

The Sharda Temple: An Ancient Archaeological Site in Neelum (Kishenganga) Valley

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Abstract

This paper focuses the documentation of an ancient archaeological site: the Sharda Temple in Neelum (Kishenganga) Valley, Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The study is based on field survey, exploration and salvage excavation carried out by this author during 2013-15 under the umbrella of Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad. This research is based on field notes, findings, temple plans and original drawings by the author. Temple is located in a conflict zone, making it inaccessible to researchers and archaeologists since 1948. Prior to political division of State of Jammu and Kashmir, the Sharda temple had remained a significant icon of the Neelum (Kishenganga Valley). The comparative study of the Sharda temple architectural style with other edifices of the region is part of this research. By thorough examination of its construction elements the paper intends to prove that this site was renovated or reconstructed during different phases of history. The findings during field survey, and cultural material unearthed through salvage excavation provide a firm base for further investigations on the subject.

Keywords: Sharda Temple, Neelum Valley, Hinduism

1. Introduction

The Sharda Temple is located in Tehsil Sharda, Neelum Valley, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). The Neelum Valley (Valley of Kishenganga) is spread on either side of the Neelum River (Kishen Ganga). At some places, the valley is politically divided by the Line of Control from Indian held Kashmir. In the west the lower Himalayan mountain ranges separate the Neelum Valley from Kaghan Valley, whereas the Babusar Pass joins

the latter zones with Gilgit Baltistan in the North (<http://www.ajk.gov.pk>, State Profile, accessed 15-8 -2016) (Map No. 01).

Before the partition of sub-continent in 1947 the Kishenganga Valley (present Neelum Valley) was part of Indian-held-Kashmir (IHK). The historical, socio-cultural legacy of the former State of Jammu and Kashmir is prevailing in ancient texts, travelers' accounts and historical archives. In these historical documents the Neelum- Kishenganga Valley is not mentioned as a separate entity, but it is described in the overall geographical context of the Kashmir (Bates 1873: 2-7; Neve 1945:152-153). In this study researcher uses both the post partition name, Neelum Valley, and its ancient name Kishenganga Valley according to context.

2. Location

The Sharda Temple is located in Tehsil Sharda, Neelum Valley, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. It is placed on the left bank of the river Neelum at the confluence of the ancient river Madhumati and river Neelum. The Kankotri or Surgun stream brings water of Saraswati Lake from the Narda Mountain, joins the river Neelum on the right bank, a few kilometers upstream from the place known as Sharda Sangam. The Sharda Temple is located on a high land facing south west from where one can view the whole of Sharda town including Narda Mountain in the north, and the cliff of Sericella fort in the south west. In the north the Neelum Valley road runs parallel to the river Neelum on the right bank and joins the Sharda village with Khel, Junahavi, Phalvi, and Gurez Valleys, Helmet, and Taobat, Kamri, Minimerg, and Burzal pass into Astor Valley. Towards the south, the same road links Dudnial, Dawarian, Lawat, Nagdar, Kern, Athmaqam and Teetwal downwards to Muzaffarabad, the capital of Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

3. Description

In 1882 when Aurel Stein started working on the chronicles of the kings of Kashmir, or Kalhana's *Rājataranṅiṇī*, he became deeply interested in the ancient remains and the traditions of the valley. He reviewed Kalhana's work of 11th CE, which contains information about few archaeological sites in Neelum Valley. Being an archaeologist Stein described the temple

structure and its significance He also cited the routes and sacred places where pilgrims stayed and performed the rites before reaching the Sharda Temple for final bath rituals. The first ever planned archaeological exploration carried out by the Taxila institute of Asian Civilizations (TIAC) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, was focusing on the Tehsil Sharda and Neelum Valley. The documented Sharda Temple and findings, including copper coins, a Ganesh sculpture, pottery fragments, terracotta pipes and miniature vessels, are described in the following pages.

The construction of the Sharda Temple is unique due to its material and architectural style, which is comparable to other stone edifices of Jammu and Kashmir. The architectural plan is a square room erected on a platform with one door facing west. The two columns on each side of the entrance door resemble the Doric style of the Greek architecture. The three-sided walls of the temple mirror the pyramidal *Shikhara* of the Kashmiri style of architecture. This kind of construction raised on high platform was extensively used in many parts of Kashmir and northern India (Brown 1940: 189-192). The southern, eastern and northern walls of the temple have a three-cornered design with extended details forming a pattern of a blind arch. The four-cornered pillars along two blind niches not only support and maintain stability but also keep the majesty of the huge edifice. These trefoil recess arches with giant three-cornered pediments follow the trabeated style of architectural construction (Neve 1993: 80-81) (Fig. 1-2).

