Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art

Edited by
Wannaporn Rienjang
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Is it appropriate to ask a celestial lady's age?

Robert Bracey[1]

This short piece is adapted from the text of the presentation I gave at the Gandhāra Connections workshop on 24th March 2017 so it is somewhat informal in style. I have in some cases expanded the references and argument, but it remains an exploration of a theme based on a single piece rather than an attempt at a comprehensive study.

I wished to explore two central and related questions. The first is how pieces can be dated when they are deprived of either firm archaeological context[2] or dated inscriptions?[3] And the second question is whether this is the right question to be asking. These questions are important for almost all Gandhāran work, and also for the class of Mathurān pieces I have chosen here.

The choice of a Mathurān piece reflects both my own interests and also my belief that viewing Gandhāra in isolation from its southern neighbour has been harmful to the study of both.[4] I also want to make clear that this is not really a paper about the Cleveland Dancers. Though the central question is when the Cleveland Dancers were made, the purpose is to explore whether dating is the right question to pursue.

Figure 1. The Cleveland Dancers, described by the Museum as follows: 'Railing Pillar, 100s. India, Mathura, Kushan Period (1st century-320). Red sandstone; overall: h. 80 cm (31 7/16 in). The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1977.34'.

[1] Several colleagues, including Peter Stewart, Christian Luczanits, and Joe Cribb, have discussed aspects of the paper with me, and I am grateful to the audience at the Gandhāra Connections event for similar engagement. Sushma Jansari was kind enough to read an early draft and comment on the content, and Ysa Frehse carefully read my final draft.

[2] Gandhāra is generally much better off for well excavated sites than Mathurā but the relatively long life and potential of re-use for sculpture applies in both cases (for Gandhāra, see Behrendt 2009) complicating the use of archaeological context in both cases.

[3] To the best of my knowledge there is only one inscribed railing pillar of the type being discussed here from Mathurā (Quintanilla 2007: fig.189). This pillar is in a private collection but is reported as inscribed by a donor, Kathika, who also donated a fragmentary railing pillar not featuring a nymph (fig.185-188) in the Mathurā museum. The inscription on the Mathurā example does not have a date but two of the characters are diagnostic. The tripartite form of the conjunct *ya* ceases to be used early in the reign of Huviṣka, *c.* 150 AD, while the curved base of *na* probably rules out a very early date (Bracey 2011). This still leaves a broad range of possible dates in the first century BC or the first or early second century AD. A fragmentary free-standing nymph from Kankali Tila (Smith 1901: pl.XCIX) is also inscribed but the inscription has not been satisfactorily read.

[4] The northwest of India through Central Asia is a patchwork of different artistic centres, containing various transient and long lived workshops which must have responded to each other through changes in clients' taste, transmission of prototypes, and transfer of personnel. That these coalesced at times into relatively distinct regional styles, such as Mathurān art, is an interesting phenomenon but the historical entities that produce it (and Gandhāran art, whatever is meant by that) remain only very poorly understood.

The Cleveland Dancers

This piece (Figure 1), acquired (with no archaeological provenance) by the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1977 (acquisition no. 77.34), was first reported in the review of 1977 in the Museum's bulletin and described as 'late second century' (Lee 1977). It was subsequently exhibited in the early 1980s and ascribed then by Stanislaw Czuma (1985) to the 'second century'.[5] The piece has also been used in several papers over the years as an example of 'Dionysiac' or 'bacchanalian' imagery in Mathurān art.[6]

The Cleveland Dancers are the corner-post of a railing pillar. There are slots for crossbars on two adjacent sides (for a total of six crossbars) and a tenon survives on the top to allow a coping stone to be mounted in place. The piece is about 80 cm high and when mounted would have been part of a stone railing about chest height used to surround a sacred space. The use of such pillars was common to many traditions and different sorts of spaces had railings but it is often assumed the piece belonged to a Buddhist *stūpa*. Like most Mathurān railing pillars it has a design arranged in several registers. The highest register consists of grapes amongst foliage, the next of onlookers playing instruments. The third register is the largest with four dancing female figures, and the final register is separated by a stone pattern and consists of two distinct narrative scenes on the two decorated sides of the pillar.

The piece is unusual in several respects. Though it is of a railing pillar type made in Mathurā, and carved in the 'red', 'red-mottled', or 'sikri' stone normal for that city's workshops in the first to fifth centuries AD, the depictions themselves seem to employ 'classical' or 'Hellenistic' elements not normally seen in artistic pieces at Mathurā.

Think horse, not zebra

The subtitle to this section refers to a common aphorism in medical diagnosis. The heuristic suggests that when you consider a symptom (the sound of hooves, for example) you should, unless you live in Africa, think first of common causes (horse) before uncommon ones (zebra). Sometimes, of course, the sound will be a zebra but that is not where your investigation should *start*.

The same general principle should apply when looking for artistic prototypes. Mathurā was a major urban centre, whose products are found across South Asia. So it was connected to trade routes that covered the whole of Eurasia. In principle an artist could have drawn on prototypes from Rome, the classical world, or even China, but they are much more likely to have drawn on closer traditions: in Andhra, western India, the Gangetic valley, or Gandhāra.

