

Archaeological Sites of the Hindu Shāhī Period in Shalbāṇḍai, District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Zafar Hayat Khan¹, Zarawar Khan², Arshad Ullah³

Abstract

This study highlights the result of a systematic archaeological field survey conducted in the Shalbāṇḍai area of Gāgra tehsil, Buner where a dense cluster of fortified settlements, military posts, and associated architectural remains of the Hindu Shāhī period (c.9th to 11 century CE) has been documented. These sites, ranging from large fortified complexes such as Gandhāo Fort to smaller security check-posts like Koṭkai and Lailā, were examined in terms of their spatial organization, architectural features, and strategic significance. The analysis reveals a highly organized defensive network, strategically distributed across mountain ridges, valleys, and passes to monitor movement and control communication routes linking Buner with the Indus River and adjoining regions. The integration of defensive, residential, and administrative architectural elements reflects a complex socio-political system under Hindu Shāhī rule. The study further emphasizes the urgent need for detailed archaeological investigation and conservation, as many of these sites are currently threatened by natural erosion, human encroachment and illicit excavation activities.

Article History

Received 02 September 2026
Accepted 24 September 2026
Published 29 September 2026
Corresponding Author*
OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Archaeological Survey,
Shalbāṇḍai, District
Buner, Hindu Shāhī
Period.

Introduction

The Hindu Shāhī dynasty, which formerly ruled over Peshawar valley and Punjab between the 9th and 11th centuries CE, have played a vital role in the political, cultural, geographical and defensive landscape of the region until its disintegration in the middle of the 11th century CE. Many archaeological remains of this period, particularly their last capital city at Hund in District Swabi, as well as the military strongholds at Gala near the Tarbela Reservoirⁱ, and Nandana at the Salt Range, have received academic and scholarly attention, other defensive and settlement sites located in the district of Buner remained unexplored despite previous attempts by the British explorers and the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistanⁱⁱ. It was in 2014, that the Directorate General of Archaeology and Museums (hereafter DGoAM), Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, launched the Archaeological survey of the district Buner, which added more than three hundred sites to its historical profile, some of which had never been reported by previous explorers. The present study, therefore, highlight some of these newly explored sites located in the area of Shalbāṇḍai

¹ Deputy Director (Research), Research and Development Centre, Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad. Email: zhkyusafzai@outlook.com

² (Corresponding Author) Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of Swat. Email: zarawarkhan@uswat.edu.pk

³ Deputy Director, Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad. Email: arshadu254@gmail.com

in the tehsil Gāgra of District Buner, which have been assigned to the Hindu Shāhī Period on the basis of their strategic location and style of construction.

Geographically the District of Buner occupies an intermediate position between the districts Swat, Shāngla, Torghar, Mardan and Swabi of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan. It has certainly served as a historic corridor for the exchange of cultures, trade and commerce, and military movements between Peshawar and the upper Indus valley, through ancient routes particularly via Shalbāndai and other areas now incorporated in Gāgra Tehsil of District Buner. The abundant remains of the Hindu Shāhī period sites, scattered across the mountain passes, suggest that these routes were controlled and guarded through a chain of fortified strongholds, watchtowers, caravanserais and toll collection posts, strategically positioned on elevated ridges and overlooking the surrounding valleys and access routes (see map, Fig. 1).

List of the explored Sites

Among the recently explored sites, the most important and partially preserved monuments in District Buner include the fortified complex known as Gandhāo Qala, Shogrām, Mānai, the forts of Hamza Tañgai, Koṭona and Koṭ, as well as the observation posts at Parshālai Tañgai, Mīrdara, and Yakhḍara. etc. The location and architectural details of each site are described here in order to share their archaeological and historical significance for scholars and researchers interested in the archaeology of the Hindu Shāhī Period.

1. Gandhāo Fort

Site No.1 on the map.

One of the largest castles, known as Gandhāo Fort, is situated on top of the hill, at latitude 34.534838° N and longitude 72.533067° E, approximately 3km north of Shalbāndai village in Gāgra Tehsil, Bunerⁱⁱⁱ. The architectural remains occupy a secluded point within a narrow and elongated valley, which extends roughly 1.5 km in length. The well-fortified and secure location of the castle near the ancient routes passing through Shalbāndai, highlights its strategic and administrative importance. The stone masonry walls of the fort cover an area of approximately 1100 × 500 meters^{iv}. The enclosure is divided into two major compartments, i.e. the upper and lower units. The lower unit extends to the crest of the Gharsar and Hesār hills, encasing the valley beneath, whereas the upper unit is strongly fortified along the four steep ridges of the Gharsar hill series. The only access to this unit was through a narrow passage carved into the solid rock, the scanty remains of which can still be seen. The lower unit covers an area of approximately 400 meters in length and consists of a cluster of architectural remains scattered along the slopes of the hills. These include residential quarters surrounded by a thick retaining wall, which is strengthened by semicircular bastions at irregular intervals. The remains of watchtowers can also be observed at the entrance of the valley, which opens towards Shalbāndai village. These observation posts were probably designed to control direct access to the routes passing through the hills. Specimens of pottery scattered on the surface of the site further testify to the prolonged occupation of this area.

