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# Archaeological Excavations at Khum Zargar in Kapisa Province, North Afghanistan

Behzad Sedaghati<sup>1</sup>  & Rohullah Ahamadzai<sup>2</sup> 

## Abstract

The site of Khum Zargar is located in the area of Hesa Awal Kohistan town in Kapisa province, north of Afghanistan, and south of the Hindu Kush Mountain range. It is closer to Jabul Saraj textile factory and Golbahar town, 60 km north of the Afghan capital Kabul. Archaeological excavations were carried out in several seasons in 1966, 2019, and 2020 by an independent team of Afghan archaeologists that resulted in the discovery of a Buddhist ritual complex with several stupas and adjacent rooms. In addition, human and animal statues and pottery objects were found in these rooms. Undoubtedly, the findings played an important role in ascertaining the history of Buddhist art and architecture during the Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian periods in the south of the Hindu Kush, and the present article discusses this site and its works.

**Keywords:** Kushan; Kidarites; Kushano-Sasanians; Buddhist Religion; Kapisa.

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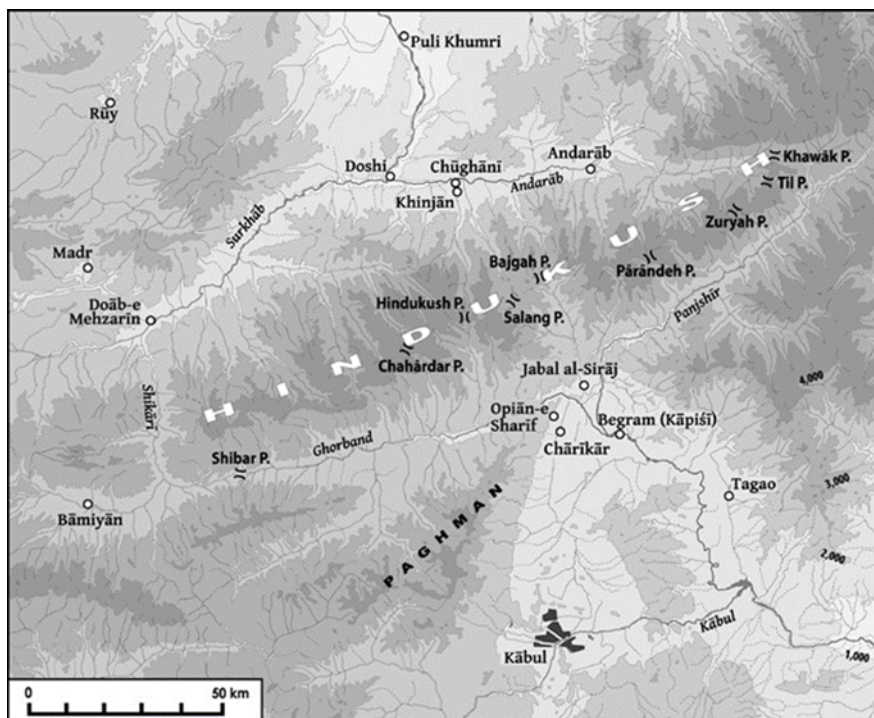
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## Introduction

The site of Khum Zargar is located in a plain called Dasht-e Sheikhan (Sheikhan Plain) and near a village of the same name in Hesa Awal Kohistan, of Kapisa province north of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan (Figs. 1-2). This site is located on the slope of a mountain called Koh-i Muri with a height of 20 to 25 meters above the surface of the surrounding land. It is also 19 kilometers from the provincial capital, Mahmude Raqi, and 9 kilometers from Golbahar town. The geographical location of this area on the map is 35.7 degrees north and 22.69 degrees east. It should be noted that there are several other stupas in Hesa Awal Kohistan, such as Ramu and Bahman, which have not been excavated so far. Further, it should also be mentioned that unfortunately, the ancient name of Khum Zargar stupa remained unknown to us until now (Zaker, 2007). The site of Khum Zargar was first identified during the survey of a French-Afghan team in Kapisa in 1932 (Noori, 2020). This site was introduced again in the survey by a Japanese team in Sheikhan Plain in 1965 and then it was excavated by an independent team of Afghan archaeologists headed by S. Mustamandi in 1966. During these excavations, it was found that the site includes two Buddhist religious complexes, Northern and Southern, and the northern part was excavated by the Mustamandi team (Fig. 1). The 1966 excavations included two trenches, resulting in the discovery of a stupa measuring 14 x 14 square meters and a courtyard and rooms with adjacent vestibules in some of these rooms, Buddhist statues and murals with ritual narratives as well as everyday life were

