

RECENTLY DISCOVERED BUDDHIST PAINTINGS FROM TAXILA (PAKISTAN): A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Gandhara, Taxila and Swat became important centres of the Buddhist religious and cultural activities during the last centuries of the first millennium BC and continued as such till the end of first millennium AD. During this period, as archaeological evidence from these regions supports, a large community of artisans and craftsmen were engaged in quarrying, sculpting and painting numerous stupas and extensive monastic establishments. Although a large number of sculptures and other objects have been recovered through scientific excavations or other means and owned by public or private museums world widely, yet a very few Buddhist paintings from Gandhara, Taxila and Swat have been reported so far. Recently a mural painting was found while excavating Jinna Wali Dehri, a Buddhist stupa site at Taxila (Figs. 1-4)¹. The excavator of this painting, however, does not inform us about its exact provenance. Previous examples of painting from Swat² (Figs. 5-8) and elsewhere³ and this new discovery at Taxila enable us to undertake a comprehensive study of mural painting of the Buddhist period at these areas. We intend here, however, to analyse them stylistically by comparing them with the contemporary ones from the surrounding regions and hypothetically propose an approximate date. This will also enable us to suggest developmental stages of this art.

History of Painting in Surrounding Areas

Buddhism at its zenith in the sub-continent found its way to other regions, and the religious precincts were not only decorated with sculpture but also with painting. Reference to the Indian paintings occur as early as the Mauryan period and its techniques developed long before the Guptas.⁴ Paintings at chaitya No.10 at Ajanta in Maharashtra state of India are dated before the Christen era while those of No.1 and 16 are dated five or six hundred years later.⁵ Another school of Buddhist painting emerged in Afghanistan at Bamiyan that belongs to the period of Hephthalites at the beginning of the 5th century.⁶ Buddhist paintings from another site over here were found in Fondukistan. A hoard of coins including issues of Hephthalite rulers and of Khusrau-II of Iran (590-628) provide a possible date of the 7th century but since these coins were in the form of an offering the foundation of the monastery may be placed somewhat earlier.⁷ To the north and east of the Pamir and Hindu Kush ranges extending to the Gobi Desert is the region of Central Asia (Chinese Turkistan). Here at Kizil a series of sanctuaries and halls hollowed out of the loess cliffs have magnificent wall paintings. The earliest of the styles may be dated by inscriptions to the early sixth century in the cave of painter.⁸

In the North western region of Pakistan, cultural entity of the so called Indus-Oxus region, painting were executed when Buddhism was at its climax. Dominico Faccenna of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Swat was the first to report painting at Butkara-I Swat.⁹ Other Buddhist paintings were also reported by some other researchers and scholars.¹⁰

Features of Paintings of the Surrounding Regions

A glance over contemporary styles of painting in vogue at Ajanta in India, Bamiyan and Fondukistan in Afghanistan, and Miran and Kizil in Central Asia may be helpful in understanding our specimen under discussion.

During the Gupta period, the art of painting although much more common than sculptures. Both of them exhibited more or less similar qualities (Figs. 9, 10) The colouring scheme is well-balanced on a compact surface; the outline predominates slightly; shading does not emphasize; and transition by means of curls and ornaments create effects close to picturesque impact. The individual lines as well as the composition of the whole scene are rhythmic and decorative. The figures are beautiful and sometimes full of intense feelings.¹¹ Poses and gestures are effectively used for the expression of emotions.¹² Individual figures are rough¹³, however, they have fine line-work and bold, flat colours. The colours and floral and animal forms, as well as the arbitrary spatial treatment give these 1500 years old murals decidedly modern a flavour.¹⁴

At Bamiyan and Fondukistan in Afghanistan (Fig-11) three styles of painting, i.e., Sasanian, Indian and Central Asian are found.¹⁵ Rigid lifeless dignity as in case of the reliefs of Iranian Kings represents the Sasanian style of painting. The Indian style depicts figures in easy movement and roundness having no relation to the frozen Sasanians style.¹⁶ In fact at Afghanistan there a mixture of elements drawn from Western and Indian sources resulted in the formation of a mixed style.¹⁷

In Central Asia (Fig. 12) as at Afghanistan, we observe a variety of styles in painting. Some figures at Kizil are treated schematic rather abstract in terms of exaggerated muscular anatomy as in case of Herakles. The outlines dominate, but the lines as well as the composition as a whole are rhythmic and decorative. Figures as at Ajanta are not crude but are full of life showing iconographic and stylistic details.

