

Some Reflections on the Formation of the Buddha Image

The process of formation of the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha eventually led to a model capable of imposing itself throughout the whole Buddhist world. The choices made during this process were not shared by all the geographical areas involved - it is now clear that the so-called 'kapardin' type was opposed for some time to the Gandharan type. - An abstract of the keynote speech by Professor Maurizio Taddei at the South Asian Archaeology Conference, Leiden, July 5, 1999



The well-known gold token from Tilyatepe (50 BC-AD 50) is a clear synthesis of the iconographical problems the Buddhists had to face in the years which saw the appearance of the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha - i.e., the princely vs. the spiritual aspect. Such contrapositions cannot be explained in merely doctrinal terms. Professor Hartel (1985, 1996) wrote that the so-called kapardin Buddha/Bodhisattva images from Mathura embody the Master, in clear contrast to the meditative Gandharan Buddha, as a royal figure, i.e. as a vision of the Mahapurusa, in which dwell the essential powers of a Cakravartin as well as those of a Buddha. It appears that the kapardin Buddha is an attempt to connect the ruler to the Buddha closely. Nothing really new in itself, though the magnitude of this ideological setting is evidenced by various concomitant circumstances, underscored by Hartel himself.

Quite recently, Vishakha Desai (1997) observed that the sexuality of male figures in Indian art is consistently under-emphasised, or not mentioned at all in art-historical essays, due to the traditional male dominance of scholarship. In particular she says that 'the increased focus on

the physicality of divine and semi-divine beings and on the explicit depiction of their genitalia' in Mathura Kushan iconography, including the Buddha, 'may suggest theological [...] significance that should not be overlooked'. I think we can agree with Desai when she says that these representations of the male divinity 'are directly linked with the characteristic features of a chakravartin mahapurusha, an idealised superman or ruler'. Thus the fact that the Buddha/Bodhisattva figures in Kushan Mathura show very well-articulated male genitalia, is another proof that they actually were representations of the Buddha as a king.

Even recent contributions take as a starting point the not so penetrating reflections Alfred Foucher developed on the subject at the beginning of the twentieth century. Foucher (1912) believed that the Gandharan Buddha was a real iconographical failure because he does not show the tonsure which is the characteristic of a monk, etc. What is crucial here is to underscore the fact that some of Foucher's premises are wrong. Actually it is not true that there is a contradiction between the literary lives of the Buddha and iconography - no literary text ever

stated that Siddhartha shaved his hair: they only say that he cut away his hair along with his turban (e.g., *Buddhacarita*, Johnston (ed.) 1936, pp. 88-89): *ciccheda citram mukutam sakesam*, 'he cut off his decorated headdress with the hair enclosed in it'. The artists were thus perfectly within their rights to represent the Buddha with a tuft of hair, though not with the long knotted hair which was the characteristic of the young males of high caste. The *cudachedana* is well documented in later art but it appears to be rare in Gandharan art: a new specimen is made known here.

Let us now revert to the chignon which characterises the Buddha's head. It is only too well known that the term *usnisa* designates both the turban and the cranial protuberance which is one of the Buddha's main *lakṣanas*. It is the present trend in the study of Buddhist iconography to take for certain that the *usnisa* is hair-knot which was later interpreted as a cranial protuberance, as it was suggested seventy years ago by A.K. Coomaraswamy and J.N. Banerjea. In recent years, other scholars (Spagnoli, 1995;



Krishan 1996) accepted this old view without any further discussion. This interpretation may be true when we deal with the Mathura *kapardin* Buddhas - it is not true in Gandhara. My point is that there are some Gandharan Buddhas which unmistakably show that their hair conceals a cranial protuberance. I believe that what was suggested by Stella Kramrisch in the thirties should still be kept in mind and meditated upon (Kramrisch 1935).

One could refer to many examples. I prefer to limit myself to a few fairly early ones whose interpretation is beyond any possible doubt: from Butkara I (Swat), Taxila, etc. I would also include in the list, the head of the fasting Siddhartha in Lahore Museum. This induces me to suggest that the presence of the *usnisa* as a protuberance in Gandharan art as opposed to the elsewhere predominant *kaparda* type is a confirmation of the fact that Gandhara looked at the Buddha as to an accomplished yogin, much more than a *cakravartin* (cf. Klimburg-Salter & Taddei 1991).

A few words should be added concerning the alleged Greek derivation of the Gandharan Buddha. In a recent article, M. Spagnoli (1995) has resumed the line of reasoning of Foucher concerning this problem and tried to connect Apollo's hair-do with the iconography of the Gandharan Buddha. Needless to say, she could not really point to any correspondence between Apollo's topknot and the Buddha's *usnisa*, rather she suggested that there may be some connection between Apollo's hair-do and Maitreya's loop-shaped top-knot. But Maitreya, from the viewpoint of iconography, is not the Buddha.

It thus appears that Mathura first depicted the Lord in a princely aspect, as a 'Bodhisattva': at the same time Gandhara was developing another type of icon, the meditative monk-like Buddha. Mathura appears to have laid stress on the Bodhisattva as a symbol of dominance,

Gandhara on the Buddha as a model for mankind.

We might say that Mathura remained faithful to the old gods, and fashioned the Tathagata, keeping them in mind, though Kushan Mathura introduced a significant novelty, namely the depiction of the male genitalia, which were not visible in most of the pre-Kushan divine images; on the other hand, Gandhara felt free to put more emphasis on the meditative aspect of the Lord.

The displayed male sex of the Mathura icons could not be accepted by a culture which saw in the Buddha a recluse who had even overcome any yogic accomplishment - from a certain point of view he could be thought of as sexless. It will be enough to look at any 'Gupta' image of the Buddha from the Mathura region for understanding to what extent the 'Gandharan' conception eventually prevailed.

What appears to be evident is that the great change in attitude towards the figure of the Tathagata is to be connected with Gandhara rather than with Mathura, and apparently involved the Mathura region and the rest of Northern India by the late Kushan or the beginning of the Gupta period. The cultural environment which produced the Kushan Bodhisattvas from Mathura could not be the same which saw the compilation of the lists of laksanas including the 'hidden sex' (a subject certainly to be discussed at length).

In conclusion, I think we have to dismiss the old contrapositions (Indian vs. Greek) and try instead to focus on the original contributions of Gandhara itself. It would be very easy to explain the ostentation of the male sex in the Buddha/Bodhisattva images - if it were a characteristic of Gandhara - on the basis of the Hellenistic tradition of divine and heroic male nakedness. But 'Hellenising' Gandhara chose

the less 'Hellenistic' solution - and it was a successful choice.

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