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MINAR-I-CHAKARI

Afghanistan's Lost and Unsolved

Architectural Riddle of Great Antiquity

Chris M. Dorn' eich

Society for the Preservation of
Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage
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SPACH LIBRARY SERIES

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PREFACE

The collapse of the Minar-i-Chakari is definitely a great loss for the cultural heritage of Afghanistan. The giant stone tower, soaring proudly from lofty mountain heights, had been the last surviving specimen of its kind.

The cosmic *stambha* or column, commemorating the Buddha's spiritual enlightenment, had lost its cubic pedestal in the course of the more than eighteen centuries of its existence and had been dangerously tilting ever since it became known to the world again in the 1830s. Restoration efforts had been made in 1923 and in 1974-76. But in the 1980s the column's shaft and capital were heavily damaged by tank shelling. Just when the world was beginning to hope that the monument, had yet survived another man-made crisis, the monument finally gave in to its imbalance and its enormous weight and fell over into the direction of the tilt.

Personally, I heard of the two Kabul Minars for the first time when, together with a small group of German students, I made preparations for a work and study trip to Afghanistan in 1965. Professor Klaus Fischer of Bonn University then wrote to us, that the ancient monument should be worthwhile to visit in order to do a photographic documentation. In August and September of that year I climbed up to the Minar-i-Chakari to examine it from an architectural point of view. In retrospect, it seems I was one of the very few foreign visitors who ever camped up there on the barren mountain ridge and so was able to photograph the column's east side in the early morning sun.

From these investigations resulted an illustrated text on the monument's architecture and its history which became part of my final Stuttgart University diploma as an architect in 1969. Since a few years now, I am trying to bring together all ancient western and eastern sources - as well as the growing modern literature on the topic - to write a first monograph on the Minar-i-Chakari.

On a moonless night at the end of March 1998 the Minar-i-Chakari tumbled to the ground. The noise of the collapse, described as explosion-like, woke up the villagers at the foot of the mountain crest where the pillar had stood. Some two weeks later, Brigitte Neubacher, Editor of the SPACH *Newsletter,* sent me an e-mail:

> "I have terrible news: the Minar-i-Chakari is gone...you must feel absolutely shattered, and so do we all here…Afghans and internationals alike say they lost their history. I am sorry I never saw it in its eternal beauty..."

With the first documentary photographs of the column's saddening remains came the question whether I would be interested in writing an article about it. Already preparing a monograph on the Minar-i-Chakari - to be published with a State grant in 1999 - I said it was an honor and pleasure for me to comply.

It was Nancy Dupree's energetic SPACH team which kindly provided me with the first photographs of the Minar's saddening remains, and so it has been a great pleasure for me to write this short paper on the Minar-i-Chakari for SPACH.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since it had become known to the world in the 19th century, the column had tilted some four degrees to the south. Rain, ice and snow had eroded the pedestal - the mountain side - much more than on the valley side on the north. During the 1980s, or the years of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, thoughtlessness and ignorance had made the conspicuous monument on the mountain ridge south east of Kabul a target for practice shooting. A full page photograph in V. Tamarov: *Afghanistan. Soviet Vietnam* (San Francisco 1992) shows at least two dangerously deep indents in the column's shaft (Illus.4). Hopes had been held by art historians, archaeologists and architects around the world that the Minar-I-Chakari - witness to so much Afghan history ever since pre-Islamic times – had yet survived another man-made crisis. These hopes were shattered when the column finally fell, apparently giving in to growing instability and its enormous weight.

With the Minar-i Chakari the world's cultural heritage lost its last great example of an incomparable piece of architecture. Most of its enigmatic features have had no chance to be fully understood. It is, however, universally accepted that the Minar was a Buddhist monument and a giant masterpiece of Gandharan art – the rare and exceptional mix of Greek and Indian cultural traits which flourished for but a few centuries in the north-western corner of the Indian subcontinent and neighboring regions. How did such divergent elements - Greek and Indian art and the Buddhist religion – come to combine in one grand monument?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Persistently, the Minar-i Chakari has been called "Alexander's Pillar" by the local population. This would make the column another four centuries older than it really is. One reason for this misconception could be found in the fact that Alexander's appearance in Afghanistan is well known, whereas the time of the Minar's construction is not.

Late in October 330 B.C., the armies of Alexander the Great filed past Kabul plowing through deep snow – winter had come early. But Kabul did not exist yet, and so the Macedonian King marched on to the foothills of the Hindukush and founded his famous *Alexandria ad Caucasum* before crossing over to the north.

The Upper Kabul valley became part of the satrapy called in Greek *Paropanisadai*. Residing in Alexandria, two Persians were the first governors *(satraps),* followed by Oxyartes. This Sogdian nobleman had become Alexander's father-in-law and was on good terms with the local population. But the peaceful colonial work of the new, mostly Greek settlers in the Kohistan lasted only a few years. When Alexander died so prematurely on the eve of 13 June 323 B.C. in far-away Babylon, war broke out immediately between his generals. The "upper satrapies" at the eastern and of Alexander's empire were also dragged into it. Although Oxyartes is mentioned ruling as late as 316 B.C., Seleukos Nikator, the winner of the diadochi in Asia, had to reconquer Bactria and the Paropanisadai in 305. But when he crossed the Khyber Pass to invade India – as he had done under Alexander 22 years previously – he came too late. All Greek possessions in the

Punjab and along the Indus had been lost to Chandragupta, the founder of the first truly Indian empire.

With Chandragupta Maurya, Seleukos concluded a peace treaty in 303 B.C. renouncing all Indian possessions and *selling* the Paropanisadai in exchange for full citizenship of the Greek settlers, their right to intermarry with the native population on an equal footing, and 500 elephants - which helped him win the decisive battle against his rival Antigonos in 301 B.C., in the west of Asia Minor.

For all of the third century B.C. the regions of modern Kabul, Ghazni and Kandahar became part of the Indian Empire of the Mauryas. This change is crucial, for now early Hinayana Buddhism started its peaceful penetration of the area - and continued to do so for the next 700 years, enriching the existing Greek culture with a new and challenging outlook on life. But after its third and most famous emperor, Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire started to disintegrate.

