

## Relief Panel Depicting Buddha Protected by Naga Muchilinda

Nidaullah Sehrai and Alia Jawad

**Abstract:** After enlightenment, Buddha is said to have been protected from severe flood and storm by Nāga Muchilinda, near Bodh Gaya. Nāgas are spirits of rivers and ponds. The event is depicted on Sanchi stupa where Nāga is depicted in human form with hoods behind head of Buddha under a tree symbolic representation of Buddha. At Amaravati Buddha footprints are depicted upon coiled and scaly body of a snake. The same scene is also depicted at Gaya in which Buddha is seated on the coiled body of Nāga. In Gandhāra, the Buddha is coiled by the Nāga and its seven hoods are protecting him from rain. The concept of representation is more protective as compared to the other.

In Gandhāra when Nāgas are in physical and verbal contact with Buddha are represented as a snake. But when paying homage to Buddha they are shown in human form with hood emerging behind the head. The concept of Nāgas in human form is perhaps to convey the idea of submission or adoration to the worshipper which is a human quality and not of snakes/serpents or the ancient belief found in the Indo-Pak sub-continent that the snakes have the power to transform themselves into human beings.

**Keywords:** Gandhāra, Muchilinda, Muchalinda, Nāga, Buddha

After enlightenment Buddha remained for four weeks by the Bodhi tree. During the fifth week the whole area was badly inundated by severe floods. Buddha was protected from the flood by a divine serpent Muchilinda who coiled around him and made a canopy with his seven hoods to protect the newly Gautama Buddha from severe storm and rain. Finally the god Indra and Brahama entreated him to preach the Dharma to the common man.

According to the Buddhist text, the event took place near Bodh Gaya. It is further confirmed by the visit of the Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsang to the pool near Bodh Gaya where lived the Naga king Muchilinda (Grousset 1971:157).

Water and aquatic creatures i.e. the Nagarajas (snake Kings) played an important role in early Buddhism. They were considered as spirits of rivers and fountains and therefore were worshiped and widely depicted in the early Indian Buddhist Art. While in Central Asia they played the role of guardians. The best example in earliest Buddhist art are the images of Shakyamuni seated

on the coils of Naga king Muchalinda protected by his hoods (Fisher 1996: 23). The story of Naga Muchilinda is depicted on the southern gateway of Sanchi Stupa-I (Plate-I), which is partly broken and same copy is repeated on the western gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi (Plate-II). The scripture varies the order and duration of the events. After enlightenment, Buddha spent one week with the Naga Muchilinda and the other one in the shade of *ficus indica* tree which was planted by a goatherd for this purpose. Both events are combined in the reliefs of Sanchi. At Sanchi the panel depicts the visit of the Naga king Muchilinda to the Buddha soon after his illumination. The Naga king is seated in the foreground in human form with hoods behind his head. Two of his queens are on his right and a ballet troupe of dancers and musicians making up the rest of the Naga group. In the background, behind Muchilinda, is the throne of the Buddha with a symbolic representation of Buddha in the shade of *anyagrodha* tree, which is attended by two *kinnaras* and two female celestials riding, respectively, on a winged lion and a griffin.

Legend tells us that it was in the shade of *anyagrodha* (*ficus indica*) tree that the Buddha rested in the fourth or fifth week after his illumination, the artist has tried his best to the particular species of fig tree, in contradistinction to the *asvattha* or *ficus religiosa* ordinarily associated with the illumination (Marshall 1973: 14 & Foucher 208).

The story of Naga Muchilinda is also depicted at Amaravati in which Buddha is depicted symbolically and in human form. The symbolical representation is on the face of the *ayaka* platform. Five nagas (snakes) are worshipping the footprints of the Buddha which are resting on the coiled and scaly body of a snake with female worshippers below. Behind the foot prints is the body of Naga in human form with hoods behind his head while the hands are in the *anjalinudra*. (Barrett 1954:7). The other depiction is on a late form of drum slab in which Buddha is carved in human form. In the entrance of the gateway the scene is depicted in which Buddha is seated on coiled body of multi headed naga, Mucilinda his hoods are protecting him from the rain and storm and his hand is raised in *abhayamudra*. On either side is a *chowri* bearers and in front are two pairs of ecstatic worshipping women (Knox 1992:132-135). The way the scene is depicted on the late form of drum slab at Amaravati the same pattern of depiction is also found at the site of Gaya in which Buddhha is seated on the coiled body of Naga and its seven hoods behind his head protecting him from storm and rain. To the right is the Naga having seven hoods at the back of the head and the snake body forming coiled seat for Buddha emerges from the right leg. While his consort is also depicted in the same manner but the snake body emerges from the left leg. (NHK plate No. 71:133) In another scene a five hooded naga is (NHK Plate No.72:133) protecting the Buddha from rain and storm.

