

Presence, Power, and Agency: Donor Portraits in Early Gandharan Art

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to shed light on locally constructed sculptural representations of donors and devotees from Butkara I in Swat valley – one of the earliest Buddhist sites in the Greater Gandhara region. The discovery of several sculptures and architectural elements depicting elaborately adorned male and female figures with distinctly individualizing facial features, and bearing varied Buddhist offerings, not only throws into relief the artistic phenomenon of portraiture in early Gandharan Buddhist art but also exemplifies the visual and material enactment of donative ritual and practice. The appropriation of a transcultural and widely legible visual vocabulary for constructing these essentially Buddhist figures underscores the complex cross-cultural interactions and encounters underpinning Gandharan art and Buddhist practice in the early centuries of the Common Era. The paper argues that, in addition to relic establishment and donative inscriptions, the ruling aristocrats used donor portraits for the material and metaphorical embodiment of their presence and piety within the Buddhist monastic space. Moreover, these images likely served as public performances for effectively navigating the broader political and socio-cultural currents. Speaking to diverse communities in the multicultural matrix of Gandhara, these donor portraits highlight the participation of visual imagery in constructing new forms of ritual and practice predicated upon the intertwined notions of power, patronage, and religiosity.

Keywords Gandhara. Buddhism. Materiality. Donors. Portrait. Identity. Ritual. Art. Archaeology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Contextualizing Donor Figures. – 3 Donor Portraits. – 4 Sculpting Identity. – 5 Materiality of Donor Portraits. – 6 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

When it comes to Gandharan Buddhist art, traditional scholarly practice generally provides a partial picture and does not, in many cases, adequately nuance its local, global, sociological, and material dimensions. Aside from some notable exceptions,¹ art historical discussion largely remains limited to stylistic and iconographic analyses of religious imagery: sculptures of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, or narrative friezes visually recounting the historical or previous lives of the Buddha. While stylistic approaches mostly focus on reductive debates on origins and influences, meanings of images are essentially sought through the lens of text, rendering them as mere visual illustrations of spatially and temporally distant Buddhist scriptures and traditions. This tendency undermines the complexity and polysemy of Gandharan images as active participants in varied social processes.

The current paper seeks to draw attention to the historically contingent and locally sculpted stone representations of lay men and women from the one of the earliest and most important Buddhist monastic sites in the Greater Gandhara-Butkara I in Swat. The artistic corpus from this site includes several green schist sculptures, relief panels and architectural elements depicting elaborately adorned aristocratic male and female figures. Their distinctly individualizing facial features, coupled with the varied offerings they hold, not only throw into relief the artistic phenomenon of donor portraiture in early Gandharan art but also exemplify the visual enactment of donative ritual and practice. The innovative use of disparate motifs and iconographies in these representations suggests the visual construction of an identity that produced and maintained social distinction as well as aided in navigating the broader political currents in the region. In this vein, the artistic record aligns well with the epigraphic evidence from Swat and neighboring regions of Dir and Bajaur. Inscriptional record underscores the predominant involvement of local aristocrats and elites in Buddhist patronage. Situating this body of sculpture from Butkara I within the archaeological, epigraphic, and historical contexts can help us gain invaluable insights into the complex structuring of Buddhist practice and the role of local elites in Gandharan Buddhism during the 1st century CE. This is especially important considering the discontinuities and shifts in the realm of artistic, epigraphic, and religious praxis during what is broadly known as the

1 This paper draws on research for my ongoing dissertation project, titled *Rethinking representation: women and gender in the ancient art of Gandhara*, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). An abridged version of this contribution was presented at the 28th EAA (European Association of Archaeologists) Annual Meeting in Budapest on September 3, 2022. Cf. Faccenna 2006; Taddei 2003; Olivieri 2022a; Brancaccio, Behrendt 2006; Brancaccio 2019; Filigenzi 2019; 2020.

Kushan period. Furthermore, exploring the explanatory power of this sculpture through the concepts of materiality and performativity enables us to understand the social interactions and religious implications of sculpted donor figures in the Buddhist sanctuaries of Swat.



Figure 1 View of the sacred area of Butkara I. © Author

2 Contextualizing Donor Figures

One of the few systematically excavated Buddhist sites in the region of Greater Gandhara, Butkara I is located near the city of Mingora in the fertile valley of Swat at the foot of the Hindukush-Karakorum Mountain ranges. It was excavated in 1956 by the Italian Archaeological Mission under the supervision of Dominico Faccenna. The site is characterized by a large sacred area with successive phases of reconstruction and expansion from the late third century BCE to the tenth century CE [fig. 1]. During the excavations, several fragmentary statues and statue heads depicting lay male and female figures were discovered (Faccenna 1962-64; 1980). The statues vary in size with examples of slightly under-lifesize and half lifesize figures as well as smaller statuettes.² Their lavish drapery, distinctive hairstyles, elaborate headdresses, turbans, and ornate jewellery are all visual cues

² The relatively large size of many figures from this corpus is striking, because generally larger images in Gandharan art – almost exclusively representing the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and deities such as Hariti – are a much later phenomenon.

that help us establish their identity and status as princely or elite figures from the secular world of the local aristocracy.³ Their accoutrements, however, clearly situate them within the Buddhist world. For example, through the symbolic offerings many of them hold out and the devotional gestures they make, they can be clearly identified as lay donors and devotees. Offerings held by the donors include lotus buds, coiled up garlands, manuscript scrolls, oil lamps, incense burners, and the quintessential Gandharan reliquaries etc. Based on stylistic, material, and archaeological evidence, this class of sculptures from Butkara I has been dated to the first half of the 1st century CE, roughly coinciding with the Saka-Parthian era in the region (Faccenna, Callieri, Filigenzi 2003). The material used for almost all this sculpture is chlorite schist with a characteristic green hue. This is a lithotype that was entirely local to Swat and one of the most valuable stones used for carving Buddhist sculptures in the early period of Buddhist artistic activity (Olivieri 2022a, 67).⁴ Varying from shades of emerald to jade green, its vibrant color, soapy texture, and reflective qualities evoke its association with precious stones, distinguishing it from other types of schist used in Gandharan art. In terms of style this sculpture falls into the category of the *'disegnativo'* or *'drawing'* style (Faccenna, Callieri, Filigenzi 2003, 290). With a penchant for line, flat volumes, frontal representations as well as a love for ornament, detail and naturalism, the sculpted bodies of donors bring together varied stylistic and iconographic conventions from Indic, Hellenistic, and Parthian artistic traditions.⁵

Due to the long life of the site of Butkara I and the practice of re-using older stone sculpture in new structures and renovations, the original display context of these images is difficult to reconstruct.⁶ Many of the statues and statuettes are in fragmentary condition,

³ This class of sculpture has received scant scholarly attention. Catherine Anne Schmidt's (2005) important paper on statues of male aristocratic devotees from Swat is one of the few exceptions.

⁴ In the early Buddhist sculptural production green schist is used throughout Swat and seems to be preferred over grey schist for aesthetic as well as symbolic reasons. Aside from Butkara I and Saidu Sharif I, examples come from Barikot, Nawagai, Parrai etc. This schist type was quarried from the emerald outcroppings in Swat (e.g. the ancient quarry of Swagalai) as well as exported to other regions of Gandhara (Faccenna et. al 1993; Olivieri 2000; 2006, 140). Furthermore, this is the very type of schist that was exclusively favored by the so-called "Maestro of Saidu Sharif" (Callieri, Filigenzi 2002) for carving the famous frieze of Saidu Sharif Main Stupa.

