

Stepped Pyramid as a Decorative Motif in the Buddhist Art of Uḍḍiyāna:

Its Origin, Evolution, Diversity and Symbolism

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Abstract: The scenic valley of Swat, historically known as Uḍḍiyāna, is renowned for its rich Buddhist heritage in art and architecture. This region is dotted with impressive stūpas, monasteries, and vihāras. These sanctuaries were exquisitely adorned with relief and portrait sculptures. Through extensive excavations by foreign and indigenous organizations, a wealth of Buddhist sculpture has been unearthed, shedding light on the Valley's illustrious past. Apart from indigenous features, the Buddhist art of Uḍḍiyāna was heavily influenced by Hellenistic, Roman, Mesopotamian, Persian and Central Asian cultures. The sculptural reliefs portray captivating architectural elements that serve as a powerful means of expression, offering a comprehensive visual representation of the historical developments that have influenced the art created in the region.

The stepped pyramid or stepped merlon as a decorative motif in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna is a recurrent architectural element known for its series of stacked, progressively decreasing tiers or steps. It is commonly employed as an embellishment in relief sculptures and sometimes used as an architectural ornamentation. In this context, the present study aims to investigate the use of the stepped pyramid as a decorative motif abundantly found in the Buddhist art of ancient Uḍḍiyāna. The investigation commences by tracing the origins of this motif, which can be found in the ziggurats of Mesopotamia. It explores how this design was initially utilised by the Egyptians, Nabataeans, Achaemenids and subsequently adopted by the Buddhist communities of northwest India. It then provides a conceptual framework that aims to elucidate the reasons behind the use and the symbolic significance of this ornate motif in the context of Buddhist art within Uḍḍiyāna. Through a thematic analysis of relevant literature and an examination of existing architectural and sculptural remnants, we can infer that the stepped pyramid as decorative pattern enjoyed both religious and worldly significance.

Keywords: Buddhism, Buddhist, decorative motif, stepped pyramid, crenellations, ziggurat, Mesopotamia, Achaemenids, Gandhāra, Uḍḍiyāna.

Introduction

The Buddhist art of Uḍḍiyāna (the present Swat Valley) refers to various forms of visual and material culture created by and for the Buddhist communities during the heydays of Buddhism. It encompasses a wide array of artistic expressions that developed over two millennia, reflecting the rich diversity of cultures and regions where Buddhism once thrived. The main purpose of this art was to convey the teachings and values of Buddhism and to inspire contemplation and spiritual practice. The impeccable geographical location of ancient Uḍḍiyāna played a significant role in the history of the Indian subcontinent.

Because of its close proximity to Central Asia where both connected through a number of passes in the neighbouring mountains, this region witnessed the land-route network of ancient civilizations. This accelerated exchange and blending of the contemporary cultures flourishing in the interacting regions. Thus, Swat remained as a medium of exchange of civilizations between East and West. In addition to its indigenous characteristics, the Buddhist art of Uḍḍiyāna features distinct influences from Hellenistic, Roman, Persian, and Central Asian cultures. Notably, the Indo-Corinthian pillars and pilasters are remarkable creations that blend Hellenistic and

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Indian elements. These features are prominently depicted in the relief sculptures of the Swat Valley. The use of acanthus leaf as a decorative motif is another striking aspect of this art. This motif adorned not only the capitals of Indo-Corinthian columns and pilasters but also featured in various architectural elements and friezes. The utilization of acanthus leaf can be traced back to Greek and Roman art and architecture, dating to around the 5th century BCE. The Indo-Persepolitan pillars and pilasters remind us of the Persian grandeur during the Achaemenid period. The Achaemenid sculptural elements are also visible in the form of different decorative motifs such as stepped pyramid or stepped merlon used in a variety of architectural members, often seamlessly integrated with Indian railing designs.

The Stepped Pyramid Decorative Motif: Origin and Form

The derivation of the stepped pyramid as a decorative motif can be traced back to several ancient civilizations including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia and Arabia.

Mesopotamia

The ziggurat was a prevalent religious structure found in the major cities of ancient Mesopotamia, encompassing regions that constitute present-day Syria, Iraq, Iran and Kuwait. The term 'ziggurat' as we know it today is a modern pronunciation derived from the Akkadian term *zighurtu* or *ziggurratum* which can be traced back to Babylonian and Assyrian texts, signifying a temple with multiple storeys. The ziggurats of Mesopotamia are recognised as the earliest architectural constructions featuring stepped pyramids in the annals of architectural history. Typically, the ziggurats featured a rectangular base and were constructed with a series of stepped levels leading to a flat platform where a temple was erected. The ziggurat was essentially an artificial mountain, created to serve as a place of worship for the gods and to provide an elevated place where priests could perform rituals, symbolically reaching toward the heavens (Cruickshank 1999: 70-3).

From about 4100 to 2900 BCE, ziggurats were constructed in every city of ancient Mesopotamia as a tribute to the patron deity of the local population. The 'White Temple and Ziggurat' dated to 3500-3000 BCE is one of the best-preserved examples, located at the then largest Sumerian city of Warka. It is important to note that the ziggurat and its accompanying temple were not public places of worship. Instead, they represented the earthly abode of the city's god, while the impressive height of the ziggurat was primarily intended to facilitate the visits of god or goddess. People would gather in temple's courtyard for religious ceremonies, where they could observe the high priest performing rituals and making offerings to the deity on the ziggurat. Alternatively, some would ascend the temple's pinnacle to receive significant messages or revelations. Ziggurat construction persisted through the Early Dynastic Period of Mesopotamia (2900-2340 BCE) and was later embraced by subsequent civilizations in the region, including the Akkadians, Babylonians, and others (Mark 2022; Curatola 2007).

The most renowned ziggurat in history is the Tower of Babel, famously linked to the great ziggurat of Babylon, known as *Etemenanki*, meaning 'the foundation of heaven and earth.' This association comes from the well-known Biblical story found in Genesis 11:1-9. Among the ziggurats still in existence, another best-preserved example is the Ziggurat of Ur near Nasiriyah, in the present-day Dhi Qar Province of Iraq. Its construction began under the reign of Ur-Nammu (2125 BCE) and was extensively remodelled by his successors. The ziggurat at Ur featured a sturdy inner structure constructed from mud bricks, encased in a protective layer of burnt brickwork measuring 2.4 metres in thickness. This outer layer was meticulously set in place using bitumen and incorporated layers of matting at specific intervals to enhance its structural cohesion (Woolley 1939; Cruickshank 1999: 70-3).

Egypt

The pyramids stand as the most renowned symbols of ancient Egypt and continue to impress the modern-day audience. The form of the

Mesopotamian ziggurat also shows connections with Egypt, where the step *mastabas* share many similarities with them. A prime illustration of an ancient Egyptian *mastaba* situated at Sakkāra, belongs to Pharaoh Zoser who ruled around 2778 BCE as the first king of the Third Dynasty of Egypt. This structure bears the closest resemblance to the ziggurat's shape. Prior to Zoser's reign, the conventional burial practice involved *mastaba* tombs, rectangular structures made of dried clay bricks that covered underground burial chambers. Zoser's vizier and architect, Imhotep, had the innovative idea to create a grand tomb for the king by stacking *mastabas* on top of one another, gradually reducing their size, ultimately forming the iconic Stepped Pyramid, the world's first large-scale monument in stone (Fig. 1). Other surviving worth mentioning pyramids in Egypt include the Pyramid at Meydun, the Great Pyramid of Cheops (Khufu) near Cairo, the Pyramid of Chephren (Khafra) at Gizeh and the Pyramid of Mykerinos (Menkaura), also located at Gizeh (Cruickshank 1999: 44-53).

Persia

Persia (the present-day Iran) possesses an exceptional archaeological and historical heritage that spans millennia, nurturing the growth of

numerous prosperous civilizations. This ancient land is home to awe-inspiring ziggurats, ancient royal palaces, Zoroastrian temples, exquisite mosques that exude architectural splendour, Christian monasteries bearing witness to centuries of faith and the lush, meticulously designed Persian gardens. Persia also holds the distinction of being home to four historic capitals, i.e., Susa, Ecbatana, Pasargadae, and the iconic Persepolis.

