

## 'HOW BUDDHA BECAME ŚIVA' – A FRAGMENTARY BAS-RELIEF FROM MATHURĀ REVISÉD

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### ABSTRACT

*The following article<sup>1</sup> discusses a phenomenon observable in all regions and all religious contexts of South Asia – the refashioning of religious objects (and buildings) in order to adjust it to the needs of another usage than the one it originally was intended for. How this change comes about cannot in all cases be determined – sometimes it seems reasonable to suppose that such re-used objects come from the debris of a religious place that fell out of use. In other cases, it is more probable that the change in shape and content of an object was a deliberate choice triggered by a change of ritual or belief. Maybe this reshaping of an object enabled people to continue the veneration of objects of particular value to the community or of particular importance due to their long-term usage despite a change of beliefs. The degree of change can also vary considerably – from minor adaptations of the shape and attributes of e.g. a divine figure to more essential changes and even, as in the object under discussion, a transition from one religion - in this case Buddhism – to another one – in this case Śaivism, one major religious movement within the larger entity of what is conventionally called Brahmanism or Hinduism.*

**Keywords:** Phenomeon observable, South Asia, religious, ritual, belief, divine, Buddhism, Saivism, Brahmanism, Hinduism

In 2003/04 the Berlin Museum of Asian Art presented an exhibition titled “*The Sublime and the Ascetic in Early Sculpture from India*” (Yaldiz & Wessels-Mevissen 2003). One of the exhibited objects (Cat. No. 24) was a well-known fragmentary bas-relief from the Government Museum Mathura (Inv.No.36.2662), which is usually identified as “*Śivaliᅅga worshipped by the Scythians*” (Fig. 1). The presentation in the exhibition provided an opportunity for a closer examination of the object. This new research resulted in the insight that the bas-relief can no longer be interpreted in the context of a Śaivite cult. The authenticity of the object, however, as well as the dating cannot be called into question.

## ART HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The early sculpture of Mathurā is representative of a significant era in South Asian art history. Mathurā was an important place of art production even in pre-Christian periods and flourished after the Kuṣāṇas, descendants of equestrian people from Central Asia, invaded northern India in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and established their empire. In this period a school of arts emerged from the workshops of Mathurā whose innovative momentum was seminal for the development of style and iconography of ancient Indian art. Presumably influenced by the depiction of popular deities such as *yakṣas* and *nāgas*, anthropomorphic images of the Buddha and the Jina as well as of the gods of the Brahmanical pantheon were made for the first time with resident workshops producing images and icons for all these different religions. It may therefore be assumed that Buddhism, Jainism, the Brahmanical religions and older popular cults peacefully coexisted in the region of Mathurā. The depiction of a *śivaliṅga* is not unusual in the art of Mathurā. On the other hand, the depiction of a *liṅga* attended by worshippers wearing a Scythian dress is less common, but was certainly no reason for earlier researchers to doubt the authenticity of the bas-relief.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE BAS-RELIEF

Carved out of mottled red sandstone, the fragmentary bas-relief measures 53 x 58 x 11 cm and is generally dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. According to Sharma (Sharma in Yaldiz & Wessels-Mevissen 2003: 76), it was excavated at Seth Bhikh Chand ka Nagla, Dampier Park, Mathura and was brought to the Government Museum of Mathura in 1936. The object is first mentioned by Agrawala who discussed the vine motif in the art of Mathurā and included a picture and a short description of the bas-relief focusing mainly on the floral decorated side band (Agrawala 1936: 130; pl. XXIII, fig. 1.). In a catalogue entry published by Agrawala some years later he provides a more detailed description of the entire bas-relief:

”2661. – Relief (ht: 1’ – 7”) showing a Śivaliṅga on a pedestal, being worshipped by two men holding garlands and wearing coats and trousers (Northern dress). A flying celestial in the left corner is shown throwing flowers on the deity. [...] Kushāṇa Period. From the hamlet called Seth Bhikh-chand-Ka-Nagla in Dampier Park adjoining which there was a Kushāṇa tank from which place evidently this bas-relief and a big Nāgī were originally found. Purchased for U.P. Govt. along with Nos. 2665 and 2666. (Annual Report of the Mathura Museum, 1936 – 37, plate II, fig. 1)” (Agrawala 1949: 128-129).