⁵ Additionally, a variety of attire can be identified in these representations. While male donor figures are mostly clad in the Indic dress of *paridhāna* (dhoti) and *uttariya* (scarf), there are some which are unambiguously represented in Central Asian and Parthian dress (e.g. B 2598; B 3117; Faccenna 1962-64). Female donors and devotees are, for the most part, depicted in clothes reminiscent of those found in Parthian art.

⁶ For reuse of Gandharan sculpture in contexts different from the original, see Taddei 2006; Behrendt 2009; Brancaccio 2022.



Figure 2 In situ fragmentary statues reused on a minor stupa at Butkara I. © Author

leaving us with several extant heads and headless, fragmentary bodies. A large part of the work, however, comes from the sacred precinct of the monastic establishment between the Great Stupa and the Great Building in stratum IV. This was a space that was restructured and renovated in the beginning of the first century CE (Facenna, Callieri, Filigenzi 2003, 282-6) under the patronage of local dynasties, governing under the Sakas and later the Parthians (Callieri, Filigenzi 2002, 59; Olivieri 2022a).

Most of the statues and statuettes depicting aristocratic figures preserve tenons for joinery on the top and/or the bottom. Additionally, all these figures have roughly executed rear faces. These features indicate that not only were these images meant to be viewed from the front but that they were affixed to architectural structures, such as stupas and chapels, with mortise and tenon joints. On these monuments, statues of donors were likely inserted within niches, placed against pilasters,⁷ or even used in railings as posts. The numerous fragmentary and effaced *in situ* figures haphazardly attached to minor stupas at Butkara I indicate that even during instances of reuse in later renovations, this sculpture continued to find space on these structures [fig. 2]. Figured relief panels, door jamb frames, and Gandharan-Corinthian capitals etc. from this site also proliferate with

⁷ In Gandharan art we have numerous examples of pilasters with images of donors and devotees carved against them. These are usually small in size and frame relief imagery.

elaborate busts of princely male and female figures holding a variety of offerings. In this vein, one can think of the images of aristocratic male and female donors as literally integrated within the material fabric of the Buddhist sacred architecture itself.

In some cases, statues of donors may have been set up on schist bases to flank staircases of main stupas as well as chapels (Olivieri 2022a, 143). For example, a statue depicting a female donor (B 6000; Faccenna 2006) was found close to the stairs of the large chapel known as the Great Building at Butkara I. From the site of Thareli in Buner, a life-size donor statue was also found with its base next to the raised platform of the stupa court C100 in Shrine X in front of Stupa 3 (Mizuno, Higuchi 1978, pl. 22; Olivieri, Sinisi 2021, fn. 18). Furthermore, architectural elements connected to staircases of stupas such as small bases for statues (or low pillars) have also been attested in Swat (e.g. SS I 225, SS I 226, Olivieri 2022a). One such base, carved out of green schist and seemingly appropriate as a support for a donor statue with a lower tenon, is *in situ* next to the first step on the right corner of the Main Stupa staircase at the famous monastic site of Saidu Sharif I in Swat (SS I 80, Faccenna 2001). Bases for standing statues near stupas and shrines have been found at other Gandharan sites such as Thareli (Mizuno, Higuchi 1978, 159). This phenomenon seems entirely fitting as it has been compellingly demonstrated that decorated staircases leading up to monumental Gandharan stupas were akin to the elaborate early Indic Buddhist *toranas* (gateways) in conception and, therefore, the purview of lay patronage and devotion (Olivieri, Iori 2021; Brancaccio, Liu 2009).

The significance of the relationship between donors/devotees and sacred Buddhist architecture is abundantly attested in Gandharan visual imagery. Diverse figures holding offerings or portrayed in devotional poses are often encountered standing under carved *toranas*, *caitya* gateways, and ornamental arches. Donor busts are also found framed within door jambs and emerging out of acanthi on Gandharan-Corinthian capitals. Several *nāgadantas* (figured brackets projecting from stupas to support garlands and festoons) represent donors bearing offerings of garlands and reliquaries.⁸ The representation of a male princely donor from a relief from Butkara I [fig. 3] exemplifies this iconography: elaborately turbaned and attired, he stands under a decorated *torana* in a three-quarter view holding a cylindrical reliquary in both hands (B 895 in Faccenna 1962-64). This artistic phenomenon and its interpretive underpinnings have been

⁸ A green schist *nāgadanta* from the recent excavations at Barikot (BKG 8654) depicts a standing male donor holding a coiled-up garland. He wears an Indic *paridhāna* and a flat necklace. I am grateful to the director of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Pakistan, Dr. Luca M. Olivieri, for permitting me to include this unpublished object from Barikot in the present article.



Figure 3 Relief with an aristocratic donor under torana. Inv. No. 895. © Faccenna 1962-64, pl. CXXI. Courtesy of IsMEO

discussed by Pia Brancaccio (2006) in her analysis on the ubiquity of figured arches in early Gandharan imagery from Swat. Brancaccio suggests that architectural elements framing a variety of donors and devotees, clad in local and non-local attire, are visual and metaphorical representations of devotional gateways into the world of Buddhism. It thus becomes increasingly clear that the numerous green schist donor statues and statuettes from Butkara I were also conceived of

as an integral part of the Buddhist architectural landscape, visually and metaphorically bearing the burden of the Buddhist project.⁹ It is as if the elite patrons were not only financing the construction of monastic centres or individual monuments but were also pre-occupied with inserting their visual and material presence within these sacred spaces. Even when broken or worn with the passage of time, the very practice of sculptural reuse would ensure their continued incorporation within sacred structures. The fragmentary torso of a male princely donor (B 823; Faccenna 1962-64; 1980) buried within the core of Stupa 27 is a fitting example of this phenomenon [fig. 4].

3 Donor Portraits

As primary documents, the statues and statuettes depicting aristocratic donors at Butkara I raise several interpretive possibilities. This is even more so when we examine whether they are generic images or likenesses representing actual persons. While most of the figures conform to artistic conventions of the period in terms of style, bodily proportions, and drapery, yet subtle differences are discerned in their details. For instance, careful attention is devoted towards differentiating the heads through diverse hairstyles and headdresses. One of the most striking aspects is the strong interest in visually articulating individualizing facial features.¹⁰ While these elements do not render the images free of idealization and visual conventions, the naturalistic style coupled with the inclusion of certain idiosyncratic details in the portrayal of faces endows these statues with physiognomic specificity and a life-like quality. Their facial expressions also suggest emotion and personality. The introduction of technical details, such as incised pupils, further serve to animate and enliven the images.

The well-preserved statue of an aristocratic female donor from Butkara I [fig. 5], currently displayed in Swat Museum (B 6000; Faccenna 2006), aptly characterizes this artistic proclivity. Over 1 meter tall (1.24 m), the figure stands on a base with an upper and lower tenon. She holds a bunch of lotus buds in her left hand while the right hand is raised in a gesture with the open palm facing outward. She is clad in a long tunic belted at the hip with a mantle draped

⁹ In other words, these objects are not mere decoration; rather, they were formulated as part of the structure itself and in some cases literally holding it up (e.g. figured railing posts). Just as the monastic institutions were dependant on lay donors for subsistence, monastic structures were brought to life by the images of donors.

¹⁰ This important formal aspect of these sculptures has received little attention. Two of the exceptions are Starza-Majewski (1994), who notes these aspects on a male head from Swat in the British Museum, and more recently, Luca Olivieri (2022a) who discusses a similar phenomenon in the context of Saidu Sharif I.



