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G. Stacul

Symbols of Early Swāt (c. 1700–1400 BC)

The last protohistoric excavation in Swāt was carried out in spring 2001 by the Italian team of IsIAO in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan. On this occasion, pit-structures used for different purposes were discovered on the steep sides of the Kalako-deray hill, in the Jambil Valley.

The recovered finds, dated to Period IV in the Ghalegay sequence, from about 1700 to 1400 BC (Stacul 1987, 53–111), include not only pottery, bones and copper objects, but also “faience” items, which were recorded for the first time at this site. Special mention has to be made of a discoid star-like bead or amulet, 2 cm long, finely carved and ground (fig. 1).

In previous years, a terracotta seal representing a star-like motif with five incised points, ascribed to Period IV itself, was recovered at the same site (Stacul 1993, fig. 16; here: fig. 2).

Although the painted pottery was recorded in Swāt from Period II, that is to say from about the mid-3rd millennium BC, Period IV provided the earliest evidence of painted subjects including faunal, floral and astral motifs. During the same period, the pottery testifies to the introduction into Swāt of the black and grey burnished ware, which is characterized by different shapes such as carinated vessels, bowls on pedestal and others. This fashion lasted many centuries, including the so-called “Gandhara Grave” period, with gradual modifications in forms.

However, the assemblage of Bir-kot in particular includes a great variety of black-on-red painted subjects, such as stars alternated with birds (Stacul 1987, fig. 45 h), peacock fashioned by a fan-like crest on the head (Stacul 1987, fig. 45 g), or bird-like heads set on an inclined level (Stacul 1987, figs. 47 a, b; here: fig. 3).

It is well known that wide-eyed stars with ring-and-dot patterns, very frequently occurred on pottery of Harappa Cemetery H, dated to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC (Vats 1940, pl. LXIII, 10, 12, 14). Large-shaped painted stars and ring-and-dot patterns, alternating with birds including peacocks, were represented on vessels in regular registers (Vats 1940, pl. LXIII,

10). Other figures also include bird-like heads set on inclined levels, notably a subject already mentioned in relation to Bir-kot, which suggests astral symbols.

According to some scholars, such as Piggott (1950, 233–235), Allchin/Allchin (1982, 247–249), Kenoyer (1998, 173–175), and others, the iconography in question was in large part alien to the Mature Harappan style, and seems to give evidence of an integration with newcomers spreading from Western Iran.

As a matter of fact, a very important point of reference concerning some aspects of this style and the connected symbology, is provided by the painted motifs on vessels from the Cemetery of Tepe Giyan in Iran (Contenau/Ghirshman 1935, pl. 6, 5–6), where stars and dot-and-ring patterns frequently occur in registers. Likewise painted stars, vertical “eye” patterns, as well as stars or astral symbols on inclined levels deserve particular attention. As it is well known, some scholars suggested typological and chronological connections between Tepe Giyan II/III and the Cemetery H culture in Panjab.

However, let us go back to Swāt. The painted pottery from Bir-kot, consisting of black-on-red designs, includes not only stars and birds such as already described, but also plant and animal representations, which in some cases may be attributed a special symbolic meaning.

As for the “plant symbols”, it is worth mentioning the three-branched fig or “pipal tree” with a single stem, which is symbolized in Swāt by some very expressive examples (Stacul 1987, fig. 44, a–c, h; here: fig. 4). As it is well known, this motif was already recorded at Mundigak IV (Casal 1961, fig. 64, 167–173) and at Nausharo, layer ID (Samzun 1992, fig. 29, 4), both dated around the mid-3rd millennium BC. Another representation of the “pipal tree” was listed at Rahman Dheri, in the Gomal plain (Durrani 1988, fig. VI, 4), while the latest evidence of such iconography was recorded at Bir-kot, in Swāt, as part of an assemblage of Period IV. These examples clearly show the long-standing life of this particular symbology, representing an unbroken tradi-

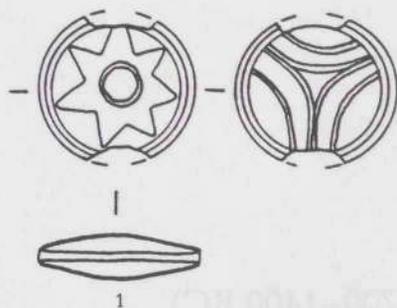


Fig. 1. "Faience bead from Kalako-deray, Swāt. Scale 2:1. Period IV. Inv. KL 564.

