
Investigating Urbanization in Ancient Kashmir: A Study of Significant Archaeological Sites

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DOI - <http://doi.org/10.37502/IJSMR.2025.81203>

Abstract

This study investigates the process of urbanization in ancient Kashmir by analysing significant archaeological sites, including Semthan (Chakradhara), Narapura, Srinagari, and Huskapura (Ushkur). Semthan presents a continuous cultural sequence over five periods, revealing agricultural surplus, craft specialization, a monetized economy, and long-distance trade, culminating in monumental temple construction and social stratification indicative of urban development. The irrigation innovations by King Lalitāditya at Chakradhara enhanced agricultural productivity, thereby supporting population growth and urban expansion. Narapura, founded by King Nara, functioned as a fortified commercial hub with extensive trade networks and aesthetic urban features that reflected economic prosperity. Srinagar's two foundations the ancient capital of Śrīnagarī at Pandrethan and the later Pravarapura (modern Srinagar) demonstrate urban continuity and strategic relocation driven by geographic and defensive considerations. Huskapura, established by the Kushana ruler King Huvishka, served as a gateway town controlling vital trade routes and exhibited religious pluralism through the coexistence of Buddhist and Hindu monuments. The archaeological remains at these sites collectively illustrate the emergence of complex urban centers characterized by specialized economies, monumental architecture, religious diversity, and strategic planning. These findings underscore Kashmir's integration into broader cultural and trade networks and provide a nuanced understanding of its urban evolution in antiquity.

Keywords: Urbanization, Ancient Kashmir, Archaeology, Trade Networks, Monumental Architecture

Introduction

Cities are the oldest artifacts of civilized life. In earlier times, the identification of cities was evident in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Kautilya, and Augustine. In Ancient India, urbanization occurred in two distinct phases. Harappan cities emerged in the middle of the 3rd millennium BC and declined in the 2nd millennium BC. The second phase of urbanization emerged and flourished in the 6th century AD. The cities of early historical India had a solid background; thus, the 2nd urbanization never reached the point of collapse and maintained continuity, unlike its predecessor. Kashmir also underwent urbanization, estimated from the 3rd century BC, when Mauryan ruler Ashoka was credited with the founding of the city of Srinagari. From the earliest times, urbanization in ancient Kashmir unfolded through a continuum of flourishing centers shaped by royal vision, religious activity, and economic

prosperity. This study investigates and analyzes the urban trends of some important urban centers in Kashmir.

Semthan:

The Semthan site is an early historic archaeological site located in the town of Bijbihara in the Anantnag district of the Jammu and Kashmir region in India. The site is situated on a plateau known as Tsakdar, which is identified as the ancient Chakradhara from Kalhana's 12th-century text, *Rajatarangini*. It sits on a loess karewa (plateau formation) at an altitude of 1646 meters above sea level on the left bank of the Jhelum River. The river forms a distinct inverted 'U' turn around the site, creating a natural peninsula. The area is notable for its concentration of archaeological remains, including rubble and pebble stone walls, terracotta bricks, pottery, and coins, which are scattered over an area of approximately 90 to 100 hectares. The landscape is distinguished by a series of high and low archaeological mounds, with local names such as Chakdhar, Rajma Teng, Sona Khut, and Shushrum Nag. The primary plateau, Chakdhar, is a trapezoidal area covering approximately 17–20 hectares. Its surface is mostly clear of modern buildings and features numerous depressions of circular, square, and rectangular shapes, which are believed to be ancient traces of habitation and various activity areas. Main Plateau (Chakdhar): The primary plateau, Chakdhar, is a trapezoidal area covering approximately 17–20 hectares. Its surface is mostly clear of modern buildings and features numerous depressions of circular, square, and rectangular shapes, which are believed to be the ancient traces of habitation and various activity areas (Shah & Lone 2022, 136-137).