Figure 4
Fragmentary torso
of male donor in Stupa
27, Butkara I.
© Faccenna 1980, fig. 83.
Courtesy of ISMEO

over her arms. While the drapery is rendered in schematic parallel grooves, its diaphanous quality, clinging close to the body and revealing the curves beneath, clearly betrays a parallel interest in the organic, naturalistic treatment of the female body. The small breasts with clearly articulated nipples, slight bulge of the belly, pronounced hips, rounded thighs and protruding knees etc., are all made visible through the thin drapes. The female is arrayed in a variety of jewels including necklaces, ear ornaments, bangles, hairpins, and anklets. Her hair is arranged in a very particular style: a fringe falls over her forehead and temples, curled locks lie on her shoulders, while the rest of the hair is gathered in a wide knot at the top of the head and loosely bound by strings of beads. Although the lack of inscription makes it impossible to identify the subject, the strong interest in individuating her face through the inclusion of specific details indicates that this image was intended as the representation of an actual person. Thin sensitively modelled eyebrows arching over upwards gazing, expressive eyes, the heavy eyelids, the small mouth with a slightly larger upper lip and a prominent nose with deeply carved nasal fur-



Figure 5
Donor lady. Inv. No. 6000. Swat Museum. © Author

rows, the folds in the neck and the articulation of a conspicuous cleft chin are all elements that collectively convey a strikingly individualized treatment of the face.

The interest and intentionality in representing a distinct person, despite artistic convention, emerges in many other male and female sculptures from Butkara I. A fragmentary female statue (B 194; Faccenna 1962-64), currently housed in Swat Museum [fig. 6], sports a very distinctive coiffeur. Furthermore, the naturalism of her broad face, wide-set almond-shaped eyes, and carefully rendered eyebags immediately conveys the artistic intention to portray someone specific. Amongst the numerous male donor statues, the almost life-size regal figure from Butkara I in Swat Museum truly stands out [fig. 7].¹¹

11 B 4033. Faccenna 1962-64, pl. CLXXVII.

Apart from the ornate turban, jewelry, and Indic dress, it is his facial features – the shape of his eyes with creases around their corners, straight nose with slightly flared nostrils, puffy cheeks, drooping horseshoe-shaped moustache, and a double chin – that make him particularly distinctive. When compared with other portrayals of males from the site, the intention to portray physiognomic differences is thrown into stark relief. For example, a male bust framed within a large door jamb [fig. 8], shows a figure sporting a set of curly hair over a youthful face with a distinctive unibrow, wide open eyes and a long, upward curving moustache parted in the middle of philtrum. The intention to convey individualism is most apparent in a stone relief from Butkara I (Inv. No. 4080 pl. DCLXIVb; Faccenna 1964), where a local princely donor, dressed in the usual Indic attributes (a turban, ear ornaments, long necklace and *uttariya*), is represented side by side with a Saka (?) prince (Sinisi 2020, 383) wearing a thick torque. Not only are their iconographic attributes carefully differentiated but despite damage one can identify the artistic intention to convey distinct personalities through individualizing facial features.

None of these images bear inscriptions. Yet they raise important questions regarding the existence of the portrait genre in early Gandharan art from Swat. The distinct possibility that we are encountering ‘donor portraits’ becomes even more likely once we compare these representations of donors from Butkara I to chronologically later images of lay donors and devotees on statue bases from Gandhara proper as well as Mathura. Most of the donors and devotees on these pedestals are stock figures without individual features. The term ‘portraiture’ can be slippery, especially if considered in the context of its traditional use in Western art historical discourse. However, a broader, more inclusive definition of the term, such as the one given by J.J. Politt¹² or the one by Richard Brilliant, is entirely suitable for the presence of this phenomenon at Butkara I. In his seminal work on portraiture, Brilliant (1991) defines a portrait as an artwork intentionally made of a living or once living person, by an artist, for an audience. By using examples of portraits from all over Europe, he demonstrates that the process of portraiture is not one of simple mimesis but rather of a deliberately constructed nature. The art historical term ‘portrait’ is rarely attributed to Indian art.¹³ It is only in recent times that the definition of the phenomenon and its application to Indian art has been addressed

¹² J.J. Politt (1986, 59) defines a portrait as an “intentional representation of a person containing a sufficient number of specific features to make it recognizable to others”.

¹³ The term ‘portraiture’, even in its most parochial sense, may be effectively applied to some of the artistic representations from Swat. Donor portraits are also attested from other Buddhist sites in the Gandharan region: e.g. the distinctively moustached and tonsured male donor from Sahri Balol (Lyons, Ingholt 1957, no 415). The insertion of an aristocratic donor couple with a highly distinctive and individualized treatment –



Figure 6 Statue of an aristocratic lady. Inv. No. 194. Swat Museum. © Faccenna 1962-64, pl. CDXLVII. Courtesy IsMEO

Figure 7 Statue of male donor. Inv. No. 4033. Swat Museum. © Author



Figure 8 Figured door jamb with a male bust. Swat Museum. © Author

(Kaimal 1999; Lefevre 2011). Lefevre (2011) has argued that the varied functions (social, political, and economic etc.) of ‘portraits’ in the context of early South Asian art outweigh a purely aesthetic or technical concern with true likeness. Lefevre’s discussion on Indian portraiture excludes material from Gandhara/Northwest regions, which is surprising since the art of this region exhibits a strong interest in naturalistic, mimetic portrayals of both monks and lay men and women – particularly in the early period of Gandharan artistic activity. In the context of Butkara I the intentional use of stone for the images of donors is also noteworthy. As Brilliant (1991, 125) has pointed out, the substantial nature and material dimension of stone sculpture more readily evokes the physical existence of the subject and may refer to corporeal integration with him/her – an aspect that will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

The long and well-established history of royal portraits on coins from the Indo-Greek and Saka-Parthian times all the way to the Kushan era, clearly reveals the significance and currency of the portrait image in this region for communicating notions of kingship, legitimacy, and political authority (Coloru 2015).

The commemorative royal portraits of Kushan rulers from Surkh Kotal and Mat, as well as their images on coins, attest to the importance of portraits for political and administrative purposes. The notion of portraiture, as a likeness intentionally made of a person, is also encountered in various Indian literary sources such as Bhasa’s *Pratimānātakas* (Statues). It is frequently found as a dramatic device in several Sanskrit plays (Saunders 1919).¹⁴ The idea of a portrait evoking the individual it represents, also appears in Buddhist discourses such as the *Aśokāvadāna* of the *Divyāvadāna* – a text closely associated with Gandhara (Rotman 2008a).¹⁵ In the *Mahīśāsakavinaya* we encounter portraiture in the form of a prohibition when nuns are forbidden from making portraits as they might form attachment to their visage (Albery 2022, fn. 25). It is also clearly present in the numerous inscribed donor images from the region of Mathura (Lefevre 2011, 72; DeCaroli 2015, 51).¹⁶ That the phenomenon of ‘donor por-

both in terms of dress and physical appearance – in a relief depicting the ‘Conversion of the Kasyapas’ from Shotorak is another important example (Meunié 1942, pl. XIX).

14 For example, *Śakuntalā* and *Mālavikāgnimitra* by Kalidasa, *Nāgānanda* by Harsa etc.

15 Artistic imitation is also a notion that is encountered in other early and later Buddhist discourses. For example, the idea of imitation in painting and carving, used metaphorically to allude to the art of teaching Dharma, occurs in the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāsa*. In the *Damamūkanidānasūtra*, the notion is raised when the method of imitation is employed by the Buddha Pusa to make his self-portrait as a model for master painters (Albery 2022, fn. 29).

