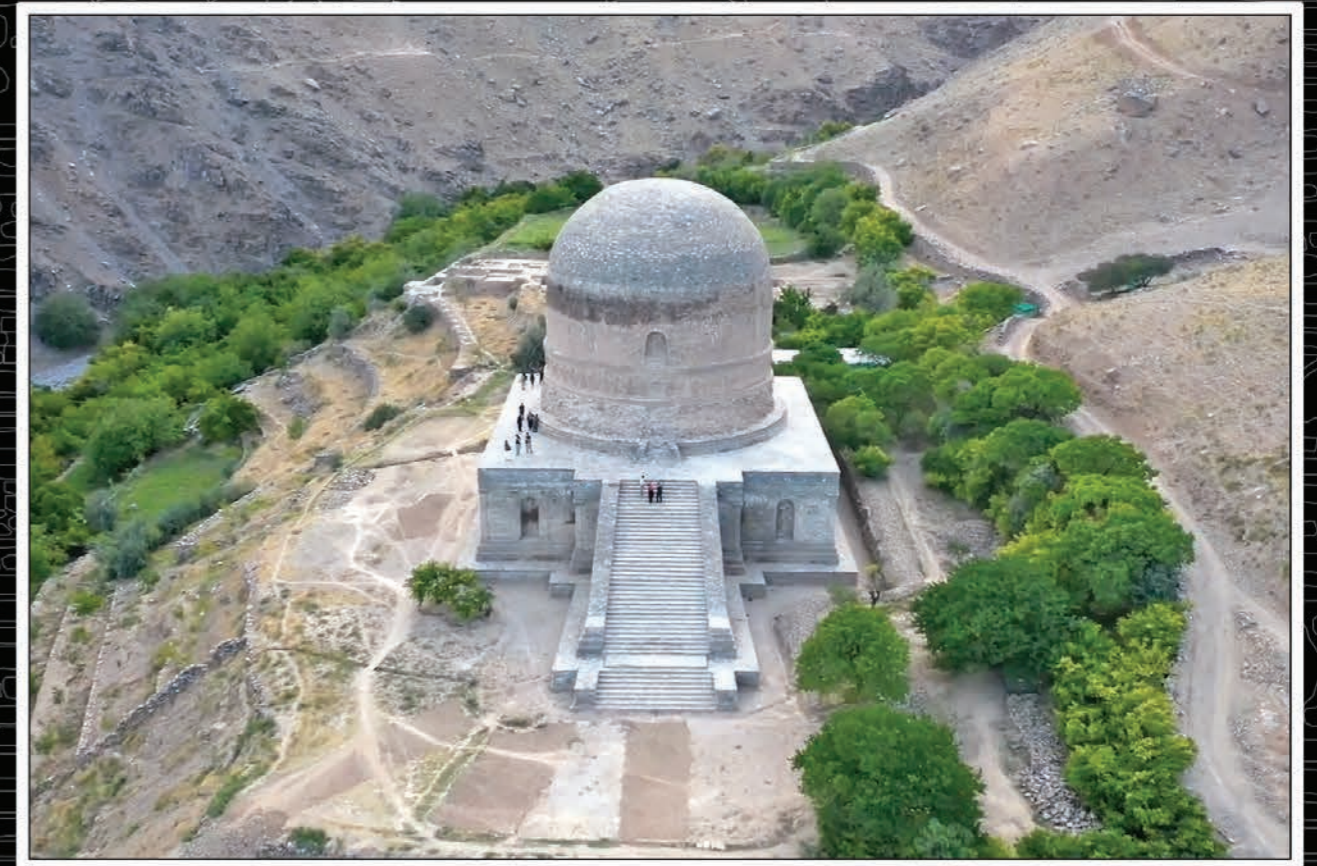
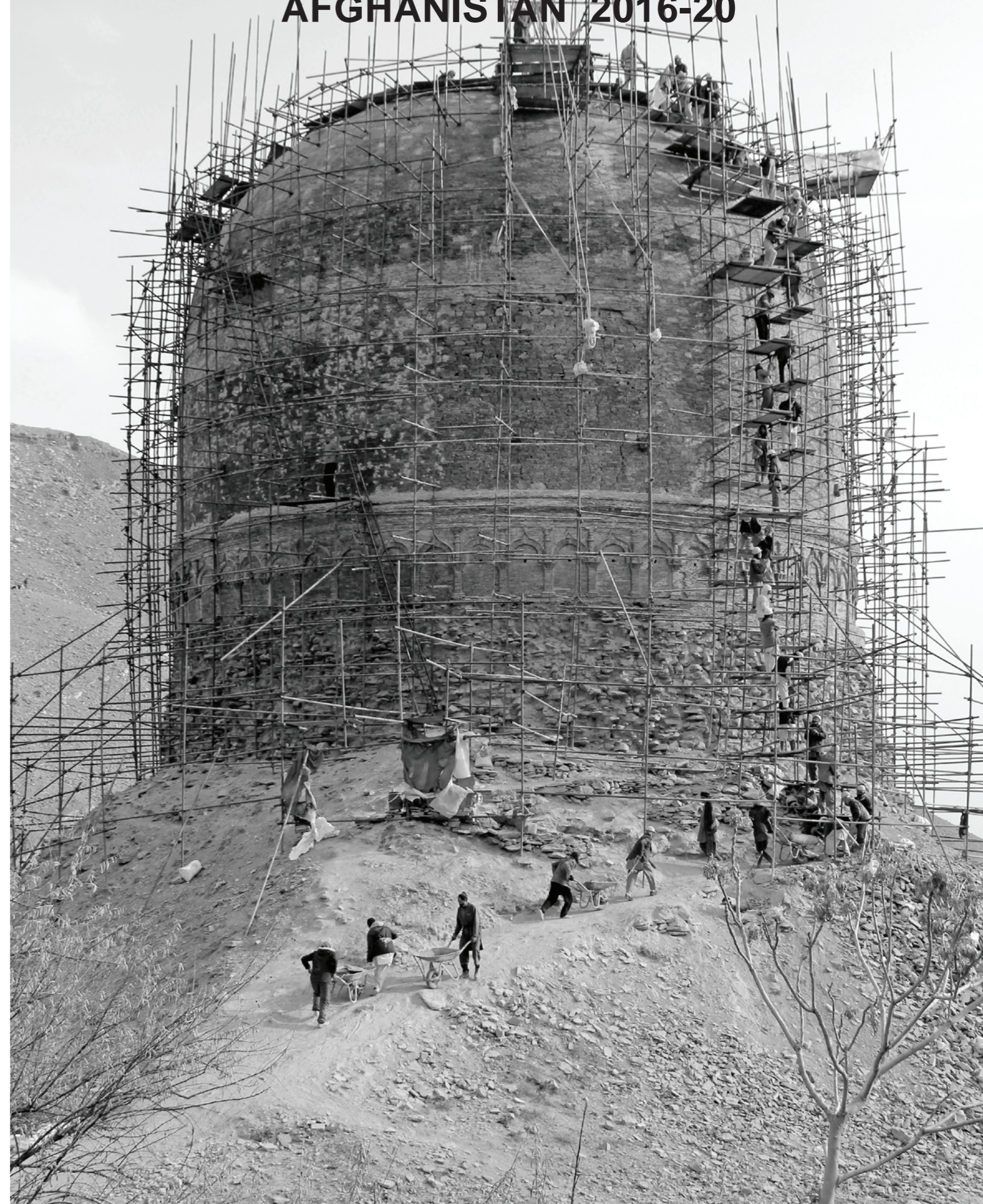


# CONSERVATION OF TEPE MARANJAN & TOPDARA, AFGHANISTAN 2016-20



AFGHAN CULTURAL HERITAGE  
CONSULTING ORGANIZATION

**CONSERVATION OF  
TEPE MARANJAN & TOPDARA  
AFGHANISTAN 2016-20**



AFGHAN CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSULTING ORGANISATION

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

(2021)



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Publication layout: Farhad Soroush

Prepared and published with the financial support of the US Department of State  
through the US Embassy, Kabul under project SAF20016-GR-0043

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## PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The seed for the conservation work described in this publication was planted in the early 1990s, when it was still possible to explore the rural hinterland of Kabul with a degree of security, even though control of many areas was contested. During regular ‘cross-line’ trips to monitor UN-funded rehabilitation projects with rural communities in the Koh-e Daman plain (known colloquially as Shamali) my Afghan companions pointed out the stupa at Topdara, nestled high in a side valley just south of Charikar. In time, curiosity got the better of us, and we made our way up the rough track leading to the village, whose inhabitants were welcoming, if a little bemused. On subsequent visits - as is so often the case even today - the Afghan tradition of hospitality meant that our picnics in the shade of walnut trees beside the stream that runs down this bucolic valley were supplemented by plates of food carried by a gaggle of shy children sent by the villagers. It was not long before the children lost their inhibitions and vied to clamber up the crumbling masonry of the stupa to its summit.

My next visit was in 2004, by when this masonry seemed destined to become a pile of rubble that has been the fate of so many Buddhist sites in the area. Despite the international outcry at the senseless damage wrought in Bamiyan in 2001, the conservation of rural stupas was not then at the top of donors’ priorities. It took a literal ‘leap of faith’ by personnel of the US Department of State to approve in 2016 a grant for ACHCO to embark on work at Tepe Maranjan (district in Kabul) and at Topdara.

This enabled a process of documentation, excavation and conservation on these two important Buddhist-era sites, in collaboration with the Afghan Institute of Archaeology (AIA) and the Department for the Safeguarding of Historic Monuments of the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The work outlined in this publication would not have been possible without the support of deputy Minister of Information and Culture Mohammad Rasul Bawary, director of the Department for the Safeguarding of Historic Monuments Arch. Abdul Ahad Abasi, and director of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology Noor Agha Noori and archaeologists assigned to the sites, Azizudeen Wafa and Abdullah Noorahmadi at Topdara and Khwaja Nader Shah at Tepe Maranjan.

The initiative was managed by Eng. Habib Noori, director of ACHCO, and supervised on site by Eng. Behzad Paya (Site Architect) with Farhad Soroush documenting the works throughout. The site foreman Azizullah Noori played a critical role in addressing the logistical challenges of ensuring timely availability of materials while managing a team of masons, comprising Daud Ahmadi, Nooralam, Hamidullah Sadat, Habibullah Noori and assistants whose work stands as testament to the survival of traditional building skills in Afghanistan. None of this work would have been possible without the collaboration of community representatives at Tepe Maranjan and the villagers of Topdara.

Jolyon Leslie,  
Co-founder of and adviser to ACHCO

## INTRODUCTION



This publication provides an overview of documentation, excavation and conservation managed by ACHCO between 2016 and 2020 on two Buddhist-era sites, Tepe Maranjan (district 7, Kabul) and Topdara (Parwan province). Part of an ongoing collaboration with the Afghan Institute of Archaeology (AIA) and the Department for the Safeguarding of Historic Monuments of the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, these activities were made possible through financial support provided by the US Department of State, through the US Embassy in Kabul.

The project has generated a significant body of documentation, only a small part of which is presented here. The primary objective of the project was the stabilization and conservation of surviving structures and, as a result, the focus here is primarily on the architectural characteristics of these Buddhist-era monuments. Certain objects that were excavated during the project are illustrated, but it is beyond the scope of this publication to draw conclusions about these. It is hoped that information about both the architecture and objects will contribute to the existing scholarship on the Buddhist era in the region; a selective bibliography is provided in an annex.

The Buddhist remains at Tepe Maranjan and Topdara form part of a network of religious complexes that lay on a pilgrimage and trade route linking the Indian lowlands to the east with Bamiyan in the central highlands to the north-west, where important relics associated with the Buddha were kept and venerated. The route was part of a wider trans-national network that saw the exchange and transfer of goods, generating prosperity across the region, while enabling the spread of cultural concepts.

Little is known about the systems or institutions through which Buddhist religious sites were established and managed. The relation between the monastic and commercial communities is also unclear, but it is likely that the two were to some degree inter-dependent. As well as donations from pilgrims and patronage by prosperous individuals, revenue from land holdings or other economic activity combined to sustain what must have been a sizeable monastic population at the time. The extent to which the lay population, rural or urban, was required to provide material or other support to the monks is unknown, and may well have varied between sites.



