

# *Relic Casket and its Deposits Discovered from the Buddhist Stupa of Village Loebanr, District Swat*

**Badshah Sardar\***

## **Introduction**

This research paper focuses on the antiquities of the Stone Relic Casket discovered from the Loebanr Buddhist Stupa, District Swat. The landlord of the site found the relic casket while working on the Stupa site to prepare fields for cultivation. Inside the relic casket was a gold box containing ashes, fragments of bones, three pairs of gold pendants and a metal finger ring (broken) with nine turquoise, garnet and agate gems. We also noticed six copper coins of Kushan king “**Kanishka-I**”, issued c.AD. 78?-103?. The major object of this research paper is to examine directly these Buddhist antiquities and to evaluate their cultural and historical importance. These artefacts still belong to a private collection and are unknown to the public. The publication of this paper will shed a new light on the commercial, political, cultural and religious ties of ancient Uddiyāna with the neighbouring countries.

## **Loebanr Village**

The village of Loebanr lies in the Jambil sub-valley of Tehsil Babozi of district Swāt.<sup>1</sup> The Jambil sub-valley is a beautiful fertile

---

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, AIOU, Islamabad.

1 In antiquity Swāt was known as Uddiyāna. A long time ago, in the far northwest corner of present Pakistan, there once was a verdant and splendid kingdom, inhabited by a gentle and cultured race of people. Uddiyāna is a Sanskrit word, which means “garden”. It appears in the narratives of Hsuan Tsang (600-664) AD, the most pious of the Chinese pilgrims. In Sanskrit Swāt was called *Su-ho-to* or *Suvastu*. In Greek sources it was known as *Souastos* or *Souastênê*.

hilly region watered by a small stream of the same name, 'the Jambil *Khawar*'. It always remained as an ideal place for ancient Buddhist religious establishments. The archaeological wealth of the sub-valley has been mentioned by the Aural Stein in his personal narrative of explorations on the North West Frontier of India.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the richest sub-valleys in respect of invaluable archaeological vestiges. It inherited several Buddhist Stupas and monasteries, settlement sites, proto-historic graves, rock stelae and rock reliefs. Besides, a plentiful number of rock carvings are also attached to both banks of the Jambil *Khawar*,<sup>3</sup> which gushing down the rocky tract reaches the plain beyond Mingora. Loebanr is a Sanskrit name meaning a big forest, lying in the foothills of Shirarra. Aural Stein mentioned the village Loebanr in his report in 1926.<sup>4</sup> It lies 4 km east of Mingora, the present commercial center of the Swāt valley.

A small newly built side road branching off in the south approaches the village from the main Mingora Jambil road at Battai Bus Stop. The Jambil road generally follows the bank of the Jambil *Khwar*. Loebanr occupies a most important place in the cultural history of the Swāt in general and the archaeology of Pakistan in particular. The Proto-historic graveyards known as Loebanr I, II and III situated here, were excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission (IsMEO) in 1976-1979.<sup>5</sup> Jurjurai stupa is situated on the northeast, while the Sherarai Buddhist stupas lie to the west.

---

2 A. Stein, *On Alexander's Track to the Indus*, (Lahore: 1998, reprint), p.74.

3 A. Stein, "An Archaeological Tour in Upper Swat and Adjacent Hilly Tracts", *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, Vol.42, Calcutta, 1930, pp.45-46; G. Tucci, "Preliminary report on an archaeological survey in Swāt", *East and West*, Vol.9, No.4, IsMEO, Rome, 1958, pp.309-12.

4 *Ibid.*, p.46.

5 The protohistoric graveyards of the Swāt have been widely described by foreign as well as Pakistani scholars; G. Stacul, mentioned it with Pre-Buddhist Cemeteries, Pre-Buddhist Necropolis, Protohistorical Cultural and Protohistoric Cemeteries. S. Salvatori, Protohistoric Graveyards and A. H. Dani, named them "Gandhara Grave Culture". See G. Stacul, "Dwelling-and Storage-Pits at Loebanr III (Swat, Pakistan) 1976 Excavation Report" *East and West*, New Series, Vol.27, Nos.1-4 IsMEO, Rome, 1977.

