

Seven (not so) Easy Pieces: **A Note on Some Found Objects from Gandhāra**

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Abstract

*Recently, a few sculptural fragments with no provenance information were found in the warehouses of the Italian Archaeological Mission (MAI) at Saidu Sharif Mission House in Mingora. The fragments were found in a box of objects collected or excavated in the late 1950s or early 1960s. The 2005 earthquake caused the old wooden shelving in the storage rooms to collapse and the original basket with the provenance information fell, with hundreds of others. In the following years, all baskets were reconstructed with patient collection work, thanks to the fact that Mission had (and still has) the habit of inking each piece, whether it was a sculptural or pottery fragment. Very few pieces remained un-inked. Being part of this small group, some of these pieces lost their provenance information. Therefore, this note presents an attempt to reconstruct the provenance of these objects and discuss their iconography. In addition to these pieces, which have been inventoried as *Varia New Series (VSN)* and handed over to the Swat Museum, there is one from a stratigraphic context, from Barikot, already at the Museum, which has features that have suggested the hand of one of the sculptors of Butkara I or Saidu Sharif I.*

Keywords: Gandhara Art, Butkara I, Swat.

1. A female figure

This piece is a fragment in green schist, representing the upper part of a standing female figure (Fig. 1). It is a fragment of a larger figure in green schist. The surface is heavily abraded, and the fragment is chipped and broken at all ends. However, it is possible to recognize the head of a female figure on one side of the object. The figure is shown frontally, or she might be slightly turning to her left. She is wearing long tubular earrings decorated on the top part with two raised bands, and a soft long necklace made of four strands of small round beads.

The face of the figure and most of the hair is unfortunately lost, but the comparison with other similar objects allows us to imagine the original appearance. The hair was held up in an elegant and quite ornate updo. She was most likely wearing her hair with short straight bangs while the rest of

the long hair was twisted in a knot on the left side of her head and kept together by a garland or a festoon. Weaved in together with the hair is a small garland or a strand of beads. Part of these elements are clearly visible on the left side of the object. On the right side of her head, she was wearing a large round ornament, a studded medallion or perhaps a flower. The rest of the long hair is left down and falls over the woman's shoulders. This female figure belongs to the same typology of another coeval sculpture from Butkara I (Fig. 2), who wears her hair in a similar manner to that of our piece. This same hairstyle—as well as similar jewelry—is worn by many other female figures in reliefs from Butkara I,¹ and from Saidu Sharif I.²



Fig. 1 - Female figure (VSN 88) h. max. 12.4 x l. max. 14.4 x t. max. 4.5 cm
(Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission).

The woman's body is almost completely lost. Only part of the neck can be seen, with two fleshy folds; while they are typical of human depictions of this time, the emphasis which the fold lines are sculpted indicates that perhaps the woman was turning slightly to her left. Almost nothing of her

¹ See for example, B 1710 (Faccenna 1964, tav. CDXXVII a); B 1716 (Faccenna 1964, tav. CDXLVI); B 4230 (Faccenna 1964, tav. DC b); B 4325 (Faccenna 1964, tav. CCCLII), B 168 (Faccenna 1964, tav. CDXLIII a).

² One example from the frieze of the main stupa of Saidu Sharif I is the fragment depicting Chandaka's return to Kapilavastu, as he brings back Siddhārta's turban to his wife Yaśodharā. Her coiffure is like that of the woman in our piece (Callieri and Filigenzi 2002: 186 and tav. VII), sans the rounded ornament.

arms survives, however, some elements point to the fact that the figure was holding her left arm up towards her head, touching the large round ornament with her fingers. The long hair to her left curve slightly to the right—conversely, those drawn on the left side follow a rather straight vertical line. A thin but quite clear line juts out almost horizontally from her shoulder, indicating the raised arm. Traces of ad added volume can be recognized right next to the head ornament on the right, which could be interpreted as a hand. In this case, the figure would recall those standing *yakṣī* and *yakṣiṇī* who raise one hand to grab the branch of a tree (Skt. *śālabhañjikā*). Similar figures were found in Butkara I.³ She is perhaps showing off her figure, or she is emoting within the context of the scene represented in the rest of the frieze, now unfortunately lost.



Fig. 2 - Female figure (B 194) (After Faccenna 1964, tav. CDXLVII).

³ In this regard, see Faccenna 1964, tav. from CDXXVI to CDXXIX.

It is more likely, however, that the figure is wearing a mantle, which she is holding aside with her left hand, in a pose not unlike the one of Fig. 3. This would account for the three parallel lines next to her hair on the right side, and for the slightly slanted line over her head (Fig. 4), which are signs of the drapery of the mantle.



Fig. 3 - Female figure with mantle (Ref. No. WS. 26)
(After Faccenna 1964, tav. CDXXX).



