

# Hellenism in Early Kashmir Images

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## Abstract

*Kashmir is bountifully rich in its heritage -her magnificent monuments, creditable inscriptions and exotic sculptures are known world over. Of these, a considerable number of stone sculptures remain mostly in the museums and private houses across the globe for their rich and prolific artistic traditions or are worshiped in the temples in Kashmir or elsewhere. Most of the surviving sculptures were created to serve a religious purpose as they depict divinities or mythical stories of the two earliest faiths in Kashmir, Buddhism and Brahmanism. Most of these cult icons are recognised by the emblems or gestures they display in addition to iconography. For the excellent manifestations the codified physical descriptions of the iconographic forms were faithfully followed and the artists just added the aesthetic sensibilities and technical skills to produce the master pieces. 'Most visualisations provide basic scheme for the artists to embellish with the aesthetic tastes and changing fashion of their own age' (Pal 2007:65). Many of these evolved and developed on account of ideas and philosophies of the peoples who traveled to and fro on the historical Silk Route for the caravan traffic of commodities and mercantile or else because of the zeal of the missionaries who continuously traversed this diamond path. Apart from political or cultural reasons the artistic fraternity got dislodged in Gandhara to take asylum in the Valley of Kashmir and created manifestations that display cross-cultural fertilisations. Given the intimacy of the relations Gandhara and Kashmir enjoyed, the paper aims to highlight how and when Gandharan elements of Hellenism was introduced in the art of Kashmir.*

**Keywords:** Kashmir, Gandhara, Hellenism, Buddhist and Brahmanical images.

## Introduction

A large number of stone images remarkable for their artistic manifestations and iconographical details with some wonderful distinctions of Hellenism were created in Kashmir after the fall of the Kushan Empire there and elsewhere. Much before that and

during the Kushan period a superior class of sculptures was produced in Gandhara [North-east & North-west parts of modern Afghanistan as well as North-west of Pakistan, comprising Peshawar, Swat, Buner, Bajaur, Taxila, etc] depicting Hellenism— itself an offshoot of the Greek art created during the Kushan era in the first two centuries of our era (Marshall 1960). The absence of such a class of sculpture in Kashmir was in spite of the fact that ancient Gandhara and Kashmir had an unbroken socio-economic and political bond during the rule of the Kushans. This relationship continued thereafter as well during the times of Kidarites (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century) and the White Huns (5<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> century). It was a region of fluctuating geo-political conditions as well as multi-ethnic social and cultural movements. Both the areas also shared religio-cultural bond given their propensity to Buddhism during the Kushan and post-Kushan period. Accordingly political boundary between the two distinct geographical areas was less discernable at times. Even though the cultural boundaries of the Gandharan art overlapped its geographical boundaries, nevertheless, Kashmir produced nothing of this type or comparable to it at a time of favourable politico-cultural ties when Gandhara was famous for the Hellenistic elements in stone and stucco during the Kushan and post-Kushan era. Hellenism, nevertheless, was introduced in the terracotta art of Kashmir in the Kushan period while in the stone masterpieces it appeared in the post Kushan space at a time when Gandhara was either losing its pristine glory or else had dwindled.

### **Early Sculpture in Kashmir**

When exactly Kashmir produced its first sculpture is not known but existing record shows that well before the arrival of the Kushans in the subcontinent a remarkable grey limestone bull capital adorned with images of bulls and humans, robust and bold, drawn from the Mauryan/Sunga traditions, was produced in the 2nd century BC (Bandey 1992; 2004: 63-78; 2011: 147-68). This novel object, as such, starts the history of sculptural art in Kashmir and must not have been a solitary piece as the bull capital is part of an architectural pillar for supporting the building superstructure or else was used in the free standing columns, *stumbahas* or supported the architraves of the gateways, *torana* and railing pillars, *vedika*. Such free standing columns surmounted with capitals were also erected in front of stupas as is evident from terracotta plaques of the 4<sup>th</sup> century found at Harwan, Srinagar (Kak, 1933). Located in the extreme north east of Kashmir the

depiction of realistic and bold bulls with strained face muscles is an importation in the art of the sub-continent after the Greco-Persian examples in Asoka's reign in the 3rd century BC. Showcasing the humans' in heavy turbans with a large central ornament [Fig 1; visible at least in one of the turbans] and large heavy ear rings were later on found in many of the schist images of Gandhara. No further evidence of this sophisticated art nor that of the Gandharan art on stone produced in the vast region of the north west of the Kushan Empire has been located in Kashmir till the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Buddhist Art and Hellenism**