### Buddhist Stupa

The Loebanr Buddhist Stupa is situated about half a km above the hamlet. It was first identified by Aural Stein and then by the IsMEO Mission<sup>6</sup> as a “ruined stupa”<sup>7</sup>. The actual site lies at sides of a ravine called *Tangai*—one of the several seasonal streams, which drain to the north and after meandering through the terraced fields for a long distance, join the main stream called *Jambil Khwar*. It marks the site of a large smashed Buddhist complex, comprising a sacred area and a monastery. During the last 60 years local antique dealers and treasure hunters have badly destroyed most of the stupa structure in search of relic caskets and stone sculptures. The main stupa still stands to height or its drum, but it has gone through a period of extensive plundering at the hands of sculpture smugglers. However, the extent remains show a stupa with a square plan having a flight of steps on the eastern side (destroyed). However, the main stupa has a square plinth with base moulding in torus and Scotia pattern. The entire Stupa was once coated with stucco plaster. (Fig.1)

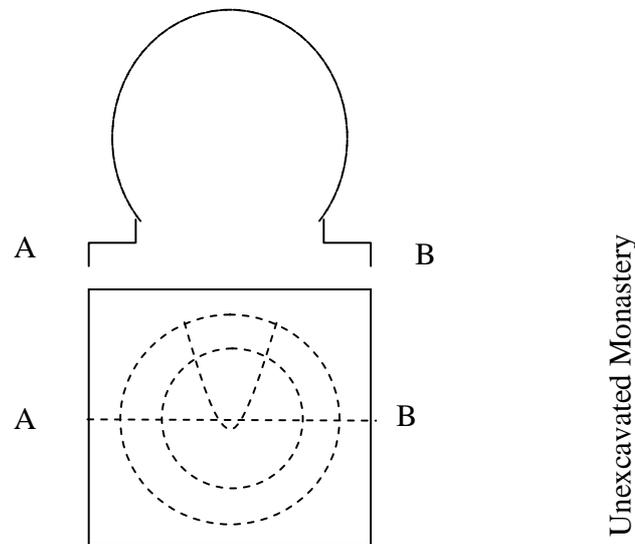


Fig.1 Ground Plan of Leobanr Stupa

6 See A. Stein, 1930, p.46.

7 G. Tucci, “Preliminary report on an archaeological survey in Swāt”, *East and West*, Vol.9, Nos.1-2, IsMEO, Rome, 1958, p. 310.

The stupa site was for the first time opened by the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, in 1981, when the antiques smugglers threatened the site. Prof. Farid Khan, the then chairman of the department, conducted the salvage operation on the site for a limited period as a result of which a small number of sculptures were unearthed. But unfortunately no excavation report has yet been published by the University. Meanwhile the landowner removed the Stupa structure and most of its diaper stone blocks were sold to the local people.

### **Monastery complex**

The monastery complex, still intact, lies on the southern side of the main stupa. It is in rectangular plan measuring about 120 x 80 ms. The exposed wall on the western side of the monastery is built in stone with typical diaper masonry, a common feature of the Gandhāra region during the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries A D. Stumps of numerous walls showing similar diaper masonry are visible on the terrace fields. This monastery is one of the best examples of a better-preserved monument in the Swāt valley. Its building is very well intact and now it is high time to excavate it for the study and research of Gandhāra religious architecture. It is significant to mention here that in the last fifty years of archaeological excavations in Swāt region, no concentration has so far been devoted to the Buddhist monasteries on a large scale. Its scientific excavation will open up new avenue of future research.

