

## Glimpses of History in the Cemetery of Charsadda (Ancient Pushkalavati)

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Pushkalavati, the present Charsadda and the ancient capital of Gandhara, is situated in the Peshawar valley on the confluence of river Swat and Kabul (Conningham 2007: 12). In the words of Dani; "Throughout the centuries Gandhara evolved a culture of its own based on the economy of its main resource – the river Kabul and its tributaries. Pushkalavati embodies the first flowering of this culture. In the history of Pushkalavati alone can be traced those elements of the culture that underlie the very bases of the gandharan life" (Dani 1969: 204). The land was so significant to the Buddhists in the past that a number of jataka stories, previous lives of Buddha, have been associated with it. Here once stood stupa of the *Eye Gift*, which has been mentioned in detail by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, which, he narrates, was several hundred feet high and was decorated with carved wood and stones (Beal 1884: 110). It was in this country where according to the Buddhist traditions Lord Buddha gave his eyes as charity and converted *Hariti*, "The Mother of the Demons" to the true faith (Foucher 1901: 28). The *Syama Jataka* is also said to have taken place in this country (Waters 1904: 217). In antiquated past the region was known for its abundance of lotus flowers, which later became the distinctive feature of the Pushkalavati area (Dani 1963: 8). Even a separate goddess was attributed to this city attested by the discovery of a gold coin of the Indo-Greek ruler Heliocles, in which the goddess is holding a lotus flower in her right hand and wearing a mural crown decorated with lotus flowers as well. Kharoshthi writing on the coins reads, *Goddess of Pushkalavati* (Mukherjee 1969: 71-74). But another distinctive feature of Charsadda is its old graveyard, abode of the departed ones from the olden times. There are several extensive Muslim graveyards in the Peshawar valley, but the one in Charsadda deserve special mention because of its historical significance (Mohammadzai 2006: 4-8).

The vast graveyard, landmark of the area, is positioned to the south of the main tehsil bazar at 34° 08' 46" N and 71° 44' 38", which also catches the visitor's eye when entering from the Peshawar side after crossing river *Jindai* (Plate 1), a tributary of river Swat. On its both sides flourished ancient settlements, which later on gave rise to the eight towns of Charsadda, called as *Hashtnagar*. It comprises of an area previously much more extensive than the present one. As the influential like elsewhere occupy such communal lands, the same was done in this graveyard and its portions close to the populated areas, main shopping centers and roads were illegitimately occupied. With its reduced area of only 3 x 4 kilometers, it may no more fulfill needs of the present growing population. A large portion of the present district headquarters is constructed over the land of this graveyard. Two main roads i.e. Khushal Khan Khattak and Ali Khan, dissecting it in the north-south direction, connect the villages of Prang, Babara and Charsadda with the district headquarter. There are several link roads running through the graveyard, connecting numerous villages and towns. Heavy goods carrying trucks, and trailers use it as bypass roads, thus annihilate not only these small fragile roads by itself but the graves as well on a faster rate.

How ancient is this cemetery, it is not easy to presume with certainty at the present state of our knowledge. Local traditions say that this immense tract of land was endowed by Ahmad Shah Abdali known as *Dure Dauran*, the ruler of Afghanistan to the local populace in lieu of their military support to the Afghan king during his Indian campaign. As the king could not ignore the services of these excellent fighters of the local populace, he kept them in his service long after the capture of Delhi and raised some of them to higher positions in military and court. But we have no documentary proof about this claim. On the other hand verses of a local poet Zainur Shah Aafat revealed in one of his poem that the present land of graveyard was granted by the Mughal king, Abar, during 16<sup>th</sup> century in recognition of the local support of safe passage to the Mughal army during their operations in the Peshawar valley. But again literary sources are silent about such an event that has ever taken place during the Mughal period.

