

## CHAPTER 3: THE ICONOGRAPHIC AND STYLISTIC LANGUAGE OF THE SCULPTURES

### 3.1 – The general characteristics of the iconography

As shown in the previous chapters, the overall appearance of the rock sculpture is greatly conditioned by certain peculiar factors: first, the limited iconographic repertory, and second, the general figurative concept, according to which the image is treated as an icon and displayed in its specific attributions, devoid of reference to contingent actions or situations. This latter characteristic emerges in all its simplicity with the numerous isolated images, but takes on more weighty significance in the composite reliefs – paratactic groups of figures, each enclosed within the individual self, showing no gesture or attitude expressive of communicative relations between them. Any connection with the long tradition of visual narrative appears to be totally lacking in these sculptures; indeed, with very few exceptions narrative subjects seem to have become obsolete in post-Gandharan Buddhist art in general.<sup>58</sup> The rhythm endowing the complex scenes with unity is no longer that of action, but is strictly figurative, the connection between the various subjects possibly being implicit in the scheme followed. We might in fact reasonably suppose that the more complex reliefs, whether extemporaneous creations or reproductions of schemes established by a norm, were perceived as concise iconographic indications, readily grasped at the time with the right doctrinal and cult background, but far from being evident to our eyes today.



**Fig. 14** – Late Gandharan stela from Ramora  
(courtesy Dir Museum; photo by L.M. Olivieri)

<sup>58</sup> Narrative tradition has retained a degree of vitality in the Xinjiang oases, as is demonstrated by the Shorchuk sculptures in particular. Nevertheless, these latter are to be observed from the viewpoint of a broader artistic framework that, in Central Asia, skilfully uses plastic materials, such as stucco and clay, in order to endow the sculptures with great realism and plastic vigour (suffice it to take as examples the three-dimensional compositions of Tapa Shotor and the effects produced by the combined use of full round and high relief). However, it is in the pictorial cycles (with particularly eloquent examples at Ajanta and Qizil) that the narrative genre seems to be perpetuated, while already during the late-Gandharan phases sculpture generally seems to be directed toward productions of an “iconic” nature (cf. Taddei 1999b: 84).

The general characteristics of the iconography can be interpreted more readily than its specific components. For the single iconographic elements, as indeed for the style and chronology, we find only disconnected, fragmentary comparisons scattered over a vast area that includes central-northern India, Kashmir, Afghanistan and the northern regions of Pakistan.

The production broadly definable as late-Gandharan already includes elements that can be somehow related to the subsequent artistic output represented by the rock sculptures. Nevertheless, we must also postulate an intermediate phase during which experimenting was done with new aesthetic and iconographic forms. Among the rare pieces of evidence identifying transitional forms we can include a small stela from Ramora, presently in the Dir Museum, which shows patterns of Gandharan ascendance (a scene of homage to the Buddha) already transformed by a totally different artistic sensitivity (Fig. 14). More than the stylistic and iconographic features, the use of space especially seems to anticipate concepts that we can observe on full display in the later rock sculpture. As a part of this process, outside influences were also absorbed and transformed, until they flowed – still recognisable but perfectly integrated – into the cycle of rock art.<sup>59</sup>

Classification of the rock sculptures in terms of stylistic and iconographic criteria is also hampered by the objective conditions of poor conservation. The damage produced by atmospheric agents was further aggravated by acts of iconoclasm, perpetrated by cutting off the faces and other significant parts of the reliefs or just stoning them while passing by.<sup>60</sup> Inevitably, therefore, the degree of conservation of the reliefs affects our assessments of their style, while iconographic details of great importance may have become totally indecipherable.

The problem of conservation may take on greater or lesser importance in relation to the individual figures. The least seriously affected is the figure of Padmapāṇi. The relative frequency of its occurrence is so high as to allow an easy retrieval of occasionally missing or unintelligible elements by making comparisons within the same typological group. More heavily penalised are the other bodhisattva figures, which can be broadly categorised on the basis of their most conspicuous characteristics, although we have no way of determining with any certainty whether further differentiations may have existed within the various categories. In many cases the damage suffered by the sculptures has wiped out significant iconographic details such as the specific form of an attribute or headdress. The fact that these subjects are seen less frequently makes precise interpretation of the images even more challenging; in many cases it will at best prove probable, if not decidedly dubious. Moreover, reconstruction of the missing details is further hindered by the paucity of external elements serving for comparison. Thus various points remain at the level of hypotheses.

Thanks to adequately documented serial production and evident affinity with the rock sculptures, certain classes of materials can be taken as terms of comparison. In the first place, we have the bronzes mentioned above, until some time ago labelled as “Kashmiri”, and the votive terracottas, but we also have the petroglyphs of the Upper Indus Valley, the Pāla period bronzes and, albeit somewhat less directly, the rock art of western India. The comparisons they offer represent a notable contribution to the definition of a broad cultural and artistic panorama, and yet they fill in none of the gaps in the specific context.

<sup>59</sup> Perhaps detrimental to the reconstruction of this phase – in addition to the widespread practice of using perishable materials such as stucco, terracotta and clay – was also the dubious criterion used, especially in the past, to select and make available the materials. This criterion was often based on a “collector’s spirit” rather than historic sense. In North-West India this favoured “classical” Gandharan production and alienated other finds which were deemed to be of lesser value. A targeted search carried out in the storehouses of the large museums would probably reveal the existence of a wealth of evidence referring to the late-Gandharan or post-Gandharan period, which could make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the stylistic and iconographic developments within Gandharan art and in later periods.

<sup>60</sup> These habits were abandoned long ago. Nevertheless, a dramatically fresh upsurge of this phenomenon led to the destruction of the colossal Buddhas of Bāmiyān (Afghanistan) in March 2001 and the damage of the Buddha of Shakhorai (modern-day Jahanabad) in Swat (C92; II: Figs. 92a,b,c,d) in October 2007. For this latter, a restoration process has been started in the framework of the ACT Project (Archaeology – Community – Tourism) led by L.M. Olivieri and supervised by the PIDSA (Pak-Italian Debt Swap Agreement). According to information provided by Rafiullah Khan (2011: 209-210, fn. 12) but not verified by us, also C93 (in the same area as C92) was blasted to fragments in 2009.

The “Kashmiri” bronzes have come in for critical reappraisal over the last few years, above all in terms of chronology and provenance,<sup>61</sup> the latter being in this case rather more scattered. On the other hand, the wider geographical range of the bronzes implies some cultural unity – a sort of artistic *koiné* that transcends strict territorial boundaries.<sup>62</sup> Although we have no certainty in the case of the bronzes – objects that travel very easily – the centres of production were certainly spread over a territory that extended beyond Kashmir *stricto sensu* to other neighbouring areas.<sup>63</sup>

Referring to these bronzes in a correct way is not yet possible, since they belong to a cultural and geographic area not yet epitomised in a comprehensive and specific terminology. Traditional glossaries, on the other hand, risk misleading, since they would only partially reflect a complex and still too little-known reality, whose combination of individual expressions and common background does not fit conventional geographies and periodisation. In point of fact, the “Kashmiri” bronzes also form a heterogeneous corpus from the chronological point of view, although clear and significant demarcations are still lacking. Nor we can turn to any “neutral” geographic term, since possible definitions – such as north-west Himalayan regions, for instance – are simply too vague and broad.

Thus, for the sake of simplicity, in the present work we will adopt the bare and purely instrumental definition of “bronzes” (or, if necessary in the context, “Pakistani bronzes”) when referring to a specific cluster, which includes the Paṭola Śāhi specimens from Gilgit and others that, as it will be particularised as occasion offers, display such close iconographic and stylistic connection with the rock sculptures of Swat as to clearly point to the same artistic region and chronological horizon. This artistic region might well have included adjoining areas such as Chilas, Baltistan, Dir, Buner, and possibly portions of Afghanistan too, i.e. areas that we recognise as a zone of cultural continuity, nonetheless only based, for the time being, on vague and disconnected evidence.

Anyhow, whatever the exact place of production of a certain bronze, what is perhaps even more important is that: a) a market existed for this particular artistic production; b) there was a keen interest in it over quite a vast area;<sup>64</sup> and c) there was evidently a shared aesthetic and religious sensibility leading at least to appreciate and seek the same objects, if not to produce them.

<sup>61</sup> D. Barrett (1962) was the first to attribute the definition of “Kashmiri” to a group of small bronzes that appeared in the antique market of Bombay (Mumbai) in 1948, some time after the then *Mahārāja* of Kashmir moved to the city after his abdication (for a short history of this event see Pal 1973: 727). Nevertheless, Barrett (1962) includes in this notion a geographic area that takes in Swat and western Pakistan as well. Likewise, Fussman (1993: 25) uses “Kashmir” to refer to a group of territories including the Upper Indus valleys and relative tributaries and which has Srinagar valley as its political, economic and cultural centre. In the wake of Barrett’s studies, both Goetz (1969) and Pal (1973; 1975; 1979; 1988) gave a rather low chronology for this class of materials, using Karkoṭa period art as their compulsory reference point. Higher chronologies were more recently proposed by Paul (1986), Fussman (1993), and von Hinüber (2004) on the basis of different stylistic and paleographic considerations. In particular, the introduction and evolution of the proto-Śāradā in Gilgit and Chilas, in the period between 600 and 671, allows the bronzes with inscriptions to be dated and, on the basis of stylistic and iconographic comparisons, also a part of the anepigraphic ones (Fussman 1993: 26-27). As Fussman emphasises, this is a non-mechanical operation that must take into account a series of extrinsic, historical and historical-artistic factors. In this connection, an essential contribution is made by an enhanced knowledge of the Paṭola Śāhi of Gilgit, which allows the personality of specific donors belonging to the dynasty to be recognised and dated with more refined approximation. A detailed analysis of the chronological problems is obviously beyond the scope of the present work. However, on the basis of more recent studies, the seventh-to-eighth-century horizon is taken as indicative for the production of the now relatively copious amount of bronzes that may be likened to the rock sculptures of Swat. Specific references will be made in the text on a case-by-case basis.

<sup>62</sup> A typical example is that of the bronze statuette depicting a crowned Buddha (or bodhisattva?) found in the Ču Valley in Kirghistan and originating from Swat or Gilgit (Barrett 1962: 40, pl. XXX, figs. 21-22; Genito 2002: 126, fig. 84).

<sup>63</sup> Fussman (1993: 2-3) puts forward the hypothesis that part of the so-called “Kashmir” bronzes actually come from excavations carried out in Gilgit in 1938, aimed at recovering manuscripts (Shastri 1939). Evidence of the existence of a workshop at Gilgit, according to Fussman (*ibid.*: 41), could be the famous bronze known as “Buddha of Nandivikramādityanandin”, depicting a Buddha (or, more probably, the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī; see below) with his right hand resting on the head of a king belonging to the dynasty of the Paṭola Śāhi of Gilgit (Pal 1975: 108-109, no. 31; von Hinüber 1983: 62-63; Paul 1986: 202-19, pl. 86; Postel-Neven-Mankodi 1985: 252-254; Fussman 1993: 39-43, pl. 30; von Hinüber 2004: 38, fig. 5); in view of the accurate rendering of the details of the king’s clothing, the depiction is believed to come from a live portrait.

<sup>64</sup> A study on the possible political implications of such bronzes in the area of Khotan has been recently started by E. Forte (Forte 2012).

It was on this common substratum, created as a result of the huge expansion of Buddhism, that the Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, and Central Asian world gave expression to their artistic tastes in constant, reciprocal exchange as the ancient age came to an end. Needless to say, the historical vicissitudes that saw now one now another of these great powers rising or declining affected cultural mobility, by expanding or reducing the range of influence of the involved artistic centres.

### **3.2 – The technical and stylistic characteristics: cross-comparisons between rock sculptures, bronze sculptures and petroglyphs**

As mentioned above, the affinity between the rock sculptures of Swat and several of the bronzes known to us is so close and evident that no geographical or chronological separation can be postulated between the two categories. Nevertheless, we must also take into account intrinsic qualities that make the two differ substantially from each other. Correspondence and divergence are subject to a range of factors including dimensions, craft technique and, above all, client and assignment. Moreover, while no distinction can be made between provenance and final location in the case of the rock sculptures, the bronzes are of dimensions and market value such that they could enjoy practically unlimited circulation, not only geographically but also in terms of the uses they might be put to, which may also have changed over time.

Style and iconography are usually adjusted to suit the various constraints, primarily those of the material and related technical possibilities. As for the rock sculptures, the morphological characteristics of the schists forming the raw material may explain the lack of elaborate details since the natural colouring and rapid re-patina-tion of this kind of stone thwart all efforts in this direction.

It is probably because the craftsmen recognised this problem that they deliberately chose a sober artistic syntax, relying on visual impact rather than artistic virtuosity. Labour spent on a well-wrought stool or elaborate drape, for example, would prove futile: time would rapidly devour them, while what survives best and longest in open-air sculpture is the expressive force derived from a purposeful position or a keen adaptation to the setting. Just how little account the artists (who must have had an expert knowledge of techniques, materials and the processes of weathering) took of possible loss of detail can be seen in the way they executed their work, without providing any shelter for the sculptures. In fact, the reliefs usually have very little or no recessing from the rock wall, carved about the figure with short oblique strokes in such a way as to merge rapidly once again with the outer surface. The resulting shallow niche offers scant protection from exposure to the elements, which could have been reduced with a less economical technique, recessing the relief further and creating a deeper background. Alternatively, the reliefs could have been protected with added structures such as wooden canopies, but we find no evidence of any such measures.<sup>65</sup>

This aspect of the technique involves also the visibility of the sculptures. It cannot be ruled out that this was heightened by the use of colour (generally encouraged by doctrinal tendencies),<sup>66</sup> even though no trace is preserved on any sculptures. However it is precisely the complete absence of shelter that makes it highly unlikely that they were originally painted. Any pictorial decoration would have been of very short duration without constant maintenance, which in many cases was also difficult to carry out due to the position of many of the sculptures. Nor should the possibility be underestimated that the artists could have foregone the visibility of a

<sup>65</sup> The existence of wooden canopies, even if they have completely disappeared, would be attested by sockets, as in the case of the rock sculpture of Gilgit (Shastri 1939: 4, pl. 1429; here, Fig. 15; cf. Appendix II, fn. 144). A different issue is represented by the relief C178 (II: Fig. 25), the peculiar context of which is rather reminiscent of a rock shelter, possibly intended as the Buddhistic interpretation (or appropriation?) of a widespread tradition in the region (cf. Chap. 2.3).

<sup>66</sup> As for a comparative example mention could be made of the bright polychromy of the Buddhist rock sculptures at the site of Baodingshan in Dazu, in the Chinese province of Sichuan (Falco Howard 2001), even though the comparison is purely technical in view of the chronological gap (the Chinese site may be dated to between the eleventh and the thirteenth century) as well as the different cultural and artistic sensibility.



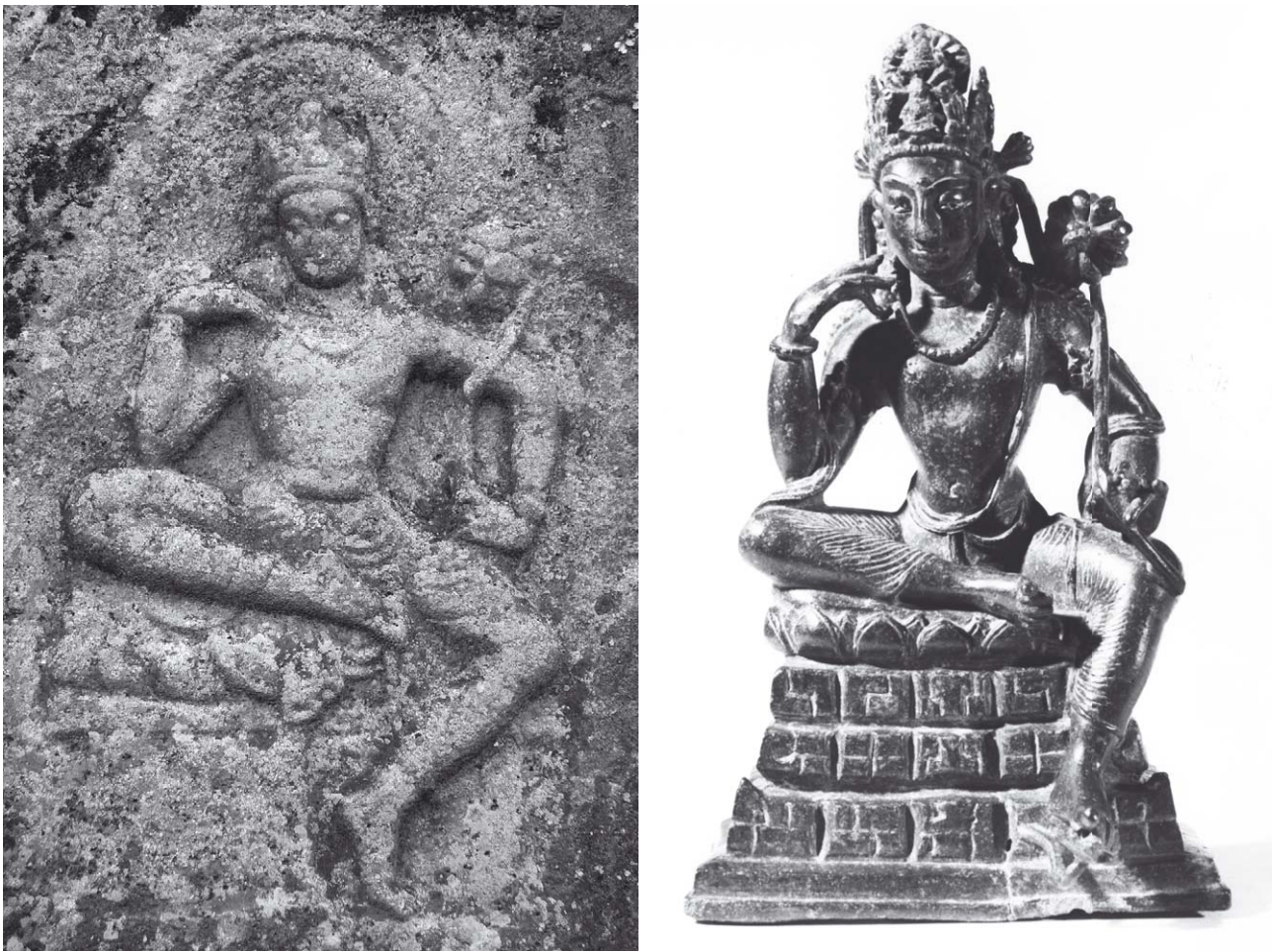
**Fig. 15** – Rock sculpture in Gilgit, showing the joint system for a canopy  
(courtesy Heidelberg Akademie der Wissenschaften, Felsbilder und Inschriften am Karakorum Highway)

brightly coloured surface, even one satisfying the iconographic rules, in favour of an impression of “naturalness”, in keeping with precise theoretical premises (see Chap. 1.3-5). Moreover, the great number of sculptures and the relatively difficult access to some of them make the idea of touching up a coat of paint a quite unlikely hypothesis.

