

## A NOTE ON SOME BUDDHIST NARRATIVE RELIEFS FROM AMLUK-DARA STUPA, SWAT

**Subhani Gul<sup>1</sup>**

Assistant Professor of Archaeology, Govt. P. G. Jahanzeb College Saidu Sharif Swat.  
Ph. D. Research Scholar, Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad.  
[Subhanigul@jc.edu.pk](mailto:Subhanigul@jc.edu.pk)

### ABSTRACT

*The general theme behind the Gandhara art was the iconography of Buddha i.e. Buddha life stories, previous life stories, miracles etc. There is some variation in depiction of sculptures sometime due to sectarian and regional variation. The present study is therefore focused on some Buddhist narrative reliefs from Amluk-dara stupa wherein the unique narrative scenes are depicted.*

**Keywords:** Gandhara, Amluk-dara, Birth of Siddhārtha, First bath of Siddhārtha.

### INTRODUCTION

The stupa of Amluk-dara (AKD 1) is situated at 34°38'50.85 N, 72°12'23.80 E, in the village of the same name which itself is located about 20 miles to the south east of Saidu Sharif, the administrative head quarter of district Swat, and about 02 km north of the main Karakar road. The main Stupa which is undoubtedly the biggest in the whole of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is constructed on a raised platform of 113 feet square with a height of 28 feet. Above the platform, the stupa stands as a tower like solid structure of stone masonry with cylindrical drum surmounted by a hemispherical dome. Apart from the main stupa, the excavation of the site has also brought to light the remains of votive stupas, image shrine, and monastic complex along with a rich harvest of Buddhist sculptures.

#### Excavation and exploration of the site

The site was first explored by Aurel Stein on behalf of the Archaeological Survey of India during his archaeological tour of Swat valley as early as 1926 (Stein 1929: 32, 1930: 18). He has mentioned the architectural detail of the site and considered it as the best preserved and largest stupa in the Swat (Stein 1930: 18). In his first report Stein states that the site has not been dug out by the treasure hunters (Stein 1929: 34), however, during his second visit to the site few years later, he observed that the dome and drum of the stupa was ransacked in search of the relic chamber, though the attempt was unsuccessful (Stein 1930: 18). On that occasion, two coins were presented to Stein by the locals, of which the; one belonged to Kushan period and the other to Turkish Shahis dynasty of Kabul (Stein 1930: 19).

Stein was also interested in the excavation Amluk-dara and Toka-rdara stupa and for this purpose he had sought permission from the concerned authorities. However, when he came to accomplish the task in 1933, unfortunately he fell down of his horse near Kabal and the plan thus postponed (Olivieri 2014: 321).

In 1938, the British archaeological Mission, led by Evert Barger and Philip Wright, came to Swat and excavated several archaeological sites in Barikot and other parts of the Swat valley, however, they could not even explore the Amluk-dara stupa. Surprisingly the report of the British Expedition to Swat mention nothing of this wonderful Buddhist edifice.<sup>2</sup>

Giuseppe Tucci of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Pakistan was the next to explore the Barikot valley in 1956 (Tucci 1958: 315-18). However, his colleague Mr. H. G. Franz erroneously captioned this monument as the stupa of Topdara (Faccenna & Spagnesi 2014: 174). The Department of

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author

<sup>2</sup> They carried out small scale excavation and obtained some sculptures from Amluk, which is situated in Kandak Valley (Barger & Wright 1941: 18).

Archaeology and Museum, Govt. of Pakistan initiated an unsuccessful attempt of the restoration of Amluk-dara stupa in 1958-59 (Khan 1968: 227-28) while in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different national and international scholars and art historians such as Domenico Faccenna, P. Spagnesi, R. Sabelli, P. Callieri, L. M. Olivieri, Kuwayama and M. Ashraf Khan highlighted the archeological importance of the site in their publications (Faccenna & Spagnesi 2014: 174). A small scale excavation of the site was also carried out by Department of Archaeology and Museum of Pakistan in 1994, but the report has not been published (Olivieri et al. 2014: 321).

The comprehensive and scientific excavation at the site was started in April 2012 under the supervision of L. M. Olivieri, which lasted for nine weeks (Olivieri. 2014: 322; Olivieri 2018: 1-106, Olivieri and Iori 2021: 197-239). A large trench AKD 1 measuring 18x40 meter in east west direction was selected for excavation to expose the original floor of stupa terrace, (Olivieri. 2014: 322). During the course of excavation four major structure were exposed a stupa to NNE [61], a shrine [60], bent roofed shrine [17] and shrine [100]. Moreover, a good collection of antiquities have also brought into light during the excavation (Olivieri et al. 2014: 322)<sup>3</sup>.