The material culture found at Semthan, along with finds from other sites such as Burzahom, Gufkral, Kanispora, and Harwan, showed cultural similarities that were traced in a broader context extending beyond Kashmir. The studies at these sites, including Semthan, are described as extensive and are considered the sole sources of information for understanding the settlement and landscape of specific chronological periods (Yattoo 2015, 223).

Methodology

The methodology for this study involved a comprehensive archaeological and historical analysis of significant urban sites in ancient Kashmir, including Semthan (Chakradhara), Narapura, Srinagari, and Huskapura (Ushkur). Primary data were gathered through the examination of archaeological remains such as structural foundations, pottery, coins, seals, and architectural fragments from excavations and field surveys, notably the 2025 field visit to Ushkur. Literary sources, particularly Kalhana's 12th-century chronicle *Rajatarangini* and accounts from Chinese pilgrims like Hiuen Tsang, were critically analyzed to contextualize the archaeological findings and trace urban development processes. The study employed stratigraphic analysis to establish cultural sequences at sites like Semthan, enabling the identification of economic, social, and religious transformations over time.

Main findings and material culture of the site:

The findings for each period are as follows.

Period I is characterized by the discovery of NBPW which is a significant indicator of trade and cultural connections with the Gangetic plains during the Mauryan period. Other findings from this period include the following:

Associated pottery includes black-slipped, plain red, and grey wares. Pottery shapes included variants of Ahichchhatra 10 A type, dishes, basins, vases, and carinated rimless handis. Beads were made from various materials. Miscellaneous iron objects were also discovered. A bone stylus, copper coins, and a seal with a highly worn legend in Brahmi script.

Period II This period is primarily identified with a red ware industry. Notable pottery shapes include bowls with incurved rims, basins, button-knobbed lids, ink-pot-like lids, and miniature vases. Some pottery sherds also featured stamped and incised decoration.

Period III This period is marked by pottery with a distinct regional style, featuring fine-grained fabric and lustrous red slip. The document notes that this period roughly corresponds to the emergence of stylized stone architecture in the valley.

Period IV This final period is represented by pottery made from coarse-to medium-grained clay, which was wheel-turned and had a dull-red slip. Many sherds from this period were decorated with stamped designs.

The presence of NBPW, coins, and a seal in Period I are typically associated with urban centers and long-distance trade networks in ancient India (Indian Archaeology 1978–79 1981, 69-70). However, the document itself does not draw this conclusion or elaborate on Semthan's role in the urbanization of Kashmir.

Analysis of Semthan's Significance for Urbanization

The excavation at Semthan revealed a continuous cultural sequence spanning five periods, providing a valuable timeline for tracking developments in material culture, economy, and social complexity. While the document does not use the term "urbanization," several findings point towards processes that are often associated with it:

Agricultural Surplus (Period I): The palaeobotanical evidence shows a well-established agricultural base with the cultivation of wheat (*Triticum vulgare Vill and Triticum Sphaerococcum perc*), Barley (*Hordeum vulgre Linn*), and Rice (*Oryza Sativa Linn*). A stable and diverse food supply is a fundamental prerequisite for supporting larger, denser populations and specialized non-agricultural labour, which are hallmarks of urban centers (Indian Archaeology 1978–79 1984,21).

Craft Specialization (Period I): The classification of pottery into five distinct fabrics (A, B, C, D, and E) suggests a sophisticated and specialized pottery industry. For instance, Fabric B is described as a "fine thin red ware... made of fine clay on wheel," while Fabric E is a crude, handmade ware. This differentiation implies the existence of skilled artisans alongside basic domestic production, indicating a complex economy.

Monumental Structures and Trade (Periods II-V):

Period II: The appearance of a rubble-wall structure and cast copper coins suggests more permanent construction and the emergence of a monetized economy. The association with Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) also places the site within a larger network of interregional trade and cultural interaction.

Period III: The discovery of a clay seal depicting an Indo-Greek deity points to long-distance connections and influences, a common feature of urban hubs.