In contrast to the lower section, the architectural remains in the upper unit are laid out in a well-organized manner over four ridges (hereafter referred to as Ridges A, B, C and D,

illustrated in Fig. 2). The lower ends of these ridges join each other in the narrow valley below, while the upper ends bifurcate in different directions, forming a more secure position for the residential quarters. Ridge A (Fig. 3–4), is located on the southeastern side of the hill and consists of the remains of small living rooms and corridors built around a large courtyard, together with a solitary structure, supposed to be a ruined palace or dwelling of high-ranking personality. The rooms and the palatial monument are provided with arched doorways executed within the thickness of the walls and staircases leading to the upper story, whereas, attached corner turrets to some of the structure indicate a high level of engineering and constructional skill during that period. Moreover, the arrangement of the large halls flanked by smaller chambers suggests a purposeful layout of the complex.

Similarly, Ridge B (Fig. 5), which occupies an intermediate position between Ridge A and Ridge C, contains some buildings, most probably served as sanctuaries. One of these monumental buildings, measuring approximately 8.5 meters on each side, is built of stone slabs and block and still survives to a height of about 5 meters. The sunken arched niche in one of the walls of this building was probably intended for enshrining an images or other venerated objects, whereas the recessed windows and fragments of a corbelled ceiling indicate that the shrine was originally crowned by a vaulted ceiling. Other structures consist of small sanctuaries, including a circular chamber with a fallen domical roof, and additional associated buildings, erected over a platform supported by raised embankments in the slopes of the hill.

The constructional remains of the Ridge C (Fig. 6) also contain buildings of religious and secular character, showing evidence of ventilators and arched openings, and surmounted by vaulted ceilings of stone masonry with a thick coat of stucco plaster (Fig. 7). Moreover, the remains of breastworks, and residential quarters located on Ridge D (Fig. 8) are comparatively less preserved, since they have been heavily damaged by the activities of antique hunters and other clandestine interventions.

2. **Shogrām Māṇai Fort**

Site No.2 on the map

The Shogrām Māṇai fort is located approximately 1.7 km south of Amnawar village and 1.6 km west of Wakīlabad village, within the Shalbāṇḍai region, at latitude 34.495413 N and longitude 72.561286 E. It spreads on an area of about 400×230 meters on the northern ridge of Shogrām hill, overlooking the southern part of the Daulatzai valley. The fort was perhaps laid out to guard the 20 km long route passing through the plains below, which extends from Pīra Abai to the village of Budāl in the Chagharzai Valley of Buner. This route is still functioning as one of the link roads connecting Buner with district Shāngla and various ferries on Indus River in District Torghar. The architectural arrangement of the fort consists of a series of watchtowers, barracks, guardrooms, and residential quarters, etc. One of the prominent watchtowers is built over a raised platform in the southern portion of the fort (Fig. 9), which is constructed in a terraced order (Fig. 11). Although most of its upper portion has collapsed, the two lower terraces remain well preserved and measures approximately 20 m in width, with a height of about 5 m above the ground level. Its platform is strengthened by bastions and breastworks on three sides, while a staircase is provided on its the northern side for access to

the upper story. To north of this structure lies a series of barracks and guardrooms build around an open courtyard (Fig. 10).

The remains of a large building complex, probably of religious or administrative character, were also documented on the northern side of the fort. It comprises large halls flanked by attached chambers on all four sides. Additional rooms and rectangular structures were also found scattered along the northwestern ridge of the hill. Beyond these remains are two guardrooms with an attached small watchtower. The northern slopes of the site contain extensive remains of residential structures, possibly designed for the accommodation of the caravans or the general public within the fortified area of the fort (Fig. 12). These include interconnected houses and isolated room units spread over an area of approximately 500 m in radius. Moreover, streets paved with stone slabs leading towards the lower valley were also sighted during the course of exploration. However, the lower part of the site has suffered considerable damage due to encroachments and illicit digging by treasure seekers, leaving behind the debris of dismantled structures and heaps of building material, some of which have been reutilized in modern houses. Despite these calamities, the *Shogrām* Fort stands one of the prominent examples of the Hindu *Shāhī* period architectural legacy in this region.

