

The Litho-Garnished Grave Art at the Necropolis of Charsadda: A Prelude

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The gulf in status between the lives of the rich and poor as seen in the living world, may also be witnessed in their abodes of eternal rest, and is a common trend experienced throughout the world. The rich as usual are desirous to be prominent and dominant even after they expire, thus we see today graves from a customary mass of soil to grand mausoleums with beautiful gardens all around. For instance the Taj Mahal in India and the Egyptian pyramids are also tombs, but they were meant for the kings and Pharaohs or the privileged class of the society. Whether it is the pyramid or a grave of any other kind, its style of construction cast back the multi faceted needs of the people of that age. In our country, the majority of the population follows Muslim faith, and buries their dead according to the Islamic customs, which follows common practice throughout the world. But the external shape of the grave differs from place to place depending upon the availability of local material and aesthetic needs of the people. The latter is practised where the people are relatively rich. One such area where specially built graves could be encountered in the North West Frontier Province is at the vast Muslim burial ground of *Hashtnagar* (the old name of the present day district Charsadda), which lies in the heart of the Peshawar valley on the confluence of the Swat and Kabul rivers. It is at this cemetery that the best examples of stone decorated graves can be seen. There are thousands upon thousands of graves here among which more than ninety per cent are decorated with this typical mode of stone ornamentation.

The Hashtnagar graveyard, which is the landmark of the area, lies to the south of the main tehsil bazaar. It catches the visitor's attention when he enters the town from the Peshawar side after crossing the river *Jindai*. It is on the banks of this river that the remains of the eight towns of antiquity are located.

The rudimentary area of the cemetery was much larger than its present size. A portion of it was transfigured into the tehsil headquarters and its adjoining government buildings, at the time the North West Frontier Province was formed in 1901 during the British period. As the graveyard is almost surrounded by populated area, the activity of land mafia has been a constant threat to its survival. It was during the pre-British days that the necropolis became known as one of the largest in the whole of South Asia. Its approximate area has now been reduced to 4 x 3 kilometres only. It is the common equity of the dwellers of the neighboring villages, which, according to the local elders, was endowed to them during the suzerainty of the Mughal king, Akbar. Such collective (common) property is locally called *shāmilāt*, whose origin can be traced back to the ancient Indo-Aryan society of c.1500 BCE. Among the communal graves there are shrines of the so-called saints, locally known as *Bābāgān*, some are known by their names while others not, and are given strange names by the local people. The most well known among them is that of Ali bin Yousaf Dalazak commonly known as Bābā Sāhib (of c. 1002 CE). Gopal Das in his *Tārikh-i Peshāwar* has mentioned shrines of some other saints in the surrounding area as well. He also notes that a special *Eid* day fair is held (Das 1874: 287) on the

Akhtar Dherai, an archaeological mound in the southern extremity of the graveyard (see also Dani 1963: 8), which is now called *Majoki Dherai* because of its close proximity to the village of Majuki (Mohammadzai 2001: 44; 2003). A good number of solitary graves attributed to martyrs or fallen heroes locally known as *Shahīd Bābā* could also be noticed in even the thickly populated quarters of the adjoining towns. Such graves are generally long in size and could be encountered anywhere, in farms, old houses, lanes and even mosques.

The Swat and Kabul Rivers have not only provided water for agriculture in the Peshawar plains for the last thousands of years, but have also gifted the area with rolled stones and pebbles that come down from the northwestern foothills with seasonal flood-waters, especially in the Swat River. Remains of ancient settlements on the banks of both the rivers still have traces of the river stones, which the occupants of the sites employed in the walls and foundations of their structures. The core of Buddhist stupas were generally replenished with rubble and rolled stones that could still be seen on the surface of such sites.