Stylistic Analysis of Painting from Taxila

The paintings found at Taxila are hieratic that were used for presentation of religious stories and legends just as numerous stone-reliefs did (Figs. 1-4). Stylistically, these paintings are influenced from the stucco sculpture of Taxila of 4th – 5th century AD that had attained closer affinity to the features of the Indian figures rather than those of Gandhāra.

Painting 1: figure of the Buddha is painted with right shoulder bare and the hair tightened on the top of the head in India style. The face is round and fleshy on contrary to those with sharp features of typical Gandhāran style.

In Taxila the painter has stressed on frontality. It seems that the painter had no grasp over his brush although he has tried to achieve balance by linear treatment but the figures on the whole are crude. The gracefully drawn hands reveal tenderness, grace and rhythm are well and figures are devoid of anatomical proportions and the artists has paid special attention to their forms. The contours of the body are not dominated by outlines.

Comparative Study of the Style

Although painting of every region has its own distinct style with specific features, yet contemporary art of other regions may influence each other.

Comparing the composition of the present paintings from Taxila with those from other regions, it is very simple and flat. Except for those from Miran, all paintings from India, Afghanistan and Central Asia are overcrowded, which the artist has rendered in a way not to destroy the effect of composition. The grouping of figures and schematic management of large scenes indicate a highly developed compositional skill of artists of those regions.

While drawing figures, outlines play a dominant role in producing various artistic impacts, fluency and plasticity. In contrast to this, the paintings from Taxila are not normally dominated by outlines to project the contours (Fig-1, 2). Almost all the figures are painted frontally characterizing frozen

and lifeless drawing while those from the other regions are full of life and rhythm. These paintings seem to be a transitional phase in which the artist of Gandhāra was coming out from the Hellenistic influence to embrace the Indian traditions.

Conclusion

In the light of a few references, the art of painting in Pakistan must have flourished since very early time. But, unfortunately, there remains very little to enable us to judge the quality of work produced. This art must have been extensively practiced in all parts of the country, however, its remains are very fragmentary because it suffered due to weathering and destruction because of vandalism of invaders over the time.

Society has always been a great influence in motivating the creative ability of its artists in a given environment. The Buddhist culture lead the artist to express him in a new manner and the theme of the end product was more important than the techniques involved there in.

The comparative stylistic analysis of the paintings found at Taxila makes it evident that the Buddhist painting was emerged and developed in Gandhāra but received popularity outside the place of its origin.¹⁸ Scarcity of Buddhist painting in Gandhāra is probably due to the reason that donation of sculpture to stupas and monasteries by pilgrims and faithful believers was a common fashion and it was easier for them to buy readymade sculpture from workshops rather than to hire artists for painting on walls of the monasteries.¹⁹ Therefore, the art of sculpting in Gandhāra flourished much more than the art of painting.

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Notes

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5. Owen C. Kail, *Buddhist Cave Temples of India*, D.B. Traporevala Sons & Co, India, 1975, pp-88
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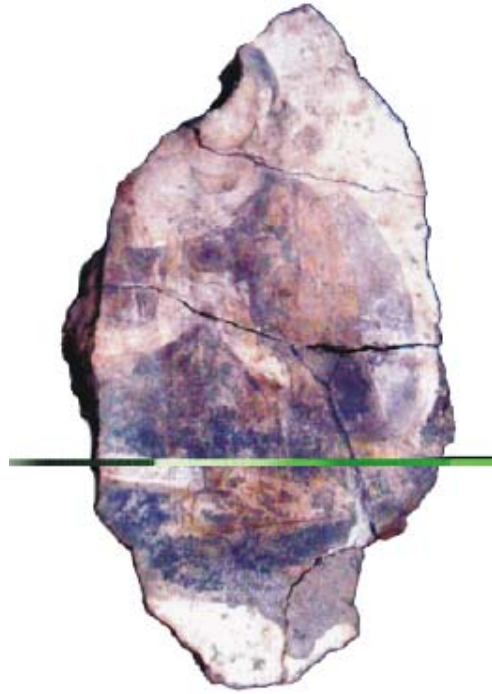


