

A Mathuran Style Buddha from Badalpur, Taxila Valley: A Reassessment of the Evidence and New Tentative Dating

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Abstract

Among the many flourishing Buddhist complexes in the Taxila Valley, the Badalpur monastic complex seems to be one of the largest, spreading over an extensive area of 2.9 acres (1.17 hectares) on the left bank of the Haro River, around 10 km north-east of Taxila Museum. The Badalpur complex could accommodate at a time more monks and pilgrims than any other monastery in the vicinity. Small scale salvage excavations were first undertaken at this site by V. Natesa Aiyar but with no significant findings in term of artifacts. However, more extensive excavations carried out by the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan from 2005 to 2009 provided scholars with plenty of artifacts for them to study, and revealed that actually the site consists of two separate monasteries, obviously to accomodate the needs of the growing community of monks and pilgrims. Amongst the most notable findings, the Badalpur complex preserved a Buddha statue of Mathuran style in dhyanamudra carved in red sandstone. Some important and unique details of this precious sculpture are missing in earlier descriptions, as well as those details useful to tentatively date this sculpture. This paper aims at outlining: (a) the links between Taxila and Mathura regions during the peak period of Buddhism, (b) reassess the details visible on the sculpture, and (c) to attempt to date our Buddha figure through comparisons with similar known Mathuran Sculptures. This preliminary assessment paves the way to further research.

Keywords: Taxila, Badalpur, Mathura, Seated Buddha, Red Sandstone

1. Introduction

Taxila Valley is rich of Buddhist religious and secular establishments; this area is predominantly famous for the many splendid monasteries and impressive stupas, an eloquent testimony that Taxila was once one of the most flourishing centers of Buddhism and that it was flooded by a diverse plethora of visitors, individuals as well as groups, including pilgrims, students, traders, scholars, researchers and tourists etc. These visitors were also agents of exchange in terms of ideas and material culture, bringing

new elements from outside and taking back Taxilan artefacts on their way back.

It is noteworthy that the reputation and importance of the Taxila Valley in the Greater Gandhara region in antiquity seems to be unmatched, for a variety of reasons; Taxila can – first of all – benefit from its favourable geographical position in close proximity to major ancient trade routes since remote times. Such position not only brought economic prosperity, but also determined its role as a place of great cultural interaction and exchange, with contributions converging here from almost all directions. Its reputation and standing as a great centre of learning – with many famous universities and teachers of unparalleled reputation – attracted people interested in knowledge and science. The importance of Taxila is further confirmed by the relocation of relevant Jataka stories to the area, as reported by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Beal 1884: 137-38; Khan 2019: 70-80).

Hermann Goetz (1959: 77) states that Mathuran sculptures and sculptors found their way into the Gandhara region, basing this observation on earlier excavations such as the one of the Dharmarajika stupa in 1915; at the site of the most famous and oldest stupa in Taxila Valley, Sir John Marshall, indeed, found the first head of a statue in the style of Mathura in Gandhara. Further subsequent excavations carried out by him at the same site and at other sites, such as Bhir Mound and Sirkap, yielded more specimens of Mathuran School sculptures (Marshall 1951, Vol.I: 278, Vol.II: 724 and 1960: 400-445).¹

2. Archaeological Investigations at Badalpur Monastic Complex

Three institutions carried out archaeological investigation at Badalpur monastic complex starting in 1863-64 and up to 2020.

- a. Archaeological Survey of India,
- b. Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums Pakistan² (hereafter DoAM), and

¹ See below, pp. 71-72.

² On 5th April 2011, after the constitutional amendment act of the year 2010, after the devolution of the Federal DoAM, administrative jurisdiction on the site of Badalpur was transferred to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (Formerly known NWFP).

- c. Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad.