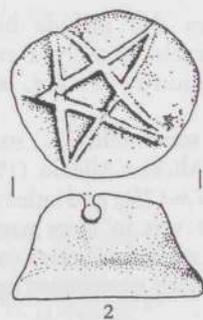


Fig. 2. Terracotta seal with incised star-like motif, from Kalako-deray, Swāt. Scale 1:1. Period IV. Inv. KL 100.



Fig. 3. Black-on-red painted figure from Bir-kot, Swāt. Period IV. Inv. BKG 373.

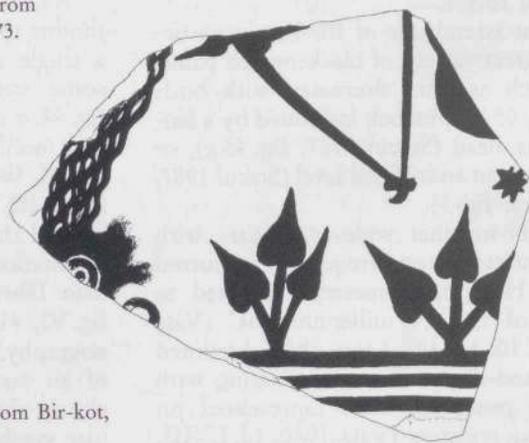


Fig. 4. Black-on-red painted figure from Bir-kot, Swāt. Period IV. Inv. BKG 344.

tion reaching back to pre-Indus times (Parpola 1988, fig. 26 a-d).

As for Bir-kot, special attention should be paid to some "aggression" subjects between animals, which already occurred in the Near Eastern glyptic art, and, later on, in Bactria and Margiana. We refer to a bird of prey hovering above what looks like a snake (fig. 5), that is to say, a fragment of a "narrative" composition depicting a dog and an animal reminiscent of an antelope. Likewise, special consideration should be paid to a horse attacked by a sort of predatory animal (fig. 6). According to some interpretations, this subject may symbolize the ritual sacrifice of the horse, in conformity with the earliest sources of the Indian tradition (Stacul 1987, 108-109).

Let us turn now to a painted human-like figure from Bir-kot, Period IV, that is to say a subject completely unusual in Swāt as well as in the surrounding regions (fig. 7). The figure is shaped in a very schematic way, with a filiform body and arms, while hands and fingers are highlighted. Close to this figure, a disk-tipped cross also appears.

The variety of symbols that are recorded in Swāt in Period IV may suggest wide-ranging contacts with different ethnic groups and cultures, from Middle Asia to the Indus. Consequently, it may be inferred that such links represented not only the result of occasional relations, but, more likely, an important aspect of the standard of living in general.

The likelihood of a semi-nomadic lifestyle of some parts of the Swāti population during Period IV was postulated by scholars such as Coningham/Sutherland 1997-8 on the basis of the supposed function of the pit-structures: It was suggested that most of such pits were used by transhumant peoples for storing grains, because the surrounding dwelling structures at ground level were very scanty. However, according to archaeological evidence from Loebanr 3 and Kalako-deray, some

very large pits, including fire-places, grinding stones and holed harvesters, were very probably used as dwellings and work-places.

It should be added that at the bottom of some pots, rather small handmade pots and even human terracotta figurines were intentionally placed. In all likelihood, they were linked with rites of propitiation. The function of several cavities is still a matter of discussion.

