

Skanda/Kārttikeya in the Art of Mathura

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Skanda is a popular god of ancient India. During Kushan period, he (as Viśākha, Skanda, Kumāra and Mahāsena etc.) was worshipped as an independent god but in later periods his worship got merged with the larger cult of Saivism. Some scholars believe that the earliest reference to Skanda is found in *R̥gveda* where Kumāra is closely associated with Agni as his son and the leader of divine army.¹ He was also considered as the god of *dhurta* or cunning (*bhagvān devo dhūrtah*) in the “*Dhūrtakalpa*” *Pariśiṣṭa* of *Atharvaveda*.² Much before the 2nd century BCE, by the time of *śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, his image (not sculpture) as a commander-in-chief had become quite popular as *śrīmadbhagavadgītā* mentions “*Senānīnāmaham Skandah*.”³ This reference counters the view of some scholars who believe that the cult of this god owes a lot from north-west and west, i.e. outside ancient India. The *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* (2.5.8) contains early references to Skanda and his various names such as Ṣaṇmukha, Jayanta, Viśākha, Subrahmaṇya and Mahāsena.⁴

Skanda in Indian art

The earliest reference to the images of Siva, Skanda and Viśākha, in the *Aśhatadhyayi* of Pāṇini V, 3, 99 is found in the Patāñjali’s *Mahābhāṣya*.⁵ According to *Mahābhārata*, Viśākha arose from the right side of Skanda when the latter was struck by Indra’s thunderbolt.⁶ The

distinct identities of Skanda and Viśākha are also proved by the two interesting coin types of Kushan king Huviṣka showing (i) two male figures standing in front bearing the Greek legend *Skando Kumaro Bizago* and (ii) three figures standing side by side within a shrine with the legend *Skando Komaro Bizago Mahaseno*.⁷ Skanda- Kārttikeya is also sometimes described as “goat-headed” (*chhagavakra*) when he is called *Naigameya*.⁸ This god also forms part of the pantheon of Jains. Yaudheya coins bear such legends as “*Bhagavata svāmino Brahmanyadevasya Kumārasya*” and figures of six headed Skanda and Ṣaṣṭhī.⁹

In sculptural art the earliest representation of Skanda is found from the site of Kankali Tila in Mathura (M.M. No. 2949, Plate 1). From the inscription of year 11 inscribed on this image, it can certainly be identified as that of Kārttikeya. This image depicts Skanda standing in *samapāda sthānaka* pose with right hand at shoulder height in *abhaya mudrā* and the left hand holding a long spear. He is wearing a *dhōtī* and a typical Kushan turban with central rosette. Another important image of Skanda from Mathura is of bronze unearthed during the excavations at Sonkh (M.M. No. SOI 178, Plate 2). The god in this representation holds the long spear in his right hand while his left hand most probably holds a cock kept at his waist height. He is wearing a typical Kushan head-dress and a *dhōtī*. His body above waist is probably shown naked. In all the Skanda- Kārttikeya images from

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Mathura region, except this bronze image, the deity holds the long spear in his left hand. In majority of the Gandhāra sculptures of Skanda-Kārttikeya (more than 20 in number), the deity holds the spear in his right hand.¹⁰ So, this feature of Skanda image from Sonkh matches more with the Gandhāra images than those of Mathura region. In the coin of Huviṣka with the legend “Maaseno” the deity holds the long spear in his right hand.¹¹ Another bronze image (M.M. No. SOI 173) was found from the site of Sonkh which represents a standing male deity holding a small bowl in his left hand and a female deity standing to the left of this male deity. The female deity possibly has a face of a lion and holds a child in her lap. Some scholars including N.P. Joshi consider the possibility of this male deity being Skanda.¹² Other Skanda images of Kushan period from Mathura are: M.M. Nos. 1022 and 1579.

Another Skanda image of Kushan period (Plate 3, M.M. No. 85.163) is found from the village Deewana Kalan (8 km north-east of Mathura). It represents a carved stela of a standing figure of Skanda holding a spear in his left hand. The figure is well adorned and appears like a guardian deity. No other identifying mark like a cock or peacock is visible in the image.

