

South Asian Archaeology 2001



Edited by

CATHERINE JARRIGE and VINCENT LEFÈVRE

Volume II

*Historical Archaeology
and Art History*

Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations

Cover: Bāmiyān. 55 m Buddha niche.
East side wall, crowned Buddha (Śākyamuni).

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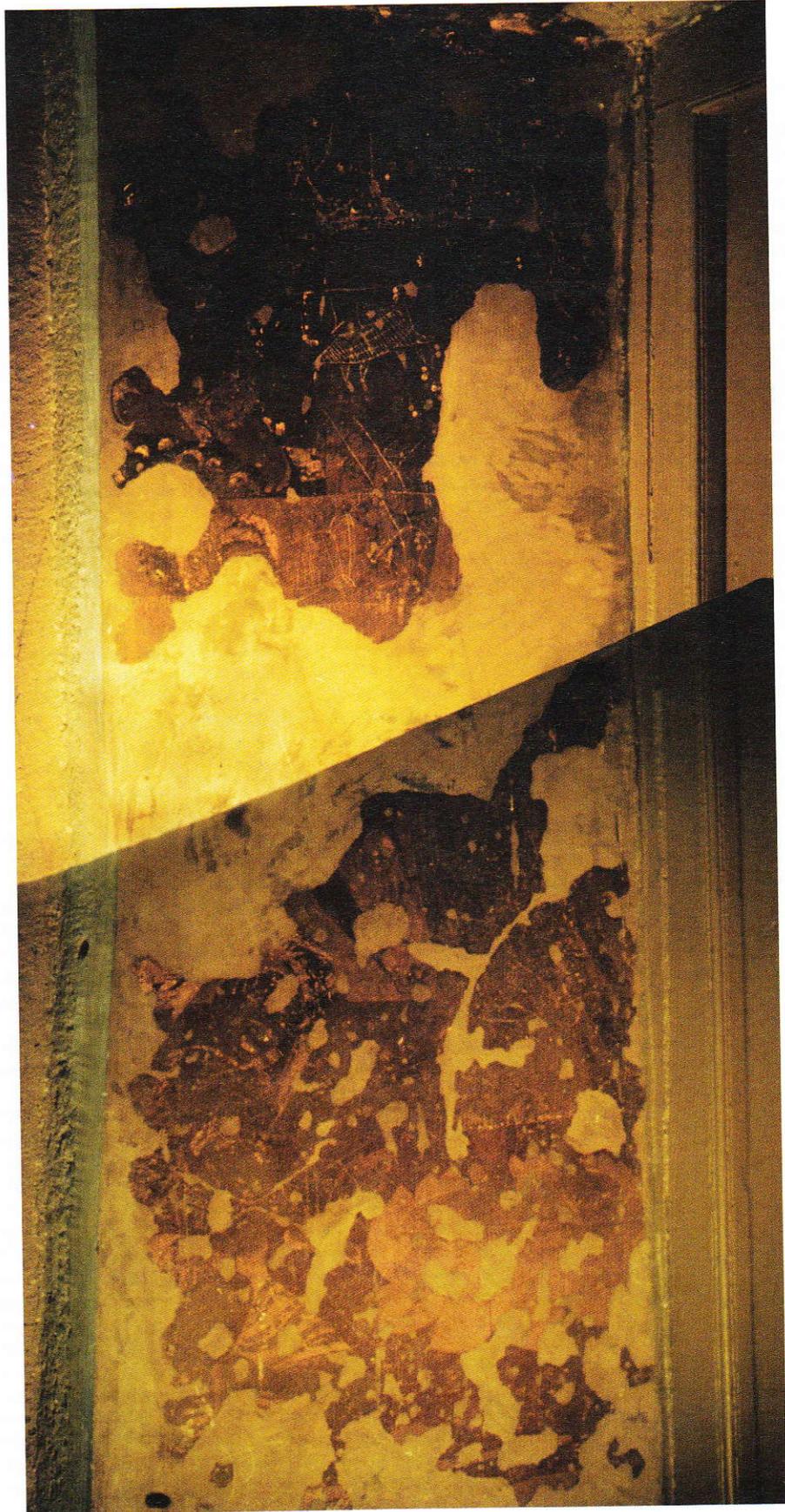


Fig. 1 - Ajanta, Cave XVII, veranda, second window niche in the right rear wall; painting on the left side (computer-generated image combining two photographs).

