
Gandhara Art: An Appraisal

_____ Tauqeer Ahmad Warraich
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Introduction

The rivers all over the world, particularly in ancient times, had greatly contributed and facilitated in offering readymade resources and cradles to early human societies. This important role of the rivers was rightly recognized and appreciated by one of the scholars of 5th century BCE, who after visiting Egypt termed its ancient civilization as the “gift of the Nile”. Even some of the ancient civilizations after their discovery have been designated after the name of the rivers on the banks of which they took their origin and flourished for millennia, such as “The Indus Civilization”, “Mesopotamian Civilization” etc. That’s why the rivers are correctly described as the “Cradle of the Civilization”. Coupled with the rivers the physical setup as well as the location of a particular land or regional territory immensely rendered to the development of the human societies to all aspects of its life pattern and even in this age of advance technology physical setup of a country or political entity has not minimized. The geo-political location of a country in this modern and advance world is regarded a fundamental thing which plays very important role in its economy as well as the aspects of life.

Similarly, the same happened with the country of ancient Gandhara, frequently described by the Chinese pilgrims in

their itinerary records as Kien-to-lo¹, which was identified with present valley of the Peshawar². The earliest reference however about this country occurs in the oldest literature of South Asia named Rigveda composed in round about from 1500-1000 BCE³. From where did ancient Gandhara derive its nomenclature, apparently seems hard to answer precisely. Did the authors of the Rigveda, who distinguished or styled themselves as Aryan, comparing themselves with those of the natives whom they remembered or termed as Dasas or Dasyus⁴, render this name to the valley of Peshawar? Was the country of Gandhara already existing with same nomenclature before the arrival of the Aryans to the west of the Indus, as it is generally referred to in the ancient literature of South Asia, and also in the books of Classical writers?

If we look at the pattern of the nomenclature of this region where once Gandhara located we may be able to find out the possible reasons and causes which contributed to the origin of its name. For instance, we frequently come across with the names of a number of tracts of land the second parts of which end with 'hara', meaning 'land', such as Nagarhara⁵, Pothohar⁶, Vanhar⁷, Nirahar⁸ etc. So far as the first part of these nomenclatures is concerned, obviously, they have derived from the physical potential or location of the respective regions or lands or cities. Most probably, same happened with Gandhara that the Aryans (authors of Rigveda) named this country after observing its most striking physical, topographical as well as geographical feature i.e., Gand or Kand or Kund, means pond, or water reservoir. Interestingly, the last word Kund still survives as the lower course of the Kabul below Manshera where it joins the Abasin or Indus is known as Kund (Pond). The heartland of Gandhara (Peshawar valley) was comprised of Mardan division (KPK— a province of Pakistan) through which the Kabul and Swat rivers are traversing through different channels and courses with a tendency of converging on into a single stream above the town of Naushera before merging

into the Indus. Particularly, during the rainy season these rivers together swell out of their courses and convert the whole valley into a huge reservoir or lake⁹ or Kund, as it seems certain that in ancient times bursting of rivers would have repeatedly been happened and it became most prominent topographical as well as physical feature of Peshawar valley from which finally it derived its nomenclature i.e., Gandhara or Kandhar or Kundhara—the land marked by reservoir.. The present Peshawar Valley converging on the Mardan division probably formed its heartland. As a frontier state Gandhara witnessed the rise and fall of several empires some of which were quite distant and therefore of a marginal interest, while some others, particularly the more ambitious among them, succeeding in intruding upon its soil. Quite natural the political boundaries of Gandhara were never fixed, wavered with the strength and weakness of its rulers. Xuan Zang delineates the actual boundaries¹⁰ though his description may only be relevant to the time of his visit (middle of the seventh century AD). According to his information Gandhara was 1000 *li* (about 166 miles) from east to west and 800 *li* (about 133 miles) from north to south. The area thus marked probably had Lamghan and Jalalabad (in Afghanistan) on the west, the hills of Swat and Buner on the North, the Indus on the east and the hills of Kalabagh on the south.¹¹