A few decades before that the Greek satrap of Bactria in northern Afghanistan, Diodotos 1, in a unilateral declaration of independence, had styled himself king.

The dynasty changed, but the new kingdom consolidated itself. Seleukos' great-grandson, Antiochos III, after an unsuccessful two year siege of the capital Bactra (Balkh), opted for a treaty with King Euthydemos I, ratifying the latter's kingship. Then Antiochos crossed the Hindukush with his army and found a much-reduced Mauryan prince ruling in the Paropanisadai.

The Greek kings of Bactria were not slow in realizing that their time had come again. Euthydemos' son, Demetrios I, embarked on a third Greek bid to conquer Indian territory to the south of the Hindukush - with success. Within half a century, the Paropanisadai and Arachosia (Kandahar) as well as Gandhara and Sindh on the Indus and most of the Punjab became Greek colonies, ruled by Greek kings whose names were engraved on beautiful copper and silver coins.

Yet, the situation was different from Alexander's time. A higher Indian culture had developed in the meantime and taken root even in the Paropanisadai. The Greeks had to recognize this and amalgamate it with their own culture. Their coins south of the Hindukush show Greek script and Greek language on the obverse and the Kharoshthi script and Northwest Indian Prakrit language on the reverse.

From about 190 to 70 B.C., Indo-Greek kings in their own right ruled over the Kabul valley. Pantaloon and his younger brother Agathocles were probably the first, and Hermaios was definitely the last Greek sovereign in *Alexandria and Caucasum.* The two greatest of the Indo-Greek princes, however, were Eucratides and Menander. Eucratides I had come from the west, toppled the Greek rulers in Bactria and installed himself as king in or around the year 171 B.C. When he had consolidated his power in Bactria he crossed the Hindukush ca. 153 B.C. attacking the young Greek king there – Menander I – who had been enthroned in *Alexandria ad Caucasum,* the town were he was born, only a few years before. A murderous civil war broke out, Greeks fighting Greeks to the last. Eucratides triumphed and extended his realm to the Indus and

beyond. He made Alexandria his capital – leaving for Menander only a small colony in eastern-most Punjab.

At the very time when Eucratides was trying to unite the Greeks north and south of the Hindukush under one crown, great developments started to make themselves felt north of Bactria, *i.e.,* north of the Oxus (Amu Darya). The menacing nomad tribes there, always restless, were rather suddenly pushed forward. For far to the east, at the western and northern fringes of Han China, peoples of the steppe were fighting it out too. The losers with all their stock animals migrated to the west and started a chain reaction by attacking all nomad peoples on their way and chasing these tribes before them. These new troublemakers were called Yae-zhi in the Chinese annals and Tocharoi in the (later) Greek texts. The nomads they dislodged and pushed westward were called Sek in China and Sakai in the west.

Ai Khanum, modern name of the ancient Greek city on the south bank of the upper Oxus (the Amu Darya), went up in flames and was abandoned by its inhabitants some time around 145 B.C. The nomadic warriors – fast-moving archers on horseback all of them – must have swept across Bactria like a flood. When Eucratides finally came marching back across the Hindukush, it was all too late. In frustration and blind anger his own son killed Eucratides while the latter was still on his way – and left the corpse by the wayside to rot. Heliocles I, the parricide, held his own in western Bactria till about 130 B.C. Then the capital itself, age-old Bactra, was stormed by the nomads and Heliocles was killed in the fighting. When in 129 B.C. the dashing Chinese explorer and general, Zhang Qian, came visiting the Yue-zhi, all was quiet. Both the Greek armies and the Greek administration had disappeared.

In the south, Menander reconquered all his lost territories. He even enlarged his kingdom and installed himself again as king supreme. For the last time, and for the length of half a generation, there was one united, rather prosperous Indo-Greek empire. It was ruled by a king whose mother had been an Indian lady. This gave her son a chance to grow up in both the Greek and the Indian worlds. Whether or not he really converted to it, Menander was well versed in the philosophies of Buddihim as is shown in a unique source, the Indian book *Milindapanha* or "Questions of Milinda" where Raja Melinda (King Menander) is disputing the Buddha's teachings in dialogues of Platonian style with the learned Buddhist monk Nagasena.

Menander died in camp, about 130 B.C., a premature death too, for his only son was still a child. Had Menander been killed fighting the Bactrian Greeks when all of Bactria had to be abandoned? As if he had been another Buddha, Menander's ashes were divided by the competing cities of his lands and entombed in *mnemeia* as Plutarch writes – which sounds very much like a Buddhist memorial, *i.e.,* the stupa.

By 100 B.C. the conquering nomads had divided Bactria between themselves: the Yue-zhi to the east, the Sakai to the west. The Greeks managed to block the Hindukush passes, but it was now only a matter of time when the fierce nomad hordes would appear also in the south. Greek India of the post-Menander period became disputed between two feuding dynasties: the house of Euthydemos, to which Menander had belonged, and the house of Eucratides. And it showed a tendency to split into ever smaller territories, governed by an ever increasing number of kinglets.

In *Alexandria ad Caucasum,* we have Zoilos I, Lysias, Antialcidas, Philoxenos, Diomedes and Hermaios as the so-called later Indo-Greek kings in the Paropanisadai. After Hermaios' death in about 70 B.C., the Yue-zhi broke through the Hindukush barrier and ended some 120 years of uninterrupted Greek rule in the Kabul valley.

In a parallel development, the Yue-zhi's nomadic rivals, the Sakai, had fought their way west and south from Bactria and had managed to settle in Drangiana, the country of the lower Helmand River, which now became known as *Sakastene,* modern Sistan. From this base, mounted Sakai armies attacked the Greek dominions in the Indus valley and were in due time able to establish themselves in Taxila. They were driven back by the Greeks for a short period of time, but in about 55 B.C. the Sakai king Azes I had definitely become the new master of much of the Punjab; only in its eastern-most corner, a tiny Greek domination survived into the opening decades of the Christian era.