*Map of area of trade/pilgrimage route between Jalalabad and Begram  
(after Errington 2013)*

The surviving religious complexes in the Kabul region differ significantly in scale and orientation, but share a number of common features. Most are in an elevated location and have access to a natural source of water, such as a spring or a stream. The natural topography was clearly a determinant in the siting of stupas, with elevated positions chosen to ensure visibility for the faithful, enhanced by painted plaster and adornment with banners and umbrellas.

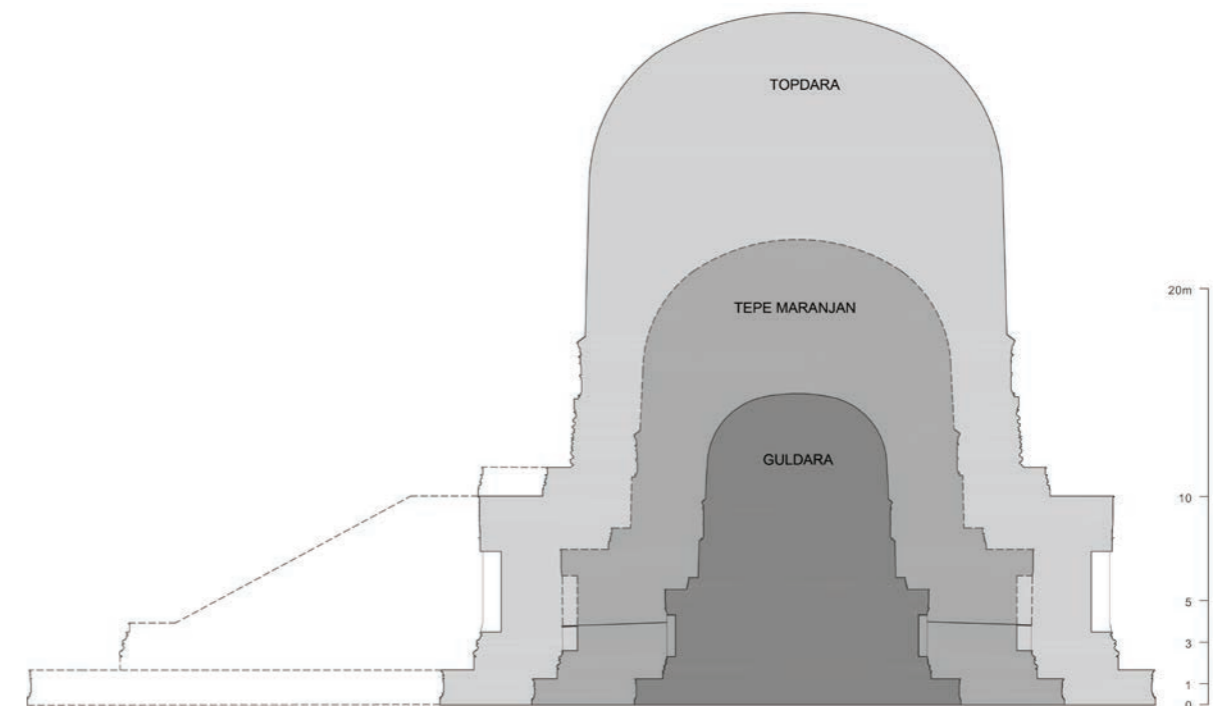


*Guldara stupa in context, looking south 2003*

The religious complexes also share a similar configuration, with a conspicuous votive structure (stupa or chapel) located in front of quarters (uposathagara) used by monks and possibly visitors. Together these seem to have defined the 'sacred area' (sangharama). This layout prevails at Topdara, Guldara and Tepe Narenj and possibly at Tepe Maranjan, where there are secondary structures (as yet unexcavated) on the slopes above the stupa platform.

It is likely that the value of a bequest or assets such as land holdings – and thereby the wealth of a monastic order – determined the scale and architectural form of its buildings. As the central element in a complex, the stupa is a key measure of its significance, which may have derived from the nature of the relics housed on the site and, as a consequence, the numbers of pilgrims.

This is reflected in the range of forms in the surviving religious complexes, from stupas with tall drums and commanding platforms such as Topdara, to a more modest scale at Guldara. An even lower platform at Tepe Maranjan suggests that the stupa may not have had a drum, similar to tumuli at Nandara in Nangarhar province. Few traces of secondary religious sites survive, but Takht-e Safar above Kabul old city (now a Muslim shrine) seems to have been little more than a way-station for passing pilgrims, possibly without resident monks.



*Comparative profile of the stupas at Topdara, Tepe Maranjan (conjectural) and Guldara*

The relative wealth of an order would also have been expressed in the applied decoration that adorned the stupa and adjoining sangharama. Excavations in the region have yielded up fine examples of both stone and clay/stucco sculpture, but not in quantities that seem commensurate with the scale and richness of the architecture. This might be explained by the prevalence of looting or the fragility of clay sculpture, but may also reflect the relatively marginal status of the Kabul region at the time and a reluctance on the part of benefactors to invest in fine craftsmanship.



*Detail of excavated stucco plinth for figure at Topdara 2019*

Whatever form they take, all religious sites seem to have depended on sustained human activity to remain relevant to the lives of the monks, pilgrims and the wider population. In what he describes as a 'living' identity, Gerard Fussman (2008) points out that there would have been no need for a monastery if there were not a stupa to venerate and, on remote sites, there would have been no need for a stupa unless there were monks. The abandonment of sites is likely to have coincided with loss of this human activity.

From the second half of C6th, trade was increasingly routed through valleys north of the Kabul river plain (through Laghman and Kohestan), contributing to a relative demise in the Kabul area of a monastic network that relied on the traffic of pilgrims. Recent archaeological finds at Tepe Narenj in Kabul (Paiman 2013) suggest that the site remained in use into late in C10th, pointing to a gradual decline in Buddhist practice rather than abrupt conversion of the population. It is likely that economic competition may have played a part in religious conversion, as established Buddhist and other traders found themselves unable to compete with Muslims on an equal footing.

A number of surveys and excavations have in recent years shed light on the Buddhist heritage of Afghanistan. It is hoped that the documentation, excavation and conservation work undertaken between 2016-20 by ACHCO at Tepe Maranjan and Topdara that is described here will contribute to our collective understanding of the role that Buddhism played in the history of the territory we now know as Afghanistan.

# TEPE MARANJAN, KABUL





## TEPE MARANJAN

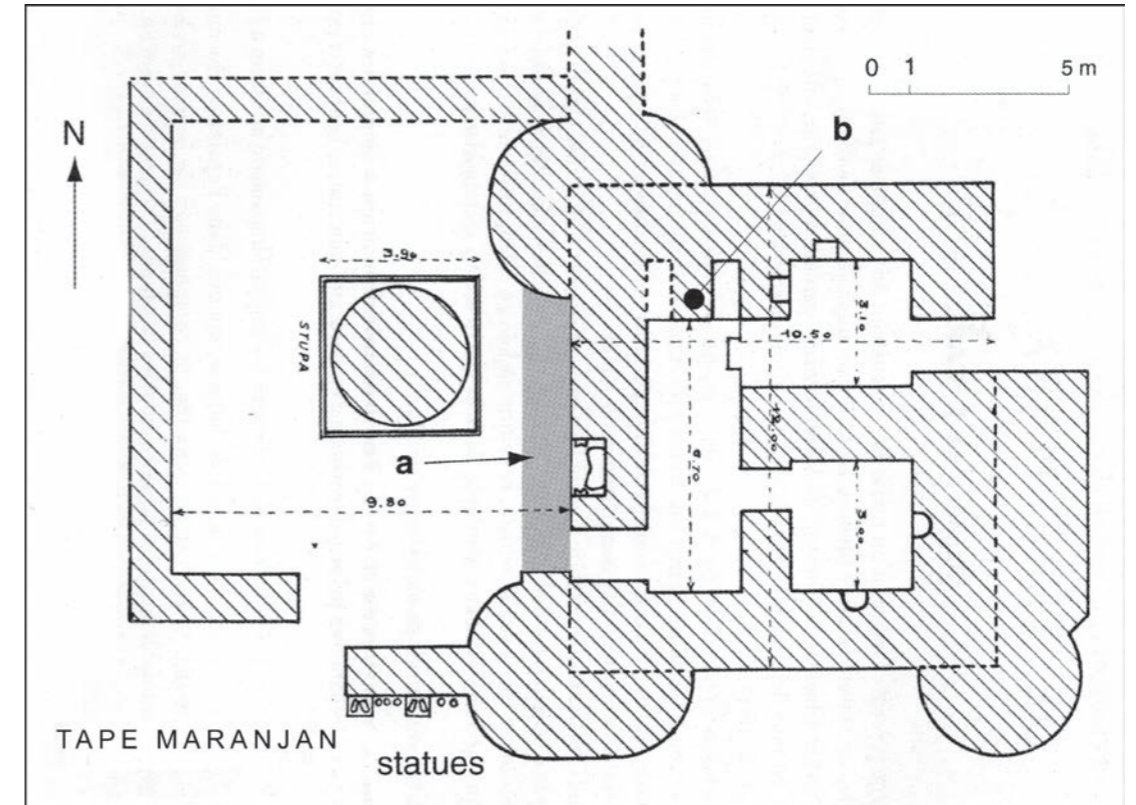


*The stupa platform at Tepe Maranjan viewed from the north-east 2016*

Forming a natural ridge in the Kabul river plain, along the southern edge of which Buddhist pilgrims would have travelled, Tepe Maranjan (34°31'N 69°15' E) is the location of several religious complexes possibly dating from C4th CE.

A small fortified structure (*qala*) on the summit of the ridge was excavated by French archaeologists (Carl & Hackin) in 1933 and subsequently surveyed by Gerard Fussman in 1976. Built of a mix of earth and straw laid by hand (*pakhsa*), the structure seems to have initially been a modest residence or watch-tower, before being re-purposed as a Buddhist sanctuary. A subsequent addition enclosed a small stone stupa and a platform housing a painted clay figure of Boddhisatva, believed to date from C6-7<sup>th</sup> CE (now in the National Museum in Kabul). Niches in the external elevation housed other painted clay figures that were later concealed behind a wall. A horde of silver and gold coins (dated to C4th CE) were also found, along with pottery and glass.

TEPE MARANJAN

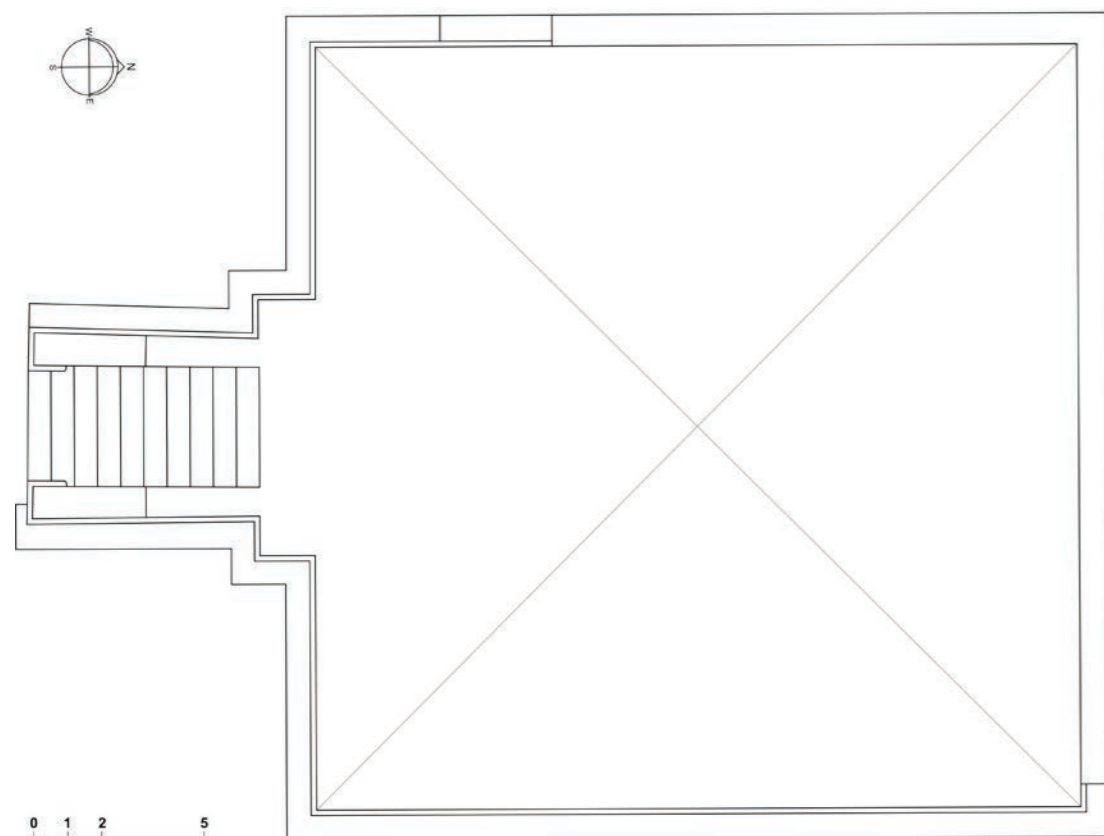


*Plan of the excavated qala at Tepe Maranjan (after Carl & Fussman)*

A large stupa was subsequently constructed, in around C7<sup>th</sup> CE, on the southern slope below the *qala*, and was perhaps part of a large monastic complex. The surviving platform of this stupa was the primary focus of ACHCO's intervention outlined in this section.

