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Reinterpreting Significance of the Site of Ancient Rokhri in Archaeological and Historical Context of Mianwali

**Abstract:**

*Gazetteer of the Mianwali District, originally published in 1915, mentioned the existence of a prosperous town in the vicinity of present-day Rokhri, near Mianwali. The statement is based upon a significant number of finds in the form of architectural remains, potsherds, sculptures, and coin. Because the archaeological profile of District Mianwali has not been explored and documented completely, a recent visit of the site by the authors became a source of inspiration to write this article to explore, highlight and understand the significance of the site in the overall historical context in tangible and intangible heritage of Mianwali. The research is also being carried out to take a view of the present condition of the archaeological mound of Rokhri in Mianwali District through re-exploring the site. Primary objective of the present paper is to document, investigate, highlight and extend the scope of the site by putting together information through archaeological, historical and oral records/traditions from the area. The outcome of this research would be useful to understand the cultural profile of the Rokhri Mound. It would also help to determine the Archaeological historical religious, socioeconomic and sociocultural significance of the region with special reference to the Ancient site of Rokhri, Mianwali.*

**Key Words:** Archaeology, Rokhri, Historical, Kurram, Mound, Mianwali, Punjab

**Introduction**

Mianwali, the hometown of renowned Cricketer and The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, is the District of Sargodha Division of Punjab, Pakistan. It is situated in the northwest of Punjab Province shares territorial limits with Chakwal, Attock, Kohat, Karak, Lakki Marwat, Dera Ismail Khan, Bhakra, and Khushab Districts. The district is divided into three Tehsils, Isa khel, Mianwali, and Piplan. Geographically it lies in Longitude 71° and 72° and Latitude 30° and 33° and covers an area of 5840 sq/kms. On the north side, the district is the continuation of Pothohar Plateau and Kohistan Namak while of the Eastern side it is the part of the Thal Desert. The River of Indus flows through the District. According to the 1998 census report of Pakistan it had 285,000 inhabitants (Pakistan, 1961).

**History of Mianwali**

The documented part of early history of the District Mianwali is yet to be known. The most acceptable and popular narrative is that there lived Hindus before the arrivals of Christians. The district was occupied by different immigrations, Awans, Jats, Baloches, and Pathans. Before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a few scattered tribes of Jats occupied the lower portion of the district. Gradually, they came from Multan and Bahawalpur and settled here. After them, Baloch came here from the south side. It is said that Mahmud of Ghazna ravaged the upper half of the district together with Bannu and expelled the Hindus. During his reign the Afghans immigration took place into Bannu and Niazis, Bannuchis and Marwats settled infertile land. Then they spread toward the north on the banks of Kurram and Gambila, here they defeated by a young group of Lodhis who drove them across the Kurram at Tang Dara. At the time of Niazis immigration, the bank of Indus was inhabited with Jat and Awan population. Isa Khel, Mushanis, and portion of Sarhang were the most important sections of Niazi tribes. During the reign of Jahangir, 4<sup>th</sup> Mughal

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Emperor, it is said that Niazis drove the Ghakkhars, who are dominant in the northern part, across the Salt Range. But soon they recovered their position and ruled over the district till before the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1738. In 1739, the emperor of Delhi surrender by Nadir Shah and the western part of the Indus came under his sovereign. In 1748, the Durrani army crossed the Indus at Kalabagh under the leadership of one general of Ahmad Shah and drove out the Gakkhars. In 1756, the rest of the Punjab was incorporated under the Durrani rule for the next sixty years including this district. (Pakistan, 1961)

### **Archaeological Profile of Mianwali with Reference to Rokhri Site:**

According to previous research, several archaeological sites are located in and around the district of Mianwali. Remains of these sites belonging to different periods have been found in present days settelemenst, namely, Musa Khel from the historic period, Rokhri from the Buddhist Period, North Kafir Kot of the Hindu Shahiya Period, Baolis of Van Bhachran, Gunjal and Hadali belongs to Muslim era and other monuments of Khushab (Dar, 2006, p. 130). Portions of ancient masonry arches and wells at kurram near Isa Khel are also recorded and mentioned in the District Gazzatteer (Government, 1915, p. 425).

