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C. Bautze-Picron

Images of Avalokiteśvara at Dharaut, Bihar

Dharaut (Dharawat) is a village located north-west of the Barabar hills, which can be reached from the road linking Gaya to Patna. The place is known for its Buddhist remains since the visit of Markham Kittoe in 1847; it was at a later period visited by A. Cunningham and J. Beglar, and a very useful presentation of all information collected on the site was summarized by D. R. Patil (1963, 115ff.). More recently, J. Leoshko (1997, 79f., 95) dedicated some pages to a major image of Avalokiteśvara which was still seen at a local Hindu temple in Spring 2000 (figs. 5–8)¹. Three further images stand at the same place, illustrating the two-armed Avalokiteśvara, a standing Buddha and a seated image of Jambhala, whose acolythes are carved on both sides of the pedestal, one carrying the money-bag of the god on his head (figs. 1–3). Another tall image of the Bodhisattva is preserved in the Patna Museum (fig. 4)².

The twelve-armed Avalokiteśvara standing below a tree which he sustains with one of his left hands (figs. 5–8), measures nearly 2 m high. This mere size implies that we face here an image of major importance in the cult, and not one aimed at being personally worshipped. There are many ways of looking at art objects, but clearly in the field of Buddhist art from Eastern India, a very conservative way has prevailed through all the last century, which is based on the research of literary sources containing description of the considered images. As Leoshko underlined it, this method introduced by the French scholars A. Foucher and M.-Th. de Mallmann proved to be very valuable, and clearly helps in identifying images, but not at all in understanding the existence of the images and their iconography. Other aspects have to be pulled forward: images are a major testimony bearing on religious history, they reflect the existence of particular beliefs at a certain period and at a certain place. Images undergo changes in course of times, changes which reflect modification in the understanding of the represented deity. Images are not isolated, they belong to a chain, they relate to similar images produced at an earlier and later period, in the region of their discovery but also in other Buddhist countries, and simultaneously,

they reflect local and temporary spiritual concerns. The large image of Dharaut cannot be understood if we do not take into consideration a very large number of factors, which I would like to summarize in this article³.

The worship of the Bodhisattva at Dharaut is not reflected through a large number of images, such as is the case at Kurkihar in the 9th century for instance, but through the presence of tall images which can be dated from the 8th to the 10th century. The earliest image and the Patna sculpture (figs. 3–4) illustrate the canonic and traditional iconography of the Bodhisattva, i. e. standing, holding the padma in the left hand while displaying the gesture of generosity with the right one (Bautze-Picron 1989b). In the case of the slightly later (early 9th century) Patna image, the two female attendants, i. e. the green Tārā and Bhṛkuṭī, sitting or kneeling at the feet of the Bodhisattva are present. The twelve-armed image reflects a dramatic modification of the perception of the Bodhisattva, which does not relate to a simple evolutionary line (for which the main criterion would be that the number of arms tend to multiply with the time passing). In fact, different understandings of the Bodhisattva converge in this image:

1. The traditional and simple form with two arms presenting the padma and the varadamudrā, which is the basic pattern for practically all Avalokiteśvara images⁴. This form usually

¹ A recent article published in *The Times of India*, Patna Branch, April 22, 2003, mentions that "most of these images found at Dharaut have now been shifted to the museums at Patna and Gaya", the author referring precisely to the group of stelae mentioned here (Satyendra Kumar 2003).

² Bautze-Picron 1989b, fig. 4; Leoshko 1997, figs. 10–11.

³ A proper study of the iconography and iconology of this type of images will be published separately (Bautze-Picron, in the press c).

⁴ Indeed, it is impossible to say that all Avalokiteśvara submit to this pattern: very rare, at times even unique, testimonies are known which clearly do not reproduce the model of the universally compassionate Bodhisattva, such as the Bodhisattva seated with his Prajñā for instance.



Fig. 1. Dharaut, Buddha. Photo J. K. Bautze.



Fig. 2. Dharaut, Jambhala. Photo J. K. Bautze.

evolves from two to six arms, and includes a specific group of attendants, starting with the two female ones, the green Tārā and Bhṛkuṭī, and getting more elaborated with the presence of the Preta and Hayagrīva, and finally of Sudhanakumāra (Bautze-Picron 1989b); the presence of the five Tathāgatas in the upper part of the stela constitutes also a common feature for these images after the 10th century.