More plausibly, one can conjecture that some sculptures could be painted on particular occasions, or for their marking a special pilgrimage spot, as in the case of the still living tradition of Nyethang, at Lhasa (Chayet 1994: 190, pl. XXVI). This sculpture in particular is suggestive of a close conceptual affinity with the rock sculptures of Swat, to the extent that one is encouraged to think of one and the same tradition. As aptly remarked by A. Chayet (*ibidem*), the big image of the Buddha reflected by the water is strongly evocative of the legend about the “Udāyana Buddha”, i.e. the origin of the first iconic representation of the Buddha (cf. Carter 1990), which Śākyamuni acknowledged as a reflection of himself (Swearer 2004: 18 esp.). The water mirror reinforces the illusion of the epiphanic character of the Nyethang image, in a play with nature closely comparable, in fact, to the dominant paradigms in the rock art of Swat.

Besides being occasional, paint might also have only been partial, and restricted, for instance, solely to the eyes. Although very few details have survived, we can still gather from our rock sculptures that big eyes were a distinguishing facial feature, in a way not dissimilar to coeval bronzes, where the importance of the eyes was usually underscored by inlay. We can thus hypothesise (as a congruous correspondence between the two classes) that the practice of painting the eyes of the images carved on the rock was common, for both aesthetic and symbolic reasons.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> We have ample evidence of the importance of the ceremony of “opening the eyes” of sacred icons (Gombrich 1966; Swearer 2004, esp. chapters 4 and 8). See also Rockwell (in this volume), who comes to the same conclusions on the basis of mere technical observations.



**Figs. 16-17** – A rock carving (C41) and a bronze sculpture (Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 444, neg. no. 1862)

Other general but unequivocal stylistic and iconographic affinities between bronzes and rock sculptures attest to the existence of some iconometric prescriptions and, more in general, of a common aesthetic and doctrinal source. The list of common features encompasses intrinsic and extrinsic elements such as the kind of ornaments (notably the particular shape of the voluminous pendant earrings, the short and relatively simple necklaces, and the three-pointed crowns), the broad faces with double chin, the triple line of the neck (*trivali*) which expresses beauty and luck (Bunce 2001: *s.v.*), the delicate sketching of the pectoral muscles, the slight protuberance of the abdomen above the belt, the narrow waist, the round flanks, the massive rigid lower limbs, and the general proportions of the figure (Figs. 16-17). Quite consistently, for instance, one can observe in standing figures that the median of the body (including the headdress, with or without crown) corresponds with the navel, and that the distance between the humerus and the wrist is equal to that from the hip to the ankle.

However, with respect to the rock sculptures the bronzes display a far richer spectrum of shades: given their modest dimensions, protected locations, and the specific artistic genre – attributable to the category of deluxe articles – they were in general crafted with minute attention to detail. It is in this dichotomy between the two classes that we may see the primary reason for what we might define as an ergonomic simplification – both stylistic and iconographic – in the production of the rock sculptures as compared with the bronze sculptures.

Thus the wealth of detail and complexity of the iconography can prove to be misleading when comparing the two classes if considered from a purely extrinsic point of view, and above all if the aim is to base a criterion for chronological determination on them. Any such system might prove to be fairly unreliable for the purpose

of classification within the category of bronzes, and all the more so when applied to comparison between the bronze and rock sculptures. Apart from the generic simplification of detail, the rock sculptures actually also appear far poorer in iconographic “types”. In comparison with the bronzes, we might speak of a “primitive” iconography, not so much in the chronological sense as in terms of the relatively limited repertory.

Moreover, the rock sculptures seem to have been produced for clients and purposes entirely different from those of the bronzes. Not only do they never bear dedicatory inscriptions, but they reveal not the slightest iconographic reference to any possible donors, except in a few, rare cases where small figures of devotees are represented. Nevertheless, the latter display generic features such that they give no real clues to the praxis of material acts of donation.<sup>68</sup> It is an absence that appears all the more significant when we consider that for Buddhists the votive offering is one of the most common ways of accumulating merits.

We may therefore infer from it further proof that the thriving rock sculpture in Swat was the result of a unitary plan, specifically designed to cover the area, rather than the chance juxtaposition of individual donations. In this large-scale plan, intended for the purpose of re-establishing the earlier sacred topography, the major unifying element was ideological and emerged, as we have seen, in the illusory uncreated nature (*svayambhū*) of the sculptures. If the inspiration for the entire project did, indeed, lie here, then it would be precisely on account of its peculiar nature that no reference is made to any individual contribution that may have been made. Not only would it have been useless, but clearly out of place. Nevertheless, the monastic community – that we assumed to be responsible for the inspiration and even, to some extent, the manual execution of the reliefs – may well have worked with the support of the laity, although no record remains of names or faces. What continues to be striking is the impact of the overall design, giving life – probably within quite a short span of time – to a throng of images ever displayed to the eyes of all the passers-by.

The ecumenical nature of the project must be considered influential on the iconographic repertory, so essential as to seem almost synoptic. The subjects are evidently among the most familiar of the current heritage of popular theology: the Buddha, the most celebrated bodhisattvas, the most universal attributes of the divinities and the most elementary meanings in the doctrine are the themes that better fit in with the equally universal and elementary open-air dimensions, while at the same time best suited to summon forth and satisfy the most widespread forms of worship and devotion.

On the other hand, in general the bronzes appear to form a more “cultured” category, often giving expression to a more markedly speculative level, and usually characterised by greater refinement in style and a richer iconography. Here the divine figures proliferate while the meaning of iconographic representation becomes more subtle and specific. We will see how the same divine figures that appear in the rock sculptures in their more generic attributions undergo diversification in the bronzes, in terms of both the quantity and quality of their representations.

Some themes in the bronzes can readily be associated with the Vajrayāna tradition (cf. Pal 1979), which is latent or scarcely visible in the rock sculptures of Swat, although the tradition had its cradle in this region. Clearly, the complexity of the Vajrayāna system, breaking down as it does the significance of the various divine manifestations, calls for a highly specific programme of instruction, not to be entered into on a generic faith alone, but demanding a greater degree of intellectual commitment. Indeed, some of the bronze sculptures – endowed as they are with a more complex iconography – seem to have been intended to satisfy a very particular demand, which goes much beyond the scope of the simple devotee. The bronze sculptures reflect a code shared by a narrow circle of initiates, in accordance with a practice that had been noted long ago by scholars (for instance Tucci 1958: 284; Botto 1959: 271). More readily than cognate artistic productions, bronze sculptures witness to how the constitutive value of an image can also descend from its being a means of spiritual education, and not only of mere enhancement of merits. As we shall see, it may also have satisfied the donor’s wishes to underline personal closeness to the cult image, possibly going as far as to identify with it to some extent.

<sup>68</sup> The only known cases are the Mangalkot stela depicting Maitreya (see Chap. 5; S141; II: Fig. 107; GS 18) and a more complex relief, again on a stela, published by Tucci (1958: figs. 14-15; here, S85; II: Fig. 87). A different case is that of stela S140 (II: Fig. 140; GS 38); regarding this see Chap. 6.

Nevertheless, demand for and custody of the bronzes was not confined to a closed circle of adepts. In some cases we know the donors from epigraphic records, and through their names we get a glimpse of the society – and of the expectations and motivations – that lay behind the donations, as well as an overview of the company of sovereigns or members of royal families, high dignitaries, and representatives of the clergy. Each was inspired by explicit aims which, in the case of the lay figures, seem to have involved accumulating merits.

In any case, it was a cultured clientele, as one may easily picture also – and possibly above all – in the case of the anepigraphic bronzes. Much less easy is the problem of detecting what they were originally intended for, whether a palace chapel or a room in the house where objects of devotion were kept, whether a religious building open to worshippers or the private cell of a monk. Nor can we rule out the possibility that it might in some cases have belonged to the baggage of a pilgrim having sufficient wealth or motivation to take a costly but portable object of devotion with him on his travels, or travelled around as prestigious gifts exchanged between high-ranking categories of donors and recipients (Forte 2012: 103-104).

Be that as it may, the location must have been private or, if public, one reserved for a particular and precisely motivated audience, and certainly not for people who might just have chanced upon some open-air setting. Thus the image reflects more freely, and with greater precision, particular forms of devotion and selective doctrinal teaching. It is, moreover, to be noted that, whether by chance or by design, the bronzes bearing dedicatory inscriptions also portray – like the rock sculptures – the divine figures most popular from the point of view of religious devotion while at the same time presenting more elementary or deliberately evident iconographic schemes. Generic as the dedicatory formulas are, in a number of examples one can sense in the iconographic choice a celebratory intention in which personal devotion – in the case of clients of a certain rank – bears a certain correspondence to their social roles.

An eloquent example can be seen in the famous so-called “Nandivikramādityanandin Buddha”.<sup>69</sup> The (generally accepted) identification of the main image as the Buddha came to the attention of Paul (1986: 207-209) and Fussman (1993: 42), who see in it an iconographic version of Śākyamuni, protector of the sovereign who favours dissemination of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* and all the other Mahayanic texts. Nevertheless, the iconographic scheme, although extremely concise, suggests a rather different ideological subject, where a historical personality, a ruler of the Paṭola Śāhi dynasty, exploiting a very well known model, presents himself as an initiate, under the guidance of the great master Mañjuśrī, here depicted as an accomplished Buddha.<sup>70</sup>

Regardless of the exact identity of the subject, the iconographic theme is perfectly clear: the divine figure, in a specific attribution associated with the revelation and dissemination of the scriptures (or dogma, albeit from the point of view of a certain school), by placing his hand on the crowned head of the king designates him as legitimate defender of those scriptures or, at the more prosaic level of political propaganda, as legitimate sovereign.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> For this specimen, cited in numerous publications, see the preceding paragraph, fn. 63.

<sup>70</sup> Such a depiction of Mañjuśrī is consistent with the role of “primordial Buddha” assigned by Buddhist tantric works to the bodhisattva (see Filigenzi 2008b: 19 ff. esp.; Bautze Picron 2010: 63-64). As a matter of fact, the Buddha’s *regalia* are usually characterised by greater completeness, with the attribution of the three-pointed cape. This seems to be valid in a relatively well-defined chronological and cultural context (see, for instance, Bāmiyān, Tāpa Sardar, Fondukistan, but also the Pakistani-Kashmiri bronzes). It is difficult to decide whether this attribute is exclusive to Śākyamuni – who, as we learn from the ceremony of the *pañcavārṣikapariṣad* described by Xuanzang, was the object of a particular coronation ritual – or it may be understood to be a more generic attribute of Buddha’s regality. We therefore do not know whether all the bejewelled Buddhas lacking a cape are to be identified as figures of Tathāgatas different from Śākyamuni or whether this attribute, also for Śākyamuni, is merely occasional and linked to particular ritual meanings. Identifications of Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Amoghasiddhi and Ratnasambhava among the Pakistani bronzes have moreover been proposed by von Shroeder (1981: respectively 11A and 11G & I, 11C, 12C, and 12D), although not always backed up with sufficient evidence. For a comprehensive study of the bejewelled Buddha see Bautze-Picron 2010.

<sup>71</sup> An analogous meaning, although within the frame of a more complex iconographic scheme, seems to be expressed by a figured *stūpa* model, housed in the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale “Giuseppe Tucci”, Rome, where a divested king (?) is probably depicted as the main actor of a ceremony of donation which no doubt is the counterpart of his being anointed as the righteous sovereign (Filigenzi 2005a).



We find a similar relationship associating and at the same time separating the bronze production and the petroglyphs of the Upper Indus Valley. The wealth of dedicatory inscriptions displayed by the latter, together with their relatively rapid execution, can be seen as lending further support to the hypothesis put forward by K. Jettmar (1989a: *passim*; see Chap. 2.9), who held that in this area – assiduously frequented by merchants and pilgrims passing through and stopping over – as a result of certain particular circumstances the tradition was established of leaving some attestation of faith, or at least of passage. Here, too, the iconographic repertory appears somewhat limited. If we exclude certain peculiarities, such as *jātakas* or the theme of the “thousand Buddhas”,<sup>72</sup> the predominant religious subjects are the Buddha and the most popular bodhisattvas (Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya and Mañjuśrī), together with representations of *stūpas*, again a highly popular ex-voto tradition.

The overall context clearly shows that the flowering of Buddhist petroglyphs in the Upper Indus Valley stemmed from earlier traditions, a fact which suggests that these areas had been held sacred in the indigenous culture from quite remote times. Drawing upon some observations by Tucci (1973: 50) regarding “communal meeting places” for annual festivals in the borderlands of Tibet, and by Francke (1914-1926: I, 20) who indicated one of them, Jettmar postulated the existence of similar traditions at Chilas. He identified one of these places in Thalpan Ziyarat, where the concentration of petroglyphs of the prehistoric age could evidence some sort of natural open-air sanctuaries (Jettmar 1989a: XXII-XXIII).

We may take this markedly conservative attitude towards the “sacred place” as a first, generic sign of affinity with the rock sculptures of Swat. Another common factor is the simplicity of the repertory, drawing upon the theme of faith and the most universal and accessible contents of doctrine. We can also trace in the petroglyphs – mixed with local components and peculiar features – expressions of that late ancient Buddhist *koiné* to which also the bronzes and rock sculptures belong. Nevertheless, significant differences are to be underlined.

With respect to the rock sculptures, the petroglyphs of the Upper Indus Valley reveal a more extemporaneous character in which, as Jettmar (1989b: 410) notes, manifestations of “folk Buddhist” cults coexist with orthodox iconographies. The Buddhist petroglyphs in these areas are the fruit of explicit individual donations, probably encouraged by the fact that, given the technique applied, commissions could be dealt with fairly rapidly, while the limited expenditure involved would also attract wayfarers pressed for time or resources. Different is, in a word, the nature of the two productions, more markedly didascalical the former, more expressly votive the latter. Again, however, a differentiating factor of great importance is the use of a specific technique and material, which quite spontaneously lead to a selection of visual components in order to ensure the most telling results.

### 3.3 – Minimal iconographic units

Given the precarious state of conservation of the rock sculptures it is hard to discern details, although basic mechanisms of the iconographic language may be singled out. One of these is the use of symmetrical oppositions, expressing contrasting or complementary values, as a disambiguation filter to distinguish different categories of figures.

The most recurrent type is that of the bodhisattva seated in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, which can be conventionally defined as the posture adopted by a figure sitting in a chair, the left leg stretching downwards, the right folded with ankle resting on left knee and sole facing upward.<sup>73</sup> Invariably portrayed in this pose is Padmapāṇi, this identifica-

<sup>72</sup> See Chap. 1, fn. 10

<sup>73</sup> There is no unanimous agreement among scholars on the meaning of the different *āsanas* such as *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, *rājaparyāṅkāśana*, *lalitākṣepa*, *lalitāsana* (the last three used as synonyms by de Mallmann 1964: 24, fn. 5 and 25, fn. 4). See A.M. Quagliotti (1989: fn. 1) for a brief examination of the terms and of the bibliographic references. Herein it was preferred to use the conventional term *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* since, etymologically speaking, it seemed to be better suited for characters of royal rank, as the bodhisattvas are, and at the same time for defining a position of ease but not of extreme relaxation. Based on the reasons that will emerge from the text, the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* can be considered conceptually closest to the *padmāsana*, of which it represents

tion being borne out by the ever-present attribute of the lotus. However, this remains a generic identification since slight variations in the iconography that no longer appear of any consequence may well have originally implied variations in the significance or particular functions of the bodhisattva. We might therefore hazard a fuller attribution for the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, identifying it as the canonical pose of the bodhisattvas belonging to the family of the lotus, or of the *karuṇā*, to which we can assign Padmapāṇi and other figures possibly associated with him.