3. Hamza Tañgai Fort

Site No.3 on the map

The ruins of this fort are located at latitude 34.512815 N and longitude 72.578575 E, at the entrance of *Parshālai* valley, about 1.4 km east of the Amnawar village in the *Shalbāndai* region of *Gāgra* tehsil, *Buner*^v. The remains cover an area of 153 × 117 meters on the ridge of hill. The site forms part of a cluster of other architectural remains known as *Yakhḍara*, *Koṭona*, and *Koṭ Fort*, located within a radius of nearly 2 km of Hamza Tañgai. This arrangement suggests that these sites may have collectively served as components of a larger complex or a defensive network established to monitor the movement through the *Parshālai* valley^{vi}, and the main valley connecting the area of *Ḍaggar* with the ferries of the Indus River at District *Torghar*. The Hamza Tañgai fort, though mostly in deteriorated and the building deprived of their superstructures, still represent thick retaining wall strengthened with semicircular bastions at regular intervals. Moreover, the structural remains of interconnected rooms built on the summits of the hills (Fig.13–14), represents either guardrooms or residential barracks for the stationed forces.

The internal layout of the site also shows stepped pathways and zigzag streets leading to a series of interconnected rooms and quarters (Fig.14). One of these rooms could have served as the residence of a high-ranking official, as can be attested from its style of construction. Generally, the Hamza Tañgai Fort represents a medium-scale fortified settlement that combines residential, defensive, and possibly administrative functions. Its association with the nearby sites further indicates the coordinated defensive system within the *Parshālai* valley during the Hindu *Shāhī* period.

4. Koṭona and Koṭ Fort

Site No.4 on the map

Koṭona and Koṭ Fort is yet another architectural complex located to the northeast of Amnawar village^{vii} within the Shalbāṇḍai area. The remains are distributed across the eastern and western summits the hill. The fortified monument on the western ridge is locally known as Koṭona, whereas the ruins on the eastern ridge is called Koṭ i.e. fort or castle. The former lies at latitude 34.512784 N and longitude 72.557556 E, while the latter is located at latitude 34.512665 N and longitude 72.568411 E. The architectural remains explored on the lower portion of both ridges have suffered considerable damage due to modern encroachment and the removal of structural remains (Fig.15). However, a good number of remains at Koṭona Fort are still lying in a good state of preservation (Fig.16) and require urgent preventive measures. These remains were probably designed for residential purposes to accommodate general population. A similar pattern was also noted in the Koṭ Fort, where the lower slopes are heavily disturbed, while the upper portion preserves substantial architectural remains.

The architectural features of Koṭ Fort (Fig. 17) consist of a number of small quarters and security posts along the western side, and large hall occupying the central position, flanked by guardrooms on the eastern side, and a watchtower built on an elevated place. The central building is particularly significant, since it was probably erected as a double-storeyed structure covered with a corbelled roof and provided with a vestibule at the front (Fig. 18). Despite their deteriorated condition, Koṭona and Koṭ Fort collectively illustrate a planned fortified settlement of the Hindu Shāhī period.

5. Baḍais

Site No.5 on the map

The site, locally known as Baḍais, is located 2.4 km north of Amnawar village, at latitude 34.530175° N and longitude 72.554983° E, in the Sangra Valley on the lower ridge of Gharsar Hill. The structural remains of the site are spread over an area of about 400 × 150 meters. The stone masonry walls have fallen (Fig. 19), and evidence of illicit digging was observed during the exploration, yet the preserved portions suggest that it was originally a small fortified settlement. One of the retaining walls still shows traces of a bastion, while the remains of stairways and zigzag passages further illustrate the continued use of the site. Inside the fortified enclosure are the traces of a large residential quarter (Fig. 20) and other remains of deteriorated buildings.

6. Mīrdara and Yakhdara Kanḍar Remains

Site No.6 on the map

Mīrdara and Yakhdara are two sites situated on either side of a seasonal mountain stream, about 3km from Shalbāṇḍai and near the village of Wakīlabad. The ruins of Mīrdara lie at latitude 34.523723 N and longitude 72.599664 E, and forms the northern portion of the valley, whereas Yakhdara, which is at latitude 34.515797 N and longitude 72.594958 E, is situated to the south of Mīrdara. Structural remains at Mīrdara are confined to scanty traces of

occupational buildings over the steep ridge of hill near the Government Primary School of the same village (Fig. 23). However, the location of monuments suggest that the site was functioning as a defensive breastwork overlooking the valley below, linking the Qabruno Pass with Batara within the Chagharzai valley of Buner.

