

The Divine Bath of Śākyamuni Represented in Gandhara Sculpture

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Introduction

The narrative sculpture of Gandhāra is a beautiful and effective communicative tool or better to say an effective expression language which narrates the prodigious life story of the Buddha Śākyamuni. This artistic language of Gandhāra Sculptures is so complete and interesting that it not only satisfies the aesthetic sense but through it can also be imagined the mythology and philosophy of Hinduism and Buddhism.

The following is the description of one of the events from the life of Buddha Śākyamuni which not only relates an event of his life but through the symbolism and style one can also observe the social, religious and economic environment of the region of Gandhāra in particular and India in general. The event has been divided in three main sections in this work: Firstly, the story has been presented as mentioned by Buddhist texts or other writers; secondly, some stone sculptured examples have been included which narrates the event; lastly, the hidden symbolic meanings have been discussed. In conclusion, importance of the sculptured narrative examples has been established as an effective expression language.

The Story related in the text

Buddhist texts and narrative sculptures indicate as if the prodigious life events continue to happen right from the conception and birth of the future Buddha. A prodigious event that occurred immediately after his birth was his divine bath.

Foucher relates the two events in the following words:

“The Bodhisattva rapidly left the hands that received him and we soon find him with a parasol and fly whisk over his head, both emblems of royalty, standing on a lotus that miraculously emerged from the earth to protect him from a coarser contact. We are puzzled to find that our sources give two immediate activities. One is the usual bath and the other “the seven steps” which the infant Buddha is said to have taken “right after birth”. We must not forget that he knew both how to walk and how to talk spontaneously. The Gandhara School showed the latter to be first, while later steles from the Ganges Valley combined, as best they could, the two episodes in the same framework” (Foucher 2003: 34).

The Buddhist text, Introduction to *Jātaka*, relates the bath in the following words:

“Now other mortals on issuing from the maternal womb are smeared with disagreeable, impure matter; but not so for the Future Buddha. He issued from his mother’s womb like a preacher descending from his preaching-seat, or a man coming down a stair, stretching out both hands and both feet, unsmeared by any impurity from his mother’s womb, and flashing pure and spotless, like a jewel thrown upon a vesture of Benares cloth. Notwithstanding this, for the sake of honouring the Future Buddha and his mother, there came two streams of water from the sky, and refreshed the Future Buddha and his mother” (Warren 1986: 46).

Aśvaghosha relates the bath of the Future Buddha in the following words:

“Two streams of water, clear as the rays of the moon and having the virtue, one of heat, one of cold, poured forth from the sky and fell on his gracious head to give his body refreshment by their contact” (Aśvaghosha 1936: 5).

According to Foucher: "Connecting the bath, tradition is most shaky and there are many variants in the accounts, even though the perfect purity of the Bodhisattva should have made it a simple formality. On one point the texts are curiously in accord: both cold and hot water were used. Sometimes it was from the earth that two springs emerged and filled two tubes in which the child was bathed "like a golden statue". At other times the water seemed to fall from heaven like rain. Someone invented something even better. In accordance with an old belief, widely found in India and still prevalent in Kashmir, water spirits, called nāgas, which haunt springs and ponds, came forth on this auspicious occasion. Two of the most famous ones, Nanda and his younger brother Upananda, are shown as half human and half serpent, naked to the waist, and directing a double jet of water upon the Bodhisattva" (Foucher 2003: 34). "Naturally the sculptured monuments reflect the variations of the texts. At Mthurā the two nāgas come halfway out of the earth, while on the Benares stele they pour the contents of two round jars on the head of the Bodhisattva, which is the Indian way of anointing kings as well as of bathing children. In Gandhara the two usual assistants, Indra and Brahmā, are responsible for this function as well as for that of carrying the white parasol and fly whisk that accompany the walk of the Predestined One" (Ibid: 34-35).

Besides different views in the text regarding the bath of Śākyamuni we have beautiful examples in the art. In the older Indian art, when Buddha was not represented anthropomorphically, this scene was depicted in a way which is not as a whole only symbolic. To represent the bath scene, instead of Śākyamuni his mother Māyā was represented and instead of Śākra/Indra and Brahmā, who were responsible for the bath ritual in Gandhāra, the ritual was performed by two celestial elephants. Beside an example from Gandhāra, an example from an older Indian school is presented so that the evolution of art and thought can be understood in a better way.

The following example has been taken from the Great Stūpa at Sāñchī which present us an example from the beginning of the Buddhist art. In this example Māyā is sitting on a lotus receiving a prodigious bath performed by two celestial elephants. It is said that the celestial water not only refreshed the new born prince but also his mother. As we know in the earliest school Buddha was never represented but there were other important characters of the story on whose representation there was not any prohibition. Thus Māyā not only represents her own bath but at the same time indicates the bath of the prince. Her sitting on the lotus flower and getting bath is also a symbolic representation of fertility and thus the birth of the Bodhisattva Śākyamuni.

