

CHAPTER 6: THE WHISPERING OF VAJRAYĀNA

6.1 – The concealed presence of Vajrayāna

As we have seen, an approximate chronological correspondence is in fact the most evident link we can detect, based on a surface view, between the rock sculptures and Vajrayāna. Vague as it may be, it suffices for us to be able to associate the history of this artistic phenomenon with one of the most celebrated personalities of the period: the great *siddha* Padmasambhava who, according to tradition, was born in Uḍḍiyāna.

Of this great master, summoned to Tibet by King Trisong Detsen, we have legendary biographies whose underlying truths are difficult to discern.²⁰³ We may, however, presume that the ideological sphere in which Padmasambhava moved — an inextricable melding of magic and mysticism — represented what was at his time the settled orientation of the religious culture of Swat. The fame of this culture had already reached well beyond the region's borders by the mid-eighth century, to the extent indeed that it could constitute a driving force for the spread of Buddhism in Tibet. Viewed in the broader perspective, Padmasambhava thus appears as the epigone of an obscure, anonymous chain of masters in a consolidated tradition that preceded him and found in him its first historical exponent.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, as we have seen, this cultural blossoming has never been reflected in archaeological evidence in the territory of Swat. For this period, archaeology has yielded nothing but monuments apparently in ruins or kept in precarious existence with minimal restoration works,²⁰⁵ nor was any such sign expected to have come down to us from the rock sculptures. However, as experience has often taught us, if it is risky to go over the material data to find confirmation of an idea, it is also all too easy to miss something in a context where we do not expect to find it. We saw how traces of the Vajrayanic philosophy, slight as they might be, can be detected even in the apparently “neutral” and popular icons of Padmapāṇi, or in the presence, in the iconographic repertory of the rock sculptures, of some deities peculiarly linked to Vajrayāna, such as the pair Avalokiteśvara/Gaṇeśa, Vajrapāṇi and, perhaps, Mañjuśrī. Features emerge that are distinctly associated with a view of the religious path and even with rituals typical of the Tantric doctrines. Moreover, among faint presences at least one clear imprint survives of the new ideological horizon.

6.2 – A manifested Vajrayanic theme

Unique among the rock sculpture, there is an interesting relief which can illustrate this Vajrayanic “presence” in the rock sculpture in a particularly direct and eloquent manner (S140; II: Fig. 140; GS 38).

Executed on a stela of the typical irregular egg shape, the relief shows a central figure enthroned accompanied by two standing ancillary figures of appreciably smaller dimensions. The central figure is seated in *vajraparyāṅkāśana* on a lion throne of a quite complex type (see Chap. 3.5). Following an equally typical for-

²⁰³ Aside from the Abhayadatta's *Caturśīti-siddha-pravṛtti* (History of the Eighty-Four Siddhas, the most important extant Indian text on the *siddhas*), translated from the Tibetan by J.B. Robinson (1979), see the Tibetan biography of Padmasambhava in W.Y. Evans-Wentz (1954), and Yeshe Tsogyal (1984).

²⁰⁴ Padmasambhava is believed to be the (spiritual?) son of Indrabhūti, the famous king of Uḍḍiyāna, whose name is closely linked with the diffusion of Vajrayāna, being the author of one of the most famous Tantric texts, the *Guhyasamājatantra* (Tucci 1977: 68-69; see also Chap. 2). Even in the legend of his life, Padmasambhava is in fact related to an earlier tradition.

²⁰⁵ But see what is said in Chap. 2 about the emblematic case of Butkara I and Shnaisha and, in general, about the possible re-interpretation of the archaeological data.

mula, the throne rests on a broad lotus corolla and is adorned with side tassels and a rich drape inspired, probably, by models of the local textile craft (the famous *kambalas*), whose production was already well-known and widely appreciated in the Maurya period.²⁰⁶ The figure is dressed as one of the many bodhisattvas appearing in rock sculpture: a crown tied at the sides of the head with ribbons hanging down, a shawl draped over the arms, *paridhāna* and jewels. The right hand appears to be in *abhayamudrā*, while the left holds a rather flattish object. Above the head, surrounded by a nimbus with flaming borders, is a sort of canopy adorned with tassels, jewels and circular elements. The two figures at the sides, a man and a woman, bear objects that are hard to identify and – significantly – are also characterised by a nimbus and are borne on lotus flowers.

