

Faxian's and Xuanzang's Wooden Maitreya and the Chartoi Rock Cut Niche at Gupis, Gilgit-Baltistan

Mueezuddin Hakal

Abstract

This note offers a short preliminary study on an artificial niche located on a cliff at the mouth of the valley of Chartoi near Gupis, Gilgit-Baltistan. The niche, looking like a gateway cut into the rock, has a mythological significance in the local folklore. This site, including the whole valley, is remembered as the abode of fairies (called the "mothers"), who can also reveal themselves through the possession of the local shamans. For this reason, the villagers offer near the niche the blood of animals or on the road congressionally cross this ravine in the occasion of marriages, etc. In this area even avoid cultivating the "hot crops" like onion or peppers in order not to upset these entities. The site can also has a topographical significance being located at the beginning of the shortest route connecting Upper Indus with Swat, therefore Gandhara. Of course, this may link the site to Chinese historical records. Finally, there is a strong suggestion that the rock niche may be associated with the site of the fabled colossal sculpture of Maitreya mentioned by Faxian and Xuanzang.

Keywords: Gupis, Ghizer, Faxian, Xuanzang, colossal Maitreya.

1. The state of the art

Both Faxian (402-403 CE) and Xuanzang (630 CE) report on the colossal miraculous wooden Maitreya sculpture in the surroundings of Darel. The sculpture is attributed to the artistic skill of Madhyāntika, the disciple of Ānanda who is said to have brought Buddhism to Kashmir and neighboring regions, including Bolor and Darel.

According to Faxian, in that region, people were observing the Hīnayāna tradition but an *arhat* transported a sculptor to Tushita Heavens with spiritual power to observe the size, color, and general appearance of Bodhisattva Maitreya (Beals 1884: 19-20). On his return, he could carve that image in a place located not far from a monastery (a large *saṅghārāma*). The image was 94 feet in height, and the length on foot of the image was 9 feet 4 inches. All the kingdoms in surrounding pay homage to it (Beals 1884: 20).

So far, every attempt to locate this fabled gigantic Maitreya wooden statue had failed. Many scholars tried to locate the area by crossing the routes followed by the two Chinese travelers, one – Faxien – coming from the Pamirs and heading to the Swat, the other – Xuanzang – coming to Swat and heading up to Bolor. Soshin Kuwayama wrote: "The itineraries of Faxian and Zhimeng [another Chinese pilgrim c. 404 CE] seem almost identical [...]. Departing from Jiecha, Qisha of Zhimeng, Faxian crossed over the Pamirs to enter Tuoli (Dareda

or Darada) which according to him was the first country belonging to North India (Bei Thianzhu). Then he went southwest for fifteen days along the foot of the mountains to reach modern Swāt. [...] In the *Da Tang Xiyu ji* Xuanzang describes a route similar to Faxian's. From the royal town of Uḍḍiyāna (modern town of Mingora) toward the northeast, the route crossed mountains and valleys to reach the Sindhu River. He then went north along the same river to reach the plain of Darada, where he saw a wooden statue of Maitreya, which Faxian also described as standing beside a large *saṅghārāma*.”(Kuwayama 2006: 112). From these very few lines it is evident that the key place to locate the colossal statue is the place or region known as Tuoli, and generally identified with Chilas (*ibid.*: 112). Max Deeg, who is possibly the best expert on Faxian's and Xuanzang's travelogues (his final edition of the latter is awaited), delivered a seminal lecture at the IsIAO in Rome in 1997 in the framework of the 14th EASAA conference. The lecture, later published (Deeg 2000) re-examined the location of Jiecha, a very important “Buddhist kingdom” that Faxian visited immediately after crossing the Pamirs. Max Deeg concluded that Jiecha (with its mysterious connections to an even more fabled “Kingdom of women”) was in Baltistan, maybe in the area of Skardu-Shigar (Deeg 2000: 885). “If this conclusion is correct – Jiecha being Baltistan – it has another consequence for the historical topography of the region: coming from Baltistan, Faxian would have not crossed the Indus to see the famous giant Maitreya usually said to have been found in the valley of Darel flowing into the Indus on the right shore. The Maitreya statue would have been on the left shore of the Indus [...]” (Deeg 2000: 884).