The Chogha Zanbil ziggurat (meaning 'basket mound'), one of the best-preserved specimens of its kind outside Mesopotamia, was constructed during the reign of the Elamite king, Untash-Gal (r. circa 1275 to 1240 BCE). This remarkable structure is located near Susa in the province of Khuzestan (Iran). The site features a colossal brick ziggurat, a grand stepped pyramidal temple dedicated to Inshushinak, the Elamite deity revered as the protector and patron of Susa. Significantly, the Chogha Zanbil ziggurat serves as a flawless testament to the once-powerful Elamite civilization (Haghighat 2020).

By 560 BCE, Cyrus II who is also known as Cyrus the Great, laid the foundation of the Achaemenid Empire. Soon after his victory over Astyages, Cyrus founded the first capital of the Achaemenid Empire named Pasargadae on the site of the battle. As the first expression of his



Figure 1. Zoser's Stepped Pyramid at Sakkāra, Egypt. (Photo courtesy, Dr. Marwa Abed Elhameed Soliman, Egyptologist at Faculty of Arts Mansoura University, Egypt).

political power and blessings of Ahura Mazda, Cyrus began the construction of the complexes of palaces and temples at Pasargadae. It was at Pasargadae that Cyrus the Great was buried in a temple-tomb after his death in a battle. This tomb, built before his death in 529 BCE, consists of six stages decreasing in height as they progress upward, and looks like a miniature ziggurat. Interestingly, for the first great Achaemenid ruler, the mountain and its symbolic form was as sacred as in Mesopotamia (Pope 1965: 22-3).

Darius I secured the throne of Persia around 522-486 BCE as the third ruler of the Achaemenid Empire. He took remarkable construction initiatives throughout the Persian Empire. For example, he commissioned the construction of a unique ritual city known as Persepolis during 518 to 516 BCE. The city of Persepolis was deliberately erected amidst the southern Zagros mountains of the Iranian Plateau and was situated approximately 40 kilometres north of the former capital of Pasargadae. Persepolis, also known as Parsa, Parseh, or Takht-e- Jamshid, is situated in the southwestern region of Iran within the vast plain named Marv Dasht. Persepolis comprised

of nine grand edifices. Among them, the Apadana (a reception hall), Trachara (Palace of Darius I), and the Council Hall were constructed by Darius I himself while the remaining structures were completed by his successors. It is likely that the stepped pyramid as a decorative motif was introduced to the Persians in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, as it is applied to the summits of certain buildings in Susa and Persepolis (Gates 2003: fig. 10.16). The outer walls of the platform beneath the Apadana are carved with bas-reliefs depicting the tribute processions of twenty-three subject peoples of the Achaemenid Empire, each bearing gifts to honour the king. These reliefs are skillfully carved and so precise in their details that the ethnicities represented here can easily be identified. The parapets of these walls were adorned with a series of stepped pyramids/battlements, often referred to as 'crenellations' or 'stepped merlon' irrespective of their defensive purpose (Fig. 2). These stepped pyramids symbolized the sacred mountain, a motif deeply rooted in Persian culture and found across various forms of artistic expression, such as tombs, altars, pottery, bronzes, crowns, doors, and textiles (Nehru 1989: 30).



Figure 2. A view of the Apadana staircase in Persepolis, having stepped pyramid decorative design (Image downloaded from <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/421092/Apadana-Staircase-a-way-to-fabled-Persian-art>, on 22 December, 2023).

By 518 BCE, Darius I had conquered northwest India so that Sindh and part of the Punjab constituted the twentieth satrapy of the Persian Empire for about two centuries. The Behistun inscription (Thompson 1937; Cameron 1950), authored by Darius I attests the inclusion of Makae (Makran), Gandhāra, and Thatagu or Sattagudai (corresponding to the present Gomal plains) within his extensive realm of twenty-three satrapies (Petrie & Magee 2007: 4). These territories were required to contribute an annual tribute of three hundred and sixty talents of gold dust, earning them the distinction of being the largest, most populous, and wealthiest among all satrapies (Jackson 1922: 335). The Indus River then served as a demarcation between Persia and India. Friendly relations between India and Persia are specifically documented during the existence and even after the decline of the Achaemenid Empire. This resulted in a long-lasting impact on the art and architecture of the Indian subcontinent in the succeeding centuries. The stepped pyramid as decorative motif in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra is one of the best testaments of Persian Influence. The Indian artists modified this ornate pattern according to their local taste and craft habits until it was beautifully merged into Indian style (Pope 1965: 40-45).

Apart from using it as a decorative pattern in the Achaemenid architecture, the stepped pyramid motif was also incorporated in the embellishment of crowns of kings and queens of that era. At mount Behistun, the monumental relief depicting Darius the Great, celebrating his triumph over the usurper Gaumāta, is encircled by a significant trilingual inscription. This inscription is written in old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian languages. The bas-relief illustrates Darius along with 12 other figures, probably the conquered people. Darius is depicted in profile, facing right and is notably larger than the other figures, almost life-sized. He holds a bow in his left hand, while his right hand is raised. His left leg is positioned on the chest of a figure who has been identified as Gaumāta, lying supine on the ground in front of him (Skupniewicz 2021: 153-70, fig. 6). Darius the Great is wearing a crown resembling a tiara with a broad floral band and a repeated stepped

pyramid or crenellated design above it (Fig. 3). This type of crown was also worn by kings and queens in Persia during the subsequent periods. An exemplary illustration of such headwear can be observed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, represented by a silver head attributed to a Sassanian king. In addition to the king's majestic facial features, his crown exhibits a distinctive composition. It comprises a beaded band at its base, from which emerges a recurring stepped pyramid or ziggurat pattern. Each ziggurat is adorned with a crescent and an intricately textured orb or sphere rising above it (Fig. 4). The amalgamation of these stylistic elements suggests that this sculpture likely dates to the fourth century CE, possibly to the rule of Shapur II, who reigned between 310-79 CE (Harper 1966: 136-46).

During the Achaemenid period, the decorative motif under review was also applied to incense burners carved in various reliefs as well as made in round in silver. The tomb of Darius the Great



Figure 3. Darius the great in Mount Behistun inscription with a crenellated crown. (retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behistun_Inscription#/media/File:Behistun_Darius_the_Great.jpg on February 6, 2024)



Figure 4. Head of a Sasanian king in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, wearing crown with recurring stepped pyramid design (Image retrieved from <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/11937/sassanian-king/> on 27 October, 2023).

is located at Naqsh-e Rostam, six kilometres northwest of Persepolis city. This is a rock-hewn tomb with bas-relief on the upper part of its façade. Darius is depicted at the left corner facing a fire altar in the centre and an incense burner at the right edge. Above, a winged deity (probably Ahura Mazda) is shown to protect the king. The king is standing on a huge platform, supported by twenty-eight figures in two rows of fourteen each. Interestingly, the incense burner is a tall stand with a stepped pyramidal conical shape at the top (Schmidt 1939: 98-9, fig. 69)

The incense burners, designed in a stepped pyramid shape were also carved in the bas-relief of Darius the Great at Persepolis. This bas-relief of Darius the Great with his Nauroz audience is also known as 'Treasury Relief'. Here, the

enthroned king is facing towards two incense burners and three men. The king's son, Artaxerxes, is standing behind him followed by three other persons. Each of the two incense burners is like a tall stand resembling an inverted trumpet, which supports a bowl-shaped container topped by a stepped conical cover. Just below the top of this receptacle, a compressed knob is partly hidden under a parasol-like element (Stone 2004: 78-9, fig. 17).

A similar example in silver was previously on display in the British Museum from 1980 until 1993, when it was returned to Turkey. This ancient silver incense burner was originally labelled as 'Greek' but later research proved it to be of Persian origin. The structure and decoration of this silver incense burner closely resemble the two pieces shown in the bas-relief of Darius at Persepolis. The stand of this silver incense burner contains a Lydian inscription incised on the extended foot, datable to around the first half of the 6th century BCE (Melikian-Chirvani 1993: 111, fig. 1; also see Harper 2005).

