

# The Historical Origins and Development of Gandhara Art

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*The region of Gandhara was the part of Achaemenian Empire in the time of Cyrus the great in 6th century B.C. It remained under the Persian domination for more than two centuries until Alexander the Great conquered it in 326 B.C. By 317 B.C. the last of the Greek forces of Alexander had departed from the country and in just 20 years the Greek rule disintegrated ceding the region to Mauryan dynasty. Founder of the dynasty was Chandragupta Maurya and his grandson Asoka who made Buddhism the state religion of his dominion and sent missionaries to neighboring states to spread the faith. After Asoka's death the dynasty underwent a rapid decline and from about 184 B.C. Gandhara returned to Greek rule, then Sakas or Scythians. For about a century and a half the Sakas were able to maintain themselves in Gandhara and were supplanted by another similar group known as Kushans. The Succeeding Kushan rulers consolidated and enlarged their territory turning it into an empire. Like Asoka, Kanishka too adopted Buddhist faith and with the true zeal of a convert fortified the religion in the region with the establishment of Stupas and monasteries.*

*After Kanishka, Gandhara was annexed by Persian rulers. Buddhism*

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*continued to flourish and develop at greater or lesser pace till about 460 A.D. when the whole North Western India was over run by white Huns who carried out the total destruction and devastation where ever they went. Buddhism had developed such firm roots in Gandhara that in spite of a number of invasions and a succession of foreign rules in the thousand years or so, majority of Gandhara population remained Buddhist.*

*The artistic manifestation of the faith further strengthened the bond unifying the people of Gandhara. The subject matter of Gandhara art was the depiction of various Buddhist concepts. Political, socio-economic and cultural structure of Gandhara has been studied in its Buddhist Art. However, Buddhist art of Gandhara has been clouded in mystery. Even today, after over a century and a half of research, many of its problems are still unsolved. Questions remain such as the date of its zenith and duration of its survival; the historical ambience from which it arose; the sources of its many cosmopolitan influences; the inspiration of the "classical" Buddha image; the circumstance; of its downfall and the destruction of its monuments. All these issues are part of discussion of the present research study.*

Key Words: Gandhara Art, Buddhist Art, Kushan Empire,  
Taxila, Buddha Image.

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Pakistan is an ancient land and cradle of many civilizations. Its history goes back to several millennia as is evidenced by Stone Age discoveries (Khan: 11-12). Its cultural heritage is preserved in the form of a large number of sites/monuments of pre-historic, proto-historic, historic and early Muslim period. They provide source material for the study of history, ancient customs, beliefs and cultures of this region. Leaving aside the prehistoric civilization flourished on fertile land of Pakistan, it produced the remarkable Buddhist art, which mingled eastern and western concepts in early historic period. It developed and unfolded a gleeful craftsman ship from the genius of its own fertile soil.

Such things count to a great extent into intellectual prestige of a modern nation. They add distinction to the Cultural Heritage of Pakistan.

Gandhara and the adjacent territories is a mountainous region below the great northerly curve where the Hindu Kush range and the central Himalayan mountain system meet. West of Indus, valleys are formed by tributary rivers flowing northwest to southeast called the Kabul in Afghanistan and Landau after its junction with the Swat River in the Peshawar basin.

The earliest literary references to the Gandhara region are in the oldest document of the Indo-Aryans, the *Regveda* (Ingholt: 13). Gandhara took sides in the great war of Mahabharata, a long epic deriving from conditions ascribed to the first millennium B.C. and by tradition the poem was first recited at Taxila. According to epic Ramayana, Gandhara region included adjoining portions of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and northwestern Punjab having two royal cities. Takshasila (Modern Taxila) and Pushkalavati (Modern Charasadda). A satrapy or province of the Achaemenid Empire is called in the old Persian inscriptions Gadara (for Gandhara) (Zwalf). Greek historian Arians mentioned Gandhara in his accounts (McCrindle: 59-62). Faxian, a Chinese pilgrim in 5th century A.D. (Remusat et al) and Xuanzang mentioned Gandhara in their account (Beal: 97).

Buddhist art of Gandhara has been clouded in mystery. Even today, after over a century and a half of research, many of its problems are still unsolved. Questions remain such as the date of its zenith and duration of its survival; the historical ambience from which it arose; the sources of its many cosmopolitan influences; the inspiration of the "classical" Buddha image; the circumstance; of its downfall and the destruction of its monuments. All these issues are part of discussion in this paper.

