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TRACES OF A BUDDHIST PAST: STUPA ENGRAVINGS IN THE ROCK ART OF KARACHI

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Abstract

This paper discusses representations of Buddhist stupas in the rock art of Karachi, focusing on sites I documented during fieldwork in Gadap Taluka, Malir District. It presents and analyses stupa engravings from several sites, with particular attention to their forms, architectural features, stylistic variations, and current state of preservation. The study is based on direct field observation, field notes and photographic documentation. The engravings are also compared with Buddhist rock art reported from Khirthar, Gilgit-Baltistan, Swat and other parts of Pakistan to identify similarities and differences in their form and style. The documented stupas vary considerably in appearance and include multi-storey, tower-like, oval-shaped and triangular forms. Their architectural features include platforms, domes (andas), harmikas, finials and streamers. Comparative and stylistic analysis of these engravings, along with related examples from elsewhere in Pakistan, provides a basis for a tentative chronology. The study contributes to our understanding of Karachi's Buddhist past and the wider Sindh-Kohistan region, and it highlights the deteriorating condition of many of these engravings due to weathering and human damage.

INTRODUCTION

Many international and national scholars have reported Buddhist engravings across rock art sites in Pakistan. In the Upper Indus Valley, particularly in the Diamer district, many rock art sites were first documented by Ahmad Hasan Dani and Karl Jettmar in a joint German-Pakistan research mission. They surveyed the area and discovered many rock carvings. After Karl Jettmar's death, a pioneer of ethnological research in the Northern Areas, his German colleagues continued research on rock art. Dani (1983) also continued exploring the Northern Areas (Gilgit-Baltistan) and wrote three books and many articles based on his fieldwork. Two of his books were on the rock art of the Northern Areas. The first book, "Chilas: The City of Nanga Parvat (Dyamer)", was a remarkable contribution by any Pakistani scholar to rock art. Indeed, Dani (1983) systematically laid the foundation of rock art research in Pakistan.

Dani's book was a real guide for scholars and students who wanted to pursue their careers in rock art studies in Pakistan. This book was also unique in that Dani provided a foundation for young scholars to further research rock art in Pakistan. This book discusses the prehistoric and historic Chilas, followed by discussions and interpretations of rock art sites in Chilas. One chapter is dedicated to Buddha and Bodhisattvas in rock art. This book chapter may have inspired his students to do PhD research on

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Buddhist rock art in Pakistan. One of his students, Arif (2002), also did his PhD on rock art in the Northern Areas and wrote several articles on the subject, focusing on different themes in rock art. Another student, Sardar (2005), also did his PhD on Buddhist rock carvings in the Swat Valley, which he later published. This gave many national and international rock art scholars access to his research on Buddhist rock art in the Swat Valley.

The second book of Dani (1995), "Human Records on Karakorum Highway", covered the rock art of the entire Karakorum Highway right from Shatial to Sost, discussing each of the rock art sites. It also guided scholars and students who later researched the Northern Areas (Gilgit-Baltistan). Meanwhile, the German Archaeological Mission, under the supervision of Harald Hauptmann, continued its work and greatly benefited from Ahmad Hasan Dani's rock art research. German Archaeological Mission discovered many other rock art sites in the Diamer, Ghizer, and Skardu districts. The German Archaeological Mission claims to have documented fifty thousand rock carvings and six thousand inscriptions in Gilgit-Baltistan (now I will be using Gilgit-Baltistan instead of Northern Areas). They published several books on rock art sites, which were also very useful for scholars and general readers. These publications also provided readers with a wide variety of stupa images in rock art to support further research on Buddhist imagery in rock art.

Alongside these explorations and publications by Pakistani and German scholars on the rock art of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Italian Archaeological Mission also conducted research in Swat, with outstanding archaeological contributions from Tucci (1958).

King (1940), Gordon and Gordon (1941) and other European scholars documented the first work on rock art before the partition.

Review of Literature

Most research on rock art in Pakistan has focused on Gilgit-Baltistan, Swat and other parts of northern Pakistan. Pakistani and foreign scholars working in these regions have documented a large number of petroglyphs, paintings and inscriptions, including many images associated with Buddhism. In the Upper Indus region, Dani (1983), Jettmar (2002), Hauptmann (n.d.), and other scholars brought to light an extensive body of rock carvings and inscriptions. Their studies are particularly useful for understanding Buddhist imagery in rock art, including representations of stupas, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other Buddhist symbols.