obtained. According to pottery remains, these rooms were probably used as residences and kitchens for the temple staff (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968). Unfortunately, the archeological research at the site of Khum Zargar could not continue in the following seasons. After the civil wars, the archeology team of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan surveyed this site and its surroundings in 2002 under the supervision of A. Zaker. After this investigation, the Afghan Academy of Sciences in 2016 surveyed this site in general under the supervision of R. Ahamadzai and N. Aghil (Ahamadzai & Aghil, 2017). After these surveys, as well as the illegal excavations and constructions, the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, decided to continue the excavations in Khum Zargar and follow up the previous studies. Based on this, the first season of the second period of excavations of Khum Zargar, focusing on the lower religious complex was conducted between July and November 2019 under the supervision of Noor Agha Noori. During this excavation, 77 movable objects including small clay figurines, pins, metal and bone objects, and parts of the walls of square and circular rooms made of stone and clay were unearthed, but its continuation was postponed to the next season. Therefore, from August to November 2020, the second season of excavations continued under the supervision of Noor Agha Noori. During these excavations, it was found that this religious complex included a series of interconnected rooms. A number of objects were found in those rooms, such as stone tablets, stone and clay statues, plain and engraved pottery, and scattered metal objects, which



Map 1. General View of Kabul Area and its Adjacent Areas (Inaba, 2017).

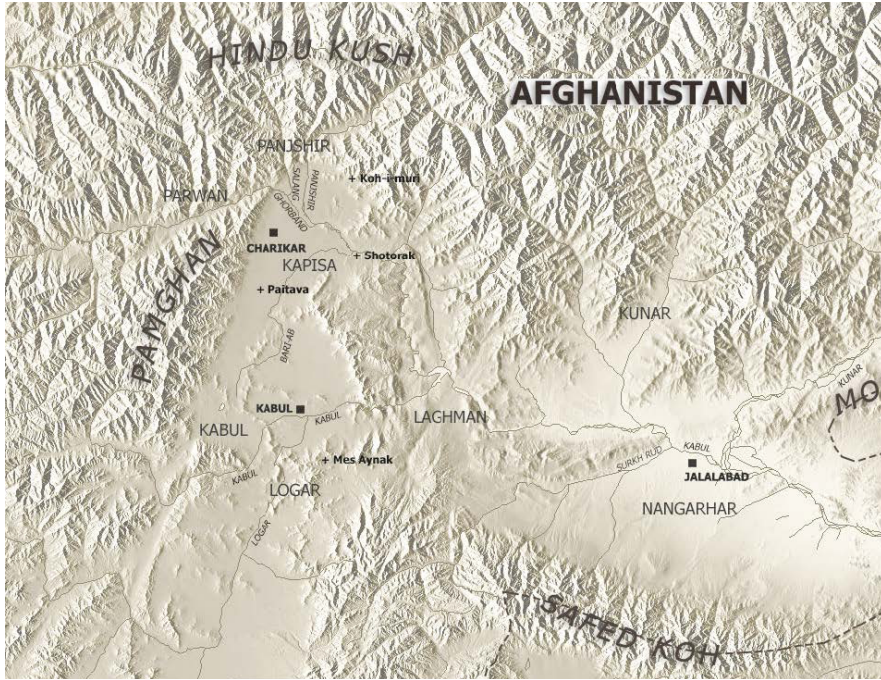
we will discuss in the rest of the article (Noori, 2020).

