

Book Chapter
Title of the Book:
Indology's Pulse: Art in Contexts. Essays
presented Doris Meth Srinivasan.
Edited by Corinna Wessels-Mevissen and Gerd
Mevissen
Published by: Aryan Books, Delhi, 2019



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Enthroning the Buddha's Relics in Gandhāra: The Classical Lexicon of the *Stūpa* Base

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New archaeological finds from Swat, Pakistan, present us with the opportunity to reconsider the visual lexicon employed to decorate the bases of Gandhāran *stūpas*. The findings of sculptural fragments reminiscent of throne legs placed on either side of *stūpas*' stairs suggest that the square bases of these monuments were conceptualised as thrones for the Buddhist relics contained in the dome. The classical imagery often embellishing these architectural elements may have been used semantically to reinforce the notion of royalty associated with the *stūpa* base as a throne for relics; in addition, it may have evoked worship and giving among the devotees.

The springboard for such study lies in two recent finds uncovered at Amluk Dara in Swat, Pakistan, during recent archaeological excavations carried out by Dr Luca Olivieri, director of the ACT Project/Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan. The finds consist of two sculpted schist blocks, here identified as A and B (Fig. 7.1), unearthed respectively in SU (54) and on top of the staircase of the main Amluk Dara *stūpa* (Fig. 7.2). They consist of narrow rectangular blocks with curved ends in the shape of a reversed S (Fig. 7.3) (Brancaccio 2014). Originally each block had two side faces that were curved echoing the profile of a moulding; figures sculpted almost in the round project out from one of the curved faces. On Block A is carved a male character, unfortunately damaged, holding a club and a draped mantle, while on Block B is a female leaning over a column with a falling drape covering the lower part of her body. Over her right arm, bent and resting on the hip, hovers a small flying Eros. Unfortunately both the head of the winged creature and that of the female figure are obliterated.¹ The decoration of this piece is completed

