

Indo-Corinthian Capitals from Shnaisha (Swat)

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Abstract: The classical character and extraordinary beauty of the Indo-Corinthian (also called Gandhāran Corinthian) pilaster capitals, found in the ruins of Buddhist sites in Gandhāra, have often excited the imagination and interest of art historians who never failed in making appreciatory comments and in speculating upon the source of inspiration. The most charming (Fig. 12) of these first came to light at Jamāl Garhi situated some eight miles due north of Mardan. But since then, they have been reported from several other sites. A. Cunningham in his excavation of Jamāl Garhi in 1852 found about a dozen of them, at that time considered to be the largest number known from any single site. But now Shnaisha, situated on the Saidu Marghuzar road, has, with its seventeen examples, surpassed this number.

The capitals from both the above-mentioned sites are carved out of light grey phyllite and exhibit a good deal of conformity in their design and decorative pattern. But in the mode of construction, they follow different traditions. The Jamāl Garhi examples, for instance, show that each capital was constructed by joining together two to six prefabricated parts by iron cramps. On the contrary, Shnaisha has only one example in which two pieces are joined together, while every one of the rest is carved out of a separate single block. Moreover, the Jamāl Garhi examples revealed traces of gilding at the time of their discovery. But the practice of gilding remains unattested at Shnaisha. Besides this, the bold and natural depiction of acanthus leaves at Shnaisha is apparently different from Jamāl Garhi where imaginary forms, such as fabulous animals, are also included to enhance the decorative effect. Thus, Shnaisha marks the stage of initial experimentation in the art of making the capitals look beautiful and Jamāl Garhi its culmination.

Keywords: Indo-Corinthian pilaster capitals, charming design, Buddha and Bodhisattva, A. Cunningham, J. Fergusson, J. Marshall, emperor Caracalla, acanthus leaves.

List of the Capitals from Shnaisha

1. Capital (Fig. 1)

Size: H. 32 cm; W. at top 38 cm, at bottom 24 cm; D. 10 cm

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 15
(found at plinth level along western side of the Main Stupa)

The left side of this capital is completely missing. It is carved only on the front side. Its decoration consists of three superimposed horizontal tiers of boldly depicted acanthus leaves. In the centre of the topmost tier is bust of Buddha in a projected recess completely covered by acanthus leaves. The right angle shows a volute under well-defined moulded abacus relieved by a fillet

and five petalled (one missing) full blown lotus suspending from a curved stalk. Another similar but smaller stalk curves to the left and ends in a cluster of three conjoined buds or pointed leaves. The number of leaves on both sides of the recess was originally six but only three have survived on the right side. In the middle tier there are three clusters of projected leaves with two drooping tufts of which the larger one, resting on top of a long stem rising from the bottom tier, is shown in front of Buddha, while the other is outwardly inclined to the right. The lowermost tier is decorated with three similarly curved leaf clusters, of which the two flanking the stem just mentioned above, are mutually inclined to each other. Only one drooping tuft has survived.

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The haloed Buddha, face and fingertips of right hand damaged, is in *abhayamudrā* with head rising above the level of the abacus. The right hand with the open palm is raised, in the left he secures the hem of his gathered drapery. His robe covers the entire body up to his shoulders forming a thick neckline and is indicated by spaced curving ridges upon his chest. He has elongated earlobes. There is a drilled hole for fixing the capitals in its place.

2. Capital (Fig. 2)

Size: H. 15 cm; W. at top 61 cm

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 17

(found at plinth level on the western of the Main Stupa)

Two pieces of pilaster capitals rejoined after excavation. The lower part is missing and could not be found in the excavated area. It is carved only on the front side. In the recessed central projection completely covered by acanthus leaves is the bust of Bodhisattva Padmapāni holding a bunch of flowers in the raised right hand. His left hand is missing but hem of the drapery can be seen passing over his left arm. His robe, indicated by shallow ridges on the chest, covers his entire body making a close-fitting neckline. His hair and face are much corroded. The projecting recess is flanked by acanthus leaves mimicking nature and terminating in volutes, one on each side. The moulded abacus is relieved by a fillet and a five-petalled lotus at the end of a stalk curving to the right. Another stalk curving to the left ends in a cluster of three conjoined leaves.

