

# SOURCEBOOK FOR THE SHAHI KINGDOMS<sup>1</sup>

## Along the Elephant's Road: The Takht of Zalamkot

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The monument simply known as “Takht” (Foucher 1899), which commonly takes its name from Zalamkot—a nondescript, small village—should henceforth be more correctly referred to as Hati-dara (Site 3) due to its topographical position in the valley of the same name that cuts through the northern slopes of the mountain range of the same name.<sup>2</sup> This is one of the highest peaks of an almost continuous mountain ridge that leads through a series of passes—from the east, cut the easternmost passes—Cherat, Gunyar, Shah-kot, Hathiano-kandao (or Hatikandao)—up to the Malakand Pass (1,362 m above sea level). Malakand can be crossed by a British military road that has been renovated several times to date. In reality, the shortest and easiest route would have been the Shah-kot Pass (623 m above sea level), which the British were unable to use due to opposition from the Ranizai tribe, despite various punitive expeditions that began in 1852. The site stands guard over the ancient highway known as Hatilar (Site 4) or the Elephant Walk/Road. The latter connected eastern Gandhara (Swabi, Mardan) with Swat (and then Bajaur, and Kunar and Nangarhar [Nagarahara] in Afghanistan), and it was part of the great road, or Uttarapatha, of which the magnificent remains of Hatilar represent the only surviving traces.

Although the monument has been variously described as a “watchtower” or a stupa until recently (Swati 2002; Khan et al. 2005; Naz and Sardar 2020), there is no doubt, as stated since 2006 (Nasir in Olivieri and Vidale 2006; Meister 2020; Olivieri 2022; various authors in Olivieri et al. 2025), that it is the monumental podium of a Shahi-era Brahmanical temple similar in size and orientation to Temple 6 in Barikot.

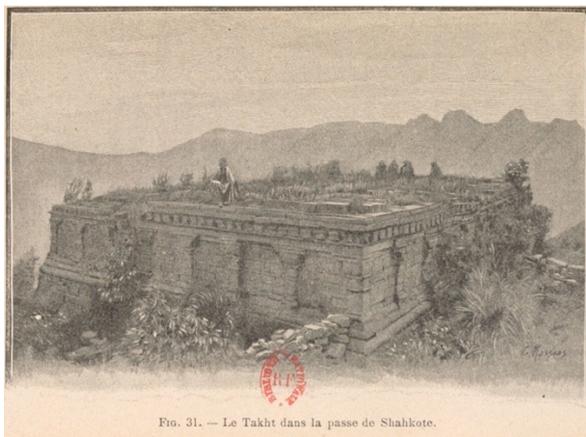


Figure 1a–b. The “Takht” throughout one century: to the left, a view of the monument taken in 1899 (Foucher 1901: fig. 31); to the right, the same view taken in 2025 (Photos: Khyber PATH)

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<sup>2</sup> The term *Zalamkot* can rather refer to the rocky hill where traces of an ancient Ghaznavid (?) military installation (*kot*) have been detected (HDZ XIII).

## TOPOGRAPHY AND FIELDWORK (Fig. 2)

Today, the recently inaugurated tunnels of the Swat Motorway pass beneath the mountain of Hati-dara. To the south of the mountain lies the ancient settlement of Palai (Foucher 1915), while to the north is the irrigated plain of Alladand-dheri, the site of a paleo-lake that was the source of the district's fortune, one of the most fertile in all of South Asia (1896 Report of A. Caddy, cited in Olivieri et al. 2025: 45). The presence of the ancient lake, with its connections to early Buddhist legends of Swat, was still visible—albeit reduced to a marsh—at the time of my first visits in the 1980s. The place name Alladand means “beautiful lake” (the village stood on a mound, hence the suffix “dheri”). Hati-kandao has been used since ancient times, as evidenced by the rock graffiti on its eastern slopes (Nazir Khan 1983). At the time of the monument's construction, the area was crossed by a paved road with curves supported by careful retaining walls, connecting Zalamkot to Palai, known as Hati-lar (Site 4). The trail runs alongside an enclosed area (HDZ VI) with ramparts and barbican (?) gates (HDZ IV–V). The enclosed area (about 40 hectares) features residential quarters (HDZ II, where among the abundant materials, also several square brick tiles with floral designs have been found), monumental buildings, peridotite and *kanjur* quarry areas (two very different building materials, both used in the Shahi period), three springs, a large masonry well (HDZ VII), a stepped tank over 20 meters long (HDZ VII), and, in the center, the monument, which is updated here: HDZ I (see Fig. 3a–c). The inhabited center, grandiose and well-fortified to guard its favorable position, can only be the city identified as “Jayapālanagara” in the bilingual Persian-Sanskrit inscription of Zalamkot. The mention of the city was not noticed in Abdur Rahman 1998, but brilliantly intuited by Ehsan Shavarebi (with Ingo Strauch), who mentions this hitherto “forgotten city” in the title of his work as the city where, on June 19, 1011, the *kotwāl* Bektāš,<sup>3</sup> on the orders and with the funds of the Amīr of Tūs (now in northeastern Iran), built a mosque (Shavarebi 2022). The search for this lost mosque (mention of which in the inscription was first detected by Shavarebi) is ongoing within our project.