16 The inscribed Mathuran images roughly date from the 1st century CE and reflect a general shift in figural art in South Asia where images of kings, heroes and donors were becoming common (DeCaroli 2015, 64).

traits' also prevailed in the context of Gandhara is attested by the recovery of an inscribed base associated with the sculpture of a lay male donor depicted in Central Asian attire from the site of Ranigat (Nishikawa 1994, pl. 102 no 4). The fragmentary inscription mentions what may be his name with the word *rūpakā* (Baums, Glass 2002, CKI 475). In Pali and Sanskrit, *rūpa* is variously translated as image, representation, portrait, likeness, form etc. (Monier-Williams 2008, s.v. "rūpa"; Quaglotti 2000, 523; DeCaroli 2015, 59).

Analyzing the material from Butkara I against the plethora of donative inscriptions from the region can shed further light on the phenomenon of donor portraits. Although there are very few recorded inscriptions from Butkara I specifically, the epigraphic evidence from Swat and neighboring regions of Bajaur demonstrates that it was the local elite – the aristocratic as well as the mercantile classes – who were at the core of the Buddhist cause during its formative era in the 1st century CE. Donative inscriptions deriving from these regions highlight the active participation of both men and women in benefactions as well as their social and economic agency in Buddhist patronage. These people were not only establishing relics, stupas, pillars, viharas, and monasteries but also avidly recording these acts in inscriptions written in Gandhari in the local Kharoshti script. The gold filigree and silver sheet inscriptions of Utara (CKI 255, CKI 265),¹⁷ wife of the Apraca prince Indravarma, as well as the famous gold plate inscription of the Odi prince, Senavarma (CKI 249), highlight the significance of donative practice in the region. The inclusion of named beneficiaries (both male and female) in these early inscriptions underscores the concern with memorializing family members in donative activity. Aside from elaborate acts of donation, inscribed pottery such as a fragmentary bowl from the sacred precinct at Butkara I (CKI 218) as well as the inscribed water pots from the British Library dated to the 1st century CE (Salomon 1999), record donations of everyday utilitarian objects to monastic communities. Invariably, however, it is the local aristocrats such as the Odirajas and the Apracarajas (Salomon 1999; Albery 2020), courtly officials and the affluent mercantile elite, as well as persons associated with them, who exert this degree of religious and economic agency in donative practice during the first century CE (Olivieri 2022a). Through the inclusion of their names, kinship ties, aristocratic, administrative, and professional titles, as well as their

¹⁷ "All buddhas are honored, past, future, and present. All solitary buddhas are honored. All saints are honored. Utara, wife of the prince, together with Prince Indravarma establishes relics of the Lord. A stone pillar is set up [...] sadadha ujimda [...] Utaraūta, Pupidria, (and) Uṣaṃvea are honored. Śreṭha, mother of the meridarch is honored. (Her) father-in-law Viṣuvarma, king of Apraca is honored. Rukhuṇaka, who has a living son, is honored. The general Vaga is honored. Vijayamitra (II), king of Apraca, is honored. The monk Dhramasena, the superintendent of construction, is honored" (Baums 2012, 208).

political affiliations, the elite construct individual as well as collective identities through formulaic donative inscriptions.

If one were to reconstruct what these elite and aristocratic Buddhist donors looked like, the donors and devotees from Butkara I (as well as those from other early Buddhist sites in Swat such as Panr I and Saidu Sharif I) would be entirely fitting portrayals. The substantial and costly commissioning of elaborately carved stone representations speaks volumes of the social and economic status of the donors.¹⁸ Moreover, the production of these images chronologically coincides with the donative inscriptions of the Apracarajas and Odirajas.¹⁹ It is therefore a compelling possibility that the elaborate statues and statuettes from Butkara I were likenesses or rather donor portraits commissioned by men and women closely affiliated with the socio-political elite, that is the local ruling dynasties, active in the region.²⁰

It is also worth pointing out that a certain social group active in this very area was practicing burial rituals and traditions which were rare, if not completely absent, in Swat at this time. Reference can be made to the important archaeological discovery of a large funerary monument (Butkara IV) built in stone masonry, containing the remains of approximately seven generations of a genetically local, single aristocratic family (Olivieri 2019).²¹ The funerary monument (discovered and excavated – but not published – by M. Taddei in 1963) was originally located on the path between two major Buddhist sanctuaries (Butkara I and Butkara III) and was actively in use from

¹⁸ The resplendent aspect of the donor portraits entirely fits with the emphasis in *avadana* texts (e.g. in the *Kotikarna-avadana* in *Divyāvadāna*; Rotman 2008a) on wealth and gold as a sign of good deeds in the past. It is, thus, no wonder that traces of gilding have been found on heads and other fragments of statues depicting lay donors and devotees during recent excavations in Barikot (e.g. the green schist head of a lay princely figure with traces of gilding, BKG 8665). I am grateful to the director of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Pakistan, Dr. Luca M. Olivieri, for permitting me to include this unpublished object from Barikot in the present article.

¹⁹ The personal seal of Indravarma from the Apraca dynasty – an inscribed intaglio set in a gold ring from the British Museum (1998, 0720.1) – also bears the image of a princely figure very like the schist male portraits from Butkara I. Wearing a *paridhana* and *uttariya*, the turbaned figure raises his right hand and holds an object akin to a *vajra* in his left hand. Although Callieri suggests that this figure might represent an early image of Indra, he also considers the possibility that it may after all be a royal portrait (Salomon, Callieri, Schmitt 1999).

²⁰ O. Starza-Majewski (1994) already hypothesized long ago that the princely donor head from Swat, currently in the British Museum, may be a portrait of the Odiraja Senavarma – the local ruler active in the region of Swat. His inscription on a gold plate (dated to the first half of the 1st century CE) tells us that he re-established the relics of Buddha Sakyamuni in the Eka-kuda stupa which he had reconstructed.

²¹ This is a multiple-burial, tripartite monument containing the remains of twenty individuals at the time of discovery. Genetic findings indicate that the individuals buried in the Butkara IV funerary monument shared ancestry with the Swat Protohistoric Graves (SPG) people (Olivieri 2019, 243).

circa 150 BCE to 50 CE (Olivieri 2019).²² This period coincides with the renovation and enlargement of the sanctuary of Butkara I and likely the production of the elaborate donor statues in green schist. The fact that this is the largest funerary building to be discovered in Swat and its environs bespeaks the status of the elite buried there. It also highlights the significance, for the elite, of memorializing deceased relatives and ancestors through traditional funerary rituals²³ and the establishment of visible monuments around their material remains. A small number of the local elite were thus continuing pre-Buddhist burial traditions at a time when generally the burial customs in Swat had already undergone major changes and inhumation was rarely practiced. However, the strategic location of the funerary monument – i.e. proximity and visual connection to two Buddhist sanctuaries – during a period when Buddhism was spreading in the region specifically through the involvement and benefaction of the local elite, clearly demonstrates its connection with the Buddhist world.

The various strands of evidence indicate that the local elite in Swat, along with continuing certain indigenous traditions, were also constituting new forms of Buddhist ritual and praxis, especially those based on donative action and image practice, in several material ways. These practices were not just limited to depositing relics, establishing individual monuments, renovating sacred areas etc., but also extended to creating new sanctuaries,²⁴ giving them their own names²⁵ and populating them with their own images.²⁶

²² Butkara IV is less than half a mile away from Butkara I and even closer to Butkara III.

²³ The burial practices and rituals attested here show certain similarities with the SPG traditions at a time when inhumation practice was almost non-existent in the Gandharan regions. It seems likely that certain elites from Swat continued the burial traditions associated with proto-historic populations of this area (Olivieri 2019).

²⁴ An aspect that is stressed upon in the inscriptions from the region (e.g. the Senavarma inscription, CKI 249). Of all the sanctuaries representing this ideology, only Saidu Sharif I has survived the ravages of time (see Olivieri 2022a).

