

# THE BEGINNINGS OF BUDDHIST ART

A. FOUCHER



# **The Beginnings of Buddhist Art**

by

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## Preface

The following essay, which is now in the public domain, is drawn from the book: *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art and other essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archeology* by A. Foucher. It is the first in the book, and one of the most important as Foucher herein discusses the important aniconic phase of Buddhist art, giving a reasonable thesis for its production and development.

The rest of the book has been scanned and corrected by my good friend and sometime secretary, Ng Ah Soon, but I am unable to present it here as there are constant references to plates that I cannot reproduce. However this essay does not have more than one reference to a Plate in the book and can therefore easily stand by itself. I have added illustrations to the essay with some files from Wikimedia.

Ānandajoti Bhikkhu  
November 2010

## The Beginnings of Buddhist Art

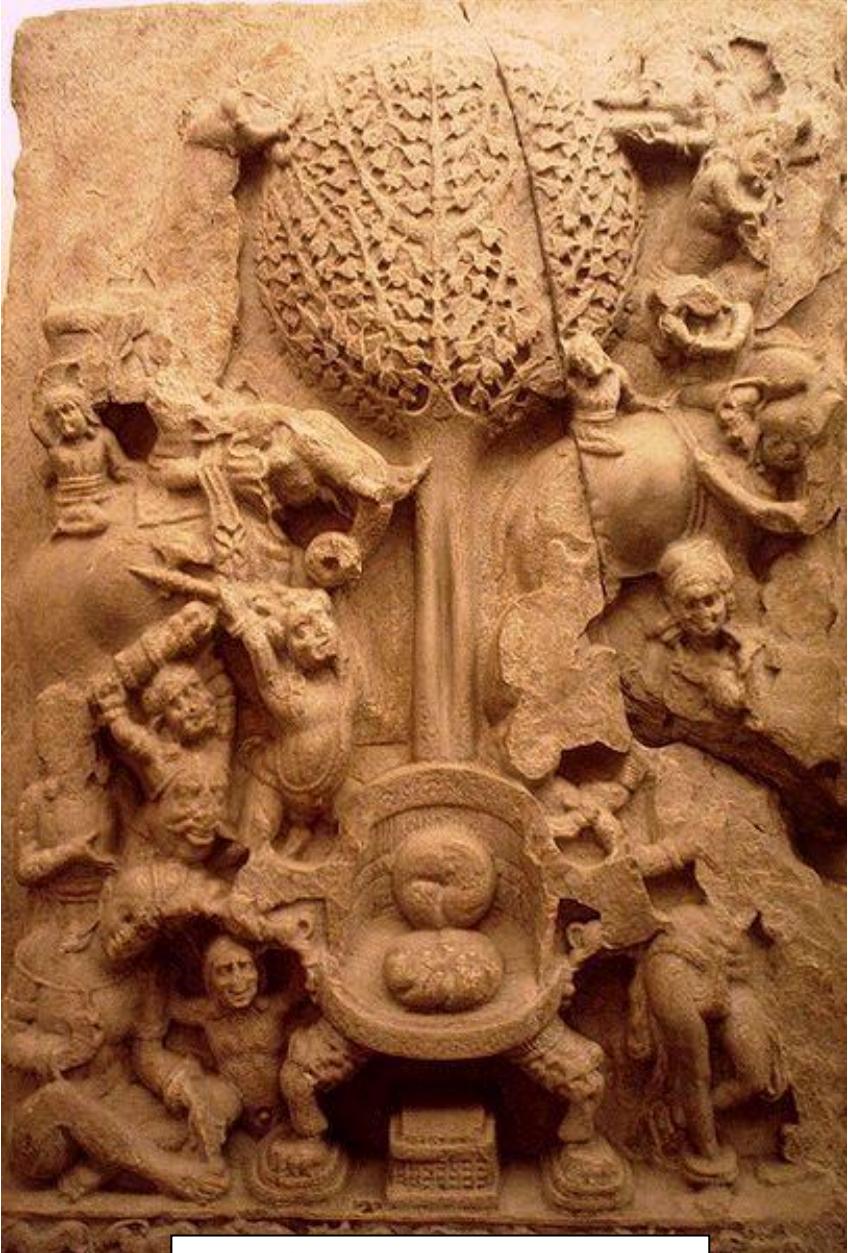
Buddhism is a historical fact; only it has not yet been completely incorporated into history: sooner or later that will be achieved. Meanwhile its initial period remains, we must confess, passably obscure. To add to our difficulty, the little that we think we know of the social and political state of India in the times of its birth has been learned almost entirely through its medium: thus the frame is no better defined than the picture. But the task, arduous though it may be, is not impossible. The fifth century B.C. is not so remote a period that it must always elude archeological research; the interval between the death of Buddha and the first information transmitted to us concerning him is not so considerable that we cannot flatter ourselves with the idea of discerning across it the veritable physiognomy of the work, if not - in conformity with the pious, but too tardy wish of later generations - the "actual features" of the worker. This hope is still more confident, and the ambition less audacious, when it is a question of the beginnings of Buddhist art. The appearance of the latter is a relatively late phenomenon, since it presupposes not only the development of the community of monks, but also a certain organization of worship on the part of the laity.