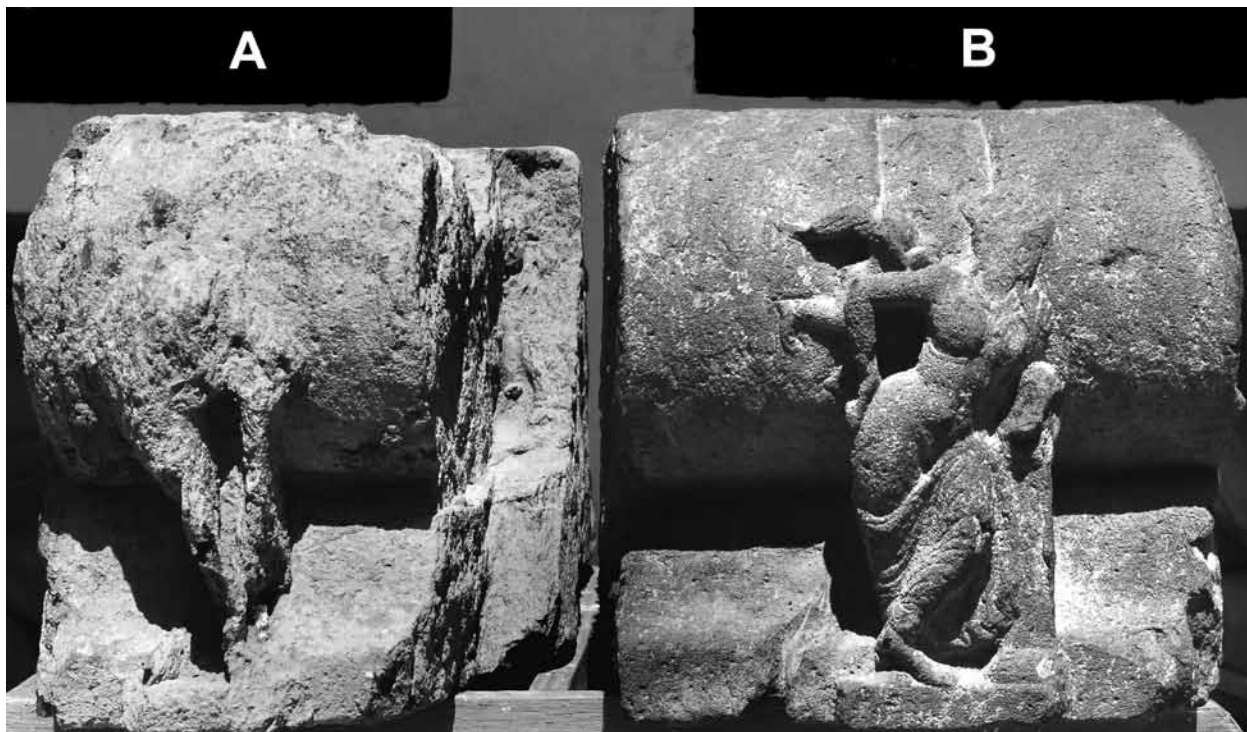


Fig. 7.1. Stair side-elements from the Amluk Dara *stūpa*, Swat, Pakistan. A. AKD 98, proper right, decorated with male figure, grey schist, heavily chipped, partly broken and reused, 26.5 x 21.5 x 79.0 cm. B. AKD 97, proper left, decorated with female figure, grey schist, chipped and reused, 26.0 x 26.5 x 80.5 cm. Photo courtesy of Luca Maria Olivieri.

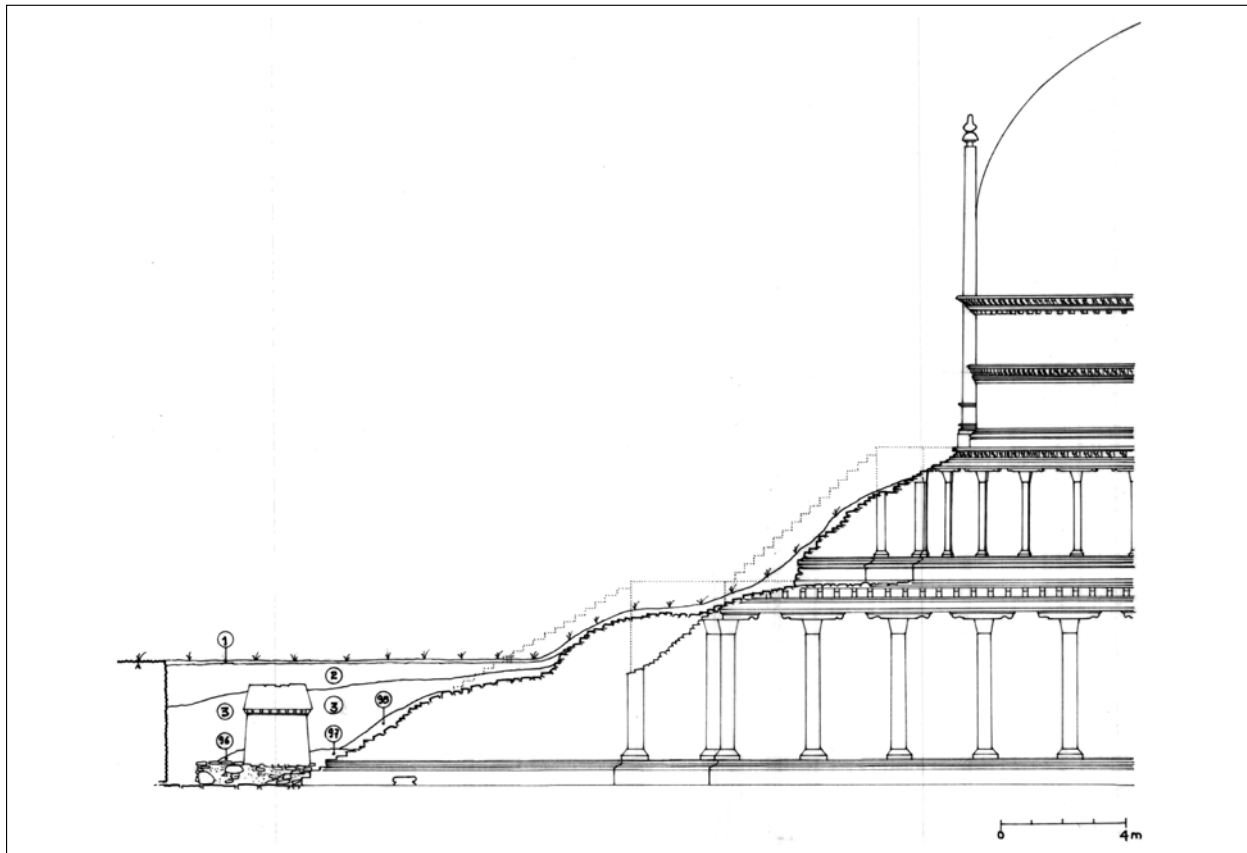


Fig. 7.2. Drawing of the Amluk Dara *stūpa*, Swat, Pakistan. Drawing by Francesco Martore, courtesy of Luca Maria Olivieri.