## Article Structure

### *Architecture*

As a result of the excavations of the Khum Zargar site, two architectural complexes have been identified so far, which undoubtedly attribute it to a Buddhist ritual site. According to Mostamindi's report, three architectural phases were identified in the northern shrine, according to which, this was probably founded in the middle of the Kushan period, and after some time, probably at the end or the beginning of the Kushan-Sasanian period, it was destroyed due to an earthquake. During the Kushano-Sasanians period (KushanShahs), it was restored and operated again, and at the end of

this period, it was destroyed by the attack of an invading tribe, and then it was used for a short time by people other than the original owners, and then abandoned, and consequently ruined. The main building of the northern stupa was made of schist stone, which was connected with metal fasteners. In the middle of this religious building, there is a stone platform with two lion statues found on both sides of it (Fig. 2). In the surrounding rooms, the walls are made of clay and stone, and evidence of murals with Buddhist ritual themes have been observed on some of the walls, which, according to Mustamandi, are very similar to the wall paintings of Tepe Sardar in Ghazni (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968). Also, as a result of the recent excavations in the southern temple, a set of



Map 2. Location of the Khum Zargar Site and some other Sites in the Region (Vanleene, 2019).

circular and right-angled rooms have been found, which according to archaeologists were relatively contemporaneous with the northern complex, with the difference that here we can distinguish two architectural phases, the first phase probably belongs to the Kushan period and the second phase probably belongs to the Kushano-Sasanian period (Fig. 3). At the end of this period, this complex suffered a severe fire as the evidence of burns on its walls was clearly visible during the excavation and the settlement did not continue there (in the Post-Palatial Occupation phase). In this section, two main rooms were found. In Trench 1, the main space, which is also known as Room 1, is square-shaped and has two entrance doors on the northwest and southwest sides, but its surroundings have not been excavated. On the walls of

this room, evidence of severe burns can be seen, and there is an air vent on its western wall, and the ceiling of this room has collapsed. On the floor of this room, a clay fire pit filled with ash and charcoal, a stone tablet and a stone pillar base along with some oxidized coins were found. In Trench 2, which is connected to Room 1, two more rooms were discovered. Room 1 is 3.60 meters long and 1.90 meters wide, and there is a stone platform in the north of this room, where two stone lions have been found almost intact on both sides. In the middle of these two statues, there was a stone tablet, and the floor was also covered with mud-bricks. The walls are made of schist and the southern wall has been destroyed. On the west side of this room, there is another room that is almost square and its dimensions are 3.80 meters from north to south and 3.70



Fig. 1. Part of The Corner of the Stupa (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1967).

meters from east to west (Figs. 4, 5). In the middle of this room, there is a stone platform, on top of which is a clay statue of Buddha in a sitting posture, and on the east side, a clay statue lying down to the right, with its head facing north (Fig. 6). The walls of this room extended and it was determined that it was 8.30 meters long and 2.40 meters wide, which was made of schist. The floor of this room was also covered with mud-bricks measuring 40 x 40 x 10 cm, and the platforms and stairs were made of stone. Two stone plaques were found on the south and west walls of this room, which were probably connected due to the holes on both sides of them. Unfortunately, part of the

eastern wall has been damaged due to illegal excavations. According to the number of existing debris and the architectural style used, the explorers proposed a hypothesis that the building probably had a second floor that was lost and the plaques belonged to the walls of the upper floor that were discovered among the debris of the lower floor.

### Stone and Clay Sculptures

As mentioned, in all seasons of excavation at the Khum Zargar site, many stone and clay sculptures have been uncovered. The first sculptures were the unfinished stone lions (at least 4 sculptures) which were determined from the surface

of the site in the survey of the Japanese team. Mustamandi has mentioned that the local people considered these statues to belong to Bibi Sabz tomb near this village. Also, by conducting excavations, it was found that these statues probably belonged to the place itself and were carved in the same place or around it. During the excavations in 1996, several other stone statues were found, the most important of which is two lions on both sides of a platform. According to Mustamandi, due to the sacred position of the lion in the Buddhist religion, these lions are very important. The mentioned lions have their tongues sticking out of their mouths and are in an angry state. Their eyes protruding from their sockets can indicate this case. In the excavations of the lower shrine, which were carried out in 2019 and 2019, many more statues were found, among which two almost intact lion statues can be mentioned on both sides of the platform of the northern wall of Room 1, Trench 2. Here too, statues were almost similar to the previous examples with lions in a roaring posture, with eyes protruding from the lion's face. The sockets, protruding ears, protruding tongue, two upper fangs, and a continuous tail, and the back part of these figures were the reason behind the bed being less decorated (Figs. 11, 12). A part of the back part of one of the lions (the left lion) was separated from the body, which was found as a piece of debris. The artistic methods of these sculptures, it was first known with the publication of the preliminary report of the excavation by Mustamandi. Since his article was noticed by other archaeologists. F. Malekzadeh, an Iranian archaeologist,

