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GANDHARA CIVILIZATION: A CENTER OF BUDDHIST CULTURE, ART, AND INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGE IN ANCIENT SOUTH ASIA

Yusra Khokhar[*1], Dr. Junaid Ali Jalbani[2], Dr. Irfan Ali[3]

[*1]*Lecturer in Pakistan studies at Government Girl's Degree College Ranipur/ PhD Enrolled Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur*
[2]*Assistant professor, Aror University of Art, Architecture, Design and Heritage, Sukkur Sindh*
[3]*Assistant Professor, Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University Sukkur*

[*1]yusrakhokhar2@gmail.com, [2]junaid.faculty@aror.edu.pk, [3]irfan.alli@bnbwu.edu.pk

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Yusra Khokhar

Abstract

This article reinterprets Gandhara as a generative civilizational centre rather than a mere corridor of Buddhist transmission or a provincial offshoot of Hellenistic art. Spanning the Achaemenid and Mauryan periods through the Kuṣāṇa apogee and later monastic centuries, it examines how successive regimes of Indo-Greek, Śaka, Indo-Parthian, and Kuṣāṇa created political and economic conditions for Buddhist institutional growth without mechanically determining its cultural content. The study analyses Gandharan visual and architectural languages, including the anthropomorphic Buddha, narrative biographical friezes, podium stūpas, and monastery-stūpa complexes, treating them as instruments of devotion, pedagogy, and patronage display. It further assesses Gandhara's intellectual role through the Gāndhārī manuscript corpus, relic inscriptions, monastic administration, and the region's contribution to Buddhism's transmission toward Central Asia and China, thereby restoring text and learning to a field still dominated by sculpture. Drawing on archaeological reports, art-historical catalogues, epigraphy, numismatics, and theoretical work on materiality and globalization, the article argues that Gandharan culture was a locally generated, globally connected formation in which Buddhist institutions selectively assimilated Hellenistic, Iranian, Central Asian, and Indic elements into a coherent

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Gandhara, frequently translated as "the land of fragrance", was a geopolitical region of South Asia, stretching along a strategic valley in the north-west of South Asia, mostly covered by the Peshawar basin, the valleys of Swat and Taxila (Pakistan) and the border districts of eastern Afghanistan. The territory was not only a political border, but also became one of the most important cultural melting pots of premodern

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history from the mid-1st millennium BCE until the early medieval period. The Achaemenid satrapy of Gandara, the short-lived but impactful Alexander of Macedon, the Mauryan incorporation under Aśoka, the Indo-Greek, Śaka, and Indo-Parthian interregna and most significantly, the Kuṣāṇa imperial order of the first to third centuries CE left etagma upon cities like Takṣaśilā (Taxila), Puṣkalāvatī (Charsadda), and Puruṣapura (Peshawar). In this dynamic political landscape, a very favorable setting for the spread of Buddhism was created. Monasteries proliferated on river terraces and mountain slopes; relic cults found monumental architectural frames; and, since the late first century BCE, artisans started to anthropomorphize the Buddha, placing a drapery, coiffure, and contrapposto on his body, a conversation between Indian religious imagination and the Mediterranean visual language that Marshall (1951) first mapped in scale in the Taxila excavations.

It is not just the many surviving examples of Gandhara sculpture, in its own impressive way, but its dense roles that make it different from other early Buddhist landscapes. It was a centre of Buddhist visual culture, a hub for long-distance trade along the roads that came to be known as the Silk Roads, and a site of the earliest Buddhist manuscripts in Gāndhārī Prakrit and Kharoṣṭhī script (Salomon, 2018). It was also a source of monks, texts, and images that spread across to Central Asia and China, which Neelis (2011) has been able to reconstruct from the evidence of routes, inscriptions, and monastic networks. Later, Chinese pilgrims like Faxian and Xuanzang recalled the monasteries as sites of learning and veneration of relics. The recovery of the archaeological record by Marshall at Taxila, by Faccenna (1980-1981) at Butkara I, and by later missions at Saidu Sharif I in Swat has revealed a series of sacred architecture ranging from pre-200 BCE hemispherical stūpas to the richly decorated terraced complexes of the Kuṣāṇa and post-Kuṣāṇa centuries (Olivieri, 2022). In the present article, Gandhara is seen not as a series of events that took place sequentially or even side by side, but as a civilizational field in which Buddhist culture, artistic invention and intellectual exchange were inextricably bound up with one another.

Historical significance of Gandhara is not something that can be narrowed down to a provincial echo of Hellenistic art, nor a peripheral annex of Gangetic Buddhism as argued here. It was a generative centre per se. There emerged a unique religious culture, a scene of visual and textual artifacts, and architectural forms that were created in the local workshops, the monastic centres, by donors of various ethnicities and by rulers who used Buddhism to serve their political ends, and which then went on to influence the vocabulary of Buddhist images, architecture and texts beyond the Indus. New archaeological discoveries have thrown older narratives into disarray, limiting the so called Greco-Buddhist art to the reign of Kaniṣka alone. In Swat, narrative schist relief and a new type of stūpa, featuring a raised podium and frontal stair, have been found to have emerged about the turn of the Common Era, when there was a shift in political power to the Śaka–Parthian realm (Faccenna et al., 2003). These innovations, however, were already well developed by the time of Kuṣāṇa patronage which increased the scale of construction in the second century, a chronology that has been put together in a usable format by Behrendt (2004). Allon (2023) and Salomon provide a detailed account of the literary use of Gāndhārī, with the discovery of birch-bark manuscripts revealing that it was not only a language of transmission but also a literary language in which sūtras, avadānas, and monastic accounts were read from the 1st c. BCE onwards, among these even biographies written locally about the Buddha. Each in isolation, and in combination, these materials call for a rethinking of Gandhara as intellectual, as well as artistic, centre of ancient South Asia.