Arabian Peninsula

The Nabataeans were people of ancient Arabia whose settlements lay in the region of what is now Jordan, Syria and parts of Saudi Arabia. Historians are of the opinion that they secured the region as far back as the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE and held it up until the Romans annexed the Nabataean Kingdom in 106 CE (Wenning 2007: 25-7). The Nabataeans are best known for their capital city of Petra, described as 'a rose-red city half as old as time' which was a remarkable rock-cut city and trading hub that is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The rock-cut tomb façades are the most splendid monuments of Petra. Of these, the most famous site is the site of el-Khazneh/khasneh (or the Treasury). Another site named Hegra (al-Hijr/Mada'in Saleh), located in northern Saudi Arabia, is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site; it was the second most important city of the Nabataean kingdom, famous for its rock-hewn buildings. Both at Petra and Hegra, the Nabataeans lavishly decorated the rock-cut monumental façades of their tombs with many symbols and geometrical motifs. Apart from floral

and faunal decorations, the stepped pyramids, as a geometric element, are frequently used symbols on the façades of Nabataean rock-cut tombs. Jordanian art-historians and archaeologists rightly use the term ‘crowsteps’ for this decorative motif (Rababeh & Rabaday 2014: 22).

The crowstep motifs are believed to be one of the earliest architectural features of the Nabataeans. Scholars as Wenning (2003) and Schmid (2001) opine that the Nabataeans likely inherited this idea from Mesopotamia. The skilled sculptors of Petra and Hegra crafted the crowsteps or stepped pyramids in a bas-relief style, showcasing a modelled form that projects from a flat background, thus giving a three-dimensional impression (Figs. 5, 6). This artistic technique enabled them to depict an abstracted version of a three-dimensional ziggurat (Rababeh 2010: 33).

Stepped Pyramid as a Decorative Motif in the Buddhist Art of Uḍḍiyāna

Historical and archaeological records verify the introduction of Buddhism to Uḍḍiyāna during the rule of the Mauryan king Ashoka (r. 269 - 32 BCE) or possibly even earlier (Tucci 1958:

281; Swati 1997: 2). The spiritual importance of the valley was established during the rule of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE and reached its zenith under the patronage of the Kushans. Although the cosmopolitan Kushans supported multiple religions, Buddhism and Buddhist art flourished notably, especially under the rule of Kanishka I, who reigned approximately from 127 to 150 CE (Falk 2004: 167). He adorned Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna with Buddhist stūpas and monasteries, transforming them into thriving hubs of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This practice persisted throughout the rule of the Kushans, extending until the reign of their final ruler, Vāsudeva I (r. circa 194-226 CE). After the decline of the Kushans, Buddhism and the Buddhist art of Uḍḍiyāna dwindled and finally disappeared after 10th century CE.

The bulk of relief sculptures for the current study is derived from various scientifically excavated and precisely dated Buddhist sites. The majority of the sculptures in question were created between 1st to 4th centuries CE. It is significant to mention here that for the nomenclature and proper identification of various architectural elements and decorative motifs in the Buddhist



Figure 5. façade of a tomb at Jabal Al Ahmar, Hegra, Saudi Arabia (Image downloaded from <https://richedwardsimagery.wordpress.com/2023/03/01/hegra-a-unesco-world-heritage-site-ashar-valley-al-ula-saudi-arabia/> on December 24, 2023).



Figure 6. Tomb facades showing stepped pyramid motif at Petra, Jordan (Image downloaded from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/encyclopedia/ancient-and-classical-civilizations/ancient-and-classical-civilization-encyclopedia/article/stepped-pyramid-motif> on December 24, 2023).

relief panels, we have followed the handbook by Domenico Faccenna and Anna Filigenzi (Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007, 2014).

After a thorough examination and thematic analysis of the stepped pyramid as a decorative motif found both on display and in the reserve collections of the Swat, Dir and Peshawar University Museums, we have classified it into five main categories:

1. Figured-stepped pyramid
2. Reverse-stepped pyramid
3. Stepped pyramid as an abstracted version of a three-dimensional ziggurat
4. Stepped pyramid with phytomorphic decoration
5. Stepped Harmikā imitated as a pyramid/ziggurat

1. Figured-Stepped Pyramid

The corpus of sculptures at our disposal includes some relief-panels with stepped pyramid as decorative motif that contain figures within. For instance, figure 7, a fragment of an ornamental relief sculpture (acc. no. GT-49) from the site of Gumbatuna now in the Swat Museum, depicts two stepped pyramids wherein the left side exhibits partial chipping. On the right stepped pyramid, a monk is depicted, possibly holding flowers tucked into the folds of his over-robe, forming a loop that hangs from his shoulders and securing its corner



Figure 7. Relief panel with lion and monk images on two stepped pyramids. Inventory no. GT-49, Size 0.49x 0.21 cm, Black Schist, Provenance Gumbatuna, Swat Museum, 2nd -3rd century CE.

with his left hand. He holds an object, likely flowers, in his right hand, gesturing as if about to throw them over someone. The pyramid on the left side shows a lion's head with a protruding tongue (Khan 1993:13, 48, no. 28).

In another example from the collection of Wāli-e-Swat, lying in the Swat Museum (acc. no. WS-154), a broken piece of a balustrade is carved in stepped pyramidal design. The stepped pyramid on the right shows an ogee arch with a defaced figure of the Buddha seated in *dhyānamudrā*. The much-defaced, seated Buddha under the left ogee arch is depicted with his right hand in *abhaya mudrā* (Fig. 8). We have two other balustrade fragments (Figs. 9, 10), having acc. nos. WS-149, WS-150 respectively, each being carved with stepped pyramid pattern with a Buddha image under an ogee arch (Tanveer 2010: 52, fig. 118). An almost similar example (acc. no. V-890) is now preserved in the Varia Collection of the Swat Museum (Fig. 11). Here the Buddha image is shown seated under an ogee arch in *dhyānamudrā* but without a halo (Ghafoor 2018: 66-7, fig. 32; also see Kurita 2003, II: 229, pl. 685).)

2. Reverse-Stepped Pyramid

Two relief panels (acc. nos. 405, 406) (apparently two broken pieces of a single sculpture) from the recently excavated site of Abba Sahib Cheena (Swat) are preserved in the collection of the Swat Museum. They exhibit a good example of reverse-stepped pyramid decoration (Samad *et*



Figure 8. Stepped pyramids with seated Buddhas under ogee arches. Inventory no. WS-154, Size 56x16.5x8cm, Black Schist, Swat Museum.



Figure 9. A balustrade in stepped pyramid with a seated Buddha. Inventory no. WS-149, Size 32.5x19.5x9 cm, Black Schist, Swat Museum



Figure 10. Balustrade in stepped pyramidal shape with a seated Buddha. Inventory no. WS-150, Size 38x28x6.5 cm, Black Schist, Swat Museum



Figure 11. A stepped pyramid with a Buddha image under an ogee arch. Inventory no. V-890, Size 26x24 cm, Black Schist, Provenance Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum, 1st-2nd century CE.

al. 2021a: 229). Figure 12 features four human figures standing in pairs between Corinthian pilasters, dressed in short garments and a mantle flaring over their shoulders. The upper border of the panel is decorated with a row of reverse-stepped pyramids with double ovolo terminals and half-rosettes in the resulting spaces. Similarly, figure 13 depicts a Buddha seated under a tree in *abhayamudrā*, flanked by worshippers on both sides. The top border is ornamented with a row of reverse stepped pyramids with double ovolo terminals and half-rosettes in the resulting spaces.

Another fragmentary sculpture from Maṭkanai (acc. no. SSAQ-000126) now in the Peshawar University Museum (Fig. 14) shows a similar decorative motif with two standing male figures between Corinthian pilasters. Both figures are shown wearing earrings, necklaces, turban, *paridhāna*, and *uttarīya* draped over their left shoulder. Their left hand appears to be carrying something (flowers?), while their right hand is akimbo resting on their waist. Reverse-stepped pyramids with half rosettes and acanthus leaves, alternating in the resulting spaces, are used to embellish the cornice (Bibi 2020: 81, pl. 68). Figure 15 is part of a relief panel from the Varia Collection (acc. no. V-1006), depicting the scene

of Bimbisara's offering and adoration (Ghafoor 2018: 120, fig. 92). The top border of this panel is decorated with reverse stepped pyramids, with five petalled rosettes in the resulting spaces.

