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Early Buddhism and Gandhara

Buddha Śākyamuni, who probably died, or entered *parinirvāṇa*, at around 380 B.C.E., was born in the border region between India and Nepal where he also grew up. He lived and taught in a relatively small area in central North India.¹ This primary area of influence is defined by the main events in his life: Lumbinī, the place of his birth, in the north, Bodhgāya, the place of his Awakening, in the south, Sārnāth, the place of his first sermon, in the west, and Kuśinagara, the place of his death, in the east

(cf. map 1, p. 31). These are all places in the central Ganges valley in Northern India, a region that would play an important role in the history of South Asia again and again.

Apparently, Buddhism had spread relatively far in a short amount of time, and about 100 years after the Buddha's death, the Maurya king Aśoka was an especially effective catalyst for its propagation. In later Buddhist legends, this is honoured and exalted accordingly. Thus, Aśoka had

Fig. 1 Stupa 1 at Sanchi, whose core dates back to the time of Asoka



been responsible for opening most of the nine stupas originally erected after the Buddha's death in the core regions of Buddhism and spreading their relics even further (cf. Kuwayama, pp. 170ff.). Early Buddhism then originally manifests itself materially in the stupa, which first of all stands for a specific Buddha – or another Buddhist saint – whose relics were deposited in its interior.

The spread of the original relics by Aśoka not only ascertains the authenticity of the monastery of Sanchi (fig. 1), located further south in the region of Vidiśa, but also triggers the erection of the first Buddhist monuments in the cultural region of Gandhara. Archaeologically, the core structures of the stupas of Taxila and Butkara also date back to the 3rd century B.C.E., if not specifically to the period of Aśoka (cf. Kuwayama, pp. 170ff.). Beyond the remains of the original monuments that had been repeatedly excavated and enlarged, we initially do not find further material evidence about Buddhist activities in the region (cf. Callieri, pp. 58ff.). According to more recent dating of Buddhist monuments in the South Asian region, this is not at all surprising.

Indeed, Buddhism in its architectural and art historical extent only becomes tangible at around the end of the 2nd century, and at that point, more or less simultaneously through the stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi and some cave complexes to the east of Mumbai, of which Bhaja (Kuwayama, p. 171, fig. 1) and Pithalkora offers the most interesting group. Earlier Buddhist monuments had been erected in perishable materials and have, as the early South Asian cities documented in literature, left only scarce archaeological traces.

In Sanchi, the smaller, more remote Stupa 2 today represents the earliest stage, and it is notable that in the decoration of its railing (*vedikā*), we do not find much Buddhism-specific content at all. Instead, the main subject of the decoration are symbols generally connected with fertility, good luck, and prosperity (fig. 2). The railing posts of Stupa 2, which were created slightly later, and the railing of Bharhut, then, not only show specific symbols related to Buddhism, but also Buddhist legends, where stories from the different previous lives of the Buddha (the so-called *Jātaka*) were more popular than those from the Buddha's life proper. It is also notable that the Buddha in the depictions of his last life is not shown figurally, but only through objects symbolising his presence, where it is often not clear whether these refer to the present or past presence of the Buddha.

As an example, the depiction of the Awakening on a railing post of the Stupa of Bharhut will be detailed (fig. 3). The image spread over three panels combines two essential levels of meaning and demonstrates the complexity of this type of depiction. Actually, what we see is a Tree of Awakening around which a temple has been erected, worshipped by flying genies and humans. The place of Awakening is represented by the altar covered in flowers with people kneeling in front of it. The railing below marks the sacred place but is also used as a scene divider and, as such, is being repeated. The division between the two frames above is disrupted by the elephant pillar which was probably placed in the immediate vicinity of the temple, but outside the sanctuary proper. At its base, a nature genie (*yakṣa*) is standing, carrying a bowl of offerings on its head, such as was in reality placed in front of the railing of this type of sanctu-



Fig. 2 Part of a railing surrounding stupa 2 of Sanchi; photograph C. Luczanits 1998 31, 20 (WHAU)

ary.² In the opposite corner of the image, a figure is crouching, scratching the earth with a stick. Apart from that, the middle frame is filled with two rows of men worshipping the sanctuary, while the bottom frame shows a group of women dancing and making music. We do not find any of the characteristics of the Awakening known from later depictions (cf. cat. no. 162). Here, the place of Awakening is shown in the manner known to the sculptors of Bharhut in the late 2nd century. We can only conclude that this is also a depiction of the Awakening itself by studying the inscriptions and the image of a lamenting Māra in the middle panel. The rows of worshipping men surrounding the sanctuary are seen as four different groups of gods, and the dancing women are interpreted as heavenly *apsaras*. While the images themselves thus refer to the worshipping of the place at the time of Bharhut, relate the inscriptions to the time of the Buddha's Awakening.

