

Playing with rings –Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā A relief panel from Aziz Dheri revisited

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Aziz Dheri is one of the richest and well-preserved sites in the whole of ancient Gandhāra, Northern region of Pakistan. Excavations have been carried out since 1993 at this unique and huge site, about one square kilometre, where, from a very limited area of the mound, more than four hundred sculptures have so far been recovered (Nasim Khan 2010a). The other cultural materials found at the site include inscriptions, seals and sealings, coins, etc. Based on stratigraphic and numismatic study as well as epigraphic evidences, these sculptures belong to different periods and, apart from few of them, they are mostly dated to the late Kushan or post-Kushan periods including those coming from the Hindu Shahi level of the site. With these discoveries, many questions may be raised regarding the chronology and development of the Buddhist art of Gandhāra, generally based on stylistic basis, as well as about the political and religious landscape of the area in the post-Kushan period which is usually considered as shrouded part of the Gandhāran history.

Some of the Buddhist sculptures from Aziz Dheri are either unique or rare by their styles and themes. One of these distinctive panels (fig.1), which is the subject of the present paper, was found during 1993 season excavation and is dated to the post-Kushan period (Nasim Khan 2010a: Cat. No.123). This panel shows a unique theme which was previously identified to be an event from the Buddha's life – an oath taking ceremony performing most possibly by

Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā, after their wedding, where both are seated and giving words to each other by sacrificing on an altar (Nasim Khan 2010a: Cat. No.123)¹. Since its first publication, the author came across some more relief panels where the figures are shown with similar subject matter and is, therefore, and ever since came with a new interpretation of the scene. One of these relief panels was found at the Buddhist site of Butkara III (SSQM-BKIII-67), the second one was recovered from a Buddhist monastery called Mian Khan, situated in the Mardan plain (Cole 1885: Plate No. 23) and the third panel was recorded at Charg Patai (Dir); one of these is identified as depicting a gambling scene played by a king and his queen (fig. 2). One more panel was found in Gandhāra whereas its exact provenance unknown (Nishikawa 1984; fig. 5).

Fig. 1

The panel shows Yaśodharā in the right side who is seated on a throne; her feet rest on a stool. She has a round face with mouth slightly opened and looking towards the table in her front. Her hair is combed back and is knotted behind the head and turns into a tuff. She is not wearing any kind of scarf but wears a beaded chain like neck ornament which passes through a cylindrical bead hanging between her breasts. She is fully covered, except her head and is

¹ An other panel which was wrongly identified by the author as offering of Dust actually represents Buddha presenting the Serpent to the Kāśyapas.

barefooted, with a tight upper garment having folds visible round her arms. She probably wears a *paridhāna*. Her left hand lies in her lap and the right is extended towards the table and rests inside the bowl (*thāl*) placed on the top of the table. Her seat seems composed of wood or canes elements (*vetrāsana*) showing horseshoe or pointed arch like designs. It is topped with a soft round cushion. The stool for her feet is rectangular in shape and has most probably four legs suggested by those visible to the viewers. Opposite to Yaśodharā, Siddhārtha is sitting on the same sort of throne as that of Yaśodharā. His head is slightly inclined looking towards Yaśodharā. The right hand is extended towards the *thāl* in the same manner as his bride. His left hand rests on his left knee. A double rim halo is depicted behind his head. He has round face and his hair is combed back. Siddhārtha is wearing a crown or a turban and is bedecked with ear and neck ornaments, bracelets and probably anklets. His upper body seems nude but he wears a *paridhāna* or a *dhoti* like lower garment.

Behind Yaśodharā, a standing female figure with oval face having a fleshy pointed nose. The lower legs are missing. She is looking straight, probably to Siddhārtha, and has the same arrangement of hair as Yaśodharā. She is holding something in round in her right hand

and a kind of drapery or a scarf in her left hand; might be the belongings of Yaśodharā. The supposed object in her right hand may also be the head of a child standing in between the figures or behind Yaśodharā. The female figure is bedecked with neck ornaments and might be wearing the garments in the same style as Yaśodharā. In the background there is a standing female figure with head missing; her body turns to the right and probably looking towards Yaśodharā. With her right hand she is grasping the central bead of her necklace while with her left, she seems securing the folds of her upper garment. She is wearing an *uttarīya* or *sāri* (?) and a *paridhāna* the folds of which are visible behind the table. To her left and behind the table there is a round column type of an object with a round or circular top. In the left field and behind Siddhārtha, a tree having branches is visible which suggests that the event might be taking place in an open area.