Similarly, the ruins at Yakhdara, which is located to the south of Mīrdara, are corporately well-preserved and also illustrate a defensive architectural component. The site is situated on a steep ridge of the hill and perhaps functioned as an observation post (Fig.21) to oversee the movement of caravans and general public. The surviving architectural remnants consists of a portion of the retaining wall with traces of bastions at selected points (Fig. 22). A huge platform of the now decayed watchtower still survives on the elevated position, surrounded by other building remains, including the supposed guardrooms and interconnected halls flanked by small rooms and chambers designed to accommodate military personnel.

7. The Site of Lailā

Site No.7 on the map

The architectural remains known as Lailā represents the vestiges of security check-post located on the southern ridge of Shogrām Hill^{viii}, at a distance of about 2.5 km southeast of Shalbāndai village at latitude 34.491811 N and longitude 72.532232 E^{ix}. The supposed check post or breastwork was probably established to monitor the route connecting Shalbāndai with the village Kalpānai. The extant structures consist of a base of a ruined watchtower (Fig.25), traces of a fortification wall, and bastions (Fig. 24) on the eastern and southern sides of the site. A series of stone slabs steps on the northern side suggests controlled access to the upper portion of the site, where dwelling units were laid out to accommodate watchmen and armed force overlooking the valley below.

8. Koṭkai and Yakhdara

Site No.8 on the map

The Koṭkai and Yakhdara sites are located in the Parshālai Taṅgai valley, approximately 3.7 km in length, and situated to the north-northeast of Amnawar village^x. This valley contains the remains of many archaeological sites; however, among them, the sites of Koṭkai and Yakhdara are worth mentioning. The Koṭkai site, which is situated at the northern end of the valley on a steep ridge of Busārosar Hill at latitude 34.538392 N and longitude 72.591411 E^{xi}, was probably a small security check-post (Fig. 26), established to monitor and control a pass leading into the valley from Shamnāl Valley of Chagharzi. However, only the foundations of some unidentified structures are preserved, whereas, the other remains are badly deteriorated. Similarly, the site of Yakhdara lies in the middle portion of the valley, approximately 2.3 km northeast of Amnawar village at latitude 34.518940 N and longitude 72.580326 E^{xii}. This site represents more preserved structural remains, including traces of staircase and foundation of thick walls belonging to guardrooms and barracks. A retaining wall strengthened by bastions can also be observed at the site (Fig.27).

Conclusion

The archaeological evidence of the Hindu Shāhī period from the Shalbāṇḍai region illustrate a well-organized chain of fortified settlements, reflecting enforced control over the caravan routes and general movement, as well as a system to check the advance of invading forces. Despite their deteriorated condition and deplorable state of preservation, these sites allude to the defensive system established during the tenure of the Hindu Shāhī Period within the geographical sphere of District Buner. Although the present study is confined to the exploration and documentation of this neglected cultural heritage of the area, it invites the attention of the relevant government authorities for the scientific conservation of these settlement and the proper preservation and protection of these important assets of history. There is an urgent need for a systematic investigation of the relationship of these military-cum-civil architectural remains and those documented in various parts of the Districts of Swat, Malakand, Dir, Shāngla, Torghar and other areas of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to express gratitude to Dr. Abdul Samad, the Director General of Archaeology and Museums, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for facilitation during the survey of the Hindu Shāhī Period remains in Shalbāṇḍai and permitted the authors to publish the report of the exploration. We are also thankful to Dr. Muhammad Waliullah, Mr. Nawaz-ud-Din, Mr. Zia-ur-Rahman, and Mr. Zahidullah for being part of the survey team.

Notes and References:

- ⁱ Khan, Z. H. and S. Batool, "Galla Fortified Mound: A Report on its Visible Architecture," *Gandhāran Studies*, Vol. 5, 2011, pp. 115–143.
- ⁱⁱ See Stein, A., *Detailed Report of an Archaeological Tour with the Buner Field Force*, Lahore, 1898; Stein, A., "Alexander's Campaign on the Indian North-West Frontier: Notes from Explorations between Upper Swat and the Indus," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 70, No. 5, 1927, pp. 417–440; Stein, A., *An Archaeological Tour in Upper Swat and Adjacent Hill Tracts*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 42, Calcutta, 1930; Rehman, S., M. H. K. Khattak and F. Rehman, "The Archaeological Exploration in Buner," in *Archaeological Reconnaissance in Gandhara*, 1996, pp. 1–79; Khattak, M. H. K., *Buner; the Forgotten Part of Ancient Uddiyana*, Karachi, 1997.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- ^{iv} Samad and Khan, "Archaeological Survey of District Buner," p. 31.
- ^v Samad and Khan, "Archaeological Survey of District Buner," p. 31.
- ^{vi} Khan, *Archaeological Profile of Buner*, p.229.
- ^{vii} Samad and Khan, "Archaeological Survey of District Buner," p. 31.; Khan, *Archaeological Profile of Buner*, pp. 238-239.
- ^{viii} Khan, *Archaeological Profile of Buner*, p.239.
- ^{ix} Samad and Khan, "Archaeological Survey of District Buner," p. 32.
- ^x Khan, *Archaeological Profile of Buner*, pp. 250-251.
- ^{xi} Samad and Khan, "Archaeological Survey of District Buner," p. 31.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 31.



