

Śarda Temple: A Legacy of the Stone Temples of Kashmir

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Abstract

The current paper deals with an archaeological site in Sharda village of Neelum Valley in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan. It is known with different identities however its general features are close to the style of stone temples in Kashmir. The structural remains are on the verge of extinction due to weathering and neglect. The paper tries to document the very remains on the basis of their architectural features and location in the contemporary landscape to bring it into the notice of the scholars.

Keywords: *Kashmir, Hindu Temple Architecture, Stone Temples of Kashmir, Neelum Valley*

Introduction

The village of Sharda is remote and isolated. It is lying beside the two confluences. One is that of Neelum or Kiṣaṅgaṅgā River and Sharda Nar, the Madhumati of Stein (1900) and the other is of Surgan Nala, the Kankatori of Bates (1873). Here, the Neelum River, is little relaxed by the mountains and its eastern bank takes the form of an alluvial plain little raised like a small plateau. The ruins of an old building catches the eye in the south of the populated area. Large blocks of stone are well dressed and layed out to set up as a structure. Local people usually use

to call it Sharda University, which is a Hindu Temple of Karkotas' Kashmir (Ahmad and Samad 2015).

Architectural Features

The structure of Śarda Temple is on a raised platform. The ground is not perfectly levelled. It inclines toward the west and a ridge to the south by the side of Sharda Nar (see map. 1). Huge stone slabs are used to balance this unevenness achieving a leveled platform, matching the farms in its east and to support the superstructures. The structure as a whole is rectangular in plan and it is aligned to E-W with a small difference of about 5 degrees. The lengthy sides are

distributed east to west. It measures about 35m in length and 26 m in width. The platform is provided with a massive staircase to the western side. Above this platform, a large courtyard forms the quadrangle with massive stone wall compound. Main structure is a square cell in its middle with a little raised podium.

The Temple is composed of different structural levels. These levels can be categorised as the staircase, portal or the gateway, the quadrangle and the main sanctuary.

Staircase

Stairs are provided as the main access to the structure (Figure 1). The structure of the staircase is itself a huge project. It is in close similarity to the architectural traditions of the stone temples of Kashmir (Ahmad & Samad 2015). Similar massive stair cases are found at many instances in Kashmir (Cunningham 1848; Stein 1900; Brown 1959; Fisher 1982; Mitra 1993). It is at about 35-45% rough slope. One can be fascinated by the lofty stone slabs used in it and the massive portal at its upper end.

There are 63 steps in this staircase. The lowest step has a 15 cm high strip in high relief to a height of 15 cm and then 25 cm high regular step. All the steps have the same height to the top. The horizontal facing is 43 cm wide whereas the breadth of the staircase is 3m and is uniform up to the top.

Guardrails are provided to both sides of the staircase, constructed in same massive stones. It is broken in 5 steps; each one being 4 m long, running parallel on both sides. Aural Stein (1900:283) mentions 6 steps of them. Each of the 5 steps of guard railing is having same style, length and height. There is a square indent 10X10 cm made in both of their facing corners. It is most probable that it was carved after laying the courses of the stones. Their lowest courses are little larger i.e. 2.4 m and then they are 2 m wide above 30 cm.

The whole structure is shaken, possibly with some earthquake. The staircase is also misaligned in a way that some of the guard rails are inclined inside and vice versa.

Gateway

The staircase joins a massive podium jutting out from the western side from

foundations of the main structure about 2 m from the south-western corner of the main court. On both sides, this portal is 1.5 m broader than the width of the staircases. The portal structure resting above it is of same level as that of the court (Figure 2).

Stein (1900:181) suggests that by conjecturing the southern wall and allocating the south-western corner, portal sets in the middle of the western wall.

It is a massive structure with half side (Southern) completely ruined. Fortunately, the remaining half portion is in place for the conjectural reconstruction.

