

THE APSIDAL TEMPLE OF TAXILA: TRADITIONAL HYPOTHESIS AND POSSIBLE NEW INTERPRETATIONS

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The so called ‘apsidal temple’ of Sirkap is an imposing building belonging, according to Marshall, to the Indo-Parthian period (*Figure 1*) (Marshall 1951, 150-151). It is built over an artificial terrace facing the main street in the northern part of the town and was brought to light by John Marshall at the beginning of the last century after some minor excavations during the 19th century. Unlike his predecessors, who were very doubtful about its nature (Cunningham 1871, 126-128), Marshall identified this building as a Buddhist *gr̥ha-stūpa* (Marshall 1930, 111; Marshall 1951, 150); this interpretation has indeed never been questioned and is accepted, also, in the last study on urban form in Taxila (Coningham & Edwards 1998, 50).

However, we cannot deem this attribution certain. No traces are detectable of the main *stūpa* Marshall recognises in the ‘circular room’ (Marshall 1951, 151). Besides, what Marshall describes as two additional *stūpas* are nothing but scanty remains of foundations belonging to two monuments of uncertain nature. As I already pointed out in a more exhaustive way (Colliva in press), Marshall was probably convinced that the apsidal shape of this building was enough to identify it as a Buddhist *caitya*. The discovery at Sonkh of an apsidal-shaped temple, probably dedicated to a *nāga* cult, shows, on the contrary, that non-Buddhist religious buildings with an apsidal plan occur in periods chronologically consistent with that of the “apsidal temple” of Sirkap (Härtel 1970; Härtel 1993). Furthermore, this building is characterised by some structural peculiarities that hardly fit the hypothesis proposed by Marshall.

THE BUILDING

The external corridor Marshall identifies as a *pradakṣiṇā-paṭha* is only 80 cm wide. Such a small dimension, especially in a *locus* closed between two solid walls, is at least unusual for this function (Colliva in press). In addition, other inconsistencies must be noted in Marshall reports: the lack of the indication of the floors’ level, and, in particular, some contradictions about the level of the circular room which seems to be lower than that of the rectangular one.

When Marshall states that the ‘apsidal temple’ floor is 1,68 m higher than the floor of the artificial terrace on which the temple is built (Marshall 1951, 153), he probably refers to the rectangular room only. In fact, even though Marshall reports that none of temple walls was preserved more than 30 cm in elevation from the above mentioned floor, the circular room’s wall cannot be less than 75 cm high, given the presence, at 45 cm from the floor, of a layer of earth 15 cm thick from which the wall still protrudes, as photos clearly show, for at least 15 cm (*Figure 2*).



Figure 1: Sirkap, the ‘apsidal temple’ (from Marshall, 1951, plate 25, figure a)



Figure 2 Sirkap, the circular room of the ‘apsidal temple’ (from Marshall, 1951, plate 26, figure a)

If the measurements are correct, we must conclude that the floor of the circular room was at a lower level than that of the rest of the building. If this hypothesis is correct, one cannot but wonder why the *stūpa*’s room of this presumed Buddhist *caitya* was built in a lower position than the ‘nave’.

An almost similar situation had already been assumed by Alexander Cunningham who, fifty years before Marshall, carried out a limited digging on the site. According to his notes, after clearing away the debris that filled the “circular room” he had reached, at 5,49 m of depth, ie presumably below the ground level (Marshall 1951, 152), a solid floor made of raw stones (Cunningham 1871, 126-128).

Challenging Cunningham’s interpretation of the archaeological data, Marshall identifies this “solid floor” as the remains of a deep foundation already exposed by a previous excavation made by Major Cracroft. The investigation carried out by Cunningham was certainly hurried and superficial, but it is unlikely that an experienced archaeologist would have mistaken the bottom of a previous trench, as proposed by Marshall, for a solid stone floor covered by debris. Moreover, Cunningham reports traces of stucco on the ‘circular room’s’ walls. Marshall does not explain such a presence, clearly out of place on a foundation wall. As for the level of the floor of the so-called ‘processional corridor’, there is no data about this at all in Marshall’s report.

THE FINDS

Among the objects brought to light, a primary role has to be assigned to the numerous stucco fragments found on the artificial terrace that Marshall attributes to the decoration of the two supposed *stūpas* of the terrace. Most of the fragments represent minor figures, mainly worshippers or donors, and show no special attributes. Some of them represent figures in royal dress that Marshall identifies with Bodhisattvas; however, the lack of distinctive elements, such as the *ūrṇā* or the halo, seriously weakens Marshall’s identification. The princely dress, which simply expresses the high status of the figures, allows one to draw different interpretations. The remaining objects found by Marshall inside and next to the

'apsidal temple' do not provide elements which can contribute to a safer interpretation of the building. I would only mention a small terracotta figure, representing a ram, found along with the stucco fragments (Marshall 1951, 155; 458)

There is another element to be taken into consideration: Cunningham's mentions of the remains of huge clay statues (2.5-3 m) in the rectangular room of the 'apsidal temple' – fragments of three heads and two right hands (Cunningham 1871, 127). Unfortunately these fragments have disappeared. Marshall refers to these as belonging to colossal Buddha or Bodhisattva statues (Marshall 1951, 151-152). Despite the perfunctory descriptions, Cunningham mentions a detail that seems to contradict Marshall's hypothesis: one of the two right hand fragments holds a hem of cloth (Cunningham 1871, 127). As a matter of fact, we do not know from coeval iconographies any Buddha or Bodhisattva figure holding a hem of the cloth in the right hand, the only occurrence known so far being attested much later (third-fourth century AD) at Hadda (Rowland 1945, 446).

