

First Season Report: Archaeological Research and Conservation Program: India and Pakistan

Archaeological Excavation of Bhamala Buddhist Complex, Taxila Valley (January to March 2013)

By

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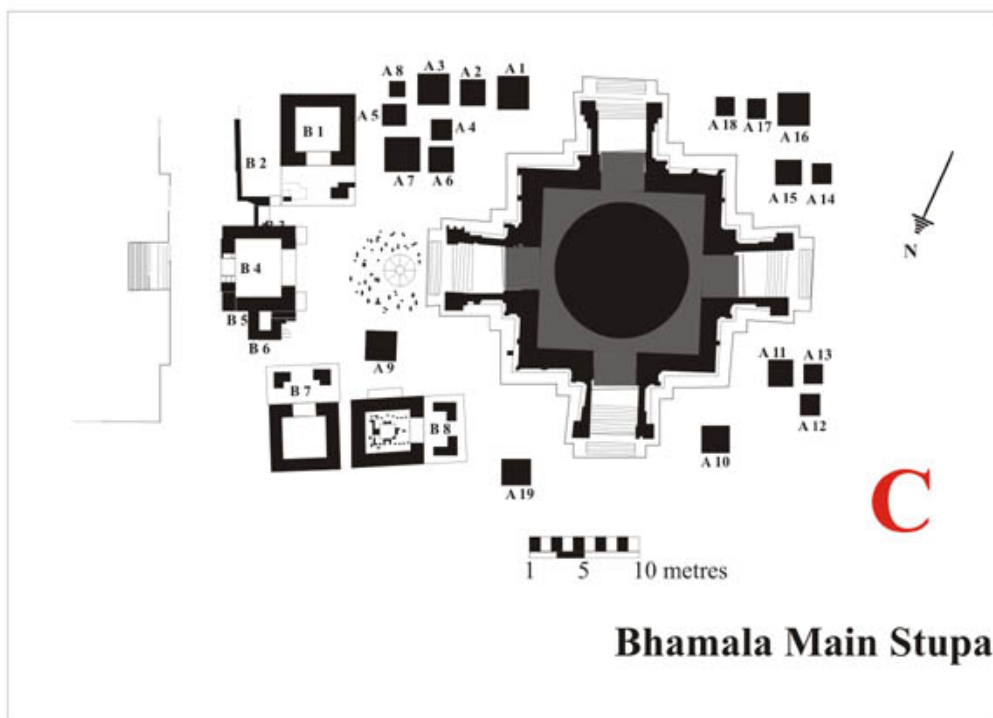
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Summary:

The valley of Taxila is characterised as a cross route of civilization, where new faith and cultures have emerged and developed. The archaeological work here in this world heritage valley to date has been sporadic and largely unsystematic. However, a recent joint Pakistan-US and Indian project, sponsored by the US State Department, has carried out one season of scientific archaeological investigation. The purpose was to build up an outline chronology and develop understanding of the historic period archaeology in and around Taxila. The study also reports on key cultural developments in Buddhist archaeology in subcontinent, its impact and connections with its border regions, such as greater Gandhara and Kashmir valley, the spread of Buddhism, and the form Buddhist art and architecture in and around Taxila. This report presents the results of this new work recently carried out at Bhamala Buddhist complex near Taxila valley in district Khanpur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Introduction

The Bhamala Buddhist complex lies around 25 KM from Taxila Museum and on the head of Khanpur dam among the Murree foothills. Archaeological and historical understandings of this Buddhist complex and the area are very limited. Sir. John Marshall was the first one to excavate this site between 1929 and 1931; he mainly exposed Buddhist Stupa and part of monastery, while totally leaving the remaining 60 % site untouched. In 2012 a joint project began between Hazara University, Pakistan, Wisconsin University Madison, USA and MS Baroda University Gujrat India, funded by the US State Department, with an intention to systematically investigate the shared archaeological heritage of Pakistan and India by involving field experts from Pakistan USA and India.



Aim

The aim of this report is to present the results of the first field season of this project (2013) and to place them within a wider understanding of Buddhist archaeology and history. We believe that this is important because the results of the field research provide our first systematically derived view of past settlement and human activity in this remote area of Taxila this project encourages archaeologists within and outside Pakistan whose fieldwork has been curtailed by security issues over the last few years. Although Taxila valley has always been regarded as a very peaceful and safe place for foreign travellers and archaeologists alike, the recent security issues affecting much of Pakistan but did not force us to re-think both our training and our field strategies. Training in new excavation methodologies and equipment has been carried out, and

data has been collected which is expanding our knowledge of Buddhist settlement in Taxila valley.



