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The Buddhist Site of Kafir Kot, Kharwar (Afghanistan)

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Kafir Kot ('The mound of the Infidels', a common toponym in eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan to indicate the ruins of former Buddhist or Hindu settlements) is situated along the uppermost course of the river Charkh, a tributary of the Logar river, in the secluded plateau of Kharwar (33°40' 06 N, 68°57'58' E, at 2500 m above sea level) in the Governorate of Logar, SE Afghanistan (Figs. 1-2).

Fig. 1 – Kafir Kot in Southeastern Afghanistan.
Fig. 2 - Kafir Kot in Kharwar plateau, Logar Province.

The site lies at a very short distance from the seat of the Vice-Governatorate of Kharwar. The plateau, swept by strong winds, is rich of water, which makes irrigation and cultivation possible. It is exclusively inhabited by Pathans, about 60,000 people scattered in very small villages and isolated qalas (Fig.3).
The easiest route to reach Kharwar from Kabul is from the metalled road leading to Pul-e Alam, the capital town of Logar, and to Gardez. You turn right at Altamur, from where it is easy to reach the pass of Khwaja Angurak and the archaeological site. From Pul-e Alam you can also take the road to Charkh, a magnificent oasis with plenty of grapes, and then proceed to Kharwar via the difficult pass of Kharpechak. Another route is from Ghazni via Zana Khan, following upstream a tributary of the Ghazni river. The Zana Khan dam is one of the few water supplies of the town of Ghazni, which is the nearest important town.

2. Narrative

The preparations for the planned fieldwork at Kafir Kot lasted for long and were subject to a number of uncertainties. We had planned to work on the site from about mid-September to mid-October 2003. In the late spring, guerrilla actions started in the region, affecting the territory of Logar and the adjoining provinces of Ghazni and Gardez.
In August, nine people - five policemen and four soldiers - were killed in Kharwar during a military attack to the residence of the Vice-Governor, which is situated a few hundred meters from the archaeological site. The attack, besides its political aim, discouraged any attempt at stopping the looting of the site, the most spectacular Buddhist town ever-discovered in Afghanistan, with the exception of Bamiyan and Hadda. The profit from the export of antiques is enormous, and looters have been particularly active at Kafir Kot in the last few years.

When I arrived in Kabul in September, the Minister of Culture, Mr Sayyed Makhdoon Raheen, and his Deputy Minister, Mr Yusufzai, were favourable that our team could go to Kharwar, provided I obtained permission from the Governors of Ghazni and Logar. The Italian Archaeological Mission is based in Ghazni, which is only about 50 km west of Kharwar, and we thought it advisable to make it our main station. Our friend Asadullah Khaled, Governor of Ghazni, was sympathetic to our programme, but he wanted first to get a clearer picture of the situation in the territory between Ghazni and Kharwar and carry out some military action to clear the place from the al-Qaeda people and local marauders.

We were eventually allowed to leave for Kharwar on 6 October. Stefano Tilia, surveyor, Elio Paparatti, draftsman, and Eugenio Monti, photographer, were with me, and we were accompanied by Abdul Rauf Zakir, representative of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, and by Mohebullah Samim, the Government responsible for cultural matters of the Ghazni province. We were given a military escort composed of six soldiers, and were supposed to stay in Kharwar for the day. We took the road to Zana Khan, on the border between the Province of Ghazni and Logar. There is a military post near the dam (Fig. 4).
It was a great pleasure to meet Haji Ahmad Zia Masud, a military commander whom I knew. He was in charge of our security, and gave at our disposal two more jeeps with soldiers and two look-outs on motorcycles. Actually, the territory between Zana Khan and the fertile area of Kharwar is desolate and very little inhabited, and offers itself to ambushes. We reached the Vice-Governorate of Kharwar at about 11 am, after a journey of four hours. Only the local responsible of the police was there, Sayyed Mir Ahmad Shah Hashimi (Fig. 5), with whom we could speak Italian, since he had been in Italy for some time years before.