In contrast with this *āsana* we find a symmetrical opposite, which we shall conventionally term reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, in which the right leg reaches down and the left leg is folded over the seat.<sup>74</sup> The opposition is significant, for it is consistently associated with Maitreya (and Mañjuśrī?), but it is also associated with Vajrapāṇi-Vajrasattva in the bronze production. Among the rock sculptures the latter can be made out only in standing figures, but we cannot rule out the possibility of representation among the seated figures, although none have conserved any iconographic detail that could offer irrefutable evidence.

### 3.4 – The *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*

Most probably the origin of the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* in iconography is to be traced back to unwritten rules of social relationship which apply to the whole of India. In general it is adopted in situations of familiarity or between peers, but in the case of social disparity it is reserved for persons of higher rank. From this behavioural code there derived the *lalitāsana* and its variants, expressing the social – or, by extension, spiritual – prestige of the divine figure who faces none of higher rank among those before him. In contrast with the *lalitāsana* – a posture of supreme relaxation and serenity attained in the social ambit – the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* can be more easily associated with a different posture in the upper part of the body. This usually expresses watchful attention prompted by some external stimulus – observing some event, for example, listening carefully, taking part in a discussion or pondering deeply some matter. In the Buddhist tradition the posture was already to be seen in the iconography at Sāñcī, where it is in fact associated with the various *deva* figures.<sup>75</sup>

It is, however, in the art of Gandhāra that use of this posture of composed ease finds the kind of canonical application that we see regularly observed in the rock sculptures. In Gandhāra it becomes a fully-fledged iconographic model, by means of which situations and concepts of various kinds – but associated by precise analogy – could find expression. Thus the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* is to be seen consistently associated with bodhisattvas and princely figures in general, and occasionally with other categories of personages, whenever the aim is to stress an attitude of rapt attention. Of the best-known scenes illustrating situations of this type, suffice it here to cite the stela of Mohammad Nari (Fig. 18) and others of the kind, conventionally known as representations of the Miracle of Śrāvastī, but more probably theophanies in which the Buddha reveals his cosmic nature, manifested essentially as light.<sup>76</sup> In these we see a throng of bodhisattvas, often portrayed in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, intent on reflecting or discussing the significance of this revelatory manifestation, or simply looking on in admiring wonder.

In the series of variants of the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, the best-known and most frequent one shows it in association with the pensive attitude,<sup>77</sup> which had already emerged – although with sporadic appearances – as char-

a kind of inferior stage. Several variant positions of the limbs are not considered significant as they are often determined by the height of the seat, by the attribute and by the gestuality.

<sup>74</sup> Also called *vāma-lalitāsana* as the opposite of *lalitāsana* (see for instance Bunce 2001: 330, s.v.). The same posture, labelled as *vāmārdhaparyāṅkāśana*, is noticed by de Mallmann (1975: 40) as peculiar to Mañjuśrī.

<sup>75</sup> For a detailed list of the scenes cf. Miyaji 1985a.

<sup>76</sup> An extensive bibliography is currently available on the “Miracle of Śrāvastī”, after the seminal work by J.C. Huntington (1980). See Zwalf 1996: 126-127, who gives a brief survey of the various interpretations and the relative bibliography. Reference is therefore to be made to some of the more recent contributions on the topic (Rhi 2003, 2008; Filigenzi 2012a).

<sup>77</sup> On the origin of the pensive attitude see the contribution by Junghee Lee (1993) and the attentive critical reappraisal thereof in Quagliotti 1996b.



Fig. 18 – Gandharan epiphanic scene from Mohammad Nari (after Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 42)

acteristic of Padmapāṇi in Gandhāra, to become actually exclusively associated to him in the rock sculptures of Swat. In the iconography, this attitude is conveyed by showing the figure with head slightly bent to the left, the index finger raised to touch the brow or, as was the case in Gandhāra, also with palm of the hand on cheek. In Gandhāra the pensive pose is also associated with other figures (see Quagliotti 1989; 1996a: especially 98-104), but in situations sharing a fundamental characteristic that helps us to understand the transition from one generic attribution to another, more specific one. In this attitude we also find Siddhārtha portrayed in one of those fundamental episodes that precede and lead up to the great choice, i.e. the reflection that came to him on observing the suffering of humanity, animals and plants during work in the fields (Miyaji 1985a: fig. 5). The sight of small animals and buds crushed by the plough and the oppressive heaviness of the toil opened his eyes to the miserable, tragic condition of living beings, moving him to a heartsick sense of sorrow and compassion, and stirring in him profound meditation (*Buddhacarita* V, 4-9).

An interesting version of the subject can be seen in a panel from Mohammed Nari, containing figured architectural squares showing scenes of the Buddha's life (Miyaji 1985a: 70-71; figs. 6-7). The third from the bottom portrays Siddhārtha, still in his princely robes, seated under a tree in pensive attitude (as we can infer from the typical inclination of the head, although the right forearm is missing); seated below, to the right, is a personage holding an umbrella, who can be identified as the faithful groom Chandaka on the basis of analogies with other reliefs. Also taking part in the scene are two male figures which stand turned towards Siddhārtha, in *añjalimudrā*, one depicted in the middle ground behind the figure of Chandaka, wearing Brahmanic headdress, the other on the opposite side of the scene, in princely dress. Miyaji (*ibidem*), who sees in the scene a variant of the First Meditation, attributes to the two dignitaries present the generic role of worshippers (see also Quagliotti 1989: 343).<sup>78</sup>

Of unequivocal interpretation as the First Meditation, of the same type as the one described by Miyaji, is the scene depicting a pensive Siddhārtha in a relief from Saidu Sharif I, with multiple scenes accommodated in two superimposed registers (Faccenna 2001: pl. 124a,b; here, Figs. 19a,b). The curvature of the slab, which is meant to fit a small *stūpa*'s drum, gives a clear indication about the right-to-left sequence of the reading. In the lower register, the scene showing a pensive Siddhārtha and three standing male characters paying homage to him is followed to left by the Great Departure. Interestingly, the male characters, clearly of *kṣatriya* affiliation as indicated by the typical moustaches and jewels, wear no turbans. This iconographic detail, which conveys a sign of respect towards Siddhārtha, suggests a closer connection of the scene with the twin episodes narrated in the *Lalitavistara* (Chap. 11: Visit to an Agricultural Village), wherein Śuddhodana, wondering what had become of his son, went out to search for him, attended by his retinue, and found him meditating in the forest. Seeing his son resplendent in his beauty and glory, Śuddhodana paid homage to him, taking out his crown, sword and shoes (Mitra 1998; 175-180, esp. 179).

Also Chandaka appears portrayed in pensive pose in a relief from Nimogram (Swat) depicting the episode of the First Meditation according to the most familiar iconographic criterion, which has Siddhārtha seated in *dhyānāsana* under the tree. Siddhārtha is shown at the centre, while the ploughing scene appears on the left

<sup>78</sup> An identical scene is probably depicted on a Butkara relief, unfortunately badly damaged (Quagliotti 1989: 343, pl. IIa). In this specific case, the interpretation remains doubtful, since a precise episode could also match the iconographic subject, namely the search undertaken by the councillor and court priest who, urged by the grieving father, attempted to bring the prince Siddhārtha back home from the forest into which he had retreated. In vain they try to persuade Siddhārtha to desist from his intentions, reminding him of the riches he was leaving behind and the sorrow he was bringing on his family and subjects; finally, it is the two dignitaries who desist in the face of Siddhārtha's inflexible determination (*Buddhacarita*, VIII-IX). Note should be taken *en passant* also of the use made in this episode of another non-incidentally iconographic *topos*: the pair of exhorters is represented by a high official and a priest, both embodying two fundamental functions in Vedic society. The same will happen after a fresh and definitive entrance into a new state of mind with the Invitation to preaching addressed by Indra and Brahmā to the now "awakened" Siddhārtha. Siddhārtha's refusal in the first case and the compassionate condescension in the second both contain an implicit lesson on passions and on the victory achieved which – to varying degrees, one propedeutic to the next – imply the superseding of the social, ethical and religious order of Vedic tradition.



**Figs. 19a,b** – A segment of a Gandharan frieze (after Faccenna 2001: pl. 124a,b)

side of the relief. For his part Chandaka, holding the reins of Kaṅṭhaka in his left hand, sits pensively on the right-hand side of the composition, head bowed and resting on the right hand. Behind Kaṅṭhaka, in the middle ground, we see two male figures (Quagliotti 1989: 342-343; pl. 1c). According to A.M. Quagliotti's interpretation, taking reference from an observation by Foucher (1905-1951: I, 344), Chandaka's pensive pose implies no sorrow at the prince's abandonment, but rather "[...] an attempt by the groom to explain and anticipate the state of mind which is to lead the bodhisattva to the [...] First Meditation, like a *lakṣaṇa* [...] in order to render an event from the Buddha's life understandable to the spectator, which he might otherwise fail to recognize [...]"

Whatever the correct interpretation, the point that needs stressing is the quality of Chandaka's mental state at that moment, shaken as he was by a powerful feeling inspired by an event that placed him before a higher reality. Chandaka, who gains insight without rational understanding, is a sort of tool of destiny, and of this he is vaguely aware thanks to the many miraculous events he witnesses in the episode of the Great Departure.

In a famous relief in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, showing the episode of Māra's Attack (Lippe 1970: fig. 11), we see portrayed a personage whose identity has been much discussed. In princely attire, the character is seated under a tree in pensive pose. According to Rosenfield (1967: 241-242) and Lippe (1970: 16-18) this figure is a sort of "ideogram" personifying the invincible force of Siddhārtha's compassion for all living beings. It is an interpretation that finds favour with A.M. Quagliotti (1989: 350-352), given the presence of the tree under which the personage is seated – a feature deemed by all the authors cited to be perfectly characteristic of the figure of Siddhārtha. Miyaji (1985a: 74 ff.) takes up a hypothesis formulated by Coomaraswamy (1928: 392-393) on a similar iconography from Bharhut and goes on to propose the identification as the character being Māra himself, described by some texts as rapt in thought after his unsuccessful bids.

Actually this relief remains of dubious interpretation, but others, from both Bharhut and Gandhāra, pointed out by Miyaji (1985a), Spagnoli (1986) and Quagliotti (1989: 360 ff.), contain an incontrovertible depiction of the defeated Māra. He can be recognised by the rod (or arrow?) with which he traces sixteen lines on the ground (*Nidānakathā*), or figures (*Lalitavistara*), or indeed the phrase "Gotama the recluse has escaped from my power, and hence I am sore distressed" (*Mahāvastu*) (from Quagliotti 1989: 361).<sup>79</sup> According to M. Spagnoli (1986), citing the evidence of a tale contained in the *Mahāvastu*, the episode refers to Māra's unsuccessful attempt to force the Buddha to bring forward *nirvāṇa*.

In the episodes so far described we find a range of sentiments expressed by means of the pensive pose that show different degrees of intensity but, as a common characteristic, the sense of bewilderment and inadequacy on perceiving, albeit as yet only vaguely, a truth concealed beyond the painful but customary confines of *samsāra*. Supposing that we could bring the episodes together within a common perspective, we might define the pensive pose as typical of one who remains in the world despite having undergone a painful change in consciousness. However, the level of consciousness is highly differentiated. Chandaka is helpless in the face of an ineluctable destiny whose divine essence he vaguely senses, but his sentiments fail to rise beyond the persistent selfishness of the pain of abandonment. Māra, on the other hand, is defeated, or more precisely "superseded": all the charms and terrors of the world that he represents are no longer anything more than an empty shell, devoid of any appeal or power of subjection. In his bitter and apparently irredeemable admission of defeat, Māra personifies the necessary destruction of all ties, all passions, and perhaps a state of consciousness corresponding to that dreadful instant that follows destruction and precedes rebirth.

Finally, the two episodes that show Siddhārtha in pensive pose and still a "prince" reveal his having attained a state of consciousness already irreversibly projected towards Buddhahood, but yet to be relieved of the bur-

<sup>79</sup> As far as these reliefs are concerned I would like to refer to the observations made by Quagliotti (1996a: 14 ff.) concerning the instrument used by Māra to write on the ground: the arrow appears only in the oldest reliefs and was then rapidly replaced by a more generic rod.

den of his worldly qualities, since the level and object of concentration is still subordinate to and conditioned by a cause. This condition precedes (in a more logical than temporal sense) the perfect mental peace in which – all turmoil and wavering allayed – *bodhi* thought is attained. The qualitative leap in consciousness is clearly stressed by iconography, which invariably resorts to the *padmāsana* whenever it wants to describe in visual terms the imperturbable state of *bodhi*-mind.<sup>80</sup> Thus, one might say that the pensive attitude of Siddhārtha actually fits much better than the *dhyānāsana* both the situation and mental condition of the so-called “First Meditation(s)”, and more precisely expresses the propaedeutic value of this event, when Siddhārtha experiences that universal empathy of which *karuṇā* is made.

In fact, the pensive Siddhārtha seems to offer an authoritative prototype for the “bodhisattva ideal”, although a short-living one which was destined to be soon overwhelmed by Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi. Strategic iconographic adaptations were probably attempted in order to avoid confusion. One of these seems to be the source of the “strange” iconography of a small stela brought to light in 2010 at Mes Aynak and published by Fussman (2012). The relief depicts a pensive bodhisattva seated on a wicker stool beneath a pipal tree and flanked by a monk, which Fussman interprets as the “unintelligent coalescence of two stereotyped motives, a pensive bodhisattva and a *lakṣaṇa*, the pipal leaves, indicating that this bodhisattva is no other than Gautama Siddhārtha Śākyamuni”.<sup>81</sup> According to the author, the relief would be thus “indicative of the poor knowledge or understanding of the life of the historical Buddha in the workshop where it was carved and by the customer, maybe a monk [...], who bought it” (*ibid.*: 147). Actually, I rather think that this is an *intelligent* coalescence of the two motives, which is meant to unambiguously identify Siddhārtha in a period when the iconographic model of the pensive bodhisattva still applies to Siddhārtha but is increasingly emerging as characteristic of Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi. If this is true, we can then go on to consider that the monk (probably the donor) was not so naïve and incompetent as to buy an iconographic and conceptual botch but exactly wanted to express its devotion in the *bodhisattva* Siddhārtha, for reasons and in ways that we could probably grasp if we only knew better the complex cultural background of “Buddhism in context”.

According to all evidence, the models elaborated in Gandhāra underwent a process of selection and conventionalisation which also marked a disambiguation of meaning. With the First Meditation(s) of Siddhārtha the iconography marks a kind of threshold point of the pensive pose. Siddhārtha’s compassion was crystallised into a historical event which, being part of an accomplished cycle, justifies the preference accorded to the *padmāsana* as a semantic sign announcing the culmination of the Buddha path. The pensive pose, on the other hand, started being exclusively (or nearly exclusively) associated to Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi, true militant hypostasis of the Buddhist compassion. Already in Gandharan art, from the moment of Enlightenment the Buddha was rarely depicted as seated in any other position than *padmāsana*, which is expressive of total control, firmness, lastingness. Only one subsequent episode was occasionally to find expression through the pensive pose, namely the Invitation to Preach (see for instance Quagliotti 1989: pl. VIIIa), when the aim is to allay not the transitory feeling of uncertainty surpassed and overcome by compassion, but rather the “distraction” from the individual pursue of *śūnya* brought about by compassion.

This is a crucial point in the development of the Mahayanic notion of the bodhisattva career, which would certainly require a more extensive discussion.<sup>82</sup> Here, we will limit our discussion to the way iconography mirrors this ideal. Actually, according to the Mahayanic perspective, the discriminate boundary is not so much between pre-awakening and post-awakening condition, but rather between two different stages of insight: the search of the individual liberation and the higher quest for others’ liberation, a compassionate motivation that

<sup>80</sup> In this way, one would say, iconography distinguishes between “pondering” and “meditating”.

<sup>81</sup> The pensive pose is actually an inference (although an indubitable one), since the right forearm of the bodhisattva is missing. It is to be noted that, what Fussman (2010: 38) interprets as “two vertical decorative bands flanking the prince” is the back of the seat; for a discussion of this and other types of seats see the next paragraph.

<sup>82</sup> For a recent reappraisal of Pāli and Chinese sources that may have influenced the notion of the bodhisattva ideal as expressed in later literature see Anālayo 2010.

arises from Enlightenment and that distinguishes the bodhisattva from the *arhat*. The bodhisattva indeed *is* an enlightened being who delays entering *nirvāṇa* in order to help all the sentient beings to reach Buddhahood. In a sense, the bodhisattva is a Buddha-maker, and in this role he is somehow ambiguously superior to the accomplished Buddha.

