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THE KURAIZ-TIRAH RELIQUARY ASSEMBLAGE: A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF A KUSHAN-PERIOD BUDDHIST RELIC DEPOSIT FROM THE TIRAH VALLEY, NORTHWESTERN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This article presents a preliminary documentation and contextual study of the Kuraiz-Tirah relic casket assemblage, recovered from a disturbed stupa chamber in the Tirah Valley, District Khyber, northwestern Pakistan. The study is based on available photographic and video records of the chamber, the recovery position of the objects, the opening sequence, and the nested reliquary contents. The assemblage includes a stupa-shaped reliquary with an inscription around the basal register, a large circular lidded relic casket, an amber/white crystal reliquary with a crystal lid, a small gold relic casket, ash material, a gold coin of Kanishka II, and a decorated bronze cylindrical reliquary with figural panels and a stepped pinnacle.The photographic record indicates that the principal objects were found together inside a prepared chamber after the removal of covering slabs or layers. The stupa-shaped reliquary functioned as an architectural outer container for a nested deposit, while the circular lidded casket and crystal reliquary represent successive stages of sacred containment. The bronze cylindrical casket preserves a complex figural program, including a seated Buddha in abhaya mudrā and associated figures identified in the photographic record as Brahma and Indra, together with other relief panels that may reflect the wider Kushan religious and iconographic vocabulary.Because the assemblage was not recovered through controlled excavation and the objects are not presently available for direct examination, all conclusions remain provisional. Nevertheless, the combination of chamber context, stupa-shaped form, inscriptional band, nested crystal and gold reliquaries, ash material, Kushan coinage, and figural bronze casket suggests that the Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage may represent one of the most important newly documented Buddhist reliquary deposits from the Khyber–Tirah frontier. If confirmed through epigraphic, and scientific study, it may significantly expand the known geography of Kushan-period Buddhist relic practice in Gandhara.

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhist reliquaries are among the most important archaeological documents of Gandhara. They are not merely containers for sacred substances; they are ritual objects that preserve evidence of devotion, patronage, sacred geography, chronology, artistic exchange, and religious ideology. Major reliquary discoveries such as the Bimaran casket from the Jalalabad region and the Kanishka reliquary from Shah-ji-ki-Dheri near Peshawar have played a central role in discussions of early Buddhist image-making, Kushan patronage, and the spread of relic cults across the northwestern subcontinent. Yet the frontier valleys adjoining the Khyber Pass, including the Tirah region, remain far less represented in the archaeological literature of Gandharan Buddhism.

The reported discovery of the Kuraiz-Tirah relic casket assemblage therefore deserves close scholarly attention. The Khyber-Tirah zone has often been viewed primarily as a corridor of movement between Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Peshawar basin. Such a view is historically valid but incomplete. Frontier corridors could also contain ritual deposits, sacred places, local patrons, and communities participating in wider religious networks. If the Kuraiz assemblage is correctly associated with a Kushan-period Buddhist deposit, it suggests that Tirah was not merely crossed by Buddhist objects and ideas, but may also have contained sites of relic veneration and sacred deposition.

The present article develops the author's earlier discussion of the Kuraiz-Tirah relic casket in his doctoral thesis, The Cultural Profile of District Khyber (Pakistan): In the Light of Recent Archaeological Discoveries (Afridi, 2026), into a focused preliminary research article. The study relies on photographic and video documentation of the recovery context, opening sequence, nested reliquary system, associated contents, and decorated bronze casket. The accompanying photographic catalogue distinguishes between original recovery photographs, which preserve primary evidence of position and condition, and publication-prepared images, which are used only to clarify object form and iconographic details. Original photographs should therefore remain the evidentiary foundation of the article, while digitally prepared plates must be captioned transparently.

The article proceeds with necessary caution. The assemblage was recovered from a vandalized or disturbed stupa chamber rather than through controlled archaeological excavation. The objects are not currently available for direct physical examination; therefore, dimensions, material identifications, inscriptions, and residue analysis require future verification, while the associated gold coin has been securely identified as an issue of Kanishka II. The original stupa superstructure was not photographed, although the chamber, its covering layers, the position of the objects, and the subsequent opening of the caskets are preserved in the visual record. The purpose of this article is therefore not to present a final excavation report, but to document, analyze, and contextualize the evidence that survives.

The main argument is that the Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage represents a structured Buddhist reliquary deposit, not a loose group of isolated objects. Its importance lies in the combined evidence of the chamber context, the stupa-shaped reliquary with inscription, the nested circular, crystal, and gold containers, the ash material, the Kanishka II gold coin, and the bronze figural casket. Together these features place the assemblage within the broader Gandharan tradition of relic deposition while also extending attention to a frontier landscape that has rarely occupied a central place in studies of Buddhist material culture.