The first Indian stupas also show how early Buddhism adapted to the popular belief in ambivalent nature genies (cf. cat. nos. 250, 251). It is probably no coincidence that the depiction of the worshipping of the tree under which a past Buddha awakened resembles the traditional worshipping of a *yakṣa* (fig. 4),³ and on the posts at Bharhut, nature genies (*yakṣa* and *nāga*) and other mythical creatures are shown worshipping the stupa, marking them as believers of Buddhism (cf. Quagliotti, pp. 126ff.).

The most important topic of early Buddhist monuments, though, are the seven Buddhas of the past who are depicted in the shape of their Trees of Awakening – as every Buddha awakened under a different tree –, or as stupas. This group that, besides Śākyamuni, also includes his six predecessors can be seen as the main topic of the famous gates (*torāṇa*) of Sanchi 1, which were probably created at around the beginning of the Common Era (fig. 5).

In the narrative scenes of Sanchi 1, the symbolic character of the objects representing the Buddha is even more pronounced. It is this type of early narrative depiction that has been attested at Gandhara in isolated



Fig. 3 Railing post with the Awakening of the Buddha, Stupa of Bharhut; after Coomaraswamy, 1956: plate VIII.

cases as well. Cat. no. 45 shows the Buddha accompanied by the traditional Brahmanical gods Brahmā und Indra, descending from the Heaven of the 33 Gods. The Buddha's presence here is illustrated by the foot print on the lowest step and the tree on the middle stairway.

On the gates of Sanchi 1, we also find, for the first time, the depiction of an emblematic Buddha body, i.e. a body of the Buddha assembled from symbols (fig. 6).⁴ On a post of the North Gate, this body consists of the so-called Omega symbol, whose lower circle also symbolises the Wheel of Buddhist teachings; a post with floral decoration whose fruit consists of jewellery, and the foot prints. This idea of depicting the Buddha was continued in South-Indian Buddhist art for several centuries. In the kingdom

Fig. 4 Worshipping the tree under which the Buddha Kāśyapa Awakened; Bharhut, Indian Museum, Calcutta 295; photograph C. Luczanits 1995 (WHAV)



of the Kushan kings, instead, the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha was developed.

By the beginning of the Common Era, Buddhism in Gandhara had turned into a mass movement. Dateable evidence for this are the inscribed reliquaries of the Apraca and Odi rulers, which not only attest to the erection of new stupas in the region but also reveal much about the religious background. The vase-shaped reliquary in Berlin, donated in the year 77 A.D. (i.e. 21 C.E.) by the Kshatrapa Śātruleka under the Apraca king Vijayamitra, documents the erection of a new stupa (cf. cat. no. 44). Another rather extensive inscription of the Odi King Senavarma, a contemporary of Kujula Kadphises, not only provides some insight into the religious practice of noble lay believers, but also into the kind of Buddhism they represented. Following a comprehensive glorification of the Buddha Śākyamuni, he also praises, besides the *pratyekabuddha*, Arhats and Listeners, Brahmā, Indra, the four Great Kings, 28 *yakṣa* generals, and Hārītī with retainers.⁵ This fascinating document puts the Stupa of Senavarma, and thus the early official Buddhism in 1st century Gandhara, in direct continuity to Bharhut and Sanchi. On the other hand, an inscription of the female lay follower Uttarā, again attributed to the Apraca kingdom, already points into a new direction by honouring “all Buddhas of the Past and Future”.⁶ Thus, when the Kushans took over power in this region, they discovered an already flourishing Buddhism. Indeed, under the Kushan Kings, fundamental changes in the conception of Buddhahood manifest themselves, whose roots can be traced to the two centuries around the beginning of the Common Era. Traditionally, the newly created cult image of the Buddha is especially revered, but its development must be seen in a larger context.⁷ Now, a considerably larger number of past Buddhas was assumed, where the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, the first Buddha, who prophesied (*vyākāroti*) Śākyamuni his future Buddhahood, occupies a special position.⁸ This direct connection of Buddha Śākyamuni with his far-away predecessor, which provides the basis for, e.g., the Buddha biography in the *Nidhanakathā*, puts the previous lives of the Buddha into a series and postulates a systematic spiritual development of the Bodhisattva towards Buddhahood, through which the Bodhisattva concept gains in importance. In Gandhara, the depiction of the Buddha’s biography often starts with this original oath before Dīpaṃkara (fig. 7 and cat. no. 145), with which the spiritual development that had preceded the last life becomes an integral part of the biography.⁹ The series of the seven past Buddhas retained a certain relevance in Gandhara, as it was connected with the Bodhisattva and future Buddha Maitreya (cat. no. 188).

