

Begram Ivories and Their Allied Problems with Special Reference to Sanchi Sculptures

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The most interesting and important discovery of Indian ivories, made by Joseph Hackin and Ria Hackin in 1937-1939 from Begram in Afghanistan, includes 600 sculptured panels of ivory caskets found in one and the same chamber, presumably to be part of a collection of some rich inhabitant of Kapisha, the ancient city. These ivory plaques supply a variable treasure house for the study of various facets of Indian life. Except for a few male figures almost all the plaques represent women in their inner apartments indulging in various sportive activities, particularly toileting and adorning themselves with ornaments. Drinking, playing with ball or birds, reclining on a couch and enjoying the dance and music were their other occupations.

The place of origin of these Begram ivories has not yet been decided and the opinion of scholars on the date of their carving is also different. Besides the report on the excavations,¹ many articles have been written² and papers presented in seminars³ on these topics. Yet, the matter does not seem to have been settled. Here, in this short paper an attempt has been made to trace out the place of origin of these ivory pieces and to fix their approximately correct date on the basis of the evidence of some archaeological material and plastic art styles.

I

Scholars have taken Begram ivories to be of Indian origin without any dispute. But, the question of their manufacturing centre or the original home of their carvers has not yet been satisfactorily answered. Various places like Varanasi, Shakala and Mathura as trade centres of ivory carvers have been

mentioned in Pāli literature.⁴ But, no significant discovery of any ivory has so far been reported from these sites. Although one or two fragments of sculptured ivory pieces of early times have been found from Ahicchatra, Taxila and Kondapur and about a dozen from Ter (Tagara of Periplus),⁵ none of these places can also be suggested to be the cradle of the Begram ivories, simply because these ivory pieces do not bear any sort of resemblance with those of Begram.

On the basis of extraordinary coincidence in almost identical pose and stance of many of the ivory figures from Begram with the almost contemporary Satavahan and Kushan carvings from the eastern and western ends of the Deccan and from Mathura, Sivaramamurti supposes the ambitious sculptors and craftsmen of these areas to be carried by the caravans to different parts of neighbouring sovereigns on their own, not so much in quest of wealth as for gathering new ideas and exhibiting their own to larger and probably more appreciative audience.⁶

Ghosh, seeing clearly a family likeness between the Sirkap comb and the Begram ivories, suggests their possible origin in the Mathura region.⁷ But, it may, however, be pointed out here that Mathura has not yielded any ivory except a bone fragment so far. Dr. Motichandra points to the possibility of a guild of ivory carvers at Sirkap coming from Mathura and carrying on their own tradition unaffected by the Gandhara tradition.⁸ But this possibility may be equally and rather more justified with Vidisha which has an archaeological evidence of the form of an inscription in its favour. It is now well-known that Vidisha was a centre of a guild of ivory carvers as is mentioned in an inscription on the South Gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi the carving of which was done by them. The inscription reads - *Vedisakehi dantakarehi rupakammam katam*, i.e. 'the carving of the sculptures done by the ivory carvers of Vidisha'.⁹

All the Begram ivories have been discovered from a single room and that too alongwith the Hellenistic and other cultural objects and some of these ivory pieces bear clear evidence of the Hellenistic and Iranian influence. Therefore, these were not fashioned by the carvers of one and the same school of art. Now, there are only two alternate possibilities, either these ivory pieces were imported from

various countries or these were manufactured at Begram by the carvers coming from various countries or having various traditions of ivory art. Most of them appear to be of Indian origin and since the majority of their figures have resemblance with those on the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the influence of Sanchi or Vidisha school of art on them is quite obvious. With an epigraphical evidence that they had carved the Southern Gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, it appears quite convincing to suppose some of the ivory carvers of Vidisha migrating to Begram (ancient city of Kapisha) and fashioning there the ivory pieces in their own tradition. Some of the ivory carvings, done by the artists belonging to the Amaravati-Nagarjunakonda school, however, cannot be ruled out as their portraiture has a significant affinity with the figures of the stone sculptures of these art centres.