Fig. 4 - VSN 88. Detail of the fragment with arrows showing the folds of mantle (Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission).

I believe a female figure from Butkara I, B 2486, is the closest comparison and companion to our piece VSN 88 (Fig. 5). This figure holds a lotus bud in her left arm, which is bent towards the shoulder. Her right arm is slightly raised to lift the mantle draped around her. The mantle falls from her head, where it covers part of her hair. The hair is twisted in a topknot on the right side, held together by a garland and beaded decoration while on the left side she is wearing a studded hair ornament. Her fringe is straight, and the rest of the long hair falls over her shoulders. She is wearing long tubular earrings decorated with two bands on the top part, and a long necklace made of four strands of small beads. Her chest is bare. The iconographic characteristics of B 2486 match almost exactly those of our piece under examination here.



Fig. 5 - Female figure with a mantle (B 2486)
(After Faccenna 1964, tav. CDXXXI).

The two pieces also match closely in terms of dimensions (Fig. 6). In both cases, the dimensions of the face—calculated from the bottom of the chin to the top end of the fringe—is slightly over 7 cm (7.2 cm for B 2486 and 7.1 cm for our piece), and its width is 5.2 for our piece and 5.5 for B 2486. The width of the necklace is 1 cm for B 2486 and 0.9 cm for the fragment; the length of the earrings is in both cases 2.2 cm. On top of both their heads, a projection extends for a length of around 2 cm. Given that in B 2486 it is clear that this projection is a tenon for inserting the figure in architectural, it is reasonable to assume that the same projection in our piece is also a tenon. Unfortunately, due to the poor preservation of our piece, no other dimensions can be compared, however, even from these measurements it seems apparent that these two objects are closely related, and perhaps even two companion pieces that donned the podium of a small stupa in Butkara I.



Fig. 6 - The dimensions of VSN 88 compared with those of B 2486.

The treatment of the surface is similar in both objects, especially that of the hair, cut with a small point chisel. A similar tool is seen in other objects from Butkara I, used specifically when sculpting small details with fine lines, and especially the hair—as it is the case, for example, of the female head in Fig. 7. The hair under the topknot in both our piece and B 2486 is cut more deeply into the surface of the stone, while the hair on the other side is left flatter. The earrings' double-band decoration is cut rather shallow in both cases, but each bead in the strands of the necklace is defined with care and attention.



Fig. 7 - Female figure (B 1716) (After Faccenna 1964, tav. CDXLVI).

Given all these elements, it is almost certain that the female figure depicted in our piece is a woman lifting her mantle and her original look was very similar to B 2486, only in a mirrored form (Fig. 8).⁴ Seeing how similar it is to this latter piece, it could be part of the same series, possibly made in the same workshop of B 2486 or by the same hand(s). It is very likely our piece comes from Butkara I.



Fig. 8 - Line drawing reconstruction of VSN 88 overlapped with a photo of the fragment (Drawings by the Author).

⁴ Faccenna uses the term *yakṣī* for all these types of figures, however, in most cases there is no tree associated with them, which would be the main iconographic characteristic of *yakṣīs*. The figure might be that of a donor, as argued by Elahi (2023).

2. A *jambu* tree

The fragment, in grey schist, depicts several branches of a *jambu* tree (Fig. 9). The branches are slightly undulated and point upwards; they are disposed in two rows, with four of them in the forefront and a couple of them emerging from the background. Each branch is aligned and slightly overlaps with the one to its right. The branches are quite thick; the lanceolate leaves are well defined and decrease in size towards the end of the branch, as they are all inscribed in a roughly rhomboid shape.

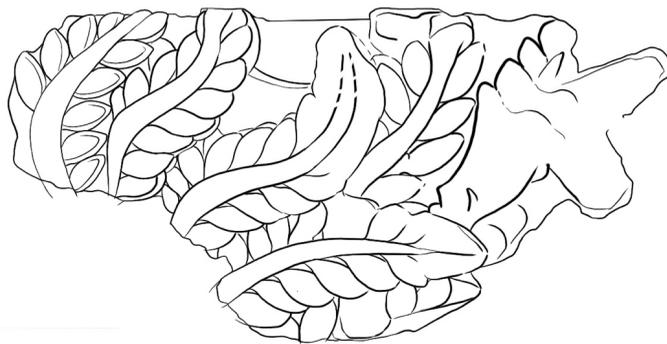


Fig. 9 - Fragment of a *jambu* tree with line drawing (VSN 94) l. max. 15.4 x h. max. 7.9 x t. max. 0.6~2.8 cm (Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission; drawings by the Author).

The fragment was part of a larger panel at the upper border in the right-hand section of the panel. These branches probably had a similar, if not almost identical counterpart mirrored in the left-hand side of the panel, so in its whole form the length of the object was certainly bigger than 30 cm. In some points the stone is only 0.6 cm thick, but the object broke in the back and a whole slab split away. Schist tends to foliate, so the split appears quite regular at a first glance. The object is also broken at both sides and at the bottom.