The Sharda Temple had already lost its original roof in 1870, when Charles Bates visited the site, and the top of the temple was sheltered by a makeshift roof (Bates 1873: 338). The oldest photograph of the Sharda temple shows wooden planks joined together that had been placed on the top of the temple. This photo was taken by Aurel Stein in 1892 during his visit to Neelum Valley, and it was later published by Borden (officially Bodley's) library, United Kingdom (Pundit, Ashok, personal communication, May 4, 2015) (Figs 3-4).

The façade of the Sharda Temple again followed the beam and lintel style of construction in which two vertical stone slabs were placed on one horizontal stone. The remaining stone slabs on the uppermost rows of the walls, and the lintel stone, indicate that the Sharda Temple had a plane or pediment roof (Fig. 5). In Late Ancient times, the lintel style, wedge-shaped pediment roof and wooden structures replaced the stone

construction. The trabeated method of architecture implies a wedge-shaped roofing instead of a round or oval one, and it was extensively used in India before the Muslim era in the subcontinent (Croix 1991: 142) (Fig. 6).

The construction materials of the Sharda Temple are heavy dressed stone slabs, lime mortar and pebbles. Plaster filling and cement patches indicate that the renovation of the temple had taken place in the later periods. The construction material of the earliest phase of the Sharda Temple is actually a kind of schist stone, which was rare in the Valley. Later outer walls of the temple were altered for the display of cultic statues during the period of Jainism (Stein 1900: 287; Bates 1873: 383).

The double grand pillars of the Sharda Temple at the entrance are a combination of rectangular and square chiseled stone structures and the top stone attached to the roof is irregularly round. The southeastern door pillars of the structure are misplaced, which is also mentioned by Stein and Bates (*ibid.*). According to former researchers the two stone square pillars with single stone capital were present in the northern side but were lost in the southern side: they were probably lost with the demolition of the outer boundary wall of the temple (Fig. 7-8).

There is a trefoil arch chamber or cell which has a base shaft in the middle of the northern outer boundary wall. The chamber housed two *lingams* of moderate size that indicate that the building was used as a Shiva cult site in different periods (*ibid.*; Khan 2014: 59). There is a gateway in the eastern fortified wall of the Sharda Temple, which was sealed permanently in later period with stones and river pebbles. That eastern doorway remained in the use of pilgrims during the performance of religious rites in the old days.

Interior of the Sharda Temple

The current state of the interior of the Sharda Temple does not show any ritual cult sculpture. There was still a stone slab in the Sharda Temple during the visit of Charles Bates in 1872. He mentioned an unpolished stone slab that lies in the middle of the temple floor with the design of a

Shri Chakra (Bates 1873: 339). But, during the visit of Aurel Stein in 1892, the stone slab was already missing (Stein 1900: 286-287).¹

The outer gateway

There is an ancient structure, which is apparently a gateway of the Sharda Temple site, that can be approached by a stone slabs stairway. The 63 stone slabs stairs first lead towards this ancient entrance structure. The construction technique shows that the combination of round and quadrangular stones of this grand gateway structure is different from that of the main Sharda Temple. This gateway structure maintains a kind of earlier Gandharan (Greek) influence, which is reflected in the outer, blustered double grand pillar and a base shaft (Bates 1873: 339) (Figs 9-10). The stones of pillars are firmly fixed with each other from top to bottom. A close examination shows that a recess or socket is carved on each stone in different directions and joined with each other through tenons or cramps – a technique widely used in Gandharan architecture. The joinery construction technique provides strength to the structure to survive over the centuries (Fig. 11). During the 8th century CE, this building technique was also extensively used in Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, India. The use of this technique still continues in various parts of Jammu and Kashmir with little change (Croix 1991: 141-142). This

