

Ancient Architecture of Pakistan: A Case Study of Palaces as Depicted in Gandhara Art

Tauqeer Ahmad, Samia Tahir and Zain-ul Wahab

Abstract: Although, Gandhara art by theme as well as subject matter is an expression of Buddhist ideals and aspirations. However, along with The Lords' jataka events and stories and presentation of last birth in stone Gandhara art also carries a lot of cultural wealth relating to the people who produced it. Particularly, the secular architecture including forts, gateways fortifications of the cities and palaces are also depicted in the sculptures and reliefs. In this research, the authors have analysed the characteristic elements and features of palace buildings sculpted in Gandhara art. Predominantly, the frontal depiction of palaces shows that they are designed according to tripartite concept and are richly decorated by applying different architectural traditions which has been discussed in detail in the following pages.

Keywords: Gandhara, art, Persepolitan, Mahayanism, Sidharata

Historical and Geographical Background

Gandhara is frequently described by all Chinese pilgrims as kien-to-lo (Beal, 1969), which is generally identified with Peshawar valley (Cunningham, 1924). The earliest reference however, about this country occurs in the oldest literature of South Asia named Rigveda (Griffith, 1968) composed from 1500-1000 BCE (Basham, 1963). From where did ancient Gandhara derive its nomenclature, apparently seems hard to answer. Did the authors of Rigveda, who styled themselves as Aryans, render this name to the valley of Peshawar? Was the country of Gandhara already existed before the arrival of the Aryans seems hard to remark. If we look at the pattern of the nomenclature of this region where once Gandhara located we may be able to find out the possible reasons which contributed to the origin of its name. For instance, we frequently come across with a number names of tracts of land the second parts of which end with 'hara', meaning 'land', such as Nagarhara (Beal, 1969),

Pothohar¹, Vanhar², Nirhar (Sachau, 2003) etc. So far as the first part of these nomenclatures is concerned, obviously, they have derived from the physical potential or location of the respective regions or lands or cities. Most probably, same happened with Gandhara when the Aryans (authors of Rigveda) named this country after observing its most striking physical as well as geographical feature i.e., Gand or Kand or Kund, means pond, or water reservoir. Interestingly, the last word Kund still survives as the lower course of the Kabul below Maushera where it joins the Abasin or Indus it is known as Kund (Pond).

The heartland of Gandhara (Peshawar valley) was comprised of Modern division of Mardan through which the Kabul and Swat rivers are traversing in different channels and courses with a tendency of converging on into single stream above the town of Naushera before merging into the Indus. Particularly, during the rainy season these rivers swell out of their courses and convert the whole valley into a huge reservoir or lake or Kund, as it seems certain that in ancient times bursting of

¹ The region of Pothohar is located to the back of Himalaya (south) comprising of mainly the districts of Rawalpindi, Chakwal and Attock.

² Similarly, to the south of Salt Range a vast tract of land is still known as Vanhar (meaning woodland).

rivers would have repeatedly been happened and it became most prominent topographical as well as physical feature of Peshawar valley from which finally its name was derived i.e., Gandhara, Kandhar, Kundhara. Gandhara was in fact situated or located between the Iranian plateau and the South Asian subcontinent.

Gandhara was conquered by Achaemenians in the 2nd half of 6th century BC who maintained their occupation till 330 BC. During two hundred years Achaemenians left cultural impact on the Indus region which continued in subsequent period, even some of the Iranian architectural elements may be discerned from Gandhara art. Alexander Macedonian defeated the last Achaemenian king Darius III at Gaugamela (Iraq) in 330 BCE. He also captured ancient Pakistan but did not influence its cultural life except mass killing and looting as well as putting the cities and their population to fire. In 320 BCE however a local champion of freedom named Chandragupta Maurya emerged as a meteor and kicked out Alexander's governors from the Indus region and established his kingdom. He also conquered Gangetic plains. Thus the Indus and Ganga valleys were first time combined under the Mauryans.

