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Shakirullah and Ruth Young



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## **Editorial Note**

*Pakistan Heritage* is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal, published annually. This volume included the papers on different aspects of archaeology and history of Pakistan and adjacent regions with subject matter ranging from the Prehistoric to the British Period.

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## **Editors**

# Some Stucco Sculptures from Stratified Excavations in Gandhara

GHAYYUR SHAHAB AND JAN MUHAMMAD

## Abstract

*This paper aims to focus on stucco sculptures from stratified excavation in Gandhar (the ancient name for the present-day Peshawar Valley), situated at the gateway to the Indian Subcontinent. Due to its strategic location along the ancient Silk Road, which connected Gandhara with China, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean, the region became a hub of cultural and economic wealth. During the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, the development of a distinctive art style for promoting Buddhism emerged, later recognized as Gandhara art. This art form was primarily expressed in three mediums: stone, stucco, and terracotta (Dani, 2008: 127), with occasional use of metals and paintings. Among these, stucco was one of the dominant mediums, second only to stone sculptures (Dar, 2010: 113-114). Stucco sculptures have been discovered at nearly all major Gandharan sites. However, before the subcontinent independence, systematic and stratified excavations were rare, and the focus was mainly on collecting antiquities, often without recording their precise context. In more recent times, significant advancements have been made in scientific excavation practices. Institutions such as the Archaeology Department at the University of Peshawar and the Department of Archaeology Govt. of Pakistan in collaboration with the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa along with contributions from foreign universities and researchers, have played a pivotal role. These efforts have led to the discovery of numerous stucco sculptures, excavated with proper stratigraphic context. As a result, these findings have provided more accurate dating, helping to trace the origins of Gandharan stucco art, particularly those associated with Buddhist traditions.*

**Keywords:** Peshawar, Gandhara, Buddhism, Ancient Art, Stucco Sculptures, Excavations

## Introduction

The earliest documented use of stucco in Pakistan can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, specifically between 2600 and 1900 BC, with prominent examples found at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (Varma K. M, 1983: 83; Kenoyer, 2021: 39-100; Hameed, Samad, Kenoyer, & Sher, 2019: 79-92).

In contrast, Western nations did not showcase stucco until after the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. Its decorative use as a wall material emerged in Roman architecture around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, while relief applications of stucco can be traced to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (Fletcher, 1975: 183; Vanni, 2021; Lapatin, 2014: 215). In Greece, stucco began to be used around the mid - 7<sup>th</sup> century BC for coating structures made from both stone and sun-dried bricks (Fletcher, 1975: 158; Kubica, 2024: 1003). Egypt New Kingdom, approximately 1580 BC, also shows evidence of stucco use (Noblecourt, 1960: 18-19; Marey & Abo El-Yamin, 2021: 31-45. Cole, Miniaci, & Lacovara, 2022: 237-259), and the material was first employed in the Middle East during the Parthian dynasty before being adopted by the Sasanians (Pourshariati, 2017: 1-552; Shayegan, 2022: 213-247).

In the Gandhāra region, stucco was introduced with Iranian invasions around CE 100 (Dani, 2008: 128; Behrendt, 2004: 268-287). During excavations at Taxila, a small stupa decorated with acanthus foliage



from the pre-Parthian period was uncovered by Marshall (Marshall, 1945: 513 & 1960: 31; Boardman, 2003: 348-374). Sirkap is believed to be one of the first sites in Gandhāra to produce stucco sculptures, dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (Dar, 2010: 128; Marshall, 1945: 513-518). Other prominent sites for these sculptures include Jamal Garhi, Sahri Bahlol, Takht-i-Bahi, in Mardan, Shanisha and Butkara-III in Swat as well as Hadda in Afghanistan, and as the recently excavated Aziz Dheri site in Swabi district (Nasim Khan, 2010). Only a limited number of Gandhāra sites have been excavated with rigorous scientific methods. Early excavation primarily aimed at artifact collection, while later efforts adopted a more systematic approach. However, many of the initial excavations, such as those at Sahri Bahlol and Takht-i-Bahi, did not adequately address proper periodization. Information regarding the chronological development of stucco sculptures has been compiled from nine different sites, which will be studied/examined further below.

