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Image of a 'Bad' Nun: Indian Ivories in Ancient Turkmenistan

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Abstract

This paper focuses on two ivory artefacts, a plaque and a figurine, found in Mele Hairam, Turkmenistan. Dated roughly between the first and second century AD, the source of the two ivories is the Indian subcontinent where similar ivories have been found. Using a comparative perspective, this paper demonstrates that the scene on the ivory plaque can be closely associated with Indian stone reliefs dating to the early centuries AD and belonging to the network of long-distance trade routes. This analysis not only affirms the close relationship between the Mele Hairam ivories and the Indian artistic koine, but also proposes a preliminary identification of the scene on the ivory plaque.

Keywords

Buddhism – nun – Gandhāra – Silk Road – ivory – Begram – Kanaganahalli – Turkmenistan – *Vinaya*

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1 Mele Hairam: a Brief Survey

Mele Hairam, an oasis settlement in Southwest Turkmenistan, is located in the eastern part of the Serakhs oasis. Situated between two prominent settlements, Nishapur and Merv, it was strategically placed along the ancient routes connecting oasis settlements and trading centres. The site was excavated by the Polish-Turkmen Archaeological Mission from 1977 till 2008 during ten excavation seasons in collaboration with the Turkmen State Magtymguly University and the Ministry of Culture of Turkmenistan. The investigations led to the discovery of a monumental fire temple, comparable to the complex at Bandian and other Iranian sites, and dating to the Partho-Sassanian period. It was likely built around the second century AD, between two irrigation canals, and may have been abandoned due to low water levels in the canals around the fifth century AD.[1] It comprises six rooms which were modified during the different phases of its long use.[2] Architectural elements found within the rooms have provided valuable information regarding the development and ritual activities of the temple. Moreover, the temple's importance can also be understood based on several fully preserved and fragmentary ivory artefacts found in its southern sector. They depict ritual accoutrements and activities that can be associated with the fire cult. However, they were recovered within fallen brick debris and may have adorned equipment within the temple.

Besides these ivory artefacts strongly echoing the activities taking place within the temple, some other artefacts found in the north-western sector shed light on the temple's connection to the overland trade routes.[3] Their relationship to the Zoroastrian temple cannot be discerned based on the available archaeological evidence.[4] They include precious minerals such as lapis lazuli, coral beads, and pearls, as well as other fragmentary ivory figurines and plaques, some of which can be connected to the Indian subcontinent. These artefacts were luxury goods on long distance trade routes and were not produced at the site. For this reason, we cannot identify their source as Mele Hairam. Since they were discovered within debris layers associated with the

1 Kaim 2022, 108.

2 The results of the excavations are available in a handful of publications, notably, Kaim 2002 and 2004. For the plan of the site, see Wagner 2002, fig. 1.

3 This also includes ivory plaques depicting male figures showing strong affiliation to western Iranian and Parthian iconography and style (Kaim 2010, 332–335; 2015). Connectivity and contextual analyses of the artefacts, which are beyond the scope of this article, are part of a forthcoming article in preparation.

4 Kornacka 2007, 188.

fire temple, relative dating based on the archaeological assemblage, which is also chronologically heterogenous, is also not feasible.

This article focuses on two ivories, a plaque and a figurine, from the northwestern sector. The first section of this article provides an iconographic analysis of a scene on the fragmentary ivory relief plaque. It is significant that the motifs used in this plaque find a strong parallel not only with contemporary ivories but also on stone reliefs from the Indian subcontinent. This section argues that the style and iconography of the plaque reflects popular motifs used on stone reliefs from early Indian Buddhist sites. Striking parallels between the ivory plaque and reliefs of Gandhāra, Kanaganahalli, Amarāvati, Sānchī and Mathurā suggest that it may have been manufactured within the Indian subcontinent before its arrival in Mele Hairam. Moreover, another ivory figurine found at the same site allows us to further narrow the geographical provenance of the objects to a workshop in the Deccan plateau.

As the scene on the relief is only partially preserved, its identification remains a mystery. However, based on the results of the first section of this article, the second section seeks to put forward a hypothesis regarding its identification. This hypothesis is based on the presence of a Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī* (nun) on the plaque. Early Buddhist institutions dispersed all over the Indian subcontinent comprised both renunciate *bhikṣu*s (monks) and *bhikṣuṇī*s. Their active public presence within Buddhist religious sites is attested by numerous literary narratives, donative inscriptions and images. In texts, the *bhikṣuṇī*s' order is portrayed as a thriving community that drew women of aristocratic and mercantile backgrounds into its fold.[5] Epigraphic sources present *bhikṣuṇī*s as teachers, followers, and donors with sufficient personal capital rivalling the *bhikṣu*s.[6] Despite their prominent position in early Buddhist sources, the identification of *bhikṣuṇī*s in art continues to present several unresolved issues.[7] Many renunciate figures in the art of key Buddhist sites in the Indian subcontinent are often identified as *bhikṣu*s, and visual narratives related to *bhikṣuṇī*s continue to escape our recognition.