Very few pieces of the story exist in the art of Gandhara. One relief of the same from the life of

the Buddha is in the Victoria and Albert Museum London, UK. It is one of the best examples its right side is well preserved. Seated Buddha is protected by the Naga Muchilinda against a rain which lasted for seven days. The Naga coiled around the body of Buddha seven times. The seven hoods are forming a canopy over the head of Buddha. According to Ackermann on both sides more Nagas have risen in order to protect the Buddha from the winds. The head of the Buddha emerges from the coils of Muchilinda's body. On the left another scenes shows a monk, with left hand raised under his garment, turns slightly to the left. Behind his head appears a three ribbed rectangular object with a human head probably separating the scene from another one, and in the background some engraved lines are probably meant to indicate the falling drops of rain water. On the upper left border of the work one can still recognize an element of a door frame from which a head adorned with an *usnisa* looks out to the right (Plate No. III) (Ackermann 1975:79).

The author has misjudged the stylized plants to depict the jungle on either sides of Buddha as a *Naga*. It is quite clear that the heads of the serpents are missing which can be clearly seen in the seven heads Naga Muchilinda. The stylized tree might be representing the *ficus Indica* the way both the episodes depicted in the relief panels of Sanchi Great Stupa western and southern Gateway or *Torana*.

Another most important sculpture is in the Kurita's Collection in which the *Naga Muchilinda* has wrapped his own body around the Buddha and his seven hoods or heads are protecting the Buddha from the rain and storm. On both sides are two other *Nagas* with a hood on top of their head the right one is probably a *Nagani* and on the left is a *Naga* both are in the pose of adoration or *Anjalimudra*. From the stylistic point of view probably the panel belongs

to the Swat Valley (Plates No. IV-V)<sup>1</sup>.

The relief panel in the recently shifted collection of former SRO (Sub Regional Office Peshawar) of the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan is bearing two numbers SRO-30 and the Old No. 115 is about 18x12cm in size and is carved out of grey schist. The panel is carved in a simple manner. Buddha is flanked by two figures on either side and is coiled by the *Naga Muchilinda*. His seven hoods are forming a canopy above his head and his halo is marked beneath by an incised line. However the face of Buddha is badly damaged. The right side hoods are broken. To his right is a female figure in *anjālimudra* probably the *Nagani* or wife of Muchilinda and behind her is another figure in same pose. To his left is another figure in the same pose but the figure behind him is badly damaged. The cornice is decorated with saw teeth decoration. The schist utilized for the panel most probably belongs to the Peshawar Valley (plates No. VI-VIII).

If compared to the Kurita collection in which a figure in *anjālimudra* is kneeling with *naga* hoods on either side of the Buddha. The same type of arrangement is very common in the panels of Gandhara in which a meditating or reassuring Buddha is flanked by a single or more devotees on either side.

In the Victoria and Albert Museum panel the event depicts the naga coiled around the Buddha in the forest however the identification of the other two figures to the left cannot be clearly ascertained. The panel in reserve collection of Directorate of Archaeology and Museum,

Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Kurita collection is depicting the Naga Muchilinda coiled around the Buddha and the Naga and his consort is also depicted in human form.

From the stylistic point of view the story narrated in Gandhara is more simple in which the naga is coiled around the body of the Buddha while in the above mentioned sites i.e. Sanchi, Amravati and Gaya the Naga and his retinue are depicted in human forms with more emphasis on the body details and arrangement of the episode. The depiction of five and seven hood Nagas is a very common theme in the Sri Lankan stupas of Anuradhapura.

