

Miniature Relief From The Collection Of The Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York: A Comparative Study Of Its Iconography And Some New Thoughts About Its Identification

Abstract

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York houses a splendid collection of Buddhist art from Gandhara. The collection also includes a three sided miniature relief to which the museum records refer to as “Three-Sided Section of a Portable Shrine with Scenes from the life of the Buddha”. This object is very interesting not only for its tiny size but equally important for the method of depicting life story of the Buddha. The present research is a study of the narrative depiction of this interesting piece of art. Scope of the investigation has been extended by making comparative analysis of the pictorial representation with general sculptures and reliefs from Gandhara. At the end, a hypothesis has been presented about the date and probable function of the miniature portable object among followers of the Buddhism.

Key Words: Miniature, Portable Shrine, Gandhara, Iconography

Introduction

The fragment of a miniature portable shrine is made of stone (Phyllitic Schist) and measure H: 11.4, L: 3.2 cm. It comes from an unknown provenance. The object is on display in Gallery 236 of the Museum with the Accession Number.1994.489.

The research devoted to the object under investigation limits itself primarily to a few scholarly articles. Lerner (1984: 40, No. 10) first time documented and listed some fragments of the Buddhist portable shrines from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Later on, Yoshihide (2000: 130, PL. 7), Sen-Gupta (2002: 53, No. 17) and Behrendt (2007: 81-82, No. 64) also referred to the object. These studies undoubtedly provide preliminary accounts of the miniature portable shrine, however, still there are certain aspects related to the iconography of the object which need to be addressed in order to understand significance of such objects in the art history of Gandhara.

In the following the visual narration on this relief will be discussed by making comparison with the general Gandharan sculptures.

Exterior of the Fragment

* Dr. Muhammad Hameed, Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

The fragment under discussion shows a different arrangement of its exterior. Its wedge shaped structure is divided into three tiny panels. The upper arched panel shows a seated Buddha, now head-less, in meditation (**Fig. 01**). The heavy drapery covers his entire body. The intermediate rectangular panel depicts Maitrya standing on a raised platform. His right hand is raised in abhaya while the left holds the usual water pot. His crested turban, jewellery and thick drapery are among other prominent features of the representation.

The lower section of the fragment is divided into two small panels and is partly damaged. It depicts the Buddha on one side and the Bodhisattva on other. The usual treatment of the brick lining pattern is also visible here. A small hole at each inner corner of the relief is notable. These holes would have served the purpose of attaching this section with its other parts.



Figure. 01.

Fragment from The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York Acc. No. 1994.489

Inner Sections of the Fragment

The fragment's interior arrangement represents two sections, referred to as "The Left Section" and "The Right Section". Each section is divided into three miniature relief panels containing different episodes from the Buddha's life.

The Left Section

The upper panel of the fragment depicts “M y ’s dream” (**Fig. 02**). She lies on her left side, guarded by one standing figure behind the bed and two sitting attendants below. An elephant is also visible below the standing attendant’s right hand. The scene illustrates the core of the story. An elephant enters M y ’s womb while she is asleep in her bed. The scene’s depiction is identical to the numerous Gandharan reliefs (**Fig. 02.1**).¹



Figure 02. The Upper Panel of the Fragment

According to Schlingloff (2000/2013 Vol. I: 308) there are references to this story in several Buddhist texts including:

Mah vastu, ed. Vol. II. p. 9, 20; p. 11, 18-2. transl. Vol. II. p. 9, p. 11.

M lasarv stiv davinaya, Skt. ed. Gnoli, 1, p. 40, 9-18.

Buddhacarita, I. v. 4; transl. p. 2.

Lalitavistara, ch. 6; ed. p.54, 18- p. 55. 10; trad. p. 54-56.

Nid nakath , ed. p. 50, 18-24. transl. p. 62.



Figure 02.1. Dream of M y . Relief from a Private Collection in Japan, after Kurita 2003: Pl. III.

