



RESEARCH PAPER

**Mapping the Past: Preliminary Assessment of Survey of
Archaeological Sites and Monuments in District Bhimber, AJ&K
(2020-21).**

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological research has played a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Bhimber region. Numerous researchers and explorers have contributed to documenting its historical monuments and sites, but its potential has not been exploited at large. To document the archaeological potential of the District Bhimber, a survey was proposed. This paper focuses on the preliminary results of this survey and documentation of archaeological sites and monuments in the Bhimber district, AJ&K, conducted between 2020-21. The main objective of the survey was to find new sites and monuments and document in detail the exposed features of already reported and new sites and monuments. Traditional field walk following village to village survey methodology equipped with proforma has been adopted for the documentation of sites and monuments. Through these efforts, over fifteen archaeological sites and historic monuments have been identified and documented detail in District Bhimber, with the majority located in Tehsil Bhimber. The sites comprise of religious structures such as temples, gurdwaras, mosques, as well as residential and defensive structures such as forts and havelis mainly associated to Sikh and Mughal period. The discovery of these significant structures emphasizes the need for continued research and preservation efforts to safeguard the cultural heritage of the region for future generations. There is still a need of large-scale survey to document the archaeological sites and monuments in other regions of the Bhimber as well as AJ&K.

Keywords: Bhimber Region, Cultural Heritage, Defensive Structures, Forts, Preservation Efforts, Religious Structures, Temples

Introduction

The town of Bhimber, situated in the Bhimber district, has been an important center of historical and archaeological significance. It was a well-known transit point for Mughal emperors traveling to the Kashmir Valley, thus earning it the epithets of "Gateway to Kashmir" or "Bab-e-Kashmir". The region boasts a plethora of archaeological sites, with a rich concentration of historical monuments and sites located along ancient routes between Gujrat, Sialkot, and Kashmir. The region's topography comprises a plain area that is enveloped by high mountains, which have played a significant role in shaping the region's cultural heritage (Khan et al 2017: 1-15).

Bhimber town has a rich and storied history that can be traced back to the Chibal Rajas who ruled the area around 1400 CE. The Chibs are considered the most prominent clan in the district, with other ethnic groups such as Gujar, Jat, Rajpoot, Jaraal, Syed, Mirza, Kashmiri, and Awan's. The founding of the town as the capital of the Bhimber state is attributed to Raja Shahdab Khan, who lived during the reign of Babur. (Hutchison & Vogel 1933: 724). This period of Bhimber's history witnessed the construction of numerous historical monuments and sites, including the town's fortifications, mosques, and other significant structures.

Literature Review

Early explorers like Godfrey Thomas Vigne in the 18th century CE, noted Bhimber's historical monuments and sites (Vigne 1842). Subsequently, Fredrick Drew (1875) and Charles Ellison Bates (1880) documented more monuments in Bhimber during the late 19th century. However, it wasn't until the early 20th century that the first professional archaeologist, Ram Chandra Kak, surveyed Bhimber and documented several monuments (Kak 1923). In 2013-2014, the Taxila Institute of Asian Civilization conducted a survey of Bhimber as part of a comprehensive survey of Azad Jammu & Kashmir and documented numerous prehistoric sites and historical monuments (Khan & Rahman 2016). However, this survey highlighted the need for present investigation of Bhimber's cultural heritage, including a more thorough documentation of archaeological assets and the exploration of uncharted sites.

The recent focus of the Tourism and Archaeology Department of AJK on conserving AJK's archaeological assets is a welcome development (Khan & Saeed forthcoming). However, the success of such conservation efforts relies on a sound understanding of the cultural heritage of the region, which can only be achieved through continued and critical investigation. Therefore, there is a need for further research and exploration in Bhimber to fully understand and appreciate its rich cultural potential.

Archaeological research in Bhimber has been an important aspect of the region's cultural heritage, with several researchers and explorers contributing to the documentation of its historical monuments and sites. However, despite the significant progress made in understanding Bhimber's cultural potential, there is a need for continued and critical investigation.

