

## **Discovery of the Earliest Monumental *Parinirvāṇa* from Bhamāla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan)**

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### **Abstract**

*Recent archaeological excavations at Bhamāla have brought to light many important discoveries in the history of Buddhist art and architecture. One of these is the parinirvāṇa statue of Buddha measuring 14 meters in length. Radiocarbon dates of the charcoal /charred wood recovered from inside the terracotta sculptures discovered inside the parinirvāṇa chamber place the construction of the structure to around the third century CE. This represents the earliest example of a monumental parinirvāṇa image and provides new evidence that must be considered when discussing the origin of monumental parinirvāṇa images in South and Central Asia.*

**Keywords:** Bhamala, *parinirvāṇa*, Taxila, Ajantā, Tapa Sardar, Polonnaruwa

### **1. Parinirvāṇas**

The *parinirvāṇa*, or great salvation, was an important event in the life of the Buddha that Gandhāran sculptors depicted with religious zeal in elegantly carved stone or molded stucco. According to various traditions, the Buddha is said to have died in 480 or 483 BC at the age of 80. He, along with his disciple Ānanda, entered at last the country of Kuśinagara and selected a mango grove for his stay. During his stay the Buddha was offered meat and, while eating it, he suffered a calcinatory attack and became very weak and was even unable to move (Richard 2011). Thus, he departed during the last hour of the night and there assembled, hundreds of his followers including Mahākaśyapa, Ānanda and Subhadra to witness the event (Ali and Qazi 2008: 253). His body was cremated according to the wish he made, which was known to Ānanda, before his death. Three major events took place before his death including the conversion of Subhadra, the offering of food by

Chundas, and the last sermon (Sherrier 1980: 211; Yamamoto 1973: 19; Hameed 2018: 59-60).

In his last sermon, the Buddha stressed upon the *triratna* (Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha) and clearly defined the importance of *nirvāṇa* and other modes of discipline. After his cremation, a dispute arose among seven different states over the division of his relics, which was finally solved by a Brahman named Drona who divided the relics into eight equal parts (Sherrier 1980: 216).

It was this great event, the *parinirvāṇa*, that led to the construction of stupas to enshrine the Buddha's relics after they had been divided into eight parts (Sherrier 1980: 210). But it is one of the strangest anomalies in Buddhist iconography that, except for Gandhāra, where it was elaborately depicted, the death of the Śākyamūni was, at least in this early period, neglected by Buddhist societies elsewhere (Sherrier, 1980: 210). The reason for this delay, according to most of the scholars, was due to the presence of stupas, which from the beginning functioned as symbol of the essence and the last step of the Buddha's career. As they contained relics, stupas were considered representative of the Buddha himself and, as such, a part of Buddha that remained in the world after the *parinirvāṇa* (Ebert 1980: 219-220).

The early depiction of the *parinirvāṇa* in Sanchi and Bhārhut is exclusively in the form of stupas. But at Amrāvati the stupa cult was broken in favour of a narrative sequence from the *Parinirvāṇasūtra* (Gosh and Sarkar 1964-1965: 168). This example can be seen from Amrāvati in the form of the empty seat of Buddha at the time when Buddha was not yet depicted in anthropomorphic form. This practice of depicting an empty bed can also be seen in the fifth century CE on seals from Mathurā as if it were the Gandhāran artists who finally placed the first anthropomorphic Buddha on the empty seat (Ebert 1980: 221-222; Gosh and Sarkar, 1964-1965: 168; Hameed 2018: 61).

Although the practice of depicting *parinirvāṇa* using an anthropomorphic form started in Gandhāra, the monumentalization of this formula was, until now, believed to have been first started much earlier by artists in India. This perception was based on depictions of monumental images at Ajantā and Kāsia, both of which are dated to the beginning of the fifth century CE, predating all other monumental *parinirvāṇa* statues found in the surrounding regions (Ebert 1980: 222). The monumental *parinirvāṇa* Buddha with a core of unbaked bricks,

