

The Episode of Unsuccessful Attempt of Measuring the Gautama Buddha in Gandhara Sculpture: Socio-religious Background and Iconographic Symbolism

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The present work discusses one of the many prodigies happened in the life of Buddha. The happening discussed in this work is about the event when Buddha's divine power was put to test by a Brahman when he tried to measure the height of the Buddha. This paper first narrates briefly the event; then it discusses a few selected sculptured narrative examples; and the last section has been incorporated to search for socio-religious background and some symbolic meanings in the selected narrative sculptured examples.

Keywords: Buddha Life, Gandhara Sculpture, Iconographic Symbolism.

The Story

A young Brahman heard that the Buddha *Śākyamuni* is sixteen feet high. He, in disbelief, decided to measure the Buddha himself. He measured a sixteen feet bamboo and tried to measure the Buddha but to his surprise the Buddha not only exceeded the measured bamboo but continued growing in height. Unable to measure the Buddha the Brahman threw the bamboo and went away but miraculously the bamboo took roots and grew into a tree on the spot.

According to the sixth *avadāna* of the *Divyāvadāna*, (Maurizio, 2003) a Brahman, thinking of him to be taller than the Buddha tried in various ways to see the top of the Buddha but in vain. The Buddha warn him of the uselessness of his efforts since neither *asūras* in heaven nor man can completely see the *Tathāgata* and advises him to measure a column, buried in a place where the Brahman made his sacrifices to *Agni*, if he wishes to know the dimensions of his body. The Brahman in disbelief digged and to his surprise found the column. It is said that he later on erected a column in the memory of the happening.

In Gandhāra sculpture, almost always, the instant of the episode has been represented in which the Brahman is holding a bamboo parallel to the Buddha. Some times another episode is confounded with this one and that is the attempt of murdering Buddha by the hirelings of *Devadatta* who were hiding behind a wall which has been indicated by a column.

Representation of the episode in Gandhāra Sculpture

It seems that this episode has not given so much importance in Gandhāra sculpture as compare to some other episodes because fewer images are found for this event (Sehrai, 1988). One of the few examples included in this work is fig.no.1.

Figure 1

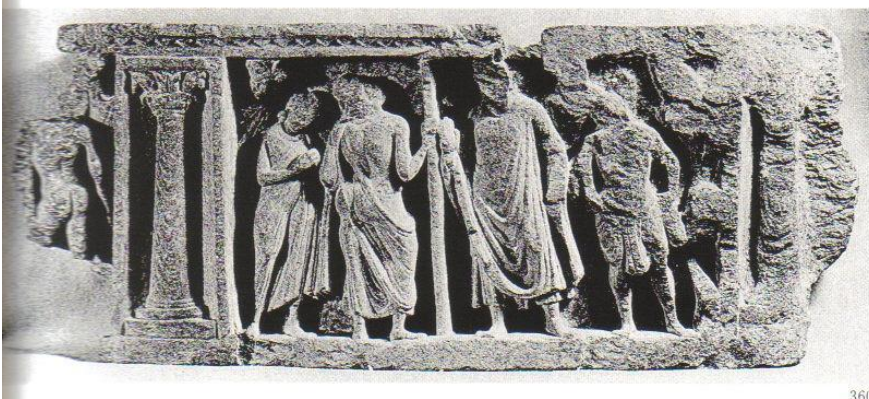


The Attempt of Measuring Buddha Śākyamuni, Schist Stone, Provenance Unknown, Peshawar Museum.

The sculptural piece is damaged and certainly other individuals present on the scene can not be seen but the important characters can be seen in it. Buddha *Śākyamuni* is standing while on his right a Brahman is holding a bamboo intended for measuring him. Buddha *Śākyamuni's* right leg is bent which indicate as if he was already walking when the Brahman tried to measure him or after the Brahman failed to fulfil his intention, Buddha started walking away. Although the right arm of Buddha is damaged but still suggests as if it was in the pose of *abhāya mūdra* (the re-assurance gesture of Buddha).

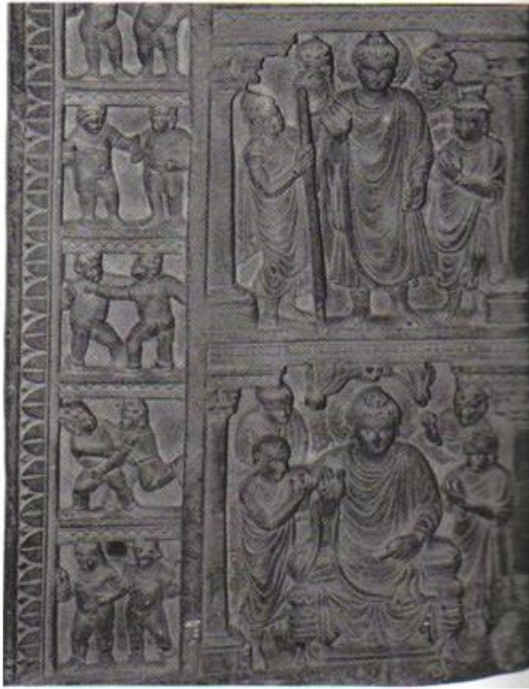
Fig. no. 2 is another example which is in a better condition as compare to the former one. Buddha is standing touching the bamboo with his right hand while the Brahman, on the right of Buddha, is holding the bamboo. Buddha is accompanied by *vajrapāṇi* (a mysterious thunder bolt bearer almost always accompanying Buddha) behind him with his weapon *vajra* (thunder bolt). As mentioned in Buddhist biographical texts Buddha was always attended by many deities beside humans and so in different scenes of Gandhāra Sculpture there is always found a few deities and humans around him. The number varies according to the space availability. In this scene there is seen an individual behind the Brahman in adoration pose. There are also present some other individuals but can not be seen clearly because they are damaged. One head can be seen behind Buddha while the other is behind the individual in adoration pose on the extreme left of the scene (Kurita, 2003).