On seeing elements that appear 'classical' in the Cleveland pillars, therefore, we should think first of nearby Gandhāra, where such elements occur frequently, not further afield in Greece or Rome. However, in an article published in 2011, Seungjung Kim began his examination by comparing the piece with a Classical Greek vase, and then with a Roman sarcophagus. Kim is quite dismissive (Kim 2011: 25) of the Gandhāran parallels but is equivocal about the precise prototype so it is unclear if he is arguing that the piece drew directly on a Greek or Roman design.

However, in terms of imagery, there are quite obvious Gandhāran parallels. The Edinburgh University Art Collection contains a schist piece (EU1325) depicting a group of dancers and musicians (Figure 2).

[5] It is not mentioned by Czuma in his 1977 article on the Mathurān art in the Cleveland collection published two issues later so was presumably acquired subsequent to that article being prepared.

[6] The lengthiest treatment of the piece is in Carter (1982), with a substantial response in Kim (2011: 21ff) but it is also treated in Peterson (2011-12: 16-17). Carter (1992; 2015: 29, 355-356) subsequently treats the association with Dionysiac imagery at length but these add nothing significant on the Cleveland pillar.

Figure 2. Gandhāran frieze. (Photo: copyright the University of Edinburgh/Thomas Morgan.)

Though the piece is much smaller in scale the women have similar hair styles and the third figure from the right is turned away from the audience with her robe draped in a similar fashion. The figures seem much more comparable to the Cleveland piece than any of Kim's examples[7].

Nudity, nymphs, and women

Kim makes a further remark on the figures in the Cleveland pillar that requires particular correction. In all publications it has been assumed, incorrectly, that the pillar was made by a workshop which normally produced Mathurān style pillars, but on this occasion used Gandhāran (or in Kim's view Western) prototypes. Following this line of argument, Kim connects the nudity on the pillars with the local practice in Mathurā, before again returning to classical Roman types:

> As for the partial nudity on the Cleveland pillar, precedents can be found locally in voluptuous Yakshi figures that have adorned other Buddhist stūpas. Other parallels from the West, and visually striking ones at that, can be found in contemporary Roman visual tradition ... (Kim 2011: 24)

In fact the 'nudity' of the Cleveland figures bears no resemblance to treatments of the female form in Mathurā. First, though this is not at all obvious[8] the female images that appear on railing pillars at Mathurā are not technically nude. Though very little is left to the viewer's imagination, a careful examination of images shows they wear skin tight, diaphanous, and for practical purposes, invisible garments. In some cases a prominent hem-line is shown without apparently connecting to anything

[7] It is possible that Kim intends to draw attention not to the figures themselves but to their interaction. The Gandhāran figures are arranged independently in a flat plane, while those on the Cleveland pillar seem more unified in their composition. While true, this ignores the very different frames a railing pillar and a panel from a *stūpa* provide. I am grateful to attendees at the talk for this suggestion.

[8] For example Coomaraswamy (1926: 60) refers to the figures as 'often nude or semi-nude', and both Trivedi (2004: 57) and Wangu (2003: 55) refer to them as nude without qualification. Though I think most specialists recognize the existence of a diaphanous garment.

else.[9] Though something akin to nudity is suggested by the visible girdle, itself an undergarment, this is very different to the disrobing figures on the Cleveland pillar. And of course we should remember that we perceive the figures in monochrome, with the possibility that paint could have radically transformed perception of their 'nudity'.

Kim refers to the female figures at Mathurā as 'Yakshi', one of a wide range of terms used for them. To simplify discussion I will from here on refer to independent female figures in architectural contexts (railing pillars or columns) as 'nymphs'.[10] Such nymphs can be further sub-divided based on their iconography but there are clues, especially in the treatment of their 'nudity' that contemporaries thought of them as a class, distinct from other female images.

They are obviously not 'real' women – not even courtesans. Female donors (who certainly did include courtesans[11]) are depicted on the pedestals of a number of Buddhist and Jain images.[12] These women generally wear a long, heavy dress with high collar, which reaches to their ankles, and unlike the nymph's diaphanous drapery, obscures the girdle. Presumably well-to-do Mathurān women wore girdles, just not visibly in public. The nymphs are probably also not 'divine' figures. There are two relatively common iconographies at Mathurā: one is a squatting female figure usually holding a child; the other is a standing female flanked by two male figures. Both of these types seem to represent deities, or at least the objects of religious worship. The squatting figures are usually referred to as *mātrikās* (mothers), while the female figure in the triad is variously identified as Ekanamsa, the sister of Krishna (Couture & Schmid 2011), or the folk goddess Shashthī (Agrawala 1971; Joshi 1986). These divine figures do wear girdles, but they are arranged differently with material draped in the centre, rather than at the side (see the right-most drawing in Figure 3).[13]

This is a marker for the difference between a feminine idealization that represents fertility, plenty, or (possibly dangerous) sexuality,[14] and the girdle-less donor figures with whom female viewers were expected to identify.[15]

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[9] For example, all of the railing pillars recovered at Sanghol were made at a workshop that followed this last convention.