reported from Chapel 63 at Tapa Sardār, near Ghazni in Afghānistān has been assigned to the eighth century CE (Antonini 2005: 325-326; Taddei 1974: 111). The one at Chui Valley, Kyrgyzstān is dated to the ninth century CE (Levi-Strauss and Lin 2004: 58). Monumental *parinirvāṇa* images at Dunhuang, China and Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka were created in the eleventh century CE (Levi-Strauss and Lin 2004: fig. 3). However, the discovery of the colossal size *parinirvāṇa* statue from Bhamāla (much earlier in date) has confirmed that the *parinirvāṇa* in both small and monumental form first appeared in Gandhāra and later, this idea disseminated to other regions (Samad et al. 2017a; Samad et al. 2017b). Bhamāla, a small but important Buddhist establishment (Fig. 1) lies between 72°47'58.31"E longitude and 33°49'13.59"N latitude. The site is located on the right bank of the Haro River in the Khānpur valley (an offshoot of the Taxila Valley) (Samad et al. 2017; Hameed 2018: 1).

## **2. Architecture and other features of monumental *parinirvāṇas***

### *Previous data*

The *parinirvāṇa*, being one of the most significant events in the life of the Buddha, was an important subject for artists even before the appearance either in small or monumental depictions of the scene. This event was first represented in the abstract by the stupa itself and later with an empty bed (Ebert 1980: 221-222). The representation of this event with an empty bed is found on fifth century CE seals from Mathurā, which show that abstract symbolic representations continued even after depictions of the *Parinirvāṇa* scene using human forms of the Buddha and his disciples had already appeared (Ebert 1980: 221-222; Hameed 2018: 60).

Artists in Gandhāra created small stone and stucco panels depicting the *Parinirvāṇa* and other scenes in the life of the Buddha to adorn stupas from the very beginning (first century CE) (Ebert 1980: 221). This indicates that the followers of the Buddhist *Dharma* in this region were not satisfied merely with symbolic worship for their religious satisfaction. Instead, they were always more inclined towards visual representations of important events.

The idea of making monumental statues representing the *Parinirvāṇa* scene provided with separate pathway for circumambulation or *pradakshina*, must have been taken from religious texts like the Mahāyāna *Parinirvāṇa* sutras, which according to Dehejia, were composed as early as first century CE (Dehejia 1997: 213). According to the Mahayana *Parinirvāṇa*-sutras, Mahākaśyapa, after reaching Kushinara, walked three times around the pyre in *pradakshina* and paid homage to the Buddha (Sherrier 1980: 212; Yamamoto 1973). Monumental *Parinirvāṇa* statues, including that of Adzhina Tepe, Tapa Sardār and Bhamāla, are also provided with separate *pradakshina* paths.

### *Bhamāla*

At Bhamāla, one *pradakshina* path would have been outside of the *Parinirvāṇa* chamber. When accessing the chamber itself the devotees would have entered from the northern entrance and proceeded from the foot of the image to the head and then exit from the southern entrance. The low ledge of stone slabs that runs along the front of the image may have been for guiding the devotees along the front of the image as it runs along the entire chamber in a north-south direction. There is a central entrance as well, which may have been for providing light or a central access/exit area. The interior walls of the chamber were originally decorated with terracotta sculptures of devotees mourning the death of the Buddha and it is not unlikely that devotees would also view and venerate these images, so it is possible that there were multiple pathways to access and exit the chamber and both simple and complex forms of *parikrama* or *pradakshina*.

The *parinirvāṇa* statue at Bhamāla (Pl. 1, Figs. 2 -3) is unique in terms of material. It is made of *kanjur* stone covered with painted plaster, a technique that was extensively used in architecture in the Gandhāra region. To our knowledge, no other Buddha image made of this material has yet been reported from the South Asian subcontinent. The colossal image of the Buddha was depicted reclining on its right side in a north-south direction with the head to the south and facing to the east toward the main Stupa A. The statue was badly damaged due to in part to the original collapse of the building in antiquity and possibly ancient looting of the structure, as well as by more recent illegal

digging. The surviving remnants of this statue that are still in situ include, the pillow, the lower half of the body, including the draped right leg and part of the lower left leg, as well as the right foot and part of the left foot. These fragments along with loose kanjur pieces with traces of carvings that can be linked to the ear and face indicate that the head was massive that the overall image would have been quite impressive. Using the model of the better preserved but much smaller image of a stucco *parinirvāṇa* image found by Marshall on Stupa A, a hypothetical reconstruction of the full image has been presented in Fig. 4. It is unlikely that it will be possible to ever reconstruct the original image from the fallen pieces but using this model it would indicate that the interior height of the image, including the platform, was around 6 m or possibly even higher. To construct this type of building and image would have required considerable resources and architectural skill. More important however is the motivation to demonstrate devotion by making such a monumental image for worship and adoration. This would have been the largest image of its kind at the time and must have attracted a lot of attention from the general population.