3. Stepped pyramid as an abstracted version of a three-dimensional ziggurat

In the realm of the Buddhist art of Uḍḍiyāna, a single stepped pyramid decorative motif is sometimes shown as an abstraction inspired by ziggurats. This artistic representation is skillfully crafted through the technique of low-relief carving. It condenses the intricate design onto an almost flat, two-dimensional surface while preserving the illusion of the original three-dimensional structure. We acquired beautiful examples of stepped pyramid rendered as an abstracted version of a three-dimensional ziggurat from the collection of the Dir, Swat, Peshawar University and the Peshawar Museum.

Figure 16 is a rectangular panel from the site of Matkanai in the reserve collection of the Dir Museum (acc. no. DMC-2011) depicting a railing design at the base and a straight festoon with lanceolate leaves facing left above. A row of stepped pyramids is carved with four steps on



Figure 12. A relief panel showing reverse stepped pyramids at the top border. Acc. no. 405, Size 20x7.8x4.7 cm, Grey Schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.



Figure 13. A relief sculpture with reverse stepped pyramids at the top border. Acc. no. 406, Size 25x8x4.5 cm, Grey Schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.

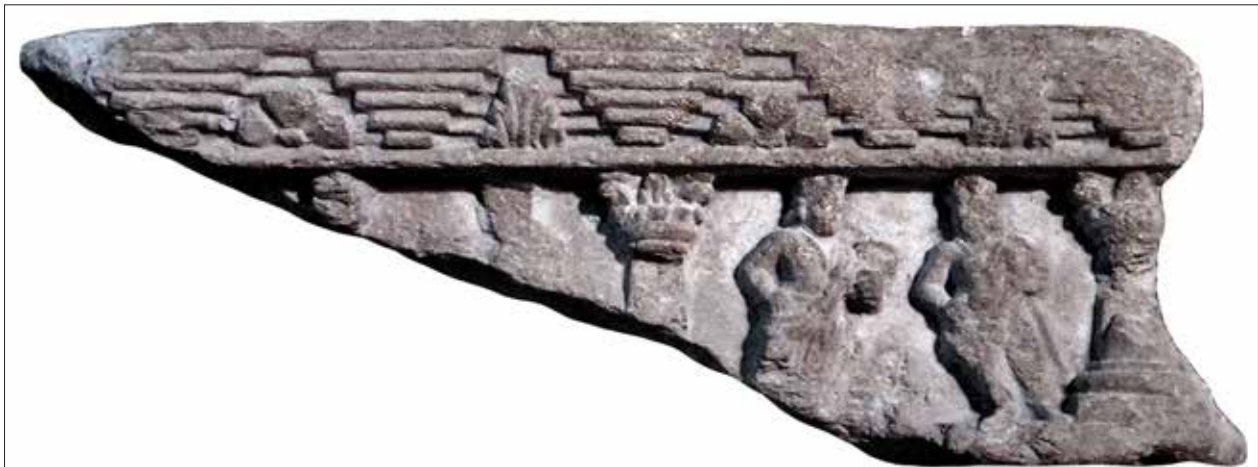


Figure 14. Fragment of a sculpture with a reverse stepped pyramid motif at the cornice. Acc. no. SSAQ_000126, Size 26.0x9.0x4.0 cm, Greenish Schist, Maṭkanai, Peshawar University Museum, Period 1st-3rd century CE.



Figure 15. Reverse stepped pyramids at the top border. Inventory no. V-1006, Size (H.W). 18x39 cm, Black Schist, Gumbat (Kandak Jangire), Swat Museum, Period 1st -2nd Century CE.

either side and a short vertical bar at the top, giving an excellent impression of a three-dimensional ziggurat (for details see Bibi 2020: 96, pl. 120). Two other examples of similar architectural elements from the site of Jabagai (acc. nos. 782, 784) are lying in the reserve collection of the same museum, depicting a fine example of a four-tiered ziggurat with a vertical bar in the centre, supported by a railing design at the base. Each tier tapers, demarcated from each other through incised lines and with an additional vertical line running in the middle of all (Figs. 17, 18).

We have a similar example (acc. no. MISC. 1-23) on display in the Peshawar University Museum exhibiting an abstracted version of a three-dimensional ziggurat. Each ziggurat comprises of three tiers, tapering upwards. There is a vertical square-shaped bar at the top of the last tier. Each tier/slab is incised with lines horizontally as well as vertically, thus making a grid pattern. These stepped pyramids or

battlements are supported by a railing design at the base (Fig. 19). A similar stepped pyramidal relief sculpture (acc. no. PM-918) is preserved in the reserve collection of the Peshawar Museum, with a *vedikā*/railing design at the base. The top border of the railing is decorated with a leaf-and-dart motif, and then crowned by stepped pyramids (Fig. 20). The Archaeological Museum of Swat also holds a good collection of stepped pyramidal relief sculptures. Three cornice pieces from Panr in the same collection (acc. nos. SM-456 [P-828], SM-481 [P-825], SM-496 [P-812 & P-855 joined together]) depict a five-tiered, three-dimensional abstraction of a ziggurat (Figs. 21-23).

4. Stepped Pyramid with Phytomorphic Decorations

The Buddhist art of Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna has a variety of floral motifs, serving dual purpose: ornamental components but also have an array



Figure 16. An architectural piece showing, row of stepped pyramids. Acc. no. DMC-2011, Size 14.5x69.6 cm, Black Schist, Maṭkanai, Dir Museum. Period 1st-3rd century CE.



Figure 17. A piece of an architectural panel showing mastaba-shaped ziggurat/pyramid motifs. Acc. no. DMC-782, Size 13.5x29 cm, Dark Grey Schist, Jabagai, Dir Museum.

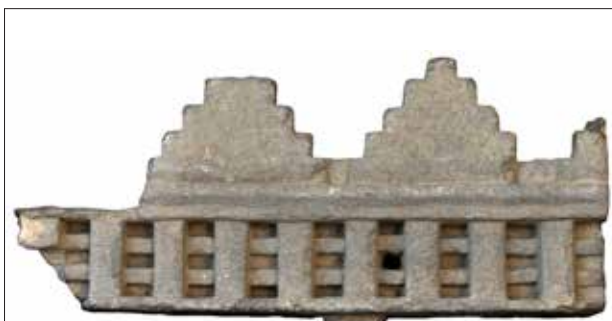


Figure 18. Architectural relief panel with ziggurat-shaped motif. Acc. no. DMC-784, Size 13.5x31.3 cm, Dark Grey Schist, Jabagai, Dir Museum.

of symbolic meanings, both religious and non-religious. We have a good collection of relief panels featuring stepped pyramids with floral ornamentations. A fair number of sculptures from the recently excavated site of Abba Sahib Cheena are lying in the reserve collection of the Swat Museum depicting stepped pyramid decorative motifs with floral and geometrical designs (Samad *et al.* 2021a). One such example from the above-mentioned site (acc. no. 015) is a broken panel exhibiting a half lotus flower in a full-blown mode, enclosed by a stepped pyramid design. Below the stepped merlon, a leaf-and-dart pattern beautifully demarcates the lower portion, which consists of a railing design and a rectangular frame on the right corner. The frame is embellished with a crisscross pattern, having a full rosette within central lozenges and half rosettes in the resulting triangles (Fig. 24).

Another panel (acc. no. 001) from the same site and collection represents two stepped

pyramids enclosing vertical acanthus leaves and a closed flame palmette with tuft. A railing design decorates the lower portion of the said panel (Fig. 25). A relief panel from the site of Abba Sahib Cheena (acc. no. 016) is decorated with a railing design in the lower portion and three stepped pyramids above. Starting from the left, the first stepped pyramid design is slightly broken and decorated with a full-blown half lotus flower, the second one comprises of vertical acanthus leaves and the last one is enclosing a closed flame palmette without a tuft (Fig. 26). A somewhat similar panel, bearing accession number 551 from the same site, is decorated with four ornamental stepped pyramids. Starting from the left, the first pyramid contains a full-blown half lotus; the second pyramid is slightly damaged and has a half rosette inside; the third one is decorated with an open flame palmette; while the last one is badly defaced. These pyramids are resting upon a chequered grid with alternating relief squares and



Figure 19. An architectural element showing a battlement or stepped merlon making an abstraction of a ziggurat. Acc. no. MISC-1-23, Size 34.0x13.0x4.0 cm, Black Schist, Peshawar University Museum (Category- Miscellaneous).



