

The visit of the sixteen ascetics to the Buddha seated in a grotto,

A Gandhara stele, Paris collection, National Museum Arts

PIERRE CAMBON

In the collection of the National Museum Arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris, France, there is a stele in schist of the Gandhara style, depicting the Buddha and the sixteen ascetics, inv. N° MA 12484. The Buddha is seated in a grotto and the grotto is in the mountain, inhabited by animals and people, when the devas are flying from the sky to present their homage to the Buddha. The Buddha himself wears the usual monastic coat, leaving the right shoulder completely nude, without protection. He is doing the gesture of the *dharmacakra mudra*, seated in the position of the meditation. Even if the relief is old and sometimes very badly erased, the composition is clearly visible and, at the base, there is the theory of the sixteen ascetics, each one adopting a different attitude. Thirteen figures are visible. If the stele has suffered a lot in the past and the former centuries, it is however complete, as well as the figure of the Buddha. The format is almost square, 64 cm high, 52 cm large, the composition well balanced, suggesting a painting, but a painting where all the figures are carved in very high relief, with the depth of the grotto where the Buddha appears.

The stele has been purchased very recently in Paris, in 2012, through a private collection. It has been acquired in Pakistan at the end of the nineteen- sixties. The stele is definitely interesting for the Guimet Museum collection, since the main part of it came from Afghanistan in the nineteen twenties and the nineteen thirties, through the DAFA excavations, at the time of Joseph Hackin (1886-1941) (Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan). after the first mission, of Alfred Foucher at the end of the nineteen century, in the old Gandhara, in 1896-1897, a trip to the Indian border, in Lahore and Peshawar area. Compared to the thousand of stucco excavated in Hadda by the DAFA, the core of the Gandhara collection is only one hundred relieves from the Foucher mission. Nevertheless, the piece is interesting in itself for the study of the Gandhara style – and that not only because this kind of stele is absent in all the material brought back by Foucher, but because it shows a very specific topic, in the Gandharan

art, which is not so frequent in Pakistan, or abroad, in the Gandhara collections: the visit of the sixteen ascetics, anxious to know a little more about the law of the Buddha, retired in the mountain, in a region supposed to be the Magadha.

This kind of iconography is following another scene familiar in the Gandharan art, the visit of the god Indra with his musician, Pancasikha, or all his court, to the Buddha meditating in a grotto, retired far away in the mountain, *Indrasailaguha*. Indra, king of *Devas*, asks for the Buddha's assistance to solve his own doubts. Before this episode, there has been another one, very similar, the invitation to the predication, with the visit of Brahma and Indra. This one can be found at the Taxila Museum, a relief from Giri, depicted in a very pure and very simple composition (01). The purpose of this visit is to ask to the Buddha to leave his retirement, his monk exercises or meditation practises in order to preach the law to all the living creatures instead of keeping it just for himself, letting unknown to the world this great revelation and the lessons of enlightenment, the *bodhi*. In both of this kind of stele, there is the same representation of a grotto of an ovoid shape where the Buddha is seated. The grotto appears to be in a mountain, which is a nice pretext for the evocation of the nature, of the landscape, of all the animals leaving in the jungle, bird, deer, monkey, even lion, sometimes treated in a very realistic way, with humour and real sympathy – this point is quite rare in the Gandharan art, at the difference of other tradition in India, from the Maurya or the Sunga period (3rd -1st c. BC) to the Gupta dynasty (4th – 6th c. AD), even during the Hindu times, as if it was an opportunity for the artist from the old Gandhara to escape from the Buddhist codes, imposed by the community of monks, an opportunity to express themselves freely, dealing with their usual environment and the area where they used to live – the same situation appears with the Christian art, in the West, during the time of the Middle Ages.

If the topic of the *Indrasailaguha* is reproduced, in a very naïve manner, and a very crude style, on the stupa of Sikri (Central Museum in Lahore) (02), or on some relief from provenance unknown, at the same Museum (03), it appears later with more details, at the Calcutta Museum, relief from Lorian tangai (04). More impressive is the scene developed on a superb way on the famous stele from Mamane dheri, at the Peshawar Museum - a prototype of that composition exists at Taxila (05). The stele from Mamane dheri has an inscription, mentioning the date of 89, without any precision of era

– that means 167 AD, if it is the Kanishka era and if the Kaniska era equals 78 AD. When the lion, sleeping below the grotto where the Buddha is seated, is supposed, in the Sikri relief, to suggest by its only presence the complete reign of the forest, of the wild animals, all the salvage realm, the stele of Mamane Dheri depicts, on a very sophisticated way, a real mountain, inhabited by animals and figures, playing with depths, difference of plans, even three dimensions, the same way than the stele acquired recently in Paris, even if the relief from Mamane dheri is definitely in better condition. The Buddha, here, is in *d h y a n a - m u d r a* and seated in the pause of meditation, *sattvaparyanka*.