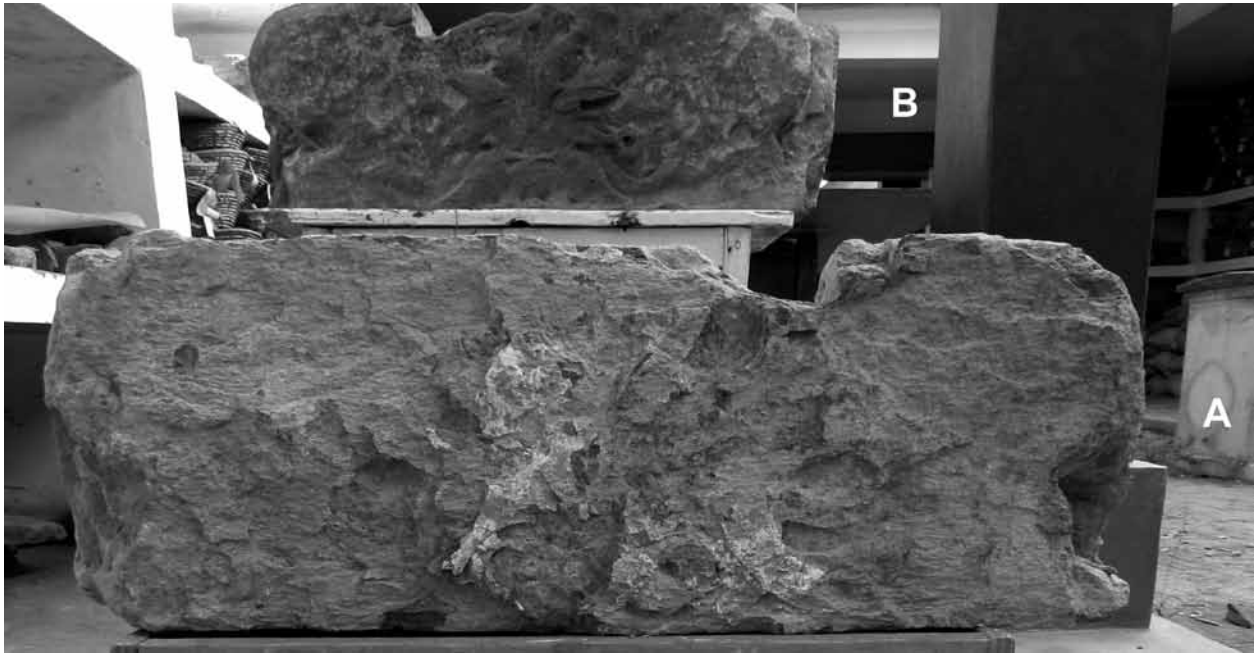


Fig. 7.3. Side view of architectural elements from the Amluk Dara *stūpa*, Swat, Pakistan. Photo courtesy of Luca Maria Olivieri.

on the rounded side by a scroll with pointed leaves, while an open flame palmette is carved on the long, rectangular face of the same piece (Fig. 7.4).

The images from Amluk Dara clearly elaborate upon classical visual *topoi* established in the Northwest of the Indian Subcontinent. The male

