

## 7. Traditional Art and Architecture in Baltistan

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This article, based on several visits to the region and a recent trip to Kashmir, will summarise current knowledge on the Islamic architectural heritage of Baltistan, recognising that much remains to be done to fill remaining gaps in the scientific research after Ahmad Hasan Dani's pioneering 1989 study of *The Wooden Style of Northern Pakistan*.

One would expect that Baltistan, as a secluded region locked in by high mountain ranges, should have developed an art and architecture of its own, with only few characteristics shared with any of its neighbours. This is not the case, unless one wants to claim the large local buildings of *khanqah*, a combination of mosque and Sufi retreat centre, to be a Balti creation. With regard to virtually all the religious buildings, including the typically Shia congregation centres, the *matam-sarai* (also called *imambarha*), and possibly also with regard to palace and fort architecture, Baltistan appears heavily dependent on influences mainly from Kashmir, its great and dominant neighbour. Some additional influences have probably come from Ladakh, culturally a part of western Tibet, with which it shares its Tibetan language. Indeed, communication with Ladakh, mainly along the Indus, is easier than with any other adjoining cultural and political entity. There were also important influences from Iran with respect to certain crafts, as described further below. Moreover, the southern Tarim basin, that is, Khotan and Yarkand, may well have contributed much to the emergence of the large type of *khanqah*-cum-veranda in Baltistan, and possibly also to the rich vocabulary of carved motifs. Thus we can conjecture that there was a strong south-north cultural movement, complemented by some influence from the east, Ladakh, from Central Asia, and from the more distant Shia world in Persia.

It is no surprise that the Islamisation of Baltistan in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries came from Kashmir soon after that regionally leading cultural Hindu centre had fallen to Islam. This is when the strong south-north movement of ideas and of actual cultural influences developed, eventually wiping out Buddhism and possibly also some Bon and Hindu beliefs in Baltistan. Yet, while Tibet thus lost its religious impact on its former province of Baltistan, it still left a visible imprint on Baltistan's Islamic architecture. The question has to remain



Fig. 131. The Shah Hamadan mosque (*khanqah*) in Srinagar (from Kak 1933, pl. VI).



Fig. 132. The shrine of Mir Ishaq in Tagas.

open, whether this is due to a locally surviving influence or to new inputs from the cultural melting pot Kashmir, which could have reinvigorated past traditions.

A mystic Shia missionary from Hamadan, Sayyed Ali Shah Hamadani, a member of the Central Asian Sufi Kubrawiye order, is credited with the first important Islamic mission in Kashmir, which he visited three times between 1372 and 1383. He died in 1384, being buried in Kulab in southern Tajikistan. According to Kashmiri traditions, seven hundred Sayyed and other followers, among them highly skilled craftsmen (the Kubra order was particularly popular among craftsmen) had come with Shah Hamadani from Iran and Central Asia to settle in Kashmir – including specialists in *kar-i qalam* (papier mâché work), *khatamband* (ornamental wooden ceiling), *panji-*ra** (latticework called *jali* in Urdu) and calligraphy. It appears that the saint passed through Baltistan at least once on his way between Central Asia, where his later life centred, and Kashmir. His great *khanqah*/mosque in Srinagar, the Masjid-e Hamadan or Shah Hamadan mosque (fig. 131), became the symbol of early Islam in Kashmir and most probably served as

the prime model for all the centrally designed wooden mosques in both Kashmir and Baltistan.

A further important cultural influence from Kashmir to Baltistan is due to the missionary activity by followers of the mystic Sayyed Mohammad Nurbakhsh, who had founded the Kubra-related Nurbakhshiye Sufi order in Iran in the fifteenth century. Around 1500 that movement was introduced by Shams-ad Din Iraqi to Kashmir, where he resided for some thirty years and where he is buried. In the middle of the sixteenth century, at the time of his son Mir Danyal Shahid, a cruel persecution of the Shia and Sufi orders suddenly developed. It was instigated by the Sunni hardliner Mirza Haydar Dughlat, one of Emperor Humayun's generals and also one of his uncles, and was aimed at the extinction of Shi'ism and all Sufi orders – and especially the Nurbakhshiye sect – throughout Kashmir. In 1550, Mir Danyal was summoned from Skardu to Srinagar and then beheaded. He was buried in Zaribal near Srinagar and is venerated as a *shahid* (martyr). All this led to a mass exodus of Shia and Nurbakhshiye families, among them many craftsmen, to Baltistan where they were welcomed by the local rulers.

There was a revival of the Nurbakhshiye order in Kashmir under the short-lived rule of the Chak family, but with the conquest of Kashmir by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1586 persecution started again. In the early seventeenth century, the Nurbakhshiye was virtually uprooted in Kashmir, while it was thriving in neighbouring Baltistan. During the whole of the seventeenth century, many Nurbakhshiye missionaries preached and taught all over Baltistan. Leading among them were the thirty-fourth *pir* (spiritual leader) of the movement, Mir Abu Said Sada (died in 1684, buried in Srinagar), his brother Mir Aref (died in 1651 or 1655, buried in Tagas), and two descendants of Shams-ad Din Iraqi – Mir Yahya (died in 1614, buried in Shigar) and Mir Mukhtar (died in 1718, buried in Kiris).

