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A. Filigenzi

A Bronze Votive Stūpa of the Shahi Period: Art, Faith and Ideology in Late-Antique Buddhism

The Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale of Rome houses a small but representative collection of Buddhist bronzes dating back to Late Antiquity that, on account of their style, iconography and geographic provenance, fall into that category long but erroneously known as "Kashmiri bronzes"¹. Even now, despite the deeper knowledge we have gained of this typology, and although the areas of production and circulation have been recognised as far wider than previously imagined, while the chronological frame has seen renewed debate, we have yet to find a new, satisfactory definition for them. The definition we seek should take account of their substantial affinities in general terms of formal and cultural traits but, at the same time, avoid levelling out their stylistic, chronological, typological and geographical differences.

Of the bronzes in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale, one deserves a special place within the whole category in virtue of the complexity and originality of the iconographic scheme together with certain stylistic peculiarities and, last but not least, the excellent state of preservation. The sculpture, coming from Afghanistan and probably produced there (or at least in the northern regions of Pakistan), had been assigned to the Hindu Shahi period, but, for the time being, I would prefer a more generic attribution to the Shahi period in general, allowing for possible assignation of this piece to the early phases (7th–8th century AD)².

The case in point is a miniature *stūpa* (Dep. 650/5809; ht. 34,3 cm, width at the base 15 cm) of the type known as "*stūpa* of the descent from heaven" (fig. 1)³, only a few specimens of which still survive in real architecture. However, the spatial distribution of these *stūpas*, scattered over a vast area spanning from East India to Pakistan, Tajikistan and Xinjiang⁴, attests not only to the widespread favour accorded to this model but also to the ample adhesion of the Buddhist world to the ideas reflected in this architectural form, which would serve as a model for many later *stūpas* in Ladakh, Western Tibet and South-East Asia. To this scant monumental evidence we can add a host

of well-known scale reproductions including other bronze sculptures⁵, the small *stūpas* in the sacred area of Tapa Sardar in Afghanistan (Taddei/Verardi 1985, 21 ff.) and the miniature terracotta *stūpas*

¹ This definition was first applied by D. Barrett (1962) to a group of bronzes that appeared on the antiquarian market in Bombay in 1948 soon after the then Maharaja of Kashmir, having abdicated his throne, retired there (see Pal 1973, 727); however, Barrett himself considers this definition as a pure convention and already indicates (even in the title of his article) the place of production of these bronzes in a wider area including Swat and Western Pakistan.

² My thanks are due to Dr. D. Faccenna, who insistently encouraged me to study this piece, already published (Faccenna 1986, 68, fig. 28; Maillard/Jéra-Bézard 1994, 178, fig. 9) but never submitted to a detailed analysis, and to Dr. D. Mazzeo, Director of the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale, who promptly acknowledged my request and kindly gave me all the assistance I needed.

³ Eight *stūpa* models are listed both in the Tibetan *Tanjur* and in Indian texts, which evidently relate to a common and widespread tradition. As for the "*stūpa* of the descent from heaven", the prototype would be that edified by Śuddhodana at Kapilavastu (see Tucci 1932, 22f.).

⁴ In particular, Bhamala at Taxila (Marshall 1951, 391f., pls. 116–118), Antichak in Bihar, Paharpur and Mainamati in Bangladesh (summary description and references in Harle 1986, 203; Huntington 1999, 390), Ajina Tapa in Tajikistan (Litvinskij/Zeimal' 1971, 45ff.; Litvinskij 1985; Litvinskij/Zeimal' 2004), Rawak in Xinjiang (Stein 1921, 128ff.; 1907, 482ff., pl. XL).

⁵ See for instance the bronze *stūpas* in the Peshawar Museum (Faccenna 1986, figs. 29–30; Maillard/Jéra Bézard 1994, fig. 6), in the Patna Museum (Faccenna 1986, fig. 32), from the Gorbard valley, in Swat (Klimburg-Salter 1982, 256, pl. XCVIa, b; Maillard/Jéra-Bézard 1994, 177, figs. 7–8), and the two *stūpas* at the sides of the "Buddha of Saṃkarasena and Devaśrī" (Pal 1975, 106, no. 30a, b; Fussman 1993, 43ff., pl. 31). They all share the same architectural layout; in particular, those of Peshawar and Gorbard valley have in common with our *stūpa* also the presence of the *lokapāla* figures on the top of the drum, even though of different appearance (see below, fn. 13).



