

# Rock Art on the Ancient Trade Routes of the Northwestern Regions of Pakistan

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The term 'rock art' is used for all types of artistic way of expression found on natural rocks and cliffs, caves and shelters, and on the surface of boulders. In other words sketches, graffiti, images, designs engraved or painted on the rock surfaces are generally referred to as rock art. Rock art is a common feature of almost all ancient civilizations of the World. The rock art subject is broadly divided into two forms: engraving and painting. Petroglyphs and epigraphs are generally found on the large boulders and open surfaces of the rocks, while paintings are found on walls of rock shelters formed in cliffs of the mountains.

The most ancient engravings are thought to be those which depict the wild animals in profile, in rather static poses, but executed in great detail. It seems that early rock art was executed by hunter-gatherers and since the Bronze Age also by foragers. Any form of rock art has the capacity to display the unknown panorama of the distant past before our eyes. It should not be simply viewed as events depicting daily life of the remote society. Rock art also renders a spiritual reality before us. Stone has been used since remote past for engraving, paintings and writing purposes. It was an enduring material used by the primitive man and one of his great properties was to make the rock art everlasting.

The paintings, on the other hand, are normally found where caves, shelters or (overhangs) abris are present. They were probably produced in many ways: such as with fingers, animal hair brushes, sticks and feathers. The painted images were drawn with mineral colours collected from the local geological deposits, plants and animals. The rock art of the Swat valley presents continuity from ancient time right to the historic period. This paper emphasizes on the recently discovered rock art (petroglyphs, paintings and epigraphs) of the Swat valley of Pakistan. Following three features of rock art will be highlighted in this work:

- (i) petroglyphs
- (ii) paintings
- (iii) epigraphs

## 1. Petroglyphs

In the Swat valley prehistoric petroglyphs found at Gogdara by Tucci in 1955 depict wild and domestic animals and anthropomorphic representations (Tucci 1958: 291-292). Gogdara rock presents some 118 figures incised as graffiti on the cliff surface. Among them 71 animal figures, 17 representations of the objects, 29 unidentified graffiti, while human figures are completely absent (Olivieri 1998: 60-61). In Swat valley prehistoric rock engravings have been found at a place known as Hathiano Kandao (Nazir Khan 1983: 59). Numerous engravings of the site bear technical pecking similarity to the engravings of Gogdara, although the animals depicted are different in both places. Scholars dated them in the second millennium BCE (Nazir Khan 1983: 60). The most successful research study on rock art conducted by IsIAO Mission in Kandak valley reveals rock art sites i.e. rock wall, caves with carvings, cup-marks and tanks sites spread all over the Kandak valley (Olivieri and Vidale 2004:121). Another most exciting discovery of petroglyphs was made in the hamlet of Charai, one kilometre below Madyan. Details of the engraving are given below:

*Plate # 01**Petroglyphs of Charai (Madyan)**Orientation: Facing west**Material: Granite**Reference: unpublished*

Charai (Madyan) is a famous small hamlet in upper Swat valley, situated on the road side leading to Kalam, about 2 km away from Madyan. The locality is famous for Buddhist (archaeological) vestiges. Charai hamlet is situated on the left bank of the river Swat. The site of petroglyphs is on the left side of the road leading to Madyan.

The boulder of the rock engravings is lying in the middle of cultivated fields and inside an apple orchard. The boulder is partially embedded in the ground and recently blasted by the land owner to get construction materials for a new house. The most outstanding is a group of archaic petroglyphs that distinguish them clearly from historic reliefs. This site of petroglyphs has not been reported earlier. The artistic details of the engravings are given below.

The exposed portion of the boulder reveals a rough outline of two human figures, both in standing position. The natural shape of man is not portrayed by the artist. Anyhow sufficient details are given to represent the forms as human, it looks like that the artist was interested in man's action rather than in his shape. The rough outline of the human body is depicted in rectangular shape with a rounded head, hands extended, and legs straight down. The face could not be reproduced in its true form. These archaic pictures technically reveal a common theme of hunting, which was the chief means of livelihood of the primitive society.