Methodology

A comprehensive approach to documenting archaeological sites and monuments has been adopted, which involves conducting field walks using traditional methodology and surveying villages to gather relevant information. In addition, valuable insights from secondary sources, particularly the published reports on Bhimber Archaeology by Kak (1923) and Khan & Rahman (2016), have been integrated to enhance the understanding of the surveyed area. To ensure standardized data collection, specially designed pro-forma has been utilized, enabling the systematic documentation of features observed during the field walks. This methodological framework establishes a rigorous and comprehensive approach to studying and recording archaeological sites and monuments, ensuring reliability, accuracy, and facilitating future research and analysis in the field of archaeology.



Fig. 1: Map of District Bhimber.

Findings

Present Explorations

To provide a comprehensive documentation of the cultural heritage in District Bhimber, it was necessary to conduct a thorough study to unveil the region's cultural potential, with a particular focus on tangible heritage. Therefore, the main objective was to carry out a systematic field survey to collect data about archaeological sites and historical monuments in the region.

The current survey and documentation efforts have resulted in the documentation of more than fifteen archaeological sites and historic monuments in District Bhimber, with a majority located in Tehsil Bhimber. Of these seven were previously explored with little scope between 1840-2016. These sites include various religious structures such as temples, gurdwaras, mosques, as well as residential and defensive structures like forts and havelis. The discovery of these significant structures highlights the need for further research and preservation efforts to conserve the cultural heritage of the region for future generations. Their brief description is given below.

Description of Surveyed Sites

Darbar Sayed Shah Bukhari Mound

Located 14 km southeast of Bhimber city along the pangloor road, the mound in village Kot Chiban is oval in shape and measures approximately 35x35x7 m with a probable northeast to southwest orientation. The area around the mound is covered with heavy vegetation, and multiple field terraces are visible. Modern graves have flattened the top surface of the mound. Facing south, the Shrine of Sayed Shah Bukhari is located towards the northern end of the mound. More than 20 graves are situated on the top of the mound, with scattered potsherds resulting from grave digging. Red ware potsherds have been found scattered on the surface of the mound, indicating a tentative Early Historic-Hindu Period at the site (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: General view of the Darbar Sayed Shah Bukhari Mound from west.

Chitti Masjid

Located 1.7 km east of Bhimber Stadium along the local nullah known as “*Bhimber Nullah*”, this mosque is rectangular in plan, measuring 13x8x6m, and aligned east to west. The main building is situated in the western end of the compound, with the entrance located at the eastern most end of the north wall. The masonry of the mosque appears to be of various types, including dressed stones and brick bats. The prayer hall is asymmetrical and faces east, with the interior comprising a large chamber with pointed arches on all four sides and topped by a flat dome. The mosque is tentatively dated to the Mughal period and is presently in a completely disturbed state (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: General view of Chitti Masjid from north.

Mughal Mosque Bhimber (Khan & Rahman 2016)

Located on the bank of Bhimber Nullah, 3.8 km north-east of Bhimber Stadium in Bhimber Rajani, is a mosque dating back to the Mughal period. Originally, the mosque was square in plan and constructed with undressed small-sized local stones, likely greenish sandstones used in the “*Chitti Masjid*”. The mosque has undergone renovation, resulting in the replacement of its semi-circular dome with a modern one. The single-story mosque was plastered with fine lime mortar, and its entrance featured a semi-circular arch with two pointed arches on the facade. A staircase located on the left side of the mosque leads to the roof (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: General view of Mughal Mosque from south.

Hathi Gate

Located approximately 2.7 km north-east of Bhimber in Bhimber City Bazar near Bhimber Police Station and Tehsildar Office, Hathi Gate is a square Mughal period monument. Constructed of green sandstone and lime mortar, the gate measures approximately 30x30x20 m and is oriented east-west with two protruding buttresses at the front. The main wall of the structure is situated behind the buttresses. The internal chamber of the gate contains arched chambers with ventilators on top and is shaped as a barrel vault on the inside (Fig. 5).