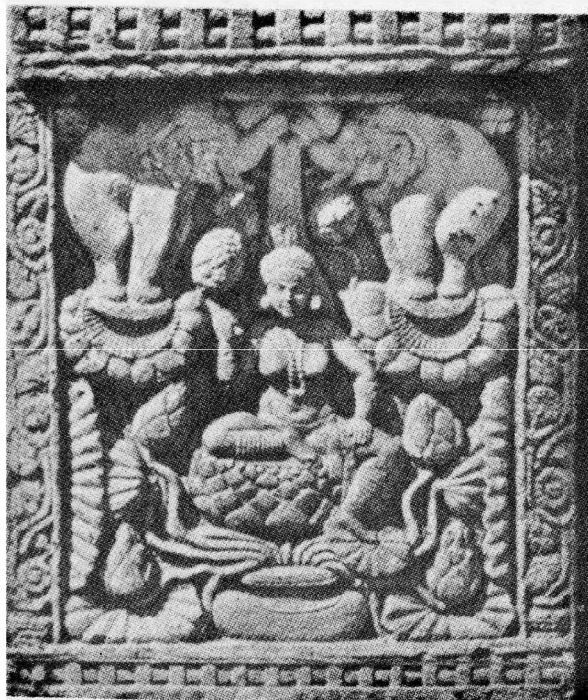


Figure 1: Queen Māyā on a lotus, The symbolic divine Birth and Bath of the future Buddha.
On the Eastern Gateway of the Great Stūpa at Sāñchī (Marshal 1980, Fig.No. 3, Plate 3).

The following example is from Gandhāra where the thought had achieved a level where there was no more prohibition in art on the anthropomorphic representation of the *Bodhisattva* or the Buddha. The responsibility of the bath ritual here is performed by the two great gods Śākra and Brahmā while there are present human attendants to assist the prince.



Figure 2: Bath Scene, an example from the sculpture of Gandhāra.

Representation of the event in Gandhāra Sculpture

Fig. 3 is an example of the bath scene in which the bath scene has been represented together with the scenes of return to Kapilavāstu on the left while in the upper portion of the panel heavenly world have been represented with the heavenly beings standing in different positions as if celebrating the occasion. In the bath scene on the lower right the prince is standing on a stool. Two female attendants are assisting the prince while two individuals, most probably Śākra and Brahma, are pouring water over him. Two other gods are present one behind Śākra and the other behind Brahmā. A parasol has been represented over the prince to symbolise his regal status.

Fig. No. 4 presents us another example which represents the prodigious bath of the *Bodhisattva*. The prince is shown standing on an animal legged shape stool. They are probably representing the legs of a lion. In this scene two maidens are shown holding the new born while the two gods Śākra with the *vajra* in his left hand and water vessel in the right and Brahma holding the water vessel in his right hand, are pouring water on the head of the *Bodhisattva*. The water vessels and the arms of the two gods are damaged. The prince has been represented with an *ushnīsha* and halo which is damaged and he is wearing anklets which mean that the noble families used to put ornaments to their children. On many occasions the human and heavenly beings are present to assist the happenings of the life of the prince and the two female attendants holding the prince might be the companions of the gods from the heavenly world.

In fig. 5, the prince is standing on a tri-legged stool and is supported by two female attendants. Behind them on the right is Śākra with his *vajra* and on the left is Brahmā and they both hold water flasks in their right hands pouring water. The figures on both ends with their hands joined in prayer are other deities.

Fig. 6 is damaged and only the individuals of the left side can be seen. The left side female attendant is supporting the prince while one of the two gods, probably Brahma, is pouring water. From the right side the supporting hand of the female attendant and Śākra's hand pouring water can be seen. The prince is standing on a stool with animal shaped legs. The prince is represented with a halo and *ushnīsha*. The halo seems to continue downward arriving till the ground with carved lines thus representing either a luminous body or the water poured over him.

Fig. 7 depicts the bath scene with only male figures and all seems to be the gods from two different heavens. On the left of the prince is Śākra pouring water with his right hand and with his left hand holding his *vajra*. Behind him is another deity whose similarity suggests that he might be his fellow of the heaven of thirty three gods (Trayastrimsa heaven). On the right of the prince is depicted a bearded Brahmā as an ascetic pouring water on him. Behind him is depicted another deity again with a beard and his similarity suggest as if he is a fellow of the heaven of the Brahmā gods. There is also depicted parasol over the head of the prince which suggests his dignity.

