

## Documentation of Ancient Script in Sharda, Neelum / Kishen Ganga Valley

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### Abstract

*The Sharda script, evolved in Kashmir from seventh to eighth century BC, was widely used in South Asia. Archaeologists have documented rock inscriptions in the Sharda script in Jammu & Kashmir (India), Gilgit-Baltistan and Swat (Pakistan). The paper discusses the discovery of an ancient script from Sharda Neelum valley. The most important aspect of this finding is that no such discovery has been reported earlier from AJK. The paper investigates archaeological evidence of the earlier script of the region and compares these rock inscriptions with those found in other places, which will help to understand the geographical distribution of the ancient script in south Asia.*

**Keywords:** *Sharda, ancient script, rock inscription, archaeology, South Asia*

### 1. Why the ancient script was not documented earlier

The recently discovered script from Sharda, Neelum Valley, remained undocumented due to the presence of an arbitrary separation line known as Line of Control (LoC), dividing the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir between India and Pakistan. Before the separation line, the poor road links in the region also made it hard for the researchers to carry out research in the region. The poor communication infrastructure, lack of awareness about cultural heritage is other reasons that an ancient script was not documented earlier.

### 2. Background of Epigraphical records in Sharda

Sharda, a subdivision of the District Neelum of Pakistan administered Kashmir, is situated on the either side of the river Neelum. The place is known as S'ardi in the ancient text, which derives its name after a Hindu goddess S'arada, (Stein 1900:281, Bates 1873:383). Archaeological exploration, documentation and salvage excavation, during 2012-14 by Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad revealed that the area has great diversity of cultural material, which includes inscriptions from the human past. The discoveries from the Neelum valley have been documented in the form of rock engravings, rock inscriptions and numismatics. The records are either in the painted or engraved form, occupying the steep rocks at different places of the valley. *Ganesh Ghati* painted rock engravings near Sericella fort Sharda and *Kel par* rock Tehjian have been mentioned as sacred sites in the ancient text of Rajatarangini (Stein: 1900 281-287). The *Nagdar Nullah* and *Badanpura* rock inscriptions are immovable epigraphy records in Neelum valley. Besides these ancient rock inscriptions, another category of inscriptions, known as movable epigraphy records, have also been recorded in the area; these writings were found on the birch bark preserved in a stone box, unearthed from Sharda during the cultivation of land. Unfortunately, the discovered stuff was mishandled by the person who had found it. Writings on the birch bark are considered a specialized form of expressions, which

mostly belong to the Buddhist era, and various archaeological missions in south Asia and East Asia have already documented some of these.

### 3. Documentation of an ancient script

The documented script comprises three inscriptions and symbols. Khawaja Rehman, the second author, obtained a hand-scribed copy of the script from a local person in 2003. He took it to Professor Nasim, an eminent archaeologist in Peshawar University. Professor Nasim could only figure out that the script resembles to the ancient Sharda script. He could not say more than that as it was partly copied. Mr. Rehman informed Ms. Rukhsana, the first author, about the existence of the script and she undertook a field survey along with a team of TIAC. Ms. Rukhsana recorded the evidence of this unique script and thus the ball started rolling. It was the first ever documentation of rock inscription in the Neelum Valley.

### 3. Location

The inscriptions are engraved on a rock boulder of *Nagdar Nullah* which lies 2096 meters above the sea level at the distance of 38 kilometers in the south east of tehsil Sharda. The place is locally known as *Khazana Mati* 'Treasure Pot'. The place is about ten kilometers upstream from Athmuqam, the district, and headquarters of the Neelum valley (Khan: 2014 53).

### 4. Description

The surface of the boulder, bearing the rock inscriptions, has turned rusty in colour due to the oxidation. These engraved words are apparently deep, it looks it has been engraved with a sharp tool. Some words are complete and few partially damaged (Pl. no 1.a & b).

### 5. Measurements

Rock boulders (complex): l: 5; h: 3.6 m.

Total number of alphabets in first group: 20

Size of each alphabet: h: 16.5; w: 8.8cm.

Size of second group/ boulder: h: 5.5; w: 6.7m.

Covered inscribed area: 0.45m.