On the other hand, we find solid body made up in a bi-triangular style, well known in metal from Tepe Hissar dating to third millennium BCE. Such a bi-triangular shaping of the body is seen in another example in which the hands look like a bracket. This style is known in the trans-Pamir region and could be dated to fourth or third millennium BCE (Samashev 1993: 36). The artistic details of these petroglyphs show close similarity with carvings of Muhammad-patai, Bang-doghal and Lekha-gata of the Kandak valley (Olivieri and Vidale 2004:134-135). These primitive engravings bear patina on the rock surface due to erosion.

## **2. Painting**

Ancient paintings are found in almost every part of the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent where there are rock shelters or abris, where paintings were applied in different techniques by using fingers or brushes. The painters always used natural substance of red, yellow, black and fine clay for white. Execution of ancient paintings were not done for aesthetic reasons to decorate a shelter. It represents a cultural activity, which existed in the everyday life of the ancient artists. Painting is a key to understand the complex symbolic rituals and ceremonies of the remote past. Although it seems that few paintings may be executed as a record of the occurrence of everyday events. Symbolism and rituals played most important role in the life of the people who knew nothing of written records. Painting is one of the media in which the ancient artist has tried to express his ideas, his desires and aspirations. This medium of expression started in Pakistan much earlier than other continents of the world.

The limited archaeological explorations so far conducted by scholars have now confirmed that shelters bearing traces of Palaeolithic paintings are situated in the province of Baluchistan (Kakar 2005: 21-25). The earliest paintings are discovered in Tor Ghar area of Loralai and Sulaiman Range of Zhob District in Baluchistan. In Tor Ghar, there are 20 shelters, while in the Sulaiman Range 27 shelters of paintings were documented (Kakar 2005: 22). The subject matter of the Tor Ghar and the Sulaiman Range paintings is fighting and hunting representations. They show animals and human beings painted in red or black on the undressed surfaces of rock-shelters. Some of the animals are shown in triangular form, rendering the body by two triangles at one corner. This method is commonly used in the rock-engravings of the Upper Indus Valley (Nasim Khan 2000: 2).

Evidence of the early Bronze Age paintings so far known in Pakistan is recorded from painted pottery (sherds) only. Pottery of remarkable variety has come down to us from the sites of Kili Gul Muhammad (Allchin 1985: 101, fig 5-17), Mundigak (Allchin 1985: 135, figs. 6.2-4), Amri (Allchin 1985: 144, figs. 6.11-12), Kot Digi (Agrawal 1982: 130, fig. 74), Rehman Dheri (Durrani 1988: fig. VI), Harappa (Vats 1940: Pl. LXIII/10,11,14), Bir-kot Ghundai (Stacul 1985: 348) and Ghalegay (Stacul 2005 : 211). The patterns on the pottery of these sites are geometrical and floral such as wavy lines, triangles, lozenges, diamonds, loops, intersecting circles, honey combs, pipal-leaf, fish scale, radiating sun, stylized animal figures (usually bull and ibex) and very rare human figures (Sardar 1992: 114-128). The colour scheme was monochrome, bichrome and polychrome such as red, black, white and chocolate.

Nothing has survived if it ever existed from the time of Alexander's invasion of India in 327 BCE, and from Greek rule till the first century BCE. Only from Philostratus '*Life of Apollonius of Tyana*' we learn that a temple in front of the Taxila city was beautifully decorated with paintings in the style of great Greek painters of the fourth century BCE (Dar 1998: 88). However from Butkara I in Swat a fragment of a fresco was discovered, which is dated in the second century BCE. Once it was considered as the earliest specimen of paintings ever exposed in any part of Pakistan (Faccenna 1981: fig. I and L).

