

## **Assassination Attempt on the Buddha A Mysterious Relief Panel in the SRO Collection of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Peshawar**

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### **Abstract**

*The relief panel (Fig.1) that shows a scene from the life of Buddha is part of the SRO collection, which is now in the possession of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums (DOAM), Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Since its first entry to the collection, the sculpture remains unidentified and to our knowledge unpublished. It is a unique or at least a rare example of its kind not only because it depicts one of the most important events of the Buddha's life, but it also represents certain enigmatic figures that needs to be distinguished and identified. In this preliminary study, we are trying to describe the pictorial representation of the episode vis-à-vis the Buddhist texts and also to decipher the characters of the event.*

**Keywords:** Gandhara Art, Assassination attempt on Buddha, SRO Peshawar.

### **1. Introduction**

After the devolution of the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, in 2011, the antiquities and other assets preserved in the then Sub-Regional Office (SRO) Peshawar were handed over to the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums (DOAM), Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Besides thousands of coins and other cultural objects, a good number of sculptures<sup>1</sup>, including the panel under discussion, were shifted to the DOAM and is now the property of the Department.

The present relief panel, which was originally part of the SRO collection, is square in shape and is made of schist. It is highly incrustated and gives the impression that it to be of a whitish colour stone. The scene is depicted within a square frame, whereas the top, left and right borders are decorated with straight branches with opposite ovate leaves in low relief and evenly paired. The lower border of the frame is plain. In the top

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these are catalogued and published in Khan (2015), Tahir Saeed and Khan (2016), Khan (2017).

border, a four petal flower is inserted in the middle of the border. The branches are of a tree like *sāla*<sup>2</sup>, the tree which can also be seen in the landscape of the mountain depicted in the panel.



Fig. 1 - DOAM, SRO (No. 2771) Collection (Photo by M. Nasim Khan).

The rocky landscape, where the scene drops, is nicely displayed and is probably without parallel in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra, as far as the theme and its context is concerned. On the high plain base stands a group of five figures. The central one is of the Buddha who stands with the weight of his body on his right leg. He is shown three quarters to the right

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<sup>2</sup> For similar designs see Zwalf 1996: 398, 494 and 518; Ackermann 1975, Pl. XLVII.a). For comparison, see also Ackermann 1975: Pl. XVII.

and his folded right hand rests on his right bared chest while with his left he grabs the folds of his upper garment. He is bare footed and wears a long *uttariya* and a *paridhāna* which hangs above his ankles. He has a round plain halo behind the head.

In his front, the two standing figures are in *añjalimudrā* and are shown with low height compared to the Buddha. The person stands close to him wears the upper and the lower garment and is also barefooted. He has a knot of hair with frontal loop at his cranium. The figure is probably adorned with neck and ear ornaments (?) and has a round halo behind his head. He is followed by another one but is shown with a slim body and is portrayed in profile. His face is unclear and details are missing. Of the two other figures that stand behind the Buddha, the one depicted immediately and close to him is Vajrapāṇi of Heracles type. He has a muscular body, wearing for a short loincloth and the weight of his body rests on his right leg. The palm of his empty right hand is shown frontally oriented. There is a certain object in irregular shape near to his right or he might be holding in his hand. Would it be a flywhisk or a pebble? In the left corner of the panel and close to him, stands a barefooted figure with a halo behind the head. He has long hair and is shown with a hair bun at his cranium. His both hands are folded in *añjali* pose and wears a long robe, but with a bare right shoulder. All these figures stand at the foot or slope of the steep cliff of a mountain.

The topography of the mountain in the background is quite interesting. To accentuate the wildness and to harmonise it with the theme of the story, the figures of two trees, two animals, a bird and two human figures are added to the landscape of the steep rocky cliff of the mountain. In the top right corner an ibex or ram is pushing, with its head, a huge tree which is tilted towards the left to, probably, block the rolling rock which is pushed by a man who stands on the cliff or the ibex action could be the vice versa. Behind him, another tree and an ibex appear. The ibex is with raised front legs, standing left, but head turns backwards and looking at the man standing behind. Apparently the ibex is preparing to force the tree towards the man standing on the cliff and who is trying to hurl the rock. Under the tilted tree, a figure, which probably emerges from the cliff, is trying to impede the rock from falling over the Buddha who stands below, possibly near to the cave (see *infra*). A bird sits inside a crevice of the cliff and is depicted close and below the emerging figure.