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To sum up, neither the architectural aspects nor the finds can support Marshall's conclusions, but interesting data and ideas can perhaps be thrown up by a re-examination of the building in the light of its historical background.

Marshall thinks that almost all the religious buildings of the first century AD Sirkap, the 'apsidal temple' included, are Buddhist or, in some cases, Jain. Excavations in other urban settlements of the region, however, yielded consistent evidence that Buddhist structures all belong to a period later than that of the 'apsidal temple'. At Bīr-kōṭ-ghwaṇḍai in Swat a small sacred Buddhist area was found in the SW part of the settlement, but its foundation goes back to the middle Kuṣḍāṇa period, mid-second to third century AD (Callieri et al. 1992, 27-35). At Charsada, the shrine in the so called 'house of Naradakha', whose function and chronology are still uncertain (Allchin 1972, 16; Taddei 2003, 529), most probably belongs to the Kuṣāṇa period (Dani 1965-1966, 28-29). Even if limited in number, the archaeological evidence from the urban settlements of the region point towards a cultural background where Buddhism, although expanding, seems to have less importance than the local Brahmanic cults (see, for Swat, Callieri in press).

If it is a matter of fact that, starting from the reign of Aśoka (third century BC), Buddhism became a reality in Taxila and Gandhāra regions (Dar 1980, 91), in no way we can speak of a predominant role of Buddhism before Kaniska; Both Fussman and Callieri, on different grounds, consider the first century AD as a period of diffusion of the Buddhism and not of predominance (Fussman 1994, Callieri in press). It is very difficult to accept Marshall's interpretation, according to which no cultic buildings of Brahmanic nature was present at Sirkap.

Written sources on this period are certainly limited but they do not seem to confirm Marshall's hypothesis; the material evidence, too, suggests the same. In fact, until the Kuṣāṇa period, coins and seals bear not only symbols of Hellenistic origin, but also iconographies linked to Brahmanic cults, whereas the Buddhist representations only appear during Kaniska's reign (Callieri 1997).

In addition, even the few sources at our disposal seem to contradict Marshall's interpretation. The name (or title?) of Gondophares is generally related to the Indo-Parthian ruler reigning at the beginning of the first century AD on the north-western regions of the subcontinent (Cribb & Bopearachchi 1992a: 14-16; Puri 1994, 196-197). There is only little information on this sovereign: some coin emissions minted under his kingdom, an inscription in Takht-i Bahi (Dani 1986: 68; Cribb & Bopearachchi 1992a: 16) where his name appears, and some later texts mentioning a sovereign who has been identified with Gondophares (Dani 1986, 68-70). On the coins minted in the name of this sovereign we find the

representation of many Greek gods, which are certainly linked to the Indo-Greek coinage, and some Brahmanic gods, especially Śiva, but there is no evidence of Buddhist iconographies (Whitehead 1914, 146-153; Cribb & Bopearachchi 1992b: 64).

Further evidence is provided by Hesychius (*Hesychii Alexandrini Lexicon*, ed. K. Latte & P. A. Hansen, Hauniae, 1953, p. 362) who notes that the Greeks knew a cult of a bull-god, probably similar to *Nandi*, whose name, *Gandaros*, relates his origin – or at least his special worship – to Gandhāra (Callieri in press).

SOME CONCLUSIONS AND A NEW POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION

Far from giving a final solution to such a thorny matter, I will try to draw up some conclusions. As already noted, the complete absence of Brahmanic cults at Taxila does not appear very plausible, especially when we consider that in the town lived functionaries of high rank (Erdosy 1990, 671-672), many of them probably linked to traditional cults, as suggested by the subjects represented on seals of this period (Marshall 1951, 680-681; Callieri 1997; Callieri in press).

Taking into account the findings from the temple, its structural peculiarities and what is known about the historic period it belongs to, it is possible to advance a different interpretation. The existence of Brahmanic cults housed in apsidal temples, as seen in Sonkh, the iconographic themes of the coins, the references in written sources to a deity with a bull worshipped in Gandhāra, all suggests that in this area a Shivaite cult was very common. We cannot therefore exclude the possibility that the ‘apsidal temple’ in Sirkap was dedicated to such a cult (Colliva in press). A connection with the Brahmanic tradition was also proposed by Claude Rapin for Jaṇḍiāl C temple, that he tentatively relates to the cult of the Pañcavīra (Rapin 1995).