Period V: This period is explicitly noted for "prolific temple building and flourishing sculptural art." 6 The ability to organize labour⁷ and resources for large-scale religious construction is a strong indicator of a complex, stratified society with a centralized authority, characteristic of an urban or proto-urban center (Indian Archaeology 1980–81 1984,21).

Thus, the evidence from Semthan, from a stable agricultural surplus and specialized crafts in its earliest period to monumental architecture, a monetized economy, and long-distance trade in later periods, collectively illustrates a developmental trajectory consistent with the emergence of urbanization in ancient Kashmīr. This site serves as a crucial reference point for understanding this transition. The site of Cakradhara (modern Tsakadar, near Vijabror/Semthan in Anantnag) holds historical importance in the context of ancient Kashmiri urbanization, primarily because of its association with significant irrigation projects and its proximity to the ancient town of Nārāpura.

Irrigation and Agricultural Development

The site of Cakradhara was central to a major irrigation initiative undertaken by King Lalitāditya. He arranged for the waters of the Vitastā (Jhelum) River to be diverted from Cakradhara and distributed to various villages. 1 Because the high plateaus (Karewas) around Cakradhara could not be irrigated by ordinary canals, Lalitāditya implemented a system of water-wheels (ambhahpratarāṇa) to lift the water. 1 This project was crucial for making the surrounding lands more productive, which is a key factor in supporting larger populations and fostering urbanization (Ray 1970, 105).

Proximity to the Ancient Town of Narapura

The historical importance of Cakradhara is further cemented by its location near the ancient town of Nārāpura, built by King Nara. Local tradition places Nārāpura in the immediate vicinity of Vijabror. 2 Kalhaṇa's chronicle supports this tradition by mentioning the shrine of Cakradhara in the neighboring region of the town of Nārāpura, which corresponds to the location of the modern Tsakadar shrine near Vijabror(Ray 1970, 16).

Therefore, the historical importance of the Cakradhara/Tsakadar site lies in its role as the focal point of an advanced irrigation system that supported agriculture and its geographical connection to the prosperous ancient urban center of Narapura.



Fig.1 Terracotta tile depicting galloping horses. This is one of the few hundred items recovered from Semthan (Bijbehara) in Kashmir. KL Image: Special arrangement [https://kashmirlife.net/\(Lone2022\)](https://kashmirlife.net/(Lone2022))



Fig.1 Statuette from Semthan, ancient Chakradhara. Kashmir; 100 BCE-100 CE. Terracotta plaque. Semi-draped figure with Hellenistic influences. Ashmolean Museum <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>(Creative Commons 2019).

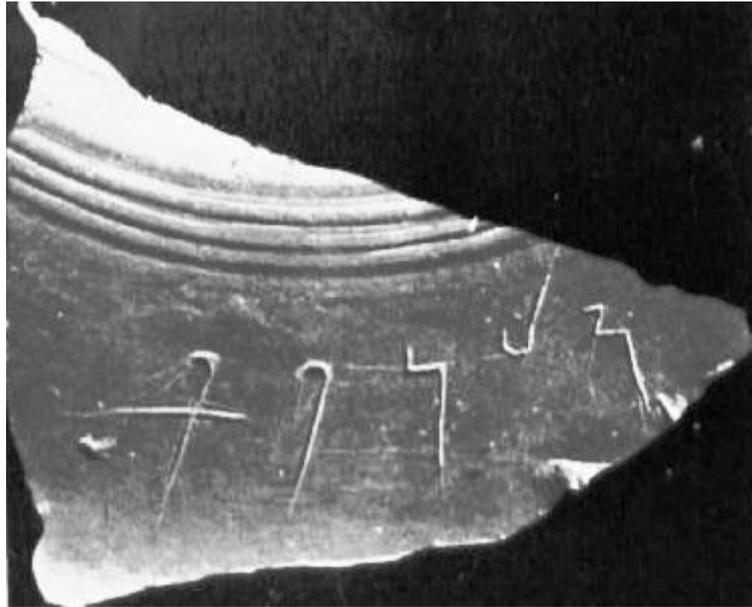


Fig.3 Inscription on a pottery sherd recovered from Semthan (Bijbehara).

