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Tracing the Royal, Romantic and Demonic Roots of the *Nio* Warrior Guardian

Jennifer Norris

The *Nio* (or *Kongo Rikishi*, 金剛力士) duo that menacingly greets entrants to ancient Buddhist temples of Japan has a layered and mysterious history developed through the interactions of Mahayana Buddhism, emerging from northern India, with ancient Indo-Greek, Central Asian and Chinese and Hindu cultural influences, as well as the wider mix of culture and commerce that interacted along the silk road trade routes where Buddhism first spread eastward. The *Nio*'s ancient history lies in this mixture and is most readily traceable through a study of the symbolic attributes in the remnants of ancient sites marking the religion's spread. While one might mistake them as a uniquely Japanese phenomena, the *Nio* retains much of the aesthetic material of much earlier *dvarapalas*, or temple gatekeepers, found millennia ago in central India, and reoccurring throughout archaic figures found across modern day Afghanistan, western and central China, and Korea prior to its appearance in Japan.

Importantly, the *Nio* are also *vajradhara* (bearer of the ancient religious weapon the *vajra*, or lightning bolt/diamond). *Vajrapani* and *dvarapala* are unique characters in that they not only stylistically adapt to host cultures across geographical expanses and time, a development that takes place across the Buddhist pantheon, but they also appear, at least until reaching China, to uniquely integrate local ruler symbolism, and in some cases the rulers themselves, assume deified protector-warrior roles. In both mythological symbolism and practical usage, then, the *vajra* and *vajradhara* represent and facilitate coalescence of the perceived spiritual and mundane world, and a variety of players and perspectives. This category of *vajradhara* includes the

Nio along with a host of other deities, though many other factors influence their particular roles.

It is important to look at how the weapons make the warrior, contribute to the perception of what the ideal warrior *is*, and even help define what the aspiring warrior becomes, from the influence of martial philosophies on action to decisions about mechanical martial responses themselves (that is, the technical development of martial arts systems). Jarrod Whitaker theorizes that the *vajra*, known as the *dorje* in Tibet, “functions as a key tool to naturalize specific metaphysical truths, while enforcing certain sociopolitical relationships” and that the religious function of the tool itself acted in part as a means of subjugating the Kshatriya warrior caste to the priestly Brahminic caste, entwining their relationship and yet empowering both. This process initiated in the Vedic varna system long before the occurrence of our subjects of study, though similar templates of interaction hold and may prove active in later evolutions of *vajra*-bearers. This study therefore seeks to analyze elements of the evolution of the iconographic symbolism of the *Nio* as a *vajrapani* to begin to unravel the character that has been prominent in certain traditional Asian martial arts, with a particular focus on the relationship to the king as demonstrated through ornamentation, and the significance of the *channavira* chain, a torso ornamentation of divergent symbolic relevance present on diverse iterations of the *vajrapani*, including possible ties to the army of the core tempter of Buddha Shakyamuni, Mara, the ‘devil’ figure of Mahayana Buddhism, incorporating the embodiment of the *channavira* feature in the greater scheme of the *Nio*'s essential physicality.

Who is the *Nio*?

Any one figure among the Buddhist pantheon may be hard to pin down, given the high level of local cultural and linguistic adaptation across territories and narratives, symbolic and ideological development across time that reflected in the blossoming of a myriad of associated figures. The *Nio*, as a *vajrapani*, finds its earliest antecedent in Buddhism as an attendant to Buddha Shakyamuni, but can also be found in Hindu traditions as *vajradhara*, in the form of Indra,¹

¹ Lamotte, Etienne ‘Vajrapāṇi en Inde’, in *Mélanges de Sinologie offerts à Monsieur Paul Demiéville*

who famously smote his enemies with the vajra, a weapon identified in the Rigveda as “his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvastar fashioned”, and in other cases, designed from the diamond bones of the sage Dadhichi² and used it to decapitate the serpentine *Vrtra*, (a demigod who was blocking the waters).³ Subsequent to its adoption in Buddhism, the figure wound a multifaceted path, undergoing enormous aesthetic transformation, particularly during the early years of Mahayana expansion, coinciding with early integration in Central Asia and China, approximately from the 1st century BCE through the 7th century CE. The *Nio* that first entered Japan on the *Hokke Sessō* plaque (銅板法華説相図 or Bronze Plaque of the Lotus Sutra) in the 7th century was a fully developed figure, with little alteration from its renderings in earlier Chinese cave temples in either stature or positioning (Fig. 1). So, while we begin with an analysis of the figure as it stands in the exterior gates of some Japanese Buddhist temples, we also have to take a look back to its transitions elsewhere.

While the *vajrapani* became central in the Vajrayana strain of Buddhism that picked up speed in the 6-8th century CE, centuries after Mahayana Buddhism had already reached its easternmost destination in Japan, this research focuses on the *Nio* specifically, as a derivation of the original Mahayana *vajrapani*, though I do look to later manifestations of the Vajrayana *vajrapani* to further substantiate a point surrounding the *channavira* significance. I seek to expose a number of topics for further research that have not been fully addressed, including the role of the image of the *vajrapani* and *dharvapala* (gate keeper) symbolism in connecting royalty to martial protection of Buddhism as it correlates to the potential of the vajra as an actual weapon according to its style of handling and depictions, and the appearance of a beaded chain ornamentation on the sculpted figure that appears to integrate into and alter the anatomy over time, resulting in abnormally patterned abdominal muscles and other facets that tie the *Kongo Rikishi* to Mara’s Army as depicted in Sanchi Stupa I, a central Indian temple built around the 3rd century BC.