[10] The range of terminology that has been used is vast and largely unsupported by any contemporary literature. For a list of terms and some references see Trivedi (2004).

[11] Courtesans were amongst the donors at religious establishments, and donors are consistently depicted as indicated in the next note. An inscription from Kankali Tila was dedicated by a courtesan, and other similar dedications are known from a variety of later sites in India. For an overview see Mokashi (2015), and on the term *gaṇikā* see Srinivasan 2005. On a related note it has become fashionable to identify the image of a kneeling woman on several plaques as a particular courtesan, Vasantasena, the principle female character in a much later play. This identification and the relevant pieces are discussed at length in Rossi (1995: 7-8) and Czuma (1985: cat. no. 41). The treatment of the female figure is very similar to that of the nymphs and this identification remains open to dispute.

[12] An image of a nun wearing a chequered robe in the National Museum Delhi (acc. no. 49.13/3; Asthana 1999: no. 89) is also worth noting in this context; again no girdle is visible, as is the case for an old woman buying fruit in a narrative panel from a pillar in Mathurā (Quintanilla 2007: fig. 243). The Aryavati Ayagapata from Kankali Tila (Smith 1901: xiv; Quintanilla 2007: fig. 148) has a figure on the viewer's left who appears to be a donor insert (head-scarf, long dress, no sign of a girdle) in a scene with mythological figures (they wear girdles but the treatment is different to the majority of nymphs).

[13] A figure that may be Durga in Berlin (inv. no. MIK I 5894; Luczanits 2008: cat. 113), has the same arrangement. While a column identified as Lakshmi does not and has probably been mis-identified (acc. no. B.89; Czuma 1985: fig. 26.3). Early, probably Kushan period, depictions of Mahishasurmardini slaying a buffalo also seem to show a similar depiction of the goddess' dhoti; see for example Viennot 1956: fig.1. These differences suggest that the apparent nudity formed part of visual coding contemporaries were expected to recognise and which would be an interesting topic for a more in-depth analysis.

[14] Though also note the provocative article by Sunil (2001/2002) which suggests these figures enjoyed an unusual level of 'semiotic openness' allowing meaning to be imposed by the viewer, including nineteenth and twentieth century scholars.

[15] With regard to the donor figures on pedestals DeCaroli (2015: 80-90) makes the point that very few depictions match the details of donors given in the inscription. He stops short of suggesting that the workshops produced generic images in advance rather than taking commissions, though this would be very interesting and is what the evidence implies. At the least though it suggests that while female donor images represent 'real' women not all represent 'actual' women.