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The pages that follow then situate Gandhara in a long chronology, starting with Achaemenid administration and Mauryan Buddhist beginnings, followed by the development of a unique art and architecture, and continuing with the contribution of the region to the composition, preservation and dissemination of Buddhist knowledge. The analysis is a synthetic one, on purpose. It is based on excavations reports, art-historical catalogues, numismatic and epigraphic research on the manuscripts and the growing literature on Gāndhārī manuscripts, and sets out to deliver a coherent narrative, accessible to scholars as well as readers interested in the cultural history of South Asia. The article also helps to solve a longstanding issue in the history of the region, as earlier colonial and nationalist works either exaggerated the role of the Greeks or attributed the Indianization of the region to Indian influence alone, ignoring the well-documented cosmopolitanism of Gandharan society. Elahi (2020) has demonstrated how these materiality and globalization perspectives can rectify that leveling. One of the more reliable images, already hinted at in the encyclopaedic synthesis of Gandhāran art at Encyclopaedia Iranica and in Boardman's foreword to Bopearachchi (2020), is that of continuous and multi-directional interaction between Iranian, Hellenistic, Central Asian and Indic traditions, mediated locally by Buddhist institutions that were remarkably adaptable over five centuries of political flux.

Literature Review

Modern scholarship on Gandhara began in earnest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when British officers, surveyors, and archaeologists encountered large quantities of schist sculpture in the Peshawar valley and adjoining hills. Alfred Foucher's foundational studies, culminating in L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra (Foucher, 1905), established the interpretive frame that would dominate much of the twentieth century. Foucher argued that the anthropomorphic Buddha image and the narrative relief cycle of Gandhara were the products of a Hellenistic artistic inheritance transmitted through the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms and their Indo-Greek successors. In his account, Greek naturalism supplied the formal means by which Indian Buddhist subjects acquired a new, humanized visibility. This thesis was never universally accepted, yet it set the terms of debate. Subsequent writers either refined the Greek hypothesis, substituted Roman or Palmyrene intermediaries as Rowland (1970) preferred to do, or insisted upon an essentially Indian genesis for the Buddha image, a position developed with particular care by Nehru (1989) through close comparison with Mathurā. The excavation campaigns of Sir John Marshall at Taxila between 1913 and 1934 provided the first large-scale archaeological context for these stylistic arguments. Marshall's three-volume Taxila documented urban sequences at Bhir Mound, Sirkap, and Sirsukh, together with the great Buddhist complexes of Dharmarājikā, Jauliāñ, and Mohṛā Morādu (Marshall, 1951). His later The Buddhist Art of Gandhara then translated those sequences into an accessible art-historical narrative (Marshall, 1960).

A second generation of research, much of it Italian, transformed the empirical base. Domenico Faccenna's excavations at Butkara I from 1956 onward produced stratified sequences of stūpa enlargement, workshop debris, and narrative friezes whose quality of recording remains exemplary (Faccenna, 1980–1981). The later campaign at Saidu Sharif I recovered a biographical frieze and a podium stūpa whose planning can be studied almost workshop by workshop (Faccenna, 2001). These projects demonstrated that figurative schist art was already underway by the late first century BCE and that Swat, rather than Taxila alone, was a primary incubator of the narrative mode. Luca M. Olivieri's subsequent work at Barikot and his re-examination of Saidu have refined the chronology still further. By correlating

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

radiocarbon dates, Azes-era inscriptions, and copper-alloy coin assemblages, Olivieri (2016) showed that the graveyard beneath Saidu and the sanctuary above it are separated by a deliberate levelling rather than by an unbroken cultural continuum. His later synthesis places the foundation of the Saidu stūpa around the mid-first century CE and distinguishes a Saka–Parthian horizon of intense westernizing material culture from the later Kuṣāṇa expansion (Olivieri, 2022). Parallel architectural synthesis by Behrendt (2004) organized Greater Gandharan sacred space into a four-phase system, tracing the evolution from early relic mounds to the densely populated monastic cities of the third to fifth centuries and offering a framework for dating sculpture by its architectural setting rather than by isolated stylistic comparison.

The textual turn of the last three decades has been no less consequential. Until the 1990s, the literary culture of Gandhara was known chiefly through a single Gāndhārī Dharmapada from Khotan and through Chinese and Pali reflections of northwestern traditions, including the Milindapañha's dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menander and the monk Nāgasena. The acquisition of the British Library birch-bark scrolls in 1994 revealed a working monastic library of the first century CE and opened a new field of palaeography and recension study (Salomon, 1999). The Senior, Schøyen, Split, and Islamabad Museum collections then expanded the corpus until Gāndhārī literature of the first century BCE to third century CE could be seen to comprise sūtras, verse anthologies, avadānas, abhidharma-type lists, Mahāyāna texts, monastic ledgers, and locally composed biographies. Richard Salomon's The Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhāra remains the indispensable introduction to this material (Salomon, 2018). Conservation and publication of the Islamabad Museum scrolls have since added administrative documents and unique verse compositions that appear to be local Gandharan products rather than copies of Gangetic originals (Allon, 2023). These manuscripts have lent new weight to the so-called Gāndhārī hypothesis, according to which many of the earliest Chinese Buddhist translations derive from northwestern Prakrit archetypes rather than from Sanskrit or Pali recensions alone.

