

**Mostly fakes.
Stelae representing Bodhisattvas
from a collection of confiscated Gandharan material**

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Abstract

This article presents some previously unpublished Gandharan pieces depicting Bodhisattvas from a collection of material confiscated by the Department of Archaeology and Museums in Islamabad in collaboration with the Customs of Pakistan, Directorate General of Intelligence & Investigation-FBR-Regional Office, Sukkur. The confiscated material comprises more than eleven hundred cultural items, including painted ceramics from Balochistan, ceramics from the Islamic period, glazed tiles, detached Buddha heads, statues of Buddhas in different postures and in different media (schist, stucco, terracotta, and bronze), and other Gandharan objects (friezes, panels, stupa models, relic caskets). Some pieces, including some of those presented in this article, are fakes. The article also contains a brief note on the ethical issues related to these materials, and a possible dating and provenance of the few authentic pieces.

Keywords: Gandhara, looting, forgeries, Bodhisattva.

1. Illicit trade in cultural goods: control issues and problems in Pakistan

The archaeological research activities conducted before and after independence on Pakistani soil have contributed much to understanding the rich and diverse cultural profile of this region. Despite the fact that the relevant agencies and departments, including UNESCO and UNODC, have provided considerable legislation at both national and international levels, the illegal trade in cultural goods has remained one of the main obstacles to the preservation and adequate protection of our country's rich cultural heritage. However, a major contribution can be seen in the enormous efforts of the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums to control the illegal trade in Pakistan's cultural heritage and recover smuggled cultural heritage under the 1970 UNESCO Convention.

The *Antiquities Act* of 1975 of the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums provides the guidelines and procedures for

adequate protection of the country's cultural heritage. According to Section 13-A of this law, the ownership of all buried antiquities belongs to the Federal Government; therefore, according to Section 29, no one may carry out or undertake archaeological explorations and excavations without a licence issued by the Director General of the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums. Export of antiquities is also prohibited, unless authorised by the Director General, under Section 26, just as the movement/trafficking of any antiquities is restricted under Section 27 of the Antiquities Act, 1975. Further, there is a prohibition on making 'replicas' of antiquities and penalties may be imposed for counterfeiting antiquities under Section 24 of the *Antiquities Act*, 1975. Furthermore, no person may deal in antiquities without the permission granted by the Director General of Archaeology and Museums under Section 25. The Director-General or any officer duly authorised by him on his behalf may arrest without warrant any person in respect of whom there are reasonable grounds for believing that he has committed an offence under various clauses of the *Antiquities Act*, 1975, and may also prosecute him to appear before the Magistrate under section 34. Every antiquity confiscated or forfeited under this Act shall be handed over to the Director General of Archaeology and Museums for safekeeping, preservation, and protection under Section 35 of this Act. The *Customs Act* of 1969 provides for restrictions on the import and export of these types of objects and seized objects are disposed of by depositing them with the heads of the departments concerned. However, these regulations are not sufficient to control the illicit trade in cultural and archaeological objects. There is an organised smuggling network associated with international art markets.

Apart from the problem of smuggling and illegal export of antiquities from our country, another major problem is the preparation of illegal replicas of antiquities, especially Gandharan objects. A 'replica' is a patently new reproduction, often in a different material, of the original, therefore there should always be a clear distinction between 'authentic' and a 'copy'.¹

¹ Gandharan replicas, for example, are produced using two different techniques. The first consists of using moulds, made of cement, stucco, terracotta and plaster of Paris. The second technique involves carving Buddha sculptures on stones of the same lithotype used in ancient workshops. The latter technique is used to produce replicas of Buddha statues to pass off as authentic pieces, such as some of the pieces illustrated in this article.

2. A confiscated Gandharan “collection”

During 2013 the Customs authorities of Directorate General of Intelligence & Investigation-FBR-Regional Office, Sukkur, intercepted a shipment containing antiquities (1162 pieces) packed in 28 wooden crates that were being transported from Islamabad to Karachi. After examination of the shipment by experts from the Department of Archaeology and Museums in Islamabad, it emerged that the collection held constituted some very important and unique artefacts, mainly from Gandhara. These artefacts fall into the following categories:

- (a) Buddha and Bodhisattva images in different materials: schist, stucco, bronze and terracotta.
- (b) Other objects in “Gandharan style” such as friezes, panels, stupa models, stupa relic caskets, 1st to 5th century CE.
- (c) Painted ceramics from Balochistan, 3rd to 2nd millennium BC.
- (d) Pottery from the Islamic period, glazed tiles and other material from the 11th-15th centuries CE.

This study confirms that the Bodhisattvas sculptures mentioned in this article as no. 1, 3, 6, 7, 8 and 10 appear to be fake. After all, the very quality of the pieces speaks for itself; even a child would realise that these are fake patents and bad ones.

