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Takht-i-Bāhī

The monastic complex of Takht-i-Bāhī is one of the best preserved Buddhist sites in the Peshawar basin. Located at the heart of Gandhāra, approximately fifteen kilometres north of the city of Mardan, this Buddhist establishment rests on three connected spurs of the Takht-i-Bāhī hill. The main structures (Figs. 1 and 9) lie on the central spur overlooking the plains that includes the Buddhist monastic site of Sahrī Bahlol. The main structure comprises at least four *stūpa* courts, a monastery, an assembly hall, and several image shrines of varying sizes (Figs. 2 and 3).

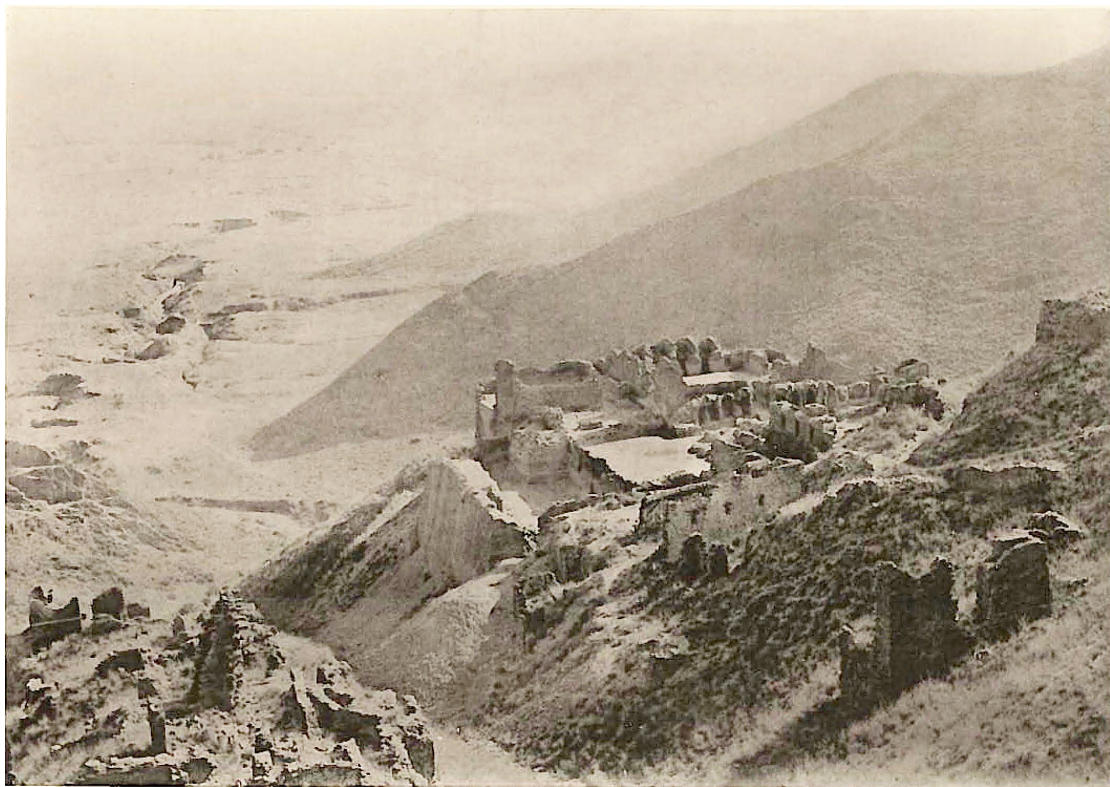


Figure 1. General view of Takht-i-Bāhī monastic complex on the central spur during 1910-1911 excavation (Photo: after Hargreaves 1914: pl. XVIII.a).

