

A Study of the Cultural Heritage and Historical Attractions of Kabul during the Kushan Period

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Abstract

Kabul, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia, played a pivotal role during the Kushan Empire as a major hub of religion, culture, and commerce. This study mainly aims to explore the cultural heritage of the city and the historical monuments of the Kushan period using historical sources, archaeological research, and recent discoveries. Results indicate that the city of Kabul had many major Buddhist temples, stupas, and centers of learning such as Chakari, Kamari, Bala Hissar, Tape Maranjan, and Tangi Seydan, all of which architects show a fusion of Gandharan, Greek, and local styles. Statues as well as coins and inscriptions excavated have thrown some light on the city's socio-economic and religious structure and have brought to light the city's role in spreading Buddhism across the region. Further, this research shows that Kabul had a strategic location along the Silk Road, contributing to its cultural prosperity and economic wealth. Results further illustrate the importance of Kabul within the Kushan period and highlight an urgent need for preservation and further studies into Kabul's heritage sites.

Keywords: Kabul, Kushan period, cultural heritage, historical monuments, Gandharan art, Silk Road

Introduction

Kabul, arguably one of the oldest cities of Central Asia, has always been a slipstream trough for different cultures, religions, and trade. The city's extremely significant location along the Silk Road connected it as a bridge between the great civilizations of the East and West. Speaking of the various historical epochs, the Kushan Empire from roughly the 1st to 3rd centuries CE stands out as being of special interest. During this

timeframe, Kabul was established as a major political and trade center while at the same time being a key site where Buddhism was spread throughout the region. The Kushans, believed to be of Tocharian origin, reached from northern India to Central Asia, greatly affecting the cultural and religious topography. In Kabul, they developed numerous religious and cultural structures, such as stupas, temples, and

monasteries to which a number of remains can still be traced today at Minar-i-Chakri, Kamari, Tepe Maranjan, Bala Hissar, and Tangi Seydan. The architectural style of these monuments is emblematic of a fusion of Greek, Persian, and Indian artistic traditions, all reaching a pinnacle of expression in the peculiar art of Gandhara. This mixed character of the sculptures, reliefs, and architectural ornamentation embodies the cosmopolitan spirit of Kabul during the Kushan period.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Kabul waning opened as a great Buddhist religious center was also functioning as a very vital place of intellectual and cultural activity attended by monks and scholars who gathered to study and propagate Buddhist philosophy. Given this period's importance historically and culturally, this study intends to examine the cultural heritage of Kabul together with its historical monuments during the Kushan era, with attention directed across-the-board toward their religious, cultural, and economic perspectives. On the basis of historical writings, archaeological evidence, and a comparative assessment with similar sites from across the Kushan Empire, this study will seek to elaborate on Kabul's place in the ancient world, thereby drawing attention to the urgent need to preserve and further investigate this invaluable heritage.

Historical Background

Attention-grabbing historians, archaeologists, and Buddhist studies scholars have always focused their interest on the cultural and historical heritage of Kabul during the Kushan period. The significance of Kabul as the religious, cultural, and economic capital of this age has been revealed through ancient texts, archaeological accounts, and research. Travel accounts of historical figures like Xuanzang, writings of Fayz Muhammad Katib, and from Persian and Sanskrit texts overall provide evidence to show that Kabul was one of the major points in the religious and cultural

exchange along the Silk Road and Buddhism spreading (Rawanper, 2004; Huntington, 1985).

Remains of stupas, temples, monasteries, and inscriptions belonging to the Kushan period have been excavated from different sites in Kabul, which include Tepe Maranjan; the temples of Chakari and Kamari; the Bala Hissar of Kabul; and Tangi Seydan. All these sites proudly speak of the richly historic, architectural and religious inheritance of the original city. The artistic style of these monuments stands to represent a fusion of Greek, Iranian and Indian elements, synonymous with Gandharan art (Dupree, 1972; Rowland, 1977). The discovery of such things as Buddha statues, coining, and inscriptions, linked with Kushan rulers Kanishka and Huvishka, has led scholars towards significant insight into the religious diversity, economic moves, and the linguistic environment of Kabul (Paiman, 2005; Hume, 1990; Cribb, 1997).