Swat and the adjoining areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have also received considerable attention, and in his study of Buddhist paintings in Gandhara, Nasim Khan (2000) discussed several sites containing stupas, Buddhas, and other Buddhist imagery. The paintings at Chaghdo (Gilgit-Baltistan), first reported by Khan (1998), are especially important because they include representations of Buddhist stupas. Sardar (2000, 2005) further contributed to the study of Buddhist rock art in the Swat Valley. The works of Olivieri (1994, 1998, 2004, 2008) and Olivieri and Vidale (2004) also contributed considerably to documenting rock carvings and paintings in Swat, Buner, and neighbouring areas. These studies provide useful comparative material for the present research, particularly for looking at the forms and styles of Buddhist stupas represented in rock art.

Rock art has also been reported from Punjab and Balochistan. In Punjab, engravings have been documented along the Chenab River and in adjoining areas (Mughal, 1999; Hayat, 2001; Saleem, 2002). Qamar (1974–1986) reported rock carvings and inscriptions from Tor-Derai in Loralai, Balochistan. Although these sites belong to different geographical and cultural settings, they show that the tradition of making images and inscriptions on rock surfaces was widespread in different parts of present-day Pakistan.

By comparison, Sindh remained largely absent from early literature on Pakistan's rock art. During his archaeological explorations in

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Sindh, Majumdar (1934) briefly mentioned rock drawings at Dalh in the Naing Valley, but the region's rock art was not systematically documented for many decades afterwards. During my field surveys, I discovered and documented numerous rock art sites in different valleys of Sindh, particularly in the Khirthar region (Kalhoro, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015, 2018). These sites contain a wide range of petroglyphs, including animals, anthropomorphic figures, cupules, geometric designs, inscriptions and Buddhist imagery. I also documented rock art in Islamabad (Kalhoro, 2010-2011) and at sites on Punjab's Pothohar Plateau.

Buddhist imagery is an important element of Sindh's rock art. My earlier fieldwork documented stupas and other Buddhist-related motifs at several sites in the Khirthar region (Kalhoro, 2018). Subsequent fieldwork in Karachi brought to light further examples, particularly at rock art sites in Gadap Taluka of Malir District (Kalhoro, 2020, 2024). These discoveries show that representations of stupas were not confined to the better-known Buddhist rock art regions of northern Pakistan. However, the stupa engravings of Karachi have received little detailed attention as a group, and their forms and architectural features have not been systematically compared with examples from other parts of Pakistan.

This paper focuses on that gap. It documents and discusses the stupa engravings found at rock art sites in Karachi and the Sindh-Kohistan region and compares them with examples reported from Khirthar, Gilgit-Baltistan, Swat and elsewhere in Pakistan. These comparisons are used to consider similarities and differences in their forms and architectural features and, where the evidence permits, to suggest a tentative chronology for the stupa engravings documented in the study area.

Methods

This study is based primarily on fieldwork conducted at rock art sites in Karachi, particularly in Malir district's Gadap taluka. I visited the sites on several occasions to document the stupa engravings, examine their physical setting, and record their present condition. During these visits, I observed the engravings directly and documented them through field notes and photography. Particular attention was paid to the form and architectural features of the stupas, their location on the rock surfaces, and their state of preservation.

Photography was the principal means of documenting the engravings. Both general views of the rock panels and close-up photographs of individual stupas were taken to record their form and details. This documentation also helped identify differences among the engravings, including multi-storey, tower-like, oval-shaped and triangular forms, as well as features such as platforms, domes (*andas*), *harmikas*, finials and streamers.

The field data were then compared with published studies of Buddhist rock art from other parts of Pakistan, particularly the Khirthar region, Gilgit-Baltistan and Swat. Comparative and stylistic analysis was used to identify similarities and differences in the form and architectural features of the stupa engravings and to develop a tentative chronology for the examples documented in Karachi and the adjoining Sindh-Kohistan region.

Result and Discussion

The stupa is a recurrent motif in the rock art of Sindh. During my field surveys in Karachi's Malir District and other parts of the Sindh-Kohistan region, I discovered and documented several stupa engravings (Kalhoro, 2020, 2024). These representations vary considerably in form and architectural detail. The main concentrations discussed here are found at Lahut Tar, Thado Dam and Gidran-Waro-Gharoto in Malir District. A few examples have also been documented at Lohi in Jamshoro District.

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Lahut Tar

The largest concentration of stupa engravings is found at Lahut Tar in Mol Valley, Malir District, where ten stupa images are engraved on boulders. Most occur on a large west-facing boulder overlooking Lahut Tar, a natural pond where shepherds bring their herds for water. The engravings' proximity to the pond is also important for understanding their current condition, as some lower carvings are periodically affected by water.

