

A CARNELIAN INTAGLIO SEAL FROM SHAH KAS, KHYBER: KUSHAN INVESTITURE IMAGERY AND KHAROṢṬHĪ INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE

Dr. Bilal Khan Afridi^{*1}, Dr. Naeem Qazi², Dr. Abdul Hameed³
Alam Khan Afridi⁴

¹Research Analyst, Planning & Development Department, Govt. of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

²Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

³Associate Professor, Department of Archaeology, Hazara University, Mansehra, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

⁴Independent Researcher in Archaeology, History and Numismatics, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

¹bilalafриди1@gmail.com, ²drnaemqazi@uop.edu.pk, ³hameed@hu.edu.pk,

⁴abdullahalamkhanafриди2015@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Bilal Khan Afridi

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a preliminary study of a carnelian intaglio seal from Shah Kas, Khyber, known through the engraved stone and its modern impression. The seal depicts a complex Kushan-period investiture scene: a four-armed standing male deity, best identified as Oešo/Oesho or a closely related Śiva-type Kushan deity, conferring a fillet or diadem upon a kneeling royal or noble figure accompanied by an attendant. The iconography recalls Kushan religious and royal imagery, especially second-century CE investiture scenes in which divine authority is visually transferred to a ruler. The visible inscriptional remains, arranged vertically in the right field, may tentatively preserve the sequence *ka-sa-va / sha-la-ra / pu-tra-sa*. The first group may be read as *Kasava*, possibly related to the *Gāndhārī/Kharoṣṭhī* form of *Kāśyapa*, or alternatively as *Kasasa*; a more hypothetical reading as *Kushana/Kuṣāṇa* may also be considered, though all such readings require further palaeographic confirmation. The element *pu-tras-a* may correspond to *putrasa*, “of the son,” or may belong to a broader royal or elite titular formula such as *devaputrasa*. On iconographic grounds, especially the kneeling figure before a deity and the close comparison with the Peshawar intaglio seal discussed by Mukherjee and later by Gul Rahim Khan and Naheed Zahra, the seal under discussion may be attributed cautiously to the Kushan period, most plausibly within the Huvishka or closely related second-century CE horizon.

Keywords: Carnelian seal, intaglio, Kushan, Shah Kas, Khyber, Oesho, Kajula, Kanishka, Huvishka, investiture, Kharoṣṭhī, putrasa, Gandhāra, royal iconography.

INTRODUCTION

Seals form an important but comparatively less studied category of ancient Gandhāran and Kushan material culture. Unlike coins, which are usually found in larger quantity and follow recognized typological sequences, seals are often isolated discoveries. Nevertheless, they preserve

valuable evidence of ancient art, palaeography, religious symbolism, administrative practice, and elite identity. Ancient seals are significant as they carry designs, symbols, short legends and individual characters, that help us understand not only the iconography, and palaeography but also

enable us to establish a possible chronology of archaeological sites (Khan & Zahra, 2016, p. 123).

The present intaglio carnelian seal is also of great importance because it combines three features of high historical value: first, a four-armed standing deity; second, a kneeling royal or noble figure receiving divine favour; and third, traces of a Kharoṣṭhī legend. The scene belongs to the same broad visual language as Kushan coinage and glyptic art, especially the divine investiture imagery of the second century CE. A similar intaglio seal from Peshawar has been analysed by Gul Rahim Khan and Naheed Zahra, who argued that its iconography is closely connected with Huvishka's copper coinage, particularly scenes in which the king kneels before a deity (Khan & Zahra, 2016).

The recently published study of the Gudar carnelian intaglio seal provides a useful methodological and comparative framework for the present Shah Kas specimen. The study emphasizes that Kushan glyptic evidence remains comparatively underexplored and that seals and engraved gems can show how imperial and divine imagery known from coinage was adapted into smaller, portable media. It also demonstrates that non-stratified glyptic objects should be interpreted cautiously through controlled iconographic and numismatic comparison rather than through findspot evidence alone (Afridi et al., 2026, pp. 1213-1215). Equally important, the Gudar study distinguishes between iconic single-deity seal imagery and narrative or investiture compositions, as reflected in the Peshawar seal. (Mukherjee, 1966, pp. 60-62).