Further references to the bas-relief are mentioned by Kreisel (Kreisel 1986: 173-174).

Coming to the visual content we should begin with an outline of the arrangement of the depicted setting.

## COMPOSITION OF THE IMAGE

In the present condition the fragmentary image shows the adoration of a *liṅga* on a pedestal attended by two worshippers. Only the right half of the depicted scene remained, while on three sides the broken edges cut off the image. On the right the scene is framed by a rim which is adorned by a branch of wine leaves with a grape and a peacock. In the center of the original, complete image, i.e. on the left edge of the fragment, the *liṅga* is positioned on a box-like pedestal decorated with a zigzag pattern. On the left side the scenery is confined by the broken edge, running diagonally alongside the summit of the phallus and continuing above. The two “Scythian” worshippers are positioned between the *liṅga* and the floral border. They are slightly different in height; the larger one carries a garland, the smaller one holds a flower in his raised right hand. Assuming that the entire composition was arranged symmetrically around the central *liṅga*, a couple of similar figures may have been placed on the lost half of the image. Above the two worshippers, in the upper section of the setting, a celestial flying deity with angular legs is depicted scattering flowers over the *liṅga*. Before we come to an interpretation of the scene depicted, we should take a closer look at the elements of this setting.

## THE PHALLUS AND THE PEDESTAL

The main subject of this scene is the *śivaliṅga*, which is positioned on a pedestal (Fig. 2). The face of the pedestal has a triple staggered bead moulding inside a carved frame. The platform protrudes from the cubic base and is divided into an upper and a lower section. While the lower section of the platform has a hatched rim, the upper part remained unornamented. With its cubic base and the protruding platform the pedestal is reminiscent of a throne. The *liṅga* rises from a recess which is engraved in the upper part of the platform. Viewed from the side the shaft of the phallus has a concave form (Fig. 3). In addition, there is a small centered hole in the front side of the *liṅga*. Compared to later phallic icons, which are usually more stylized, the present *liṅga* appears more lifelike, i.e. the glans of the phallus is shaped in a naturalistic way instead of being reduced to a carved line indicating its contour. The iconography of the *śivaliṅga* in the art of Mathurā is treated in detail by Kreisel (Kreisel 1986: 173-174.).

Another element to be noted is the difference in the treatment of the background. Around the *liṅga* an area of only roughly dressed stone forms a kind of halo, while the remaining surface sections were accurately smoothed and polished.

## THE SET OF FIGURES

Next to the *liṅga* a group of devotees, worshipping the phallic icon, is depicted. Two human males are standing to the right of the pedestal, attended by a celestial deity flying above. The human worshippers are bearded, bareheaded and of different height.

Their dress, consisting of a girded tunic with a decorative braid, tight trousers and long-toed boots, is usually denoted as “Scythian” or “northern” style and resembles the costume characteristic for central Asian horse people. Both figures wear a necklace and a kind of anklet or leg ring. The adorer standing next to the *liṅga* bears a garland, while his companion has lotus flower in the raised hand and holds an unknown object which could be a dagger. Above the human devotees, a flying divine being with bent legs is sprinkling the *liṅga* with flowers. The deity wears a scarf and is adorned with a necklace.

### THE FLORAL ORNAMENTS

On the decorative rim edging the fragmentary bas-relief two meandering interwoven vine branches is depicted. A grape and peacock, presumably but two elements of a whole series of depictions, are enclosed by the leafy tendrils. The head of another peacock, following the former, is visible at the lower breaking edge. Yet another fragment of floral ornaments adorns the spandrel of a fragmentary arch next to the flying deity. However, the engaged pillar, partially obscured by the rear devotee and supporting the arch, remained unornamented.