At the present day, two propositions command wide acceptance. First that Gandhara art flourished under the Kushan Empire, a

statement which does not immediately define its date. Secondly, that the presence of the draped Buddha image is characteristic of the developed Gandhara School. This image is understood to have been absent in ancient Buddhist art, and was still wanting in the city of Sirkap at Taxila during the first half of the first century A.D. It is assumed that the numerous Buddhist sculptures of the monasteries around Taxila, and near the Dharmarajika Stupa, (Fig. 1.), are all later than the Kushan capture of the city about 60 A.D. and represent as later phase.

However, at Taxila soon after 20 A.D. and on at least one closely contemporary site, that of Butkara in Swat, early Buddhist sculptures are known which foreshadow the Gandhara School, though still lacking the canonical Buddha figure (Fabregues: 40). The late J.F. van Lohuizen-De Leeuw in an important article showed that a few sculptures of the ancient “*aniconic*” type were actually made in Gandhara (389). She provide evidence too that primitive Buddha images of a



Fig. 1. Dharmarajika Stupa.

heavy appearance were produced in the Mathura region before the rise of the Gandhara School, and that specimens of this type were even brought to Gandhara. Priority in these respects must be conceded to Mathura. At the same time, these early images were not found satisfying as the symbol of an expanding world religion. It is with the developed Gandhara style incorporating the draped Buddha image that the present paper is concerned.

First of all something must be said of the link between the art of Gandhara and the domination of the Kushans. That Central Asian people were by the late first century B.C. in control of the regions between the Indus and the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) Rivers. After about 60 A.D., the Kushans additionally occupied Taxila, and penetrated as far beyond as Bahawalpur (a district of South Punjab, Pakistan) the Jumna and the Ganges. Two categories of evidence reinforce the link between the Kushans and what one may call the "classic" Buddha image. First, the existence of both standing and seated Buddha figures among the many religious types on coins of the Kushan emperor Kanishka, which certainly imply that by his day such images of the Buddha were widely known (Gribb: 231-244). The chronology would be clearer if the precise date of Kanishka could be established, but for the time being that is debated. I am prepared to accept what is almost the traditional solution: to place the first year of the Era of Kanishka in or about 128 A.D. Many other theories are however propounded, and have to be considered.

A publication by G. Fussman provides a footnote to this link between the Gandhara Buddha and the Kushan dynasty (43-44). He reproduces a life-size schist image of the Buddha in usual Gandhara style bearing a short Kharosthi inscription naming the donor ( ... *putrasa kodisenaasa danamukhe*). Dating is provided by the *aksara-sa* in the second word, of which the loop is semi-open. It is well known that this *aksara* offers a chronological test for the script, the semi-open form

being typical of the first century A.D. He shows that this *sa* occurs at latest on coins of the Kushan ruler Vima Kadphises, so that the statue in question should be no small later than the latter reign. With this conclusion, indeed, little fault is to be found. For Fussman, however, as also for many scholars in South Asia including the late professor A.L. Basham, the accession date of Kanishka is 78 A.D., and the reign of Vima immediately prior to this, giving a bracket for the image of “50-70 A.D.”

This “short dating” leaves no space for Soter Megas, the notorious “Nameless King” of the Kushans, whose copious coin issues witness a substantial reign. On the basis of chronology, Vima occupies the generation immediately before 128 A.D. (say 95-128 A.D.), leaving space between 60 A.D. + and 95 A.D. for Soter Megas. Evidence *ex silentia* that in 78 A.D. Soter Megas, not Vima Kadphises (and still less, of course Kanishka), was ruling is provided by the famous Taxila Silver Scroll inscription of the year 136 of Azes, to be resolved as 79 A.D. (Konow: 77). The ruler named is there designated anonymously as “the Great King, King of Kings, the Son of Heaven the Kushan,” a designation that would appropriately cover the Nameless King. Thus the Kodisena Buddha could be admirably dated around 78 A.D. or even a little later, on the lines of Professor Fussman’s discussion. But the historical context is not exactly the same.

