

Excavation at the Buddhist Site of Zar Dheri 2021: A Preliminary Report

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Abstract

Zar Dheri, a well-known Buddhist complex is located in Tambah, a small village on the right side of Shinkhari-Dadar road in District Mansehra. This important Buddhist complex was for the first time recorded and published by Mr. Harold Hargraves, the then Superintendent, Archaeological Survey of India in 1922-23. The site had remained at the mercy of the plunderers till it was revisited by a joint team of archaeologists from the Department of Archaeology, Government of Pakistan and Tokyo National Museum Japan during their collaborative field research carried out in Hazara region in 1990s. Excavation at Zar Dheri carried during the said joint project revealed many important architectural remains and artefacts. But despite these remarkable discoveries the site was once again left exposed to the natural deterioration and human encroachment.

The current research was thus a salvage operation carried out by the Department of Archaeology Hazara University Mansehra with the financial support of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC). The present field investigation at Zar Dheri was though limited to a smaller area but it has revealed important material remains including ceramics, bones, inscriptions and fragments of stone sculptures as well as structural remains. The newly excavated remains will not only help to throw light on the archaeological significance of the site but will also help to reconfirm the chronology of the site. A preliminary report of the current excavation is presented in this paper.

Keywords: Zar Dheri, Mansehra, Cruciform Stupa, Stone Sculptures

Introduction

District Mansehra, better known for its beautiful valleys and natural landscape, is also rich in terms of archaeological heritage. Mansehra is located about 161 km from the capital city, Islamabad. It lies between 73°11'52.79" E Longitude and 34°19'52.98" N Latitude. Mansehra has been enjoying an important geographical position on the trade routes including the ancient Silk Road, the modern Karakorum Highway and the most recent China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The rich natural resources of the region made it suitable for the survival of human population and the trade routes further connected the region with other societies, thus, paved the way for the spread of different cultures beliefs, knowledge, trade and technology. The earliest evidences of human cultural activities in the region may be traced back to the 3rd century BCE. Apart from the Ashokan Edicts, thousands of other sites have been reported from the region, which have been assigned to the Indo Greek, Scytho-Patthian, Kushan, Sassanian, Hephthalite, Hindu Shai, Ghaznavid, Mughal, Sikh and British periods.

Zar Dheri, a well-known Buddhist complex is located in Tambah, a small village on the right side of Shinkhari-Dadar road in District Mansehra. The site lies between 73.27108° E Longitude and 34.4989° N Latitude. This important Buddhist complex was for the first time recorded and published by Mr. Harold Hargraves, the then Superintendent, Archaeological Survey of India in 1920s. The site had remained at the mercy of the plunderers till it was revisited by a joint team of archaeologists from the Department of

Archaeology, Government of Pakistan and Tokyo National Museum Japan during their collaborative field research carried out in Hazara region in 1990s (Hameed, 2012).

Zar Dheri was selected for long term excavation by the Pak-Japan expedition team. This excavation project was undertaken from 1995 to 1999, which resulted the discovery of the earliest cruciform stupa with a monastic complex. In addition, many important antiquities including copper coins, stone sculptures and architectural elements, Iron and stucco objects were also unearthed during the first excavation. But even after these important discoveries the site was not properly protected and promoted for tourism rather the exposed structures including the cruciform stupa were left exposed to the natural and human threats which resulted irremediable destruction. The entire monastic complex to the north of the main stupa is presently covered with modern houses. This rapid construction can also be seen on the eastern and western sides. And if this encroachment continues for another decade, this important site will completely disappear. The current research was thus a salvage operation carried out by the Department of Archaeology Hazara University Mansehra with the financial support of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC). The present field investigation at Zar Dheri was though limited to a smaller area but it has revealed important material remains including ceramics, bones and stone wall structure, stone inscriptions and fragments of stone sculptures, which will not only help to throw light on the archaeological significance of the site but will also help to reconfirm the chronology of the site.