It is important to note that the *parinirvāṇa* was also replicated at Bhamāla in other forms. A stucco panel (Pl. 2) was reported by Marshall from main stupa A, and three more panels (Pls 3-5) were recently found during our last field season, attached to the drum of main stupa B. Thus, at Bhamāla were have the most extensive number of *parinirvāṇa* depictions in the entire Gandhāra region.

The monumental *parinirvāṇa* image at Bhamāla is accommodated in a long rectangular chamber (Fig. 3b., Pl. 6), measuring 22.72 m north-south in length and 7.56 m east-west in width. Access to the chamber is provided by three openings on the eastern side. The first and second entrances from north to south are of the same size, both measuring 2.20 m in width while the third and southern-most entrance is slightly wider and measures 2.30 m. The entire chamber was constructed with semi-ashlar masonry with double ashlar courses between the large diapers, and with small flat stones inserted between the squared ashlar to level-up the beds. The interior and exterior walls were originally covered with a thick layer of lime plaster that was probably left plain white. A floor level made of lime mortar mixed with pebbles was exposed at a depth of 240 cm below the surface level. The chamber was solely built to house the *parinirvāṇa*

statue measuring over 14 m in length. For this purpose, a long platform measuring 15.7 m in length was constructed inside the chamber in a north-south direction against the west wall. The height of the platform is approximately one metre. The facing of the platform is also semi-ashlar masonry with two additional rows made of *kanjur* covered with lime plaster at the top that form the bed or mat on which the Buddha image is reclining with the head to the south and facing the main stupa. The platform has two niches (Pls 7, 8) constructed approximately 0.7 m from each end. On the south end the niche would have been under the edge of the pillow and the north niche is positioned under the ankles of the image. A low ledge measuring 0.45 m in width and made of stone slabs was constructed along the front of the platform in a north-south direction that may have been associated with circumambulation or *pradakshina*. In addition, low stone platforms were also exposed along the southern and northern walls inside the chamber to accommodate terracotta sculptures. Remnants of such sculptures were discovered during the excavation on the northern, northwestern, southern and southeastern corners of the chamber (Hameed 2018; Hameed et al. 2019).

The *parinirvāṇa* chamber was probably covered with a wooden roof based on the evidence from a layer of charcoal, iron nails and clumps of iron fittings discovered from inside the chamber. Although the roof may have collapsed with burning, there is no evidence for burning on the terracotta sculptures inside the chamber or on the plaster decoration covering the *parinirvāṇa* image. There is no evidence suggesting a second story was found, although a staircase leading to the roof was discovered outside the chamber on the northern side.

### **3. Chronology of monumental *parinirvāṇas***

#### *Previous data*

As mentioned earlier, the stone/stucco panels depicted with *parinirvāṇa* scene first appeared in Gandhāra, but the tradition of monumental *parinirvāṇa* was considered to have emerged first at Ajantā in India. Chronology of the monumental *parinirvāṇa* prior to the recent discovery at Bhamāla is given as under.

## Ajanta

The monumental *parinirvāṇa* image in cave 26 at Ajantā is dated to fifth century CE (Dehejia 1997: 207-10, 235). The site of Ajantā in Mahārashtra, India was founded in the first century BCE with two *chaityas* and a set of residential *vihāras* (Dehejia 1997). The extensive and vibrant sets of narrative murals for which the site is famous, were the result of a later concentrated phase of patronage, largely sponsored by aristocracy associated with Vākāṭaka ruling family, which took place in the fifth century CE (Dehejia 1997: 207-10, 235). Cave number 26 at Ajantā contains a 7.6 meter (25 feet) long *parinirvāṇa* statue of Buddha flanked by *Sāl* trees at either end. Seated figures of various monks, including Subhadra and Ānanda, are present while the standing feet of Mahākāśyapa are also visible. The fifth century CE date of cave 26 is confirmed by the elaborated rock-cut Sanskrit inscriptions on the façade of the right door, dedicating the cave to Buddhahadra, who is said to have exercised much influence with the feudatory Aśmaka king (Dehejia, 1997: 207-10, 235).

