

EARLY TERRACOTTAS FROM CHANDRAKETUGARH

Paresh Chandra Das Gupta

The archaeological site of Chandraketugarh lies about twenty-three miles to the northeast from Calcutta. The place covers a very large area including several villages (viz., Berachampa or Devalaya, Jhikra, Hadipur etc.) and long stretches of cultivated fields. Very recently, the site was explored by the present writer for about one and a half years (1956-1957) which resulted in the discovery of numerous early terracottas of high importance and value. The collection has been further enriched by many other rare figurines collected from the same site by Satyen Ray and Prabhas Shome.

The terracotta figurines from Chandraketugarh are noted for their beautiful execution and style, which undoubtedly add to the richness of the already known finds of the Maurya, Śuṅga, Kushāṇa and Gupta periods. The male and female figurines of the early period are marked with a singular charm attained through an uncommon lyricism of style. These not only remind us of the similar miniature terracotta sculptures from other North Indian sites, viz., Tamluk, Bangarh, Patna, Kosam, Bhita, Mathura, Hastinapur, etc., but also in some instances afford evidences of foreign contact. Perhaps the earliest terracotta figures from Chandraketugarh, so far discovered, are two *yakṣiṇī* heads wearing elaborate coiffures. One of these is the bust of a small moulded female figure (size: 3" × 2.3") wearing a bicornate headdress (Pl. XIII, Fig. 1, left and Fig. b, p. 51) which makes it comparable with similar figures from other North Indian sites. The other one (2.3" × 2") is also wearing an elaborate headdress adorned with circular medallions and precious ornaments (Pl. XIII, Fig. 1, right and Fig. a, p. 51).¹ The treatment and style of these two *yakṣiṇī* figurines along with their coiffures seem to be associated with similar figures from Tamluk, Patna and Hastinapur, which are generally attributed to the Maurya period.² The conscious attempt to create the forms, the archaic decorations and the partly subdued feminine traits make them easily distinguishable from the Śuṅga and Kushāṇa terracotta figurines.

The main bulk of the terracotta figures from Chandraketugarh consists of numerous examples of Śuṅga and Kushāṇa periods, apparent from their treatment and style. The Śuṅga terracottas

¹ This was collected by D. P. Ghosh, Curator of the Asutosh Museum, Calcutta University, Calcutta.

² Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of India*, London 1954.

Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, Calcutta 1933, p. 11, Pl. 7, Fig. 13.

Indian Archaeology—A Review, 1954-55, Pl. XXXIX.

Ashton (ed.), *The Art of India and Pakistan*, Pl. 4, 39.

Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1926-27; p. 135, Pl. XXXI.

B. B. Lal, "Excavation at Hastinapur and Other Explorations in the Upper Ganga and Sutlej Basins, 1950-52," *Ancient India*, Nos. 10 & 11, Pl. XXXVI, 1. The Hastinapur terracotta belongs to Period III of the excavated site which also yielded numerous sherds of the Northern Black Pottery as well as a number of punch-marked coins.

with their usual frontality are marked with an almost two-dimensional technique revealing the beauty and charm of modelling. Among the terracottas of the Śuṅga period a unique figure of Sūrya (7·5"×3") represented on a toy-cart is interesting, as in the composition shown here the Sun God is shown standing on his celestial chariot flanked by two females, probably Uṣā and Pratyusā, and a giant is depicted as being trampled down under the rolling wheel of the car of Heaven.¹ The symbolism and the Bhaja design as expressed through this composition obviously recalls the contemporary similar motif of the cave-sanctuary of Bhaja in the Western Ghats of the 2nd century B.C.