### **Site of Rokhri**

Among all Archaeological sites which have been recorded so far in the region, the mound of Rokhri is probably the most significant of them all. It is a huge ruined site, measures 1150 feet long by 1000feet broad (Alam, A Mahisha Maridini Statue from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1989, p. 46) with small mounds around it (**Fig. 1**). The geographical location of the area as a gateway to mainland Punjab played a very vital role in the overall formation of religious, so,social and cultural life of the region. Historical records, as well as archaeological evidences, reveals the existence of an ancient town located at the junction of the river Indus and Kurrum, which is Rokhri. As per initial records the town Rokhri lies 6 miles north-west of Mianwali and 3 miles from the Samandwala Railway Station on the Kundiyan-Kalabagh section of the north-western railway (Vats, 1925-26, pp. 58-59). In 1868, the river Indus made a bend to the eastward above Mianwali and washed away the old high bank on which the small town of Rokhri stands. This flood exposed multiple remains of ancient times (Cunningham, 1878-79, pp. 29-32). But presently, the River Indus flows considerably far away from the site. This complex of sites was firstly known to archaeologists in 1838 (Alam, A Mahisha Maridini Statue from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1989, p. 46).



**Figure 1. Present View of the Rokhri Mound, Photo by Authors**

### Importance of the Site location on Ancient route: The Mianwali-Kurrum Pass

#### Aural Stein Route (Makran to Mianwali)

Rokhri offers the first plain landscape on the way through Mianwali-Kurrum Route. Sir Mortimer Wheel writes that the north Kafir Kot was a commanding gateway of the Kurrum approaches to the Indus Valley and the Punjab Plains (Dar, 2006, p. 30). The discovery of a remarkable Jade Statue, depicting a Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim traveling in a mountainous region on his mule, reveals more information of this important route. The subject matter of the relief and the use of Jade, rightly pointed by Hargreaves that it has Chinese origin and imported from China as an item of personal luggage of some Chinese pilgrim or merchant who most probably used the Mianwali-Kurrum route for his journey (Dar, 2006, p. 30). So, both references related to the Mianwali-Kurrum route clearly define inland importance of the first plain land or metropolitan, which was Rokhri.

#### Etymology of Rokhri:

So far as the etymology of the Rokhri is concerned, no proper reference is found in historical accounts. From where the word Rokhri is derived? What does it actually means? Is it a name of some tribe? Or associated with some personality? We are not sure about any of the possibilities. Even it does not have uniform spelling and being written in different forms i.e. Rokri (Cunningham, 1878-79, pp. 29-32), Rokhari (Vats, 1925-26, pp. 58-59), and Rokhri (Government, 1915, p. 424). According to oral traditions, during Hindu habitation, a registration system named Rokar-Bahi was in practice here, from where this town derived its name Rokri and then changed into Rokhri, over time. So origin and meaning of the word are still shrouded in mystery.

#### Previous Literature about Rokhri

Mr. Priestley in 1868 mentioned about archaeological remains from Rokhri. In his report, Cunningham reproduced the complete account of Mr. Priestley who informed about a huge inscribed brick from here (Cunningham, 1878-79, p. 32). Similar information about Rokhri we also find in the District Gazetteer of Mianwali, 1915 (Government, 1915, p. 424). Furthermore, Vats in 1925, added more details of the site (Vats, 1925-26, pp. 58-59). Stein visited the site in 1937 and published his account of Archaeological remains, antiquities, and present condition of the site (Stein, 1937, pp. 67-68). At that time, the association of the site with Buddhism had been completely understood after knowing about the architectural remains of a Stupa, which Vats had already published in his report (**Fig. 2**). Several Gandharan-style antiquities were known from the site including Buddhist sculptures, as Foucher had already included and published a few of these, which were collected from Rokhri mound (Foucher, 1905-1951, pp. 120-21). Once the significance of the site as Buddhist Heritage established, it kept on attracting scholarship related to Gandhara art the example of which we find in the work of Ingholt who also published six pieces of artifacts from Rokhri in his book "Gandharan Art of Pakistan" (Ingholt, 1957).