Recent theoretical writing has sought to move the field beyond the old polarity of Greek influence versus Indian essence. Studies informed by globalization theory and materiality emphasize local agency, the social life of schist as a medium, workshop organization, and the multi-directional circulation of motifs along trade routes that linked the Mediterranean, Iran, the steppe, and the Gangetic plain. Elahi (2020) has argued that chaîne opératoire analysis and a focus on connectivity can replace the ethnic containers that still haunt older catalogues. Bopearachchi (2020) has returned to the objects themselves to show how western compositional devices were transformed in order to narrate stories of Indian origin and how Hindu gods were staged as subordinates of the Buddha. Iranian contributions—circumambulatory corridors recalling Achaemenid fire-temple plans, flame nimbi, and certain altar types—have been reassessed as integral rather than incidental, a line of inquiry associated with Tanabe (1984) and Verardi (1987–1988) and summarized in the Encyclopaedia Iranica entry on Gandhāran art. At the same time, revisionist archaeology has cautioned against reading every classicizing detail as evidence of an ethnic Greek population still resident in the first century CE. Many such forms had already been naturalized in Bactria and the northwestern cities for centuries and were deployed by Buddhist patrons for specifically Buddhist ends. The present article builds upon this third-generation consensus: Gandharan culture is best understood as a locally generated, globally connected formation whose Buddhist institutions selected, transformed, and exported elements from several civilizational repertoires.

Despite this growing abundance, a typical imbalance is yet evident in literature. Integrated

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

studies of economy, monastic administration and gender outnumber art-historical catalogues so much. While it is keener than it was a generation ago, chronology is still questioned at the individual workshop level and at the level of the Kaniṣka period as a whole. There is now a consensus among numismatists, with Cribb (2018) making the case well argued, that this date belongs to the second quarter of the 2nd century CE. Despite these collected papers of the Oxford Gandhāra Connections project, one can see how many sculptures remain untightly placed years from now (Rienjang and Stewart, 2018). However, as Behrendt has repeatedly emphasized, the antiquities market still presents provenance problems that prevent sculptures from being securely dated, unless they are in the context of architecture. Lastly, the scholarship of Pakistanis and Afghans is not always appropriated into the synthesis in English, such as the long-running Journal of Asian Civilisations, or by the likes of Muhammad Nasim Khan on paintings, Kharoṣṭhī documents and Swat sites. For an account to be publication ready, it needs to incorporate excavation, text and theory in a cohesive manner and be clear about what remains to be known.

Problem Statement

The question that this article presents is the so far continuing division of Gandhara in the scholarly literature and in public historical consciousness. The region is called the birthplace of the Buddha image, a Greco-Buddhist curiosity, or a way-station en route to China, but each of these partial characterizations is insufficient on its own to provide a description of Gandhara as a civilizational centre, its intellectual density, its institutional continuity and its internal diversity. Although very valuable for its documentary evidence, colonial-era scholarship tended to view Gandharan art as the lucky result of a supposedly superior classical form applied to the local subject of the Orient, thereby downplaying the role of local monks, donors, and sculptors. The nationalist histories of South Asia have reacted to this in part by downplaying the Hellenistic and Iranian elements in an attempt to assert an unadulterated Indian tradition of Buddhist art. In the meanwhile, the spectacular sculpture has made the equally spectacular relic inscriptions, monastic architecture, and trade archaeology of Gandhara seem to have taken a back seat in many textbooks so that the term Gandhara is now used almost exclusively for a style of stone carving.

There is also a chronological and geographical haziness. Gandharan art is frequently presented as a unified style from the first to fifth century, though the development of the narrative schist work in Swat, the scaling up of patronage by the Kuṣāṇa rulers, the stucco art of the later period like Jauliāñ and Haḍḍa, and the long after-life of the monasteries into the sixth and seventh centuries receives insufficient attention. Greater Gandhara (Taxila, Peshawar basin, Swat, Buner, Hazara, and eastern Afghanistan) is also a single school, but the procedures used in the workshops, stone quarries, and affiliations of the schools were different in each valley. It is hard to account for the transformation of a frontier region into for several centuries one of the main engines of Buddhist culture in Asia, or how this engine came to a standstill after the disruptions by the Hephthalites, and when pilgrimage routes were redirected. The problem, therefore, is how Gandhara became a hub and not just a channel of Buddhist culture, art and ideas, and what political patronage, monastic institution, artistic technology and long distance connections enabled this centrality.

Research Objectives

1.To reconstruct the political and religious trajectory of Greater Gandhara from the Achaemenid and Mauryan periods through the Kuṣāṇa apogee and later monastic life, showing how successive regimes enabled Buddhist institutional growth.