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2 Description of the Relic Caskets and Iconographic-Typological Analysis

2.1 The stupa chamber and recovery position

The available recovery photographs provide crucial evidence for the depositional position of the assemblage. One image records the chamber during opening, when an upper covering had already been removed and an unknown person appears to be removing or lifting a second internal cover. This stage is significant because it suggests that the reliquary deposit was protected by more than one covering layer. The presence of such covering elements supports the interpretation that the objects were concealed in a prepared relic chamber rather than lying casually in disturbed soil.

A second contextual photograph shows the opened chamber with the relic objects visible at its base. The chamber is rectangular or square-cut, with compact sides and a lower inner compartment. Within this lower area, the miniature stupa-shaped reliquary, the bronze figural casket, and associated chatri or umbrella elements are visible. The objects appear to have been placed together in the same chamber. A larger chatri is to be associated with the miniature stupa-shaped reliquary, while a smaller partly visible chatri likely belonged to the smaller inner relic casket. Although the chamber was exposed through disturbance and not through scientific excavation, the photographs are valuable because they preserve the spatial association of the principal objects.

The chamber evidence is therefore essential to the article. It shows that the assemblage should be interpreted as a structured deposit rather than as a set of unrelated antiquities. The sequence visible in the photographs may be summarized as follows: first, the stupa chamber was opened after the removal of an upper cover; second, a second internal cover or layer was removed; third, the principal objects became visible at the base of the chamber; fourth, the miniature stupa reliquary, bronze casket, and chatri elements were recovered; and fifth, the inner containers were opened, revealing further nested relic caskets and associated contents.

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Plate 1. Chamber during opening.



Plate 2. Objects in situ.

Figure 1. Stupa relic chamber and recovery context. Left: chamber during opening, with covering layer being removed. Right: opened chamber showing relic objects in situ, including the miniature stupa-shaped reliquary, bronze casket, and associated chatri elements. Original recovery photographs.

2.2 The miniature stupa-shaped reliquary

Among the objects recovered from the chamber, the miniature stupa-shaped reliquary is the most important architectural component. It is fashioned as a portable stupa, with a rounded anda-like dome, cylindrical lower drum, circular base, and crowning chatri or umbrella finial. The dome preserves incised divisions that may represent stylized architectural or lotus-petal treatment. Around the lower basal register is a circumferential inscription band. The inscription is not yet read, but its presence is of major importance, since Gandhāran relic inscriptions generally follow a recognizable dedicatory formula, often recording a date, the name of one or more donors, the act of establishing the relics, and the relic itself; optional elements may include a place name, persons in whose honor the establishment was made, and expressions of a wish for the attainment of nirvāṇa on behalf of the donor or, occasionally, all beings (Baums, 2018, p. 54).

The form of this object is significant. It does not merely imitate a stūpa for decoration; rather, it transforms the architectural form of the stūpa into a reliquary container. This reduction of sacred architecture into miniature form is well attested in Gandhāran relic practice, where reliquaries were fashioned in the form of miniature stūpas and their hollow architectural components served as receptacles for relics (Lerner & Kossak, 1991, pp. 74-75; Cribb, 2018, pp. 60-61). The stūpa-shaped reliquary thus functions simultaneously as container and monument: it houses the sacred deposit while reproducing, at miniature scale, the architectural form associated with relic veneration. The Kuraiz example may therefore be placed provisionally within the Gandhāran typological

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tradition of stūpa-shaped reliquaries and miniature sacred monuments.

The inscriptional band increases the significance of the object, but caution is necessary. Until the inscription is documented through close-up photography, raking light, RTI imaging, digital tracing, sign-by-sign reading, transliteration, translation, and specialist epigraphic study, it cannot be used as secure evidence for donor identity or date. In the present article it should be described as a visible circumferential inscription around the basal register, pending full reading.



Plate 3. Original recovery view.



Plate 3a. Second original view.

Figure 2. Miniature stupa-shaped reliquary on circular inscribed base, shown in original recovery photographs from two angles. The domical body, upper pinnacle/chatri, circular base, surface deposits, and basal inscription band are visible.

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Figure 3. Miniature Stupa-shaped reliquary prepared for publication clarity. Digitally prepared from original recovery photograph.

