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M. L. Carter

Buddhist Aspects of the Imagery of Skanda in Gandhāra and Central Asia

In the Rabatak Inscription the deities presiding over the sanctuary of the victorious Kaniška I begin with the goddesses Umma and Nana, followed by Aoromozdo, and Mozdoano, ending in the triad of Sroshardo, Narasao, and Miuro (Sims-Williams/Cribb 1995/6, 77–79; Sims-Williams 1998, 81–82). In a faint Bactrian interlinear inscription over these names, probably written later, Sims-Williams finds "...and he is called Maaseno and he is called Bizago". These are Bactrian names for Mahāsena and Viśākha, a pair of closely related Indian deities who may be most appropriately identified with the Bactrian deities of the inscription, Sroshardo and Narasao. Sroshardo (i. e. Sroshard) is undoubtedly a form of the Iranian deity Sraosha, and Narasao (i. e. Narasa), a Bactrian form of the Iranian Nairyosanha. Sraosha and Nairyosanha are often paired in Zoroastrian texts (Boyce 1975, 60f.) and it is highly probable that their Bactrian versions had similar personae. These Iranian gods are at times presented in a triad with Mithra (i. e. Mihr or Miuro), the very popular solar god so often seen on Kuṣāṇa coins reverses. Mukherjee (1995, 9) interprets the line as referring only to Sroshardo "... who is called Kumaro who is called Maaseno who is called Bizago". I believe that Sims-Williams' reading is more exact.

In the inscription we recognize the name Maaseno (Mahāsena) "great army" as one of those most commonly identifying the Indian god of war and wisdom Skanda-Kumāra, not Śiva in this instance, as G. Fussman (1998, 584f.) suggests, although Skanda too bears this same epithet. The dual Indian deities, Skando-Komaro (i. e. Skanda-Kumāra) and Bizago (i. e. Viśākha the twin who was created from a lightning strike to his side) are named on a coin reverse type of Huviška showing a pair of nimbate males with swords, holding staves and facing each other (fig. 1). Both are bare-chested and possibly mustachioed, with necklaces and arm ornaments, and seem to wear a headdress with a knob on the front. They appear to be youthful twins like the Dioscuroi, and would have made

suitable twin gatekeepers for Kaniška's Bactrian shine.

We may note that in Indian lore Skanda-Kumāra, known first as militant and most wise, is also a deity potentially benevolent or malevolent in regard to children. He is entitled in one inscription, "... one who is a protector of children and (is identifiable with) the sun", (Mukherjee 1986, 123ff.; 1987, 252) but in the *Parāskara Grhyasūtra* (Jha 1982, 65) he is a *bāla graha*, afflicting children with disease. As B. N. Mukherjee points out (1987, 252ff.), it is possible that a form of Skanda-Kumāra or Viśākha is represented in a Kuṣāṇa terracotta of an ogre-like figure holding a child and a club. It may be of some significance that the figure wears a headdress with a knob on the front, like the numismatic twins. A pair of over life size guardian figures discovered near Mathurā at Bharna Kalan, datable to the Kṣatrapa or early Kuṣāṇa era, depict princely males, one with a flaming aureole and the other holding the base of what D. Srinivasan (1990, 63ff.) calls the figure of a child or diminutive person (fig. 2 a. b). Both have a Brāhmī inscription stating that a minister (*pratihāra*) caused an image of Agni to be made "so that the fires (?) may be pleased". Patanjali in the 2nd c. BC refers in his explanation of Pāṇini's *sūtra* (V.3.99) to images of Skanda and Viśākha already existing under the Mauryas (see Banerjea 1985, 85; Chatterjee 1970, 29f.). It seems quite possible that Skanda and Viśākha, who emanate from Agni and sacred fire in early texts, can be identified as the Mathuran gatekeepers. More evidence will be given below.

Another coin reverse type of Huviška shows the deity Maaseno (Mahāsena), usually thought of as a form of Skanda-Kumāra (fig. 3). Here the nimbate deity stands frontally holding a sword and a beribboned staff topped by a cock and wears a long cloak with clasps at the centre of his chest. He also wears a necklace and armbands, has a pair of long side locks and a headdress or hair made up of three balls or locks on the top and two lower down on either side of his head. In the *Viṣṇudharmottara*



Fig. 1. Reverse of Kuṣāṇa gold dinar of Huviṣka, 2nd c. AD. American Numismatic Society. Photo M. L. Carter.



Fig. 3. Reverse of Kuṣāṇa gold dinar of Huviṣka 2nd c. AD. American Numismatic Society. Photo M. L. Carter.