1, (Bibliothèque de l’Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises XX), Paris 1966, pp. 113-59

2 “The Great Sage Dadhichi <https://web.archive.org/web/20070421195923/http://www.urday.com/dadhichi.html>

3 Thus, was Indra, by wielding the vajra against his enemy “giving life to the Sun and Dawn and Heavens” in Book I, Hymn XXII of the Rigveda The Rigveda. Translated by Ralph Griffith. 2018. Global Grey Book 1: Hymn 32. P 30. Lines 2-4.

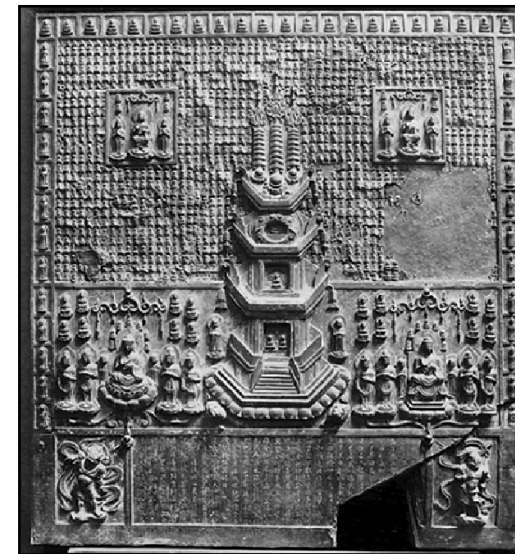


Figure 1: Hokke Sessō Plaque with first recorded *Nio* in Japan in Bottom Corners. Edited.

Vajra Legacy of the Vedic Period

Much of the *Nio*’s iconography can be traced back to a pre-Buddhist origin, beginning with the mysterious weapon of the vajra itself, but including the *Nio*’s posture, the vajra-bearer’s role as a guardian king, and the positioning of the deities itself as a protector of the Buddha. Analysis of certain aspects of these features involve a deep-dive into the archaeological past of the Indo-Aryan groups which first introduced the vajra-bearer Indra to India and Central Asia, as well as the development of the role between Kshatriya and Brahmin, two important symbiotic varna classifications, as the classifications themselves began to develop and become differentiated.⁴

Some have connected the *vajra* to the copper bar celt of the Indo-Aryan southward migration and others to Yamnaya groups who share linguistic features with the Indo-Aryans. Falk, Das Gupta and Kuznetsov separately linked semi-psychological, semi-functional weapons found in the Copper Hoard Culture to the *vajra*, including copper bar celts (Falk, 1993),⁵

4 Whitaker, Jarod. “I Boldly Took the Mace (Vájra) for Might: Ritually Weaponizing a Warrior’s Body in Ancient India”. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*. 20, 1: 51-94 (2015). DOI 10.1007/s11407-015-9184-z.

5 Falk, H (1993) “Copper Hoard Weapons and the Vedic *vajra*”, *South Asian Archaeology* 1993, Pro-

anthropomorphic figures (Das Gupta, 2009)⁶ and cudgels found in burial mounds that were “by far the largest metal object found in a Yamnaya grave”, held by the status-holding male figure, the focus of the burial mound, dating approximately 3000-2900 BCE (Kuznetsov, 2005).⁷ The latter claim indicates that the object in the *Agyo*'s (the open-mouthed *Nio* usually positioned on the right and most commonly carrying the *vajra*) hands may trace nearly 5000 years back to primitive Indo-Aryan warriors. Notably, both the copper bar celts and the tomb cudgels are weapons designed to be thrown or swung, in accord with Vedic descriptions of the *vajra*. The shape of the *vajra* is transformed over time. After analyzing representations of the *vajra* across time, Zin suggests that extant representations of the *vajra* are more closely modeled on the Greek *kerounos*, or lightning bolt, which, interestingly enough, was also used by Zeus to slay a giant serpentine being.⁸ Monika Zin demonstrates a further connection with Vedic literature; in her study of *vajrapani* reliefs, she found that determining that the positioning of the *vajra* in the hands indicates the *vajrapani*'s role in a given narrative.⁹ There are two main positions, as can be seen in *Agyo*¹⁰ and his counterpart, typically to the left of the gateway and with a closed mouth, the *Ungyo*,¹¹ along with their Chinese, Korean and Central Asian counterparts. In narratives where the *vajra* is held in the left hand, the character is standing by, much like *Ungyo*, and observing with a readiness to action that hasn't yet been activated. Aloft, in the right hand indicates a readiness to fight, as demonstrated by *Agyo*,



Figure 2: Ungyo (left) and Agyo (right) Hand Gestures of Forbearance and Attack. Edited.

and connected by Zin to Indra's *vajradaksina* position¹² in the battle against *Vrtra*, in which the deity is likewise compelled to take the *vajra* in the hand, indicating battle action.¹³ We can see these echoes in the hand positioning of *Agyo* and *Ungyo*, in which the active *Agyo* indicates attack, and the down-facing palms of *Ungyo* indicate forbearance (Fig. 2).

The Kings Guard the Gates

Through a study of Vedic texts, Whitaker concludes that between 1000- 600 BCE, with the development of class divisions between Brahmin priests and Kshatriya warriors, the *vajra* was increasingly symbolic of the Kshatriya warrior class. As the Kshatriya class was thought capable of rule, kings were ceremoniously handed *vajras* during coronations, symbolically dedicating their service to the Brahmin priests and the relationship between Brahmin and Kshatriya was reinforced by symbolic splitting of the *vajra* into four pieces, two held by each side, during the slaying of *Vrtra*.¹⁴ A more extensive study might be conducted on the symbiotic relationship between the religious and warrior classes, and the role of consecrated weapons in maintaining relationships, as

ceedings of the 12th International Conference of South Asian Archaeologists in Helsinki, ed Parola, A (et al), Helsinki 1994, pp 193-206.