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2.3 Nested contents of the miniature Stupa-shaped reliquary

The opening sequence indicates that the miniature stupa-shaped reliquary contained a smaller circular relic casket. This circular casket is visible in photographs from different angles and is a rounded, lidded container with a raised central knob and incised concentric lines. The surface is grey to bluish-grey, with deposits and traces of wear. Its form suggests a secondary reliquary container placed within the larger stupa-shaped casing.

The circular relic casket contained ash material and a gold dinar of Kanishka II. The coin appears to correspond closely to the Kanishka II subsidiary-gold-mint Oēsho type classified by Cribb and Bracey as Series G.G2-i. Such representations reflect the broader Kushan practice of incorporating multiple religious traditions and divine figures within imperial visual culture (Rosenfield, 1967). On the obverse, the crowned and diademed king stands facing, holding a trident and sacrificing at an altar at the left; a second trident above the altar. The Bactrian legend reads in part ϸAONANOϸAO KA ... NηϸKO KOϸANO, with additional Brahmi letters vi at the right and tha between the legs, and Kharoshthi pa at the left. On the reverse, two-armed Oēsho stands facing, holding a trident and diadem, with a bull behind; the Bactrian legend OηϸO appears at the right, with additional tha above and the tamgha at the left (Cribb & Bracey, 2025, vol. 2, pp. 651-652). The coin was previously recorded in the author's doctoral thesis (Afridi, 2026). This association is one of the most important chronological and ritual elements of the assemblage. The ash suggests relic contents, while the coin provides a chronological marker for the sealing or use of the deposit.

Inside the circular casket was a further inner reliquary made of amber/white crystal or rock crystal, provided with a lid of the same material. The photographic record shows this crystal reliquary inside a grey bowl-like or circular outer container, both in closed and partly opened views. The crystal container has a small lid shaped in a Buddhist chatri-like form. The use of crystal is ritually meaningful, since translucent and precious materials frequently functioned as inner containers in Buddhist relic deposits, marking the transition from outer architectural casing to the more sacred inner core.

Within the crystal reliquary was a still smaller gold relic casket. This innermost gold container represents the culminating stage of the nested deposit. The sequence from stupa-shaped casing to circular casket, from circular casket to crystal reliquary, and from crystal reliquary to gold casket demonstrates a hierarchy of sacred containment. Each inner layer increases the value, protection, and ritual intensity of the deposit.

The nested arrangement may therefore be reconstructed as follows: the miniature stupa-shaped reliquary contained the circular lidded casket; the circular casket contained ash material, the Kanishka II gold coin, and the crystal reliquary; the crystal reliquary contained the small gold casket. This sequence is crucial because it demonstrates that the Kuraiz material follows a structured Buddhist logic of relic protection and sacred enclosure.

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Plate 5.1. Close-up top/oblique view.



Plate 5.2. Hand-held top view.

Figure 4. Large circular lidded relic casket from the nested deposit, shown in original recovery photographs. The rounded body, central raised lid knob, concentric incised lines, and surface deposits are visible.



Plate 5. Circular casket.



Plate 5a. Comparative prepared view with tiered element.

Figure 5. Large circular lidded relic casket and associated stacked ribbed/chatri-like element. Digitally prepared views used for form and proportional clarity.

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Plate 5b.1. Original recovery view.



Plate 5b. Publication-prepared view.

Figure 6. Stacked ribbed object or chatri-like casket element with multiple projecting circular tiers. Original and publication-prepared views.



Plate 5c.1. Crystal reliquary closed.



Plate 5d.1. Crystal reliquary opened.

Figure 7. Amber/white crystal reliquary placed within a grey outer container, shown in original recovery views: closed and partly opened.

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Plate 5c. Prepared closed view.



Plate 5d. Prepared open view.

Figure 8. Amber/white crystal reliquary inside the grey outer container, digitally prepared for publication clarity while retaining original colour relationships and deposits.



Plate 5e.1. Original setting.



Plate 5e. Prepared view.

Figure 9. Amber/white crystal reliquary inside the grey outer container, original contextual view and publication-prepared view.

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Obverse. Reverse.

Figure 10. Gold dinar of Kanishka II, associated with the relic deposit. Obverse: crowned and diademed king standing, holding a trident and sacrificing at an altar; Bactrian legend and additional Brahmi/Kharoshthi letters. Reverse: Oēsho standing with trident and diadem, bull behind, Bactrian legend OηþO and tamgha. Comparative reference: Cribb & Bracey, 2025, vol. 2, pp. 651-652, Series G.G2-i; previously recorded in Afridi, 2026.

2.4 The Bronze Reliquary

The second major object from the chamber is the decorated gilt-bronze or gilded bronze cylindrical reliquary. It has a cylindrical body, broad upper rim, raised lid, central stepped pinnacle, and relief panels framed within arched architectural settings. Its surface is covered with green patina, corrosion, and mineral accretions, but the available images preserve enough detail to show that it was a carefully designed figural casket.