II

Now as regards the date of Begram ivories, scholars like Hackin, Stern and Jeannine Auboyer trace out the likeness of these ivories with the sculptures of Mathura of the 2nd-3rd century CE. Hackin places these ivories in the 3rd century CE on the basis of a grylle motif found in the Begram casket IX. Quoting Blanchet, says that the grylle motif originated in Sardinia in the 3rd century BCE and it became very popular in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE.¹⁰ Stern, after a vigorous stylistic analysis of the Begram ivories, dates them at the earliest to the last quarter of the 1st century CE and the latest to the second quarter of the 2nd century CE, their dating lying somewhere between the two extremes.¹¹ On closer examination, Jeannine Auboyer takes them back from the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE.¹²

But, Davidson, on the other hand, sees in them more resemblance with Sanchi sculptures and therefore dates them to the 1st century BCE. Davidson has taken certain art motifs which were very popular in the 2nd-1st centuries BCE and were abandoned in the beginning of the Christian era. According to him, the trefoil motif in armlet, so popular at Bharhut, appears only on two among hundreds of figures at the Great Stupa at Sanchi and on none of the Begram ivories; the overlapping rosette motif appears only one on the ivories, not at all on the *toranas*;

both the old and new types of *chaitya* arch are represented on the ivories but only one possible example of the old arch on the *toranas* of Sanchi. Thus, the motifs on the Begram ivories and Sanchi *toranas* testify to a simultaneous dissolution of the old syndrome. In this way, Davidson dates these ivories to the 1st century BCE, between 75 and 25 BCE, and takes them contemporary to the Sanchi bas-reliefs on the Great Stupa.¹³

III

Joseph Hackin, Phillip Stern and Jeannine Auboyer have made special studies of the Begram ivories in relation to Indian art and have drawn wonderful parallels all the more revealing by the close comparison of details through the pictorial examples.

Hackin has no doubt about the Indian origin of the Begram ivories. But, unfortunately, he has no ivory pieces from India for comparison and therefore he has to turn again and again to sculptures. Hackin compares Begram ivories with certain elements of floral and animal symmetry in the bas-reliefs of the Southern and Eastern Gateways of the Great Stupa at Sanchi.¹⁴ But, as regards human representation, he compares the Begram ivories with only Mathura sculptures and never with those of the Sanchi bas-reliefs.

Accepting very close resemblance of the Begram ivories with Mathura figures of the Kushan times, he, at one place says that "fully developed sensual types of women are common to both", but at another place he describes the Begram ivories as "primitive in style" and the female types as "heavy and awkward with large heads and small jamps".¹⁵ Hackin appears to self contradictory in his above statements. His latter statement goes against the very basis of his comparison of the Begram ivories with the Mathura *yakshis* whose body is neither heavy and awkward nor disproportionate.

Phillip Stern and Jeannine Auboyer have selected some Mathura *yakshis* of the 2nd century CE and explained their resemblance with those of ivories. This comparison is mainly based on the nudity voluptuousness, poses and the subjects of these figures. But, so far as the poses of the female figures and the subject matter

of the Begram ivories are concerned, these can also be found in the art of some other periods. Actually, the key points of seeking comparison should be the style, the degree of the plasticity, the physical refinement and the fashion of the coiffures, dress and ornaments. Moreover, Stern and Auboyer have taken all the Begram ivories together. But, actually they belong to different periods ranging from the 1st century BCE to the 1st-2nd century CE. We can take them into two categories, the earlier ones being contemporary to the Sanchi sculptures and the later to that of Amaravati-Nagarjunakonda.

Since Begram ivories mainly represent females, we must consider for their comparison the female figures of the Satavahan and Kushan times. The figure of Mathura *yakshis* attained a great freedom of movement, of gesture and attitudes. It is at Mathura in the Kushan epoch that the increased plasticity leads to the creation of alluring female forms with full round breasts and hips, attenuated waists and smooth texture of warm living flesh.¹⁶ This degree of plasticity and refinement of physical limbs showing unabashed lewdness is not at all available in the figures of the Shung times of Bharhut, Bodhgaya and Sanchi Stupa No.2. Female figures of the Satavahan period, i.e. those represented on the *toranas* of Sanchi are in between, neither as low and flat in relief as those of Bharhut and Bodhgaya nor as elegant and well-shaped as those of Mathura. And so is the case with the majority of the female figures of the Begram ivories belonging to the earlier phase. They are not as fine in bodily texture as those of Mathura. Hackin himself accepts that human form at Mathura is more elegant than on Begram ivories.¹⁷ So they, on the other hand, are very close to figures of the Sanchi *toranas*.

Females on these ivories, no doubt, represent a transparent dress but its presence is clearly marked by the double folds. This fashion of dress is quite similar to that of the figures on Sanchi *toranas* where on the *shalabhanjikas* appear to be nude though the folds of their drapery are clearly visible. It was a pre-Christian fashion which is not found on the Kushan figures of Mathura. The body of the Mathura *yakshis* is completely revealed without having any mark of their drapery.