Thus a mystic Shia movement gained ground in Baltistan, while the ruling class, supposedly of Central Asian Turkish origin and adhering to the mainstream beliefs of the Twelver Shia, created a number of largely autonomous small kingdoms or princely states. They were headed by men bearing different titles, who later became known as *raja*. The division into small kingdoms may well have proliferated after the occupation of Baltistan (and later Gilgit) by the army of Gulab Singh, the Dogra ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, in 1840/1841.

Leading principalities were those of Skardu and Khaplu. The state of Skardu, which was ruled by the Makpon family, controlled the best lines of communication with Kashmir, leading across the up to 3900-metre-high Deosai plateau and the 4000-metre-high Burzil pass (fig. 2). Members of the same family also governed the state of Kharmang, situated on the path leading along the Indus to Ladakh, as well as those in Rondu and Astor, controlling the access to and from Gilgit and Chilas in the west. The other leading principality, that of Khaplu, located on the Shyok tributary of the Indus and ruled by the once powerful Yabghu family, controlled the paths into northern Ladakh, which in turn is linked with Khotan (Tarim basin) across the approximately 5500-metre-high Karakoram pass. The settlement pattern in Khaplu, located on a huge alluvial cone, is characterised by separate villages originally housing craftsmen of the same trade – a division according to professional skills found all over India.

There were, in addition, the princely states of Shigar and Kiris. Shigar, governed by the Amacha family, controlled the communications with Nagir and Hunza across the Baltoro glacier, and those with Yarkand and the Tarim basin across the forbidding, approximately 5600-metre-high Muztagh pass. The state of Kiris, once ruled by the Yabghu family, had a central location insofar as it was surrounded by other Balti principalities on three sides. Therefore, probably not by coincidence, one finds in Kiris the most important saintly tomb and thus the leading pilgrim centre of Baltistan.

#### THE BUILDING STYLE

The architecture of Baltistan is based on the use of a sort of log-house structure applied to practically all of the more prominent buildings, large or small, religious or secular. The monumental building repertory consists of the large structures of the *khanqah* dominating many of the settlements, the mosques (*masjids*), the tombs of saints (*astanas*), the congregation halls for the commemoration of the death of Husein (*matam-sarais* or *imambarhas* or *huseiniyes*), and the forts/palaces (*khars*) of the different *rajas*. The style, locally called *thatar*, is strongly conditioned by the ‘cator and cribbage’ building technique (see fig. 96). Stone walls are



Fig. 133. The *khanqah* and two tombs of saints in Tagas (pl. 49).

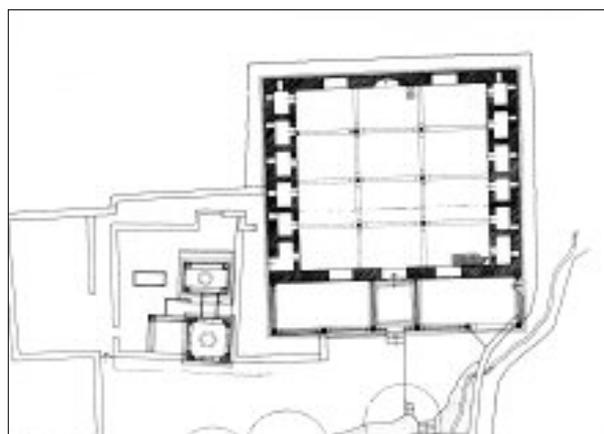


Fig. 134. Plan of the *khanqah* and the two tombs of saints in Tagas (from Dani 1989b, fig. 30).



Fig. 135. The spire and *qubbah* of the shrine of Mir Ishaq in Tagas.



Fig. 136. The winged wooden 'bells' on the shrine of Mir Ishaq in Tagas.

reinforced with occasional vertical layers of parallel beams ('caters'), laid at some distance above each other. On the corners, the longitudinal beams are interlocked at a right angle. For further structural strengthening in the corners (and also inside the walls), one often finds vertical cages or boxes composed of pairs of short pieces of timber beams built up in alternating right angle directions (fig. 95), looking like ladders from the outside ('cribbage'). They are pinned to the longitudinal wall beams, connecting them and tying them together into a semi-rigid frame. The void between the beams (or within the cages) is filled with stones or mud bricks and earth, which makes the walls become rather heavy and sturdy. This building technique was once widespread in the western Himalayas, but rampant deforestation now makes it prohibitively expensive.

The same cribbage construction method was applied to the solid pillar-like frames constituting the corner columns of the tombs of saints (*astanas*). In the wide openings between the composite columns, ornamental timber panels or *jali* screens were inserted (pls. 53, 100).

Apart from this general construction method, another typical feature is the prominence of centralised cubic structures and the *stupa*- or *chorten*-like spires crowning the pyramidal roofs. They are the most important indications of strong influences from Kashmir (and probably also from Buddhist Ladakh), where these features are as widespread as in Baltistan. The top structures rise from a four-, six- or eight-sided lantern, called *masjid* (mosque), which carries the *cholo* (top), consisting of a slim pyramidal spire with four small crosswise projecting beams, which may feature two roof-like brackets. From the projecting beams were suspended wooden vase-like objects, some (or originally all?) of them featuring thin 'wings' as if meant to catch the wind, possibly imitating bells hanging from Hindu or Buddhist temples (figs. 135, 136).