The excavations are being conducted under the auspices of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (in collaboration with the Directorate General of Archaeology of the Pakistani province) and are part of the ongoing Khyber PATH project.

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<sup>3</sup> With reference to the *kot* of Zalamkot? See Site HDZ XIII.

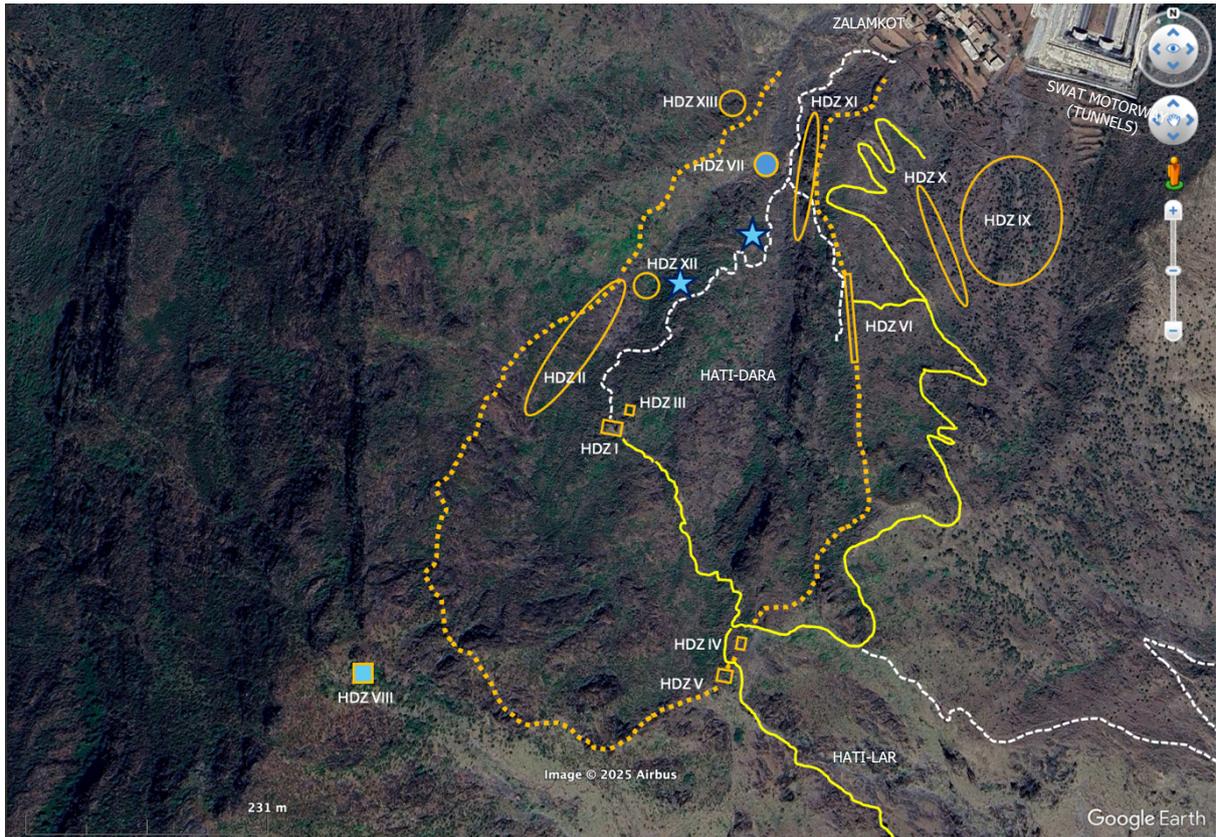


Figure 2. Sketch map with the location of the HDZ sectors: HDZ I: “Takht”; HDZ II: residential area; HDZ III: minor cultic building; HDZ VI: Gate E and bastion 1; HDZ V: Gate E and bastion 2; HDZ VI: Walled circuit W; HDZ VII: masonry pit-well; HDZ VIII: water tank (stepped); HDZ XI: ancient Muslim graveyard; HDZ X: cluster of rock-carvings; HDZ XI: *kanjur* quarry area and water-mill; HDZ XII: peridotite quarry area; HDZ XIII: watchtower (*kot*); stars indicate the presence of natural springs; yellow dotted line = walled circuit; yellow line = ancient road network (Hati-lar); white dashed line = modern pathways. (Google Earth map, elaborated by the author)