For the next one hundred years, military governors of the Yue-zhi ruled the former Paropanisadai – the court of their king remaining in Bactria's capital, Bactra. It is interesting to note that a Chinese source, the Han Annals of Ban Gu, mentions the name of *Kabul* for the first time in history. A list of five new Yue-zhi provinces, governed by high military leaders, ends with: "… the fifth belongs to the general of Gao-fu, and the seat of government is at the town of Gao-fu." All scholars agree that Gao-fu is Kabul. We see then that the former Greek satrap of the Paropanisadai was renamed *Kabuilstan* under the Yue-zhi and the administrative center was moved from *Alexandria ad Caucasum* to their new town of Kabul.

In general, the new lords were carefully trying to leave intact what cultural achievements they inherited from their Greek predecessors. The Yue-zhi were eager to learn – and had ample time to do so for the next few generations. The coins of the last king Hermaios with their Greek and Indian legends were re-issued unchanged for a long period of time, to show the world that roughneck nomads could become civilized settlers – and worthy inheritors of Greek and Indian culture.

Few other historical facts are known about this "dark century." As they coined no money of their own, none of the Yue-zhi governors of Kabul left us his name. Instead, it was the ruler of another Yue-zhi fief who rose to sudden fame early in the first century A.D. Our lone Chinese source gives the name of his fief as *Gui-shuang* and his own name as *Qiu-jiu-que,* saying that his capital was closer to China than Kabul. The Chinese transliterations of foreign names are awful, but this Yue-zhi general has been identified with Kujula Kadphises and the name of his fief was in fact Kushan, both known from coin legends and inscriptions. Kujula is said to have attacked and annexed the other four Yue-zhi fiefs and to have styled himself king. To the new kingdom he gave the name of his fief thus founding the great Kushan Empire. Certain indications in the Later Han Annals, where we read all this, make it clear that these events took place after A.D. 25. But things were not at all as simple as the chronicler Fan Yeh states in his terse sentences. For the great Parthian Suren, Gondophores, sovereign king of the Sakai in Sakastene, early on attacked Kujula, first in the Kabul valley, then also in the Punjab. He regained what the Sakai kings had lost in the northwest of India, driving Kujula back onto his own territory.

In A.D. 46 or a few years later, in the wake of the Suren's death, Kujula was able to resume his ambitious plans to unite all Yue-zhi under one ruler. He retook Taxila and Kabul from the Parthians – overstriking Gondophares' coins as Gondophares had overstruck his.

Finally, Kujula went on to conquer the Yue-zhi heartland, Bactria proper, called Pu-tiao by the Chinese. There he did away with the king of the old Yue-zhi dynasty who, as we known from various Chinese sources, was still reigning in Bactra in the Year 2 B.C.

Only then, towards the very end of his long life and career, can Kujula Kadphises have crowned himself the new, undisputed Great King, the King of Kings. He died, over 80 years of age, shortly before A.D. 80.

Fan Yeh reports: “His son Yan-gao-zhen succeeded him as king. He conquered India again and sent a general to rule over it. From this time on the Yue-zhi were extremely wealthy and prosperous.” Since the recent discovery of the Rabatak stone inscription (published 1997) we know that Yangao-zhen was not Vima Kadphises as had been believed for so long, but his father, the elusive Kushana *Vima Takto.* Some scholars had called him “The Nameless King,” others had ignored his existence. Vima Takto had to reconquer India because his father Kujula Kadphises had at last devoted all his energies to Bactria in his final bid for the Yue-zhi crown and had in the process neglected India. The last Parthian king in the Punjab was killed when the Kushana finally subdued all former Sakai dominations in India.

But Vima Takto was also preoccupied with Bactria. From there he established friendly relations with Han China and in A.D. 88, some ten years after his coronation, he sent a mission to the “Son of Heaven” demanding the hand of a Chinese princess. When repudiated by the haughty Chinese general Ban Chao, brother of the court historian Ban Gu, Vima I dispatched a huge army in A.D. 90. Ban Chao escaped disaster only by retreating and letting the exhausted mass of soldiers starve in the Taklamakan desert. Maybe Vima (I) Takto resigned after this setback or he died not too long afterwards as he must have been of advanced years himself when he followed his ’octogenarian” father as king.

With his son, Vima (II) Kadphises began the “golden age” of the Kushana kingdom, which now become a third power between the Roman and Chinese Empires. At the “crossroads of Asia” it grew rich primarily on the transit flow of a rapidly expanding world trade in luxury goods.

Vima II was the first Kushana to introduce a gold currency, modeled after the *aurei* of Rome. The copper coins of Kujula Kadphises depicted the king as *dhramathida* or "steadfast in the law (of the Buddha)" and the coppers of Vima I portrayed him with the rayed head of the Iranian god Mithra, while Vima Kadphises' gold coins made extensive use of the Indian god Siva. The Kushanas clearly believed in syncretism, the attempt to combine differing religious systems: all creeds were welcomed and patronized at times.

The region's apogee of wealth and power was reached under the fourth Kushana, Kanishka I, the great-grandson of Kujula Kadphises. This famous king came to the throne early in the second century A.D.. Kanishka commissioned dynastic architectural projects of the grandest scale - such as the Great Stupa near Peshawar (Purushapura) and the temple of Surkh Kotal in the Hindukush near Pul-i-Khumri.

As internal evidence shows, it was under Vima (II) Kadphises that the new provincial capital of the Kushanas, Kabul (*Gao-fu; Kabura basileion),* began to grow in importance - reflected in the construction of Buddhist settlements in its surroundings. The most conspicuous single structure of these was the *stambha* or pillar which is called "Minar-i-Chakari" today.

ARCHITECTURAL CONCEPT

The Minar-i-Chakari had been the last surviving example of at least two similar monumental *stambhas* which were part of the Buddhist remains near Kabul.

Modern exploration of these ruins began in 1833. It occasioned a first notice in the July 1834 issue of J. Prinsep's *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (JASB), published in Calcutta:

> "In one of the recesses or glens deeply locked within the mountains, stands a Grecian pillar called Surkh Minar…Another Grecian monument or minar appears perched upon the crest of the ridge at a great elevation..."

The author, J.G. Gerand, a British surgeon in the services of the East India Company, had just returned from a clandestine mission to Bukhara, north of the Oxus River, accompanying Lieutenant A Burnes. In the 19th century, scientific studies in Afghanistan were a by-product of military exploits.

