

New Light on (and from) the Muhammad Nari Stele¹

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1. Introduction: Locating the Muhammad Nari Stele

The Muhammad Nari stele of the Lahore Museum is without doubt one of the most remarkable pieces of Gandhāran art, and the best known example of a significant number of sculptured panels of considerable complexity unique to this school (Figure 1). Such works have justly been referred to as “complex steles,” a term used in this paper as well. While in fact a number of steles and stele fragments of this type were found near the village of Muhammad Nari—and these will also be referred to in this study—the almost immaculate state of preservation of the Lahore specimen has resulted in its being called “the Muhammad Nari stele,” as if it were the only one.²

The stele in question is made of light grey schist, measures 119 x 97 x 28 cm, and is distinguished by the impressive intricacy and depth of its carving. It is dominated by a teaching Buddha seated on a large lotus in the centre, beneath the branches of a fanciful tree and various beings, two of whom hover in mid-air above his head in the act of crowning him with a wreath. The lotus has a large number of fleshy petals and a bejewelled stem. The stem is flanked by a standing couple and the upper bodies of four more figures rising out of two lotuses which float upon the waters of the lotus pond that forms the

¹ This is a revised version of the paper that formed the basis of our presentation in the Special International Symposium on Pure Land Buddhism held at Otani University, Kyoto, on 4 August 2011. We would like to express our gratitude to Shōryū Katsura, the organizer of the symposium, whose kind invitation to speak at this event galvanized us into writing up our ideas, and we also thank the scholars who kindly agreed to act as respondents, Akira Miyaji, Noritoshi Aramaki and Takashi Koezuka, for their searching and constructive comments on our work. We must also mention here the participants in the seminar “Buddhist Visions of Paradise” held at Stanford during the winter quarter of 2010 with whom much of the material in this paper was first discussed (Norihisa Baba, Heawon Choi, Charles DiSimone, Chen Li, Anna Pawlowski, Trent Walker, and Nicholas Witkowski), and record our thanks as well to others who have from time to time favoured one or both of us with information, images, references, or a critical ear, including Stefan Baums, Osmund Bopearachchi, Oskar von Hintüber, Anna-Maria Quagliotti, Juhyung Rhi, Elizabeth Rosen Stone, and Joanna Williams. Last but not least, the foundation for the art-historical work on which a good part of this article is based was laid during a fellowship at the Lumbini International Research Institute, Nepal. The work continues, and eventually we hope to present this research in a more extended and comprehensive form, but for the time being this paper should be taken as a kind of “interim report.”

² This village (in fact, now a town) in the Charsadda district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province in Pakistan is spelt “Muhammad Nārī” on the government maps, and we use a simplified form of this (without diacritics) here (as also used in, e.g., Rosenfield 1967). Also attested in the literature on the finds from this site are the spellings Muhammad Nārī (e.g. Grünwedel 1920), Mohamed Nārī (e.g. Foucher 1909/1917), Mohamed-Nari (e.g. Rhi 1991), Mohammad Nari (e.g. Rhi 2011b) and Mohammed Nari (e.g. Huntington 1980, Quagliotti 1996a, Rhi 2008, Bautze-Picron 2010).

base of the composition. The central Buddha is surrounded by numerous bodhisattvas engaged in different activities, several of them grouped together. In the upper area there are also solitary bodhisattvas seated within their own pavilions, and in the top corners two meditating Buddhas emanate further standing ones. Since all the details of the stele will be discussed in the course of this paper, this general description will suffice for now.

It is still unclear to us when this remarkable work of art was discovered. It is, however, recorded that another relevant stele (Stele 10 in our list below) was excavated from a mound near the village of Muhammad Nari by an engineer by the name of Dempster working for Swat Canals.³ This stele was subsequently published by Henry Hardy Cole, initially as a sketch in Cole (1883: pl. 1) and then, using a photograph which had been taken by M. Serrot in that same year, in Cole (1885) as Plate 1 of Appendix I, "Illustrations of Graeco-Buddhist sculptures from the Yusufzai District," which occupies pp. cviii–cxvii of that volume.⁴ At present, we can only assume that other sculpture attributed to Muhammad Nari was found in the same mound around the same time or slightly later. The objects from this site eventually reached the Lahore Museum, and the Muhammad Nari stele has remained there until the present. There it was accessioned under the number 1135, an inventory number that was subsequently changed at least twice, to I-255 and then to the present G-155. Other important objects from the same site, among them the stele photographed and published in 1883 referred to above, were later moved to the Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery after the partition of India and Pakistan. Within the Gandhāran galleries of the Lahore Museum, the Muhammad Nari stele is appropriately displayed in the central case on one of the side walls opposite the famous image of the fasting Siddhārtha from Sikri. Although certainly to be ranked at the same level of cultural, historical and artistic importance with that iconic specimen of Gandhāran sculpture, it has not received anything like the same level of popular attention. Indeed, the two pieces convey the most dramatic contrast: one a powerful image of the solitude and self-denial of a single gaunt ascetic, the other a depiction of the glory of a Buddha enthroned in state and surrounded by a bejewelled host.

The stele was apparently found in near-perfect condition (with the notable exception of the broken nose of its central Buddha), but has since its discovery suffered some minor but not insignificant damage, in consequence of accidents during transport, or as a result of deliberate modifications made in order to mount the piece. This is clear from a comparison of its present condition with a historic photograph taken considerably before 1905, which already shows the symmetrical cut-outs near the bottom corners where the lower halves of two seated bodhisattvas were removed to provide bracket mounts (Figure 2). The cut-out on the right was then also used to write the acquisition number, no. 1135, on the piece. Two other early photographs already bear witness to further damage; in both of them the number now appears on the left-hand cut-out. The shot taken in 1905 by Count Adrien van der Berght⁵ may be the older of the two: in it the bottom left-hand corner seems largely intact, but the books held by bodhisattvas on both sides have been broken, that on the right having disappeared almost entirely. The

³ Burgess (1897: 8, description of pl. 112).

⁴ For Cole's description see p. cx. This is virtually identical to the description in Cole (1883: 7–8). For the image see also British Library, <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/s/zoomify59137.html>

⁵ See Taddei (1987/2003: fig. 3) and Quagliotti (1996a: fig. 1).

photographic print of roughly the same time (showing the stele in the same case of the Lahore Museum) preserved at the Warburg Institute in London reveals the same damage to the books, but one can also see that the bottom left-hand corner—the left end of the pond—has split off, even though it remains attached to the stele. In more recent photographs that piece is lost altogether, and with it the hood of a nāga and the three lotus blossoms it bore. Comparison of the historical photographs with current images reveals other damage as well, e.g., the partial loss of the parasol above the Buddha in the upper right corner, two petals of the originally perfect lotus snapped off, and so on.

2. Competing Interpretations

Naturally, the amazing number of details on the stele have over time provoked a large literature with various significantly different interpretations of the piece's content, interpretations that can only be summarized here.⁶ The shared concern of all of them is with identification, in particular of the Buddha enthroned in the centre of the composition.

The initial (and standard) identification for steles of this type was put forward by the pioneer Gandhāran scholar Alfred Foucher, who saw in them an elaborate representation of the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī.⁷ Told in numerous different versions, the Śrāvastī episode actually contains several distinctive miracles, of which the “Multiplication Miracle” or simply the “Great Miracle” is the most important for the interpretation of the stele. In this miracle the Buddha, taking his seat on a thousand-petaled bejewelled lotus created by a pair of nāgas, magically creates doubles of himself in different postures on lotuses filling the sky.⁸ Multiple Buddhas and the nāgas generating a lotus are both seen as the characteristic features that identify a scene as the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī. However, this reading of the Muhammad Nari stele has almost no support in terms of the visuals of the piece itself, apart from the multiplications shown in the upper corners—and even those show the Buddha in the standing position only. In fact, such an identification can only be justified if one assumes a successive development of steles of increasing complexity that came to be more and more removed from the original representation of the event. Nevertheless, despite being questioned almost from the start,⁹ Foucher's interpretation still enjoys a following, and even in recent scholarship by Schlingloff and others it is favoured over other ones.¹⁰ It assumes that steles of this type represent an event in the life of the historical Buddha, as

⁶ More extensive summaries of previous research on the stele are found in Quagliotti (1996a: 281–282, n. 7), Rhi (1991: 5–9, 316–323) and Miyaji (2002).

⁷ Foucher (1909; 1917). Before that the stele was already published in Burgess (1900: pl. 7, fig. 2) and Foucher (1905: fig. 79). Foucher is followed in his interpretation by Lyons & Ingholt (1957: 121–25, pl. 255) and Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 395), among others. Kurita follows Foucher in assigning nearly all complex steles to the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī.

⁸ See now Rotman (2008: 253–287) for a translation of the *Prātihāryasūtra* in the *Divyāvadāna*, the most commonly cited version of the story. Brown (1984) provides a useful review of the different miracles performed at Śrāvastī as they relate to the art-historical record.

⁹ Besides being queried by those advancing alternative interpretations, this identification of the Gandhāran complex steles was also questioned by van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (1949: 124–138) and Williams (1975: 182–183).

¹⁰ See Schlingloff (1991) and (2000: I, 488–515; II, 102–105) as well as Ali & Qazi (2008: 139–143). Note in particular the wide range of imagery apparent in the line drawings of Schlingloff (2000: II, 102–105) interpreted as representing the same event, which the author explains on the basis of the many textual variants of this miracle.

indeed most of Gandhāran art does, and thus identifies the central teaching Buddha seated on the lotus as Śākyamuni.

Another interpretation put forward, for example, by Japanese scholars such as Nakao Odani (1967) and Akira Miyaji (1985a, 1993, 2002, 2005), also identifies the central figure as Śākyamuni, but Śākyamuni in the glorious and radiant form he displays before teaching such Mahāyāna sūtras as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, the *Sandhinirmocana*, the *Tathāgatagarbha* and so on. Miyaji (e.g. 1993: 252) refers to this event as the “Miracle of Great Light.” Considering the Muhammad Nari stele only, one could say that this identification has the advantage of accounting for both the teaching gesture and the massive presence of bodhisattvas surrounding the Buddha. In addition, miracle working at the event could explain some of the other details of the stele. This interpretation shades into a vaguer and less specific reading of the stele as a Mahāyāna “theophany,” as advanced by John Rosenfield (1967: 235–238, fig. 90). This is the position towards which Juhung Rhi most inclines (1991: 148; 2003: 174–175; 2006: 171), even though in his most recent publications he remains cautiously non-committal, seeing some merit in nearly every explanation (except that which invokes the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī).¹¹

It was John Huntington who in 1980 first persuasively argued that the Muhammad Nari stele represents the Buddha Amitābha or Amitāyus in Sukhāvatī.¹² In a long and comprehensive paper he examined many of the stele’s details and compared them to the textual descriptions available to him, in particular those of the Sanskrit text of the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha*. Although he certainly provided the most compelling interpretation until then, Huntington’s identification did not find a large following for a number of reasons. It was objected that many of the textual details that can be related to the stele are of a rather generic nature and occur in many texts, there is no detail in the stele that could be taken as an unmistakable reference to the text, and there are a number of details that appear to have no relationship to the text at all. Last but not least, at that time Huntington’s treatment of this topic appeared to go against the grain of studies of Gandhāran art, which tended to explain that art entirely in terms of Mainstream Buddhism. Consequently, some scholars dismissed his reading of the stele, along with the earlier ones.¹³

Nevertheless, Huntington’s hypothesis cleared the ground for a new interpretative approach to the stele. Anna Maria Quagliotti (1996a) came to largely the same conclusion, while Gérard Fussman (1987:73) first accepted Huntington’s view, but later distanced himself somewhat in favour of a more generic Buddha-field (1999: 548–551). In the same vein, more recent scholarship interprets the stele as a generic, but not strictly identifiable, Buddha-field for which the known steles only represent examples

¹¹ For example, Rhi (2011b: 115) writes: “... the Mohammad Nari stele can be best understood as a grand vision of a Buddha (Shakyamuni or a generic Buddha without a specific name or potentially with diverse names) who has been elevated to the status of a supramundane being. It is possible that the stele is a recreation of a wondrous vision that a practitioner experienced or was anticipated to experience in a visualization practice, which is attested to in early Mahayana scriptures as constituting an important concern of Mahayana.”

¹² In the West this hypothesis had previously been advanced—without any discussion—by Benjamin Rowland (1938: 79, n. 2), but before him the Japanese scholar Toyomune Minamoto had in the 1920s argued for it on the basis of similarities with East Asian depictions of the Pure Land (see Minamoto 1925, 1926).

¹³ E.g. Brown (1984: 80–82).

(Rhi 2008, 2011a, 2011b). Christian Luczanits (2008: 49–51) emphasized the visionary aspect of the stele as the field is revealed by a Buddha to a disciple at a place in the wilderness and in the presence of Vajrapāṇi (Figure 3). Other scholars put forward slightly different interpretations. Gregory Schopen (1987: 130–31, n. 50 = 2005: 273–74, n. 50) would favour Abhirati over Sukhāvātī, if he thought the stele represented either of them (see below). Finally, associating the stele with later textual sources, Jacques Giès and Monique Cohen (1996: 341–344) even see the Buddha Vairocana, as a superior manifestation of Śākyamuni, in the central image of the stele.

Among all these interpretations, some are more plausible than others, but none of them is entirely satisfactory, the main problem being that none really explains all the major features found on the stele. Regardless of how detailed they are, nearly all previous interpretations suffer, to a lesser or greater extent, from a failure to deal adequately with four issues:¹⁴

- 1: The full range of textual traditions possibly relevant to the interpretation of the stele has not been taken into account.
- 2: From an art-historical point of view the stele has not been adequately analyzed in relation to similar pieces and the light they might throw upon the features it shares with them and upon its idiosyncrasies.
- 3: The relationship between text and image has not been reflected upon in sufficient depth or detail.
- 4: Finally, so far no wider interpretative framework incorporating textual, art-historical and buddhological considerations has been offered for the complex steles as a general class of Gandhāran sculpture.

The following account, while attempting to address all four of these issues, cannot cover them in their entirety. Instead, by focusing on key elements we hope to offer a new perspective on the interpretation of the stele which has a greater potential to solve the question of its identity than any previous attempt. We begin with a consideration of some of the textual sources describing Buddha-fields, since it appears to us that several of the more persuasive and detailed discussions of the Muhammad Nari stele in recent times focus on the possibility that it is in fact a representation of such a realm. Our concern here, then, is with establishing what a Buddha-field might look like, and what might be the features which an artist could reasonably be expected to incorporate in the very limited space of something like this stele.

3. Domains of the Awakened Ones: Two Paradigmatic Buddha-fields

Mahāyāna sūtras abound in descriptions of Buddha-fields, or, following Davidson (2002: 132–133), “Buddha domains” (Skt. *buddhakṣetra*), descriptions which range from the long and prolix to the short and sketchy. Their frequency is not surprising, since the domain of a Buddha is a natural consequence of the pursuit of the bodhisattva path, and the site of its culmination. Indeed, the bodhisattva path itself is often conceptualized as the “purification” of a Buddha domain. Two of these ideal worlds stand out as being the subject of more detailed treatments: Sukhāvātī, the western domain of Amitābha, and Abhirati, the eastern domain of Akṣobhya.

¹⁴ The notable exception is Rhi (1991). See especially his comments on pp. 11ff., which raise similar issues.

Amitābha's Sukhāvātī

The cult of Amitābha and Sukhāvātī certainly triumphed historically, especially in later East Asian Buddhism, so it is natural that some have tried to see our stele as an early Indian depiction of what would later be considered the Pure Land *par excellence*. To do this they have had recourse to three texts devoted to its description, which are:

- (1) The *Larger* (or *Longer*) *Sukhāvātīvyūha* (LSukh)
- (2) The *Smaller* (or *Shorter*) *Sukhāvātīvyūha* (SSukh)
- (3) The *Guan wuliangshoufo jing* (*Guan jing* or *Visualization Sūtra*)

Of these three, it is the LSukh which provides the most detailed description with the surest Indian pedigree,¹⁵ hence scholars assessing the Muhammad Nari stele have generally looked to it for inspiration. However, they have worked from the Sanskrit version,¹⁶ and this has been somewhat problematic, in view of the complicated textual history of the work. Looking at the five surviving Chinese translations, one can distinguish two recensions of the text, as follows:

Chinese Translations of the Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūha*

Early Recension

- (1) *Fo shuo amituo-sanyesanfo-saloufotan guodu rendao jing* 佛說阿彌陀三耶三佛薩樓佛檀過度人道經, by the Han Dynasty translator Lokakṣema (fl. c. 170–190 C.E.), although attributed to Zhi Qian 支謙 (fl. c. 220–257): T 362.
- (2) *Fo shuo wuliangqingjing pingdengjue jing* 佛說無量清淨平等覺經, a revised version of (1) by the Wu Dynasty translator Zhi Qian, although attributed to Lokakṣema: T 361.¹⁷

Later Recension

- (3) *Fo shuo wuliangshou jing* 佛說無量壽經, attributed to the Wei Dynasty (220–265) translator Kang Sengkai 康僧鎧 or Saṅghavarman, but probably by Buddhahadra (359–429) and Baoyun 寶雲 and dating from 421: T 360.¹⁸
- (4) *Dabaoji jing wuliangshou rulai hui* 大寶積經無量壽如來會, produced during the period 706–713 by Bodhiruci (fl. 693–713): T 310 (5).¹⁹

¹⁵ The *Guan jing* is commonly thought to be a Central Asian or Chinese compilation, albeit one put together using Indian materials. On this question see especially Fujita (1990) and Silk (1997). English translations of the *Guan jing* may be found in Takakusu (1894) and Inagaki (1995).

¹⁶ The edition of choice is that of Ashikaga (1965), and that is the one we refer to here, even though it has now been superseded by Fujita (2011). Since this has just been published and is not yet widely known, we do not cite it. For English translations of the LSukh and the SSukh see F. Max Müller (1894a & b) and Gómez (1996).

¹⁷ For an extended discussion of the authorship of T 361 and T 362, and for the hypothesis that the translators' names have been switched, see Harrison (n.d.); cf. Nattier (2008: 86–87); see also Harrison, Hartmann & Matsuda (2002). Not all scholars accept this view. Fujita, for example, continues to maintain that T 362 is “almost certainly by Zhi Qian,” while holding that T 361 is “most likely” by Bo Yan, and dated 258 C.E. (see Fujita 2011: xvi). The important thing to note is that T 361 and T 362 are not independent texts, but two different versions of the first Chinese translation of the LSukh. Whether we date that translation to the late 2nd century (Lokakṣema) or to the first half of the 3rd century (Zhi Qian) does not significantly affect the arguments of this paper.

¹⁸ English translations in Inagaki (1995: 19–89) and Gómez (1996: 153–222). Although this version is generally aligned with the Later Recension, it is not solely reflective of it: the text is significantly contaminated by the older Chinese translation.

- (5) *Fo shuo dasheng wuliangshou zhuangyan jing* 佛說大乘無量壽莊嚴經, dated 991 and attributed to the Song Dynasty translator Faxian 法賢 or Dharmabhadra, otherwise known as Tianxizai 天息災 (fl. 980–1000): T 363.