The three panels discussed above shows more protective concept because he is surrounded by the Nāga and the hoods are forming a canopy above the Buddha. The concept of story is conveyed in a more simple and direct manner. In the art of Gandhāra when the Nāgas are in physical or verbal contact with Buddha. They are represented as snakes in art. But when showing adoration to Buddha are represented in human form with clasped hands / *anjālimudra*. The reason is that the concept of adoration can be only conveyed in human form as in the case of Peshawar Museum Panels depicting “Hymns of Nāga Kalika” (Ingolt 1957, Pls. 57-58) “Buddha in Fire Temple of Uruvilva” (Ingolt 1957, Pl. 84) and “Victory over the black serpent at Rājagriha” in Lahore Museum (Ingolt 1957, Pl. 92)”. The other reason is that in Indo-Pak sub-continent there is common perception that the snakes/serpents have the powers to transform themselves into human beings. Therefore, the Nāgarajas are represented in human form.

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from Isao Kurita's collection <http://1.bp.blogspot.com>

## References

- Ackermann, H. C. (1975). *Narrative Stone Reliefs from Gandhara in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London Catalogue and Attempt at a Stylistic History*, IsMEO, Rome.
- Barret, Douglas (1954). *Sculptures from Amaravati in the British Museum*, London, Trustees of the British Museum.
- Fisher, Robert E. (1996). *Buddhist Art and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, Ltd, London.
- Grousset, R. (1971). *In the footsteps of the Buddha*, New York.
- Ingholt, H. (1957). *Gandhara Art in Pakistan*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Knox, R. (1992). *Amaravati Buddhist Sculptures from the Great Stupa*, London, Trustees of the British Museum.
- Marshall, J & Foucher, A. (n.d.). *The Monuments of Sanchi*, Vol. One Text, The Government of India Press, 8 Hasting Street, Calcutta.
- Marshall, J. (1973). 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara*, Karachi.
- NHK, The Life of Buddha and His Legend (In Japanese with brief English details) (<http://gandharan-archives.blogspot.com/search/label/2-The%20Buddha%20protected%20by%20Muchilinda>)

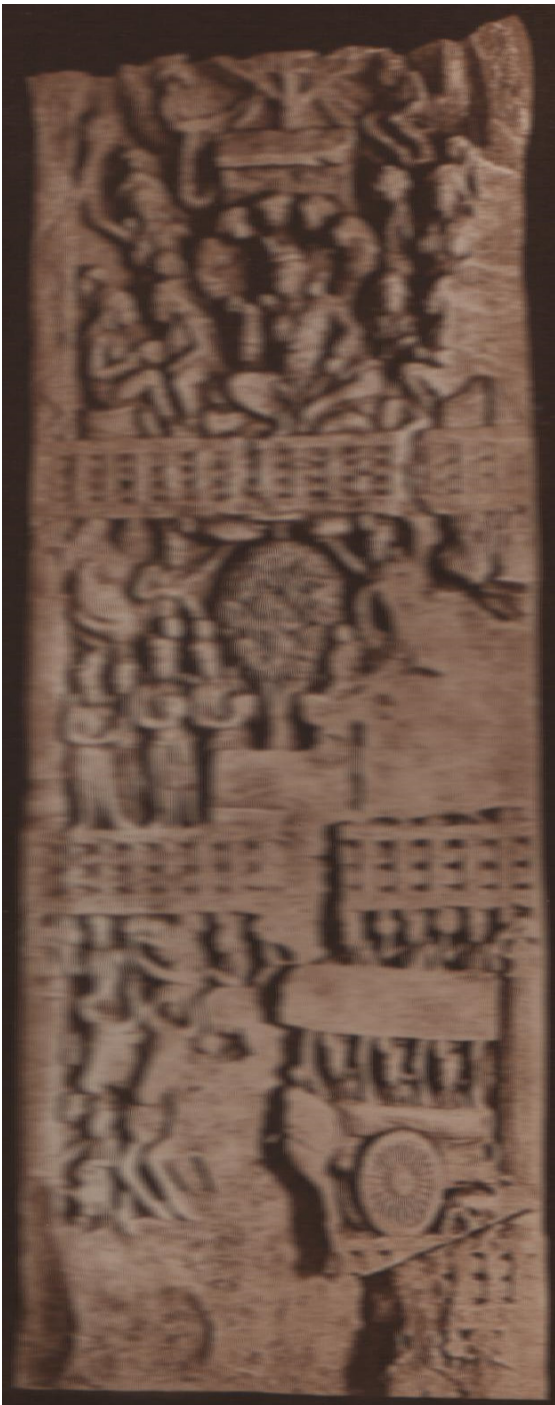


Plate-I: Naga Muchilinda Scene from the Southern Gateway Pillar of Sanchi Stupa I