The Gudar seal belongs primarily to the former category, whereas the Peshawar seal and the present Shah Kas seal, with a deity, kneeling royal figure, attendant, and act of conferment, bear close similarities with the latter category. In this respect, the Gudar, Peshawar, and Shah Kas seals may be viewed together as part of a growing corpus of Kushan glyptic art in which numismatic imagery, divine authority, and elite identity were transmitted across portable engraved objects (Afridi et al., 2026, pp. 1219-1222).

The purpose of this article is therefore to describe the present seal, compare its iconography with

published Kushan parallels, examine its possible Kharoṣṭhī inscription, and offer a cautious preliminary interpretation.

Description of the Seal

The seal is an intaglio engraved on carnelian, characterized by a brownish central zone with whitish coloration along the edges of the stone. The object was first noted briefly in the author's doctoral research, but without detailed iconographic, inscriptional, or numismatic analysis. The present study therefore offers its first focused scholarly examination. Since photographs of the reverse are not presently available, the assessment is necessarily limited to the engraved face and its modern impression. The impression is oval in form and preserves a deeply carved figural composition. The scene may be divided into three principal components: the standing deity occupying the central field, the kneeling figure positioned before the deity, and the inscriptional field arranged along the side of the composition.

The main figure is a four-armed standing male deity, probably Oešo/Oesho, occupying the central-left portion of the scene and holding different attributes in his hands. The deity stands frontally, with an uṣṇīṣa-like or high coiffure on the head and a bare chest. The body is shown frontally, while the left arms are extended toward the right, where the kneeling figure is placed. The upper right hand holds a trident, while the lower right hand appears to hold either a drum or a thunderbolt, an identification that may be considered in light of Rosenfield's discussion of Kushan divine attributes (Rosenfield, 1967, p. 92). The upper left hand extends a wreath, fillet, or diadem-fillet directly toward the kneeling male figure, while the lower left hand appears to hold a skin or garment, a detail that may be compared cautiously with textual descriptions of divine attributes in the Vishnudharmottara (Kramrisch, 1928, p. 66). The kneeling figure appears to wear loose costume comparable to that represented on the coinage of the Yüe-zhi/Yüeh-chih rulers (Rosenfield, 1967, p. 7). One knee is bent to the ground, while the other leg is raised, creating a posture of reverence before the deity. He is shown receiving, or awaiting, the diadem or fillet. This attitude is close to the Kushan investiture formula,

in which royal authority is represented as being bestowed by a deity. This detail is important because B. N. Mukherjee also observed a comparable arrangement in his article on the Peshawar seal, where a kneeling king accompanied by an attendant was interpreted as part of an investiture event (Mukherjee, 1966, pp. 60-62).

The inscription is engraved in the right field and arranged vertically. The impression is not perfectly sharp, and because intaglio impressions reverse the original direction, the reading of some akṣaras must remain cautious. The visible sequence is tentatively arranged from right to left, according to the normal direction of Kharoṣṭhī writing, as: ka-sa-va sha-la-ra pu-tra-sa. The possible reading Kasava / Kasavasa / Kasavasha may be cautiously considered within the wider Gandhāran-Kharoṣṭhī linguistic environment. The form Kasava is not, at present, securely attested as a Kushan or Sasanian royal name; however, it is known in Buddhist Kharoṣṭhī inscriptional contexts as the Gāndhārī/Prakrit form of Kāśyapa/Kasyapa. In the Taxila-Jaulian inscriptional material, the readings “The Buddha Kasyapa (Kasava)” and “The Buddha (Tathagata) Kasyapa (Kasava)” are recorded by Marshall and illustrated in Plate XI (Marshall, 1921, p. 10, pl. XI, figs. i-k). This provides an important parallel showing that Kasava was an attested religious name-form in the Gandhāran Kharoṣṭhī milieu.

For the present seal, therefore, the sequence may be read as Kasava, or, if followed by a genitive ending, as Kasavasa/Kasavasha, meaning “of Kasava/Kāśyapa.” The alternative form Kasavasha should be treated with greater caution, since the distinction between sa and śa/sha can be difficult on worn or impressed seal legends. The reading should not yet be presented as a confirmed dynastic or royal name, especially because Kushan royal Kharoṣṭhī legends more commonly preserve titles such as Maharajasa, Rajatirajasa, and Devaputrasa, while later Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian coinage increasingly moved away from full Kharoṣṭhī legends. A safe scholarly formulation would be: “The sequence may tentatively preserve the name Kasava, a Gāndhārī/Kharoṣṭhī form of Kāśyapa, already known from Taxila-Jaulian Buddhist inscriptions;

however, its occurrence here requires further palaeographic confirmation.”