In the Swat valley, painted shelters were reported in Kafirkot area near Thana village. The paintings of Kafirkot represent a Buddhist sacred area with bowed men (Nazir Khan et al 1995: 333). Traces of paintings were also reported from the sites of Hinduanohtai, Shamo and Marano-tangai. Paintings of Hinduanohtai are famous for series of Buddhist stupas. The Shamo site shows men with weapons, a horse and a stupa. Marano-tangai shelter reveals a set of abstract symbols, squares intersected by a cross and square filled with a single dot (Nazir Khan et al 1995: fig. 14). Paintings of all these sites were dated from first to fourth century CE (Nazir Khan et al 1995: 350).

In 2000, the IsIAO Mission discovered three painted rock shelters in the Kandag valley of Swat. They documented painted shelters such as Sargah-sar, Kalkai-kandao and Dwolasmannai-patai (Vidale and Olivieri 2002: 173). The Sargah-sar paintings reveal human figures (some carrying weapons), animals and elaborate geometric symbols. While the paintings of Kalkai-kandao shelter represent crowded designs, vivid compositions of animals, humans and geometric patterns. The Dwolasmannai-patai shelter shows complex, irregular geometric patterns and human carrying weapons. All three shelters are located far from Buddhist sacred areas, and it differs in one important respect

from those already known from sites in the Thana valley. They are dated between first and third century CE (Vidale and Olivieri 2002: 189). Recently a chance discovery of mural paintings from the Buddhist monastery of Jinnan Wali Dheri (Taxila) is stated to be a unique phenomenon in the entire Gandhara region (Ashraf and Hasan 2004: 20). Another important painted shelter is known as Kaferi Smasta near Kukrai village in the Marghuzar sub-valley of Swat.

*Plate # 02*

*Painted shelter of Kaferi Smasta*

*Orientation: Facing*

*Material: Granite*

*Reference: unpublished*

In 2000, the present author found a shelter with vestiges of paintings at the site of Charoona Dara to the south of the present Kukrai village, in the Marghuzar sub valley of Swat. This shelter lies about three kilometres south of Kukrai village. Located on the crest of Gishar hill to the west of Mt. Ilam, the site is known as Kaferi Smasta (shelter), with paintings of hunters and human figures. It is a shelter, semicircular in shape, about 1.5m deep and 5m high and opens to the southeast side. No traces of artificial activity-intervention were found.

The paintings are executed inside the natural undressed surface of the shelter. The images are painted with mud pigment on the right wall of the shelter. On the right side wall where the ceiling begins to slope down reveal seven figures and the representation of a monument, most probably a stupa. To facilitate the description of the paintings, it may be divided into two groups although they form a uniform composition. The top register reveals a person standing in front of monument in akimbo position. The stairs like structure/monument, branches out on top, almost like vertical antennae represents a stupa. A vertical monument with a six staged structure and a human figure on top of it reveals close similarity with that of the Upper Indus Valley site of Hodar. This monument, in our opinion, has a marked affinity with the so-called derivative stupa (Jettmar 1985: fig. 13).

Human figures of the lower register are shown standing frontally in different poses. From their outstretched arms and legs quite apart, it seems that they are celebrating a hunting scene. The technique most commonly used for the painting is that of outlined figures, but human figures are more realistic on the wall of the shelter. All anthropomorphic figures carry a weapon, a tool or an attribute: a bow or a club in their hands. The human figures of Kaferi Smasta resemble to the paintings of the Dwolasmane-Patai shelter in the Kandag Valley (Oliveri 2005: 220)

All these images were probably painted with a finger struck using whitish ochre. As already noticed, there is a complete absence of polychrome. The original paintings were in white, and a faint white line remains visible around figures subsequently repainted in yellow. Kaferi Smasta paintings are characteristically in a yellowish cream shade, which, at times, can be made to look pink. Because the shelter was exposed to weathering, this fact is responsible for demolishing many of the paintings. Shepherds have frequently used the site for shelter and the fleece of their flocks thus have rubbed paintings from the walls, or smoke from their fires has eliminated most of their artistic details.