Constructed of stone masonry, the platform measures 22.4 metres across and is oriented to the south, ensuring that it was visible to pilgrims passing along the route between other religious sites nearby, such as Tepe Narenj and Shewaki. It is unclear what the relation between these sites may have been, or whether Tepe Maranjan formed part of a wider sacred landscape that extended beyond the ridge on which it stands.

CONSERVATION AT TEPE MARANJAN AND TOPDARA, AFGHANISTAN 2016-20



*Plan of the stupa platform at Tepe Maranjan, with secondary structures*

At the start of work in late 2016, the only visible parts of the platform were sections of ‘diaper’ stone masonry standing up to nearly 2 metres above ground along the east and south sides. These were the result of a partial reconstruction undertaken in 1987 during excavations by Afghan archaeologists. Although the detailed findings of this work remain unpublished, evidence was reportedly found indicating that the site was abandoned in around C8th CE.

The dimensions of the platform suggest that the dome of the stupa was sizeable, although the limited amount of rubble found during the works does not correspond with the volume of masonry of a drum. This might be due to the removal of material over time for use in construction in what is now a densely-populated urban neighborhood, but does not explain why lower sections of the original masonry on the platform remained intact.

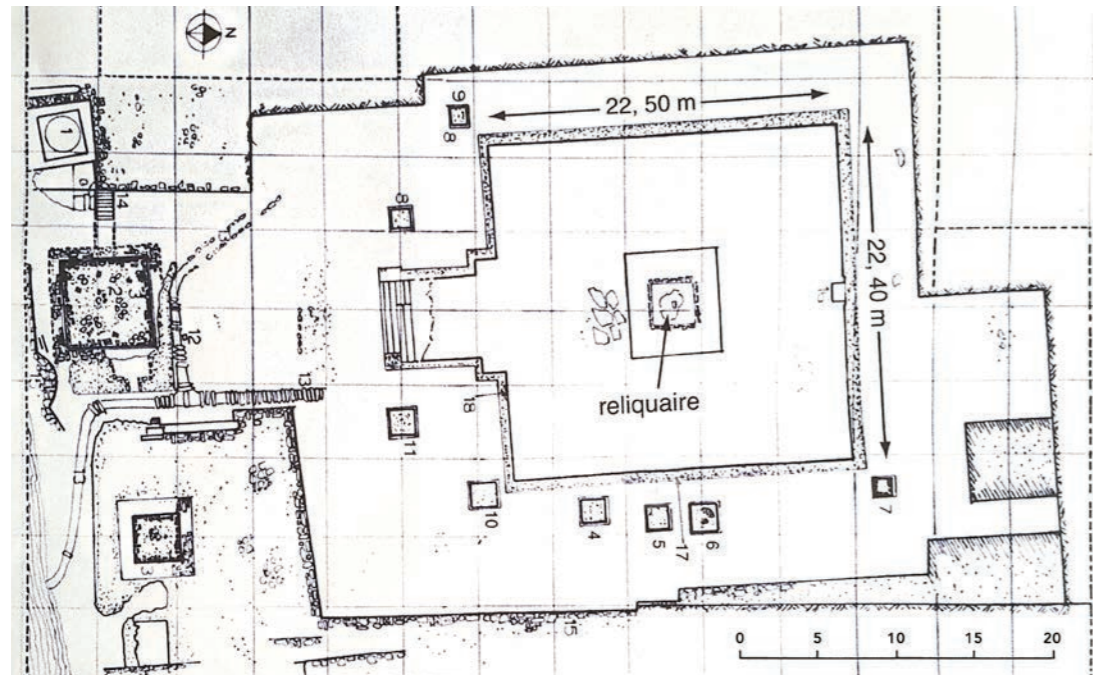


*Stupa platform at Tepe Maranjan from the north 2016*

While the square form of the stupa platform could be clearly made out from the slope to the north, it was not clear at this initial stage if any of the original masonry survived under the ground along the north and west sides. On the south side, a wide stair leading up to the platform could be discerned.



*Stair on the south side of the stupa platform at Tepe Maranjan 2017*



*Plan of stupa platform at Tepe Maranjan (from Fussman) 1987*

Following detailed documentation of the exposed structure, several shallow trenches were excavated perpendicular to the platform to establish what might lie below ground. What emerged was stone masonry (between 90cm and 1 metre wide) along the north and west sides, forming a lower plinth that abuts the platform and increases the dimensions to 24.3 metres square.



*Excavation of trial trenches along the north side of the stupa platform 2016*



*Detail of excavated platform (top), plinth (center) and stone paving (bottom)*



*Schematic section through the plinth and platform at Tepe Maranjan*



*Detail of restored string-course at base of stupa platform at Tepe Maranjan*

Below the diaper masonry on the upper walls of the platform is a string-course (largely concealed behind the outer plinth on the north and west sides) formed from fragile pieces of schist that had all but disintegrated in places.



*Detail of original lime plaster on west side of platform at Tepe Maranjan 2017*

On the east and west sides, areas of the original lime plaster and pigment suggest that the platform was built as a finished structure, with the outer plinth added subsequently. Laboratory analysis in 2018 of two fragments of the plaster indicated that it comprised lime, straw and mineral aggregate, with what might be a gold alloy, perhaps from the original decorative covering.



*View from above of excavation on east side showing platform (bottom), remains of plinth (center) and stone paving (top) 2017*

All that survives of the outer plinth along the east and south sides (exposed at the start of conservation) are a few courses of stone masonry. On the north and west sides, excavation revealed sections of masonry of up to 70 cm high, with engaged piers and traces of a modest entablature on the outside face.

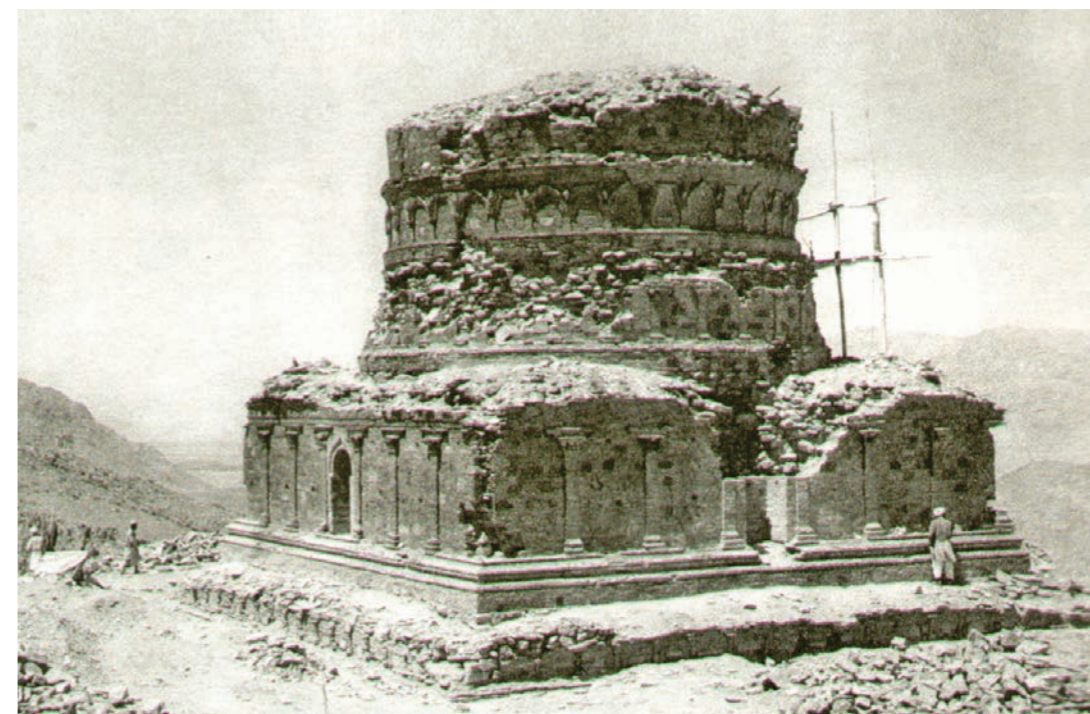


*Detail of north elevation of the excavated plinth, prior to stabilization 2017*

The function of the outer plinth is unclear. The masons who constructed it did not key the new masonry into the platform and its modest height (no more than 75cm above ground) means that it could not have served as a structural buttress to the inner structure. It seems more likely to have been added to provide an outer ambulatory for the faithful to circle the stupa; given that such rituals must have been well-established, it is unclear why it was not part of the original construction of the platform. Several other stupas in the region (Topdara and Guldara) have lower plinths surrounding a central platform, but these are integral, suggesting they were constructed at the same time.



*Plinth (center) along the north side in front of platform masonry. The tower in the background was constructed for photographic surveys 2017*



*Guldara stupa, Kabul province 1971*

Above the level of the outer plinth are niches (95cm wide) in the center of the north, east and west elevations of the platform, with the stair to the south flanked by a pair of niches of similar dimensions. The niches in all likelihood housed plaster or stone figures.



*Conservation of south side of platform, at Tepe Naranjan showing niche 2017*

After documentation as the excavations proceeded, the surviving sections of the outer plinth were stabilized along with the masonry of the platform, re-using where possible schist pieces retrieved from the rubble, laid in lime mortar. Sections of new infill were laid protruding 1cm from the wall surface, to enable this to be distinguished from the original masonry.



*Stabilization of the plinth (center) outside of the platform (right) 2017*

In parallel with these works, an area in the centre of the platform was excavated, in order to establish what might remain of a reliquary found in 1987. No trace of the original reliquary chamber was found, and the surface of the platform was subsequently paved with flat stones laid to falls, to protect the structure and facilitate access by visitors.



*Stone reliquary excavated from the center of the stupa platform 1987*



*Laying stone paving on the platform surface 2018*

The final stage of work on the platform entailed reconstruction of stairs on the south side. Traces of the original risers and treads enabled reconstruction of 10 steps leading up to the platform, flanked by walls around which the string course at the base of the platform extends.

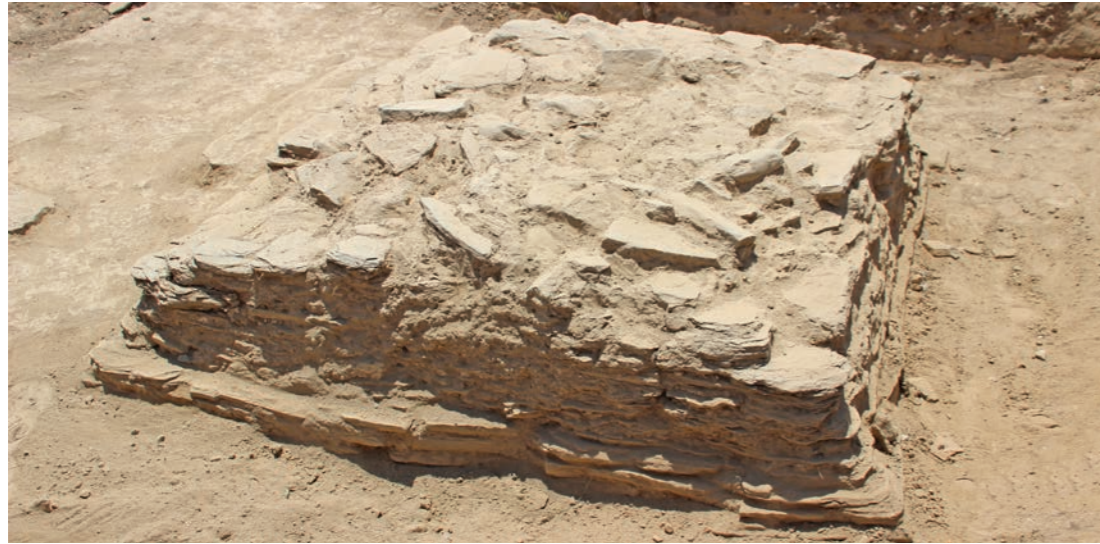


*Stupa platform at Tepe Maranjan after conservation, from the south 2018*



*Detail of restored stone masonry on flanking wall of the south stair 2018*

During the conservation of the main platform, the remains of plinths of 10 small votive structures (identified during the 1987 campaign) were again excavated. Following documentation, these were stabilized along with the original stone paving that extended on all sides of the platform to a differing extent.



