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## Looking at Gandhāra

**Keywords:** Art History, Silk Route, Gandhāra

*It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand.*

—Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"

### Discovery of Ancient Gandhāra

The beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was revolutionary in terms of western world scholars who were eager to trace the conquest of Alexander in Asia, in speculation of the route to India he took which eventually led to the discovery of ancient Gandhāra region (today, the geographical sphere lies between North West Pakistan and Eastern Afghanistan). In 1808 CE, Mountstuart Elphinstone was the first British envoy sent in Kabul when the British went to win allies against Napoleon. He believed to identify those places, hills and vineyard described by the itinerant Greeks or the Greek Sources on Alexander's campaign in India or in their memory of which the Macedonian Commanders were connected. It is significant to note that the first time in modern scholarship the word “Thupa (Pali word for stupa)” was used by him.<sup>1</sup> This site was related to the place where Alexander’s horse died and a city called Bucephala (Greek. Βουκεφάλα ) was erected by Alexander the Great in honor of his black horse with a peculiar shaped white mark on its forehead. The Britons were rather more excited to link with their Anglo Saxon ancestry to Greeks which triggered the modern explorations and studies in Gandhāra. It was Jean-Baptiste Ventura who was an Italian General in the services of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab; explored the Mankiala Stupa in 1830 CE. He found reliquaries and Kushana coins<sup>2</sup> which later presented to James Prinsep for further studies. Initially land surveying team of British Army explored the stupas of Greater Gandhāra region and a few decades later it was explored by Alexander Cunningham and the Archaeological Survey of India. But these explorations were not

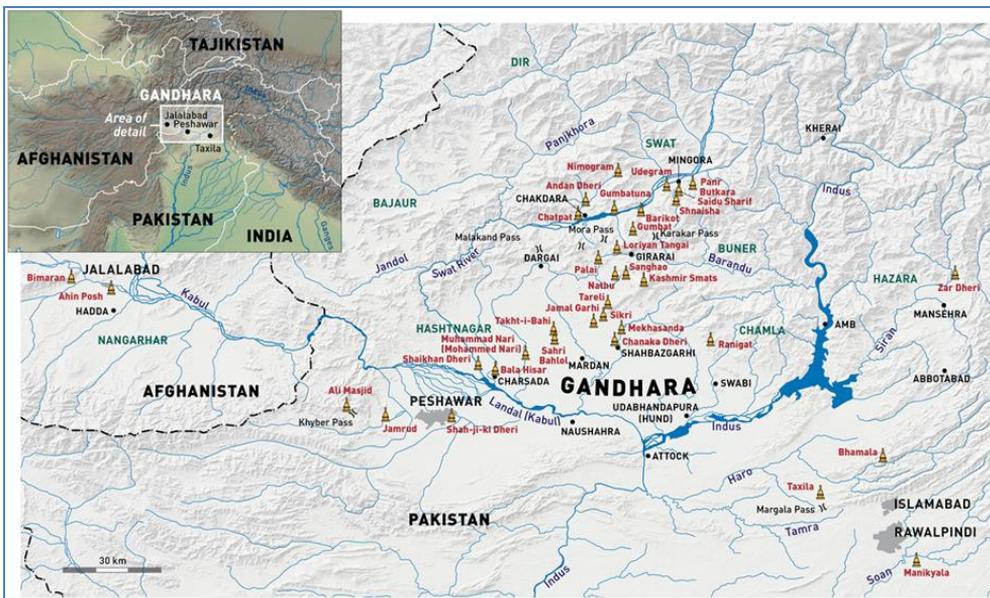
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<sup>1</sup> The Asiatic journal and monthly register for British and foreign India, China and Australasia, Volume 17 (1824) 12.

<sup>2</sup> RAY (2014) 64.

scientific due to more like just digging to get sculptures for museums, it lacked proper excavation and recording, almost destroying many of the stupas that a reconstruction was not possible.<sup>3</sup> First Scientific Excavation started in 1913 when John Marshall excavated Taxila. One of the most beautiful Buddhist monastery of Gandhāra stands 500 feet above the ground on a hill behind the town of Takht-i-Bahi, nine miles north of Mardan city. Dr D. B. Spooner, then curator of the Peshawar Museum, was the first archaeologist to excavate Takht-i-Bahi systematically in January 1907 as instructed by Sir John Marshall. These British army officers posted in Mardan excavated many sites in the district as amateur archaeologists. The Mardan district was the richest area for archaeological explorations and excavations at the time. Maj-Gen Sir Alexander Cunningham, Director-General Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), revisited it in 1873. It was first mentioned in 1836 by General Court, a French officer during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's time. The group of buildings exposed after the systematic archaeological excavations are (1) The court of Many Stupas (2) The Monastery (3) The Main Stupa (4) The Assembly Hall (5) The Low-Level



**Fig.1.**Archaeologically Excavated Sites in Gandhāra. Photo Credit: Maps designed by Dirk Fabian, ingraphis.de, Kassel, © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.