The table placed in between the couple is composed of a round shaft supported by a pedestal of three legs with round elements. The shaft supports a flat top with a horizontal line (see below) and on top of it is placed a large size *thāl*. The *thāl* is probably of square shape with sloping sides receding from the top to the bottom.



Fig. 1. A relief panel from Aziz Dheri (Nasim Khan 2010a: Cat. No. 123)

Fig. 2

The second panel presents similar theme as we have in fig. 1. It was found in the monastery of Mian Khan (Cole 1885: No. 23) situated in the vicinity of Sanghao and Kashmir Smast area. This is an arched panel broken from its right side. The preserved portion shows two parts. In the upper register, a bowl is placed on a throne the front of which is covered with a drapery. Different figures in *añjali* pose are to be seen in the left field. In the lower part of the panel, there are four different human figures standing or sitting to the table in the centre. At the right side, a princely figure, probably Siddhārtha is seated on a throne; the legs of the throne are decorated with round elements as in fig. 3. He is wearing the upper garment in a narrow mode covering only his left shoulder and a *paridhāna* with pointed ends. He is seated $\frac{3}{4}$ to the left; his

bare feet are on a foot-stool with probably three horizontal rows of beaded design. He wears a crown with a crest in the front, ear ornaments and neck jewellery. His right hand, which is broken along with the top of the table, is extended towards the bowl placed on the table; it seems that his hand is placed inside the pot.

On the opposite side of the table, Yaśodharā² is seated on probably a similar cane seat as shown in fig. 1. She is almost in profile posture facing right and is wearing the upper and lower garments and is bedecked with a headdress, ear rings, necklace and a pair of heavy necklaces. Her right hand is extended towards the table and

² In the present case and in fig. 2, we are not very sure about the identification of the figures. But the context shows, particularly in fig. 2, that the figure in question may be of Yaśodharā.

seemingly placed inside the bowl but with her left hand she probably holds a torch. Behind, a standing figure, probably a female, is holding something similar to a torch in her right hand. She is wearing the upper and lower garments and is bedecked with a head dress, ear rings, and a pair of heavy anklets. She is standing in a relaxed mode, with her right hand stretched towards the left, and observing what is going-on between the couple. In the middle and in the background of the table, a heavily dressed and

bejewelled female figure is holding a torch in her right hand and looking towards the bowl.

The table is composed of a tapering shaft with round elements for decoration. It stands on a base of three legs and supports a flank or the top of the table. Probably a bowl (*thāl*) with sloping sides is placed on the top of the table, which are receding to the bottom. The form of the table is almost the same as in the next example (fig. 3) except the arms which are missing here.



Fig. 2. Broken arched panel from the Monastery of Mian Khan, Mardan

Fig. 3

This arched relief panel, composed of two registers, was discovered at Chārg Patai (Khan Pur-Lower Dir) probably during 1982 season excavation at the site. The panel is broken and only its left half is preserved but one can guess from the preserved portion about the subject matter of the scenes. In the lower register, the scene presents the Great Departure of the Śākyamuni. Yaśodharā is sleeping with her head placed on a high pillow while Śākyamuni seated on her side is ready to depart. In the right corner are probably shown three female figures; all are in sleeping position. The one to the extreme right inclines on a large size pillow with head slightly turned to front. In the upper register, Yaśodharā sits on a high seat with her

feet placed on a foot stool. Her left hand probably stays on her left thigh while the other one is extended towards the table in her front where her right hand seems placed inside the *thāl*. The figure visible to the right of Yaśodharā and behind the table is much defaced but she seems looking towards the missing figure supposed to be Siddhārtha. The table is composed of a pedestal with three legs and a shaft with round elements for decoration. Two arms with round elements support the top of the table (see fig. 3). Both compartments are decorated with floral designs and are separated from each other by a row of lotus flowers of five petals each.



Fig. 3. Relief panel from Chārg Patai



Fig. 3a. Relief panel from Charg Patai (photograph taken in 2011)

Fig. 4

This panel shows almost a similar scene as the previous examples. It was recorded at Butkara III (Swat) during excavation conducted in 1984/1985. Dozens of sculptures were found but it is difficult to date them precisely due to lack of stratigraphic details. The two copper coins of the Kushan period, one belong to Wima Takto II (Nasim Khan 2010b) and the other one to Vasu Deva, may suggest Kushan era of the sculptures. All these sculptures are nicely executed and present different narratives from Buddha's life (Rahman 1991) already known from Gandhāra except the one presented here.

