

# Gandhāran Art in Its Buddhist Context



Edited by  
Wannaporn Rienjang  
Peter Stewart



# **Gandhāran Art in Its Buddhist Context**

**Papers from the Fifth International Workshop  
of the Gandhāra Connections Project,  
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Cover: Barikot: panel BKG 2269. (MAIP; photo by Aurangzeib Khan.)

Multiple image shrines in the lower *stūpa* court of Takht-i-Bāhī. (Photo: J. Rhi.)



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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Note on illustrations .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Contributors .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Preface .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart	
 <b>Selling space at the monastery and making economic sense of the ‘intrusive’ at monastic sites in Gandhāra .....</b>	 <b>1</b>
Gregory Schopen	
 <b>Does iconography really matter? Iconographical specification of Buddha images in pre-esoteric Buddhist art .....</b>	 <b>12</b>
Juhyung Rhi	
 <b>Solving the riddle of the ‘Muhammad Nari Stele’: a new look .....</b>	 <b>42</b>
Dessislava Vendova	
 <b>Early Gandhāran art: artists and working processes at Saidu Sharif I .....</b>	 <b>60</b>
Luca M. Olivieri	
 <b>Buddhist art of Gandhāra: a catalogue of newly documented sites in Malakand District .....</b>	 <b>77</b>
Fozia Naz	
 <b>List of participants in the workshop .....</b>	 <b>88</b>



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While this is not the last book that Oxford's Classical Art Research Centre will produce under the heading of 'Gandhāra Connections', it marks the conclusion of a five-year programme of events and other research activities, which could never have happened without the enthusiastic assistance of our donors. We should therefore like to express our deep gratitude to the Bagri Foundation and Richard Beleson not only for enabling the 2022 international workshop, but also for their sustained and generous support over several years, and to Neil Kreitman for making it possible to get the project off the ground.

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**Dessislava Vendova** completed her Ph.D. in Buddhism at the Department of Religion of Columbia University, New York City. Her primary research centres on the body and the life story of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni and the narratives and art connected with it. She is particularly interested in re-evaluating the critical role of the Buddha's biography in the early textual, visual, and material transmission of Buddhism. Her work considers its role and function in the construction of early Buddhist sacred monuments and the Buddhist practices connected with the cult of the Buddha Śākyamuni.



## Preface

Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart

This book arises from the fifth and final planned workshop of the Gandhāra Connections project at Oxford's Classical Art Research Centre, which was held online via Zoom in March 2022. For a variety of reasons, not all of the participants in that workshop were able to commit their papers to the present publication, but we were pleased that the workshop was able to contribute to the development of research which will appear in print elsewhere in due course. As a record of the workshop's original papers, a list of participants is appended to the book.

Each of the project's workshops has been devoted to a topic which we felt was crucial for understanding the ancient art of Gandhāra. Our starting point was the relationship between Gandhāra and the world of classical Greek and Roman art, but our interests have ranged much more broadly because that cross-cultural relationship can only be tackled by considering other essential aspects of Gandhāran art. Consequently, we looked first at problems of chronology; then the geography of artistic production; then at all kinds of global connections with the region; and next, in 2021, the rediscovery and reception of Gandhāran art: the processes by which our experience of Gandhāran art has been shaped and filtered in modern times (Rienjang & Stewart 2018; 2019; 2020; 2022).

For the final workshop it was proposed that we should examine a topic which is of fundamental relevance to the understanding of Gandhāran art: its place within Buddhist religion.<sup>1</sup> One might ask: how can this be a discrete theme, for Gandhāran art *is* Buddhist art, broadly speaking. Was Buddhism not the subject of the entire project? Yet although the immediate religious contexts of Gandhāran art and its significance for the ancient Buddhist population are of primary importance, there remains much that we do not wholly understand, and perhaps too often do not even enquire about. It is important to focus consciously on the monasteries and shrines of Gandhāra, and on the wider community of their inhabitants and visitors, to understand why religious art was made and what its iconography and stylistic repertoire meant to its original users and viewers.

This effort is hampered by comparatively limited evidence for the original settings of sculptures, the loss of less durable artistic media, huge gaps in our knowledge of the Gandhāran settlements and their mixed populations, and the restricted (though growing) body of literary and epigraphic evidence for cult practices and beliefs. At the same time, it is challenging to correlate the archaeology of Gandhāra with the vast and complex body of literary evidence for evolving religious ideas in other parts of the ancient Buddhist world.

This was the task that we set for participants in the workshop. Their responses embraced literature, art, and archaeology across a wide geographical span. The selected papers in this volume give a sense of the different approaches involved and are organized in an approximate thematic order, beginning with Gregory Schopen's study of votive practices in monasteries, continuing with critical analyses of Buddha iconography by Juhyung Rhi and Dessislava Vendova, and concluding with new perspectives on specific archaeological sites by Luca Olivieri and Fozia Naz.

<sup>1</sup> We were particularly grateful to Christian Luczanits and David Jongeward for their suggestions about this theme.

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# Early Gandhāran art: artists and working processes at Saidu Sharif I

Luca M. Olivieri

## Preamble

The *Festschrift* published in 2006 by Pierfrancesco Callieri to celebrate Domenico Faccenna's eightieth birthday (Callieri 2006), represented an important novelty amongst the studies on Gandhāra and Hellenistic Asia.<sup>1</sup> In fact, for ancient Indian art and architecture, and Gandhāra in particular,<sup>2</sup> studies on stone-processing techniques, organization of building sites, guilds of craftsmen (apart from epigraphic and textual documentation), were (and still are) rare. This is why I attempted to present a reconstruction of the working process at Saidu Sharif I in a recent study (Olivieri 2022a). The latter, I hope, will be considered more as a practical working model for future studies than for the hypotheses it contains. That study is based on Faccenna's (1995; 2001) data, to which I have added other, new data, from the excavations I directed at the Buddhist sanctuary of Saidu Sharif I from 2011 to 2014 (henceforth abbreviated as Saidu). From that study originates much of what follows, which focuses on the early phases of the Saidu sanctuary (c. second half of the first century AD, period Ia).

## The site and its location

Saidu Sharif is a small but important urban centre of the Swat valley (Pakistan, province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa). The town, which served as the capital of the Yusufzai State of Swat under the Miangul dynasty from 1917 to 1969, is located at an altitude of about 1,000 metres. Just outside the town, to the north, are the excavated ruins of a Buddhist sanctuary located at the bottom of a side valley, not far from the Swat River.<sup>3</sup> The sanctuary is located south-east of an ancient settlement, a large capital known in early Chinese sources as Mengjieli, the remains of which extend beneath the urban fabric of the modern city of Mingora. In addition to the extra-urban sanctuary of Saidu, other Buddhist religious centres were located in Mengjieli, including two extra-urban sanctuaries located on the heights surrounding the town, Panr I (north-east of the town) and Butkara III (south-east), while on the eastern outskirts was a celebrated ancient urban sanctuary, Butkara I.<sup>4</sup>

The sanctuary of Saidu, whose ancient name is not preserved (some considerations are in Olivieri 2022a: 15), consists of two parts, a monastery and the *stūpas* area, built on two artificial terraces. The monastery – square with a central courtyard – was built on the upper terrace, while the lower terrace (3 metres below) shows the sacred area with the central *stūpas* (henceforth: *Stūpa*), which stands on a high podium with four columns at the corners, and minor monuments (*stūpas*, chapels, columns). The creation of the two parts of the sanctuary was coeval (Figure 1).

<sup>1</sup> The edited volume bore the title *Architetti, capomastri, artigiani* chosen to honour the innovative line of study of the great Italian archaeologist.