Fig. 1. A bronze votive *stūpa*. Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale, Roma (Dep. 650/5809; Neg. R 2804/1). Courtesy of the Museum.



Fig. 2. Detail of fig. 1: the dome; the columns; the lions; the *lokapālas* (Neg. R 2804/6).

– small votive objects, sometimes bearing or containing within a profession of faith – well documented in India, Afghanistan, Ladakh, Tibet, Xinjiang⁶. The catalogue can be extended yet further with another type of documentation, namely two-dimensional reproduction, mainly represented by terracotta plaques (Faccenna 1986, 68, fig. 27), and, within certain limits, graffiti from trans-Himalayan areas⁷.

The *stūpa* consists of a tall, star-shaped podium, organized in three superimposed, receding structures, with a low plinth and two bodies of different heights. As in all the other known specimens of this type, both real and reproduced, the upper body is much taller than the others. Distributed at different levels on this basement various human, animal and divine figures are represented. Four

flights of steps ascend the centre of each side, starting from the first body. On this high platform stands the actual *stūpa*. The drum, consisting of two cylindrical storeys marked by a projecting

⁶ Examples and careful comparisons are provided by Taddei (1970), to whom I refer the reader for a systematic examen of the subject.

⁷ A number of *stūpas* has been documented among the graffiti of the Northern Areas of Pakistan, many of them showing the same peculiar features we observe in our *stūpa* (see below): a tall basement composed of receding bodies (Maillard/Jéra-Bézard 1994, 173), high pinnacle with first *chattrā* supported by struts, sometimes columns (Dani 1983, 82 ff., fig. p. 8; Faccenna 1986, 68, fig. 31) and *lokapālas* (Thewalt 1985, 785 f., 789 ff., figs. 7, 12; Fussman 1993, pl. 12; Maillard/Jéra-Bézard 1994, 173 ff., figs. 3–4), but the lack of characterising details, as for instance the flight-step, and their early dating (most of them are earlier than 600 AD; see Fussman 1994, 59) make the identification with the star-shaped typology less than hypothetical; we might however consider them as a sort of architectural antecedent or at least a very close prototype.



Fig. 3. Detail of fig. 1: the dome; the columns; the lions; the *lokapālas* (Neg. R 2804/7).

moulded cornice, rests on a flat octagonal body of somewhat irregular shape⁸. The dome, as in many other *stūpa* reproductions of the late antique period, shows a bulbous, near-spherical shape. Four columns surmounted by sitting lions surround the *stūpa*, rising on the top of the platform and so marking the corners of the podium (figs. 2–3).

Four pilasters rise on the top of the drum in positions alternating with the columns of the lower level, and act as struts for the first *chattrā*. In the intermediate spaces, four haloed *lokapālas*, armed with spears, stand in a warning attitude, left hand on hip. The *stūpa* is crowned by thirteen *chattras* with an *āmalaka*-shaped top (fig. 4), but the actual finial was probably lost, as suggested by the traces of what seems to have been an iron pin on the flat upper surface. Further evidence in favour of this hypothesis can be found not only by comparison with other reproductions of *stūpas*⁹, but also in an iconographic detail on this very *stūpa*, which we will return to later.

As regards the architectural organization of the *stūpa*, the first thing to notice is the wealth of



Fig. 4. Detail of fig. 1: the *chattravālī* (Neg. R 2804/2).

details, preserving the accuracy of a true replica of real models despite the schematic simplification inevitable in scale reproduction. In particular, certain structural elements such as the columns or

⁸ This is a quite unusual feature which, as far as I know, finds only rare comparisons in real monuments. It is attested in Xinjiang, at Loulan, where the *stūpa* LA X, of the square plan type, shows a similar, although much higher, octagonal body below the drum (Stein 1921, 389) and in the Tumshuq Tagh (Rhie 2002, 106, fig. 3.66). The same typology is also known in Afghanistan, from Hadda (Barthoux 1933, 101f.; Tarzi 1990, 715, fig. 11; Afghanistan 2002, photo pp. 88–89), Shotorak (Meunié 1942, figs. 4–7) and Tapa Sardar (Silvi Antonini 1979). Probably, we are confronted here with an architectural experiment that will know a fortunate outcome in the later Muslim traditions.

