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C. W. Schmidt

Evidence Suggesting the Simultaneous Development of Two Forms of Avalokiteśvara in Ancient Greater Gandhāra: A Preliminary Report

INTRODUCTION

There remains a great deal of speculation as to the time and place for the development of ideas related to Mahāyāna Buddhism and to the rise and dominance of Avalokiteśvara as the most popular embodiment of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal. In contrast to his acknowledged popularity among both lay and monastic communities, and the enormous numbers of images created over the millennia, the details of Avalokiteśvara's emergence at the beginning of the common era remains largely illusive. Even his name, a compound of Sanskrit terms, is problematical, as specialists have not been able to come to agreement as to how it should be interpreted, although often given as the "Looking-down Lord," who, like the historical Buddha, is characterized as a model of Compassion. These issues have been discussed at length by scholars seeking, through careful analyses of literary references and terms, to provide insight into the cultural and religious history of the period and the formulation of his identity. The results of analyses in this art historical study suggest that, within the expansive number of schist works created by the highly productive Buddhist school of ancient Greater Gandhāra, there is a large and unique body of extant visual evidence for the early phase of Avalokiteśvara's development, which undoubtedly will offer a wealth of new opportunities for increased understanding¹.

As a corporal part of an on-going, larger, research project on Bodhisattva images, the information summarized in this article is intended to add clarity to iconographic and chronological issues, and complement the work of researchers in other disciplines. While the precise interpretation of works from the Northwest remains complicated and challenging in many ways, and most are not explained explicitly by inscriptions, the hypothesis that the images or image fragments in the research corpus are intended to represent

either Avalokiteśvara or the Padmapāṇi form of Avalokiteśvara, and that the two forms were developed simultaneously in ancient Greater Gandhāra, seems compelling.

CLASSIFICATION OF WORKS IN THE RESEARCH CORPUS

The research corpus contains documentation for ninety-one works or fragments classed as images of Avalokiteśvara or the Padmapāṇi (lit. having a lotus in hand) form of Avalokiteśvara. For Avalokiteśvara, the distinguishing attributes are a *mālā* (wreath) and/or a *bimba* (turban crest image of a Buddha) (fig. 1). For the Padmapāṇi form of Avalokiteśvara, the distinguishing attribute is a *padma* (lotus) (fig. 2)². Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, the names Avalokiteśvara and Padmapāṇi will be used in accord with what appear to be their distinguishing attributes³. All of the

¹ The term Greater Gandhāra is often used at present to refer to Gandhāra, the ancient name of the Peshawar Valley region in the North-West Frontier Province of modern Pakistan, and to its neighbouring regions that include sectors of Afghanistan to the west, the Swat and other river valleys to the north, and the Taxila area to the east of the Indus River.

² Hand-held floral and jewel offerings have extended histories in South Asian culture as symbols of devotion and of the promises offered by Buddhism. At some point, the lotus, in the form of a dais, was used to signify divine status (Saunders 1960, 159.). It is notable that many of the Gandhāran wreaths and garlands, including Bodhisattva wreaths and the wreath suspended above Buddha images, were sculpted in a manner stylistically related to the Greek laurel wreath of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, where it was used to celebrate various types of victory, the hope for a divine immortal rebirth, and when placed on the head, divine status (fig. 8) (Schmidt, in press a, text related to figs. 18–21).

³ The first several centuries C.E. represent, from an iconographic perspective, a vibrant, creative and fluid period, which frequently makes identification difficult.