Despite the extremely fragmentary state of the piece, some hypotheses regarding the original iconography of the whole panel can still be made. The tree represented here is a *jambu* (*Syzygium malaccense*), showing the typical ovaloid leaves arranged opposite to each other along the branch. The branches seem to radiate from a point to the left of the panel, and they gently slope inward in that point. Given these factors, and the slight curve to the breakage pattern there, it is clear that a halo originally stood there. We can reasonably assume that the central figure was either a Buddha or a bodhisattva.

We can speculate further and discuss who exactly was in center of the panel and what he was doing. The *jambu* tree often appears as Siddhārta's canopy in the depiction of the episode of the first meditation: a striking example of this iconography is a sculpture from Sahri Bahlol, now in the Peshawar Museum (Fig. 10). The bodhisattva is sitting under a *jambu* tree canopy and, with his eyes closed, looks serene as he meditates. On the pedestal, the image of plowing on the right side of the flaming altar is the clear iconographic clue of the scene (Rhi 2006: 157-158).

Another *comparanda* for our piece is a panel from Butkara I, B 1213, which shows the prince in *dhyānamudrā*—the hands do not survive, but the sharp angle of the bent arm clearly shows that his hands were laying in his lap—under the *jambu* tree crown (Fig. 11). To his left, two male figures wearing princely attire are worshiping him, while above them, a winged figure is flying towards Siddhārta and is about to shower him with flowers (Taddei in Faccenna 1964: 55). The tree, as in our piece, is depicted with the branches pointing upwards.⁵

⁵ Other reliefs from Butkara I have a similar iconography: B 2147 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCXI a; B 2870 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCXI; B 2617 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCXII; B 1545 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCXVI.



Fig. 10 - The First Meditation, from Sahri-Bahlol Mound C
(After Rhi 2006, fig. 7.6).



Fig. 11 - Buddha in meditation (B 1213) (After Faccenna 1964, tav. CCVI).

The directionality of the branches deserves some discussion. In the frieze of Saidu Sharif I, the branches of the *jambu* tree are usually shown pointing downward.⁶ In our piece, however, the branches are pointing upwards. Moreso, the artist carved them with a vitality and fluidity that makes them look as if they are slightly shaking in the wind. In B 1213, the *amorino* barging into the scene might be responsible for the slight flutter of the leaves in the scene, but one might wonder whether the branches are shaking in response to the spiritual strength of the Buddha taking center stage in the relief.

Upward-pointing radiating branches in reliefs from Butkara I, in fact, most often (but not solely)⁷ appear in relation to the figure of the meditating Buddha.⁸ In these panels, the Buddha is shown in *padmāsana* on a square throne, the hands are in *dhyānamudrā* in his lap, and he is usually flanked by one or two worshipers per side. The presence of the *jambu* tree would suggest these panels represent the young Siddhārta—here still technically a bodhisattva—engaged in the First Meditation. However, in depictions of this episode the prince is often shown dressed in princely garb, donning long earrings, necklaces and bangles (more similar, for example, to the sculpture in Fig. 10), while in the reliefs examined here, he is dressed more demurely, without any type of jewelry—save the presence, in some cases, of a small string or band at the base of the *uṣṇīṣa*—and is almost bare-chested.

The way the Buddha wears the robe in these scenes is highly reminiscent of a young ascetic's appearance (Fig. 12). His right shoulder is bare, while the left one is covered by the *uttariya* tied in a knot. The end of the fabric falls almost vertically in the lap, leaving the chest mostly bare. This robe for the meditating Buddha seems to be particularly favored in Butkara I, where it appears not only in many panels,⁹ but also in high-relief sculptures from the side of the Great Stupa (Fig. 13). The concomitant presence of all these elements—the position of the hand and the body, the ascetic robe, the branches pointing upwards as if shaken by the strength of Siddhārta's meditation—seem to prove that these scenes are meant to

⁶ See for example the panel S 1112, described in Faccenna 2001: 261-262.

⁷ See for example B 2858 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCIX a (*Offering of the for Bowls*).

⁸ Among others: B 1213 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCVI; B 2870, Faccenna 1964, tav. CCXI; B 2617 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCXII.

⁹ In addition to the reliefs already mentioned, we can also add B 2535 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCX a, B 2147 Faccenna 1964, tav. CCXI and purchased from Udegram Faccenna 1964, tavv. CCXII a and CCXVIII.

showcase the meditative power of the Buddha. Indeed, in the catalogue of the sculptures from Butkara I, Taddei was discerning enough to never declare any of these scenes as ‘First Meditation’s, but rather he always described them as generic scenes of worship of *padmāsana* Buddhas (Taddei in Faccenna 1964).

