

# SOURCEBOOK FOR THE SHAHI KINGDOMS\*

## Salt Range Temples of the Śāhi Period

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The history of the northern Indian Nāgara tradition of temple architecture in the early medieval period needs to take account of a distinctive, outlying branch in the region between ancient Gandhāra and the Punjab. Fewer than twenty monuments survive, much dilapidated, straddling today's Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces of Pakistan. Associated with the Salt Range, most of the sites are to either side of the hills, close to the Indus and Jhelum rivers. Because of this strategic location on routes from Gandhāra towards the plains, the area has many fortifications, some from the Śāhi era, and at least two of the temple sites (Bilot, Kafirkot) are connected to forts. The temples have generally been ascribed to the period of the Hindu or Udi Śāhi (833-1026 CE), but the earlier ones were probably built under the Turk Śāhi (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries). While Buddhism predominated during the latter's rule, these are Hindu temples, probably mainly Śaiva, although it is impossible to say much about their cultic affiliations as hardly any sculpture survives, and there are no pertinent inscriptions. Similarly, there are no records pointing to patronage. The main basis for understanding the relationship of these monuments to the broader traditions of South Asia can only be the architecture itself.

Some of the sites were discussed by Alexander Cunningham in the 1870s and 80s, and by Aurel Stein early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Meister 2010: 1–5). Both overemphasize Kashmiri connections, beguiled by the presence of a characteristic form of trefoil arch that, along with other features of medieval Kashmiri temples, springs from ancient Gandhāran traditions. Percy Brown followed this lead in his broad architectural survey of the South Asian subcontinent, while noting that several of the temples have north Indian (Nāgara) *śikhāras* (spires) (Brown 1942: 161). *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture* devoted one brief chapter to the topic, by Krishna Deva (Deva 1998), recognizing the temples as belonging to 'a Nāgara sub-style.' Since that publication, excavations have been carried out by Pakistani archaeologists, notably Abdur Rehman. Michael Meister collaborated with Rehman and published a series of art historical articles covering the full surviving corpus of what he labels 'Gandhāra Nāgara,' culminating in the first monograph on the temples (Meister 2010), which provides the starting point for further study of the architecture of the Salt Range temples.

While the temples are immediately recognizable as Nāgara, clearly through links with the heartlands of post-Gupta temple-building traditions—that is, with what may be called the 'Nāgara mainstream'—various local features make the style distinctive. One is the predominant building material itself and the way it is used. Coarse *kanjar* stone is cut into standardized blocks, with uniform course heights, bonded with mortar. These were originally covered with plaster, of which traces remain, and no doubt beautifully painted. The construction method contrasts with the dry masonry and varied block size typical of stone temples in India, and resembles the character of brick temples, where ornamental detail is adapted to the modularity and coursing of brickwork. A yet more striking peculiarity is the use of *vousoir* or 'true arch' construction for domes over cellas and porches, set on squinches. This technique, contrasting with the usual Indian corbelling, has

conventionally been thought of as post-Islamic. Some of the earlier monuments have battered walls (Fig. 3).

Such characteristics indicate that regional traditions of monumental architecture were well established before the importation of Nāgara practices, and some features certainly look back to Gandhāran architecture of the Kuṣāṇa period and earlier. Several of the monuments are raised on a platform reminiscent of a Gandhāran *stūpa* base, articulated with pilasters and adorned by niches representing different shrine forms (Fig. 1). Other Gandhāran elements are the already-mentioned multi-foil (mainly trefoil) arch motif deriving from the Gandhāran version of the ‘*caitya* hall’ type of structure, openings and niches in post-and-lintel frames with sloping sides, and Corinthianesque pilasters (now very stylized, and progressively supplanted by the post-Gupta vase-and-foamate type). The base mouldings of these temples are only partly cognate with Nāgara ones, again with echoes of ancient Gandhāran precedents. These various features, together with ornamental details such as large rosettes and zigzag decoration on *vedika* (altar/railing) mouldings, are enduring aspects of the style, regardless of formal developments. Some of the later temples, very unusually, have an upper chamber, with ambulatory, at the base of the tower, reached by a narrow staircase within the thickness of the antechamber walls.

This architecture is not an entirely isolated phenomenon within the Śāhi realms. Some 300 km to the northeast, in Swat (ancient Uḍḍiyāna), at Barikot, Zalamkot, and Gumbat, sparse architectural fragments from temple ruins show a comparable mixture of post-Gandhāran and Nāgara elements. The fine sculptural fragments found in the Śāhi heartlands around Kabul point to the existence of important Śaiva temples from around the 7<sup>th</sup> century in that region, though nothing is known of their architecture. All this brings home to us how the bigger picture is far from complete.

The basic chronology of the Salt Range temples, as outlined by Meister, seems clear both from their own logic of formal development, and by comparison with the broader Nāgara tradition, which follows the same kind of evolution. Essentially, this consists of development from a tower design made up of multiple miniature pavilions (Figs. 2 left and 3) to a ‘Latina’ form where the pavilions are fused into a unitary, curved spire (*śikhara*) (Figs. 4 and 5). This typically gives way to new composite forms, presaged in just one example from the Salt Range, at Nandana. This process is accompanied by an increasing number of steps in the plan, culminating here in a *pañcaratha* plan—one with five projections and intervening recesses (Fig. 5). Alongside these developments, the horseshoe arch dormer motifs (*gavākṣa*, *candraśālā*) progress from discrete shapes standing out from a flat surface (Fig. 2) to overlapping fragments woven into a linear network (*jāla*) (Fig. 5).

