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ANIMAL ICONOGRAPHY IN THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE INDO-SCYTHIANS: A NOTE ON STONE TOILET TRAYS FROM TAXILA, GANDHARA

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Abstract
The material culture of the Indo-Scythians provides important evidence of the cultural traditions, artistic expressions, and socio-religious beliefs of ancient Gandhara in the first century BCE. Among the archaeological remains recovered from Taxila, stone toilet trays represent a distinctive category of artifacts that combine practical utility with elaborate decorative designs. The carved animal motifs on these objects provide a significant source for investigating the symbolic and cultural aspects of Indo-Scythian material culture. This study examines the animal iconography represented on stone toilet trays from Taxila through an iconographic and comparative archaeological approach. It identifies both real and mythical animals, including horses, dragons, and crocodiles, and analyzes their symbolic meanings within the cultural context of the Indo-Scythian period. Furthermore, the iconographic range of these animal motifs reflects the interaction between indigenous Gandharan traditions and artistic influences from Central Asia and the Hellenistic world, illustrating Taxila cosmopolitan attractiveness as a major center of cultural exchange. However, by focusing on an understudied category of archaeological material, this research establishes that stone toilet trays are valuable sources for reconstructing the symbolic world and material culture of the Indo-Scythians.

1. Introduction
The Indo-Scythians emerged as a major political and cultural power in the northwestern Indian subcontinent (Juping, 2013: 82-92) during the first century BCE, establishing their authority over Gandhara and adjoining regions (Muhammad, Jan, & Afridi, 2025: 136-149; Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223; Cribb, 2020:

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653-682). Their rule coincided with a period of intense cultural interaction, during which indigenous traditions merged with influences from Central Asia and the Hellenistic world (Olbrycht, 2021). Owing to its strategic location at the crossroads of these regions, Gandhara developed into a vibrant center of commercial, cultural, and artistic exchange (Ramzan, 2023: 115-125; Tarar & Khan, 2025: 191-203; Kadam, 2025: 39-101). The archaeological record of this period reflects the dynamic nature of these interactions and provides valuable evidence for reconstructing the social, economic, religious, and artistic life of the Indo-Scythians (Morris, 2019: 53-94; Genito, 2025: 11-98). Among the material remains of the Indo-Scythian period, the stone toilet trays excavated from Sirkap at Taxila constitute one of the most distinctive categories of archaeological artifacts (Cribb, 2023: 633-670; Muzio, 2011: 331-340). Carved primarily from schist, steatite, and phyllite, these circular or oval trays combine functional utility with refined artistic decoration (Rapp, 2009: 21-142). Their surfaces are ornamented with a wide range of motifs, including floral designs, geometric patterns, human figures, and animal representations, demonstrating the high level of craftsmanship (Khan, 2024:174-183 attained by Indo-Scythian artisans (Dar, 2018: 29; Bopearachchi, 2025). Excavations at Sirkap have revealed a considerable number of these objects, indicating their widespread use and their importance within the material culture of ancient Taxila (Marshall, 1947:3-32; Falk, 2010: 89-113).

Indo-Scythian material culture in Gandhara comprises the archaeological remains associated with the Indo-Scythian occupation of the region during the first century BCE (Muhammad, Jan, & Afridi, 2025: 136-149). It includes a wide variety of objects and structures, such as architecture (Dar, 2006), coins, sculptures, pottery, stone toilet trays, terracotta figurines, metal implements, ornaments, seals, and religious objects (Marshall, 1947:3-32). Together, these remains provide important evidence for reconstructing the technological skills, artistic traditions, economic activities, and socio-cultural life of the Indo-Scythians (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223; Cribb, 2020: 653-682). They also demonstrate the cultural diversity of Gandhara, where indigenous traditions interacted with artistic and cultural influences from Central Asia, Iran, and the Hellenistic world, resulting in a distinctive material culture that reflects both local developments and broader regional connections (Dar, 1979:143). As an integral component of Indo-Scythian material culture, these stone toilet trays provide important evidence for understanding the technological capabilities, aesthetic preferences, and cultural values of the communities that produced and used them. Their decorative repertoire reflects the interaction of indigenous Gandharan traditions with artistic influences transmitted through Central Asia and the Hellenistic world, illustrating the cosmopolitan character of Taxila as a major center of cultural exchange (Borovka, 1928:73). Although previous studies have examined the chronology, typology, manufacturing techniques, and artistic features of stone toilet trays (Marshall, 1962; Allchin, 1993), comparatively little attention has been devoted to the systematic study of their animal iconography and its symbolic significance.

Animal imagery occupied a prominent position in the visual culture of the ancient world, where it frequently conveyed concepts of power, authority, protection, fertility, prosperity, and the relationship between humans and the natural environment (Borovka, 1928:73). Within the Indo-Scythian artistic tradition, the depiction of animals extended beyond mere decoration to serve as a symbolic language through which cultural identities, religious beliefs, and ideological values were expressed (Dar, 1979:143). The recurring representations of lions, horses, deer, and mythical creatures on the stone toilet trays of Taxila demonstrate the integration of local artistic conventions with foreign iconographic traditions, reflecting the multicultural environment of Gandhara during the Indo-Scythian period (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223). This study investigates the animal iconography represented on the stone toilet trays from Sirkap, Taxila, through an iconographic and comparative archaeological

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approach (Marshall, 1950:493-497). It aims to identify the principal animal motifs, examine their artistic characteristics, and interpret their symbolic and cultural meanings within the broader context of Indo-Scythian material culture. However, by situating these artifacts within their archaeological, historical, and artistic contexts, the study seeks to illuminate the role of animal imagery in expressing cultural identity and cross-cultural interaction.

In doing so, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Indo-Scythian material culture and demonstrates the significance of stone toilet trays as an important source for reconstructing the artistic traditions, symbolic systems, and cultural dynamics of ancient Gandhara.

