ART. XXI.—*The Buddhist Caves of Afghanistan.*

By WILLIAM SIMPSON.

IN going through the Khyber Pass I saw numerous recesses in the rocks which struck me as places which might have been used by ascetics, but they indicated no signs of having been excavated, hence nothing definite could be assumed regarding them. In the scarp under the Ishpola Tope there is one of these rude niches which would be a very desirable spot for a holy man to retire to, who wished to give up the things of this world, but who at the same time had some intention that his light should not be hid under a bushel, for if an ascetic ever made it his residence, every passer-by must have seen him, high above the road, with little more than a fair allowance of space in which to sit cross-legged. From the immense number of caves I afterwards saw which had been excavated, indicating that a very large monastic population had existed, I have now little doubt that during the fervour of asceticism in the Buddhist period, most of these rocky niches had been thus occupied at one time or another. At Daka there are a few caves which have been excavated, but they are little more than holes.

It was at Basawul, the next march beyond Daka, that we came upon the first large group of caves. They may number about one hundred, and have been excavated, close to the village of Chicknoor, at varying heights along the base of a rocky hill, known as the Koh-be-Doulut, or "The Worthless Mountain," for nothing will grow on its steep rocky sides. This is on the left bank of the Kabul River, and I was indebted to General Macpherson for the means of crossing to see them. A large raft floating on inflated bullock-hides was procured, and on it, a party, including the General and a guard of Ghoorkhas, were ferried over. The Pushtoo word for cave is *sumutch*, but pronounced very

nearly as if written *smutch*; the natives previous to our going over had given us a wonderful account of these caves; describing them as extending far into the mountain, a hundred miles and more, we were told, and that through one of them there was a road to Kashmir. They also stated that many of them were inhabited, and that the people kept large flocks in them. From these statements some of the officers took over lanterns so as to be able to explore these labyrinthine recesses, and revolvers were not forgotten in case of attack. It was rather remarkable to receive such extravagant accounts with the caves themselves within sight. A traveller passing along might have learnt all this, and recounted it again in perfect good faith, and the marvellous caves of Chicknoor might have been much talked about.

A visit across the river dispelled the illusion. There was not a living thing found in any of them, and their extent was limited to about 20 or 30 feet of penetration into the rock; they were all very similar, each having a circular roof, from which they might be described as not unlike a series of small railway arches, their width being perhaps 10 or 12 feet. In one case two of the caves were connected by a passage behind, but the passage was not longer than the caves themselves. These excavations might be divided into two groups, the largest being at the east end of the Koh-be-Doulut, near to Chicknoor; the caves here were probably the oldest, for some of them were in a very dilapidated condition,—while on those higher up the river a few fragments of plaster were visible. Although we found no one in the caves, it turned out that the Koochis, who are a migratory tribe with camels and flocks, come down to the lower regions in the winter, and occupy the caves, leaving them again about April. In some parts of the Jelalabad valley we found a large population of these people in Caves, and the result has been not only the destruction of the plaster, but also the blackening of it, so that all inscriptions, paintings, or colour of any kind, wherever it existed, has in almost every case ceased to be visible. This is much to be regretted; the Caves seem to have been all

Fragment of Picture
in small Cave;
at Tappa Zurgaram
Huda.

Wm Simpson.

Back of Chair,
enlarged.

Leg of Chair
enlarged.

THE BUDDHIST CAVES IN AFGHANISTAN.

THE BUDDHIST CAVES IN AFGHANISTAN.

covered with plaster; many of them were no doubt painted, but of this only some few remains were found, the little that is left suggesting, however, that a great quantity of valuable material has been destroyed by the Koochis utilizing the Caves.

As the Afghanistan Caves were all but new to me, it was necessary to be careful in coming to any conclusion as to who their constructors had been. At first, that is, so far as the Chicknoor Caves threw light on the subject, the origin of the Caves was far from being evident. The Koochis living in these recesses with their flocks made it possible that they had been excavated for dwelling in; this was the general idea among the party who had gone over to see them. I rather suspected their Buddhist origin, and the repetition of the circular roof in them all, as well as their uniform size and shape, led me to think that some type had been rigidly followed as a pattern. It struck me that if they had been originally constructed as habitations, more variety would have been given to them from the varied requirements of different individuals. It was only after seeing the vast quantity of Caves in the Jelalabad valley, that their origin became a certainty in my mind. Their constant association with topes, and mounds of Buddhist remains, made it evident that there was some connection between them. In almost every case where there was a scarp of rock under the mounds, Caves existed in it; and as in most cases the Topes had been erected on elevated spots, there were few remains near which the Caves were not found. The remains of structural Viharas could often be distinguished from that of the Topes, and it may be a point worth noting, that Caves and Viharas existed together.