<sup>2</sup> With a few exceptions: e.g. Dehejia 1992, Rockwell 2006, 2016, and Schopen 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The sanctuary of Saidu was discussed in the 2020 volume of this same series, Haynes, Peverett & Rienjang (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Pānr I and Butkara I were excavated by Domenico Faccenna (IsMEO); Butkara III, by Abdur Rahman (University of Peshawar) (see notes and refs in Olivieri 2022a).

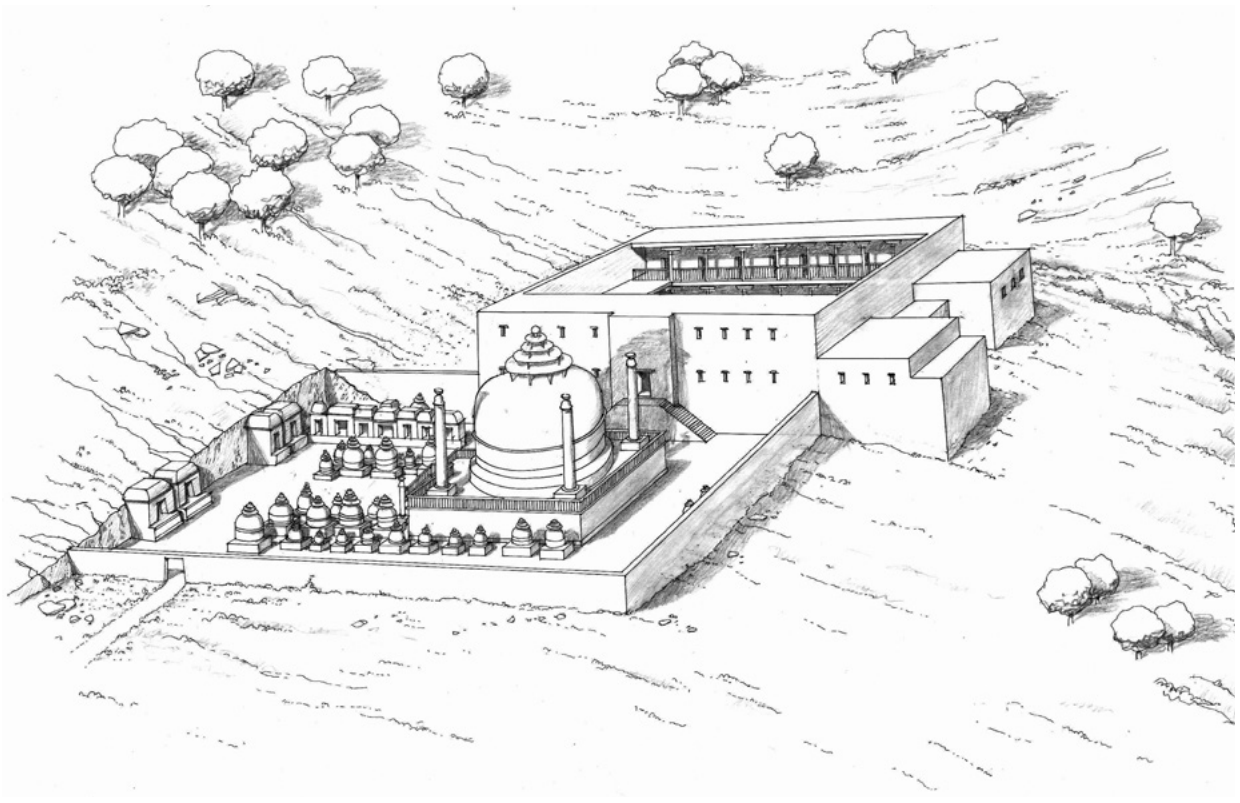


Figure 1. Saidu Sharif I: stupa terrace and monastery, ideal reconstruction (view from SW). (Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan [MAIP]; drawings by Francesco Martore.)

## Chronology

The early chronology of Saidu concerns the final phase of the ‘Saka-Parthian’ period, or rather of what could best be described as the ‘Oḍiraja’ period. This is a particularly important historical phase in Swat, characterized by a great deal of building activity that is amply reflected in the archaeological stratigraphy, with religious foundations, extension of fortification walls and re-foundation of towns (Coloru, Iori & Olivieri 2022). This phase, which shows the highest degree of westernization of material culture, is characterized by the use of the Azes era in inscriptions and the beginning of an economy based on copper alloy coinage. Radiocarbon dating of the stratigraphies in association with both these coins and the typical material culture leads us to a period from the middle of the first century AD to the second half of the first century AD.

Fragments of a single cornice found in the L shrine at Dharmarājikā (Taxila) can help us to make the context more certain. On the basis of the inscription, the quality of the stone (schist) and the style, the cornice was certainly imported and possibly donated to Dharmarājikā by inhabitants of the north-west (Figure 2). Both Faccenna (2005) and Chantal Fabrègues (1987) have emphasized how close these pieces are to the decorated cornices of monuments 14 and 17 from Butkara I period 3. The cornice bears a dedicatory inscription: on fragment B (CKI 195) the year is mentioned, which Stefan Baums translates as ‘in the ninety-third year’ (Baums and Glass 2002- ), presumably calculated with respect to the beginning of the Azes era: we are in the middle of the first century AD.

This same date can also be assigned to monuments 14 (and 17) of Butkara I (Figure 3). At this stage, however, the figurative and decorative language of Butkara I has not yet reached the fluidity we see attained in the art of the Saidu Stūpa. Saidu must have arrived a little later, just enough time (a

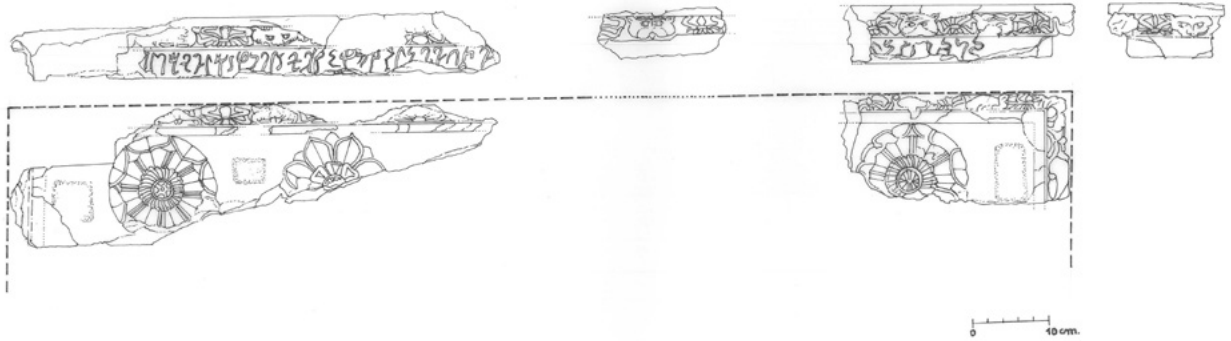


Figure 2. Dharmarājikā (Taxila): three segments of a cornice. (MAIP; drawings by Francesco Martore.)