Fig. 1 - Map of District Buner showing the distribution of Hindu Shāhī Period sites in the Shalbāndai area

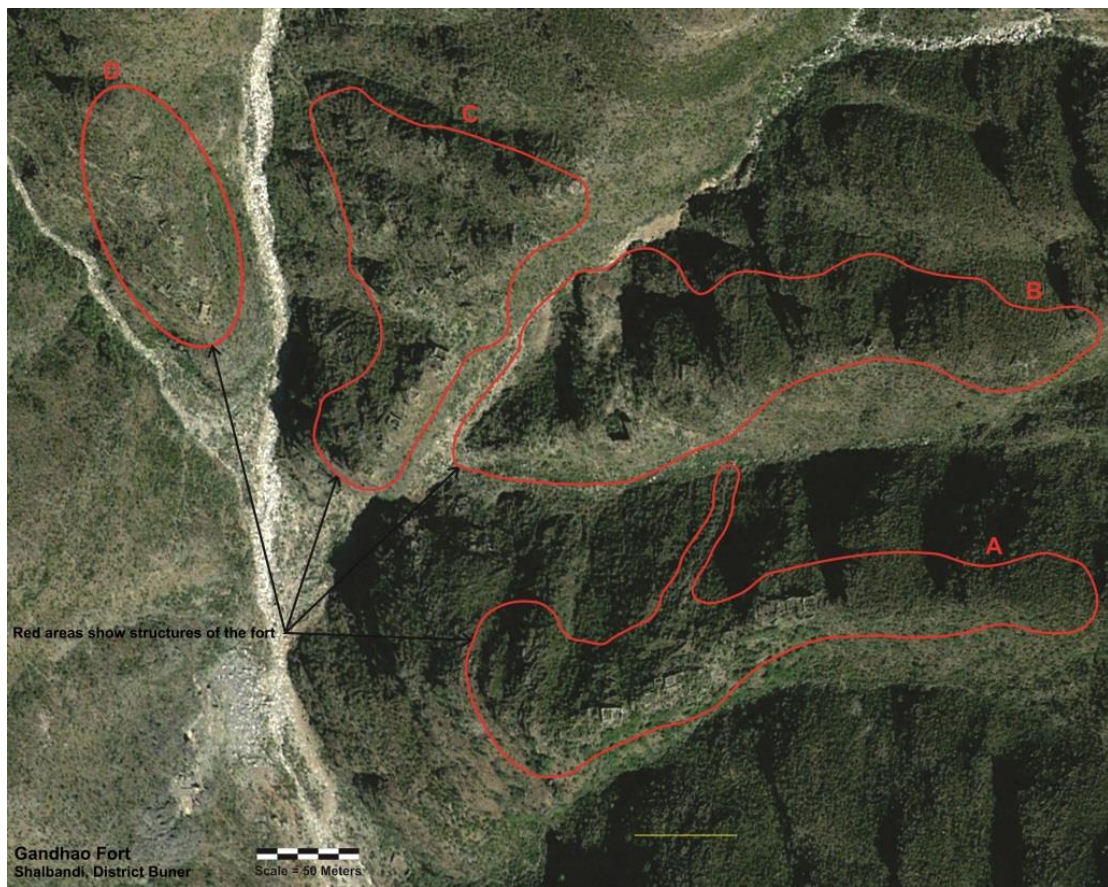


Fig. 2 - Shalbāndai: (*Google*) Image Showing different Parts (A to D) of Gandhāo Fort

