

Inner and Central Asian Art and Archaeology II

New Research on Central Asian, Buddhist and Far Eastern Art and Archaeology

Edited by Judith A. LERNER & Annette L. JULIANO



BREPOLS

Markham Kittoe and Sculpture from Sārnāth in the British Museum

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The international conference on Buddhist sculpture at Victoria and Albert Museum prompted me to develop my research on Buddhist subjects and to publish two papers on items in the collections at the British Museum (Willis 2013; Willis 2014).¹

Continuing this work, I turn here to a small group of images from Sārnāth. My aim is to present evidence for the provenance of these sculptures and to explain why this information was unknown for many years. To this, I will add some observations on context where such contexts can be recovered.

COLLECTIONS AND PROVENANCE

The sculptures of the Gupta period in the British Museum are few in number, but among them is one superlative example, the standing Buddha acquired in 1880 (Fig. 1a and 6). This has all the hallmarks of the well-known Sārnāth style, notably the diaphanous drapery, serene countenance and cream color of the sandstone. The piece has been published often, for example, by James Harle in his landmark study of Gupta sculpture (Harle 1974). Most recently, I have published the Buddha in an article on the inscribed bronze figure from Dhanesar Kherā in which I have reassessed the chronological development of the fifth-century style (Willis 2014).

For many years there was uncertainty about the provenance of the British Museum's standing Buddha because there seemed to be no record of where the sculpture was collected, who collected it and how it came to the Museum. These problems were resolved when I studied an album of drawings now kept in the British Library. I am grateful to Devangana Desai for bringing the album to my attention. Study of the drawings soon showed that one depicts the British Museum's sculpture (Figs. 2-3). The album was assembled by Markham Kittoe, the Archaeological Enquirer to the Government of the Northwest Provinces from 1848 (Archer 1972,

p. 135). He designed and built Queen's College at Benares and in the course of his work trained a number of artists: Pyari Lal, Mahesh and Ganesh Lal, Mahesh and Ganesh Prasad and Girdhari Lal. Some of these painters helped with the drawings for the College, while others assisted Kittoe in recording the sculpture that he excavated at the site of Sārnāth.

A study of the Kittoe drawings shows that many involved a degree of reconstruction, especially in those drawn by Kittoe himself. In the standing Buddha, for example, the halo is made whole, the broken hands completed and the feet added. The feet are especially out of scale, indicating they are hypothetical. A pair of feet from a different image of the period were added to the image at an early stage, as shown by the plate given in Harle (1974). These were detached during conservation before 1992. Aside from this issue, the Kittoe album is important because it shows that the British Museum Buddha was collected at Sārnāth.

The Sārnāth School has long drawn attention because of the abstract refinement of the pieces. The style had a wide impact, especially in the sixth century, but so little work has been done on it that not much can be said about why this style emerged and what exactly it means in terms of Buddhist thought. One possibility is that this representation is connected with historical speculation about the Buddha's nature and physical body. This subject has received some attention, notably in Reynolds (1977), Makransky (1997) and Williams (2009). The best historical analysis is in Xing (2005) on which my account draws. Theological speculation about the nature of the Buddha's body (*kāya*) developed as Buddhist followers reflected on his nature, essence and superhuman attributes as described in the oldest texts. The development spanned a number of centuries from the demise of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni until the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The origin of the speculation is based on statements found at an early stage, such as the *Samyutta Nikāya*, where the Buddha tells Vakkali

that: “He who sees the Dhamma sees the Tathāgata, he who sees the Tathāgata sees the Dhamma.” In other words the historical Buddha had an actual physical body or *rūpakāya* but at the same time was the embodiment of truth or Dharma. So the *rūpakāya* and *dharmakāya* coexisted simultaneously in him, a two-body theory that is articulated in Nāgārjuna’s *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*. The exact definition of the *rūpakāya* and *dharmakāya* became a subject of sustained debate in the Buddhist schools, most notably between the Mahāsaṃghikas and Sarvāstivādins. The Mahāsaṃghikas, whose literature is fragmentary, had an idealized devotional view and regarded the Buddha as a transcendental being, unsullied by impurities (Xing 2005, p. 55). The Sarvāstivādins took an analytical approach, summarizing and synthesizing the attributes and qualities of the Buddha as described in the early *sūtras* before formulating their understanding of the *rūpakāya* and *dharmakāya*. Their two-body theory was developed in the *Vibhāṣā*, an early text translated into Chinese by Saṅghabhūti in 383. It was later translated by Buddhavarman in 437-39 and lastly by Xuanzang in 656-59 (Xing 2005, p. 20). The two-body theory is found in all three versions.