While the discussion of the robe of the Buddha and its relation to the *jambu* tree branches might seem a digression, it is important to remember that, as Filigenzi (2005) has shown in her masterly discourse on the Buddha robe, even small details—deceptively secondary in the visual largesse of some panels—can be iconographically significant. I believe this to be the case for the directionality branches of the *jambu* tree, as I have briefly outlined here. Turning back to our piece here, then, the tree fragment was part of a larger panel that might have depicted a Buddha in meditation, most probably dressed in the ascetic garb. The popularity of this iconography in Butkara I, as well as the many technical and stylistic similarities with other pieces from this site outlined above, points to the same possible provenance for our piece as well.



Fig. 12 - Two young ascetics (B 3673) (After Faccenna 1964, tav. CXCIX).



Fig. 14 - Buddha in meditation (B 3799) (After Faccenna 1964, tav. CCX b).

3. Siddhārta under a tree

This piece comes from Barikot and is inventoried as BKG 2342 (Fig. 15). The object, in green schist, is very fragmentary (the piece as it stands today was recomposed from two fragments, and its surface is heavily abraded). Despite the poor conditions, the face of a bodhisattva sitting under a tree is clearly recognizable. The bodhisattva has a round face with a large forehead and a thin neck. His ears are slightly elongated but sculpted close to the face, and a trace of thick moustaches is still visible despite the abrasion of the surface. The hair is tied in a tall and wide knot on top of his head—giving the impression of a *uṣṇīṣa*—with a double band decorated at the center with a gem in the shape of a disk or, possibly, a rosette. The halo behind his head, circular and undecorated, is partly covered by the branches of the tree which fall down around the bodhisattva like a canopy. The background behind the tree remains plain.



Fig. 15 - Siddhārtha under a tree (BKG 2342) l. max. 16.3 x w. max. 16.5 x t. 6
(Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission).

Despite coming from Barikot, the piece shows a remarkable stylistic resemblance with several pieces from Butkara I and Saidu Sharif I, hinting at the large aesthetic reach of major religious sites in the region, even within urban cultic contexts. Good comparisons for BKG 2342 are the two fragmentary panels in Fig. 16 and 17. In the first one (B 2615), the treatment of the hair corresponds quite closely to the one in our piece: not only the hair itself is drawn in continuous narrow parallel grooves, but it is also held up with a similar double string decorated with a central circular element. The hand of the sculptor of BKG 2342 is a happier one, which was able to carve the small details of the hair strands with a fluidity that does not quite appear in B 2615. Similar too is the piece in Fig. 24, B 3120. More of this panel is preserved, and consequently we can see part of the tree behind the bodhisattva. Siddhārtha's hair is tied up in a tall hairdo with a double band,

here decorated with a starlike-shaped ornament in the center. The eyes of the bodhisattva here as in B 2615 are demarcated with a heavy top lid drawn with a sharp and deep cut in the stone and a softer lower lid; inside the eye, the iris is delineated, but unlike the pieces from Saidu Sharif I, the pupil is not shown here. In our piece, the eyes are treated in a similar way with the incised iris. It looks like the pupil might be present, but the surface of the stone is too abraded to tell for sure.



Fig. 16 - Siddhārtha under a tree. B 2615 (after Faccenna 1964, tav. CXVII a).



Fig. 17 - Siddhārtha under a tree. B 3120 (after Faccenna 1964, tav. CXVI).

In terms of subject matter, the episode represented here seems to be a general worship scene with a central Buddha under a tree, originally flanked perhaps by two attendants or by Indra and Brahma. The presence of the tree, however, might give us a clearer indication of the scene depicted here, which might be a meditation scene—perhaps even the representation of Siddhārtha's First Meditation. We can compare the tree branches with the object described here previously (Fig. 9) to see that the tree shown here is in fact a *jambu* tree, usually associated with the bodhisattva's meditation and especially with the First Meditation, as explained above.

4. A young ascetic or brahmin

This piece is a fragment in green schist and is damaged at all ends, making it virtually impossible to gather the original dimensions of the relief panel. The surface is heavily abraded as well. However, part of a head of a young ascetic or brahmin stands out against the background of an architectural

structure (Fig. 18). Differently from all the pieces examined so far, the general provenance of this one is known. The object is in fact inked in the back as ‘SI / A.’ ‘SI’ refers to the site of Saidu Sharif I, however, the reference for the second part of the designation remains unclear and it has not been possible to reconstruct the exact provenance of the piece within the site from just these letters. The piece is a good example of the drawing style (*stile disegnavivo*), characterized by a greater emphasis on lines rather than volumes, and shows the eye treatment—with thinly drawn eyelids and double pupil—that is typical of the Maestro of Saidu Sharif I. It was probably sculpted by either an imitator or by someone who was formed at the Maestro’s workshop.

