

A Survey of Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (former North West Frontier Province), Pakistan (2005)

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Abstract

A survey of Lower Dir was carried out during October and November of 2005 by a team of archaeologists from the Universities of Hazara, Peshawar and Leicester. The main aim of this survey was to collect data about all archaeological sites in this area from prehistoric through to recent historic periods in order to develop a profile of human settlement and activity in this region. In total, 294 sites were located and recorded (including sites already excavated and published), and within this total, the vast majority of sites have been attributed to the Buddhist period.

Keywords: Pakistan, Lower Dir, landscape survey, Buddhist sites

Introduction

There are many well known archaeological sites in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (former NWF) Province of Pakistan, such as the UNESCO World Heritage Buddhist monastery Takht-i Bahi and the neighbouring city site of Sari Bahlol. Archaeological exploration in the 20th century has included work at the site of Charsada in the Vale of Peshawar (Coningham and Ali 2007; Wheeler 1962), and survey and excavation at many sites in the Swat Valley (Callieri 2005; Facenna 1980; Stacul 1989). While it is clear that this region is rich in archaeological remains, thus showing its importance in both prehistoric and historic periods, there are areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as the valley of Dir, which are less well known. In order to extend our knowledge of the settlement history of Dir, a survey of archaeological sites in Lower Dir was undertaken in October-November 2005 by archaeologists from the Universities of Peshawar, Hazara and Leicester. The results of this survey have already been published (Ali et al 2009) and a discussion of the results in relation to the Gandharan Grave Culture presented. This paper will summarise some of the key trends in the data and is followed by a Gazetteer of sites. Figure 1 shows the location of the survey area.

Previous Archaeological Investigations in Dir Valley

Professor Ahmad Hasan Dani carried out the majority of systematic archaeological exploration in Dir Valley during the 1960s and early 1970s, with his work at Timargarha (Gandharan Grave site) (1968-9a), Balambat (Gandharan occupation site) (1968-9a), Chatpat (monastery and stupa) (1968-9b) and survey (1968-9b) and Damkot (including Chakdara fort) (1968-9b; Rahman 1968-9). An analysis of extant published material and ethnographic interviews have also been synthesised as part of an exploration of urban and rural contact in the period between the Indus and Early Historic urban phases (Young 2003).

The neighbouring valley of Swat is the subject of extensive description within early travellers' accounts, such as Fa-Hien and Xuanzang (Legge 1886; Stein 1928; Xuanzang 1996), who

note the large number of Buddhist settlements and population. Dir, however, receives little, if any mention, which could suggest that Dir was not such an important focus of Buddhist activity. We would argue that the large number of Buddhist sites identified in this survey (some 235, see Table 1) shows that Dir must have been a very important, and densely settled area in terms of Buddhist religious and occupation sites. While this paper presents the data itself, we believe that it would be both interesting and useful to undertake settlement analyses in future in order to begin to model settlement and population over time in Swat, Dir and surrounding areas. This of course would require close phasing of settlements in order to achieve the best results, and this type of phasing information is lacking in our survey results. We believe that the number of sites that have been classified as 'Buddhist' in this survey, and the number of sites recorded in previous activities in Swat and other regions, indicates a wealth of material with which to carry out a range of settlement analyses.

Methodology

In order to cover a representative area of the Lower Dir Valley, a team of local archaeologists and students were trained in the methodology of transect survey, and an area some 20km by 10km was surveyed. In addition to this, known archaeological sites were also visited and recorded, and local informers were interviewed and further sites identified and recorded making use of local knowledge. Sites were defined as a structure, feature, lithic find spot or ceramic scatter of 5 sherds or more per square metre (Coningham et al 2004: 3). Each site was recorded on paper and through digital photography. The location of each site was recorded using a handheld GPS to give co-ordinates and height above sea level, although the co-ordinates will not be included in the Gazetteer due to the major risk to heritage sites from illegal excavation. Looting or other damage such as agricultural or urban encroachment was recorded and this information was passed to the Directorate of Archaeology, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan, as part of their Cultural Heritage Management planning process.

Results

A total of 294 sites representing human activity were identified and recorded during the 2005 survey of Lower Dir. Table 2 shows the breakdown of these sites according to estimated chronological period, and Table 3 shows the breakdown of sites according to site type and estimated chronological period. Here we offer a brief summary of the main trends in the chronological periods and some ideas for future research.