Horizontally, the portal is made up of two parts, a larger part of 1.8 m deep toward the stairs and a little smaller about 1 m from the cella court. Both were separated by wooden gate of which the square hook holes in a little raised pilaster, is still noticeable. This separating pilaster is provided with a small projection in the western edge where it is attached to the northern wall of the portal. Panelling is achieved by carving in the centre. These are two panels, achieved as high relief, each being about 15 cm (Figure 4).

Walls around the entrance are decorated with a geometrical design which is unique all around the monument however square below it is exceptional. The size of this leitmotif is different at any point to match the size of both parts in which they are executed.

A couple of one circular and a square pilasters are at the ends of the porch facing cella (Figure 5-a). Both are portraying a pedestal, a shaft and capital. Capital is relatively better preserved where square echinus, necking and astragal can easily be distinguished.

One at the end of the main courtyard is little nudged inside the way. This pilaster is supporting the only existing curved projection of the arch. This arch was ultimately supporting the superstructure above this porch, the pedimental roof. It is also carved out of the huge stones after setting them in place. The inner face of the portal had the vault of this arch. The arch directly rests on the circular pilaster and the square one is little far from it to the northern side. The intermediate space and the square pilaster have a small panel above the dado level (Figure 5-a). Both of the panels are of the same size and same pyramidal design on their top.

The traces of stucco and few pinkish colour pigments can also be seen around them.

The main court/ Quadrangle

The quadrangle is formed in a rectangular plan (Figure 6). Portal is providing entrance to its western wall and it extends inside to about 2 m. The portal and staircase are not just in the front of the main sanctuary as in general case but they are little nudged to the southern corner.

There is a little raised layer of stones to form a, 20 cm wide, string course, running all the way around the structure matching with same to the inner side of the enclosure wall just 40 cm above the general ground level of the court inside (Figure 6). Assuming this as ground level, the average height of the walls is 2.6 m.

Western wall

The western wall is mostly covered with the entrance portal (Figure 7-a). Including half of the entrance and southern corner of this wall as well as coping of the northern side is missing. The southern corner of the portal area deludes for south-western corner of the

wall. At the confluence of northern and western walls, a later superstructure is made up as a small picket.

Niche Recess, the *Taqchah* (تاقچه)

To the 50 cm north from the joint of portal and northern segment of western wall, is a 1.3 m deep niche (Figure 7-b). It is 1.3 m wide and 1.5 m high. There is a stone topping it. The upper portion from outside is provided with a false pyramid like geometrical motif.

It directly faces the entrance to the main sanctuary. It might also been linked to the entrance.

Northern wall

The northern side of the main courtyard is 43.5 m long with a stone wall of 2 m thickness and 2.6 m height (from court level). It has deep foundations, sunk into the ground to about an approximate of 2-3 meters. Its western side is particularly massive as the ground is not plan in the whole area and it is raised about 3 m to achieve the level of the quadrangle. However to the east of northern wall, due to the raised ground level, its foundations are just matching with relative ground level (Figure 6).

The now barren stone in the northern wall are easily visible from outside. At some instances, it looks that discarded stone from other portions are also used here. For example, there is a perfectly carved, little raised square on a stone surface and also there are stone having indents and carvings identical to the architectural decorations in the Temple.

Some places on this wall are provided with coping. The coping was possibly introduced around the entire enclosure wall (Figure 8). There are some such remains in the northern wall. These extend to a length of about 3 m in the eastern corner of this wall and then it is followed by continuations of a ruined superstructure. This coping is projected above the wall making an eave. From outside this coping is has a small groove beneath the eave, possibly to prevent the rain water from getting stuck with the wall (Fig).

