

A dark period in Indian history? The Indian North-West in the 6th to 10th c. CE

Organizers: Kathrin Holz, Ingo Strauch

Abstract:

The period from the 6th to the 10th century CE in the Indian North-West, encompassing regions such as Punjab, Gilgit, and Kashmir, marks a crucial transitional phase in South Asian history. Despite the political diversity in early medieval South Asia, exemplified by various dynasties such as the Palola Shahis of Gilgit, the Early (or Turk or Kabul) Shahis, and the Late (or Hindu) Shahis, the region is unified by the adoption of a common script, called Proto-Sarada. This era is also characterized by significant religious transformations, including the gradual decline of Buddhism, the growing dominance of Hindu traditions, and the advent of Islam. The diversity of sources available to reconstruct this period—including Persian and Arabic texts, Kashmiri chronicles, varied epigraphic evidence, numismatics, and art objects—presents a complex challenge, as these sources are often difficult to harmonize. By drawing on epigraphy, paleography, literature, art, and archaeology, the panel, seeks to reassess the historical and cultural context of the region, challenging the notion of this era as a 'dark period.' By examining the complex interplay of political, religious, and cultural forces, the panel aims to shed new light on this pivotal era in South Asian history. The panel takes place in the framework of the Proto-Śāradā Project of the universities of Würzburg and Lausanne (<https://www.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/proto-sharada-project/>).

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Recent Archaeological Researches in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan

Ehsan Shavarebi (Institut für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte, Universität Wien)

Coinage of the Turk Shahis in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands: State of Research and New Perspectives

Abstracts:

Ingo Strauch (Université de Lausanne)

An Archive of Administrative Birch-bark Documents from 7th-8th c. Punjab

The concept of "dark periods" in history often arises from the lack of reliable sources or the contradictory nature of existing ones. This challenge can sometimes be addressed through the discovery of new materials that provide a clearer understanding of these historical gaps. A prime example of such a development is the recent discovery of several hundred birchbark manuscripts that have surfaced on the art market since 2019. These manuscripts, which are believed to come from the same archive based on their material features and content, shed light on a previously obscure period in history.

Dated to the 7th and 8th centuries CE and originating in the Western Punjab, these manuscripts are written in an early form of the Proto-Sharada script. They primarily consist of two types of texts: administrative letters, likely for official or bureaucratic purposes, and detailed tax records that list transactions, including the taxes paid by merchants, the merchandise involved, and the specific dates of these exchanges. This type of archive is unprecedented in premodern India, making the discovery particularly significant.

My presentation will introduce the known fragments of this archive, examine its contents, and explore the potential for further research into the economic and social history of the Punjab region between the 7th and 10th centuries CE. The manuscripts provide an

invaluable opportunity to deepen our understanding of this period, especially in terms of trade, taxation, and administrative practices.

Camillo Formigatti (Universität Würzburg)

Travellers Lost in Terminology. On Proto-Śāradā, Nāgarī, Kuṭila and the invention of the Tibetan Script

The invention of the Tibetan dbu-can script is a topic that sparked the interest of both Indologists and Tibetologists from the beginning of the twentieth century. Tibetan traditional lore attributes its origin to the figure of the Tibetan intellectual Thon mi Sambhoṭa. According to Tibetan sources, the emperor Srong brtsan sgam po sent him to India in 633 CE to study writing systems in order to create a script for the Tibetan language. Scholarly discussion about the possible source script for the development of the dbu can oscillates between several scripts used in seventh-century North India, with the most probable candidates being scripts diffused either in Kashmir or Nepal. Yet it is difficult to find an exact correspondence between the scripts named in the Tibetan sources and the actual scripts used in the Himalayan range and Northern India in the relevant period, mostly because of the ambiguity in the application of palaeographical terminology in secondary literature. The most recent scholarly analysis of the palaeographical and historical sources suggests a Nepalese script as the source used by Thon mi Sambhoṭa. However, the new findings of manuscript written in the Proto-Śāradā script in the Gandhāran region and dated with colophons to precisely this period might provide a different picture. This paper will provide a preliminary evaluation of this important material and try to build alternative hypothesis about the origin of the dbu can script, taking into account also Tibetan historiographical works and inscriptional material.