Previous Archaeological Investigations at Zar Dheri

The first report on Zar Dheri site was published by H Hargreaves in which he has given a detailed description of the principal stupa (Hargreaves, 1923). Excavation at the site was carried out at the site after seven decades of its discovery. The first joint excavation project was undertaken from 1995 to 1999 by Pak-Japanese team who spent seven consecutive seasons at the site and revealed the main stupa and monastic establishment (Yoshihide, 2011, Fig. 7). Apart from the architectural remains, the joint team discovered many archaeological artefacts. Important among these are the stone sculptures and architectural elements (now housed in Peshawar Museum, Peshawar), which were found sacked in cell no 16 (Yoshihide, 2011; Hameed, 2012). Some of the stone sculptures have been described by Abdul Azeem, who has tried to compare them with the stone sculptures from Butkara-I (Azeem, 2002). While Yoshihide (2009), based on numismatic evidences and *Kharosthi aksharasts* has assigned the site to the 2nd century CE.

Aims and Objectives of the Current Excavation

The current archaeological excavation was carried out with the following main objectives:

- To rescue site from further damage into the hands of the antiquarians and the local people.
- To expose the structural remains of the stupa complex.
- To document and publish the remains which were not previously recorded.
- To establish a possibly complete chronology of the site with the help of latest and previously recorded evidences.
- To expose the structural remains of the stupa complex.
- To train the students of the Department of Archaeology Hazara University, Mansehra in field archaeology.

Current Excavation

The site was roughly documented by the Japanese archaeologists due to modern houses constructed over the site and other encroachments. The excavation map of the Tokyo national mission was followed in current excavation (Figure 2) with some addition. In addition, a detailed topographic map was also prepared with the help of Total Station (Figure 1).

After the preparation of maps, the site was divided into various grid following Wheeler Technique. Each of these grids measured 20x20 metres which was further divided into 4 trenches of 5x5 meters. Thus, a total of 2916 trenches were laid to cover the entire site. Having prepared the grid plan, each of the trenches was allotted a specific number starting from the north-western corner. The numbers started with a digit (1) horizontally, while vertically it starts with (A) in alphabetical order. Thus, the first grid comprised of trenches at the north-western corner bearing number i.e. (AI/1, AI/2, AI/3 and AI/4) while the last grid at south-eastern corner ends with L VIII/1 and L VIII/2 (Figure 2).

After a detailed documentation, the current excavation at the site started in the first week of September 2021. Initially, six trenches (K III/2, K IV/1, K III/4, K IV/3, L III/2 and L IV/1) located on the southern side of main Stupa near the grand staircase were selected for excavation with the purpose to clear the staircases and find traces of subsidiary stupas. The condition of grand staircase was badly damaged and fallen stone boulders were found from trench KIV/3. The surface layers of all the trenches were comprised of grass, shrubs, dressed and semi-dressed stones, rubbles and modern plastic which came to an end at the depth of 30cm below the surface level. The digging continued at a depth of 180 cm below the surface. Excavation in this area was not very productive and it only revealed a heap of stone rubbles along with potsherds and bones fragments.

Having refilled the six trenches, an area in the upper terrace was (i.e. north-eastern corner of the main Stupa) was selected for further digging. This was one of the areas which was not excavated previously during the Pak-Japanese expedition. The main aim of excavating this area, was to trace and clear the boundary/enclosure wall of the main stupa. For this purpose, fourteen trenches (G VII/1, G VII/2, G VII/3, G VII/4, G VIII/1, G VIII/2, G VIII/3, G VIII/4, F VII/4, F VIII/3, F VII/2, F VIII/1, E VII/1, E VII/4, and E VIII/3) were opened. Excavation in this area not only revealed traces of the enclosure wall around the main stupa but also two other stone structures which were not recorded during the previous diggings. One of these structures was a stone passage which was extended towards the east. But unfortunately, a small portion of this passage measuring 1x1m could be exposed as its continuation towards east was interrupted by a modern mud house. The remaining portion of the same passage still exists in its primary context inside the mud house. This stone passage might have connected Zar Dheri with Sirkap, a contemporary site located to the east of Zar Dheri (Figure 5).

