

MELODIES IN STONE: THE DEPICTION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN GANDHARA ART

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Abstract

Ancient Gandhāra remained a vibrant center of culture, religion, education, trade and commerce. The people of Gandhāra were passionate about art, music, and dance, which is reflected in the intricate carvings and sculptures from that period. These artworks often depict scenes of merry-making and dancing, showcasing the region's lively cultural atmosphere. Particularly notable is the depiction of the musical instruments in Gandhāra art, which highlights the refined aesthetic sense of the people. The skillful portrayal of these instruments further emphasizes the region's deep appreciation for music and arts of their time. In this article which is a part of M.Phil. dissertation titled, 'Continuation of Cultural Traditions in Peshawar valley as revealed in Gandhāra art', I will highlight the well-known representations of the musical instruments in this art.

INTRODUCTION

Humans have always been in search of beauty, colours, music, dance, and the pleasures that make this world enchanting. Whether through the vibrant hues of nature or the rhythm of melodies, the human spirit is drawn to expressions that evoke joy and wonder. In every corner of the world, people seek these experiences, finding meaning in the arts and the emotions they stir. The pieces of Buddhist art of Gandhāra, which is on the display of many well-known museums in Pakistan and other parts of the world, have revealed music and other enticing scenes despite the belief of Buddhism being devoid of worldly matters.

Being a cosmopolitan region, the sub-continent has continued to be home to a wide variety of races, faiths, ethnic groups, languages, and civilisations. Some religions consider music to be sacred in addition to being a form of recreation. In certain regions, it evolved into a necessary component of a certain society's everyday existence over time (Sylvan 2002:20).

Although there is no written record about the history of music and musical instruments dates back to prehistoric times. Regarding the device's origin, the literary data only includes the Aryan Religious Books, the Vedas and other Aryan holy scriptures (Ahmad 2013: 29 & Basham 2004:383-4). We have some

archaeological evidence of a musician class in the large towns of the Indus Valley civilization to entertain the general population. However, the most quoted seven figures standing in a row that are stamped on a seal from Mohenjodharo (Kenoyer 1998: 130), one of the capital cities of Indus Valley Civilizations, cannot be recognized as singers or dancers. However, there are instances such as the drum beater is depicted on a tablet in front of the Tiger deity, which is the only illustration of a musician from Harappa, and the famous 'dancing girl' from Moenjodaro (Kenoyer 1998: 130). However, no musical instruments have been found in any of the Indus cities till date. It can be understood that they undoubtedly would have created their own musical instruments to be performed for these dancing figures. Later Indian literature, i.e. Vedas, mention the music and instruments that the so-called Aryans brought to India (Ahmad 2013:29).

Although we do not have concrete evidence, this does not imply that the prospect did not exist here before the arrival of the Aryans. However, a variety of musical instruments, including the harp, drum, lute, flute, and cymbals, are highlighted in the Aryan literary record. The hymns that make up the Rigveda were sung at various ceremonies. Both a religious and a secular tone can be found in the Samaveda, or commentary on the Rigveda (Basham 1975: 37)

The melody, harmony, and rhythm of South Asian music are its general features, these styles cannot be broadly classified but can be divided into two primary themes: *taala* and *raga* (Ahmad 2013: 29). These musicians knew the "hepta tonic scale" which is still used in the modern music. The Indian music is *hepta* tonic and its seven notes are known as *sadja rsabha*, *Gandhāra*, *madhyama*, *panacama*, *dhavata* and *maids*. *sa ri ga ma pa dha, ni, sa*, are its abbreviations (Basham 2004: 384).

The successors of Aryans, the Buddhist Gandharan monks in ancient Gandhāra used to play holy music, and the lay Buddhist monks employed chanting and intoned music to teach people about the teachings of the Buddha. However, in order to draw people to Buddhism, the laity employed songs, dancing, and musical instruments (Ahmad 2013:29-30).