The Sanskrit version, like the Tibetan translation, belongs to the Later Recension (LR), and this is what scholars have worked from, where they have not also looked at the later Chinese translations, English versions of two of them being available. Unfortunately, there is as yet no translation of the Early Recension (ER) text into a modern Western language.²⁰ One consequence of this is that previous discussions of the Muhammad Nari stele have tended to overlook it.²¹ This is unfortunate, since the description of Sukhāvātī (and of Amitābha) in the ER is significantly different, in ways which are arguably relevant to the question of any relationship between the LSukh and the Muhammad Nari stele. Focussing particularly on these relevant features, we might note the following points:

1. Those reborn in Sukhāvātī are all males. While this is a theme in the LR, it is more trenchantly expressed in the ER, which does not blur the issue the way the LR does (i.e. there are no apsaras in the Sukhāvātī of the ER). On this subject see Harrison (1998). It is in consequence of this that all those reborn in Sukhāvātī simply have to be reborn in lotuses, or by some other miraculous means. For example, the second vow in the ER runs as follows:

Vow No. 2: When I become a Buddha, may there be no women in my realm. If women wish to come and be born in my realm, then they will turn straightaway into men. All the innumerable gods and humans and even small flying and wriggling things who take rebirth in my realm will all be born magically within lotus flowers in pools of the seven treasures. They will grow up and all become bodhisattvas and *arhats*²² totally beyond numbering. If I fulfill this vow then I shall become a Buddha. If I do not fulfill this vow I will never become a Buddha. (T 362, 12: 301a27–b3; no equivalent in T 361)

2. Sukhāvātī's population includes *śrāvakas* ("arhats") alongside bodhisattvas. The presence of *śrāvakas* in Sukhāvātī is virtually elided in the LR, but is a prominent feature of the ER. However, while providing for these two different spiritual orientations, the text is concerned to emphasize the absence of any physical distinction between these two groups of salvation-seekers (or, for that matter, between humans and gods). Everybody looks the same, although there is a difference in the brightness of their haloes (see next).

Vow No. 9: When I become a Buddha, may all the bodhisattvas and arhats [i.e. *śrāvakas*] in my realm have appearances which are handsome, pure and excellent, may they all share the one colour and all be of the same type, just like the people of the sixth heaven [i.e. Parānirmitavaśavartins]. If I fulfil this vow then I shall become a Buddha. If I do not fulfil this vow I will never become a Buddha. (T 362, 12: 301c10–13; cf. T 361, 12: 281a20–21 [Vow 3])²³

¹⁹ Translated, with omissions, in Chang (1983: 339–360).

²⁰ Indeed, such a translation would be premature until the text of Lokakṣema's translation is reconstructed (to the degree that this is possible) on the basis of T 362 and T 361. For a fuller discussion of the text-critical problems see Harrison (n.d.). On the general significance of this material see Nattier (2003).

²¹ Again, the exception is Rhi (1991).

²² Note that (*a*)*luohan* is Lokakṣema's standard rendition for *śrāvaka*.

²³ See also T 362, 12: 303c12–15; cf. T 361, 12: 283a24–27.

The absence of any visible distinction between humans and gods remains a strong theme in the LR as well (Ashikaga 1965: 11 [Vow 4], 37–39), although the division of the humans into *śrāvakas* and bodhisattvas has been elided.

3. The two chief bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, are given slightly greater prominence. For example, the text states:

“The bodhisattvas and *arhats* [= *śrāvakas*] all have their own haloes, which have different illumination ranges. Among the bodhisattvas, there are two bodhisattvas who are most revered, always seated to the left and right of the Buddha, attending upon him in the discussion of the truth [?]. The Buddha is always seated facing these two bodhisattvas, discussing matters past, present and future in all eight directions, up above and down below. If he wishes to have these two bodhisattvas go to the countless Buddhas in all eight directions, up above and down below, then they fly off right away, arriving wherever they wish to go. Their flight is as swift as the Buddha’s, their valour is peerless. One of the bodhisattvas is called Avalokiteśvara, one of the bodhisattvas is called Mahāsthāmaprāpta.²⁴ Their radiance and insight is supreme, their haloes illuminate the thousand-Sumeru Buddha-realms in other directions, so that they are always brightly lit. The [other] bodhisattvas’ haloes each illuminate a thousand million myriad *li*, the arhats’ haloes each illuminate seven *zhang*.”

The Buddha said: “If the people of the world, be they good men or good women, should be in dire straits and in fear of the actions of officials, they have only to take refuge in these bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta and they will all be saved, without exception.” (T 362, 12: 308b9–22; cf. T 361, 12: 290a12–28)

4. The eventual parinirvāṇa of Amitābha is foreshadowed, to be followed by the succession, in turn, of the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta to his teaching throne:

The Buddha said, “When the Buddha Amitābha subsequently undergoes parinirvāṇa, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara will then become a Buddha, in command of the wisdom of the way, master of the teaching. The gods, humans and species that flit and wriggle that he liberates in the world, the eight directions, above and below, will all be made to attain the way of nirvāṇa of the Buddha. His excellences and merits will again be like the great teacher, the Buddha Amitābha’s, and he will remain for innumerable kalpas, for kalpas more incalculable than innumerable kalpas, on the same model as the great teacher [?], and only then will he undergo parinirvāṇa. In his turn the bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta will then become a Buddha, in command of the wisdom of the way, master of the teaching. Those he liberates and his merits will again be like the great teacher, the Buddha Amitābha’s, and he will remain for innumerable kalpas, and still not undergo parinirvāṇa, transmitting from one to the other in succession the exceedingly bright way of the scriptures (dharma) and the most excellent realm, his [their?] dharma being in this way forever uninterrupted and boundless.” (T 362, 12: 309a14–24; cf. T 361, 12: 291a3–13)

²⁴ Here we give the names in their regular Sanskrit forms. Lokakṣema’s transcriptions (or what remains of them) suggest something different. He(?; variant: Gai)louxuan 盧(蓋)樓亘 (cf. the transcription of Lokeśvararāja: Louyixuanluo 樓夷亘羅) suggests something like the Gāndhārī form Olo’iśpara. However, the problem of the Indic forms of Avalokiteśvara’s name(s) and their rendition in Chinese is a jungle we shall not enter here. Mohenabo 摩訶那鉢 suggests Mahānapatta or something similar for Mahāsthāmaprāpta, but it is possible that a character has been omitted.

This material is entirely absent from the LR.

5. More attention is given to the way in which the inhabitants of Sukhāvatī interact with each other, rather than Amitābha being the sole focus of their attention:

All the countless gods and human beings ... who have achieved rebirth in the Buddha Amitābha's realm gather together in a great assembly, coming together amid the waters of the pools of the seven treasures. Each and every person sits atop a single large lotus blossom. They all declare their own merits and virtuous practices. Each person tells what precepts he kept or good dharmas he practised when pursuing the way in the past, during his former lives, and the details of whence he came to be born, the scriptures which he delighted in, his wisdom and knowledge of the scriptures, and the merit from his practices. ... The host regard each other with decorum and harmony. Happy and jubilant one and all, in wisdom and valour they are all a match for each other. (T 362, 12: 311b14–24; cf. T 361: 12: 293b2–12).

6. There is a much more systematic tripartite classification of those reborn in Sukhāvatī, with different practice requirements for each of the three classes. In brief—because the relevant passages are far too long to give here—the distinctions are as follows:

1st class: Renunciants (members of the Saṅgha)

Requirements: bodhisattva status (i.e., following the Mahāyāna), upholding Mahāyāna sūtras, moral purity, plus singleminded aspiration to Sukhāvatī (no minimum time period specified)

Results: vision of Amitābha in dreams; at death, encounter with Amitābha in person and lotus rebirth in Sukhāvatī in close proximity to Amitābha

Apparently no problems with doubt in this class.

2nd class: Laypeople

Requirements: merit-making (mostly forms of gift-giving and *pūjā*), moral purity, plus singleminded aspiration (for at least 1 day & night)

Results: vision of Amitābha in dreams; at death, vision of a *nirmāṇa* of Amitābha, lotus rebirth in Sukhāvatī

Those in this class who fall prey to doubt, however, must endure 500 years in a jewelled borderland city or fortress after their lotus birth before being able to join Amitābha's congregation.

3rd class: Laypeople

Requirements: moral purity, plus singleminded aspiration (for at least 10 days & nights)

Results: vision of Sukhāvatī in dream at death, lotus rebirth in Sukhāvatī

Those in this class who fall prey to doubt must also endure 500 years of imprisonment.²⁵

Without going into all the details, it can be seen that this schema envisages a hierarchy of blessings, with status being marked by access to Amitābha himself. Also of interest is the relevance of the

²⁵ We give here a simplified summary of some very long passages in the original. The relevant passages are to be found in the Vow Section (T 362, 12: 301b14–c5 [Vows 5–7]; cf. T 361, 12: 281c2–9 [Vows 18–19, no close match]) and the Description Section (T 362, 12: 309c24–311a17; cf. T 361, 12: 291c14–293a6).

renunciant-lay divide, and the distinction even within the laity between those with the resources for merit-making and those lacking them.

In the LR this system has broken down and its distinctions have almost entirely disappeared.

7. There is a stronger centre-periphery motif in the ER, which is related to the fate of the doubters in the 2nd and 3rd classes. Imprisoned in their cities or fortresses (Chinese *cheng* 城) on the borders of Sukhāvātī, they are unable to join the congregation in the centre, and must wait 500 years before their *vimānas* are able to take off and give them the freedom of movement enjoyed by the other inhabitants (for the references see above, under Point 6). At the same time, however, it is emphasized that Sukhāvātī is perfectly flat. There is no Mt Meru, to say nothing of any lesser mountains or hills. In fact, the ER makes no mention at all of Amitābha's Bodhi tree, although it appears in the LR.
8. There is more emphasis on light. We have already seen this in connection with the details about the haloes of the bodhisattvas and *śrāvakas*, but it is also apparent in the considerably more expansive section on the radiance of Amitābha, with which the description of Sukhāvātī begins in the text (T 362, 12: 302b20–303a2; cf. T 361, 12: 281c27–282b11).²⁶

Later in this paper we will consider the Muhammad Nari stele in the light of these distinctive features of the ER of the LSukh, concentrating particularly on elements which have not been adequately addressed previously. But what of other possibilities? What of the contention advanced by Schopen when he says, contra Huntington, that “[t]here is, in fact, probably more “evidence” to suggest that it [the stele] represents Abhirati than there is to suggest that it represents Sukhāvātī.”²⁷ To assess this claim we need to know what Abhirati might look like.

Akṣobhya's Abhirati

For a description of Abhirati we must consult in the first instance the primary source text for the early cult (if we can call it that) of Akṣobhya, the *Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha*, extant in two Chinese versions and one Tibetan translation:

- (1) *Fo shuo achufo guo jing* 佛說阿閼佛國經, attributed to Lokakṣema (fl. c. 170–190 C.E.): T 313.²⁸
- (2) *Dabaoji jing budong rulai hui* 大寶積經不動如來會, produced during the period 706–713 by Bodhiruci (fl. 693–713): T 310.6.²⁹
- (3) *'Phags pa de bzhin gshegs pa mi 'khrugs pa'i bkod pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*, by Jinamitra, Surendrabodhi and Ye shes sde, early 9th century.

Again, this is not the place for an exhaustive treatment of the textual accounts of Akṣobhya and his domain Abhirati,³⁰ but if we single out those elements which can be compared with the features of

²⁶ One can get a dramatic impression of this from the relevant pages (172–173) in Kagawa 1984, where all the versions are set side by side.

²⁷ See Schopen (1987: 117, n. 50; 2005: 262, n. 50).

²⁸ The attribution to Lokakṣema is not without its problems, but can be upheld, as long as one recognises that there is also evidence of considerable later revision, possibly sometime early in the 3rd century. Cf. Nattier (2008: 85–86).

²⁹ An English translation, with the omission of many substantial passages (not all of them marked), appears in Chang (1983). Dantinne (1983) presents a copiously annotated French translation of the first three chapters, with reference also to the Tibetan.

Sukhāvātī listed above, arranging them under the same rubrics, we find some notable differences, and some similarities.

1. There are women in Abhirati, whose superior qualities are described, as is their ready access to jewellery and clothing growing on trees. Consequently, birth is through the womb, even though it is painless (T 313, 11: 755c28–756a2, 756b3–15; T 310, 11: 105b23–27, 105c18–24 [cf. Chang 1983: 323, with omissions]).³¹ There is no rebirth from lotuses, and no description of anyone sitting upon a lotus, even Akṣobhya himself, although it is said that wherever he stands or walks, thousand-petalled lotuses spring up under his feet, even when he enters people's houses. When he sends *nirmāṇas* to other worlds, the same lotuses also appear beneath their feet (T 313, 11: 756c7–22; T 310, 11: 106a11–26 [cf. Chang 1983: 324]).
2. There are *śrāvakas* in Abhirati, alongside the bodhisattvas. In this respect the AkTV and the LSukh (ER) are similar, but the presence of the *śrāvakas* in Abhirati is emphasized to a far greater degree. In fact it is a motif which runs throughout the entire text, so that it would be tedious to give precise references to all the relevant passages, but see especially T 313, 11: 756c24–758a15; T 310, 11: 106a28–107a6 [cf. Chang 1983: 325–326]. Exactly how the *śrāvakas* were pictured by the authors of the text is not clear, but we imagine that they were thought to be *bhikṣus* (and perhaps *bhikṣuṇīs*?). Interestingly, at one point the text states that even the bodhisattvas of Abhirati are mostly renunciants (*pravrajitas*), only a few of them being householders (T 313, 11: 758b27–c9; T 310, 11: 107b16–24 [cf. Chang 1983: 328]). Nowhere is it said that the *śrāvakas* and the bodhisattvas are indistinguishable or that they look different, so we do not have firm grounds to draw a conclusion (cf. Point 6 below).
3. Akṣobhya does not have two chief bodhisattvas.
4. The future parinirvāṇa of Akṣobhya and the events which follow it are described in great detail, but there is no succession scenario of the sort we find in the LSukh. However, before he passes away, Akṣobhya will predict the awakening of the bodhisattva Gandhahastin, whose domain will be similar to Abhirati (T 313, 11: 760b20–761b24; T 310, 11: 109a7–c22 [cf. Chang 1983: 330–332]). This is the only occurrence of this bodhisattva's name in the text (cf. Point 3).
5. Interaction between the inhabitants of Abhirati is not thematized in any way. All attention is supposedly focussed on Akṣobhya.
6. There are no class divisions among those who are reborn. Gods and human beings enjoy similar delights (clothing, food and drink, adornment), to the point where humans do not envy the gods, to whom they are not inferior in any way (T 313, 11: 755b26–c4; T 310, 11: 105c1–2 [cf. Chang 1983: 323]; 108b13–16 [cf. Chang 1983: 330], 112b15–19 [omitted in Chang 1983]). Again, it is not made clear whether gods and human beings are indistinguishable in appearance.
7. The spatial arrangements of Abhirati are rather different from those of Sukhāvātī. Abhirati is not flat, but has mountains, including Meru. In addition, there is a gigantic Bodhi tree, under which

³⁰ For an illuminating discussion of this material and its place in the history of Buddhism, see Nattier (2000). The work of Kwan (1985) is also useful.

³¹ In this version of the paper we give references for the Chinese versions only.

Akṣobhya achieved awakening, and under which he now presumably teaches,³² which, according to the Chinese versions, has some kind of stepped platform or railing around it (T 313, 11: 755b26–c4; T 310, 11: 105a28–b4 [cf. Chang 1983: 322]). In T 313 the term for this is *lanshun* 欄楯, probably Sanskrit *vedikā*. This massive structure is 4 *yojanas* or 560 Chinese *li* in circumference. However, the most conspicuous physical feature is a gigantic triple staircase connecting the world of the gods and the human plane (T 313, 11: 757a28–b14; T 310, 11: 106c1–15 [cf. Chang 1983: 325–326]).³³

8. There is far less emphasis on the light of the Buddha Akṣobhya, although brief mention of it is made at a couple of points (e.g. T 313, 11: 755b26–c4; T 310, 11: 110a4–7 [cf. Chang 1983: 332]).

An excellent summary description of the features of Abhirati is found in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*:³⁴

There and then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti thought, “What if, sitting right here, without leaving my seat, I were to take hold of this Abhirati world, all of it—with its hundreds of thousands of bodhisattvas; its resident gods, serpent-deities, forest-spirits, celestial musicians, and asuras; its encircling Cakravāḍa mountains; its rivers, pools, fountains, lakes, and encircling oceans; with its Mount Meru, mountain peaks and hills; with its sun, moon and stars; with the abodes of its gods, serpent-deities, forest-spirits, and celestial musicians; with its palaces of the Brahmā gods and their retinue; with the men of the villages, towns, cities, provinces, kingdoms; with its women’s apartments; its assemblies of bodhisattvas and accomplished *śrāvakas*; with the tree of awakening of Akṣobhya, the Realized One, and with the Realized One Akṣobhya himself teaching the Dharma seated amidst an assembly, vast as the sea; and the lotuses that carry out the Buddha’s work for living beings in the ten directions;³⁵ and with those three stairways of the Abhirati world, each made of a different precious substance, reaching from the continent of Jambūdvīpa to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods in the world Abhirati, so that the gods of that heaven can descend to that continent in order to see the Realized One, honour him with praises, attend to him, and hear the Dharma, stairways by which, in turn, human beings ascend to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods in order to see those gods—what if, with my right hand, I take the whole Abhirati world, furnished with immeasurable marvellous qualities such as these, and taking all of it from the watery depths up to the palaces of the Akaniṣṭha heaven, and what if, having dislodged it as a potter separates his wheel from its base, I were to hold it like a garland of flowers, bring it into this world and show it to the whole assembly?”

This passage in the V_kN is all the more valuable for highlighting what were obviously believed to be the essential features of Abhirati, among which we might note the diversity of the audience, the presence of

³² This is not stated explicitly anywhere in the text, but it is difficult to imagine that this would not be the case.

³³ The triple staircase is, of course, another powerful motif deriving from a miracle in the Buddha’s life, the Buddha’s descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods (Trayastrimśa) after teaching his mother there.

³⁴ The following passage comes from Chapter 11 of the Sanskrit text (Study Group 2006: 112–113). The translation is based upon the draft prepared by the Mangalam Translation Group, currently being edited for publication by Luis Gómez and myself.

³⁵ These are presumably the lotuses which appear beneath the feet of the *nirmāṇas* with which Akṣobhya projects himself into other worlds (see Point 1 above).

women, the unevenness of the terrain, the giant Bodhi tree at the centre, and the architectural detail of the triple staircase.³⁶

We shall return to these descriptions later in this paper. Suffice it to note here how influential they were historically. As Schopen has demonstrated (1977), both Sukhāvatī and Abhirati came to be paradigmatic Buddha-fields. Once we acknowledge the force of these two paradigms, we begin to see that the problem of determining what the Muhammad Nari stele depicts cannot be solved in isolation, but requires a comprehensive approach, not only to the textual sources relating to Sukhāvatī and Abhirati, but also to the archaeological record, that is, to other complex steles, their contents and artistic conventions. Let us look at these aspects of the subject before returning to the text/image problem.

4. Artistic Conventions

The substantial fluidity and diversity which close analysis reveals in the development of the textual sources surveyed are also features of the visual evidence. Most importantly, the Muhammad Nari stele cannot be interpreted in isolation, as it incorporates numerous artistic conventions deriving from different sources that need to be accounted for.