### 3. Epigraphs

The Swat valley, situated on the crossroad of ancient silk route, remained an active centre for merchants, foreign traders, religious pilgrims and communities. The connection between China and ancient Uddiyana (or the Swat valley) across the hanging passages is well attested to in Chinese sources. In the Swat valley, tremendous concentrations of Buddhist period reliefs, petroglyphs and inscriptions have been documented in successive campaigns by native and foreign scholars (Sardar 2000: 181). Priority was given to a publication of the material to understand comprehensively all inscriptions. It is hoped that it would pave way for further insight into the rich epigraphic data from the valley.

The bulk of epigraphs written in different scripts such as Kharoṣṭhī, Brāhmī, Proto-Śāradā, Nāgari, Persian and Arabic scripts were reported from the Valley. Important among them are the three Buddhist inscriptions from Swat published by Bühler (Bühler 1979: 133-135). The Buddha foot prints with an inscription from Tirath in the Upper Swat valley shows 11 Kharoṣṭhī letters dating to the first century BCE (Konow 1929: 98-99, pl. 1.5). The inscription on a relic vase from Swat relic vase inscription of Meridarkh Theodoros, is one of the most ancient inscriptions after the reign of Aśoka pertaining to the Indo-Greek rule (Konow 1929: 1-3). Other important inscriptions recorded are the Swat rock inscription (Konow 1929: 9-10), Saddo rock inscription (Konow 1929: 9), Loriyan Tangai pedestal inscription of the year 318 (nos. 4860, 4871, 4995, 5095) (Konow 1929).

Similarly the Khazana Gat inscription reveals Brāhmī characters resembling the Śāradā and Arabic scripts (Stein 1930: 55-56; Tucci 1958: 303). Other epigraphic record from the same region also include a Ghaznavid inscription from Udigram, Swat (Nazir Khan 1985), a Kharoṣṭhī inscription from Butkara I (Swat) (Petech 1966: 80-82), the Zalamkot bilingual inscription (Rehman 1997-98), a set of brass bowls from Swat, a relic casket from Swat and a slab from Malakand (Falk 2003).

This paper encompasses three Brāhmī inscriptions in the locality of Jahanabad, previously known as Shakhoraī (Stein 1930: 50). Inscriptions, their location, present state of preservation, stylistic details and literary compositions will be highlighted. As a result of this writer's field survey conducted in 2002 and in the following years in the valley, we found three Brāhmī rock inscriptions which are still in situ. Jahanabad hamlet is situated at a distance of about one and half kilometre northeast of Shakhoraī village. It is about 5km northeast of Manglaur village on the left bank of Sair *khwar*, and is approachable by a jeep track from the main Malamjaba road. The site is approachable by a steep rise over boulders and through thorny wild bushes. Two gigantic rocks on the hillside, "Oba Gat", and "Khazana Gat", disclose engravings of three Buddhist period inscriptions. Two inscriptions are carved on 'Oba Gat', meaning the rock of the water and there being a spring below it. The third inscription is engraved on a huge isolated rock of 'Khazana Gat'. Their details are given below:

*Plate # 03*

*Oba Gat Inscription-I*

*Measurement: length 4 m. 3 lines*

*Script: Gupta Brahmi*

*Orientation: facing west*

*Reference: (Bühler 1979: 135; Stein 1930:50)*

*Reading: Line 1: sarvvapāpasyākaraṇa kuśala syopasampada*

*Line 2: svacittavyavadānam*

*Line 3: ca etadbuḍḍāṇuśaṣanam*

*Translation: "Not to commit any sin, to acquire merit, to purify one's mind - that is the teaching of Buddha"*

Oba Gat Inscription-I is a Sanskrit rendering of *Dhammapada*, verse 183 (Bühler 1979: 135). It is engraved on the upper portion of the rock immediately above the cave with deeply incised characters. The inscription contains three lines in north-south direction, carved high up in the centre of the rock face; no one can reach or touch it from the ground surface. This inscription has suffered mostly by weathering.