The second type of evidence linking the developed art of Gandhara with the Kushans comes from the sculptures themselves. The characteristic appearance of the Kushan chiefs and notables is well known, both from coin-types and from the royal statues of Khalchayan, Mathura, and Surkh Kotal. The main items of costume were the long tunic or shirt, worn over baggy trousers, and soft leather boots. In cold weather a substantial cloak, secured by a massive clasp, was worn over all. A broad leather belt encircled the waist, secured by a metal clasp of ornate “barbaric” style. This belt was necessary to carry the heavy, cross-hilted sword worn on the left side. Typical also of the Kushan

fashion was the long, drooping moustache, and in many cases the high cheekbones which give a hint of the East Asiatic type. Recognizably similar figures are seen among the votaries represented on Gandhara sculptures. It is difficult to escape the impression that such sculptures belong to the epoch of the Kushans. Other foreigners are also from time to time recognizable in sculptures from Gandhara: Saka, Parthians, and visitors from the Classical history. They are readily distinguishable from the Kushan notables whose appearance, often as donors, is frequent on typical Gandhara work.

The geographical limits of the artistic province of Gandhara, to east and west respectively, are conveniently fixed by the sites of Taxila and Nagarahara, the last great city represented archaeologically by the site of Hadda. At Taxila the principal site, that of Sirkap, lacks the Gandhara Buddha. At such well-preserved monasteries as Mohra Moradu (Fig. 2) and Jaulian (Fig. 3), religious retreats, we may suppose, occupied after the fall of the city, Buddhist sculpture survives in profusion, though the preferred material is stucco. These sculptures are most probable later than the fall of Sirkap 60 A.D. (Fig. 4) and



Fig. 2. Site of Mohra Moradu.



Fig. 3. Site of Jaulian.

their excavator, Sir John Marshall, placed them considerable later. In fact he contended, for reasons never very systematically argued, that they were as late as the fifth century A.D., representing a completely distinct revival of artistic output which he termed the “Indo-Afghan School.”<sup>1</sup> The reason for this designation was a very material one. For just as Taxila was characterized by the output of sculpture in stucco, so was the site of Hadda in Afghanistan. If Taxilan work belonged, as Marshall maintained, to the fifth century A.D., then so must some or all of that at Hadda. Then arose the need to assume a distinctive “Indo-Afghan” school linking the two.

Marshall’s hypothesis that stuccoes must *ipso facto* and as a whole be later than stone sculptures depends to some extent on a discovery in the area of the Dharmarajika Stupa. There two small pits, designated M4, and a chamber B 17 (Marshall 1918: 51, 1936: 53-54). These were

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<sup>1</sup> “As a fact the great majority of the images in question are products of the Indo-Afghan School which was at its zenith in the fifth century A.D.” (1960a: 266). Throughout his major work, Marshall regarded the existence of this Indo-Afghan School as axiomatic. In this later work, he withdrew the term, but evidently not the concept (1960b: 110).





Fig. 4. Site of Sirkap.

used for the mixing of lime stucco and their floors were composed of Gandhara relief's laid face downwards. As the reliefs in question were already in a sadly worn and damaged condition when they were let into the floor, it may safely be inferred that a considerable period, say a century or more, had elapsed between the time when they were carved and the construction of the pits, which from the character of the walls appears to have taken place in the fourth or fifth century A.D.

Another argument for the late dating of the stuccoes arises from terminal deposits suggesting the monasteries had been overrun during the fifth century A.D. Marshall thought the interval between the completion of the latest secondary stupas and their destruction would have been short, on account of their fine preservation. Caution is needed here because, excavators of standing monuments can easily over-emphasize the terminal deposits. Destruction dates need not closely relate to the floruit of a site, let alone to dates of foundation. Indeed Marshall accepts that most of these Taxilan sites were actually founded under the Kushans.

Even greater caution is needed in transferring this late chronology to Hadda. This locality represented the best preserved remains of the ancient city of Nagarahara, but French excavations in 1928 were conducted in difficult conditions, and interrupted by the Afghan Civil war of the following year. In past few years fresh light has been thrown on the situation there by the Afghan excavations at the site of Tappa-i-Shotor (Mariella and Shaibai Mostamindi: 15-36, especially 16-18 with Fig. 1). The central Stupa there was surrounded, as usual, by secondary stupas, some 26 in number. It is agreed, that these secondary stupas could represent the funeral deposits of successive abbots, or princely benefactors of the monasteries, whose cremated remains were deposited within. The placing of these deposits could have extended over a considerable duration. However, without very detailed excavation records it is hard to determine how fast the area was filled up, as the death rate must have varied from decade to decade.