Another tradition discloses that much earlier than the Mughal period, when mass exodus of the Pakhtoon tribes from Afghanistan to the Peshawar valley took place in 15<sup>th</sup> century, this vast, flat tract of land was the theater of many battles among the newly settled tribes for gaining more and more fertile lands for themselves (Gazetteer 1897-98: 54). Level lands of the valley, especially those close to the rivers, like the present areas of *Sholgara* and *Doaba*, were the most sought after areas for the new settlers. As its ground was stained with human blood, it was regarded as unsuitable for cultivation or human habitation, consequently it became a communal burial ground. Since literary sources are quiet about such events, therefore it is difficult to draw a definite line between facts and traditions. It seems more plausible that emergence of this immense land of the present cemetery could be traced back in the times of the Aryan tribes, who some 3500 years ago were living here in close-knit tribal communities. Those semi-nomadic tribes of the Western stock although practiced not much agriculture but kept more livestock for their subsistence. Vast tracts of lands were kept outside their villages for animal grazing, which was the common property of the whole tribe. The bigger a tribe was, the more animals their people kept, thus a bigger tract of land was needed for their animal grazing. Apparently the present land of the cemetery was the common property of a bigger Aryan tribe. With the passage of time the same tradition of common ownership of land passed on to the Pakhtoon tribes, who named this type of common possession as *Shamilat*. The cemetery land also was the shared asset of the predecessors of the present Mohammadzai tribe residing around the cemetery, where their cattle grazed. Later on when they gradually shifted to cultivation, the idea of personal property also began to emerge. Cattle grazing reduced, because livestock was either kept near the village or taken to the fields for help where there was plenty to eat, thus the land in question, converted into a grassy land. With their conversion to the Islamic faith, the Pakhtoos then converted to bury their dead close to the villages. As the land was already available near the town, they started burying their dead here. Consequently with the upsurge in population, the number of graves also kept greater than ever at the same rate, resulting into the emergence of the present enormous graveyard. Different clans i.e. *Khels*, residing in the surrounding villages have their own separate portions in the graveyard where they bury their dead. Due to the population growth, coupled with paucity of the burial land, demarcations are made on the ground with shallow trenches or even burnt brick enclosures constructed, where every clan is to use its allowed portion of land only.

Though the Makli graveyard at Thatta, Sindh may be larger in size i.e. area-wise, however Charsadda one is the biggest on the basis of grave density. The former graveyard has mostly graves of the ruling class and their associates as well as saints, and other holy men, whereas the latter one has graves of the common populace. Though there are mausoleums of a few saints and two enclosed portions for graves of the earlier Durrani period ruling family, however almost all of the graves here are those of the ordinary people. It is hard to envisage whether the close-by vast graveyards of Rajjar, Utmanzai, Trangzai, Umarzai and Tangi were also part of the greater Charsadda graveyard, if so then it certainly was one of the largest in South Asia. There are separate sections for Christians and Qadyanees near the main Janazagah. Durrani graveyard is in the northeastern section enclosed with barbed wire and tall shady trees to its four sides where majority of the graves are decorated with white marble slabs. In the southeastern portion near *Baretai Dherai*, there is a separate portion for the burial of non-locals and outsiders, known as *Musafarkhana*, where anyone can bury his dead without prior permission.

Among the many unknown Saints buried here, there are mausoleums of Ghazi Gul Baba, Mullah Shah Alam Baba, Mian Sayed Noor Baba, Baba Sahib (Ali bin Yousaf Dalazak), Jhare Baba, Shaheed Baba etc. Annual *Urs* is held in their honour, devotees in thousands gather over these shrines at night to listen to the *Qawals* who pay their homage to the departed souls. Once in a year, the kiths and kens of the departed visit the graveyard to give necessary repair to the graves of their relatives on the 10<sup>th</sup> of *Muharam* i.e. Islamic Lunar Calendar. On the first day of every *Eid* celebrations, elder ladies of the family along with children in the escort of a male member, arrive early in the morning to offer *Fatiha* and *Tilawat* for the departed soul. This visit is considered compulsory if a family member was recently died.

South of Janazagah on the right side of Ali Khan Baba road there are two thick enclosures of burnt bricks with gates to its western sides locally called *Chardewarai*. The one having grave of the so called Ali Khan (18<sup>th</sup> century Pashto poet) is comparatively smaller than the other one, which has eight graves of the previous local ruling family of the Ali Khel clan during the Durrani-Sadozai period. It has a tall big gate to its western side with sunken arched enclosure, adorned with small cupolas. Multicolour painted decoration of the time, in floral and geometric ornamentation, applied to the arch, can still be observed (Plate 3, no. 2). Southwest of the aforementioned two enclosures are remains of a third mausoleum, built of burnt bricks like the other two, is said to be of a lady saint. It was constructed on a raised platform with steps from northern and southern sides having a domed central chamber. Its super-structure has now crumbled down due to negligence. Due to the lack of any inscriptional record, it is difficult to know exactly which specific period these mausoleums belong to, but its architectural features point towards their close resemblance with the buildings of late Islamic period.

