

INTERTWINED RELIGIOUS CULTURES: BUDDHISM, AND HINDUISM

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BODHISATTVA BHAISHAJYARAJA, "THE HEALING KING"

Swat Kingdom (present-day Swat District, Pakistan)

8th–9th century

SUMMARY

The valleys of what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan were home to thriving Buddhist kingdoms, where ancient Indian, Western, and Central Asian civilizations met. Archaeologist Luca Maria Olivieri and art historian Anna Filigenzi discuss a bronze statue of the Healing King, which reflects the mixed iconography of Hindu and Buddhist Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. Adorned with plants and gems, the bodhisattva's main attribute, a bowl with healing fruit, denotes his medicinal powers.

The Swat region, a valley at the foot of the Karakorum Mountain Range in Pakistan, is known for its special place in the sacred geography of Buddhism. Some episodes of the Buddha's previous lives took place there, and Swat (ancient Uddiyana) is believed to be the birthplace of Padmasambhava, the revered teacher to whom the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet is attributed. In the first millennium CE, the landscape of Swat housed a tight network of Buddhist monasteries and monuments, which greatly contributed to the doctrinal and visual culture of Buddhism. Its strategic position between China, Central Asia, and India made Swat a prominent zone of transit and pilgrimage. Swat was visited by Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian, Song Yun, and Xuanzang in the fifth to seventh century, and even later, when Buddhism was no longer practiced there, by Tibetan pilgrims from the thirteenth to the early twentieth century. It is therefore not surprising that many portable objects, including small votive bronzes and manuscripts, have left Swat, brought home by pilgrims, and lately rediscovered in Tibet and China, as well as in Western collections.

Swat was an important artistic center of the Buddhist art of Gandhara, which can be broadly dated between the first and the fourth century. At the end of the seventh century, when the region was disputed among the rulers of Kabul (Turki Shahi and then Hindu Shahi), the Tibetans, and the Chinese imperial forces,¹ it began experiencing a new artistic phase.² This is evidenced by sophisticated rock sculptures



incipient vajrayana, the esoteric form of Buddhism that seems to have had in Swat one of its major centers of elaboration.



Fig. 2. Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara/Padmapani; Arabkhanchina; Swat Kingdom (present-day Swat District, Pakistan); 7th–8th century; photograph courtesy ISMEO Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan



Moreover, these rock sculptures show interesting manifestations of intertwining between Buddhist and Hindu iconographies. A cognate production of this art, sharing the same visual forms, is represented by a class of portable bronze statues, among which this bronze is possibly one of the most magnificent examples.

This bronze sculpture (fig. 1), like all contemporary productions, is evidence of an artistically lively period during which strong ideological impulses started coalescing into new visual models. The bronze probably pictures Bhaishajyaraja, the Healing King or Healing Bodhisattva to whom several early Mahayana scriptures, including the *Lotus Sutra*, make allusion.

A BUDDHIST TRIAD

The bronze represents a haloed sitting bodhisattva flanked by auxiliary figures. It belongs to a class of hollow bronze sculptures made by the lost-wax method.³ It consists of two parts—made separately using different techniques—that can be disassembled for ease of transport. The main part is the hollow central statuette and its throne, in the round, with a low-relief halo frame fixed to the back by means of two removable pins.

THE CENTRAL BODHISATTVA

The bodhisattva, his feet resting on an open lotus with one leg pendent (*ardhaparyankaasana*), is seated on a throne in the form of a double lotus on a rock-shaped base. The right hand is in boon-granting pose (*varada mudra*), while the left hand holds a stem with three inflorescences; the most visible one, with reversed and upturned petals, bears a bowl.

The bodhisattva, adorned with bangles, necklace, armlets, and a tripartite jeweled tiara, tied with ribbons knotted at either side, wears a long skirt (*paridhana*) held by a girdle with a central clasp in the form of a rosette. A narrow scarf (*uttariya*) passes behind his waist and over the crooks of his elbows. His torso is nude, with a soft rendering of the anatomy.

The headdresses worn by bodhisattvas usually contain elements that are distinctive of specific personalities, such as the buddha effigy for Avalokiteshvara and the miniature stupa for Maitreya. Here, the tiara features a central spherical jewel clasped by two arched lobes, and pointed crests at the sides, with a central motif



therapeutic role, for they are believed to be sources of radiations capable of adjusting the inner light of the subtle body.











THE HALO FRAME

The frame, which accommodates the ancillary figures, seen from the front features two open shrines at the sides (housing the two attendant bodhisattvas), composed of trilobed arches resting on pillars. On the top of each arch is a sun/moon symbol, with fluttering ribbons. The upper part of the halo frame constitutes the nimbus of the central bodhisattva. It is formed of three oval concentric sections. The central section presents an open vegetal scroll running clockwise with seven buddhas surrounded by body halos, in meditation pose, with the monastic overrobe, or mantle, covering hands and feet. The outer part shows pointed flames converging upward. A miniature stupa at top center has a finial's tip in the shape of a sun/moon emblem, from which two ribbons flutter outward.