So far as the coiffures and hair dressings are concerned, the Begram ivories of the earlier phase seem to be near to the Shung-Satavahan age than to the age of

the Kushans. Like *shalabhanjikas* of Sanchi, Begram ivory females have also been carved with elaborate coiffures adorned with garlands and ornaments, the feature quite absent from Mathura *yakshis*. The head-dress of the Mathura *yakshis* is quite simple with a big and round bun attached over the parting line and this fashion is rarely found on the ivory figures of Begram.

In this way, it seems probable that the carving of most of the Begram ivories of the earlier phase and the *toranas* of Sanchi was the creation of one and the same school of art. Now, with the evidence of stone carving of the Southern Gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi by the ivory carvers of Vidisha we do not seem to be wrong in supposing the carving of these Begram ivories done by the carvers of the same school.

IV

The above conclusion may be supported by the fact that not only the female figures on the Begram ivories but most of the other ivory pieces, representing female figures, found from different places in India and abroad, also have been considered by scholars as resembling to the female figures on the Sanchi *toranas*.

A bone mirror-handle, 3.7" in height, excavated by Rai Bahadur K.N. Dikshit from Ahichchhatra in 1940-44 and now in the National Museum, New Delhi (Acc.No.III.6897 K IX.48), represents a standing lady. Her earlobes are in the early style, hair combed backwards, and the back shows the hair plaits of the *venis* covered by a veil as noticed in the reliefs of Sanchi.¹⁸ According to R.C. Agrawala, it is a rare object of exquisite Shung workmanship and may well be placed as early as 50 BCE. He believes it to be a probable product of ivory carvers of Vidisha region.¹⁹

Of the two ivories from Ter, the larger one, about 5" in height, reported to be in the personal possession of a prominent citizen Sri Ramlingam, displays, according to Barrett, the style much more in common with the art of Sanchi and the north-west Deccan than with the early phases in Andhradesha.²⁰

A fragment of an ivory comb, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (I.M.21-1937), represents a couple in amorous pose. The woman has put up her hand across the shoulders of her lover. The figures in the comb bear close

stylistic resemblances to figures of similar nature in the Sanchi bas-reliefs and according to Dr. Motichandra, there is every possibility that the comb owes its origin to Malwa.²¹ R.C. Agrawala also sees an affinity of the representation of the *mithuna* on this comb with the figures in Sanchi bas-reliefs and also supposes the comb itself to be a product of Sanchi idiom.²²

A 24 cms high ivory handle in the form of a standing female figure, excavated by Prof. Maiuri in 1938 from Pompeii, is profusely decorated with ornaments and elaborate coiffure.²³ The excavator considers it to be a pure product of Indian art without any Hellenistic influence.²⁴ On stylistic grounds, particularly of the spiral-shaped earrings which appear only at Bharhut, Sanchi and Jaggayapeta, Dr. Motichandra places the figure in the later half of the 1st century BCE, i.e. contemporary to the Sanchi sculptures on the Great Stupa.²⁵ It is supported by the fact that the statuette wears long chains of gold, strings of pearls and garlands of flower over her braids in the quite similar fashion as those of the Sanchi *shalabhanjikas*.

Thus, the resemblance of all these ivory pieces with the figures of Sanchi sculptures makes both of them to be the contemporaries and the creation of one and the same school of art. In other words, these ivory pieces may be the products of the ivory carvers of Vidisha; and if produced by local artists, their production was greatly influenced by the art of Vidisha carvers.

From this discussion, it is now clear that Begram ivories of the earlier phase, due to their more resemblance with the figures at Sanchi than with those at Mathura, are the creation of Vidisha school of art and belong to the period between the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE.

V

But, whereas the figures of the Begram ivories of the earlier phase represent many affinities with those on the Great Stupa at Sanchi, ivories of the later phase exhibit some sort of similarity with the Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda females. The slender and elongated body, the degree of freedom of movement, gesture and poses and the fashion of the short and broad necklace (*kantha*) of these ivory

females mark them more akin to female figures in the art of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda rather than those of Mathura of the Kushan times. Actually, the Begram ivory females never achieved the degree of perfection in their body structure to the extent of the Mathura *yakshis* of the Kushan epoch. This fact naturally suggests the transformatory character of these Begram ivories of the later phase and therefore they may safely be placed in the 1st-2nd century CE between the age of the Sanchi *toranas* and that of the Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda of the 2nd-3rd century CE.