*Platform of secondary stupa, prior to conservation 2017*



*Area of stone paving at SW corner of the platform, with plinth of secondary stupa to the top-right 2017*

New areas of paving were laid between the original stones, draining to shallow channels aimed at directing surface water away from the stupa platform. As part of measures to protect the platform from surface water draining from higher ground to the north and west, a series of embankments and retaining walls were introduced along with planting of the upper slopes with indigenous trees.



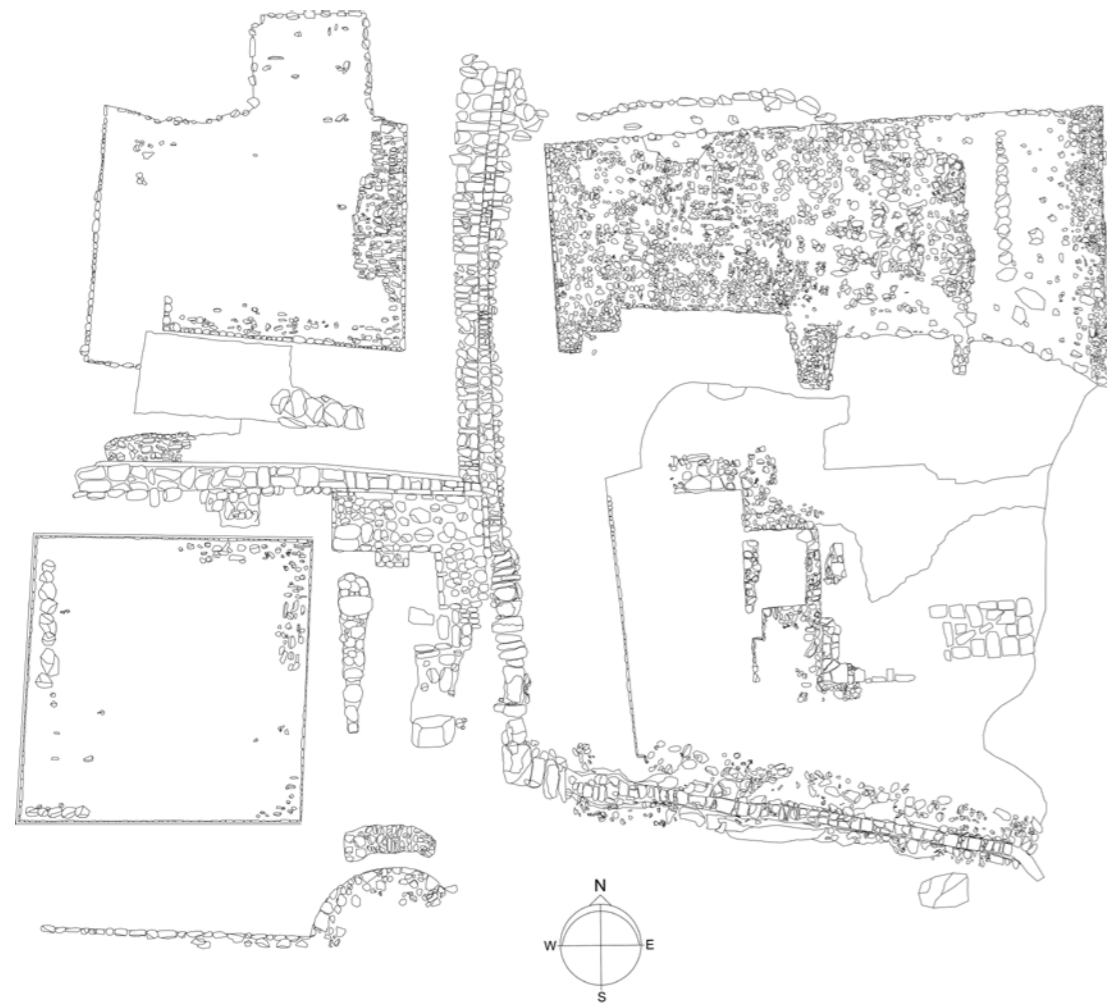
*Construction of surface drain to the west of the platform 2018*



*Detailed documentation of a section of original stone paving*



Excavation of the area south of the main platform revealed a number of overlaid stone structures, some of which were clearly plinths for secondary stupas. Several retain sections of dressed stone masonry, while others are constructed from rounded river stones. Between them runs a stone-lined channel, partially-covered, draining to the south. These structures were stabilized with lime mortar and left exposed. The remains of a secondary stupa (partially reconstructed in 1987) to the south-west were left for future excavation.



*Documentation of structures excavated to the south of the main platform*

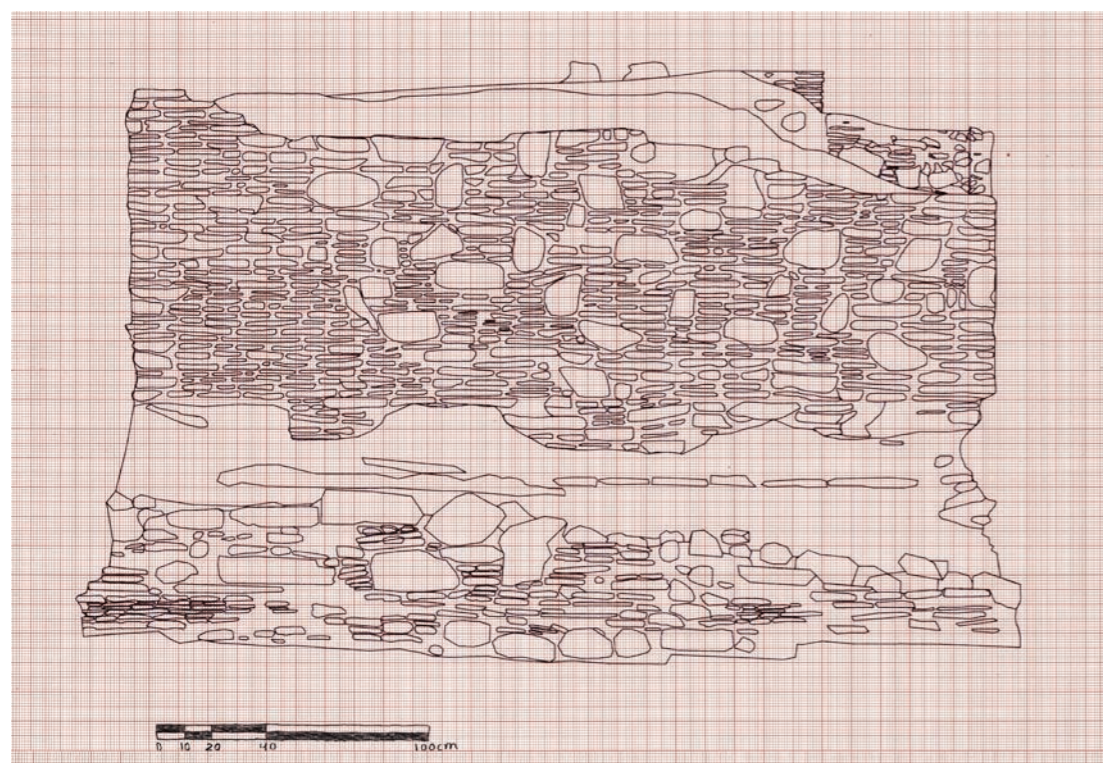
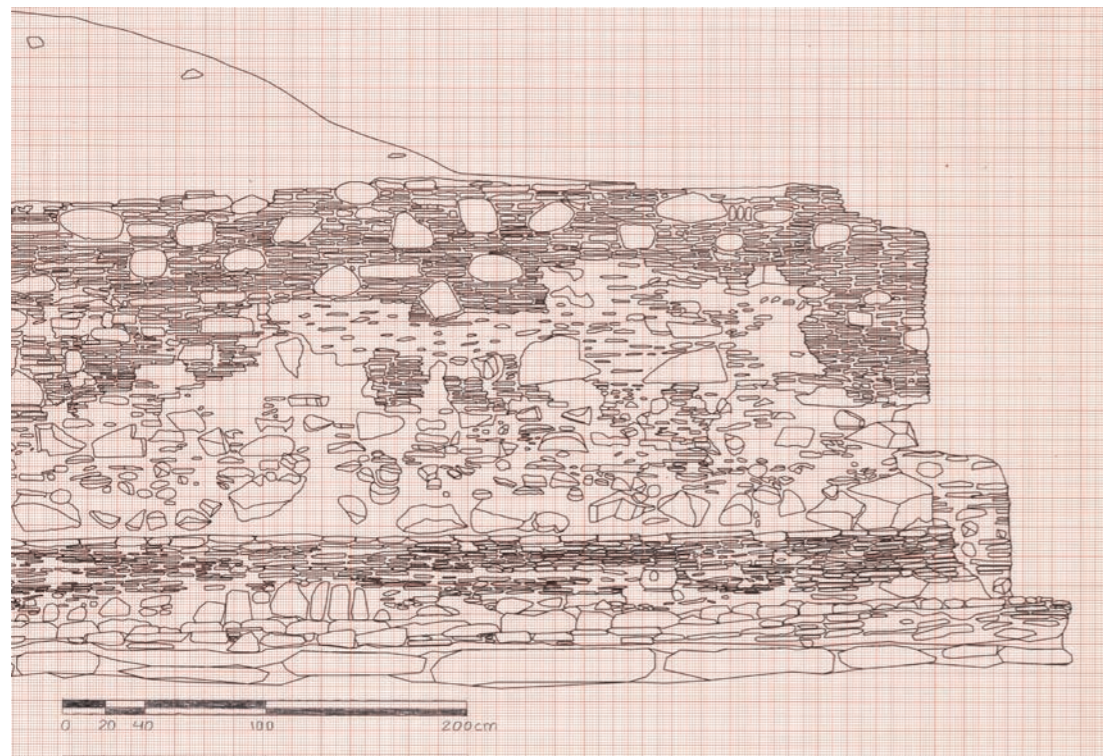


*Stone-lined channel and other structures south of the main platform, after excavation 2018*

A number of objects of archaeological significance were excavated in the course of the works at Tepe Maranjan. Among these are six standing figures (approx. 16cm high) carved from schist unearthed on the south stair of the stupa platform. They seem to have belonged to a larger frieze, although it is not clear whether this was part of the decorative scheme of the stupa or from another site. The fact that the figures were found just under the ground surface suggests that they may have been brought from elsewhere in the vicinity and secreted for subsequent recovery.