¹ In 2005, a scholar, Malcolm McEwen, visited again Sharda in the Neelum Valley. He was particularly interested in the stone slab of Sharda Temple, and on its connection with the *Shri Chakra*, as expression of a specific religious philosophy (McEwen 2009: 17-37). Moreover, nothing is descriptive regarding architecture of Sharda and other sacred sites in his commentary. The only focus of McEwen study was to explore the stone diagram of *Seri Chakra* in the Sharda Temple site. This stone slab is also known as Sharda *Khund* (water pond), and it is believed to be associated with a Hindu Goddess (*Sharika*) in the narratives of legends across the divide in Jammu Kashmir (Pundit, Omkar, personal communication, March 2, 2015). Traditionally, Kashmiri Pundits worshipped the deities in their natural forms like boulders, lakes and springs. It is believed that Goddess *Sharika* is inscribed naturally on boulders as a *Shri Chakra* smeared in vermilion color. It is widely reported that the *Shri Chakra* of Sharda Temple is in fact the *Shri Yantra*, means ‘Place to visit’ or pilgrimage to fulfill religious obligations (ibid.). This *chakra* symbol of Sharda temple reflects the reverence of Kashmiri Pandits for this site, who visited the temple prior to the division of 1948 in Jammu and Kashmir. The study upholds the historical records and myths related to the Sharda temple heritage site in Neelum valley.

gateway structure has exposed two trefoil niches which remained in use for placing oil lamps, figures or other objects of rites in olden days.

There is a possibility that the gateway could be part of earlier structure most probably from Buddhist period. It is possible then that the outer gateway belonged to ca. 4th CE, or at least that was built before to the construction of the Sharda temple. The major structure of this gateway appears to have been destroyed due to human vandalism or natural calamity. On the southern side along the Madhumati river about hundred meters away from main temple structure, there should be another structure, possibly connected to the temple: a mound which features a cluster of stones partially visible under debris.

Addendum: A short comparative study

The architectural characteristics of Sharda Temple are comparable to the Martand Temple in Srinagar, Kashmir, which was constructed during the reign of King Lalitāditya in 8th century CE. The period of king Lalitāditya (724-760 CE) was revolutionary in terms of the architecture of Kashmir, when he introduced both Brahmanism and Buddhism related religious buildings (Brown 1940: 189-192). It can reasonably be inferred that the Martand Temple followed the architectural traditions of the Sharda temple. The style of the Hindu temples evolved from 5th to 10th century CE. The basic projected square plan of the typical temple consisted of an entrance framed with an elaborate doorway and a circular path closely connected to the *Nagara* style of architecture (Meister 1979: 204; Ahmad and Samad 2015). The *Nagara* style of architecture was applied for the construction of Hindu temples in north India and Kashmir area. That happened when Buddhism was slowly replaced by Hinduism starting from the 4th-5th century CE, and subsequently, many Buddhist shrines were heavily modified and converted into Hindu temples (Meister 1979: 204; Ray 1969: 45). Another popular style of architecture in Kashmir was the *Vesara* style, which was also employed for the construction of temples in the Salt Range, Punjab, Pakistan (Brown 1940: 185-188) in the later period of cultural and political collaboration (Hakal et al. 2018: 73-74).

The Sharda Temple is also comparable with the Mandhol Temple in District Poonch, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. It is a quadrangular shrine, with an eastern opening door and *Shikhara* design on the other three walls.

Besides Kashmiri *Shikhara* design, the temple reflected also the late Gandhara style echoed by its peculiar Greek elements. The grand columns and pillars are ornamented in Corinthian style with elaborate design of acanthus leaves. This highly decorated style was developed around the 5th century CE, which is also considered as a supportive element for the façade and roof (Neve 1993: 81-82). The Burand Temple complex ruins in Kotli and Deera Temple, Rawalakot, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, are a continuity of the Sharda Temple architecture style in Neelum Valley.

4. Finds

Ganesh sculpture

A Ganesh head in grey schist stone is unearthed in the adjacent area of Sharda Temple during digging in the fields by a local farmer. The head has documented by research team of TIAC during field survey 2015. It is in fragmentary form and from the examination of its ventral side it seems that it might have been detached from some sort of panel. Most probably the head looks as if detached from the pillar's capital. The trunk of the elephant rises towards the upper side and the figure appears to be decorated with ornaments. The carving reflects the use of refined craftsmanship. The skillfulness is visible from the treatment of various parts. The minor details of the eyes and trunk were expertly done (Fig. 12a, b).