*Plate # 04*

*Oba Gat Inscription-II*

*Measurement: length 4 metres, 4 lines*

*Script: Gupta Brahmi*

*Orientation: facing west*

*Reference: (Bühler 1979: 135; Stein 1930: 50)mrh*

*Reading: Line 1: vācānurakṣt*

*Line 2: saṃvṛtaḥ kkāyana caivakuśalanna kurvan*

*Line 3: tāstrāyinkarmapathānui sokya āraghye*

*Line 4: nmārgamṛpippraveditam*

*Translation: "(Let him be one) who guards his speech, is well restrained in mind, and commits no evil with his body. Keeping these three roads of action clear, one may gain the path taught by the Sages."*

Oba Gat Inscription-II is a rather free Sanskrit rendering of *Dhammapada*, verse 281 (Bühler 1979: 135). It is engraved in bold and deeply incised characters, comprising four lines, extends over a surface of about four metres in length in north-south direction. The lower inscription is carved in the right lower corner of the rock and therefore is easily accessible to human activities. It is exposed to both natural erosion and human vandalism.

Both inscriptions engraved on the western face of the rock contain Sanskrit verses from the *Dhammapada*. The palaeographic character of their letters, according to Bühler's analysis, seems to date the inscriptions from the early Kushan period (Stein 1930: 50).

*Plate # 05*

*Khazana Gat Inscription-III*

*Measurement: length 2.5 metres, 3 lines*

*Script: Gupta Brahmi*

*Orientation: facing west*

*Reference: (Bühler 1979: 134; Stein 1930: 50)*

*Reading:*     *Line 1: anītyā vava (sic! for vata) saṃskārā utpādayaya*  
                   *Line 2: dharmiṇaḥ utpadya hī nīrud (dh)yante tepā (read teṣām)*  
                   *Line 3: vyupaśamas sukham*

*Translation: 'The Samskaras are truly subject to originating and decay. For, after originated they disappear. Calming them is happiness'*

This is the famous verse spoken according the *Maha-Parinibbana-Sutta*, vi. 16, by Indra at the time of Śakyamuni's death, or proclaimed by Buddha himself according to the *Maha-Sudassana-Jataka* (Bühler 1979: 134).

The stone on which the inscription-III exists, is known as 'Khazana Gat', as once some treasure was found near it. According to O. von Hinüber, the inscription is well written in spite of two very obvious mistakes as indicated. The inscription, on the basis of stylistic comparison, can be dated roughly to 6th century CE. It is certainly not younger than about 650 CE at the very latest.

All the three are deeply and boldly incised on rough stones. The letters, varying between two and four inches in height, resemble in many respects the so-called Northwestern Gupta Brāhmī characters. Although all the three inscriptions unfortunately furnish no confirmed date, yet they provide support to the following conclusions:

- The Jahanabad inscriptions of Gupta Brāhmī characters rendering a *Dhammapada*, verses revealing and testifying the fact that Jahanabad was once an active centre of Buddhism. Besides the three inscriptions, the colossal relief of Jahanabad Buddha dating to the 7th century CE, and the rock relief of the seated Avalokiteśvara (7th century CE), in the centre of the orchard are the other living proofs of Buddhism in the Swat valley.
- On the basis of paleographical characters von Hinüber roughly suggests a date in the 6th century CE for these inscriptions. According to him, it is certainly not younger than about 650 CE at the very latest.
- It was generally believed that Brāhmī did not travel towards the Northwest regions of the subcontinent, but the existence of these inscriptions reveal that during the Gupta period Brāhmī remained language of the *Dhammapada* verse.
- It throws light on the fact that engravings and carvings practices were on peak during the 7th century CE in the Swat valley. Those who proposed a theory that Buddhist art was eradicated in fourth-fifth century CE need to revise their theses.