3. Capital (Fig. 3)

Size: H. 35 cm; W. at bottom 36 cm, top 58 cm;

D. at bottom 5 cm, top 8 cm

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 32

Nicely carved almost complete capital showing three superimposed tiers of acanthus leaves in high relief. In the centre of the topmost tier is the bust of haloed Buddha in *abhaya* pose in the projected recess formed by acanthus leaves. His robes, indicated by curving grooves, covers the entire body forming a thick and rather loose neckline. He has wavy hair, low *uṣṇīṣa* but *urṇā* is not visible. His head rises above the abacus

and his elongated earlobes almost touch his shoulders. His raised right hand is intact; in the left he has secured the hem of his drapery. The moulded abacus is relieved by a fillet and a six-petalled lotus from an undulating stalk. Another stalk curves in the opposite direction towards the recess and ends in the cluster of three conjoined leaves or buds. This arrangement is repeated on both sides of the recess.

The middle tier, rather compressed, is decorated with tiny little acanthi and three drooping tufts of which the one in the centre is larger in size than the other two. Of these the one on the left is much damaged while the other marking the right end of this tier is outwardly inclined. In the lowermost tier there are two stunted drooping tufts besides much smaller acanthi.

4. Capital (Fig. 4)

Size: H. 26 cm; W. at bottom 36 cm, top 54 cm;

D. 8 cm **Material:** Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 51

(found at plinth level along western side of the Main Stupa)

A complete capital decorated with three superimposed tiers of acanthus leaves carved in high relief. In the centre of the topmost tier which occupies more than half of the space, is the bust of haloed Buddha in *abhayamudrā* with right hand raised to the level of shoulder and the left securing the hem of drapery. He has fully opened eyes, wavy hair, low *uṣṇīṣa* and indistinct *urṇā*, elongated earlobes and conventional drapery indicated by parallel ridges on the front. The projected recess, completely covered by acanthus leaves, has three leaves and a volute on each side. The head of Buddha rises above the abacus which as usual is relieved by a fillet and five-petalled full blown lotus dangling from an undulating stalk on each side. Another similar but smaller branch of the same stalk turns in the opposite direction and ends in a cluster of leaves. In the compressed middle tier are, besides three drooping tufts, of which the one in the middle having five petals, is larger in size and has been placed before the Buddha, there are two pairs of comparatively smaller leaves. In each pair the leaves are mutually inclined to each other. In the lowermost tier are four acanthus leaves and four buds.

5. Capital (Fig. 5)

Size: H. 30 cm; W. 58 cm; D. at bottom 8 cm, top 10 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 82
(found on plinth level along the western of the Main Stupa)

Another example of simple and unpretentious carving. The left angle of this capital is completely missing. Its decoration consists of three superimposed tiers of acanthus leaves. In the centre of the topmost tier is bust of haloed Buddha in *abhayamudrā* well set in the recessed projection. His right hand is raised to the level of his shoulder, with the left he secures the hem of drapery. His robe is indicated by spaced shallow ridges descending from the neckline. His head badly damaged is raised above the moulded abacus relieved by a fillet and a full blown six-petalled lotus at the end of a curved stalk. The usual smaller stalk in this case has disappeared because of the damaged part of the abacus. Originally there were two volutes but only the one on the right has survived. Under the volute are three leaves of which two rise vertically while the third on the extreme right is twisted into a curl under pressure of the volute.

In the middle row there are four acanthus leaves disposed in two pairs and three drooping tufts of which the third on the left is missing. The bottom row is decorated with four acanthus leaves of which the two in the centre are mutually inclined to each other.