<https://kashmirlife.net/>(Lone 2022)



Fig.4 Terracotta displaying a dancing woman. A rare recovery from Semthan (Bijbehara) details the artworks that were part of the ancient Kashmir culture.

<https://kashmirlife.net/>(Lone 2022).

2. Ancient Town of Narapura

The city of Narapura was founded by a king named Nara. Kalhan's chronicle provides a detailed and elaborate description of this ancient city. King Nara, who succeeded his father Vibhishana II, is credited with building the town named after him. It is situated on the sandy bank of the Vitastā (Jhelum) river. Local tradition places the ancient town of Narapura in the

immediate vicinity of the modern town of Vijabror. This tradition is supported by Kalhan's mention of the shrine of Chakradhara (modern Tsakadar) being in the neighbouring region of Narapura, which aligns with the geography of the area around Vijabror.

Analysis of the urban features of Narapura:

1. *Commercial Hub*: The town is a vibrant center of commerce. A key feature of its urban design was the presence of markets (hattas) that were consistently stocked with supplies. 1 This indicates a planned commercial infrastructure designed to support a large urban population and trade activities. 2. *Connectivity and Trade Routes*: Narapura's prosperity was heavily linked to its excellent connectivity. The city was serviced by highways that facilitated the flow of goods into its markets. 1 Its location on the sandy bank of the Vitastā (Jhelum) River was also a major urban advantage. The river served as a crucial artery for trade, with the text mentioning "the sails of a hundred ships plying up and down," which gave splendour to the river and suggests a bustling riverine trade network. 3. *Defensive Fortifications*: A significant urban trend shown by Narapura was the importance of defense. The town, also called Kimnārapura, was explicitly described as being "encircled by walls." 1 The author notes that ancient Kashmiri towns were likely to be defended by walls, and Narapura is a prime example of this practice. 4. *Aesthetics and Quality of Life*: Urban planning also included elements that contributed to a high quality of life. The city was adorned with "gardens full of swelling flowers and fruits," making it, as it were, a "synonym for 'heaven.'" 1 This suggests that urban development was not purely functional but also incorporated aesthetic and recreational spaces in the city. 5. *Accumulation of Wealth*: Owing to its commercial success, Narapura was a city of immense wealth. It was said to have surpassed even Kubera's mythical town in the riches amassed there, pointing to a highly successful urban economy (Ray 1970: 16).

3. City of Srinagari.

The history of Kashmir's capital involves two distinct foundations: first, the ancient city of Srinagari, and later, the 'new capital' named Pravarapura, which eventually inherited the name Srinagar and became the site of the modern city.

A). The First Foundation: Ancient Srinagari

The earliest capital mentioned is Śrīnagarī, which Kalhaṇa's chronicle attributes to the great King Aśoka. This 'old capital' is identified with the site of the present-day village of Pandrethan, which derives its name from the Sanskrit Purānādhishṭhāna (meaning 'the old capital'). This original city was situated to the south-east of the modern one (Stein 1900,439-440).

B). The Second Foundation: Pravarapura (the 'New Capital').

Later, King Pravarasena II, who likely ruled around the middle of the sixth century A.D., established a new capital. This new city was officially named Pravarapura (or Paravarasenapura) in honour of its founder. This name has been used for centuries in official records and literary works. Despite its official designation, popular usage retained the name of the older adjacent capital. Over time, Pravarapura came to be known simply as Śrīnagar.⁶ This transfer of a name from an old capital to a new one is a common phenomenon in Indian history.⁶ The site for Pravarapura was chosen near the Śārikā hill and was initially confined to the right bank of the Vitastā River. This location offered superior natural advantages in terms of communication, resources, and defense, which is why it endured as the capital while other royal

cities fell into decline (Stein 1900, 441-445). The original city, called Śrīnagarī, was founded by Aśoka at the site of modern Pandrethan. Centuries later, King Pravarasena II founded a new capital nearby, officially named Pravarapura, which is the direct predecessor of modern Srinagar and eventually adopted its popular name.