Buddhas on Lotuses

The most obvious feature of the Muhammad Nari stele and many related works is the prominent lotus blossom, a symbol for the purity and the miraculous power of the Buddha. In Gandhāra, the earliest depictions of the Buddha are without lotuses, regardless of whether the Buddha sits or stands. Equally, lotuses do not occur in depictions of the Buddha from Mathurā during the Kuṣāṇa period, and are even rare in Gupta art.³⁷ Their occurrence is better documented in the art of Andhra, i.e. Amarāvatī, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and related sites, where lotuses appear to arise with the earliest anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha, which in this region do not predate the late second or early third century. In addition, in this art school the lotus predominately appears with the standing Buddha,³⁸ while Buddhas seated on lotuses are rare.³⁹ In addition, an unusual abundance of lotus bases is found at site 9

³⁶ A feature, by the way, that makes it more likely that any depictions of Abhirati, if they could be found, might have more affinities with the Descent from Trayastrimśa than they would with the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī. It seems quite possible that the iconography of this episode had an impact on descriptions of Abhirati. Further, the giant *vedikā* around Abhirati's Bodhi tree also reflects contemporary iconographical and architectural conventions deriving from the demarcation of sacred trees in early Indian religious practice.

³⁷ Examples are Buddha depictions from Devnimori (early 5th century) and some Sāmānīth Buddhas from the 5th century (see, for example, Williams, 1983: figs. 57, 90, 92).

³⁸ E.g. Stone (1994: figs. 22, 112, 115, 145, 152, 153). The lotus for the standing image is to be linked to the pedestals of the Buddha's footprints (*buddhapāda*), which were originally square (e.g., all examples in Knox 1992) but also became lotuses (e.g., Stone 1994: figs. 91, 92), and narrative scenes in which the Buddha's feet are venerated (see e.g. Knox 1992: nos. 12, 70, 72 and Stone 1994: figs. 176, 177). It is noteworthy that on two drum slabs of the British Museum (Knox 1992: nos. 70 and 72) the central Buddha image on a lotus is linked to the Saundarananda story represented on the dome, in one scene of which the Buddha again stands on lotuses (second scene to the left of the āyaka pillars on both; see also Sivaramamurti 1942: pl. lxiii, 2).

³⁹ The distinction made between seated and standing Buddhas is also evidenced by the newly excavated site of Kanganhalli, where the seven Buddhas of the past and Maitreya (we owe the identification of these images to Oskar von Hinüber's reading of the inscriptions on them) are seated on thrones, but the two standing images were placed on lotus pedestals.

of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, where even the stūpas consistently have double lotus bases as well, which may well provide a chronological threshold for the popular emergence of this imagery. As Stone (1994: 37–58) has shown, this site, along with the related site 6, began to flourish in the second quarter of the third century. Incidentally, the two early Buddha images seated on crude lotuses published in Stone (1994: figs. 100, 118) are to be associated with these two sites. Thus, if Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī* (III.31–32), which makes specific reference to the construction of Buddha images upon lotuses, is indeed to be associated with popular practice in this region, as Joseph Walser (2002: 250–62; 2005: 79–87) maintains, this text would have to be attributed to the second quarter of the third century at the earliest.⁴⁰

Furthermore, Rhi (2003: 166–171) was able to show that, according to a series of Mahāyāna texts translated into the Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in the late third century, the donation of a Buddha sitting on a lotus flower is listed as something a bodhisattva ought to do, presumably reflecting contemporary practice (see below for further remarks on the significance of these passages).

It may well be that the prominent position given to the lotus seat created by the two nāgas Nanda and Upananda in the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī is related to or even the source of this practice, but it is also the case that a lotus flanked by two nāgas is not necessarily an indicator of this miracle. However the process of development may be, the imaginative image of two nāgas (beings who are naturally associated with water) creating a miraculously precious lotus seat for the Buddha to sit on turned out to be extremely powerful, and eventually was taken up in other contexts as well. From an art-historical perspective it is a major mistake to use such a minor detail as a basis for identification. It also underestimates the power exemplary imagery has in the development of art. In fact, the two nāgas shown in the Muhammad Nari stele cannot be the two nāga kings of the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī, since they are a couple, the female being placed on the right side of the stem with her back towards the viewer (Figure 4). Further, they are engaged in throwing lotus flowers towards the Buddha and do not appear to have a close connection with the bejewelled lotus stem. Instead the stem is touched by another male to its immediate right, possibly meant to represent a yakṣa and responsible for the jewels that cover the stem, who also holds what appears to be a rhyton in his right hand. His female partner is shown on the opposite site and her hands folded in front of her breast in veneration are now lost.⁴¹

Certainly more significant for an interpretation of the Muhammad Nari stele is the lotus pond from which the main lotus and many minor ones grow. In fact, the pond takes up the whole width of the base of the stele and lotuses grow all along its surface. It is inhabited by ducks, fish and a second couple of nāgas. Closer inspection of the stele further reveals that in fact all but one compositional element on the

⁴⁰ Of course this depends entirely on the dating of Nāgārjuna. We find Walser's attempts to determine the date of the *Ratnāvalī* with reference to the dates of the Sātavāhana kings on the basis of the existence of lotus-pedestal images of the Buddha unconvincing, along with his attribution of the occurrence of this motive to the time of Yajña Śrī Sātakarṇi, which he infers from a tenuous relationship of one panel with a Buddha depiction on a lotus to another panel with an inscription mentioning a king of this name.

⁴¹ Her hands are perfectly preserved on the earlier photographs referred to above (see Figure 2).

stele, the Buddha revealing the Buddha-field, actually have lotus bases and thus conceptually derive from and are supported by this pond.⁴²

The pond at the bottom of a stele is commonly accompanied by a rather peculiar tree shading the central Buddha. Clearly distinguished from the Bodhi tree with its heart-shaped petals and botanically not identifiable, the tree is mainly made up of large blossoms (or sprays of lobate leaves radiating out from a central ring) from which sprout either garlands of pearls or the upper bodies of figures holding offerings and garlands for the Buddha (Figure 5). In the latter case the petals or leaves form a kind of skirt.⁴³ In this paper we refer to such a tree as a jewel tree. This type of tree appears to be integral part of steles with ponds, but it also occurs on steles without the pond as well as more simple triads of a Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas and a few additional figures only (see, e.g., Figure 6). In rare instances, secondary figures of a complex stele are seated under a figureless variant of the jewel tree (e.g., in Stele no. 3).

Triadic Compositions

Triadic compositions of a Buddha flanked by two standing figures are found with the earliest depictions of the Buddha and remain relevant into esoteric Buddhism. In the Mathurā school of art, early Buddha depictions are flanked by two attendants brandishing fly-whisks. The earliest Buddha representations of Gandhāran art, in contrast, are flanked by Brahmā and Indra. It is this composition that also informs later Gandhāran triads showing the Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas, as these still retain a reference to the two Indian gods by consistently representing the bodhisattvas in two types, a brāhmaṇa type with loosely tied-up (but uncovered) hair and a kṣatriya type wearing a turban.⁴⁴ It is likely that triadic compositions showing a teaching Buddha on a fleshy lotus flanked by two standing bodhisattvas represent simpler and possibly earlier versions of the complex steles, since they share a number of their characteristics. The triad of the year five, the well known Brussels or Marteau Collection Triad of the year five (today in the Agonshū collection in Japan), is certainly key to both the chronology of such representations⁴⁵ and the interrelationship of these two bodhisattva types (Figure 6). This triad shows the upper bodies of Brahmā and Indra between the Buddha and the two flanking bodhisattvas, each deity iconographically related to one of the bodhisattvas.

⁴² This is clearer in comparable steles, in particular the lotus pond stele from Sahri Bahlol in the Peshawar Museum, where the stems of the lotuses are carved as well. Although it might appear then that the lotuses at the top of any stele of this kind must have very long stems to reach down to the water, this is simply a consequence of perspective: if we were to flatten out the composition, all the stems would be the same length, except perhaps the one supporting the Buddha's lotus.

⁴³ Ingholt (Lyons & Ingholt 1957: figs. 366, 368) identifies these figures as *kinnaras*, and the flowers they sprout from as lotuses. While there is no support for the latter identification, there seems to be some warrant for *kinnaras* wearing skirts of leaves. See Zin (2003: 1, 189–197). Note, however, that, contra Zin (esp. p. 195, n. 56), there is no support in the LSukh for *kinnaras* in Sukhāvātī (the two mentions in the text refer to beings located outside Amitābha's domain) and that only in Gandhāran complex steles do these beings appear with haloes. Be that as it may, Miyaji (1993: 254) also identifies these beings as *kinnaras*.

⁴⁴ On later Gandhāran triads and the identity of the flanking bodhisattvas see in particular Rhi (2006) and Miyaji (2008).

⁴⁵ The year five likely refers to the Kuṣāṇa era and conforms to 232 C.E. or—in the third century of the Kuṣāṇa era—332 C.E. Fussman (1999: 546) even considers a date to the first Kuṣāṇa century possible for this stele. On the inscription and its publication see <http://gandhari.org/>, inscription number CKI0232.

In complex steles, this basic triadic composition is retained, as the Buddha is always flanked by two more prominently represented standing bodhisattvas of the two types. While in some steles these bodhisattvas are shown in an iconography comparable to that in the triads, in others they are garland holders attending the Buddha, as is also the case in the Muhammad Nari stele. Both the less prominent size and placement of the flanking bodhisattvas on this stele and their lack of distinctive attributes or mudrās indicate that they cannot be identified individually unless the topic of the stele itself suggests an identification for them.

Regarding the bodhisattvas that have distinctive attributes, their possible identifications can be summarized as follows. The brāhmaṇa type certainly derives from the iconography of Maitreya, the future Buddha, which was already established shortly after the first Buddha images were made. He is consistently represented with the loosely tied long hair and a flask, both signs of his last rebirth as a brāhmaṇa. As Taddei (1969/2003) has shown most convincingly, Maitreya shares these characteristics with Brahmā. In the Brussels Triad (Figure 6) Maitreya—or perhaps we should say, the brāhmaṇa type—is shown on the Buddha’s right, with Brahmā immediately behind him at the Buddha’s shoulder.⁴⁶

The possible identity of the second kṣatriya-type bodhisattva, who is associated with Indra/Śakra, is more open, since more than one bodhisattva is known to be of this type. In the earliest Buddhist art of Gandhāra the turbaned bodhisattva, commonly without attribute, making the gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya mudrā*) with his right hand and resting his left hand on the hip, represents Siddhārtha, who also occurs in narrative scenes in this form.⁴⁷ In the Brussels Triad (Figure 6) the turbaned bodhisattva is of this iconography, but has a seated Buddha in the crest of his turban. He is shown on the Buddha’s left, with Indra behind him, wearing his peculiar crown (*kirīṭa*).

In other triadic compositions the turbaned bodhisattva most commonly holds a wreath in his pendant left hand. The identity of this bodhisattva is contested and there seems to be no conclusive evidence for determining it. It is clear, however, that the wreath often has a central blossom at its bottom and that this bodhisattva eventually gets replaced by a flower-holding bodhisattva, who may be identified as Padmapāṇi or Avalokiteśvara.⁴⁸

In terms of the relative position of the bodhisattvas in the triads Maitreya—or the brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva—is often represented in the more prominent position on the Buddha’s right. This is also Brahmā’s position in early Gandhāran reliefs, and it may thus well be that triadic compositions with Maitreya—or the brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva—on the Buddha’s right hand are on average slightly earlier. In the Brussels Triad (Figure 6) both Brahmā and the brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva are represented in this position, on the viewer’s left. Some (later?) steles show the wreath- or flower-holding bodhisattva in the more prominent position on the right hand of the Buddha previously occupied the brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva. This exchange of positions may well indicate that Maitreya as an individual bodhisattva

⁴⁶ For a statistical analysis of this bodhisattva type see also Miyaji (2008: 127–131).

⁴⁷ In fact, this particular type of representation of Śākyamuni may derive from a narrative event prior to his first vow to become a Buddha in front of Dīpaṃkara, an identification that still needs to be worked out properly.

⁴⁸ For a statistical analysis of the turbaned bodhisattva in Gandhāran reliefs see Miyaji (2008: 131–139), where the wreath- and lotus-holder are not distinguished.

loses prominence in later Gandharan art, however, it may also have to do with triads that show the upper bodies of Brahmā and Indra between the Buddha and the two bodhisattvas, each of them iconographically mirroring the bodhisattva on the opposite side (see Figure 14).

This certainly is a grossly simplified picture, and the chronological issues associated with it have not even been touched, but it does demonstrate that triadic compositions in Gandhāra consistently balance the two bodhisattva types. What is more, in the Muhammad Nari stele the complementary nature of the brāhmaṇa- and kṣatriya-type bodhisattvas permeates the whole stele, with the two types represented alternately throughout, regardless of the attribute they hold.⁴⁹ Indeed, the more one becomes aware of the sculptor's strong concern for symmetry and balance, the more one realizes the dangers of rushing to identification.

Bodhisattvas and Buddhas

In general, it is important to keep in mind that the identification of individual figures in early Buddhist art is more the result of scholarly conventions than solidly established facts and this is, of course, true for Gandhāran art as well. Concerning the iconographic types of bodhisattvas summarized above, only the identifications of Maitreya and Śākyamuni can be considered fairly solid. Their identity can not only be concluded from the context of some of their representations, but it is also corroborated by rare inscriptions on coins and roughly contemporaneous Mathurā school representations.⁵⁰ These two bodhisattvas and their caste affiliation can also be considered the foundation for the differentiation of the two bodhisattva types.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva depicted in later Gandharan art, that is, in triadic compositions and complex steles, is necessarily to be identified as Maitreya. In the Brussels Triad (Figure 6), for example, the two bodhisattvas may on the basis of their iconography conventionally be identified as representing Maitreya and Siddhārtha, but it is equally possible, and in many respects more likely, that the two bodhisattvas on the stele actually represent a more general concept, whatever that may be.⁵¹ Such a more general interpretation is suggested by triads and complex steles in which the two bodhisattvas are represented without identifying attributes, as is also the case with the Muhammad Nari stele. As mentioned above, this has the consequence that the two bodhisattvas in the stele can only be identified on the basis of its general topic.

The same is, of course, true for the Buddha representation. In this respect it has to be noted that the conventional identification of almost all Buddha images as the Buddha Śākyamuni may grossly underestimate the importance of the Seven Buddhas of the Past for early Buddhist art, not to mention the importance of the Buddhas of the present, as established with the emergence of the concept of a Buddha-field. There is relatively little evidence, however, which would enable us to assess the

⁴⁹ The balance in this regard was also seen by Huntington (1980: 664–665).

⁵⁰ This refers to numerous scenes of the Buddha's life that corroborate the iconography of the bodhisattva Siddhārtha and to the identification of Maitreya as proven by the copper coins issued by Kanīṣka I identifying the figure as "Mētrago Boudo" (see, e.g., Cribb, 1980, 1999; Huntington 1993; Tanabe 1993) and by the famous Ahicchatra image on which Maitreya is mentioned by name (see, e.g., Rosenfield 1967: 231).

⁵¹ At this stage, we refrain from suggesting any such general concept, since this would require a study of its own.

importance of Śākyamuni's six predecessors in Gandhāra. Certainly, there are a few representations showing the Seven Buddhas of the Past together with the bodhisattva Maitreya (see the bottom of Figure 10 for one example). None of these representations belongs to the earliest phase of Gandhāran art, but the depiction of the Buddhas makes it clear that they can only be distinguished individually on the basis of their succession. Given the importance of the past Buddhas in Bharhut and Sanchi, it may well be assumed that in Gandhāra, too, they were much more often represented as individual figures than is apparent now. For example, at the late Gandhāran site of Jauliān, Taxila, two Buddha images on stūpa D1 were identified as representing the Buddha Kāśyapa, and a third as representing Śākyamuni.⁵² Among the textual sources the *Anavataptagāthā*, "Songs of Lake Anavatapta,"⁵³ is of particular relevance in this context, since it has been found in a Kharoṣṭhī version as well. In this text, the monk Kusuma explains his present condition as a disciple of the Buddha as the result of offering a flower to the stūpa of the Buddha Vipasyin.⁵⁴ We should also bear in mind the frequent representations of Śākyamuni's vow in front of the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, which turned into iconic imagery as well.⁵⁵ Most importantly, there is also an inscribed image of the Buddha Amitābha from Mathurā, which is dated to year 26 in the reign of Huviṣka, which today is interpreted as referring to 153 C.E.⁵⁶ Of this image, only the base with the feet of the standing Buddha and an attendant to his left are preserved. This is enough evidence to conclude that Śākyamuni was certainly not the only Buddha represented in Gandhāran art.

Returning to the Muhammad Nari stele, the central Buddha clearly cannot be identified on the basis of his iconographic features. What is important, however, is his teaching gesture, since it tells us about his primary activity. It also relates the central Buddha to the remarkably lively assembly of seated and standing figures surrounding him, the formal characteristics of which can be summarized as follows. In general, the stele conveys a strong sense of communication and interrelation, by combining groups of figures into what Stella Kramrisch (1983) has called magical boxes in the case of the Ajanta paintings. Analyzing the composition in terms of the interrelationship of its figures, there is a large central assembly flanked by many smaller ones. The further up one moves on the stele, there is also an increase of solitary figures not related to others. This fact and the forms of interaction of the secondary figures communicate that the figures lower on the stele are closer to the Buddha than those further up. Those in the upper row could even be taken as inhabiting remote areas, which offers one possible explanation for the Buddhas emanating images of themselves in the upper corners (see below). The spatial location and the degree of engagement of the bodhisattvas depicted are closely correlated: those in the lower area and in the vicinity of the central Buddha are occupied with discussion and veneration, while those in the upper half of the stele are engaged in solitary meditation, reflection and teaching.

⁵² Konow (1929: 96–97), Marshall (1951: 374–75) and <http://gandhari.org/>, inscriptions CKI0082, CKI0084 and CKI0085.

⁵³ The text contains the recitations of 36 disciples of the Buddha narrating their own past lives.

⁵⁴ Salomon (1999: 30–33).

⁵⁵ On the unusually high frequency of depictions of the *Dīpaṃkara-jātaka* in Gandhāra and their possible connection with Mahāyāna Buddhism, see Rhi (2003: 157–158).

⁵⁶ The inscription on this base has been studied by Schopen (1987/2005). Another alleged reference to the Buddha Amitābha on a fragment of a Gandhāran triadic composition first suggested by Brough (1982) has in the meantime been refuted by Salomon & Schopen (2002).

The subtle way in which artistic conventions are combined here contributes to the complexity of the stele. Its composition thus successfully conveys the notion of the various qualities of Buddhas and bodhisattvas—or different notions of Buddhahood and bodhisattvahood—by depicting different aspects or phases of their activity. Further, the appearance—often in pairs—of bodhisattvas with the same attributes, gestures or sitting postures indicates that the main concern was to create an impression of a multiplicity of bodhisattvas and not to represent specific figures with definite identities.

Sacred and Divine Architecture

Complex steles often contain depictions of architecture. In the stele in question we see two types of single-storied, free-standing pavilions. Other complex steles, in contrast, have a single structure framing all images. No doubt, these are idealised buildings, but they are based on and reflect actual sacred architecture. In Gandhāra, two types of sacred structures were known, the stupa and the sanctuary.⁵⁷ Gandhāran stūpas were placed on a podium, which appears systematically from the first century C.E., and occasionally four lion columns were placed at its corners (see the top stūpas on Stele no. 11 and Stele no. 12).