6. Capital (Fig. 6)

Size: H. 28 cm; W. 57 cm; D. at bottom 6 cm, top 9 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 83
(found in the debris to the west of the Main Stupa)

Well-formed capital slightly damaged at the right lower side. It is carved only on the front side. The decoration consists of three superimposed horizontal tiers of acanthus leaves in slanting position. In the centre of the topmost tier is bust of haloed Buddha in *abhaya* pose well set in the recessed projection which occupies more than

half of the available space. Flanking the recess are clusters of tapering leaves – three on each side. Of these the two at the extreme right and left ends are twisted under the weight of their respective volutes. Above them is a moulded abacus decorated with a prominent fillet and a full-blown lotus at the end of a curved stalk. A branch of this stalk, turning towards the recess terminates in a cluster of three leaves. The recess is completely covered by acanthus leaves.

The middle tier is much compressed and is decorated with two pairs of acanthus leaves and a drooping tuft in the centre, of which the stem rises from the bottom tier. The lowermost tier is a little broader than the one above it. The extant part of it shows three acanthus leaves and one drooping tuft.

The fingertips of Buddha's right hand and his face are badly damaged. His left hand is hidden behind the seven petalled drooping tuft which covers his entire front. His robe is indicated by V-shaped shallow ridges descending from his neckline.

7. Capital (Fig. 7)

Material: Phyllite
(found in debris on the south side of the Main Stupa)

A badly damaged and defaced capital showing traces of the same decorative features, such as three horizontal tiers of acanthus leaves, projecting recess, bust of Buddha etc., as seen in the above-mentioned examples.

8. Capital (Fig. 8)

Size: 33 cm; W. at bottom 27 cm, top 41 cm
Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 125
(found in debris along the northern side of the Main Stupa west of the flight of steps)

The left side of this capital is completely missing. The decoration consists of three superimposed tiers of boldly projected acanthus leaves and bust of haloed Buddha in the reassurance pose. His face and thumb of the raised right hand is much damaged. His robe is indicated by widely spaced curved ridges descending from the prominent and

naturalistically formed neckline. The uppermost tier occupies more than half of the space. In the centre of it is the projected recess completely covered with acanthus leaves. Its top rises above the abacus. The right angle is well preserved and is decorated with a volute above a cluster of three leaves two of which stand vertically while the third, on the extreme right end, is curved. The moulded abacus is relieved by a prominent fillet, a full blown six petalled lotus and a rosette (trace only) from an undulating stalk. The middle tier has four acanthus leaves in addition to two drooping tufts one of which is on the front side of Buddha and rests upon a long stem rising from the lowermost tier, itself decorated with three acanthus leaves and a drooping tuft.

9. Capital (Fig. 9)

Size: H. 33 cm; W. at bottom 34 cm, top 42 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 126
(found in debris along the north face of the Main Stupa west of the flight of steps)

A nicely carved capital of which the right angle is missing. Its decoration consists of three superimposed tiers and bust of haloed Buddha. His right hand, with damaged fingertips and thumb, is raised in *abhaya* pose, with the left he secures the hem of his gathered drapery indicated on the chest by widely spaced ridges descending from the neckline oddly looking like a necklace. The head of Buddha with a low *uṣṇīṣa* (forehead and hair damaged) rises above the level of the abacus. All this is set in a projected recess completely covered by the acanthus leaves. The extant surviving angle on the left shows a cluster of acanthus leaves tied at the base with a ribbon. Of these the one on the extreme left is bent apparently under pressure of the weight of the volute. The abacus is damaged and shows a cluster of buds adjoining the upper side of the recess. The middle tier is decorated with three acanthi (traces of the fourth also visible) and one drooping tuft on the top of a long stem in front of Buddha. The bottom tier has four acanthus leaves and two drooping tufts. The leaves in the centre forming a pair are inclined to each other.