Fig. 1: Painting from Taxila, Pakistan

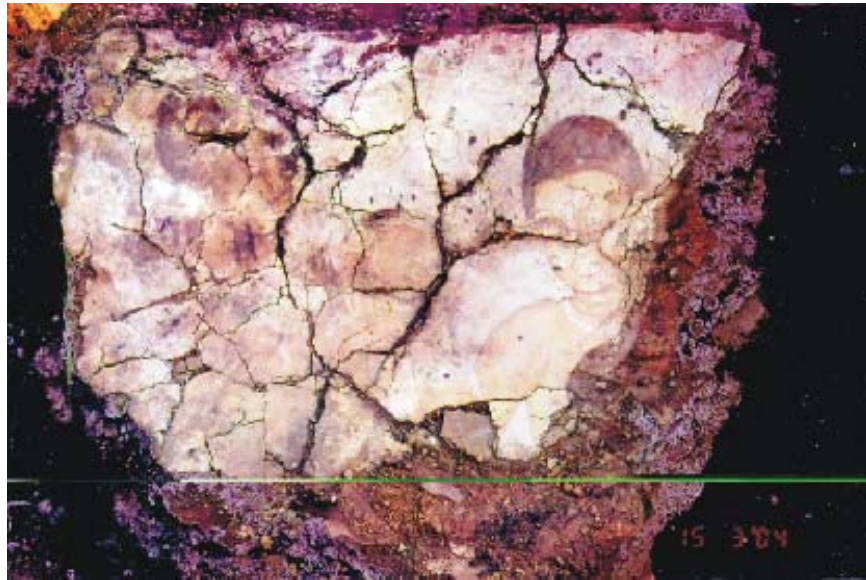


Fig. 2: Painting from Taxila, Pakistan



Fig. 3: Painting from Taxila, Pakistan



Fig. 4: Painting from Taxila, Pakistan



Fig. 5: Painting from Butkara-I, Swat, Pakistan



Fig. 6: Painting from Butkara-I, Swat, Pakistan



Fig. 7: Painting from Butkara-I, Swat, Pakistan

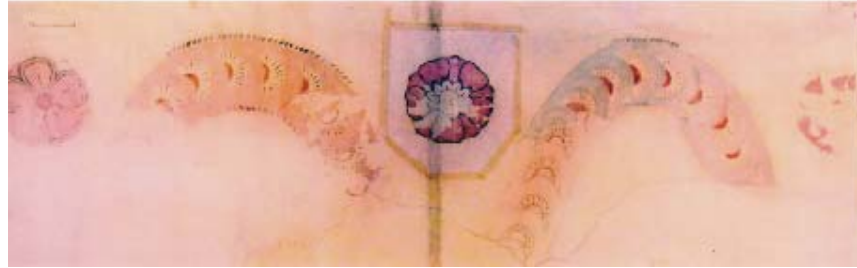


Fig. 8: Painting from Butkara-I, Swat, Pakistan

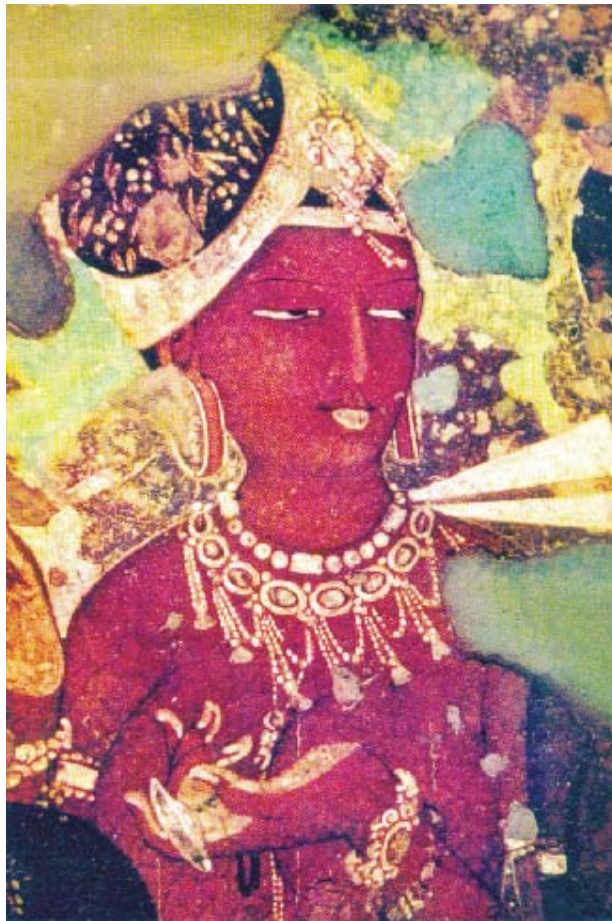


Fig. 9: Painting from Ajanta, India (Photo Courtesy. Goetz)



Fig. 10: Painting from Ajanta, India (Photo courtesy Barrett)



Fig. 11: Painting from, Bamiyan Afghanistan (Photo courtesy Rowland)



Fig. 12: Painting from Kizil, Central Asia (Photo courtesy Rowland)