The lid and upper surface are important for understanding the object's form. The top includes a central stepped knob or pinnacle with three visible chatris, while the upper surface of the lid preserves incised or relief ornamentation of seven lotus petals. The yashti/mast reinforces the architectural symbolism of the casket, making the object resemble a miniature sacred structure rather than a plain container. The oblique view allows the design of the lid and central knob to be seen clearly.

The casket is decorated with high-relief figural panels arranged within arched architectural niches, or caitya-arch frames, reflecting the Greco-Roman architectural vocabulary often visible in Gandharan art. The principal image shows the seated Buddha with a halo behind his head, wearing a light draped robe and making abhaya mudrā with his right hand. The figure also wears a distinctive formal headdress which may be compared, cautiously, with the crenellated crown and prominent striated globe of the fourth-century Sasanian silver royal head in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an object traditionally associated with, or dated to the reign of, Shapur II (Harper, 1966, pp. 137-146). The Buddha is flanked by the Indian deities Brahmā and Śakra/Indra, forming a repeated iconographic group. The presence of Buddhist, Iranian and Indian visual elements is consistent with the wider religious and artistic plurality of Kushan-period visual culture (Rosenfield, 1967). The decorative element consisted of five high-relief figures: two corresponding groups centred on the Buddha with Brahmā and Indra, together with two additional

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figures that may represent devotees or divine attendants.

The figural programme of the bronze casket is especially significant. One panel shows a seated Buddha in abhaya mudrā beneath an arched frame. The figure is framed by flanking architectural elements, including columns or pilasters, and seated on a raised base. The gesture of the raised hand, together with the seated posture and arched niche, supports the identification of the central figure as a Buddhist sacred image. Because the original close-up photograph preserves corrosion and damage, both the original image and a publication-prepared version should be shown: the former as primary evidence, the latter for visual clarity.

Additional panels show attendant or deity figures associated with the Buddha. The photographic catalogue identifies one figure to the left of the Buddha as Brahmā, shown in profile and facing the Buddha in a reverential pose. He appears as a haloed ascetic, holding a water pot or kamandalu in his left hand, wearing clothing comparable to that of Indra, and raising his right hand. Another figure to the right is identified as Indra, likewise shown in profile and facing the Buddha. This arrangement recalls a well-known Gandhāran iconographic grouping in which the Buddha is flanked by Brahmā and Indra, as interpreted on the Bimaran reliquary, where the group has been associated with the Buddha's descent from Trāyastriṃśa heaven (Cribb, 2017, pp. 77-78).

Another relief panel shows a standing or divine figure, possibly a solar deity or a figure related to Miiro/Mithra-type imagery. This identification should remain provisional. Kushan visual culture often combined Buddhist, Iranian, Indian, and Hellenistic divine imagery, especially in coinage and religious art. If the panel does reflect a solar or Iranian deity, it would not contradict the Buddhist function of the casket; rather, it would place the object within the wider religious plurality of the Kushan world. However, the safest formulation is that the panel shows a relief figure beneath an arched frame whose precise identification remains open pending specialist iconographic study and clearer high-resolution close-up photographs.

In each spandrel, or space between two arches, is depicted a spread-winged bird, with the plumage rendered in fine grooves; the adjacent birds appear to face one another in paired compositions. The placement of birds between the arches closely recalls the spread-winged bird motif on the Bimaran reliquary, while paired birds are also documented in comparable Gandhāran architectural reliefs from Taxila Kalawan (Cribb, 2018, p. 59).

Typologically, the bronze casket belongs to the tradition of decorated Gandharan reliquaries in which sacred figures are set within architectural frames. Its arched niches, columns, figural reliefs, lid, and pinnacle transform the casket into a miniature sacred structure. In this respect, it complements the stupa-shaped stone reliquary: one object miniaturizes the stupa architecturally, while the other presents a figural sacred program on the surface of a cylindrical reliquary container.

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Plate 6.1. oblique view.



Plate 6.2. frontal view.



Plate 6.3. Original recovery view.

Figure 11. Decorated bronze cylindrical reliquary with lid, stepped pinnacle, green patinated surface, and figural relief panels beneath arched architectural frames. Prepared views are shown with the original recovery photograph for comparison.



Plate 6.6. Original detail.



Plate 6.7. Publication-prepared detail.

Figure 12. Lid and upper surface of the decorated bronze reliquary, showing the central knob/pinnacle, circular rim, and seven lotus petal ornamentation.