ATTENDING BODHISATTVAS

The two symmetrical standing bodhisattvas under arches at the sides are characterized by some divergent details. The figure on the right wears a short skirt (dhoti) and holds in his left hand the stem of what looks like a lotus flower. He also displays the usual bodhisattvas' ornaments and a tripartite tiara decorated with solar symbols: the central jeweled crest features a vertically open lotus flower at the top, while the lateral crests are seemingly composed of disks within crescents. The figure on the left wears a long skirt (*paridhana*) and the typical ornaments, with the remarkable exception of the short necklace, made of cowrie shells (*Cypraea moneta*), an emblem of fertility also connected with water and the moon. His tripartite tiara also contains lunar allusions, evident in a half lotus open vertically in the central crest and half flowers within crescents at the sides.

Two small nearly frontal busts spring from the base of the bodhisattva's nimbus. Slightly inclined, they look toward the central figure. The pair's role as attendants is explicitly indicated by the fly whisk (*chamara*) they hold in their right hands. Surprisingly, though, the figure to the left has the appearance of a buddha, with right shoulder uncovered and (perhaps) an attribute in his left hand; the figure on the right holds an upright vajra (thunderbolt) in his left palm.

THE FIGURES ON THE BASE



On either side of the rock kneel two simplified figurines of worshippers, possibly the donors. They are probably a male-female couple. Their ornaments and headdresses, though of simplified form, are revelatory of their high rank.⁴

THE INTERPRETATION

The bronze probably pictures Bhaishajyaraja, the Healing King or Healing Bodhisattva. The vegetal stem with three inflorescences (not be confused with the single-flower lotus) serves as the physical/mystical support of what we may consider to be the bodhisattva's main attribute, that is, a bowl. The tripartite stem might well represent the flowering branch (often of a myrobalan, highly extolled by ancient Indian physicians for its medicinal virtues) carried by Bhaishajyaraja. It is worth noting, indeed, that the artist represents the plant while having in mind the model of the lotus, which he was evidently more familiar with.

The combination of the bowl, the healing plant, and the gem on the headdress strongly evokes the notion of medicine, with which Buddhism engaged from its earliest days, being involved with the alleviation, prevention, and eradication of all suffering. The idea of the healing dharma is embedded in many Buddhist texts, which also exemplify the multilayered historical processes of absorbing and integrating medical knowledge, practices, orientations, and rituals into a "Buddhist path" to healing.

The emergence in the iconography of well-defined Buddhist healing figures was partly due to competitive interaction with other religious systems. Similarities with Vishnu have been noted by scholars. Vishnu's connection with physical and spiritual health care, naturally embedded in his role as Preserver, is expressed by the miraculous gem (*kaustubha*) that Vishnu bears on his chest and is believed to emit healing light. Likewise, our bodhisattva is given a cosmic dimension, expressed both by the flaming halo with the Seven Buddhas and by the combined sun disk/crescent moon repeated on the top of the halo, on the top of the side arches, and in the crowns of the two side bodhisattvas. The presence of the boars and lion inside the rocky throne's recess further stresses the analogy with Vishnu's cosmic nature. The different crowns of the two ancillary bodhisattvas are suggestive of their respective identities, Suryaprabha (the sun, to the right side) and Chandraprabha (the moon, to the left side), two characters that often accompany Bhaishajyaraja.



feature is the Vishnuite temple at Barikot, dating to the seventh century. The presence of this and other pieces of archaeological and art historical evidence testify to the penetration of Hinduism into a stronghold of Buddhism such as Swat (ancient Uddiyana), supported by the powerful Shahi patronage. Rather than producing a clash between two opposing systems, this arrangement fostered a stimulating encounter in a period of great cultural and artistic innovations. Seen together, the rock and bronze sculptures represent the most direct and unquestionable affirmation of the incipient Vajrayana, with abundant implications for the rereading and understanding of the legendary accounts of Uddiyana and Padmasambhava from a historical perspective.⁶

Brief mention should also be made of the overall appearance of this sculpture, which is transformed into a veritable portable shrine by its aureole. Whether such compositions were inspired by large-scale versions is difficult to say. Given their ready mobility, they must certainly have been inspirational models for architectural structures and decorations of the kind found in later Himalayan temples.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the piece almost certainly comes from Swat,⁷ and that its date,⁸ in view of the art of the Palola Shahi,⁹ can be no later than the eighth century.

FOOTNOTES

FURTHER READING

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A PROGRESSIVE TIBETAN ARISTOCRAT'S TRADITIONAL EQUESTRIAN EQUIPMENT

Saddle Made for Yuthok Tashi Dhondup
Derge, Kham region, southeastern Tibet
ca. 1943–1947



THE STATUARY OF DOLONNUUR, INNER MONGOLIA, AND ITS IMPACT ACROSS THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST WORLD

Vajrapani
Dolonnuur, Inner Mongolia
mid-18th century

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