The bodhisattva ideal finds different expressions and shades in the post-canonical literature. Of particular relevance to the present investigation is the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*, where Avalokiteśvara is fully credited with a central role in the salvation process.<sup>83</sup> According to this text, Avalokiteśvara was distracted from merging himself into the *śūnya* by an uproar from a remote distance. When he realised that this was nothing but the desperate wailings of the people at his imminent disappearance, he resolved to postpone his ultimate liberation until the last sentient being was emancipated (Bhattacharyya 1989: 29). Notwithstanding a remarkable distance between the narration of the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* and the above-mentioned episodes involving characters and conditions as different as Siddhārtha, Māra, Chandaka, a clear continuity line can be detected at the iconographic and conceptual level. The connection is represented by the perturbed states of mind all originating, albeit with different insight, from cogitation on sorrow.

The pensive pose, and the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* in general, is thus used in the Buddhist iconographic tradition – above all in the post-Gandharan phase – to express with immediacy a condition ideally projected towards Buddhahood (or better, toward *śūnya*), yet at the same time still strongly linked to the world. It is in this sense that the pose becomes a sort of *lakṣaṇa* of the nature of the bodhisattva, suspended in equilibrium between the transcendental and the immanent, precisely by virtue of that sentiment of sorrow and compassion for the miseries of the world that takes on the concrete substantialism of historic evidence in the life of Siddhārtha, but which in the personification of the bodhisattva expresses a divine, atemporal function. Although this is a characteristic generically attributable to all the bodhisattva figures, it is Avalokiteśvara who incarnates it most specifically.

The art of Gandhāra produced a great many bodhisattva figures portrayed in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, in the pensive attitude that expresses profound sharing in the sufferings of living beings and, as a necessary corollary, the commitment to succeed in putting it behind. Apart from representation as a single figure, the bodhisattva is thus portrayed in some triads.<sup>84</sup> In the art of Gandhāra the iconography of Avalokiteśvara had yet to be firmly established, but we can safely identify as such the bodhisattva marked out by sun symbolism in the headdress<sup>85</sup> – in all cases consisting of a turban – and in the attribute. At this early stage in the formation of

<sup>83</sup> The evolution of the soteriological theory of *karuṇā*, so eloquently epitomised in the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*, is nevertheless a long process. Whatever the exact date of the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* (cf. Studholme 2002: 9-17), it is worth noting that basic concepts among forerunners to this text, such as the different forms Avalokiteśvara can assume in order to teach different kinds of sentient beings, are already expressed in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (de Mallmann 1948: 41) and attested by iconographic sources as early as in Gandhāra (Taddei 1987: 349-357, 353 esp.; fig. 5).

<sup>84</sup> There are at least three known cases of triads in which a pensive Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi appears:

- 1) triad in Brough 1982: 69, Fussman 1987: fig. 4, Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 8;
- 2) triad inside micro-architecture from Loriyan Tangai in Grünwedel, Gibson and Burgess 1901: pl. 147, Foucher 1909: pl. 11, Miyaji 1985b: pl. 19, Sawoo 1983: fig. 1, Rhi 2006: fig. 7.15, Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 9;
- 3) triad inside micro-architecture from Loriyan Tangai in Foucher 1909: pl. 12; Miyaji 1985b: pl. IX, 1 no. 16; Faccenna 1986: fig. 13, Kurita 1988-1990: I, fig. 398, Filigenzi 2012a: figs. 46, 46 bis).

A fourth possible case is represented by a crude relief in the Peshawar Museum, also depicting a triad, where the object in the left hand of the pensive turbaned bodhisattva might be a lotus bud (Miyaji 1985a: pl. V, 2 no. 9, Id. 1985b: 21, fig. 14, Id. 2008: fig. 15; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 41).

<sup>85</sup> On this topic see Filigenzi 2012a: esp. 122-130, but cf. Quagliotti (2000), who recognises in the bodhisattva with Sūrya in the headdress a specific iconographic connotation of Siddhārtha. This highly plausible identification nevertheless raises a problem, one that is not marginal in the art of Gandhāra, namely the weakness of the index of recognisability of analogous iconographic types: the type described by Quagliotti is actually very similar to other examples of bodhisattva present in the triads, in which it seems possible to instead recognise Avalokiteśvara. In several cases, the pose is identical with the left hand on the side, and generally with relatively undiversified attributes. See for example the well-known relief in the de Marteau collection, referred to in the literature as “the year 5 Buddha” (in actual fact a pentad), published for the first time by Harle (1974), or the example, similar in subject, of the Indian Museum



iconographic conventions, we may consider as characteristic of Avalokiteśvara the attribute of the lotus, which is usually represented in Gandhāra with one or more buds on short stems, and of the garland. Together with the turban, both of these are the attributes that – with no exceptions – mark out all the single images of the pensive bodhisattva. One particularly interesting feature is the invariable orientation shown in the position of Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi, always portrayed with head leaning to the left, right leg folded over the seat in a more or less angular form, while the left leg reaches down (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20 – Gandharan bodhisattvas in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* (courtesy British Library; Photo 1003/1045)

Excluding the more complex scenes, where the presence of a great many figures in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* makes the need for symmetry particularly important, it will be seen that – not only in Gandhāra – this *āsana* remains largely unchanged.<sup>86</sup> This evidently derives from natural behaviour, the tendency being to bring the weight of the body to bear on the right side when assuming this posture if circumstances permit. The position is therefore normally attributed to figures in isolation or in all those cases where the balance of the composition does not call for mirror-image symmetry.

of Calcutta, published for the first time by Foucher (1909: pl. 10; 1905-1951: II, fig. 406). Also starting from the premise (with which I however disagree) that the figure of Avalokiteśvara is necessarily characterised, already in Gandhāra, by the effigy of Amitābha in the headdress, it is still necessary to identify all the closely related subjects that nevertheless lack this attribute and that cannot (as in the case of the bodhisattvas that appear in triads and pentads) be reduced to representations of Siddhārtha. A similar problem has been raised by the interpretation proposed by Fussman (1987: 75-76) regarding certain images of bodhisattva with the small flask and hair tied in a knot (usually identified as Maitreya), which the author identifies as Mahāsthāmaprāpta.

<sup>86</sup> One exception to this tendency is represented by several portrayals of Māra, who is depicted as marking out signs on the ground. In this case, the exception seems due to the simple need for compositional balance.

The figure of Avalokiteśvara remains essentially faithful to this iconographic model – albeit with secondary variants – even when included in a triad. In one of these cases (Brough 1982), although the left side of the relief is missing, given the rule of symmetrical balance so widely observed in Gandhāra for compositions of this type, we can safely say that the pendant to Avalokiteśvara must have been a bodhisattva of the “Brahmanic” type, also seated in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* or, on the evidence of other examples,<sup>87</sup> in *sattvāsana* (with ankles crossed; cf. Bunce 1994, II: 1016, fig. 256; Id. 2001: 244), as we occasionally (and almost exclusively) see Maitreya portrayed. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that in the symmetrical representations it is the Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi figure that dictates the compositional trend – naturally from left to right – and imposes a mirror-image counterpoint on the companion figure, as if the iconographic prescription specifically gave him priority over the pensive pose. We find the same convention applied, for example, in the triad first published by Grünwedel, Gibson and Burgess (1901: pl. 147), where the pendant to Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi is a bodhisattva of the “Brahmanic” typology bearing a book as attribute, and again pensive, although his pose is in fact the reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*.<sup>88</sup> Thus we find that the tendency is already established in Gandhāra to endow Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi with a distinctive but not exclusive *lakṣaṇa*: the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* associated with the pensive pose, expressing that Buddhist sense of *karuṇā* of which the bodhisattva represents the hypostasis.

The *kṣatriya/Brahman* contrast within the category of bodhisattvas is extremely frequent in Gandhāra. It epitomises two essential values and functions, *prajñā* and *karuṇā*.<sup>89</sup> While the generic characterisation of the bodhisattva remains constant, inspired as it is by the model of prince Siddhārtha,<sup>90</sup> the bodhisattva more specifically endowed with a function associated with *prajñā* may be recognised not only by his attributes but also by the lack of a turban, in the place of which we see a particular headdress which, albeit with a few variants, recalls the chignon of the Brahmanic ascetic. In Gandhāra the chignon characterises the figure of Maitreya and, probably, that of Mañjuśrī, as in the case of the triad already mentioned.<sup>91</sup> However, this contrast tends to disappear, or at least to become less rigid, in post-Gandharan art for reasons that presumably include the practice of adorning sacred images with *regalia* and a codification of attributes that had by then become the rule.

By contrast, in the rock sculptures of Swat we find established as a norm what was a trend *in nuce* in the art of Gandhāra, namely the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*/reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* contrast as an iconographic sign that the bodhisattva belongs to this or that group or family. Thus the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* is confirmed as the

<sup>87</sup> Once again the triads – that is, concise doctrinal summaries based on elementary oppositions – provide interesting confirmations and food for thought. See, for instance, the triad within micro-architecture cited in fn. 84, no. 3. A similar case is that of the triad in the Peshawar Museum (also cited in fn. 84), depicting Maitreya on the right, identifiable by the Brahmanic headdress and the *kamaṇḍalu*, seated in *sattvāsana* (or *pralambapādāsana* with ankles crossed), in *abhayamudrā*; on the left is Avalokiteśvara, seated in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, also in *abhayamudrā*, with an unclear attribute. In this rather late (?) and clumsily executed relief, the pose of the two bodhisattvas breaks the customary rule of symmetry, instead conforming to the iconographic convention deemed more peculiar to both. Maitreya is thus depicted also in other contexts: see for example a relief from Charsada, in the Lahore Museum, where Maitreya, in *namaskāramudrā*, is seated beneath a canopy on a backed throne with his feet on a footstool, surrounded by worshippers (Ingholt 1957: fig. 285; J.C. Huntington 1984: fig. 6; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 61). Quite similar is the Maitreya portrayed in the upper lunette of a stela in the Chandigarh Museum, a so-called “Miracle of Śrāvastī” (Quagliotti 1996c: Pl. III, fig. 5; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 44). However, as for the specific case of Mañjuśrī depicted in reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* see above, fn. 74.

<sup>88</sup> For this specific example see the contribution by M. Sawoo (1983); a discussion of similar subjects is addressed by Quagliotti 1990 (see below, fn. 91). We cannot rule out that in Gandhāra the opposition *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*/reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* was already fixed as a distinctive sign of specific bodhisattvas. See for instance the isolated bodhisattva in reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* holding a book (?), possibly Mañjuśrī, in the Musée Guimet (Rhi 2006: fig. 7.9; Id. 2008: fig. 7).

<sup>89</sup> The various motifs of this contrast include an association of concepts that appears to be elemental in Indian philosophy, where the *prajñā*, or the commitment to the path of knowledge, finds the most spontaneous personification in the figure of the ascetic. Nevertheless this question, which is much more complex and subtle, involves a true functional specificity expressed in iconographic choices that are by no means random. For a discussion of this topic see the specific chapters on Padmapāṇi and Maitreya.

<sup>90</sup> The reason underlying the model nevertheless runs even deeper: it is precisely the regal nature of the “irreversible” bodhisattva that is highlighted by the iconography (Verardi 1985: in particular 88).

<sup>91</sup> On the presence, or rather, the identification of Mañjuśrī in Gandhāra, see Quagliotti 1990.

typical characteristic of Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi, head of the *karuṇā* family. The reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, on the other hand, is consistently applied to Maitreya, head of the *prajñā* family and probably to other bodhisattvas not readily recognisable but whose presence is – for reasons we have already seen (see Chapter 1.2) – perfectly plausible: Mañjuśrī who, like Maitreya, incarnates not only knowledge of the Law but also its conservation and transmission, and Vajrapāṇi in his various manifestations, who incarnates custody and the combative spirit of the Law.

### 3.5 – The thrones

The actually rather limited variety of thrones can be traced back to certain Gandharan prototypes, although they may depart so far from the original models as to be hardly recognisable at first sight. A constant feature of the rock sculpture iconography is the lotus flower – a simple support for standing figures or integral part of the throne of seated figures. By now, in fact, it is so completely integrated into a system of conventional signs as to be treated with considerable freedom, in forms ranging from realistic representation of the corolla itself to lightly sketched quasi-abstraction such as a small row of petals set below or above the throne.

Among the most imaginative morphological variants of the lotus flower is the seat regularly associated with the figure of Padmapāṇi, which takes the form of a tall rectangular dais, with a sort of cushion projecting at the top and a row of lotus petals at the base (e.g. C9; II: Fig. 8a; GS 10, 16). The origin of this seat, which appears to emerge from a synthesis of various prototypes, can also be readily traced back to Gandhāra.

In the Gandharan reliefs the pensive bodhisattva usually sits on quite a high seat serving to endow the *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* with ease and naturalness, reducing the angle at which the leg stretches down. The seat itself is usually a narrow cylindrical stool, which may take on the appearance of a four-legged throne (Fig. 20, right), sometimes equipped with a back.<sup>92</sup> In this case the back will be markedly flared upwards, the top forming a straight line, although in the real prototype – supposing there was one, in this case not much dissimilar in shape from chairs still in use in the area – it must in some way have followed the curvature of the seat. Presumably the reduction to a straight line reflects the scant interest Indian art took in perspective, which shows only what the eye sees and not what is effectively there. It is in any case quite probable that the model – with a back or not – took inspiration from a type of seat actually in use, often woven in wicker, as the elaborate decorative pattern suggests. Support for this hypothesis comes from the fact that this type of seat, albeit in a simplified version, also appears in narrative reliefs, associated with persons of rank (Faccenna 2001: 113-114, fig. 37 and relative data charts), in scenes that most probably mirror settings and conditions of real life.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Besides the seats of the two bodhisattvas in the relief from Loriyan Tangai, now in the Indian Museum of Calcutta (see fn. 84, no. 2), see that of the bodhisattva Maitreya in a relief from Charsada, now in the Lahore Museum (Ingholt 1957: fig. 285; J.C. Huntington 1984: fig. 6; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 61), and in a relief from Chatpat (Dani 1968-69b: fig. b no. 93). Among the rock sculptures, the backed throne is witnessed by a single specimen in Puran (Olivieri 1994: fig. 12; here, Fig. 21).

<sup>93</sup> The various seat types can provide thought-provoking ideas concerning the relationship between the art of Gandhāra and the real world as well as on the process of extrapolating actual iconographic lemmas from the latter. It should be noted that in Gandhāra, for the figures of Buddha and bodhisattva, the simple rectangular podium prevails, often enhanced by figured scenes on the front face, as well as other seat types for minor figures that for the needs of the narrative must be portrayed seated even in the presence of the Buddha. Such is the case of high ranking personages, generally seated on elaborate stools, or ascetics that, in the scenes depicting the visit of the Buddha, sit on rolled up mats. The principal personages in “Kushan” dress, in those “unbiographical” scenes that are usually reserved for continuous friezes, are instead seated on a curved chair of curule type perhaps inspired by the folding chairs that presumably existed among nomadic peoples and were used, if not every day, at least as a sign of distinction on particular occasions or for special personages. Support to this hypothesis is provided by the funerary deposits in the Saka necropolis of Tillya Tepe in Afghanistan, where remains of a chair of this type have been found in Tomb no. 4 (Sarianidi 1984: 2, fig. 3A; Mode 2013: 215; 216, fig. 18). The backed chair, although already attested in the early Gandharan period by its occurrence in the frieze of the Main Stūpa of Saidu Sharif I (Faccenna 2001: pl. 17a), becomes a quite common feature only at a relatively late date. Judging by its widespread presence in the Pāla art of Bengal and Bihar, and by the extreme richness of its decorative motifs compared with the



Fig. 21 – Buddha on backed throne, Puran (courtesy IsIAO, neg. Dep. CS L17915 20)

If, then, this type of stool – also in real life – was apparently reserved for figures of superior status the Gandharan iconography occasionally adds a significant element of differentiation. In fact, certain images of bodhisattvas seated on stools – isolated or in triads – have one or both feet set on a footstool which is almost as broad as the seat and has the form of a fully opened lotus.<sup>94</sup> It is precisely from this particular iconographic convention, distinguishing the bodhisattva from the generic personage of rank, that a new form of stool appears to have evolved, i.e. the stool resting on or emerging from a lotus corolla represented in summary form as a rectangular dais with a row of petals at the base.

While this type of seat is only occasionally to be seen in the figurative repertory of the bronze production, it is one of the most frequent iconographic elements in the rock sculpture, albeit with the necessary adaptations to fit it into the particular context. The stool on lotus corolla appears in three bronzes also depicting Padmapāṇi, where particularly the decoration on the body of the seat clearly reveals its derivation from wickerwork, simplified as the pattern is.

scarcity and simplicity of the “Gandharan” specimens, this type of chair probably belonged to a more specifically Indian tradition, and its adoption in the Gandharan context, albeit only marginal, nevertheless appears to be significant.

<sup>94</sup> See for example the residual bodhisattva from the triad published by Brough (see fn. 84, no. 1); the bodhisattva on the left of the triad within micro-architecture from Loriyan Tangai (see fn. 84, no. 3); the pensive Padmapāṇi in the Indian Museum of Calcutta (Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 74), where the upper part of the footrest remains – obviously the pistil of an open lotus, as in the preceding examples.