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Plate 6.8. Original close-up.



Plate 6.9. Prepared close-up.

Figure 13. Seated Buddha in abhaya mudra on the decorated bronze reliquary, framed by an arched niche and flanking columns. Original and publication-prepared close-up views.



Plate 6.10. Brahma, original.



Plate 6.11. Brahma, prepared.



Plate 6.12. Indra, original.

Figure 14. Attendant/deity panels associated with the Buddha panel. Left and centre: figure identified in the photographic catalogue as Brahma toward the left of the Buddha. Right: figure identified as Indra toward the right of the Buddha. Identifications remain subject to further specialist study.

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Plate 6.4. Damaged relief panel.



Plate 6.5. solar/Miiro-related figure.

Figure 15. Additional relief panels on the decorated bronze reliquary. Plate 6.5 has been provisionally associated with solar or Miiro/Mithra-related imagery, but the identification remains cautious pending comparative iconographic study.

2.5 Iconographic and typological interpretation

The Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage combines three interrelated types of evidence: architectural form, nested containment, and figural iconography. The stupa-shaped reliquary expresses the architectural symbolism of the Buddhist monument. The nested circular, crystal, and gold caskets express the ritual logic of sacred containment. The bronze casket expresses Buddhist iconography through the seated Buddha and attendant figures, while also possibly reflecting the broader visual vocabulary of the Kushan world.

The nested sequence is particularly important. Buddhist relic deposits frequently use a hierarchy of containers, moving from outer stone or architectural forms to inner precious materials such as crystal and gold. Such a sequence is not accidental. It establishes increasing levels of sanctity, protection, and ritual value as one moves inward toward the relic material. The Kuraiz assemblage follows this logic: chamber, stupa-shaped reliquary, circular casket, crystal reliquary, gold casket, ash contents, and coin.

The iconography of the bronze casket strengthens the Buddhist interpretation. The seated Buddha in abhaya mudrā, the figures identified as Brahma and Indra, the arched architectural frames, and the upper mast together suggest a reliquary object designed within the Gandharan-Kushan religious world. The possible presence of a solar or Miiro/Mithra-related figure would further situate the object within the plural visual culture of the Kushan period, but this identification should remain secondary and provisional until clearer study is possible.

The Kanishka II gold coin provides the main chronological anchor, but it must be handled carefully. Its documented association with the nested deposit provides a terminus post quem for the sealing of the inner deposit. It does not

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automatically date the manufacture of every container, nor does it prove the date of the original stupa structure. The correct formulation is that the assemblage may be provisionally assigned to the Kushan period on the combined basis of coin association, Gandharan reliquary typology, stupa-shaped form, and figural bronze iconography.

3 Comparison with Major Gandhāran Reliquary Traditions

The Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage should be considered within the broader Buddhist and Gandhāran traditions of relic deposition, but the comparison must remain precise and cautious. Buddhist relics occupied a central place in devotional practice, were closely associated with stūpas and sacred landscapes, and could be housed in nested reliquaries made from materials such as stone, crystal and precious metal (Skilling, 2018, p. 4, pp. 8-9; Baums, 2018, pp. 53-54). Against this broader background, the reported Kuraiz assemblage is notable for combining a prepared chamber, stūpa-shaped reliquary, nested circular, crystal and gold containers, an inscriptional band, associated coinage and a decorated bronze casket. These latter features derive from the Kuraiz recovery documentation itself and should not be attributed to the comparative sources. If authenticated, their combination may indicate the extension of established Gandhāran relic practices into the Tirah frontier.

The Bimaran casket is relevant because of its figural Buddhist imagery and precious reliquary character. Like Bimaran, the Kuraiz bronze casket presents sacred figures within an ornamental architectural framework. However, the material, form, and context differ. Bimaran is famous for its gold and garnet workmanship, while the Kuraiz assemblage combines stone or limestone, bronze, crystal, and gold in a nested sequence. The comparison is therefore not one of direct equivalence, but of shared reliquary logic: precious containment, figural imagery, and Buddhist ritual purpose (Cribb, 2017, pp. 58-59, 78-79; Cribb, 2018, pp. 53-54).

The Shah-ji-ki-Dheri or Kanishka reliquary from Peshawar provides an even closer conceptual comparison because it connects Buddhist relic deposition with Kushan political and religious culture. The Kuraiz assemblage should be discussed in relation to this tradition because of the associated Kanishka II gold coin, the figural bronze reliquary, and the potential inscriptional evidence. The Kuraiz casket does not duplicate the Shah-ji-ki-Dheri reliquary, but both may be considered within the broader context in which relic deposition articulated Buddhist devotion, sacred space, patronage, and wider political and social networks in Gandhara and the Kushan world (Errington & Falk, 2002, pp. 101-110; Baums, 2012, pp. 227-233).