The stela was published some years ago by P. Callieri (1986), who proposed identification of the subject depicted here as the Buddha Amitāyus. This interpretation was based essentially on the bowl-like object the central figure holds in the left hand, in which Callieri sees the miraculous ointment vase symbolising the healing power of Amitāyus. This is a probable hypothesis since it corresponds broadly with the iconographic conventions associated with this figure, which is moreover often depicted in the guise of a bodhisattva. When the study appeared, systematic survey had yet to be conducted on the rock sculpture of Swat. Nevertheless, Callieri found close comparisons with this category and, indeed, with productions having some affinity in terms of geographical, chronological and cultural contiguity, namely votive bronzes and terracottas produced in Swat, Kashmir and Tibet.²⁰⁷

Yet, the interpretation proposed by Callieri also contains certain incongruous elements which, with the fuller knowledge of the general context of rock sculpture we now possess, we can relate to a more markedly Tantric environment. In particular, the form of the attribute and the *mudrā* itself do not match with the iconography of Amitāyus. In fact, Amitāyus is usually shown in *dhyānimudrā*, with a vase, rather than a bowl, on the palm of his hands. Although subject to variation, the form of Amitāyus' vase appears to be inspired by ritual vessels or at any rate more elaborate and refined than a simple bowl, and evidently deemed more suited to the content. It may, moreover, be that this iconographic choice served precisely to differentiate the medicinal vase from the *pātra*, of which we also have at least one illustration offered by rock sculpture, confirming a decidedly more prosaic form for this attribute (S192; II: Fig. 56; GS 3). However, closer observation of the object our personage bears in his hand suggests that it is even too flat for the typical bowl form, coming much closer to representing a *kapāla*. The left hand, unfortunately much abraded, also appears to depart somewhat from the customary depiction of the *abhayamudrā*. Indeed, it appears to fit better with the position the *abhayamudrā* takes on when accompanied by the presence of an attribute, which is usually — whether in sculpture or in painting of Tantric inspiration — a small *vajra*.²⁰⁸

While remaining confined to the level of hypotheses, we cannot rule out the possibility that this is also the case with our sculpture, as suggested by the profile conserved. For example, the vertical element to the right of the palm is of disproportionate length for the thumb, while the short horizontal protuberance we can just make out on the left might actually belong to a *vajra*. Apart from these particular details, the general tone of the iconographic theme is, I believe, well suited to depiction of a *siddha*, the central figure of Vajrayāna and pre-eminent model of perfect accomplishment. Although *siddhas* essentially represent a non-monastic ideal, militantly anti-conventional, it is nonetheless not infrequent for them to pursue accomplishment within the monastic order or in association with it.²⁰⁹

This is the prevalent tendency, for example, in the iconographic models of the *Mahāsiddha* in Tibet, very often shown in monastic garments and grave, imposing postures, perfectly and eloquently offsetting other

²⁰⁶ For the importance of this specialised craft production to the country's economy see Chap. 2.9. We may assume that the drapery covering the thrones in both bronze and rock-cut sculpture (see Chap. 3.5), though usually far less elaborate than this specific specimen, were derived from real artefacts and their usage as prestige symbols.

²⁰⁷ As regards the bronzes and terracotta plaques see *infra*; for the *ts'a ts'a* see Tucci 1932.

²⁰⁸ A good example is provided by the Vajrasattva published by Pal (1975: 162, no. 59a,b).