Fig.2 - Taxila Museum (After Khan and Lone 2005, no. 35).



Fig.3 - Taxila Museum, from Giri site (Mohatta Palace Museum).

The vista in the background shows two different settings: the steep cliff of a mountain, where a group of five figures stands, and the panoramic view of the precipice with habitats. The landscape, the hustle and bustle in the backdrop and the presence of the Buddha with his companions may suggest parallelism or coherence with the episode related to the

assassination attempt on the Buddha by Devadatta, the abominable<sup>3</sup> and the traitor cousin of the Buddha<sup>4</sup>. Though the landscape, the overall arrangement of the figures and the synchronism of the actions with their characters suggest that all these actors are part of the same story, however, their identity and role in this episode pose a problem.

## **2. Assassination attempt**

We know from the Buddhist texts that Devadatta's hatred of the Buddha was so strong that pushed him trying three times to kill or get killed the Buddha (see *infra*). The assassination attempt on the Buddha by Devadatta and the attack of Mara on Buddha are both illustrated in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra and, in large, their iconographic features are easily recognisable, however, the attack on Buddha in the mount Gridhrakuṭa is practically absent. The few available examples of the episode are compiled and well-studied by Monika Zin (2006, figs. 2 and 3) but these are either fragments from large panels or they do not show enough details to harmonized exactly the illustrated characters with the textual description of the event. In one of these fragmentary evidences (Fig. 2), one can only guess that the big round object holding by a *Yakṣa* is hurled down by Devadatta who is depicted above. In the second panel Jīvaka is believed dressing the wounded foot of the Buddha (Zin 2006: fig. 2) while in the last panel (Zin 2006, fig. 3), the figures are told of the Buddha, Vajrapāṇi, doctor Jīvaka, Ānanda and Yakṣa Kumbhira. Here, in the left side, Buddha is seated on a throne while Jīvaka is dressing the wounded foot hurt by the rock hurled by Devadatta (Zin 2006, fig. 3).

The assassination attempts on Buddha by Devadatta are discussed in some of the Vinaya texts (see *infra*) and which tell that Devadatta had tried three times to kill the Buddha to take leadership and seize control of the Buddhist order. Andrew Bareau has devoted a detailed study on Devadatta's vicious acts and has elaborately discussed them in the light of the Buddhist texts which he has classified under two series of documents (Bareau 1991: 89-90). If we are to believe in the texts, in the present context, we would then depend more on the texts of the first series since they are more elucidative, particularly the texts of the Sarvāstivādin and Mulasarvāstivādin. The texts of this series agree, at least, on two

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<sup>3</sup> Bareau 1991: 119

<sup>4</sup> Foucher 1900, vol. 1: 168.

assassination attempts on the Buddha by Devadatta— first, to let an angry elephant loose on Buddha in the streets of Rājagṛha and, secondly having rolled a large rock on Buddha from the top of Gṛidhrakuṭa. Bareau says,

“Si l’on en croit les textes de la première série des Theravādin, des Sarvāstivādin et des Mulasarvāstivādin, la haine de Devadatta envers le Buddha est si forte qu’elle la pousse à essayer par trois fois de le tuer ou de le faire tuer. Tous s’accordent pour l’accuser d’avoir lancé sur le Bienheureux un éléphant furieux dans les rues de Rājagṛha et d’avoir fait rouler sur lui un gros rocher du haut du Pic des Vautours.” (Bareau 1991: 119).

The texts of the second series do not provide additional information to reflect them in the present study. Both groups of the texts agree that the occurrence takes place near Rājagṛha on the mountain of Gṛidhrakuṭa<sup>5</sup>. In the text of the second series, only the Mahīśāsaka and the Dharmaguptaka narrate the attempt of Devadatta to kill the Buddha, while the texts of Theravādin, Sarvāstivādin and Mulasarvāstivādin remain silent about these three offenses committed by Devadatta. Bareau tells,

“Dans les textes de la second série, ce sont les Mahīśāsaka et les Dharmaguptaka qui racontent les tentatives d’assassinat du Bienheureux par Devadatta au moyen de tueurs à gage et d’un rocher, les Dharmaguptaka ajoutant celle où le criminel se sert d’un éléphant furieux. Au contraire, les Theravādin, les Sarvāstivādin et les Mulasarvāstivādin restent muets sur ces trois crimes dans leurs textes de la second série.” (Bareau 1991: 119).

