

THE DISCOVERY
OF TWO STUCCO HEADS
OF THE VIDŪṢAKA
IN GANDHARAN ART

INTRODUCTION

The *vidūṣaka* is a crucial character of the classic South-Asian theatre. He is often described as the buffoon (*Spaßmacher*, *Hanswurst*) of a play. His function, his social position (a brahmin), his funny looks, hairstyle, voice, suitable names, and other specific traits have been described by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.¹⁾ Both the textual sources and visual representations (Fig. 1)²⁾ testify to the fact that this trickster of theatre pieces had been known in India much earlier than the compilation of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

This short paper investigates two stucco heads excavated in the Gandharan region, which can be identified as the *vidūṣaka* according to the authors' observation. This small but new finding will fill in the gap left in previous studies, that have attested to the presence of the *vidūṣaka* in both the theatri-

¹⁾ Aspects of his personality, his function and iconography have been extensively discussed by Zin (see fn. 3) and in previous works of the present authors (Arlt / Hiyama 2015; Hiyama / Arlt 2016) and shall not be repeated here.

²⁾ Zin (2015a, 386) refers to an inscribed *torāṇa* from Katra (Mathura Government Museum, No. 54.3768, after American Institute of Indian Studies, Photo Collection No. 052670) as the possibly earliest depiction of the *vidūṣaka*. The inscription mentions *Mahākṣatrapa Śodāsa*.

cal and visual traditions in India and east Turkestan, yet had a large gap in the regions between.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In her three papers published in 1998 and 2015, Monika Zin demonstrated how the iconography of the *vidūṣaka*, as described by Bharata, found its way into the Buddhist art of Ajanta, Mathura and Amaravati, and investigated this interesting figure in detail.³⁾

On the basis of Zin's iconographical works, the present authors managed to identify a large number of representations of the *vidūṣaka* in the wall paintings decorating the Buddhist rock monasteries of the Kucha oasis, thousands of kilometres away from the Indian subcontinent.⁴⁾

Considering this situation, the lack of a representation of the *vidūṣaka* in Gandhara comes as a surprise. It seems quite unlikely that the iconography of the *vidūṣaka* in Kucha, which displays a strong resemblance to its depiction in Indian art, was transmitted without leaving any trace in the regions between India and east Turkestan. The fact that manuscripts of drama pieces referring to *vidūṣaka* have been found in Gandhara, reinforces the plausibility

³⁾ Zin's paper in 1998 analyses representations of the *vidūṣaka* in the art of Ajanta and Mathura (see also Zin 2003: No. 26). In her paper in 2015(a), she introduces a larger number of representations from these regions and also in the art of the Amaravati area. In her paper in 2015(b), she focuses on the *vidūṣaka*'s role as the *pavvajjā* ('the going forth') of the main character in a play or a story.

Zin was the first scholar who recognized the identification of this specific type of figure in Indian art. It was Mehta, who, in her paper in 1995, already recognized the bent staff *kuṭilaka* in a painting in Cave 17 in Ajanta, which is one of the most important requisites of the *vidūṣaka*. Her study, however, does not consider the identification of the actual figure, who holds the bent staff *kuṭilaka* (Mehta 1995: 399–400), but just described it as 'a little boy' (Mehta 1995: 392–393; compare to Zin 1998: 30, fig 1; Zin 2003: 246, Detail 1). Mehta also identifies a standing figure in the Ajanta paintings as the *vidūṣaka*. The figure is wearing an adorned turban, a patterned tunic and apparently a pair of trousers (Mehta 1995: 390–1). The identification is based on the decor of the turban and labelled as „trishikhandaka” = *trīśikhaṇḍaka* obviously in reference to the characteristic hairdo of the *vidūṣaka*, but seems to be incorrect.

⁴⁾ See Arlt / Hiyama 2015; Hiyama / Arlt 2016. Inoue (2013a, b) also closely studied the iconographical features of the discussed figure and concluded it as a kind of buffoon in the royal entourage, though neither arguing its exact origin nor connecting it to the Indian theatrical tradition.

that visual rendering of this character must have once existed in Gandhara as well.

Recently, the authors observed a stucco head, exhibited in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which shows the typical iconographical features of the *vidūṣaka*. Subsequently, a clay head with similar visual features, published in a catalogue of the British Museum, can be studied in this frame as well.

TWO STUCCO HEADS OF THE VIDŪṢAKA IN TWO COLLECTIONS IN LONDON

The Victoria and Albert Museum possesses the head of a stucco figurine, which is missing its body. It is about 15 cm tall and made of a lime composition with polychrome (Fig. 2).⁵⁾ It is labelled as the ‘head of a devotee’ and dated to the 4th to 5th century AD. Its provenance is affiliated to the Khyber Pass region of north-west Pakistan.

