

## Buddhist, Sogdian, Zoroastrian or Śaiva? Reinterpreting Some Interesting Images from Dandan Uiliq

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### I

Located to the north-east of Khotan in the vast inhospitable Taklamakan desert, between the rivers Khotan and Keriya, in the autonomous region of Xinjiang in Chinese Turkestan, Dandan Uiliq (also written as Oilik), is a significant archaeological site with Indian footprints that has attracted the attention of scholars for a century and a quarter. Amongst the early explorers Dr. Sven Hedin<sup>1</sup> (1896) and Sir Marc Aurel Stein<sup>2</sup> (1900-1901) have left interesting accounts of their explorations and excavations in Central Asia including Dandan Uiliq. They were followed by others like Ellsworth Huntington (1905) and Emil Trinkler and Walter Bosshard (1928).<sup>3</sup> No expedition to Dandan Uiliq took place for the next seven decades till Christoph Baumer led a team to the place in October 1998 and excavated some of the sites afresh. He published his findings in a well documented book in 2000.<sup>4</sup>

Christoph Baumer not only revised some of the observations on findings of Sir Aurel Stein but also added a lot of new material including painted panels to our knowledge. Some of the painted panels in the temple D13 described by him attracted our attention while reviewing his book for the *Research Bulletin Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute*, Vol.I published in December 2002. We made some independent observations on identifications proposed by him.<sup>5</sup> Baumer further revised his identifications in a paper presented in an international seminar in 2007 at the National Museum Institute, New Delhi.<sup>6</sup> In the same seminar Lokesh Chandra<sup>7</sup> also expressed his views on some of the murals published by Baumer. Both of them

failed to take notice of our suggestions. Since there is no consensus of opinion amongst scholars on the identification of the figures in the paintings from Dandan Uiliq, it becomes pertinent to discuss them afresh.

## II

Of the two panels published by Baumer that we are going to discuss here, the first one<sup>8</sup> (Fig.1), “located on the western inner side of the northern wall”<sup>9</sup> in the temple D13, depicts three seated divinities two males and a female in the centre. On the extreme left is a three-headed, four-armed, ithyphallic male seated cross legged on a circular cushion like seat. His hair is tied in a bun above his central head with the rest falling on his shoulders and a round *ūrṇā* like protuberance is to be seen in front on the head. There is a circular halo behind. Of his three faces, the central one, slightly bent forward, has drooping contemplative eyes, with vertical



Fig.1 : Three seated divinities, Temple D13

third eye on the forehead and thin drooping moustaches. His left face is feminine and the right that of a male with cap like headdress. He wears a round plain necklace, armlets and bangles. In his upper two hands he holds round discs generally identified as symbols of the sun and the moon. His lower right hand rests on his thigh. It is not clear if there is some object in this hand or not. His lower left hand is raised to the chest having a round object, doubtfully identified as pomegranate by Baumer.<sup>10</sup> A figure of couchant black bull is shown at the feet of the deity. The central figure is a female, also seated on a circular cushion, single headed looking towards right, wearing cap-like headdress, ear-ornaments, flowers in hair, necklace, single bangle on right wrist, a blouse, a waistband with another band hanging in front and halo on the back of her head. She is cradling a swathed infant in her arms close to her breasts. She has been identified as Hāritī, the Buddhist goddess, by scholars. The third figure on the right<sup>11</sup> is also an ithyphallic male seated cross-legged on a circular cushion-like seat. He is shown three headed with a third eye on the central forehead and a halo behind. There are some indistinct marks above his heads on the halo. He wears a necklace, may be of pearl strings. He also wears a cross-band on his chest. Of his four hands, he holds round discs in his upper two hands symbolizing the sun and the moon. In his lower hands he holds horizontally a long *daṇḍa* like object that has been identified as *triśūla* by Baumer<sup>12</sup> but three points of trident are not visible in the given plate. It may be *Śakti*.

