

**MURAL PAINTINGS FROM BUDDHIST  
MONASTIC COMPLEX OF ABBA SAHIB  
CHEENA, SWAT, KHYBER  
PAKHTUNKHWA, PAKISTAN: HISTORY OF  
DISCOVERY, TECHNIQUES AND  
DIFFUSION**

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**Abstract**

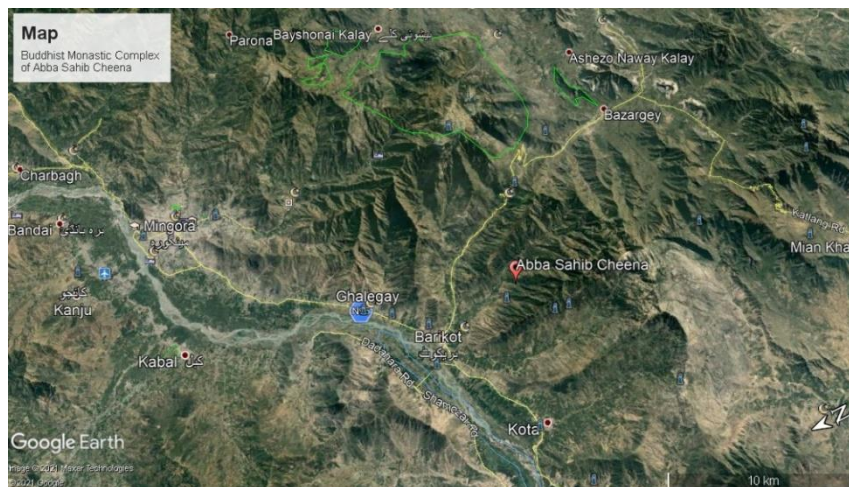
The Buddhist Monastic Complex of Abba Sahib Cheena (or Abbasaheb-China) stands as one of the most significant Buddhist sites within the Swat Valley. The site was discovered by Aurel Stein in the 1930s. However, the first systematic excavation was conducted by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at the site. It has unveiled an array of remarkable archaeological remnants, including various structures and movable artifacts. Particularly intriguing, the most captivating finds from the Abba Sahib Cheena site are the mural paintings. These paintings depict monks, bejeweled disciples, and a winged Eros, forming the central focus of this paper. They were discovered adorning the ceiling of an archway, potentially utilized as a meditation cell, as well as on the brackets of a chapel. These paintings have been executed using red and dark green hues, these dry-fresco paintings provide a striking visual representation. A concerted effort has been made to comprehend the themes and techniques underpinning these paintings through a comparative analysis.

**Key Words:** Swat Valley, Abba Sahib Cheena, Paintings, Techniques

**Introduction**

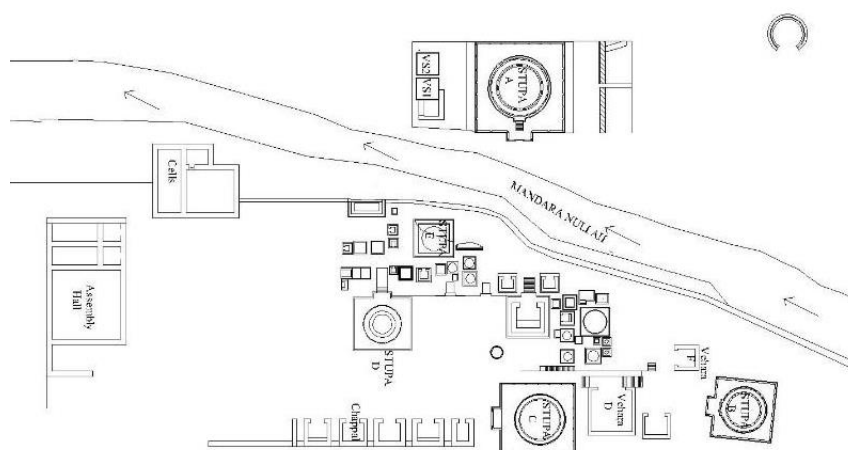
The Swat Valley is bestowed with abundant natural resources, its fertility nourished by the Swat River and its tributaries. Its resourceful environment had attracted human habitation since

prehistoric times. In keeping with their predecessors, Buddhists also settled here as early as the mid-late 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE (Butkara I), and over time numerous stupas and monastic establishments were erected alongside these settlements. The Swat Valley holds a preminent position in the Gandhara region. Historical estimates suggest the presence of approximately one thousand Buddhist monasteries in Swat, inhabited by around seven thousand individuals (Buddhist monks)<sup>1</sup>. Prominent among Swat's significant Buddhist sites are Butkara I, III, Saidu Sharif, Udegram, Chatpat, Charbagh, Amlukdara, Gumbatuna, Tokar Dara, Nimogram, Panr, Shankardar, Barikot, Andan Dheri, and Abba Sahib Cheena. These sangharamas or monasteries in Swat showcase an array of eloquent architectural embellishments<sup>234</sup>. Abba Sahib Cheena (or Abbasaheb-China)<sup>5</sup>, a monastic complex of note, takes center position in the present paper. Situated at a latitude of 72°13' E and a longitude of 34°37' N, this Buddhist monastery is positioned approximately six kilometers from Barikot village along the Barikot-Buner Road<sup>6</sup>.