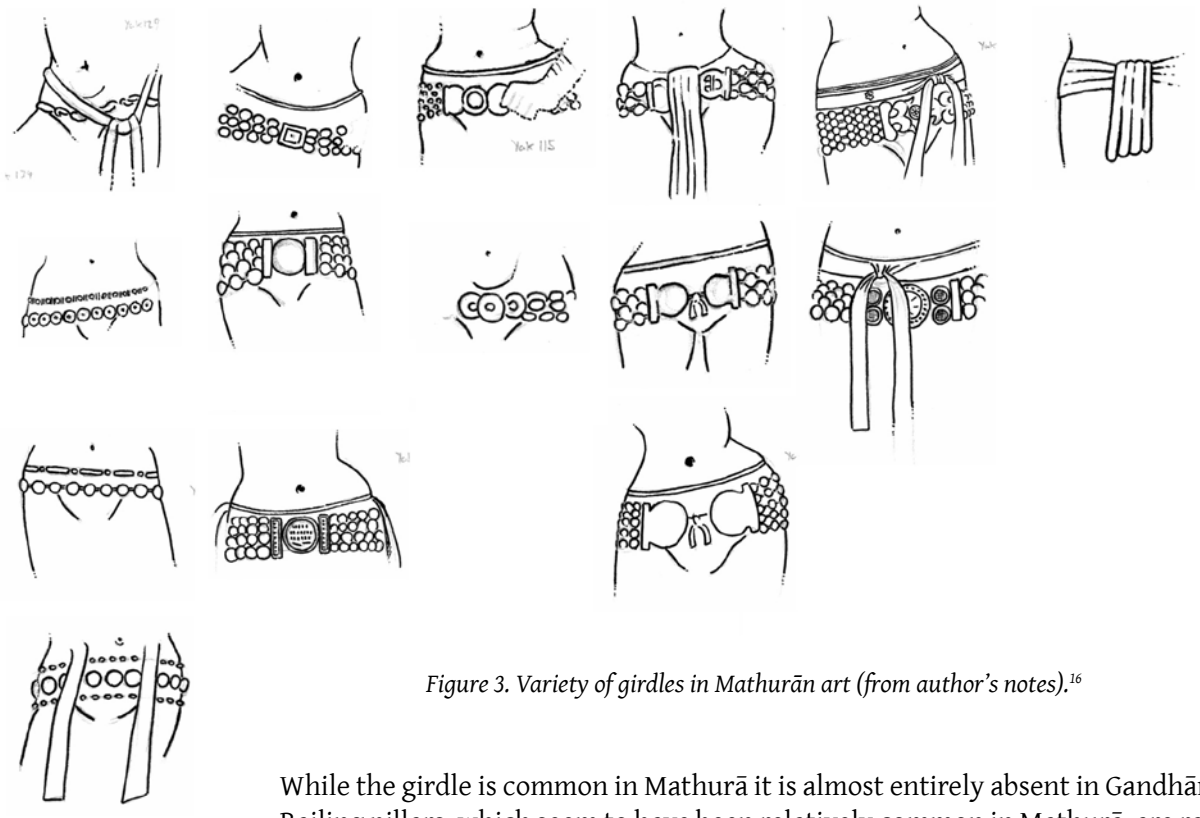

Figure 3. Variety of girdles in Mathurān art (from author's notes).[16]

While the girdle is common in Mathurā it is almost entirely absent in Gandhāra. Railing pillars, which seem to have been relatively common in Mathurā, are rare in Gandhāra, but there is an iconographically equivalent depiction. Gandhāran narrative reliefs are often broken up with spacing images. Some of these are architectural elements like columns, and others show male or female figures contained within a frame, often standing on a pot. Female figures of this type may stand cross-legged with one hand reaching into foliage above their head, an arrangement which is very like the type of nymph known as a śālabhañjikā.[17] There is, for our purposes, an important difference. The Gandhāran female figures are wearing obvious full-length dresses, with no girdle visible.[18] In fact when nudity, actual or apparent, does appear in this context it is those spacer figures, which are male, that are usually shown nude.[19] This gendering of the figures in decorative contexts is important. Male figures are known on railing pillars from Mathurā but they are rare, and so is nudity. So the two contexts reverse not only the dominant gender of the figures but also the visual treatment of the body, in terms of perceived or actual nudity.

[16] This is only a partial representation of what is the most variable aspect of the nymph's costume. The girdles can be classified in a variety of ways and it is tempting to see a chronological progression from those consisting only of discs (the fashion at Sanchi and Bharhut) to the more complex types with a central plate or plates. However different types seem to co-exist at both Sanghol and Kankali Tila, and it is likely that as well as changing fashion the design could vary with iconography or other factors. For example, the more complex pieces with five part clasps, the fifth column of Figure 3, seem to be more common on large free-standing pieces, which probably reflects the greater space the artist had for elaboration.

[17] Examples showing various of these characteristics include Dar 2016: pls. XXVII.f, XLIV.c, LIV; Khan 2005: nos. 203, 220; Zwalf 1996: nos. 187, 232, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 501.

[18] The only example of a girdle I am aware of is Khan: 2005, no. 399 from a narrative depiction at Taxila.

[19] Khan (2005: no. 278 and 279) and Zwalf (1996: nos. 180, 216, 228). Zwalf (1996: no. 493) shows an example of a clothed male figure. I am aware of only one 'female' nude figure in this context. The piece (Pal 2003: no. 34) in the Norton Simon Museum (acq. no. 1979.14.1.S) is odd in a number of respects, and unfortunately also lacking provenance so conclusions should be cautious. The naked male is holding grapes but apparently with female sexual characteristics. My, uninformed, inclination is that if genuine the piece has been modified, possibly unintentionally.

It would be interesting to pursue this issue further. Such a stubborn difference in the way the female form is depicted, despite extensive cross-contamination in the artistic traditions, must point to some profound cultural differences in the perception of gender. In fact, though the nymph type figures have attracted much attention, it has generally been taken as unproblematic that they function as 'paradise' imagery of some sort. It has not been recognised that if the railing pillars are a paradise imagery, it is firmly a male, heterosexual, paradise, even if they were not read as overtly erotic. So, how did the many female patrons and monastics at these sites experience this imagery? Or for that matter the prevalence of male rather than female nudity at Gandhāran sites? It was precisely this point that I raised at the beginning: that there might be more interesting questions to ask about these objects than when they were made. For the moment, the important point to take away is a stubborn difference in cultural attitudes to gender and nudity between Gandhāran and Mathurān artists, despite extensive cultural exchange in other artistic elements.

Not a Mathurān artist

The treatment of 'nudity' alone is not sufficient to doubt that this piece was made by a Mathurān trained artist.[20] Much more problematic is the disregard of proportional systems. Artists operating in long-term workshop traditions, where apprenticeships in the craft would be normal, develop proportional systems as a way of reliably scaling their subject matter. The use of proportional systems at Mathurā has received only one detailed study: that by Mosteller (1991). Mosteller's study focuses on standing male images, such as *yakṣas* (the pot-bellied male counterparts to *yakṣīs*), Buddhas, *tīrthan**karas*, or Vishnu. Reproducing a similar study here is impossible as it requires identifying the component parts that an artist worked with and careful measurements of where those parts intersected with the original plane on which the master roughed out the figure.