The middle panel of the fragment shows “Bodhisattva’s encounter with an elephant” (Fig. 03). He is depicted while striding to the right and placing his right hand on the elephant’s head; the latter emerges from the palace gate. The Bodhisattva is most probably accompanied by *Vajrapāni*, standing behind him, presently not visible. Above the elephant’s head, there are figures who may be watching the event.

According to Behrendt (2007: 82) the scene depicts the story when Devadatta kills an elephant and asks Siddhartha to demonstrate his superhuman strength by throwing the elephant over seven city walls. This interpretation is correct considering the way Siddhartha is depicted wearing usual ornaments. The narrative is depicted in a slightly different way as compared to the Gandharan reliefs (Cf. Fig. 03.1). According to Zwalf the literary references can be found in *Mahavastu*, Vol. II: 74-5, *Lalitavistara*, XII. L. 144-5 and *Saṅghavedavastu*, I: 59 (1996: 158).



Figure 03. The Middle Panel of the Fragment



Figure 03.1. A Gandharan Relife Depicting the Event. Photo from Gandharan Archives Kurita

On the other hand, Lerner & Kossak (1991) and Sen-Gupta (2002) have mistakenly identified the episode as “taming of the mad elephant Nal giri”. Regarding this interpretation, there are numerous Gandharan reliefs which depict this episode (**Fig. 03.2**).²



Figure 03.2. The Story of Dhanapala on a Gandharan Relief from Dir Museum

Chakdara. Photo from *Gandhara* 2008: 228.

In most of these reliefs the elephant is shown to the Buddha's left. Some other figures, including *Vajrapani*, are also depicted. These Gandharan examples depict the episode in which the monk Devadatta is planning to kill the Buddha. As part of the plan, a mad elephant is released to attack the Buddha. The Buddha calms down the elephant by putting his right hand on its head. The story is known as Dhanapala which has been exclusively discussed by Zin (1996: 331-334).³

The lower panel of the fragment depicts "fasting Siddhartha" (**Fig. 04**). He is sitting on a seat, leaning to the right towards a figure standing in front of him. His body is still emaciated. Two more figures can be seen in the background. This composition suggests a depiction of the moment after abandoning asceticism, the moment Siddhartha decides to eat. The figure standing in front of Siddhartha could be one of the gods, whereas the two behind him could be dieties or two girls.



Figure 04. The Lower Panel of the Fragment

Another possibility might be the depiction of the god Indra and Brahma's visit. Buddhist diptychs show four examples of a similar depiction, but with more figures in the background.

Compared to other Gandharan reliefs, the visual narration of the story, in our relief, is unusual. In the other examples, Siddh rtha is sometimes depicted sitting still in meditation or in some cases, holding a bowl. He is flanked by either one or two figures, mostly females holding solid food and liquids in respective pots (**Fig. 04.1**).⁴

Schlingloff (2000/2013 Vol. I: 370) refers to the literary references of the episode:

Mah vastu, ed. Vol. II. 205, 3- p. 206, 19. transl. Vol. II. p. 195-97.

M lasarv stiv davinaya, Skt. ed. Gnoli, 1, p. 108, 20- p. 110, 33.

Buddhacarita, XII, v. 109-111; ed. p. 142; transl. p. 185.

Lalitavistara, ch. 18; ed. p. 267, 13; p. 270; trad. p. 230 f.

Divy vad na, ed. p. 329, 9-11.

Nid nakath , ed. p. 68, 5- p. 70, 13. transl. p. 76-78.

All the panels are framed inside usual brick lining pattern running along the inner edges of the reliefs.



Figure 04.1. Fasting Siddh rtha on a Relief from The British Museum, London. Acc. No. 1880-67. Photo from *Gandhara* 2008: 185.

The Right Section

The upper panel of the fragment depicts “Siddh rtha leaving palace” (Fig. 05). He is illustrated striding to his left, wearing a crested turban and usual princely ornaments. His right hand is in *abhaya* with the palm inward, while the left hand rests on his hip. He is perhaps looking behind at a figure whose face is the only visible entity in the background. There are two more figures below the Bodhisattva’s feet. The composition might depict the moment when Bodhisattva decides to renounce palace life. The figure behind him must be Chandaka; the two below could be sleeping women. From Gandharan sculptures, we can include line drawing of a relief depiction the same event (Cf. Fig. 05.1).

