

Buddhist Ivory Diptych from Kashmir: Re- Interpretations of a few Scenes and Some New Thoughts about its Iconography, Function and Date

MUHAMMAD HAMEED

Abstract

After death of the Buddha, his body was cremated and the relics were distributed among existing eight tribes. Numerous Gandharan reliefs depict transpiration of the relics. Most often the event is represented in the form of a well guarded procession. The narrative was also repeatedly depicted on diptych type miniature portable shrines of the “Elephant and Rider Type” diptychs. This paper is about an ivory diptych of the similar type. It has carving on both sides. Its exteriors portray transportation of the relics while on the interior complete life story of the Buddha is depicted. Main purpose of the present research is to reinterpret a couple of scenes depicted inside the ivory diptych. These narratives have not been correctly interpreted by the previous scholarship. Attempt has also been made to understand narrative scheme applied inside the ivory diptych. The present author also intends to investigate aspects related to significance, manufacturing date and function of the object.

Keywords: *Ivory. Diptych. Buddha, Iconography, Gandhara. Gandhara Art, Miniature Portable Shrines*

The Ivory Diptych

This is the only available Buddhist ivory diptych, preserved in its complete shape. It was discovered in the Chinese province of Kansu and belongs to the Committee for the Administration of Cultural properties of the Kansu province. The diptych was handed over to the Museum of Chinese History (now known as National Museum of China) in Beijing (Barrett 1967: 11).

Soper (1965: Figs. 1-6) published first account of its discovery and iconography.

Afterwards, Barrett 1967: Pl. II. Figs. 1a & 1b, Rowan (1985: Pls. 1A & 1B) and Yoshihide (2000: Pls. 1-5 & 12-13) contributed. A study of this shrine has helped enormously in determining the shape and contents of all the fragments of this type of portable shrines.

The exterior of the ivory diptych represents an elephant and a rider in complete profile. Similar treatment is repeated on its both wings (Fig. 01) and it shows a heavily dressed man, either a noble or a royal, riding an elephant. He has a round face, healthy cheeks and prominent circular earrings. His headdress consists of a piece of garment, fasten by a prominent ribbon. His heavy upper garment or shawl is marked by wavy horizontal lines running across his body. A small round shawl fastener is visible on his shoulder. The man wears decorated trousers that show a vertical frieze of dotted squares running all the way down to his feet, placed on a saddle. The seat fixed on the elephant's back is richly decorated. It is fastened by ropes all around the elephant's body. A bell swings on each side of the elephant's belly, right above the soldiers. The elephant looks calm; his trunk and tail are rolled into circles.

The rider holds a stūpa-shaped shrine which consists of a large base, a dome and five *chattras*. A seated figure with a sword or knife in his left hand is also depicted behind the rider. Two standing figures, close to the bell in between the elephant's legs, are depicted. They hold shields in their right hands and swords in their left. There is another figure standing in front of the elephant's leg. The man is depicted in the same fashion as the formers except for a dotted helmet. The men are soldiers guarding the procession transporting the Buddha's relics.

The lower part of the diptych shows a rectangular platform. Two oval shaped recessed panels are carved inside this platform and bordered by a single groove at the top and the bottom.

The ivory diptych's other wing displays a similar carving and execution. Both the wings are joined with an iron hinge passing through a circular hole. These holes would have been used to join the two wings. The perforation has been so carefully executed that it does not damage any part of the carving in both wings. Perhaps the perforations were drilled first and the carving was done afterward.

The interior of this ivory diptych represents a complex iconographical treatment. It is divided into 54 panels of variable shapes and sizes (Figs. 02 & 03). These panels narrate complete life story of the Buddha, starting from Dīpaṃkara to death of the Buddha (Fig. 04). Rowan identified most of the scenes correctly, with the exception of numbers 10, 36, 42 and C section (1985: 270). According to his interpretation, the scene number 10 represents “Siddhārtha learning martial art”. This identification proves incorrect when compared with the former fragment. As already indicated, the scene depicts “cutting of bunch of reeds”. Zin states, “the artist represents the bunch as a single element, resembling a plain rod” (Cf. Zin 2008).