Figure 20. Panel showing stepped pyramids in the shape of a ziggurat. Acc. no. PM-918, Schist, Peshawar Museum.



Figure 21. A cornice piece carved with the stepped pyramid motif in the form of abstraction of a ziggurat. Acc. no. SM-456 (P-828), Size 11.2x31.6x3.0 cm, Green Schist, Panr, Swat Museum.



Figure 22. A cornice showing a ziggurat-shaped motif. Acc. no. SM-481 (P-825), Size 10x34x3.5 cm, Green Schist, Panr, Swat Museum.

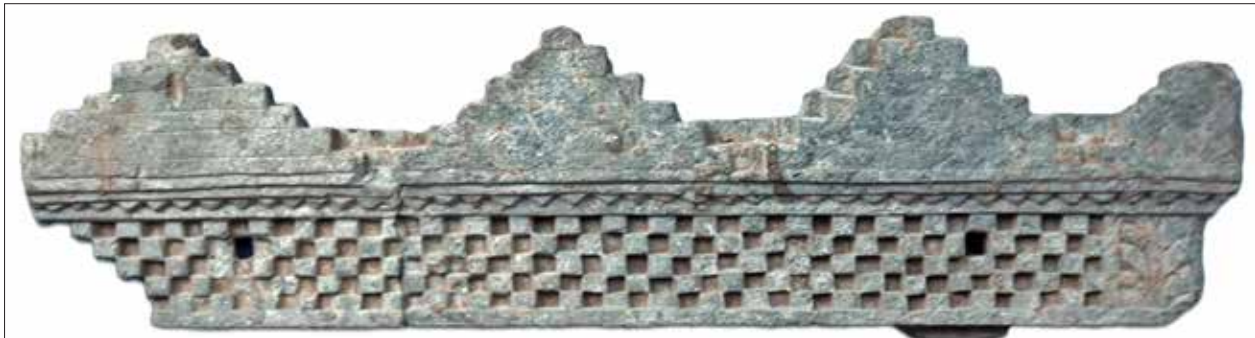


Figure 23. Cornice showing ziggurat-shaped battlements. Acc. no. SM-496 (P-812 + P-855 joined together), Size 10.9x43.8x2.7 cm, Green Schist, Panr, Swat Museum.



Figure 24. A stepped pyramid motif enclosing a full-blown half lotus flower. Acc. no. 015, Size 21x15x4 cm, Schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.



Figure 25. Stepped pyramid motif with vertical acanthus leaves and palmette. Acc. no. 001, Size 16x10x4 cm, Schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.

a square panel on the left corner, which is bisected into triangles each containing a smaller triangle (Fig. 27).

A relief panel (acc. no. 552) from the above-mentioned site is ornamented with four exquisitely carved stepped pyramids above and a chequered grid pattern with alternating squares and brackets below. Starting from the left, these pyramids are enclosing vertical acanthus leaves, a half rosette, a full-blown half lotus and a triangle with concave sides containing a triangular indentation in the centre (Fig. 28). Apart from lotuses, rosettes, acanthus leaves, and palmettes, the decorative stepped pyramids sometimes also enclose *pipal* leaves. For instance, a relief panel (acc.no.625) from the site of Abba Sahib Cheena exhibits four stepped pyramids, having straight acanthus leaves,

a full-blown half lotus and a twig of *pipal* leaves. The pyramid in the right corner is badly damaged (Fig. 29). Representations of *pipal* leaves inside a stepped pyramid decorative design can be better observed in a relief panel (acc. no. 70) from Amlukdara now in the reserve collection of the Swat Museum (Samad *et al.* 2021b). This panel comprises of two stepped pyramids enclosing an open flame palmette and elegantly carved offshoots of *pipal* leaves (Fig. 30). Another panel from the aforementioned site and collection (acc. no.71) shows two decorative stepped pyramids with an open flame palmette and vertical acanthus leaves (Fig. 31). The open flame palmette and rosette pattern enclosed in stepped merlons with a railing design below, can be observed in a relief panel discovered from Jabagai, bearing

the accession number DMC-783 now in the reserve collection of the Dir Museum, Chakdara (Figs. 32). Another relief panel (acc. no. DMC-1129) from the site of Dir, lying in the reserve collection of the same museum, is carved with a railing design and three stepped merlons on the top, inhabited by floral motifs depicting an open flame palmette in the centre, surrounded by two full-blown lotuses (Fig. 33).

Similarly, the Archaeological Museum of Swat houses a relief panel (acc. no. NG-48) from the site of Nimogram, showing three stepped pyramids filled with an open flame palmette, acanthus leaves and a full-blown half lotus above and a grid pattern with alternating relief triangles below (Fig. 34). An interesting panel from the site of Nimogram (Fig. 35), having the accession number NG-49, comprises of an ornamental frieze. The lower section features a chequered grid with alternating squares in relief surrounded above by a band of alternating acanthus leaves and four petalled rosettes, and at the bottom by a plain fillet. A row of stepped pyramids with an open flame palmette, a triangle with concave sides, and

a half rosette are placed above the lower segment. The last pyramid's theme has been defaced (for a detailed study of the Nimogram sculptures, see Arif 2014).

The Varia Collection of the Swat Museum houses a panel (acc. no. SM-692 [V-610]) that contains a *vedikā* crowned by a saw-tooth pattern and two stepped pyramids occupied by straight acanthus leaves and a half rosette with well-defined petals, stamen, and pistil (Fig. 36).

A relief panel (Fig. 37) belonging to the Wāli-e-Swat Collection of the Swat Museum (acc. no. WS-41), is carved with the exterior of a building, a parapet decorated with stepped merlons, intricately embellished with open flame palmettes on their triangular surfaces and bordered below by plain fillets. In the lower section, five monks are shown standing in profile under ogee arches with clasped hands and their left legs slightly advanced. The arches are decorated with pendants at their extremities and are separated by Indo-Persepolitan columns. These columns provide support to a stepped entablature and a dentil architrave, that adds to the overall aesthetic beauty



Figure 26. Stepped pyramids inhabited by lotus flower, acanthus leaves and palmette. Acc. no. 016, Size 26x10x3 cm, schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.



Figure 27. A stepped pyramid decorative motif, having half lotus, rosette and open flame palmette. Acc. no. 551, Size 35.5x10x10 cm, Schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.



Figure 28. A row of stepped pyramids inhabited by floral designs and a triangle with concave sides. Acc. no. 552, Size 29x6x9.5 cm, Schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.



Figure 29. Stepped pyramids decorated with acanthus, lotus and pipal leaves. Acc. no. 625, Size 29x12.2x3.5 cm, Schist, Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat Museum.



Figure 30. Stepped pyramids inhabited by open flame palmette and pipal leaves. Acc. no. 70, Size 39x15x7 cm, Schist, Amlukdara, Swat Museum.



Figure 31. Open flame palmette and vertical acanthus leaves enclosed by stepped pyramids. Acc. no. 71, Size 22x13x3.5 cm, Schist, Amlukdara, Swat Museum.



Figure 32. Stepped pyramids decorated with rosette and stylized palmette. Acc. no. DMC-783, Size 10.5x40 cm, Schist, Jabagai, Dir Museum.



Figure 33. Stepped pyramids filled with full blown lotuses and open flame palmette. Acc. no. DMC-1129, Size 13x27.5 cm, Schist, Dir, Dir Museum.



Figure 34. Stepped pyramids exhibiting open flame palmette, vertical acanthus leaves and full-blown lotus. Acc. no. NG-48, Size 6" (H), schist, Nimogram, Swat Museum.