A further numismatic parallel of considerable importance is provided by the early copper coinage of Kujula Kadphises, particularly the Hermaios-style AE tetradrachms issued in the Kabul valley and Gandhāra during the first half of the first century CE (Mitchiner, 1978, no. 2844). These coins preserve the Hermaios-style diademed bust and Greek obverse legend, while the reverse identifies Kujula through a Kharoṣṭhī formula reading Kujula Kasasa Kushana Yavugasa Dhramathidasa (Bopearachchi, 1997, pp. 190-198). The occurrence of Kasasa is especially relevant to the present seal, whose visible sequence has been tentatively arranged as ka-sa-va / sha-la-ra / pu-tra-sa. However, the third sign in the first group, read here as va, is slightly ambiguous because of the imperfect clarity of the impression; if this sign is instead read as sa, the sequence would become ka-sa-sa, corresponding closely to Kasasa in Kujula’s Kharoṣṭhī legend.

This possibility is significant because it would place the inscription even more firmly within an early Kushan epigraphic environment in which Kharoṣṭhī genitive endings, especially -sa, were used in royal naming and titulary formulas. Other Kujula issues similarly employ Kharoṣṭhī legends, including Khushanasa Yauasa Kuyula Kaphasa Sacha Dhramatidasa and Kuyula Kadaphasa Kushanasa, confirming the regular use of Kharoṣṭhī for dynastic names, ethnic designation, royal titles, and religious affiliation in the early Kushan period. In this context, the Shah Kas seal’s possible reading may be understood in two ways: as Kasava/Kasavaśa/Kasavasha, if the third sign is accepted as va, or as Kasasa, if the sign is read as sa. The latter possibility would create a closer formal parallel with Kujula Kadphises’ coin legend, while the former may still be considered in relation to the Buddhist Kasava/Kāśyapa name-form known from Gandhāran Kharoṣṭhī contexts.

Nevertheless, both readings must remain provisional, since the sign in question requires confirmation through clearer impressions and systematic palaeographic comparison. The

comparison with Kujula's coinage therefore strengthens the possibility that the inscriptional formula, if not necessarily the entire seal, preserves an early Kushan linguistic horizon, perhaps rooted in or influenced by the Kujula Kadphises phase.

A further hypothesis may also be considered in view of the imperfect clarity of the impression. The group presently arranged as ka-sa-va may not be the only possible reading; if the vowel and consonantal details of the signs have been affected by the condition of the impression, the sequence could alternatively be examined as ku+śa+na= Ku-śa-na, yielding a possible connection with Kuśāṇa / Kushana. This possibility is especially relevant because early Kushan Kharoṣṭhī legends regularly employ the dynastic or ethnic designation Kushana, as seen in formulas such as Kujula Kasasa Kushana Yavugasa Dhramathidasa and related Kujula Kadphises issues.

If the Shah Kas seal preserves a form closer to Kushana, the inscription may not refer simply to a personal or religious name such as Kasava/Kāśyapa, nor only to the Kasasa element paralleled on Kujula's coinage, but may instead encode a broader Kushan dynastic or ethnic affiliation. However, this reading remains more hypothetical than Kasava or Kasasa, since it depends on whether the first group can palaeographically support ku, śa, and na rather than ka, sa, and va/sa. Until clearer photographs or impressions become available, the first group should therefore be presented as carrying three possible readings: Kasava, if the third sign is read as va; Kasasa, if the third sign is read as sa; and, more cautiously, Kushana/Kuśāṇa, if the akṣara forms are reinterpreted under the effects of worn or unclear impression. Among these, Kasava/Kasasa remain the more immediately supportable readings, while Kushana should be retained as a broader working hypothesis requiring future palaeographic confirmation.

The second group of akṣaras, tentatively read as shalara/ sha-la-ra, remains the most uncertain element of the proposed inscription and should therefore be treated with particular caution. If the reading is palaeographically confirmed, it may be compared with Sanskrit shalara/ śālāra, which is