What these two very different kinds of residences implied I cannot pretend to determine; but they naturally suggest that some point of distinction is indicated. It is quite possible that they have a chronological sequence; that the Monks dwelt in Caves at first, and that the Viharas came into use afterwards; or the opposite may have been the case. Unfortunately, from the decayed condition of the Caves, and the complete demolition of the Viharas, nothing can as yet be said as to the probable date of either. There is another question which

often came into my mind when on the spot, and that was as to whether the Caves or the Topes had come into existence first. It may have been that, when a Tope was erected, the Caves and Viharas were constructed for the attendant Monks; or it is equally possible, and if anything I think it is the most likely of the two theories, that the Caves and the Monks first existed at these spots, and that, if any of them attained to a high reputation for sanctity, he would most probably have been honoured with a Tope containing his ashes, and thus begun the group above, which is now represented by the mound. Beyond a surmise of this kind, I have no evidence to offer on the subject.¹

There were some marked exceptions as to the form of the Caves, but the great mass of them were similar to those at Chicknoor;—they are simply oblong recesses, and in nearly every case with a circular roof. They vary in dimensions, but as an average size I would say they are about 20 ft. in length, 10 feet wide, and about 12 feet high (see *plate 2*). In a great many of them there was a small rude recess cut on one side, on the level of the floor, or only a few inches above it. From their size, these recesses suggested that their purpose had been for sleeping in, and from their rough, irregular appearance, it is possible that they were not excavated at the same time as the Caves; if this has been the case, it would imply a change at some time in the habits, or rules, of the Monks who dwelt in them. In this I assume that these Caves were used as cells by the ascetics, but from what I have seen of the Buddhists in Tibet, and elsewhere, I have no doubt but each Cave would be at the same time a place in which religious services would be performed, and that pilgrims and pious individuals would visit them on account of the sanctity of their inmates. The Caves, although small, were, we may suppose, much larger than the cells of the ordinary Viharas, and were therefore capable of being

¹ Hiouen-Tsang, in *Vie et Voyages*, p. 274, and in the *Voyages*, vol. ii. p. 214, describes two chambers cut in the rock of Khavandha, near the Pamir plateau. In each chamber there was a *Lo-han*, or Arhat, “*plongé dans l’extase complete.*” So far as this example goes, it indicates that each Cave would be the habitation of one monk.

used as chapels. According to Hardy's *Eastern Monachism*, the space allowed for the Buddhist ascetics of Ceylon was 12 spans long by 7 spans wide,—now that would be about the size of the recesses just described. If I recollect right, the Caves of Ceylon are single, like those in Afghanistan, thus contrasting in their arrangement with the groups round a larger central Cave, such as we find in Western India. The oldest Caves in India are those near Buddha Gaya in Bengal, and they are also of the single kind; showing that this was the first type in use by the Buddhist ascetics. The groups round a central cell, or chapel, now known as “*Vihara Caves*,” were a later development; it thus becomes evident that if the Afghanistan Caves were derived from India, it must have been at an early date, when the single cell was the rule. The great resemblance between the Afghanistan Caves and those at Buddha Gaya suggests that there had been a following of the model either on the one side or the other, and one naturally concludes that the Bengal group is the oldest. As our knowledge of dates in the one case is a blank, this can only be put as an assumption, and we must wait with patience in hopes that further light may be brought to bear on the subject.¹

The Caves of India were derived, so far as their forms are concerned, from the wooden architecture of the period, and the early examples of Barabar and Rajgir are no exceptions to the rule; in the case of those last named this is evident from the doorway of the Lomas Rishi Cave, in which the wooden forms are very beautifully copied in the rock. From this it is assumed that the circular roof of that Cave, as well as of the others in the same locality, were derived from the round wooden roofs of the houses of the period, and as this circular roof is common to the Afghanistan Caves, it becomes an evidence in favour of the idea that the Bengal type was the model which had been carried to the North-West. There are other links of evidence in addition to this. In some of

¹ In the Bengal Archaeological Survey Reports, vol. i. p. 48, General Cunningham says that an inscription in the Viswa Mitra Cave, at Barabar, gives the date of its dedication in the 12th year of the Raja Priyadasi, or Asoka, or 252 B.C.

