

Depictions of *uṣṇīṣa* in Buddha images from the Gandharan Collection of the Peshawar Museum.

*To Domenico Faccenna on the 100th Anniversary of His Birth
(Roma 1923 - Castel Madama 2008)*

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Abstract

*This paper describes and discusses a selection of Buddha heads stored at the Peshawar Museum Collection in the light of the academic discussion on the representation Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa* in Gandharan art and according to the descriptive terminology established by Faccenna. The article is structured in three sections: the first section presents a very brief introduction to the Peshawar Museum Collection; the second one provides an overview of the scholarship on the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa* and its representation in Gandharan sculptures; the third and final section presents a selective catalogue of some unpublished Buddha heads from the Peshawar Museum Collection. The study is dedicated to Domenico Faccenna, the first Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (from 1955) on the centenary of his birth.*

Keywords: Peshawar Museum Collection, Gandhāra, Buddha, *lakṣaṇa*, *uṣṇīṣa*, hair styles.

1. Introduction

The Peshawar Museum Collection was formed by the Frontier Circle of Archaeology, established by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) during the first half of the 20th century. A significant portion of the Gandharan section came from archaeological excavations conducted by ASI. Since Pakistan's independence, archaeological excavations have been carried out by the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums, both independently and in collaboration with foreign missions at various sites (e.g., Takht-i Bahi, Sahr-i Bahlol, Thareli, etc.; cf. Sehrai 2020).

The Gandharan collection holds reliefs depicting scenes from the Buddha's life, free-standing images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, architectural elements (*stūpa* pegs, brackets, capitals, etc.), and devotional scenes. It also contains objects (identified as Sub-Regional Office [SRO] Peshawar) confiscated by customs and police agencies from illegal dealers and smugglers after 1947.



Fig. 1 - Domenico Faccenna (on the right), Giuseppe Tucci (in the centre) and two princesses of the Miangul Family, the ruling family of Swat (1857-1969), at the IsMEO headquarters in Rome (Palazzo Brancaccio) in the early 1960s. Photo courtesy Miangul Archives.

By presenting a selection of Buddha heads from the SRO collection, this paper provides a brief overview of the *uṣṇīṣa*, one of the major physical characteristics (*lakṣaṇas*) of the Buddha, from both a visual and scholarly perspective. The descriptions of the heads are based on the *Repertorio terminologico per la schedatura delle sculture dell'arte gandharica* (= *Repertory of Terms for Cataloguing Gandharan Sculptures*) by Domenico Faccenna and Anna Filigenzi (2007), the standard reference for the descriptive study of Gandharan art.¹ On the centenary of Domenico Faccenna's birth [Ed. 2023] (Fig. 1), the author wishes to dedicate this paper to the scientific legacy of the first director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (IAMP; 1955–1995).²

2. The *uṣṇīṣa*

It is widely known that the Buddha is traditionally described as possessing the 32 major bodily marks (*lakṣaṇas*) associated with Indian notions of the *Mahāpuruṣa* (“Great Man”) and *Cakravartin* (“Universal Ruler”). However, only some of these characteristics were represented in sculptures. The most puzzling and discussed among the major physical marks of the Buddha is the *uṣṇīṣa* (*uṣṇīṣasīraskatā*), “the integral mark of a Buddha image, the sign by which an image is identified as that of a Buddha. The *uṣṇīṣa*, a symbol of the realization of nirvana, exceeds the shape of a man and the confines of the cosmos” (Kramrisch 1966: 38). This *lakṣaṇa* seems to have been understood differently by Buddhists throughout various cultural and historical contexts (Taddei 1996). Literally, the term has been translated as “head having the shape of a turban” (*uṣṇīṣa-sirsa*). The 5th-century CE commentator Buddhaghosa explained it as a well-rounded head showing a broad and full forehead (Mayer 1986: 129). According to some

¹ A Chinese translation of the *Repertory* is also available (Faccenna, Filigenzi 2014). Following the terminology established in the *Repertory*, the project “Digitization of Gandharan Artefacts (DiGA): A project for the preservation and study of Buddhist art in Pakistan,” (2021–2024) of the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) at Ruhr University Bochum, (see Autiero, Elwet, Moscatelli, Pons 2023) digitized and catalogued the Gandharan collection of the Dir Museum (see <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/pool/diga> [accessed 12 October 2024]). A digital thesaurus for the description of Gandharan art, which draws upon and expands the *Repertory* is available at <https://w3id.org/diga/terms> [accessed 12 October 2024].