Taxila provides a useful comparison for relic-chamber contexts. Sehrai and Jawad note that the main stūpa at Kalawan, Taxila, contained a large relic chamber that was periodically accessible from above (2016, p. 28). More generally, Gandhāran stone reliquaries frequently enclosed smaller containers made of crystal or precious metal, containing the relics and associated donative objects (Baums, 2018, p. 54), while nested reliquaries are well attested more broadly in the archaeological and textual traditions of Buddhist relic deposition (Skilling, 2018, pp. 8-9). The Kuraiz sequence of a stūpa-shaped outer container, circular casket, crystal reliquary, and gold casket may therefore be understood within this broader tradition of successive sacred containment. The comparison with Taxila should, however, remain contextual and typological, since the sources cited here do not establish an exact Taxila parallel for the particular nested sequence documented at Kuraiz.

Manikyala provides an especially useful structural comparison for the Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage. The relic deposits of the Great Stupa included chambered deposits with successive reliquary containers, precious inner receptacles, and associated Kushan coinage, including a gold issue of Huvishka (Mitra, 1971, p. 128; Baums, 2012, p. 249). This combination demonstrates that successive sacred containment and the deposition

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of Kushan coins within reliquary contexts were established practices in Gandhāra. The comparison with Kuraiz is therefore significant not because the two deposits are identical, but because both combine nested reliquaries, precious materials, and numismatic evidence within structured relic deposits. The inscribed reliquaries from Bajaur, particularly those associated with Indravarman and Ramaka, provide an additional geographical comparison by documenting named patronage, relic establishment, and inscriptional practice in a northwestern setting beyond the principal urban centres of Gandhāra (Baums, 2012, pp. 208, 215; Lerner & Kossak, 1991, p. 76). Together, Manikyala and Bajaur strengthen the interpretation of Kuraiz as part of a wider but regionally varied Gandhāran tradition of relic establishment.

Butkara and the Swat valley provide useful comparisons because they demonstrate Buddhist activity in valley landscapes outside the major urban centers of Gandhara. Tirah, like Swat, is a mountainous frontier region, though the archaeological documentation of Buddhist sites in Tirah is much thinner. If the Kuraiz assemblage is confirmed, it would suggest that relic veneration extended into another valley frontier, thereby broadening the sacred geography of Gandharan Buddhism (Sehrai & Jawad, 2016, pp. 27-29; Errington & Falk, 2002, p. 109).

Other inscribed Gandhāran reliquaries are relevant for interpreting the basal inscription on the stūpa-shaped reliquary. Gandhāran relic inscriptions generally follow a recognizable dedicatory formula, often recording a date, the name of one or more donors, the act of establishing the relics, and the relic itself. Optional elements may include a place name, persons in whose honor the establishment was made, and expressions of a wish for the attainment of nirvāṇa on behalf of the donor or, occasionally, all beings (Baums, 2018, p. 54). A full reading of the Kuraiz inscription may therefore clarify the donor, date, purpose, dedicatory formula, and perhaps the social setting of the deposit. Until such a reading is undertaken, however, the inscription should be treated as visible but unread epigraphic evidence.

The comparative significance of the Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage may be summarized through five features: first, the presence of a prepared chamber; second, the use of a stupa-shaped reliquary with inscription; third, the nested sequence of circular, crystal, and gold containers; fourth, the association with a Kanishka II gold coin; and fifth, the decorated bronze casket with Buddhist and possibly Kushan-related figural imagery. This combination makes the assemblage a potentially important addition to the Gandharan reliquary corpus (Baums, 2018, p. 54; Cribb, 2017, pp. 78-81; Errington & Falk, 2002, pp. 101-110).

Table 1. Comparative position of the Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage within major Gandharan reliquary traditions.

Assemblage / Site	Principal Features	Comparative Significance for Kuraiz-Tirah
Bimaran reliquary	Precious-metal figural reliquary; Buddha with associated deities; architectural framing; spread-winged bird motifs; associated coinage	Important iconographic comparison for the Kuraiz bronze casket, particularly the Buddha–Brahmā–Indra grouping, architectural framing, and bird motifs. The material, chronology, and depositional context, however, differ substantially.
Shah-ji-ki-Dheri / Kanishka reliquary, Peshawar	Kushan-period Buddhist relic deposit; inscriptional evidence; royal/political associations; Buddha with Brahmā and Indra	Provides a major conceptual parallel for the relationship between Buddhist relic deposition, Kushan political-religious culture, patronage, and sacred geography.