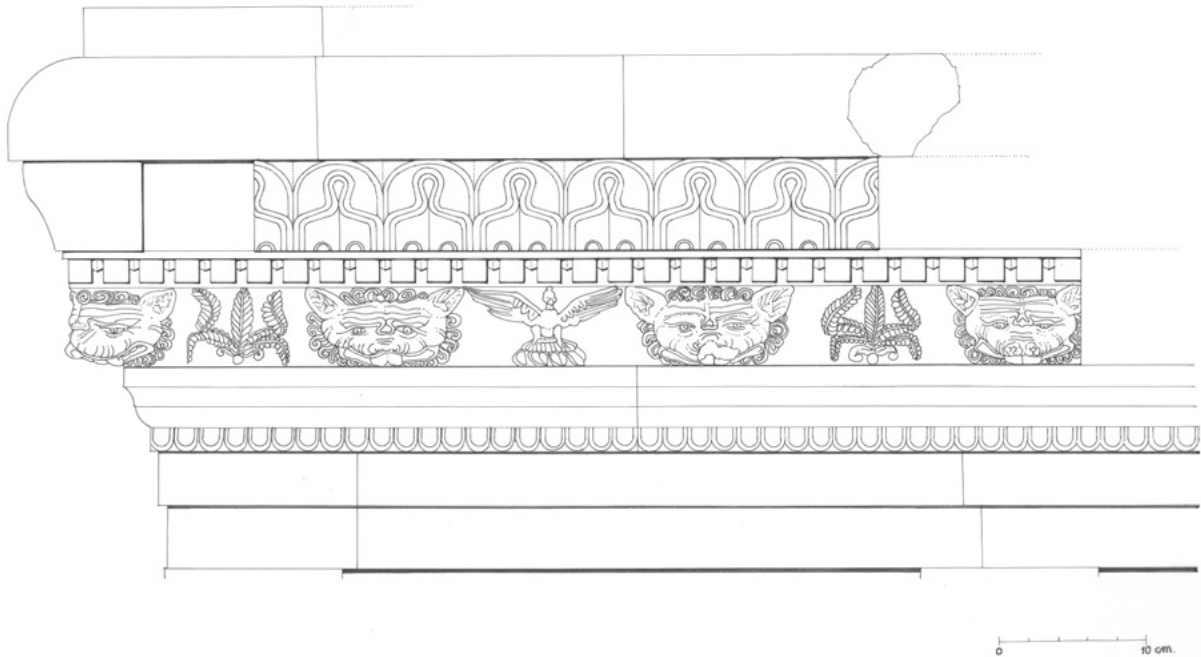


Figure 3. Butkara I: stūpa 14, detail of the cornice on the west side. (MAIP; drawing by Francesco Martore.)

generation later, as Faccenna says, perhaps less) for both artists and patrons to become familiar with such totally innovative language. We can propose a period after the middle of the first century AD as reasonable for the foundation of the Stūpa, a few years later than Faccenna (2007) proposes. The Stūpa, as we will see later, was abandoned towards the end of the third century AD, a few decades before the entire site was abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

### Innovations

Although we do not know its name, the sanctuary must have had a great reputation in antiquity (see details in Olivieri 2022a). Many innovations were first attempted at Saidu, many were replicated several times, others were forgotten. In terms of architectural innovations, the Saidu Stūpa is the oldest known large stūpa built on a high square podium with a central staircase. The Stūpa stands on a square podium (c. 20 x 20 metres), with a flight of steps on the north side. The latter leads to the upper paved level of

<sup>5</sup> Date of abandonment established by Faccenna and Callieri in the fourth-fifth century (see Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018). The chronology of the coins associated with the later layers at the sanctuary does not go beyond the fourth century (Faccenna 1995: 158-163).

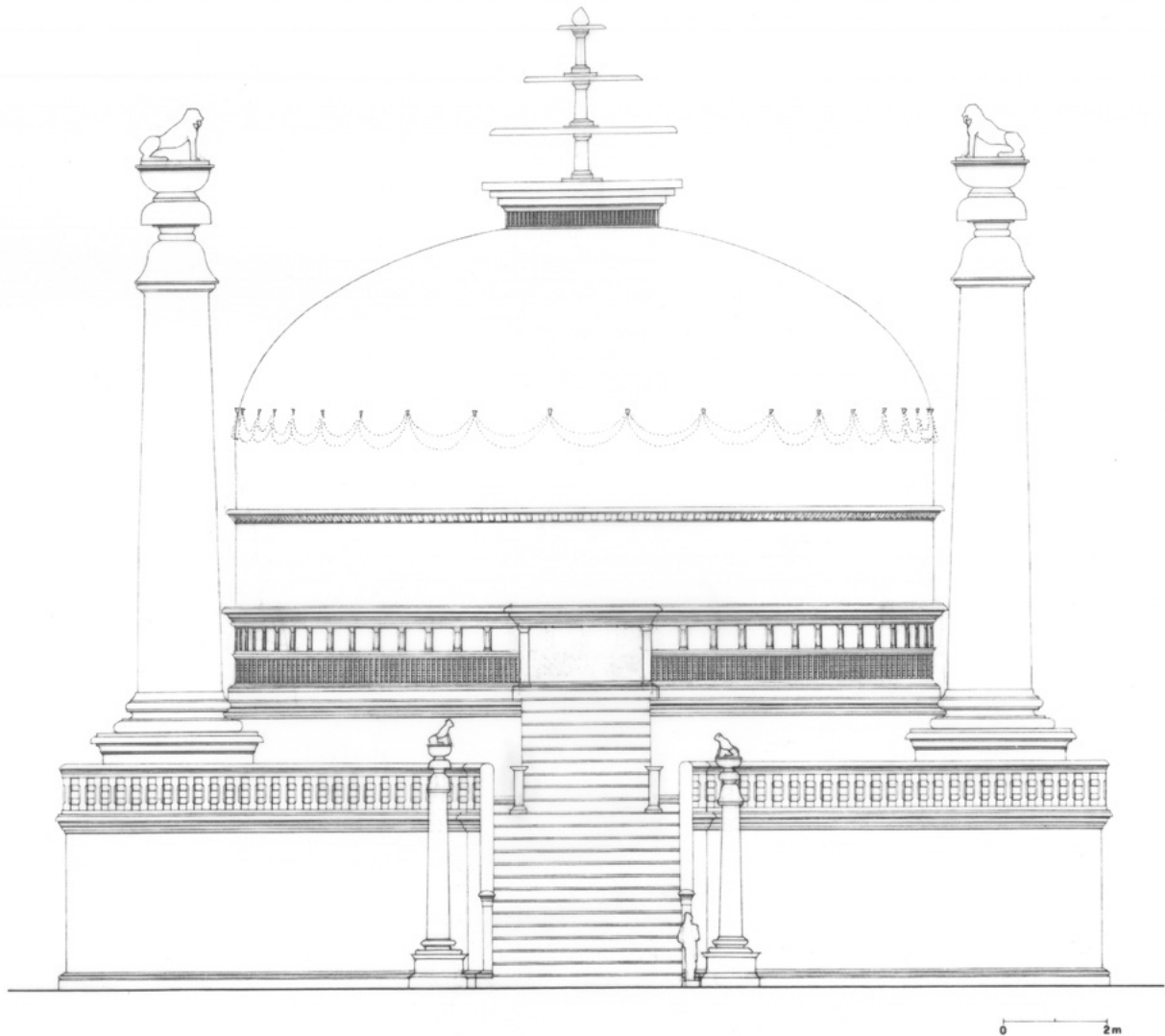


Figure 4. Saidu Sharif I: Stupa, front view (N) reconstruction. (MAIP; drawings by Francesco Martore.)

the podium, each corner of which is marked by a tall column topped by a seated lion facing the centre of the Stūpa. The staircase and podium have a stone railing (*vedikā*). The first cylindrical body (here the *medhi*, the podium being a kind of raised ground), which had a diameter of sixteen metres, is accessible by a second staircase aligned with the main one. At its summit is the path for ritual circumambulation or *pradakṣiṇāpatha*. The Stūpa proper has a circular plan with a diameter of fourteen metres. The total height is estimated to be less than fifteen metres. This type represents the first and most substantial evidence of a *stūpa* pattern that later became a standard in Gandhāra (I have discussed it at length in Olivieri 2022a) (Figure 4).