Niche, the *Taqchah*

The wall above the level of the quadrangle is not different outside view. However from inside, there is a deep niche in its middle, fronting the main sanctuary (Figure 9). It is located just above the dado level. It is projected

about 30 cm out into the court. However being at a little raised level it is supported with small sloped projection like that of a common type for the balcony. Stein (1900: 283) says about the geometrical design of this niche. It is nearly a cubical of 1.25 X 1.18 X 1.25 m from inside. It once contained two small *Linghams* (Stein 1900: 283), as it looks that it was originally built for receiving such cult. The opening wall of the niche is projected in a way that it could be easily accessible for the worshippers. Opening is little designed and once had same pyramidal panelling (Stein 1900: 283) however they are not that clear now.

Eastern Wall

The eastern wall is also made up in similar style and material. The stone blocks in this side are also relatively better preserved. Wild growth is however is deteriorating it vigorously. The whole span of this wall is intact excluding coping and other crowning features (Figure. 8 a).

It has the continuation of the super structure found on the eastern corner of the northern wall. There is an exit or backdoor in the centre of this wall.

Postern

The doorway is simple and a flat slab of stone topping it as a lintel. Here the wall is little wider. Though its base is covered with stone debris, it is still clear that it is rising from the level of the string course (Figure 10-a).

It is 2.2 m high and 1.5 m wide at the inner opening which is uniform till the depth of 1.9 m where it narrows. The width is reduced to 1.38 m at a culmination point at which a step projection makes it narrower (i.e. about 40 cm) suddenly. It is 30 cm wide. In the midway of the narrowing, there are two square holes in both sides.

On the top corners, there are two circular holes. Similar may be in the base which are buried in the debris. Fragments of *kanjur* stone can be seen in the debris.

Niche, the Taqchah

To its north just 1.5 m away is a recess matching all the aspects of other niches with the exception of the height (Figure 10-a). The depth in the wall is 1.4 m and width is 1.2 m. It look higher however it is missing with its crowning elements. Instead it has a small 50 cm wide string

course at 1.3 m from its base. Here it joins the possible superstructure. Above this string course, it narrows a bit and extends in a continued pattern up to 2.6 m of height from the base of the niche. It is damaged above this level.

Southern Wall

There is an austere steep leading to the hill stream, Madhumati, in the southern side of the Temple. It has cast havoc for the structure by claiming its southern foundations. Stein (1900: 181) has mentioned the same situation and also confirmed the missing of southern wall (Figure 11).

The eastern corner has left with some part of it. The stones of this wall can be seen dispersed on its place as well as in the strata of the steep below. There are wild olive plants found abundantly on this steep. These plants have destroyed by moving the existing foundation stones. However, currently, they are strengthening the remaining structure by minimising the erosion.

The remains of, once a niche in its midst, are obvious in the form of the fragmentary traces of *kanjur* stones. They are dispersed on the surface where a modern strengthening wall is built on

the same place. Such walls are currently built in the gapes and crevasses are reinforced with meshing of steel wires.

The superstructure

Above the enclosure wall in the eastern side of the quadrangle, there is a continuation of the wall above its level of coping. It is not only true for the eastern wall but also extends to about 4 m into the northern wall. In the eastern wall it raises as a pediment with 1.3 m height at its apex. However it is not finished at the top. It looks like it is decayed (Figure 12).

It is a 60 cm thick stone wall positioned on the outer side of the all below.

The Main Sanctuary or Cella

In the centre of the quadrangle, there are the remains of a square structure, raising above the level of enclosure walls. It was built with elaborate craftsmanship. A 1m high podium is provided to make it prominent. The entrance is provided from the western side. There must have been huge elaborate superstructure, which is now missing (Figure 13).

The main shrine is decorated to the existing height from all the sides other

than one at entrances. Trefoil arch is exquisitely used to decorate the exterior. This arch is achieved by high and low relief system.

It was possibly plastered with lime mortar. There are the traces of stucco found inside as well as outside.

The plan of the main sanctuary is square. Along the vertical line, the sanctuary is provided with two levels, base and cella or sanctuary and a probable 3rd level, pyramidal surmounting, as the general motif suggested, which is now gone but can be conjectured. These levels can be compared with the Hindu temple order in India with *pitha*, *mandika* and *shikara* respectively.