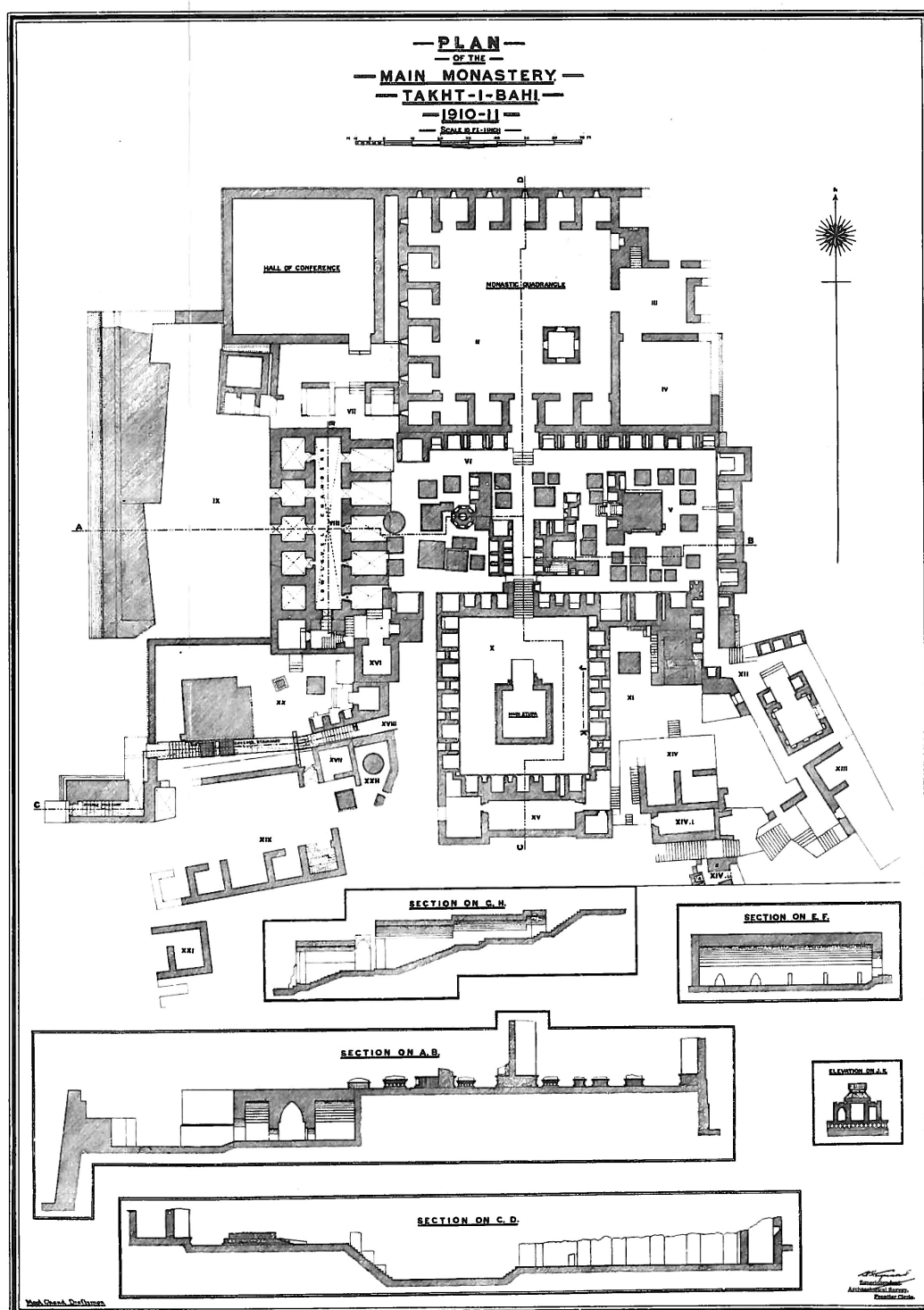