This rectangular panel is depicted with different figures including Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā also observed in the previous two examples; the

scene is previously identified as "Prince Siddhārtha at School" (Swati 1997: 44, pl. 25). The figures to the left are partially damaged and defaced. In the right field, there is an in-framed Corinthian pilaster composed of a three stepped pedestal which supports a round column added with foliated capital. In the centre of the panel is depicted a tripod table of plain flank with a horizontal line in the centre and in front which shows that a plain object is placed on the table. The shaft of the table shows round elements for decoration. Both sides of the round shaft and above the round elements, two slanting or oblique arms support the flank of the table.

To the left side of the table, Yaśodharā is seated in a shy mode with her inclined looking towards the table paying special attention to the event

happening at the time. She is seated on a throne showing legs with round decorative elements. Yaśodharā's legs, placed on a stool, are shown in front and close to each other; her right knee just touches the lower edge of the table. But her body is slightly turned towards the table. She is wearing a robe, the folds of which are held with her left hand. The loop of the folds is above her hand. Her hair is combed downwards and is

carrying a wreath above her forehead. She is wearing two pairs of heavy anklets, neck jewellery and probably ear ornaments. Her right hand is extended towards the table and her elbow is placed on it while she is holding a rectangular shaped object in her right hand that is raised and opened to front. The object has a pointed upper end and is shown with parallel grooved lines on its front surface.

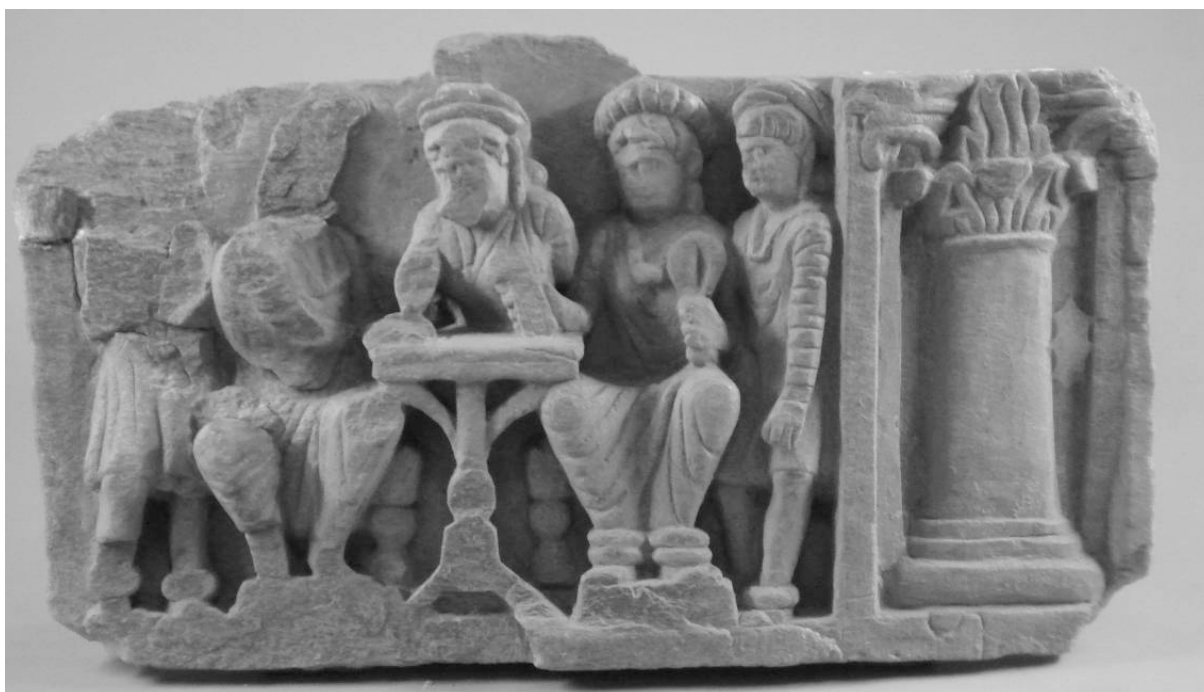


Fig. 4. A relief panel from Butkara III (Swat)

Behind Yaśodharā, a standing female figure is wearing a tight upper garment with long sleeves and may be a short lower dress having straight hem which stays above her knees. Her hair is combed downwards and probably carrying a wreath on her head. She is wearing a necklace and heavy anklets and observing carefully the episode.

To the other side of the table Siddhārtha is seated almost in the same position. His face is broken vertically behind the ears and details of the face are missing. Siddhārtha is seated $\frac{3}{4}$ to

the right with his right hand, which is partially broken, extended towards the table and may originally be carrying something in it or may be holding the hand of the female figure who sits beside Siddhārtha. He is wearing the upper garment and the *paridhāna*. His neck jewellery is partially visible. He is seated on the same kind of a seat as Yaśodharā; his feet rest on a stool.