If among the productions of this art the sculptures are almost the sole survivors, we have at least preserved to us, notably in the labelled bas-reliefs [2] of Barhut, documents of the very highest rank. Certainly the stones are by no means loquacious: but they atone for their silence by the unalterableness of a testimony which could not be suspected of rifacimento or interpolation. Thanks to their marvellous grain, they are to-day as they were when they left the hands of the image-makers (*rūpakāraka*) two thousand years ago; and upon this immutable foundation we can construct inferences more rigorous than upon the moving sand of the texts. In the ever restless and changing play of the doctrines we are never quite certain that the logical sequence of the ideas is exactly parallel to the historical succession of the facts. On the other side, the routine character of all manual technique will allow us to detect with certainty, in the still existing monuments, the material traces of the procedures which must have been usual earlier: inversely,

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and by a kind of proof backwards, the correctness of these postulates will be verified in that they alone will be found to render a satisfactory account of the often uncouth character of that which has been preserved to us. All these reasons seem to us to justify the task which we have undertaken. In the assault delivered from various quarters upon the origins of Buddhism we believe even that the attempt to go back to the very beginning of its art is, among all the methods of approach, that which has for the moment the most chances of success.

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*Māra's Assault (Amaravātī)*

## I

None, indeed, of the monuments known at the present time, building or sculpture, takes us further back than the Maurya dynasty. Does that mean that art was created entire [3] in India towards the year 250 before our era, by a decree of the Emperor Aśoka? Of course it would be absurd to believe this. From the Vedic times Indian civilization had at its disposal the services not only of the carpenter, the wheel-wright and the blacksmith, of the potter, the weaver and other fabricators of objects of prime necessity, but also of those whom we call art-workers, painters, goldsmiths, carvers in wood or ivory. If the texts were not there to tell us this in words, the evidence of the sole surviving monuments would be sufficient to establish it. Fergusson has proved once for all that the oldest constructions in stone, by the servile manner in which they copy the framing and joining of timber work, testify to the previous existence of wooden buildings. On the other hand - as we know from a reliable source by means of an explicit inscription - it was the ivory-workers of Vidiśa who carved, in the immediate vicinity of their town, one of the monumental gates of Sāñchī. Besides, it is obvious that the finished and well polished bas-reliefs, which for us are the first in date, represent not by any means the first attempts of beginners, but the work of sculptors long familiar with their business and changing their material, but not their technique. The whole transformation which was accomplished during the third century before our era is limited to the substitution, in religious and royal foundations, of the reign of stone for that of wood.

