

Reused Hindu-Buddhist Panels in a Muslim Graveyard at Ziarat, Talash Valley, Lower Dir

FAWAD KHAN

Abstract

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province is fortunately very rich in archaeological remains and very often one can hear about the chance discovery of underground structures, sculptures, coins, pottery, and figurines etc. at various areas. However, this abundance of cultural assets is slowly and gradually disappearing due to various reasons of which the clandestine diggings and illegal occupation of ancient sites are the most noteworthy. In every exploration report of the archaeologist we see that certain Hindu and Buddhist period abandoned sites are presently occupied by the construction of mosques, houses, or the community graveyard. In this connection the Muslim graveyard of the Ziarat village is one of the best examples. The present paper thus treats with the preliminary survey report of the documentation of some graves in the said graveyard which has been decorated with the extracted stones from a Buddhists stupa and Hindu temple, and still possesses the original carvings of decorative and architectural representations.

Location

The village of Ziarat is situated at the feet of Talash valley in the Lower Dir district around 15km north of Chakdara. This lush green valley remained a suitable place and a halting spot for invaders, missionaries, saints, visitors and traders from the time immemorial. Better to use a specific time period (e.g. Since Lower Palaeolithic) Although no written record is available to help us in reconstructing ancient history of the region, except archaeological remains and antiquities collected partly from scientific excavation or discovered by chance. However, from some literary sources, particularly the accounts of the Greek historians of Alexander the Great and Chinese Buddhist pilgrims throw valuable light on the past glory of the region. According to the Greek historians, the area of Dir came under the sway of Alexander the Great in 327 B.C., after he confronted the Assakenians, a war like people inhabiting the present Ziarat area in the Talash valley (Dani 1992: 93). On the other hand, the accounts of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Fa-

Hien (5th century A.D) and Hiuan-Tsang (7th century A.D), tells us about some of the sacred Buddhist establishments of Dir district.

The Archaeological Significance of Talash Valley

Though Talash Valley is very rich in ancient relics and archaeological remains, yet no attempt was made in the past by the locals to preserve and document them, rather this task was left for some foreign art historians and antiquarians of the nineteenth century.

In this regard, the first written record dealing the antiquities and standing monuments of the area was published by General M.A. Court, one of the military officers of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. According to him the ruins of Talash are situated between the confluence of the River Panjkora and Swat. In the midst of these massy and immense ruins exists of an enormous Cupola, of which more elaborate architecture than other monuments of that description, because it is said to support

around its base a number of bass relieves (Court 1840: 307).

The next reference was made in 1845, when Mr. R. Leech, the then political agent of Qandahar, sent his agent to Dir, Swat and Bajuar territories for knowing the political situation prevailed in those independent tribal areas. His informer recorded that Talash was inhabited by the Yousafzai tribe, and that there were the remains of buildings like towers and some stones are bearing the Greek (?) characters (Leech 1845: 815). Another extensive account about Talash has been written by Mr. Raverty, who states that Talash was very rich in mountains of antiquity, consisting of domes or cupolas, on the face of which there were tablets, half a yard long, and inscribed in an unknown character, said to be *Yunani* or Greek, but probably Pali. If Greek, the examination of these ancient monuments would, no doubt, throw an extensive, and clearer, light on the proceeding of the Greek in these quarters, which are so mixed up with nonsensical fables, as to furnish ready tools in the hands of those ignorant of the antecedents of the Afghan nation, for working out their own theories (Raverty 1865: 151).

Raverty was followed by H.A. Dean, the first Political Agent for Dir, Swat and Chitral in 1898. He personally visited different parts of lower Dir and recorded the Buddhist and Hindu period monuments. In one of his travels to Talash Valley, he informs us that a former Khan of Dir almost ruined an old Deva temple at Gumbat, in the Talash valley, the stone being carried off to Dir. Portion of it, however, was in better state of preservation. Ruins and inscriptions exist on the ranges from the Binshi pass to the south-west, and

near Nawagai were declared by him as remains of a large city. Unfortunately, these were inaccessible for examination (Dean 1896: 664). The Deva Temple of Talash was later on documented and fully described by Sir Aurel Stein in his excellent report entitled *Serindia* with photographs (Stein 1921: 22. Fig.3). In the Post-Independence era, the Archaeological remains of Dir were investigated by Dr. Ahmad Hassan Dani, of the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar between the years 1963 to 1969. He conducted excavations of various Buddhist monuments and was the first to document the rock cut images of Buddha, Bodhisattvas and Hindu gods (Dani 1969).