### **The Relic Casket**

It is a general practice in Gandhāra region that a relic casket contains bodily relics, such as ashes, bones, and nail or hair clippings of the Buddha or a disciple. The excavated evidence of many stupas deposit shows that objects did not need to be pristine to be considered worthy of burial, the clearest indication of this being the coins, which range from mint to an extremely worn condition. Incomplete or fragmentary pieces of jewellery were also often included. The present relic casket is of chance discovery and nothing is known about the stratigraphical context of the objects found inside it. The only known thing is that the collection is of original nature and purely belongs to the Loebanr Buddhist Stupa.

The relic casket is made of soft whitish soapstone used in ancient times for making sculptures. It is made of two sections; the circular plain container and the rounded ornamented lid, both broken. The container is circular in shape and reveals a moulded round upper edge and a ring edge at the bottom. The internal depth of the container is about 9 cm. It may be dated to the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.<sup>8</sup> It encloses a minute gold box of reliquary of a corresponding size. Most interesting of all the artifacts found in the casket is a finely finished gold circular box having some ashes and bits of bones. The lid of the relic casket (broken in three pieces) reveals three-band ornamentations on the top. It is fashioned in the incised lotus petals decorations, ring design and again lotus leaf motifs encircling a plain knob. Lotus, which is a symbol of purity, is found on numerous relic casket lids of the period. It recalls the use of the motif on the crown of the many Stupa models of Gandhāra<sup>9</sup>.

The details of the relic casket and its deposits are as under:

- Gold box containing ashes and fragment of bones
- Three pairs of gold Pendants
- A metal finger ring (broken) with turquoise gem
- Garnet sand Agate gems (nine in number)
- Six copper coins of Kanishka I, issued c. AD 78?–103?

### Gold Box

Love for ornamentation is ingrained in mankind from time immemorial. To this the people of Uddiyān could not have been an exception. The gold box mentioned above is studded with maroon colour rounded ruby gems all around. The gold box consists of two parts, a container and its fitted lid. Both are marked by four gold loop-handles and decorated with ruby gems. As to gold being found in Swāt, there are valid testimonies in the records of the Chinese pilgrims: Hsuan-Tsang writes that Swāt produces gold. Sung Yun describing the Buddhist settlement of T'o-lo speaks of

8 A.H. Dani and N.A. Khan, "Relic Casket and Adorsed Sculpture from Buchkan Stupa Palai", *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, Vol.XXI, No.II, 1998, pp.157-64.

9 Elizabeth Errington and Joe Cribb, (eds.), *The Crossroads of Asia*, Cambridge, 1992, fig.169, p.172-73.

six thousand gold images. In the protohistoric tombs excavated in Swāt also gold earrings have occasionally been found. Prof. Dr. Farooq Swati, in one of his recently published articles, published in *South Asian Studies*, says:

The variety of ornaments that these moulds suggest possibly can be seen on Buddhist sculptures of the ancient provinces of Uddiyāna and Gandhāra after the advent of the Christian era. A variety of beads, ornamented brooches, amulets, rigs (used for making earrings, finger-rings and other ornaments), nose-studs, bracelets, etc., were produced in these moulds. Some of them were used singly or as complete ornaments. Others, after necessary retouch and finishing, were arranged or soldered together to make complex ornaments such as necklaces, armbands, earrings, pendants, anklets, etc.<sup>10</sup>

It is true that the native sculpture art of Gandhāra portrays males and female wearing ornaments irrespective of their gender position. However, from the sculptured representations, it would be difficult to know the difference between the ornaments used by the aristocratic persons and those by the commoners. In Gandhāra we found jewellery of forehead, ear, nose, arm, wrist, fingers, thighs, hips and legs.

