



A CHANCE DISCOVERY

The Lost Terracotta Buddhist Stupa of Kahu-jo-daro

An Attempt at Reconstruction

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The recently disappeared Buddhist stupa at Kahu-jo-daro, Mirpurkhas was originally a part of a larger Buddhist establishment and also one of the finest surviving examples of the tradition of Indo-Roman terracotta art and architecture of the pre-independence era. A large mound, extending over 30 acres (approximately 12 hectares) of land, it was situated to the north of the present town of Mirpurkhas – today the district headquarters of Thar and Parkar in the province of Sindh, Pakistan (Fig. 1). Recent images of the site indicate complete destruction of the main stupa including its plinth level as well as its surroundings (Fig. 2).

Like many other archaeological finds, the Kahu-jo-daro Buddha stupa was a chance discovery. The site was initially noticed by General John Jacob (1812-1858), who was then Acting Commissioner in Sindh, though he did not understand its historical significance. But, interestingly, in 1859 James Gibbs, a senior British Official, described the site as remains of a brick platform or “thul” and had excavated the upper part of the mound. Though he does not appear to have followed scientific excavation methods but he was very careful while removing a fine earthenware pot from the top strata of the hollow chamber, which contained some pieces of crystal and amethyst. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of these finds remained unknown for many years but recent research reveals that the earthenware pot was deposited in the Karachi Museum. After Gibbs’s exploration, surprisingly, we do not see any activity at the site until 1890, when Sir John Woodburn (1843-1902), later Collector of Hyderabad (Sindh), accidentally came across a large painted terracotta seated Buddha image (now in the V&A collection, London) and also the head of a second image and rescued them from railway contractors in 1894.¹ As was the case in Mohenjodaro (one of the largest Harappan metropolises in Sindh, Pakistan), the bricks of the mound at Kahu-jo-daro were also extensively used after

1890 for laying the local railway tracks and construction of buildings. However, the historical importance of the Kahu-jo-daro stupa remained unknown until Henry Cousens, (then Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey, Western Circle), excavated the site in 1909-10 (Fig. 3). Regarding his first visit to the site, he wrote that he was “surprised to find that there was so much of the stupa, which occupied the centre of the north end of the general site, still remaining.” One of the finest terracotta Buddhist monuments was thus saved from extinction.

Archaeological remnants from the site

What was visible at the time of excavation was a layer of sun-dried bricks projecting from a heap of rubbish. The circular base of the stupa rested on a square platform which probably belonged to an earlier structure that supported a stupa. The stupa was once surmounted by a large *harmika* (square capital), which contained the sacred relics presumably of the Buddha or a Buddhist saint. The casket containing these relics was later handed over to the Mahabodhi Society, Sarnath. The relics were then enshrined in the new Mulagandhakuti Vihara there.²

In addition to the earthenware pot, a stone relic casket was found at the Kahu-jo-daro stupa. It contained a small crystal bottle covered with white sand, and a number of offerings of coral and crystal beads, seed pearls, four gold beads, one small gold wire ring, ten copper coins, some small lumps of charcoal, a few grains of unidentified material, and some other odd beads. Inside the crystal bottle was a small silver cylindrical case containing some minute object the size of a pin-head and some dust, wrapped in gold leaf.

The existence of relics in two different containers raised the question in the minds of the excavators, whether the relics belonged to two persons in the same reliquary.



3

Fig. 1 Site map of Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan

Fig. 2 Kahu-jo-daro Stupa site pic, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 2012

Fig. 3 Site view before excavation, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, Photo Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India

In the absence of any inscription or literary evidence, the identification of the Kahu-jo-daro stupa relics has remained a mystery. However, their importance cannot be overlooked.