The Graveyard of Ziarat

The Muslim graveyard of Ziarat village of the Talash valley, is known for its unique Muslim graves decorated with stone slabs bearing Hindu and Buddhist motives. It was partially documented by Professor Abdur Rahman of the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar (Rahman 1979: 279-280), and since then, no intensive research was done on this graveyard. It was in 2015, that the present author was informed by one of his subordinates at the Dir Museum Chakdara about the presence of a huge circular stone with ribbed body just in the shape of a turnip. The statement of the informer regarding the strange stone aroused our curiosity and we at once set out for Talash, where we saw it lying in the premises of the old Hindu Shahi period fort. After clearing it we concluded that is the stone replica of the *Amalaka* of a Hindu temple. Thus, the owner was convinced for its donation to the Dir Museum Chakdara, who very kindly agreed¹ and also helped us in its transportation to the Museum,

¹ We are thankful to the owner Mr. Sher Amin Khan of the Gumbat village for the donation of this Amalaka stone to the Dir Museum, Chakdara.

where it is placed on open display (Pl. 1).

Beside the Amalaka stone, our attention was drawn to some Muslim graves of the nearby graveyard, which according to locals are very ancient and embellished with decorated stone slabs. In order to confirm the statement of the locals, we visited the site and became astonished to see that decorated stone slabs, which were originally utilized in some Hindu and Buddhist architectures are now reused in the decoration of the Muslim graves. Although the graveyard is sacred to the local due to the presence of the shrine of a certain saint Syed Jalal-ud-Din Bukhari, the history of whom is still shrouded in mystery, yet the graves are not so old as attested by engraved inscriptions on some the graves which show a dated not earlier than the 20th century. An attempt is made in the following pages to highlight various interesting aspects of the particular graveyard.

The Architecture and Artistic decoration of the graves

As far as the architecture of the graves is concerned, the sarcophagus of the graves is rectangular box shaped, made of pile of earth extracted from the crept, and encased with stone masonry walls all around. Sometime it has two receding terraces, and provided with tall upright stone one each at the head and feet side (Pl. 2). Although no mortar or any other binding material seem to have been used in the masonry, yet some of the graves are preserved in their original shape. In the masonry lines are inserted many decorated stones blocks and slabs extracted from some Hindu and Buddhist monuments bearing carved floral and geometric designs as well as architectural elements such as pieces of base mouldings, cornices, hermika and replicas of

Amalaka (Pls. 3-6). Moreover, an attempt is also been made to adopt the ancient ashlar and diaper masonry style for the construction of these graves (see Pls. 3 & 4).

It is also evident that in some cases the figural and anthropomorphic designs from the decorated stone blocks are obliterated before fixation in the masonry (Pls. 7 & 8), because the representation of such designs is prohibited in Islam. On the other hand, these reused stone blocks are inscribed with Arabic scripts showing the name of the deceased person and the date of his demise in the Hijri calendar, while many are re-decorated with geometric designs showing the net pattern, triangles (Pl. 9).

Inscriptions

Some of the graves show short Arabic inscription in nastalique style and confined only to the kalima, Persian couplet in two lines, and name and date of the demise of the deceased person. In this regard one of the inscriptions records the name of the buried person as Tawkal khan, who died in the month of Safar 1344 A.H., corresponding to 1923 A.D. (Pl. 10). Another two lines inscription shows the first kalima in the upper line and the name of the buried person as Inzar Gul or Nazar Gul who laid on rest in 1345 A.H? (1924 A.D) (Pl. 11), yet another shows the names of Sayyad Mumtaz Khan and the date as 1355 A.H., (Pl. 12), and Gul Hakim and Bacha Khan, both died in 1344 A.H (Pls. 13 & 14).

Archaeological and Historical Importance

Although the graveyard of Ziarat village is not so ancient and the date of the construction of the graves is ranging between 1327-1345 A.H., (corresponding to 1909-1927 A.D), that is to say

the 20th century of the present era, yet the data achieved from the documentation suggest that the same area remained sacred not only for the Muslim, rather it was also inhabited by Hindu and Buddhist communities in the past. The decorated panels inserted in the masonry of the graves display the love of Muslim for decorated motives, particularly floral and geometrical regardless of thing that these were manufactured by non-Muslims. On the other hand, the obliteration of figural motifs also proves that the Muslim communities still follow the Islamic laws regarding the prohibition of anthropomorphic representations even in the 20th century. While the use of Hijri calendar in instead of Gregorian in the inscription is the continuation of the Muslim traditions prevailed in India and Pakistan since the arrival of Islam in the 8th century A.D.

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Pl. 1: The stone Amalaka from Talash in the Dir Museum, Chakdara



Pl. 2: General view of a grave in the graveyard of Ziarat village



Pl. 3: Stone blocks showing floral decoration



Pl. 4: Stone blocks showing upside-down floral decoration



Pl.5: Stone blocks with incised geometric designs



Pl.6: Amalaka stone reused in the masonry of the Grave



Pl.7: Stone blocks with defaced decoration



Pl. 8: Another example of defaced decoration



Pl.9: Re-decorated stone blocks with geometric designs



Pl.10: Inscription showing name and date of deceased



Pl.11: Inscription showing the Kalima and name the deceased



Pl. 12: Inscription showing name of the deceased



Pl.13: Inscription showing name and date of deceased



Pl.14: Inscription showing name and date of deceased