Internal Assessment Part II (Semester IV)

HSM 305: Imagining India's Past: Visual Sources

Topic:

Reading Meaning: comparative Analyses of Specific Buddhist sculptures vis a vis Buddhist texts

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Introduction

In this Paper, I will attempt to analyse specific sculptures depicting 'The Great Departure' And 'Mara-Vijaya' Scenes from the various sites of Sanchi, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Gandhara and Ajanta and perform a comparative analysing between them, as well as against the Buddhist texts of Lalitavistara, Ashvaghosha's 'Life of The Buddha' and early Pali canons to determine the extent of, if any, relationship between texts and images and the nature of said relations.

Lalitavistara, for instance, is one of the most complete versions available of the story of Buddha's life. It interestingly includes numerous visual narratives with vivid details and previously non-existent descriptions that are often found in visual Culture as well. Making it one of the most vital textual references for Buddhist Artistic culture.

Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharitra* or 'The life of the Buddha' extends from the birth to the death of the Buddha. However, only half of the text (up to the Mara-Vijaya and enlightenment episode) survives. This text too is rich in details that have over the years solidified as part of the Buddhist canon.

The Pali canons, particularly the earlier ones, in contrast, are extremely simple and bare in their narrative and often only provide scattered accounts on the birth, early life, enlightenment and the final months of the Buddha[1], lacking the details found in later texts.

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[1] Vidya Dehejia, Discourse in Early Buddhist Art (2005)

The Great Departure

The Great departure refers to the scene(s) depicting prince Siddhartha's renunciation and departure from the palace to pursue the ascetic life. This scene is often depicted as a monoscenic narrative focussing on the prince on horseback and sometimes includes scenes prior to and after the event.

I have chosen specific sculptural reliefs from the three important sites of Amravati, Nagarjunakonda and Sanchi to illustrate the different ways in which this scene is depicted and their relation to the textual descriptions in Buddhist literature.

Amaravati:

A railing pillar from Amaravati (Fig. 1) depicts a series of monoscenic images to form a sequential narrative of 'the great departure' episode.

The central medallion depicts an anthropomorphic prince Siddhartha leaving the palace gates (left corner) atop his horse, Kanthaka.

When looked against the textual description of this scene in the Lalitavistara and Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharitra*,it is evident that many details from them, especially Lalitavistara, have found their way in this relief.

For instance, this scene includes all the often-found elements associated with this episode such as Chandaka the groom, a 'well adorned' Kanthaka, and *Yakshas* carrying his hooves as described in the Lalitavistara. The scene also depicts a large procession including gods rejoicing and playing instruments. on top, over the head of the Buddha, are figures that are holding up what looks like lamps and could likely be the 'fiery bodied denizens of heaven' that shone light in his path as described in Ashvaghosha's 'life of the Buddha'.
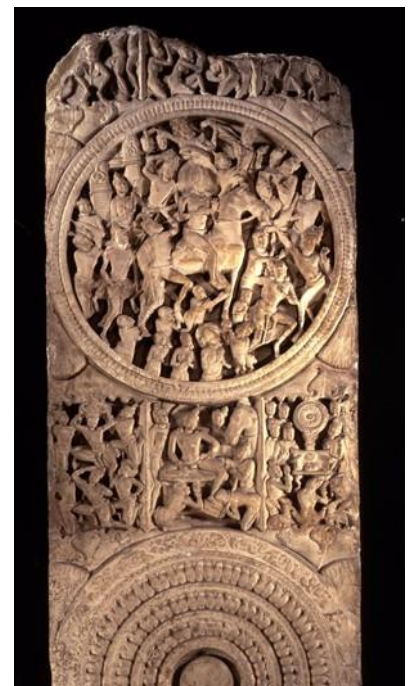

Fig. 1 railing pillar, Amaravati. British Museum

Bellow the medallion are depicted three scenes (not in a sequential order).
The first frame from the left depicts the gods taking the Boddhisatva's headdress to heaven, the second frame shows a seated Buddha, once again in an anthropomorphic form, asking a grieving Chandaka to return to the palace with his horse and the final frame is a static mode depiction of the Buddha's first sermon to a group of monks.