Owing to its peculiar geographical location Gandhara had been playing an interesting role in the development of culture and civilization in South Asia. Throughout its history, it has been receiving cultural currents from Western Asia, Iran and Central Asia not to preserve them in their pristine form but to mould them in its own crucible before passing them on the Indian plains, or vice versa. It was, in fact, the meeting place of several diverse cultures: Achaemenians from Iran, Greeks from Bactria, Kushans from Central Asia and Mauryans from Pataliputra have all left their indelible imprints upon its soil. It is interesting to note that none of the foreign cultures could succeed in completely replacing

the indigenous cultural pattern of Gandhara. This was largely due to the resilience and vitality of the cultural forces unleashed by the newly introduced religion of the Buddha, which not only withstood the pressure of incessant foreign invasions but also allowed alien elements to get completely absorbed into the mainstream. Even Buddhism, when it reached Gandhara, took a new turn of its life and developed into a world religion. This was popularly known as the Mahayana (the Great Vehicle). Mahayanism in its turn gave birth to the most tangible form of the civilization of Gandhara—the Gandhara art—which we shall discuss below.

Gandhara Art Terminology

With the growth of knowledge in the 19th century concerning the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, it came to be generally recognized that the valley of Peshawar in the Khyber Pakhtun Khawa (abbreviated as KPK), was anciently known as Gandhara as indicated above. Scholars took up this name and, as a matter of convenience extended it to designate the art pieces found there. Thus the term Gandhara art came into vogue.

Brief Historical Background

From the conquest of the Achaemenian emperor Cyrus, the Great (559-30 BCE)¹², to about ACE 465 when northwest India was overrun by the Hunas or Huns or Ephthalites¹³, Gandhara remained under foreign yoke for about one thousand years, excepting a brief interval marked by the Mauryan rule (305-190 BCE)¹⁴. The foreign invaders hailed from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and in each case brought new ideas to enrich the local culture. But, inspite of the tremendous pressure which these foreign cultures must have exerted on the local way of life, the bulk of the population of Gandhara remained faithful to their own language and culture in which Buddhism played a

dominant role. The art of Gandhara is therefore a by-product of Buddhism representing an interesting medley of cultural flavours. Viewed as a whole, it appears to have been the outcome of a kind of religious propaganda which, in the form of sculptures and paintings, brought before the eyes of the worshippers those aspects of the religion which lent themselves to easy representation in pictures. This propaganda was primarily based upon presenting selected events from the actual life of the Buddha and his earlier births as Bodhisattva (i.e. Buddha-to-be) in sitting as well as standing positions. Initially the Buddha was represented merely symbolically and not physically. The presence of the Buddha is symbolically marked by carving his turban placed upon his seat, stupa encircled by railing, Buddha pada, bodhi tree etc.¹⁵. But, whether the panel reliefs with such symbols, or bearing the figure of the Buddha appeared first or the independent image of the Buddha still remains a controversial point. The drum of a stupa from Sikri re-erected in the Lahore Museum gives a good idea of how sculptures were employed to propagate the Buddhist faith. Thus Gandhara art is, first and foremost, a Buddhist art and must be judged by its success in fulfilling its purpose as a sacred art, designed to illustrate the history and legends of the Buddhist faith and to glorify the memory of its founder.

Materials

Materials chiefly employed by the sculptors consisted of a kind of bluish stone or schist, clay and stucco. The use of wood has also been attested at some places. The stone was evidently quarried from the hills of Swat and Buner. Of these, schist must have been an object of flourishing trade as selection of huge stone blocks and their transportation to the open country involved considerable effort. Whether the use of stucco and stone went side by side or one after the other, opinions differ. Sometimes, arguments are expressed in favour of a later school of Gandhara art (Indo-Afghan) in

which clay and stucco played a significant role. In this regard the remarks of Sir John Marshall are worth quoting. He remarks thus: "For by this time (AD 140 and the break-up of the Kushan empire) the Buddha and Bodhisattva images had become supreme and ubiquitous as objects of adoration, and were being endlessly multiplied on every imaginable scale, from the tiny figures impressed on clay sealing and buried in the heart of stupas to the colossal cult statues enshrined in chapels, 30 feet, and more in height. And this kind of decoration, with its myriads of duplicated figures, was of course, at once facilitated and encouraged by the use of clay and stucco in place of stone"¹⁶.