The face of that figure is represented smiling, the head is shaven, but some tufts have been left, the appearance of which closely resembles those we know from examples of the *vidūṣaka* in South and Central Asia (Figs. 3).⁶⁾ The figure is not simply smiling; it is also showing a row of crooked teeth, a characteristic visual trait which can be clearly observed in an example from Ajanta (Fig. 4).⁷⁾ The shaven head, the hair-tufts, and the crooked teeth are all typical elements of the iconography of the *vidūṣaka* in South and Central Asia.

In Fig. 5 we can see another small head, housed in the British Museum, supposedly found in Punjab.⁸⁾ Judging from its stylistic features, Errington attributes it to Taxila, while Zwalf speculates about its origin in Gandhara proper.⁹⁾ It has a height of approximately 19 cm, and it once formed a part of

⁵⁾ Victoria and Albert Museum, no. IS.44–1994. This piece was bequeathed by Col. Kenneth William Merrylees.

⁶⁾ Fig. 3: Kizil Cave 114 (Gebetsmühlenhöhle), right side wall = Le Coq / Waldschmidt 1933: Tafel 10a; see also Arlt / Hiyama 2016, Fig. 2.

⁷⁾ Fig. 4: Ajanta, Cave 1, interior front wall; image courtesy of the Institute for Indology and Tibetology of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich (Archive of Asian Art Photo Collection, Ajanta Series No. 5503).

⁸⁾ Fig. 5: The British Museum, no. OA 1865.4–12.1 = Zwalf 1996, vol. 1, pl. XV. For photographic plates see Burgess 1899: pl. 25.1; Foucher 1951: 18–20, fig. 310; Errington 1987: 171–2, fig. 6.6. and Zwalf 1996: vol. I, 337, pl. VX; vol. II, fig. 626.

⁹⁾ Errington 1987: 171–2; Zwalf 1996: vol. I, 337.

a clay figure. Just like the previous example, the face is represented smiling, showing a line of upper teeth. The head is shaven, while some strands have been left covering the crest, the sides, and the back of the head. This example reminds us of the special iconographical traits of the *vidūṣaka*, typical in Amaravati and Mathura (for example Figs. 6, 7), where the figure's hair-strands resemble 'a crow's foot' as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.¹⁰⁾

On the basis of these new identifications, we conclude that the iconography of the *vidūṣaka* had also been known in Gandhara, which seems to be most plausible, since it existed in South Asia and eastern Turkestan. Although it is unfortunate that we do not know anything exact about the pieces' origins and their original context, we can at least be certain that they originate from the Gandhara region, and that the iconography clearly matches the typical features of the *vidūṣaka*.

It is curious that no representation of the *vidūṣaka* has been attested so far among the stone sculptures and reliefs in the Gandhara region. Is this solely owing to the randomness of the findings of Gandharan art objects, or does it possibly hint to different narrative contexts, in which the art-making activity with each material—stone and stucco—once served? The question remains open for further studies.

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¹⁰⁾ Fig 6: Nagarjunakonda Site 37, Archaeological Site Museum, No. 36 = Zin 2016: Fig. 14; Fig. 7: Mathura Government Museum No. J. 4 = Zin 2016: Fig. 20b. As for the 'crow's foot' described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (XXIII, 151; ed. vol. 1, p. 161; trans. vol. 1, p.433) see Zin 1998: 39–40.

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Fig. 1: Vidūṣaka (left) and a messenger (right). Katra, Mathura Government Museum, fragment of a toraṇa, After American Institute of Indian Studies, Photo Collection, no. 052670.



Fig. 2: A stucco head, Victoria and Albert Museum, no. IS.44-1994; Drawing by S. Hiyama.



Fig. 3: A mural fragment from Kizil Cave 114 (Gebetsmühlenshöhle), right side wall = Le Coq / Waldschmidt 1933: Tafel 10a.



Fig. 4: Ajanta, Cave 1, Interior front wall. Image courtesy of the Institute for Indology and Tibetology of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich (Archive of Asian Art Photo Collection, Ajanta Series No. 5503).



Fig. 5: A stucco head, the British Museum, no. OA 1865.4-12.1 = Zwalf 1996, vol. 1, pl. XV.



Fig. 6: A narrative scene from Nagarjunakonda Site 37, Archaeological Site Museum, No. 36 (Photograph by courtesy of Monika Zin).



Fig. 7: A male figure and the vidūṣaka, Mathura Government Museum, No. J. 4 (Photograph by courtesy of Monika Zin).