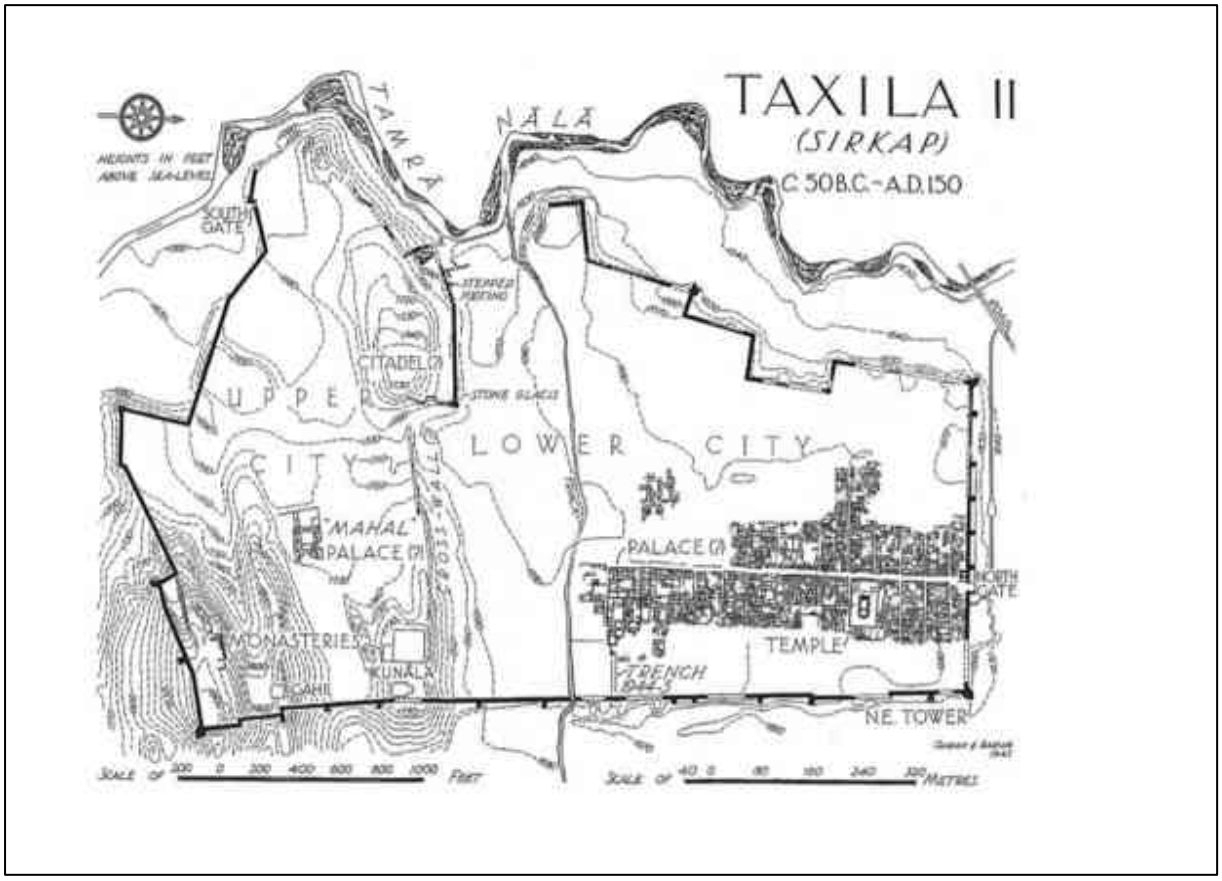


Fig. 1. The Sirkap city, Taxila, within the Stone walls (after Wheeler, 1948)

2. The Establishment and Development of Indo-Scythian Rule in Gandhara

The Indo-Scythians, commonly identified with the Sakas, were Central Asian groups that entered the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent during the first century BCE (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223). Their establishment in Gandhara introduced new political and cultural dynamics that significantly influenced the region's development. Major urban centers such as Taxila (Dar, 1986; Marshall 1950:493-497), Pushkalavati, and Kapisa emerged as important hubs under their rule, facilitating interactions between local traditions and external cultural influences. Through these exchanges, the Indo-Scythians contributed to the growth of a distinctive artistic and cultural environment in Gandhara (Bopearachchi, 2025). Archaeological investigations across Gandhara have produced substantial evidence for the presence and activities of the Indo-Scythians. Excavations at sites including Sirkap Taxila (Marshall 1950:493-497), Shaikhan Dheri Charsadda (Dani 1965), Aziz Dheri Swabi (Shah Nazar 1993; Nasim Khan, 2010), Gor Khuttree

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Peshawar, (Durrani, 1993, 1996, Ali 2006-07), Hayatabad Peshawar, (Gul Rahim Khan, 2017-2022), Pir Manakrai Haripur, (Dar & Jan 2015), Akra Bannu, Butkara-I Swat, (Faccenna 1956-58), and Barikot Swat (Olivieri 2014; Olivieri, & Callieri, 2020; Olivieri, Iori, Minardi, Lant, Samad, & Vidale, 2022) have uncovered a wide range of material remains. Coins, sculptures, inscriptions, pottery, beads, ornaments, architectural remains, and other artifacts reveal important aspects of Indo-Scythian society, economy, and artistic traditions (Muhammad, Jan, & Bano, 2025: 925-941; Pankova & Simpson, 2020). These discoveries demonstrate that the period was marked by cultural interaction and artistic innovation, resulting in the emergence of unique forms of material culture. Although Indo-Scythian political authority gradually weakened during the first century CE and was eventually replaced by the Indo-Parthians and Kushans, their cultural legacy continued to influence the region (Morris, 2021; Muhammad, Jan, & Afridi, 2025: 136-149). The artistic traditions and cross-cultural connections fostered during their rule played a crucial role in shaping Gandhara's historical and cultural landscape (Badikillaya, 2018: 349). As a result, the Indo-Scythian period remains an important chapter in the study of ancient Gandharan civilization (Bopearachchi, 2025) and its material culture (Yang, 2017:177-208).