*Ensemble of sculpted schist figures (conjectural configuration)*

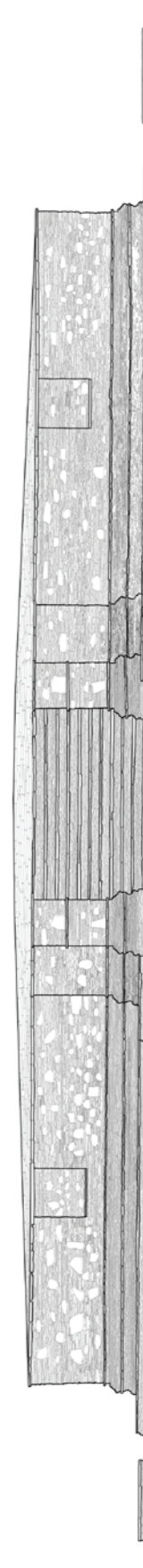


*Examples of pre-conservation on-site documentation of the platform*

TEPE MARANJAN



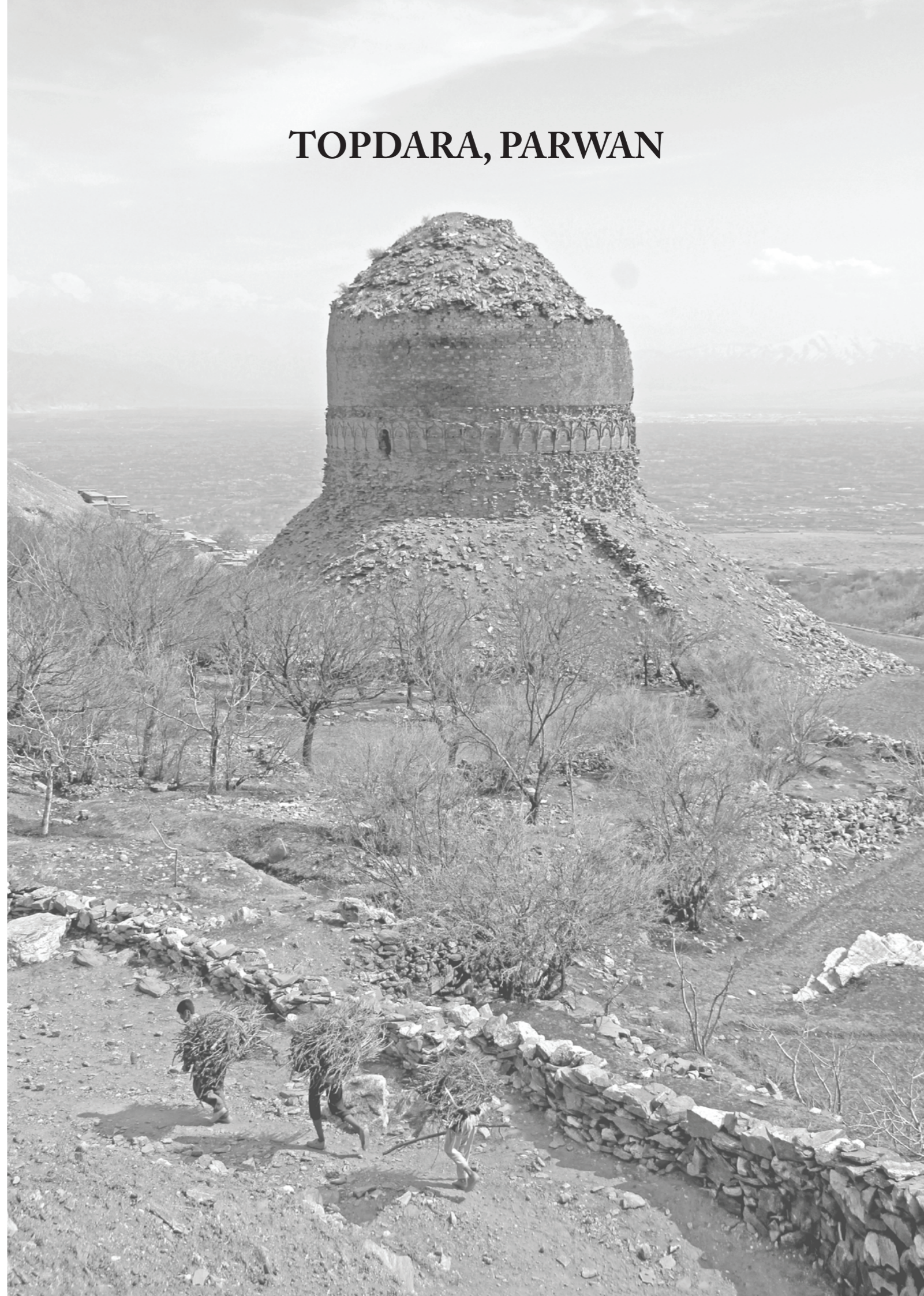
SOUTH ELEVATION, BEFORE CONSERVATION



SOUTH ELEVATION, AFTER CONSERVATION



# TOPDARA, PARWAN



## TOPDARA

The stupa at Topdara is believed to be the largest surviving structure of its type in Afghanistan. Some scholars claim that the complex was commissioned by the Kushan ruler Kanishka in around C1st CE, while others are of the view that it is more likely to have been built in the C5th CE. The site lies above a pilgrimage route leading from Jalalabad (Nagarahara) via Kapisa (the Kushan capital – now Bagram – 22 km east of Topdara) to Bamiyan, where relics of religious significance attracted pilgrims from across the region at the time. Charikar, the current capital of Parwan province, lies 5 km to the north-east.



*Aerial view of Topdara stupa from south-west 2014*

The stupa (lat 34°59'N long 69°08'E) is situated in a commanding position in the western foothills above the Koh e Daman plain, ensuring its visibility from some distance. At an altitude of 1925 metres above sea-level, the site has a year-round source of water from a stream that flows along the south side of a narrow valley that is surrounded on three sides by rugged mountains. Traces of further structures, including mounds that may mark stupa bases near ruins of a monastic complex, stand on the slope 1 km below the mouth of the valley and the village of Topdara. These sites have been surveyed but not yet systematically excavated.

TOPDARA



*Topdara stupa in the context of the valley 2016*

Initial surveys of the upper stupa at Topdara showed that a sizeable section of the south side had collapsed. The apex of the standing structure stood 33.12 metres above ground level, supported on a cylindrical drum measuring 20.8 metres in diameter. At this stage, the partially-collapsed dome and drum were the only visible parts of the structure, and stood on a steep mound of earth and rubble, with few indications of what might lie underground.



*Collapsed section of stupa drum and dome to south 2016*

CONSERVATION AT TEPE MARANJAN AND TOPDARA, AFGHANISTAN 2016-20



*Mound around the stupa, from the east 2016*



*Detail of arcade around the drum of the stupa 2016*

The upper part of the drum has an arcade comprising 56 blank arches (90cm wide) with projecting ogee-shaped hoods, divided by engaged piers with tri-partite capitals, the central section of which support cylindrical pilasters in the spandrels extending to an upper string course. Each bay of the arcade has a dowel hole that would have been used for fixing decorative panels or figures.



*Upper niche on the east side of the stupa drum, prior to restoration 2016*

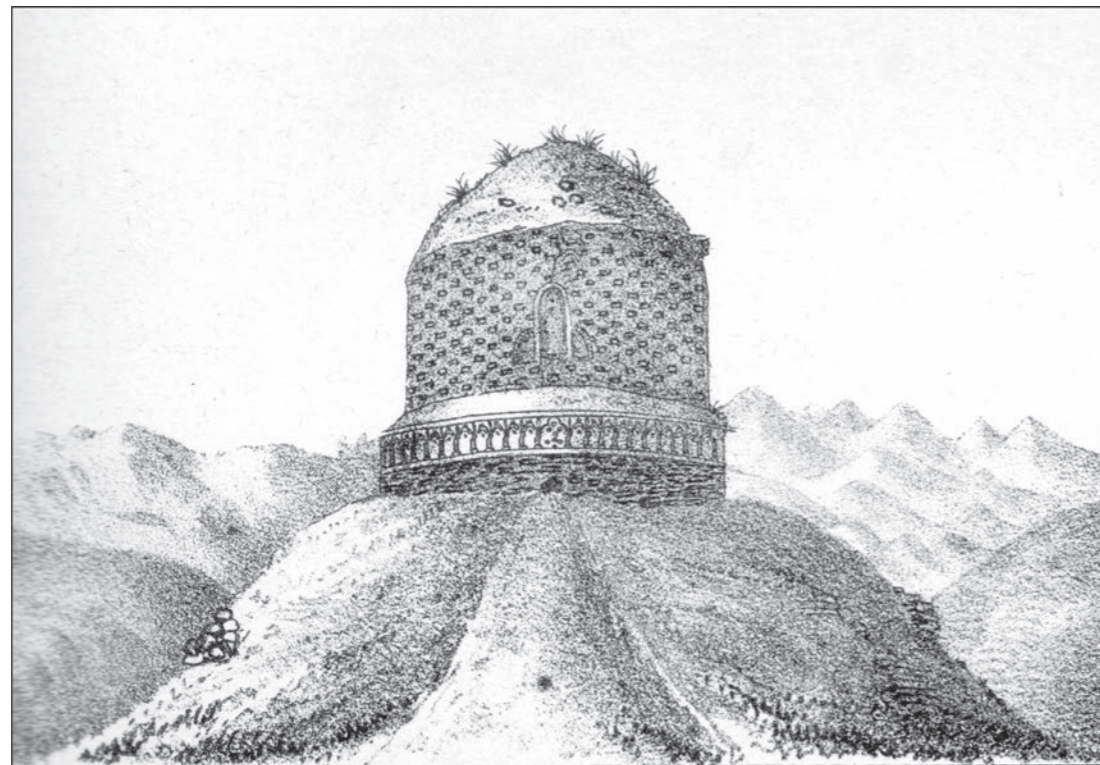
At a higher level, on the east side of the drum, a deeper tri-lobed niche (measuring 4 metres across and 2.9 metres high) housed sculpture, probably a standing Buddha flanked by figures of donors. Traces of a stucco halo were recorded in this niche during a survey in 1972 (Mizuno).



*Cavity on east side of the lower drum of the stupa, before filling 2016*

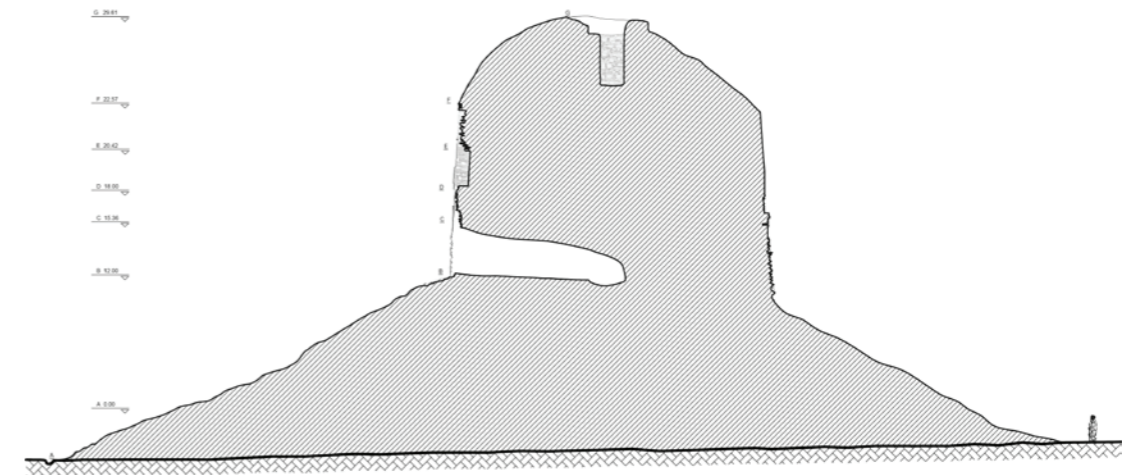
At the base of the drum on the east side was a sizeable cavity extending deep into the structure, the result of the ‘opening’ of the stupa in 1833 by the British adventurer Charles Masson, who in 1841 described the stupa thus:

*“perhaps the most complete and beautiful monument of the kind in these countries, as it is one of the largest. I examined it in 1833, and found in the center a small apartment, formed by slate-stones, and containing the same materials as the mass of the building; amongst them I detected a fragment of bone, but no more useful result: the inner surfaces of the slate-stones had been covered with red lead. This was the first tope I opened, and subsequent experience led me to believe I had not proceeded far enough in the examination of the structure...”*



*Drawing of Topdara stupa from the east by Charles Masson 1841*

Following initial surveys, the first stage of conservation in spring 2017 entailed the backfilling of this cavity with stone masonry in lime mortar.



*Section through mound and stupa (showing the cavity) prior to conservation*

This was followed by repairs to the projecting cornice above the arcade around the drum, using surviving traces of the original masonry as a template. Unstable sections of masonry on the upper surface of the dome were also stabilized at this time, as material dislodged from above had over time damaged projecting elements on the lower structure (such as the cornice) as they fell.



*Detail of arch in the arcade around the stupa drum 2016*

A cavity that had been opened in a north-facing niche of the arcade – in all likelihood also the work of Charles Masson, who wrote of his frustration at failing to locate a reliquary at a lower level – was also backfilled with stone laid in lime mortar.



*Cavity on the north side of the arcade around the drum 2016*

To ensure the structural integrity of the structure, the focus of conservation activity then shifted to the collapsed section on the south side. Photographic records since the 1990s indicated that erosion of material in the core of the stupa had accelerated, risking a total collapse if left unchecked. Following removal of loose earth from the base of the damaged section, courses of stone infill were laid in lime mortar, using primarily material retrieved from the rubble that was keyed into the original masonry to ensure an effective structural bond.