Cemetery / Gandharan Grave Culture sites

A number of ancient, i.e. pre-Islamic, cemeteries were recorded in this survey. These have been tentatively classified as potential Gandharan Grave Culture sites on the basis of grave construction and orientation, and where grave goods have been recovered when the sites have been disturbed through agricultural and housing encroachment, or through looting. As many Islamic graves are constructed in a similar way from similar materials, there is potential here for misidentification. However, Islamic graves are oriented so that the body is placed on the right side to face Kaaba (or Makkah), and no grave goods are interred with the body. This means that in Lower Dir we have used the criteria of *grave orientation and any knowledge of grave goods from local informants to begin this classification* of cemetery sites. There are of course wider issues about the Gandharan Grave Culture and how it is defined that are outside the scope of this paper and this survey; however the data presented here can

contribute to this debate, which will be developed in the context of on-going research by the authors in Chitral and other parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Early Historic / Buddhist sites

The majority of all sites identified and recorded in this survey fall into this category. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (North West Frontier) Province is known from both historical and archaeological sources as an important area for settlement and religious activity following the conversion of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka to Buddhism (c.268 BCE). Art historical analysis in the form of the Gandharan art movement, which recorded the life and events of Gautama Buddha through stone carving, gives us a great deal of information about Buddhist activity and impact, but direct archaeological analysis and interpretation has been the subject of far less study in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and particularly in Dir.

The term 'Early Historic' period also covers pre-Buddhist Mauryan activity, Indo-Greek activity, Kushan activity, and a series of other dynastic rulers up to the Hindu Shahi period. While those sites with structures such as stupas could be designated Buddhist, or those with distinctive diaper masonry designated Early Historic-Buddhist (Marshall 1951), many sites fall into a very broad chronological grouping. This points toward an urgent need for more work on Early Historic sites in this region in order for more precise classification and thus analysis to take place; being able to fine tune the chronology for this period is a crucial part of understanding the processes at work in this region from approximately the middle of the first century BCE through to the middle of the first century CE.

Some 35% or one third of all sites in this category had a mound or structural remains indicative of a stupa, showing the importance of veneration and orthopraxy in this region. Given that this survey has focused on a small area in Dir Valley, this figure suggests that there was a high concentration of formal religious activity here. With greater periodisation of Buddhist sites we would be able to begin to map changes in activity and foci over time. The recording of fourteen rock carvings depicting Buddhist iconography confirms the importance of religious activity in this region.

Hindu Shahi

Thirty five sites were classified as Hindu Shahi; identification was based on the architectural style characteristic of the Hindu Shahi dynasty (late 7th – 10th/11th centuries CE) and associated pottery (Rahman 1979).

Islamic/Mughal

Of the 15 sites in this category, one was the grave of a saint built on an earlier stupa site, and the other was the fort built by Zain Khan Koka, then later occupied by the British, and the others are graves and tombs. We were surprised that we did not find more sites in this category, including such things as pottery scatters of Islamic vessels. This may be the result of the intensive agricultural activity within the survey region, but it is a methodological issue that we would like to re-visit if political conditions in this region permit follow up work.

British

Four sites dated to the British occupation of Dir were recorded in the survey area. Churchill Picket was built in 1897, and the dis-used bridge across the Swat River in Chakdara was built in 1902. Both

the bungalow of the Nawab of Dir, dated to the late 19th century and the Chakdara fort are examples of the re-use of sites and structures.

Conclusion

The preliminary survey of Lower Dir has met the main aim of this project by carrying out systematic survey in this region and locating and recording archaeological sites from all periods in order to characterise settlement and activity here. Having identified and recorded 294 archaeological sites in the survey area, we can say with confidence that this was an area of some importance during the Early Historic period. While research has shown that Swat was a major focus of Buddhist activity (e.g. Callieri 2005; Filigenzi 2005), we know far less about neighbouring Dir. This survey has shown very clearly that Dir also played an important role in the Early Historic and Buddhist periods, and that further study is critical in understanding this role more fully.

We have demonstrated that systematic survey is effective within Lower Dir, but we believe that there could be more sites (particularly small pottery scatters), that we have not identified due to the topography, land cover and the need to move quickly through the landscape in certain places. This issue could be explored through a series of methodological tests, and we would like to return to carry these out at some point in the future, when circumstances permit.

This preliminary survey of a selected area within Lower Dir, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, has shown that although largely unknown in archaeological terms to date, there is indeed a very rich archaeological heritage. We have many gaps in our knowledge and further work is necessary in order to begin to address these gaps, particularly important given the many physical and cultural threats to sites.

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