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A BRIEF STUDY OF TAXILA REGION AND DESCRIPTION OF TAXILA AS AN ANCIENT PLACE OF EDUCATION

Mohammad Kashif Faisal

M.Phil. Scholar, Pakistan Studies, Department of Pakistan Studies,
NUML, Islamabad

Syed Hamid Mehmood Bukhari

Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, NUML, Islamabad

Dr. Attiya Iqbal

Ph.D Scholar, Quaid i Azam University Islamabad

Abstract

Taxila, an ancient city located in the Rawalpindi district of Punjab, Pakistan, is a significant archaeological site and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1980. Known as Takshasila in Sanskrit, the city has a rich history spanning nearly three millennia, with its origins tracing back to the Neolithic age. Taxila served as a prominent center of education and culture, particularly during the 5th century BCE to the 5th century CE, and is often regarded as one of the world's earliest universities. The city's name, derived from the Sanskrit words "Taksha" (serpent) and "Sila" (hill), reflects its mythological and historical significance. Taxila was a hub for higher education, attracting students from across the ancient world, and offered a diverse curriculum including sciences, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, and military arts. The article explores Taxila's historical evolution, its role as an educational center, and its contributions to ancient knowledge systems, highlighting its importance in the cultural and intellectual history of South Asia.

Keywords: *Taxila, Takshasila, Ancient Education, Archaeological Heritage, Gandhara, UNESCO World Heritage Site, Buddhist Monasteries, Ancient Universities, Higher Education, Cultural History.*

Introduction

Archaeological remains and the oldest monuments represent landmarks within the development of human oldest civilization and constitute worthwhile history of mankind. Pakistan is a birthplace of invaluable historical cultures and holds a rich historical, archaeological and cultural traditions.

Taxila is an important city of Archaeological remains in Rawalpindi district of Punjab. It is an old city of considerable

Archaeological heritage, housing important historical Buddhist monasteries, temples and monuments. Taxila remains are one of the six world heritage sites of Pakistan and also an oldest living city in the sub-continent region. It was included in the world heritage site list in 1980¹. Taxila is a unique site of showing so many layers of civilizations, beginning from pre-historic time and moving to the proto-historic Buddhist and Islamic cultures. It is a vast complex of old age archaeological invaluable heritage, its origin lies buried inside the mysteries of the Neolithic age. History and antiquity of Taxila span almost three millennia.²

Taxila is better depicted by the Greeks, "to have been the largest city between the Indus and Hydaspes. The ruins are very extensive, having still the appearance of a very large fortified town. There are no ruins at any other spot in the Sind Segar Duab covering even as much ground".³

Ancient Taxila was focused upon when Alexander Cunningham came to Taxila and started excavation and research here. He was a military engineer converted to archaeology⁴. He was then an antiquarian and Archaeologist for the British. Before his coming to Taxila, Taxila was a lost city from many decades following its decline he brought out its cultural and historical aspects before the world.

Taxila became more prominent under Sir Hurbert John Marshall's excavation work in Taxila and other archaeological sites in this region. He spent half of his life here from 1913 to 1934 (21 years) and discovered its hidden treasures and civilization. In the early 1900's, he was the first director of Archaeological department survey of India. It was a time when Archaeology developed as more disciplined field work and new historical things came into light from the entire world. John Marshall conducted excavational

¹ Mehmet Somuncu, Ashfaq Ahmad Khan, " *Current Status of Management & Protection of Taxila World Heritage Site, Pakistan,*" Department of Geography, Ankara University, Ankara, P. 45-60

²Dr. SaifurRehman Dar, "Taxila and the Classical World." *Journal of International Association for the Study of the Cultures of Central Asia* vol. VI, no. 1, July 1993: 113-133

³J. G. Delmerick, "Notes On Archaeological Remains at Shah ki Dheri And The Site Of Taxila," *Journal Of Asiatic Society Of Bengal, Part I*, Vol. XXXIX, No. I-IV (Fall 1870): 89-95

⁴Dar, "Taxila and the Classical World," 113-133

work in Taxila and discussed out Taxila's ancient and mysterious cultures in his books, which considered an authenticity in archaeological world.

Taxila valley lies in the Potohar plateau and ruins are some 32 kilometer north-west of Islamabad current capital city of Pakistan. The remains of Taxila spread over large area of the city. These old age heritage consists of buildings, Buddhist stupas, ruin temples and monasteries etc. In addition, Taxila was also an important educational center of the sixth century B.C.E to the fifth century C.E⁵.

