

THE VESSANTARA JATAKA FROM CENTRAL ASIA

—P. Banerjee

In the Stein Collection of Central Asian antiquities in the National Museum, New Delhi, there is an interesting fragment of wall-painting from Miran (m.III.002) which has not been identified as yet satisfactorily. Miran is situated on the southern of the two principal silk routes passing through Central Asia. 'It lies near the south-western edge of the loo-desert, at the foot of the northern slopes of the Altin-tagh; about five hundred and twenty miles E.N.E. of Khotan and two hundred and fifty miles S. of Turfan.

In style, the paintings of Miran are related to the art of Gandhara and are attributable to the fourth century A.D.

According to Stein, the painting in question occurred on frieze over the dado of the Stupa cella, No.III, in Miran. The shrine in question was square outside but circular inside. As Stein has observed, it was once surmounted by a dome and enclosed by a small Stupa in its centre¹.

The present panel (pl.1) which is in a fragmentary condition, shows in the centre a male figure, seated on a throne with an ornamental background. His feet rest on a foot-stool. The right foot points forward and the left is at 'right angles to it'. The left arm is akimbo, with hand resting on thigh. The right is extended, as if engaged in discussion or addressing some one. The expression of his eyes bears a deep anxiety on his part. He is dressed in a *dhoti* (lower garment) which reaches up to the ankles. The upper garment consists of a buff-coloured stole, which passes over the left shoulder leaving rest of the upper portion of the body bare.

At his feet, on the right, is shown seated a similar but smaller figure, with his hands joined in adoration. He wears a high conical cap or turban with two lunette-shaped upward flaps, betraying his princely status or lineage. This peculiar head-dress is met with again on the paintings of the rotunda of the Miran Temple V, where it certainly marks royal personages. The origin of this conical cap or turban, as Stein has noted, is uncertain. He, however, suggests the possibility of its being derived from or based on the princely insignia used in Bactria or Sogdiana 'through which the Central Asian adaptation of Graeco-Buddhist art passed into the Tarim Basin'².

Opposite, on the edge of the painting appears a part of another figure, with his drapery over the left knees and upraised fore-arm only visible.³



According to Stein and Andrews the main or central figure of the panel represents probably Gautama before his enlightenment⁴ and the figure at his feet, on the right, is a worshipper. I have studied the panel closely and find nothing in it to justify this probability. So far as the main or central figure is concerned, it is without a halo, which is invariably associated with the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures of

Central Asia. Again, in dress and appearance it bears no resemblance to any Buddha figures from Miran or any other part of Central Asia. In my opinion, the fragment depicts a part of the Vessantara Jataka, i.e. Vessantara meeting his father before going on exile. For the convenience of discussion the Vessantara Jataka (one of the most popular stories of the previous births of Gautama Buddha) can be narrated here briefly.

In the kingdom of Sivi, there was a king called Sanjaya and he had a son called Vessantara known for his generosity from his birth. When Vessantara was born, a divine elephant left its young one for the prince in the royal stable.

As Vessantara grew, his fame for generosity spread all over the country. Whatever was asked of him, he gave without hesitation. In the course of time, he married a virtuous lady called Maddi, who bore him two children, a son called Jali and a daughter called Kanhajina.

Now at that time, the country of Kalinga had a very bad drought which caused a great famine and hardship to the people. In order to bring rains to his land, the king of Kalinga, at the request of his people, sent four Brahmanas to the city of Jetuttara in the Sivi kingdom to fetch the auspicious elephant of Vessantara, which brought prosperity to the Sivi kingdom. When the Brahmanas asked Vessantara for his elephant, he gave it away. The loss of this auspicious elephant infuriated the people. In great number did they come to the king, Sanjaya, and complained against Vessantara's excessive generosity and demanded his banishment from the land. The king agreed to banish his noble son, thinking that otherwise the people would kill his son and rise in revolt against him. He commissioned an agent to convey the people's demand to Vessantara.

Receiving the king's tidings, Vessantara remained unperturbed. He, however, asked that his banishment might be delayed for a day to enable him to perform the gifts of seven hundreds; and then he came to take leave of his parents.

