

NORTH KARAKORAM: A JOURNEY IN THE MUZTAGH-SHAKSGAM AREA

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THE FOLLOWING brief account of a journey in the little-known Muztagh-Shaksgam area in 1945 may be of interest as so few travellers have visited this remote and unattractive country in the North Karakoram. From Phurzin-i-Dasht at the mouth of the Braldu river to the confluence of the Muztagh-Shaksgam river¹ with the stream from the Sarpo Laggo, the only previous traveller is the late Sir Francis Younghusband on the second of his Central Asian journeys in 1889.² Our route was from Gilgit to Baltit, the capital of Hunza; thence to the Shimshal valley, over the pass of that name, and down the Braldu river to Phurzin-i-Dasht where the Braldu flows into the Muztagh-Shaksgam river. From this point, turning right, the track led up the left bank of the Muztagh-Shaksgam as far as its junction with the stream from the Sarpo Laggo and Crevasse glaciers; then up the Sarpo Laggo to the Muztagh pass, and over to the Baltoro glacier in Baltistan. From there we ascended the Biafo glacier to the Hispar pass, and continued down the glacier and valley of that name to Nagir, and so to Gilgit.

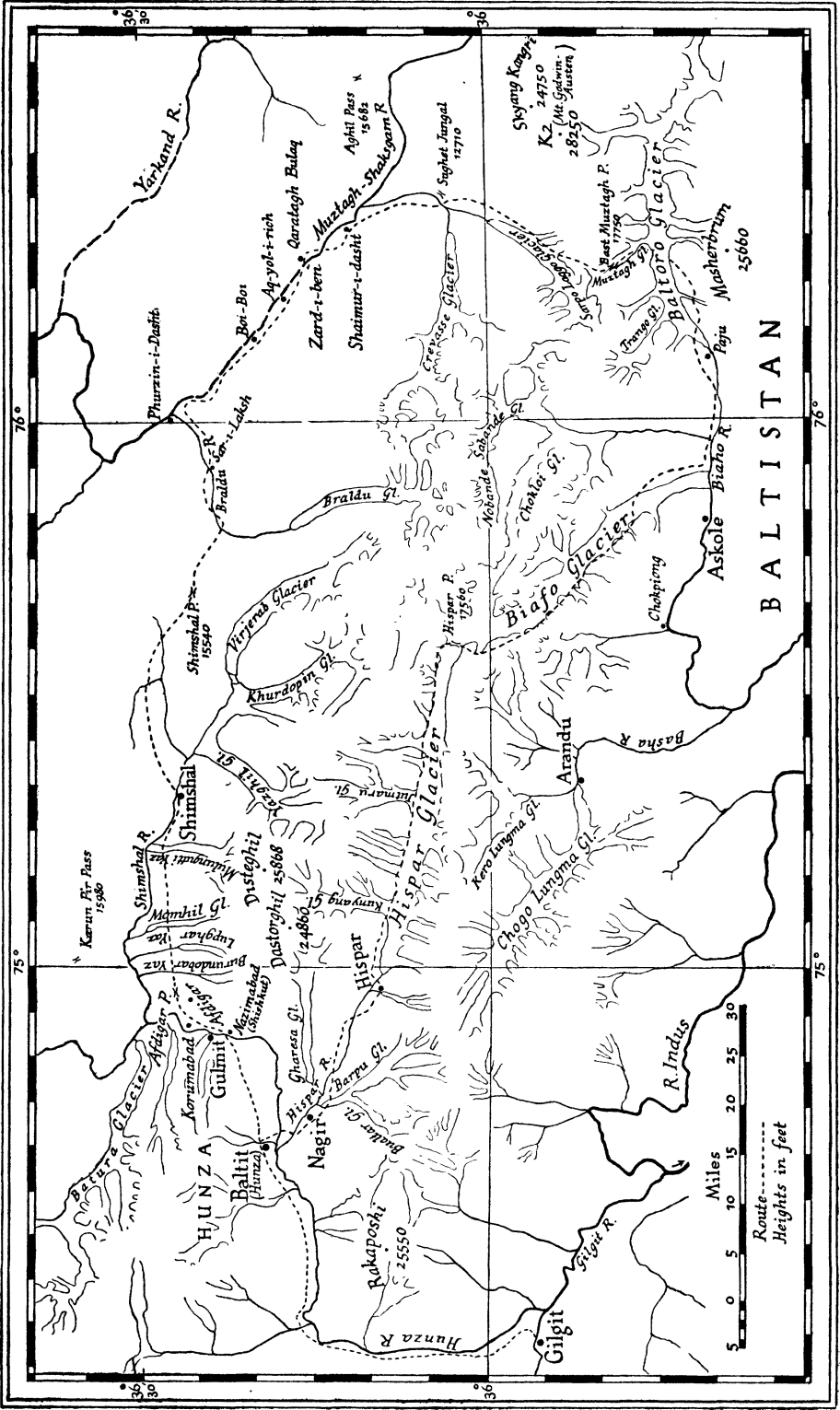
Having reached Baltit from Gilgit, we started from there on 20 June 1945. In summer the normal way to the Shimshal is over the Karun Pir pass (15,980 feet) but, as that way was well known and decidedly dull, we chose a new route. This was by the Afdigar pass, so far unknown to Europeans, which proved however longer and more trying than the Karun Pir route, in spite of the assurance of the local people that it was quicker and easier.

