

## 5 The Frieze. The Form

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**Summary** 5.1 The Narrative Images. – 5.2 The Great Central Panel (or False Niche). – 5.3 The Scene.

### 5.1 The Narrative Images

We have yet to go into the sculptural and iconographical aspects of the Frieze. Let us now address these thorny questions.

At the planning stage, the life of the Buddha must have been the theme proposed for the frieze on the monument. This is not to be seen as an obvious choice, considering the nature of the monument. With the choice of the theme itself, we are already looking towards a series of innovations that characterise both the monument and its artistic content.

Important as the theme of biographical narration is, debate on it has, oddly enough, been rather less than one might have expected (certainly less than many minor issues now receiving great attention). This is probably due to the fact that the only complete biographical friezes that have come down to us are those of Loriyan-tangai and Sikri, both on small if not actually miniature stupas. Moreover, on the Loriyan-tangai stupa (Swat-Malakand), the frieze goes only from the Birth to the Renunciation (and is positioned on the podium), while the Sikri frieze (Mardan), which is on the drum, is also devoted to the previous lives of the Buddha; moreover, the panels might have been reassembled in the wrong order (Taddei 1993, 32 fn. 26; see Faccenna 2001, § 3.4). In both cases, however, we are at the end of the first if not well into the second century CE. In both, rather than displaying dynamic movement the narration develops through juxtaposition of scenes with a frontal Buddha, somewhat like the stations of a *via crucis*. Apart from these examples, all the rest, representing the overwhelming majority of the art – among the largest in terms of quantitative production – is accounted for by loose pieces of reliefs mostly of the late-first/second century, detached from the monuments, or portions of figured friezes set on semi-columns or half-pilas-

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ters from small stupas, naturally showing only a selection of biographical scenes. In these fragments, moreover, the linear narrative we would expect to find is often lacking, the static approach noted at Sikri predominating, while lively dynamism only appears in the genre scenes (actors, musicians, dancers, women at a balcony, etc.). I would in fact say that while this novelty is to be seen in Gandhara, and first appeared at Saidu, it is seldom used later, and certainly not with the completeness and magnificence attested at Saidu. Here I am not referring to the sculpturesque production, in stucco of the fourth-fifth century, when replication of the multiple Buddhas predominated, also with doctrinal motivation, nor am I referring to the small and large steles in schist of the third-fourth century, conveying a sense of the Mahayana devotion of bodhisattvas and paradises, which appears to reflect the age of Gandharan art coming towards an end. Rather, I am referring to the production in schist achieved when the diffusion of this art had reached its culmination, beginning to turn into a genre itself. We have no other evidence of great friezes or biographical narratives. This is one of the major elements of Saidu. To our present knowledge, there is no complete biographical figured frieze of the life of the Buddha in Gandhara. But, again, the 'system' is replicated in part, in parts, but never in its entirety.

Saidu artistic production is thus to be placed at an exceptional, fortunate time in relations between art and clients, associated with the apogee of the Oḍiraja, who may perhaps represent themselves in the Frieze. As far as we know, such conditions were never to be repeated on such a scale. After Saidu, the Buddhist monasteries organised themselves in such a way as to acquire an importance independent of the secular powers, to the extent of centralising management of agricultural production and even gaining power as landowners in the cities, where they bought properties, as we have already seen.<sup>1</sup>

From the point of view of secular power, administration of the territory under the Kushans, and also the fact that the latter had chosen as allies 'on the field' the monasteries, with their manifold competences in agronomy, administration, etc., must have left less scope to the local nobles, the landowning powers, who must have seen their power eroded through the progressive transfer of production and properties. In fact, from the beginning of the second century we see an inexorable decline in the number of secular dedicatory inscriptions, with corresponding increase in the inscriptions of subjects affiliated to the Kushans (Baums 2018, 66, tab. 1). Effectively, the Oḍiraja disappears from the historical picture of Swat after Senavarma.

This is also a time (second-third century CE), well documented by urban excavations, that saw an important phase, that archaeologists have defined of 'Indianisation' of the material culture in ceramic forms and techniques, ornaments, etc. (Olivieri, Vidale et al. 2006; Callieri, Olivieri 2020). By contrast, the golden age – in terms of creativity and development – of Buddhist art in Gandhara came when the consolidation of a local culture was at its height, open to the world but with a character of its own (first century BCE–first century CE).

Coming back to the matter of biographical narrative linearity, the scholars who have looked into it have begun with the earliest material of Swat, for it was undoubtedly here that the pattern formed. One of them was Maurizio Taddei, who dedicated two major works to the topic (1993; 1999); I rec-

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of these topics, see Olivieri, Vidale et al. 2006; Olivieri 2012; Filigenzi, Olivieri 2018; Olivieri, Iori 2019; Olivieri 2020. Particularly important is Shaw 2017.

commend them to the reader. Here I will quote him only briefly as a warning against the risk of temptations:

If, however, this form of narrative has no true match in India, it would be futile to seek the model in the Roman-Hellenistic world. It was there, in Gandhāra, the choice was made to entrust the religious message through the dimension of human life. (Taddei 1993, 38)<sup>2</sup>

## 5.2 The Great Central Panel (or False Niche)

At Saidu the biographical narrative is developed through sixty panels, supposing that, as suggested above, there was a central panel or false niche. The 2011 excavation revealed two or possibly three large fragments, which might be surviving parts (with others overlooked in the past) of a large central panel, beginning and end, standing as a caesura in time and the focal centre of the Frieze [pt. XIII].<sup>3</sup>

The presence of a central panel at the top of a stairway, or at any rate at an entrance, represents a further connection with the early Indian tradition,<sup>4</sup> which saw the stupa with its four entrances ideally marked out by four *mahācaitya* – more or less false niches as seen later in representations of Amaravati, each standing for a symbol associated with the Four Miracles (Birth, Enlightenment, Preaching, Death or Extinction) (Bénisti 1960, 78). As Saidu introduced the novelty of a single entrance, determining to which cycle the central figure belonged would be very useful for our purposes. Thanks to the find of fragment SS I 22, we know that this must have depicted a large Buddha seated on a throne with standing figures on either side. Part of this Buddha, (his left knee), the throne and, to the right (for the observer), evidence of a draped figure, are preserved in a large panel fragment. The fragment is 14 cm thick and showed on the lower side at least two parallel tenons (one preserved), and the centre mark, indicated by the guideline corresponding to the centre of the drapery covering the throne. This centre sign is very important since – in the language of the marks used at Saidu – it constitutes clear evidence that it was a panel to be placed at the centre of a symmetrical composition and was made up of a number of elements, since a single slab of those proportions was probably not available. Note the partial conservation of a figure with drapery with crenellated fringe to the left of the seated Buddha. The edge shows a smooth vertical face that was to be set against a side panel. In terms of dimensions, there is only one panel that could be placed beside this fragment (to the right). This is a damaged relief (S 305), which would go well beside the central group with respect to dimensions and figures represented (note the drapery with