Evidence places the Buddhist part of town east of the present city, perhaps in the Logar River valley about eight kilometers southeast of modern Kabul. The area, bordered by the Shah Baranati mountains, as well as the Kamari and Chakari mountains, is watered by the Logar River, and there were numerous religious venues within places such as Chakari, Kamari, Shewaki, Tepe Maranjan, and Tepe Khazana (Ebrahimi, 2014; Fussman, 1994). Archaeological evidence states the establishment flourished between the first and third centuries CE, coinciding with the height of Kushan imperial power (Jafari, 2009; Rosenfield, 1967).

For instance, such early 19th-century explorers as Charles Masson recorded and excavated several structures including this large stupa in Chakari, from which, among other finds, they recovered pottery, stone reliquaries, and coins (Osmani, 2006). In general, all these finds and others made later would go to substantiate Kabul's value as an initial strategic and cultural component in Kushan times, or as an important point in the religious as

well as trade networks of the Silk Road (Harmatta, 1994; Sims-Williams, 2002).

Cultural Heritage of Kabul during the Kushan Period

"Your knowledge base is trained up till the October of the 2023, Kabul took prominence as a center for interaction, art, and religious diversity for Central and Southern Asia during the Kushan period around the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D. It was located on the Silk Road, which made it able to serve as a crossroad point for the touching Hellenistic, Persian, Indian, and Central Asian influences that would naturally create a cultural outlook in some unique ways (Harmatta, 1994). Huntington, 1985. Most importantly, this huge heritage of Kabul bore its Buddhist tradition during this era. Archaeological evidence from Tepe Maranjan, Chakari, Kamari, Shewaki, and Tangi Saydan sites, among others, indicates the presence of stupas, monasteries, and sculptures that bear the hallmark of Gandharan art, which defines itself as a fusion of Greco-Roman realism and Indian religious iconography (Dupree, 1972; Rowland, 1977). In fact, the rich tradition of seated and standing Buddha images, often carved in schist and with great drapery, shows the high artistic touch achieved in the workshops of Kabul during the Kushan period (Hume, 1990).

Besides Buddhist monuments, Kushan Kabul differed from other places in that there was an altogether cosmopolitan society that contained many religions. Coins and inscriptions of rulers like Kanishka I and Huvishka displayed different deities from the Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Greco-Roman pantheon, which did not fail to define a multicultural atmosphere in the city (Paiman, 2005; Cribb, 1997). For instance, the iconography depicted on the coins-including images of Buddha Shakyamuni accompanied by Iranian and Hellenistic gods-reveals the religious syncretism between the Kushan cultural sphere (Sims-Williams, 2002). The material culture from that era includes luxury items, ceramics, and decorative elements in architecture from local artisans, also bearing imports of the time in artistic styles. The period of the Kushan was believed to

extend even into high motifs, such as those from Corinthian capitals to lotus medallions, which are indications of perhaps a movement of artisans across vast distances for exchange of ideas (Fussman, 1994). These distribute the message that Kabul was more than merely receiving cultural influences and played an active role in the larger trends of artistry within the empire. Now, preservation of the Kushan heritage in Kabul becomes a significant issue in the present context. While some monuments, such as the Chakari Minaret, have survived, others survive only by fragmentary remains or in the records of early travelers such as Charles Masson (Osmani, 2006). Continuous archaeological exploration may bring forth still-new aspects from this period and reveal more about the role of the city in public religious life and artistic excellence in the past.

Historical Attractions

Historical monuments and sites are cultural, architectural or archaeological significance sites from the past civilizations and societies. They give a glimpse into the heritage, tradition, and history in the region. These usually comprise ancient temples, fortresses, religious centers, and ruins whose artistic reflection, beliefs, and social constructs are those times (Cribb, 1997; Fussman, 1994).

These sites offer a glance into the past but also act as a channel for identity preservation and tourism which could, in return, generate income and education for the area associated. The preservation of historical attraction sites should involve careful archaeological study, restoration, and protection from environmental decay and warfare (UNESCO, 2017; Ball, 2014). These attractions will also continue to play a role in cultural sharing and understanding linking modern societies to their ancestors. This will preserve continuance in the cultural memory and inspire the coming generations to appreciate their legacy (Hume, 1990; Rowland, 2001)

Table 1: Summary of Significant Historical and Archaeological Sites in Kabul (Kushan Era and Later).