⁹ See for instance the specimens published by Faccenna (1986), where a variety of finials is represented.



Fig. 5. Detail of fig. 1: the peopled base-ment (Neg. R 2804/5).

the struts of the *chattras* are treated in such a way as to fit perfectly with the function imaginable in real prototypes, and not as mere decorative devices.

The columns are of two different types that find no precedent in the canonical forms – or at least those known to us in the Gandharan and post-Gandharan repertoire – even making allowance for the evident variations and approximation due to the summary execution of the work (figs. 2–3). As regards the columns on the platform, the base, with the pronounced projection of its bulb-shaped element from the plinth, is more reminiscent of a Gandharan-Persepolitan type than of a classical prototype¹⁰. This bulb-shaped element may possibly have been of the *āmalaka* type, as indeed some irregularly incised lines suggest. The capital, this one also roughly shaped, appears to have been formed by a thick collar, an *āmalaka* element, an abacus and a modillon, supporting a lion figure. The heads of the four roaring lions rise slightly above the top of the dome: sitting on their hind legs they face outwards, leaning against the dome with their tails raised and abruptly bending backwards. As for the anatomical details, the lion figures with their curly manes, leaf-like arrangement of fur on their breasts, globular, protruding eyes, and the armllets they wear on their forelegs find a close match in the late-antique bronze and rock sculptures of the northern regions of the Subcontinent¹¹.

Even more peculiar is the shape of the pilasters supporting the first *chattra* (fig. 3). A vertical groove, opening above in two separate branches in a sort of Y motif, runs along the quadrangular shaft, which rises on a stepped base of uncertain shape. As for the capitals, their strange appearance, with the calathus organised in two separate rows of volute-like motifs, despite some differences, is strongly reminiscent of forms attested at Chiga Sarai in Eastern Afghanistan, or at Barikot in Swat,

probably sporadic and still underestimated traces of an autonomous current of late-antique architecture¹².

Another striking particular is represented by the *lokapāla* figures, which strongly diverge from the iconographic conventions of Gandharan ori-

¹⁰ A possible comparison can be traced out at Tapa Sardar, Afghanistan, where we find the same slender (octagonal) shafts and bulb-like elements, as for instance in Chapel 23 (Taddei/Verardi 1978, fig. 54) and throne no. 38; here (as in the less preserved no. 24) the base of the column consists of a *kalāṣa* emerging from a lotus flower (Taddei/Verardi 1985, 28, fig. 7 and pl. 9).

¹¹ I refer the reader to Pal (1975) and Fussman (1993) for a quick review of the bronze specimens. As for the rock sculptures of Swat see Filigenzi (2003) that, apart from a specific example of this subject, contains a quite complete bibliography, to which Sardar (2003) is now to be added. Similar features are also shown by some lion figures at Tapa Sardar (Taddei 1968, 120).

¹² In particular, the comparison suggested here is with a miniature capital from the stucco decoration of a Hindu temple recently discovered at Barikot and assigned to the Turki Shahi period (Callieri/Colliva/Abdul Nasir/Olivieri 2000, 213; Callieri/Colliva/Abdul Nasir 2000–01, 226; Callieri, in press). I had the opportunity to illustrate the salient stylistic and iconographic features of that decoration programme at length in the previous edition of this Conference (Filigenzi, in press b), where I compared this miniature capital with some architectural elements from Chiga Sarai (van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1959, 67, fig. D; 68, fig. R). In her pioneering work J. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw was already arguing for the existence of an independent tradition of medieval architecture in the North-West of the Subcontinent with connections in contemporary Kashmir, although not deriving from there. I would also call for comparison the wooden capitals so widely attested in the northern regions of the Subcontinent and Central Asia that we know not only from archaeological remains but also from a still living tradition.

gin¹³. It is hard to tell whether the cone-shaped element covering their heads is to be interpreted as a cap or a head-dress. Whilst the slight lateral depressions add to the impression of a head-dress crowned by a diadem, the two vertical strips hanging down on the cheeks are strongly reminiscent of a Phrygian-style cap, but at the same time they might be equally read as long locks of hair¹⁴.