Base of the cella

The main chamber of the whole structure is provided with a podium which raises to about 1m. This podium gets higher than the string course in the compound wall. Stones used in the base are relatively bulkier. There is no clear traces of decoration or plastering found at this level.

There are harder basalt stone slabs, used beneath the podium which can be seen

as they are little projected outward in the current ground level.

To the western side of this plinth, a small humble staircase is attached to ease the only access in the sanctuary (Figure 14). It is 1.85 m wide and each step is about 60 cm flat and has same height. Both sides of the staircase are provided with a covering by using a long stone of about 0.5 m width.

The Sanctuary

The room of the sanctuary is like a hallow cube with more height than other dimensions. At the plan, it is a square of 3.8 m from inside. The doorway allows entrance in the middle of the west side. It sets about 1.3 m wide in the middle of the western wall with the same length (i.e. 1.3 m) on both ends. Presently, only an open place represents it, rather it would have been a wooden door barring the entrance.

From inner side, walls are flat with few traces of plasters. Mostly, they are new, possibly around 1940s based on the grade of used cement. The entrance step is also covered with a layer of cement. There is a narrow string course at a height of about 2.9 m. it is about 45 cm wide. There is about 10 cm setback in

2.1 m of the walls above this string course which extends to the level of the cornice.

Currently, herbs are growing on the floor sides, while shady area is muddy and humid. Small plants are growing on the walls too.

In the southern wall at 1.1 m from the western corner and 0.9 m high is a hole. It might have been used to hook-support the cults or other worship necessities like incense burners, etc.

From exterior, three sides, north, east and south, are decorated with the common pedimental motif. The motif is wrought in relief design of successive pediments and trefoil arches.

The door has fronted with a kind of canopy to cover the small flight of steps, of which only pillars in the northern side can be seen. The other side is lacking with such remains. There is small gap (about 60 cm) between the pillar at the end and the pillar attached to the sanctuary at front. Currently it is filled with small chips, but it yet clear that originally it was open (Figure 15).

Excavation

On the course of the archaeological survey of Kashmir, a team of archaeologists from Taxila Institute of Asian Civilization (TIAC), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, also documented the site. A trial trench was laid out, located 10 m east of the eastern wall in a farm. An elaborate ashy layer is clearly visible along with concentration of the potsherds. The report of the exploration will shed light on the site (Figure 16).

Pottery from the Site

The cultural material that can be found abundantly in the whole area is the pottery shards (Figure 17). They can be found in near surroundings of the temple and temple itself. Apart from conventional offering bowls, pieces of rough textured bricks can also be found.

Kiśan Ghatī and Śraḥśilā Castle

Kiśan Ghatī is a cave located about 2.5 km downstream of Sharda, on the left bank of Neelum River (Kiṣangaṅgā). Here, a slender cape, projecting toward the river and small stream touches the river. To the west of this small tributary, a high stony section can be found of large boulders. On close examination of

the surface of the boulder, traces of stucco-like material can be observed. The word “OOM” is written in Śārādā script that can be visualized as dim lining in pinkish red pigments. In addition a Swāstīka can be seen (Figure 18-a). Stein (1900) explains the Sharda Muhatmya’s story that a muni, Muni Śandliya (Kumari 1988) saw here a Gneśa figure.

At the head of this boulder, a cave is located in a position that it is hard to get in there. It’s a natural cave for which local peoples’ referral is quiet often. They believe it is a sacred Hindu Site where they used to visit before partition. Accordingly, many cults are located in a square room. On the contrary, the cave looks like a natural phenomenon. It is irregular in symmetry (Figure 18-b). The upper portion of the cave is littered with stalactites posing fearing ghostly effects which possibly mystified it.

Some remains of structures can be seen some way downstream from Kiśan Ghatī. The Kalhana’s Śraḥśilā Castle (Ahmad & Samad 2015) can also be placed here. Therefore it can be the same site.

