

The ‘*Cūḍā-chedana*’: A Gandharan Relief from Saidu Sharif I (Swāt, Pakistan)

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Abstract

The following pages present a relief brought to light during the excavations of the Buddhist sacred area of Saidu Sharif I (Swāt, Pakistan) by the Italian Archaeological Mission and identified by the author during a survey in the Mission House. The relief represents the episode of cūḍā-chedana (the cutting of the hair), rarely depicted in Gandharan art. Apart from two reliefs (one from Kunduz and the other from uncertain provenance and kept at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford), the relief of Saidu Sharif I is the only one coming from a documented archaeological context. The discovery of this relief sheds new light on the contribution of Saidu Sharif’s workshop in the Gandharan artistic phenomenon, a subject that deserves further study.

Keywords: Gandharan Art, Saidu Sharif I, Swāt

Introduction

The relief discussed in the following pages was found by the Italian Archaeological Mission during the excavation of the Buddhist monastery of Saidu Sharif I (Swāt, Pakistan), now stored in the Swat Museum, in Saidu Sharif, with the Inv. No. SS I 66.¹

¹ I am grateful to Dr Luca Maria Olivieri, director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (MAI), for allowing me to publish the relief I identified during a survey in the Mission House, in October 2017. The relief was in the *godown* (warehouse), along with other materials coming from the excavations of the monastery and the areas of the Stūpa Terrace left unexcavated by Domenico Faccenna. More articles on these materials are in preparation. This article is dedicated to Akhtar Munir known as Tota, the restorer of MAI, who took care of the relief and brought it back to its former glory with dedication and competence.

Although this note is devoted to the presentation of a single relief, it also aims to take stock of a rare iconographic representation in Gandharan artistic production: the cutting of the hair of Siddhārtha. So far very few examples of this iconography come from the Gandhāra region, to the point that one may wonder about the popularity or significance of the episode in Gandharan visual narrative tradition. However, minor this episode may be, it belongs to one of the most significant narrative cycles in the life of the Buddha, that of renunciation.

The sacred area of Saidu Sharif I is placed chronologically and stylistically in a rather early period of Gandharan art and it could be argued that this iconography reflects an experimental phase.



Fig. 1 – SS I 66: Siddhārtha cutting his hair, from Saidu Sharif I (Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif; photo by the author).

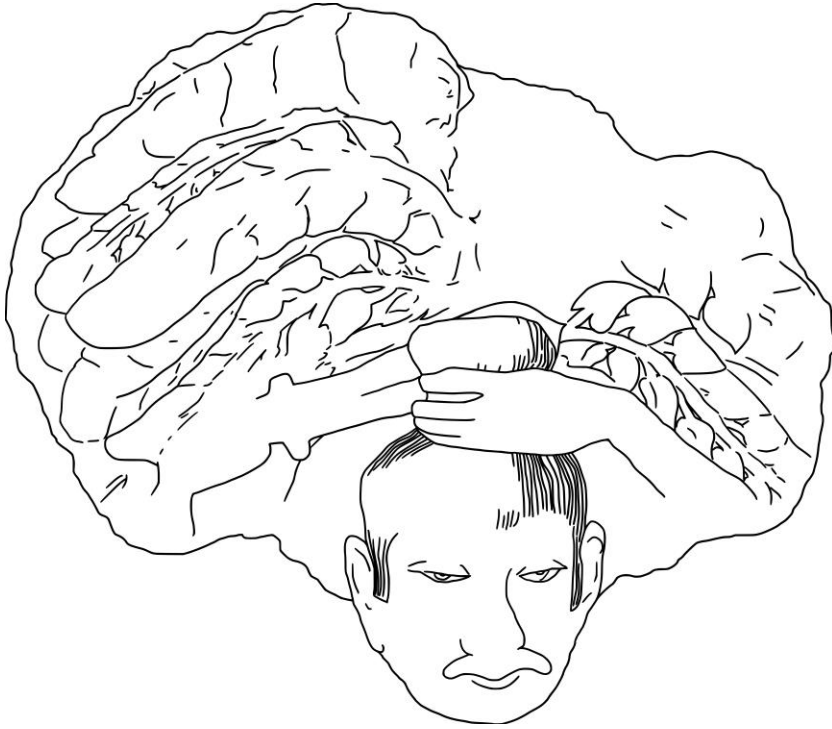


Fig. 2 – SS I 66: Siddhārtha cutting his hair, from Saidu Sharif I
(drawing by the author).