The *Mahayanic* Buddhists believed that in order to maintain the happiness of the Lord Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*, all facets of the Buddhist society should

play ceremonial music. Even though there is not much information accessible, it provides a vibrant overview of the musical events. This information throws light on how dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments affect the Buddhist community's social and religious life (Ellingson 1980: 434). Similar to this, the relief panels of Gandhāra art had a variety of musical instruments carved by their artisans that performed *hepta* tonic scale, melody, rhythm, *raaga*, and *taala* (Ahmad 2013:29)

Musical Instruments

The Gandhāran musicians employ three different kinds of musical instruments, according to archaeological evidence:

1. Wind instruments
2. Stringed instruments
3. Thumping or Percussion instruments

Wind instruments

Divergent end-blown double pipes are one of three varieties of wind instruments. The musicians of the Kushan period played transverse flutes and single-end blown pipes (Jarrige *et al* 2002: 134).

Flute

The flute is often comprised of two types.

1. Horizontal or transverse: In this type, the sound hole is placed at the lower end.
2. Slanting or vertical in which one end of the flute is made up as mouth and it is further divided in two groups.
 - i. It is of small size, sometimes consisting of only one pipe called a *Murlī*, and at other times consisting of two pipes called a *Jorī*
 - ii. Large size: It consists of a tube that is longer and wider at the ends, resembling a trumpet (Ahmad 2013:32).

Stringed Instruments

During Kushan's reign, stringed instruments such as harps and plucked lutes of various sizes and shapes were frequently utilized in the Gandhāra. These harp-like, pear-shaped, barb-like waisted instruments that protrude from the resonator and have a noticeably larger neck that tapers to the top of the instrument are regarded by some researchers as the ancient version of the modern *Rabāb* (Saches 1940/42: 160-161; Rishtin

1959: 69; Shirzoy 1996: 54). These instruments can be seen in the Gandhāran relief panels showing the visit of god *Indra* to the *Indraśāla* cave and in this panel wine drinking and dancing scenes were depicted. These musical instruments can be broadly divided into three groups.

Harp

There are two types of harps, L-shaped and horizontal arched. The former features three to five parallel strings on the frame that are played with a plectrum or finger, with the strings facing the musician. The L-shaped harp faces the audience and has up to ten strings.

One of the relief panels depicts a garland-bearer participating in a celebration with a group of musicians playing various instruments, sculpted by a Gandhāran artisan. A garland bearer with garland on his left shoulder is standing next to a musician who is playing a horizontal arched harp. A panpipe is being played by the third one (Ahmad 2013:31).

Lyre

It is a stringed instrument with a U shaped. The Lyre has been carved in the Gandhāran reliefs, just like the other musical instruments described.

Lute

It is a long-necked, pear-shaped instrument with two or three strings that are connected by hooks (bolts) known locally as *dotara* and *ektara*, respectively. In order to achieve the desired sound, the strings are adjusted by using hooks. Mostly in the relief panels of the Gandhāra art show that female musicians played the lute (Ahmad 2013: 31-32).

Percussion instruments

In both ceremonial and secular contexts, the percussion instruments are frequently shown in Gandhāra art. These instruments come in a variety of shapes and sizes, such as barrel-shaped drums known locally as “*Dhol*,” single-headed and double-headed ends. Locally, the cymbal is referred to as *Tal*, while the drum frame is called *Daf* (Marshall 1960: fig 49).

Drum

A drum is a wooden instrument in the shape of a barrel with a tight membrane covering one or both

ends. It can be seen in Buddhist reliefs in three different shapes: bowl, barrel, and cylindrical. The membrane is located on the round end of cylindrical drums, which have straight sides. The midsection of the barrel-shaped drums swells. Only one side of the bowl-shaped drum is membrane. The drum is struck with sticks or hands to create sound. The drum is typically played at prestigious festivals. Locally, the smaller drums are referred to as *Dholak* and *Tabala*. Locally, the little hand drum is referred to as a *duff* or *Thambal* (Ahmad 2013: 30).

Cymbals

A round brass plate is called cymbal. It generates sound by striking with another plate or hitting with a stick.

Bell

This musical instrument resembles to a metallic cup having a metal ball hanging inside that is wider at one end. Every time the ball hits the cup’s edges, a sound is produced.