The identification offered by this paper is hypothetical, and the author is aware of the pitfalls in reconstructing a partially preserved plaque. The arguments made in this study only support this identification to an extent, but it is hoped that it encourages more targeted studies on *bhikṣuṇi*s. Such studies are necessary to establish the visual conventions related to this group of

5 For numerous examples of how women joined the nun's order, see Muldoon-Hules 2017.

6 Collett 2015.

7 The confusion between the depictions of nuns and monks is discussed in Lakshminarayanan 2024b, 487–488.

Buddhist followers who are rarely addressed in art historical analyses. In the meantime, plaques and stone reliefs with *bhikṣuṇi*s, however rare and isolated they may seem, present a strong argument in support of their presence in the Buddhist visual corpora. They underline once again that *bhikṣuṇi*s were also fully fleshed-out characters in their own terms and found themselves on equal footing with the *bhikṣu*s in visual as well as literary narratives.

2 Iconographical Analysis of the Indian Ivories

Two ivory artefacts from Mele Hairam can be connected to the Indian subcontinent based on their material and iconographic features. The two ivories are a fragmentary rectangular ivory plaque and a female figurine, likely a mirror handle. Let us start with the plaque which measures roughly ten centimetres in length and was decorated on both sides (fig. 1).[8] The object to which it was attached remains a mystery.[9] On the obverse side, the plaque preserves a lively scene that includes several female figures.[10] The reverse side depicts a female figure standing on an open lotus and surrounded by animals. Due to the poor condition of this side, it is difficult to interpret the scene.[11] However, the obverse preserves a number of figures which provide some clues on how we may decipher the scene. In the subsequent discussion, we will see how the iconographic features of the plaque are far from innovative. The figural and decorative elements on the plaque can be favourably compared to both ivory and stone reliefs from Indian Buddhist sites.[12]

8 A more direct relationship between the plaque and South India is also established by Zin (2025, 171). The present paper arrives at the same identification for the figures even if it differs in its objectives.

9 For the name of the sides, this article follows the labels given by Kaim & Kornacka 2016.

10 The excavations at Begram, located around 60 km north of Kabul in modern Afghanistan, yielded a large number of ivory plaques (Hackin 1939). The site belonging to the Kuṣāṇa period, dating broadly between the first century and the fourth century AD, contained a hoard of objects including glassware, bronzes, ostrich egg, and coins. Amongst the Begram ivories, the most common themes are palatial scenes with female figures. These plaques, integrating styles and iconography found in the Indian North and Northeast, were attached to furniture such as chairs and stools (Mehendale 2001).

11 It may represent a Gajalakṣmī, similar to the reliefs found in Sānchī and Bhārhut. However, the poor condition of the side does not allow us to confirm this suggestion. Moreover, the function of the other animals and the male figure is not clear.

12 An inscription from Sānchī stating that a relief decoration of the gateway was made by the ivory carvers (*dantakāra*) from Vidiśā makes the comparative study between ivory and stone possible (Burgess 1894, 92).

FIGURE 1 Ivory plaque, Mele Hairam: obverse side, Asghabat National Museum, Ashgabat, Inv. No. MH99-10063. 1
PHOTO: AGNÈS MARTIN

The obverse side of the plaque depicts six figures, out of which one figure is only partially preserved. Since none of the other ivory fragments found in Mele Hairam can be associated with this plaque, it is impossible to reconstruct the missing section of the scene which may have preserved other figures. Starting from the right, let us try to interpret the iconographic and stylistic features of this fragmentary plaque using a comparative approach. The first figure is a female figure standing with her right hand on her hip and her left hand holding a *torana* (gateway) located behind her. Her bodily posture recalls female figures popular within the subcontinent and referred to as *śālabhañjikā*s. Connected to the *dohada* motif in literary texts, the ubiquitous female presence around architectural structures such as wells, pavilions and gateways commonly signified the auspiciousness of a location.[13]

Similar female figures holding gateways also appear on the Begram ivories such as in fig. 2. The Begram plaque, which is partially preserved, depicts a female

13 Dehejia 2009, 81–90. Interestingly, the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinaya* forbids nuns from standing at the door as only prostitutes stood at the door to attract clients (Schopen 2017b, fn. 17).