6 Tapan Kumar Das Gupta, “Die Anthropomorphen Figuren der Kupferhortfunde aus Indien”, *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz*, 56, 2009, 39-80.

7 Kuznetsov, P. “An Indo-Iranian Symbol of Power in the Earliest Steppe Kurgans”. The Institute of History and Archaeology of the Volga Region. Samara, Russia. *Journal of Indo-European Studies*. Volume 33, Number 3 & 4, Fall/Winter 2005. P10-11.

8 Monika Zin, “Vajrapāṇi in the Narrative Reliefs, in: *Migration*”, *Trade and Peoples*, Part 2: Gandharan Art, ed. C. Fröhlich, The British Association for South Asian Studies, (Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists in London 2005) 73-83.

9 Monika Zin, “Vajrapāṇi in the Narrative Reliefs, in: *Migration*” pp. 73-83.

10 *Agyo* is the open-mouthed, figure to the right when facing Niomon temple gates, who bears the *vajra* in a raised hand.

11 *Ungyo* is the closed mouth figure typically to the left of the Niomon entryway at temple gates in Japan, with lowered hand symbolizing forbearance.

12 This is translated from Sanskrit as “holding a thunderbolt in the right hand” according to Sanskrita.org. Last modified on 17 August 2012, at 01:47. Accessed <https://www.sanskrita.org/wiki/index.php?title=vajra>.

13 Monika Zin, “Vajrapāṇi in the Narrative Reliefs, in: *Migration*” pp. 73-83.

14 According to Whitaker, “... two pieces become the sacrificial post and wooden sword of priests, and two become the chariot and bow and arrows of Kshatriyas”. Whitaker, Jarod. “I Boldly Took the Mace (Vájra) for Might: Ritually Weaponizing a Warrior's Body in Ancient India”. P 54.

well as study in the symbolism of the features of the vajra, as it clearly doesn't attempt to appear to be a deadly weapon in the way that a more functional blade or projectile might. Yet, we can begin to establish that the relationship of the *vajrapani* with the king, perhaps more closely than other deities, continued past Vedic times and was in fact part of the social understanding and role of the figure. We can again look to the transformations of renderings of the primitive *vajrapani* across time. It is not enough to point to the flowing, crown-like ribbons or fiery hair that often protrude from the *Nio*'s mostly bald scalp, or to reference that their later manifestations as *Heng* and *Ha* are referred to in China as 仁王 or 'benevolent kings'. It could be that the figures were societally static, representing kings of old and not contemporarily relevant, or that the principle evidenced by Whitaker of utilizing the *vajra* as a means of connecting the religious to martial class had evolved. We should examine first the continuation of linkage with historical kings, dating back to a figure that has not yet been connected with the *vajrapani*, the Bharhut *yavana*, a *dvarapala* styled after an Indo-Greek warrior, some allege to be King Menander.¹⁵

The *Nio*, as a *dvarapala*, shares symbolism with non-vajra bearing *dvarapala* that may speak to the function and development of the character. The earliest example found of a royal door guardian is the Bharhut *yavana* (Fig. 3), Interestingly, through the Gandharan period the guardian figure would continue to often be foreigners and Greek. The Bharhut *yavana*, dating back to the 1st or 2nd century BCE, is robed in what appears to be a sleeved tunic with the belly button exposed. There is only one figure, and it is crowned with a Greek king's headband,¹⁶ the likes of which we can see in other renderings of *yavana* (foreigners) at both Bharhut and Sanchi stupa sites. We can see adoption of royal headgear echoed in the Kizil Cave Vajrapani *dvarapala* of the 5th century (Fig. 5) and in the skull and flame crowns of tantric *vajrapani* popularized through Vajrayana Buddhism. The wisping bands around the head, as if blown by wind, are similar to the windswept headbands in certain *Nio* such as that of Todai-ji. While the figure is Greek, it doesn't yet show much Greek sculptural influence. The heroic musculature hasn't yet been



Figure 3: Bharhut *yavana*, triple vajra/sankosho, triratna. Edited.

integrated and the figure is of average stature. Absent of a *vajra*, the *Yavana*'s weapon is a sword with wraps crossing over a *triratna*, heading what appears to be a staff or stick. This *triratna* (Fig. 3) is symbolic of Buddhism's three jewels the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, a symbol reflective of the meaning of the *vajra* as the Dharma, borne by the protector of the Buddha. Structurally, the stick and three prongs are comparable to trident *vajra*, albeit one-sided. The later vajras come in a variety of shapes, outlined by Louis Frederic, who identifies the three pointed *vajras*, known in Japan as *sankosho*, in the material and spiritual universe, these three points represent the *Triratna*, the 'three jewels' of Buddhism (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Samgha), the three mysteries of word, thought and action."¹⁷ This seems to be the earliest extant example of delegation of the Dharma-bearing symbolism to a foreigner (as we see becomes popular in the Gandharan period) and to the *dvarapala* rather than a more central figure. If there is a connection to later *vajrapani*, the Bharhut *Yavana* may be an early indicator of the habit of adopting local

15 Banerjea, J. N., and J. N. Banerji. "A BHARHUT RAILING SCULPTURE." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 10 (1947): 65-68. Accessed June 25, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/44137105

16 Boardman, John. *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*, 1993, p. 112 Note 91

17 Frederic, Louis. Transl. by Nissim Marshall. *Flammarion Iconographic Guide: Buddhism*. Paris, France. 1995. P65.

royalty as religious protectors, common to the narrative *vajrapani*; though the positioning of the dharma guardian at the door resembles later *dhvarapala vajrapani*.