Chamber (6) The Courtyard (7) The Court of Three Stupas (8) The Wall of Colossi and (9) The Secular Buildings.<sup>4</sup> An unfinished Buddha confirms that the stone sculptures were carved at the site for the installation in chapels of the monastery of Takht-i-Bahi. They are surrounded by lofty walls 30-ft tall on the three sides in which the colossal Buddha images in stucco were installed in their chapels. Dr. Leitner collected sculptures from Guides Mess at Mardan in 1870.<sup>5</sup> Shows in Vienna, 1871 and Florence, 1872, he exhibited which made

<sup>3</sup> GRIFFIN (1886).

<sup>4</sup> Takht i Bahi by Jim Down

<sup>5</sup> PHUOC LE HUU (2010) 56.

western world widely to know about Gandhāran artifacts. Other important site in Pakistan include Sehri Bahlol, Shahbaz Garhi, Jamal Garhi, Sawal Dher, Mekha Sanda, Chanakai Dheri, Aziz Dheri and Butkara in Swat valley etc. Hadda, Begram, Bamiyan, Mes Aynak etc. are the important Gandhāra sites in Afghanistan.

### **Gandhara, the name in Literature.**

The etymology of the term “Gandhāra” is derived from Sanskrit word Gandhā, which means perfume and it is assumed that valley was blooming with flowers. Other meaning of Gandhā in Sanskrit is red lead, and it was important ingredient of beautifying product of makeup for women; which was mainly produced in Persia and imported via Gandhāran silk routes to India and Mediterranean. Gandhāra is also mentioned in Rigveda, a 7th century BCE text, which describes the ‘fat tailed sheep’ coming from Gandhāra region. Buddhist scriptures, Anguttara Nikaya counts Gandhāra as one among solas janapadas (sixteen Janapada), divided on the basis of people lived in the region. According to Mahāparinibbana Sutta, one tooth relic of Buddha went to Gandhāra. Hindu texts, Mahābhārata and Puranas mention this place as well. Behistun inscription of Darius I mentions this region as part of Persian Achaemenid Empire from where the supply of Yak-wood was imported. According to Herodotus - Darius I appointed Skylax (a Greek captain) to explore the lower reaches from Kabul river down to Indus in the South (Peshawar). Herodotus we learn a set of names of



**Fig.2.** Acc. No. 48.3/44 National Museum, New Delhi

people of the Indus- Gandhārier (Gandhāri) is one of them. Hecataeus of Miletus (560-480 BCE) writes- conquest of Alexander, he marched from Bactria to Gandhāra, his troops took control over all trade in the mountainous range. He found no appreciable resistance in Gandhāra and moved further to Taxila where the diplomatic ruler joyfully received him. It followed the decisive battle with Porus, the ruler of Punjab. The Macedonian conquest had

immense effects. It linked these area to the western world. Trade goods were- elephants, spices, etc. To manage the areas, Alexander had some veterans, some indigenous dynasties were appointed.<sup>6</sup> Other Greek and Roman accounts mention this region and Gandhāri people in their writings.

Chronicles of Xuanzang and Faxian gives a detailed version of Gandhara region. Faxian emigrated in the early 5th century CE Udyana (i.e. Swat valley) , area around Hadda in Afghanistan, he describes which is five days after Gandhāra, i.e. Peshawar valley and seven days further east to Taxila.