<sup>2</sup> “Buddhism was certainly not the only religion that Hellenism had dealings with, and we should perhaps ask ourselves whether it is only a matter of Hellenistic lexicon adapted to Buddhist thought or whether we should speak of a narrative structure that was created by Buddhism in the Northwest regions, which Hellenism, after providing for it the most suitable formal repertory, was able to master and later reflect upon other, more western religious experiences. And this is perhaps the really great innovation brought about by the Buddhist art of Gandhāra” (Taddei 1999, 83).

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the two dozen fragments that may have belonged to the Frieze. These and others will be dealt with by Anna Filigenzi and Antonio Amato.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘early Indian tradition’ is used to refer to the Indian architectural tradition prior to or coeval with Saidu (c. 250 BCE–50 CE).



Figure 20  
SS I 117 (MAIP; photo by Antonio Amato)

crenellated fringe in both).<sup>5</sup> The violent chiselling indicates that in the phases of abandonment (about fourth century CE) it was deliberately damaged. We will be returning to this point when we come to the demolition phases which, we may add here, occurred not only rather early, but almost immediately after the abandonment of the monument.

The outer cornice of the group could have been formed by two Gandharan-Corinthian pilasters (not semi-columns) larger than those of the Frieze (between 80 and 100 cm in height as compared with the roughly 40 cm of the semi-columns; 20 cm in width), with central flutes and Corinthian capitals with central leaf. It was the find of these two pilasters [fig. 20]<sup>6</sup> that suggested to Domenico Faccenna, without any other evidence at the time, the existence of a central group or figured false niche.<sup>7</sup> The maximum preserved width of the fragment with the Buddha enthroned is 62.20 cm, and we can therefore infer that the total width must have been at least 85 cm. The preserved height is 40.30 cm, and proportionally the entire piece must have been 1 m high. The face of the Buddha must have been about 26 cm in height. The faces of the figures gathered to the left and right, which may have belonged to the central group – we have some evidence – do not exceed 13 cm, with the exception of one reaching 17 cm.

<sup>5</sup> The piece was interpreted as the presentation of Yaśodhara to Siddhārta (Faccenna 2001, 138).

<sup>6</sup> Faccenna 1995, 542-3, fig. 263. One of the two pilasters (A 86) was recently inventoried (SS I 117) [fig. 20].

<sup>7</sup> The second stairway that leads to the top of the podium at the top of the first circular storey (not preserved at Saidu), has always implied in all the cases observed the presence of figured work at the centre or a false niche. See the examples in the stupas of Amluk-dara, Tokar-dara (a column stupa) etc., analysed by Elisa Iori (2018).

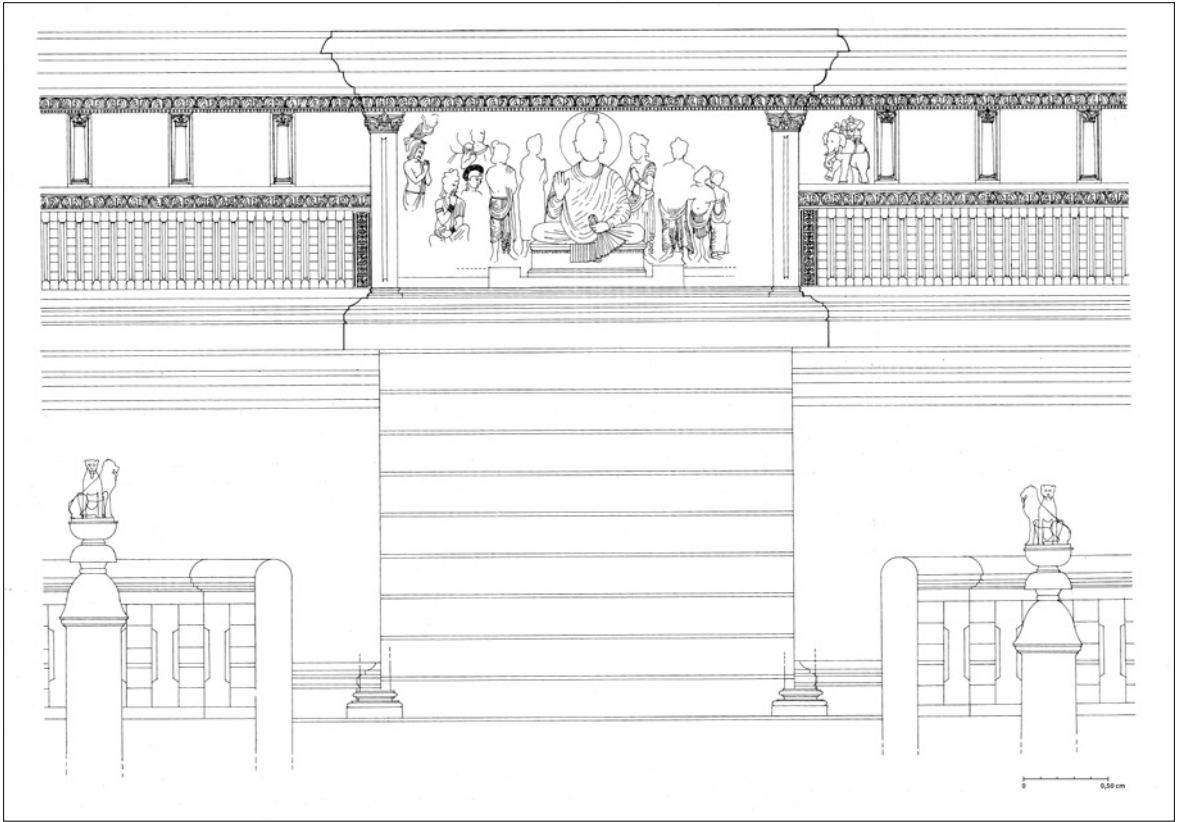


Plate XIII Saidu Sharifi, front view (N) (detail) (MAIP; drawings by Francesco Martore)



Figure 21 SSI 15 (ACT; photo by Edoardo Loliva)

The same excavation sectors that yielded the new fragments of the Frieze [fig. 21]<sup>8</sup> and the large fragment of the seated Buddha also yielded various fragments of heads of men – young and smooth-skinned, old and bearded – and women. Given the sizes of the heads, these fragments cannot have belonged to the panels of the Frieze, nor indeed to any of the monuments at Saidu, but may have belonged to this central panel.<sup>9</sup> Outstanding amongst these figures is an extraordinary female figure with princely robes (SS I 2) and a face rendered so carefully that one cannot help thinking it must have been an actual portrait.