The presence of ruins of monasteries is the evidence that Taxila was a learning center in the region of Gandhara. The oldest historical university of Takshasila has been very famous in ancient world⁶.

The Name

*“Gandhara-vishaye siddhe tayah purya mahatmanoh
Takshasya dikshu vikhyata ramy aTakshasila puri”*

“In Gandhara district, of the great cities, the city of Takshasila is beautiful, well-known for the consecration of Taksha [Prince of the Serpent Tribe]”

Vayu Purana, 88, 189-190⁷.

The name of the city was Takkasila or Takhasila (in Sanskrit, Takshasila)⁸. So, Takshasila was a correct name of Taxila which was abbreviated in Sanskrit. In the very beginning, the name of the city spelt as Takha-sila or Taksha-sila in the Prakrit epigraphs⁹, but in the words of Heliodorus, the Greek ambassador, is Takkhasila¹⁰. According to Vayu Purana, the name of the city was Takshasila, no better authenticity about the name of Taxila by Puranic verse given above.

⁵“History of Education”, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007.

⁶Dr. Muhammad Rafique Mughal, “Feasibility Study on the Establishment of International Institute of Comparative Civilizations at TAKSHASCHILA (TAXILA),” January 29, 1997.

⁷Ahmad Hassan Dani, *The Historic City of Taxila* (Lahore: Sang-e-meel Publications, 1999), P.1.

⁸John Marshall, *A Guide to Taxila* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1936). 3rd ed, P.9.

⁹Dani, Op Cit., P.21.

¹⁰Ibid

Now the present name of Takshasila is spelt as Taxila, which was described by Sir Hurbert John Marshall. Taxila was transcribed by Greek historians and Romans and later the word was commonly used by European writers¹¹. In the result of excavation at different sites of Taxila, many old age coins and inscriptions of ancient local rulers have been found. Most interesting is the copper plate founded by Mr. Roberts, containing the name of Taksha-sila, in the form of Pali Taksha-sila, from which the Greeks derivative their Taxila¹².

According to source, the name 'Takshasila' which is variant of the same name is recorded by Al-biruni, he acknowledged this name, he copied the Samhita of Varahamihara¹³. "Taxila, or exactly Taksha-sila, the capital city of Taksha (the serpent king) the city of old, where the serpent king was ruling before coming of the Aryans". The name was continued in use when the Aryans made this city the capital of Gandhara¹⁴.

Meaning of Taksha-sila

Takshasila is the original name of Taxila, which is Sanskrit word. The name infests the combination of two words, Taksha and Sila, which means Serpent and hills respectively¹⁵. So, the name of the city Taksha-sila interprets as the hills of the Serpents¹⁶, because this area was under the management of Takshas tribe, they inhabited and ruled over Takshasila. Takshas, the oldest ruler of Taxila was called Taka tribe. The name was originate from their devotion

¹¹Ahmad Hassan Dani, *The Historic City of Taxila* (Lahore: Sang-e-meel Publications, 1999), P.21.

¹²Surendranath Mojumdar Sastri, *Cunningham's Ancient Geography of India* (Calcutta: Chuckerverty, Chatterjee & Co., Ltd., 15, College Square, 1924), 120-138

¹³Dr. Abdur Rahman, "Taxila under the Ghaznavids," *Journal of Central Asia*, Vol. VI, No. 2, December, 1983. 173-177

¹⁴A. H. Dani, "Taxila the old Metropolis of Gandhara," *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, December, 2001. 182-184

¹⁵Muhammad Bahadar Khan, M. Hassan, M. Habibullah Khan Khattak, F. Rehman , and M. Aqleem Khan. "*Bhir Mound: The First City of Taxila (Excavations Report 1998-2002)*," Department of Archaeology and Museums & National Fund for Cultural Heritage, June, 2002. P. 13

¹⁶Ibid

with Taksha, serpents have given the name of the city Takshasila , the hill capital of the Takshakas.¹⁷

It can be possible that the city's name was taken from its founders, Takshau, who was a Bharata's son, but it can also be possible that the name of the town may be assumed from Taksh, a Serpent God, and sila a stone or rock.¹⁸

According to another source, the literal meaning of the word Taksha in Sanskrit is 'to cut or to split' and sila means 'stone, rock or hill'.¹⁹ So, the Taksha-sila signified 'the city of cut stone'.²⁰

The Tibetan called it rdo-hiog which means cut-stone²¹. According to the late F. C. Andreas, Naggaruda is the name of the city Taksha-sila in Aramic translation.²²

Fa-Hien, who was Chinese pilgrim, says;

"From this [Gandhara] going east seven days, there is a country called Chu-ch'a-shi-lo .Chu-ch'a-shi-lo in Chinese words is [read 'means'] "cut-off head."²³

It is Buddhist belief that Buddha gave his head in charity to a man, due to which the kingdom got it's name²⁴.