## Tapa Sardār, Bāmiyān and Adzhina Tepe

The *parinirvāṇa* images reported from Tapa Sardār, Bāmiyān, is assigned to the fifth – sixth century CE, while those reported from Tapa Sardār and Adzhina Tepe are dated to seventh – eighth century CE (Taddei 1974: 15-16).

According to Taddei and Verardi (1974: 15), the Adzhina Tepe and Tapa Sardār colossal *parinirvāṇa* scenes are contemporary to paintings at Bāmiyān, Afghanistan that represent the same event. However, the 7th – 8th century CE date of the former two scenes are likely somewhat off, since in the early 7th century CE, the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang reported seeing a 304.8 meter (1000 feet) long figure of Buddha lying in a sleeping position (obviously *Mahāparinirvāṇa*) at a convent nearby Bāmiyān (Beal, 2004: 51). As this *parinirvāṇa* image was well-established at the time of the pilgrims visit, it could be argued that it was likely to have been built earlier (so far we do not have data earlier than mid-sixth century CE) which would make it the same age as the famous monumental stone sculptures of Bāmiyān. Fitzsimmons is of the view that the stucco panel reported

from the Bhamāla main stupa A by Marshall was contemporary with Adzhina Tepe and Tapa Sardār (Fitzsimmons 2001: 47). However, he failed to take into consideration the numismatic evidence, as Marshall discovered coins dating to the later Kushān Period within the foundations of the stupa (Marshall 1951: 392-93). If Adzhina Tepe and Tapa Sardār were contemporary with Bhamāla main stupa A, then they should date to at least as early as the 5th century CE. This date is very similar to those provided by radiocarbon samples from the *Parinirvāṇa* chamber. It is supported by coins from the monastery area, which date from the later Kushāna (Kanishka II, Vasudeva I and II) Period (Hameed 2018). The radiocarbon dates of charcoal collected from the main stupa A top, and those collected from the debris inside the *parinirvāṇa* chamber also give the same 4th – 5th century CE date (Pl. 13-14) (see below).

#### Later monuments

The *parinirvāṇa* statue of Buddha from Chui Valley, Kyrgyzstan is dated to the ninth century CE (Levi-Strauss and Lin, 2004, fig. 3). Monumental *parinirvāṇa* images at Dunhuang, China was created in the eleventh century CE (Wang 2018: 3). The Polonnaruwa Statue from Sri Lanka representing the *parinirvāṇa* is assigned to the eleventh century CE (Premtilleke and Karunaratne 2004).

#### *Bhamala*

Until the discovery at Bhamala, artists at Ajantā in peninsular India were credited with having created the first monumental *parinirvāṇa* statues in the fifth century CE. Now we know that the monumental *parinirvāṇa* statue at Bhamāla is earlier and can be considered as a key for the evolution of such specific iconography in Buddhist art and archaeology.

No numismatic evidence was recovered from inside the chamber of the monumental *parinirvāṇa* chamber at Bhamāla, which was excavated during our first two field seasons (2012-13 and 2014-15) (Samad et al. 2017; Hameed et al. 2018). However, new radiocarbon dates on materials associated with the chamber place its construction in the third century CE (Pls 9-12) (Hameed et al. 2018).



