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# Lion Motif in Mauryan Art: Indigenous or Foreign?

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Received: 12 August 2017; Revised: 06 September 2017; Accepted: 15 October 2017  
Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 5 (2017): 433-444

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**Abstract:** *There are many art motifs in Mauryan art, which are either West Asiatic or Greek in origin, but they underwent the process of transformation according to Indian taste and ethos. This idea of transformation is best reflected in various lion motifs of Asokan pillars. In Mauryan India they crowned the pillars of piety, dharmastambhas and roared the triumph of Dhamma, i.e. they have become the Dhammaghosakas all over the Mauryan Empire. Undoubtedly it is West Asian in origin, as Coomaraswamy, Ray and Irwin have pointed out, but it underwent great formal changes on the soil of India from the very beginning, as if it was deliberate, pre-planned and well thought of.*

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**Keywords:** West Asia, Hellenistic, Capital, Lion, Mauryan, Egyptian, Achaemenian

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## Introduction

The magnificent capitals of the Mauryan pillars consisting mainly of lion as their crowning feature, in form, shape and appearance represent an unprecedented and unique category in the Indian art history creating splendid aesthetic effect and meaning to the total form of the pillars. The depth of meaning that goes with the symbolism of these lion capitals is unique in the entire field of Indian art activity and to which there is hardly a parallel in world art (Agarwala 1965: 96). Lion as the crowning animal of Mauryan pillars have been found from several places. Such as, Lion capital at Bakhira, Lion capital of Lauāiyā Nandangaāh, Rāmpurvā Lion Capital, Sārnāth Lion capital, Sāñchī Lion capital. Besides these, lion capital has been found at Masadh village in Arrah district of Bihar. Apart from this Allahabad pillar was also surmounted by a lion but the lion must have disappeared many centuries ago when the pillar was re-erected by Jahangir it was crowned by globe surmounted by a cone (*Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 4: 127).

A few years back a Lion capital at Collectorate *Ghat* Patna has been discovered (Figure 1) by the officials of Patna circle of ASI, which has got very little polish and is with open eyes. The sculpture has a crown on the top and the moustache of the sculpture is very prominent. The face of the lion has human look and its tongue is protruding out. The teeth of the lion are visible along with the canines. The most striking feature of this

sculpture is that it has got the impression of a royal figure. On the top of the head a fort like design can be seen. The top contains beaded design within two parallel lines with the depiction of fort thereon. The expression of the eyes of the above said sculpture gives a sense of satisfaction. This sculpture can be correlated with the lost capital of Mauryan palace.



**Figure 1: Lion Capital Discovered at Collectorate *Ghat*, Patna**

It is somewhat curious that the lions in Mauryan art are always and invariably done in a manner, which seems already to have been fixed by convention. Their formal pose and appearance, the rendering of their volume are bold and vigorous but stylized treatment, their plastic conception and the sense of form as revealed in them are on the whole the same and pre-determined. The trend of the style is already evident in the Basāāh-Bakhira lion and it is within the limit of the given trend that the style evolves and advances in treatment and execution. The aesthetic vision and imagination, the attitude and outlook of the artist do not show any definite change. This is partly true as

well of the lion, the horse and the bull on the Sārnāth abacus. It raises the presumption that this style and convention, which has no earlier history in India, came from outside where they had already been fixed and well established (Carotti, 1908: 218).

Did it come from the Achaemenian West? This seems to be very doubtful for the modeling of these sculptures have nothing in common with that of the Achaemenian ones nor the powerful feeling for volume and preference for stagnant, compact forms have anything in common with Achaemenian Iran. Moreover West Asian art especially Iranian art during the Achaemenian period came heavily under the influence of Hellenistic art; further, "the few attempts made in Iran in the domain of free plastic art bear an entirely different stamp in their preference for angular forms" (Bachhofar, 1923: 6-7). Marshall therefore argued for Hellenistic plastic tradition as practiced by Graeco-Bactrian artists. From what we know of the Hellenistic colonies in West Asia and the part they played in Maurya India it is possible, even; highly probable that Hellenistic art and culture also played a very dominant role in Mauryan art. The Mauryan lions in their aesthetic conception and plastic formulation, in their conventional modeling and advanced visualization, in their feeling for volume and sense of form invariably recall conventional and decedent colonial Greek works of the same art form and design. Here then, we can trace the source of the impetus and inspiration of the conventional art of the crowning lions of Mauryan columns.