Fig. 2 a. Sandstone guardian figure from Bharna Kalan 2nd c. BC. Mathurā Museum (87.146). Photo courtesy of Doris Srinivasan.



Fig. 2 b. Sandstone guardian figure from Bharna Kalan 2nd c. BC. Mathurā Museum (87.145). Photo courtesy of Doris Srinivasan.

(III. 71, 3–6) a six-faced form of Skanda is described as having a three or five locked hair arrangement (see Banerjea 1985, 364). In this coin image we find a far more imposing personage, a militant figure with the attribute of the cock for which the deity we call Skanda-Kumāra in Gandhāra is commonly identified. In yet a third coin reverse appearance three deities appear in some sort of shrine on a plinth, Maaseno in the centre, flanked by Skando-Kumaro and Bizago in secondary roles (Göbl 1984, types 157, 227A). Maaseno is clearly the chief of the triad in this representation. He is identified as Sroshardo in the Rabatak Inscription, and must be closely related to Sraosha, the Iranian holy warrior and messenger of prayer.

It has often been noted that Sraosha has the cock as his primary symbol (Kreyenbroek 1985, 118f.) and that he bears a marked similarity to Skanda-Kumāra under the Kuṣāṇas (Chatterjee 1970, 22f.; Pal 1986, 164). In the Rabatak Inscription, not only does this appear to be the case, but also the Bactrian Narasao, who is the equivalent of the Zoroastrian Nairyosanha, is seen as the Indian equivalent of Viśākha. Later in India strong Iranian influence appears in the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* (I. 76. 13, 18) where one of the dvarapalas of the sun god is also called Srausa or Srosa. The same deity here called Stosa appears in the *Samba Purāṇa* (16.8) as a form of Kārttikeya.

Thus far we find in Kuṣāṇa coin imagery an assemblage of three closely related militant deities, twin militant guardian males with a generalissimo. Indeed Mahāsenā, who is seen in the Rabatak inscription as the equivalent of Sraosha/Sroshardo, is clearly identified in the coin reverse, and has more of the attributes of Skanda/Kumāra than the numismatic twins Skando-Kumaro and Bizago (i. e. the cock on the ribboned staff, five coils of hair on the head and two long side locks). Possibly, Gandhāran images showing an armed mature militant figure with a cock and spear should be identified specifically as Mahāsenā rather than Skanda or Kumāra.

Skanda, Viśākha and Mahāsenā appear to coalesce into multiple versions of a single deity including the thoroughly Indian image of Kārttikeya riding a peacock. Yet it is the Gandhāran triad that is most interesting from a Buddhist viewpoint, since one tiny figure of a Mahāsenā type deity holding a spear and cock is seen in an array emanating from a seated Gandhāran Buddha in the Peshawar Museum (Taddei 1987, 350 fig. 1). This would seem to indicate that a version of this god was looked upon with favour within some Buddhist establishments in Gandhāra. Also, we may note that a militant guardian figure with a spear, who could easily be Mahāsenā, sometimes appears in Gandhāran reliefs as a protective deity flanking the Buddha opposite Vajrapāṇi (see Raducha 1985, 94 figs. 18–19; Ingholt 1957, fig. 131; Zwalf 1996 I, nos. 221, 521).

One of the most puzzling features of Gandhāran art has always been the identification of bodhisattvas. Maitreya with his flask is a Hinayāna figure, and the Buddha as prince Siddhartha is certainly another. Yet a third type, labelled by Rosenfield (1967, 238ff.) as 'mahāsattva', has no sure identity. In the Kuṣāṇa Era bodhisattvas had reached a point in Mahayānist theology where there were developing personae, the earliest mentioned being Mañjuśrī, youthful bodhisattva of wisdom (Hirakawa 1993, 291ff.; Dayal 1932, 44f.). Although some lesser figures in Gandhāran reliefs have been identified as Mañjuśrī (see Quagliotti 1990, 99ff.), his presence in early Mahayānist literature far outshines his possible depictions as a minor figure in Gandhāran Buddhist imagery. The character of this deity bears a resemblance not only to Skanda-Kumāra-Viśākha and Mahāsenā, but also to the Iranian deities Sraosha and Nairyosanha and their Bactrian equivalents. It has often been speculated that Iranian Buddhists were active in early Mahayāna thought, molding aspects of the characteristics of Zoroastrian deities into those of bodhisattvas. I would suggest that the highly popular Sraosha, the only Zoroastrian deity to retain high status as the heavenly messenger archangel Saroš under Islam, is certainly one of these (Boyce 1975, 60). In Parthian Manichaeism Srosaw Yazd is the 'Father of Greatness' (see Kreyenbroek 1985, 172). He also becomes the Tertius Legatus in Manichaean texts from Turfan, the heavenly messenger who will redeem the last particles of light from the burning world, and has twelve 'daughters' who are signs of the Zodiac (Legge 1914 II, 328).