The Gandhāran sanctuary shares many of the elements of the stūpa, especially its elevated placement. In its simplest form the sanctuary is a single-celled and single-storied structure with a domed roof, its shape deriving from the grass hut. A developed Gandhāran sanctuary, in contrast, is a two-story building with a more or less square ground plan, a tapered dome-shaped roof on top of the upper story and a circumferential roof projection shaped in a quarter circle for the lower story.⁵⁸ This latter type of building was of special importance in Gandhāra and was reproduced in art in a multitude of examples. Of particular importance is that the shape of a decorative false gable of a stupa corresponds to a section cut through such a sanctuary building. False gables of this typical Gandhāran type were also used for the sanctuary itself, either on the side of the entrance alone or on all sides, as is the case with the cross-shaped pavilions depicted in the Muhammad Nari stele.

In the complex steles we have a number of sanctuary variants represented, most commonly in the form of a section cut. The simplest form are the single-celled, single-storied pavilions with a pointed arch on top. They are represented as an arch on two pillars and are commonly occupied by a single figure. Single-celled structures may also be double-storied, in this case the upper storey is represented from the front (see the pavilions on Stele no. 2). Single- or double-storey cross-shaped pavilions have three bays, a large one for the central figure and two smaller ones at the side used for attending figures. They are usually represented as four-pillared structures with the central arch shown frontally and the side ones from the side. A railing at the roof level may indicate that this structure is actually meant to be two-storied. While the arches are most often round on the inside and pointed on top, a trapezoid shape is occasionally found as well. This shape is often found in the lower storey of multi-storied buildings, expanding the central bay in height, and may well derive from such representations (see Figure 10 and Figure 12).

⁵⁷ In the special language relating to Gandhāran art, such buildings are called *vihāra*, a term usually reserved for monks' living quarters and thus avoided here.

⁵⁸ One such building is still preserved at Gumbat in the Swat valley (see, e.g., Olivieri 2008: 296, fig. 5).

The double-storied cross-shaped pavilion also provides the base for the multi-storied architecture seen on some complex steles. In this case, the Buddha occupies the higher main bay and the flanking bodhisattvas of the basic triad the side bays, above which are balconies (Figure 10). The main bay may have a false gable arch, or a trapezoid arch with the false gable arch then represented above it. If the structure is conceived as multi-storied, the upper stories are commonly made up of rows of single cells (Figure 11). This relationship of a large main building with successive stories above it reflects the most complex western Indian caitya cave facades, such as those of Bhaja, Bedsa, Karli and Pitalkhora.⁵⁹ As such, the architecture on a complex stele represents the idealised architecture of a royal or even divine palace, certainly a suitable abode for a Buddha and those who follow in his footsteps.⁶⁰

The idealised nature of the depicted buildings is also visible in the details, such as the complex and varied Persepolitan columns, the abundance of lion consoles, the occasional elephant console, as well as the ribbons, streamers and banners that decorate the uppermost or projecting structures. Most commonly the roofs of such buildings are embellished with birds, parrots and peacocks seeming to be especially popular.⁶¹ It is quite conceivable that this artistic convention later impacted on the textual tradition, when it was found necessary to account for birds in Sukhāvātī and other similar Buddha-fields which supposedly lacked animals altogether. This question is in fact explicitly addressed in the SSukh, as if it were a problem demanding a solution.⁶² Birds are also found in front of the railings of balconies, which are only occupied by women, a convention that derives from the depiction of royal palaces in early Indian narrative art. In Gandhāran narrative scenes, such balconies alone are sufficient to indicate royal or divine architecture.

5. Lotus Ponds, Palaces and Emanations: Three Types of Complex Stele

If one analyses the complex steles from Gandhara as a whole, whether preserved intact or in fragments, it becomes clear that there are two principal types with a teaching Buddha in the centre, a lotus pond type and a palace type. The Muhammad Nari stele belongs to the lotus pond type, which have water indicated at the bottom from which theoretically grow the lotuses upon which all the images or pavilions sit. The palace-type stele, examples of which have also been found in Muhammad Nari, differs from the first type in using a more or less complex style of architecture to frame most of the figures depicted. In the following the most important examples of these two types are described in some detail, before they are related to a third type that has a meditating Buddha in the centre.⁶³

It should be noted that the following selection does not include all complex steles attributed to Gandhāra to date, but only those with a reasonably well-established provenance and/or a record of

⁵⁹ In the case of Pitalkhora only a few windows of the original facade remain high up in the rocks.

⁶⁰ See also the remarks in Rhi (1991: 154–155).

⁶¹ For comments on the birds in these steles see, e.g., Huntington (1980: 661).

⁶² That solution is that the birds are not real animals, but apparitions conjured up (*nirmita*) by the Realized One. Without going into the details here, it should be noted that the ER of the LSukh contains not a single mention of birds in Sukhāvātī. In the Sanskrit text of the LR, by contrast, there are four mentions, three of which deem it necessary to specify that the birds are conjured up by the Realized One (*tathāgatābhinirmita*)—another indication that the SSukh was composed after the ER of the LSukh, and probably before the LR assumed its final shape.

⁶³ A similar classification is found in Miyaji (2002: 23–24; 2008: 124), with the triads seen as a fourth group.

documentation preceding the last decades. We are aware that there are numerous other steles and fragments that have become known more recently, but since the authenticity of many of them is contested we have decided not to include them in this study.⁶⁴

Lotus pond-type Steles

Stele no. 1: Our main stele from Muhammad Nari; Lahore Museum, Inv. no. G 155 (old 1135, I-255) (Figure 1)

Light grey schist; 119 x 97 x 28 cm

Archival photos: Asian Art Museum, Collection of South, Southeast and Central Asian Art, Berlin; Warburg Institute, London.

Burgess (1900: 32; pl. 7, 2); Vogel (1906: 256–257); Foucher (1905: fig. 79; 1909: 74, pl. xvi; 1917: pl. xxvii, 1; 1918: 206; 1922: 534–37, 848); Lyons & Ingholt (1957: 121–23, fig. 255⁶⁵); Rosenfield (1967: 236, fig. 90); Miyaji (1971: 57, fig.; 1985a: 79 & 83, figs. 12 & 14; 1993: 253, fig. 10; 1996: 361, fig. 8; 2002: 10, fig. 1); Huntington (1980); Bussagli (1984: 140); Brown (1984: 79–84, fig. 4); Huntington (1985: 145–46, fig. 8.24); Schopen (1987: 130–31, n. 50); Taddei (1987/2003: fig. 3); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 395); Schlingloff (1991: 127–28, n. 77, fig. 43, tracing); Rhi (1991: 95–100, 147, pl. 3); Giès & Cohen (1996: 341–344, no. 253bis); Quagliotti (1996a); Bautze-Picron (2010: 14–17, figs. 18a, 18b).

Stele no. 2: Stele with lotus pond-type Buddha-field in centre and Maitreya in top panel; possibly from Muhammad Nari⁶⁶; Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery, no. 572 (Figure 7)⁶⁷

Stele with three scenes one on top of the other, the central one of which is of the lotus pond type. The top scene shows a prominent Maitreya with a large round hair knot in the centre, seated on a conventional throne and flanked by divine attendants. The one with hair loop sitting to his left is in an attitude of conversation but turned away from the main image. In the small bottom scene, a *pātra* on a throne is venerated.

In the central panel the large teaching Buddha is surrounded by a multitude of bodhisattvas in four tiers. The Buddha is seated on a large lotus blossom flanked by two figures who appear to be throwing flowers towards him. The two are likely meant to be *nāgas*, but their snake hoods are not preserved. Above the Buddha's head is a jewel tree of three blossoms, and immediately beneath it hover two rather fat putti⁶⁸ holding a wreath. At arm level, the Buddha is flanked by two turbaned

⁶⁴ Since modern forgeries often combine motifs from different sources, and are thus liable to undermine the typology of complex steles we are advancing, it is essential to the argument of the paper that no risks are taken in terms of the selection of examples. Consequently, whenever steles are included in the list despite a less well-established record of provenance, the question of authenticity is briefly discussed in a footnote.

⁶⁵ In this picture the stele is only partly represented and from an angle.

⁶⁶ In the latest Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery catalogue the attribution of this stele to Muhammad Nari is put in doubt, on the basis of style and type of stone used (Bhattacharyya 2002: 97). Foucher (1917: pl. xxvii) explicitly states that the origin of the stele is unknown, but he does not know the origin of the main stele either (pl. xxviii).

⁶⁷ Formerly Lahore Museum with the same inventory number.

⁶⁸ We prefer to call these flying beings putti for two main reasons: first, there is no doubt that in their function and appearance as they occur in Gandhāran art, they are of Western derivation; second, their exact status, e.g., secular or divine, and function within the Gandhāran reliefs themselves remain unclear. Thus, we prefer the more general terms putto/putti to the more

and haloed bodhisattvas holding garlands. At head level, there are two further flanking figures, presumably deities; both have haloes. The one on the left is a bearded man holding a large vajra, looking more like more Zeus than Indra or Vajrapāṇi. On the right a goddess with cylindrical crown, possibly a city goddess, holds her hands folded.⁶⁹

The assembly around the main group is represented in four tiers. In the bottom row, of which only the right side is preserved, are two seated bodhisattvas of the two types, the inner one looking up to the Buddha and conversing with him. In the next row, one of the four (or five?) bodhisattvas on lotuses is of the pensive type and turbaned and holds a large flower. Although both bodhisattva types are used, the turbaned type takes the inner position on both sides. The third row from the bottom has two pavilions, which appear not to be set on lotuses, with meditating bodhisattvas in them seated on lotuses. On the outer side sit two more bodhisattvas on lotuses, their heads damaged, the left one holding a large flower. On the right side, between the goddess and the pavilion, is another standing bodhisattva of the brāhmaṇa type.

The uppermost level occupies the narrowest band and has a single meditating bodhisattva seated on a lotus against a circular mandorla on the left side. On the right side, a Buddha seated on a rock (or cloud?) under a tree reveals the Buddha-field to a kneeling monk with hands in *añjali*. The upper body of a figure behind the monk is preserved in traces only. In the corners are figures which may be horses (?), possibly standing for sun and moon, a feature not found elsewhere.

Neither the bottom attendants nor the pavilions with the meditating bodhisattvas are supported by lotus blossoms (although the bodhisattvas are seated on lotuses within the pavilions), and there is no notion of a pond, since the tier below is used for another scene. All figures except the monk in the revelation scene and the pair at the base of the lotus are haloed.

Bluish grey schist; 85 x 47 cm.

Archival photos: Asian Art Museum, Collection of South, Southeast and Central Asian Art, Berlin; Collection P. & G. Bautze⁷⁰

Burgess (1900: pl. 8-1); Foucher (1917: pl. xxvii); Foucher (1918: fig. 459); Rosenfield (1967: 236–37, fig. 91); Paul (1986: 171, no. 572); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 399); Rhi (1991: pl. 54); Schlingloff (1991: figs. 41, tracing); Bhattacharyya (2002: no. 153); Schlingloff (2000: II, 102, no. 16, tracing); Miyaji (2002: 21, fig. 2).

Stele no. 3: Large, fragmentary lotus pond stele; from Sahri Bahlol (Exc. 1939)⁷¹; Peshawar Museum, inv. no. 2785 (old 2016)⁷² (Figure 8)

Large stele with teaching Buddha on an enormous lotus surrounded by secondary figures of different sizes. Certainly the most complex and sophisticated representation of the lotus pond theme besides the Muhammad Nari stele. Many of the figures on this stele have mustaches and the

specific cherub/cherubim, the rather generic genie/genii (as, e.g., used by Zin 2003: 141–152), or the specific Indian *vidyādhara*, as they have been called in Huntington 1980 (on these see Zin 2003: 163–172).

⁶⁹ This is the only instance where a female figure is represented within the main body of a lotus pond-type representation.

⁷⁰ Published in Bautze (2008: fig. 2).

⁷¹ The provenance is mentioned on the museum label but curiously not in Ali & Qazi (2008: 176).

⁷² This piece and the preceding one, the two most significant comparable steles of this type, have already been utilized in Quagliotti (1996a).

Buddha has wide open eyes, both indicators that this stele is earlier than many others.

The teaching Buddha, his large lotus and the jewel tree above him occupy more than half of the stele's surface. From the tree on top no details survive, but the type is still recognizable. Unusually, a considerable portion of the Buddha's halo is occupied by smaller haloed figures kneeling on lotuses. Of the four small ones above one is holding a garland, while the other are showing veneration. Underneath them larger figures appear to bow towards the Buddha's head.

At the bottom, the lotus has a plain stem. It is flanked by four figures, the outer ones possibly a couple throwing flowers, while the inner ones seem to point towards the Buddha. Unlike the equivalent figures in the Muhammad Nari stele, they rise directly out of the water of the large pond which constitutes the lower border. In the centre of this, among lotus blossoms, several small figures can be recognized. Two male figures attend an incense burner in the centre. These are flanked by three figures on each side, only some of them preserved, who are slightly larger and face up towards the Buddha.

The entourage of the Buddha is represented in a rather complex interaction of larger and smaller figures. At the height of the arms the Buddha is flanked by two larger standing bodhisattvas who likely once held garlands. The right one of these is of the *brāhmaṇa* type. Especially large are also the two seated bodhisattvas to the sides of the central lotus, their thrones placed on fleshy lotuses with downturned petals. Both are turbaned and in direct communication with the Buddha. The remaining bodhisattvas on the stele are of similar size. In the bottom corners groups of two bodhisattvas are seated under trees and converse with each other. At the level of the knee there are groups of two as well, with the inner bodhisattvas also directed towards the Buddha. The leftmost bodhisattva is turbaned and meditates, the rightmost one has his arm raised above his head (now lost). Two further seated bodhisattvas engaged in conversation with the Buddha are represented behind the standing bodhisattvas.

Of the upper area only the right half is preserved. There are three solitary bodhisattvas seated on thrones within different-shaped pavilions, two of which appear to be mounted on lotuses. The lower bodhisattva is of the pensive type, the middle one is meditating, and the upper one is teaching and has his legs crossed at the ankles. Just to the right of the lower bodhisattva's throne is the scene where a Buddha, seated in the wilderness under a tree in the presence of Vajrapāṇi, reveals the Buddha-field to a disciple, of whom only the lower section is preserved.

Grey schist; 149.95 x 116.92 cm.

Archival photo: Warburg Institute, London.

Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 402); Rhi (1991: pl. 6); Ali & Qazi (2008: 176).

Stele no. 4: Central part of a lotus pond stele with teaching Buddha; origin unknown; Karachi, National Museum of Pakistan, Inv. No. 374

In this relatively flat stele fragment the large central teaching Buddha sits on a rather narrow and flatly carved lotus, his knees projecting well beyond its edges. The Buddha's body is elongated and massive and the legs and feet appear slightly too small for it. His large circular halo almost reaches his shoulders. Above the Buddha is an elaborate jewel tree, with the upper body of a figure holding a garland projecting forward from the top central blossom. Underneath two large flying putti with wings hold a circular wreath above the Buddha's head. It is certainly wide enough to fit around his

uṣṇīṣa. To the sides of the Buddha's arms stand small haloed figures, likely representing Indra on the left side, and Brahmā on the right side. Indra wears a cylindrical crown and holds a vajra upright in his left hand. Brahmā, looking rather youthful, has his right hand raised towards the shoulder and holds a flask in the left. Of the flanking bodhisattvas only the one on Brahmā's side is preserved, he is of the kṣatriya type and has his right hand in the gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya mudrā*), while the left arm is broken at the elbow. He stands on a broad flat lotus.

At the bottom of the stele, the lotus grows out of a pond filled with ducks and fish. There are four figures at its sides, two standing on lotuses and two with their upper bodies projecting from lotus blossoms as well. The standing figures are a lay couple, the man to the left and the woman, with distinctive headdress and coiffeur, to the right. The half figures are possibly a couple as well, the left figure being turbaned and the right one having the hair uncovered. They may also represent the two bodhisattva types. All figures around the lotus have their hands raised in *añjali*; the hands of the standing figure touch its petals.

Grey schist; height 112 cm

Lyons & Ingholt (1957: 35, 124, pl. XVI, 3⁷³); Taddei (1969/2003: figs. 13, 14); Miyaji (1985b: pl. VII, 1); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 406); Bautze-Picron (2010: fig. 19, detail of the tree and putti with wreath).

Stele no. 5: Fragment of a lotus pond stele with only the lower part preserved; from Sahri Bahlol (Exc. of the A.D.F.C 1911–12); Peshawar Museum, inv. no. 1121

From this stele essentially only the lower tier is preserved with much of the body of the central Buddha, but this section is still very informative.

As with the other Sahri Bahlol stele, the lotus on which the Buddha sits is enormous. There is an emphasis on the lotus pond underneath and all figures above it are on lotuses, for two of which, on which once stood figures flanking the Buddha, the stems are visible as well. The lotus is also flanked by standing figures, haloed bodhisattvas who touch its upper petals. Underneath, flanking the bejeweled stem, the upper bodies of a male and a female rise out of lotuses in the water and throw flowers. It is unclear if they are nāgas. On each side are three more seated figures, the outer ones of which are meditating facing the centre. Of the two inner bodhisattvas the left one is offering something, while the right one is shown in a pensive attitude. The middle bodhisattvas appear to be engaged in discussion. Because of damage to the heads the bodhisattva types can no longer be discerned.

The pond itself has a few fish and a couple of ducks represented in the swirling water. Further there are two kneeling adorers, possibly a couple, who essentially have to be read as being placed in front of the Buddha-field and thus outside it.

Grey schist; 48.29 x 48.29 cm.

Archival photo: Warburg Institute, London.

Ali & Qazi (2008: 161).

⁷³ In this illustration, only the central part of this stele with the Buddha is shown.

Stele no. 6: Lotus pond stele with squarish figures; from Sahri Bahlol mound C⁷⁴; (formerly?) Peshawar Museum⁷⁵

The stele is of a rather flat and squarish style with the central Buddha taking up more than half of the stele's surface. Haloed, he sits on a throne set upon a flat lotus growing out of the pond that once occupied the entire width of the stele but is now largely lost. The jewel tree above the Buddha has an upper body of a figure holding a garland on the middle blossom. Two flying putti immediately beneath the tree hold a wreath above the Buddha. At arm level haloed bodhisattvas of the two types hold garlands. At the level of the head two haloed meditating bodhisattvas of the two types are seated against circular mandorlas.

At the top of the stele, the jewel tree is flanked by two different scenes. In the upper left corner, a haloed meditating Buddha seated on a square throne under a parasol emanates six standing Buddhas, while two kneeling figures venerate him. In the upper right corner, a Buddha seated in the wilderness on a square stone or throne reveals the Buddha-field to a monk kneeling to his left side and a standing figure immediately behind him, who may also be a monk. To the right of the Buddha is an elderly, bearded Vajrapāṇi, more Zeus than Heracles. Apart from the Buddha, no figure in this scene is haloed. The thrones of these two Buddhas in the upper register appear to lack the lotuses with downturned petals used for all other secondary images on the stele.

The rest of the Buddha's entourage is represented in three tiers of two figures on each side. Among them the brāhmaṇa type dominates. All are haloed. The bodhisattvas are engaged in discussion and other practices. In the top row, the two figures on the left are both looking upwards and have their right hands raised in a gesture of blessing (the index and middle fingers outstretched), the one on the outside possibly holding a book. On the middle level, all bodhisattvas are of the brāhmaṇa type and two of them are meditating, the rightmost one with his legs crossed at the ankles. The first figure to the right raises his arm above the head, as does the leftmost figure in the bottom row, possibly to shield the eyes against the light. It would seem that in the bottom row the two bodhisattvas closest to the throne were facing away from the Buddha.

