

The Tradition of Buddhist Narrative Illustration in the Swat Valley

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Abstract: The Swat valley has an important role in the development of Buddhist art. The religious imageries and biographical scenes of the Buddha were carved in stone that embellished the sacred buildings and were replicated as a standard schema of architectural decoration. With its turbulent political and social history, the region was not only graced with several religious constructions all over the valley but also expanded biographical story of the Buddha almost to length of its completion by introducing fresh scenes during their respective turns of each ethnic and political group. The material excavated by archaeologists records the political, social and religious history. Based on these cultural material and extensive studies, this paper investigates the evolution and development of narrative art in the Swat valley. The results show that biographical narrative illustrations extended through the ages help in understanding Buddhist iconography in cultural preferences and innovative approaches of visual story-telling.

Keywords: Narrative art in Swat, evolution of Buddhist narrative art, visual biography of the Buddha

Besides originator of anthropomorphic images, the Swat valley is also credited to have been illustrated a more detailed biography of the Buddha. However, the inception and evolvement of Buddhist narrative illustrations in Swat took several years to epitomize the Buddha's life story, depicted almost to the length of its completeness. It were the faithful exertions of different multiethnic societies who during their respective turn in the region contributed to the wealth of Buddhist art.

The Swat valley, ancient region of Uddiyāna, holds an important position in the South Asian archaeology. The earliest human occupation, here, appeared around the third millennium BC; evidently in the prehistoric rock shelter near the village of Ghaligay (see Stacul 1967, 1969), whereas the Historical period of the region was established with the arrival of Macedonian army in the fourth century BC. Buddhism in Swat was flourishing during the reign of Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BC). Throughout the subsequent political dominion, the Indo-Greeks, Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians, Kushans, Kushano-Sassanians and somewhat the Hindu Shahis profoundly left their marks on the Buddhist art and architecture. Thus, the valley had been the cradle of Buddhist culture for about one millennium years.

During this long period of imperial patronage and an uninterrupted support of the community, several Buddhist stupas and monasteries were established in the valley. The antiquities of these sites reveal that, apart from internal motivation, the outgrowth of Buddhist art, here, was much influenced by external political upheavals and the

needs of a cosmopolitan society. In a turbulent history of the region, the assimilative ability of Buddhism was remarkable that not only accepted and integrated new elements with full satisfaction into its artistic vocabulary but also maintained very confidently the originality and true nature of this art in relation to religious principles and practice.

The present scholarship has treated early Buddhist narrative art, specifically, with regard to the literary accounts of the Buddha's legends; both his several previous incarnations (the *jataka* tales), and the last earthly life he lived as Gautama Buddha. Owing to a huge corpus of studies in understanding the narrative art as a visual counterpart of the oral and literary traditions in Buddhism, the purpose of this paper is to explore a partly neglected theme; the development of Buddhist narrative illustration in the Swat valley, concentrating on the extended biography of the Buddha; which analysis is important for iconographical and cultural features, underwent through different evolutionary phases of this art.

Dealing with biographical narrative in Buddhist art, the representational imagery of the Buddha can be characterized either by: (1) typical narratives where the action, time and place of the event are clearly recognizable, or (2) aniconic representation in which the Buddha's image is absent but the time and place of the event are identifiable. Narrative possibility in such scenes is that the Buddha's presence is allusively suggested by some relevant signs—either symbolic; such as, the Deer and Wheel together illustrate the *Buddha's First Sermon*, or indexical

as the *Buddhapada* (Buddha's footprint) at the top and bottom steps of a ladder represents the *Buddha's Descent from Trayastrimsha Heaven*. Non-biographical scenes are those where, though, the Buddha is often shown but the time and place are not recognizable at all.

Depiction of Events in Pre-Buddhist Swat

Since the occupation of pre-historic people down to the formation of Buddhism, artistic expression in the Swat valley was limited only to crafting activities, corresponding to the utilitarian objects, ornaments, tools and equipment of hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies. The painted clay pottery of these early communities was decorated with floral, astral and zoomorphic motifs which appeared for the first time on their ceramics dated to Period IV (c. 1700–1400 BC) of the Swat Cultural Sequence (Stacul 2003).¹

Among the assemblages collected from various sites of this period, two pottery shreds from Barikot are significant for their event-like image decoration which, speculatively, depict faunal confrontations: one a hovering bird attacking a snake, and the other shows a monster attacking a horse (Stacul 2003: Figs. 5, 6). Furthermore, a similar representation of commemorative incidents is evident in the glyptic art of Gogdara I of the same period (Olivieri 1998). This practice can be observed in the painted shelters and rock art in the Kandak and Kota sub-valleys (Olivieri & Vidale 2004; Sardar 2007, 2011). A stone frieze from Muhammad-patai, Kota sub-valley, is suggested to portray an animal sacrifice (Olivieri 2006:76). However, none of the pottery decoration nor the painted shelters and petroglyphs are liable to provide the components of regular story-telling. Hence, in the whole cultural scenario no art form is evident to attest the tradition of true narrative illustration in the valley, until the Buddhist artistic culture has grown in the region.