Apparently, it was the case also with the fragment of the Peshawar Museum, coming from the Takht-i-bahi excavation, 1908 (06), to which Alfred Foucher is referring when he wrote his book on “*L’Art Gréco-Bouddhique du Gandhara*” (07). He mentions the topic and does do the parallel with the visit of Indra, but he does not stress the rarity of this type of scenery, the rarity of the description of a true Nature in the Gandharan art. For the first time, the artists are free to play with a composition in the three dimensions, to play with details coming from their own time and their regular life, free to add and to use their own experience of man and of artist. The result is then far more realistic than the rare representation of *jataka*, the episodes of the Buddha’s story in his former life, sometimes pretext, like in Bharhut and Sanchi, to the evocation of the jungle and then of the animal life. In the Gandharan art, this type of representation, testifies, very often, of an archaic phase of the development of the school and is generally naïve (08). The nature, here, is suggested on a symbolic way and not at all described with all the precision and all the realism that is so striking on the stele from Mamane dheri.

Some fragments describing animals in the mountain, appear in the Museum collections, like, for example, the Los Angeles County Museum (09). They should have belonged to this phase of the Ghandharan art, a phase relatively late and playing with a new type of iconography, dealing with the visit of Indra or the venue of the sixteen ascetics to the Buddha seated in a grotto. Testifying of that tradition, the stele acquired in Paris seems to follows, very closely, the approach of the fragment coming from Takht-bahi, actually at the Peshawar Museum, which looks very close to the disposition of Mamane dheri – not

only the composition itself, but also the details, the style, even the attitudes of the sixteen ascetics, some of them seen from the back and almost in movement: same games of the monkeys in the mountain, same couple of goats with their child, same flying spirits with blossoms, same presence of Vajrapani (here to the left of the cave), with Pansikha as pendant, (here, to the right), same ascetic seated in a yogi posture (10). In the inverse, the composition is very far from the approach on the same topic, as it can be seen on a relief of the Victoria and Albert museum (11), which looks more crude and definitely awkward, with a disposition by levels. The silhouette also of the Buddha's figure is close to the Buddha's image on the Mohammed Nari stele from the Central Museum in Lahore, which depicts what could be a "paradise" or the exaltation of the Buddha's image seated on the lotus. In fact, the evocation of the Buddha figure in the mountain could recall also, in a way, the legend of the grotto that keeps the shadow of Buddha, a grotto supposed to be close to Hadda, in the Jellalabad area, and mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims, and specially Xuanzang (12). For the pilgrim who meditates in the grotto, just in front of the wall, and concentrates very intensely, the image of the Buddha finally appears, after a long time of personal preparation. - a Buddha seated on a lotus, among an assembly of deva and of Bodhisattva; he is doing the gesture of the *dharmacakra-mudra*. This kind of representation is close to the compositions of Dunhuang and to the first representations of the Amitabha paradise. In Gandhara, too the *dharmacakra-mudra* is connected with the Buddha on a lotus, at the Kushan period (1st- 3rd c. AD) or post-Kushan times.

But, on the stele recently acquired in Paris, the Buddha is not seated on a lotus, at the difference of the Mohammed Nari stele, actually at the Central Lahore Museum. Nevertheless, he is doing the same gesture, supposed to be the *dharmacakra-mudra*, a gesture of which the form seems to be very specific to the Gandharan Art and the North-West province. It looks very distinct of the Indian approach of the same gesture which is fixed, in Sarnath or Mathura, during the Gupta times (4th – 6th c. AD) (13) and seems, there, to be connected with the first sermon at Sarnath. In the Gandharan area, this gesture has apparently a broader connection: it is associated with the Buddha seated on a lotus, the so-called Great miracle of Sravasti in the theory of Foucher, that many scholars considered now, after the article of John Huntington (14), as a depiction of a scene of paradise, without forgetting the possibility to see, in that composition, a

transfiguration of the figure of the Sakyamuni Buddha, a kind of theophany (15). Anyway, the gesture seems, apparently, to suggest a scene of predication, and symbolizes the action of teaching. It is also typical of a certain phase of the development of the Gandhara school and should be dated relatively late, since it becomes more and more popular at the final period with the development of the stucco moulding, specially on the votive stupa at the site of Hadda, Afghanistan, in the Tapa Kalan monastery. At each level, here, appear on the stupa, between pillars with Corinthian capitals, the same succession of images of Buddha seated in meditation and in *dhyana-mudra*, on a very repetitive way, a kind of litany, with sometimes, from time to time, the exception of a figure doing the *dharmacakra-mudra*.