The most distinctive feature of this graveyard is that it is home to a special type of graves, decorated with small stones, in which all four sides of the grave are generally embedded with small rolled stones collected from the local rivers (Plates 5 & 6). The combination of these black and white stones arranged in artistic precision to form different floral and geometrical shapes and designs, is a typical feature of this burial ground, not met with anywhere else. This stone decoration art is locally called as *Da Kanro Gulkari*. Though stone, brick, cemented as well as pre-fabricated grave tops are also made, along with a few box shaped graves made of black stone slabs, yet the general liking is for the aforementioned stone decorated graves known as *Hashtnaghri Qabroona*. Ninety per cent of the graves in this cemetery are those of this stone in-lay decoration, which is the most preferred choice here since antiquity. How old is this distinctive grave beautification art is difficult to tell with certainty, but local elders are of the view that it could be older than three hundred years. Such graves currently becoming popular are made outside Charsadda as well. Though the wealthy sometimes use cemented brick, or marble slab and tile graves to prove their position in the society, yet majority of the people prefer *Hashtnaghri* graves, since it is not only less costly and made in short time but is durable as well. There are skilled masons for this job; they pass on this art of grave decoration from one generation to the next.

Strangely enough some of the floral and geometric patterns on these stone decorated graves closely resemble to those found on bits of pots and pans scattered on the surface of Majuki Dherai (Plate 4). It's the best available example of cultural give and take. More than thousand years old decorative motifs and signs are still being practiced for the beautification of the present graves. Whenever graves are dug in this graveyard, cultural material of the olden time in the shape of coins, sculptures, beads and pots are frequently stumble upon. River *Jindai*, a tributary of river *Swat* flowed close to the southeastern side of the graveyard in antiquity, this could be attested from huge layers of sand deposits at several places from Majuki upto Baretai dherai. It is at the hamlet of Majuki where lotus ponds could still be seen in a wider area, covering several hundred hectares. During the flowering season, the human eye cannot catch the limit of these lotus flowers, dancing with the cool breeze. This romantic scene is the unforgettable moment of one's life.

In the southern end of the cemetery are remains of Majuki Dherai, scattered in a wider area. While commenting on this mound, Dani (1969: 207) writes, "the northern part of the mound is intact because of the graves, but the southern one is being gradually denuded of its earth to serve as manure in the fields. Standing on the top of the mound, the visitor can see the vast expanse of the river that must have once flowed beneath the ramparts of this city. Here once met the two mighty rivers, Kabul and Swat, and the confluence gave rise to the old sacred spot known today as Prang, .....". This ancient settlement seems to have been founded in the early historic period attested by the discovery of punched mark coins from this mound. Its latest levels show cultural material of the Hindu Shahi period and even glazed potsherds of the



