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# The nun of Milan: A Gandharan *bhikṣuṇī* figurine in the Civico Museo Archeologico\*

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## Abstract:

A Gandharan stucco figurine in the Civico Museo Archeologico in Milan, probably originating from Hadda, depicts a *bhikṣuṇī*. Cautiously dated around the second century AD or, more likely, later, this piece constitutes a rare iconographic testimony to the presence of female Buddhist monastics in Gandhāra.

## Keywords:

*bhikkhunī*, *bhikṣuṇī*, *gaṇḍapratīcchādāna*, Gandhāra, Hadda, nun figurine, nuns' robes, *saṃkacchika*, *saṃkākṣikā*, stucco, *Vinaya*

The collection of Gandharan sculpture in the Civico Museo Archeologico in Milan includes a small statuette depicting a Buddhist nun (inv. no. A 1988.02.01; see figures 1–2).<sup>1</sup> The statuette, of unknown provenance and acquired through purchase in Milan, measures 26 x 10 x 7.6 cm. Its lowermost part just below the rim of her upper robe—ankles and feet—is missing. The robes worn by the nun display well-preserved traces of polychromy, more reddish than brownish in colour.<sup>2</sup> The statuette is, presumably, made of stucco.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The collection is held in the museum building that houses most of the collections of the Civico Museo Archeologico, located in the former convent of the Monastero Maggiore, alongside the ancient church of San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore, with entrance on Corso Magenta 15; see Salsi 2011: 165–166. The creation of an exhibition section dedicated to Gandharan art—comprising steles, reliefs, and figurine fragments—belongs to the relatively recent history of the Civiche Raccolte Archeologiche di Milano and thereby of the museum. No holding of Gandharan provenance was present in the materials acquired until the mid-1970s. The initial purchases, acquired from both art dealers and private donors, were also supplemented by donations. These acquisitions, at least until the early 1990s, were vetted by Alessandro Passi (Università degli Studi di Bologna). An unpublished catalogue of the collection building on Passi's preliminary work was prepared by Giovanni Verardi (then Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli and Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente) in the early 1990s. Additional pieces were acquired in subsequent years; see Provenzali 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For recent research on materials and polychrome decoration of Gandharan art, see Lluveras-Tenorio et al. 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Since no material analysis has been carried out, it is not possible to determine with certainty whether the piece is made of stucco or gesso. Very precise and detailed studies are now available on the stucco working techniques used in Gandhāra besides the contribution of Varma 1987. The reader is referred, in particular, to the

The Gandharan iconographic production made use of three kinds of material: stone, especially schist, widespread in Gandhāra proper as well as Swat, at an early date; unbaked clay, common in the Buddhist sites of present-day Afghanistan, and, finally, stucco, of more limited use, attested in a number of sites between south-eastern Afghanistan, Gandhāra, and the region of Taxila bordering Punjab. A sizeable number of fragments of stucco images, mostly heads, often preserving traces of colour, come from the mounds forming the large site of Hadda, ancient Nagarāhāra, in the vicinity of present-day Jalalabad. Hadda's artistic output is impressive not only in quantitative terms but also because it has preserved for centuries the characteristics of a surprising, unmistakably Hellenised production.<sup>4</sup> Tapa-ye Kafariya, one of Hadda's numerous sites, partly excavated by Jules Barthoux in the 1920s and dated to the third–fourth century has yielded a very large number of stucco images.<sup>5</sup> Numerous materials in stucco come also from Tapa Kalan, known since the nineteenth century and excavated by Zémarylai Tarzi.<sup>6</sup> Attention has recently been paid to the site of Bhamala near Haripur, north of Taxila, a sanctuary that had already attracted John Marshall's attention. The courtyard of Stūpa B shows a use of stucco images even more extensive than the monastery of Jaulian at Taxila.<sup>7</sup> Some of the images found in the excavation were safely left in situ, whereas the rest are kept in the Peshawar Museum. The description and photographic documentation of the well-known stucco images from the monasteries of Jaulian and Mora Moradu can be easily found in John Marshall's volumes on his excavations at Taxila.<sup>8</sup>

The place of origin of the Milan statuette is in all probability the region straddling the Khyber where the sites mentioned above are located, even if the use of stucco is documented also in more distant areas. On account of its material and stylistic aspects considered in comparison with the stucco production in the area, the large site of Hadda and locations of related production might be the place of origin of the statuette, which might date from just after the second century AD, or, more likely, later. These are just rough approximations as dating isolated stucco pieces poses challenges due to their tendency to show minimal changes over extended periods and their decontextualised nature which severs the archaeological and iconographic relationship from their original environments.