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Manikyala reliquary deposits	Prepared relic chambers; nested reliquaries; precious inner containers; associated Kushan coinage, including gold coinage	One of the strongest structural comparisons for Kuraiz because it demonstrates the combination of nested sacred containment, precious inner reliquaries, and Kushan coin association within a prepared relic deposit.
Bajaur reliquaries, including the Indravarman and Ramaka deposits	Inscribed reliquaries; named donors; relic establishment; dated or historically anchored frontier deposits	Important for demonstrating that sophisticated Buddhist relic deposition, inscriptional patronage, and sacred investment also occurred in northwestern frontier landscapes beyond the principal urban centres of Gandhāra.
Taxila / Kalawan	Large relic-chamber context; evidence for Gandhāran reliquary practice; use of inner precious-material containers	Useful contextual comparison for chambered relic deposition and successive containment, but not an exact parallel for the specific Kuraiz nested sequence.
Butkara / Swat	Buddhist ritual activity in mountainous valley landscapes; reliquary and monastic traditions outside the major urban centres	Supports the interpretation that Buddhist sacred activity extended into mountainous and valley environments beyond Peshawar and Taxila.
Other Gandhāran inscribed reliquaries	Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions; donor names; dates; dedicatory formulae; relic establishment	Essential comparative material for the future reading of the basal inscription on the Kuraiz stūpa-shaped reliquary and for reconstructing its donor, date, purpose, and social context.
Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage	Prepared chamber; inscribed stūpa-shaped reliquary; nested circular, crystal and gold containers; ash relic material; confirmed Kanishka II gold dinar; decorated bronze figural reliquary	Combines architectural, inscriptional, numismatic, precious-material, and figural evidence in a single assemblage and potentially extends the documented geography of later-Kushan Buddhist relic practice into the Tirah frontier.

4 Dating of the Reliquary

The dating of the Kuraiz-Tirah reliquary must be approached through a combination of numismatic, iconographic, and typological evidence. The principal chronological indicator is the gold dinar of Kanishka II recovered from the nested relic deposit. The coin corresponds to the Kanishka II subsidiary-gold-mint Oēsho type classified by Cribb and Bracey as Series G.G2-i. On these dinars, the obverse depicts an armoured and diademed king standing frontally with his head turned to the left, holding a trident in his left hand and making an offering at an altar with his right, while the reverse depicts Oēsho standing before a bull, holding a trident and diadem (Cribb & Bracey, 2025, vol. 2, pp. 651-652). The coin was previously recorded in the author's doctoral thesis (Afridi, 2026). As the coin is securely identified as an issue of Kanishka II, it provides a firm *terminus post quem* for the deposition of the assemblage. Cribb and Bracey's revised chronology places the reign of Kanishka II at approximately c. AD 230-246 (2025, vol. 1, pp. 20-21); accordingly, the associated relic deposit cannot have been sealed before the issue and circulation of the coin, although the coin does not by itself establish the exact date of deposition.

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The coin provides a terminus post quem for the sealing of the inner relic deposit, but it does not by itself date the manufacture of the stupa-shaped reliquary, the circular casket, the crystal container, or the bronze figural casket. Gandharan reliquary studies show that objects could be reused, redeposited, or finally sealed later than their manufacture; coin evidence should therefore serve as a chronological anchor for the deposit rather than as an automatic date for every associated object (Cribb, 2017, p. 79; Errington & Falk, 2002, pp. 109-110).

The iconography of the bronze casket supports a Kushan-period or late Kushan attribution. The seated Buddha in abhaya mudrā, with a formal headdress possibly recalling Iranian or Kushano-Sasanian visual conventions, the attendant figures Brahmā and Indra/Śakra, the arched architectural niches, and the possible solar or Miiro/Mithra-related figure belong to the wider Gandharan-Kushan visual language. This is significant because figural Buddhist reliquaries such as the Bimaran casket and the Shah-ji-ki-Dheri/Kanishka reliquary have long been central to discussions of the chronology of anthropomorphic Buddha imagery and Kushan-period Buddhist art. In the Bimaran case, the association of coins with the relic deposit has been heavily debated, and recent research has shown that such numismatic evidence must be handled cautiously rather than used mechanically as a direct date for the reliquary itself (Cribb, 2017, pp. 79-80; Errington & Falk, 2002, pp. 102-105).