At Tappa-i-Shotor it was the opinion of the excavators that the site as a whole, with its primary stupa, belonged to the first and second centuries A.D., which is entirely probable. Two groups of secondary stupas were identified in the report, an earlier and a later, though the architectural differences were fairly marginal, and do not suggest a wide gap. Up to the present, no exact sequence has been fixed. However, stupa No. 24 was found to contain a pot holding one cooper coin of Menander (155-145 B.C.), of the Bull-and-tripod type. This must no doubt be understood as an antiquarian relic, since with it were found ten bronzes of the Sasanian Shapur III (383-388 A.D.). The question remains whether this deposit was votive, indicating when stupa No. 24 was completed; or whether it is a hoard, concealed in the stupa during some crisis.

We cannot insist that the order in which the stupas were numbered represents that in which they were built, though No. 24 was anyway one of the later group, and possibly among latest. The following possibility can certainly be entertained: that the coins were a hoard

buried at the moment, during the reign of Shapur III, when the Sasanian Governors lost control of Afghanistan, and the country was overrun by the Kidarite (not by the Hephthalite) Huns, similar coins of Shapur II and Shapur III were found by Marshall in the site of Mohra Moradu at Taxila, and could reflect the same situation. The celebrated hoard of Tepe Maranjan near Kabul (Curiel: 101-132, especially 119), of similar composition apart from a few pieces of Kidara himself, tells much the same story.

On the interpretation least favourable to our view, that the coins are foundation deposits, the last secondary stupas were being built in the fourth century A.D. but if the deposit is a hoard, they may have been a century or more earlier, the coins indicating no more than a moment of disruption at the site. It is true of course that when dealing with stucco figures, the possibility of damage and restoration during ancient occupation is always present. At Hadda, there are many heads, perhaps even whole figures, that certainly “look late,” and could be replacements. Certainly large numbers of heads were already detached in antiquity, and the existence of late heads on several of the stupas does not necessarily indicate that the stupas themselves were equally late.

So for as Hadda is concerned, evidence at Tappa-i-Shotor for the existence of a fifth century A.D. “Indo-Afghan School” is definitely slender. One may doubt whether it is stronger at Taxila. It is hazardous to dissent from the conclusions of the excavator at any major site, and especially with so experienced a worker as Sir John Marshall. Yet one can suspect that the dogma of the fifth century Indo-Afghan School linking Hadda and Taxila has done much to confuse understanding of Gandhara sculpture. This thesis is difficult to reconcile with modern knowledge of the historical background. Every secondary stupa, of course, calls for individual dating. Some of those at Ghazni, and possibly elsewhere in Nagarahra, may be as late as the seventh or eighth century A.D., as of course are also the relics of Fonduqistan in the

Ghorband Valley. But that is not the same as arguing for the occurrence of any general efflorescence of art in the fifth, or even the fourth century A.D.

This question has been discussed at length, because it bears on the possible existence of an early school of Gandhara art at Nagarahara. If Hadda is late, and all stucco sculptures are likewise deemed late, a possible role of Nagarahara in the founding of the Gandhara school is easily aside. Yet the Bimaran casket, also from the Ningrahar area, has often been judged, as one of the earliest objects bearing the Gandharian Buddha image, and thus one of the earliest products of the Gandhara School. If Nagarahara indeed played a part in the genesis of the school, this circumstance needs to be brought into focus. It appears that the Buddha image was lacking at Sirkap, and it could emerge that the art of Gandhara which diffused that characteristic image was especially linked with the fortunes of the Kushans.

It is a tenable hypothesis, then, that the early output of Gandhara art was especially centred west of the Indus where the Kushans first held sway, and we may suppose that there was some systematic link between the artists and that dynasty. The basis of such a link is not far to seek. Ancient invaders of the sub-continent, from the Indo-Greek ruler Menander and the Buddhist community are well known. That the Kushans were sympathetically disposed towards Buddhism is equally attested. Kanishkas patronage of the stupa at Peshawar is an obvious indication. If we consider which city west of the Indus was most likely to have provided a centre for the expanding Kushan power, the possible list is not long. The axis of their advance was Kabul, Nagarahara and Peshawar. At Kabul, accessible from the south-west via Ghazni, there is sporadic evidence of Indo-Parthian incursions. Coins of Gondophares have been found on the airfield at Kabul, and in quantity at Begram. Peshawar is likewise approachable from the Indus plain, and if the rising Kushan power were seeking a secure base, their choice was Nagarahara. In this area, of course, that hybrid coins of Hermaeus with

Kujula Kadphises were current, an indication of continuity between to Kushan, and their predecessors the Indo-Greeks. That link in turn brings to mind the possible connection of Gandhara art with the Indo-Greeks.