The nun of Milan, although not old, is not really young, as shown by the creases on the forehead and on the sides of her mouth. The shaping of details such as the hands and the ears is realised fairly roughly. Her head is turned to her left, in all likelihood to face an image of the Buddha. It is probable that the statuette was part of a small group of nuns, arguably a

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analyses and study carried out on a head kept in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Verri et al. 2019), subject to clarification that the term 'stucco' here refers exclusively to "lime- (CaCO<sub>3</sub>) or gypsum- (CaSO<sub>4</sub>)-based compounds, which are the binding agent and whose properties can be modified by the addition of aggregates, such as sand and straw, and additives, such as organic materials, including gums, proteins, oils, etc." (p. 138).

<sup>4</sup> The reader is referred to Vanleene 2022, assembling the documentation of all the sites of Hadda and of a good part of the materials found there, thousands of which are kept in the Musée Guimet in Paris; cf. also Vanleene 2019. The most spectacular finds from Hadda come from Tapa Shotor, now destroyed but well documented, all made of unbaked clay (Tarzi 1991, among several other publications).

<sup>5</sup> Barthoux 1930–1933.

<sup>6</sup> Tarzi 1990 and Vanleene 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Hameed et al. 2018: 179; for Bhamala, cf. also Hameed et al. 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall 1951.

*pendant* of a group of monks. The scene may have been shaped in one of the panels decorating the square body of a stūpa, between one pilaster and another.

The nun's ears are significantly elongated, as is generally, but not always the case with those of monks, of which, however, Gandharan iconography offers, by comparison, an overwhelming number of examples. The elongated earlobes usually characterise the image of the Gandharan Buddha. This feature is, however, not included among the thirty-two marks (*lakṣaṇa*) or the eighty secondary characteristics (*anuvyañjana*) of his body;<sup>9</sup> its most usual reading is that it would be meant to emphasise his social upbringing, wealth, and power since, as a Śākya prince, he would have worn big, heavy earrings, which would have stretched his ear lobes. Such heavy earrings that had created the elongated lobes were a common adornment of male and females from families of good standing. Arguably, it is difficult to imagine how the (Gandharan) Hellenistic canon could have approved of such an aesthetic stretch. There are examples where the ears of the Buddha are reverted to normal size, as in a standing schist image in the Lahore Museum;<sup>10</sup> but, in general, Buddha images showing ears of normal shape are very rare. The implications carried by a possible need to identify the Śākyans as members of the *kṣatriya* order by means of this iconographic trait might explain why, *pace* the Hellenistic canon, the elongated ears were embraced so pervasively in Gandharan Buddhist art. In any case, it remains difficult to understand why Buddhist monastics would have also wanted to or come to be represented in the same way, as if in imitation of the Buddha. The present specimen shows that no distinction was made between monks and nuns in terms of such an apparent tribute paid, as it were, to the Buddha's physical feature.

The nun raises the lower hem of her upper robe with her hands, lifting one to the height of her right breast with her right hand, and the other well above the corresponding knee with her left hand. The dynamism of the gesture expresses the movement of rolling up the robe in order to put it with the right shoulder uncovered as if about to pay homage to the Buddha. The seeming insouciance of her demeanour in lifting the robe's flaps might be judged objectionable if it were not for the statuette's full compliance with the principles of Hellenistic art—embracing movement, variety, and a departure from codified, rigid gestures and poses.

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The task of the coroplast was to show that the image was that of a nun. Simply relying on her facial features and shaven head would not have been enough to distinguish her as such. The two means available to convey her identity as a nun, rather than a monk, were pointers to her different body shape and close-up details of her monastic attire. As to her body shape, the coroplast chose to reveal, however discretely, the presence of female breasts. This discreet cue ruled out suggesting the presence of the *saṃkakkṣikā* (Pali *samkacchika*), on the assump-

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<sup>9</sup> The Buddha's ears have equal size and shape and are completely free from defects (nos. 69 and 70 in most listings of the *anuvyañjana*); for references to surveys of the eighty secondary characteristics see the references listed in Anālayo 2017: 65 note 77 as well as Wimalaratana 1994 (?): 193–195.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Marshall 1960: pl. 58, fig. 85.

tion that this piece of a nun’s robe was designed to compress and flatten the breasts (more on this point further below); attempting a depiction of the *saṃkākṣikā* would have minimised the small-spaced breasts, concealing her female identity. As to the robes’ attire, this appears distinct from that seen in depictions of monks, both in the way she wears her robes and in the inclusion of at least one piece of robe—the garment seen wrapping the right shoulder—never typically worn by male monastics. The statuette displays three pieces of robe in total: (1) the upper robe (Pali and Sanskrit *uttarāsaṅga*), (2) a shoulder-covering garment visible on the right shoulder left unwrapped by the upper robe (not seen in the case of monks); (3) the lower robe (Pali *antaravāsaka*, Sanskrit *antarvāsa*).