This *cholo* ensemble is topped by the *qubbah*, basically consisting of a small metal umbrella (also described as a dented canopy) with several suspended short chains. They hold a metal, often three-pronged *alam* (referring to the Shiah 'trinity' of Mohammad, Ali and Husein), which is also used for the finial on standards paraded during the annual periods mourning the death of Husein.

However, Baltistan has developed its own style of *khanqah*, different from Kashmiri models, consisting of large or even huge roughly square and occasionally multi-pillared halls with wide and high verandas attached to their front side.

#### KHANQAHS

The *khanqah* in Baltistan and Kashmir was developed as a multi-purpose structure for the formerly more numerous Nurbakhshiye followers in Baltistan and the Sufis of the Naqshbandiye, Qaderiye and other or-



Fig. 137. Interior hall of the *khanqah* in Khaplu.

ders in Kashmir. It serves as a congregational mosque, *jami masjid*, and as a retreat centre for mystics, Sufi, observing the *chila*, the annual forty-day retreat of the Sufi order. It is also used as a meeting hall for the *matam*, the performance of the memorial service recalling the passion of Husein in the month of Muharram (the Twelver Shia population performs the *matam* service in separate congregational buildings called *matam-saras* or *imambarhas*).

While it appears that the large *khanqahs* encountered in the region were first built in Kashmir and then in Baltistan, physically speaking the building types used in both regions have little in common except for the appearance of square or nearly square halls and the provision of seclusion cells for Sufi retreats. The famous precursor of all later *khanqahs* is the wooden Khanqah-i Moualla or Shah Hamadan mosque in Srinagar (fig. 131). Beautifully located on the right bank of the Jhelum river, it shows a large centralised structure with two storeys – the lower one supported by four large columns – and with seven seclusion rooms topped by a gallery (reserved for women) on each side. Built around 1400, after Shah Hamadani's death, it may have changed much of its appearance due to two destructions by fire and subsequent rebuildings, the latest one in 1731. The interior was badly restored recently. With its portico-like entrance structure, lateral verandas and balconies the building looks very different from the simple four- or multi-pillared halls and frontal verandas of the many *khanqahs* in Baltistan.

Only few *khanqahs* seem to exist (or to have survived) in Kashmir, and little is known about their style. The only other published *khanqah*, the one in Pampur, vividly recalls the structure in Srinagar, but is much smaller and single storeyed. The somewhat different *khanqah* in Chrar-i Sharif, which burnt down in 1995 (see



Fig. 138. The *khanqah* of Shigar.

below), and the structures reportedly still standing in Tral and Wachi could not be seen during my recent visit to the area.

In Baltistan there are at least ten *khanqahs*, and with their often enormous size they constitute landmarks dominating the skyline of many settlements – particularly in the eastern area, the centre of the Nurbakhshiye followers. Generally, they measure up to twenty-three/twenty-five metres on both sides, and up to some six metres in height; they count four, six or more columns supporting the roof, and often feature six to eight rooms or cells (*hujras*) on each side, used for retreats and overnight

accommodations. All of them carry a large frontal veranda, *baramdah* or *wacha*, of the same height as that of the roof and they often feature balconies and large windows with complicated *panjira* latticework. Their roofs are either flat or tent shaped with a shallow slope, and probably all of them have (or had) a *qubbah* on top.

The largest of the surviving original *khanqahs* in Baltistan are located in Khaplu (fig. 137) and Kiris (pl. 54). The structure in Khaplu has six huge columns with square bases and large bracket capitals, more than twenty additional smaller columns in support of the weakened roof beams, eight *hujras* and a four-metre-wide veranda, which counts ten richly decorated arches topped by varying *panjira* latticework.

Generally founded by great Nurbakhshiye teachers and missionaries, certainly none of the existing *khanqahs* date back to the time of the great missionaries Sayyed Ali Shah Hamadani and Mir Shams-ad Din Iraqi. However, the exceptional wooden *khanqah* in Serfakhur (district of Churga, Shigar valley) is believed to be a creation by Shah Hamadani himself. The saint is also credited with planting the tree, around which a two-storeyed structure enclosing a court was built. The *khanqah* is reached after crossing that court, now dominated by a maple tree grown to monumental proportions (pls. 50, 52).

Each of the most important *khanqahs* is associated by a dated inscription with one of the great teachers/saints who lies buried behind or next to it. The oldest is probably that of Mir Yahya in Shigar, which was founded in 1647. The largest structure, the *khanqah* of Sayyed Mohammad in Khaplu, is dated to the year 1712. The most reputed building, due to the saintly prominence of its founder, Mir Mukhtar, is the Khanqah-i Maulla in Kiris, founded in 1706. Some structures may date from the nineteenth century, a few are even very new, such as those in Machilu and Kande in the Hushe valley, to the north of Khaplu.