In Kabul, Gerard had met two other Europeans in late 1833: Charles Masson (alias James Lewis) who had escaped from military service in India in 1826 and was now living in Kabul; and Dr. Martin Honigberger, court physician to the last powerful Indian maharaja, Ranjit Singh of Lahore, now on the way to his native Transylvania (Siebenburgen). To Masson we are indebted for the oldest surviving sketch of the Minar-i Chakari (Illus. 2). Honigberger brought his valuable knowledge of Buddhist stupas to Afghanistan. He had acquired it from the French chevalier A. Ventura. This general had fought under Napoleon at Waterloo and was now also in the services of Ranjit Singh. In 1830, Ventura had with great success opened a first monumental Buddhist "tope" (*i.e.,* stupa) that of Manikyala in the Punjab which M. Elphinstone had discovered during a political reconnaissance mission to Peshawar in 1808-09. Honigberger put this kind of archaeological exploration to work in Afghanistan and taught it to Masson. The latter was able to carry on till 1838 when he had to leave the country abruptly, because he, too, had become a political agent.

Honigberger and Masson extracted Kushana and Roman gold coins from some of the Buddhist stupas near Kamari, Shewaki and in the Guldera valley (Illus 7+8). They provide helpful evidence for dating these structures – and with then the minars.

At least the pedestal and foundations of the Minar-i-Chakari have also been tunneled in search for similar deposits. But Buddhist *stambhas,* due to the difference in religious meaning, do not normally conceal relic chambers like all Buddhist stupas.

In the beginning as well as later on, most observers were satisfied with a visit to the lower column, called Surkh Minar or "Red Tower" and shunned the arduous climb to the column much higher up, called at times Minareh Syah or "Black Tower". It was only after his return to England that Masson gave a first reliable account of the two minars, published in 1841:

> "Amongst the topes of the Shevaki group … is a column of masonry called Surkh Minar, or the red pillar… It is clearly of the same age at the topes… On the crest of the (mountain) range also above the principal tope of Shevaki is another column called Minar Chakri, superior in altitude and in preservation. Of this I annex a sketch …The original form of Surkh Minar was probably identical, but its upper parts have fallen beneath the injuries of time."

Two soldiers were the next to report. Lieutenant A. Burnes visited the lower column in 1838. He mentions the minarets of Chukreea (Chakri) in his book *Cabool* and correctly remarks: "These buildings are evidently not minarets, but more probably of a monumental nature." Lieutenant V. Eyre – one of only 122 lucky survivors of the British army massacred in Afghanistan in January 1842, then a prisoner of Akbar Khan – was marched past the Minar-i-Chakari on 24 May 1842. In his diary we read:

> "We took the direct road toward Cabul, having Alexander the Great's column in view nearly the whole way…We halted for half an hour…Resuming our way, we again entered some hills, the road making a continuous ascent for about a couple of miles to Alexander's pillar, one of the most ancient relics of antiquity in the East… As we reached this classical spot, a view of almost unrivalled magnificence burst suddenly upon our sight…On the way down another Grecian pillar was discernible among the hills on the left."

Another surviving participant in the First Afghan War (1839-1842), who, as a prisoner, walked past the Minar-i-Chakari, was Captain W. Anderson. His diary has been discovered only recently and was bought by the India Office Library. The few words on the Minar and a tiny sketch are still awaiting publication.

A first and most beautiful lithograph of the Minar-i-Chakari is based on a professional drawing by Lieutenant Sturt of 1841. It served as the frontispiece in *The Defence of Jellalabad* by Sir Robert Sale. Sturt, the general's son-in-law, did not survive the massacre at the Khurd Kabul Pass and only one of his sketch books was later returned. Lady Sale wrote in 1846:

> "Alexander's Column (the Title Page). I had frequently expressed a wish to visit this spot…I had often with a field-glass looked at this column from our encampment on the Siah Sung near Cabul, and parties were sometimes made by gentlemen to visit it…Those who went there, generally asked permission of the chief, one of the robber tribes, who would then, it was said, kill a sheep and make a feast for the guests...When the prisoners were removed from Zaudek to the neighborhood of Cabul, it was found impossible for us to pass through the Cabul Pass, and the road of the pillar was adopted; it was rugged in the extreme, and very steep. The pillar itself…is much defaced and broken at the base, and since the celebrated earthquake of our captivity it has lost its equilibrium, and will probably fall in a few years…"

The first known photograph is the work of J. Burke who was possibly a civilian with the British occupation army. Most likely, the picture was taken in September 1880 when hundreds of British and Gurka soldiers lined up the footpath in the rocky cliffs for the generals Stuart and Roberts to reconnoiter this mountain pass – insurgent forces were expected from that direction – and to examine the Minar. The 67th Regiment's *Chronicle* of January 1881 has the story:

> "On the Khundao range of hills, which form the Southern Boundary of the Kabul plain, stands the Chakari Minar…It is not on the highest peak of the range, and consequently only from certain points about Kabul can it be seen clear and distinct against the sky line. It marks the Kotal which leads from the Kabul plain into the Chakari Valley and thence to Tizeen itself, a more direct route to the Ghilzai country, than by way of the Khurd Kabul pass. For many months past our climbers had burned with desire to climb the hill…All kinds of rumours were afloat…There stood the Minar looking down with a supreme contempt upon our puny works round Sherpur…its mystery seemed failed never to be solved even by the most adventurous spirits…A ride of a mile brings us to …where the real ascent commences. The pillar looks so close that 10 minutes should see us at its foot, but in half an hour we are still winding in and out of the rocks…The last few yards are so difficult that all except the muleteers dismount…And this is the Minar…A solid pillar made of slabs of slate and bits of rock well cemented with mortar, its height perhaps 110 feet, its shape circular…the whole very like a gigantic candle stick…the workmanship is by some savant amongst us pronounced Buddhist…and the Minar must therefore be 2000 or 3000 years old…"

SCENERY

The Minar- Chakari was built on the foremost crest of the Shakh Baranta range, about 16 km. (10 miles) southeast of Kabul, as the crow flies. The three-dimensional coordinates of the column's position are N. lat 34°, 25' and E. long. 69°17'30, at an alt. of 2,530 meters (8,300 ft.).