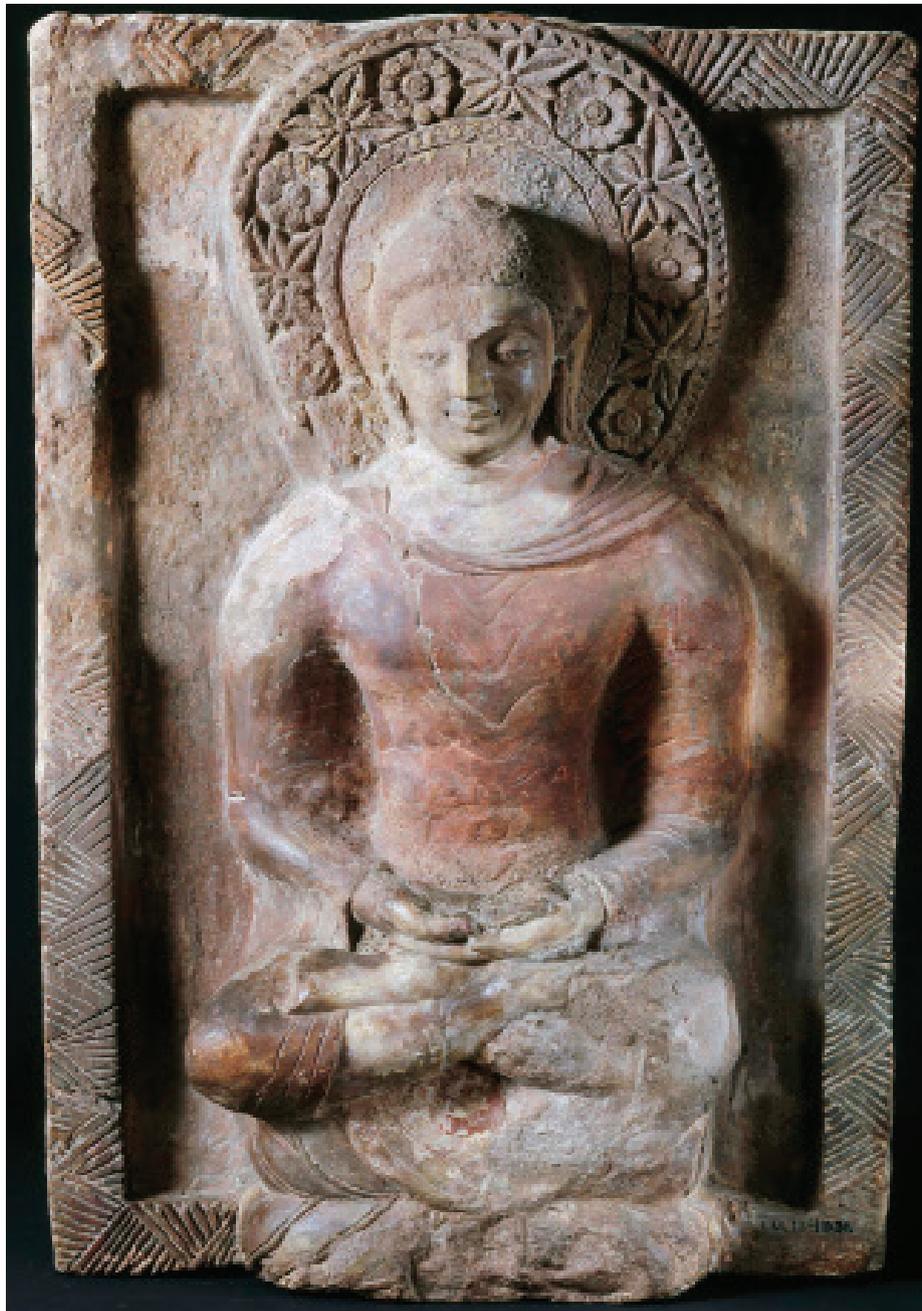
Interestingly, similar stone relic caskets found in the ruined stupa of Panahiam Jhar at Saheth-Maheth in Uttar Pradesh, were dated by Sir John Marshall between the 3rd and 4th centuries BCE. Such caskets were also discovered in the coeval Boria stupa near Junagadh in Kathiawar, Gujarat (now in Junagadh Museum).

Originally, the Kahu-jo-daro stupa was decorated with 11 terracotta relief panels of seated Buddhas in the niches of the four faces of the platform. Each of the north, east, and south faces, had three large panels (about 65 cm. in height) and two smaller panels on either side of the entrance to the stupa on the west face (**Fig. 4**). At the time of the excavation, only seven large images and a small one were found in situ. Images were missing from the southern niche on the east face, the eastern niche on the south face, and the northern side of the entrance on the west face. Of the two large missing images (one seated image and one



4

Fig. 4 West face of Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, Photo Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India



5

Fig. 5 Seated Buddha, Terracotta, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 5th century CE, Coll.: Victoria and Albert Museum, London

head) probably rescued from railway contractors by Mr. Woodburn, as already mentioned, and one of them (seated image) is now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (**Fig. 5**). All these terracotta sculptures were originally painted.