Śrīnagarī and the Study of Urbanization

The site of ancient Śrīnagarī, which the document identifies as being in the vicinity of modern Pandrethan, is crucial for investigating the early stages of urbanization in the region. It provides a tangible starting point to trace the evolution of the region's capital, demonstrating shifts in urban planning, settlement patterns, and the factors that influenced the location of major cities (Stein 1900, 439-440).

Evidence of Early Urban Foundations: The chronicle attributes the foundation of the original Śrīnagarī to the great King Aśoka. While the exact remains of Aśoka's city are not pinpointed, the site of Pandrethan, known as Purânâdhishṭhâna ('the old capital'), serves as the primary location for this early urban center. The name 'the old capital' indicates a historical memory of its former importance and provides a geographical locus for investigating the earliest phase of Kashmir's urban history. The presence of ancient building remains on the slopes near Pandrethan further supports its past status as a significant settlement.

Continuity and Shift in Urban Centers: The existence of an 'old capital' at Pandrethan and a 'new capital' (Pravarapura, the modern Srinagar) founded by Pravarasena II nearby demonstrates a key process in urbanization: the relocation and expansion of capital cities. The pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang's account from circa 631 A.D. clearly distinguishes between the 'old city' and the 'new city,' providing an early historical record of this urban shift. The eventual transfer of the name 'Śrīnagarī' from the old site to the new one illustrates how urban identities can migrate, with popular usage favouring continuity even as the physical location of the capital changes. This process is analogous to the history of other Indian capitals, such as Delhi.

Investigating Site Selection Factors: A comparison of the site of the old Śrīnagarī (Pandrethan) with that of the new one reveals the evolving criteria for urban settlement. While Pandrethan offered security from floods due to its proximity to hill slopes and access to Dal Lake, its advantages were limited. The new site of Pravarapura offered far superior advantages in terms of its central location, communication via the river and lakes, and defensibility, which ultimately ensured its permanence as the capital. This comparison allows researchers to study the strategic, economic, and geographic factors that drive urban development and determine the success and longevity of a city.

Archaeological Significance: The area around Pandrethan and the nearby Takht-I Sulaiman hill contains significant archaeological sites linked to the old capital. The well-preserved *temple at Pandrethan*, identified as the foundation of the minister Meruvaradhana, and the *shrine of Jyeṣṭharudra* on or near the hill are key landmarks. These sites, along with extensive but untraced ruins on the terraced slopes, provide physical evidence for archaeological investigation into the layout, architecture, and religious life of this early urban center (Stein 1900, 439-445).