Further research on the site suffered a great setback due to which it was left unattended which consequently damaged it either through natural or human factors. However, locals had become aware of the richness of the site and collected a huge number of antiques in all forms. This leads to the second phase of the study of the site and in 1989, Humera Alam (Alam, 1989, pp. 45-49), mentions about her visit and findings from the site in detail. She added more information in another article (Alam, Lahore Museum Collection of Stucco Sculptures from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1990). From the significance of her findings of the site extended from the Buddhist period to the Hindu period site in the area. The sculptures which she mentioned clearly reflect the existence of Hinduism.

The first compiled version of the site was published in 2003. The essay, written in the Urdu language, threw light on the historical significance of Rokhri (Ahsan, 2003) but again due to the general understanding of the author, many aspects of the site still remained obscure. The information and photographs mentioned in the books, however, repeated the religious association of the site with Buddhism and declared it as one of the main learning centers for followers of the religion (Niazi, 2003).

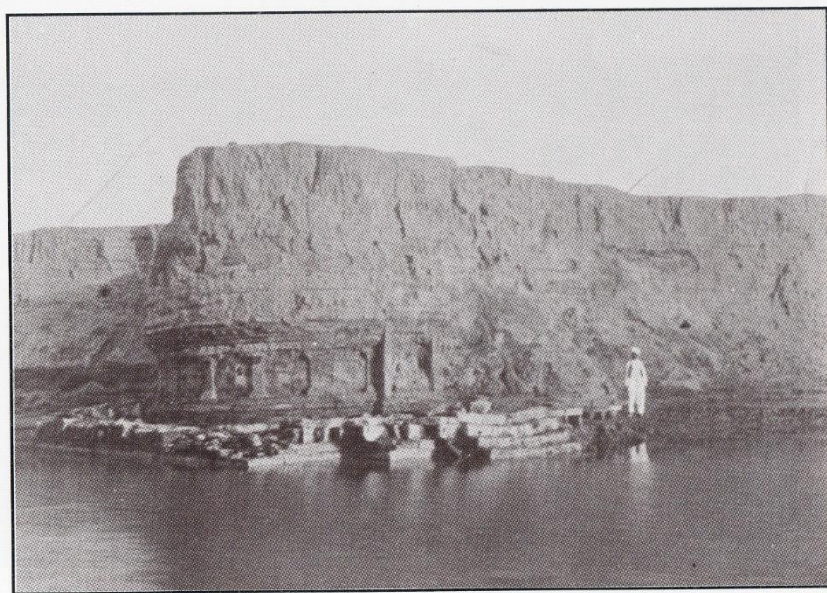
In 2006, Dr. Saifur Rehman Dar, mentions a little about this important site (Dar, 2006, p. 30). Furthermore, in his later publication, he mentioned about some artifacts that were collected from Rokhri and part of the Lahore Museum (Dar D. S., 2016). The latest and more recent information about Rokhri and its antiquities in Lahore Museum has been mentioned by Dar & Dar (Dar & Dar, 2018).

The above-mentioned accounts described the site and its different aspects i.e. artifacts, architectural remains, time period, etc. The information is being analyzed and evaluated into the following points:

### **1. Architectural Remains, Particularly of Stupa**

The initial records and information state that the architectural remains of the sites were firstly exposed and seen during the flood of the Indus river, in 1868 (**Fig. 1**). Remains of a Buddhist Stupa, two circular walls which constructed of brick-shaped blocks that appeared to be prepared artificial kind of stone (Cunningham, 1878-79, pp. 29-30) and large well-shaped brunt bricks with a layer of white plaster (Government, 1915, p. 424). Such type of artificial blocks is still used for construction of houses in this region. Moreover, two brick pillars and some fragments of plaster moldings were recorded (Cunningham, 1878-79, pp. 29-30). Most of the fragments are profusely ornamented with thin gold scroll-work (Government, 1915, p. 424). Based on this discovery it was said to as Buddhist site. Four walls enclosing a series of paved rooms of some ancient dwelling was also recorded previously (Cunningham, 1878-79, p. 30). The presence of thousands of bricks and numerous mouldings in Kankar and concrete proved that the old city of Rokhri possessed this material for building construction (Cunningham, 1878-79, pp. 30-31).

Afterward, in 1925, the flood of river Indus exposed another structure that was reported by M. S. Vats. The Stupa with base, mouldings, drum, and four stairs were visible after the flood.