Evolution of Buddhist Narrative Illustration in Swat

Buddhist art in Swat is necessarily associated with the establishment of religious architecture. So far as the sacred art had not been projected right from the earlier arrival of Buddhism rather by building the stupas, *viharas* and monasteries. The earliest Buddhist monumental structures in India

were built by Asoka, particularly, after his mythic act of erecting 84,000 stupas in his vast empire. The Great Stupa and permanent dwelling monastery of Butkara I in Swat are attributed to the time of Asoka. In the following centuries (c. 2nd–1st century BC), another remarkable complex, Butkara III, was established in the vicinity, and, in the first century CE, the religious hubs were increased by adding other monasteries; such as, Saidu Sharif I and Panr I in the nucleus of the valley.

During the Indo-Parthian period and early Kushans (c. 1st century BCE–1st century CE), the stupa monasteries of Charg-patay, Chatpat and Andan-Dheri were constructed in the southwestern parts of the valley. While entering into the valley on the right side of River Swat, the Gumbatuna and Marjanai stupas are remnants of the Kushan period (c. 2nd–3rd century CE). With the succeeding arrival of each new ruling class, new monasteries were established and the existing sacred precincts were enlarged or reconstructed, however, after the Kushans (c. mid–4th century CE), there is hardly any construction of new monastery or stupa, and some momentous centers were likely abandoned during the time of Kushano-Sasanian; such as Loebanr, Charg-patay and Marjanai. Similarly, Butkara III, Saidu Sharif I, Panr I, Andan-Dheri and Chatpat seem to have no substantial position after the Late Kushan (c. 4th–5th century CE).

Though some sites have evidence of new constructions within the existing monasteries; such as, in the monastic center of Nawagai (Qamar 2004:185), whereas in Shnaisha, contemporary of Nawagai, the sectarian changes now appeared more openly in the Buddhist faith—the ever-increasing repute of the Bodhisattva cult in the period from Hephthalite and onwards.

The aforementioned sacred precincts and several other sites in the valley are predicated sources of the Buddhist studies in art and architecture. Relief panels and reverential icons carved in small to medium size tablets and solid blocks of schist stone were installed onto the body of stupas and other parts of the building. Generally, the analyses of Buddhist sculptures are based on the frequency of artistic production, change of material and approaches of illustrating scenes with diversified iconography in different cultural periods or ethnic shifts which phases are observable in the life

of these sites. Evolutionary stages of Buddhist culture, in this paper, are distributed into different ethnic periods and bracketed within three broad phases.²

Phase I: Formative and Early Stage (1st century BC–2nd century CE)

The preliminary phase of Buddhist art in Swat began after founding the earliest complex at Butkara I. The subsequent rebuilding of Great Stupas 1, 2 and 3 belongs to the earliest construction of the complex, attributed to the Mauryan time. However, none of these original structures have sculptural decoration. The cornice friezes of Stupas 14 and 17 of Butkara I are the only oldest carved pieces; dated to the time of Azes II (c. 1st century BC). The friezes depict leonine totems alternating with honey-suckle, lotus and other symbols (see Faccenna 1962: Fig. 45, Pl. XIVa). While sculptures exhumed from the inner chamber A, and shrines B, C, and D of Butkara III; assigned to the first phase of the site and dated to pre-Soter Megas period (Rahman 1999), have symbols comparable to the cornice friezes of Stupas 14 and 17. A distinct variety depicting the garland-bearers from Stupa No. 16 (shrine C) of Butkara III has a similar scheme of lion-head protome type decoration (see Khan 2015: Pl. 133). Two other panels from this site, attributed to the same phase, also provide imagery with human representation: one shows the *Nagaraja emerging from a Lotus*, and the other a narrative panel illustrating two successive events; *Devadatta Slaying the Elephant and Nanda Hurling the Dead Elephant* (Rahman 1999: pls. 7, 6).

