

Revisiting the Archaeology of an Early Historic City

A Case Study of Semthan, Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper primarily assesses the links between the Central Asian regions and Kashmir during the early historic period. Archaeology and textual sources are critically analysed to guess the magnitude of relations both regions shared during the time period under study. The Kushana and Indo-Greek sources speak of the paramount importance of these regions and the relations between the two. Semthan, an early historic site in Kashmir, is focus of the study. NBPW, Indo-Greek and Kushana remains were found at the site during the course of excavations. Besides from explorations, carried at the site by the author, many archaeological evidences of these ruling dynasties were found. Semthan survived as an urban hub and main trading post of these ruling powers in Kashmir.

Keywords

Kashmir, Archaeology, Early Historic Period, Kushanas, Indo-Greeks, Semthan, Archaeological Surveys

Introduction

There is considerable amount of source material available in Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic and Persian, in addition to the archaeological evidences, which throw a flood of light on the millennia old socio-cultural and economic relations between Central Asia and South Asia. At times, major portions of these regions formed a part of one political entity e.g. under the Kushana rulers and Mughal empire. Similarities, commonness and affinities between these regions could be visualized from many perspectives.

The cultural interaction between these regions could have been possible only through land routes. The most important highway connecting South Asia, including India and Kashmir, with the Central Asia, West Asia and East Asia was the Silk Road. Right from ancient and medieval times Kashmir was connected with these vast and distant land masses by a large network of main and conjunctive roads connecting Central Asia with India and China on the one hand and Europe and West Asia on the other (Ahmad, 1986:3). The Indian subcontinent was integrated into a long-distance trade network during the early historic period (third century BCE to fourth century CE) that linked the economic spheres of the Roman Mediterranean, the East African coast and South-East Asia (Smith, 2000:75). From early times, Kashmir was hooked to its Central Asian neighbourhood through regional, cultural, economic and political integration (Kaw, 2010).

The most important Empires among them, of which we have ample literary and archaeological evidences, were Indo-Greeks and Kushana rulers. The Kushana Empire was the dominant power of the Central Asia and Northern India from the 1st to 4th

century CE (Bracey, 2012:117). The imprint of their rule in Kashmir was brought to light by the excavations at many places which confirmed not only the coming of these ruling powers to Kashmir but a great deal else related to the nature of their rule.

Excavations at Semthan

An archeological discovery in this regard was the excavation at Semthan (33°48' 202" N, 75°05' 477" E) an early historic archaeological site in Bijbihara, Anantnag district in Kashmir. The site is located on the top of the loess karewa formation deposited by an ancient lake, at an altitude of 1646 masl on the left bank of the Jhelum river. The credit for noticing the archaeological potential of Semthan for the first time goes to Georg Buhler (1837-1898) a renowned Indologist. In his detailed report of a tour in search of sanskrit manuscripts made in Kaśmîr, Rajputana and Central India which appeared in 1887 Buhler wrote:

I have only to mention one site which has escaped them (Cunningham and Cowie), as well as all other Kaśmîr travelers. This is the mound of Châkhdhar or Chakradhara, about a mile west from Bijbrôr, the ancient Vijayēvara . . . It is utterly destitute of vestiges of ruins. Nevertheless it once bore a town and an important fortress . . . Its identity with the old Chakradhara would be proved by the great number of ancient Kaśmirian, Scythian, and Kâbulî coins which are every year disinterred on the mound . . . more, and especially more valuable silver and gold coins, used to be found there. I recommend the place to the attention of archaeologists and numismatists (Buhler, 1877:18).

The archaeological material at Semthan and its correlations with the textual evidences of the Rajatarangini, which mentions present Semthan plateau as Chakradhara was first made by M. A. Stein in his translation of the text basing the identification on the closeness of Semthan to Bijbihara in geographic terms and the narration of the historic events by Kalhana involving both Chakradhara and also the Vijayesvara in close vicinity to each other (Stein, 1900:i.38,fn).

The archaeological remains in the shape of rubble and pebble stones, fired bricks, miniature terracotta figurines, pottery etc. can be seen scattered in huge quantities on the whole area presently bound by the Jhelum river on the east and north, by the Semthan village on the west and by new colony Bijbihara on the south. The whole area approximately 90 to 100 hectares with a perimeter of around 3.5 kilometres is dotted by pottery and other cultural materials. The most prominent archaeological features of site are a series of high and low archaeological mounds dotting this whole landscape. These mounds are locally known as Chakhdhar (1646 masl), Rajma Teng (1622 masl), Sona Khut (1595 masl) and Shushrum Nag (1612 masl).