The *Vibhāṣā* mentions the two bodies in the context of the Buddha’s *rūpakāya*. In early *sūtras*, such as the *Samuktāgama*, it states that the Tathāgata “was born in the world, abided in the world, and yet was not defiled by the worldly *dharma*-s.” In Saṅghabhūti’s translation of the *Vibhāṣā*, the Sarvāstivādins explained this as follows (Xing 2005, pp. 20-21, slightly modified):

It is on account of the *dharmakāya* that the *sūtra* states this. However, it also refers to the *rūpakāya* when it says ‘the Tathāgata was born in the world and abided in the world.’ At the same time, the *sūtra* refers to the *dharmakāya* when it says ‘yet he was not defiled by the worldly *dharma*-s’ [because he was] attached to nothing, attained *sambodhi* and so transcended the world’.

The translation of Buddhavarman is similar and more concise:

The *sūtra* refers to the *rūpakāya* when it says: ‘the Tathāgata was born in the world and abided in the world’, but refers to the *dharmakāya* when it says: ‘appearing in the world but was not defiled by the worldly *dharma*s.’

These explanations show that the two-body concept of

the Buddha was current in the Sarvāstivāda School during the fourth and fifth centuries and involved the coexistence of a physical and spiritual body. This is of interest with regard to Sārnāth because we know from inscriptions that the Sarvāstivādins asserted their presence there, ousting the Theravādins. In their turn, they were replaced by the Sammatīya School (Baruah 2000, p. 51). Because the Sārnāth images are notable for their spiritual qualities – combined, of course, with the physical reality of a stone sculpture – it is tempting to suggest that the development of the Sārnāth style owes much to Sarvāstivāda speculation about the nature of the Buddha’s body.

This assertion—bold and historically precise—would need to be verified by tracking the diffusion of the Sārnāth style and comparing these findings with the known locations of the Sarvāstivāda School. Parallels of this kind are probably too exact, however. This is because they rests on an assumption that there were links, i.e. a direct dialogue of some kind, between artists and theologians. More likely is the possibility that the style reflects the debates about the *rūpakāya* and *dharmakāya* that were generally current, and that the images were made so they could be read according to a variety of theological positions within the Buddhist fold. That this is the case seems to be shown by a second sculpture in the British Museum, this time a Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana* (Fig. 4). This also has a corresponding drawing in the Kittoe album (Fig. 5). As with the standing Buddha, the British Library album shows the sculpture is from Sārnāth. The find spot and iconography are of interest because this appears to be the earliest representation of the Buddha seated with the legs pendant. The position is associated with Maitreya in popular tradition, especially Tibet, but recent studies have shown that identifications were originally more fluid and that we need to be wary of making anachronistic identifications (Bautze-Picron 2010, pp. 24-5; Revire, 2011; Griffiths et al., 2013; Revire, 2014). The best suggestion is that the early images of this type are invested with royal meaning and that they show the Buddha teaching on Mt. Meru. This sublime location, indicative of the idealized Buddha in a heavenly world, is more in accord with the Mahāsaṃghika vision of Buddhahood.