Right in front of the north face of the monument, the mountain side drops sharply some 600m. (2,000 ft.) into the wide Kabul plain, the Kohdaman and, further on, the Kohistan. The often snow-capped peaks of the Hindukush serve as a splendid backdrop. To the south of the column, there is a stretch of flat ground, followed by the rise of another mountain ridge with peaks more than 3000 m. (9,900 ft.) high. In the surroundings, ruins of "Buddhist" masonry have been discovered, indicating that the *stambha* once formed part of a monastery, lost in the clouds of this rocky solitude.

As the British prisoners found out, the Minar-i-Chakari for long centuries has marked the mountain pass of the shortest connection from ancient Kabul (present Begram) to Khurd Kabul and Buddhist Nagarahara (Jalalabad) – for pilgrims and caravans alike.

The modern name Minar-i-Chakari is often interpreted as meaning, "Tower of the Wheel" - deriving from Sanskrit *Cakra* or "the Wheel" which the Buddha had set in motion with his teachings (the *dharma)*. An early quote of this interpretation is found in *Asia*, December 1925, where A.L. Olson writes:

> "A monument conspicuous because of its location high on a mountain pass about eight miles from Kabul is the Minar-i-Chakri, or Pillar of the Wheel, a Grecian pillar about one hundred

feet high…[it] probably was once surmounted by the Wheel of the Law, Buddhist symbol for the succession of births and deaths and rebirths…"

With the advent of Islam in Afghanistan, Buddhist propagation came to an end. Since then, old Indian Sanskrit names have been forgotten. Today, every *tope* or *tepe* (stupa) in Afghanistan is known by a generic name descriptive of its location or situation. As. W. Ball pointed out in *Studia Iranica* 13, 1984, "the real local name is in fact Minar-i-Chakari and not Minar-i-Chakhri, even though the latter at first sight appears to make better sense in Persian." The two columns southeast of Kabul have simply been called Surkh Minar and Minareh Siah in the last centuries – Red Tower and Black Tower. Minar-i-Chakari, it seems to me, is in fact a shortening of Minareh Siah Chakari or The Black Tower of Chakari – where the latter name is that of a dry valley (Khwar) south of the Minar and of a village at the end of this valley, transcribed also as Čakari or Čakaray.

DESCRIPTION

The two Kabul Minars were most probably identical, free-standing columns of an unparalleled, truly monumental scale. They were composed of three major parts: the rectangular pedestal, the cylindrical column with base, shaft and capital – and an uppermost crowning of unknown shape.

The Surkh Minar, built much closer to the foot of the same mountain and having lost the upper part of its capital and all crowning long ago, finally collapsed into a pile of rubble - due to an earthquake in the springtime of 1965.

In the summer of the same year, 1965, my on-the-spot calculations of the Minar-i-Chakari's total height, measured at the central axis, showed slightly more than 27 m. (88.5 ft.). A careful survey, carried out by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology and the British institute of Afghan Studies in 1975/76, fixed the total height at 28.6m. (93. 8 ft.) – by taking the sloping ground into account.

As only a very small portion of its north (valley) facade had survived, the dimensions of the pedestal were difficult to reconstruct. It can only be said with confidence that it was of a cubic shape and covered a square of *ca*. 8 m. x 8 m. (26. 2 ft. sq.). On three sides, the pedestal had been so dangerously reduced – to not much more than the diameter of the column shaft itself – that a collapse seemed imminent. A first attempt at stabilizing the Minar, undertaken in 1923 and using unskilled local labor, had been of very limited value as not much of it was left in 1965. The Afghan/British restoration work of 1974 and 1975/76 was successful in stabilizing the Minar with a stone-and-concrete pedestal of cone-shape and a hidden reinforced concrete ring beam immediately above it. This changed the outer appearance of the Minar considerably, and the last traces of the Greek column base were lost in the process. A genuine restoration of the pedestal was not attempted – it must have become clear at the time that we are utterly unable to rebuild larger tracts of so-called Buddhist *(diaper)* masonry in its original, highly sophisticated quality today – particularly in a remote place like that of the Minar-i-Chakari.

The column base of the Minars was of the Attic order – very familiar to Graeco-Bactrian and Gandharan art and architecture, *e.g.* in Ai Khanum and Surkh Kotal. The Black Tower had only faint traces left, barely visible in the column's contour lines. In this instance, however, the Red Tower had preserved more: the clearly visible channel between the bulges of the Attic *torus-scotia-torus* base, the upper bulge protruding less than the lower.

The column base supported a cylindrical column shaft of sturdy proportions (illus. 6). In the case of the Black Tower it was some 12 meters (39.4 ft.) high, the lowest circumference measured 19.08 m. (59.3 ft.) at the base tapering to some 4.5 m. (14.8 ft.) at the top.

The Minar-i Chakari's shaft showed one peculiarity: a lean of slightly more than 4° – visible best from the southwest. Thus, the top of the Minar was about 2 m. (6. 6 ft.) off the vertical axis. This tilt was not straight, but curved, and more pronounced on the outer side, the inner side being almost straight. This twist is said to have been caused by a stronger erosion on the south side due to the prevailing wind, rain, and ice from that direction scouring out mortar between the facing stones. But the Minars were not hollow. Instead, their interiors were solidly filled up with well-cemented rubble masonry. My own impression, therefore, is that the Black Tower was in fact built that way – that the enormous stone masses of the column shaft somehow went out of control during construction time. The Red Tower did not show any such congenital defects (illus. 1).

The most astonishing part of the Kabul Minars, no doubt, was the column capital. Its total height almost equaled that of the column shaft and was of an intricate, composite nature. The lower part is a grandchild of the "full-blooded campaniform capital of the Asokan monoliths" to use the words of P. Brown in *Indian Architecture* (1942). In other words: it adopted the bell-shaped capitals of the monolithic stone pillars or *lats* of the third Indian emperor Ashoka. Both can be traced back to the famous capitals in the royal palaces of Achaemenid Susa and Persepolis. The upper capital elements can be described as two hemispherical shapes, piled up with the two half-round sides facing each other, or as a dome and a bowl separated by an intermediate disk (Illus. 5). This motif is much less Mediterranean than it is genuine Indian - the two roots out of which the composite art of Gandhara has grown. There are bas relief scenes on the pedestals of many Buddha statues showing free-standing columns with similarly composite dome-and-bowl capitals. Here they represent fire altars flanked by pious adorants. Yet, it seemed strange that in Buddhism – as in Zoroastrianism – fire should be worshiped. H. Ingholt, in *Gandharan Art in Pakistan* (1957), drew this conclusion:

> "The fire altar… probably is to be explained by the syncretism ripe at Gandhara at this time… Sasanian coins portrayed the fire altar – emblem of the chief Zoroastrian deity, Ahuramazda – being worshiped by the reigning monarch. Here it may well represent the Buddha, who in the minds of his worshippers was the equal of Ahuramazda in power."