Let us take a look at the fragments we consider here. I will begin by listing those documented from my 2011-14 excavation.

1 Buddha seated on a throne in the form of the podium with smooth plinth and torus base, smooth body, cornice with fillet, cyma reversa, recessed triple fillet, dentils and bars showing lesser height and width;<sup>10</sup> Buddha wearing a cloak (*samghāṭī*) and thus with both shoulders covered. The folds of the outer garment are gathered together in the lap, stretching to the knees on either side, and falling fanwise in the centre, while the inner garment hangs in eleven close-set vertical folds, hanging over the plinth but under the fan-shaped folds. If Buddha is holding the garment with the left hand the right hand was possibly in the teaching gesture (later known as *abhayamudrā*). On the right behind the Buddha is a standing figure with *paridhāna* with crenellated hems (fragment SS I 22) [pl. XIV].

2 A panel with at least three figures facing to the right: at the centre, the right profile of the face of a young woman with short hair over her cheeks, crown-garland with elongated laurel leaves, earrings hanging low; behind, at a lower level we can make out a slightly smaller male figure with turban (type 1 or 2 of Faccenna 1999-2000);<sup>11</sup> above, a figure possibly with a

8 Of these SS I 15 is one of the few (along with S 360? [Faccenna 2001, 235-6]) in which the image of Siddhartha has been preserved (?). In 2001 Faccenna wrote: “Nel fregio di Saidu Sharif I, tra i frammenti rimasti, non ci è conservata la sua immagine” (En. transl.: “In the frieze of Saidu Sharif I, among the remaining fragments, there is no image of him”) (Faccenna 2001, 145) [fig. 21].

9 Faccenna 1995, 543. In any case, the entire reconstruction of the central group is a task assigned to a work group led by Anna Filigenzi with the collaboration of Antonio Amato.

10 On the dentils and bars see below § 9.1.

11 These two types of ‘turbans’, typical of the most influential members of the court, look more like floppy headdresses, held in place by knotted embroidered bands on the forehead, rather than turbans. The difference between the two types depends on the length and elaboration of the upper part. A comparison can be made with the decorated band around the high headdress of the second figure of the prince on the large panel in the Museum of Oriental Art, Turin (IAp/179). Alternatively, one can consider the band as a raised flap. See the example from the inscribed silver pyxis from the time of Vasudeva (third century) (Falk, Sims-Williams 2017). One of the figures, referred to in the inscription as Rām the *hōstīg* (a title of unknown meaning), wears a short, long-sleeved tunic with a girdle and breeches, carries perhaps a thin torc, and carries a long sword with a flat circular pommel. He wears a cap with side flaps folded upwards, which is very similar to the ‘turbans’ of type 1 and 2. The upper part of the chin-bands of soldiers and knights (types 3 and 4 of Faccenna 1999-2000), would also appear to be wrapped around similar headdresses. The chin-bands serve to protect the mouth from dust, e.g. when riding. These headdresses (types 1-4) should be studied with renewed attention. It is not by chance that Faccenna had devoted a short work to them (Faccenna 1999-2000). As for the value of these headdresses in the cultural context of the time and place of the frieze, Faccenna writes: “The use of pre-existing models cannot be ruled out. Yet we have reasons to believe, given the homogeneity of the complex, that if any such use took place, it was confined to the period in which the frieze was executed” (Faccenna 1999-2000, 48 fn. 3). It can be concluded that, just as the armour is the



Figure 22 SSI 155 (MAIP; photo by Antonio Amato)

fly-whisk or whip (a groom?) (fragment SS I 2). The completion of the male figure with turban and the woman is to be found in S 1286 [pls XV-XVII].

The following are pieces excavated in the past but inventoried subsequently, in 2019.

same as the parts of armour from the first century revealed by the excavations (Olivieri 2011b), the headdresses (with torque and swords, etc.) were probably those in use by the nobles and knights of the Odi, later repeated in the Gandharan production dependent on the Frieze, and almost in fashion in the later production also in Swat itself. It should be noted that the tall conical headdresses, absent from the Frieze, are present only in the art of the Kushan period (see for this type of headdress Olivieri, Sinisi 2021; MAO, IAp/179; see later the reliefs of stupa 38 of Saidu that I call the 'Cycle of the Months').





Figure 23 SS I 203 (MAIP; photo by Antonio Amato)

- 3 Face of a young man, right profile, smooth-skinned (fragment SS I 203) (this could be the face of the young man with the horse) [fig. 22].
- 4 Elderly male face in profile on the left, bearded (fragment SS I 203) (belongs to the right-hand side of the false niche) [fig. 23].<sup>12</sup> To these pieces are added others documented and inventoried in the past.
- 5 Face of a woman, almost frontal, turned slightly to the left, with features similar to SS I 2 (fragment S 11; Faccenna, Taddei 1962, pl. CLXXXVIIb).

<sup>12</sup> It will be useful for the reader to compare the Master's art with that of a later production from another great stupa in Swat that is less than half a century later. Compare the 'young' and 'old' of Saidu with the 'young' and 'old' of Amluk-dara, where the verism of the Master's portraits stiffens into the cliché of the ages of the ascetics (we are about 110-120 CE) [figs 24a-b].