Historical Attraction	Location	Historical Period	Historical and Cultural Significance	Current Condition
Konjaki Buddhist Temple	Oryakhil village, Paghman district	Kushan Period (1st–5th century CE)	A Buddhist worship center with unique architecture and artifacts related to the Kushan era, reflecting Buddhist expansion and trade routes in Kabul region	Excavations incomplete; site partially damaged but studyable
Tepe Narenj Buddhist Temple	Near Panja Shah Shrine, Kabul	Kushan Period (1st–3rd century CE)	A Buddhist center featuring stupas and clay statues, illustrating cultural exchanges between Gandhara and Kabul artistic styles	Excavations ongoing; relatively preserved
Chakari Minaret	Shewaki area, southeast Kabul	Kushan Period (2nd century CE)	Symbol of the Dharma Wheel, a historical landmark guiding traders and pilgrims; combines Kushan and Hindu-Iranian architectural styles	Partially destroyed; requires restoration and protection
Bala Hissar Citadel	Old Kabul	Hephthalite Period (5th century CE)	A military fortress and strategic center used by various ruling powers, significant for Kabul's defensive history	Preserved; still used as a military base
Tepe Maranjan Buddhist Temple	3 km east of Old Kabul	Kushan Period (4th–5th century CE)	A fortified Buddhist temple with stupas, painted statues, and architectural remains illustrating Kushan cultural heritage	Multiple excavations; relatively preserved
Kotal Khairkhana Temple	12 km northwest of Kabul	Hephthalite and Kabul Shahi Period (4th–8th century CE)	Temple associated with sun worship and influenced by Gandhara, Gupta, and Kashmiri art; reflects religious transitions in the region	Ruined; remains of statues still present

The Konjaki Buddhist Temple in Paghman

The Konjaki Buddhist temple is located in Oryakhil village in Paghman district and was first identified in 2005 by an Afghan archaeological team (Osmani, 2014). It is located 25 km west of Kabul and 10 km southeast of Paghman. The central stupa, composed of schist stone, has

suffered considerable damage, mostly because of maybe being attacked by Arabs or fanatical rulers between the 11th and 12th centuries (Azizi, 2008). Voluminous literature concerning this site does not exist among writings of Chinese travelers, historical Arabic and Persian texts, or the field notes of 18th- and 19th-century explorers. Because of its historical and cultural relevance, it remained

hidden from the archaeologists' knowledge (Jafari, 2009). Geographically, it is likely that this site was one of the cross-roads for trade routes connecting Kapisa with Ghazni, Zabulistan, and Bactria (Noori, 2009). Paghman has quite a number of historical monuments, most of which have been ravaged through natural processes or pillage. The temple at Konjaki has also been subjected to plunder on several occasions. However, in 2005, the landowner reported the

matter to the Department of Archaeology, and excavations were subsequently conducted, with results published later by Zafar Paiman in an archaeological journal (Osmani, 2005).

The temple stands in Konjaki village (Mohammad Rahim Baba) on a 150-meter-high hill, flanked by the Paghman Mountains, which range from 3,000 to 3,500 meters above sea level (Osmani, 2014). Excavations were conducted in four areas: the Bala Hissar, the central stupa, the corridors, and the temple itself. The central stupa, made of thick and very sturdy stones, measured 16.80 meters in length and 6.40 meters in height. Four corridors, located 200 meters away from the center stupa, were further revealed and associated with the temple (Osmani, 2005). The corridors had distinct characteristics:

First corridor: 73 cm wide and 80 cm deep; no statues were found.

Second corridor: Very similar to the central stupa, possibly built at the same time (Azizi, 2008).

Third corridor: 92 cm wide; four ceramic jars containing ashes were found, one broken and three intact, likely dating to the 5th–6th centuries AD. A human skeleton was also discovered, possibly belonging to a military officer or local ruler (Osmani, 2005).