Sir Alexander Cunningham was the first investigator to document Badalpur site during his archaeological survey in 1863-64 (Khan 2019: 73). Before excavation, the main stupa of Badalpur had been already completely deprived of its stone facing (Cunningham 1871, II: 144-46). A salvage excavation at the stupa complex of Badalpur was first carried out during the 1916-17 season by V. Natesa Aiyar, then superintendent of the Archaeological Survey of India. The finds recovered in the first season include ten copper coins of the Kushan period, 43 clay sealings, and pottery (Marshall 1960: 400-445; Arif and Khattak 2009: 119). Dr. M. Arif, Director of the Exploration and Excavation Branch of the DoAM, also unearthed large quantity of clay sealings from Badalpur in the 2005/06 excavations. The quantity of sealings from Badalpur is the largest one ever recorded from any single Buddhist monastic complex in the region.

Starting at the turn of the 21st century, in the context of an increasing heritage consciousness in Pakistan, also archaeological excavations resumed and increased; in this cultural ferment, considering the undeniable importance of the site, the Exploration and Excavation branch of the DoAM resumed the then suspended excavations in Badalpur in 2005 under the direction of M. Arif (Khan et al. 2009: 26). Structural remains of eight cells on the western and southern sides of the ruined monastery were exposed (Khan et al. 2007: 41). During excavation more than 128 clay sealings were discovered along with gold coins of the Kushan period (Arif and Khattak 2006: 126).³ Copper door hooks and iron clamps were also reported from the store room together with a small number of pots (Khan et al. 2007: 49-50; 2009: 41). The discovery of a hoard of coins (208 coins, including one gold coin) from the floor level in one of the monastic cell, is the outstanding feature amongst the antiquities

³ Amongst the most important discoveries from the first season's (2005-06) excavation include the unearthing of a unique and rare gold coin of the Early Kushan Period. five complete *chhatras* (umbrellas) of votive stupas, a one meter diameter iron pan, 188 copper coins, a ritual copper pot, a surgical instrument, copper plates, iron objects (nails, clamps, hinges, a saw, door bosses, stands, strips with nails), copper pendants, a copper bell, copper strainers and a large number of potteries including storage jars, pots, bowls, terracotta oil lamps and a heart shaped schist stone lamp.

found during the excavations in 2009 (Khan et al 2009: 25). M. Ashraf Khan, the then Director of the Exploration and Excavation Branch, DoAM, started excavations in 2008-09, that led to fascinating discoveries. Apart from many other antiquities, the most important discovery from the 2008-09 season is the Buddha statue in *dhyanamudra* in red sandstone from Mathura, another highly important Buddhist centre of knowledge and art. It was during that same season of excavations that a schist statue of Maitreya, a relic casket, terracotta oil lamps, and grinding stones were also reported from this site (Khan et al. 2013: 65-80). Another significant find from Badalpur is a miniature stupa made of schist stone now exhibited in the Islamabad Museum; this miniature stupa survives in very fragile conditions, most probably due to large scale fire in past.

After the devolution of DoAM in 2010, the Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, continued excavation at the site of Badalpur till 2018 (Khan et al. 2013: 65-80). The exposed structures included a main stupa and two votive stupas, enclosed by chapels of different sizes, meant for accommodating individual images of the Buddha. The main monastery was also found at the eastern side of the Main Stupa; this structure is majestic in shape, counting forty monk cells and two gateways. However, among the structures excavated at Badalpur, the discovery of a second monastery is absolutely exceptional; this structure is situated on the southern side of the main monastery, and contains twelve monk cells, an assembly hall, a kitchen, a storeroom and a water tank.

3. Mathuran style objects from the Taxila Valley: Finds from the Colonial Era

Mathura art is a primarily religious art of early India, mostly coeval to the Gandhara school, best known for Buddhist images.

Mathura is a city located in the western part of the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The site lies in the Ganges-Yamuna Doab (conjunction) on the Yamuna River, about 25 miles (40 km) northwest of Agra. Mathura is still an important sacred place as it is believed to be the traditional birthplace of the god Krishna and one of the seven sacred cities of the Hindus. According to Muhammad Ishtiaq Khan⁴ ‘Mathura or

⁴ Muhammad Ishtiaq Khan (1934-2008) also served as Director General of Archaeology, Pakistan (Ancient Pakistan, Vol. XX-2009:55).