Water Sources

Water sources are crucial to any Hindu Temple and particularly in Kashmir. Qadir (1993) allotted the name of Amara Kund to the water source of this temple. There are three main water sources while walking along the Sharda *Nar*, at about a furlong upstream is a waters spring (Figure 19-a). Moving upward, there is another spring (Figure 19-b). From this spring water supply schemes are leading to the inhabited area around the Sharda Temple.

A third source of water is to the north of the temple about two farms away (Figure 20). It is still used by the locals who took their animals there to drink from a prepared tank.

Summary & Conclusion

The Śarda Temple is lying in the Sharda Village around the confluences of waters. Most of the structure has been deteriorated out of weathering. The structure is provided with a massive podium in order to match the uneven ground. The whole structure portrays a rectangular, enclosed walled quadrangle with a main square building in the centre. In the west, entrance is provided

with a massive portal way comparable to the central building. There are niches in the walls and portal. In the eastern wall, there is a postern, like sally port in a fort.

The primary building material of the structure is large sand stoneslabs cut with huge labour and care. Decorations are also carved in the similar manner. The other material include wood. A very few remains are now apparent in the form of stakes once inserted in the holes of doors, etc. It was possibly used in doors and niches. On the other hand, there are traces of stucco found in the cella presenting that it might have been plastered.

Such structure can be prevailed for a religious purpose rather than a secular one. Massive stone work also presents not only the prestige of the responsible authority or authorities, but also the zeal of the stone workers who took part in this huge construction project. The absence of plaster or the other fragile materials like wood is evident to infer that it is old enough and environmental ravages washed all of it. The roofs bore the same fate, though it was probably built in stone.

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Figures



Map 1. A topographic view of Sharda Temple and associated sites

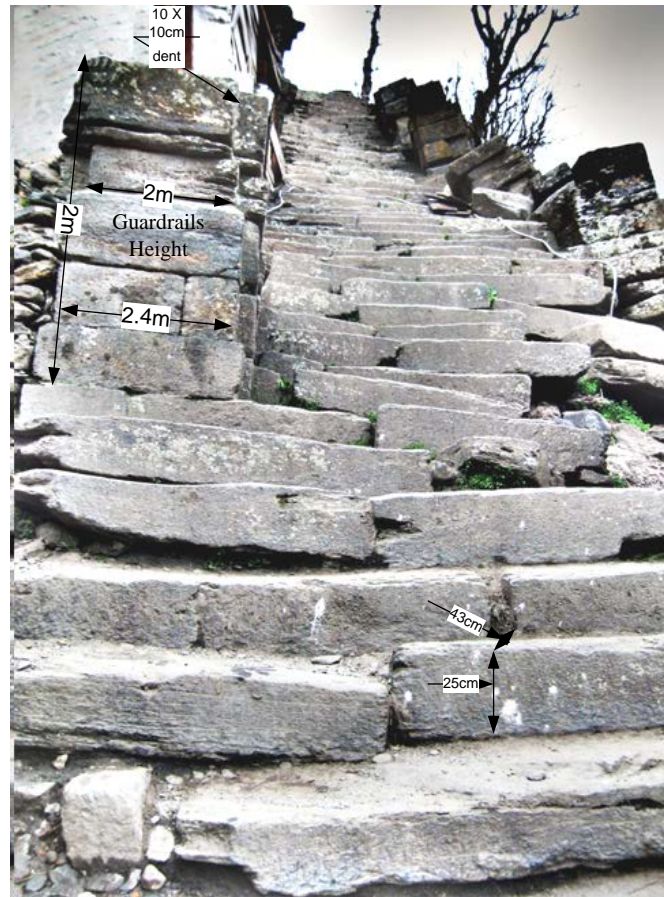


Figure 1: Staircase in the western side from the lowest step



Figure 2: Staircase joining the portal's podium. A view of northern and southern faces respectively.