One of the most prominent engravings on this boulder represents a stupa resting on a rectangular platform. Above the platform rises a rectangular storey or tower terminating in a circular dome (*anda*), surmounted by a *harmika*, finial and streamer (Fig. 1). Similar stupas with streamers occur in the Gaj Valley, although some of the Gaj examples have more elaborately decorated streamers (Kalhoro, 2018). The streamer of the Lahut Tar example is comparatively plain.



Fig. 1. Labyrinth and Stupa image at Lahut Tar, Mol Valley (Photo by the author, 2013).

Below this stupa are engravings of a Bactrian camel and a smaller stupa. The latter rests on a broad square platform and has a single storey topped by a circular *anda*, *harmika* and finial. Nearby is an anthropomorphic figure that may represent a monk or devotee associated with the stupa. Comparable compositions in which anthropomorphic figures appear beside stupas have been documented at Makan Dan in the Gaj Valley (Kalhoro, 2018), while Dani (1983, p. 107) reported a broadly similar example from Chilas.

Smaller stupas and anthropomorphic figures surround another prominent stupa on the same boulder. Three human figures are engraved near it and may represent individuals venerating the stupas, although their identity cannot be established with certainty. The large stupa rests on a rectangular podium and consists of two square storeys supporting a prominent *anda*, above which are a *harmika*, finial and streamer (Fig. 2). Several smaller stupas appear around this composition. One rises from a broad square platform in a tower-like form and terminates in a circular dome and finial. Another differs from the surrounding examples in having a tower resting on a square platform and a trident-shaped finial.

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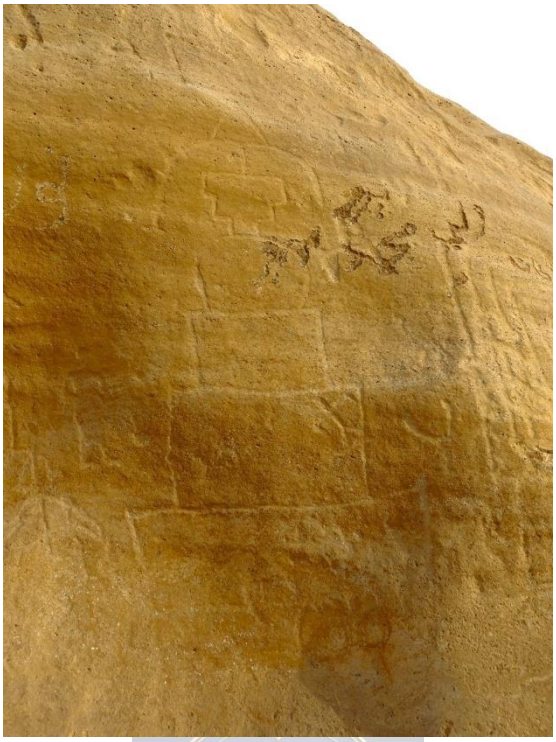


Fig. 2. A large stupa image at Lahut Tar, Mol Valley (Photo by the author, 2013).

Three further stupas are engraved to the left of the large central example. One has a rectangular platform supporting a tower that terminates in an *anda*, *harmika*, finial and streamers. Another consists of a tower standing on a square platform and topped by a dome and small finial. The third is a three-storey, tower-like stupa resting on a square platform and surmounted by a finial (Fig. 3).

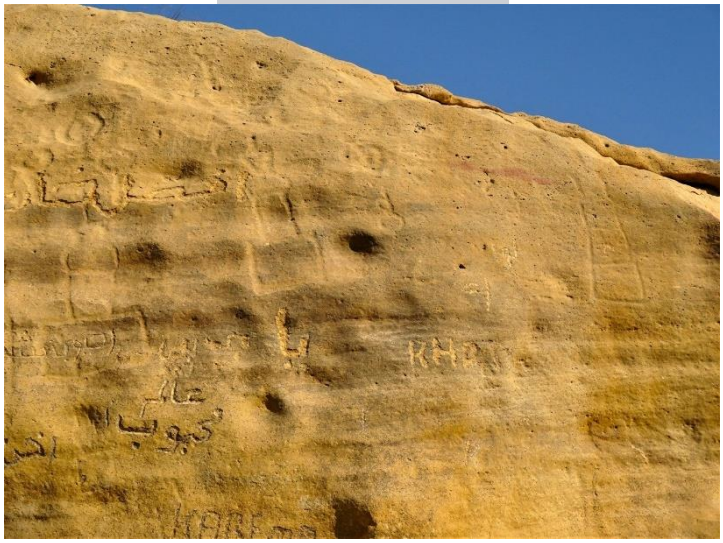


Fig. 3. Engravings of three stupas at Lahut Tar, Mol Valley (Photo by the author, 2013).