10. Capital (Fig. 10)

Size: H. 30 cm; W. at bottom 32 cm, top 45 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 127
(found in debris east of the flight of steps)

A much damaged but nicely carved capital with the right angle completely missing. The decoration consists of three superimposed tiers of acanthus leaves. The topmost tier occupies almost half of the available space. In the centre is the usual projected recess of which the top is rising above the abacus. Within it is a much-corroded bust of Buddha in *abhaya* pose with the right hand (fingertips missing) raised above the level of his shoulder, in the left he secures the hem of the gathered drapery. The robe is indicated by spaced ridges descending from his neckline. The left angle has a cluster of three leaves tied at the base with a ribbon. Of these the one on the extreme left is bent under pressure of the volute. The abacus is decorated with a full-blown lotus from an undulating stalk. Another similar but smaller stalk curves in the opposite direction and on reaching the recess ends in a cluster of buds. The somewhat compressed middle tier is marked by a small outwardly inclined drooping tuft. The one in front of Buddha is fairly large and rests upon a long stem rising from the bottom tier which itself is decorated by clusters of leaves mutually inclined towards each other and two drooping tufts. There are two drilled holes for fixing the capital.

11. Capital (Fig. 11)

Size: H. 32 cm; W. at bottom 34 cm, top 45 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 128
(found in debris east of the Main Stupa)

A much-damaged capital with the abacus and both angles missing. The three-tiered decorative pattern as noticed above continues here as well. In the centre of the topmost tier is the abraded bust of haloed Buddha (evidently in *abhayamudrā*) set in the projected recess completely covered by acanthus leaves. His robe shows widely spaced curved ridges and a closely fitting neckline. At the right is a cluster of almost vertical leaves tied together at the base by a ribbon. Traces of two undulating stalks with the usual full-blown

lotus and a cluster of buds are also visible. The compressed middle tier is decorated with two pairs of mutually inclined leaves and one drooping tuft resting upon a long stem. The lowermost tier has one set of mutually inclined clusters, two outwardly inclined leaves, one on each end (the left one is missing) and two drooping tufts of which the one on the left is much damaged. Drilled hole for fixing.

12. Capital

Size: H. 19 cm; W. 20 cm; D. 6 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 79

(found below the plinth level along the western side of the Main Stupa)

Three fragments of a capital showing haloed Buddha in *abhayamudrā* amidst acanthus leaves.

13. Capital

Size: H. 16 cm; W. 38 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 118

(found in debris above the cornice level, south side of the Main Stupa)

Fragment of a capital showing defaced Bodhisattva(?) holding a bowl surrounded by acanthus leaves.

14. Capital

Size: H. 11.12 cm; W. 37 cm.

Material: Phyllite **Field Reg. No.** 113

(found above cornice level south side of the Main Stupa)

Fragment of a capital showing two clusters of mutually inclined leaves separated by a slot (apparently stem of a drooping tuft). No image.

15. Capital

Size: H. 16 cm; W. bottom 15 cm, top 23 cm.

Material: Green Schist **Field Reg. No.** 129

Square capital decorated on two sides with three superimposed tiers of acanthus leaves. The other two sides show vertical slots and chisel marks. No image.

16. Capital

Size: H. 16 cm; W. 23 cm.

Material: Green Schist **Field Reg. No.** 130

(found in debris east of the Main Stupa)

Fragment of a capital decorated with acanthus leaves as above. Kharoṣṭhī letter ‘᳚’ (a) on top. No image.

17. Capital

Size: H. 11 cm; W. 23 cm.

Material: Green Schist **Field Reg. No.** 131

(found in debris east of the Main Stupa)

Fragment of a capital decorated as above. Kharoṣṭhī letter ‘᳚’ (ra) on top. No image.