The following would be the most relevant and important points, in our context, to be retrieved from the texts of the first series are:

***Text Theravādin: Cullavagga*** (P.T.S), vol. II, p. 180-206) (Bareau 1991:89, 93)

- i. To kill the Buddha, Devadatta hurls a rock from top of the peak of Gijjhakūta/Gṛidhrakuṭa under which Buddha meditates;

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<sup>5</sup> The name Gṛidhrakuṭa is mentioned in different Buddhist texts e.g. Vinaya Piṭaka III, 58-59, 159.160 (Horner translation 1963: 98, 274)

- iii. Though the two peaks of the mountain get close to intercept the rock still;
- iii. A shard of it hurts the foot of the Buddha and bleeds;
- iv. The disciples propose to ensure the protection of their master, but he refuses.

***Text Sarvāstivādin*** (T. no. 1435, p. 257a-267a) (Bareau 1991:95-96)

- i. Buddha meditates in the Yakṣa Kimbala cave under the peak of Gijjhakūta/Gṛidhrakuṭa;
- ii. Devadatta and his four friends drop a large rock on him the moment he leaves the cave;
- iii. The Yakṣa grabs the rock and sends it away;
- iv. But a shard of it escapes;
- v. The Buddha desires a teaching and makes a journey all over the world, on earth and in the various heavens, but he is pursued by the pebble.
- vi. The pebble finally joins him and hurts his foot at the precise moment when the Buddha lands in front of the cave.

***Text Mulasarvāstivādin*** (T. no. 1450, p. 99a-206a) (Bareau 1991: 89, 99-100)

- i. Devadatta throws a big rock on Buddha
- ii. The Yakṣa Kimbila/Kumbhīra grabs the rock in flight
- iii. But a fragment of stone hits the Buddha's body
- iv. Kimbila dies soon after and is reborn among the gods of Trāyatṛiṃśas to whom he tells this story. While Buddha tells a Jātaka in praise of the Yakṣa.
- v. Doctor Jīvaka rush to treat him;
- vi. Ānanda obtains from king Ajātaśāstru an extremely rare and necessary remedy medicine in this specific case;
- vii. The medicine turns out to be insufficient, however, and the monks go to look for others, more efficient, even rarer, at the limits of the world.
- viii. The blood having finally stopped flowing from the foot of the blessed One.
- ix. Ajātaśāstru, in large cortege, bow down to the feet of the Buddha.

### 3. Discussion

It would not be very easy to reconcile the textual evidence with the pictorial representation because they do not only differ on this subject, but also, because the whole narration would have been difficult for the artist of Gandhāra to elucidate in a limited space of the panel. Despite this fact, the Gandhāran sculptor has intelligently illustrated important aspects of the episode insisting particularly on expressing the characters' thought, feeling and may be their age (see *infra*). For a reason of complexity of the episode, the artist had to decide which segment of the event was more important for the donor or believers of the Buddhist faith and how far the artist could go to cover it in the pictorial representation.<sup>6</sup>



Fig.4 - British Museum (After Zwalf 1996, no. 213).



Fig. 5 - DOAM, Buddha and Vajrapāni holding a torch or a flywhisk (After Nasim Khan 2010, no. 184).

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<sup>6</sup> The complexity of the Buddhist iconography is that it not only differs from locale to locale but sometime it also does not patch up with the Buddhist relevant texts (on this subject, see Nasim Khan 2016, 2018: 22).





Fig.6 - British Museum, Vajrapāṇi wearing a lion's skin (After Zwalf 1996, no. 293).



Fig.7 - DOAM, Heracles wearing a lion's skin and is carrying a wine cup (?) and a sword (After Nasim Khan 2015, fig. 18).

The identification of most of the figures is, therefore, a complex issue. Except the figure of the Buddha and Vajrapāṇi/Heracles, the rest of the figures could only be recognised either through their iconographic details or due to pure imagination. Buddha, shown tallest than the rest of the figures, stands in the middle. His physiognomy suggests that the Buddha is slender and looking sick, old and tired and is apparently in the final days of his life. Besides his old age, his life seems menaced and intimidated by different serious facts, e.g., the attempts of Devadatta to kill him and the political unrest in the country (Bureau 1966: 24-25). The exhausted Buddha stands with crooked body, his right closed hand is on his right chest, but his thumb up, a gesture of modesty and at the same time a sign of an accomplishment. The condition of his health in this panel reflects and remembers the words of Devadatta who announced to the Buddha

when he was teaching and giving instruction to the monks and in the presence of king Ajātaśāstru,