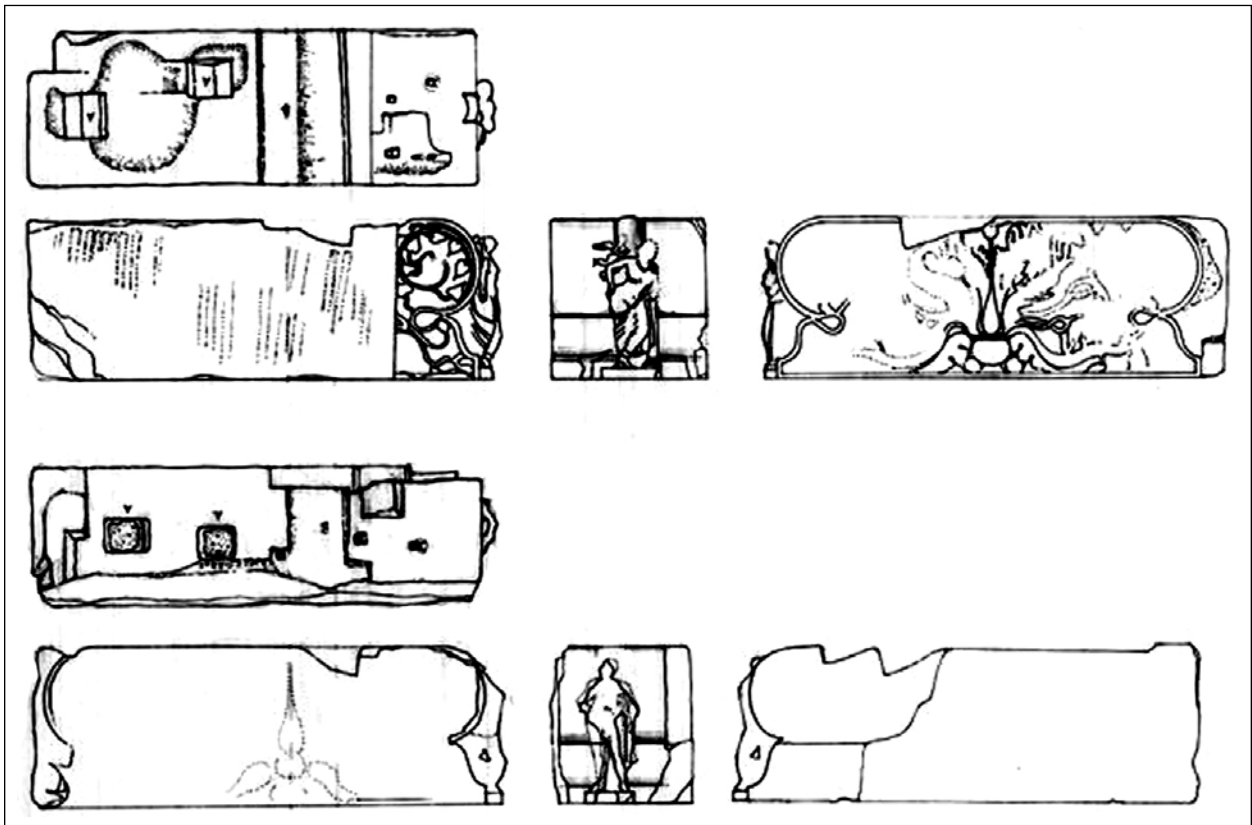


Fig. 7.4. Drawing of the architectural elements from the Amluk Dara *stūpa* by Francesco Martore, Block A below, and Block B above, courtesy of Luca Maria Olivieri.

figure with a club and mantle falling off the left shoulder follows the iconography of Herakles popular in the eastern parts of the Hellenistic world and echoes images of the god with club and *leontis* recurrent on Indo-Greek and early Kushan coins (Fig. 7.5).³ Similarly, the female figure conforms to the classical typology of the goddess Aphrodite leaning on the column also reproduced in the jewellery at Sirkap (Fig. 7.6; Col.pl. 6) and Tillia Tepe.³ The ornamental patterns that completed the decoration of Amluk Dara sculpture B also suggest a Graeco-Roman connection. The ornamental leafy scroll with heart-shaped leaves generally identified as of the Indian *pīpal* tree, seems to evoke the ivy branches often found in visual contexts associated with images of the god Dionysos.⁴

The pieces from Amluk Dara are not unique; in fact, they belong to a small corpus of odd-shaped sculptures that are often overlooked by scholars. They consistently display floral or figural motifs of Graeco-Roman origin including palmettes, leafy scrolls, marine deities, lions and figures associated with drinking and wine.⁵ An excellent example of this category of sculptures is the so-called lion plinth with drinking satyrs and women, from the Central Museum in Lahore (Fig. 7.7). Information on the original placement of these pieces within the architectural layout of *stūpas* is provided by archaeological excavations conducted in different parts of ancient Gandhāra. John Marshall (1951: 167, pls. 27b, 30b) recorded in Sirkap, Block G, a sculpture similar to the ones from Amluk Dara positioned at the base of the stairs leading to the



Fig. 7.5. Kushan coin of ruler Kujūla Kadphises with image of Herakles on the reverse, alloyed copper, British Museum, acc.no. 1894,0506.1676. Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 7.6. Winged goddess, Sirkap, Block E, c. 1st cent. CE, gold repoussé, ht. 6.3 cm, National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi. Photo courtesy of Christian Luczanits [Col.pl. 6].

plinth of a small *stūpa*. Excavations conducted by Domenico Faccenna at Panr in Swat also brought to light a comparable piece at the bottom of the flight of stairs leading to the square podium of *stūpa* 16.⁶ At Shotorak in Afghanistan, Jacques Meunié recovered two panels *in situ* forming a pair that supported the first step of the stair leading up to the main *stūpa* F.1 (Fig. 7.8) (cf. Meunié 1942: 14, figs. 118, 119, pl. XXXVII). Such ample evidence indicates that pieces like those found at Amluk Dara were used as ornamental panels forming a pair installed by the first step of the staircase leading to the podium of the *stūpa*.



Fig. 7.7. Architectural element, provenance unknown, Lahore Museum, acc.no. G-167. Photo courtesy of Christian Luczanits.