Beyond the control of materials and territory, it is particularly important that materials such as these illustrated below are routinely confiscated by the different law enforcement and customs control forces. An element equally important as the theft and despoliation of Pakistan’s archaeological and artistic heritage (conducted by international elements now beginning to be well known), is that of the intoxication of the antiquities market with pieces that are patently fake like many of those featured in this catalogue. Maybe the reader will want to ask what the reason for concern on the part of the authorities about this is, since after all it concerns a private market, mostly carried out on foreign “theatres”, whose reputation is being increasingly devalued day by day. Authorities should look favourably on the phenomenon of devaluation of this market, if it were not for the fact, highly serious from the point of view of scientific ethics, that many scholars, even world-renowned ones, use materials from the antiquarian market for publications that leave the question of the provenance and non-genuinity of the pieces seriously unexplored. This

factor, although also less and less frequent (new generations of scholars are increasingly attentive to these ethical aspects fortunately) in fact intoxicates scientific research, since so many elaborations and considerations, so many interpretive models are produced on the basis of pieces that are not authentic. This phenomenon, while still present, is fortunately beginning to be, shall we say, recessive at least as far as works of art are concerned, while it continues undaunted on coin collections, epigraphs and even manuscripts, both Buddhist ones and those of the mediaeval and pre-modern periods.²

Let this brief note therefore serve as a warning to all those who continue to think up their archaeological “novelties” not through serious and strenuous research done in legal archaeological excavation, but through comfortable chats sitting in the backrooms and warehouses of art dealers.

3. Catalogue

No. 1

Schist

53 x 32 cm

Stele

Seated Bodhisattva

Right side (proper) of the base is broken. Nimbus broken and recomposed.



The bejewelled B. is represented seated in *padmasana* and *dhyanamudra*. Base with seated Buddha in *padmasana* and *dhyanamudra*. flanked by two worshippers with folded hands. The *uttariya* is worn in the narrow mode across the lap and lies with a thicker edge on the left arm, below the left elbow an end rests on the seat and on part of its leg. The *paridhana* is as usual. On the turban band meet at a large central bead beneath a fantail crest with pointed conical ornament and a summarily executed vertical lop of cloth. The slanting and prominent uneven eyes under curved and distinct edges for eyebrows and *urna* are prominent between the edges of eyebrows.

² These often escape the attention of vigilant authorities. Indeed, remember that an object, building, etc., is declared as “ancient” and thus legally protected when it has been in existence for more than 70 to 100 years (depending on legislation). A Persian manuscript from the 17th century should therefore be protected as a Gandhari manuscript from the 1st century CE.

No. 2

Schist

34 x 23 cm

Stele

Seated Bodhisattva

Portions of the nimbus and (proper) left shoulder are missing.



The bejewelled B. is represented seated in *padmasana* and *dhyanamudra*. The base is decorated with a geometric design, with the right part of halo broken and missing. The turban has flat bands with beaded and undulated motifs emerging on each side from the lotus cup beside a large globular central bead. The slanting and prominent serene eyes under curved and distinct edges for eyebrows with lids. At the bridge of the nose between eyebrows is a prominent *urna*. Well-shaped nose and upper lip covered with moustache. Bodhisattva wears a chain necklace with a horizontal thick (exagon-section) ending. The *uttariya* is in the wide mode, one end over the right thigh on the left arm with another tasseled, end emerging from under the broad shoulder loop and over the left forearm onto the thigh.

No. 3

Schist

38 x 27 cm

Stele

Seated Bodhisattva Maitreya

Head, long earlobe and nimbus are broken on the (proper) right side.



The bejewelled B. is represented seated in *padmasana* with hands holding a *kamandalu*, on a plain base. The oval head with slanting open eyes with curved eyebrows and urna is prominent between edges of eyebrows on the bit narrow forehead. Nose is in good shape with little damage near the nostril. Lips are well shaped, upper lip is a bit protruding and chin is prominent. The turban has a flat retaining band with beading and undulating motifs in between emerging on each side and a large central bead. Under the turban hairs are shown on the upper portion of forehead. The *uttariya* is worn and a thicker edge on the left arm passes wholly into the shoulder loop

and below it a length emerges to fall onto the left thigh. The amulet chord has cylindrical boxes. The water pot neck is held between two fingers of the right hand.

No. 4

Schist

122 x 50 cm

Statue-stele

Standing Bodhisattva

Both forearms, portions of feet and top portion of the nimbus are missing.

