

CLAY-BASED SCULPTURES: ANALYSIS OF TECHNICAL ASPECTS AND TYPOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT · The subject of this paper is Afghan clay-based sculptural production, which constituted the predominant feature of Buddhist sacred areas throughout almost the entire history of Buddhism in the country. In particular, the record under scrutiny here encompasses the Late Kushan, Huna and Shahi periods (approximately from the 3rd/4th century CE to the 10th/11th century CE). It was in this era that the use of mouldable materials such as clay and stucco reached such a degree of refinement that it significantly impacted the pan-Asian vocabulary of Buddhist artistic forms.

The aim is to analyse and discuss technical and material aspects related to the often detectable – but rarely documented – traces of the inner armatures around which the sculptures were modelled and sculpted, as well as the signs left by the systems of anchorage to the wall. These elements, if carefully inspected, can be of great help in defining sculptural typologies and recurrent techniques employed for specific purposes.

In particular, this paper examines sculptures from the Buddhist archaeological sites of Tapa Sardar, excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan (hereafter IAMA) in the Ghazni area during the 1960s and 70s,¹ and two additional sites, Tepe Narenj² and Qol-e-Tut³ that were excavated in the Kabul area by the Archaeology Institute of Afghanistan (hereafter AIA), with the assistance of IAMA, in the 2000s. The analysis makes use of the abundant archaeological documentation of the above-mentioned sites produced by both the IAMA and the AIA, made available in the latter case thanks to the ongoing collaborative project and specific agreements between the two institutions.

KEYWORDS · Buddhism, Art, Archaeology, Huna Period, Shahi Period, Clay and Stucco Sculpture, Techniques, Materials, Inner Armature.

STATE OF ART

AFTER the decay of the Kushan empire, when especially stone was used to create sculptural decorations,⁴ an apparent transition to the use of plastic materials seems to have taken place in the region of Gandhara, in parallel with a change in political and trade balance. The progressive renewal of the Buddhist sanctuaries was due to the establishment of new ruling aristocracies, which often adopted the Buddhist religion to legitimate their power.⁵

Clay, already traditionally employed in the architecture of ancient Afghanistan, met the growing demand for the creation of lavish decorative features, usually polychrome, often gilt and gigantic in scale, thanks to its plasticity which meant that it could be easily modelled and impressed, and to its wide availability and low cost. The iconographic types and size classes generally documented in many important sites suggest that the original decorative schemes included a multitude of figures, hierarchically positioned, of both religious and secular character such as Buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities and lay donors in various postures and proportions.

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¹ TADDEI 1968; TADDEI - VERARDI 1978; VERARDI - PARAPATTI 2005.

² PAIMAN - ALRAM 2010, 2013.

³ PAIMAN 2018; PAIMAN - FILIGENZI 2020.

⁴ Well-preserved sculptural decorations in stone have survived in remarkable quantity. However, for the most part the Gandharan sculptures known to us come from pre-modern antiquarian investigations and chance discoveries, or belong(ed) to private collections, for which we have no, or insufficient, archaeological and contextual information. On the other hand, systematic archaeological excavations conducted may rarely yield sculptures *in situ* but can nonetheless provide key evidence for their original settings and chronology. A striking example is the masterly study of the narrative frieze from the Main Stūpa of Saidu Sharif I (FACCENNA 2001).

⁵ KUWAYAMA 1991; FILIGENZI 2010.