

## **Amalgamation of Hellenistic and Indian Elements in the Frieze of the Buddha and the Nude *Vajrapani* of Kushan Art at Jamal Garhi**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Gandhara school of art is distinct from other schools of art developed in ancient India around the 1st century BCE to 3rd century CE, during the time of Kushan dynasty. Prevalent archaeological evidence unearthed at the sites of Gandhara reveals many art depicting the Lord Gautama Buddha and scenes related to the life of the Buddha. Jamal Garhi is one of the Gandharan sites which was initially excavated by the British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham. One of the reliefs illustrates the depiction of Vajrapani as the protector of the Buddha. Particular relief has not been analyzed to examine the fusion of cultures, yet it can be taken as a fine example. The significance of the selected relief is the illustration of Vajrapani, modeled after the Greek deity Hercules, who is depicted in full scale nude and turning backwards. None of the Gandharan art known hitherto has depicted Vajrapani in the particular manner and the Buddha without any Buddha mudra. The selected relief will be analyzed focusing on the mix of Hellenistic and Indian elements. Examples from Greek art will be analyzed in order to discuss how the Gandharan artist has amalgamated both the Indian and Hellenistic values, to present the stories related to the Buddha in the service of the Buddhist devotees. Further, it is evident that the artist is probably a foreigner who works in the service of Buddhism. The Hellenistic elements which can be seen in the relief supports the assumption that the artists should be a Greek or was influenced by Greek values. Further, it is evident that the artist is not aware of the Buddhist manner of depicting the Enlightened One.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Gandharan art, Kushan dynasty, Lord Buddha, Vajrapani, Cultural amalgamation*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Gandharan school of art can be recognized as an Indian school of art with Greek influence. The hitherto known archaeological evidence at the sites of Gandharan school of art reveal art and architectural elements which attest both oriental and Hellenistic elements in depiction as a result of “the cultural influence of the Indo-Greeks and the Indo-Parthians who had mingled with the local population”<sup>1</sup>. Among the prominent art and sculptures found in the Gandharan art, the depiction of *Vajrapani* as the protector of Lord Buddha in reliefs is significant. The objective of the paper is to highlight the importance of the selected frieze where the nude *Vajrapani* is depicted turning complete backward unlike any other Indian or Hellenistic art found so far. Further the paper will discuss both the Hellenistic and oriental elements in the selected illustration of the Buddha and the *Vajrapani* in the relief found at the monastic site of Jamal-Garhi, Gandhara. Further, the discussion will be extended by focusing on the fact whether the artist of the specific relief is an Indian or a Greek artist based on the analysis of the relief and examine how the artist have amalgamated both the oriental and Greek values in the same relief in order to serve the purpose of the particular art.

### **II. METHODOLOGY**

The selected relief from Jamal Garhi will be examined focusing on the amalgamation of Hellenistic and Indian elements in the depiction. Examples from Greek art from historical ages, specifically that of the sculptures from the Classical period and the Hellenistic period of Greece, will be comparatively examined in order to discuss how the Gandharan artist has amalgamated both the Indian and Hellenistic values, to present the stories related to the Buddha in the service of the Buddhist devotees.

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<sup>1</sup> (Agrawala, 1964)

### III. DISCUSSION

The ancient region of Gandhara is comprised of the North-western part of ancient India which includes the Peshawar valley and the Swat valley. In the modern map, this is the part of Afghanistan and North-western Pakistan. The region of Gandhara belonged to the Achaemenide<sup>2</sup> empire and was under the Persian domination during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Once Alexander the Great conquered the Persian empire in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Gandhara came under the power of Macedonia. In 320 BCE, Chandra Gupta Maurya initiated the Maurya dynasty. The edicts or the pillars erected by King Ashoka (268 –232 BCE) proves that he declared Buddhism as the religion of the state and became a patron of Buddhism during his reign. Further, Ashoka had built several stupas and monasteries in the region in order to promote Buddhism<sup>3</sup>. Ashoka's death marked the decline of Mauryan power in Gandhara and from 184 BCE onwards several other rulers held the authority in the region of Gandhara until the Kushanas came into power in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.

