
**PROTO-HISTORIC NOMADISM IN CENTRAL ASIA
AND MEGALITHIC GRAVES IN DISTRICT GHIZER,
GILGIT-BALTISTAN (PAKISTAN)**

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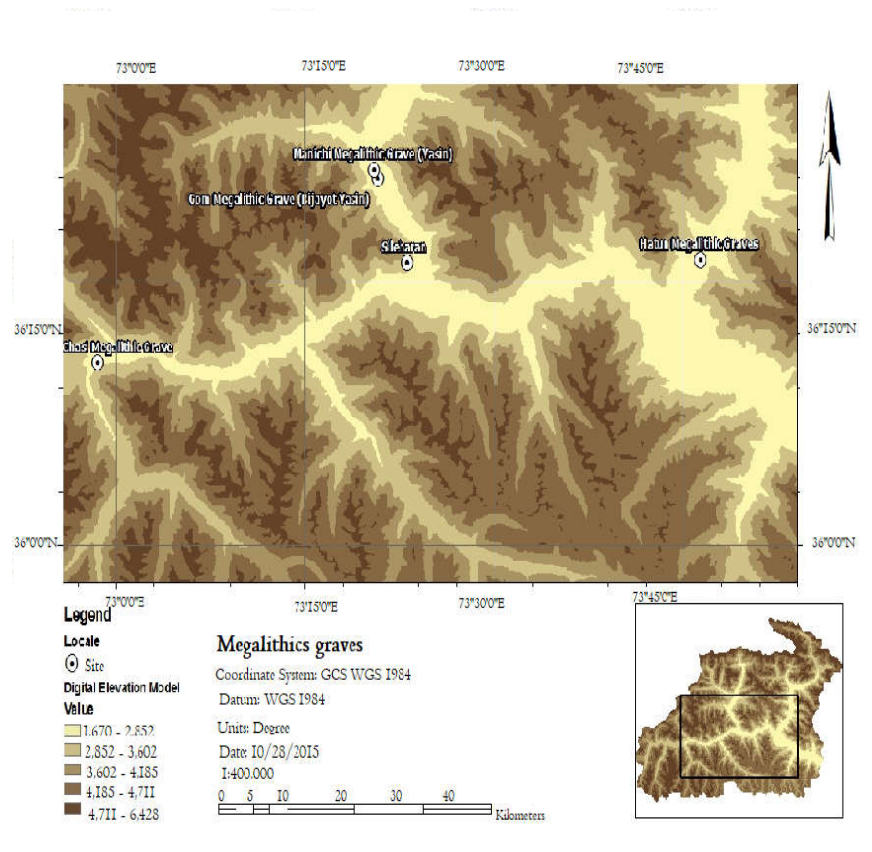
This essay offers a concept about the movement of nomads in Central Asia, as marked by the circular planned megalithic graves reported from different localities. Recent explorations in District Ghizer have added more to our previous considerations about the similar erections from Gilgit-Baltistan. This inquiry attempts to unfold the study about such circles in four parts: firstly, it lets us know about the archaeological significance of such antiquities in broader context of Central Asia; secondly, it presents the previous investigations on the issue, particularly related to the findings from Ghizer; thirdly, it discusses the details of megalithic graves from the said area considering preservation, lost elements and surviving features; and fourthly, based on a comparative study of the features, author reached a plausible conclusion of the study, which is presented as the last part of this paper.

Key words: Megalithic graves, Nomads, Andronovo Culture, Gandhara Grave Culture, Archaeology, Central Asia, Ghizer.

Introduction

The complex data, mainly related to the Bronze Age nomads' burial customs, scattered in the vast areas of Central Asian steppes, has raised many questions in academia. In order to understand this complicated data, proto-historic burial cultures in Inner Asia are classified¹ into two major groups under the broader topics of 'Timber Grave Culture/Surubna/Cairn burial complex' and 'Andronovo Culture'. The former culture originated in Volga region and covers the vast areas of Western Kazakhstan, while, the latter originated in Central and Eastern Kazakhstan

covering the areas of Kirgizia and Fergana valleys. It seems that both of the burial cultures met at the middle reaches of the Zaravshan basin at the site like Mominabad Cemetery².