This may serve as a first indication of the fact, that the slender *stambhas* represented the Buddha and were as such objects of special veneration.

That the Minars of Kabul once carried a crowning element on top has never been doubted. Some of the *lats* of Ashoka had sculptures preserved on their capitals, crowned with a Buddhist symbol: so the world-famous *Simha Stambha* of Sarnath – the place of the Buddha's first Sermon in India – carries four lions with the *dharma cakra* on top, the spooked solar wheel and Buddhist symbol of the good law.

On top of the Minar-i Chakari only a pile of rubble was left. The Black Tower's monumental height and its position in the splendid isolation of a harsh mountain world, accessible only on foot, prevented any closer examination. Most widely accepted, however, was the idea that it once carried this "wheel of the good law" as its crown – as its name seemed to prove so convincingly. But the etymology of such names has been called deceptive. As an architect, I had always felt that something circular – *i.e.*, of equal width and height did not fit on top of these towering monuments. It made no sense from a strictly *formal* point of view. On one old photograph I thought I could discern a small cubic socle amongst the rubble up on the Black Tower, but nothing more.

In 1975/76, an iron-pipe scaffolding was erected for restoration work and a closer scrutiny became possible for the first time. What a unique chance for a photographic survey of all the vexing details of the Minar's complex capital from a close distance! And how tantalizing that G. K. Rao in *Afghanistan Archaeological Review* 1 (1979) only wrote: "The debris on top of the abacus was cleared and a rectangular platform revealed." More revealing was what, in her *Historical Guide to Afghanistan* (1977), Nancy H. Dupree had to say about it:

> "During the conservation project carried out by the British Institute of Afghan Studies in cooperation with the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, in 1975-76, the remains of a further structure of undetermined nature were discovered on the very top of the Minar; it was, perhaps, the "umbrella mast" common to Buddhist structures in many countries."

Such an oblong crowning would make so much better sense: a *high* "umbrella mast" (*chattravali*) – on a tall column – in an *elevated* place. One impressive example of such a column crowning has, in fact, been preserved in a votive stupa surrounded by four slender *stambhas*, each carrying a tiny *chattravali*-crowned stupa on its capital. It is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

CONSTRUCTION

Unlike their distant Indian prototypes – the monolithic Mauryan *lats* – the *stambhas* near Kabul were built in a particular type of masonry. The building material for it was close at hand anywhere in Afghanistan: living rock or, to be more precise, white quartz and green schist.

The structural system of the columns was simple. The accumulating gravity loads were brought vertically – *i.e.,* within the solid column shaft and in the most direct way – down to the bedrock, the best of all possible foundations. As free-standing columns, the Minars did not have to carry any dead loads. They can be considered as vertical compression members and first of all had to resist possibly

dangerous buckling forces. Here, too, the obvious – not very elegant – sturdiness of the column proportions was on the safe side. The ratio of total height to smallest shaft diameter was 27 m. ÷ 4.5 m. = 6 for the Minar-i Chakari. Only figures above 10 constitute a real danger of buckling.

Resistance against wind forces, particularly important in the case of the elevated, exposed location of the Minar-i Chakari, was greatly enhanced by the cylindrical shapes of column shaft and capital. The highest and most exposed element, the crowning – whatever it may have been – was obviously to a much lesser degree "streamlined" and did not withstand the harsh weather conditions. Also, the lowest structural element, the pedestal, eroded much faster for at least two reasons. It was not of cylindrical, but cubic shape; and it had to take the onslaught of snow, ice and water. Hence, it is easy to understand why, on a sloping ground, the mountain side of the pedestal was washed away while a small section in the middle of the opposite (valley) side had survived – protected by the column itself.

The type of masonry of both Kabul Minars is that of all the stupas in the vicinity. It is the product of a very sophisticated building technique which was developed to suit one particular building material; that of schist. It is generally called *diaper masonry,* due to the chequered appearance of its outer surfaces. At times, it was simply called "Buddhist" because it could be seen on all the Buddhist monuments of ancient Gandhara, *i.e.,* the Kabul, Swat, and middle Indus valleys in southeastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan (illus. 7).

The diaper type masonry consists of a form giving an outer *casing* and an inner *core.* The outer casing, some 30-50 cm. (1-1.6 ft.) thick, is made up of very regular layers of about 3 cm. (1.2 in.) thin schist laminae of a reddish to bluish-grey color, their visible face carefully hewn. They were fitted so tightly together that hardly any bonding mortar was needed. The core consists of a coarse, irregular rubble masonry in a thick mortar bed. These two heterogeneous parts were connected in short, rather regular intervals by slabs of whitish quartz, square in section (*ca*. 20 cm. x 20 cm.), and up to 1 m. (3.3 ft.) long. Their heads protrude from the surface of the wall and give it its peculiar chequered appearance – very pleasing to the eye. Yet, in Buddhist times, all structural parts were hidden (and protected) behind at least two different layers of a very strong plaster.

A visit to the Minars during construction time must have been a fascinating sight – for those lucky enough to witness it. Personally, I would have been most interested to see how, after the comparatively easy shaft, the highly complex shapes of the capital sections were built. Two circumferential, wood-filled grooves at either end of the capital seem to indicate the lower and upper anchorage of a giant, temporary wooden mould, needed to assist in building up such intricately curved outer contours.

For the construction of the Minars, a large amount of manpower was required, no doubt, both on the ground and on the scaffolding which probably went up with the towers in sections of some 3 meters (10 ft.) each. The scaffolding holes could best be seen on the Red Tower.

ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION

Beyond the Black Tower's well-preserved capital, not much of the two Minars' architectonic embellishment has survived. What we saw in our days was just the bare skeleton. In the course of their extraordinarily long life span, the two towers had been stripped to their bones. Of their softer skin, *i.e.,* all decorative mouldings in plaster and stucco, nothing at all had been left. Here similar, coeval monuments of culturally related regions serve to help us out with the details of missing parts. One of these areas is the ancient city of Taxila; another – somewhat closer – the Swat valley. Near Mingora, on the south bank of the Swat River, the Italian Archaeological Mission has excavated free-standing Buddhist *stambhas* about one-half and one-quarter the size. Considerably smaller in size, they served a more decorative purpose, surrounding large main stupas. Careful and intelligent hypothetical reconstructions of these Gandharam-style columns – complete with all component parts such as pedestal, base, composite capital and crowning – provides us with many details of the architectural decor, long ago lost on our Minars (illus. 3).

Hence, the cubic pedestal, square in plan, was decorated with base and cornice mouldings. The column proper had an attic base composed of a *scotia* (which had still been visible on the Red Tower) with fillets between two *toruses,* and stood on a plain square plinth or directly on the pedestal. Also, the decorations of our Minars' Indo-Persepolitan capitals were fashioned completely in stucco: acanthus leaves in low relief on the Iranian bell, lotus leaves on the Indian (Gandharan) dome and bowl – as is very clearly visible on analogous columns, found in many Gandharan low relief scenes. And whereas the uniform, homogeneous coats of plaster, covering all surfaces, were generally kept in white, parts of the architectural decoration were sometimes highlighted in color – which in exceptional cases served as an undercoat for gilding.

DATING

The age of the two Kabul Minars depends on the hotly debated question of Kushana genealogy and chronology. The more Gandharan art and Kushan history have been discussed in the last 150 years, the less it seemed possible to agree on relative, let alone absolute dates. Unlike Ashoka's *lats,* our two Minars stood uninscribed. Also, they did not yield any relics. At least in the latter respect, the neighboring stupas were of greater help. A. Cunningham noted in *Archaeological Survey of India 5* (1875):

> "Mr. Fergusson also thinks that the pillars are coeval with the *topes*, an opinion in which I fully agree…Now, the age of this group of *topes* can be ascertained, within very narrow limits, from their contents, which were extracted by Dr. Honigberger. Only two of these topes yielded any results; but these were a gold coin of Wema Kadphises, and an ink inscription in Arian letters on a steatite vase."

With regard to another important piece of evidence, Masson wrote in *Ariana Antiqua* (1841):

> "The man employed by M. Honigberger, some year and a half after that gentleman had left Kabul, brought to me for sale two or three gold Indo-Scythic [=Kushana] coins, of the same species as those found in these topes, with a gold coin of Trajan."

Honigberger's vase from the Shewaki stupa disappeared and its Kharoshthi inscriptions have never been read. But the Kushana and Roman gold coins have survived in the famous London and Paris collections and have been carefully studied since. While coin deposits of stupas have been questioned as valid dating evidence by some scholars, the reasoning of D.W. MacDowall is convincing when he remarked during a Berlin symposium (1986): "Before we reject the prima facie date suggested by a coin deposit we need strong evidence that it is inconsistent with other data." Today what A.F.R. Hoernle has written long ago in the *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1879) is acceptable:

> "It follows that the coins which are found in the Topes must have been placed in them, as being contemporary and current, whether native common…. or foreign and rare."

After the coins of stupa deposits, further evidence for the question of dating is the type of masonry of the Minars themselves. It can best be compared with what J. Marshall in Taxila (1951) described as "early fine diaper". He assigned this type to the last quarter of the first century A.D.. This dating has been challenged since, but the latest revelations in Kushana chronology show that Sir John was not too far off the truth after all.

And a last help for a relative dating can be found in an architectural detail. This is the bracketed type of cornice which occurs both on the *stambhas* and the stupas. On the Kabul Minar's the finely cut double brackets were part of the lower cornice of the capital's Persepolitan bell – totally destroyed at the Red Tower but well preserved way up on the Minar-i Chakari. A certain evolution of this recurring architectural feature allows us to place the monuments in a relative chronological order. We can see that the double brackets of the Minars best resembled those of the Guldara stupa (seven gold coins of Vima II and one of Kanishka), but clearly antedate the heavy consoles of the Shewaki stupa (one gold coin each of Vima II, Kanishka, and Trajan) where this detail may already be called a dental cornice (Illus. 8).

All told, we are tempted to place the erection of the two Minars near Kabul broadly into the reign of the third Kushana emperor, Vima (II) Kadphises – or from the very last years of the first into the dawning of the second century A.D..

ORIGIN, PURPOSE, AND MEANING

Buddhist *stambhas* excavated and painstakingly restored by Dr. Faccenna and his Italian Archaeological Mission at Saidu Sharif I and Panr I near Mingora could be taken as genuine replicas of our Minars. Yet, the smaller Swat *stambhas* are a generation or so older. We are, therefore, inclined to assume that this hybrid type of column traveled with the first Kushanas from the Swat and Gandhara regions up the Kabul valley to the Kohistan.

After the death of the last Greek king Hermaios, a century earlier, the old Paropanisadai province had for the first time been overrun by Yue-zhi nomads who then moved the capital from *Alexandria ad Caucasum* to the lesser city of Ortospana - strategically located near the famous trivium or junction of three important highways

– which they renamed something like Kabul. On their way to Bactria, the Kushanas, after forcefully bringing all five Yue-zhi fiefs under their control, had only then been able to recapture the Upper Kabul valley from the Indo-Parthians or Pahlavas. Right with the Kushana *Shogun*, who called himself *dhramatidasa* or "Steadfast [believer] in the Buddhist law," came the first monasteries near the provincial capital of their new patrons, modern Begram some 60 km. north of Kabul. The *floruit* of their settlements was to come some two generations later, early in the second century A.D., marked by the erection of the tall Minars.