(c) ROKHARI : BUDDHIST STUPA AS EXPOSED BY THE RIVER INDUS, SHOWING BASEMENT AND STEPS STILL UNDER WATER.

**Figure 2. Buddhist Stupa, Rokhri.**

Corinthian pillars are used in drum to divide its circumference. The plinth was square in shape and the whole structure was made of Kanjur stone and covered with a fine layer of lime plaster (See Plate). Vats referred it to as Kushan Period on its stylistic grounds. He mentions that there was another brick stupa at the south-west corner of

the plinth (Vats, 1925-26, pp. 58-59). But according to my opinion, it is impossible to construct another structure far close to that huge stupa.

Sir Aurel Stein visited Mianwali to gather information about old mounds in the district. On December 23<sup>rd</sup> he visited the mound of Rokhri. He described the condition of the site in his report (Stein, 1937) in the following words:

“here an exceptionally heavy flood in the summer of 1928 had laid bare a structure built with cut stone and mortar about half a mile to the north-east of the village. Judging from the villagers’ description, it appears to have been a small Stupa or rotunda. A flood in the following year had swept it away, and all I could find in situ were some large slabs of cut stone that seemed to have belonged to the foundation. In front of a flight of steps was said to have been exposed”.

Alam is of the opinion that Cunningham and Vats accounts describing two different stupas (Alam, Lahore Museum Collection of Stucco Sculptures from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1990). The one visited by Cunningham completely washed away after the flood of 1925, when Vats visited the site. But according to the opinion of present researchers, Cunningham, Vats and Stein, all described one stupa. The structure mentioned by Cunningham might be the outer walls of the stupa enclosure or ancient city that was vanished after the flood and the structure of stupa exposed which was described by Vats and Stein. Most probably, these were two stupas if we see the construction material of the remains, Cunningham mentioned brick masonry on the other hand Vats and Stein states Kanjur or cut stone masonry. On this basis, one can say that there were two different stupas. The stupa that was mentioned by Vats is also mentioned in the list of protected monuments (Muhammad, 1987, p. 243).

## **2. Inscription**

Sir Alexander Cunningham mentioned in his report that Mr. Priestley in 1868 informed about an inscribed brick which was thus translated by a Brahman (Cunningham, 1878-79, p. 32). The inscription was:

*“Sila thapu thapiyan Abdu nam Kumbhar Bal tilan di pakiyan Sultan Sikandar diwar.”*

“The brick-maker who caste these bricks was Abdu by name, a kumbhar; he burnt them with fuel of the mustard plant in the time of Sultan Sikanda.”

According to the translator, this saying was very common and applied mostly to forts which are said as stronger as the Wall of Alexandar (Cunningham, 1878-79, p. 32). But there is no mention where that inscription was placed and after collecting from the site which authority owned it and what are its present whereabouts.