Connections to an incorporated Herakles figure can be identified in the flowering of Gandharan Indo-Greek influence include the loincloth, lion or tiger skin,¹⁸ wind scarf, musculature and lower-body stance. These aspects derived from Gandharan art have been covered extensively by Behrendt,¹⁹ Brancaccio and Behrendt,²⁰ and Mairs,²¹ and so won't be touched on here. The association of the *vajrapani* with Herakles during the period of flourishing of Gandharan art has been well-documented, so we won't go into detail of that aesthetic transformation here, except to say that the protective figure gained significance and predominance among visual renderings of certain events of the Buddha's life, particularly conversions. If we are to analyze the figure from the proposed vantage point of a connection with kings, the choice of Herakles is not far off the mark. It must be remembered that the Indo-Greek kings since Alexander the Great frequently represented themselves as Herakles in coinage,²² and primitive portraits would incorporate parts of the Heraklean iconography into their own, predominantly the lionskin headdress and the club as outlined by Tarn²³ and Narain.²⁴ In Nahapana, of the 1-2nd century Kshaharata dynasty of northern India, we find a ruler influenced by the Greeks, who inscribed both vajra 'three jewels' symbol on coins, along with his face and depictions of Greek gods (Fig. 4),²⁵ indicating



Figure 4: Nahapana coin with 3 pronged vajra. Edited.

that in some cases even non-Greek rulers would use the Greek gods as a sign of authority. We can understand, therefore, from the association of Herakles to royalty that extended past the Greeks, that the Heraklean depictions may not be a deviation from the apparent connection of the narrative *vajrapani* to kings. Alexander himself was known to deeply identify with the figure of Herakles, comparing his own life adventures to the mythical figure and aspiring to outdo him.²⁶

At Kizil in the Cave of the Statues, the royalty connection continues with a wall painting the Vajrapani, dating around the 5th century CE that suggests an Indo-Iranian influence on the rendering of Vajrapani. This depiction has been associated with the Sasanian god Verethragna (Bahram), who was, in the same centuries of the Heraklean Vajrapani (148 B.C.), sculpted as Herakles as a cave temple guardian in Kermanshah, Iran, and from whom a lineage of 6 Sasanian kings took their names between 271 and 591 CE.²⁷ Much like the Heraklean casting, Verethragna had a close historic connection with royalty as well. Of the Kizil Vajrapani (Fig. 5), it is stated:

His divinity is indicated by a halo. On his head is a diadem decorated with beads and disks, with a white and hanging from either side; rising from it are plumes of feathers at the sides and in the center a large, ornamented disk. Similar diadems appear in Sasanian art—for example, on a stone relief of the third century A.D. from Sar

18 While the tiger-skin was theorized to have developed locally from Chinese tribes, Crowell and Hsing provided substantial evidence otherwise. Crowell, William and Hsing, I-Tien. "Heracles in the East: The Diffusion and Transformation of His Image in the Arts of Central Asia, India, and Medieval China". *Asia Major*. Vol. 18. No. 2. (2005) pp 103-154. Accessed from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41649907>.

19 Behrendt, K. *The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2007.

20 Brancaccio, P., Behrendt, K. *Gandharan Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, Texts*. UBC Press. Vancouver, Toronto. 2006.

21 R. Mairs, *The Archaeology of the Hellenistic Far East. A Survey. Bactria, Central Asia and the Indo-Iranian Borderlands, c.300 BC-AD 100* (Oxford, 2011); Holt (n. 7).

22 Vasishtha Dev Mohan, Mehta. *The Indo-Greek Coins*. Ludhiana: Indological Research Institute. 1967.

23 Tarn, W.W., et al. *The Greeks in Bactria and India*. 3rd Edition. Chicago: Ares Publisher. 1984.

24 Narain, A.K. *The Indo-Greeks*. B.R. Publishing. 2003.

25 The Coin Galleries: Western Kshatrapas: Kshaharata Dynasty <http://coinindia.com/galleries-kshaharatas.html>

26 Arrian, translated by Hamilton, J.R. *The Campaigns of Alexander*. 1958. England: Clays Ltd.

27 Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "List of Rulers of the Sasanian Empire." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/saru/hd_saru.htm (March 2016)



Figure 5: Kizil Cave Vajrapani, Edited, Citation Below

Meshed that depicts King Bahram II as a lion slayer (Ghirshman 1962, figs. 215, 216). Roman Ghirshman has pointed out that a royal crown decorated with eagle feathers was originally the symbol of the Avestian god of victory, Verethragna. Verethragna had the same function as Indra, the Vedic god of war, who was included in the Buddhist pantheon.²⁸

While the headgear in the *dhvarapala vajrapani* of Ajanta caves is damaged and rather difficult to make out, it appears to be a form of royal headgear as well. The Ajanta *vajrapani*, along with its corresponding *dhvarapala* Avalokitesvara wear elaborate ornamental crown headgear that is so delicately rendered that it has been assumed that the painters were familiar with palace or court paintings, indicating another association with royalty (Fig. 6). Harkening now to an amalgamate of ancient gods, Verethragna, Indra, and Herakles, and now adopting the form of a temporal ruler, the musculature of the

²⁸ *The Ancient Silk Routes: Central Asian Art from the West Berlin State Museums*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York. P68.



Figure 6: Ajanta Cave Vajrapani Edited

Gandharan figure has turned into a lean form, and the figure is seated with one leg poised for movement, the right hand raised and holding a flywhisk with which he attends to the Buddha, the right hand is grasping the vajra with a fist shaped in a mudra.