FIGURE 2 Ivory plaque depicting a female figure, Musée National des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet, Paris, Inv. No. MG1901
PHOTO: ASHWINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

figure in the *śālabhañjikā* pose. When compared to the Mele Hairam plaque, the *śālabhañjikā* figures are similarly dressed wearing a *paridhāna* (lower garment) indicated by a series of parallel lines. Shallow parallel lines to indicate clothing are part of Indian artistic traditions as early as the first century BC and appear on the stone reliefs from Sānchī, Amarāvati and Kanaganahalli.[14] Their bodies are also similarly modelled with prominent breasts and arched waists aligned with Indian artistic conventions. Some differences can be identified in the actions and context of the figures. In the Begram plaque, the female figure holds her headdress rather than the elaborate gateway under which she stands. However, the Mele Hairam figure clearly grasps the gateway. This action, in other mediums such as stone, can be illustrated using a relief from the Amarāvati *stūpa* (fig. 3). The relief depicts the arrival of the sage Asita to the palace of King Śuddhodana, the father of Siddhārtha, the future Buddha Śākyamuni. It depicts the palace using a large *torana* with a female figure in *śālabhañjikā*, similar to the Mele Hairam plaque. Based on the comparison between the three figures from Begram, Mele Hairam and Amarāvati, we can

14 According to Stone (2008), the Begram ivories were likely manufactured in Southern India based on the iconographical and stylistic similarities between them and reliefs from Amarāvati and Kanaganahalli.

FIGURE 3 Detail of a relief from Amarāvati depicting scenes from the Buddha's life, National Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. 70.L/4
PHOTO: ASHWINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

suggest that the scene taking place on the ivory plaque may be associated with a palatial setting.

Next to the *torana* is a female figure, with a seemingly nude upper body and wearing a pleated *paridhāna* and a jewelled girdle. Despite the presence of clothing, the figure's *mons veneris* is clearly visible. This visual convention used to depict the semi-nude bodies of female figures is also part of the Begram ivories (fig. 4). Moreover, they also appear on reliefs from Sānchī and Kanaganahalli. For example, a relief from the Sānchī *stūp*a, dating around the first century BC, commonly interpreted as depicting Aśoka and his queens also follows the same visual convention (fig. 5).[15] The female figures are fully dressed, as indicated by the series of pleats on their lower garment. However, the figures' *mons veneris* and breasts are visible through their clothing.

Next to the standing figure, is a seated female figure on a latticed stool. Similar stools are also part of figs. 5 and 6. Moreover, they also appear on an Indian

15 A similar panel was also found in Kanaganahalli following the same conventions for the lower garment, see Zin 2018, 563.

FIGURE 4 Ivory plaque depicting a female figure, Musée National des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet, Paris, Inv. No. MG1901
PHOTO: ASHWINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

FIGURE 5 Detail of a relief depicting Aśoka and his queens, Sānchī, Madhya Pradesh
PHOTO: JOHAN LEVILLIAN

FIGURE 6 Ivory plaque depicting a female figure, Musée national des arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris, Inv. No. MG1901
PHOTO: ASHWINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

ivory comb found in Ter, Maharashtra, depicting a seated female figure.[16] The Mele Hairam figure is elaborately dressed; besides the pleated *paridhāna*, she is also adorned by a long necklace that falls between her breasts, wreaths, long earrings, anklets and bracelets. She leans on the stool with her left palm placed on it and her two legs are slightly stretched out in front of her. Her bodily posture can be favourably compared to examples from the Kanaganahalli *stūpa* such as the relief depicting the Haṃsa-*jātaka* (fig. 7). The relief depicts the story of how a bodhisattva-goose was caught by a fowler. The goose was presented to the king and the queen, who are seated on round stools and engaged in a conversation.[17] In the light of the Kanaganahalli relief, the gesture on the Mele Hairam plaque can be associated with speaking or conversation.

Next to her, a poorly preserved standing figure holds an arched harp, and can be interpreted as a musician. Subsequently, a large figure can be seen seated on a coffer-type throne with a back with a rolled mat-shaped footrest. This large figure is adorned by a thick cloth that exposes the chest and the right arm.[18] She likely holds a plectrum in the right hand. Her revealed chest, in comparison to the seated female figure that we have previously discussed, preserves an uncovered breast. Her head is shaved, and she is the only figure on the plaque wearing a *saṃghāti* (monastic) robe. Taken together, these features suggest that the seated figure is a *bhikṣuṇī* (nun).[19]

16 Patil 2022, fig. 1. See also similar seated female figures on ivory plaques from Begram illustrated in Simpson 2016, fig. 3.

17 Zin 2018, 109.

18 For another bald figure on ivory carvings, see Sarianidi 1985, fig. 142.

19 Kornacka identified the figure as a man and stated that the 'noticeably scant number of male figures depicted on ivory and bone objects in general, including the Begram collection, prevents from indicating any direct analogies with our male figure' (Kornacka 2007,

FIGURE 7 Detail of a relief depicting the Haṃsa-*jātaka*, Kanaganahalli, Karanataka
PHOTO: ASHWINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

Few figures of *bhikṣuṇī*s can be definitively identified in Buddhist art. One of the earliest representations of a *bhikṣuṇī* comes from Butkara I, Swāt Valley,

185). The identification of the figure as a *bhikṣuṇī* also fits with this general trend when we consider that the Begram ivories most commonly depict women. However, it should be noted that male figures, despite a negligible 1.7 percent, can be identified amongst the Begram ivories (Ray 2003, 232).