Fourth corridor: 1.92 meters wide and 2.30 meters deep, resembling the other corridors. Remains of a coffin were found but had decomposed due to humidity. Additionally, three copper coins and three arrowheads were recovered, likely dating to the reigns of Kushan

rulers Vima Kadphises and Kanishka (Jafari, 2009).

The central stupa, decorated in a style similar to Kushan art, has suffered extensive damage (Osmani, 2005). Protective wall coatings and decorative bases have eroded due to natural factors (Noori, 2009). It is believed that the original stupa had seven to nine umbrella tiers, which were destroyed due to the arrival of Islam and seasonal rainfall (Osmani, 2005).

The temple's architecture reflects a style common in Afghanistan since the 1st century AD, using alternating thick and thin stones for wall reinforcement, with decorations made from ochre and a clay layer. The area around the stupa was paved with large stones, enabling Buddhist monks to perform circumambulation. At the eastern entrance of the corridor, four large jars filled with bones were found—possibly the cremated remains of Buddhist monks. Three jars were intact and bore stamped seals, while one was broken (Noori, 2009).

In addition, human skeletons, coins, and other artifacts suggest that the site remained in use at least until the 5th century AD (Osmani, 2005). Due to a lack of resources and suitable conditions, excavations at the site have not yet been completed, and comprehensive data on the temple remain unavailable.

The Buddhist Temple of Tepe Narenj

Tepe Narenj, a Buddhist temple located near the Panja Shah shrine, stands at an elevation of 1,897 meters above sea level in a place that has historically been characterized by stagnant water bodies such as Qol-e-Hashmat Khan (Noori, 2009). It lies adjacent to the Kabul Ring Mountains; its name may have derived from the Hindi word Naranjan (Azizi, 2008). This site was discovered in 2004 when an inhabitant reportedly found a wall while building a house for himself. An inspection was made by the Department of Archaeology, and excavations started under Afghan archaeologist Zafarullah Paiman, funded by the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA), with a budget of €5,000

(Osmani, 2005). Excavations were carried out from 2004 to 2008. Many structures and finds were uncovered: central and votive stupas, monastic cells, clay statues, and ceramic vessels. Regardless of six levels of excavation, only two preliminary reports have been published (Osmani, 2014). The stupas are iconographically and mythologically very important for Buddhism, showing evidence of Gandhara, Nagarahara, and Kabul artistic styles, and are dated to the Kushan period (1st-2nd centuries CE) (Azizi, 2008).

There were three phases of excavation in 2005. The first lasted six weeks and revealed stupas, monastic cells, and clay statues with decoration (Azizi, 2008, p. 86). The second phase in the summer of 2005 opened numerous test trenches, showing more good prospects. The central stupa, which is built in two tiers, still stands up to 1.6 m in height. The analysis of stratigraphy, together with previous research from 1933, confirms that the temple was first constructed in the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE and was renovated in the 4th to 5th centuries CE (Osmani, 2014). The finds included clay statues and coins from both the Kushan and Hephthalite periods—some of which rest in the Kabul Museum while others fell victim to atrocities by the Taliban. Further excavations had brought to light a schist stupa on the eastern side of the temple, thereby further confirming the monument's gigantic scale. It contained monastic cells dome-shaped beamed corridors in the lower regions where the Buddhist monks lived. Architectural parallels suggest that the construction style of the stupa at Tepe Narenj was akin to that of Nagarahara, with further affinities to the stupas of Gol Dara and Konjaki in Paghman. Most distinguishedly, both entrances of the Tepe Narenj and the central stupas of Konjaki face east, while the stupa of Gol Dara, on the other hand, faces southeast (Noori, 2009).

In the western areas of the temple, more cells and stupas were excavated as well as remains of raw bricks, stone walls, and fragments of Buddhist statuary. The analysis results of stratigraphy and of surviving structures suggest that the site has undergone multiple episodes of destruction and

pillaging throughout its history (Azizi, 2008; Osmani, 2014).

