

# SOURCEBOOK FOR THE SHAHI KINGDOMS\*

## **Kharwar (Kafir Kot), Afghanistan: Buddhist Clay-based Sculpture from the Early Period of the Śāhi Kingdoms**

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In the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, the major commercial and pilgrimage thoroughfare between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent was rerouted from the eastern Hindukush to the western Hindukush, resulting in a tremendous transformation of the Buddhist landscape of the historical northwest (see Kuwayama 2002, 2006; Inaba 2015). Gandhāra pivoted into decline, while the western Buddhist centers at Kapisa-Kabul and Bāmiyān flourished under expanding Turkic authority and increased trade benefits during the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries (that is, the early Śāhi period which spanned the c. 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE).<sup>1</sup> These factors contributed to the emergence of a ‘new order’ of wealthy Buddhist sites across eastern Afghanistan (Verardi 2004: 43), notably in relation to the nexus of southern regional routes connecting Kapisa-Kabul to Gardez and Ghazni in Logar province.<sup>2</sup> Among this new order was the vast Buddhist town of Kharwar (Kafir Kot),<sup>3</sup> located at the south of Logar about 40 km northeast of Ghazni near the village of Charkh. Kharwar’s location gave it control of trade along the southern routes.

In 2004, Giovanni Verardi (2004: 5) identified Kharwar as ‘the most spectacular Buddhist town ever discovered in Afghanistan, with the exception of Bamiyan and Hadda;’ subsequent archaeological discoveries allow us to add to this list Mes Aynak,<sup>4</sup> the only other major Buddhist settlement in Logar.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, decades of deadly conflict and the ongoing activity of insurgent groups in Logar pose security risks that have prevented thorough documentation and excavation at Kharwar, leaving it subject to deterioration, destruction, and looting. The Italian and Japanese teams that attempted excavation missions in the early 2000s were hindered by such security issues. Today Kharwar is virtually unknown, shrouded by Taliban control of the roads through Logar and the international focus on Mes Aynak following salvage archaeology initiated in 2009 to rescue the site’s artifacts from the imminent threat of mining its rich copper deposits.

Our present knowledge of Kharwar is limited to a small group of looted objects recovered to the National Museum of Afghanistan,<sup>6</sup> and the structural remains and *in situ* sculptural program identified during the one-day survey conducted by an Italian team in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Verardi (2012) attributes the decline of Buddhism in Gandhāra to economic and policy changes in the region associated with the expansion of Brahmanism. Around this time, the beginnings of Brahmanical temple construction are also seen in the Salt Range and Swat (see Verardi 2012; Olivieri 2021).

\*Online publication of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project ‘Cultural Formation and Transformation: Shahi Art and Architecture from Afghanistan to the West Tibetan Frontier at the Dawn of the Islamic Era’ (P-31246) directed by Univ.-Prof. Dr. Deborah Klimburg-Salter in collaboration with National Research Partner HR Doz. Dr. Michael Alam.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the expansion of these southern routes, see Klimburg-Salter 2010.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to the site as Kharwar to differentiate it from the better-known site of Kafir Kot (‘Mound of Infidels’) in the Salt Range of present-day Pakistan.

<sup>4</sup> Mes Aynak is located at the north of Logar province, about 40 km southeast of Kabul. Klimburg-Salter (2018; also 2019) provides the most thorough, recent review of archaeological work at the site.

<sup>5</sup> Other prominent sites may exist in Logar, but they will likely remain unknown until there is greater political stability in Afghanistan that permits safe archaeological explorations and excavations.

<sup>6</sup> The sculpture fragments in the National Museum were photographed by Klimburg-Salter in 2004; this documentation is available in the Western Himalaya Archive Vienna ([WHAV](http://www.whav.org)).

<sup>7</sup> The survey was financed by the National Geographic Society.

This material was presented in a short archaeological survey report by Verardi (2004) and later published within a wider discussion of Afghan archaeology (Verardi 2007).<sup>8</sup> Verardi's 2004 report reveals the relevance of this material to the corpus of Buddhist clay-based sculpture attributable to the early period of the Śāhi kingdoms.