The Unknown Ajanta Painting of the Aṅgulimāla Story

MONIKA ZIN

Of all the verandas in the Ajanta complex, the one in front of cave XVII is in the best condition. Although some parts of the paintings are severely damaged, particularly in their lower parts, what remains allows us to identify the narrative (Schlingloff 2000: Nos. 24,68,69,77,83) and devotional representations, among them the famous Wheel of Existences (Zin 2002: No. 46) and rocky landscapes around two Bodhisatva kings (Zin 2003: No. 42.14-15). The paintings featured on this veranda are among the most frequently published images from Ajanta. From the veranda a door on the cave's central axis leads into the cave, and two windows on either side of the door once allowed light and air to filter in. In the nineteenth century, however, they were fitted with thick window frames and wire-netting. This is the reason, incidentally, for the increased humidity and lack of ventilation which have caused the deterioration of paintings inside the cave. The window niches in the approximately one-meter-thick wall offered welcome extra space for painting. What has survived until today are the paintings in both niches to the right of the door. Although poorly preserved, the paintings are of a high artistic quality and allow us to determine their religious content. Thus in the first niche there is a representation of the Rāhula episode (Schlingloff 2000: No. 71), on the opposite side. In the same niche we can see the story of the youth Sumati (Schlingloff 2000: No. 72) to whom the Buddha Dipaṅkara predicted his future Buddha hood. Similarly, the niche of the second window is also painted. Its right side shows a devotional image of the Bodhisatva Avalokiteśvara (Zin 2003: No. 45.6). The mural on the opposite side is in no poorer condition than the other three, but elements that would allow an interpretation are not easily recognisable. This is obviously the reason that the painting has never been published.

The right side of the narrow painting (Fig. 1) depicts the Buddha standing on a lotus. Like in the other paintings, the installation of the window frame cut off part of the Buddha's body. But it is unlikely that any significant iconographical elements were lost by the removal of this part. The scene takes place in front of the Buddha. Four figures are visible: at the bottom, below the base of the Buddha's lotus, a man squats or bows down on one knee and is worshipping the Buddha with his hands folded together in a gesture of reverence. Above this person there is another figure, or perhaps the same person in a different scene. The figure is depicted in a dynamic movement and approaches the Buddha. The depiction of the head is peculiar (Fig. 2): the hair is standing on end as it is the case with demons and – unique in Ajanta – is decorated with small ringlets. Above this person there is

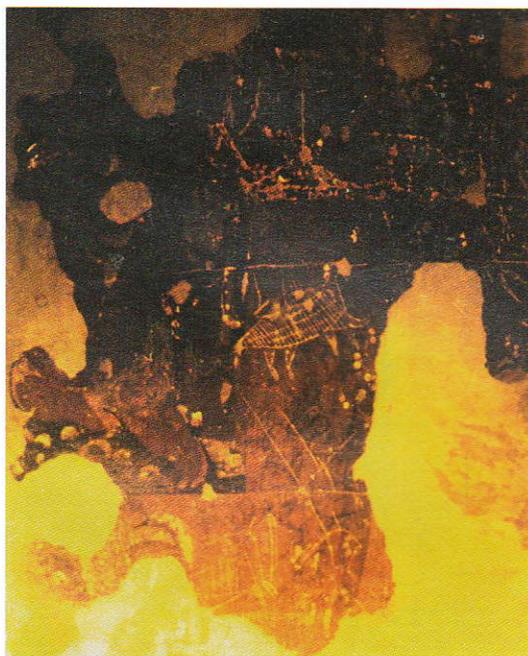


Fig. 2 – Detail from Fig. 1.

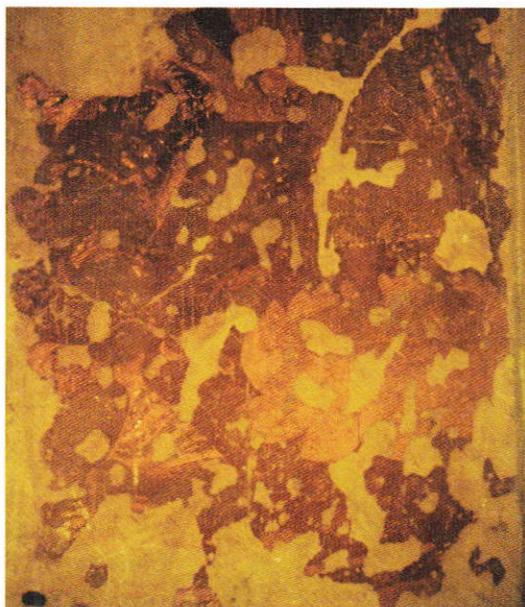


Fig. 3 – Detail from Fig. 1.

a flying dwarf. Such dwarfs are often depicted in Ajanta as bearers of garlands or umbrellas. This particular dwarf, however, is not flying towards but away from the Buddha. His hands are held in a gesture of horror, a sign which is not only frequently found in the paintings of Ajanta but is also a universally recognisable expression of fear.