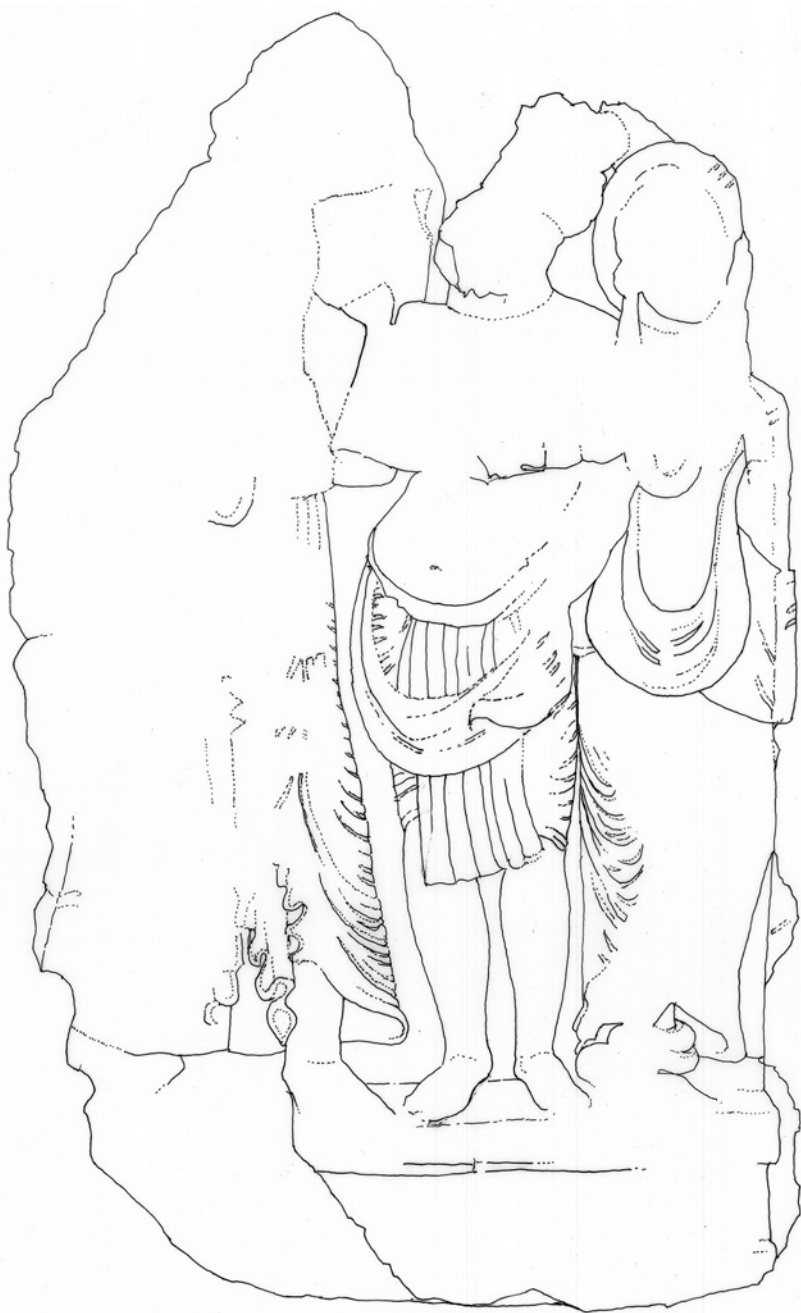
Plate XIV Saidu Sharif I, SS I 22, Buddha, central figure of the false niche (ACT; photo by Edoardo Loliva)



**Plate XV** Saidu Sharif I, SS12, false niche, left side figures (MAIP; photo by Luca M. Olivieri)



**Plate XVI** Saidu Sharif I, SS12, false niche, detail of SS12 (MAIP; photo by Shafiq Ahmad)



0 10 cm

Plate XVII Saidu Sharif I, S 305, false niche, right side figures (MAIP; drawings by Francesco Martore)



Figures 24a AKD 43 (ACT; photos by Edoardo Loliva)

This face is the same size as the other three described above (max. 13 cm) and could belong to one of the lost figures on the left side of the false niche. **6** Brāhma, praying, in profile, with *uttariya* on the left shoulder, *gāndharva* flying above (fragment S 629). The position of the *gāndharva* suggests that it was under the left kalathos of the capital of the left pillar; one can assume that this figure was mirrored by Indra on the opposite side.

**7** Male torso of prince with armilla in decorated bands, short necklace (*torc*) and bracelets with triple or quadruple decorated band, *uttariya*, hand held on an object (the hilt of a sword)<sup>13</sup> (S 1286 \*76b) [fig. 25].<sup>14</sup> One can see a bent right arm with an armilla with a decorated band, the hand perhaps open as a sign of adoration; the left arm bent towards the waist with triple or quadruple band decorated bracelets, in the act of holding the hilt of a sword with a flat circular pommel, which looks very much like the handle of the *akinakes* of the Saka. The man wears a short necklace (*torc*), another Saka element, while the dress is Indian, the *uttariya*, worn with elegance.<sup>15</sup>

**13** On the seat and the position of the arms see S 1246 \*58c-d, and S 1125 \*64a.

**14** I remind the reader that the asterisk \* refers to the corresponding table in Faccenna 2001.

**15** For a complete discussion of *torcs* (including the gold ceremonial girdle of Pattan) and short swords with pommel hilt of Saka milieu, as well as their iconography in the petroglyphs of the



Figures 24b AKD 75 (ACT; photos by Edoardo Loliva)

To the right of the man just behind remains a portion of a female bust with a long necklace; the male figure could be seated as on the example of the large panel B 2816 (Faccenna, Taddei 1962-64, pl. CLXII); the fragment is part of the left panel and could be integrated into SS I 2.

8 Panel (\*77c) with three standing figures (Callieri, Filigenzi 2002, nos. 144, 142). The figure to the left with *saṃghāṭī* with crenellated folds, roughly chiselled, is taller than the other two. He has the same dimensions and clothing as the standing figure on the right of SSI 1 (Faccenna 2001, 138). This panel is part of the right side (for the viewer) of the false niche [fig. 26]. The two figures to the right represent a man with *paridhāna* and *uttariya*, torso bare, and a woman with a long tunic. Both faces are chiselled: the man, with brahmin's hairstyle, looks up towards the Buddha (face in profile to the upper left), the woman, who from the crown appears to be a noblewoman, seems to be looking down, in slight foreshortening.<sup>16</sup> S 305 has a vertical recess on the right (for the viewer), which implies the pres-

Upper Indus, see the posthumous work of Harald Hauptmann (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> This is why the piece was interpreted as the presentation of Yaśodhara to Siddhārta (Faccenna 2001, 138). If the piece is to be placed - as I believe - in the central niche, the subject must be different.