Although the chronology of Butkara III is somewhat dubious, in particular for assigning the period before Wima Takto. However, relative evidence from these sites provides some reasonable clues for assuming the practice of stone-carving in the Swat valley as it was boosted up during the Indo-Greek period.³ Furthermore, the garland-bearer relief panels showing lion protomes from Butkara III, the cornice friezes of stupas 14 and 17, and the construction of the Great Stupa 3 of Butkara I are contemporary (at the end of Azes II; c. first century BCE). With regard to the anthropomorphic representation, visual storytelling is also ascertained in the period between the Indo-Scythians and early Kushans (c. 1st century BC–1st century CE). So

far as a *terminus ante quam* date for the practice of stone-carving, the Buddhist narrative art has been evolved around the transitional period of the Common Era.

Period 1. Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians and Early Kushans

In historical scenario, the Indo-Scythians, a Central Asian nomad tribe, succeeded the Indo-Greeks who have occupied the area during the early decades of the second century BC. However, for about a century, they lived in an inimical situation of civil wars and proved themselves as worst enemies of their own. To the end of the first century BC, parts of the Indo-Scythian lands were seized by the Indo-Parthians. In the first century CE, a clan of the Yue-Chi tribe; the Kushan, in search of fresh pastures crossed the Hindu Kush under their leader Kajula, and spared time to curb the Scytho-Parthian lands, and held them until the mid-third century CE.

In these multiple waves of invaders from outside and amalgamation with the preexistent Indian Buddhist culture—a period which can be considered as a time of proselytizing the newly arrived populations to Buddhism—the artform evolved during this phase was much syncretic in approach. Sculpted panels that embellished the stupas and various parts of the monastic structures have representations of different ethnic societies. For example, several relief panels showing figures under chaitya arches have depictions of local and foreign divinities, monks, *putti* and some elites in Indian, Greek and Central Asian appearance (Brancaccio 2006:212). In addition, princely figures in offerings or adoration poses; either carved in reliefs or single statuettes, are probable glimpses of their submission and devotion to the Buddhist faith. It is also possible that the rich and influential people have commemorated their ultimate events of conversion to Buddhism or giving donations by carving these pictures.

The recurrent portrayal of such images was too plenty that these are far exceeding the quantity of narrative scenes. Buddha's images executed during this phase were more hieratic and emblematic rather than biographical. He is always shown seated cross-legged on a low or raised throne in *abhaya-* or *dhyanamudra*, and flanked by devotees, monks and the tutelary gods; Indra and Brahma, in

reverent gesture of *anjalinudra*.

Majority of figures in relief panels, from Butkara I and III, illustrating the seated Buddha flanked by *Devotees and Worshippers* are in traditional Indian or monastic dress; the *uttariya* and *antariya* (respectively upper and lower garments), while some princely male figures wear various types of turban. Conversely, the panels illustrating biographical scenes exemplify the figures clearly in typical ethnic profile. Non-Indian figures; particularly of female, are in the Indo-Scythian and Indo-Parthian costume; including sleeved tunic and trouser. These features reveal an essential concept that Buddhist images were necessarily indigenous, and artists have established a local legitimacy in relation to rigorous canon of the scripture. Equally, these iconographical contents indicate trends in religious imagery related to the sacred sites. What can be estimated here is that during the formative stage (a period roughly between Azes II and Soter Megas; c. 35 BC– 80 CE), emblematic and tautological⁴ figures of the Buddha in hieratic postures with figural procession were customary in the twin sites of Butkara; likely intended to pronounce his transcendent character, while biographical illustrations were a small fraction of the Buddhist sacred art.

In the huge collections of sculptures, no single site exhibits all the episodes, however, most significant incidents in biographical cycle of the Buddha; from birth to nirvana, were displayed in all Buddhist sites. An incisive selection of major events was presented so that they not only had outlined the life story of the Buddha but also enhanced the holy status of the stupa. A typical cycle of the Buddha has jataka tales and various stages of the life of historical Buddha Sakyamuni; from conception, birth and youth to struggles for the Perfect Enlightenment, preaching the Dharma, and finally to the death, cremation and construction of stupas over the corporal remains of the Buddha. By combining evidence from Butkara I and III (provenance in the list are indicated by * and ^; respectively), the following sequence results:

I. Jataka

1. Dipankara Jataka*^

II. The Conception and Nativity

2. Maya's Dream and Interpretation of Dream*^
3. The Birth *^ and Seven Steps of Siddhartha^

III. Life in the Palace

4. Interpretation of Siddhartha's Horoscope*
5. Siddhartha Learning at School^
6. Killing, Dragging and Hurling of the Elephant^
7. The Choice of Bride and Bridal Procession*

IV. On the Path to Enlightenment

8. The Great Renunciation*
9. The Great Departure*^
10. Farewell to Horse and Groom^
11. The Exchange of Clothes*
12. Return of the Horse and Groom*
13. Gods Entreat Buddha to Preach*^

V. Spreading Dharma and the Miracles of the Buddha

14. The Rolling of the Wheel (First Sermon)
*^5
15. The Miracle of Fire^
16. The Conversion of Naga Apalala*
17. The Twin Miracle at Sravasti*
18. Decent from the Trayastrimsa Heaven*

VI. Mahaparinirvana

19. The Death* and Cremation of the Buddha*^

This cycle shows that representation of major events was typical to all Buddhist sites. Here, a common life cycle is beginning from Dipankara Jataka so that recapitulating the Buddha-by-Buddha sequence sets background for the story of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is followed by *Queen Maya's Dream*, the *Interpretation of Dream* and succeeding by the *Birth of Siddhartha*. Next to these are the *Great Departure*, *First Sermon*, and

ending with the *Cremation of the Buddha*.

Besides the parenthetic scenes, the last four episodes are akin to the sacred places associated with these events, as the Buddha expounded to Ananda in the *Mahaparinibbhana Sutta*.⁶ Such a prudent selection of events indicates that the deciding authority was well-versed in the religious philosophy. It also spells out another important epoch; occurred between the two transitional centuries of the Common Era (first century BC/CE) namely the textual tradition. In this period Buddhist scriptures; especially related to the life of Gautama Buddha, were committed to writing, apparently imparted in Pali and Sanskrit, the former being the language of the people.

The Pali Canon; early written down around the first century BC in Ceylon (former Sri Lanka), records fragmentary accounts of the Buddha's life. On the other hand, the post-canonical texts; the *Mahavastu*, *Buddhacharita*, and the *Lalitavistara*; compiled in Sanskrit during a few early centuries of the Common Era, elaborate many episodes and events in the biography of the Buddha. Indeed, a comparative study of art and text would expose that this literature was in vogue in the Swat valley and narrative scenes were treated in the light of these scriptures.⁷

Although some other events likely of equal merit— with a special reference to the *Miracles*— were also illustrated, it was the ingenuity and creative deft of the artists to visualize more curious themes from the Buddhist narratives; extant either in oral or written formats, which not only expanded the story cycle by contextual scenes but also executed an illustrated version of the chronicle. The contextual scenes were often composed in sequential mode of narration.⁸ In this way, *Maya's Dream* abuts the *Interpretation of Dream* in a single panel, and in turn, it was conjoined with the *Birth of Siddhartha* in another instance. This scheme was also adopted in other scenes such as the *Killing of the Elephant* with the *Dragging of the Elephant*, the *Choice of Bride* with *Bridal Procession*, and the *Death of the Buddha* with *Cremation of the Buddha*. This compositional format benefited artists, and certainly they took advantage of it, to place additional segments of scenes before and after in the sequence during the subsequent periods.

The practice of expanding biography of the Buddha was continued during the short time of Soter Megas (circa the end of first and beginning of second century CE). A set of ancillary scenes, in Butkara III, put to the biographical cycle include:

- The First Bath of Siddhartha
- Distribution of Charity after Birth
- Siddhartha goes to School
- The Contest of Archery, and
- The Attack of Mara

Up to the end of the first century CE, the biographical narrative scenes have been developed to a standard format. At the dawn of the second century CE, the Buddhist art appeared in a more energetic way so that it was a mature style in many aspects; profoundly, exercised during the prosperous period of the Great Kushans and remained dominating in the following century.

Phase II: Mature Stage

(2nd–mid-4th century CE)

The mature phase of artistic glory in Swat may be split into two ethno-political groups: the first is the Great Kushans; Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva, (beginning to the middle of the 2nd century CE), and the later, the Kushano-Sasanian period (mid-3rd– mid-4th century CE).