Discussion

The profusely ornamented capital (Fig. 13) which earned so much celebrity for the Indo-Corinthian style of Gandhāra capitals was found in the ruins of a Buddhist site on top of the hill overlooking Jamāl Gaṛhi village. The site was discovered by A. Cunningham in 1848 when he obtained a Buddha head in a very good state of preservation. In 1852, Lieuts. Lumsden and Stokes partially explored the stupa itself and found a considerable number of sculptures which afterwards came into the possession of E.C. Bailey who first published an account of them in the *Journal of the Bengal Asiatic Society* (1858) and then took the whole collection to England where the sculptures were exhibited in the Crystal Palace which in 1860 unfortunately caught fire so that the whole collection was totally destroyed (Fergusson 1891: 169). In 1873, the site was probed by Lieut. Crompton who commanded the 8th Company of Sappers and Miners. He employed Srgt. Wilcher to draw up a detailed survey map of the site which was subsequently used by A. Cunningham. Crompton found several narrative reliefs and some capitals (including the famous one mentioned above) which showed carving in high relief and traces of gilding. He was followed by A. Cunningham who took the job more seriously and excavated the whole site. He records the discovery of eight coins of Vāsudeva I (Cunningham 2000: 195) besides some capitals.

Regarding the capitals Cunningham remarks that each of the larger specimens was manufactured out of several distinct pieces. Thus, the lower half of acanthus leaves was formed of two, three or four pieces and the upper half comprising abacus and volutes was made in four pieces which were carefully fastened with iron cramps. During his visit to the Lahore Museum, he made an attempt to reassemble some of the parts and successfully rejoined four specimens (*Ibid.* 191).

The overall resemblance between the capitals of Shnaisha and Jamāl Garhi is quite apparent. For instance, both share with each other of the three-tiered format with acanthus leaves, centrally project recess, volutes, full-blown lotus, bust of Buddha or Bodhisattva, moulded abacus etc. But in the mode of construction, they should seem to have followed different traditions. Thus, out of the seventeen examples found at Shnaisha, sixteen show that each capital was carved out of a separate single block. Another difference lies in the depiction of the lotus and rosette. In the Shnaisha examples, the lotus has five to six petals, at Jamāl Garhi the number of petals is twice as much. Similarly, the cluster of three leaves at Shnaisha is replaced by a rosette at Jamāl Garhi.

Throwing light on the nature of acanthus depicted in the best preserved and richly carved Indo-Corinthian capital from Jamāl Garhi J. Burgess (1986: 152-3) remarks that the foliage is not of the classical acanthus, but more like the palms similarly treated. J. Fergusson (1891: 174), who argued for a late date for the Gandhāra capitals, writes: 'they are more Greek than Roman in the character of their foliage, but more Roman than Greek in the form of their volutes and general design. Perhaps it would be correct to say they are more Byzantine than either'. A similar line of thought is adopted by J. Boardman (1994: 131) who remarks: 'The Corinthian column was of course current in Bactria and there are indications that the Gandhāran derived as much from the Indo-Greek as from any new inspiration from the West'. A. Cunningham (2000: 194) is more specific: 'that this was an original innovation of the semi-Greek architects of Northwest India. I have little doubt; and if it was suggested to them by any earlier works, the suggestion must have

come from the creative Greeks of Ariana, and not from the imitative Romans'.

The figure of Buddha/Bodhisattva under foliage was regarded as a possible indication of age for the Indo-Corinthian pilaster capitals. A. Cunningham very well knew the somewhat similar capitals of the Roman emperor Caracalla (CE 211-217). The early date, i.e., the beginning of the first century CE, of the Roman examples, he remarks, is almost contemporary with what I have suggested for the Jamāl Garhi capitals, i.e., the later half of the first century BCE. J. Fergusson (1891: 178, f.n.3), however, considers this dating 'a curious slip of the pen'. He dates the Baths of Caracalla to CE 312-330. In view of the known date of the reign of Caracalla (CE 211-17), Burgess (1985: 153) suggests 'cir. CE 215', date for the Gandhāran examples. Inferring from the same source V.A. Smith (1889: 107-98) remarks that these capitals must be later than CE 217. But the coins of Vāsudeva I (about CE 180) found in the excavation of Jamāl Garhi have different story to tell. If these capitals were contemporary with the reign of Vāsudeva I, the correct date for them would be the end of the second century CE.