Research aim

This study aims to explore and analyze the persistence of ancient cultural traditions in the modern Peshawar Valley by examining their representations in Gandharan art. The research focuses on how traditions such as dress, music, agriculture, household objects, and religious practices depicted in Buddhist sculptures and friezes from the Gandhara period still resonate in contemporary society. Through systematic documentation and visual analysis of selected artifacts housed in museums across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and comparative ethnographic observations, the study seeks to identify tangible connections between ancient and modern cultural practices. This investigation fills a critical gap in existing literature, where previous research emphasized religious narratives while overlooking the socio-cultural continuity embedded in art. It also aims to contribute to cultural preservation, tourism development, and academic research by highlighting the living heritage of Gandhara in a modern context.

Research methodology

The present research based on the scientific Archaeological investigations and review of the literary data collected from the libraries.

Archaeological investigations:

Material evidences retrieved from the field investigations that help us to trace out the origin and development of these traditions since long. The Archaeological data comprise of digital photographs/snaps of Gandharan art etc. Moreover, the Buddhist sculptures also observed thoroughly.

Literary data:

Literary data help us to understand the historic facts and figures about the traditions of the past. Literary data comprise of old reports, photographs and maps/drawings of the under discussion traditions of the past still practiced. The literary data help us to know about the origin and existence of certain tradition in modern times.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected from museum exhibits, particularly Gandharan art panels, statues, and friezes, using photographic and descriptive documentation techniques. Key categories such as dress (e.g., turbans), agricultural scenes (e.g., ploughing), traditional sports (e.g., wrestling), musical instruments, and domestic items (e.g., pitchers and cups) were selected for analysis. Secondary data was gathered through literature reviews from historical and archaeological publications to validate the continuity of these cultural elements. Additionally, informal field observations and local interviews were considered to support the modern relevance of these traditions.

Results

The analysis revealed a significant continuity of cultural traditions from ancient Gandhara to the present-day Peshawar Valley. Relief panels depicting agricultural scenes, domestic settings, and musical performances closely resemble modern practices such as ploughing with oxen, use of turbans during formal events, and traditional music during festivities. Utensils like pitchers and cups, as seen in Gandhara art, are still used in rural households. Sports such as wrestling and archery, carved in ancient friezes, remain popular in local traditions. This continuity highlights the deep-rooted cultural memory and resilience of the region's sociocultural fabric.

Discussion

The research affirms that Gandharan art functions not only as religious symbolism but also as a documentation of everyday life. The survival of these traditions indicates the resilience and adaptability of cultural norms in the Peshawar Valley. Factors such as geographic continuity, shared language, and sustained social structures have played vital roles in preserving this cultural heritage. This study further validates the potential of archaeological art to serve as a lens for understanding the evolution of local culture. It also aligns with previous observations by scholars such as Brancaccio (2006) and Naqvi et al (2011), who recognized the role of art in cultural preservation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that a variety of traditions depicted in Gandharan art still exist today in the Peshawar Valley, though often in modified forms. Items like utensils, musical instruments, agricultural tools, and ceremonial customs such as marriage and mourning rituals have endured over centuries. This continuity emphasizes the cultural depth of the region and offers a strong argument for preserving its archaeological heritage. The research recommends enhanced funding for cultural conservation, greater public awareness, and further interdisciplinary studies to safeguard and celebrate the living traditions rooted in Gandhara's ancient legacy.

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Figures



Fig.1 Panel shows stringed musical instruments (Peshawar Museum)



a.



b.

Fig 2. a. Courtesy by Inspiration & Transformation Treasurers from Gandhāra & Chang`an 2016, b. Modern Rabāb



Fig. 4 Courtesy: Zwalf



Fig.5 Courtesy: Tauqeer Ahmad



Fig.6 Modern wind instruments



Fig. 7 Courtesy: Zwalf



Fig. 8 Courtesy: Zwalf



Fig. 9 Modern Drums



Fig. 10 A man with a bell in his hand on the right to in the attacking scene (After Tauqeer 2013)



Fig. 11. Modern Bell