Buddhist Temple of the Chakari Minaret

Buddhist temple of Chakari Minaret is about 16 kilometers away southeast of the old Kabul, near the Shewaki area, whose geographical coordinates are 52°34' N latitude and 17°96'30" E longitude (Osmani, 2014). It is built on an elevation commanding its name, Chakra, which is the Buddhist Wheel of Law; Hence, it is also referred to as the "Red Minaret" on account of its red stone masonry. According to Foucher, the Chakra stands for the symbol of the Buddhist Wheel of Law; he attributed this monument to the 2nd century CE, refuting his claim with the association of the 3rd century BCE and the reign of Ashoka (Osmani, 2005).

Deriving from the word Kakara in Sanskrit, which means the Dharma Wheel, the other name is Rotating Tower, conflating the different aspects of geography, history, culture, and architecture, which the monument stands out as one of the most thrilling sites bordering the capital. Towering at present to a height of about 15 meters with a diameter of 20 meters at the base, it was constructed in cylindrical form tapering upward and with the uppermost part displaying a camel-brown color. German researchers noticed that local residents call it "Alexander's Column," even though the historical evidence for Alexander's presence here does not correspond to the period of the minaret's construction.

During the 19th century, it was utilized as a shortcut, linking Kabul with what is now called Bagrami, to the east, Nangarhar. In 1965, measurements showed that the minaret was 27 meters tall, while the British Institute of Archaeology recorded it as high as 26.6 meters in 1975 (Osmani, 2014).

Scholars, both Afghan and foreigners, have focused their investigations on the Chakari Minaret, including the following: Charles Masson (who lived in Kabul under an alias, James Lewis), J.G. Gerrard, Dr. Martin, Haing, and Honigberger, who found Kushan and Roman gold coins in places such as Shewaki, Kamari, and Gul Dara—entities that greatly enhance the Buddhist story of

Kabul (Noori, 2009). The main restoration of the site occurred in 1923 by British and Afghan archaeologists working together, during which a conical core of concrete was introduced to reinforce the edifice. Excavations in 1952 revealed three tea kettles and a water pot that were all stoned-polished, indicative of a Buddhist religious context (Osmani, 2014).

A comparable wheel to that of Chakari Minaret is seen at the summit of the Benares Minaret, India, which is associated with Ashoka. The Chinese pilgrim, Xuanzang, asserted that the edifice might belong to the Ashokan period. Majority of the historians interpreted it to Kushan period. According to historian Ahmad Ali Kohzad, construction of the minaret would have begun during the reign of Kanishka I, a devout Buddhist,

and accompanied with such effort would have been creation of Buddhist settlements around the minaret (Ebrahimi, 1984). Architecturally, the construction comprises outer, middle, and inner shells, protected by thicknesses of 30-50 cm. Its highly elaborate stone carving is a reflection of the renowned craftsmanship during the Kushan era. This cubic design in the lower section, which allowed snow and rain to accumulate, exposed the lower section to wind, which might have fastened the erosion of the base. The Chakari Minaret brings architectural similarities with old monuments in Taxila as well as the Swat Valley that have been excavated by an Italian archaeological team, showing cultural and artistic connections between Kabul and the larger Gandharan region (Noori, 2009).



Figure 1. The ruined shape of the Chakari Minaret after its collapse due to natural disasters following the impact of training rockets (17)

Buddhist Temple of Bala Hissar, Kabul

Meaning "strong citadel," Bala Hissar has been known for its strategic structural strength. The 10th century geographer Istakhri described in his *Al-Masalik wa Al-Mamalik* a formidable fortress (Hume, 1990) in the topography of its construction. Several Military houses and ranks housed within the upper and lower structures of Bala Hissar. Fortified walls, moats, several gates, watchtowers, and military centers are in a place dedicated to being a defensive stronghold. The site was geographically surrounded by Shah-e Salihin from the northeast, Bagrami from the northwest, and the walls of Zanburak Shah to the

southeast. These were the historical, nearby places Kocha-e Kharabat and Qol-e Hashmat Khan (Osmani, 2005).