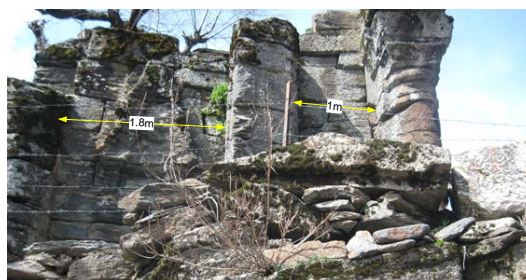


Figure 3. Parts of portal from southern side

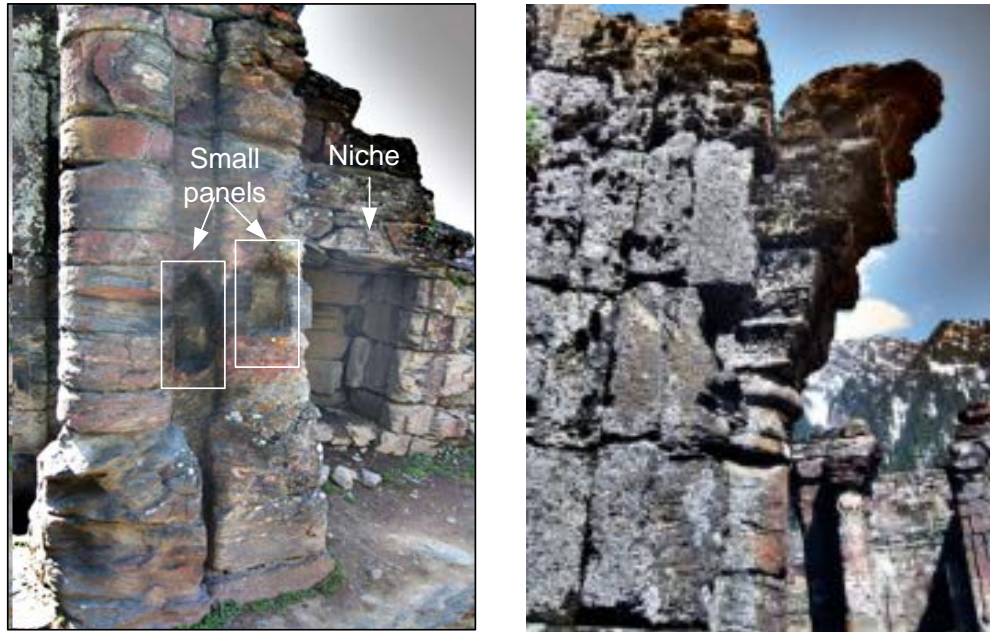


Figure 4. Eastern side of the portal's existing structure a. from inside, b. from outside