Rowan claims that the scene 36 illustrates “Kaśyapa’s amazement”, whereas in fact it represents the “Bodhisattva crossing the river Nairājanā”. According to Rowan number 42 represents “Devadatta’s attempt to murder the Buddha”. This interpretation is incorrect. It has also been comprehensively studied and interpreted by Zin (2006) with reference to textual sources and examples from the other Buddhist schools of art. According to Zin such imagery illustrates the “Malla episode from Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra”.¹

In Gandharan sculptures the episode is generally followed by Parinirvāṇa, as is the case with the ivory diptych. A similar narrative scheme is followed in the ivory diptych. The central depiction of the scene reflects its significance. Finally, the C section which Rowan claims to present standing Buddhas. In fact, they are depicted on a lotus under flowering trees. This depiction recalls the standing figures of the Buddha in the “great miracle of Śrāvastī”.²

The story line inside the ivory diptych runs from the top to the bottom and the additional space are filled is by relatively large standing Buddha with right hand raised in *abhaya* (Fig. 02). The upper part of the interior on both wings is divided into square panels and deals with Siddhārtha’s princely life. The lower parts form an arched section, further divided into successive panels. This section of the diptych deals with the Buddha’s life during and after enlightenment (Cf. Figs. 02, 03 & 04). He stands either on a lotus or

¹ For more information about literary sources of the scenes and its examples in Gandhara, see Zin 2006: 340-355.

² Cf. Williams 1975: 182-183. J. Huntington 1987: 58-59.

without lotus under flowering tree and is flanked by half-length figures.

Origin and Iconographical Significance of the Ivory Diptych

In addition to the unique nature of the ivory diptych and its good condition, a few crucial aspects need to be discussed. Firstly, it is necessary to enquire into the diptych's origin. With regard to the iconography, it shares a number of Indian features, such as Siddhārtha's dress, bare torso and short lower garment, the Buddha's robe design, his ornaments and the style of narrating the Buddha's biography. All these features suggest an Indian origin. According to Soper, the diptych was subsequently taken to Chinese frontiers by a returning pilgrim (1965: 211). It was most probably manufactured during the late seventh century C.E. (Soper 1965: 222). After a comparison with other fragments of the Buddhist ivory sculptures from Kashmir, it can be argued that the ivory diptych is a work of Kashmiri artists.³ According to Soper the ivory shrine has a considerable Chinese share in its carving (218- 223).

Secondly, the iconographical connection of the ivory diptych with its stone counterparts is also a crucial factor. With reference to the previously discussed fragments, it becomes obvious that Gandharan sculptors had already begun the method of dividing the interior of such shrines in different panels in order to take full advantage of the space.

Additionally, the use of a non-linear system of story description in these diptychs is equally significant. The scenes were selected without following chronological sequences. A keen observation of the narrative scheme exposes a characteristic feature according to which most important scenes were illustrated in the centre of each row of the panels. In upper part of the right wing, for example, the square panels 7, 18 and 22 depict Asita's prophecy, the first sortie and sleep of women. On the opposite leaf the square panels 10, 15 and 25 illustrate how Siddhārtha learns the art of fighting, marriage, Siddhārtha's welfare to his groom, changing of his cloth. All of these events had a significant impact on Siddhārtha's life.

In the lower sections of the diptych, its central panel number 32 and panel number 41 are more significant because the former represents "Māra's defeat" and the later depicts

³ For more information about ivories from North-West Indian, see Dwivedi 1970. Czuma 1988.

“entry into *nirvāṇa*”. These are again the most important events in the Buddha’s life after renouncing his palace life. Such method of representation possibly reflects Andhran influence, where, according to Zin, not only the events are illustrated but also associations and a deeper understanding of the life of the Buddha are evoked (2013: 37).