The object depicts a young man. The man’s curls are well defined in round bosses with a central depression, and they are held up on top of the head in a small topknot that is typical of the depictions of ascetics or brahmins. The same hairdo appears on figures of bodhisattvas holding flasks, usually identified as Maitreya, and on depictions of the god Brahma, who usually appears as part of a set flanking Śākyamūni with Indra. He is in front of city walls, as evidenced by the row of oblong arrow loopholes carved into the background behind the figure’s head. Two flat bands run horizontally right behind his topknot: it is unclear whether they are part of the urban architecture—perhaps part of a string course? — or part of an element draped on top of the walls that is falling down towards the figure. Another element that is quite difficult to decipher is the projection above the figure’s head. It is heavily damaged but still shows a roughly rounded profile—once again, it could be an object posed on top of the ascetic’s head or something falling from whatever was originally present on top this figure. On the right side, a triangular shape emerges right above the breakage: it is slightly projecting from the background of the relief and is now almost completely abraded.

Given the very fragmentary state of the piece, reconstructing its iconography is quite challenging, however, a few hypotheses can be advanced on the basis of the setting of the scene (an urban environment, or rather just outside of it) and our main character (a brahmin or ascetic, who could be either the main character in the scene or one of the side figures attending to the protagonist).

The episodes that combine the two elements of the brahmin (or a brahmin-like figure) and the city walls in Gandhāra are not many: unless this is a completely new iconography (and the chance is always there)

and/or an unknown *jātaka*, it is likely that our piece might represent one of these.

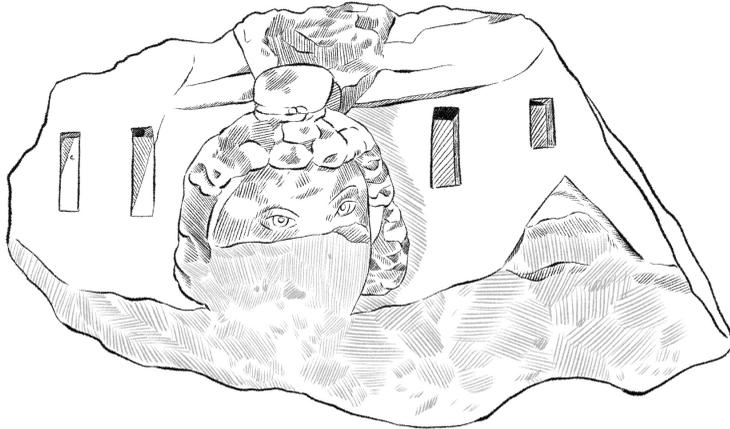


Fig. 18 - Young ascetic or brahmin with line drawing (VSN 92)
l. max. 14.5 x h. max. 8.4 x t. 4.9
(Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission; drawings by the Author).

The Dīpaṅkara jāta

This episode recounts of the very beginnings of the historical Buddha Śākyamūni. In one of his previous lives, when he was still a brāhmin by the name of Megha (Sumedha or Sumati, according to other traditions),¹⁰ Siddhārta took the ambitious vow to become enlightened in front Buddha Dīpaṅkara. Megha-Siddhārta then prostrated himself in front of Dīpaṅkara, who had so inspired the ascetic through his countenance and superior mental qualities, and had the Buddha walk all over his matted hair.¹¹ The episode happens in front of the city of Dīpāvātī, according to the *Divyāvadāna*, right as the Buddha is about to enter the city. In this case, the figure represented here could be the very Megha, turning to his left to offer flowers to the Buddha, under the watchful eyes of the citizen of Dīpāvātī, looking down from the city walls adorned with banners and garlands. Such scene is in the relief in Fig. 19, where Megha appears four times—buying flowers from the flower girl; throwing flowers towards the Buddha; prostrating in front of him; levitating in the air. Behind him the loopholes for arrows are visible, cut in the city walls.



Fig. 19 - Dipankara Jataka (left); worship of Maitreya (right). Peshawar Museum. Acc. No. 2718 (Photo courtesy of the Kern Institute [P-036881]).

¹⁰ For the *Dīpaṅkara jāta*, see Jones 1949 and Rotman 2008 and 2017.

¹¹ In the *Mahāvastu*, Megha cleans the Buddha's feet with his matted hair—the variation in this small detail is preserved in a panel now in the Art Institute of Chicago (Acc. No. 2015.447), where Megha's hands grab the Buddha's feet from above and he covers them with his hair. The detail is unusual, and since the exact provenance of the Chicago piece is unknown, the possibility that this is a modern object cannot completely be ruled out.