With the arrival of the Muslims, burning of the dead gave way to burying and afterwards making a grave over the remains. With the passage of time, alterations were added to make it better-looking. Thus the simple use of rolled stones developed into a full fledged art, exclusively associated with this land of the twin rivers. The grave builders of the area have widely utilized these river stones not only for its making and invigorating but also for its beautification and embellishment. As time passed, the task was taken over by artisans who showed distinction in this fastidious profession, applying their hidden genius and transforming it into an art. A purely indigenous decorative art locally called '*Da Kānro Gulkāri*' meaning stone decoration, was developed, which we have termed 'The Litho-Garnished Grave Art of Charsadda'. The material is locally obtainable and cost free, but the proficiency of its use in time developed into an art, which was admired greatly by the local populace that its use soon extended into the whole of the Peshawar valley.

The skilled artisans expressed their artistic intellect in the art, thus utilizing this free gift of nature for gratifying the aesthetic requirement of the locals. Rolled river stones of two colours, i.e. black and white, are utilized as the main medium of expression, though other colours such as brown and green are also employed but quite rarely. According to an expert of this art we talked to:

we keep no pre-planned concept what pattern we would make. Once we start decorating a grave with stones, an idea about a particular contour is automatically formed in our mind. Sometimes the client demands for a special pattern or illustration of his choice, but we normally prefer to work according to our own sketch in mind (Figure 1). This gives us full freedom to express our dexterity as we feel appropriate for the job, thus the end result is always more than the client's expectations.

A wide range of floral and geometric patterns are being used in this decoration process. All the four sides of the grave are covered with stones, each side normally having a different design. Though faunal patterns are generally not used because of its living character, yet some bird designs are occasionally depicted. Geometrical designs include squares, rectangles, circles, triangles, crosses, multiple lines and numerous other composite ones (Figures 7, 9). Floral designs include flowers and leaves of different shapes and sizes (Figure 8). The faunal designs normally consist of a flying eagle

(Figure 6). Sometimes the name of the deceased is also written (Figure 5). *Kalimah*, *Allah-o Akbar*, *Ya Allah-Ya Muhammad*, *Allah Khair* are written in Urdu/Arabic (Figure 2). There are also some graves which bear the deceased date of death (Figure 4). A grave was also noticed with Roman letters 'A' and 'S' representing the initials of the name of the deceased, i.e. *Asif Ali*. The decorations hint at changing trends and new experiments in the art according to the shifting tastes of the community. They also indicate its elasticity and flexibility, with the new requirements and altering predilections of the locals being incorporated. This style of decoration started here centuries ago, passed through many developmental stages, and still used widely. It did not need help of the rich and nobility for its subsistence, indeed this style of grave decoration seldom appeals to the upper class. It is rather the art of the common people, which they have kept alive for many centuries. It is not costly and is within the reach of everyone. It began centuries ago, and its popularity indicates that it will be kept alive for much longer time. With the passage of time both shapes and themes have been modified. Time has so far failed to subdue this artistic development present only in this part of Gandhāra. Likewise we have collected more than two hundred pot sherds with stamped designs from the surface of Majoki Dherai, an ancient settlement mound located close by as noted above. The different designs on the existing litho-garnished graves as well as those on the ancient pot sherds are so similar to each other that a possible link between the two cannot be ruled out. The extant art seems to be the developed form of that forgotten art of stamped designs on the earthen pots utilized by the ancient people of the land.

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Figure 1: Stone decoration in process