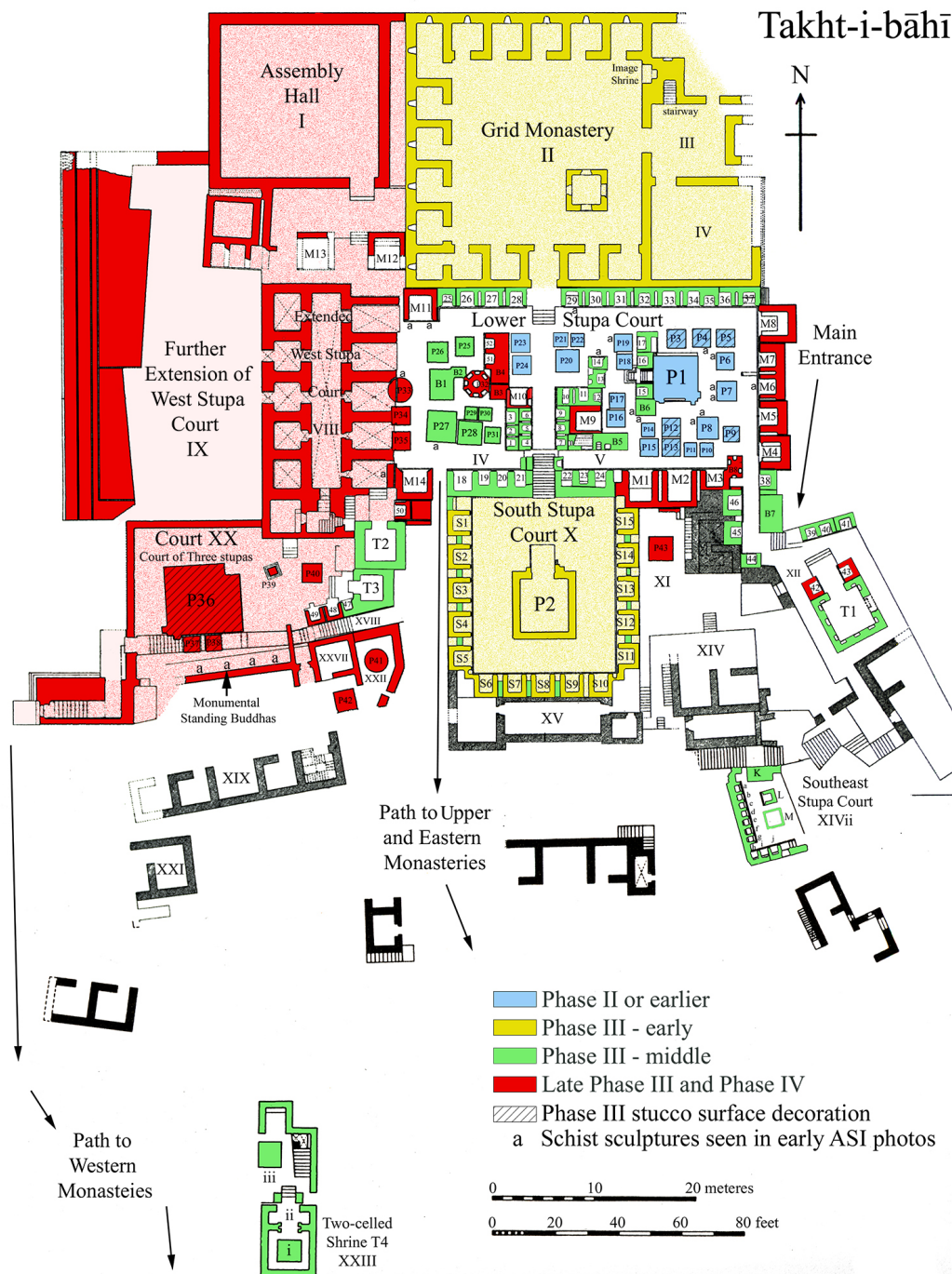


