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Visual Narratives of Divine Kingship and Martial Authority: An Analysis of Regal Images During the Reign of Kanishka I

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Abstract:

This article delves into the artistic expressions of divine kingship and martial authority during the Kushana Dynasty, with a specific emphasis on the reign of Kanishka I. The study centres mostly on the sculptural portrayal of Kanishka along with other supportive artefacts, including coins and relic caskets, offering a subtle exploration of their iconography and symbolism. While some of these objects are widely recognised, others are newly discovered or overlooked, enriching our understanding of the visual language employed by the Kushana rulers. By scrutinising sculptures, the study unravels the multifaceted layers of meaning embedded in these artistic creations, revealing the nuanced representations of divine kingship and martial authority. The article also highlights the differentiation of representational ideologies within the empire, as observed in the distinct depictions of the ruler in Gandhara and Mathura. In Gandhara, Kanishka is portrayed as a benign celestial deity, while in Mathura, a more martial representation of the king emerges. Additionally, the study uncovers the differentiation of cultural entities within the Kushana Empire. In Gandhara, the ruler assimilated into the local culture, while in Mathura, he showcased himself adorned in Central Asian attire. This cultural dichotomy is explored through the lens of artistic representations, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which the rulers projected their identity and authority. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper comprehension of the complex interplay between art, ideology, and cultural identity during the Kushana Dynasty, particularly under the reign of Kanishka I.

Keywords: Divine, Kanishka, Kushana, Martial, Sculpture.

Introduction: During the era of Kushanas (ca. 1st century CE–3rd century CE), art flourished in two principal spheres: the expansive Bactro-Gandhara region in the northwest, producing art steeped in Hellenistic and Iranian influences, and northern India, particularly the Mathura region, where works in the Indic style thrived (Huntington & Huntington, 1985, p. 126).

Due to the advantageous geographical location of Gandhara, trade prospered along the well-established Silk Road. This fostered the gradual settlement and growth of Buddhist

communities in the region (Callieri, 2006). The prosperity of trade became a driving force behind the patronage of Buddhism by merchants. These traders generously donated substantial amounts of money to Buddhist monasteries and sacred sites. This infusion of financial support became a catalyst for the gradual construction of religious idols, portraying various deities and ultimately contributing to the evolution of a distinct and expansive genre of art. Simultaneously, the middle Ganga valley, with its vibrant commercial activities, emerged as another significant artistic centre that shaped the post-Mauryan artistic landscape. Mathura, as the southern capital of the Kushanas, became a noteworthy hub, contributing a valuable chapter to the cultural history of the Indian subcontinent (Chakrabarti, 2006, pp. 2–5). While not as opulent as Gandhara, the art of Mathura played an integral role in shaping the artistic narrative of the period.

Within these artistic genres, stone sculptures took centre stage, portraying religious motifs alongside the notable presence of regal portraits. These portraits, a distinctive contribution introduced by the Kushana rulers, evolved into a pivotal tool for defining and disseminating the concepts of divinity and martial authority among their subjects. This article delves into the profound impact and symbolism embedded in this artistic substance, exploring its role as a means of reinforcing the enduring concepts of divine rulership and power during the era of the Kushanas.

The Genesis: The initial phases of the Kushanas existence depict them as mobile nomadic tribes. Tracing their origins from the chronicles of the Han dynasties in China (Chakravarti, 2014, p. 39), the nomadic past of the Kushanas reveals their roots in the *Yuezhi*, a central Asian tribe who were speakers of Tocharian dialects (Bivar, 2009, para. 5). With continued conflicts with the neighbouring *Xiongnu* (Huns) along the northern borders of China, the *Yuezhi* tribe was compelled to undertake a westward migration during the 2nd century BCE. After various conflicts with regional powers, they finally arrived in Bactria around the late 2nd century BCE (Liu, 2001, p. 265). As chronicled in the *Hou Han Shu* (5th century CE), the annals of the later Han dynasty, the *Yuezhi* tribe was divided into five clans or chiefs—*Hui-mi*, *Shuang-mi*, *Kueishuang*, *Hi-tun*, and *Tu-mi*. Notably, it was the *Kueishuang* lineage that gave rise to the dynastic appellation of Kushana (Chakravarti, 2014, p. 42).

