

PESHĀWAR IN ANTIQUITY

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Peshāwar, one of the oldest living cities of Pakistan, is veritably a city of historic romance. Its history, stretching over more than two thousand years, is replete with traditions and tales that are told and retold cherishingly often over a cup of green tea in the *Qahva Khānas* of the famous Qiṣṣa Khwānī Bāzār, aptly translated as “Story Teller’s Street”. Peshāwar has indeed been a rendezvous of innumerable invaders and conquerors who succeeded in forcing their way through the north western passes to try their luck for the alluring treasures of India of yore. These invaders have all left behind an unbroken tale of thrilling adventures that echo and re-echo against the ranging hills around Peshāwar as they stopped and passed on to the east. Those among them who chose to stay behind, while others marched on to the vast Indian panorama, settled on the debris of old and mixed up with the local population. It is this amalgam of varying races and tribes of men that has become the hallmark of culture in Peshāwar. Thus it is not unusual to find people speaking simultaneously old Persian or Pash̄to or Hindko in the city Bāzārs. Although Pash̄to speakers have flocked from the surrounding villages into the city to avail themselves of urban facilities, the most predominant language inside the households still remain Hindko — a modern form of the older language of Peshāwar.

The name Peshāwar has been variously interpreted. For the British who came from the east, it was of course the headquarters of their North West Frontier Province. Even those who came from the north west generally called it the frontier town¹ probably because it was the first city that they came across during their march towards the south Asian subcontinent. Hence some people found it easy to connect the word Peshāwar with the Persian expression Peshāwardan (literally meaning coming in front)². The Mughal emperor Humāyūn considered the holding of Peshāwar as a real beginning to the conquest of India. Akbar’s court historian Abū al-Fadl records four different forms of the name:

1) Parsh̄awar 2) Peshāwar 3) Pishāwar 4) Parsh̄apūr³. Babur gives the form Parsh̄awar⁴, whereas Abu al-Fida⁵ record the name as Farshabūr. A. Cunningham suggested that the present name owes to Akbar’s fondness for innovation that led him to change the ancient Parsh̄awar, which he did not understand, to Peshāwar⁶.

An early eleventh century author, Albīrūnī, gives two different spellings Parsh̄awar and Pursh̄ūr⁷. Chinese Pilgrims particularly Hiuen Tsang⁸ (A.D. 630) and Fa Hien⁹ (5th century) write *Po la sha pu lo* and *Fo lu sha* respectively. Apparently all these forms are variants caused by different pronunciations of one and the same name. The most recent variant in one of the local languages being Pekhawr.

In the Kharoshthi inscription found at Ārā near Attock, dated in the (Kaṇiṣka) year 41 appears the word *Poshapura* which has been taken to stand for Purush̄apura. Sten Konow¹⁰, the editor of this inscription rejects the pedantic original form Purush̄apura and thinks that Posha represents Paush̄pa, from the Sanskrit word Pushpa (meaning flower). It is very tempting to give the word Peshāwar this meaning i.e. City of Flowers, which no doubt it is, but the persistence of the form Parsh̄a/Purush̄a in all the literary accounts does not favour this interpretation. It has also been suggested that the word Parsh̄apūr is due to Achaemenians who assumed the title of

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Lord of Parsa (i.e. King of the Persians). The old Gazetteer records a Hindū tradition that the name Parshapur is after a Hindū called Purrus or Purrush and hence the meaning is simply the seat of Purrus or “Porus”¹¹. While Purrus may be rejected straight away for lack of corroboratory evidence there is some reason to believe that the first part in the name Purushpur/Parashwar stands for Porus. This word is also known from other sources. For instance Porus was a ruler in the Panjāb during Alexander’s invasion in the fourth century B.C. It may be a tribal name and the same tribe may have migrated from the present North West Frontier Province to the Panjāb. The second part of the word i.e. ‘war’ or ‘Pur’ means enclosure. Thus the word Peshāwar would simply mean enclosure of Porus. Peshāwar must have been a very small place when this name was applied to it.

Abū al-Faḍl¹² mentions Bagrām or Bigrām as a second name for Peshāwar. Bābur also uses both the names, but what does this word mean? According to Gopal Das¹³ it was the name of a Hindū rājā Vikrama who rebuilt the city and gave it his own name. But this tradition, A.H. Dani says, is as imaginary as the king Vikrama himself¹⁴. Cunningham takes the word to mean “the city” *par excellence* and traces it from the Sanskrit *Viand Grama*¹⁵. According to him it is also applied to three ancient sites in the immediate vicinity of great capitals, namely Kābul, Jalālābād and Peshāwar. It has been suggested that the name consists of two original Sanskrit words *Vara* (best) and *Grama* (village). In the course of time *Varagrāma* got corrupted into Bagrām¹⁶. Charles Masson however derives the word from the Turki *bi* or *be* “chief” and the Hindi *Grām*¹⁷. Thus Bagrām/Bigrām means the place where the chief lived. This probably refers to the area now covered by the Bālā Ḥisār, the Lady Reading Hospital and Dhakkī Nalbandī. If this is the case, and it seems very much too be so, then Purushapur or Purushāwar must be the name of some other locality near Bagrām.