recorded in standard Sanskrit lexicons in the sense of a ladder, stairway, or flight of steps (Apte, n.d.; Monier-Williams, 1899). In the context of an investiture scene, such a meaning may carry symbolic implications of ascent, elevation, ceremonial approach, or movement toward divine authority. The alternative division la-ra / lara may also be significant, since it preserves the initial phonetic base lara, which could theoretically represent an earlier, shorter, or regional form from which a later Sanskrit or vernacular form such as Laranya may have developed. If the seal belongs to an early phase of Kushan cultural and linguistic interaction, such an evolution cannot be ruled out, especially in a multilingual environment where Prakrit, Sanskritized forms, Bactrian, and local Gandhāran usages interacted. However, this proposal must remain hypothetical, since the development from lara to Laranya has not yet been securely demonstrated through standard lexicographical or inscriptional evidence. It should also be noted that the well-attested Sanskrit word for grace, charm, beauty, and elegance is lāvaṇya (Monier-Williams, 1899, s.v. "lāvaṇya"); therefore, lara/Laranya should not be treated as an established translation at this stage. The group may alternatively represent part of a personal name, title, honorific expression, or damaged/ligatured sequence rather than an independent lexical term. For this reason, the interpretation of sha-la-ra / la-ra should be presented only as a secondary and provisional possibility, pending clearer impressions, epigraphic comparison, lexicographical confirmation, and further study of possible linguistic development from lara to Laranya.

The clearest and most meaningful element of the inscription appears to be pu-tra-sa. This sequence is important because putrasa is a well-attested genitive formation in northwestern Prakrit/Kharoṣṭhī usage and forms part of the Kushan royal title devaputrasa. Early Kushan coin legends preserve formulas such as Maharajasa Rajatirajasa Devaputrasa Kuyula Katakaphasa, showing that devaputrasa belonged to the royal titular vocabulary of the early Kushans. The presence of pu-tra-sa on the Shah Kas seal, if correctly read, may therefore indicate that the

inscription is not a simple private label but part of a royal, religious or elite titulary expression. However, since the preceding signs are uncertain

and the full syntactic structure of the legend is not yet secure, the reading should remain cautious.

Catalogue of Akṣaras on the Seal

Arranged from right to left, according to Kharoṣṭhī writing direction.

No.	Akṣara	Roman reading	Proposed grouping	Interpretive note
1	𑀓	ka		The sign is clearly identifiable as ka .
2	𑀚	sa		Secure reading; the sign is clearly identifiable as sa .
3	𑀖	va	Ka+sa+va = Kasava	Slightly ambiguous; probably va , though sa/ śa cannot be fully excluded because the image is not perfectly clear.
4	𑀥	sha		The sign is clearly identifiable as sha .
5	𑀗	la	Sha+la+ra = shalara	The akṣara sign is clearly identifiable as la .
6	𑀢	ra		The akṣara is visibly read as ra .
7	𑀧	pu		The form is unmistakably pu in the impression.
8	𑀭	tra		The conjunct/sign is clearly preserved and may be read confidently as tra .
9	𑀚	sa	Pu+tra+sa = putrasa	Secure reading as sa ; although the upper part is slightly unclear, the initial form and remaining lower portion support the identification.

Iconographic and Historical Discussion

The closest published comparison for the present seal is the intaglio seal from Peshawar, first published by Mukherjee (Mukherjee, 1966, pp. 60-62) and later revisited by Gul Rahim Khan and Naheed Zahra (Khan & Zahra, 2016). In that seal, a four-armed seated male deity offers a diadem or fillet to a kneeling royal figure. Mukherjee compared the deity with Manaobago (Mukherjee, 1966, pp. 60-62), that can be seen on the gold coins of Kanishka and Huvishka. The legend MANAOBAḠO on Kushan coins is in Bactrian and has been interpreted as “house-god”, and the name Manaobago has also been associated with Avestan Vohu Manah, the foremost of the Ameša Spentas and the personification of “Good Mind,” wisdom, and understanding (Rosenfield, 1967, p. 79). Although the deity on the present seal appears to be standing and may be more appropriately compared with Oešo/Oesho because of the trident and related attributes, the

Peshawar seal remains highly relevant as a parallel for the investiture composition.

Gul Rahim Khan and Naheed Zahra further argued that the kneeling figure should be studied through the copper coinage of Huvishka. They noted that Huvishka’s copper coins show the king kneeling before the goddess Nana (Cunningham, 1892, pl. XXI, nos. 21-22), wearing royal costume and receiving divine favour (Khan & Zahra, 2016). This comparison is important for the present seal because the kneeling posture is not merely decorative. It belongs to a clear ideological theme: the king receives legitimacy, victory, and authority from a divine power.