It has been rightly suggested that the depiction of a divinity amidst acanthus foliage did not appear all of a sudden in the Baths of Caracalla or at Jamāl Garhi. Earlier examples are also known. For instance, the figure of Nike amongst acanthus leaves is found on the Corinthian capitals of the temple of Augustus built by Greek craftsmen at Ancyra about CE 10. Another example is found at Priene. These examples, it has been suggested, are earlier in date than any Gandhāran capital. In view of the above, it was generally believed that the idea behind such capitals was already in the air and might have reached Gandhāra with the Bactrian Greek rulers who taught the Indians image worship. But J. Marshall (1973: 106) follows an altogether different line of thought. Sprightly devas and Yakshas are seen emerging from leaves and flowers on the south jamb of the western gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi which dates from the first century BCE. Thus, if there was any borrowing at all, he remarks, it is more likely to have been done by the west rather than the east. Obviously, this near-at-hand source

of Buddhist art was the one from which the idea would be most likely to find its way into the art of Gandhāra.

Conclusion

The practice of ornamenting capitals with a view to enhancing the effect of beautification of a building appears to have been widespread in the first/second centuries in the stretch of land extending from Greece to Bactria. Gandhāra being a close neighbour was well within its influence. Thus, Gandhāran architects, commissioned to construct beautifully ornamented stupas, could easily take advantage of this practice and being fully aware of its efficacy as it perfectly suited the religious atmosphere of the time apply it in their new constructions. With the spread of the 'Relic Cult' during the Kushan period, the construction of gorgeously decorated stupas was apparently looked upon as an act of great religious merit which could help in putting an end to the endless cycle of rebirths and earn for the donor a seat in the Sukhavati heaven. The Indo-Corinthian pilaster capitals from Shnaisha datable to the time of Soter Megas who must have ruled about the time of the Kushan conquest of India reveal an initial experimentation in the process which culminated at Jamāl Gaṛhi in the time of Vāsudeva I (CE 191-227). The Shnaisha capitals in the depiction of the acanthus leaves, follow the dictates of nature to a large extent, those of Jamāl Gaṛhi of imagination.

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Figure 1. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 2. Shnaisha: Capital with Budhisttva seated amidst acanthi



