

The Ending of the Law and the Hope of Salvation: Some 6th Century Chinese Buddhist Sculptures in The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

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In the mid-6th century, an apocalyptic mood settled over China. Due to the persecution of Buddhism there in the 5th century and the news of the destruction of the great monasteries of Gandhara (the Peshawar valley in modern Pakistan) by the Shaivite warlord Mihirakula (r. 510-42), as well as the incessant warfare of the first part of the 6th century in China, Chinese Buddhist intellectuals calculated that the world had entered the final period of the predicted decay of the Dharma – the teachings of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni (d. c. 400 BCE). Believed to have been most efficacious during the period of the ‘True Law’, that is, the centuries immediately following Shakyamuni’s *parinirvana*, or passing, the Dharma was thought to have weakened in its soteriological power through the subsequent period of the ‘Semblance Law’ and into the final period, called the ‘Ending of the Law’, which was believed to have begun in the mid-5th century and is considered to be ongoing even today. One consequence, expressed in the art of the Northern Qi dynasty (550-77), was a powerful urge to preserve and defend the Dharma. Two guardian images from this period in The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art testify to this impulse: one is an atlantean figure of a winged demon (Fig. 1), the other a bust of a guardian king (Fig. 2).

The winged demon embodies a monstrous combination of comic and frightening elements. As a type of nature spirit, he has the claws and fangs of a lion, with an open maw that seems to emit the sound of a roar. His hybrid, demonic nature is indicated by the addition of large wings on his back and the beaded spine that ends between his brows, signs of the supernatural found in native Chinese depictions of beings from the spirit realm. Though muscular like an animal he is squat, almost dwarf-like, in proportion, and has the pot belly traditionally associated with comic entertainers.

The North Cave at Northern (Bei) Xiangtangshan, a Northern Qi imperial cave-shrine site in Hebei province, originally held 26 of these winged demons carved in high relief (Zhang and Sun, eds, fig. 1.15). Many are now in the great museums of the world, including the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and the Museum Rietberg in Zürich. Excavated from the living rock, the huge, cubical space of the North Cave is centred on a square pillar carved with monumental images of the Buddhas of the Three Periods, a favoured programme of royal patrons

in the 5th and 6th centuries that was based on the *Lotus Sutra*. It allowed for the instantaneous worship of the totality of all Buddhas, and made manifest the concept of succession to the ‘throne’, a notion dear to royal hearts. At each corner of the elevated base of this pillar was a caryatid winged demon, facing outward. The side walls are each carved with eight matching Buddha shrines in niches framed by pilasters that rise up to the ceiling, 11 metres above. At the base of each of the eleven pilasters another winged demon once knelt as a caryatid figure; the Nelson-Atkins figure was one of these.

The winged demons engaged the devotee at eye level, but they were not intended to terrify worshippers (although the monk-chronicler Daoxuan [596-667] does identify this grotto uniquely as the one containing ‘frightening demon figures’); rather, their roaring leonine faces, clawed toes and confrontational gestures were intended to serve in defence of the Dharma, as embodied by the Buddha images. As such, the visitor to the cave was probably meant to read the winged demons as being in front of the Buddha shrines rather than just below them; however, their usual placement at the base or the sides of a structure would suggest that their perceived function was both supportive and protective. We do not know what the Chinese called these creatures, and there is no scriptural source that identifies them, but since they are at once monstrous and comic they must have been considered spiritually base; hence, the base of a structure is their appropriate setting.

These winged demons are derived from ‘thunder monsters’, which first appeared in 6th century sculpture in China, on both Buddhist and mortuary monuments. Thunder monsters do not kneel, but run and gesture wildly. On some monuments, such as the famous Northern Wei period (522) limestone epitaph of the royal Lady Yuan in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, they are inscribed with their names (Bush, 1974). The Beijing Palace Museum researcher Shi Anchang has determined that these are also the names of Sogdian nature deities, suggesting that thunder monster imagery could be traced to the Central Asian Sogdians, who were the chief traders on the Silk Road and resided in China’s major cities (Shi, 1997). Chinese imperial patrons were avid for foreign imagery in the 6th century, and many motifs from Persia, Sogdiana and other parts of Central Asia entered the Chinese artist’s reper-

tory at this time. The sculptors who made the winged demons from the North Cave seem to have borrowed the idea of the nature deities and used them in the manner of the 'barbarian' dwarf caryatid figures seen in Chinese art since the Bronze Age (c. 1900 BCE-CE 200), here given the additional role of protectors of Buddhism.