Hieun Tseng transcribed the region of Taxila (Taksha-sila) as Ta-ch'a-shi-lo, where he mentions the monastery of the alms gift of the head by the Buddha.²⁵

¹⁷Ahmad Hasan Dani, *A Short Guide to Taxila* (Lahore: Institute of Heritage Education-Pakistan, 2000), P.1

¹⁸Delmerick, " *Notes On Archaeological Remains at Shah Ki Dheri And The Site Of Taxila,*" 89-95

¹⁹Dani, *The Historic City of Taxila*, P.1.

²⁰Ibid

²¹Marshall, " *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila Under the Orders of the Government of India Between the Years of 1913 and 1934*" , P. 1

²²Ibid

²³Dani, *The Historic City of Taxila*, P.1.

²⁴James Legge, *Record of Buddhistic Kingdom*, Paragon Book Reprint Corp, New York, ed., pp. 32-33

²⁵Sameul Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki or The Buddhist Records of Western World*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner& Co., London Vol. 1. P.136

Local people of the city have preserved the spelling Sirkap for one of the sites²⁶. Simple meaning of the word is “cut of head” in their language. In Sanskrit sir stands as siras’ and kap meaning ‘to cut’. To explain this name Alexander Cunningham has taken resources to the Buddhist story of the voluntary beheading of the Buddha for charity²⁷.

According to ‘Pliny’ and ‘Ptolemy’, the classical writers have spelled Taxila as ‘TAXILLA’ and ‘TAXIALA’. Most of the classical writers have indicated that ‘TAXILES’ was the name as dynastic title of Taxilian rulers. It may be possible that the name of the city was derived from it²⁸.

Place of Education

The evidence of ruins of monasteries in Taxila proves that the ancient city of Taksha-sila was a famous place of education. It was an early Buddhist learning center from 5th century BC to the 2nd century AD²⁹. In addition

“The Buddhist literature refers to Taxila as a seat of learning and the abode of world-famous teachers”³⁰.

By various accounts, Taxila is considered as the oldest and earliest university of the world³¹.

Ancient Taksha-sila is described in some details as a noted center of high level education and several centuries before, it attracted many students from all over the world till the devastation of the city. The city was also honored as having world’s first universities and flourished in the 1st to 5th centuries CE³². Taxila exerted a sort of preference over other center of education in ancient India, it was also a center of higher studies³³, According to Radha Kumud Mookerji,

²⁶Dani, Op Cit.,

²⁷Ibid

²⁸Dar, “*Taxila and the Classical World*,” 113-133

²⁹Global Heritage Fund, “*Saving Our Vanishing Heritage: Asia’s Heritage in Peril*.” (2012). 21-22

³⁰Khan et al., P. 13.

³¹Kanak Baran Barua, “*Buddhist Archaeological Sites and Civilization in Pakistan, Taxila: Former Crossroads of Industry in the Ancient Middle East*,” July 11, 2018

³²Naveed, “Taxila” Ancient History of Encyclopedia.

³³Barua, Op Cit.,

“Thus the various center of learning in different part of the country became affiliated, as it were, to the educational center, or the central university of Taxila which exercised a kind of intellectual suzerainty over the wide world of letters in India.”³⁴

A variety of subjects were taught at Taxila University, including sciences, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, literature, politics, philosophy and military sciences³⁵. It was not an institutionalized education place but rather an epitome of studies centered around monasteries³⁶.

According to Joseph Needham; Greek invader arrived in Taxila during 4th century BCE,

“ When the men of *Alexander* the Great came to Taxila..... they found a university there the like of which had not been seen in Greece, a university which taught the three Vedas & the eighteen accomplishments & was still existing when the Chinese pilgrim, Fa-Hsien went there about AD400.”³⁷

With the growth of civilized cities and towns educational system came into existence, throughout India like Banaras, Nalanda, Pataliputra, Valabhi, Dasapura in North-India; Kanchi, Behr, Belagami in South India became famous Ghatika-Sthanas or Universities³⁸. Taxila became famous for educational activities in ancient India. Taksha-sila (Taxila) was an oldest among the other universities in ancient India; it was well recognized as a center of knowledge as early in 700 B.C³⁹. In Taxila (Taksha-sila) university, all the subjects including arts and science were taught, even Buddhist could learn the Veda, and the Greeks like menindar learnt the sruti and smriti⁴⁰.