Unfortunately, there are no worse conditions, climatic and historical, for the preservation of monuments than those of India. All that was of wood was condemned beforehand to fall into dust; all, or nearly all, that was of stone and that the climate might have spared has been destroyed by the vandalism of man. Thus is explained why the most ancient remains of Buddhist art are at once so late and so rare. If we leave aside [4] the great monolithic pillars dear to Aśoka, as well as the caves excavated for the benefit of all the religious sects in every place where the geological formation of the rocks lent itself thereto, we find on the ground level, and

pending more systematic excavations, scarcely anything to mention, except the debris of the balustrades of Bodh-Gayā and of Barhut, and the four gates of Sāñchī. The mention of the kings Brahmamitra and Indramitra, inscribed on the first, on the second that of the dynasty of the Śuṅgas, and on one of the last that of the reign of Sātakaṇi suffice to date them generally, but with certainty, as belonging to the second, or first, century before our era. It is doubtless to the same epoch, if we may judge by the style, that we must refer the oldest fragments of the balustrades exhumed both at Amarāvātī and at Mathurā. If to these few stray remnants of sculptures we add the remains of the most archaic paintings of Ajaṅṭā, we shall very soon have finished compiling the catalogue of what may be styled - in opposition to the later school, of the north-west frontier, much more penetrated by foreign influences - the native school of Central India.

Let us go straight to the most striking feature of this old Buddhist school. Although well known to specialists, it will not fail to surprise uninformed readers. When we find the ancient stone-carvers of India in full activity, we observe that they are very industriously engaged in carrying out the strange undertaking of representing the life of Buddha without Buddha. We have here a fact which, improbable as it may seem, Cunningham long ago demonstrated. It is established on the written testimony of the artists themselves. Those of Barhut inform us by an inscription, that such and such a person on his knees before a throne “is rendering homage to the Blessed One”. Now, without [5] exception, the throne is vacant; at the most, there is a symbol indicating the invisible presence of Buddha.<sup>1</sup>

The latest researches have only opened our eyes to the extent of the field of application of this constant rule; it holds good for the years which preceded as also for those which followed the *Sambodhi*, for the youth as also for the old age of the Master. The facade of the middle lintel of the eastern gate of Sāñchī illustrates his departure on horseback from his house: the embroidered rug which serves as a saddle for his steed is empty. A medallion of Bodh-Gayā

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<sup>1</sup> A. Cunningham, *Stūpa of Barhut*, pl. XII-XVII.

represents his first meditation: empty again is the seat before which the traditional ploughman is driving his plough.<sup>2</sup> Some panels of Amarāvātī show us his birth and presentation to the sage Asita; only his footprints - a direct ideographic transcription of the formula which was in use in India to designate respectfully a “person” - mark the swaddling clothes on which in one place the gods, in another the old ṛṣi are reputed to have received him into their arms.<sup>3</sup> These selected examples suffice to demonstrate that the ancient Indian sculptors abstained absolutely from representing either Bodhisattva or Buddha in the course of his last earthy existence.<sup>4</sup> Such is the abnormal, but indisputable fact of which every history of Buddhist art will have at the outset to render account.

[6] As far as we know, no perfectly satisfactory explanation of this fact has until now been given. First of all we tried to dispose of the matter more or less by the supposition, as evasive as gratuitous, that the ancient school had either not desired or had not been able to figure the Blessed One; neither of these two reasons appears to us to have the least value in proof. Shall we speak of incapacity? Assuredly, one can see that the concrete realization of the image of the “perfect Buddha” was not an easy task: and the difficulty could not but increase with the years, in proportion as the time of the Master grew more distant and his features faded more and more into the mists of the past. Nevertheless, we must not form too poor an opinion of the talent of the old image-makers, and the argument becomes moreover quite worthless, when one attempts to apply it to the youth of Buddha. What was he, in fact, up to the time of his flight from his native town, but a “royal heir apparent”? Now the type of *rāja-kumāra*, or crown-prince, is common on the gates of

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<sup>2</sup> *Art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, fig. 177 and p. 345.

<sup>3</sup> See on the staircase of the British Museum, n<sup>os</sup> 44 and 48, or Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship* pl. XCI, 4, and LXI, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Let us add, in order to be quite correct, “at least under his human form”; for we know that a bas-relief at Barhut represents the Blessed One Descending into the bosom of his mother in the form of an elephant (cf. below, p. 20).