### **Kharwar: The Site**

The site comprises several mounds located along the right bank of the Charkh river at an elevation of 2,500 meters on the Kharwar plateau.<sup>9</sup> The area spans about 30 square kilometers, according to Ball (2019: 212), although the size might be refined following further survey work. The Italian mission identified four divisions of the site: (1) a 15-hectare ancient town atop a terrace in the southeast;<sup>10</sup> (2) an unexplored mound to the south across a river bed (Mound 12); (3) a round-bastioned fortress of unbaked bricks at the north of the town, and several monastic buildings and stupas to the west (Mound 11) clustered around a water spring with the whole area demarcated by stone stupas at roughly the four cardinal directions; and (4) several mounds northeast of the town.

Kharwar's impressive size, high elevation, and centrally located spring led Verardi (2004: 42; 2007: 248) to hypothesize that it is 'Hosala' (he writes 'Hesaluo'), one of the two large<sup>11</sup> capitals of the kingdom of Zābulistān ('Caojuzha') as identified by Xuanzang in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> But Kharwar's geographic situation is not precisely consistent with Xuanzang's textual description of Caojuzha, and, in fact, Kharwar might be located slightly outside the boundaries of this kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

Architectural features at Kharwar may offer clues for the site's chronology. Verardi (2004: 16) suggests a date of the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century onwards for the fortress at the north of the settlement based on comparison to known round-bastioned forts in Shotorak, Tepe Maranjan, and Guldara as well as in Gandhāra. Another architectural feature attributable to this period are square-chambered chapels with domed ceilings on squinches as found in the monastic compound of Mound 11.<sup>14</sup> Verardi (ibid.: 23) proposes that the dome on squinches, which is considered a Sasanian architectural feature and is known from several sites in the Hindukush as well as from Tapa Sardār and Guldara, was likely introduced to eastern Afghanistan no earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. It is not possible to suggest a detailed chronology for the site until a full survey can be safely conducted.

### **Sculptural Production**

Much of the original Buddhist clay-based sculpture and mural paintings from Kharwar has been destroyed or lost to the antiquities market because of illegal excavations and looting; however, some recovered clay heads and donor figures are now held in the National Museum

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<sup>8</sup> The 2007 publication does not include the documentation of the clay sculptures in the National Museum.

<sup>9</sup> The coordinates given by Verardi (2004: 2) are 33°40' 06 N, 68°57'58' E; Ball (2019: 212) gives 33°40' 20.52945840 N, 68°55' 25.42495800 E (revised from previous editions) and identifies the site's location in Ghazni province, northeast of the town of Ghazni on the way to Charkh-i Logar in the upper Logar valley. See rough site plan in Verardi 2007: 241.

<sup>10</sup> The town yielded numerous surface finds including potsherds (common red ware stamped with floral and other motifs), a lapis lazuli lion-shaped bead, and a Kuṣāṇa coin (Verardi 2004: 15).

<sup>11</sup> Both capitals are identified by Xuanzang as about 30 *li* in diameter (Beal 1884, vol. 2: 283); Verardi (2004: 42) equates 1 *li* to about 700 meters.

<sup>12</sup> The other being Ghazni ('Hosina').

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Minoru Inaba for sharing this insight. For more on Zābulistān/Caojuzha, see Inaba 2015.

<sup>14</sup> This superstructure only remains on Chapel 11D, but Verardi (2004: 22) suggests that it was originally a component of all the chapels at the site.

of Afghanistan in Kabul.<sup>15</sup> Despite the damage from such illicit activities, the complex at Mound 11 contains important *in situ* artifacts in the chapels surrounding the stupa court (Verardi 2004: 18-22).<sup>16</sup> In chapel 11E, there are remnants of the lower portion of two red-painted clay standing<sup>17</sup> Buddha or Bodhisattva figures and a fragment of a donor figure with wooden wall support. Chapel 11F contains remnants of several figures, possibly donors. Chapel 11D bears indications—notably traces of a painted flaming halo—that a clay standing Buddha figure was once affixed to a wall by a wooden armature.