Once this mood of fright is determined, it is no longer difficult to accurately identify this scene. There are only very few episodes in which the Buddha is involved in a situation that conveys a similar mood. As generally recognised, the episode may illustrate the assaults of Devadatta or the conversion of an aggressive person. The hair on the head of the aggressive person in our picture, standing on end in demon fashion, could give the impression that this is a scene which cannot be more specifically identi-

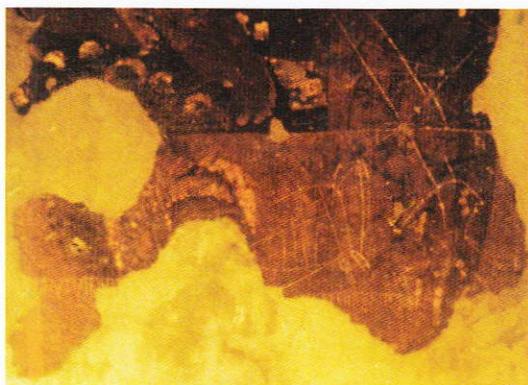


Fig. 4 – Detail from Fig. 1.

fied than one which shows the conversion of an evil Yakṣa. But at the bottom of the painting, a clear sign has survived that points to a different interpretation (Fig. 3): a sword lies on the ground which the converted person has obviously dropped. If the aggressive person is the same as the one kneeling, he would have to be equipped with a sword, who would certainly be shown ready to attack. On the left edge of the painting we can see a preserved fragment of a vertically displayed object which is of exactly the same colour as the sword lying on the ground (Fig. 4). The painting's reconstruction results in the following (Fig. 5): a person with a drawn sword is striding toward the Buddha, and, below, he kneels. The sword he has dropped is lying next to him on the ground.

The scene is well-known and can be easily identified. It is the story of the conversion of Aṅgulimāla, the mass murderer.

There are frequent references to and narrations of this story in Buddhist literature,¹ often in the connection with a *Jātaka* about Aṅgulimāla's previous life as the man-eating demon Saudāsa, who was converted by the righteous king Sutasoma and freed from his murderous impulse.² It is possible that the story of Aṅgulimāla derived from the Saudāsa narrative, known since the Veda. Both stories deal with the fundamental problem of true Brahmanhood. In one of the Buddhist narratives about Saudāsa we find a sentence central to Aṅgulimāla's conversion: "I am standing still, you are not standing still."³

The oldest surviving version of the Aṅgulimāla story consists of 25 verses of *Theragāthā*⁴. Apart from the dialogue, based on the play of words *ṭhito/aṭhito*, which takes place between Aṅgulimāla and the Buddha "I am standing still, you are not standing still",⁵ we learn that the present Thera is the son of a Brahman. He used to be *hiṃsaka*, the bloodthirsty robber Aṅgulimāla, and is now *ahiṃsaka* and the son of the Buddha.

Still, in the canonical literature there is a story which is actually nothing other than a commentary on this section of the "Verses of the Monks". It is the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta* in the *Majjhimanikāya*,⁶ in which the verses of *Theragāthā* are repeated. Both the name of Aṅgulimāla and the meaning of the verse *ṭhito/aṭhito* are explained here. The story is set in Śrāvastī, Aṅgulimāla is a wanted murderer who kills the inhabitants of entire villages and towns