### **Gold Pendants**

Out of the three pairs of gold pendants one is disc-shaped and the other two pairs are leaf-shaped, respectively. These pendants most probably are the detached parts of a necklace, which was worn loosely around the neck. In this case, the necklace is long and extends up to the breast. The pendants and the gems were probably bored in the middle and threaded closely. Necklace (*hāra*) and girdle (*mekhalā*) seem to be the most elaborate and prominent jewellery in the ancient Indian culture.<sup>11</sup>

### **A Metal Finger Ring**

Another interesting find among the relic casket deposits is a broken copper finger (ring) with its flat oval bezel and a sky blue turquoise gem. Turquoise has now been in use as an ornate stone for about 5500 years. Pushing its history dates back to 3000-4000

10 M.F. Swati, and M. Khan, "A Note on Jewellery Moulds from Maidam, Swat", *South Asian Studies*, Vol.17, London, 2001, pp.189-98.

11 M.N. Khan, "Some thoughts on the nature of the Gold ornament from Pattan (Indus Kohistan)", pp.127-38.

B.C.<sup>12</sup> It is during the Neolithic period that the first jewels made out of lapis lazuli and turquoise made their appearance at Mehrgarh<sup>13</sup> and it is in during the fourth millennium that these gems began to spread through the Indo-Iranian borderlands and Central Asia.<sup>14</sup> It is in the third millennium, however, that the gem-work reached its zenith. Carnelian and lapis lazuli are considered as true precious stones all over the world. Though these stone have become rare over the ages, their use has never completely ceased. In the third and the fourth millennia, lapis lazuli and turquoise were mainly used in the manufacture of small objects, such as beads and pendants, but they were also used in amulets, seals and tablets. The appeal of the lapis lazuli and turquoise was perhaps due to the ritual value that is still attached to the blue stones throughout Iran and the orient. In these countries, these stones are used as talismans against the evil eye.<sup>15</sup>

### **Garnets and agate gems<sup>16</sup>**

In the ancient world, both east and west, engraved gems were among the most common works of art in the possession of individuals. They had both an ornamental and a functional role, worn as rings or as pendants, they also served as personal signature marks to be impressed in clay or other malleable substances to seal

- 
- 12 Turquoise commonly occurs in vein lets penetrating weathered, aluminium-rich, sedimentary or volcanic rocks (where it has been deposited near the surface from circulating phosphatic waters) in arid climates, and in small, fine-grained, rounded masses and crusts. Its well known deposits occur in Persia, Sinai Peninsula, China, Chile, Egypt, Turkey, Mesoamerica (Arizona). The most highly prized variety is sky blue or robin's-egg blue. The bracelets of Egypt's Queen Zer contain carved Sinai turquoise and are possibly the world's oldest jewellery. Turquoise is rarely found in pieces larger than walnuts. It is usually polished with a low-convex, rounded surface, but it may be carved, engraved, or set in mosaics.
  - 13 A. Parpola and P. Koskikallio, "Lapis Lazuli beads in Susa and Central Asia: a preliminary study", *South Asian Archaeology*, 1993, Vol.I, p.137.
  - 14 D. K. Chakrabarti, "Lapis lazuli in early India", *Man and Environment* 2, 1978, pp.51-58.
  - 15 J. Wyart, and P. Bariand & J. Filippi, "Lapis lazuli from Sar-I Sang, Badakhshan, Afghanistan", *Gems and Gemmology*, 17 (4), 1981, pp.184-90.
  - 16 Garnets are silicate minerals with diverse compositions. All garnets have almost identical atomic structures found in a wide variety of rocks-igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary. Iron-rich almandine, the most common garnet, is widespread in metamorphic rocks such as schist and gneisses and in granitic igneous rocks. Garnets have been prized as gems for over 5000 years.

documents. Their universality ensured the wide distribution and long survival of designs. Greek motifs have been found in use on gems and seal impression from both Chinese Turkestan and India, long after the period of Greek contact. Among the nine garnet gems of the casket, one reveals a glyptic art<sup>17</sup> with the portrait of Greek god Hercules.<sup>18</sup> Glyphs, beyond their archaeological meaning, may be considered to consist of small precious stones on which figures were incised in suspense on carved. The present incised gem is very small and no greater than 1 cm in diameter. In Egypt and Asia Minor, from earliest times, glyphs served to indicate ownership. They were used as seals and were produced in a wide variety of forms.