FIGURE 8 Relief from Butkara I depicting the nun Utpalavarṇā, Swāt Museum, Mingora, Acc. No. 1050
PHOTO: AGNÈS MARTIN

Pakistan (fig. 8).[20] Dating to the first century AD, the relief depicts the *bhikṣuṇī* Utpalavarṇā welcoming the Buddha as he returns from the Trāyastriṃśa (Thirty-Three Gods) heaven.[21] The nun wears a long-sleeved tunic with stripes and squares. A long shawl covers her shoulders and terminates at her back, slightly below her neck. Her hair is not fully shaved, and a straight fringe is visible above her ears. Similarly, other Gandhāran reliefs dating from the second

20 Butkara I was carefully brought to light by the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO, now IsIAO, Italian Institute for Africa and the East) between 1956 and 1962 (Faccenna 1980). The site, developed between the third century BC and the tenth century AD, consists of a monumental central stupa, or the Great Stupa, surrounded by smaller subsidiary stupas and shrines with and without relic chambers.

21 Based on Faccenna's *stile disegnativo* or the 'drawing style', this relief was dated to the first century AD (Filigenzi *et alii* 2003, 277–380). The reliefs from Gandhāra and literary sources related to this episode from the Buddha *vita* have been thoroughly analysed by Bopearachchi 2011, 352–368. Rather than revisit the reliefs, I limit myself in this article to highlighting the iconography of Utpalavarṇā.

century onwards also depict her wearing similar monastic garments consisting of a long tunic and a shawl.[22]

Some *vinaya*s (the rules of discipline for monks and nuns) of different Buddhist schools explicitly state that covering the breasts was an important aspect of nuns' clothing.[23] On the Gandhāran images, Utpalavarṇā's clothing closely follows established conventions on the robes of *bhikṣuṇī*s found in the *vinaya* texts.[24] Discussing the monastic robes, scholars such as Oskar Von Hinüber, Anālayo and Heirman have identified and discussed the different components of a *bhikṣuṇī*'s attire: the *saṃghāṭī*, *antarvāsa*, *uttarāsaṅga*, *saṃkakṣikā* and the *udakasāṭikā*.[25] Amongst these components, particular emphasis is made by the texts regarding the proper covering of the breasts. For instance, the *saṃghāṭī*, *antarvāsa* and the *uttarāsaṅga* were commonly worn by both *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s and were the long outer cloak, lower robe and an upper body robe respectively. In the Pāli *Vinaya*, *saṃkakṣikā* and the *udakasāṭikā* were specific robes for female renunciates and corresponded to a cloth that wrapped the breasts and a bathing attire respectively.[26] The *saṃkakṣikā* was likely a piece of cloth that bound the breast to maintain the decorum of *bhikṣuṇī*s and could be of varying sizes. Similarly, in the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin *Bhikṣunī-Vinaya*, a similar cloth covering the rounding of the breasts is prescribed.[27]

In light of these *vinaya* rules, when the breasts are visible in our visual corpora, artists clearly indicated that they were covered by the monastic robes. A statuette of unknown provenance in the Civico Museo Archeologico in Milan depicts a nun without the *saṃkakṣikā*.[28] Despite this, she wears another bulky garment that covers her right shoulder. Even though the *saṃkakṣikā* cannot

22 For a complete analysis of Gandhāran reliefs depicting nuns, see Lakshminarayanan 2024b.

23 When distinct robes are not depicted, at least one relief preserves an inscription that identifies the *bhikṣuṇī* by her name. On a fragmentary relief dating to the first century BC from Kausambi, Utpalavarṇā is depicted wearing a loose robe covering her body and standing in front of a long staircase as she touches her forehead to it. The identification of the *bhikṣuṇī* can be confirmed from the short Brāhmī inscription in two lines consisting of *u pa la va* and *ṇā*. For the discussion of this relief, see Mace 2022.

24 For a general overview of rules in the *vinaya* texts, see Heirman 2019.

25 von Hinüber 1975, 133–139; von Hinüber & Anālayo 2016, 79–90; Heirman 2008, 145–158.

26 Pāḷi *Vinaya* II. 272, *cf. Sifen lü* [Skt. *Dharmaguptakavinaya; Four-Part Vinaya*] translated by Buddhayaśas (Fotuoyeshe AD 408–413) and Zhu Fonian (AD 412–413). *T*. 1428, 757a17–19 and 924c13–14.

27 Roth 1970, 146. For a list of different robes in this text and other *Vinaya*s, see Heirman 2008, 148–149.

28 Verardi & Dhammadinnā 2024.

be identified in this statuette, some attempt to present the nun as a thin and modest follower of the Buddha can be understood. The figure on the Mele Hairam plaque, in sharp contrast, is depicted with her large body and one breast revealed.