Coins (Fig. 13)

Four copper coins were discovered from the surface of the temple during the survey. Three of the coins were found on the north-western wall of the temple, while the fourth coin was discovered near the south-eastern wall of the Temple. One of the coins (probably Shahi) looks like it bears an image of the goddess Ardoxsho of "Kushana style" of the second century CE (precisely 140–180 CE) with Brahmi legend *Sr Ja<ypaladeva?>* on the obverse and a standing figure of "Kushana style" on the reverse (Fig. 13). The remaining three coins belong to the Islamic period i.e. one to the Ghaznavids (? - 10th century CE) with Arabic legend *Muhammad*, the

other belongs to the Shah Period (14th century CE) with Persian legend *Shah*. The fourth coin is badly defaced and the legend thereon is not legible.

Terracotta Bricks and Pipe

A large number of terracotta bricks in fragmentary and deteriorated condition have been collected from the surface of the site and the nearby areas of the Sharda Temple. The bricks probably belonged to the earlier building at this site that might have belonged to the Buddhists, e.g. monastery, etc.

A terracotta pipe (l. 25, w. 9 cm, th. 2cm) is in fragmentary form and the preserved portion is in good state. The terracotta pipe is red and slightly sandy in texture and there are rope designs on the exterior and interior surfaces of it. Beside the terracotta pipe a good number of red ware potsherds, plain and simple, of various shapes and sizes have been collected from the surface and slopes near the Sharda Temple.

5. Conclusion

It is a well-established fact that the Sharda Temple in Neelum Valley is a wonderful piece of architecture belonging to the Late Ancient or Early Medieval architectural style of Kashmir, ca. 8th century CE. Our field research revealed though the existence of earlier architecture. One of these remains is certainly linked to the outer gateway, which shows architectural and technical features distinct from the Temple itself. The collected cultural material (terracotta pipes, bricks, coins, pottery fragments) is still too poor to confirm an earlier chronology. There is an urgent need of further exploration and excavation in the parts external to the Temple so to complete the assessment of the cultural profile of this important archaeological site.

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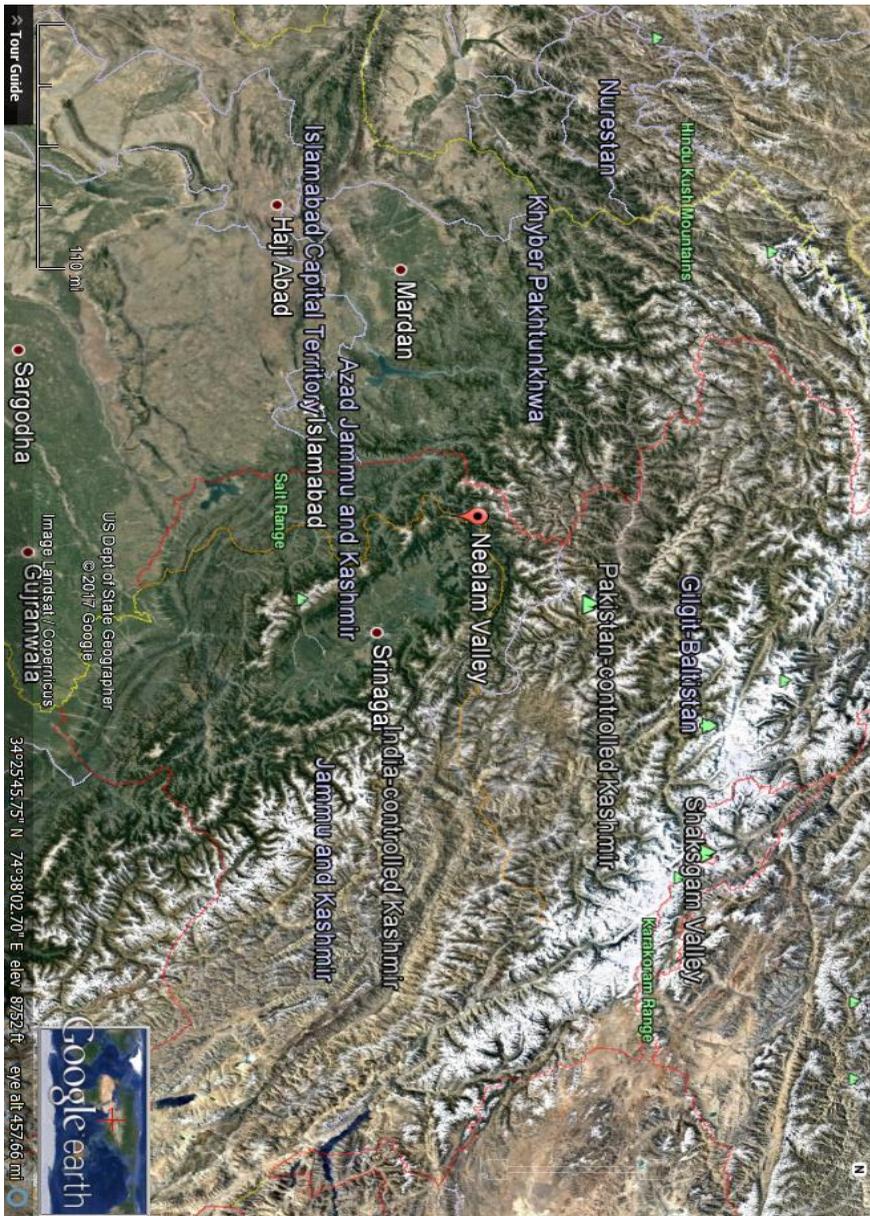
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Map 1- Neelum Valley, Azad Jammu & Kashmir (Source: Google Earth Pro)