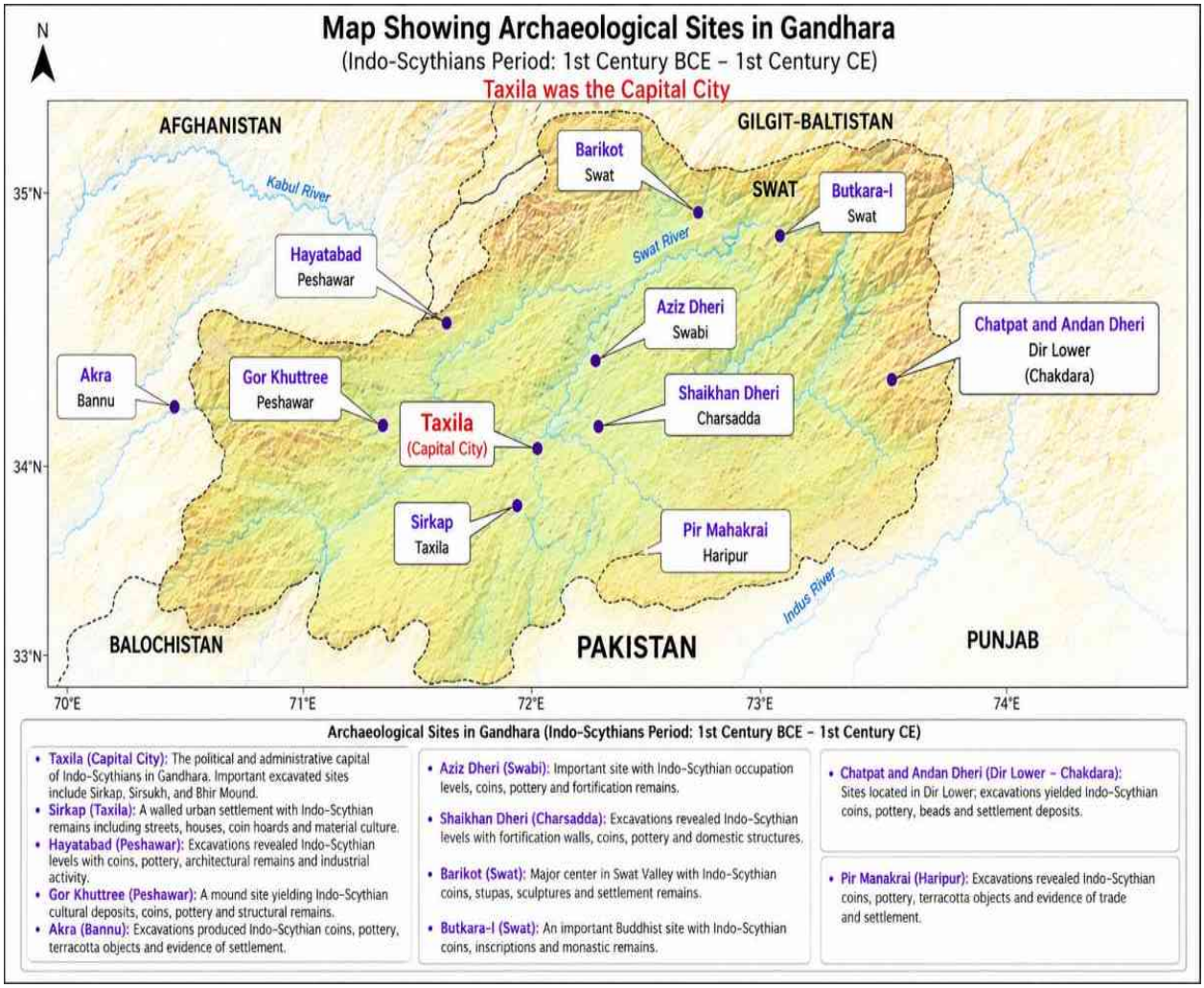


Fig. 2. Map showing archaeological sites of the Indo-Scythian period in Gandhara

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3. Animal Iconography in the Material Culture of the Indo-Scythians

Animal iconography constitutes one of the most distinctive features of Indo-Scythian material culture in ancient Gandhara (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223). The frequent representation of animals on a wide range of archaeological objects shows they were not merely decorative motifs, but meaningful visual symbols embedded in Indo-Scythian cultural, social, and artistic traditions (Bhandare, 2017: 70-103; Srinivasan, 2008: 130-134). These representations provide valuable evidence for understanding how animals were perceived, interpreted, and incorporated into the visual language of a society that maintained close cultural connections with Central Asia while adapting to the artistic environment of Gandhara (Stewart, 2023; Bopearachchi, 2025). The material culture of the Indo-Scythians includes architecture (Dar, 1979:141-184), coins, sculptures, pottery, terracotta figurines, ornaments, seals, metal objects, and stone toilet trays, all of which preserve evidence of animal imagery in varying forms (Muhammad, Jan, & Bano, 2025: 925-941). Among these categories, stone toilet trays offer one of the richest sources for studying animal iconography because their decorative surfaces were specifically designed to accommodate elaborate relief carvings (Simpson & Killen, 2022: 1, 23). The repeated appearance of animal motifs on these objects indicates that such imagery occupied an important place in Indo-Scythian artistic expression and conveyed ideas that extended beyond aesthetic decoration (Rosenfield, 1967; Skupniewicz, 2025; 1-42).

The prominence of animal imagery in Indo-Scythian art can be understood in relation to the Scythians' nomadic traditions (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223). Originating from the Eurasian steppes, the Scythians maintained a close association with animals through pastoral life, hunting, and horsemanship (Khazanov, 2015: 32-49). Consequently, animals became central to their artistic vocabulary, serving as symbols of strength, mobility, protection, courage, fertility, and prestige (Alves & Barboza, 2018: 277-301). When the Indo-Scythians established their rule in Gandhara during the first century BCE, they introduced many aspects of this artistic heritage while simultaneously adopting local artistic conventions. The resulting iconography reflects a synthesis of Central Asian traditions with the indigenous artistic practices of Gandhara (Muhammad, Jan, & Afridi, 2025: 136-149).

One of the defining characteristics of Indo-Scythian pictorial culture is the adaptation of the Scythian animal style, an artistic tradition widely recognized across the Eurasian steppes (Abdullaev, 2020:167-217). Dynamic compositions, stylized forms, powerful anatomical modelling, and an emphasis on movement characterize this style. Animals are frequently portrayed in active or confrontational poses, often emphasizing muscular bodies, expressive heads, and flowing contours (Merlini, 2025: 78-131). Although the animal style underwent modification after its introduction into Gandhara, many of its characteristic features remained evident in the decorative programs of stone toilet trays (Faccenna, 2003: 3-4; Falk, 2010: 89-113). Local craftsmen blended these stylistic elements with Hellenistic naturalism and indigenous decorative traditions, creating a distinctive artistic language unique to the Indo-Scythian period (Rosenfield, 1967; Olivieri, Iori, & Coloru, 2022: 110-135). The diversity of animal representations found in Indo-Scythian material culture reflects both the natural environment and the symbolic world of ancient Gandhara. Horses, deer, birds, bulls, and other animals appear repeatedly, each carrying different cultural associations. In addition to real animals, mythical creatures such as griffins and dragons also occur, demonstrating that the iconographic repertoire extended beyond the observable world into the realm of mythology and symbolic belief (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223; Bopearachchi, 2025). These representations reveal that artisans deliberately selected animals to convey ideas associated with authority, protection, prosperity, courage, and harmony with nature.

The significance of animal iconography is further enhanced by its occurrence on objects

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used in everyday life. Rather than restricting symbolic imagery to religious monuments (Maguire, 2000:18-33) or elite commissions, Indo-Scythian craftsmen incorporated meaningful representations into domestic objects such as stone toilet trays (Ghosh, 2019: 41-67; Coningham & Edwards, 1997: 47-75). This practice illustrates how artistic symbolism permeated daily activities, allowing ordinary objects to function as expressions of cultural identity and social values. The integration of symbolic imagery into utilitarian artifacts also reflects the sophisticated artistic sensibilities of the communities that produced and used them. Animal iconography likewise provides important evidence for cultural interaction in ancient Gandhara. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, Iran, and the Hellenistic world, Taxila became a centre where artistic traditions from different regions converged (Marshall, 2013; Falk, 2010: 89-113). The animal motifs preserved on Indo-Scythian artifacts reveal the influence of Hellenistic realism, Iranian symbolism, Central Asian animal traditions (Borovka, 1928:73), and indigenous Gandharan craftsmanship (Samad, 2012; Bopearachchi, 2025). Instead of replacing one another, these traditions were selectively combined, resulting in an artistic style that reflects the multicultural character of the region (Olivieri, Iori, & Coloru, 2022: 110-135).