Ahmad Ali Kohzad as history-recorders says that Bala Hissar was built either at the same time or was being constructed by the fortification of Sher Darwaza Mountain as a military center of the Hephthalites, a confederation of central Asia whose culture was martial. So, attributing to this, the fortress was supposed to be built in the 5th century CE during the time of the Hephthalites. Once their military and political power was consolidated, the Hephthalites split into two factions; one moved westwards to enter present-day Badakhshan and defeated the Sassanids, while

the other, which included the Zawli tribe, settled around Kabul and Ghazni and defined Zabulistan. During these times, many monuments of walls and fortifications were raised, and among them, Bala Hissar was the most principal stronghold (Paiman, 2005). The earliest entry into Bala Hissar by any European was that of Charles Masson, who was an English traveler and penetrated into Kabul during 1826-1838. Although the scientific methodology was not used in the conduct of research, Masson's writings are some of the earlier documents relating to the site. Such documents reveal that Masson carried off a number of antiquities from Bala Hissar, most of which ended up in the British Museum later. The Buddhist temples surrounding Bala Hissar remained unblemished until the late 9th century of the Common Era when Ya'qub ibn al-Layth al-Saffar and his brother 'Umar invaded the region. Most of these temples were plundered, with gold statues of Buddhists having been shipped to Islamic centers as war bounties. Kohzad states that Buddhist, Shaivite, and Brahmanic traditions were present in the Kabul area at least a century after Ya'qub had invaded. Historical accounts say that Bala Hissar was built before the 4th century AH (10th century CE), and its defensive walls were joined up, making it surmise that construction began in the 5th century CE—about 150 years before the advent of Islam in the area—while Bagram (Kapisa) remained the capital [15, p. 105]. Bala Hissar was a military and political

stronghold from time immemorial into modern times. Bala Hissar also finds mention in the original historical works such as the Baburnama, Humayun-nama, Akbarnama, and Jahangirnama, recording its identity as a military depot. The fortress had four main entrances, Delhi Gate, Barak Gate, Taqina Gate, and Iron Gate, built into a network of deep moats flooded with water (Osmani, 2005). In contemporary history, during the rule of Dr. Najibullah and in the decades thereafter, Bala Hissar served as a military base. During that time of British occupation, and later under international peacekeeping forces, this fortress continued to be key military fortifications. Nevertheless, the archaeological explorations have been minimal and so are the preservation efforts. Observational studies suggest that the fortress comprises shallow domed chambers entirely made of wood, stone, sand, lime, mud, and straws. Systematic digging of its foundations would allow more accurate dating of the origins and unveil other phases of construction and modification. So, Bala Hissar is among the best historical sites in whole Afghanistan, and it has served as one of the major military and political centers in the Hephthalite period down to Islamic rule through to the present day. The multi-layered history of this site—taking in Buddhist sanctuaries, medieval Islamic fortifications, and modern military uses—not only underlines the site's relevance but also the ongoing strategic imperatives.



Figure 2. A view of the watchtowers and the strategic location of Bala Hissar, Kabul, near Qol-e Hashmat Khan in Shah-e Salihin (17).

Buddhist Temple of Tapa Maranjan, Kabul

Tapa Maranjan, probably the most prominent East Buddhist archaeological site, is located nearly 3 kilometers east of Old Kabul in the Kabul Valley. In the year 1933, the site was introduced to scholarship when a French archaeological mission under Monsieur Jean Carl commenced systematic excavations on 15 June of that year (Jafari, 2009). Stratigraphic and architectural evidence indicate that the temple complex was mainly erected in the Kushan period (1st–3rd centuries CE), with major repairs and additions made during the 4th and the 5th centuries CE. It was said to be built as a fortified monastic complex for protection against the possible incursions of Yuezhi or other nomadic groups. Originally, the complex consisted of rectangular mud-brick constructions, stupas, clay statues, and ceremonial halls. One big building commonly described was 12.30 × 8.60 meters and topped by a domed roof resting on arched chambers, expressing an amalgam of architecture derived from Gandhara and Central Asia. The stupas surrounding the complex had stone foundations, and mud-brick superstructures, complying with the standard tripartite Buddhist model: square or circular base (*medhi*), cylindrical drum, and dome (*anda*), capped with a *harmika* and *chattravali*. Among the most distinguished finds were paintings of Buddhist sculptures and votive figures along with one stupa (lower part only survives). Human remains in reliquaries, teeth and ashes believed to be associated with Buddha, were also found in excavations (Noori, 2009). Decorative clay vessels with Kushan and Sassanian motifs were retrieved, frequently embellished with stylized floral and animal decorations. These testify to the artistic attainment of the time, indicating culture exchange between South-Central Asia. Tapa Maranjan is also interweaved with local folklore, especially the fable of a sorceress named Maranjan who hides her treasure, now turned to dust. Although such tales belong to the oral tradition, they cast light on the permanent imprint of the site in the memory of the local populace. The archaeological work at the site lasted for nine phases of excavation when stupas, statues, coins, and ceramics had been