References & Notes

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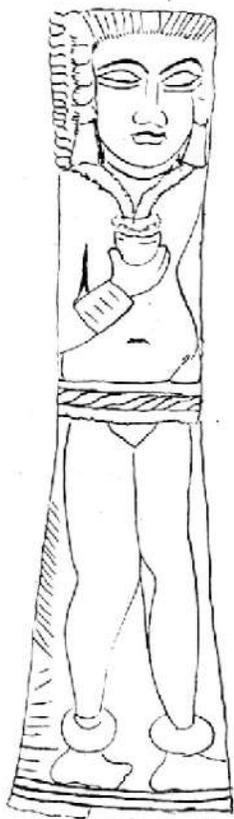


Fig.1 : A bone mirror-handle in the form of a standing lady holding a bowl (Taxila)

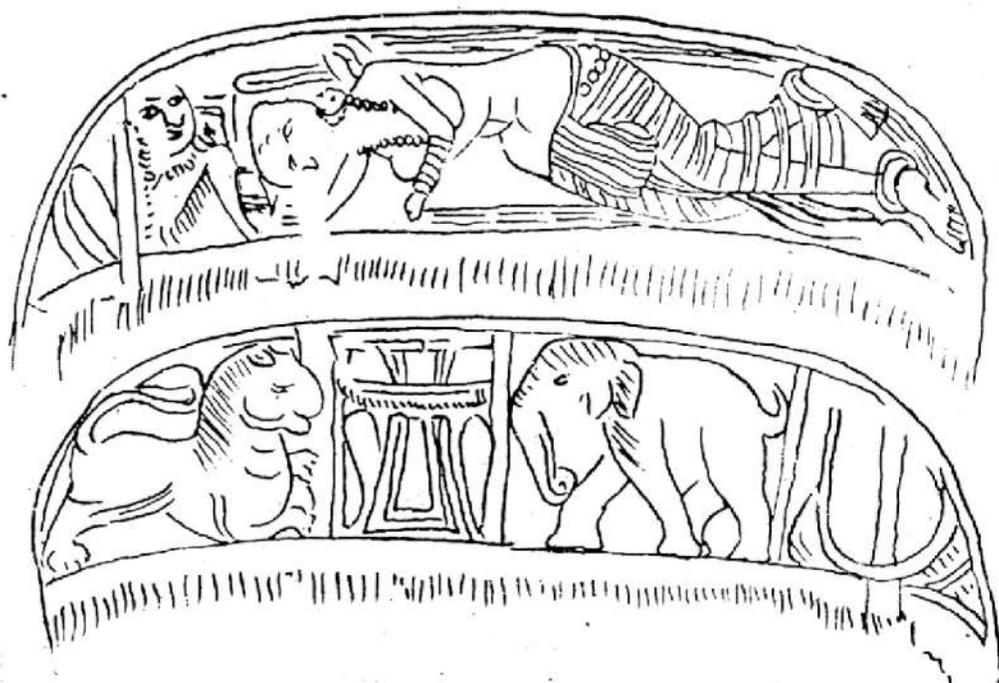


Fig.2 : An ivory comb showing a lying lady on one side and auspicious symbols of lion and elephant on the other (Taxila)



Fig.3 : A fragment of an ivory comb representing a couple in amorous posture (now in Victoria & Albert Museum, London)



Fig.4 : A handle of mirror in the form of a young and beautiful lady (Ter/Tagar)

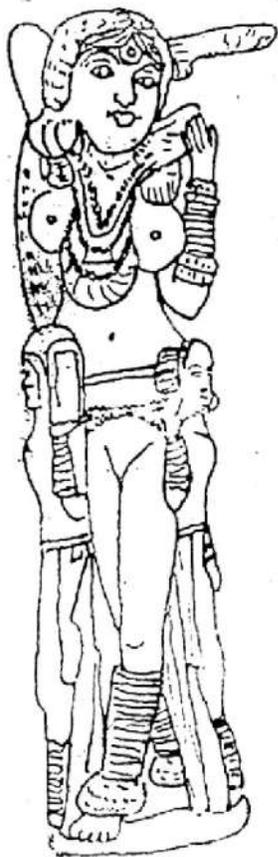


Fig.5 : An ivory handle in the form of a standing female figure (Pompeii)



Fig.6 : A young lady playing with a goose (Begram)