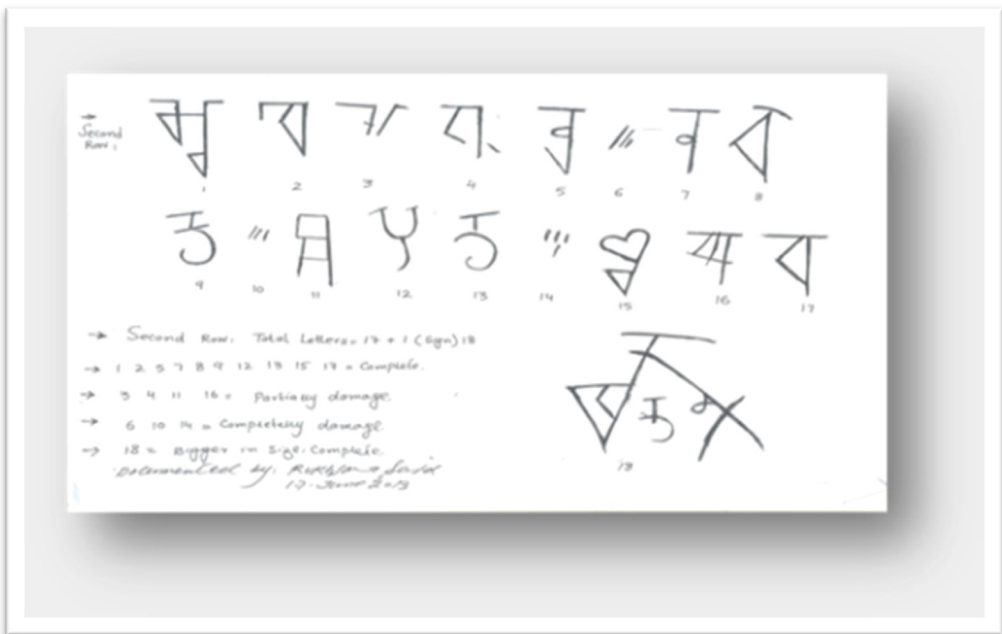
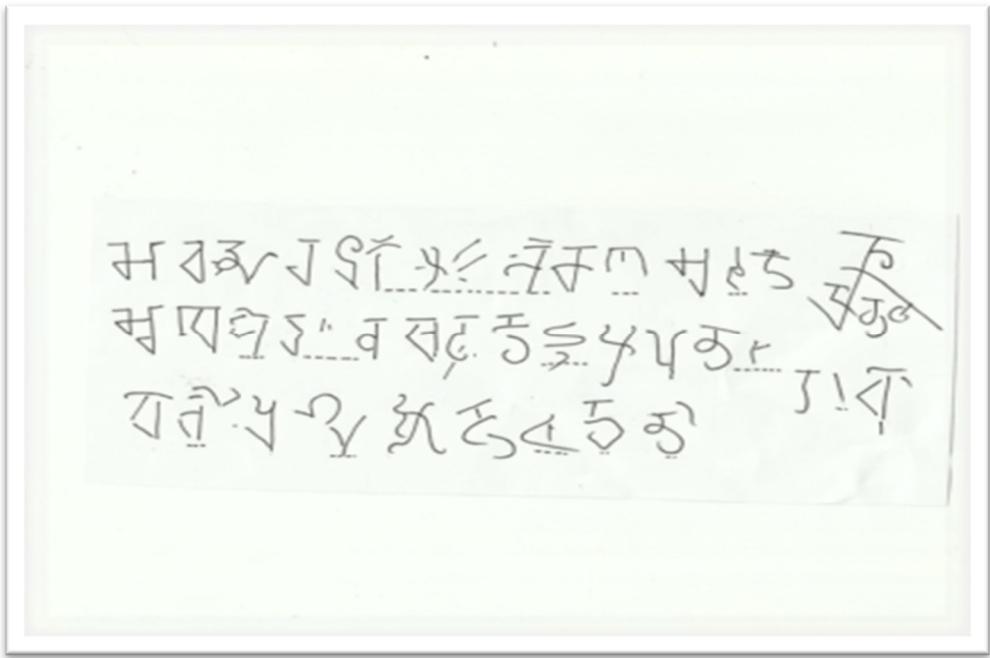
Diameter of lotus flower: d: 10 cm.

Third group/rock boulder; inscription: l: 0.82 m.

*Trisula*; l: 26 cm.

Diameter of *Trisula*; d: 11.5 cm

Besides the inscription two *trisulas* and a lotus flower has also been engraved on the surface of the boulder. These *trisulas* are of different sizes and the budding lotus is with eight petals. The diameter of lotus flower is 4 inches. The third group of the engraved symbols is faded; these symbols signs largely damaged and cannot be easily deciphered. (Khan: 2014 53-54).



