

Review Article
Traces of Sculpture in the Kushan Empire

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Abstract

The Kushan Empire (c. AD 30–375) was a major ancient power that stretched from Central Asia to northern India; it was founded by the Yuezhi nomads and controlled the Silk Road. Reaching its zenith during the reign of Kanishka, the empire supported Buddhism, developed Greco-Buddhist art, and traded with Rome, China and Parthia. Kushan period art (1st–4th centuries AD) formed a hybrid structure that blended Central Asian, Hellenistic (Greco-Roman) and Indian traditions, shaped particularly by the Gandhara and Mathura schools. Known as the golden age of Buddhist art, this period is characterised by Greco-Buddhist style Buddha statues, royal portraits and gold coins. Mathura art comprises the Buddhist sculpture tradition that developed in Mathura—a centre of trade and pilgrimage in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh—from the 2nd century BC to the 12th century AD. The sculptures were crafted from red sandstone quarried from the nearby Sikri quarries. Due to the sculptures produced using this material, which is still widely found in north-central India today, Mathura is described as a centre for sculpture production. This article discusses the contributions of the Kushan Empire to the art of sculpture—an empire that, whilst not historically dominant, has left a lasting legacy through its visual arts. Focusing on the period of the empire's rule, the research concentrates geographically on Mathura and the works housed in the Mathura Museum.

Keywords: Kushan Empire, Mathura, Sculpture, Buddha, Yaksha-Yakshi

1. Introduction

The Kushans were a civilisation that was unable to exert significant influence due to their geographical location. They were subject to the influence of both Iranian powers to the west and Chinese powers to the east. First recorded in Chinese sources as the Yuezhi, allies of the Han Dynasty, the Kushans, after being defeated by the Xiongnu¹ in the early 2nd century AD, abandoned their former homeland in the Tarim Basin of Western China and settled in Bactria (Figure 2) (an ancient country situated in the region comprising parts of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, between the Hindu Kush mountains and the Amu Darya) [1]. During the reign of Kanishka, the Kushan Empire became a hub of cultural exchange where Greek, Iranian and Indian

influences converged.

Under the Sasanian-Kushan kings, the western part of the Kushan Empire (Bactria, Tokharistan) was under Sasanian control. Much evidence regarding this is derived from coins [2]. It is evident from the depictions of fire altars on his coins that King Kanishka adhered to the Zoroastrian faith. During his reign, two major schools of sculpture developed, one in Mathura and the other in the vicinity of Gandhara [8]. The methodology involved an on-site survey of the artefacts housed in the Mathura Museum, which was subsequently supplemented by a review of the literature.

2. The Kings and Art of the Kushan Empire

Between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, the Kushans established a vast, powerful and wealthy empire on both sides of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

¹ According to ancient Chinese sources, it was a confederation of tribes comprising semi-nomadic peoples who lived on the steppes of East Eurasia from 220 BC to the late 1st century AD. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Xiongnu>)

Although evidence comes from Chinese sources, coins and inscriptions, the dates are not certain [2].

Having abandoned their ancestral homeland in the Tarim Basin of Western China to settle in Bactria, the empire subsequently weakened due to internal conflicts and the rise of the Parthian Empire [8].

2.1. The Kushan Kings

The first known Kushan king, according to Chinese sources, was Kujula Kadphises (AD 50–90), who united five tribes, defeated Hermaios—the last Greek king of Bactria—and expanded his territories as far as Gandhara, south of the Hindu Kush. According to coins, his son, known as Vima Taktu (AD 90–AD 102), also ruled in north-western India, extending his influence as far as Mathura [2]. He was succeeded by his son, Vima II Kadphises (AD 102–AD 127). Vima II Kadphises issued gold coins honouring the Hindu god Shiva, reflecting a shift towards Hindu culture and a move away from Greco-Roman influence. These coins, the first gold coins minted in India, also demonstrate the empire's growing prosperity (Figure 1) [2]. The Kushans adopted the Bactrian language, written in the Greek alphabet, whilst also developing relations with Rome. On the Trajan Column, known from history, there is also a Kushan delegation celebrating the emperor's victory over the Dacians in Romania (AD 107) [2].