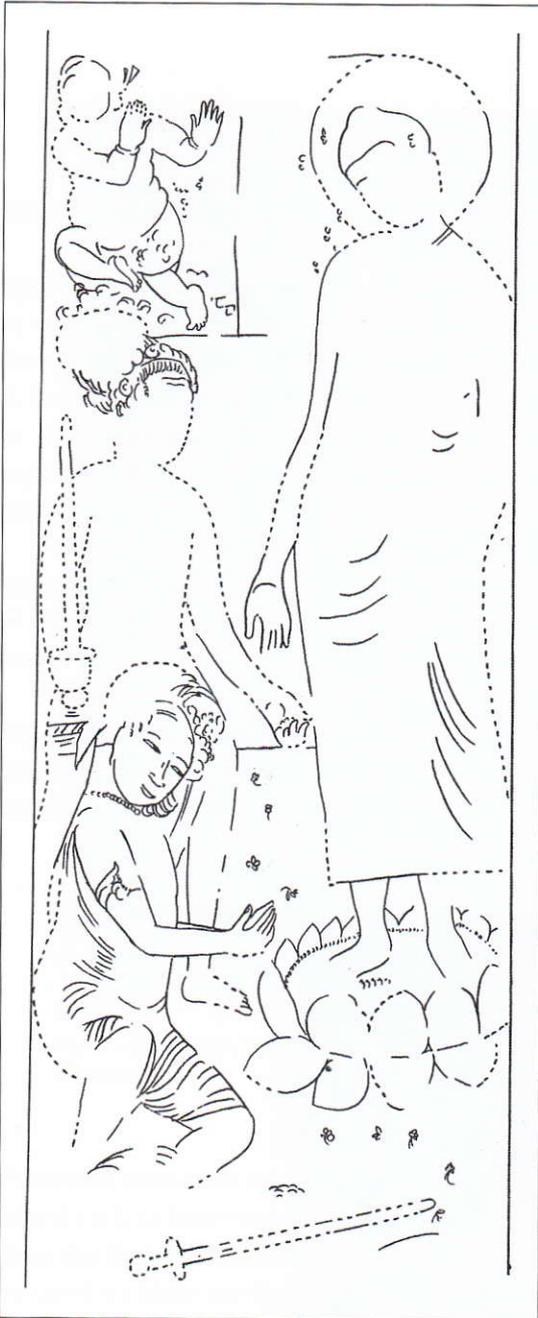


Fig. 5 – Reconstructing drawing: author.

and who wears a garland (*mālā*) made of his victims' fingers (*aṅguli*). King Prasenajit organises a military expedition to hunt down the mass murderer. The Buddha goes into the forest in which Aṅgulimāla lives and performs a miracle – the robber cannot catch up with him. “Stand still!” Aṅgulimāla calls. “I am standing still, you are not standing still!” the Buddha replies and – by subsequently explaining that a monk arrests his desires – he converts Aṅgulimāla and takes him to a monastery. King Prasenajit visits the Buddha and is delighted to learn that the vicious murderer can no longer cause any harm.

The same story is also found in the northern Buddhist tradition, namely in the fragmentary Sanskrit manu-

scripts of the *Samyuktāgama* probably of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school (Hartmann 1997-98)⁷ and of the Sarvāstivāda and Kāśyapīya schools preserved in Chinese translations (*T 99* and *T 100*, Bareau 1985-86: 655). Unlike the Pali version in the *Majjhimanikāya*, which takes place in Śrāvastī, the northern renditions are set in Magadha (*T 100*) or in Aṅga (*T 99*); accordingly, King Prasenajit does not appear in these versions.

The Pali version in the *Majjhimanikāya* incorporates one more episode: as a monk, Aṅgulimāla utters a “word of truth” (*satyavācana*) to help a woman who has suffered labour pains for many days to deliver her child. Aṅgulimāla, overcome with compassion for the woman giving birth, receives advice from the Buddha, who says he should swear that he has not harmed any creature since he was born. The monk rejects this as a lie. The Buddha then asks him to swear that he has not harmed any creature since he was born as a Brahman. Aṅgulimāla swears and this has an immediate effect. It is to be understood that Aṅgulimāla became a true Brahman only at the moment of his conversion by the Buddha. The oath, called *Aṅgulimālaparitta*,⁸ is still known in Buddhist countries as a formula to help a woman in labour (Gombrich 1971: 224).

The episode featuring the “word of truth” does not figure in the already mentioned northern versions – it appears to be associated with the town of Śrāvastī. The “word of truth” is found also in Chinese renditions, all of which are set in the town of Śrāvastī: in the *Ekottarāgama* of the Dharmaguptakas (?) *T 125* (Bareau 1985-86: 655-56), two separate Hīnayāna texts of undetermined school affiliation *T 118* and *T 119* (*ibid.*: 657), and one Mahāyāna text *T 120* (*ibid.*: 657-658). These texts reveal further narrative features, namely a motif explaining what made the youth Aṅgulimāla engage in such a murderous occupation. *T 118* and *T 152* (Chavannes 1910-34, Vol. 1: 148-157) relate that the future murderer was a handsome young Brahman male with whom the wife of his teacher fell in love. When he rejected a love affair, the woman accused him in her husband's presence of seeking to engage her in an adulterous relationship. The teacher then demanded that the youth achieve true Brahmanhood by killing one hundred people. This was a cunning plot on behalf of the teacher. In forcing the youth to commit such a crime, he planned to hand the youth over to justice authorities in an act of revenge that would spare

him the necessity of killing his student himself – a move that would naturally spoil his reputation. The plot, with its Hippolytus motif and the teacher's demand that the youth kill one hundred people and cut off their fingers, culminates in the addition of the murderer's mother, who was to be his final victim and at the last moment is spared certain death by Buddha's conversion of Aṅgulimāla. Other versions of the story extend the number of victims to one thousand and deepen the plot by the addition of a mother driven into the forest out of a touching desire to bring her son something to eat (*Der Weise und der Thor*: 300-307, 324-26; Chavannes 1910-34, Vol. 4: 110-111).

