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BUDDHIST RELIQUARIES OF GANDHARA
Summary of Research and Publication

Gandhara is well known to art historians and historians of religion as home to a prolific school of Buddhist sculpture that flourished in the 1st to 4th centuries AD. I am currently engaged in a research project for surveying Buddhist reliquaries, a particularly important class of objects produced in Gandhara that have not previously received comprehensive attention. Gandhara was a relatively small geographical area located in what is now eastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan. Its Buddhist sculpture tradition spanned some six centuries, and is renowned for combining artistic influences from Greece, India and Persia.

No comprehensive survey and analysis of Gandharan reliquaries has ever been attempted. A few reliquaries have periodically appeared in museum displays and exhibitions, but have generally been considered a secondary class of objects compared to dramatic relief panels that feature scenes from the life of the Buddha, and iconic images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for which Gandhara art is famous. An intention of this research is to reveal how reliquaries contribute importantly to our understanding of Indian Buddhism and Buddhist culture of the 1st - 4th centuries AD. The survey includes objects and material from museums and private collections in Pakistan, India, Japan, Europe and North America.

The research received primary support from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council grant (SSHRC). Publication funds have been provided by the Neil Kreitman Foundation. The book is to be published under the title BUDDHIST RELIQUARIES OF GANDHARA in 2012 by The Early Buddhist Manuscript Project as the first volume in a new Gandharan Studies series, auxiliary to the University of Washington Press' Gandharan Buddhist texts series.

In the opening chapters I introduce ancient Gandhara and its Buddhist tradition, including a narrative from traditional sources regarding the Buddha's last days and parinirvana, and the relic cult that spread from India into the present day Pakistan and Afghanistan areas. There are examples of Gandharan stone panel reliefs that illustrate key elements of the Buddha's story, including the distribution and transportation of relics, and the veneration of stupas that contain relics. From a primarily art history point of view, I identify and document five principle types of stone reliquaries: small spherical, standard spherical, elliptical, cylindrical, and miniature stupa types. There are subgroups within each type derived from variations in surface decoration and design features. Furthermore, relic caskets are documented made of gold, silver, bronze and crystal that were often found nested in the stone containers.

My collaborators in the project include Elizabeth Errington, art historian and numismatist with the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum who has prepared a comprehensive treatment of archaeological context for all Gandharan reliquaries in British Museum collections. Professor Richard Salomon, Department of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington, provides an overview and analysis of Gandharan Kharoshthi inscriptions that appear on about ten percent of the reliquaries. Stefan Baums provides a complete catalog of all known Gandharan reliquary inscriptions, often with new or revised translations.

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