Material and size unknown.

Marshall (1960: pl. 110, fig. 151); Rhi (1991: pl. 65); Schlingloff (1991: fig. 42, tracing); Schlingloff (2000: II, 102, no. 29, tracing).

Stele no. 7: Lotus pond stele; origin unknown⁷⁶; formerly in the Peshawar Museum⁷⁷ (Figure 9)

A rather unusual flatly carved stele broken into two parts with a comparatively small central Buddha. The stele consists of two main sections, the actual lotus field and an upper palace frieze that seemingly is set off but contentwise clearly belongs to the main theme. This composition is a good argument for the interpretation that certain parts of a stele of this type have to be read as outside or beyond the principal field.

The teaching Buddha is seated on a relatively simple and low lotus with a bejewelled stem and no

⁷⁴ This origin is provided by Rhi (1991: pl. 65).

⁷⁵ The stele is not recorded in Ali & Qazi (2008).

⁷⁶ We note, however, that this stele is stylistically similar to our Stele No. 16, from Takht-i-bahi (excavated 1908).

⁷⁷ As shown by the Warburg photo of 1913–14. Its present location is unknown.

figures relating to it. The lotus petals are uniquely shaped with their points differentiated from an inner part with a semi-circular end. Above the Buddha the jewel tree is combined with a parasol adorned with a crescent, the shaft of which seems to be held by the two flying putti underneath, who also hold a wreath around it. Otherwise the tree has the usual blossoms, two of them bearing the upper bodies of turbaned figures with their hands joined in veneration. The frontal blossom underneath the tree on the left side bearing the upper body of a figure holding a garland may also be part of the tree. Presumably there was a matching figure on the right.

The composition of the attending figures in the main area of the field has three distinct levels, the tree level, the Buddha level and the level underneath the Buddha. At the central level the Buddha is flanked by two frontally represented bodhisattvas. The left bodhisattva is of the brāhmaṇa type, performs the gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya mudrā*) and holds a flask, an iconography deriving from depictions of Maitreya. The bodhisattva on the right probably once held a wreath, but his head and right hand are lost. To their sides are two seated pairs of bodhisattvas, one above the other, the upper pair on the right being lost, engaged in different activities. None is focussed on the Buddha. Such pairs are also to the side of the tree in the top row: only the pair on the left is intact, the outer bodhisattva kneeling in adoration, the inner one raising a flower to throw at the Buddha. The pair on the right may have mirrored them. In the bottom row are seven more similarly engaged bodhisattvas, only the central one of which is standing. Throughout the stele, the brāhmaṇa type and the kṣatriya type are difficult to differentiate, as even the former has a chain of pearls with a central ornament in his hair. All bodhisattvas are on lotuses.

In the top frieze five architectural frames with trapezoidal or semi-circular arches house five scenes. In the centre, a meditating Buddha is emanating four more standing ones. On either side of him we see two teaching Buddhas, the one to the left seated cross-legged and the one to the right seated in the regular lotus-posture. On the far left is a brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva emanating different deities, including a Buddha. On the far right is another Buddha apparently indicating the Buddha-field to two adorers, possibly a monk on the left and a bodhisattva on the right. In this case, their adoration is clearly directed towards the Buddha-field. On this stele all central figures of the upper row are seated on lotus thrones with downturned petals.

Schist; size unknown.

Archival photo: Warburg Institute, London.

Stele no. 8: Lotus pond stele with large pavilions in upper corners; from Sahri Bahlol, mound D⁷⁸; Karachi, National Museum of Pakistan Museum

This rather unusual lotus pond stele has a rather simplified composition and a row of seated bodhisattvas underneath the Buddha with donors adjacent to them.

The central teaching Buddha sits under a parasol⁷⁹ on an unusually small lotus. Above his head the traces of two flying putti holding a wreath can still be recognized. The lotus with its rather flat and

⁷⁸ Provenance given by Rhi (1991). Kurita, who apparently was the first to publish this stele, attributes it to Taxila (2003: I, pl. 401). The stele bears a number of features that makes us doubt its authenticity. However, the clear re-carving of the bottom of the stele and the convincing damage to it speak in its favour.

⁷⁹ The narrow space there makes it impossible that this stele had a jewel tree.

simple petals, two of the three rows being downturned, is flanked by two figures kneeling on the ground in veneration, now headless, but presumably monks (they are male and wear no jewellery). The Buddha is flanked by bodhisattvas of the two types standing on high lotuses. The left one has loosely tied hair, performs the gesture of deference with the right hand and holds a flask in the left, in the manner normally associated with Maitreya. The right bodhisattva likely was turbaned and appears to have held a wreath. To their sides are four seated bodhisattvas, of whom the lower left probably held a flower and the upper right a book. The lower right bodhisattva has an arm raised above the head. All figures except for the putative monks and the seated bodhisattva in the bottom corners are on lotuses and all but the monks are haloed.

In the upper corners are the remains of two ornate pavilions with meditating Buddhas on lotus thrones, each flanked by two adoring figures, possibly bodhisattvas.

The bottom row is likely to be a later re-carving that continues the main subject, which is indicated by the curved background of the carved space there, the sharp edge partly undercutting details of the central panel where it joins this section, and the style. It features a row of six haloed bodhisattvas, the central four of whom look up towards the Buddha. Of these, two hold flowers, one shows a gesture of discussion and one has his hands folded in veneration. The two outer bodhisattvas face away from the centre and are in communication with the standing donors represented in the corners. On the left two males venerate a bodhisattva holding a flask in his left hand. On the right are two females with offerings and a bodhisattva who probably once held a wreath.

Grey schist; size unknown.

Photo: C. Luczanits 2007.

Miyaji (1985b: pl. VIII, 2); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 401); Rhi (1991: pl. 40).

Stele no. 9: Lotus pond stele from Yākubi, Swabi⁸⁰; Peshawar Museum, inv. no. 3110 (old 280)⁸¹

This rather small stele is composed in two separate parts, an upper part based on the lotus pond type with secondary bodhisattvas seated in pavilions flanking the main lotus (assuming a symmetrical composition), and a separate band of figures underneath centred on a meditating bodhisattva. This stele probably represents a later type comparable with the emanation-type steles described below.

The central Buddha is teaching and sits on a moderately sized lotus, his knees projecting considerably beyond its edges. At the height of his arms, he would have been flanked by two haloed bodhisattvas standing on lotuses, but only one survives, and even he is badly damaged. The lotus is flanked by two garland-holders kneeling directly on the ground, bodhisattvas of the brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya types. In the bottom left corner, a bodhisattva sits inside a pavilion on a rattan chair with legs crossed at the ankles and the feet supported by a lotus-footstool. He is of the brāhmaṇa type and holds a book as if about to open it. There are two more bodhisattvas of different sizes on lotuses above the pavilion. The smaller lower figure kneels. The larger upper figure is a

⁸⁰ According to Spooner (1912: 129), it was found by Mr. Wilson-Johnson in a stream. Swabi is the district immediately to the north of the confluence of the Kabul and Indus rivers.

⁸¹ Donated by Col. Wilson Johnstone [sic], I.C.I (Ali & Qazi 2008: 160–61).

brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva, who sits in a relaxed pose and has his right arm raised, probably throwing an offering towards the Buddha. Further above are two more figures, a seated meditating bodhisattva in a pavilion and another one seated at the height of the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa*, both of the brāhmaṇa type. The one in the pavilion sits on a lotus, and his pavilion is supported by a lotus as well; the seat of the other has been obliterated. All secondary figures on this stele are directed towards the main Buddha image, and only for those on lotuses is a halo discernible.

In the bottom frieze a turbaned bodhisattva meditating under a tree and seated on a low seat or mat occupies the centre. He is flanked by two more bodhisattvas seated with their knees wide apart and feet close together (exceptionally the legs are not crossed at the ankles) on somewhat higher seats (there are no lotus seats on this level) and engaged in conversation with the smaller standing figures to their sides. On the left are three lay followers, the first holding a flower and the other two with their hands in *añjali*. The only figure preserved on the right side is a monk who is turned away from the bodhisattva.

There is a donation inscription on the lower band.⁸²

Grey schist; 59.73 x 36.85 cm.

Spooner (1912: 129-32, pl. xlvii); Coomaraswamy (1927: fig. 54); Zimmer (1954: II, 64a); Lyons & Ingholt (1957: 123-124, fig. 256); von Mitterwallner (1987: fig. 3); Rhi (1991: pl. 43); Schlingloff (1991: fig. 40, tracing); Schlingloff (2000: II, 102, no. 22, tracing); Ali & Qazi (2008: 160-61).

Palace-type Steles

Stele no. 10: Palace-type stele with Seven Buddhas and Maitreya; from Muhammad Nari⁸³; Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery, Inv. no. 1134⁸⁴ (Figure 10)

Stele showing an elaborate palace of fascinating architectural details that is essentially divided into three tiers. While the top tier is part of the main scene, the bottom tier is strictly separate.

The central triad consists of a teaching Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas standing on the ground. The Buddha is seated on a large lotus with a jewel stem flanked by two kneeling figures touching its petals. The bodhisattvas are not individually recognizable, since both have lost their heads. Presumably they held garlands only. The arch above the bodhisattva on the right has a Buddha seated in meditation on a lotus, and a similar Buddha probably occupied the other arch too. The balconies between these arches and the main Buddha's head are filled with three figures each, the central one broken on both sides and the remaining ones all female, without haloes. There is a

⁸² See the "Yākubi image inscription," CKI0139, on <http://gandhari.org/> for the reading and publication references. The significance of the inscription is discussed by Brown (1984: 82), Fussman (1987: 74, n. 38), von Mitterwallner (1987: 227-228) and Rhi (1991: 109, n. 28), among others, but a satisfactory conclusion has not yet been reached. We are grateful to Stefan Baums for his current attempts to read and interpret the inscription. That work is still in progress, but at present it is fairly certain that the reading *jinakumaro* is unsupported, and therefore there is no epigraphic basis for asserting that this must be an image of Śākyamuni.

⁸³ This stele was excavated from a mound near the village of Muhammad Nari by Mr Dempster, C.E., of Swat Canals (see Burgess 1897: 8, description of pl. 112).

⁸⁴ Formerly Lahore Museum with the same inventory number.

fourth woman on the outside corner at the right; of the one on the left little survives.

In the upper section the gable of the main palace is flanked by two cross-shaped pavilions. In the one on the left a haloed bodhisattva sits on throne and footstool with his legs crossed at the ankles. On the right sits a pensive bodhisattva holding a wreath, also haloed, with his right foot up on the footstool. Both are flanked by standing bodhisattvas in attitudes of reverence, only partly preserved. In the central gable two scenes of the Great Departure are represented, remarkably in reverse succession from bottom to top, probably to emphasize the actual departure. In the top scene, the haloed Bodhisattva rides frontally out of the arch, and to the left of him is a figure in Kuṣāṇa dress. In the lower scene the haloed Bodhisattva has just risen from the bed, his hand stretched towards the groom kneeling to the left of it. Two sleeping women can be recognized in the side corners. On the roof-level balconies we again find women, originally two on each side of each pavilion.

The bottom frieze features the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya, who is represented to the right of the Buddhas. All eight are haloed, and there is considerable variance in their depiction. Remarkably, the figures at each end of this line-up are turned towards the flanking adorers. On the left we have three adults and a child with their hands joined in veneration. On the right a monk guide introduces Maitreya to a couple. All figures on this level stand upon the ground.

Grey schist; 105 x 77 cm.

Archival photos: Asian Art Museum, Collection of South, Southeast and Central Asian Art, Berlin; British Library⁸⁵.

Cole (1883: pl. 1 (sketch); 1885: pl. 1); Burgess (1897: pl. 112); Foucher (1905: 193, fig. 77); Foucher (1917: pl. xxvi, 1); Grünwedel (1920: fig. 63, tracing); Marshall (1960: fig. 123); Miyaji (1985a: 88, fig. 17; 1985b: pl. IX, 2; 2002: 24, fig. 3); Paul (1986: 171, no. 1134); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 397); Rhi (1991: pl. 45); Bhattacharyya (2002: no. 340, "Amitābha preaching in Sukhāvati").

Stele no. 11: Upper part of a multi-storied palace stele; from Muhammad Nari; Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery, Inv. no. 1137⁸⁶

Of this once very large stele only the upper part is preserved, showing rows of figures in three tiers, the lowest tier at the same level as the central arch under which the central image once sat.

In the top row a stūpa in the centre is flanked by a Buddha and a bodhisattva, both of them emanating other figures. The stūpa stands on a capital, has three base rings and four niches housing Buddhas on the dome. Its massive parasols, at least seven, are supported by posts from the dome and from them trail large ribbons. In the corners are four lion columns. To the left the meditating Buddha seated under a parasol on a lotus with downturned petals emanates six more standing Buddhas. In an identical composition the meditating bodhisattva on the right emanates six deities. Of these only the ones on the left are preserved, the middle one of them identifiable as Skanda.⁸⁷ To the sides of the lotuses of these two figures crouch two bodhisattvas with loosened hair in a

⁸⁵ <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/s/019pho000001003u01099000.html>

⁸⁶ Formerly Lahore Museum with the same inventory number.

⁸⁷ The top figure has been identified as Kubera (Bhattacharyya 2002: 112), but his attributes, an elongated pointed object held hanging from the right hand in front of the legs and a bag in the left hand, are not entirely clear.

position reminiscent of Śākyamuni's primary vow in front of the Buddha Dīpaṃkara.

On the middle level, just above the tip of the arch, are five single-celled pavilions separated by columns. In the central building sits a Buddha on a lotus making the gesture of fearlessness (*abhayamudrā*). The two bodhisattvas in the flanking pavilions are directed towards him. The bodhisattvas in the outer pavilions face away from him, indicating that considerable portions are lost at the sides as well (there were at least seven pavilions on this level, cf. Stele no. 12 below). All the bodhisattvas on this level sit on thrones, not lotuses.

Flanking the central arch with peacocks on its roof are four pavilions (originally at least six). The two inner ones each house a bodhisattva kneeling on the ground and facing towards the arch and thus the central Buddha. The outer building, preserved only on the right, houses a teaching Buddha upon a lotus. Enough remains of the next level down to establish the presence of six arched alcoves. Grey schist; 76 x 95 cm.

Foucher (1905: fig. 78); Paul (1986: 171, no. 1137); Taddei (1987/2003: fig. 4); Rhi (1991: pl. 49); Schlingloff (1991: fig. 45, tracing); Schlingloff (2000: II, 103, no. 19, tracing); Bhattacharyya (2002: no. 341).

Stele no. 12: Multistoried palace-type stele; from Sahri Bahlol, Mound D (Exc. 1911–12); Peshawar Museum, inv. no. 2771 (old nos. 1554, 60)

Stele found in parts and reassembled with substantial losses at the bottom. The composition is divided into three tiers, the bottom composition with the main triad occupying almost two thirds of the stele, a row of arches above it, and three separate structures at the top.

The central Buddha sits under a caitya arch on a rather simple lotus with elephants underneath, which once offered lotuses with their trunks. Separated from him by Persepolitan columns two attendant bodhisattvas, haloed, stand on lotuses with downturned petals. The bodhisattva to the left with turban, the gesture of fearlessness (*abhayamudrā*) and lotus could be read as Avalokiteśvara, the one to the right with open hair, the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*) and flask as Maitreya. The quarter circles of the lower arch were occupied by two tiny haloed bodhisattvas perched on elephant heads and venerating the Buddha (only the one on the left has survived), outside the lower arch are balconies on each of which stand three women, without haloes but elaborately coiffeured. Under the top of the arch two putti once held garlands above the Buddha's head, but only one of them is preserved. The top of the arch is flanked by two Buddha triads, a teaching Buddha (obliterated on the right, but preserved on the left) flanked by a pair of meditating ones facing him, all six seated on lotuses.

Similar arches (seven of them) house images on the next level up, where the centre is again taken by a Buddha with *abhayamudrā* and holding the end of his dress. He is flanked by two Buddhas, the one on the left meditating, the one on the right, only partly preserved, teaching. All three are seated on lotuses. At each end are two bodhisattvas, the inner ones with loosely tied hair and sitting cross-legged, the outer ones turbaned and in pensive posture. All of these sit on thrones, not on lotuses.

The top row has a stūpa in the centre flanked by two narrative episodes of the Buddha's life, the offering of dust and the vow in front of Dīpaṃkara, both resulting in a prediction made by the respective Buddha. In the outer corners bodhisattvas of the two types are shown teaching in

separate pavilions, seated on thrones with legs crossed at the ankles. Figures offering garlands stand to either side and hover in the air above them.

Grey schist; 114.37 x 71.17 cm.

Hargreaves (1930: 98-99); Lyons & Ingholt (1957: 125–26, fig. 257); Miyaji (1985b: pl. VI, 1–3; 2008: figs. 1, 5 and 7); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 396); Rhi (1991: pl. 39; 2006: fig. 7.14); Schlingloff (1991: fig. 44, tracing; 2000: II, 102, no. 25, tracing); Ali & Qazi (2008: 150–51).

Stele no. 13: Palace-type stele on lotus stand; from Loriyan Tangai⁸⁸, Indian Museum, Calcutta, inv. no. A 23484 (old 5090) (Figure 12)

Less complex palace-type stele with a teaching Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas, originally mounted on a lotus with downturned petals that was also found.⁸⁹ Unusual is the projection on top of the stele that once may have supported a parasol. The stele itself has essentially three tiers, the central palace room with the main figures, the roof area flanked by two pavilions, and the lower frieze.

The large central palace room has three spaces, with the central area housing the Buddha taking up the full height. The Buddha makes the *dharmacakramudrā* and sits on a double-petalled lotus with elephants underneath. Above his head a twisted garland is flanked by ribbons. Separated from him by Persepolitan columns are two seated bodhisattvas. The bodhisattva on the left sits with his legs crossed at the ankles, holds the left hand in a gesture of communication towards the Buddha and has the right one on the lap, where an outline of the flask he held is still visible. Presumably he is of the *brāhmaṇa* type, as is indicated by his bare feet in relation to the sandaled ones of the second bodhisattva. This figure is turbaned, of the pensive type—seated in royal ease (*lalitāsana*) with his head supported by his right hand—and holds a wreath in his lap. Both bodhisattvas sit on thrones set on the floor, but the one on the left has a lotus for a footstool. Above each bodhisattva is a balcony occupied by two females holding flower offerings.

The arch in the shape of a false gable in the centre of the top area is dedicated to the veneration of the Buddha. In the top arch a standing Buddha is flanked by two adoring figures, while in the extension below a couple of meditating Buddhas, their flat seats not clearly recognizable, are flanked by kneeling adorers. Meditating Buddhas seated on lotus thrones also occupy the single-celled, double-roofed side pavilions on this level. The central arch has a large finial above it, with flying streamers preserved on the left side.

In the bottom frieze five putti carry an immense garland and at each end kneel two more figures in *añjali*. The one on the left is a monk, while the one on the right is female.

Dark grey schist; 85.5 x 40.5 x 12.2 cm; height of c. one meter including the lotus base.⁹⁰

Archival photos: Warburg Institute, London; Asian Art Museum, Collection of South, Southeast and Central Asian Art, Berlin.