Specimens of Buddhist sculptures have been found in an area much wider than the Peshawar Valley. The boundaries of this vast area can only be loosely determined. On the northwest it is marked by the Ghorband and Panjshir valleys in Afghanistan with a northward extension in the Qunduz valley along the traditional trade route,¹⁷ north of the Peshawar valley numerous sites and sculptures have also been found in Swat, Dir and Bajaur. On the east Taxila marks the sites of several stupas, monasteries and cities, though sculptures and Buddhist monuments have been reported from areas much further afield such as Manikiala and also from Rokhri near Mianwali. Although the Kabul valley is generally looked upon as the southern limit, sculptures have been found in the excavations of Tapa Sardar near Ghazni as well. Several sites exist in the Kohat district of which sculptures have recently been illegally excavated and taken away. These territories may be conveniently referred to as the artistic province of Gandhara art.

Within this artistic province territorial names other than Gandhara were also known. The prosperous valley of the river Swat (ancient Suvastu) was anciently known as Udyana, variantly recorded Uḍḍiyana, Uḍḍyana and Oḍḍiyana¹⁸. The Udyana valley was visited by several Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who mention its numerous monasteries and its own

government. A *Kharoshthi* inscription of the early Kushan times mentions a certain Senavarma, an Oḍi king¹⁹. The name closely corresponds with Hodi raja of the folklore, who was defeated by Maḥmud of Ghazna early in the 11th century AD. Several villages in Bajaur, Dir, Swat and the Peshawar valleys still bear the name Odigram (Odi village). The term Uddyana / Oddiyana may therefore be translated as the 'Odi Land' instead of 'garden' as it is usually translated²⁰.

Another group of *Kharoshthi* inscriptions mention Apracha kings. This name is almost identical with Piracha / Paracha—the name of an ethnic group now scattered in the Peshawar valley and the adjoining districts of the Panjab. The present Chach plain to the east of the river Indus above Attock was known as Chukhsa. The territory of Kapisha, with a city of the same name, may be identified with the Panjshir-Ghorband valley in Afghanistan. The name Khavada mentioned in a *Kharoshthi* inscription is thought to correspond to modern Khawak or Wardak about 65km southwest of Kabul. On the road between Kabul and the Khyber Pass were successively the districts of Lampaka (present Lamghan or Laghman) and Nagarahara (corrupted as Nangarehar), presently known as Jalalabad²¹. The district of Hazara to the east of the Indus in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is mentioned by Xuang Zang as Wu-la-shi²² or Uraca or Arsaces.²³ This name has been identified with Hazara.²⁴

No detailed archaeological atlas or gazetteer is available for this artistic province. Drawing much upon Chinese sources, Fouche²⁵ carried out a geographical survey of the Peshawar valley and gave an early account of sites and their locations. Stein's survey of Swat was the first of its kind in this region; it threw a flood of light on the archaeological and geographical setup of the country. Deydiers's bibliography arranged by regions and sites also include Afghanistan. Tissot²⁶ and Errington²⁷ have published more detailed maps.

The Surveys of India and Pakistan also give maps but these are uneven and incomplete.

Gandhara art is not the only name for the Buddhist art of the Peshawar valley. Other names such as Greco-Buddhist, Aryans, Indo-Greek and Indo-Bactrian²⁸ and Roman-Buddhist²⁹ have also been suggested. But these names, as Grunwedel³⁰ has rightly pointed out, "are open to the objection of implying a theory respecting their origin. Gandharan sculptures are entirely connected with Buddhist iconography, though many of them manifest some western or classical influence. Since they are found almost exclusively, or at least, a great majority of them, in the country which early writers named Gandhara, they may be very properly characterized by the area of their origin". Gandhara art is therefore the most appropriate name for them.

