

# SOURCEBOOK FOR THE SHAHI KINGDOMS<sup>1</sup>

## Was There a Phase of Clay Sculpture Production at Sahri Bahlol?

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A small clay head of a female figure with an ornate headdress held in the Peshawar Museum collection (inv. no. PM-3350) is among the lesser known, more unusual artifacts excavated at Sahri Bahlol, Pakistan in 1912.<sup>2</sup> This ancient fortified urban site in the Peshawar valley in historical Gandhāra is known for its early Buddhist schist sculptures. The female head, which has been attributed to the *c.* 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE and is constructed of clay that was accidentally fired,<sup>3</sup> indicates the possibility for a late phase of Buddhist clay sculpture production at Sahri Bahlol that is contemporary with sites across the Śāhi kingdoms from eastern Afghanistan to Jammu and Kashmir in India. This brief inquiry explores whether there is evidence for the use of clay in the sculptural production at Sahri Bahlol. Was clay used in a later repair or for sculptures produced during re-occupation of the site in the *c.* 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century CE?



Head a female (front and back). Sahri Bahlol, Pakistan, excavated 1912. Clay, accidentally fired. 14.5 x 10 x 8 cm. Peshawar Museum, PM-3350. Photos after Luczanits 2008: 320, figs. 5-6.

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<sup>2</sup> In the catalogue for an exhibition of Gandhāran art held in Bonn, Germany in 2008, the object is identified as a terracotta female head excavated at Sahri Bahlol in 1912, 14.5 x 10 x 8 cm in size, and attributed to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century (Luczanits 2008: 320, figs. 5-6). Luczanits (*ibid.*), however, clarifies that the clay head was unintentionally fired as demonstrated by the uneven coloration.

<sup>3</sup> See Luczanits 2008: 320, figs. 5-6.

The large residential and religious site of Sahri Bahlol, located northeast of Peshawar (about 7 miles northwest of Mardan and 2.5 miles south of Takht-i-Bāhī), comprises a primary urban mound surrounded by smaller settlement mounds and religious sites. The main mound was first examined in the early 1860s by Bellew, but resettlement of the site around this time prevented a full excavation. Excavations of the surrounding mounds (Dhamami, Misri's fields, Mounds A-H) have been conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) under Cunningham in 1872, Spooner in 1907 and 1909-10, and Stein in 1912.<sup>4</sup> The archaeological evidence indicates that the site was occupied from the c. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The excavations yielded a substantial quantity of Buddhist schist and stucco sculptures and reliefs, as well as human remains, pottery sherds, coins, and limited structural remains. The finds largely testify to an early period, as demonstrated by coin finds dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the early 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>5</sup> Most of this material was deposited in the Peshawar Museum.<sup>6</sup> At Mound E, the discovery of fragments of Brahmanical white marble sculpture and Hindu Śāhi coins<sup>7</sup> reveals re-occupation of the site and indicates use of the site up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Errington 2003). During this late period, Buddhist practice continued, but Hindu cult worship was also introduced.<sup>8</sup> Stein (1915: 117) pointedly compared the marble figures to the material he previously found 'among the scanty remains of Hindu shrines surviving at Und, the ancient Udabhāṇḍa, on the Indus which served as the Gandhāra capital under the "Hindu Shāhis of Kābul"' (see Kimmet 2020).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Errington (1987: 116-25; 1993) and Rienjang (2012: 5-6) summarize archaeological activities at the site. See archaeological reports (Bellew 1864: 137-43; Cunningham 1875: 36-46; Spooner 1909, 1914; Stein 1915).

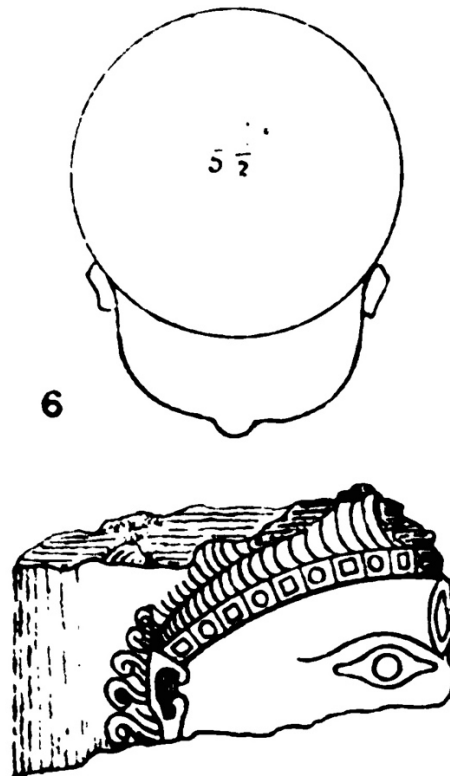
<sup>5</sup> These include coins of Azes, Soter Megas, the Kuṣāṇs, and Kuṣāṇo-Sasanian rulers (see Errington 2003; Rienjang 2012: 5-6).

