

## Two Narrative Panels of Gandhāra Sculpture

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The British Museum London has a representative collection of Gandhāran sculptures. These have been systematically studied and catalogued by Zwalf with his deep experience and knowledge. He has discussed and illustrated an interesting panel sculpture (fig. 1), and has offered certain observations about the possible identification of the theme of the panel.<sup>1</sup> The panel shows two standing figures distanced from each other, and in the pose of having an exchange of something between them. The figure on the left is a female and shows her status to be that of a high order in view of the ornaments and shoes she wears. The figure on her right is an utter contrast not only because of it being of a male figure but also due to the fact that it is nude one with exposed genitals and visible public hair. In between them there are suggestions of the locale being that of a garden.

The identification of the theme was not very easy for Zwalf. That is why he has put in a few possible suggestions. One of them is that it represents a tutelary couple, also, he has suggested by comparing a few others of similar type of representation from the collection of the Indian Museum, Calcutta. He has suggested that it might be a panel representing the Goddess Hārītī and her male counterpart Pañcika.

However, none of Zwalfs' suggestions seems to be tenable. Had it been the representation of a tutelary couple, the two should have been shown closer to each other, and, perhaps also in a formal orientation, instead of one being faced to the other.<sup>2</sup> The similar argument also can be offered negating the two being the representations of Hārītī and Pañcika.

The nudity of the male figure goes against either of the two identifications offered by Zwalf. We are not aware, neither has Zwalf pointed us to one, of any narrative involving the tutelary deities or Hārītī and Pañcika necessitating the two figures in the above mentioned orientations of responsive exchange.

The panel obviously has a narrative content. It is important to locate any well known story that might have inspired the Gandhāran artist to represent the



**20.1:** Panel of *Mahāsaṅkalpa Jātaka*, Gandhāra, Kuṣāṇa period, British Museum, London



**20.2:** Panel of *Mahāsaṅkalpa Jātaka*, Kuṣāṇa period, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh (Acc. No. 2384)

panel in the way it has been done. It is evident that the panel does not represent any story in the totality. It is perhaps one of the episodes in the story which has been captured in this visual presentation by the Gandhāran artist. Gandhāran sculpture being predominantly Buddhist in content it is possible that the narrative concerned has the visualisation of an episode from a Jātaka tale.

The Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh has also a very large collection of Gandhāran sculpture which the Museum received as part of the Indian share of the Lahore Museum immediately after the partition. This collection has also been thoroughly studied by the scholars in an International Colloquium sponsored by the institution. Later the entire collection of Gandhāra sculpture in the Museum has been published in the form of a catalogue. In this work under the item no. 621, Acc. No. 2384 an interesting panel has been taken note of (fig. 2). Surprisingly, this panel seems to be almost similar to the Gandhāra panel that Zwalf has taken note of from the British Museum Collection referred to above. Before we go into the details of the differences between the two we have to mention the similarities which will prompt us to suggest the identification of the British Museum panel with that of the identification suggested in the Catalogue of the Chandigarh Museum Collection.

In the Catalogue of the Gandhāra Sculpture of the Chandigarh Museum Collection the theme has been identified as that of the *Mahāsankalpa* Jātaka. The story given in it is as follows, "The Bodhisattva was once born as a monk, and he travelled across the country without staying for long at any particular place. However when he reached the kingdom of Benaras during his wandering, the king requested him to stay back at his kingdom for sometime. Seeing the king's eagerness Bodhisattva monk agreed to stay there for sometime. The king built up a small hut for the monk in his beautiful palace garden. He used to come to the monk daily to give him his daily provisions. After some time the king had to go out for some days to contain some border trouble. While leaving, he entrusted to the queen the duty of giving daily provisions to monk herself. He requested her to see to it that the monk should not have any inconvenience during his absence. The queen made it her daily routine to go to the garden to hand over personally the daily provisions to the monk. One day she got infatuated by seeing the youthful and stout bare body of the monk. Realizing the predicament of the queen the Bodhisattva-monk decided to leave the place of his temporary residence. Next

morning onwards he was not visible anywhere nearby. The king, however, not seeing the monk there was perturbed after his return. The queen also could not say anything about the reason of monk's leaving the palace garden. The king with great efforts traced out the Bodhisattva -monk somewhere, and came to know about the reason for his leaving the temporary abode, although the monk expressed his gratitude for the king and the queen for the comfortable stay in the palace garden."<sup>3</sup>