The crowning lions of the early phases, namely the Basāāh -Bakhirā and Lauāiyā-Nandangaāh examples, are the works perhaps of Indian artists but tutored in the style and tradition of contemporary West Asian art; this is marked in the grappling with the problem of form arid its precise execution which are so evident in these sculptures. There is decided advance in the Rāmpurvā, Sārnāth and Sāñchī specimens; this may have been achieved by the same Indian artists working increasingly in the direction of contemporary West Asian art or by colonial artists of the Hellenistic world imported by the Mauryan court. In any case, there are in these specimens, a strong and undeniable Irano-Hellenistic stamps that may not have been imprinted by traditional Indian hands (Ray, 1975: 35).

When we analyze the Mauryan art we find that the idea of lion as the crowning animal was adopted from West Asia as we can see from the art creations during the reign of Aśoka. But it was not a slavish copy of the motif. It was adopted from West Asia whatever suited Indian cultural ethos and in forms which was again modified according to the Indian taste and requirements. This is called the transformation of the form and idea (Gupta, 1982: 339). The principle of transformation leading to the extent of indianization can be seen by comparing the lions in West Asian and Indian art. Lions in India don't have mane on the belly as compared to the lions in West Asia. While practically all lions in the West Asian art are looking ferocious and monstrous, none of the Mauryan lions look like that. Lions in West Asia adorn the gateways of palaces or parapet walls of the fortifications, but in Mauryan art they crowned the pillars of piety, *dhammastāyjbhas* and roared the triumph of *Dharma* all over the

Mauryan Empire. This was the metamorphosis of a decorative element used by West Asian king and rejection of the details, which did not suite to Indian taste. Thus, the Mauryan lions are no carbon copy of any particular West Asian or Greek model.



**Figure 2: A gold Rhyton from Hamadan with Winged Lion, 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC**

The surviving Mauryan crowning animals-single and addorsed lions are apparently selected from a repertoire which anticipated Aśokan sculptures. In effect, details in the treatment of Aśokan animals reveal as many similarities with Mesopotamian art in general, as with the Persepolitan proteomes in particular. To illustrate this point we may note for example that the treatment of the eyes and the mane of the Sārnāth lion that is in accordance with conventions widely apparent in Assyrian, Iranian and Hellenistic sculpture (Herzfeld, 1941: 242). A. U. Pope attributes the four quadrupeds circulating the abacus of the Sārnāth capital to that of the similar animals depicted circulating the rims of plates or the outsides of bowls of West Asian origin (Pope, 1960: 38). According to Irwin Assyria was the home for Aśokan lions. Irwin admits that the lions of Aśoka's monuments clearly represent a heraldic beast of foreign pedigree

embodying nothing of the intuitive character of Indian animal art through ages. The open mouth, protruding tongue of West Asian lion sculptures at least from the second millennium B.C. and more. Historically, the lion was widely represented in fourth millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia. Other West Asian countries included this animal in their art only in subsequent periods. "Careful examination of the anatomy of the beasts on the Sarnath and Sanchi capitals, especially the detailed treatment of the forelimbs leaves no doubt that the masons who carved them had been working from already stylized models, and without first hand knowledge of the animals itself, which cannot be said of the artists who carved the bull and elephant capitals." Irwin admits: "If we look for its (Vaisali lion's) closest parallels in Western Asia, we are taken back to Achaemenid art of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.-in particular to the so-called 'applied art', represented by gold rhyton or drinking cup (Figure 2) which Ghirshman attributes to about 500 B.C." According to Ghirshman, "The closest parallel of lion of Vaisali pillar may be traced back to Achaemenid art of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. in the representation of a drinking cup of 500 B.C.". Regarding this Irwin maintains: "It is logical to suppose that portable metal work objects such as this must have been much coveted by the Indian rulers dazzled by the power and splendour of the Achaemenid court during the two centuries before Alexander the Great (Irwin, 1976: 747-8.)."



**Figure 3: Lion in West Asian Art**

With the ancient Egyptians the lion was dedicated to the God Shu and the Goddess Sechenet, both of which were, therefore, represented with the heads of the lion (Gupta, 1982: 324). Leo, the lion, was the symbol of water; hence that animal is found in the

decorations of pitcher, pails, *etc.* The Assyrians and Greeks in their architecture made the lion guardian over the palace. To the Greeks and Romans this animal became guardian over springs, doorways, stairways, *etc.* Dedicated to springs the flowing water gushed out of a lion's mouth. In Doric architecture we find an open mouthed lion's head decorating the outlet that released the rainwater from the roof. In the decorative arts, the lion, typical of strength, was used by the ancient Greeks and Romans as a form of support (legs, *etc.*) for chairs, benches and tables (Figure 3).