Sāñchī, as also on the balustrade of Barhut;<sup>5</sup> what material hindrance was there to their making use of it to represent the Bodhisattva? It is clear that they could have done so, and yet they carefully abstained from doing so. Shall we fall back, then, upon the other branch of the dilemma and say that they did not dare? Assuredly the gravest members of the order must long have held to the letter the stern saying that “the master gone, the law remains”;<sup>6</sup> and we are quite willing to believe that the law alone was of import for them. The reverend Nāgasena still teaches king Menander that henceforth the [7] Blessed One is no longer visible except in the form of the *dharmakāya*,<sup>7</sup> of the “body of the doctrine”; but of any express prohibition of images we have in the texts no knowledge. Since when, moreover, and in what country does popular devotion trouble itself about the dogmatic scruples of the doctors? Certainly it was not so in ancient India: for otherwise we could not at all understand the enthusiasm with which the valley of the Ganges and the rest of the peninsula welcomed the Indo-Greek type of Buddha. From Mathurā to Bodh-Gayā, and from Śrāvastī to Amarāvātī, we see it installed in triumph on the circumference of the *stūpas* as in the interior of the temples. So rapid a conquest is a sufficient proof that the objections of conscience, if any such existed, were far from being insurmountable.

But, it will be said, if it is true that the ancient Indian image-makers asked for nothing better than to represent the Blessed One, and that, on the other hand, they were capable of it, why then have they so carefully abstained? To this we see but one reply, in appearance, we must confess, simple-minded enough, but one which, in India, is still sufficient for all: “If they did not do it, it was because it was not the custom to do it”. And, no doubt, it would be easy to retort: “But you confine yourself to putting off the question; if it does not arise with regard to the sculptors whose works we possess, it still holds good entirely with regard to their predecessors.” - Certainly, and far

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<sup>5</sup> See Cunningham, *Stūpa of Barhut*, pl. XXV, 4, (*Mūgapakkha-jātaka*, n<sup>o</sup> 538: cf. infra, p. 56 and pl. V, 6) and p. VI (mention of the *Viśvantara-jātaka*); north gate of Sāñchī, lower lintel (*Viśvantara*), etc.

<sup>6</sup> *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, VI, I.

<sup>7</sup> *Milindapañha*, ed Trenckner, p.73; trans. Rhys Davids, P. 113.

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from contradicting, that is just the point at which we wished to arrive. We hold that this monstrous abstention, such as we observe on the monuments of Barhut and Sāñchī, remains perfectly incomprehensible, unless we [8] enquire into the traditional habits which it supposes and which, for that very reason, it is capable of revealing to us. Like certain anomalies in animal species, it can only be explained as an inheritance from a nearly obsolete past, which this survival helps us to reconstitute. In other words, it is vain for us to seek a solution of the problem in the few relatively late specimens at present known to us; it is to the anterior history, to what is still the prehistoric period of Buddhist art that we must go to discover it. To such a typical case of artistic teratology it is the evolutionist method of embryology that it is proper to apply.



*The Awakening (Bārhut)*

## II

To begin, we have the best reasons for thinking that the habit of adoring human images, and even the art of fabricating them, were still less general in the India of the Brahmans before Alexander than in the Gaul of the Druids before the time of Caesar. Certainly this absence of idolatry properly so-called did not in any way exclude the existence of more rudimentary forms of fetichism:<sup>8</sup> nevertheless, the fact remains that Buddhism did not develop, like Christianity, in a world long infected by the worship of images and prompt to contaminate it in its turn. Not [9] only did the first century already know symbolical or allegorical representations of Christ; but from the second century we meet with his portrait on the paintings of the catacombs.<sup>9</sup> When that of Buddha makes its appearance in India, the religion which he had founded was already four hundred years old: even so it had required the contact of the civilisation, and the influence of the art, of Hellenism. On the other hand, Buddhism was not born, like Islam, in an environment beforehand and deliberately hostile to idolatry. We do not find that the Vedic texts breathe a word about it, either for or against: and their silence is explained precisely by the fact that the idea of it had not even presented itself to the Indian mind. As soon as the time for it shall have come, the grammarians will not fail to mention in the employment of the learned language the mode of designating the new fact of the Brahmanic idols.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, when the question of