The Kushanas were a branch of Yueh-chi came from Central Asia and they were known as Kuei-Shaung (Kushan) by the Chinese historians<sup>4</sup>. With the subjugation of Central Asia by another tribe named Huns, the Kushanas first moved to Bactria. After several conquests the Kushanas succeeded in expanding an empire of their own in ancient northwest India including the region of Gandhara. The expansion of the Kushan empire was recorded by a Chinese historian named Fan Yeh in 446 A.D.<sup>5</sup> 'Gradually wresting control of the area from the Scythian tribes, the Kushans expanded south into the region traditionally known as Gandhara, an area lying primarily in ancient India's Pothowar, and Northwest Frontier Provinces region but going in an arc to include Kabul valley and part of Qandahar in Afghanistan, and established twin capitals near present-day Kabul and Peshawar then known as Kapisa and Pushklavati respectively.'<sup>6</sup>

The site of Gandhara is a part of the silk route, as being identified as a trade route, mainly connected China, South Asia and the Roman empire. Accordingly, both western and eastern cultures intermingled and Gandhara became a centre where traders from different parts of the Eastern and Western parts of the world connected with each other. Gandhara school of art can be seen from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and lasted for several centuries. Gandharan art is distinct from other schools of art which existed in ancient India during this period. For instance, both Mathura school of art (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) which is a local school of art of the ancient India and the Gandharan school of art adopted an Indian subject (stories related to the Buddha). On the other hand, their form of art differed as the Mathura artists used an Indian form of art while the Gandhara artists adopted a foreign form in depiction. 'The cosmopolitan nature of Gandhara art is the likely product of cultural interaction due to invasions, immigration, emigration, diplomatic links, and trade communications. Together, these factors led to a unification of an array of various stylistic traditions obtained from Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Central Asians, Chinese and Indians.'<sup>7</sup> The Kushanas were foreigners came from Central Asia to India. They extended their authority towards the sites of Gandhara and helped for the development of Buddhist art. The Kushana kings may have identified the importance of sponsoring the religion of the state, Buddhism, in order to adopt, to settle and to confirm their authority in the particular areas. Thus, their contribution to the growth and the development of the religion of the state and catering in the service of Buddhist devotees can be recognised as a political necessity to authorize the power of the Kushan dynasty in India. Further, the flourishing trade in the area and its effect in culture is apparent in the amalgamation of Eastern and Western elements in the unearthed Gandharan art.

Number of archaeological evidence was unearthed in the Gandharan site including reliefs, friezes, and pillars depicting the scenes related to the life of Gauthama Buddha. Currently, there are ample scholarly discussions and studies on the mix of Greek and Indian elements in Gandharan art. Scholarship today focuses on the features, cultural elements, and different interpretations of the unearthed archaeology. As mentioned earlier, this paper will focus on a particular relief sculpture, which has not been taken under discussion, in which the Lord Buddha is depicted with his protector *Vajrapani* by side. Furthermore, the specialty of the frieze lies in the fact that the nude *Vajrapani* in contrapposto stance, is turning backward and this cannot be seen in any other Greek or Gandharan art found hitherto. According to Indian Buddhist legends, *Vajrapani* was the protector of the Buddha. Generally, in Gandharan Buddhist art, the Lord Buddha is accompanied by *Vajrapani*, a male figure who is identified as depicted in different representations<sup>8</sup>. This male figure is holding a *Vajra* or a

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<sup>2</sup> Ancient Persian Empire from 770-330 BCE

<sup>3</sup> (Marshall, 1960)

<sup>4</sup> Pulleyblank, P. G., 1968

<sup>5</sup> These records were mainly based on the reports submitted to the Chinese emperor by an officer named Pan Yung around 125 A.D. (Puri, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> (Katariya, 2019)

<sup>7</sup> (Ihsan Ali, Muhammad Naeem Qazi, 2008)

<sup>8</sup> (Tanabe, 2005)

thunderbolt and the name *Vajrapani* or *Vajirapani* means the thunderboltbearer<sup>9</sup>. In modern scholarship, there are different interpretations of this male figure depicted along with the Buddha.