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

2.To analyse the formation and functions of Gandharan visual and architectural languages the anthropomorphic Buddha, narrative friezes, podium stūpas, and monastery-stūpa complexes as instruments of devotion, pedagogy, and patronage.
3.To assess Gandhara's intellectual role through the Gāndhārī manuscript corpus, relic inscriptions, monastic administration, and its contribution to Buddhism's transmission toward Central Asia and China.

Research Questions
1.What political, economic, and religious conditions enabled Gandhara to develop from an Achaemenid frontier satrapy and Mauryan Buddhist province into a major centre of monastic culture between the third century BCE and the fifth century CE?
2.How and why did Gandharan artisans and their monastic patrons create a distinctive visual language combining Hellenistic, Iranian, Central Asian, and Indic elements, and what religious work did it perform within stūpa and monastery settings?
3.In what ways did Gāndhārī texts, relic practices, and scholarly networks constitute an intellectual culture that both reflected local concerns and participated in the pan-Asian circulation of Buddhist knowledge?

Methodology
This article is a qualitative historical synthesis, rather than based on new excavation, but using published primary documents and secondary scholarship. There are four interrelated corpora that make up the evidentiary base. The first type is archaeological (excavation reports and site monographs from Taxila, Butkara I, Saidu Sharif I, Barikot, Takht-i-Bāhī, Jauliāñ, Dharmarājikā and others, plus the architectural phasing which dates sculpture based on its context rather than through the stylistic comparison of single sculptures). The second is art-historical, featuring catalogues of schist and stucco sculpture, studies of the types of Buddha, bodhisattvas, and narrative cycles, and discussions of the introduction of Hindu deities in Buddhist settings, chronology, and workshop practice. The third type is textual and epigraphic, based on editions and surveys of Gāndhārī birch-bark manuscripts, Kharoṣṭhī relic inscriptions, and on the accounts of Chinese pilgrims. The fourth is contextual and theoretical, covering the numismatics of Indo-Greek, Śakas, and Kuṣāṇas, as well as the study of trade and mobility, and critical historiography which challenges colonial and nationalist frames.
The approach used is comparative and contextual. The individual monument and text are not considered as a "masterpiece", but as an artefact of an institution (monasteries, donor network, royal court, and workshop) embedded in a specific valley and time period. A conservative approach to chronology is taken. When there is overlap in the dates provided by radiocarbon, coins, and inscriptions, stylistic dates are preferred only where the coin and inscriptional dates are known, as in the Azes and Saidu Sharif I horizons. When there is doubt, such as in the case of many unprovenanced sculptures, in which case the article points to the limits but not to a specific year. The interpretive point of view is not Hellenocentric, nor is it Indocentric. It assumes a cultural form is mobile and that it is appropriated and re-imagined by local agents. It is therefore not the presence of a Greek sculptor in Gandharan but rather a Corinthian pilaster of a Buddhist stūpa that has a Mediterranean genealogy. Greater Gandhara is the geographic term as it is now used by archaeologists, and care must be taken to distinguish between the regions of Swat, Taxila, the Peshawar basin and the Afghan extensions.
Restrictions are to be given as of the most famous sculptures, many lacked context due to coming from the market into museums. The Gāndhārī corpus is revolutionary, but only partially edited and sectarian attribution, usually to the Dharmaguptakas, has yet to be demonstrated.

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

Due to an intermittent lack of political conditions, synthesis must be based on older reports whose recording standards vary significantly. These do not preclude a regional interpretation, but they do mean that interpretations about any single school must be in balance with the unevenness of the record.

Historical Formation, Political Patronage, and the Making of a Buddhist Landscape

The depth of the historical remains of Gandhara far antedates the advent of Buddhism, and accounts for the fact that it was able to become so thoroughly institutionalized. The district was known as Gadāra or Gandara, a satrapy on the southeast border of the empire, connected to the Iranian plateau through administration, tribute and people (Callieri, 2023). The Achaemenid period brought not only imperial infrastructure, but also a practice of superimposing cultures which would continue to be an aspect of the area. Long before Alexander's campaign of 327-326 BCE, Iranian administrative traditions, local customs and practices, and long-distance contacts with Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean had already begun existing concurrently. Alexander's journey was short, but his legacy long. It introduced Hellenistic urban techniques and a Greek speaking elite into Bactria and the northwest, and it established the foundations for the successive Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms that would develop a coinage, urban planning, and visual vocabulary that was part of Gandhara's legacy, as Bopearachchi (2020) has reconstructed. These new elements were assimilated by the city of Taxila, which was already a venerable seat of learning in Indic tradition, and in later tradition was identified with the grammar of Pāṇini, of Ṣālātura. In Bhir Mound excavations have demonstrated the urban fabric of the Achaemenid and early Hellenistic periods, and at Sirkap, which has a grid and a blend of Buddhist, Jain and classical sacred architecture, the Indo-Greek and later the Śaka–Parthian occupation is recorded (Marshall, 1951).