### **Dynastic Rules**

After the conquest of Alexander in the 4th century BCE, this region as assimilated with Greek culture and had influenced in terms of economical and political aspect as well as artistic tradition. Chandragupta the first monarch of Indian Mauryan Empire defeated Seleucus Nicator- a marriage contract then combined the two dynasties and the Gandhāran region came under Mauryas as marriage dowry exchange of 500 elephants. His grandson, Ashoka's rule laid the beginning of Buddhism, he put relic of Buddha in Taxila. The creation of this stupa was brick build. Legends that his son Kunala worked there. Another stupa in Butkara is also attributed to him. Time of Indo-Greek rule in 2nd century BCE came after the fall of Mauryan Empire in India. It's great king Milinda (Menander) was a patron of Buddhism. Discovery of Milinda's coin in Butkara approves it. Scythian tribes from the North of Bactria destroyed the remains of Graeco Bactrian rule. A little later came Yuezhi from the North in Bactria and pushed Scythians to the west in South West Afghanistan. Parthians were under the Indo Greek dominion. Then came the Scythian and Parthian rule, Maues (80-65 BCE) and Azes (50-10 BCE), it is in his rule, reliquaries-votive offering for Buddhist monasteries prepared. Scythian families held high office. Gondopernes I (c. 20-10 BCE) had empire of Eastern Afghanistan to the Ganges. New Power Kusana, Kujula Kadaphises (30-80 CE) had alliances with Indo-Greek princes. Silk export via Silk Route were controlled by them and Parthians in the west still influenced by Hellenistic forms and trade. Maritime trade was developed from Red Sea-via Arabia to Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> Kanishka I was the greatest of all Kushan king and had an extent of his empire from Bactria to Magadha in India. Kusana (Yuezhi race) from North Bactria in 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE proved to be great patron of Buddhist monastic activities. Sasanians (i.e. Indo-Sasanians) destroyed Kusanas in 240 CE and took over the Silk Route control. In 410 CE, by the invasion of Huna (Hephthalites) won Bactria and Gandhāra.

### **Modern Study in Art History**

Beginning of 20th century also saw the beginning of Study of Gandhāra in Art History. Greek influence was studied by Foucher, *L'Art Gréco-Bouddhique du Gandhāra*

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<sup>6</sup> LANE FOX (1973).

<sup>7</sup> CASSON (1991) 8 - 11.

and John Marshall, Ananda Coomaraswamy in his work, *Origin of the Buddha image*. Roman influences in Gandhāran Art was studied by D Ahrens, H. CH. Ackermann and Mortimer Wheeler. Iranian influences in Gandhāran Art was studied by M. Bussagli and D. Schlumberger. Johanna E. Van Louhizen-De Leeuw in 1949 published *The "Scythian" period an approach to the history, art, epigraphy, and palaeography of North India from the 1st century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D.* Later studied by scholars John M. Rosenfield, his book *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, Francine Tissot, M. Taddei, John & Susan Huntington and Lolita Nehru, Elizabeth Errington etc.



**Fig.3.** Indian-standard coin of King Maues (80–65 BCE). The obverse shows a rejoicing elephant holding a wreath, symbol of victory. The Greek legend reads ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΜΑΥΟΥ (Great King of Kings Maues). The reverse shows a seated king, or possibly Buddha in Dhyana Mudra. Kharoshthi legend: RAJATIRAJASA MAHATASA MOASA (Great King of Kings Maues).<sup>8</sup>

### Synthesis of Gandhāran Culture

Silk Route trade and the influence of local cults, Soma or Haoma; Zoroastrian fire cult, and rising Buddhism slipped into Syncretism of Gandhāran traditions of rituals and art. The Gandhāran region had been a crossroad of Cultural influences. Buddhism from India via Gandhāra to Central Asia became a world religion. The Art of Kusanas time having two important centres, Gandhāra and Mathura and they both seem to have influenced each other. Gandhāra Art was more naturalistic in execution, the style was similar to Hellenistic in plan of carving the relief but the themes were pretty Indian- mainly Buddhists. The middle phase of Art-making was influenced by Romans as many scholars such as Lolita Nehru pointed it.<sup>9</sup> In Roman times, they were making the use of background with intense carving. According

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maues#/media/File:MauesBuddhaCoin.JPG>

<sup>9</sup> NEHRU (1989) 28.

to Sir John Marshall, the Art in Gandhāra can be divided into two phases. In the first phase, they made icons with schist stone ( 1st to 2nd century CE) and second phase (3rd to 4th century CE), the icons were made in stuccos, and even in Taxila where schist was abundant, making of icons in stuccos proliferated and the trend was followed in even the Hadda and Kapisi in Afghanistan. In between these two phases there was a gap of a century; but Lolita Nehru writes that the making of sculptures was continued in Taxila.<sup>10</sup> It was perhaps the lack of patronage or the art of Gandhāra got its peak and declined and it led to look for a change in execution of Art making. Another reason that I see, when the monasteries were offered with votive stupas and sculptures and many a times pilgrims wanted to take back souvenirs; the idea of making an icon in stone was rather time taking and expensive and was quite tough to carry it to long distances, whereas the stucco materials were cheaper and use of color made it look more vibrant. The Italian team Excavation of Butkara site led by Domenico Faccenna in 1956<sup>11</sup> revealed that earlier mode of stone carving was ‘drawing type,’ and close to Indian Art of Bharhut and Sanchi and it lacked naturalistic modeling. Buddhist narratives on panels were in continuation as seen in Greek Art for example Parthenon frieze, etc.