²⁵ Several inscriptions from Gandhara mention viharas and monasteries named after donors (e.g. CKI 370). The discovery during the 2021 excavation season at Barikot, of a potsherd from a monastic room that has been interpreted as the *gandhakutī*, also identifies a specific vihara named after a donor – “[Dada] Vihara” (BKG 7912, Olivieri et al. 2022c, 176).

²⁶ In this paper, I have refrained from considering whether these portraits could also be representations or commemorative portrayals of the donors’ deceased ancestors/relatives. This is a different line of enquiry that is reserved for future investigation.

4 Sculpting Identity

The very act of commissioning donor portraits to be installed within monastic spaces, and physically integrated within sacred structures, is quite a potent and powerful practice. It immediately alerts us to the possibility of new identities being forged; identities that not only enact the self in worldly terms but also situate it within the sacred sphere. Gleaning patterns in the use and adaptation of widely circulating motifs and iconographies, and identifying the prominence accorded to certain ornamental details, can be instructive in understanding the formulation and presentation of identity through visual means. Some of these visual cues can help us tap into the process by which the elite fashioned for themselves a multifaceted identity.

The donor portraits from Swat are characterized by the appropriation and localization of certain Indic motifs for their ornamentation.²⁷ The significance and centrality of bodily adornment and ornamentation as a deeply rooted cultural phenomenon is well known from the pre-modern Indic artistic and literary traditions (Dehejia 2009; Ali 1998). In this regard, certain recurrent forms of ornamentation sported by the donor figures from Butkara I stand out. While aristocratic male donors are generally represented with elaborate turbans, several female portraits have their faces uncharacteristically marked with designs such as rosettes, crescents and *asvattha* leaves. Facial marks are rare in later Gandharan sculpture. Similar designs, however, mark both human and semi-divine female figures from the ancient Buddhist site of Bharut indicating close visual connections with early Indian Buddhist sculpture. These marks have been interpreted by scholars as carrying auspicious and protective connotations (Dehejia 2009; Chendriye Basu 2014). The use of face marks may also refer to the pan-Indic courtly practice of *alamkara* – ornamentation and adornment – as discussed by Daud Ali (1998), situating this early sculpture from Swat within the Indic cultural context of the urban elite.²⁸ Furthermore, marking and tattooing the face also formed part of the ornamentation practices of local indigenous cultures such as those enjoyed by the Dardic groups originally

²⁷ It is interesting that while some Indic artistic motifs are readily appropriated, others do not find traction in the early Gandharan sculptural tradition at all. For example, the general disregard for female nudity and the strong emphasis on detailed renditions of drapery in this artistic tradition is noteworthy.

²⁸ For *alamkara* and courtly artifice see Ali 1998. Ali argues that Buddhist vinaya literature reflects the same courtly culture that emerges in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* where self-adornment and embellishment of the body with paint, flowers, fine clothes, and jewels was conceived of as an extremely important courtly practice.

inhabiting this region.²⁹ One cannot ignore the possibility, however, that face marks on donor portraits may also be a response to wider cultural currents. In this regard, the presence of face marks in the Parthian artistic tradition may be another connection represented by this motif (see Faccenna 1996; Sinisi 2018).



Figure 9 Earplugs from Barikot, Swat. Swat Museum. © Author

Attention may also be drawn to the peculiar ear ornaments ubiquitous in the early sculpture from Butkara I. Images of donors from statues, relief panels and architectural elements dated to the first century CE from this site are commonly represented with discoidal ear plugs or elongated cylindrical ear pendants inserted within enlarged earlobes.³⁰ Such ear ornaments (although widespread in early historic/historic material culture in South and South-East Asia) are specific to Swat sculptural production and are rarely represented in later Gandharan artistic repertoire where suspended earrings become the visual norm (Tissot 1985; Postel 1989; Micheli 2007).³¹ Both types, however, are commonly represented in early Indian sculpture – both in

²⁹ The women of Kalasha tribes – remnants of this wider indigenous group – continue to bear face tattoos as ornamentation. The elaborate headdresses traditionally sported by them are also noteworthy. For connections between the early Buddhist art of Swat and indigenous Dardic people see Tucci 1997, 165; Filigenzi 2020.

³⁰ Similar ear ornaments are attested on aristocratic figures from the frieze of the Main Stupa at Saidu Sharif I as well as on donor figures from Panr I (e.g. P 630).

³¹ The Lahore Museum Hariti and the Skara Dheri Hariti are two of the few later Gandharan sculptures that sport similar ear ornaments.

non-Buddhist and Buddhist contexts.³² For example, these ear ornament types are encountered in Sunga terracottas³³ as well as sculptures from Bharut, Mathura, Sanghol and some of the Begram Ivories etc.³⁴ Their pervasiveness in early Gandharan art from Swat highlights the significance of their symbolic value as objects of identification in this region. It also speaks to the importance of Indic fashion and ornaments among the elite of Swat where a preference for non-Indic – Central Asian/Iranic – attire and drapery has generally been identified.³⁵ One of the best examples of a discoidal earplug comes from the portrait of the aristocratic male donor discussed above [fig. 7]. His earlobes can be seen stretched around large earplugs which are conspicuously decorated with incised concentric circles. On the other hand, both the donor lady as well as the fragmentary female statue from Swat Museum [figs 5-6], are represented with elongated cylindrical ear pendants decorated with a rosette on one side.³⁶ Michel Postel (1989) has traced the long history of the use of discoidal earplugs and cylindrical ear pendants in India from Bronze age urbanization phases (Harrapan period) right up to the present times in Indigenous material culture. Interestingly the archaeological record from Swat has also turned up several decorated and undecorated earplugs [fig. 9] and ear pendants. While many are made of terracotta, some pieces are intricately crafted from bone and ivory. To this category belongs a decorated elongated ear pendant from the site of Saidu Sharif I (S 2336), carved in bone and turned on a lathe [fig. 10].³⁷ Additionally, an ivory earplug with a floral design has also been recovered during the recent archaeological excavations at Barikot (BKG 9387).³⁸

32 These ear ornament types have been commonly found in archaeological excavations from India as well (see Postel 1989, 9-54).

33 The presence of seals and coins with Kharoshti inscriptions in Eastern India from the Sunga period attests to the flow of objects and ideas between these regions (Stronge 1995, 14).

34 While discal and annular type ear plugs are represented on the earliest Indic sculptures from pre-Mauryan and Mauryan period, the elongated cylindrical (or reel type) seems to appear around the first century CE (Postel 1989, 55-75).

35 The popularity of this ear ornament for female donor figures from Butkara I is especially interesting, because generally non-Indic motifs and styles are preferred for their dress and drapery.

36 In some cases, these are quite like Postel's (1989) 'reel-type' ear ornament category.

37 This ear ornament is currently displayed in Swat Museum. Although clearly an elongated ear pendant meant to be inserted into the earlobes, it has been labelled as a handle in the excavation report (Callieri 1989, 174) and chess piece in the Museum's label. Marshall (1960, 690) also reports the discovery of an elongated (or reel-type) ear ornament in dark green glass with one side decorated with a rosette from Taxila. In some of the early bone and ivory objects from Taxila, such as the figured mirror handles, we also see nude but bejeweled women sporting similar ear ornaments.