the Bengal Caves there is a drip under the circular roof, and this I found in one of the Caves at Hada. To this there is still another feature of identification;—in the doorway of the Lomas Rishi Cave it will be noticed that the jambs slope inwards above; this is also found at Bhaja and among the older of the Western Caves. The peculiarity belongs also to the remains of Buddhist Architecture in Afghanistan, and in the Cave at Tappa Zurgaran at Hada, where the plaster remained in some parts in a tolerably perfect state, and where the drip just mentioned was quite perfect,—the inward slope of the walls upwards was also a distinct feature (see section of Cave in *plate 2*). It may be mentioned that some of the Caves had flat roofs, but these were the exception,—as an instance there is one in a group, near to Darunta; the group is called, from there being a number of Caves connected by a very long communicating tunnel, the “Bazaar,” to be afterwards described. The roof in this case may perhaps have been originally very slightly curved in the centre, it is connected with the perpendiculars on each side by a well-defined curve, the whole outline of the roof appearing to be a very flat ellipse. I have a section of a roof from a small Cave at Tappa Zurgaran which is of this form (see section in *plate 2*).

I came upon only one Cave which resembled the Rock-cut Viharas of Western India. This is in the same cliff as the Pheel-Khana Cave, to which it adjoins. There was a stair which led up to the Cave, which is now all but gone, some worn remains of a few of the steps are still to be seen; a large square chamber has been formed, about 42 feet by 41 feet: a large square mass has been left as a support in the centre, 14 feet square. On three sides there are cells, three on two of the sides and four on the other, making ten in all, and on the fourth side there are two apertures which open out to the cliff to let in light. The whole Cave is very rudely formed,—a cornice perhaps existed round the central support, but it is all so rough, this is uncertain; the cells are, if anything, still ruder,—the better formed ones being round in the roof like the other Caves of the region,—some of them being little better than holes; still these recesses, primitive as they are,

are very different from those in the other Caves already described,—the difference consisting in their greatest dimension being at right angles to the Cave, and in their widening out in the inside, this giving them the character of a *cell* in contradistinction to a *recess*. This peculiarity of the cells, as well as the general character of the whole Cave, led me to the idea that it had been excavated from a description by some one who had seen the Vihara Caves of Western India. If this is the case, it gives us a limit for the antiquity of its date.

On the right of this Cave is the one known in the present day as the Pheel-Khana Cave, and which gives the name used by the natives to the whole group of Caves, mounds, and remains of at least one Tope,—the “Tope Gudara” of Masson. This Cave is so exceptional in its character that it might be doubted if it belonged to the Buddhists, for none of the peculiarities of their excavations are found in it. It has a large opening, perhaps about 20 feet high, narrow at the top and wide below, like a pointed Gothic arch, only these words suggest an architectural character which would mislead in this case; the Cave turns from the entrance at right angles to the south, from which there is a narrow passage to the outside, where it meets a similar passage from the entrance. The place is large enough to have kept an elephant, which is implied by its name, which is “Elephant House”; and as the site for Nagarahara, the ancient capital of the district, which I have proposed, was on the other side of the Kabul River,¹ exactly opposite, it is quite possible that in former times it may have been used for this purpose. A plan of the Vihara and the Pheel Khana Cave is given in *plate 3*.

Judging by the remains at this place, there must have been a large colony of Monks about it during the Buddhist period. On the west side there is a high cliff overhanging the Kabul River, and in the most prominent part of it there is a large niche, in which, I came to the conclusion, there had been at one time a colossal figure of Buddha. No remains of the

¹ See Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society for April, 1881.

statue are now visible, for it may have been formed only of mud and covered with a thin coating of *Chunam*, which was the material of which a fragment of a large figure was made I came upon in my explorations at the Ahin Posh Tope. The reason for supposing this niche had a figure in it, was owing to there being no means of reaching the recess. On the south of the niche are five Caves similar to the other Caves in this locality;—they were inaccessible from the river, so a long tunnel had been cut behind them, thus making a means of communication. As this tunnel with its openings into the Caves has the appearance of an underground street, it has received the name of the “Bazaar.” There is a shorter tunnel which crosses the long one at an angle, and its object is not quite clear, but I think it may have been to give light to the larger tunnel, or it was formed as a passage to a balcony, or ledge, which had been cut in the cliff in front of the Caves. The remains of what I take to have been the ledge are so decayed that I can only put this as a guess, but the longest tunnel is continued beyond the last of the Caves, when it turns towards the river, and at this point the ledge still exists, and leads to a small recess in a corner of the cliff. If it existed thus far, the natural conclusion is that it went round to the front of the great niche where the figure of Buddha sat, so that the devotees could pass round and make their obeisance before it. This extension of the tunnel beyond the Caves shows that its principal object was not so much to lead to them as to the colossal statue. A plan of this curious group of Caves will be found in *plate 4*.