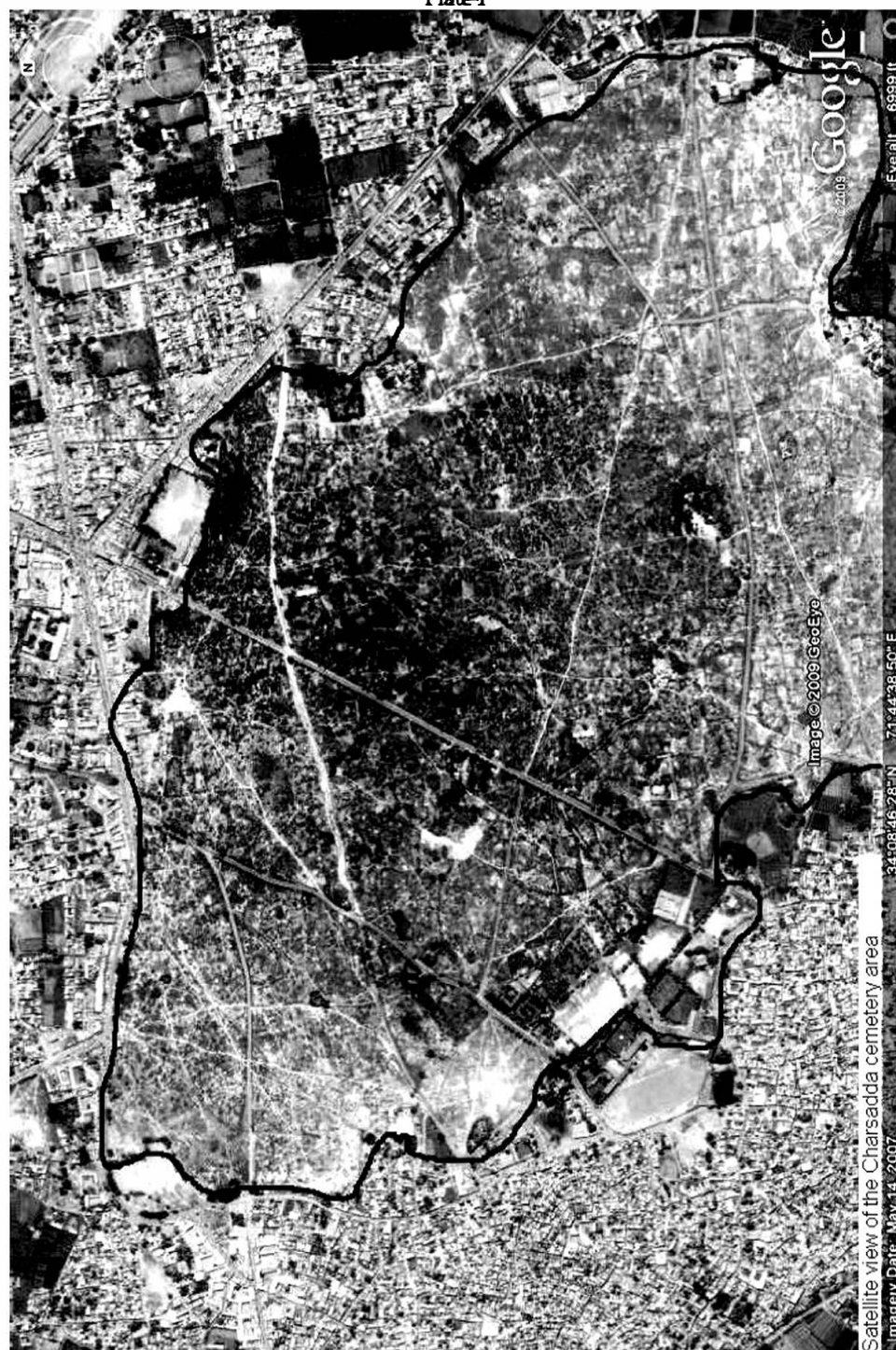
early Islamic period (Plate 2,3). But the site is well known for its stamped ware pottery, evidence of which could be seen on the surface of the mound from where we have collected more than three hundred different stamped designs on potsherds (Plate 2-2, 3-1). On some of the pottery could also be found embossed designs like the one in the shape of a Tamgha (Figure A, Plate 2-4).

Other finds from this locality indicate that a flourishing population inhabited it from the Indo-Greek to the Hindu Shahi period. The site has been under threat due to its close proximity with the populated areas as well as digging for new graves. More over search for antiquities has also accelerated danger of destruction to this chapter of ancient history of area (Plate 9-2). If proper excavations are conducted on this spot, possibly a new site, not inferior than the nearby sites of Bala Hisar and Shaikhani Dheri, will come to light that will further add up in the completion of the historical past of Pushkalavati.