The panel offers a limited depiction with regard to extend and characters. Conversely, majority of the Gandharan sculptures illustrates the moment elaborately. According to Zwalf, the literary version of the narrative can be found in *Mah vastu*, II: 159-61, *Lalitavistara*, XV.L: 201-2 & 205-10, *Buddhacharita*, V: 47-63 & 68-72, *Sa ghabhedavastu*, I: 81, 85 and *J taka* Introduction, I .ed. 61-2, transl. 171-3 (1996: 164).



Figure 05. Upper Panel of the Fragment

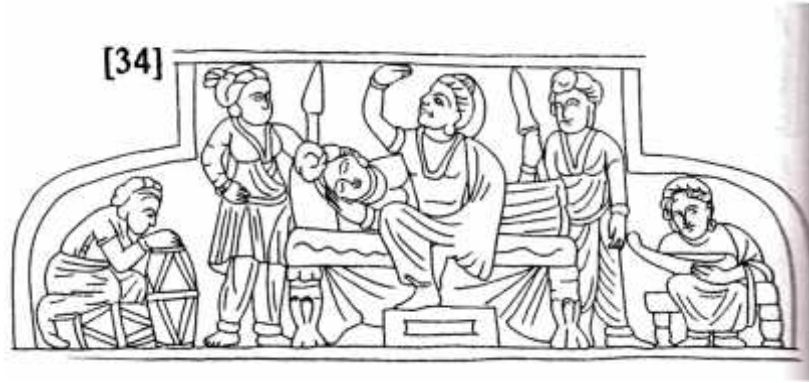


Figure 05.1. Line Drawing of Gandhara Relief from Indian Museum, Calcutta. Acc. No. G5, after Schlingloff 2000/2013 Vol. II: 70.

The seated figures in both lower corners of the relief appear to be female. In this sense the composition may be interpreted as “Bodhisattva among Sleepy Women”.

The middle panel of the fragment depicts two figures doing wrestling (Fig. 06). The Bodhisattva, seen from the back, dominates the competition and almost carries his contender. There are two half length figures watching the contest.



Figure 06. Middle Panel of the Fragment



Figure 06.1. Bodhisattva Learning Archery on a Gandharan Relief from Peshawar Museum. Acc. No. PM_02741, after Ali & Qazi 2008: 79.

The wrestling contest is often depicted in connection with archery in Gandharan reliefs (Cf. **Fig. 06.1**).⁵ Usually, both the scenes are depicted in successive panels, separated by pilasters. Schlingloff (2000/2013 Vol. I: 347) has documented all the textual versions of the story:

M lasarv stiv davinaya, Skt. ed. Gnoli, 1, p. 58, 18.

Divy vad na, ed. p. 391, 8-10.

The fragment's lower panel represents "first sermon". The Buddha, seated under a tree, has raised his right hand in *abhaya* while the other hand holds falls of his drapery - an indication of earlier representation of the episode (**Fig. 07**). His left shoulder is covered. Facial features include a round *u* *a*, long ears, narrow eyes with prominent upper and lower lids, long nose, moustaches and fleshy cheeks.



Figure 07. The Lower Panel of the Fragment

In front of the Buddha, below his seat, an eight-spoked wheel is placed. A deer facing the wheel is depicted in each lower corner of the relief. The Buddha is accompanied by five monks, two on the top, two beside his shoulders and one sitting next to his right knee. The whole composition is identical to other Gandharan reliefs and includes important elements and characters of the scene, such as a wheel, deer and five monks. Artists have done wonderful job through combining and depicting all characters of the event in a limited space.

In Gandhara, there are numerous reliefs depicting the Buddha's first sermon (**Figs. 07.1**).⁶



Figure 07.1. First Sermon on a Gandharan Relief from Peshawar Museum. Acc. No. PM_02781, after Ali & Qazi 2008: 132.