2.1.1 Kanishka (AD 127 - 151)

Kanishka succeeded his father, Vima II, around 127 AD. Like his Bactrian predecessors, he was styled as a full Achaemenid 'King of Kings'. He expanded the Kushan empire northwards into India. By waging war against the Chinese, he extended Kushan rule as far as the city of Xiangjiang in China—the ancient homeland of the Kushan people—as well as into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and the agricultural basin.

During this period, Buddhism was the principal religion of India; Kanishka endorsed this faith and encouraged its spread northwards and subsequently into Bactria; from there, it was carried by Indian missionaries to the eastern frontier of Kushan power in Xinjiang.

The main centres of the Kushan Empire were Bactra (Balkh), Kapisa (Bagram in Afghanistan) and the capital, Purushapura (Peshawar). A Buddhist monastery was established here, and the Kanishka Stupa—one of the tallest structures in the ancient world (its dome

twice the size of the Pantheon in Rome)—was built to house Buddhist relics [5]. The (Indo-Greek) Gandharan artistic style began to develop during this period, marking the golden age of the Kushan Empire, which lasted until 232 AD.

During the reign of Kanishka, the Kushan Empire brought together Greek, Iranian and Indian cultural influences, whilst maintaining diplomatic and commercial relations with the Parthians and the Roman Empire [8].



Figure 1. A gold coin minted by Vima II Kadphises.

2.1.2 Kanishka's Successors

It is thought that Huviška, believed to be Kanishka's son or brother, succeeded him. During this period, Kushan rule was largely consolidated in India through peaceful means. In the course of this process, the capital was moved from Bactria to Mathura (south of Delhi), and gold coins were minted, the majority of which were produced in Balkh. During the reigns of Kanishka II and III, the empire weakened and fell under the rule of the Guptas, the new rulers of India [4].

2.2. The Sasanian Kushan Kings

Following the victories of Shapur I, the details of which remain unclear, the western part of the Kushan Empire (Bactria, Tokharistan) came under Sasanian control. Much of the evidence is again derived from coins [2]. According to this, the empire was not directly ruled by the Sasanian kings, but was governed by its own Kushan kings, to whom the Sasanians granted a degree of autonomy.

Following the last Kushan king, Behram, handing over Gandhara to Shapur II (330–365), no further information regarding the Kushan kings is found [8].



Figure 2. An ancient country situated between the Hindu Kush mountains and the Amu Darya.

During the reign of King Kanishka, the Kushan Empire—which linked China and Iran to India—saw the emergence of two major schools of sculpture in the Mathura and Gandhara regions, marking significant developments of the period [4].

3. Mathura School

Situated on the banks of the Yamuna River, south-west of Delhi and north-west of Agra, Mathura has been a sacred place of pilgrimage in Indian cultural history. This site is also regarded as the birthplace of Krishna, a figure of great significance in Hindu worship. Here, one can also find traces of Shiva, the Mother Goddess Shakti, as well as yakshas, nagas and other deities [5].

In Mathura, Indian sculpture during the Kushan period became highly developed and the city emerged as a major centre. The products of this great workshop have been found as far west as Taxila (Pakistan), as far east as Chandraketurgarh (West Bengal) and Mahasthan (Bangladesh), and as far south as Shravasti and Kasia (Uttar Pradesh). A stone balustrade discovered near the Punjab in 1885 demonstrates that artefacts produced in Mathura were transported to various regions [3, 6, 10].