It seems that from its earliest depictions, the narrative *vajrapani* was often related to mythical and actual representations of existing kings, perhaps indicating a continuation of the ancient Vedic symbiosis. This is echoed in the Gandharan representations of the figure as Herakles, to the Kizil and Ajanta, Central Asian and Indian representations, and even possibly tracing back to the role of the Bharhut *yanava*. While the Ajanta *vajrapani* is no longer representative of the narrative figure, and has shifted towards an iconic role, it can be seen that the royal association has carried all the way to the later *dhvarapala vajrapani*, including the *Nio*. Further study into the purpose of this rendering may be conducted, and with the relative dissolution of the narrative *vajrapani* on entry into China, it is left to see how this significance carries on to the increasingly significant *dhvarapala vajrapani*.

The Embodied *Channavira*

The *vajrapani*, like many other bodhisattvas, *yakshi*'s, *yakshinis* and other mythological Buddhist and Hindu beings have uniquely patterned adornments which can identify or reveal aspects of the character, history or lineage. One common adornment that can be seen draped across the shoulder onto the opposite hip of figures is the *yajnopavita*, or sacred thread, an adornment that was increasingly represented in Buddhist images after the 5th century.²⁹ While most of *yajnopavitas* extend to just past the waist, there are some examples of extended *yajnopavitas* found on Avalokitesvara and Manjusri as early as the 6th century.³⁰ The double chain that is evident on the *dhvarapala vajrapani* looks very similar to the single-stranded *yajnopavita* in its style of beading and can be found in the attendants of diverse bodhisattvas as well as a host of other figures throughout the 8th and 9th century. Yet the double chain seems to have particular significance for the *vajrapani*. It is found Longmen Guyangdong Cave during the Binyang Period of the late Northern Wei between 500-523 AD (Figure 7.4), and in the Tang-era completed between 672-675, Feng Xian Temple³¹ (Fig. 7.5), long before its widespread use.

The chain is a *channavira* and can be found in relatively rare instances when compared to the *yajnopavita*. The chain seems entirely absent from the *vajrapani* narrative assistant to Buddha Shakyamuni role in its renderings through northern India and Central Asia. Yet, it is evident elsewhere, possibly indicating a derivation. Some of the earliest extant representations of the *channavira* in Buddhist art can be found at Sanchi Stupa I, dating the first century BCE, where one of the *lokapala* (door guardian) figures, of the pillars upheld by four different *lokapala*, facing and representing protection of different directions, wears a *channavira* with a rectangular clasp (Fig. 7.1). The gateway of Sanchi Stupa III, dating the first century CE, has four *yaksas* that quite resemble the *lokapala* entwined among decorative lintel. Notably only one *yaksa* of each pair of four wears the *channavira* and notably, it has a similar clasp to the *lokapalas* of Sanchi I (Fig. 7.2). It is evident that the characters are



Figure 7: Channavira Wearing Figures of Possible Association Edited

29 LaPlante, John D. "A Pre-Pāla Sculpture and Its Significance for the International Bodhisattva Style in Asia." *Artibus Asiae* 26, no. 3/4 (1963): 247-84. Accessed October 10, 2020. doi:10.2307/3248985.

30 Ibid.

31 Relying on dates given by Schumaker, Mark. https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/niochi-na_18.html

distinguished by their ornamentation, suggesting this is a specific figure that may aid us in understanding the symbolic genealogy of the *Nio*. These *yaksas* have been labeled genies by Marshall³² and *kumbhanda*, or dwarf-like spirits, by Agrawala.³³ The non-*yaksa dvarapala* of Sanchi do not wear *channavira*, but have outwardly splayed feet and exposed navels like the Bharhut *yavana*.

Kongwang Mountain reliefs of the late Han era in China also reveal figures wearing the *channavira* though it is rare. About one particular figure, Marilyn Martin Rhie recounts:

*Portrayed in a posture of activity or squatting with both elbows akimbo and fists on his thighs, he wears a large hat on his head and X-crossed straps cross his bare chest. Such crossed straps (channavira) occur frequently in male figures in Kushana period art 1st-3rd century A.D... and this suggests that, despite the channavira not having a history in Chinese native art, it has traveled as a symbol, and stayed with a figure holding a squat posture, bare chested, and with limbs extended. are common in Greek and Roman art, especially on warrior figures.*³⁴

We have already described that *Nio*-like figures wearing the chain can be found at Longmen Caves. In one other Tang era example from Longmen, we can see a *dhoarapala* figure much like the *Nio* who doesn't wear the chain but instead has the puckered or crisscrossed belly button and the unusual, ball-like upwardly curving musculature in the abdomen. This musculature can be seen in the earliest *Nio* statues in Japan of Horyu-ji (Fig. 10.3-10.4), among others. I have yet to find an example of a *Nio* equipped with both the features of the balled and upward curving musculature and the *channavira* at the same time. The puckered navel can be seen in a 9th century *vajrapani*. That is not to say that the new musculature replaced the ornamental cross, for there are later versions of the *Nio* in which the ornamentation is again used, especially

32 Marshall, Sir John. 1902. *The Monuments of Sanchi*. Volume 1. Accessed from: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.532798/page/n3/mode/2up?q=mar>

33 Agrawala, Prithvi Kumar. "The Kumbhāṇḍa Figures in Sanchi Sculpture." *East and West* 37, no. 1/4 (1987): 179-89. Accessed October 11, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29756817>.

