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Editorial Note

The authors are responsible for the linguistic and technical qualities of their texts. The editors only tried to ensure minimum coherence to the articles. The editors always reserve the right to make all the changes in the manuscripts to maintain the standard of the Journal.

False-Niche or False-Door? The Evidence in Real and Represented Architecture

Elisa Iori

Abstract

This paper represents the ideal companion of the preceding one. One of the major features documented at Amluk-dara is the presumed presence of a huge central niche, which was the architectural target of the monumental staircase. The same feature has been documented in other stupas, such as Tokar-dara in Swat and Zar Dheri in the Hazara district, as well as in another gigantic stupa at Shevaki 1 in Kapisa. The frontal niche which welcomed the believers at the summit of the staircase, might have had the shape and function of a door. A celestial door, not a real one, a kind of trompe l'oeil, through which transpires the spiritual being embedded in the apparent density of the material architecture. Doors/non-doors are often represented in small stūpas, and in the architecture represented in Gandharan reliefs. The analysis of these materials, their connection with real architecture, and the related symbolic values, are addressed in the following pages.

1. Introduction

The many examples of Gandharan production conserved in museums all over the world can only give us a vague idea as to how monuments and sacred places, today stripped of their figurative role, must have appeared to the devout, pilgrims and to travellers in the past.

The new architectural vision of the sacred buddhist area of Gandhara was combined with the birth of a new disposition of figurative apparatus, in which the horizontal frieze shown on the body of the *stūpa* seems to represent one of the more original solutions. However, the Gandharan figurative programme did not end with horizontal friezes and

indeed, there are various types of decoration that have contributed to the creation of the new figurative layout of Gandharan sacred buildings.

One of the more common figurative spaces used to illustrate the life of Buddha is represented by elements which have been given the term false-niche¹. This is a sort of stele terminating in a pseudo-trefoil arch defined as a flat representation of a vertical section of *vihāra* with a double overlaid covering, separated by an intermediate cylindrical

¹ Throughout this article, the terminology used by Faccenna and Filigenzi (2007: 50) will be used. Generally, a false-niche has been indicated with many different terms (e.g. ‘pignon de *stūpa*’, Foucher 1905-1951: 127; ‘false gable’, Ingholt 1957: 102; Faccenna and Taddei 1962: pl. XVIIb, Zwalf 1996, I: 55, et al.; ‘false-window’, Ackermann 1975: 98; ‘false gable-window’, Hargreaves in Marshall 1975: n. 85; ‘fausse niche’/‘false niche’, Foucher 1905-1951: 76; Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: 50, et al.) attributable to two definitions: ‘false gable’ and ‘false-niche’. The term ‘false gable’ intends to translate the Foucherian definition ‘pignon de *stūpa*’, with a clear reference to the classic gable. However, this reference, inherent in both definitions of ‘false gable’ and ‘pignon de *stūpa*’, seems to come from two different considerations.

Zwalf explains how the term ‘false-gable’ is justified in the shape that the element assumes at its final part (Zwalf 1996, I: 55), namely, in the trefoil arch that – though being a section of an double overlaid covering – here is seen as a gable. The definition therefore would be a sort of synecdoche, calling the entire piece by a small part. In this sense, the term ‘false gable’ relates to the decorative element from a *vihāra* with a double overlaid covering.

Instead, in using the definition ‘pignon de *stūpa*’, Foucher seems to make reference not so much to the shape, but to the position that the false-niche takes up on the body of the *stūpa*, a position that would seem to recall the classic gable (Foucher 1905-1951: 132). This definition therefore associates, in the same way as ‘false gable’, a similarity to a classic gable; however the term ‘pignon’ here seems to be linked more to the positioning on the buildings’ dome, particularly those of *stūpas*, rather than to the cover of a *vihāra*. Confirmation of this is given by the definition ‘pignon de *stūpa*’ itself, which, in Zwalf’s perspective would sound like ‘pignon de *vihāra*’.

In any case the use of a definition that alludes to classic gable seems inappropriate. In fact, the term ‘gable/pignon’ refers to something that in its entirety – both in shape and in function – is not actually a gable.

Another branch of study uses the term ‘false-niche’, which even Foucher utilizes in reference to the representations of these elements on reliefs and small *stūpa* using the expression “fausses niches formant saillie” (Foucher 1905-1951: 76, 186). This element effectively appears as a niche carved on to the body of the dome in the representations of Gandharan reliefs, whereas small *stūpa* and real architecture (see Archaeological Evidence) suggests a protruding position with respect to the *stūpa*’s curved surface, then showing a clear incompatibility, from an architectural point of view, of the element in question with the definition of ‘niche’, because the in-set feature of the element is absent in Gandharan ‘false-niches’. However, being encased in a solid frame in vertical axes and isolated (at least physically) from the rest of the illustrative apparatus that decorate the structure to which the element is placed against, the images enclosed within the ‘false-niche’ are completely independent in context. In this sense, the term ‘niche’, meant as its original meaning *nidus*, acquires a more correct dimension. So, it would be opportune to use the term ‘niche’, which, although not entirely adequate from an architectural point of view, is used here with a conventional value, dismissing the definitions considered as too limiting and misleading that allude, even in different ways, to a classic gable.

element, which is made up of a curved overhang in the lower part and a dome above (Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: 43; Table 1)².

Given that the stele is placed against the body of sacred buildings through a system of anchoring, the archaeological decontextualization unfortunately forms the rule. In truth the false-niches, being easily exposed during the passing of time to breakages and removal by human and natural factors, were never found *in situ*.

Lacking in any archaeological context, the study of false-niches has been until now exclusively limited to iconographical and iconological analysis of the superimposed reliefs within, with little interest towards the archaeological context of this particular category of decorative support. However, I do believe that a deeper analysis of archaeological evidence may provide a new interpretation towards understanding both the symbolic meaning of these elements and the internal logic in selecting the subjects illustrated within them.

2. Indirect Evidence: small *stūpas* and reliefs

A useful indirect source of information in determining the disposition of false-niches on Buddhist buildings is represented by reliefs and miniature *stūpa*³, where nevertheless these elements do not appear to have a canonised position.

In Lorian Tangai's well-known small *stūpa* (Fig. 1), the lower part of a false-niche is inserted into the last circular storey or drum, with the trefoil arch protruding with respect to the curved surface of the dome. However, it should be noted that the original presence of the false-niche in this is doubtful, given the absence of this element in the earlier photographs from the end of the nineteenth century (British Library 1003/1037; Burgess 1900: 88, fig. 35; Faccenna 2001: 160, fn. 57).

² The examples in their entirety are no higher than one metre. However, some component fragments from the lateral naves of Type B false-niches exceed one metre, thus demonstrating the existence of examples of a larger size, which were the result of assembling many slabs and have been more easily subject to breaking up (e.g. Behrendt 2016). See also the fragment of a large lunette (w. 1.31 m) from Butkara I (Faccenna and Taddei 1962: pl. CLXII) and fragments from Zar Dheri (below).

³ The only case where a false-niche has been connected to something other than a *stūpa* is provided by a relief of unknown provenance conserved at the Central Museum of Lahore (Jansen and Luczanits 2008: Cat. No. 206).

The small *stūpa* of Gandha[i]ri⁴ (Fig. 2), albeit universally accepted for its compressive incongruity (Burgess 1900: 88, fig. 36; Zwalf 1996, I: 36; Faccenna 2001: 161, fn. 59), showed four recesses to house false-niches directly on the raised part of the dome. The authenticity once again is doubtful.

A miniature *stūpa* from Takht-i-Bāhi, conserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Ackermann 1975: 98-99, pl. XXXIII-XXXIV), shows a false-niche placed against the drum of the *stūpa*. The *Parinirvāṇa* of Buddha is shown inside, in the main figured field, whereas there are generic scenes of adoration and Buddha in meditation in the two areas above. Nevertheless it is believed that the *stūpa* had been given an incorrect combination of a dome with a quadrangular *harmikā* used as a base (Ackermann 1975: 98). As a result, we do not know the original development of the lower part of this small *stūpa*.

A different placement is suggested by a curvilinear frieze from Butkara I which must have adorned the surface of - a by now lost - small *stūpa* (Faccenna and Taddei 1962: pl. LXXXIa-b; Fig. 3). In fact, here the lower portion of a false-niche is directly inserted between the figured panels of the horizontal frieze. Even though we cannot be certain of the frieze's position on the small *stūpa*, it is difficult to believe that the frieze decorated the *stūpa*'s dome.

With regard to the representations on the reliefs, when present, the false-niche appears either directly on the raised part of the dome (e.g. Zwalf 1996, II: 235), or against the second circular storey (Figs 4, 5) of a *stūpa* on a quadrangular podium with angular columns.

The architecture represented in small *stūpas* and reliefs therefore show either one or four false-niches upon the last circular storey of the *stūpa* or at the height of the dome (on the drum or on the raised part of the dome) with the upper part protruding. In this last case, the false-niche certainly would have suffered from structural problems, keeping in mind also the heavy earthquakes that have always characterised the region. Although this type of indirect source helps in understanding more or less the positioning of false-niches and the type of buildings they were adhered to, it is difficult not to raise doubts over their total adherence to reality, talking about simplified representations that are in many cases doubtful of their authenticity. In order to understand the meaning and functionality of

⁴ Originally in the Indian Museum of Calcutta (Tissot 1985: pl. IX.1; Zwalf 1996, I: 36).

false-niches, it is important to look at real as well as represented architecture from a critical-comparative perspective.

3. Archaeological Evidence

Despite the fact that false-niches have never been recovered *in situ*, some archaeological evidence allows us to propose a series of considerations. In particular we refer to the *stūpa* of Zar Dheri in the Hazara district and the two *stūpas* of Amluk-dara and Tokar-dara in the Swat valley. Zar Dheri represents a *unicum* for a variety of reasons. In fact, many reliefs and architectural elements that are integral parts of at least three large false-niche's trefoil arches have been discovered in one of the monastery's cells (Yoshihide 2011: 238, 282-284). These pieces not only stand out for their excellent condition and iconographical singularity, but also represent the largest examples of false-niches ever discovered, reaching a width of three metres (Group A and B) and four metres high (Group A). Adding to the exceptionality of this discovery is a peculiarity of the *stūpa*. In fact, in correspondence with at least three (S, E, W) of the four stairways that originally gave access to the second storey of the *stūpa*, the presence of a raised niche/recess (2.5 m long) has been revealed, which interrupts the curved line of the *stūpa* itself (Yoshihide 2011: 257, pls 67-68). In the reconstructed model, the trefoil arches found in the monastery cell are positioned in correspondence with these niches/recesses, in the upper part (Fig. 6).

The main *stūpa* of Amluk-dara (see Olivieri in this issue), with its 32x28m (almost) square podium, is the largest ever excavated in the Swat valley. Along the axis of the double stairway (N) that leads to the second storey of the *stūpa*, there is a rectangular plinth 4m wide with a 90cm protrusion that was restored by the Department of Archaeology and Museums (DOAM) in 1958-59 (Fig. 7). The archaeologists have put forward the hypothesis that this structure could have been the base of a large, lost false-niche (Faccenna and Spagnesi 2014: 177-8; Olivieri et al. 2014: 348-349). As well as Amluk-dara, the Tokar-dara *stūpa* has a double stairway (W) that gives access to the second circular storey of the *stūpa*. In front of the stairway there are traces of a linear podium 'protruding slightly beyond the line of the body of the stupa with an elevation suggesting a wall, also linear, in the shape of a shallow niche' (Faccenna and Spagnesi 2014: 331; Fig. 8). D. Faccenna, interpreted this structure as

well as the one at Amluk-dara as the base of a large false-niche (Faccenna and Spagnesi 2014: fig. 368).

A similar characteristic can also be observed in several Afghan *stūpas* in the region of Kabul/Kapisa, probably from a later date than those already mentioned. The Shevaki 1 (Fussman 2008, II: pl. 48) and Top Dara 1 (Fussman 2008, II: pl. 91-92; see Olivieri this issue: fig. 31) *stūpas* present a large trefoil niche on the dome, in line with the access stairway at the *pradakṣiṇā-patha*, which was meant to house sculptures in stucco.

At Shevaki 1, apart from the large trefoil niche, the lower portion also seems familiar⁵, recalling the false-niche's profile which in this case is higher with respect to the level of the walkway. Differently, at the level of the upper drum at Seh Topan 4 there is quite a deep niche whose profile doesn't seem ascribable to a trefoil arch (Fussman 2008, II: pls 42, 42.c), but rather could have been adapted to house a statue. Despite the clear differences, we cannot exclude that these niches on the domes of the Kabul/Kapisa area's *stūpas* were a reflection of an older Gandharan tradition, where a false-niche with a trefoil arch is placed in front of the access stairway to the *pradakṣiṇā-patha*, though in this particular case much leaner in terms of shape and iconographical content. Another later reference to false-niches comes from the *Dharmarājika stūpa* in Taxila, which had four moulded bases (about 5.8m wide) during its final reconstruction phase. These bases – protruding about 1.6m from the dome's profile - were placed in correspondence to the four stairways that give access to the circular structure (Marshall 1951: 237; Fig. 9). What Marshall considers triple niches housing an image of Buddha with Bodhisattva clearly refer to the subdivision of the lower part of a complex false-niche (or Type B, see Tab. 1), which here however appears to take on a three-dimensional appearance.

To sum up, the Gandharan *stūpas* in Zar Dheri, Amluk-dara, Tokar-dara and Taxila show, in relation to the entrance stairways, the presence of one or four, according to the *stūpa*'s type, protruding rectangular bases or niches. According to the reconstructive hypotheses put forward by archaeologists these were the places of large false-niches which, then, would appear aligned with the stairway and directly placed either on or inside the *stūpa* at the height of the walkway. There is also large crumpling above the bases at Amluk-dara and Tokar-dara which is very

⁵ Whilst Masson's reconstruction proposes a simple lengthened trefoil arch (Wilson 1841: pl. IX).

indicative. It is very probable that the false-niches represented the point at which treasure hunters concentrated, being a weak spot that provides relatively easier access to the internal structure of the *stūpa*. These crumples, albeit reshuffled by treasure hunters, would partially represent a negative mark of the original false-niches. In particular, the profile of the large *vacuum* of the Amluk-dara *stūpa* brings to mind the form of what we have come to know as a false-niche (Fig. 7; see Olivieri this issue, figs. 28-30, 42). The positioning of false-niches at the height of the *pradakṣiṇā-patha* that is suggested by archaeological evidence does show similarity to the reliefs in Figs 4, 5. The false-niche's position directly on the raised part of the dome, could come merely from a simplification of real architecture instead.⁶ In fact, as noted at Amluk-dara and at the *Dharmarājika*, the false-niches could assume an elevated position with respect to the walkway caused by the insertion of a high rectangular base.

The oldest archaeological reference (and reliefs) suggests therefore a position for false-niches that brings to mind that of the portal or *torāṇa*, being directly connected to the entrance stairway and the *pradakṣiṇā-patha*. Other references to the link between false-niches and doors are given by the internal allocation of the figures and from several decorative elements associated with false-niches.

4. Typology and Decorative Elements

The main discriminative factor between the two types of false-niche is provided by the articulation of its lower part in one (Type A) or three (Type B) naves respectively. However, in both types A and B⁷ (Tab. 1) the lower portion maintains a trapezoidal appearance due to the inclination of

⁶ This could be potentially valid also for the suspended position observed in the small *stūpas* discussed above. However, their doubtful relevance (in particular, I refer to the small *stūpas* from Loriyan Tangai and Gandha[i]ri) lead me to exclude them from any speculation. Instead, the position suggested by the small curvilinear frieze from Butkara I seems to correspond to that indicated by archaeological evidence and reliefs in Figs 4, 5.

⁷ The reference bibliography for the sample examined (for a total of about 200 elements of false-niches) is the following: Hargreaves 1930; Foucher 1905-1951; Marshall 1951; Ingholt 1957; Faccenna and Taddei 1962, 1964; Taddei 1974; Ackermann 1975; Tissot 1985; Zwalf 1996; Faccenna 2001; Kurita 2003; Khan 2005; Jansen and Luczanits 2008; Ali and Qazi 2008; Khan 2016. Photographic archives: The British Library, *Archaeological Survey of India Collections*, www.bl.uk; American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/; Western Himalaya Archive Vienna (WHAV), <http://whav.aussereurop.univie.ac.at/>; *Archivio fotografico Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale "Giuseppe Tucci"*.

the lateral jambs, which recall the oldest wooden constructions, whilst the upper portion assumes the profile of a voluted pseudo-trefoil arch with intermediate element. The latter is often associated with pendants, finial and decorative elements connected to the extrados of semi-arches and/or arches through a system of sockets and tenons.

In many false-niches, the figured field of semi-arches seems divided into three assumed areas by two dividing vertical bands that reunite to form a dividing arch of lunettes or end at the height of the lunette arches' impost level (Foucher 1905-1951: fig. 48), thus recalling the internal skeleton of the vaults in ancient wooden constructions like that represented on the doorway of the Lomās R̥ṣi Buddhist cave in Magadha (British Library 1003/44). Moreover, in some examples the bracket-like motif in the arch's intrados (Figs 10-11)⁸ does nothing but recall (as is Lomās R̥ṣi's case) the wooden support beams, whereas the frequent dividing lunette arches recall those of the doors represented on Gandharan reliefs (e.g. Callieri and Filigenzi 2002: no. 82). The figurative repertoire of the upper lunettes in the door represented in the Gandharan reliefs and that of the false-niches is also very similar. In the door's lunettes the decoration is usually very simplified given the narrow surface available. In particular, there are phytomorphic decorative motifs, figures with snake-tails and worshippers. In the upper lunettes of the false-niches, even though scenes of adoration are often found⁹, phytomorphic decorative motifs are particularly common, such as rows of rosettes or lotuses and open flamed palmettes (Figs 10-11; see also Callieri and Filigenzi 2002: no. 88; Saidu Sharif: S 667, S 890, S 1043), which can also be found in the lunettes of doors shown on the reliefs (e.g. Faccenna and Taddei 1962: pl. CLXVI). Moreover, the fantastic figures with snake-tail or feline bodies at the ends of the lunette are characteristic, representing an effective solution for taking advantage of the entire space both in the lunettes of the false-niches (e.g. Foucher 1905-1951: figs 48, 271; Zwalf 1996, II: 491) and in those of the portals (e.g. Callieri and Filigenzi 2002:

⁸ Reference is made above all to several fragments from Saidu Sharif I (e.g. S 477, S 522, S 538, S 544) and Butkara I (e.g. B 890).

⁹ Referring mostly to the scene of adoration of the *bhikṣā-pātra* (e.g. Ingholt 1957: 168; Foucher 1905-1951: fig. 48), of Buddha (e.g. Faccenna and Taddei 1964: Pl.CDIIIa; Ingholt 1957: 238) or more rarely of Bodhisattva (e.g. Tissot 1985: figs 19, 30), of the turban (e.g. Faccenna and Taddei 1964: pls CDIIIa, CCCXCIX; Zwalf 1996, II: 491) and, in only one case, of Buddha remains (e.g. Faccenna and Taddei 1964: pl. CCCXCIX).

no. 82). Another echo in the false-niche of the door motif comes from the external decorative elements. The volutes of arches and semi-arches, that are constant in false-niches, usually terminate in a bird's head or a 'monster' (Fig. 12). As the Gandharan reliefs show, the volutes run constantly at the end of the portal arches and lintels in the *toranas* both in simple and figured form (Figs 13-14).

In real architecture, the Indian world shows these decorative elements not only on the lintels of the East *torana* at Bhārhut (Huntington 1985: 5.8), where the volutes take the shape of the terminal part of a *makara*, but also on the lintels of the *torana* of Sanchi I where they present a more geometric appearance (Huntington 1985: 6.4). The mythical creature *makara*, a symbol of 'auspiciousness and the primal life source' (Huntington 1985: 65), complies very well with the theme of passage innate in the *torana* and generally in the portals. It is probably in this Indian figurative-semantic collection where the origin of the volutes with 'monster/bird's heads' that characterised the arches and semi-arches of the false-niches can be found.

The arch pendants that assume the form of a bunch of grapes or a fruit (Fig. 12.c-d) show similarities with the decoration of portal arches and *torana* shown on the reliefs (Figs 13-14; see also Faccenna and Taddei 1962: pl. CLXVI) that reproduce floral elements in stone, which most probably reflect the usual manner of decorating these structures in real life.¹⁰

A further clue to the link between false-niches and door motifs comes from the lower register of a Type B false-niche showing the worship of Buddha's remains: in the second cylindrical body of the *stūpa* there is in fact a false-niche, whose lower part actually seems to have been made as a door or portal with two fold-leaves as indicated by the vertical line (Fig. 5). Additional support for the association between false-niches and door motifs comes from the reliquary of Shaikhan Dheri (Allchin 1972; Fig. 15) that reproduces a miniature cruciform building with a

¹⁰ Finials and figured elements connected to the extrados of semi-arches and/or arches, generally representing different species of birds (with very few exceptions: see Foucher 1917: 332, pl. XXVII; 'Archivio fotografico MNAO': Inv. GANDHARA 152, 166), seem to recall the motif of *vihāra* more than the portal. In fact, birds frequently appear on the covering of *vihāra* represented in reliefs (e.g. see Zwalf 1996, II: 506; Jansen and Luczanits 2008: Cat. No. 202). Finials can be both in simple and figured form: lophophorus (?) with open wings (Foucher 1905-1951: fig. 48) or simply two wings (Kurita 2003, I: 337).

double roof covering probably illustrating real architecture – although nothing similar has ever been brought to light (Allchin 1972: 17). The four faces of the building act exactly like a false-niche (or viceversa) with a bracket-like decoration that evokes the wooden structure of the real architecture on which the object is drawn and shows an internal subdivision in superimposed figured registers representing scenes from the life of Buddha accompanied with a verse of text from top to bottom, something that also characterizes false-niches.

In conclusion, archaeological evidence, internal portions of figured fields and decorative motifs suggest that false-niches, whose profile is clearly inspired by a section of *vihāra* with a double roof covering (Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: 43), refers more in particular to the facade of the latter and is intended as a portal, as highlighted by the reliquary of Shaikhan Dheri. If we acknowledge the validity of this reference, we must ask ourselves the reasoning behind this recall to the entrance of a *vihāra* with double overlaid covering on the body of a *stūpa*.

5. The Symbolic Value of the False-niche

Throughout the Gandharan area the spaces where the reliefs are located change. Whilst *torāṇa* and *vedikā* represent the ideal place for the location of reliefs in India, due to the importance given to these structures in the devotional rite of *pradakṣiṇā*, in sacred Gandharan structures, *torāṇas* and *vedikās* around the *stūpa* disappear, even though *vedikās* can appear as a parapet along the border of the *stūpa*'s quadrangular body and along the access stairway (Faccenna 1980-1981, I: fig. 30; Olivieri et al. 2014: 347, 379-384).

In his analysis of *stūpa* n. 17 at Butkara I, D. Faccenna acutely brings to light the symbolic value of the *vedikā* and pseudo-*vedikā* motif in the Gandharan area that “concettualmente prosegue la balaustra (*vedikā*), che nello *stūpa* indiano (Sanchi) limitava lo spazio in cui era racchiuso il monumento e nel quale si accedeva per una porta (*torāṇa*)” (Faccenna 2004: 318). As a matter of fact, though disappearing from the architectural apparatus, recalls of the *vedikā* are persistent (due to its symbolic value as a sacred enclosure) in the decorations on the body of the *stūpa*, as well as on the *harmikā*, in the decorative form of the pseudo-*vedikā* both in real (e.g. main *stūpa* of Saidu Sharif I, Faccenna 1995) and represented (e.g. Callieri and Filigenzi 2002: no. 68) architecture. It is therefore possible to

hypothesize that the *torāṇa* – as complementary value to that of the *vedikā* - lost its original place around the *stūpa* and was recalled in Gandharan *stūpas* by the motif of false-niches¹¹. As demonstrated by archaeological evidence, false-niches are always placed in front of the entrance stairway, a position that mirrors that of the portal. From a morphological point of view however - as mentioned above - the false-niche seems to refer to the facade, intended as a portal, of a *vihāra* with double overlaid covering rather than to a typical Indian portal (*torāṇa*), something unfamiliar to Gandhara.

The choice of a reference to *vihāras* with double overlaid covering is probably due to the wide diffusion of this structure in the North West of the Indian subcontinent and to the sacred value which it was connected to.¹² As a result, it is possible to hypothesize that the main components and figurative supports of sacred Indian structures (*vedikā* and *torāṇa*) were inherited by Gandhara. Here, deprived of their own architectural identity, they became ‘decorative’ motifs applied directly to the sacred building because of their symbolic value to the enclosure and entrance. Being a spiritual display of Buddhism, apart from being a memorial to Buddha’s *mahāparinirvāṇa* (Fussman 1989: 44), the *stūpa* is above all a receptacle of embedded and intertwined symbols that can have more or less visibility according to the period, to the place and to the devotee’s spiritual sensibility, even though the Dharma retains its wide and absolute value. As a cosmogram and a replica of the establishment of the cosmic and spiritual order (Irwin 1979, 1980), the *stūpa* becomes a three-dimensional *maṇḍala* that could but include a symbol of passage and an access to beyond, as an actual portal. If the *vedikā* indicates the holiness of the place by defining its borders, the presence of an entrance in the form of a false-niche symbolically emphasizes accessibility.

¹¹ The connection of the portal motif to Gandharan *stūpas* is evident, for instance, in the decoration of the platform at the base of the *stūpa* in block F at Sirkap, Taxila (Marshall 1951: 163-164, pl. 28, 30a).

¹² Although other types of *vihāra* are observed in reliefs and architectural remains (e.g. Jansen and Luczanits 2008: 251, 325; Foucher 1905-1951: 224), the linear translation of the *vihāra* with double overlaid covering seems to be recalled in Gandharan reliefs with more frequency. Moreover, it is the only motif that has won a place of honour on the body of sacred buildings in the form of a false-niche. So one wonders whether the prevalence of this motif on the reliefs is motivated by some specific cult role or activity connected to the *vihāra* with double overlaid covering or the predominance of this motif is simply connected to the prevalence of this specific type of *vihāra* in Gandharan territory, or whether the sculptors chose this motif only for spacial (i.e. the trefoil arch fits to the profile of a meditating Buddha very well) and artistic reasons.

6. The Great Departure within the False-niche

It is possible to hypothesize that false-niches, more properly false-doors, became a decorated space – given their symbolic value – loaded with a particular semantic value and most probably the selection of illustrated figures within are a result of this meaning. Which subject could be more apt in proposing a reflective pause¹³ in the moment of the approach to the rite of *pradakṣiṇā*, that projects the devotee towards the dimension of spiritual safety, if not the Great Departure?

In both Type A and Type B false-niches the episode from the life of Buddha that appears most often is that of the Great Departure (Filigenzi in Callieri and Filigenzi 2002: 101-102)¹⁴, which occupies a place of honour in the lower register. In a verse of text from top to bottom that is characterised in almost all reliefs containing it¹⁵, the Great Departure presents itself at the apex of a narrative climax in which episodes relative to the life of Prince Siddhārtha¹⁶ (e.g. The Great Renunciation and scenes from the palace) follow each other chronologically, in a crescendo of intensity towards the main event which is used as a representation of effect: Siddhārtha is shown frontally on horseback, the front part of the horse comes out of the frame, almost as if it comes out of the decorative dimension, expanding the power of the image that recalls the model of the

¹³ Differently from a narrative frieze, the reading of a false-niche requires a physical staticity from the observer. See Taddei 1993: 46.

¹⁴ The picture that emerges from the analysis of subjects illustrated in various fields of the false-niche (see bibliography in fn. 7) is nevertheless varied and shows how the space of the false-niche, particularly in Type B false-niches, could be used both for chronological development of a narrative cycle (the life of Bodhisattva Siddhārtha; Conversion of the Kaśyapas: e.g. Foucher 1905-51: fig. 225) and to illustrate different subjects linked by particular themes (e.g. Dīpaṅkara jāataka/Offering of the handful of dust/Buddha and the son Rāhula: Ingholt 1957: 159, Taddei 1974: fig. 13), whilst in many cases between two chronological extremes, subjects that are probably dear to local traditions (or to the devote who commissioned the work) can be inserted in the case of small *stūpas*. However, examples are not lacking where only one episode of Buddha's life (accompanied by generic scenes of adoration and offerings) is represented in a false-niche or cases in which in all figured fields generic scenes of adoration appear. These last two cases characterise Type A false-niches, many of which belonging to small *stūpas*. must have played a determining role in the selection of the subjects.

¹⁵ The only exception known to this day is that of the false-niche with the Great Departure, that shows unconnected subjects in the superior registers from a thematic and chronological point of view (Jansen and Luczanits 2008: Cat. No. 158).

¹⁶ On the figured panels represented on the false-niche overhanging arch segments see Filigenzi 2006: 17-27.

Sun God on a cart, not without semantic repercussions (Filigenzi in Callieri and Filigenzi 2002: 101-102). Using the image of Buddha on horseback in this manner (facing the observer directly), it almost seems as though it is taking the role of a mediator between the *stūpa* (with all its connected values) and the devotee. Without doubt the fact that the lower portion of the Type A false-niche is formally depicted as a tapered door must have guided the sculptors in the choice of subject. So much so, that in several Type A false-niches containing the Great Departure, the city gate (a key element for the identification of this episode) is significantly less evident and at times completely absent (e.g. see Ingholt 1957: 168; Kurita 2003, I: 145; Khan 2005: 15; Zwalf 1996, II: 176). However, the formal aspect of the lower portion of Type A false-niches cannot justify alone the prevalence of this episode that actually appears much more often in the lower register of Type B false-niches (e.g. see Taddei 1993: fig. 13; Kurita 2003, I: 147; Ingholt 1957: 40), lacking any direct graphical correlation with the portal. It is in fact the false-niche in its entirety that conveys the meaning of the portal and the passage. It is not an accident that a key episode of the life of Buddha like the Great Departure - when Prince Siddhārtha decides to abandon his secular life at the palace and take the path of deliverance - has a place of honour on this decorative support loaded with this semantic value¹⁷.

It is probable that false-niches showing episodes relative to the life of Bodhisattva Siddhārtha, positioned in chronological order and culminating in the Great Departure, rather than a sort of incipit or epilogue to the eventual narration that developed in the horizontal frieze of the *stūpa*,¹⁸ would represent a sort of invitation to the devotee to 'enter' through a metaphoric doorway into the dimension of Dharma, personified by the *stūpa* itself, thus being guided and inspired by the choice of Siddhārtha.

* * *

¹⁷ In the case of four false-niches/doors in cruciform *stūpas* (e.g. Zar Dheri), a more varied thematic collection is possible.

¹⁸ At the moment the combination of horizontal frieze and false-niche is only attested in the small curvilinear frieze from Butkara I (Fig. 3).

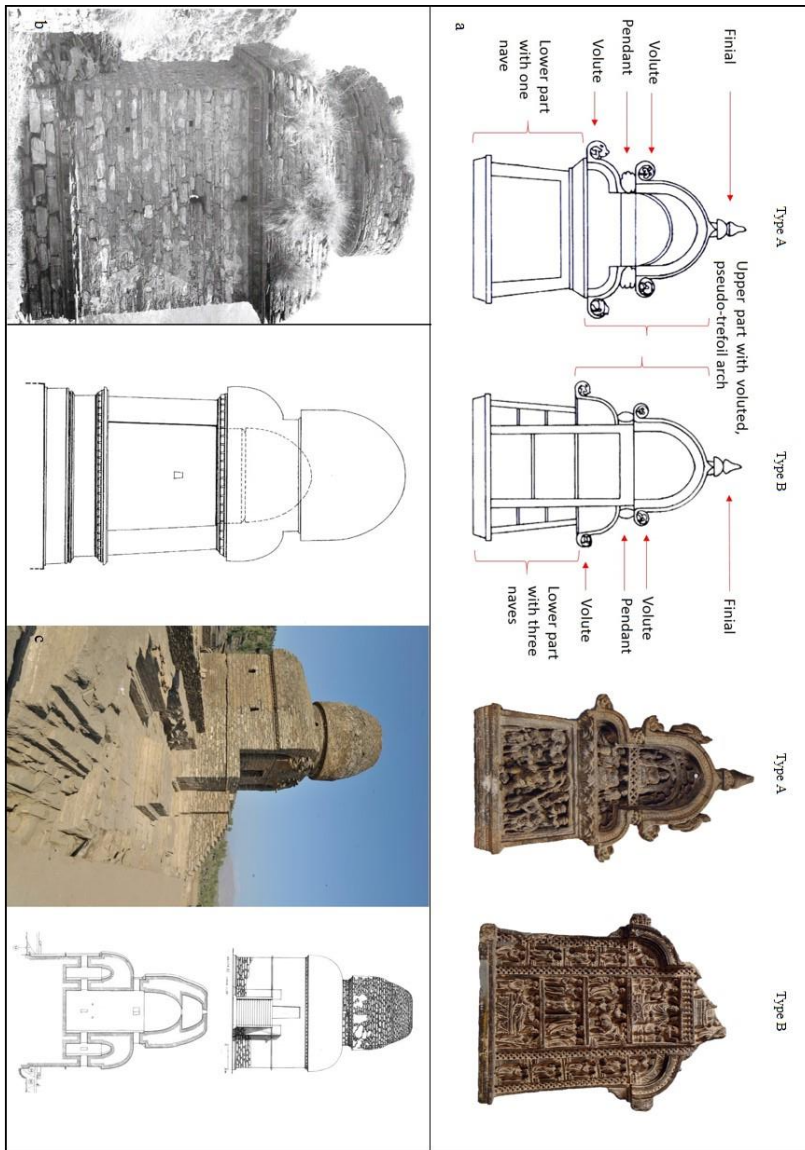


Table 1- a) (from left): Type A or simple false-niche (Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: pl. 20): linear translation of a single cell *vihāra* with double overlaid covering; Type B or complex false-niche (Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: pl. 21): linear translation of a double shell *vihāra* with double overlaid covering; b): single cell *vihāra* with double overlaid covering, Abbasahebchina (Swat): photo and reconstructive section (Faccenna and Spagnesi 2014: figs 440, 453); c): double shell *vihāra* with double overlaid covering, Gumbat (Swat): photo, frontal prospect and section (Olivieri et al. 2014: pls III, VI).

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Post-scriptum

When this article was in the proof stage, I came across a very interesting feature from Butkara III. On a side of a harmikā there is a scene that has been interpreted as the “worship of the vihāra” (Khan 2016: 60; Fig. 16). Although the latter is a known motif on Gandharan reliefs, in this case it is absolutely evident that the represented object is a false-niche, not a vihāra. Lacking of any figured registers, the meaning of the false-niche, worshipped in this scene, is relevant for its own symbolic and spiritual value. Maybe the ‘beyond’ value of the false-niche/false-door discussed above, can give a reasonable framework for an otherwise perplexing representation.

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Figures

Captions

Figure 1 – Small *stūpa* from Loriyan Tangai. Indian Museum of Calcutta (Jansen and Luczanits 2008: 174).

Figure 2 – Small *stūpa* from Gandha[i]ri. Unknown (Jansen and Luczanits 2008: 185).

Figure 3 – Small curvilinear frieze, Butkara I. Swāt Museum, Saidu Sharif (Faccenna and Taddei 1962: pl. LXXXIa).

Figure 4 – Relief illustrating the adoration of a *stūpa*. Lahore Museum (Ingholt 1957: 157).

Figure 5 – Part of the lower register of a Type B false-niche from Takht-i-Bāhī illustrating the adoration of the remains of Buddha. Peshawar Museum (Photo by C. Moscatelli).

Figure 6 – Conjectural elevation of the main stupa from Zar Dheri (Yoshihide 2011: ill. 7-9).

Figure 7 – *Stūpa* of Amluk-dara after restoration in 2012 with part of the base protruding (Photos by the author).

Figure 8 – *Stūpa* of Tokar-dara from the West with part of the base protruding (after Faccenna and Spagnesi 2014: figs 337, 355).

Figure 9 – *Dharmarājika stūpa* of Taxila from the East (Photo by the author).

Figure 10 – Bracket-like motif in the arch's intrados of a false-niche in green schist from Butkara (Inv. B 744; 27.5x33.5 cm) MNAO, Roma. Photograph courtesy of IAMP-ISMEO.

Figure 11 – Bracket-like motif in the arch's intrados of a false-niche in green schist from Saidu Sharif (Inv. S 544) MNAO, Roma. Photograph courtesy of IAMP-ISMEO.

Figure 12 – Volutes and Pendants; a: *Dharmarājika* (Taxila), Taxila Museum (Khan 2005: 309); b: Butkara I, Swat Museum (Inv. B 36; photograph courtesy by IAMP-ISMEO); c: unknown provenance, Central Museum Lahore (Jansen and Luczanits 2008: Cat. No. 158); d: unknown provenance, Karachi Museum (Kurita 2003, I: 145).

Figure 13 – Ascetic in portals. Butkara III, Peshawar University Museum (Jansen and Luczanits 2008: Cat. No. 221).

Figure 14 – Relief with the image of donor in *torāṇa*, from Butkara I. MNAOR, Rome (Callieri and Filigenzi 2002: no. 72).

Figure 15 – Prospective reconstruction of the reliquary of Shaikhan Dheri (Allchin 1972: fig. 7).

Figure 16 – One face of a *harmikā* illustrating the adoration of the false-niche. Butkara III (Khan 2015: 61, n. 29).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