In between these two traditions emerged a different class of art in Kashmir in baked clay, between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century, at a large number of Kushan sites of Buddhist faith. At these sites was found large artistic activity that produced stamped tiles used for the decoration of monastic courtyards and parts of their walls [Fig. 2]. Even if this art does not compare in workmanship or in execution of form with the stucco or schist of the North-West, or *chunar* of Central India not to speak of Indian ivory found in Begram, Afghanistan, but these tiles are distinct in their own way as they carry a large body of motifs varied in nature; like the scenes of game and chase, mythical and social scenes, musicians and dancers, humans and animals, fruits and foliage, etc - the depiction from the lives and cultures of various people living in a wider area, and thus the Turkman cap, Parthian archer, Greek swan, Persian vase, Assyrian lion, Indian elephant, Roman rosette, Chinese fret, etc (Brown 1942: 155). All these elements illustrate the wide knowledge the Kushan artist had acquired in the vast region of their domain and from elsewhere where they made contacts. Importantly the motifs also show Buddhist symbolism, like *puṇaḡhaṭṭa*, or *kalpavṛkṣa* emerging out of a *puṇaḡhaṭṭa* or the *Dharmachakra*, establishing thus that such monastic places would have served as flourishing centres to propagate and transmit the Buddhist traditions and at the same time depicting their allegiance to the Kushan dynastic art which is reinforced by the fact that like their coins the Kushan monarchs have been drawn on some of these tiles (Bandey 1992; 2004: 63-78). In spite of all this variety found in Kashmir the artists never manifested an anthropomorphic image of Buddha that is said to have appeared in the nearby Gilgit,

(Dani : 40-41) and is claimed to have influenced subsequently in the carving of mediating Buddha images on rocks from Swat to Xinjiang (Dar 2004: 17).

Instead emerged low relief moulded human figurines, in the 2nd century that has wide variety of type and expression [Fig.3]. The artist has drawn inspiration from real life to execute the images as seen in Gandhara (Pal 2007: 66) and some have head-dresses and hair styles as Indian while a variety of body garments express Hellenistic features, underlining the importance of Gandhara in terms of artistic influence at this comparatively early date. Many of these resemble with Bactrian images as were reported by Soviet archaeologists across Amu Darya in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Frumkin 1970: 66, 6,124-25,152,116). Like the Bactrian images these are highly refined in ornamentation, many are like the Nathu yakshi image of Gandhara [now in Calcutta Museum] while many others are wearing a crossed–breast chain, double necklace, wrist bangles and ear rings as found in Gandharan /Bactrian examples. In spite of such cultural and artistic relations with this vast region of Hellenistic influence still no Buddha or Buddhist image appeared in Kashmir.

It was only around the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the real Buddhist images, again in terracotta, having great details evolved for the first time in Kashmir [Fig. 4]. A large number of fragments of the parts of body; limbs, hair curls, ornaments, life size as well as miniature, besides heads of terracotta sculptures (Kak 1923) were found in close proximity to Gandhara, at Ushkar near Varamul (also called Baramulla) that served as the gateway to Kashmir from the West [besides in other museums, many are in Srinagar Museum]. They present excellent examples of modelling where delicacy and sensuousness, and idealism and realism have played their part in fashioning the images. The heads in particular, located from the Buddhist establishment and pronouncing the importance of icon for Buddhism and Buddhists by this age in Kashmir shows a great variety and was produced separately to be later added to the bodies to decorate the walls of Buddhist temples. Certain appliqué ornamentations like head curls, beard, moustaches, hair and head dresses were also added after the heads were moulded to give them individuality. Mostly representing Bodhisattvas, with definite influence of Hellenism, such heads were also available in Gandhara as at Sirkap or Jaulian (see for example Marshall 1951; 1960) as well as at Akhnur, near Jammu, belonging to the 4<sup>th</sup>

century (Mani 2004: 83-102). Significantly this class of images marks the introduction of Buddhist sculptural art in Kashmir of which evidence has also come from other Buddhist sites in Kashmir, like at Harwan, Srinagar (Fabri 1955: 53-64). All these heads and their body parts were produced after the exit of the Kushans and only after Mahayanist philosophy prospered in Kashmir.

It was only thereafter and in the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> century that stone sculptures reappear in Kashmir. The earliest of these [Fig.5] and comparable to Gandharan schist images, even though not in quality of material and execution, is the image of Buddha on a grey stone slab that was located at the western gate of Kashmir in Varamul (Bandey 1992: 81-92). The Buddha image [now in Srinagar Museum] is a replicate of the Gandharan types in style, in execution as well as in flowing drapery. Seated in meditation on a stylized lotus the mannerism became the hall-mark of many images in Kashmir as hereafter both stone and bronze sculptures in round were produced in large numbers.