Instead, to illustrate the problem, a proxy for the proportional system will be used. This is the ratio of the height to the width of a series of intact frontally facing nymphs (from pillars, brackets, or columns). The height is measured from the centre point between the eyes to the approximate position of the heel. The width is considered to be bound by the outer-most points indicated by hips and breasts. Of the Cleveland Dancers, only the figure carrying a palm branch is facing frontally, and is photographed straight on in Carter 1982 (fig. 2). That figure has a ratio of 4.27.

For comparison I was able to find twenty-four nymphs of definite Mathurān origin for which there were good photographs taken from the front and which were intact enough to take measurements. None of the twenty-four produced a ratio over 4.[21] To put it bluntly, the Cleveland Dancers are too tall and thin to be a Mathurān product (Figure 4).

It is true that the stone, the general framing (in multiple registers), and the purpose (a railing pillar), speak to Mathurā, but these are superficial elements that an artist could easily adapt. It is much more difficult to believe that an artist would create an independent and original piece based on mixing Gandhāran and Mathurān elements but disregard not only the conventional coding of 'nudity' in the local aesthetic repertoire but also their[22] basic training in proportional systems.

[20] Note that in addition to the treatment of the dancers the horse-headed ogress in the bottom panel is depicted nude but without any girdle. Her pose resembles a famous narrative scene from Mathurā (see footnote 10) but is not used for other images of the horse-headed ogress at Mathurā or elsewhere (see Rowland 1953: pl.15.B; Gill 2000: 75-77).

[21] The actual results were 2.83, 2.88, 3.07, 3.24, 3.27, 3.37, 3.40, 3.41, 3.42, 3.43, 3.45, 3.46, 3.47, 3.49, 3.50, 3.50, 3.52, 3.58, 3.58, 3.64, 3.64, 3.80, 3.82, 3.90.

[22] It remains the case that we know frighteningly little about the artists who made either Gandhāran or Mathurān work, or in fact about South Asian work more generally. A recent attempt to correct this (Dehejia & Rockwell 2016) unfortunately does not cover Mathurā. For example, it is unclear if artists themselves were gendered. Though it is assumed that they were male the medieval Nadlai stone inscription apparently refers to a woman working in a team of artist (Misra 2011: 49).

So on this point I will break company with all of the previous commentators who took the piece as a Mathurān work. If the piece does not look like a Mathurān piece it probably isn't – think horse not zebra.

The Punjab, itinerant workman, or 1970

There are three realistic possibilities for who made the piece, all of which have a bearing on the date – which was the nominal question this paper began with. The first is that it was not made in Mathurā but simply from Mathurān stone, in which case a location between the two centres in the Punjab, such as Sanghol, would be logical. Information about Sanghol's sculptural tradition is limited but both Mathurān and Gandhāran objects were imported to the site. If Sanghol did not have its own sculptural tradition, it is possible that other unexcavated sites in the Punjab did and might have produced pieces borrowing from the major centres to the north or south. This would imply a date later than both the Mathurān and Gandhāran prototypes. The second possibility is that a non-Mathurān artist (perhaps one from Gandhāra) was employed in Mathurā to make a piece for a local purpose but in non-local style. This second possibility raises interesting questions about who determines an image's appearance. Do artists make work 'on spec' and sell it to patrons? Or do patrons commission works? And, in the latter case, how and in what detail do they specify the appearance of a sculpture? One of the issues with railing pillars is precisely that they are parts of large sets so one usually expects to find stylistically similar examples, unless this piece was a repair or replacement stylistically at odds with its neighbours, or never formed part of an actual railing.The third possibility is that this is a modern concoction, a fantasy piece, made by a skilled modern forger in the 1970s. We need seriously to entertain this possibility with all pieces that have no archaeological provenance, and so far no one has done so publicly in this case. It would be an elaborate and very skilled forgery, but that would also explain the way it closely parallels superficial elements of Mathurān or Gandhāran art while apparently deviating from underlying technical practices. It might also explain why Kim sees direct classical borrowings rather than the more logical intermediary of Gandhāra.