The *Cūḍā-chedana* Relief

The greenish grey schist relief illustrates an episode of the life of the Buddha rarely represented in Gandharan art: Siddhārtha in the act of *cūḍā-chedana* (the cutting of the hair), after leaving the palace of Kapilavastu.

Unfortunately, only a fragment remains of the upper part of the relief that presents Siddhārtha under a pipal tree crown raising his hair with the left hand and cutting them with a leaf-shaped short sword (Fig. 1 and 2). The figure has a plain nimbus, hair with vertical strands, long earlobes without earrings, half-closed eyes with incised iris and pupil, a wide nose, and a moustache. The fragment measures 15.2 x 18.6 x 4.4 cm. It is broken on all four sides, chipped and corroded, in particular where the arms, forehead, and nose of the figure are.

Due to the rarity of Gandharan reliefs depicting this subject, it is not possible to draw iconographic comparisons and reconstruct the scene in its entirety. It should be noted that the presence of the pipal tree crown is frequently associated with the seated posture of the Buddha. If we consider that Siddhārtha was sitting on a rectangular podium, as he usually does, we can deduce that the relief measured about three times the current height, namely approx. 40 cm. On either side of the figure of Siddhārtha were most likely the squire Chandaka and the horse Kanthaka, unless we assume the presence of other figures connected in some way to the celestial hosts.

With regards to the rendering of perspective, the head of Siddhārtha is turned a couple of degrees to the left in relation to the plane formed by the back face. The left side of the relief seems more protruding than the right one: the plane of the tree branches to the right seems to be downgraded compared to the branches to the left. In addition, the right ear of Siddhārtha is detached from the nimbus while the left one adheres to it (Fig. 3-5).



Fig. 3 – SS I 66, detail (photo by the author).



Fig. 4 – SS I 66, detail (photo by the author).



Fig. 5 – SS I 66, detail (photo by the author).

The 'Cūḍā-chedana': A Gandharan Relief from Saidu Sharif I

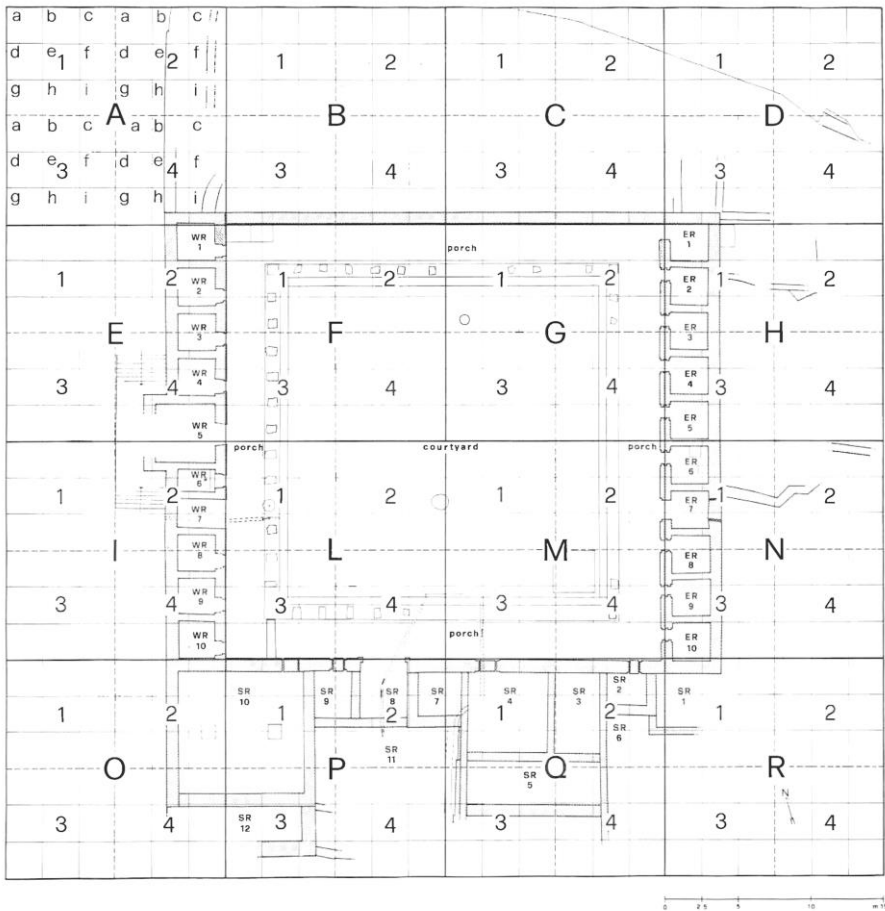


Fig. 6 – Saidu Sharif I, Monastery: excavation grid (after Callieri 1989).