The more popular representation of Skanda in the art of Mathura is found on triads which represent goddess Śaṣṭhī surrounded by two male figures holding a long spear in their left hands. The goddess Śaṣṭhī in most of these images is shown in the centre with six heads and the right hand in *abhaya* pose and the left hand holding a water-pot; her height is much shorter than the two male figures. A fine example of such a triad is the relief housed in Mathura Museum (No. F 1, Plate 4). There are some other Skanda images which form part of *mātrkā* panels with seven or a lesser number of mothers (M.M. Nos. F. 39; F. 38; 2491; 1179). The two male figures on either side of such panels with right hand in *abhaya mudrā* and in the left hand holding the long spear were earlier identified as *āyudha puruṣas* (as an earlier form of Virabhadra) by V.S. Agrawala¹³ but Joshi might be right in identifying them as Skanda and Viśākha (or some other form of Kārttikeya).¹⁴ In the art of Mathura during the Kushan period, there are some other representations of persons holding a spear in their left hand. Some are quite small in size and others might be part of an architectural member. Some of them might be just door-keepers but possibility of their identification as Skanda can't be outrightly rejected.

The salient features of Kushan Skanda images are:

1. Except for the Yaudheya coins, Skanda is always represented with one head and two hands. The left hand always holds a *śakti* or long spear, except for the above mentioned bronze image (Plate 2) and the right hand is generally held in *abhaya* pose. Sometimes the top of the spear is decorated with floral garlands.
2. The standing god is generally shown in *samapāda sthānaka mudrā*. He has boyish charm and looks like the leader of an army. This attribute of him is highlighted in the images of Gandhāra region while in Mathura, in spite of him being a warrior, this aspect is not emphasized.
3. He is sometimes shown with a head-gear typical of Kushan period and sometimes he has his hair tied in a top knot. In some sculptures, two braids of his hair are shown falling on his shoulders.
4. He is generally shown wearing a *graiveyaka* of triangular shape and occasionally he wears a *yaṅopavīta*.
5. He is shown wearing a *dhotī* tied at the waist with a sash running down on the left side.
6. In the art of Mathura, Skanda-Kārttikeya is not shown associated with a cock except for an image (M.M. No. 32.2332, early Gupta period). The Lala Bhagat pillar of Kanpur had a cock-capital which should be related with the cult of Skanda-Kārttikeya.

During the Gupta period, the importance of the cult of Skanda-Kārttikeya continued to be popular as is supported by a number of sculptural findings as well as literary references to the temples dedicated to this deity. The overall appearance of the deity shifts towards a youthful *nāyaka* from that of a warrior god. He is more often shown associated with his mount peacock either riding on it or feeding the peacock. His hair is arranged as *śikhaṇḍin*. His *graiveyaka* now has a tiger nail (*vyāghra nakha*) tied in the centre of it. There is a standing Kārttikeya image from Braj *Bhumi*, now housed at the local museum (M.M. No. 2019). Two terracotta images of Skanda are also housed in the Mathura Museum (M.M. Nos. 38.2794 and 32.2270). A Kārttikeya image (M.M. No. 14.466, Plate 5; on the back cover) is quite unique and shows the god riding on a peacock facing to the front. Skanda wears

his hair in matted locks with a pair of loose locks falling on shoulders. He has elongated ears, wears an *ekāvali* necklace and armlets. He probably holds a *śakti* in his left hand and the right hand is damaged. Kārttikeya is being anointed (*abhiṣeka*) as the commander of the divine forces (*Deva-senā*) by four faced Brahmā on right, and Indra on left, both having matted locks and wearing girdles. They hold jars in hands pouring sacred water on the head of Skanda who became the *Senānī* of the gods to lead their armies in battle against the demon Tārakāsura. Behind Brahmā and Indra are two other smaller figures. The one to the right is headless, that on the left is probably goat-faced. The feathers of the peacock are spread around the deity. This episode of anointment is mentioned in detail in *Matsya Purāṇa* (159.6) and that description matches a lot with the treatment of this sculpture. V.S. Agrawala had identified the two deities pouring water over Skanda as Brahmā and Siva and he had also correlated this episode of *abhiṣeka* with the account given in *Kumārasambhava*.¹⁵