Alexander Cunningham (1843) who was interested in Indian art and archaeology was in the belief that, the *Vajrapani* is Devadatta, the cousin brother of the Buddha during his princehood, before the great enlightenment. Albert Grunwedel<sup>10</sup> was in the belief that *Vajirapni* was a representation of the God Indra or Maara. However, the scholar Hermann Oldenberg (1901) who studied the life of the Buddha and his doctrine, assured the male figure to be a depiction of Hercules from Greek mythology<sup>11</sup>. Later, the scholars Senart (1905), Foucher (1905), Lamotte (1966), and Santoro (1991)<sup>12</sup> who were interested in Gandharan art supported the interpretation of Oldenberg. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the Gandharan artists have used the model of the Greek Hercules according to their interest with both Hellenistic and Indian elements in depiction. The selected depiction of the Lord Buddha and *Vajirapani* will be analyzed in order to examine how the cultural amalgamation affected the art of Gandhara during the reign of Kushanas.

#### IV. FINDINGS

The following frieze was unearthed at the site of Jamal Garhi, Gandhara. The site of Jamal Garhi is identified as 'a small town located 13 kilometers from Mardan at Katlang-Mardan road in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northern Pakistan'<sup>13</sup>. The site was initially excavated by the British Archaeologist Sir Alexander Cunningham during 1848. Cunningham in his reports of the years 1872-73 describes the site as "The village of Jamal Garhi is situated to the south of the Paja ridge which separates Luukhor from Sudam, just as the point where the Gadar Rud breaks through the hills."<sup>14</sup> Further, Colonel Lumsden<sup>15</sup> and Lieutenant Cromten<sup>16</sup> excavated the site during 1852 and 1871 respectively. They unearthed several archaeological evidence including stupas and many reliefs, friezes, and sculptures depicting the Buddha and the stories related to the life of the Buddha<sup>17</sup>. In that manner, the site was identified as an ancient monastery from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD to 5<sup>th</sup> century AD in ancient India. Thus, as mentioned earlier, the following frieze (Figure 02) was also unearthed among the other artefacts at Jamal Garhi, Gandhara. A specific part, as illustrated in the figure 01, depicts the Lord Buddha accompanied the *Vajrapani*, who is depicted in full scale nude and turning backwards.



Figure 01<sup>18</sup>

<sup>9</sup> (Tanabe, 2005)

<sup>10</sup> Buddhist art in India, 1893

<sup>11</sup> (Tanabe, 2005)

<sup>12</sup> (Tanabe, 2005)

<sup>13</sup> [https://howlingpixel.com/i-en/Jamal\\_Garhi#cite\\_note-1](https://howlingpixel.com/i-en/Jamal_Garhi#cite_note-1)

<sup>14</sup> (Cunningham, Report for the Year 1872-73, 1875, pp. 46-53)

<sup>15</sup> (Cunningham, Report for the Year 1872-73, 1875, pp. 46-53)

<sup>16</sup> (Cunningham, Report for the Year 1872-73, 1875, pp. 46-53)

<sup>17</sup> (Cunningham, Report for the Year 1872-73, 1875)

<sup>18</sup> The Buddha and a naked Vajrapani in a frieze at Jamal Garhi, Gandhara.



Figure 02<sup>19</sup>

The selected frieze (Figure 2) can be dated back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, to the time of the reign of the Kushan kings. The above part of the frieze as shown in the figure 01, highlights a depiction of the Lord Buddha and Hercules as *Vajrapani*. The face of the Buddha is destroyed but the figure can be identified as the Buddha with the halo and the monastic robe. The Buddha is standing with his feet apart and holding an object in his right hand which cannot be identified. Particular depiction of *Vajrapani* is significant as he is depicted in full scale nude and turning backwards revealing the nudity, beside the Buddha. The head of Vajrapani is also destroyed. Further, *Vajrapani* is holding a part of the falling drapery in his right hand and holding the *Vajra* (the thunderbolt) in his left hand.