The upper body of the figure, which is standing behind Siddhārtha, is missing. This might be a male figure standing to the right and may be

observing the events as the other standing figure does. He is wearing a short skirt or *paridhāna*, reaching above his knees, and is bedecked with heavy anklets.

The woman seated behind the table is shown with a two-fold head dress, the upper garment and neck jewellery and may be wearing long ear ornaments. She is seated in front but her body is slightly turned towards Siddhārtha. She is looking towards the table or the hand of Siddhārtha. Her right hand is extended towards the table and seems placed on the top of it in the same style as Yaśodharā's right hand. Her elbow rests probably on a cushion. On the pedestal and in the right corner, there is a Kharoshthi letter 'ba'.

Fig.5

A similar example (fig. 5) has been found in Gandhāra (Nishikawa 1984: fig. I-17) but its exact provenance is unknown. The scene is identified as the couple playing a dice³.

In this panel, Siddhārtha is seated in the left field on a high seat. His left hand stays on his left knee while the right hand is raised and closed but with pointed indice and attentively looking towards the centre of the table. It seems possible that he is holding something in his hand, most probably the dice or may be the gesture of counting. Behind, a standing female figure holds a parasol over Siddhārtha's head. To the left, a standing man is seen with a *chowri* in his right hand. In the right field, Yaśodharā is also seated on a high seat holding a bunch of lotus flowers or tulips in her left hand while in the right she holds a box type object. It is possible that in our fig. 4, she is equally carrying a similar object and the subject matter would be the same. But the main difference between the two panels is the absence of the female figure sitting behind the table and who seems to be playing the role of a referee in all these games or events.

³ The object held by Yaśodharā could also be a musical instrument.



Fig.5. Taken from Nishikawa, 1984

The composition and the overall subject matter in these panels is almost the same except the arrangements of the figure in the second panel (fig. 2) where Siddhārtha is seated on the left side of the table and Yaśodharā to the right which is not the case in the rest of the panels. Moreover, Siddhārtha of the first panel shows a halo behind his head which we do not find in the other examples. The other major difference that can be observed between these panels is the shape of the table. In these examples they seem more light and decorated while in fig. 1, it looks heavy and simple; there are other such differences in styles but we have to focus here only on the subject matters depicted in these panels. Almost absent in the art of Gandhāra, interpretation of these happenings in the panels pose a problem. Do these panels represent certain religious events such as conversion of Nanda ((Zwalf 1996: No. 205) or childhood of the prince Siddhārtha at school (Swati 1997: Pl.

25)? Are the principal figures in these panels are Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā? Do these panels present certain religious ceremonies or some kinds of rites related to a wedding? Is the couple gambling or playing games, the games which are still in practice in the region played either during or after a wedding ceremony?

One of the beauties of the different cultures of the Indian sub-continent is that they are rich in charms, full of events, ceremonies, rites and rituals. Marriage is considered as sacred as other their religious events and is displayed with all the exquisite rites and traditions. Among the most significant of these traditions are the games and gambling played by the newly married couple and which by the passage of time, in certain cases, lost their actual meanings and remained a compulsory element in the culture which sometimes became an integral part of a religious ceremony and is regarded as

part of their rites and rituals related to their religions.

In the different cultures of the sub-continent, a hush-hush or open game is played on purpose to destine feudal-lordship of the groom or the bride. To be more précised, such games are played to gain supremacy over each other. There is nothing specific to do for achieving this aim. Every ethnic group has its own way of doing certain practice or play a game to gain his or her dominancy on the other or on the family of each other or even to gain love and affection in future life. These traditions some time pass on to another culture preserving sometime their original meaning but in many cases they are mingled with other and generate new rites. The few examples of games or rites listed below are taken here with a view to give an idea how different games are played by the newly married couple in a view to dominate each other.

In Chitrali society, after the ceremony of *nikah* and in the house of the bride, two glasses of milk are placed on the table in front of the couple and the tradition says that the one who take and drink first the milk will not only be the dominant figure in his or her future life but will also have the force to rule over the family. Therefore, during this ceremony, everyone is trying to be the first to take the glass of milk⁴.

A similar example can be found in the Pashtoon's culture, particularly in the Afridi's society, where before or after *nikāh*, a glass of milk is presented to the couple to share and drink from the same glass. This is to begin their life with love and by sharing everything in their life without showing any supremacy on each other. Similar tradition exists in some other

groups of the Pashtoon's culture of the area. After the marriage, when the couple meet for the first time in their bedroom, the bride is trying to do two things on purpose. Either she does not make bed-love during the very first meeting, although the groom insists, and to avoid this, the bride gives the reason of having menstruation cycles. If she is succeeded, she is believed to be dominant on her husband in future. The second discreet game played by the bride is to get up early in the morning and wear the shoes of her groom; if she does so, she is then regarded a dominant person. It is said that in the early days of the marriage, it is generally the groom who has to wake up first. In another example, when the groom enters for the first time to his bedroom to meet his bride, the bride should immediately stand up because that act will give her the destiny of power and the courage to dominate her husband in his future life but also to show her respect for the groom.