Map 1 – Map of the Buddhist Monastic Complex of Abba Sahib Cheena (GoogleEarthPro)

Initially leased and safeguarded by the ACT-Field School Project, led by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan and the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (DOAM), the site eventually came under the purview of DOAM for excavation in 2020-2021 after the project concluded<sup>7</sup>. The inaugural scientific excavation yielded a wealth of significant archaeological remains encompassing both artifacts and structures. Given the scope of these findings, the current paper's primary focus is on the infrequently found paintings within the context of Gandhara.



Plan 1, Plan of the Archaeological Site of Abba Sahib Cheena, Swat  
(Plan by Authors)

The structural remains of this Buddhist site are strewn across the embrace of the mountains, their slopes adorned with pine trees (regrettably, now dwindling and felled). These vestiges span from the mountains' eastern slopes, extending alongside a stream<sup>7</sup>. In 2019, the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa procured a 93-kanal plot of land. Upon acquisition, the site's boundaries were delineated, and drainage systems were established to curtail structural degradation. These structural remnants are situated on terraces, once employed by local villagers for cultivating diverse crops. The course of excavation revealed main stupas, 18 chapels, 25 votive stupas, monastery and a circular shaped kitchen.

### Previous Research on Buddhist Mural Paintings in Gandhara

In contrast to China, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, Buddhist murals are a rarity within the Gandhara region. In Gandhara, traces of mural paintings have only been uncovered at Butkara I in Swat<sup>89</sup>, Jinan Wali Dheri in Taxila<sup>10</sup>, and Yakatoot in Peshawar<sup>11</sup>. At Jinan Wali Dheri, the mural paintings were discovered on the corridor floor of a monastery, with smaller fragments adhering to the walls. Some figures had suffered defacement due to burnt marks during the monastery's destruction<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, Abba Sahib Cheena in Swat Valley emerges as the third noteworthy site in Gandhara to expose these rare discoveries. While remains of paintings are dispersed throughout the same complex, this discussion focuses on the prominent ones. The preliminary excavation report of Abba Sahib Cheena briefly outlines these paintings. Following meticulous examination and analysis of the murals' nature, certain descriptions have been reinterpreted<sup>7</sup>.



Fig. 1 – Figure showing highlighted areas with Mural Paintings  
(Photo by Authors)

### **Methodology**

The present research endeavors to analyze the mural paintings that were uncovered during the systematic excavation at Abba Sahib Cheena. The subject paintings were revealed within a well-defined structural context. The contextual details pertaining to these paintings were meticulously recorded during the field investigation, providing a foundation for establishing their chronological placement. Comprehensive in-situ photographs and drawings, prepared during and following the excavation process, have facilitated the description and comprehension of the depicted figures and subject matter in these paintings.

Moreover, a comparative analysis was undertaken, aligning these paintings with other known examples within both the Gandhara region and beyond. This approach allowed for a broader examination of the artwork and its implications. A thematic analysis was subsequently employed to assess the findings, and aiming to reevaluate previous interpretations.

### **Inventory of Buddhist Paintings at Abba Sahib Cheena**

Among the archaeological findings recently reported from Abba Sahib Cheena, the fresco-secco paintings reported from the site bear unique testimony. These paintings are comprised of a winged Eros, bejeweled figures, and disciples. Three individual images are executed in the metopae between the brackets on the upper string of a chapel (nos. 1-3) (Trench C), while other five (nos. 4-8) are painted

on the vaulted roof arch on upper terrace (Trench D). The ceiling is embellished by paintings of devotees and males figures. It was meant to accommodate large standing sculptures.

### **1 - Buddha**

**Type:** Mural Painting (Fresco-Secco)

**Locus:** Trench C

**Condition:** Slightly Defaced

**Description:** An image of Buddha wearing monastic robe. The folds of his drapery are marked with green color as visible from right shoulder. His is outlined on the forehead but *ushnisha* is absent. His facial features are prominent with bulging opened almond eyes, thin eyebrows, thin defaced nose and thin lips. The nose is damaged. The right lobed ear is intact while the left one is missing.