For nuns, all *Vinayas* add two more pieces of robe to the basic set of three, consisting of a lower robe (Pali *antaravāsaka*, Sanskrit *antarvāsa*), an upper robe (Pali and Sanskrit *uttarāsaṅga*), and an outer robe or cloak (Pali *saṅghāṭi* or *saṅghāṭī*, Sanskrit *saṅghāṭi*). That is, in the case of nuns, this threefold (and symbolic) set (Pali *ticīvara*, Sanskrit *tricīvara*) becomes a set of five in total.<sup>11</sup> These two additional robes, however, as summed up by Ann Heirman (2008: 148), “are not the same in every *Vinaya* tradition. Moreover, there seems to be much confusion regarding the exact use of these robes.”<sup>12</sup> Now, the garment visible on the nun’s right shoulder, clearly differentiating her appearance from that of a monk, must be one of these two additional robes.

In principle, the garment wrapping the nun’s right shoulder could be identified either as a *saṃkākṣikā* (Pali *saṃkacchika*) or, alternatively, a *gaṇḍapratichhādāna*. On the basis of a scrutiny of ancient Indian texts and iconographic representations, Oskar von Hinüber (in von Hinüber and Anālayo 2016: 85) has shown that “the *saṃkākṣikā* is a comparatively narrow ribbon”.<sup>13</sup> The *gaṇḍapratichhādāna*, unknown to the Theravāda tradition,<sup>14</sup> occurs in the *Bhikṣuṇī-Prakīrṇaka* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda tradition as a piece of cloth to be pulled down above the *saṃkākṣikā* so as to fully cover the curvature of the bosom which is revealed on wearing only a *saṃkākṣikā*, because the latter appears not to cover the breasts completely, but only providing some support while leaving part of the breasts uncovered.<sup>15</sup> von Hinüber (in von Hinüber and Anālayo 2016: 85) has pointed out that, according to the

<sup>11</sup> On the *ticīvara* as per the Theravāda *Vinaya* see, e.g., Kieffer-Pülz 2007: 35–45, and on the formula for the declaration of the determination of the not being separated from the *ticīvara* as transmitted by various *Vinaya* traditions Chung and Kieffer-Pülz 1997: 42–49.

<sup>12</sup> See the survey in Heirman 2008: 148–151; cf. also Dhammadinnā 2016: 40 note 29. Heirman 2008: 150 further explains that in fact, “when seen together, the *Vinayas* ... put forward six robes that can be part of the standard clothing set of a *bhikṣuṇī*: an inner robe, an upper robe, an outer cloak, a bathing cloth, and two more special garments.”

<sup>13</sup> See Roth 2005 [1970]: 203,<sup>31</sup> (§ 187). von Hinüber in von Hinüber and Anālayo 2016: 85 notes, however, that this is contradicted by *pācittiya* rule no. 74 of the Sanskrit Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda *Vinaya*, which gives the size of the *saṃkākṣikā* as four *sugata* spans long and two wide; on *sugatavidatthi* referring to a current, average span, see Kieffer-Pülz and Pruitt 2018: 193 note 2.

<sup>14</sup> Except that it could perhaps be similar to the vest or shoulder cloth (*aṅsa*) nowadays worn by Theravāda monks in some communities in South and South-east Asian, which might perform a function somewhat similar to that of the *gaṇḍapratichhādāna*. However, unlike the case of the pieces of robes in question, this is not classified as a piece of *ticīvara*, but it is generally understood to pertain to the category of requisite-cloths (*parikkhāra-coḷa*), whose allowance is found in the Theravāda *Vinaya* at Vin I 296,<sup>32</sup> (Pali Text Society edition); see the detailed discussion in Kieffer-Pülz 2007: 42–45.

<sup>15</sup> Roth 2005 [1970]: 306,<sup>3</sup> (§ 263) (*saṃkākṣikā*) and 313,<sup>2</sup> (§ 277) (*gaṇḍapratichhādāna*).

Theravāda *Vinaya*, the *saṃkacchika* also covers the body from the collarbone to the navel, “which would also make a *gaṇḍapratichhādāna*, an item consequently not mentioned in the Pāli *Vinaya*, superfluous” (p. 85). In Taking into account Yijing’s 義淨 translation of *saṃkakṣikā* as ‘side-covering cloth’,<sup>16</sup> von Hinüber (in von Hinüber and Anālayo 2016: 85–86) envisages the following development: “Originally, there were two pieces of clothing as described in the [Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda] Bhikṣuṇīprakīrṇaka. Using the narrow *saṃkakṣikā*, however, became obsolete in course of time while, simultaneously, this term could be used for a larger garment now, and, as it were, replace [the] *gaṇḍapratichhādāna paṭa* [a robe to hide the rounding of the breasts]. Already at the time of the *Vibhaṅga*-commentary in the Pāli *Vinaya*, it seems, *saṃkacchika* had semantically replaced *gaṇḍapratichhādāna* ... the development leading finally towards *saṃkakkhika* / *saṃkakṣikā* superseding *gaṇḍapratichhādāna* seems to have been a fairly early one.”