#### MOSQUES

The mosques visited by the *rajas*, court dignitaries, and the Twelver Shia population (but also the Nurbakhshiye followers) differ from the *khanqah* not only in their much smaller size, but in most cases also in their more strictly centralised ground plan and their generally arcaded verandas, which are either located on the front of the prayer room or all around it. In addition, they feature steeper pyramidal roofs and rich

carved decoration. With one exception, all the mosques are small, some even tiny, measuring only three by three metres, with one central column in the prayer room. Their entrance doors and small grilled windows are decorated with often exquisite carvings. Most probably all of them had, and many still have, on their roof a four- or six-sided 'lantern' crowned by a *qubbah*.

Two mosques, the one in Skardu fort and the other in Paroa near Tagas (figs. 139, 140), stand out for their particularly high, heavy corbelled roof cornices, thereby emphasising even more the 'towering' character of the roof and its crowning ensemble. This type of roof design appears to relate to tower-like Buddhist *stupas*, pagodas and *chorten*.

The Chakchan mosque in Khaplu (pl. 47), the largest and most impressive among the old Balti mosques, is special insofar as it should be understood as a Nurbakhshiye building with the function but without the appearance of a *khanqah*. It is said to be located on the site of a Buddhist temple, and allegedly it was founded by Shah Hamadani. It has two storeys, the upper one used as a summer mosque, the lower one serving as a winter mosque and as lodging for visitors and Sufi. A richly decorated, arched veranda surrounds the building on four sides, a pyramidal spire with a *qubbah* crowns the hexagonal lantern on top of the tent-shaped roof. A broad ornamental frieze decorates the lower storey facing north. The prayer room houses four slim, faceted pillars with cross-bracket capitals and bases with cusped arched panels in high relief. Several superimposed, richly carved corbelled cornices form the transition to the ceiling. The *mihrab* and the nine segments of the ceiling, five of them with a 'lantern roof', are decorated with exquisite *khatamband*. During recent restoration of the building, which was actually in a good condition, much of it was painted and the roof was covered with metal sheets.



Fig. 139. The mosque in Skardu fort in 1914 (from De Filippi 1924, p. 54).



Fig. 140. The mosque in Paroa in 1914 (from Dainelli 1924, pl. LIV).



Fig. 141. The Chaburonjo mosque in Shigar in 1914 (from De Filippi 1924, p. 75).

Another outstanding mosque of the type featuring a veranda surrounding the prayer room is the small, two-storeyed Khilingrong mosque in Shigar (pls. 60, 106), recently restored by the Aga Khan Cultural Service-Pakistan (AKCS-P). It also has a veranda at the entrance on the lower floor. As a mosque which once may have served as a ‘court mosque’ (in addition to a much smaller structure next to the *raja’s* palace), it is a showpiece of refined and richly decorated wooden architecture. The prayer room on each floor has a central pillar topped by a carefully decorated cross-bracketed semivoluted capital. There are richly carved spandrels of the arcades of the lower veranda and refined ornamental carvings inside on the entrance, windows, and on the *mihrab*.

Other examples of mosques completely surrounded by a veranda are the ruined, double-storeyed mosque in the fort of Skardu (fig. 139), still standing in 1914, the one-storeyed Chahburunjo mosque in Shigar, which in 1914 still had some sections of its elaborate arcaded veranda and original roof (fig. 141), and the recently restored and painted Brakshan mosque, also a one-storeyed structure, below the Chakchan mosque in Khaplu. The other wooden mosques have a veranda only at the front and, occasionally, on one or two other sides as well. The best structures known to me are again in Skardu, Shigar and Khaplu: most noteworthy among them are the Tayur mosque in Skardu, with a modern mosque recently attached to it, the Ambariq mosque in Shigar (fig. 292; pl. 104), which was recently restored by the AKCSP, and the mosque in Khangsar Mohalla in Khaplu, featuring a veranda on two sides.

In Kashmir – at least in those areas I was able to travel to – no such mosques remain to be found. All the structures which look somehow similar to the described wooden mosques of Baltistan, thus featuring a centralised ground plan, a frontal, sometimes also surrounding veranda, and a pyramidal roof with a *qubbah* on top, are tombs of saints. There was, however, the beautifully carved wooden mosque of Ata Mohammad Khan in Chrar-i Sharif from the late eighteenth century, which must have been similar to the Baltistan mosques. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by fire during the war events of 1995, together with the shrine of Sheikh Nur-ad Din (fig. 142), the most exquisite wooden building in Kashmir, and the adjacent *khanqah*.



Fig. 142. The shrine of Sheikh Nur-ad Din in Chrar-i Sharif, Kashmir, before its reconstruction in the 1960s (from Wakhlu 1998, pl. 6).

#### TOMBS OF SAINTS

The same type of centralised structure surrounded by a veranda is seen in virtually all the tombs of saints (*astanas*) in Baltistan. They show the wooden construction method already described, but restricted here to the building of cribbage pillars at the four corners. The four open sides of the inner building constituting the tomb chambers are screened with often exquisite latticework. Originally, most of the surrounding poled or arcaded verandas may also have been partially or totally enclosed by decorative carved timber panels. The structures are held together by the dead weight of the four corner pillars, the surrounding veranda and the pyramidal roof with its characteristic superstructure.