In fact, *stūpa* stairs in Gandhāra are most often decorated with figural elements lifted from the Graeco-Roman repertoires; the Amluk Dara pieces A and B installed on either side of the first step would have been completed, with good probability, by a series of string panels and stair risers also inspired by classical forms. Figures like ichthyocentaurs or triton-like creatures that combine mythical and real

features are frequently seen on triangular string panels (Fig. 7.9), while stair risers consisting of long and narrow rectangular panels to be viewed in vertical succession by devotees ascending to the podium, often evoke an atmosphere of festivity.⁷ The figures represented on them enjoy music, dance, wine, or hunt; garlands and erotes are also included; the characters are dressed either in Kushan or, most



Fig. 7.8. Side-element of stairs, Shotorak, Afghanistan. After Meunié 1942: no. 118, pl. XXXVII.



Fig. 7.9. Stringer, provenance unknown, grey schist, 19.4 x 28.6 x 7 cm, British Museum, acc.no. 1889,1016.2.
Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

frequently, classical garb. One can suppose that stair risers depicting men wearing triton-like costumes like those in the British Museum (Fig. 7.10) were associated with stringers with ichthyocentaurs (Fig. 7.9) and that the marine theme of the particular set was complemented by stair sides with sea creatures comparable to those seen in Shotorak (Fig. 7.8). The classical language of the stair decoration is in perfect agreement with the visual idiom employed in the architectural decoration of Gandhāran *stūpa* bases. The square or rectangular podium introduced for the first time in Gandhāra is like a base for the round dome that makes the whole relic structure taller and more imposing. Typically at the bottom of a *stūpa* base is a *torus-and-scotia* moulding, while at the top is a cornice with small brackets often looking like S-shaped pilasters with pseudo-Corinthian capitals; along the walls of the podium-base are pilasters with Attic bases and pseudo-Corinthian capitals. The flight of stairs most

often includes a projection at the top that serves as a landing area, but no space is left on the podium for the circumambulation of the dome (Fig. 7.2).

This layout is unique to Gandhāran *stūpas*. Traditionally in North India relic monuments never included square bases: they were large round domes surrounded by a fence or *vedikā*, with one or more gates leading to the *pradakṣiṇāpatha* or the circumambulatory path. While the dome was always plain, often the stone upright of the *vedikā* or the gates were decorated with a variety of images including narratives of the Buddha's life and previous birth stories, ornamental floral patterns, auspicious symbols and effigies of protective deities such as *yakṣas* or *nāgas*. Walking clockwise around the *stūpa* was the main ritual action performed by devotees while visiting relic monuments. Therefore, in North India, whenever bases were inserted "to boost the height of the stupa", as suggested by Professor Shoshin Kuwayama



Fig. 7.10. Stair riser, provenance unknown, grey schist, 16.5 x 43.2 x 4.8 cm, British Museum, acc.no. 1889,1016.1. Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

(2008: 172), they were always cylindrical in shape. In Gandhāra only a couple of major early *stūpas* such as the so-called Dharmarājika in Taxila and in Butkara followed the traditional Indic round plan with the omission of the *vedikā* and the gates. Once a distinctive Gandhāran idiom began to emerge in *stūpa* architecture, the square podium was immediately introduced in the design. According to Professor Shoshin Kuwayama who extensively studied Gandhāran architecture, and in the previous chapter reviewed the particular nature of *stūpas* erected in this region, the square podium was first introduced in *stūpas* erected within the urban site of Taxila. Relatively small in size, all the *stūpas* excavated by Marshall in Blocks 1A, 3A, 1D, 1F, 1G, 1C' and 1E' as well as the palace showcase this particular innovation (Fig. 7.11) (cf. Kuwayama 2002: 12–14). Scholars have tried in vain to explain the origin and function of these square podia-bases; Kuwayama proposes that there may be connections between Roman funerary architecture and the structure of Gandhāran *stūpas*, and in particular he compares the *stūpas* with circular domes over square podia to some of the early Roman imperial *mausolea* such as the one belonging to Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia in Rome. However, even by introducing the idea that Roman architecture may have been influential in the formation of a Gandhāran *stūpa*

design, he still remarks that “the function of the staircase remains mysterious” (2008: 173).