Another excavation at the site was conducted by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museum, (hereafter DoAM) Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which lasted from October 2019 to March 2020, in the result of which some new structures and more than 1500 objects were recovered (Samad et al. 2021: 15).

### **Chronology**

The coins reported by Stein and the Radiocarbon dating of the samples collected in 2012, reveals that religious activities at Amluk-dara stupa sites continued from beginning of the 2nd century CE to 4th-5th century CE, although the stupa remained in function until the 10th century CE (Olivieri 2014: 393).

Majority of the schist production belongs to Period I of Amluk-dara (2nd century CE), from Period II the sculptural production changed radically, schist was abandoned in favour of limestone and stucco (Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018: 82-83).

### **The Narrative Relief Panels from Amluk-dara**

The present study is focused on two narrative relief panels recovered from Amluk-dara during the archaeological excavation carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission in collaboration with the DoAM in 2012.

#### **No. 01: The Birth of Prince Siddhārtha (Pl. 01)**

Inventory No. AKD 89

Swat Museum No. 1216

Context: AKD I (136): reused in Period VI (see Olivieri. 2014: 365-266, fig. 57)

Material: grey schist

Size: l. 45.5 cm, h. 39 cm, t. 6.9 cm

#### **Condition**

This rectangular panel is comparatively in good state of preservation, while the base is partially chipped. The head of the figure on the extreme right is defaced the feet of five figures are missing. Chisel marks and a mason mark (Kharoṣṭhī letter *na* 𑀨) carved on the back while two tenons provided on both upper and lower faces.

#### **Description**

The birth of Prince Siddhārtha is depicted in the panel, wherein Queen Māyā stands in centre, flanked by gods on right and attendants on the left side. All the prevalent detail of birth seen can be observed as Māyā stands on the centre holding a branch of *śala* tree with her right hand. She wears a short knee length tunic over the *paridhāna*, a garland-like wreath, a long necklace, ear pendants, and anklets. The headdress of Māyā is straight hair fringe on forehead followed by a large wreath. On her each side are three standing figures. On the left, is Indra receiving the child on a piece of cloth. The god wears *paridhāna* and *uttarīya* – the chest is exposed –, a long necklace, ear pendants, and a high turban consists of a fan shaped crest with frontal stone. Two male attendants follow, both wearing *paridhāna* and *uttarīya* – the chest is exposed –, high turban with fan shaped crest, central stone and ornaments. The first one, with crossed legs, has the left

<sup>3</sup> For the detail report see Olivieri 2014.

hand at the mouth and the right hand extended upwards holding waving *uttarīya* (gesture of admiration); above the latter is a barrel drum. The second one is in *añjalimudrā*. On the right are three female figures. Prajapati is supporting Māyā; she is clad in a long-draped garment tied with girdle, and adorned with ornaments, garland-like wreath and headdress; straight hair fringe on forehead followed by a large wreath. She is followed by two attendants, both wearing a long-draped garment with central folds and ornaments. Both the figures share the same headdress i.e. straight hair fringe on forehead followed by a large wreath. The first one holds a water pot in the right hand and a fan in the left hand; the second one (head chipped) is in *añjalimudrā*. Two trees on the background extremities (right one not preserved). The base of the panel consists of a projecting, plain fillet which is almost chipped only right portion is preserved.

### **Unique features of the relief**

Here Māyā is shown with straight legs instead of crossed legs.<sup>4</sup> The depiction of Māyā with crossed legs is symbolising her similarity with Yakshni, a mythological female figure of divine or supernatural power. On the other hand her depiction with straight legs is pertaining to her naturalistic aspect or approach to realism. Some of the Gandharan relief panels which shows Māyā in crossed legged position are housed in Peshawar Museum (fig. 2, see also Ali & Qazi 2008: 52-54, 3.4 Acc. Nos: PM\_02729, PM\_02725, PM\_02727), the British Museum (Zwalf 1996: 89-93, pls. 144,145,146,149), as well as in Taxila Museum (Khan, Mahmood-ul-Hasan and Lone 2005: 74, pl. 06), the Victoria and Albert Museum London (Ackermann 1975: 60, pl IX), National Museum Karachi Museum (Ingholt 1957: 52, pl. 14), and the SSAQ Museum, University of Peshawar (Khan 2015: 27-34).

The relief panels portraying Māyā with straight legs (Fig. 3) and which can be compared the under discussion panel, are also housed in the Peshawar Museum (Ali & Qazi 2008: 55, pl. 3.4)<sup>5</sup>, and British Museum, London (Zwalf 1996: 90, pl. 147).