When evaluating the Mele Hairam nun with other representations of *bhikṣuṇī*s in Buddhist art dating from the first centuries AD, a key difference emerges in the way her body is portrayed by the artist. On the one hand, stone reliefs depict *bhikṣuṇī*s wearing an inner and outer robe that shrouds their bodies and covers their arms and shoulders. Unlike figures of laywomen, the bodies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s are not portrayed with exaggerated female organs. Such demure attire for *bhikṣuṇī*s is also emphasised by Buddhist texts that protect their female body even during bathing. The *prātimokṣa* rules concerning different components of the robes, their characteristics and the manner to care for them are carefully set out by the *vinaya*s for both *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s to avoid even the smallest censure from donors and lay followers. The inability to follow the rules on the part of the renunciate communities resulted in offences such as the *pācittika* that had to be expiated.[29] The robes worn by renunciates were often donated by lay donors and the unkempt appearance or use of disreputable robes damaged the identity of the renunciate in question and the reputation of the monastic institution in general.[30] To avoid censure from lay donors, the *Mahīśāsakavinaya*, *Mahāsāṃghikavinaya*, *Sarvāstivādavinaya*, and the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinaya* explicitly highlight the profound correlation between the renunciate's own body and their clothing stating that robes should be cared for in the same manner as one's own skin or eyes.[31]

The presentation of the body of the renunciate with all the material components such as the monastic robe in an irreproachable manner seems to be of significant importance to the *saṅgha* (Buddhist institution). In comparison to the demure nuns such as Utpalavarṇā venerating the Buddha on stone reliefs, the Mele Hairam nun is of slightly exaggerated proportions wearing the robe in a manner that does not completely adhere to monastic regulations. Unlike

29 *Wufen lü* [Skt. *Mahīsāsakavinaya*; *Five-Part Vinaya*] translated by Zhudaosheng (AD 345–434) and Fuotuoshi (Buddhajīva *c.* AD 420) *T.* 1421, 180c15–15, *Shisong lü* [Skt. *Daśabhāṇavāravinaya Sarvāstivādavinaya Ten Recitations Vinaya*] translated by Puṇyatāra (Furuoduoluo *c.* 4th–5th AD) and Kumārajīva (Jiumoluoshi AD 344–413). *T.* 1435, 419b6, 12–13, *Genben shuoyiqie youbu bi'naiye* [Skt. *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinayavibhanga*] translated by Yijing (AD 635–713). *T.* 1442, 654b26–27. The texts and the rules concerning the robes are discussed in Heirman 2014, 467–488.

30 Schopen 2006, 323.

31 Heirman 2014, 484.

the *bhikṣuṇī*s with a cloth wrapper that diminished the size of their breasts, the ivory plaque figure exhibits her body to the viewer. Such a representation that deviates from the prescribed rules, the following section of the present article argues, could potentially contribute to the identification of the scene.

For the moment, let us turn back to the final figure on the plaque which is only partially preserved. This seated figure carries an arched harp and is likely a musician. The gender of the figure as male can also be suggested based on the absence of anklets. Commonly, female figures regardless of their status, are always depicted wearing jewellery such as anklets and bracelets in Indian art. The lack of such ornamentation on this figure suggests that it was likely a male musician.

Besides the figural space, the plaque is also decorated by a vertical and a horizontal frame. The vertical frame consists of rosettes separated by horizontal fillets. The horizontal frame is plain on the bottom and comprises a series of stepped pyramids on the top. The decorative motifs are also widely present in early Buddhist art, and most commonly in Gandhāra. Similar decorative motifs also appear on the Begram ivories as well as stone reliefs (figs. 9 and 10).

The figures and the decorative frame on the Mele Hairam plaque reflect common motifs found in Buddhist art. The gestures, ornaments, modelling of the bodies and even the furniture represented on the plaque align with contemporary ivory plaques from Begram and stone reliefs from Gandhāra, Kanaganahalli, Amarāvati and Sānchī. The striking similarities between the ivory plaque and other early Buddhist images suggest that the plaque may have been manufactured by Indian artisans, somewhere on the subcontinent.

This hypothesis is also supported by another ivory figurine found in Mele Hairam (fig. 11). The figurine finds close parallels among similar ivories found in Begram, Ter, Bhokardan as well as the one from Pompeii. Three elaborately decorated high relief ivory sculptures from Begram, measuring less than fifty centimetres each, are commonly interpreted as depicting *yakṣinī*s (female nature spirits).[32] They wear elaborately pleated garments, jewellery, and crowns, and stand on *makara*s (mythical aquatic animals). In comparison, the Mele Hairam figurine is rather simple; she wears a pleated *paridhāna* as indicated by the shallow lines along her legs, simple bracelets, anklets and a long necklace that falls between her breasts. Her right hand is raised as she holds her earring. The gesture, closely related to female figures, also appear in stone reliefs such the one from Kanaganahalli (fig. 12). Her clothing and jewellery also closely resemble the ivory mirror handle from Ter, a thriving ancient ivory

32 Images of the three sculptures can be found in Tissot 2006, 134–136.

FIGURE 9 Ivory plaque with decorative motifs, Musée National des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet, Paris, Inv. No. MG1901
PHOTO: ASHWINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

FIGURE 10 Gandhāran Cornice of monument with stepped pyramids, Dir Museum Chakdara, Inv. No. DMC2011
PHOTO: DIGITIZATION OF GANDHARAN ARTEFACTS PROJECT

and bone manufacturing centre in present-day Maharashtra, India.[33] Analysed together, the only notable difference between the figures stem from their clothing; the *paridhāna* of the Mele Hairam figure has a frontal zone while the Ter figurine wears a beaded girdle.[34] Striking similarities in the presentation of body, hairstyle and gesture with one hand holding their earrings suggest that the Mele Hairam figurine may have also been produced by Indian artisans from the Deccan region.

