

# **One theme, two sculptures and three possessions. Buddhist relief panels from Gandhāra representing Siddhārtha going to school.**

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## **Abstract**

*Two panels, one was in the Mardan Museum, Pakistan, and the other is presently in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, represent the same theme with the same general iconographic features and they are also identical in shape. The Mardan Museum sculpture remained on display for long time but since then has passed from sight, conversely, photographs of an identical panel have long been preserved in the archives of the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar. This article focuses on the whereabouts of these three objects, their acquisition history in addition to the reason for their iconographic similarities and other related facts such as the question of their authenticity.*

**Keywords:** Gandhara, Mardan Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, Buddhist sculptures, Siddhārtha schooling, private collections.

## **1. Introduction**

Mardan Museum is located in Mardan town in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It was first established in 1991 at the town hall of the city and initially consisted of a single room where Gandhāra artworks were exhibited. Most of these sculptures were transferred to the Museum from the reserve collection of the Peshawar Museum. The Mardan Museum collection was also based on seized materials believed to have been discovered in Gandhāra. In 2009, a museum-specific building was constructed and all antiquities were moved to the new building. One of the sculptures exhibited in the old museum building was a relief panel in schist depicting the episode of Prince Siddhārtha going to school (Fig.). Alike panel is supposedly preserved in a private collection in Peshawar (Fig. 2), hereafter PCP. Both these sculptures are similar in form and contents to the panel preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, hereafter VAMP (Fig. 3). Apart from their form and the episode depicted therein, what other relationship there might have been in the three occurrences is worth

knowing. But, before trying to understand their relationship, it may be necessary to first know the acquisition history of these panels.



Fig.1 - Sculpture in Mardan Museum, KP: Siddhartha riding a chariot (see text for credits).



Fig. 2 – Siddhartha riding a chariot (see text for credits).

## **2. Three possessions: a descriptive study**

The existence of the PCP became known to the author through photographs available in the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar. The panel is apparently not in the possession of the Department, but one may wonder how photographs of this sculpture which is similar to the one that was preserved in the Mardan Museum became part of the archives of the Department of Archaeology. Apparently, and as customary, people from the region, sometimes, bring their archaeological finds to the Department for analysis and identification. Most likely, this object was also brought to the

Department for the stated purposes, somewhere in the 1980s, and which was probably photographed by a staff member of the Department. The digit 19 marked on the sculpture was most probably the initial number which was given to the object by its owner. The same number, marked in the same area and under the shadow of the *śāla* tree, is also observed in the MMP. But, in case of the MMP, the number is repeated and is also added to the front of the pedestal which is not the case in PCP. Regarding the MMP, the information about its existence was first shared with the author by a colleague who at the time worked in the Directorate of Archaeology and Museum, Government of KP.

The MMP shows Prince Siddhārtha accompanied by his fellows and being lured to school in a two-wheeled chariot pulled by two rams and driven by a charioteer. The rams are healthy and meaty and the wheels of the chariot are huge. The Prince's seat is relatively small but at the same time suitable for his age. The front of the pedestal or plinth on which the event takes is decorated with pointed arch-shaped patterns. The sculpture is broken into two pieces but they are being repaired and repositioned. However, traces of the joints are still visible. The image of Siddhārtha, the person standing behind him, one of the rams, including the yoke, and the base are damaged. For this reason, the left side of the head of the person standing behind Siddhārtha is flaked off vertically and is partially missing. Siddhārtha is depicted without a halo and because of this, the left hand of the person standing behind is visible. The physical description and the few iconographic features of the MMP show that the two sculptures, the MMP and PCP, are identical and the photographs produced here (Figure 1, 2) are of the same sculpture taken on two different occasions and may be for two different reasons.

How and when the MMP was acquired? Is it still in the Museum? As already observed the PCP and the MMP are the same. I guess this sculpture was originally part of the collection which was seized by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of KP, in 1990. In the same year, the antiquities were then shifted to the newly established Mardan Museum for display. But, later on, after the court order, the seized antiquities were returned to the owner including, probably, the sculpture in discussion which was already assigned Mardan Museum Registration No. MM 00582.

The episode and the iconography of the VAMP have already been well explained and there is nothing special to add except that this sculpture is similar in style and content to the MMP. Now the question is, are MMP

and VAMP two different sculptures? Except for the damages in the MMP and the missing front leg of one of the rams in VAMP, the shape of both panels, the arrangements of the figures and their general iconography are the same, and at first glance, the photographs appear to be of the same panel. But their detailed iconographic study shows that they are two different sculptures.