Māyā is normally shown with the upper body bare or wearing transparent garment with prominent breasts. However, on the contrary our panel illustrate her with tight fitting skirt covering the body. This indicates that the cold climate of Swat valley has been kept in view by the artist of the panel. However, this is not the only example of such depiction since many other relief panels also do portray her with tied fitting garment. In this regards the relief panels housed in the Peshawar Museum (see Ali & Qazi 2008: 54-56) and sculptures from But Kara III in the SSAQ Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology University of Peshawar (Khan 2015: 27,31,33, figs 6,8,9) as well as Lahore Museum (Ingholt 1957: 52, fig 15), the British Museum (Zwalf 1996: 90-92, figs 145,147,149), Swat Museum (Arif 2014 : 154, 171, pls. 131,163), Taxila Museum (Khan et al. 2005: Pls. 7&9), also show Maya with tied fitting dress covering her complete body. In this connection, it can be assumed that the tradition covering the whole body of female figures, especially of Queen Māyā was in vogue in Swat and our panel from Amluk-dara has added new evidences to support this hypothesis. Here we can observe the birth celebration by celestial beings, the depiction of drum (*dolak*) above the human figures, and the flywhisk holding by an attendant illustrates gesture of pleasure which has been rare portrayed elsewhere in Gandhara art.

### **No. 02: First bath of Siddhārtha (Pl. 04)**

Inventory No.: AKD 170

Swat Museum (Reserve Collection)

Context: AKD 1 (Erratic. Cleaning of baulk)

Material: grey schist

Size: l. max. 13.5 cm, h. max. 10.0 cm, t. 4.5 cm

**Condition:** This figured frieze is broken on all three sides except the bottom. Back face has vertical tool marks.

### **Description**

In this broken frieze, Siddhārtha (head missing) is shown standing on pedestal in slightly bent position (fig. 4) with both hands hanging down. To the right of Siddhārtha the kneeling figure (missing from the scene) is attested by the presence of their bent knees, close to the bowl which indicate that he is giving bath to

<sup>4</sup> From Swat some other panels also shown the Māyā with straight legs but very rare.

<sup>5</sup> The catalogue has no detail about the provenance.

Siddhārtha. From the right of frieze, Siddhārtha is hold by a figure, however only hand can be seen and rest of the body is missing. The base of the frieze is formed by plain fillet and cavetto.

### **Unique features of the relief**

The scene of the first bathing of Siddhārtha is also very important in terms of Buddhist iconography in Gandhara Art. According to the Buddhist traditions, gods Indra and Brahmā gave a bath to child after the attendants failed to find water anywhere (Tanweer 2010: 83). As a common depiction in Gandhara art a child standing on pedestal or tripod is held by two kneeling or standing ladies while the bramanical gods Indra and Brahmā are pouring water over the child. In our panel the child hold by two figures is attested by the kneeling figure by left and extended hand by right. The rest of the scene is missing. The interesting feature of this frieze is that here a bowl (water storage pot) is shown near to the kneeling figure for the purpose of bathing, while usually Indra and Brahmā are shown pouring water in the bath having no water sources.

So this kind of presentation is the inclination toward the realistic approach rather to supernatural approach. A number of panels depicting first bath without water sources are housed in different museums, for example in Peshawar Museum (Ali and Qazi 2008: 58, Khan 2017: 294, pl. 12, Ingholt 1957: 53, pl. 16) in SSAQ Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology University of Peshawar (Khan 2015: 36, pl. 11), Swat Museum (Khan 1993: 65, Tanweer 2010: 48, pl. 98), British Museum London (Zwalf 1996: 152, pl. 153).

From Saidu Sharif stupa a panel representing the first bathing and the ceremony is attended by six persons, however, there too, no water pot is depicted (see Faccenna 2001: tav 120 b)

### **CONCLUSION**

The importance of the Amluk-dara stupa is attested by the unique style adopted for different iconographic detail. Moreover, the stupa site is believed to have remained an active center of religious practices for very long time. The close resemblance of the sculptures from this site with those discovered in other parts of Swat and elsewhere testify that the exchange of ideas was in vogue at that time. However, on the contrary, the unique and rare depictions of narrative relief panels, like those mentioned in this study also provide canvassing evidence that Amluk-dara Buddhist complex had perhaps enjoyed the status of a distinguish workshop of artistic activities (see Brancaccio and Olivieri 2019: 121-142).

### **Acknowledgment**

First of all I would like to thank Dr. Zarawar Khan, Assistant Professor of Archaeology University of Swat, for his guidance in data collection, revision and correction in article despite his busy schedule of activity. I also express extreme gratitude to my co-supervisor Dr. Luca Maria Olivieri, Director Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, for his quick response to my quires and all possible cooperation in issues faced by me, he checked my paper and suggested me some new references and additions. I am also grateful to Dr. Ghaniur- Rahman, Director Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, who encouraged and improved my idea about this paper. Thanks to my supervisor Dr. Sadeed Arif, Assistant Professor, Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, for his cooperative supervision with the fullest responsibility.