*Reconstruction of collapsed section of the arcade around the drum 2017*

Once the reconstruction of the lower drum reached the level of the arcaded band, 5 missing niches were rebuilt in a manner matching the original scheme, while repairs were undertaken to the damaged upper tri-lobed niche on the east side described above. As in subsequent interventions, infill masonry here was laid with a 3 cm projection, to enable these sections to be distinguished from the original fabric, in line with international conservation practice.



*Laying masonry infill during repairs to the stupa dome 2017*

With the structural base of the stupa strengthened, a detailed inspection of the surface of the dome was undertaken, revealing a cylindrical well-like cavity at its apex, measuring 1.2 metres across and some 3.2 metres deep. The nature of its construction indicates that it may have formed part of a reliquary, as seen on some other stupas from this period. Villagers from the area however claim that the cavity was dug by snipers during factional fighting in the area during the 1980s, when it provided a vantage-point. After documentation, the cavity was closed off with a small stone dome in order that work might proceed on backfilling the core.





*Cavity in the apex of the stupa dome, prior to capping 2017*

The reconstruction of the dome was undertaken entirely manually, with some 4,600 tons of stone (some of which was quarried from nearby mountains) lifted by hand up scaffolding that had been erected around the structure. The infill was laid in a clay-rich mortar, matching the original un-coursed masonry, with the profile of the dome based on geometry derived from the surviving parts. The dome surface was finished with diaper stone with pointing of lime-rich mortar.



*Reconstruction of the stupa dome viewed from the west 2017*



*Laying masonry around the outer edge of the dome 2017*



*Detail of cornice (from below) at stupa 1 at Shewaki 2020*

Little of the cornice that ran around the lower edge of the dome (above the arcade) remained, as material dislodged from above had obliterated any protruding elements. Other stupas that retain this cornice intact (Shewaki, for example) suggest that it was likely to be an elaborate configuration made up of cantilevered pieces of schist. In the absence of traces of any such detail at Topdara, a conjectural reconstruction was avoided and this zone simply stabilized with plain masonry infill.



*Cantilever for lower string course under construction 2018*

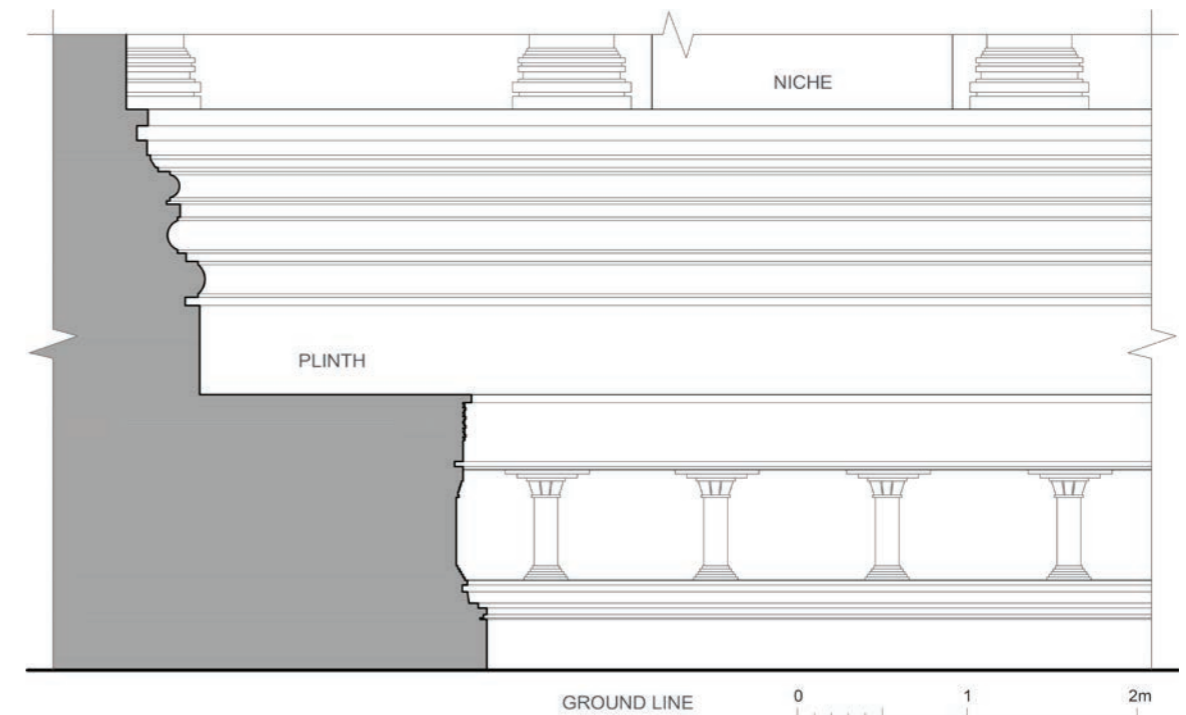
Below the arcaded band around the drum, however, the original details of a lower string course could be discerned, and these were stabilized and partial reconstruction undertaken of the missing sections. On the north side, where weather-related deterioration was most severe, a cantilevered section was constructed to support masonry of parts of the string course that had collapsed.

It is unclear why no trace remained of the architectural treatment of the lower drum, where there is a band of rough stone masonry above an articulated base. Other stupas of this era, such as Guldara, have a series of engaged piers around the lower drum, and it is likely that Topdara had a similar treatment.

In the absence of any trace of the original treatment, the rough masonry was stabilized and pointed, to serve as an illustration of the condition of much of the fabric prior to conservation.



*View of the stupa drum at Guldara 2004*



*Section through lower drum with articulated base*



*Upper stair on the east side at Topdara, after stabilization 2019*

The remaining traces of the articulated projecting base (1.5 metres high) around the base of the lower drum provided a template for reconstruction, along with a short flight of steps (measuring 3 metres across) on the east side, from the platform level up to the drum, aligned with the tri-lobed niche above. Flanked by low walls, this flight of steps is likely to have had a ritual function.



*East stair at Topdara, prior to reconstruction 2018*

As conservation of the dome and arcade proceeded, excavation of material from the east side revealed sections of the original masonry of the walls flanking a staircase measuring 10 metres across and extending for 19.5 metres from the stupa platform, to which it provides access from ground level. Several of the original steps were found intact at the lower level and these formed the basis for the subsequent reconstruction of the entire flight of stairs, comprising 50 steps with risers of 20 cm and treads of 38 cm. As no trace was found of the original parapets of the flanking walls, these were left unfinished.



*Excavation along south side of the plinth and platform at Topdara 2017*

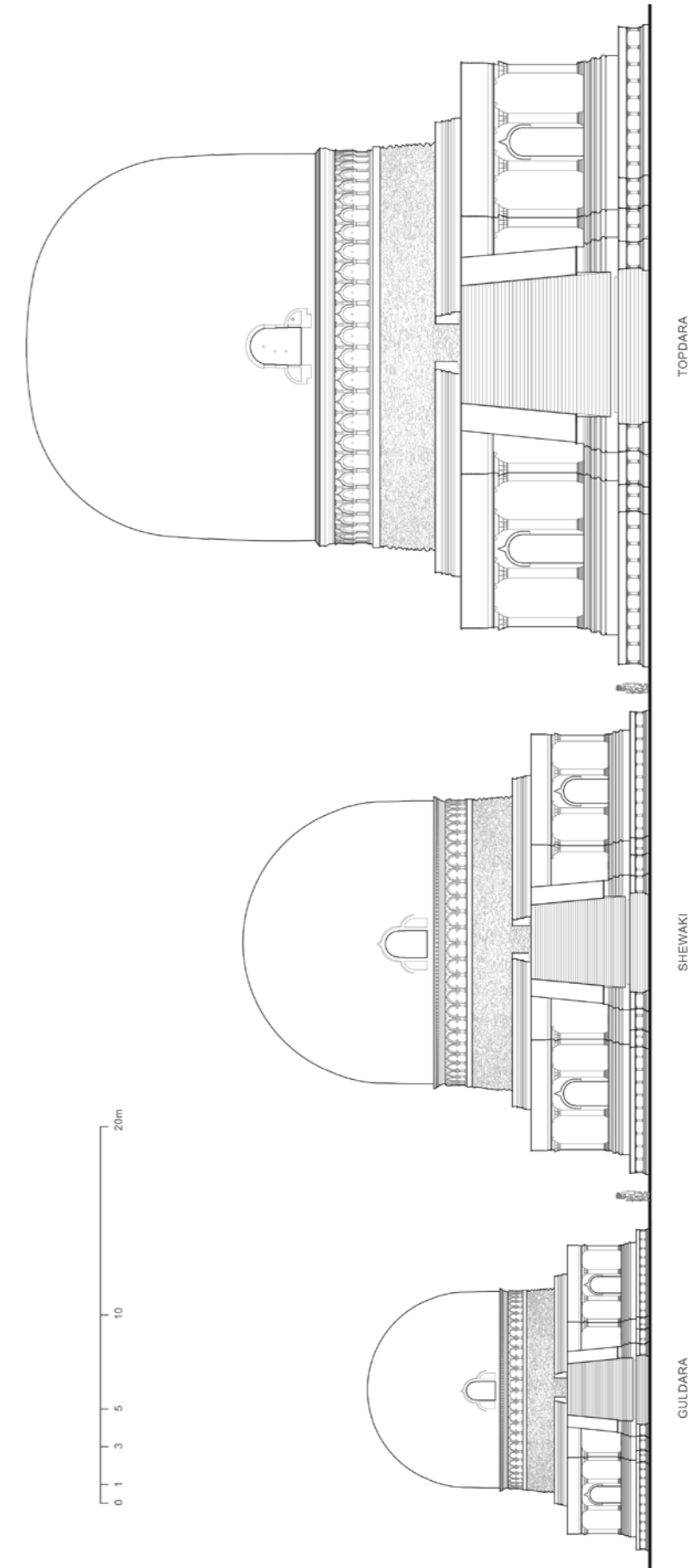
Subsequent excavation along the south side of the platform revealed extensive sections of the original masonry intact at lower levels, and the documentation of these informed the ensuing process of stabilization and conservation.



*Initial stabilization of the south side of the plinth and platform 2017*

The outer plinth of the stupa stands some **1.7 metres** above the original ground level (determined from the areas of original stone paving that survive) and is **1.6 metres** wide. The outer elevation is articulated with engaged piers at approx. **90cm** centers, with capitals supporting a protruding cornice formed from small pieces of schist. The architectural language, albeit on a larger scale, is similar to that at Guldara and Tepe Narenj.

The area between the plinth and the stupa platform had been paved with flat stones, some of which are intact. The platform itself rises 10 metres above original ground level, with an elaborate string-course along its base, above which engaged piers at 2.65 metre centres are set in diaper masonry and surmounted by Corinthian-style capitals under what seems to have been an upper entablature, of which no trace survives.



TOPDARA



*Excavated plinth and platform masonry on south elevation, with niche 2017*

A pair of niches, measuring 3.95 metres high by 1.5 metres wide, flank the stair on the east side of the platform, with a niche of a similar size in the center of the north, south and west elevation. The latter niche is concealed behind the later stair, but the ogee-shaped apex is visible and formed a basis for the reconstruction of the other niches.

The strategy adopted for the conservation of this and other excavated masonry was to document and then stabilize the original sections in situ, using stones retrieved from the rubble and laid in lime mortar. Deflections or distortion of the original sections was where feasible incorporated into the repairs, with areas of new infill masonry laid with a 1 cm protrusion to enable it to be distinguished from the original fabric, as described earlier.



*Detail of original masonry (lower part) and infill above on plinth 2017*

The condition of the original masonry on both the plinth and platform of the stupa indicate that its deterioration was a consequence of neglect, with no evidence of deliberate destruction. The upper part of the west elevation was better-preserved than elsewhere, due to the addition of a stair that abuts and thereby offers protection to the platform, where 3 capitals of the engaged piers survived and served as a template for reconstruction on other elevations.



*Detail of excavated capital on west elevation of platform 2018*

While there was no trace of the original architectural treatment of the upper part of the platform elevations, there would in all likelihood have been an elaborate entablature with a projecting cornice and architrave, as seen on other stupas (such as Guldara). Rather than undertaking a conjectural reconstruction, a band of indented masonry was built to indicate its unfinished condition.



