

Stucco Buddha Images surrounded by Double Haloes: Recent Discoveries at Bhamāla (Taxila)

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Abstract: Bhamāla, one of the most important Buddhist establishments is located on the right bank of the Haro river in the Khānpur region of Taxila Valley. Recent Excavations at the site have brought to light many remarkable discoveries, which include the earliest monumental Parinirvāṇa statue of the Buddha, the terracotta sculptures, coins and other metal objects. The present research is focuses on the Buddha images in stucco surrounded with nimbus and aureole which are very rare in and outside the Gandhāra region.

Keywords: Bhamāla, Taxila, Nimbus, Aureole

Introduction

Very few stone sculptures have been reported from Taxila region, which are also considered to have come from Greater Gandhāra, while those made of sandstone came from India. Like other sites in the Taxila region, our excavations at Bhamāla also revealed terracotta and stucco sculptures. The terracotta objects were confined to the *Parinirvāṇa* chamber and to some of the chapels exposed on its northern side. This article is based on an analysis of the stucco Buddha images surrounded by double haloes.

Stucco as an art of moulding is thought to have been introduced from the west most probably by the Parthians. No traces of stucco were reported at Bhirmound, nor in the Greek level at Sirkap (Marshall, 1951a: 513). But after its introduction during the Parthian period, stucco was used abundantly for the adornment of stupas and walls generally, and in this medium, were executed not only endless Buddha and Bodhisattva figures but also legendary scenes. Stucco as a building material appeared during the Harappan phase as early as 2500 BCE, but in works of art the use of stucco can hardly be traced back to the 1st century BCE in the region (Dar, 2010:119). Marshall, after his extensive excavations in the Taxila region, has classified the Buddhist Art of Gandhāra into two major schools based on their styles. Of these, the latter i.e. “Indo-Afghan-school” is said to have flourished during the third-fifth centuries CE (Marshall, 1951a: 439).

The stucco sculptures of the so-called “Indo Afghan School” are generally characterized by their fine finish and colouring for picking up details and the representation of the distinct Buddha and Bodhisattva images replacing the pictorial panels representing the *Jātakas* or other life events of Buddha (Behrendt, 2010: 18; Dar,

2010: 115; Marshall, 1951b: 72). But the stucco panel from Bhamāla representing the *Parinirvāṇa* scene, shows that with the introduction of the revolutionized liturgical body of the Buddha, the representation of the life stories of the Buddha did not disappear completely. According to Marshall (1951a: 442), the images belonging to the “Indo Afghan school” are also characterized by the least Hellenistic influence as compared to those produced during the early periods.

As mentioned earlier, stucco was used as a second important material after stone in Gandhāra art but it was widely used in and outside Gandhāran region. In ancient Gandhāra, the Taxila region is specifically famous for its stucco art. The earliest use of the stucco from Taxila region was reported by Marshall at Sirkap in the form of bold acanthus leaf decoration on the small stupa in Block E, which he has dated to early 1st century CE. The earliest figural works in stucco were also reported from the same site, which are thought to have adorned the two small stupas in front of the Apsidal temple in Block D (Marshall, 1951a: 513). Sculptures of this material were unearthed from almost all the monastic establishments in the Taxila Valley, but the most extensive collection was noticed at Jauliān, where the lower portion of the main stupa and the subsidiary stupas can still be seen adorned with stucco images (Marshall, 1921: 6-7).

Recent excavations at the site of Bhamāla unearthed 248 stucco fragments of both sculptures and architectural elements. Of these, the former includes heads, arms, legs and other fragments of Buddha/Bodhisattvas and worshipers, while the latter comprises pilasters, flowers and leaves fragments. It is difficult to discuss the entire stucco collection, we, therefore, restricted the present paper to the stucco seated Buddha images reported

from the chapels around the main stupa B at Bhamāla.