The VAMP was discovered in Charsadda in the Peshawar valley (Marshall 1960: 76, fig. 95). The panel is said to have been added to the Museum's collection in 1947/1948 under inventory no. I.S. 51-1948 (Ackermann 1975: 76, pl. XVII). It was originally in the possession of Maj. Gen. H. L. Haughton, then became the property of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. This sculpture was first published by Buchthal in 1945 and stated it was an unidentified scene. Later on, the sculpture was displayed in an exhibition held in the Royal Academy of Arts, London in 1947-1948 (Ashton 1948; Rawlinson 1947-1948: 13, 106). This exhibition was opened to the public on Saturday, November 29, 1947, and closed on Sunday, February 29, 1948. The sculpture was published in a catalogue edited by Professor H.G. Rawlinson with exhibit no.106 but without a photograph of the object. In a note, the sculpture is mentioned "a chariot" of the Lesser Vehicle based on Chinese sources and examples and is dated to 2nd-4th century A.D. It was published in another catalogue of the same exhibition but, edited by L. Ashton, which appeared in 1948 (Ashton 1948: pl.19 (111)).

In the introductory note by Rawlinson (1947-1948) and Ashton (1948), it is believed to have been found in Gandhāra but with exact provenance unknown. Ashton introduced the panel as "Buddha in goat-cart, symbol of the Lesser Vehicle (Hīnayāna)". The sculpture was later published by Hargreaves (1951) who identified the scene "Siddhartha is going to school". It was then published by Marshall (1960: 75, fig.95) and Veronica Ions 1967 (Ions 1967: 132) and later by some other scholars e.g. by Hallade (1968-1975: 129, Abb.8). But a more detailed iconographic study has been published in the Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue appeared in 1975 (Ackerman 1975: pl. XVII). When and how it came in the possession of the Victoria and Albert Museum? It was probably acquired at the exhibition in 1947/48 since Ashton has mentioned this in the exhibition catalogue saying that it is now in the possession of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Ashton 1948: pl. 19 (111)).



Figure 3. Sculpture in the V&A Museum, London  
(After Marshall 1960: fig.95)

### **3. Discussion and conclusions**

What relationship does the VAMP have with MMP? If there was any, one may need to understand. To have a general look at the photographs, the first impression one might get is that they are of the same sculpture. But analysing them closely, one may also reach a different conclusion.



Fig. 4 - Aphrodite and Eros, grey steatite (10 cm),  
Islamabad Museum (Photo by the Author).

The base of the VAMP is plain while the MMP features arch-shaped patterns. In the MMP Siddhārtha is without a halo but in VAMP the halo is depicted. The charioteer is shown somehow frontally while in the MMP it is turned 3/4 to his right. His right arm is also flaked off in the VAMP. The person standing to the right of Siddhārtha in the MMP is shown frontally. While in the VAMP, the head of the same person is turned to his left and looks towards Siddhārtha. The hair is also not of the same style. The form of the knot of the garment on the shoulder of the same person is in a heart-shaped design while in the MMP it is not present. The difference in the

iconography of the four persons standing in the background in the two panels is also evident. The person standing on the right is bald except for the mesh on his cranium in the VAMP but it is not the case in the MMP. However, in the MMP the person is probably adorned with neck jewellery which is identical to that worn by the female figure (?) who stands before the rams. Both persons do not wear neck jewellery in the VAMP. In the MMP, the central figure, among the last three persons in the background, holds a pointed writing board which is not the case in VAMP where all are rectangular. In the MMP, the figures are probably sleeveless while the second last person in the background, and to the left, has his arm covered with his robe/garment. In VAMP, the tree is shown as more stylised.

To conclude, the group of these objects represents two sculptures, which are in two different places, but both depict the same theme. Is the MMP a fake or a copy of the VAMP? Circumstantial evidence suggests that it may be a fake sculpture and could be a modern copy of the VAMP. While this may be the case, the MMP still requires physical study and analysis of its material, as drawing conclusions from the photographs would be a bit risky. The PC/MMP/VAMP is not the only exception of travelling or escaping of Gandhāran objects from one place to another with false sources and identifications but there are several examples of such cases, cloaked in one or another form, throughout the world. Few years back, a group of objects from Gandhāra which probably first travel to Japan and then reached to USA, is returned to Pakistan some of which are in display in the Islamabad Museum (e.g. Fig. 4). Presumably, some of these objects are included in an article which is published few years back (Kurita 2014); one of these (Kurita 2014: pl. 28, fig. 22 and pl. 27, fig. 19) is on display in the Islamabad Museum (see Fig. 4).

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