Lion head is also used as spouts. The Greek mainland, however, borrowed it in first millennium B.C. It was absorbed in court art of West Asia and it became the king's favourite motif. Thus, the lion found place not only in royal palaces, tombs, hunting and war scenes but also in glyptic and terracotta art. But the representation was not natural but stylized one. Slowly and gradually each country of West Asia evolved its own style of depicting this motif. Hence, it can easily be distinguished from one another. The characteristic feature of the Aśokan lion lies in the actual modeling with its emphasis on flesh surface, and its indifference to the real anatomy and bone-structure of the animal. Assyrian lion depicted in hunting scenes acted as the model for Mauryan lions but the Assyrian lions are elongated with its locks of mane reaching down to the belly and patches of muscles are shown in geometric forms. Besides this, the body proportions of the Aśokan lions are entirely different from that of Assyrian lion. The frontal part occupies practically half of the body, while in the Indian examples it is rarely more than one third. The facial expression in the two examples is also different. The reason behind it was that Aśoka's exploitation of this animal motif in art was for an entirely different purpose than the one to which the West Asian countries employed it. The open mouth posture of the Aśokan lion represents the heraldic aspect not of the king as an earthly ruler but that of the *Dhamma*, which the king upheld merely as a lay disciple. The majestic aspect of the lion is, therefore, not of terrestrial character. The Aśokan lions, in other words, were never expected to rouse fear in the minds of the onlookers while their West Asian lions were invariably meant to inspire awe and fear. The Aśokan lions were in fact expected to stir a positive response in the minds of the people; respect for the *Dhamma*. In West Asia the lion served the king, enhanced the valour of his personality and terrorized his subjects; in India it served the *Dhamma*, established its supremacy and inspired the masses. It was also meant to inspire the Buddhist monks and the officials to march ahead, spread and broadcast in every corner of the world the message of the *Dhamma*. Therefore, there was absolutely no need to follow any of the West Asian idioms, and in fact it was totally eschewed by Aśoka. Therefore, in West Asia the lion was ferocious; in India it was comparatively gentle. This is the basic conceptual difference at the execution of the lions in West Asia and India.

Regarding the Sārnāth Lion capital S.K. Saraswati proclaims: "However we may attribute them on account of the execution of the muscles or the treatment of the muzzles and the paws to Persepolis, the "flexible naturalism" which permeates every form in the entire capital is Indian in spirit and breaths, so to say the tender sympathy

for animal kind which is inculcated by the doctrine of *ahiṃsa* (non-violence) preached by the Master. A general indebtedness to Achaemenid forms is not impossible, but in Indian hands and in Indian atmosphere the dryness and aridity of the Persian tradition become softened and imbued with a new fullness of life and form (Saraswati, 1957: 33)."

S.P. Gupta suggests that the lion capital of Sārnāth represent the chariot of the Sun God (Gupta, 1982: 123-127). He has suggested that the four wheels on the abacus are the wheels of a moving chariot as they are shown with their hub. It has also been logically demonstrated by him in the context of the edict engraved on the shaft of the pillar that could have been a better object to bear the giant wheel representing the *dhamma*, the eternal doctrine of Buddha, by any other than the eternal like the sun. Indian literature is replete with references to these four animals in a group but nowhere is it said to represent the chariot of the sun (Agrawal, 1964: 38).

The four animals simply represent either the four directions or part of the assemblage of auspicious objects brought about at the time of coronation of a king or any other royal ceremony. When therefore Aśoka adopted these animal symbols he thought that in the current tradition and in the people's imagination these four animals symbolized the temporal qualities of wide sovereign authority of dignity and strength, of potency and power, of supernormal energy and awesome majesty. According to V.S. Agarwal the four adorsed lions above the abacus of Sārnāth lion capital symbolize the might of a *Chakravarti* king. It is the power of the state known as *Kshatra* expressed through the lion symbolism, as we know that the king was considered to be a tiger or lion in his kingdom and in the coronation ceremony was made to sit on a lion's throne (*Simhasana*). The four lions of the capital truly form a *siṃhāsana* of the most perfect type that support the moral order of the kingdom (Agrawal 1964: 105).

Possibly, the best example of lion motif is the one on top of the Lauāiyā-Nandangaāh pillar; best in the sense, that although it is formal and conventional, the distinct air of naturalness around it is not found in any specimen from West Asia. The trunk is comparatively long, slim and perfectly proportionate. The legs are thin. The back is full; the tail-end is short; the emphasis is obviously on flesh. One volume subtly rolls into the other and the viewer likes to touch it and feel it without any sense of fear. It is indeed so very gentle. The Achaemenian examples (Figure 4), on the other hand, are extremely terse and full of raised veins and muscles. They create awe. They are often monstrous. We may now consider the foreparts. The legs are somewhat thin and clumsy. The face is heralding, the whiskers are linear, and the locks of hair are short, combed and arranged; schematically. Sitting on its haunches like a dog, it is extremely formal and sophisticated. There is an apparent similarity in both of them as far as sitting posture is concerned. But there is a vast difference in the posture and the posture adopted by sitting lion on Aśokan pillars such as the one on Vaiśāli pillar and the Lauāiyā-Nandangaāh pillar (Figures 5 and 6). It is, however, neither monstrous nor ferocious like the Achaemenian examples.