2. The twelve-armed Bodhisattva “commonly” met with in the 8th and 9th centuries in the region around Nalanda; this type reflects considerations where Avalokiteśvara appears as rescuer of the Pretas, also named after Nepalese sources Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara (Leoshko 1985). This function of the Bodhisattva was of major concern in Bihar, more particularly in the region located north and east of Gaya, thus around Nalanda, and it knew a particular development at Kurkihar where a large number of “Amoghapāśa” type images, but six-handed, were produced in the 9th century.
3. The two-armed Bodhisattva standing or sitting below a tree. This tree is not any tree, but the jewel-tree, bearing “real” jewels or/and the “seven jewels” (saptaratnas)⁵.

This image integrates thus well-known models in a harmonious composition which remains unique, but the existence of which gets justified through the geographical and historical context. From the first model shortly referred to above (for its development, see Bautze-Picron 1989b), it includes the two standing female attendants, the Krodha at the left of the Bodhisattva and, in the pedestal, the Preta at his right (fig. 8). Sudhanakumāra has not yet been integrated within the image, although the presence of Mañjuśrī, seated on his lion, and teaching, in a position symmetric to the one of the hungry ghost, evokes the introduction of the learning as a possible way of salvation in the iconography of the Bodhisattva (leading thus the way to the slightly later introduction of the young man Sudhanakumāra in the images of the Bodhisattva). The *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* which narrates the long spiritual quest of the young man, tells how he was initiated by various Bodhisattvas, among whom Mañjuśrī, before he finally reached the Potala where Avalokiteśvara resides (Fontein 1967, 5 ff.). As to the five Tathāgatas, they sit on lotuses growing out of the tree: three sit above the trunk, with Amitābha in the central position, two sit below the trunk (fig. 8).

Twelve-armed images of the Bodhisattva are rare and mainly found in sites around Nalanda as mentioned above. The earliest surviving image, which constitutes also a master-work produced by

⁵ Mitra 1991; Bautze-Picron 1995, fig. 18; Bautze-Picron 2000, pls. 18–19; Donaldson 2001, figs. 197–198, 207–208.



Fig. 3. Dharaut, Avalokiteśvara. Photo J. K. Bautze.



Fig. 4. Patna, Avalokiteśvara. Photo J. K. Bautze.



Fig. 5. Dharaut, Avalokiteśvara. Photo J. K. Bautze.



Fig. 6. Dharaut, Avalokiteśvara, detail. Photo J. K. Bautze.



Fig. 7. Dharaut, Avalokiteśvara, detail. Photo J. K. Bautze.

one of the Nalanda ateliers, can be dated in the 8th century (Asher 1980, 81 f.), and might have been the model for all later images in the region. A specific choice of attributes and gestures seems to have been made and always repeated; through a reference to a Nepalese literary source, scholars agreed to name this image “Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara” (Meiszahl 1967, 482 ff.), a name which underlines the importance of the unfailing noose, an attribute usually presented by one left hand, but which, in this case, is held by a right one, turning elegantly around the trunk of the tree. The attributes and gestures of the Dharaut image are: (lower to upper right hands – fig. 7) varadamudrā (now lost),

bunch of jewels, a stalk from the tree to which is attached a large jewel, the stalk of the lotus, noose which turns around the tree, rosary, and (upper to lower left hands – fig. 6) tree, manuscript, tridaṇḍa, lotus stalk, ?, water-flask⁶.

Altogether, images of the Bodhisattva standing or seated below the tree are very rare. This tree carries here the saptaratnas carved in wide scrolls distributed in the upper part of the slab. Two further standing images from east Bihar and south Bengal of the two-armed Avalokiteśvara are known. The first one was discovered at Bhandarhati in Hooghly District, and is now preserved in the Asutosh Museum⁷, the second one is in worship in a temple at Bausi, on the Mandar Hill in east Bihar (Sinha 1981, fig. 5)⁸. Another beautiful image is preserved in the Khutia temple at Ayodhya (Orissa) where the Bodhisattva is depicted simultaneously standing below the tree and sitting at the foot of it (Donaldson 2001, figs. 198, 208). A fourth one, much damaged, is preserved in the Orissa State Museum (Donaldson 2001, fig. 197). Besides, the two-armed model will be venerated in Nepal at a later period (Pal 1967–68, 2, fig. 6).