The Kuraiz evidence differs from the Bimaran problem in one important respect. The Kuraiz coin is not an Azes or posthumous Azes issue connected with the debated pre-Kanishkan emergence of the Buddha image, but is an issue of Kaniṣka II. Therefore, the Kuraiz bronze casket should not be presented as an unprecedented early anthropomorphic Buddha image. Rather, it should be understood as part of a later Kushan or Kushan-related phase in which anthropomorphic Buddha imagery, divine attendants, architectural framing, and syncretic religious motifs were already established elements of Gandharan visual culture.

On present evidence, the Kuraiz-Tirah reliquary assemblage may be provisionally assigned to a later Kushan-period horizon, with the sealing of the inner relic deposit occurring no earlier than the issue and circulation of the securely identified Kanishka II gold dinar. Cribb and Bracey place the reign of Kanishka II at c. AD 230–246; the coin therefore provides a firm *terminus post quem* for the deposition of the assemblage, although it does not by itself establish the exact date of the final sealing. The manufacture of individual containers may have preceded the final act of deposition. The bronze casket's figural programme, the stupa-shaped reliquary form, the nested sequence of precious containers, and the associated coin all support this broad chronological placement. A more precise date for the final deposition must await the epigraphic reading of the basal inscription, direct material examination of the reliquaries, and scientific analysis of the associated relic contents.

5 Conclusion

The Kuraiz-Tirah relic casket assemblage is a potentially major discovery for the archaeology of Gandharan Buddhism and for the study of Kushan-period frontier landscapes. The available photographic and video record indicates that the objects were recovered from a prepared stupa chamber or reliquary compartment after the removal of covering layers. The visible chamber context, the position of the objects, and the later opening sequence all support the interpretation of the assemblage as a structured Buddhist relic deposit.

The most important component is the stupa-shaped reliquary with a basal inscription band. Its form miniaturizes Buddhist sacred architecture, while its inscription may eventually provide donor, dedicatory, or chronological information. Inside this architectural reliquary system was a nested sequence of containers: a circular lidded relic casket, ash material, a Kanishka II gold coin, an amber/white crystal reliquary with a crystal lid,

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and a small gold relic casket. This hierarchy of containers reflects the Buddhist logic of sacred protection and ritual intensification.

The bronze cylindrical casket adds another major dimension to the assemblage. Its relief panels, arched frames, seated Buddha in abhaya mudrā, associated figures identified as Brahma and Indra, and possible additional Kushan-related imagery place it within the broader visual culture of Gandharan Buddhist reliquary art. The combination of architectural reliquary form, nested contents, precious inner containers, inscription, coinage, and figural bronze decoration makes the Kuraiz assemblage unusually rich.

The historical significance of the find lies in its location. Tirah and the Khyber frontier have often been treated primarily as corridors of movement rather than as landscapes of Buddhist ritual practice. The Kuraiz-Tirah assemblage, if authenticated and properly documented, suggests that Buddhist relic veneration may have extended into this frontier zone during the Kushan period. It therefore has the potential to revise the religious geography of Gandhara by showing that frontier valleys were not merely routes of passage but may also have been sites of sacred deposition and local patronage.

A further concern relates to the post-discovery history and present whereabouts of the assemblage. According to information available to the author, the objects were subsequently transferred through the antiquities trade and are believed to have entered the international market. Their dispersal, if confirmed, represents a serious loss to the archaeological and cultural heritage of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pakistan. The surviving photographic, video, contextual, and numismatic documentation should therefore be preserved as a permanent provenance record capable of assisting the future identification of these objects should they reappear in dealer catalogues, auctions, private collections, museums, or other repositories. Any such identification should be referred to the competent archaeological and heritage authorities for investigation of provenance and legal status and, where warranted under applicable national and international frameworks, for appropriate measures toward recovery and repatriation to Pakistan. Reuniting the assemblage with its place of origin would restore an important component of Pakistan's archaeological heritage and would also make possible the direct scientific, epigraphic, numismatic, and conservation study that is presently unavailable.

The conclusions of this study necessarily remain provisional. The assemblage was recovered from a disturbed rather than scientifically excavated context; the objects are not presently accessible for direct examination; the basal inscription has not yet been deciphered; and no scientific analysis of the materials or associated relic contents has yet been undertaken. These limitations should be acknowledged openly, but they do not diminish the importance of the surviving evidence. Rather, they define the priorities for future research: high-resolution documentation, epigraphic study, specialist numismatic examination, material and residue analysis, conservation assessment, provenance investigation, and coordinated heritage protection. If these steps can be undertaken and the assemblage securely authenticated, the Kuraiz-Tirah reliquary deposit has the potential to become one of the most significant documented Buddhist relic discoveries from the northwestern frontier of Gandhāra.

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