The first deity on the left was identified by Christoph Baumer as Śiva-Maheśvara, a deity of Hindu origin adopted in Vajrayāna Buddhism. He has further identified its left smiling face as Śiva's Śakti and the angry male face on the right as his violent and destructive aspect.<sup>13</sup> He also refers to its description in some Khotanese texts as one of the eight protectors of the cosmos.<sup>14</sup> But later on he identified it as Weshparkar, a form of Īśvaraka. Commenting on the same figure, on the authority of Susan Whitefield,<sup>15</sup> Lokesh Chandra remarked that he is not Śiva-Maheśvara but his Buddhist apotheosis as Maheśvara or Īśvaraka (Weshparkar) or Nīlakaṇṭha. He refers to the hymn to Nīlakaṇṭha transliterated

and translated into Chinese by Bhagavaddharma in CE 650-661.<sup>16</sup> He quotes a number of references in support of his identification. We shall revert to it shortly. The second figure has been identified as the Buddhist goddess Hārītī both by Baumer<sup>17</sup> and Lokesh Chandra.<sup>18</sup> The latter further asserts that she was the guardian deity of Khotan. The male figure on the extreme right, as already pointed out has been identified by Baumer as Brahmā “who was also absorbed by Vajrayāna Buddhism”.<sup>19</sup> Later on he elaborated upon his identification asserting that in Sogdian context prevalent in Dandan, the figure represents Zurvan, the deity of Time.<sup>20</sup> Zurvanism is a branch of Zoroastrianism. In a similar panel published by Aurel Stein<sup>21</sup> we have a three-headed deity holding bow and arrow that was earlier identified by Joanna Williams as Brahmā<sup>22</sup> but later on Markus Mode and Zhang Giangda identified it as that of Zurvan.<sup>23</sup> This makes the panel with two Zoroastrian and a Buddhist deity in the centre. However, Lokesh Chandra has not agreed with Baumer's identification of the third figure on the right. He describes it as having, “three visible faces, four arms, feminine faces, breasts, and is ithyphallic. The androgynous features may be compared to Ardhanārīśvara”.<sup>24</sup>

As for the first figure on the left is concerned, all scholars agree that it clearly has Śaiva features. Whether he is Īśvaraka (Weshparkar), Maheśvara or Nīlakaṇṭha taken into Buddhism is a moot point. Here it is evident that all the three names are synonyms of the great Indian god Śiva. It is well-known, as pointed out by M.K. Dhavalikar<sup>25</sup> also, that Śaivism and Buddhism both reached Central Asia and got blended together with the passage of time. But their iconographic traits continued as before. If we look towards Sogdian origin for these murals, it must be noted that both Hindu and Buddhist iconography reached the region from India. The Buddhist iconography reached at an early date and the Hindu iconography became stronger after the decline of the Buddhism c. 7<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards. Thus the Hindu nature of these murals assignable to c. 8<sup>th</sup> century CE cannot be ruled out.

The ithyphallic images exclusively belonged to Śaivism as also Nandi, the bull as vehicle of Śiva. His three faces with the feminine and fierce aspects are also well-known. Here the object in his lower left hand that has been taken as a

pomegranate is actually a *mātuluṅga* or *bījapūraka*, citron, one of the attributes of Śiva. He may simply be identified as such.

The figure on the right requires closer attention. It is clearly an ithyphallic male figure. The faces are that of a young male and not feminine as Lokesh Chandra thought. The Ardhanārīśvara images invariably have right half as male with attributes of Śiva and the left as female with attributes of Pārvatī. These features are missing in the present image. The image cannot be identified as that of either Brahmā or Zurvan also. Brahmā is never shown ithyphallic in iconography nor is there any textual reference to him as such. We are not aware of any ithyphallic images of Zurvan either. It may be presumed that three heads of the deity are hidden being on the backside. It clearly has a third eye on the forehead, wears a cross-band on chest which is a sign of a warrior and carries a *śakti*<sup>26</sup> in his lower hands. He may be easily identified as Kārttikeya, the youthful commander-in-chief of the divine army.

With this identification of the two figures, the identity of the central figure becomes very clear. The image is that of Śaṣṭhī, the consort of Kārttikeya, who is protector of children in Hinduism. She is shown carrying children in her lap or around her and is worshipped on the sixth day of the birth of a child, especially the male child. Thus the triad is Śaiva in nature indicating the continuance of the prevalence of this faith in Dandan Uiliq. It becomes further clear from the images in triad discussed below.