### **Copper coins**

Coins provide a visual guide to the history of the region in general and the Gandhāra kingdom in particular, when it was part of the Achaemenid Empire on the eve of its conquest by Alexander the Great down to the arrival of Islam. On the coins we find the portraits, some realistic, some stylized of the individuals and people who shaped its history. They also chronicle the changing languages and scripts. Through their designs they provide detailed information on many aspects of the culture of the region, particularly its ever-changing religions, reflecting influences from Iran, Greece, Rome and India. Among the relic casket artifacts were six coins of Kushan period, which reveal the following:

**Obverse:** king radiate standing to front, head to left, wearing Kushan royal cap and diadem, long heavy coat and trousers,

---

17 Glyptic or the art of carving hard precious stones and gems, has been one of the most refined aspects of minor art since the time of the earliest civilizations. There has been a continuity of tradition from antiquity to modern times in repertoires of mythical, magical symbolic, and portrait subjects. This continuity has been particularly evident in small gems used as seals or jewels or included in ornamental works of gold or silver.

18 Hercules was the son of Jupiter or Zeus and Alcmēna. As Juno was always hostile to the offspring of her husband by mortal mothers, she declared war against Hercules from his birth. She sent two serpents to destroy him as he lay in his cradle, but the precocious infant strangled them with his own hands. He was, however, by the arts of Juno rendered subject to Eurystheus and compelled to perform all his commands. Eurystheus enjoined upon him a succession of desperate adventures which are called the "Twelve Labours of Hercules." He was regarded as god of strength and power, hero of heroes and athlete and competitor.

holding long spear in left hand, making an offering at a small altar with right hand. Bactrian Greek legend reads *NISHKI*, missing words are (*Shao K*).<sup>19</sup>

**Reverse:** Iranian sun god *NHP* (Mithra) radiate standing to front, head to left, wearing characteristic rayed halo of sunrays behind him and making gesture of blessing. Greek legend reads *Miuro*.<sup>20</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

Throughout the centuries the village of Loebanr remained a place of historical importance, rich in the extensive ruins of inhabited sites and sacred areas. It reveals a complete archaeological sequence from prehistoric to historic times. Large numbers of Gandhāra Grave Culture sites; (i.e. Loebanr-I, Loebanr-II and Loebanr-III), Buddhist period rock carvings and ruins of stupas have been found during the last few decades. The great mass of archaeological materials scattered unnoticed and undocumented need further investigation. The stupa structure is completely destroyed and most of the stone blocks of the Stupa have been sold to the local people by the landowner and only a heap of pebbles remains. The study of these antiquities reflects that it was once a fabulous Buddhist monument in the region. On the basis of “Kanishka-I” coins it can be argued that this Stupa structure was erected during the period of Kushan supremacy. These coins also help us to establish chronology of the kings of that time. It also confirms the fact that this Stupa enjoyed an official status throughout the Kushan Empire. It also enlightens us about the quality and nature of the stupa architecture of the period.

The presence of the gold objects and other gems antiquities in the casket highlights the importance and scope of the Loebanr Stupa among the Buddhist community. They also reflect the fact that this Buddhist complex was visited by spiritual dignitaries of that time and sacred donations were made to it by them. The occurrence of ashes and fragment of bones reveals the sanctity and

---

19 R.B. Whitehead, *Catalogue of Coins in the Punjab, Museum, Vol.I, No.68, Indo-Greek Coins*, Oxford, 1914, p.188.

20 R. Gob, *System und chronologie der Munz prägung des Kusanreiches*, Wein, 1984, p.75, No.770-71.

piousness of the Stupa. These antiquities of the relic casket purely belong to the Mahāyāna Buddhist period and are strictly religious in character, concerned specifically with worship and ritual. On the basis of the coins evidence the Stupa can be dated to 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The remains of this dilapidated but certainly elegant edifice conceal the mysteries of the religion of the Buddhist community and stand witness to the glory of our ancient past.







