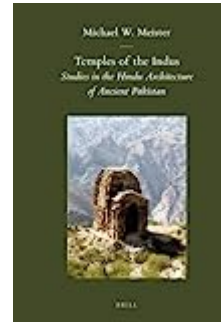


Michael W. Meister. *Temples of the Indus*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. xv + 85 pp. Illustrations. \$132.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-18617-0.



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The history of the North West Frontier Province (as it was called in British India), a large part of which falls in the current Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, for a variety of reasons, is usually visualized in terms of its affinities with Afghanistan. An important reason is that the Pashtun, the province's largest ethnic group, share ethnic links with that region. At the same time, there are many other strands that make up the ancient past of the province and which connect it with regions that, unlike Afghanistan, are not in its immediate vicinity.

As far as protohistory is concerned, the objects of marine shell from the coast of Sindh in sites of the northwest as also the similarity in the painted motifs on some of the pottery at those sites with the late Harappan Cemetery H culture of Punjab, exemplify these interactions. For the later historical phases, Michael W. Meister's scholarly *Temples of the Indus* is the most recent work which highlights those wider links, from the sixth to the tenth centuries CE.

The book itself is a fairly slim volume, less than a hundred pages and its spare dense text, along with 149 photographs and drawings, documents the Hindu temples there. As a consequence of this documentation and

analysis, the Salt Range and the sequence of temples that were built there are shown to be part of a larger South Asian tradition. As the book puts it, through these monuments, the sites of the province "root themselves to a central symbol of Indic sacrality. Even changing political boundaries, ancient and modern, cannot cloak this" (p. 35).

Meister is a widely respected art historian and has been the general editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture* (1983-92). His survey of the Salt Range sites began in 1993 in collaboration with the University of Peshawar, and later through a joint project with the Pakistan Heritage Society. The project had an art-historical and an archaeological component and both these elements form the subject of this book. The art-historical element, though, is much stronger in this volume and that may well be because a comprehensive field report of the excavations at north Kafir Kot is to be published by Professor Abdur Rehman of Peshawar University.

Chapter 1 is a short historiographical intervention which examines nineteenth- and twentieth-century writings on the temples of the Indus. The first publication in which the temples figured was the 1875 field report of

Alexander Cunningham, the first director general of the Archaeological Survey of India. It was also Cunningham who, for the first time, described some of their architectural features, such as the fluted pillars and trefoil arches, as belonging to what he called “the Kashmirian style of architecture” (p. 1). Even though Cunningham would revise his opinion, his initial ascription—the conflation of Salt Range temples with those of Kashmir—set the tone for subsequent works. Aurel Stein, Daya Ram Sahni, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Percy Brown were among those who continued to highlight this link. Among them, Stein would later argue for a more local inspiration, as when he described the decorative motifs as being largely derived from late Graeco-Buddhist art in Gandhara.

It is these elements which frequently figure in Meister’s description of the various sites whose architectural features and chronology he minutely examines in chapter 2. He divides the evolution of the temples into three phases and the central reference point is Nagara architecture, which “with its typifying curvilinear tower, evolved in middle India in the fifth to the early seventh centuries” (p. 12). The regional evolution, as visualized in this book, from the late fifth to the early eleventh centuries CE, begins with pre- and proto-Nagara sites, moves through the evolution of Gandhara-Nagara sites, and finally, culminates in a discussion of later Nagara sites. But even before that, Meister convincingly argues that the sequence of arches found in Buddhist architectural forms in the region from Kabul to Taxila, means that one does not have to place the trefoil arch, as Cunningham did, in relation to any other region. Presumably, Meister is referring to Kashmir since the general tenor of his study shows the differences between the temples in his own area of research and Kashmir. His general conclusion about architectural variations, in fact, is worth citing in full: “If there is a Gandharan legacy in Hindu temple architecture of subsequent centuries ... it took two paths: one, a unique tradition of temples with two-tiered pyramidal roofs with gables built in Kashmir from at least the reign of Lalitaditya in the eighth century. The other was an independent tradition, both in Gandhara and south, in the Salt Range and along the Indus, that merged a *latina* tower to a Gandharan base” (p. 51).