Clearly, the bodhisattva, Mañjuśrī, a youth who carries both book and sword as his attributes, is both most wise and most militant. His supreme wisdom is theological in nature, since he is perfect in knowledge concerning the Buddhist Dharma. He carries a *Prajñāparamitā* text that he protects with his sword. From the point of view of his character, youthful appearance, five coils of hair (*pañcaśikha*), and sword can be derived most directly from the Mahāsenā/Skanda/Sraosha genre of deity. Indeed, there is one later form of the bodhisattva riding on a peacock that is a Kārttikeya-Mañjuśrī (Mañjukumāra) in the *Aryamañjuśrī-mūlakalpa* (de Mallmann 1964, 44ff.). As Arapacana Mañjuśrī his name is a five-syllable mantra made up of the first five letters of the Gandhāran Kharoṣṭhī alphabet (see Brough 1977, 85ff.; Salomon 1990, 255ff.).

Significantly, Sraosha is identified in Zoroastrianism as the *yazata* of prayer, having the sacred word for his body (*tanu.mathra*) a trait in keeping with Mañjuśrī who is the embodiment of mantras. Sraosha is also a guardian of the sacred fire. Boyce (1975, 61f.) sees a striking parallel for this deity in the Vedic Bṛhaspati, the warlike *purohita* of the gods who appears to be an aspect of Agni. The

Vedic god Narāśansa, also a form of Agni, personifies the fire of the manes, and provides a probable origin for the Zoroastrian Nairyosanha (Hillebrandt/Sarma 1990 I, 71). Both the Bactrian Sroshard and Narasa should probably be regarded similarly. Skanda in early Indian mythology appears to have been sired by Agni before he was adopted as a son of Śiva (see Chatterjee 1970, 2ff.). Thus, according to the Rabatak Inscription, it would seem that Bactrians and Indians living within the Kuṣāṇa Empire were reuniting similar deities who had a common origin in Indo-Iranian pre-history as divinities embodying aspects of sacred fire. As personified sacred fires they took the form of priestly messengers or heralds of the gods who could interpret divine will, carry prayers, and provide incantations to protect their worshippers (see Bailey 1975, 4).

The Buddhist creators of the *Milindapañha* (I, 18) chose Mahāsenā for his association with holy wisdom to be incarnate in the sage Nāgasena in order to answer the questions of the Indo-Greek king Menander. This may have been a first step toward the concept of a bodhisattva of wisdom. The next would have been to adopt him into some Buddhist establishments either as a single deity, or in the case of Skanda and Viśākha a pair of protectors and divine religious preceptors. From the constellation of deities of the Skanda/Sraosha type we may see the concept of Mañjuśrī emerging as a primary bodhisattva of nascent Mahayāna ideology (de Mallmann 1964, 18; Mukherjee 1987, 253f.). Mañjuśrī appears beside Maitreya in Lokakṣema's Chinese translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrika Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* completed by AD 179 (Hirakawa/Gröner 1990, 291). Therefore his origin must have been well before this time. Although many of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts do not mention him by name, his help was required for Śākyamuni and all of the Buddhas to achieve Enlightenment. He is considered to be a chaste youth (*kumārabhūta*), and in this is much like Skanda-Kumāra. Mañjuśrī's later persona as cosmic ruler may have been acquired from Manichaeism in Central Asia where Srosh the divine solar messenger has a retinue of twelve virgins who personify signs of the zodiac. By the Tang era Mañjuśrī became the premier bodhisattva of China supposedly living on the five-terraced mountain Wutaishan, and to be seen as a youth with hair dressed in five coils symbolizing his five syllable mantra (Birnbaum 1983, 9ff.; Getty 1962, 113). It appears most probable, however, that he originated much earlier, on or before the Kuṣāṇa era in the northwest Indian subcontinent under the influence of Buddhists who had already adopted one or more of the constellation of Skanda/Sraosha type deities as divine mentor and protector. There can be no doubt that a significant amount of the persona of Mañjuśrī in the post-Kuṣāṇa Buddhist world is derived from these sources.