The sculptural art of Mathura during the Kushan period has certain distinctive features: the use of red sandstone as a material; the emergence and proliferation of numerous images associated with Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism and various sects; a progression from symbolic imagery to anthropomorphic representation; the visualisation of auxiliary deities; the use of the lion throne (simhasana); the depiction of feminine beauty, grace and allure; the creation of powerful statues of ruling kings; various images and inscriptions on pedestals; the development of auspicious and decorative motifs, also widely used in India's religious architecture; and a diversity of plant and animal forms. All these features developed through the assimilation of Gandharan art, cultural exchange with it, and the adop-

tion of an eclectic approach. Some stonemasons known by name during the Kushan period include Rama, Sanghadeva, Jotisa, Dasa, Shivarakshita, Singha, Nayasa, Dehayu, Vishnu and Jayakula. [1, 3, 6, 10]

3.1. Buddhist Images

The Mathura school of sculpture played a significant role in the development of Buddhist sculpture. Whilst the Gandhara school was also important, certain fundamental elements of Buddhist sculpture took shape within the Mathura school. These elements are as follows: the general appearance of a yogi, the concept of the chakravartin (universal ruler), the lotus throne, the meditative posture, the urna (the 'wisdom' point rising between the eyebrows) and the ushnisha (the protrusion on the Buddha's head) (Figure 3). The Hindu yaksha statues still extant in Mathura constitute the typology of early Buddhist statues in terms of their proportions and frontal appearance. [3, 6, 9].

3.2. Depiction of the Seated Buddha

The general characteristics of the seated Buddha figure are as follows: it is carved in high relief (Figures 3–4); the side faces feature leaves of the Bodhi tree; celestial beings are depicted in the corners; attendants with mosquito nets stand on either side; the Buddha's head is carved with a topknot (known as a kapardin); a raised right hand in the abhaya mudra (gesture of protection) and a left hand resting on the knee or, occasionally, clenched. All these elements combine to create the commanding demeanour befitting a cakravartin (universal ruler). In depictions of the Seated Buddha, examples are found featuring an urna, wide, almond-shaped eyes, small earlobes and a slightly smiling expression; an upper garment covering only the left shoulder, carved with auspicious motifs; and feet turned upwards in a cross-legged yoga posture. [3, 6, 10].



Figure 3. Sitting Buddha.



Figure 4. Sitting Buddha lotus position detail.

3.3. The Standing Buddha

Similar features can be seen in the upper parts of standing Buddha statues from the Kushan period. The left hand is held in an akimbo position at the lower part. There is a belt holding the lower garment, and a bouquet of flowers or a turban between the feet. This posture symbolises the supremacy of the enlightenment of the Buddha over kingship.

Following the Mathura School's interaction with the Gandhara School, new features emerged in Buddhist

imagery: these include a thick, pleated robe covering both shoulders (ubhayamsika sanghati); Vajrapani, bearing a thunderbolt and serving the Buddha; other postures such as dhyana (meditation); and the presence of a kusha grass cushion at the seat. [3, 6, 10] (Figure 5).

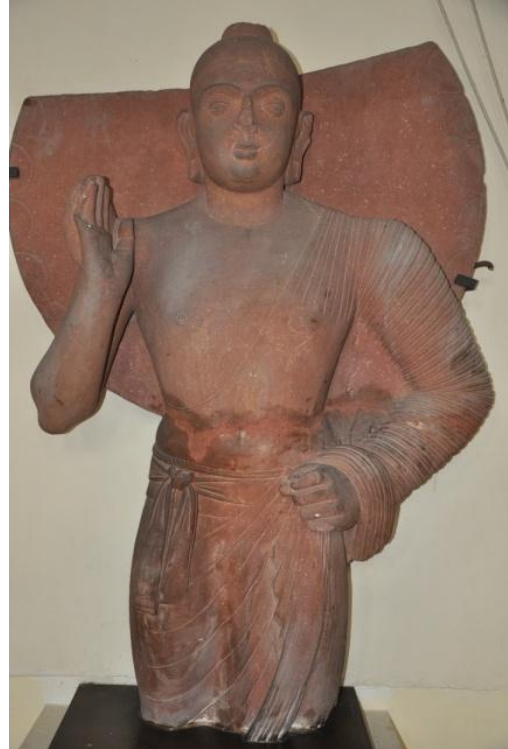


Figure 5. Standing Buddha.