It is interesting to note that while the other two scenes depict an anthropomorphic Buddha, he is represented in the concluding last scene in an aniconic form by a cushioned throne topped with a wheel crowned pillar. The reason for this shift in form within the same narrative relief is unknown. Perhaps to distinguish between the worldly prince Siddhartha at the beginning of his journey and the enlightened Buddha?

In contrast, another sculpture from Amaravati dating back to 2c CE (Fig.2) depicts a much more minimalistic and 'quieter' scene of an aniconic Buddha, represented by an empty space above Kanthaka and bellow a hovering parasol, exiting the palace gate with Chandaka in tow. This scene in its simplicity and lack of a celebratory procession seems to have drawn its inspiration from the Pali canons that lack the elaborate details added in the later texts. The account of Buddha's departure from the palace in the Pittakas, for instance, is only a passing mention with the barest of details.

Fig. 2 The great Departure, Amaravati 2c CE

The person in front could perhaps have been interpreted as Vrisravana, who, in Lalitavistara, declares that he would lead the way for the procession. However, this is unlikely in the absence of any other detail depiction connecting this relief to the text specifically and is more likely Chandaka.
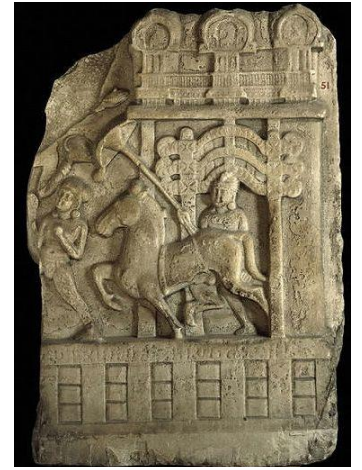
Neither of the reliefs depict scenes leading up to the departure, nor the aftermath of it in the palace that are described in great detail in both the above mentioned texts. Choosing instead to focus solely on the Buddha's movement and the activities surrounding him.

NagarjunaKonda:

Fig.3 is a monoscenic depiction of 'the great departure' episode from Nagarjunakonda that includes all the commonly found elements associated with this scene. A procession of gods rejoicing and playing instruments surround the central figure within the frame, i.e. an anthropomorphic Buddha on horseback. Details of his royal attire and jewellery can be seen, so can a halo surrounding his head and a parasol. This is notably in contrast to the description of the departing Boddhisatva in the Pittakas where he is said to have 'shaved his head and worn monk's clothes before leaving the palace'. The horse, Kanthaka, guided by the groom Chandaka is ornamented as described in the Lalitavistara as well as Ashvaghosha's narrative. It is interesting to note that Kanthaka's hair is trimmed short and he dons a bulging belly as described in the latter. The hooves of the horse are carried by, what would be according to the text, *yakshas*.

Fig. 3 The great departure, Nagarjunakonda

The depiction of the details point to this relief being based upon, or in the very least inspired by, the above-mentioned texts and clearly does not follow the narrative description in the earlier Pali cannons.

Two other dome slabs at Nagarjunakonda depict sequential networks of events occurring before and after the great departure scene.

The first (Fig. 4), pre-departure sequence consists of three panels. From bottom to top, the first panel (partly damaged) represents the four rides that prince Siddhartha took to the parks wherein he encounters a sick man, an old man, a corpse and a monk in each of the trips respectively, detailed in the Lalitavistara. In this relief however, all four incidents have been presented together with the focal figure of Buddha on his chariot taken as a common element.

Fig. 4 pre-departure sequence. dome slab, Nagarjunakonda. Huntington Archive database.

Fig. 5 Post- departure Sequence. Dome slab, Nagarjunakonda. HuntingtonArchive database.