There are more examples of similar depiction in the other fragments of the portable shrines.⁷ Furthermore, there are many Gandharan reliefs with a symbolic representation of the event e.g. wheels placed on pilaster, throne and triratna.⁸

Regarding literary sources, there are references of the Buddha delivering his first sermon in a deer park near Benaras in several Buddhist texts, well documented by Schlingloff (2000/2013 Vol. I: 62) :

Mah vastu, ed, Vol. III. p. 328, 20- p. 340, 15. transl.Vol. III. p. 320-35.

M lasarv stiv davinaya,Skt. ed. Gnoli, 1, p. 133-39.

Mah vad nas tra,Vorg. 8 a- 9; ed. p. 117-30.

Catu pari ats tra, Vorg. 11.1-15.19; ed. p. 132-71.

Buddhacarita, (Tib): XV, v. 15-58; transl. p. 30-35.

Lalitavistara, ch. 26; ed. p. 407, 12- p. 418. 21; trad. p. 340-48.

Divy vad na, ed. p. 393, 23 f.

Nid nakath , ed. p. 81, 26- p. 82, 10. transl. p. 112-13.

Sa yuttanik ya, LVI, II. 11, 1; ed. Vol. V. p. 420-24. transl. Vol. V. p. 356-60.

These are two more fragments of similar type, one in The Peshawar Museum and the other in The National Museum, New Delhi. These are possibly of “Miniature St pa-Shaped Objects”. After a close examination of the shape and manufacturing technique of these objects, we can assume that these miniature st pas were originally consisted of four-quarter sections, carved on both sides. These reliefs illustrate the Buddha’s entire life story. Their iconography shows different descriptive method. Although the scenes followed chronological sequences, however, the most important scenes were depicted in the centre.

The arrangement of scenes is following a premeditated and is not arranged in the linear chronological way as we find in Gandharan reliefs but corresponds rather with composition. This aspect may have been inspired from Andhara, where the most important scene is usually depicted in the centre.⁹

Conclusion

Present study has made comparative analyses of the “Miniature St pa-Shaped Object from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York. . The exterior and the interior imagery of the object provide us with glimpses of its sacred nature. This further guides us to determine that the artists in Gandhara manufactured such types of shrines as substitute which could be placed inside houses to fulfil worshipping purpose, particularly used by those who had less opportunity to visit actual st pas and monasteries. Moreover, it can be argued that a tradition of using private shrines existed in Gandhara, side by side with the construction of st pas, monasteries, sculptures and reliefs.

These fragments of the “Miniature St pa-Shaped Objects” were most likely used inside some other models of “Building-Shaped Shrines”¹⁰. With regard to the existing opinions about the dating of the miniature st pa-shaped objects’ fragments, stylistic study of their exterior and interior iconography suggest a date during the late half of the 5th century C.E., (Stein 1907, Lerner 1984, Sen-Gupta 2002, Yoshihide 2000, Behrendt 2007, 2012). The dating seems appropriate considering the iconographical similarities with the sculptures and reliefs from Gandhara. The narrative representations seem to repeat older visual tradition such is the case with the depiction of first sermon in the fragment from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

This dating clearly suggests that the tradition of using “Building-Shaped Shrines” continued for centuries and “Miniature St pa-Shaped Objects” were

placed inside such shrines. Unfortunately, majority of such miniature portable shrines has not been preserved.

Primary Sources

Buddhacarita, Skt. ed. & transl. Johnston, E. H. 1, Sanskrit Text, 2, Cantos 1-14, translated from the Original Sanskrit, Supplemented by the Tibetan Version, Together with an Introduction and Notes, Punjab University Oriental Publications, 23, Lahore 1936; Tib. transl. Johnston, E. H. *The Buddha's Mission and Last Journey, Buddhacarita 15 to 28*, in: Acta Orientalia, 15, Leiden 1937, p. 26-62, p. 85-111, p. 231-52, p. 253-92.

