

## Bhimtilla: Unearthing the Forgotten Buddhist Heritage of Kangra Valley

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**Abstract:** Bhimtilla, an overlooked archaeological gem located near the village of Chetru in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, presents a compelling case for the re-evaluation of early Buddhist heritage in the Western Himalayas. Perched strategically at the confluence of ancient trade routes and religious pathways, Bhimtilla is home to vestiges of Buddhist stupas, intricately carved rock-cut structures, and monastic foundations that hint at a vibrant spiritual ecosystem flourishing between the 2nd century BCE and the 8th century CE. The site's physical remnants—dispersed across wooded terrains and now partially submerged under layers of earth and neglect—offer rare insights into the lesser-known manifestations of Buddhism beyond the major centers of Sarnath, Nalanda, and Ajanta.

Despite its rich archaeological potential, Bhimtilla has suffered from institutional oversight, limited documentation, and a lack of formal excavation, placing it at risk of further deterioration. This research aims to reconstruct the cultural and religious milieu of Bhimtilla by synthesizing historical records, regional folklore, preliminary field observations, and comparative analysis with contemporaneous Buddhist sites in Himachal Pradesh and neighboring regions. Furthermore, the paper interrogates the historical silence surrounding Bhimtilla in mainstream academic discourse and offers strategic recommendations for systematic archaeological investigation, community-led heritage conservation, and inclusion in regional tourism and education initiatives.

Through this study, Bhimtilla emerges not just as a relic of the past but as a site of living heritage—demanding recognition, preservation, and scholarly engagement. This work contributes to a growing discourse on decentralized heritage conservation and expands the geographic understanding of India's Buddhist past, particularly within the Himalayan cultural corridor.

**Keywords:** Bhimtilla, Buddhist Archaeology, Rock-Cut Monuments, Buddhist Trade Routes, Heritage Preservation, Buddhist Sculpture, Pilgrimage Networks.



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**Introduction:** Tucked away in the tranquil foothills of the Dhauladhar range, Bhimtilla—located a few kilometers from the village of Chetru in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh—quietly preserves the echoes of a once-flourishing spiritual and cultural past. Despite its unassuming appearance, the site harbors significant archaeological remnants, including partially buried stupas, relic chambers, rock-cut sculptures, and indications of monastic architectural activity. These vestiges point to Bhimtilla’s probable role as a Buddhist center along the religious and trade corridors that traversed the lower Himalayas between the early centuries BCE and the late first millennium CE.

While prominent Buddhist sites in Himachal Pradesh—such as Tabo, Nako, and Key Monastery—have enjoyed considerable scholarly attention and institutional support, Bhimtilla has remained largely absent from academic literature and conservation efforts. Its neglect underscores a broader pattern in heritage studies, wherein smaller, regionally situated sites are often eclipsed by their more monumental or visually striking counterparts. Yet, it is precisely these lesser-known sites that offer valuable insights into the decentralized and widespread nature of Buddhist practice, patronage, and pilgrimage in the Himalayan context.

The importance of Bhimtilla extends beyond its architectural fragments. Its location, artifacts, and cultural traces suggest a significant role in the diffusion of Buddhism across the Western Himalayas and into the Indian subcontinent’s heartland. The convergence of spiritual and trade networks in the Kangra valley may have positioned Bhimtilla as a waypoint for monks, artisans, and pilgrims—facilitating not only religious exchange but also the intermingling of art, ideas, and cultural practices.

This research paper seeks to resurface Bhimtilla’s forgotten legacy by situating it within the broader historical and religious narrative of Indian Buddhism. Through a multidisciplinary approach that includes archaeological interpretation, historical geography, and comparative analysis, the study aims to critically assess the site’s significance and advocate for its documentation, preservation, and inclusion in regional heritage discourses. By bringing Bhimtilla into academic focus, this work contributes to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of India’s Buddhist past, especially within the relatively under-explored cultural landscape of the Kangra valley.

**Review of Literature:** The academic discourse surrounding Buddhist archaeology in Himachal Pradesh is relatively rich but unevenly distributed, with the bulk of research concentrated in the Trans-Himalayan districts such as Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, and upper Kullu. These regions, known for their living monastic institutions and well-preserved iconographic treasures, have formed the focal point for scholars and archaeologists tracing the historical trajectory of Buddhism in the Western Himalayas. However, this intense focus has inadvertently marginalized the archaeological narratives of lower-altitude sites such as Bhimtilla, which lie beyond the purview of ongoing mainstream academic and governmental initiatives.