Stucco Buddha Figures with Double Haloes

According to *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, April 4, 2018, a halo, which is also known as nimbus or aureole is a ring representing light that surrounds a person in Art. These have been used in the iconography of many religions to indicate divine or holy figure such as deity. The best examples of the representation of halo/haloes can be found in the sacred art of Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, where the holy figures are surrounded by halo around their head or body or in some cases around both. The halo around the whole body is often called *Mandorla*. Haloes may be shown in any colour or combination of colours, but are most often depicted in golden, white or yellow when representing light. While in representing flames, they are depicted in red colour. Halo, is generally thought to have been used as a symbol of divine rank. *Aureole* (the body halo) and *nimbus* (halo around the head) along with fire alter were most probably taken by the Buddhists from the Persians. These elements were observed in the Buddhist iconography of light symbolism (Hargreaves, 1930: 103; Jongeward, 2002: 32f).

According to the Buddhist traditions, soon after the birth of Siddhartha, astrologers were set to cast his horoscope because there were 32 major and 80 minor marks (including that of the halo) of a Great Being. Based on these marks, the astrologers professed that the child would become a universal monarch or a perfect Buddha, the saviour of the world, for the marks of both are the same (Hargreaves, 1930: 17; Sehrai, 1978: 26f). This is also confirmed from the scenes representing the life stories of Siddhāratha such as his birth (PM-2725), Siddhāratha taking seven steps (PM-2729) Bath of Siddhāratha by Indra and Brahma (PM-2733), Siddhāratha going to school (PL-2736). In all these panels displayed in the Peshawar Museum, Siddhāratha is depicted with a prominent halo around his head showing his divine character.

It is clear from the above discussion that halo was used by the Gandhāran artists to indicate the divinity of figures including the Gautama Buddha, Indrā and Brahmā. But the images depicted with double haloes such as recently discovered from

Bhamāla are very rare. The origin and dissemination of this feature in and outside Gandhāra region needs further research.

Images of Buddha with double haloes found from other site and earlier theories about their origin

Nimogrām

Excavations at the Buddhist site of Nimogrām in the present Swāt district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan) have revealed a large number of sculptures in stone and stucco. Some of the panels depicting seated Buddha figures having double haloes are discussed as under:

- A stucco bracket fragment (NG 468, Fig. 1) depicts a seated Buddha in *dhyānamudrā*. The halo behind his head is backed by a full body halo. Remnants of red pigment can be observed on the robes of the Buddha.
- Curvilinear fragment of light green schist (NG 292, Fig. 2) depicting the Buddha flanked by three devotees as well as Vajrapāṇi. The Buddha, seated in *dhyānamudrā*, is surrounded by a body halo, superimposed. By a halo around the head.

Shah-ji-ki-Dheri

Among the many monuments of ancient India mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims, one of the most important was the stupa at Shāh-ji-ki-Dheri located in the present district Peshawar of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The successive excavations in 1908-09 by D. B. Spooner and later on in 1910-11 by H. Hargreaves revealed important discoveries including the Stucco Buddha images showing double haloes (Behrendt, 2010: 20; Kuwayama, 1995: 353; Spooner, 1908-09, Pl. XIVa). Behrendt (2010: 20) has placed the stucco images in the late 6th century CE.

Images of Buddha surrounded by Double Haloes in the Peshawar Museum Collection

- A long frieze in stone depicting two Buddhas in meditation pose and four figures in the background (PM_00906). The left side Buddha figure is surrounded by haloes behind his body and head. Exact provenance of the frieze is not known and



Fig.1 Stucco seated Buddha from Nimogram Swat surrounded by double haloes, Curtesy of Joan A. Raducha



Fig. 2 Stone panel from Nimogram Swat depicts seated Buddha surrounded by double haloes, Curtesy of Joan A. Raducha

as per the record of the Museum, it was donated by P.G.G. Pipon, Esquire, I.C.S.

- Buddha seated in *dhāyanamudrā* on a lotus throne under a portal arch (PM_018498), with a radiating halo around the body, which is superimposed by the halo behind head, and images of himself on the side, in the Miracle of Śrāvastī. It was found from Sahri Bahlol (Mardān) during the excavations of 1906-07 by the Archaeological Survey of India, Frontier Circle (henceforth ASIFC), and is dated to the 2nd-3rd century CE.
- Stucco Buddha in meditating pose on lotus seat (PM_02164). The seated figure is surrounded by haloes behind his head and body. The upper halo is slightly cut off. The sculpture was found from Sahri Bahlol (Mardān) during the Excavation of the ASIFC in 1911-12 (Stein, 1912a). As per the record of the Peshawar Museum, it is dated to the 3rd -5th century CE.
- Crown medallion showing small seated

Buddha in *dhyānamudrā* (PM_02313), with double haloes. It was reported from Sahri Bahlol (Mardān) during the excavations by ASIFC in 1906-07 (Shakur, 1954). As per the record of the Peshawar Museum, it is assigned to the 2nd -3rd century CE.