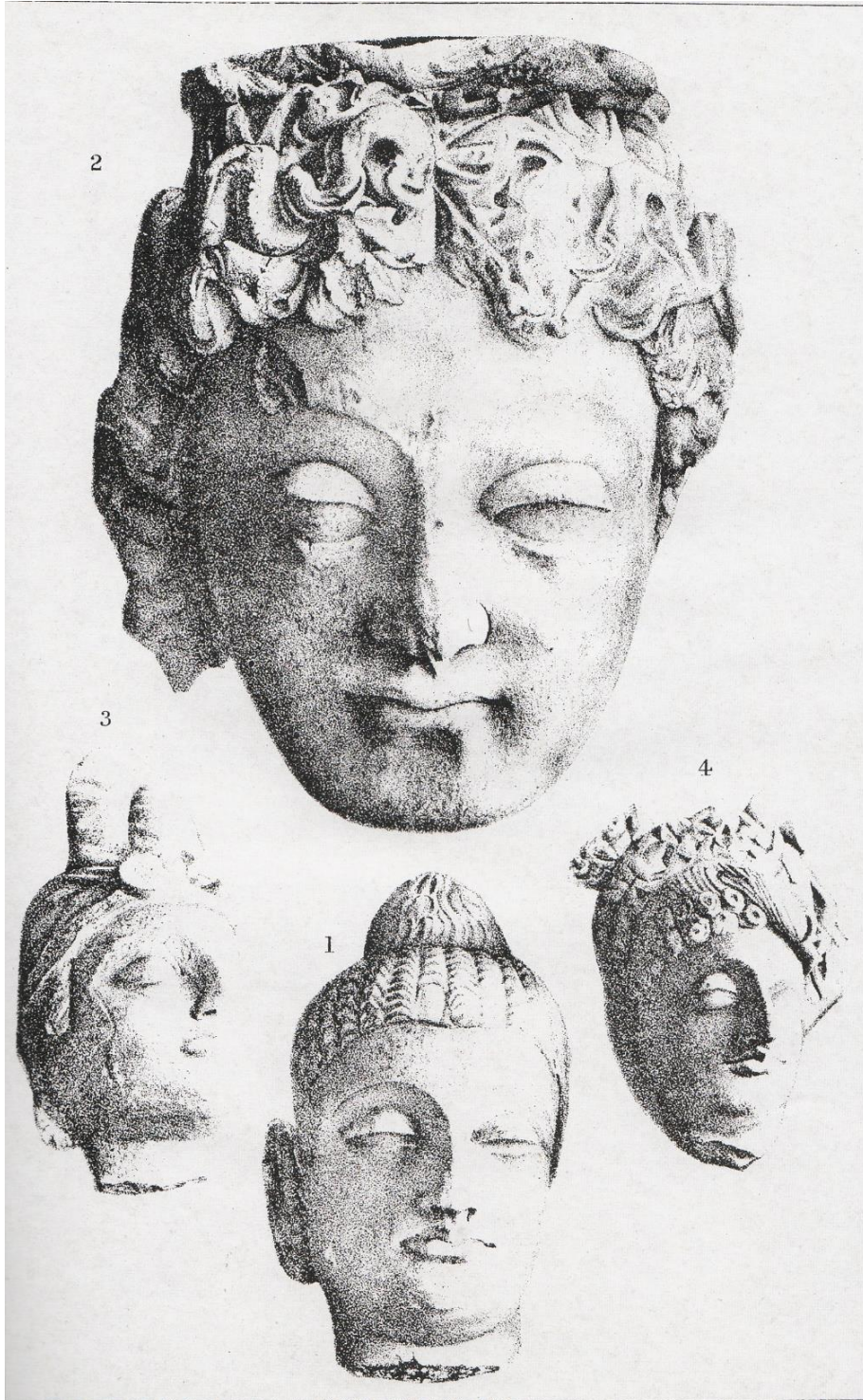
## **3. Coins**

Copper coins (Government, 1915, p. 424) were also found and reported from Rokhri. Coins of Wema Kadphises, Kanishka, Vasu Deva, and Samanta Deva were found which show that the site had occupation of the Indo-Scythians period (Cunningham, 1878-79, p. 31). Alam (Alam, Lahore Museum Collection of Stucco Sculptures from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1990, p. 44) and Dar (Dar D. S., 2016, p. 122) mention about the coins of the Muslim period that were reported and were kept in storage of the Lahore Museum. Based on these references, it can be said that the earliest coin, discovered from Rokhri, belongs to Vima Kadphises (Kushan Ruler) and the later belong to the Muslim (Muhammadan) Period. Based upon the numismatic evidences history of the site can be safely determined from Kushana period.

## **4. Buddhist Period Artifacts**

Due to lack of information, nothing has been ever mentioned or documented about the number of Buddhist period artifacts and sculptures recovered or collected from Rokhri. What we know is only through record of the Lahore Museum which reflects that the antiquities from Rokhri were given to the Museum by the courtesy of Mr. Priestley and Sir Alexander Cunningham (Alam, Lahore Museum Collection of Stucco Sculptures from Rokhri, District

Mianwali, 1990, p. 44). According to Alam, “it only mentions the two lots of stucco sculptures, received from Rokhri first in January 1869 and second in March 1869 by Mr. Egerton and Mr. Priestely respectively”. Later on, thirty-two (32) pieces of plaster sculptures that might belong to an early period of Buddhism were mentioned by Cunningham (Cunningham, 1878-79, p. 31) with a brief detail of each figure. He also published a picture of four heads in his report (**Fig. 3**).