3.4. Jain Figures

Jain imagery first appeared in the form of Ayagapatas (tablets of veneration) and figures of the Jina Tirthankaras (deities) [11, 12]. During the Kushan period, carved figures were depicted on a single column block. The Tirthankaras are nude; they are shown in a seated position meditating (dhyanaस्था) or standing (danda or kayotsarga). All bear a Shrivatsa mark on their chests (Figure 6). During this period, the Hindu deities Balarama and Krishna, as well as Parshvanatha or Suparshvanatha, are identified by a serpent canopy (Figure 7). Many Jain statues bear Brahmi inscriptions, which provide valuable historical information about the Jain community during the Kushan period. The carved stone balustrades surrounding Jain and Buddhist stupas and chaityas are significant features of these monuments. As seen in the example from Mathura, similar examples can also be found at Bhuteshwar and Kankali. (Figure 8). [10-12].



Figure 6. Jina in a meditative pose.



Figure 7. A snake canopy used by Hindu gods.



Figure 8. Balustrades details.

3.5. Brahman, Folk Deities and Royal Portraits

During the Kushan period, depictions of Brahman and figures from the general populace appeared in various forms. The best-known deities of this period include Vishnu, Shiva, Surya, Kartikeya, Agni, the Divine Mothers (Figures 12–13), Kubera (Figure 11), the Yakshas and the Nagas.

Shiva is depicted in the form of a symbolic lingam and in human form. Shiva's son Karttikeya, the god of

war, is depicted as a young man wielding a spear. His brother Ganesha is depicted as a dwarf with an elephant's head from the late Kushan period. Life-size or near-life-size statues of Kushan kings have been unearthed 16 km north of Mathura. These statues represent Wima Kadphises, Kanishka and Chashtana (Figures 9–10).

Folk cults, on the other hand, are represented by yakshas and nagas. During archaeological excavations carried out in the region, statues from a Naga temple dating from the Kushan period were discovered in the Mathura region [7]. The Yakshas, on the other hand, appear to be a diminutive source of entertainment.



Figure 9. Empire Kanishka.



Figure 10. Kadphises.



Figure 11. *Kubera.*

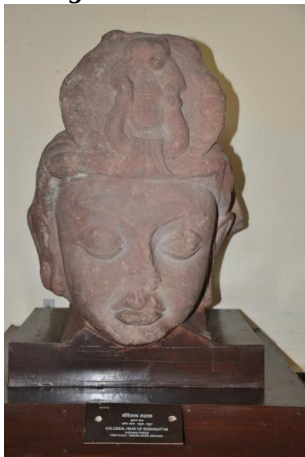


Figure 12. *Head of Bodhisattva.*



Figure 13. *Divine Mother.*

3.6. Yahksha ve Yakshi

The mythological figures of the yahksha and yakshi are usually depicted as a pair. These figures, which are quite common in early Buddhist, Jain and Hindu art, are male (yahkshas) and female (yakshis) respectively. They are believed to be spirits dwelling in nature and are regarded as a symbol of nature worship.

In early Buddhist literature, sources such as the Therigatha describe them as guardian spirits who instil good moral conduct. Many monumental yahksha figures produced during the early historical period were regarded as guardian deities of trees or other natural features (Figures 17-18-19-20).

In Tibetan Buddhist sources, however, it is claimed

that yahkshas and yakshis are individuals who have been reborn as benevolent spirits that serve a person or a community throughout their lives. Jain texts similarly suggest that when these spirits have exhausted their virtues, they are reborn as mortal human beings. This indicates that, in both Buddhist and Jain approaches, nature deities that were previously independent have been incorporated into the metaphysical system.

The earliest examples of yakshas and yakshis are the sculpted reliefs on the stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi. They are mostly depicted as attendants of the Buddha. In these depictions, they are richly adorned with jewellery and wear a dhoti tied beneath a protruding belly. Their mounts include horses, elephants or rams. There are also examples in which they are depicted holding a mace or staff (Figures 14-15-16).

Yakshis are generally depicted as figures with bare upper bodies, wearing necklaces, bracelets and anklets, whilst their lower bodies and waists are adorned with clothing and jewellery, and they have voluptuous figures. Owing to their connection with the natural world, they are depicted beside trees or clinging to them; such yakshis are known as shalabhanjikas, a reference to the birth of the Buddha beneath the sala tree. They may also be depicted holding a vessel filled with water or a lotus flower—symbols associated with fertility—or appearing alongside a naga. Yakshi figures have also been depicted standing atop dwarf-like figures, as seen in the Bhuteshwar reliefs from the Kushan period (Figure 21).