The relief was found in a sector (A2) in between north-western monastery area and north-eastern stūpa terrace area (Fig. 6). According to the reports of excavations conducted by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (Callieri 1989), the fragment was discovered in a layer (2a) connected to the last phases of the sacred area.

It is however reasonable to assume that this was not the original location of the relief. In fact, the dimension of the fragment in comparison to other reliefs of the site support this hypothesis: the reconstructed height of the relief – approx. 40 cm – is on the one hand

compatible with the panels belonging to the frieze of the Main Stūpa (MS)² and, on the other hand, completely out of scale if compared with reliefs coming from minor stūpas; the thickness too matches that of panels of the frieze (4.4 cm).

Other elements corroborate the hypothesis that the fragment could belong to the frieze of MS. The sculptural style seems to be that of the Maestro of Saidu Sharif I: the rendering of the eyes (cfr. S 622; Faccenna 2001: 242-44) and hands (cfr. S 1102; Faccenna 2001: 260), most of all, but also the tree branches (cfr. S 1128; Faccenna 2001: 266-67). Stylistically speaking, the fragment fits nicely into the frieze: it provides no rupture were we to insert it in the sequence of panels depicting the scenes of Kanthaka's farewell (S 132; Faccenna 2001: 225-26) and of the meeting with the hunters (S 48; Faccenna 2001: 218-21), if not even among them.

Finally, the stone is the same type of chlorite schist used to produce the reliefs in Saidu Sharif I, although the colour turns more towards greenish grey rather than the sage green typical of the MS frieze. Only a petrographic analysis will remove any doubt.

The Scene in Gandharan Art

To my knowledge, only two examples of *cūḍā-chedana* were known in Gandharan art so far:³ the Kunduz frieze published by Klaus Fischer in 1958 (Fischer 1958) and the relief acquired by the Ashmolean Museum in 1997 and published posthumously by Maurizio Taddei in 2008 (Taddei 2008).

The frieze published by Fischer (Fischer 1958: 238, fig. 4, scene 10; 241) represents the Great Departure and was discovered in a ditch

² Each panel of the frieze measures approx. 45 cm in height; the probable width – according to Domenico Faccenna (Faccenna 2001: 35-36) – is 65 cm, while the thickness is about 4.5 cm.

³ Faced with the absence of the subject in Gandharan art, Alfred Foucher observed that this could not lead to the conclusion that the iconography of *cūḍā-chedana* was completely absent from the repertoire (Foucher 1905: 365-66). Fischer – after reporting some rumours about the presence of the subject in private collections of West Pakistan (Fischer 1958: 241, note 67) – cites an example of *cūḍā-chedana* from Khotan that, according to Stein, was produced in the Gandhāra region (Stein 1907: 858, pl. XLVIII Kh 003. g. obv.).

near the monastery of Kunduz together with two other reliefs depicting the youth of Siddhārtha and the episode of the Four Encounters. The Great Departure frieze shows a series of scenes, one of them is dedicated to the cutting of the hair: the Bodhisattva is standing while he cuts his unbound hair; Chandaka is right next to him, ready to receive the discarded memento. The scene is included in a continuous narrative of the life of the Buddha.

As for the relief belonging to the Ashmolean Museum (Taddei 2008: 5, fig. 1.3), Taddei reports that it was previously kept in a Japanese private collection (Taddei 2008: 4, note 7). The provenance of the relief is unknown, but Taddei had no doubt about its Gandharan origin (Taddei 2008: 3-4) and the Ashmolean Museum on its website reports the Swāt Valley as the probable place of creation.⁴ The scene is similar to that of the Kunduz frieze, even if with some differences: the seated posture of Siddhārtha and the depiction of the hair, no more unbound but tied in the usual Gandharan *chignon*. Therefore, iconographically speaking, the relief comes close to the one from Saidu Sharif I. It is indeed very likely that the latter could confirm the Gandharan origin of the relief preserved at the Ashmolean Museum.

Taddei concludes that it is possible to attribute some significance to the choice of the standing or the seated variant of the Buddha in this scene. While the standing variant is an understandable choice in a narrative context, the seated one raises the figure of Siddhārtha to an icon, transforming the *cūḍā-chedana* «into a founding episode in the Buddha's career» (Taddei 2008: 4).