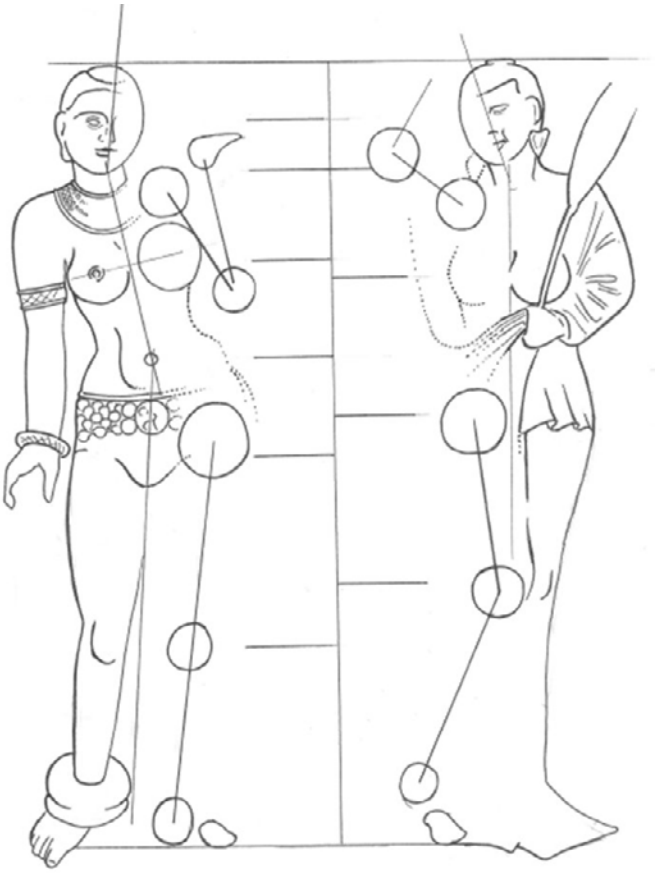

Figure 4. Speculative construction schemes for a Mathurān nymph (left) and a Cleveland dancer (right) showing the marked differences in proportions. (Drawing: author.)

After I raised this possibility at the Gandhāra Connections workshop, and following the discussion of details (below), several participants were convinced that the piece is indeed a modern forgery.[23] It is important to point out that although I think this is the most likely explanation for its incongruities

[23] The original presentation and questions are available online at <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/problems-chronology-Gandhāran-art-session-4b-24th-march-2017-0> (last accessed 21st February 2018), though a small section is missing in the middle part of the recording.

(think horse, not zebra) there is no 'smoking gun' and more importantly authenticity is not the purpose of this paper. Genuine or not the Cleveland Dancers have clearly motivated Carter to make interesting observations about Gandhāran art (1992) and they have already posed interesting questions about cultural exchange through their incongruities.

Some details

The following points cover some, but not all, of the details of the pillar. They are supplementary to rather than a replacement for the lengthy discussion in Carter (1982).

Grapevines

Usually Mathurān pillars feature a single upper register, with either onlookers or foliage.[24] The Cleveland pillar has both, with the top register composed of foliage, and overlapping with the onlookers below. The foliage in this case is composed of a grape vine, which has drawn comment from a number of contributors. Carter places most weight on its presence, connecting it to Dionysiac influence:

> ... it appears most probable that the Mathurān sculptor who executed this work allowed himself to be strongly influenced by Gandharan imagery in order to depict more authentically the exotic Yakṣa paradise far away among the snowy peaks of the northwest where grapevines flourished to provide their amrita substance, the wine of the grape. (Carter 1982: 255)

I have already explained, contra Carter, why this is not a Mathurān sculptor (and we have no idea if it is a 'he') but what about the grapevine? Grapevine motifs are not uncommon motifs at Mathurā. There are a number of door-jambs and Jain decorated tablets (known as *āyāgapaṭas*) which use grapes as a decorative technique. The detail here (Figure 5) is from the Mora door-jamb (Smith 1901: pl. XXVI; see also Quintanilla 2007: figs. 264-266). Sharma (1995: figs. 34 and 37) features two more comparable door-jambs, and Quintanilla (2007: figs. 150-153 and 162-164) identifies three *āyāgapaṭas* which also show the motif.

The grapevine motif is the element most suggestive of a date. All of the doorjambs and *āyāgapaṭas* I have mentioned are similar in style and might date to the mid-first century AD. This is Quintanilla's comment (2007: 125):

> The stylistic characteristics noted in the ornamental carvings of the Pārśvanātha and Nāṃdighoṣa āyāgapatas are like those on the Vasu doorjamb which is dated by an inscription to the reign of svāmi mahākṣatrapa Śoḍāsa and the Morā doorjamb which was found at the same place as a stone slab carved with an inscription also dated to the time of Śoḍāsa.[25] Joanna Williams has suggested that the Vasu doorjamb dates to the third century AD, and that its ornamental reliefs were carved later than the inscription, for the relief carvings seem to her to presage those of the Gupta period in their elegance. However, they do not concur with the dry, schematized styles of the third century AD.

[24] There are certainly exceptions. A Sanghol pillar (Gupta 2003: no. 10) features a building; a piece in the National Museum (Delhi J278; Agrawala 1966: no. 15) depicts a bather below a rocky outcrop, a feature seen on a few other pillars; and there is a Mathurā Museum piece (J2; Quintanilla 2007: fig. 52) in which the upper register is a medallion with a narrative scene. At least two pillars (Czuma 1985: no. 29; Pal 2003: fig. 2) have both onlookers above and foliage below. Another Cleveland Museum piece (1943.71) also has both but this is a complete railing carved in one piece and the onlookers are a part of the architrave rather than the pillar.

[25] Joe Cribb spoke at the event about chronology in general (see his paper in the present volume). Positioning Sodasa beyond a vague 'first century' bracket is not straightforward.

Figure 5. Drawing of the Mora door-jamb. (After Smith 1901: pl. XXVI.)