Sculptures

Sculptures found in the artistic province of Gandhara may be broadly divided into three groups:

- A. Independent cult images
- B. Non-Buddhist deities
- C. Relief panels

Which of these groups is earlier in date is difficult to say. But, since stupa worship started earlier than image worship and relief panels were fixed in stupas, the reliefs may be earlier than independent cult images.

Group-A: Independent Cult Images

i. Buddha

The cult images, seated or standing, are usually frontal and share certain bodily signs called *lakṣhaṇas*³⁷. A cross-

legged meditation pose is very common for seated images of the Buddha, but, in some rare cases, he is also shown seated in a chair with pendent legs in the so-called European fashion (*pralambapadasana*)³². With new developments in Buddhism which took expression in the Mahayana (i.e. Great Vehicle) philosophy, the figure of the Buddha received a transcendental and cosmic character. This we find remarkably expressed in the art of Gandhara where the Buddha image gained in height and even in the reliefs, where he is accompanied by his associates; his personality towers over everything else. A fine example of this tendency may be seen in the Peshawar Museum. The Buddha stands to a height of 2.64m and is the tallest statue known from Gandhara. The great Buddhas of 38 to 55 m carved out of rock at Bamian (blasted some years ago) in Afghanistan are an exceptional expression of this tendency. The size of available stone blocks and the difficulty of transporting them did put some restraint on the dimension of independent images. But the zealous Buddhist artists found a way out: clay and stucco, the more amenable materials, could address the problem of achieving greater height. Among the thirty chapels at Takht-i-Bahi in what was called the "court of colossi", between the main stupa and the monastery, some, when first seen were still from 25 to 30 feet (8.375-10.05m) in height.³³ The Peshawar Museum has recently acquired a stucco head 52 cm in height.³⁴ At the Dharmarajika at Taxila, now incomplete stucco image housed in a chapel of which the walls were evidently intended to support a considerable weight, would, from its proportions, had reached a height of 10.675m.³⁵

The images of the Buddha show some special signs or symbols. The signs for a transcendental being or a Universal Monarch as recorded in literary sources are 32 principal and 80 secondary.³⁶ But all of these do not appear on the images of the Buddha. The most prominent among those that appear are *ushnisha*, *urṇa* and wheel. The *ushnisha* is represented as a bun of curly hair on top of the head, while

urna is a tuft of hair between the eyebrows often indicated by a depression meant obviously for a semiprecious stone. The wheel appears on the palms and soles of the Buddha images. Except in the smaller reliefs the Buddha is rarely without a halo which looks like a disc behind the head. A whole-body or aureole which may be round or oval also appears in a few late reliefs and bronzes.

According to the *Vinaya* (i.e. discipline books) the monastic robes are mainly three. Each one is an unsewn oblong piece of cloth made of a variety of materials. One of these is a lower undergarment round the middle (*antaravasaka*). The second is an upper underrobe over the left shoulder (*uttaranga*). The third is an overrobe (*saṃghaṭi*) to cover only the left shoulder³⁷ or both. The Buddha as a cult image wears these monastic robes. But it is difficult to be exactly sure how these robes were worn in Gandhara. Opinions differ regarding the exact position of these robes.

The term *mudra* (pose) is used to designate certain significant gestures performed by the hands. In later Buddhism *mudras* were very many but only a few appear in Gandhara art. The most common is *abhyamudra* meaning "without fear". It is performed by the Buddha by raising the right hand almost to the height of the shoulder. From the situations where it occurs in the narrative reliefs it seems to have a wider range of meanings, not only the offer of security but also instruction and assent.³⁸ Some of the seated figures show the right hand lying above the left, palm upward, in the lap. This is known as *dhyanamudra*, i.e. meditation pose. Another pose called *dharmacakramudra*, i.e. preaching gesture, is expressed by bringing both the hands before the chest. The *bhumisparshamudra* meaning the "earth-touching pose" was performed by the Bodhisattva before the Enlightenment, when he called upon the earth-goddess to bear witness in the context of Maras' Attack.

