

Buddhist Treasures from Ancient Gandhara:  
The Islamabad Museum Collection of Gandhari Buddhist Manuscripts

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Abstract

The last three decades have witnessed a major transformation in our understanding of Buddhism in ancient Gandhara, an area that corresponds to present-day Northern Pakistan and Eastern Afghanistan. The main impetus for this transformation has been the discovery of several major collections of Buddhist manuscripts that preserve hundreds of Buddhist texts, the majority of which are in the Gandhari or Sanskrit languages. Dating from approximately the 1st century BCE to the 8th centuries CE, these manuscripts thus provide evidence of the types of texts that Gandharan Buddhist communities were transmitting and composing over this 800 plus year period, which in turn documents developments in ideas, orientations in practices, and language choices that took place in the region over this long period, including, the increasing presence of the Mahāyāna.

This lecture will concentrate on the texts preserved in the Gandhari language and written in the Kharosthi script, which represent the oldest of these new manuscript discoveries, dating from approximately the 1st century BCE to the early 3rd century CE. Of these, I will focus in particular on those of the Islamabad Museum Collection, which is the subject of my current research.

I will begin by discussing the materiality of Gandharan birch bark manuscripts, which are not uncommonly fragmentary, their conservation, and the process by which we bring the texts to publication. I will then discuss the texts in the collection, which range from early ‘canonical’ texts, to commentaries and story literature, Buddha biographies, Mahāyāna texts, and those that concern prominent historical figures, such as Kushan kings, and what they tell us about the community or communities that produced these manuscripts and the literary and ideological developments that were taking place during this early period in Gandhara. I will conclude by discussing the digital platform we are developing for collaborative research on and publication of these Gandharan manuscripts, inscriptions, and artwork. I will also discuss how these digital resources can act as a basis for making these important cultural artifacts more easily accessible to the communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan to facilitate their better understanding and appreciation of their rich Buddhist heritage.

Short biography

Mark Allon teaches Sanskrit, Pali and Gandhari, and Buddhist, Indian, and Asian studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. His primary research interests are the composition and transmission of early Buddhist literature, the ways in which texts have been used by Buddhist communities, and the Indic languages of early Buddhist texts. He is involved in two major research projects. The first concerns the study and publication of the recently discovered Gandhari Buddhist manuscripts from Pakistan and Afghanistan. The second involves the conservation, photographing, and study of the Kuthodaw Pagoda marble stelae recension of

the Pali canon in Mandalay, Myanmar. He is the author of *Style and Function: A Study of Dominant Stylistic Features of the Prose Portions of Pāli Canonical Sutta Texts and Their Mnemonic Function* (Tokyo, 1997), *Three Gāndhārī Ekottarikāgama-Type Sūtras: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 12 and 14* (Seattle, 2001), *The Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts with Specific Reference to Sūtras* (Hamburg, 2021), and numerous articles on early Buddhist literature. In collaboration with an international community of scholars and digital humanists, he is engaged in developing tools for the digital publication of Buddhist manuscripts and inscriptions.