

A NEWLY DISCOVERED IMAGE OF DURGA FROM GANDHARA

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The image of Durga combating the demon(Mahisha) was found at Kharaki site, 40 km north-east of the Takht-I-Bahi Monastery in Mardan district. It is in grey schist stone and measures 11.5 x 8 cm. It is roughly rectangular carved in bas-relief with flat back, roughly chiseled. The seated two-armed image of Durga (Mahishamardini) holding a trishula in her right hand pierces the demon's head. She wears a low crown and beautiful ornaments including a necklace and bracelets. She puts on elegant traditional garments decorated with incised lines. She has small breasts, almond-shaped eyes and a prominent belly. She has got a vertical third-eye mark on her forehead. Her left hand rests upon the back of the demon, who lies on the high seat (asana), adorned with incised lines.

Durga is a popular goddess in the Hindu Pantheon and possibly the worship of this goddess began in Gandhara at the beginning of the Christian era during the period of the Kushanas. she is a well-known goddess in the Indian literature. Her legend is described by T.R. Burton as follows:

“The Mahisa gained his power by conducting such sever penances that he threatened the stability of the gods themselves on account of the good Karma. he accumulated. Mahisa, who took the form of a buffalo. become so over-weaning that the gods begged Durga to subdue him. they were helpless against him. In the commonest version of the story she is created from the combined energies of the angry deities, endowed with a weapon from each of them. The Javelin of Agni. the trident of Shiva, the disc of Visnu and so on she is multi-armed to carry all her weapons and riding a lion. She is the fearfulness of the (male) deities, combined. She is usually depicted. after many battles, at the moment of triumph and having just decapitated the buffalo. She places one feet upon the neck of the recumbent animal and delivers the final blow, spearing Mahisha as he emerges from the neck of the dying buffalo.”¹

This is the second example of such type of Durga image has been reported from the Buddhist establishment in Gandhara region. One more Durga image in black schist stone has been unearthed on the Muhammad Zai site in the Peshawar² suburb. Besides Kharakai and Peshawar, only a single image of Durga in red sand stone has been found from Rohkri site in the district Mianwali in the Punjab province of Pakistan.³ The worship of the Durga was also popular in Afghanistan. Only two Buddhist establishments, namely Tapa Sardar at Gazni and Gardaz in Afghanistan⁴, have produced evidence of Durga (Mahisamardini) images, assigned to the 7th-8th century A.D.

The cult of Durga, along with other deities of the post Vedic Hindu Pantheon, was very popular in the country around Mathura to the south of Delhi from the first century AD onward. It also widely spread at Elora, in central India, in the 6th-8th centuries rock-cut cave temples.⁵ Her worship was quite popular in the hilly regions of Himachel Pradesh and Jammu-Kashmir, Bhita in the Gupta era⁶, and Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu (Indian) in the middle of 7th century AD.⁷

The Durga images of Ghazni and tapa Sardar and Rokhri have no affinity to those of Gandhara. They were produced in Afghanistan and the Punjab (Pakistan) after the occupation of Hindushahi King's in the seventh-eight century AD.

The site of Kharaki was visited by the authors in January, 2000 for a comprehensive study. During our field work, we observed a few fragments of schist stone sculptures, pottery and terracotta figurines on the site. After comprehensive study of the site, it is thus evident that Durga image was also a favourite subject of the Gandhara artists during the Buddhist period from Ist century AD to 5th century AD.

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Fig 1: Image of Durga (Mahishamardini) Kharaki, District Mardan