## **Taxila**

Taxila, also known as Taksasila, is referenced as a prominent center of education in several ancient texts, including the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Jataka tales. Alexander the Great visited Taxila in 326 BC, marking the beginning of its prominence in recorded history. In subsequent centuries, the city was also visited by renowned Chinese pilgrims, including Faxian in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE and Xuanzang in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. The earliest systematic documentation of Taxila ruins was conducted by Alexander Cunningham, who identified and explored key sites (Cunningham, 1871: 120-138). Later, extensive excavations were led by Sir John Marshall, spanning from the spring of 1913 until 1934 (Marshall, 1945, three volumes: Dani, 1986).

Among the significant sites in the Taxila Valley excavated by Cunningham and Marshall are Dharmarajika, Jandial, Mohra Moradu, Kunal, Jaulian, and subsequently the three cities of Taxila have been also excavated such as Sirkap, Bhira Mound, Sirsukh. Buddhist stucco figures were discovered at nearly all these locations, with the exception of Bhira Mound. Prominently, at Sirkap, a Bodhisattva head adorned with a simple three-roll turban was unearthed at the Parthians level, as documented by Marshall (Marshall, Volume-II, 1945, Plate No. 19 and 149: p. 519). Stucco sculptures from other Taxila sites have been dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Jaulian stands out as the most significant site for stucco production, featuring extensive decorative stucco figures in its stupas, some of which date back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE (Marshall, 1945: 523). Furthermore, Mohra Moradu yielded numerous detached heads and other stucco fragments.

## **Shaikhan Dheri**

Shaikhan Dheri, located in Charsadda, Archaeological excavations were carried out in 1963-64 by the Archaeology Department of the University of Peshawar. The excavation work allowed researchers to outline the historical development of the site, categorizing it into three phases across seven distinct periods. During this process, a variety of artifacts, including coins, sculptures, terracotta figurines, and other antiquities, were unearthed. Prominently, stone sculptures linked to Buddhism were discovered, particularly from the first phase and the second period, which corresponds to the reigns of the Middle or Great Kushans, specifically under Kanishka (127-140 CE) and Huvishka (160-190 CE). Moreover, stucco sculptures were attributed to the later Kushan period (under the rule of Vasudeva). Among these stucco

artifacts, depictions of the Buddha in seated positions, reflecting Dhyana (meditative) and Abhaya (fearless) postures, are of particular significance (Dani, 1965-66: 45).

### **Bambolai**

It is located about ten miles from Chakdara along the main Aspan road in Lower Dir district, the site was excavated during 1968-69. During these excavations, stucco heads were discovered on both sides of the stupa, along with a stone panel depicting the Dipankara Jataka. According to the archaeologist overseeing the excavation, this stone panel was not originally from the site but was brought in from elsewhere. Furthermore, several Buddhist terracotta heads were found, including an exceptionally large one. This particular head, measuring approximately ten inches in height, features smooth facial contours, half-closed eyes, a straight nose, and rounded cheeks. The recovered stucco heads share similar stylistic attributes (Pl. I). The archaeologist classified these artifacts as belonging to the last phase of occupation at Chatpat, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE (Dani, 1968-69: 63).