Map I:

Location map of Megalithic graves (produced by Author).

In addition to this, Gandhāra Grave Culture³ in Chitral⁴, Dir, Swat⁵ and Peshawar Valley also reveals a complicated data⁶, which is comparable to the above mentioned Inner Asian parallels; with reference to the nomadic cultures⁷, burial customs and technological linkages particularly related to the typological similarities of pottery⁸.

Large size stone cenotaphs of burials' mounds, dated to proto-historic period between Aral Sea and Pamir⁹, and similar constructions in wood from different localities in Xinjiang region, is defined as Gumugao II culture¹⁰. It is related to similar stone circles categorised under the Andronovo Culture and include similar examples from Siberia¹¹.

The evidences of big circles are comparable with the circles, also found from Siberia, Urumqi and Kazakistan, dated, on Radio Carbon 14 analysis of the data from the selected sites, to the latter half of 3rd millennium and early half of 2nd millennium B.C.¹² However, another culturally linked proto-historic burial tradition known from Chitral, Dir, Swat and proper Gandhāra follows the earlier and falls between 1500/1400 to 800¹³ or 400 B.C. or continues in Chitral until medieval ages¹⁴. This tradition is known to us as Gandhāra Grave Culture¹⁵ or Swat Valley Culture¹⁶, revealing three forms of burial customs: (1) inhumation, (2) cremation and (3) fractional burial; and recently the careful excavation-based investigations at Swat¹⁷ revealed the evidences of reopening of graves most probably for performing the rituals.

The core object of this study is to understand similar megalithic circles, in District Ghizer of Gilgit-Baltistan, from the extreme northern parts of Pakistan. This data can help us understand the cultural connection of nomadic cultures in Central Asia and those developed in the Swat valley.

Ghizer valley is situated on the road connecting Central Asia with Gandhāra, through the mountain valleys and passes, located in the areas of the mountain range of Hindukush and Karakoram. Ghizer shares its access to Wakhan and Chitral through the passes in the North, North-West and West of the District. Similarly, from Ghizer one can approach Darel through the passes from Singul Gah, which leads further to Swat and Gandhāra. Whereas, Gilgit is located down stream, towards the East.

Previous investigations

Such structures from this area were for the first time mentioned by Biddulph¹⁸, the then British Agent, who calls them 'circular stone tables'. Two times he¹⁹ visited Ghizer zone: the first time he toured Punyāl and Yasin in 1876; and the second time in 1878. During his earlier visit he noticed the circular graves of huge size in Yasin, and added more to his understanding during his latter stay. He compared them to the graves from Astor²⁰ and those in Central India.

Later Friedrich and Jettmar²¹ visited Ghizer, and studied such circles with reference to the example at Chaši in Gupis in comparison to the Gumbate Mausoleum at Bubur²² and examples from Central Asia, implausibly placing this tradition to the beginning of the Common Era. Ahmed Hasan Dani²³ attempts to reconstruct the history of this area

from archaeological remains, historical sources and documented oral traditions. He²⁴ places the megalithic graves in Ghizer area and pit graves from Duran Sor in the same category and period. He²⁵ further suggests that the big circles of stone from Chaşi and Yasin represent the graves of chiefs or nobles, whereas, the other graves in their surroundings might belong to the common people. Here, he²⁶ tries to understand the migration of Dardic hordes, a group of Indo-Aryan ethno-linguistic group, from the remains of graves found with concentration in this District. He also includes circular graves at Bubur, Gurunjur and Upper Gahkuch to the list. Of such kind of graves at Duran Sor, half a kilometre away from Dain, near Chotor Khand in Ishkoman, Nazir Khan unofficially excavated three pit graves during 1994-9527. On the same site in the year 2012 an unknown European team attempted to conduct excavation for two days with the support of local labours, as the villagers noticed²⁸.