Figure 25 S 1286 (after Callieri, Filigenzi 2002, nos 142, 198)

ence of a lateral vertical dowel (projection), tangential to the right pillar, which completed the scene.

9 Possibly to be added is fragment S 1178: a three-quarter preserved right leg (h. 10 cm) of a male figure with part of a dhoti (\*57c).

10 Finally, I would like to add a fragment with a standing figure with *paridhāna* and *uttariya* S1026 (\*76c), preserved for 33 cm, from the left foot to the waist, which for material and style belongs to the school of the Master (Faccenna 2001, 137), and for size is associated with the smaller figures of panel S 305. If S 1026 was part of the false niche, it should be located to the left of the Buddha together with pieces S 1286, SS I 2, SS I 155 [fig. 27].

We are fairly certain that all these pieces were part of the central false niche. They are all clearly the work of the Master and, in terms of dimensions, none could have belonged to the Frieze, nor indeed to any other dec-





Figure 26 S 305 (after Callieri, Filigenzi 2002, nos 144, 199)



Figure 27 S 1026 (after Faccenna 2001, tab. 76c)

orative group of the other early stupas, which are of considerably smaller dimensions than those of the central Stupa.

In general, the faces in the Frieze panels do not exceed 6.5 cm. The proportional ratio between the dimensions of the faces is clear: Buddha (central false niche: max. 26 cm) - large figures (central false niche: max. 17 cm) - middle size figures (central false niche: max. 13 cm) - figures (Frieze: max. 6.5 cm).

So the whole work of the false niche was composed of several parts. If on the left we have only fragments, on the right we have sufficient information. The central panel SS I 22 was monolithic; at the bottom it was held together with S 305 by a smooth dowel to complete the plinth base under the throne. S 305 in turn was completed on the right by a vertical dowel.

On the evidence of comparison and of the fragmentary remains it is quite possible that the subject of the false niche was a generic scene of adoration of the Buddha. Next to the Buddha we find two pairs of figures: more than bodhisattvas or *lokapāla*, perhaps influential members of the Saidu religious community. At their sides are figures of the royal family, which may be actual portraits (see Lefèvre 2011). Scenes of this type can bring together, alongside gods, lay worshippers and others making offerings. It is not excluded, indeed it is likely, that members of the royal family (who knows,

perhaps Senavarma himself) are represented here among the laity.<sup>17</sup> Judging by the compositional richness of the perspective planes that we imagine from the surviving parts, by the composition by size, which decreases symmetrically from the centre towards the sides, by the projecting architectural framework, by the composition of the slabs to form the unity of the false niche, it is clear that we are faced with what was, and can only be imagined, the masterpiece, the most ambitious work of the Master of Saidu.

As far as the architecture of the false niche is concerned, a case in point is from Butkara I (B 3732; Faccenna, Taddei 1962-64, pl. CLXXXVIIb), where we find a generic scene of the Buddha preaching, with two lay figures at his sides. The scene is included in a central panel, at the sides of which are sequences of narrative scenes interrupted by Gandharan-Corinthian semi-columns. This piece, set within a narrative frieze with Gandharan-Corinthian partitions, may have been taken as the model, possibly for the scene itself, but not for the form of the central panel which, here, given the pilasters, we should visualise as rectangular. Adoration scenes are ideal for representing a generous donation by a great aristocratic family.<sup>18</sup>

Thanks to the new findings we can take a central false niche to be certain (see Faccenna, Callieri 2002, fig. 41) with a conjectured width including the cornice of about 3 m, a little more than the width of the second stairway (9 Gft).<sup>19</sup> This measurement could correspond to five panels calculated at about 1.56 Gft [50.8 cm] without the dividing element (0.5 Gft [14 cm]) [conjectured total length 2 Gft = 64.8 cm]. The hypothetically reconstructed height of the false niche is not greater than that of the Frieze including the accessory register of the pseudo *vedikā* but excluding the upper cornice of the Frieze (thus > 123 cm). If this were the case, the false niche would have come within the top cornice of the Frieze, which, due to the greater thickness components of the false niche (c. 20 cm), was certainly projecting here. The whole of the central false niche therefore projected at least 10 cm over the profile of the frieze.<sup>20</sup>

Returning to the length of the false niche, subtracting this measurement from the circumference of the second storey, (131 Gft [42.44 m]), the area occupied by the Frieze would have been about 121.7 Gft (39.44 m) and the Frieze itself would have consisted of 60 panels.<sup>21</sup>

**17** See the proportions between the various figures in the adoration scene B 7362 (Callieri, Filigenzi 2002, 174 fn. 84).

**18** A fine, later example among the many depicting the aristocratic donors of Swat beside the enthroned Buddha is preserved in the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome (Bussagli 1984, 192). See also, B 3014 (Faccenna, Taddei 1962-64, pl. CCXXIII).

**19** If we add to the 84 cm of the original width of the central panel SS I 22, 65 cm per side (calculated on the original width of panel S 305) 20 cm of the lateral dowels, and 22 cm of the maximum width of the two large lateral pilasters (measurement taken at the capital), the total width of the false niche group falls perfectly within the presumed maximum limit of 3 m overall, calculated on the width of the stairway. The width of the frontal false niche of the column stupa of Tokar-dara (l. podium c. 21 m) measures 3.8 m; that of Amluk-dara (l. podium c. 34 m) measures 3.65 m.

**20** Often the top cornice of the central false niches was decorated with rows of acanthus leaves (see also B 1768; Faccenna, Taddei 1962-64, pl. CDVII).

**21** A possibility that had already been considered (Faccenna 2002, 128).

## 5.1 The Scene

According to Faccenna's interpretation, based also on the areas where the surviving parts were found, the Frieze should begin from the left of the central group following through five biographical cycles defined according to the canonical series of the 'Birth Cycle' 'Palace Life', the 'Way towards Enlightenment', 'Propagation of the Law', 'Death Cycle'.