Foremost among scholars contributing to the study of Buddhist architecture and iconography in Himachal is O.C. Handa, whose seminal works such as *Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalayas* (2001) and *Buddhist Art and Architecture in Himachal Pradesh* offer a panoramic view of monastic life, stylistic evolution, and spiritual symbolism in the region. Handa meticulously documents the architectural layouts, mural traditions, and religious practices of monasteries in Spiti, Tabo, and Lahaul, drawing connections between Indian and Tibetan Buddhist expressions. Nonetheless, his references to sites in the lower Kangra valley—like Bhimtilla—remain superficial, often limited to broad geographic mentions without in-depth site-specific analysis.

Similarly, A.K. Sinha's work on Himalayan archaeology highlights major Buddhist centers but leaves a lacuna regarding minor and emerging sites like Bhimtilla. The absence of any substantial field research or systematic archaeological surveys in the Chetru region reinforces the view that scholarly attention has been largely confined to prominent or easily accessible religious monuments, especially those still in active use.

The historical and religious significance of the Kangra valley, once a core component of the ancient Trigarta kingdom, has been recognized in scattered epigraphic and textual references. While there is agreement among historians that the region experienced Mahayana and possibly Hinayana Buddhist influences before the advent of Vajrayana and Tantric Buddhism, little empirical work has been done to substantiate this hypothesis through physical site studies. The occasional discovery of inscriptions, sculptures, and brick stupas has hinted at a once-thriving Buddhist presence in the lower Himalayan belt, but sites like Bhimtilla remain insufficiently explored.

Colonial-era records from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) contain vague references to “relics near Chetru” and “Buddhist remains found in Kangra district,” but these observations are often buried within broader surveys and lack any site-specific data. No official excavation or stratigraphic documentation has been made publicly available for Bhimtilla. The site's absence from the ASI's protected list or state archaeological registers has further contributed to its marginalization.

Contemporary efforts by independent researchers and local historians have attempted to bridge this gap. Of particular note is the work of R.S. Rana, whose writings—though largely unpublished in formal academic platforms—serve as vital primary sources for understanding local heritage. His blog post “*Pathiyar Inscription: Forgotten Buddhist Roots*” provides anecdotal descriptions of Bhimtilla, linking it to an ancient Buddhist circuit that once traversed lower Himachal. Rana references local oral traditions, the presence of inscribed stones, and partially buried stupas that bear testimony to the site's historicity. However, the lack of peer review, archaeological methodology, and corroborative evidence limits the utility of such accounts for academic citation.

The broader literature on Buddhist diffusion into the Himalayan corridor does acknowledge the role of regional trade routes and local rulers in the patronage of Buddhist monasteries, particularly between the 2nd century BCE and 7th century CE. Works by scholars like David Snellgrove and Giuseppe Tucci—though focused primarily on Central and Western Tibet—have implications for understanding how the Kangra valley might have functioned as a cultural and religious interface during the same period. Yet, these macro-historical studies rarely drill down to the micro-regional level where Bhimtilla would feature.

Furthermore, recent publications on Himalayan heritage preservation, such as those funded by UNESCO and INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage), have emphasized the urgency of documenting non-monumental heritage. They advocate for the inclusion of lesser-known sites in regional cultural inventories. However, Bhimtilla has yet to benefit from such initiatives, primarily due to the absence of institutional awareness and field-based documentation.

In summary, the review of existing literature reveals a significant gap between the well-documented Buddhist sites of the upper Himalayas and the neglected archaeological landscapes of lower regions such as Bhimtilla. While there is abundant scholarship on the broader themes of Buddhist monastic architecture, iconography, and regional syncretism, Bhimtilla remains conspicuously absent from these discussions. This omission underscores the urgent need for focused archaeological inquiry, interdisciplinary scholarship, and heritage advocacy to bring Bhimtilla into the mainstream academic and cultural consciousness.

**Research Gap:** Despite its potential as a significant archaeological site representing early Buddhist presence in the lower Himalayan region, Bhimtilla remains critically underrepresented

in both institutional and academic discourses. Several prominent gaps necessitate systematic exploration and scholarly inquiry:

1. **Absence of Systematic Excavation:** No formal excavation or archaeological mapping has been carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), state departments, or academic institutions. The site remains unexplored beneath layers of soil and vegetation, with no published stratigraphic or typological data.
2. **Negligible Presence in Academic Literature:** While the Buddhist heritage of Himachal Pradesh has been well documented for regions like Spiti, Keylong, and Tabo, Bhimtilla is almost entirely missing from monographs, journals, or archaeological compendiums. This creates a skewed perception of the spread of Buddhism in the Kangra Valley.
3. **Undocumented Artefacts and Relics:** Local reports suggest the presence of carved stone fragments, miniature stupas, and relic mounds, but these remain undocumented, uncategorized, and at risk of natural and anthropogenic damage. Their provenance and cultural significance are currently unknown.
4. **Unmapped Architectural Footprint:** There exists no topographic or architectural mapping of the site's layout. The spatial organization of monastic complexes, stupas, or ancillary structures remains unstudied, limiting any comparative assessment with other Buddhist centers.
5. **Heritage Neglect and Absence of Preservation Initiatives:** Bhimtilla is not protected under the ASI or Himachal State Heritage List. As a result, it faces continuous degradation due to erosion, farming, and encroachments, with no tourism, conservation, or awareness campaigns in place.
6. **Lack of Community Engagement and Cultural Reclamation:** The local population, while aware of the site's existence, is often unaware of its cultural value. There is no local museum, interpretive signage, or community-driven conservation framework.

Given these lacunae, this research seeks to lay the groundwork for scholarly attention and interdisciplinary collaboration on Bhimtilla, addressing both the physical site and its representation in the broader Buddhist heritage discourse.

### **Aims and Objectives**

**Aim:** To investigate, document, and contextualize the archaeological and historical significance of Bhimtilla as an overlooked center of Buddhist heritage in the Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh.

### **Objectives**

1. **Documentation of Visible Relics:** To identify, photograph, describe, and catalog the visible Buddhist relics, such as stupas, sculptures, and rock-cut features currently exposed at Bhimtilla.
2. **Historical Contextualization:** To place Bhimtilla within the timeline of Buddhist expansion across Northern India and the Western Himalayas, particularly in relation to other regional Buddhist sites.
3. **Comparative Site Analysis:** To draw comparisons with similar but better-documented Buddhist sites like Tabo (Spiti), Dhankar (Lahaul), and Shravasti (Uttar Pradesh) in terms of architecture, iconography, and monastic layout.
4. **Excavation and Preservation Strategy:** To propose a detailed roadmap for archaeological excavation, conservation strategies, and preventive measures to protect the site from further degradation.

5. **Heritage Integration and Awareness:** To integrate Bhimtilla into academic curricula, public history initiatives, and cultural tourism circuits, promoting local involvement and institutional support.

**Methodology:** This study employs a qualitative, exploratory, and comparative archaeological approach, integrating field-based insights with secondary literature and local ethnographic input. The methodology is organized under the following components:

1. **Literature Review:** A thorough review of existing secondary literature—including academic books, peer-reviewed articles, ASI bulletins, and grey literature—is conducted to establish the historical backdrop of Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh. The review also identifies theoretical frameworks used in the study of similar lesser-known Buddhist sites.
2. **Field Observation and Remote Documentation:** Geospatial analysis using satellite imagery, GPS tagging, and field photography is undertaken to create an initial digital archive of the site's visible features. Descriptive notes on stupa mounds, sculptural fragments, and other architectural elements are recorded.
3. **Oral Histories and Ethnographic Accounts:** Interviews are conducted with local residents, elders, and amateur historians from Chetru and Pathiar to collect oral traditions and anecdotal evidence about Bhimtilla. These help in understanding community memory and socio-cultural continuity.
4. **Comparative Archaeological Framework:** The site's relics and layout (as inferred from field observation) are analyzed in comparison with known Buddhist sites from the same period and region. This includes a stylistic, material, and spatial comparative analysis.
5. **Policy and Heritage Review:** Government records, ASI heritage lists, and tourism development plans are analyzed to evaluate the site's exclusion from official heritage frameworks. Recommendations are proposed to include Bhimtilla in future state and central conservation projects.
6. **Ethical Considerations and Cultural Sensitivity:** All field interactions are carried out with full consent from local communities, with an emphasis on respecting the sacred and ancestral value of the land. The study avoids any intrusive excavation and relies on non-invasive documentation.

## Analysis

1. **Geographical Location and Setting:** Bhimtilla is strategically located near Chetru village in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. Perched atop a modest hillock and encircled by cultivated fields and deciduous forest cover, the site commands an elevated view of the surrounding valley. Its proximity to perennial water sources and accessible pathways connecting the plains to the Himalayan interiors would have made it an ideal location for a Buddhist monastic complex or a meditative retreat on a pilgrimage route. The terrain and vegetation suggest long-term settlement potential, with natural resources conducive to sustaining a small monastic population.
2. **Archaeological Features:** Preliminary field observations and oral accounts indicate that Bhimtilla hosts multiple archaeological indicators suggestive of its Buddhist heritage. Among the observable features are:
  - **Rock-cut stupa foundations** arranged in a semi-circular fashion, indicative of typical votive stupas used in monastic precincts.
  - **Stone sculpture fragments**, including pedestal bases and partially eroded relief carvings, consistent with early Buddhist iconographic styles.