Figure 2: Allah is Great



Figure 3: Box-type graves

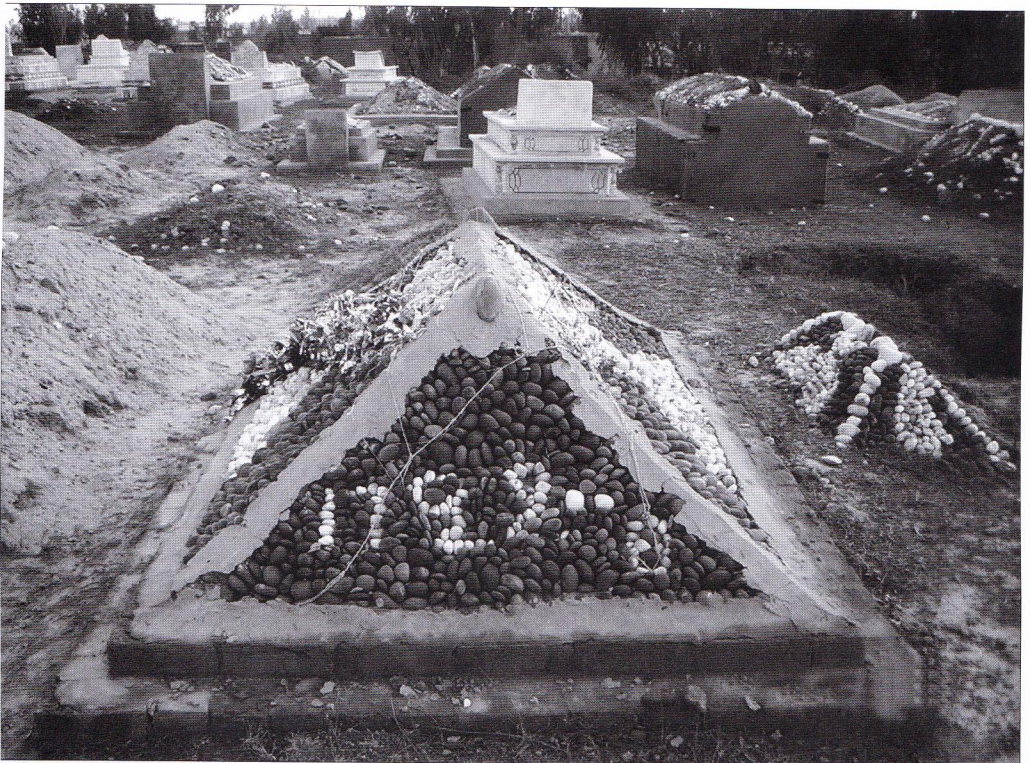


Figure 4: Date of death written with stones

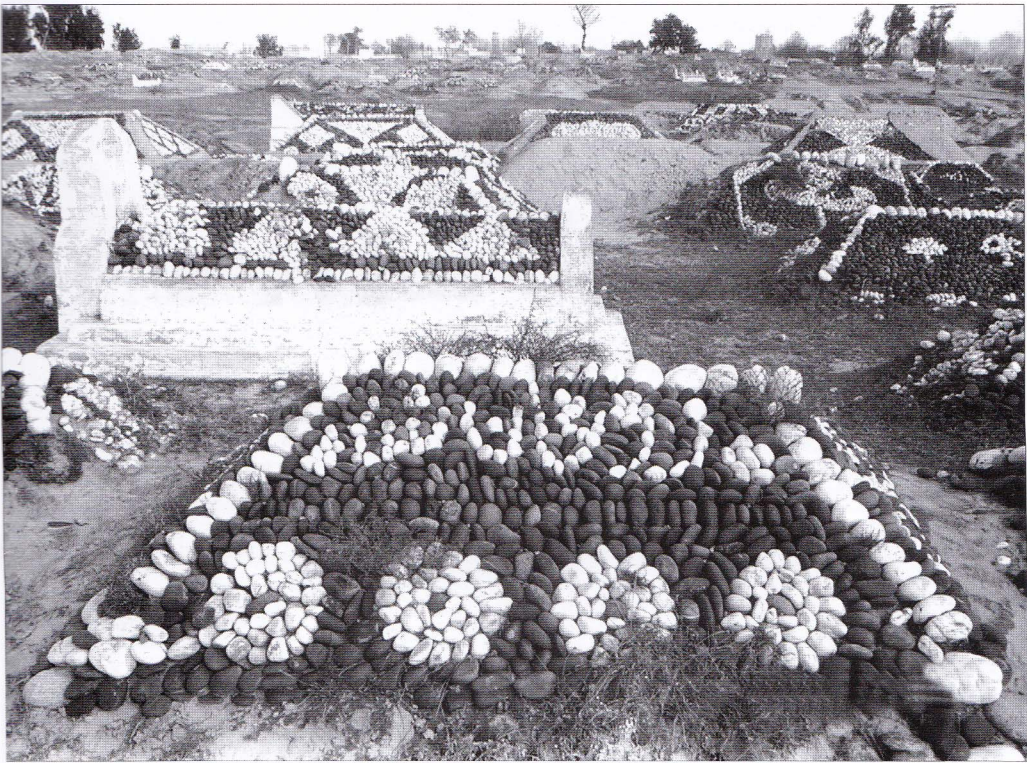