Muttra of today [...] derived its importance mainly from its favourable geographical situation, as it was not only located on the river Jumna, but was also the meeting place of important commercial routes from Central Asia via Taxila, from the Indus Valley via Minnagar and from the gulf of Gujrat via Ujjain and Madhyamika' (Khan 1966: 41). In the early centuries of the Common Era in Mathura flourished one of the main schools of early Buddhist art. Paraphrasing Alexander Cunningham, Muhammad Ishtiaq Khan pointed out that "the old Buddhist statues are made of Sikri sand-stone, from which it would appear that Mathura must have been a great manufactory for the supply of Buddhist sculptures in Northern India [...] and Taxila, naturally, was no exception". Due to the prominent position both of Mathura and Taxila, the discovery of objects from Mathura in Taxila had a priority over similar discoveries at other places in this region (Khan 1966: 42).

As already mentioned, the first Mathura style object found in the Taxila Valley is a male head from the Dharmarajika stupa, excavated in 1915 by Marshall (accession No. 369, Dh-15-371). Style and material clearly pinpoint this product to Mathura; the eyes are half closed, has a thick lower lip, it appears to be shaven or wearing a closefitting cap. This male head was found in court 'A' at Dharmarajika stupa; however, although the piece was found from the excavations, we have no basis for dating it except the stylistic grounds since – as the excavators record – "as the courts A and B were kept open and at their original level until well on in the medieval period, their excavation in spite of the deep accumulation of debris (some 16 ft.) above them, yielded little or no stratigraphical evidence." Also an unfinished Mathura style head has been found at the same site (accession No.432 Dh 30-217). The male head has been tentatively dated by M. Ishtiaq Khan to the third century CE, while no date was assigned to the unfinished head found from the same site.

In 1939, a small relief panel of red sandstone, measuring less than 20 centimeters in height, and depicting a seated Buddha was found in Bhari Dheri, in the Taxila area (Accession No. 9080 Bd 39-1), during a surface collection. After studying the piece, M. Ishtiaq Khan remarks that the piece can be dated on stylistic grounds to the early 2nd century CE (Khan 1966:43).

4. The Mathuran Buddha from Badalpur

The red stone (without white spots) statute under investigation was found during 2008-09, in a verandah in front of cell no. 22 of the Main Monastery (Khan 2019: 73). This small sculpture, measuring 12x13 cm, was found during excavations; as already pointed out, another similar specimen has been found in the Taxila valley in a surface collection at the site of Bhari Dheri (Marshall 1951: II, 717-18, no. 119; III, pl. 220, no. 119; Khan 1966: 41-55, fig. 1; Foucher 1905: 51:1, 4-7, 35).⁵ Hence, the uniqueness of the Badalpur Mathuran Buddha also lies in the fact that it is the first of its kind found during proper excavation. It is possible that the sculpture was located in the verandah where both residents of the monastery and visitors could pay their hommages and prayers. Sign of fire at the finding spot and on the statue itself also suggests that a sudden catastrophe might have devastated this monastery and this could be the incursion of the so called White Huns in the 5th century C.E.

This sculpture depicting a seated Sakyamuni was found broken in two pieces. The figure was conceived almost like a sculpture in the round, even if the flat rendering gives a relief impression, almost as two reliefs have been just put together. The back side shows the entire bodhi tree with straight trunk, branches, and foliage. It also shows the back of the throne, and the back of the figures of the Buddha and his attendants. The stele is perforated to enforce the effect of a sculpture in the round. The Buddha is seated in *padmasana* on a high throne with two lions on the pedestal seated back-to-back “en profil”, face adjacent to the corners. Buddha has a prominent nose, long ear lobes, protruding eyes, thick lips and an oval shaped chin. He is wearing a transparent garment (*sanghati*) covering his left shoulder while the right one is bare. He has a *kapardin* hairstyle, that is a spiral-shaped chignon. His right hand is in *abhayamudra* with a *chakra* (wheel of the law) on his palm, while his left hand is touching his left knee. Both soles of his feet are depicted with the *chakra*. The navel is shown prominently. The back of the sculpture depicts a full grown pipal tree, usually associated to the episode of the enlightenment of Lord Buddha. There is a perforation on the back of the *ushnisha*.