The division of the relics/Guarding of the relics

After the Buddha's passing in Kuśinagara, the rulers of the neighboring kingdoms vied for the possessions of his bodily remains. To avoid outright wars, the brahmin Doṇa took upon himself to divide the Buddha's relics and distribute them evenly. In this scene, the brahmin is usually represented sitting behind a table upon which the parts of the relics are arranged evenly. In some cases, the scene happens in front of the city and, in some cases, even on top of the city walls, like in a panel from the Peshawar Museum (Fig. 20). If it is the case that our piece represents the division of the relics, the conical object whose point survives to the right of the panel could be the top of a reliquary casket. Another scene that our piece could be part of is the guarding of the relics, a moment that happens just prior their division—this scene is also represented in front of city walls, as seen in Fig. 21.

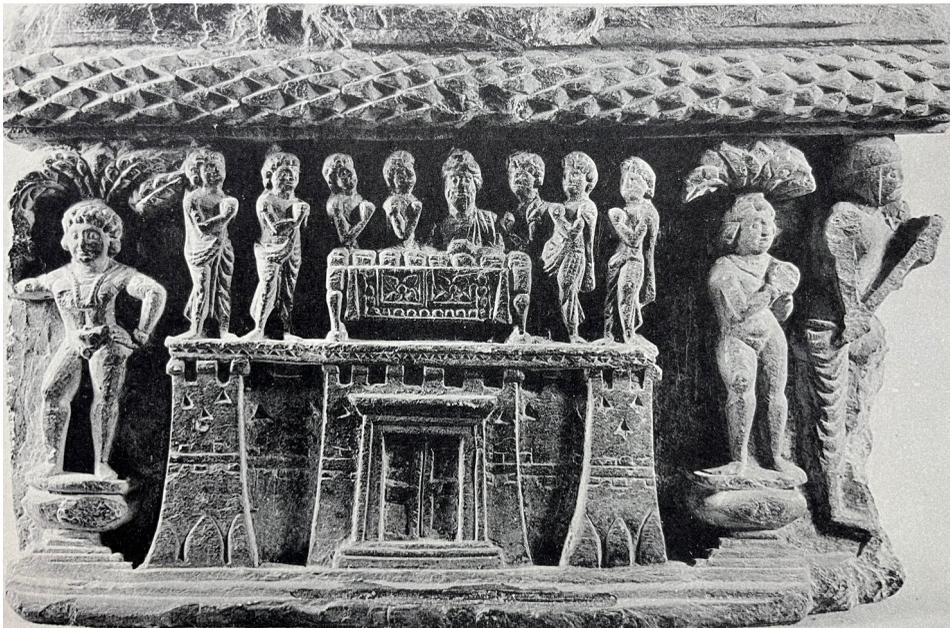


Fig. 20 - Division of the relics, Peshawar Museum (After Ingholt 1957: pl. 152).



Fig. 21 - Guarding the relics, Lahore Museum (After Ingholt 1957: pl. 151).

Ānanda asks the casteless girl for water

Rarer is the depiction of the episode where Ananda asks for water from Prakriti, a casteless girl from Śrāvastī—an episode that still constitutes possible *comparanda* for our piece. The story is represented in a panel from Śikri now in the Lahore Museum and shows Prakriti on the right drawing water from the well (Fig. 22). She gestures to a man on her right, probably her equally low-caste brother.¹² To the left of the panel, two worried citizens are leaving the city to go interrogating the Buddha about such episode, as members of any caste could not interact with casteless people, a ban that Ānanda completely disregarded to get water from the woman. One of the figures exiting the city is wearing his hair in a similar updo to the man in our piece and stands in front of the city gate. On the right, arrow-shaped slits can be seen donning the city tower and the city walls.

The options for the identification of our piece are certainly not exhausted—because of the presence of the city walls, possible additional *comparanda* are: the *Maitrakanyaka jāataka*, where Maitrakanyaka enters a series of cities before ending up expiating his sins against his mother by having a rotating iron wheel installed on his head; and the invitation of Śrigupta, when the rich houseowner Śrigupta attempted to end the Buddha's life by inviting him to lunch and concealing burning coals under a ditch

¹² This is Foucher's interpretation as exposed in Ingholt 1957: 78.

right at the entrance of his house. In both cases, however, it is not so easy to explain the presence of a brahmin or a young ascetic.



Fig. 22 - Ānanda asks a casteless girl for water, Lahore Museum (After Ingholt 1957, pl. 103).

5. A Gandhāran-Corinthian column

The piece in Fig. 23 is a Gandhāran-Corinthian semi-column encased in a flat fillet in green schist. The surface is almost completely covered by a light brownish encrustation, but the décor of the column is still clearly visible. The acanthus leaf is well defined and opens below a palmette topped by a rosette with four petals on the abacus. On the underside of the surviving volute on the left side, a series of parallel horizontal lines give the impression of a snake-like belly.

