



The first sermon, one of four sides of a stupa harmika, Gandhara ca. 2nd Century CE
Freer Gallery of Art ©, Washington D.C.

The Mriga In Buddhism

A Web Presentation for
Future Discussions

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1. Prologue what does “mriga” mean and how is it used ?

Prologue:

In the past week, there has been some discussion of deer, chakras and vajras in the Buddhist context. Please allow me to enter a few comments that may be (or may not) of use.

In the Buddhist context, the notion of the deer comes from the word *mr.ga-dava* [*mriga-dava*], one of the two names of the place where the first sermon (*dharmachakra-parvatana*) of the Buddha was taught. The other name is the *R.s.ipatana* [*Rishipatana*], the “place of the descent of the Rishis.”

According to the lexicons that I have available, “*mriga*” means those who are “afraid to die” and generically refers to game animals such as deer, antelope, rabbits, squirrels and the like. Thus, I usually translate *mriga-dava* as “game preserve” or “game park”

Prologue:

However, as an early and quite romanticized translation of the Buddhist narrative, *mr.ga* became “deer.” This has become the *de facto* translation throughout the English speaking Buddhist world and certainly serves the purpose well enough since a deer is a *mriga* but one of many varieties of animals that also qualify.

Putting the wheel of the methodology in motion in a place of game animals is about as neat a demonstration of *slesha* “double entendre” as I know of. The challenger of the Buddha’s enlightenment is a personification of *mara*, “death” known simply as *Mara* (The word *mara* is also based on the root *mr.*). But it is death with a kicker— you are going to be reborn only to die again and again— forever! It is this very immortality that the enlightened being seeks to escape. There is no “eternal peace” for those caught up in *samsara*.

Prologue:

Thus, the “fear of death” takes on a whole new meaning. Simply dying would be ok, but the pain and suffering of the life cycle must be endured again. That is the fear that the Buddhists refer to, not death per se, but the eternity of the life and rebirth cycle.

When in early Buddhist sculpture, The Buddha is shown teaching the first turning of the wheel, and he displays abhaya mudra, “symbolic signing of fearlessness,” he is bestowing fearlessness [of death] on his hearers by means of their following his teachings.

Accordingly, the mriga attending the wheel are symbolic of all beings in all realms of existence who have not attain fearlessness.

2. A Harappan period prototype

The beginnings:

Two mriga under a seat, surmounted by a religious figure have a deep history in the Indic culture's symbol system. The well-known "yogin" seal (Parpola's M-304A) had 2 ibex under the seat.



Un-restored



Computer graphics restoration by JCH

The beginnings:



The fragmentary horns of the second ibex are very clear in the original and are what led me to make the proposed restoration.

The beginnings:



Without entering into the ongoing debate about who, what, and why regarding this seal, we can be certain of the following facts. A hierarchically determined importance is given a human who is seated in a still used yogic posture and who wears a crown with water buffalo horns. He is arranged frontally on a raised seat. Both frontality and the raised seat are universal signifiers of rank and or religious status. He is surrounded by four large animals: rhinoceros, water buffalo, elephant, and tiger all of which continue to have symbolic meaning in Indic religions to the present day. And, below his throne, are two mriga, in this case ibex, again probably arranged to symbolize stature[?].

On to Buddhism.

3. Is the Indic Buddhist mriga a deer or an antelope?

A. Mauryan period

B. Gandhara

C. Gupta period

1) Ajanta

2) Sarnath

D. Licchavi period (Nepal)

1) [clarification] Who are the Buddhist of Nepal?

2) symbol usage

Ashokan Period mid 3rd cent. BCE



The earliest sculpture we have of a Buddhist mriga (Sarnath, India Mauryan period temple of the “first sermon” ca. 250 BCE) the animal was portrayed as an antelope.

Ashokan Period mid 3rd cent. BCE



With the short horns and straight muzzle the Mauryan period sculpture is obviously of the *Hemitragus hylocrius* - Nilgiri tahr. In other words, the Mriga was understood as an antelope—not a deer.

Gandharan, Peshawar Valley ca 2-3rd cent. CE



2nd cent CE image of the first sermon from Gandhara

Gandharan, Peshawar Valley ca 2-3rd cent. CE



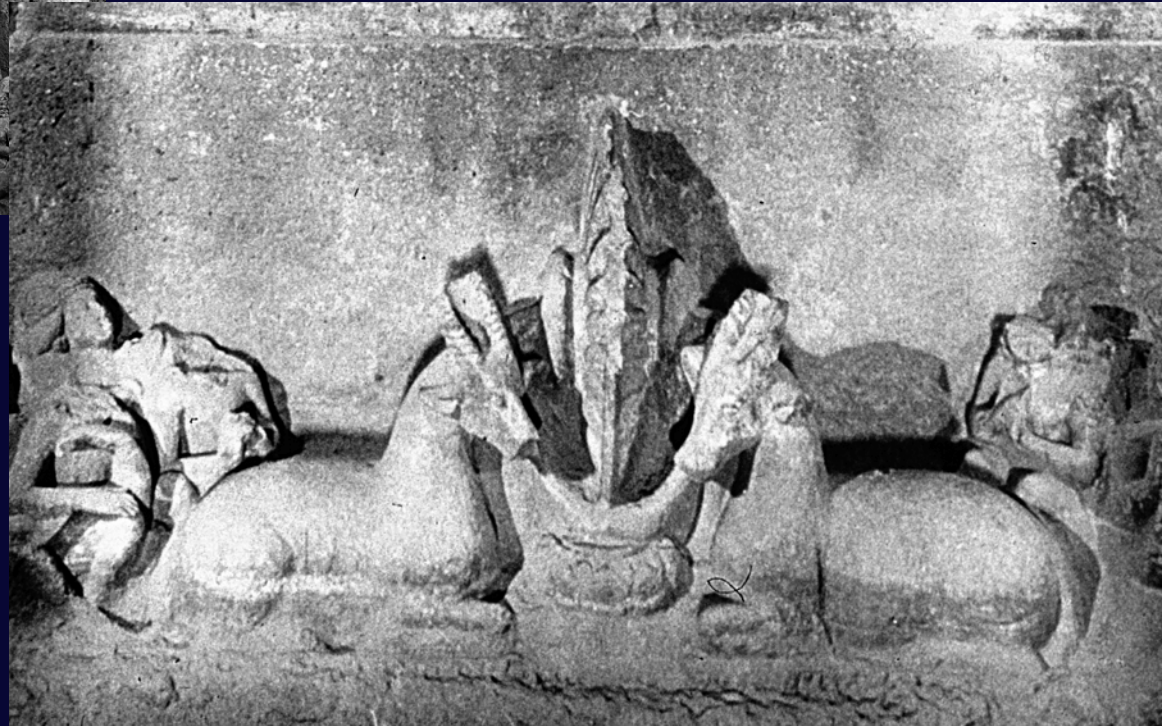
In this 2nd cent CE image of the first sermon from Gandhara the attendant mriga are both antelope although the left one is a bit problematic to identify. It may be a female Nilgiri but I am not certain from available resources.