Figure 5: Rokhan Shah- name of the deceased

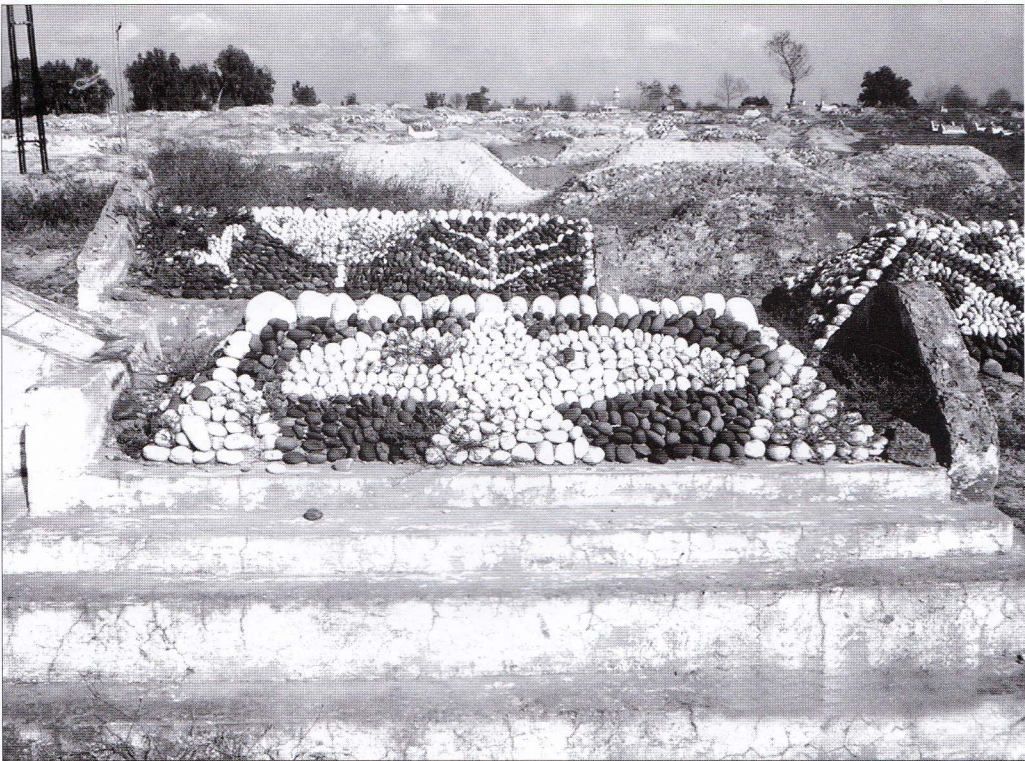


Figure 6: A flying falcon

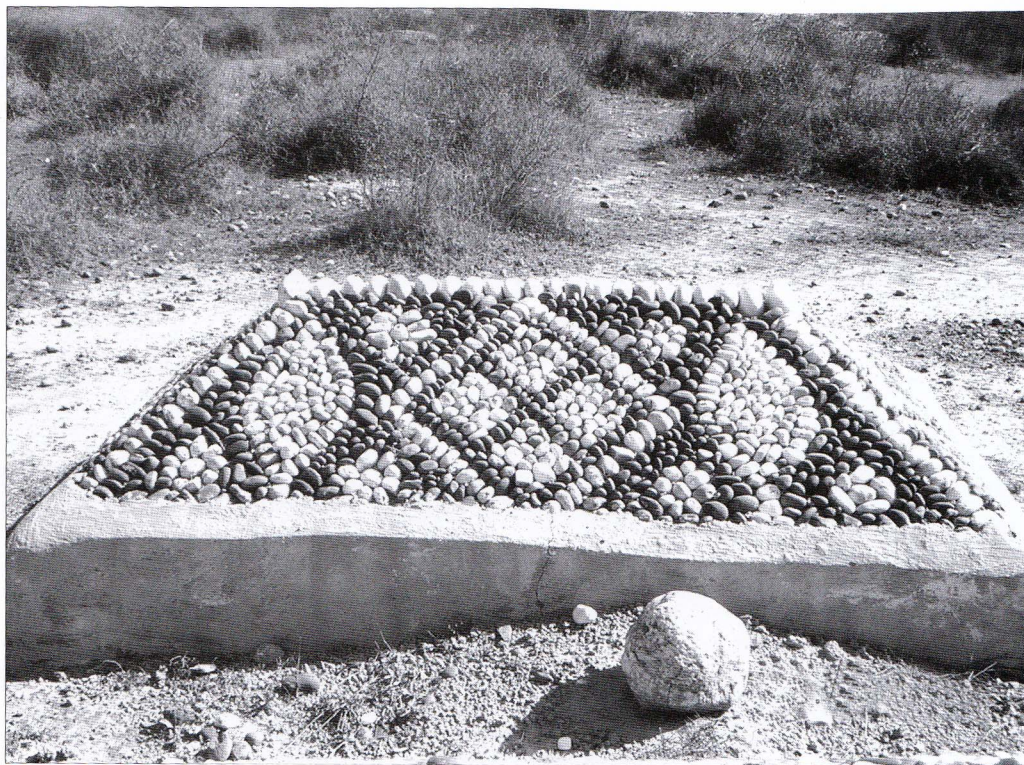


