

BUTKARA III: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Butkara III marks the site of an ancient Buddhist establishment, the actual name of which has long been forgotten. The present name, a corrupted form of the Persian word *butkada* meaning 'the house of images', is the name of the area lying adjacent to the town of Saidu Sharif (Swat) to the east. The actual site lies astride on the sides of a ravine called Nari Khwar — one of the several seasonal streams which drain the northern side of the Katokhpa hill and, after meandering through the terraced fields for a short distance, join the main stream called Jambil, a tributary of the river Swat. The area between the Nari Khwar and the Obo Khwar to the east, now known as Bashi Pati after the name of its present owner, is a tongue — like little plateau made up of a thick deposit of numerous superimposed layers of gravel and compact soil several metres in thickness. (The geological composition of the deposit had great attraction to those who preferred to dig underground chambers than constructing them with brick or stone). The plateau descends field by field to the north and ends, not far from the present road, at a point where the two ravines join together. This is precisely where the site of Butkara III is situated. Part of the site is now occupied by the shanty houses of the Bashi family and the rest was excavated by the present writer in two seasons' work — first in November-December 1982 and then in May to October 1985. The site lies under a thick deposit of hill detritus washed down from the Katokhpa hill by torrential rains which are a common phenomenon in Swat. At the time of its excavation the site was found quite intact and showed no signs of disturbance nowadays generally caused by sculpture robbers.

The excavated part of the site consists of an area almost 54 x 48 m in length and breadth. But the site seems to have stretched over a much larger area as indicated above. The Nari Khwar divides it into two unequal halves. Excavation work to the west of the Nari Khwar, our area B, has brought to light the front face in a much damaged condition, of a row of six rooms dug out of the natural clay deposit and provided with a masonry front wall facing area A to the east — the scene of our major operation. Patches of a thick coat of plaster and red colour up to the dado level can still be seen on the front side of the wall. Antiquities included potsherds, iron nails, earthen lamps, terracotta beads and charcoal. Iron nails with umbrella and conical heads show that the entrances were provided with wooden doors studded with a variety of nails. A little below area B, to the north, are the remains of a little dam which regulated the water of the Nari Khwar.

AREA A

Structural remains at area A were found buried under a thick deposit of hill-wash which, after the abandonment of the site, completely sealed it off. These structures can be divided into two main groups: those (i) in the open court, and those (ii) in the underground chambers hereafter referred to as shrines A, B, C, D, E and F. Stratigraphically, group ii is partly earlier and partly contemporary with group i.

i. *The Open Court*

Structural remains in the open court mainly consist of ten *stupas* (numbered 1 to 10) eight of which are disposed in two parallel rows in front of the shrines while the remaining two

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are symmetrically placed a little outside the rows — one each on the southern and northern sides of the court. These *stupas* are square in shape (the size varies from 1.52 to 3.33 m a side, the tallest being 2 m in height) and in elevation show two different stages: (a) square platform with mouldings at the bottom and top and (b) a circular drum having similar mouldings at the top. No traces of a dome or umbrella or spacers were found near them. This is a problem which still remains a puzzle. Some of the *stupas* showing late diaper masonry have preserved patches of lime plaster. The building material consisted of (i) irregular slabs of local limestone from the Katokhpa hill for those showing diaper masonry (our type A) and (ii) dressed rectangular blocks of light grey granite (nowadays generally quarried at Malakand but also found in many other parts of Swat) for those showing ashlar masonry (our type B). Some of these *stupas* have been provided on all the four sides with a paved circumambulation path which, on the outer side, is marked by stones standing on edge. These structures are so closely packed together that it is difficult to establish stratigraphic relationship between them. Yet general expansion of the site from south to north shows that our type A is earlier than type B.

Most sculptures found in association with type B were lying topsy-turvy on the floor, some heavily encrusted and corroded because of water action. In stupa no. 1, however, which looks more like a platform than a stupa, because of its unusual dimension on this site and also because of the complete absence of a drum, all the sculptures were found *in situ*. Some of these stupas were considerably damaged by the hill torrent which has been flowing in the middle of area A — the torrent which was later to contribute so much towards saving the site from all kinds of human hazard by putting a thick envelop of hill-wash upon it, in the initial stages seems to have done considerable harm to the sacred structures.

ii. *The Shrines* (Pls. 1–4)

The most interesting aspect of the structural remains on this site is represented by its underground chambers or shrines, six of which have so far been exposed. The shrines are the first of their kind so far discovered in Gandhara and show us how successfully the Buddhists of Butkara, in view of the wet climate of Swat, tackled the problem of having a covered space for the more lavishly decorated stupas and clay sculptures without actually building it. The thick clay deposit at Bashi Pati offered the right kind of solution. A vertical section in the natural deposit was first of all obtained by removing clay from the area of the open court and then underground chambers were dug into it at regular intervals, strengthening the section with retaining walls where necessary.