⁸⁸ This attribution is given in Marshall (1960: fig. 122), while the photograph used in the thumb has a paper glued to the stele saying it is from the Swat valley. In the early literature Loriyan Tangai is considered part of Swat.

⁸⁹ An old photograph showing the stele mounted on the lotus is also preserved. It shows that the top decoration of streamers and birds was fully intact when the piece was discovered.

⁹⁰ Foucher (1917: description for pl. xxv, 1).

Burgess (1900: fig. 25); Foucher (1905: 192, fig. 76; 1917: pl. xxv, 1)⁹¹; Majumdar (1937: 67–68, pl. ix, c); Marshall (1960: 94–95, fig. 122); Miyaji (1985a: 90, fig. 18; 1985b: pl. IX, 1); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 398); Nehru (1989: pl. 17); Rhi (1991: pl. 42); Schlingloff (1991: fig. 47, tracing); Klimburg-Salter (1995: no. 133).

Stele no. 14: Fragmentary palace-type stele with a teaching Buddha and the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya at the base; of unknown origin; private collection, Japan⁹²

Fragmentary stele of a Buddha-field emphasising the palace architecture with a large teaching Buddha in the centre. The flanking bodhisattvas are broken away; only the remains of their feet can be seen.

In the arch above, a haloed kṣatriya-type bodhisattva with his right hand in *abhayamudrā* and the left hand at the hip is surrounded by four figures, two of them turbaned but none with haloes. In the centre the teaching Buddha sits on a rather crude double lotus flanked by male and female donors kneeling on the ground; the male is a monk. On either side of the Buddha's head haloed bodhisattvas of the two types, or rather Brahmā and Indra, kneel under the arch with their hands joined in veneration. Flying putti place a garland in front of the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa*. Remarkable are the complex columns and the many animals and putti.

On the lower register the row of the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya is flanked by two females, the one on the right holding blossoms in a cloth. All eight central figures are haloed, their haloes bending like leaves behind their head. They are similarly depicted, but there is considerable variation in their hairstyle and in the position of the hands. Maitreya makes the gesture of fearlessness (*abhayamudrā*) and holds a flask.

Schist; 70 x 45 cm.

Exhibit (1985: no. 37); Kurita (1990/2003[II]: pl. 294), where the stele is attributed to the Swabi region.

Stele no. 15: Section of a palace-type stele with the palace growing out of a pond; of unknown origin and location⁹³

Of this rather flat stele with prominent architectural features in a composition similar to Stele no. 12, only the main section with the Buddha and one of the flanking bodhisattvas is preserved. The elaborate palace is combined with the pond on which the palace stands, their relationship being essentially undefined. The pond is filled with buds and beings, two of them underneath the inner pillars, but none of these is discernible in details. The flanking bodhisattva stands on a lotus blossom growing from the pond.

The squat teaching Buddha is stylistically unusual, a particularly strange feature being the undulating hair line on the forehead. He sits under the remains of a false gable arch on a relatively narrow lotus with downturned petals, his knees projecting considerably beyond its edges.

⁹¹ In this photograph the stele does not yet show the present damage!

⁹² There certainly remains some doubt with regard to the authenticity of this stele, but none of its unusual elements can be qualified as entirely impossible.

⁹³ Lyons & Ingholt (1957: 35) refers to this piece as “once on the art market in London”. Stylistically, this stele is very unusual, but its condition and wear are strong indicators that it is indeed an authentic piece of Gandhāran art.

Underneath the lotus are the heads of three elephants, one frontal and two at the sides. The elephants on the side carry lotus flowers with kneeling and haloed devotees on them, presumably bodhisattvas.⁹⁴ Persepolitan columns separate the Buddha's space from that of the flanking bodhisattvas. Here only the bodhisattva on the right is preserved, with his right hand in the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*) but oddly turned, and holding a flask in his left hand by its neck in an unusual manner and higher than normal, at the height of the belly. His voluminous coiffure, with parallel ridges on the large hair knot, is unusual as well. Above the bodhisattva an elaborate balcony houses two women with offerings in separate compartments. In front of the balcony's railing are two birds.

Material and size unknown.

Lyons & Ingholt (1957: pl. xvi, 4).

Two Types in Comparison

As this short survey of relevant steles shows, most of the sophisticated complex steles come from only two sites, Muhammad Nari and Sahri Bahlol. An analysis of the two types of steles from these two sites reveals a number of significant differences:

- The lotus pond-type stele always includes what could be called a revelation scene, i.e. a scene in which a Buddha outside the actual Buddha-field and not seated on a lotus appears to be bringing the content of the stele to the attention of a kneeling figure. This revelation invariably takes place in the wilderness.
- With the exception of this wilderness scene, all other elements of a lotus pond stele, including the pavilions,⁹⁵ are placed on lotus blossoms that theoretically grow out of the pond at the bottom of the stele.
- The audience of a lotus pond stele consists predominantly of bodhisattvas engaged in different activities. Besides the veneration of the main Buddha, there is an emphasis on discourse and communication. Solitary bodhisattvas may also be present, engaged in reflection, meditation and teaching.
- On a lotus pond stele additional Buddhas are found only on the periphery and not in the main assembly.
- Palace-type steles, by contrast, have additional Buddhas among the secondary figures represented in direct relation to bodhisattvas.
- In palace-type steles Buddhas sit on lotuses while bodhisattvas sit on seats or thrones or stand on the ground.
- Palace-type steles do not emphasize dialogue but solitary practice. There are no gestures of dialogue between bodhisattvas. Each figure occupies his own architectural space.

⁹⁴ But according to Lyons & Ingholt (1957: 128), Lūhasudatta and his wife.

⁹⁵ An exception is Stele no 2, in which the pavilions are not standing on lotuses, nor are any of the figures at the bottom of the main scene.

- Only palace-type steles show scenes of the Buddha's life on them. Also the connection to the seven Buddhas on the past only occurs with palace-type steles.
- Only palace-type steles have balconies, and these are invariably occupied by women without halos.

Comparable steles of unknown origin or from other sites (or fragments of them) seldom reach the same sophistication, but in many instances share the main differentiating characteristics listed here. While in part obscuring the differentiation between the two types, they occasionally also help to understand the relationship of the different elements on such steles. For example, steles with the revelation scene on the level of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas emanating other beings, e.g. Stele no. 6 and Stele no. 7, may indicate that those scenes are thought to lie beyond the actual Buddha-field as well.

If all steles considered so far, those from the two main sites and the comparable ones, are taken into account the above characteristics are certainly statistically supported, even more so as it seems clear that steles in which different elements are merged are commonly of a later manufacture than the steles from the two main sites. Despite the differences visible in the two types, it is rather likely that the palace-type stele is associated with water as well. This is not only indicated by the unusual Stele no. 15, which literally has the palace standing on a pond, but also by the lotuses that support the Buddhas and bodhisattvas on these steles as well. In addition, the elephants that occasionally appear as the supports of the lotus are also associated with water. Last but not least, the whole palace may stand on a lotus (Stele no. 13, Figure 12), distinguishing the divine from the royal.⁹⁶

The blurring of the two types recognisable in some of the steles (e.g., Stele no. 9, which is unusually small) may have been supported by the presence of a third type of complex stele focused on a meditating Buddha emanating other standing Buddhas, typically eight of them, fanning out on either side of his body. The main steles of this type are described here as well, under the rubric "emanation type".⁹⁷

Emanation-type Steles

Stele no. 16: Lotus pond-type stele with emanating Buddha; from Takht-i-Bahi (exc. 1908); formerly Peshawar Museum (Figure 13)

The stele centres on a meditating Buddha seated on a throne and under a parasol ornamented with a crescent moon; in this and other respects it is similar to Stele no. 7. The Buddha is haloed and emanates eight Buddhas standing on lotus blossoms, four on each side. To the sides, two haloed bodhisattvas stand on lotuses holding garlands. They appear to be of the two types but the headdress of the bodhisattva on the right is not recognizable as a turban.

Above the parasol is the foliage of a jewel tree with three additional haloed Buddhas, a teaching one flanked by two with their right arms in their monastic robe and the left holding an end of it.

⁹⁶ This conforms to Chinese depictions of Buddha-fields, which tend to emphasize the water, although they are more architecturally explicit and often have the palaces on piles in the water. In the case of the palace-type steles, it is also possible that the ponds at the bottom reflect general Indian cosmological notions about the earth resting on a base of water.

⁹⁷ Rhi (1991) uses the term "multiplication" to denote this type.

Two haloed meditating Buddhas flank the parasol. All five of these Buddhas sit on lotuses.

The lower area is considerably damaged, and it is unclear if once a lotus supported the principal Buddha's throne. At the level of the throne he is flanked by two seated bodhisattvas directed towards him. The lefthand bodhisattva is of the brāhmaṇa type and appears to hold an offering, the bodhisattva on the right is of the kṣatriya type and holds a lotus blossom in the right hand.

Material and size unknown.

Archival photo: Warburg Institute, London.

Spooner (1911: pl. xlv, c); Foucher (1922: fig. 484); Lyons & Ingholt (1957: pl. xxi, 2); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 391); Rhi (1991: pl. 46); Schlingloff (1991: figs. 37 and 38, tracing; 2000: II, 102, no. 14, tracing).

Stele no. 17: Unfinished lotus pond-type stele with emanating Buddha; from Takht-i-Bahi; remains at site (?)⁹⁸

This unfinished stele has a meditating Buddha in the centre and is cut off on the left side, with the loss of the outermost figures. The Buddha is seated below a parasol on a double lotus supported by elephants. The material left to the sides of the Buddha's body was likely meant for emanating Buddha figures (see the previous example). On each side of the lotus a standing figure (the right one turbaned) raises an arm, presumably throwing an offering, while holding a garland in the left hand. Further, a seated bodhisattva in the bottom right corner raises his arm to protect his eyes. Two figures, represented as upper bodies only, flank the parasol, the left throwing flowers, the right venerating. Above the central parasol, a jewel tree is flanked by two Buddhas seated on lotuses under their own parasols, both with the gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya mudrā*).

Grey schist; height 119.4 cm.

Lyons & Ingholt (1957: no. 263); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 394).

Stele no. 18: Lotus pond stele with emanating Buddha; from Sahri Bahlol, Mound C⁹⁹; Karachi, National Museum of Pakistan, Inv. no. 1734¹⁰⁰

Stele with two clearly separated tiers, a large Buddha emanating smaller Buddhas in the upper part and a bottom row with seated bodhisattvas in conversation.

The large meditating Buddha sits on a double lotus supported by elephants, the two at the sides holding lotus flowers in their trunks that bear haloed figures kneeling with their hands extended in veneration towards the Buddha. Above the Buddha are three blossoms of a jewel tree, beneath which two flying putti¹⁰¹ hold a large parasol. The Buddha emanates standing Buddhas on lotuses, four on each side, only the ones on the left being preserved. To the sides of the upper standing Buddhas, two bodhisattvas throw flowers towards the Buddha. Two more meditating Buddhas seated on lotuses under parasols flank the jewel tree on top. On either side of the principal Buddha's lotus were two seated bodhisattvas, only the one on the left being preserved. He sits on a

⁹⁸ According to Rhi (1991: 157 & n. 46), at that time only broken fragments remained in a storage building at the site.

⁹⁹ This provenance is provided by Rhi (1991: pl. 5) and supported by Schlingloff (2000: I, 493). Higuchi (1984: no. I-9) gives the provenance as Mardan.

¹⁰⁰ Formerly Peshawar Museum, as shown by the Warburg photo of 1913–14.

¹⁰¹ These putti, like those of the Muhammad Nari stele, are winged.

throne.

In the bottom frieze seven bodhisattvas seated side by side and engaged in conversation with each other are flanked by two monks. Behind them we see two standing attendants and traces of a third. Both types of bodhisattvas are equally represented, all are haloed and sit on thrones that stand on lotuses deriving from a common pool. Of the bodhisattvas one sits in meditation, one holds a flask and a third one a book. Among the others three share very similar gestures, raising one hand in the direction of the principal Buddha above them and having the other hand palm up on the thigh.

Grey schist; 83 x 54 cm.

Archival photo: Warburg Institute, London.

Lyons & Ingholt (1957: pl. xx, 2); Bussagli (1984: 188); Higuchi (1984: no. I-9); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 393); Rhi (1991: pl. 5); Schlingloff (1991: figs. 39, tracing; 2000: II, 102, no. 11, tracing).

Stele no. 19: Fragment of a lotus pond stele with emanating Buddha; of unknown origin; Government Museum, Madras

The middle and bottom left corner section of a lotus pond-type stele. In the centre a now headless meditating Buddha is seated on a lotus with large petals growing out of a pond on a bejewelled stem. The Buddha once emanated five Buddhas standing on lotuses on each side, but only parts of the group on the left survive. To the left of the lotus a smaller standing lay personage or bodhisattva of the *brāhmaṇa* type has his hands raised in veneration. Behind him, a seated bodhisattva looks towards the central Buddha, a flying putto holding a crown above his head. Both secondary figures are on lotuses deriving from the common pond.

Material and size unknown.

Taddei (1969/2003: fig. 31, with caption referencing another piece; 1987/2003: fig. 2).

Compared with the two types characterized above, these steles are clearly less complex and distinctive, but their details are closer to the lotus pond type. In addition, we have seen that an emanation scene appears as a subordinate element more frequently in the lotus pond steles. Nevertheless, in none of the examples found so far (i.e., in which the emanation is centre stage) is a revelation scene depicted. All examples have a parasol immediately above the Buddha, in one case carried by putti. The Buddha is always in *dhyānamudrā*. Emanation type steles usually do not have larger flanking bodhisattvas, and if there are any (as with the two steles from Takht-i-Bahi), they are less pronounced than with the other types. Further, all secondary figures in the respective section of the stele are directed towards the central emanating Buddha. The secondary Buddhas found in the tree area are not emanating any further Buddhas and are often of varying types. If any of the complex steles is to be associated with the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī, it is this type. But here too the absence of a clear marker of this narrative and the presence of attending bodhisattvas speaks against such an identification.

Steles, Fragments and Triads

We have reviewed almost 20 pieces, but the number of complex steles documented in Gandhāran art is considerably higher than this.¹⁰² Besides the fairly complete steles we have inventoried in this paper, numerous fragments of such steles have been documented, and these easily triple the number of surviving examples. While we have been unable to include these fragments in this study, we did use the most informative of them to develop our typology and conclusions. Further, some of these fragments indicate that the topic at hand was not only represented in the form of single steles, but likely also by combining a number of stone panels into a larger composition, as has been done with larger false window gables.

Further, it is important to keep in mind that the three types distinguished here are also represented in simpler formats, the first two types in the form of triadic compositions, and the latter in the form of the meditating Buddha emanating further Buddhas on lotuses. At present the exact relationship of these triadic compositions to the complex steles in terms of chronology and succession is still unclear to us. It is nevertheless useful to point out examples for each type and characterise their frequency and variation.

Among the triads, those of the lotus pond type are by far the most frequent, and Figure 6 can be taken as an example of them, even if no water is indicated at the bottom of the stele. Other triads of this type clearly reference the pond, such as Figure 14, which shows a similar composition with the gods in the background exchanged. A number of them show additional bodhisattvas and Buddhas. All of the triads share the jewel tree, some of them with figures in it, but none has putti crowning the Buddha with a wreath, even if some of them are very close, such as a well known triad from Sahri Bahlol today in the Peshawar Museum (Figure 15).¹⁰³

Palace-type triads are comparatively rare and less closely associated with the complex steles of this type. Due to the architecture they also lack the reference to Brahmā and Indra so frequently found with lotus pond-type triads. An interesting example for such a triad, today in the Lahore Museum, shows the teaching Buddha inside a pavilion flanked by two much smaller bodhisattvas (Figure 16). To the left is the wreath-holding bodhisattva and to the right a bodhisattva of the brāhmaṇa type. All three are placed on lotuses, the stems of the flanking bodhisattvas deriving from the main lotus. Between the figures, immediately in front of the pillars, kneel two figures, a monk to the left and a female lay follower to the right. As this rather unusual example indicates, the few palace-type triads preserved also vary considerably. Another interesting example shows the Buddha flanked by two pensive bodhisattvas, the

¹⁰² Adding the triads, Rhi (1991: 5–6) arrives at a figure of around 130. See his list of images in Appendix 1 (pp. 194–206). Rhi's list includes some works whose authenticity might be doubted (see his comments in n. 8 on p. 3), but even if we exclude these, the number is still high.

¹⁰³ Buddha triad stele; from Sahri Bahlol (exc. 1906–07); Peshawar Museum, Inv. no. PM-2770 [old 158]; triad of a seated teaching Buddha flanked by two large standing bodhisattvas; Buddha seated in meditation on a large lotus flower and under a fanciful tree with a haloed garland-holder and, at least originally, two teaching bodhisattvas emerging from it; the bodhisattva standing to the Buddha's right with turban and wreath, the one to his left is of the Maitreya type, with loosely tied hair and gesture of deference, the left arm holding the flask broken off; the busts of the gods Brahmā and Indra projecting from the background at shoulder level, Brahmā on the left with gesture of deference and flask, Indra on the right with *kirīṭa* and thunderbolt; two meditating bodhisattvas in pavilions above. Grey schist, 57 x 49 x 11 cm. Previously published in, e.g., Lyons & Ingholt (1957: fig. 254); Kurita (1988/2003[I]: pl. 403; Exhibit (2008: no. 203); Miyaji (2008: figs. 2, 4 and 6).

left one holding a book, the right one a bunch of flowers (Figure 17). The Buddha's lotus seat is flanked by what appear to be two figures, an older man with a rhyton along his arm, just as in the Muhammad Nari stele, and a corpulent being possibly holding a snake and representing a nāga. Further a monk and a woman are kneeling in veneration of the Buddha behind them.¹⁰⁴

Simpler forms of emanation-type steles are not triadic compositions, but panels showing the emanating Buddha (Figure 18). From Peshawar Museum alone eight such representations are known.¹⁰⁵ In most cases these were originally part of larger compositions, and are thus generally to be counted among the fragments of complex steles.

To conclude, art-historically three types of complex steles have to be differentiated, for all of which simpler formats also exist. While these three types are clearly distinguished, their dependence on artistic conventions also makes them share numerous elements. This picture can, of course, be refined still further by looking at all the steles and the fragments available in relation to the sites where they were found and in their chronological development and interrelation. This remains a future task. The following discussion of the evidence can thus only be taken as preliminary and mainly considers the larger phenomenon represented by these steles.

6. Discussion of the Evidence

In the following discussion we can only address a limited number of the issues raised above at the end of our survey of previous studies of the Muhammad Nari stele. Taking full account of existing descriptions of the Buddha domains Sukhāvati and Abhirati, including the as yet untranslated Earlier Recension of the LSukh, we will explore the possible relationships between these texts and the three types of complex stele we have isolated. The considerable variation between the types and even within each type and the many different motifs they share with each other and with the textual sources indicate that we cannot expect a close text-image relationship with a one-to-one correspondence. On the contrary, it may well be that much of what is shown in a stele is not reflected as such in any text, and vice versa: textual and visual tropes differ considerably from each other, since much of what a text describes may be impossible to depict and, as has been shown already, depictions follow their own conventions, which have, in a sense, a life of their own. At the same time an identification may conceivably be possible on the basis of a single distinctive feature alone. It is time, therefore, to embark on a general analysis of the steles' main topics and themes.