**Figure 3. Buddha Heads form Rokhri, after Cunningham, 1878.**

Cunningham also provided preliminary details of the thirty-two sculptures:

**“Eight heads of Buddha**

**Ten heads of laymen**

**One large center of Acanthus Capital**

**One volute of large capital**

**Two dentils; one with vermillion in hollows**

**Five lions’ heads**

**Four small figures, legs and arms gone**

**One large breast and arms, half-life size**

**One small body**

**One four-armed body holding dish”**

These were collected from outside of the two concentric walls of the Buddhist Stupa at Rokhri (Alam, Lahore Museum Collection of Stucco Sculptures from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1990, p. 45). According to Cunningham (Cunningham, 1878-79, p. 31), all these finds were placed in the Lahore Museum at that time. Ichnographically, these statues have Greek features rather than Hindu art (Government, 1915, p. 424). Later on, Miss Alam, the former Director of the Lahore Museum wrote extensive account of these sculptures. She catalogued the figures and explained their iconography and determined date of these unique finds, , for more detail see (Alam, Lahore Museum Collection of Stucco Sculptures from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1990, pp. 43-54). Among those thirty-four pieces, she was successful in locating twenty-three pieces and studied them. A seated headless stucco figure was also reported by M. S. Vast, in 1925. Its imagery shows the figure of Bodhisattva in a niche, wearing an amulet on the upper part of arms (Vats, 1925-26, p. 58). Sir Aurel Stein also mentioned a seated figure of stucco was mentioned by in his report (Stein, 1937) that was removed to the Lahore Museum. Foucher (Foucher, 1905-1951) and Ingholt (Ingholt, 1957) published six heads that belonged to Buddhism.

### **5. Hindu Figure**

Alam Sculpture of a Hindu figure, Mahisha Mardini was reported in 1989, which she collected from a local resident. It is made of red sandstone and a four-armed deity is carved in relief on its one side, identity as goddess Durga (Alam, A Mahisha Maridini Statue from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1989, p. 45). According to her, this discovery of stone sculpture and a Hindu deity of the Gupta period fill the gap of history. It dispels the notion that Rokhri is only a Buddhist site. Furthermore, she mentions that the presence of Hindu sculpture indicates that there must be existed a Hindu Temple once (Alam, A Mahisha Maridini Statue from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1989, p. 47). Another Hindu figure, mentioned by Dar as “in the Museum (Lahore Museum) a Hindu stone statue of River Goddess Ganga standing on a Makra in front of the pillar” (Dar D. S., 2016, p. 122). These two discoveries of Hindu deities indicate that there must be a Hindu period or Hindu population in past.

## 6. Other Artifacts

Vats, in his report of the site, mentioned a variety of artifacts which indicate cultural richness of the site. Among the finds, include fragments of pottery in different colors and designs, shell bangles, faceted beads of agate, and other stones (Vats, 1925-26, p. 58). Two terracotta figures with the highest stylistic features were also collected from villagers. One is the mailed head of foreigners and the other is a tiny Kushan figure. (Vats, 1925-26, p. 59). Some other artifacts including bricks remain of masonry, large earthen vessels, and clay pipes used for aqueducts (Government, 1915, p. 424) and slabs of red sandstone (Alam, A Mahisha Maridini Statue from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1989, p. 47) also recorded. Describing the site of Rokhri, Sir Aurel Stein (Stein, 1937) states “the coarseness of such painted pottery and rare-relief decorated ware as could be found on mound points to its late occupation, probably in Muhammadan times”.

### Present work

During a recent visit to the site of Rokhri, it is found that presently it is only a huge ruined site which consists of multiple small and large mounds (See Plate). It is near a village/town of the same name. At present, the town of Rokhri and the ancient mound is under the possession of some Niazi Tribes. The main leading tribe is Samand Khel while the other are Sedu Khel, Kudane Khel, Hathi Khel, Begu Khel, Sonay Khel, and Mumakzai Pathans, who are inhabitants of the adjacent land.