We crossed the Hunza river a little short of Gulmit by a fair "country" bridge to Shishkut, now renamed Nazimabad. From this village the track led up the left bank of the Hunza river and was extremely awkward, especially for laden coolies. These difficulties could be avoided by crossing the river by *zaj* or raft a little above Gulmit. The river is much too wide to bridge, even with a rope, but offers no difficulty to the country raft. The material for the raft would have to be brought from Gilgit. On the second day after leaving Shishkut, we made camp under the Afdigar pass, as it was impossible to reach the summit in one day from the foot. The halt was at the summer steading of Afdigar, a pleasant grassy spot with abundant juniper, grass, and a small spring, which we reached by a steady pull up over grass, offering no real difficulty.

From Afdigar camp to the top of the pass was a steady climb of four-and-a-half hours. A path had to be picked, and the track soon became very rough, with some snow, though a month later all trace of snow would have gone. The pass itself was about 15,500 feet. The view from it was very fine to the west, over Hunza proper, but looking east over the Shimshal area a dreary series of

¹ The river is called Muztagh, or Snow Mountain River, by the Turki-speaking people, and Shaksgam by the Tibetan-speaking people of Baltistan and Ladakh.

² *Proc. R.G.S.* 14 (1892) 216-18.



barren ridges filled the view, relieved however by the fine domed mountain, named Dastorghil, to the south-east. It is 24,860 feet high, and is not to be confused with its neighbour, Disteghil Sar (25,668 feet).¹

A precipitous descent brought us tumbling headlong to the foot of the *nala* on the other side, known as the Burundobar Yaz or Shu-gardan-i-zor. The map calls it the Ghutulji Yaz, but the mixed company of local men who accompanied us had never heard of this name.² The *nala* itself was very narrow but pleasant, with good wood and a spring of water and room for a small camp. We attempted to follow the stream down to its junction with the main Shimshal river, but the ravine soon became impassable. There was no other course than to climb the great wall of the ravine immediately facing us. The next day we toiled up it, for a little while over grass, then over rock and shale, with patches of ice and snow. It was a wild scramble throughout, our chief troubles being the absence of a path and our guide's ignorance of the position of the actual pass. Several false casts were made, but at last, nine hours after leaving camp, we reached the crest. It was a considerably more arduous march than the previous one, over the Afdigar pass proper, and we were unprepared for it.

A very steep descent led to the Lupghar Yaz valley and glacier. On the right of the valley, near a summer grazing ground with huts, we pitched camp, thirteen hours after leaving the Barundobar. Here there were grassy slopes of a pamir-like formation and a wide and dirty glacier. Two more ridges or low watersheds had to be crossed before we joined the usual path from the Karun Pir. At last, on 27 June, we reached the village of Shimshal. The only gain from taking this unknown route was novelty. It is certainly a way to be avoided, for it offers not even a view.

From Shimshal village we had an uneventful march, over the Shimshal pass (15,540 feet) and along the Braldu river to its junction with the Muztagh-Shaksgam at Phurzin-i-Dasht. This place is a winter grazing ground on the left of the Braldu river and close to the main stream of the Muztagh-Shaksgam. Incidentally the spelling on the map, Furzid or Phurzid, is wrong. *Phurzin* means "birch" in the Wakhi language, and there are many birch trees here. *Dasht* means an uncultivated plain, and has not the significance of "wilderness" or "desert" which is given it in Persian. There was no need to cross the Braldu, so we did not visit the steading.

At this point the track turned sharp right, away from the Braldu and up the left bank of the Muztagh-Shaksgam river. Here we joined the route taken fifty-eight years ago by Sir Francis Younghusband. No European had since followed him, at which we did not wonder.³ Immediately above the confluence of the two streams a steep and high, yellowish spur thrust into the stream. This had to be "turned" and proved a most formidable obstacle. It

¹ Dastorghil is the twin peak of Momhil Sar (24,090 feet) at the head of the Momhil glacier; Disteghil Sar is at the head of the Mulungutti glacier: see "Karakoram Conference report," *Geogr. J.* 91 (1938) 133.—*Ed. G. J.*

² The name Ghutulji Yaz was obtained from local Shimshalis by Afraz Gul on the Visser expedition of 1925, and first appears on Ph. C. Visser's map, *Geogr. J.* 68 (1926) facing p. 532.—*Ed. G. J.*

³ Younghusband made the journey early in October 1889, when the river was easily fordable; he was therefore able to keep to the river bed throughout.—*Ed. G. J.*

was difficult and even hazardous work, and the Shimshali coolies, who are unexcelled on rock, did admirably.