Figure 3. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi

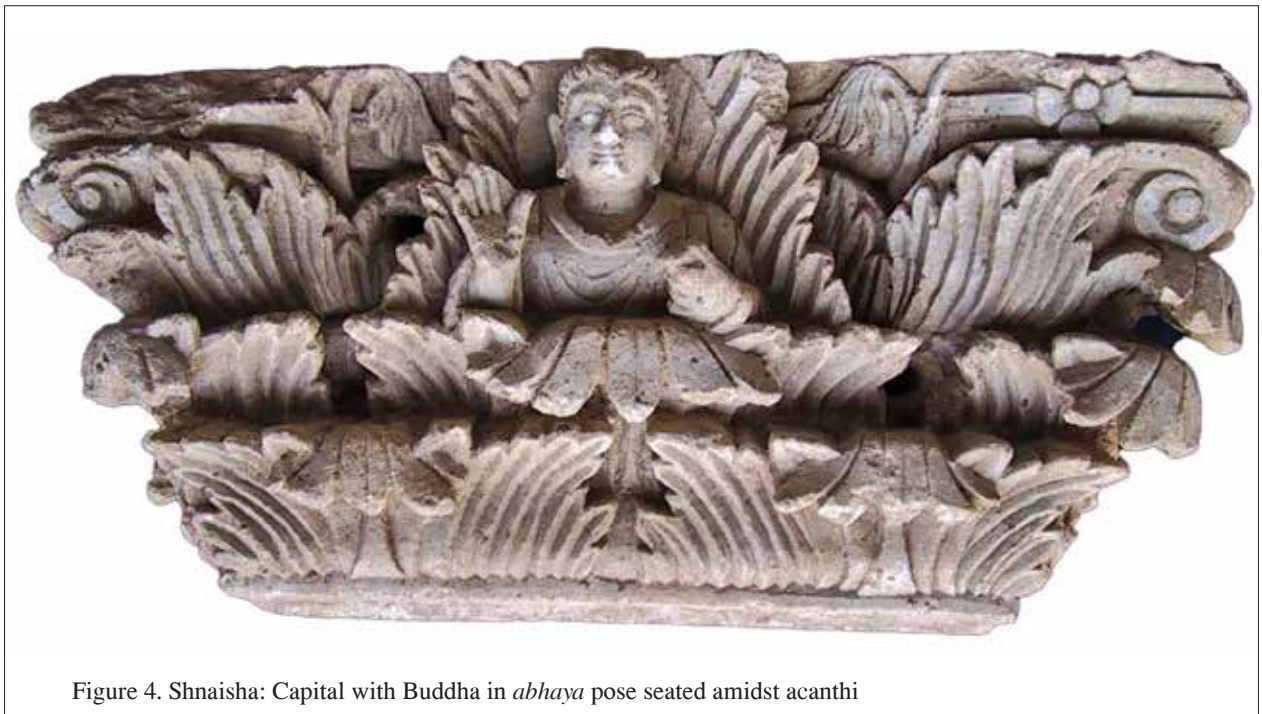


Figure 4. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 5. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 6. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi

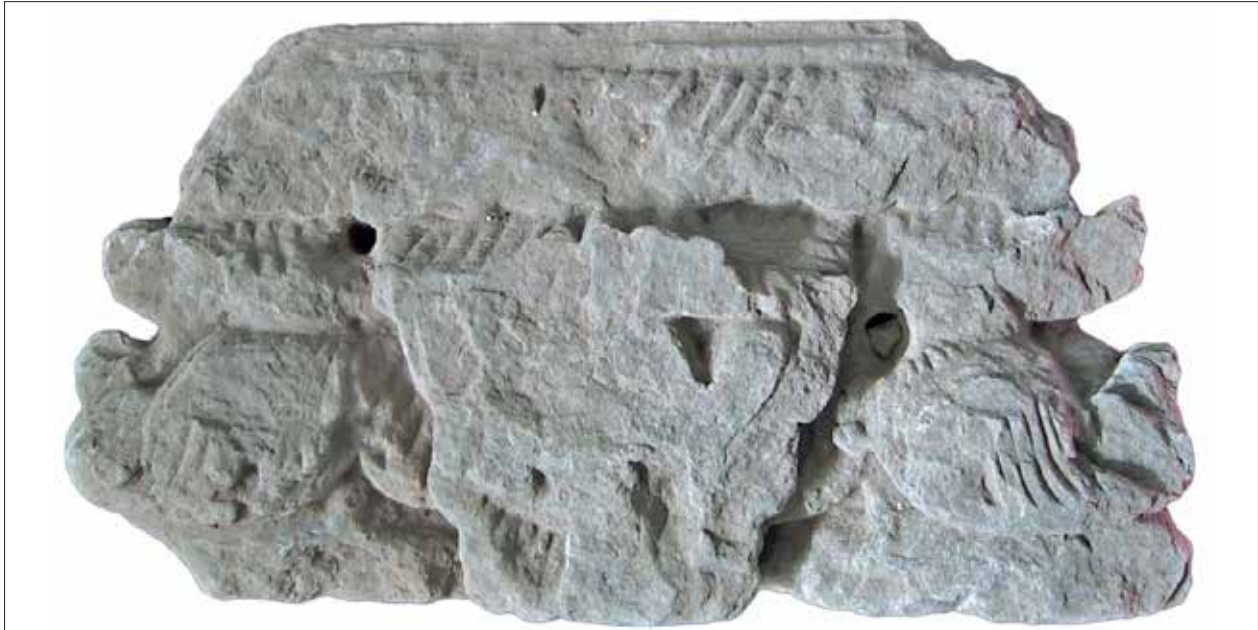


Figure 7. Shnaisha: Damaged capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 8. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 9. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 10. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 11. Shnaisha: Capital with Buddha in *abhaya* pose seated amidst acanthi



Figure 12. Corinthian capital from Jamalgarhi (After Fergusson 1891:173)