*Remains of entablature on platform of Guldara stupa 2004*



*Buttress on west side of stupa platform at Topdara, before stabilisation 2018*

The near-identical architectural treatment on three of the platform elevations provides evidence that the stair to the west (measuring 14.35 metres across and extending for 22.55 metres from the platform) was added subsequently. This is borne out by the lack of structural bonding with the platform masonry. At the junction of the stair and platform are full-height buttresses whose function is evidently structural; the depth of accumulated earth and rubble in this area indicate flash-flooding down an alluvial wash to the north-west that is currently planted as an orchard.



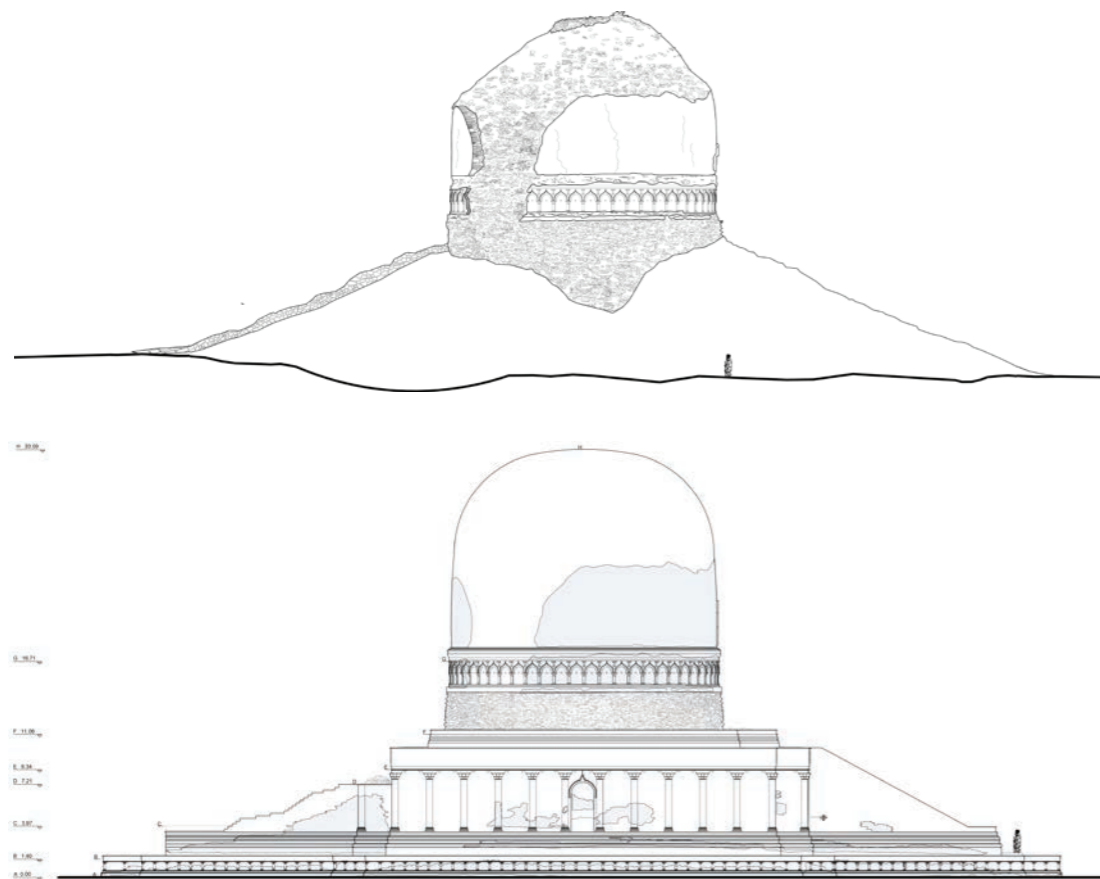
*West stair at Topdara during restoration 2019*

As no trace was found of the original risers or treads on the west stair, reconstruction of the steps was not attempted, with the surface finished with lime mortar to limit erosion. The lower parts of the plinth around the stair were in relatively good condition and were conserved, along with the flanking walls.

Following the conservation of the elevations of the platform, stone paving was laid to falls across its surface to ensure a weather-resistant finish and to facilitate access by visitors. A similar finish was laid around the ambulatory around the drum and the lower plinth.

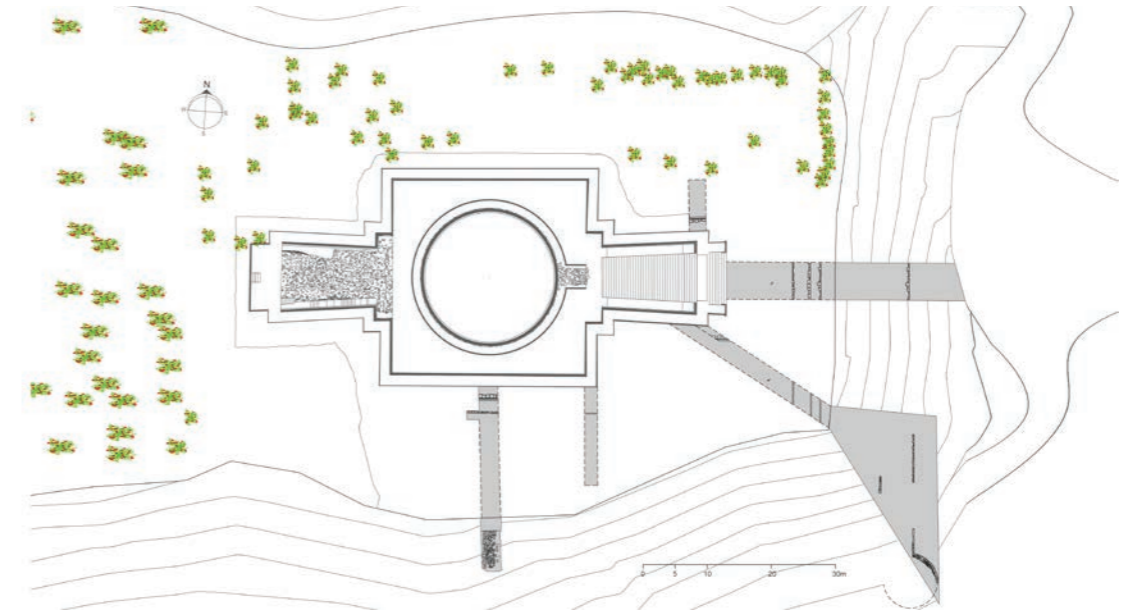


*Paving stone paving over the surface of the platform and ambulatory 2019*



*Comparative drawings of the south elevation at Topdara stupa prior to conservation (above 2016) and after (below 2020)*

TOPDARA



*Layout of trial trenches (in grey) excavated east and south of Topdara stupa*

The excavation during 2019 of several trial-trenches to the south and east of the stupa platform revealed sections of stone retaining walls that formed a series of lower terraces, with traces of a flight of steps towards the stream to the south. Differences in the quality of the masonry in these retaining walls indicate that they were constructed at different times. As well as ensuring the stability of the slope on which the stupa was built, the visual impact on pilgrims approaching this vast structure would have been dramatic.

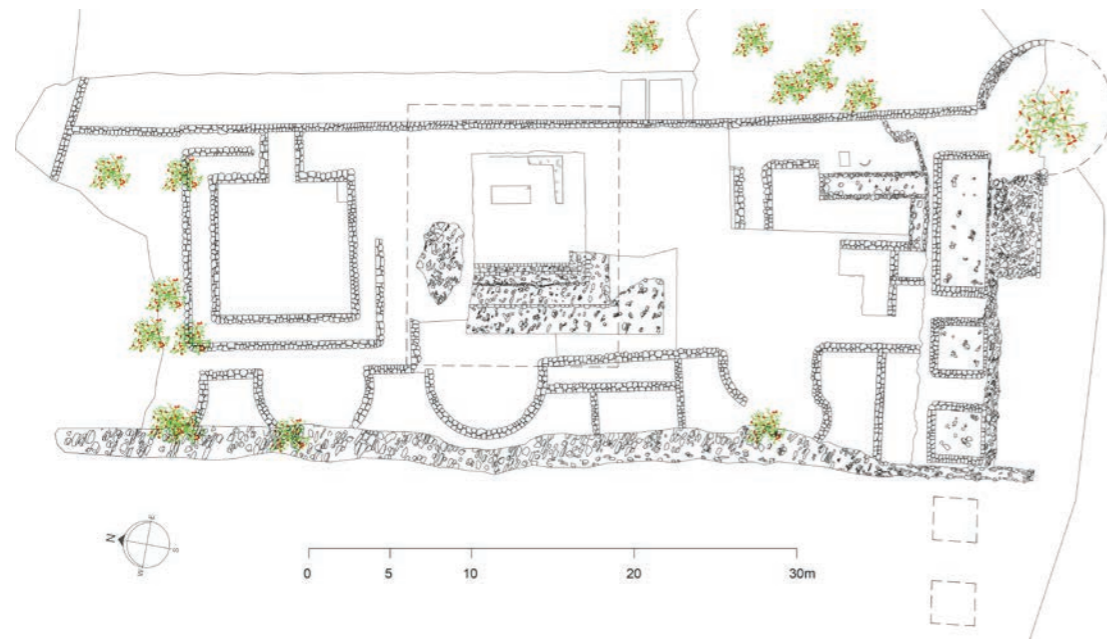
At the bottom of the east stair leading to the stupa platform a flight of 6 steps descending just over 2 metres below the current ground level was unearthed during excavations. At the bottom of these steps is a small square platform on which a circular course of stones suggests that it might have been a secondary stupa, similar to those seen at Tepe Maranjan.

Traces were also found of a circular buttress at the south-east extremity of what is now agricultural land. Further excavation will be required to establish the extent and configuration of the lower terraces and other structures that may have formed a larger sacred area, of which the stupa is the key element. Recent excavation at Tepe Narenj near Kabul, where the religious complex is situated on 9 ascending terraces extending along a natural spur, suggests a possible hierarchy of functions with limits on access to some levels (Paiman 2013).

CONSERVATION AT TEPE MARANJAN AND TOPDARA, AFGHANISTAN 2016-20

## MONASTERY

During the course of initial site surveys, exposed sections of diaper stone masonry walls were identified just over 60 metres to the west of the stupa. Excavation of this area was initiated in late 2018, initially focusing on the southern part, where a row of 3 separate chambers (of similar width but differing lengths, without openings and a floor level 3 metres below the adjacent ground) built of coursed stone masonry were found. To the east of these spaces is part of a round bastion of dressed stone (measuring just over 8 metres in diameter) that may have formed the outer corner of a larger walled structure.



*Layout of excavation of the monastery area west of the stupa*

Subsequent excavations in the north of this area revealed a series of overlaid mud brick and stone masonry walls/platforms that appear to delineate rectilinear spaces, two of which contain decorative stucco plinths and fragments of sculpted figures, suggesting a votive function similar to those found at Tepe Narenj. The manner in which these structures are superimposed suggests that they were constructed over an extended period.