In the same conference, Haruko Tsuchiya presented a different hypothesis. Faxian did not follow the Gilgit way (as Kuwayama claims), but, crossed the Pamirs, entered the Wakhan, and then reached the Ishkoman valley. Therefore, in her view, the Maitreya statue should have been located somewhere there in the Ishkoman valley before the Indus. As proof of that, she presented several interesting petroglyphs (with Buddhist subjects: stupa mainly) and another intriguing object, like a “Buddha statue of Kashmiri style”, which, however, she forgot to further describe or illustrate (Tsuchiya 2000: 897). The hypothesis of the Darkot Pass (a bit to the west of Ishkoman, north of Gupis), which was supported by Aurel Stein, who crossed it in 1913 (Stein 1928: 45), was discarded by the Japanese scholar based on its objective difficulty, confirmed also by local informants.

2. Facts and myths

Chartoi, possibly mean “the killing mountain” (as “char-e-toli”) or the mountain of Toli (as Char-Toli) in Burushaski, is located three kilometers from Gupis leading up to the south from the town's western limits. From a higher elevation it gives a complete view of main Yasin valley. The Chartoi valley directly leads to

Batherate through Kha-bar (lower ravine), and further to Darel. It is the shortest way to Darel, and therefore to Mankial and Swat.

This site was not explored or mentioned by previous archaeological explorers in the area. However, the locals were knowing about the door-like amazing gigantic structure, therefore Mr. Kushwaqt Hussain Maqpon, belonging to the same village and of a noble family shared some pictures with General Muhammad Yusaf Khan and Mr. Rizwan, who later approached me in June 2021.

The niche presents a low arch resting upon vertical jambs (uprights). During my fieldwork at the site, along with my local friends, I attempted to measure the gigantic work of ancient times by determining the angles on the site. As a result, we collected the measurement of vertical height around 60 meters and horizontal length is around 26.4 meters.

The niche is the result of an artificial activity. Along the edges of the uprights of the niche and the lowered arch, signs of deliberate chipping and retouching are visible. Unfortunately, there are no tool marks, holes, or sockets to suggest the accommodation of a structure. It remains to explore the base, now covered in debris, for the presence of a large horizontal recess that could have been used to house a structure. In reality, it is not permitted to touch, let alone dig around the niche, as the local population attributes a sacral function to it.

The locals refer to this site and to the valley of Chartoi as an abode of fairies (called “the mothers”). It is believed that every Friday the door opens and the fairies visit the people and the valley. The local shamans are possessed by these fairies descending from this valley or the peak of Tirich-mir and others. Therefore, it is said that particular music can be heard from this valley on the happy and worried days of royal families. Because of the sacrality of that space, local people avoid cultivating “hot” or “impure” crops, like onion, peppers, and tobacco in the valley near the niche. People still today congregationally cross this valley during marriage festivities, and present the blood of an animal or bird as an offering, to have the blessings of mother fairies for a good future. This tradition continues from the time immemorial. Similar rituals and beliefs are shared with the communities of remaining Ghizer, Gilgit, Hunza, and Nagir.

3. The site’s location and the Chinese accounts

In practice we have little, but if we put it together with other details, we can perhaps conclude that the niche could have housed the statue of Maitreya seen by Faxian and reported by Xuanzang.

On passing the Tsoung Ling (Onion) Mountains, Faxian¹ reached along with his four fellows the location of Tuoli. I do not think that Tuoli may be on the left bank of the Indus, as proposed by Max Deeg (2000). The toponym is instead

¹ Visible geological stratigraphy similar to onion layers in the mountain sections of western Hindukush is normally seen in Ghizer, possibly attracted to call Onion Mountains as marked by a portion of this Range near Sumal, Gupis (see Fig. 12).

well present in Gupis and Yasin. There, during rituals of *Hemas* festivities, Yasini folks recall the memory of the “King of Tuli” (Hakal 2015), which can be identified with Yasin or Gupis. Once passed through Tuoli, Faxian could reach the Sin-to or Indus (Beals 1884: 21-25), after passing over the passes reaching Darel leading to Kohistan valley.²

Yasin can be directly approached from Wakhan Pamirs through the Burughul or Darkot Pass. The latter, despite some recent reservations (Tsuchiya 2000), as proved by Aurel Stein, who managed to cross it despite the harsh weather conditions, should be considered the best route to enter Gilgit Baltistan from the Pamirs (Stein 1928: 45-46, figs. 43-44). Stein documented not only a rock-carving of a stupa-like structure at the bottom of the pass but also a few lines of Tibetan (*ibid.*: fig. 46; see Fig. 10 as Darkot I in Fig. 1).