According to the excavator, only six Buddha images were removed from the four faces of the platform for safekeeping. However, in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) collection, Mumbai, there is one image of the Buddha from this group seated cross-legged on a low stool in the Gandhara style, bearing the same site number, which does not find any mention in the excavation reports but has been noticed recently in one of the site photographs from the ASI archives (**Fig. 6**).

Kahu-jo-daro is probably the only site in the region which has yielded so many relief panels of the Buddha images, so far. Stupas at other sites in the region such as Thul-Mir-Rukan, Sudheranjodaro, and Deperghangro were 'in all likelihood' also decorated with terracotta work.

The site has also yielded hundreds of sun-dried votive clay tablets, almost identical to those discovered from Nalanda and Sarnath in eastern India. These votive tablets were used by pilgrims as offerings and lay in heaps in front of the three shrines at the entrance to the stupa. They were found along with copper coins approximately 15 cm below the actual ground level.

The remaining artefacts, in the collection of the CSMVS museum, are mainly of decorative nature and



6

Fig. 6 Seated Buddha, Terracotta, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 5th century CE, Coll.: CSMVS, TC 2

were used as adornments on the outer face of the base as well as the stupa. According to the museum records, the collection consists of 297 moulded bricks and architectural fragments; five large seated Buddha images in high relief; and a smaller image within a niche, a standing male figure in relief (identified as a devotee), two roundels depicting the image of Kubera, a few rectangular bricks bearing the image of Jambhala (?), a large number of sun-dried clay tablets as also a tiny fragment of stone depicting a Jataka scene.

Buddhism in Sindh

When and how Buddhism found a footing in Sindh is difficult to establish owing to the paucity of archaeological and literary material. At the same time, it is evident that Buddhism took root in the Gandhara region during the time of the great Mauryan Emperor Asoka. It continued to expand in the subsequent period under the hegemony of the Indo-Greek, Scythian, Parthian and Kushana dynasties. More particularly, the Shinkot casket inscription from the

Bajour in the North-West Frontier Province proves that the Great Buddhist Indo-Greek King Menander propagated Buddhism between the Hindukush and Sindh.

There can be little doubt that the terracotta Buddhist stupa at Kahu-jo-daro was not an isolated artistic activity in this area. Asoka, had developed a close association with this region when he was first appointed as the Governor of Takshasila, the chief city of the eastern region of Gandhara, in the ancient Peshawar Valley (c 300-273 B.C.), now in north-west Pakistan. Later, when he became Emperor and embraced Buddhism, the site of Takshasila was selected for the erection of one of the major Buddha stupas, as attested by the Kharoshti versions of the Fourteen Rock Edicts at Shahbazgarhi and Manshera. This must have been one of the many artistic projects he commissioned.

The activity of establishing religious monuments gathered momentum and was firmly established during the Kushana rule. Kanishka, the most famous Kushana ruler, made Peshawar his winter capital. He had a great fascination for Buddhism, and the fourth Buddhist council in Kashmir was held during his reign. The existing great stupa at Mohenjodaro is an interesting architectural example of this period in the region. The remains of the Buddhist establishment at Mohenjodaro, indicate that the main stupa in the centre and the apartments around the periphery were built and rebuilt and also repaired more than once. The earliest floor of the quadrangles was originally made of bricks taken from the existing older structures of the Harappan culture.

Art Traditions

It is a matter of fact that local art traditions in north-western India gradually got assimilated into the Greco – Roman style of the Gandhara region and this idiom together with the indigenous style at Mathura (northern India) metamorphosed into an Indianness which could wisely be termed as the India – Gandhara art tradition. An interesting literary reference in the Rudrayanavadana of Divyadana mentions close commercial and cultural relations between Rajgriha (in Bihar) and the Rorua (modern Rohri in Western Pakistan).

The Allahabad Pillar inscription mentions the glorious expedition of Samudragupta (330 -370 A.D.) in the north-western frontier of India which brought the people of Gandhara and Central India face to face and helped them to establish relations in trade and culture. In the Sindh region the indelible mark of the Gupta influence on a number of brick stupas, can be attributed to Chandragupta II (375-412 C.E), as mentioned in the Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription.

