

FA HSIEN'S ROUTE FROM PAMIR TO THE DAREL VALLEY ON THE INDUS FIELD RESEARCH IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN: 2003-2006

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This paper highlights the results of four years of field work conducted in Northern Pakistan from 2003 to 2006 as part of Tsuchiya/Amjad field research tracing Fa Hsien's route from Pamir via the Darel Valley to Gandhara.

Fa Hsien, a Chinese pilgrim of the fifth century A.D. travelling to India, reached Darel in 401 A.D. immediately after crossing Pamir and entering the Indian sub-continent. A colossal wooden image of 24-meter Maitreya Buddha at Darel was the center of adoration, drawing pilgrims from many corners of the Buddhist world. Fa Hsien's itinerary appeared to have focussed on reaching the Darel Valley, bypassing Gilgit, known as another center of Buddhism in the region.

The present field research, launched in 1991, has already brought to light a direct and the shortest route from Pamir to Darel, hitherto never been introduced before, namely from Pamir through the Khora Bhort Pass, to the Karambar, Ishkoman and Singal valleys on to the Darel Valley (**Fig. 1, see:** p. 3168). The outcome of the various stages of our field research has already been presented previously at the past ICANAS congresses at Hong Kong (1994), Budapest (1997), Montreal (2000) and Moscow (2004 Abstract only).

The field research in the Darel Valley was conducted from 1998 to 2002¹, the first of its nature since 1913 when Aurel Stein made his exploration. It took eight years to initiate due to the difficulty ensued by the inherent tribal feuds prevailing in the Darel Valley.

Our field research covered two prominent sites: **Rajikot (Fig. 2, see:** p. 3168) a fortress city on a massive hill, and Pouguch 'university' site, a religious establishment where Fa Hsein could have made his pilgrimage. Rajikot's spacious scale, impregnable stone walls, and a siphoned system of water supply from Kotogah River indicate wealth and power which dominated the fortress. Legends tell of the existence of a powerful ruler at Rajikot who could conceive the grand plan of a temple with a colossal image of Maitreya. On the other hand, the legends about **Pouguch "university" site (Fig. 3, see:** p. 3168) strikingly correspond to the description written by Fa Hsien that is was a place of worship and learning, and the pilgrims from four corners of the Buddhist world assembled to worship a wooden image of Buddha.

¹ Tsuchiya, 2002; 2005a.

On the basis of this earlier field work, **the following four years of field work, from 2003 to 2006 (Fig. 4, see: p. 3168)** concentrated on the hitherto unexplored area where the heads of the Singal and the Darel Valleys are linked and where the route from the Killik and Mintaka Passes, via Gilgit and the Kargah and the Khanbari Valleys, reaches the Darel Valley.

These Four Sessions of Field Work Explored

1. In 2003: The route from the Singal Valley via **the Yajur Pass** into the Darel Valley.

2. In 2004: The route from the Batraith Valley via **the Batakhun Pass** into the Darel Valley.

3. In 2005: The route from the Singal Valley via **the Khanbari Pass** into the Khanbari valley and via **the Chojode Pass** into the Kargah Valley, reaching Gilgit.

4. In 2006: The route from the Kargah Valley into the Khanbari River system and through the **Waibudi and Ishkobar Passes to Yashot Village** in the Darel Valley.

1. In 2003, the route from the Singal Valley via the Yajei Pass into the Darel Valley was surveyed². It is a no-man's-land to the non-Darelis, and an area which remained unexplored by during our previous field work. [The field research of the Singal Valley in 2001 covered almost the entire valley except for the head beyond the Patharo Chowki, while the field work in the Darel Valley (1998-2000) which started from the mouth of the Darel Valley was halted at Horone, as it deemed too dangerous to continue.] The 2003 field work covered the head of the Singal Valley and by the Patharo Pass (**Fig. 5, see: p. 3169**) entered the Maja Sagar, a high plateau of pasture land extending westward from the glacier-covered Kini Chish Mountain, at a height 4940 meters, the highest mountain in the area. Under the perpendicular cliff on Kini Chish's northwest side, the Maja Sar Lake (**Fig. 6, see: p. 3169**) a wide body of water with a two to three kilometer diameter, provides a rich supply of water to the area, resulting in meadows full of alpine flowers. Only the families of Darel have the right to spend their summers grazing cattle and growing maize in these meadows.