The only temple which consciously follows the style of Kashmir, in Meister’s opinion, is the temple of Malot in the Salt Range and this was probably because at that time, in the tenth century, there was a strong matrimonial and political link between the Udi-Sahi or Hindu Sahi dynasty and the Kashmir ruling family.

If the Kashmir link of northwest Pakistan is downplayed, chapter 2’s description of a range of temples at pre- and proto-Nagara sites, culls out comparisons with other regions. So, for instance, the sculptural remains and the layout of the red sandstone temple of Murti are compared to those from the Bhumara Siva temple in central India. The multistorey temple tower of Temple B at the pilgrim center of Katas is shown to have parallels with Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh. As for the fortified hill on which Bilot Kafirkot is situated, the oldest temple there (Temple D), “in constructional conventions, composition of *candrasalas* spaced along broad cornices, and corner aedicules” is thought to strongly resemble the sixth-/seventh-century Bilvanatha temple at Bilveshvara in Saurashtra.

The next phase which saw the evolution of the Gandhara-Nagara style is marked by elements rooted in the region—such as the pilasters at Temple C in Kafirkot and Temple E at Bilot which have pseudo-Corinthian capitals that are common in Gandhara. Simultaneously, there are Nagara elements here as well. An example of this is the brick temple at Kalar which has pilasters with “modillion” brackets commonly found in Gandhara along with bands of ornaments among the mouldings which bear a close similarity with other parts of India.

Among the shrines described in the book, the most remarkable seems to be Temple A at Nandana—a later Nagara site—which exemplifies a local Indus style of Nagara architecture. This eleventh-century temple has three levels folded within a *latina* tower, and the third level encloses an upper chamber and ambulatory. Were the upper chambers related to defensive needs, considering that the fortress at Nandana eventually fell to Mahmud of Ghazni? Meister is not completely sure about whether the upper chambers had a ritual purpose or were “look-out” defensive peepholes, but this was a feature that was original to the Salt Range.

Chapter 3 provides some details of the excavations at Kafirkot where two seasons of excavations were carried out in 1996-98. The discovery of new structures such as Temple E; the relationship between certain temples and ruined structures in their vicinity; the enlargement of shrines in the ninth and tenth centuries; the combination of wood and limestone in construction as also the thick layer of ash in excavations which suggest that a fire burned out the wooden beams and floor of the entry hall of Mari; and, a nearly complete cult image are a few important elements that are highlighted. The unique image, which appears to be of an athletic ascetic with his heels

drawn up tightly in a yogi pose and with his toes touching the lotus seat, has been taken by Meister to be that of a Mahayogin (“great yogin”).

There is nothing, though, that the excavations reveal about the rituals that may have been conducted within the temple complexes. Such rituals, in many instances, have left material traces. The large number of terracotta bowls excavated from the temple areas at Bhitari in north India and the animals—as the bones of sheep and cattle suggest—sacrificed for the deity in the inner sanctum of the Parasurameshwara temple in Gudimalam (Andhra Pradesh) are examples of such archaeological traces. Elsewhere too, lamps, ablution basins, and votive offerings in the form of terracotta figures of gods

and goddesses have regularly turned up in excavations of temples across India, from Kashmir to the deep South. In Meister’s volume, however, there are no references to such evidence. Since this is a summary of the excavations, such details have been omitted and one hopes that the comprehensive excavation report of Professor Rehman will throw more light on what archaeology has to tell us about ritual practices in the temples of the Indus. As it is, Meister’s narrative, combined with the excellent photographs of the temples and their surrounding landscapes along with illustrations of their ground plans and features, makes this volume invaluable for understanding the little known but rich architectural canvas of Hindu temples in Pakistan.

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