CHAPTER TWO

SITES, HISTORY, AND COMPARATIVE CHRONOLOGY

Centered in the Peshawar Valley and on the Pothohar Plateau, ancient Gandhāra was at times ruled from Peshawar, Charasadda, Taxila, Kabul under the Turk Śāhis, and in the ninth and tenth centuries by Hindu (Uḍī) Śāhis from Udabhāṇḍapura (Hund). The Chinese pilgrim, Xuanzang 1906, visiting Gandhāra in the seventh century, noted, along with many Buddhist sites then in decline, hundreds of Hindu structures for which little evidence now remains (Rehman 1984).

Shoshin Kuwayama 1999: 36–37 & 52–54 has identified a “kingdom, inaugurated by Khingal [that] existed in the Kābul valleys with capitals at Bagram in the summer and Hund in the winter. It came into existence in parallel with the political weakening of the Hephthalites toward the middle of the sixth century and lasted until the rise of the Turks in Kābul in the middle of the seventh century.” In his opinion “Turkish rulers of Kābul replaced the Khingal dynasty in the third quarter of the seventh century.” Kuwayama’s rethinking of the history of Kapiśi (Kabul) in this period is particularly useful for understanding the historical frame with which fortresses and temples along the Indus must eventually be correlated. Most striking, in his interpretation, is a shift in trade routes:

Particularly important for the history of the Northwest was the policy of the West Turks never to cross the Hindukush in order to occupy Gandhāra and beyond. Therefore, after the decline of the Hephthalites, a political vacuum to the west of the Indus thus fell into the hands of a local dynasty…inaugurated in Kapiśī by a ruler called Khingal…. This new political map drawn from the middle of the sixth century onward is also closely related with a drastic change in the trade routes connecting the north with the south through the Hindukush…. This change was really an epoch-making event by virtue of its atrophying effect on Gandhāra and its promotion of Bāmiyān and Kapiśī as trade centres stimulating their sudden prosperity in and at the south foot of the Hindukush respectively.

Kuwayama ibid. 59 found evidence from the site of Kair Khana to reconstruct “a conflict between the two different religions” between ca. 606–629—before Xuanzang’s visit—involving worship of a local divinity Zhuna (Zur in Muslim sources) versus “a new intruder group
worshipping Sūrya [the Sun god] as the one and only deity.” He argues that the Kinghal dynasty extended its reach to the west bank of the Indus by the seventh century—to Hund, which became its winter capital, but also to Bannu and possibly even Dera Ismail Khan—a region with a large Brahmanical population alongside Buddhists. Kuwayama 1977 & 1999: 66–68 has also studied a number of marble sculptures of Brahmanical affiliation found from south of the Hindukush, which he has tended to date to the seventh and eighth centuries.

Nāgara Architecture in the Northwest

Nāgara architecture, with its typifying curvilinear tower, evolved in middle India in the fifth to early seventh centuries. It had other formal modes—barrel vaulted in some instances or layered pyramidal in others—which do not appear in Pakistan, but its architects had developed a latina morphology for the Nāgara temple by the mid-sixth century that made it immediately distinctive. Sites in the Salt Range and along the Indus preserve a sequence of temples with curvilinear towers with vertical banding that defines the evolution of a distinctive regional school of Nāgara architecture.

Turk Śāhis ruling from Kabul and Hund in the seventh–eighth centuries continued to proclaim themselves Buddhist, yet during their rule, and perhaps with their patronage, a regional school of temple architecture, built on a greater Gandhāran foundation, evolved to give local expression to a new Nāgara vocabulary that had developed in Gangetic India to house Hindu, Jain, and occasionally Buddhist images for worship (Meister 1986). Using the technology of a greater Gandhāran construction—with ashlar-faced, sometimes rubble-filled walls, mortar, and simple interior domes and squinches—these temples interpret the latina Nāgara morphology of Hindu middle India in local and original ways.

In the period of the succeeding Hindu Śāhi rulers of Hund from the ninth to eleventh centuries, this regional variety of Nāgara architecture developed distinct formulations, with doubled chambers buried on the vertical axis within a single latina tower and with an upper ambulatory path accessible by means of a narrow stairway in one wall of the ground storey. Sometimes called ‘mināras’ today, these larger temples did stand like fortification towers along the ridges of the Salt Range and along the upper Indus River (fig. 112).