### III

The second panel published by Baumer from Dandan Uiliq D13 is also of a divine triad<sup>27</sup> (Fig.2). It is said to be painted on the lower southern end of the western wall of the temple.<sup>28</sup> This one is equally interesting and may be described in brief. On the left is a three-headed male deity with a halo behind his heads and the hair tied in topknot. He wears a necklace with three beads in centre, armlets with design and bangles. He is wearing a *dhotī* and seated cross-legged on a peacock that has its neck raised upwards. The deity holds a bow and three arrows in his upper right and left hands respectively. In his lower left hand he has a cock held close to his chest while



Fig.2 : Divine triad, Temple D13

his right hand rests on his thigh with an indistinct object held in it. Baumer's description is slightly different. He says, "the three-headed Brahmā, whom we recognize by the three arrows he holds in his upper left and the bow in his upper right hand, and, above all, by his vehicle, the wild male goose Hamza (*sic. harīsa*), who stands close to his left knee. His lower left hand holds a cock, an attribute of uncertain meaning".<sup>29</sup> The haloed deity in the centre is a female seated cross-legged on a round cushion looking to her right wearing a beautiful tiara and draped in a *sārī*, the fold of which passes under her right arm and over her left shoulder much like the one worn by Indian women in present times. She wears a beaded necklace and holds a swathed baby in her arms. Another young child is shown seated on her left lap holding on to her. The four-handed deity on the extreme right is rather enigmatic. He is seated cross-legged on a round cushion-like seat wearing a *dhotī* with folds clearly visible on legs, a necklace with three big round beads in the centre, round earring and plain bangles on his wrists. He holds two round discs symbolizing the

sun and the moon in his upper hands while the lower right hand has what looks like a lotus. The lower left hand is not visible in the picture. The most curious feature is his face that looks like that of a boar (*varāha*) or a wolf as Baumer has put it. He is looking to the right. His headdress is as curious as his face. It shows a round object above a band and either flames or feathers on both sides. A halo behind his head indicates his divine status. Baumer has suggested that it is either the Varāha incarnation of Viṣṇu or a *graha*, a benevolent deity ensuring the good health of children.<sup>30</sup>

The three-headed deity on the left was identified as Brahmā by Baumer as already pointed above. However, the learned scholar changed his view later on and suggested that it is Washagn, the Sogdian variant of Verethragna,<sup>31</sup> the Iranian god of victory, 'masquerading under the traits of Kārttikeya'. The Iranian Verethragna is a variant of the Vedic Vṛtraghna, an epithet of Indra who is also god of victory. The iconography of Verethragna is different from that of the image under discussion. Baumer has referred to some other similar images at Yungang, where Indian influence of the Mathura school of art is noticeable. At the same place in Cave-10 there is a panel depicting the scene of churning the ocean by gods and demons. To the left of this scene is also a seated image of Kārttikeya.<sup>32</sup> Despite of the fact that some of these images are earlier in date than the one under discussion, they clearly show a strong presence and popularity of these Hindu deities in Central Asia. Lokesh Chandra has rightly identified it with Skanda-Kārttikeya<sup>33</sup> without taking note of our earlier suggestion of the same identification.<sup>34</sup> The attributes of this deity peacock as his mount and a cockerel should leave no place for any doubt. Further the *Aṃśumadbhedāgama*, a Tāntric text on iconography, refers to bow and arrow as attributes of Kārttikeya. Some other medieval texts also describe bow and arrow as his attributes.<sup>35</sup>

The deity in the centre has so far been identified as Hārīti by all the scholars. However, as in the case of the first triad discussed above, we feel that she should be identified as Śaṣṭhī, the consort of Kārttikeya.<sup>36</sup> The portrait of Śaṣṭhī

occurs on the reverse of the Yaudheya coins with that of Kārttikeya on the obverse. Her presence by the side of the latter appears very natural.

The image on the extreme right is rather enigmatic. Baumer had suggested that it could be Varāha, the third incarnation of Viśṇu or a *graha*, a benevolent deity ensuring the good health of children.<sup>37</sup> Lokesh Chandra thinks that the image has face of a sow and has identified it with that of Vajravārāhī.<sup>38</sup> However, the iconography of the present image, which looks more masculine rather than feminine, does not match the textual description given by Lokesh Chandra of a goddess who is known to “terrify, kill, tear to pieces, and terror to all beings”.<sup>39</sup> It does not match the known iconography of Vajravārāhī in any way. It may be of interest to note that Alice Getty discussed a similar image from Bāzāklik in the Thousand Buddha Caves (Turpan, Xinjiang) (Fig.3) and proposed it to be identified as Gaṇeśa. She has pointed out that there are a number of images of Gaṇeśa in these caves along with those of Śiva, Mahākāla and Kārttikeya. She



says, “The interesting feature of these frescos of Gaṇeśa is that the elephant-face does not follow the usual representations of the god, for the trunk is a short prolongation of the nose and the end of the trunk somewhat resembles the snout of a wild boar”.<sup>40</sup> She concludes that it would be most unusual to have the image of the boar-headed god in the company with Śiva and Kārttikeya.<sup>41</sup> M.K. Dhavalikar in a recent article on the iconography of Central Asian Gaṇeśa has also referred to the image published