“Enough, Devadatta, please do not lead the Order of monks.” And a second time...And a third time Devadatta thus spoke to the Lord: “Lord, the lord is now old, worn, stricken in years...It is I who will lead the Order of monks.” (Cullavaga VII, 3.2-3; translation Horn 264)

After this provocative language used by Devadatta<sup>7</sup>, the Buddha said to him,

“I, Devadatta, would not hand over Order of monks even to Sāriputta and Moggallāna. How then I could to you, a wretched one to be vomited like spittle?” (Cullavaga VII, 3.2-3; translation Horn 264)

With a thirst for power and probably in revenge, as he was insulted by the Buddha<sup>8</sup>, Devadatta made several attempts to harm the Buddha and to lead the Community of the monks, but he failed every time<sup>9</sup>.

The figure standing behind the Buddha is Vajrapāṇi/Heracles<sup>10</sup> who is shown standing on his right flexed leg. His muscular body is naked and only wears a loin cloth. His left hand is cupped under the *vajra* (?) while the gesture of his right hand shows that he is lifting a heavy article which looks like a lion skin<sup>11</sup> or it is a pebble he is trying to intercept.

Next to Vajrapāṇi and in the left field stands a figure with hands in *añjali* pose. He is with bowed head and is looking at the ground, a gesture of reverence on one hand and the sign of paying attention to the discussion that is going on between the Buddha and the figures standing before him, on the other. He wears a monastic robe and has long hair which falls on his shoulder. The hair knot at the top of his head is high and round. The

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<sup>7</sup> See also Bareau 1991: 115-117

<sup>8</sup> See Lamotte 1970.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed study see Bareau 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Vajrapāṇi in this form is rarely represented in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra. However, for other forms such as Vajrapāṇi of Hermes type we have more examples; for some of the good instances see Figs. 4, 5 in the present text. On the iconography of Vajrapāṇi/Heracles in Gandhāra art see Flood 1989, I-Tien Hsing and Crowell, W.G. (2005) and Tanabe 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Heracles is generally characterised by a mass and a lion skin (see Figs. 6, 7)

halo behind the head is of the same type as those of other haloed figures. Who this figure represents? Is this god Brahma?<sup>12</sup>

The two haloed figures standing before the Buddha are in *añjalimudrā*. With all devotion, they are with bowed heads and probably observantly listening what the Buddha is saying. The one who stands close to the Buddha has long hair, falling on his shoulder, and a flat hair knot or hair bun with a frontal loop arranged at the top of his cranium. The hair style very much looks like that of Maitreya's hair style (see e.g. Tanabe 2007: Pls. II-9, II-10). He is probably adorned with ornaments such as ear ornaments and neck jewellery. In the absence of a *Kamaṇḍalu*, should one still believe it to be the figure of a Maitreya?

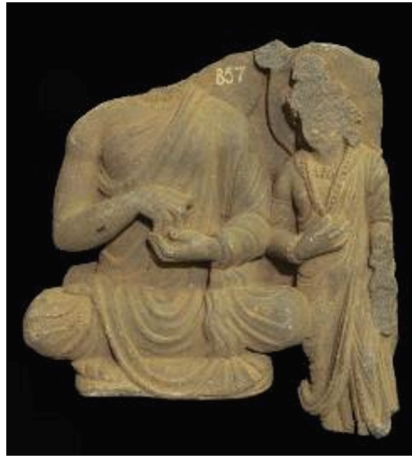


Fig. 8 - Maitreya's compliance  
(Peshawar Museum Accession No. PM: 00669).