The deity on the present seal should therefore be understood in relation to the wider Kushan investiture tradition rather than as a direct repetition of a single coin type. The Peshawar seal and Huvishka-related material provide important parallels for the kneeling figure and the conferment of authority, while the present seal

differs in showing a standing four-armed deity with attributes closer to Oešo/Oesho. Afridi et al. (2026, pp. 1213-1215) have shown that Kushan glyptic imagery could adapt imperial and divine forms known from coinage into portable engraved media. In the same way, the Shah Kas seal may represent a localized glyptic expression of Kushan royal-divine ideology.

The inscriptional evidence also supports a Kushan setting. Kharoṣṭhī was widely used in the northwestern regions, including Gandhāra, Khyber, the Indus region, and the Kabul valley. Early Kushan coinage south of the Hindu Kush often used Greek on the obverse and Prakrit written in Kharoṣṭhī on the reverse. The reading putrasa is therefore compatible with early Kushan and Gandhāran usage. The title devaputrasa is especially important because it appears in early Kushan royal coin legends and expresses the ruler's divine affiliation.

On present evidence, the seal may be placed broadly in the Kushan period, most probably in the second century CE. If the Huvishka comparison is accepted, a more specific attribution to the period of Huvishka may be suggested, though with caution. The seal may have belonged to an elite, official, religious, or administrative context in which Kushan royal ideology was reproduced in miniature.

Conclusion

The intaglio carnelian seal under discussion constitutes an important addition to the corpus of Kushan-period glyptic material from Shah Kas, Khyber. Its central composition depicts a four-armed standing deity, cautiously identified as Oešo/Oesho or a closely related Śiva-type Kushan deity, conferring a diadem, fillet, or other insignia upon a kneeling royal or noble figure. The presence of an attendant reinforces the ceremonial and hierarchical nature of the scene, which can be interpreted as a divine investiture, symbolizing the conferment of kingship, authority, or legitimacy.

The closest parallels are found in Kushan coinage and in the Peshawar intaglio seal documented by Mukherjee (1966) and later analyzed by Gul Rahim Khan and Naheed Zahra (2016).

Comparison with Huvishka's copper coinage is particularly relevant, as it depicts similar kneeling figures receiving divine favor, underscoring the ideological continuity of royal-divine legitimization in the second century CE. The inscriptional sequence, read as ka-sa-va / sha-la-ra / pu-tra-sa, may preserve several significant elements: Kasava, if the third sign is read as va; Kasasa, if the third sign is read as sa; and, more cautiously, Kushana/Kuṣāṇa, if the first group is reinterpreted under the effects of an unclear impression. The clearest element, pu-tra-sa, may correspond to putrasa and perhaps to a wider titular expression such as devaputrasa, suggesting a Kushan royal, elite, or religious association. Meanwhile, the tentative reading Kasava/Kasavasha introduces a potentially religious or personal name-form, connecting the seal to the broader Gandhāran Kharoṣṭhī tradition while reinforcing its early Kushan chronological placement.

Although the precise reading of the inscription remains provisional pending higher-resolution photography and expert palaeographic study, the iconography strongly supports a second-century CE Kushan attribution, plausibly within the Huvishka or closely related horizon. The seal thus contributes significantly to the study of Kushan glyptic art by demonstrating how divine authority, investiture symbolism, and inscriptional identity could be compacted into a small, portable object, reflecting both the artistic conventions and administrative-religious ideology of the period. It also situates the Shah Kas seal within a growing corpus of comparative material, including the Gudar and Peshawar seals, illustrating the transmission of numismatic imagery into glyptic media and the continuity of Kushan royal iconography across multiple object types.

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Plates Catalogue



Plate 1. General view of the seal impression. Blue impression of the intaglio carnelian seal showing the complete oval composition. The four-armed standing deity appears at the centre, with the kneeling royal figure and attendant on the right.



Plate 2. Detail of the central deity. Close-up of the four-armed standing deity, probably Oešo/Oesho or a closely related Śiva-type Kushan deity. The deity appears to hold a possible fillet or diadem, along with other attributes.



Plate 3. Detail of the investiture scene. The kneeling figure before the deity, probably a Kushan ruler or royal personage, shown receiving divine favour or authority.



Plate 4. Detail of the inscriptional field.

Vertical group of Kharoṣṭhī characters visible on the right side of the impression. The sequence may tentatively include ka-sa-va, sha-la-ra, and pu-tra-sa; the clearest possible element may be putrasa, possibly part of a wider royal or elite expression such as devaputrasa.