Another engraving appears lower on the boulder, where it is sometimes submerged by water from the hill stream. It represents a four-storey structure topped by a circular *anda*, *harmika* and finial.

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Two additional stupa representations are engraved on another boulder that also bears handprints, footprints and animal-track motifs. One appears unfinished, while the other has a triangular form terminating in a small dome. Their incomplete appearance makes it difficult to reconstruct their intended forms precisely.

The Lahut Tar engravings are important because they show considerable variation within a single site. Multi-storey, tower-like and triangular forms are represented together, each distinguished by different combinations of architectural elements, including platforms, *andas*, *harmikas*, finials and streamers. Unfortunately, several of the engravings are now badly weathered, while others have been damaged by more recent inscriptions and names carved over the older images. Their condition makes some architectural details increasingly difficult to identify.

Thado Dam

Another important concentration of stupa engravings is located at the Thado Dam rock art site in Gadap taluka. Eleven stupa representations have been documented here, although many are badly weathered. As an open-air site, the rock surfaces have been exposed to prolonged weathering, which has affected both the Buddhist engravings and other motifs.

Five stupas appear together on one panel. The most prominent is a three-storey structure resting on a rectangular platform (Fig. 4). Its *anda* is surmounted by a *harmika* and finial. Smaller stupas are carved on either side. One is oval-shaped and appears to have two storeys with a finial above, while another is triangular, with two storeys, a *harmika*, and a finial. Below this group is a simpler, single-storey representation without a clearly preserved upper element.

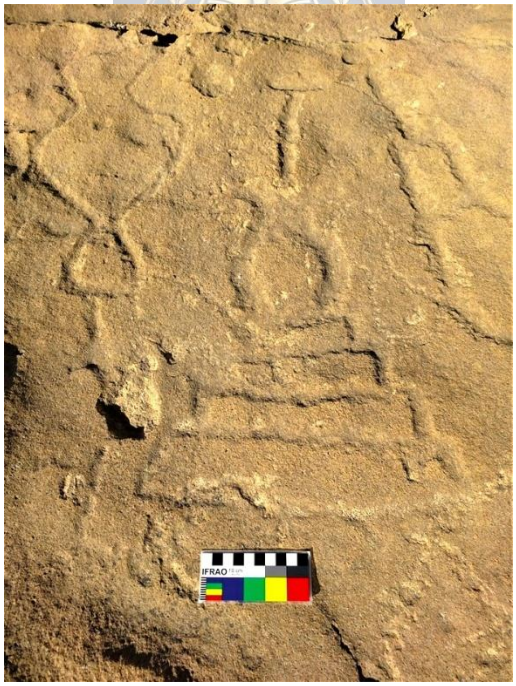


Fig. 4. A stupa image at Thado Dam Valley (Photo by the author, 2014).

Another stupa on the same panel resembles the three-storey example but has suffered considerable damage. Its surviving outlines indicate a multi-storey structure with an *anda* and finial. Elsewhere at the site is a four-storey, tower-like stupa topped by a finial. Four additional engravings nearby are now severely

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Volume 5, Issue 7 September, 2026

weathered and vandalised. Their surviving contours suggest that they too may have been tower-like in form, although their architectural details can no longer be reconstructed with confidence.

A separate panel contains one of the largest stupa representations at Thado Dam. It consists of two storeys: a square lower section and a triangular upper section, above which is a hemispherical dome and finial. The combination is unusual among the examples documented at the site. Comparable variation in stupa form is known from Chilas, Thalpan and other sites in the Diamer region, where architectural features of stupas represented in rock art also vary considerably (Ebert, 1994).

The Thado Dam engravings therefore add further forms to the range documented in Karachi. Their present condition, however, limits detailed stylistic comparison in several cases. Weathering and recent human damage have obscured features that would otherwise be useful for understanding their architectural forms and possible chronological relationships.

Gidran-Waro-Gharoto and Lohi

Stupa engravings are also found at Gidran-Waro-Gharoto in Gadap Taluka. Six examples have been documented at this site, all of which are broadly tower-like in form. One is particularly well preserved and clearly displays this architectural style (Fig. 5). Although fewer in number than those at Lahut Tar and Thado Dam, these engravings further demonstrate the occurrence of Buddhist imagery across the rock art landscape of Gadap in Karachi's Malir district.