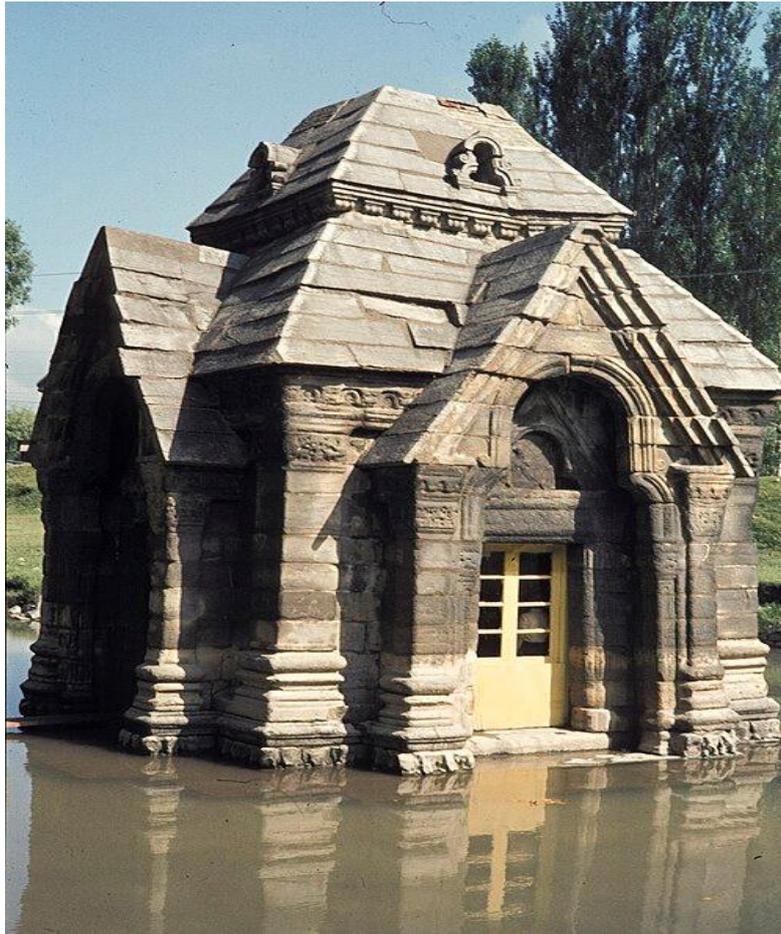


Fig.5 Jammu and Kashmir in 1981, Srinagar - Hindu temple at Pandrethan (Meruvarddhanaswami Temple).

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2c/Pandrethan_Shiva_Temple%2C_Srinagar%2C_Jammu_and_Kashmir%2C_India_%281981%29.jpg

4. Huskapura

The archaeological site of Huskapura, modern-day Ushkur, is highly significant for studying urbanization in ancient Kashmir, particularly regarding frontier settlements, religious pluralism, and the influence of foreign dynasties.

Huskapura as a Site for Urbanization Study through the Eye of Rajatarangini.

Foundation and Early Influences:

Huskapura was founded by the Turuska (Kushan) King Huska, who is identified as the historical ruler Huvishka, the successor to Kanishka. Its foundation was laid in the first or second century A.D. (Stein 1900, 483). Its establishment by a foreign dynasty highlights the role of external powers in shaping ancient Kashmir's urban landscape.

Strategic Location as a Gateway Town: Huskapura was strategically situated on the left bank of the Vitastā, immediately opposite its twin town Varahamula (modern Baramulla). Together, these towns were located just above the gorge where the river leaves the valley, marking the starting point of the great route to the west. This position made them a crucial gateway for trade

and communication (Stein 1900, 482). The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang noted that he spent his first night in a convent at Huskapura after entering the kingdom through the western pass, underscoring its role as a key entry point (Stein, 1900, p.483).

Urban Importance and Scale: The document suggests that in ancient times, Huskapura was the larger and more important of the two towns. Kalhana mentions it far more frequently than does Varāhamihira. This importance is supported by the numerous religious buildings erected there by powerful kings such as Lalitāditya-Muktapida and Ksemagupta. The presence of a great Visnu temple (Muktasvamin), a large vihāra with a stūpa, and multiple maṭhas indicates a thriving, patronized urban center.

Archaeological Remains at Ushkur

Foundations and Lingas: Foundations of ancient buildings can be traced across the plain near modern Ushkur. Two colossal Lingas, still in situ, attest to the presence of significant Saiva shrines in the temple's architecture.

Stupa: The damaged remains of a stupa are located approximately 400 yards west of the village. This Stupa, possibly built by Lalitāditya, yielded an ancient coin of the Taxila type, providing tangible evidence of its antiquity and connections.

Vihara: This Stupa was likely associated with the 'Moung-ti Vihara' mentioned by the pilgrim Ou-k'ong, a convent that was a major Buddhist establishment at the site.

Religious Pluralism: The Archaeological and textual evidence from Huskapura points to a religiously diverse urban population. The co-existence of major Buddhist structures (the Vihara and Stupa) and prominent Hindu temples (Muktasvamin and Saiva shrines) in the same city is a clear indicator of religious pluralism, a key feature of urbanization in the region (Stein 1900: 483).