² For an overview of the life and works of the great Italian art historian and archaeologist, see Filigenzi 2008, Callieri 2008, and Khan 2011.

scholars, the *uṣṇīṣa* was first conceived as a bun of tied hair and only later as a cranial protuberance (e.g., Zin 2003: 200). The meanings associated with the *uṣṇīṣa* are probably best illustrated by a hole drilled in the heads of some Buddha sculptures. This hole has been connected by Deborah Klimburg-Salter and Taddei (1991) to the *brahmarandhra*, the cranial hole through which yogic energy is believed to flow. While not opposing this interpretation, Juhyung Rhi (2005) has suggested that the hole might have been intended to hold relics.

In Mathuran sculptural production, the Buddha is depicted with a snail shell-like lock of hair (*kaparda*), while in Gandhāra, the *uṣṇīṣa* is usually carved in the shape of a chignon and covered by hair styled in various ways. According to C. Sivaramamurti,

“The usual Gandhāra type is wavy hair bundled into a top-knot. The early indigenous Kushan type is either an almost clean-shaved head with just a line of the hair indicated along the top of the forehead or a single sinistral (gastropod shell) curl on top. The Gupta type is a very pleasing bump on the head covered over with lovely curls. In mediaeval sculpture, especially in South India, a flame appears above this bump” (Sivaramamurti 1954: 20).

Carolyne W. Schmidt has suggested several major phases of visual development for the Buddha’s hairstyles. From a rather flat, *jatāmukuta*-like bun, the hairstyle evolved into a high bulbous topknot. Particularly, she observed that in Swat sculptural production this latter style is often fastened by a band or ring that displays a jewel, comparable in fashion to those found among the Sakas and Parthians. These styles, in turn, echo the *krobylos* of the Greek-Roman tradition, which spread from the Mediterranean to Central Asia during the Hellenistic period. In later sculptural developments, a rather low rounded *uṣṇīṣa* “became the conventionalized mode” (Schmidt 1990: I, 223-228).

3. Buddha heads from the SRO Collection

The *Repertory* lists 14 distinct types of Buddha’s hairstyles³ (Faccenna, Filigenzi 2007: 4.2.5, 140-141):

³ These are broad categories, and variations might occur within them. The *uṣṇīṣa* can be continuous or separated and may be secured at its base by a ring or string.

1. Style I: Hair parted in the middle with continuous, vertical waves from a peak over forehead.
2. Style II: Hair parted in the middle with horizontal broken waves.
3. Style III: Hair parted in the middle with lateral continuous waves.
4. Style IV: Hair with broken and irregular waves.
5. Style V: Hair with broken and alternating waves (up and down).
6. Style VI: Hair with vertical broken waves converging at centre.
7. Style VII: Hair with horizontal rows of overlaid waves.
8. Style VIII: Hair with stacked coils having curled tips.
9. Style IX: Hair with rows of disks having a central dot.
10. Style X: Hair with concentric waves.
11. Style XI: Hair with vertical rows of waves.
12. Style XIII: Hair with vertical strands converging at the centre.
13. Style XII: Hair with small squares.
14. Style XIII: Hair with small squares having a central dot.

The following hairstyles were observed in 9 Buddha heads from the Peshawar Museum Collection (SRO).

a) Hair Style II: Hair parted in the middle with horizontal broken waves

Cat. No. 1

Object Buddha head (Fig. 2)

Material Grey schist

Measurement H 34, W 17
(cm)

Acc. No. SRO 240 (Old No. W U 1846)

Provenance Unknown. Probably found during excavation by Department of Archaeology in Peshawar and Swat Districts.

Description A colossal Buddha head with oval shaped face, wavy curly hair parted from the centre of the forehead arranged backwards and runs into round *uṣṇīṣa*, fasten with a ribbon, narrow forehead, *ūrṇā* and eyes are prominent. Halo is missing, nose, eyebrows, lips and chin is exfoliated and defaced. Left ear missing and lobe of right ear is exfoliated. The face orientation of the head is in frontal position. The

Buddha head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

Cat. No. 2

Object

Buddha head (Fig. 3)

Material

Grey schist

*Measurement
(cm)*

H 12, W 7

Acc. No.

SRO 971 (Old No. W.U 718)

Provenance

Unknown. Probably found during excavation by Department of Archaeology

Description

Buddha head with oval shaped face, wavy curly hair runs into high pointed *uṣṇīṣa*, *ūrṇā* is not visible, half close eyes, thin and straight lips partially exfoliated, long nose with nostrils, left elongated earlobe missing. The face orientation of the head is in frontal position. The head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

Cat. No. 3

Object

Buddha head (Fig. 4)

Material

Grey schist

*Measurement
(cm)*

H 5, W 3

Acc. No.

