

## A Brief Account on an Inscribed Relic Casket from Marjānai, Swāt

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**Abstract:** The reliquary along with an inscribed lid is found in 1982 at the Buddhist stupa of Marjanai in the Swat Valley. These days, the analyses of the relics and the inscriptions inscribed upon them, have become an interesting field of study. Here the main purpose of the study is to bring to limelight the inscription and identify the name of the person, possibly whose relics it contained and to provide further an opportunity to the researcher to study & analyse the contents of the relics and find out further information in the historical records about the local rulers.

**Keywords:** Marjānai, Swat, Relic Casket, Kharoshti, Raja Piṇaṇo.

### Introduction

Marjānai, a Buddhist site, was excavated under the Gandhara Archaeological Project by the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar in 1982, under Prof. Farzand Ali Durrani. The site is situated about 21 km northwest of Mingora in Amluk Tangi area, Swagali Valley, Kabal, District Swāt. Similar ruins of ancient structures and cultural artefacts are scattered over the surrounding area. The site occupies a terraced field and it may be noted here that the owner had already destroyed the site for agricultural purposes as well as for antiquities at the time of excavations, conducted by the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar. The site yielded a number of sculptures, few relic caskets and coins, which are now housed in the Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Peshawar. Two structural levels were recognized by the excavator labelled as phases I and II. Phase I is marked by the main Stupa and votive stupa No. 3. whereas phase II is represented by stupas No. 1, 2 and 4-18, a pillar, and the fortification wall of rubble masonry (Khan 1995:8).

Votive Stupa 3 was unearthed (trench C) inside a

square chamber having a corbelled domical roof faced by a porch in a courtyard which kept the stupa protected. However, its southern side was found damaged. The round base (2.5 m diameter) of the stupa was covered with lime plaster with a height of 1.30m. The two drums separated by a cornice. The top one was crowned by a dome. The whole structure from the paved floor rises to a height of 2.30m. The concept of cremation and pot burial is very old. It was found in the Cemetery H of Harappa (Vats, 1940:204-5) and in Gandhara Grave Culture in which three different types of burials were practiced. The most important was the burial of bones or ashes of the dead in pots in single or multiple burials, showing the earliest evidence of cremation and burial of the bones and ashes in Gandhara either in simple or visage urns (Dani 1967:62-63). When Buddha died he was cremated and his bones and ashes were distributed among the eight claimants who constructed stupas upon it (Vaidya 1997, 25). Various types of reliquaries are depicted in the distribution and transportation of the relics in the art of Gandhara (Ingholt, 1957:Pl. 152-154 145,147,149-150). Uttarasena of Uddiyan also received his share and while transporting the relics the elephant died near the present stupa of Shankardar which was

constructed upon the relic (Stein, 1930:32). According to the Buddhist accounts Ashoka opened the seven stupas and redistributed the relics all over his empire and the stupas constructed by him are known as Dharmarajika the one at Taxila and other at Butkara I in the Swat Valley. The Shinkot reliquary from Bajaur is considered to be the earliest and is dated to the mid second century BC i.e. to Bactrian Greek ruler Menander (Ray, 2017).

Initially stupa was reserved for the relics of the Buddha but later on it was also constructed on the relics of Buddhist monks/sagas and these types of stupas are known as *sarira* stupas. All the stupas don't contain relics. During a study of 406 reliquaries from Gandhara only 10% were inscribed on lids and on the inner side to hide them from worshippers when on display (Ray, 2017). Some stupas have large relic chambers the best example is the main stupa of Kalawan at Taxila with a diameter of 4 meters and is painted several times and was periodically entered from the top (Ray 2014:94).

The reliquaries are inscribed with a same pattern/ formula of inscription mentioning the name of donors, date of donation in the prevalent era and person's name. However, these reliquaries rarely mention only names. The historic accounts mostly mentioned the names of the great rulers of the dynasties. Little information regarding the local rulers or governor who served under these dynasties are available to the historians.