He told us that we could safely spend the night on the place, which we eventually did in the big qala of a medical doctor, Nakibullah, where a large number of neighbours and elders convened for dinner.
In the afternoon of the following day, Commander Masud thought it wiser to send us back along another road. He did not accompany us this time, and we met him only at Zana Khan. Later we were to know that he had arrested two Talibans affiliated to al-Qaida on the very road we had come the day before.

Another trip to Kharwar was planned for October 13. The team was composed of Stefano Tilia, surveyor, Elio Paparatti, draftsman, Giannino Pastori, archaeologist, and Eugenio Monti, photographer, accompanied by Mr. Zakir. Since this time the group was not aided by an escort, it was decided to take a different route from Ghazni, first following the metalled road to Kabul (almost completed) and then turning right to Baraki Barak and Pul-e Alam, the capital of Logar, where a meeting with the Governor of the Province had been planned. The members of the team started off early in the morning; after travelling up through the province of Wardak they turned right from the main route after Sayyedabad, and headed eastward along a gravel road. After a few kilometres they entered a valley with a flowing stream in its middle and luxuriant vegetation all around, quite in contrast with the stark and barren landscape they had just left. As usual, road conditions were rather poor, thus lengthening travel time considerably. In the district of Baraki Barak, the valley was widening and the intensity and you could observe the richness in cultivations of an apparently very
fertile land. After a ride of about 4 hours the team finally arrived on the paved road connecting Kabul with Gardez: this meant that Pul-e Alam was only a few kilometres away.

Once arrived, the members of the team headed directly to the Governor’s seat, where they were kept waiting for a while since there was an ongoing session. After it ended, the Vice Governor and his secretary came out and greeted them, but told them that unfortunately the Governor himself was not in Pul-e Alam since very important matters had taken him to Kabul, and the bad news was that he had taken all available escort vehicles with him. In fact, without any proper escort the team would not be permitted to carry out the planned mission. It was not possible to find a solution in order to materialize an escort team, and even though the local responsible for culture had given all his support, the group was obliged to drop the project and rode back the same way it had come.

No other work on the site could be carried out during the season.

3. The Site

Kafir Kot is composed of a cluster of mounds (Figs. 6-7) on the right bank of the river Charkh near the small village of Jawzay.

Fig. 6 - Kafir Kot, general view (360°).

Fig. 7 - Kafir Kot seen from west.

Several other mounds, some of which of considerable size, dot the river course to the west of Kafir Kot. We could not visit them, but their existence adds to
the complex picture of a territory where the constant presence of water and a carefully controlled irrigation system allow cultivation and cattle-breeding. When watered, the lime is extremely fertile, and one has to imagine that in Buddhist time the territory was more fully exploited, so as to support a community that was certainly larger and richer than the present one. The cattle are not free to pasture, but are kept in cowsheds adjoining the *qalas*.

The main site, Kafir Kot, may be divided into four parts (Fig. 8).

![Fig. 8 - Map of Kafir Kot.](image)

The first, which occupies the SE part of the settlement, corresponds to the ancient town. To the south of it, separated by a deep canal or ancient river bed, rises a large mound, numbered 12 on the map, which was not visited (Fig. 9).
The third part into which Kafir Kot may be subdivided lies to the west of the habitation area: it includes a fortress, built near the northern corner of the town, and a number of sacred buildings, forming a sort of amphitheatre at the centre of which there is a water spring. Finally, a series of mounds, not included in the map, lie to the northeast of the town along the mountain spurs which close the valley to the north (Fig. 10).
Fig. 10 – Kafir Kot, mounds to north and northeast of main site.

After a thorough visual survey of the site, which enabled us to have a clearer picture of how the various features were planimetrically arranged, we decided upon the best positions where to set up the topographical instrument. These resulted, rather obviously, in the tops of mounds 4 and 7 (Fig. 7): the highest points from which the whole site could be easily observed. Another instrument stationing point was set at the extreme SE corner of the main terrace in order to cover a few sectors not visible from the above-mentioned mounds. Our time was very limited, and this resulted in the impossibility to survey the whole site, so it was decided to at least map the outline of the main terrace - the town - and add all other features schematically.
The town

The town (Figs. 8, 11) is situated on a high terrace, and has a rather irregular shape, with recesses and corners. It is 15 ha. large. There is a large stupa in schist in the SW corner (Fig. 12).