The origins of the Greeks element in the art of Gandhara are constantly debated. Let us consider first the position of possible survivors from the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek cities. For the Greek inhabitants the Scythian invaders of 130 B.C. must have represented a serious danger. When the Scythians in turn were driven away from Bactria by the advancing Yue-zhi tribes, the change of invaders could only have represented a respite for the Greeks. It is obvious that in the historical scenario of the first century B.C., the Kabul Valley would have constituted for Greek survivors that last place of refuge. This region finally passed, by negotiation or by chance, into the control of the Yue-zhi, whom the Kushan clan was soon to dominate. The Kushans had, in general, a reputation for moderate rule, and could have provided the Greeks with much-needed patronage and protection. Thus we can see at Nagarahara during the middle of the first century A.D. the various ingredients needed to provide a historical context for the rise of Gandhara art. On the one hand, there could have been the teams of Greek artists and craftsmen, refugees no doubt from the abandoned Greek cities of Bactria, available to establish the workshops, to design the typical motifs of the new style, and above all to develop the highly original draped Buddha image. On the other, the military power of the Yue-zhi tribes, now under the leadership of the Kushan clan, was able to afford protection to the Greeks, no less than to the conveniently quietist Buddhist communities. At the same time, the burgeoning profits of the Silk Road were providing the economic surplus for the creation of monuments, and for the patronage of sculptural and no doubt graphic arts, where the technical proficiency of the Greeks could produce results of a character highly impressive for that period.

Scholars have extensively debated whether the Greek influences in Gandharan art came from Graeco-Bactrian civilization, or by sea from the Roman world. The strength of both arguments shows that both influences must have been present. Though classical writers say nothing of visitors to the Mediterranean from the Indo-Greek world prior to the Roman annexation of Egypt, at the level of the merchant communities contacts cannot be excluded. It is not hard to see how Greek subjects of the Kushans could have served that kingdom by opening up maritime contacts with Egypt, besides acting, as several signatures suggest (Burrow: 13-16), as architects and designers of Gandhara monuments.

It is not uncommon for art historians to decry the art of Gandhara as lacking in aesthetic quality. Even so well-informed an authority as Buchthal once wrote, in a jaundiced mood.

The artistic merit of the single sculptures, apart from the interest represented by the adaptation of Classical subject matter for the purposes of eastern mythology, is in most instances negligible. The monotony of the production as a whole, the lack of quality in most of the original works, make any extensive collection of Gandhara sculptures extremely uninteresting to anyone but the specialized scholar. (66)

Naturally the repertoire of Gandhara art includes specimens of metropolitan, provincial, and rustic quality. Yet taken overall, such judgments seem intolerant. In any event, the society of Gandhara under the Kushans was culturally diversified. It is above all in the cosmopolitan nature of its appeal that the fascination of its study chiefly resides. Often we see, in well-known Gandhara themes, a reflection of Hellenistic influence.

Here therefore the hypothesis is presented that the appearance of the art of Gandhara took place at the city of Nagarahara, under the

rule of the Kushan Prince Kujula Kadphises, around or shortly before the year 60 A.D. Here were available the resources, human, political and financial, that made possible its development. It is suggested that Gandhara art, with its typical Buddha image, had a particular connection with the Kushan state and was at first specially patronized and encouraged by those rulers. This was notwithstanding that the Kushan also possessed a different school of art, which one may term the Royal School, which stressed equestrian subjects and nomadic accoutrements and dress, and was principally occupied with the creation of dynastic, as opposed to Buddhist, monuments. Any great school of art must possess a political and economic basis, and this is as true of the art of Gandhara as of any other.

## Glossary of Chinese Terms

(C=Chinese)

Faxian (C) 法顯

Xuanzang (C) 玄奘

Yue-zhi (C) 月氏

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