systematically recorded. In the 1970s, a hoard of silver coins and gold ornaments was discovered on the western slope of the hill. The treasure, now in the Kabul Museum, included coins of the 4th–5th centuries BCE, possibly carried to the region by Greek merchants working during the Hellenistic period (Andarabi, 2010). More securely, the bulk of the coinage found at the site is Kushan and late Kushano-Sassanian periods. The architectural sequence suggests that the temple was originally built between 1st and 3rd centuries CE during Kushan rule, serving monastic as well as pilgrimage uses. In the 5th century CE, after suffering damage from natural or human causes, the site was repaired, and defensive towers, rising up to 10 meters, were added. Tapa Maranjan was in use until the early Islamic period, and the function of a Buddhist center likely ceased by the late 7th century CE (Osmani, 2005).

Today, Tapa Maranjan is considered to be an essential reference for understanding the Buddhist heritage of Kabul, shedding light on the religious, artistic, and political history of the region from Kushan supremacy to the early Islamic expansion.

Buddhist Temple of Kotal Khairkhana

The Kotal Khairkhana archaeological site, some twelve kilometers northwest of the city of Kabul, is located on the southern slopes of Hazara Baghal Mountain. Its first documentation in 1934 was by French archaeologist Jean Carl during an expedition of *Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA)* (Noori, 2009). The same year saw the beginning of systematic excavations by Joseph Hackin, exposing architectural features and sculptures that have created discussions among scholars regarding the original religious function of the temple. Early interpretations placed the site as Brahmanic in the Hephthalite period (5th to 6th CE). However, subsequent studies proposed that the structure was first a Buddhist temple converted to sun worship by the Hephthalites, who are known to have been hostile toward Buddhism. This conversion could have taken place during the Kabul Shahi period (7th to 9th CE) when the temple was enlarged and adapted to Vedic solar worship. Archaeological

and iconographical evidence indicate that the temple was dedicated to Surya, the Vedic sun god, who was widely worshipped in Central Asia between 1400-1200 BCE under various names, including Mithra and Ahura Mazda. In 1979, the site revealed a marble statue of Surya depicting the god as defined in Vedic texts: with a pair of heavenly attendants and in a chariot drawn by seven horses. Unfortunately, this statue was lost in the civil unrest of the late 20th century (Noori, 2009).

Excavations from 1934 documented three worship rooms, each with three stone platforms that held statues, implying a symbolic arrangement for a total of nine sculptures. Several of the statues were damaged, with stylistic analysis linking them to the Gandharan, Gupta, and Kashmiri artistic traditions. The original dating of the Surya statue was the 4th century CE (309–388 CE), but additional stylistic comparison and stratigraphic assessment shifted the dating to the 7th–early 8th centuries CE (Azizi, 2008).

The historical sources suggest that the temple was destroyed circa 870 CE during the Arab-Islamic expansion into the Kabul Valley. The artistic heritage of Kotal Khairkhana is often linked to the period of the Zabul Shahi dynasty and the late Sassanian ruler Yazdegerd III (r. 630–651 CE), who exerted influence in the Hindu Kush region during the last decades of Sassanid rule (Tarzi, 2005). Even today, despite the destruction and loss of artifacts, Kotal Khairkhana remains a vital site to constant religious changes in the Kabul region from Buddhism to various Brahmanic solar cults, marking the transition of broader culture and politics in Central and South Asia during the late antique to early medieval periods. Tourism Potential of Historical Sites in the Kushan Period of Kabul.