The rock is very soft sandstone, with layers of conglomerate, and the five Caves are excavated partly in both, the conglomerate being in the lower part of the Caves, and the sandstone above. The last, although very soft, has stood the effects of time better than the harder conglomerate, except in the roofs, where it has fallen down in flat masses. This made the original form of the roofs doubtful, but one of them I thought must have been flat, and has already been alluded to. The Caves may be about 12 or 13 feet wide and about 20 feet long, and each had the usual small recess on the

side. They must have formed very pleasant places to reside in, looking out over the river towards the Siah Koh, or Black Mountain, along the base of which there were numerous Topes and Viharas about a mile and a half distant.

Above these Caves, among many mounds and remains, is the Pheel Khana Tope, and still higher than it is another excavation which ought to be described. It is a rude, square niche, perhaps about 15 or 20 feet high. It has openings to the south and the west, so that the figure, which, from the height of the niche, I suppose to have been a standing one, could have been seen from the two sides. The niche presents no architectural features, unless it be that of the trefoil arch, so peculiar to the trans-Indus structures, and this was so very rudely done, that the intention of the maker might pass unnoticed. In this niche were some hands, of a very primitive style of art, cut in the soft sandstone; similar hands were also on the walls of the Caves below. My first impression was that they were modern, but noticing that the sandstone, soft as it was, had been more durable than the conglomerate, I am now inclined to believe that they may be as old as the Buddhist period. The existence of somewhat similar hands on the sculptures at Bharhut tends to confirm this. A sketch of one of these hands is given in *plate 4*.

This does not exhaust the rock-cut excavations at this place. Low down in the cliff under the "Bazaar" can be seen some small tunnels; these were aqueducts, and the current of the river has carried the rock away in many places, thus making them seem numerous, but there is more than one tunnel, and they are not all on the same level, which probably implies that the water was taken from different heights, at separate points of the river, to irrigate the higher as well as the lower parts of the plain of Besud, opposite Jelalabad. In the cliffs still lower down the river the continuation of these aqueducts can also be seen, and one which gets its supply below the Pheel Khana Cave still carries water to Besud. It would be important to know if these aqueducts are as old as the Buddhist period, but that point cannot be settled with certainty. The remains of an aqueduct with a tunnel through a hill at Girdi

Kas is associated by the people there with the Badshahs of Delhi; but our Engineer officers reported to me the existence of "Buddhist masonry" in it,—this, as well as other considerations, inclines me to believe that these hydraulic works are all older than the Mahomedan era. Amongst these considerations, it may be mentioned that at Hada there is a rock-cut conduit under the mounds at that place, and we may safely assume its date to be as far back as the Buddhist period.

At Hada, the *Hilo*, or *Hidda* of Hiouen Thsang, there are numerous examples of Topes and mounds with Caves beneath them in the conglomerate cliffs. About half a mile to the west of the great mass of remains at that place is an irregular elevation in the plain covered with mounds, where cliffs are pierced with a very interesting group of Caves. Masson gives the spot the name of *Tappa Zurgaran*, or "The Goldsmith's Mound." The largest Cave in this group is known at the present day by the name of the "Palace of the Hoda Rajah"—Masson calls him Hudi or Udi,¹—who seems to be a very legendary character. General Cunningham says that Khairabad opposite Attock on the Indus is believed by the people in that locality to have been "the stronghold of Raja *Hodi* or *Udi*."² According to the present inhabitants of Hada this Cave is of interminable extent, and the Chicknoor legend was also affirmed about it, that it communicated with Kashmir. Colonel Tanner, who was on the Survey Department with General Sir Samuel Browne's column, had some excavations made into it, and the general character was brought to light. A plan of it will be found in *plate 2*. The only part that was not explored was at the south-east corner, where a continuation is blocked up by stones. This most probably only communicated with another entrance

¹ See *Ariana Antiquæ*, p. 105.

² Archaeological Survey of India, Cunningham, vol. ii. p. 64, where it will be seen that the fame of this legendary Rajah extends from Jelalabad to the Punjab. Lowenthal derives the name of *Udi* from *Udyāna*; but General Cunningham identifies it with "the great Indo-Scythic race of *Yuti* or *Yuchi*." Macgregor, in his papers on Central Asia and Afghanistan, states that in Kaffirstan "their kings are named Oda and Odashooh." We have here perhaps the most probable origin of the name.

from the front. One continuation behind terminated where a perpendicular shaft exists; and another which branches off obliquely comes out again into a hollow, thus forming a sort of "back-door" to the place. The ramifications of this Cave it will be seen from the plan, where the dimensions are given, makes it, with the exception of the "Bazaar," already described, the largest of the Caves I had seen in the Jelalabad Valley. At the entrance of this Cave the plaster was left in tolerably fair condition, and the section with circular roof, given in *plate 2*, is taken from it. In the rubbish at the entrance there were found some pieces of a Corinthian capital, and a fragment of a round stone ornamented with lotus leaves, which had probably been the base of a statue. These had no doubt tumbled down from some structures above, of which the foundations were visible.