In fact, the square podia of Gandhāran *stūpas* tend to be quite high, and the inclusion of a staircase with a small rectangular landing on the top would suggest that devotees could climb up to approach the round dome. Yet the configuration of these monuments is such that there is no space on the podium for the ritual circumambulation of the dome, and devotees who would have attempted such a thing would have simply fallen off. What is especially relevant about the introduction of a staircase in Gandhāra is that it establishes an ‘axis of access’ to the monument by marking the front of the dome.⁸ The staircase with or without a rectangular landing area also appears in the small urban *stūpas* of Sirkap (Kuwayama 2008: 175), and was developed on a monumental scale at the main *stūpas* of Saidu Sharif I, Gumbatuna, Andan Dheri, Thareli, Ranighat and Gangu Dheri. A large staircase with rectangular landing can also be seen at Amluk Dara (Fig. 7.12). The frontal emphasis in the design of Gandhāran *stūpas* with staircases was likely dictated by the diffusion of ritual forms other than circumambulation, as also pointed out by Prof. Kuwayama in the previous chapter (Ch. 6); in fact, the traditional Indic practice of *darśana* or direct vision of the divine during worship may



| Fig. 7.11. Sirkap, Block G, *stūpa*. Photo: Pia Brancaccio.



| Fig. 7.12. Stairway of the Amluk Dara *stūpa*. Photo courtesy of Luca Maria Olivieri.

have been important to the Gandhāran Buddhists, particularly in the context of relic worship. Devotees metaphorically 'saw' the relic enshrined in the *stūpa* as they approached the monument frontally and climbed the stairs. The placement of a false gable on many *stūpa* domes, right in axis with the flight of stairs, seems to corroborate this idea. The false gable, a sort of monumental *aedicula*, was completely filled with images of the Buddha's life that gave visual form to the unseen bodily remains buried deep in the dome.

It should be mentioned that in the *Dīvyāvadāna*, a Buddhist text that reflects the religious milieu of Gandhāra in the Kushan period, the practice of engaging visually with the divine is highly emphasised. In several passages of this text it is made clear that seeing engenders faith (*śraddhā*), which in turn creates the wish to make an offering (*prasāda*), which translates into an actual donation to the Buddha or the religious establishment (*dāna*) (cf. Rotman 2009).

There is no question that the cult of relics was of foremost importance to the Gandhāran

Buddhists, even if effigies of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were ubiquitous at the sacred sites. Scenes of relic adoration are frequently depicted on statue pedestals as well as in narrative reliefs, and the Chinese pilgrim Fa Xian who visited the region around the year 400 personally describes how the relic of the Buddha's skull was placed on a lofty throne to be worshipped at Hadda. Such evidence aside from confirming the local importance of this religious practice also tells us how the Buddha's relics were installed for worship. The relics, whether consisting of bodily remains set in reliquaries or objects that the Buddha used, such as the begging bowl or turban, are shown in the reliefs on elaborate thrones identical to those used by the kings and queens. The ornate throne generally consists of a square draped podium sometimes crowned by a canopy (Fig. 7.13). The legs of the throne are always decorated with elaborate mouldings and sometimes shaped as lion paws, and they mostly refer to foreign, western types as demonstrated by Doris Srinivasan in her illuminating study on crafts in Gandhāran art (2006: 262). In fact,

