

Unveiling the horsemen of pir panchal

Fahim Latief¹, M K Pundhir²

¹ CAS Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Hunas first appeared in India during the reign of Emperor Skandagupta. Skandagupta defeated Hunas which is mentioned in Bhitari pillar inscription. Despite the victory over Hunas, the golden age of Gupta Empire starts to decay after that. Provincial kingdoms starts to attain independence from Imperial Guptas. Kalhana in his Rajatarangni mentions the rule of Hunas in Jammu and Kashmir, archaeological evidences also proves that. This article aimed to highlight Huns rule in Jammu and Kashmir through archaeological evidences. The Huns, an ancient nomadic group originating from Central Asia, are believed to have had a significant historical presence in the region of Jammu and Kashmir, situated in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Their influence, which traces back to the 5th and 6th centuries CE, is primarily associated with the invasions of South Asia led by various Hun rulers. The Huns in Jammu and Kashmir are thought to have interacted with the local populations, leaving behind traces of their culture, language, and political influence. Historians have debated their role in shaping the region's political landscape during the decline of the Gupta Empire and the subsequent rise of regional kingdoms. Archaeological evidence, including coinage and inscriptions, as well as historical accounts from contemporaneous sources, offer insights into their presence and impact. This abstract examines the historical and archaeological perspectives on the Huns' presence in Jammu and Kashmir, exploring their military campaigns, cultural exchanges, and lasting legacies in the region's history. The Huns' influence is a key element in understanding the complex political and cultural developments of Jammu and Kashmir during this turbulent period in South Asian history. Unveiling the Horsemen of Pir Panchal

Keywords: Hunas, archaeology, horsemen, sculpture

Introduction

"Ghora Gali" (meaning "Horse Pass" in *Hindi*) is an ancient site located near the village of Gool along the Gool Sangaldan road, approximately 50 kilometers from the district headquarter of Ramban in Jammu and Kashmir. This site is renowned for its mysterious and striking stone sculptures, predominantly depicting horsemen, which are scattered across the landscape in the Pir Panjal mountain range. These sculptures are a fascinating archaeological marvel, featuring detailed carvings of horses and warriors, often with one, two, or even three riders astride a single horse. The horsemen appear to be armed, suggesting they represent warriors or soldiers, possibly from a bygone era. The site itself is situated in an open area near natural springs and ponds, hinting that it may have served as a strategic resting point along ancient trade or travel routes through the rugged Pir-Panjal Mountains.

Who are these Horsemen?

Ghora Gali is an intriguing site in India, famous for its stone sculptures that depict numerous horsemen. The origins of these sculptures are still a mystery, with various theories trying to explain their creation. Local folklore often links them to the *Pandavas* from the *Mahabharata*, suggesting they were carved during their legendary journey thousands of years ago. However, some scholars believe the sculptures are influenced by Central Asian or Bactrian cultures, as the style and patterns of the figures differ from traditional Indian art. Other theories suggest the statues could date back to the 18th century, but there has been no conclusive

archaeological evidence to confirm their exact age or the identity of the creators. What is clear, however, is that these monuments predate the Muslim period in the region and don't follow Buddhist or Hindu traditions. They likely represent a unique cultural layer from the time of the Huns, who ruled the region between the 5th and 7th centuries. The Huns were powerful yet enigmatic, leaving a lasting influence on both Central Asia and India, though much about them remains unclear. Without written records, we can only rely on archaeological exploration to shed light on their origins.