The earliest certain mention of a Buddhist patronage in the area dates back to the Mauryan century. Aramaic and Prakrit inscriptions on stone monuments found at Aramaic and Prakrit sites near the northwest (rock edicts of Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra) help to confirm the presence of Gandhara within both the emperor's policy of dhamma and its status as a multi-lingual, literate region in the mid-third century BCE. According to Buddhist tradition Aśoka built many stūpas. Early relic mounds have been identified by archaeology at Dharmarājikā in the Taxila valley and the foundations of these date to this early horizon (Marshall, 1951). A similar early mound, with an early hemispherical dome on a circular plinth, but lacking figurative decoration, is recorded at Butkara I (Swat) in Faccenna's years 1980-1981. However, it is unclear whether all the Dharmarājikā designations are literally Aśokan, but the community did remember these monuments as royal-dharma foundations, as they bear the title in later Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions from Butkara (Baums 2023). This Mauryan moment thus began the process of Buddhism becoming a public religion in Gandhara long before the first Buddha image was carved. It also made the relic the focal point of sacred space, an effect that had long lasting repercussions as many later Gandharan works of art have been created to encase, recount and present relics.

The intervening centuries from the fall of the Mauryan to the rise of the Kuṣāṇa are no longer considered a dark age in which no art was heard. Some Indo-Greek rulers, like Menander, are also represented on a coinage that sometimes included Buddhist symbols, and ruled a society where Greek civic forms and Indian religions coexisted, and even lived in a world of philosophically engaged sovereign rulers like the Milindapañha. It need be emphasized that the Śaka and Indo-Parthian periods are not just a preparation for Kaniṣka, but rather a horizon in which the art of the Buddhist monks of Gandhara in schist actually came to be. The late

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

first century BCE and the first century CE see the conversion of older aniconic symbolism into figurative, and ultimately, narrative relief, at Butkara I, and at Saidu Sharif I (Faccenna, 2001). The same horizon brought forth another architectural concept, namely the stūpa perched upon a raised platform and reached by a stair at the front, which would come to be a characteristic of the sacred architecture of Gandhāra. The radiocarbon evidence, Azes-era inscriptions, and associated coinage confirm the mid-first century CE date of the foundation of the great stūpa of Saidu, which is slightly later than some of Faccenna's earlier estimates, but still firmly earlier than the Kuṣāṇa or Kaniṣka in the narrow sense of the term (Olivieri, 2022). This redating matters. It means that the visual language, which was once termed as Kuṣāṇa art, was already being used in Swat workshops before the Kuṣāṇa emperors became the major patrons of Peshawar basin.

The Kuṣāṇa century is, however, still the largest. Vima Kadphises was succeeded by Kaniṣka I, Huviṣka and another Vima Kadphises who, under the rule of Kujula Kadphises, united Bactria, Gandhara and most of northern India into a single political and monetary unit. The Buddhist Buddha appears on some imperial coins bearing Greek inscriptions in the label Boddo in the second quarter of the second century CE (Cribb 2018), as do increased numbers of monks building monasteries under Kaniṣka. Long ago, Rosenfield (1967) demonstrated how images, relic deposits, and entire sacred precincts could serve as markers of dynastic identity and a way to demonstrate religious identity to others in this culture of patronage. The gifts recorded in a monastic ledger among the Islamabad Museum Gāndhārī scrolls can be traced back in time from Kaniṣka and are the earliest evidence for royal support for the Buddhist institutions (Allon, 2023). Imperial towns (like Puruṣapura) emerged and Taxila's Sirsukh phase shows Kuṣāṇa urbanism. The architectural fabric of stūpas, chapels and monks' cells which today dominates the archaeological landscape (Behrendt, 2004) was consolidated by the great monasteries of Takht-i-Bāhī, Jamāl Garhī, Sahrī Bahlol, Jauliāñ and Kalawān. This expansion was financed by wealth through transcontinental trading, control over mountain passes leading to India, Central Asia, and further, to China and the Roman East. Gandhara was not rich because it was Buddhist; it was rich because it was Buddhist, and Buddhism was a language of merit which was accessible and prestigious to the elites and was widely understood.

Later history of the region is characterized by ongoing vigor of the monastic life and political upheaval. Behrendt's third to mid-fifth century phasing evidences an extraordinary acceleration of the creation of sacred space, such as the advanced stucco programmes of Taxila, and Haḍḍa in Afghanistan. In the fifth century the Hephthalites ravaged many, but Chinese pilgrims in the fifth and the seventh centuries still discovered operating monasteries and renowned relics. Surrounded by its mountain terrace, Takht-i-Bāhī continued to function up to the seventh century. The gradual disintegration of the Gandharan Buddhism and the subsequent movement of its pilgrim visitors to other centres in India is tied to the changes in the Chinese pilgrim route which Kuwayama (2006) has discussed. In decline, however, the region left behind a built and sculptural legacy that remains so vast that it still dictates the perception of early Buddhist art in the world. The lesson of this long arc in history is that centrality was created, not bestowed. The enterprise of a frontier became a centre because of Achaemenid connectivity, Mauryan religious policy, Indo-Greek cultural experimentation, Kuṣāṇa imperial peace and money, and the organizational genius of the Buddhist saṅghas.