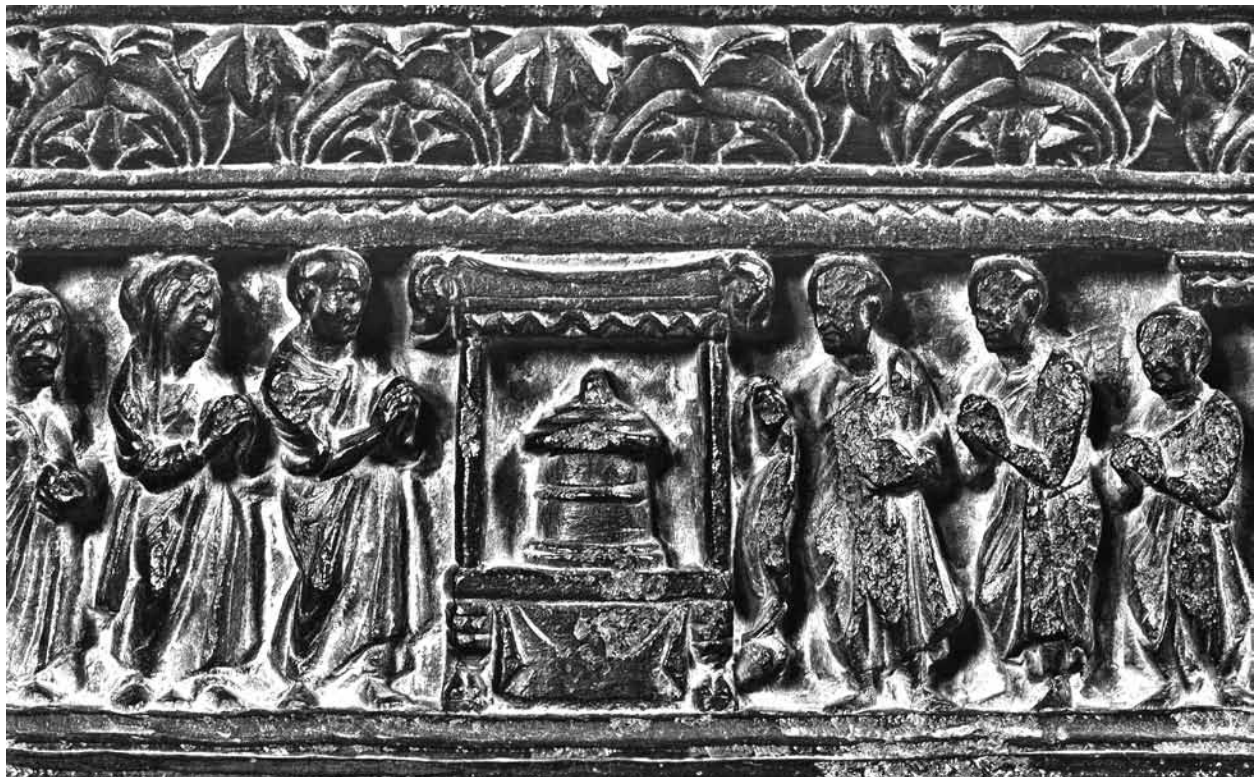


Fig. 7.13. Detail of pedestal of a standing Buddha sculpture, provenance unknown, grey schist, 140 x 48 cm, Central Museum, Lahore, acc.no. G-381. Photo courtesy of Christian Luczanits.

lion feet frequently appear in Hellenistic and Roman furniture such as seat, throne and table legs.⁹

The evidence examined above seems to suggest that the square podium introduced in Gandhāran *stūpa* architecture was semantically functioning as a throne for the relics enshrined in the dome. If relics were always seen and worshipped on elaborate thrones, then the *stūpa* podium conceptually functioned as a royal seat on which the relics in the *stūpa* could be presented for all to worship. In Gandhāra the square *stūpa* podium must also have worked to boost the height of the relic mound and to mark the sacred space like all the *vedikās* from North India; the pillars with pseudo-Corinthian capitals ever present in the design of the *stūpa* podia semantically functioned as *vedikā* uprights. Yet the visual and conceptual connections between Gandhāran *stūpa* bases and relic thrones remain very strong: even when free-standing columns make their appearance at the four corners of the podium, the allusion to the four posts supporting the canopy above the relic throne becomes apparent.

The proposed formal analogy between the *stūpa* and the throne sheds light on the role played by sculptures comparable to those found in Amluk Dara within the design of a Gandhāran *stūpa*. ~~The curved sides of the sculptures echo, in a stylised way, the profile of a moulding generally augmented by the presence of carved figures or shaped into a lion paw. These 'sides' in fact functioned as the front of our sculptures; the lion paws for example, installed at the very bottom of the flight of stairs, by either side of the first step, looked like elaborate feet sustaining the *stūpa* podium conceptually formulated as a relic throne. The countless depictions of thrones in the narrative art of Gandhāra, with or without animal feet, make the analogy between a *stūpa* podium and a throne for relics quite convincing. Further, the finding of exquisite ivory throne feet in Begram such as the ones fashioned in elephant shape confirms that royal seats had elaborate animal feet in the Kushan~~

period (cf. Cambon 2007: 187, no. 152). In fact, there are surprisingly strong ties between the visual repertoire employed for the decoration of the *stūpa* stairs and the ornamentation seen in many fancy items associated with royalty both in the Tilia Tepe tombs and in the Begram finds.

This connection brings up another important factor that may have had an impact on the design of our stair pieces – the notion that a 'royal' lexicon was deemed appropriate to decorate the throne-like *stūpa* podium. The implications of such observations are manifold:

1. The motifs employed to decorate podia of Gandhāran *stūpas* are commonly found on jewellery, precious coins, and exclusive objects used by the local elites. The range of meanings associated with them was evocative of wealth and power, thus transforming the podium of every *stūpa* into a bejewelled throne.
2. The dominance of visual forms from the classical tradition was also the result of a deliberate choice: it reinforced the semantic association between the *stūpa* podium, royalty and kingship. Following the interpretation suggested by Marco Galli (2011), Gandhāran "classicism" can be read as a selective language system used to reference the world of the local courts. Thus an image of Herakles like the one carved on our stair piece would immediately recall in the eyes of the devotees the notion of royal strength; Aphrodite, on the other hand, would have evoked the notions of beauty and sensuality that are appropriate to a courtly setting.
3. Many of the motifs recurrent on *stūpa* stairs such as tritons or other mythological beasts seem to be re-elaborations in classical form of figural *topoi* common in decorations of thrones. For example *vyālas* with riders, *makaras* and other water creatures can be seen among the fragments of ivory thrones



Fig. 7.14. Architectural element, provenance unknown, grey schist, 22 x 50 x 9.5 cm, Peshawar Museum, acc.no. PM-2967. Photo courtesy of Christian Luczanits.