### **The Relic Casket**

The excavator recovered three relic caskets, one from the dome and two from the relic chamber at the base. A small casket of soap stone was found from the debris. The relic caskets found at the base are decorated with lotus flowers and petals. One is made of soapstone while the other smaller in size and peach shape is of green phyllite. Striation marks on the inner side clearly indicate

that both were manufactured on a lathe. The surface decoration was done with chisel. The earliest depiction of the same floral motif is painted on the inner side of a bowl coming from the early Harappan site of Gumla (Dani 19: Pl. 88a). Murtazganj ring stones are also decorated with full-blown lotus flower and are dated to Asoka's time (Gupta, 1980: 55-59). The historic period bowls with a stamped lotus motif is found inside centre of the bowls and was noticed by Sir Mortimer Wheeler at Charsadda (1962:40-41). Wheeler termed this kind of pottery as "Lotus Bowl". In his view, it was in use in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and its origin may go back into the later part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

In the centre of the lid of relic casket is a hole surrounded by radiating seven petals. The outer circle has overlapping petals (ogival or leaf and dart motif) which are framed in border with radiating lines. The unique feature of the relic casket is that it has a hole in the centre instead of a knob which is mostly found in such relic caskets. The hole in the lid of the large relic casket is covered with the lid of a small peach shape relic casket having three-tiered knob from which petals radiate (Pl. IV). The lower body is also covered with ogival motif. A tiny metal relic casket placed inside it has not been opened yet. The purpose of placing the two relic caskets in such a manner was to merging them into a single piece which is quite interesting. The large casket lid is decorated with a full-blown lotus with double corolla petals the knob in the centre represent pistil. The base and the lids have prominent fillets and the body has a row of bordered ogival or leaf and dart motif. Such relic caskets are common in Gandhara and Uddiyana. The Bimaran reliquary has full blown lotus on the base in *repouse* (Errington 1992:189). The Shahji-ki-Dheri relic casket also has an incised lotus flower on the lid (Ingholt, 195 &: Pl. 494). The reliquary similar to our specimen now on display

in Saidu Sharif Museum Swāt was recovered from Butkara I and is dated to 2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> century CE but it has a knob in the centre (Filigenzi 2009: Cat. No.125). The best example which is quite similar to the one found at Marjānai is in the Peshawar Museum collection of reliquaries. The Peshawar specimen was purchased in Swāt. It is made of stone and has the same type of roughly carved decoration. But instead of a knob, a seated Buddha figure in *dharmacakra mudra* made most probably of iron and was fixed as a knob in the centre for which an irregular hole was made (Pl. I, II). The exact date of the casket cannot be ascertained. Another pear-shaped relic casket in the Peshawar Museum is similar to the pear shaped one from Marjānai but the decoration is rough (Pl. III).

The depiction of lotus flower is very common in the early Buddhist art of Gandhara. But it is associated with the birth scenes and it is quite strange that it is widely used on the relic caskets in Gandhara. Death itself represents rebirth, when one dies, then his rebirth can take place, according to the Buddhist beliefs. Therefore, both stages are one and of the same process. Therefore, the lotus represents both rebirth and death because without death, rebirth is impossible (Gupta: 1980:71). The relic casket under discussion is inscribed with the name of a person most probably the one whose relics it contains. The inscription is incised with a sharp pointed tool in Kharoshti characters. It was not noticed by



the excavator previously. The fragile nature of soapstone and of the thin fabric of the relic container probably did not allow the carvers to go deep for engraving the letters (Pl. V). The last letter of the inscription is unclear but most probably, it is *no*. the inscription from right to left can be transliterated as *Raja Piṇaṇo*. The inscription belongs to the later Kushan period and can be dated from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. It was a period in which the central authority appears to be weak and local rulers have got certain authority. It also indicates that that *Raja Piṇaṇo* would also have been a local ruler of the Swat Valley. The word *raja* is used for prince or male member of the royal family or a local ruler. The etymology of word *Piṇaṇo* is unclear. Whether the casket contains the remains of a local ruler or a common man is difficult to decide. But, as the stupa was constructed inside a chamber it may suggest that the relics are of an important person. With few exceptions, votive stupas are generally constructed in the open. The other relic casket has no traces of inscription. Further study of historical text of the region may provide further information.

Both the relic caskets are made of different materials but the excavator has not noticed that the stupa was opened later and caskets there were put together. What does the tiny metal relic casket contain will be known only when it is opened or X-rayed (Pl.VI-IX).

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**Plate No. I:** Relic casket from Peshawar Museum



**Plate No. II:** Relic casket with a Seated Buddha in Dharmacakra mudra Knob



**Plate No. III:** Pear shape relic casket Peshawar Museum collection



**Plate No. IV:** Relic Casket as placed in the relic chamber of the stupa at Marjānai



**Plate No. V:** Kharoshti inscription on the lid



**Plate No. VI:** Separately placed relic caskets



**Plate No. VII:** Relic Caskets with open lids



**Plate No. VIII:** Hole in the lid



**Plate No. IX:** Relics inside the casket