### **Hellenism in Hindu Images**

Remarkable it is that most of the Gandharan style Buddhist sculptures were copied in the manifestations of the Brahmanical faith in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In fact many of these look like the copies from Gandhara had not the iconography changed from that of classical Gandhara Buddhist images to the Brahmanical one in Kashmir. The earliest such example is of *ekmukhlinga*, now under worship in a temple at Varamul, of early 6<sup>th</sup> century [Fig. 6]. It is partly Buddhist in iconography and execution as the *mukha* (face) and *jatha* of Siva is supported on the snail curls of Buddha (Bandey 2011: 155). The amalgamation of iconography is because the hand working for producing this early image was trained in Buddhist sculpture in Gandhara and while handling the Brahmanical image the sculptor simply executed Hindu iconography in conjugation with that of the Buddhists. Or else such details were copied from Gandhara where three headed Siva as discussed by Sherrier (1993: pl 48.2a) has hair curls like the Varamul *linga* but has these larger in size and thus must have influenced sculptor in Kashmir as was the case with other elements that were incorporated on other images; like the short

necklace the Bodhisattva images had in Gandhara which were copied as *makara* faced short necklaces on many Brahmanical images at Varamul.

Resemblances apart, the training of the sculptor in Gandharan Buddhist images have made him to copy Gandharan elements freely on many other early images of Kashmir. Of these a few Lakshmi/Gaja Lakshmi images, the Brahmanical goddess of plenty and wealth, found in Vajibror (also called Bijbihara), a south Kashmir town of ancient origin, illustrates the domination of Gandharan thought of sculpting. All of these are clad eclectically in the three piece classical costumes; a short sleeved tight fitting tunic or *chiton*, a gracefully held shawl/scarf or himation and a long skirt - the three piece Hellenistic costume and patent motif of Gandharan art of the Buddhist school (Bandey 2009: 75-86). During the hey days of Kushans, the sculptor in Gandhara created a 'syncretic goddess combining elements of image of Persian Anahita, the West Asian Nana and Indian Lakshmi' (Pal 2007: 74) and the Gaja Lakshmi images of Kashmir exhibits this amalgamation. An example of this image, found a few years back at Vaghom in Vajibror, is like a Greek image holding cornucopia in the left hand [Fig. 7]. This was after the earlier images of Hariti/Ardoxsho in Gandhara, who borrowed it from the Persian realm further west. The borrowal of the lion-seat in the image is from Nana/Anahita that was drawn from the Sassanian iconography as is also seen in some of the coins of the Kushans as their imperial religious pantheon (Bandey 2009: 75-86). Almost a copy of this image has also been found at Varamul where instead of *gajas* or elephants the image is lustrated by two cherubic celestials (Pal 2007: Fig 63)—a Greek thought visible in Gandhara.

Even though both these images do not look in any way to have been carved in Gandhara proper yet two other images give the impression as if these were transported from there, such is their class of execution and resemblance with the Gandharan hand. The stone image of Lakshmi reported from Brar, near Vajibror (Foucher 1913), whose present location is not known, appears in all respects a Greek goddess of fortune, standing in elegant pose, the eyes half closed, head held gracefully that merited only the subtle facial expression the artist has carved with precision along with the free flowing dress in a complete conventional way of Gandhara [Fig. 8]. This is fine piece of work, shapely made with firm modelled features holding in complete elegance the Greek

emblem. Its near copy is in Victoria and Albert Museum of London Gandhara (Paul 1986: 141) which is seated on a high backed throne, but in execution and mannerism, even in modelling both are replicas of the many Greek copied images. Of the same atelier but the work of the less gifted sculptor are two Vajirbror standing images of Lakshmi in the Srinagar Museum, even though mostly damaged and thus retaining lesser details, they still show what the artists were able to achieve in Kashmir in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

So many cult images of 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> century in Gandhara were of the Bodhisattva Maitreya (Marshall, 1960: Figs. 137, 139, 140). If not all of them, three images of Maitreya [Mohra Moradu monastery, Taxila Museum; Shari Bahol, Peshawar Museum; and the one in Lahore Museum] seem to have inspired the sculptor to carve the Vajirbror six armed Kartikeya image, now in Srinagar Museum, [Fig.9]. All the three Gandhara Bodhisattva images bear Greek stamp on modelling. Had not the iconography changed from that of classical Gandharan Buddhist images this Vajirbror image would have looked to be from that area, such is the resemblance in modelling. The 6<sup>th</sup> century grey chlorite sculpture of Kartikeya compares closely with the Gandhara Bodhisattva images in terms of his 'massive frame with powerful shoulders and strictly frontal stance' (Suidmak 1989: 42), attired in a wealth of jewellery and like them has pleated skirt.