The Art and Architecture of the Devotional Language of the Visual

The most common feature of gandharan art is the humanization of the Buddha. Prior to about

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

the first century CE, Indian Buddhist art used empty throne, the Bodhi tree, the footprint and the wheel, rather than a figure of Śākyamuni, to represent his presence. In Gandhara, and, roughly synchronously, at Mathurā, that turned out to be replaced by images of the Buddha sitting or standing among men, in which he is adorned with the uṣṇīṣa, ūrṇā, elongated earlobes, and monk's robe, but is depicted with naturalistic anatomy and drapery that lacks exact parallels in earlier Indic sculpture (Huntington, 2016). Behrendt (2007), in his writing from the Metropolitan collection, has emphasized the rapid evolution of this new body into a cult image, as well as a narrative actor. The earliest anthropomorphic indications are provided by relief images on reliquaries of the Bīmarān, mostly dated to the late first century CE, from which free standing Buddhas of schist and narrative panels in dense relief proliferated in the catalogues compiled by Zwalf (1996). The standing Buddha of the mature Gandharan type usually sports a heavy robe that cascades in rhythmic, almost toga-like folds, the hair in wavy locks, not schematic snail-shell curls, and the body, which can be seen through the folds of the robe, engages in a gentle ponderation. The features have always been open to comparison both with Apollo, and with Roman imperial statuary; and it is not a coincidence. At length, as Hellenistic workshops in Bactria, Roman objects brought in by the merchants, and a local taste educated by centuries of classicising coin portraits did, Hellenistic motifs and techniques were supplied. But it's not a Greek god in Buddhist costume. The iconographic programme is Buddhist: the marks of mahāpuruṣa, the particular mudrās of reassurance, meditation, first sermon and parinirvāṇa, the settings for the narrative depictions of birth, enlightenment, first sermon and parinirvāṇa; and its purpose is to make the absent teacher present at the relics shrine.

The other big invention of the school is Narrative relief. Saidu Sharif I (2010), a biographical frieze wrapped around the drum of the main stūpa, provided worshippers with a continuous visual life of the Buddha, as they engaged in the basic ritual of stūpa devotion, pradakṣiṇā, which involves traveling clockwise around the stūpa. (Faccenna, 2001) This has since been reconstructed by Olivieri (2022) who has demonstrated that the frieze was not an add-on but part of the original design of the monument. These cycles are a way of making the literary legacy of stone. The episodes of the dream of Mayā, birth in the garden of Lumbinī, the first bath, palace living, departure, the attack of Māra, the first sermon at Sarnath and the death at Kuśinagara recur repeatedly, and are supplemented by a steadily expanding number of secondary episodes and Jātaka antecedents. Bopearachchi (2020) has demonstrated how western compositional elements were used to depict Indian stories, and how artists who served the Buddhist donors could have the Buddha present Brahmā and Indra to visually reinforce the superiority of Buddha over the older deities. These panels are used to depict tritons, atlantes, Corinthian pilasters, vine-scrolls, and erotes with garlands, all of Mediterranean origin, which are quite naturalized as ornamental grammar. To say this is a syncretism is a correct description, one must recall that the term is used here in a positive way. The visual language had to be understandable to the multi-ethnic audience of monks, merchants and local notables; and it had to work for a religion whose core dogma was that a historical man had come to a transcendental state. The naturalistic bodies made the history believable and the miraculous iconography made the transcendence visible.

These images were organized by architecture into ritual space. The early stūpas of Butkara I and Dharmarājikā are the first examples of mounds of solid hemispherical form that cover relics in Indian art. In the first century CE a new type comes to the fore, the stūpa on a high square or rectangular podium with a sometimes monumental stairway on one face, the cylindrical

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

drum which is articulated by pilasters and narrative panels, and a harmikā above, with chhatrāvalī. This form, which was first clearly documented at Saidu Sharif I, opened up more sculpture space and was showier in the way that the devotee approached it (Olivieri, 2022). Smaller votive stūpas, chapels, and columns surrounded the main stūpa, creating a cluttered and densely packed sacred area typical of Takht-i-Bāhī, Jamāl Garhī, and the Taxila monasteries, which Behrendt (2004) has made central to his four-phase model. The relic precinct and the saṅgha life and cult of the Buddha existed as a single architectural organism in the monasteries, which included residential cells, assembly halls, and water installations. Structured façades, sometimes with Corinthian columns and pilasters with capitals that decorated with figures. The early and mature phases of the Swat and Peshawar basin programmes were made up of schist, while the stucco, which was more rapidly modelled and easily painted, was used for many later programmes in the Taxilan and Afghan regions, as Marshall (1960) has commented on Jauliāñ and related sites. Schist is itself historically significant, for its materiality. The small size of the stone in the Swat hills allowed for a linear precision and depth of relief that was not always possible with limestone and sandstone in other parts of India. The workshop investigations undertaken at Saidu suggest that this site was a place of organized ateliers, not individual geniuses, while the technical investigations reported by Arrighetti and his associates (2019) confirm this.

Any simple story of the Buddha type is complicated by Bodhisattva imagery. The small Buddha with the water flask (Maitreya) and the small Buddha with the headdress (Avalokiteśvara) are cult figures in their own right and as attendants in triads (Rhi, 2006). Their anatomy, the musculature of their torsos, and sometimes their moustaches are classicizing in response to another religious status: the being who delays final nirvāṇa to help others. The appearance of such figures has been understood as proof of Mahāyāna currents in Gandhara; in principle the ideals of the bodhisattvas did not require a well-developed Mahāyana canon in order to be accepted by the mainstream monastic Buddhism. The images do reveal a new devotional sphere that, along with the historical Buddha, was populated by a cosmos of compassionate figures. The presence of Hindu deities, too, is a feature, albeit not one of equal stature or standing, in the Buddhist narrative, which is a visual theology, and which Bopearachchi reads as a conscious proclamation of Buddhist supremacy in a religiously plural landscape. Their iconography was a synthesis of Indian yakṣa traditions and the seated, jewelled iconography of the cosmopolitan elite, as well in point of example as the Gandhara essay in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2012).