I also discovered and documented two stupa engravings at Lohi, near Taung in Thano Bula Khan taluka, Jamshoro District. The site lies about 3 km north of Taung and consists of a rock wall oriented roughly north–south. Its carvings include animals, anthropomorphic figures, handprints, footprints, geometric motifs, grids and stupas. Some motifs, particularly camels, handprints, and footprints, appear relatively recent and were made by people from nearby settlements who bring their livestock to the pond in Nai Baran (Kalhoro, 2020). One of the stupa engravings at Lohi is surrounded by geometric motifs and has suffered recent damage. The second is a two-storey, tower-like representation surrounded by geometric designs. The coexistence of older engravings with more recent carvings at Lohi is also significant, as it shows that local communities continued to use the rock surfaces over a long period.



Fig. 5. A stupa image at Gidran Waro Gharoto (Photo by the author, 2014).

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Comparative Discussion

The stupa engravings from Lahut Tar, Thado Dam, Gidran-Waro-Gharoto and Lohi display considerable variation in form. Multi-storey, tower-like, oval and triangular representations are found at these sites, while recurring architectural elements include square or rectangular platforms, *andas*, *harmikas*, finials and streamers. Some forms have parallels in the rock art of the Khirthar mountain range as well as in Buddhist rock art reported from Gilgit-Baltistan and Swat.

The closest regional comparisons are found in the valleys of Khirthar, where I have documented numerous stupa engravings, including multi-storey and tower-like forms (Kalhoro, 2013b, 2018). Comparisons with dated or more securely contextualised examples from elsewhere in Pakistan help consider the possible chronology of the Karachi engravings. Such comparisons, however, should be treated cautiously. Similarity in architectural form does not necessarily demonstrate that two engravings were produced at precisely the same time or that one tradition directly influenced another.

The evidence nevertheless shows that the Buddhist stupa formed a recognisable and varied element in the rock art tradition of Karachi and Jamshoro in the Sindh-Kohistan region. The differences in form and architectural detail suggest that these representations were probably not produced as a single uniform group. Their relationship to examples from Khirthar and northern Pakistan provides a basis for considering their chronology, which is discussed further in the conclusion.

Conclusion

Various stupa images appear in the rock art of Karachi's Malir and other districts in Sindh-Kohistan. Both comparative and stylistic analyses have been done to make a tentative chronology. The Buddhist stupas of Karachi and Jamshoro in Sindh-Kohistan should not be studied in isolation; they can be compared with those found in Khirthar, where we have many parallels, including stupas engraved with inscriptions. Dani (1983) and German scholars in Gilgit-Baltistan have also dated similar types of stupas, such as tower-like and domed ones. This made comparison easier, and the stupa style provides evidence of the period in which it was engraved. Based on this comparative and stylistic analysis, I classify stupas of Karachi and Jamshoro into three categories: 1) multi-storey stupas with dome, 2) tower-like stupas with and without dome, 3) oval-shaped, triangle-shaped, and tower-like stupas with trident-shaped toppings. The first category of multi-storey stupas with domes or *anda*s emerged in the 3rd to 5th centuries, as we have seen similar stupas with Gupta Brahmi inscriptions in some valleys of Khirthar.

The second category of stupa, with or without a dome, was engraved during the 6th and 7th centuries AD. The third category of stupa also emerged in the 7th century and continued up to the 9th century, when the Buddhist community became a minority, and many of them converted to Islam. Tower-like stupas with trident-shaped toppings are numerous in the valleys in the Khirthar and Bado Ranges. These stupas have also been reported from other parts of Pakistan, particularly from Gilgit-Baltistan. Some have also been reported from the Swat Valley.

Khirthar has a wide variety of stupa images. I have discovered and documented that multi-storey and tower-like stupas are numerous in the valleys of Seeta, Mazarani, Chhanhar, Keharji, Radh, Buri, Khurbi, Makhi, Sallari, Gaj, and Nali. These stupa images likely spread from the north, from the valleys of Khirthar and Bado to the valleys of Sindh-Kohistan, and to the valleys of Mol, Thado, and Gidran-Waro-Gharoto in Karachi, and to Baran in Jamshoro. The Buddhists were in the majority in pre-Islamic Sindh. They inhabited the valleys of Sindh-Kohistan and left behind many stupas in rock art, and their physical structures now lie in ruins. The best surviving Buddhist stupa is in the district of Shaheed Benazirabad (formerly Nawabshah), called Thull Mir Rukan. The tower-like stupa (called Thull in Sindhi) resembles various stupa images in Sindh's rock art.

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Volume 5, Issue 7 September, 2026

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