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L'archéologie du Cachemire, du Néolithique à la période historique

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF KASHMIR,
FROM THE NEOLITHIC TO THE HISTORICAL PERIOD

*L'archéologie du Cachemire, du Néolithique
à la période historique*

Conférences de M. Mohammad Ajmal SHAH,
Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir (Inde),
directeur d'études invité

Mohammad Ajmal Shah, Assistant Professor at the Centre of Central Asian Studies (CCAS) and curator of the Central Asian Museum, from the University of Kashmir (India) came to Paris as part of the DEI (directeur d'études invité) program of EPHE-PSL in October 2023 at the invitation of Laurianne Bruneau. Mr. Shah delivered a series of four lectures at the Maison de l'Asie on "The Archaeology of Kashmir, from the Neolithic to the Historical period" that was attended by researchers and students from different institutions.

Presentation of the Centre of Central Asian Studies

The Centre of Central Asian Studies (CCAS) at the University of Kashmir (Srinagar, India) was established in the year 1978. It is a multidisciplinary academic and research institution exploring the historical, cultural and socio-economic connections between Central Asia and South Asia. CCAS also hosts a museum showcasing artefacts and antiquities from the Himalayas and Central Asia.

In 2017, the CCAS introduced archaeology as an academic discipline and established a dedicated department. The program aims to equip students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills in archaeological research and fieldwork. To this aim, a Memorandum of Understanding ("convention scientifique") was initially signed in 2017 with the École pratique des hautes études (EPHE-PSL). At this occasion, Laurianne Bruneau delivered a lecture on the archaeology of the Himalayan region to faculty and students at CCAS in Srinagar. The MoU between CCAS and EPHE-PSL was renewed in 2022 for a period of five years. It is within this scientific and cooperative frame that Ajmal Shah benefited from the EPHE-PSL's DEI program.

Presentation of the lectures

The first lecture discussed the "Kashmir Neolithic". Dating back to the 4th millennium BC, it is characterised by semi-buried dwellings and granaries; stone and bone tools; the cultivation of millet, wheat and legumes; the domestication of livestock; human and animal burials. Many of these features are also attested at certain Central Asian Neolithic sites, raising the question of cultural relations between the Kashmir

valley (and therefore the north of the Indian subcontinent) and Central Asia from the earliest times. The lecture also brought into context the remains and archaeological material from the reference sites of Burzahom, Gufkral and Kanispore, as well as Neolithic sites recently discovered during surveys that shed new light on this key period known as the “Northern Neolithic” in Indian archaeology.

The second lecture entitled “The impact of cultural exchanges and the Silk Roads on ancient Kashmir art” discussed the art historical material which connected Kashmir with Central Asia, China and the Middle East via branches of the Silk Road. The impact of these cultural exchanges, which intensified in the early years of the Christian era, previously received little attention. Yet, the influences of the various regions involved in the exchange of goods and ideas via this vast communication network on the art of Kashmir are evident as early as the 1st century AD. The lecture also discussed a variety of literary sources that present Kashmir as one of the major artistic centres of early Christian Era.

The third lecture discussed “The ancient history of Kashmir (200 BC–450 AD)”. As the northern gateway to India, Kashmir has seen many population movements. The region has always served as a base for penetrating further into the subcontinent: Sakas, Parthians, Kushans and Huns have all passed through. The valley was part of the Indo-Greek kingdoms, as excavations at the Semthan site have shown. As for the Kushans, it was from Kashmir that they were able to reach the famous city of Taxila and take control of the Ganges plain. As the remains attest, between 100 and 450 AD, the Kushan sovereigns ruled and founded several urban settlements in Kashmir. The lecture highlighted the rule of different dynasties and discussed the results of explorations and excavations carried out in Kashmir and proposed a new archaeological history of the valley for the early historical period.

The fourth and last lecture of the series dealt with “Recent archaeological discoveries in Kashmir valley: new research prospects”. In recent years, for the first time since the 1980s, the Kashmir Valley has been the focus of major archaeological research. Conducted by the Centre for Central Asian Studies, these studies are being carried out as part of international collaborative projects and are already enabling us to renew our knowledge of the valley, from the Neolithic to the early historical period. The Centre of Central Asian Studies has also carried out salvage archaeology at several sites threatened by human activity. The Gool site has been documented using 3D technology, and excavations have been conducted at the Kushan site of Ahan. While presenting the recent activities of the Centre of Central Asian Studies, the lecture elaborately discussed the impact of new technologies and international collaboration on the development of archaeological activities in the valley, as well as highlighted opportunities and challenges in conducting archaeological activities in the Himalayan region.