Innovations, or rather technical experiments, include the railing above the square podium (a gamble never repeated from the second century onwards)<sup>6</sup> and the four tall columns rising on the podium

<sup>6</sup> It is not found, for instance, in the other major *stūpa* I excavated at Amluk-dara I and Gumbat/Balo Kale I, nor does it appear in the reports of other excavations. I do not consider here the cases of two small monuments at Sirkap. Consider also that the parts of the enclosure (posts or *stambha*, the cross-bars or *suci*, as well as the bases and coping or *ūṣṇiṣa*) are large and would hardly have gone unnoticed. Moreover, being parts not of interest to the unfortunately flourishing antiquities market, they would have escaped the rapacious attentions of clandestine excavators.





Figure 5. Saidu Sharif I: Frieze, the return with the relics (S241, Swat Museum). (MAIP; photo by Luca M. Olivieri.)

*stūpa* terrace (perhaps set directly on the rocky outcrop) would have resisted much better than columns (or the enclosure) built above the podium.

In respect to the visual programme, the greatest innovation, the earliest and largest evidence of which is found at Saidu, is the figurative programme decorating the *Stūpa*: it is a narrative frieze (henceforth: Frieze) consisting of 60 large panels, illustrating the main events in the life of the historical Buddha, partitioned by semi-columns of the Gandhāran-Corinthian order. The art of the Frieze, the earliest example of a narrative frieze known to us, became a standard pattern in Gandhāra, so famous that copies of it on other media surface even several centuries later in the wall-paintings of Miran, Xinjiang (Filigenzi 2006a).

In the detail of the scenes in the Frieze, there are some that we find for the first time in Saidu, while others actually appear only in Saidu. These include, for example, the hair-cutting scene, of which only two examples survive: one in the Ashmolean Museum and the other in the Swat Museum, from the Saidu Frieze (Amato 2019). Another unique scene depicts the return of King Utarasena (Uttarasena) to Swat (Figure 5). Utarasena is mentioned in the inscriptions of the Oḍi, who ruled in Swat at least until the time of Kujula Kadphises, as the progenitor of the family reigning in the region. Oḍi by the way is perhaps the name attributed to the Swat region, known in later sources as Oḍḍiyāna or Uḍḍiyāna.<sup>7</sup> This panel, following the biographical narrative order, was probably the last of the Frieze. Faccenna's identification of the latter as the return of Utarasena with the relics is, of course, a conjecture, which is not only attractive but also convincing (2001: 229). The king, seated cross-legged on a large throne placed as a palanquin on his elephant, keeps the reliquary in his left hand, while his right hand is held in front as if to protect carefully the precious gift during the long journey home.

<sup>7</sup> According to a tradition reported by Xuanzang, Utarasena was a contemporary of the Buddha, also of Śākya lineage. Utarasena obtained and carried to Swat on the back of his elephant a remnant of the relics as foretold by the Buddha himself before the *parinirvāṇa* (Carter 1992).

corners. The construction of the columns on the podium represents a rarely repeated technical hazard, which finds few comparisons after Saidu: from memory, I can only recall the slightly later cases of Tokar-dara I and Gumbatuna (also in Swat; see Faccenna 2006), while at Panr I, for example, the architects more wisely thought to build the columns outside the podium, well grounded on the floor level. Consider, in fact, that the Swat region is highly seismic: the construction of free-standing structures (be they high or low, columns or enclosures), in any case with a high centre of gravity, above a large built structure (like the *stūpa* podium) would have exposed them to the seismic amplification caused by the internal structure of the podium: multiple layers of pebbles and slabs. This means that, given the same seismic wave, columns built on the

## The constants of the work

The art of the Saidu Frieze is recognizable at a glance; where the formal element does not help us, the choice of material certainly does, which helps us recognize in small, shapeless fragments, parts of the Frieze. The entire Frieze is in fact carved in a soft but compact schist, with a characteristic shade of green. This stone is rather rare and can only be obtained from a few outcrops located not far from Saidu. The choice of stone is the first constant, from which derive, by way of corollary, a series of technical constants. Indeed, these are constants that only that stone can allow. In this sense, the choice of material has a direct effect on the sculptor's technique: the choice of this material, although difficult to find, is therefore conscious and purposeful, regardless of the economic investment forced upon the work's financiers. Technique and style find perfect correspondence in the chosen material; indeed, we can say that the incomparable style of the Frieze (and annexed parts) is due as much to the technique as to the material. The material's response to mechanical stress and transformation is always secure, reliable, never unpredictable.

Let us now return to the technical constants of work of the Frieze and annexed parts. It is thanks to these that we can also attempt to recognize the school of the Frieze in pieces from both Saidu and outside. The first characteristic is the ability to work where the thickness of the stone slabs is negligible: five centimetres on average (Figure 6a-b). This is a lower average thickness, net of surface, than any other Gandhāran production. The second characteristic concerns the regular treatment of the back and the sides, which is always very confident and 'economical' in respect to the working process. Nothing excessive or casual: competent flat chisel cuts, never overlapping, safe, parallel, precise as the gouges of a skilled carpenter. The chiselled surface of the sides is always flattened with a rasp or abrasive tool.<sup>8</sup> There are other constants: some are purely formal (headgear, hairdress treatment, armour and weapons, horses and horse harnesses, swallow-tailed crenulated drapery, etc.), others refer to the sculptural technique, which involves certain tools, including the drill, or rather two types of drill, as pointed out in a previous volume in this same series (Brancaccio and Olivieri 2019) (Figure 7). There are also things that were constantly better or worse: e.g. the modelling of feet and hands respectively. Another important constant, almost a kind of 'signature' of the main artist, concerns the treatment of



Figure 6. Saidu Sharif I: (a) detail of the rear slab (SS I 2; Main Niche, Swat Museum); (b) detail of the rear slab (S241; Frieze, Swat Museum). (MAIP; photos by Luca M. Olivieri.)

<sup>8</sup> On this issue, see below.



Figure 7. Saidu Sharif I: Frieze, panel SS I 3, detail (note the use of drill in the hair). (MAIP; photo by Edoardo Loliva.)

standing, and mounted *a giorno* against the second body of the Stūpa, slightly detached from it (Figure 8). Another technical gamble, which perhaps only the mind of an artist at ease with the art of cabinet-making could have imagined making.

Incidentally, there are several clues and some evidence pointing to the existence of a carpentry tradition behind the training biography<sup>12</sup> of the main artist and Saidu's craftsmen.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the same

the eyes of the larger figures.<sup>9</sup> This concerns the final process of the sculptural activity, which in my view was carried out when the pieces were in place, well positioned, as we shall see, at eye level. The eyes of the larger figures are marked by a double blow of the pointed chisel, so that a horizontal triangular mark is engraved to define the pupil. In this way, the artist has succeeded in suggesting the gaze, in reviving the blindness of the image, in enlivening the immobility of the figure represented, in vitalizing, albeit illusorily, the scene into a dynamic and mesmerizing whole. Thanks to these characteristics or constants, together with the quality of the stone, we can recognize the hand of the school in two pieces far from Saidu, for instance: in one from Parrai and another from a site near Barikot (located opposite each other on the right and left bank of the Swat river).<sup>10</sup>

### The Frieze and the accessory register

Around the second cylindrical body, next to the *pradakṣiṇāpatha*, were the Frieze register and the accessory register decorated with a false railing, also in green schist (henceforth: first register).<sup>11</sup> The accessory register is the same height as the frieze and depicts a false railing (*false-vedikā*). It is made up of a numerous series of up-rights and cross-bars, all parts carved one by one, as if free-

<sup>9</sup> Domenico Faccenna calls the main artist the 'Maestro of Saidu'.