It is frequently believed that the Great Kushans were generous patrons of Buddhist faith but; as a passing inference, circumstances in a broad scenario do not fully support this theory (cf. Buswell 2003:120-21; Andrea 2008:fn.4), since the Kushans practiced, or favoured, Zoroastrianism in Afghanistan, a blend of Buddhism, Vishnuism and Jainism in Mathura, and Buddhism in the Northwestern India; Uddiyana and Gandhāra.⁹ Similarly, the Kushano-Sasanian were likely interested in collecting taxes and tributes they were to receive from the Uddiyana and Gandhara regions through their vassals while nothing had to do with the people and area. Therefore, the period can be characterized only by a religious freedom. In either term, under a political agenda or faith, the Buddhist art and architecture in Swat observed the advent of a “Golden Age” in the history of Buddhism.

Period 2. The Great Kushans

Distinctive features determining the Great Kushans supremacy over their predecessors were

that since Kanishka's time, the Northwestern and central India, and parts of Central Asia, all came under a single domain; they started international trade, and affluent contacts were established with the West; Rome in particular; and had propitious exchanges with China and Central Asia.

This freedom of frequent communication served as stimulant to the artistic growth. Artists were moving among the Buddhist ateliers (Schmidt 1990:65), and in this transcultural interaction, they exchanged their ideas, themes and images with each other.¹⁰ At the same time, changes also occurred in the religious philosophy that apparently reformed the resultant art, too. In effect, non-Buddhist deities; essentially in emblematic form, were added into the Buddhist pantheon;¹¹ derived from the local cults and creeds extant in the Kushan kingdom.

A remarkable aspect of the imperial Kushans was their literary feats; in religious and secular fields as well. By the Buddhist Council at Kashmir, convened by Kanishka as an attempt to sanctify Buddhist texts, considerable impacts were observed on the ensuing arts. The texts and commentaries drawn up at this Council were written by Ashvaghosha and Parshva. The former was an eminent scholar and prose writer of Sanskrit, and a spiritual advisor to Kanishka. The Mahayanist Sanskrit scriptures were more influential during this period which, though, stressed on the universal salvation and future Buddha but the life of Sakyamuni Buddha remained vital. These scriptures introduced new themes and enlisted events before and after the enlightenment (cf. Karetzky 2000: xxiiiiv). In particular, the *Mahaparinibbhana Sutta* that elaborates significant events after the *First Sermon* to the erection and adoration of stupas.

These expansive biographical scenes executed in the stupa monasteries of Charg-patay (c. 1st-2nd century CE), Saidu Sharif I, (c. 1st-5th century CE), Shnaisha, Nawagai (c. 2nd-10th century CE), and Marjanai (c. 2nd-3rd century CE) exhibit trends in the Buddhist narrative art of the Great Kushans.

Apart from an excessive proliferation of the biographical narratives, this period can be characterized best for excellence in the rendering techniques. As far as the objective of narratives was standard, most of the scenes were depicted

repeatedly, and the biographical cycle was similar to the prototypical specimens of the old masters. However, for now much of the events were rendered with crowded scenes, deep in carving, and figures have more defined iconographical features.

To overcome the problem of compound scenes in a single slab, the picture halve was divided into different pictorial spaces. The best result was achieved through conflated and continuous modes of narration. In this way, two successive occasions of the *Birth and Seven Steps of Siddhartha* were combined in a unified setting so that the child emerges in typical style and at the same time the figure of child is repeated who walks in the foreground, while the rest of figures are conflated. In another example, episodes of *Siddhartha goes to and Learning at School* are brought to a single picture-frame i.e. the continuous style (see Khan 1995: Pls. 10, 11). Likewise, the *Dipankara Jataka*; previously rendered in conflated mode, for now it was illustrated in a unique style, which preserves the conflated style but a new contextual scene, when Sumedha is purchasing lotuses from a girl, was also added to the left. Yet, a new event, the *Offering of the Four Bowls* was represented in the synoptic scheme. Hence, an important facet can be observed in the Buddhist narrative art as updated by executing scenes in single-frame polyscenic mode; viz. the conflated, synoptic and continuous styles.

So far material is available for study from the sites of this period, the sculptures of Saidu Sharif I have a great uniformity in execution that seem product of a single project prepared in one atelier. From thematic viewpoint, they were very close to the sculptures of Butkara I; which exhibit a mature level of the same group of artists. They, particularly, had specialized in the art of portraiture, who crafted secular portraits and statuettes of the noble elites in religious context with a delicate perfection of features. Such a tendency is more saturated in the physical traits, attributes and costumes of the figures; for instance, *Contest for the Relics* and the *Departure of Horsemen from the City* (Faccenna 2001: Pls. 36, 37) in all likelihood represent a kind of historical events, and the figures seem to have been sculpted posing the real people as model. In another example, despite the generalized scene of the *Transportation of the Relics*, the theme portrayed at Saidu Sharif I is more aptly showing

the event when the legendary King Uttarasena of the ancient Uddiyana, riding on a magnificent elephant-howdah, is bringing his share of the Buddha's relics to his kingdom (*ibid.* pp. 227-29).