THE INDIA MUSEUM AND MARKHAM KITTOE

When Kittoe returned to England, his collection went to the India Museum in London, as did his album of drawings. After various transfers and departmental

changes, the album came to rest in the British Library, while the sculptures were transferred to the British Museum in 1880. An outline of the institutional reorganizations and collection transfers is given by Ray Desmond in his history of the India Museum (Desmond 1982). In connection with the actual sculptures, I have given a summary of the main events (Willis 1997). For the present concern, the most interesting document is a print in the *London Illustrated News* for 6 March 1858 (Fig. 6). This shows the interior of the Tea Sale Room in East India House, Leadenhall Street, completed in 1858 and designed by Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820-77). Along the walls of the room are a number of sculptures, most notably and visibly the seated Buddha just noted. There is no doubt that this is Kittoe's sculpture. The standing Buddha is not, however, the Buddha from Sārnāth. Rather, it is the standing Buddha collected by Kittoe at Kurkihar in Bihār in 1848. Kittoe's sculptures from Kurkihar were carved with the letter 'K' and a number. The standing Buddha in the British Museum – now number 1880.80 – was labelled K1. The majority of the Kurkihar sculptures were deposited in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, and were catalogued by John Anderson (Anderson 1883, p. 72). Anderson explained the K numbers and – as the contentious curator should do – noted that he could not trace some of the K sculptures. Thanks to Anderson's careful account of the numbers, we know the missing items are those taken by Kittoe to England and, in fact, never deposited in the Indian Museum.

The question naturally arises how the memory of Kittoe, and his connection to these sculptures, was lost over the years. The quick decision to dissolve the India Museum was no doubt a contributing factor, as was the housing of the Kittoe album and sculptures in different departments and different institutions. But the most important factor seems to have been Kittoe's death soon after he returned to England in June, 1853.

In view of how very little is known about Kittoe, I was happy to find a brief account of his life by Alexander Cunningham in the first volume of his *Archaeological Survey of India Reports* (Vol. I, 1871, pp. XXIV-XXVII) quoted below. This information is not well known – I have not seen it cited anywhere – and is worth giving in full in view of the fact that Kittoe's collection is one of the most important in the British Museum, the standing Buddha shown here in Fig.1 being a center-piece in the Asia gallery as it stood in 2015.

“Markham Kittoe was already known for his architectural taste by his design for the little church at

Jonpur, and his drawings of Muhammadan building, when, towards the close of 1836, the march of his regiment from the Upper Provinces to Medinipur brought him through Calcutta, where he first saw James Prinsep. He was then engaged in the preparation of a work, which appeared in 1838, in the title of “Illustrations of Indian Architecture.” The work was chiefly valuable for its illustrations, of which many have now been superseded by photographs. Kittoe's antiquarian zeal and architectural knowledge were strong recommendations to James Prinsep, who induced him to pay a visit to the Khandagiri rock to examine the inscription in old Pali characters, of which Stirling had published a poor and imperfect copy in the *Asiatic Researches*. The result was an excellent copy of a very important inscription of King Aira, and the discovery of one of Asoka's edicts at Dhauli, with sketches of the more important caves and principal sculptures.

Kittoe's services were warmly acknowledged by James Prinsep in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, and also in a letter to me of 4th November 1837, in which he mentions “a beautifully illustrated journal from poor Kittoe,” and begs me to “keep an eye to his interests, for he would be an invaluable antiquarian traveller.” At this time Kittoe was temporarily removed from the army for bringing indiscreet charges of oppression against his Commanding Officer, for which there was but little foundation save in his own over-sensitive disposition. Through Prinsep's influence he was appointed Secretary of the Coal Committee, which led to his extended tour through Orissa, the results of which were published in the *Bengal Asiatic Society's Journal* for 1838 and 1839. He was afterwards restored to his position in the army, and appointed to the charge of one of the Divisions of the High Road from Calcutta to Bombay, leading through Chutia Nagpur.

For several years he was employed in the uncongenial work of a Road Officer, and it was not until 1846 that he had the opportunity of returning to his archeological researches. In doing so he felt that he was partly carrying out the wishes of James Prinsep, “who oft expressed a wish that he should ramble over the district of Bihar, and cater for him.” During 1846 and 1847, he accordingly travelled over a great part of the districts of Bihar and Shahabad, and added much valuable information to our knowledge of their antiquities. But his chief aim seems to have been to make a large collection of drawings of

choice specimens of sculpture with a view to future publication. In following out this plan much of his valuable time was wasted in making drawings of sculptures and architectural ornaments, of many of which photography has since given us finer and even more detailed copies. But no less praise is due to him for the unwearied industry and patience with which he performed his self-appointed task, the results of which now form a valuable collection of about one hundred and fifty drawings belonging to the library of the East India Museum.