The bejewelled B. wearing beautiful drapery, stands on a pedestal/base carved with images of worshipers. The *uttariya* is in narrow mode and covers the upper left arm like a short sleeve with a thicker lower edge drawn into the shoulder loop from which a thin length emerges to pass over the forearm to join a wide fall of drapery behind. The usual *paridhana* with a girdle and projecting drapery and its folds are prominently ridged and terraced and formed strips on the left broken arm in *abhayamudra* pose. The head is oval or round, the face rather flat and broad with prominent eyes, the shaped lips are sharply cut, the moustache curves from beside a bare upper lip and the chin is prominent. The turban has a ribbed band and a twisted edge of material. A bead necklace of multiple strands has terminals of crossed-hatched cylinders.



No. 5

Schist

26 x 17 cm

Stele (portable)

Seated Bodhisattva

The bejewelled B. is represented seated on a high lotus throne in *padmasana* and *dhyanamudra*. The *uttariya* is in the wide mode, one end over the right thigh on the left arm with another tasseled, the end emerging from under the broad shoulder loop and over the left forearm onto the thigh. The turban has a flat retaining band with beading and undulating motifs in between emerging on each side and a large central bead. Eyes are open and the left one is damaged with a nose also damaged around the nostril.



No. 6

Schist

122 cm x 58 cm

Stele

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

The bejewelled B. is seated cross-legged on a highly decorated pedestal (bands with geometrical/geometric-floral designs); feet are placed on a stool. Strangely, the B. features the *dharmachakramudra*, A seated Amitabha Buddha is shown on the turban of B. Undulated hair with oval shaped face and narrow forehead with curved eyebrows and *urna* is prominent between the edges of eyebrows. Small slanting eyes and nose is thin in shape with wide nostrils. The shaped lips are sharply cut, the depressed moustache curve from beside a bare upper lip and the chin is prominent. The *uttariya* features thick undulating and tasseled length falling from under the elbow onto the left leg and touches the heel of the right foot. The *paridhana* is worn with a girdle and projecting drapery and its folds are prominently ridged and terraced.



No. 7

Schist

101 cm x 39 cm

Statue-stele

Standing Bodhisattva Maitreya

Right (proper) arm missing.

The bejewelled B. is represented as standing on a pedestal or base (supported by two Gandharan-Corinthians pilasters framing a scene of the adoration of the relics). The *uttariya* covers the left shoulder with a thicker lower edge (dangling from the right broken hand). The *paridhana* features girdles, projecting drapery joins the water pot. Edge of *paridhana* is dangling between the legs of the statue. Behind the head is a plain rounded halo, the long oval face with perfect nose and wavy moustache and full rounded chin. Eyes are slanting, half open with low rounded lids. Over the raised *urna*, the hair is in short corkscrew curls and falls on the shoulders and the chignon is bumpy.



No. 8

Schist

114 cm x 38 cm

Statue-stele

Standing Bodhisattva Maitreya

Right (proper) arm missing.

The bejewelled B. is represented as standing on a pedestal or base (supported by two Gandharan-Corinthians pilasters framing a supporting Atlas). For the general description see above. Bodhisattva no. 8 features the pilgrim-chord, and plan collar appears between the chain of the necklace and amulet chord with three cylindrical boxes is passing under the necklace. Face is oval with smooth planes slopping beneath them are unevenly long prominent eyes with sharply cut lids forming almost slits over the rounded eyeballs. The nose is well shaped with a wavy thin moustache. Over the



raised *urna* the hair is in undulating form and falls on the shoulders and the chignon is bumpy. Behind the head is a rounded halo.

No. 9

Schist

50 cm x 27 cm

Stele (small size)

Bodhisattva

B. is seated on a throne or base in *padmasana* and *dhyanamudra* (the tips of both thumbs are touching one another). The throne is supported by two Gandharan-Corinthians pilasters framing two worshipers at the sides of a fire altar.



The turban of bodhisattva has flat bands with beaded and undulating motifs and large central globular central bead. The face is oval with long concave ears, and narrow oblique eyes with sharply cut lids set back under curving edges for eyebrows. Nose is damaged, the curving moustache in relief has covered the upper lip under the damaged nostril. Halo is rounded and slightly damaged from the left side of the back of the head. The *uttariya* is worn in the narrow mode across the lap and lies with a thicker edge on the left arm, below the left elbow an end rests on the seat and on part of its leg.

No. 10

Schist

39 cm x 13 cm

Stele (portable)

Standing Bodhisattva Maitreya

Right (proper) arm missing.