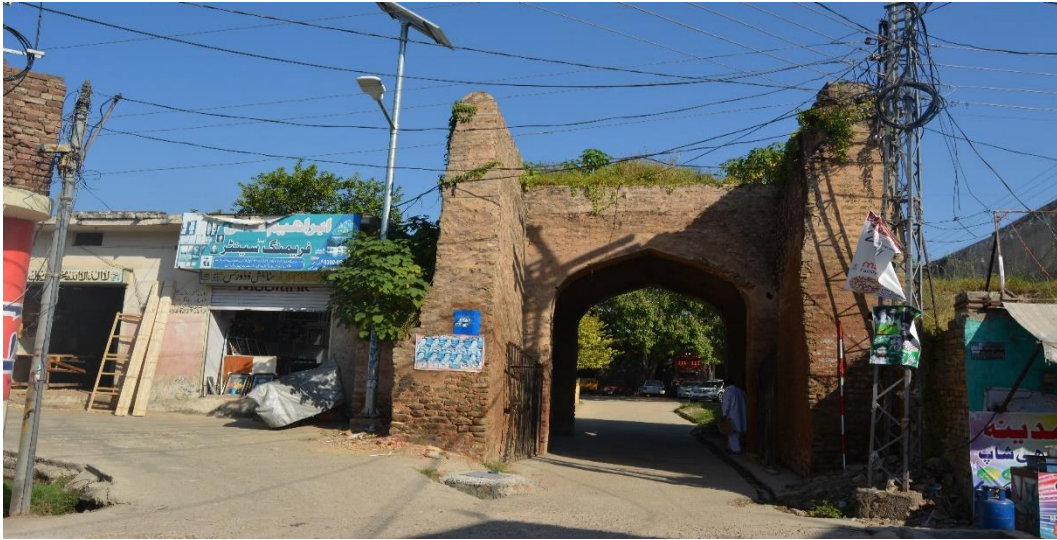


Fig. 5: General view of the Hathi Gate from west.

Daura Rajgan Water Tank

Located in UC Daura Rajgan, approximately 12 km north-west of Bhimber, this rectangular water tank is constructed with dressed greenish sandstones and lime mortar. It measures about 11.3 x 7 m and features a small rectangular water tank on the immediate north side for water collection, likely for rainwater harvesting. The entrance to the main tank is on the northern side and stairs leading down are present on the western edge. An inscription slab that was previously located on the western wall inside the main tank has been removed by locals. The site is tentatively associated with the Dogra Raj/Sikh Period (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: General view of the Daura Rajgan Tank.

Seeta Baoli (Khan & Rahman 2016).

Located in Bawli village in Tehsil Bhimber, about 290 meters northwest of Samahni Chowk, this trapezoid-shaped monument is aligned east to west and measures 21.5 x 4.9 meters. The main well, which is circular, is situated at the eastern end of the structure and is enclosed within an octagonal building that is accessed by a long staircase. The entrance is situated on the irregular wall at the western end. Between the well and the steps, vestibules are located with arched openings to the east and west. Burnt bricks and lime mortar were used in the construction of the monument, and it is tentatively assigned to the Dogra Raj period (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: General view of the Seeta Baoli from west.

Barna Baoli

The monument known as Barna Baoli is situated adjacent to the main Bhimber-Jatlan Road, 12 km north-west of Bhimber Stadium and Bypass. The structure is oriented in an east-west direction, with its entrance located on the east end and the water well situated on the western end. Its dimensions measure 15.5 x 2.8 meters. Upon entering the monument, visitors can descend to the floor of the well where they will observe beams and arches holding the walls apart. On the left side of the entrance is a small receptacle, and a small plaque is affixed to the interior of the well. Burnt bricks, lime stones, and lime mortar were used in the construction of the monument. The Barna Baoli is tentatively associated with the Dogra Raj period (Fig. 8).