Another important character of the interior carving is the method of depicting multiple scenes in vertical and horizontal arrangement. Such particular way of storytelling takes us away from Gandhara and reminds us of the Sarnath Gupta steles of the Buddha’s life. In these steles, eight “miracles” of the life of the Buddha are repeatedly depicted. Williams reproduced the statement of Alfard Foucher that “such steles were made and used as souvenirs taken by pilgrims” (Williams 1975: 189). J. Huntington states, “With these images, a monk or lay devotees could pay their homage to the whole of Aṣṭamahāprātihārya without even leaving his home monastery” (1987: 63). The diptych under discussion displays an extended version of the former steles and seems to have conceptual influence of visual imagery of these steles – an element that we do not find in Gandhara art.

The ivory diptych presents the best view of the interior arrangement. Their complex treatment of the interior may reflect a somewhat late introduction, possibly the late 6th century C.E. This observation of the present author is based upon the iconographical comparison of the fragments of “Elephant and Rider Type” diptychs which represent very few major scenes of life of the Buddha.⁴ Such shrines may represent earlier examples and can be dated to 5th century C.E.

Function of the Elephant and Rider Type Diptychs

Gandharan artists portrayed each of the episodes frequently including the transportation of relics. There are different figural versions of processions carrying relics. Equally, different mediums of transportation were depicted by Gandharan artists including camels,⁵ horses⁶ and elephants.⁷ In the majority of these cases, all episodes were arranged

⁴ The present author in his PHD thesis about “Miniature Portable Shrines from Gandhara and Kashmir” has discussed more than 10 fragments of the “Elephant and Rider Type” diptychs. All these are in stone and have carving on both sides.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Ackermann 1975: 89, Pl. XXXVIb. Tanabe, et al. 2002: 95, Cat. No. 175. Kurita 2003: Figs. 520, 524 & 525.

in single frieze separated by panels and in chronological order. These reliefs were most often placed around a stūpa.

The tradition of transporting relics on an elephant was already known in ancient Buddhist art. The earliest depiction dates to the 2nd and 1st century B.C., like on a stone relief from the Bharhut stūpa⁸ (Jongeward, Errington, Salomon & Baums 2012).⁹ In this perspective, it seems obvious that Gandharan artists continued the idea of depicting transportation of relics from early Buddhist art in India. Gandharan artists modified the depiction by adding camels and horses as a means of transportation. However, in the portable shrines, no such modification took place.

Conclusion

The ivory diptych is a unique specimen of art not only for its iconography but also for its form and function. The diptych has two-folded significance just like its outer and inner look. Its sacredness is reflected by its use as a miniature portable shrine. For its holder the diptych might have served the purpose of fulfilling his religious duties. Secondly, the narrative art represents quite usual way of depicting complete life story of the Buddha, even though; one with a little knowledge of the faith can easily follow the story line. The iconography is a mixture of non-linear and linear arrangement, so we can say that it is Gandharan but at the same time not thoroughly Gandharan in nature. Such elements on such objects are clear indicative of the Indian side influence, as has already been discussed. What we need to do is to look for more objects of such types in order to develop our understanding about Gandhara art. Miniature portable shrines of similar category may guide us to understand that Gandharan artists quite possibly used other mediums of expressing Buddhist narrative art other than large sculptures and reliefs. Study of miniature shrines, of which diptych type portable shrines constitute a major part, can be useful not only for understanding religious but also artistic behaviours of the Buddhist communities living in and around Gandhara.

⁶ Cf. Faccenna 1964 Vol. II. 3: Pls. CDXX & CDXXI. Zwalf 1996: Pls. 233-234.

⁷ Kurita 2003: Figs. 522, 523 & 526.

⁸ Coomaraswamy 1956: Fig. 166. Also see Schlingloff 2000/2013 Vol. I: 67-71 . No. 8 (8).

⁹ Jongeward, Errington, Salomon & Baums 2012: 23, Fig. 2.11.

