

Shrouded in haze of time

IHSAN H. NADIEM says that rare specimens of temple architecture of very pleasing and harmonious blending of three distinct styles of religion

Dera Ismail Khan, the southern-most district of the North West Frontier Province, not only spreads over a vast area but also presents varied forms of landscape and a diverse type of cultural scene. Besides the remote antiquity like the sites at Gumla and Rahman Dheri, it has in it the unique Muslim period tombs at Lal Mahra Sharif belonging to the Tughlaq period, taking their origin in the 14th century, and the modern building feat in the shape of Chashma Barrage. It is then little wonder that students of architectural history find here some of the unique examples of building art.

Two such interesting examples are faced at the Kafir Kots, Northern and Southern, the latter lying near the village of Bilot Sharif. A local tradition tells that there were three brothers named as Til, Bil and Akil each of whom built a kot or fort and named it after himself. Til Raja's kot is now generally reckoned as Kafir Kot, specifically the Northern Kafir Kot, while the other two kots are even to date known after the names of their founders. Bil Raja's kot was known after him as Bil-kot, now corrupted to Bilot (the southern Kafir Kot) while Akil's fort was called Alik Kot, becoming Akilot, now thought to be the site of Akra near Bannu.

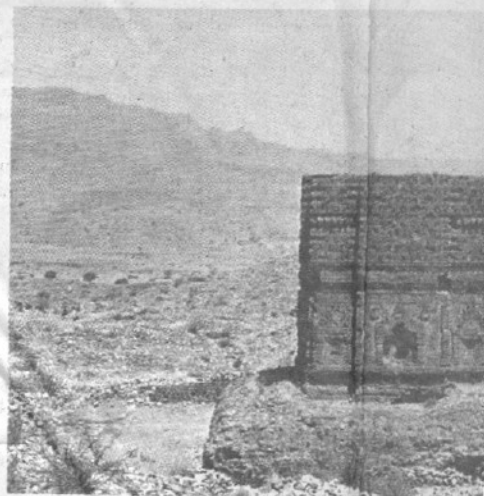
Both the Kafir Kots, northern as well as southern, have their origin shrouded in the haze of time. However, on the basis of the architectural evidence, as also the historical events, they certainly are assigned a date prior to the conquest of Punjab by Mahmud of Ghazna (1001-1026 AD). They strongly bear the marks of Kashmir style on the basis of which they could be reckoned to go back to 7th-8th centuries AD when this whole area was under Kashmir. The assumption is further corroborated by the fact that in the first half of the 8th century AD the inroads of the Arab Muslims had already gone up the Indus and there is complete

absence of any Muslim architectural specimen in both of the Kafir Kots.

The Kafir Kot Bilot site, or the Southern Kafir Kot, although remotely located, is now easily accessible from Dera Ismail Khan taking either the Canal Road along the Paharpur Canal or the D.I. Khan-Chashma Road. It lies on the top of the hill just above the Paharpur Canal Regulatory and about a couple of kilometres from the village of Bilot Sharif. The extensive remains of a fortified town belong to the Hindu Shahiya period, antedating Muslim era in the region. The fortification and the temples inside now lie scattered on the heights and would have once commanded the valley below towards Punjab.

The fort occupies a defensive position on top of a well-defined plateau formed by an offshoot of the Khisor Range on its southern-most point where it touches the Indus Plan. The range is part of one of the three high ranges, namely Bhattani, Marwat and Khisor. These hills display the general north-south alignment as the Waziristan hills and the Sulaiman Mountains, but are devoid of not only all the tertiary formations but practically also of the Cretaceous constitution. Geologists conclude from this fact that these hills might be the remnants of an older landmass which once extended over a far greater area. The topography of the surrounding area clearly suggests that it was once touching the river Indus that, at present, is more than fifteen kilometres away.

The spur is outlined by a massive defensive wall of dressed stone blocks without mortar, using larger blocks towards the base. There are about twenty round-fronted towers with clear indications of at least one gateway towards the south. A proper investigation may reveal other such features as well. The whole of the defensive wall is