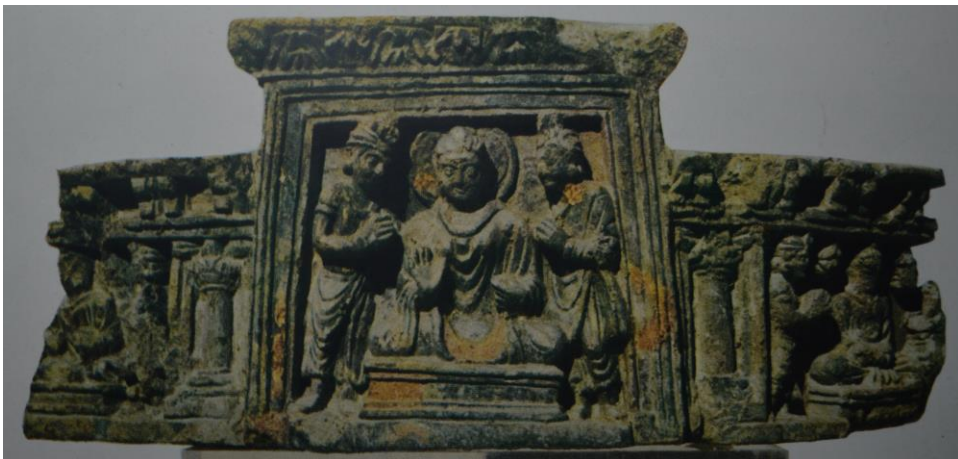


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

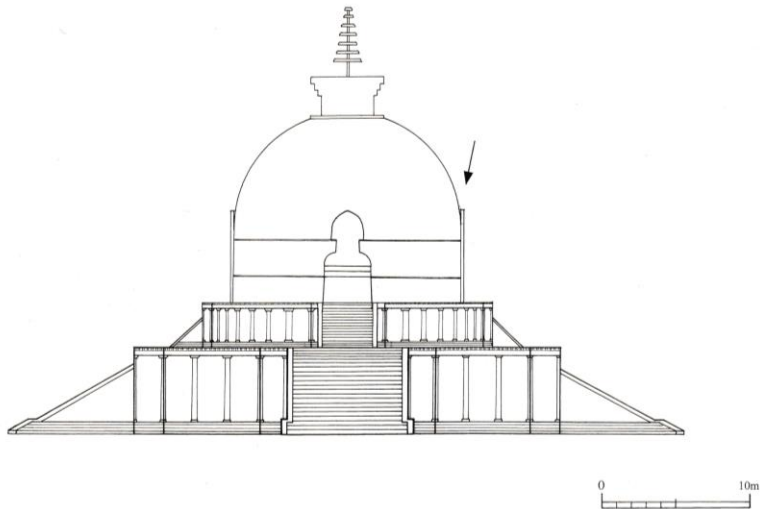


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

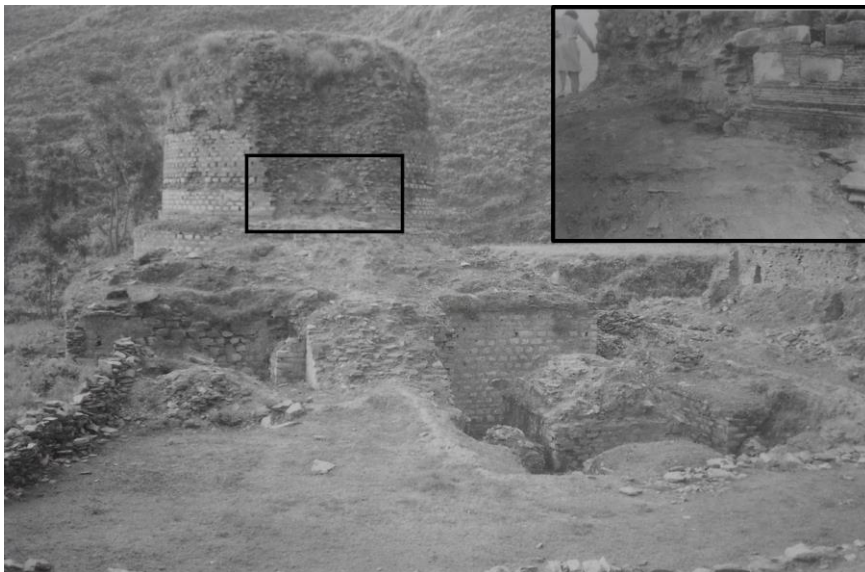


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

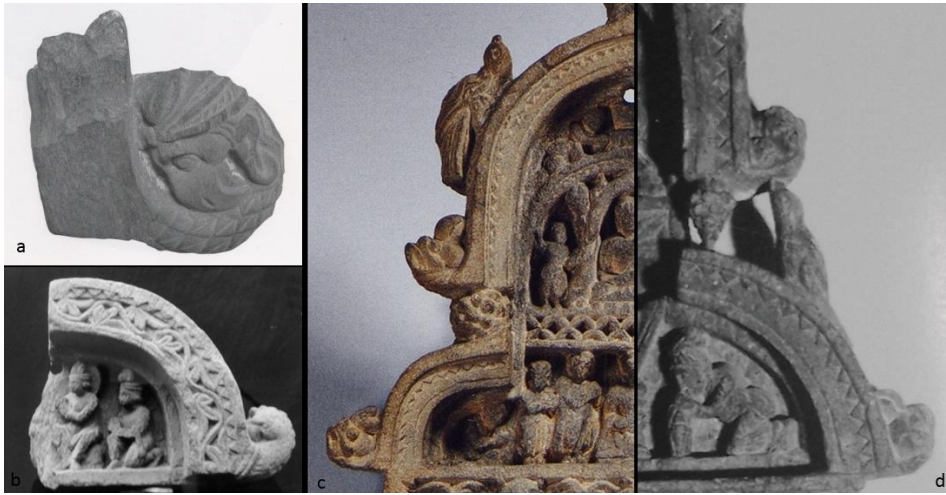


Fig. 12



Fig. 13

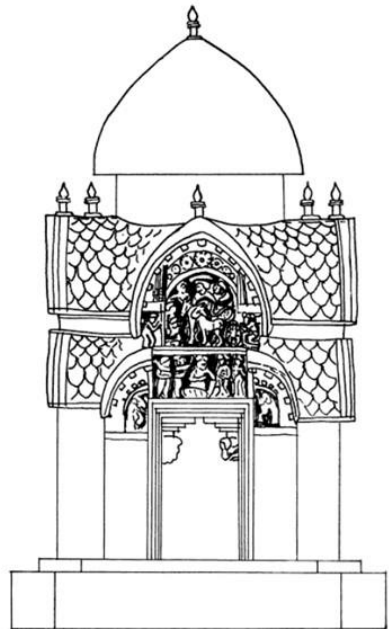


Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