Figure 2. Site plan of Takht-i-Bāhī monastic complex on the central spur during the 1910-1911 excavation (Photo from Hargreaves 1914: pl. XVII).



Excavated structures and finds

H.W. Bellew visited the site of Takht-i-Bāhī during the latter half of the nineteenth century. He published a description of the remains and provided a basic plan of the

monastery and a *stūpa* that lie on the central spur (Bellew 1864: 125-136).¹ Following his report, the *stūpa* was apparently looted but still yielded *in situ* relief panels on the plinth (Bellew 1864: 130). He also reported seeing sculptural fragments made of blue schist in the *stūpa* court, some of which, he remarked, may have been parts of large-scale sculptures originally placed inside the niches around the court (Bellew 1864: 131). A few years after Bellew's visit, F.H. Wilcher conducted a formal clearing of some areas at the site (Wilcher 1874).² He reported a total of 165 sculptural fragments. His descriptions of all the sculptural finds are, however, too brief and do not allow significant identifications apart from some seated Buddhas and standing bodisattvas.



Figure 4. Stupa Court V after clearance by Spooner (Photo: after Spooner 1911: pl. XL.b).

An archaeological mission by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) started at the monastic complex of Takht-i-Bāhī in 1907 under the supervision of D. Spooner (1911). Spooner began his work with the conservation of the remains at the site and cleared Assembly Hall I. In 1908 he excavated Monastery II and Stupa Court V (Fig. 4). The excavation revealed several sculptures not recovered during Wilcher's clearance of the site. A few of these sculptures were discovered in Monastery II, an unusual to find such works, a fact which prompts Behrendt (2004: 181) to suggest that there may have been an image shrine within the monk's residential area. Spooner (1911: 136) reported a total of 472 sculptures from the site, many of which were found in Stupa Court V and along the passageway connecting Stupa Court X and

¹ According to Bellew's descriptions of the two structures they correspond to Monastery II and Stupa Court X, which were later published in Spooner 1911 and Hargreaves 1914 (See Fig. 2).

² According to Wilcher's description, these structures include Stupa Court X, Lower Stupa Court V, and Monastery II, which were later published in Spooner 1911 and Hargreaves 1914 (See Fig. 2).

Monastery II.³ Among these are a relief panel depicting an Atlas (Spooner 1911: fig. 4), Dipankara Jataka relief panels (Spooner 1911: pl. XLII. d), scenes from the Buddha's life, a seated Buddha and standing bodhisattvas (Spooner 1911: pl. XLVI. d, e, f; here Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Standing bodhisattvas excavated by Spooner (Photo: after Spooner 1911: pl. XLVI. d, e, f).

The next archaeological work at Takht-i-Bāhī monastic complex under the ASI was conducted by H. Hargreaves between 1910 and 1911 (Hargreaves 1914). Hargreaves cleared four remaining areas on the west side: Stupa Court IV, area VIII, area IX, and Court XX (Figs. 2 and 3). In area VIII, he recovered a few sculptures, a few corroded coins and broken pottery with an undated inscription in Kharoṣṭhī (Hargreaves 1914: 34). The coins were too corroded and were not documented. Hargreaves (1914: 34) identified one of them as belonging to the Indo-Greek king Apollodotus. In Court XX, he recovered three *stūpa* plinths, all of them bearing *in situ* stucco friezes depicting seated and standing Buddhas (Fig. 6). Many of these figures still had traces of red pigments. The plinth of the largest *stūpa* of the three also bears an *in situ* stucco relief depicting Pancika and Harītī (Fig. 7). Other *in situ* sculptural finds in Court XX include two large Buddha heads and six pairs of feet lying against the wall base (Fig. 8). Hargreaves also discovered traces of the foundation of the fourth *stūpa* in Court XX, where he found a broken iron pot in the *stūpa* debris. The pot contained a small cylindrical casket made of gold sheet, itself containing a small portion of red earth (Hargreaves 1914: 38), a general characteristic of *stūpa* relic deposits in greater Gandhāra (Rienjang 2017).

³ These sculptures have been labeled as Nos. 679 to 1151 in the Peshawar Museum (Spooner 1911: 136).