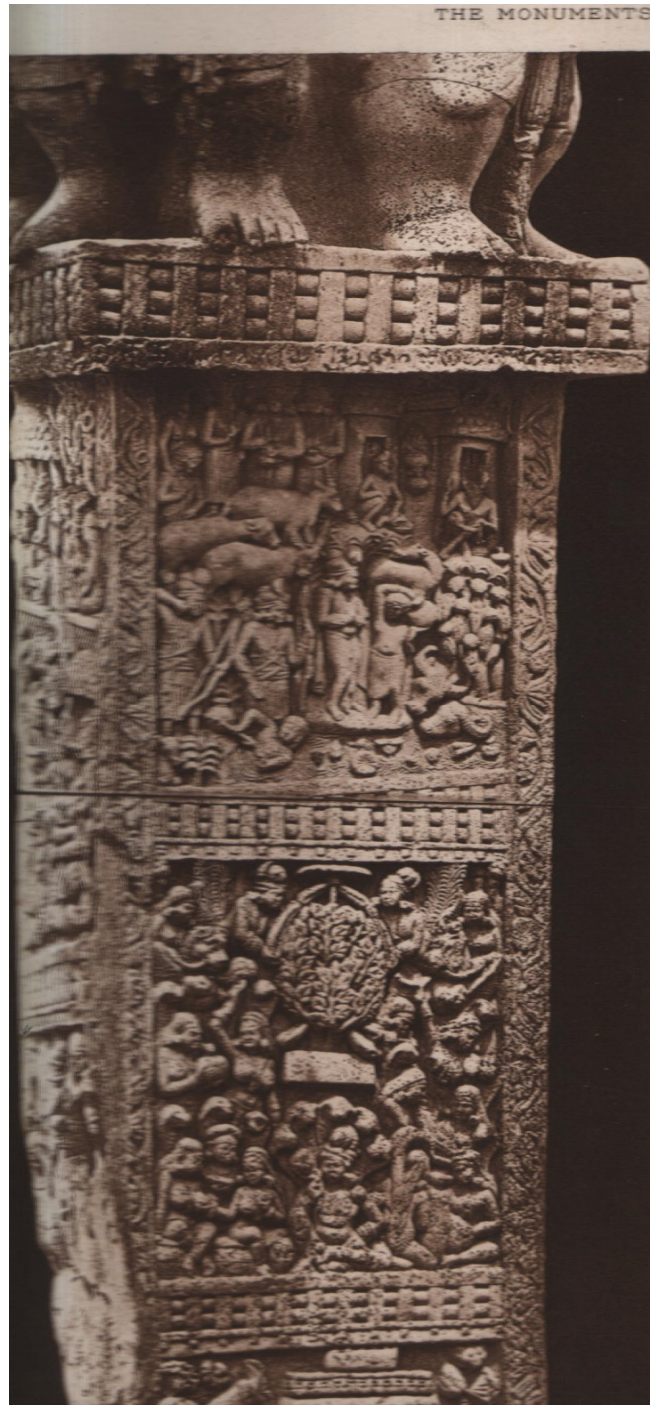


Plate II: Western Gateway pillar of Sanchi Stupa I





Plate-III: Relief Panel of Naga Muchilinda in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
(Inventory No. I.S. 179-1949)



Plate IV: Kurita Collection



Plate V Buddha wrapped by Naga Muchilinda flanked by a kneeling Naga and Nagani Detail of Kurita Collection



Plate-VI Relief Panel of Naga Muchilinda in the Reserve Collection of DOAM





Plate-VII Details of Buddha Head and covered by seven Naga hoods



Plate VIII Details of Naga Muchilinda coiled around Buddha