Fig. 1. Standing image of Avalokiteśvara bearing a wreath. A diminutive image of a Buddha is displayed on the crest of his turban. Sahri-Bahlol, mound C. Circa 3rd century C.E. Gray schist. H: 98 cm. Peshawar Museum, no. 1867. Photo: Courtesy of The British Library.

ninety-one objects in the research corpus appear to have been sculpted between the second half of the 2nd century and the end of the 4th century of the common era. The corpus is composed of both independently sculpted figures and relief and stela carvings. There is evidence for sixty large, independently sculpted figures shown in both standing and seated positions, and thirty-one small relief and stela carvings, all from officially sponsored excavations or older collections. Of the forty-seven examples classed as Avalokiteśvara, thirty-three are independently carved images. The remaining fourteen are found in relief and stela carvings. Forty-four images are classed as the Padmapāṇi form of Avalokiteśvara. Of these, twenty-seven are independently carved images while the remaining seventeen examples are found in relief and stela carvings. Prior to discussing the most informative examples, it is useful, for contextual and chron-



Fig. 2. Image of Padmapāṇi seated and displaying the gesture of meditation (*dhyāna mudrā*) with a lotus blossom suspended below his hands. Takht-i-Bāhi. Circa 3rd century C.E. Gray schist. Peshawar Museum. Photo: Courtesy of The British Library.

ological purposes, to present outlines of the development of the Bodhisattva concept and early literary references to Avalokiteśvara.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BODHISATTVA CONCEPT

It is now thought by many researchers that the Bodhisattva concept, in its original form, arose within a purely Buddhist framework⁴. In pre- and proto-Mahāyāna texts, such as the *Jātaka* book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* and *Mahāvastu*, the term Bodhisattva is identified with Śākyamuni in his previous births and with animals. Until achieving enlightenment during his final earthly incarnation, Śākyamuni perfected himself through an extended series of rebirths as a compassionate Bodhisattva, able to rescue the devoted from suffering and

⁴ The scholarly community is indebted to the work of earlier researchers, especially H. Dayal and, M.-Th. de Mallman, whose studies continue to serve as reference points (Basham 1981, 21).

inspire spiritual progress. Thus, it may be deduced that the early Mahāyāna doctrine of the Bodhisattva was derived from evolving internal dynamics, for if Śākyamuni Buddha developed from a Bodhisattva, that must also be true of other Buddhas as well (Basham 1981, 22ff., 45; Krishan 1984, 204; Verardi 1985, 67).

Following Śākyamuni as a Bodhisattva, the next to rise to prominence was the preordained Maitreya, and within the emerging Mahāyāna tradition, the unnamed Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, and subsequently others including Avalokiteśvara. The early phase of Avalokiteśvara's development appears to have occurred after the acceptance of the *māṅsui* Buddha (earthly Buddha) system and the belief that merit can be transferred, but prior to the inception of later Mahāyāna cosmologies, probably originating in the deification or hypostatization of activities and functional capabilities found in the biography of Śākyamuni⁵. In contrast to Śākyamuni, for Avalokiteśvara the literary evidence contains few myths related to his personality or history. This factor notwithstanding, it is of contextual value to review an abbreviated summary of information provided by the early Mahāyāna texts in which Avalokiteśvara is associated with both Śākyamuni and Amitābha.

EARLY LITERARY REFERENCES TO AVALOKITEŚVARA

It appears probable that the oldest literary reference to Avalokiteśvara is to be found in the 24th chapter of *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (*Lotus of the Good Law*), often referred to as the *Lotus Sūtra*. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, Avalokiteśvara functions as a single entity among others. He is presented by Śākyamuni as a vision of splendour and efficacy, able in multitudinous ways to rescue his devotees from worldly adversities, such as fire, drowning, bandits, and childlessness as well as unhealthy mental dispositions, which inspire karmic retribution, such as passion and hatred. In a second early text, the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* section of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*, Avalokiteśvara, is bestowed with similar characteristics and recounts his vow to serve as a refuge from earthly fears and perils, and to inspire his devotees to seek Supreme Enlightenment. The *Gaṇḍhavyūha* is thought to fall chronology between the writing of the 24th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* (early Kuṣāṇa era) and early Amitābha texts, research suggesting the probability that an early version was composed in South India, but fixed in central or north-western India by the early Kuṣāṇa period (Nakamura 1987, 195; Cleary 1984, 1–2).