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<sup>8</sup> We allude to the golden *puruṣa* which formed a part of the altar of sacrifice (Śat.-Brahm., 7, 4, I., 15) and to the effigy *krtya* of the magic rites (Ath. Veda, X, I), etc. - For what is to be understood by the Gallic simulacra of Cesar (*Bell. Gall.*, VI, 4), see the article of M. S. Reinach on *L'art plastique en Gaule et le druidisme* (*Revue Celtique*, t. XIII, 1892, pp.190 sqq.), where are cited also corresponding testimonies of Herodotus (I, 131) and Tacitus (Germ., IX) as to the non-existence of idolatry among the Persians and the Germans.

<sup>9</sup> M. Besnier, *Les Catacombes de Rome*, Paris, 1909, pp.204, 208, 223-224.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Scholia to Pāṇini*, V,3,99, excellently discussed by Prof. Sten Konow in his interesting *Note on the use of images in ancient India* (Ind. Ant.,1909): but they have no value as proof for the pre-Mauryan epoch with which we are here concerned.

the images of the Master presents itself to the faithful Buddhists, their writings will supply explicitly the opportune solutions; and if these successive solutions are, moreover, contradictory, it is simply that in the interval the needs of the religious conscience have changed at the same time as the conditions of artistic production. But, as far as concerns the most ancient period with which we have to deal, investigations into the literature have remained from an iconographical point of view as sterile as the researches on the spot. For the moment the history of religious art in India, previous to Buddhism, is, [10] whether it must remain so or not, philologically a blank page, archeologically an empty show-case.

That in Buddhism, as in all religions, art is at first only a simple manifestation of worship, everyone will willingly admit. The only question is to know what branch of Buddhist worship has supplied this special excrescence with an opportunity for its production. It is evidently not in the periodical reunions of the monks that we shall find the smallest decorative pretext. The veneration shown to the mortal remains of the Blessed One explains the leading role of the funeral tumulus in Buddhist architecture. It will not escape us that it is still the same veneration which, thus advantaged, has offered in the obligatory surroundings of those reliquary monuments the natural support to the sculptures, the sole destination of which for a longtime was to decorate the balustrades of the *stūpas*. We might even suspect a mark of its influence in the almost entirely biographical character that this decoration has assumed, just as, by the rite of circumambulation, it has fixed the direction in which the scenes must succeed one another and be read. But, beyond this general orientation, we discover at the basis of this kind of devotion nothing that could have determined the mode of composition of the bas-reliefs. There remains the third and last ancient form of Buddhist worship, that which Buddha himself is supposed to have taught on his death bed to his well-loved disciple, "There are four places, O Ānanda, which an honorable worshipper should visit with religious emotion, What are these four?"...They are, as we know, those where the Predestined One for the first time received illumination and preached and those where for the last

time he was born and died.<sup>11</sup> Now [11] just in this devout practice of the four great pilgrimages resides any hope which we have of at last coming upon the long-sought point of departure. In order that we may grasp at once the germ and the directing principle of Buddhist art, it is necessary and sufficient to admit that the Indian pilgrims were pleased to bring back from these four holy places a small material souvenir of what they had there seen.

We can scarcely believe that the reader will refuse to grant us this small postulate. Can he be so ignorant of the outer world that he does not know the universal empire of the mania, innocent in itself, for souvenirs of travels? The innumerable manufacturers and shopkeepers who everywhere live by it would quickly demonstrate it to him. Has he never in the course of his migrations, whatever may have been the object or the cause of them, bought curios, collected photographs, or sent away picture post-cards? These are only the latest modes and a profane extension of an immemorial and sacred custom. If he doubts this, let him lean, for example, over one of the cases at the Cluny Museum<sup>12</sup> which contain the emblematic metal insignia of all the great pilgrimages of the Middle Ages, as they have been fished out of the Seine in Paris.