<sup>10</sup> These pieces were collected in 1938 by E. Barger and Ph. Wright (Barger and Wright 1941), and are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: VAM IM 85.1939 and IS 129.1961 (respectively published in Ackermann 1975: pls. VIIIb and XXXIIb). In these pieces, however, the hand does not seem to have achieved the same mastery and maturity that is evident in the Saidu Frieze.

<sup>11</sup> At this point I must add a detail that might prove interesting. The frieze and the false railing were interrupted at the front, where the staircase was located, by a large central composite panel. The existence of a false central niche had not been ruled out by Faccenna, but today, in light of the new fragments that have emerged from the excavation I conducted at the site between 2011 and 2014, it has become practically a certainty (see Olivieri 2022a).

<sup>12</sup> In the Goethian sense of *Lehrjahre*.

<sup>13</sup> We have no evidence of carpenters' workshops in Swat and Gandhāra, where, however, there is a well-attested tradition of wooden craftsmanship from the Śāhi period (see the wooden pieces from Kashmir Smast in the British Museum) to the modern age (Olivieri 2022b; Scerrato 2009); on slightly earlier wooden materials, see the evidence from Mes Aynak (some fundamental annotations on perishable architecture and art are in Filigenzi 2015: 46-47). There remains the negative fact of the false-niches of the major stūpa of Amluk-dara 1 (see Olivieri 2018) and Tokar-dara 1 (Faccenna and Spagnesi 2014), of which only the large recesses or central projections at the upper staircase remain. No traces of these structures, which must have been very large, have been found in the excavations; in the case of the main stūpa of Amluk-dara 1 the niche must have been eight metres high.



Figure 8. Saidu Sharif I: the assemblage of the false-railing; the cross-bars are digitally reproduced. (MAIP; photo by Luca M. Olivieri.)

operational sequence of drawing, roughing and finishing the panels (which I mentioned above), the main evidence is to be found in the system of assemblage used in the accessory register, in the register of the Frieze, and to assemble the two together and connect them to the body of the Stūpa.<sup>14</sup> Both registers use exclusively continuous sockets and tenons (both horizontal and vertical), support rails, with wooden clamps on dovetail sockets to connect the upper part of the Frieze (a cornice with row of acanthus leaves) to the wall body (Figure 9). Significantly, metal brackets are never used in the Frieze. Such a system of assemblage, in its complexity of separate parts, is hard to find in any other (later) Gandhāran monument.<sup>15</sup> What we find instead is, so to speak, the crystalization of those systems: the registers of the false-railing are henceforth always carved, despite the scale, as single pieces in high relief, never open and in separate parts to be assembled;<sup>16</sup> the system of rectilinear tenons and sockets continues to be used, but more frequently single tenons and sockets are preferred for the easier assembly of multiple panels; the use of metal cramps in standard sizes is then introduced on a massive scale, which in my view, goes hand in hand with the standardized production of sculptural elements

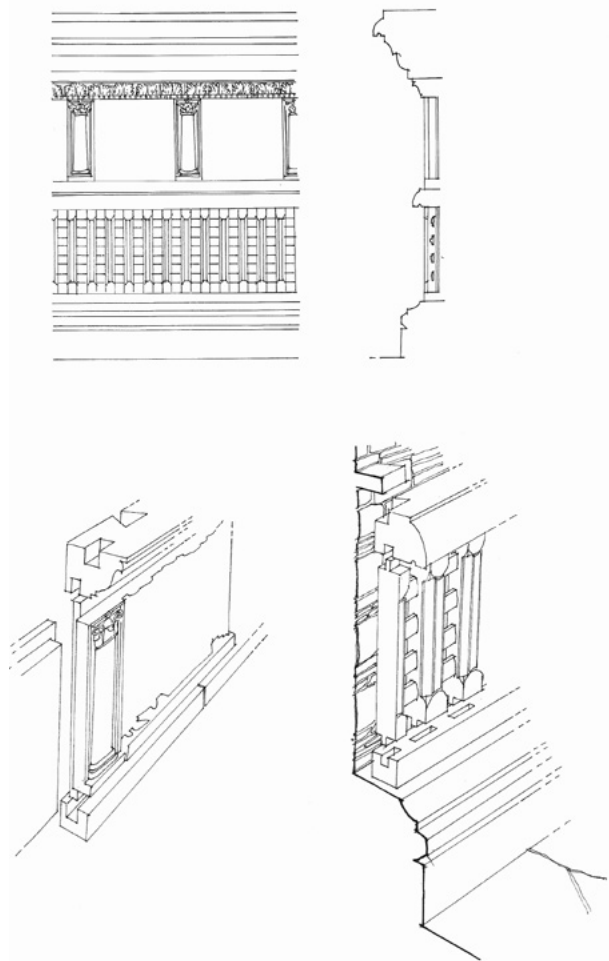


Figure 9. Saidu Sharif I: Frieze and false-railing, assemblage of registers (MAIP; drawings by Francesco Martore.)

Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that they might have been constructed of perishable materials, such as wood.

<sup>14</sup> An important point that we will not deal with here, concerns the presence of masons' marks (location markers) and other carving instructions, such as guidelines. Those refer us to an assemblage technique, well attested in the Mediterranean (Salomon 2006), and typical of the work of the carpenter, which implied in my view a plan view of the operations by the sculptor, who at least in Saidu was certainly also the architect and responsible for the building yard (see Hahn 2001 with references).

<sup>15</sup> This statement should be tempered when one considers that no sculptural programmes of this size have come down to us, with the exception of the large false niches of Zar Dheri 1, which deserve a separate technical study.

<sup>16</sup> At Kanaganahalli (in Karnataka), for example, the false-railing register is carved on the same slab on which the two upper figured registers are carved.