According to Greek mythology, Hercules is identified as one of the strongest demi-gods who succeeded on twelve difficult tasks given by the Gods. As a result, in sculptures, Hercules was given 'strength' as one of his attributions. The image of Hercules appears all in Greek, Roman, and Indian archaeology. The coins issued during the reign of Seleucus Nikator (359-281 BCE) and also during the time of Kushan Empire depict Hercules showing the importance given to the Greek deity in Indian iconography. Accordingly, different types of illustrations of Hercules can be witnessed in the Buddhist Gandharan art as well. These illustrations are found in the friezes, relief sculptures and pillars of stupas, temples and monasteries in the sites of Gandhara. In the particular depiction, *Vajrapani* denotes a mix of characteristics of Greek Hercules and an Indian deity who protects the Enlightened One. The specialty of the above depiction of *Vajrapani* is his revealed nudity from backwards. This can be seen neither in the Greek reliefs nor in the Indian art. The purpose of the particular illustration is questionable. Further, the physical details of the *Vajrapani* in the above image derives from the anatomical details of Heracles. The Greek sculpture of Farnese Hercules by Lysippos<sup>20</sup> of late Classical period of Greece<sup>21</sup> is a fine example to study how the Classical artist carefully portrayed the strong and built-up male figure of Hercules. The anatomical details of *Vajrapani* in the above relief is similar to the depiction of the anatomy of Hercules by the Greek artist. Depicting the protector of the Lord Buddha in nudity and turning backward are clearly non-Indian and non-Buddhist elements. This again supports the idea that the artist of the above relief was either a Greek who sculpted the frieze in the service of foreign devotees. The contrapposto stance<sup>22</sup> which is used to depict *Vajrapani* in backwards is also significant as it reminds the Classical sculptures which depicted nude male figures in contrapposto stance. The statue of Riace warrior (460-450 BCE)<sup>23</sup> is a fine example which shows how the Classical artist depicted the contrapposto stance in back view in sculptures. Moreover, holding drapery is another identification of Hellenistic sculptures. These elements can be clearly considered as Hellenistic influences. On the other hand, the depiction of the *Vajra* with Hercules creates an argument in scholarship. According to Greek mythology, the thunderbolt (the *Vajra*) is an attribute of Zeus, the King of gods of the Greek Olympian Pantheon<sup>24</sup>. In Greek literature, epic writers like Homer and Hesiod call Zeus as the 'Thunder-bearer'. On the other hand, in Indian mythology and specially in Indian Vedic Hinduism<sup>29</sup>, the God Indra holds a thunderbolt. According to the history of Vedas, Indra is the God of thunder, lightning, storms and rain<sup>24</sup>. Thus, a confusion arises on the fact why the artist of the Gandharan art has depicted

<sup>19</sup> Complete and original frieze depicting Lord Buddha accompanied by Hercules and other devotees at Jamal Garhi, Gandhara

<sup>20</sup> A Roman marble copy of the Farnese Hercules is available to study today and this was sculpted by the Roman sculptor Glycon in 216 AD.

<sup>21</sup> Image source: <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/lysippos.html>

<sup>22</sup> The Contrapposto stance refers to the depiction of human figure with relaxed right arm with weight leg balances tensed left arm with free leg and on the other hand weight leg and free leg balance free arm and tensed arm. (Pedley)

<sup>23</sup> Image source: <https://art261.community.uaf.edu/riace-warrior/>

<sup>24</sup> The Greek Olympian Pantheon is consisted of twelve Greek Gods and Goddesses including Zeus as the King of gods. <sup>29</sup> (Berry, 1996) <sup>24</sup> (Tanabe, 2005)

a Vajra in the hands of Hercules, the Greek deity. According to Vedic belief the God Indra was a guardian deity of Buddhism. According to the argument of Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Vajrapani* is a successor and a secondary form of the God Indra<sup>25</sup>. Nevertheless, it is possible that the artists may have tried to depict both, the Indian Indra and the Greek Hercules in one figure while depicting him as the protector of the Buddha. It can be further assumed that the artists who were influenced by both the Hellenistic culture and Indian culture may have attributed elements from both cultures to recreate the character of *Vajrapani* as the protector of the Buddha.