No architectural remains, that were mentioned in previous literature are present on the site. There only found countless potsherds over the complex of these mounds and some other artifacts. Some natives of Rokhri shared different interesting stories about the site and treasure hunters, who looted the artifacts from the site by dig in the dark and even forcefully. These looters damaged a great part of the site. They also told that after rain, people found even pieces of gold from the site and other precious things like semiprecious stones. An old man told that this old city was flourished at the time of the “Great wall of Zulqarnain/Alexander”.

Some artifacts from the surface of the site are collected which include, potsherds, shell bangles, rusted copper coins, stone beads, and an animal figurine. A Hindu figure is also collected, which is presented by a local resident. Analysis of these findings clarify that the ancient site of Rokhri belongs to a remote past, most probably, it is a Harappan Period Site. Chronologically the collection is divided into the following periods: Harappan Artifacts, Early Historic Period, and Historic Period Artifacts.

### Harappan Like Artifacts

Harappan artifacts includes some potsherds (Perforated)(Fig. 4). Apparently the perforation of these potsherds indicate continuation of the tradition used during Harappan period. Extensive survey and documentation of the site and its surrounding areas may bring more evidences either to support or to negate hypothesis of the association of this site with Harappan period settlement.





Figure 4. Harappan Period like Potsherds, from Surface Collection

## 2. Early Historic Period

Some artifacts that are collected from the surface belong to the early historic period. These are some potsherds (**Fig. 5**) and an important finding or terracotta figurine of Hindu Deity (**Fig. 5**). This Hindu Figurine is the continuation of Alam (Alam, A Mahisha Maridini Statue from Rokhri, District Mianwali, 1989) and Dar (Dar D. S., 2016) references that proves, there must be a Hindu period in past.



Figure 5. Terra-cotta Figure of a Hindu Deity

## 3. Historic Period

A great number of Historic potsherds are also collected from the during present visit. These potsherds are finely inscribed with different patterns (see Plate). Few pieces of rusted copper coins (Fig. 6) are also collected.



Figure 6. Potsherds of Historic Period, Collected from Recent Survey of the Site

#### Other Finds from Rokhri

During recent survey of the site and interactive discussion with the community living nearby village, some other objects made of terracotta, metal, semi-precious metal, stone, ivory and shell were also collected. Although millions of potsherds re found scattered at every inch of the site, a god number of artifacts have also been recovered from the site. These objects include broken shell bangles (Fig. 7), fired bricks, fragments of terra-cotta objects, particularly animal figures, beads (Fig. 8) which local people find most often after rainfall. Some of these objects were given to us voluntarily by locals as they were curious to know about actual history of the site quite contrary to different fabricated stories and narratives reached to them generations after generations about destruction of the sites. From available archaeological, historical information about the site and its significant location at very important trade route connection the Mountainous range with plains f Punjab, it is quite clear that Rokhri had enjoyed continuous period of prosperity as one of the main cultural centers of ancient India in general and of ancient Punjab in Particular. Oral traditions also testify religious. Social, cultural and economic importance of the place. The whole information needs to be put together in order to compile and comprehend true potential of Rokhri and Minawali.



Figure 7. Fragments of Shell Bangles from Rokhri



Figure 8. Beads from Rokhri

### Conclusion

It can be concluded that the site of Rokhri is of great importance due to its belonging to the Harappan period. Previously it has only mentioned that it was a Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim period site but no one can mention the Harappan period here. While the present findings and analysis clarify it that its history goes back to the Harappan time. The general pattern of establishment or existence of Kushana period site at Harappan period settlement can be found at majority of the Buddhist and Indus sites in plains of Punjab. The very unique site of Rokhri must be studied in context of the recently reported discoveries of more than 200 Pre-Historic sites in the area of Thal desert (Ghauri, 2018), and Nari, the First Early Indus valley Site Discovered between the Salt Range and the River Jehlum (Dar, 2003). Following the pattern of Indus sites, Department of Archaeology University of the Punjab intends to conduct extensive survey of Mianwali with special focus to find Indus Valley sites on the bank of River Indus and its local tributaries. Such investigation will definitely be helpful in the reconstruction of complete picture of the region based upon the documentation and analysis of the archaeological data, historical as well as oral narratives developed here. The hypothesis is built upon the reinterpretation of the significance of the ancient site of Rokhri which is the best place to start further research. Through this study we will be able to find and reconstruct complete chronology of the district starting from Indus age up to Colonial period.

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