From an archaeological perspective, animal representations serve as valuable indicators for interpreting chronology, artistic development, and cultural exchange (Morriss-Kay, 2010: 158-176). Variations in style, composition, and iconographic themes help distinguish different phases of production and illustrate how artistic preferences evolved. The increasing prominence of animal imagery during the Indo-Scythian period marks an important departure from the predominantly human-centered themes of the preceding Indo-Greek (Taasob, 2023:178-188; Rosenfield, 1967). However, animal iconography occupies a central position within the material culture of the Indo-Scythians and represents far more than an ornamental feature of archaeological artifacts (Muhammad, Jan, & Afridi, 2025:136-149). It reflects the interaction of artistic traditions, the transmission of cultural values, and the symbolic importance of animals in Indo-Scythian society. Through the study of these motifs, particularly those preserved on the stone toilet trays of Taxila (Ghosh, 2019: 41-67; Kumar, 2023: 37-47), it becomes possible to reconstruct important aspects of Indo-Scythian ideology, craftsmanship, and cultural identity, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the artistic heritage of ancient Gandhara (Stewart, 2023; Behrendt, 2007).

4. Archaeological Context of Stone Toilet Trays at Taxila

Stone toilet trays represent one of the most distinctive categories of minor stone artifacts recovered from the archaeological sites of ancient Taxila (Kumar, 2023: 37-47). Excavations at Sirkap and other locations within the Taxila Valley have produced a substantial assemblage of these objects, establishing them as an important component of Indo-Scythian material culture (Coningham & Edwards, 1997: 47-75). Their widespread occurrence in urban and domestic contexts suggests that they were closely associated with everyday activities, particularly personal grooming and cosmetic practices, while their elaborate decoration indicates that they also fulfilled aesthetic and symbolic functions. Archaeological evidence indicates that approximately eighty-two stone toilet trays have been recovered from the Taxila Valley, the majority originating from secular rather than religious contexts (Muhammad, Jan, Bano, 2025: 925-941). This distribution suggests that these artifacts formed part of the material culture of daily life instead of being exclusively associated with ritual activities (Iori, 2018). Taxila remains the only site in Gandhara where stone toilet trays have been recovered through systematic archaeological excavations, allowing their chronology (Muzio, 2011: 331-340), archaeological context, and cultural significance to be examined with a high degree of confidence. The stratigraphic evidence from Sirkap provides an important framework for understanding their development during the Indo-Scythian period (Dar, 1979:141-184; Marshall, 1962).

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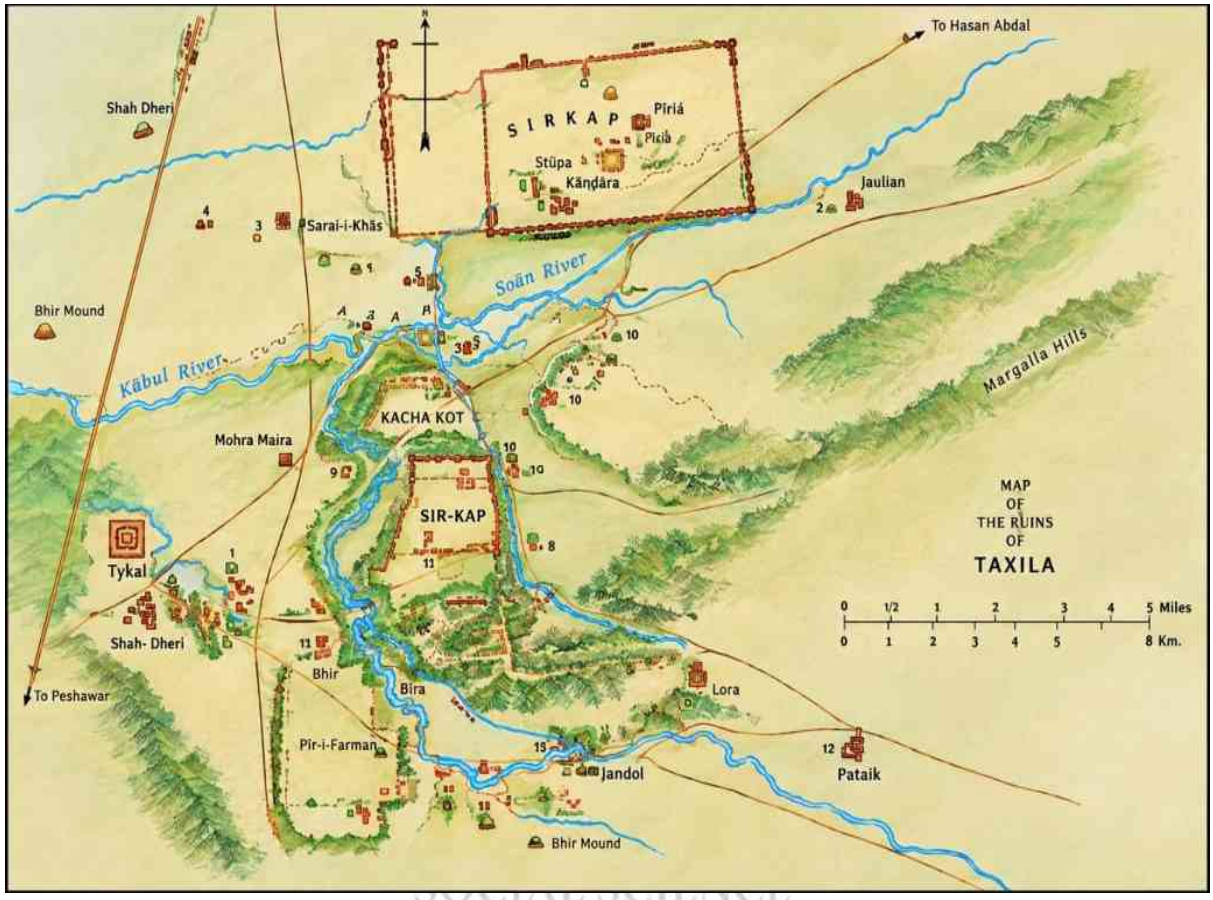


Fig. 3. Map of the Sirkap city, Taxila (after Alexander Conningham 1871)