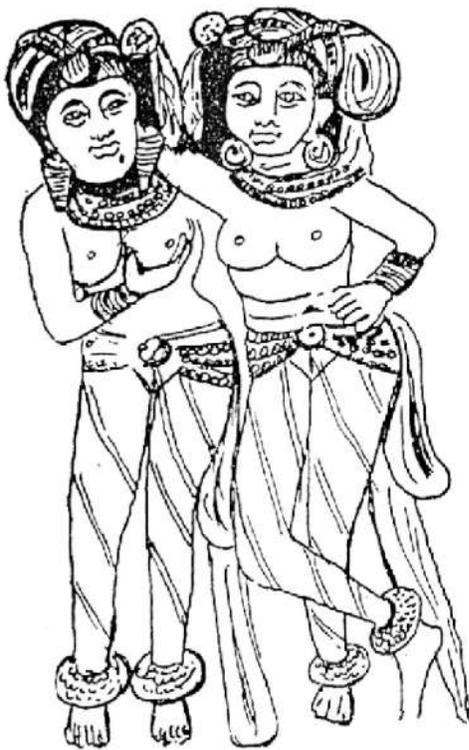


Fig.7 : Two lady friends standing together



Fig.8 : Two ladies showing their hair decoration



Fig.9 : A lady playing with a parrot

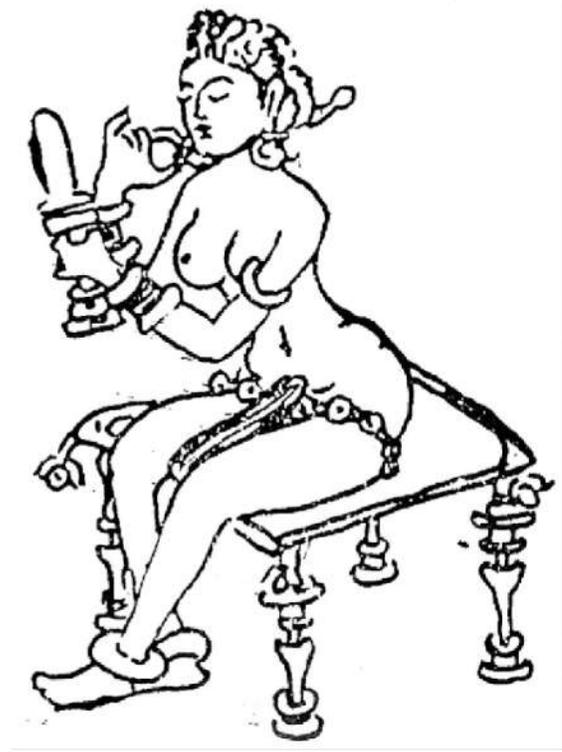


Fig.10 : A lady looking her ear-ornament in the mirror



Fig.11 : A helper lady approaching to heroine for their toileting and adorning



Fig.12 : A lady feeding her child in her lap

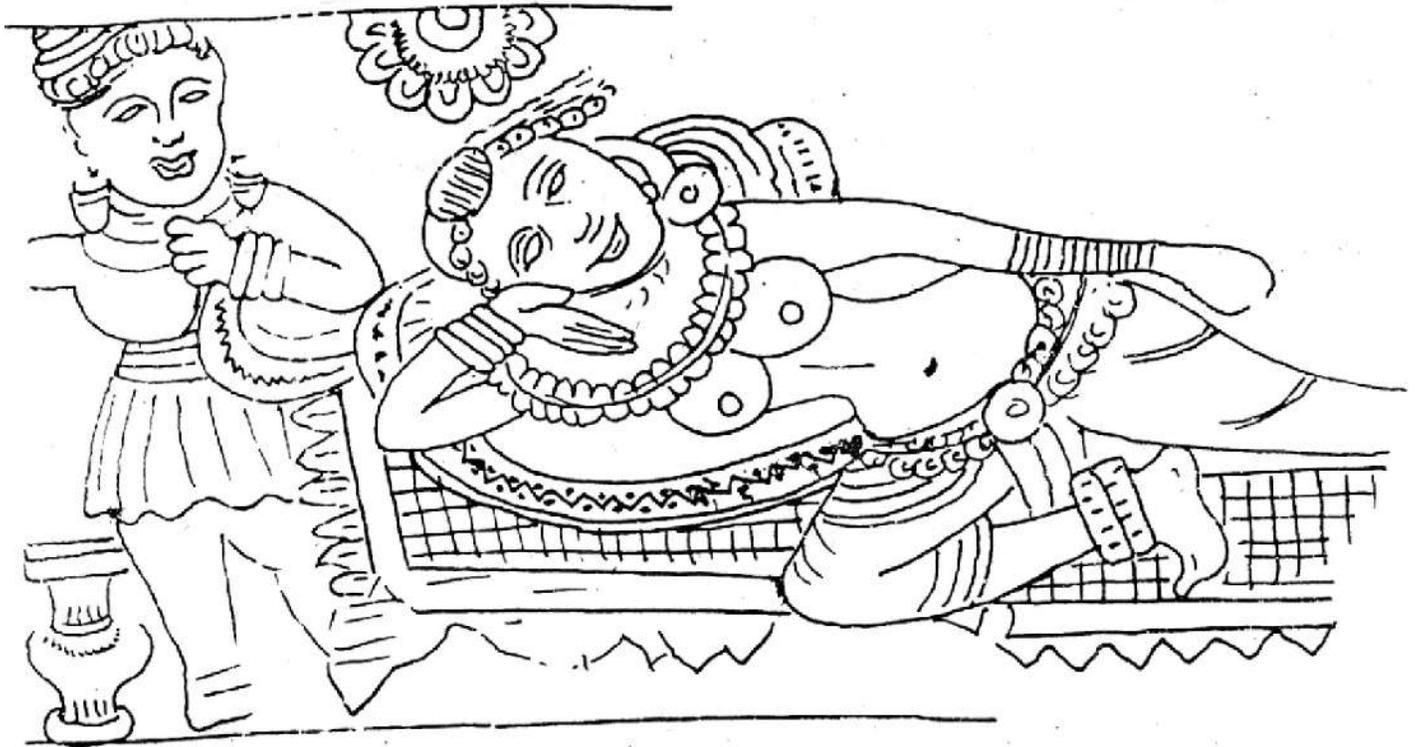


Fig.13 : A lady reclining on a couch