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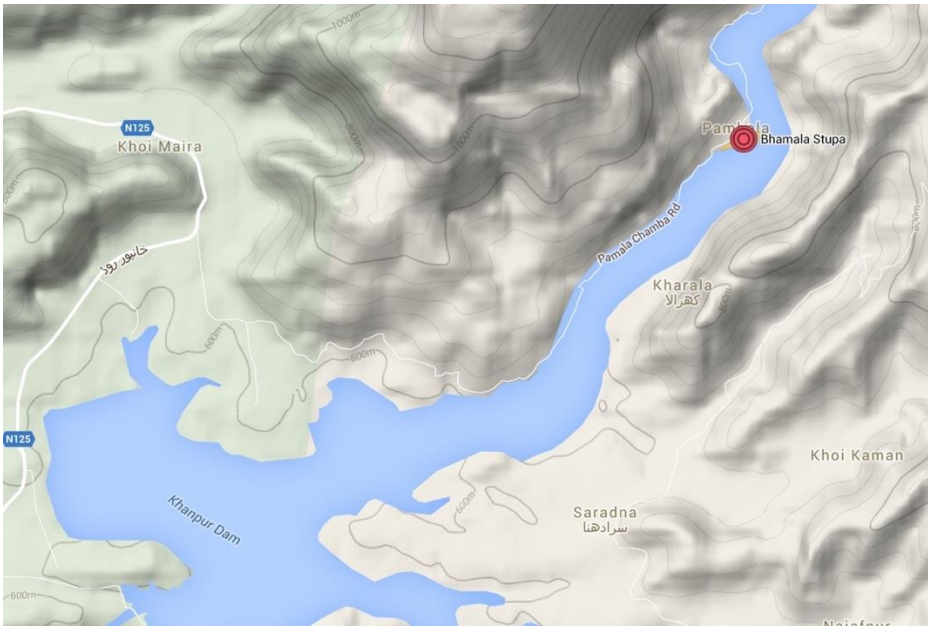


Fig. 1. Google Map with the Bhamala Buddhist Complex (Taxila) (elaborated by A. Hameed).

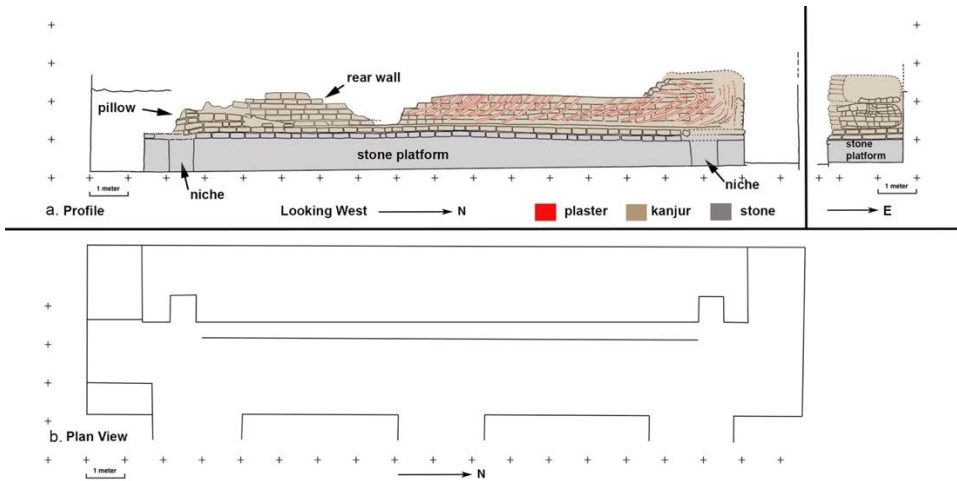


Fig. 2a - Profile view of remnants of the monumental *Mahaparinirvāṇa*, Bhamāla

Fig. 2b - Plan view of the *Mahaparinirvāṇa* chamber

(Drawings by J.M.Kenoyer and A. Hameed).

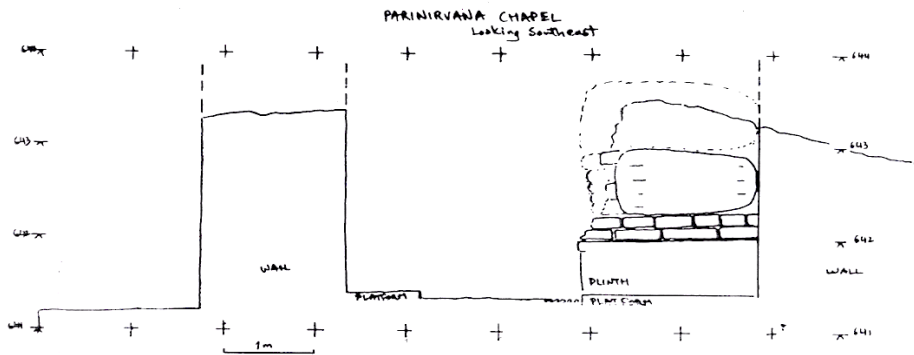


Fig. 3 - Lower Foot of the Mahaparinirvāṇa at Bhamāla overlooking south (Drawings by J.M. Kenoyer).