There are two gates at the head of the Darel Valley from Maja Sagar, by way of the Batakhun and the Yajei Passes. The way to the Yajei Pass from the Maja Sagar starts from the mouth of the Kolibari Valley towards Narkanoi, along the Kolibari stream, flowing out of the Gali Sar Lake, located immediately below the Yajei Pass. The Yajei Pass (**Fig. 7, see: p. 3169**) is an open pass, accessible all year-round, where snow does not accumulate. Throughout the year the Yajei Pass, with its gradual ascent and descent, can be used by a large herd of cattle without

² Tsuchiya, 2008 (in press a).

difficulty. This pass is considered by the Darelis an important common pass since it is essential for them to take their cattle for grazing in their summer pastures on the Maja Sagar plateau above the Darel Valley. The relatively gentle descent from the Yajei Pass reaches Atth in the upper Darel where conifer trees and cedar grow (**Fig. 8, see:** p. 3169). The Yajei Pass, with its easy accessibility, would be passable for an adept traveler like Fa Hsien, even at the age of 66.

2. In 2004³, the route from the Batraith Valley via **the Batakun Pass** into the Darel Valley was surveyed. The Batraith River, a tributary to the Gilgit River, has its source at Maja Sar. The Batraith Valley has nine sub-valleys and five summer settlements.

The Batakun pass (**Fig. 9, see:** p. 3169) located southeast of the Maja Sagar Plateau, is rocky, steep and dangerous and partially covered by snow. The descent towards the Darel Valley (**Fig. 10, see:** p. 3169) is particularly lengthy and exhausting, climbing down rugged, almost perpendicular slopes. Cattle have difficulty coping with the steep incline of the Batakun Pass and are often lost by losing their balance on the way.

Despite its precarious nature, the Batakun Pass is still considered the quickest and shortest way linking the Darel and the Singal Valleys, particularly in an emergency. It seems to have served as a strategic route in the past as the legend of a goat at the top of the Batakun Pass testifies to the role of the Batakun Pass: there was a goat which had could send signals to the entire Darel Valley warning of a possible invasion by kicking her feet on the ground, creating the sound of a drum. Upon being alerted, the Darelis would light a fire to make the whole valley aware of the imminent invasion and assembled at Darband, their defensive gateway (**Fig. 11, see:** p. 3170). A network of the Batakun Pass defense system seemed to have existed, protecting the whole Darel Valley, including Pouguch, the possible Buddhist establishment where Fa Hsein must have made the pilgrimage. Watchmen were said to have been posted at the strategic points around the clock to look out for any sign of smoke from the Batakun Pass. When the smoke was spotted, fires were then lit at each watch-point.

Darband, a defensive gateway, was constructed one kilometer south of Matic, at a point where all the routes to the Darel Valley from the Tangir, Batraith, Singal and Kargah Valleys come together. The location of Darband seems to have been aptly chosen at the foot of the precipice soaring close to the right bank of the Darel River. The Darband gate was made out of pine, and its frame was said to have been carved with a floral design. The gate was wide enough for a laden animal and a man on a horse-back to pass through. Though now diminished to piles of rubble, a portion of wall still remains and an open space where the gate was standing until

³ Tsuchiya, 2008 (in press a).

the 1980s is recognizable. On the left bank, a long defensive wall, two to two and a half meter high and one meter wide, reaching to the side of the mountains for a considerable distance can still be discerned. Any possible attack coming from the Gilgit Valley side can be defended at Darband.

The presence of Darband, near the head of the Darel Valley (**Map 1, see:** p. 3171), clearly indicates that the entrance to the Darel Valley is at the head of the valley, and not at its mouth, where the Darel River joins the Indus and where no defensive system has been found so far. The Indus must have been the major factor which discouraged any attacks from the mouth of the Darel Valley. Therefore Pouguch, located only 15.3 kilometers to the mouth of the valley where Fa Hsien could have visited to worship the colossal Maitreya Buddha, was at the safest place in the Darel Valley. At the entrance of the Darel Valley, the Batakhun and the Yajei Passes with their respective functions have been standing as the two gates.

3. The 2005 field work⁴ focussed on the Khanbari Valley, which lies between the Darel and Gilgit, the route, according to the so-called established opinion, that Fa Hsien traveled: leaving Pamir, passing Hunza and Gilgit on his way to Darel. In constrast, our point is if Fa Hsien visited Gilgit, it would have been impossible for him to ignore Gilgit, and the very absence of any mention of Gilgit in Fa Hsien's record made us consider that Fa Hsien took a direct route to Darel without passing through Gilgit.