But the more interesting feature is the scale coat, which now appears to us as a curious blending of different traditions: although the scale coat with crossed belts and breast disk find fairly evident comparison in a number of Gandharan warrior figures, given its unusual length the coat closely resembles examples documented, once again, in the East. Comparison might in fact be made with the well known *lokapāla* from Dandan Uiliq, in Xinjiang (Stein 1907, 251ff.), or the armed deities from Dunhuang (Maillard/Jéra-Bézard 1986, fig. 16), who wear a coat of this kind, more similar to a caftan than to the short coat of the Gandharan examples.

Turning, now, to the figural elements on the basement (fig. 5), in the first place we must surely read some significance in the particular positions of the figures both in relation to the different levels of the monument and in terms of their more or less accentuated visibility from a frontal view. Four human figures and a pair of crouching animals (a humped bull to the right, an antelope to the left) are represented on the plinth, i. e. on the lower level of the basement. As for the human figures, they all kneel in a worshipping attitude, hands in *añjalimudrā*. Notwithstanding their small size and a certain tendency to graphic simplification, which increases with the distance of the figures from the frontal focus, some slight variations can be detected among them, evidently serving to differentiate their rank, function or genre. They are all members of the aristocracy, as witnessed by their dress and ornaments: three of the four figures are undoubtedly male, wearing a caftan with two lapels, necklaces and ear-rings. They seem to share the same head-dress, although lack of any indication of hair makes identification uncertain: we may equally imagine a tall chignon and a sort of diadem, or a pear-shaped cap with a narrow edge or brim. The cap hypothesis weakens when we look at the first figure to the left, whose head-dress, of a more elaborate model, might be interpreted either as a more detailed rendering or as a veritable differentiation of social status: three ornaments, the central one larger than the others, evoke in this head-dress the familiar image of the diadem with three crests, but, in any case, we cannot exclude the possibility that these ornaments are set into a cap (see fn. 14).

The superiority in rank of this figure over the other three seems to be underlined not only by



Fig. 6. Detail of fig. 1: the female (?) figure on the right (Neg. R 2804/4).

the prominent position, but also by the knife hanging down from an invisible belt. A decorated belt, but with no weapon attached, is worn by the first figure to the right. The third male figure, to the left, bears a garland hanging down from his joined hands. The fourth figure, on the right, probably female, is given the most receding position, visibility being guaranteed by means of a slightly diverging inclination with respect to the figure in front (fig. 6). This figure shows the most simplified rendering, probably due to the near concealment: the impression we receive is of a simple tunic, with no fashion details. The artist, however, takes pains to distinguish this from the other personages: the hair, this time clearly indicated and devoid of any ornaments, is simply parted in the centre and worn backwards in a halo-like arrangement, but the ear-rings seem to be of a more ostentatious fashion. Judging from the context, these four figures are representative of a subordinate role: they are probably only secondary

¹³ Cf. the *lokapāla* figures in the similar bronze *stūpas* in the Peshawar Museum and from the Gorbard valley (see fn. 5) that can be considered as almost contemporary with our specimen. In both these *stūpas* the *lokapālas'* outfit still recalls the Gandharan prototypes of warrior figures.

¹⁴ Comparison might be made with the head-dress of some minor characters among the bronze sculptures; see for instance the already mentioned "Buddha of Saṃkarasena and Devaśrī" (donor on the left) and the "Buddha of the year 92" (donor on the right) (Fussman 1993, 31f., pls. 23–27). In some respects similar are also the fashions variously documented in the East, and especially in Xinjiang, where the head-dress takes on a tall, vertical form, often with long lateral locks of hair; as for instance in some terracottas from Yotkan (Stein 1921, pl. I) or in some bronze statuettes (Stein 1921, pl. VII, Yk. 007; Silk Routes 1982, 164f., nos. 102–103).



Fig. 7. Gandharan relief depicting a scene of homage to the Buddha. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif (Inv. no. V 1330). Courtesy of the Museum.

donors if not simple witnesses to the donation. The actual donor is, in fact, to be recognised in a fifth figure, clearly dominating the others. Standing a step above, on the narrow terrace of the first body of the podium, this personage explicitly and indeed proudly manifests the act of donation, his right hand touching a scale reproduction of the *stūpa* beside him.