Catu pari ats tra, ed. Waldschmidt, E. *Das Catu pari ats tra, eine Kanonische Lehrschrift über die Begründung der buddhistischen Gemeinde, Text in Sanskrit und Tibetisch, Verglichen mit dem P li nebst einer Übersetzung der chinesischen Entsprechung im Vinaya der M sarv stiv dins. Auf Grund von Turfan-Handschriften herausgegeben und bearbeitet, Abhandlungen der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Berlin 1952-62; transl. Kloppenborg, R. *The S tra on the Foundation of the Buddhist Order*, Leiden 1973.

D ghanik ya, ed. Rhys Davids, T. W / Carpenter, J. E. Pali Text Society, London 1890-1911; transl. Rhys Davids, T. W / Rhys Davids, C. A. F. 1-3, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, 2-4, London, 1899-1921.

Divy vad na, ed. Cowell, E. B. / Neill, R. A. Cambridge 1886; repr. Cambridge 1970, Delhi 1987.

J taka, ed. Fausböll, M. V. *The J taka together with its commentary, being tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*, vols. 1-6, London 1877-96; transl. Cowell, E. B. (ed.), *The J taka or Stories of The Buddha's Former Births. Translated from the P li by Various Hands*, vols. 1-6, Cambridge, 1895-1907.

Lalitavistara, ed. Lefmann, S. 1. 2. Halle 1902-08; ed. Vaidya, R. L. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, 1, Darbhanga 1958; Tib. ed. & trad. Foucaux, P. E. *Annales du Musée Guimet*, 6, 19, Paris 1884-92; repr. 1988.

Mah vastu, ed. Senart, É. 1-3, Paris 1882-97; repr. Tokyo 1977; transl. Jones, J. J. 1-3, -Sacred Books of the Buddhists, 16, 18, 19, London 1949-56; repr. 1976.

Mah vad nas tra, ed. Waldschmidt, E. *Das Mah vad nas tra: Ein kanonischer Text über die sieben letzten Buddhas, Sanskrit, verglichen mit dem P li nebst einer Analyse der in chinesischer Übersetzung überlieferten Parallelversionen. Auf Grund von Turfan Handschriften herausgegeben, Abhandlungen der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Berlin 1953-56.

Majjhimanik ya, ed. Trenckner, V. / Chalmers, R. 1-3. Pali Text Society, London 1888-99; transl. Horner, I. B., 1-3, London 1954-67.

M lasarv stiv davinaya, Skt. ed. (extr.) Gnoli, R. *The Gilgit Manuscripts of the Sa ghabhedavastu, Being the 17th and Last section of the Vinaya of the M lasarv stiv din*, 1-2, Serie Orientale, 49, Roma 1977-78; Tib. transl. ed. Suzuki, T. The Tibetan Tripitaka, Peking Edition, 41-44, Tokyo-Kyoto 1955-61.

Nid nakath, ed. Fausböll, M.V. in: *J taka*, 1, London 1877, p. 2-94; New ed. Jayawickrama, N. A. Pali Text Society, Oxford 1990; transl. Rhys Davids, T. W. in: *Buddhist Birth Stories*: 1-133.

Sa yuttanik ya, ed. Feer, L. 1-5, Pali Text Society, London 1884-98; transl. Rhys Davids, C. A. F. / Woodward, F. 1-5, Pali Text Society Translation Series, 13, 14, 16, London 1924-30.

Secondary Sources

Ackermann, Hans Christoph. 1975. *Narrative Stone Reliefs from Gandhara in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London*. Rome: IsMeo.

Ali, Ihsan & Qazi, Muhammad Naeem. 2008. *Gandharan Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum (Life Story of the Buddha)*. Mansehra: Hazara University.

Behrendt, Kurt A. 2007. *The Art of Gandhara in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Behrendt, Kurt A. 2012. "Fasting Buddhas, Ascetics Forest Monks and the Rise of the Esoteric Tradition." In: *Coins, Art and Chronology II: The First Millennium C.E. in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands*. No. II, edited by Michael Alram, Deborah Klimburg-Salter, Inab Minoru Inaba and Matthias Pfisterer, Wien: 299-332.

Faccenna, Domenico. 1962. *Sculptures from the Sacred Area of Butkara I*. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico Dello Stato.

Faccenna, Domenico. 1964. *Sculptures from the Sacred Area of Butkara I*. 2 Vols. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato.