There is hardly any doubt that the present panel of Chandigarh Museum Collection represents the episode of the meeting of the monk and the queen for the last time. The female figure with lavish jewellery and shoes obviously is that of the queen who is shown in the act of giving the provisions to the monk. In order to indicate the locale of the incident being that of a garden the artist has shown a tree with exotic type of blossoms between the two figures. There remains hardly any doubt that the panel of British Museum Collection and that of the Chandigarh Museum are of the same narrative content. In that way we are inclined to suggest that the British Museum panel taken note by Zwalf also represents an episode of the theme of the *Mahāsaṅkalpa* Jātaka. However, the figure of the monk in the Chandigarh Museum sculpture is not nude at all, where as the British Museum male figure has a stark nudity intentionally shown by the artist. The story of the Jātaka concerned has doubtless an indication of the monk's youthful body being the cause of some uncomfortable mental transformation in the queen. But the artist of the panel of the Chandigarh Museum has indicated this aspect by showing the figure of the monk with a stout and robust body. The artist of the British Museum panel has gone a step further by not only showing the monk's body with youthful vigor, but also by making it more amorous that the nudity aspect is an oddity in a Buddhist narrative, and, in that way the artist of the British Museum piece has shown an eloquent boldness.

In spite of the admission of the fact that the artist of the British Museum piece has gone a long way to give account of his boldness of visual statement, it has to be pointed out that nudity perhaps was not openly accepted in the Buddhist monastic livelihood. Had it been a Jaina narrative, which is not absolutely unlikely in Gandhāra, we have to accept it as Digambara concept which perhaps was not that popular in the Gandhāra region during the 2nd - 3rd century C.E. to which the above mentioned panels have to be stylistically placed. It seems that both the

panels are Buddhistic, and also are of the Mahāyāna genre which was well known for conditioning the monastic behaviour with sophistication and cultural civility.

The compositional similarity between the two panels is verily very striking. It seems that one is a copy of the other with a little bit of omissions and commissions and with differences in the executional aptitude of the respective artists. But it is difficult to suggest which one is original and which one is the shadow of it. It is possible that the two were produced at two different sites of Gandhāran sculpture<sup>4</sup>, and both the artists drew the inspiration from the common pool of the Jātaka legends. The two artists interpreted the same theme in their own respective manner, and their expressive abilities also substantially differed. However, it is interesting that the same Jātaka tale is represented in two panels of the Gandhāra school of art. Excepting the celebrated *Dipaṅkara* Jātaka, Gandhāra sculpture has seldom the repetition of the same Jātaka story. It is more striking that both the artists have selected the same episode of the story for the visual representation.<sup>5</sup>

## **REFERENCES AND NOTES**

1. W. Zwalf, *A catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum*, London, 1996, catalogue item no. 101.
2. *ibid.*
3. D.C. Bhattacharya (ed), *Gandhara Sculpture in the Government Museum & Art Gallery, Chandigarh*, 2002. Catalogue item no. 621, Acc. no. 2384.
4. Zwalf has kept silent about the provenance, while the Chandigarh museum catalogue says that the provenance is unknown. The stylistic execution of the two are so different that they could not be from the same site and by the same artist.
5. Zwalf has referred to several parallel examples from the collection of the Indian Museum, Calcutta. But they are hardly similar to the British Museum piece or to the Chandigarh museum example. Hārītī Pañcika images almost invariably show a child between them which is conspicuous by its absence in the two narrative panels discussed in this paper.