Figure 35. A row of stepped pyramids with palmette, triangle with concave sides and a half rosette. Acc. no. NG-49, Size 24"x6.5", Schist, Nimogram, Swat Museum, Period 1st -3rd century CE.

of the building's façade (Tanveer 2010: 35, fig. 39; Faccenna 1964, II, pt.3: 190-91, pl. DCLXXII a).

5. Stepped Harmikā imitated as a pyramid/ziggurat

Harmikā in the form of a pyramid or ziggurat is frequently found in the Buddhist architecture of the Swat Valley. We came across beautiful examples of such depictions in various collections. For instance, an excellent example of a stepped harmikā (acc. no. NG-452) belonging to the site of Nimogram is housed in the Swat Museum.

This object consists of seven tiers with floral motifs present on the sides and undersides of the three lower levels. Moving upwards, there is a slab with pillar-shaped brackets decorated with acanthus leaves on the undersides. Then another level bordered by plain fillets, is decorated with a chequered grid and relief squares. Another slab with *cyma reversa* brackets, followed by another chequered grid segment. Above the projected moulding, there is a row of stepped pyramids, each with an acanthus leaf design in the centre (Fig. 38). Another panel from the same site

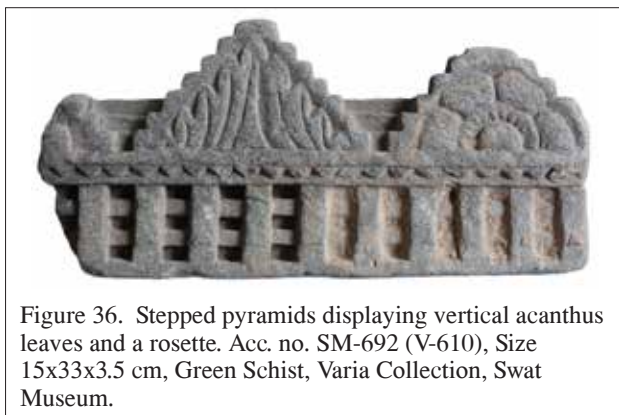


Figure 36. Stepped pyramids displaying vertical acanthus leaves and a rosette. Acc. no. SM-692 (V-610), Size 15x33x3.5 cm, Green Schist, Varia Collection, Swat Museum.

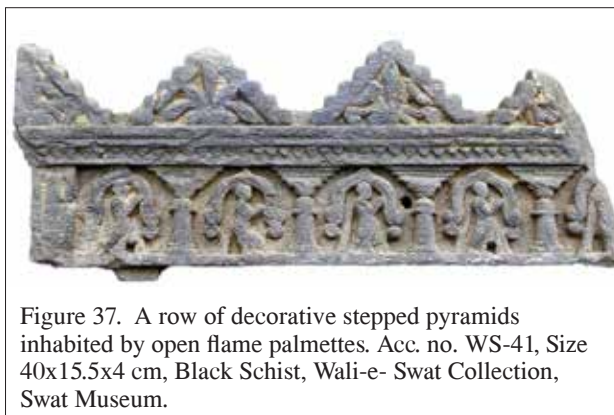


Figure 37. A row of decorative stepped pyramids inhabited by open flame palmettes. Acc. no. WS-41, Size 40x15.5x4 cm, Black Schist, Wali-e- Swat Collection, Swat Museum.

(acc. no. NG-110) is also a seven-tiered stepped harmikā with projected moulding at the top, adorned with stepped pyramids (Fig. 39). During our data collection, beautiful stepped harmikās were located in the collection of the Dir Museum. For example, a stepped harmikā (acc. no. DMC-2119) comprising of six tiers and a projected moulding at the top is provided with stepped pyramids inhabited by alternating acanthus leaves and a half rosette (Fig. 40). Another prominent example of a stepped harmikā from the same collection (acc. no. DMC-759) can be seen in figure 41.

Analysis and Discussion

The main objective of the present study is to establish a theoretical framework that explores the potential uses and meanings of the stepped pyramid as a decorative motif in the Buddhist art of Uḍḍiyāna. It is crucial to recognize that there is a scarcity of written records or findings that would provide insights for this type of interpretative study. Though art-historians in the field of Buddhist art and architecture have described this motif in their work, none of them has so far tried to give a detailed account of its origin, evolution, diversity, and symbolism. Therefore, trying to dig into the meanings and functions of a decorative element like a stepped pyramid is currently based on speculation due to shortage of relevant information. Despite these challenges, efforts were made to employ the existing evidence to propose meaningful interpretation. With an extensive study of the relief-panels carved with stepped pyramid

decorative motifs and the available literature, the interpretative framework is approached from both sacred and secular perspectives.

The Sacred Symbolism

The sacred meaning of a stepped pyramid as an ornamental pattern can be influenced by the historical and cultural context in which it is used. A stepped pyramid/ziggurat was commonly built in Mesopotamia, particularly in the Sumerian, Akkadian and Babylonian civilizations. Ziggurats were often associated with gods and were considered a link between the heavens and the earth. Rituals and ceremonies would take place on the ziggurat's various levels. The design and symbolism of the stepped pyramid (also known as stepped merlon and battlement) decorative pattern, variously used in the Buddhist art of the Swat Valley, share parallels with the Sumerian ziggurat and the *mastaba* tombs. As mentioned earlier, the ziggurat served as an intermediary space connecting the heavens and the earth. Scholars generally assert that the stepped pyramid motif has its origins in the stepped architecture of the Sumerian ziggurat, with both structures intended to ascend vertically as a symbolic representation of reaching towards the divine. The ziggurat, crafted for divine-human communication or the ascent of the gods, likely influenced the formation of the stepped pyramid decorative motif in the successive periods. The origin of this motif may be attributed to the perception of a truncated stepped shape rising in diminishing tiers/levels.

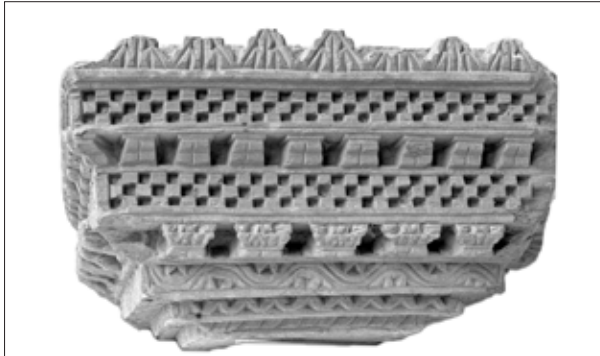


Figure 38. Harmikā in the shape of a stepped pyramid, also provided with the stepped pyramid motif at the parapet. Acc. no. NG-452, Size 7"x7" (L & H), Soapstone, Nimogram, Swat Museum, Period 1st -3rd century CE.



Figure 39. Harmikā in the shape of a stepped pyramid/ ziggurat. Acc. no. NG-110, Size Ht 4.5" Sq 8.5", Soapstone, Nimogram, Swat Museum, Period 1st-3rd century CE.



Figure 40. Stepped harmikā in six tiers. Acc. no. DMC-2119, Size 10x25.5 cm, Schist, Unknown provenance, Dir Museum.



Figure 41. Harmikā carved in the shape of a stepped pyramid. Acc. no. DMC-759, Size 13x22 cm, Schist, Chatpat, Dir Museum.

This conceptualization finds resonance in biblical narratives, such as Jacob's dream in Genesis (28: 10-22), where he saw a stairway or a ladder resting on the earth and its top reaching the heaven with angels ascending and descending. This imagery bears similarity to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9), presumed to resemble the ziggurats in the Near East. Jacob's vision of ascending angels aligns with the notion of stair shapes representing the ascent of the departed soul as mentioned in the Old Testament (Rababeh and Rabaday 2014: 29).

In comparing the stepped pyramid decorative pattern with Mesopotamian ziggurats, particularly the Tower of Babel, it seems probable that the descending stairs in this element serve the purpose of seeking divine blessings and perpetuity for the

deceased person. Whereas, ascending the ladder symbolises the spirit's journey towards divinity and the domain of eternity.

