

A NOTE ON SOME BUDDHIST NARRATIVE RELIEF PANELS IN THE DIR MUSEUM, CHAKDARA

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ABSTRACT

The paper highlights the artistic and iconographic importance of some of the Buddhist narrative relief panels housed in the Dir Museum, Chakdara, of District Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study aims to find out the interpretation of different events of the life of Buddha depicted in the relief panels, lying unpublished in the reserve collection of the Dir Museum, Chakdara, in the light of Buddhist literature. All these panels have been recently come into light due to the re-arrangement of the stored collection of the Museum by a team of Archaeologists from the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa³.

Key word: Dir Museum, Narrative Relief panels, interpretation of iconographic scenes.

The archaeological Museum of Dir is situated in the Chakdara city; the administrative headquarter of lower Dir district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Museum was initially established by the Nawab of the former Dir State (Ali et al. 2014: 5716), however, after the merger of the State into Pakistan in 1969, the Museum came under the Political authority of Malakand. With the passage of time, new constructions were carried out in the Museum premises including the boundary walls, residential quarters and halls for display and reserve collection, and the new building was thus inaugurated in 1979 (see Ali et al. 2014: 5716). After the inception of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 1993, the Dir Museum came under its direct control and till date the same Directorate is looking after its collection and administrative affairs.

The Buddhist narrative relief panels housed in the Dir museum are very important in terms of Buddhist iconography and other related aspects, since they represent different events from the biography of Buddha, such as, the jataka or pre-birth stories, the dream of Queen Maya, the birth of Siddhartha, his life in the royal palace, renunciation,

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enlightenment, first sermon, demise and the cremation of his corpse. All these art pieces are very skillfully manufactured in schist stones; either quarried from the local hills or acquired from the mountains of Swat and Mardan, and was fixed to stupa and shrines, for the visual narration of different episodes of the life of Buddha.

However, these art pieces remained underground for many centuries because of the crumbling down of the sacred Buddhist edifices in the past, until the 19th and 20th centuries, when some of these ruined Buddhist sites were exhumed either by the immature British military and civil servants during the Chitral campaign of 1895. The sculptures and other valuable antiquities found in such clandestine diggings were either smuggled to the black markets of the world, or transported to different museums of India and abroad (see Khan 2017).

After the independence of Pakistan, the Department of Archaeology and Museums in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar carried out scientific excavations in district Dir and discovered a good harvest of Buddhist sculptures. Thus the Buddhist sculptures now housed in the Dir Museum Chakdara, have been discovered in different Buddhist establishments of Dir such as Andan Dheri, Chat Pat, Ramora, Bambolai, Nasafa and Chargano Shalkandai (Dani 1971, Wahab 2011).

Although the Dir Museum also displays ethnological material, manuscripts, coins and ceramics, however, the large hall with side galleries are reserved for the display of Buddhist sculptures acquired through archaeological excavations, donation and purchase. Some of these sculptures have been published in the preliminary excavation reports and guide books, however, most of the Buddhist narrative reliefs discovered at the site of Bagrajai and elsewhere, are lying unstudied in the reserve collection of the Museum. An attempt is therefore, carried out in the present research work to highlight the religious, artistic and iconographic importance of some of these art pieces.

THE BIRTH OF SIDDHARTHA (PL. 01)

Inventory No.	DMC 1983
Provenance:	Bagrajai
Source:	Excavation
Material:	Black Schist
Size:	12.5x23.5 cm

A partially broken panel is representing the birth scene of prince Siddhartha. Queen Maya is standing frontally cross legged and holds branches of a tree with both hands. The child is coming out of her right side, while god Indra receives him in a piece of cloth. On the left side of Maya, three female figures standing of which the one supports the Queen, the other stands with folded hands and the third figure carries a bunch of peacock feathers in the left hand. On the other side, a male figure is standing behind Indra with folded hands.

The scene is enclosed by Corinthian pilaster on either side, of which the one on the left side is half broken along with the lower left portion of the panel. The preserved portion of cornice above is provided with wine scroll and petals.