After these quick glimpses into their history, the significance of the once truly spectacular twin towers seems more difficult to expound. Of the few archaeologists who visited the Minars and left us a record of their arduous climb, one was A. Toynbee. In *Between Oxus and Jumna* (1961), he noted the following impressions:

> "The Minar-i-Chakari is an enigmatic monument. It is on the grand scale…The masonry is in the diaper style as that of the stupa below, and this diaper-work suggests…that both monuments were built in the Kushan Age. What ever the date of the column may be, it is a child of the marriage of Greek with Persian architecture…Who erected this great column on these rugged heights? What did its erection signify? It must have cost a vast expenditure of labour. So presumably it commemorates some important person, human or superhuman, or, alternatively, some important event, historic or legendary. The puzzle presents itself, but remains unsolved."

If the Minar-i Chakari were only an isolated monument, its erection could indeed glorify a historic event. But ruins in the vicinity signify that the *stambha* once was part of a monastery – as yet unexcavated as are most Buddhist settlements near Kabul, with some exceptions such as the stupa-complex in the "Vale of Flowers", Guldara. Hence, the glorification can only be that of one historic person: of the Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama who became the Buddha became some 500 years ago.

In early Buddhism, the significance of the *stambha* was that of an anionic symbol of the Enlightened One who, for so many centuries, remained beyond any representation in human form. This religious concept, translated into suitable architectonic expression became closely related to Hinayana Buddhism. When out of the many monasteries of the Swat region the new Great Vehicle doctrine emerged, the *stambha* as a Hinayanist symbol of aniconic worship was doomed. In Mahayana Buddhism the stupa was moved to the very center and assumed overpowering dimensions. The *stambha* survived for a while as a decorative element on the perimeter, *i.e.* in a very characteristic architectonic concept of Gandharan origin – the columned stupa - and then went out of service. In such circumstances, the Kabul Minars take on special importance as the last grand-scale specimen of the Hinayana cosmic pillar J.G. Irwin has written so much about, *e.g.,* in 1987 in honor of Giuseppe Tucci:

> "…Let us hope that we have finally established a place for the cosmic pillar in Buddhism as a cosmogonic image…It equally served as a symbol of the Buddha's Enlightenment, mythically identified with his triumph over the demon Mara…Much more research needs to be done…The Minar-i-Chakari, literally, "object that gives light"…will then be understood as one of the most dramatic expressions surviving from the ancient world."

Such research will now be a posthumous effort. Through natural agents and man-made calamities, Afghanistan's and also the world's cultural heritage has, in the year 1998, lost one last grandiose symbol of spiritual enlightenment.

Yet, the high historic value of the Kabul Minars has survived in the guise of another extremely beautiful form. As an architectural achievement, it was again employed to fulfill its inherent purpose in the service of another world religion. Here, it has witnessed an evolution which leads to spectacular heights – in the true sense of the word.

In *Pharos* (1909), his fundamental monograph on towers, H. Thiersch remarked that the word *minaret* can etymologically be traced back to Arabic *manara*, meaning a place that gives light – as all minarets of Egypt had gone back to the Pharos, the world-famous, 120 m. (400 ft.) high light tower of Alexandria, dating from the third century B.C .. The author goes on:

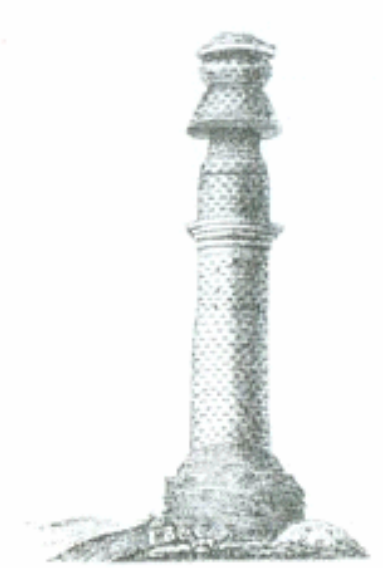
> "The Islamic countries of the East are characterized by minarets…circular in plan and cylindrical or conical in elevation. The origin of this round minaret remains in the dark… Not the tower of Samarra, and less even the one of the Delhi, can be considered the source…The origin…must be looked for in other regions and older times…in those border lands between India and Persia which today are mainly included in Afghanistan. Here we find the oldest cylindrical towers I know…It is certainly not a proof, but a welcome indication…of their congeniality with mosque towers that the local Muslims call them Minar."

Hence, the column-shaped minarets in East and West from lofty heights call out the inspiring message of enlightenment the Minars had once conveyed to the people of Kabul.

December 1998

I11us.1 the column tiled some 4 degrees to the south

Column or Minar Chakri



I11us. 2 earliest sketches by Masson 1830s

From: H.H Wilson, Ariana Antiqua, 1841

I11us. 3 similar column of older date at Swat Pakistan
Reconstruction: scale 1: 100

Diagram from; C. Faccenna, Rome, 1995
Saidu Sharif I (Swat, Pakistan)

I11us. 4 in the 1980s the column was damaged by shelling

Photo: Jolyon Leslie, 1997

I11us. 5 the height of the capital equaled the of the shaft

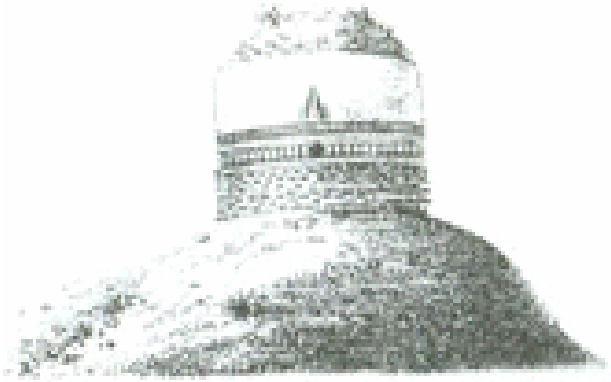
Photo: APHCHA

I11us. 6 the shaft was filled with rubble Masonry

Photo: Rensje van Neek, 1998

I11us. 7 Guldara Stupa: diaper masonry was a sophisticated building technique used by the Kushans

Photo: Brigitte Neubacher, 1998



I11us. 8 Kushan and Roman gold coins were extracted from stupas

From: H.H. Wilsom, London, 1841 Ariana Antiqua

I11us. 9

December 1997

Photo: APHCHA

I11us. 10+11

April 1998

Photo: William Reeve

I11us. 12 Afghanistan's Lost Heritage

Abdullah, April 1998