The different art elements from different geographical locations which constituted the art of Kahu-jo-daro are enough indication that the artists of this region were liberal and flexible in accepting various architectural principles, forms and designs from the Gandhara as well

as the Kushana – Gupta art tradition. Dr. Moti Chandra commented on these newly found ideas of art and the transformation of the new concepts in temple architecture, its forms and decorations, saying, "Architecture, both Hindu and Buddhist, if it were to be in stone naturally required plenty of money and time. But the people in the Gupta age seem to have been in a hurry to propagate their newly made discoveries in the field of aesthetics and art forms as extensively and within as short a time as possible. Building of the brick temples and stupas and decorating them with carved and moulded bricks and figures caught their fertile imaginations as this new mode of construction was cheaper".³

There is no doubt that religious faith in this region survived even after the Arab conquest which is borne out by Pala images, which bear inscriptions recording their installation by a Buddhist monk of Uddandepura from Sindh (same as Oddantapuri Mahavihara, Bihar Shariff, near Nalanda, 11th Century C.E). The Kahu-jo-daro stupa at Mirpurkhas yielded hundreds of unbaked clay votive tablets and Arab copper coins at the entrance to the stupa on the west face and helps us to conclude that the establishment was in worship and also remained a living Buddhist centre at least up to the 9th-10th century C.E.

Religious Inspiration

The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, (CSMVS), Mumbai has the largest and the most comprehensive collection of finds from the Kahu-jo-daro stupa. It provides a rich source to examine the religious as well as the artistic activities of the 5th-6th century inhabitants of the site. It is significant that, except for images of the Buddha, the site has not yielded any outstanding



Mahayana images. Though several contemporary Buddhist monuments in the eastern and western parts of India are replete with representations of the Bodhisattvas, the considerable fragmentary remains from Kahu-jo-daro do not indicate the possibility of even one Bodhisattva image here. However, the presence of Kubera and Jambhala(?) images would only remotely connect the site with the full-grown Mahayana tradition (Fig. 7). Moreover, the stupa structure, made of sun-dried bricks, predates decorative terracottas and bricks.

From an examination of the remains from the site it is obvious that the original Kaho-jo-daro stupa structure was erected by devotees of the orthodox Hinayana Buddhism who had only marginally accepted the Mahayana tenets. The fact is corroborated by the records of the contemporary Chinese travellers. Xuanzang (629-645 CE) mentioned that Buddhism was at its peak in the Sindh region and that the king of the region was a Buddhist. Yi-Jing (671-695 CE) observed that the Sammitiya sect of Hinayana tradition dominated the region. The Sammitiya sect had been quite popular and widespread during the 3rd-4th centuries CE, as is evident from one of the earliest inscriptions at Sarnath which states that around the 3rd century this sect drove out the Sarvastivadins. Later, they

became more prominent at the time of Harshavardhan (606-647 CE). Yi-Jing also recorded the presence of a large number of monasteries of this period from Ahichhatra, Sravasti, Vaisali, Sarnath, Kapilavastu, Malwa, Valabhi and the region of Sindh.⁴

It is very likely therefore that the original sun-dried brick stupa structure of Kahu-jo-daro was purely Hinayana in character. In all probability it was in existence at least a couple of centuries before the introduction of Buddha images. The Mahayana influence is evident in the eleven Buddha relief panels found in the niches on the platform. These and other smaller panels must have been added later as a result of the Sammitiya sect accepting the image of the Buddha in their religious practices.

Buddhism survived even after the Arab conquest of the region in 715 CE, as is evident from the presence of hundreds of unbaked clay votive tablets and Arab copper coins found at the entrance to the stupa. The clay tablets in the collection are of different sizes varying from 4 cms-9 cms in length and are mostly oval in shape. Most of the tablets bear the inscription "Ye dharma" under the image of the Buddha or stupa in the Brahmi character of the 7th or 8th century similar to those found at Nalanda (now in Bihar) (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7 Kubera, Terracotta, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 5th century CE, Dia. approximately 20 cms, Coll.: CSMVS, TC 51

Fig. 8 Nalanda type seals and clay tablets, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, Coll.: CSMVS, M-137, M-146, M-184, M-152



The bricks found at the site exhibit a great variety of patterns and fine workmanship. Being stylistically akin to similar remains from the Gandhara region, these bricks reveal the Hellenistic influence in ornamental details. Among these designs are several forms of fretwork, chequers, rosettes, lozenges, palmettes, T-pattern moulding, stylized leaf, acanthus, and other motifs (Fig. 9).