The first systematic archaeological excavations at Semthan were conducted by R. S. Bisht of the Archaeological Survey of India who reported its results in Indian Archaeology- A Review 1980-81 (Mitra, 1983:21-24; 107-108; pl. XI, XII, XIII, IX). Here, for the first time, the actual cultural sequence at the site was confirmed. The excavators reached up to the natural soil at a depth of 10.2 metres (Gaur, 1987:327-337). A total of 35 successive floor levels were encountered which reflected six periods of cultural

occupation, ranging from the pre-NBP period up to the medieval times without any break (Gaur, 1987:329). From the references of these excavations the following cultural sequence of the occupation levels could be made (Gaur, 1987:327-337; Shali, 1993:111-121, 143, 214).

Period I- 'pre-NBP'; c. 700-500 BCE

Period II- 'NBPW'; c. 500-200 BCE

Period III- 'Indo-Greeks'; c. 200 BCE-1 CE

Period IV- 'Kushana-Huna'; c. 1 CE- 5th century CE

Period V- 'Hindu'; c. 5th century CE-13th century CE

Period VI- 'Late Medieval'; (post 13th century CE) onwards.

Semthan is the only archaeological site in Kashmir Valley from where Northern Black Polished Ware and Indo-Greek culture is reported from the stratified layers, though coins of some of the Indo-Greek rulers were explored throughout the Kashmir Valley (Lone, 2016:72). Excavations at the site, bridges the gap, in a manner of speaking, between the end of the megalithic phases of Gufkral and Burzahom and the beginning of the early historic period of Kashmir. The Site Catchment Analysis and systematic intensive archaeological surveys carried out at Semthan also brought to light the pottery traditions of Kushanas and Indo-Greeks in addition to coins, terracotta figurines etc. (Lone, 2019:90-104) These types of surveys provide data to enhance the understanding of local and regional economic patterns of the early historic period which in turn illustrates the social links maintained across landscapes (Smith, 2000:75).

The Indo-Greeks and Kushanas were the people who came from Central Asia and ruled India and Kashmir for some time. The above mentioned archaeological occupation layers at Semthan of these two ruling powers are briefly discussed in the following pages. The third phase of occupation at Semthan is termed as the Indo-Greek period. It commences from 200 BCE and continues up to the beginning of the first century of the Common Era. The occupational level at Semthan of this period is only 40 centimeters thick, marked by a series of successive floor levels. This period revealed well developed and sophisticated pottery unknown to Period I and Period II. This is a distinguished pottery of very thin fabric having a slip ranging from bright red to orange (Mitra, 1983:21) and pink (Shali, 2001:128; Gaur, 1987:331) in colour. It was characterized by the frequent use of functional devices like pinched lip, spout, handle and ring or pedestal base (Shali, 2001:128). The prominent shapes include goblets, earthen thali (pans) (Mitra, 1983:21; Agrawal, 1998:80) bowls (Agrawal, 1998:80) vases with out-turned and internally thickened rims and vessels with high necks (Shali, 1993:120).

Another significant discovery of this period is a potsherd with an inscription in five letters engraved below the rim portion or the neck of the pot on the external side [Mitra, 1983: Pl.XIII (A); Shali, 2001:128; 1993:120]. The inscription mentions 'dhamorai' or 'dharmo rajai', probably referring to Menander who visited Kashmir during this period (Shali, 1993:120). Shali dated this inscription to first century BCE, however, Lahiri (1992:270) places this inscription to 2nd century BCE. Besides, a small clay seal

depicting an Indo-Greek deity was also recovered from this level (Mittra, 1983:21). The excavators have identified this deity with the Greek god-Apollo (Gaur, 1987:331; Shali, 2001:128).

The most important discovery of this period are Indo-Greek coins (Mittra, 1983:21). These coins were collected from surface explorations at the site. Among the surface collections, coins of Menander were prominent besides that of copper issues of the rulers of Indo-Scythians and Indo-Parthians like Azis, Azilises and Abdages (Shali, 1993:120). A large number of terracotta human figurines also come from this level. Prominent among them is a human head with a serene facial expression (Shali, 1993:120). Period IV of occupation at Semthan has been labelled as 'Kushana-Huna' period having a cultural occupation of around five centuries starting from the beginning of the Common Era and continuing up to fifth century CE. This label is slightly problematic as it creates a lot of confusion in the minds of readers to distinguish between the two cultures. The preliminary excavation report does not make it clear where the Kushana phase of activity ends and at which point the occupation level of the Huna period begins. However, a reference is made to an early phase of occupation belonging to the Kushana period and last phase possessing cultural traits of Huna period. The excavators seem to have reached this distinction on the basis of variations in ceramic production. A radiocarbon date provided by a charcoal sample recovered from layer number 23 gives a date of 1780 ± 130 (170 CE) (Joshi, 1993:146). This phase of occupation is the most important period of activity at the site, as the occupational level is more than four meters thick, continuing from layer number 14 to 24 (Gaur, 1987:331, 329).