The *Mahāvastu* takes a step further in arranging past and future Buddhas in an endless chain of oath and prophecy and turning the prophecy of a future Buddha into a Buddha’s duty. Thus, the series of Buddhas is also endlessly continued into the future, a concept that was then implemented in the *Bhadrakalpikasūtra*, the “Sutra of the Fortunate Aeon”. The *Mahāvastu* also attests to the continuing exaltation or deification of the Buddha, which has already to be assumed of the first Buddha images. A good example would be the so-called “Bala Bodhisattva” from the Kushan year 4 (i.e. 131 C. E.), who also has cosmological relevance due to the zodiac symbols depicted on his honour umbrella (fig. 8).¹⁰ The larger-than-life size of the sculpture can be seen as another sign for his deification, but

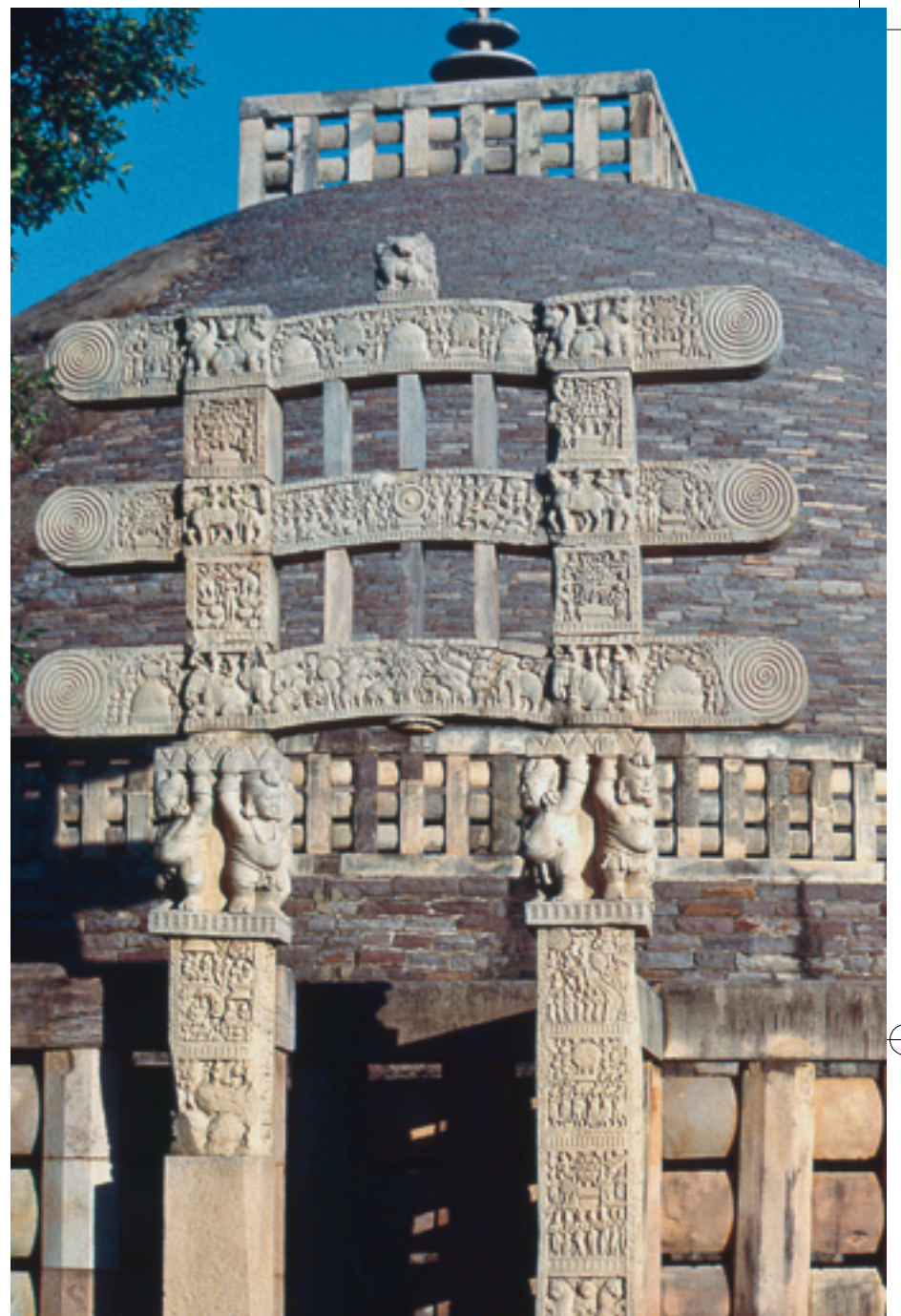


Fig. 5 West gate of Stupa 1, Sanchi, with the seven Buddhas of the past in the shape of trees and stupas on the top cross beam; photograph C. Luczaniits 1998 28, 43 (WHAU)

Buddhas were assigned different body heights in the different periods as well, which art might also allude to.

Kanishka I already ruled over large areas of the Ganges valley at the beginning of his reign in 127 C.E., and thus also over the core area of Buddhism. The Vidiśa region with Sanchi was probably also already part of the Kushan Kingdom, as especially the early sculptures from the Mathura school found in Sanchi show. Among these depictions, there is an inscribed sculpture of the Bodhisattva Śākyamuni commemorating his first



Fig. 6 Emblematic body of the Buddha, North Gate, Stupa 1, Sanchi; photograph AIIIS (ar_040168)

meditation under the rose-apple tree,¹¹ a topic also found in Gandharan art (cf. p. 25, fig. 8). Thus, Mathura possessed a prospering art school that played an important role for the development of iconic cult figures sculpted in stone and, accordingly, the image of the Buddha.