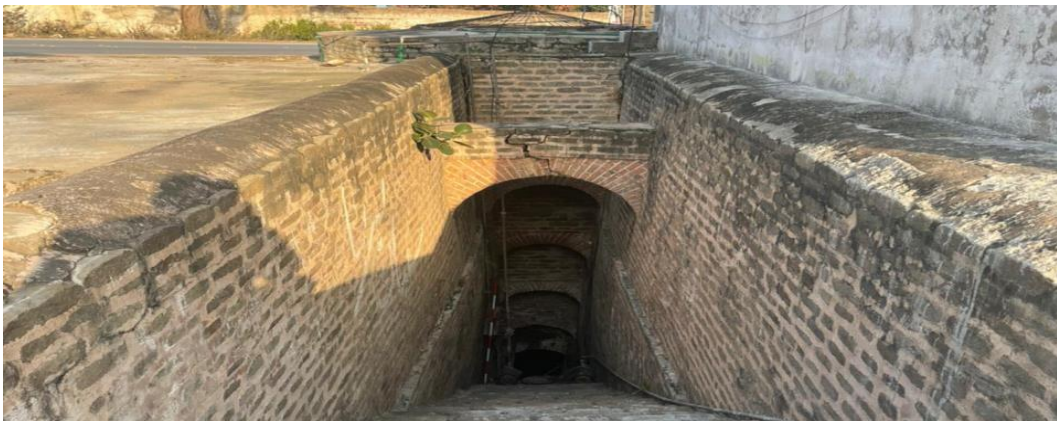


Fig. 8: General view of the Barna Baoli from south.

Kunwan Dhandhar Kalan

The well at Government Boys Middle School Dhandhar Kalan in village Kot Chiban, situated along the Barnala road about 11.5 km to the south-east of Bhimber Bypass, is a unique historical site. Located within the school's courtyard, the well is oriented in an east to west direction, with its possible entrance believed to be situated at the eastern end and the only preserved part, the water well, located at the western end. Unfortunately, due to the removal of the entrance, the dimensions of the well cannot be accurately determined. However, the site is tentatively associated with the Dogra Raj period, adding to its historical significance.

Kunwan Panjeri

Located in Panjeri village, Tehsil Bhimber along the Panjeri road, this well is a remarkable structure approximately 21 km northwest of Bhimber City. It stands prominently in front of a private residence and is built with green chiseled/dressed sandstone blocks and burnt bricks. Unfortunately, the original layout of the well is no longer visible, making it impossible to determine its exact dimensions or details. However, its construction materials suggest a possible association with the Dogra Raj period. Despite the lack of information on its history, the well remains an intriguing architectural feature of the area (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: General view of the Panjeri well from east.

Rani Ka Kunwan

Situated in Mohra Saddah, Tehsil Bhimber along the Gujrat Road, approximately 4 km south of Bhimber City, this site was originally an open-air well, but has since been enclosed within the courtyard of the newly built Al Khizer Mosque. While only the well has been preserved, the construction is notable for its use of green chiseled/dressed sandstone blocks, burnt bricks, and lime mortar. The tentative association of this site with the Dogra Raj period adds historical significance to its already impressive architectural features.

Dhamawa Haveli

Located in UC Kasguma near Government Boys High School Dhamawa, about 30 km northwest of Bhimber City, this large mansion measures 28x7x10 m. Its grand entrance is adorned with three arches in the center, each supported by double-columns on both sides. Intricate details including wooden shutters and jharokas are present on either side of the entrance. The jharokas are topped with semi-domes and have shahjahani arches on posts with wooden railings at the base and jalis on top. The upper level contains additional arched openings with wooden shutters and semi-domes. The interior of the entrance boasts three

arches on two levels, and the mansion is flanked by column-shaped structures on either end. This monument is tentatively associated with the 19th century CE (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: General view of the Dhamawa Havili from south.