During the process of clearing the north-eastern corner of the enclosure wall of the main stupa, another separate wall with variation in width was found extended towards the monastery area. The gap between these two walls indicates that access to the entire complex might have been provided on the eastern side.

Findings and Discussion

The current excavation revealed some interesting findings in terms of architectural remains and portable artefacts and nonartefacts. Among the structural remains, a 15m long stone wall of rough diaper masonry exposed near the eastern staircase of principle stupa leading to the stupa core; and the stone passage outside the enclosure wall extended to the east are worthy to mention. The function of the former wall is still subject to question due to its unique position and direction. While the later, (stone passage) might have been constructed to either as a passage leading to the main gate or to connect Zar Dheri with Sirkap.

The current excavation also confirmed that the site has been severely damaged due to plundering and no traces subsidiary stupas were left intact except a rough structure/stone heap exposed on the western side of southern (grand staircase). This heap might be the core of a votive stupa which was destroyed into the hand of illegal diggers.

Among the movable archaeological objects, pieces of schist stone, possibly part of a sculpture, stone architectural elements, a schist stone with inscribed with Kharoashti aksharas (letters), pieces of terracotta sculptures, charcoal pieces and terracotta potsherds are worth mentioning. Evidences of stone sculptures during the previous excavation with traces of their fragments during the current excavation show that unlike other Buddhist sites in Hazara and Taxila regions, schist stone was abundantly used at Zar Dheri due to its easy availability. Sources of schist stone were also identified near Zar Dheri during the current field investigation. XRD analysis of the schist samples from Zar Dheri and those collected from the local queries will confirm the use of local schist by the artisans of Zar Dheri during the Buddhist era. Similarly, the radiocarbon dates of the charcoal samples collected from different stratigraphic units will help to reconfirm the date assigned to Zar Dheri and establish a possibly complete chronology of this important Buddhist complex.