pointed to sculptures such as the lion's head in Persepolis and a golden Rhyton of a lion from Hamadan (Fig. 9). He also mentioned the importance of the lion statue in Achaemenid art and considering the effects of Achaemenid art on the Maurya Empire of India, including the example of the lion statue in Sarnath (Fig. 10), He concluded that Khum Zargar sculptures were also influenced by Achaemenid art (Malekzadeh, 1969). Later, Nazar Mohammad Azizi criticized the hypothesis. Malekzadeh considered the lions to be influenced by Greco-Buddhist art and considered them to be comparable with the lions found in Hadda (Azizi, 1969). According to the present authors, the opinion of both archaeologists can be correct. As for Azizi's opinion, the lion statues can be studied in the context of Kushan art and can be compared with the finds of Hadda and Shotorak Tepe in Begram (Fig. 11). Considering the relative contemporaneity and common artistic style of the region, this hypothesis can be accepted, but Kushan art was influenced by its predecessors, the Achaemenids and Maurya Empire of India, as much as it was influenced by Greco-Bactrian art. Another important point in this regard is the comparison of these lions with the findings of recent years, such as the bronze statue of an angry lion in the Boste site of the Fareghan region in Hajjabad town in Hormozgan province of Iran (Fig. 12) (Rahbar & Khalili, 2021). Based on comparison with similar examples in Achaemenid art, such as the Golden Rhyton in the shape of a lion of the National Museum of Iran and the lion statue on the capitals of Persepolis, it is considered to belong to the Achaemenid peri-



Fig. 2. The Statue of One of The Lions of The Northern Shrine (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968).

Fig. 3. A General View of a Part of the Southern Shrine at the Time of Excavation (Noori, 2020).



od. Also, this statue is very similar to the lions recently found in Khum Zargar. In addition, it should be mentioned the lion statues from the Kushan period in the Termez area (Fig. 13) and the lion statue in Mathura (Fig. 14), are other examples of lion sculpture in this period and have similarities with the examples of Khum Zargar. Also, on top of this platform and in the mentioned room, there were sev-

eral clay and stone statues, mostly only parts of them remaining. One of the most important of these statues is a stone statue of a Bodhisattva, whose head is missing, but the parts of his body that remain show that he was sitting on a throne, his chest and stomach were bare, and he had a necklace, which in its center, there is a neck pendant, some of the end shapes of which end in animal heads. This figure





Fig. 4. Aerial Photo of the Excavations of the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 5. The Map of the Excavations of The Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).

also has many ornaments and a shawl on it, which Mostamandi considers to be more influenced by Indian art, (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968). According to the authors, this figure can also be compared with those from Hadda (Fig. 15). Among other statues in this room, there was a clay Buddha statue that came out of fire and was 1.10 meters high (Fig. 16). Mustamandi considered the flames

in this statue to be a native or Iranian element that was seen in Kushan and Sasanian coins, (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968). Among the other statues of this lower collection, we can refer to the parts of the Buddha statue, where parts of the head such as the left eye and left ear remain, and other parts have been found scattered (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 6. Left: The Fallen Statue in The Southern Shrine, Right: Part of the Head of the Same Statue (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 7. A View of the Platform in Trench 2 of the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 8. One of the Lions on Both Sides of the Platform of The Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 9. A Golden Rhyton in the Shape of a Lion Preserved in the National Museum of Iran (Rahbar & Khalili, 2021; Yaghmaei, 2023).

### Pottery

Mustamandi did not mention much

about the pottery in his report and only considered the site as belonging to the



Fig. 10. Lion Statues on a Pillar in Sarnath, India (Abdullaev, 2013: Fig. 14).