<sup>6</sup> Some of the sculptures found by Bellew in the early 1860s were transferred to the Lahore Museum in 1869 (Errington 1987: 123).

<sup>7</sup> Cunningham (1875: 45) found an abundance of 'silver and copper coins of Syalapati Deva and Samanta Deva, bearing the bull of Siva,' while Stein (1915: 116-17) records excavating a total of four Hindu Śāhi copper issues of Venkadeva, Spalapatideva, and Bhimadeva. Stein (ibid.: 116) describes the archaeological context of the first find in detail: 'The numerous alterations which this shrine had undergone, were strikingly reflected by the structural remains discovered in the court adjoining the main platform on the east. Two parallel flights of stairs leading up the top of the latter were still built in proper alignment. But the two low platforms of irregular oblong shape, II, III, which had been constructed across the court from the north-east and south-east corners of the main platform, are running distinctly askew. Between these two platforms and facing the flights of stairs there stood a base about 4 feet square with a circular stone drum obviously intended for a small Stūpa. A few feet to the east of it was found a stone drum, 2 feet across, bearing on its top an Amalaka-shaped stone which from the large circular hole in its centre may be assumed to have served as the base for a wooden pillar. In the central cavity of this stone two copper coins of the Hindu Shāhi dynasty were discovered, on bearing the name of Venkadeva, and the other less well preserved, apparently an issue of Spalapatideva, the two together definitely proving that worship continued here down to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A. D.' Then: 'For the chronological determination of the ruin it is important to note that the only coin finds made besides the one already mentioned consisted of two copper pieces of the Hindu Shāhi dynasty. One of these, found some 15 feet to the north of the main platform shows the type of Bhīmadeva, illustrated by Cunningham's unique coin No. 18; the other found near platform II is badly worn, but probably belongs to one of Venkadeva's common issues as represented by Nos. 2, 3 in Cunningham's *Coins of Medieval India*' (ibid.: 117).

<sup>8</sup> Stein (1915: 117) suggests, for instance, that a terracotta female torso found here reflects a Hindu context. See the British Library archives for a photograph (Visual Arts, Photo 1006/2 (1277)).

<sup>9</sup> Prior to Stein's find, Cunningham (1875: 45) excavated a white marble *ekhamukha lingam* at Sahri Bahlol which he noted as the only sculptural evidence of Brahmanism that he found in the Yusufzai district.



Cunningham's sketch of the white marble *ekhamukha lingam* fragment he excavated at Sahri Bahlol in 1872. After Cunningham 1875: pl. XII, fig. 6.

Stein's photograph inventories for Sahri Bahlol only list sculptures made of stone and stucco; the term 'clay' is not found (see Falconer and Russell-Smith 2007: 116-27). This problem of terminology is witnessed throughout the excavation reports and subsequent scientific literature, with general references to stucco and plaster sculpture which do not offer any conclusive evidence for a later phase of clay sculpture. However, there is indirect evidence for the use of clay as a base for other materials. Could some of the 'stucco' heads be made of clay or a clay core?<sup>10</sup> Only examination in person of the artifacts (or perhaps of Stein's archived photographic material<sup>11</sup>) would enable accurate identifications of the materials and techniques used. This could allow for new attributions of clay-based sculpture to this site as well as others in Historical Northwest India.

The importance of Sahri Bahlol in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE is supported by Errington's (1993: 58) argument that it is the Gandhāran town of *Fo-sha-fu* or *Pa-lu-sha* described in the Chinese accounts of Songyun (visited *c.* 520) and Xuanzang (visited *c.* 632), respectively.<sup>12</sup> We can hypothesize that during the *c.* 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, clay-based sculptures might have

<sup>10</sup> Notably, Stein (1915: 104) discovered a colossal stucco head (h. 20 inches) at Mound C, and suggested that the absence of a body was 'evidence that it had consisted of mere friable clay, supported probably by an inner framework of wood, such as I had found in all similar sculptures from Khotan to Tun-huang.'

<sup>11</sup> Throughout his excavation report, Stein (1915) refers to the inventory numbers of his photographs (said to be enumerated in a list as an appendix which I have yet to locate) which are kept in the office of the Director General of Archaeology at Shimla and at the India Office. Some of his photographic material is held in both the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (see Falconer and Russell-Smith 2007) and the British Library India Office (Visual Arts archives, Photo 1006/2 and 1006/3). An inquiry to the British Library India Office's photographic archive is in progress.

<sup>12</sup> Errington (1993: 58-59) notes that while Cunningham and Foucher both located *Pa-lu-sha* at Shāhbāzgarhī, the archaeological evidence does not support this identification.

been created. But it remains difficult to determine on the basis of the present evidence if this included newly-constructed sculptures (see n. 10) or if clay was used in the context of repairs. It is also difficult to date these sculptures; some may date to the late phase of Buddhist activity (6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century) or a later re-occupation of the site. But at this stage of the research, I cannot offer any further definitive evidence for a late phase of Buddhist clay sculpture production at Sahri Bahlol.

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