38 I am grateful to the director of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Pakistan, Dr. Luca M. Olivieri, for permitting me to include this unpublished object from Barikot in



Figure 10
Elongated ear pendant from Saidu Sharif I, S 2336. L. 9.3 cm; diam. 2.4 cm. © Callieri 1989, fig. 135

Examples from excavations at the proto-historic site of Kalako-de-ray as well as the urban settlement of Barikot in Swat point to the fact that such ear ornaments long remained in fashion in this region. They were worn by the urban laity in the early centuries of the Common Era up until late antiquity (Micheli 2007; Olivieri 2022b, 266). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that some of the ear ornament motifs from the archaeological record are replicated on the donor portraits from Butkara I. For example, specimens of discoidal earplugs with concentric circles from Barikot [fig. 8] closely mirror the earplugs worn by the male donor figure from Swat Museum. The ear pendant from Saidu Sharif I is a decorated version of those worn by numerous male and female donor figures from Butkara I and other early Buddhist sites in Swat. The use of indigenous Indic ornaments

the present article.

for donor portraits anchors these figures within the Indic cultural context. This may be deemed as a deliberate attempt to construct a localized iteration of a pan-Indic urban and aristocratic cultural identity – an identity that would also connect local aristocrats from this region to the mythologized palatial world of prince Siddhartha. In this vein, it is interesting to note that the elongated, cylindrical ear pendants donned by aristocratic donors from Butkara I are replicated on courtly characters depicted in the earliest Gandharan visual narratives of the Buddha’s historical biography. The large lunette-shaped relief from Butkara I depicting *Royal Chaplain Introduces Yaśodharā* as well as several narrative reliefs from the famous Saidu Sharif Frieze are fitting examples.³⁹

Interestingly, the epigraphic evidence from Swat hints at similar endeavors. The Odirajas ruled in Swat in the 1st century CE – a period roughly coinciding with the production of early donor portraits from Butkara I. The evidence that Odirajas were concerned with garnering political power and legitimizing authority through Buddhism, comes clearly through their donative inscriptions and, most importantly, their attempt to trace their lineage to the Sakya clan of the Buddha. The well-known inscription by the Odi king Senavarma proclaims inheritance from the indigenous Indic *Ikṣvaku* lineage (or *ismaho* in Gandhari) through the legendary figure of Uttaraseṇa (Baums, Salomon 2007; Albery 2020, 225).⁴⁰ The narrative of the Sakyan origin of the royal house of Uddiyana is also reported by the Chinese traveller Xuanzang as well as found in extant fragments of the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* (Deeg 2011). Proclaiming this lineage was thus important for its legitimizing function for local rulers, and regional dynasties had resorted to this very tactic in different times (Deeg 2011). This localized narrative is also preserved in an intricately carved panel from the Saidu Sharif Frieze (S 241, pl. IV, Olivieri 2022a). Visual media, with all its power and immediacy, was thus variously exploited for constructing connections between the local elite and the pan-Indic urban culture as well as the courtly world of Buddhist traditions.

A variety of Central Asian, Parthian, and Hellenistic motifs and styles are also present in the representations of aristocratic donors. The deliberate appropriation and domestication of these motifs for donor portraits provides a glimpse into the intentions behind the visual construction of identity: an identity that not only maintained social distinction on the local level but also aided in navigating the

³⁹ B 2816, pl. CLXII; Faccenna 1962-64. Also see SS 12; Olivieri 2022a.

⁴⁰ *Ikṣvaku* is the name of the legendary *cakravartin* (wheel-turning) king.

broader political currents in the region.⁴¹ The recurrent use of a hand gesture in the iconography of donor figures from Butkara I is particularly striking in this regard. Both the donor lady and the male donor [figs 5, 7] are portrayed with their right hands raised in a gesture with the open palm facing outward.⁴² The gesture of the raised hand with the outward facing palm is encountered in several other donor figures (both statues and relief panels) from Butkara I as well as other sites in Swat such as Panr I, Butkara III etc. A female donor bust on a Gandharan-Corinthian capital from Butkara I is also portrayed making this gesture with her right hand as she holds a reliquary in her left hand [fig. 11].⁴³ Moreover, a figured Corinthian capital all the way from Surkh Kotal also bears a male bust with his right hand raised in a similar fashion and the left holding out an offering (Cap. 142.5, Tissot 2006, 64).⁴⁴



Figure 11 Figured Gandharan-Corinthian capital. Swat Museum. © Author

41 As Calhoun (1994, 21) points out, identity, even when individual, is a construction which is intrinsically linked to how one intends to be known in specific ways by others.

42 Although much damaged, the position of the arm of the male donor indicates that it was raised in a similar gesture as the donor lady.

43 B 7354. Currently housed in Swat Museum.

44 Chronologically this site is slightly later than the Buddhist sites from Swat, yet it has been compellingly hypothesized that craftsmen from Swat may have been hired to produce figured Corinthian capitals from Surkh Kotal. In some cases, sculpture from this site also exhibits motifs that were appropriated from the Parthian imperial imagery (Olivieri, Sinisi 2021).

The ubiquity of this motif in portrayals of donor figures across Gandhara indicates that this hand gesture was an important visual device and may have variously served as a proclamation of homage, reverence, benediction and/or submission between the devotee and divinity.⁴⁵ Although this specific gesture recalls the Buddha's quintessential *abhayamudrā*, as a pictorial device it had a long life in the ancient Iranian artistic repertoire from the Achaemenid to the Sasanian period. Various scholars have addressed the significance of hand gestures in the Iranian and Near Eastern context as symbolic devices with royal connotations and their use for the expression of social and religious relations (Choksy 1990; Dirven 2008; Heyn 2010 etc.). In the Iranian context, for instance, the funerary portrait busts from Palmyra and royal portraits from Hatra primarily exemplify this gesture for proclaiming reverence to the divine (Choksy 1990; Dirven 2008).⁴⁶ Some coins roughly dating to the Saka-Parthian period in Gandhara also show an equestrian ruler making a similar gesture.⁴⁷ The use of this gesture for the portrayal of both male and female aristocratic donors from Butkara I, dating roughly to the Saka-Parthian period, suggests that widely prevalent visual codes, especially those from imperial contexts, may have been employed as a gloss to represent essentially local Buddhist rituals. Furthermore, this practice betrays the active desire on the part of donors to express their identity and status through a visual lexicon that not only conveys elite and royal association but is also readily legible across cultural boundaries.

5 Materiality of Donor Portraits

While much of the patronage of local dynasties and the urban elite may have been politically informed, yet the imagery of donor portraits also goes beyond mere worldly concerns of communicating power and prestige. The very lack of an inscribed record on these sculptures, or for that matter any other architectural relief bearing

⁴⁵ It should be noted, however, that this reading of hand gestures is largely informed by familiar western religious norms and conventions. Making more active use of the body for communicating with the transcendent is present in other models of ritual behaviour as well.

⁴⁶ The Palmyrene and Hatrene portraits were used in funerary and cultic contexts. In Parthian art the gesture of the raised hand as well as *prokynesis* were reserved for portraits of royalty in religious contexts (Choksy 1990).

⁴⁷ Although without provenance, a base tetradrachm of an Indo-Parthian ruler, Abdagases shows the equestrian ruler with his palm raised on the obverse. This motif is also found on coins from Butkara I of the local dynast, Apracaraja Aspavarma (Göbl 1976, nos. 60-1).

donor portraits, complicates any straightforward interpretation of these simply as visual proclamations of honour and patronage. These images are certainly that, but there are other, more complex, intentions and aspirations embedded in them. Just as the myriad Gandharan reliquaries carrying named donative inscriptions were hidden away from public eyes and interred deep within stupas, the lack of recorded names on donor portraits makes these images virtually anonymous.⁴⁸ This fact alone demands the exploration of other dynamics underpinning the complex act of commissioning and erecting elaborate portrait images at monastic establishments. What did these nameless donor portraits 'do' in the sacred area of a Buddhist monastic space? What did their material presence and performative⁴⁹ aspect signify for ritual action and religious experience?