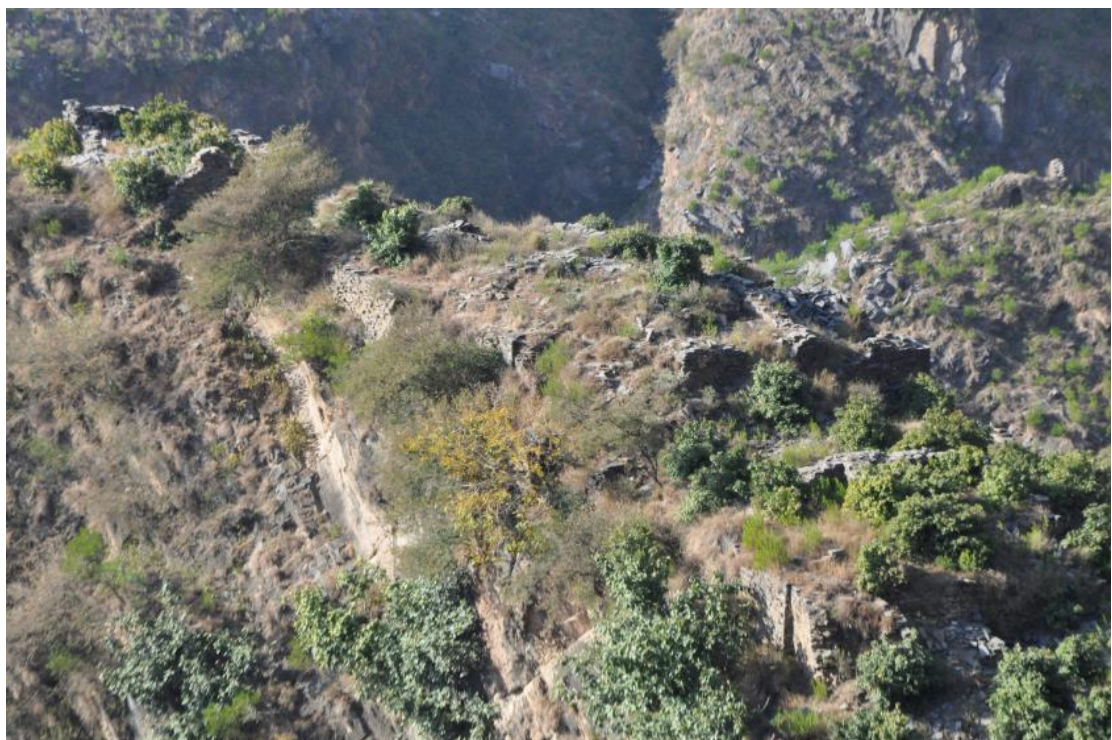


Fig. 3 - Shalbāndai: General View of the Remains of Ridge-A of Gandhāo Fort



Fig. 4 - Shalbāṇḍai: A view of structural remains in the western part of Ridge-A of Gandhāo Fort

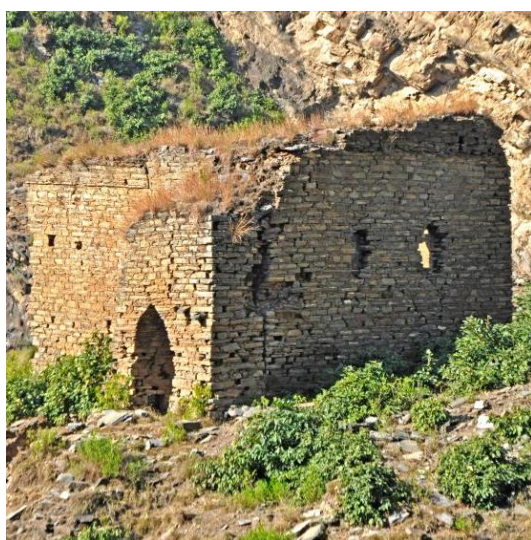


Fig. 5 - Shalbāṇḍai: External and internal view of a supposed sanctuary at Ridge-B of Gandhāo Fort