Now, we cannot but note the fact that location, measurements, and even the presence of a monastery nearby, all fits very well with the valley of Chartoi, rather than with Darel as generally believed and recently elaborated by H. Tsuchiya (2005: 261).³ The monastery (a large *saṅghārāma*) mentioned by Faxian is possibly the one I could locate at Kōṭ in Sumāl (Hakal 2015: 69-70) or may be another unnoticed structure somewhere in Gupis town. We hope that future systematic investigations will help resolving the puzzle.

Acknowledgements

This paper was initiated on the inquiry of General Muhammad Yusaf Khan (Former Vice Chief of Army Staff), Mr. Khushwaqt Husain Maqpon, and Mr. Rizwan. Thanks for your insistent inquiry that forced me to produce this short note. Many thanks to Professor Dr. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer for placing his idea about this niche, “looks like it was prepared to carve a figure of Buddha” which indeed pushed me further to visit this site, document and present this work for the readership. I humbly acknowledge the kind support of Professor Dr. Luca Maria Oliveri, for further adding the details of Faxian’s and Xuanzang’s routes, and helped me detailing on the technical aspects of the niche as a potential space for a wooden sculpture, and adding more to my text and reference. I shall remember my local guides Durdana Khan, Nazir Ahmad Jan and his son Faham Ahamad Jan, enriched me with the details of local myths and voluntarily accompanied to reach the site. All the images with the exception of Figs. 10-11 are by the Author, and Figs. 1-3 are elaborated from Google Earth.

² Following Faxian, Sung Yun and Xuanzang visited Khotan, other Central Asian cities and Gandhara. They both mention the rugged landscape of Po-lu-lo (Bolor) in the Tsoung Ling mountains and gave a description of geography with details of landscape, rivers, roads, bridges and cultures (Beals 1884: 19-20).

³ Of course her view was somehow influenced by the idea that Faxian first reached Gilgit and then approached Darel via the Singal valley, Punyal. Once one accepts the old (Stein’s) and still valid and more plausible theory of the Darkot pass, it will be clear that the valley of Chartoi is the best way to reach Swat. On a richly carved boulder, along with a stupa-like structure, a second Tibetan inscription was first documented by John Mock on the southern side of Darkot pass near Thui (Prof. Dr. Livia Holden pers. comm.) (Fig. 10; as Darkot 2 in Fig. 2).

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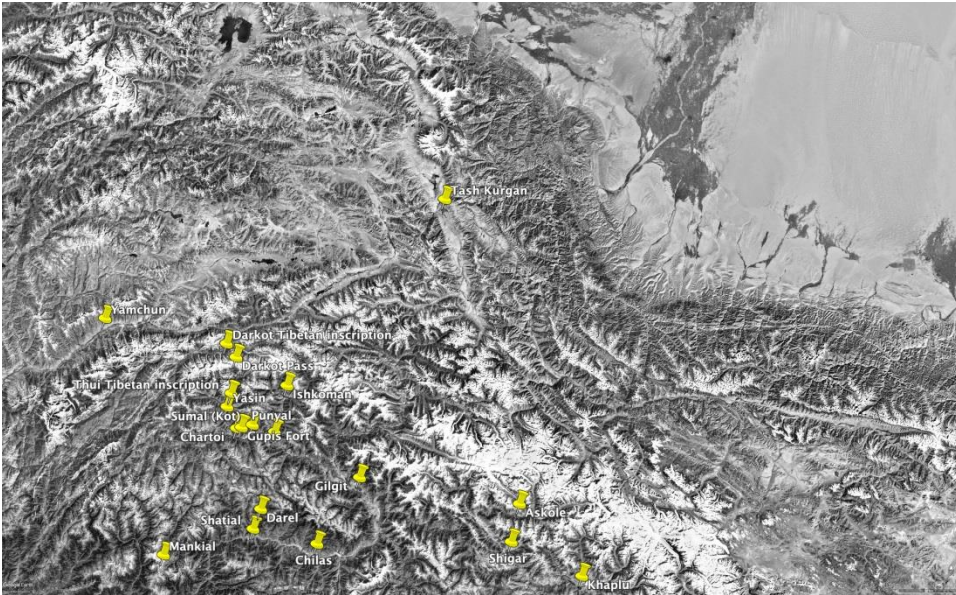