Despite these differences, (**Map 2, see:** p. 3171) it was necessary to conduct our field research between Gilgit and Darel in order to obtain an accurate picture of the traffic network in this area. Of the two valleys, the Kargah and Khanbari, lying between Gilgit and Darel, the Khanbari River, having its source at the glacial lake of Naronamal, is about 60 kilometers long and drains into the Indus River about 50 kilometers west of Chilas. The Khanbari Valley has remained little known. Only Sir Aurel Stein, in 1913, at the beginning of his third expedition to East Turkistan, crossed the Khanbari Valley at Demot on this way to the Darel Valley and commented on it.

The 2005 field work concentrated on the route from the Singal Valley via **the Khanbari Pass** into the Khanbari valley (**Fig. 12, see:** p. 3170) and via **the Chojode Pass** into the Kargah Valley. Coming from Maja Sagar, the view of the Khanbari Valley from the Khanbari Pass was spectacular with the wide valley and Naronamal Lake surrounded by rich pasture land. Going downhill, the Kotogah, a side valley to the west, gradually ascended toward the Barigah, providing access to the Darel Valley. Further down at Kaliodat, we took the Chorjode Valley, another side valley to the east, towards the Chorjode Pass, the very head of the Kargah Valley.

⁴ Tsuchiya, 2008 (in press b).

The upper Kargah Valley, which has its mouth on the Gilgit River, is covered by forests of pines and cedars (**Fig. 13, see:** p. 3170). At Majnay stood the ruins of a watch tower, Shikari, to protect people and livestock from attacks by the Darel and Khanbari people. Going down the Kargah Valley to Jut was easy and from Kanne, a vehicle was made available up to Basin at the mouth of the Kargah Valley near Gilgit.

As a result of the 2005 field work, we have ascertained that the Kargah Valley does not link directly with the Darel Valley. The Khanbari Valley sits between the Kargah and the Darel Valleys linked by the Chorjode Pass and Barigah Pass. The trails are mostly gradual and easy. Good pastures promise summer settlements, so the routes are not kept as a no-man's-land, which must have provided a good environment for the travelers in ancient times.

4. The 2006 field work⁵ started from the mouth of the Kargah Valley and went upstream. At Majnay, we took the Chillali Route (**Fig. 14, see:** p. 3170). The vegetation was rather sparse and there were few trees. At the Chillali Pass, a clear outline of a polo ground could be recognized where the mountain slope ends in the Ghoutoo Valley. In order to take a new approach to the Darel Valley, the Narnai Valley, a side valley of the Khanbari Valley, was taken. (**Fig. 15, see:** p. 3170). From the top of the Narnai Pass, the peak of the Kinichish Mountain could be viewed, standing high among the panoramic scenery of the Gilgit Mountain Range. Descending towards the main Khanbari Valley, forests of Deoders, cedars, firs and pines became very thick. Stein recorded that 'Luxuriant conifer forest at an elevation of 2100 meters to 3300 meters, far thicker than any seen since leaving Kashanaganga, clothed the steep slopes towards the Khanbari River.'⁶

The main source of income of the Darelis is the timber business which is heavily dependent on 'the magnificent forests growths found from Khanbari and Tangir'⁷ Crossing the Khanbari River (**Fig. 16, see:** p. 3170). We entered the Waibudi, a side valley with steep slopes, covered by grass and thick forests (**Fig. 17, see:** p. 3171). Many cattle were grazing in the pastures of the Waibudi Sagar, a rich pasture land irrigated by many streams. Travelling via the Barigah Pass, we headed toward the Ishkobar Pass. The Ishkobar Sagar, just below the pass, had a large pasture, with small ponds framed by thick lawns. Descending down the Ishkobar Valley, the volume and the speed of the Ishkobar River increased, gushing down the sharp descent where the valley narrowed down, and where the thick tree line started. At its mouth, rubble and boulders filled the valley, while its sides were covered with thick forests. Yashot, the last permanent village in the Darel Valley, is on the right bank of the Ishkobar River, which drains into the

⁵ Tsuchiya, 2008 (in press b).

⁶ Stein, 1928 (reprint in New Delhi 1981) v.i:15.