On the other hand, several parts of the Buddha are destroyed including the face and the right hand. The Buddha in the above relief does not show any symbolic gesture but he is holding his right hand above the ground. An object is on his right hand unlike other Buddha sculptures of the Gandharan art but it is quite difficult to identify the object. His left hand is moving freely. In most other illustrations in Gandharan art, the Buddha is gesturing a mudra unlike the above illustration. Thus, it is possible that the artist was not aware of the importance of depicting the Lord Buddha with a Buddha mudra. This strongly supports the fact that the artist was a foreigner, probably a Greek artist as there are other Hellenistic elements in the illustration, which will be discussed in the following.

The drapery of the Buddha is significant as it is neatly depicted by the artist. The monastic robe of the Buddha is a reminiscence of the depiction of drapery during the Classical era (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and the Hellenistic era (late 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) of Greece. The artists of both

Classical and Hellenistic eras paid perfect attention to the illustration of the folds of the drapery according to the movement of the body. Later, this naturalism was adopted by the Roman artists of the Augustan period as well. Greek Caryatides figures<sup>26</sup> (early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and the relief sculptures of the temple of Parthenon<sup>21</sup> (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) illustrated the natural flowing of the drapery with number of pleats. Further, the sculptures like the Drunken old woman<sup>22</sup> and the sculpture of the Old fisherman<sup>27</sup> of the Hellenistic period of Greece can be taken as the sculptures which denote naturalism of the Hellenistic art. Aforementioned sculptures can be taken as examples to show how the Greek artists used drapery in a naturalistic manner of representation. The pleats of the cloth move according to the movements of the body by giving a natural illustration of the subject. Unlike the earliest depictions of the robe of the Buddha in which the artists have depicted the cloth without any pleats, the above illustration carries a number of pleats similar to the Greco-Roman depiction of toga in sculptures. Further, the robe covers the whole body to the neck denoting an element related to the Buddhism. Thus, the depiction of the Lord Buddha in the above relief can be considered as an amalgamation of both Hellenistic and Indian elements.

## V. CONCLUSION

Thus, the example discussed here, the relief sculpture of the Buddha and *Vajrapani* found at Jamal-Garhi sheds light on the mix of both Hellenistic elements and Indian elements in the Buddhist Gandharan art during the time of the Kushan empire. Further, as the evidence illustrates the artists cannot be a local artist but a foreigner, probably a Greek, who was not aware of the Buddhist values and beliefs. Since the reign of Kushanas attested the commerce through silk route which made the site of Gandhara one of the centres in between the East and the West, the Greek, Roman, Chinese, and Indian cultures were inter-connected and the influence of other cultures is witnessed by the Gandharan art, especially during the Kushan period. Thus, in order to solidify their power and authority, the Kushanas were in need of promoting the values of Gandharan culture including the leading religion of the area, Buddhism. Number of stupas and the monasteries found across the region of Gandhara disclose archaeological evidence to study the art of Gandhara which highly promoted Buddhist art. As a result of the inter-connection that prevailed between different cultures and the influence of the Greeks living in the region, the Gandharan art exposes evidence of a Hellenistic inspiration. The example of the illustration of the Buddha accompanied by *Vajrapani* found at a site of Gandhara from 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE is one such instance which unveil the fusion of the Hellenistic elements and Indian elements in Buddhist art of Gandhara during the reign of the Kushanas.

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<sup>25</sup> (Coomaraswamy, 1931)

<sup>26</sup> Greek Caryatides figures (5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) were sculpted female figures, which served as columns of the Erechtheum's south porch. Erechtheum is a Greek temple on the north side of Acropolis of Athens.

<sup>27</sup> Image source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250748>

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