Although the identification of these historical scenes is not always convincing in the constant absence of any written captions on sculptures in this region, the presumptive inference of researchers and scholars are rather appropriate. Similar to the scene illustrating the *Transportation of the Relics*, Farooq Swati contextualizes two relief panels from Charg-patay as depicting events from the story about *Opening of the Ramagrama Stupa* (Swati 1996; 2012: pls. 12, 13); a religio-historical narrative related to Emperor Asoka. One panel depicts an enthroned ruler in his court with deferential cortege in the foreground, and then retinues are marching in the background. The other portrays a stupa flanked by two *nagarajas* and a royal figure seated, similar to the throne and style as shown in the previous panel, in the right of the scene, and a female attendant is offering a basket to another seated female figure in the left. The scenes are described as:

- King with His Retinue (or Court Scene) and
- Homage to the Ramagrama stupa

New scenes supplemented to the biographical cycle of the Buddha were preoccupied by selecting themes prone to the royal and metropolitan activities which have significant elements of historicity; as shown in the list of events from Saidu Sharif I, including one panel from Charg-patay:

- Gift of the Elephant by Suddhodana
- Wedding of Siddhartha and Yashodhara
- Barking of the White Dog (Charg-patay)
- Conversion of Nanda
- Buddha Tames Nalagiri, the Wild Elephant
- Preparation of Pyre for Cremation
- Contest for the Relics

The remarkable representation of scale armours of aristocrats, executed in the *Gift of the Elephant* and *Contest for the Relics*, are some of the substantial evidences of contemporary culture of the Great Kushans; the fact which is confirmed by the archaeological finds from Bir-kot-ghwandai (Olivieri 2011). This characteristic and typical militia is echoed almost all the way in the Buddhist art through the succeeding periods in

Uddiyana and Gandhara regions.

Period 3. The Kushano-Sasanians

In the mid-third century CE, although, the political history was interrupted by Shapur-I, the Sasanian ruler of Persia, and eventually transferred powers to their Kushan vassals, who were apparently kind to Buddhism (Heirman & Bumbacher 2007:60), but the ethnic profile and cultural activities had remained undisrupted. Therefore, the period can be marked as a continuation of Buddhist art and culture in the region (Dani 1968-69:80). Though neither new stupas were constructed nor any monastery was established in the following centuries but religious activities and growth in art were progressed in the persisting line.

In this period, between the Late Kushan till the influx of the Kushano-Sasanian (c. mid-2nd–late-3rd century CE), relief panels prominently appeared in the fashion as they were executed in the preceding period, however, some Sassanian features can be observed afterward (*loc. cit.*; cf. Swati 2007:114-15), therefore, the material taken for consideration are the inventory likely from the later phases of the extant sites like Chatpat, Shnaisha Nawagai and Marjanai; abbreviated here with CP, SSA, NWG and MJN.

Besides an enhanced plasticity of figures by carving them deep in the panels, the period is marked by the introduction of individual emblematic icons of Prince Siddhartha, Buddha and bodhisattvas (Dani 196869: pls. 42-43, 51, 54). The improved iconographical features of individual images were also implemented in the narrative reliefs.

More episodes added to the biographical narrative of the Buddha are scenes either supplementing the ubiquitous events or prefacing the logical chain of a certain event. In this way, for instance, the long gap between the *Nativity* (in Lumbini) and the *Horoscope of Siddhartha* (at Kapilavastu) was filled with the *Transportation of the Child*, and the *Renunciation* is upheld by adding *Siddhartha meets the Ill Man*. Other descriptive scenes from this period are listed below:

- Transportation of the Child (MJN)
- Siddhartha meets the Ill Man (NWG)
- Buddha's First Meeting with Brahman (SSA)

- Hymns of Naga Kalika (MJN)
- Offering of the Grass (MJN)
- Preparation of the Seat (CP)
- Caravan Merchants (Trapusa and Bhallika) (CP)
- Offering of the Four Bowls (MJN)