Mathura was also a centre of Brahmanism and the early Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa- (Viṣṇu-) cult. Indeed, the development of the Buddhist cult image in the Mathura school is the result of profound changes in the Indian idea of deities, which is expressed, e.g., in the creation and use of permanent cult images of high gods. The iconographic parallels of the Mathura Buddhas in relation to other sculptures of gods as well as the right hand that is held aloft with the palm turned inwards that is found in all early Mathura icons (cat. nos. 130 and 113) point to shared foundations. The Mathura Buddha type (cat. no. 130) has rightly been called a ruler figure, with his rigid posture, the fist of the right hand placed on the leg, and his lion throne.¹² On the basis of numerous dated inscriptions, the development of the Mathura type is comparatively easy to trace.¹³

While the basic idea of a Buddhist cult image is probably based on the same idea in Gandhara and Mathura, the finally realised cult images, then, are surprisingly different. The early Gandharan Buddha, as far as can be ascertained due to the scarcity of chronological points of reference, seems closer to the Mathura type. Usually, a disproportionally high hair knot held by a distinct band, wide-open eyes, and the moustache are seen as characteristics of early Buddha depictions (cat. nos. 46, 48), especially as some of these characteristics are typical for objects from the Parthian rule (cat. nos. 47, 63). Early cult images of the Buddha are mostly assigned to Śākyamuni, but it cannot be ruled out that other past Buddhas might have been depicted as well.¹⁴

In the early reliefs, the Buddha is sitting under a tree, meditating, and is worshipped by Brahmā Sahāmpati and Śakra, the Lord of the Gods (Cat. nos. 45 and 183).¹⁵ Brahmā occupies the more prominent position to the Buddha's right, i.e. to the left of the observer. The common depiction of these Brahmanical gods points to a conservative Brahmanic society in Gandhara at the time of the emergence of Buddhism, especially if compared to Mathura. For Swat, research has been able, in the meantime, to work out a detailed chronology of the early art and a regional succession of styles (cf. Filigenzi, pp. 197ff.).