⁵ This site has now completely been lost and fully encroached by modern buildings. Hence, no scientific excavations are possible here to explore possibility of such finds from systematic excavations.

This precious sculpture is carved in the Mathura style of Buddhist art that flourished in the trading and pilgrimage centre of Mathura from the 2nd century to the 12th century C.E; its most distinctive contributions were made during the Kushan and Gupta periods (1st - 6th century CE).

Apart from what has been identified or described previously about this sculpture, after minute examination we can add further additional iconographic information. The figure of Buddha is partially clad in a monastic robe whose folds are well defined, in relief, with bold grooves, and discernible layers. There is a definite effort towards naturalism and plasticity in the rendering of the drapery. The left shoulder and left half of chest of the Buddha is covered by the upper garment. The garment was folded back and draped over the right shoulder that was, therefore, partially covered. The lower garment is tightly draped on both legs, hanging down and spreading in a fan on top of the throne in centre in a fan. On the backside, part of Buddha's drapery is also visible. The face, besides protruding eyes, also has puffy cheeks, giving him a very lively expression.

Closer examination reveals the presence of further symbols on the Buddha's body, apart from the already known *chakra* on the palm of the raised right hand. In the area between the lower part of the palm and the wrist there is a faded sign tentatively identified as a lotus flower. Also the soles of the feet (facing upward in the *padmasana* position) bear significant symbols: a *chakra* on each sole and possibly a *trishula/triratna* on each sole by the heel. The presence of two symbols on each palm and on each sole, in a comparable positions, is noteworthy; in particular the presence of a *chakra* coupled with a *trishula/triratna* on the soles (while a more usual *chakra* and *lotus* appear on the palms) is definitely unusual, but not altogether absent on the sole of the seated Buddhas from Mathura. The Buddha most prominently shows the *chakra* symbol on the raised, soft, fleshy right hand that is in *abhayamudra*. *Abhaya*, literally fearlessness, is the gesture of reassurance that conveys to the devout that they have nothing to fear with the Buddha's grace. Fearlessness is the promise of the enlightened condition of Buddhahood, and it is one of the most commonly represented gestures in buddhist iconography. The palms of the hands and the soles of the Buddha's feet are marked, then, with auspicious symbols as prescribed by the scriptures; the most frequently repeated is the *chakra* (wheel) symbolizing Buddha's teaching and his law (*dharma*). The *chakra* represents and recalls the turning wheel of the

Buddhist teaching and having such symbol on palms and soles is also one of the auspicious symbols (*mahapurusha lakshana*) that distinguish those great beings destined to be buddhas.

Buddha is flanked by two male figures of attendants, badly mutilated and damaged. Heads and right arm of both figures are missing. The figure on the left side of the Buddha is a male, not a female as first thought (Khan 2019: 78). This fact can be very easily ascertained examining the chest of the figure and comparing it to that of the Buddha; the left attendant's chest is as flat as that of the Buddha, and does not look in any way like a female torso. This mutilated figure is naked except for the part below the navel, where signs of a belt suggest that he was originally wearing a lower garment (*antariya*). He is wearing bangles on his left wrist that is resting on his left hip; the right raised hand is missing, but it was most probably holding a fly whisk. Similarly, the mutilated figure on the proper right of the Buddha is also in very bad state of preservation, but we can infer from the remaining fragment that he is wearing a dress similar to that on his companion and he is standing in the same pose.