Each of these shrines consists of a porch and an inner chamber at its back. The floor of the porch in every case is unpaved and, being slightly raised above the level of the open court, is provided on the front side with a small retaining wall having projected mouldings and steps in the middle. Only the front side of the porches is open and admits light and air into the inner chambers. The other three sides, in some cases at least, were provided with offset or bench-like projections which supported clay sculptures. It may be interesting to note that a stone sculpture was found within the body of a much damaged clay figure of a seated Buddha. In one late example the porch contains three nicely built square-shaped stupas in a row. These stupas were made up of dressed stones, carefully plastered and painted in blue and red colours, but unfortunately they were almost completely demolished by some late occupants of the site in need of a living room. In front of this porch, flanking the entrance, were two square columns of stone blocks. Debris of these columns and the stupas just referred to was found dumped on one side of the front wall of this porch. In one case however the porch shows masonry walls, but there is evidence to show that it was a later addition introduced at the time when the original clay—

cut porch collapsed and had to be replaced. The roof in this case probably consisted of two shells. The inner shell which is fairly intact is a corbelled vault and the outer shell of which only traces are left behind looked probably like a gable. Adjacent to this porch are two *viharas* with domical roofs. In this case also the existence of an upper gable can be surmised from the fact that a number of sculptures mixed up with numerous stone blocks were found on top of these *viharas*.

THE INNER CHAMBERS

The inner chamber in every case consists of a square room, almost 4 m a side, with a roof cut in the form of the underside of a dome. Access to the inner chamber is provided through a metre-wide masonry entrance flanked in some cases by two ventilators and decorated by panels of lotus flowers fixed at the door-sill level.

The stupas found in these inner chambers are all circular in plan and are fairly well preserved up to the level of the *harmika* except where they were demolished by some late occupants of the site. The tallest of these structures measures 3.20 m from the floor to the level of the *harmika*; the average diameter of the base being 2.70 m. The style of masonry varies from early to the late diaper. Extant patches of plaster, in some cases showing traces of blue and red colours, indicate that these structures were externally plastered and finished off with different colours. The stupas are very nicely built and, in elevation, each comprises of three parts — base, drum and dome — all being separated by projecting mouldings. In one case, however, which alone yielded 42 sculptures, the drum of the stupa is composed of two tiers. The number of umbrellas found in every case is three. Spacers and *harmikas* have also been found in a good state of preservation. The *harmikas* are generally square blocks of solid stone with carvings on all the four sides. In one late example however different parts of the *harmika* were prepared separately and then joined together, leaving the core empty. These parts were found scattered in the chamber and have now been put together. Numerous brackets with volute ends, some bearing traces of gold wash, were recovered from the debris associated with these stupas. The relic chambers, often only one, but in some cases two, were found sunk in the dome of the stupas down to the level of their drums and yielded nice caskets and stupa models containing thin gold leaves and tiny little beads.

PHASES

Four structural phases supported by a limited stratigraphy were observed. Phases ii and iii are associated with the coins of Soter Megas and Vasudeva respectively.

Phase i: represented by shrines B, C, D and inner chamber of A; early diaper masonry. Pre-Soter Megas period.

Phase ii: represented by stupas 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10 (all in the open court); porch of shrine A, *viharas* 1, 2; kitchen; workshop area; sculptures from shrine B probably reused in stupa 1; semi-diaper masonry. Associated with a coin of Soter Megas.

Phase iii: represented by stupas 2, 5, 6 (all in the open court) and shrine E together with its clay sculptures; clay sculptures in the hall adjacent to the 'workshop' to the north. Masonry partly late diaper and partly ashlar. Associated with a coin of Vasudeva.

SCULPTURES

Out of 188 antiquities found in this site 180 are represented by sculptures (Pls. 5–11). Out of these 19 are free-standing human figures in high relief, wearing in some cases princely

costume, and the rest are rectangular panels of phyllite or green schist. The distribution of princely figures is as follows: 4 belong to shrine D, 2 were found in debris belonging to shrine A, 2 in shrine E and the rest in debris belonging to shrine F. In shrine D they were found at level with the dome indicating that they were fixed on top of it on four different sides.