In the Seraiki culture, when the groom enters his bedroom and meet his bride for the first time, he should be harsh or callous and show annoyance on his face. While the bride would try to face the situation bravely and to act anything that could appease the situation and does not give any opportunity to the groom to do any malevolent act. If successful, she is believed to be dominant over her groom in future. Otherwise, it will go the other way round. In some areas, the couple stand in front of the family and they are then asked, after counting up to three, to sit down, and the person who sits first will sit forever and is the winner while the looser will be the minor. The other game generally played by the couple to gain dominancy over each other is when both of them are sitting together, along with their family members, each one is looking for an opportunity to pinch slyly first on the body of the other to pave his or her destiny for

⁴ Although such act looks easy to perform, in the local culture, the couple is very shy and such kind of game is difficult to play in front of the family.

dominancy in his/her future life.

In the Hindko speaking areas, particularly of the Peshawar city, after spending the first night together, the couple drop their “gana” (bracelet) inside a *thāl* filled with milk and then the groom has to search his/her “gana” in the liquid while the bride has to try to avoid him to do so by pushing his hand from the *thāl* which is normally placed on a table. As long as the game prolong this will go in favour of the bride and will show her superiority in future.

In some areas of the Pashtoon and of the Punjab, rings of the newly married couple are dropped in a large size pot filled with milk or other liquids that are sometimes mixed with petals of flowers. The pot is placed on a table and the couple is asked to find his or her own proper ring in the churning liquid. The person who finds first his or her proper ring is considered the winner and is believed to be a dominant person in future life. Such game is very much common in the Indian cultures.

There exist many other such games that come up with the idea of superiority and inferiority matters. These games or rituals transmit from centuries through their regular appearances as an integral part of a marriage. The author is very much convinced that the four panels studied here, particularly the one from Aziz Dheri, present similar games common in the local cultures. All these panels might not represent the same them but the main subject may remain the same. All these panels depict the figures of Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā and might be passing through the same experience. In our first example (fig. 1), the *thāl* on the table is probably filled with liquids. The right hand of each of the figures seems placed inside the pot most probably looking for their proper *gana* or ring and playing one of the famous Indian

games called “Fishing Rings”.

In the second panel (fig. 2), the hands and the top of the table are partially missing but the deed or idea may be the same as in the previous example. In this panel, all figures are carrying torch except Siddhārtha. The torch held by Yaśodharā⁵ is in her left hand while the other one is placed inside the pot. The right hand of Siddhārtha is put in the liquid but the left is placed on his knee in the same way as in the previous example. This panel may also represent the game “Fishing Rings”.

In our next panel (fig. 3), the upper register may represent the same game as we have in our figs. 1 and 2 or the couple may be playing a dice or other such game as to be judged from the shape of the table which has a flat top.

In the next panel (fig. 4), the couple is playing a certain game where a musical like instrument is held by Yaśodharā in her intact hand; the object is very similar to a small harp (Nasim Khan 2010a: Cat. No. 11) or xylophone (see Faccena and Filigenzi 2007: 233.3). It is also possible that the female figure sits behind the table is in fact Yaśodharā who is playing the arm-wrestling game with Siddhārtha whose arm is missing. The figure sitting behind the table could also be playing the role of a referee of the game. In such a game, normally a female is playing the role of a referee and before starting the game, the arm of the referee is placed on a cushion and after counting up to 3 the game is started. This scene may equally represent the game of playing with rings and the lady seen

⁵ During the procession of a wedding, in the tribal belt of Darra Khyber, a lantine or a torch is carried by the bride which should be illuminated for five or six days and should not be turned off otherwise it is considered as bad augury or omen for the family in general and the couple in particular.

sitting behind the table in the three examples may be playing the role of a referee. The couple could also play

The above examples suggest that the relief panel from Aziz Dheri presents one of the famous games 'Fishing Rings' which is played by a couple during the wedding ceremony and

may be regarded as a rare example of this kind in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra. These panel show that the Buddhist art of Gandhāra not only preserves narratives from part of the Buddha's life as historic Buddha but if studied in detail, the art could be regarded as a complete manual which even tell us about the most intimate part of his life; this needs further research.

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