The throne is supported by two sitting lions positioned back to back at the extremities of the front side; on close examination, it is evident that the right paw of the lion seated on the left, is raised up to the head of the lion to support the throne, and, specularly, the left paw of the lion on the right, is also raised in a similar manner. Lion sculptures of similar shape and style are frequently found from the monastic complex of Buktkara I in Swat. The lions have a muscular, broad-chested body and a visible mane, allowing to identify them both as adult male animals.

The halo behind Buddha's head is broken and survived only part of the lower half; the remnants do not allow to reconstruct how it would appear originally and do not show any possible incision or inscription.

The identification of this small icon as originated in the area of Mathura is immediate to the expert's eye.⁶ Thus, after revisiting our sculpture's iconographic details, we confirm that this exquisite representation of a Buddha seated in *padmasana* on a lion throne and

⁶ According to an unpublished lecture delivered in 1992 by Prof. Srinivasa Kalyanaraman "small seated Buddhas from Mathura were installed at Sanchi, Ahichhatra and as far east as Bengal and north-west as Charsadda, outside Peshawar. The seated Buddhas from Mathura are even more important than the standing over because it is this form, the yogic position called *padmasana*, which the great majority of Indian images have continued to take until the present day and because their iconography is richer." The findings from the Taxila area confirm such assumption.

flanked by two male attendant (unfortunately badly damaged) reflects common features of the style of Mathura, including the clothing consisting in a thin transparent robe (that actually covers both shoulders as evident from the surviving traces on top of the right shoulder) and the hair that is smooth on the head like a cap, with the cranial bump (*ushnisha*) on top in the shape of a spiral bun or coil of hair (*kapardin*).

5. Comparison of the Badalpur Sculpture with other known sculptures from Mathura

In this concluding paragraph we present some comparisons that can help to better date on stylistic grounds the Badalpur sculpture.

First of all, there are many similarities between the sculpture of Buddha discovered from Badalpur and the sitting Buddha found from Bari Dherī; the style of the drapery is almost the same, however the grooves of the folds on the Badalpur Buddha are thicker than those on the sculpture of Buddha from Bari Dherī. There is a *chakra* on the front of the lion throne of the Bari Dherī sculpture between the two lions, while there is no such sign in the case of the Buddha reported from Badalpur. Both Buddhas are flanked by two figures of attendants, one on each side. The opinion of Muhammad Ishtiaq Khan about the dating of the Bari Dherī sculpture is important, he observes that “the relief unlike many Mathura pieces has no inscription although there is room for it on the pedestal. A detailed study of the style, however, enables us to assign it a fairly accurate date [...] Our piece with a little more pronounced lips and half closed eyes can, however, be dated a little later in early 2nd century CE”

A sculpture depicting a seated Shakyamuni Buddha in a similar pose is on exhibition in the department of Indian and Southeast Asian Art of the Cleveland Museum of Art;⁷ the sculpture is made of mottled red sandstone and is bigger in size from the Badalpur one, measuring 51.4 cm in height. The red stone sculpture from Badalpur Taxila and this one have some remarkable similarities; the Badalpur Buddha shows a backside that is fully carved with a full grown pipal tree in shallow relief, same rendering of the back is visible on the ‘Buddha with attendants under a Ficus Tree’ from the Cleveland Museum of Art (Morris 1998-1999: 80-91, Fig. 7). Similarly, the space on the front, around the halo of the seated

⁷ Czuma 1977: 97-98, figs. 24-25; also see <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1970.63> (accessed on July 2, 2021 (editor’s note)).

Buddha in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Morris 1998-1999: 80-91, Fig. 6) is also fully adorned with pipal leaves, as remnants on the fragmented specimen from Badalpur also seem to suggest. Foliage is also visible in the rear space of the right raised hands of both Buddhas, probably also made to strengthen the hand with additional thickness artistically disguised in the shape of foliage. Morris suggests to date the Cleveland Buddha to the first half of the 1st century CE.

Another such figure of Buddha flanked by two male attendant in the style of Mathura is in the Kimbell Art Museum,⁸ Fort Worth, Texas, USA which has been dated to 82 CE (according to the museum's website), however such date needs to be updated, according to the most recent consensus on the regnal years of Kaniska, to 132 CE (Menon 2020).