Although Taxila has yielded the largest concentration of these artifacts (Bhandare, 2017: 70-103), isolated examples have also been reported from other archaeological sites (Marshall, 1962), including Udigram in Swat, Butkara - I (Warraich, 2015: 17; Hilal & Kokab, 2026: 267-284; Ramzan, 2023), Bala Hisar at Charsadda, (Ali, Coningham, Connan, Gething, Adam, Dessort, & Heron, 2006: 641-655), and Hatra in Iraq (Dirven, 2022: 119-150). Their occurrence across a broader geographical area suggests that the production and circulation of stone toilet trays extended beyond Taxila (Kumar, 2023: 37-47), reflecting cultural interaction and artistic exchange across northwestern South Asia and adjacent regions. Nevertheless, the numerical predominance of specimens from Taxila underscores the city's role as a major center of craftsmanship, artistic innovation, and intercultural contact during the Indo-Scythian period (Ghosh, 2007: 289-310). The decorative repertoire of these stone toilet trays is remarkably diverse (Muzio, 2011: 331-340), incorporating floral, geometric, human, and animal motifs executed in finely carved relief. Among these decorative elements, animal representations occupy a prominent position and constitute an important aspect of Indo-Scythian visual culture. The recurring depiction of both real and mythical animals (Dickinson, 2005: 109-163) demonstrates that these objects served purposes beyond their practical function, embodying symbolic meanings and reflecting the cultural values of the communities that produced and used them. Consequently, the archaeological context of the stone toilet trays (Muzio, 2011: 331-340) provides an essential foundation for interpreting the animal

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iconography preserved on their surfaces and for understanding its significance within the broader framework of Indo-Scythian material culture in Gandhara (Allchin & Erdosy, 1995).

5. Origin and Artistic Influences of Animal Iconography on Stone Toilet Trays at Taxila

Stone toilet trays represent a distinctive category of material culture (Muzio, 2011: 331-340) that developed in ancient Taxila between the 2nd century BCE and the 1st century CE (Marshall, 1962). Archaeological evidence indicates that these objects first appeared during the Indo-Greek period (Widemann, 2000: 227-258) and continued to be produced under the Indo-Scythian and Parthian dynasties. The largest assemblage has been recovered from Sirkap, the second city of Taxila (Ghosh, 2007: 289-310), demonstrating that these artifacts formed an important component of urban life and artistic production in ancient Gandhara (Stewart, 2023). Their continuous manufacture across successive political periods reflects both the persistence of local craftsmanship and the adaptation of artistic traditions in response to changing cultural environments. The decorative programs of the stone toilet trays reveal the evolution of artistic expression in Gandhara (Falk, 2010: 89-113). Early examples display motifs and compositional principles rooted in the Hellenistic tradition, reflecting the artistic legacy of the Indo-Greeks (Ghosh, 2007: 289-310). During the Indo-Scythian period (Marshall, 1962; Ghosh, 2007: 289-310), however, the iconographic repertoire underwent a noticeable transformation. Animal imagery assumed a more prominent role, with artisans increasingly depicting lions, horses, deer, birds, and mythical creatures alongside mounted riders and hunting scenes. Many of these representations exhibit stylistic characteristics associated with the Scythian Animal Style (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223), in which animals are portrayed with dynamic movement, stylized forms, and symbolic emphasis. This development marks a significant departure from earlier Hellenistic decorative conventions and reflects the growing influence of Central Asian artistic traditions (Kudaibergenova, 2019: 224-252; Marshall, 1962).

The animal iconography preserved on these trays illustrates the interaction of diverse artistic and cultural traditions. Indigenous Gandharan motifs were reinterpreted through the incorporation of Hellenistic (Marshall, 1962; Ghosh 2007: 289-310), Central Asian, Iranian, and Parthian elements, resulting in a distinctive visual language that characterizes Indo-Scythian material culture (Cribb, 2020: 653-682). Rather than functioning solely as decorative motifs, the animal representations conveyed symbolic meanings associated with power, protection, mobility, prestige, fertility, and the natural world. Their recurring appearance on stone toilet trays demonstrates that animal imagery played an important role in communicating cultural values and social identity within Indo-Scythian society. The artistic diversity reflected in these artifacts underscores the cosmopolitan character of Taxila, where long-distance trade networks and sustained cultural interaction encouraged the exchange of artistic ideas and iconographic traditions. Although stone toilet trays constitute a relatively small category of archaeological material, they preserve an exceptional record of Indo-Scythian visual culture. Their carefully executed animal motifs provide valuable evidence for understanding the development of artistic traditions, the transmission of cultural influences, and the symbolic language embedded within the material culture of ancient Gandhara. Consequently, these artifacts occupy an important place in reconstructing the artistic identity and cultural interactions of the Indo-Scythians at Taxila (Cribb, 2020: 653-682).

6. Artistry and Animal Iconography on Stone Toilet Trays

The stone toilet trays of Taxila represent one of the finest examples of craftsmanship within the material culture of the Indo-Scythians (Allchin & Erdosy, 1995). These carefully carved objects illustrate the technical expertise of local artisans and provide important evidence for understanding the artistic traditions and symbolic expressions of ancient Gandhara (Dar,

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1984; Muzio, 2011: 331-340). Although the earliest examples date to the Indo-Greek period, the decorative repertoire underwent a significant transformation under Indo-Scythian rule, reflecting shifting artistic preferences and the incorporation of new cultural influences (Mierse, William, 2022:1-462). The increasing prominence of animal imagery during this period distinguishes the Indo-Scythian examples from their earlier predecessors. Most stone toilet trays were fashioned from locally available stones, including steatite, phyllite, and schist (Siegesmund & Török, 2010:11-95) and generally measure between 9 and 17.5 centimeters in diameter. They are typically circular in form, consisting of a shallow concave surface enclosed by a raised rim, while the reverse side may be either flat or slightly convex (Ghosh, 2019: 41-67). The inner surface served as the principal decorative field, where craftsmen employed both low- and high-relief carving techniques to produce intricate compositions (Muzio, 2011: 331-340). The careful arrangement of figures and ornamental motifs demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of balance, proportion, and spatial organization, transforming these utilitarian objects into finely executed works of art (Vogel, 1953).