Before doing so, we should make it clear that at this point we can infer very little about the contents of any of the complex steles from their provenance or their date. In a later version of this paper we hope to address these questions more systematically. Suffice it to say here that most of the steles appear to be

¹⁰⁴ This triad from Loriyan Tangai is in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, and apparently has in the meantime lost most of the figures flanking the lotus (see Miyaji 1985b: pl. XI, 1; 2008: fig. 17; Rhi 2006: fig. 7.15). For other palace-type triads see, e.g., Schlingloff (1991: fig. 44, tracing), showing a palace-type triad with two additional meditating Buddhas of unknown origin recorded from the Gai Collection, Peshawar.

¹⁰⁵ Ali & Qazi (2008: 166–173). There are more on these pages, since the authors do not differentiate between emanating Buddhas and emanating bodhisattvas.

products of the later period of Gandhāran art in stone,¹⁰⁶ and that, where we do know their provenance, most of them come from a fairly narrow range of sites: Muhammad Nari, Sahri Bahlol, Takht-i-Bahi and Mardan (these four are very close together, Sahri Bahlol being one kilometre from Takht-i-Bahi), with just a few outliers from Loriyan Tangai and Yākubi (Swabi). That is to say that there is a significant concentration in the Peshawar Basin north of the Kabul River.¹⁰⁷ It is too early to say what this means, but one thing is obvious: a considerable degree of wealth would have been required to pay the artists who produced such a large array of complex and ornate pieces, some of which may have taken months to complete, and their workshops would have required a handsome infrastructure. It is perhaps not surprising that the donors would have wanted their own images put into the picture, but in any case, from a technical and thematic point of view, these are hardly the sort of works that would have been produced by solitary artists working in remote locations. They indicate a thriving artistic milieu with high levels of patronage. But even if we accept this, it does not help us to determine what these pieces mean: for that we have no alternative but to look at the steles themselves, as we have tried to do.

Other Buddhas, Other Worlds

What all three stele types have in common is that they depict a situation which is not of this world, which is extraordinary, even supernatural, in particular by virtue of the multiplication of their main protagonists, but in each type this is achieved by different means with different, although complementary, implications.

For the lotus pond steles, the display or revelation motif is a crucial element in this regard, insofar as it marks the difference between two worlds explicitly. In a majority of the examples, somewhere in the upper right-hand region of the stele, we find a small narrative scene, showing a Buddha in conversation with a monk in an attitude of reverence.¹⁰⁸ This Buddha gestures towards the larger Buddha in the centre of the stele, revealing him and his entourage to the monk, and at the same time indicating to us a qualitative distinction of buddhahood between this revealing Buddha and the main Buddha. The contrast between the two types of buddhahood is further emphasized by the presence of Vajrapāṇi¹⁰⁹ in the revelation scene, while divinities or bodhisattvas flank the Buddha in the main area, and it is also underscored by the locale of the revelation. While the revealing Buddha sits more or less on the ground or on a grass-strewn seat in a natural environment, commonly with an indication that this is the wilderness,¹¹⁰ the main Buddha is enthroned on high in an unnatural but auspicious environment.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Rhi (1991: 10) puts most of them in the period from the mid-3rd to the early 5th centuries, a span of little more than 150 years (see also *ibid.* p. 4, n. 10).

¹⁰⁷ For more detailed comments on the distribution of these pieces and its possibly historical significance see Rhi (2003: 179–185). Rhi (1991: 156–159) also presents some interesting reflections on the possible physical context of the complex steles at the relevant sites.

¹⁰⁸ In most cases this figure is damaged, but Stele no. 2 shows clearly that he is a *bhikṣu*.

¹⁰⁹ Vajrapāṇi generally functions in Gandhāran art as an iconographical marker of Śākyamuni, and is seldom found with other Buddhas.

¹¹⁰ In the case of the Muhammad Nari stele, this takes the form of two animals in caves in the rock-face beneath the Buddha's seat. Here the sculptor appears to have borrowed a convention from the Indraśailaguhā depictions (see, e.g., Lyons & Ingholt 1957: fig. 129, and Marshall 1960: fig. 118) to indicate, as Huntington suggests, the *Gr̥dhrakūṭa*, the site of the preaching of the LSukh.

There can be no doubt that these two Buddha representations are an expression of two different types of buddhahood, that of a *nirmāṇakāya* Buddha active in this world and that of a more exalted Buddha-manifestation beyond our common world, whether one chooses to call it *saṃbhogakāya* or not. The representation on lotus pond steles of additional emanating Buddhas adds further force to the distinction between the two types.¹¹²

In emanation-type steles a different form of buddhahood is already implicit in the main image and his emanations (*nirmāṇa*). Obviously, there is a qualitative difference between the main meditating Buddha and his standing emanations, radiating from him like rays of light, the perfect visual trope to represent the concept of *nirmāṇa*. Besides the emanations, this type of stele commonly also has additional Buddhas represented in the upper area. Since these are shown above the parasol honouring the main Buddha, they might be considered as being outside his actual domain, but it is also possible to think of them as further manifestations, perhaps at a greater distance, of the central figure. No attempt is made, however, to link these Buddhas visually or conceptually to the main Buddha.

In the Muhammad Nari stele, the two smaller emanating Buddhas in the top corners can be seen as indicating the central Buddha's activity directed outwards. We do not believe that Huntington's reading (1980: 659–660), which links them with Amitābha's emission of light, is the only possible one or even the most plausible, since the ER of the LSukh also makes it quite clear that Amitābha will send *nirmāṇas* of himself to those devotees who lack the prerequisites for a personal visitation and reception at the time of death, and he will also send visions of himself into the dreams of those less fortunate (see above, under Point 6).¹¹³

Multiple Buddhas are also present in the palace-type steles: besides the main Buddha in the main niche, additional Buddhas, often with their own flanking bodhisattvas, occur on all levels of these steles. Again, it is not clear what their relationship is to the central figure. The Buddha active in this world is here represented through the narrative scenes from the Buddha's life and the row of the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya found on two of these steles.

Since there can be no two Buddhas in the same world at the same time, the additional Buddhas represented on complex steles that are not clearly to be interpreted as *nirmāṇas* of the central figure have to be of a different world. Complex steles thus represent more a matrix of Buddha domains, than a single one. This type of multiplicity therefore has to be understood spatially rather than in quality or temporally.¹¹⁴ Such a spatial relationship is also hinted at by the peripheral location for additional

¹¹¹ Rhi (2008: 259) makes the point that the lotus throne of Amitābha is mentioned neither in the LSukh or in the SSukh, although it is prominent in the *Guan jing*. This is true, but one could say that protocol demands that Amitābha should sit higher than his followers, and not on the ground.

¹¹² It may be significant that, as far as we know, there are no absolutely indisputable examples of emanating Buddhas who are **not** seated on lotuses. Two doubtful cases included in this study are Stele no. 6 (smaller figure on upper left) and Stele no. 16 (central Buddha).

¹¹³ Huntington's argument has been quite rightly called in question by Quagliotti (1996a: 284, 287), but in our view the problem is that he is referring to the wrong part of the text (and to the wrong recension of it). Quagliotti's attempt to see this as an allusion to Śrāvastī strikes us as somewhat forced.

¹¹⁴ As the representations of the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya in a row indicate, the temporal relationship between Buddhas is expressed by showing them in a row.

Buddhas on lotus pond steles, and the multistoried composition of the palace-type steles with their references to divine architecture (see above). Thus, while lotus pond-type and emanation-type steles are clearly the domain of a single Buddha, with any reference to other domains in their upper areas, palace-type steles need to be read as a multiplicity of domains, the central one emphasised. They are in a way cosmic palaces.

The spatial relationship embedded in the multiplication of Buddhas also implies that not everything represented on a stele is to be understood spatially as actually part of the main subject, the Buddha and his domain. This is particularly relevant in the interpretation of the adoring figures at the bottom of some lotus pond steles. Here often a distinction is made between haloed figures and those without haloes, the latter to be interpreted as not fully part of the main scene even though they too may be represented on lotuses.

It may well be that all three types assume the pond and/or the lotus as the seat of everything represented within a Buddha's domain. We have already noted that the palace-type steles are also associated with water, as indicated by the unusual Stele no. 15 and the elephants that occasionally support the main Buddha's lotus. The stūpas in the top centre of some palace steles are themselves represented on lotuses or acanthus leaves. These are vegetal indicators of the supernatural, as is the sheer size and shape of some of the lotuses on which the main Buddha is seated, with their bejewelled stems and many layers of petals. In simpler versions the fleshy lotus is commonly replaced by a flatter one with down-turned petals.

Returning to the revelation motif, it is fair to say that this was the lynchpin of Huntington's attempt to link the Muhammad Nari stele with the Sukhāvatī tradition, and with the LSukh in particular (Huntington 1980: 658). Quagliotti saw it differently, as a reference to the Indraśailaguhā episode, but still recognised in it the revelation of a different order of reality (1996a: 282–285). While it is possible that the artist borrowed the detail of the animals in caves from depictions of that episode (see above), we find Quagliotti's reading unconvincing (and in the end impossible to follow), chiefly because the Buddha is not in a cave, and the figure with the vajra whom she reads as Indra appears only as an attendant: the Buddha's interlocutor is the monk.

Somewhat more cogent alternative explanations have been offered by Schopen (1987: 117, n. 50; 2005: 262, n. 50) and, following him, by Rhi (2003: 173–174; 2008: 256), pointing to other texts where Śākyamuni shows Abhirati to Ānanda or Śāriputra. These counter-arguments would be much more convincing if the contents of the stele tallied in any way with the textual descriptions of Abhirati, but they do not (see below). We might also add that what Śāriputra is shown in the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, according, e.g., to T 313 (11: 759c6ff), is the Buddha Akṣobhya surrounded by all his disciples, i.e. *śrāvakas*, who in this context would have to be monks. It is a similar situation with the vision of Abhirati shown to Ānanda and the rest of the audience in the Prajñāpāramitā texts: they see Akṣobhya with his assemblies of *bhikṣus* and bodhisattvas (*bhikṣusamṅghaparivṛtaṃ bodhisattvagaṇapuraskṛtaṃ*), and this is made quite clear even in Lokakṣema's translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (see T 224, 8: 469a18–22). Furthermore, Schopen's point about Vajrapāṇi having a connection with Akṣobhya and not with Amitābha is irrelevant, since Vajrapāṇi is not with the central Buddha in any case. Finally, the presence of female figures in the foreground has already been accounted for, at least to our satisfaction. All this

means that Schopen's claim that "[t]here is, in fact, probably more "evidence" to suggest that it [the stele] represents Abhirati than there is to suggest that it represents Sukhāvati" cannot be substantiated, and that Huntington's linking of the stele's revelation scene with the display episode in the LSukh remains the most plausible explanation so far.

Domains of Activity

The main Buddhas in the steles are always active in some sense, either teaching or generating emanations out of their meditative state. Secondary Buddhas are less engaged if they are not revealing the main Buddha to a disciple (only on lotus pond-type steles) or emanating smaller Buddhas standing on lotuses themselves. Besides these main types of seated Buddhas and their standing emanations, palace- and emanation-type steles may also show standing Buddhas in the group of the seven Buddhas of the past (see Steles nos. 10 and 14), or in key scenes of the Buddha's life (see Steles nos. 12 and 13). These do not stand on lotuses and their context implies that they are *nirmāṇakāya* representations. In groups of standing Buddhas the hands of the individual figures are held in different ways but there is no obvious iconographic meaning attached to these postures. Palace- and emanation-type steles may also show additional seated Buddhas with the gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya mudrā*) or with their right hands in their robes (see Stele no. 16).¹¹⁵ In all our examples there is not one case where the main Buddha is not seated on a lotus (except for Stele no. 16, where the throne is lost). This is also true for the smaller Buddhas, with the singular exception of the revelation scenes. Further, all Buddhas are haloed.

The main Buddha is clearly set into a miraculous environment, his lotus is bejewelled, the tree shading him carries large pearl garlands and half-bodied beings holding symbols of royal status above him. At times, elephants support the lotus and offer lotus blossoms with their trunks. Further, winged or wingless flying putti hold a parasol above the Buddha or crown him with a wreath. This latter motif clearly derives from Western precedents, not only because of the putti themselves, but also in terms of the wreath and the crowning motif, which were new to South Asia at that stage. This motif is most frequently found on lotus pond steles, occurs occasionally on lotus-type triads and on palace-type steles as well. The classical Western connotation of the wreath on the head is victory and/or kingship, but it may also signify the qualification to teach the dharma.¹¹⁶

Only in lotus pond steles is there also a clear reference to the splendour of the Buddha, the light he emits. Characteristically it is a bodhisattva in the bottom row close to the Buddha who raises his arm in front of his eyes. On the Muhammad Nari stele, the same gesture is even depicted a second time in the upper left corner with a bodhisattva gazing towards the emanating Buddha in the corner there. This double usage may be read as supporting the idea that the emanating Buddhas in the corners actually

¹¹⁵ This seems to be a seated variant of a depiction more common with standing Buddha images and deriving from the way the Roman toga is sometimes depicted.

¹¹⁶ The crowning motif of the teaching Buddha flanked by a pair of brāhmaṇa- and kṣatriya-type bodhisattvas also mimics the arrangement of a royal court, where the king would sit between his two chief ministers, who may be either brāhmaṇas or kṣatriyas. However, this is arguably mimicry of mimicry, since what we are seeing here may well reflect Indian notions about the rulers of the gods and their celestial palaces, which themselves derive from earthly models. Bautze-Picron (2010: 14–17), who discusses the motif in some detail, with the Muhammad Nari stele as a key example, interprets the wreath as a reference to the Buddha's glorification. Cf. also Huntington (1980: 668–669).

represent separate Buddha domains. However, an alternative reading would be to link this bodhisattva to the revelation scene on the other side, which he balances, and to read him as reacting to the light which the central Buddha radiates outwards as a result of Ānanda's request to Śākyamuni—not the primary and constant radiance, as with the bodhisattva closer to the Buddha, but a specific beam in response to an external need, similar in nature to the emanating Buddhas above.¹¹⁷

Also the bodhisattvas represented in complex steles are active in many ways. While usually the focus of their activity is either directed towards a Buddha or they are solitary, on lotus pond-type depictions the bodhisattvas are also engaged with each other in various ways, even though, in line with the passage of the LSukh (ER) which we cited above, each sits or stands atop his own lotus, with few exceptions in which a lotus is shared. We have already looked at the more general aspects of this interaction in the section on artistic conventions. It thus suffices here to focus on some of the more interesting details of their activities. The most common bodhisattva activities are adoration, raising the hands in *añjali*, and offering something to the Buddha. Bodhisattvas in the lower area of a lotus pond-type stele are further engaged in discussion with the Buddha and with each other, the latter expressed in many variants. Prominent among the bodhisattvas engaged in discussion with fellow bodhisattvas—and usually not focussing on the Buddha at all—are those holding a book. On the Muhammad Nari stele large books are—or were—held by two brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattvas in the second row from the bottom, both engaged in conversation with their immediate neighbour, who appears to be listening.¹¹⁸ We could say that this is much more consistent with the ER of the LSukh, describing as it does the “horizontal interaction” of many of the bodhisattvas in Amitābha's assembly, even to the extent of their discussing the sūtras they have read (see above, Point 5). However, not all book-holding bodhisattvas on comparable steles are engaged in conversation.¹¹⁹ Further, many bodhisattvas on lotus pond steles hold lotus flowers, some of them as if poised to make offerings of them.

The isolated bodhisattvas in the upper area of lotus pond steles represent the activities of meditation, reflection and teaching, which occur on other stele types as well. Of these the meditating bodhisattvas are the least frequent. On lotus pond steles isolated meditating bodhisattvas occur not far from the main Buddha's head, while others may be represented at the edge of the assembly facing in. On some steles, both of the lotus pond type (Stele no. 7) and of the palace type (Stele no. 11), meditating bodhisattvas

¹¹⁷ By this reading—admittedly speculative—the bodhisattva is looking upwards at the emanation scene, rather than towards the central Buddha, to indicate his response to the miracle of light sent out of the domain by the Buddha in a meditative state (in the same way that the *nirmāṇa* forms are sent out).

¹¹⁸ This feature is obscured somewhat by the damage to the stele, but the intact books are still visible in the historical photographs (see above). Books certainly were represented on other steles of this type as well, but have broken off in most cases. E.g. on Stele no. 2 the outer bodhisattvas in the second row from the bottom may have held books, and on Stele no. 3 book-holding bodhisattvas may have been in the bottom corners.

¹¹⁹ In our view it is the concomitance of holding a book and being in conversation which is significant here. However, in the Musée Guimet fragment of a lotus pond-type stele from Mardan the book-holding bodhisattva appears not to be relating to any other figure.

emanate different high beings, Buddhas as well as Hindu gods. In this occupation they almost equal a Buddha and in the steles they are represented at the same level as the emanating Buddha.¹²⁰

Teaching bodhisattvas equally presuppose an exalted notion of a bodhisattva's activity. While it can be assumed that the first bodhisattva depicted teaching was the future Buddha Maitreya, this imagery only developed at a stage of Gandhāran art that is practically contemporary with the complex steles. In the steles, the teaching bodhisattvas are rather types than distinctive individuals, as nicely demonstrated by the Muhammad Nari stele, which has a teaching bodhisattva of both the brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya types. Each is enthroned within his own pavilion and attended by a pair of bodhisattvas. This might be interpreted as a kind of "flash-forward" representation of the future teaching careers of Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, who, as we have seen, play a slightly larger part in the ER of the LSukh (see above, Point 4), and these two may also be intended by the matched pair of bodhisattvas flanking the Buddha.¹²¹ That the teaching bodhisattvas are much smaller than the majority of the figures and located to the sides may indicate that they are "out-of-frame" elements of the composition, although the sculptor has still taken care to set them upon lotuses, to indicate that they belong to this realm or level of reality too.

Pensive bodhisattvas are clearly most frequent on complex steles. They occur not only alone in single-celled pavilions near the top of the composition, but also among the larger crowd on the lotus pond steles. These two variants of pensive bodhisattvas may actually have different meanings.¹²² While the bodhisattva in the crowd is clearly in a mood of reflection, those in separate pavilions may be conveying an entirely different mood when interpreted in the light of the description of Sukhāvātī in the ER of the LSukh. The two bodhisattvas sitting within pavilions in the top register of the Muhammad Nari stele, in the "pensive pose" but holding offerings in the hand not placed against the cheek, may conceivably be interpreted as representations of the doubters of classes 2 and 3, temporarily confined in an otherworldly form of house arrest (see above, Point 6). Certainly their placement is suggestive, both if we interpret the top as the most distant from the conceptual centre, and if we observe their proximity to the images of the Buddha emanating *nirmāṇas* of himself (to those of class 2, who have fulfilled less stringent requirements?). Equally suggestive is the fact that of all the figures in the stele they are the most conspicuously self-absorbed and isolated. We might therefore read the pensive pose in this context as indicating dejection rather than deep thought: these bodhisattvas have offerings, but immured in their palaces remote from the centre where the action is taking place, they cannot yet present them to the Buddha.¹²³

¹²⁰ It is an interesting but puzzling fact that in Gandhāran depictions Buddhas only emanate Buddhas but bodhisattvas always emanate a variety of high beings including one Buddha and a number of Hindu gods.

¹²¹ Cf. Huntington (1980: 666–667), who is forced to conclude that the stele "does not belong to a tradition of Sukhāvātī in which the two Bodhisattvas were emphasized."