The greatest event ever took place in the history of Gandhara during the Mauryan reign was the introduction of Buddhism which transformed the whole outlook of this region. Mauryan decline encouraged the Bactrian Greeks to expand their political hegemony to Gandhara as they invaded it in 190 BC and maintained their sway for almost one hundred and fifty years. It was during this period that Greek cultural traits began to penetrate into the Indus region and Gandhara art provides us considerable information in this regard. The Indo-Greeks were overpowered by Scytho-Parthian in the 2nd half of first century BC. Gandhara enjoyed real glory of its history under the Kushan who took over its control in the 2nd half of first century A.C. Gandhara art was in

fact a product of this period. Particularly, a new form of Buddhism was developed and flourished in Gandhara known as Mahayanism. However, Gandhara experienced the worst calamity of its history in the hands of Huns, and could never recover its past glory.

So far as the ancient architecture of Gandhara is concerned it has not survived most probably due to savages of the time as well as devastating nature of human vandalism. In spite of archaeological excavations and researches no structural remains of ancient building like palaces or forts have been discovered. Unlike the architectural paucity Gandhara art supply, however, considerable, information regarding the secular architecture of the land. In this paper we would discuss the main features of ancient palaces of Gandhara in the light of the reliefs and sculptures of the Buddhist art of Gandhara.

Palaces

The reliefs and sculptures of Gandhara art show several secular buildings some of which may be identified as palaces. Although Gandhara art was not originally meant to present such structures, but in connection with the event or story to be presented, certain portions of a palace building is depicted in the relief or sculpture. The architectural elements or composition of a complex thus displayed suggest that sculptors would have been familiar with actual buildings of palaces the parts of which they picked in accordance with the story. So far as the literary sources of ancient South Asia are concerned they refer to high buildings comprising of two, nine or innumerable stores. But the remains of surviving structures found in Gandhara are Buddhist monasteries which are double stores in height and may be regarded as the tallest buildings ever built. No monastery or vihara building is sculpted in the extant Gandhara art, however, evidence of royal palaces are no exception.

A critical analysis of Gandhara art reveals that

sculptors or architects predominantly employed the tripartite designs or patterns for palaces and gateways. Besides this, they had amply expressed their flair of tripartite scheme in trefoil arches. In the history of early Muslim architecture the appreciation of tripartite division is fully expressed in the form of Mashatta palaces (Creswell, 1958).

Architecturally, the tripartite composition of a palace building is not technically complicated rather it forms a simple design consisting of a large central hall flanked by two smaller rooms. In most Gandharan reliefs this architectural scheme or pattern of a palace building can predominantly be observed. However, a variety of roofing system is found. The roofing systems shown in Gandharan reliefs, mostly, consist of an arcuate or vaulted tunnel and trapezoidal. A reverse pattern in a few examples can also be seen as flanking chambers are with arcuate and taller roofs while the main hall reveals a flat one. Besides this, balconies and elaborate balustrades rendered with human busts form a significant feature of the roofing systems. Mostly, in such cases, Persopelitan pillars with adorned bull capitals are preferred. The sculptors embellished the palace buildings with a variety of decorative motifs including laurel wreaths saw-tooth design, friezes of chequered designs, bead-and-reel borders and acanthus leaf patterns. The figures of birds like fluttering peacocks are sometimes depicted perhaps to animate lifeless and somber events or scenes.

In following pages some of the structures displayed in Gandharan reliefs are presented. Figure 1 in this regard reveals a very good example of tripartite division of a place building. According to the design the middle portion of the main hall is covered with a lofty arcuate roof being supported by columns of Persopelitan order. The flanking chambers of this palace, however, consist of low flat roofs. The galleries can also be observed above these roofs. In this

relief the front face of the galleries comprises of chequered patterns and a line of saw tooth design on the curve of the arch.