The problem concerning the origin of the Buddha image has not yet been convincingly resolved. Assuming

western inspiration for the form and origin of the Buddha image, some scholars see it as adapted from the Greco-Roman Apollo.³⁹ Others have suggested late Roman Republican starting or the early imperial toga statue as the possible sources of inspiration.⁴⁰ Golubew⁴¹ and Coomaraswamy⁴² suggest standing Yaksha and Yogin of ancient India art as prototypes. It has also been argued that there was no need for a European stimulus and that Gandhara and Mathura schools of Buddhist art could have evolved the image independently.⁴³ Coins of Kanishka (c. AD 100 or little later) showing well developed Buddha image are also cited as postulating an earlier and established form.

ii. Bodhisattva

A magnificent group of sculptures in Gandhara art is represented by the Bodhisattva figures. The *Jataka* stories which describe the previous forms of existence of a Buddha naturally led to the creation of a being whose characteristic (*stava*, Pali *satta*) was enlightenment (bodhi) and who, while doing pious actions in the presence of a Buddha expressed his desire to appear in the world in a later incarnation. Gautama did the same before former Buddhas. Thus Bodhisattva is the one who is on the way to Buddhahood. The sum total of his good actions allows him at each re-incarnation to be born as a superior being in a constantly ascending scale of goodness, till, in the Tushita heaven, he resolves to accept another human existence so that he may show the confused and perplexed humanity the way of salvation.

In theory the Bodhisattvas are innumerable and belong only to Mahayana or northern school. Except Maitreya—the Buddha of the future—they are unknown in the southern schools. Like the Buddha, the Bodhisattva usually shows a halo, an urna and the three principal gestures, namely the *abhaya*, *dhyana* and preaching *mudras*. In common with

kings and nobles of that time the Bodhisattvas are elaborately decorated and wear two garments one of which called *dhoti* (in Sanskrit *paridhana*), is draped around the waist so that one of the shorter sides falls on the left in rounded or pointed ends. The other is an upper garment called *uttariya* and is worn in various ways.

Some of the Bodhisattvas are turbaned while others are bare-headed. The turbaned show a fantail device forming the crest of the turban, whereas the bare-headed are characterized by abundance of undulating hair on the head. Besides, the Buddhist Messiah, the Maitreya, important Bodhisattvas in Gandhara art include Siddharta, Avalokiteshvara (also called Padmmapani ("lotus-in-hand")), and Manjushri. Of these Maitreya has been securely recognized. His usual attributes are the right hand in *abhaya* and the pendent water pot (*Kamaṇḍalu*) held by the neck in the left. Avalokiteshvara has a seated Buddha image in the crest of his turban. But Siddharta is problematical and is sometimes identified by a ploughing scene. Manjushri holds an oblong palm-leaf manuscript.

Group-B: Non-Buddhist deities

As sculptures, coins and seals reveal non-Buddhist deities and spirits, they must have been widespread in Gandhara. Senavarma's inscription⁴⁴ (Bailey 1980: 21-29) mentions deities who were honoured by the Buddhists. A number of them are found in sculptures. These are Brahma and Indra (both high gods of the Hindu pantheon), the four maharajas (or *lokapalas*, i.e. guardians of the cardinal points), the twenty eight generals of the *Yakshas* or nature spirits, and Hariti with her retinue. One of the *lokapalas*, called Vairavaṇa or Kubera, has often been linked with Pancika—the only *Yaksha* general identified on the sculptures, who received an independent cult. The most frequently occurring *Yaksha*, called Vajrapāṇi ("vajra in hand"), the Buddha's protector, is usually found on panel

reliefs, and never seems to have been worshipped independently. Another deity Mara occurs in narrative reliefs connected with Renunciation and with his Assault before the Enlightenment. A deity with spear and peacock has been identified with the Hindu god Skanda-Karttikeya whose classical parent, Shiva was also worshipped in Gandhara, as he is seen not only on coins but also on panel reliefs and rock-carvings. On the coins again we find a moon and a sun deity. The goddess with cornucopia is generally identified with Iranian Pharro and Ardokhsa, goddess of wealth.⁴⁵