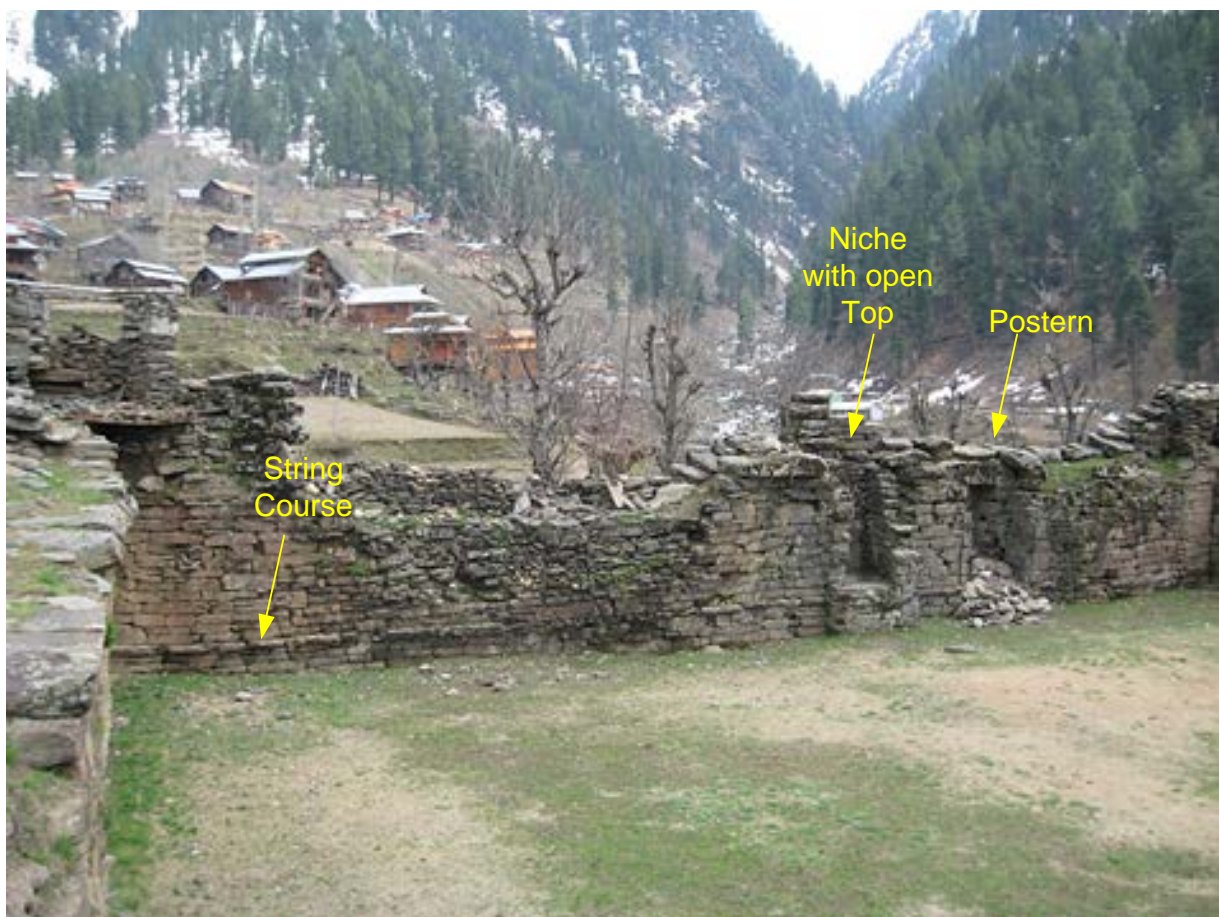


Figure 5. Eastern side of the courtyard



Figure 6. Western Wall



a. portal

b. niche along the portal



Figure 7. Coping in the Northern Wall



Figure 8. Northern wall and the niche

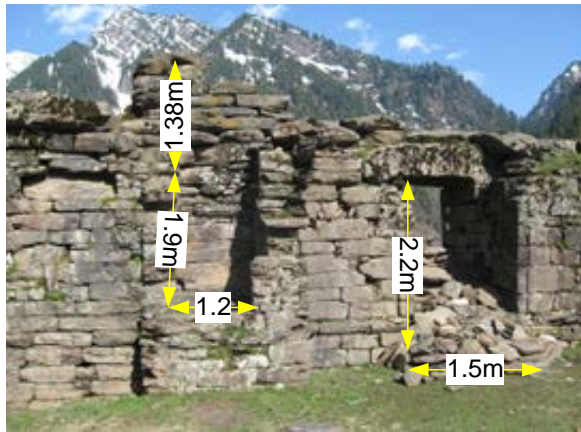
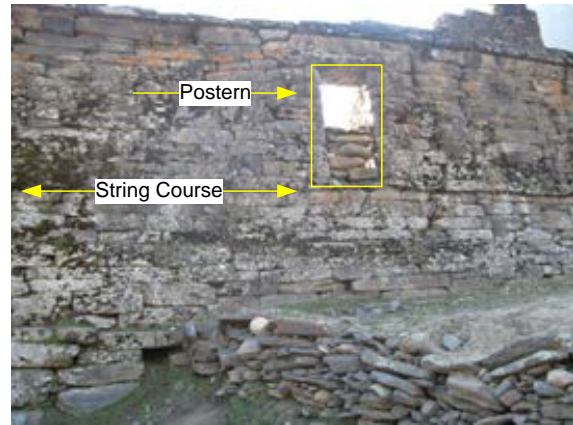