The largest number of sculptures recovered from this site is represented by panels of varying sizes. These are very nicely carved in low relief and are in a very good state of preservation, a number of them being found *in situ*. Except for those showing garland-bearers (Pl. 5), all the panels are independent units by themselves and in no case is the subject matter carried over to the neighbouring panels. Nevertheless, a very broad relationship among them was observed in shrine C where most of the panels showing garland-bearers were found at one level and those depicting human figures under arches at another. Similarly panels showing *jataka* stories or scenes from the life of the Buddha were found at a different level.

The level at which these sculptures were fitted on the stupa is evidenced in shrines B and D where, although sculptures were not found *in situ*, their position could be easily ascertained from the sockets or little holes left behind all around the springing point of the dome. It is interesting to note that the number of tenons found on panels belonging to shrine D corresponds to the number of sockets left behind on the stupa, making it easier to put the sculptures back in their original positions. In this case the top of the panels was covered by a separate wreath-like frieze showing traces of gold wash. In some other cases however this wreath-like frieze is made part of the individual panels.

In the subject matter depicted on these panels, the most frequent is the scene showing human figures — standing or seated — under arches. Next is the scene showing a seated Buddha flanked in most cases by Indra and Brahma (Pl. 8) but in some cases by two devotees or monks. Next in order of frequency are garland-bearers followed by standing princely figures in high relief and then by panels showing lotus flowers. On the scenes relating to the Buddha's life the most frequent is 'the birth scene' followed by the scenes called 'bath of the child and seven steps', 'horoscope reading', 'Gotama going to school', 'Gotama at school', 'the Great Departure', 'farewell to Kanthaka', 'Kasyapa and the Buddha', 'taming and hurling of the elephant' (Pl. 6), and 'cremation'. The *jataka* stories are represented by Syama Jataka and Dipankara Jataka (Pl. 9). Other scenes include stupa worship (Pl. 10), worship of the Three Jewels (Pl. 11), turban worship, bowl worship, *caitya* worship, feasting monks, Nagarajas (Pl. 7), tug-of-war scene and acrobats.

A very important feature of this site is the existence of a workshop in which a number of unfinished architectural members of stupas and panels meant for carving sculptures were found reclining against a wall.

CHRONOLOGY

There is no numismatic evidence for the earliest phase. Phase ii however can be dated on the evidence of a coin of Soter Megasthenes. Similarly phase iii can be assigned to the period of Vasudeva on the basis of a single copper coin of this ruler. Again there is no numismatic evidence for phase iv, but the site seems to have continued to be occupied even long after the period of Vasudeva. Gradual extension of the site from south to north shows that new additions were made in the area now occupied by the Bashi family. Archaeological evidence suggests that the site came to an end at the hands of a people who were equipped with bows and arrows and who professed a faith different from Buddhism, for, they levelled up some of the stupas and used the shrines for living purposes, leaving hearths, charcoal, bones, and potsherds behind.

PLATES

- Pl. 1 — Stupa in an underground chamber. The front portion of the chamber together with its porch has been removed. The stupa, preserved only to the height a little above the level of the drum, shows fine diaper masonry. Its core is made of clay filling. Shrine B. Period I.
- Pl. 2 — Detail of stupa in shrine C. Period I.
- Pl. 3 — Stupas in shrines C (right) and D. Porches in front of these shrines have disappeared. Period I.
- Pl. 4 — Masonry porch (left) in front of shrine A. The entrance at the back leads to an underground chamber still unexcavated. On the right are a vihara and some stupas in the open court. Period II.
- Pl. 5 — Four amorini support an undulating garland on their shoulders. Attached to the centre of each loop of the garland at the bottom are three fruit-like objects or flowers and above them floral designs and birds. The foliage of the garland varies, each loop carrying a different design. The garland is bound at regular interval by eight ribbons with flowing ends, which divide it into nine sections. The two halves of a loop carried on the shoulder of an amorino are identical. Green Schist. Porch of shrine A. Size 70x16 cm. Period II.
- Pl. 6 — Panel relief, divided in the middle by an encased Indo-Corinthian column into two halves, depicting taming (right) and hurling of the elephant. Green Schist. Shrine C. Size 32x16 cm. Period I.
- Pl. 7 — Panel relief showing a Naga king emerging from a lotus flower. Green Schist. Shrine A. Size 25x25 cm. Period I.
- Pl. 8 — Panel relief showing Buddha seated cross-legged, with auspicious marks on the soles, on a raised platform in meditation pose with Indra (on the right) and Brahma exhorting him to preach the law, while two *devas* scatter flowers from above with their raised right hands. At the back of the head can be seen twigs of a fine tree sprouting from behind with a wreath in the centre. One of the twigs passes through the wreath. Two more wreaths or *malas* can be seen hanging from the foliage above the Buddha's shoulders. Green Schist. Stupa 1. Size 39x26 cm. Period II.
- Pl. 9 — Panel relief showing the Dipankara Jataka. The Dipankara Buddha stands on the right in reassuring pose, while Sumati holding a water flask, characteristic of the Brahmins, in the left hand, tosses five flowers before him which, instead of falling to the ground, remain suspended in the air. Sumati, who is bearded, is then shown prostrated in front of Dipankara. The frame is topped with a frieze of half acanthi and is bordered by two vertical rows of acrobats, one each on the right and left side. Green Schist. Stupa 7. Size 44x34 cm. Period II.