There is an alternative way from Sar-i-Laksh, on the right of the Braldu river some 6 miles from its mouth, which crosses the watershed on the right of the valley by the Chinderikin pass, and joins the Muztagh-Shaksgam river from the left bank, just above the difficult part of the route where the ridge or spur ends. The Shimshalis, on their rare visits to this region, invariably take this route which, though steep and rough, is easier than following the left bank of the Muztagh-Shaksgam.

Beyond the spur, the river, which had been flowing in a gorge, became broader. The view upstream was of a wide river bed of water-worn stones, over which the turbid stream rolled and roared in its great grey channel. The bleak hills rose steeply on both sides, almost sheer from the river, and this gloomy vista was unrelieved, even the snow peaks having vanished. Indeed, the ascent of this part of the valley is in a trough, cut off from any sight of the neighbouring country.

The track went up the west side of the valley as far as a yellowish-brown hill with a domed top, known as Zard-i-ben, where our progress was checked. By climbing to a great height we could have passed over the hill, but the strain on the men was unjustifiable, and our proper course was to ferry over the river. This we did by *zaq*—a raft of skins, without which a journey in this country is impossible. Crossing back again to the left side, we continued up the valley. At Zard-i-ben there was a magnificent view to the head of the valley of Mount Godwin Austen (K.2),¹ height 28,250 feet, and its satellite Skyang Kangri (24,750 feet).

We passed several pleasant camping grounds on our way up the left bank of the valley, notably at Boi-Boi and at Aq-yol-i-rich. At the latter place there was a good deal of grass and remarkably thick brakes of thorn, with abundant tamarisk and other brushwood. There appeared to be much less vegetation of any kind on the opposite or right side of the stream. The two places named in Sir Francis Younghusband's map Yalpaqtash (the Slippery Rock) and Qaratagh Bulaq (Black Mountain Spring) could not be identified. Evidence of flooding was very marked, and it is possible that these two places had been swept away. Opposite Zard-i-ben there was a spring, and even some swamp, with a bare black mountain behind. This may have been Qaratagh Bulaq, but it seemed too far upstream to be the place named.

Just short of where the stream from the Sarpo Laggo and the Crevasse glaciers joins the Muztagh-Shaksgam, we entered the country mapped by the late Michael Spender with Eric Shipton's expedition in 1937.² No praise is too great for this excellent piece of cartography which provides a singularly accurate map of a very difficult area.

Leaving the main valley, the track turned up the left bank of the stream, which had to be crossed. In this we experienced great difficulty. Owing to the nature of the water, the raft could not be used, and the only means of

¹ The writer deprecates the label 'K.2'; if any man deserves to be commemorated, it is Godwin Austen, the first European to see the mountain. [Both names are discussed in "Karakoram Conference report," *Geogr. J.* 91 (1938) 136.—*Ed. G.J.*]

² *Geogr. J.* 91 (1938) 313-19, map facing p. 400.

crossing was by fording. This was cruel work. The water was bitterly cold and up to our necks; the current was strong, and the bottom of the river was rough and treacherous. The stream moreover flowed in several deep channels, and the whole manœuvre demanded both courage and care. The Shimshalis are very capable at this kind of work, and the crossing was made with only one accident. On the other side huge pots of tea restored our circulations.

From here, the route led up the western side of the Sarpo Laggo. It was very slow going, and the weather was not good. On 27 July we made camp at the mouth of the rather insignificant *nala* that leads up to the Muztagh pass (17,750 feet). The few previous travellers in the Sarpo Laggo seem to have followed the western side of the glacier and valley, which is in no way preferable to the eastern, and entails at least one unnecessary and wearisome traverse of the glacier. By keeping to the eastern side of the Sarpo Laggo much toil and temper are saved.

Crossing the Muztagh pass, that is, the East or original pass, was not nearly so troublesome as we had expected. On the Sarpo Laggo side a very easy, gentle, snow slope leads up to the crest. On the Baltistan side the descent does not at first appear to be very comfortable, but after some examination the difficulties disappear. On the left, as one looks over, there is a bergschrund and an ice fall which we at once saw to be impossible. On the right, there is a series of rough, rocky ridges covered with snow. We had an awkward scramble of some 900 feet down to the snowfield at the head of the Muztagh glacier which flows into the Baltoro. The descent is precipitous, but the dangers appear to have been magnified.¹

The Muztagh glacier was heavily crevassed and needed some caution. But far the most trying part of the journey was the descent of the Baltoro glacier, which was most exhausting and took several days, although the actual distance is negligible. There can be no better inducement to abandon this route over the main Karakoram than the way over the Baltoro. At last we reached Paju at the snout. From there we journeyed down the Biaho to within a few miles from Askole, the first village in Baltistan, then up the Biafo, over the Hispar pass, down the valley of that name, and finally via Nagir to Gilgit.

¹ All accounts seem to agree that the Muztagh pass has become less formidable during the last fifty years.—*Ed. G. J.*