The Nāgara temples of the Salt Range are entirely distinct from the Kashmiri temple form, even if they share certain Gandhāra-derived details (trefoil arch motif, Greco-Roman-derived pilasters). However, at least among later (c. 10<sup>th</sup> century) temples, their architects show familiarity with the Kashmiri type and treat it as an alternative and contrasting form of temple. In this way, the relationship between the ‘Gandhāra Nāgara’ and the Kashmiri forms is analogous to the one between Nāgara and Drāviḍa in the medieval Deccan, with mutual awareness and elements of conscious hybridity. In the case of the Salt Range, this interchange is chiefly confined to the perennial idea of displaying an image of one form of shrine at the center of a different form. Thus, the (largely ruined) Temple C at Mari Indus is a Nāgara shrine with projecting Kashmiri one. The

red sandstone temple at Malot is close to a cluster of ‘Gandhāra Nāgara’ sites, but its details reveal it to be by a different school or workshop. Though the superstructure is lost, the temple form was clearly Kashmiri, while the projecting central niches are (not fully mastered) renderings of composite Nāgara shrines (Fig. 6).

It is clear from the architecture that the adoption of Nāgara temple architecture in the region was through its assimilation by the local school rather than wholesale migration of artisans to this region from the Nāgara heartlands. A key question for understanding the architecture of the Salt Range temples, and at the same time for dating them, is the nature of contact with those heartlands, and whether this was momentary, sporadic, or continuous. Meister implies some kind of distant yet sustained contact, as he takes developments in the Salt Range temple designs as evidence for dates close to those moments in the Indian plains when comparable transformations took place. On this basis, his proposed chronology is very long, spanning right from the late 6<sup>th</sup>/early 7<sup>th</sup> century (for temples that Krishna Deva had ascribed to the 10<sup>th</sup> century) to the early 11<sup>th</sup>. He goes as far as calling the early Salt Range temples a ‘missing link’ for understanding ‘Nāgara formation.’

These assertions need to be questioned. Close study of their detail shows that the earlier temples are not as early as they appear. In particular, the shapes of *gavākṣa* motifs and the patterns in which they are arranged suggest that the initial moment of contact with the Nāgara tradition would have been in the 8<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest. Thereafter, the strong local character persists, without any point at which the style becomes markedly more ‘authentically’ mainstream Nāgara. The latest of the Salt Range temples appear even further from the mainstream standard. While contacts, clearly not intense, are likely to have been sustained throughout the life of the ‘Gandhāra Nāgara’ tradition, its stages of development seem not to have depended on outside influences. The early influx of Nāgara forms and principles would have furnished a sequence of latent possibilities. These seem to have been realized within a century or two rather than four or more. I aim to illustrate this argument in a longer article. Further probing of these architectural issues might possibly throw light on their shadowy context in this corner of the Śāhi realms, and its cultural and political connections with the world beyond.

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## FIGURES



Map 1. The Salt Range temple sites within the greater Śāhi territory.



Figure 1. Bilot, Temples B (right), C (left), and D (centre), with Temples F and G in the distance (right), from south-east. (Photo courtesy of Adam Hardy, with thanks to Zeeshan Ghani and Samra Khan)



Figure 2. Bilot, Temple D from south, with Temples E (right) and G (beyond). (Photo courtesy of Adam Hardy, with thanks to Zeeshan Ghani and Samra Khan)



Figure 3. Kafirkot, Temple A, south. (Photo courtesy of Adam Hardy, with thanks to Zeeshan Ghani and Samra Khan)

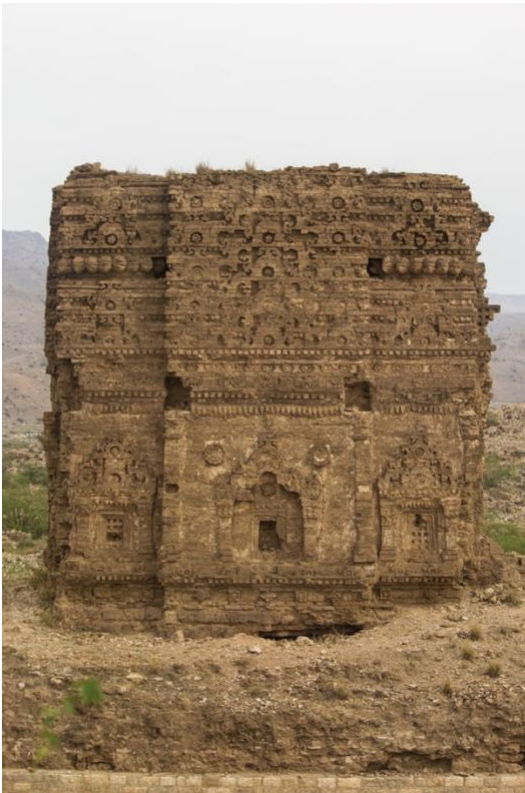


Figure 4. Bilot, Temple A, south. (Photo courtesy of Adam Hardy, with thanks to Zeeshan Ghani and Samra Khan)



Figure 5. Bilot, Temple C, south. (Photo courtesy of Adam Hardy, with thanks to Zeeshan Ghani and Samra Khan)



Figure 6. The temple at Malot. (Photo courtesy of Adam Hardy, with thanks to Zeeshan Ghani and Samra Khan)