The second panel is a monoscenic depiction of the central figure of the Buddha seated cross legged, surrounded by sleeping females in his chambers, representing the scene detailed in Lalitavistara as a turning point for the prince, as he witnesses the contorted sleeping women and is repulsed by the human form to the point of wanted to transcend beyond it.

The third panel illustrates a classic 'Great Departure' scene consisting of an anthropomorphic Buddha in royal garbs, atop Kanthaka whose hooves are supported by *yakshas*, accompanied by Chandaka, and surrounded by rejoicing gods. Indra himself carries the parasol, according to Dahejia, in this relief[2].

The post-departure sequence (Fig.5) likewise consists of three panels depicting scenes progressing from bottom to top.

The lowest panel is a set of three scenes in a continuous mode without any frames distinguishing them. Starting with the Buddha handing over his jewels and bidding farewell to Chandaka and Kanthaka, it moves on to the scene of him exchanging clothes with a hunter where, mirroring the description in Lalitavistara, the divine son, in the guise of a hunter, holds the Buddha's silk garment in both hands as he touches it to his head. Further, in the far right, Chandaka is shown departing atop Kanthaka as is evident from their backs turned in a retreating pose.

Although this panel is not in the correct sequence according to the text, it shows clear signs of being strongly inspired by Lalitavistara. It is further illustrative of how artists often diverged from reproducing textual sources rigidly in favour of more effective communication of the theme. The iconography here, for instance, does not match the text exactly; the focus here is on communicating the expressions and feelings encapsulated within the texts. For instance, the devotion of the hunter as he clutches the Buddha's robes in adoration, the nonchalant pose of the Buddha while parting with his jewels and companions, the grieve stricken Chandaka on his knees as well as the awe of the worshipping gods, are all captured within these sculptures.

Likewise, the topmost panel on this slab depicts a grieving king Suddhodhana as the central figure. Before him kneels Chandaka (in accordance to Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharitra*) convincing the king of the futility of

[2] Vidya Dehejia, Discourse in Early Buddhist Art (2005)

attempting to bring the prince back owing to his conviction in the path he has chosen. It also shows Kanthaka and a collapsing Gautami being held up by an attendant. Both instances detailed in both the mentioned texts.

These panels are further testament to the fact that understanding these images would require a prior knowledge of the narrative and its sequence. Especially considering that, these panels in particular move from bottom to top as opposed to the expected top to bottom and carry multiple, otherwise indistinguishable, scenes in one frame.

Sanchi

The 'Great Departure' scene on a *torana* in Sanchi (Fig.6) is a great example of a continuous narrative where the succession of the story is not marked my any distinguishing frames or dividers, rather through the repetition of the same character, in this case, Kanthaka. In this vast relief, Buddha is represented in an aniconic form by the empty space atop Kanthaka shaded by a parasol. A repetition of the horse and the entourage from left to right makes spatial movement and succession clear. At the point where the Buddha disembarks and parts ways with his horse and Chandaka is portrayed by a pair of *Buddhapada* underneath the parasol. From this point onwards, the horse is seen retreating back to the palace.

Aniconic images pose greater issues in terms of interpretation due to a certain degree of ambiguity that they cannot shed. This particular relief has, over the years, had much debate surrounding it, particularly when it comes to the explanation for the obvious aniconic representation of the Buddha.

Fig.6 The Great Departure, Sanchi

MARAVIJAYA:

The Mara-vijyaya episode is described in great detail in both the Lalitavistara as well as Ashvaghosh's 'life of the Buddha'. Buddha, according to Lalitavistara is said to have invoked Mara in order to conquer the desire for all sensual pleasures as a means of attaining complete awakening. As it is an incident that directly precedes Buddha attaining enlightenment, it is often depicted as an isolated or a part of an entire narrative of significant moments in the life of the Buddha. In Lalitavistara as well as Ashvaghosha's narrative, the description of Mara's army is graphic with details of violence and gore as is evident from this passage from Lalitavistara.