Kushan period (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968). However, in recent excavations, a lot of pottery has been found, based on this, they can be divided into two groups, wheel-made and hand-made, with most of the pottery belonging to the wheel-made group. Also, the pottery of this site is divided into two categories, plain and patterned, due to their decorations, and the majority of the pottery is simple red and brown. In the case of patterned pottery, most have plant decorations. It should also be noted that most of the pottery was found broken and crushed, but several complete vessels were also found from this section (Fig. 18), (Noori, 2020). Accord-

ing to the authors, the pottery obtained from the Khum Zargar site can be similar in terms of form, color, and construction to some samples found at the Mes Aynak site (Fig. 19). Also, the tallow burner that was found at this site can be considered comparable to the examples of the Mes Aynak site (Fig. 20).

### Burial

Only one burial has been found on this site. This burial was in the corridor of Room 1, Trench 2, and is a jar burial type. This jar is handmade and oval in shape and has a height of 74 cm. It is made by connecting several pieces of pottery and has a handmade cover that is made with



Fig. 11. The Lion Statue Found in Hadda (Mustamandi, 1971).



Fig. 12. The Bronze Statue of an Angry Lion in Fareghan Region in Hajiabad Town in Hormozgan Province of Iran (Rahbar & Khalili, 2021).

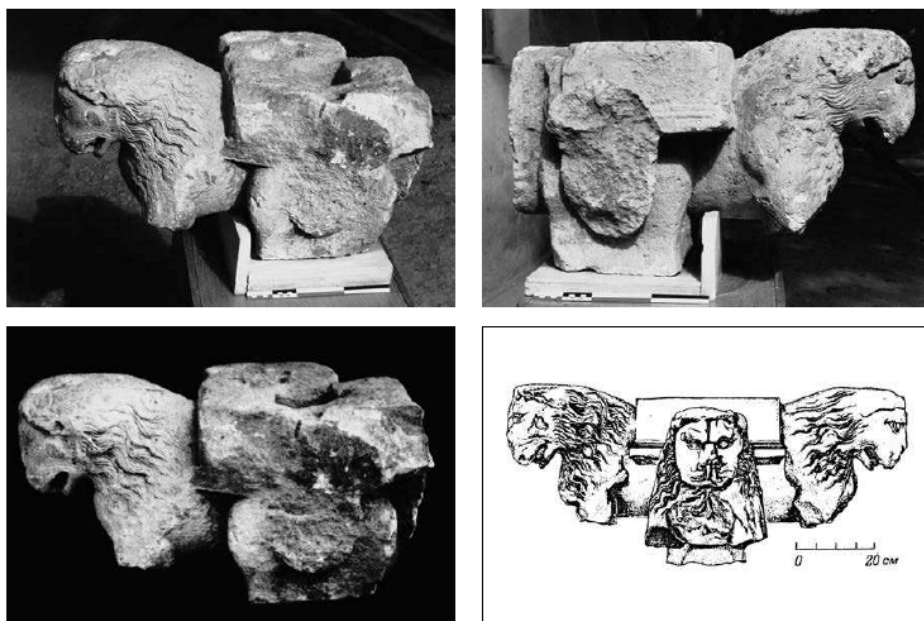


Fig. 13. Lion Stone Statue of Termez in Uzbekistan from the Kushan Period (Abdullaev, 2013: Fig. 15).

great skill (Fig. 21), (Noori, 2020). Inside this jar, a human skeleton was found in an irregular shape along with the soil. Unfortunately, due to the impossibility of conducting physical anthropology studies in Afghanistan, the age and gender of this person have not been determined yet.

### Coins

From the excavations of 1966, 17 coins were found, 16 of which belonged to the Kushano-Sasanian period and one belonged to the Kushan period. Also, during this excavation phase, a thin gold medal was found, bearing an image of a person on it along with an inscription in Kharosthi script (Fig. 22), (Mustamandi, 1968). In addition, in the excavations of 2020, 4 copper coins were found, which belonged to the Kushan period, one of which was related to the reign of Huvish-

ka as the image of Huvishka riding an elephant is engraved on it. Another coin was found with the image of Kushan king Vasudeva I, and on the back of it, Shiva, one of the Hindu gods, is shown next to the sacred Hindu cow, Nandi (Fig. 23). The other two coins were probably also belonged to the Kushan period, but due to oxidation, it is necessary to restore them further (Noori, 2020).