The question must be raised whether the motif of the mother, which arises from the demand of a vindictive teacher, should in fact be viewed as a later development of the text (as Bareau argued 1985-86) or whether the story already incorporated this motif at an earlier date

and was simply not always referred to in its entirety in the texts available to us.

The same episodes with a wife in love, a teacher's demand to kill one thousand people and a mother carrying food also occur in a Pali commentary literature from the 5th century, namely in *Papañcasūdanī*⁹ and *Paramatthadīpanī*.¹⁰ It appears that these narratives, which underwent changes in both the northern and southern traditions, stem from a common and most likely canonical text which has not survived until the present day.

Art also provides evidence that all of the story's episodes were known in earlier times, both in the South and in the North. The mother was part of the narrative from an early date.

The oldest known reliefs of the Aṅgulimāla episode stem from temporally close epochs but geographically distant regions, namely from Amaravati and Gandhara. In



Fig. 6 – Relief from Amaravati, Madras Museum.

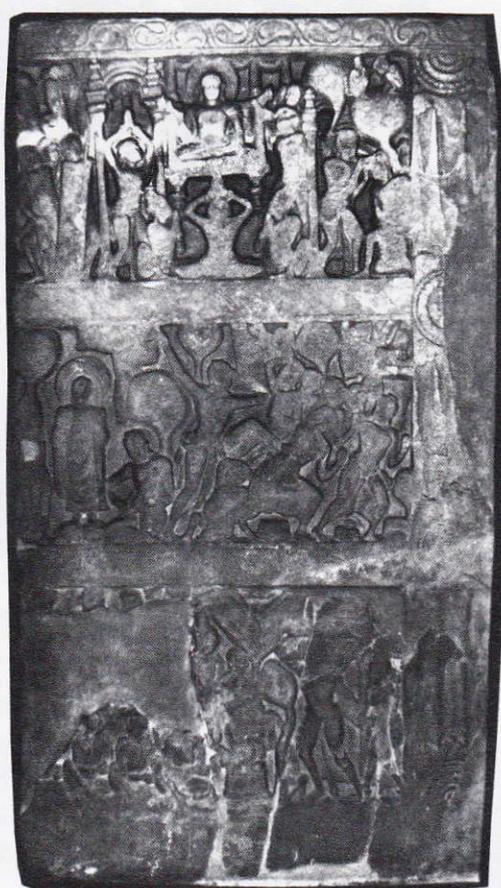


Fig. 7 – Relief from Nagarjunikonda, Nagarjunikonda Museum.

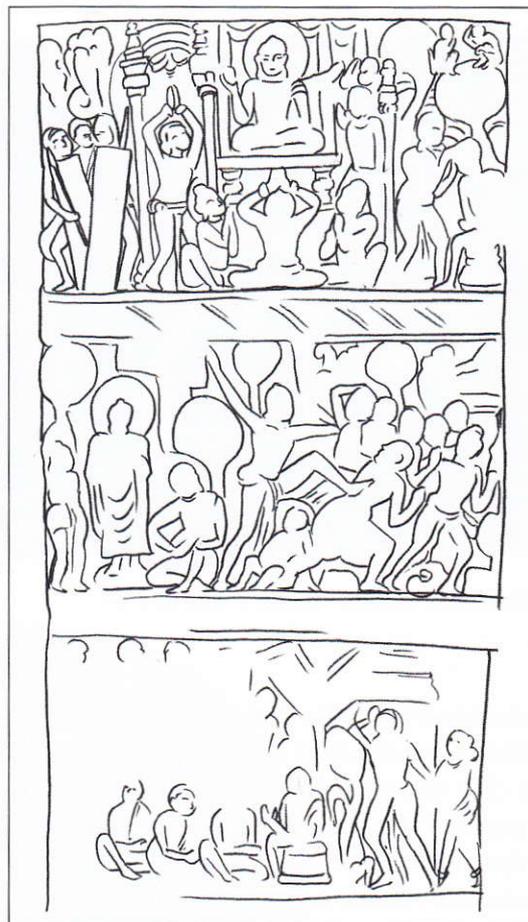


Fig. 8 – Drawing.