Figure 9. Eastern Wall



a. Internal View

b. External View



Figure 10. Reinforcements for southern wall



Figure 11. Observation post in the north-eastern corner (possibly Sikh Period). Old wall continuation to its east. (Encircled)

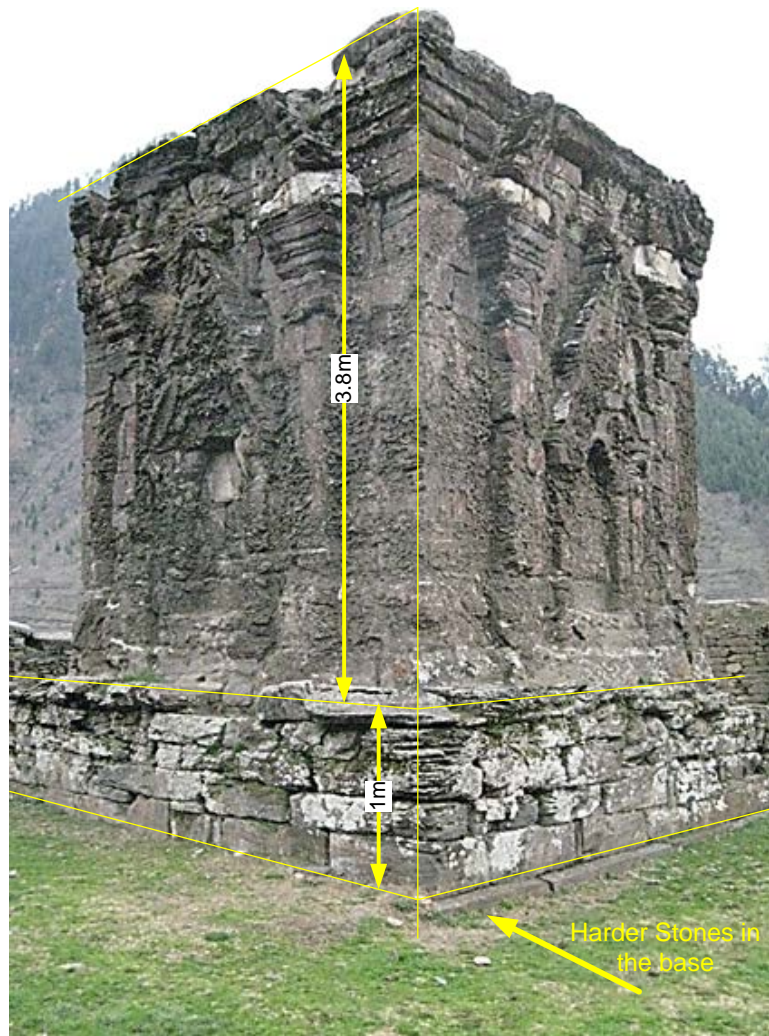


Figure 12. Main Shrine from western side



Figure 13. The entrance to the sanctuary



Figure 14. The remaining pillar of the canopy to the door from southern side in front of door. These repairs have cement used in some instances.



Figure 15. Trial Trench in a farm to the east of the site (



Figure 16. Terracotta from the Site



Figure 17. a. Kiśan Gatī

b. Cave in Kiśan Gatī (Inner View)



Figure 18. Two water sources along the Sharda Nar a. along the bank and b. little above the stream.



Figure 19. Water source to the north of the Temple