### Decorative Plaques

According to Mustamandi's report, in his excavations of the northern shrine, a stone plaque was installed between two lion statues in the middle of a platform, in which the larger Buddha image was displayed in the center along with six other people and two children (Fig. 24), (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968). In addition, in the recent excavations, several stone tablets of schist were found,



Fig. 14. Stone Statue of a Lion from Mathura, India (Rosenfield, 1967: Fig. 10).

among them, it is possible to mention the plaque attached to the platform of the northern wall of Room 1, Trench 2, which was located in the middle of the statue of two lions and in the front of the throne. This plaque was connected to the platform on both sides with nails whose holes are visible in the plaque. The mentioned plaque is 95.6 cm long and 25.8 cm wide. On this plaque, the pictures of 14 people have been identified, in the center there is a person who is probably one of the local elite or a religious person, and on both sides of him are four people who are probably his bodyguards or relatives. On the other two sides, other people are standing and they are probably making a deal or an agreement or paying tribute. This

narrative scene was probably placed in the temple as a document of an important historical/religious event (Fig. 25). Also, two other plaques were found on the western and southern walls of this room, which were probably connected to the walls. The plaque belonging to the southern wall, which might belong to the upper floor, was 58 cm long, 30.5 cm wide, and 17 cm thick. On this plaque, the image of three people is engraved, in the center of which there is a Bodhisattva, and on both sides of him are two monks, the one on the right is holding a sheaf of wheat and the one on the left is donating an object to Bodhisattva (Fig. 26). Another plaque was attached to the western wall and it was 75 cm long, 36 cm wide and 24 cm thick,



Fig. 15. left: Statue of Hadda in the Afghan Team's Excavations; Right: Statue of Hadda in the Guimet Museum, (Tarzi, 2018: 39).

and of course, there is a possibility that this object also belonged to the upper floor that was destroyed. On this plaque, the pictures of 19 people are engraved, which include narrative topics from the Buddhist religion. In the first part of this plaque, the image of Buddha is depicted under a tree in a state of meditation and in a very thin state, while his bones are visible. In the second part, the image of Buddha is depicted in a state in which he is holding the tree due to his inability and someone is offering him an object. In the third part, the image of Buddha is shown while he has come to his enlightenment and has taken the object from the person. Some of Buddha's enemies who tried to persecute him are also depicted (Fig. 27) (Noori, 2020).

### Other Findings

In addition to the aforementioned items, many other objects have been found scattered from the Khum Zargar site, which is very important to mention. Among these are the objects that were found in the 1966 excavations in the surrounding rooms of the northern temple, such as copper dishes that were probably used for cooking and women's cosmetics. Valuable finds have also been found in the lower shrine, among which are scattered objects such as metal nails, metal fasteners, stone pieces of building decorations, carved stone pieces, stone vessels, stone slabs, etc. Also, part of a stone pillar base (Noori, 2020) which according to the authors is comparable to the example found in Balkh (Fig. 28).





Fig. 16. Buddha with Flames from the Northern Shrine of Khum Zargar (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968)

### Conclusion

According to architectural styles and decorations, as well as stone and clay

sculptures, as well as valuable plaques at Khum Zargar, this site can be considered one of the important places



Fig. 17. Kanishka Gold Coin (Fazeli & Babadi Akashe, 2022).

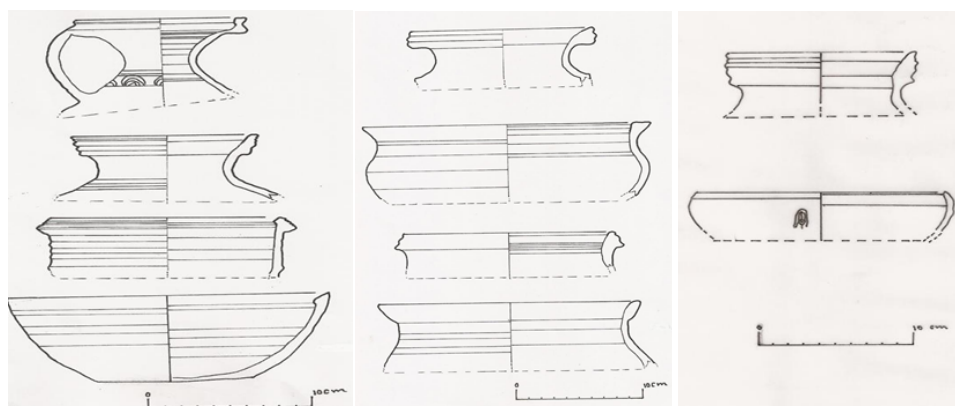


Fig. 18. A Selection of Pottery Found from the Tepe Gol Hamid in the Mes Aynak (Faizi, 2011: 178).

