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J. Siudmak

Early Bronze Masks from Ancient Kashmir and the North-West Region

A cast bronze mask of a male deity, allegedly found in Waziristan, somewhere on the border of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, and now in a private collection, throws new light on the early development of Brahmanical art in ancient Gandhara, and adjacent territory. The mask, which is 24 cm high, comprises the diademed head and top part of the chest of the deity, and compares typologically and stylistically with other bronze masks of unknown provenance found in this region, and with a fragmentary stone sculpture from Kashmir as well as with another bronze mask allegedly found in the same place. Most importantly its facial features and diadem compare closely with those of the central figure of an inscribed bronze group sculpture, which dates from the beginning of the second quarter of the 5th century, and still retains a strong Gandhāran flavour. The heavy weight of the masks make it evident that they were never made to be worn, but rather were intended as the permanent or temporary cladding of the face of a wood image. There is also the possibility that they were paraded on litters in festivals like their descendants, the mohras of Himachal Pradesh. These early images are interesting in augmenting the small corpus of Brahmanical images which has survived in the North-West in the late Gandhāran period such as the large-scale images of the Hārīti from Sahri Bahlol (Kurita 1990, fig. 488) and the Vaiṣṇāvī from Shabkadar (Smith 1911, fig. 78), as well as contemporary examples from Kashmir.

The most distinctive feature of these cast bronze masks is the form of the diadem, which shows some variation, and gives an interesting insight into the use of regalia in images of this period. The masks are both Vaiṣṇava and Śaivite, so there is no sectarian significance. In the first example to be considered (fig. 1), the central element is a hexagonal panel with ribs radiating from the centre, which is occupied by the protome of a winged lion, from the mouth of which falls a festoon of pearls. At each angle and immediately above the lion's head there is a small rosette. The

fillet is formed of a cartouche and beads, and at the sides there are semi-circular concentric medallions. Behind each ear is an Aśoka blossom framed by a pair of leaves. The moustached face is fanged indicating that the deity is the Bhairava form of Śiva. Further confirmation of its Śaivite identity is offered by the single line of beard at the junction of the neck and jaw, a feature of two examples of a group of early *ekamukhalingas* from Kashmir of a slightly later period (Siudmak 1992, figs. 54.4, 54.7). Two Śiva heads from the same group of sculptures have similar fangs to these, but lack a moustache (Siudmak 1992, figs. 54.3, 54.6). The distended pierced ears of the Bhairava mask have small ear ornaments, and there is a wide torque or neck ornament with a broad strap of herring bone design. The space between the neck and torque is inscribed in Brāhmī characters of the late 4th or early 5th century, of which the palaeography compares closely to that of the inscription on the pedestal of the Viṣṇu group discussed below, and includes the proper name Bhaṭṭara Siṅha. The lower edge of the mask like others in the group follows the line of the curved neck ornament. It is quite distinct from the later masks or *mohras* of Himachal Pradesh, which are finished off square lower down across the chest, sometimes incorporating the upper arms.

The eyes, ear ornaments and torque have large empty sockets, which must have been originally inset with crystal or semi-precious stone, and thus the original appearance was quite sumptuous. Beneath the fillet is a row of corkscrew curls, a treatment normally considered as Gupta, one of several that will be discussed later, while a bulging mass of curly hair shows behind the ears at either side, showing some resemblance to the hair treatment, albeit in profile, of Sasanian coins of the 5th century of Yazdgard I and Bahrām V. N. Khan has recently identified a Kidārite counterpart with a frontal portrait and a cluster of curls at both sides in the same manner as that of the mask (Göbl 1967, vol. 3, pl. 10,11). Unfortunately, the ornaments and diadem show no resemblance to those of the mask,



Fig. 1. Cast bronze mask of Bhairava – 24 cm high, first half 5th century, ancient North-West, private collection.

and it appears from an examination of contemporary numismatic evidence in general that there are no parallels in coinage for diadems of this type.