Apart from being meaningful in itself, this synthetic but, at the same time, complex scene contains some unexpected details which open a window on the religious beliefs and practices of the period. The high rank of the donor, already implicit in his being involved in such important an act, is suggested by only a few attributes, apparently the minimal signs of status that could not be omitted: a necklace, a diadem consisting of three oval elements and an unidentifiable object (a sort of short staff), which the donor carries in the left hand. Apart from a sort of *laṅgoṭī*, summarily indicated with incised lines, the donor is naked. No doubt this is a case of ritual nudity, relevant to the ceremonial act the donor is performing. We all know the story told by Faxian about the procession of Buddhist images in Khotan, when the king takes off his crown of state, changes his dress – for a fresh suit, says Faxian, probably for a simpler one, we may infer – and with bare feet

and offerings moves to the city gate to welcome the images (Legge 1886, 18f.). Xuanzang tells us about another ceremony of great political importance, the *pāñcavārsīkapaṇṣad* periodically performed at Bamiyan (Beal 1881, 51f.)¹⁵ dealt with at length by D. Klimburg-Salter (1989, 123 ff.) and further investigated by M. Taddei (1992) and M. Deeg (1995; 1997 [*non vidi*]). Identification of the scene among the mural paintings of Bamiyan is by now, I think, largely accepted. Perhaps less known is a small ivory sculpture where a similar subject is to be recognised (Asher 1972, pl. V). Here an unshaven, bearded man dressed as a monk is represented in the act of placing jewels (probably taken from off his own body) into a basket held by a minor character, probably a servant, kneeling beside him. The original place of these figures was probably at the side of a Buddha in a triptych and the monk/non-monk character is evidently a king, or a princely donor, depicted in the very act of divesting himself (symbolically, of course) of his riches on behalf of the Buddha: a humble gesture of devotion and a proud manifestation of sovereign power at the same time. I think however that what we know of ceremonial penitence, devotion and homage is only a small part of an uninterrupted chain of ritual traditions, isolated links of which appear here and there through the ages, as for instance in a Gandharan relief in the Swat Museum at Saidu Sharif (fig. 7), where a princely male figure is represented in the act of paying homage to the Buddha, whom he is probably welcoming to his own place, washing the Buddha's feet (?) with the help of a woman (probably his wife) who bears a spouted vessel. It is worth noting that as a sign of ritual homage the princely figure appears without a turban, although he remains bejewelled. This is of course just another sign of how little we know of the ancient traditions, ranging from the customs of hospitality, as probably in this case, to events of more visible impact and political import, such as a kingly donation to a religious establishment¹⁶; nor can we distinguish what belongs to an Indic substratum "internationalised" by Buddhism and what belongs to chronological and cultural stratifications. But in the specific case of our bronze, another odd aspect is to be pointed out. The *stūpa*

¹⁵ Due to the historical circumstances, the ceremony performed at Bamiyan has gained a wide fame, but we must not forget that Xuanzang himself speaks of similar ceremonies performed by the kings of Kapisha, Kucha and Kanauj (Klimburg-Salter 1989, 123) and that the same is also reported by Faxian in relation to K'eeh-ch'a/Skardo (?) (Legge, 1886; 22f.).

¹⁶ Legge himself commenting the K'eeh-ch'a ceremony (see ftn. 15) calls attention to other events of this kind recorded in the same account (king Aśoka's grant of all the Jambudvīpa to the monks) as well as in the *Mahāvamsa* (Legge 1886, 23, ftn. 3); cf. also the reflections offered by Rowland (1961) and Taddei (1992).

the donor is touching with his right hand is a fairly exact, although highly simplified, replica of the actual one, except for the surprising lack of the *chattras*, of which only the first at the bottom is represented. Just at margin, I would like to point out that also the shape of the finial is significant in relation to the major object; in fact, the vertical top above a bulb-like element (very similar to the already mentioned bronze *stūpa* of the Patna Museum) lends support to the hypothesis advanced earlier that the finial of the actual *stūpa* itself was incomplete.