SRO 2440 (Old No. MS-6215)

Provenance

Mekha Sanda

Description

Buddha head with oval shapes face, crimped hair which runs into round pointed *uṣṇīṣa*, the depiction of *ūrṇā* is not visible, open eyes, thin and straight lips with deep corners, long nose with nostrils partially exfoliated, elongated earlobe executed delightfully. The face orientation of the head is in frontal position. The head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

b) Hair Style III: Hair parted in middle with lateral continuous waves.

Cat. No. 4

Object

Buddha head (Fig. 5)

Material Grey schist
Measurement (cm) H 36, W 23
Acc. No. SRO 002 (Old No. MN-37)
Provenance Mohammed Nari
Description A partially broken Buddha head with oval face, narrow forehead, wavy hair parting from the centre of the forehead, combed backward and runs into high and round *uṣṇīṣa* (chignon). The mark of *ūrṇā* (one of the physical characteristics of Buddha) is missing, half close eyes with prominent eyelids, thick eyebrows and slightly pointed chin. The right side of the head (from *uṣṇīṣa* to chin) is however chipped. The modeling of the eyes is noticeable, the eyelids, eyeballs, nose, lips and ears are exfoliated. The face orientation is on the right side. The Buddha head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

Cat. No. 5
Object Buddha head (Fig. 6)
Material Green schist
Measurement (cm) H 11, W 17
Acc. No. SRO 399 (Old No. W.U 725)
Provenance Unknown. Probably found during excavation by Department of Archaeology in Peshawar and Swat Districts.
Description A Buddha head with round face, wavy hair arranged backwards, runs into round *uṣṇīṣa*, narrow forehead, *ūrṇā* is not visible, close eyes with narrow slits and prominent lids, thin and straight lips with deep corners are slightly exfoliated. Nose is exfoliated, both ears and halo are chipped. The face orientation of the head is in frontal position. The head is executed skillfully.

Cat. No. 6
Object Buddha head (Fig. 7)
Material Black schist

Measurement H 28, W 18
(cm)
Acc. No. SRO 986 (Old No. TR-64-335 S.2)
Provenance Thareli
Description A Buddha head with oval face, wavy hair runs in high *uṣṇīṣa*, narrow forehead, *ūrṇā* depiction is prominent at the centre of forehead, half close eyes, thin and straight lips with deep corners, long nose with nostrils exfoliated, both ears are and defaced. The face orientation of the head is in frontal position. The head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

c) Hair Style X: Hair with concentric waves.

Cat. No. 7
Object Buddha head (Fig. 8)
Material Green schist
Measurement H 12, W 8
(cm)
Acc. No. SRO 972 (Old No. TR-64 -2911 S.345)
Provenance Thareli
Description A Buddha head with round shaped face, crimped hair runs into high pointed *uṣṇīṣa*, slender forehead, the mark of *ūrṇā* is not visible, close eyes, thin and straight lips, long nose with nostrils partially exfoliated, left ear is chipped. The face orientation of the Head is in frontal position. The head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

d) Hair Style VIII: Hair with stacked coils having curled tips.

Cat. No. 8
Object Buddha head (Fig. 9)
Material Grey schist
Measurement H 20, W 13
(cm)
Acc. No. SRO 107 (Old No. 130)
Provenance Unknown

Description A Buddha head with rounded face, hair arranged in small snail-shell shaped curls, (a classic Indian style which originates from Mathurā), and has high *uṣṇīṣa*, narrow forehead, halo as well as *ūrṇā* is missing and chipped. Half close eyes, partially chipped are carved out piercingly; lips are deep and sharply executed. The face orientation of the head is almost in frontal position. The Buddha head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

Cat. No. 9

Object Buddha head (Fig. 10)

Material Grey schist

Measurement H 18, W 11

(cm)

Acc. No. SRO 582 (Old No. SRP 553-554)

Provenance Unknown

Description A Buddha head with oval shaped face, hair arranged in snail-shell shaped curls, combed backwards which runs into low round *uṣṇīṣa*, traces of *ūrṇā* depiction is visible, half close eyes, thin and straight lips (partially exfoliated) with deep corners, long nose with nostrils. Left side of the head is chipped from top i.e. *uṣṇīṣa* to chin of the face, left elongated earlobe and halo also missing. The face orientation of the head is slightly turned to the left side. Buddha head is in a good state of preservation but exfoliated from left side of the head. The head is executed skillfully with detail iconographical features.