Similarly, the Egyptians made stepped *mastabas* or pyramids as eternal abodes for their pharaohs. In the case of the Egyptian pyramids, their stairway-like structures aid the ascent of the deceased spirit towards the sky, facilitating a connection with the gods. The *mastaba* of Zoser's pyramid in ancient Egypt, resembling a majestic flight of steps, is interpreted as the means by which Zoser ascended to the Sun god (named Ra), akin to a ladder to heaven (see Fig. 1). A connection can be established between the decorative motif of the stepped pyramid and the design of the Egyptian step *mastaba*. The impact of ancient Egypt is evident in the artistic

expressions of various civilizations, such as the Persian civilization, subsequently influencing the Buddhist art in Gandhāra and eventually making its way to the Swat Valley.

The Aztecs and Mayans in Mesoamerica prominently featured stepped pyramids in their architecture, which were closely tied to religious rituals and festivities. They served as a symbolic link between the spiritual and material worlds, representing a connection between the earthly and divine realms. The tiers or steps of the pyramid could be seen as symbolic stages in the journey of spiritual ascent or elevation (for details see Phillips 2008).

We also observe structures like stepped pyramid in the Asian countries, for example, the Borobudur temple in Indonesia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, featuring a massive, stepped pyramid structure. Its base is adorned with decorative relief carvings that tell the story of the Buddha's life and teachings. These reliefs are arranged in a series of panels on the terraces, creating a stepped pyramid effect. As the pilgrim climbing up the terraces of this sacred monument, s/he was believed to enact symbolically the ascent of the soul from the world of desire, which he was leaving behind, to the world of spiritual perfection and ultimate union with the cosmic Buddha himself (Munsterberg 1970: 200-05, Yamamoto 1990: 107-08).

The famous temple of Añkor Wāt/Angkor Wat (meaning palace monastery) in Cambodia was built by the Khmer king Sūryavarman II between 1112 and 1160 CE and features stepped pyramid patterns in its architecture, particularly in the central tower (Zimmer 1983: 208-09). Another stepped pyramid temple is also located at Baksei (Cambodia) dated to 10th century CE (Munsterberg 1970: 232-35). Moreover, the architectural style of Japanese stūpas often incorporate stepped pyramid patterns. These stūpas, known as pagodas, feature multiple levels, and the lower levels are adorned with decorative motifs and carvings. Additionally, in some Chinese Buddhist temples and pagodas, we also find stepped pyramid patterns in the form of decorative carvings and architectural features. These patterns are often associated with pagoda-

style structures. The brick pagoda of the Songyue temple complex is a twelve-sided and fifteen-tiered structure located in the Henan Province, China. It was Built in 523 CE and is thus the oldest surviving Chinese pagoda so far (Misra 2015).

The Ajanta and the Karla rock-cut sanctuaries stand as significant embodiments of Buddhist faith in the historical landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, the Swat Valley served as an important centre for Buddhism during ancient times. Despite sharing connections with Buddhism, there seems no direct historical or cultural exchange between these sites. Artistic ideas had developed independently in accordance with the unique contexts of these regions. Appearance of the stepped pyramid decorative motif in the Indian rock-cut sanctuaries during the 1st century BCE suggests diverse cultural influences, including those from Mesopotamian traditions.

The Buddhist rock-cut sanctuaries at Ajanta (dated 50 BCE to 50 CE) are located north of the town of Aurangabad, in the Indian state of Maharashtra. At Ajanta Cave no. 12 (Fig. 42), the walls of the hall above the cell-doors are ornamented with caitya-window motifs connected at places by a *vedikā*-design, the right wall being further ornamented with stepped merlons or a stepped pyramid in the Mesopotamian style (Kail 1975: 80-92; Singh 1965; Zimmer 1983, II: pl. 164; Mitra 1996: 47). Other examples include the Ganesh Lena caitya at Junnar where the pillars are carved in high relief with bell-shaped capital, above which animals are seated on a reverse stepped-pyramidal platform (Kail 1975: pl. 33).

The Karla Caitya-Hall, also known as the Great Caitya of Karle, is dated to the last quarter of the 1st century BCE and located near Pune, in western India. The stūpa (Fig. 43), carved at the profound centre of the apsidal projection, consists of a double-storeyed dome, surmounted by a reverse stepped-pyramidal shaped harmikā, in which the wooden parasol/umbrella is still standing (Zimmer 1983, II: pl. 78; Kail 1975: 108-11: pl. 4A).

Harmikā and *chattras* of a Buddhist stūpa symbolises the spiritual ascent or the journey towards enlightenment, with each level

representing a higher stage of spiritual realization. Additionally, the decorative motifs and carvings on their exteriors often tell stories from the life of the Buddha or depict important Buddhist teachings, making them not only artistic elements but also tools for conveying religious and spiritual messages (Zimmer 1983: 231-46, Fogelin 2012; Rawat and Hameed 2019). The domical structure of a stūpa shares some visual similarities with a pyramid/ziggurat. Both architectural forms exhibit a tapering or ascending shape, even though with different details and cultural contexts. While the fundamental shapes of a stūpa and a pyramid differ, the stūpa being more rounded and the pyramid having a polygonal base, the common element lies in their upward-reaching form. Both architectural styles may convey a message of ascent, symbolising spiritual significance in their respective cultural contexts (also see, Yamamoto 1990: 31-73).

In the context of our study, we have recorded harmikā in the shape of a stepped pyramid, that are also provided with a projected moulding, adorned with stepped pyramid decorative motifs (see Figs. 38-41). The inclusion of the stepped harmikā

with stepped pyramid decorative motifs could be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the ritual ascent to divine heights. This deliberate design choice may be seen as a reverence and spiritual connection to the Buddha.

Another distinct feature came to surface during our study, i.e. the depiction of a stepped pyramid in the form of an abstracted version of a three-dimensional ziggurat, often decorating cornices and parapets. The inclusion of a stepped pyramid in Buddhist art, presented as an abstracted version of the three-dimensional ziggurat, reflects subtle details that needs further investigation. This intentional employment of the design choice deviates from a factual representation of the ziggurat, retaining its stepped structure. The stepped pyramid serves as a symbolic element for ascension and spiritual progression, with each tier/level representing different stages of enlightenment. The placement and orientation of the stepped pyramid may carry meaningful implications. This design reflects the connection between architectural inspiration and spiritual symbolism, inviting viewers to engage with the artwork on both aesthetic and philosophical levels.



Figure 42. Stepped pyramid decorative motif at Ajanta Cave no. 12. (Image retrieved from http://www.kamit.jp/02_unesco/02_ajanta/xcav12in_eng.htm on December 26, 2023).



Figure 43. Stepped harmikā at Karla Buddhist Rock-Cut Caves, India. (Image retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lobodrl/8651670716/in/photostream/> on December 26, 2023).

Moreover, the positioning and alignment of the stepped pyramid within the artistic composition is significant. It could be positioned in relation to other elements, such as the Buddha figures or sacred motifs, reinforcing its role as a symbolic representation of elevation and transcendence. For example, balustrades are intricately carved with a stepped pyramidal pattern, while seated Buddhas are depicted beneath ogee arches, as seen in figures 8-11. These artistic elements symbolise the elevated spiritual stature of the Buddha himself.

During our study, we noticed another distinct and striking pattern in the relief panels featuring sacred imagery (see Figs. 12-15). Such examples show the presence of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas in the figured field and a row of

reverse stepped pyramid decorative motifs is positioned above. The choice of this design seems intentional, possibly representing a symbolic meaning. Knowing that the Buddha, revered as the enlightened one, is seated below, the arrangement of the stepped pyramids is notably centred towards him, emphasising the elevated status of this spiritual leader. This deliberate placement accentuates the significance of the Buddha in the visual narrative, with the stepped pyramid motifs acting as a visual expression of the elevated and enlightened presence below (cf. Ghafoor 2018: figs. 45, 52, 54, 87; Faccenna 1964, II, pt.3: 112, pl. CCCLII).

The surfaces of the stepped pyramid decorative elements are frequently treated with floral motifs, such as the lotus flower, *pipal* leaves, palmettes, acanthus leaves, and rosettes. This fusion of botanical symbolism with architectural elements reflects a plausible understanding of the natural world intertwined with spiritual and philosophical connotations.