Decline and Legacy: The document notes that the name Huskapura disappears from later chronicles, suggesting that its importance waned after the Hindu period, with the town of Varahamula eventually eclipsing it (Stein 1900, 484). Its modern-day status as a small village named Ushkur, surrounded by extensive ruins, provides a classic case study of urban decline in the Middle East.

In conclusion, Huskapura (Ushkur) is a prime archaeological site for investigating the intersection of foreign influence, strategic trade routes, and religious patronage in the development of a major frontier town in ancient Kashmir.

Field visit:

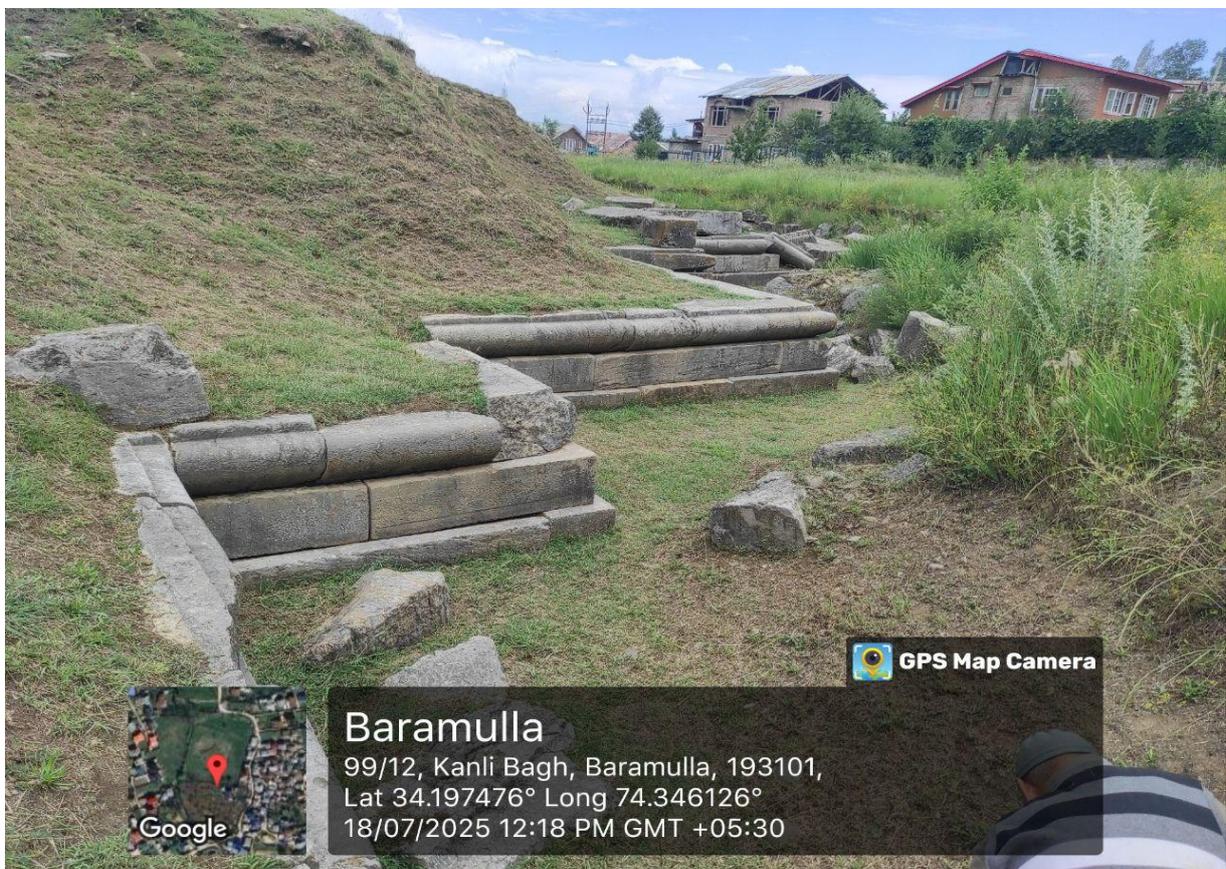


Fig.6 Camera image from the Ushkur ASI-protected site.