34 Rhie, Marilyn. *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia: Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan-shan in Central Asia*. Handbook of Oriental Studies Section Four: China. Volume 12. Brill. Boston, 2007, p. 39.

in versions of Heng and Ha, characters that emerged in China much later during the Ming Dynasty between 1368-1644.³⁵ Yet even when the chains are reintroduced, as we can see in *Heng* and *Ha* (Fig. 7.9) the navel is uncrossed, the abdomen returns to a realistic contour. The presence of these two means of dealing with the rendering of the belly of the figure suggests some import to the positioning of the chain, covering of the navel and nipples, that wasn't present in the earliest examples of the chain in Sanchi Stupa I. Though the import of covering the navel seems more consistent, in works like the *Todai-ji Nio*, flowers that cover the nipples, where in previous iterations the chains covered them or they were bare, and in later iterations clothing would take the place, but the covering of the nipples is not as frequent as that of the navel. Even in the kingly depictions of the narrative *vajrapani* in Ajanta and Kizil caves, the navel is covered (Ajanta, see Fig. 6) and crossed (Kizil, see Fig. 5). We can see in the depictions of Heng and Ha, post-12th century Chinese versions of the *vajrapani*, who are relatively clothed, the cross pattern is still replicated in some circumstances, and in fully clothed *Nio*, the crossed pattern is achieved with the outfit (Fig. 7.12). The Kiyumizu-dera *Nio* (Fig. 7.7), with balled musculature extending up the center of the sternum as well, might suggest the musculature to be indicative of the *channavira*. Lastly, in newer versions of the *vajrapani* stemming from the Tibetan tantric traditions, the crossed chain has again been introduced with popularity (Fig. 7.13).

One must note that the *channavira* is not exclusively found on *yaksas*, nor on warriors, despite its relatively rare presence before the 6th century, and seems to have other connotations. In fact, it is often found on women, including the female Chulakoka Devata³⁶ found at Sanchi. It is also worn by some of the members of Mara's army in the Sanchi Stupa I, which we will look into later at length. Notably, other renditions of the attack by Mara's army also include both male and female figures sporting the crossed *channavira*, including a relief in Ajanta Cave 26 known as the 'Temptation of Mara' where two male figures to the left of the Buddha appear to wear it, as well as multiple temptress female figures on the right (Fig. 8). Interestingly, as in Sanchi, not all of Mara's army figures bear the chain, they are distinguished

35 Schumaker, Mark. <https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/nio.shtml>

36 Mankodi, Kirit.L. "The Case for Devata Mahakoka from Bharhut". *CSMVS JOURNAL* 16_06_2016. https://www.academia.edu/26741625/The_Case_for_Devata_Mahakoka_from_Bharhut



Figure 8: Ajanta Cave Temptation of Mara with Figures with Channavira. Edited.

by their features and some bear the chain. In one instance, found from 2nd or 3rd century Gandhara, Mara is himself wearing the *channavira* and poised next to the *vajrapani* (Fig. 9). The *channavira* is found in Begram (modern-day Afghanistan) from the 1st-2nd century CE, worn by a woman thought to be a river goddess.³⁷ It is also seen on two female figures retrieved from Sirkap, in modern-day Pakistan, dating to the same time, who are identified as fertility goddesses because of the presence of the *channavira*, indicating an association with fertility.³⁸ Benjamin Rowland, in the understanding that all human representation in Buddhist art is symbolic, also identifies the *channavira* as a symbol of fertility often used in *yaksha* and *yakshini* and goes on to elaborate on the role of such adornments in terms of the demonstrating Buddhist religious concepts:

Certain attributes of fertility already recognized in the prehistoric

37 Ollivier, Thierry. Musée Guimet. Text by Fred Hiebert. National Geographic Society. <https://www.cemml.colostate.edu/cultural/09476/images/afgh05-023-12.jpg>

38 Dobbins, K. Walton. "Gandharan Art from Stratified Excavations." *East and West* 23, no. 3/4 (1973): 279-94. Accessed October 11, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29755889>.



Figure 9: Mara with channavira next to vajrapani. Edited

*figurines are still present in the shape of the beaded apron and the crossed scarves or channavira... the very sharpness and precision with which these jeweled ornaments are carved connote by contrast the softness of the flesh parts that are rendered in smooth, unbroken convex planes. As in the free-standing statues of the Maurya Period, the conception of the body in terms of a collection of interlocking rounded surfaces is the sculptor's device to suggest the expanding inner breath or prana, as well as the quality of flesh in stone.*³⁹

This interpretation suggests the fertility connotation of the *channavira* visually connects with demonstrations of *prana*. Might this interpretation then relate to the rounded musculature found in the later *Nio*? It is possible that the fertility significance is relevant to the *vajrapani* figure, particularly considering the

39 Rowland, Benjamin. *The Art and Architecture of India*. Second Edition. Penguin Books Ltd. 1953. Great Britain. P 49

forthcoming argument regarding the relationship of Mara (associated with Eros⁴⁰), to *vajrapani*, though the characterization of fertility would seem far from the protective nature understood of the figure. It is possible that the *Nio* is only tangentially related to the notion of fertility through an association with Mara's army? The philosophical and religious linkage between fertility, prana and the Kshatriya or warrior status might also be a point of entry into further understanding of this potential.

Mara's Om and Some Curious Stances

Many believe the popularized Gandharan *vajrapani* to derive from *yaksa*, and this perception certainly influenced later stories developed about the character. In Tang era China, stories were passed around in which the *vajrapani* convinced monks to break religious taboos such as flesh consumption, even human flesh, in order to gain physical strength. Though, rather than being seen as going against the dharma, this rule-breaking, monstrous personage was highlighted as core to the character's power and uniquely imitated by his Shaolin adherents. It was even the case that monks would mimic this behavior in hopes to attain his power, according to Shaolin researcher Meir Shahar.⁴¹ The belief that the *vajrapani* derived from a *yaksa* seems to have impacted its monstrous aesthetic, the *Nio* bears significant *yaksa*-like features: a disproportionate head, distended belly, wrathful expression, threatening posture, in some cases fangs and encasing in fire to name a few. Yet while many of the versions of the *Nio dhvarapala vajrapani* are monstrous, their branching lineage includes rather lifelike renditions, and it can't be assumed that the figures that developed did so in a linear fashion, with clear-cut or singular influences. It may be that the *Nio* derived from the narrative *vajrapani* figure, as seems to be the conclusion drawn by the tracing of the Gandharan iconography across Central Asia and China, but in the way that no human can claim to be the offspring of just one grandparent, the *Nio* may source from various figures. One linkage I propose here is that of Mara's Army, based on

40 Grunwedel, Albert. Translated by Agnes Gibson. Extended by Jas Burgess. *Buddhist Art in India*. London. 1901. p 95

41 Shahar, Meir. *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2008.

the renderings at Sanchi Stupa I.