Fig. 11 – Terrace with habitation area.
Points were measured along the terrace's rim - more or less, every twenty steps. Later, all gathered data would be processed in order to produce an accurate and oriented map (north) of the site's main feature through which we would be able to evaluate its proper extension in area.

The whole surface of the mound is covered by potsherds. The great majority can be classified as common red ware, sometimes stamped with round medallions or with small-incised circlets forming floral motifs, or also with spiralled motifs (Figs. 13-14).
On the basis of pottery, functionally differentiated areas can be recognized. In the NE part of the terrace, an area heavily affected by looting, only fragments of large jars are found (Fig. 15), a thing which may indicate the existence of specialized shops or depots.

Fig. 15 – Fragment of jars in the town.
Other objects are also available from the surface. We collected a bead in the shape of a lion made of lapis lazuli, and a Kushana coin. The coins issued by the Kushana rulers (1st-3rd century AD) were in use for a long time after the collapse of the dynasty, and cannot be taken as a chronological indicator, unless they are found in a sealed stratigraphic context.

The Fortress

Mound 2 (Fig. 16) may be tentatively identified with a fortified palace or fortress, preserving two-storeyed buildings entirely built with unbaked bricks.

The walls are plastered with a thick layer of pakhsa (clay mixed with straw) and show traces of green paint. A round bastion in the northern corner (Fig. 17), covered by a corbelled dome, is accessible through the tunnels which were excavated by looters. A corridor, 70 cm large, runs around the central, circular room, with which it does not communicate, and along the northern side of the fortress. The lower room (see especially section A-B) has a parabolic vault, and was never plastered.
Fig. 17 – Fortress, detail with round bastion. Plan and sections.

Round-bastioned structures are documented in other sites of SE Afghanistan (Shotorak in Kapisha, Tapa Maranjan in Kabul, Gul Dara in Logar, etc.), and in Gandhara. They are dated from the middle of the 6th century onwards, a date which also suits the fortress of Kafir Kot.
At about 15 m south of these structures, there are two circular water tanks (Fig. 18), which measure ca. 5 m. at the bottom, where there are lateral passages probably leading to similar adjoining structures. These tanks are seemingly situated at the centre of the inner court of the fortress.

Fig. 18 – Water tank inside fortress

The Sacred Area

The large mounds south of the fortress and west of the town are easily recognizable as stupas and monasteries. The sacred space is apparently defined by four stupas, approximately situated at the four cardinal points (Fig. 8). Stupa 5 is, however, much smaller than the others. The stupas are built in stone, while the chapels and, presumably, the monastic quarters, were made with unbaked bricks. Small stupas in stone were very numerous in the monasteries, as is shown by the schist umbrellas scattered in the whole area (Fig. 19).
The large mound numbered 11 delimiting the whole area to the west, could be at least in part examined. The mound rises abruptly to the east of a river branch, and is occupied by a monastic establishment. You can easily recognize the stupa court surrounded by a row of chapels, similar one to the other (Fig. 20).
The stupa has a diameter of 20 m, and its distance from the centre of the chapels is 10 m. Fig. 21 shows a schematic reconstruction of this part of the monastery, heavily affected by illegal excavations. The stupa is made of schist, and a large pit has been dug at its centre in the aim of reaching the relic chamber.

![Fig. 21 - Schematic plan of monastery in Mound 11.](image)

The chapels opening into the stupa court have also been robbed of the sculpted and painted decoration. Some of the rooms on the southern side of the quadrangle (Fig. 22) can be entered through the tunnels made by the looters.
Fig. 22- Chapels south of stupa court in Mound 11. Plan and section.