On the strength of our present evidence, it is difficult to precisely pinpoint this locality. Nevertheless the various developmental stages of the ancient city may provide a clue. The earliest city in fact comprised of more than one locality situated at the banks or on the islands of the Bārā river. Both Elphinstone and Mohan Lal record that two or three brooks ran through different parts of the town. These were skirted with willows and mulberry trees and were crossed by bridges. Mohan Lal and Elphinstone belong to the last century and the very important piece of information recorded by them clearly shows that different branches of the Bārā river used to flow through the city as late as the 19th century. The flow of Bārā river into the city was stopped, as the old Gazetteer records, in 1860 when the city was threatened by a flood which caused great loss to public and private buildings in the city. Dams were constructed outside the Kohāt and Edwards (Kābulī) gates at considerable cost to turn the flood water in the outer drain of the city. Moreover the tendency of the river to run into its old channel was checked by a large dam at Landī Akhūnd Aḥmad some three miles upstream¹⁸. Today these old channels are traceable in two great gutters, the one running at the back of the Qiṣṣa Khwānī Bāzār and the other coming from the Kohātī gate to join it, then advancing together towards Chowk Yādgar on way to Shāhi Bāgh.

These channels afford an important evidence to study the development of the old city. They divided the walled town into three areas. East of the channels lie the highest ground centring round Gor Gaṭhṛī with Karīm Pūra to its North West and Pīpalmandī to south west. At the Pīpalmandī can still be seen the old pipal trees, described by Bābur¹⁹. This area was certainly occupied in the pre Muslim period as the present excavation at Gor Gaṭhṛī has shown. Today, besides smaller lanes and bye-lanes, two broad streets traverse this area, the one starting from Chowk Yādgar, goes to Gor Gaṭhṛī and near the Clock Tower Branches off to Karīm Pūra and finally leads to Hashtnagarī Gate and Lāhorī Gate, the other starts from Pīpalmandī and

proceeds towards Ganj and Yakkatūt gates. This pre Muslim city is separated by the joint flow of the channels near Chowk Yādgar from Andar Shahr, the locality in which stands the mosque of Mahābat Khān. The Mohalla of Dhakkī Nalbandī forms an adjunct of this part. This whole area is again a high mound.

The third area is more clearly defined. Between the Kohātī Darwāza channel and the Qiṣṣa Khwānī channel lies Jahāngīrpura. The name probably commemorates the Mughal emperor Jahāngīr in whose reign this area must have been developed. From here the Mughal city spread out between the two channels westwards with Sar Āsiya (head of water Mill) marking the limit of the extension. The focus of this zone is Namak Mandī which in the olden time was the hub of the grain market. This whole zone is on a lower level than the older pre-Muslim part of the city and extends lengthwise along the old bed of the Bāṛā channel. To this was later added the locality of Rāmdās who was a treasurer in the Sikh regime. Subsequently in the Durrānī period this area accommodated the governor house²⁰.

Of the three areas or localities mentioned above, in brief, one was the ancient seat of government and centered upon the present Bālā Ḥiṣār. This was probably the Bigrām/Bagrām of the Mughal times. The area of Jahāngīrpūra marks later additions as shown above. The most ancient part of the city is thus represented by Gor Gaṭhī and the adjoining areas. If the Bālā Ḥiṣār locality was known as Bigrām/Bagrām and the areas between the Kohātī Darwāza channel and the Qiṣṣa Khwānī channel was called Jahāngīrpūra from at least the time of the emperor Jahāngīr, we are left with no alternative but to believe that the remaining locality (i.e. Gor Gaṭhī) was known under the name Purushpūr or Porushwar. And hence the name Peshāwar which seems to be a corrupted form of the word Porushpur or Porushwar. While the governments changed frequently and the name Bigrām was lost, the name of the actual town, i.e. Peshāwar persisted and was later applied to the whole town.

REFERENCES

1. *Gazetteer of the Peshawar District*, 1897–98, p. 44.
2. Munshi Gopal Das in *Tarikh-i-Peshawar*, p. 141 gives two other meanings: (a) *Peshah War*, i.e. full of artisans, and (b) *Pashah War* i.e. full of creeping insects.
3. In the *Ain-i-Akbari* (Nawal Kishore and Asiatic Society editions) there is only one spelling, Parashawar. In the *Akbarnama* for Parashawar, see Vol. III pp. 216, 308 and 343, for 'Peshawar' see *Asiatic Society ed.*, Vol. II, p. 215 and for 'Pishawar' see *Asiatic Society ed.*, Vol. III, p. 515.
4. *Babar nama*, trans. by A.S. Beveridge, pp. 393, 490.
5. This spelling is due to the peculiar Arabic pronunciation in which the letter p. is missing.
6. A. Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India*, p. 79.
7. *Albiruni's India*. trans by E.C. Sachau Vol. I, pp. 276, 427, 453. The latter spelling is also adopted by the Pashto poet Akhund Darweza who interprets the name as full of turbulence. See *Gazetteers of the Peshawar District*, p. 44.
8. *Chinese Accounts of India*, trans by Samuel Beal, Vol. II, p. 150.
9. *Ibid.*, Vol. I. p. 17. Note 25.

10. Sten Konow, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. II, pp. 164–165.
11. *Gazetteer of the Peshawar District*. p. 44.
12. *Akbarnama*, Vol. I. p. 248.
13. Gopal Das, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
14. A.H. Dani, *Peshawar: Historic City of the Frontier*, Peshawar 1969, p. 3.
15. *Ancient Geography of India*, p. 29.
16. A.H. Dani, *op. cit.* p. 4.
17. Charles Masson, *Narrative of various Journeys*, Vol. III. p. 165.
18. *Gazetteer of Peshawar District*, 1897–98, p. 369.
19. *Babar Nama*, p. 230.
20. A marble slab inscription fixed on the gate of the Edwards High School records that the area of the present school was the residence of Yār Muḥammad Khān (1823–27) and then Sulṭān Muḥammad Khān (1831–34), Durranī governors of Peshawar.
21. Recent excavation at Gor Gathī shows that the earliest levels go back to the time of the Indo-Greeks or perhaps a little earlier.