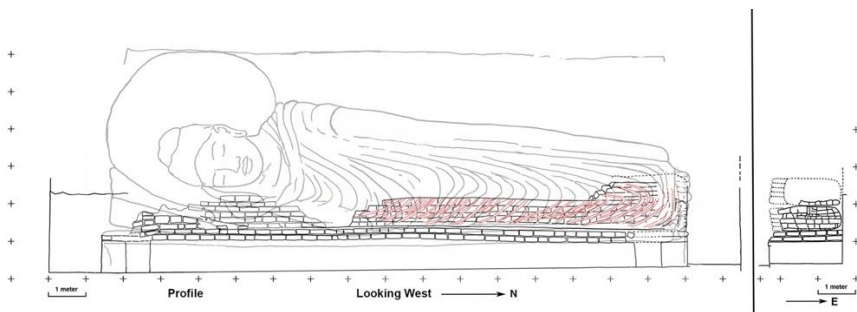


Fig. 4 - Hypothetical reconstruction of the chamber using the smaller *parinirvāṇa* from Stupa A as a model (Drawings by J.M. Kenoyer).

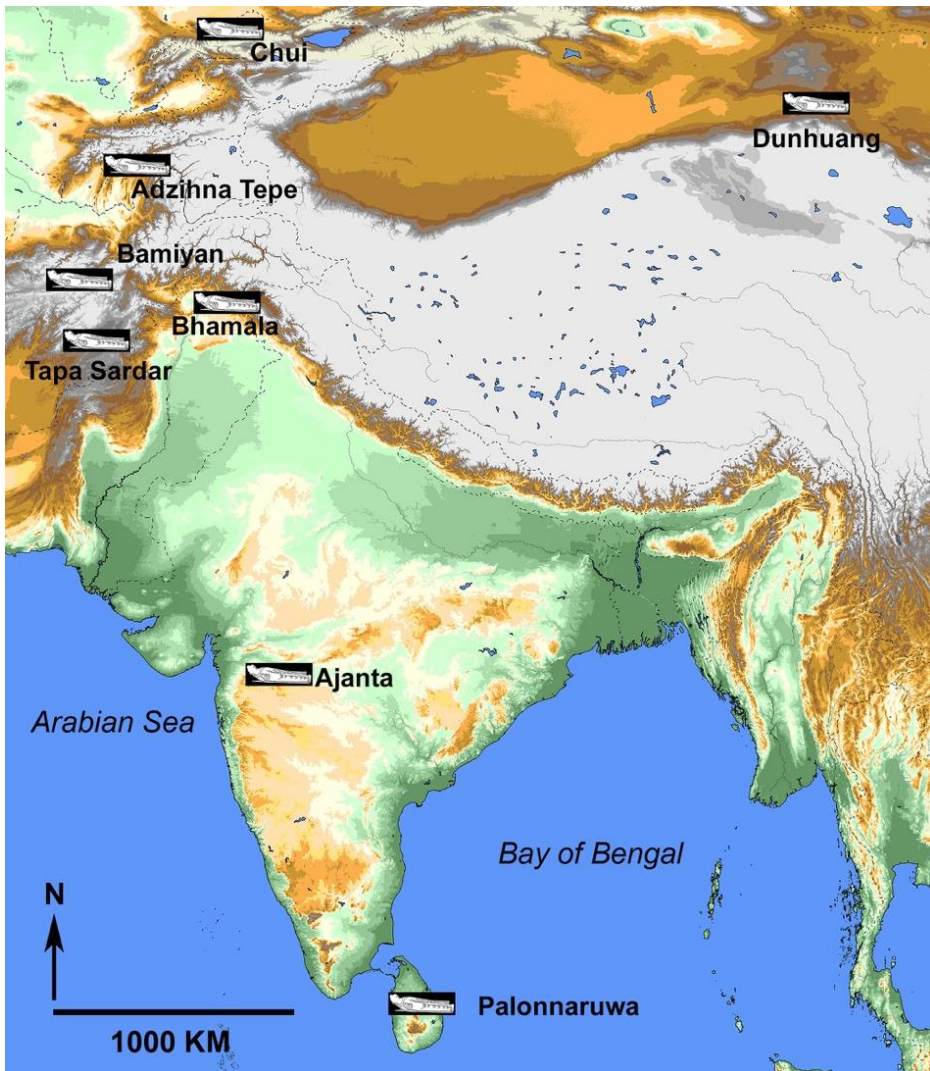


Fig. 5 - Distribution of the monumental *Mahāparinirvāṇas* in South and Central Asian regions (elaborated by A. Hameed and R. Law).

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Pl. 1 - *Mahaparinirvāṇa* at Bhamāla made of kanjur stone (Photo by A. Hameed).



Pl. 2. Stucco Panel representing a *Mahaparinirvāṇa* scene reportedly from Main Stupa A of Bhamāla according to J. Marshall (Photo by A. Hameed).





Pl. 3. Bhamāla excavations 2015-16: Stucco *Mahaparinirvana* scene found attached to the western plinth of Stupa 2 (Photo by A. Hameed).



Pl. 4. Bhamāla excavations 2015-16: Stucco *Mahaparinirvana* scene found attached to the northern side drum of Stupa 2 (Photo by A. Hameed).

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Pl. 5 - Bhamāla excavations 2015-16: Traces of Stucco *parinirvāṇa* scene from Stupa 2 (Photo by A. Hameed).



Pl. 6 - *Parinirvāṇa* Chamber at Bhamāla accommodating the Earliest Monumental *Mahāparinirvāṇa* Statue of Buddha (Photo by A. Hameed).



Pl. 7 - Niche exposed on the northern side of the platform inside the chamber accommodating the feet of *Parinirvāṇa* Buddha (Photo by A. Hameed).



Pl. 8 - Niche exposed on the southern side of the platform inside the chamber accommodating the head of *Parinirvāṇa* Buddha (Photo by A. Hameed).