It seems that spacious hall designed here in fact precisely suits to the story depicted therein. As young prince Sidharata is enjoying his leisure time upon his couch in the company of his wife. Musicians including drummer, flutist, harpist and dancers are around him, performing their musical art to the best of their ability. It is interesting to observe that the rooms in which the musicians are sitting were not originally separate units, but in fact they formed two ends of the same hall. To cover the whole middle portion of the hall a lofty arch (or vault) is provided which required a different kind of technology, as it appears a three centred arch. From where did the sculptor derive this technique carved in the relief is not easy to explain. Apparently, it seems that sculptor might have taken this specimen from contemporary architecture, or, it was a result of his own imaginative power. However, it appears that the extant Buddhist monuments reveal only the knowledge of corbelled arch.

Above discussed story or event is also depicted in Figure 2. Even the setting is not changed. The palace building in this relief shows same height of both the side chambers and middle portion of the hall. Here the side chambers are covered with trapezoidal roof however the middle portion marks the same arch including saw-tooth decoration. The vacant space on either sides of the arch is provided with the pattern or design of chequered screens. So far as the origin of the trapezoidal roof is concerned, the extant Buddhist monuments of Gandhara do not reveal any such structure. Thus it seems probable that the idea of trapezoidal roof would have been derived by sculptors from wooden prototype.

Figure 3 presents another example of a palace building. Here the middle portion is replaced by a trapezoidal roof while the flanking chambers

are covered by corbelled arches instead of flat roof. In another relief above mentioned arrangement is reversed as the corbelled arches are provided to the flaking-chambers instead of flat roof (Fig: 4). Now the form of the trapeze is changed into a triangle as both sides are straightened, being joined each other at the top. The front of the trapeze is decorated with typical saw-tooth ornamentation.

The execution of a tripartite design sculpted in Ingholt's 39 B (Fig: 5) however seems an even more interesting example (Ingholt, 1957) its composition. The middle portion of the palace building consists of long flat roof and the flaking chambers are covered with arcuate roofing system. While In rest of the examples the flaking chambers are marked merely by balconies, as it is depicted in Fig: 6).

In preceding pages we have discussed a few examples just to share that how in the sculptor's view the building of a royal palace looked like. But we should bear in mind that the depiction of such complexes was not the primary objectives or function of the Gandhara artists. They have merely given at least part of such royal palaces. One of the archaeologists is of the opinion that (Fig: 7) such architectural employment in the sculptures of Gandhara art was primarily intended to provide an appropriate setting for dramatic scenes. Sometimes, even artists have illogically emphasized on the setting which appear out of all proportion to the event or scene. Even they present imaginative and sumptuous examples of the prince's palaces. But sometimes the structural representation of the palaces seems dominating in connection to the rest of the picture. Nonetheless, we have countless examples of the use of architecture as a decorative character in the art history of early Indian sculptures, namely Sanchi, Bharhut, Mathura, Bod Gaya etc (Marshall, 1960).

The architectural representations of royal palaces

in the Gandharan reliefs are profusely decorated on their front with a variety of designs and patterns. Regarding the interior decoration of the royal palaces however we collect nothing much from panel reliefs except the employment of Persepolitan and Corinthian columns. The exquisitely carved capitals of these pillars enhance the beauty, dignity and grace to the structures. It may particularly be referred that in one case, discussed above (Fig: 5), we observe very pleasing coffered ceilings of the palace building. In this regard however, Figure 7 presents more information regarding the decoration and therefore needs to be elaborated in detail. The panel displays an indoor scene which describes the story of Nanda's conversion of which there are three episodes portrayed from different sculptures. There is only single example of a relief which depicts all these three episodes in one setting.