Animal iconography occupies a central place in the decorative programs of these stone trays (Dar, 1984; Muzio, 2011: 331-340). The carved compositions include representations of lions, horses, deer, birds, and mythical creatures, either depicted individually or integrated into scenes featuring human figures, mounted riders, hunting episodes, and composite beings (Andreeva, 2023: 55-71). Attention was given to anatomical detail, movement, and posture, enabling the artists to create compositions that convey vitality and dynamism. Many of these depictions exhibit characteristics associated with the Scythian Animal Style (Sharkey, 2022:120), including stylized forms, muscular bodies, and expressive movement, while simultaneously incorporating elements derived from indigenous Gandharan artistic traditions (Dar, 1984). The visual impact of the animal motifs is further enhanced by decorative backgrounds composed of lotus petals, floral scrolls, geometric patterns, and radiating designs (Marshall, 1913). These ornamental elements not only enrich the overall composition but also demonstrate the fusion of Hellenistic, Central Asian, Parthian, and local artistic traditions that characterized Gandhara (Dar, 1984; Stewart, 2023) during the Indo-Scythian period. Such stylistic diversity reflects the cosmopolitan environment of Taxila, where sustained cultural interaction encouraged artistic innovation and the exchange of iconographic ideas (Vitale, Redding, & Khan, 2024:13-20). Beyond their decorative appeal, the animal motifs carved on these toilet trays formed an integral part of Indo-Scythian material culture. They expressed concepts of power, protection, prestige, mobility, and the natural world, revealing the symbolic importance of animals in Indo-Scythian visual culture. Consequently, the craftsmanship displayed in these artifacts extends beyond technical excellence, illustrating how artistic skill and symbolic representation were combined to produce objects that embodied the cultural identity and aesthetic values of the Indo-Scythian communities of ancient Gandhara.

6.1 Material of Stone Toilet Trays

The stone toilet trays recovered from Taxila (Dar, 1984) represent an outstanding example of Indo-Scythian craftsmanship and constitute an important component of the material culture (Allchin & Erdosy, 1995) of ancient Gandhara. These artifacts were primarily fashioned from locally available stones, including steatite, phyllite, schist, and chloritized micaceous schist. The selection of these materials was determined by their durability, fine-grained texture, and ease of carving, qualities that enabled artisans to produce intricate decorative compositions with remarkable precision (Falk, 2010: 89-113). Their smooth surfaces provided an ideal medium for engraving detailed representations of animals, human figures, floral motifs, and geometric designs, reflecting the high level of technical skill achieved by craftsmen (Morgan, 2018: 91-115) during the Indo-Scythian period. Among the minor stone artifacts excavated from Taxila, toilet trays occupy a distinctive position because

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of their refined workmanship and elaborate iconographic programs (Muzio, 2011: 331-340). Many examples were carved from chloritized micaceous schist, a material also employed in the production of female figurines and other decorative objects. Its durability and uniform texture allowed artisans to execute delicate relief carving while ensuring the long-term preservation of intricate motifs. The careful selection of raw materials demonstrates a thorough understanding of the physical properties of stone and the technical requirements necessary for producing finely decorated objects (Marshall, 1947: 3-32).

The craftsmanship displayed on these trays is particularly evident in the execution of animal motifs, which form a prominent element of their decorative repertoire (Muzio, 2018: 123). Artisans rendered animals with carefully observed anatomical features, balanced proportions, and a convincing sense of movement, revealing both technical proficiency and artistic creativity. The precision of the carving suggests that the craftsmen possessed considerable experience in relief sculpture and could adapt different artistic conventions to suit the available stone (Muzio, 2018: 123). These representations also reflect the integration of indigenous Gandharan traditions with artistic influences from Central Asia and the Hellenistic world, resulting in a distinctive visual language that characterizes Indo-Scythian material culture (Allchin & Erdosy, 1995; Marshall, 1947: 3-32). The quality of the materials and the sophistication of the carving techniques have ensured the preservation of these artifacts, allowing modern scholars to examine their artistic and symbolic features in considerable detail. Consequently, the stone toilet trays of Taxila provide valuable archaeological evidence for understanding the technological capabilities of Indo-Scythian artisans, the development of stone-carving traditions in Gandhara, and the central role of animal iconography in the visual culture and material heritage of the Indo-Scythian period (Coningham & Edwards, 1997: 47-75).

The stone toilet trays of the Indo-Scythian period were primarily manufactured from locally available stone materials, including steatite, phyllite, schist, and chloritized micaceous schist. The selection of these stones was largely influenced by their durability, fine texture, and suitability for carving intricate decorative designs. Their relatively soft surface allowed craftsmen to produce detailed representations of animals, human figures, and ornamental motifs with considerable precision and artistic skill. Among the stone artifacts recovered from Indo-Scythian contexts at Taxila (Marshall, 1947: 3-32), toilet trays constitute one of the most distinctive categories of minor art. These objects are frequently associated with female statuettes carved in the round, both of which were often produced from chloritized micaceous schist. The use of this material not only enhanced the durability of the artifacts but also provided a smooth surface suitable for detailed artistic expression. The careful choice of stone and the high quality of workmanship visible on these trays reflect the advanced skills of local artisans (Dar, 1984). The carved animal motifs demonstrate a strong understanding of form, movement, and composition. The material itself played an important role in preserving these images, allowing modern scholars to examine the artistic traditions and iconographic features of the Indo-Scythian period. Consequently, the stone toilet trays from Taxila serve as valuable evidence for studying both the material culture (Dar, 1979; Allchin & Erdosy, 1995) and the artistic achievements of the Indo-Scythians, especially their preference for animal imagery as a significant element of visual expression.

6.2 Technique of Carving and Decoration

The stone toilet trays of Taxila demonstrate the advanced stone-carving traditions that flourished during the Indo-Scythian period (Muzio, 2018: 123). Their production required a combination of technical knowledge, artistic ability, and careful planning, enabling craftsmen to transform simple stone blocks into finely decorated objects (Falk, 2010: 89-113). The artisans selected fine-grained stones such as steatite, phyllite, and schist because these materials were durable yet sufficiently workable to accommodate detailed relief carving. The

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physical properties of these stones allowed for the precise execution of decorative motifs while ensuring the long-term preservation of the carved surfaces (Allchin & Erdosy, 1995). The manufacturing process began with shaping the raw stone into a circular or oval form using chisels, hammers, and other carving implements. The craftsmen then fashioned a shallow concave interior enclosed by a raised rim, creating a balanced surface suitable for decorative composition. Once the basic form had been completed, the inner surface was carefully prepared to receive the carved designs (Coningham & Edwards, 1997: 47-75). Relief carving was subsequently employed to produce intricate compositions, requiring considerable control over depth, proportion, and spatial arrangement. The precision of the carving reflects the technical proficiency of Gandharan artisans and their familiarity with established sculptural traditions (Marshall, 1947: 3-32). Animal iconography occupies a central place within these decorative programs. Craftsmen depicted a variety of animals either as independent subjects or in association with human figures, mounted riders, and mythical creatures. Attention was devoted to anatomical detail, muscular form, posture, and movement, resulting in lively and expressive compositions. The use of relief carving enabled the artists to create a sense of depth and dynamism, giving prominence to the animal figures while maintaining harmony within the overall design. Many of these representations exhibit stylistic features associated with the Scythian Animal Style, while simultaneously incorporating indigenous Gandharan artistic conventions and Hellenistic compositional principles (Dar, 1979; Allchin & Erdosy, 1995).