of worship of Buddhism in the south of the Hindu Kush Mountains. The extent of the surrounding sites of the Khum Zargar shrine and the presence of several other important unexplored Buddhist shrines near this village indicate that there was a city of at least six square kilometers in this area during the Kushan era. Therefore, in the case of extensive excavations, we may see a similar example to the city of Bagram or Mes Aynak, or Hadda. Nevertheless, this requires the continuation of archaeological research in this area. Regarding the founding date of the shrine, due to the lack of laboratory studies, it is not

possible to give a definite opinion, but according to the coins found, as well as the way the sculptures and architecture were executed, these buildings can be considered to belong to the middle or late Kushan period. Based on this, the foundation date of both shrines, which seem to have been built at the same time or at a short distance, can be dated to the second half of the second century AD or less possibly to the first half of the third century AD. According to the destruction and reconstruction of this building, which Mustamandi considers to be the cause of an earthquake, the beginning of the second phase of

both shrines can be dated to the second half of the third century AD, this phase probably lasted at least fifty years to a century and at the end of this period, both shrines suffered a severe fire and the lower shrine was abandoned forever. These events can probably be seen as the result of Kidarites wars and attacks, as well as Shapur II's invasion to the east around 360 AD. Considering that Sasanian coins, especially from the period of Shapur II, which were active in his mint

in the east, have not been found on this site like Tepe Maranjan in Kabul, it is possible to raise the possibility that the shrine of Khum Zargar was attacked by the invading tribe. It was probably the Kidarites that burned down and they or the local people settled in the northern shrine for a short time, then with the arrival of Shapur II's army to this area, this shrine and perhaps the city were abandoned forever.



Fig. 19. Left: Clay Tallow Burner from Khum Zargar (Noori, 2020), Right: Clay Tallow Burner from Mes Aynak (Faizi, 2011: 186).



Fig. 20. Left: South Shrine Burial, Middle: The Burial Jar after Repair, Right: The Handmade Clay Lid (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 21. Gold Medal Found in the Northern Shrine of Khum Zargar (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968).



Fig. 22. Kushan Coins Found from the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 23. The Plaque Installed on The Platform of the Northern Shrine (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968).

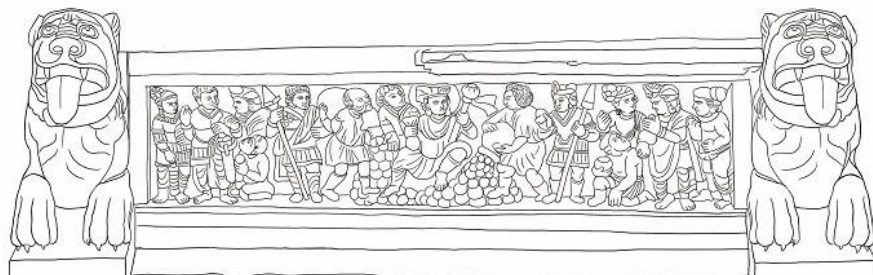


Fig. 24. The Plaque Installed on the Platform of the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 25. A Plaque Found in the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 26. A Plaque Found in the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 27. Left: A Statue Standing on a Lotus (Mustamandi & Mustamandi, 1968). Right: Part of Lion Statue on the Left Side of the Platform of the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 28. Sculptures and Scattered Fragments of Decorations from the Southern Shrine (Noori, 2020).



Fig. 29. Left: Part of A Column Base from the Southern Shrine of Khum Zargar (Noori, 2020). Right: Column Base from Sakhi Camp, Balkh Plain (Faizi, 2015: 183).

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