The decorative architectural fragments found at the site are mainly beautiful terracotta moulded pilasters, arches, capitals, medallions, and dentils of brackets. Stylistically, the terracotta images of Kahu-jo-daro combine not only the Gupta and Gandhara traditions but also reflect some characteristics from distant Amaravati, Rangmahal, and Ter. Pronounced Gupta influence is apparent in the highly decorated *prabhavali* (halo), in the modelling of the figure, as expressed in the smooth curves of the face and the body, the half-closed eyes with shapely eyelids, and characteristic earlobes (Fig. 10).

Each of the seated Buddhas found in the niches of the platform walls are placed on a high lotus pedestal with an *asana* (cushion) spread over it. Both the *prabhavali* and

the relief design framing the entire panel consist of four-and eight-petalled flowers. A remarkable feature of Buddha's drapery is a lower garment that extends slightly beyond the *sanghati* (robe) that covers the folded legs. It is evident from the *Mahavaga* that the Buddha was particular about the code of conduct for monks, including their manner of dress. A Buddhist monk was supposed to wear three robes: a double waist cloth, a single upper robe, and a single lower garment. The lower garment seen beneath the robe of the Buddha is the *antaravastara* which was wrapped around the loins and reached down to the knee.⁵

Re-construction of the Stupa

At the time of excavation, Cousens observed that the stupa had suffered some structural imbalance due to the weight of the upper tower pressing more directly upon the walls of the square plinth, as a result of which the walls showed signs of subsidence and bulging outward. The walls had been subsequently fortified by providing an additional outer layer. According to the excavator, this had helped



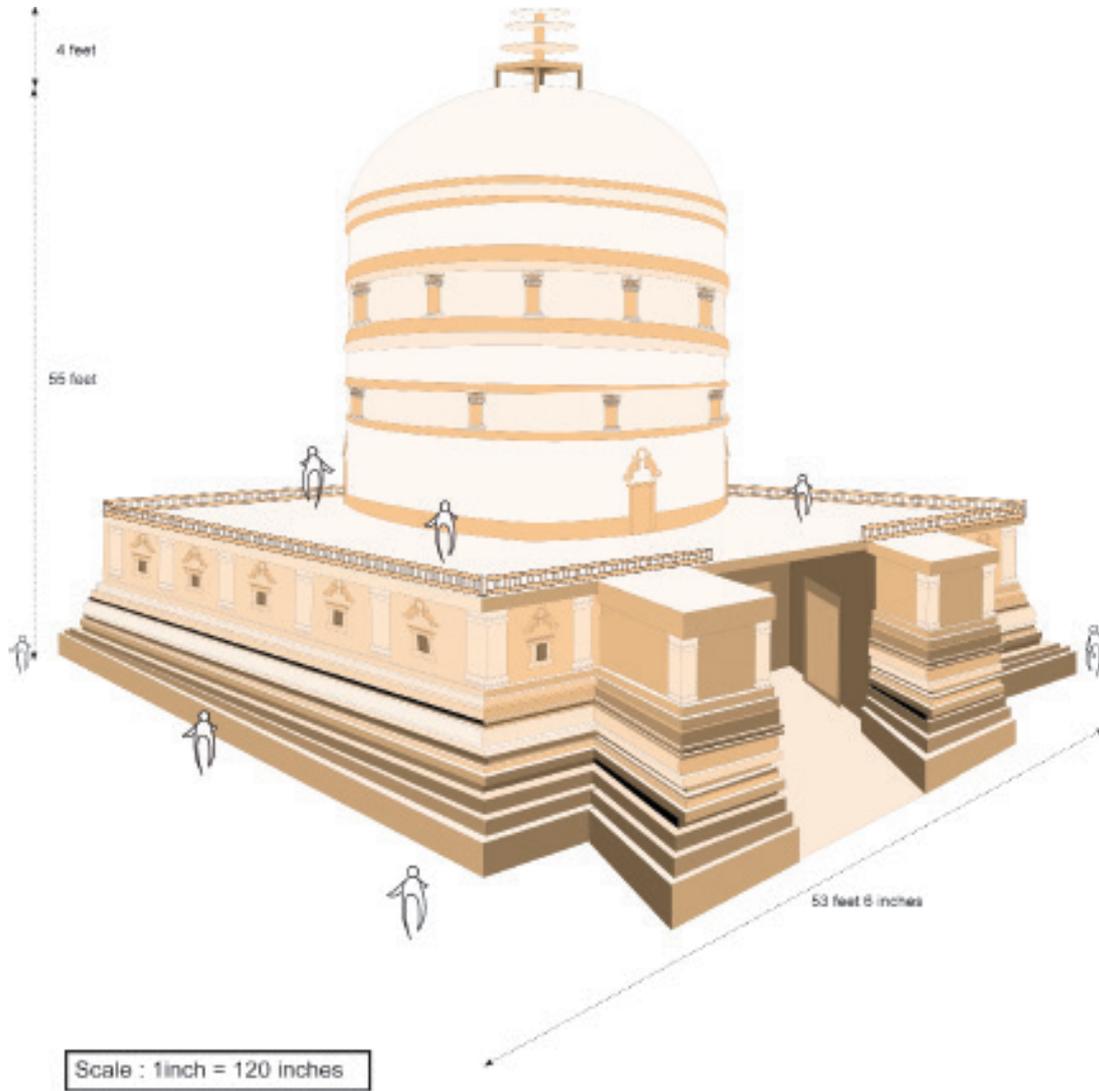
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Fig. 9 Decorative bricks from the Stupa, Terracotta, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 5th century CE, 15.8 x 16.5 x 8 cms [CSMVS, TC 61], 15.7 x 17 x 6 cms [CSMVS, TC 52], 15.5 x 19.6 x 15 cms [CSMVS, TC 55], 15.4 x 21.5 x 4 cms [CSMVS, TC 263], 14.5 x 21 x 4.5 cms [CSMVS, TC 264]