²⁰⁹ See for instance Tucci (1995 [repr.]: 43-47) and Eliade *et al.* (1987: 124) *s.v.* Mahāsiddhas.

iconographic types where, in sharp contrast, the *siddha* figure appears as a yogin or even as one seized by holy possession.²¹⁰

However, classical Vajrayāna, usually (and perhaps in part wrongly) considered a development of the Mahāyāna, conceives of the *siddha* as a bodhisattva, whose principal aim lies in commitment to the benefit of others. Indeed, Tibetan tradition accounts for the variety of extraction, methods and practices characterising the biographies of the *siddhas* precisely with fulfilment of the bodhisattva's vow to help living creatures of every level and condition, identifying with them and adopting the same lifestyles (see Eliade *et al.* 1987: 124, *s.v.* Mahāsiddhas).

Returning now to our stela, I believe we may attempt an initial interpretation thus: if this is the image of a *siddha*, then it offers a spiritual model perfectly delineated but probably still in a process of formation at the iconographic level. Nevertheless, comparison with serial productions bearing some affinity reveals a number of points in common that can hardly be put down to mere chance. Once again, the area favoured for examination is that of the bronzes and votive plaques made of clay or terracotta. Moreover, it is above all the latter that offer the possibility to cross over to the world of Tibetan iconography, distant in time and space but conceptually close, where the figure of the *siddha* in particular was to find collocation in a conventional code serving to express accomplished "canonisation". While the ideal bodhisattva-figure inspiration prevails in the Swat stela, the tradition that would become established in Tibet was of more distinctly monastic inspiration.

Clearly, the Tibetan option had strong ideological content to be accounted for with — eventually successful — efforts to curb the secularisation of Buddhism and bring the potentially dangerous currents, as indeed were the Tantric ones, back under the control of dogmatic rules.²¹¹ However, the striking affinities to be seen in general with Indian tradition and in particular with the northern regions confirm the persistence of models elaborated, or in course of elaboration, in these areas between the seventh and eighth century CE, probably finding their way into Tibet with these very bronzes and votive terracottas. Our knowledge of these objects is undoubtedly limited to a very small sample of the total volume of production and circulation, which we can only suppose to have been much more extensive than has so far been documented. In particular, whatever its origins, the production of Swat appears readily recognisable on the basis of close affinities with the rock sculpture, physically immovable and inseparably linked with the area that produced it, enjoying a self-contained dimension and thus constituting reliable geographical and cultural reference.

The two ancillary figures accompanying the central figure on the stela may appear something of an anomaly in the sphere of rock sculpture but they definitely represent recurrent features among the votive bronzes and terracottas which, by virtue of geographical and chronological horizon, we may consider as belonging to the same cultural environment.²¹² A particular meaning is clearly being expressed in this man/woman couple. The hieratic character of the subject and, above all, the repetitive iconographic module convey the impression that these are not simply donors but, even if they were, the role-associated features and attributes they display suggest identification as a symbolic couple.²¹³ Unfortunately, in this case, as in most others known to us, the attributes are not recognisable. In this particular case we nevertheless might hazard a hypothesis,

²¹⁰ Examples of both types can easily be found in the iconographic repertoires. A brief review is offered for instance by the old but still useful *Mythologie asiatique illustrée*, Paris 1928, pp. 131 ff., esp. 151-158; see also Tucci 1932: I, 102-106 and pls. XXXVIII, b-XL, b; Rhie and Thurman (1981: 154-155, 165 ff.); Pal (1984: pl. 40).

²¹¹ On this topic see for instance Tucci (1995 [repr.]: 43-44); Snellgrove and Richardson (1968: 129-131).

²¹² This is a very common and widespread motif in Buddhist iconography, especially in Tantric contexts. Within the limits of our theme, see the bronze sculptures of our Figs. 27a,b and 28 as well as Pal (1975: 198, no. 75) and the terracotta specimens in Paul 1981.

²¹³ This process of identification appears perhaps more evident in connection with kingship and patronage. Evidence abounds throughout the ages of political propaganda made through religious iconographic themes, as in the well-known history of the Maurya and Gupta period, but to cite just one particular case, see the personification as Indra displayed by Harṣa Vardhana, documented by Xuanzang in his description of the royal festival at Kanauj (Beal 1958 [1884]: II, 242) and other similar traditions recalled by M.D. Willis (1997: II, esp. 620-621).