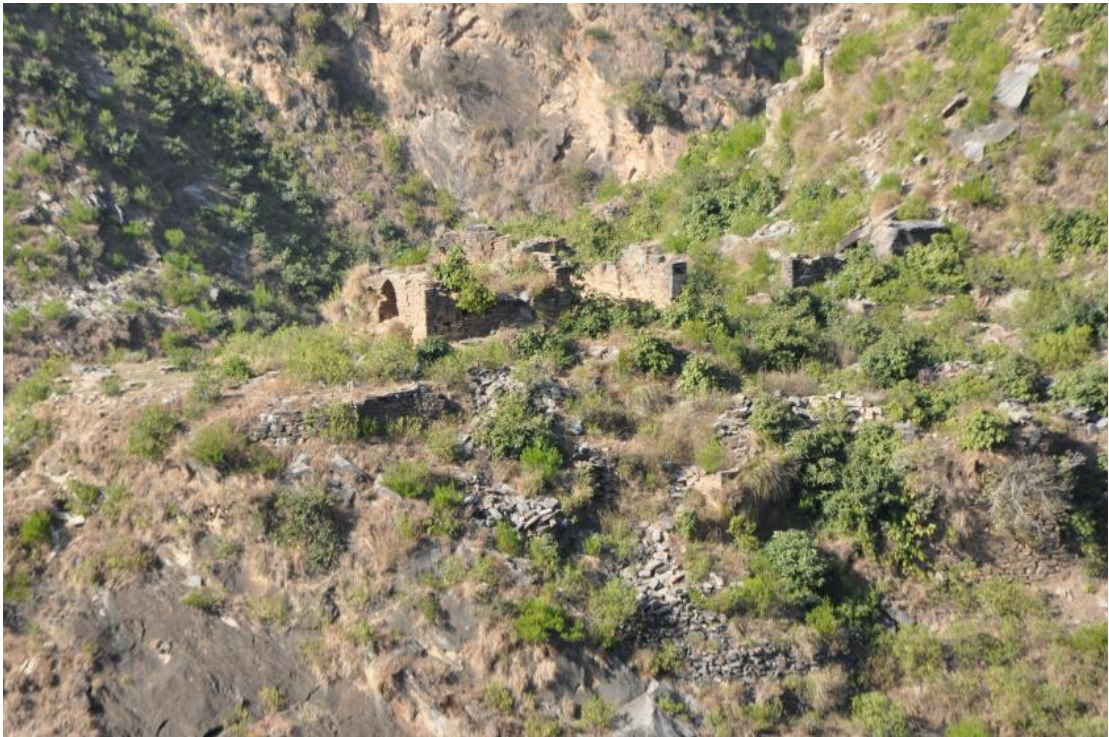


Fig. 6 - Shalbāṇḍai: General view of the Southern parts of Ridge-C of Gandhāo Fort



Fig. 7 - Shalbāṇḍai: Interior view of the vaulted-roofed building at Ridge C of Gandhāo Fort



Fig. 8 - Shalbāṇḍai: General view of the remains at the lower portion of Ridge-D of Gandhāo Fort

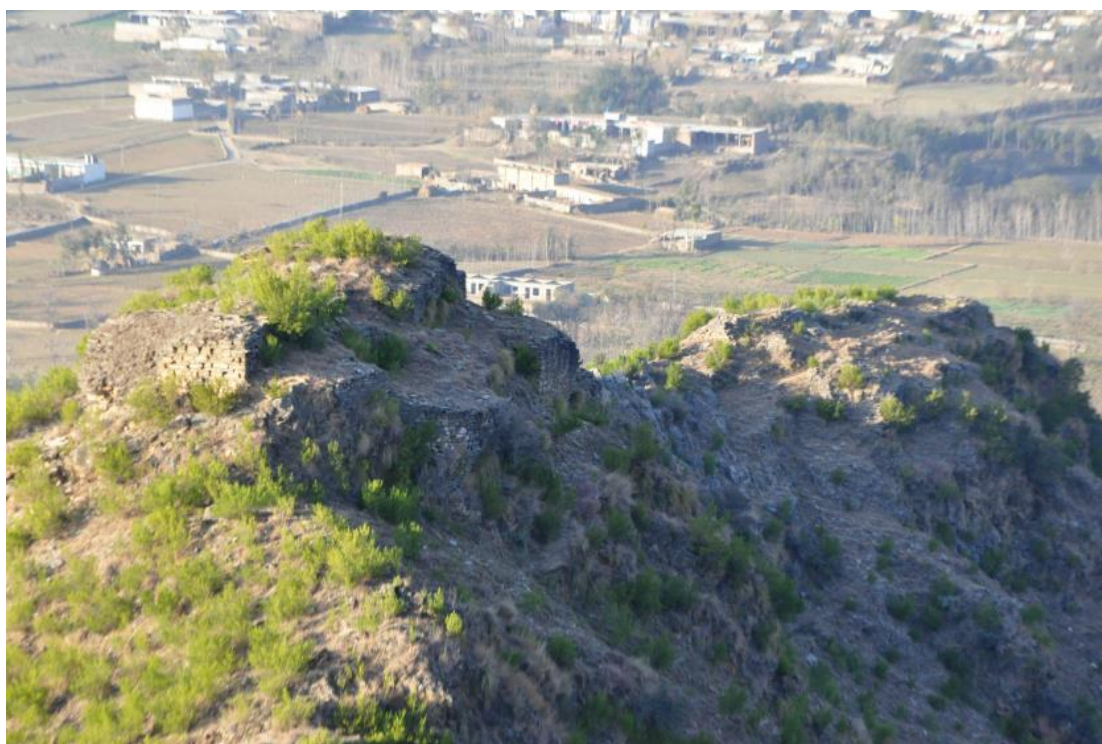


Fig. 9 - Shalbāṇḍai: General view of the Southern parts of Shogrām Fort



Fig. 10 - Shalbāndai: Structural remains at the central part of Shogrām Fort



Fig. 11 - Shalbāndai: Plinth of a watchtower at Shogrām Fort



Fig. 12 - (Google) Image Showing Structural Remains on Northern Ridge of Shogrām Fort