A characteristic Baltistan feature is the design of the tomb chamber’s interior, as there is no ceiling, but a heavy cor-

belled cornice leading into a hexagonal or octagonal chimney-like drum, the *chaman*, which rises some five to seven metres to the lantern, called *masjid*, on top. In the tomb of Mir Aref in Tagas (pl. 49) and in structures under repair or in ruins, the *chaman* can be seen from the outside. It may have been designed to enhance the spiritual links of the saint with heaven.

The *qubbah* consists of the same ensemble as seen on the mosques and *khanqahs* – a small pyramidal spire with crosswise projecting sticks hung with wooden ‘bells’ and crowned by a metal umbrella holding a metal *alam*. As seen in Tagas, the wooden ‘bells’ were originally equipped with wings possibly imitating winged metal bells suspended from Hindu temples or possibly also Buddhist temples or *stupas* in Ladakh.

The leading six *astanas* are: that of Sayyed Mir Yahya (died 1632) in Shigar (fig. 143); those of Mir Aref (died 1651 or 1655; pl. 49) and of Mir Ishaq (fig. 132), a son of Sayyed Mir Mukhtar, standing side by side next to Mir Aref’s *khanqah* in Tagas (fig. 133); the tomb of Hazrat Mir Mukhtar (died in 1718) behind his *Khanqah-i Moualla* in Kiris (fig. 144); the *astana* of Sayyed Mohammad (fig. 145; pl. 53), a son of Sayyed Mir Yahya, behind his huge *khanqah* in Khaplu; and that of Mir Sayyed Ali Tusi (died 1670) at Kuwardo near Skardu. The two tombs in Kiris and Kuwardo were restored by the locals some time ago, resulting in a sad deformation of the structures. More recently the AKCS-P put the *astana* in Khaplu back into its original shape, and lately the restoration of the tomb of Sayyed Mir Yahya in Shigar (fig. 143) got under way, with the locals given advice by the AKCS-P. A number of other tombs are smaller and copy any of the models of the four described structures in a more modest way. Good examples are seen in Kiris, where next to the restored *astana* of Sayyed Mir Mukhtar one finds the tombs of three other saints in different states of dilapidation.

The two tombs in Tagas stand out not only for their comparatively good state of preservation, but also for their greater height and their two-storeyed structure achieved by placing an intermediate layer of hori-



Fig. 143. The *astana* of Sayyed Mir Yahya in Shigar (before restoration in December 2004).



Fig. 144. The dilapidated *astana* of Mir Mukhtar in Kiris before its restoration (from Dani 1989b, pl. XXIX a).



Fig. 145. The dilapidated *astana* in Khaplu before restoration.



Fig. 146. A window of Ambariq mosque.

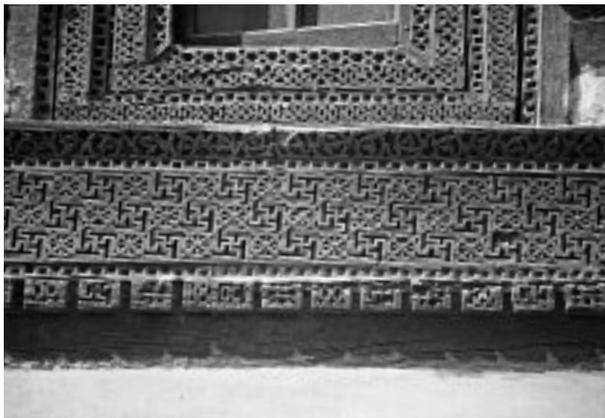


Fig. 147. The frieze on the front of Chakchan mosque in Khaplu.



Fig. 148. The frieze inside Chakchan mosque (pl. 48).

in the eighteenth century. However, the noted features may just as well date from the middle of the nineteenth century, after Skardu had fallen to the Jammu ruler and after the important local ruler had lost much of his power. He must then have realised that it would be useless to hold on to his strong castle on the Khardong hill, which dominates the wide Indus valley at Skardu. At about that time, the other rulers in

zontal logs at half height. This method was certainly meant to increase the stability of the unusually high structures. The two 'storeys' of the two tombs show different latticework.

The saintly tombs in Kashmir (according to observations made during my recent visit covering only a small part of Kashmir), show a similar centralised design, but are generally built of bricks and stones. Featuring a ceiling above the tomb, they are without the wide chimney-like *chaman*, characteristic of the Baltistan *astana*. They are nearly devoid of woodcarvings and also painted decoration, except for the little decoration generally found on the lintels and jambs of the entrance doors.

#### RAJA PALACES

Each of these princely states had a rather modest 'palace', *khar*, and a court life complete with a number of dignitaries, secretaries, guards and servants, including grooms who cared for highly prized horses used in polo games, the rulers' favourite form of entertainment. It is likely that all the palaces and the connected court life date from a recent time, that is, not before the eighteenth or even the middle of the nineteenth century, when a somewhat stable political situation under the dominance of the Maharaja of Jammu may have induced the *rajās* to move from proper forts into unfortified palaces, thereby becoming an easier prey to invaders. Dani learnt that the palace in Khaplu was "built in the middle of the nineteenth century after the older mud fort on the top of the hill was deserted". I was told that the then *raja* had thrown a large stone from the fort, located on the hilltop behind the present palace, to let the stone decide where to build his palace.