The story depicted in above referred panel narrates an event that happened with the Buddha and his half-brother Nanda, latter was a custodian of the former's begging bowl. By intention Nanda was a worldly being and had no interest in the philosophy of the Buddha. Therefore he wanted to disassociate himself by handing over the bowl to the Buddha. He was in fact waiting for a proper time to do so. So, Nanda got an opportunity on the day when incidentally the Buddha went to his house to see him. While the Buddha was just to enter in the doorway at same moment Nanda went to his wife's dressing room and picked up the bowl, and humbly tried to present it to him. But, for Nanda's utter surprise, the Buddha asked former to accompany him to a nearby Sangharama or monastery where Nanda was ordained to the Order after a monk's barber shaved his head, much against his will. Nanda also was instructed to stay in the monastery and shut all the doors before leaving it. He was ultimately overcome by worldly desires as at first he tried to close all doors before leaving the monastery, but

in vain. Then, finally he left monastery for his home but surprisingly he found the Buddha on his way. Although, he adopted stealthily way through woods but Nanda found the Buddha advancing towards him. Then he hid himself behind a tree, but miraculously the tree exposed Nanda as it arose up in the air. Thus, the tree left him face to face with the Master. The Buddha quickly took Nanda back to the Sangharama or monastery.

The panel under discussion depicts Nanda twice first when he is leaving his lovely wife, Sundari, and second he is humbly presenting the Buddha his bowl. While Sundari is displayed sitting in a high legged chair facing a table. The legs of the chair are nicely moulded or turned over a lathe. Such chairs are still liked by wealthy people in Peshawar valley (=ancient Gandhara). A mirror can be seen on the table and a covered box of ointment. Sundari is shown being attended upon by other ladies. This feature of Gandharan society is still in practice and in vogue among the wealthy in Peshawar valley. A wreath which encloses something is hanging at the back side wall of the dressing room. Moreover in Zwalf's Figure 170 similar wreath may also be observed.

The palace building under discussion, particularly its main hall depicts square Corinthian pillars which support the superstructure; the recessed oblong panels can be seen on the shafts. The middle portion of the hall is covered trapezoidal roof, carried by worn out lozenge headed corbels. However, the flanking chambers present different arrangement to support a gallery, as four human heads are supporting corbelled arches. The edges of the trapezoidal roof and underside the coping of the galleries are decorated with characteristic saw-tooth rows. Another prominent feature of this story is that the episode seems to have taken place inside the room which is provided with a projected doorway on the left where Nanda is depicted kneeling before the Buddha. Besides this, a running scroll is provided to the doorway frame

as well as two capped battlements with triangular loopholes can also be seen above the door frame.

Moreover, the relief panels referred to by Zwalf (British Museum. & Zwalf, 1996) No. 141, Ingholt (Ingholt, 1957) Nos. 11, 39 B and Marshall (Marshall, 1973) No. 122 give outstanding architectural setting, depicting different dramatic scenes, seems to have with all probabilities been taken from real architectural models. They do not appear merely imaginative and fanciful instead they give true representations of ancient Gandharan palaces, sleeping rooms and courts. Preferably, the Gandharan sculptors predominantly used trapezoidal roof for the chambers related to royal and other ladies. Perhaps it may be due to common characteristics or mannerism of the artists suggesting nothing but a subtle and fragile rendering of the subject matter. The archaeological evidence still yields certain features and elements of individual architectural designs namely balconies, capitals, columns, broken shafts and shrine models etc.

Conclusion

Preceding discussion and analysis of the Gandharan sculptures and reliefs clearly shows that ancient palaces in Gandhara were elaborately built. However, the tripartite division was a favourite design for the architects and artists which they have predominantly expressed. In the center of the palace building a hall is placed roofed with trapezoidal or vault tunnel, while on its either sides are flanked by small chambers. This design or arrangement of the palace façade forms a tripartite division. It seems however hard to discern the actual pattern of masonry applied for the construction of ancient palaces by architects or masons from which the Gandharan sculptors copied. Archaeological evidence reveals that usual masonry technique used in Gandhara for construction is now termed as rough-rubble, rubble, diaper and semi-diaper or semi-ashlar. But no such pattern of masonry is

found in the reliefs or sculptures. Similarly, different decorative schemes were applied to embellish the palace buildings including saw-tooth rows, capped battlements, triangles, fillets, triangular loopholes, chequered screen etc. Another pleasing aspect of palace complexes was

the Corinthian and Persepolitan or more precisely Indo-Persepolitan columns used as support mainly to trapezoidal halls and flanking vaulted chambers.