Fig. 1 - Central Asian landscape.

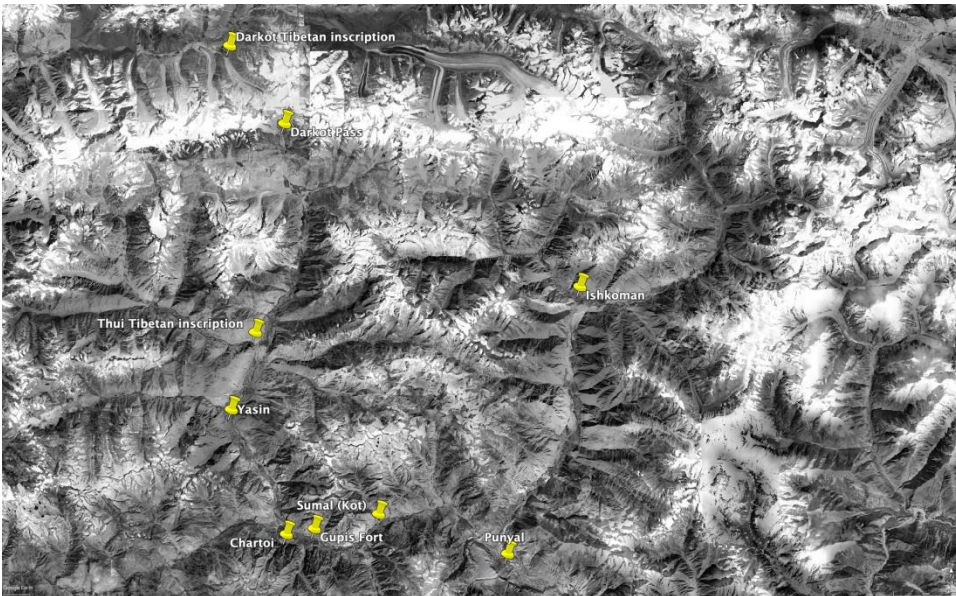


Fig. 2 - Location of Chartoi Rock Cut Niche.