One image of Kārttikeya has been found from village Mora, now kept in the godown of Mathura Museum (No. 99.24, Plate 6 a & b). This image belongs to circa 4th century CE (Gupta period). The treatment of the body is typical Gupta i.e. slender body with very fine drapery. The Kārttikeya image is in standing pose with its head and arms missing. His mount, a peacock has been carved beautifully in lower part of the red sandstone sculpture. Kumāra is wearing a *dhotī* tied in a peculiar fashion at his waist with central knot and most of it hanging in folds and pleats on the left side of him below waist. On the upper limb, he is only partially draped, in a way of sacred thread. The most striking characteristic of this sculpture is that it has been carved on both sides. It appears that the two of the images of the deity are indicative of their different identifications as Skanda and Kumāra. It is supportive of the fact that during Kushan period the same god was conceived as different gods by varying the attributes of him by different names - Viśākha, Skanda, Kumār and Mahāsena. In the present sculpture because of its broken nature, the difference between the two aspects of the deity can not be analysed but it surely represents two different aspects of the same god.

New sculptural findings

1. Skanda from Noh (Plate 7)

This quite defaced red sandstone miniature sculpture was found from the famous site of Noh in district Bharatpur

of Rajasthan. The god is shown standing and holds his *śakti* in his left hand. His right hand was probably held in *abhaya mudrā*. He wears the *dhotī* tied at his waist as observed usually. This image belongs to Kushan period.

2. Skanda from Jhandipur (Plate 8)

This miniature sculpture was observed at a shrine of local goddess in village Jhandipur of district Mathura. In his left hand the deity holds the long spear and his right hand is in *abhaya* with palm in profile. The hair is tied in a top knot. The sculpture might be belonging to late Kushan-early Gupta period.

3. Skanda from Sonkh-khera village (Plate 9)

This image was found at a local goddess shrine in village Sonkh-khera of district Mathura. The deity is shown seated and riding on his mount peacock; the peacock facing front. The deity holds the spear in his left hand while the right hand is in *abhaya mudrā*. His hair is arranged in *śikhandīn* and is shown wearing large round ear-rings and possibly a necklace with *vyāghranka*. This sculpture should belong to early Gupta period. Somehow this sculpture reminds of the most famous Kārttikeya image of India, housed at Bharat Kala Bhawan, Varanasi (Plate 10) and indicates that such type of images from Mathura would have been the inspiration to the artists of Varanasi.

4. Fragmentary Śiva Parivāra image with Skanda (Plate 11)

This fragmentary piece of a Saivite sculpture depicting Śiva along with his *parivāra* was observed at a shrine in village Kanwara of district Bharatpur. The young charming boy Kumāra is shown riding on his *vāhana* peacock. In such type of Umā-Maheśvara sculptures, Skanda is generally shown at this position near the feet of his parents and by the side of the bull Nandin. This sculpture might be datable to Gupta period as many other Gupta period sculptures were observed at the same site.

Conclusion

On the basis of our study it can be concluded that the cult of Skanda-Kārttikeya continued to be a popular one from the Kushan period to the Gupta period. Till this time, we find a variety of representations of various aspects of Skanda-Visakha-Kumara-Kārttikeya in the art of Mathura. The finding of a two-sided carved image of this deity from

Mora village provides a new opportunity to further study this cult. After the Gupta period, the cult of Skanda seems to have merged with the more popular cult of Saivism and

as a result of that we find a lesser number of independent sculptures of Skanda-Karttikeya.