### INTERPRETATION OF THE IMAGERY

In order to get to a comprehensive interpretation of the depiction described it has to be stated first of all that there are no other objects known from this period which show “Scythian” worshippers alongside a *śivaliṅga*. The few related images depict the *liṅga* attended by mythical creatures

(Kreisel 1986: figs. 1a; 1c.). For this reason, the imagery of the present bas-relief is unique and deserves closer attention. A comprehensive compilation of *liṅga* icons from Mathurā including bas-reliefs depicting the phallus is given by Kreisel, who mentions a few similar objects (Kreisel 1986: figs. 1a; 3a.). It is remarkable that most of the early depictions of phallic icons on stone slabs show the *liṅga* positioned under a sacred tree.

The closer examination of the *liṅga* on the pedestal has conveyed several unique details which allow us to draw additional conclusions. As previously mentioned, the uneven treatment of the background seems particularly conspicuous. Furthermore, the engraved recess in the platform where the *liṅga* is connected to the pedestal, is remarkable - as is the pedestal itself.

First to be discussed is the change in surface treatment. The background of the bas-relief in general appears to have been carefully smoothed and nearly polished, yet in an area around the *liṅga* the surface is slightly elevated and considerably less well smoothed. The contours of this rough surface area seem to indicate that a halo surrounded the phallus; a detail that contradicts everything we know about the prevalent iconography of the time. Accordingly, the different treatment of the background must have other reasons. Taking into account the unusual imagery of the bas-relief with “Scythians”

attending a Śaivite icon, the most reasonable explanation is that the object has been partly remodeled. In more specific terms, it seems that the pedestal of the current *liṅga* was originally intended to be a throne and the figure originally placed on this throne was later reworked into the phallic icon. From this it follows that the shape of the rough surface around the *liṅga* reflects the contour of the figure originally depicted on the throne. That the imagery was actually changed is quite obvious due to the remaining slight elevation of the surface. But why the craftsmen did not bother to smoothen the surface around the *liṅga* and to match it to the polished background remains unknown.

The comparison of the present *liṅga* on the pedestal with similar depictions of Śaivite context has resulted in the conclusion that no other *liṅga* was positioned on a similar pedestal in this period. However, a cubic throne adorned with a staggered bead-moulding is well-known from Buddhist imagery – it is one type of throne for the Buddha. Throne-seats with a similar decoration are depicted on a Buddhist bas-relief from RājGhāt (Mode 1986: 25, Taf. 9.) and at the Stūpa of Jamalpur (Srinivasan 1989: pl. 9, IV.). According to Mitterwallner the zigzag-motif on the face of the pedestal is indicative of the date of the bas-relief:

*“The latter may be assigned to the reign of early Kuṣāṇa king Huviṣka, because of the zigzag band chip-carving on the front of the box-shaped pīṭha. This betrays Gandhāra influence that reached Mathurā some time around the year 51 of the early Kuṣāṇas, as demonstrated by the Gandhāra-influenced Buddha, donated in the same year”* (Mitterwallner 1984: 25, pl. 4.).

Whether the protruding platform of the current pedestal was once supported by the lions conventionally depicted in the Buddha-thrones of this period is uncertain; on the objects of comparison mentioned above these lions are absent.

Against the background of all these observations, we can safely identify the contour of the unpolished background around the *liṅga* as the silhouette of a Kapardin Buddha. This type of image was a prevalent Buddha icon of the period. The circular upper section of the rough area is the remainder of the halo, while the lower area reflects the shoulders and the arms of the original Buddha figure. As a result of the remodeling, the vast bulk of the former image was removed. The remains of the Buddha’s crossed legs seem to have been transformed into the upper section of the current platform while from the upper part of his body the *liṅga* was formed. Viewed from the side (Fig. 3) the concave lower part of the *liṅga* as haft seems still to reflect the belly and the transition to the chest of the seated Buddha figure. Accordingly, the hole in the *liṅga*’s shaft can be explained as the navel of the former Buddha (Fig. 4). We may assume that the recess was cut into the platform to lengthen the shaft of the phallus thus improving its proportions. The hatched rim along the platform may refer to the Kuśa grass used exclusively for the

seat of the Buddha. Since the use of this material was confined to the Buddha it seems rather unlikely that another Buddhist image, e.g. a Bodhisattva, was depicted in the relief.