The Hellenistic stamp is also visible in many other images as the imitations and their perfect rendering is seen in the depiction of wearing moustaches by the male figures [Fig.10; now in the Central Asian Museum, University of Kashmir, Srinagar]. Like in the Greek art of Gandhara where this element was visible in many images of Panchika, Bodhisattva and Buddha, in the Hindu deities of Kashmir this remained as an element of stylishness, in and after the 6<sup>th</sup> century, in stone and bronze, as well as in the terracotta (Bandey 2011: 157). Even if not many such examples have survived yet the remnants of Hellenism continued, in one way or the other, in the sculptural art of the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Kashmir as has been found in the examples of the Pandrathen, more particularly in the female images [all of these are in the Srinagar Museum] where the Greek skirt now became more stylised. The *tri-bangha* pose of the deities allowed the dress to flow in the direction of the movement to make these more elegant.

## Conclusion

While the early sculptural evidence in Kashmir distinctly reveals its stylistic and iconographical linkages with Gandhara rather than with the southerly plains of the subcontinent, the question why it could not produce and imitate Gandhara faithfully in the Kushan era is enigmatic and the issue has been dealt separately elsewhere that describes the reasons for the absence of fabulous Kushan sculpture in Kashmir. Apart from the close association with Gandhara, the historical evidence suggests that mighty Kushans ruled Kashmir for a considerable period of time in the early years of our era and established Buddhist monastic establishments there (Kalahana 1961: book I). The above narrative on the other hand explains that true sculptural art appeared only at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, after its first evidence in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and thus after a gap of more than five hundred years and certainly after the exit of mighty Kushan dynasty. The 6<sup>th</sup> century sculptural art, besides for the requirements of esthetic sensibilities, got created on account of peculiar socio-political conditions at Gandhara that got established after the White Hun devastation of the Buddhist establishments there (Thomas 1904: 88-89). Such conditions uprooted the artistry in Gandhara as they lost the royal patronage on which they had sustained so far and forced them to seek refuge in the neighbouring areas including Kashmir to play a vital role in the manifestation of Buddhist and Brahmanical images. In addition to the material evidence produced above it also finds support in Kalahana's narration as he records that "a thousand *agraharas*" (land grants) were bestowed by the early 6<sup>th</sup> century White Hun ruler, Mihirakula, to the Gandhara Brahmins for their settlement in and around Vajiror (Kalahana 1961: book I : Verse 312- 316). Among them were, presumably, artists who carried the traditions of Gandhara to Kashmir with refinements required under the Brahmanical faith. Importantly all of the Vajiror images are of the Brahmanical faith, thereby pronouncing that Kashmir was the stronghold of the faith at this point of time.



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## Figures



Figure 1 The Bull Capital, Phalgam, Kashmir



Figure 2 Terracotta Tile, Harwan, Kashmir



Figure 3 Terracotta Figurines, Semthen, Kashmir



Figure 4 Terracotta Head, Ushkar, Kashmir



Figure 5 Stone Buddha, Varmul, Kashmir



Figure 6 Stone *Ekhmukhlinga*, Varamul, Kashmir



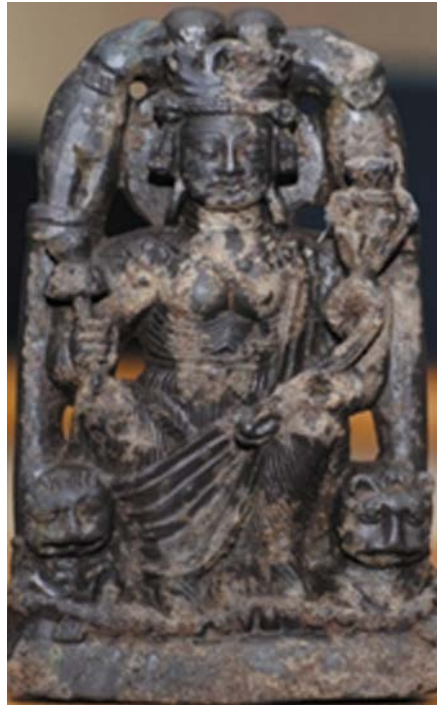


Figure 7 Stone Gaja-Lakshmi, Vaghom-Vajibror, Kashmir



Figure 8 Stone Lakshmi, Brar-Vijbror.



Figure 9 Stone Kartikeya, Vajibror.



Figure 10 Stone Head, Vajibror