Fig. 1 - Front view of the Sharda temple (photo by the author).



Fig. 2 - Side view of the Sharda temple (photo by the author).

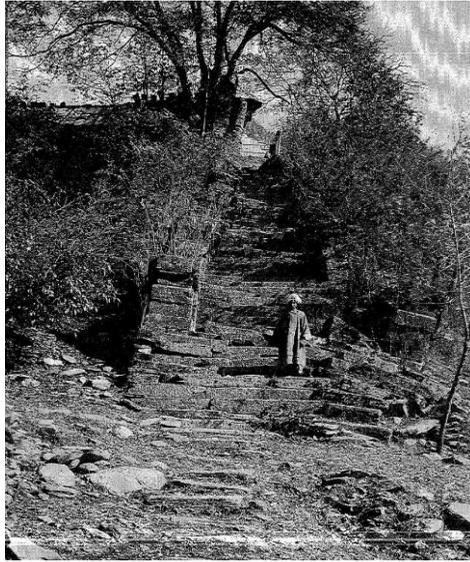


Fig. 3 – An old photo of the Sharda Temple steps (elaborated by the author).

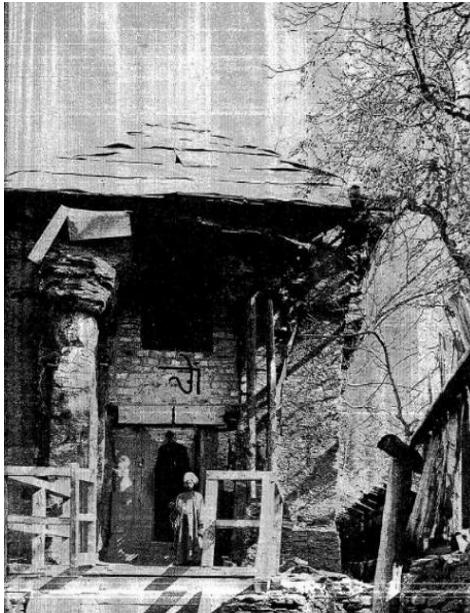


Fig. 4 – An old photo of the Sharda Temple with roof top (elaborated by the author).