Regarding the historical context, the Buddha's worship by Scythians is comprehensible whereas the depicted veneration of a Śaivite icon, though it cannot be ruled out, seems rather unlikely. Within the corpus of Buddhist sculpture from Mathura several comparable images are known (Sharma 1995: fig. 65, 70, 74.). Although the Śaivite cult flourished in Mathurā during the Kuṣāṇa era and even before, the development of Śaivaimagery was slower than that of Buddhist representations. Moreover, the representation of Śiva was mostly syncretic among the Kuṣāṇas (Rosenfield 1967: 93.), which is one more reason why a remodeling of the image appears as a reasonable supposition. Banerjea argued the “Scythian” worshipper next to the *liṅga* could be identified as king Vāsudeva (Banerjea in Sastri 1957: 247.), but this was later rejected by Rosenfield (1967: 93).

Another indication for the Buddhist origin of the image is the depiction of the deity throwing flowers, which is a prevalent motif in the Buddhist iconography of this period, but is not known in connection with phallic icons. On the other hand, the worshipping “Scythians” are holding a garland and a flower in the same way as the mythical creatures, which are depicted on a sandstone lintel from Mathurā, worshipping a *liṅga* with a sacred tree (Kreisel 1986: fig. 1a). In addition, the depicted vine-leaves are another common element of Buddhist imagery in the art of Mathurā while in Śaivite context this motif is virtually unknown. All these details combine to conclusively demonstrate that the current Śaivite depiction is the result of a major remodeling of an originally Buddhist image.

The importance of this conclusion cannot be overrated since it means that the bas-relief can no longer be regarded as one of the earliest examples of Śaiva art from Mathura. Based on the form of the throne pedestal and the contour of the unpolished background we may assume that originally a seated Buddha was depicted. While the date assigned to the relief may well be upheld for the original Buddhist carving, the date of rededication cannot be verified. Due to the naturalistic form of the *liṅga* If an early date for the reworking of the relief, probably during the time of the Kuṣāṇas, seems reasonable (Mitterwallner 1984: 18).

The reasons for such an essential change remain unknown. While it seems reasonable to assume that the re-use followed economic necessities – stone sculptures and reliefs doubtlessly were objects of considerable value and it was quicker and therefore cheaper to partly rework an already existing piece of sculpture than to invest procure a raw piece of stone that had to undergo the entire process of sculpting in a workshop. Whether this reworking of an existing piece was the result of a case of iconoclasm, i.e. the deliberate supersession of one religious movement by another – in this case Buddhism by Śaivism – is less easy to decide. In this context it is worth mentioning that

the take-over of Buddhist sites and objects by other religious groups, often by Śaivism, is not unknown as the example of the Buddhist cave at Karle shows – here the Buddhist cave (*caitya*) with its *stūpa* was turned into a Śaiva temple around the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the *stūpa* was henceforth venerated as a *liṅga*. In all probability, the interpretation of the relief as an attempt of political propaganda that aimed at putting the Kuṣāṇa elite close to indigenous *liṅga* cults can be ruled out. A final question that cannot be answered due to a lack of background information about the find spot and the circumstances the relief was discovered in is when the piece was damaged. If the piece cracked in the process of reworking this may well be the reason why the final smoothing of the rough surface around the *liṅga* was not undertaken.