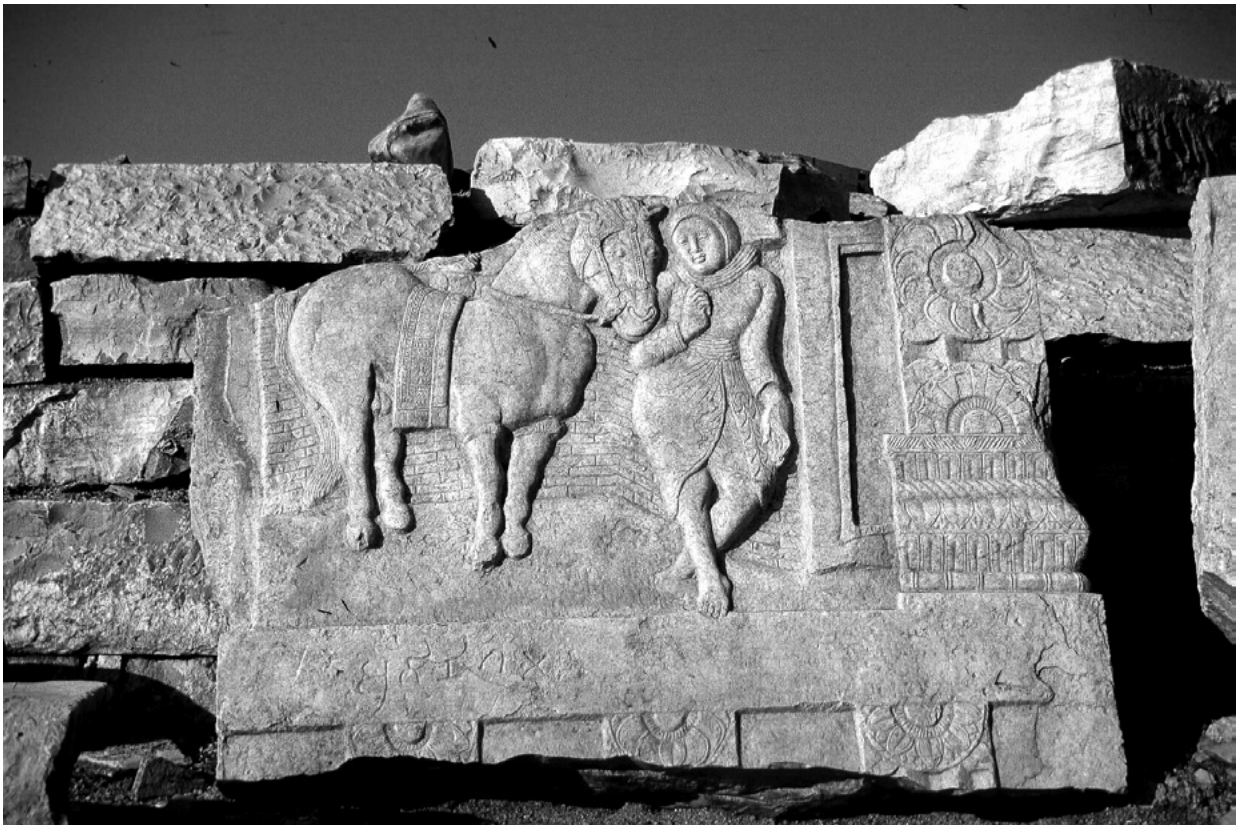


Figure 10. Kanaganahalli: main stūpa, (a) panel 05 (Zin 2018: pl. 10); photo CL00 36.23; (b) panel 08 (Zin 2018: pl. 10) CL00 37.06. (Photo by and courtesy of Christian Luczanits.)

out of work, produced individually and applicable to monuments built independently of a particular decorative design.<sup>17</sup>

In the reconstruction proposed here, the Frieze has been placed above the false-railing (accessory register). This has already been discussed in this same series in my notes to Haynes, Peverett and Rienjang 2020. There are no reasons, either technical or logical, other than perhaps simple prudence, to argue that the Frieze was located below the false-railing (Faccenna 1995: 525-545). Faccenna's caution has to do with *stūpa* models in which the false-railing is located at the top of the drum, never underneath. However, these models represent idealized *stūpas*, and what is more, they never show a figurative frieze. I therefore believe that we cannot deduce an unequivocal relationship between the parts from these models. A decisive comparison can be drawn with the panels at the main *stūpa* of Kanaganahalli (which had a phase coeval with Saidu), where the double-figured frieze is found above the reproduction of the false-railing (Zin 2018: 185-214 [pls.]) (Figures 10a-b).<sup>18</sup> Returning to Gandhāra, the interesting correction that an unknown but careful hand made on a panel from Barikot (BKG 2269) is also worth mentioning in partial support of this hypothesis (Figure 11). The panel depicts a *stūpa* with columns (placed outside the podium of the *stūpa* as at Panr I, not above the podium as at Saidu).<sup>19</sup> The panel was found reused in the decoration of chapel 527 in courtyard 28 of Block D in the excavation of the ancient city (Olivieri 2011: figs. 5, 9-11). The *stūpa* depicted features the false-railing placed along the second cylindrical body. In a phase probably connected with the time of reuse, an unknown hand engraved faint but sure vertical lines interspersed with short parallel horizontal lines, which clearly represent false-railings. One is engraved on the podium, as if surrounding it by a fence in the fashion of Indian *stūpas*; the other is engraved on the first body in the free space, just below the false-railing carved by the sculptor, as if to say (perhaps) that that feature was rather there! The corrective intervention can be dated to the time of the re-consecration of the panel, which, together with other heterogeneous pieces, forms the pastiche of reused images assembled for the chapel.<sup>20</sup>

In the *Stūpa* of Saidu, with the false-railing at the bottom, the visitor, the devotee, looking ahead at the top of the first flight of steps, would have the illusion that the false-railing was a screen behind which was a continuous colonnade, like a *portico* or *veranda*, set against the *Stūpa*. The *Stūpa* and the Frieze thus appear behind the false-railing. This perspective play was very well known in Indian Buddhist art, but it is part of a universal category: in Western art and architecture, it appears for instance in the lower register of the Ara Pacis, but also in the earlier Etruscan tombs, etc. The artistic universal referred to



Figure 11. Barikot: panel BKG 2269. (MAIP; photo by Aurangzeib Khan.)

<sup>17</sup> This issue of metal cramps is discussed in more detail in Olivieri 2022a: 63-64.

<sup>18</sup> Kanaganahalli hosts a figurative programme that begins (according to the inscriptions) as early as the mid-first century BC, with revivals until the mid-second century AD (Zin 2018: 4-5).

<sup>19</sup> I correct here what is written in Olivieri 2022a: 116.

<sup>20</sup> The dating of this small chapel, on stratigraphic grounds and from absolute chronology, lies within the third century AD.



involves in a two-dimensional representation placing below what would be in front in three-dimensional reality, and above what would be behind.

In this way, among other things, the Frieze, thus positioned above the false-railing, would not only have been clearly visible, at eye level, to those walking along the ambulatory path, but would also have been perfectly visible from the terrace level up to the projection of the staircase. In this reconstruction, therefore, the Frieze also had a public function; the figures of the Frieze would have been at eye level for observers, who would have crossed their gaze with the gaze skilfully engraved on the images, in a living dialectic of perceptual relationship between the two subjects.

### Art in motion

The uniqueness of the Saidu Frieze is the same that can be found, on a considerably larger scale, in the great commemorative monuments of antiquity, and lies in the fact that the building and Frieze were born together. While the narrative reduces the volumetric weight of the building behind it, just as the hands of a clock need the dial, the building dictates the rhythm of observation. In Saidu, the figures in the background of the frieze, as Anna Filigenzi first suggested (2006b), seem to appear *from behind* the semi-columns. In this way, I would add, it is as if the artist had conceived the partition in the foreground, while behind, as in a continuous strip, the figures actually move from one panel to another. This narrative device has an obvious dramatic effect. In reality, I can therefore conclude, it is as if the entire Frieze were conceived as a single scene unfolding behind a portico punctuated by columns (Figure 12).

The Stūpa, although static, is built to be perceived through movement: this is an important fact in design, because the architect already knows how the construction will be perceived, knows its paths and – here is the point – the obligatory points of viewing/observation. I recently made the comparison

with the phonograph record (Olivieri 2022a). This in fact only emits a sound (or rather the right sound) if it is turned, and only in one direction, so here the Stūpa is only experienced in motion, in one specific direction. This has a very important association with the fact that when we walk around the Stūpa, in the shadow of an ideal portico, and always and only in one direction, we ‘read’ a story, a narrative, unfolding before our eyes. Indeed, one might say that the story is coming towards us, from left to right, as in the illusion of movement that one has when sitting in a stationary train, while the one next to it that is leaving appears stationary. Note that, in fact, in the Frieze the artist seems aware of the illusory effect, since the main characters, not all but the majority, look to the right and meet with their gaze (as mentioned above) the gaze of the incumbent observer (Figure 13a-b).

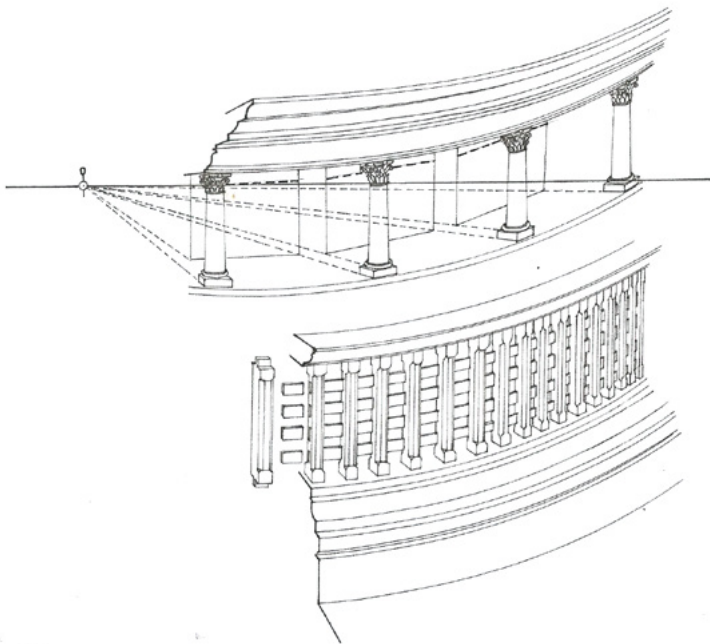


Figure 12. Saidu Sharif I: Stupa, the false portico and the false railing; the dotted line indicates the sculptor's point of view. (MAIP; drawings by Francesco Martore.)



Figure 13. Saidu Sharif I: Frieze, (a) panel S 1112 (Swat Museum); (b) detail of the same. (MAIP; photo by Luca M. Olivieri.)

The dividing panels with Gandhāran-Corinthian half-columns, which will become later so common as to be taken for granted, was also unprecedented in Gandhāra.<sup>21</sup> In Saidu, the dividing device has the same function as the natural division with trees or the framing of scenes. When it appeared, perhaps for the first time in the Saidu Frieze, it must have had an extraordinary visual impact. The interlude serves both as a technical expedient, to address the aspect of time as a *continuum* to be translated into spatial terms, and to resolve the spatial void resulting from temporal gaps. In short, the interlude makes it possible to dissolve one episode and the other, distinguishing them but at the same time projecting them in their continuity.

In this way, the *stūpa* (this *Stūpa* first and foremost) becomes, so to speak, ‘a space/time machine’, which places this monument in a dimension of extraordinary innovation, which explains both its longevity as a model and its replicability *ad libitum*. The space of the monument (its form in space) is punctuated by time (the narrative), which again recalls space, this time the geographical space of the places of events. Here one is in Lumbini and Kapilavastu; then one moves to Bodhgayā, then to Varanasi, then to Kushinagara. The devotee is transported not only back in time, but along the time of the narrative, but also and above all in the space of a mental pilgrimage.

<sup>21</sup> At Butkara I, in the immediately preceding phases, this partitive scheme is still not developed to the completeness we find at Saidu. At Kanaganahalli, the figurative scenes, which are not organized in a linear narrative sequence, are separated by architectural dividing elements. These (pillars imitating *vedikā* up-rights) do not mark out a continuous or syntactic scene as it would appear at Saidu, but instead separate different scenes that are juxtaposed paratactically. Similar partitions are recorded in many Buddhist *stūpas*, e.g. at Jaggayyapeta and Nāgārjunakoṇḍā in Andhra Pradesh (see Zin 2018: figs. 1, 2). In the former case, partitions with elaborate Indo-Persepolitan semi-columns are applied as dividing panels to the first cylindrical body or drum (or *medhi*?).



## The artist

The evidence of synchronism that places the Frieze and its Stūpa roughly at AD 70, brings us to an exceptional and fortunate moment associated with the apogee of the Oḍiraja dynasty, at the time of the last king Seṇavarma (Falk 2015: no. 064). According to the relative date of his celebrated inscription, he must have ascended the throne around the mid-first century AD. This means that, in principle, Saidu's construction can be placed during his reign. It is therefore not unreasonable to imagine that Seṇavarma or his court were the interlocutors of the artists working at Saidu.

Overall, the archaeological evidence unequivocally shows that the sculpted parts display a distinct stylistic signature, the signature of a single hand, and that they were conceived as parts of a single visual project, closely linked to the architecture. The project was centralized under a single hand right from the choice of materials, which were rare and valuable: green schist for the decorative parts, light talc schist for the facings and columns. The final implication is that the author of the Frieze was probably also the architect who designed the *Stūpa*. From the evidence of the data, it was possible to detect a close collaboration between that individual and the sculptors and quarrymen (for the choice of materials), between him and the master masons and workmen (for the execution phase). The entire process can only be seen, yet as the product of a complex collective activity, but coordinated by a single specialist, artist and technician, who was responsible for the entire process: from the design to the choice of materials and the final execution of both the construction and the sculptural components.

As we know, in Gandhāra and the surrounding regions, part of the construction of religious buildings was in most cases a work in progress, which was returned to at intervals. The construction of the Saidu Stūpa did not follow this pattern: the undertaking was also completed because it probably had a main source of funding through a high-ranking group or individual, perhaps a king. The connection between the various phases of the Saidu Stūpa is so close that we must necessarily recognize the entire monument as the work of a single enterprise whose main artist, perhaps even the leader, is to be seen in the Master (*Maestro*) of Saidu identified by Domenico Faccenna.

To what extent was the Master involved in the Buddhist community that consecrated and managed the monument? The Master certainly had a long professional career behind him and all evidence suggests that Saidu was his main enterprise, if not his masterpiece. It seems less likely that the Master already belonged to that or some other emerging monastic community, but this is just a guess. As we have seen, the frieze includes scenes that would become common in later Gandhāran art, others quite rare, others completely new, such as the return of Uṭaraseṇa, or showing original compositions, e.g. the wrestling scenes, which are so dependent on Western models. It therefore seems to me that, while following the wishes of the patrons (whether they were laypersons or monks), the Master played an active role in the design of the scenes, choosing the most appropriate ones on the basis of his own preferences and expertise. Definitely the Master was an artist who enjoyed sufficient reputation to impose his own point of view and sensibility.

## Epilogue: redemptions, collapses, deconsecration

The importance of Saidu, as we have anticipated, is also linked to the decidedly short life of the site. At one point, first the Stūpa was demolished (and deconsecrated), then the sanctuary was abandoned. While the life of Butkara I and most of the great sanctuaries of Swat remained in operation well into the late ancient age, Saidu was abandoned three centuries after its foundation. In the second century, the railing, and then the components of the frieze collapsed. Elements of synchrony of the two episodes can be deduced from the contemporary reuse of these elements in buildings of the

sanctuary's period II.<sup>22</sup> Around the third century, the spoliation of the podium began, whose blocks were reused in the restoration of smaller monuments and even in parts of the monastery (Faccenna 1995: 443-445). Thus, we can imagine that while the Stūpa was gradually being demolished, parts of its body were being used to restore the minor stūpas around it: the major Stūpa torn to pieces to 'feed' its architectural *minores*, as in the story of the Mahāsattva prince, who fed the tiger and its cubs with its body. As I have said on another occasion, perhaps there is no better end for a stūpa.

With period III, elements that suggest earthquakes intervene, as we shall see.<sup>23</sup> The most dramatic moment is represented by the collapse of Columns A and C on the floors of the final phase.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted, in fact, as evidence of the decline and disinterest in the site, that the ruins of the two columns were not removed, unlike the other two, which must have collapsed earlier. Interesting is the arrangement of the remains of Column C, of which we find two trunks. The upper section collapses between the two monuments to the north-east of the Stūpa, while the lower one collapses immediately to the left of the Stūpa's staircase. We see here the effects of transverse seismic waves that caused the column to undergo a torsion phenomenon that resulted in its collapse in two opposite directions.<sup>25</sup>

While in Butkara I, Pāṇṇ I and Amluk-dara, following the destruction caused by the two earthquakes, major restoration works began, substantially altering those monuments, Saidu was in fact left to its fate. During this phase of abandonment, a very important event in the life of the Stūpa occurred, involving the spoliation of the relic chamber in ancient times. When the relic chamber was opened, archaeologists saw that the reliquary had already been removed, leaving only a tiny silver box next to a side of the lower chamber. I think the latter was left there intentionally when, *in antiquo*, the main reliquary was removed.<sup>26</sup> More deposit objects were found inside the upper chamber, proving that the lower deposit was no longer disturbed once it was reclosed.<sup>27</sup> After these deposits were made, the upper chamber was ceremoniously closed again (Figure 14).

It must be said that the operation could only have taken place at a time when – as we will see – the *aṇḍa* of the Stūpa had been almost completely demolished but the sacred area was still in use (period IV).<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, if the Stūpa had already been partially demolished and deprived of the Frieze, as we shall see later, it would even have been right to remove the relics.<sup>29</sup>

I have just said that a ceremony took place at the time of the secondary deposition. This could be evidenced here by the finding of fragments of blue glass twisted bracelets above the lid of the upper chamber (Faccenna 1995: 441, n. 1). These were found inside the cavity or shaft made to reach the reliquary chamber for the

<sup>22</sup> For the former: fragments are in the core of the podium of shrine 63 (period II, phase a = second-third century AD); for the latter: a pillar in the podium of shrine 36 (period II, phase b = second-third century AD).

<sup>23</sup> Their collapse can be related to one of the large earthquakes of the third-fourth century, hypothesised at Saidu, Pāṇṇ I and Butkara I (Faccenna 1995: 158). With the data from Barikot and Amluk-dara, two destructive seismic events that occurred over a period of approximately thirty to fifty years between the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century have been identified and dated absolutely (Olivieri 2011; 2012; 2018).

<sup>24</sup> The columns at the NE and SW corners of the Stūpa podium.

<sup>25</sup> At the time of the collapse, Column C still had the lion on its top, which was in fact found in three fragments during the 2011 excavation, about one metre away from the top disc. These are fragments of the chest with the head, the right paw, part of the terga.

<sup>26</sup> This was a small cylindrical silver reliquary with a diameter of 4.35 cm, which in turn contained a small cylindrical gold box with a diameter of 2.15 cm (which contained a pearl with a hole through it), a cylindrical quartz necklace bead, six gold bracts in the form of a lotus flower, a similar silver bract. In addition to this, the following objects were found in the chamber: two spherical gold necklace beads, a third similar one, a fragment of gold thread, a gold leaf, a silver bract in the form of a lotus flower.

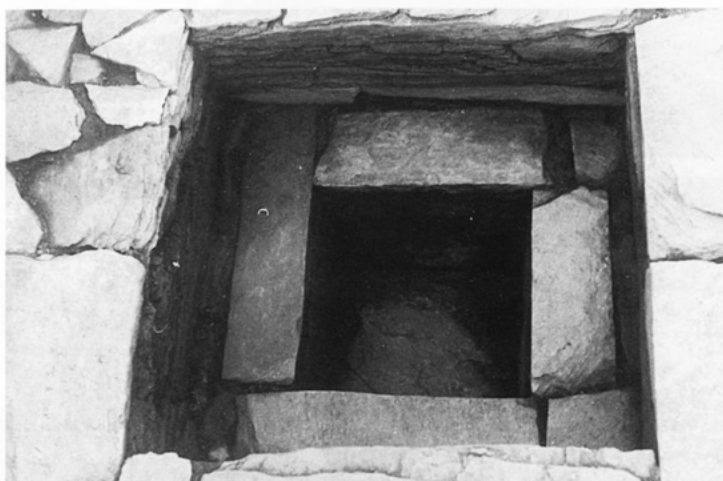
<sup>27</sup> It consists of two identical gold necklace beads, a tiny silver bract in the form of a lotus flower, a pearl and a shell necklace bead.

<sup>28</sup> Otherwise, it would not have been possible to reach the relic chamber.

<sup>29</sup> In addition, from the razed surface a shaft was dug into the Stūpa to reach the relic chamber.



a - ST. MS, reliquary recess; lower compartment and relic-casket Inv. no. S690. See pp. 51, 433, 441.



b - ST. MS, reliquary recess; upper and lower compartments with relic-casket and contents removed. See pp. 51, 433, 441.



c - ST. MS, reliquary recess with lids and contents removed; general view. See pp. 51, 433, 441.

Figure 14. Saidu Sharif I: Stūpa, the reliquary recess. (Photos: after Faccenna 1995: pl. 44.)

break-in.<sup>30</sup> The preserved razed top of the Stūpa is 150 cm above the relic chamber. Between this and the conserved top were slabs of stone that were well bedded. The bangles were found between the stones about 70 cm above the relic chamber. Their presence and position in the post-deconsecration stratigraphy suggests the idea that the bangles were intentionally broken and intentionally deposited.<sup>31</sup> It is possible that the ritual breaks of the bangles relate to female ritual contexts, perhaps to women's monastic communities, connected to the abandonment of family life (marriage), the state of symbolic widowhood (hence the breaking of the bangles), and entry into the *bhikṣuṇī* community.<sup>32</sup> The deconsecration of the Stūpa, the removal of the reliquary and its secondary consecration somewhere else, may have therefore been performed by a female community, but this is another story.

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<sup>30</sup> Faccenna wonders whether the bracelets are not modern and therefore intrusive (1995: 441, no. 1). We now know that they are typical bracelets of the Kushan and late Kushan phases, well attested in Barikot (see Micheli 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Bangles in other late Buddhist ritual contexts in Gandhāra have been found intentionally broken. For instance, on the banks and around the altar (Olivieri 2012), of the first courtyard of Temple B in Barikot (see Cristiano Moscatelli, PhD dissertation, University of Naples, 'L'Orientale' 2022). Other occurrences include broken and whole bangles, embedded in the late *pradakṣiṇapatha* floor of the Dharmarājikā stūpa in Taxila (Micheli 2020).

<sup>32</sup> On women's monastic communities, see Schopen 2014.

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## List of participants in the workshop

**Juhyung Rhi**

Does Iconography Really Matter? Iconographic Specification of Buddha Images in Pre-Esoteric Buddhist Art

**Henry Albery**

Artistic Tensions: On Some Uneasy Relations between Monasticism and Art in the Vinaya

**Muhammad Hameed**

The Lost Buddhist Art of Gandhāra

**Gregory Schopen**

On Selling Space at the Monastery: Making Economic Sense of ‘Intrusive’ Images and Stūpas at Monastic Sites in Gandhāra

**Christian Luczanits**

On the Language of Gandhāran Buddhist Art

**Wannaporn Rienjang**

The Bimaran Casket and its Buddhist Context

**Alice Casalini**

Framing and Reframing: Architectural Legibility in Gandhāran Art

**Dessislava Vendova**

Solving the Riddle of the ‘Muhammad Nari Stele’: A New Look

**Abdul Samad**

Latest Discoveries in the Buddhist Archaeology of Gandhāra

**Marianne Bergmann, Shailendra Bhandare, and Martina Stoye**

Indian Dedications at Berenike on the Red Sea

**Fozia Naz**

Buddhist Art outside the Sacred Premises in Uddiyana Region: An Overview on Fresh Documentation in Malakand District

**Luca M. Olivieri**

Artists, Workshops and Early Gandhāran Buddhism: The Case of Saidu Sharif I

***Gandhāran Art in Its Buddhist Context*** is the fifth set of papers from the workshops of the Classical Art Research Centre's Gandhāra Connections project. These selected studies revolve around perhaps the most fundamental topic of all for understanding Gandhāran art: its religious functions and meanings within ancient Buddhism.

Addressing the responses of patrons and worshippers at the monasteries and shrines of Gandhāra, these papers seek to understand more about why Gandhāran art was made and what its iconographical repertoire meant to ancient viewers. The contributions from an array of international experts consider dedicatory practices in monasteries, the representation of Buddhas, and the lessons to be learned from excavations and survey work in the region.



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