Fig. No. 1 Birth scene of Siddhārtha (Photo courtesy Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan)



Fig. No. 2 Birth scene of Siddhārtha from Peshawar Museum (Ali & Qazi 2008)



Fig. No. 3 Birth scene of Siddhārtha from Peshawar Museum (Ali & Qazi 2008)



Fig. No. 4 First bath of Siddhārtha (Photo courtesy Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan)



Fig. No. 5 First bath of Siddhārtha from Peshawar Museum (Ali & Qazi 2008)



Fig. No. 6 First bath of Siddhārtha from Saidu Sharif stupa (Faccenna 2001)

## REFERENCES

- Ackermann, H. C. (1975) *Narrative Stone Reliefs from Gandhara in the Victoria and Albert Museum in Londaon*. Reports and Memoirs XVII. Rome: IsMEO
- Ali, Ihsan. & Muhammad Naeem Qazi. (2008) *Gandharan Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum (Life story of Buddha)*. Peshawar: Hazara University Mansehra NWFP Pakistan.
- Brancaccio, P and L. M. Olivieri (2019) Regional workshops and the small stupas in the Swat Valley: an analysis of the evidence from Gumabat, Saidu Sharif and Panr. *The Geography of Gandhāran Art*. Edited by Edited by Wannaporn Reinjang and Peter Stewart. Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd. 121-142
- Faccenna, D. & Anna Filigenzi (2007) *Repertory of Terms far cataloguing Gandharan Sculptures*. Rome: IsIAO.
- Faccenna, D. (2001). II fregio figurato dello stupa principale nell area sacra Buddhista di Saidu Sharif I (Swat Pakistan), *Reports and Memoirs*, Vol. XXVIII, Rome: IsIAO
- Faccena, D. & Piero Spagnesi. (2014) *Buddhist Architecture in the Swat valley, Pakistan Stupas, Viharas, a dwelling Unit*. ACT-Field School Project Reports and Memoirs, I. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Ingolt, H. (1957) *Gandhara Art in Pakistan*. New York: Pantheon Books
- Khan, Gul Rahim. (2015) *A catalogue of Sculptures from Butkara-III (Swat) Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Vol. 1)*. Peshawar: Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar.
- Khan, F. A. (1968) Conservation, Excavated Remains at Swat (1) Amlokdara Stupa, *Pakistan Archaeology*, 5: 227-228.
- Khan, Muhammad Ashraf, Mahmoodul Hassan and Abdul Ghafoor Lone (2005) *A Catalogue of Gandhara stone sculptures in the Taxila Museum*, DOAM, Pakistan.
- Khan, M. Ashraf (1993) *Gandharan Sculptures in The Swat Museum*. Swat: By the author, Archaeological Museum Saidu Sharif Swat.
- Khan, Zarawar (2017) The Buddhist narrative relief panels: a study of the collection of Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Ph. D Dissertation submitted to Department of Archaeology University of Peshawar.
- Olivieri, Luca M. (2014) *The last phases of the urban site of Bir-kot-Ghwandai (Barikot) The Buddhist sites of Gumbat and Amluk-dara (Barikot)*. ACT-Field School Project Reports and Memoirs, II. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Olivieri, Luca M. (2018) Amluk-dara (AKD 1) A Revised Excavation Report. *Journal of Asian Civilizations* 41(1). Islamabad: Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations.1-106
- Olivieri, Luca M and Anna Filigenzi (2018) On Gandhāran sculptural production from Swat: recent archaeological and chronological data. *Problem of Chronology in Gandharan Art*. Edited by Wannaporn Reinjang and Peter Stewart. Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd. 71-92
- Olivieri, Luca. M & Elisa Iori (2021) Monumental Entrance to Gandharan Buddhist Architecture, Stairs and Gates from Swat. *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale* Vol. 57: 197-239
- Samad, Abdul, Muhammad Waliullah, Mehran Ashraf and Aamir Sajjad. (2021) *Amlukdara Swat Excavation and conservation report 2019-2020*. Peshawar: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- Stein, Aurel (1929) *On Alexander's track to the Indus*. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited.
- Stein, Aurel (1930) *An Archaeological tour in upper Swat and adjacent hill tracts*. Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 42, Calcutta: Government of India central publication branch.
- Tanveer, T. (2010) *Buddhist Collection of Wali-i-Swat*. Ph. D Dissertation submitted to Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology University of Peshawar.
- Tucci, G. (1958) A Preliminary Report on an Archaeological Survey in Swat, *East & West*, Vol. 9, Rome: IsMEO
- Zwalf, W. (1996) *A catalogue of Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum*. London: British Museum Press.