Plates No.1 ( a & b Documented inscription Sharda Neelum valley

## 6. A comparative study

The expanse where the rock inscriptions were found is adjacent to the Chilas region, and the Babussar Pass which is junction of Hazara, Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan. In northern areas the Chilas has a rich history of rock carvings, most of which are from Buddhist period. This inscription was engraved on the route from Kashmir to the Chilas and Gandhara in ancient times. The inscriptions have been deciphered as name of the travelers who had come far and inscribed their names on these boulders (Dani 1983: 06). According to Ahmad Hassan Dani:

*“The rock inscriptions of Chilas are late Brahmi script 3rd to 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. These writings were engraved by pilgrims, monks and missionary which, is closely related the script used in middle India, rather than proto sarda script (Dani 1983: 230).*

The ancient scripts have been reported from Kashmir Samist site in Gandhara Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa, Pakistan. These were copper scroll bearing Kharosthi, inscription, engraved with dotted technique belonged to the late Kushana period. The writings on birch bark, placed between two stones and treated with thick layer of mud were also reported. The discovered Brahmi inscription on schist stone decorative with *linga*, belonged to 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century ACE, Similarly the late Sarada inscription is engraved on rectangular piece of schist stone and the style of writing placed it somewhere between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries ACE (Khan Nasim 2002:04).

The Kharosthi, stone inscription has been also documented from Campbellpur, Attock, in Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa belonged to Kanishka period (Dani1981:37). The other recorded Kharosthi inscriptions has characteristics of the later Kushana period, which were documented from ancient Gandhara. These inscriptions were concluded as later phase of Kharosthi script before the Brahmi in Gandhara replaced (Khan Nasim etal 1999-2000:03).

The Brahmi script of about 4<sup>th</sup> century ACE has also been observed in the area of Harwan stupa of Srinagar Kashmir (Ray 1969:216). In the east Sharda Neelum valley connects Srinagar ancient capital of Kushana. On the west of Neelum valley is located Kaghan valley and further connect swat valley of KPK. Bulk of epigraphs scripts in Kharoshthi, Brahimi, Proto Sharda, Nagari Persian were recorded by Italian archaeological missions (IsIAO) in swat valley, Pakistan.

Beside the alphabetical characters, the various documented symbols on the rock boulders in sharda Neelum valley, has great significance and prove their association with various cults, which existed in the region at that time. The representation of lotus flower is used in both Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. Lotus or chakra is also symbol of Vishnu. These types of symbols of lotus, *chakra* (Disc) and *Trisula* (trident) has been recorded on the rocks boulders of Chilas. (Dani 1983:220).In the Buddhism *Trisula* (triratna) represents the Buddha, law and community, which also represent Sanga, Buddha, and community (Monastery, Teacher and people).