The first of these, the property of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was published by Pal (1975: 136, no. 46a,b) and Lerner (1975: 4, pl. 4). Lerner indicates the provenance as Swat or Kashmir and a dating somewhere in the first half of the seventh century; nevertheless, he considers it earlier than the Swat rock sculptures “[...] exhibiting little of the Gupta flavor of this bronze” (*ibidem*), and offers as evidence the photos published by Tucci (1958: figs. 4, 10, 13, 18, 19, 22).<sup>95</sup> The bronze represents a Padmapāṇi in pensive pose, seated on a cylindrical stool displaying incised geometric decoration, at the base of which is a row of reverse lotus petals upon which the bodhisattva rests his left foot.

Undeniable here is the correspondence with the rock sculptures of Swat: for example, the shape of the seat is to be seen in simplified form in relief C104 (II: Figs. 104a,b) and in stelae S129 and S138 (II: Figs. 131 and 144 respectively). What is more, the bronzes display other obvious similarities to features typical of the rock sculptures. These include the type of headdress, with locks of hair drawn back; the drape of the garment, portrayed at pelvis level in two series of folds following a circular movement, and the hem fanning out at the centre; and above all the anatomical structure, solid yet graceful, with the slight protuberance of the lower part of the abdomen, the broad face, large elongated eyes and, as in the case of stela S129, the attribute of an open lotus viewed frontally.<sup>96</sup> Sculpting in the round and the greater refinement in technique endow the bronze image with a more natural grace, to be seen above all in the position of the left foot (which in the rock sculptures is constrained in rigid angular profile), in the sinuous line of the lotus stem (practically straight in the rock sculptures), and again in the realistic execution of the petals. Taking together the affinities and the obvious reasons for divergence (see above, Chap. 3.2) we see as quite secondary not only the stylistic but also the iconographic differences, certain attributes or their specific forms being subject to variation according to the context.<sup>97</sup> With regard to provenance, Swat is thus to be considered certain, while the short dedicatory inscription incised on the lotus petals at the base in Tibetan characters (Pal 1975: 136) confirms the diffusion of these products well beyond the centres of production.

An almost identical piece, apart from the *dhoti*, in this case reaching down almost to the calves, is to be seen in a bronze in the Rockefeller Collection (Lee 1970: fig. 9; Pal 1975: no. 45; here, Fig. 22). This bronze, albeit somewhat abraded in the upper part, still displays the same details in the headdress, showing no difference from those of the previous one.

The third bronze was published and discussed by J.C. Harle (1979). The subject is identical, but certain characteristics of the style and iconography point to a different area of provenance. Yet it is precisely this evident difference that makes the affinities with the Swat production all the more striking. In this case the seat displaying incised decoration in the form of interlocking lozenges has a projecting moulding at the base, while the lotus corolla is set on top like a cushion – a variant which, however, is also largely attested in the rock sculpture (see for instance C32, C41, C73, C123, S130; II: Figs. 33, 36 [GS 11], 76b right, 127, 132 respectively); the lotus flower that the bodhisattva holds in his left hand is small and in full bloom.

All three figures display a decidedly ascetic characterisation,<sup>98</sup> indicated by the Brahmanic cord, the cervid or feline skin over the left shoulder, the total absence of jewels and the extreme simplicity of the headdress, which in the third case even lacks the Buddha image. Given the somatic characteristics (round face, flattened rather than aquiline nose, less pronounced eyeballs), the particular headdress (hair gathered above and falling to the left in schematic curled locks of progressive length, and a sort of circular “window” at the centre of the

<sup>95</sup> The date proposed by Lerner, although acceptable, is based on a wrong premise. It actually does not take a series of intrinsic and extrinsic elements into account which, as has often been noted here, means that it is not possible to perfectly equate artistic productions that differ in the material and technique used and their intended use even when they belong to closely related environments.

<sup>96</sup> It is to be noticed that both in bronze and rock sculptures the lotus (or a local variant of the family of *Nimphaeaceae*?), even when open and seen in frontal view, never shows the pistil, which remains always hidden within the closed inner row of petals.

<sup>97</sup> For further discussion see the following paragraph.

<sup>98</sup> For this aspect see Chap. 4.2.



Fig. 22 – Bronze sculpture depicting Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi (after Pal 1975: no. 45)

head showing the hair parted in almost horizontal locks), together with the emphatically linear execution of the drapes and hair and, finally, the type of alloy (Harle 1979: 133), the third figure takes its place in a geographical context other than that of the Pakistani-Kashmiri bronzes, which Harle assigns to north-western or western India, postulating the existence of minor or at any rate unknown production centres. In this specific case Harle sees the most probable provenance in the Panjab (*ibid.*: 134).<sup>99</sup>

The type of seat adopted in the bronzes nevertheless shows scant affinity with the iconographic lexis of the rock sculptures, which rarely dwell on sophisticated detail in their decoration. The airy play of interweaving forms displayed by the bronzes is completely lost in the rock sculpture, where the seat becomes solid and smooth.<sup>100</sup> And yet the process of simplification here is counterbalanced by an inventive approach that adapts the form of the seat to its function and, again, seems to take inspiration from the previous tradition. Certain Gandharan sculptures, probably belonging to a late phase, pointedly draw attention to the lotus supporting – or generating – the divine image, showing the flower fully open so as to expose the pistil completely. With this device the iconography is evidently intended to allude to the transcendental nature of the revelation. At the same time, by emphasising the position of the divine figure within the inner space of the lotus, the artists offer an inspired translation of a metaphor familiar to Indian religious thought – that of the lotus as a mystic receptacle.<sup>101</sup>

In the specific context of the Swat rock sculptures, the seat of Padmapāṇi (or at any rate more often associated with him than with other figures) seems to have emerged from a combination of the traditional wickerwork stool, possibly having already gone through the changes attested by the bronzes,<sup>102</sup> and this particular form of theophorous lotus. Of decisive importance here is the affinity between the upper contour of the pistil of the flower in the Gandharan sculptures and that slightly projecting element appearing at the top of seats in the rock sculptures, which at first sight looks like (and, after all, actually is) a rigid cushion. The seat is of quite considerable height in most cases, although somewhat lower in a few examples, and the presence of fillets at the base and top of the body are more suggestive of a dais than a rendering of the pistil of a lotus, however free it may be (e.g. C90 and S143; II: Figs. 90, and 145 [GS 34] respectively).

Another recurring type of seat is represented by a low backless chair, either in the shape of a podium with solid body or a four-legged throne. This typology combines two different artistic idioms, one closer to traditional forms of Gandharan origin, the other in the wake of more innovative trends widely attested by the stone and bronze sculpture that, for the sake of simplicity, we can generically term post-Gupta. These new models of throne are quite diffused over a vast area including not only Swat and Kashmir, but also central-northern India

<sup>99</sup> On the Western origin of the “window” headdress see Taddei (1962) and Harle (1987); both provide examples of the persistence of this motif in a late period, to which must be added the female bust kept in the British Museum, from Buner, and dated by Barrett to a period slightly earlier than Avantivarman (855-883) (Barrett 1957: 56; fig. 2). Also among the Pakistani-Kashmiri bronzes this particular headdress was largely present; see for example bodhisattvas nos. 42, 43, 50, 52 and 82 in Pal (1975), which, although with slight variations, are all based on the same prototype; all except no. 82, assigned by Pal to 600 ca. (a dating that is however quite doubtful), may be included stylistically in a series directly linked to the Queen Diddā bronze. Although the bronze discussed by Harle represents, at least so far, an isolated case of provincial art, it shows how the iconographic type of the pensive Padmapāṇi typical of Swat and the surrounding areas emerged as the reference model.

<sup>100</sup> The only known exception is the Padmapāṇi of Jare (C107; II: Fig. 108; GS 12), the seat of which is decorated with a circle motif that seems schematically to represent woven vegetal fibres.

<sup>101</sup> The list of examples would be pointlessly long. Reference is therefore made to Miyaji 1985b and Kurita 1988-1990 for a rapid, albeit incomplete, overview. By way of example a small but well known icon, perhaps from Jamālgarhī (in Kurita 1988-1990: I, fig. 408) may be taken. It portrays a triad, where the quasi naturalistic treatment of the theophoric lotuses, in particular those on which the two standing bodhisattvas rest, clearly render the idea of a base. The same iconographic practice tending to emphasise a physical and mystical coincidence between the “heart” of the lotus and the divine image appears also in cases in which the theophoric lotus is depicted with straight petals. Here the detail becomes less apparent as the pistil of the flower is partly concealed and at the same time is confirmed as being significant. Also here reference is made to verification by means of a well-known example, the (incomplete) triad published by Brough (1982).

<sup>102</sup> However, the inverse process cannot be ruled out, namely that the bronzes are based on the model created by the rock sculpture.

and areas that in one way or another were exposed to Indian artistic influence, from Ladakh to Tibet and as far as Mainland Southeast Asia. Despite local variants, they unmistakably show elements of formal unity such as a common repertoire of symbolic figures and the lively and dynamic character of the representation – all features that can also be recognised, albeit in a much simplified version, in the rock sculptures of Swat.

As for the more traditional current, this is not in itself a proof of an earlier dating of the monument displaying it. One can notice indeed that it is more frequently associated with Buddha figures, which in the rock sculpture are often characterised by a deliberate archaism (see above; cf. GS 1-8, esp. 2-4).

The large relief of Shakhorai (C92; II: Figs. 92a,b,c,d), which stands out from the general context on account of the flattened volumes and elegant flow of line,<sup>103</sup> offers the simplest and most austere example of the throne – a rectangular dais with projecting fillet above and below, and a flat cushion. Slightly more complex in form is the throne of the Buddha in stela S125 (II: Fig. 55; GS 4), decorated with a vegetal motive – probably rosettes or lotus scrolls – or a re-interpretation of the rosette-and-sheaf motif. Also taking inspiration from the more traditional repertory is stela S191 (II: Fig. 147; GS 8), where on the front face of the throne of a Buddha in *dhyānāsana* we see displayed, in the space between the frontal lions, two crouching deer, in profile, converging at the sides of a wheel. The same motif appears in a relief in Puran (Olivieri 1994: 474-475, fig. 12; here, Fig. 21). It may well be that the wheel was adopted in the artistic production of the areas and period we are concerned with here as a more generic symbol of the cosmocratic power of the Buddha, while the precise reference to the Park of Deers and the First Sermon might have been made to identify the image of Śākyamuni.<sup>104</sup>

However, the more traditional current also offers signs of the iconographic trend, albeit with some exceptions and at a marginal level. Among them, mention must be made of the characteristic fringed or knotted tassels falling along the sides of the throne, or the decorated drape occupying the central part – elements frequent not only in the rock sculptures but also in the bronzes.

We have only one case (or maybe two) of Buddha seated on an elephant throne. In a large relief in the Mingora area (C1; II: Figs. 1a,b; G35) the throne is borne by three crouching elephants, executed somewhat crudely, turned three-quarters rightwards in a view that shows only the muzzle with long trunk reaching down and coiling to the left, and part of the forelegs. Unfortunately the relief is badly damaged, and certain significant details can no longer be made out. Nevertheless, the arms are set at angles suggesting that the Buddha is performing the meditation gesture, being moreover the only *mudrā* that, with the few exceptions listed above (see Chap. 1.2), the rock

<sup>103</sup> The almost “drawing” style of the figure is highly reminiscent, particularly in the schematic treatment of the drape, of the strongly conventional nature of the upper Indus Valley graffiti, where the Buddha figure becomes a kind of pictogram (see Jettmar 1982: pl. 2, fig. 7).

<sup>104</sup> “Park of Deers” is the currently used definition, although a more correct translation of the original Sanskrit would read “Park of the Antelopes”. On this topic see the remarks by Fussman (1994a: 62) also in the light of the studies by D. König (1994: 75-76, 86-87). The specific iconographic reference to the First Sermon, in extra-Indian contexts, accentuates its symbolic connotation and takes on a broader field of application, eventually becoming a recurrent decorative element, as for example in Tibet (Fussman 1994a: 65). The wheel motif among the deer also appears in other bronzes; see for example the Buddha in the British Museum, sitting on a more complex seat comprising a lion throne with drape and tassels on a double lotus corolla that Barrett was the first to assign to the Swat Valley and dated, using too low a chronology, to between the late eighth and ninth century (Barrett 1962: 37; figs. 3-4). Quite similar is the Buddha of the Pan Asian Collection, identified by Pal as Gautama (Pal 1975: 198; no. 75), which displays a greater stylisation but also a more complex iconography owing to the presence of an elaborate radiate nimbus and two small female figures standing on lotus-shaped bases. However, the deer motif seems to take on a symbolic meaning regardless of the historical reference, even though it is derived from it. See for example the representations of deer in a rock cornice which sometimes appear in the bronzes, where the wheel is either absent (Pal 1975: no. 22a,b), or not directly connected with the deer (*ibid.*: no. 30 a,b). In these cases they seem to express a more generic relationship with the worldly level of existence, or better a reference to the value of asceticism in the scenario of the world (see for instance the association with an ascetic form of Avalokiteśvara/Lokeśvara in von Schroeder 1981: 128, 21A), although a convention persists in the iconography which requires them to be paired and squatting (on the symbolic significance of the rock see below). The mere presence of the deer evidently led Pal to consider the Buddha/Gautama identification as certain, even in the absence of the wheel (Pal 1975: no. 32, where the wheel is replaced by a crouching lion). The same identification is proposed by the author in other dubious cases as well, such as for the bejewelled Buddha of Nandivikramādityanandin (*ibid.*: no. 31).



sculptures iconography seems to have reserved for images of seated Buddhas.<sup>105</sup> The second example we have of an elephant throne was visible on the stela S85 (II: Fig. 87; GS 9) now lost (?), seen by Tucci (1958: 308, fig. 14) on the road between Manglaor and Azgharai. The stela is among the most complex and interesting from the point of view of iconography. The main subject is a standing Padmapāṇi, surrounded by minor figures, meditating Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and donors arranged vertically on a number of superimposed registers. One of the figures, on the second register from below, is portrayed seated on a throne supported by two (standing?) elephants in profile, diverging, with head and a foreleg depicted in a somewhat incongruous representation. Between the two animals there is an element that might well be interpreted as a highly stylised drape delineated with sharp lines. This character might be interpreted either as a bodhisattva or a bejewelled Buddha, or even – and more probably, indeed – as Akṣobhya, whom vajrayanic iconography often depicts as a bodhisattva (see below).

Although direct stylistic and iconographic comparisons are unfeasible, given the poor state of conservation, on the evidence of a pronounced affinity with the broader context of the rock sculptures we can liken these two examples to a sculpture belonging to a private collection, published by Kurita (1988-1990: II, figs. 295-298; here, Figs. 23a,b,c,d). The author traces the probable provenance of this object to Buner, but in the light of the possible comparisons we may equally well ascribe it to a Swati origin. On the four faces of a vertical parallelepiped sculpture, 40.5 cm tall, four principal figures are represented in relief projecting from a recessed background, conceived as a sort of niche, and four minor figures (in terms of size, but not necessarily of rank) above them, each set within a similar sort of niche with fairly regular contours.<sup>106</sup>



**Figs. 23a,b,c,d** – A miniature pseudo-*vihāra* element or miniature pillar-*stūpa* (after Kurita 1988-1990: II, figs. 295-298)

<sup>105</sup> Excluding very rare cases of total illegibility of the images, the angle of the arms allows the *mudrā* to be identified even in badly damaged sculptures. Among the rare cases of Buddhas depicted in *mūdras* other than the *dhyānimudrā*, some doubts remain about relief C6 (II: Fig. 6), in which the right arm of the Buddha is outstretched, thus suggesting a *bhūmisparśamudrā*, although it is only a non-verifiable hypothesis.

<sup>106</sup> This is probably a miniature pseudo-*vihāra* element, of which we have several Gandharan examples (cf. Kurita 1988-1990: II, nos. 431-433; Freschi 1994: no. 38). However, the chronological position of the piece, i.e. post-Gandharan, makes it equally likely that it was a miniature pillar-*stūpa* element, the latter better known outside India. The specimens preserved in Central Asia and China, especially inside caves, attest to the wide-spread diffusion of this typology, whose remote origin may be traced back to the *caitya* halls of western India. This topic, although referring to the Mogao cave site near Dunhuang, is extensively treated by Abe (1990).

Three of the principal subjects seem to represent different versions of Maitreya, while the fourth represents a Buddha in *dhyānāsana*, the head surrounded by a flaming nimbus, hair and drapes of the garments conforming to a manner of execution that finds affinities both in the rock sculptures and in the bronzes.