Fig.3 : Gaṇeśa, Thousand Buddha caves, Bāzāklik

by Alice Getty and fully agreed with her identification.<sup>42</sup> This explanation is fully applicable in the present context. Incidentally lotus happens to be one of the attributes of Gaṇeśa.<sup>43</sup> The image along with that of Kārttikeya and Śaṣṭhī may convincingly be identified as that of Gaṇeśa.

## References & Notes

1. *Through Asia*, New York, 1899.
2. *Ancient Khotan*, Oxford, 1907; *Sand Buried Ruins of Khotan*, London, 1904.
3. Cf. Christoph Baumer, 'Sogdian or Indian Iconography and Religious Influences in Dandan-Uiliq: The Murals of Buddhist Temple D13', in Anupa Pande (ed.), *The Art of Central Asia and The Indian Subcontinent in Cross-cultural Perspective*, New Delhi, 2009.
4. Christoph Baumer, *Southern Silk Road In the footsteps of Sir Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin*, Bangkok, 2000.
5. *Research Bulletin Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute*, Vol.I, December 2002, pp.228-229.
6. Christoph Baumer, *Op.cit.* (2009), pp.170-184.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.163-169, *Research Bulletin Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute*, Vol.I.
8. Baumer (2000), p.89, Figure 69.
9. *Ibid.*, p.86.
10. *Ibid.*, p.87.
11. Baumer has noted that there is another figure next to it. But it is mutilated beyond recognition. *Ibid.*
12. P.87; Figure 69 on page 89.
13. *Ibid.*, pp.86-87.
14. Baumer (2009), p. 176.
15. *The Silk Road*, Chicago, 2004, p.159, fig.13.
16. 'Dandan-Uliq Panels for the Divine Protection of Khotan', in Anupa Pande (ed.), *The Art of Central Asia and The Indian Subcontinent in Cross-cultural Perspective*, New Delhi, 2009, p.165.
17. Baumer (2000), p.88; and (2009) p.177.
18. *Op.cit.*, p.166.
19. Baumer (2000), p.87.
20. Baumer (2009), p.177.
21. *Ancient Khotan*, Vol.II, Plate LXIV, I, Oxford, 1907.
22. *East and West*, Vol.23, 1973, pp.140-42.
23. Quoted by Baumer (2009), p.177.
24. *Op.cit.*, p.166.

25. Cf. M.K. Dhavalikar, in Anupa Pande (ed.), *The Art of Central Asia and The Indian Subcontinent in Cross-cultural Perspective*, New Delhi, 2009, p.234.
26. Baumer has called it a *trīśūla* but the three spikes of a trident are not visible in the picture.
27. Baumer, Figure 70 on page 90.
28. *Ibid.*, p.88.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p.89.
31. Baumer (2009), p.178.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Op.cit.*, pp.166-67.
34. *Research Bulletin Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute*, Vol.I, December 2002, pp.228-229.
35. J.N. Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, 2002 (5<sup>th</sup> edition), Delhi, p.365.
36. Soon after the publication of our review of Baumer's book in 2002, Late Shri R.C. Agrawala discussed these images with us and fully agreed with our identifications.
37. Baumer (2000), p.89; (2009), p.179. Incidentally Zhang Guangda has been referred to as identifying the same figure with Verethragna, who is said to have similar attributes. *Ibid.*
38. *Op.cit.*, p.167.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ganesa: A Monograph on the Elephant-faced God*, New Delhi, 1971 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p.41.
41. *Ibid.*, p.42.
42. M.K. Dhavalikar, (2009), *op.cit.*, pp.236-237.
43. J.N. Banerjea, *op.cit.*, p.358.

**Photo Courtesy :** Figs.1 and 2 - Chritoph Baumer; Fig.3 - Alice Getty.