Another bronze mask cast from a brassy metal (Kramrisch 1981, fig. 84) although heavily worn, is immediately recognisable as a closely related example of the type. It has the same curved lower edge, here outlined with beading. Of unknown provenance, it was shown in the recent Chicago exhibition *Himalayas an Aesthetic Adventure*, where it was dated to the 7th/8th century, and attributed to Himachal Pradesh. In the catalogue it was noted that “the shape and design of the tiara . . . are without parallel either in Kashmir or Himachal Pradesh” (Pal 2003, 97). It is slightly larger at 27 cm high. Here the central panel is of pentagonal form, and sharply pointed, but still retains the pattern of ribs radiating from the centre. As in the other sculpture there are semi-circular medallions at both sides, here enclosing rosettes. It is possible that the pupils of the eyes were inlaid – the eyes are recut, and it is unclear whether the pupils were pierced later – and a third eye is clearly visible in the forehead, the moustache has long curling ends, and the mouth is also fanged, indi-

cating that it is another image of Bhairava. The pierced distended ears have ear-clips at the top of the helix, and ear ornaments formed of ribbed cylinders with lateral bars, which resemble those on several Brahmanical sculptures from the North-West, including those of the large Hārītī from Sahri Bahlol in the Peshawar Museum already mentioned. The large stone sculpture shows further resemblance to both masks in the fanged mouth and wide torque, while the Aśoka blossom and leaf in its headdress resembles those of the first mask. The motif of a lion head with a string of pearls and a bead in the headdress of the Hārītī is found on several of the sculptures under discussion, as well as the *ūrṇa* in the forehead, presumably reflecting an influence from Gandhāran Buddhist art.

Another related bronze mask in much better condition was on the London art market in 1988, also allegedly found in the North-West, which was published by Srinivasan (1997, fig. 10). It was shown in a recent exhibition in France (Bopearachchi/Landes/Sachs 2003, fig. 319). It is the smallest at 16 cm high. It has the same general form, and the central hexagonal panel of the diadem is also pointed like that of the previous example. The hatched ground has the same radiating ribs with bosses at the corners, but at the centre is a very prominent cockade. The forehead is marked with an *ūrṇa*.

The headdress of these three masks can be closely compared with that of a bronze standing three-headed Viṣṇu with attendants, formerly in the Nitta collection, total height 41 cm, also published by Srinivasan (1997, fig. 1). The hexagonal panel, though smaller in proportion, is pointed like the previous two, though also set back further on the head, more befitting the greater depth of a sculpture. It too has radiating ribs, and a boss at each corner as well as at the centre and immediately below. The fillet is formed of cartouches and beads, and the concentric side medallions are of semi-circular form, resembling those of the first example. The facial features compare closely with those of the three different masks. There is also an *ūrṇa* on the forehead, and a small curved raised area shows beneath the fillet. The modelling of the body, which has a prominent *śrīvatsa* on the chest, the form of the *dhotī* and sash, and the short *yajñopavīta* relate the image closely to 5th century sculpture from Kashmir, the period of Gandhāran influence, which I have referred to elsewhere (Siudmak 1994) as the early phase of the formative period. However, the positioning of the lateral animal heads, emanating from the shoulders rather than from the side of the head, so far as is known, is not a convention in Kashmir. This arrangement, particularly with the Varāha head pointing up-

wards, indicates a direct influence from Mathura, where it is a constant feature (Coomaraswamy 1923, pl. 19). Iconographically, the figure is also interesting in holding a lotus in the raised inner right hand. This is a fairly constant feature of Viṣṇu images in Kashmir and the North-West, as is the half figure of Pṛithvī between the legs of Viṣṇu on the pedestal, both borrowed from Gandhāran Buddhist art, the latter certainly copied from *Māravijāya* scenes. While the lotus is a common emblem of Viṣṇu in north Indian sculpture of the medieval period, it is not found in the Gupta period to my knowledge, and must have entered mainstream north Indian art as a late influence from the North-West region.

The pedestal of the sculpture has a *Brāhmī* inscription, which includes a date. It was read in the year 3 by co-author L. Sander (Srinivasan/Sander 1997, 124), but was recently emended by H. Falk to year 33 with her concurrence. There is no reason to doubt that the Viṣṇu image and pedestal belong to one another, especially as the inscription refers to the installation of the image of Nārāyaṇa [at Bhimāsthāna in the Gharāṭṭamaṭṭha of Śrī Vai(h)likā. . . . a religious gift of Śrī Variṣā]. Taking the palaeographical evidence into account, the date was interpreted by L. Sander (Srinivasan/Sander 1997, 124) in the Laukika era, giving a date of 427 AD.