33 The city is also mentioned in the *Periplus* as a great city from where merchandise were carted towards the harbour to be eventually shipped overseas (Casson 1989, 83). The excavations yielded a corpus of finds that can be positively compared to other settlements and trading sites dating to the first century AD such as stone reliefs, rouletted ware, faience and carnelian beads, shell bangles and ivory rods (Chapekar 1969; Deo 1986; Patil *et alii* 2022).

34 The Bhokardan and the Pompeii figurines also wear similar clothing, and their sexual organs are visible.

FIGURE 11 Ivory figurine, Mele Hairam, Asghabat National Museum, Ashgabat, Inv. No. MH98-6032. 3
PHOTO: AGNÈS MARTIN

FIGURE 12 Detail of a relief depicting the birth of the Buddha, Kanaganahalli, Karanataka
PHOTO: ASHWINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

Given this broad context, how can we explain the scene on the Mele Hairam plaque? At present, the plaque is incomplete and heavily damaged. Based on the available data from the excavations, it is difficult to know if the plaque was ever intact before it found its way to Mele Hairam. Moreover, its exact purpose within the fire temple cannot be discerned as it was found in debris layers.

Nevertheless, the Mele Hairam ivories are of considerable interest as they can be associated with an important group of luxury objects exchanged within the east-west trade routes.[35] For this reason, the ivory plaque may have been considered precious regardless of its fragmentary condition.

Given several uncertainties, it is not possible to provide a definitive identification of the scene on the ivory plaque. However, some conclusions can be cautiously advanced based on the representation of the nun on the plaque. According to literary biographies of the Buddha, nuns were allowed to join the Buddhist order during the Buddha Śākyamuni's lifetime. The two-fold community (*ubhayataḥsaṃgha*) comprising of monks and nuns is said to have been instituted after the Buddha permitted his stepmother Mahāprajāpatī to become a nun. We have already alluded to how the inclusion of women in the *saṅgha* as *bhikṣuṇī*s created new circumstances directly related to experiences, particularly, the needs of the female body required the formulation of a different set of rules and regulations than those governing the life of *bhikṣu*s. Since the recognition of the significant role played by women in early Buddhism by scholars, the codes of behaviour and roles related to nuns in Buddhist literature, archaeology and epigraphy continue to gain prominence.[36] However, images of female renunciates, despite the ubiquitous presence of reliefs and sculptures across early Buddhist sites in the Indian subcontinent, have infrequently figured in these debates. This is partly due to the methods and assumptions deployed in the study of the Buddhist visual corpora which continue to associate the visual representation of renunciates with the male gender. When identified, images of *bhikṣuṇī*s tend to be read based on literary sources and the contexts associated with them, rituals, normative behaviours ascribed to them, such as their clothing and appearance based on the visual language, are not taken into account.[37] A large-scale effort to review previous classifications of *bhikṣu* images is necessary to understand the representations of *bhikṣuṇī*s in early Buddhist art. The following section demonstrates how such an effort, even in a limited manner, echoes what is reflected by our epigraphic and literary sources and can contribute to our understanding of the dynamic roles assigned to female bodies in art.

35 According to the Muziris papyrus, 7.4 percent of the cargo going between Muziris and Alexandria was made up of ivory, both tusks and fragments (Rathbone 2001, 46).

36 Collett 2006; 2009; Milligan 2019; Schopen 2017b; 2017c; Dhammadinnā 2016, 46–53.

37 When images are taken as primary source of Buddhism and not just as complementary data to texts, the perception of certain male and female figures and their actions can be understood within their local context, see Lakshminarayanan 2024a. For comparative analysis of images and epigraphy with results appearing in Lakshminarayanan 2023, 2024b.

3 Interpretations of the Scene

This section advances that the important element in deciphering some aspects of the scene depicted on the ivory plaque is the image of the nun. As previously noted, visual representations of nuns in early Buddhist art are rare. However, literary narratives on their positive and negative contributions to the *saṅgha* are numerous. Exemplary nuns such as Mahāprajāpatī, Utpalavarṇā and Kṣemā feature as the leading disciples of the Buddha. Despite the *saṅgha* carefully orchestrating the presentation of *bhikṣuṇī*s and gradually adapting rules for different conditions, some nuns continuously pushed the limits of acceptable behaviour in both dangerous and humorous ways. One such recurrent model of bad behaviour is Sthūlanandā (Pāli: Thullanandā); her name when translated literally is 'Fat Joy'. She is described as a greedy woman with an exaggerated sense of self-worth when she joined the *bhikṣuṇīsaṅgha*. Naughty, yet intelligent, the *bhikṣuṇī* Sthūlanandā's repeated transgressions often resulted in the creation of new rules for the *bhikṣuṇī* community. Her motivation for pleasure and pursuit of advantageous financial opportunities often left her in extraordinary situations that required a solution from Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and the Buddha.