With regard to the canonical tradition incorporated in the early Buddhist architecture of India, there are the four 'miracles' (Birth or *jāti*, Enlightenment or *abhisambodhi*, Preaching or *dharmacakrapravartana*, Death or *parinirvāṇa*) with the addition of 'Palace Life', which represents a further novelty amongst the innovations at Saidu.<sup>22</sup> On the basis of our calculations, 12 panels should have belonged to each of the five cycles, each with its semi-column set to the left of the figured panel, for a maximum length within of 65 cm or 2 Gft. The resulting total covers the entire circumference of the second circular storey of the Stupa.

For this biographical cycle, we have no evidence of this particular sequence (we are not concerned with single episodes here) before Saidu. Even in its most evident narrative forms, the Buddhist art of northern and central India confined itself to the choice of episodes in the life of Siddhārtha, and their paratactic – and in any case atemporal – arrangement. As Anna Filigenzi succinctly put it, "the event [in the Buddha's biography] is not viewed in its [...] unfolding, but in its being" (Filigenzi 2002, 96). The art of the Saidu Frieze moves on from this tradition, presenting something never attempted before by the artists of the Subcontinent, namely organising the episodes in a temporal, biographical sequence. Maurizio Taddei pointed out that this innovation had no precedents in India "and perhaps not even in the classical world" (Taddei 1993, 25). Nor indeed, as far as we know, even in Gandhara, before Saidu.

And even the Gandharan-Corinthian partition with semi-columns, which was to become so common in Gandhara as to be taken for granted, was without precedents.<sup>23</sup> Faccenna (2003, 347) does not exclude that the partition may be a "transference" of the railing motif (*vedikā*). With reference to Saidu, however, I would not agree, also because an enclosure (the false railing) is actually present in the other register of the Frieze. At Saidu the partition serves the same function as natural division with trees or framing of the scenes (Filigenzi 2004, 105). When it first appeared in the Saidu Frieze, we may reasonably imagine it having an extraordinary visual impact. The partition serves both as a technical device and to cope with the aspect of time as *continuum* to be translated into spatial terms, as well as the spatial *vacuum* resulting from gaps in time. The caesuras in the two registers of space and time need to be accounted for when the artist addresses the problem of the synoptic representation of events in sequence. In short,

<sup>22</sup> The 'Great Departure' in the early Indian stupa is often used as first scene in the sequence.

<sup>23</sup> The mind turns to the reliquary of Bimaran dating roughly to the period of Saidu (Cribb 2018; Errington 2018): I have no certainty, but my impression is that it must be later. Here, I am not referring to the iconography of the Buddha, nor of the associated personages, but to the typical form of partitions with short fluted pillars, Tuscan type capital and carinated arch. Short fluted pillars are typical of the later production in schist and the first production in stucco. Note, however, that the figure of the Buddha on a decorated doorjamb from Butkara I dating to the late first or early second century CE is very similar to that of the Bimaran reliquary (B 3215; Faccenna, Taddei 1962-64, pl. CCLXXXIX). We will return to this later on.

the partition allows for the dissolve between one episode and the next, distinguishing them but at the same time projecting them in their continuity. Here I would like to air a suggestion by my colleague Antonio Amato. He has pointed out to me the way the figures in the background of the Frieze seem to appear *from behind* the semi-columns, as if the artist had conceived of the partition as standing in the foreground, while behind, as in a continuous strip, the figures effectively moved from one panel to another. This narrative device has a distinctly evident dramatic effect (in the sense of theatre, representation).<sup>24</sup> And yet the Master's study of the perspective pattern led to a further development. Actually, the entire Frieze is conceived of as a single scene unfolding behind and in front of a peristyle, within a portico punctuated by columns [fig. 28]. The diagram presented here shows that the horizon line passes at the height of the capitals' *kalathos*. On the other hand, the line from the observer's point of view is at the height of the second third of the panel starting from the bottom, i.e. at about 1.6 m from the ground level at the top of the first cylindrical body, i.e. at the eye level of the moving (walking) spectator. The perspective development shows the path of the scenes from panel to panel under a portico. The theme of the false arcade is so widespread that it hardly merits discussion: here it reminds me, for example, of the Hellenistic-Alexandrian motif of the Palace of Columns at Ptolemais in Cyrenaica (Pesce 1950; Gullini 1964, fig. 263).<sup>25</sup> There, behind the upper real columned portico (Corinthian order), south side, internal front, we find in the background, set back and raised, a pseudo wall portico on a smaller scale (about 1/3).

We will return to the subject of the portico when we address the question of the perspective of the work and the view of the Frieze, and thus its positioning.<sup>26</sup>

But it is worth mentioning the relationship between the portico and the *peripatos*, between the portico and the *pradakṣiṇā* or ritual circumambulation. The Stupa, though static, is built to be perceived through movement: this is an important fact in design because the architect already knows how the construction will be perceived, knows its paths and – here is the point – the obligatory points of view/observation.<sup>27</sup> The architect knows that there will

<sup>24</sup> On the possible role of drama and theatre in the genesis of the Buddha biographical cycle in Gandhara, see Brancaccio, Liu 2012 and Brancaccio forthcoming.

<sup>25</sup> In general the false-portico or pseudo-portico motif (*logeion* in the theatre) found success in the Alexandrine world (Bonacasa 2009).

<sup>26</sup> On this point see the reference by Faccenna (2001, 182). The origin of this motif might be sought in the Parthian world that goes from Seleucia on the Tigris to Margiana (Old Nisa) and beyond. It is always worth rereading that brief masterpiece by Antonio Invernizzi († 2021), the "Réflexions sur les rencontres interculturelles dans l'orient hellénisé" (published in 2014). There is also a return from Gandhara back to the west: consider the contribution of the sculptors of the Gandharan school to Surkh Kotal (Olivieri, Sinisi 2021, fn. 6), but above all the limestone sculpture of Termez and Airtam of the Kushan period. In general the question as to where the sensibility was formed that we find fully fledged in the first art and architecture of Butkara I and Saidu remains unanswered. Michele Minardi, for his part, has presented interesting material from Chorasmia with a convincing discussion on Battria (Minardi 2019). Faccenna looked to Sistan (Faccenna 1981). As for the 'Parthian' component in Gandharan art, one is always pleased to reread not only Fabrègues 1987, Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1949 but also Rowland 1956; Marshall 1960a (§ 3) and Goldman 1978.