The Scene in Texts

According to textual sources, the episode of the *cūḍā-chedana* took place just before the farewell of Siddhārtha to Chandaka and Kanthaka. Textual accounts generally agree on the main outline of the event, but present some variations with respect to what *precisely* the Bodhisattva cuts: the *Buddhacarita* designates the part that the Bodhisattva cuts as the *mukuṭa* (translated by Olivelle with the English word *headdress*), while the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara* use the Sanskrit word *cūḍā*

⁴ <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1997.246>

(translated respectively with the English word *tuft* and the French expression *touffe de cheveux*).

In the *Buddhacarita* (Aśvaghōṣa and Olivelle 2008: 178-79) we read as follows:

56. Then, from Chándakas hand the resolute prince took the sword with the hilt inlaid with gems; he then drew out the sword from its scabbard, with its blade streaked with gold, like a snake from its hole.

57. Unsheathing the sword, dark as a lotus petal, he cut his ornate head-dress along with the hair, and threw it in the air, the cloth trailing behind— it seemed he was throwing a swan into a lake.

58. As it was thrown up, heavenly beings caught it out of reverence so they may worship it; throngs of gods in heaven paid it homage with divine honors according to rule.

The *Mahāvastu* version (Jones 1949-56, II: 161) is concise and straight to the point:

The thought occurred to the Bodhisattva, “How can I become a wanderer with this tuft of hair on the crown of my head?” So the Bodhisattva cut off the tuft with his knife. And that tuft was taken up by Śakra, the lord of devas, and received worship in Trāyastriṃśa (166) where the *cūḍā* festival is observed.

The *Lalitavistara* (Foucaux 1884: 197) says:

Il vint encore à la pensée du Bodhisattva: “Comment donc (conserver) une touffe de cheveux, après être devenu religieux errant?” Et, coupant avec son épée, sa touffe de cheveux, il la jeta au vent. Elle fut recueillie par les dieux Trāyastriṃçats pour l’honorer; et, aujourd’hui encore a lieu, chez les dieux Trāyastriṃçats, la tête de la touffe de cheveux. Là aussi fut bâti un Tchàitya; aujourd’hui encore il est connu sous le nom de Tchûdâpratigrahana (touffe de cheveux recueillie).

Lexical ambiguities aside, what interests us about these textual accounts is the presence of some witnesses during the act of the cutting of the hair. Images cannot be considered as direct visual translations of a specific textual source; it is however interesting to note that texts refer to the presence of Chandaka and divine beings at the event. The former, according to the *Buddhacarita*, offers the sword to Siddhārtha who is determined to cut his hair. The gods, according to the three sources mentioned, collect the precious relic and make it the object of devotion.

Moreover, none of these texts refer to the delivery of the headdress to Yasodharā by Chandaka – a subject represented, for example, in one of the panels of the frieze of Saidu Sharif I: S 622 (Faccenna 2001: 242-44). On the contrary, the *Buddhacarita* and the *Mahāvastu* bear the words of the same Chandaka, according to whom the headdress was taken to heaven (*Buddhacarita* 8.48; Aśvaghōṣa and Olivelle 2008: 226-27) by the god Śakra himself (*Mahāvastu* 189; Jones 1949-56, II: 182).

Conclusion

At the end of this brief note presenting the relief with the *cūḍā-chedana* from Saidu Sharif I, I wish quote Maurizio Taddei's words to highlight the importance of this relief and identify future lines of research: «The very fact that Gandhāra preserves only one specimen of each variant [standing and seated] might be the witness of a great doctrinal incertitude in facing this episode – a subject to be dealt with in the future» (Taddei 2008: 4).

The discovery of the *cūḍā-chedana* subject in Saidu Sharif I, does not change the reality of the facts recorded by Taddei. Whether it was a matter of different threads of narrative traditions or an episode passed over in silence, there is no doubt that – faced with the spread of other subjects and iconographies – the *cūḍā-chedana* emerges as a minor subject in the Gandharan context.

It is also true, however, that the ascertained presence of the subject in Saidu Sharif I (regardless of the exact location of the fragment) lays the foundations for a more in-depth study of the diffusion of this subject and iconography. The relevance of Saidu Sharif I at an architectural and iconographic level is unquestionable: the artistic production of the Maestro was fundamental for the definition of some iconographies and for their diffusion to Central Asia (Filigenzi 2006). In the same way, perhaps because of its character as an early Gandharan Buddhist site, Saidu Sharif I has been a laboratory of ideas that have not always taken hold.

Therefore, looking at Saidu Sharif I – and at early or less known sites – is fundamental. This must be done not to identify its gaps or absences, but rather to enhance its original features. In conclusion, I would suggest to reverse the perspective: starting from Saidu Sharif I to follow the weak traces of some iconographic migrations, instead of approaching the study of the site to validate our scientific certainties.

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