Stucco Buddha figures surrounded by double halos from Bhamāla

During the second and third season of field investigations at Bhamāla, traces of stucco seated Buddha figures surrounded by *aureole* and *nimbus* were found from the chapels to the east of the main stupa B. The eastern chapels (Fig. 3) of the main stupa B were found in a better state of preservation. A total of nine chapels were exposed on this side all facing west towards the main stupa B. Of these, chapels 1, 2 and 4 were found empty, which were either looted or severely damaged. Chapel 8 revealed only the lower knees of the central Buddha figure. But traces of double-haloes of the central Buddha image, are clearly visible in all the



Fig. 3 Eastern chapels of main stupa B at Bhamala

four chapels. While the rest of the chapels i.e. 3, 6, 7 and 9 revealed stucco images of Buddha with double haloes flanked by devotees and standing Buddha figures. While chapel 5, located between chapels 6 and 7, exhibits a stucco headless Buddha, seated in *dhyānamudrā* with a single halo. A brief description of these chapels is given as under:

Chapel 3

Chapel 3 has a stucco headless seated Buddha in *dhyānamudrā* flanked by two standing devotees. Both are facing Buddha. The right-side figure is represented with *ushnisha*, he holds the hem of the garment with his right hand and his left hand resting on thigh, while the left side figure is holding fly-whisk in his right hand. Traces of red pigments can be seen on the face of the right-side figure. The southern and northern walls of the chapel are adorned by four standing headless Buddha images, two on either side. The central Buddha image has a halo behind head, as well as a full body halo (Fig. 4).

Chapel 6

Chapel 6 exhibits a stucco Buddha seated in *dhyānamudrā* surrounded by double haloes. Border of the lower (body) halo is decorated with lotus petal designs (Fig. 5). Head of the seated Buddha

was found missing. The figure is flanked by two standing devotees and other standing Buddha images all found headless.

Chapel 7

Chapel 7 at Bhamāla exhibits the second best preserved stucco images. The central Buddha is seated in preaching pose (Fig. 6), and is surrounded by double haloes. Border of the lower halo is decorated and is very similar to the one reported from chapel 6. As usual, the central Buddha figure is flanked by two devotees, one on either side. The right flanking figure is shown standing, looking at the Buddha and is holds the hem of *saṅghāṭi* with his right hand. While left side, standing devotee is holding fly-whisk in his right hand and cornucopia in the left. The southern and northern walls of the chapels are also adorned with standing Buddha images, two on either side.

Chapel 8

Chapel 8 was also found in a very poor state of preservation. The only stucco objects from this chapel include knees on the seated (Central) Buddha image, feet of standing figure most probably of the Buddha attached to the northern wall of the chapel and traces of the double haloes.



Fig. 4 Chapel 3 at Bhamala adorned with stucco seated Buddha surrounded by double haloes



Fig. 5 Chapel 6 at Bhamala adorned with seated Buddha surrounded by nimbus and aureole



Fig. 6 Chapel 7 at Bhamala showing seated Buddha surrounded by nimbus and aureole

Chapel 9

The best-preserved stucco sculptures were found from chapel 9. This chapel exhibits a seated stucco figure of central Buddha provided with head and body haloes very similar to that of chapel 7.

As usual, the seated Buddha image is flanked by devotees, one on either side. The right-side devotee is standing looking at the Buddha, grasping the hem of the garment with his right hand, while the figure standing on the left is holding fly-whisk in his right hand and cornucopia in his left. In addition, traces of double haloes were also reported from chapels 21 and 22 on the western side of the main stupa B.