one Amaravati frieze¹¹ the story is reduced to one picture. *Aṅgulimāla* is seen here twice: firstly with a raised sword attacking the Buddha (depicted in the form of a column of fire), and secondly kneeling before him. Opposite the Buddha there is a female figure with a pot, obviously the mother. The same scene is presented in another Amaravati relief (Fig. 6). Here the group below represents the early deeds of *Aṅgulimāla*, perhaps related to the military operations organised by King Prasenajit. On the left side monks are seated, probably observing *Aṅgulimāla*'s admission to the monastery. There is no sign of a garland of fingers on *Aṅgulimāla*, all he is wearing is a Brahman's string. Another relief (Fig. 7-8), from Nagarjunikonda, to my knowledge previously unidentified, is not difficult to interpret even though it is badly damaged: the middle section at the right shows the killings, while at the left *Aṅgulimāla* is presented on his knees before the Buddha. The mother can be seen standing on the other side of the Buddha. The upper section shows the visit of King Prasenajit, while on the right side *Aṅgulimāla* is seen shaving in

preparation for his entry into monkhood. Though rather damaged, the lowest section is key to determining the date that the *Aṅgulimāla* story existed with all its components. It shows nothing other than one episode from the early life of the future mass murderer – a scene at school. On the right side, the teacher's wife stands with her husband, she who caused the 99-fold misfortune. As already mentioned, the earliest surviving reference to this episode in southern Indian literature derives from the 5th century.¹² The relief pre-dates it by *c.* two centuries.

While the damaged relief from Nagarjunikonda does not reveal any more details, one can make out that the murderer is wearing an extremely broad Brahman string *yajñopavīta*. This could be the garland of fingers. *Aṅgulimāla* appears to be taking it off as he kneels before the Buddha.

The reliefs from Gandhara present the *Aṅgulimāla* story in two or three successive scenes in the space of just one picture. *Aṅgulimāla* attacks the Buddha with a sword, while his mother is standing nearby, he is then



Fig. 9 – Relief from Gandhara, Chatpat, Chakdara Museum 2333.

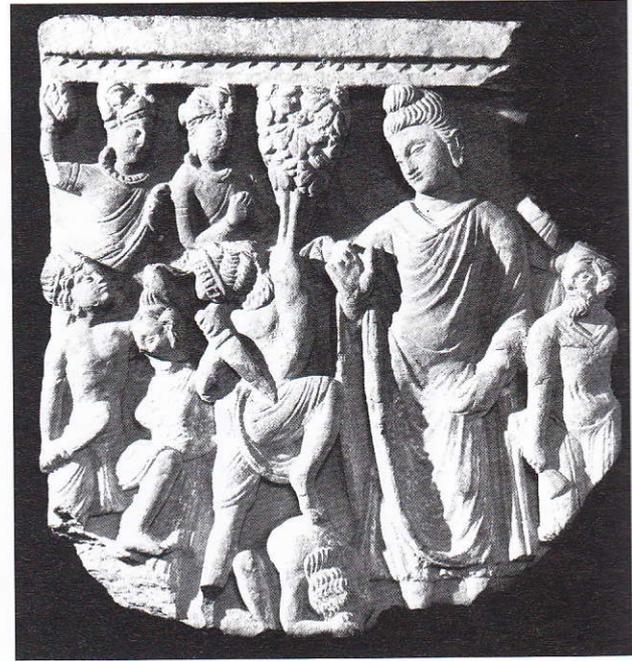


Fig. 10 – Relief from Gandhara, Private Collection, © Sherrier: after Kurita 1988-90, Vol.1, fig.472.

shown on his knees before the Buddha (Fig. 9), or there is an additional scene in which the murderer is attacking the mother (Fig. 10). A painting in Hadda is arranged in the same manner.¹³ In contrast, paintings from Central Asia only show Aṅgulimāla's attack,¹⁴ sometimes with the mother on the other side of the Buddha.¹⁵ While the Central Asian paintings depict the appearance of Aṅgulimāla in a conventional way, in Gandhara he is equipped with an attribute – namely a characteristic head-dress. At times it appears to be a crown of fingers. But the individual parts of the crown are sometimes too large to be intended as fingers, above all 99 or even 999 of them. Brancaccio (1999) identifies them as the head ornaments of savage forest inhabitants. Aṅgulimāla's crown is also reminiscent of demons' hair standing on end.¹⁶