In texts associated with the Buddha Amitābha/Amitāyus (respectively, "Unmeasured Splendor/Unmeasured Life") and his celestial western paradise or Pure Land, Sukhāvati, the Land of Bliss, Avalokiteśvara functions as part of a trinitarian

relationship. Concepts and capabilities related to this trinitarian relationship are based on the larger *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra* (*Sūtra on the Display of the World of Bliss*) and the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra* (*Sūtra of the Meditation on Amitāyus*). In the larger *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra* and in the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta serve as the primary Bodhisattva reflexes attending Amitābha/Amitāyus. In both texts, Śākyamuni states that Amitābha's primary attendants, the great active agents Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, were previously born in the Sahā (mundane) world, his world, and have now been reborn in *Sukhāvati*, a refuge beyond the cycles of rebirth (Müller 1985, 48ff., 52, no. 1; Nakamura 1987, 202; Holt 1991, 34).

The larger *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra* is of additional specific interest to this effort due to its transmission to China, which provides the earliest dateable direct reference to Avalokiteśvara. This text was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese for the first time between 147–186 C.E. by An-Shih-kao, a Parthian, and a second time between 168–188 C.E., by Lokakṣema, a Kuṣāṇa (Mizuno 1982, 45f.; Divakaran 1989, 146; Neville 1999, 13; Holt 1991, 33). Of related value in establishing a chronology is an inscription on an image base from Govindnagar, Mathurā, which is dated in the 26th year of Huiṣka and includes an undoubted reference to Amitābha (Sharma 1984, 280f.; Salomon/Schopen 2002, 24f.). The direct dateable evidence from these translations and the inscription can leave little doubt as to the esteem granted to Amitābha and his World of Bliss within the realm of the Kuṣāṇas by the middle decades of the 2nd century.

The history of Mahāyāna meditational and visual imagery found in the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*, composed at a time not far removed from the writing of the larger *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra*, is of great value for the insight provided into expectations for specific iconographic characteristics of Avalokiteśvara (Holt 1991, 34ff.; Huntington 1980, 656; Nakamura 1987, 172, 203f.). Among the many splendid attributes of Avalokiteśvara described in the 10th meditation of the text are a garland and a turban with a heavenly crown displaying a transformed Buddha (Takakusu 1985 [2], 181f. 200; Holt 1991, 34ff.).

CORPUS OF INDEPENDENTLY SCULPTED IMAGES

Among of the shifts in scale and subject matter that mark the Buddhist school of the 2nd century is a new focus on two types of large, independently sculpted, standing images of turbaned Bodhisattvas. One turbaned type is shown with his hand

⁵ Rosenfield 1967, 241ff.; Tucci 1948, 174ff.; Dayal 1978, 47ff.; Mallman 1948, 59ff.; Holt 1991, 32f.



Fig. 3. Image of Avalokiteśvara holding a wreath and seated in a pensive form of royal ease (*lalitāsana*). Takht-i-Bāhi. Circa 3rd century C.E. Schist. H: 56.32 cm.; W: 33.28 cm. Peshawar Museum. Photo C. Schmidt.



Fig. 4. Image of Padmapāṇi seated in a pensive form of royal ease (*lalitāsana*). Loriyān Tangai. Circa second half of 2nd or 3rd century C.E. Gray schist. H: c. 66 cm. Indian Museum, Calcutta, no. 4993. Photo: Courtesy of J. and S. Huntington.

placed firmly on his left hip while the second turbaned type is distinguished by a wreath, held in his left hand, and/or by a diminutive image of a Buddha, displayed in the crest of his turban. For almost a century with varying degrees of caution, images of this second standing type have been identified as Avalokiteśvara. The earliest example so designated is a damaged figure of a wreath-bearing Bodhisattva from Sahrī-Bahlol (Schmidt, in press a, fig. 4). The ends of the fillet to which the wreath was bound can still be seen on the left side of the figure. Its acceptance as an image of Avalokiteśvara by D. B. Spooner and a number of other scholars relates to its having been found with two crest ornaments, each with a Buddha image that could be properly seated on the tennon of his turban, and with several carvings of an arm and hand holding a wreath (Lyons/Ingholt 1957, 140; Schmidt, in press b, figs. 7–10. 13. 14).