### **Chatpat**

Chatpat, a small village located in district of the Lower Dir approximately which two kilometers from the Chakdara and it was excavated in March 1968. It is important to discuss here that three different occupation phases have been reported by the field director which spanning from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. Artifacts from the final period of occupation include stucco sculptures, notably found in situ. Among these is a molded figure of a seated Buddha in Dhyani mudra. A rough stone was placed behind the figure's head, functioning as a support to secure it within a niche. The head, along with its halo, was crafted separately and later attached to the body at the neck, with the joint concealed by the folds of the drapery. The facial features of the sculpture are finely smoothed, with the Buddha's eyes depicted in a half-closed, serene expression (Pl. II & III). The arrangement of the hair, with vertical lines interspersed with dots, along with the design of the top knot, suggests an emulation of the ridged style characteristic of Gandhara art (Dani, 1968-69: 89).

### **Shnaisha**

Shnaisha Gumbat, is another important stupa site (Buddhist) which is situated about 6 km south of (Saidu Sharif) in Swat. In 1989 this site have been excavated by Mr. Nazir Khan, Custodian of the Swat Museum. Additional excavations were conducted by the University of Peshawar's Department of Archaeology in 1990. The site yielded a variety of artifacts, including sculptures and coins, which date back to the Kushan, Kushano-Sasanian, and Hindu Shahi periods. Among the findings were stucco sculptures from the late Kushan period. Noteworthy is a head of the Buddha, characterized by a high *uṣṇīṣa* (cranial protuberance), half-closed eyes, and delicately incised, curved hair lines (Pl. IV & V). Furthermore, a large, modeled Buddha head and a partially preserved bust of a Bodhisattva were also discovered at the site (Rahman, 1993: 33).

### **Marjani**

The Marjani site, situated about 21 km northwest of Mingora, was excavated in 1982 as part of the "Gandhara Archaeological Project" by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Peshawar. The

chronological framework of the site was established based on coins, with the first phase attributed to the Kushan period and the second to the Kushano-Sasanian era (Khan S. N, 1995: 25). Most of the sculptures uncovered were found near votive stupa No. 3 in trench B- 4. While many were carved from green phyllite stone, some were also molded in stucco. These artifacts are attributed to the late Kushan period. While most of the stucco sculptures suffered considerable damage, one remarkable exception was a Buddha head (Khan S. N, 1995: 13). This sculpture is characterized by half-closed eyes, a slim, straight nose, a small, closed mouth, and a smooth, oval-shaped face (Pl. VI).

### **Aziz Dheri**

It is located about three kilometers northeast of Ganghu Dher village in the Swabi district, since 1993, the site has been excavated periodically by the (Directorate of Archaeology, and Museums Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), in collaboration with the University of Peshawar Department of Archaeology. The site has been periodically excavated since 1993. These excavations have unearthed a wide range of cultural artifacts, including sculptures, coins, religious and secular structures, and other antiquities. The site history spans from at least the Indo-Greek period to the Islamic era (Nasim Khan, 2010: 1). Sculptures discovered at the site date from the early Kushan period through to the Hindu Shahi period. The earliest stucco figures identified belong to the late Kushan period. Among them is a male head with a fleshy, round face, wide, open eyes coated with red ochre, a small, closed mouth, and a nose that has suffered damage (Pl. VII). The facial features reflect the later style of Gandhara art (Nasim Khan, 2010c: 43). Another stucco figure, possibly depicting a Bodhisattva, dates to the Kidarite period (Pl. VIII). This figure also has a round face, open eyes, and a small mouth, with features such as open eyes, fleshy cheeks, and ornate hair styling suggesting later artistic developments (Nasim Khan, 2010c: 60). Additional stucco sculptures from Aziz Dheri show similar characteristics, indicating a continuation of these artistic trends into a later phase.

### **Sampur Dheri (Baja Swabi)**

It is located near the village of Baja, approximately 10 km east of Swabi district, this archaeological site was first documented by James Abbot in 1854. Subsequent surveys were carried out by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Peshawar, led by Shah Nazar Khan. The first organized excavation was undertaken in 2011 by the (Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). These explorations unearthed a variety of artifacts, such as coins, stone carvings, stucco sculptures, and other significant relics. Although many of the stucco sculptures were found scattered among the debris, a few were still in their original positions, set along the plinth of the main stupa wall. Furthermore, within the main stupa, coins associated with the Kushan emperor Huvishka were discovered, shedding light on the site's historical significance during the Kushan period. Although many of the stucco figures were severely damaged and missing their heads (Pl. IX, X), it is remarkable that these sculptures are dated to the mid-Kushan period (Khan & Khan, 2011: 43-68).