Recent object-centred archeological, anthropological, and art-historical scholarship has underscored the materiality and efficacy of artefacts as embodied objects, leading to new understandings regarding their ontologies and their multivalent effects on human intention, perception, and action. Materiality entails a consideration of the material properties of objects, their agency and affects, and the complex ways in which they are entangled with other objects as well as with human actors. It is worth noting that in the context of Buddhism as well, the aspiration towards release and the ultimate belief in immateriality is itself expressed and achieved through the very materiality of its forms, rituals, and practices (Miller 2005; Rotman 2008b). Addressing donor portraits from Butkara I as materially grounded, embodied objects can, therefore, help us anticipate the varied dimensions of their meaning and function within particular and wider contexts.⁵⁰

Lynn Meskell has cogently argued in the context of Egyptian art that materiality entails "deconstructing our notions that objects and subjects are discrete and essential entities that inhabit particular,

48 Image and text rarely intersect in the Gandharan context. While names of donors are ubiquitous in donative inscriptions from Gandhara, images of donors seldom include their names. And yet the mimetic aspects of these donor portraits may have ensured recognition and appreciation from contemporary audiences. Both names and portrait images were, therefore, conceived of as two separate but parallel vehicles to evoke the physical existence of the donor. This phenomenon can be contrasted with the use of the written word in Buddhist sites from India proper (e.g. Mathura, Bharut and Sanchi etc.) where text either captioned conventional images or clearly named the donor in a visible place. Claudine Bautze-Picron (2014) has also discussed the significance of inscribed names on images of donors from Eastern India. Unlike Gandhara, the presence and visibility of named inscriptions on donor images from Buddhist centres in India may indicate that donors were presented and recognized through their names.

49 Here the notion of performativity is influenced by Judith Butler's (1998) conceptualization of 'performance' and the repetition and conventionality embedded in it.

50 The usefulness of materiality as a theoretical framework for analysing Gandharan art has been discussed by the author elsewhere. See Elahi 2020 with references.

impermeable worlds” (2004, 119). To understand how our donor portraits functioned in the sacred monastic space, the notion of homology and continuity between bodies and objects – in this case the actual donors and their sculpted representations – can be particularly useful. The idea is to think of personhood as not just limited to corporeality but something that could also extend beyond to objects and images. As visible, tangible, and mimetic portrayals of donors, the sculpted images of Butkara I establish a binding connection between themselves and the bodies of the donors they represent (Gell 1998).⁵¹ The notion that an image (*pratimā*) and its subject (*pramā*) were one and the same was already deeply rooted in the ancient Indic culture and society (DeCaroli 2015, 51; Alberly 2022, 9). In Vedic tradition, images were primarily used in magical rites and rituals. For example, portraits or artistic representations of specific individuals primarily functioned as doubles or proxies through which the subjects could be controlled or subdued (DeCaroli 2015, 55). Images in the Gandharan Buddhist context were also thought to possess inherent agency, power, and presence.⁵² Once deployed in the Buddhist realm, however, the function of the portrait image was radically redefined for the sake of attaining positive spiritual goals. These ideas can help us appreciate how through mimesis and materiality, naturalistic representations of donors from Butkara I exerted agency both by portraying the donor as well as standing in for him/her.⁵³ Moreover, the durability of the material chosen for carving these images as well as the notions associated with it – permanence and purity – may have symbolically charged the subjects with the very same qualities.⁵⁴ In this vein, I suggest that the donor portraits from Butkara I, carved in the costly and permanent medium of stone, mate-

51 “The action of making a representational image, of any kind involves a kind of binding, in that the image of the prototype is bound to, or fixed and imprisoned within, the index” (Gell 1998, 102). In his seminal work, *Art and Agency*, the anthropologist Alfred Gell elucidated the social agency of artworks and emphasized the importance of analyzing what art does rather than what it means – an approach that has considerable potential for interpreting ancient art as well.

52 While travelling in Gandhara, Xuanzang reports “There is a figure of Buddha in white stone about eighteen feet high. Sometimes there are people who see the image come out on an evening and go around the great stupa. Lately a band of robbers wished to go in and steal. The image immediately came forth and went before the robbers. Affrighted they ran away; the image then returned to its own place and remained fixed as before. The robbers, affected by what they had seen, began a new life” (DeCaroli 2015, 146).

53 For similar ideas on portraits and personhood in the context of the ancient Andes, see Wilkinson 2023. The existence of similar visual practices in the context of ancient Near-East has also been pointed out by scholars (see Bahrani 2001; Dirven 2008).

54 Stone is frequently associated with ideas of permanence and purity. Ancient literary sources also inform us of the magical and symbolic properties attributed to various stones in antiquity (see Callieri 1997, 29). Additionally, the deliberate choice of green

rially and metaphorically functioned as embodied extensions of real donors:⁵⁵ not merely representing them but making them ‘present’ across spatial and temporal boundaries, in physical proximity to sacred objects and structures.⁵⁶ The materiality of the donor portraits and their physical entanglement with the materiality of the stupa – a structure that ‘presences’ the Buddha – is particularly significant for the hermeneutic of presence in these objects. The importance of the relic cult and, by extension, the stupa in Gandharan Buddhism cannot be emphasized enough. As a receptacle for his relics, the stupa symbolized the Buddha himself, his *dharmic*-body, his concrete presence (Fussman 1986).⁵⁷ Through their stone images, the donors were thus eternally ‘presented’ in the presence of the Buddha.

The essential physicality of the donors’ gestures as well as the nature and variety of the material offerings and gifts held out by these figures, emphasize their performativity as conduits to ritual action⁵⁸ and karmic benefit. In other words, their performative aspects serve to animate the statues and concretize donative ritual. The offerings held by donors enact the abstract and yet concrete notion of *dana* – ritualized acts of donation – in visual, material, and metaphorical terms. The concept of *dana* refers to a ritual gift offered to the Buddha, his stupa, or his sangha to reap *dharm*a or spiritual merit, making it the foundation of Buddhist practice (Lewis 2015, 321). *Vinaya* and *avadana* literature abounds with karmic histories that

schist – with its gem-like, visually captivating qualities – and the possible notions attached to it should be kept in mind.

55 Although scholars studying similar phenomena in other contexts have used the term ‘surrogate’ (e.g. for the portraits of elite figures at Hatra; see Dirven 2008), I deliberately refrain from using it here. Surrogacy implies distance and disembodied substitution. Embodied extension refers instead to eschewing distance between the sign and the signified, the index and prototype, the subject and object. Embodied extension implies that bodies are not conceived of as bounded impermeable entities and that corporeal personhood can be multiplied and distributed even between the animate and the inanimate. Here the notion of embodiment is influenced by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For a discussion on Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of embodiment see Carman 2008.

56 The notion of ‘presence’ has also been elucidated by Schopen (2004a) in the context of personal names in donative inscriptions from Sanchi. For conceptualizations on the presence of objects, or object-oriented ontology, in different art historical contexts see Belting 1994; Bahrani 2014; Gaifman, Platt 2018.

57 The evidence that in this region relics, contained within the stupa, were regarded as the body of the Buddha also comes from the local Odi king Senavarma’s donative inscription where a clear distinction is drawn between the Buddha’s last historic body and his final body in the form of relics (Baums 2017, 56). Veneration of the stupa is also a visual theme that is frequently encountered in Gandharan art. For relic cult in Gandhara see Brown 2006. For a concise discussion on the symbolism of the Buddhist stupa see Polichetti 2002.