Mediaeval India has also left by hundreds evidences of this custom. Most frequently they are simple clay balls, moulded or stamped with a seal, and without doubt within the reach of all pockets, which served at the same time as *memento* and as *ex-voto*. They are to be picked up nowadays on all Buddhist sites, even [12] in the peninsula of Malacca and in Annam.<sup>13</sup> Do we compromise ourselves very much by conjecturing that these sacred emblems are in

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<sup>11</sup> *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, V, 16-22.

<sup>12</sup> Unless it is more convenient for him to try the same experiment at the British Museum, where a case in the Medieval Room also contains a collection of these *signacula*.

<sup>13</sup> For specimens from India, see Cunningham, *Mahābodhi* pl, XXIV; J. R. A. S., 1900, p. 432, etc.; from Burmah, *Archeol. Survey of India*, Annual Report, 1905-1906, pl. LIII; from Malacca, *Bull. de la commission Archeologique de l'Indo-Chine*, 1909, p.232; from Annam, B.E.F.E.O., 1901, p.25, etc.

Buddhism the remains of a tradition which goes back to the four great primitive pilgrimages? The worst that could result from it would be that Buddhist art must have owed its origin to the satisfaction of a need everywhere and always experienced, and, we may almost say, of one of the religious instincts of humanity. It would be difficult to imagine a theory more humble and more prosaic: it is in our opinion only the more probable for that, nor do we see what other we can substitute, if, at least, we are unwilling to attribute to that art any but a rational origin.

In fact, this point once gained, all the rest follows. Nothing is more easy than to guess what must have been the souvenirs brought back by the pilgrims from the four great holy places. To take the modern example most familiar to the French reader, what is represented by the images or medals offered for sale and bought at Lourdes? First and foremost, the miraculous grotto. What must have been represented on stuffs, on clay, wood, ivory, or metal by the first objects of piety manufactured at Kapilavastu, at Bodh-Gayā, at Benares, or at Kuśinagara? Evidently the characteristic point towards which, at the approach of each of these four towns, popular devotion was directed. Now we know these points already from the picturesque expressions of the texts. What was first visited at Kuśinagara was the site, very soon and quite appropriately marked by [13] a *stūpa*,<sup>14</sup> of the last death of the Master.

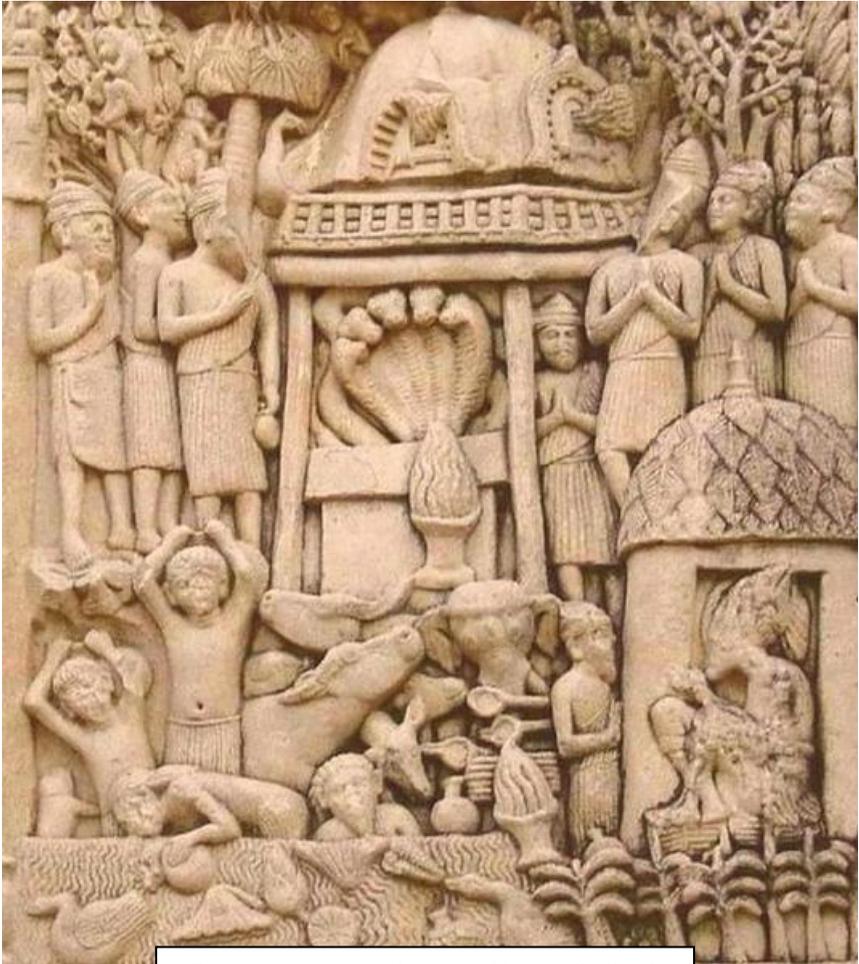
In the same way, the essential miracle of Benares having taken place at the “Mṛga-dava”, the Gazelle-park, it was inevitable that its consecrated description as “putting the wheel of the law in motion” should be translated in concrete terms by a wheel, usually accompanied by two gazelles. What was contemplated at Bodh-Gayā, on the other hand, was the evergreen fig-tree, at the foot of which the Blessed One had sat to attain omniscience. Finally, what would be worshipped at Kapilavastu? Here the answer is less certain: undoubtedly the great local attraction consisted in the recollection of the nativity of Buddha; but, without mentioning his paternal home, the most ardent zeal might hesitate between the

