

The Discovery and Development of Buddhist Archaeology of Gandhāra: An Appraisal

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Abstract:

The history of archaeology in the Indian sub-Continent spreads over more than one and a half centuries. To review, highlight and evaluate archaeological activities conducted in due passage of time, an attempt has been made to learn from the past experiences and to suggest strategy for how to proceed in a better way. To comprehend academic problems and prospects related to the development of the subject matter, a survey of archaeological activities done in Gandhāra is presented here to be shared.

Introduction:

The discovery of Buddhist archaeology of Gandhāra is a by-product of the European quest for ancient coins who were fascinated by the adventures of Alexander the Great in the east. The accounts of these adventures are given by classical writers, but nothing on the ground in the form of coins or monuments substantiate them. Great was the joy when chance discoveries of a few Bactrian Greek coins in the 18th century CE set the ball rolling in this direction. Footprints of Alexander's successors in the east were thought to be emerging. The coins were deciphered and published that stimulated the interest of various private collectors. The establishment of the Asiatic Society by Sir William Jones on the 15th January 1784 facilitated research work and the journal *Asiatic Researches* was first published in 1788.

Encouraged by this development, Col. James Tod, during his 12 years residency in India, collected 20,000 coins of different denominations and published a memoir on Greek, Parthian and Indian coins in the first volume of the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1824. He described most of the collection as possessing no special interest;

however, a few novel issues carrying great numismatic and historical values are pointed out. They were coins of Apollodotus and Menander discovered for the first time. Tod's discovery of these coins constituted an era in the history of Bactro-Indian numismatics (Wilson 1841: 4). Another enthusiastic coin collector was Charles Masson. "In the July of the present year (1833)", he states, "I left for the city of Kabul to explore the districts north of it ... I soon learned that large number of coins were continually found on the plain (called Begram)". Masson continued his research for four years and, besides opening a large number of stupas, collected more than 30,000 coins (Wilson 1841:11).

Meanwhile a French officer of the army of Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ruler of the Panjab, General JB Ventura opened an ancient monument, actually a Buddhist stupa, near the village Manikiala/ Mankiala (JB Ventura 1832). It was first reported by M Elphinstone, who on his way back from Kabul in 1808 sent a party to test Col. Wilford's view that Mankiala marked the site of ancient Taxila. Elphinstone's party found no remains other than the *tope*, as the stupa was locally called, but twelve years afterwards Moorcroft,

crossing the spot, was informed by people that old walls, potsherds, and ancient coins were frequently discovered. Topes were also observed by Moorcoft on the west of the Indus and in Afghanistan (Wilson 1841: 31). The "Tope" of Mankiala was not a solitary example of its kind on this spot. M Court who visited the place shortly afterwards found no less than fifteen *topes* in the neighbourhood which he opened and, luckily, found Roman coins in one of them. An account of Ventura's discovery, effected in April and May 1830, was forwarded to Calcutta and made known there about the end of the same year. In the beginning of March 1832, Lieutenant (later Sir) Alexander Burnes, then on his way to Bokhara, visited Mankiala and inspected the operations of Ventura. Burnes also made a collection of coins which was published by James Prinsep in the journal of the Society for June 1833 (James Prinsep 1833: ii, 310).

Discovery

Ventura's work at Mankiala and Masson's digging in Afghanistan opened up a new field, namely, Buddhist archaeology, which stimulated general interest in images and paved the way for plundering such monuments. Sir Aurel Stein (1929: 17) just at the outset of his famous Swat trip bitterly remarks: "My first visit was to Nal, at the foot of the Mora pass, where, above a small village, diggings made for Col. Deane in 1897 had brought to light a mass of fine Greco-Buddhist relievos. These had been excavated from fine stupas or shrines by local Pathans without supervision or guidance; but, at least, they were safely lodged in the Calcutta Museum. Much regrettable damage and loss have been caused, before and since, in tribal territory and elsewhere along the Peshawar border, by "irresponsible" digging for remains

of that Hellenistic sculptural art which once adorned all Buddhist sanctuaries of this region. How destructive such digging usually was and how often much of the spoil, when sold to amateur collectors, was ultimately scattered or destroyed, is a story too sad to be told here". One of the most evocative descriptions of "stupa-hunting" has been given by Major Herbert B Edwards (1851) of the 1st Bengal European Fuzilier Regiment, in connection with his notice of Akra mound near Bannu (Edwards 1851: 335-41).