THE FIRST BATH OF SIDDHARTHA (PL. 2)

Inventory No.	DMC 1984
Provenance:	Bagrajai
Source:	Excavation
Material:	Black Schist
Size:	12x25.2 cm

This is a partially broken and damaged relief panel and representing the first bath of the child Siddhartha. He is shown standing on a low pedestal and supported by two seated figures, while god Indra and god Brahma are standing on either side of the child and pouring water over him from small pitchers. One the extreme right and left of the panel is standing devotees, whereas, traces of another one in the background are also visible on the left side. The scene is enclosed by defaced Corinthian pilasters.

THE FIRST BATH OF SIDDHARTHA (PL. 3)

Inventory No.	DMC 1225
Provenance:	Malakand
Source:	Gifted by Political Agent, Malakand
Material:	Black Schist
Size:	12x25.2 cm

This fragmentary relief panel is showing two scenes, separated by a cornice of overlapping petals. The upper tier is represented by five standing human figures wearing roman toga and making different gestures. The lower tier depicts the bath scene of Siddhartha. He is shown standing on low pedestal, and supported by two kneeling figures. Whereas, god Indra and god Brahma are standing on either side of the child and pouring water over him from small pitchers. Traces of an enclosed Corinthian pilaster are also visible on the lower left portion of the panel.

THE RETURN OF QUEEN MAYA TO KAPILAVASTU (PL. 04)

Inventory No.	DMC 1895
Provenance:	Dir
Source:	Purchased
Material:	Black Schist
Size:	14.5x22.5 cm

This rectangular panel is partially broken and damaged, but the preserved portion depicts the transportation of the palanquin of Queen Maya to the palace of Kapilavastu, after giving birth to Siddhartha in the Lumbini garden. The queen is shown sitting frontally on a cushion of the palanquin and holding the child in her lap. She is wearing a sleeved tunic and perhaps trousers concealed by a dhoti. Two male figures are slightly bending to lift the palanquin with both hands. Two additional figures are also shown in the background. An enclosed Corinthian pilaster is visible to the right of the scene while the cornice of panel shows a row of pipal leaves.

THE MAHAPARINIRVANA OF BUDDHA (PL. 05)

Inventory No.	DMC 1900
Provenance:	Dir
Source:	Purchased
Material:	Phyllite
Size:	21x25.5 cm

Portion of a square relief panel is showing the Mahaparinirvana, or death scene of Buddha. The corpse of Buddha is shown lying on one side, over a mattress spread on a raised cushion. His head is resting on the elbow or the right hand above a pillow, the legs slightly bends and the left hand bending to chest. Two mourning figures are shown on either side of a small squatted figure at the front of the couch. While two other figures, one on the head side and another on the feet is mourning with folded hands. Some other figures are also shown in the background but their heads are defaced. Busts of figures with folded hands are also shown in niches on either side of the panel, while traces of another scene is also visible above the death scene. Tonnons are also provided to the bottom of the panel for fixation into some sort of pedestal, while the left and right borders are decorated with a thick row of overlapping pointed leaves.

THE ADORATION OF STUPA (PL. 06)

Inventory No.	DMC 1987
Provenance:	Baghrajai
Source:	Excavation
Material:	Schist
Size:	21.3x27.7 cm

Portion of a rectangular relief panel is divided into three tiers, of which upper one is broken, while the lower right tier represents the adoration of a stupa by devotees. The stupa is consisting of a square plinth, double drums; and hemispherical dome topped by five chatra in diminishing order. A pair of two devotees with folded hands is depicted to the left of stupa while to the right; there is the traces one devotee in adoration pose. The lower left

tier of the panel is depicting three devotees in a row with folded hands and pays reverence to the stupa. An enclosed pilaster separates the lower tiers of the panel from each other, and a scroll of wine is also shown in the upper tier.

CONCLUSION

Although some of the Buddhist sculptures and narrative relief panels housed in the Dir Museum, Chakdara have been catalogued and interpreted by scholars and art historians, however, there are still enough materials in the reserve collection which need interpretation in the light of Buddhist literature. The present study is the beginning of a meticulous research yet to be carried out on the unpublished Buddhist antiquities, particularly the narrative relief panels, the elaboration of which can add new chapter to the iconographic issues of the Buddhist art of Gandhara.

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PLATES

Pl. 01: The birth scene of Siddhartha



Pl.02: The first bath of Siddhartha



Pl. 03. The first bath of Siddhartha



Pl. 04. The return of Queen Maya to Kapilavastu



Pl. 05. The Mahaparinirvana or death scene of Buddha



Pl.06: The adoration of stupa.