4. Conclusive notes

The comparative analysis, iconographical and stylistic study have provided substantial evidence that in the collection of the Peshawar Museum Collection, the Buddha head is covered with long, wavy hair, forming a top knot standing for *uṣṇīṣa*. The prominent depiction of *uṣṇīṣa* as wavy hair bundled into a top knot in Buddha heads are illustrated in twenty Buddha heads out of thirty-three Buddha heads in the collection. The *uṣṇīṣa* tied with cord or ribbon (low or high in round) is depicted in fifteen Buddha

heads. Buddha in *abhayamudrā* with depiction of typical *uṣṇīṣa* (in wavy hair bundled into a top-knot or *κρωβύλος* i.e., a roll or knot of hair on the head in Greek antiquity) found in three images (two of them feature the *dharmacakramudrā* gesture). Although our knowledge about the chronology of Gandharān sculpture is elementary, after comparative study we can suggest Buddha images are datable towards the end of the 2nd and 3rd CE, when this art has become popular and was already at its climax.

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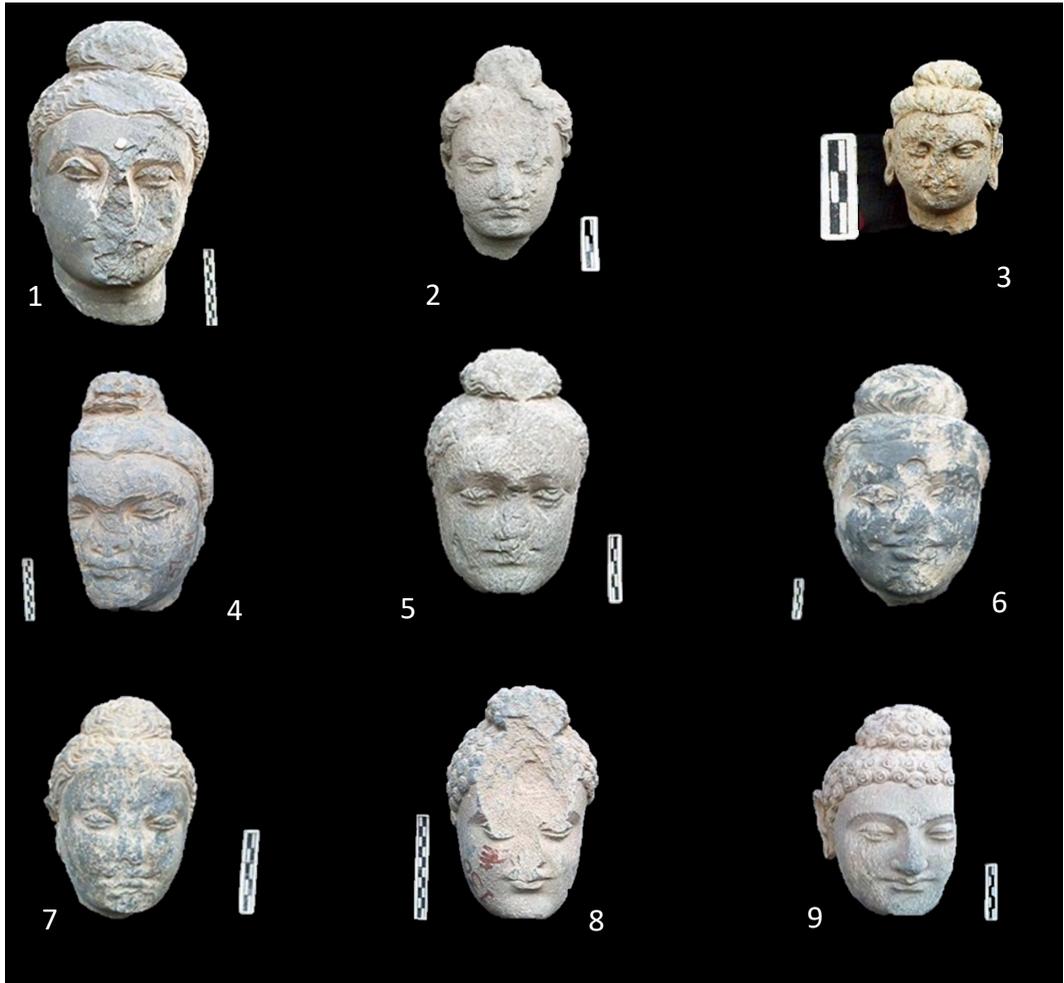
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Figs. 2 (1-9) - Buddha heads from the SRO collection. All pictures by Authors (with different scales).