Similar dates can be assumed for the palaces in Skardu and Shigar, though Dani suggests an earlier date for the structure in Skardu: This building presents "some late Mughal architectural features" and may thus be dated

Baltistan may well have developed a similar new interest in improving their living conditions – a trend induced in part by new exposure to the much more developed culture in Kashmir.

Probably the palaces were built and decorated with competition between the ruling families in mind. It is related, for instance, that Hatem Khan, a powerful ruler of Khaplu at the end of the nineteenth century, had conquered most of Baltistan, including Skardu, and then brought – among other looted objects – an exquisitely carved door frame from the palace in Skardu to be built into the entrance to the court leading to his palace.

Among the five palaces to be mentioned, that is, those in Khaplu (fig. 92; pl. 46), Kharmang (fig. 90), Kiris, Shigar (fig. 93) and Skardu, that in Kharmang could not be visited. The palace in Kiris, the smallest and most modest building in the group, is still lived in. The most impressive palaces, namely those in Khaplu, (probably) Kharmang and Skardu (partially lived in), are in bad repair, while the (somewhat) fort-like palace in Shigar, known as *Fong Khar*, ‘the palace on the rock’, was in a ruinous shape in 1999 when the Aga Khan Trust for Culture started to restore it (see chapter 10). In the meantime, the building has been not only carefully restored, but also transformed into a very special guesthouse and a small museum holding a collection of carved wooden items, most notably fronts of large chests, as well as historic objects of daily use.

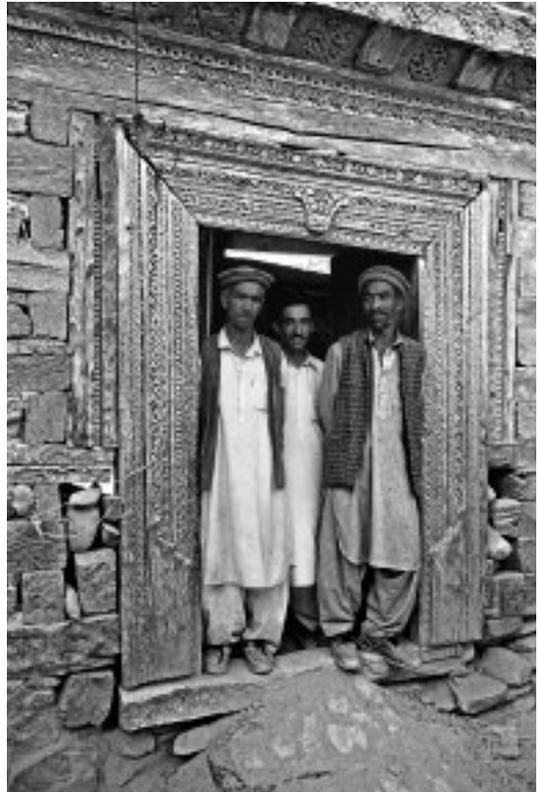


Fig. 149. The old frame of the entrance door (now moved back to its original position on the ground floor), and the corbelled cornice on the upper east elevation of Shigar palace (see also figs. 150-152, 219).

The palaces are flat roofed, as are all the secular buildings in Baltistan. The building technique is that of *thatar*, but with signs of haste or thrift regarding the adequate insertion of stabilising beams which had to be brought from far away. The apparently scarce use of timber reinforcements led to sagging of the walls, thereby reducing the strength of the structure.

The two palaces in Skardu and Khaplu have three storeys, a large three-storeyed timber portico (*jaroka*) at the front, a loggia (*angun*), and a balcony on one or more sides, partially with excellent wooden latticework, some ceilings ornamented with *khatamband* work, and exquisitely carved doors. The portico, which features cusped arcades and cusped arched windows, appears to distinguish more than anything else the two buildings as ‘palatial’. The palace in Khaplu, known as the Tokhsikhar, ‘the high(er) palace’, appears even more imposing, as it stands on a raised terrace.

The outside of the palace in Shigar is decorated with a corbelled cornice showing a series of medallions (figs. 149-152), and inside both the palaces in Khaplu and Shigar one finds exquisite woodcarvings and *khatamband* work which reflect the courtly life style of the then rulers (see below).



Figs. 150-152. Various motifs from the cornice on the façade of Shigar palace.

#### THE ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION

The monuments of Baltistan – whether *astanas*, mosques or palaces – show a wealth of characteristic woodcarvings generously applied to adorn structural and non-structural elements alike. These decorations appear on the horizontal squared beams used in the construction of the walls, on arcaded verandas, the often corbelled cornices both outside and inside, the cases of doors and windows, the door wings, the columns or pillars with their bases and capitals, on the *mihrab* and so on. In addition, windows and large openings are generally filled with *panjira* latticework, and on the ceilings one often finds *khatamband* work (pl. 46). Consisting of small rectangular wooden pieces joined together according to varied geometric patterns, these art works constitute important decorative and architectural features in their own right. Strongly influenced from Iran, from where the crafts of *panjira* and *khatamband* were originally brought to Kashmir and Baltistan by Shah Hamadani, their different geometrical patterns carry mostly Persian names.