Although the Yakshas and Yakshis had lost their significance in Buddhism and Hinduism by the middle of the first millennium AD, they were regarded in some Buddhist rituals as beings who grant wishes. During the Middle Ages, they continued to be depicted and worshipped in Jain art.

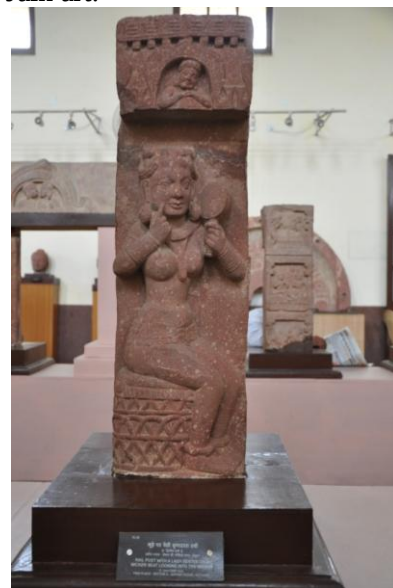


Figure 14. *A woman sitting down.*



Figure 15. Pillar with a woman.



Figure 16. Woman under pipal tree.



Figure 17. Prasadhika.

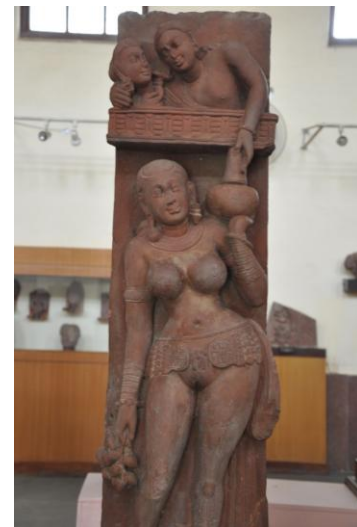


Figure 18. Woman carrying a wine pot.



Figure 19. Lady standing under the tree.



Figure 20. Railing pillar.



Figure 21. Railing pillar lady under the tree.

4. Discussion

Before invading northern and central India and establishing an empire, the Kushans had migrated from north-western China and had occupied Central Asian territories for over a century. It is thought that in the region where they settled, they adopted Greek culture, as well as the Greek and Bactrian languages and scripts, which they used alongside the Indian Brahmi script on their coins and inscriptions [13]. In northern India, the art of the Kushan Empire flourished between the 1st and 4th centuries AD. It blended the Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara, which was influenced by Hellenistic art, with the Mathura traditions, which represented Indian art. [5]. In addition to all this, it is thought that Gandharan Greco-Buddhist art was produced by the Kushans from the late 1st century AD onwards.

The Kushans practised an eclectic religion and, as can be seen on their coins, worshipped dozens of gods from Iranian, Greek and Indian traditions. It is thought that this tolerant environment, combined with an open-minded approach to the visual arts, fostered an innovative and rich artistic scene within the Jain, Buddhist and Brahman traditions. Most of the known early Buddha statues date from the Kushan period [13].

Although it is not certain, from the reign of Vima Kadphises or Kanishka I onwards, the Kushans established one of their capitals at Mathura in northern India. Although Mathura was already an important centre of art at that time, the Kushans developed this centre significantly, particularly through Buddhist art [13]. Although several Buddha statues known as the 'Isapur Buddhas' are known to have existed in Mathura prior to the Kushan period, around 15 AD, the style and symbolic expression of this early period did not endure [9]. Throughout this ongoing process, the Kushan people standardised the symbolism of the Buddha statues, thereby enhancing their quality and aesthetic appeal, and ensured the enduring legacy of their kingdom through the works they produced over the centuries [9, 14].

Author Contributions

Safiye İrem Dizdar: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts Of Interest

"The author declare no conflicts of interest."

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Biography



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