Gandhara. 2008. *Gandhara: Das Buddhistische Erbe Pakistans ; Legenden, Klöster und Paradiese*. Mainz Verlag Phillip Von Zabern

Ingholt, Harald. 1957. *Gandharan Art in Pakistan*. New York: Archon Books.

Kurita, Isao. 2003. *Gandhara Art I: The Buddha's Life Story. A Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Tokyo: Nigensha Publishing Co., Ltd.

Lerner, Martin. 1984. *The Flame and the Lotus: Indian and Southeast Asian Art from the Kronos Collections*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Miniature Relief From The Collection Of The Metropolitan Museum Of

Sen-Gupta, Achinto. 2002. "Portable Buddhist Shrines." *Arts of Asia* no. 32 (4): 42-61.

Stein, Aurel D. 1907. *Ancient Khotan*. London: Oxford. Clarendon Press.

Yoshihide, Koizumi. 2000. "Study on the Portable Shrines in Northwest India." In: *Proceedings of the National Museum Tokyo*.no. 35: 89-156.

Zin, Monika. 2006a. *Mitleid und Wunderkraft. Schwierige Bekehrungen und ihre Ikonographie im indischen Buddhismus*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Zin, Monika. 2006b. "About Two Rocks in Buddha's Life Story" *East & West* no. 56 (4): 329-358.

Zin, Monika. 2013. "Buddhist Narrative Depictions in Andhra, Gandhara and Kucha – similarities and differences that favour a theory about a lost Gandharan School of Paintings." In: *Gandhara, Kucha no Bukkyo to Bijutsu*, Vol. 1 [Kokusai Symposium "Silk Road no Bukkyo Bunka – Gandhara, Kucha, Turfan" 2012. 11.3-5, Ryukoku Daigaku, Seika Houkokusho I]. Kyoto: Ryukoku Daigaku, March 2013, edited by. A. Miyaji: 35-66.

Zwalf, Wladimir. 1996. *A Catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the The British Museum*, Vol. I-II . London: The British Museum Publication.

Notes & References

¹ For more examples, see Faccenna 1964 Vol. II. 3: Pls. CDLVIIIa & b, CDLIX. Ingholt 1957: Pl. 9. Kurita 2003: Pl. III, Figs. 16-19.25. Zwalf 1996: Pl. 141. In these reliefs M y is lying on her left side and the elephant enters to her right side. In other reliefs, she is depicted lying to her right side.

² Kurita 2003: Pl. III-XI, Figs. 432-433.

³ For detailed version of the story see Zin 2006a: 69-95.

⁴ Cf. Kurita 2003: Figs. 187-192 & 201.

⁵ Cf. Ackermann 1975: Pl. XII. Ingholt 1957: Pls. 27-30. Kurita 2003: Figs. 90-95, 98, 101 & 104.

⁶ Cf. e.g. Ackermann 1975: Pl. DXXXVIIa. Faccenna 1962 Vol. II. 2:Pls. LIV & CXXVI. Ingholt 1975: Pls. 75-79. Kurita 2003: Pls. 3-II, 3-III, 3-IV. Figs. 269, 271, 280, 281, 285. Zwalf 1996: Pls. 199-201.

⁷ See Cat. Nos. 5 (Cat. Fig. 5.4), 14, 17, 22, 23, 24 & 26.

⁸ E.g. Faccenna 1962 Vol. II. 2: Pls. CXIX, CCXXIXa, b, CCXXX a,b. Faccenna 1964 Vol. II, 3: Pl. DXXXVII. Kurita 2003: Figs. 281-298. Zwalf 1996: Pls. 201-202.

⁹ For comparison between Gandhara and Andhara see Zin 2013.

¹⁰ A chapter in PHD dissertation of the present author deals with such Building Shaped Shrines from Gandhara. So far two fragments of such miniature buildings have been documented and studied by the author. Inner arrangements of these buildings show a circular space which was most probably designed to house a round object. The present author believes that miniature portable shrines, such as the one from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, were built like miniature stupas and were placed inside the building shaped shrines.