Figure 3a–c. (a) The upper podium or “Takht” (HDZ I) at the end of the cleaning operation (view from southwest); (b) the water tank HDZ VIII; and (c) the pit-well HDZ VII (Photos: Khyber PATH)

Before excavations began, the “Takht”—a rectangular building oriented east-west—was covered with dense vegetation. Thick bushes, shrubs, and small trees had spread throughout the area surrounding the structure, obscuring its architectural features and accelerating the deterioration of the exposed stones (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The upper podium or “Takht” (south side) during the cleaning operations (Photo: Khyber PATH)



Figure 5. The north side of the monument: the two podia of the “Takht” toward the end of the operation (view from east-northeast). A triangle symbol indicates the position of the stairway. (Photo: Khyber PATH)

Biodisturbances and human interventions (treasure hunters’ pits that cut the corners and part of the masonry body) had weakened the stability of the monument, producing a progressive detachment of the external wall facing from the roughly layered rubble core. That resulted in gaps and cracks as well as displacement of stones (see Fig. 7), which put the structural stability of the “Takht” at risk. The study for the conservation masterplan is ongoing under the direction

of Marco Pinelli and Alessandra Buizza (Khyber PATH). During this year’s operations, Trench HDZ I–1 was laid out on two sides of the “Takht”: one part on the north side, measuring 26.80 meters x 3 meters, and another part on the west side, measuring 8.70 meters x 3 meters (see Fig. 5). On the north side, the base of the upper podium was exposed. The exposed part of this wall shows that some portions are well preserved, maintaining their original stone masonry, while others have collapsed or slipped due to the sloping nature of the terrain. The elevation measured circa 5 meters from the bottom of the “Takht” (or upper podium). The elevation of the lost shrine is calculated as circa 10 meters high excluding the topping of the dome.



Figure 6. Trench HDZ I–1: Aerial view of the “Takht” with tentative sketch plan of the two podia, stairway, and the cella with the corridors (Photo: Khyber PATH).

#### DECORATION OF THE SHRINE (Fig. 7)

As mentioned, more than two hundred decorated or molded pieces that belonged to various parts of the elevation of the lost shrine were recovered and documented during the clearance and excavation (over two hundred were numbered on the spot). Most of the fragments were documented at the bottom of the south side in secondary collapse facies (i.e., ante 1899) (see Fig. 7). Safe removal of these pieces and excavation of the intact layers beneath them is the task of the fieldwork planned for spring 2026 (Khyber PATH season 2). Fifteen of the pieces were inventoried and handed over to the Swat Museum.

The podium of the shrine, like the base of the upper podium, featured a thick torus molding running all around the building interrupted at the east side where the projecting body framed the entrance (*pronaos*). Above the podium, there was a plain wall marked by a series of false pilasters with pseudo-Ionic floral capitals, surmounted by a second band decorated with a smaller torus and figured metopae (Ganesha, Varaha-Vishnu) flanked by semi-columns. Capitals and upper parts of the figures were part of a third band. A fourth band was formed by smaller and closed pilasters (missed), surmounted by a fifth band with capitals and projecting architectural elements topped by a row of dentils. The dome formed the upper part with an unknown height and profile that might have been formally analogous to those in the coeval Kashmiri architectural school.

Other pieces belong to the (three) projecting niches that can be hypothesized as present on every side but the arched entrance of the cella. Some pieces still bear traces of stucco. We can therefore put forward the hypothesis that the entire monument was plastered with (colored) stucco.

One cannot but praise the versatility of the Shahi sculpting school of art: in a radius of 50 kilometers, sculptors were active roughly contemporarily on different stone materials: sandstone at Gumbat (Talash, Lower Dir) and Chiga Sarai (Kunar), *kanjur* and stucco at Barikot, and peridotite at Hati-dara. The materials are currently being studied by Elisa Iori.



Figures 7 and 8. Cleaning of decorative pieces at site; handling of heavy pieces in the Mission House's storerooms (Photos: Khyber PATH)

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