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Plate-I



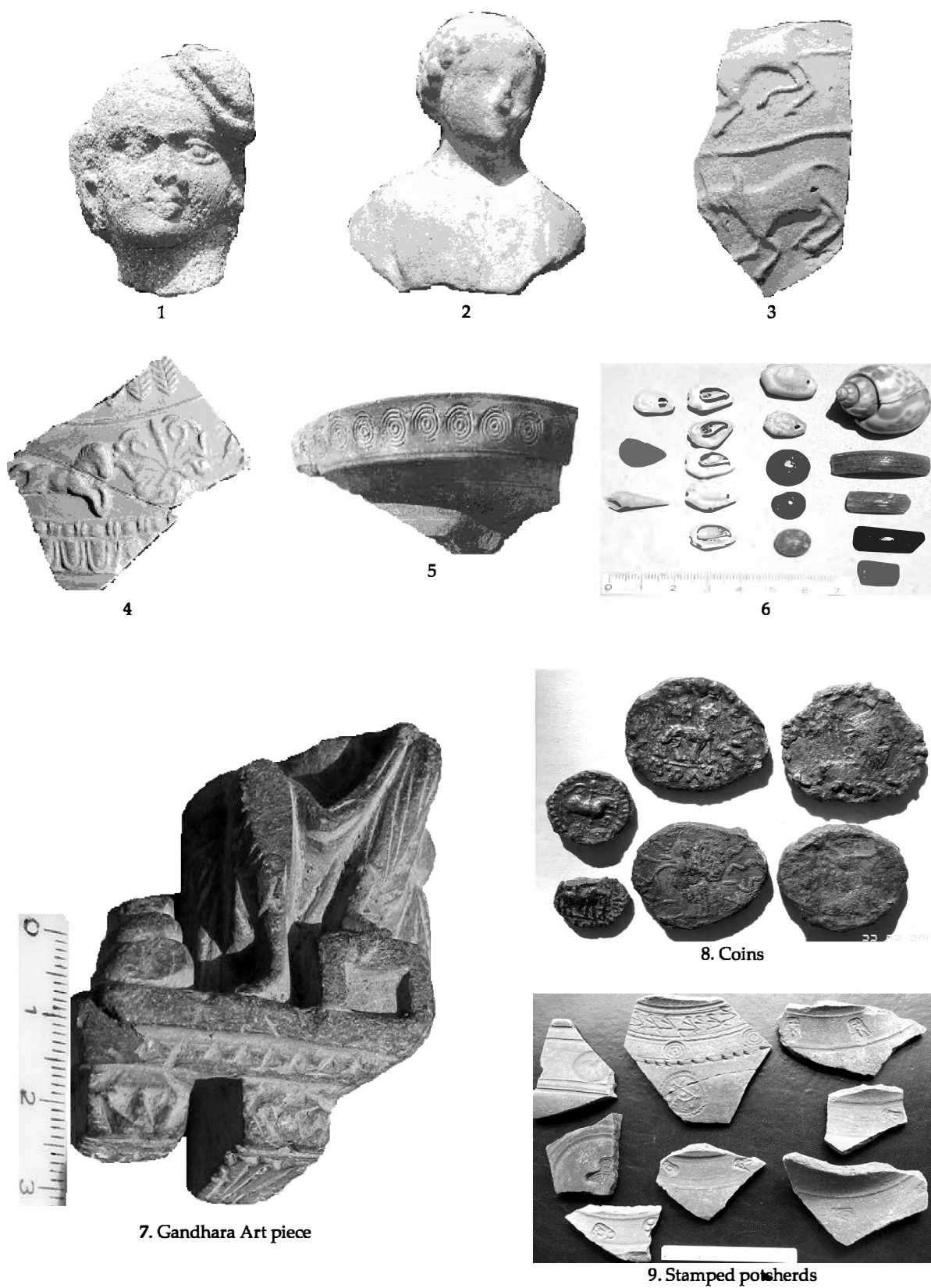
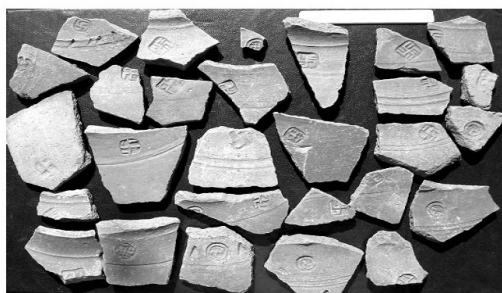