With this a vague outline of a Gandhāra school of sculpture showing Greek as well as local influences started emerging. The first note on this subject is apparently by W Jackson (Jackson 1852: 511-13) who illustrated two pieces of Gandhāra stucco found near Peshawar. In the same year EC Bayley (Bayley 1852: 606-21) found a detailed note on some sculptures found in the Peshawar district. These were collected by Col. Lumsden of the Guides Corp and Lieutenant Stokes of the Horse Artillery from a site known as Jamal Garhi. A sketch plan of the Jamal Garhi stupa and drawings of sculptures and architectural pieces are also given.

The development of archaeological activities which finally resulted in the discovery of Gandhāra School may be divided into three phases. The first phase was dominated by Cunningham, the second by Marshall and the third by the Italian Mission in Swat, the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar and the Japanese missions.

First Phase

A systematic enquiry into the ancient past of India started with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861.

Alexander Cunningham, then in his 48th year and freshly out of the army with the rank of Major General was appointed as its first head (Chakrabarti 1988: 57). Cunningham identified the ancient city of Pushkalavati with the two large towns of Parang and Charsada and in the same general area two small stupa sites mentioned by Xuan Zang. The site of Varusha with a cave and a spring was identified with the village, Palodheri, near Shabaz Garhi and ancient Utakhanda with Hund. Salatura, the birth place of Paṇini was identified with the modern town Choṭa Lahore and Ranigat with Aornos of the classical writers. Cunningham's major achievement in the Panjab was the identification and description of the ruins of Taxila in which he mentions the ramparts of Kacha-Kot and Sirkap and the great city of Sirkap each of which being as large as the imperial city of Shah Jahan at Delhi. But the size and number of the stupas, monasteries and other religious buildings, he remarks, is even more wonderful than the great extent of the city. Hasan Abdal with its Buddhist ruins was identified with the place of the legend of the Naga Elapatra. In the same general area he laid a trench to a depth of 22 feet at a stupa near Boati Pind while Balar stupa was opened by a local chief. He mentions the stupa of Badalpur as one of the three largest stupas in the Panjab (the others were Mankiala and Shahpur). He also refers to Buddhist remains at Tarnawa, Kurmal and Rawalpindi or Gajipur. He visited Mankiala and excavated a large mound (200x180x10-12 feet) north of the stupa opened by Ventura. At Sonalia Pind, near Mankiala, he opened a stupa and found, along with coins, a stupa model in its relics' chamber.

It is not possible to cover all the archaeological activities of Cunningham in this brief note. His initial appointment for two years was extended up to 1864-65 season when the government of India appreciated the results of the surveys carried out by him, but, without recommending further extension. As a result Cunningham left for England on 9th February, 1866.

But the need for systematic exploratory activities was soon felt so that in a dispatch dated 11th January 1870 the Duke of Argyll, the then Secretary of State, wrote of the necessity of centralising the archaeological activities under the government and putting them on a secure basis. The government of India under the Viceroy Lord Mayo accepted the suggestion and wanted Alexander Cunningham at the head of new central department, the Archaeological Survey of India. Cunningham was back early in 1871 to take over.

In the introduction to the report of 1872-73 season, Cunningham began with a reference of the increasing number of sculptures coming from the north western regions. The ruins which first came under scrutiny during this season were those in Peshawar valley. At Shahbazgarhi, Cunningham satisfied himself by taking a fresh copy of the Ashokan inscription (fig. 5) and noting the existence of an extensive city in the vicinity. The excavations at Takht-i-Bahi were superintended by Sergeant FH Wilcher of the Sappers and Miners. The stupa of Jamal Garhi, opened by Col. Lumsden, was surveyed and cleared by Sergeant Wilcher. The remains of Sawal Dheri, Nogram and Khairabad were briefly mentioned. In 1878-79, he reported the finds of beautiful Gandhāra

heads at Rokhari, near Mianwali (Cunningham 2002: Vols. 1, 11, V, XIV, XIX).

The reports from the north western frontier were sporadic. In the third volume of *Indian Antiquary* (1874) there was a report on the Buddhist ruins at Jamal Garhi with the plan of the excavated monastic and stupa structures. The excavations were done in March and April 1873 by the 8th Company of Sappers and Miners under the command of Lieutenant Arthur Crompton. There was also a note on the collection of the Gandharan sculptures by GW Leitner in *Indian Antiquary* of the same year.