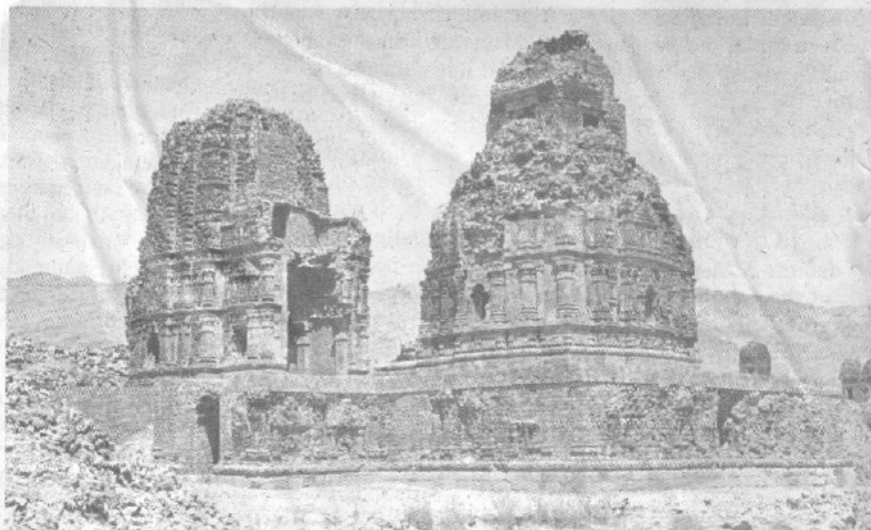
Kafir Kot Bilot, D.I. Khan

considerably covered with debris, as also is the gateway. The interior of the fortified area, about 100 metres above the plain, is covered with remains of buildings, including the typical Hindu temples surviving to this day.

Square in plan, all these temples rise in the form of the convex sided tower or an ornate sikhara typical of medieval period of northern subcontinent and contain a square cellar with corbelled dome. The foundations of the edifices are in stone available locally, while in the superstructure we invariably find kanjur stone following the general pattern of Buddhist Stupa architecture in the Gandhara region, dating from 1st to 5th centuries. The masonry is set in white lime mortar and faced with white stucco, which has turned very hard with the passage of time. It is perhaps this plaster which has made these shrines stand to this day in spite of the prolonged neglect and virtually no repairs or conservation done to them.

The chief types of decorations found here are the typical embellishments of the

Hinc
cons
cinq
flora
orna
worl



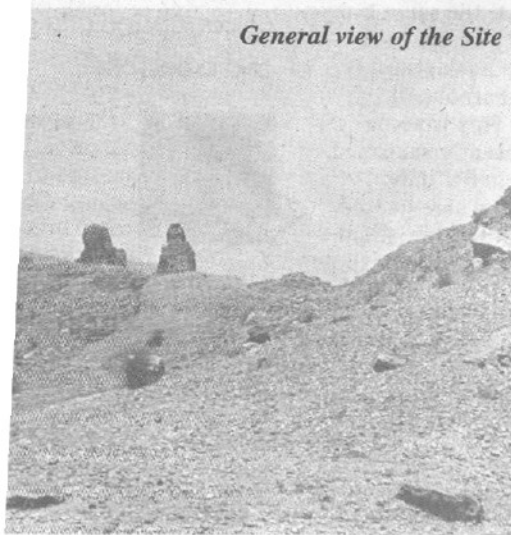
Two temples

the buildings has its special significance in view of its rareness in the area. In one of the shrines Hindu deities after Gandhara-style also survive in trefoil arched niches.

These rare specimens of temple architecture present a very pleasing and harmonious blending of three distinct styles of religious architecture. The rich plastic embellishment and some of the architectural details like Corinthian pilasters, dentil cornice, saw-tooth and beehive ornamentation and sloping doorjambs etc. clearly point towards Gandhara/Buddhist influence. On the other hand, cinquefoil arches surmounting the recesses or niches unmistakably suggest their drawing inspiration from the Kashmir style of temple architecture. The pyramidal form of sikhara has been inferred as a copy of

timber prototype designed to resist the heavy snowfall of Kashmir. The general outline as well as the overall shape of the temples, also incorporating pilasters having vase capitals with pendent foliage in a fashion first elaborated by fifth and sixth centuries Gupta architects of the northern plains clearly show their close affinity with the Gupta style of temple architecture of the plains. In the words of Wheeler, "a north-westerly extension of the architecture of Jumna-Ganges plains doubtless as an aftermath of the westward extension of the Gupta Empire from those same plains into a north-western style which had matured largely under local Buddhist patronage". However, Percy Brown prefers to call the temples of the Salt Range on the whole as a provincial offshoot of the Kashmir style. The group of temples along the river Jehlum in the Punjab, Amb, Katas, Malot and Nandna are nearly more related to the Kashmir style, especially the one at Malot is the most typical example. The southern group mainly consisting of the Kafir Kots, northern and southern, both by the river Indus, are more ample in proportions and replace pure pyramidal roof with sikhara. Their plastic embellishment, rich decoration of tiered carved pilasters, dentil cornice, foliated medallions and 'horse-shoe' and 'malaka' motif suggest their closer resemblance with structural work of Gupta architects.■

General view of the Site



- The author is a former Director of Archaeology, Pakistan, and Visiting University Professor of Architecture.

Email comments at:
inadiem@brain.net.pk