Although this paper by no means has been able to answer all questions surrounding this hitherto unique piece of sculpture but has, on the contrary, raised additional questions, it is hoped that it has shown how after a careful analysis of a work of art and by critically reviewing and - if necessary – revising seemingly well established scholarly positions even long known objects can reveal new insights into the history of their formation and hitherto unknown details of their usage.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of an essay written in German and co-authored by my former colleague Tilo Letz, which was published in the Journal of the Berlin Museum of Indian Art (*Indo-Asiatische Zeitung. Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für indio-asiatische Kunst* No. 10, 2006: 24-31). A revision of this essay was included in the catalogue of the exhibition *Bild. Macht. Religion – Kunst zwischen Verehrung, Verbot und Vernichtung* ('Image. Power. Religion - Art between Adoration, Prohibition and Destruction'), which was held in Bochum Museum of Art in 2019. This English version shall present the result of my research to a wider international audience.

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## FIGURES



Fig. 1. Fragmentary bas-relief depicting a scene of adoration. Mottled red sandstone, Mathurā, 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Government Museum Mathura. Photo: Iris Papadopoulos.

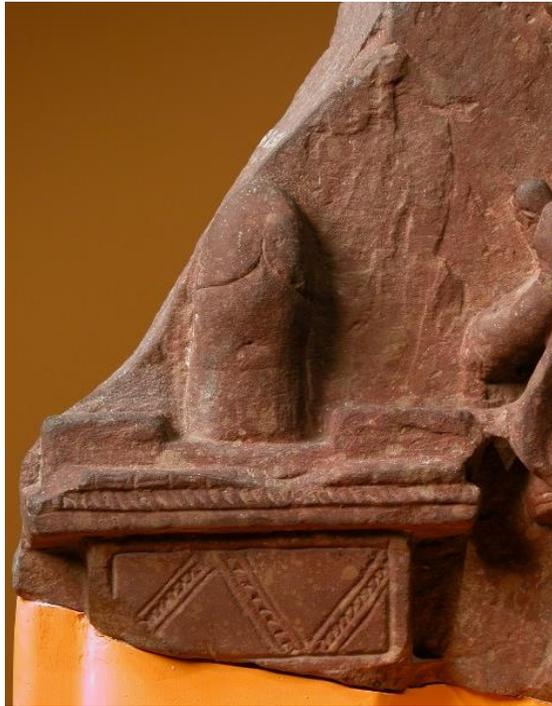


Fig 2.  
Detail of Fig. 1.  
Pedestal with  
*śivaliṅga*. Photo:  
Iris Papadopoulos.



Fig. 3. Detail of Fig. 1. Side view of the  
*śivaliṅga*. Photo: Iris Papadopoulos.

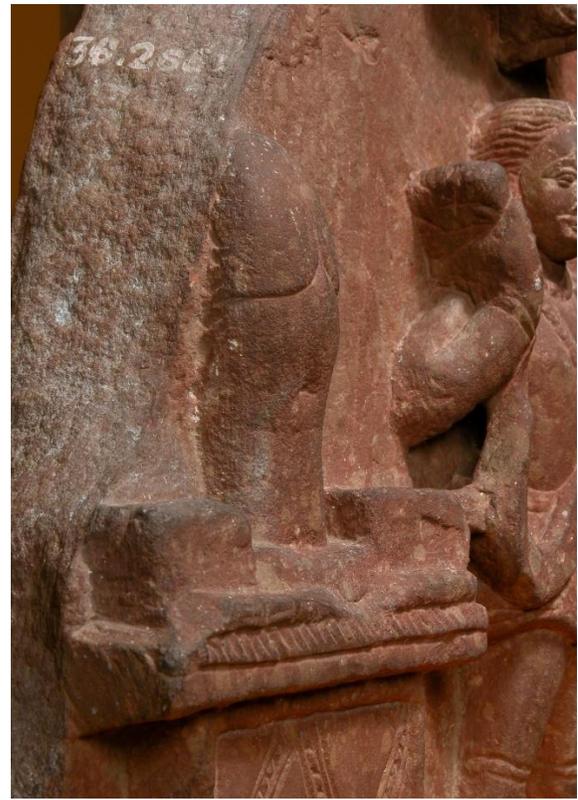


Fig. 4. Detail of Fig. 1. Pedestal with  
*śivaliṅga*. Photo: Iris Papadopoulos.