The human type of guardian figure in 6th century Chinese art is exemplified by the bust of a guardian king (see Fig. 2). The guardian kings, or 'Guardians of the Four Directions' (Skt *lokapala*), are stationed on the four sides of Mount Sumeru, the mountain at the centre of the universe according to ancient Indian cosmology, and are charged with protecting

Shakyamuni and the Dharma in all four quadrants. Like the winged demon, the guardian king serves to frighten the enemies of the Dharma with his intelligent frown of concentration and his mouth open to utter mystic Sanskrit *dharani* to ward off any threat. On Buddhist shrines from the 6th century onward, pairs and quartets of armour-clad *lokapala* were often placed next to a pair of bare-chested *dvarapala*, or door guardians, as added defenders of the Buddha. Both the increase in the number of protective figures at this time and the greater ferocity of their expressions and gestures are evidence of the anxiety felt about the preservation of the Dharma.

The fragmentary nature of this relief clearly indicates that it was taken from a grotto, but identifying the original prove-



(Fig. 1) Winged demon
From the North Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan, Fengfeng mining district, Handan, Hebei province
Northern Qi period (550-77)
Limestone
Height 86.4 cm
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust (35-276)



(Fig. 2) Bust of a guardian king
 Probably from Xiangtangshan, Fengfeng
 mining district, Handan, Hebei province
 Northern Qi period, c. 570-75
 Grey limestone
 Height 55.2 cm
 Purchase: William Rockhill
 Nelson Trust (53-48)

nance is nettlesome. The carving is both crisply edged and smoothly modulated, indicating the work of skilled artisans, which suggests an elite sponsor. Such a fine sculpture should come from a well-known site. Further, the facial features are large and broad, consistent with the 6th century vogue for what was considered an Indian appearance, which makes a Northern Qi attribution convincing. Lastly, the crown the *lokapala* wears is flat in front, with incised linear decoration, and its edges are delineated with boldly curving scallops and volutes; ribbons emerge from the back and flutter to the side. In sum this distinctive type of crown, the dramatic, Indianized face and the sharp, linear carving of the costume details contrasted with the smooth, broad planes of the form all conform to the style of the Northern Qi sculpture that is known to be from the site of Xiangtangshan. Could the figure have come from there? Unlike the large cave-shrine complexes of Yungang (in Shanxi province) or Longmen (in Henan), Xiangtangshan is fairly small, comprising less than a dozen grottoes. It has been documented in photographs since 1925, and well studied by Japanese, American and Chinese archaeologists; currently its virtual reconstruction is being undertaken on a website produced

by a Sino-American consortium of scholars (see <http://xts.uchicago.edu/>). In other words, the site is thoroughly inventoried, and according to the latest Chinese publication, there is no *lokapala* figure this small unaccounted for (Zhang and Sun, eds, p. 27).

The Indian appearance of this *lokapala* is in part a reflection of the contemporary belief that Indian icons and their imitations in China were especially efficacious during the decline of the Dharma. While the first emperor of the Northern Qi dynasty, Wenxuan (r. 550-59), discarded Chinese sculptural styles and costumes as a political rejection of Chinese notions of rule by a native aristocratic class and turned to Indian styles as part of a programme to show his authority as coming from Buddhist ideas of kingship by associating himself with Emperor Ashoka (the powerful ruler who institutionalized Buddhism in India; r. c. 273-232 BCE), the adoption of an Indian appearance for Chinese statues also worked in the religious sphere to invoke the icons from the holy land of Buddhism – believed to be better vessels for the embodiment of the *dharmakaya*, the eternal Buddha principle.