The bejewelled B. (holding the *kamandalu*) is standing on a base or pedestal supported by two Gandharan-Corinthians pilasters framing a supporting Atlans. The *uttariya* covers the left shoulder with a thicker lower edge, while it is also dangling from the right broken hand. The *paridhana* with girdles, pointed ends, hangs



between the two legs. The drapery folds are in broad, flat strips and terraced. The turban has a flat retaining band with beading and undulating motifs and hairs are coming out on the upper portion of the forehead under the turban and falling on the shoulders. The face is oval and narrow oblique eyes with sharply cut lids set back under curving edges for eyebrows. Pointed *urna* is on the narrow forehead between edge eyebrows. Nose is in perfect shape with a moustache on the upper lip.

4. Area of provenance, style and chronology of the stelae

A large number of Buddhist sites in Gandhara have been investigated, but it is very unfortunate that the materials, particularly the sculptures recovered from these sites, have been studied according to their style or iconography rather than their stratigraphic and historical context³ (with exceptions, such as Butkara I, Saidu Sharif I, Barikot,⁴ Bhamala⁵ and Jinawali-dheri,⁶ Aziz Dheri⁷). Moreover, there are very few dates inscribed on the Gandhara sculptures. For an update of the current hypothesis and chronology see Baums 2018, Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018, Olivieri 2022.

The style of these stelae is pretty consistent. The hair is indicated in most cases by the vertical wavy, pitted, and parallel grooves, with the *urna* on the forehead. The faces are usually fleshy, broad but also oval shaped with close eyes under the sharp-edged eyebrows and the lids with very sharp edges, rather relatively thin mouth, and a full chin. The rounded forehead and thick moustache are also visible and prominent. The drapery of figures in the collection shows distinct features. The folds are usually narrow; in ridges and folds, and the over-ropes cover both shoulder of image. There is no doubt that the perpetrators of the forgeries in this collection have drawn on a sculptural typology, which today, thanks in part to the findings

³ We refer here, amongst many others, to Ali and Qazi 2008, Dar 1984, Harle 1986, Ingholt 1957, Marshall 1951, Id. 1960, Rowland 1936, Schmidt 1990, Sehrai 1991, Zwalf 1979, Id. 1996.

⁴ Brancaccio and Behrendt 2006, Olivieri 2019, Id. 2021, Olivieri Vidale et al. 2006, Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018. See also Callieri 2011. Olivieri et al. 2019,

⁵ For Bhamala see the many publications directed by Abdul Samad and various contributors appeared in several Pakistani research journals in the last 10 years (e.g. Hameed et al. 2018).

⁶ Bahadar et al. 2008.

⁷ Nasim Khan 2010.

in Swat, Barikot, but also in the past at Shaikhan-dheri, and other urban sites, is increasingly well known and better studied (see e.g., Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018). For the forgers it is a sculptural typology that comes to meet the obvious difficulties that a narrative relief poses instead. This is for a number of reasons, firstly iconographic simplicity (so to speak), secondly structural simplicity. Imitating a stele with a single figure poses far fewer problems, and less potential for error for the forger. The small size of these stelae also poses fewer problems for finding the raw material, a good schist, which as ancient sculptors knew, is not always easy to find, and today less so than in ancient times (see Olivieri 2022).

The few authentic materials of the confiscated collection presented here, are well comparable with materials reported from different Gandhāra sites in the Peshawar Valley Malakand (and from Swat also), dated between the mid-2nd and the 4th centuries CE. Based on recent studies of frontal stelae from Swat and other areas of Gandhara (Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018: 73-79), for the pieces presented here we can assume a more precise chronology focused on the second half of the 3rd century or the beginning of the 4th century CE.

5. Conclusions: some inputs for the future

Late Gandharan Bodhisattva imagery reflects not only artistic force but a compound interchange of influences from which the Buddhist artistic traditions evolved. These images (or better the original stelae from which most these pieces “derive”) can provide a means of opportunities for reflection on the religious achievements of Buddhism, their spiritual faith and the artistic vision of the sculptors at the dawn of Mahayana.

Finally, once again a warning. Pakistan no longer wants to be regarded as an open pit mine where it can illegally dig and export at will. It never has been, and it does not want to be for the future. Since Independence when Pakistan inherited the ASI *Ancient Monument Preservation Act* (1904) and our Country has had a clear and defined legal apparatus. The *Antiquity Act* of 1975, which is still valid, together with post-2011 Provincial laws (post-18th Constitutional Amendment), are extremely valid tools that both Federal and Provincial authorities have at their disposal to crush this “nefarious traffic” as Marc Aurel Stein called it back in the early 20th century.

If this is the task of archaeological authorities and implementation forces, the task of scholars will henceforth be to refuse to publish and study

material of dubious provenance, knowing that their scholarly works may have the effect of not only supporting the economic traffic of antiquarians, but also contributing to intoxicating research with the blind and supine publication of fake materiel.

Scientific research is something else, and certainly the last thing it can and should do is to propose false data for false conclusions. There is really no need for that.

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