The person standing behind is partially damaged and the face is not very clear. The figure is with slim thigh, but comparatively with pronounced hips; it is difficult to establish any idea of its gender. Keeping aside the iconographic issues, assuming that the two figures represent a couple, still

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<sup>12</sup> The image can be compared with the one which appears in the Giri sculpture, Taxila, (Fig. 3). Here, Brahma stands with hands in *añjali* pose while the Buddha meditates inside the cave. On the opposite side, stands Indra. The two flying figures, who are tossing flowers, are probably the *yakṣas* or *gandharavas* who are having the same costume as the one appears in our Fig. 2. The two haloed figures in the upper compartment are *devas* who celebrate the event.

it would be difficult to identify who they represent and what is their role in this episode. Should one guess the figures to be of Ajātaśāstru and his consort Vajira?<sup>13</sup> After a futile assassination attack by Devadatta, Ajātaśāstru, *complice* in this crime, decides to renounce or surrenders (Bareau 1991: 100) and Buddha has to reconcile with him<sup>14</sup>. Bareau says,

“Le long texte des Mūlasarvāstivādin se termine par une courte série d’épisodes relatifs aux relations entre le Bouddha et le roi Ajātaśāstru. Ce dernier va, en grand cortège, se prosterner aux pieds du Bienheureux et lui poses diverses questions sur la doctrine et la morale, mais il n’est fait alors aucune allusion à Devadatta ni à ses crimes.” (Bareau 1991: 100)

If otherwise, putting aside once again the iconographic complexity, one could also think about Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, the two chief disciples of the Buddha who accompanied him during all this episode or they could simply be *devas* with the same characteristics as to be seen in Fig.3. The text Mulasarvāstivādin makes allusion to Ajātaśāstru subjugation before the Buddha.

#### **4. Conclusions**

To compare the descriptions provided in the three texts of the first series (Bareau 1991: 89), the Vinayapiṭaka of Sarvāstivādin and the Vinayapiṭaka of Mulasarvāstivādin are more revealing on the subject than the Theravādin. Apparently, the narrative in the panel has more in common with the text of the Sarvāstivādin. To combine both the texts and the iconography, we may come to the following conclusion. The panel shows a mountain (A.i: Gijjhakuṭa)<sup>15</sup> and the Buddha (A, B, C) who is standing outside the cave (B.vi)<sup>16</sup>. Among the two figures in the mountain, one is probably Devadatta who is trying to drop the rock on the Buddha (A.i, B.ii, C.ii) while Yakṣa Kimbila is attempting to prevent it from falling on him (B.iii, C.ii). Behind the Buddha stands Heracles and

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<sup>13</sup> Representation of a female with a halo seems rare in Gandhāran art. May be, among the few example is the figure of Hariti in the SSAQ Museum, University of Peshawar.

<sup>14</sup> Fussman says, “Dès l’origin, le bouddhisme a ainsi cherché à se concilier les grands de la terre. La légende bouddhique et les *māhātmya* dont les pèlerins chinois nous on conserve la substance transforment en protecteurs du Buddha les rois de l’antiquité (Bimbisāra, Prasenajit et même Ajātaśāstru),...” (Fussman 1994:25)

<sup>15</sup> The sign in bracket refers to the relevant section of the text here referred to.

<sup>16</sup> The cave is not visible but the overall location is depicted in the panel.

probably Brahma. The object close to Vajrapani's right hand could also be the shard detached from the block of stone dropped by Devadatta on the Buddha (B.iv). In his front stands probably Indra or may be Maitreya<sup>17</sup> to whom does Buddha seem to entrust something to exert (see note 18). Or the two figures standings in front of the Buddha may also represent *devas*, or with less probably one of them is Ajātaśāstru (C.ix). To blend iconography with the Buddhist texts, the possibility of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana or Jīvaka (C.v) could not also be ignored.

As far as the role and the reason for the presence of the two animals and the two trees is concerned, we are not quite sure about it. Are they representing the four companions, disguised in animals and plants, of Devadatta? If so, their role would not be to protect the Buddha but to help Devadatta to harm him. Similarly, the role of the small bird, if there was any, in the mount Gijjhakūṭa is hard to understand. May be, her presence is to show that the scene drops at the Gijjhakūṭa. Could the bird in this panel be Gṛidhra?

Although, this carved version of the probable assassination attempt on Buddha by Devadatta seems unique, the proposed identification for certain of the figures is still vague and require further investigation.

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<sup>17</sup> Maitreya seems always carry a pot, directly or indirectly, and is characterized mainly by the flask and his hair bun. In his preaching pose he is generally shown not carrying the pot (see Zwalf 1996: 42), except may be in the case of Peshawar Museum example (PM\_03000). But Maitreya is probably never shown in *añjalimudrā* but, at the most, his right hands is raised in *abhayamudrā* while the left carries the water flask (Zwalf 1996:42). We have a rare example (Fig. 8) where Maitreya stands close to Buddha, touching elbows, with his right hand on his chest, a gesture of compliance, and the other holds the flask.

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