Fig. 8 represents the prince on the stool flanked by Śākra and Brahma pouring water. On the left of the prince is Śākra with his *vajra* with a kingly robe while on the right is Brahmā as a Brahmana ascetic. Over the prince is depicted a parasol in the shape of a multi headed *nāga*. This could be an influence from an art which followed the text saying that the prince was bathed with the water poured by two *nāga* kings, nanda and upananda. According to the Buddhist scripture such as *Lalitavistara*, supposedly lotus flowers are used instead of a stool but in Gandhāra almost always the stool is depicted instead of any flower. But in this representation the stool is represented in a shape which suggests the shape of a flower represented upside down.

Fig. 9 includes two scenes. On the right, in the bath scene, the two female attendants are holding the prince from his hands to support him while the two gods are pouring water for the bath. On the left the scene of return to Kapilavāstu had been depicted.

Fig. 10 represents the prince standing on a stool supported by two kneeling female attendants while two other female attendants are standing on both the ends. The attendant on the right is holding a small pot which might symbolise bathing. A *nāga* hood has been depicted over the prince, which suggests that the bath was performed by the cosmic serpent, *nāga*. One of the female attendants on the left end of the prince is holding a peacock feather or a palm leaf who seems to be the same attendant who is almost always depicted beside Prajāpati (the sister of Māyā) at the time of the birth of the prince.

In fig. 11 the scene on the left is another typical example of the bath scene. The two female attendants are supporting the prince while the two gods, Śakra and Brahmā, are pouring water to bath him. On the right is the scene of the prodigious birth.

Fig. 12 represents the prince with a bald head like a monk but with a halo. He is flanked by the two gods, Śakra and Brahmā, pouring water. The prince is supported by two female maidens. There are also two other heavenly beings represented in the scene. One is represented behind the one female maiden on the right while the other behind the maiden on the left.

Iconographic Symbolism of the Event

The Bath

The narrators and later the writers on the one hand and the artists on the other made use freely of their imagination to elevate the future Buddha to a level which could not be matched but they, being part of a temporal society were not able to eliminate many happenings in the life span of a human. For example they could not ignore the importance of the bath of a child and so of the future Buddha after birth but in this case they attached prodigy to it. In the text one will find different versions regarding the bath of the great being. Some will say that there were two streams of water which appeared miraculously and poured water on him. Other will say that Brahmā and Śakra/Indra poured water over him which had miraculously appeared. Others will say that the two celestial great *nāga* brother kings poured water over him to perform the ritual of his bath.

In Gandhāra sculpture we see almost always the water pots in the hands of Śakra/Indra and Brahmā who are pouring water over him while they are assisted by two females who could either be human or heavenly maidens. But sometimes there is also depicted a *nāga* hood to symbolise the presence of the *nāga-s* and thus conform the sculpture with the text which give credit for the bath to the *nāga-s*.

The episode of the bath of Śākyamuni brings to one's mind the importance of the bath in the Indian religions. When bath is taken in a proper spiritual way it becomes very important because the waters, for example that of river Ganges, are said to have descended from the heaven and thus it provides an opportunity to the humans to purify themselves with the heavenly waters. Thus a bath on any stage of the life if taken in a specific way is the instrument of purification.

For the future Buddha it was not necessary to be purified because it is mentioned in the Buddhist text that he was beyond any kind of impurity even inside the body of his mother. But the rite was too important to be performed.

Two Streams of Water

The idea of the two streams of water might have arrived from the fact that: 1) there were present two gods who were expected to perform the rite together and thus the two streams were necessary. 2) In the other case there again were two *nāga* kings who were also representatives of the power over waters as they lived in or better to say possessed the lakes and ponds.

As the idea was set that there were two streams of water it was felt necessary to mention that one of them was of hot water while the other of cold water. Thus it also symbolise the honour of a regal or noble treatment.

Triad in Gandhāra Sculpture

The bath scene presents a very interesting representation in Gandhāra sculpture. The presence of Śākra/Indra on the one side and Brahmā on the other side of the *Bodhisattva*, with the *Bodhisattva* in the centre, makes an interesting triad. As we have already mentioned that Brahmā is considered the representation of knowledge while Śākra as the representation of action, energy or power and the *Bodhisattva* treated by both of them indicates as if the *Bodhisattva* was destined to achieve the power or ability of both of them. The *Bodhisattva* was the centre of the triad and thus of more importance than them both.

Later on, when the *Bodhisattva* Śākyamuni had already attained the supreme knowledge he established the order of monks and after his *mahā-parinirvāna* one of the symbols which represented him was a trident or the representation of three which included himself as the centre and *dharma* (the doctrine) on his one side while the *sāṅgha* (order) on his other.