Being a stock troublemaker, Sthūlanandā often engaged in behaviour considered appropriate for laywomen but was forbidden for nuns. Buddhist narratives discuss her several unsuitable attributes, and in the tasks that she takes up by closely following laywomen's lives such as wearing jewellery, perfumes, extravagant clothing, house cleaning and child-rearing, she is said to have exceled in them.[38] She cunningly manipulates existing rules leading to some hilarious circumstances in which she shares women's secrets with men, instructs other nuns to temporarily renounce their vows, falls in love with laymen, narrates the Buddha's life story to actors for profit, nearly works as a domestic servant, and learns magical spells. In these narratives, she often exploited the similarities between nuns, laywomen and prostitutes, in order to set up lucrative businesses. Following each of these events, the Buddha set out new rules demarcating the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for *bhikṣuṇī*s and punishments for transgressing them. For example, in a narrative from the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinaya*, Sthūlanandā approached a laywoman

38 These stories from the Tibetan *sDe dge bka 'gyur* (*Bhikṣuṇīvibhaṅga* Derge Ta 197b6–7; Ta 77b; Ta 20a; Ta 304b1–305a27; *Kṣudrakavastu* Derge Da 134b1–3) are translated in Finnegan 2012, 147–148, 253–255, 330–331, 335–336. Manuscripts from Bairam Ali, Turkmenistan also preserve an *avadāna* related to Sthūlanandā suggesting the popularity of this stock troublemaker. For the translation of this text, see Karashima & Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya 2015, 178–182.

and queen Mallikā to find out how they pleasured themselves when their husbands were away. With their advice, she fashioned herself a dildo made of tree resin and used it on her body. She was fast asleep when the nunnery caught fire and ran out of her cell with the dildo strapped to her heel. This led to some children making fun of her and the Buddha, when he heard about the matter, set out a rule against the use of dildos made of tree resin.[39] Such narratives paint a picture of a witty yet careless nun, whose extensive knowledge of the monastic codes allowed her to confidently bend them to her own advantage.[40] In another narrative from the same *vinaya*, Sthūlanandā encountered a well-dressed young woman during her alms rounds and learnt how she made money through prostitution. Sthūlanandā immediately realised that making money through prostitution was an excellent idea and so, executed a plan in which she recruited a poor woman without any means of support. Sthūlanandā provided her with clothing, jewels and unguent and sets up a brothel to make money.[41] In this narrative too, Sthūlanandā's unacceptable behaviour led the Buddha to establish a new rule preventing nuns from engaging in prostitution.

In the same vein, Sthūlanandā's lucrative relationship with musicians is also highlighted in another narrative from the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinaya*.[42] A group of performers wished to develop a musical play on the life of the Buddha during a festival in Rajagriha in order to attract a large audience. However, when they approached a group of monks, their request was denied. The performers approached the nearby nunnery and Sthūlanandā readily supplied them with episodes from the Buddha's life in return for food. The performers fulfilled their part of the bargain and using Sthūlanandā's knowledge, they composed a play on the Buddha's life with songs and instrumental music including a humorous scene on the monks. The narrative continues with the embarrassed and angry monks taking their revenge by staging their own play with elaborate costumes. When the events were reported to the Buddha, the text states that he established a rule prohibiting undyed robes, *i.e.*, costumes for the monks. While the narrative focuses on the monks' behaviour rather than Sthūlanandā's, her actions were the catalyst for the events that followed. The Buddha's rule was not related to the transactional relationship between her and the musicians, but the tension created by her relationship with them cannot be ignored based

39 For the full story and humour in the *vinaya*, see Clarke 2009, 324–326.

40 Skilling 2001, 148–149. Despite her knowledge and preaching skills, she eventually exited from religious life (Ohnuma 2013, 20).

41 Derge Da 156b.7–158a.3. In Da 158a.3–159a.3, she sets up a street walking woman with a pimp (translation in Schopen 2017a, 16).