Discussion

- Recent excavations at Bhamāla have brought to light the second best preserved stucco sculptures after Jauliān. The sculptures include the individual Buddha figures in seated and standing positions as well as seated images of Buddha flanked by devotees. In addition, remnants of three *Parinirvāna* statues were also found attached to main stupa B. The stucco *Parinirvāna* statues from Bhamāla show that the representation of life stories of Buddha continued during the latter phase of Gandhāra art, which is known as the “Indo-Afghan School of Art”.
- Courtyard of the main stupa B at Bhamāla was probably the most lavishly decorated one in terms of stucco sculptures. Traces of these can be seen on the stupa as well as in the chapels and on pedestals on the eastern, northern and western side of the stupa.
- The most extensive number of stucco images surrounded with double haloes show that the practice of representing Buddha images with head and body haloes was well known to the artists of Bhamāla much before than it is generally thought. The Buddha images depicted with double haloes were also reported from other sites in and outside Gandhāra region (Tanabe, 1987, Fig. 12) including Shāh-ji-ki-Dheri (Peshāwar) (Tanabe, 1974: 37), Sahri Bahlol (Mardān), Nimogrām (Swāt), Rawak (Chinese Khotan) and Tapa Sardār

in Afghānistān.

- As far as the origin of double haloes is concerned, this representation for the first time appeared on the reverse of Kaṇiṣka I coins, where the standing Buddha is surrounded by a double circular nimbus and an oval shaped aureole (Tanabe, 1974: 32). The gold coins of Kaṇiṣka excavated from Ahin Posh, near Jalālābād in east Afghānistān, which are now owned by the British Museum, also exhibit the Buddha images on their reverse with oval shape aureole. Gold *Dinars* of Kaṇiṣka I, struck in Peshāwar also depicting the standing Buddha surrounded by double haloes (Tanabe, 1987: 134).
- The aureoles surrounding the stucco seated Buddha images recently excavated from Bhamāla are slightly different in style than those found in and outside Gandhāra region. At Bhamāla, the Buddha images are represented with double circled aureole and the space between the circles is decorated with lotus petals, while the nimbus that surround the head of the stucco images of the Buddha at Bhamala is represented by plain discs. On the contrary, the Buddha images with double haloes from other sites including, Shāh-ji-ki-Dheri, Sahri Bahlol and Nimogrām lack this element i.e. double circled aureole (body halo).
- The representation of double circled nimbus surrounding the head of the Buddha was however practiced by the Buddhist artists especially in Dīr and Swāt regions. Traces of this tradition can also be noticed on the gold coins of Kaṇiṣka I (Tanabe, 1987: Fig. 2).
- The stone Buddha images with double haloes were also from Sahri Bahlol, which are now in the reserve collection of the Peshawar Museum. Two of these figures i.e. (PM_01849 and PM_02313) are dated from second-third century CE. While the third one bearing accession number (PM_02164) is assigned from third-fifth century CE.

Conclusion

Recent excavations at Bhamāla revealed the second best preserved collection of stucco sculptures after Jauliān. These sculptures include individual figures of Buddha seated in meditation pose and three *Parinirvāna* statues attached to the main stupa B. While the chapels around the same stupa are adorned with stucco Buddha figure flanked by devotees and standing Buddha images. The pedestal outside the chapels also contained stucco images of the Buddha, traces of which can still be seen. Among the stucco sculptures reported from Bhamāla, those of the seated Buddha with double haloes (nimbus and aureole), being rare, are worth mentioning. The stucco Buddha images with double halo reported from Shāh-ji-ki-Dheri (Peshāwar) were formerly thought to be no earlier than the sixth century CE and that this idea might have come from Bāmiyān (Afghanistan) (Behrendt, 2010: 24). The discovery of the stucco Buddha images with the same elements on one hand show that this practice of double halo was known to the artists of Gandhāra much earlier than it is generally thought. On the other hand, it also raised questions about the chronology of the stucco sculptures, which were dated to 6th-7th century CE based on these motifs. The stone seated Buddha figures from Sahri Bahlol, now owned by Peshawar Museum also confirm that the tradition of double-haloes in stone and stucco first appeared in the central Gandhāra region (Peshawar Valley) and later disseminated to the surrounding regions.

No numismatic evidences associated with the stucco sculpture has come to light from the Bhamāla to suggest a date for their production. However, the silver coin of Hunas with inscription in Bactrian reads as (Shaho Alchano means king Alchan or Alkhon), clearly shows that the stucco images that adorn the stupa and its surrounding chapels and pedestals were produced and installed before the arrival of the Hunas. The coin was found on the floor near the flight of steps of main stupa B.

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