Nevertheless, there are many instances where we find Skanda type deities, still recognizably Indian, in Buddhist environments in Central Asia and the Far East. In China, at Cave 8 in Yungang we find a relief showing a pudgy smiling youth with five heads, hair in coils and side locks, and six arms (fig. 4). He holds a cock while riding on a peacock. His importance as a deity of cosmic sway is indicated by the sun and moon held in his upper arms, and his militancy by the bow in another. I do not believe that one can find a clear indication that this is a Chinese proto-Mañjuśrī as Mukherjee suggests (1987, 252ff.). More obviously, he seems to be a Central Asian version of Skanda as a playful childlike figure, a popular Brahmanical deity within a Buddhist setting. Another version of Skanda is painted on the back wall of Cave 274 at Dunhuang. Here he and Gaṇeśa appear with Śiva as his progeny attending the seated Buddha Maitreya. In the domed ceiling of an 8th to 9th century Buddhist rock cut shrine at Toyuk in Xinjiang is a figure riding a peacock who must be an assimilated Kārttikeya (Andrews 1948, 43, pl. X; Mukherjee 1987, 250). Also at Bezeklik a figure of the same deity on his vahana may be seen on the upper left of a large painting of gods and demons (Andrews 1948, 83, pl. XXIV; Mukherjee 1987, 250 fig. 2). A paper banner from a location near Dunhuang, now in the National Museum New Delhi shows a typical Skanda-Kārttikeya holding a flaming gem and a bird (Mukherjee 1987, 249 fig. 1). On a painted paper from Dunhuang, now in the Stein collection in the British Museum is another rendition of the deity riding a peacock, holding a skull-topped wand and a diminutive child with a ball. Here we have a Skanda type deity in the ambivalent guise of protector or possibly destroyer of children, and, interestingly enough, reminiscent of the Mathuran deity from Bharna Kalan holding a child.

In a purely Buddhist form Skanda-Kumāra has been transformed in China into Weito, (Iḍa ten in Japan) as *vihārapāla*, protector of temples and the faith. In one typical example from a temple in Zhejiang Province dating from around AD 1200, his image is that of a beardless youth clad in armour holding a sword placed on his folded arms or holding a *danḍa*-like cudgel (fig. 5). He is usually placed near the entrance of the interior of the shrine facing inward directly behind a representation of the outward facing Maitreya (van Oort 1986, 30, XLVII).

A fascinating outgrowth of the Kuṣāṇa Indo-Iranian trinity may be seen in esoteric Buddhism in the imagery of Fudo (Skt. Acala, 'the immovable one') originally distinguished in Japanese Buddhism as a messenger of the Buddhas (Sawa 1972, 148). He later became chief of the five *Myō-ō* (Skt. *vidyārājas*), i. e. Guardian Kings of Light. As Fudo he has remained very important in the Shingon tradition of esoteric Buddhism. In Japanese rep-



Fig. 4. Detail of a relief of a Skanda-type figure from Cave 8, Yungang, Northern Wei Dynasty 5th c. AD. Photo M. L. Carter.



Fig. 5. Guardian figure from Lingyin-si Temple. Southern Song Dynasty, around AD 1200. Zhejiang Province, China. Reproduced by author from local postcard.

representations he is shown as youthful, often wearing hair in coils or knots and a single braid, and surrounded by flames. He is ferocious looking with bulging eyes and fangs, and holds a sword and noose (see Ford 1987, 17, pl. 25; Sawa 1972, pls. 13, 70, 118–119). In Japan his two smaller attendants (*doji*) are called, interestingly enough, Kongara and Seitaka or Kimbara and Chetaka (Getty 1977, 35; Sawa 1972, 113ff., 149). In this triad we find a reflection of the Kuṣāna trinity of Mahāsena, with twins Skanda-Kumāra and Viśākha (fig. 6). How this triad came to be preserved intact in Buddhist Japan is deserves further investigation. Fudo is considered a champion of righteousness, destroyer of evil, and like Sraosha a psychopomp, greeting the soul immediately after death. He is also a healer and protector for women in pregnancy and childbirth, like some versions of the Indian Skanda. He lacks the cock attribute but is symbolized as Kurikara Fudo in a black dragon curled around a sword, like a caduceus (Getty 1962, 35). Could we have an attribute of Hermes here?

Fig. 6. Painting of Fudo with attendants in the Shoren-in Temple Kyoto, Japan, Late 11th c. AD. Photo reproduced from Sawa 'Art in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism', fig. 119.



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