These suggestions, however, still leave some details unexplained. What was the function of the circular room and what about the level of its real floor? The real function of the different *loci* of the temple remains unknown; we can just hope that, in the future, new excavations on the site or new comparable monuments will offer useful evidence. Who was represented in the imposing clay statues that were found in the rectangular room? Little more is possible to say about the clay fragments found by Cunningham. A possible comparison with this clay statues can perhaps be traced out at Khalchayan in Bactria, where the palace of Khanaka Tepe, attributed to the first Kuṣāṇa period, is richly decorated with wall paintings and polychrome reliefs in clay (Pugačenkova 1971; Santoro 1995). The use of the same material and the chronological proximity of Khalchayan and Sirkap sculptures allow for possible contacts. Unfortunately, the disappearance of the clay fragments found by Cunningham and their inaccurate description



Figure 3: Sirkap, Male head with princely attributes, stucco, (from Marshall, 1951, plate 149, figure b)

make any comparison impossible; once again, we can only make simple speculations.

For the stucco fragments, as well, we cannot draw any conclusion. Most of the fragments, devoid of any divine attribute, are likely to represent simple noble donors, but some of them, in particular a fragment of a head of colossal dimensions (34 cm high) (*Figure 3*), allow some speculation. As for the latter, the exceptional dimensions seem to suggest that it belongs to a more important votive figure. The presence of votive royal statues in the temple complexes is attested, as a matter of fact, throughout all the Hellenized world, with the inclusion of the Kuṣāṇa reign (Callieri 2001, 111).

The hypothesis of a temple dedicated to a Brahmanic/Shaiava cult remains, I believe, the most likely, but a further possibility should still be considered for future research.

Already in 1983, Giovanni Verardi, expressed some doubts about the shape of the main building of the religious complex of Māt that, in his opinion, was apsidal (Verardi 1983, 229), and advanced the hypothesis that it was dedicated to a cult of Śrī o Laksmī, seen as an incarnation of the royal fortune; in the same article he recalled that the presence of Shaiva images is perfectly consistent with such an interpretation (Verardi 1983, 237; 265-269). A similar hypothesis seems well-matched with the evidence from the ‘apsidal temple’ of Sirkap.

In the case of Sirkap, a further topographic element would be also consistent with a former Indian tradition. The *Arthaśāstra*, describing the disposition of the buildings inside the fortified city, mentions the existence of temples dedicated to *Nagaradevatā*, the tutelary deity of the city, and to *Rājadevatā*, the family deity of the king (Kangle 1972, II, 157), and further states that ‘the tutelary deities of the city and the king, and workers in metals and jewels and Brahmins should live in the northern quarters’ (*Arthaśāstra* II.4.15) (see *Figure 4*).

To conclude, the structural peculiarities of the monument, its position in the northern part of the city, the presence of stucco fragments of colossal size (probably representing votive royal figures) the existence of clay relief similar to the ones from a dynastic site like Khalchayan and, moreover, the possible resemblance with the site of Māt, all point towards such an interpretation.

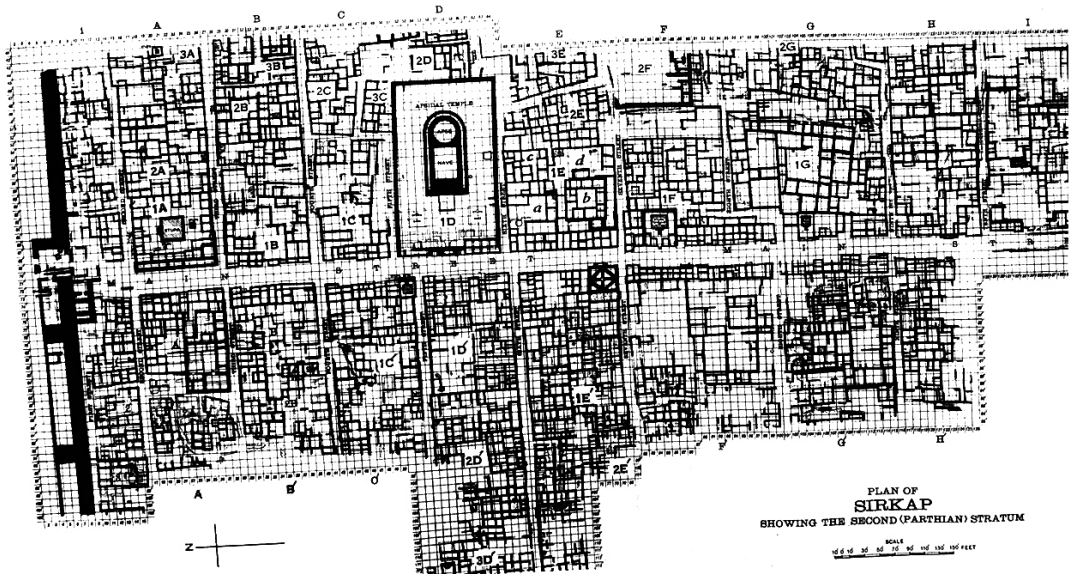


Figure 4: Sirkap, map of the northern part of the city (from Marshall, 1951, plate 10)

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