Chak Pandith Temple (Khan & Rahman 2016).

This temple is located about 40 km slight south east of Bhimber City, in Chamb Village along the Chamb-Gujrata Road, Tehsil Barnala. The temple measures 2.25x2x5.5 m. It is a small, historic Hindu temple with two shikaras dedicated to Lord Shiva and Krishna, tentatively assigned to Dogra Raj/Sikh Period. The temple is made of standard size bricks with lime mortar and has a simple architecture. Inside the temple, there are two garbhagrihas, one for placing murti and the other for Shiva-lingam. The left shikara is larger and decorated with a painted picture of Lord Krishna, while the right shikara is smaller and broken. There is a narrow path around the garbhagriha for devotees to revolve around the murti and Shiv-lingam, and the temple is decorated with simple art (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: General view of Chak Pandit Temple.

Sarai Saad Abad (Khan & Rahman 2016; Batool 2015).

The Mughal period Sarai is located 3.5 km south east of Samahni in Saadabad area along the Sarai Saadabad Road in Tehsil Samahni. The Sarai is a rectangular-shaped single-story building with octagonal bastions at each corner and battlemented wall. It is oriented in a northwest to southeast direction and has an open field to the south. It measures 111x75 m. The eastern and western walls are divided by impressive gateways that have cells on either side. The courtyard of the sarai is bordered with cells and there is a mosque attached to the east wall. Later construction by inhabitants has increased the population of the courtyard (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12: General view of the Sarai Saadabad from west.

Baghsar Fort (Khan & Rahman 2016).

The Mughal period Fort of Baghsar is located in Baghsar village on the top of hill in proximity of LOC and about 16 km south-east of Samahni. The fort is square-shaped and has two levels enclosed by thick sandstone walls with limestone plaster. The exterior enclosure follows the plan of the fort and has merlon crenellations, arrow slits, and openings for weapons. The inner enclosure has four bastions at each cardinal point and smaller bastions on each wall. The main entrance is on the northeastern wall, and the inner entrance is on the southeastern wall. The fort has a main hall, a stepped water pond, a temple, and a mosque in dilapidated condition, as well as cells along the perimeter walls (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13: General view of the Baghsar Fort from south.

Ali Baig Gurdwara (Khan & Rahman 2016; Ikhlaque 2017).

The Gurdwara is located in village Ali Baig, slightly north-west of Bhimber at a distance of about 32 km. The Gurdwara complex has a double enclosure and is made of burnt bricks in lime mortar and cement-sand plaster. It has a rectangular plinth and an arched entrance gate with two main square columns. The main façade is on the north wall and the Western façade has two floors and a single domed room. The interior is arched with round arches and a flat roof, with a single room on the roof that supports a provincial style dome/cupola with a round drum and onion dome on top. The monument is tentatively assigned to 20th century CE (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14: General view of the Ali Baig Gurdwara from north.

Conclusion

Present explorations have provided a comprehensive documentation of the cultural heritage in District Bhimber, especially the tangible heritage as a result systematic field survey. More than fifteen archaeological sites and historic monuments in District Bhimber have been documented. The main category of tangible heritage in the present exploration include temple, gurdwara, mosques, as well as residential and defensive structures like forts and havelis, mainly associated to Dogra Raj and Mughal Period. Of these seven were previously explored with little scope such as Barna Baoli, Seeta Baoli, Baghser Fort (Khan & Rahman 2016), Sarai Saad Abad (Khan & Rahman 2016; Batool 2015) and Ali Baig Gurdwara (Khan & Rahman 2016; Ikhlaque 2017) etc.

The documentation and discovery of these significant archaeological sites and historic monuments in District Bhimber, with a majority located in Tehsil Bhimber, underscores the urgency for continued research and preservation efforts to safeguard the cultural heritage of the region for future generations. The findings of this study serve as a valuable resource for heritage conservationists to formulate effective strategies to protect and promote the tangible heritage of Bhimber.

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