Heraos or Heraios (or Heraus/Heraeus), the earliest documented Kushana ruler, is substantiated through coins bearing his association with the Kushana (*Koshano*) (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 148; Bivar, 2009). But the metamorphosis from the nomadic *Yuezhi* to a settled polity unfolded during the reign of the formidable ruler known in Chinese records as *K'iu-tsiu-k'io*, likely identified as the Kushana king Kujula Kadphises from his inscribed coins (Chakravarti, 2014, p. 43). Credited in Chinese accounts with subjugating the other four *Yuezhi* clans, he notably conquered *Bu'ia*, often equated with Bactra, the capital of Bactria situated near modern Majar-i-Shariff in Afghanistan. His military forays also extended to *Anxi* (the Parthian ruler of Iran) and *Gao-fu*, or Kabul (Chakravarti, 2014, p. 43). Subsequently, his grandson, Vima Kadphises (Kadphises II), expanded Kushana dominion into the Indus River region and to Mathura, while Kaniska I, the fourth ruler in the lineage, furthered the Kushana empire, extending their authority across Uzbekistan,

Afghanistan, much of the Indus basin, and the surrounding territories of Mathura (Mukherjee, 1988, pp. 43–92).

The Idea of Divine Kingship: The concept of divine kingship in the Kushana era has been thoroughly explored by many scholars. The notion of kingship in early India changed over time. But a contemporaneous text *Manusmṛti* considered the king's celestial genesis from eternal particles of—Sun, Moon, Fire, Wind, Yama, Kubera, Varuna, and Indra (Hopkins, 1931, p. 311). Ranabir Chakravarti (2014) emphasises this eloquent testimony within a monarchical framework, prominently showcased through the Kushana polity (pp. 55–56). Notably, the Kushana rulers seemed to strive for a divine status, evident in their adoption of 'Devaputra' or 'The Son of God' as their dynastic attribute, a term prominently inscribed on the coins of Kushana monarchs (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 278). Sanping Chen (2002) suggests that it is possible that the dynastic epithet 'devaputra' was influenced by the Chinese tradition where the ruler was perceived as the 'Son of Heaven' (p. 293). Further affirmations of this divine kingship include titles such as 'Devamanusa' (God in human) in Sanskrit, 'Bago' (God), and 'Bogopouro' (Son of God) in Bactrian (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 279). Suchandra Ghosh (2017) suggests that the narrative of divine kingship was disseminated across the empire, with particular emphasis placed on their coins. These coins, as a widely circulated medium, became instrumental in attracting extensive public attention. Hence, Kushana rulers were frequently depicted on the obverse of their coins with a halo behind their heads, symbolising their transcendent nature, often portrayed as emerging from celestial clouds. The portrayal of the king as a god is apparent in these actions (p. 8–9).

An intriguing aspect previously unseen in the subcontinent was the Kushana rulers' pioneering construction of dynastic 'God-houses,' or sanctuaries referred to as 'Bagolango' or 'Bogopouro' in Bactrian, and 'Devakula' in Sanskrit/Prakrit inscriptions. These sanctuaries served as centres for the worship of the rulers themselves (Ghosh, 2017, pp. 12–13). Vima Kadphises initiated the construction of two such centres for the royal cult: one near Mathura at Mat and the other at Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan. Kanishka I continued and completed the dynastic sanctuary at Surkh Kotal. Kushana dynastic sanctuaries were also discovered at Khalchayan and Airtam in Uzbekistan. These sanctuaries housed life-sized free-standing statues of three generations of kings (Ghosh, 2017, p. 13), symbolising their status akin to that of God. According to B.N. Mukherjee, a Kushana monarch was worshipped as a deity in a temple during his lifetime and after his death (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 280). He also suggests that the deification of kings, the installation and worship of their images in shrines, and people's reverence for them led to the practice of a cult of the emperor (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 287). Suchandra Ghosh (2017) suggests that this practice was likely intended to foster unity in an empire encompassing diverse ethnicities, linguistic groups, religious beliefs, and cultural customs (p. 13).