10

Fig. 10 Buddha, Terracotta, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 5th century CE, 62 x 47 x 12 cms, Coll.: CSMVS, TC 58



11a



11b

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Fig. 11a Reconstructed North-West face of Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan

Fig. 11b Site View of North-West face of Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, Photo Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India

Fig. 12 Reconstructed view of West face (entrance) of Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan

Fig. 13 Devotee, Terracotta, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 5th century CE, 74 x 32.3 x 15 cms, Coll.: CSMVS, TC 56



13

in preserving the images, decorative bricks, and other artefacts on the walls of the square platform of the stupa for so many centuries.

An effort has been made here to reconstruct the stupa of Kahu-jo-daro, one of the few examples of decorative terracotta stupa architecture in the Indus valley, with the help of surviving architectural fragments and other artefacts in the collection of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly Prince of Wales Museum of Western India), Mumbai. It would have been difficult to imagine the original shape of the stupa merely on the basis of these fragmentary remains. However, interpreting these in the light of the other contemporary stupas enables us to get a fairly accurate idea of the original stupa of Kahu-jo-daro at Mirpurkhas. (Figs. 11a and b).

The Grand Entrance

One can easily imagine the magnificent scene around the stupa in the valley of Kahu-jo-daro. The main stupa with its majestic *harmika* stood nearly 20 metres tall, its towering presence inspiring the approaching devotees and pilgrims over a long distance, from all four directions. Thousands of local devotees and those from all over India, and perhaps other countries as well, must have thronged there to pay

their respects to the great soul whose corporeal remains were enshrined in this stupa (Fig. 12).

Approaching from the west, they would have reached the main entrance to the stupa which must have been embellished with decorative bricks and possibly with a *torana* (gate), as seen at Sanchi. Passing through the gate, they would make the routine circumambulation (a tradition that is still followed in all three major religions of India, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain) round the platform which held the relics in its centre, and which supported the gigantic stupa. While circumambulating they would have passed the visual gallery of seated Buddhas in the niches in the platform walls, before entering the stupa from the centre of the west side. Inside, there was a group of three small shrines most likely containing images of the Buddha as indicated by the presence of elevated rectangular pedestals in the centre of each square shrine. The only remnant from these small rooms is a large terracotta bas-relief of a standing man about 76 cm tall, which was found leaning against the north wall of the central shrine. The image, in all probability, represents a donor disciple, the only secular image found so far (Fig. 13).

The roofs of the shrines were wagon-vaulted, with corbelling brick patterns (a tradition that prevailed in the region even during the Indus period 3200-1800 BCE). On

either side of this group of shrines, a pair of staircases led up towards the west, to the platform above, as if for the *pradakshina* around the circular tower.