The *yakshini* figurines of these ages are enlivened with a symbolism and beauty which once inspired the artists of Bharhut, Bodhi Gaya, Sanchi, Ahichchhatra, Mathura, Bhilsa, Didarganj and Amaravati, besides frequently stimulating the romantic tales of many ancient Pāli and Sanskrit works. The Śuṅga figurines may be easily distinguished by their almost two-dimensional character, and they are conventionally shown as wearing the so-called *pañchachūdās*, wreaths of flowers, jewelled and golden bands (*ratna-paṭṭas*), flowing scarves, elaborate ornaments comprising earrings, multi-stringed pearl necklaces, smooth tassels, bracelets, heavy girdles, anklets and luxuriously hanging transparent skirts, which almost make them the *nāyikās* of everlasting beauty and sensuousness. A mutilated terracotta plaque (3·5"×4") showing the large head of a *yakshini* is unique (Pl. XIII, Fig. 3), as it is not only adorned by the conventional five magical hair-pins resembling weapons (sword, arrow, battle-axe, trident and the goad), strings of beads mostly twined over the coiffure, earrings and others but also the margin of the stele is covered with a row of honeysuckle motif, which finds place on Maurya and Śuṅga monuments. The face is pressed between two planes and its flatness seems to be nearer to the art of Bharhut than to the more evolved form of the Sanchi *Vrkshakās*. The other *yakshini* figures assignable to the Śuṅga period present a variety of coiffures, costumes and jewellery. Thus, apart from the diaphanous scarves and skirts of the *yakshinis*, we find a chiton-like dress in the lower part of a figurine (3·8"×2·2") revealing its exotic character even in the pre-Kushāna period. This terracotta figure (Pl. XIII, Fig. 4) which bears a reddish slip and reveals typical two-dimensional form of the Śuṅga style, suggests that coastal Bengal came into maritime contact with the Hellenistic world even before the time of the composition of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (c. 1st century A.D.) when the relation was already firmly established.² A mutilated moulded plaque (2"×2·8") showing the head of a female figure wearing elaborate headgear and

¹ Vide, *Indian Archaeology—A Review*, 1955-56, Pl. LXXII, B. This terracotta was collected by Sri S. Ghosh. P. C. Das Gupta, "Archaeological Finds from Berachampa," in *The Modern Review*, April, 1956.

² A small head of a female wearing diadem (Pl. XIII, Fig. 1, middle) bears Hellenistic character. A similar figure was found from a late level of Period III of the Hastinapur excavation — and thereby it might be easily assigned to the Maurya age. See B. B. Lal, "Excavation at Hastinapur," p. 84, Pl. XXXVI, 5. It is not impossible that the present terracotta from Chandraketugarh is a contemporary of the Hastinapur figurine.



Fig. 17. Head of a terracotta *yakshini*.
Chandraketugarh. c. 2nd century B.C.
Asutosh Museum, Calcutta.

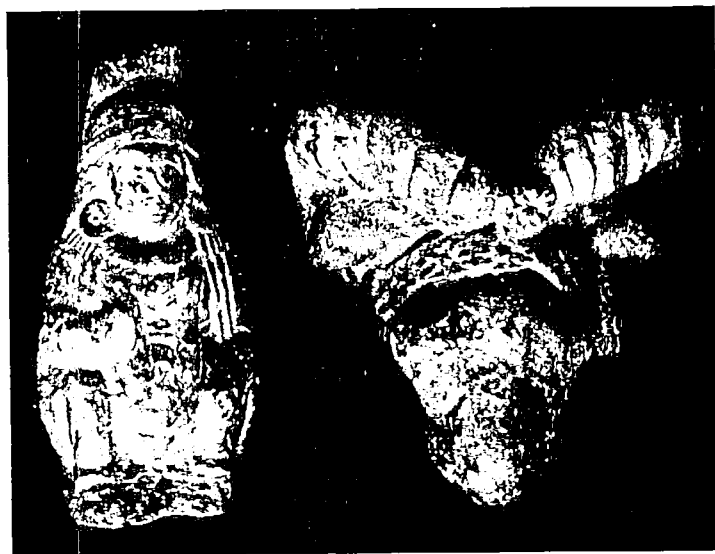


Fig. 18. (Left) Terracotta rattle with a seated figure (Kubera). Chandraketugarh.
1.8" x 2.4". Kushāna. Asutosh Museum, Calcutta.
(Right) Terracotta decorated ram's head. Chandraketugarh. Kushāna.
Asutosh Museum, Calcutta.