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<sup>14</sup> “A Stūpa of Aśoka”, says Hiuan-tsang; that is, of archaic form; cf. also Fa-hian (Beal, *Records*, I, p. LII, and II, p 32).

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place of his material birth and that of his spiritual renaissance, between the park of Lumbinī, where he issued from the right side of his mother, and the no less famous gate, through which he escaped from the miserable pleasures of the world. Whatever might in this case be the difficulty of choice, with regard to the three other sites at least no hesitation was possible. A tree, a wheel, *stūpa*, these suffice to recall to our memory the spectacle of those holy places, or even, by a constant association of ideas and images, to evoke the miracles of which they had been the theatre. Again, these things could be indicated as summarily as one could wish: if human weakness cannot dispense with the material sign, imagination makes up for the poverty of artistic means.



*Buddha overcoming the Nāga (Sāñchi)*

### III

[14] Such is the sole part which hypothesis plays in our theory. The whole subsequent development of Buddhist art flows logically from these premises; and henceforth there are none of the still surviving documents which do not successively corroborate the various stages of its evolution. The oldest monuments which have come down to us from Indian antiquity are a few rectangular coins of copper or silver. Now it is very remarkable that, among the symbols with which they are punch-marked, the tree, the wheel and the *stūpa* play a considerable, and indeed, on many of them, a predominant part.<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the chance of their discovery, the existence of the *signacula*, which we imagined to have been made for the use of pilgrims, ceases to be, for as far back as we can go, a pure conjecture. Better still, we can clearly discern in the infantile simplicity of these emblems the style of the most ancient manifestations of the religious art of the Buddhists. They are, properly speaking, less images than hieroglyphics endowed for the initiated with a conventional value: and, at the same time, we succeed in explaining to ourselves what we have already more than once had occasion to note, that is, the abstract and quasi algebraical character of this art at its commencement.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, we easily conceive that, in consequence of being conveyed beyond the great centres of pilgrimage, [15] artistic emblems of this sort may have seen their initial signification modified. They came, by degrees, to be regarded less as mementos of sacred spots than as figurative representations of miracles, the memory of which was connected with those places. In other words, in proportion as they were propagated further and further from their place of origin, their topographical and local character diminished more and more, to the advantage of their symbolical

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<sup>15</sup> To quote only the latest study, cf. D. B. Spooner, *A new find of punch-marked coins*, in *Arch. Survey of India, Annual Report 1905 - 1906*, 1909, p. 150. According to the excellent analysis which Dr. Spooner has given of this discovery, out of 61 coins 22 bear all three symbols at once and 22 others associate the two last together.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. for instance, *Art Gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, p. 608.

and universal value, until they ended by becoming the common patrimony of the image-makers and being fabricated everywhere without distinction where a Buddhist donor ordered them. It is just this state of diffusion and subsequent generalisation that is proved to us even in the IV<sup>th</sup> century by the banality and dispersion of the so-called “Buddhist” coins.