The throne upon which the Buddha is seated is borne by three frontal elephants, of which we see only the heads, the trunks coiling to the right, and the forelegs. The position is unnatural, the rendering of volumes heavy, almost as if squeezed in between the lower fillet and the cushion on the throne. Also reminiscent of Swati production, and especially the work in bronze, is the rendering (naïve as it is) of the lions on the throne of the seated Maitreya, which look as if they are emerging from the tassel-bordered drape.<sup>107</sup> The association with the figure of Maitreya raises a more general problem of interpretation. The figure of Akṣobhya appears to derive from an idealisation of the imperturbability of the Buddha Śākyamuni (Snellgrove 1989: 37). In fact, one of his distinctive attributions is the *bhūmi-sparśamudrā*, although the position of the hands, like the orientation of the figure, traditionally corresponding to the East, can vary, as we see in Tibetan iconography (Krom 1927: II, 146 ff.). We do not know whether, in this particular context, the figure of Akṣobhya was consciously adopted as a hypostasis of Śākyamuni or a separate identity.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, in the latter case, too, there are traces in the literature of a connection between Akṣobhya and Maitreya (as indeed, let us add, between Akṣobhya and Śākyamuni). In particular, in some of the texts of the *Prajñāpāramitā* Akṣobhya appears as the present Buddha, while Maitreya, Dīpaṅkara's disciple, is indicated as the future Buddha (*Hōbōgin*, s.v. Ashuku).

The elephant throne appears sporadically, and somewhat later, in the art of Gandhāra.<sup>109</sup> It consists of a fully opened lotus corolla, with pistil exposed, borne by three crouching elephants almost flattened on the base of the relief, in a very limited view revealing the central elephant frontally and the two at the sides in profile. The Indian inspiration is clear in this iconography, especially in the convention of the raised trunks, and is emphatically shown in one case where each of the elephants holds a closed lotus in its trunk (see below, fn. 109, no. 3).<sup>110</sup>

Among the clay thrones found in the Terrace of the Main Stūpa at Tapa Sardar (Ghazni, Afghanistan) – the images occupying them have since been lost – there is also one supported by two elephants (Taddei and Verardi 1985: pls. 5, 7, 10; here, Fig. 24). According to Verardi, the throne could have belonged to an image of Akṣobhya, the Buddha of the East customarily associated with an elephant. Evidence for this association is to be found in the position of the throne, set – albeit not with perfect precision – towards the south-east (*ibid.*: 30). For the purpose of comparison, the author cites a bronze from Charbagh, Swat, published by Barrett (1962: 39, fig. 13), belonging to the Wali Sahab collection of Swat. According to Barrett it portrays a bodhisattva in

The examples of open air pillar-*stūpas* include the Shijia Zhenru Sheli Baota (Śākyamuni's True Likeness Precious Relic Stūpa) near Baodingshan (Falco Howard 2001: fig. 118), the simplicity of whose structure makes it particularly well suited for comparison with our piece. The architectural elements and the arrangement of the iconographic subjects is strongly reminiscent of the Maṇuṣi Buddhas' *stūpas* (cf. Snodgrass 1985: 132-134), but the meaning here clearly revolves around Maitreya.

<sup>107</sup> For a brief overview of comparable bronze specimens cf. von Schroeder (1981: 10A, 11D, 11E, 11H etc.).

<sup>108</sup> See for instance the ambiguous character of the Orissan sculptures of the late sixth to eighth century depicting Buddhas in *bhūmi-sparśamudrā*, either alone or flanked by two bodhisattvas (Donaldson 2001: pp. 100 ff.; figs. 74-78).

<sup>109</sup> The elephant throne is present in at least three Gandharan stelae:

- 1) Triad within micro-architecture (Peshawar Museum; in Ingholt 1957: fig. 257; Miyaji 1985b: pl. IV, 1, no. 10; Kurita 1988-1990: I, fig. 396; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 45)
- 2) Triad within micro-architecture (Ingholt 1957: fig. XVI, 4; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 50)
- 3) Pentad (from Sahri Bahlol, Peshawar Museum; in Ingholt 1957: fig. 261; Miyaji 1985b: pl. III, 2, no. 5; Kurita 1988-1990: I, fig. 412; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 27).

<sup>110</sup> A different case is that of elephant figures acting as caryatids, as for example in a sculpture in the Portland Museum (Taddei and Verardi 1985: pl. 16). Here the Buddha is seated on a closed lotus flower beside which there are two small kneeling and praying figures. The figures are included in an architectural structure (probably a pavilion) supported by four columns of which only the bases remain. The figure rests on a bracketed base supported by three elephants with raised trunks (the two lateral ones in profile, the central one facing the front), alternated with winged atlases. An almost identical motif returns on the base of a relief depicting the *Parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, photographed in an antiques market (Archivio IsIAO, Dep. Cs Ng. R 16752, 10-12), but also in the small *stūpas* of Mohrā Morādu and Jauliān at Taxila (Marshall 1951: I, 361, 524-525; III, pls. 156-157), where the lower registers are decorated with alternating elephants and atlases.



Fig. 24 – Tapa Sardar, Throne 6 (courtesy ISIAO, neg. Dep. CS 7399/11)

*bhūmisparśamudrā*, originally holding a *kamaṇḍalu*, now lost, which Verardi however considers a possible representation of the Buddha Akṣobhya.<sup>111</sup>

Another image of Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, seated on a throne supported by three elephants standing frontally, may be likened to our relief C1. It consists of a bronze conserved in the National Museum of Karachi, in all likelihood from Swat, where the throne is characterised by a remarkable incongruity in the execution of the drapery: the cloth falls in two vertical series of close semi-circular folds between the elephants and seems to be finished on the two outer edges by a border with drop-shaped tassels (Figs. 25a,b).

What the elephant figures in all these extra-Gandharan examples have in common is the execution of the trunk, which is no longer raised but dangling and coiled at the end. In the Karachi bronze the attempt to give the animal figures a degree of dynamic symmetry was achieved by means of a slight differentiation in the design of the trunk – almost straight in the central one, with the lateral ones slightly raised towards the exterior – while

<sup>111</sup> The identification of this bronze sculpture with Akṣobhya is accepted also by von Schroeder (1981: 94, 11C). It is possible that the position of the right hand, which led Barrett to postulate the original presence of a *kamaṇḍalu*, is merely a misleading variant of the *bhūmisparśamudrā*.



**Figs. 25a,b** – Akṣobhya? (Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 447, neg. nos. 1859, 1873)

this stylistic sophistication, albeit modest, is completely absent in the rock reliefs. However, a greater staticity is generally observed in these figures than in the Gandhāra examples. It is perhaps due less to reasons of a purely stylistic nature and more to the different iconographic function of the animal, which is now viewed as an actual *vāhana* in association with particular divinities of the Buddhist pantheon, while in Gandhāra it seems rather to hold a more generic role of *nāga/makara*.

The identification of the Buddha on the elephant throne with Akṣobhya, as proposed by Verardi in the Tapa Sardar context, may theoretically be extended to also take in the Buddha of the above-mentioned pseudo-*vihāra* or miniature pillar-*stūpa*, the bodhisattva or Buddha depicted on the stela S85 and, ultimately, to the relief C1. However, in the latter case, any relationship between directional hierarchy and physical orientation of the sculpture, which faces north-west, is to be excluded. On the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that in Gandhāra as well, as perhaps at Tapa Sardar, an accurate topographic position of the sculptures (and not only in the specific case of the Buddhas of the five directions) represented an important criterion for image identification which, in the absence of an original context, is now entrusted to elements of ambiguous interpretation.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Cf. however what is stated above, with specific reference to Akṣobhya, in connection with the variability of the iconographic scheme.

The thrones examined so far belong to the simplest and most traditional typologies, even though, as we have seen, each has an equivalent that is widely attested in other similar and more or less contemporary productions which show how subjects inspired by the older tradition have again been integrated into an artistic and religious conception imbued with a fresh spirit. Nevertheless, in a very few samples we find thrones that, even in a very simplified form, can be more directly linked to the repertory typical of the bronze sculptures, where the thrones' structure is usually more complex and the iconographic motifs more innovative. However, the comparison does not stop short at the bronzes but may easily be extended to other categories of perhaps less well known objects, owing both to the limited number and to the lack of systematic studies: the stamped terracottas of Swat and the small stone icons from Kashmir (Paul 1981; Id. 1986).

One of the iconographic types most frequently found among the bronzes is the *śiṃhāsana* emerging from a simple or double lotus corolla, covered with a drapery bordered with tassels and often decorated with two large fringed or knotted tassels falling at the sides. Each of these elements, as has been seen, are frequently found in rock sculptures but are rarely all reproduced contemporarily and in detail.

The lotus corolla with reverse petals used to support the throne is a late Gandharan invention. It appears in a group of reliefs depicting non-narrative subjects which share highly pronounced stylistic characteristics. In particular, the iconometric canons are based on abstract values: massive flattened volumes, highly conventional anatomical rendering, schematic drapery, with sparse pairs of incised lines, relative gigantism of the figures accentuated by the disproportion of faces and hands.<sup>113</sup>

In the Gandharan version the throne is still of the traditional type: rectangular, decorated with semi-rosettes inside filleted triangles (see fn. 113, no. 4), with cushion and drape (*ibid.*, nos. 1 and 2), but also with a drapery leaving two small lateral columns uncovered (*ibid.*, nos. 3, 5, 6), perhaps to be understood not as decorative protomes of a full podium but as the legs of a seat with an open structure. The drapery is of the simple type, sometimes decorated with a vertical band with an incised rhombus pattern (*ibid.*, nos. 3 and 5). The lotus has a simple corolla, with reverse lanceolate, usually bordered, petals and an indication of the pistil. In only one specimen does the lotus have a double corolla (*ibid.*, no. 6).

This initial prototype evolves into a more complex throne. Widely documented among the bronzes, this type of throne appears among the rock sculptures in a very simplified form and with a number of variants, frequently associated with the Buddha and occasionally with bodhisattvas. The columns of the Gandharan specimens are replaced or sometimes accompanied by a pair of lions, in frontal view with the anterior paws upright, or else in profile, crouching on their rear paws, or again, in a version probably typical of Swat, in frontal view and crouching with forepaws crossed below the chest. The lion figures generally display the same proportions (oversized head, short paws) in the frontal view with upright forepaws, a peculiarity that tends to be corrected in the version viewed in profile or crouching. One example of the first case is the relief C3 (II: Fig. 3). Here the *śiṃhāsana*, as in the majority of rock sculptures, is much simpler than in the bronzes, with respect to which it also displays a particular variant: the lions' heads are turned towards a large central wheel, according to a common compositional pattern. A similar feature is found also in reliefs C6 (II: Fig. 6) and C9 (II: Figs. 8a,b; GS 7), where, in the central part of the throne, it is just possible to perceive residual traces of another figurative element that also in these cases might have been a wheel.

<sup>113</sup> A list of examples, probably incomplete, is given here:

- 1) Pentad, Indian Museum, Calcutta (Foucher 1909: pl. 10; Id. 1905-1951: II, fig. 406; Tsuda 1937 (?): fig. 96; Miyaji 1985b: pl. XII, 2, no. 20; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 21)
- 2) Pentad, from Sahri Bahlol (?), private collection (Kurita 1988-1990: I, fig. 410; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 22)
- 3) Pentad, National Museum, Karachi (Miyaji 1985b: pl. VII, 1, no. 14; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 23)
- 4) Pentad, antiques market (Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 24)
- 5) Pentad, from Charsada, Patna (or Lahore?) Museum (Miyaji 1985b: pl. X, 2, no. 25; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 31)
- 6) Triad, National Museum, New Delhi (Miyaji 1985b: pl. XI, 2, no. 24; Filigenzi 2012a: fig. 32)

To this a further specimen is possibly to be added, a pentad split and cracked in the bottom right part, where the horizontal element conserved under the throne is most likely to be interpreted as the upper edge of a lotus pistil (Kurita 1988-1990: I, fig. 407).

In relief C30 (II: Figs. 31a,b; GS 6) the throne is even simpler; the space between the two frontal lions is empty and instead of the fringed tassels we find two slender columns that previously appeared in several Gandharan examples. The strong outward jutting of the execution should however be noted as it calls to mind the open-work treatment of many thrones in the bronze sculptures, as though the artist had drawn inspiration from them.<sup>114</sup> The good state of conservation of the relief enables us here to perceive a number of details, which are also typical of this production, such as the almost human expressiveness of the lions and the mane, which creates a crown of curls around the head and takes on a leaf-like shape on the chest, where the fur is given a hairstyle appearance with a central parting.

The more traditional form of lion throne (a low rectangular chair supported by two frontal lions and a single or double row of lotus petals at the base) is associated in one case (C31; II: Figs. 32a,b; GS 20) also with the figure of Maitreya, and in several stelae with the figure of Padmapāṇi (S37, S46, S136, and probably S44; II: Figs. 39a,b, 46a,b,c [GS 13], 137 and 45a,b respectively). Also associated with the latter is a type of *siṃhāsana* that is stylistically and iconographically more complex and innovative in the relief C96 (II: Fig. 96; GS 14), with crouching lions between which there is the typical drapery bordered with tassels. Another decorative element can also be made out on the extreme left of the throne. It probably represents not the lateral, large pendant tassel typical of many similar examples but rather a tasselled border identical to that of the central drapery, as though the drapery itself covered the entire throne and was simply lifted up over the lions' body, as in other previously illustrated cases. The same treatment of the drape may be found in another bronze sculpture, also belonging to the National Museum of Karachi collection (Figs. 26a,b). Again the image is that of a Buddha, in *varadamudrā*, on a *siṃhāsana* supported by a lotus with a double corolla.

Despite the difference in the way the dress folds are treated, with simple incised lines running from right to left in one case and converging towards the centre in the other, the two bronzes have numerous other stylistic details in common: the treatment of the clothing, which coincides perfectly in the overall design (see below); the shell-like curls of the hairstyle; the physiognomic type; the three-lined neck; the anatomical structure; and even the drape tassels, which have a similar drop-like design. It should also be noted that in both cases the hem of the dress held by the Buddha in his left hand resembles a cord rising up over the left leg and passing under the right foot.<sup>115</sup> It is therefore appropriate not to attach undue importance to the way the drape is rendered, as it might be based on different models for which in any case a long-standing previous tradition exists and which

<sup>114</sup> The same impression is also conveyed for example by a small Kashmiri stela in the British Museum (Brooke Sewell Fund, 1960, 4-11.3) depicting a triad; here the throne is characterised by greater detail and a more complex iconography, including the small figure of an atlas seated cross-legged among the lions, with arms raised. Close similarities with the throne of the stela cited here are offered by several bronzes which display the motif in an almost identical way (Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, in *Oriental Art*, 14, 1, 1968: 21; Buddha in *abhayamudrā*, from the monastery of Phyang, Ladakh, in M. Singh, 1968: 53; Buddha in *abhayamudrā*, protected by the snake Mucilinda, in Pal 1975: no. 23; Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, in Patterson 1978: fig. 6; jewelled Buddha in *abhayamudrā*, in Siudmak 2011: no. 16), or with only slight variations, where the two slender frontal columns are placed between the atlas and the lions rather than at the ends (Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, in Pal 1975: no. 25; jewelled Buddha in *varadamudrā*, *ibidem*: no. 32), or lastly a more complex organisation with the addition of rampant dragons between the atlas and the lions (Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* from Fatehpur, first published by Vogel, in ASIAR 1904-1905: pl. XXXV; Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, in Pal 1975: no. 21a,b). Clearly, the comparison is based on the front view, which is the one reproduced on the reliefs. In the bronzes, the throne, with its three-dimensional structure, is composed of four corner columns and sometimes displays figured elements on the rear side as well (e.g. the Fatehpur bronze, the back of which again bears the portrayals of the two rampant dragons, this time facing the front with enlaced bodies, between two frontal lions). It should be noted how this type of throne, ranging from the simplest to the most complex form, is exclusively associated in the bronzes with Buddha figures. The gryphon is listed by Paul (1986: 52) among the most significant analogies between the motifs of the tiles of Harwan and the iconographic repertoire of the Hūṇa coins. However, it should be noted that a very similar motif, i.e. the intertwined dragons, was already known in Gandhāra (cf. Zwalf 1996: 344). Striking, in my opinion, are the formal and thematic similarities with the ancient but long living motif of the “animal master”. For an insightful and stimulating overview of the ideological consistency of this motif see D’Erme 1997. On the astronomic/astrological meaning of the two intertwined dragons see Santoro 2003.

<sup>115</sup> One wonders if this is the loop or bandage used by ascetics to maintain the difficult position of *padmāsana*. This detail, commonly found in bronzes, also warrants a reappraisal of the Gandharan examples. On this topic see Filigenzi 2005b: 114.



**Figs. 26a,b** – Buddha on a *siṃhāsana*  
(Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 442, neg. nos. 1861, 1874)

conceivably were in use contemporaneously. Consideration must also be given to the fact that the different types of drapery can slightly alter the anatomical rendering, with the latter becoming more conspicuous where the folds are only incised lines and less evident when the drapery is rendered in relief, as in the case of these two bronzes. In short, it may be postulated that, despite the differences, they belong to the same series. The similarity of the *siṃhāsana* depicted in the Karachi bronze to that of relief C96 is striking owing to the particular rendering of both the drapery and the lion figures, which are characterised by the same arrangement of the mane, in locks falling over the shoulders, and the leaf-like appearance of the fur on chest.