- **Platform-like stone arrangements**, which may correspond to remains of viharas or congregational spaces.
- **Small chaitya or relic chambers**, typically used to enshrine sacred objects or relics of revered monks.
- **Inscriptions**, now heavily weathered, possibly in early scripts like Brahmi or Kharosthi, whose presence suggests formal religious activity.

These architectural remnants align with Buddhist monastic architecture from the Kushana to Gupta periods (2nd–6th century CE), marking Bhimtilla as a once-active center of Buddhist practice.

3. **Cultural and Religious Context:** The architectural forms and spatial layout of Bhimtilla reflect elements of Mahayana Buddhist tradition, especially the presence of stupas and chaitya-like structures. However, stylistic ambiguity in some artifacts opens the possibility of earlier Hinayana influence, reflecting a transitional religious phase in the region. This aligns with other sites in the Kangra valley, such as Pathiar, where early Brahmi inscriptions and stupas indicate a fluid movement between Hinayana and Mahayana practices.

The etymology of "Bhimtilla" also adds a mytho-cultural layer to its significance. Local folklore associates the site with Bhima, a Pandava prince from the Mahabharata. It is likely that Buddhist missionaries strategically appropriated such pre-existing cultural narratives to foster local acceptance—an approach common in Buddhist assimilation practices across India.

4. **Comparative Archaeological Context:** While Bhimtilla does not yet boast elaborate frescoes or inscriptions like Tabo (Spiti) or Ajanta (Maharashtra), its material culture shares notable architectural and iconographic parallels with:
  - **Tabo Monastery (Spiti):** Though more expansive, both sites exhibit elevated positioning and religious iconography carved into stone.
  - **Ratnagiri and Lalitgiri (Odisha):** Like Bhimtilla, these sites remained obscure until their systematic excavation unveiled their spiritual and architectural significance.
  - **Udayagiri (Odisha):** Known for rock-cut architecture, Udayagiri's use of monastic chambers and relic spaces resonates with the platform-like structures at Bhimtilla.

These comparisons illustrate that archaeological modesty should not preclude historical significance. Smaller Buddhist sites often served as satellite institutions, supporting monastic travel, pilgrimage networks, and localized religious activities.

5. **Local Awareness and Heritage Condition:** Interactions with residents of Chetru and neighboring villages reveal a fragile link between the community and its heritage. Elderly villagers recollect stories of Buddhist relics and spiritual energy surrounding the site. However, there is no formal awareness, interpretive signage, or conservation effort in place. In several instances, stones believed to be part of ancient structures have been repurposed for local construction, and frequent agricultural activity in the area continues to erode unprotected relics. The lack of institutional presence, absence of protective fencing, and encroachments due to farmland expansion reflect a critical threat to Bhimtilla's survival as an archaeological site.

**Summary and Conclusion:** Bhimtilla emerges from obscurity as a site of quiet archaeological importance, holding within its soil the remains of a once-active node in the Buddhist spiritual map of Northern India. The presence of stupa remnants, sculptural fragments, and relic chambers firmly situates the site within the early Buddhist monastic tradition, potentially dating from the Kushana to Gupta periods. While not yet excavated or widely studied, the features observed

suggest Bhimtilla may have served as a resting and worship site for Buddhist monks and pilgrims traversing the Himalayan corridor.

Its geographic positioning, religious relics, and cultural layers—including the syncretism of local legends with Buddhist narratives—further underscore its historical significance. The comparative study situates Bhimtilla alongside other small but symbolically potent Buddhist sites that have only recently entered mainstream scholarly discourse after systematic excavations.

The lack of preservation measures, documentation, and institutional recognition constitutes a grave threat to Bhimtilla's archaeological and cultural value. This research thus calls for immediate academic attention, multidisciplinary excavation, and community-inclusive heritage conservation. By bringing Bhimtilla into scholarly and public conversations, we can recover not only a lost piece of Kangra's Buddhist past but also create avenues for cultural tourism, education, and regional pride.

Ultimately, Bhimtilla is not just a forgotten archaeological site; it is a silent testimony to a time when the teachings of the Buddha echoed through the Himalayan valleys, awaiting rediscovery and restoration.

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