Fig. 3 – Buddha  
drawing of the previous figure



Fig. 4 – Sketch-

(Photo and Sketch by Authors)

### **2 - Winged Eros**

**Type:** Mural Painting (Fresco-Secco)

**Locus:** Trench C

**Condition:** Slightly Defaced

**Description:** A round chubby face of an Eros with large protruding eyes. Eyebrows are clearly marked. The nose is absent but lips are damaged. The left ear is absent while right ear is noticeable. Interestingly, Eros has an *urna* on his forehead. His right wing is clearly visible outlined with sepia color; inside, the feathers are



colored green.

Fig. 5 – Winged Eros  
drawing  
of the previous figure



Fig. 6 – Sketch-

### 3 - Male Figure

**Type:** Mural Painting (Fresco-Secco)

**Locus:** Trench C

**Condition:** Defaced

**Description:** A bald male figure. His facial features are poorly preserved. Only a small part of his right ear is seen with an earring.



Fig. 7 – A Male Figure  
the



Fig. 8 – Sketch-drawing of  
previous figure

### 4 - Head of Buddhist Monk

**Type:** Mural Painting (Fresco-Secco)

**Locus:** Trench D

**Condition:** Defaced

**Description:** A poorly preserved head of a Buddhist monk. The right eye is present while the left one is missing. The nose is visible, but its tip is damaged. The left ear is present. A small part of his right ear is hardly visible.

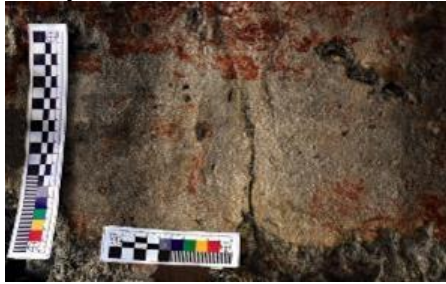


Fig. 9 – Head of Buddhist Monk.  
of  
figure



Fig. 10 – Sketch-drawing  
the previous  
figure

### 5-Male Figure

**Type:** Mural Painting (Fresco-Secco)

**Locus:** Trench D

**Condition:** Defaced

**Description:** A male figure wearing monastic robe. Folds of his drapery are clearly visible from his left shoulder. The head is bald, and the left ear is intact; in contrast, the right one is missing. An earring is visible in his ear. All facial details have vanished. His body is wholly outlined and colored in a reddish-brown pigment.



Fig. 11 – Male Figure



Fig. 12 – Sketch-drawing of the  
previous figure

### 6 - Male Figure

**Type:** Mural Painting (Fresco-Secco)

**Locus:** Trench D

**Condition:** Defaced

**Description:** A male figure with prominent mustaches on his face and a pointed nose. He has long ear lobes. The right eye is lost. The left almond-shaped eye is open under a projecting eyebrow. He is wearing a robe with a high collar.



Fig. 13 – Male Figure.



Fig. 14 – Sketch-drawing of the previous figure

#### 7 - Bejeweled Figure in *Anjalimudra*

**Locus:** Trench D

**Condition:** Defaced

**Description:** A poorly preserved bejeweled male figure. He wears a typical Kushan drapery. The left shoulder of the figure is covered, but the right one is naked. His hands are folded in *anjalmudra*. Only a small portion of the facial outline is intact, the rest is damaged. Facial details are not preserved. He wears a thick necklace.



Fig. 15 – Bejeweled Figure

in *Anjali Mudra*



Fig. 16 – Sketch-drawing

of the previous figure

#### 8 - Bejeweled Devotee in *Anjalimudra*

**Locus:** Trench D

**Condition:** Defaced

**Description:** A devotee facing left. His head is badly damaged. The body is covered with drapery but the right shoulder is naked with



prominent thick folds. He wears necklaces with multiple bands and bangles on his wrists. The hands are folded in *anjali mudra*.



Fig. 17 – Bejeweled Devotee  
the

in *Anjali Mudra*

(Photo and Sketch by Authors)

Fig. 18 – Sketch-drawing of

previous figure

Note: All the Photos and Sketches are by authors.

### Technique

These murals are characterized as *fresco-secco* (dry fresco). This technique essentially involves a form of watercolor blended with lime milk, carefully applied with delicate brushes onto partially dried plaster. While widely employed in ancient India. This method also finds usage within the ancient Tibetan cultural realm. The same technique has been employed in the paintings at the Buddhist Complex of Butkara I<sup>13</sup>. The colors employed for these murals encompass light brown, sepia, and green hues. The backdrop is adorned with a light brown ochre, with the outlines delineated in a deep sepia tone. The paintings feature varying shades of red and occasional splashes of green. A skillful shading accentuates the facial and body features, bestowing them with a pronounced prominence. It is plausible that the pigments utilized in manufacturing these colors were sourced from nearby quarries from the nearby mountain areas.