The constant tendency to simplify detail, which characterises the entire rock art production of Swat, is contradicted in several instances, although it is perhaps significant that these exceptions are in any case applied only to the stelae. One example of complex *siṃhāsana* is represented, for instance, by stela S140 (II: Fig. 140; GS 38), depicting the haloed figure of a *siddha*, accompanied by two minor figures, a male and a female, also with nimbuses, standing on two small lotus flowers.<sup>116</sup> The throne is composed of a double lotus corolla with opposing petals and darts with a receding row of leaves (?); a smooth fillet borders the base of the relief, following the trend thereof. On the corolla stands the podium, supported by two lions with their heads projecting upwards on the slightly bulging cushion, from the extremities of which hang two large tassels composed of a knot and a fringe. The lions crouch frontally, the heads erect, the paws crossed under the chest, the typical curled mane falling to the sides, bulging globular eyes with incised pupils. Between them lies a hem of the drape, with the

<sup>116</sup> For a detailed analysis of this particular subject see Chap. 6.

now illegible pattern of its border decorated by superimposed rows of rosettes (?). The drape hangs downwards, describing a roughly trapezoidal curve in accordance with a convention common also among the bronzes.<sup>117</sup>

For this particular example, a close comparison is offered by a stamped terracotta plaque depicting a Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* seated on a very similar throne (Callieri 1985: 203, pl. VIb). The plaque, discovered during the excavation of Damkot, has been dated by Abdur Rahman to the late sixth century (Abdur Rahman 1979: 288).<sup>118</sup> Here the lions, unlike those of the stela, display the fur on their chest as well, which repeats the usual leaf-like motif. Greater schematism may also be perceived in the way the throne's drapery is depicted, with no decoration and plain border, as well as in the tassels with straight and slightly oblique fringes. The base, echoing Gandharan conventions, is composed of a lotus corolla with single row of reverse petals and darts, and the exposed crown of the stamen. Several features of the plaque are of great interest, most predominantly the background, where we find a widespread and long-lasting motif that will become typical of Pāla art: the backed throne decorated laterally by rampant leogryphs mounted on elephants and topped by *makara* heads, which can just be perceived against a background entirely covered with phytomorphic motifs. The Buddha's flaming nimbus soars upwards from the back, giving the object its typical profile with a kind of cusp high up in the centre.

The Damkot plaque is not an isolated case as it may be linked to a relatively well documented mass production in the region lying between Swat and the Indus, which Paul (1981: 421) assigns to a period between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century. Although fragmentary, the objects in this particular series (small terracotta plaques and moulds) clearly display salient iconographic and stylistic characteristics that, while on the one hand are found to be typical of a genre production, on the other allow interesting comparisons to be made with other more or less contemporary art manifestations. As well as the representation of isolated figures, as attested by the Damkot plaque, the stamped clay production seems often to include another subject: a central figure of worship that from the surviving fragments may be imagined to be surrounded by a flaming nimbus, at the sides of which there are two (or more) minor figures. These figures, which also bear nimbuses, are generally denoted by a pronounced *ābhaṅga* and by the particular anatomical rendering, with the forms clearly revealed under an almost invisible garment, according to the formal tradition of the "Gupta" style. The motif of the drapery nevertheless persists in the recurring motif of the shawl, which falls laterally in a wavy motion and full-bodiedness that sharply contrast the diaphanous consistency of the robes. The same convention is applied to the female figure on stela S140 (II: Fig. 140; GS 38); the flaming nimbus appears here as well, a motif which is moreover quite widespread in rock sculpture in Swat.

The theme of a central figure accompanied by an ancillary pair is attested in environments other than that of stamped clay, not only by the stela cited but also by several bronzes. One of these is a bronze in the Pan-Asian Collection depicting the Buddha Śākyamuni, as shown by the presence at the base of two deer at the side of a wheel (Pal 1975: no. 75). Comparison with the Swat stela is particularly cogent, not only due to the presence of the ancillary figures at the sides of the Buddha, but also to the extremely similar treatment of the *śimhāsana*, with marginal differences in the view of the lions (here they are frontal) and in the shape of the lotus supporting the throne, with a simple reverse petal corolla. On top, at the centre of the Buddha's flaming nimbus, there is another recurrent iconographic motif, a *stūpa* surmounted by the astral symbol of the solar disk on a lunar sickle with infulae at the top.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> For a quick overview of this particular rendering of the drape I refer to the several specimens in Pal 1975 and von Schroeder 1981, to which now the seated Maitreya published by Siudmak (2011: no. 23) is to be added.

<sup>118</sup> This dating is actually based on the assumption that this is the *terminus post quem non* for the life of the Buddhist settlement. The chronology of the site, especially with regard to the late phases, is nevertheless to be revised. On this see Part II, p. 234, fn. 29.

<sup>119</sup> The presence of this *stūpa* crowning motif is also documented among the graffiti of Chilas II and Thalpan (Fussman 1994a: 60-61). In stone sculpture, a *stūpa* thus crowned is depicted on the rear of a small icon in the British Museum representing a triad on the profiled anterior face (neg. no. CVIII-5), which the museum information sheet assigns to Kashmir and dates to the eighth century, although it seems rather to be part of that "transition" series documented between the North-West and Kashmir, which Paul assigns to the sixth century (Paul 1986: 101 ff.). In the bronzes this astral motif appears not only in this form but also as an ornament on the shoulders of the three-pointed cape of a bejewelled Buddha (Pal 1975: nos. 29, 30, 32). On the origin and spread of this motif, which produced original fusions with the *pūrṇaḥaṭa* at Bāmiyān (Tarzi 1973), see Berthier (1991).





**Figs. 27a,b** – Maitreya with ancillary pair  
(Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 449, neg. nos. 1855, 1870)

This is an example of that relatively complex conventional frame denoted as the “Buddhist aureole”, which is processed separately and then applied to the main figure by means of dovetailing systems. This separate body, in addition to the ancillary pair, also includes the nimbus of the central figure with its possible crown and a transition structure joining the various elements. The pattern may be made more elaborate, for instance by adding arches to frame the two lateral figures and other smaller decorative elements on the sides, and so on up to the more complex structures, of which some famous examples remain.<sup>120</sup> A frame of this kind must also have accompanied the

<sup>120</sup> There are numerous examples. For the simplest ones see the Maitreya image from the Karachi Museum (Figs. 27a,b), the frame of which includes the ancillary pair standing on a simple fillet, and the flaming nimbus with a transition element in the form of a thin continuous undecorated plate. In another specimen in the National Museum of Karachi, in a frame lacking the principal figure, the pattern is slightly more complex owing to the presence of crowning elements (*stūpa* in top centre and adamantine symbols enclosed by vegetal scrolls [Fig. 28]). In a similar case, this crown is instead figured and consists of two *gandharvas* (?) with *cāmara* (Paul 1979: fig. 21). An even greater iconographic richness is attested by the “Buddhist aureole” published by Pal (1975, no. 44), who dated it to around 800. This consists of a large flaming frame crowned by a *stūpa* with astral symbols at the top; in the centre are the nimbus and the aureole originally enclosing the central figure, without doubt a Buddha; between the latter and the edge, enclosed by a dense pattern of interlaced phytomorphic decorative motifs, smaller figures are depicted: on the side, two standing bodhisattvas, separated from the central figure by two thin semi-columns; and above a pair of *kinaras*, a pair of *gandharvas* and a series of



Fig. 28 – Buddhist aureole (Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 444, neg. no. 1864)

Karachi image of the Buddha in *varadamudrā* described above (Fig. 26), which still bears on the back a plate fragment and on the right, at the level of the knee, a small projecting lotus-shaped base that originally served as a support for a smaller figure (of which the feet remain), which must have had a counterpart on the opposite side.

The practice of completing bronzes by means of joining elements seems however to have been quite widespread. Indeed, the bronzes examined so far, which have come down to us without any frame, all possess at least one small tenon on the back, at the shoulders level, which one assumes served as a pivot for the nimbus. However, in many cases the tenon is accompanied by a socket, generally situated at the top of the throne, which seems to point to the original presence of a more complex frame, namely, the traditional figured “Buddhist aureole” that in preserved, intact specimens displays a dovetailing system that is perfectly compatible with the enon and socket of the “unadorned” bronzes.<sup>121</sup>

meditating Buddhas. This type of applied frame is not, however, restricted to Buddhist production. See for instance the well-known and even more complex Avatāra frame of Srinagar (Pal 1975: no. 11).

<sup>121</sup> The joining system is visible in the Karachi Maitreya and its frame (see previous fn.), which illustrate the mechanism of the double male and female joint for the more complex frames that, in view of their size, require a number of points of attachment. This is

A persistent compositional convention therefore exists which is transmitted to various categories of objects, each of which expands or suppresses certain details, adapting the basic scheme to suit its specific needs and scope according to the material, to the processing technique and ultimately to the use to which it is to be put. The intricate decorative pattern of the terracottas is lost completely in the rock sculptures and becomes schematised in the bronzes,<sup>122</sup> reappearing in the stamped decoration on stucco and clay, as in the case of Tapa Sardar (Taddei and Verardi 1985: 20; 27; pl. 6). It must therefore be inferred that this decorative motif, although popular in the north-west regions, was, for reasons of cost, limited to the objects allowing the use of the stamping technique. On the other hand, other elements persist, such as the flaming nimbus and the hemmed drapery covering the throne, largely present at Tapa Sardar (*ibid.*: 30; pls. 4, 5, 7, 9; Fig. 24).

In the pattern of correspondences between the various categories of objects, accessory elements occasionally appear as well, such as in the Damkot plaque, in which the Buddha figure displays a striking resemblance to that of the Karachi bronze depicting the Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* on an elephant throne. The pose is identical, with the soles of the feet clearly visible. Identical are also the headdress, the body and face volumes (with a highly rounded chin and very similar features with regard to physiognomy and proportions), and the gesture, with the left hand holding a hem of the clothing. The drapery design is practically the same as well, with a 'V' neck, folds converging towards the centre of the bust, and the crenellated hem of the *saṃghāṭī* on the right leg, from which protrudes the *antaravāsaka* to form a motif consisting of straight linear folds repeated for the hem of the garment on the opposite leg. At the hem the separation between *saṃghāṭī* and *antaravāsaka* is perhaps marked by a clearly visible pair of folds executed in greater relief. Moreover, it is precisely this peculiar pattern of neckline and hems that shows the degree of affinity between the two Karachi bronzes mentioned earlier, and which confirms a non-linear distribution of the stylistic and iconographic correspondences. On the front of the rock sculpture it is possible to observe how the surviving part of the great Buddha image of Tindo-dag (C115; II: Fig. 115; GS 2) conforms to the same conventional drapery pattern.

The existence of iconographic models that have been freely adapted to suit the different contexts is reiterated by the form of a particular *siṃhāsana*, which sometimes appears in the bronzes, but is found in only one case in the rock sculpture repertory of Swat. This is one of the previously cited stela (S46; II: Figs. 46a,b,c; GS 13) or rather the lower right fragment of a stela, which has retained the left foot of a bodhisattva in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, certainly Padmapāṇi, resting on the base of a throne composed of a lotus with reverse petals and darts and a podium supported by two lions (of which only the right hand one is preserved), with torso and head facing the front, the body in profile, and crouching on the rear paws, forepaws upright, the tail coiled upwards. Lions in a similarly unnatural posture are found in several bronzes, separated by columns and atlas (Pal 1975: no. 32), or with tails enlaced and coiled, as in the case of the well-known bronze of Nandivikramādityanandin (*ibid.*: no. 31). The persistence of this motif (as well as of many others) is easily traced inside the Pāla production, where the fantastic character of such representation is often accentuated, as in the case in which the lions' tails terminate in complex volutes based on ornamental phytomorphic motifs (British Museum, Bridge Collection, 1827.7-1.27).<sup>123</sup>

No less significant than the recurring motifs is the absence – or the very sporadic occurrence – of other motifs, of which a considerable number of cases, however, are found in other, very similar contexts. Although not excluding the possibility that some evidence might have been lost because of the precarious state of conservation, they remain in any case significantly episodic.

indirect confirmation that a single tenon usually situated at the base of the neck on the back of the figures was meant for a single nimbus. For a brief verification cf. Pal 1975, where in many "unadorned" examples the rear part is visible showing the system for dovetailing the applied parts.

<sup>122</sup> The simplification of several motifs does not involve only the Pakistani-Kashmiri bronzes but also a large proportion of the Pāla production. For a rapid overview of the latter cf. S.K. Mitra (1979), S.L. Huntington 1984, and Ray, Khandalavala and Gorakshkar (1986).

<sup>123</sup> For the Pāla-era production see S.L. Huntington (1984, with preceding bibliography).



**Figs. 29a,b** – Maitreya on rock throne  
(Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 443, neg. nos. 1856, 1866)

This is the case, for instance, of the rock throne. This typology is found in only five specimens, invariably associated with the figure of meditating Padmapāṇi: in reliefs C72 (II: Fig. 75), C19 (II: Fig. 19), C100 (uncertain; II: Fig. 100), C194 (II: Fig. 66) and in stelae S132 (II: Fig. 80; GS 15) and probably, with a more complex iconography, S42 (II: Fig. 43). The body of the bodhisattva's seat consists here of quadrangular flat crude ash-lars subdivided into two or three sections by engraved lines. This is the iconographic convention customarily used to render the idea of rock, and which is widely applied in sculpture and painting, from India to Xinjang.

The most direct comparison for the rock sculptures comes from three bronzes of the Karachi collection, the execution of which is identical with regard to iconographic and stylistic idiom. The first two (Figs. 29a,b; 30a,b) consist of two seated bodhisattvas, with a long *paridhāna*, *uttarīya* draped like a shawl, a large three-crested crown held by a string with two bows projecting out from the sides of the head with long descending ends, a Brahmanic cord, bangles, bracelets, a short necklace, and pendant earrings. The hair is gathered on top, with the exception of two long coiled locks clinging to the head behind the ears and falling over the shoulders. Like the hair, the garment folds as well are defined by a dense drawing of parallel lines. The faces have a thin mouth and nose, and large elongated, semi-open and bulging eyes.

On the other hand, the pose and the attributes are different and define two distinct personalities: one of them is a Maitreya in *varadamudrā*, identifiable from the reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, the *utpala* lotus in the



**Figs. 30a,b** – Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi on rock throne  
(Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 444, neg. nos. 1862, 1871)

left hand and a long-necked *kalaśa* which seems to hang from the stem of the latter and, lastly, from the *stūpa* effigy on the central crest of the crown. His necklace has a richer appearance, with threads terminating in a vaguely floral form; the other one is the typical meditating Padmapāṇi in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, who holds in his left hand, resting on one leg, a long-stemmed lotus with open frontal corolla above the shoulder and bears on the central crest of the crown the effigy of a meditating Buddha. Both bodhisattvas have the foot of the outstretched leg resting on a small curved-stem lotus which seems to emerge from the throne.

Except for the base, smooth for Maitreya and with two recessing listels for Padmapāṇi, and for the top, a simple cushion for the former and a low lotus corolla, with upturned, bordered petals and darts for the latter, the throne has the same structure: a truncated pyramid tapering slightly at the base. The optical perspective of the tapering, which is minimal in order to take into account the ratio between the base and the top, is heightened by the expedient of dividing the three rows of ashlar of which the throne is composed into two sections separated by a groove running above the lower row, which ends in the two anterior corners in a kind of upward projecting tooth.

A simpler version of the same structure is found in the third bronze (Figs. 31a,b), representing a bodhisattva belonging to the *prajñā* family, characterised by a reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*. The differences with the two preceding bronzes may be briefly listed as follows: curly hair instead of straight locks, absence of Brahmanic



**Figs. 31a,b** – Vajrapāṇi on rock throne  
(Karachi National Museum; courtesy MNAOR, NM 1959 445, neg. nos. 1857, 1863)

cord, necklace of cylindrical beads with circular extremity. In *varadamudrā*, the bodhisattva holds in his left hand an object hanging downwards, the grip of which is hidden. However, the shape of the object, an elongated pentagon, suggests a two-pointed *vajra*, one point of which the bodhisattva is concealing in the closed palm of the hand, perhaps to express a particular meaning. The presence of a diamond as effigy on the central crest of the crown makes this identification of the attribute likely, and consequently that of the figure as Vajrapāṇi or Vajrasattva (see also Chap. 5). The throne on which the bodhisattva is seated, with its smooth moulded base and two rows of receding ashlar, is also divided into two sections by a deep groove that heightens the gradual receding of the elements composing the throne and in this case makes up for the absence of tapering. A very similar version is found in a fourth bronze, quite certainly depicting Maitreya, in reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, with *kalaśa* in the left hand stretching downwards and *akṣamālā* in the right hand lifted up to shoulder level (von Schroeder 1981: 12 H). The only differences consist of the row of ashlar also on the base of the throne and the shape of the cushion, depicted as a low lotus corolla with upturned petals.

Among the Swat bronzes, a perhaps slightly later interpretation of the rock throne is contained in an image of Padmapāṇi in the Cleveland Museum of Art (von Schroeder 1981: 84; fig. 6f). The figure is seated cross-legged, wearing only a *paridhāna* fastened on one side, in *varadamudrā*, holding a closed lotus with long, curved stem in the palm of the slightly lifted up left hand. The bodhisattva has no crown, which has been replaced by a

voluminous headdress, a fan-shaped chignon drawn tight at the base by a ribbon. The throne is of the lotus corolla type (here with reverse petals) placed on top like a cushion, while the base is made up of a row of ashlar with a broken line, with the customary groove separating it from the two upper rows. The upwards projecting teeth are here transformed into large volutes on the anterior face. The same taste of decoration for the sake of decoration can also be observed in the way the hair is treated: it is dense and tidy, with symmetrical curls.