Following the completion of the carving, the trays were carefully smoothed and polished to enhance both appearance and durability. The polished surface accentuated relief work and increased the visual clarity of the decorative motifs. Floral scrolls, lotus petals, geometric patterns, and radiating designs were frequently added to frame or complement the principal imagery, creating balanced and visually engaging compositions (Coningham & Edwards, 1997: 47-75). These decorative elements not only enriched the aesthetic quality of the trays but also demonstrated the fusion of artistic traditions that characterized the multicultural environment of ancient Taxila (Marshall, 1947: 3-32; Dar, 1984). The carving and decorative techniques employed in the production of these artifacts illustrate the remarkable skill of Indo-Scythian craftsmen and their ability to integrate artistic refinement with symbolic expression. The careful execution of animal motifs reflects their importance within Indo-Scythian material culture (Dar, 1979; Allchin & Erdosy, 1995), where visual imagery served both aesthetic and cultural purposes. Consequently, the stone toilet trays of Taxila (Dar, 1984) represent a significant source for understanding the technological achievements, artistic traditions, and symbolic language that shaped the material culture of the Indo-Scythians in ancient Gandhara (Marshall, 1947: 3-32).

6.3 Chronological Development of Animal Iconography on Stone Toilet Trays

The chronological development of the stone toilet trays from Taxila (Marshall, 1947: 3-32) provides an important framework for understanding the evolution of animal iconography within the material culture of the Indo-Scythians (Dar, 1979; Allchin & Erdosy, 1995). Archaeological evidence indicates that these artifacts were produced from the mid-second century BCE to the second century CE, spanning the Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Indo-Parthian periods. This extended period of production coincided with profound political and cultural transformations in Gandhara, during which artistic traditions were continuously reinterpreted through interaction with indigenous, Central Asian, and Hellenistic influences (Marshall, 1947: 3-32). The reconstruction and expansion of Sirkap created an environment in which these artistic developments could flourish. The earliest stone toilet trays are generally attributed to the Indo-Greek phase of Taxila (Dar, 1979; Allchin & Erdosy, 1995). Their decorative programs are dominated by Hellenistic artistic conventions, including mythological scenes, human figures,

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floral ornamentation, and carefully balanced circular compositions. The relief carving is characterized by naturalistic modelling, harmonious proportions, and refined execution, reflecting the enduring influence of Greek artistic traditions in northwestern South Asia (Marshall, 1947: 3-32). Animal motifs are present on some early examples but usually play a secondary role within the overall decorative scheme.

A significant transformation occurred during the Indo-Scythian period, when the iconographic emphasis shifted towards animal imagery. Representations of lions, horses, deer, birds, and composite creatures became increasingly common and often occupied the central position within the decorative compositions. Mounted riders, hunting scenes, and stylized animal forms also appear with greater frequency, reflecting artistic conventions associated with the Central Asian Scythian Animal Style (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223). These changes demonstrate that animal imagery became an increasingly important medium for expressing cultural identity, authority, mobility, protection, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. The subsequent Indo-Parthian phase continued many of the artistic traditions established during the Indo-Scythian period while introducing additional stylistic variations (Marshall, 1947: 3-32). Although Hellenistic decorative elements remained visible, the preference for animal motifs persisted, indicating the lasting significance of this iconographic tradition within the visual culture of Gandhara. The gradual adaptation and refinement of these motifs illustrate the continuity of local craftsmanship alongside the assimilation of new artistic influences. The chronological sequence of the stone toilet trays, therefore, reflects more than a change in artistic style; it documents the evolution of symbolic expression within Indo-Scythian material culture (Coningham & Edwards, 1997: 47-75; Dar, 1984). Variations in iconography, composition, and carving techniques reveal how artistic traditions responded to shifting political and cultural circumstances while preserving elements of earlier visual conventions. Consequently, the chronology of these artifacts provides an essential basis for understanding the development of animal iconography and its role in shaping the artistic identity of the Indo-Scythians in ancient Gandhara (Marshall, 1947: 3-32).

7. Discussion and Significance of Animal Representations

The stone toilet trays from Taxila preserve one of the richest assemblages of animal imagery within the material culture of the Indo-Scythians. The recurring depiction of both real and mythical animals demonstrates that these motifs were far more than decorative embellishments. Instead, they formed an essential component of visual language through which artistic traditions, cultural values, and symbolic concepts were expressed. The careful selection and arrangement of animal figures indicate that they held particular significance for the communities that produced and used these objects, reflecting aspects of identity, belief, and social ideology. Archaeological evidence from Sirkap indicates that the iconographic series of stone toilet trays evolved alongside the political and cultural transformations that occurred in Gandhara. The earliest examples, attributed to the Indo-Greek period, are characterized by Hellenistic artistic conventions, including mythological narratives, human figures, and naturalistic compositions. During the Indo-Scythian period, however, the decorative emphasis shifted towards animal representations. Lions, horses, deer, birds, and composite creatures became increasingly prominent, often appearing alongside mounted riders, hunting scenes, and other dynamic compositions. This transition reflects the growing influence of Central Asian artistic traditions while simultaneously preserving elements of indigenous Gandharan craftsmanship.

The execution of these animal motifs demonstrates the remarkable skill of Indo-Scythian artisans. Using relief carving, they carefully modeled anatomical features, muscular forms, posture, and movement, creating

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compositions that convey vitality and realism. The balanced arrangement of figures within the limited circular space of the trays illustrates a sophisticated understanding of composition and design. These artistic qualities not only enhanced the visual appeal of the objects but also reinforced the symbolic importance of the animals represented. The symbolic significance of the animal motifs varied according to the species depicted. Lions were associated with strength, authority, courage, and royal power, while horses reflected the military traditions, mobility, and nomadic heritage of the Indo-Scythians. Deer symbolized harmony, grace, and the natural environment, whereas birds were commonly linked with beauty, purity, and spiritual ideals. Composite and mythical creatures, including griffins and dragons, represented protection, supernatural power, and guardianship. Together, these motifs illustrate how animal imagery functioned as a symbolic medium through which concepts of power, prestige, prosperity, and cultural identity were communicated. The prominence of animal representations on the stone toilet trays also reflects the multicultural environment of ancient Taxila. Their iconographic repertoire reveals the interaction of indigenous Gandharan traditions with artistic influences from Central Asia, Iran, and the Hellenistic world, resulting in a distinctive visual tradition that characterizes Indo-Scythian material culture. Consequently, these artifacts extend beyond their practical function as objects of personal use and emerge as important archaeological evidence for understanding the artistic achievements, symbolic systems, and cultural interactions that shaped the visual culture of the Indo-Scythians in ancient Gandhara.