Falk prefers the Kushana era producing a date of either AD 360 or 460. If this era is accepted, the later date seems most likely. Srinivasan after exhaustive research attributed it to Kullu, perhaps for its resemblance to the later *mohras* of that territory, while Sander ascribed it to Gandhāra. My information was that the bronze group was found at Kashmir Smast, a cave sanctuary and temple complex in the hills north of the Peshawar valley bordering Buner. This has now been shown by Falk to be the Bhima ashtana noted by Xuanzang (Beal 1905, 112f.), and this is borne out by the inscription. The importance of this ancient site and bastion of Brahmanism in an area almost entirely dominated by Buddhism, is discussed at this conference by N. Khan.

The first of the comparative examples from Kashmir is a fragmentary sculpture carved from grey chlorite (fig. 2), the head and shoulders of a Viṣṇu in the 5th century style of Bijbehara, now in the collection of the Central Asian Museum at Srinagar University. It is 12.5 cm high. The diadem has a pointed pentagonal central panel similar to those of the other sculptures, though here it is decorated with three rosettes each with festoons of pearls before a prominent beaded crescent. It is also set back on the head like that of the three-headed Viṣṇu. The fillet comprises three ribbed cartouches, and at each side there is a semi-circular medallion, here differently decorated. A line of

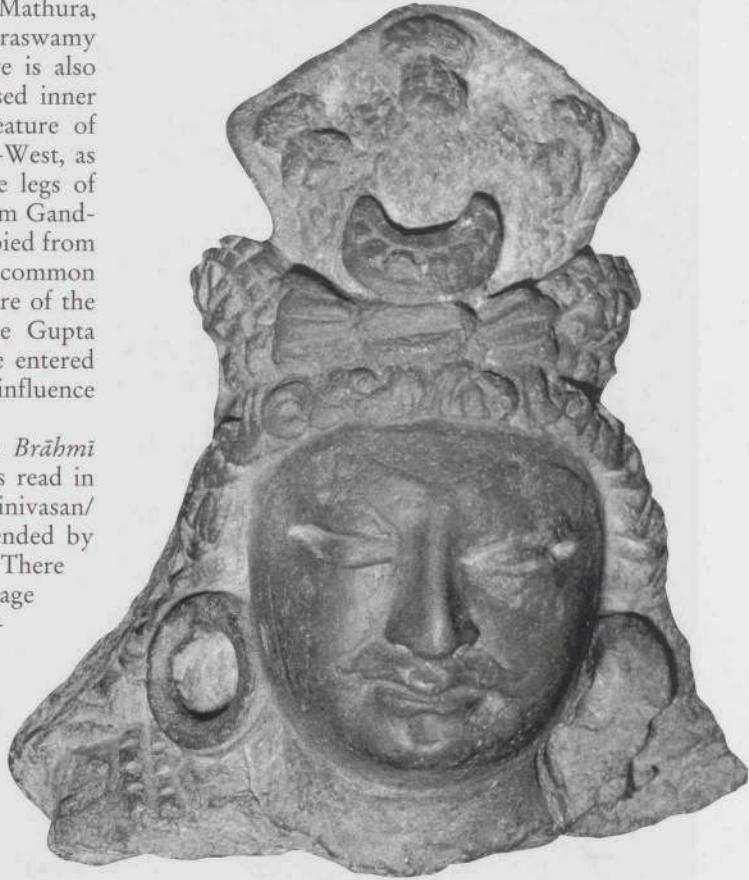


Fig. 2. Grey chlorite head of Viṣṇu – 12.5 cm high, first half 5th century, Bijbehara, Central Asian Museum, Srinagar, no. 94.13.

curls shows under the fillet, while the hair at the sides falls to the shoulders. The facial features are quite close to those of the other heads, and there is also a moustache. The eyebrows are ribbed. Here the ear ornament is an annular ear-ring, a ubiquitous Gupta feature.