The tapered shape of the throne, a motif that is not found in the rock sculptures, is obviously a reference to the mountain. The rock-mountain relationship and the associated imagery are strongly present in the religious art of the period and are expressed with great plastic verve not only in the bronze production, but also in several stone sculptures in Kashmir (see below). This idea gained such an important place in the religious imagery of the time that it is found very frequently and, moreover, in a range of iconographic forms that express now an aspect, now a possible relationship, now a psychological feature, to the point of becoming a true *topos* of Buddhist art from India to the Far East.

It is impossible to determine whether the explicit reference to the mountain and its symbolism expressed in these bronzes should be interpreted in a general sense, or whether, even in this simple form, it contains a specific reference to Mount Meru, which is found instead very clearly expressed in another group of bronzes, where the rock throne takes on the form of an hourglass.

The reference to Mount Meru is quite obvious in the case of the Vajrasattva in the Pan-Asian Collection (Pal 1975: no. 59 a,b), where two snake-like *nāgas* are depicted coiled around the central narrowing part of the throne. The bronze in question has a large number of stylistic features in common with the Padmapāṇi in the Cleveland Museum, owing to the typical drapery of the *paridhāna*, whose closely packed linear folds converge towards the left side, as well as to the abandoning of the albeit vague naturalism in the treatment of the hair, with a dense disc pattern. In reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* – in accordance with the custom expressed also in the rock sculptures for the bodhisattvas of the *prajñā* family – the bodhisattva has his right foot resting on the small lotus emerging from the base of the throne. He is seated on a lotus corolla with upturned petals and darts placed like a cushion on the top of the throne. The Brahmanic cord is absent, but the figure is embellished with rich jewellery and a three-crested crown bearing five small figures of Buddha in *dhyānāsana* and has as attributes a two-pointed *vajra* held in the right hand against the chest and a *ghaṇṭā* in the left hand resting on one knee. A definite suggestion for this particular iconography may be found in the legend that explicitly links Vajrapāṇi-Vajrasattva to the myth of the churning of the ocean, implemented using Mount Meru as pivot and the *nāgas* as cords.<sup>124</sup>

A more slender version of the throne, which is nevertheless almost identical with regard to the other details, appears on another bronze specimen, the so-called Buddha of the year 92 (Fussman 1993: 31-32, pls. 23-27), where in the central narrowing the snake-like ends of two *nāgas* are tied together. The reference to Mount Meru retains its force, even though in this case the lack of any explicit mythological link means it is more generic, at the same time emphasising its symbolic value. Mount Meru seems in other words to be incorporated into the late antique Buddhist iconography now as a philological reference to legendary events, now as the pure quintessence of the sacred mountain. In this acceptance, the hour-glass form of the rock throne is again associated with Vajrapāṇi, in his terrific version (Pal 1975: no. 60). Here, the throne, without the *nāgas*, nevertheless houses in a central niche two lions depicted in an extremely natural attitude, one peacefully crouching, the other with its head turned upwards as though to contemplate the figure on the throne.

In all these cases, however, the clear-cut hourglass form contains a definite and non-accidental suggestion of the *vajra*, in which it is possible to postulate a conscious synthesis between the rock/mountain theme (it is

<sup>124</sup> The churning of the ocean, in the Buddhist version of the Indian myth, was decided by the Buddhas' meeting on Mount Meru, in order to cause the Water of Life (*amṛta*) hidden in its depths to emerge, and to be used as an antidote against the poison of the demon Hālā-hala. Guarded by Vajrapāṇi, the *amṛta* was later stolen by the monster Rāhu, who was then fiercely combated and defeated. The Buddhas, however, intending to punish Vajrapāṇi for his inattention, compelled him to drink a mixture of poison and *amṛta*: this would explain the blue colour of Vajrapāṇi (Getty 1914: 49). It should be observed how Vajrapāṇi, in this version, is the Buddhist counterpart of Śiva Nīlakaṇṭha.

on a mountain top that Indian mythology, both Brahmanic and Buddhist, often places founding events) and the idea of the adamantine throne, the symbol of indestructible firmness.

A much more complex version of the rock throne appears in a bronze of the Norton Simon Foundation depicting a Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* (Fussman 1993: 49-50, pls. 35-39, with preceding bibliography). Situated in the internal cavity are a man and a woman seated in a relaxed pose. She is intently listening to him playing the flute, a now missing element whose original presence is clearly indicated by the position of the male figure's hands.<sup>125</sup> On each side, outside the cavity, are four donors with highly differentiated appearances (a man and a woman in Indian dress at the sides of the cave, followed by a bearded man in Scythian costume on the right, and a monk, on the left). In the far corners, on two receding elements on the same plane, are two (divine? royal?) male figures kneeling on a lotus flower with a double corolla, with short *paridhāna*, three-crested crown and rich jewellery accessories, including the long *vanamālā*. The relative sizes of the various figures, in the order in which they have been described, have been somewhat increased. The lower plane of the throne houses animal figures inside small niches: deer, lions, rams. With the exception of the deer, facing the front from the centre of the anterior face and peacefully crouching, the other animal figures, depicted also on the sides and at the back, may be distinguished by their different, highly natural, dynamic poses, especially the lions on the anterior face depicted in the act of licking their own genitals. A pair of birds in the centre of the front face, on the upper shelf of the rock throne, completes the concise but effective picture given of this vivid earthly universe at the feet of Buddha.

Stylistically speaking the bronze may be compared with the Buddha of Fatehpur (Vogel 1904-1905), owing to the shell-like curls of the hairstyle, to the cushion decorated with pearl-studded medallions, but above all to the characteristic pattern of the garment, which leaves the right shoulder uncovered and one part of which falls behind the left shoulder with a hem that, rising along the chest, widens into a triangle with an undulating pleat motif. The Fatehpur bronze, the lower part of which has been badly worn, has not preserved the elements of the other work, in which the hems of the garment repeat the crenellated motif of the upper part. However, a striking common element is the manneristic preoccupation with detail, which also shapes the drape of the garment – with its abstract curved lines converging on the centre in one case, and to one side in the other – as well as the softness of the features with the weak chin and the almost complacent expression on the face. These features appear to be shared by many specimens of the production labelled as Kashmiri, which includes not only bronzes (among them the above-cited Buddha of the year 92), but also ivory objects (Asher 1972) and stone sculptures, some of which reproduce the rock throne motif with minimal variations.

In the ivory sculpture the rock throne is characterised by the extraordinary vivacity of the animals contained in it, thus bearing witness to their fidelity to a model that evidently was a well known one. This is true, for instance, of the panel belonging to the Kanoria Collection (*ibid.*: pls. I, II), where the central Buddha, surrounded by Māra's terrifying hordes, is depicted in *dhyānāsana* on a throne from which emerge two roaring lions gazing upwards. A more complex case is that of the throne of the meditating Buddha surrounded by minor figures in the Prince of Wales Museum (*ibid.*: pl. X), where two cervids have been added to the lions, forced by the artist into unnatural contortions but producing a strongly dynamic effect.

<sup>125</sup> The interpretation of this iconographic detail is not easy. According to Pal (1975: 92, no. 22a,b) the couple inside the cave could be interpreted as shepherds, or simply musicians related to the worship of Buddha, in which music plays an essential part. Nevertheless the position and attitude of the couple, in which the woman seems enraptured by the music played on her companion's flute, suggests a more subtle symbolic meaning. I personally believe that this iconographic detail is an allusion to the "cavern of the senses", namely to a level of existence under the deceptive influence of the *prakṛti*, while the other figures, also depicted on the rock but outside the cave, seem to represent a different level of consciousness which is externalised in the worship of Buddha. However, I should also like to mention, although with less conviction, the legend contained in a seventh-century Chinese text (but actually dating back to an earlier tradition) in which mention is made of the "cave of *vajra*" on Mount Wu-t'ai shan, the residence of Mañjuśrī. In this case the bodhisattva was supposed to have deposited "[...] des instruments de musique célestes offerts par un démon au buddha du passé Kāśyapa [...]. Il y a là une cithare [...] en argent, jouée par un être céleste en argent, ainsi que deux parties du Tripiṭaka (Vinaya et Sūtra) du temps de Kāśyapa, sur papier d'or et écriture d'argent, également transportés là par Mañjuśrī" (Stein 1988: 7; *non vidi*; quoted from Quagliotti 1990: 102).



While the rock throne has a flattened and somewhat indeterminate form in the ivory specimens, in a well-known and roughly contemporary Kashmiri stela, the so-called “year 15 Buddha of Sukhavarman”, the throne takes on a decidedly hourglass shape, with a kind of ring around the narrow central section, which is clearly based on the model of the mountain/pivot bound by the *nāgas*. The scene depicted is once again Māra’s attack, with the Buddha in this case in *bhūmisparśamudrā* (Paul 1986: pls. 80, 80a, 80b; Siudmak 1990: figs. 1, 2). This particular throne form is interpreted by Paul as “a visual rendering of the conceptual throne or *vajrāsana*” (Paul 1986: 161), an interpretation rejected by Siudmak, who recognises in it the conventional rendering of the rock (Siudmak 1990: 853).

Both observations seem to be true, as emerges with particular clarity in this example, where the *vajrāsana* is equated symbolically with the Buddha’s imperturbable and victorious firmness. In particular, Paul’s interpretation (taken up by Fussman 1993: 38) is also well suited to certain solutions adopted by the Pāla period artists, who seem to have assimilated the conventional “hourglass” rendering of the rock/mountain with the *vajra*. Observing for example the famous Buddha of the Rockefeller 3<sup>rd</sup> Collection (Pal 1975: 30a,b) (a central bejewelled Buddha and two lateral *stūpas* on three lotus flowers blooming on a single stem), we find the rock motif on the base, which here consists of a rectangular body with the typical broken profile housing four small figures of donors on receding lateral elements. On the anterior face a wheel, two atlases and two deer facing each other are depicted inside an irregularly shaped cavity, as might be expected in openings in the rock. These are punctuated by vertical elements, a kind of natural rock pillar, the shape of which is quite the same as that of the throne of the Buddha of Sukhavarman.

This base – and other similar ones – clearly represents a well-known and widely imitated model, as is demonstrated by the pedestal of an image of a Buddha in *padmāsana*, of which only the legs remain. This comes from Sarnath and bears a long dedicatory inscription dating to the year 1083, under the reign of Mahipāla. Although the rock motif is absent, the mode of depiction on the anterior face betrays its derivation from the northern model, in any case widely imitated by Pāla art. Proceeding from the centre towards the extremities, the following are depicted: a wheel between two vertical *vajra*, two deer, two lions and two atlases, separated by two small pillars (Vogel 1903-1904: 221-223; pl. LXIII, fig. 3).

The *vajras* at the sides of the wheel probably derive from a reinterpretation of the hourglass form of the rock pillars in the original model. Moreover, this latter also must have inspired the deliberately unnatural, albeit dynamic, pose of the lions, depicted with the head and trunk facing forward, the body in profile, and one paw lifted exaggeratedly.

We have seen how, at least in one case, the hourglass form of the rock throne is directly linked to Mount Meru. Even though explicit reference is lacking in other examples, such as in the case of the Buddha of Sukhavarman, a repeated allusion to the sacred mountain *par excellence* nevertheless persists in the conservation of the hourglass form. In this meaning, the form has been accepted by Buddhist iconography beyond the boundaries of the Indian world. Stylised as two stepped opposite pyramids joined at the summits, in Japan it becomes the *sendai-za*, namely the throne that makes explicit reference to its own origin on Mount Meru (Dale Saunders 1960: 132).

The symbolic theme of the rock, explored architecturally on a macroscopic scale, seems to become a true *topos* of the iconography of the late antique Buddhist world, after a subdued presence in the art of Gandhāra.<sup>126</sup> a sacred mountain, a gloomy place where light is dimmed, throne of the divinity, scenario of the *saṃsāra* and of the dominating – but at the same time liberating – *māyā*.<sup>127</sup> Again with a dual symbolic meaning, the rock expresses the often unconscious communion of the world with the divine, the place in which it is possible to transform and redeem the most obscure and inert elements with which the creatures of the *saṃsāra* are

<sup>126</sup> Subdued presence does not however mean it was not incisive. The cave and rock theme already has a strong and precise significance in Gandharan iconography, although it is practically encrypted. On this topic see Filigenzi 2005c, Id. 2006, Id. 2012: 78 ff. esp.; Quagliotti 1996c: 11-12.

<sup>127</sup> This is the speculative orientation of the *Upaniṣad* period, in which *Māyā* is also the mother of psychic regeneration, just as in the Buddhist *milieu* she will be the mother of the Awakened (cf. M. Falk 1986: 189). This dual function of *Māyā*, always implicit in Buddhist philosophy and ethics, sometimes finds explicit expression, in particular in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (*ibid.*: 457 ff.).

weighed down. It is by means of this particular acceptance that the rock is melded with that of the *vajra* in the iconography. The transformation of the pillar into a *vajra* could actually be considered not a misinterpretation but as the explicit rendering of a concept expressed allusively in the original model. The hourglass form of certain rock thrones and pillars seems to be an attempt to implicitly underscore precisely the mountain's dual nature – at once the axis of the world and of heaven, following the two-pointed *vajra*. Likewise, of the multiple meanings of *vajra* (von Glasenapp 1940: 21) we glean one in particular from the literature and the iconography which seems to have nourished much of late antique Buddhist imagery: it is not only the weapon which annihilates the enemy, but also “[...] l’essence adamantine immanente aux être et aux choses” (Lamotte 1966: 151). It is no coincidence that the *vajra* is the distinctive attribute of Akṣobhya and the family of which he is the head. Indeed, not only does Akṣobhya represent the quintessence of Buddha's imperturbability (and therefore, we might say, he is as unmovable as a rock) but also the primordial cosmic element of the *vijñāna* and the Self-existing-body (*svābhāvika*),<sup>128</sup> namely the consciousness that humans already possess, although in a subdued form, in their innermost Self.



**Fig. 32** – Tapa Sardar: A fragment of a pinnacle in the shape of a *pūrṇaḡhaṭa* on rock-like basis (courtesy IsIAO, neg. Dep. CS LA 10423/1)

The scenario of earthly existence, in this speculative context, is thus illustrated in visual and textual sources with a blend of humility and pride. It is admirably summed up in the animal figures nestling in the rock cavity through which a pulse of life passes that contorts their limbs; in the figures immersed in a rock background at Bāmiyān (Hackin and Carl 1933: pl. XLVII, fig. 57), at Tapa Sardar (Taddei 1968: 120; fig. 41) and almost

<sup>128</sup> The idea of the seed of immanent Buddhahood even in unaware man and expressed by the *vajra* is moreover found already in Gandhāra, in the figure of the mysterious and faithful companion of Buddha, to be identified, in my opinion, with Ānanda, the disciple closest to Buddha and yet the furthest away from Buddhahood (see Filigenzi 2006).

every where in the painted and sculptured decoration of the Buddhist sites of the Xinjiang.<sup>129</sup> The idea is often translated into a rapid, summarising sweep, a strip of rock at the base of the throne, either *śimhāsana* or *padmāsana*, of Buddhas as of bodhisattvas, with the same efficacy and intensity (Pal 1975: nos. 32, 56, 74, 76, 78; von Schroeder 1981: 10B, 10D, 12D; von Hinüber 2004: figs. 3-7). The elemental force of this concept and its infinite capacity for aggregation lend themselves to a wide range of iconographic inventions. For instance, it certainly also served as inspiration for that pattern on the chest of the Buddha Vairocana of Balawaste (*Sérinde*: no. 271), in which a vigorous vegetal shoot seems to emerge from a pot, at the same time suggesting a *śrīvatsa*. The snakes coiled around the base, the sharp-edged form, and the rhombus decoration of the pot point to a synthesis between the *pūrṇaḡhaṭa* and Mount Meru. The presence of an almost identical symbol among the stucco decoration of Tapa Sardar (TS 1692; Fig. 32) is no accident. It evidently belongs to a current iconographic lexicon that the entire Buddhist oecumene readily understands, elaborates, synthesises, and transmits in an exchange that enriches the common patrimony.

Owing to its wide diffusion, this theme was given little space in the Swat rock sculptures where, as we have seen, even the rock throne, so widely attested elsewhere, appears only sporadically. This absence is certainly deliberate: there is simply no need in such a context for a symbolic representation of the rock. The idea that other art forms, so similar in terms of chronology and conceptual inspiration, could only express in the narrow and immobile space of the object or reproduce in a fictitious scenario, is a constitutive part of every figure in the rock sculpture. In its simple and ingenious intuitiveness it finds an almost animated expression in the spontaneous and natural framework of the rock surface and the entire surrounding landscape.

<sup>129</sup> As it is impossible to present here an exhaustive list of the relevant specimens I refer the reader to *Murals for Xinjiang* [...] 1982 and *Zongguo shiku* [...] 1989 for a quick overview of the painted decoration; as for the sculpture see Maillard 1983: *passim*.