Quintanilla generally has far too much confidence in the accuracy of stylistic dating deriving from connoisseurship. However, tentatively, on the basis of find spot, similarity of style, and palaeography, it is plausible all these pieces date to the first century. Perhaps the use of the grapevine as a motif flourished at a particular workshop in this period and reflects the northern tastes associated with the Satrap rulers? If we wish to imagine the import of a northern artist this seems like a sensible moment.[26] At least one of the door-jambs features a standing figure with a spear in the armour of a heavy cavalryman (Sharma 1995: fig. 34). If the maker of the Cleveland pillar is not simply using these pieces as prototypes at a much later date then the pillar might date to the mid-first century and be the work of a northern workman associated with the wider Śaka community.[27]

If this were true, it makes the date much less interesting than the implications. It would suggest, given the workshop hypothesis, that this was intended for a non-Buddhist site (none of the doorjambs show any evidence of coming from a Buddhist site and the *āyāgapaṭas* are all Jain), and that there was an influx of northern artists in the first century AD, very early in the development of Gandhāran art.

Musicians

Below the grapevines are four female musicians. They employ cymbals, two lyres, and a lute-like stringed instrument. Their hair is tied up and braided in the same manner as the dancers below, they wear similar leaf-shaped ear-rings, and two have folds of material visible at their shoulders which suggest similar dresses. None of these features are typical for Mathurā.

Onlookers are not unusual on Mathurān railing pillars though they are usually set in an architectural frame of some sort, such as a window or a railing. When depicted they almost always conform to the same fashions of hair style and ear-rings as the nymphs. Even where drapery is show in such a way as to give the impression of a non-diaphanous dress (Vogel 1929: fig. 47) the individuals still wear the same heavy disc-shaped ear-rings commonly found in other depictions.

Musical instruments are not commonly depicted in Mathurān art. An image of a male flute player on a railing pillar whose costume suggests a north-western ethnicity[28] is one example. I am unaware of any showing similar instruments to those used by the onlookers though similar depictions seem to be relatively common in Gandhāran art.

[26] Though several railing pillars from Mathurā, one featuring a figure in northern nomadic dress, have names of artists and these seem to be local rather than Śaka (Lüders 1961: #145-148). However there has been no systematic study of artists' names recorded on Mathurān pieces.

[27] The famous lion capital inscription is engraved in Kharoṣṭhī and so testifies to the presence of skilled foreign workers in the period.

[28] See *British Museum Quarterly* 1965: 64, fig. 15.

Stone ground

Beneath the lower dancers the lower register has a stone background. The use of a stone pattern in the lowest register eventually becomes a standard element of this iconography in Nepal in the sixth and seventh centuries. Amongst Mathurān railing pillars a stone pattern is not unknown,[29] being most common under figures who hold a tree and stand on a dwarf (the śālabhañjikā pose).

A nymph on a corner bracket which has a stone ground beneath the figure can be dated archaeologically.[30] It was found at Sonkh with a variety of other pieces which undoubtedly belonged to a railing pillar. One of the crossbars has an inscription on the end, which would have been hidden from view in the final construction (Hartel 1993: 308). The crossbar was subsequently re-used for another carving which has damaged the part of the inscription in which the date was recorded but enough of the king's name (Kaniṣka) survives that combined with diagnostic characters it can be firmly placed in the reign of Kaniṣka I (*c.* AD 127-150).[31]

However, the Cleveland stone pattern does not compare particularly well with either Mathurān or later Nepalese or Kashmiri uses of the design. One element is particularly odd. The stone design projects outwards beyond the body pillar, in such a way that it would obscure the join between crossbar and pillar. I am unaware of this feature on any other Mathurān pillar, though the frequent lack of photographs from different angles makes it difficult to confirm.[32]

Some thoughts on a date

In summary, the piece draws heavily on non-Mathurān prototypes. Those elements in common with other Mathurān pieces, particularly the grapevine, suggest a date in the first century AD (earlier than that usually given in publications). However if it draws heavily on Gandhāran imagery (itself hard to date) this might suggest a later date. However, the most likely explanation for the juxtapositions and incongruities in the piece remains that it is made much later based upon existing pieces – most likely as a modern fantasy.

How wrong could we be?

Let us for a moment take the possibility of a late Kṣatrap or early Kushan date seriously. Czuma (1985) applies such a dating for all of the pieces which were exhibited alongside it, and Trivedi (2004: 58) takes it to be the case for almost all nymphs. Pal (2003) and Quintanilla (2007) give a broader range of dates for Mathurān art in general but, on the basis of stylistic similarity, both place the overwhelming bulk of nymphs in the second century AD.

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[29] Stone patterns on railing pillars and brackets include: Smith 1901: pl. 29, fig. 1; Lee 1949: figs. 1-2; Czuma 1985: no. 34a; Sharma 1995: fig. 23; Gupta 2004: nos. 4 and 13; Agrawala 1966: no. 15.