In general, the carved decoration consists of several continuous ornamental bands side by side. One finds stylised arabesque- and acanthus-like scrolls, entwined floral, often lily-like configurations standing opposite each other, guilloches, denticulations and rows of four-petalled rosettes, circular motifs, swastikas or bud-like configurations. The combination of several such bands created broad friezes which appear as wall decorations and ornamental linings of doors and windows, thereby de-materialising the structural elements and creating evocations of paradise-like beauty certainly much appreciated by the faithful.

The carvings on the Ambariq mosque (figs. 146, 291), thought by Dani to be the oldest in Baltistan, look less inspired and rather flat and ‘dry’. They cover the space with a dense network of single or intertwined, mostly geometrical motifs lacking plasticity. Another stylistically related example is provided by the broad frieze below the windows of the lower floor of the

Chakchan mosque in Khaplu and on the corbelled cornice inside its prayer room (figs. 147, 148). The frieze on the outside is composed of a broad central band filled with a complicated design of three rows of swastikas alternating with circles, which are continuously interconnected. The two borders are formed by denticulations and a narrow flower scroll on the somewhat projecting and thus cornice-like top section. The broad frieze in the prayer room has in its centre a similar interconnected combination of three rows of circles and – in this case – diagonally placed three-lobed, lily-like flowers, both inscribed into a square mo-

tif. Among the bordering bands of ornaments there is one above which stands out by its wave-like appearance of small inclined spirals. All these carvings and the very broad decorations framing the windows of the mosque are strongly reminiscent of the network-like, mainly geometrical configurations composed of complicated guilloches, simple scrolls with a floral motif alternating in position, continuous angular swastika-meander bands, a kind of Vitruvian scroll and so on, noticed in the Ambariq mosque.

Designs of a different kind are seen on the corbelled cornice on the façade of Shigar palace, showing a series of large carved medallions topped by a band of rhombuses (or squares placed on their corners) filled with knot-like designs (figs. 150-152). Two of the medallions have a figurative design, each depicting a pair of birds – the one pair shown with intertwining necks, the other drinking water from a lotus-like flower (pl. 58).

In the former reception room (now the museum) of Shigar palace (fig. 232), a pillar with a square base and large half-convoluted bracket capitals, standing in the centre, shows such an exquisite carved decoration that it may be classified as a superb representative of the court style in Baltistan (fig. 157). It testifies to a specific interest in plasticity and in depicting three-lobed lily-like flowers and centralised configurations of highly ornamental appearance. The top of the column depicts one of the most characteristic motifs found in Baltistan, also seen on the lintel of the richly carved door frame leading into Shigar palace: it is a vase-like configuration seen all over Baltistan in the centre of door lintels, once possibly constituting an apotropaic motif (figs. 155, 156).

As would seem, such ornamental carvings represent a higher and more complex developmental stage corresponding to a 'court style' which may have evolved some time in the late eighteenth or in the course of the early nineteenth century. Good examples of this style with its interest in plasticity and floral motifs are seen on and in the Khilingrong mosque in Shigar (figs. 153, 154). The cornices on top of the windows of the upper floor are deeply carved with bands of palmette-like plants, and laterally one finds two rows of leafy scrolls in combination with bands of meanders. Similar cornices carved with a 'palmette-frieze' are above the door into the lower prayer room and on the *mihrab*. There is also a 'classic' looking broad cornice-like frieze which runs underneath the windows around the whole prayer room. It is composed of a band showing somewhat deformed swastikas inside circles, accompanied by two rows of continuous meanders and topped by a floral scroll in alternating opposites. The mainly geometrical carvings around the windows of Chahburonjo mosque also show an interest in providing more relief to the ornaments by combining them with embossed sections.



Fig. 153. A window of Khilingrong mosque in Shigar.



Fig. 154. Upper part of the *mihrab* in Khilingrong mosque.



Fig. 155. Door in the loggia of Khaplu palace.



Fig. 156. Door in the court of Khaplu palace.

Top quality carvings of the ‘court style’ can be seen on two doors inside the palace in Khaplu (figs. 155, 156). The decoration of the leaves of the double door in the loggia is dominated by five pairs of large disks of varied design, showing multi-lobed flowers inside broad rims filled with a network of densely interlaced strings or wavy guilloches. The single leaf of the other door, located in the open court inside the palace, shows a late Moghul-inspired design of two arched, multi-lobed niches, with a flowering tree inside the upper niche and a large circular motif, with a star in its centre, filling the lower niche. The borders of the door leaves as well as the lintels and jambs of both doors are carved with several ornamental bands of guilloches, scrolls with flowers in alternating opposite positions and so on. The V-formed, vase-like floral motif depicted in high relief in the middle of the second door’s lintel appears as an outstanding sample of a design motif seen very frequently, often reduced to a simple configuration, on door lintels everywhere in Baltistan. This motif may have developed originally from a design related to an apotropaic horned animal head such as a bovine head suspended from the entrance door’s lintel.