Luther Obrock (Berkeley University)

The Kārkoṭas in Kashmiri chronicles

The kings of the Kārkoṭa dynasty (c. 655-825 CE) takes up the entirety of the fourth book of Kalhaṇa's monumental Sanskrit history of Kashmir, the Rājatarāṅgiṇī. Here he recounts the exploits of some of the most famous and memorable kings, including Muktāpīḍa/Lalitāditya and Jayāpīḍa. Kalhaṇa's text is also at its most geographically expansive in its description of the Kārkoṭa dynasty, with Lalitāditya presented as a conquering monarch of Central Asia and Jayāpīḍa travelling widely through North India. Historically, it is during the Kārkoṭa Dynasty that Kashmir comes into its own as a preeminent imperial center and with a new self-confidence comes new ways of expressing place, polity and power. The Nīlamata and Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇas both most likely come out of the Kārkoṭa court and, as Ronald Inden has argued, assert both an alliance to Sanskritic norms of South Asia and also assert their independence as an imperial formation. In this talk, I will investigate Kalhaṇa's framing of Kārkoṭas and in

particular the way in which the two pulls—between Central Asia and North India is narrativized into the making of a particularly Kashmiri dynastic culture

Antoine Conforti (Université de Lausanne)

“Little book, abundant in meaning”: the Lokaprakāśa, a manual for Sanskrit scribes in medieval Kashmir

The Lokaprakāśa is a medieval sanskrit text from Kashmir, remarkable for its content almost exclusively pragmatic and mundane: it likely served as a manual for scribes, consisting of lexicons and collections of notarial deeds. Attributed to 11th century author Kshemendra, its origins are unknown, and it has survived only in a considerably revised form, with modifications inserted up to the 17th century alongside elements undoubtedly predating 1500.

Premodern Indian documents are quite scarce, and we only know of a few didactic works interested in fields like writing practices, being notarial activities or epistolography. Those prove very useful when confronted with juridical and administrative documents or inscriptions, as they contain insights regarding everyday life. Its collection of notarial deeds makes the Lokaprakāśa a very precious source for social and administrative history of late medieval Kashmir, but its lexicon can also provide valuable information for more ancient context, despite its altered state, its terminology echoing that for example of Kṛṣṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī. This is why I am now preparing a critical edition of the text, based on all the available manuscripts, accompanied with a historical study, in which I will pay attention to the social and economic matters, as well as the relation of the text itself to the larger political and context in which it both got preserved and modified, that is Sanskrit's status as a literary, and possibly also administrative language, in the now Persian-dominated Sultanate Kashmir.

Blain Auer (Université de Lausanne)

Where is the Indian North-West? A View from Medieval Persian and Arabic Sources

The concept of the Indian North-West as a distinct region is a modern construct, shaped by colonial and postcolonial frameworks. However, its historical roots can be traced back to earlier representations in medieval Persian and Arabic sources. This talk explores the historical development of the idea of India in the writings of Muslim scholars who described the regions that once comprised the North-West of India, focusing on their geopolitical, cultural, and economic significance. Drawing on works such as Kitāb al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms) by Ibn Khurradādhbih (d. c. 911 CE) and Kitāb al-Hind (The Book of India) by al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048 CE), this presentation explores how medieval Muslim geographers, historians, and travelers conceptualized the Indian North-West as a frontier zone of economic, cultural, and political significance.

Special attention will be given to descriptions of trade routes, natural resources, and cultural encounters, which positioned the region as a site of connection and transformation rather than peripherality. By foregrounding these sources, this talk highlights the historical dynamism of the Indian North-West and challenges its marginalization in contemporary discourse. The findings also reveal the broader methodological potential of Persian and Arabic texts in reconstructing subcontinental histories and rethinking regional identities beyond modern boundaries.

Kathrin Holz (Universität Würzburg)

Proto-Śāradā Epigraphy in Context: Chronology, Palaeography, and Historical Insights

Proto-Śāradā, a script used from the late 6th to the 10th century CE in the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent, provides a crucial window into the region's linguistic, cultural, and political landscape. This script was employed across a wide range of contexts, including Buddhist manuscripts and inscriptions of varied genres on stone and metal. A significant portion of these inscriptions is linked to local dynasties that carried the title Shahi, reflecting the sociopolitical and cultural dynamics of the period.

This presentation centres on the analysis of Proto-Śāradā inscriptions, investigating their palaeographic features, stylistic variations, and chronological framework. This research advances our understanding of the development of Indic scripts, offering new perspectives for scholars in epigraphy and palaeography. By situating Proto-Śāradā inscriptions within their historical and cultural context, the study illuminates the broader dynamics of the early medieval northwestern India.