The artistic dexterity is further demonstrated in the thematic episodes of the Buddha's life which though explicating the heroic deeds of the Buddha but seem essentially didactic, and can be read and taught as separate stories for moral lesson to the followers. For example, the following list of curricular stories:

- Buddha presents Serpent to Kasyapa (MJN)
- Taming of Elephant, and
- Offering of the Handful Dust (CP)
- Offering of Honey by Monkey, and
- Nursing of the Dead Woman (CP)
- Hostility of Angulimala (SSA)

From technical perspective of the visual narratology, artists in this period were interested to preserve the linear structure of events—the narrative frieze. A good example is a single block of the stupa drum from Chatpat (Chakdara Museum, Dir; Inv. No. CHPT-764) that shows eight representative scenes in clock-wise sequence: *Maya's Dream*, *Interpretation of Maya's Dream*, *the Birth of Siddhartha*, *Return to Kapilavastu* (two scenes), *Horoscope of Siddhartha*, *Siddhartha riding to and Learning at School* and the *Wrestling Contest*. In the same way, eight narrative panels from Marjanai illustrating scenes from *Ascetic Banquet* to the *Distribution of the Relics* (Khan 1995: Pls. 10a, b, 11a, b, 12b, 13a) are considered as pieces of original decoration affixed in sequence (Behrendt 2004:120f; Khan 1995).

Phase III: Late Stage and the Decline (c. mid-4th–9th century CE)

The fourth century CE can be regarded as the last flourishing period of Buddhist art in the Swat valley. The Late Kushan undauntedly won their independence from the Sasanian lords, and sustained their rule until the last quarter of fifth century CE (c. 477-507 CE) when they were expelled by the Hephthalites from the region.

Period 4: The Late Kushans

The Chinese monk, Xuanzang, who reached the Swat valley in 630 CE, reports 1400 *sangharamas* and remarks that the people of Uddiyana practised “the art of using charms”. He also mentioned several Deva (or Hindu) temples and other places of worship of the unbelievers (Beal 1884:120f).

These religious changes are obvious in the surviving art. At Shnaisha, devotional icons of Bodhisattvas Maitreya, Padmapani and Avalokiteshvara appeared. Moreover, the time of Hephthalites was one of the most critical situation for the Buddhist religion and art because Gandhara had lost its splendour and among the displaced population to Swat, there were skilled artisans of stucco and clay who preferred to fashion large icons of the Buddha in this material. Narrative art in stone was hardly practised in the valley, and scenes found in the cultural phase of this period have largely depicted existing events which hints to the fact that these panels were reused in the buildings. A few scenes, although, never in the corpus of the already known sculptures from the Swat valley, for instance the panels from Nimogram, depict the *First Meditation and Plough Ceremony*, the *Conversion of Atavika* and the *Invitation of the Buddha by Srigupta*, but these do not approve the existence of stone-carving workshops active in the valley.

Large panels with three or four scenes rendered in sequential format was a new trend of the last period. One such panel from Chatpat (Dani 1968-69:Pl. 57a) portrays the *Maya's Dream*, *Interpretation of Dream*, *the Birth of Siddhartha*, and *Return to Kapilavastu*. Another panel from Shnaisha has three consecutive scenes including the *Death of the Buddha*, *Cremation*, and the *Contest for the Relics*.

Period 5: The Hindu Shahis

Though Buddhism persisted but no narrative art is evident during the disintegration of state during the fourth century CE through the Hindu Shahi period. Buddhist rock carvings are corresponding to the last breath of artistic vitality in Swat. Hindu temples were established, such as, temple of Vishnu at Tindo Dag near Barikot (Filigenzi 2006).

Conclusion

Since the early human occupation in the third millennium BC down to the arrival of Buddhism during the fourth-third century BC in the Swat Valley, no artform is evident to ensure the tradition of narrative illustration, and the Buddhist art can be pronounced as the earliest narrative art in the region. However, there is roughly a span of about two centuries between the arrival of Buddhism and the commencing of its serving art. Buddhist art and the tradition of narrative illustration in the valley was associated with the establishment of Buddhist sacred architecture including stupa structure, *viharas* and monasteries. The earliest Buddhist religious centers were established in and around Butkara during the time of Ashoka.