Animal representations on the stone toilet trays of Taxila constitute one of the most distinctive features of Indo-Scythian material culture. Their incorporation into objects of everyday use demonstrates the close relationship between artistic expression and daily life, revealing how functional artifacts could also communicate ideas of identity, belief, and status. Archaeological evidence from Sirkap indicates that the iconographic repertoire of stone toilet trays evolved in response to the political and cultural changes that shaped Gandhara). The earliest examples, generally assigned to the Indo-Greek period, are dominated by Hellenistic artistic conventions, including mythological narratives, human figures, and naturalistic compositions. During the Indo-Scythian period, however, a marked shift occurred in the decorative program, with animal imagery assuming a more prominent role. Representations of lions, horses, deer, birds, and composite creatures frequently occupied the central field of the trays, often accompanied by mounted riders and hunting scenes. This transformation reflects the growing influence of Central Asian artistic traditions while preserving elements of indigenous Gandharan craftsmanship and Hellenistic composition. The execution of these motifs demonstrates the remarkable technical ability of Indo-Scythian artisans. Through carefully controlled relief carving, they rendered anatomical details, muscular forms, posture, and movement with considerable precision, producing compositions that are both dynamic and visually balanced. The quality of the workmanship suggests that animal imagery was not introduced simply to enrich the decorative appearance of the trays but was deliberately employed to communicate ideas that were meaningful within Indo-Scythian society. Among the represented species, the lion occupies a prominent position as a symbol of strength, courage, authority, and royal prestige. Horses, reflecting the nomadic traditions and cavalry-based military organization of the Indo-Scythians, symbolize mobility, power, and economic prosperity. Deer convey concepts of grace, harmony, and the natural environment, whereas birds, including peacocks and swans, evoke beauty, purity, and spiritual ideals. Mythical creatures such as griffins, dragons, and crocodiles further enrich the iconographic repertoire, representing guardianship, supernatural power, and protection.

Collectively, these motifs illustrate how animal imagery functioned as a symbolic medium through which concepts of authority, prosperity, protection, and cultural identity were visually

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communicated. The iconographic diversity preserved on these stone toilet trays also reflects the cosmopolitan character of ancient Taxila. As a major centre of trade and cultural exchange, the city brought together artistic traditions from Gandhara, Central Asia, Iran, the Parthian world, and the Hellenistic Mediterranean. The fusion of these traditions produced a distinctive visual vocabulary in which local artistic conventions were reinterpreted through foreign stylistic influences. The resulting iconography demonstrates the adaptability of Indo-Scythian craftsmen and illustrates the dynamic cultural interactions that shaped the material culture of ancient Gandhara. The study of animal iconography on the stone toilet trays, therefore, contributes significantly to the understanding of Indo-Scythian material culture. These artifacts reveal that animal representations extended beyond decorative ornamentation to serve as powerful cultural symbols embedded within everyday objects. However, by examining their artistic style, symbolic meanings, and archaeological context, the stone toilet trays of Taxila provide valuable evidence for reconstructing the artistic traditions, cultural exchanges, and ideological values that defined Indo-Scythian society in ancient Gandhara.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of animal iconography on the stone toilet trays of Taxila determines that these artifacts occupy a distinctive place within the material culture of the Indo-Scythians. Beyond their practical function, they served as carefully designed objects through which artistic ideas, cultural traditions, and symbolic concepts were expressed. The diversity of animal representations preserved on these trays reflects a sophisticated visual tradition that formed an essential component of everyday material life in ancient Gandhara. The iconographic evidence indicates that the Indo-Scythians did not simply adopt existing artistic conventions but selectively adapted and reinterpreted them within their own cultural framework. The integration of indigenous Gandharan traditions with Hellenistic, Iranian, Central Asian, and Parthian artistic elements produced a distinctive iconographic vocabulary that illustrates the dynamic cultural environment of Taxila. In this context, animal imagery functioned as a medium through which concepts of authority, mobility, protection, prestige, and the relationship between humans and the natural world were visually articulated.

The study also highlights that stone toilet trays constitute an important yet underutilized source for investigating the social and ideological dimensions of Indo-Scythian society. Their iconographic programs reveal aspects of cultural identity that are not always evident from architecture, inscriptions, or coinage alone. As portable objects used in domestic settings, they provide a rare perspective on how symbolic imagery was incorporated into everyday life and how artistic expression extended beyond monumental and religious contexts. From a broader archaeological perspective, the animal motifs preserved on these artifacts contribute to the reconstruction of regional networks of artistic exchange across Gandhara and neighbouring regions. Their stylistic diversity illustrates the movement of ideas, motifs, and craftsmen along the cultural corridors that linked South Asia with Central Asia and the Hellenistic world. Consequently, the study of these objects enhances our understanding of the processes through which visual traditions evolved in response to political change and intercultural contact. The stone toilet trays of Taxila, therefore, represent more than finely carved archaeological objects; they are enduring records of Indo-Scythian material culture that preserve evidence of artistic innovation, technological expertise, and symbolic communication. Future comparative studies incorporating similar artifacts from Gandhara and adjacent regions may further clarify the development of animal iconography and its role in shaping the cultural identity of the Indo-Scythians, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the artistic heritage of ancient Gandhara.

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Pl. 1. Winged hippocamp depicted on a stone toilet tray, Period IV, Sirkap, Taxila, Indo-Scythian period (1st century BCE -1st century CE) (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).

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Pl. 2. Winged hippocamp depicted on a stone toilet tray, Sirkap, Taxila, Indo-Scythian period (1st century BCE -1st century CE) (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).



Pl. 3. Winged hippocamp with a body decorated in overlapping scales, depicted on a stone toilet tray, Sirkap, Taxila, Indo-Scythian period (1st century BCE–1st century CE) (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).

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Pl. 4. Micaceous steatite toilet tray, Period IV, Sirkap, Taxila, Indo-Scythian period (1st century BCE–1st century CE) (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).



Pl. 5. Stone toilet tray depicting a hippocamp (mythical sea creature), Period IV, Sirkap, Taxila, Indo-Scythian period (1st century BCE–1st century CE) (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).

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Pl. 6. Stone toilet tray depicting two horses, Period IV, Sirkap, Taxila, Indo-Scythian period (1st century BCE–1st century CE) (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).



Pl. 7: Depiction of a semi-nude female figure accompanied by a child riding a hippocamp (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).

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Pl. 8: Winged hippocamp depicted on a stone toilet tray from Sirkap (after Dar, 1984; Francfort, 1979).