The bronze mask of a three-headed Viṣṇu (fig. 3), the lion head broken off, said to have been found in the Valley of Kashmir, and in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (acc. no. 2004.177), resembles the others in its general form, but is a very superior piece of casting, and is the most elaborate, and the largest – 34 cm high – of all the masks. Significantly, the boar head emanates from the side of the head rather than between the neck and shoulders, and its snout points directly forwards. This is the general rule in Kashmirian sculpture, and it is interesting to note that it was already established at this time. The central panel of the crown differs somewhat from the others. It is slightly pointed giving an almost pentagonal effect. There are no radiating ribs. Instead there is a complex design of bosses at the four corners, linked by festoons of pearls, the lower two formed of rosettes, the upper ones with lion protomes



Fig. 3. Cast bronze fragmentary mask of three-headed Viṣṇu – 34 cm high, first half 5th century, allegedly found in Kashmir, in the Metropolitan Museum of New York (20004.177). Gift of Donald and Polly Bruckmann.

dangling beads from their mouths. A similar larger lion is positioned at the apex of the diadem, while two strings of pearls loop diagonally to the corners below. The hatched background contains three further rosettes, one with a dangling bead. A plain flaring cylinder with a rounded medallion above forms the side of the crown. The entire outer edge of the diadem has a serrated outline. The facial features are close to those of the Kashmir Smast bronze example, and here too there is a moustache, an *ūrṇa* and small curved ridge showing beneath the fillet. The ear-rings formed of the protome of a lion dangling pearls, and the torque formed of two confronting *makaras*, are of outstanding design. This mask too must have been a sumptuous object since it was also originally extensively inset with crystal or semi-precious stones indicated by the empty sockets of the eyes of the central head and the boar head, and the diadem and torque.

Before discussing possible influences on these sculptures, note will be taken of two other masks. The first example, which is in the Kronos Collections, and was also exhibited in Chicago (Pal

2003, fig. 53), is another Bhairava mask, with fanged mouth and third eye, and is 19 cm high. Here the hair is arranged in corkscrew curls and secured by a fillet with small floral motifs. The *Brāhmī* inscription which reads *itaṃ śivaśevapraṣṭimāḥ* (this is the image of the god Śiva), is in late Gupta characters according to von Hinüber, and thus is slightly later than those under discussion. It is rounded off below the neckline like the other examples. The other image is an inscribed brass mask of a Nāga Rāja, 46 cm high, in the Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, which was discovered in Peshawar (Errington/Cribb 1992, 238). Its *Brāhmī* inscription has been dated to the 6th or 7th century by Fussman, which places it outside the period of the other masks, but in its general form it is clearly descended from the type.

Though the facial and physical features of this early group of sculptures, as well as dress in the case of the bronze group, are still heavily influenced by Gandharan art, there are several stylistic features which indicate Gupta influence. Two features have already been noted, the use of

corkscrew curls on the first mask and the annular ear-rings of the Kashmir stone Viṣṇu. In addition, the form of the cockade on the diadem of the smallest mask, the rosettes, some festooned with pearls, and the lion heads or lion protomes dripping with pearls or dangling beads, are further examples of fairly standard Gupta features, while the wide torque is a constant feature of Gupta sculpture from Udayagiri dating from the early years of the 5th century like that of the standing Viṣṇu from outside Cave 6 (Harle 1974, fig. 8). The similarity of the *śrīvatsa* and the form and fall of the *vanamālā* of this sculpture to those of the Kashmir Smast Viṣṇu should be noted. It is more than tempting to see the flaring headdress of this Viṣṇu with a lion head dripping pearls from its mouth as the central ornament as a contemporary model for those discussed from the north-west and Kashmir, although there are no rounded side pieces. A detached head from Besnagar has a much lower diadem (Harle 1974, fig. 18), also with a lion-head, and both sides have the same serrated outline as the bronze mask from Kashmir, which is the closest to the Gupta type. Examples too can be found in the stone sculpture of Mathura. The crown of a Viṣṇu found at Baghichal Birhal has the same flaring central panel (O'Connors 1972, fig. 9).

Whatever the exact influence on the diadem, these sculptures, which must all belong to the first half of the 5th century, or slightly later in the case of the Viṣṇu group, offer evidence of the early penetration of Gupta iconographic and artistic influence, well before the period of the Hephthalites in the late 5th and 6th century, during the reign of their more tolerant predecessors, the Kidarites. The distinctive form of the diadem probably continued to be used until the conquest of the Hephthalites in the early decades of the second half of the 5th century, when it was gradually replaced by a turreted crown, familiar from sculpture of Kashmir and the North-West of the late 5th and 6th century (Paul 1986, figs. 48–49).

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