In what is to my knowledge the only depiction of the Aṅgulimāla story in the art of Pala (Fig. 11), in which the murderer is seen drawing his sword on one side of the Buddha and the mother is found on the other, Aṅgulimāla's head is portrayed in a peculiar manner. Above the forehead there are small ringlets, above which in turn we see hair standing on end in typical demon fashion. And above this there are five round objects, the significance of which is unclear to me. They might be the curls of a Brahman pupil, or spherical objects with which certain demons or Māra¹⁷ are equipped. What is certain is that the pointed shapes on Aṅgulimāla's head in the Pala sculpture are not the leaf crown of an *āṭavi* or a finger garland. The finger garland, incidentally, is featured here in the form of a *yajñopavīta*.

Following this summary of comparable Indian depictions, we return to the Ajanta painting. Aṅgulimāla is shown here twice, during the attack and after his conversion. It is very unlikely that the mother was also represented. If she was, the picture was destroyed when the window frame was installed.

The hair of the attacking Aṅgulimāla stands on end, demon fashion, and above the forehead there are the same type of small ringlets as found in the Pala sculpture. Unfortunately, the top of the head is no longer visible, so it is impossible to determine whether the five spherical objects were also part of the composition. Even without these objects, the murderer's appearance is far more reminiscent of the Pala sculpture than depictions found in other regions. However, the finger garland is not shown here, neither in the form of a *yajñopavīta* nor as a crown. Perhaps the garland was depicted lying on the ground. A fragment of a no longer identifiable brightly coloured object can be recognised above the sword. Directly vertically above this unidentifiable remnant there is the left hand of the upright Aṅgulimāla, in which there seems to be something reminiscent of a pearl necklace. Perhaps it was the grisly garland, *aṅgulimālā*.

Contrary to the art of Amaravati and Gandhara, where the conversions of Yakṣas and Nāgas are frequently depicted, the paintings in Ajanta do not feature conquests of the evil-minded. Obviously such stories were not popular among donors in this region. For this reason the Aṅgulimāla painting is exceptional. It may be, however, that the painting was not created to depict a dif-

ficult conversion. The paintings in the neighbouring niche portray the stories of Rāhula and Sumati. We know the two pictures belong together because they appear alongside one another in other places, namely in other paintings in Ajanta (Vasant 1991) and in reliefs in Gandhara (Taddei 1974, 1992). This raises the question of whether the Aṅgulimāla painting was conceived together with another painting in the same niche. The painting on the opposite side depicts a certain Bodhisatva, most likely

Avalokiteśvara, who is being worshipped by women. As proven by Pal (1974: 33-34), Avalokiteśvara was worshipped by women hoping to conceive. In this light the Aṅgulimāla painting acquires new significance. Integral to this story is the *aṅgulimālaparitta*, a protective formula used for births. It is derived from the “word of truth” and refers to true Brahmanhood.

All illustrations (unless specified) by author.



Fig. 11 – Relief from Nalanda (?), Pala Period, 9th century, 20 1/2 × 13 × 6 inches.
Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse 1972.26, © Elvehjem Museum of Art.

NOTES

- ¹ For more records of the story mentioned in this paper cf.: Hartmann 1997-98. Apart from the references listed there, the following additional references to the story or the person of Aṅgulimāla may be mentioned: *Mahāvagga* I.41, ed. Vol. 1, p. 74; transl. SBE / 13: 196; *Milindapañha*, ed. p.410; transl.: Vol. 2, p. 290; *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* XIII.10, ed. Vol.3, p. 185; transl. Vol. 3: 25; XXVI.39, ed. Vol. 4: 230-31; transl. Vol. 3: 338; *Jātaka* 55, ed. Vol. 1, p. 275; transl.: p. 139; *Jātaka* 537, ed. Vol. 5, p. 456; transl.: 246; *Jātaka* 546, ed. Vol. 6, p. 329; transl.: 156; Fa-hien, cf. Beal 1884: XLIV; Hiuen Tsiang, cf. Beal 1884, Vol. 2: 3; *Śatapāñcāsatika Stotra*, Vers 127, Hoernle 1916: 73; *Mahāvamsa* XXX.84, ed. p. 242; transl.: 205.
- ² For records of the story of Saudāsa, representations in art as well as references to the research on the narrative material of Saudāsa / Kalmāṣapāda, cf. Schlingloff 2000: No. 56 (Sutasoma).
- ³ *Jātaka* 537, ed. Vol. 475: *tiṭṭhāhīti mayā vutto so vaṃ gacchasi yammakhamo/ aḥito ṭhito 'mhīti lapasi/ brahmacāri idaṃ te samaṇa ayuttam/ asiṇ ca me mañṇasi kamkappattan ti//*; transl.: 259: "Although I bid thee stand, thou still dost forward fly, an crying "Lo! I stand, methinks thou dost but lie: Unseemly 'tis; this sword, O priest, thou must assume to be a harmless shaft equipped with heron's plume."
- ⁴ *Theragāthā* 866-891, ed. pp. 80-82; transl. pp. 82-84.
- ⁵ *Theragāthā* 866, ed. pp. 80-81: *gacchaṃ vadasi*

