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M. Frenger

Sun Images from Mathura – Cult Icons or Emblems ?

INTRODUCTION

Stone sculptures depicting the sun god from Mathura are well known. Kuṣāṇa examples such as Mathura Museum, Acc. No. 67.378 (fig. 1) are normally small depictions with a height of not more than 15–20 cm showing the god seated in a chariot. In all these images, the chariot is indicated by two or four horses galloping to either side. Of the chariot itself, only the front edge is visible, reduced to a simple horizontal recess.

The close relationship between the iconography of the sun god in these sculptures and that of the Kuṣāṇa rulers was observed long ago (Rosenfield 1967, 189f.). Features like the short club held in his right hand and the sword hanging from his left side as well as the dress with the boots, the coat and a flat necklace, are common both to depictions of the sun god and to those of the Kuṣāṇa rulers themselves. Club and sword are prominent attributes for example in the famous Kaniṣka sculpture from Mat. For the dress, portraits of the Kuṣāṇa rulers on their coins can serve as a comparison, especially because the small space available led to simplifications similar to those seen in the sun images. The connection between royal Kuṣāṇa iconography and the depiction of the sun god is further underlined by the fact that another iconographic type appears in which the chariot is replaced by a lion throne (Srivastava 1972, pl. 12b). These reliefs, as well as a number of largely unpublished fragments lacking both the chariot and the lion throne, are only identified as images of the sun god on the basis of their close resemblance to the chariot figures.

The predominance of non-Indian dress in all Kuṣāṇa sculptures of the sun god also seems to support the theory of a foreign influence, i. e. a non-Indian sun cult coming from either Iran or Central Asia, which reached India together with or even before Kuṣāṇa rule (Srivastava 1972, 253; Gail 1978, 347) and which only incorporated parts of an older indigenous tradition such as the chariot.

It is the aim of this paper to re-examine the evidence provided by images of the sun god from Mathura, but also images of the sun god that

predate the Kuṣāṇa period and originate from other places in India, in order to develop an alternative view of the iconographic developments and religious purpose of the sun images produced in Mathura up to the Gupta period.

PRE-KUṢĀṆA SUN IMAGES

Reliefs identified as the sun god are preserved among others in Vihāra no. 19 in Bhaja and in the Anantagumpha in Khandagiri/Orissa, which is probably a Jaina cave. The best known example belongs to the *vedikā* of the stupa at Bodh Gaya (Srinivasan 1992, pl. 5) and can serve to recapitulate the iconographic features of a pre-Kuṣāṇa sun image.

In all these reliefs the sun god stands in a carefully depicted chariot wearing a turban, his left hand lying on the upper edge of the body of the chariot, his right hand raised in front of his chest. A parasol is visible over his head and he is accompanied by one or more female attendants, in the case of the Bodh Gaya Sūrya by two female archers, aiming at two small male figures to the left and right of the horses. Turban, parasol, chariot and even the gesture of the main figure itself are features characteristic of a royal person. They can be found for example in one of the *jātaka* medallions from Bharhut (Klimburg-Salter 1995, cat. no. 31) and in the reliefs at Sanci showing royal processions, where the male figures driving either a biga or a quadriga are certainly not intended as depictions of solar gods but rather of kings or princes. Only a strict frontality was obviously reserved for the sun god; the reliefs of kings and princes are in contrast depicted in profile. The close connection between the two iconographies is a source of uncertainties concerning the identification of some pre-Kuṣāṇa images. The terracotta plaque in the Patna Museum (Srivastava 1972, pl. 7a) often referred to as the earliest image of the sun god in India, does not show any element that could not be used as an argument for its identification as a king, and is therefore of doubtful identification (Lacour-Jalouneix 1983, 24; Gail 1978,



Fig. 1. Sun god with chariot. Mathura Museum Acc. No. 67.378. Buff sandstone. Photo M. Frenger.

336). An alternative identification has also been proposed for the relief in Vihāra No. 19 in Bhaja.

All the reliefs mentioned come from either a Buddhist or Jaina context and they were definitely not meant to be worshipped as deities in their own right. Moreover, their examination shows that a connection between the iconography of the sun god and that of the idealised ruler or cakravartin was already firmly established before Kuṣāṇa times.

Returning to the Kuṣāṇa sun images themselves, it seems reasonable to suppose that they are by no means contradicting these older iconographic traditions. In contrast, they are the continuation of a well established connection between the iconography of the sun god and that of the ruler; as the appearance of the ruler changed, the image of the sun god was also changed. Even the replacement of the chariot by the lion throne appears in this light merely as the substitution of an old attribute of royalty by another of similar content, but closer related to Buddhist imagery.