Room 11E preserves two thrones in the NW and SW corners, where the lower parts of two clay images of Buddha or Bodhisattva, painted red, are still standing (Fig. 23). The figures were represented as if walking. The remains of the image portraying a donor (Fig. 24) are visible on the western wall. There was a wooden stick in the hole in the wall, probably meant for supporting the donor’s right hand offering a heavy object (a reliquary?).
Chapel 11F (Fig. 22), measuring 5 x 5 m, has a door giving into the stupa court. A stupa stood at its centre, and four images at the corners. On the SE corner are visible the remains of a standing image, and along the southern wall a few donors (?). This chapel has been left partly unexcavated by the looters.

The next chapel to the west seems undisturbed. It also measures 5 x 5 m, as can be surmised from the space existing between Chapel 11F and Chapel 11D. The latter, with the same measures, can be entered from a tunnel on the western side and can be also seen from the collapsed vault. This room was originally covered by a
dome raised on squinches (Fig. 25), a feature introduced from Sasanian architecture, and it is likely that the other chapels had the same kind of vault. Here also there were images at the four corners, and traces of painting can be observed on the surviving squinch in the SW corner. The head of a Buddha image, anchored to the wall by means of a wooden stick, once stood against the lowermost arch of the squinch (Fig. 26) where there are traces of a painted, flaming halo.

Fig. 25 – Mound 11, squinch in chapel 11D.
Square chambers covered by domes on squinches are common at Bamiyan, and are well documented in the free-standing architecture of central Hindukush, as well as at Tapa Sardar (Ghazni) and Gul Dara, a monastery in the lower Logar valley. It is generally believed that this architectural feature was not introduced into eastern Afghanistan before the 5th or 6th century. This also helps in suggesting a late date for Kafir Kot, or at least for a large part of its buildings.

A stone stupa was also observed in Mound 1 (Fig. 27), which closes the amphitheatre to the north. We could draw a detail of its base (Fig. 28 left), very similar to that of the main stupa at Tapa Sardar in Ghazni (Fig. 28 right).
The stupa in Mound 5, decorated with half-pilasters (Fig. 29) also shows very close similarities with Tapa Sardar.
We could also draw a detail of the stupa base in Mound 7, with a cornice with torus at the bottom and half-pillars above it, 1.2 m distant one from the other. There probably was an upper processional path (*pradakshina-patha*). These architectonic features are visible thanks to a tunnel excavated by the looters (Fig. 30).
The Sculptures

A very large number of clay sculptures, paintings, and manuscripts (as reported by some) found at Kafir Kot have been illegally excavated and smuggled to Peshawar in Pakistan in recent years. Peshawar is the traditional centre supplying antique markets with Gandharan pieces all over the world. Some sculptures, mostly clay heads, were recovered by the Afghan authorities, and are now kept in the Kabul Museum. The sanctuary on Mound 11, which has been thoroughly cleaned out, is only one of the places from where the objects may come from. The mounds south of the fortress and Mound 1 may also be the places where they were taken.

The sculptures are made of clay, the commonest material used in the late and post-Gandharan Buddhist sanctuaries of Afghanistan and Central Asia. Gandhara is the ancient name of the plain of Peshawar in northern Pakistan, famous for the extraordinary output of Buddhist sculptures in stone datable to the 1st-3rd century AD. The art of Gandhara spread beyond the Khyber and the Hindukush in the following centuries, but here the medium used was rather stucco or clay. This allowed for the composition of very large panels and, if required by the iconographic programme, of very large Buddha and Bodhisattva images. Narrative scenes were less frequent than in early Gandharan production, and we often see groups with Shakyamuni or Maitreya Buddha at the centre surrounded by gods and worshipped by devotees.

The clay images were shaped around a frame made of wood and straw, and the clay was also mixed with minute fragments of straw. The decorative details and some anatomic parts (hand fingers, hair locks, necklace beads, bracelets, etc.) were separately made with moulds and applied to the image when it was still wet. The upper, thin coat of clay was painted or gilded. In some cases, the golden leaf was applied on the painted image, probably some time after it was first moulded.