<sup>27</sup> The fact that for stupas we know the simple rules of *pradakṣiṇā* is an exception to the information we have for path rituals associated with other monuments with visual programmes, for example the Apadana in Persepolis.

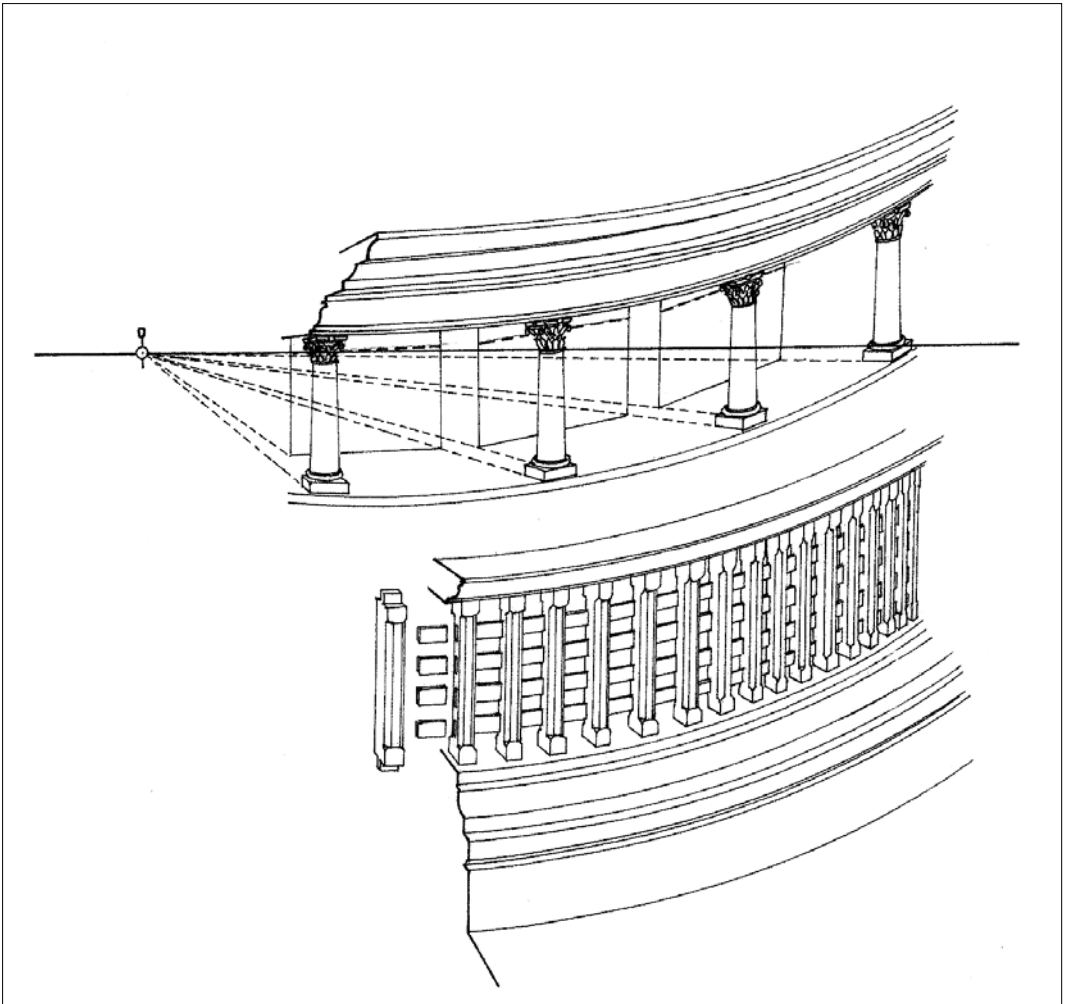


Figure 28 The false portico and the false railing; the dotted line indicates the sculptor's point of view (MAIP; drawings by Francesco Martore)

be no different ways, no alternative points, to 'experience' that construction. Like a phonograph record that only gives sound if it is turned, and in one direction only, so here the Stupa is only experienced in movement, in a specific direction. This has a very important association with the fact that when we walk around the Stupa, in the shadow of an ideal portico, and always and only in one direction, mind you, we 'read' a story, a narration, unfolding before our eyes. How much does this 'obligation' imposed on the architect help the sculptor (who in Saidu is certainly one and the same person)?

Knowing that a frieze will necessarily be seen in motion helps the composition and its design. This is because of the simple logic that shows that in order to insert 'time' where there is no time (the static sculptural panel), all that is needed is for the viewer to move:

How is a picture or relief whose elements are essentially immobile, and whose world is basically stilled and silent, graphically to convey, and not vaguely to hint at, a story that unfolds in time? A story encompasses a sequence of events, but is more than their mere succession. It is the change and the transition from one episode to the next, in short the passing of time, which we must be made to feel if the story is to become alive in our mind.

[...] Since pictorial form cannot move, ingenious devices have been developed for enlisting the onlooker's help in supplying motion or movement, particularly in cyclical representations. To follow the Panathenaic procession we have bodily to move along the Parthenon frieze turning the four corners of the temple. (Pächt 1962, 1-2)<sup>28</sup>

There is yet another aspect to consider (not so much as a hypothesis, but rather as an aesthetic suggestion). The repetitive, the rhythmic association of the semi-columns with the panels suggests a further association of the protagonist of the sequence (Siddhārtha/Buddha) with the semi-columns themselves, as if they were repeated symbolisations of him: the repetition annuls the multiplicity, making of the many semi-columns one single but repeated semi-column. In the early Indian environment, this shift in level would not be hard to conceive of, the column (the semi-column being its two-dimensional simulacrum) itself being a symbol of royalty and, making the natural distinction, of the Buddha as universal sovereign, *cakravartin*. Indeed, in the case of our Saidu Stupa, the monument is marked at the four corners by four gigantic leonine columns, while the two minor columns, also leonine, stand at the sides of the stairway, and two taller ones stand a little further out, asymmetrical and more external to the stairway.

Thus the space-time caesura was at the same time a symbol and possibly even a ritual, rhythmic support for mnemonic repetition of the story of Siddhartha/Buddha which, at the time of the Saidu Frieze, had yet to be transcribed.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps study of the texts and rituals could reveal to someone better grounded in these aspects than myself whether the pause suggested by the architectural caesura on the visual path of the *pradakṣiṇā* served some further function.