KUṢĀṆA IMAGES WITHIN A LARGER PICTORIAL CONTEXT

In order to understand the development of sun iconography in Mathura another aspect gains in importance: the lack of images which can be positively identified as cult objects in Kuṣāṇa times. In contrast, there are at least three reliefs showing the sun god in an undoubtedly inferior position within a larger context. First among them is the fragment of a stone lintel now on display in the State Museum Lucknow depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha and three of the seven Buddhas of the past together with Maitreya (Acc. No. B.208; fig. 2).

Here the sun god is placed at one end of the narrative sequence, immediately beside the small female figures who probably indicate the temptation of the Buddha. The Buddhist context of the lintel can not be doubted. It shall not be discussed here whether the presence of the sun god in this case is a reference to the genealogy of Sākyamuni (Srinivasan 1992, 39f.) or a hint to the enlightenment of the Buddha as proposed for the Bodh Gaya sun god (Leoshko 1991). Perhaps he was simply used to frame the scenes from the life of the Buddha together with a now lost image of the moon on the opposite side, thus putting the scenes between them into a framework of day and night, or more generally, of time. Irrespective of which of these different meanings was or were intended; the sun god in this context is used merely as an emblem to convey this meaning to the viewer.

The second occurrence of the sun god as part of a larger relief carving is in one of the earliest depictions of Varāha (Mathura Museum Acc. No. 65.15.4; fig. 3). The four-armed Varaha holds two discs in his upper right and left hands with two tiny but recognisable depictions of a seated male figure in a chariot. This relief is significant in more than one regard: First, it shows that discs with this motif were also used as a kind of emblem in brahmanical images as well. A comparison with images of other deities of this time, for example a small Mahiṣāsūramardini image in the collection of the Museum für Indische Kunst Berlin (Acc. No. I 5817; Palast der Götter: cat. no. 115) shows that, instead of anthropomorphic depictions, similar discs are depicted showing the circle of rays of the sun and the crescent of the moon. One can assume therefore that the two discs in the Varāha-relief have the same meaning. From the usual position of sun and moon it can be conjectured that the disc in Varāha's right hand is the sun-disc, the pronounced rim of this disc perhaps indicating the rays or general shape of the sun.

It is also interesting to notice that there was obviously no very clear iconographic distinction between sun and moon during Kuṣāṇa times. The only aid in distinguishing between these images in Kuṣāṇa art are two pointed triangles behind the shoulders of the seated male figure, which might represent the two ends of the crescent moon, similar to those depicted behind the shoulders of the moon god Mao in Kuṣāṇa coins. We have to keep in mind therefore that every image of the sun in a chariot might also be an image of the moon. It is only from Gupta times onwards that a more distinct iconography of the moon is developed, as can be seen in the famous lintel from Garhwa now in the State Museum Lucknow (Acc. No. B.223; Joshi 1972, pl. 3). Here the moon god, shown seated on a crescent, and an image of the sun god closely related to the sun chariots of the Gupta period in Mathura, occupy the extreme ends of the lintel and thus frame the central scenes.



Fig. 2. Lintel with scenes from the life of the Buddha. Lucknow Museum Acc. No. B.208. Red sandstone. Photo M. Frenger.

The third example is that of the head of a female wearing a medallion with the sun god as an ornament over her forehead. It is in the reserve collection of the Lucknow Museum (Acc. No. 46.80; Rosenfield 1967, pl. 18). This ornament may perhaps be regarded as a sign of the religious affiliation of the lady wearing it, but there seems to be no other case of an adorant wearing a piece of jewellery indicating his or her religious preference. If this medallion is not to be taken as a purely decorative object, the intended reference is perhaps only to the general qualities of the sun as the bearer of light.

These three examples illustrate that the emblematic use of sun images as an important but not central element of larger compositions is well documented at Mathura. It may be remarked that this is also in accordance with depictions of the sun in the Gandhara region. Here, sun images appear either on pillar capitals or as ornaments placed in the central rosette of the turban worn by some bodhisattvas. Although the ideas underlying these depictions of the sun god are not identical with those of the Mathura reliefs – the use of a circle as a frame for the composition is hardly ever applied in Gandhara – their placement indicates that the sun images carried a symbolic meaning here, as well.