⁷ Stein, 1928 (reprint in New Delhi 1981) v.i:18.

Darel Valley (**Fig. 18, see:** p. 3171). The Yashot residents, considered to be the strongest and most courageous and vicious, have this approach route from the outside world via the Ishkobar Valley directly to their backyard.

CONCLUSION

The two series of field research conducted in **2003 and 2004** on the route from the Singal to the Darel Valley have confirmed clearly the respective functions of the Yajei Pass and the Batakhun Pass. Despite our proposition, given prior to the commencement of the field research, that Fa Hsien could have taken the Batakhun Pass, the Batakhun Pass was proven to be not as common of a route, due to its steep and rugged slopes, too dangerous for men, livestock and pack animals. However, strategically, the Batakhun Pass together with Darband must have served as a powerful defense location, since in an emergency messages by means of smoke can be conveyed from the Batakhun top so that people will assemble at Darband to defend the valley.

On the other hand, the Yajei Pass, the pass which never had been highlighted historically, has been confirmed to be the common route used by people and livestock. Now we are able to propose that Fa Hsien could have traveled from Pamir to Darel by way of the Yajei Pass.

The two series of field research conducted in **2005 and 2005** enabled us to comprehend the general status of routes between Gilgit and Darel. According to the established opinion, the access route to the Darel Valley from Gilgit via the Kargah and the Khanbari valleys had been considered to be the regular route from Gilgit to Darel. Though not included in the Fa Hsien's route that we proposed, the knowledge of the actual links, which had never been explored before, was necessary. This field work (2005-2006) has ascertained that the Kargah route reaches Darel by crossing the Khanbari Valley through several steep passes and that the distance between Gilgit and Pouguch (Darel) is twice as long as that between Singal village and Pouguch (Darel).

The luxuriant conifer forests covering the steep slopes in the Khanbari Valley at an elevation of 2100 meters to 3300 meters as Stein observed still exist. Since the Darel people hold the timber business right in the Khanbari Valley, Darel still now is known for its timber.

We must recall the fact that Fa Hsien recorded that the Maitreya Buddha image in Darel was a wooden image. Of the colossal Buddha images known from the ancient world, (such as Bamiyan, Dunhuang, Longmen, Yungang), Darel's Maitreya Buddha is the sole image made from wood. The abundant supply of timber in the surrounding valleys must have enabled them to conceive of a colossal image in wood.

The incessant flow of traffic in relation to transhumance between the permanent village and the summer villages must have been in practice from ancient times as the most basic system in the semi-nomadic style of living. It could be discerned that even at the time of Fa Hsien, the road in the area must have been kept functioning for the traffic, not only for cattle but for those travelers heading towards the Darel Valley.

The series of four field works, made from 2003 to 2006, has thus gradually revealed the access route which Fa Hsien took from Pamir to Darel. [End]

The present field research was directed by Haruko Tsuchiya and Amjad Ayub, and was assisted by Taj Rehmat, field assistant. Editorial assistance was provided by Patrice Fusillo and the maps were prepared by Tokutaro Matsuda.

FIGURES (See: pp. 3223-3226)

Fig. 1: Our New Route and the Established Route.

Fig. 2: A distant view of Rajikot, Darel, photographed by Aurel Stein in 1913.

Fig. 3: Pouguch Site, Darel.

Fig. 4: Our Field Trips: 2003-2006.

Fig. 5: The Patharo Pass at the head of the Singal Valley..

Fig. 6: The ice-capped Kinichish Mt (4940m) and the Maja Sar Lake.

Fig. 7: The Yajei Pass, accessible all year around.

Fig. 8: Att in the upper Darel Valley.

Fig. 9: The Batakhun Pass in the distant view.

Fig. 10: The Darel side of the Batakhun Pass, with near perpendicular slopes.

Fig. 11: Site of Darband a defensive gateway.

Fig. 12: A view from the upper Khanbari Valley from the Khanbari Pass.

Fig. 13: A view from the upper Kargah Valley from the Chorjode Pass.

Fig. 14: A polo ground in the upper Ghoutoo Valley from Chilleli Pass.

Fig. 15: A conferous forest in the Narnai Valley, near the Khanbari valley

Fig. 16: A view upstreamm of the Khanbari River.

Fig. 17: A steep slope of the Waibudi Valley.

Fig. 18: Yashot Village on the Darel River, with the Ishkobar Balley in the background.

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