In metrical terms, the Frieze is a sequence of short and long elements, and the architectural caesura – figuratively speaking – is like the clash of a cymbal marking the end of one scene and the beginning of the next. We can imagine the path followed by the worshipper as a prayer in movement, syncopated circumambulation performed with few steps and slight, imper-

<sup>28</sup> At this point Otto Pächt adds references that I quote here for the reader's benefit: C.H. Kraeling et al., *Narration in Ancient Art, a Symposium* (57th General Meeting, Chicago, December 29, 1955); H.A. Groenewegen-Frankfort, *Arrest and Movement* (Chicago, 1951). I thank Doris M. Srinivasan for pointing out the interest of the Austrian scholar's work for Gandharan narrative (Srinivasan 2016).

<sup>29</sup> The term *verbomoteur* coined by Marcel Jousse comes to mind (see Ong 2002, 21). On the transcription of the oral tradition, see Richard Salomon (2018, 52), where he explains the absolute need of the Buddhist world, felt particularly around the turn of the Christian era, to oppose the prophecy holding that the teaching would be lost around five hundred or a thousand years after the *parinirvāṇa*. Transcribing, copying and depositing innumerable texts of the scriptures became "a sort of insurance policy or back-up system". The first transcriptions of the Buddha's biography date to the subsequent period: it seems to me that the earliest is the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa, generally dated to the early/mid-second century CE.

ceptible pause. Obviously, the start and finish of this ritual path would ideally be in front of the central image (the false niche).

Text and image as a double competence in the narrative art, one discursive the other visual, are never disjointed. In fact, as already mentioned, in one of the inscriptions of the west portal (corner pillar) of Bharhut (see also Ray 1994-95), the donor, who was a *navakarmika*, is also called *bhāṇaka*, that is both building superintendent and performer in charge of reciting, preserving (and creating?) texts.<sup>30</sup> Taddei (in this following A.K. Coomaraswamy) uses the significant term of “picture showmen” for monks or lay members who had the task of illustrating narrative reliefs to the worshipper (Taddei 1999, 82). Note that Taddei does not use the equivalent ancient Indian term, because we do not know it, and because Taddei and others, including V. Deheja (1990) imagined the existence of these figures from the existence of the narrative reliefs, and from ‘labels’ placed as captions under the Bharhut images. These ‘labels’ disappear in Sanchi, they are not present in Gandhara, and this according to Taddei was due in the first case to the progressive familiarity of the worshipper with the legendary corpus on the life of Buddha, which was gradually structured, and in the second case also to the fact that “the life of Buddha was arranged in a more or less stable, meaningful succession of significant episodes” (82). The problem in this Buddhist art of Gandhara, and in particular for these first accomplished expressions of it, such as the art of Saidu, is precisely that of the relationship between text and image. Which comes first? There is no clear answer to this question. It is perhaps necessary to try to disengage from the iconological tradition of Christianity and then the Renaissance, where the image often follows the written text. An admirable example of *sganciamento* (detachment, uncoupling) is, after all, the Ara Pacis and, above all, the Trajan Column (Settis et al. 1988), which – unless proven otherwise – does not originate from a formalised text, but primarily from the memory of action.<sup>31</sup> These conclusions, in contexts that are not so distant after all, are reached by Otto Pächt (1962), who, with reference to the contribution of art to the creation of the religious and dramatic text in the Anglo-Saxon Middle Ages, speaks in dignified terms of “stagecraft”.<sup>32</sup>

Returning to the relationship between artists and monks, we have no evidence that these roles coincide, even though they both share a common conceptual context. If this were still largely oral at the time, the question would remain difficult to resolve: visual expression leaves taphonomic traces, oral expression does not. One could try to intercept this phenomenon outside of Buddhism in rock art, for example that of cultures marginalised by Buddhism in the Gandhara (Olivieri 2015b).

In India, during the several centuries around the Christian era, such possibilities existed. Inscriptional evidence indicates that there was little or no barrier between a person’s involvement in Vedic rituals and devotional cult practices requiring icons; potential patrons and artisans

**30** Let us translate it as *rhapsōidos*, in the literal sense of *rhapsōidein*, i.e. ‘stitcher of songs’ (see the already cited Ong 2002, 23). In 1929 A.K. Coomaraswamy coined the term “picture showmen” (1929).

**31** This is more important than the Telephos frieze, for which we have a collation of stories (cf. Milman Parry’s insight into the verb *rhapsōidein* as ‘to stitch together a song’, see above).

**32** See the chapter on Milman Parry in Ong 2002 (It. ed. 2014).

could experience both. In this accommodating atmosphere, ritual forms charged with symbolic meaning congenial to the new context could be transmitted with ease. Comparable historical situations, in other areas of world art, exist to support this thesis. For example, quite analogous is the role of the ritual as the starting point for iconographic innovations in twelfth-century English narrative painting. In the early twelfth century, full-fledged picture cycles suddenly make an appearance for which no prior textual or pictorial models exist. Tracing the source of a particular cycle, the St. Albans Psalter, Pächt [Pächt 1962] is able to show that the spoken words of the liturgical drama helped the twelfth-century artist cope with the problem of finding pictorial expressions for subjects never treated before. (Srinivasan 2016, 49)

The problem would seem to be no longer whether twelfth-century iconography was inspired to some of its innovations by the liturgical drama, but whether the style of pictorial narrative as such had been influenced by the new venture of presenting the Bible story as staged drama, in a basically theatrical form. (Pächt 1962, 32)<sup>33</sup>

Finally, as far as the visual design is concerned, I even believe that at least in Saidu, the Master, who was certainly a professional, retained a great deal of independence. Not only that: if one relies on the absence of a sculptural tradition in Swat and Gandhara before that of Butkara I, and then of the Frieze, one would have to conclude the artist had probably trained elsewhere (all the more so since one hears the technical and instrumental appeal of the Hellenistic tradition).

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**33** As mentioned, Pia Brancaccio was the first to deal with this issue and is still dealing with it, with truly new perspectives: “This is not to say that Gandharan reliefs represent actual Buddhist plays performed by local actors. What we are trying to argue is that there is a profound dramatic perception behind the creation of Gandharan narrative” (Brancaccio, Liu 2012, 179; see also Brancaccio forthcoming).