### **Discussion**

This study focuses on sites that have been scientifically excavated, where the materials, particularly Buddhist stucco sculptures, have been dated based on stratigraphic evidence. The objective of our study was to analyze the chronology and distinct features of Gandharan stucco sculptures. The findings indicate

that the earliest examples of stucco and terracotta Buddhist figures were discovered in Taxila, with some dating back to the Parthian period at Sirkap. According to Marshall research, one renowned artifact from this era is a stucco head of a Bodhisattva (Marshall, Plate 149, No. 19 of the Volume -II, 1945: 519). If this identification is correct, it suggests that the tradition of Buddhist stucco art in Gandhara began at a relatively early stage.

The second significant site is Sampur Dheri Baja (Pls. IX, X), where stucco figures from the mid-Kushan period, particularly from the reign of Huvishka, were found. Unfortunately, many of these sculptures are damaged, making stylistic analysis difficult. The remaining seven sites that yielded stucco sculptures date predominantly to the later Kushan period, around the fourth century CE. This suggests that while artists generally adhered to earlier models, there were notable changes over time. The naturalistic style of earlier periods gave way to exaggerated features, with rounder, fleshier faces becoming more common. In later examples, the eyes were often depicted as wide open and bulging (Pls. VII & VIII).

## **Conclusion**

The earliest stucco sculptures in the Peshawar Valley and its surroundings appear to have originated during the period of the Middle Kushans and continued into the later Kushan era. However, based on stylistic analysis, sculptures from sites like Sahri Bahlol and Takht-i-Bahi exhibit characteristics that strongly suggest an earlier style, possibly dating back to the 1st century CE. In the historical development of stucco sculptures in the Gandhāra region reveals a rich artistic tradition that dates back to the early influences of the Indus Valley Civilization and continued through various cultural exchanges, particularly during the Kushan period. The archaeological findings across multiple sites, including Taxila, Shaikhān Dheri, and Sampur Dheri, provide crucial insights into the chronological evolution of these artifacts. The earliest stucco examples, notably from the Parthian and mid-Kushan periods, indicate a foundation for the later, more elaborate styles that emerged. As the tradition progressed, artistic expressions shifted from naturalistic depictions to more stylized and exaggerated forms, reflecting broader changes in aesthetic preferences. This study underscores the significance of rigorous scientific excavation in understanding the artistic heritage of Gandhāra, highlighting the need for continued research to further illuminate the complexities of its stucco art and its role in Buddhist iconography.

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## Plates



**Pl. I:** Showing different stucco heads from Bambolai Chakdara (Dani, 1968-69: 63)



**Pl. II:** Shows a stucco sculpture (Dani, 1968-69: 63)



**Pl. III:** Stucco sculpture from Chatpat (Dani, 1968-69: 89)



**Pl. IV:** Stucco head from Shnaisha Swat  
(Rahman, 1993: 33)



**Pl. V:** Stucco head from Shnaisha Swat  
(Rahman, 1993: 33)





**Pl. VI:** Stucco Buddha head from Marjani (Khan S. N, 1995: 13)



**Pl. VII:** Stucco head from Aziz Dheri (Nasim Khan, 2010)



**Pl. VIII:** Stucco figure from Sampur Dheri Baja (Khan & Khan, 2011: 43-68)



**Pl. IX:** Stucco figure from Sampur Dheri Baja (Khan & Khan, 2011: 43-68)



**Pl. X:** Stucco sculpture from Sampur Dheri Baja (Khan & Khan, 2011: 43-68)