Plate 2: Antiquity recovered from Majuki Dherai, Charsadda

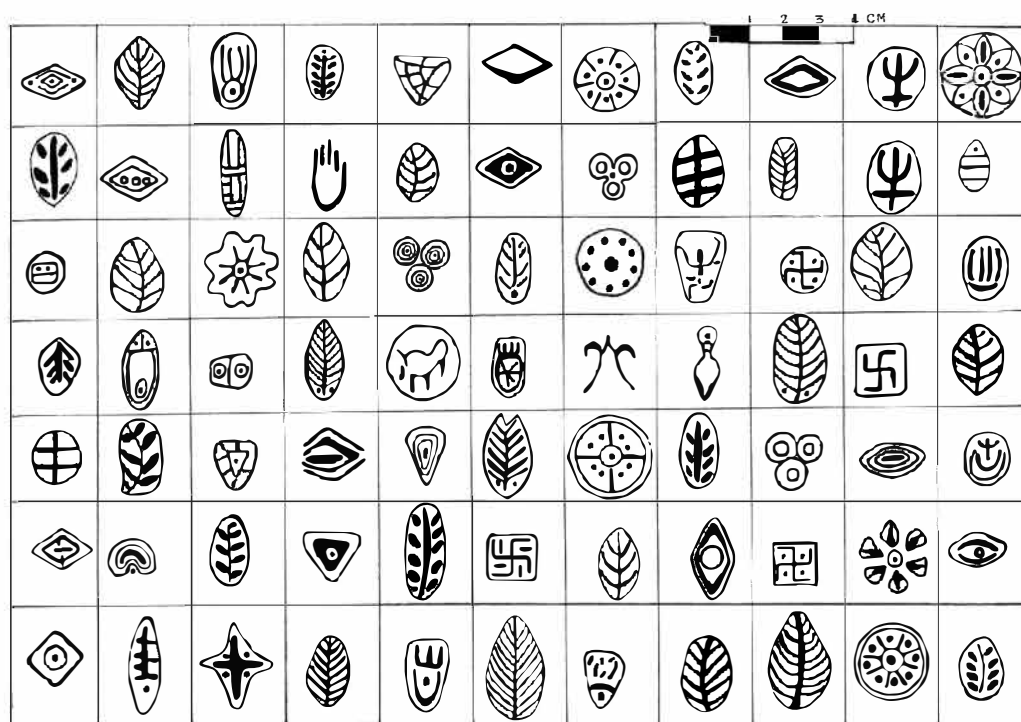


1. stamped potsherds



2. entrance

**Plate 3:** Charsadda graveyard. 1. stamped sherds from Majuki Dherai and 2. Main gate of the Durrani period grave enclosure in the cemetery.



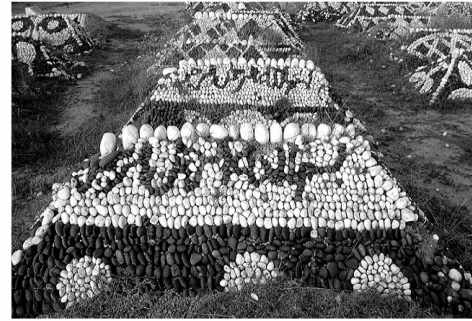
Different stamped designs on sherds collected from the surface of Majuki Dherai located in Charsadda graveyard

**Plate 4:** Designs found on the pottery of Majuki Dherai





1. *Allahu Akbar* is written on the grave with white stones. Also see the arrow to the left.



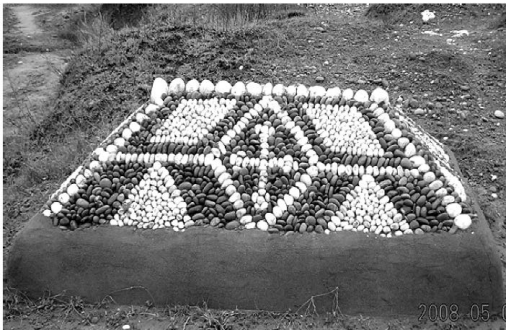
2. *Kalma* is written on the graves with black stones



1. Geometric design made with stones on the grave



2. Stone decoration on grave in progress



1. Geometric design and a cross in the centre



2. Name of the buried person



1. Box shaped decorated grave of black stone slabs



2. Decorated graves on top of the mound

**Plate 5:** Decorated graves in the cemetery of Charsadda





1. A Tamgha style design



2. Name of the dead person along with the date



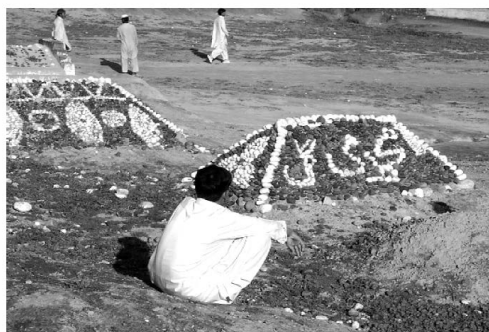
1. Top of the mound is covered with stone-decorated graves



2. A star shaped design on the grave. Pot sherds are also seen in between the stones



1. A floral design is made with white stones



2. Name of the buried person is written on his grave

**Plate 6:** Decorated graves in the cemetery of Charsadda