Likewise, the evidences from this area are, as suggested by Hauptmann²⁹, earlier than the similar evidences from Kashmir and South Asia, as marking the movement of nomads. This culture of proto-historic nomadic hordes is not only peculiar to Ghizer area, but also extends to Astor³⁰, Darel³¹, Tangir, Goharabad (Gor) near Chilas, Jutal on the opposite side Nomalin Gilgit³². A recent archaeological exploration³³ in Ghizer in 2014 helps us understand more about the antiquity of this burial tradition (Map I).

Recent archaeological explorations

During winters of 2014, from 1st January to 31st March, this author³⁴ conducted a survey for his PhD research. This data³⁵ is the part of that work and presented here again with some major additions and elaborations. This field activity in District Ghizer of Gilgit-Baltistan was mainly focussed in Punyal valley. However, random surveys in Ishkoman, Gupis and Yasin were also conducted. This preliminary survey, in these three Tehsils of District Ghizer, can be expanded in future with more detailed explorations. The data was collected with the help of different tools, such as pro forma, GPS, graph papers, ranging rods, compass, field diary, measuring tapes, scales and digital camera. Every site, during this field work, was documented to understand the detailed features of that particular site, in order to understand it in the context of similar sets of examples of sites from the area. Sites were approached through interviews with the locals, and the most useful for providing such information were the shepherds. Because the shepherds are roaming

with their cattle in the area, therefore, they can tell us about the location of the sites, we are looking for, with more precision and easy access to the location. Compass and GPS were used to help us in find the direction and coordinates of the location, respectively. The preliminary sketches of the plan and sections were made after measuring the sites of burial circles, which were finalised later. The details of the sites were recorded in pro forma and field diary to add the information collected with scaled pictures.

Megalithic graves from Ghizer Valley

The graves constructed on a large circular plan with big boulders, have been reported from different areas of Gilgit-Baltistan. From Ghizer District, such megaliths are known to us since the last century and quarter. Based on all primary and secondary sources, so far, there are eight examples of such graves known from this District. These eight examples are located at five different localities. At (1) Hatun in Tehsil Punyāl, there are three graves located in one place at X 36.27206 and Y 73.77233. In Tehsil Yasin, we have noticed three surviving examples of four of such monuments including the one located in the opening of (2) Yasin valley near Gupis town, another one is at Sileharang (3) Gom in Bijayot (Fig. III) and one more is located at (4) Manichi (Fig. IV) in Yasin town. Near to this megalith at Manichi, there was another one which is now completely lost. In the area of Gupis, there is so far single example, known from (5) Chaşi.

In the eastern portion of village Hatun, these three ancient circles are located in series at one place in north-east to south-west arrangement (Plate I). The space between all three of them is same and is nearly 36 meters. Of them, the one with largest in plan is located in the south-western side, the grave in the middle is smaller than the former, and the north-eastern one seems the smallest among all three, half swallowed by the intervals of floods in the connected river flows down from Ishkoman. Here, for easy understanding, we can call the south-western one as 'A', the middle one is named 'B' and that at the north-eastern end is said to be 'C'.

Among all the examples, grave 'A' (Fig. I / Plate II) is with largest boulders ever used in any grave in Ghizer. The average height of stones placed in a circle is nearly 1.9 meters and the average width of each stone is more than a meter. The full diameter of this grave in circular plan is 8.2 meters. Locals claimed that there was nothing else buried as

a grave good and no one was able to explain the position of the body. Two stages are visible on the exterior of the grave: below at first stage, stones of larger size are placed standing and above at the second stage, elongated smaller stones are placed horizontally, projecting outward.

The grave 'B' (Fig II / Plate V/VI) constructed between graves 'A' and 'C' is comparatively smaller in circumference than grave 'A' and seems larger than 'C'. The diameter of this circle is 7.2 meters. It was fully intact till 2012. Locals told me that they checked the site with metal detector before its opening and found only bones right underneath the grave stone at the centre of the circular grave. The body was covered with stone planks and pebbles around. The grave is constructed with a circle of standing stones around it. The average size of each stone exposed from ground surface is 0.7 meters. The even surface of the stone is shown exposed and rough part of it is kept hidden in the arrangement of them. Above the standing stones the stones in triangular-like section are placed above by exposing the thick portion of it to the outer-side.

