

Kuṣāṇa Art Beyond the Kuṣāṇa Realm : With Special Reference to Nepal

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Stylistic features of Kuṣāṇa art, or to be more precise of the Mathura school of sculpture, seem to operate beyond the Kuṣāṇa realm (see map Fig.1).¹ The Mathura



Fig.2: Bodhisatva from Mathura, Sarnath Museum (photo A.J. Gail)



Fig.1: Kuṣāṇa realm (photo Gandhara, 2008)

pieces in the Sarnath Museum, among them the Bodhisatva dated in Kanishka's year 3 (= first half of 2nd century CE, Fig.2),² represent an early export from Mathura to the site of the Buddha's first sermon, but this area appears still to belong to the Kuṣāṇa empire. The *mithuna* couple on the veranda of the *caityagṛha* at Karla in Maharashtra (Fig.3), however, is definitely outside the Kuṣāṇa realm although this sculpture is strongly suggestive of significant features of the Kuṣāṇa style (Fig.4).³ The broad hip, the heavy breasts and the bulky anklets of the female partner are particularly notable (Figs.3 and 5).⁴ Before we turn our

attention to early Hindu figures in the Kathmandu Valley, we have to keep in mind the fact that Buddhist art in that area commenced rather late. According to Pal's careful observations, a figure of Avalokiteśvara from the middle of the 6th century CE seems to belong among the earliest testimonies to Buddhist art, although the birthplace of the

Buddha Lumbinī is in the Terai, i.e. the southern fringe of the contemporary state of Nepal.⁵

Practically all stone figures from the early post-Christian centres in historic Nepal depict female goddesses, a fact that is indicative of a strong (even pre-Hindu) mother cult in the Valley.⁶



Fig.4: Śālabhañjikā excavated in Sonkh (photo A.J. Gail)

worshipped as Śitalādevī who is responsible for smallpox.⁷ A close inspection, however, makes it evident that the background of this goddess is quite different. Covered by dirt and soot one can discover a snake hood, consisting of five cobra-heads (*pañcanāga-phana*) and framing her head like a halo



Fig.3: Couple on veranda of Karla caityagṛha (photo A.J. Gail)

Our first specimen is of extraordinary interest. In a small temple in the Balaju Gardens of Kathmandu a goddess is seated with hanging legs (*pralambapāda*),



Fig.5: Scene with drunken women, Mathura Museum (photo internet s.v. Mathura sculpture)

(Figs.6-8). This identifies the goddess as nāgī, a species of creatures that seems to have been very popular in pre-Kuṣāṇa India and that was partly absorbed by the Buddhist faith and art. Yet in contrast to all known Indian specimens⁸ the deity represents by the same time a mother goddess since she holds a child on the left side of her lap.

Features that seem to suggest a connection with the Kuṣāṇa art of Mathura include her physique, particularly the heavy breasts and the small waist. The shape of the hip something that is rather prominent in Kuṣāṇa art cannot be assessed in this case. This observation holds good for the girdle



Fig.6: Nāgī mātṛkā temple, Balaju Gardens (photo A.J. Gail)



Fig.7: Nāgī mother *ibidem* (photo Bangdel, 1987)



Fig.8: Nāgī mother *ibidem* (photo A.J. Gail)

the make of which is blurred. Besides, her outfit is in harmony with Kuṣāṇa females. This is made clear from the cap-like hairdo and the massive rings that embellish her ankles. With Bangdel⁹ I would not hesitate to place the figure in the 2nd century CE, latest in the 3rd century CE. One should, however, keep in mind that we do not exactly know when the Kuṣāṇa style reached the Kathmandu Valley. Not a single sculpture under consideration is accompanied by an inscription able to reveal a precise date.

Our second specimen concerns a very much eroded sculpture the details of which are no longer discernible. Yet it is evident that we have to do with *Durgā Mahiṣamardini*, the most popular icon of Durgā throughout Indian history (Fig.9).¹⁰ Even today, on the occasion of the



Fig.9: Durgā Mahiṣamardini, Hadigaon (photo Bangdel, 1987)



Fig.10: Durgā Mahiṣamardini, Mathura, Museum für Asiatische Kunst (photo A.J. Gail)

Daśaharā festival, in many regions of India Durgā's killing of the buffalo demon is represented by temporary sculptures that are worshipped in makeshift temples (bamboo, cloth, etc.). After the festival, the sculptures are thrown into the water of rivers or the ocean where they dissolve. In this case, the difference between Kuṣāṇa sculptures and post-Kuṣāṇa pieces is rather distinct. The Kuṣāṇa sculptures exhibit Durgā fighting without any weapons. Pal has carefully described the specimen of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art¹¹ (1986, S72). A similar sculpture is kept in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin (Fig.10). The Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta rock sculptures of Udayagiri, M.P. (a few kilometers from Sāñci) are approximately datable by an inscription of the Gupta era of the year 80, i.e. 400/1 CE. Here Durgā not only uses her arms in order to kill Mahiṣa, by the same time she thrusts

her trident (*triśūla*) into the backside of the demon who is masked as a buffalo (Figs.11 and 12). The right hand of the goddess, pressed on his back, and the shaft of the trident are represented as parallels. This observation holds good for 2nd century CE, latest in the 3rd century CE, the