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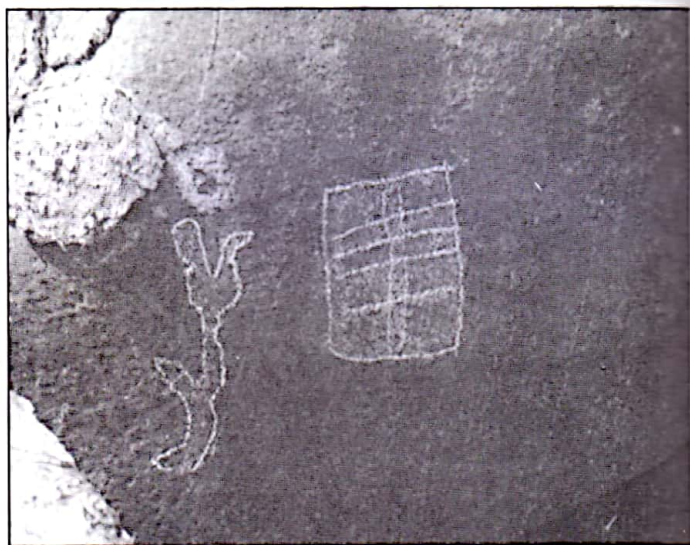


Plate # 01: Petroglyphs of Charai (Madiyan)



Plate # 02: Painted Shelter of Kafiri Smasta

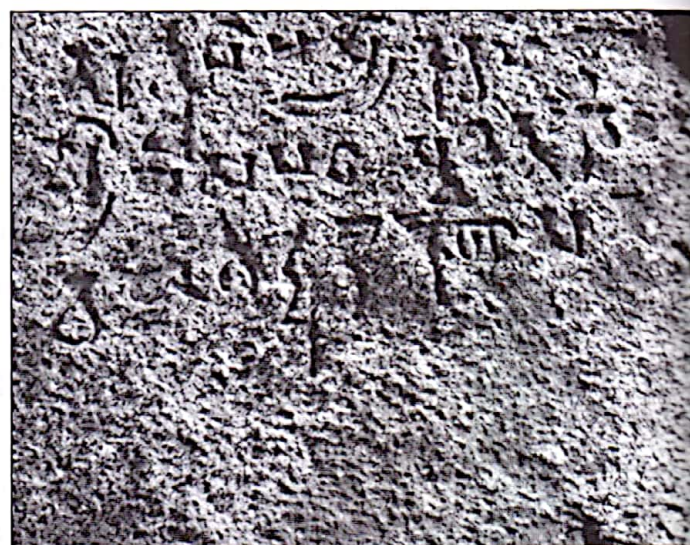
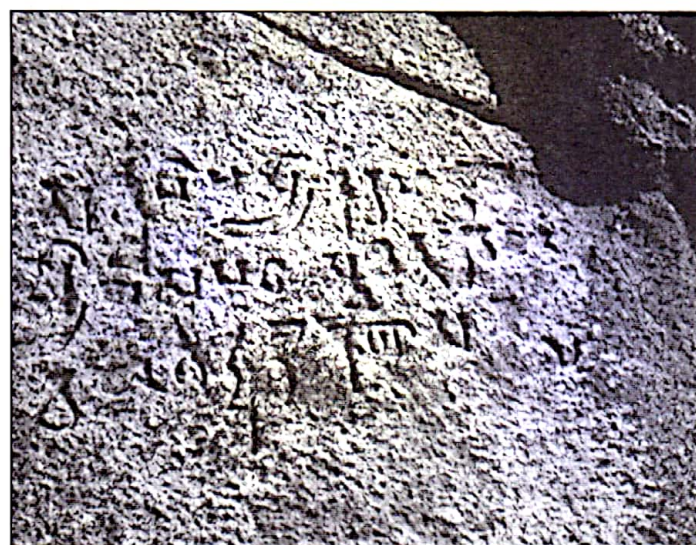