Fig. 42 – A *siddha* with *vajra/ghaṇṭā* symbols (courtesy MNAOR, Inv. no. 5637)

namely that the couple correspond to that complementary opposition, well attested in Tibetan iconography and liturgy, of *vajra* and *ghaṇṭā*. Actually, this hypothesis might also be extended to other examples where the conserved form of the attributes, if not identifiable, at least appears compatible with these two objects.

Occurrence of the *vajra/ghaṇṭā* pairing in Swat and within the chronological horizon we are dealing with is proved by at least one example – this time well conserved – that leaves absolutely no doubt about identification of the attributes. This motif appears, for instance, in the aureole reproduced in Fig. 28. This type of more or less complex “Buddhist aureoles” that were slotted onto the back of central cult images must also have been very frequent, as attested by the presence of tenons and sockets on the back of many bronzes that have survived in isolation.²¹⁴ In the particular case of our stela, the profile conserved and the hold the male figure has on the attribute are closely echoed in a bronze depicting a fierce aspect of Vajrapāṇi (Pal 1975: 164-165, no. 60). Even more poorly conserved is the female figure, but the attribute does not appear incompatible with a *ghaṇṭā* if we view her as holding it on the palm of the left hand, holding the handle in her right hand. The complementary *vajra/ghaṇṭā* union, expressed here in the physical presence of the couple, is conserved in Tibetan iconography stripped of any accessory form, where the lotuses do not support the humanised hypostases of the symbols but rather the symbols in all their essential nature (Fig. 42).²¹⁵

In relation to the more general theme of the *siddha* figure, various other features for comparison with the Swat stela can be found in Tibetan iconography. The arrival of Padmasambhava in Tibet at the invitation of King Trisong Detsen marks a definite *terminus ante quem* for the history of Vajrayāna. It implies that at that time Vajrayāna had already acquired not only a mature doctrinal dimension but also, we assume, an iconographic lexicon of its own, where a special place must have been accorded to the *siddha* as the ideal model of “perfect accomplishment”.

²¹⁴ See Chap. 3.5.

²¹⁵ On the symbolism of *vajra* and *ghaṇṭā* see Dale Saunders (1960: 146-147, 184-191); in relation to the iconography of *gurus* and *siddhas* see Tucci (1932: I, 104-105).



Fig. 43 – Padmasambhava (after Tucci 1949: pl. 59)

If the hypothesis I propose here is correct, we may suppose that this model corresponded more or less to that of our stela. Actually, Tibetan iconography itself offers a version of the Padmasambhava figure that comes fairly close to it, to the extent that it might be the most direct intermediary between a prototype elaborated in his land of origin and an image re-modelled according to canons more in keeping with the land that received him. Of the “eight aspects of guru Padmasambhava”, the first (and presumably most archaic) describes him as seated on a lotus, having two arms and holding a *vajra* in his right hand and a skullcap in the left,²¹⁶ just as the central figure does in our stela. Moreover, among the various *siddha* figures, Padmasambhava is often distinguished by sumptuous cloaks, in which we may discern the reflection of some relationship with the bodhisattva figure (Fig. 43).²¹⁷ Despite the difference, the affinity remains evident with the subject of the Swat stela – as yet the only surviving example of the kind known to us, but probably not the only one produced. It does, however, seem worth noting that this subject never appears among the very many reliefs executed on walls or large boulders of rock, as if meant not for a place universally accessible but rather for some reserved, protected place.

It is quite possible that replicas more or less matching this subject circulated in the form of bronzes or terracottas, as indeed we are also encouraged to believe by the line associating it with Tibet. The extraordinarily important role played by terracotta figurines, seals and sealings (possibly not all ‘votive’, as they are usually described) in the transmission of iconographies is, I believe, generally acknowledged, or at least readily imaginable. Indeed, a good many of them were quite probably models, of no great cost, weight or bulk, easy to transport and reproduce. This, in fact, is amply demonstrated by the many Tibetan *ts’u ts’u* themselves, some of which would seem to have been cast from Indian moulds or repeated copies of them.²¹⁸ In particular, let us take a look at one of these, the first to have aroused my curiosity, and a specimen of unmistakably Tibetan crafting (Fig. 44).