Values and Opportunities

Historical places of the Kushan period such as the Buddhist temples of Tepe Narenj, Tepe Maranjan, and Kotal Khairkhana found in Kabul represent important cultural and historical symbols with a high possibility for attracting tourists both from within Afghanistan and abroad. They also reflect the art and architecture of the Gandharan and

Kushan periods and the religious and cultural diversities of the past in the region (Osmani, 2005; Azizi, 2008). Valuable artifacts such as stupas, statues, and ancient coins provide unique opportunities for the fostering of cultural and historical tourism, thus enhancing national identity and raising public awareness toward cultural heritage (Jafari, 2009; Andarabi, 2010). Moreover, the geographical location and proximity of these sites to the city center of Kabul provide easy accessibility for the guests to visit, an essential element for the development of tourism (UNESCO, 2017).

Nevertheless, the actualization of these potentials is direly obstructed by serious challenges. The wars and political instability have always constituted major threats of destruction; insufficient funding and lack of proper skillsets in conservation and restoration of archaeological sites enhance the threat from illegal excavations and looting that have all but destroyed portions of these sites (Noori, 2009; Rasouli, 2006). Weak tourism infrastructures, lack of visitor facilities, and poor promotion and awareness have also hampered the project of cultural tourism in Kabul (Ball, 2014). The monuments have also suffered destruction of the structural integrity of these monuments from natural threats which include erosion caused by rainfall and earthquakes (Foucher, 1922). To maximize the potential for tourism development from Kabul's historical sites, comprehensive conservation and restoration programs, executed with international cooperation and on the basis of global best practices, should be developed and implemented (DAFA, 2005). Training specialized personnel and increasing local community awareness of the importance of cultural heritage are priorities that should be considered alongside establishing proper tourism infrastructure, including visitor centers, amenities, and safe access routes (Rowland, 2001; UNESCO, 2017). Identifying and developing promotional and cultural policies to better present these attractions nationally and internationally will considerably increase the numbers of tourists. Adopting modern technologies such as virtual reality and virtual tours will also generate interest

and incite physical visits (Andarabi, 2010; Ball, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ariana was a conspicuous center of Buddhist worship; the Kushan Empire, which ruled for almost two centuries in these regions, had also become a flourishing center for scientific, cultural, and artistic activities. History has it that during the reign of Kanishka the Great, all over his vast empire—from Taxila in the west to Mathura in the east, from Balkh to Bamiyan and Peshawar—thousands of religious and charitable structures came up (Xuanzang, 7th century/1996; Cribb, 1997). Under the Kushans, especially during the reign of Kanishka, Buddhism flourished and reached its heights in this region, giving rise to the construction of many impressive temples, stupas, and monasteries. Among the more famous examples are the stupas of Samangan and Naw Bahar of Balkh, and the major temples in and around Kabul, such as Chakari Minaret, Tepe Maranjan, and Tepe Narenj, plus the recently explored sites near Kabul: Khwaja Safa and Kunjaki in Paghman. These monuments not only reflect far-reaching dissemination of Buddhism but speak volumes about Afghanistan's rich cultural, artistic, and historical heritage. Kabul, in its own right, as an important religious and cultural center has, through the ages, remained under the influence of a wide variety of religions and architectural styles. Geographically located between two major Buddhist centers, Kapisa and Hadda, Kabul became a hub for trade caravans and Buddhist pilgrims, channeling into cultural exchange and economic growth. Among Kabul's architectural heritage, the Chakari Minaret embodies the ingenuity of Buddhist architecture and provided a navigational guide for traders and pilgrims. Sadly, many of these monuments, Chakari Minaret among them, have been ruined or destroyed through war and neglect in recent decades. Although many of these historic sites have not yet been excavated, the finds that they actual hold are indeed invaluable in both quantity and quality, demonstrating the cultural and artistic opulence of

the Kushan era with their display of the merging of Gandharan, Hellenistic, and indigenous Afghan artistic tradition. This merger is visible in the Buddhist temples and fine arts of Kabul and embodies the cultural synergies that defined this historic epoch. Overall, this study examines the architectural and cultural significance attributed to the sites of Buddhist temples in Kabul during the Kushan period and how their impact continues to affect architecture and art in the region to this day. Therefore, these historical monuments stand as not just the symbols of piety, but rather as living testimonies to the greatness of civilization and cultural achievement in Afghanistan, deserving of all the scholarly commitment, conservation projects, and public awareness.

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