Plate # 03: Oba Gat Inscription-I



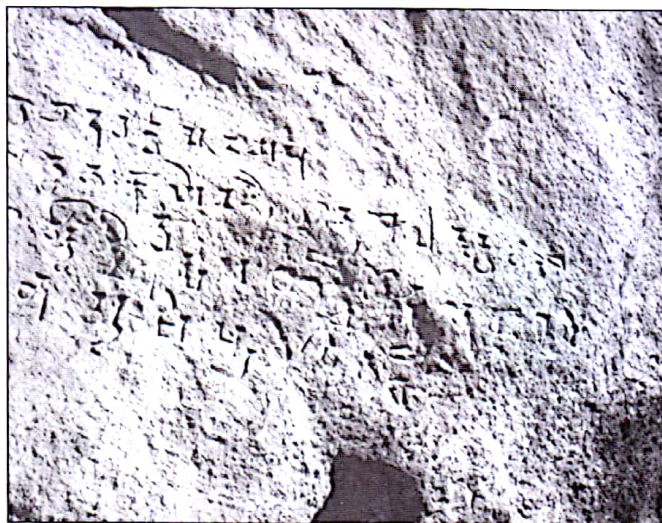
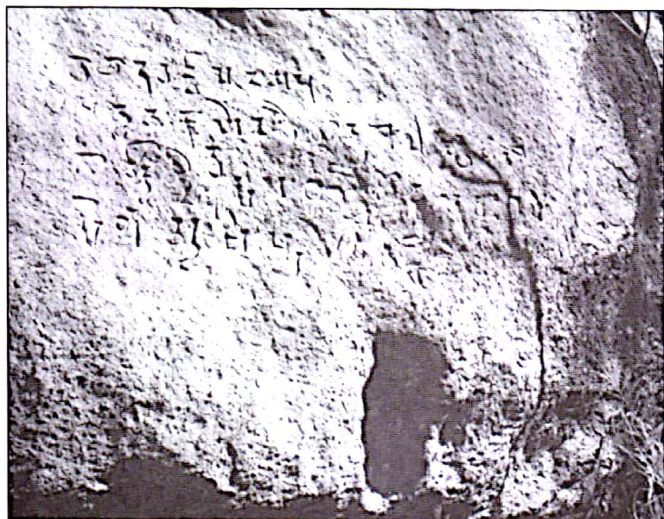


Plate # 04: Oba Gat Inscription-II

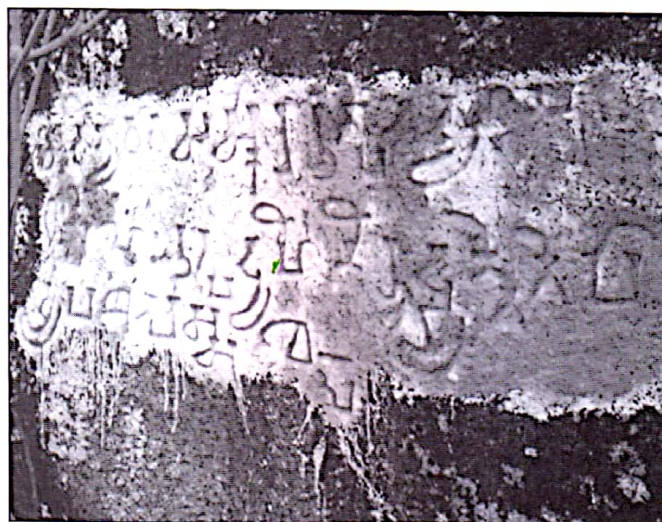


Plate # 05: Khazana Gat Inscription-III