The Square Platform

The highly embellished square platform of the stupa was about 6 metres above the ground and nearly 18 metres square excluding the *Pancharatha* (five projections) at the middle of the west face. The walls on either side of the entrance in the west face of the stupa, above the moulded base, were divided into four bays. The corner bays were larger and possibly once contained blind-latticed windows within frames. The other two bays on either side of the entrance were each decorated with a panel containing a smaller image of a seated Buddha in a frame of peculiar design (Fig. 14).

Like the west, the other three faces above the base were also decorated, with the space above the mouldings on each side divided into five bays by pilasters.

The three central niches of each had a terracotta image of seated Buddha in meditation, while the other niches had rectangular blind-latticed windows. The lowest recess in the moulding depicts a variety of motifs in the form of square panels, interrupted by a set of four petals (Fig. 15).

Cylindrical Tower

The great tower (missing) of the stupa was once highly embellished with one or more bands of pilasters, with image niches between them, and numerous string belts of decorative motifs and mouldings of sculptural bricks (Fig. 16). The presence of a larger number of fragmentary moulded and ornamental bricks at the site indicates its close similarity to the stupas (towers) of Thul-Mir-Rukal, near Moro, Deparghagro near Brahamanabad, Sudheranjodaro near Tando Muhammad Khan, and the one near Jerruk.

The grandeur of the Kahu-jo-daro stupa tower (now missing), nearly 18 metres tall excluding the *harmika* and umbrella, could be compared with the Amaravati stupa

14



Fig. 14 Buddha, Terracotta, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan, 5th century CE, Coll.: CSMVS, TC 57



15



16

Fig. 15 Reconstructed view of South face of Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan

Fig. 16 Reconstructed view of cylindrical tower from North-West, Kahu-jo-daro Stupa, Mirpurkhas, Sindh, Pakistan

in southern India as well as the highly embellished tower Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath in modern India. The tower, with *harmika* above, was possibly crowned by a massive wooden triple umbrella.

Conclusion

It is fascinating to see the stupas in Sindh, the Mahastupa at Devnimori (in Gujarat), and the later stupas in Bihar and Bangladesh followed the Gandhara tradition of square terraced platform supporting a spherical dome, a tradition which originally evolved during the Kushan period (1st-2nd century CE). But the possible date of the original establishment of Mirpurkhas has remained unresolved in

the absence of inscriptions and other literary evidence. From the point of view of architectural design and ornamentation one can assume that the reconstructed stupa at Kahu-jo-daro seems to have been closer to the Devnimori stupa (late 4th- 5th century CE) in Western India. Both stupas reveal a close affinity to the stylistic tradition that prevailed in Gandhara during the 2nd-5th centuries CE.

The tradition of reconstruction and renovation of stupas was a well known Buddhist convention. They would renovate or encase a stupa within a larger envelope, an act regarded as being of great merit. Almost all the important stupas, in the Gandhara and Sindh regions, and at other sites in India, followed such conventions.

In conclusion we may reiterate that the original sun-dried brick structure of the Kahu-jo-daro stupa at Mirpur Khas probably belonged to the earliest period (2nd-3rd century BCE) and later underwent major changes during the 4th-5th centuries CE as is apparent from the presence of a large number of curved and ornamental bricks of that period. The normal size of the bricks is 42.5 x 25 x 7.5 cms, which again corresponds to that of the bricks of Gupta shrines such as those at Bhitargaon, Ter, and Devnimori.

Though we in India have lost many historically important monuments like the rare terracotta Buddha stupa of Kahu-jo-daro owing to political indifference and human ignorance, regrettably no sincere attempt has yet been made by the UNESCO or Authorities of different countries or civil society to protect and preserve this cultural heritage for posterity. Today, the preservation of cultural heritage presents major challenges even in circumstances of peace and prosperity.

END NOTES

¹ H. Cousens, 'Buddhist Stupa at Mirpurkhas, Sindh, *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*; 1909-10, p.80. Reprint 2002, New Delhi.

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³ Moti Chandra, 'A Study in the Terracotta from Mirpurkhas', in the *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, No. 7, 1959-1962 edited by Moti Chandra, 1964, pp-3.

⁴ Nalinaksha Dutta, *Buddhist sects in India*, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1977, pp.194, 195, 303.

⁵ Kalpana Desai, *Jewels on the Crescent, Masterpieces of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Formerly Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, Mumbai*, 2002, pp.228.

