

A Note on the So-called Kinnara-Mithuna Terracotta Plaque

Dr. A.L. Srivastava

Kinnara normally means a mythical being having (a) head of a horse on human body (*aśvamukha*) and Kinnarī, female Kinnara (*aśvamukhī*) and (b) human head and torso on an equine body, also known as *Kimpuruṣa-Kimpuruṣī*.¹ *Mithuna* means the couple of a male and a female. Barring 'twins', no other 'two' can be called *mithuna*. So the two males or two females can not form *mithuna*. Actually, the inherent sense (*bhāva*) of the term *mithuna* conveys a pair consisting of a male and a female capable for *maithuna*, the act of copulation or sexual union. It means both the male and female of a *mithuna* should belong to one and the same species, as we find two fish in *mīna-mithuna*, two geese in *haṁsa-mithuna*, etc.

As already hinted, two types of *Kinnaras* are well known - (1) Having a horse head on a human body and (2) having a human head and torso on an equine body.² Here the topic is confined only to the second type of *Kinnara*. So far, eleven *Kinnara*-couples better known as *Kinnara-mithuna* belonging to second type have come to our notice, five in terracotta plaques and six in stone bas-reliefs.³ Of these eleven, nine represent a normal man riding on the back of a human-headed mare (*Kinnarī*), whereas the remaining two show a normal woman enjoying the ride on a human-headed horse (*Kinnara*). It is to be noted here that none of the eleven couples represents a pair of *Kinnara-Kinnarī* i.e. a male and a female both of the same *Kinnara* species. Only two of them show *Kinnara* form and nine *Kinnarī* as carrier. The rider is always a normal human being, in two cases women and in nine men to pair similar number of the carrier *Kinnaras* and *Kinnarīs*. Still these couples are called *Kinnara-mithuna*, perhaps because, despite their different compositions, these pairs have one male and one female.

A round terracotta plaque was acquisitioned in 1933 in the Government Museum, Mathura (No.33.2350, ht.9.3 cm, 1st century B.C.E.).⁴ It represents a galloping mare with head and torso of a beautiful woman, with attractive hair-



8.1: Kinnara-*mithuna*, Terracotta Plaque, Government Museum, Mathura, 1st century BCE
(Courtesy: Government Museum, Mathura)

dress (*keśa-vinyāsa*), heavy ear-pendants (*karṇābharāṇa*), short necklace (*graiveyaka* or *kaṅṭhā*), multi-stringed waistband (*mekhalā*), armlets (*keyūra*) and bracelets (*kaṅkaṇa*). The rider on its back is quite similarly bedecked barring the only exception of a single-stringed long necklace (*ekāvalī*) in place of the short one. The *ekāvalī*, dangling between the breasts, is a favourite ornament of women better known as *stana-hāra*. Both the carrier and the rider are in full bloom of joyous mood with smiling face. Looking in front, both are in embracing attitude by placing one of their hands around the shoulders of their companion. A third female figure, bulky and partly damaged, is seen below the dangling leg of the rider (fig.1).

This terracotta plaque has been described as *Kinnara-mithuna* by V.S. Agrawala,⁵ Deena Bandhu Pandeya⁶ and others.⁷ V.S. Agrawala, however, did not publish its illustration. Pandeya published a line-drawing but he did not mention its source. Its photograph is seen by the author for the first time in the *Terracotta Catalogue of Mathura Museum*. This photograph clearly shows that the female rider is a normal woman. Besides the similar facial features, hair-dress and ornaments of the carrier *Kinnarī* and the rider, some other considerable features of the latter are to be taken into consideration. These are the large and round female breasts, the *stana-hāra* dangling between the breasts and multi-stringed *mekhalā*, which are exclusively female ornaments and also the *sārī*, going down to the ankles, indicated by creases on the dangling leg. These features provide clear evidence that the rider is a female and not a male. On my request, Dr. S.P.Singh, the Deputy Director of the Mathura Museum, has checked the plaque in question and informed me (vide his letter dt. Jan 24, 2009) that the rider in this plaque is a female figure.

Surprisingly, in this plaque both the rider and the carrier are beautiful females. It is not certain if this representation of the female rider on a *Kinnarī* is deliberate or a mistake on the part of the artist. It is the one and only example of the pair of *Kinnara-mithuna* in which both the figures are of beautiful young women. In absence of any male figure in this composition, how far it is justified to call it a *Kinnara-mithuna*? In true sense, it is not a *mithuna*. However, if at all we call it a *mithuna*, it is better to call it *Kinnarī-mithuna* and not *Kinnara-mithuna*. We still feel that the matter requires careful consideration and convincing explanation related to the nomenclature of the composition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We extend our hearty thanks to Dr. S.P. Singh, Dy. Director, Govt. Museum, Mathura, who, vide his letter no. 432/M-III-16/09 dt 24th Jan. 2009, conveyed that the rider on the back of *aśva-kinnarī* is a female and not a male.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. V.S. Agrawala also calls it Puruṣa-vigraha (*Indian Art*, Varanasi, 1965, p.72).
2. *Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa*, III.42.13-14 : *Kinnarāḥ dvihividhāḥ proktāḥ*.
3. Of the five terracotta plaques, four, each one from Mathura, Kauśāmbī, Madhya Pradesh and Rājghaṭ (Varanasi) are circular and one from Ahichatrā is square. Of the six bas-reliefs four are in medallions in Sanchi art (three in the central medallions of the ground rail-pillars of the Stūpa no.2 and one on the staircase rail-pillar of the Great Stūpa) and the two in panels, one from Jamalpur, now in the Mathura Museum and the other on the entrance of a Cave at Nasik (Maharashtra).
4. V.S. Agrawala, 'Acquisitions to the Mathura Museum', *Annual Bibliography of Indian Archaeology*, 1934, p.15 vide Deena Bandhu Pandeya, 'Identification of the Horse-bodied and Human-faced Figures'. *Kalā*, vol. II. 1995-96, pp.53-57, f.n.4.
5. V.S. Agrawala, *Handbook of the Sculptures in the Curzon Museum of Archaeology, Muttra*, Allahabad, 1939, p.21.
6. Deena Bandhu Pandeya, *op.cit.*
7. V.K. Sharma, Jitendra Kumar, P.L. Mishra and S.P. Singh, *Terracotta Catalogue of Mathura Museum*, Mathura, 2000, p.39, pl.48.