The typologies of style typically divide the period between the early part of the 1st century BCE and the early 1st century CE into an early phase, the mature period between the 1st and 2nd centuries into a late phase between the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the forms became more frontal, heavier, and more painterly, particularly in the stucco (Zwalf, 1996). It is important to note that these phases are not to be confused with a gradual improvement and deterioration in quality. Despite the relative softness of the late stucco work at Jauliāñ and Haḍḍa, the expression is rather different from the elegance of the incised work found in early Swat schist, and may owe as much to changing ritual requirements as to anything else. At all stages the art is firmly rooted in its place of origin. There is a difference in composition between the images made for a relief on the drum of a stūpa, which are read in motion during circumambulation, and cult images to be seen when facing the object in a chapel. Plaques and columns of Kharoṣṭhī were created by donors, some of whose names are preserved, and served to publicize their achievement and family virtue. The Gandhara visual culture is therefore not only a story of style,

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

but one of a visual culture. It is the physical substance of a religious community that believed that pictures could impart knowledge, defend, and present what books and relics could, too, and that possessed both wealth and the technology to have the pictures endure.

Intellectual Culture, Manuscripts and Trans-regional Exchange

While sculpture has long been the face of Gandhara, the discovery of its literature has revolutionized the scholarly face. The Gāndhārī Buddhist texts are the earliest Buddhist manuscripts found to date, and the earliest Indian Buddhist manuscripts in general, of which the earliest are written in the Kharoṣṭhī script on birch bark, less commonly palm leaf or other supports, and date from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE (Salomon, 2018). The British Library scrolls, the Senior collection, the Schøyen fragments, the Split manuscript, the materials in the Library of Congress and the large Islamabad Museum assemblage, which is currently being conserved under the Gandhari Manuscript Project (Allon, 2023), are now included in the collections. They contain a variety of items. These contain translations of familiar sūtras (including the Sūtra of the Rhinoceros Horn, Saṅgītisūtra, and anthologies of dharmapādas), avadāna stories, a verse biography of the Buddha nowhere else exactly parallel in other languages, praise poems, and proto-abhidharma lists. Works of the Mahāyāna tradition also include fragments of the sūtra edited by Harrison, Lenz, and Salomon. Monastic ledgers recording the value of gifts and the individuals who gave them, such as the one that records the gifts of Vima Kadphises, provide a rare insight into the administration of monastic institutions. They were written by many copyists, were sometimes placed in clay pots, and in a few instances seem to have been ceremoniously buried so that the collection is a library and a relic burial.

The language in these texts is an historical fact of first importance. It was the administrative and literary vernacular of northwest region for centuries (Gāndhārī Prakrit in Kharoṣṭhī script). It was not a rude local vernacular that needed to be replaced by Sanskrit; rather, what it was, was the language through which a Buddhist canon (or multiple interlocking proto-canons) could be written, copied, and learned. An analysis of the material from the British Library by Salomon (1999) led him to believe that a significant number of these works belong to a Dharmaguptaka milieu, a view corroborated by the Chinese Dīrghāgama, widely dated to that school. The implication is that there were organized textual communities with distinctiveness in the recensions in Gandhara, whether or not every scroll can be so affiliated. It is unfortunate that this moment of the Prakrit has been forgotten in general histories because of the later success of Sanskrit in Indian Buddhism. The restoration changes the picture of the early Buddhist literature: the Pali literature of the southern schools is separated from the Sanskrit literature of the later northern schools by a northwestern group of texts that is both local and a force for the world. According to the so-called Gāndhārī hypothesis much of the earliest Chinese translation of the Buddhist literature was done not from Sanskrit texts, which have survived, but from the northwestern Prakrit originals. The new manuscripts have lent this hypothesis some documentary support, which Salomon (2018) centers in his synthesis.

The copying of sūtras was not the only way to engage in intellectual life in Gandhara. The reputation of Taxila as a centre of learning extends beyond the Kuṣāṇa period and included Vedic knowledge, legal, medical, military and monastic education for Buddhist monks. The dialogue of MENANDER and the NāGASENā, whatever its historical kernel might be, envisions a public culture in which a Hellenistic king and a Buddhist philosopher may engage in the discussion of personal identity, kamma and nirvāṇa in an overlapping conceptual field. Monasteries provided education, religious

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

services, and economic activities. They were given land and equipment; they supervised the cults of relics to which pilgrims flocked; and they educated travelling monks. Not only were Chinese pilgrims sent to Gandhara to view relics, but they were also seeking texts and teachings; the monks of the northwest, on the other hand, travelled along the oasis roads towards the Tarim basin, then to Khotan, and finally to the Chinese capitals. Art went with them. The northwestern experiment was to create a prototype of the classicizing Buddha of Gandhara, which Central Asian and early Chinese workshops were able to adapt, and the visual conversion of East Asia into an anthropomorphic Buddha is unintelligible without the northwestern experiment (Neelis, 2011).