Next morning, Vessantara had performed various gifts before he left the city with his wife and children. On the way some Brahmanas asked for the horses of his chariot which he gave to them. As he proceeded, he gave his chariot to certain other Brahmanas. He then with his wife and children came walking to the Mount Vanka. His misfortunes still followed. A Barhmin came here from Kalinga to take his children to serve his wife as servants. Though he loved his children dearly, he gave them away. Then came Sakra in disguise and asked for his wife. Hesitatingly he gave his wife to Sakra. Pleased with this, Sakra revealed his self and gave boons to Vessantara. At the end he was happily reunited with his father and children.

In the light of the facts of the above story, it seems easy to identify the figures of the present panel from Miran. The Central figure, which Stein and Andrews feel inclined to identify as Gautama, is in my opinion Vessantara's father king Sanjaya. That he was a king is evident from his dignified bearing and also from the fact that he is shown seated on a throne, with his feet resting on a footstool. The smaller figure to the right is Vessantara, whose royal lineage is indicated by the conical cap or turban on his head. The other figure, now almost completely damaged, except a portion of his left knee and fore-arm represents probably one of the audience who came to complain to the king against Vessantara's indiscreet act of excessive charity. Thus the main scene intended to be portrayed here is the complaint of the subjects against Vessantara and the latter's meeting his parents before going on exile. Since the painting has been very much damaged the whole of the scene cannot be easily understood, though the part of the episode showing Vessantara, taking leave of his father with folded hand is very clear.

The identification which I suggest is supported partly by an Amaravati sculpture (pl.II) and largely by a painting in Cave XVII in Ajanta (Pl.III), depicting the Vessantara Jataka. The Amaravati sculpture very vividly shows the agitation of the people before the king Sanjaya.⁶ As is the case with the Central Asian panel, the king is seated on a throne with his right foot placed on the foot-stool. His left arm rests on the back of the throne and the right arm is shown akimbo with the hand placed on the thigh.

On the left of this scene is shown the gift of the elephant by Vessantara and on the right the gift by him of the cart and the bulls. But one significant thing to note is that the Amaravati panel omits to show Vessantara taking leave of his father - the scene, which is the main subject matter of the Central Asian painting in question. The Ajanta painting mentioned above depicts this particular theme very elaborately and has been of great help to me in identifying the Central Asian panel from Miran.