According to Mankodi, in his study of Bharhut, "during the second century BCE, Indian iconography had not yet developed the concept of associating attributes with divinities".⁴² So, were there but one relation between the Sanchi depictions of Mara's army and the *Nio* that developed as *dvarapala*, we might discount it as the misfires of an undeveloped symbolic system, particularly when we see other figures bearing a similar ornamentation to seemingly indicate fertility. Yet there is another important feature that ties the Sanchi Mara's army to the *Nio*, that of the Om. It has been well documented that mouth position of the *Nio* guardians in which *Agyo*, baring his open mouth, complements *Ungyo*, with a closed mouth. Of the significance and usage of these sounds, Mark Schumaker states:

*Each is named after a particular cosmic sound. The open-mouth figure is called "Agyō," who is uttering the sound "ah," meaning birth. His close-mouth partner is called "Ungyō," who sounds "un" or "om," meaning death... Western audiences are most familiar with the sacred term "OM" or "ON." In Chinese, this term is sometimes written 唵. It is rendered in Chinese as ǎn, in Korean as ㅍ (or) OM (or) AM, and in Japanese as オン (or) ON. These versions of the sacred term from India remain faithful to the initial logic behind them -- the term begins with open vowel and ends with closed consonant, thus representing all possible outcomes (from alpha to omega, open to closed, birth to death).*⁴³

Sanchi Stupa contains the earliest dated representations of Mara's Army, with much attention paid by the sculptors to create animated and expressive figures, described as "a group of grimacing, thick-featured men, whose grotesque physiognomies contrast with their elaborate head-dresses and ornament" (Figure 10.1).⁴⁴ In many of the later depictions of Mara, the most outstanding features are of the tempting daughters being offered to the

42 Mankodi, Kirit.L. "The Case for Devata Mahakoka from Bharhut". CSMVS JOURNAL 16_06_2016. https://www.academia.edu/26741625/The_Case_for_Devata_Mahakoka_from_Bharhut. P 7

43 Mark Schumaker. 1995-2015. <https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/nio.shtml> last edited Last Update Jan. 14, 2015.

44 Malandra, Geri Hockfield. "Māra's Army: Text and Image in Early Indian Art". *East and West*, December 1981, Vol. 31, No. 1/4 (December 1981), pp. 121-130. Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO). P 122 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29756586>

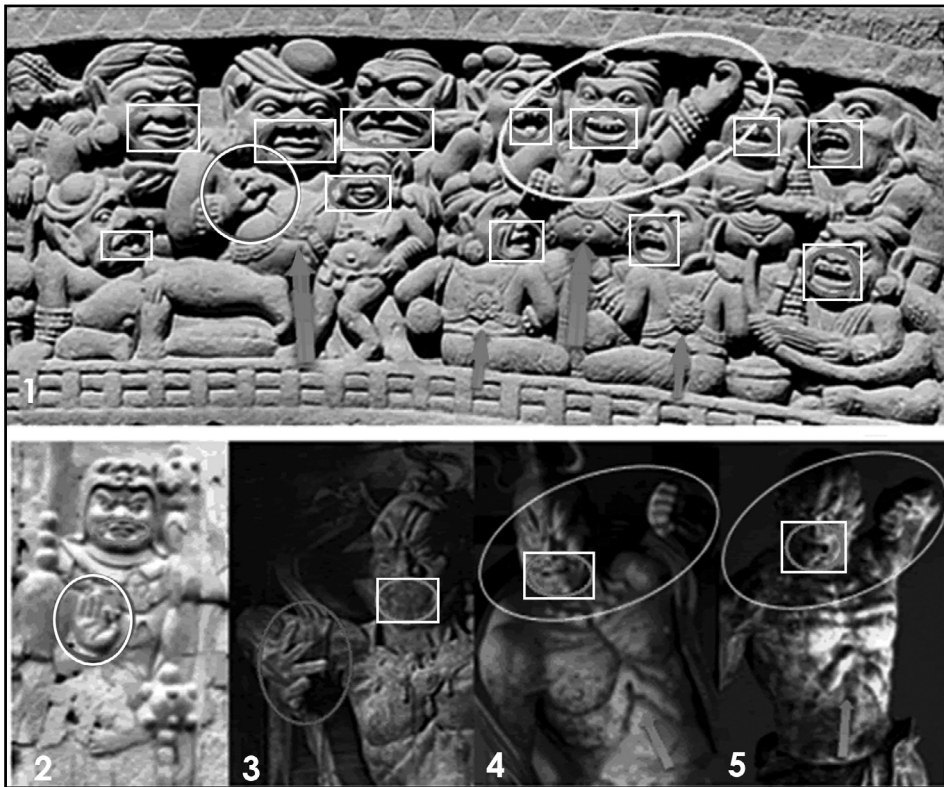


Figure 10.1- 10.5: Mara's Army Om and Hand Gestures at Sanchi Stupa 1, Edited.

Buddha, or of the animal-headed monsters armed and attacking. As Malandra points out, this earliest relief focuses almost entirely on the human figures rather than weapons, or animalistic features.⁴⁵ The figures, facing we can note the figures on the left have closed mouths while the figures on the right have open mouths. The majority of the left-side figures with closed mouths are facing rightward, much like *Ungyo*, and the majority of the right-side figures with open mouths are facing leftwards, much like *Agyo*.