Art and Ideology: Art played a pivotal role in the propaganda efforts of the Kushana rulers. In the discerning analysis of Benjamin Rowland (1971), the styles and ethnic nuances discernible in Khalchayan presaged the distinctive attributes that would come to define the later opulence of Gandhara art, perhaps even contributing to its very genesis (p. 32). He

astutely identified a compelling affinity between the illustrious head of a *Yuezhi* prince from Khalchayan and Gandhara Bodhisattva, and proposed a hypothesis that—these depictions might embody local nobility, rendered in a divine semblance reminiscent of figures within the Buddhist pantheon (Rowland, 1961). Madame Pugachenkova's keen observations deepen the narrative, drawing attention to the striking resemblance between one of the royal portrait heads and the coin portraits of Heraos housed at the Lahore Museum (Rowland, 1971, p. 32). This shared likeness transcends mere ethnic characteristics, hinting at the distinct possibility that it represents yet another manifestation of a deified royal portrait. Here, art surpasses its traditional function of visually representing things, transforming into a powerful medium through which rulers rise to a divine level. They intertwine their images with elements borrowed from religious pantheons and local cultural symbols, creating a heightened and symbolic representation of their authority.

The significance of this artistic narrative gained even greater prominence during the reign of Kanishka I. Notably, personal idols of the ruler, adorned with distinct characteristics, serve as the focal point of our analysis, delving into the intricacies of these representations.

The Mat, housing the renowned fragmented sculpture of Kanishka currently displayed in the Mathura Museum, offers an arresting portrayal. It captures him attired as a Scythian nobleman, with boots and a stiff tunic (Huntington & Huntington, 1985, p. 128). According to Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington (1985), Kanishka's martial prowess is subtly suggested by the attributes of his weaponry—a mace delicately resting on the ground, supported by his right hand, and a sword firmly clutched in his left (p. 129), with a raptor-headed hilt—a symbol of 'God-given fortune' (Mode, 1995, pp. 551–552). These symbolic elements eloquently convey his dominion and capacity to assert control, emblematic of a Kushana ruler. But they also suggest, "Although religious or other abstract symbolism has been inferred from these items, it is yet to be determined if the presence of the weapons indicates more than a normal part of the formal dress required for state portraits" (Huntington & Huntington, 1985, p. 129).

Turning our attention to the sanctity of Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan, broken images of Kushana rulers, recovered in the 1950s, offer compelling insights. Scholars have identified one as the likeness of Kanishka I (Schlumberger, 1959, p. 85). Despite the upper portion of the sculpture being damaged, discernible features include the figure adorned in Afghan salwar, a tunic embellished with vine designs, and long boots fastened with buttons (Rosenfield, 1967, p. 156). Suchandra Gosh (2011) underscores the resemblance between the Mat and Surkh Kotal images. Although both sculptures share similarities in clothing, according to her, "The style of clothing while having some parity differs in the fact that the Surkh Kotal image is wearing a salwar typical to the Afghan lands whereas the Mathura shows a royal personage dressed in typical central Asian clothing. This was a portrayal of their authority in their acquired territory to suggest that they were rulers of the region and were different from the indigenous population. This could indicate the kind of political culture adopted by the Kushanas in their realm" (p. 217). Further nuances in this argument

arise, particularly in the Kanishka image from Mat. The mace features a noteworthy detail: the depiction of the Indic *makara* near the base (Rosenfield, 1967, p. 179). This prompts the question of why a Kushana ruler, embracing Scythian dressing, incorporates an Indic symbol in the mace near his feet. The *makara*, a mythological hybrid creature associated with the river goddess Ganga (Darian, 1976), suggests Kanishka's authority over the Ganges valley, illustrating his cultural and territorial dominance.