¹²² Much hinges on how we read the so-called "pensive pose" itself. Does it show deep reflection or dejection? On this subject see, e.g., Miyaji (1985a), Quagliotti (1996b).

¹²³ Cf. Huntington (1980: 663) for a different reading. The ER of the LSukh is quite clear that everybody in Sukhāvātī is reborn in a lotus, including those sentenced to a term of solitary confinement.

Other types of figures in the steles are engaged in acts of devotion. Women on balconies (palace type only) and figures flanking the lotus stem throw flowers at the Buddha or hold offerings ready to present. On lotus pond steles in front of the water, and thus certainly meant as outside the picture proper, devotees are attending to incense burners and additional nāgas are engaged in adoration.

Women generally occur in peripheral, marginalized positions only. On lotus pond-type steles they occur among the couples to the sides of the lotuses. These figures are invariably without haloes and thus can be read as actually outside the domain represented on the stele or just about to be reborn into it. The only exception to this is Stele no. 2, where a haloed city goddess is depicted among the gods flanking the main Buddha. On palace-type steles, women also populate the balconies within the stele, a position traditionally occupied by them. There, too, the women are represented without halos and thus do not have the same status as the other exalted beings represented.

Across all three types we notice a pattern: where the stele is divided into two or more separate panels, female donors tend to be confined to the lowest panel, although there are exceptions. Where, however, the stele is single-panel, these women have to be accommodated near the bottom of it.

Here too we might well reason that the sculptors of the lotus pond-type steles have tried as best they could to remain true to the idea of Sukhāvatī as a paradigmatically all-male domain. Once we rise from the base, we find there are no women in the main assembly: all the bodhisattvas are male, and even the tree beings and the putti are male (cf. Point 1 above). Indeed, except for the putti and their wings, all these beings look similar, exactly as promised in the LSukh, which asserts that everybody in Sukhāvatī looks the same, and that there is no distinction, except in name, between gods and human beings. In the ER this absence of distinction is explicitly affirmed between *śrāvakas* (whom one might normally expect to be depicted as monks) and bodhisattvas.

If, then, we had a mind to follow Huntington, Fussman and Quagliotti in seeing the Muhammad Nari stele (and others like it) as a depiction of Sukhāvatī, then we could say that there is an even better fit between it and the ER of the text. But what of other possibilities? What of Schopen's contention that "[t]here is, in fact, probably more "evidence" to suggest that it [the stele] represents Abhirati than there is to suggest that it represents Sukhāvatī. But in truth it probably represents neither."¹²⁴ Here, as we have already suggested, we need to pay closer attention to the descriptions of Abhirati in the *Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha* and elsewhere, reviewed above, and ask ourselves whether any of the features most typical of that Buddha-field appear: the women, the triple staircase, the congregation of *śrāvakas*, the Bodhi tree with its *vedikā*. They are indeed conspicuous by their absence. There is a tree in the stele, but it does not look like a Bodhi tree.

It is thus arguably not the case that there is more evidence to suggest that the Muhammad Nari stele depicts Abhirati, and so Schopen's first claim must be rejected.¹²⁵ As to his second assertion ("But in truth it probably represents neither"), the question then arises, if neither, then what else? If no other

¹²⁴ See Schopen (1987: 117, n. 50/2005: 262, n. 50).

¹²⁵ He makes much of the presence of the two female figures at the base of the stele, but, as we have indicated previously, this question has been adequately addressed by both Huntington and Fussman, who both argue that they stand outside the main frame of the composition.

specific Buddha-field has been proposed as a candidate, one is left with the hypothesis of a “generic Buddha-field,” whatever that may mean. However, as Schopen’s own work has demonstrated (Schopen 1977), both Sukhāvātī and Abhirati came to be paradigmatic Buddha-fields, the former paradigmatically all-male and flat, the latter with women and the more conventional topography.¹²⁶ This would mean not only that any field **like** Sukhāvātī or **like** Abhirati would be indistinguishable from them, unless explicitly labelled—the textual descriptions would be the same, so too, presumably, the artistic representations—but that the notion of a generic Buddha-field is in effect unsustainable: we could only have a generic Sukhāvātī-style Buddha-field and a generic Abhirati-style Buddha-field. And it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Sukhāvātī-style Buddha-field would look very like our lotus pond type. It may not follow, however, that the palace type is a depiction of Abhirati, but that is something requiring further consideration.

7. Conclusion

It is plain enough that we are far from fully understanding this aspect of Gandhāran sculpture, but we hope that by taking a more comprehensive approach to the complex steles, some things are clearer than before. Although our focal point has been the Muhammad Nari stele, by isolating the lotus pond type we have tried to sharpen our perception of its contents, which, when set against those of the palace type, stand out more clearly. Moving beyond a concern with a specific text-image relationship, to say nothing of distinguishing particular characters on the basis of their attributes, we have to ask what a depiction of a Buddha enthroned on a lotus surrounded by a host of male bodhisattvas, also on lotuses, might be, if not firstly, a reflection of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and secondly, a depiction of Amitābha in Sukhāvātī, the paradigmatic all-male environment, the ideal world for hearing the Dharma and making offerings to the Buddha? To counter that this is an epiphany of Śākyamuni, or the “Miracle of Great Light,” whether based on the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* or any other Mahāyāna sūtra, is of course to accept that we have here a product of the Mahāyāna, but beyond that is not particularly convincing. If we take the epiphany to imply a vision of the Buddha about to preach the *Lotus*, for example, then where are the other members of the audience, especially the *śrāvakas*, who always appear as *bhikṣus*? With the exception of the solitary monk in the revelation scene, *bhikṣus* are singularly absent from all our steles, except occasionally in donor position, to say nothing of *bhikṣuṇīs*. If we go on to examine the descriptions of the wonders the Buddha performs at the beginning of many Mahāyāna sūtras, we will find that they do not after all tally very well with what the Muhammad Nari stele shows us either.¹²⁷ To postulate, on the other hand, that the stele portrays a generic Buddha-field does not take us very far either, since we have already seen that it has too many specific features suggestive of Sukhāvātī, and at the same time it lacks one of the defining features of Abhirati, which is women in their quarters, something we see in the very centre of the palace-type steles, which in this respect contrast very sharply with the lotus pond type, and indicate a deliberate avoidance of this feature by the artists who produced

¹²⁶ A telling illustration of the paradigmatic function of Abhirati recently surfaced in the fragments of a Mahāyāna sūtra in the Gāndhārī language and Kharoṣṭhī script from Bajaur currently being worked on by Ingo Strauch. See, e.g., Strauch (2010).

¹²⁷ Conspicuously absent are the myriad Buddhas of the cosmos seated on lotuses and teaching the Dharma (as in the case of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*). One might also ask why, if this is an epiphany or a miracle, are so many figures in the composition paying no attention.

the lotus ponds. In addition, it is only the palace type that is associated with different scenes of the life of the Buddha, thus possibly indicating that the represented domain is somehow more closely connected with this world than the lotus type. However, we do not on that basis draw the conclusion that the palace type is Abhirati, since apart from the presence of women the steles lack the specific details which might support this.

Similar considerations apply to the triads, which we have suggested are simpler versions, and the earliest of them possible predecessors, of the complex steles. Here again one's presuppositions tend to determine the outcome. If we read the Buddha as Śākyamuni, and the flask-bearing brāhmaṇa-type bodhisattva to one side as Maitreya, then the kṣatriya-type bodhisattva on the other side may be identified as Siddhārtha, at least if he shows *abhaya mudrā* with the right hand and has his left hand on his hip, and we come out with a linear schema of past-present-future to explain what all three are doing together. But even in a very optimistic assessment, only a small minority of the triads could be interpreted that way,¹²⁸ and there is considerable variation in them, especially with the kṣatriya-type bodhisattva. If this bodhisattva has a garland or a blossom, he tends to be read as Avalokiteśvara, which makes the composition difficult to explain in terms of the interrelationship of the represented individuals.¹²⁹ We therefore presume that even though the bodhisattva representations in the triads are of fairly consistent iconographic types that do suggest individual identities,¹³⁰ triadic compositions have to be interpreted in ways that do not solely depend on the individual identification of the bodhisattvas but also consider their more general meaning as representatives of the two bodhisattva types. Given the importance of succession and the continuity of Buddhist teaching permeating the literature (for example the ER analysed above) and art (such as the representation of successive Buddhas and the Seven Buddhas of the Past and Maitreya) of the first centuries of our era, it is likely that the flanking bodhisattvas have to be interpreted in this way as well. Maitreya's presence certainly stands for the continuation of Buddhism in our world, and the Buddha following him would be of the kṣatriya class as well. If the bodhisattva types are reversed—and assuming that the wreath- or lotus-holder is indeed to be interpreted as Avalokiteśvara—we have the succession scenario of a world like Amitābha's Sukhāvatī, where the kṣatriya-type bodhisattva is the immediate successor and the brāhmaṇa type follows. This would conform to the succession scenario described in the ER. If this interpretation is right there is no reason why a triad should not represent Amitābha with Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, or indeed some other Buddha with his lieutenants, the bodhisattvas being merely depicted in accordance with artistic convention as being of the two types, reflective of the two highest classes in Indian society, which together constitute, one supposes, the most suitable pool for future Buddhas. Especially when all three are mounted on lotuses, why should this not indicate another order of reality, or a different level of Buddhahood?¹³¹

¹²⁸ Among the 47 examples Miyaji (2008) analysed only two clearly represent the Siddhārtha type.

¹²⁹ For an example of this way of reading such triads, leading to the conclusion that, given the presence of Maitreya, the Buddha must be Śākyamuni, and is "hardly identifiable as Amitābha," see Rhi (2003: 166–167).

¹³⁰ In his 2006 article, Rhi clearly stakes out his position (p. 151, n. 5): "Unlike Buddha images, representations of bodhisattvas carried clearly readable iconographic signs that revealed their identity."

¹³¹ We set aside here the issue of whether Buddhists during the period these works were made and used may in their ritual practice have been rather more relaxed and loose about the identity of their images than we tend to be, and may not have cared

Thus, in our interpretation, not every flask-bearer in a subordinate position is necessarily Maitreya, but his depiction carries the significance of Maitreya as the future Buddha of the brāhmaṇa caste. Similarly, not every bodhisattva with a book necessarily represents Mañjuśrī, and not every one with a lotus needs to be Avalokiteśvara, but their iconography carries some of the meanings for which these bodhisattvas stand.

Looking at the problem from another angle, any Gandhāran sculptor faced with the challenge of representing Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta as the chief attendants of Amitābha would have had little option but to cast them in familiar terms and in accordance with the succession conventions. In addition, the kṣatriya-type bodhisattva needed to be distinguished from the all too familiar image of Siddhārtha, and thus received an attribute, the wreath, held in a way very similar to Maitreya's flask. In this scenario the wreath can be explained as a symbol of succession and the new image carries the significance of the future Buddha from the kṣatriya class. Its replacement by the lotus and the depiction of the Buddha in the turban are to be seen as further developments.¹³² This suggests that it is not the bodhisattvas' individual characteristics alone which are decisive in identifying Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta when they flank the Buddha in Sukhāvatī, but it is their combination and the composition of the triad that suggest one identification or another.

Here we turn back to the Mahāyāna sūtras first translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa, which Rhi (2003: 167–170) first adduces primarily as evidence for the practice of making Buddha images seated on lotuses, specifically the *Sumatidārikāparipṛcchā* and the *Vimaladattāparipṛcchā*. There are some minor difficulties with the interpretation of the Chinese versions, which we will not go into here,¹³³ but the Tibetan translations of both texts make it clear that the significance of these passages goes beyond the making of such images to include also their purpose, which is miraculous rebirth on a lotus in front of the Buddhas (plural!). E.g. the Derge version of the *Sumatidārikāparipṛcchā* (dKon brtsegs Ca 217a6–b1) reads:

bu mo byang chub sems dpa' chos bzhi dang ldan na | sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das nmams
kyi thad du rin po che chen po'i padma las rdzus te skye bar 'gyur te | bzhi gang zhe na
| 'di lta ste | phye ma 'am | me tog ud pa la 'am | padma 'am | ku mu da 'am | padma dkar
pos lag pa bkang ste | de bzhin gshegs pa'i sku gzugs sam | de bzhin gshegs pa'i mchod
rten la 'bul ba dang | gzhan dag la yang gnod sems mi skyed pa dang | de bzhin gshegs pa'i
sku gzugs padma'i gdan la bzhugs pa byed du 'jug pa dang | sangs rgyas kyi byang chub la
nges pa rgya cher mos pa ste | bu mo byang chub sems dpa' chos bzhi po de dag dang ldan
na sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das nmams kyi thad du rin po che chen po'i padma las rdzus te
skye bar 'gyur ro ||

particularly whether the Buddha they saw in front of them was Amitābha or Akṣobhya or Śākyamuni. This issue is also touched on in several places by Rhi (2003: 163–164; 2008: 259).

¹³² The explanation scenario outlined here will be further developed in an expanded version of this study. Interestingly Avalokiteśvara eventually assimilates the iconography of Maitreya entirely and becomes an ascetic type holding a flask as well. The description of the two bodhisattvas in the *Guan jing* has Avalokiteśvara wearing a crown (i.e., a turban?) with an image of Amitābha on it, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta with a vase in his headdress, possibly reflecting the ubiquity of these two types as a matching pair.

¹³³ Except to point out that the translation quoted in n. 49 is not by Harrison, as indicated by Rhi.

With four things, young lady, a bodhisattva is reborn miraculously from a great jewel lotus in the presence of the Buddhas and Blessed Ones. What are the four? They are filling one's hands with powder or blue lilies (*utpala*) or lotuses (*padma*) or night lilies (*kumuda*) or white lotuses (*punḍarīka*) and offering them to the image of a Realized One (*tathāgata*) or to the stūpa of a Realized One; having no malice towards others; commissioning an image of a Realized One seated on a lotus throne; being firmly convinced about the awakening of the Buddha. With those four things, young lady, a bodhisattva is reborn miraculously from a great jewel lotus in the presence of the Buddhas and Blessed Ones.¹³⁴

In our view the full significance of these passages is that they indicate a strong link between the practice of making Buddha images on lotus thrones and the aspiration to be reborn on a lotus oneself, in front of another Buddha, in another Buddha-field.¹³⁵ Even though there is no mention in these texts of Amitābha, the implication presumably is that he could be one of the Buddhas intended, and that the intended rebirth is in a domain of the Sukhāvātī type.¹³⁶ This kind of passage could well have encouraged the making of the lotus triads and also the lotus pond steles, in some of which, as we have seen, the donors even had themselves depicted in the act of being miraculously reborn. It is also an interesting example of sympathetic magic, that the other ritual practice enjoined is the offering of various kinds of lotuses and similar flowers—or, as is clearer in the Chinese versions, grinding them up to make a powder which is then offered—to Buddha images and stūpas, so as to cause one's own birth-lotus to arise in the other world in the presence of Buddhas.¹³⁷

We submit, therefore, that the complex steles must represent visions of other worlds, in a universe characterized by the simultaneous presence of multiple Buddhas, or multiple bodhisattvas, or both. Accounting for the multiple bodhisattvas is not difficult, whether we go by the descriptions of the LSukh or not,¹³⁸ but interpreting the multiple Buddhas, especially in the palace-type steles, is less straightforward. Are they Buddhas from different realms, sending their emanations to the realm of the central Buddha or somehow opening up the space between their *buddhakṣetras* to enable communication, as happens often enough in Mahāyāna sūtras? Or are they secondary forms of the

¹³⁴ A verse follows, summarizing the content of the prose. The corresponding passage in the *Vimaladattāparipṛcchā* (Ca 255a2–7) differs in some respects, but is consistent on those aspects bearing on this study. The last line of the two following *gāthās* again makes it clear that rebirth is in the presence of Buddhas (plural), and not Śākyamuni: there is no question of rebirth “in front of me” (cf. Rhi 2003: 169, n. 49).

¹³⁵ See also the Tibetan text of the **Dārikāvimalaśraddhāparipṛcchā* (Derge dKon brtsegs Cha 100a5–b5) for a very similar passage. Rhi's reference (170) to the related passage from the *Bodhisambhāra(ka)* attributed to Nāgārjuna needs to be amplified. In fact only the verses are attributed to Nāgārjuna, and they simply advocate the construction of lotus-throne images of the Buddha (see Lindtner 1982: 241, v. 113); it is the otherwise unknown commentator Īśvara who points out that the purpose of doing this is to achieve rebirth as an *aupapāduka*, and to obtain the body of a Buddha (T 1660, 32:536c21–22).

¹³⁶ If one followed the text of the *Akṣobhyavyūha* to the letter, one would hardly do this to be reborn in Abhirati, since its inhabitants arrive by more conventional means, through the birth canal.

¹³⁷ As we have seen, the Tibetan translations of these passages make the plural clear, which goes some way towards resolving the question raised by Rhi (2003: 177–178, esp. n. 77).

¹³⁸ We must also recognise that we do not have access to all the texts that may have been circulating in Gandhāra at this time. The recent emergence of a hitherto unknown Mahāyāna sūtra from Bajaur (see above) shows how incomplete our record may be. This means we may not possess certain texts which would enable a more precise identification of our steles or interpretation of their contents.

central teaching Buddha, in meditation and other postures, doing his work in all directions? Do the palace-type steles represent one Buddha active in many ways in his one world, or many Buddhas active in many ways in their many worlds? At this stage we see no basis for solving these questions. However, what seems to be important about the complex steles, especially those of the palace type, is precisely their complexity: they may indeed be an attempt to represent the unrepresentable, a world with Buddhas and bodhisattvas in all directions. It is a fact not often commented upon that one of the most common words in Mahāyāna sūtras is the word “all” (chiefly Sanskrit *sarva*, but other words do similar service), and that these texts betray a pervasive concern for and interest in totality. It is perhaps this aspect of Mahāyāna that finds expression in the complex steles.¹³⁹ The palace type arranges all these Buddhas and bodhisattvas to impressive effect, each in his own architecturally defined space, whereas the lotus type, being more clearly devoted to a single Buddha, disposes its bodhisattvas more freely around him in the same space. Perhaps this feature, more than anything else, suggests that the palace-type steles are images of a cosmos which extends beyond a single Buddha-field.

We end this paper by admitting that a certain and unequivocal text-image linkage cannot be established between the Muhammad Nari stele and the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūha*—i.e. this is hardly something which could ever be **proved**—but that it is nevertheless highly likely that it is (and steles like it are) a depiction of Amitābha in Sukhāvātī, flanked by Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. It is therefore also likely to be connected in some way with the forerunners to East Asian images of Sukhāvātī, as we see for example in Cave 332 at Dunhuang,¹⁴⁰ and as Minamoto argued as far back as 1926. We also find compelling an explanation of other complex steles, especially those of the palace type, in terms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and must therefore conclude that the assertion that there is little or no archaeological evidence for the presence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India before the 5th and 6th centuries is no longer tenable, if it ever was. This view has already been undermined by recent manuscript discoveries from Pakistan and Afghanistan, and should now be modified, if not abandoned altogether. Indeed, the type of Buddhism which produced these impressive and sophisticated masterpieces can hardly have been marginal, still less non-existent.

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¹³⁹ We find a similar impulse in the depictions of the thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa, although the relation of this iconographical practice (as indeed of the *Bhadrakalpikasūtra*) to Mahāyāna Buddhism is not so clear.

¹⁴⁰ For an image see, e.g., Rhi (2008: 257, fig 4). Rhi (ibid., p. 255) points out the similarities, but expresses reservations about their significance.

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