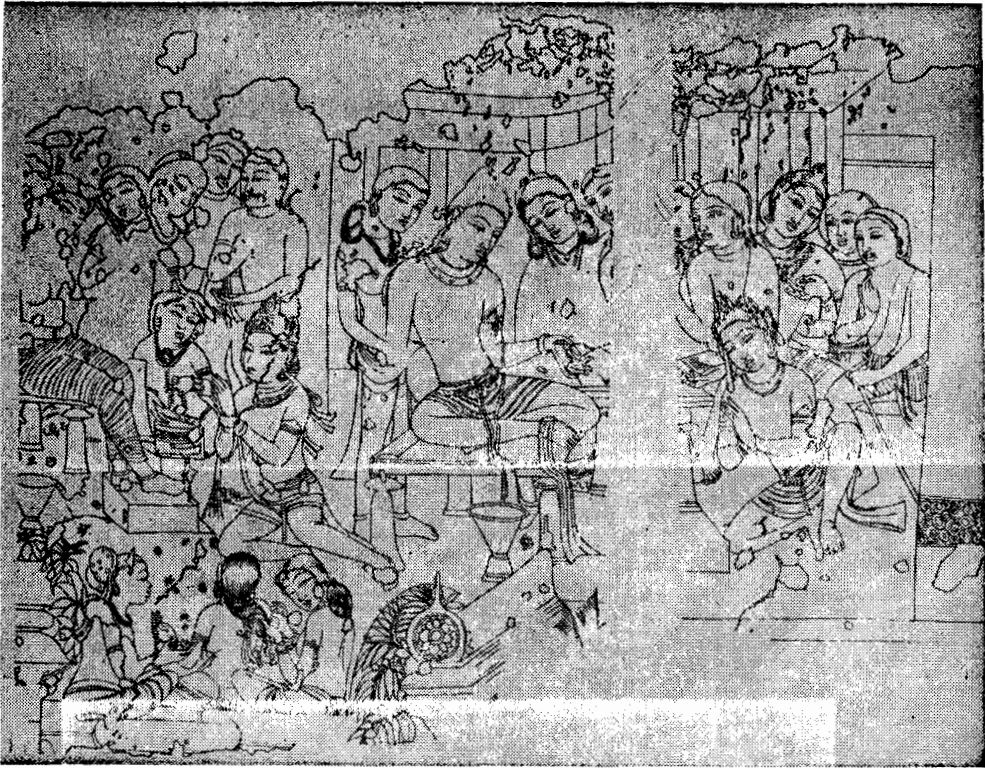


In Ajanta painting we find Vessantara taking leave first of his mother, Phusati and then his father , Sanjaya. The queen Phusati is shown seated on a throne, and Vessantara, kneels down before her with his hands joined in adoration⁷. There are three maids depicted in three different poses below the queen and the prince. By the side of the queen there are a female chauri bearer and two more maids, holding ornaments probably for the prince to enable him to offer gifts according to his heart's desire.⁸

Vessantara is shown again near the feet of his father seated on a throne. The face of the king shows anxiety. Here also Vessantara kneels down with folded hands.⁹ In both the places he is shown bedecked in jewellery and crown. The artist brings out very successfully the nobility of Vessantara's character, i.e. his respect for his parents and obedience to his father's wishes on one side and on the other the anxiety of his parents and an overspread gloom in the palace because of impending banishment of Vessantara.

When one compares the details of the Ajanta painting with those of the Central Asian fragment one hardly fails to recognise the identity of their subject matter. It is interesting to note that though the other parts of the story are found depicted in many sculptures and paintings this particular incident of Vessantara's taking leave of his father before going on exile survives now only in the Ajanta and Central Asian fragments under discussion.

The Vessantara Jataka seems to have been very popular in Central Asia as in India. Stein discovered a very elaborate depiction of this Jataka (pl. IV) also on a frieze of the south-east wall of the round passage of the Miran Temple V about sixty yards north-west from the Miran shrine No.III.¹⁰



Here also, the physical features, dress and crown of Vessantara (shown as gifting away the auspicious elephant to the Kalinga Brahmins) are the same as those of the Vessantara figure depicted in the Miran shrine III, described above. From Stein's description of the painting of the Miran V it appears that originally the incident of Vessantara's meeting his father before going on exile was depicted here also, but the particular portion was badly damaged when Stein visited the site., leaving only a bare outline of it, not admitting of a very easy identification.

The Dipankara, Ruru, Vessantara and many other Jatakas were depicted in Central Asian paintings. The popularity of this theme in Central Asia can be explained by the fact that in this region Hinayana Buddhism continued to flourish side by side with Mahayana Buddhism for a long time. Both Fa-hien and Hiuen-Tsang noticed many flourishing centres of Hinayana Buddhism in several regions of Central Asia. In fact, we find a great preponderance of the Hinayana theme in the Central Asian art as in Ajanta and Bamiyana.

NOTES:

1. Sri Aurel Stein, *Sirindia*, Vol. I, Text (Oxford, 1921), P.493.
2. Sir Aurel Stein, *op. cit.* pp. 504 and 505; F.H. Andrews, *Catalogue of Wall—Paintings from Ancient Shrines in Central Asia and Sistan* (Delhi, 1933), p. 67, *Wall—Paintings from Ancient Shrines in Central Asia.* (Oxford, 1948), p. 2 and 3.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Stein, *op-cit*, pp. 504 and 505.
5. E. B. Cowell and W.H.D. Rouse, the Jataka, Vol. VI (Vesantara Jataka, Jataka No. 547), p. 246 ff.
6. C. Sivaramamurti, *Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum* (Madras, 1956), pp. 260 and 261, pl. XLII, 5.
7. G. Yazdani, *Ajanta Text Part IV* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 44 and 45 pl. XXIa.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Sir Aurel Stein, *op. cit*, pp. 521 and 516, figs, 134-140.
11. Sir Aurel Stein, *op-cit*, pp. 517 and 518.