



for a number of years now I have been teaching a class for the History Department where I do a “tour” of the great Empires of antiquity, from Pharonic Egypt to Viking Europe. For all their interest in Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians and Romans though, it is the exploits of Alexander the Great that inevitably lead to the most questions from my students.

This spring one of my students in History 101 asked me during class what happened to the far flung garrisons of the Greeks and Macedonians who were settled in the far corners of Alexander’s vast empire. I told her that over the succeeding centuries they disappeared or were absorbed by succeeding waves of invaders. All that was left of the Greeks who left their Mediterranean homeland to settle in distant lands of Africa and Asia was the occasional coin, spearhead or amphitheater testifying to the conquests of one of history’s greatest leaders.

Then, after some thought, I corrected myself and told her the legend of the Kalash people of Pakistan.

High in the snow capped Hindu Kush Mountains on the Afghan-Pakistani border lived an ancient people who claimed to be the direct descendants of Alexander the Great’s troops. While the neighboring Pakistanis were dark skinned Muslims, this isolated mountain people had light skin and blue eyes. Although Pakistan proper converted to Islam over the centuries, the Kalash people retained their pagan traditions and worshiped their ancient gods in outdoor temples. They produced wine much like the Greeks of antiquity did. This, in a Muslim country that forbade alcohol.

Tragically, in the 19th century the Kalash were brutally conquered by the Muslim Afghans. Their ancient temples and wooden idols were destroyed; their women were forced to burn their beautiful folk costumes and wear the burqa or veil; and the entire people were converted at sword point to Islam. Only a small pocket of this vanishing pagan race survived in three isolated valleys in the mountains of what would later become Pakistan.

After class the student came to me and asked me if I’d ever visited the Kalash tribe of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Wistfully, I told her I had not, but it was my dream to do so.

(from top left) The Kalash women, unlike their Muslim counterparts, wear brightly colored dresses instead of burqas and do most of the manual labor. A “jingle truck” winds through the Taliban-controlled Swat Valley. Kazi, the holyman of Rumbur, recognized us as fellow “pagans” and welcomed us to stay in his village.

# The lost children of Alexander the Great

## A journey to the pagan Kalash people of Pakistan

Map recreated from composite maps online at [Globalsecurity.org](http://Globalsecurity.org)





(left) Adam and I visited the Moghul Mosque in Lahore on our trip north to the Chitral Valley. (Below) A local man and I stand far above a Pashtun village in the Swat Valley.

just re-conquered most of the valley this winter and have opened the main road through it. If you don't stray from the road, and there is no fighting, you just might be able to pull it off."

Nervous about the prospect of adding a journey through a war zone to our trip to the Kalash, Adam and I then traveled to the capital of Islamabad. There, after much searching, we found an ethnic Pashtun driver who claimed to have once traveled to the remote homeland of the Kalash. He not only knew the route but had a tough SUV to get us there.

After haggling for the price of the trip, we set out driving across the burning plains of Pakistan where the heat soared to 120 degrees. Finally, after traversing the country from the Indian border to the Afghan border we arrived at the mountains.

### The Swat Valley, Pakistan

And what mountains they were. The Hindu Kush or "Hindu Killers" are an extension of the Himalayas and soar to 25,000 feet. As we drove into the tree-covered mountains the temperatures began to drop. While we found respite from the heat everyone grew tense. Saki, our driver, warned us that we were now in Taliban territory. We had entered the Swat Valley.

We did not travel far before we were stopped at the first of many Pakistani army checkpoints we would encounter. When the soldiers discovered that there were two Americans in the truck they strongly warned us to avoid leaving the road.

One of them asked us to sign our names in a registration book and proclaimed that we were the first foreigners to enter the Swat since the Taliban had taken it in 2007.

That night we stayed in Dir, a Swat Valley village that locals claimed had briefly served as hiding place for Osama Bin Laden when he fled Afghanistan in 2001 during Operation Enduring Freedom. Kidding or not, that night we slept fitfully.

As a precaution, Adam piled chairs against our inn room's door to keep out any Taliban or Al Qaeda intruders. In the back of our minds we always had the tragic story of the Wall Street reporter Daniel Pearl who was captured by Al Qaeda in Pakistan and beheaded.



### Kalash Village of Rumbur, Pakistan

The next day we made it safely out of the Swat Valley after crossing a mountain pass at 10,000 feet and a nearby glacier. We were now in the scenic Chitral Valley. We drove up this valley for several hours before our driver grew excited. Gesturing to the dark mountains on our left, he said one word with a grin—"Kalash."

With mounting excitement we left the main road, crossed a large river and began to drive up a mountain trail straight into the mountains. This continued for a couple of hours before the narrow valley opened up and our exhausted driver announced that we had finally arrived in Rumbur, the most isolated of the Kalash valleys. Having made our way from Boston to Abu Dhabi to Lahore to Islamabad to Swat to Chitral, we had finally reached our destination in the high mountains on the Afghan border. It was now time to meet the Kalash.

It did not take us long to find them. Adam was the first one to spot a Kalash shepherdess in the trees wearing a stunningly bright peasant costume. After seeing the faceless burqas of the women of the Swat the juxtaposition between Muslim women and this Kalash woman could not have been greater.

As we drove along we saw several more brightly clad Kalash women. But when we tried to take their pictures they shyly ran off and hid behind trees. Worried that we might break some local taboo on photography we continued on our way.