The Kushana-Huna period of occupation is directly resting on the cultural debris of the Indo-Greek period and has presented far more reliable data than the previous levels regarding the different phases of activity at the site. The pottery of this phase witnessed the continuation of the typology of the earlier periods with new additions (Mittra, 1983:21). Besides, two distinct phases of pottery production were also noticed in this period. The first series belonging to the Kushana period and the other is of the Huna lineage.

Phase I: The evidence of the Kushana pottery is strikingly significant in this phase. The fabric of this lot ranges from coarse to fine red ware and a distinct coarse grey ware (Gaur, 1987:331). The ingredients are profusely used in the medium or coarse wares (Shali, 1993:121). The fine red ware is coated with red slip (Shali, 2001:149). The shapes include bowls with incurved rims, vases with long vertical neck, inkpot like lids (Gaur, 1987:331), lid-cum-dish—internally hollow with out turned rims, jars of dull red ware with out-curved horizontally splayed out rims with a deep profile, pots with spherical body (Shali, 1993:121,122) and round base, wide mouthed incense burners and small wine cups (Shali, 2001:149). The decorations on some sherds are simple and varied from applique, incised to stamped designs (Shali, 1993:122).

The prominent antiquities of this period include

1. Beads made of terracotta, semiprecious stone (Mittra, 1983:23), bone, shell (Shali, 1993:122) and crystalline quartz (Gaur, 1987:333; Agrawal, 1998: 83),
2. Terracotta balls and wheels,

3. Clay seals and sealings bearing legends in Brahmi and Kharoshti scripts (Mittra, 1983:21; Shali, 1993:122). Seals were also collected from the ground survey (Mittra, 1983:22-23);
4. Copper and silver coins of Kushana rulers (Shali, 1993:122),
5. Large number of terracotta figurines (Mittra, 1983:21, pl. XII) of humans, animals and other miscellaneous objects, usually made out of single mould.
6. Copper and iron objects (Mittra, 1983:23).

This period also revealed the nature of the structural activity of Kushana period in Kashmir Valley of which parallels are found within and outside its geographical boundaries such as Gandhara (Shah 2013). The most interesting feature of the building activity was exposure of mud brick, rubble and diaper-pebble walls (Gaur, 1987:331) with associated floor levels—a significant representative of building activity of the Kushana period in Kashmir. Floors were paved with rubble stones. Terracotta brick tiles with faint motifs of a cross within a circle were also noticed (Gaur, 1987:331).

Phase II: The excavations had distinguished a separate phase of activity on the basis of structural and ceramic remains. This phase is generally known as the 'post Kushan' period or Huna period. There is a perceptible change visible in the settlement patterning during this phase. The structures include buildings of rubble stones without any mortar or cementing material (Shali, 1993:122). This change in structural activity, in the post Kushana period, in occupational deposits from diaper-rubble to rubble style of constructions was also seen at Harwan (Kak, 1933:105-111). The floors at Semthan were paved with small sized rubble stones (Shali, 1993:122).

The ceramics of this phase are also different from the previous phase of activity. Pottery is represented by bright red slipped ware (Gaur, 1987:331). The main shapes encountered are bowls having tapering sides and footed bases, variety of goblets with round bases (Shali, 2001:150) water vessels, basins with out-turned, internally thickened and sharpened rims (Shali, 1993:122) miniature and huge storage pots with spherical body and round bases and some moulded pottery (Gaur, 1987:331). This phase also yielded some terracotta figurines both of animals and humans (Shali, 1993:122). Prominent one is a terracotta human face that has some parallels in its style to the sculptures of the Gupta period of north Indian plains (Gaur, 1987:331). Besides, top most levels of this period yielded some coins of the Huna rulers (Gaur, 1987:331).

Since a range of materials pertaining to the Kushan period was found in the course of recent fieldwork, it would be useful to look at this phase in detail. Kushan period in Kashmir is distinctively known for its terracotta art (Shah 2014). The valley under prosperous rule of Kushan kings has seen growth of an independent school of art. Instead of stone as a popular material for the artists of Kushana period in the Indian subcontinent especially those related to the Gandhara school of art (Singh, 2009:462), the artists in Kashmir preferred clay as a popular medium of exhibiting their artistic flavours (Bandey, 2011:152). This is attested by the recovery of a large number of terracotta tiles (from a number of Buddhist/Kushana period sites) as also figurines of humans and animals (Gaur,

2002:368) as well as beads, skin rubbers, seals and miscellaneous objects. These art forms especially terracotta figurines bear Hellenistic influence. Gandhara school of art flourished between 1st and 5th century CE, it continued till 7th century CE in parts of Kashmir and Afghanistan (Singh, 2009:462). That is probably the reason behind the recovery of these terracotta figurines showing Hellenistic influence as exhibited from the excavations. The 'antiquity register' of year 1982 season of excavations lists the maximum number of these figurines from Period V at Semthan (Lone, 2016a:326).