The two doors may be classified as very important art works representing two different styles. The double door (fig. 155) differs from the single door because of its finer, more intricate and less floral, apparently more locally-grounded ornamentation. The Moghul-inspired door may well be the newer of the two doors. It appears stylistically related to the richly carved frontal boards of large storage chests which were acquired for the Palace Museum in Shigar. Appearing closely related to the ‘court style’, the rather unstructured filling of surfaces with a network of mainly floral, often deeply undercut motifs betrays a probably late developmental stage.

#### THE ROLE OF KASHMIR

All the described features – such as the *thatar* building style based on inserted wooden pegs rather than on any kind of joinery, the ‘invention’ of the *khanqah*, the strong preference for a centralised square ground plan, the pyramidal roofs crowned with the *qubbah* – point to strong influences from Kashmir and Ladakh. The layout of the Kashmiri buildings may have been inspired by Hindu architecture built in stone, since centralised square structures are widespread in both Kashmir and Ladakh. The slim spires with umbrellas, crowning the countless *stupas* and *chorten* in Ladakh, cannot but constitute the models for the *cholo* and *qubbah* ensemble seen in Kashmir, from where this architectural feature probably travelled to Baltistan. Thus it seems clear that the prime models for the Baltistan architectural style were the Khanqah-i Moualla (Shah Hamadan mosque) in Srinagar, related structures elsewhere in Kashmir, and wooden buildings similar to the more recent mosque of Ata Mohammad Khan in Chrar-i Sharif. Nevertheless, some specific Baltistan features such as the huge *khanqahs* with their wide and high frontal verandas and the *chaman*, the wide chimney-like drum of the saintly tombs, are without equivalents in Kashmir.

Given the fact that in Baltistan (where timber is a rare and precious commodity), wooden architecture had emerged to such a dominant position, while in well-wooded Kashmir the important religious structures are mostly built of bricks and stones, one wonders to what extent Kashmir’s long-lasting Hindu tradition in building with stone is the explanation for this discrepancy. The exceptional character of wooden buildings, namely the *khanqahs*, *khanqah*-like mosques and some structures like those burnt in Chrar-i Sharif, especially the famous, beautifully decorated shrine of Nur-ad Din Nurani and the mosque of Ata Mohammad Khan, appear related to the more transitory concepts presented by Sufi culture. The shrine of Sheikh Nur-ad Din Nurani had been extensively decorated with excellent, but more recent



Fig. 157. Central column in the audience hall of Shigar palace. For more details of the restored audience hall, see the series of illustrations on pp. 228, 229.

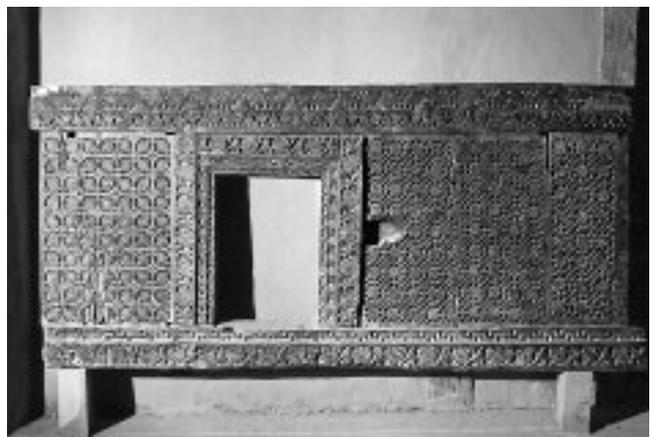


Fig. 158. Front board of a carved chest in the Shigar fort museum.

woodcarvings, probably dating from the nineteenth century. (Apparently there are no published illustrations showing the building before its most recent modern reconstruction. During my recent stay in Srinagar I was able to purchase a few photos showing the old building and its carvings, which are unrelated to those in Baltistan).

The question remains how much of the architectural decoration owes its appearance to influences from Kashmir. Certainly, Kashmir with its highly developed crafts may well have contributed considerably to the development of the carved decoration in Baltistan, but there is little remaining evidence available with the sole exception of corbelled cornices, a favourite feature in both regions, and possibly closely related to similar looking cornices of Hindu temples in Kashmir. With regard to carved decoration, all the buildings visited during my recent stay in Kashmir show none or little, with the 'ancestor' – the Shah Hamadan mosque in Srinagar – being no exception. There is a richly painted decoration on its entrance door (the inside has been changed by the recent restoration), but carvings exist only outside on a heavy corbelled cornice running along the base of the building. They recall the 'court style of Baltistan'. Other examples of rare carvings, such as the recently painted ones on the door frame of the shrine of Batamaloo Sahib in Srinagar, relate to the 'average' carvings in Baltistan, but do not present any telling features.

There is also the rich vocabulary of ornamental motifs seen on the stone carvings of Hindu temples in Kashmir, most noteworthy are those in Martand and Avantipur. Some of these motifs also appear in Baltistan. However, if one wants to admit possible influences from Hindu architecture, by the same reason one could argue in favour of influences from the Buddhist monasteries which once existed in Baltistan without leaving any traces, except for rock carvings.