- from Begram (see Cambon 2007: 218, no. 209).
4. If classical forms were semantically used to express notions of royalty, they also conveyed additional meanings to the devotees. Visual forms referencing precious objects and wealthy environments must have elicited the notion of gift giving among the Buddhist worshippers. *Prasāda* or offering played an important role in Buddhist devotion and was vital for the survival of the religious establishment, as demonstrated in the *Divyāvādāna* (cf. Rotman 2009). An interesting example of the crossover existing between precious courtly objects and devotional gifts is the well-known Indravarman casket, a wine goblet in silver that was gifted to the Buddhists as a receptacle for sacred relics (cf. Salomon 1996).
 5. Auspiciousness must have been another meaning conveyed by our classical imagery – the palmette with a vase-like knot represented in Sculpture B from Amluk Dara clearly references the *pūrṇaghāṭa* or vase of plenty, ubiquitous in the decoration of North Indian *stūpas*; similarly, the Herakles knot that appears on another piece identifiable as a stair side

also depicting a female figure leaning on a column, now in the Peshawar museum (Fig. 7.14), must have alluded, in a classical language deemed appropriate for the Gandhāran *stūpa* podium, to the auspicious intertwined motif known as *śrīvatsa*, ubiquitous in the Indic world.

6. Finally, images like those of Herakles and Aphrodite placed by the entrance of the *stūpa* would have also performed a role comparable to that of *devatās* such as *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* carved on the *toraṇas* of Indian *stūpas*. Performing functions of guardians of the relics and supporter of the *dharma*, *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* placed at the threshold of the sacred space embodied a notion of protection and safekeeping that was also inherent to the western mythological creatures represented on the stair sides and stringers.

To conclude, the distinctive podium introduced since early on in *stūpa* design, far from being a simple base for the dome, may have been conceptually developed as a throne for the Buddha's relics as suggested by the placement at the *stūpa* base of architectural elements generally associated with thrones' feet. Classical forms so recurrent in the decoration of the *stūpa* base such as stair risers were semantically used to give voice

to the idea of royalty as they continued to serve as the visual vocabulary of the court throughout the Kushan period. The particular selection of classical iconographies may have been dictated by further

associations with notions of giving, auspiciousness and protection that were so important to the Buddhist communities throughout the Indic world.

NOTES

1. An almost identical female figure appears on a frieze from Zardheri (Swat), likely from the decoration of a *stūpa* base, now in the holdings of the Peshawar Department of Archaeology and Museums, inv.no. S15. See Jansen & Luczanits 2008: 102, no. 38.
2. Images of the god Herakles holding the club and the *leontis* appear frequently on Kushan coins ascribed to Kujūla Kadphises.
3. Two golden ornaments with the effigy of a goddess leaning on the column were found in Sirkap within the Indo-Parthian levels of Block E, while a less spectacular specimen in bronze was discovered in Block B (Marshall 1951: 632, nos. 96–97; 605, no. 418). Finds from the early Kushan milieu of Tilia Tepe demonstrate how these jewels were worn by the wealthy elite: in Tilia Tepe 'Tomb VI' dating to the beginning of the Common Era, an exquisite gold image identical in size and iconography to the ones from Sirkap (5 cm in height) was strung to a long turquoise necklace worn by the deceased royalty. A similar golden ornament with the goddess standing between two columns was also found in Tilia Tepe, Tomb II (Cambon 2007: 178, no. 136; 137, no. 60).
4. A good example for the eastern diffusion of this motif is an exquisite glass *oinochoe* from Begram decorated with a scroll of pointed ivy leaves (Cambon 2007: 219, no. 210).
5. See Jansen & Luczanits 2008: 100, no. 35. See also Brancaccio 2014.
6. Unfortunately, the architectural fragment was abraded and its decoration did not survive (Faccenna *et al.* 1993: 163, figs. 31–33, pl. 83a).
7. A careful discussion of stair risers can be found in Errington 1987. Stair risers rarely depict images of the Buddha's life and generally do not include his effigy, although *jātakas* have been recognised in a few cases in the context of the Jamalgarhi pieces.
8. To paraphrase the title of a study by Michael Meister (2006), "Access and Axes of Indian Temples".
9. See for example the marble foot of a Roman table in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc.no. 13.115.1.

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