[30] Some non-architectural pieces with related iconography also have a bearing. A bronze figurine published by Goetz (1963) from South Arabia offers no immediate help as Goetz appears to depend on the Indian evidence to date the piece. A more useful example is the well-known ivory figurine recovered at Pompeii as the eruption in AD 79 provides a terminus ante quem. The ivories from Begram also depict many female figures of similar iconography, though their date is contested (attractive images and a list of important treatments are given in the short pamphlet by Simpson 2011). However these are problematic comparanda as it is not always clear where they were made, what role such portable pieces played in transmitting artistic ideas, or whether contemporaries thought of such domestic figures as equivalent to the public images on railing architecture.

[31] Sharma (1995) gives *c.* AD 100 but this is mostly a function of his early dating. Unfortunately though the Sanghol railing also has an archaeological context there is nothing to establish the date of that.

[32] Projection over the edge is not itself unique to this piece. In a piece from the Indian Museum in Kolkata the arm of the figure projects beyond the column (see Auboyer 1948: no. 1). In my original talk I suggested that since the stone ground is not a ubiquitous feature of Mathurān art it would be an odd thing for a forger to pick up and then misinterpret, so this might be evidence for a contemporary artist.

How wrong could this be? An analogy suggests we could be very wrong indeed. Mary Shepherd Slusser published a major study of a set of wooden struts from Nepal in 2010 (Slusser 2010). Not only do these struts inherit elements of one of the nymph iconographies (the śālabhañjikā), they are also conceptually similar. Based solely on stylistic assumptions (and relative similarity) these struts were broadly dated to the mid-second millennium AD. In fact, as Slusser demonstrates, by combining very careful study of the objects with radiocarbon dates, the tradition can be shown to begin six hundred years earlier in the late first millennium AD. Could our dating of Mathurān sculpture, or for the purposes of the event at which this paper was presented, Gandhāran sculpture, be as badly wrong?

The problem is in part one of assessing the degree of conservatism/diversity in Mathurān workshops. Are so many figures on railing pillars so similar because the bulk of our surviving examples belong to a single period of relatively intense construction (in the late first or early second century?) or because Mathurān artists were very conservative. Are stylistically odd pieces, such as the nymphs on gateway brackets from Kankali Tila (Quintanilla 2007: figs. 39-41), chronologically distinct from the bulk of the pieces, or simply experimental (as the Cleveland piece would need to be if genuine)? The answers to those questions would take us some way to understanding the mind-set of patrons and artists, and it might answer some interesting questions about why railing pillars around the sacred sites of different traditions are indistinguishable, or how viewers understood and interpreted 'nudity'.[33] And they might, incidentally, date the individual pieces of sculpture.

Conclusion

As I have tried to sketch out in this paper, the Cleveland pillar raises a lot of interesting questions about our understanding of the relationship between workshops in Gandhāra and those in the city of Mathurā. How experimental were the artists? Which elements did they adopt, and why? That the Cleveland pillar has been consistently misidentified as a product of a Mathurān artist or workshop shows that the criteria for identifying workshops are not adequate to the task. The female figures at Mathurā, which are difficult to date for most of the same reasons as Gandhāran pieces (i.e. they lack inscribed dates or secure archaeological contexts), also offer a host of interesting questions about the way they were understood by contemporary audiences, and the differences between Gandhāran and Mathurān audiences.

Answers to almost all of the questions sketched out here either depend upon dates or impinge on our dating of objects. However, I would like to suggest that pursuing the question of dating is probably the least profitable way of approaching this. In the first chapter of this book, Joe Cribb gives a very detailed presentation of our current understanding of the political chronology of the north-west in the early centuries AD, something that for a long time was synonymous with the 'date of Kaniṣka'. I recently gave a lengthy account (Bracey 2017) of the historiography of this problem from 1960 until its resolution in the last decade. Most of the advances that were made actually came from studies of sources (text, epigraphy, or coins) which were not directed at the problem itself but at answering some other question.

[33] I have previously suggested that there is a correlation between the prominence of the order of Buddhist nuns, textual evidence of antipathy/discomfort towards women's independence, and the portrayal of 'nudity' in Kushan art. Art does reflect in complex ways social anxieties (at least amongst that section wealthy enough to patronise it). However, some of the ideas I have sketched out in this article might suggest, contrary to my earlier thoughts, that the apparently more revealing depictions at Mathurā might reflect the sort of female images which are made ('nymphs' rather than goddesses), rather than a general change in the practice of depicting the female form.

The same is likely to apply to these nymphs in particular, and both Mathurān and Gandhāran art in general. Dates matter for our understanding of relationships between the centres, for workshop practices, and social responses to art. For example, it is a genuinely interesting question as to why both Mathurā and Gandhāra have their own consistent śālabhañjikā type of nymph but neither seems to have influenced the other. If either art were insular that would be explicable, but both borrow heavily in other features, such as the grapevine discussed above or representations of the Buddha. Addressing this sort of question means developing a better understanding of workshop practices and patronage (far more complex in the region of Gandhāra than the city of Mathurā) and will likely lead to a better understanding of dating. However, focusing on dating is not the route to arrive at that solution. So, no, to answer the question of the title, it is not appropriate to ask a celestial lady's age.

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