*Left:* Head of a male figure wearing a turban, possibly a donor. Unfired clay with traces of red paint. H. 20 cm. National Museum of Afghanistan, 35.41.04.6.

*Right:* Head and torso of a female donor figure. Unfired clay, painted. H. 46 cm. National Museum of Afghanistan, 35.41.04.3.

(Photos © Klimburg-Salter, 2004, WHAV)

Verardi (2004: 27) attributes the clay sculptures to the 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, a period he calls the Hellenistic influenced ‘late-Gandharan production’ of the 4<sup>th</sup> to mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. He bases this conclusion on stylistic comparison to the sculptural production of Tepe Shotor (Haḍḍa), Tepe Maranjan, and Tapa Sardār (early period, *c.* 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>).<sup>19</sup> He emphasizes that the Tang-influenced late Buddhist sculpture found at Fondukistān (early 8<sup>th</sup> century) and Tapa Sardār (late period, *c.* 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century) is not found at Kharwar, an indication that the site ‘was

<sup>15</sup> Verardi (2004: 28-41) describes several of the more noteworthy objects. For higher resolution images, see visual documentation in the Western Himalaya Archive Vienna ([WHAV](http://www.whav.org)). Planned study of the objects via video conference call with the National Museum curators in 2021 had to be postponed.

<sup>16</sup> The central stupa is 20 meters in diameter and constructed of schist (Verardi 2004: 19; 2007: 244).

<sup>17</sup> Verardi (2004: 20) suggests ‘the figures were represented as if walking.’

<sup>18</sup> For discussion of the chronology of Tapa Sardār, see Taddei 1999; Verardi and Paparatti 2005; Klimburg-Salter 2010; Verardi 2010. While Taddei’s periodization goes from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, Verardi favors earlier dates beginning in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century with the final abandonment of the site in 795 CE when Ibrāhīm ibn Jibrīl reached Kabul and may also have attacked Zābul (Verardi and Paparatti 2005: 442; Verardi 2010: 346).

<sup>19</sup> The clay sculptures were produced with a similar technique to that of other Buddhist clay sculpture in the Śāhi kingdoms. Verardi (2004: 26) explains that ‘the clay images were shaped around a frame made of wood and straw, and the clay was also mixed with minute fragments of straw. The decorative details and some anatomic parts (hand fingers, hair locks, necklace beads, bracelets, etc.) were separately made with moulds and applied to the image when it was still wet. The upper, thin coat of clay was painted or gilded. In some cases, the golden leaf was applied on the painted image, probably some time after it was first moulded.’

abandoned earlier than other Buddhist sites, as for instance Tapa Sardar which was deserted only at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century’ (Verardi 2004: 44). Other scholars (Taddei 1999; Klimburg-Salter 2010) date the abandonment of Tapa Sardār to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The most recent research suggests reduced but continued use into the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup>



Donor figure. Unfired clay, painted. H. 50 cm. National Museum of Afghanistan, 35.41.04.2.  
(Photos © Klimburg-Salter, 2004, WHAV)

The fact that this material represents the earliest chronological parameter of the Śāhi kingdoms suggests potential for comparative analysis with more recently discovered artifacts in Afghanistan (e.g., Mes Aynak) as well as with early sculptures attributed to the eastern periphery of the kingdoms (e.g., Ambaran in Jammu, India).<sup>21</sup> Further investigation is required to refine the chronological attributions and to understand the role of Kharwar’s prosperous patrons and artisans in the exchange of materials, technologies, and ideas along the transregional communication corridors traversing Logar (and beyond) at the cusp of the Śāhi period.

<sup>20</sup> Arturo Annucci presented numismatic evidence in his talk ‘Coins from Tapa Sardar and the Islamic Sites of Ghazni (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries)’ at the Fourth International Shahi Project Workshop in Vienna, October 4, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, the similarity of some of the appliqué floral elements in the Kharwar clay figures to those found in headdresses at Ambaran (Akhnur) merits consideration.

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