Grave C (Plate I) is not fully intact, but a portion of it is intact until now. Its destruction is due to flooding in river Ishkoman, which cut the bed down to the present level. Major components of the grave are destroyed by these activities. However, eight standing stones represent this grave. This circular alignment of standing stones helps us to determine the size of a grave can be of size of nearly 5.5 meters. The characteristic of this grave must be same with the remaining two, when it was constructed, but now only standing stones are there. The smooth surface is exposed on the external side and rough portion is kept in the interior. The sizes of standing stones are uniform with 1.2 m.

Gom megalithic grave is located at Gom, in Bijayot, Yasin. Word 'Gom' might be a corrupt form of grama meaning a village in Sanskrit, is called gam in Şinā, giram in Buruşaski, all may have been under the influence of Sanskrit during its classic period. Coming to the point, Megalith grave (Plate VII) at this village is the largest in diameter. It is the largest grave of its kind with largest plan. Its size is 9.9 meters in diameter from every angle and is truly measured circle in plan. Its radius is 4.95 meters and circumference is 31.11 meters. The stones are aligned in their standing position at the lower stage and on upper stage the stones of triangular section are placed with bit of exposure to front, as normal. It is in better condition of preservation.

Earlier, before 1990s, there were two examples of megaliths available at Manichi in proper Yasin. However, now, one (Plate VIII) of them has

been completely destroyed and only the remains of others can be observed at the location. Later, a partially intact grave is located in the garden of Sayurj Khan. The diameter of later example is 8.2 meters. This grave was also badly destroyed by the illegal diggers. Our informant revealed that during digging they found bones covered by stone slabs, broken shards of terracotta pottery and scattered small beads, white in colour, inside the grave. It also shows that burial (Plate IX) was made on ground level and a wall was constructed around the body, covered by planks and a heap of soil while stones were placed around it.

Another example of this type of megalithic grave is mentioned by Biddulph³⁶, also referred to by Jettmar, and Dani located at Chaşi in Gupis. It has same characteristic as all other cited above. Circular in plan, the standing stones at the lower stage, at the upper stage horizontally placed stones lie.

On the right bank of the River Yasin, near the junction of rivers, at a barren place there at Sileharan another grave is located. We were unfortunate not to visit this grave. But it was among the graves which were visited by Biddulph³⁷ and he mentions its condition of preservation. This grave was also recorded by Pak-German Archaeological Mission.

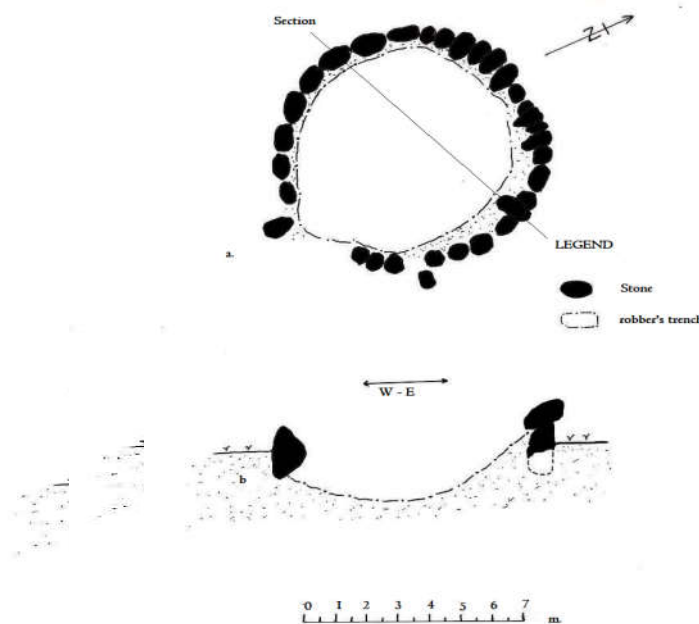


Fig. I:
 Hatun—Plan (a.) and section (b.) of megalithic grave ‘A’ (sketched by Author).