According to Tucci the subject depicted here is Tsong Khapa with his two principal disciples, Gyaltsab Dharma Rinchen (rGyal ts’ab dar ma rin c’en) and Mawei Ńima Geleg Pal (sMra bai ni ma dge legs dpal) (Tucci 1932: I, 103-104, pl. XXXIX, a). If Tucci’s hypothesis is correct, this small clay plaque cannot be from before the fourteenth century, and yet certain features of the subject, as well as the general organisation of the scene, look like stubborn survivals of earlier motives, possibly no longer understood and reinterpreted in the light of current conventions.

It may seem somewhat far-fetched, but one cannot help seeing in this *ts’u ts’u* a reflection of a model very close to our stela. The figure on the stela is seated beneath a canopy adorned with large, wavy vittae and circular elements which Callieri (1986: 435) interpreted as rosettes, although the depression at the centre of the lateral elements seems too marked. If we observe now the *ts’u ts’u*, we shall see that its upper area is a concise depiction of the sky, although the volute form of the clouds and the arrangement of stars composing it suggest direct descent from the canopy in the Swati stela (which, after all, may well have been adorned with astral symbols). It is nearly as though the latter had been the model for it – not clearly grasped but in a sense understood correctly as symbol of the celestial residence of the immortal *siddha*.²¹⁹ The basket of flowers, too,

²¹⁶ For textual references to the iconography of Padmasambhava, the most authoritative source is the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* Pantheon (in Lokesh Chandra 1991: 43-54); for a succinct review of the same see Bunce (1994: I, 384-385) under the heading Padmasambhava; see also Tucci (1949: II, 540; III, pls. 141-142).

²¹⁷ For further specimens see for instance Baader *et al.* (1981: 286); Rhie and Thurman (1981: 166-182). Often Padmasambhava is represented wearing a particular hat, as a memory of his place of birth, decorated with a feather (that of an eagle, symbol of penetrating vision, according to Rhie and Thurman 1981: 167). I would recall the custom, still alive in Swat at least until a few decades ago, of wearing a lophophore’s feather as a sign of distinguished intellectual rank.

²¹⁸ Many illustrative examples are to be found in the fine collection of *ts’u ts’u* housed in the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale G. Tucci, Rome (most of them formerly belonging to the private collection of Giuseppe Tucci); leaving aside the specimens pointing to an Eastern origin (Xinjiang or China), I would draw attention to those which clearly descend from Indian models dating back even to the pre- or early Pāla period, such as Inv. nos. 5366, 5396, 5419, 5463, 5462, 5464, 5638, 5679, or from Medieval Kashmir, as Inv. no. 5368.

²¹⁹ Cf. Eliade *et al.* (1987: 124), *s.v.* Mahāsiddhas; see also Tucci (1949: II, 617, fn. 295).



Fig. 44 – A Tibetan *ts'a ts'a* (courtesy MNAOR, Inv. no. 5347)

bears an odd resemblance to that hem of the *kambala* falling onto the throne of the *siddha* on the stela; even the marked underlining of the scene in the lower part of the *ts'a ts'a* recalls the curious fillet defining from below the figuration on the stela. Actually, this would not be the first case of a *lectio faciliior* ultimately bringing into greater evidence a concept already inherent in the original model, possibly at a distance of centuries.

Despite the geographical and chronological gap, comparison is inevitable, suggesting – as indeed do so many other examples of various subjects – that there must certainly be some bridge between the two worlds and two ages. As yet we simply lack knowledge of the intermediate stretches of the bridge, but the rock sculptures of Swat would, together with other related productions, seem to constitute one of the initial stages. From this we see emerging ever more clearly a complex ideological and iconographical heritage that evidently cannot stand as an isolated phenomenon but which merges into the broader context of a new religious culture in which the great innovatory ferment has already taken on definite characteristics. The journey of Padmasambhava begins from this tenacious outpost of Buddhism, bearing in his train the – already famous – baggage of the new doctrine, together with its codes of thought and visual expression.