Unfortunately, most of the nineteen meticulously sculpted life-size and half-life-size figures bearing a wreath are missing their crest emblems, although the recovery of four additional, isolated, stone crests of this type indicate that others images were similarly adorned (Schmidt, in press b, figs. 14–17). That there were additional examples of the wreath-bearing type is clearly substantiated by photographic records, which provide evidence of eleven fragments of left hands, each holding a wreath (Schmidt, in press b, figs. 7–10). One example, however, was recovered with both the crest and wreath largely in tact (fig. 1). While the wreath-bearing image shown in fig. 1 displays a turban crest emblem in the form of a seated Buddha, the Buddha image displays the standard Gandhāran teaching gesture, *dharmacakra mudrā*, rather than the conventionalized *bimba* attitude for Amitābha, which is *dhyāna mudrā*. Given what is known at present, it would seem that the *bimba* would most likely represent either Śākyamuni or Amitābha as images of both are shown in this teaching mode in the Northwest (see figs. 5–8).

Contrary to expectations and of perplexing interest is the fact that no independently sculpted examples have been found of Avalokiteśvara shown seated in meditation and identifiable by either of his attributes, the wreath or crest image of a Buddha. In contrast to the large number of standing images of Avalokiteśvara, it is also perplexing that no large standing images of Padmapāṇi have thus far been identified from officially sanctioned excavations or older public and private collections. The third turbaned type is only shown seated and holding a lotus blossom, the attribute that served as inspiration for the descriptive epithet Padmapāṇi (fig. 2). Typically, the legs of the image are positioned one on top of the other with the hands folded in meditation (*dhyāna mudrā*). A lotus flower can be seen suspended below the hands. There are fourteen individual examples of this type, positioned variously on rectangular thrones,

Fig. 5. Relief of Śākyamuni seated in *padmāsana* and displaying *dharmacakra mudrā* beneath his *bodhi* (Enlightenment) tree, the *Ficus religiosa*. Possibly from Dharmarājikā Stūpa, Taxila. Circa second half of 2nd or 3rd century C.E. Schist. H: 51.3 cm.; W: 49.5 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, no. 67.137. Photo: Courtesy of Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri.



Fig. 6. Stele with image of Śākyamuni seated in *padmāsana* and displaying *dharmacakra mudrā*. Subject based on the 11th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Gandhāra. Circa second half of 2nd or 3rd century C.E. Gray schist. H: 71.8 cm.; W: 71 cm. Miami University Art Museum, no. 73.S.1.1. Photo: Courtesy of the Miami University Art Museum.





Fig. 7. Stele with an image of a Buddha, probably Amitābha/Amitāyus, seated in *padmāsana* and displaying *dharmacakra mudrā*. Sahri-Bahlol area. Circa second half of the 2nd or 3rd century C.E. (dated year five). Gray schist. H: 62 cm.; W: 60 cm. Private collection, Japan. Photo: After Kurita 1988, 143.

as in fig. 2, or on lotus pericarps. An additional image is seated in a crossed-ankle position (Kurita 1990, 138)⁶.

While the standing and meditation traditions appear discrete for Avalokiteśvara and Padmapāṇi, the image traditions overlap with regard to the position of royal ease or pensive mode in which one leg is lifted or crossed over the other leg and the fingers of one hand are raised toward or gently touch the forehead (figs. 3–4). In the Gandhāran repertoire, the pensive position bears a direct relationship to images of Siddhārtha and a period of reflection prior to his first meditation, thus associating it with the beginning stages of spiritual progress (Rosenfield 1967, 241; Lee 1993, 311ff.). Thus far, there are two documented images of Avalokiteśvara seated in this pensive position with his right hand raised and in his left hand holding a wreath, and seven similar images of Padmapāṇi holding a lotus. While there are numerous additional turbaned examples of the pensive type, they are either badly damaged or bear no attributes.