Soon we entered the Kalash village of Rumbur. The wooden houses were built in steps above one another up the valley's walls and the village square filled up with Kalash curious to see us. Among them was Kazi, the village holy man. Everyone stood back as he approached us and heard our request to stay with the Kalash for a few days and learn about their culture. Kazi, a wise man with twinkling eyes, heard us out and thought about it for a while. After some thought he finally smiled and gave us his blessing. He proclaimed that as blue-eyed pagans (the Kalash believe Christians worship three gods, the Trinity) we were like the Kalash and welcome to stay with them.

Everyone's shyness was forgotten and the village men and women proudly posed for photographs and allowed us into their



Adam photographs the drivers of a broken down Jingle truck as we cross Lowari pass at 10,000 feet. Our local guide, typical of the fair complexioned, blue-eyed Kalash, stands in front of ancient wooden idols.

homes. Once again the comparison to the Pashtun Muslims in Swat and greater Pakistan was tremendous. The conservative Muslims of Swat had women's quarters in their houses where no outsiders were allowed. Here the women were free and dressed in beautiful folk costumes that seemed to belong to a different era.

During our stay we hiked up into the mountains overlooking the Afghan border and were taken to the Kalash people's outdoor temples. There they made sacrifices of goats to their ancient mountain gods. Sadly most of their ancient wooden idols had, however, been stolen or defaced by neighboring Muslim iconoclasts who found them to be heathen abominations.

We were also told that one of the local leaders who fought in the courts to protect the Kalash from such problems had recently been assassinated. On many levels we sympathized with the Kalash—who were losing numbers to conversion to Islam—as a dying race facing an existential threat. And I must say that after

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the heat, pollution and crowds of Pakistan proper, we found this pristine mountain enclave filled with incredibly hospitable farmers and shepherds to be a veritable Shangri La.

Over and over again we were invited by smiling Kalash into their simple wooden houses for meals where we talked about life beyond their remote valley. Most Kalash had only left their valley a few times in their life, then usually to go to a neighboring Kalash

I remember her response vividly. "Dr. Williams," she said, "you're always telling us to get pass-ports and get out to see the world. Why don't you take your own advice and just do it?"

### Lahore, Pakistan, June 2010

A student's challenge can be motivational so this past June my colleague from the Charlton College of Business, Dr. Adam Sulkowski, and I set out to travel into the Hindu Kush Mountains on the Pakistani-Afghan border to see this ancient race for ourselves.

"A student's challenge can be motivational."

But when we arrived at our Pakistani host's house in Lahore after flying through Abu Dhabi, Adam reacted with caution towards our bold dream of visiting the lost descendents of Alexander the Great.

"It's a dangerous two-day journey off road into the mountains," he rightfully warned. "But that's not the most important obstacle we'll have to overcome. To get to the remote homeland of the Kalash we need to cut through the Swat Valley."

Rafay our host then pointed out our intended route on a map. Adam and I groaned. Our dream was falling apart. Swat Valley, we both knew, was a stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban. In 2007 the Taliban brutally conquered this beautiful alpine-like valley and enforced a puritanical version of Islam on the local people. They also used it as a springboard for sending suicide bombers throughout Pakistan.

"But all hope is not lost," Rafay continued. "The Pakistani army





The wooden goat heads adorning a sacred Kalash temple stand in sharp contrast to the Muslim mosque silhouetted at sunrise in neighboring Chitral Valley. Adam and I were warmly invited for dinner at the home of a village elder in Bumbur where a local women agreed to pose with me.

valley for a marriage or to celebrate a great festival.

On our final evening in Rumbur the villagers held a great feast for us. We celebrated with the famous Kalash red wine. My most endearing memory of the mystical night was of Adam doing a snake dance with a local elder, snapping his fingers rhythmically and dancing lower and lower in the center of the clapping audience.

The next morning we were woken to the sound of cows being led by children through the misty village. We said our goodbyes to everyone and drove out of Rumbur. As I looked back I saw several Kalash girls standing on a terraced hill above us in their bright costumes waving to us.

With our driver, a Pashtun Muslim who had never drunk before, recovering from the previous nights festivities we took leave of our hosts and left this fragile mountain enclave to make our long journey out of mountains. It was now time to reenter Pakistan proper, a land that seemed far removed in space and time from the ancient rhythms of the Kalash.



### Back in the USA

When I returned to America two weeks later the whole thing seemed surreal and difficult to explain to my friends in Boston. As I unpacked my Kalash headdress, downloaded my photographs, and recovered from a case of food poisoning acquired on the 18-hour plane ride home, the memories of the Kalash began to fade.

But then I remembered I had one last important task to fulfill. I found the email address of the student in History 101 who had boldly dared me to go in the first place and emailed her the photo (above) of myself with a Kalash woman. The message was simply, “What I did for summer vacation, a visit to the Kalash.”

I will always remember her response for it drives home the real joys of teaching at UMass Dartmouth: “Awesome prof! Hope you said hi to Alexander’s *peeps* for me. You will be proud of me too, I got my passport and am working this summer to save money to go to France next summer!”

*For the complete photographs of Professor Sulkowski and Williams’ expedition to Pakistan go to [brianglynwilliams.com](http://brianglynwilliams.com).*