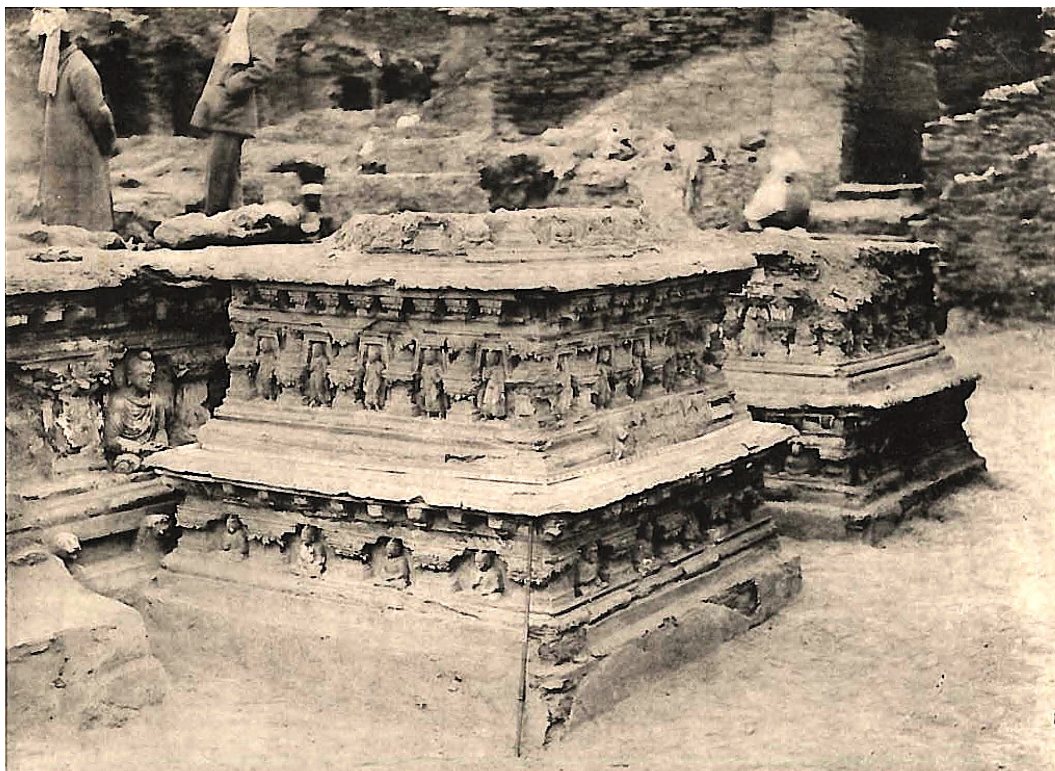


Figure 6. *In situ* stucco friezes in Stupa Court XX (Photo: after Hargreaves 1914: pl. XXII.a).