³⁴Radha Kumud Mookerji (2nd Ed. 1951; Reprint 1989), “ *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist* (P. 487), MotilalBanarsidass Publ., ISBN 81-208-0423-6

³⁵Naveed, “Taxila” Op Cit.,

³⁶Ibid

³⁷Needham Joseph (2004). *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West*. Routledge.ISBN 0-415-36166-4

³⁸Dr. S. SrikantaSastri, “ *Taxila: An Ancient Indian University*,” (1961) 1-3. WWW.Srikanta-Sastri.Org

³⁹D. G. Apte, *University in Ancient India*. No. 11.Faculty of Education and Psychology, Maharaja Sayaji Rao University of Baroda, 1971. 8-23.

⁴⁰Sastri, “ *Taxila: An Ancient Indian University*,” (1961) 1-3.

A variety of subjects and craft courses were taught in Taksha-sila University, literary, technical and professional subjects were already taught, two types of courses were the Vedas and Silpas⁴¹. The Vedic studies included six auxiliary sciences, the sciences of correct pronunciations, Literature guiding, Aphoristic, Grammars, Astronomy, Prosody and Etymology. Holy traditions and Secular law, Sankhaya, Nayaya (logic), Vaisesika (Atomic theory of creation), Arithmetic, Music, Medicine, Four Vedas, Puranas (Antiquities), Itihasas (History), Military Art, Poetry and Conveyancing⁴². These are the silpas and craft study subjects but in this list the Vedas and some other subjects which cannot be said as crafts, according to references, the following crafts were taught in this university: Convincing of Law, Mathematics, Accountancy, Agriculture, Commerce, Cattle breeding, Smithy, Carpentry, Medicine and Surgery, Archery and Allied Military art, Astronomy, Astrology, Divination, Magic, Snake charming, Art of finding hidden treasure, Music, Dancing and Painting⁴³. Taksha-sila University produced a lot of famous historical personalities who led the history in later period. The writer of Arthshastra, Kautilya, who was admin and bureaucrat by Mauriyan Empire (known as chankya), taught at Taxila for some time⁴⁴. Panini, the famous and well-known Grammarian of Sanskrit, was a famous student of this university⁴⁵. Jivak, the renowned Physician at the court of king Bimbasa, cured emperor from fistula. He also saved King Pradyota of Ujjayini from jaundice, and he was educated in medicine and surgery at Taxila University⁴⁶. The king of Kosala was educated at Taxila⁴⁷. In addition, “princes from various kingdoms used to be sent to this place for education”⁴⁸.

⁴¹Apte, Op Cit.,

⁴²Apte, 8-23

⁴³Ibid

⁴⁴I. H. Qureshi, *A Short History of Pakistan*, University of Karachi, 1967. P. 21 ISBN NO. 969-404-008-6.

⁴⁵Apte, Op Cit.,

⁴⁶Bimala Charan Law, *Historical Gleanings*, Calcutta and Simla Thacker, Spink & Co, 1922. 1-9.

⁴⁷Ibid

⁴⁸Ibid

“The students are always spoken of as going to Taxila to complete their education and not to begin it. They are regularly sent to the age of sixteen year or when they ‘reach of age’. Taxila was a place not of elementary but higher education, of colleges or universities as eminent from schools”⁴⁹. Only higher education was given in Taksha-sila University. In ancient Indian educational system, up to the age of eight was primary stage and secondary education enclosed from eight to twelve years of age. So, the students came to learn at taksha-sila University in sixteen to twenty years of age⁵⁰.

There is no any restriction about the choice of subject, Taksha-sila university was based on the motto “knowledge for knowledge’s sake”⁵¹. Each teacher in Taksha-sila University was a complete institution in his work and in himself a complete authority and self-sufficient. No one could involve in educational system and in the process of university methods. In addition, no external authorities or political and local leaders or kings were accepted in Taxila University for control⁵².

⁴⁹Mookerji, P. 489 *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist*, P. 489

⁵⁰Apte, 8-23.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid