

Buddhist Period Sites Reported from Malakpur Area, Tehsil Gadaizi, District Buner (Pakistan)

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Abstract

The area around Malakpur Village of district Buner represents one of the richest archaeological landscapes of Buner and ancient Uddiyana, containing a diverse assemblage of Buddhist-period heritage. Recent investigations have identified a series of Buddhist stupas, rock carvings, monastic remains, and associated settlement traces spread across the hilly terrain of Ilam, Beshunai, Malakpur, Pir Baba, and adjacent localities. This article synthesizes all available archaeological data from the documented survey, focusing specifically on Buddhist-period sites — Kafero Dherai Stupa, Ramanrai, Gogai Stupa, the three Bangosar Carvings, Ilam Kalai, Alaksar, and Gogai Stupa. The study highlights their geographical settings, structural characteristics, architectural typologies, state of preservation, and their significance within the Buddhist cultural sphere of Buner. Through comparative analysis with other regional monuments, especially those of Swat, the article situates these sites chronologically and culturally within the broader landscape of Uddiyana, Gandhara and Kushan-period Buddhism.

Keywords: Survey, Buner, Buddhist-period sites, Gandhara.

1. Introduction¹

Malakpur lies within the Gadaizi Tehsil of district Buner (Fig. 2), forming part of the historic Uddiyana region known for its dense Buddhist archaeological heritage. The area encompasses valleys, steep ridges, terraces, and foothills of Mount Ilam and Jam Doap hill, providing an ideal setting for monastic establishments, stupas, hermitages, and rock-carving activities during the Buddhist period. Historical surveys by the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan (DOAM), particularly the investigations of 2014–15 by the Directorate General of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, recorded numerous Buddhist sites distributed across Malakpur, Beshunai,

¹ This article is intended as a supplement to the article published in the previous issue of this Journal.

Gogai, and Ilam Kalai and other surrounding villages. These sites demonstrate large stupas, monastic traces, carved boulders, Buddhist and non-Buddhist paintings (see Olivieri 2012), and cultural sites containing multilayered deposits.

2. Buddhist Period Sites in Malakpur Area

The Buddhist-period sites of the Malakpur area form an important archaeological landscape of ancient Uddiyana, reflecting a deeply rooted Buddhist presence in this part of Buner. Their distribution shows a close integration of sacred architecture with the natural terrain, shaped by monastic practices and regional pilgrimage networks. Despite modern disturbances, these sites retain significant research value, making their documentation and preservation essential for understanding the Buddhist heritage of Buner and the wider Gandhara—Uddiyana region.

2.1. *Kafero Dherai Stupa*

A monumental double-drum stupa was identified at the northeastern foot of Mount Ilam, representing one of the most imposing Buddhist structures in the Malakpur region. Known as the Kafero Dherai Stupa, the site lies near Beshunai village within the Malakpur area of Gadaizi Tehsil (Fig.2.). Geographically, it is positioned at 34.610176 N and 72.362762 E, approximately 2.5 km west of Malakpur village and 1.5 km south of Beshunai, resting on a natural mound beside the right bank of the Koga–Siparai Khwar. It is situated just below the eastern ridge of Alaksar, one of the two principal summits of Mount Ilam. The monument can be approached through either the Malakpur–Gawidhand or the Beshunai–Gawidhand routes. The site was earlier reported by Rehman (1996: 12-13) and Khattak (1997: 58-61) and later on by Samad, Khan (2016: 7) and Khan (2018: 54, 161).

Several architectural components of the stupa remain remarkably well preserved, offering valuable insight into the monument's original grandeur. The stupa (Figs 3, 4) survives in the form of a large square podium, each side measuring 24 m and rising 6.2 m above the present ground level. Above this square base stands the first drum, which measures 12 m in diameter and 1.7 m in height, followed by the second drum, 9.2 m in diameter and 3.9 m high (Fig. 4). The total preserved height of the monument is recorded as 11.8 m. The dome, although partially intact, is

now irregular in shape due to extensive illegal excavations that have cut through the central core down to the ground level, leaving the relic-casket chamber clearly exposed (Khan 2018: 161-162).

One of the most distinctive architectural features of the Kafero Dherai Stupa is its eastern staircase (Fig. 3), which is preserved far better than those of many other stupas recorded in Buner. The stair riser is designed in two widths—8 m wide at the base of the stupa and 5.4 m wide at the outer projection. Double projections and supportive structural elements flank both sides of the staircase. Moldings executed in large, thin diaper masonry adorn multiple levels of the monument, including the middle of the stair riser, the top of the podium, the lower edges of both drums, and the upper part of the lower drum. The overall masonry is composed of ashlar blocks with their interstices packed with thin diapers, reflecting construction techniques characteristic of the region.

The stupa's architectural style places it within the Kushan period (Samad, Khan 2016: 7), and it bears strong stylistic affinities with the Shingardar Stupa and other monastic monuments of Swat (Khan 2018: 161). Its scale, design, and preserved elements indicate the importance of the structure within the religious landscape of ancient Uddiyana. Adjacent to the stupa, on the western plain, lie the remains of a Buddhist monastery, underscoring that Kafero Dherai once formed the nucleus of a substantial monastic and ritual complex. The monument is further enclosed by steep slopes of the natural mound on its northern, eastern, and southern sides, enhancing its commanding position within the surrounding terrain.

2.2 Ramanrai Stupa Site

Ramanrai is one of the largest and most important Buddhist-period archaeological sites in district Buner (Khan 2018: 162). It lies near Balo Khan Kalai (Pir Baba) within the Malakpur area of Gadaizi Tehsil, positioned at 34.608075 N and 72.398002 E at an elevation of 1748 m a.s.l. Approached from the east of Balo Khan Kalai, the site spreads across a steep ridge of Mount Ilam, extending roughly 1.5 km east–west and one km north–south. Ramanrai site was earlier reported by Stein (1929: 167-69; 1930: 98), and later on by Rehman (1996: 48-50), by Khattak (1997: 74-77), by Samad, Khan (2016: 7), and by Khan (2018: 54, 162-164; 2024: 49-67). The landscape is dominated by massive granite and marble boulders, with the archaeological deposits distributed across terraced slopes. Three major parts preserve rock shelters, structural mounds, wall traces, and

architectural alignments that reflect extensive and multi-period Buddhist occupation.

Ramanrai is not only an important Buddhist period site, but it has been previously discussed as it contains prehistoric rock shelters (Samad, Khan 2016: 7; Khan 2018: 146). Ramanrai contains a remarkable variety of religious and secular structures, including the main stupa (Fig. 5), a ‘hollow’ stupa, numerous votive stupas, chapels, isolated monastic cells, monastic complexes (Fig. 4), rock-shelters, water features (Khan 2024: 49-67), and residential remains. The main stupa complex occupies a minor plain basin in the western part of the site and consists of a large stupa and a ‘hollow’ stupa built upon a single rectangular platform measuring 24 × 14 m and 2 m high (Khan 2018: 162-164). Both structures are accessed by stairs on the north and east. The main stupa rises to a present height of 9 m, while the ‘hollow’ stupa shows only its base and traces of a ‘hollow’ drum, damaged by treasure hunting.

Surrounding the main complex are numerous votive stupas, often erected on large boulders and accessible either naturally or by stair-risers. These stupas occur in both square and circular forms, though most have been damaged by weathering and illicit digging. Small chapels, each about 2 × 2 m, are also situated around the complex, again often positioned on boulders or raised platforms. Additional stupas and at least three monastic complexes lie to the southeast, east, and northeast. The monastic remains near the northern rock-shelter are the best preserved, though partially lost to agricultural encroachment.

Several rock-shelters occur in the western and central areas, some containing internal stairways and structural additions, possibly used as storage or ancillary rooms. The site is rich in water sources, with three springs flowing from Alak/Garhai Sar, channelized through masonry conduits. Two wells and a central water tank—likely used for water storage or ablution—are also present. A small bathroom, with a slab-paved floor and central water channel, is located near a spring beside a monastic complex.

Because the settlement occupies a steep ridge, stair-risers are provided throughout the site, while massive stone blockades were constructed to control the channeled water and erosion during heavy rains (Khan 2024: 49-67). Additional structures include houses, streets, an underground chamber built as a double-storey corbelled structure, and other secular buildings. Although Khattak (1997: 74-77) reported a watchtower on the western side, recent surveys did not confirm its presence.

Architecturally, the site resembles major Kushan-period Buddhist complexes such as Takht-i-Bahi and those of the Swat Valley, indicating that Ramanrai likely flourished under royal patronage and formed a major religious and urban center in ancient Uddiyana.

2.3 Gogai Stupa

Gogai Stupa is located near Bhai Kalai, on the southeastern slopes of Mount Ilam. The site occupies a small natural mound situated on a gently sloping area measuring approximately 200 × 110 m and is most easily accessed through the Bhai Kalai–Gogai (and Bangosar) route. The stupa lies at latitude 34.585052 N and longitude 72.428933 E and at an altitude of 797 m above sea level. The site was reported by Samad, Khan (2016: 8) and Khan (2018: 190-191).

Although the monument has suffered extensive damage, largely due to plundering and treasure hunting, several key components remain identifiable. Surviving traces include mounted stone blocks of the stupa's drum (Fig. 7) and fragments of a huge *chattra*, while the centre of the stupa has been dug out and even the base excavated on all sides. To the southwest of the stupa lie the remains of a monastery (Fig. 8), now largely concealed beneath a mound whose upper surface has been converted into agricultural fields. Scattered wall traces are still visible across the cultivated land. Surface collection at the site has yielded fine pottery, including the rim and base of a dish, a decorative pot handle, and the rim of a jar with thick incised lines (Khan 2018: 190-191).

An important numismatic find was also reported by a local resident, who presented a silver coin of Diodotus I, allegedly unearthed near the stupa. If genuinely associated with the site, this discovery may indicate an earlier, possibly Indo-Greek, phase in the monument's history (Khan 2018: 157, 262). Despite its current state of ruin, the Gogai Stupa clearly formed part of the broader network of Buddhist religious centres that once flourished across the Malakpur region.

2.4 Bangosar Carving–1

Bangosar Carving–1 (Fig. 9) is situated near Bangosar village along the route connecting Gogai to Bangosar. The carving lies at 34.610291 N and 72.384393 E, at an elevation of 953 m, and forms part of a broader concentration of Buddhist rock art in the area. The carved panel itself

measures 202 × 68 cm, executed on a stone surface that has endured significant weathering damage, obscuring much of its original detail (Fig.10.). Nevertheless, its presence—along with other carvings nearby—indicates that Bangosar once served as an important locus for Buddhist devotional imagery rendered on natural rock boulders. The site was first reported by Olivieri (1994: 468-473), by Filigenzi (2015: 115, 116 & 236) and later on by Samad, Khan (2016: 8), whereas conservation activities on this carving were carried out in the framework of the British Council Cultural Protection Fund (CPF) project.

A large boulder, measuring approximately 10.5 × 7 m, stands in the southern part of the village beside the Bhai Kalai–Bangosar route. The boulder contains a rock shelter facing west toward the main track (Fig.9.). The shelter interior measures 6.5 m in width and 2.5 m in height, and at its centre a carved panel of 2.5 m in width and 1.2 m in height features a sequence of five haloed Bodhisattvas rendered in varying sizes and poses (Fig. 10). The figures decrease in size from left to right, and although all are in a poor state of preservation, their stylistic attributes strongly reflect the artistic traditions of Kushan-period Gandhara and Uddiyana (Khan 2018: 164-165).

The first figure, located at the extreme left, is a standing Bodhisattva now too damaged for detailed identification. Unlike the others, it is depicted not as a fully chiseled figure but in contour outline with interior dotted markings. The image measures 60 cm in height and 30 cm in width, and appears to show the Bodhisattva with outstretched arms, possibly holding a beaded garland in the right hand and a pilgrim's staff in the left.

The second figure represents a Padmapāṇi Bodhisattva seated on a throne, though much of it has been defaced. Measuring 85 cm high and 55 cm wide, the figure is rendered in *lalitāsana*: the right leg is crossed over the left, which hangs downward. The left-hand rests upon the knee of the pendant leg, grasping a pilgrim's staff, while the raised right hand touches the cheek in a characteristic pensive pose.

The third figure is also a Padmapāṇi Bodhisattva seated on a low throne, similarly, depicted in *lalitāsana*, though in this case the left foot rests upon the right, which serves as the pendant leg. The right-hand rests either on the leg or in the lap, while the left hand likely holds a lotus or pilgrim's staff. This figure, more modest in scale, measures 65 cm in height and 45 cm in width.

The fourth Bodhisattva, largely effaced, measures 40 cm high and 30 cm wide. He is seated on a throne in *dhyānamudrā*, with hands joined in

the lap. The posture appears close to a full lotus position, with the feet placed upon opposite thighs.

The fifth and smallest image, measuring 36×36 cm, is again a representation of Padmapāṇi, executed in the stylistic tradition of the second figure but now heavily damaged. The Bodhisattva is shown seated on a lotus throne, with the right foot placed over the left pendant leg. The right hand appears to touch the cheek in a pensive gesture, while the left hand rests upon the knee.

2.5 Bangosar Carving–2

Bangosar Carving–2 (Fig. 11) was recorded by Samad, Khan (2016: 8) and Khan (2018: 166). It is situated slightly upslope from the first carving in Bangosar village, at 34.610710 N and 72.385308 E, at an elevation of 1024 m. The carving is executed on a rectangular boulder set within the settlement area, forming part of the same cluster of Buddhist devotional rock art that characterizes this locality.

A niche measuring 54×37 cm has been carved into the boulder to accommodate the image of a standing Bodhisattva, whose surviving form measures 47 cm in height and 26 cm in width. The figure is now heavily defaced, yet its original posture can still be discerned: the Bodhisattva stands frontally with arms hanging down on either side. It is likely that he once held a beaded garland in his right hand and a pilgrim's staff in his left, a common attribute pairing in Gandharan Buddhist iconography. The carved surface, approximately 2×1.5 feet in size, has suffered significant deterioration, leaving only faint traces of the original engraved features (Khan 2018: 166). Despite its damaged condition, the carving holds considerable archaeological value.

2.6 Bangosar Carving–3

Bangosar Carving–3 is located close to the earlier two carvings, at 34.610699 N and 72.384934 E, at an elevation of 1009 m, positioned along the Bangosar–Ramanrai route in the northern part of Bangosar village. The carving is executed on the southern face of a large boulder, where a roughly square niche measuring approximately 1.4×1.3 m has been fashioned to contain two Bodhisattva figures (Fig. 12). Although the panel is now damaged, the surviving sculptural forms clearly reflect the Buddhist artistic tradition that characterizes this cluster of carvings. The site was reported by

Olivieri (1994: 468-473), by Filigenzi (2015: 115, 116 & 236), by Samad, Khan (2016: 8), and Khan (2018: 166-167), whereas conservation activities on this carving were undertaken within the framework of the British Council Cultural Protection Fund (CPF) project.

Within the niche, two haloed Bodhisattvas are depicted side by side—one seated on the left and the other standing on the right. Their faces are severely defaced, but their ornamental crowns, jeweled diadems, and other iconographic elements remain partly visible. Both figures appear to wear their hair braided to one side, or perhaps the decorated band of the diadem rests across the right shoulder. They are shown dressed in the Buddhist dhoti, with their torsos left bare in the conventional manner of Gandharan and Uddiyana art. Such stylistic features suggest a date within the Kushan period, consistent with similar carvings in the surrounding region.

The seated figure on the left represents a Padmapāṇi Bodhisattva, portrayed in a serene and regal *lalitāsana* pose. Measuring about 1.3 m in height and 0.8 m in width, the Bodhisattva sits upon a high, undecorated throne resting on a stylized lotus base. His right leg is crossed over the left, which hangs down as the pendant leg, its toes lightly touching the lotus flower below. The left arm is extended, with the hand resting upon the knee of the pendant leg and likely holding a pilgrim's staff raised above the shoulder. The right hand is lifted toward the cheek in the well-known pensive gesture, emphasizing a meditative and contemplative expression.

The standing figure to the right, identified as Maitreya, is carved in a graceful *tribhaṅga* posture on a lotus base. Measuring 1.3 m high and 0.7 m wide, Maitreya holds a bunch of flowers in his outstretched right hand, while his left hand carries a spout-less *kamaṇḍalu*, symbolizing his ascetic qualities and future role as the Buddha-to-come (Khan 2018: 166-167).

2.7 Ilam Kalai

Ilam Kalai is located at 34.616348 N and 72.364372 E, at an elevation of 1884 m a.s.l., in the upper basin of Mount Ilam. The site is accessible via a non-metalled jeepable road branching northward near the confluence close to Char village on the Jawkhela–Jowar road. The small village of Ilam is situated on a bulldozed archaeological site (Khan 2018: 195–196). Archaeological evidence at the site is limited and includes a few structural remains (Fig. 14), small potsherds scattered in cultivated fields, and a long series of stone steps constructed at various locations. More notable

discoveries include a small number of punch-marked coins reportedly found by a local elder, as well as sculptures that were allegedly looted by antique dealers from Ilam village (Khan 2018: 195–196). Earlier, several inscriptions from Ilam village were reported by Senart (1894: 334) and Stein (1898: 19), while Rehman (1996: 36) and Khattak (1997: 64–65) also documented a Buddhist site along the route to Ilam village.

Historically, Ilam has been one of the most frequently discussed sites by scholars. It has been identified as a sacred place since prehistoric times (Tucci 1977: 27; Olivieri 1996: 68–69) and as a sacred Hindu site from the Vedic period, where Ramtakht (Fig.13.) was believed to have been located (Court 1839: 312; Stein 1898: 21–22). Ilam has also been recorded in Alexander historiography as Mount Meros (Abbott 1854: 350–353) or as a probable location of Aornos (Tucci 1977: 52–55; Olivieri 1996: 58, 64–70; Coloru, Olivieri 2019). Furthermore, the site has been identified under various names by historical sources: as Mount Hila or Hilo by Chinese pilgrims (Court 1839: 312), Mount Ilo by Orgyan-pa (Tucci 1940: 52), and Mount Yalom Pelom by sTag tsan ras pa (Tucci 1940: 79).

2.8 Juro Stupa (Alaksar)

The site of Alaksar is located near Ilam village at 34.618723 N and 72.366580 E, at an altitude of 2331 m a.s.l. The structural remains at Alaksar are now heavily damaged, with only fragmentary evidence marking their former presence (Khan 2018: 204). The site was previously reported by Stein (1930: 99) during his identification of sites around Jobra village. Another stupa site of particular importance is situated in a small village known as Juro, near the Alaksar peak of Mount Ilam (Fig. 13). During the 2014–15 field campaign, the Juro stupa site was occupied by a security forces check-post. As a result, detailed photographic documentation of the site was restricted due to security considerations. This Buddhist stupa complex comprises a principal cruciform stupa (Fig. 15), several votive stupas adjacent to the main structure, and monastic complexes (Fig. 16) located at various points across the site (Khan 2018: 179).