Seeking to account for this eye-catching detail, one cannot help wondering whether indeed the intention of the artist was exactly what we see: the donor touching not generically the *stūpa*, but precisely the *chattravāli*. Very tentatively I would suggest that, if this detail is of some iconographic importance, then it means that a special importance is attached to the *chattravāli*, perhaps regarded as the true symbolic substitute for the Buddha, the axis which passes through the universe as the *chattravāli* ideally runs through the monument (cf. Irwin 1979, 826–827 esp.). If it is indeed so, then the donor and the object donated are, in a sense, celebrated as equivalent: they both embody the *cakravartin*-ship, one being mirrored in the other (cf. Fussman 1986).

Returning, now, to the two animal figures, it was surely no mere whim that dictated the choice. Here we find paired not only the two poles of animal life, the wild and the domestic, but something more, or more subtle, with a strong symbolic relevance also to human life: just as the humped bull is closely linked in the Indic world with labour and the family, the first and fundamental cell of active associative life, so the antelope embodies the alternative (and potentially antithetic) choice, the solitary way of renunciation. Not only is the antelope pelt in fact constantly associated with ascetic figures, but it is in the "Antelope park"¹⁷ that Śākyamuni first preaches the Dharma. This animal pair represents the two possibilities of life, both conferred with the same dignity in the world of the Buddha and both confidently crouching in His shadow. But from where does this benevolent shadow emanate? From the *stūpa*, of course, but – I would suggest – also from the donor. Faced with such an iconographic picture, it is in fact hard to get away from the impression that before us stands a royal donor who, by presenting himself as a *defensor fidei*, assumes the charge of acting in the worldly sphere *on behalf* and *on account* of the Buddha.

Yet another iconographic feature emerges from the vivid assemblage of this bronze, almost concealed from the frontal view, as if to avoid manifest visibility: on the left side of the second body of the basement, a two-headed figure stands dressed in monastic garb, right hand in *varadamudrā*, left



Fig. 8. Detail of fig. 1: the two-headed Buddha (Neg. R2804/3).

hand on the hip, probably grasping a hem of the tunic (fig. 8). The very small dimensions of this figurine and of the space containing it probably account for a certain clumsiness, which makes interpretation of certain significant details somewhat doubtful: the two heads are not centred and the head-dress is hardly discernible, even if the incised lines on the right head seem intended to depict an *uṣṇiṣa*. An element in low relief exactly following the contour of the right arm might be interpreted as an unsuccessful attempt to represent an additional arm. If this is indeed so, then we may deduce that the original intention was to represent a four-armed figure, and that only technical difficulties might have produced such an ambiguous effect. In any case, the raised, half-hidden position and sublimated anatomic deformity clearly hold particular significance. I think that, notwithstanding the ambiguity of the details, we can interpret this image as a two-headed Buddha, of the kind we had so far been acquainted with only from Xinjiang (von Le Coq 1913, Taf. 40a; Silk Routes 1982, 183f., no. 121; Sérinde 1995, no. 160, 214–215; Grossato 1999, fig. p. 61). Following the suggestion of the first explorers and commentators of the antiquities of that region (von Le Coq 1913, Taf. 40a), explanation of this unusual iconography

¹⁷ The sanskrit word *mṛga*, i. e. the animal embodying the freedom of wild life, can be indifferently translated as deer or antelope. On the zoological identification of the *mṛga* see König (1994, 75 ff., 86 f.) and the comments by Fussman (1994, 61 ff.).

has always taken reference from the story told by Xuanzang about a strange image of the Buddha, whose body was double from the waist upwards and only one below. As Xuanzang recounts, two poor men, unbeknown to one another, had commissioned an artist to paint an image of the Buddha, each having only one gold coin. The artist painted a single picture and, the two poor men having by chance come at the same moment to see the image and pay reverence to it, he indicated the same figure to each. Seeing how disappointed the two men were, the painter explained to them that he had not cheated them and that there must have been some spiritual indication by the picture itself. Scarcely had he finished, says Xuanzang, when the picture, by some spiritual power, divided in two, both parts alike sending forth glory (Beal 1881, 102f.). This is the story that Xuanzang, who speaks of an "old tradition", probably heard from local people. What is usually omitted when quoting it is the fact that the image Xuanzang refers to was painted on the great *stūpa* in Peshawar, which, according to the tradition, was built by Kaniška (Beal 1881, 99ff.). The description left by Xuanzang clearly conveys to us what the *stūpa* must have looked like in his time, probably after much repair and re-decoration. Although relatively ancient (at least ancient enough to have given birth to a legend), the painting (sixteen feet high) must have been the product of one of the later phases of re-decoration of the monument¹⁸.