The *Yaksha* has also been recognized in the amorino of garland bearing friezes of which some nice specimens have been found at Butkara 111. Female figures standing against framing pilaster are likewise interpreted as representing *yakshis*. The human and bird figures may be *Kimnaras*. Indra's harpist Pancasikha may be a *gandharva*, the heavenly musician. Co-existing with these were serpent cults plenty of evidence for which may be found in panel reliefs. On his way to the *pipal* tree under which the Enlightenment was to take place, Siddharta passed the abode of Kalika, king of the Nagas. When Kalika (or Apalala) and his wife Elapatra saw the effulgence of his body, they prophesized in a hymn his approaching Enlightenment. The serpent killing bird-deity or *garuḍa* also finds place in a few reliefs.

Of the deities having foreign origin Herakles may be mentioned first. His influence on the Vajrapāṇi iconography is very evident. Beside this, a city-goddess identified as Tyche (with turreted headdress), Athena, Dioscuri, Nana and possibly wind-god also occur on Gandharan reliefs. There are numerous examples of Atlas, Tritons, Hippocamp, Centaur, ichthyocentaur, marine bull and winged dragon. Of our particular interest are donors and worshippers who display a variety of costumes. Besides Apollo and Daphne, the toilet trays, of which a considerable

number was found in Sirkap, represent a non-Buddhist element in Gandhāran sculpture.

Group-C: Relief Panels

A considerable Gandharan sculptures consist of relief panels of various forms and sizes. Very few of them have been found *in situ*, a circumstance which makes it difficult to know the precise place where they were fixed in a stupa or monastery. At Butkara 111 a number of them were found in position but their arrangement showed no sequential order. It is generally assumed that the curved or flat oblong panels stood in a horizontal arrangement on a stupa drum or base. At Butkara 111 it was noticed that flat panels could form a harmika and were also used on chapel walls. One stone relief was found in the body of a much damaged stucco image of a seated Buddha. Another showing garland-bearers was found in front of the folded legs of a stucco image of large size possibly representing Buddha.

The narrative panels illustrate events in the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni. Some show *Jatakas* or stories from his previous existence.

Concluding remarks

Though the Buddhist art of Gandhara flourished for more than one thousand years in the northwest parts of ancient Pakistan (1st century BCE to 10th century ACE) depicting the life story of the Buddha and early forms of his existence (*jatakas*) mainly in stone, but its chronology still remains an unresolved problem. Even still the origin of the first image of the Buddha is debated issue among the scholarship related to Gandhara art. The enigma of the beginning of Gandhara art though have been addressed in the scholarly discussions but, instead of reaching to any solution or conclusion the problem seems more aggravated and perplexed. Now in the presence of gauge mire of intelligent guesses, inferences and speculations the core

issues relating to Gandhara art need to be addressed in the light of concrete evidences regarding its beginning and chronology. The region or the country where this Buddhist art flourished was known as Gandhara in ancient times and it had never been a landlocked. Throughout its ancient history of one thousand years it was only ruled for one hundred and thirty years by a local ruling dynasty as in rest of its history it was invaded by foreign invaders successively and ruled it. The foreign masters did not come to rule with only troops or soulders but they brought with them their cultural traits, religion, philosophy of life, traditions, mode of constructions as well as languages. Unfortunately no connected history of the time has survived to us regarding the process of assimilation of the cultures of these invading people into the land they occupied. However, Gandhara art seems the only surviving source to tell us the real story of cultural interaction and process of assimilation into Gandharan life. Above all, inspite of absorbing alien cultural traits the people of Gandhara seem never compromised their own traditions as Gandhara art depicts the whole story.

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