Beside the image of the seated Bodhisattva which is presently preserved in a private collection (Bautze-Picron 2000, pls. 18–19), all further examples are of small size. One is carved in the niche of a votive stūpa at Ratnagiri (Donaldson 2001, 185, fig. 207); another one, unpublished, is preserved at the Naradah Museum. These three examples include the tree above the Bodhisattva deeply sunken in his pensive mood. But a number of examples are known where the tree is not included: one, unpublished, is kept at the Bodhi-gaya site museum, a bronze depiction was collected at Nalanda (Paul 2001, fig. 7, inter alia), a stone slab was found at Mainamati where the Bodhisattva is four-armed (Asher 1980, pl. 112) and another image is included within a bronze stūpa also discovered in southeast Bangladesh (Banerji 1933, pl. LXXVb). Further, seals showing the six-armed Bodhisattva in this attitude are known, originating from Nalanda (Pal 1967–68, fig. 7; Biswas 1989, fig. 41). It is not here the place to dwell upon these testimonies, but an overall appreciation shows that the material is scattered all through Eastern India (Bihar, Bengal, Orissa), that it can be dated between the 7th and 10th century, and that the images, although similar, illustrate different aspects which relate to an iconographic type usually named

⁶ Leoshko 1997, 80 proposes another set of identification: “They include in the left hands: the vase, *pāśa*, lotus, *tridaṇḍi* and book with one hand holding the side of the tree. The right hands display the *varadamudrā*, jewel, plant, rosary and hold the tree.”

⁷ Sengupta 1983; Mitra 1991, fig. 34; Leoshko 1997, pl. 12; Huntington 1984, fig. 221; Saraswati 1977, ill. 91.

⁸ Where it is wrongly identified with Kāmadeva (Leoshko 1997, 160).



Fig. 8. Dharaut, Avalokiteśvara, detail. Photo J. K. Bautze.

“Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara” after the Japanese Nyoirin Kannon or “Cintāmaṇi Lokeśvara” in Nepal (Pal 1967–68), or in a neologism “Ka-ruṇāghana Avalokiteśvara” (Paul 2001, 360 and *passim*).

Beside these images where the Bodhisattva sits, leaning the head on one of his hands, the tree bearing jewels appears as a prominent feature in the depiction of Avalokiteśvara seen as a teacher, appearing from behind the nimbus. I would like to mention here two 9th/10th century images.

1. Eight-armed, from Nalanda (Indian Museum 1)⁹.
2. Two-armed, in the Nalanda style, belonging to the Museum für Indische Kunst Berlin (Bautze-Picron 1998, 33 and cat. 49).

Both relate to a stela from Kurkihar (Indian Museum 2), but reflecting the Nalanda stylistic idiom, where the Bodhisattva sits in a cave on the Potala (often published, see Saraswati 1977, ill. 83), and to an image of unknown provenance, but most probably from Orissa or south Bengal (Indian Museum 3) where the Potala is also depicted; the mountain carries animals and trees as well as caves¹⁰.

Thus, we have a chain of images, all displaying various aspects of the Bodhisattva which are all related. They all show Avalokiteśvara as a teacher: seated in the traditional *lalita-* or *padmāsana* (Indian Museum 1–2), or in the less conventional “European way” or *pralambāsana* (the Berlin image and the Orissan style image in Calcutta); and they locate him on the Potala (Indian Museum 2–3), or below a tree (Berlin and Indian Museum 1). Through the presence of the tree, they relate to the images presented above where this tree is evidently a major element.

Among all Bodhisattvas in Eastern India, it is Mañjuśrī who opens the way to spiritual knowledge or *prajñā*, he assumes this function in place of the Buddha, or rather most probably symbolizes this function owned by the Buddha (Bautze-Picron 1993). It is possible that his importance is bound to the development of the monastic institution as a place of learning. In front of him, Avalokiteśvara offered a more universal approach to the rescue of the souls, he is from the very beginning the

⁹ Bautze-Picron 1989a, fig. 14.