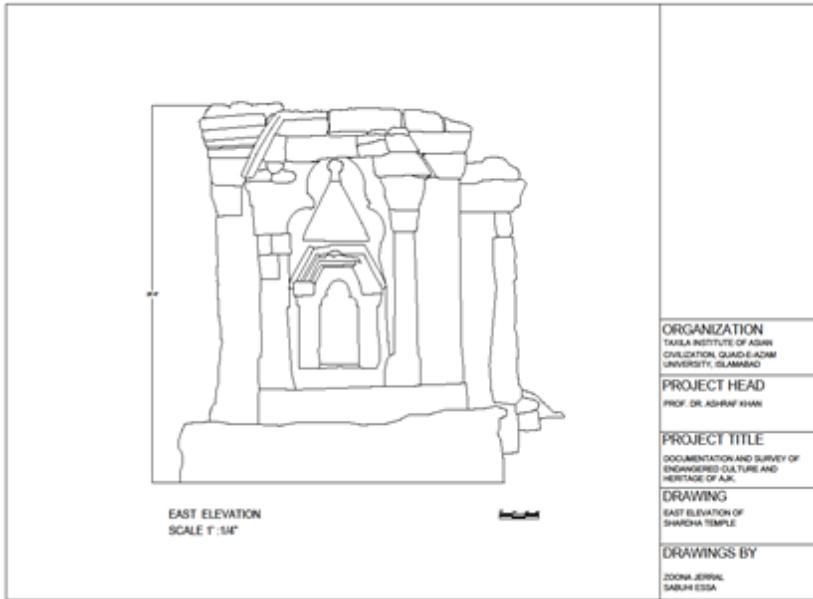


Fig. 5 - East elevation drawing of the Sharda Temple (drawings by the author).

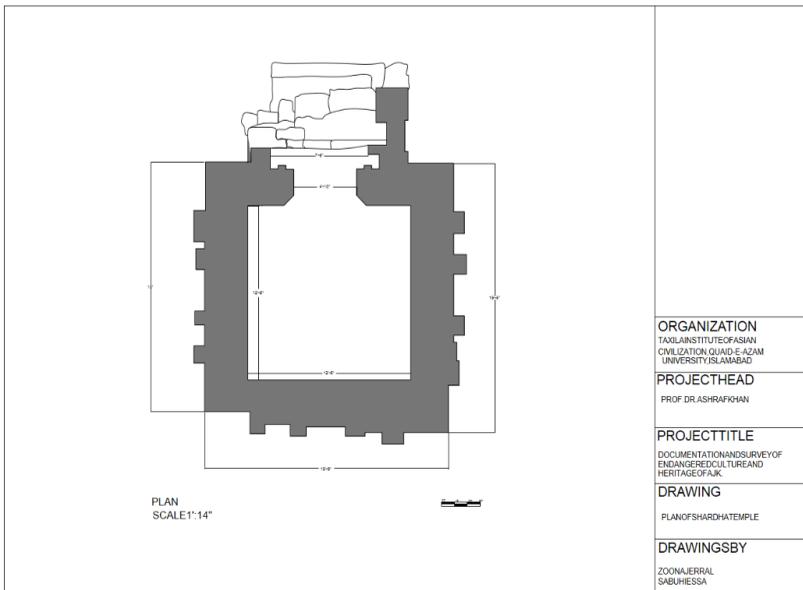


Fig. 6 - Plan of the Sharda Temple (drawings by the author).

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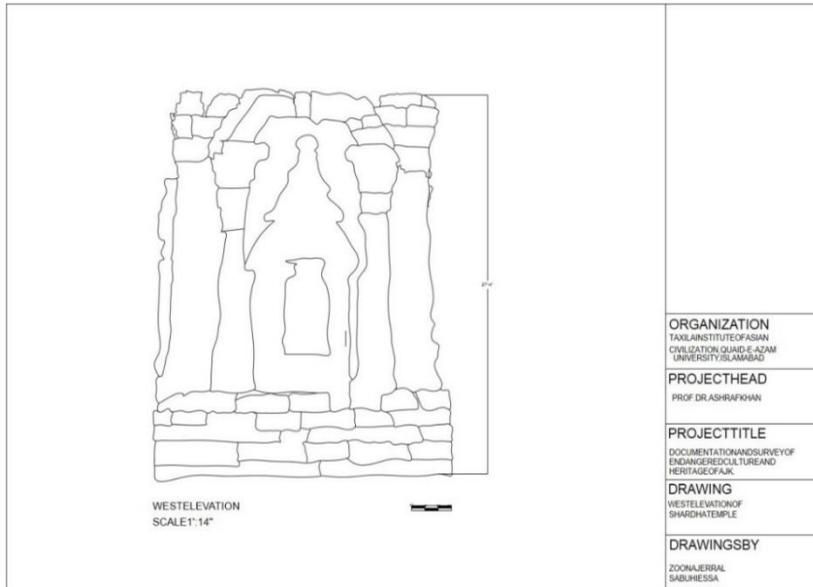


Fig. 7 - Western elevation of the Sharda Temple (drawings by the author).