About this time, through the influence of Mr. Thomason, Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces, Kittoe was appointed "Archaeological Enquirer" to Government, on a salary of Rs. 250 a month. Whilst engaged on this work he was requested to prepare a design for the proposed Sanskrit College at Banaras. His design was approved; and, when the building was fairly begun, Kittoe was obliged to reside altogether at Banaras to superintend its construction. With this work he was fully occupied during the remainder of his career, his only archaeological researches were some rather extensive excavations at Sarnath, when he uncovered a complete monastery and added considerably to his collection of sculpture drawings. The work at the College was severe, as he had to model most of the moldings with his own hands. On the 19th May 1852, he wrote to me "Oh how I wish the College were out of hand, that I might set to work and compile my drawings and papers into some shape." When I saw Kittoe at Gwalior in September 1852, he spoke despondingly of himself. His health was evidently much impaired, and he complained of headache and want of appetite.

He was sick of the drudgery of the college work; and in the beginning of 1853 his health completely broke down, and he was compelled to seek for change of air in England. On the 2nd of February he gave a lecture in Calcutta before the Asiatic Society on the antiquities of Sarnath, and exhibited to the meeting his collection of sculpture drawings. The voyage to England did him no good, and on his arrival he was so ill that he saw no one, and, as one of his friends informed me, "he went straight to his home and died" in June 1853. Like Prinsep he sank from overwork and at about the same age.

As a draughtsman Kittoe was painstaking and accurate, and therefore always trustworthy; as an explorer, he was enthusiastic and indefatigable,

qualities which generally command success; but as an investigator, he was wanting in scholarship and faulty in judgment. As specimens of his defective judgment, I may cite his continued doubts as to the identity of Asoka and Piyadasi, and his serious suggestion that the Barabar Cave inscription of Dasaratha, which Prinsep had truly assigned to the historical Dasaratha of Magadha, one of the immediate successors of Asoka, might probably be referred to the half fabulous Dasaratha of Ayodhya, the father of Rama.

Kittoe's chief discoveries were limited to temples, sculptures and inscriptions, and I cannot recall a single locality which he identified, or a single historical doubt which he settled, or a single name of any dynasty which he established. His discoveries were the result of unwearying exploration, and not the fruit of mental reasoning and reflective deduction. Such also, when his career was drawing to a close, was his own modest estimate of himself. On the 19th May 1852 he wrote to me: "Let me not lead you to suppose that I claim knowledge. I am woefully deficient. I am a self-educated man, and no Classic or Sanskrit scholar; I merely claim a searching eye and mind, and a retentive memory of figure and fact, and place or position. Hence my great success in finding inscriptions where many have searched in vain! - Cuttack and Gya to wit." This estimate of himself seems fully to justify my opinion of him, while at the same time it corroborates the prophetic judgment of James Prinsep that Kittoe would make "an invaluable antiquarian traveller."

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Notes

1. I am grateful to John Clarke for organizing the International Conference on Buddhist Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum and for ensuring that the proceedings were published. It my pleasant duty

to thank the British Museum for its unwavering support of my research activities and the European Research Council under whose funding this publication was prepared (Synergy Project Grant 609823).



Fig. 1a. Standing Buddha, mid-fifth century. Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh). Sandstone; H: 1.44 m. India Museum collection, The British Museum, London (Asia 1880.6). Complete figure.



Fig. 1b. Standing Buddha, mid-fifth century. Sārnāth (Uttar Pradesh). Sandstone; H: 1.44 m. India Museum collection, The British Museum, London (Asia 1880.6). Upper part.