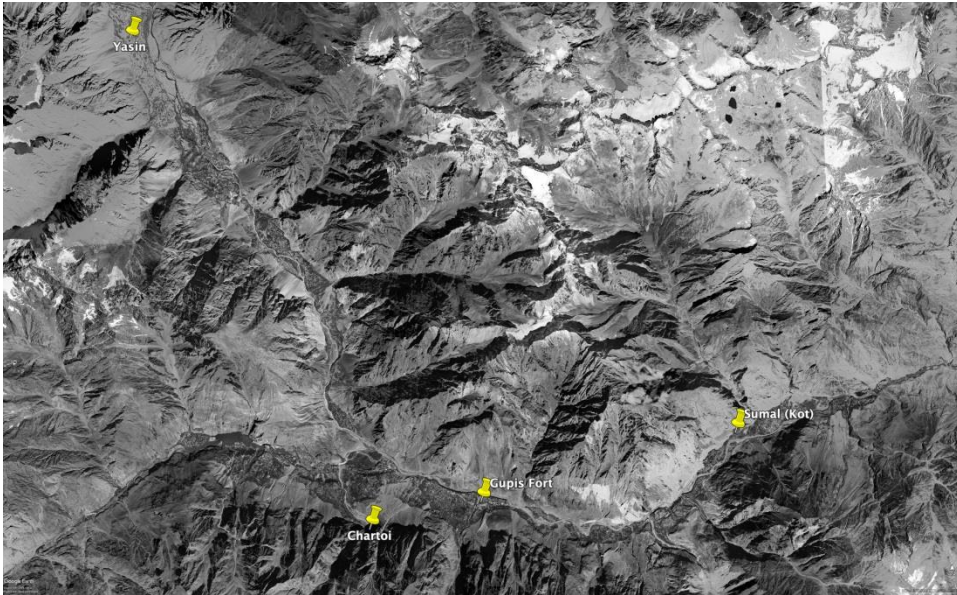


Fig. 3 - Location of Chartoi Niche with reference to Sumal (Kot).



Fig. 4 - Chartoi Vale and Rock Cut Niche in view.



Fig. 5 - A closer view.

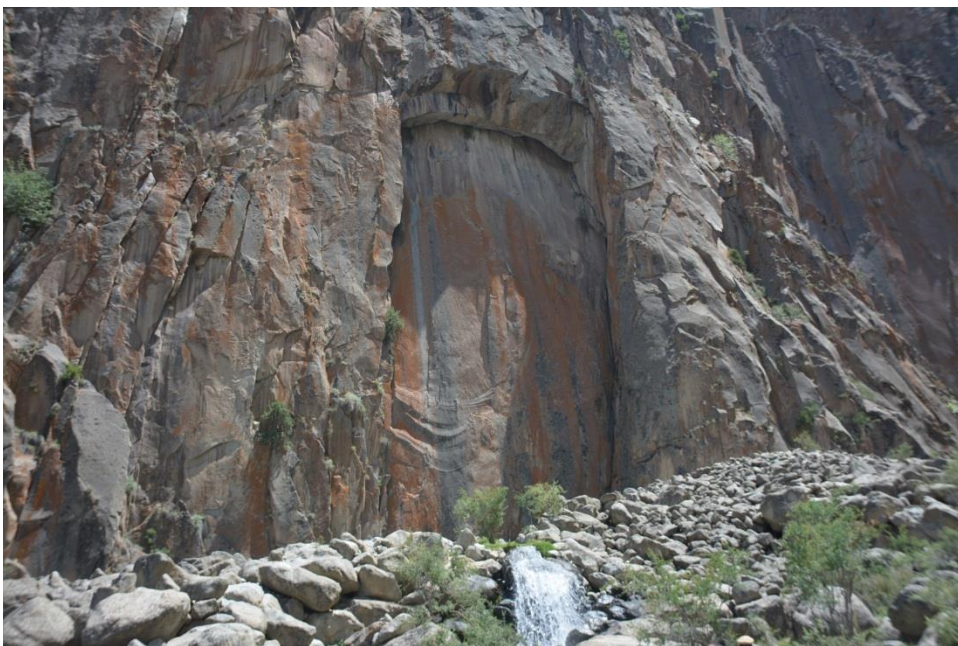


Fig. 6 - Chartoi Rock Cut Niche.



Fig. 7 - Details of top arch of Rock Cut.