The column is today but a fragment, and only part of the top left side survives. It is not inked, but it is quite clear that it comes from the site of Saidu Sharif I. Not only it comes from this site, but it was also part of the figurative frieze on the main stupa drum. This hypothesis is confirmed, and

can be believed, by comparison with other architectural pieces belonging to the frieze in terms of style, iconography, and dimensions.



Fig. 23 - A Gandhāran-Corinthian semi-column (VSN 93); h. max. 11.5 x w. max. 10.2 x t. 4.4 cm (Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission).

The capital has all the elements that are typical of the semi-column dividing element of the great frieze of Saidu Sharif I: the acanthus leaf, the rosette, the two volutes flanking the central drooping leaf. The collar of the capital is made of two flat fillets and the entire semi-column is enclosed within a rectangular frame. Our capital shows all the characteristics of the columns of Group A: the leaves are well-defined, the rosette is big and spans to the entire height of the abacus with full, non-bilobated petals, the top leaf is shaped like a fan, and the lines are sharp but not schematic.¹³

¹³ Faccenna 2001, p. 131-132.

Our piece has a continuous vertical rebate on the back of the left side, indicating that another piece was inserted to its left. In the known pieces from Saidu Sharif I, too, the rebate is on the left side, and the width stands between 1.8 cm and 2.2 cm while in our piece it stops at around 2.1 cm. The depth of the rebate in our piece stands at 1.7 cm—but it might have been a little bit more given how the back surface is slightly abraded. The depth of the rebate in the known Saidu pieces is between 1.6 cm and 1.9 cm.¹⁴ Since the right side of the object is lost, it is impossible to ascertain whether this column was part of a relief panel with a figured field to the right, or it was an individual dividing element.

The many parts of the capital also correspond to the known Saidu Sharif I pieces in terms of dimensions—have now been made these relations clearer by reconstructing the whole piece in Fig. 24 and pairing it with one of the measured drawings in Faccenna (2001). Given all these elements, the provenance of this piece can without a doubt be assigned to the frieze of the stupa of Saidu Sharif I.

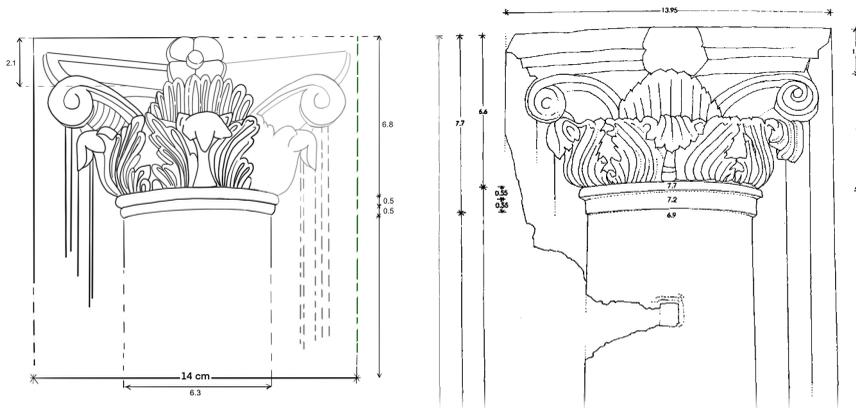


Fig. 24 - Line drawing of VNS 93 with measurements, compared with a similar object in Faccenna 2001, fig. 10, p. 48 (Drawings by the Author).

¹⁴ Faccenna 2001, p. 38.

Two nāgadantas

The final two pieces in this note come from one of the minor stupas of Saidu Sharif I. These two *nāgadantas*—a particular type of architectural element that functions as a peg to hold garlands and banners around the lower part of a stupa drum (Provenzali 2022: 188)—are both inked on the bottom as SI / AC. The letter A designates a provenance from the monastic part of the whole sacred precinct. The first *nāgadanta* of the pair, VSN 95 (Fig. 25), depicts a winged woman playing an instrument—probably a conch shell which is now lost because of the damage sustained by the object. She is wearing big round earrings, a long tunic with long sleeves, and her hair is arranged in two loops of tresses on top of her head.



Fig. 25 - *Nāgadanta* (VSN 95) h. 5.7 x w. 4.8 x t. 9 cm
(Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission).

The second *nāgadanta*, VSN 96 (Fig. 26), is a winged man dressed in a sleeveless tunic, perhaps an *exomis*. He is raising both his hands to the right side of his face in a dance. Specifically, he is performing the “Persian snap,” which is a move performed whenever a dancer uses their hands to mark the time (Lo Muzio 2019: 54). It is not an uncommon sight in early Gandhāran art, and it is most often performed by figures wearing Persian attire, following a pictorial tradition that goes back to the Hellenistic world (Lo Muzio 2019: 81-82). The snap points to the important political and cultural presence of the Indo-Parthians in Gandhāra, a presence that would be very large at least until the end of the 2nd century (Goldman 1978). However, as

Lo Muzio points out (2019: 80), we should be careful in attributing any specific ethnos to the Persian snap, as it is performed by a variety of figures wearing different attires—such is the case of VSN 96, where the man is wearing a Hellenistic *exomis*, rather than Parthian clothes and/or Phrygian cap. That said, it is clear, however, that these two *nāgadantas* are made to recall the Iranian world in general—in this sense, they fit in a strategy of self-representation of the royal elites of Swat, as they showcase a full mastery of the Graeco-Iranian visual language (Olivieri and Iori 2021).