In the subsequent phases of political and ethnic changes and the ever-increasing Buddhist populace, several new sacred buildings were constructed, and the Swat valley had become one of the spiritual center in the Buddhist culture. The impact of Buddhism here was so commanding that even with the political hegemony, no power among the Greeks, Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians and Sassanians could succeed to soil the seeds of new creed or religion, and Buddhism subjugated the conquerors to support and patronize the religion and art. New stupa monasteries were established and the existing centers were expanded and renovated with producing countless artworks in the aesthetic and religious milieus. However, the need of cosmopolitan society, the artists and stone-carvers had practised so that they produced a syncretic art. The narrative artists had adopted and experimented with advanced and creative approaches in rendering scenes—evincing from simple monoscenic, it gradually went to conflated, continuous, synoptic and cyclic or sequential modes of narrative representations. They also strived for new stories and events from the oral tradition, scriptures and historical events to capture the art market because the professional art workshops and ateliers were established who had not only carried out art productions but also dealt in sculptural material for many centuries.

The evolvment and development of Buddhist narrative illustration went through three distinct phases including its formative stage in the first century BC to second century CE, the mature and

golden period from second through third-fourth centuries CE, and gradually the tradition became fade after fourth century CE. Although, since fourth century CE, Buddhism prevailed for more than seven centuries in the valley but new constructions were seldom evident, and the sculptural workshops were most often closed off. In the existing monasteries where new units were built or the structures were renovated, sculptural material were reused for decoration rather executing new artworks. In its last phase, Brahmanism and Hindu religious activities were gradually prominent, and the art ended in the valley.

Notes

1. The earliest tradition of painted pottery in the Swat valley, although, held in Period II (2400–2180 BC) of the Swat Cultural Sequence (Stacul 2003:211).
2. The evolutionary phases and classification of dating sculptures are based on the establishment or life span of sites; unless they are designated in previous researches, rather than on the quality of carving.
3. The fine quality of work and skillful execution of relief panels from the earliest evidence of stone-carving are so proficient that it can hardly be considered as an inchoate production, and urge to believe that the artists were already seasoned in carving; presumably in the woodcraft. Execution of Hellenistic figurative iconography (Callieri 2007:151) and imitation of Vedic-Persian architectural elements; e.g. Persepolitan pillars as scene divider, (Swati 2007:111) in relief panels are supportive evidences for assumption.
4. A literary term means a valid expression to express the same thing twice or redundantly in different words. It is used, here, as rendering a scene in different styles of representation, but which loses its narrative function and become generic such as the worship scenes.
5. The First Sermon in Butkara-III is represented in symbolic format by adding triratna adoring by monks (cf. Ingholt 1957:70, Pl. 79).
6. This Pali version of the *Sutta* is different from that of the Mahāyāna. In the Pali version, the Buddha recounts these places to Ānanda

as: “there are four places the sight of which should arouse emotion in the faithful. Which are they? “Here the Tathagata was born” is the first. “Here the Tathagata attained supreme enlightenment” is the second. “Here the Tathagata set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma” is the third. “Here the Tathagata attained the Nibbhaelement without remainder” is the fourth.” (Digha Nikaya 16:5.8).

7. It is certain that most of the scenes in relief panels are parallel to the contents of these texts; however, they were not the only references to visual narratives because the *Lalitavistara*, *Buddhacharita* and *Mahavastu*, all contain events only from birth to the attainment of enlightenment.
8. During this phase all narrative scenes were composed in the monoscenic mode of narration; either single scene per panel or multiple scenes sequentially separated by different compositional elements. No scene is evident in polyscenic mode except the *Dipankara Jataka* which was in the conflated mode, and this type became a standard format; replicated all over in the early Buddhist art.
9. Their coins bearing images of Greek, Roman, Iranian and Indian deities are further evidence of the phenomena.
10. Since Kanishka time, the Kushan set two capitals; the Northwestern and Central Asian regions were controlled from Purshapura (Peshawar), and the central India from Mathura. Buddhist images of Gandhāran artists are found in Mathura, and it contributed several features in return. However, each of the regions had an indigenous school of art with features of their regional styles (see Swati 2007).
11. Non-Buddhist deities; especially of Indian origin, in Swat are limited as compared to Gandhāra which was more liberal and eclectic in religious imagery.

Sculptures Reference

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37, 47, 84; Dani 1968-69:Pls. 35, 36, 44-48, 57, 59; Khan 2015:Pl. 5-17, 19, 21-23, 28, 37, 62, 64, 74, 133; Khan 1995:Pls. 10-17; Qamar 2004:Figs. 11, 13-17, 29-32; Swati 2007:Pls. 11-12, 19-20, 56-62; Swati 2012:Pls. 2-10, 13-14.

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