¹⁰ Bautze-Picron 1998, 47, note 89; Leoshko 1997, pl. 15.

universal compassionate, and through his worship – or through the veneration of the sacred formula “om maṇipadme huṃ” – beings are drawn towards nirvāṇa. Avalokiteśvara’s personality opens to more human and universal issues, and we can surmise that his cult, in Bihar, spread over the borders of the monasteries at that period. As a matter of fact, the large number of images from Kurkihar and the region as well as the twelve-armed ones from Nalanda area, clearly reflects the concern of the Buddhists in the rescue of the hungry ghosts or Pretas, a situation which was fostered by the proximity of Gaya, more particularly of the Pretshila located north of the city, a place of pilgrimage which was, and still is, the place where the śraddhas take place¹¹. This aspect of the Bodhisattva, image of universal compassion, image of a being who visits the hells and rescues their inhabitants, found its best expression in the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*, a text already from the 4th to 5th century, which was apparently “rediscovered” at that time. An illustrated version is for instance preserved in the British Library (Losty 1989), whereas the text contains elements which coincide with the images from Bihar. Thus, we are told by the Tathāgata Śikhin that when the Bodhisattva leaves the country of Sukhāvati, “various wish-fulfilling trees, mango-trees, fragrant oleander flowers, and campaka trees appear, together with lotus pools (puṣkarīṇyaḥ) abundant with flowers and hundreds of wondrous jewel trees. Flowers, jewels, various marvelous mango trees, and divine garments fall like rain. Near the vihara, the seven jewels appear (hastiratnaṃ, maṇiratnaṃ, aśvaratnaṃ, striratnaṃ, gharatnaṃ, pariṇāyaratnaṃ). The ground is seen to be bright gold. When Avalokiteśvara leaves Sukhāvati, the whole of creation trembles in six ways” (Studholme 2002, 124). The jewel-tree is an image which repeatedly occurs in the text, and it is clearly put here in relation with the appearance of the Bodhisattva. The image of the female deity below the tree, constitutes one of the most striking model of Indian iconography, it refers to the fertility, to the creativity, and was, as such, also borrowed from the pan-Indian background, in order to depict the birth of the Buddha. In eastern India, it will be introduced in the iconographies of the Tārā (Donaldson 2001, figs. 289–90; Bautze-Picron 2000, 111 ff., pls. 10, 12, 15–17) and of Avalokiteśvara as here the case. Moreover, the fact that the five Tathāgatas sit on lotuses which grow out of the tree, help to visualise the tree as the axis mundi. The *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*

clearly understands the Bodhisattva to be the creator of the universe and rescuer of the souls (Studholme 2002, 40sq), which he is in the Dharaut image: he holds the tree with a left hand like in the “śalabhañjika” type of images, whereas the Ayodhya stela depicts him simultaneously at the foot of the tree, sunken in his meditation, and standing below the tree while distributing his endless compassion to the Pretas.

But how to explain the teaching function which he also assumes, apparently being seated on the Potala and below a tree? A text which should most probably be here considered is the already mentioned *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, a text of major importance at the time, as proved by its depiction on the Borobudur in the 8th century. It narrates the spiritual quest of a young man, Sudhanakumāra, and his encounters with various masters and Bodhisattvas, among whom Mañjuśrī, till he reaches the Potala and gets the learning from Avalokiteśvara himself (Fontein 1967, 5ff.). The presence of Mañjuśrī in the pedestal of the Dharaut image might in fact refer to his secondary position in relation to Avalokiteśvara in this text, and, at the same time, it paves the way to the introduction in the iconography of the Bodhisattva of Sudhanakumāra in the 10th century replacing at his right, the Preta who is hence seen in the pedestal, as already here the case. The image of the Bodhisattva clearly then states that the rescue of the soul passes through spiritual knowledge, and is not exclusively depending on his own immense compassion. The long path followed by Sudhanakumāra is also the path which should be followed by the souls.

The Dharaut image clearly addresses a wide number of issues which I only but briefly considered here; it shows the Bodhisattva as the creator of the universe, as the universal compassionate and as the dispenser of learning. It belongs to a group of images which can be dated from the 8th to the 10th century, and although they reflect esoteric concerns (through the presence of the Krodhas distributed around the Bodhisattva for instance), they escape the “official” Vajrayāna dominant trend as advocated by texts such as the *Sadhānamālā* and the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*. Those images of Avalokiteśvara indicate that particular spiritual concepts could find their way in art and that the traditional “identification” of images, which exclusively makes use of the “official” Vajrayāna sources, is often not enough to allow an understanding of their existence and of their composition.

¹¹ Concerning this aspect, see Bautze-Picron 2001 and Bautze-Picron, in press a & b.

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