A field visit was undertaken to the ancient site of Ushkar near Baramulla to examine its archaeological features and to evaluate its historical significance. The site is situated at a gentle elevation and is characterized by dispersed stone foundations, architectural fragments, and pottery shards. The presence of carved stone blocks and structural remains suggests that the area once accommodated significant religious or residential construction. Although partially disrupted by modern activities, the site retains a substantial archaeological potential. The visit provided clear insights into the spatial organization, architectural style, and cultural layers of ancient Kashmir (Kumar 2025).

The ancient site of Ushkur is situated on the left bank of the Jhelum River, along the Baramulla–Srinagar highway in the Baramulla district. The name Ushkur is believed to be a later form of Huvishkapura, a city established in the 2nd century CE by the Kushana ruler King Huvishka, as documented by Kalhana in *Rajatarangini*. According to both literary and archaeological sources, Huvishka constructed a stupa in this city during his reign. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsuan-Tsang), who visited Kashmir in 631 CE, records spending his first night in a monastery located within the precincts of this stupa. In the 8th century CE, the Karkota ruler Lalitaditya Muktapida (724–760 CE) is said to have erected a Vishnu shrine named Muktasvamin, along with a large vihara and another stupa at the site of the current temple. Of the remains, only a stupa is visible, primarily represented by the lower courses of its base. The base exhibits a square plan with projections on all sides, resembling the stupa at Parihaspura. Excavations indicate that the existing stupa, likely dating to the 8th century CE, was constructed atop an earlier, underlying stupa, which may have been the original one attributed to King Huvishka. During these excavations, archaeologists recovered 11 terracotta heads of men and women from the northern wall. These artifacts, stylistically influenced by the Gandhara School, are currently preserved in the Sri Pratap Singh Museum in Srinagar (Archaeological Survey of India, Srinagar Circle 1969).

Main findings

Semthan (Chakradhara): Continuous cultural sequence over five periods showing agricultural surplus, specialized pottery industry, monumental architecture, monetized economy, and long-distance trade, culminating in prolific temple building and social stratification, indicating urban development. **Irrigation at Chakradhara:** King Lalitāditya’s innovative water-wheel irrigation enhanced agricultural productivity, supporting larger populations and urban growth in Kashmir. **Narapura:** Founded by King Nara, Narapura was a fortified commercial hub with busy markets, extensive trade via roads and rivers, aesthetic gardens, and significant wealth accumulation. **Srinagari:** Two capitals—ancient Śrīnagarī (modern Pandrethan) founded by King Aśoka, and later Pravarapura (modern Srinagar) founded by King Pravarasena II—show urban continuity, strategic relocation, and enhanced defense and economic advantages. **Huskapura (Ushkur):** Founded by Kushana King Huvishka, strategically located as a gateway town controlling trade routes, with rich religious diversity (Buddhist viharas and Hindu temples) and archaeological remains reflecting foreign influence and urban complexity; declined after the Hindu period.

Conclusion

The archaeological and historical evidence from key sites such as Semthan (Chakradhara), Narapura, Srinagari, and Huskapura (Ushkur) collectively illustrates the complex process of urbanization in ancient Kashmir. These sites reveal a trajectory marked by agricultural surplus,

craft specialization, monetized economies, strategic urban planning, and extensive trade networks. Monumental architecture, including temples and stupas, alongside evidence of religious pluralism, reflects the evolving social stratification and centralized authority. The relocation and continuity of capitals, as seen in the transition from ancient Śrīnagarī to Pravarapura, underscore adaptive urban strategies that respond to geographic, economic, and defensive needs. Furthermore, foreign influences, particularly through the Kushana rule at Huskapura, highlight Kashmir's integration into broader cultural and trade spheres. Together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how ancient Kashmir developed into a region characterized by thriving urban centers with complex social, economic, and religious dimensions.

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