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# An Exceptional Group of Painted Buddha Figures at Ajantā

by Anand Krishna

About twentyfive years back I got interested in classification of Ajantā Painting and tried to evolve its chronology. At that stage it was generally assumed that most of the “Mahāyāna group” of paintings belonged to one single class.<sup>1</sup>

This paper does not attempt to fix the chronology of the “Mahāyāna group” of paintings, which is an interesting problem in itself. The present author feels that this group spanned a wider period of time: from ca. 450 A.D. to ca. 550 A.D. or 500 A.D. Moreover, a closer examination would reveal several distinctions in styles, possibly due to different cross-currents at work or even distinct *ateliers* of painters showing their individual handling of the standard Gupta-Vākāṭaka traditions. The other distinct type is the Western Chālukyan-influenced style, which is limited to just a few examples. The Sibi *Jātaka* panel and the unidentified court scene (mistaken by early writers as the “Persian Embassy,” see foot note 1) in the Cave No. 1 are the latest in the series and show “Medieval” trends.

In a basically Hīnayāna cave (No. 10) Mahāyānistic traits include a series of standing figures of the Buddha in painted panels. They are uniformly in the Gupta-Vākāṭaka style of the fifth century, except for one group of panels that shows heavy Gāndhāra influence.

Although Sasanian-Persian influence—as a parallel instance in Ajantā Painting—is known in the “Embassy” scene or a ceiling panel in Cave No. 1 popularly known as “Khusarav and Shirin (?),” Gāndhāra-influenced painting is unknown in Ajantā, except in the panels under discussion.

*Yavanas* or *Yonas*, had a footing on the western coast of India. This is evident from a (later) reference to Yavanarāja Tushāspha as a governor in the Saurāshtra region under Aśoka. This name indicates

his Persian origin, although he is called "Yavana Rāja." The dual *Yona-Kamboja* in the Aśokan inscriptions stands for the north-western region or its two tribes, and possibly for an eastern Persian strain under heavy Hellenic influence. Thus, these were known as *Yona* and not *Pārasika*. It is for these tribes as well as the Greek community, that Aśoka ordered a Greek version of his edicts in Aramaic and Greek. Later on this community must have contributed to the rise of the Gāndhāra school of sculpture in that region. It is no wonder that *Yona* settlers on the Western Indian coast brought these art-forms to their new homes. What surprises is that the *Yona* influence is so scanty in the early Western Indian carvings—except in borrowing of a few motifs here and there. However, this influence is poor in its stylistic content in the main current of the Western Indian sculpture.

We know from inscriptions that the *Yonas* patronized the scooping of caves in Western India, even as early as in the "Hīnayāna Period." It is no wonder that similar donations were repeated in the "Mahāyāna Period" at Ajanṭā. Yet the present group of panels is the solitary known instance in the realm of painting. If there were others in that group, they are lost. Since a few panels from the extant group have completely disappeared, there possibly could have been more of this type.

In terracotta figures of the fourth century from Western India, Gāndhāra influence is quite well known; the Mir Pur Khās panels and the Devnimori<sup>2</sup> seated Buddha figures (datable ca. 375 A.D.), etc., are apt examples. Therefore, the painted standing Buddha panels at Ajanṭā cave No. 10 are to be accepted in the same run. They represent a slightly later stage, ca. 450 A.D., when the standard Gupta-Vākāṭaka style was already set. Thus, the Gāndhāra-influenced painting did not leave any mark on the standard "Mahāyāna Period" Ajanṭā painting and therefore our Gāndhāra-type panels carry only an historical significance.

At least three panels in this style have been published by G. Yazdani;<sup>3</sup> he has accepted these as true Gāndhāra-style paintings.<sup>4</sup> However, this attribution cannot be accepted, in view of the stylistic contents of these panels. Our above suggestion—viz., a Western Indian extension of the Gāndhāra idiom, is substantiated by the stylistic changes. The key evidence to support the suggested date of ca. 450 A.D. is provided by the kneeling figure of the devotee in Yazdani's plate XXXVII b. This is depicted in the true Gupta-Vākāṭaka style of the middle of the fifth century. Moreover, the treatments

cannot be accepted as belonging to the standard Gāndhāra style, which had already declined in its homeland. It is quite possible that the local Western Indian painters were imitating the proto-types set before them as models. In our FIG. 1 we find almost a straight figure, with no attempt to show *bhangimā*, which is otherwise a characteristic of the Gupta-Vākāṭaka style (FIG. 2).

The face is heavy yet ovaloid, which corresponds to the Devnīmori type A.<sup>5</sup> Fleshy treatment is more evident in this group; it is not so emphasized in the Gupta-Vākāṭaka style. The *samghāṭī* is treated in the traditional schematic manner, with series of triple crescents representing thick folds, progressively thinning out in the second and top ridges, as in certain later Gāndhāra stone sculptures. The end of the *samghāṭī* is collected by the left hand and falls straight to the side (the absence of the sensitive zig-zag fold of the Gupta-Vākāṭaka order is noted), in vertical parallel lines. The *samghāṭī* as a whole gives the



FIG. 1



FIG. 2

impression of a thick cloth material as seen in the Gāndhāra prototypes, and drapes both the shoulders in the same tradition. It is interesting to find that the hem has indications of projected corners, possibly derived from the projecting corners of the coats of the Sasanian figures. Returning to the facial treatment, we find halfclosed eyes, yet the eye-type is changed; the Gupta-Vākāṭaka wide eye-type is absent; moreover, the wavy upper eye-lid is changed to a straight-rimmed variety. The hair is suggested with flame-like dashes, as against the curly form of the Gupta-Vālāṭaka group. The hand in the *varada-mudrā* is also very simple; the palm and fingers are large. The halo, similarly, belongs to the Gāndhāra tradition: it is small and plain, with some degree of ornamental band at the edge.

This figure, along with the next, has a short and thin moustache, as is found in fifth-century paintings from eastern Afghanistan or Central Asia.

Our FIG. 3 shares the characteristics of the above panel, except



FIG. 3

that here, Central Asian features are more evident: the eyes are slit and the cheek bone more pronounced. The end of the ear-lobe is conventionalized with a degree of ornamental depiction and is thicker.

Exceptional as these figures at Ajanṭā are, they did not leave any impression on the local style.

## NOTES

1. As an exception, a court scene in the Cave No. 1 was considered seventh century. It was suggested that this particular panel showed an historical scene: the Persian Embassy at Pulakesin II's Court. This suggestion, however, has been given up.

2. R. N. Mehta calls this as Western Indian Art of Kshatrapa style; see in *Excavations at Devnimori*, Baroda, 1966, page 182; for Gāndhāra type Buddha figures: *ibid.*, pp. 142–143, pl. XI. A etc.; for suggested date of ca. 375 A.D.: *ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

3. G. Yazdani, *Ajanta*, part III (Plate), Oxford, 1964, plates XXX b, and XXXVII a. The third panel on the side facet is barely visible (plate XXXVI a).

4. G. Yazdani, *Ajanta*, Vol. III (Text), Oxford, 1964, pages 38 and 39.

5. R. N. Mehta, *op. cit.*, pages 142–143, plate XI. A etc.