Ajanta ca. 3 quarter of the 5th century



Cave 4, shrine image with a teaching Buddha and Vajrapani and Avalokiteshvara the antelope flank a edge-on wheel

Ajanta, ca. 3rd quarter of the 5th century



Again, we have the nilgiri antelope as the mriga

Sarnath, Gupta Period ca. 5th century



Detail of a “first sermon” sculpture in which we have the nilgiri antelope as the mriga flanking a edge-on wheel.

The five monks and a female donor also appears in the scene.



Who were the “Nepali Buddhists?”

Joanna Kirkpatrick added: Maybe Nepalis consider these two deer to signify firmness and compassion (sounds Tibetan to me,) but I'd been led to think that they represented the deer park, where the Buddha turned the wheel of the law, i.e, preached his first sermon. The chakra in between the two deer IS the wheel of the the law (dharma).

In this statement, we suffer from several misconceptions, in part fostered by the Nepalese community itself:

- 1) There are no Nepali Buddhists !
- 2) The Buddhist community is a sub-set of the Newar ethnic group, who speak Nepal Bhasa, a Tibeto-Burman language with very little relationship to Sanskrit; although the Buddhist community has a huge body of Sanskrit loanwords.
- 3) The Nepalis are Rajputs who conquered the Nepal (Kathmandu) valley in 1768 under Prithivi-narayan Shah. They speak a Sanskritic language, Nepali and not Nepal Bhasa. They are all Hindus.

While I will not go into it at this point, the Koliyas, Mallas, and Licchavis of early Buddhist literature figure prominently in early Nepalese inscriptions.

Kathmandu Valley, Licchavi period ca 5-6th century



Detail of a lintel in which we have the nilgiri antelope as the mriga flanking a edge-on wheel.

4. Drops out of use in most of the Indic Buddhist world except Karkota Kashmir and Pala Eastern Gangetic basin

A. Kashmir

B. Eastern Indic

The Indic world in general, ca.6-7th century

Somewhere about the beginning of the 6th century, the mriga flanking the chakra and the chakra itself fall into disuse. They are never lost but they become quite rare in the Indic cultural sphere with two exceptions. Kashmir and the Pala-Sena regions of the eastern Gangetic basin.

Nepal after 880

After the end of the Licchavi period, (ca. 330 to 879/880) the Dharma chakra and the deer flanking it drop out of the Newar Buddhist vocabulary. For reasons I do not understand, even in the astamangala symbolism, the chakra is replaced by the two crossed chauries.



Detail of the metal ceiling in Basupur at Swayambhu Mahachaitya, modern

Kashmir, 714

The dated Vairochana/Shakyamuni in Akanishta Paradise has a band across the bottom flanked by two Ganas and two deer (not antelope!). These tiny creatures clearly have branched antlers.



Bihar, Pre-pala ca. 700



The eight conjuror's transformations (Asta-maha Pratiharya) formed a major core practice in the Pala period. These events consisted of:

- 1) The birth
- 2) The enlightenment
- 3) The first sermon
- 4) the descent among the gods
- 5) The great transformation
- 6) The taming of the elephant
- 7) The gift of the monkey
- 8) The final cessation

The first sermon, which concerns us here, is invariably depicted with the antelope.

5. Later use in Nepal by Tibetan community

A. At Swayambhu Mahacaitya

B. Tibetan example form Lhasa

Nepal after 880

In Nepal, even at Swayambhu Mahachaitya the core site of Newar Buddhism, the mriga and chakra symbols are present only because of offerings by the Tibetan community. I am sure this fact is confusing to most, but the Newar Buddhist community and the Tibetan Buddhist community have a very long standing relationship of mutual respect and tolerance.



East entrance of Swayambhu Mahachaitya, with a torana offered by a Tibetan modern

Tibetan mriga

In Tibet, it is common practice not to show either horns or antlers on the mriga. This group of photographs, from various web sources, clearly shows that the famous group on the Jokhang do not have either. While it would be impossible to know whether Tibetan mriga “never” have horns or antlers, it is my impression that it is uncommon. Thus, they are neither deer or antelope but simply generic mriga.



Tibetan mriga



Among Tibetans, the meaning is clear and simple. “In this place the Buddhist Dharma is taught and practiced.” While there are many overtones and nuances to explanations (e.g., referencing the “first sermon,” etc.), this fundamental meaning is central to the collective symbol.

The End