Later on, when the philosophy of the school of Mahāyāna had already established the *Bodhisattva*-s were elevated to the highest level and thus the Buddha was started representing flanked by two *Bodhisattva*-s, Maitreya and Avalokiteśvara, instead of the two Brahman gods to continue representing the triad.

In conclusion we can say that the narrative sculpture of Gandhāra has shown itself to be an effective tool to communicate the mythical, philosophical, social and religious condition of the Hindu-Buddhist society of Gandhāra in particular and India in general.



Figure 3: Bath of Bodhisattva Śākyamuni, (On the left Śākyamuni in his mother's lap? and above heavenly beings in the heaven), Dark Grey Schist, H. 23.5 cm, W. 49.8 cm, D. 5.9 cm, From Kāfir-kot, The British Museum, (Zwalf, W., *A Catalogue of the Gandhāra Sculpture in the British Museum*, London, The British Museum Press, 1996, Fig. No. 152)



Figure 4: Bath of Bodhisattva Śākyamuni, light grey Schist, H. 12.5 cm, W. 23.2 cm, D. 4.9 cm, From Buner–Yusufzai border, The British Museum, (Zwalf, W., *A Catalogue*, 1996, Fig. No. 153)



Figure 5: Bath of Bodhisattva Śākyamuni, Stone, Provenance Unknown, Museum of Indian Art, Berlin, (Photo by the author)



Figure 6: Bath of Śākyamuni, Green Schist, H. 17 cm, Possibly from Swat, Private Collection Japan, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhāra Art*, English/Japanese Edition, Tokyo, Nigensha Publishing Co., 2003, Fig. No. 54)



Figure 7: Bath of Śākyamuni, Green Schist, H. 13 cm, W. 22 cm, From Bajaur, Private Collection Japan, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhāra Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 55)



Figure 8: Bath of Śākyamuni, Grey Schist, H. 13 cm, W. 28 cm, Provenance Unknown, Peshawar Museum, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 56)

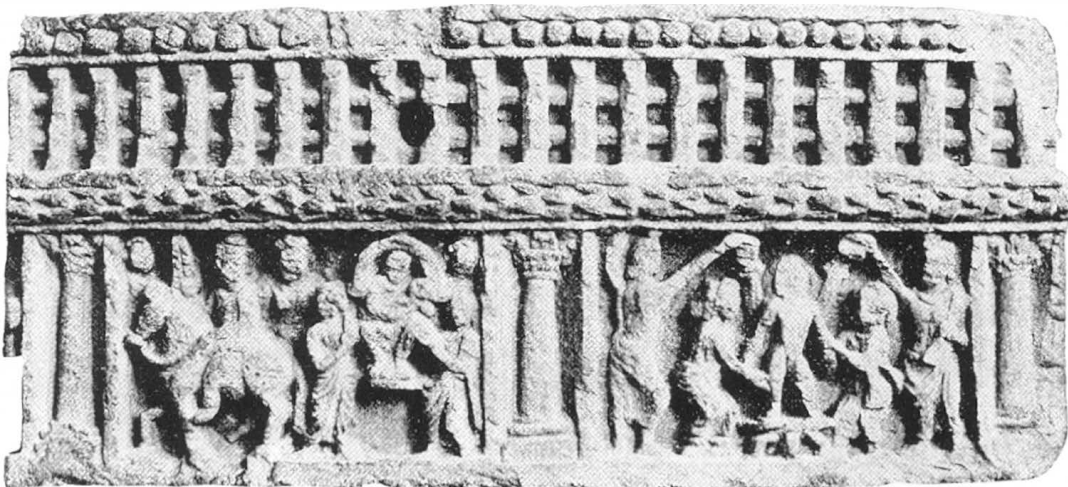


Figure 9: Bath of Śākyamuni, and (return to Kapilavastu), Grey Schist, H. 15 cm, from Jamal Garhi, Lahore Museum, No. 807, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 57)



Figure 10: Bath of Śākyamuni, Grey Schist, H. 16cm, W. 16cm, Provenance Unknown, Private Collection Japan, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 596)



Figure 11: On the right Birth of Śākyamuni and on the left Bath of Śākyamuni by Indra and Brahma, Schist Stone, H. 10 cm, Provenance Unknown, Collection of Marteau, Bruxelles, (Bussagli, M., *L'arte del Gandhara*, Torino, UTET, 1984, p.193)



Figure 12: Bath of Śākyamuni, Green Schist, H. 25 cm, W. 39 cm, Mardan Group, Peshawar Museum No. 2071, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. PI-VII)

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