Fig. 13 – Shalbāṇḍai: Structural remains at the southern parts of Hamza Taṅgai Fort

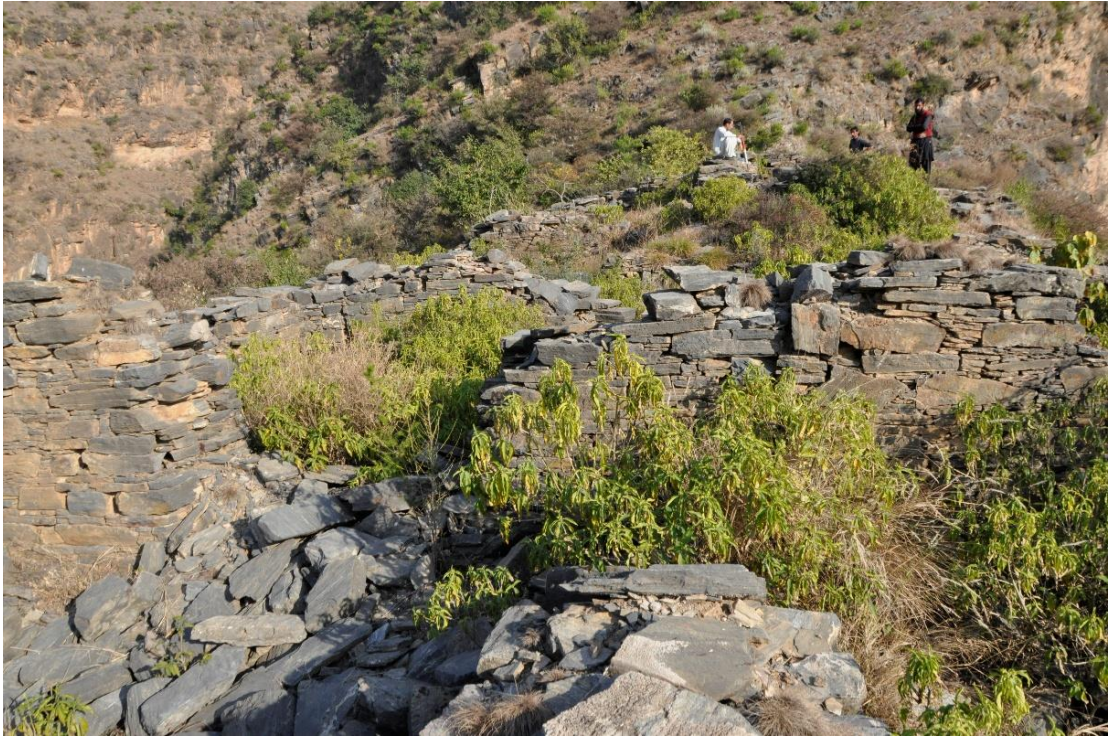


Fig. 14 - Shalbāṇḍai: Building remains at the central part of Hamza Taṅgai Fort



Fig. 15 - Shalbāṇḍai: General view of Koṭona Site



Fig. 16 - Shalbāṇḍai: View of the dressed masonry wall at the northern portion of Koṭona Site



Fig. 17 - Shalbāṇḍai: Structural remains at the Koṭ site



Fig. 18 - Shalbāṇḍai: Remains of Upper portion of a double-storeyed structure at Koṭ site



Fig. 19 - Shalbāṇḍai: View of the structural remains at Baḍais



Fig. 20 - Shalbāṇḍai: Close view of the masonry work at Baḍais site



Fig. 21 - Shalbāṇḍai: Structural remains of Yakhdara Kaṇḍar site



Fig. 22 - Shalbāndai: Fortification wall and bastion at Yakhdara Kanḍar Site



Fig. 23 - Shalbāndai: Structures on the Steep Ridges of Mīrdara Kanḍar Site



Fig. 24 - Shalbāṇḍai: Remains of retaining walls at Lailā Site



Fig. 25 - Shalbāṇḍai: Plinth of a breastwork or bastion at Lailā Site



Fig. 26 - Shalbāṇḍai: A view of the ruined structures at Kotkai Site



Fig. 27 - Shalbāṇḍai: View of the structural remains at Yakhdara Site



Fig. 28 - (*Google*) Image showing the location of Yakhdara Site