The story Xuanzang tells us is, of course, valid in the sense that it is drawn from local oral traditions, but it is not the only conclusive explanation of this unusual iconography¹⁹. Bicephalism is the simplest and at the same time the most complex of the anamorphic symbols, representing at the higher speculative level the concept of dualism, visually expressed by the Y-shape of the body. We can read this dualism as the indivisible aspect of the Buddha's true nature, transcendent and immanent at the same time, or even in the chronological sense of past and future which dissolve, when embodied by the same figure, in the secret of identity and eternity. If we seek parallels in the Indic world, the only figure that we can compare to this is Agni, with whom the Buddha shares many other iconographic and conceptual features (cf. Grossato 1999, 61). Moreover, it is hard to deny a strong symbolic significance to such a figure in a context like this – a figured *stūpa*, endowed by its very nature with a self-contained quality, complete and coherent in all its parts.

To sum up, we have seen in this small bronze a wealth of details, from both the architectural and figural point of view, affording a composite picture of the artistic trends of a little known period in which we still see a strange blending of different traditions, but which may perhaps represent the normal expression of an inclusive, cosmopolitan

culture. Thus we have here an invaluable opportunity to survey a compendium of the current artistic models and religious thought, which can help us string together the partial, scattered data available to us from archaeological, artistic and literary contexts. For my part, I am convinced that further, more important conclusions will arrive as we forge ahead with researches. The "*stūpa* of the descent from heaven" is, in my opinion, the architectural expression of a strong ideological current focused on a bipolar system: the heavenly nature and the terrestrial cycle of the Buddha, with its historical implications, where protagonists are not only Śākyamuni and Maitreya, but also the legitimate *cakravartin* who, in the void separating the *parinirvāna* of Śākyamuni from the advent of Maitreya, takes upon himself the burden of being the *defensor fidei*. We cannot, I think, consider it a mere chance that the great *stūpas* of Bhamala and Ajina Tepa and the small *stūpas* of Tapa Sardar are all merged in a context which gives special prominence to *mahāparinirvāna* scenes²⁰, nor indeed can the alternation between Śākyamuni and Maitreya, so insistently underlined in a wide range of Buddhist sites of the Late Antiquity, from India to Afghanistan and Xinjiang²¹, be regarded as isolated coincidences. In such a context the bejewelled Buddhas and the divested kings belong to the same religious and ideological horizon, albeit with different shades that call for close scrutiny.

¹⁸ Following Foucher (1901, 328ff.) this *stūpa* was positively identified with Shāh-jī-ki-Dheri. On this controversial subject see Fussmann (1987, 77ff.), Kuwayama (1996) and Errington (in press).

¹⁹ See the explanation proposed by Schlingloff (1997–98), who interprets the two-headed Buddha as an iconographic synthesis of the twin miracles (*yamakaprātibhārya*) performed by the Buddha at Śrāvastī. I do not intend to discuss here the possible derivation of this iconography, but only to stress its symbolic value, which is, in my opinion, implicit also in the narrative source, whatever it may be. I take the occasion to thank Dr. M. Zin, who called my attention to Prof. Schlingloff's work, and Prof. Schlingloff himself, who kindly sent me an abstract of it.

²⁰ A *mahāparinirvāna* scene – which stands out among undifferentiated replicas of Buddha figures – is represented on the south-east corner of the Bhamala *stūpa* (Marshall 1951, 392, pl. 118a, b); colossal *mahāparinirvānas* are housed in chapels both at Ajina Tepa (Litvinskij/Zeimal' 1971, 30f., 81ff., figs. 2–3, plan p. 27; Litvinskij/Zeimal' 2004, 100ff., figs. 13, 65 a. b – 67) and Tapa Sardar (Taddei 1974).

²¹ On this subject see the article by Abe (1990) that, though centred on the Mogao Cave 254, offers a wide range of comparisons and bibliographic references. For a deep investigation on the side of literary traditions see Nattier 1991.

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