Figure 2



The Attempt of Measuring Buddha, Grey schist, Provenance Unknown, Lahore Museum, (Fig. No. 360)

In fig. no. 3 on the upper portion is depicted Buddha with the Brahman measuring him with the bamboo, while three other individuals are present on the scene, two of them behind the Buddha while another beside him. All three seems to be either lay noble followers or heavenly beings suggested by their robe and hair style. On the left side of the architectural piece, scenes from the early life of Buddha *Śākyamuni* have been sculptured (Kurita, 2003).

Figure 3

The Attempt of Measuring Buddha, Grey schist, Provenance Unknown, Lahore Museum, (Fig. No. 361)

In fig. no. 4, Buddha, unlike the previous examples, is represented on the left side in the scene while the Brahman is on the right. But Buddha is still touching the bamboo with his right hand and so he has been represented turned towards the bamboo unlike the other examples in which he is looking outwards. Behind Buddha seems to be his followers while behind the Brahman are represented two individuals in the adoration pose probably intended for Buddha.

Figure 4

The Attempt of Measuring Buddha, Grey Schist, Provenance Unknown, Lahore Museum, (Photo by the author)

As we know that almost always Buddha after performing any miracle took his seat and preached the law, He is represented in this sculptural piece on the lower portion in the teaching posture. Beside others, *vajrapāṇi* is present as well. On the enclosing pillars is represented heavenly beings, who are most probably the tree spirits, *yākṣa-s*.

Fig. no. 5 is identical with that of number 3. In both of them, Buddha has been represented with the gesture of *abhāya mūdra* in the central register while the Brahman is trying to measure him. On the left border of the panel different scenes have been represented from the youthful life of the Buddha.

Figure 5



The Attempt of Measuring Buddha, Grey Schist, Provenance Unknown, Lahore Museum, (Photo by the author)

Socio –Religious Background and Iconographic Symbolism

The Brahman

This was not the only case in which a Brahman came to verify something prodigious heard about Buddha *Śākyamuni*. The Buddhist text relate that mostly they were not only given the chance to be satisfied for what they had come to verify but in addition they also received some very effective discourse from Buddha which made them delighted and were converted to his doctrine. In the *Dīgha Nikāya* there are even examples of Buddha's discourses with Brahmans to establish the idea of the superiority of the *Kṣātriya* class.

The Bamboo

The bamboo as an instrument of measuring, mentioned in this story, indicates its wide use for this purpose. Bamboos prepared in different measures might have been used for the purpose of measuring clothes, land for building houses and land for growing crops and paying taxes. In many cases until recently this simple method of measurement was used in Indo-Pak subcontinent.

The Buddha's growing Height

Buddha was unsurpassable. He was higher than all, even the gods. This was the message conveyed through this episode. There are several symbols which project Buddha as the superior one from all. The *uṣṇīṣa* (a hair tuft on Buddha's head) and *ūrṇa* (a dot on Buddha's forehead), always depicted in Gandhāra sculpture, are the prominent symbols of the superiority of Buddha. If the *uṣṇīṣa* symbolises his divine superior height the *ūrṇa* symbolises his superiority and depth in knowledge.

His growing in height was a message, that he can not be seen from above or equalised by some thing. He was beyond any measurement. A human being can not even imagine of the heavens of *arūpa devata* how can one imagine of the place above? Buddha's cranial can be considered like the highest heavens and his *ūṣṇīṣa* is the suggestion of his being beyond any reach either human or divine beings.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the Gandhāra sculpture has proved its effectiveness as communicating tool of a socio-religious doctrine side by side its text. It is instrumental in the reconstruction of not only religious life of Buddha but also the then social set up and mindset of the different sections of the society in which these sculptures were chiselled. Brahmins and *Kṣātriya* classes seem to be in a kind of struggle for superiority during the life of Buddha. Brahmins are mostly given importance in the sculptures and texts as this was, however, an age old religious class and people had been following them. And if a Brahmin converts to Buddhism he might be followed by many others. Thus, we see that this class was the prime target of the Buddha and was mostly successful in this.

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