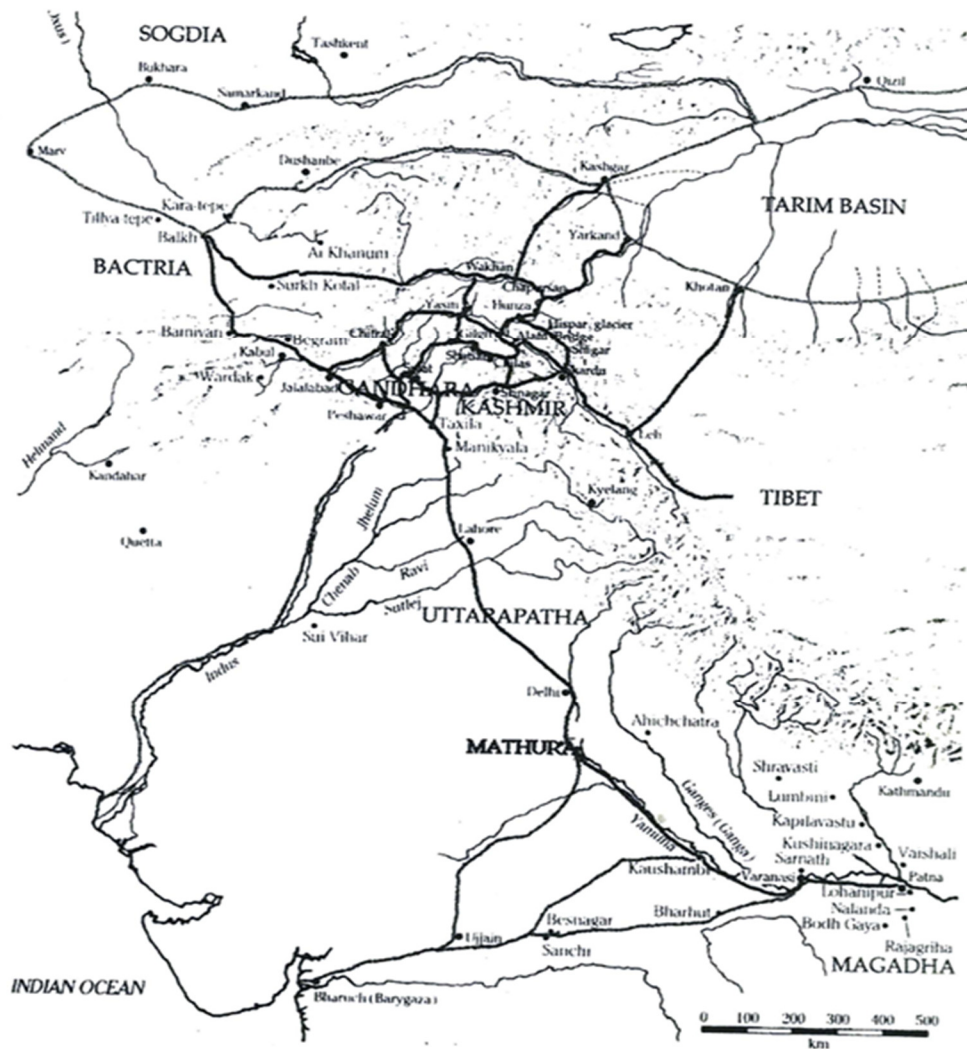


Plate 2 Map 01: Adapted from Janson Neelis (2000). South Asian Archaeology 1997, ancient routes connect Neelum valley, Kashmir with surroundings

The documented rock inscription from Sharda Neelum valley was forwarded to renowned linguists in the region but unfortunately, it has not been fully deciphered yet. According to Prof. Omkar Koul the experts analyzing and concluded the documented rock inscription of Sharda Neelum valley as following “One letter for the sound [b] is same as in Sharda, two letters representing the sounds [s] and [r] are also similar to the Sharda script, while other letters are proto forms. Another thing revealed that each letter in the line represents a *biij mantra* which is

very common in all the earlier scripts. In the third row at the end, the symbol like a flower represent *ajḡal* (having eight leaves), followed by the symbol for *Trishaku Bhairav*. In the Second row, the last symbol represents a motif. Sharda script was developed around 8th century. The rock inscriptions appear to be proto-forms of the Sharda script. At least two letters are same and others have changed shapes. The shapes of the letters are somewhere between the Kharoshti and the Sharda script. It is difficult to find out the exact period when the script has developed”.

The characters of documented rock inscription of *Nagdar* Sharda in the Neelum valley is similar to the rock inscriptions found in Gandhara, presently, in Khyber Puktoonkhawa province, Chilas of Gilgit-Baltistan and Srinagar, capital city of Jammu & Kashmir, India. The documented script proved that area was centre of attraction for travellers, Pilgrims and monks, who left their marks in the form of inscriptions on the rocks in the surroundings of the Neelum valley, on different tracks connecting the Great Silk Road.



Plate No: 3 (a, b, c, & d) : Rock inscriptions signs and symbols

### 7. Social and religious reverence of an ancient script in Neelum valley

The archaeological evidence recorded from different locations of the Neelum valley indicates that the area has remained under the drives of various religious cults from Pre-historic period 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE; to 18<sup>th</sup> ACE. The birch bark locally known as *Bohjj patter*, an ancient material used for writings, is abundant in the valley. The layer of birch bark is still used by the local *Mulvis* ‘religious leaders’ to write *taweez* ‘amulet’ in *saffron or commonly used ink*. These rituals also highlight the continuity of sacred writings on the birch bark. Similarly, Local folks copy the alphabets of ancient script from rock inscriptions on birch bark and tie it with milk churner to get good output; it seems the continuity of the ancient belief system and an excellent instance of syncretism. This hypothesis helps to understand the reverence of an ancient script in the social and religious lives of the people.



## 8. Conclusion

Language is one of the basic segments of human progress. Recent discovery of the rock inscription in the higher mountains of the Neelum valley (Kishen Ganga) confirm the existence of a developed ancient script linking this area with rest of the region. The inscriptions also reinforce the Cultural connections amongst civilisations in Trans-Himalayan region. Some other rock inscriptions have been reported in the area, it is important that proper study of these inscriptions is made. We are still looking for experts to decipher these ancient scripts. Complete study of these rock inscriptions will add up valuable information about the ancient history of the region.

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