Throughout history, invaders often entered India from the northwest, as seen with figures like Alexander the Great. India didn't have a native culture of horseback riding because horses couldn't be bred there. So, the nomadic conquerors who arrived brought the equestrian culture with them, establishing their own states in the region. Over different periods, India faced invasions by the *Aryans*, *Sakas*, *Kushans*, *Hunas*, *Turks*, and *Mongols*. The widespread and distinctive depictions of horsemen in India likely belong to these invaders, who relied on horseback riding for both travel and warfare. To understand why these statues may be linked to the *Huna* culture, we need to look closely at the sculptures themselves. One notable feature of these statues is that all the riders have strikingly similar faces. The sculptors seem to have created a collective image of a warrior, focusing on common traits to represent the entire group. The flat necks of the statues might reflect a distinct anthropological feature known as "frontal-occipital" or "ring" deformation, a practice among Central Asian peoples around the 1st century. This practice was adopted by the Huns and spread to Europe and India. The coins of the *Huna* rulers also depict flat necks and a unique skull shape, which match the features seen in the stone statues. The riders' faces share similar characteristics with those on the *Huna* coins, such as big straight noses, handlebar mustaches, and large round earrings. An even more remarkable aspect of these statues is the depiction of horses carrying two, three, or even four riders. This exaggerated representation suggests that these riders could be mythological figures—heroes or ancestors on a journey to a distant land, a concept found in many cultures. These statues may be memorials to fallen warriors, as the repeated faces and solemn postures of the horsemen evoke a sense of eternity and mystery. The sculptures are highly detailed, showcasing intricately carved harnesses, clothing, jewelry, and weapons. However, the art style is somewhat stylized or primitive, with distorted body proportions, including the arms and harnesses. The horses' backs are adorned with tasseled carpets, reminiscent of Oriental sofas, large enough to hold several riders. The uniformity of the horsemen gives them a mythical quality, as if they come from an unknown world. Despite their similarities, each horse sculpture has its own unique features. The carvings also show fine details of the horses' harnesses, the riders' clothing, and their weapons. The horses' legs, chest, and hindquarters are adorned with carvings of women. The statues vary in size, with many standing over two meters tall due to their long legs. Interestingly, these long legs don't seem deeply embedded in the ground, which gives the horses an unnaturally tall appearance. Many statues have been found toppled, likely due to frequent earthquakes and landslides in the area. Some riders' heads are missing, probably from later damage. The horses' faces are expressive, with large eyes, thick lashes, and open mouths revealing sharp teeth and sometimes a protruding tongue, a feature that adds to their magical or mystical aura. The riders' costumes are stylized versions of actual clothing. The statues depict an idealized warrior, wearing a mix of armor and decorative fabric. The riders wear tight-fitting trousers and soft, decorated boots, as well as armored jackets and skirts that cover their thighs. Scaled armor appeared in northern India around the 1st century BC,

during the Kushan Empire. The riders' hats are round and flat on top, with undulating designs along the brim, symbolizing a stylized branch. Some hats have strings tied at the top, a detail still seen in the local population of Ramban district today, along with turbans. Occasionally, some riders wear short caps with their hair cut straight and visible underneath. Some riders hold vessels in their left hands, shaped like hourglasses, some decorated elaborately while others are simpler. The way the riders hold the vessels, often raised in a gesture, suggests the drink they carry is meant as an offering.

Recently work by N. Zabolotsky on the mysterious stone sculpture give abundance reasons to establish the fact that these horsemen belong to *Hunas*. In which he scientifically trying to prove their Central Asian connections. To corroborate N. Zabolotsky findings, literary evidence particularly Kalhana and Huien Tsang mentioned Mahirkula ruled Jammu and Kashmir for short span of time after being expelled from Malwa by Yashodharman and he seeks refugee in Jammu and Kashmir. There is no shred of doubt that Jammu and Kashmir was ruled by *Hunas* for some time. *Kalhana* in his *Rajatarangni* mentioned the rule of Mahirkula, ruler of *Hunas*, ruled Jammu and Kashmir for some time. Kalhana mentioned his cruelty and the sufferings of people during his short reign. To corroborate the literary evidence archaeological evidences also assist us to solidify our claims. During the excavations at *Ambaran*, which is 150 kms from Ghora Gali, coins of Huna ruler were unearthed. Religious deities were depicted strangely i.e. standing deity were shown having two horses under the feet, which is rare in Indian history. Another deity wearing a unique coat and having trishul in left hand, which seem to be local gods.

Why This Site Was Preferred

After visiting this site, one can understand why this particular site was chosen. One striking reason is the presence of hot springs nearby, which likely tempted them to settle in this location. Natural hot water was considered a wonder at the time, especially when science and technology was not advanced. The hot spring still exists today, locally known as "Tatta Pani" or hot water. It is believed to have healing properties and can cure various diseases. People in the past preferred living near water bodies, and having a hot spring nearby would have certainly encouraged people to choose this site.

