

Unveiling the Buddhist Heritage of Tokar-Dara, Swat: Recent Excavations and Discoveries

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Introduction

The Swat Valley, a key region of ancient Gandhara, formed a vital nucleus of Buddhist civilization from the 3rd century BCE to the 10th century CE. Despite its recognized significance, many Buddhist complexes in the valley remain undocumented or partially explored. This study addresses the research gap concerning the Tokar-Dara Buddhist complex by presenting results from its first scientific excavation, conducted by the Directorate General of Archaeology and Museums, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, during 2024-2025. Understanding Tokar-Dara is essential for reconstructing the regional networks, artistic traditions, and religious life that characterized Buddhist civilization in Gandhara. The text is justified on both the left and right sides.

Objectives

The primary aims of this study are:

1. To document the architectural layout of the Tokar-Dara complex, including its main stupa, votive stupas, monastery, and vihara.
2. To analyze the artifacts recovered and assess their chronological and cultural context.
3. To evaluate Tokar-Dara's role within the broader framework of Buddhist civilization in the Swat Valley and South Asia.

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative archaeological field methodology. Systematic stratigraphic excavation was conducted across the stupa court, monastery, and associated structures. Data collection included detailed architectural recording, artifact cataloguing, and photogrammetric documentation. Recovered material was classified by typology and fabric, and comparative analysis was performed against known Gandharan assemblages. Preliminary chronological assessment was based on numismatic evidence, particularly a Kushano-Sassanian period copper coin. Framework diagrams and site plans will be included to illustrate the excavation strategy.

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Results

Excavation revealed a well-planned Buddhist complex centered on a main stupa surrounded by multiple votive stupas, a monastery, and a vihara. Significant finds include numerous pottery sherds, stone relief panels depicting Buddhist themes and motifs, hermika fragments, stone pestles, and iron objects. Notable discoveries comprise a stucco statue of Buddha in the Dharmachakra mudra, miniature reliquaries, and a copper coin datable to the Kushano-Sassanian period. The material assemblage indicates sustained monastic activity and artistic production. Visuals including artifact photographs and site plans will be captioned and integrated.

Discussion / Conclusion

The findings from Tokar-Dara affirm its status as a major center of Buddhist civilization in the Swat Valley during the late antique period. The architectural sophistication and iconographic repertoire reflect strong integration with the wider Gandharan artistic and religious sphere, while the Kushano-Sassanian coin provides a key chronological anchor. These discoveries enhance understanding of monastic networks, patronage patterns, and the material culture that sustained Buddhist civilization in this region. The results contribute new data on the transmission and localization of Buddhism in South Asia and underscore the need for continued conservation and study of Swat's Buddhist heritage.

Keywords - (Tokar-Dara; Swat; Buddhist civilization; stupa; monastery; artifacts; excavation; DGOAM; Gandhara)

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