In an exhibition in Seoul, South Korea, a captivating sculpture of Kanishka I was exhibited in 2017. The sculpture is part of a private collector's collection from Pakistan. It stands approximately 120 cm tall and exhibits the characteristic Gandhara style, likely dating back to the 2nd century CE. Initially labelled as the 'Noble of the Kushan Dynasty,' the true significance of this sculpture was uncovered by historians Kang Woo-bang and Park Gyo-soon (Jae-hyun, 2018). They identified two symbols on the left side of the stone stand as the royal '*Tamga*,' an abstract seal or symbol associated with Kanishka I, resembling those found on the reverse of his coins (Akishev, 1984, p. 109). This revelation transformed the sculpture into a rare full-length representation of Kanishka I. We can identify the resemblance in the sculptural features between this full-length one and the image from Surkh Kotal. From this, we can presume that this full-length sculpture is probably similar in structure to the Kanishka image of Surkh Kotal, only that it is intact. So, this full-length sculpture offers a better understanding of the style. The lower portion is as similar as Surkh Kotal; in the upper portion, we can see the figure wearing a belt holding a decorative sheath, likely containing a sword, and possibly his left hand—which is broken—was resting on the handle of the sword. A conical hat adorned with various patterns, floral motifs, and jewels sits atop the figure's head. Additionally, the figure is adorned with various decorative jewels, reflecting opulence and prosperity. Considering the numismatic and epigraphical evidence aligning this image with Kanishka I, the lavish depiction within the royal image is expected and justified.

However, there are unique features in this sculpture that are not commonly associated with kings or nobles. The figure's hairstyle, curled like snail shells, is commonly found on sculptures of Sakyamuni. Stretched ear lobes, symbolising wisdom and compassion in Buddhist iconography, are noticeable (Krishan, 1966). The downward-casting eyes suggest a meditative state, with a gentle expression on the face resembling the moustachioed Bodhisattva of Gandhara art (Behrendt, 2007, pp. 54–55). Moreover, the figure holds a lotus in the right hand, symbolising purity and perfection, often associated with the charismatic existence of Buddha and Bodhisattvas in various styles (Siddiqui, 2012).

While Kanishka was a renowned patron of Buddhism, this sculpture bears significant influence from Buddhist ideology. However, it is not merely an adaptation of religious art into royal sculpture. The features eloquently depict the divine kingship of the Kushana ruler, positioning him almost akin to the divine.

A Similar disposition can be seen in the renowned Kanishka casket found in the relic chamber of the great Stupa at Shah-Ji-ki Dheri (Archaeological Survey of India, 1912, p.

49). According to the inscription inscribed on this casket, B.N. Mukherjee dated this during the time of Kanishka I, mentioned as situated in the city called *Kanishkapura*, modern-day Peshawar (Mukherjee, 1964). Crafted into two principal sections—a receptacle and its lid—the casket showcases three rounded figures atop the lid. The central figure portrays the seated Buddha, his right hand elevated in the *Abhayamudra*, flanked by two counterparts—Brahma and Indira—both standing gracefully with hands folded in the *Anjalimudra*. The external surface of the receptacle boasts an undulating garland enveloping its form, hosting sixteen relief figures, three of which represent the Buddha seated above the garland (Dobbins, 2012, pp. 24–26).

A regal figure, standing before the garland, appears to be the central figure of this embellishment—presumed to be Kanishka himself. Regally attired, the monarch dons a girded great coat or caftan with concentric folds cascading from a wide belt. The courtly attire, reaching below the knees, conceals the legs with pantaloons and the feet with sizable boots. With the left hand resting casually on the hip and the right hand gracefully raised, clutching two long flowers. The posture is similar to the newly discovered full-length image of Kanishka. A regal headdress, adorned with dual tiers, perhaps symbolising garlands, gracefully encircles a crown or pointed cap (Dobbins, 2012, p. 26). Beside the monarch stand personifications of the sun and moon deities (Rosenfield, 1967, Fig. 60a).

The relic caskets hold a profound charm within the sacred precincts of stupas. In crafting his own likeness upon the casket, the monarch endeavoured to convey the celestial essence inherent within him. The portrayal of the king amidst an array of divine deities on the receptacle is indicative of that. Notably, the king is adorned in opulent attire, reminiscent of his portrayal in other recognised depictions, yet abstains from holding any weapon.

Some sculptures of Kanishka, though not widely recognised, can be found in private collections—one such example is found in the LOT-ART collection, featured in an auction in 2016. Described as a schist statue of Kanishka (16.5 cm W x 27.9 cm H), this particular artwork presents two figures, one larger and the other smaller (“Important Gandharan Schist Statue of Kanishka,” 2016).