Figure 4: Seated dog (?), Persepolis 5<sup>th</sup> -4<sup>th</sup> century BC



Figure 5: Lion Capital of Lauāiyā Nandangaāh Pillar



Figure 6: Lion Capital of Vaiśāli Pillar



Figure 7: Open Mouth of the Lion in West Asian art



Figure 8: Open mouth of the Lion in Mauryan Art

### Lion in Mauryan Art and West Asian Art

- Like many West Asian and Greek examples, the Aśokan lion has open mouth with its tongue protruding; the posture is called heraldic. In the West Asian examples of lions, the mouth is open either too little or too large; in the former category of much examples the tongue is completely inside the mouth, while in the latter it is protruding out of the mouth prominently. Sometimes the tongue in Western examples is lolling. The Aśokan lion, in contrast, has only moderately open mouth with tongue largely inside: only a little, the tip with its base is really out of the mouth. As a result of this moderation, the muscles on the face of the 'Aśokan' lions are also not much tense.





**Figure 9: Front View of Sarnath Lion Capital Showing Various Facial Features**

- In the West Asian examples, by and large each bristle is shown in the form of a tuft arranged like inverted commas with thick ends at the top. Obviously, it is everything but naturalistic. This highly conventional style is seldom seen in the 'Asokan' lion. The whiskers in 'Asokan' lion have linear treatment; each bristle is shown with uniform thickness throughout its length (Figure 9).
- In the West Asian examples eyes are wide open. So is true of the Asokan lions. The eye balls were made of some precious stones and then fixed in the sockets both in West Asia and India. The outline of the eyes in the Asokan lions is distinctly marked by a moulded band crossed at the outer ends, with one end shorter than the other. The overall form, therefore, is fish like in perspective. This was hardly the case with the West Asian examples where either the band is not there or else the raised portion of the socket is chamfered. In some examples the eyes are skirted with distinct bulges not to be found in the eyes of the Asokan lions.
- The cheeks of the Asokan lion are neither filled with folds of muscles nor are flat and lifeless. They have a natural undulating surface and their treatment is photogenic. In the West Asian examples they are filled up with folds of muscles. This reflects the tension in muscles on the face of the lion when it enters into the roaring posture.

- The Aśokan lions in respect of legs stand out as the best examples of naturalistic depiction; as they are short and slender with only one or two veins running in shallow relief and moving in their normal course, the bony structure show up only to the extent necessary for depicting a strongly built body with fully developed muscles. The feet are planted firmly on the ground with sharp nails and raised bones of fingers. In the monumental examples of Assyria the legs are marked with roundels and ovals to indicate the muscular growth. Because of this the lions are highly stylized. The Persian lions are marked by cobweb of veins, sometimes mixed up with bones. Such lions are also very stylized.

One fragmentary lion head has been found from Masarh, Distt. Bhojpur, Bihar which is carved out of Chunar sandstone and bears the typical Mauryan polish. But it is undoubtedly based on the Achaemenian idiom. The tubular or wick-like whiskers and highly decorated neck with long locks of the mane with one series arranged like sea waves is somewhat non-Indian in approach. But, to be exact, we have an example of a lion from a sculptural frieze from Persepolis of 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in which it is overpowering a bull which may be compared with the Masarh lion (Figures 10 and 11). Here we can draw particular attention to the treatment of the nose in a peculiar combination of geometric design and floral motif. It is practically a cobweb of lines, one flowing into the other and producing some loops, large and small, particularly on the eyes and along their outer edges.



**Figure 10: The Lion Overpowering a Bull from Persepolis, 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.**



**Figure 11: Lion Head found at Masarh**

## **Conclusion**

Thus, in the Mauryan period of Indian art the contribution of West Asian art forms was definitely there but its quantum was limited and its basic features were transformed and indianized. It is clear that somewhere or in some way Achaemenids have influenced the Mauryan lion. Apart from the cultural and trade contacts of India with this country, one fact should not be forgotten that Achaemenids ruled a portion of



India in the North-West for some time. But whatever influence from the West is said to have infiltrated in India, it is likely that the major share may go to their rule and its consequence.

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