Second Phase

Archaeological activities in the next phase filled the museums with sculptures. Clandestine diggings also increased to fill private collections. In fact the arrival of Lord Curzon as the Viceroy of India in 1899 marked the dawn of a new era for Indian archaeology. He reorganized the archaeological survey and recreated the post of the Director General which had been abolished after the retirement of Cunningham. John Marshall was appointed the new Director General. He joined the department on 22nd February, 1902 and continued to work in this capacity till 1928 (Chakrabarti 1988: 128). But he stayed on in various capacities to 1934. All field researches done in this period except the work of MA Stein in Central Asia in the early part of the 20th century, were either directly due to his planning and direction or closely linked to the work begun by him. Marshall unleashed a vigorous programme of excavations.

Spreading over 25 square miles (40 sq km), Taxila was a world by itself. During the 24 years (1912-36) of his work on this site

Marshall laid bare all the important monuments that we see there at present. The discovery of the Indus Civilization during this period would seem to have shifted the focus but the work on Taxila and other sites of less importance was not allowed to suffer.

In Gandhāra the mounds of Bala Hisar, Mir Ziyarat, Palatu and Ghaz Dheri were partly excavated. The work at Takht-i-Bahi, done in two seasons, 1907-08 and 1911-12, by DB Spooner and H Hargreaves, was mainly of the nature of clearance to prepare a plan of this monastic complex. Its ground plan had become necessary because, as Spooner (1911: 180) has rightly remarked, "many of the best pieces of Gandhara sculpture now to be found in the museums of Europe were originally recovered from this site". The site of Sahri Bahlol possessed, in addition to its main stupa mound, a large number of mounds in the vicinity, including a small town site. The stupa mound was excavated by Spooner in 1909-10, while Aurel Stein (1911-12) investigated another six mounds in this area. Sahri Bahlol yielded a large number of sculptures including the tallest Buddha images now exhibited in the Peshawar Museum. Work on Shah-ji-ki-dheri, outside the Ganj Gate of Peshawar city, was undertaken by Spooner in 1907-08. The famous Kanishka relic casket was found in 1908-09 season. The site was identified with Kanishka Vihara. In 1909-11 Hargreaves undertook complete clearance of this area exposing thereby a cruciform stupa. In 1915-16 Pandit V Natisa Aiyar (1915-16: 115-16), then superintendent of the Frontier Circle, described with plan and measurement a stupa called Shpola 27 miles (43 km) from Peshawar on the road to Landi Kotal in the Khyber pass. In 1920-22 Hargreaves conducted clearance work at Jamal Garhi and

also located stupas at Hāji Bela, Beddadi, Chitti Gati, Palosa Khpa (near Jamal Garhi), Asota, Koṭ Sirkap near Mansehra and another Koṭ near Takht-i-Bahi (see Chakrabarti 1988: 134-35). There was no place to properly preserve all these finds. Therefore a new museum was established at Peshawar and filled up with sculptures and other finds.

Third Phase

In the third phase the marginal areas of Gandhāra such as Swat and Dir became major fields of archaeological investigations, while Gandhāra itself was relegated to a secondary position for the simple reason that spoliation of cultural sites had been going for so long and at such a rapid speed that nothing much was left for proper investigation after the middle of the 20th century when the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, initiated its programme of excavations in lower Dir, around Chakdara, the crossing point, at which a proper bridge built during the British period, provides access to upper Dir, Bajaur and Chitral.

The research programme of the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, was carried out in two separate campaigns. In the first campaign, 1963-64 to 1968, the work was started at two ancient cemeteries at Timargarha and a settlement site at Balambat but it went on developing towards the investigation of Buddhist sites in the vicinity of Chakdara. Thus the sites of Damkoṭ, Chaṭpaṭ, Andan Dheri, Ramora and Bambolai were excavated and published in the journal of the Department entitled *Ancient Pakistan*. It may be remembered that the Department had already carried out excavations at Shaikan Dhe-i, near Charsada, bringing to light a number of fine schist sculptures. The materials

from the Dir sites are now on display in the Dir Museum, Chakdara. In the second campaign, before shifting attention to Swat, the site of Charg Pati and a few other sites of lesser importance were excavated in Dir. In Swat the site of Butkara III and Shnaisha, excavated by Prof. Abdur Rahman, yielded a rich crop of sculptures now exhibited in the SSAQ Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Peshawar (Dani & Rehman *Ancient Pakistan: Vols. I-III, VII, VIII*).

The main sites of our interest excavated by the Italian Mission in Swat include Butkara I, Panr I, Gumbat, Saidu Stupa, Bir-Kot-Ghundai at Barikot, and Uḍigrm. Part of the sculptures found from these sites is to be found in the Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, and another part in Italy in the IsMEO Museum at Rome.