- samaṇa ṭhito 'mhi mamañ ca brūsi ṭhitaṃ aṭṭhito 'ti/ pucchāmitaṃ samaṇa etaṃ atthaṃ kasmā ṭhito vaṃ aham aṭṭhito 'mhi//*; transl. p. 82: "While going along, ascetic, you say "I am standing still", and you say that I who am standing still am not standing still. I ask you this, ascetic, "Why are you standing still, and I not standing still?"
- ⁶ *Majjhimanikāya* 86, ed. Vol. 2, p. 97-105; transl. p. 284-92.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* also references to further fragments of manuscripts including the story.
- ⁸ Already referred to this way in *Milindapañha* II. 4 (ed. p. 150-51): *puna Bhagavatā parittā ca uddiṭṭhā seyyathidaṃ/ Ratanasuttaṃ Khandha-parittaṃ Moraparittaṃ Dhajaggaparittaṃ Āṭānāṭṭi-yaparittaṃ Aṅgulimālaparittaṃ/* transl. (Vol. 1, p. 211): Safety-runes were however appointed by the Lord, that is to say the Jewel Sutta, the safety-rune in the Khandha(ka), the Peacock safety-rune, the Crest of the Banner safety-rune, the Āṭānāṭṭiya safety-rune and Aṅgulimāla's safety-rune.
- ⁹ *Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā* of Buddhaghosa, ed. Vol. 3: 328-32; analys. in: Gombrich 1996: 138ff.
- ¹⁰ *Theragāthāṭṭhakathā* of Dhanapāla, ed. Vol. 3, p. 54-56; transl. in: Mrs. Rhys Davids 1913: 318-25; analys. in: Gombrich 1996: 138ff.
- ¹¹ Madras Museum, ill.: Burgess 1887: pl. 48, fig. 4; Coomaraswamy 1935: pl. 2, fig. 9.
- ¹² One relief from Amaravati with the representation of scenes from a Brahman school was identified by Sivaramamurti (1942: 192) as the Aṅgulimāla story. The interpretation is not certain, however, as the relief ends with these

- scenes and does not show the later episodes.
- ¹³ Ill.: Barthoux 1933: 163 (drawing).
- ¹⁴ For instance in Cave 32, main chamber, right side of the barrel vault: ill.: Xu Wanyin 1983-85, Vol. 1: fig. 26; Cave 80, main chamber, right side of the barrel vault: ill.: Xu Wanyin 1983-85, Vol. 2: fig. 53, 59; Cave 171, main chamber, left side of the barrel vault: ill.: *ibid.*, Vol. 3: fig. 60.
- ¹⁵ Cave 175, main chamber, left side of the barrel vault: ill.: Xu Wanyin 1983-85, Vol. 3: fig. 20.
- ¹⁶ Further reliefs of the Aṅgulimāla story in Gandhara: relief from Sahri Bahlol, Peshawar Museum 1371: ill.: Foucher 1905-51, Vol. 2: fig. 304; relief in the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, ill.: Foucher 1905-15, Vol. 2: fig. 305; relief ill.: Ingholt 1957: fig. 119; Kurita 1988-90, Vol. 1: fig. 47; reliefs in the Private Collections in Europe: ill.: Kurita 1988-90, Vol. 1: pl. P3-IX and *ibid.* Vol.1: fig. 473; relief in the Private Collection, Japan, ill.: Kurita 1988-90, Vol. 1: fig. 474.
- The depictions of the Aṅgulimāla story can be easily confused with depictions of the scene with Sumati and the Buddha Dīpaṅkara.
- ¹⁷ Other paintings of the Aṅgulimāla story in Kizil: Cave 32, main chamber, right side of the barrel vault: ill.: Xu Wanyin 1983-85, Vol. 1: fig. 26; Cave 171, main chamber, left side of the barrel vault: ill.: *ibid.*, Vol. 3: fig. 60.

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