Fig. 26 - *Nāgadanta* (VSN 96) h. 5.8 x w. 4.6 x t. 11 cm
(Photo courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission).

The style of the two *nāgadantas* deserves some words. Even though most (if not all) of the *nāgadantas* found so far belong to the drawing style (Provenzali 2022: 189), VSN 95 and VSN 96 already seem to be moving towards a more plastic treatment of the volumes: the figures project out from the surface quite dramatically and, despite the small dimensions of both objects, the facial features are well-defined and almost in high-relief, rather than delicately incised like it is the case with many of the known examples of the drawing style. They are perhaps a good, albeit diminutive, example of a moment of transition between the drawing style and a more volumetric and plastic treatment of the sculptural surface. Still, however, they belong to the earliest phases of production of the art of Gandhāra, and especially to a production that was typical of Swat—few other *nāgadantas* have been found in Taxila, but their style follows quite closely the *stile disegnativo* and they belong to the earlier phases (Marshall 1951: 707-708). A final note on the *nāgadantas* must be devoted to their directionality in their original location. As a *nāgadanta* is basically a form of bracket, these

two objects would have been part of a cornice. Their size tells us that they were on a small stupa; the sockets and tenons on the back tell us that they were corner elements, that is, mounted on the corner of the rectangular podium of a stupa (Fig. 27). Both VSN 95 and 96 show the same type of joint system in the back.

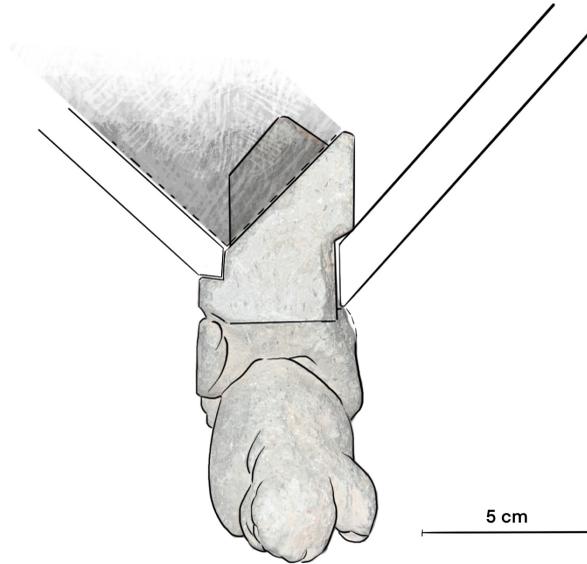


Fig. 27. Reconstruction of the mechanism of the joint in the back of VSN 96 (Drawings by the Author).

A similar object was found in Saidu Sharif I in the north-eastern corner of the monastic area, inventoried as S 2140 (Fig. 28). Its dimensions correspond to the two *nāgadantas* discussed here, making it likely that it, too, belonged to the same series and to the same monument.¹⁵ This piece comes from a layer associated with Period I of the construction of the monastery, dated to the 1st century CE (Callieri 1989: 120).

Despite its poor state of conservation, it also seems to depict a man either performing the “Persian snap,” or holding a long object (perhaps a musical instrument). It mirrors VSN 96—as per the description in the archaeological report, it shows a “youthful figure [who] holds both hands by his sides near his shoulders. He wears a robe [...] over his left shoulder;

¹⁵ Only the depth of the tenon changes between the pieces.

his face is slightly raised and turned to the right” (Callieri 1989: 147). It is indeed very similar to our piece(s), but the figure is turning the other way. If these are indeed part of the same monument, we must consider that another similar *nāgadanta* was present originally as decoration of the fourth corner but is now lost. We cannot know whether the figure was turning right—like VSN 95 and 96—or it was turning left—like S 2140.

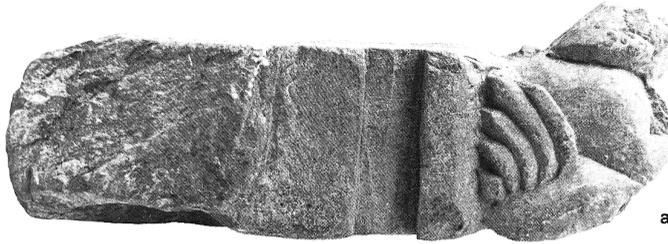


Fig. 28 - *Nāgadanta*. S 2140 (After Callieri 1989: 148).

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