58 For an understanding of ritual as social action and praxis or in other words ‘ritualization’ see Bell 1992. For a discussion on archaeological approaches to religious ritual, see Fogelin 2007.

elaborate upon the important ritual practice of *dakṣina* (giving), *dana* or donation – especially as a lay imperative – for generating positive merit. That such legends and beliefs were widely popular in Gandhara is evidenced by their presence in the specific vinaya and avadana texts redacted in this region such as the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* and *Divyāvadāna* (Rotman 2008a).⁵⁹ Additionally, certain extant didactic narratives such as the Gandhari version of the *Anavatapta-gāthā* – written in the local Kharoshti script – indicate how the ritual gift of even a single flower to the Buddha or his stupa could result in generating unlimited karmic benefit (Salomon 1999, 30). Apart from texts, the overwhelming concern with accruing merit through donative acts emerges strongly in donative inscriptions from Gandhara dating to the turn of the Common Era (Albery 2020, 379). These inscriptions highlight the ritualized practice of donations and relic deposit, establishing *dana* as an important lay ritual for the purpose of accruing karmic benefit.

Ancient Buddhist textual sources such as the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*, likely dating to the beginning of the Common Era, further shed light on the materiality of donated objects in the ritual practice of *dana*. In this text, the Buddha enjoins monks not to throw away donated cloth and, instead, use it to fill cracks of monastery walls – when it is worn out and all other use for it has been exhausted – in order for it to continue producing merit for the donor (Salomon 1999, 246; Schopen 2004b, 241). Some of the codes clearly emphasize the significance of merit especially for lay donors to “go from this world to the other world” (Schopen 2004b, 239). These textual codes voice the social and religious concerns of the time. The use and reuse of donor portraits as most other Buddhist sculpture in Gandhara, itself speaks to concerns of merit production and continuation.⁶⁰ Seen in this light, the donor portraits from Butkara I may be responding to donors’ deep anxieties regarding merit-making as well as their soteriological aspirations. The intrinsic materiality of the donor portraits, their offerings, and gestures, as well as their physical place within sacred structures, demands that we refrain from seeing them simply as disembodied expressions of purely symbolic action. Rather, as embodied extensions of donors, they effectively tap into the material dimensions of ritual praxis.

And yet, as Merleau-Ponty has argued, art is not something that “exists in itself as a thing, but the work that reaches the viewer and invites him to take up the gesture that created it” (Carman 2008, 186). Through their visual authority and distributed affects, the do-

⁵⁹ For example, *Toyikamaha-avadana* (Divy 465.10-469.19, Rotman 2008a) narrativizes the practice of *prasada* (practice of faith) through acts of donation and veneration.

⁶⁰ For the practice of use and reuse in Ancient India see Brancaccio 2022.

nor portraits from Butkara I were also agents for evoking responses and setting into motion wider currents.⁶¹ For example, their agentive and affective capacity may have been instrumental for naturalizing donative action and inspiring *śraddhā* (faith) in viewers. *Śraddhā* is literally translated as faith, but as Rotman (2008b) argues, it can also be seen as an act of devotion and generosity triggered through vision and sight.⁶² Buddhist texts clearly indicate that monasteries were busy places with much traffic of nuns, monks and lay people. The intention to affect visitors through spectacular visual sights is something that clearly comes across in various Buddhist texts and legal codes (Albery 2022). In his work on the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*, Gregory Schopen (2004c; 2006) has compellingly demonstrated that monastics of the Indic North and Northwest had embraced the materialistic values and aesthetics of the urban elite and liberally employed art and visual imagery on stupas and in monasteries to attract patronage from wealthy donors. Along with the usual artistic repertoire of figural imagery, the regal representations of real donors, intricately carved out of visually captivating green schist stones, and eternally performing donative rituals in sacred areas of Buddhist establishments, would have enabled imitative practices in contemporary viewers. They would have reinforced and perpetuated the cycle of *dāna* – something that would have aligned well with the interests of the sangha in this early period when it was still dependent on the generosity of the local aristocrats and elites.⁶³ In other words, these performative donor portraits would have rendered normative the social and soteriological significance of ritualized donative action. The aristocratic elite were, therefore, not only carving for themselves a lasting space in the Buddhist monastic world, but also constituting new and dynamic forms of ritual behaviour and religious practice predicated upon the visual and material enactment of donative and devotional action.

⁶¹ For the many powers inherent in images see Freedburg 1989.

⁶² For the notion of *śraddhā* in *Divyāvadāna* see Rotman 2008a; Brancaccio 2011.

⁶³ This completely changes in the Kushan period when the local aristocracies and dynasties abruptly disappear from the picture. In this period Buddhist monasteries become proxies in Kushan administration, controlling resources and partaking in trade, no longer requiring the mediation of the local elite for their financial subsistence (Olivieri 2022a, 19 fn. 17).

6 Conclusion

This paper argues that the numerous representations of donors and devotees from the site of Butkara I are not generic images but portraits or likenesses of aristocratic donors that seamlessly straddle the mundane and the supramundane. Using local, pan-Indic, and cross-cultural visual signifiers, these donor portraits formulate an identity that negotiates prestige and power both on the local and the global level – that is, they anchor the subjects within an Indic urban elite lineage and yet speak in a courtly language that responds to and effectively navigates the shifting imperial and cultural currents in the region. In their capacity as donor portraits, the sculptures from Butkara I were not merely powerful visual images, but their materiality enabled them to function as embodied extensions of real aristocratic men and women actively participating in the infinite performance of donative ritual. Through their physical incorporation within Buddhist sacred structures, stone likenesses of donors would have “presenced” the donors and devotees within sacred spaces and mediated a direct and deeply emotive relationship between the lay donor and devotee, the sacred architecture, and the Buddha.⁶⁴

Lefevre (2011, 83) has argued that portraits in ancient India served to “perpetuate the gift and the act of devotion”. An inscribed donor image from the twelfth century also aptly highlights this concept. The inscription on the image reads: “He, through his image, performs worship constantly” (Schopen 2004a, 394). As embodied extensions of donors, the performative donor portraits from Butkara I were likely conceived of as continuous sources for accruing merit even after the donor himself or herself had long perished.⁶⁵ This is not surprising considering the ubiquity in early Buddhist texts and monastic codes of statements such as the following:

Actions never perish even after a hundred aeons, but having arrived at the optimum time, they bear fruit for the man.
(*Sanghabhedavastu-Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*)⁶⁶

Similar statements abound in *Divyāvadāna* as well (Rotman 2008a; 2008b). Buddhist discourses on causal efficacy of normative Bud-

⁶⁴ Although beyond the scope of the current paper, the notion of *darśan*, as shared connection between the divine and the devotee, may be particularly useful for understanding this relationship. For *darśan* see Rotman 2008b; Gell 1998, 116.

⁶⁵ A sense of this can be gleaned from the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*. Also see Alberly 2020, who argues that donative activity had the power to cause desired dharmas in the future. See a somewhat similar interpretation of inscribed named reliefs from Sanchi by Schopen (2004a).

⁶⁶ Schopen 2004a.

dhist rituals and practices across past, present, and future rebirths have been discussed by Gregory Schopen (2004a) as well as Henry Albery (2020, 554) on the basis of epigraphic activity.⁶⁷ By commissioning enduring images of themselves infinitely performing donative ritual, and using visual signifiers co-opted from varied cultural contexts, the local aristocratic elite not only constructed high-status identities to distinguish themselves from contemporary audiences, but also negotiated long-term karmic benefits (such as auspicious rebirths) for themselves. That this practice had continuity in Buddhist tradition, can be attested from the various representations of donors and devotees in images from India up until the thirteenth century (see Bautze-Picron 2014; Kim 2020). Donor portraits from Butkara I thus not only offered the local elite an embodied experience in the sacred Buddhist space, but also a performative technology for ritual practice geared towards indefinite merit-making.

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⁶⁷ For a discussion on the importance of auspicious rebirths in donative praxis in the context of Ajanta, see Tournier (2020).

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