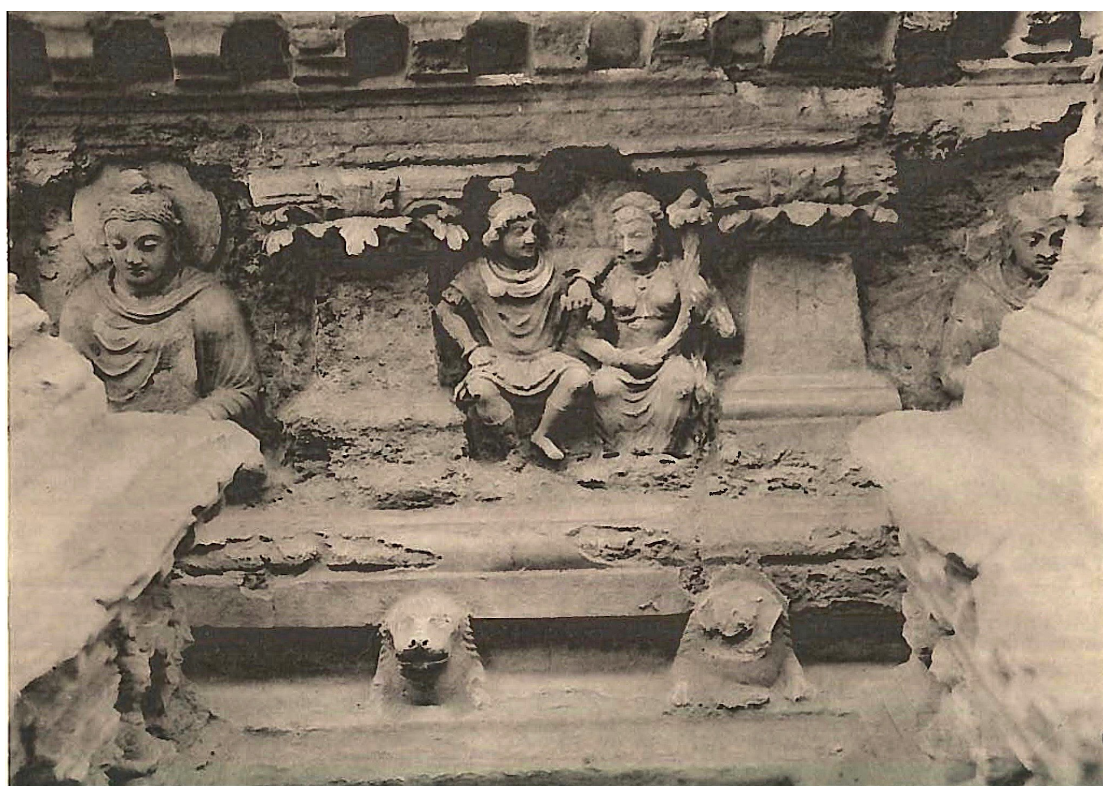


Figure 7. *In situ* stucco frieze in Stupa Court XX (Photo: after Hargreaves 1914: pl. XXII.b).



Figure 8: *In situ* heads and feet in Stupa Court XX (Photo: after Hargreaves 1914: pl. XXI.a).

Soon after Hargreaves's work, A. Stein carried out further clearing of the site including areas XXIII and XIV, and conducted conservation of some areas, particularly area VIII and Court XX (Stein 1912).⁴ Between 2002 and 2005 A. Azeem of the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, conducted excavations of an unexcavated area on the western spur of the Takht-i-Bāhī hill (Khattak, forthcoming). The excavations reveal at least a quadrangular structure and a round structure with flights of steps attached to one side. It also yields another round structure resting on a square platform, also with flights of steps attached to one side, a feature that strongly suggests its being a *stūpa*, and not a water reservoir as Bellew (1864: 134) and Cunningham (1875: 35) had suggested (Khattak, forthcoming).

Chronology

As mentioned above, a corroded copper coin of Apollodotus was found in area VIII (Hargreaves 1914: 34). It is not certain if this corroded coin was an issue of Apollodotus I (c. 180-160 BC) or Apollodotus II (c. 65-50 BC). The so-called dated Takht-i-Bāhī inscription, bearing Gondophares's regnal year 26 and year 103 of an unspecified era, was not found at Takht-i-Bāhī but in the nearby Shabazgarhī, thus cannot be used to help dating the site (Konow 1929: 57; Errington 1987: 115; Behrendt 2004: 182)⁵.

⁴ Apparently the report from Stein's own work was not produced. The published report on the site by him largely describes the areas excavated by Hargreaves between 1910 and 1911 (Stein 1912). Among the sculptures from Stein's mission are two *in situ* relief panels reproduced in Behrendt 2004: figs. 51-53.

⁵ It has been suggested that the unspecified year used on this inscription belongs to the Azes era (Cribb 2018: 15; Cribb 2005; Falk 2015: 32).

Using architectural types, Behrendt (2004: 182-3) dates the founding phase of the Takht-i-Bāhī monastic complex to the period between mid to late first century AD and *c.* AD 200, with its earliest structure being *stūpa* P1 in Stupa Court V.⁶ He argues that the site was extensively expanded during the following period, *c.* AD 200 to fifth century AD, when new structures such as Stupa Court X, Monastery II and area IX were built and many small to life-size image shrines in Stupa Courts IV and V were added. He also remarks on the absence of niches, or what he believes to be image shrines, in some of the newly expanded areas such as area IX, and suggests that such an absence of devotional structures may reflect decline in economic prosperity and patronage (Behrendt 2004: 253). Behrendt (2004: 189, 206), however, highlights the reuse of sculptures as evidenced at the site and suggests that the Takht-i-Bāhī monastic complex was not abruptly abandoned and may have continued in use a few centuries after the fifth century AD.

[Wannporn Rienjang. Version 1: 13 October 2018]



Figure 9. Modern view of the site looking north, showing the Stupa Courts and Monastery II beyond. (Photo: Muhammad Zahir, CC BY-SA 3.0 licence, via https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:General_View_of_Takht-i-Bahi_Site.JPG)

⁶ Behrendt (2004: 188) dates this on the basis of the similarity between the layout of the area around *stūpa* P1 and those of three sites in the Peshawar basin, Ranigat, Mekhasanda and Thareli, which he dated on numismatic grounds to the period between late first century AD and *c.* AD 200. The point of similarity is specifically ‘a modest stupa surrounded by heterogeneous small stupas’ (Behrendt 2004: 188).

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