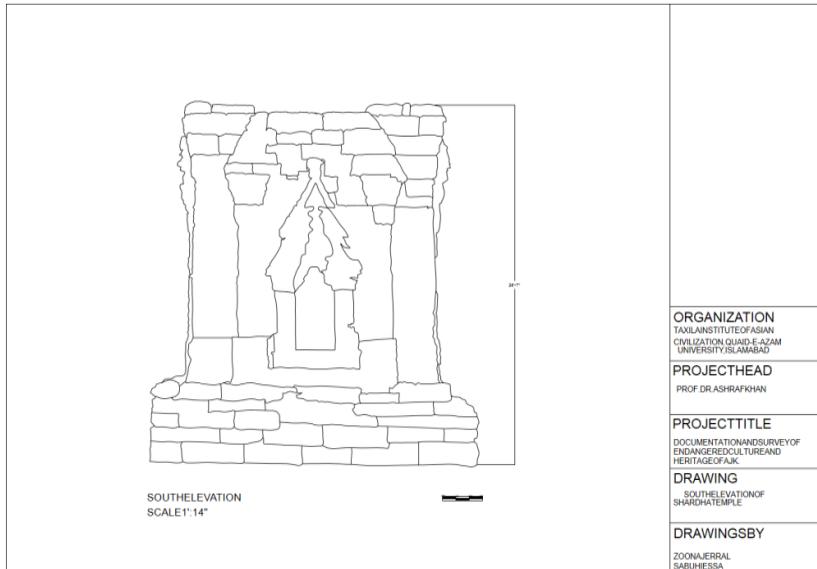


Fig. 8- Southern elevation of the Sharda Temple, Neelum Valle.y

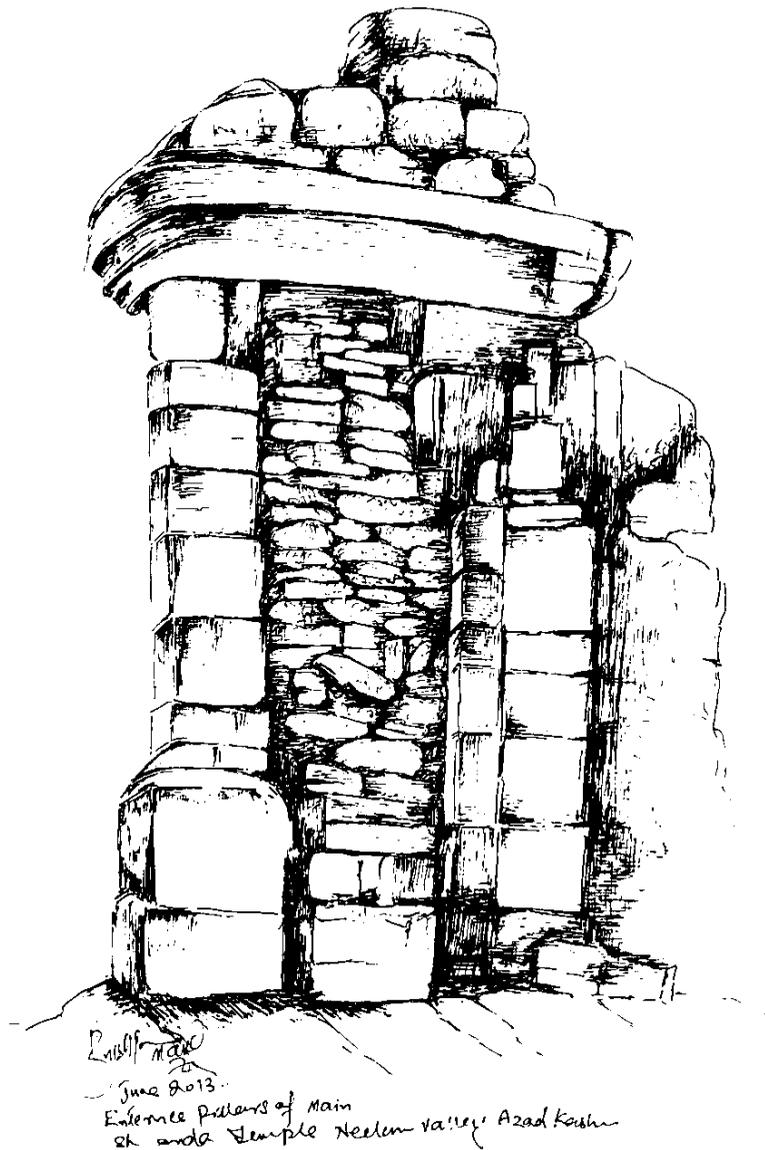


Fig. 9 - Reconstruction of the Temple, Neelum Valley (drawings by the author).