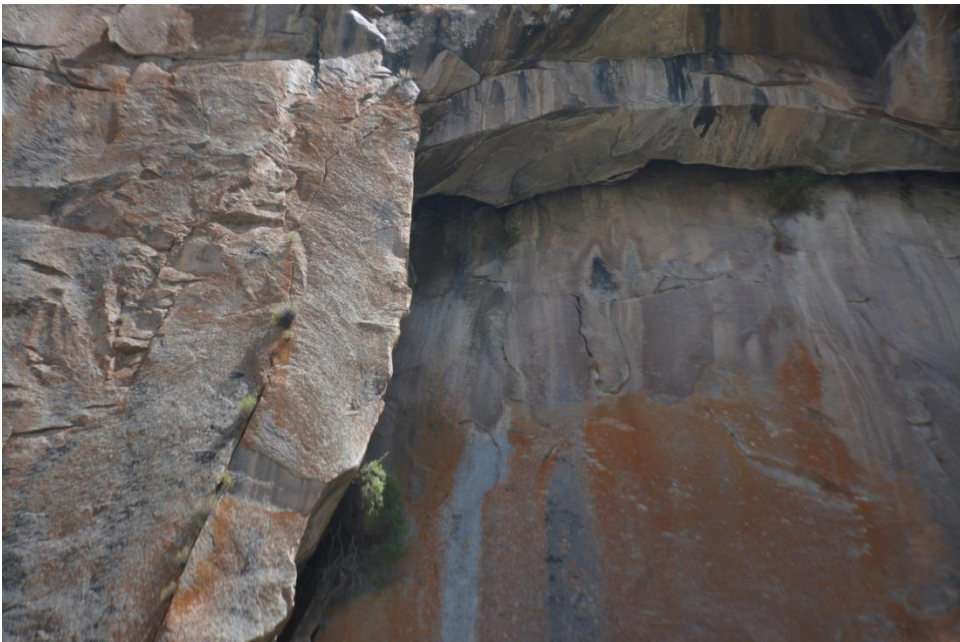
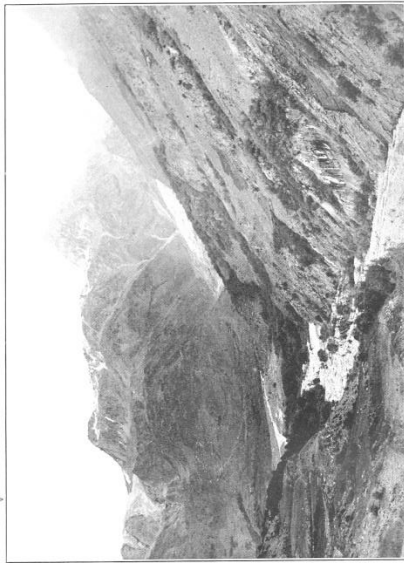


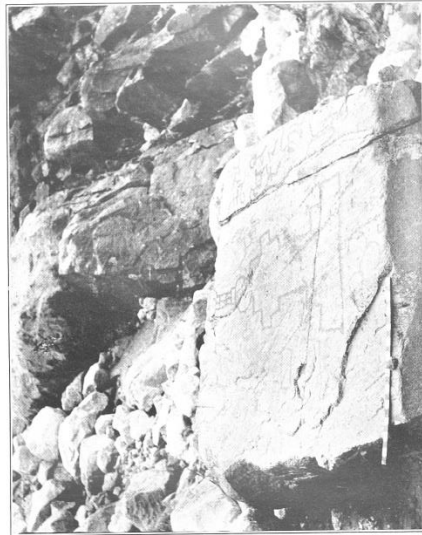
Fig. 8 - Details of stone works.



Fig. 9 - Local guides and site in background.



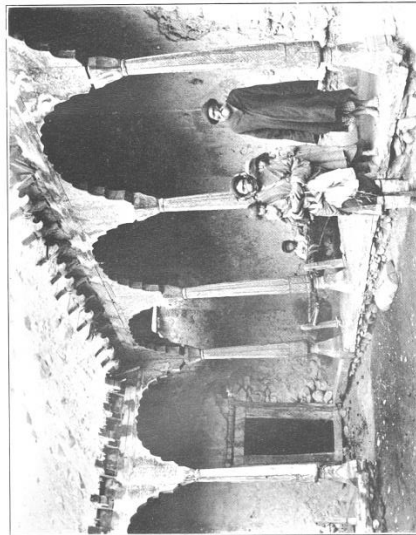
44. DARKOT PASS SEEN FROM BELOW DARBAND RIDGE.



46. ENGRAVED BOULDER WITH SUTPA DESIGN AND TIBETAN INSCRIPTION ON ASLANT TO DARKOT PASS. (See pp. 15-16; App. A.)



43. FIRS BED ON NORTHERN SLOPE OF DARKOT PASS.



45. OUTER COURT OF HAKIM'S HOUSE AT BARKULLI YASIN.

Fig. 10 - Darkot Pass (Stein 1926: figs 43-46)



Fig. 12 - Section showing geological stratigraphy like onion layers, on the left bank of Yasin River, at the eastern side Sumal, or at the front of Kaşışal, Yangal, Gupis.