Fig.11: Durgā Mahiṣamardini, Udayagiri 17, M.P. (photo A.J. Gail)



Fig.12: Durgā Mahiṣamardini, Udayagiri 6, M.P. (photo A.J. Gail)

defaced sculpture from Hadigaon in the Kathmandu Valley (Fig.9). Therefore, a date not before the beginning of the 5th century CE is reasonable, and a Kuṣāṇa



Fig.13: Nayahiti, Pāṭan (photo A.J. Gail)

date can safely be ruled out. The third sculpture is still in situ in the fountain (*hiti*) called Nayahiti (Fig.13) in Chyasal tol, Pāṭan (Figs.14 and 15). Mary Slusser dates her from the 6th century CE¹² (1982, Pl.527f.), while Bangdel prefers a very early date, corresponding to

the Śāka period, i.e. the 1st century BCE (as Śāka *satih* starts from 78 CE). Indeed, the matter is not easily determined since the sculpture seems to combine earlier and later features. A careful investigation appears necessary.

Kuṣāṇa traits are the extended hips, the sunken navel, the heavy anklets¹³ and earrings. The position of the *abhaya*-hand, leaning against the right shoulder, conforms to Kuṣāṇa tradition (Fig.2).¹⁴ Post-Kuṣāṇa features, or to be more precise early Gupta ones (in the Kathmandu Valley this period is labelled Licchavī) are the single-chain necklace (*ekāvālī*),¹⁵ the elegantly twisted shawl and the wavy shaft of the lotus. In contrast to the Gaja-Lakṣmī from Nayahiti



Fig.15: Detail of Fig.14 (photo A.J. Gail)

(Fig.14) concerning a Kuṣāṇa fragment from the Mathura

trunks of the elephants is quite different from the Nayahiti specimen. Taken together these features of the superb Gaja-Lakṣmī seem to represent a sculpture that forms a bridge between Kuṣāṇa and Gupta stylistic elements. In consequence a date around CE 400 would be appropriate.

The lesson to be drawn from these observations could be that only careful listing and comparing of iconographic elements is able to date an object that otherwise lacks any precise chronological indications.



Fig.14: Gaja-Lakṣmī, Nayahiti, Patan (photo A.J. Gail)

Museum (Fig.16) both the arrangement of the herbal hood of Lakṣmī and of the two pots and



Fig.16: Gaja-Lakṣmī, torso, Mathura Museum

References

1. *Gandhara, Das Buddhistische Erbe Pakistans*, Ed. Kunstund Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, 2008, Karte 1 p.39.
2. See J.P. Vogel, *La Sculpture de Mathura*, Paris, 1930, Pl.XXVIII b.
3. The photo was taken by the author during the excavation on the site of Sonkh, 30 km to the west of Mathura, in January 1974. I would, however, not rule out the possibility that the Karla *mithuna* is even pre-Kuṣāṇa or Śaka.
4. See also Vogel, *Ibid.*, Pl.XVIII.
5. Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Nepal, Part 1, Sculpture*, Leiden, 1974, Fig.8.
6. Lain S. Bangdel, *Nepal – zweitausendfünfhundert jahre nepalesische Kunst*, Leipzig, 1987, Figs.2137.
7. See Mary S. Slusser, *Nepal Mandala – A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, Princeton, 1982, Vol.1, p.329f. Pal, *Ibid.*, p.129, Fig.58, calls her Hārītī, the Buddhist equivalent of Śitalā.
8. N.P. Joshi, *Mātrkāṣ. Mothers in Kuṣāṇa Art*, New Delhi, 1986.
9. Bangdel, *Ibid.*, Fig.37.
10. Published by Bangel, *Ibid.*, p.65f., Fig.30.
11. Pratapaditya Pal, *Indian Sculpture. Vol. I: circa 500 B.C. A.D. 700. A catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1986, No.S72. Pal points out that the "manner in which the goddess destroys the animal is unique to Kushan period reliefs" (*loc. cit.*).
12. Slusser, *Ibid.*, Vol.2, Pl.527f.
13. Not noticed by Mary S. Slusser since her photos show the bottom of the fountain flooded (*op.cit.*, Pl.527f).
14. See also Vogel, *op.cit.*, Pl.XXVI.
15. More often than not the necklace of Kuṣāṇa females falls between the two breasts (Pal 1986, Nos.S70 and 72).