The three images discussed above share one feature with the other Kuṣāṇa sun images in stone; that is the reduction of details in the image in order to make it more easily recognisable within a limited space. Compared to the elaborate reliefs of pre-Kuṣāṇa times with detailed depictions of the chariot itself, the horses, and with additional figures next to the chariot, the Kuṣāṇa sun images



Fig. 3. Varāha holding the discs of sun and moon. Mathura Museum Acc. No. 65.15.4. Buff sandstone. Photo M. Frenger.

show only a minimum number of features. The chariot is reduced to a simple recess, the horses are only summarily depicted, and besides the round frame into which the whole composition is placed nothing else is shown. It is probable that this was not only due to the lack of space; in the only larger sculpture of this type, on display in the Mathura Museum (Acc. No. 00.D.46; Klimburg-Salter 1995, cat. no. 83), the availability of more space did not lead to an addition of more detail to this heavily reduced composition. One possible explanation is that in its use as an emblem it was simply not necessary to include a lot of



Fig. 4. Sun god with chariot. Mathura Museum Acc. No. 87.107. Pink spotted sandstone. Photo M. Frenger.



Fig. 5. Sun god with chariot. Mathura Museum Acc. No. 56.4016. Red sandstone. Photo M. Frenger.

detail; it was, on the contrary, more effective to have an image reduced to only a few elements essential for identification. The horses were sufficient to symbolise the chariot, and together with the upper half of the sun god and the circle as a frame, were enough to allow the viewer to recognise the sun.

CHANGES OF ICONOGRAPHY AFTER THE KUṢĀNA PERIOD

The iconographical changes to the Kuṣāna sun image during the transitional phase to the Gupta period did not take place in an organized way, at least in regard to the chariot type. Among the reliefs from Mathura there are several sculptures which must be regarded as experimental stages. It would take too long here to discuss every stage of the development in detail, but the essential changes can be shown in two examples now in the Mathura Museum (Acc. No. 87.107, fig. 4; Acc. No. 56.4016, fig. 5).

The first and most eye-catching change is in the depiction of the chariot. The number of horses is increased. Instead of two or four horses the seven horses mentioned in R̥g-vedic descriptions of solar gods are introduced. It is important to note that the additional horses are not simply added on both sides. It was intended to make the addition and number obvious, and to achieve this the sculptors had to carve a central horse – a much more difficult sculptural solution.

Another significant change is in the growing complexity of the chariot itself. In pre-Kuṣāna sun images the body of the chariot was depicted in a realistic manner, showing all elements of it, including the front and sides of the chariot body and the shaft. The Kuṣāna images reduced it to a minimal element of the composition, but later the body of the chariot became visible again and was depicted as an architectural structure. Several simple mouldings indicate the walls, and the upper edge consists of a kapota, sometimes even showing a central candraśālā window. This architectural concept of the chariot originated from Mathura and spread from here across Northern India.

However, the changes also continue within the body of the chariot:

Besides the sun god himself, seated either in the old Kuṣāna way or in padmāsana, his former attendants, the female archers, make their comeback (fig. 5). Prominent in the Bodh Gaya sun image several centuries before, they completely disappeared in the Kuṣāna sun images, only to return in the first sculptures showing traces of the Gupta style to become two of the standard attendants of the sun god.

The dress of the sun god cannot be judged from the badly-worn examples of this type. Only the change in headgear can be detected. The sun god no longer wears a flat cap or the equally flat hair

knot. Instead, the simple *kiriṭa* crown also worn by Vaishnava gods of this time appears; an analogy that might indicate the beginning of an identification with Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa at a point when a brahmanical sun cult was only just beginning to be established.

The last of the important iconographical changes is the introduction of a new set of attributes. Instead of the club and the sword of the Kuṣāṇa sun images the god holds two objects in his raised hands. Although they are badly worn off in one of the sculptures (fig. 5), they can be identified as two loop-like objects in the other (fig. 4).

The general direction of all these modifications is clear. They all show for the first time the will to create an explicitly brahmanical image of the sun god in which the ancient vedic and epic concepts overlie the royal aspect of solar iconography which played such an important part in both Kuṣāṇa and pre-Kuṣāṇa images of the god. The changes demonstrate a definite desire to create an image different from the older concept used as an emblem, and this new need to create a much more detailed image is probably an indication of the rise of new religious and political requirements.

The second important type of Kuṣāṇa sun image, the god seated on the lion throne, loses its importance and finally disappears after the end of Kuṣāṇa influence. Although such remarkable and famous examples of this type as the one in the Mathura Museum (Acc. No. 12.269; Rosenfield 1967, pl. 43) and that in the Ashmolean Museum (Acc. No. 1972.45; Harle 1974, 44, pl. 51) were still produced in Mathura during the transitional phase between the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta styles, this type never gained any importance outside the Mathura region and was given up almost completely in favour of other iconographic forms.