Figure 7: Floral and geometric designs

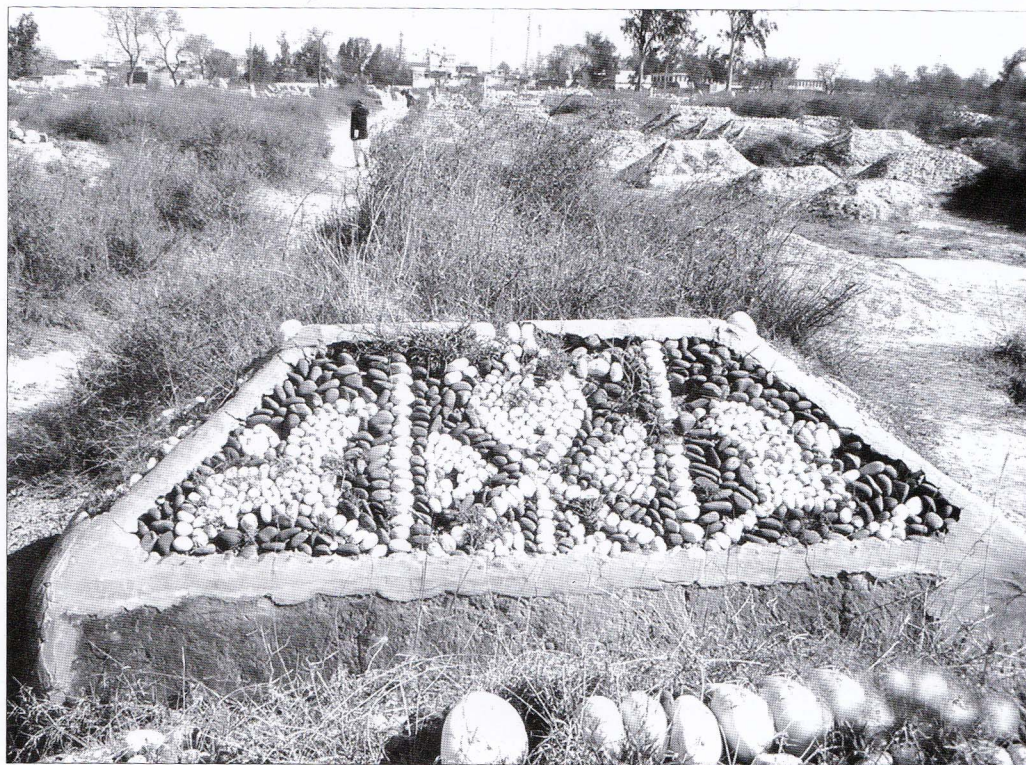


Figure 8: Floral-cum-geometric designs



Figure 9: Domes with minarets