The cruciform stupa is situated at the center of the site and rests on a double, or possibly triple, base. The main stupa is square in plan, measuring approximately 30 m on each side. The dome of the stupa was most likely also square in form; however, the exact shape of the drum is difficult to determine, as it has been severely damaged by illegal excavations, with stone blocks scattered across its surface. Stairways

providing access to the base are present on all four cardinal sides. Two monasteries are located to the west of the main stupa complex, both of which are extensively damaged due to weathering and illicit digging. Additional architectural fragments are visible along nearly every ridge of the hill and at the corners of the site.

3. Conclusions

The Buddhist-period sites of the Malakpur area collectively demonstrate that this region formed a major religious, artistic, and monastic landscape of ancient Uddiyana. They reflect sustained Buddhist activity, particularly during the Kushan period, and close cultural and architectural links with the Swat Valley and wider Gandhara region. Despite severe damage caused by natural decay, illicit diggings, agricultural encroachment, and modern development, these sites retain substantial archaeological and historical value. Their integrated study highlights Malakpur's importance within regional pilgrimage networks and underscores the urgent need for systematic documentation, protection, and conservation to preserve this significant component of Pakistan's Buddhist heritage.

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Fig. 2 - Map of District Buner Showing Concerned Archaeological Sites.



Fig. 3 - Kafero Dherai Stupa (Showing Flight of Steps).



Fig. 4 - Kafero Dherai Stupa (showing base and drum).



Fig. 5 - Ramanrai Stupa Complex.



Fig. 6 - Parts of Monastic Complex at Ramanrai.



Fig. 7 - Visible drum of Gogai Stupa.



Fig. 8 - Exposed structures near Gogai Stupa.



Fig. 9 - Rock-shelter Bangosar Carving-1.



Fig. 10 - A general view of Bangosar Carving-1.



Fig. 11 - General View of Bangosar Carving-2.



Fig. 12 - General View of Bangosar Carving-3.

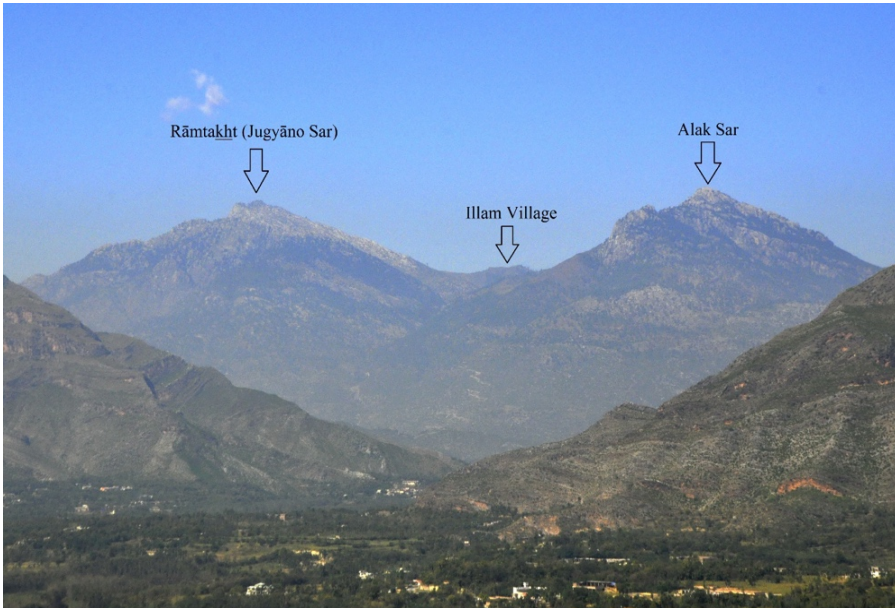


Fig. 13 - Ilam Mountain (Showing Ramtakht, Ilam Village Site, and Alaksar Site).



Fig. 14 - Exposed Structures at Ilam Village Site.



Fig. 15 - Parts of the base and drum of Juro Stupa.



Fig. 16 - Scattered structures at Juro Stupa Site.