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Figures

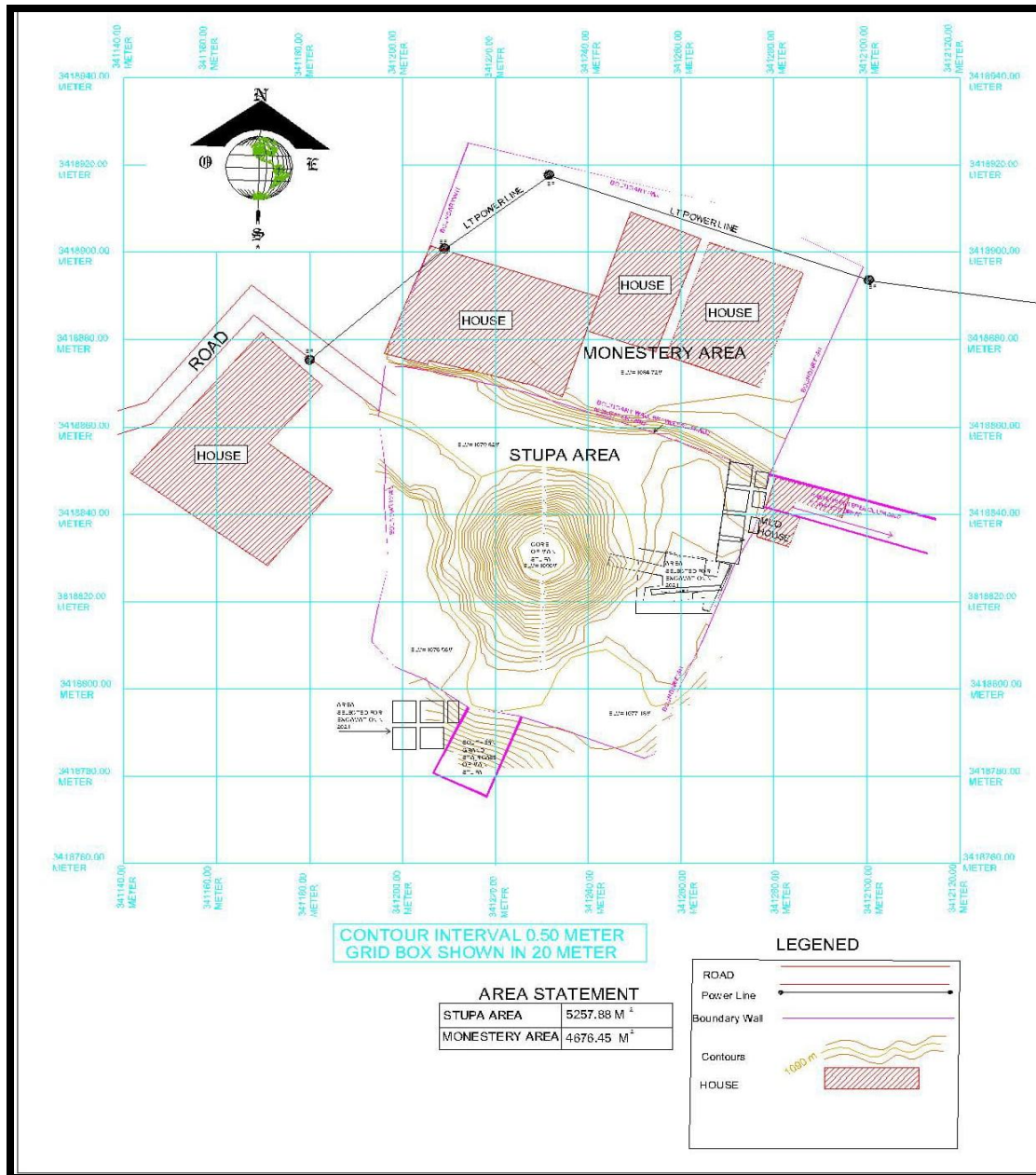


Figure 1 Topographic documentation of Zar Dheri using Total Station

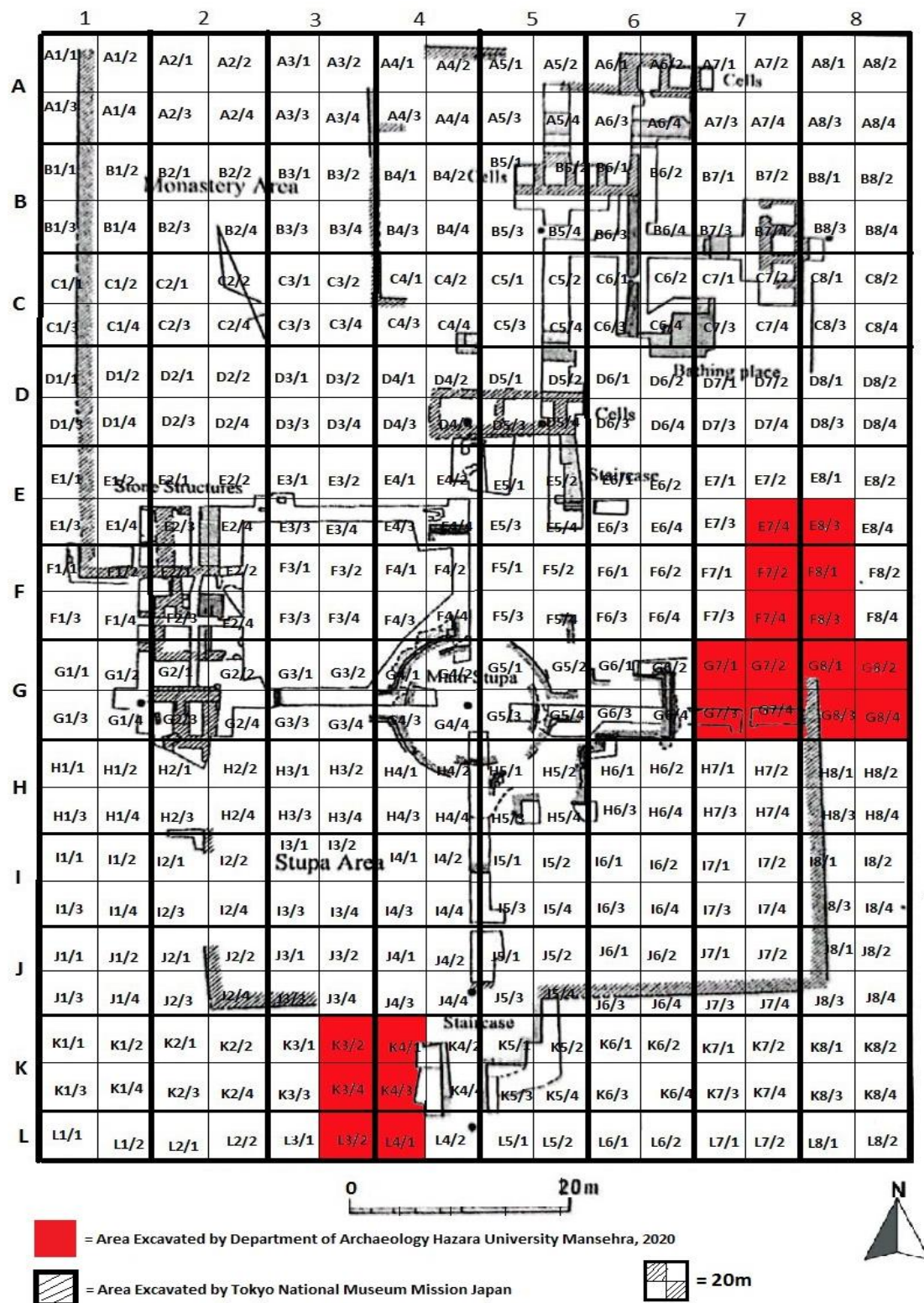


Figure 2 Grid Plan of Zar Dheri Shinkairi, Mansehra (Courtesy: Tokyo Mission Pakistan 1992)

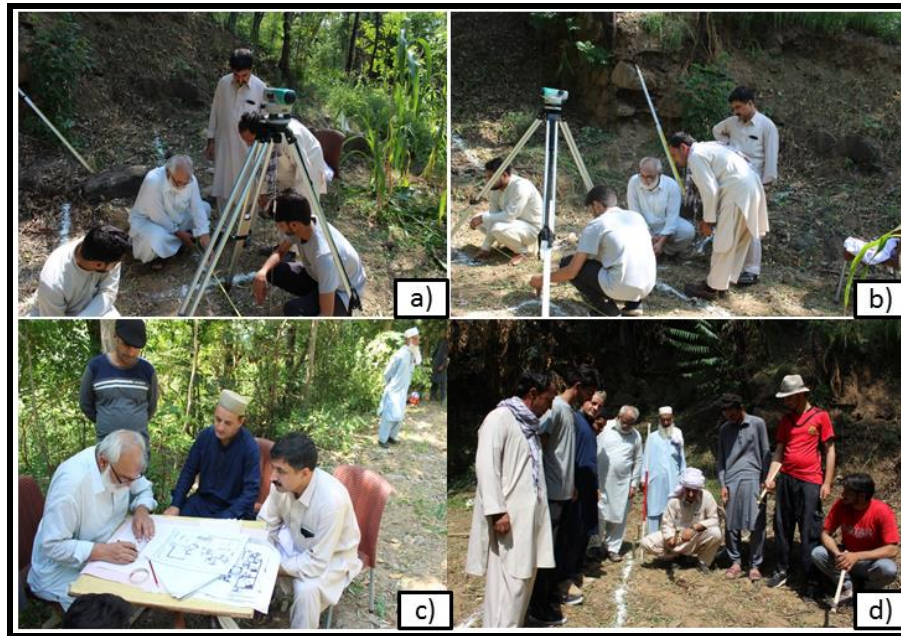


Figure 3: a) Setting up a datum point, b) making trenches, c) Drawing layout of trenches, d) Start-up of excavation work



Figure 4 a) Students training, b) field team, c) student's engaged in excavation process, d) Insitu stone slab with inscription



Figure 5 a) Stone Passage extended towards East b) portion of eastern wall inside mud house c) newly exposed wall against the eastern staircase of main Stupa d) portion of western wall of Sirkap facing toward Zar Dheri