- Pl. 10 — Panel relief bordered on the left with an encased Indo-Corinthian column, showing a stupa and two devotees one of which is offering flowers. The stupa has a double circular plinth and three umbrellas with a round column surmounted by a lion in each of the four corners of its square platform. Green Schist. Stupa 1. Size 30x24 cm. Period II.
- Pl. 11 — Panel relief showing a winged column in the centre supporting the triratna flanked by four shaven-headed devotees or monks — two on each side — with hands clasped in adoration. The devotees in the foreground are kneeling. Green Schist. Stupa 1. Size 18x14 cm. Period II.



Pl. 1



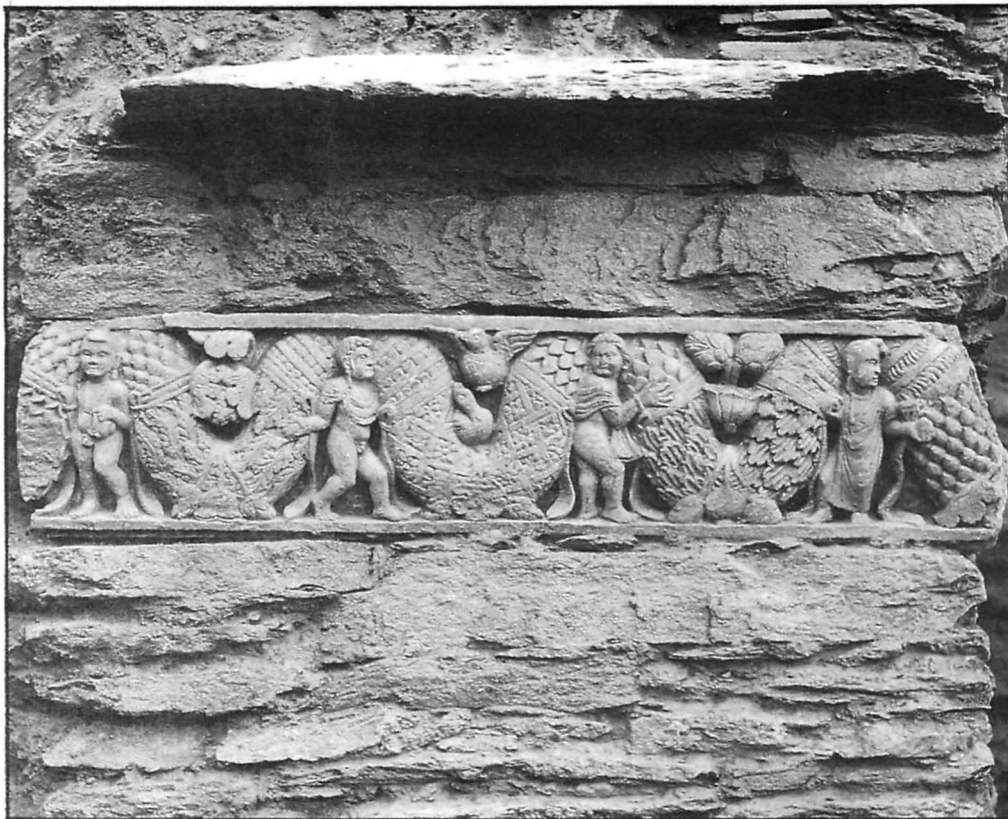
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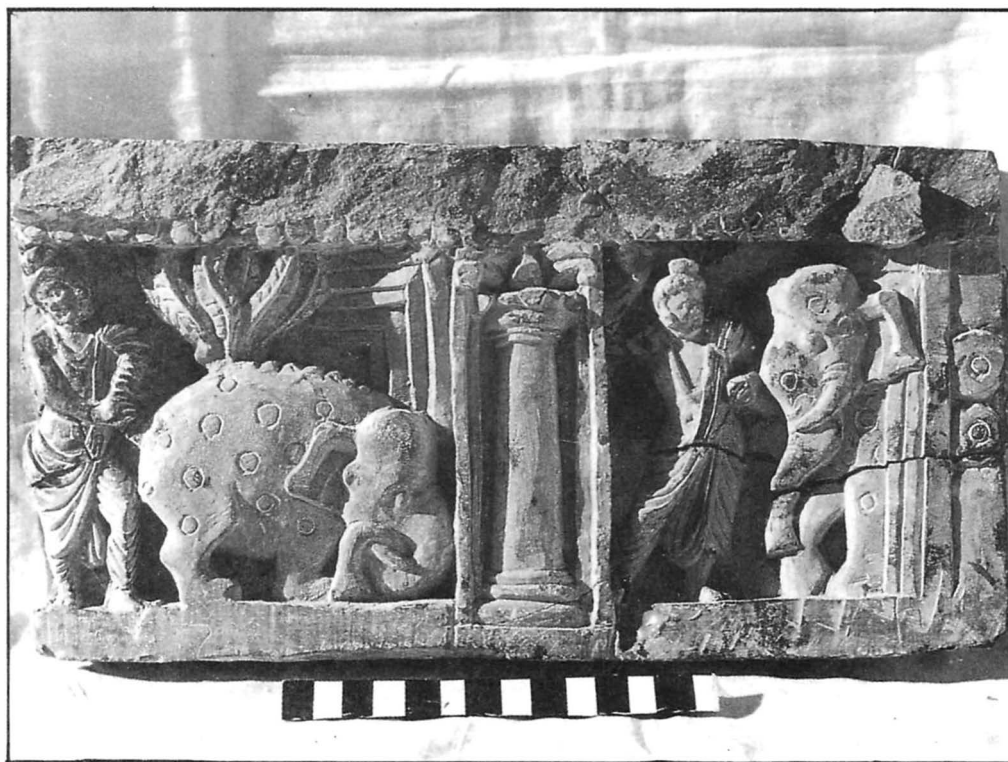
Pl. 3