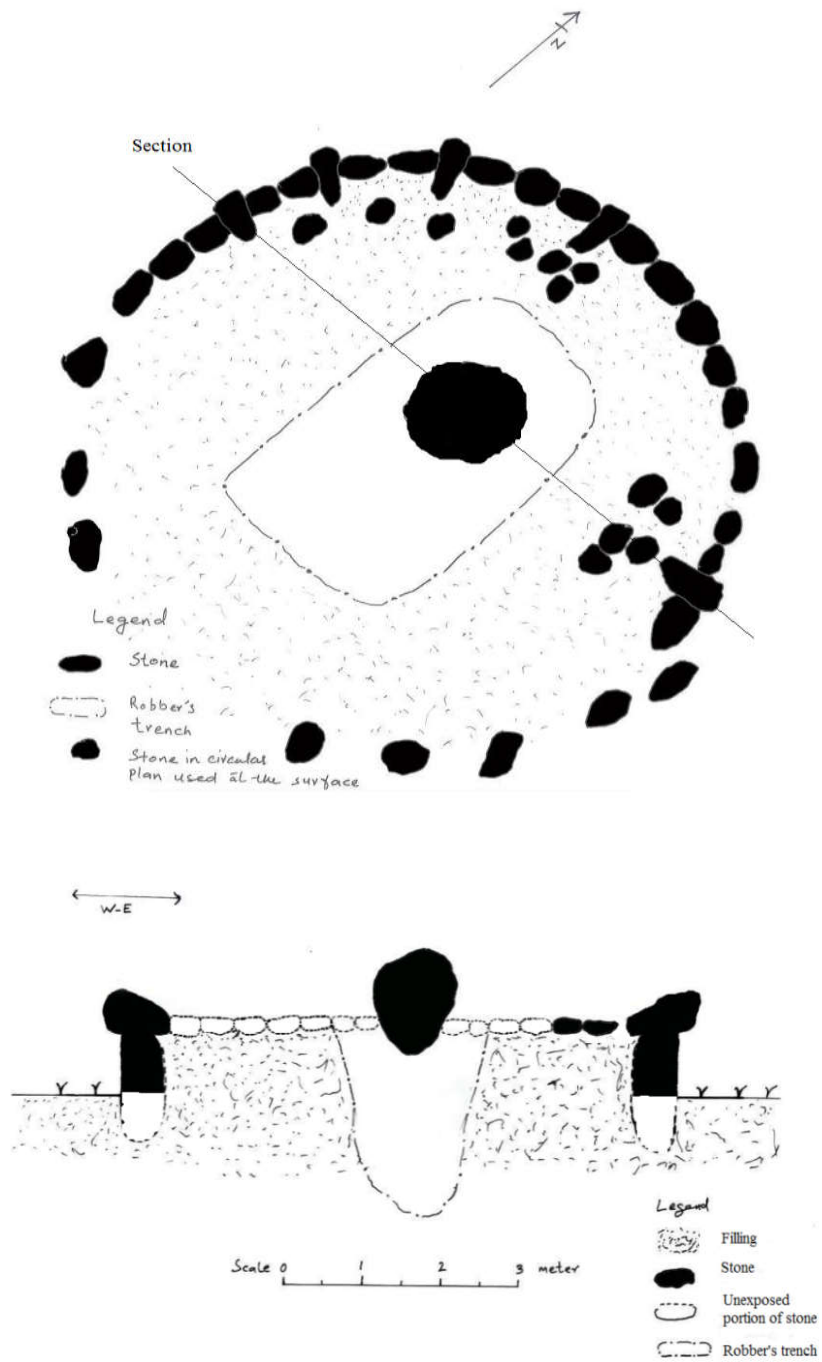


Fig. II:

Hatun—Plan (a.) and section (b.) of megalithic grave 'B'(sketched by Author).