If, in the Gupta period, the *dharmacakra-mudra*, in India, seems to be connected with the scene of the first predication, when the Buddha finally decides to teach the law to all the living creatures– it will be fixed, definitely that way, in the post-Gupta times, and will be the image in all the Buddhist world –, before, in the Gandhara area, in Kapisa and Swat, the link does not exist, even the form of the gesture. In those regions, at the oldest period, the iconography is not really stable, even not codified. Sometimes, the presence of a wheel symbolizes the *dharma* or the Buddhist law (16), Sometimes, the presence of the deers recalls the place where the first predication is done (17). but on many examples, the Buddha, is seated in a meditation position, and does a different gesture – a gesture which could be the one of *abhaya-mudra*, or the one of *vitarka-mudra*, even the one of *bhumisparsa-mudra*, like in Butkara, Swat (18) or in Shotorak (19), Afghanistan. At that time, the gesture of *dharmacakra-mudra* does not appear and is not at all connected with the scene of the predication, at the Sarnath gardens, at the very early stage of the Gandhara school.

Then, the question is double: Why the apparition in Gandhara of the *dharmacakra-mudra*? What is the origin of the gesture and what could be the provenance? Why also does it take this specific form that seems, at the end, to be at the origin of the *bodhyagri-mudra* (20), a new type of *mudra* in the esoteric Buddhism, which one figure, from Fondukistan, Afghanistan (6th – 7th c. AD), shows very clearly, in clay (21). Local origin or local adaptation of an Indian model? Influence of usual life has been suggested, codification of theatre and dance, even the role of the Hindu concept (22). But, some scholars have stressed the surprising richness of the Buddhist *mudra* in

Gandhara, suggesting to review the chronology of the school in function of the apparition of this kind of gesture, specially if it is compared to the old school of Mathura in India, to which Gandhara has been linked, politically and geographically, in the sub-continent. In India, *Dharmacakra-mudra* appears really with the Sarnath school at the Gupta period, after the Kushan times (23). Anyway, the gesture suggests a very specific period and should have some reasons, even if the question is still polluted by the different approaches, the different visions of the chronology, as it is the case specially for the triad from the de Marteau collection. For the professor Fussaman, this stele is dated and its date is, by definition and through palaeographic analysis, referring to the Kaniska reign, that means, for him, an era based on the Saka computation (78 Ad) (24). The stele, consequently, belongs to the end of the 1st century AD, (or, eventually, to the beginning of the 2nd century AD), when some other scholars proposed a very late dating, very often based on a personal theory.

So, it is the interest of the stele in Paris to do the connection between the iconography usually connected with the Buddha on lotus and the topic of the visit of the sixteen ascetics, which seems to come directly from the iconography of the visit of Indra to the Buddha seated in the mountain. If this topic seems to have been very popular, from Gandhara and Swat (25) and even to Hadda (26), the representation of the Buddha and the sixteen ascetics, in the inverse, seems to have been less frequent, through the collections actually known. It is anyway, a scene of predication, a scene of teaching, and if it is not referring to the first sermon in the deer park at Sarnath, however it recalls the different episodes of preach at Sravasti among the heretic masters. The scene here follows the approach of Mamane dheri (Charsadda); the only difference (without forgetting the question of gesture) is nevertheless the conception of the piece in itself – treated, in the Mamane Dheri stele, like a sculpture, in the three dimensions, even on the fragment coming from Takht-i-bahi, when it is treated in the example of Paris, almost like a painting, a painting in high relief or a kind of “retable”, announcing the large panel of Mohammed Nari could confirm that point the close relation of style between the Buddha image of the stele actually in Paris, with the one from Mohamed Nari. Furthermore, when the image of the stele of Mamane dheri, as the one coming from Takht-i-bahi, is clearly in *dhyana-mudra*, the one from the Guimet Museum is, without any ambiguity, doing the *dharmacakra-mudra*. Then, it suggests that the Paris stele is

close and definitely linked to the Gandharan area at the final period - the Gandharan area *stricto sensu*, that means the Peshawar country, and testifies of the apogee of the Gandhara style, when the Buddha image, step by step, is becoming an icon, codified, and placed at the centre of the composition. The figure is then depicted on a bigger scale than all the assistants around - human figures, gods or animals, and appears definitely to be supra-human, announcing the huge images of the Bamiyan valley. This type of representation could date from the Kushan period (1st -3rd c. AD), if the interpretation of the professor Fussman is correct, but it could refer too, not without logic, to the post-Kushan times, if it is compared to other tradition from the sub-continent, Mathura and Sarnath, or to the development of the Gandhara style through the Kapisa area, Afghanistan (27), during the Gupta times (4th -6th c. AD). Paris, 21.07.2012

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