Luca M. Olivieri (University of Venice)

Vajirasthāna/Barikot. New archaeological data on the "Indian North-West" in the 6th to 10th.

Between 2022 and 2024, the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan and Directorate and Archaeology of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, completed an excavation and conservation phase at the acropolis and lower town of the ancient urban site of Bazira, near Barikot, in the Swat Valley. Excavations in the lower town and on the slopes of the acropolis have uncovered several structures, but above all an important Buddhist stupa dating back to the chronologically inclusive period of the Kidarite and Alchan rulers (c. 5th-6th century). These testimonies, following the abandonment of the ancient city in the Kushano-Sasanian period, shed new light on little-known phases still distorted by old historical interpretations. The acropolis was transformed between the 6th and 10th centuries into a monumental cultic terrace, where an imposing vaiṣṇavā temple was built in the Turk Śāhi period (end-7th century), the size of which was doubled in the late Hindu Śāhi period (10th century). The contribution aims to present an overview of the results, the absolute chronologies, in the context of a possible palaeoenvironmental and climatic reconstruction. The archaeological and architectural evidence, together with new finds of

sculptures, epigraphic data and material culture data, finally make it possible to present a detailed and large-scale reconstruction of a large monumental site in the heart of ancient north-western India.

Simone Voegtle (Université de Lausanne)

Inscribed Art of the Shahis

Between the 7th and 12th centuries, the region around Pakistan and northern India was particularly rich in bronze figurines. A small number of these objects, namely from the Gilgit region and the Palola Shahi period, bear a donor inscription and sometimes also a date. Such examples are of great value for the chronological anchoring of the Proto-Sharada script but also offer clues to the stylistic development of the sculptures. However, due to the known uncertainties regarding the different eras and in order to avoid circular reasoning, it is important to see these objects first in the context of their production. This article subjects the best-known iconographic types to a formal analysis and classification. The aim is to gain further clarity about their stylistic development and thus also a new perspective on the inscribed art objects.

Abdul Samad (Directorate of Archaeology & Museums Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Peshawar)

Recent Archaeological Researches in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan

The northwestern region of India, now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, has long served as a cradle of civilizations and a melting pot of diverse cultures. Despite being historically overshadowed by other geographical areas, recent archaeological research in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, led by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, has yielded significant new findings. Over the past few years, extensive surveys have documented more than 2,000 sites, with over six Gandharan-period sites (dating from the 2nd to the 6th centuries AD) undergoing systematic excavation. This research has led to the conservation of over 20 key sites, with results published in both national and international scholarly journals. Furthermore, the establishment of a digital heritage center has facilitated greater access to the region's rich archaeological collections. These efforts have opened new avenues for national and international scholars to investigate and reconstruct this historically significant yet previously understudied period in the history of northwestern Pakistan.

Ehsan Shavarebi (Institut für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte, Universität Wien)

Coinage of the Turk Shahis in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands: State of Research and New Perspectives

A poorly studied chapter in the history of the Indo-Iranian borderlands is the period following the migration of the Western Turks from Inner Asia to the south in the second half of the 6th century CE. After their arrival in the Hindu Kush region, a group of Turkic

overlords gradually seized power from the declining 'Iranian Huns' and established a new polity, usually referred to as the 'Turk Shahi' or 'Kabul Shahi' kingdom(s), which survived for nearly two centuries.

Due to paucity of literary sources, the numismatic evidence plays a central role in reconstructing the political history of this period. The Turk Shahis adopted the general model and system of their coinage from their western neighbour, the Sasanian Empire of Iran. The iconography of their coins principally follows the conventional Sasanian model, depicting the standardised portrait of the issuer on the obverse, and usually a Zoroastrian fire altar flanked by two standing figures on the reverse. They also borrowed Hunnic and Indian iconographic elements and combined them with the Sasanian model, creating a heterogeneous mosaic of coin types. On their coins, they used three different languages: Bactrian (in cursive Greek script), Middle Persian (in Pahlavi script), and Sanskrit (in Brāhmī or proto-Śāradā script). Their coin legends contain various names and titles of Iranian, Indian, or Turkic origin.

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the coinage of the Turk Shahis, to outline the developments and the current state of numismatic research, and to sketch the scientific desiderata and new approaches to the topic.