The lotus flower has a rich and diverse religious and cultural history. It holds sacred meanings dating back to ancient times and is revered by various cultures such as the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Persians, Hindus, and Buddhists. Due to its being of sacred nature, it found its way into the decorative art of the Egyptians. It was also utilised by the Assyrians and Persians to adorn their temples. Moreover, the Greeks and Romans employed the lotus motif in their artistic expressions. Surprisingly, this symbol made its journey from the classical world to the South Asian subcontinent, where it became a significant element in Hindu mythology (Rehman 1989: 71). This sacred flower goes beyond religious boundaries, often serving as an attribute associated with divine and semi-divine figures in many religions. During the aniconic phase of Buddhism, the depiction of a lotus bud meant to show Buddha symbolically. Its spotless ascent from muddy waters represents purity, enlightenment, and transcending of earthly hardships. The lotus has been represented as a symbol of purity since pre-Buddhist times (Zimmer 1983: 158-226; see also Zimmer 1946: 90-92). In Buddhist art, the depiction of a full-blown lotus symbolises

the stages of enlightenment, and the pre-enlightenment period is represented by a closed bud (Siddiqui 2012). Placing lotus motifs on the stepped pyramid suggests a narrative of spiritual ascent and awakening, where each tier represents a stage in the journey toward enlightenment.

Acanthus leaves have been a preferred ornamental motif in art and architecture since remote antiquity down to the present. This decorative motif is widely used to decorate Corinthian capitals, as well as holding symbolic significance in European art. Being one of the oldest decorative elements in classical architecture, acanthus leaves were often featured as funerary symbols in ancient Greek and Roman sculptural art. Initially associated with death, the acanthus motif underwent a transformative evolution and later came to symbolise life and immortality. Acanthus leaves, historically associated with Hellenistic architecture, bring a touch of Graeco-Roman appearance to the Buddhist art of Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna, while potentially symbolising enduring life and vitality. In the case of our study, we have observed that the stepped pyramid decorative motif is frequently exhibited with acanthus leaves. As the acanthus leaves evolved to symbolise life, their combination with the stepped pyramid could be interpreted as a representation of rebirth and renewal. The ascending steps signify a journey towards spiritual enlightenment or a higher state of being, while the acanthus leaves, associated with life, contribute to the theme of regeneration and the perpetual cycle of growth (Lee-Niinioja 2018: 3-6; Gilani and Siddiqui 2021).

Pipal leaves are generally associated with the sacred Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained *nirvāna*. The depiction of *pipal* leaves in the Buddhist art evokes a sense of divine connection and spiritual awakening. The stepped pyramids inhabited by *pipal* leaves employ a visual homage to the important moment in Buddhist history and reinforce the subject of enlightenment. Palmettes and rosettes, with their intricate and stylized forms, contribute to the rich tapestry of sacred symbolism. The symbolic interpretation of the palmette flower is diverse and multilayered, ranging from victory and eternal life to fertility and divine blessings. Rosettes are sometimes

associated with cosmic order, their depiction with the stepped pyramid creates a sense of cosmic harmony.

The sacred meaning embedded in these floral motifs is not merely confined to their individual meaning but also extends to their arrangement and combination. The deliberate placement of these motifs on the stepped pyramid emphasizes a harmonious fusion of architectural structure and spiritual symbolism, creating a visual language that communicates profound insights into Buddhist philosophy and the transformative journey toward enlightenment.

The Secular Interpretation

The non-religious or secular interpretation of the stepped pyramid decorative design may symbolise various aspects, including foreign cultural influences, architectural aesthetics, or regional styles. As we know that Uḍḍiyāna was located at the crossroads of various cultural influences, for example, Greek, Roman, Persian, Central Asian and Indian. The stepped pyramid motif might be the result of synthesis of diverse cultural elements, portraying the amalgamation of different artistic traditions in the region. This decorative motif may have been chosen by the sculptors of Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna for its aesthetic appeal and visual impact. The stepped pyramid decorative element could be seen as a visually pleasing and harmonious arrangement, showcasing the artistic preferences of the sculptors and sponsors. Still another secular interpretation of this ornamental pattern could be as a representation of authority or power, symbolising the significance of the site or the individuals connected to it.

It is significant to mention here that while these secular interpretations provide possible explanations for the stepped pyramid design in the domain of the Buddhist art of Uḍḍiyāna and Gandhāra, the basic meaning of such elements is often rooted in religious or spiritual symbolism. The relief panels that exhibit such decorative motifs used to adorn various parts of the monastic complexes, and, therefore, are deeply connected to Buddhist beliefs and narratives, and any secular interpretation should be considered alongside the religious context of the art.

Concluding Remarks

Buddhism holds an important place in the historical narrative of the Swat Valley. To disseminate this religious doctrine, monastic complexes and stūpas were erected in large numbers in the valley. These sacred buildings were meticulously adorned by adept sculptors, who depicted various scenes from the life of the Buddha, capturing moments from his princely life to his role as a revered teacher. Furthermore, numerous *jātakas* were also exquisitely carved in stone, portraying the artistic expertise of the craftsmen involved. The Buddhist art of the Swat Valley also depicted architectural decorative elements that were not strictly aligned with Buddhist iconography or philosophy. Instead, they were influenced by the cultural milieu of the time and were employed for decorating relief panels. Local artists utilised a wide variety of decorative motifs, both indigenous and borrowed from foreign sources. These relief panels often incorporated architectural elements of foreign origins, including Hellenistic, Roman, Persian, Central Asian, and Indian influences. Worth noticing are Corinthian pillars and pilasters, Persepolitan columns and pilasters, stūpa pegs or *nāgadanta*, false brackets in the form of atlas and cupid, acanthus leaves and vine scrolls as decorative motifs, and variety of arches, roofs, doors and jambs, etc.

Apart from many other architectural and decorative elements, the Buddhist art of the Swat Valley exhibits a distinct and intricately carved ornamental motif known as the stepped pyramid or stepped merlon decorative motif. Originating as ziggurats in ancient Mesopotamia, this motif traversed cultural landscapes, reaching Persia and subsequently spreading to Gandhara and the Swat Valley through extensive trade routes. From the 6th to 4th century BCE, Gandhāra flourished as a satrapy of the vast Achaemenid Empire, and it is evident that this motif found its way to the Indian subcontinent during this period.

The ancient Uḍḍiyāna, strategically positioned in the northwestern corner of the Indian subcontinent, played an important role in shaping the development of religious and cultural ideas. The artists from Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna generously exchanged ideas and polished their

skills. The symbiotic relationship between these locales resulted in the transmission of artistic motifs, including the stepped pyramid pattern. The stepped pyramid decorative motif can be seen as a frequent and aesthetically rich feature adorning the Buddhist relief-panels. Through the interconnected web of trade routes and cultural intersections, it is obvious that this motif got embedded in the artistic tapestry of the Swat Valley, consolidating its presence as a testament to the shared cultural heritage of greater Gandhāra. The decorative element under discussion is fused together with a variety of indigenous and foreign artistic elements, making it a remarkable component within the vast realm of Buddhist art. This intricate fusion of the stepped pyramid decorative motif with a combination of rich cultural elements, elaborates the valley's significance as a melting pot of artistic traditions.

This motif continues to find expression in contemporary contexts, adorning both secular and sacred structures, as well as gracing elements like furniture and textiles. One such example can be seen in the vibrant city of Karachi, where remnants of the ancient Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, survive in the form of the Parsis. They have chosen to employ the distinctive ziggurat-shaped decorative motif onto the façades of their temples, serving as a testament and cultural legacy of the Achaemenid Persians (Fig. 44).

The aim of this study was to highlight that the stepped pyramid decorative motif was not just an ornamental pattern but had both aesthetic and practical purposes in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna. Our investigation into the matter enabled us to opine that the Buddhist community of the region saw architecture as a powerful means of expressing their thoughts and beliefs. This motif was more than just an artistic addition, serving both sacred and secular functions. Future research may elaborate further the successive use and meaning of the stepped pyramid decorative motif in the region of Uḍḍiyāna and Gandhāra.



Figure 44. Stepped merlon decorative motif on the façade of Parsi Dar-e-Meher in Saddar Karachi city.

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