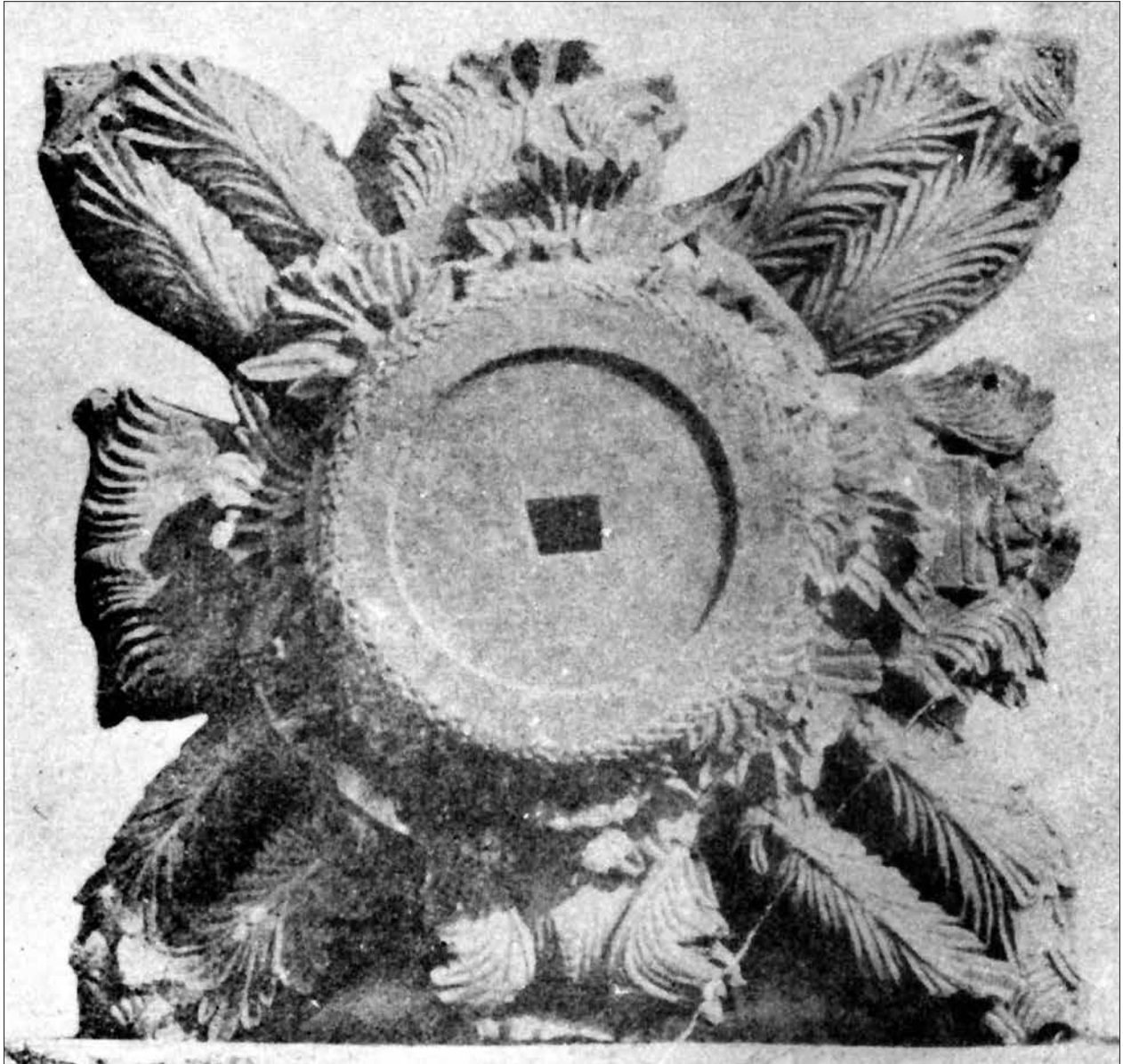


Figure 13. Indo-Corinthian capital from Lorian Tangai (After Foucher 1905: Fig. 111)