42 Liu 2018, 717–718.

on other narratives. In a narrative from the Chinese and Tibetan versions of the same *vinaya*, Sthūlanandā is said to have taught some women to sing, dance and play musical instruments, and so new rules against this behaviour had to be formulated.[43]

When viewed in the light of such narratives about misbehaving nuns, the relief plaque from Mele Hairam may depict a naughty nun who is comfortably interacting with a rich laywoman (perhaps, a prostitute) and musicians to satisfy her own interests. The literary accounts related to Sthūlanandā often make it clear that she lived dangerously outside the disciplinary norms and often engaged in inappropriate behaviour. As a prototype of a bad nun, it is not surprising to find her flaunting the rules related to monastic robes on the ivory plaque. Indeed, in the Chinese *Mahāsāṃghika-Bhikṣuṇi-Vinaya*, she wears dirty clothes and exposed her belly, breast and sides. Her rough behaviour was unappealing and her dishevelled appearance exposing her body resulted in her being treated poorly while other decorous nuns received more donations in the form of bowls, robes, food and medicines; advantages that does not go unnoticed by Sthūlanandā.[44] Based on other narratives, it was not her voluptuous body type, which is portrayed negatively, but rather her upkeep of it. In the *Bhikṣuṇī-Prakīrṇaka* of the *Mahāsāṃghikalokottaravādin*, nuns with heavy breasts were even regarded as beautiful. However, to prevent any distraction and unwanted attention, the Buddha is said to have instituted a rule allowing nuns to wear a *saṃkakṣikā* so that their breasts may be contained.[45] Elsewhere in the same text, Sthūlanandā voluptuous breasts are regarded as a source of humour and not beauty. When she walked around the terrace of the monastery, her heaving breasts were compared to bottle gourds by onlookers. Following this embarrassment, the Buddha instituted another rule for covering the curvature of the breasts in addition to the *saṃkakṣikā*. In the two instances, one nun, despite having a voluptuous body was deemed beautiful and too distracting while the troublemaking Sthūlanandā was jeered and laughed at by the people for her large breasts.

The ivory plaque from Mele Hairam presents a similar image of a nun whose voluptuous body is comfortably perched on a large stool as she listens to a musician in the company of laywomen. Her large body is covered in a thick pleated robe haphazardly thrown on top of her bosom. Despite the cloth covering her shoulder, the outline of her left breast, the exposed right breast and their curvature are presented in the same way as the body of the lay woman seated next to her. Well-known as a repeated offender, the plaque may preserve a part of

43 Liu 2018, 722.

44 Hirakawa 1982, 281–283.

45 von Hinüber 1975, 134–135; English in von Hinüber & Anālayo 2016, 82.

a humorous story similar to the narratives about Sthūlanandā. Sthūlanandā's ability to ingratiate herself with laywomen, do business with prostitutes, and flirt with laymen in the textual narratives mirrors the image on the plaque which depicts a comfortably seated nun in the company of a musician and three laywomen.

With an abundance of caution, I hypothesise that the plaque likely depicts a humorous scene which includes a nun, perhaps Sthūlanandā. Based on the architectural features, the scene seems to take place in a palatial, if not elite environment. The luxurious setting is also echoed by the seated figure, her female attendant and the two musicians. Its Buddhist characteristics is alluded to by the rare presence of a nun, whose representation, much in the same way as Sthūlanandā, does not fully adhere to the *vinaya* rules.

4 Concluding Summary

The ivory plaque and figurine from Mele Hairam are stylistically related to early Buddhist sculptures from central and southern India. Since there seems to be a close connection between ivory carvers and stone artisans, based on the Sānchī inscription, the Mele Hairam ivory artefacts may have been produced in Indian workshops, at least with artists familiar with popular iconography in contemporary sculptures. How and when the ivories may have found their way to the fire temple in Turkmenistan needs to be clarified by further analysis. However, the associated assemblage to which they belong suggests that Mele Hairam was an important trading station along the ancient land routes. It is generally accepted that trading activities between Parthia and the East increased during the reign of Mithridates II in 115 BC. Moreover, during the Kuṣāṇa period, the political and economic stability of parts of Central Asia and India further increased connectivity between the East and the West. In this context, the Merv Oasis and, to some extent, the Serakh Oasis, seems to have played a significant role in cross-cultural exchanges. The strategic location of the Serakh's Oasis at the crossroads of overland trade routes may explain why luxury goods such as the ivories, despite their Indian characteristics, found their way to a Zoroastrian fire temple.

The most interesting aspect of the Mele Hairam plaque is the presence of the *bhikṣuṇī*. She is depicted in a bulky form wearing a thick pleated cloth gathered around the left shoulder, bald, and with large breasts. Images of *bhikṣuṇī*s are rare and the vast majority of them that have been identified so far can be associated with Utpalavarṇā, one of the foremost nuns in the Buddha's life story. Visual representations of Utpalavarṇā closely follow the *vinaya* rules which state that nuns must be decorous and dressed appropriately. In comparison

to Utpalavarṇā, the nun on the Mele Hairam plaque is seated on a high stool, exposing her breast and in the company of laywomen and musicians. Based on the behaviour of the Mele Hairam nun, which falls outside of the *vinaya*s' prescriptions, I hypothesised that the scene may be related to Sthūlanandā. Even if this hypothesis proves false, the presence of a female renunciate figure on the plaque remains significant. Already rare in early Indian art, the plaque adds to the growing body of visual evidence related to nuns, a yet to be fully exploited corpus for further research.

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