There are two figures whose posture we can particularly focus on, the two whose hands are emphasized. The largest figure on the left with the closed mouth has a palm-facing outward with fingers pressed together gesture (shown in rectangles). The standing figure, third from the right on the top

row, with an open mouth and bared teeth, has a palm facing to the side and the right arm raised (shown in circles). While not all of the figures are wearing *channavira*, these two do, as well as the two figures facing backwards whose positioning reveals that the back of the chain has an identical floral clasp to the front. The two seated figures likewise have a closed mouth on the left and an open mouth on the right and seem to be complimentary of each other. The mudra with the outward facing palm and first digit touching the thumb, held by the large figure on the left corresponds to a mudra held by a closed mouth *dvarapala* figure in Maijishan, and again can be seen in the Todai-ji *Ungyo*, indicating that the particular mudra has been associated with *vjarapani* figures along the route of transmission. The positioning of the standing figure on the right's hands will be recognizable to anyone familiar with the *Nio* or similar dieties like *Shukongoshin* in Japan.

The association of the *vajrapani* to Mara through its role of Indra has been suggested by Grunwedel on the basis of the figures Mara and *vajrapani* uniquely doubling in certain narrative panels and due to the presence of a Gandharan relief of Lahore presumed to depict Mara's army in which "The clubs and peculiar fold of the sleeve are purely Greek; indeed, were it not for the fangs and the demoniacal features, one would be reminded of a Hercules."⁴⁶ Another relief of Gandhara reveals Mara's army to have weapons such as the trident, full beards and clothing clearly echoing Herculean Greek figures. (Fig. 12) In his analysis, Grunwedel continues to suggest that the *vajrapani* split into two figures, one, a bodhisattva, and another, the remnant of Indra, a yaksa that fell in stature.⁴⁷ This doesn't seem consistent with the continued evolution of the *dhvarapala vajrapani* who increased in significance over time, nor does the *vajrapani* aesthetic seem to emerge from Mara himself, but rather to take on certain characteristics of he or his demon army. In multiple examples, Mara and *Vajrapani* are pictured in the same relief, indicating they must be separate entities. *Channavira* can be found in multiple depictions of the assault on Mara from as late as the 8th century Burobudor Stupa in Indonesia where Mara as an archer sports a *channavira*, indicating the *channavira* association wasn't transferred but

⁴⁶ Grunwedel, Albert. Translated by Agnes Gibson. Extended by Jas Burgess. *Buddhist Art in India*. London. 1901.p 93-95

⁴⁷ Ibid p 99-100

⁴⁵ Ibid p 123



Figure 12: Gandharan Assault on Mara with Greek Figures. Edited.

Figure 11: Lahore Gandhara Mara's Army with Herculean Symbolism

shared.⁴⁸ The similarities between *Nio* and specific outlined members of the earliest Mara's army at Sanchi outlined herein include the Om mouth positing, the symbolic presence of the *channavira* chain, the body positioning of the army group that seemingly corresponds with their mouth position, the individual body positioning and mudras of the two standout figures and the overall stylistic congruity of monstrous human figures. These complement Grunwedel's findings regarding the relief of Lahore. Given that the *vajrapani* does seem to split into two types of figures that I have roughly categorized here as narrative and *dhvarapala*, there seems to be enough evidence to suggest further investigation of a connection or possible derivation of the *dhvarapala vajrapani* from Mara's army.

48 Fraser, Sarah E. "Borobudur. Stupa, second terrace, scenes from the life of Buddha: Temptation of Mara. Java, Indonesia, ca. 775-850 CE". Hindu and Buddhist S.E. Asia. http://buddhist-art.arthistory.northwestern.edu/arthisory_240/F1040/F-1040-080.JPG

Conclusions

Much is left to be explained about what may be one of the most culturally syncretic figures in Mahayana Buddhism, seeming to adopt by its far eastern manifestation rounded facial and body characteristics of Chinese art, exaggerated musculature of Indo-Greek Herakles, ornamentation of Persian arts, the Hindu *vajra* and protective role symbolism. This research reveals a few possible connections for further study. With regards to the role of the *vajrapani* in defining religious and ruler relationships, I attempted to demonstrate a preliminary connection due to the adaptation to royal aesthetics and to draw attention to the *vajrapani* similarity with a previous *dhvarapala* king, the Bharhut *yavana*. Secondly, by identifying the *channavira* that is found in many examples of the *vajrapani*, showing how the symbolism remains relevant to the different manifestations of *dhvarapala vajrapani* including *Nio* and suggesting that even where the chain is absent, the abnormal musculature might indicate an intentional physical integration of the *channavira*, given the absence of the odd abnormal musculature when the *channavira* again becomes present. Lastly, the *channavira*, in conjunction with the well-known 'Om' mouth positioning of the Agyo and Ungyo, the mudra and arm positioning, and the relative body positioning of the Mara's Army in their earliest known depiction in Sanchi Stupa I. The next step is to seek substantiation of the connection to Mara's army through Buddhist literature, to search for the transmission of connection between Kshatriya and Brahmin through recorded ritual and the morphing of the weapon that defines their relationship. Finally, to search for the connection that led to the convergence of the monstrous and the king. One last consideration that ties our latter two topics of inquiry herein together is that, if the connection of the *vajrapani* and, thus *Nio*, with Mara is established, the aforementioned fertility symbolism of the *channavira* might then be analyzed in terms of Mara's connection with the Greek god Eros. Perhaps the unusual, *channavira*-shaped musculature of the *Nio* is a last trace of the ancient, deified embodiment of love, Eros, through its association with the demonic temptations of Buddha's main opposition, Mara, ultimately embodied through the evolution of an iconic martial king.

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