In Afghanistan, the most famous monasteries decorated with clay images are (or rather, were) Tapa Shotor at Hadda, near Jelalabad (one of the largest Buddhist sites known, corresponding to the ancient town of Nagarahara), which was excavated by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s; Tapa Maranjan, in Kabul, first excavated by the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan and then by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology; Fondukistan, not far from Bamiyan, excavated by the French Mission; and Tapa Sardar near Ghazni, unearthed by the Italian Archaeological Mission. Tapa Shotor was destroyed shortly after the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979, and only a few pieces remain of the beautiful,
almost intact clay decoration for which it was so famous. Tapa Sardar was ravaged by the Taliban in 2001, one week after the blast which destroyed the colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan, but fortunately the majority of the clay sculptures, which were kept in the storehouse, have survived the war. They belong, in part, to the late-Gandharan production, and, in part, to the late Buddhist period. To the latter belong the sculptures from Fondukistan, partly kept in Kabul and partly in Paris.

Stylistically, the late-Gandharan production, which can be dated from the 4th to the mid-7th century, still adheres to Hellenistic models, consciously preserved and reproduced. The examples from Kafir Kot are also part of this production, and closely resemble the sculptures from Tapa Shotor, Tapa Maranjan and those from the early sanctuary of Tapa Sardar, and can be attributed to the 6th-7th century. Conversely, the late Buddhist production that we know from Fondukistan and especially Tapa Sardar, strongly influenced by Tang art, seems to be altogether lacking in Kharwar. This may indicate that by the end of the 7th century the local monasteries did not receive any further patronage.

Among the pieces kept in the Kabul Museum, there are a few heads of the Buddha, the others being of donors and, probably, devas or gods. The following are the best preserved pieces.
1. (Fig. 31) Head of a Buddha or Bodhisattva with elongated eyes and usnisa (cranial protuberance). Hair-dress made of moulded curls, of which only a few survive. Traces of red colour on the face, black colour on curls. Clay, ht 35 cm
2. (Fig. 32) Male head wearing headgear (?).
   Traces of red paint.
   Much damaged on left side and forehead.
   Clay, ht 15.5 cm
3. (Fig. 33) Head of a male donor wearing a cap, of which only the lower border survives.

Traces of red paint.

Damaged, especially on right side; a few cracks.

Clay, ht 16 cm
4. (Fig. 34) Head of a youth wearing a helmet-like headgear, bound with a string partly surviving below the right cheek.

Traces of red paint.

Chipped and worn.

Clay, ht 15 cm
5. (Fig. 35) Head of a male donor wearing turban.
Traces of red paint. A few cracks.
Clay, ht 20 cm
6. (Fig. 36) Head of a prince or Bodhisattva, with hair-dress decorated with a beaded jewel and applied curls, of which only few survive. Faint traces of red colour. Damaged on right side. Clay, ht 20 cm
7. (Fig. 37) Head of a young Brahman, as shown by the loop of hair on top of head.
Painted red; eyebrows marked with black colour.
Chipped.
Clay, ht 12.5 cm
8. (Figs. 38-39) A donor, wearing pants and tunic and holding a bunch of flowers. He wears plain wristlets and a belt decorated with moulded plaquettes, two of which survive. The flowers, obtained by a mould, are separately applied on a lump of clay. Red painted.
Headless and feetless.
Clay, ht 50 cm
9. (Figs. 40-41) Upper part of the image of a female donor wearing an elaborate hair
dress with a row of curls on the forehead and locks falling on shoulders. Her folded
garment is visible on the right. Right hand raised at the height of the breast.
Curls painted black; eye lines and eyebrows made with black paint; lime preparation
for paint on face and breast.
Clay, ht 46 cm
10. (Figs. 42-43) Upper part of the image of a male donor, wearing moustache and accurately combed beard.

Much worn; traces of lime preparation for paint.

Clay, ht 44 cm
11. (Fig. 44) Head of a youth wearing a cap decorated with small round plaques.
Worn: chipped.
Clay, ht 15 cm
12. (Fig. 45) Head of a youth wearing a small cap.
   Chipped; a few cracks.
   Clay, ht 15 cm
13. (Fig. 46) Head a Brahman with hair made in a knot or of a Bodhisattva. A few hair locks survive, obtained with moulds.
Red and black painted.
Chipped; ht 14 cm
14. (Fig. 47) A male head (of the Buddha?) showing elongated eyes.
Traces of paint and gold leaf.
Chipped; hair and ears lost.
Clay, ht 21.5 cm

4. Historical

Only excavations will be able to answer the questions raised by the very existence of such a huge site as Kafir Kot, but a few preliminary considerations may be of some interest.