RELIEF AND STELAE CARVINGS: TRIPARTITE RELATIONSHIPS

During the 2nd century, along with large freestanding images, theophanies and visions of paradisiacal realms associated with Mahāyāna traditions make their appearance. These relief and stela carvings, which vary in size and complexity, prove very informative in that they often provide insight into

early iconographic programming, which would otherwise be lost completely. In these, Avalokiteśvara and Padmapāṇi are consistently shown in hierarchical, tripartite relationships focused on a large image of a Buddha seated in *padmāsna* (lotus sitting attitude) and displaying *dharmacakra mudrā* (gesture of wheel of the Dharma). There are fourteen reliefs and stelaie that include an image of Avalokiteśvara as one of two primary Bodhisattvas. In these examples he is shown with a wreath and/or a crest image of a Buddha, in either a pensive or standing position. There are seventeen reliefs or stelaie that include an image of Padmapāṇi as one of two primary Bodhisattvas in a tripartite relationship. In these, he is shown with either a lotus bud or with a mature lotus displaying its pericarp, and in either a pensive or standing position.

Among the relief and stelaie carvings in this study, there are two, which offer clear evidence, that in Gandhāran imagery, both Avalokiteśvara and Padmapāṇi can function as a primary reflex of Śākyamuni. In the first example, Śākyamuni is positioned beneath his *bodhi* (Enlightenment) tree, the *Ficus religiosa*, but instead of his being seated on a rectangular plinth as would be expected, he is seated on a lotus dais (fig. 5). The Bodhisattva on his proper left holds a wreath in his left hand

⁶ An unprovenanced image can also be seen in Kurita (1990, fig. 9).

Fig. 8. Stele with image of a Buddha, probably Amitābha/Amitāyus, seated in *padmāsana* and displaying *dharmacakra mudrā*. Mohammed Nari. Circa second half of the 2nd or 3rd century C.E. Gray schist. H: 116.84 cm. Lahore Museum, no. 1135. Photo: Courtesy of J. and S. Huntington.



and a large lotus blossom in his right hand. In the second example, which is based on the 11th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the historical Buddha is seated in lotus throne below a canopy of magical flowers (fig. 6). An image of Padmapāṇi stands on his proper left. Above Padmapāṇi stands on his *stūpa* of Prabhūtaratna, a Buddha of the past who had vowed to appear if the *Lotus Sūtra* was expounded. Following the appearance of the Prabhūtaratna *stūpa*, the text passages recount Śākyamuni's opening the jewelled *stūpa* and seating himself beside Prabhūtaratna to continue his sermon. Across the bottom of the stele is an image of the next future earthly Buddha, Maitreya Bodhisattva, and seven Buddhas, representing those who have been called to this world so that they might also hear the scripture.

In a stele that has become widely accepted as a vision of Sukhāvati, the Buddha is seated on a lotus dais beneath a canopy composed of the jewel-bearing flowers of paradise (fig. 7). This stele appears to reflect passages found in the 10th meditation of the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*, as the Bodhisattva standing on the Buddhas proper left displays the *bimba* attribute of Avalokiteśvara, a diminutive image of a Buddha in the crest of his turban. A more complex, well-known stele from Mohammed Nari, has also been accepted as a vision of Sukhāvati by a number of scholars, including both J. Huntington and A. M. Quagliotti

who have published lengthy articles on this interpretation (fig. 8) (Huntington 1980; Quagliotti 1996). Unfortunately, the primary Bodhisattvas carry jewel garlands as symbols of their devotion rather than distinguishing attributes. At the same time, the Western-style wreath suspended above Amitābha's head is of a type often carried by Avalokiteśvara.

CONCLUSION

Assembled through this effort is a unique and compelling, extensive research corpus of stone sculptures which attest to the simultaneous development of Avalokiteśvara and the Padmapāṇi form of Avalokiteśvara in Greater Gandhāra from c. the 2nd through the end of the 4th century. Within the Buddhist community, these sculptures, many of them large and technically refined, would have undoubtedly served a variety of needs related specifically to votive practices, support for meditation, and, through ritual, evocation of the powers of Avalokiteśvara. As reflections of the values of lay devotee and monastic communities during the period of their creation, they offer, in comparative studies such as these, essential documentation for increased comprehension of the evolution of artistic forms and religious history of the Northwest.

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