The terracotta art flourished at Semthan as a major craft during the early historic period is also borne out by excavations at the site (Gaur, 2002). The antiquity register of year 1982 excavation lists a total number of 138 antiquities found during excavations at the site. Majority of them were found in proper contexts. Only a few of them are labeled as 'surface collection'. Out of 138 antiquities, 41 are terracotta objects including miniature figurines of humans and animals, beads, wheels, rings, seals, gamesmen, spout, pendant and skin rubber. Terracotta figurines of animals and human beings depict some Hellenistic influence in their execution and subject matter. The human figurines mostly female are 10 out of 41 followed by animal figurines which are 9 in total (Lone, 2016a:327).

The evidence is further authenticated by surface explorations at the site recently. Out of total number of 49 objects of different materials recovered, 23 are of terracotta. Among them, 11 are animal figurines, 10 are human figurines, one terracotta bead and one unidentified object. Moreover, 11 stamped terracotta pottery bases of bowls were also recovered (Lone, 2016a:255).

From the examination of material culture recovered from Semthan, one can argue that Kashmir developed at that stage an indigenous school of art in which terracotta or clay was already in vogue as a medium of artistic expression when it came under Kushan rule. The evidence seems favourable and convincing here. The early historic period in Kashmir was already set in a stage of urbanism before its conquest by Kushan Empire. There existed a local school of art of which expressions were mostly articulated in terracotta. The Hellenistic features were only an addition to these figurines by the artists who came from the Gandharan territories because of change in political power and patronage. The evidence is conclusive also in case of terracotta tiles. These tiles too exhibit a sense of evolution, in terms of surface treatment, from simple and plain tiles to most profusely decorated tiles at Harwan, Hutmura and Semthan. The argument that Taxila received this technique of making and paving their courtyards by terracotta tiles from Kashmir (Bandey, 1992:9) holds ground here. The evidence suggests that the relations between the Kashmir and Gandhara strengthened manifold after the conquest of Kashmir. As Gandhara region was ruled by foreign powers, the intermingling of these cultures in Kashmir resulted in such art forms having both regional manifestations and foreign influences (Shah 2017: 24). Such variations of influence in Semthan terracottas were also noticed by Siudmak (2013:32-57).

Lastly, Semthan excavations also provided evidences of sericulture and plane or chinar trees. From Period V, the remains of moras alba (white mulberry tree) and platanus

orientalis (plane or chinara tree) were recovered. *Morus alba* was cultivated in ancient China. It has no indigenous origin in India. Chinese silk technology reached as far west as Palmyra during Han Period, as 'one piece of silk, woven using Chinese technology,' was recovered at Palmyra (Liu, 2010:30-1). Semthan has produced earliest archaeological evidence of silk worm rearing or sericulture industry in Kashmir. Though its date of introduction is still a debate (Lone et al., 1993:155) its discovery in the archaeological record at Semthan and subsequent scientific analysis suggests that it was introduced in Kashmir by the early medieval period. However, some scholars deny the presence of sericulture industry in India before the medieval times (Habib, 2008:8). Among other 'woolen textiles' found at Palmyra 'cashmere was definitely a product of Kashmir or some other high-land region in Central Asia' (Liu, 2010:30-31). The introduction of *Platanus orientalis* in the Kashmir Valley, during this period is also noteworthy (Lone et al., 1990:389-391). It looks that Kashmiri products travelled as far as Roman world. 'The Romans used costus, bdellium, lyceum, and nard as spices, dyes, and medicines, and all came from plants grown in the high mountains of Kashmir and in the Himalayas' (Liu, 2010:38).

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that the archaeological evidences at Semthan are of tremendous value to study the history and archaeology of Kashmir region. The area has played a significant role throughout its history in different socio-religious, cultural and trading networks and has emerged as one of the successful and leading urban centres in the early historic period of Kashmir. The Rajatarangini is witness to the emergence of this place as a historic township. Two important cultures such as Northern Black Polished Ware and Indo-Greek culture are only reported from this place. Moreover, the systematic survey and Site Catchment Analysis, carried out at the site has added to its importance (Lone, 2019:90-104). However, little is known at present about the prehistory and early historic periods of this township.

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