"Some of them were vomiting poisonous snakes…Some ate human flesh and drank blood, chewing on human arms, legs, heads, and livers, and slurping entrails, faeces, and vomit. Their terrifying bodies…Some had swollen bellies and weak bodies, with their bones sticking out. Their skin, flesh, and blood had dried out, and their ears, noses, hands, feet, eyes, or heads were cut. Some were so thirsty for blood that they would cut each other's heads off. Some of them wore garlands of human fingers that they had cut off and strung together."

It is, however, much more subdued in sculptural depictions

Sanchi:

The central architrave of the north *torana* at Sanchi stupa 1 (Fig. 7) depicts a synoptic narrative of the Mara-vijaya episode. This relief is peculiar in that the scale of the sculptures increases from left to right as well as the artistic style varies. The figure of Mara seated on a throne divides the relief into two parts. On the left, is a very noticeable indexical representation of Buddha beside which stand Mara and his children trying to distract him in vain and then retreating, as described by Ashvaghosha.

On the right side, however, the illustrations diverge from the textual description. Although Mara's army is depicted as consisting of large, grotesque, demonic beings 'with big bellies and mouths', they are still fully human figures and they do not carry any weapons, nor are they shown attacking the meditating Buddha. However, inspite of the lack of gore and violence as described in the Lalitavistara, the sheer size, expressions and artistic rendering of the demon figures communicates their menace.

Fig.7 Mara-Vijaya Scene, Sanchi Stupa 1, North Torana, Central Architrave

While Mara's army dominates this relief, a second variation of this scene on the lowest architrave of the west *torana* (Fig.8) places the indexical representation of the Buddha as the central focal point. With the left side of it occupied by venerating gods and the right side occupied by Mara's army hastily retreating, this narrative exudes the superlative quality of the Buddha.

This relief is also more reflective of the mentioned texts in that Mara's army, in this case, is armed (with weapons such as axes, clubs, bows, arrows, lances) and violent, as well as includes animals. While most are retreating, some are shown as attacking the indexical Buddha.
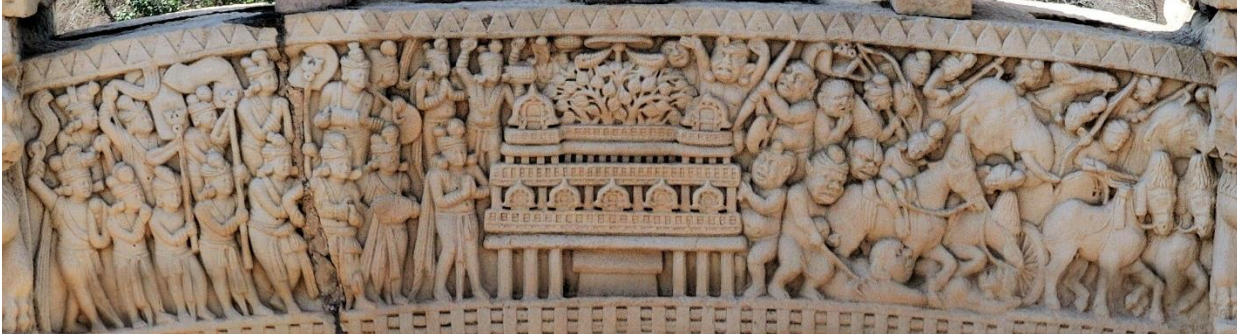

Fig.8 *Mara-Vijaya/ Enlightenment, Sanchi Stupa 1, West Torana, Lowest Architrave*

Gandhara

The two figures of Mara-Vijaya reliefs from Gandhara portray obvious stylistic difference as compared to that at Sanchi (and even Amaravati). While Fig.9 is more Hellenistic in its features, hairstyle and attire, figures in Fig.10 with their facial hair and turbans bare closer resemblance to Persian features. In both cases, however, although Mara's soldiers, in accordance with the mentioned texts, consist of humans, animals, part-human part-animals and wield various weapons to attack the seated Buddha, they are strikingly more pleasing in their form, especially in contrast to the ones in Sanchi, as well as the vivid descriptions in the texts.