Fig. 10 - Main stairs of the Sharda Temple (photo by the author).

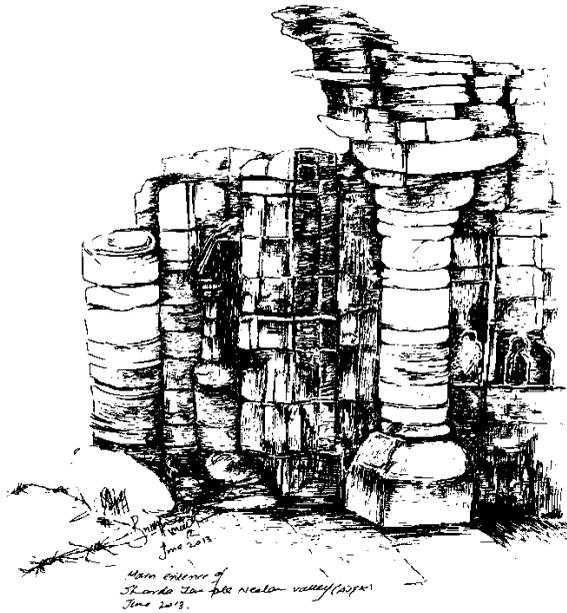


Fig. 11- Sharda Temple entrance (drawings by the author).

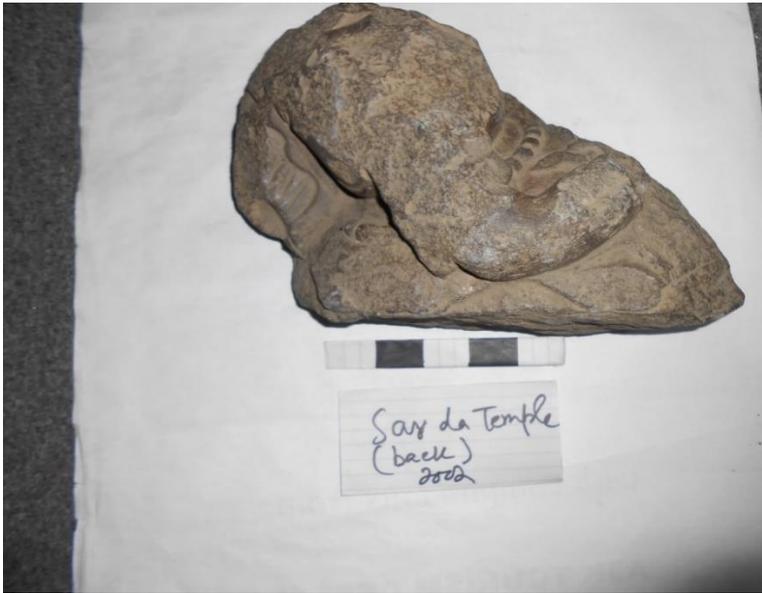


Fig. 12a - A head of Ganesh from Neelum Valley (photo by the author)



Fig. 12b - Sketch of Ganesh head from Neelum Valley (drawings by the author)

No.	Coin	Obverse	Reverse
1	<p>Material: Copper Weight: 10.1 gm Dia: 2 cm Period: 10th-11th century CE Description. Obverse: Enthroned Ardoxsho ("Kushana" style?) Brahmi legend <i>Sri Ja....</i> Reverse: Standing figure ("Kushana" style)</p>		
2	<p>Material: Copper Weight: 6.4220 gm Period: 8th Century CE Description Obverse. Arabic legend ... <i>Muhammad ...</i> Reverse. <i>Fisanah</i>, date probably ca. 8th-11th CE</p>		
3	<p>Material: Copper Weight: 5.3703 gm Period: 14th Century CE (Islamic Period) Description Both sides of the coin are defaced and unclear</p>		
4	<p>Material: Copper Weight: 0.6281 gm Period: 14th Century CE (Islamic Period) Description Obverse. Arabic legend <i>Shah...</i> Reverse. Defaced</p>		

Fig. 13 - Copper coins (surface collection from Sharda temple).