### **Buddhist Monastic Units & Art**

Mahasanghikas and Sarvastivada sects of Buddhism were active in Gandhāra during Kusana times. The image of Buddha in human form was the milestone change in continuum of Buddhist Art. The work of making the Buddha figure on the Maues coins<sup>12</sup> appear to be done by Greek craftsman. Later this example was tried on stone. Unlike Greeks who loved to use marble to carve the sculptures, in Gandhāra, the local sculptors chose locally available schist stone<sup>13</sup> which was hard to chisel down . John Boardman points it a mason's' work<sup>14</sup> in execution but still beautiful vibrant art. Another change that we see, since the Greeks were writing on Parchment, papyrus and since they were pushed back to Bactria and Alexandria, the style of writing scrolls was enacted with indigenous, birch bark writing evolved in Gandhāra<sup>15</sup> in line of Buddhist principles of nonviolence, no killing of goats for their skins as seen in the case to get parchments and various sutras were documented in Gandhāri language using kharosthi script. The stele in Fig.2. shows people from different strata of the society are venerating and adoring the stupa. The relic tradition, stupa making had seen a significant change during Kusanas with evolved chhatravali, use of soapstone and plaster. The pilgrimage of Gandhāran Buddhist monasteries were started from travelling monks and Silk route traders and important officers and diplomats from foreign countries. The patrons of Buddhists rose to its peak in the times of Kanishka and many monasteries were started functioning, local cults mingled up, winemaking also started in

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<sup>10</sup> NEHRU (1989) 106.

<sup>11</sup> FACCENNA (1974) 126 - 176.

<sup>12</sup> TARN (1966) 400.

<sup>13</sup> KEMPE (1982) 25 - 28.

<sup>14</sup> BOARDMAN (1994) 127 - 128.

<sup>15</sup> BAUMS (2014) 1.

these units and local people going with cupful of wine and offering it to the sculptures of Hariti and Panchika, the protective Gods pair put out on the front of the Stupas railings.

The Buddhist Art of Gandhāra went textual and classical under the influence of local Buddhist monastic sects. The wandering itinerant monks were not much learned but they kept narrating the stories from the Life of Buddha and in that way they earned their livelihood by getting frequent alms. The stress was given on Vinaya,<sup>16</sup> the code of Discipline for Buddhist monks. The offering scenes were widely shown on stupas; the one reason was to attract it's patrons, because it was one mean necessary for monasteries to run by getting donations. Conversion scenes also show how Buddha controlled the evils and put them on the right path of Dhamma.

The scenes portraying miracles performed by Buddha was to astonish the devotees to learn the nature of Buddha as God and it was the basis of these Semi-Mahayana units that change competed with Brahmanical doctrines of God's having special powers led the Buddhism to increase their numbers of converts .



From the left: **Fig.4-5.** Miracle of Sravasti, Indian Museum, Kolkata, Hariti and Panchika Indian Museum, Kolkata.

<sup>16</sup> RHYS DAVIDS, OLDENBERG ( 1881) 1 - 5.

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## Summary

Gandhāran artifacts serve as memory of the two millennium past aesthetics, art, culture and norms of the people of Gandhāra. The modern scholarship was started with the archaeological excavations, it's interest in the western world with its link up, peculiar with classical forms. The intellectual society's urge to learn from Buddhist visuals and collectionism had grown to its peak from last two centuries. The Kushan empire was into contact with the Mediterranean Rome, Egypt & Iran, one of the world's best cultural centers of the era that burgeoned the local centers of Art and it was obvious that assimilations of forms of making artifacts were based on the demand of the patron. By these exchanges, Gandhāran Art also influenced Roman Art with introduction of Jewelry and Flower garlands etc. as it was going both ways; with exporting goods to the western society. Buddhism was also going westward, the prime time was second century CE when it saw its finest flowering and prominence on the gateway of the Silk Road. The quest for divinity through seeing art was the one way to attract lay people and theirs donation could accelerate the monastic activities from writing religious codes (Sutta in Pali, Sutra in Sanskrit) to making new Viharas (monasteries) and Chaityas (temples) .

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