Fig.9 *Mara-Vijaya/Enlightenment, Gandhara*

Fig.10 *Mara-Vijaya/Enlightenment, Gandhara*

A seated anthropomorphic Buddha with his right hand extended in a *Bhumisparshamudra* is the central focal figure in both the sculptures.

It is further interesting to note that Fig.10 also depicts the earth goddess emerging from the ground at the foot of the Buddha's seat. This element is strongly indicative of the importance of Lalitavistara as a textual source of reference as it is the only text to talk of the presence of the earth goddess as a witness to this

event. Also peculiar is the tree, in this image, under which sits the Buddha which is not the usually depicted pipal tree seen also in Fig.9

In Fig.9, the two figures in the forefront on the (viewer's) left of Buddha are perhaps Mara and his daughter trying to distract him. Following the textual description in Lalitavistara, the figure seated nearby then, could well be Sarthavaha, Mara's son who starts feeling devotion towards the Buddha and discourages the attack upon him.

Ajanta

Cave 26 at Ajanta houses a large Mara-Vijaya sculpture, the central focus of which is the looming figure of an unwavering Buddha deep in meditation under the Bodhi tree with his hand extended in *Bhumisparshamudra*. He is surrounded on top by Mara's army. In the foreground are Mara's daughters attempting to entice the meditating Buddha, something that was missing in the earlier discussed examples. Mara's army here, though not as grotesque as the ones in Sanchi, is

Fig.11 Enlightenment, Ajanta cave No. 26

depicted in accordance with Lalitavistara as being a combination of humans, animals and a mix of the two. They are also shown attacking the unperturbed Buddha in a chaotic display that is juxtaposed with the unwavering calmness of the central Buddha figure. The (viewer's) right of Buddha shows the unsuccessful soldiers retreating while a dejected Mara sits in the right bottom corner with his head in his hands.

This relief too depicts many successive parts of the event within one frame with no comprehensible sequence or differentiation bar the central figure that divides the relief into two parts.

An example of the depiction of the Mara-Vijaya scene as part of a larger display of important events in the life of Buddha is Fig.12 from Mathura. The right top corner of the frame shows a meditating Buddha being attacked with a bow and arrow, which if in accordance to Ashvaghosha's narrative, is frozen and does not fly. On his right are, what seems to be, Mara's daughters attempting to seduce him out of his *tapasya*. It must also be noted that here too, the sequence of events is not followed with the artist taking the liberty of placing the 'descent of Sankissa'

Fig.12 'Life of Buddha' Narrative, Mathura Museum

image before the enlightenment scene in order to give a better visual structure to the whole piece.

It is also interesting to note that like in the case of 'the Great Departure', the earliest Pali canons, particularly the *Theravada* Pali canons describe the event of the Buddha's enlightenment in extremely simple terms. They lack important details associated with it such as Mara, his daughter and even his army. Additions of which are made in later texts and canonized, finding their way into images as well. The most graphic and vivid descriptions of which can be found in Lalitavistara as well as Ashvaghosha's 'Life of the Buddha' that include elaborate scenes described in previously non-existent rich detail.

Conclusion

Text and literature, particularly canonical, develops and evolves overtime, as is the case with Buddhist literature that acquires more flesh and details that are canonized along the way.

When it comes to text-image relationship, it is evident from the examples analysed in terms of two specific texts, in this paper, that although images are based on literary prototypes, they aren't intended to be mere visual representations of written material; Or even a means of illustrating literary canons for easier access. Because, as evidenced by the above discussed reliefs, all of them require a certain degree of prior knowledge and familiarity with the narratives, their characters and their sequences in order for them to be comprehended.

Moreover, although it is evident that certain images are inspired by or based on certain literary narratives, it is also clear that artists often played around with the chronology, iconography, time, presenting related and unrelated scenes together and separately in order to communicate their visuals more effectively or for the sake of aesthetic structure or simply because it served their narrative to make certain changes.

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