The development of the cult image of the Bodhisattva is almost contemporaneous to that of the Buddha.¹⁶ Here, depictions of the future Buddha Maitreya are assigned a special role in early Gandharan art (cf. Luczanits, pp. 249ff.). The Bodhisattva depictions in the two schools of art in the Kushan Kingdom, i.e. Mathura and Gandhara, are quite different as well, where the Gandhara Bodhisattvas show such dominant regional characteristics that they are often assumed to be portraits of local princes.

Neither these essential innovations in Buddhism, which are, at first, only relevant in the Kushan Kingdom, nor the fragments of Gandharī texts that have been identified in the last few years (and whose texts are attributed to Mahāyāna Buddhism) allow us to assign these changes to Mahāyāna Buddhism. They pave the way, though, for the development that is also being visually interpreted in late Gandharan art (cf. Rhi, pp. 242ff.).

Notes

- ¹ The date given follows the “shorter chronology” favoured in current research, which puts the death of the Buddha at c. 100 years before Aśoka (cf. especially Bechert 1991 and Bechert 1997).
- ² A sculpture of such a yakṣa is attested for Pithalkora and is today kept at the National Museum, New Delhi.
- ³ Cf. especially Lüders 1941, pp. 21–31.
- ⁴ This designation has been adopted after Dehejia 1997.
- ⁵ Salomon 1986.
- ⁶ Salomon 1988, newly discussed in Salomon 2003, pp. 54–57, fig. 20–30.
- ⁷ We cannot address the issue of an, ultimately unsuccessful, attempt of a Buddha depiction here that was put on a commemorative coin dated to the middle of the 1st century B.C.E. and found among the treasures of the tombs of Tillya Tepe (cf., e.g., Taddei 1995, p. 43 and Cambon 2007, cat. no. 119).
- ⁸ In the career of a Bodhisattva, this prophecy marks the threshold from the eighth to the ninth stage (*bhūmi*); Jones 1949, p. 1,2.
- ⁹ Taddei 2003.
- ¹⁰ Verardi 1985.
- ¹¹ This has been dated to the Kushan year 28, Willis 1999 (= AIIS 73.90; Sanchi Museum Inv. No. A82); a pedestal from the year 22 found at Sanchi shows a Buddha flanked by Kushan donors (= AIIS 228.58; Sanchi Museum Inv. No. 2785/83).
- ¹² Härtel 1985.
- ¹³ E.g. Czuma 1985 and Härtel 1995.
- ¹⁴ Iconographically, the different Buddhas are not yet distinguishable at that time. In Jaulian, two of the Buddha figures of Stupa D1 were identified as representations of Buddha Kaśyapa (Konow 1929, p. 96–97; Marshall 1951, p. 374–75).
- ¹⁵ Cf. the inscription of the Senavarma Reliquary in Salomon 1986, p. 271.
- ¹⁶ We can see in the Mathura inscriptions just how close these parallels were, in which the earliest Buddha images are designated Bodhisattva.

Select Bibliography

Bechert 1991; Bechert 1997; Cambon 2007; Coomaraswamy 1956; Czuma 1985; Dehejia 1997; Härtel 1985; Härtel 1995; Jones 1949–1956; Konow 1929; Lüders 1941; Marshall 1951; Salomon 1986, pp. 261–93; Salomon 1988, pp. 169–77; Salomon 2003, pp. 39–69; Taddei 1995; Taddei 2003 (1999); Verardi 1985, pp. 67–101; Willis 1999/2000, pp. 245–51.



Fig. 7 Dīpa-kara-Jātaka, Central Museum, Lahore, Inv. Nr. 1277; photograph C. Luczanits 2007 D5347



Fig. 8 Depiction of the Buddha from the Kushan year 4 with *axis mundi* and umbrella, Sarnath Museum; photograph by Madho Ram Prasad, c. 1907; original dimensions 14.8 x 20.5 cm, silver gelatine print, silky lustre; collection P. & G. Bautze