Woman's Place

In some statues, you can also see equestriennes positioned behind the male riders, always last in the line. These women are identifiable by their long, flowing hair, a diadem, and temple pendants, and they lack weapons. Sometimes, a small child is shown behind one of the women. Apart from these distinctions, the women are depicted similarly to the men, wearing armor-like costumes. The only clear difference is the diadem and temple pendants, much like the female riders in the Himalayan region. The women are generally shown riding on the horse's croup, either alone, in pairs, or in small groups. They wear long skirts with geometric patterns, tied at the waist with a broad cloth belt. Occasionally, their bare feet are visible beneath their skirts,

and their upper bodies appear bare, with visible breasts, suggesting they wore translucent blouses. They also wear necklaces and high headgear covering their hair. This style of dress is quite different from traditional Indian clothing like the sari. However, long skirts and blouses were worn by Rajput women, who held an important position in society. Their role was sacred, often having the power to either extend or shorten their husbands' lives based on their actions. Rajput women were also known to end their lives voluntarily when their husbands passed. The presence of female figures in these statues may reflect these ancient Rajput customs and could also commemorate deceased women and children. The female faces on the statues are similar to the male ones, with long, bird-like noses. In one hand, the women hold a lipped jug, and in the other, they hold a ring-shaped object resembling a festive garland. These garlands, often seen in the hands of dancers on ancient Iranian tableware, were symbols of victory and used to crown heroes. The presence of these garlands in the female figures links the statues to a broader tradition of honouring warriors. Interestingly, these stone horses with riders (and occasionally equestriennes) are not the only extraordinary sights in the Pir Panjal region. The statues are located near a series of small basins cascading down the mountain slopes. These basins likely served a ritualistic purpose for ablution, linking the monuments to Hindu traditions. Though many basins are overgrown with grass and bushes, they still provide water for local residents. However, unlike the Himalayan statues, these stone horses are always shown fully harnessed, with saddles and stirrups, but without riders. This distinction suggests that these statues may have served a different purpose. While there is no agreement on their exact purpose, age, or the identity of the sculptors, it's clear that these stone horses are monuments to the warrior riders, similar to those found in the Himalayan region.

Jewellery

The sculptor paid attention to every detail in the artwork. These sculptures are adorned with jewelry, and you can easily spot the long circular earrings. All the riders are wearing rounded caps, which is unique and interesting. The clothing of the riders looks impressive and well-embroidered. The sculptor also gave careful attention to decorating the horses. Both the swords and scabbards are beautifully detailed. The stones used for these sculptures may have been locally sourced, as similar stones can still be found today. It's also noticeable that the riders are wearing shoes, which suggests a connection to Central Asia.

Warrior Class

One solid point that can be put forward here is the association of the warrior class with these horsemen. Each horseman is depicted holding some kind of weapon in his hand, shown in different modes of attack. Sometimes the horseman is shown attacking, sometimes he is shown pulling his sword out of its scabbard, and sometimes he is shown about to take out his sword. The depiction of horsemen carrying swords suggests that either they were returning from a skirmish, or they were about to attack and stopped for rest.



Religious Affinities

Religious deities were shown in unusual ways, which is rare in Indian history. For example, one standing deity is shown with two horses under its feet. Another deity wears a unique coat and holds a trident in its left hand, possibly representing a local god. One of the most interesting depictions is of a deity standing on a horse, and the horse is standing on an elephant. This suggests a preference for horses over elephants and gives a clue about their place of origin. It also indirectly points to the domination of outsiders over the locals. In several depictions, a deity is shown sitting cross-legged with three heads, which is quite unique.



Conclusion

The Huns' presence in India, particularly between the 5th and 7th centuries, left a significant yet enigmatic imprint on the region's history. Their invasion and rule introduced new cultural and military influences, particularly in the form of horseback riding, which was previously absent in India. The Huns are believed to have impacted art, sculpture, and warfare, as seen in the unique depictions of horsemen in regions like Ghora Gali. These monuments likely reflect the Huna warriors' distinct anthropological traits, clothing, and cultural practices. Despite the absence of clear written

records, archaeological findings suggest that the Huns played a crucial role in shaping the region's history, with their legacy persisting in art and architecture, even as much of their history remains shrouded in mystery.

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