Archaeological Excavation

The main aim of archaeological excavation at Bhamala was to identify archaeological evidences representative of a range of periods, types, and functions in order to begin to construct a chronology and understand the broad character of Buddhist settlement and activity in this remote mountain valley. This was achieved through “Haris Matrix” and “lot” technique, with site locations placed in terms of elevation, settlement, topography and ground cover. These technique was in contrast to the largely known “Wheeler” and “Marshall” techniques employed in Pakistan in the field of Archaeology, thus through this project we for the first time implemented this excavation technique on historic period site. The value of this study lies in the fact that the first time these

techniques are implemented on a historic period site. Furthermore, there is cultural aspect to this project, i.e. it aims to change the views of colleagues' across the border of Pakistan. This joint project with Indian colleagues makes the archaeologist realised their role in preserving the shared cultural heritage/resources and to capitalised in them. Experts in archaeology can play a vital role in development of archaeology in South Asia.



Archaeological Excavation results

Results of the first season:

The western part of Bhamala, which Marshall hesitated to excavate, is chosen to begin our scientific investigation. In fact it was on site training as well as exploration of the site. In the first season, introducing students and staff to handle new equipments and conceptualizing new excavation approaches was as important as actually excavating an unearthing of antiquity. During the process, unique features of the site were exposed,

such as the extension of this complex towards western side, which draws out attention to another phase of settlement. Antiquity recovered includes, carnelian seal, depicting composite deity, probably Indian *gajalakshmi*. Evidences of Kashmiri influences were observed and understood, these Kashmiri features, such as decorated tiles, chakra in front of cruciform type of Buddhist Stupa, has introduced new school of Buddhist ideology in the region. Several terracotta and Stucco Buddha statues were recovered during this scientific digging, which are going through conservation treatment presently. Similarly, among other large number of minor antiquity, copper coins were recovered, which after initial study and observation dates back to the Kidara-Kushan period (4th to 5th C.AD).



What the results of our one season of fieldwork mean is that for the first time we are able to say that Bhamala was a place that was used by Buddhist community over hundreds of years, and we have the beginnings of an outline chronology that goes

beyond Kushan period (2nd C. AD). We can also say that Bhamala was clearly not an entirely isolated area from the main Taxila. The excavation of Bhamala shows that there is material culture in Bhamala complex which can be used to find answers to many unanswered questions about Buddhist cultural change, development and contact in this region. The geography of Bhamala Complex and surrounding area pose great difficulties to researcher which is self explanatory as why it is not clearly at forefront of historic event. However, the evidence of settlement and settler in this area proved that movement from and to Bhamala was part of life and culture of Taxila.

Archaeological survey methodology

As noted above, limited archaeological researches have previously been carried out in the main Khanpur valley and Taxila. These surveys were conducted as 'village to village surveys' whereby the survey team drove between villages and asked residents whether they knew about deserted buildings, old places, or places where antiquities had been discovered. Such surveys provided a useful starting point, as they exploited local knowledge and indicated the great archaeological potential of Khanpur region. An objective of this project was to introduce new (to Taxila valley) methodologies for identifying and recording sites, and to that end we decided to make use of transect survey methodology, which one of us (Samad) had been involved in to great effect in a project located in the Chitral valley. By basing our survey primarily on random transects we aimed to obtain a sample of sites from different periods and of different types that would be representative of past human activity, rather than simply representative of the current knowledge of selected inhabitants of villages near roads. Although the project has encountered a number of practical difficulties in terms of training and execution, we have evolved strategies to circumvent these difficulties as far as possible, and we believe the results are very instructive and show that adopting new survey methodologies is both possible and productive. Our first season of survey (2013) can thus be seen very much as a trial of equipment, approach and understanding, and ultimately of success. It gave the field team confidence in the survey methodology and equipment, and this allowed further data collection in our second season (2014).

Conclusion

We believe that the first season of archaeological fieldwork that have been carried out in Bhamala as part of this project have been very valuable and have allowed us to begin to address the main project aims and objectives. The archaeological survey has identified and recorded sites from a range of periods from which we are beginning to construct an outline chronology. This is the first time that Bhamala complex has been subject to systematic archaeological exploration, and the results show that this is an excellent platform on which to build future projects. Indeed, we hope that this is just the beginning for Khanpur and Taxila archaeology, and from a purely academic perspective the results of our fieldwork raise the possibility for asking many more

questions.

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