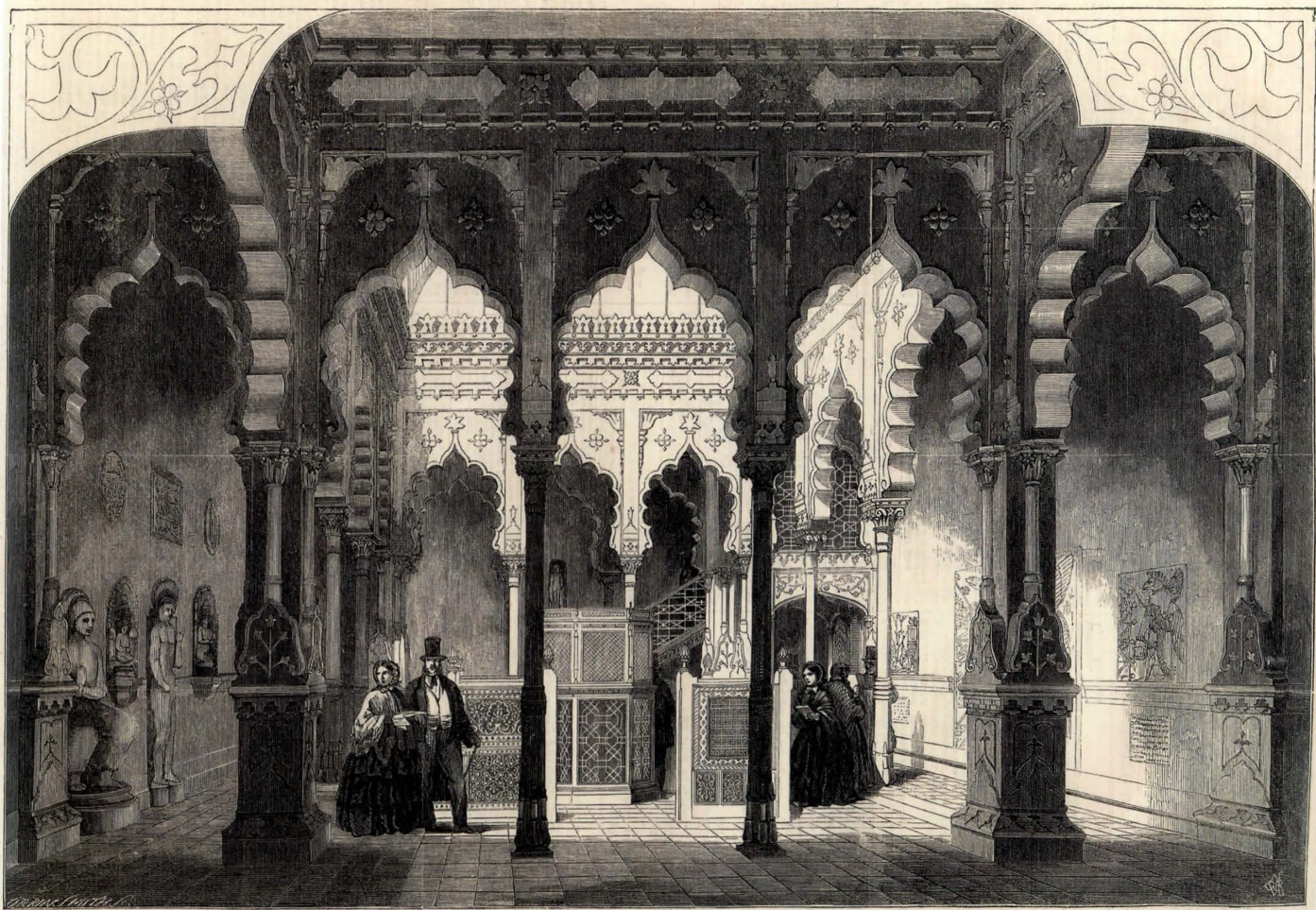
Fig. 2. Standing Buddha from Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh). From an album of drawings by Markham Kittoe and his assistants. The British Library (OIOC WD 2876).



Figure 3. Seated Buddha, second quarter of the fifth century. Sārnāth (Uttar Pradesh). Sandstone; H: 1.18 m. India Museum collection, The British Museum, London (Asia 1880.7).



Figure 4. Seated Buddha from Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh). From an album of drawings by Markham Kittoe and his assistants. The British Library (OIOC WD 2876).



THE EAST INDIA HOUSE MUSEUM

Figure 5. Interior of the Tea Sale Room in East India House, Leadenhall Street, completed in 1858 and designed by Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820-77), from the *London Illustrated News* for 6 March 1858. The British Museum, London (Asia 1996, 1007, 0.2).