The imitation of the majestic columnar type of Buddha image produced in Mathura (in today's Uttar Pradesh in India) that was embraced by the Northern Qi rulers was continued by the devout first emperor of the succeeding Sui dynasty (581-618), Wendi (r. 581-604). The exquisite figure of the bodhisattva Guanyin in Figure 3 is comparable in style to the monumental Amitabha Buddha figure now in the British Museum (see Howard et al., fig. 3.95), which is dated to 585, and so is likely to be early Sui period in date. It inherits the Northern Qi interest in imitating Mathuran sculpture in terms of its subtle tension between the simplicity of the smooth, taut planes of skin and fabric and the linear play over the surface in the finely detailed strands of jewels, looping scarves and scrolling hems, though it leaves behind the fleshy, breathing quality of its Indian source in favour of a timeless, geometric perfection.

Daochuo (562-645) was a Buddhist intellectual who advocated belief in Pure Land teachings and in the special power of certain practices during the Ending of the Law. He taught that the greatest karmic benefit was to be gained from building monasteries and making religious artefacts, such as the sculptures in the image hall. The central deity in Pure Land teachings, which became increasingly widespread in the 5th and 6th centuries, is Amitabha, who presides over the Pure Land in the west, and his two most important bodhisattvas are Avalokiteshvara (Ch. Guanyin) and Mahasthamaprabhata. Its large size and superb carving, and the traces of gilding, suggest that the Nelson-Atkins Guanyin may have been produced on imperial command, perhaps to stand in the image hall of a government-sponsored monastery, available for public worship on the festival days of the Buddhist calendar. While it may have stood alone, probably it was an attendant



(Fig. 3) Guanyin
Sui period, c. 590-600
Limestone with traces of gilding
Height 132.1 cm
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust (35-308)
(Photography by E. G. Schempf)

(Fig. 4) Guanyin shrine
 Sui period, 599
 Gilt bronze
 Height 21.6 cm, width 14.9 cm
 Gift of Laurence Sickman in memory of Mrs Paul Mallon (79-41)

bodhisattva in a triad with a standing Amitabha at the centre. The feet and pedestal are now missing from the statue, but it must originally have been about 1.5 metres tall. Life-sized statues were believed to have a special power, but figures that contemporary Chinese believers considered ‘life-sized’ were typically over 1.8 metres in height. Hence, the complete Guanyin would have been the appropriate size to flank such a ‘life-sized’ image of Amitabha as part of a Pure Land triad in an image hall.

From the 5th century, Guanyin also began to appear as the central deity in some sculpted groups, as in the gilt-bronze Guanyin shrine with an inscription dated to 599 in Figure 4. The tiny figure of Amitabha in his crown identifies him as Guanyin, yet here the standing bodhisattva holds his hands in the *abhaya* (‘fear not’) and *varada* (gift-bestowing) *mudras*, which are usually displayed by Buddha images, and he is also flanked by the paired attendants usually seen around a Buddha: bodhisattvas, monk disciples, door guardians and lions, suggesting his new status as an independent deity. Guanyin is the divine being most believers called upon for rescue from all types of dangers in this world. The ‘Universal Gate’ chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, which describes the many forms Guanyin will take to help people, was circulated as a separate scripture from the 5th century onward, and images of Guanyin soon began to proliferate. Guanyin can also be called upon for healing, and to locate the believer’s deceased relatives and rescue them from negative rebirths should they not be reborn in the western Pure Land. Prayers are fuelled by lengthy prostrations and scripture-chanting before an image, and while such devotions can be offered in public image halls, they could be made more privately at home with small icons such as this shrine. Not only is it only just over 20 centimetres high, but the figures can be removed from the base, making the piece quite portable and allowing the believer to have the icon with him or her at all times. While the physical presence of the icon was considered protective, the making of the shrine, as an act that promoted the Dharma, created karmic merit for the believer. Finally, this little shrine also serves to preserve the Dharma, for although gilt bronze is a luxury material appropriately used to glorify the faith and attract adherents, it is also extremely durable and so has safeguarded a small expression of the Dharma to this day.

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All the works illustrated in this article are in the collection of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

Unless otherwise stated, all photography is by Jamison Miller.

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