Fig. 19. Terracotta plaque with rhinoceros motif.
Chandraketugarh. Kushāna.
Asutosh Museum, Calcutta.



Fig. 20. Terracotta head of *yaksha* or *gana*. Chandraketugarh.
Late Kushāna. Asutosh Museum, Calcutta.

The torso of a moulded terracotta plaque (2·8" × 2·2") showing a standing warrior is also interesting. He is represented as holding by his right hand the decorative hilt of an undrawn sword, and he is wearing heavy bangles as well as a *vastra-yajñopavita*. The broad chest and the general heaviness of the figure combined with a treatment in restrained relief are the features of the early Kushāṇa period.

Among the moulded terracotta plaques of the Kushāṇa and Gupta periods the most interesting are a class depicting *mithuna* or erotic subjects (Pl. XIV, Fig. 11) where the style of delineation quite often recalls the art of Amaravati. Several of these examples may even go back to the Śuṅga period.¹ The amorous couples depicted on these plaques are shown in sexual union in various postures enumerated by Vātsyāyana in the *Kāmasūtra*. Some of the erotic scenes reveal animals and birds cohabiting. A moulded terracotta plaque (3·3" × 3·6") of Śuṅga style depicts a standing couple, the male engaged in disrobing the *nāyikā* in a way which brings to our mind a partly similar motif in stone from Sarguja, U.P., belonging to the Kushāṇa period. The early *mithuna* motifs from Chandraketugarh seem to be analogous with a terracotta of the Śuṅga period bearing a scene of *coitus revertus* discovered at Tamluk during archaeological excavations carried out in 1955.² These amorous scenes of the Śuṅga and Kushāṇa periods clearly show that Vātsyāyana drew much of his material from earlier sources. While discussing the same problem with the early *mithuna* terracottas from Ahichchhatra, V. S. Agrawala has remarked, "At best they seem to be related to the ideal 'man and woman' figures represented at Sanchi as forming part of the repertoire of the idyllic land of Uttarakuru, where *mithuna* pairs endowed with eternal youth and beauty are born from wish-fulfilling trees (*kalpavriksha*) and spend their lives in continuous pleasure."³ The ancient clay-sculptures of Chandraketugarh evince that the skilful artists of this region once were actuated by the desire to present before the people types and patterns saturated with erotic symbolism. They are undoubtedly the forerunners of the multitude of *mithuna* stone sculpture of medieval Orissa and Khajuraho.

Numerous animal carts with beautiful decorations have been recovered from the site of Chandraketugarh and its vicinity (Pl. XV, Figs. 12 and 13)⁴ which could be assigned to the Kushāṇa period. A group of elephant carts depicts elephants resembling the rock-cut elephant of Dhauri in Orissa and in certain cases the style and treatment may even take them back to the age of Mauryan art tradition. The animals of toy carts are elephants, rams and horses, the former being sometime shown as winged and sporting with lotuses. Probably this is the first time that terracotta winged

¹ A terracotta mutilated *mithuna* plaque shows a couch with embellished legs having vase-like bases. The legs resemble similar stone-pillars of Bharhut, Karle and Nasik. Another plaque depicts a pillared hall with merloned roof of Śuṅga style.

² *Indian Archaeology—A Review*, 1954-55, Pl. XXXIX.

³ V. S. Agrawala, "Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatra, Dt. Bareilly, U. P.," *Ancient India*, No. 4, p. 109.

⁴ A terracotta plaque depicting a charging rhinoceros (Pl. XVI, Fig. 19) from Chandraketugarh is assignable to the Kushāṇa period on stylistic grounds. This was collected by Sri M. K. Pal and Sri G. R. Raychaudhuri.