According to other scholars, such as Parpola (1988, fig. 32), the culture of Swāt Period IV was mainly connected with the spread of Early Rgvedic Aryan peoples moving from Margiana and Bactria, who are believed to have reached Swāt around 1700 BC.

However, as already noted, according to the archaeological evidence, the occurrence in Swāt of symbols and items alien to local traditions may be related to different factors. These include, for instance, the influence from Panjab, of the Harappan post-urban culture; but we also refer to the cultural wave, which introduced some symbolic representations such as the so-called “pipal tree” or the “aggression” between animals (Parpola 1988, fig. 26).

The disappearance, after Period IV, of the painted pottery and the “faience” ware, as well as of the stone holed sickles, or harvesters, of the Central Asian tradition was connected with the emergence of a new cultural stage which marks the end of the previous trend.

This change in the ways of life and values that occurred in Swāt after about 1400 BC, with the spread of Period V Culture, is identified by some scholars as the “Gandhara Grave Culture”. It was characterized by large stone-walled settlements at the ground level and by large graveyards, such as Aligrama in Swāt, and Timargarha in Dir. And, unlike during previous periods, the new standard of living provided clear evidence of the development of sedentary activities, of village life, and the emergence of social differences that are mainly related to the growth of agricultural production.

Despite the very scanty evidence of burials from Period IV, several hundred graves, ascribed to periods V, VI and VII, were located in Swāt near Mingora and Saidu Sharif (Silvi Antonini/Stacul 1972). These include cremations, flexed inhumations, and “fractional” depositions. Differences in burial customs mainly reflect the decline of cremation and the gradual prevalence of flexed inhumation. The ritual symbols consisted mostly of human terracotta figurines with extended arms and distinct legs. Finally, graves disappeared in Swāt at the end of Period VII, while ceramic forms reveal a partial continuity in the subsequent Period VIII (Stacul 2000, 747–757).

Summing up, the last protohistoric excavations in Swāt corroborated the previous evidence on the Ghalegai sequence, with special reference to Period IV and the connected ritual symbols. The occur-

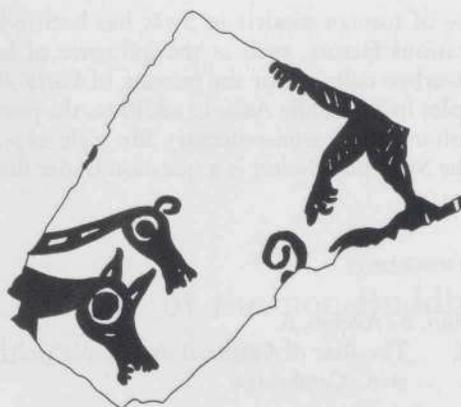


Fig. 5. Black-on-red painted figure from Birkot, Swāt. Period IV. Inv. BKG 1057.



Fig. 6. Black-on-red painted figure from Birkot, Swāt. Period IV. Inv. BKG 500.

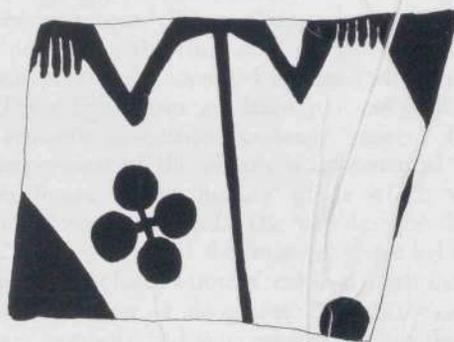


Fig. 7. Black-on-red painted figure from Birkot, Swāt. Period IV. Inv. BKG 302.

rence of foreign models in Swāt has been related to various factors, such as the influence of Indus post-urban cultures, or the moving of Early Arian peoples from Middle Asia. In addition, the possible transhumant or semi-sedentary life style of a part of the Swāt population is a question under discussion.

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