Pl. 4



Pl. 5



Pl. 6



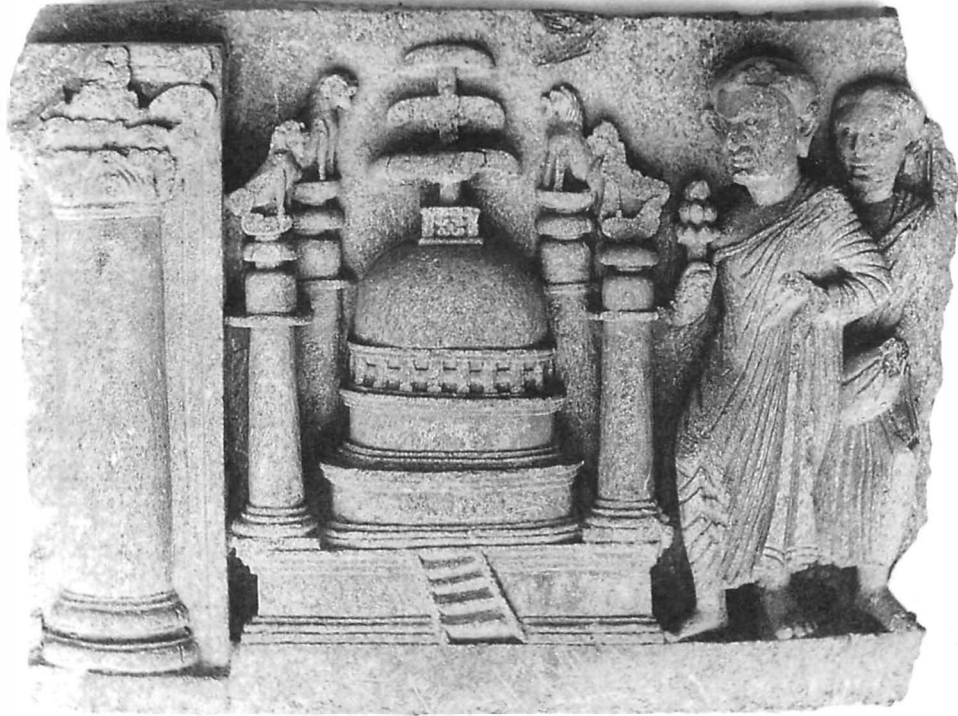
Pl. 7



Pl. 8



Pl. 9



Pl. 10



Pl. 11