References

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3. *Srīmadbhagavadgītā*, X. 24, Gita Press, Gorakhpur.
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5. Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaiṣṇavism Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, Varanasi 1965 (first printed in 1913), pp. 150-151.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Gardner, P., BMC, Pl. XXVII as cit. by Upendra Thakur, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
8. Banerjee, J.N., *op. cit.*, p. 363.
9. Thaplayal K.K. and P. Srivastava, *Coins of Ancient India*, Lucknow 1998, p. 99-103.
10. For details of the Gandhāra Kārttikeya images, please see the paper of D.M. Srinivasan, "Skanda/ Kārttikeya in the Early Art of Northwest," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, Vol. 5, ed. Katsumi Tanabe, Kamakura, Japan 1998, pp. 233-268.
11. For this type of coin, please see J.M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1967, p. 79 and Coin 95.
12. Joshi, N.P., *Mothers (Mātrkāś) in Kushan Art*, Delhi 1986, p. 9 and Fig. 31.
13. Agrawala, V.S., *A Catalogue of Brahmanical Images in Mathura Art*, Lucknow 1951, pp. 59-61.
14. Joshi, N.P., *op. cit.*, p. 8. For a detailed list and discussion of Skanda images associated with Mātrkāś, one may refer to this book.
15. Agrawala, V.S., *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

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Plate 1: Kārttikeya (M.M. No. 29.49)



Plate 2: Skanda (M.M. No. SOI 178)



Plate 3: Skanda holding a spear, Deewana Kalan, Mathura



Plate 4: Śaṣṭhī surrounded by Skanda and Viśākha (M.M. No. F 1)

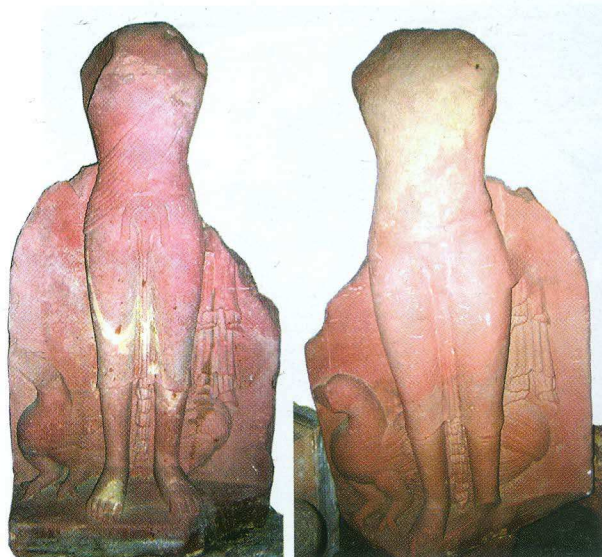


Plate 6a and b: Kārttikeya from Mora (M.M. No. 99.24), Gupta period (front and back view)



Plate 7: Skanda from Noh, Bharatpur



Plate 8: Skanda from Jhandipur, Mathura



Plate 9: Skanda from Sonkh-khera, Mathura



Plate 10: Skanda, Bharat Kala Bhawan

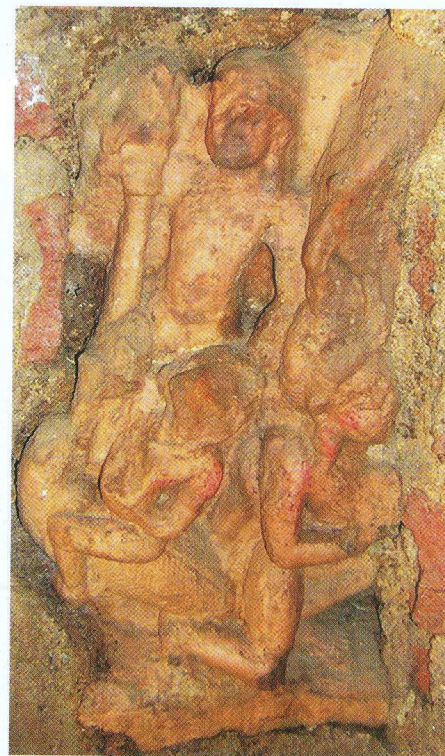


Plate 11: Fragment with Skanda, Kanwara, Bharatpur