TOPDARA



*Excavation of subterranean spaces on south edge of monastery 2019*

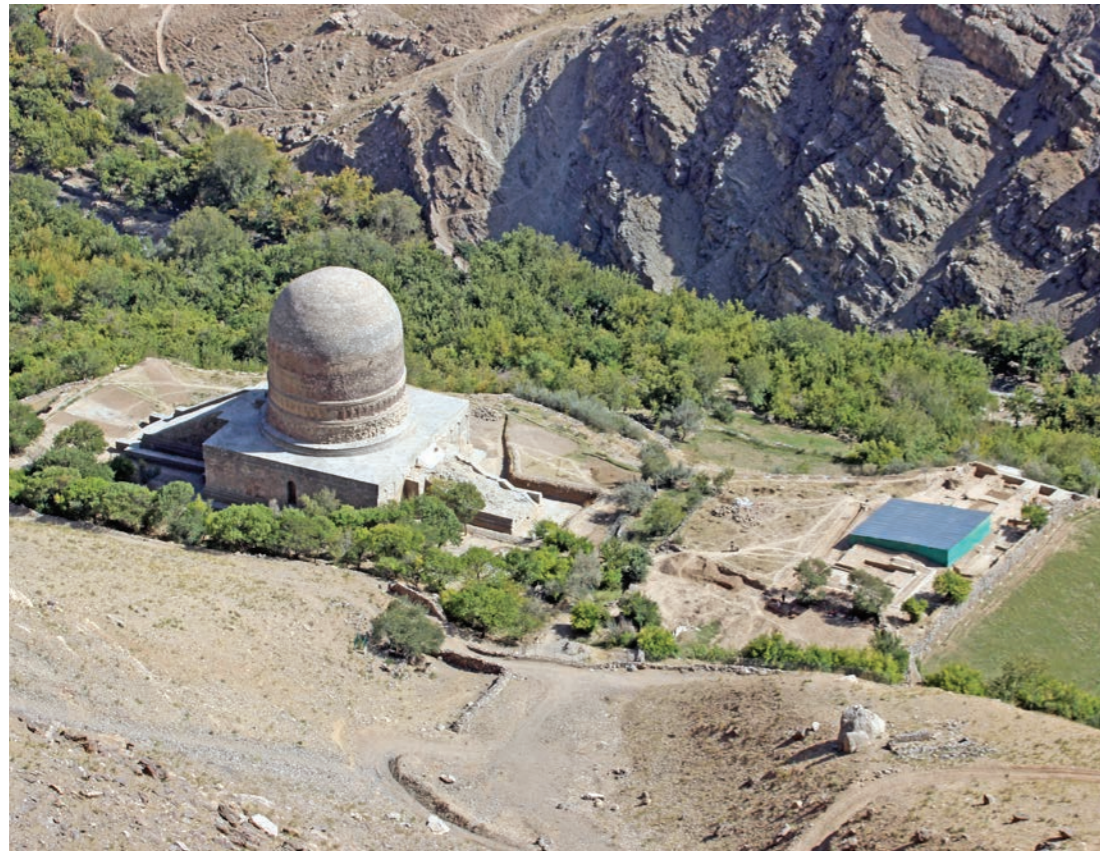


*Detail of stucco plinth and fragment of figurative sculpture 2019*

CONSERVATION AT TEPE MARANJAN AND TOPDARA, AFGHANISTAN 2016-20



The three semi-circular stone bastions along the west side of the excavated area appear to form part of a defensive boundary, and resemble elements of the traditional mud-walled *qala* still inhabited by extended families in rural parts of the region. Just as a smaller *qala* was adapted for religious use at Tepe Maranjan, it is possible that an earlier residential building may have been re-purposed by the monastic order at Topdara.



*View from north-west of stupa with roof over excavation on right 2020*

Sections of stone masonry that were exposed by excavations in this area were consolidated with protective stone coping laid in lime mortar, in a manner that can be distinguished from the original fabric. A protective roof was erected over the central part of the excavation where fragile stucco finds have been left in situ, and a chain-link fence was erected around the perimeter of the archaeological area.

## EXCAVATED OBJECTS

Objects of archaeological significance retrieved during the course of conservation and excavation at Topdara were assessed and recorded on site before being forwarded to the relevant authorities. Among these are fragments of carved schist sculpture that may have been part of a decorative frieze on the main stupa or another structure in the complex.



Two of these fragments seem to depict narrative scenes: one shows a seated figure of Patanjali (on the right) represented with a human torso and a lower body as coiled serpent, wielding a staff and facing a griffin-like creature. Believed to have been the author of the Yoga sutras around 400 C.E, Patanjali is represented elsewhere with a conch or a disc.



Another narrative schist fragment depicts a prone (female?) figure behind whom squats a male with arms outstretched, facing away. The figures on the left of the central hole (for a fixing) are indistinct.

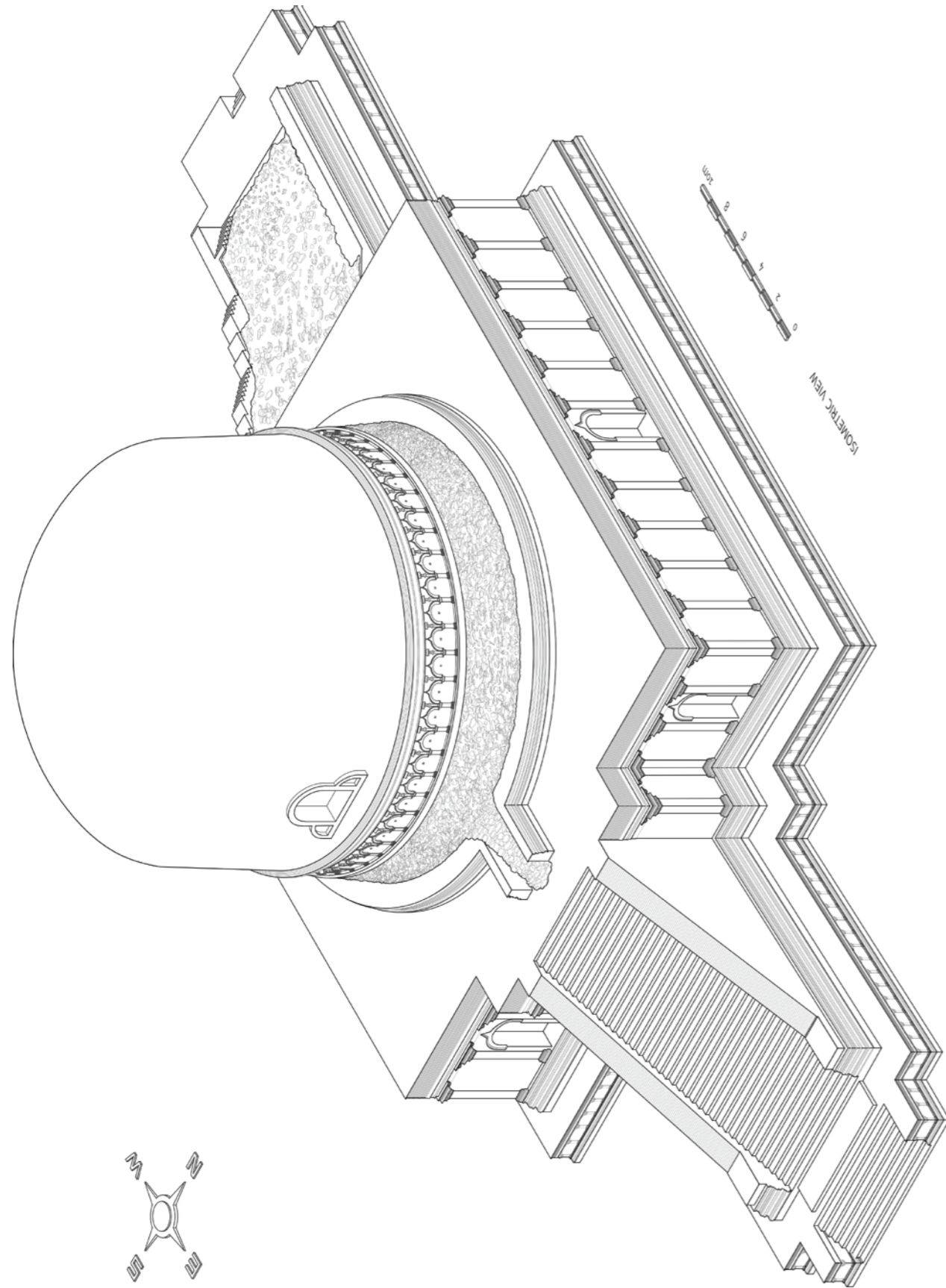


A third schist fragment depicts a standing figure in traditional dress, turning to the right-hand side and with hands clasped in veneration, set in a stylised arch. This panel, which has a hole for fixing, may have been one of those in the niches in the arcade around the drum. It bears a resemblance to stucco figures thought to represent donors to a religious complex, excavated at Tepe Narenj, near Kabul (Paiman 2013).

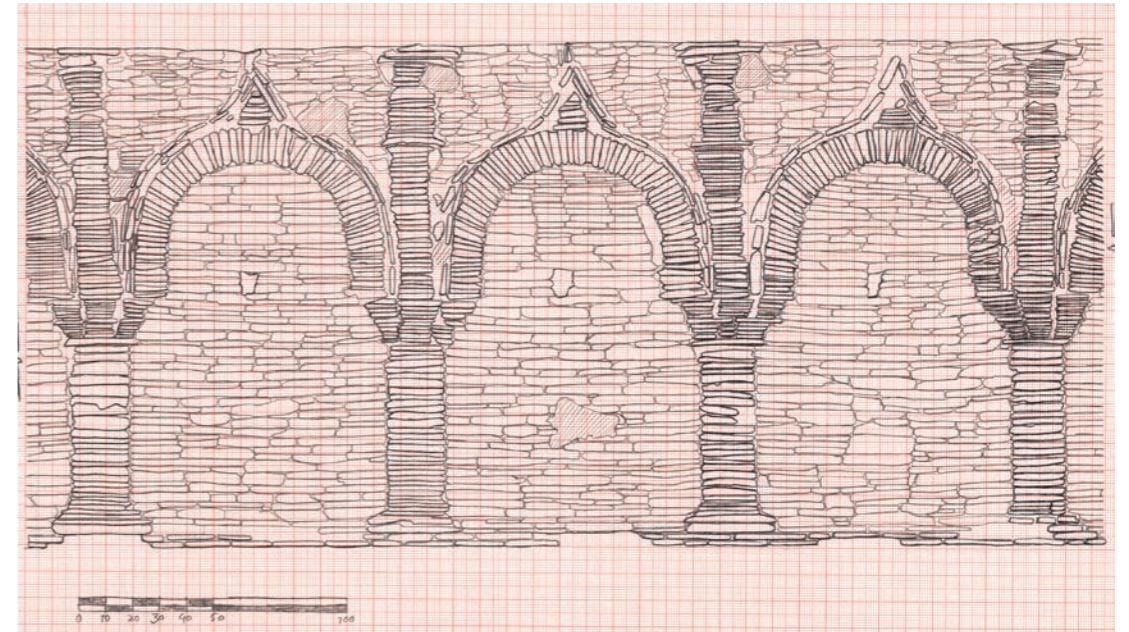


Among the other objects excavated at Topdara is a tiny gold and pearl ornament that may have been attached to a garment or used as jewellery.

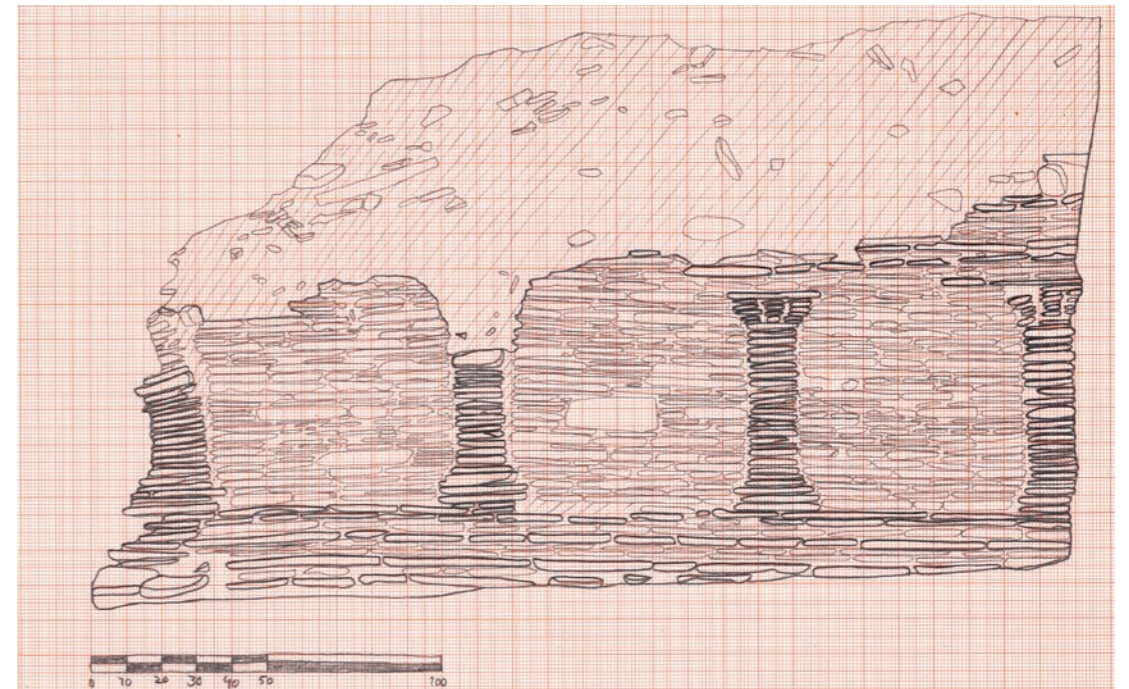




Examples of hand-drawn survey sketches prepared on site.



*Drawing of niches in arcade around the stupa drum, prior to conservation*



*Drawing of a section of the plinth elevation during excavation*

STUPA-E TOPDARA, PARWAN



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