But Exchange was never one way export of Indian Buddhism via a passive corridor. Motifs, coins, merchants and ideas flowed in multiple directions. Objects and ornamental habits of the Parthians and Romans became part of the inspiration for gandharan workshops, Iranian architectural memories influenced some temple layouts and steppe clothing and portrait conventions can be seen on donor figures, while Indian narrative imagery and Mathurā type icons spread westward. The Silk Road was not a pipeline but a network and Gandhara was one of its tightest knots, a geography Elahi (2020) has appealed to scholars to examine in a way that avoids one-way influence. Within the unique text of the Buddha-biography and in the politically charged compositions that incorporate contemporary rulers into Buddhist story, one can see the authorship of local composition, indicating that authors in Gandhara were capable of creating as well as of continuing the tradition (Allon, 2023). Buddhist art includes depictions of Hindu gods, the existence of a pluralistic monastic tradition, and the use of Greek characters on some Kuṣāṇa coins, overlaid on the background of Bactrian and Kharoṣṭhī scriptural inscriptions. But that many were not chaos. It was shaped by the saṅgha's requirement for a clear way to teach, the donors' wishes for the recognition of their good works, and rulers' interest in a religion that would find common ground across the ethnic diversity of an empire that stretched from the Oxus to the Ganges.

The intellectual significance of Gandhara thus hinges on three accomplishments, which strengthened each other. First, the region was able to produce written literature in its local language early enough to provide recensions which were not far removed from the time of the oral transmission's first inscription. Second, it developed a visual pedagogy of unprecedented narrative density, so that the same biographical and doctrinal information can be read in the manuscripts, and walked around in the stones. Third, it was located in the geographic area from which these texts and images could be introduced into Central Asia and China when it was the most receptive. As the importance of the northwest as a medium of trade waned, due to the wars of the Hephthalites and the withdrawal of Kuṣāṇa successor states, and later as the Chinese pilgrims turned to Magadha, the manuscripts were interred, the monasteries depopulated, and the workshops silenced (Kuwayama, 2006). What they left behind is neither provincial affair nor any of the main archives from which the most successful missionary religion of the ancient world can still be studied at the time when art, text and empire intersected.

Conclusion

Gandhara was a centre, not a corridor that merely conducted other people's achievements from one civilization to another. The valleys of the north-west have produced a culture of Buddhism that, over almost 1000 years of recorded history and more so from the first century BCE to the fifth century CE, influenced the history of Asia through its monuments, images and manuscripts. There were several and cumulative conditions which made the centrality possible. Achaemenids and Hellenistic structures

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

fostered an Achaemenid-Hellenistic tradition of cross-cultural administration and a pool of visual forms. Buddhism became a public religion with the advent of the Mauryan policy and the ritual nucleus of the sacred space was the relic stūpa. The immediate context of the occurrence of aniconic signs is the Indo-Greek, Śaka, and Indo-Parthian societies, where the podium stūpa was invented and where narrative pictures emerged. Kuṣāṇa peace, coinage and elite conversion led to a proliferation of monasteries on a scale that only an empire could support, on a territory. In all these regimes, the Buddhist institutions chose from the collections of Iranian, Hellenistic, Central Asian and Indic genres and transformed the appropriations into new objects of devotion, instruction and patronage.

The art that emerged is rightly renowned, but its purpose has been sometimes forgotten. The anthropomorphic Buddha, biographical frieze, jeweled bodhisattva and Corinthian-framed stūpa did not provide for stylistic displays. They were methods of making the Buddha manifest in a country of relics and pilgrims, of teaching the laity without asking them to master a body of religious texts in one language, and of providing a formal language for the piety of the donor, whatever its origin. The Gāndhārī manuscripts now show that there was a parallel verbal culture of similar originality. In the north-west, scribes were producing sūtras, stories, ledgers and new biographies in their own Prakrit, leaving behind the oldest surviving Buddhist books and providing archetypes that would feed the first Chinese translations. Intellectual exchange, in this context, was only a secondary product of trade. It was a well-organized activity of monasteries, which reproduced, taught, welcomed and disseminated, and happened in a land where the mountain passes that were used for the silk trade were also used for conveying scrolls of birch-bark and portable icons.

The older question regarding the nature of Gandharan art, whether it is really Greek or really Indian, has become unproductive in that form. In light of the evidence presented here, another formulation is supported. The Gandaran culture is a historical achievement of the Buddhist communities, a resolution of several traditions in a specific political economy. These are all archaeologically proven constituents, and they are the elements of Greek naturalism, Roman ornamental habits, Iranian sacred plans, steppe portraiture and Indian narrative and iconographic systems. All of them together is the whole but none of them alone. The whole is made possible by the ability of Gandharan Buddhism to assimilate difference without compromising its ritual and doctrinal integrity. This ability is a unique mental accomplishment of the region, more than any individual statue or sūtra.

The impact extends beyond the historical to the practical for contemporary scholarship, and for today's societies that live on the ancient terrain. The sites of Taxila, Takht-i-Bāhī and Swat sanctuaries are not only national heritage sites of Pakistan and Afghanistan, but primary documents of a shared Asian past that is already global, in which South Asia was global. The future of this past depends on continued conservation of monuments, responsible publication of the remaining Gāndhārī scrolls, and the fusion of local knowledge and expertise in archaeology with international research. The purpose of the present article has been to provide what it might be expected that such a great amount of monks and traders, sculptors and scribes, emperors and anonymous donors made the northwestern part of the subcontinent one of the great centres of Buddhist culture in the ancient world.

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

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ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

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JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE, INSPIRING SOCIETY