The Japanese archaeological team from Kyoto University excavated in the Mardan district between 1959 and 1967, at sites situated within Gandhāra proper. These sites include Kashmir Smast, Chanako Dheri, Tarelli and Mekhasanda. Another Japanese team from the same University brought the great site of Ranigaṭ under the excavation and exposed very interesting sculptures. Meanwhile the Government Department of Archaeology and Museums carried out its research programme at Nimogram in Swat and more recently at Garh Moriyān, Hāji Shah Mor and Jinnan Wali Dheri.

Karl Jettmar's work in the Karakoram in 1980 opened up a new field in which rock carvings scattered in the whole area spreading over hundreds of miles became the focus of attention of successive German teams.

Marshall's three volumes on *Taxila* and his *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara*, in addition to the contributions made by A Foucher and other art historians, had made major portions of this art accessible to the scholarly world. Then Islay Lyons and Harald Ingholt (1957) published a catalogue entitled *The Gandhara art of Pakistan* based on a collection of excellent photographs taken by Mr. Lyons of sculptures then available in the Museums of Pakistan. *A catalogue of the Gandhara Sculptures in the British Museum* by W Zwalf (1996) and (2) *Gandharan Art* by Isao Kurita (1990) has made the job a little more handy. As Ingholt, Zwalf and Kurita are easily available most of our illustrations refer to these works.

Concluding Remarks

The antiquarian activities initiated in the 2nd half of the 18th century by European antiquity collectors ultimately resulted in paving the way for systematic archaeological researches. These early antiquarians were mainly interested in collecting the coins of Alexander and subsequent Greek rulers of the east. However, the chance discoveries of the Greek rulers encouraged these antiquarians to enhance their activities. Moreover, decipherment of the legends found on the coins generated their interest in the ancient history of South Asia. So far as the discovery of the Buddhist archaeology of Gandhāra is concerned, at first, early antiquarians identified the Buddhist "topes" as the "tombs of the unknown kings". However, translation works of the early literature of South Asia such as the *Vedas*, Buddhist and Jain scriptures as well as Puranas, greatly facilitated such activities. Coupled with this the discovery of sculptures from these topes or stupas and monasteries (the Buddhist

establishments) rather opened a new field of Buddhist archaeology which greatly attracted scholarly attention of both art historians and archaeologists all over the world. In course of time such scholarly discourses and discussions, regarding the origin and development of this particular art, led scholars to present their own point of views. Thus, as a result, we are now left with confronting scholarly views as well as theories. Now, this art is generally known as "Gandhara Art" which obviously derived its name from the country where it was originated and flourished almost for one thousand years. As, it is commonly believed that in ancient times the Peshawar valley was known as Gandhāra, which was first time recorded by one of the Chinese travellers with its measurements. However, Gandhāra art has differently been termed by a number of scholars such as Greco-Buddhist art, Romano-Buddhist art, Kushano-Buddhist art etc.

However, the sad aspect of such antiquarian activities was that the sculptural wealth of the Buddhist art of Gandhāra was started to be ruthlessly robbed, drained and to be sold both in local and abroad markets. Such plundering activities, in fact, destroyed the very archaeological evidences which may otherwise be greatly beneficial in reconstructing the true story and history not only of Gandhāra School of Art but also the history of this land. So far as the systematic study of the Buddhist archaeology is particularly concerned it took start with the establishment of Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 under its first Director General named Major General Alexander Cunningham. Cunningham had mainly been engaged in historical geography of this land though he laid down archaeological trenches

at a number of Buddhist sites. In fact, he was mainly guided by the Chinese traveller's diaries as well as classical accounts. As a result, he succeeded in identifying a number of oblivion ancient cities of South Asia as well as Buddhist establishments. But the misfortunes of the Buddhist archaeology did not stop as merciless antiquity collectors plundered its material wealth to such an extent that it could not recover this blow, just for earning their living and financial ends. Thus, the job of scholarly circles, interested in history, culture, religion and art history of Gandhāra, became more challenging and painful. After

independence the archaeological researches were accelerated more vigorously by local and foreign archaeologists but, nowhere in whole of Gandhāra they succeeded in discovering any clue which may help in finding out about both ends, i.e., origin and decline of the Buddhist art of Gandhāra. Although, scholars have been grappling with this an enigmatic and extremely perplexed problem in reconstructing its precise history, and hopefully one day they would untie this apparently complicated problem.

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