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Figure 1: Life in the palace, Karachi, No.507; formerly in Lahore, No. 567. Jamrud



Figure 2: Life in the palace, Lahore, No. 46.



Figure 3: Life in the palace. (Zwalf No. 170).



Figure 4: Seated Bodhisattva. (Kurita 1990: No. 43).

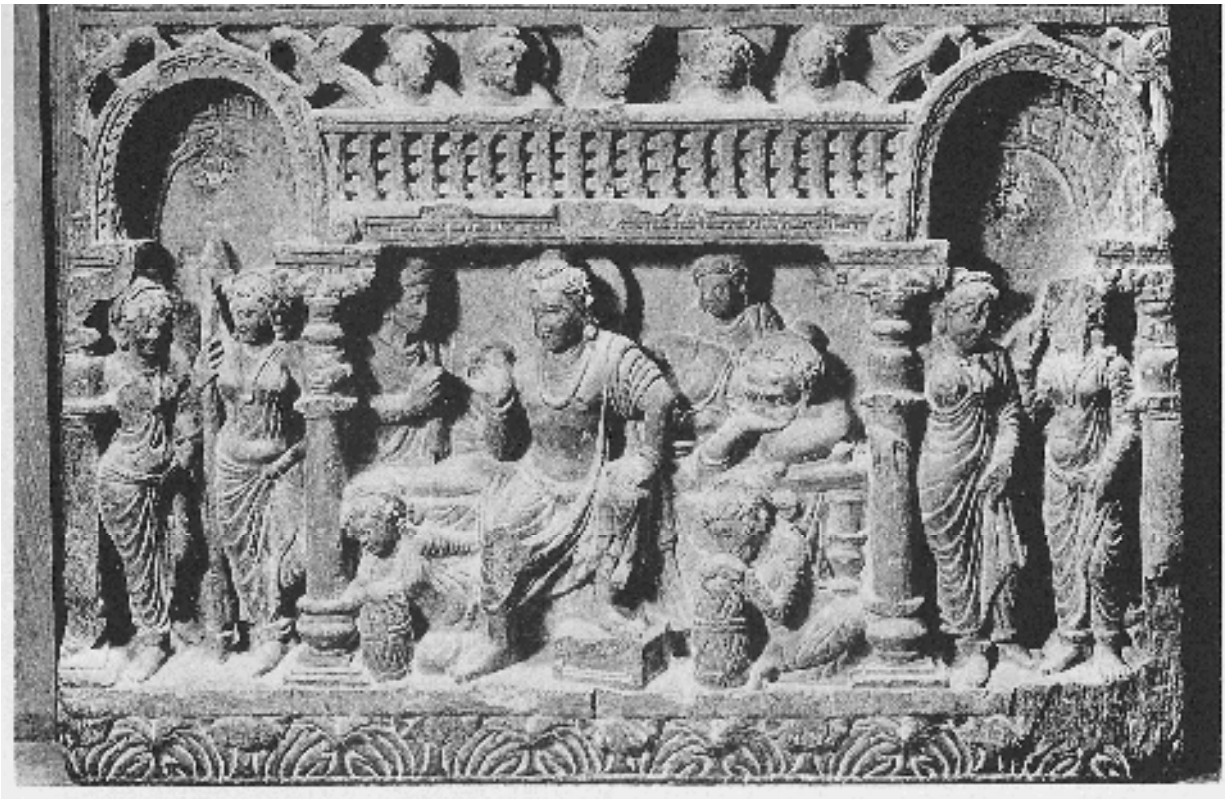


Figure 5: The Renunciation, Lahore, No. 46.



Figure 6: Seated Bodhisattva. From Swat. (Kurita:No. 45).



Figure 7: Conversion of Nanda. (Marshall 1973: No. 121; Zwalf : No. 205)