Pl. 9 - Charcoal sample Taken from Terracotta Sculpture inside *Parinirvāṇa* Chamber for radiocarbon dating (by A. Hameed).

Sample No	Year of Excavation	Trench No	Lot No.	Feature No	Depth	Description
BML-15-308	2014-15	A/1 (Old)	---	8	156 Cm from the surface	Charred wood in Parinirvana Chamber, Lot no. 308, Feature 8 which is composed of stone debris and fragments of terracotta sculptures on the north western corner of the chamber



BETA 343399: Cal AD 240 to 400 (Cal BP 1710 to 1550)

Sample No	Year of Excavation	Trench No	Lot No.	Feature No	Depth	Description
BML-15-3	2014-15	A/1 (Old)	---	25	150 Cm from the surface	Charred wood inside terracotta image in Parinirvana Chamber, Sculpture Feature 25, attached to the northern wall in situ position



BETA 405790: Cal AD 240 to 395 (Cal BP 1710 to 1555)

Pls. 10 (above), 11, and 12 (below two) - Radiocarbon Dates of the charred materials collected from the *Parinirvāṇa* Chamber at Bhamāla (Photos by A. Hameed).

Radiocarbon Dating Analyses of Charcoals from Bhamala

Sample No	Year of Excavation	Trench No	Lot No.	Feature No	Depth	Description
BML-13-633-3	2012-13	C/VI (Old)	633	3	16 cm from the surface	Charcoal from F.3 Lot no. 633 in Trench no. C/VI opened on the northeastern top of the main stupa. F.3, an ashy layer composed of charcoals, stucco and iron fragments



BETA 450882: Cal AD 345 to 430 (Cal BP 1605 to 1520) and Cal AD 490 to 530 (Cal BP 1460 to 1420), Cal AD 490 to 530 (Cal BP 1460 to 1420)

Pls. 13-14 - Samples taken from the top of Main Stupa A (Photos by A. Hameed).