In the light of the above, it may be suggested that the nun of Milan is not wearing a *saṃkakṣikā*, which would have presumably flattened her breasts—assuming that nuns would have worn such a sash in that way when the piece was created and that the coroplast would have attempted to take it into account. It remains, however, challenging to pinpoint which piece of robe she is actually wearing. Firstly, given that already the tradition shows uncertainties in matters of nuns’ robes, with the designation and function of the robes specific to nuns being inconsistent across the *Vinayas*, trying to precisely identify it by means of already obscure explanations would be a rather groundless endeavour. Secondly, historically, the institutional affiliation(s) of the monastic establishments of ancient Gandhāra over time still remains indefinite,<sup>17</sup> which makes it practically impossible to predict, based on textual testimonies, what types of robe set one could expect to find represented in art. Additional uncertainty in this respect comes from a gap in our knowledge of the way Gandharan nuns wore their robes, that is, how they would practically implement the *Vinaya* requirements in that respect. Such a gap cannot be filled by turning to the material culture of the living monastic tradition, for the disappearance of the female Buddhist order in India (and Gandhāra) and the discontinuation of the Indian living robe-making (and robe-wearing) monastic tradition for Buddhist nuns prior to the contemporary re-establishment of the Theravāda *bhikkhūnī* order in the twentieth century has determined a hiatus in the transmission of this aspect of monastic material culture in South and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>16</sup> Takakusu 1896: 55.

<sup>17</sup> To date, two Gandhari manuscripts identified as containing text pertaining to the *Vinaya* have been identified. The first of them, fragment BC 13 from the Bajaur Collection of Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts, is inscribed on both sides of the scroll, with two different versions of the beginning of the *naiḥsargika pācittiya* rules being written on the two sides. The obverse contains the first nine rules on the section of matters concerning monastic robes, whereas the reverse remained incomplete due to lack of space (caused by the larger-size script that was necessary on the rougher surface of the reverse), stopping in the middle of rule no. 8; see Strauch 2014 and 2022: 8. According to Strauch 2014: 824 the presence of two different versions of the rule in the same manuscript may indicate that “the scribe conducted a comparative analysis of both versions”. As observed in Anālayo 2023 [2020]: 82, however, “finding two different texts on the two sides of a manuscript might only reflect the constraints of the medium, in terms of dearth of writing material, and need not imply that these two texts were actually employed in the same oral performance by the same reciters”. The second, recently identified, contains the first nine *saṅghādisesa/saṃghātiśeṣa* rules of a Gandhari *Prātimokṣa-sūtra*; this manuscript is currently being studied by Mark Allon; see also Strauch 2022. On the Bajaur collection in general, see, e.g., Strauch 2008a and 2008b, and Falk and Strauch 2014. The circulation and use of *Vinaya* texts in Indic languages other than the local Gandhari, stemming from one or different monastic lineages, is also possible; see Salomon 2020.

In any case, and more importantly, expecting that a figurine would accurately replicate the minute details of actual monastic attire would be methodologically misguided. After all, Gandharan Buddhists would look at, and pay homage to, images that were created on their own visual—and in many ways conceptual—terms vis-à-vis the languages of contemporary texts and traditions. For the time being, we have to content ourselves with welcoming the finding of the nun of Milan as providing a rare testimony to the presence of *bhikṣuṇīs* in Gandharan art,<sup>18</sup> approximately in the period following the second century AD, adding to the sparse epigraphic and textual presence of nuns in Gandhari records.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18.</sup> The faintly visible profile of a painted female worshipper at the feet of the Buddha in the now completely destroyed chapel 100 of the Tapa Sardar sanctuary, does not seem to point to a nun; see photograph and linear sketch in Verardi forthcoming (previously published in Verardi and Paparatti 2005: 424–425, figs. 23 and 24; the analysis in Verardi and Paparatti is now updated in Verardi forthcoming).

<sup>19.</sup> Inscriptions CKI 226 and possibly CKI 225 in Baums 2012: 239 (nos. 36 and 35 respectively); see also the entries for or *bhikkhuni* and *bhikkhunisaṃgha* in the Gandhari.org dictionary at <https://gandhari.org/dictionary/bhikkhuni> and <https://gandhari.org/dictionary/bhikkhunisa%E1%B9%83gha>.

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Fig.1: Gandharan *bhikṣuṇī* figurine, Civico Museo Archeologico, Milan, inv. no. A 1988.02.01



PLATE 20

Fig.2: Gandharan *bhikṣuṇī* figurine, Civico Museo Archeologico, Milan, inv. no. A 1988.02.01