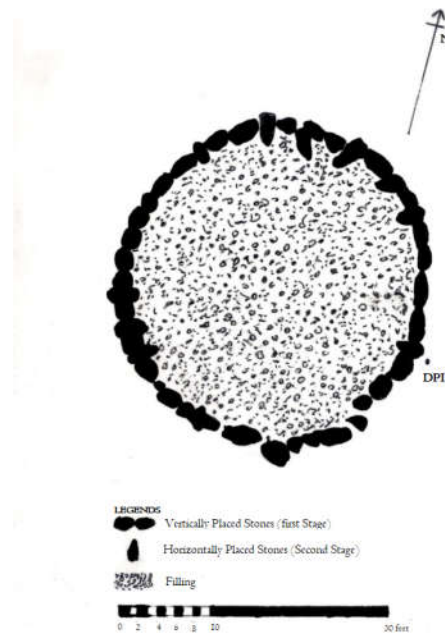


Fig. III:

Bijayôt (Yasin)—plan of megalithic grave at Gôm (sketched by Author).

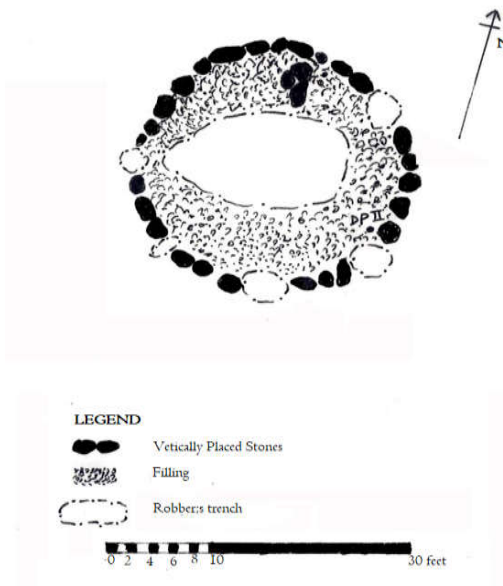


Fig. IV:

Yasin—plan of Manichi megalithic grave (sketched by Author).



Plate I:

Hatun—grave 'C' and grave A and B can also be seen (Photograph by Author).



Plate II:

Hatun—megalithic burial 'A' (Photograph by Author).



Plate III:

Hatun—interior of megalithic grave 'A'(Photograph by Author).



Plate IV:

Hatun—exterior of grave 'A'(Photograph by Author).



Plate V:

Hatun—grave 'B'(Photograph by Author).



Plate VI:

Hatun—robber's trench in grave 'B'(Photograph by Author).



Plate VII:

Bijayot, Yasin—megalithic grave at Gom (Photograph by Author).



Plate VIII:

Yasin—Manichi megalithic grave (Photograph by Author).



Plate IX:

Yasin—details of grave walls, exposed by illegal digging at Manichi (Photograph by Author).

Nomadism and megalithic tombs: an analytical study

The builders of such tombs had selected the site near the ancient banks of the rivers normally. As we have noticed in Hatun, the tomb near Gupis town, is an example located at the confluence of the River Gupis and the River Yasin, a case at proper Yasin, at Bijayot, and that at Jutal in Gigit area.

In Hatun, the burials help us to imagine the height of the river bed during the age of their construction, and three graves lined together are very close to the river. In Yasin Valley, such tombs are located in a plain area now, but at the time of their construction, it seems to be very close to the flowing river. In Jutal at Gilgit, the case is same to that at Hatun. Thus, it is understandable that most probably the builders of such graves were nomads who selected the site for their burial near the rivers. It also lets us think that may be they used to camp on the banks of the rivers, during their seasonal stay, beside the water resources.

It seems that the dead body was not buried by digging a pit in the earth, but kept on the surface at the ground level in east-west direction, as we observed the evidence at Manichi in proper Yasin (Plate IX), surrounded by a wall around and sealed by planks of stones over, which is further covered with gravels with or without soil filled around the burial.

The filling inside the tomb was made of pebbles only or gravels mixed with soil were deposited till the limits of the outer wall of vertically placed large stones. In two cases, including that of Bijayot and the one located in the opening of Yasin Valley, we have only the deposit of pebbles. Conversely, in remaining five cases; one at Manichi in Yasin, three at Hatun and another at Jutal, the filled material comprised gravels mixed with soil.