The presence of a halo behind the smaller figure’s head identifies it as a spiritual being like Indra or Bodhisattva. A similar divine aura is also gracing the king’s head, thereby endowing both with a divine identity. The king, distinguished by opulent attire akin to other Kushana depictions, holds a large mace in a slightly tilted manner, echoing a similar representation in the Kanishka image from Mat.

The sculpture’s style and posture align with the characteristics of Kanishka I, evident in his attire of Kushana tunic and boots. Yet the king also wears pantaloons and turban—a nod to the cultural influences of the Gandhara region. Interestingly, a striking resemblance exists between this figure and the image of Kumara (Kartikeya) housed in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Pal, 1986, p. 164). Of particular note is the discernible size disparity between the king’s image and that of the Bodhisattva. The king looms larger, suggesting a symbolic hierarchy wherein the Kushana king holds more significance in terms of divinity

compared to the Bodhisattva—implying a superiority of the king over the Indra or Bodhisattva in the eyes of worshippers or followers. This distinctive feature echoes in other artistic representations, such as the image of ‘*The God Kumara*’ (Pal, 1986, p. 164), the portrayal of ‘*Buddha with Uruvilva Kashyapa*’ in the National Museum, Karachi (Rhi, 2008, p. 56–57), as well as later Ajanta cave paintings depicting ‘*Buddha in Kapilavastu*’ (Ghosh, 1996, Plate LXXVI).

The intentional variation in size becomes a compelling point of consideration. It underscores a thematic departure wherein a king assumes a superior role in divinity, blending martial authority with a divine image. This nuanced differentiation in style and portrayal serves to convey a unique narrative, emphasising the elevated status of the Kushana king in comparison to traditional Bodhisattva representations.

Conclusion: The characterization of Kanishka as a *Cakravartin* in Buddhist Chinese and Central Asian texts is intriguing, notably portraying him as a forceful militarist expressing remorse for the violence inflicted upon his enemies. This depiction stands in stark contrast to early Buddhist art, which traditionally did not celebrate a martial king. The enigmatic portrayal of Kanishka wielding a formidable mace and sword in the Mathura portrait deepens this complexity, standing in sharp contrast to the prevailing artistic sensibilities of the time (Rosenfield, 1967, p. 176). Conversely, the recently discovered full-length sculpture from Gandhara presents a Kanishka that deviates significantly from the martial posture seen in the Mathura image. In this portrayal, Kanishka assumes a benign state, marking a departure from the militaristic iconography. This dichotomy in nature suggests the possibility of religious ideological differences between the dynastic sanctuaries of Mathura and the Gandhara region.

The profound artistic disparities transcend mere stylistic preferences; they potentially reflect underlying distinctions in religious ideology. In Mathura, Kanishka seeks to project himself as a potent cultural force, weaving together martial and divine elements, while in Gandhara, he gracefully adapts to the regional cultural nuances. This intricate exploration of artistic expression unfolds as a dynamic interplay between political authority, cultural identity, and religious beliefs. It invites us to contemplate the multifaceted nature of Kanishka’s representation, offering a nuanced lens through which to understand his dynamic presence across diverse cultural and religious landscapes.

The smaller sculptures of Kanishka provide compelling evidence that the cult of the emperor extended beyond the confines of dynastic sanctuaries; rather, it permeated into the realm of personal worship. These diminutive representations suggest a more intimate and individualised veneration of Kanishka, emphasising that his influence and divine status were not solely reserved for formal or dynastic settings. The presence of these smaller sculptures implies a widespread and personal devotion to the monarch, highlighting the multifaceted nature of his cult and its accessibility to a broader spectrum of worshippers.

As we delve deeper into this captivating tapestry, we are invited to contemplate the multifaceted nature of Kanishka's representation. It becomes a lens through which we can discern the dynamic presence of this ruler across diverse cultural and religious landscapes, offering profound insights into the complexities of his historical persona. The interwoven threads of militarism and divinity, cultural influence, and regional adaptation present Kanishka as a figure embodying the nuanced tapestry of his time.

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