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Figure



Figure. 1. Exterior of the Ivory Diptych from National Museum of China, Beijing. No. 1952 ICL. Cat. No. 17, after Yoshihide 2000: 11.



Figure 2. Interior Arrangement of the Ivory Diptych. Cat. No. 17, after Yoshihide 2000: 12.

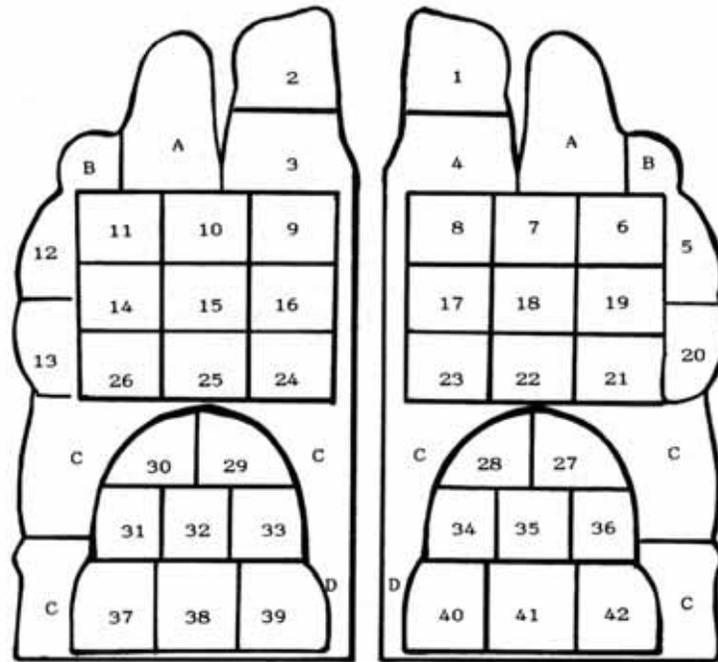


Figure 3. Interior Arrangement of the Ivory Diptych. Cat. No. 17, after Rowan 1985: 270, Fig. 2.

A Stupa
B Kneeling Worshipper

C Standing Buddha
D Rinceau Design

- 1 Dipamkara
- 2 Maya's Dream
- 3 Interpretation of Her Dream
- 4 Birth and Seven Steps
- 5 Bath of the Newborn
- 6 Return from the Lumbinī Garden
- 7 Asita's Prophecy
- 8 Siddhartha Goes to School on a Ram
- 9 Siddhartha at School
- 10 Learning Martial Arts
- 11 Archery Contest
- 12 Disposal of the Dead Elephant
- 13 Wrestling Contest
- 14 King Advised to Take a Bride for His Son?
- 15 Marriage?
- 16 Lustration as Heir?
- 17 Siddhartha in His Seraglio
- 18 First Sortie
- 19 Second Sortie
- 20 Third Sortie
- 21 Meditation under the Jambu Tree

- 22 Sleep of the Women
- 23 Siddhartha Calls His Groom
- 24 The Great Departure
- 25 Siddhartha's Farewell to His Groom, Changing His Clothes
- 26 Siddhartha Cuts His Hair
- 27 Interview with the Ascetic Ālāra Kālāma
- 28 Meditation after Fasting
- 29 Discourse with Five Ascetics Led by Ajña Kauṇḍinya
- 30 Meeting with the Grass-Cutter
- 31 Gifts from the Caravan Leaders Trapuṣa and Bhallika
- 32 Māra's Defeat
- 33 First Sermon in the Deer Park
- 34 Preaching
- 35 Buddha Shows His Alms-bowl to the Kāśyapas
- 36 The Kāśyapas' Amazement
- 37 Conversion of the Nāga Apalāla
- 38 Alms-giving
- 39 A Conversion: of Aṅgulimalya?
- 40 The Barking Dog Story?
- 41 Entry into Nirvāṇa
- 42 Devadatta's Attempt to Murder the Buddha

Figure 4. Narrative Scheme inside the Ivory Diptych, after Rowan 1985: 270.