The size of the grave, in its circumference and/or diameter and that of vertically placed stones varies from grave to grave. The largest grave in circumference is in Bijayot with full diameter of 10.05 m. The tomb 'A' at Hatun and that at Jutal have size of 8.2 m. in diameter. Differently, the megalithic grave 'B' at Hatun has size 7.2 m. in diameter. The reconstructed size of tomb 'C' at Hatun seems 5.5 m. in diameter.

Stones of huge and uniform size, preferably from the rivers were arranged for the monumental construction of such graves. The heights of vertically placed stones vary from tomb to tomb: In case of Hatun 'A' the stones height from the present ground level is 0.7 m. but actual sizes of stones are nearly 2 m. In Hatun 'B' the height of standing stones from present ground level is also 0.6 m. but actual size is unknown. In case of Hatun 'C', the total height is 1.2 m. In Bijayot the height is nearly a meter, from ground level. And same is the size at Manichi in Yasin.

The outer wall, after the burial at ground surface, was constructed in three stages can be classified as first, second and third: At the first stage, megalithic stones are being placed in a circular plan around the grave. During the placement of stones, builders kept this in their mind that the smooth surfaces of the stones must be kept exposed; however, the rough parts should be kept hidden to the interior side. Between the two megaliths gaps were filled with smaller ones. On upper or second stage, elongated stones comparatively smaller in size are placed horizontally, slightly projecting out from the limits of standing megaliths. On the third stage, the upper surface or the floor is made smooth by placing the circular stones in the mosaic or left unfinished. The evidence of floor is marked by the tomb of Hatun 'B'. However, in all other cases there is no visible evidence. In the centre, right above the grave a big circular boulder was placed, which marks the location of the grave below, as we have only the evidence of grave 'B' at Hatun (Fig. II and Plate V).

This phase of burial is purely inhumation. There is no evidence of cremation visible to us, so far. However, there must be some rituals, such as those associated with fire, in this burial tradition, about which there is no evidence left. Interestingly, such sites are not connected to

any ancient settlements, therefore, it can be assumed that these graves were related to ancient nomads, rather than with settled people³⁸.

If there is any connection between the complicated data of both cultures in Central Asia and in Chitral, Dir, Swat and Gandhāra, then the migration of such nomadic groups into the valleys in and around Gandhāra can be understandable. This can help us resolve the unsettled academic puzzle of Aryan Problem, which has divided the world's scholarship into two³⁹. One can also easily imagine about the development of burial cultures from inhumation into three of its above mentioned forms during Vedic Ages. It means in Gandhāra, the transition from inhumation towards cremation, occurred between 1500 to 500 B.C. It can also be assumed, of all the three, cremation became popular in the later phases of development, and was in practice at the time of Buddha during 5th century B.C. The similarities in the architectural features of megalithic tombs and hemispherical *Dharmarajikas* vividly show the cultural connection, and compels us to believe that the origin of stupa cult rests in such earlier models of monumental burials pointing towards the solar cult.

Conclusion

Megalithic graves in Ghizer are circular in plan, constructed with boulders of uniform sizes. However, the plan and the stones' sizes vary from grave to grave. Such circles are not constructed nearby any ancient settlement sites in the area, but located mostly close to the rivers' banks, which most probably mark them as the remains of nomadic/ semi-nomadic hordes, which is connected to the large scale nomadism in Central Asia during proto-historic ages. Such megaliths in Ghizer are comparable to the similar circles found in the area between Aral Sea and Pamir and from different localities in the Xinjiang region, categorised under the Andronovo Culture. Such evidences from Siberia, Urumqi and Kazakhstan are now dated between 3500 B.C. and 2500 B.C. Proto-historic burials in Chitral, Dir, Swat and Peshawar Valley are dated between 1500 and 800 B.C. and these graves in Ghizer zone, geographically located on road between both the regions, vividly appear to be filling the geographical and historical gap between both cultures in Central Asia and that in south of Hindukush. Further excavation-based researches on such sites, with the support of absolute dating methods, can add more to our knowledge and, can help us resolve the complex problems in the regional history of the mentioned period.

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