Two more comparable specimens are the stele from Katra, now in the Government Museum in Mathura and dated to the end of the 1st century CE (Menon 2020), and the one presently housed in the Harvard Art Museum that has been dated to c. 2nd century CE (Menon 2020).

The conclusion drawn by Rekha Morris (1998-1999: 80-91) is worth of consideration when she states that “the Harvard image of the Buddha Under a Ficus Tree may not belong to the earliest, formative group of known Buddha images from Mathura. However, it is possibly the earliest stele of this typology, the Buddha under a ficus tree, and one of the earliest images of its accomplished phase (which includes the Cleveland Sakyamuni and the Katra Bodhisattva). Indeed, within this assured phase the Harvard Buddha occupies a preeminent place, mediating between the earliest creations of the Buddha image in Mathura and the inception of canonic imagery as seen in the Cleveland Sakyamuni and the Katra Bodhisattva.”

Muhammad Ishtiaq Khan (1966: 45-46) has also discussed this issue in an earlier publication; according to him “On the other hand, the sitting attitude with the left hand on knee and the pose of the right hand raised up to the shoulder, the thin sticking garment across the body leaving the right shoulder bare, the prominent busts, the almost smooth surface of the hair, and the sitting lions at the corners leave no room for doubt that it is comparable to and datable with similar pieces from Katra, one in Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and “Early Mathura Seated Buddha type” of Comaraswamy. This type as dated by Comaraswamy (1927) and Van Lohuizen-de-Leeuw (1949) is datable to the second half of the first

⁸ <https://www.kimbellart.org/collection/ap-198606>

century CE Dating of our sculpture more precisely is difficult, but the Buddha reported from Badalpur Taxila with a little more pronounced lips and half closed eyes can however be dated a little later in early 2nd century CE”

Rekha Morris (1998-1999: 80-91) has identified four problematic areas in chronology and dating of the Kushana period art of Mathura (ca. 1st - 4th c. CE) i.e. (i) “no securely dated monuments from the period survive. About forty-five inscribed sculptures enable us to postulate a relative chronology, but all are dated in unspecified eras of uncertain dates, of which there were several in use: the Maurya era (beginning approximately 322 BCE), the Seleucid era (312 BCE), the Parthian era (248 BCE), the Saka era (129 BCE), the Vikrama era (57 BCE), and the various dates suggested for Kaniska's reign (144 CE, 128 CE, 78 CE).”, (ii) “monuments such as the images under discussion have been removed from their original context. Scholars classify sculptures of the Kushana period into two broad stylistic groups by reference to the two major centers of production: Gandhara and Mathura. Many Buddhist monuments in and around Mathura are no longer extant”, (iii) few of the inscribed images of this period refer to a donor, so that the only statement one might make about patronage is a negative one, i.e., that the patron of such images was most likely to have been non-royal like Friar Bala or (most likely) the patrons of the refurbishing of Mat and of Surkha Kotal.”, and (iv) in the present state of knowledge iconography does not clarify chronology. Detailed stylistic analysis in conjunction with studies of chronology by such scholars as Lohuizen, Rosenfield, and others allows us to chart a relative if not an absolute chronology within which to place images such as those under discussion.”

Considering the data obtained from the analysis reported above, and keeping in mind the current scholarly consensus on questions of chronology, we attempted a more precise datation of the Mathuran Buddha from Badalpur; after careful evaluation we come to the conclusion that our panel with seated Buddha in *padmasana* and *abhayamudra* in the sculptural style of Mathura most probably belongs to the first half of the second century CE and more precisely about 127 to 132 CE.

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Fig. 1 - Front view of the Mathuran Panel from Badalpur Taxila, showing the Buddha seated on a lion throne in the gesture of *abhayamudra* (Photo by Ashraf Khan).



Fig. 2 - Back side of the Panel with Pipal Tree (Photo by Ashraf Khan).