The type which filled the gap was a newly invented iconographic form which developed during the Gupta period, best represented by an example in the Mathura Museum (Acc. No. 595; fig. 6) and was about to become one of the standard iconographic forms. It would be too much to say that this form replaced the older lion-throne-image, but the decline of the older form and the invention of the new probably took place within the same period of time and at least one small, unfortunately very worn sculpture shows a kind of mixed iconography (Mathura Museum, Acc. No. 15.938; fig. 7). The lions beside the throne have been replaced here by two standing attendants similar to those flanking the representation of the standing Sūrya. This introduction of a new standing sun god attended by two male figures raises several questions. The iconography of this type is a combination of features derived from older Kuṣāṇa dress, such as the broad necklace and the almost triangular covering of the chest, as well as elements unrelated to any older Indian model such as the long shawl hanging over the elbows,



Fig. 6. Standing sun god with male attendants. Mathura Museum Acc. No. 595. Red sandstone. Photo M. Frenger.



Fig. 7. Seated sun god with male attendants. Mathura Museum Acc. No. 15.938. Red sandstone. Photo M. Frenger.



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the attendant visible on the right side of the sun god below the shawl, and the objects in his hands which can be identified as a garland with isolated protruding flowers.

The shape of this floral garland is more visible in another sculpture from Mathura Museum (Acc. No. 15.1007; Srivastava 1972, pl. 15b). Here one sees the slope of the garland bent back and the flowers on either side. It is a remarkable coincidence that a description of the sun god holding a garland rather than single lotus flower or a bunch of them is found in the *Sāmba-Upapurāṇa*, a text containing, besides other material connected with the sun cult, the oldest version of a myth relating the arrival of the Maga priests from Śakadvīpa (Stietencron 1966, 255). According to this myth, which was later repeated in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, the Maga priests first brought the worship of an anthropomorphic sun image to India.

The two attendants, more complete in the earlier example (fig. 6), are identified as Daṇḍin on the left and Piṅgala on the right of the sun god on the basis of several iconographic texts beginning with the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*. Their Iranian origin has been traced by H. von Stietencron, who identifies them with two gods belonging to the entourage of the Iranian god Mihira (Stietencron 1971, 12). The major features of this new iconographic form thus relate directly or indirectly to a non-Indian sun cult and perhaps this type of image was originally created for the use of a separate religious group. However, this was not the final stage. As the appearance of lotus garlands in sun images with the chariot (fig. 4) demonstrates, some kind of exchange between traditional and new iconography, and probably also between the religious groups behind them, began almost immediately. This exchange led to the creation of large and complex sun images such as the large stela discovered in Mathura in 1992 (Mathura Museum Acc. No. 92.1; Frenger 1998, 531) and another much more damaged example in the reserve collection of the Mathura Museum (Acc. No. 124; Diskalkar 1931, 34; Srivastava 1972, pl. 13b) incorporating both the female archers and the male attendants. Images like these which were obviously meant to be installed not as part of a wall but standing free on the ground or on a pedestal, can clearly be regarded as cult objects. The further development of these new iconographical types, however, falls outside the scope of this article.

CONCLUSION

Based on the evidence presented it can be concluded that the sun depictions in Mathura from before the Gupta period do not yield any information positively connecting them with any cult situation. Features like the non-Indian dress do not provide an argument for the influence of an Iranian or Central Asian sun cult at this time, but are rather the result of a continuation of the former connection between sun iconography and that of the ruler following the introduction of a new royal iconography under the dynasty of the Kuṣāṇas. In addition, there are no images of this period which can be safely identified as cult images. In contrast the existence of at least three objects in which the sun god serves as a kind of emblem, or – more generally speaking – as the carrier of a certain symbolic meaning connected rather with the solar orb as part of the cosmos, suggests that those sun images without context were also meant to be understood in a similar way. The pre-Kuṣāṇa tradition of depicting the sun god in a Buddhist or Jaina context carrying a meaning related to the respective religion, but not central to it, was obviously continued in Mathura throughout the Kuṣāṇa period.

It is only from post-Kuṣāṇa times onward that there are features visibly connecting the sun images to Vedic descriptions of the sun god on one hand but also to non-Indian influences which are named and explained as special to the sun cult in the *Sāmba-Upapurāṇa* and the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. The extant material shows that one iconographic form, the "chariot type", continued to exist from pre-Kuṣāṇa times until after the end of the Kuṣāṇa period and was several times adapted to the needs of a changing religious and political situation. The other form, the "lion throne type", which developed during the Kuṣāṇa period as an alternative expression of the connection between the ruler and the sun god, fell out of use at some point after the end of Kuṣāṇa rule, roughly at the same time as a new type of icon was being invented, representing a new form of sun god perhaps belonging to a newly migrated cult. The possibility has to be considered therefore that whatever sun cult came from the west to Northern India its influence must have begun only after the end of Kuṣāṇa rule over Mathura. Only at the time when Mathura became or was about to become part of the Gupta realm did it successfully establish itself in this part of Northern India.

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