What we know about SE Afghanistan in the Buddhist period largely depends on the information we have from the Chinese pilgrims, and in particular from Xuang Zang, a learned monk who visited this region during his journey from China to India in about 630 AD and on his way back some fifteen years later. Some of the Buddhist kingdoms he visited, such as Bamiyan, Kapisha and Nagarahara, are described at

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some length; others we are unable to identify. There is much uncertainty especially about the places visited by Xuanzang during his return journey to China. We still depend on the 19th century translations of his report, which are largely inadequate. We also lack a thorough study of the other relevant Chinese sources.

In the 7th century, there were two kingdoms south of the Hindukush: Jibin, which included the former kingdoms of Kapisha and Kabul, and Caojuza. The latter corresponds to the Kingdom of Zabul which we know from the early Arabic and Persian sources. Zabul fiercely opposed the advance of the Arabs from the mid-seventh century onwards, until the final subjugation of the whole territory in the early 870s. According to Xuanzang, one of the capitals of Caojuza/Zabul, whose boundaries we do not exactly know, was Hosina. It is generally identified with Ghazni (which was to become the capital of the Ghaznavid empire in the 11th-12th century). The other capital of the kingdom, Hesaluo, was as large as Hosina. Both cities measured 'above 30 li in circuit' (a li corresponded to about 700 m), and 'had strong elevated situations'.

In the city Hesaluo – to quote the translation by Thomas Waters – 'there were springs from which issued streams of water which the farmers used for irrigation. The climate was very cold, and frost and snow abounded(...). This description may fit Kafir Kot, 2500 m high: in fact, there is a spring at the centre of the amphitheatre constituted by the mounds formed by the monasteries and stupas to the west of the town proper (Figs. 8, 48), and the river Charkh flows to the south of the settlement, making cultivation possible, while one of its branches flows to the west of the sacred area. Hesaluo is apparently one and the same thing with Haosa Dacheng, mentioned in a later Chinese source, the Monograph on Geography of the Xing Tang Shu, or New History of the Tang Dynasty. The rank of Dacheng, great town or capital, would perfectly fit Kafir Kot.
It is not clear when the Buddhist monasteries of SE Afghanistan were first established. Some of them may go back to the early centuries AD, but the large majority was certainly built between the 6th and the 7th century. This is the period when patronage was particularly strong. A new route had been opened between China and India, replacing the old Karakorum route. The Buddhist communities of eastern Afghanistan, which won the control of all the trade, benefited enormously of the new situation. The huge Buddhas of Bamiyan, which were built in about AD 600, are an example of this. Kafir Kot was certainly part of this new order.

Xuanzang observed that in many Buddhist kingdoms of Afghanistan and northwestern India many monasteries were deserted, and that ‘temples of the gods’, that is, Brahmanical temples, had been established. Brahmanical icons in marble, datable to the 8th century, come from Gardez, Kabul and Kapisha. In Logar, the province where the plateau of Kharwar is situated, the Sakawand temple, mentioned in several Muslim sources, attracted Hindu worshippers ‘from the remotest parts of Hindustan’. Clearly, Brahmanism was growing at the expense of Buddhism, and in the 7th and 8th century the Buddhist kingdoms were under the double attack of the Muslims from the west and of the Hindus from the east and south.
As pointed out above, there is no evidence at Kafir Kot of any artistic output influenced by Tang art, a phenomenon which can be observed in many sites of Western Central Asia in the first half of the 8th century. This would indicate that Kafir Kot was abandoned earlier than other Buddhist sites, as for instance Tapa Sardar, which was deserted only at the end of the 8th century. The decline of Kafir Kot may not have been due to the increasing pressure of the Arabs, although the frequent disruption of trade routes in the second half of the 7th century must have affected the town, which controlled the trade route between Ghazni (and, farther south, Kandahar) and Logar.