To the north of the Palace of the Hoda Rajah, and in the same cliff, are a number of Caves, three or four of which are exceptional in their form. They are square in plan, with flat roofs, but the roofs have domes in their centres. The domes are round in all except one, which is conical, or of a tent shape (see *plate 5*). These Caves are very small, the one with the conical dome is of very restricted dimensions, being about 6 feet square; the dome is 3 feet 2 inches diameter, and about the same in height; the circular formed dome, given in *plate 5*, is 7 feet 3 inches diameter, and its height is 3 feet. The Cave, of which a plan is given in same plate, was larger; still it is only 13 feet square, and the dome is 9 feet diameter. This had eight small niches, two near each corner: these were about 2 feet 6 inches wide, and about 3 feet high, arched at the top. In one of these Caves part of a circular base was found under the dome. There was not enough left to determine whether it was the pedestal of a statue, or the base of a small Tope; so that that point is left uncertain. I am inclined to think that this exceptional form of cave was excavated to contain Topes.

We have no counterpart to these Caves in India, that I can remember, except it be the circular inner recess of the Lomas Rishi, Viswa Mitra, and the Sudama Caves at Barabar,

the recesses of which are domed, and were supposed to have contained Topes. Although these square Caves at Hada are in some respects widely different from those at Barabar, still I am struck while writing by the case of having to recur again to the Bengal examples for the type of the Afghanistan excavations.

This last group of Caves being so small they have escaped the ruinous results of having been occupied by the Koochis, and some traces of paintings are still visible on them. The domes seem to have had one or two belts of panels all round represented in colour, and in each panel was a figure, little more than a head and shoulders, the background being either a trefoil arch, or a nimbus round the head,—the effort to represent them in *plate 5* makes them far too distinct, for what is left of them is very shadowy. The smallest of the Caves,—that with the tent-shaped dome, from its littleness, seems to have escaped all the influences of smoke, and there is in it a fragment of a painting in which the colours are still very bright, particularly a background which is of emerald green,—if that colour was known to the painters of the period. The plaster has been knocked off in large patches, and this picture has not escaped. The background of green is a circle about 18 inches diameter; the upper part is damaged, but there is still left the lower part of a human figure, sitting on a chair, with the feet resting on a footstool,—the one ankle resting over the other: the left hand resting on the thigh. No costume is visible. *Plate 1* gives a sketch of the painting, with enlarged details of the chair. The legs of the chair are so like those of *Charpoy*s, to be seen in India at the present day, that we may suppose they have been turned on a lathe. The perpendicular bars are made in imitation of the “Buddhist Railing.” There are chairs and sofas represented in the Amaravati Sculptures; these are no doubt thrones, as royal or important personages sit on them; but even now Rajahs do not sit on chairs, the throne is a *Gadi*, or pad. This implies a very curious change in India since the Buddhist period. Chairs or seats are not unknown in India,—late European influences are

outside of the point here,—but it might be stated that almost the whole population of India are without such articles of furniture. It would be important if some one could explain the influences which have produced such a change.

If all the Caves in Afghanistan were painted, and the chances are that they were, we may be certain that a vast mass of valuable knowledge has been destroyed with them. These small Caves were the only places in which I saw any fragments of painting. Vestiges of colour were visible on some of the Topes, and on the sculptures upon them; a figure which came to light at the Ahin Posh Tope had evidently been painted yellow. The late Sir Vincent Eyre has mentioned to me that he saw paintings at Bamian, and I think Lady Sale also alludes to them, and says something about her daughter and herself having tried to copy some of them. This implies that the subjects had some importance thus to attract the ladies to make copies.

One day a man came in from Hada and told the late Sir L. N. Cavagnari that he knew a Cave that was much larger than that of the Hoda Rajah's Palace. At his request I went out to Hada with the man, and the result shows how little one ought to trust to people living on the spot about matters of this kind. In *plate 2* a plan of this Cave is given, mainly to show the form of one of the exceptional Caves, but it will be seen that it is much smaller than the one the man compared it with. Its length in one direction is 50 feet. The sides and roof were in a tumble-down condition. There were some remains of plaster on the circular roof.