Fig.14 : A lady enjoying horse-riding



Fig.15 : A lady standing in an amorous pose holding a ball

Fig.16 : A lady standing on a crocodile (*makaravahini*)

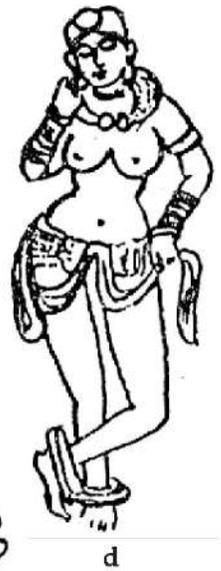


Fig.17a-f : Mathura Yakshis standing in different postures



Figs.18a-b : Shalabhanjikas, Sanchi

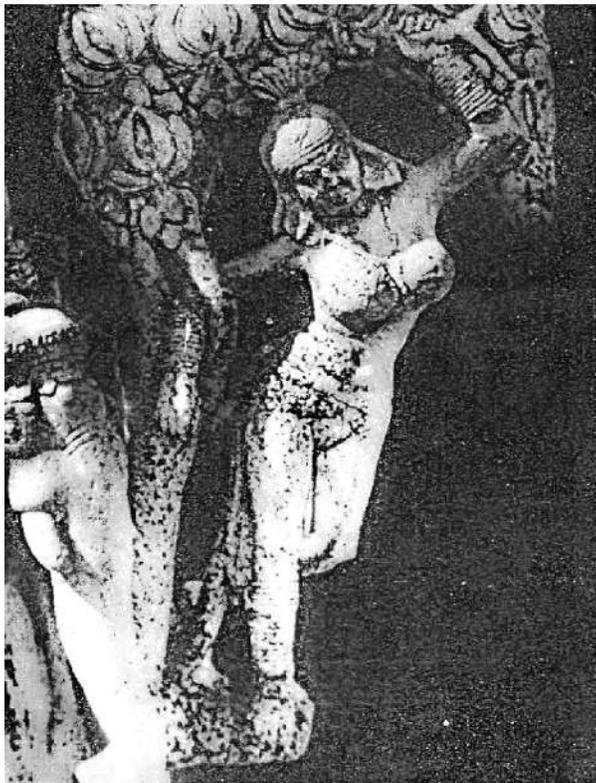


Fig.19 : The bracket Shalabhanjika
East Gate, Great Stupa, Sanchi



Fig.20 : The head of the Shalabhanjika (Fig.19)