### Discussion

The paintings, discovered within an arch (likely used for housing a sizable standing sculpture or meditation cell) and nestled amidst the chapel brackets, represent a significant discovery from the site. Buddhist murals were previously documented at Butkara I<sup>8,9</sup> and Jinan Wali Dheri<sup>10</sup> before the present research. Notably, the paintings from Butkara I (1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE) and Abba Sahib Cheena (2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE) likely precede the others, executed with the same

technique through the application of delicate stucco plaster. In contrast, the murals at Jinan Wali Dheri employed mud plaster with fine stucco overlay. Displaying a diverse array of colors, these murals belong to a later period. Comparable traits are observed among these paintings, notably the presence of bejeweled figures.

Paintings featuring similar techniques were prevalent during the Kushan era in Buddhist monasteries across Afghanistan, such as Foladi, Bamiyan, Hadda, Kakrak, Kharwar, and Dilbirjan-Qazan<sup>1415</sup>. The techniques align with those seen in Jinan Wali Dheri, consistent with the late Kushan era attribution (4th-5th century CE) for this monastic complex. The thematic focus of Abba Sahib Cheena's paintings comprise of Buddha, Buddhist monks, bejeweled figures, and a winged Eros. A notable feature is the presence of an urna on Eros's forehead, possibly as an effect of a gradual Indianization of Gandhara art. This clarifies that the depicted figure is not a winged Buddha, as even the rare flying Buddha found in Buddhist art lacks wings (although it is present in the stone sculptures of Abba Sahib Cheena). Instead, the figure bears a resemblance to Eros, a celestial being often portrayed with wings in Buddhist art.

To conclude, the emergence and development of Buddhist paintings occurred at key sites (Butkara I, Abba Sahib Cheena, and Jinan Wali Dheri) within Gandhara, extending beyond its borders to attain popularity in Central Asia and China. Aurel Stein's<sup>16</sup> explorations in 1906-08 at Miran yielded murals in a ruined Buddhist monastery, prompting him to posit their origin from Gandhara. In our view, due to the influx of sculptural production in Gandhara, the art of mural painting experienced a decline. Consequently, sculptural art flourished, imbued with Hellenistic influences, and was manifest in diverse materials such as stone, stucco, terracotta, and metal. Painting, though briefly predominant, waned in Gandhara before the Sassanian invasion in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE. Like the painted shelters of protohistoric time again a shift toward paintings in rock shelters began, exemplified by sites like Patvano Gatai and others<sup>1718</sup>. While the painting techniques persisted<sup>19</sup> further insights can be gleaned from Olivieri's work<sup>20</sup> on this matter.

Gandhara remained a pivotal point throughout history for its geo-location and link to Buddhism. Due to its geophysical position, it remained an attractive center of pilgrimage and creative activities, almost for a span of 1000 years. This fact is attested by several Chinese and Korean pilgrims and monks who visited Gandhara from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Buddhism was propagated by King Ashoka and it spread from Gandhara to China, Korea, Japan and Central Asia. A fair number of Buddhist mural paintings were found from Gandhara, Central Asia and extended to Ajanta and Elora in India.

The exploration of this art was begun in Gandhara during 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE and present until 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Century CE particularly in Swat region of Ancient Uddiyana.

The Buddhist paintings in the Gandhara region not only serve as visual expressions of religious devotion but also provide invaluable insights into the evolution of Buddhist art, offering a nuanced understanding of cultural, stylistic, and iconographic changes over time. The current study has revealed interestingly an Indianized Eros with prominent *urna* marked in between the eyebrows. This type has not been observed before neither in sculptural art nor in murals. So, it will open the room for more comprehensive research upon this feature of Buddhist art.

### **Summary**

Abba Sahib Cheena stands as one of the most significant Buddhist complexes within the Swat Valley. Recent excavations at this site have uncovered a trove of significant discoveries, encompassing both architectural remains and movable artifacts. Among these treasures, the reported mural paintings emerge as particularly rare and remarkable findings. The present paper marks the inaugural endeavor to comprehensively describe and analyze these important archaeological evidences.

The stylistic attributes of these paintings suggest an affiliation with the late Kushan period (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Century CE). This research underscores the awareness within Swat's communities of the intricate and skillful execution of mural paintings during this era. Through their thematic content, featuring depictions of Buddha, adorned figures, and employing sepia and light brown tones, these paintings find parallels with the murals of Butkara I and Jinan Wali Dheri. However, the contrasting features include incorporation of a winged Eros characterized by a prominent *urna* on the forehead, the depiction of disciples with distinctive large mustaches and shaven heads, and the novel use of green pigments.

The unique placement of these paintings solely within an arched cell and chapels serves as a testament to the religious dedication of the artists behind their creation, and to their fervent commitment and artistry.

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