But we must hasten, in this rapid sketch, to come to the monuments whose Buddhist character can no longer be disputed. We know what impulse was towards the middle of the third century given by the imperial zeal of Aśoka to the religious foundations of the sect. It is, therefore, only the more curious to observe how, even a hundred years after him, the school of Central India continues to follow faithfully in the beaten track of the past. From this point of view, the four gates of Sāñchī, which we have had the good fortune to retain almost intact, may furnish a fairly safe criterion of the degree of persistence of the ancient usages.

Now Fergusson long ago remarked there the extreme frequency of what he called “the worship” of the tree, the *stūpa* and the wheel. According to statistics hardly open to suspicion, since they were drawn up in support of theories quite different from ours, the first emblem is repeated no less than 67 times, the second 32 times; and if the last does not reappear more than 6 times, this number suffices, nevertheless, [16] to assure it the third place in the order of importance of the subjects.<sup>17</sup> We have not, of course, to follow Fergusson in the strange anthropological speculations which he has engrafted on to these observations. All that we should be tempted at first to read in his table would be the preponderance of the miracle

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<sup>17</sup> Cf, Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent-Worship*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1873, pp. 105 and 242. Here is the table, in which he has included the data of the sole gate of one of the small neighbouring *stūpas*:

Tree, <i>Stūpa</i> ,	Wheel.			
Great <i>Stūpa</i> .	South Gate	16	5	1
	North Gate	19	8	2
	East Gate	17	9	1
	West Gate	15	10	2
Small <i>Stūpa</i> .	Only Gate	9	6	4

of the *Sambodhi*, or of the *Parinirvāṇa*, over that of the *Dharmacakra-pravartana*.

In reality the larger number of the first two symbols depends upon another cause. The artists proceeded to apply to the Buddhas of the past the formulas which had at first served for the Buddha of our age. People were pleased to level all the seven by representing them at one time by their funeral tumulus, at another, and much more frequently, by their empty throne under their Tree of Knowledge:<sup>18</sup> the wheel alone had remained the special apauage of our Śākya-muni, and consequently was repeated only at rarer intervals. But these are only subsidiary details; taking these figures all together, their imposing total testifies loudly enough to the constant repetition in traditional form of what we know, from the evidence of the coins, to have been the first attempts at Buddhist art.

Being forced to cover the relatively extensive surfaces placed at their disposal, the sculptors of [17] Sāñchī evidently commenced by re-editing profusely, right in the middle of the second century before our era, the summary and hieroglyphic compositions which they had inherited from their direct predecessors, the makers of religious objects in the fifth century.

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<sup>18</sup> The decisive reason for the predominance of the inspired compositions of the type of Sambodhi over all the others will be given a little further on, p. 19.



*Preaching to King Pasenadi (Bārhut)*

## IV

This is a first and certainly very important, but purely material, verification of our hypothesis. There are proofs more subtle than the proof of statistics, which open up deeper views of the development of the ancient Buddhist school. The years have passed, technical skill has increased, the iconographic types of gods and genii have been formed, the gift of observation and a sense of the picturesque have awakened in it: but it remains nevertheless, as regards the capital point of the figuration of Buddha, the docile captive of custom. Around the old themes of the studios, it embroiders, it is true, some variations: it embellishes the *stūpas*, surrounds the wheels with wreaths, or, careless of the anachronism, gives beforehand to the tree of the *Sambodhi* the curious stone surround which, more than two and a half centuries after the miracle, it owed to the piety of Aśoka; but for all that it does not go beyond the ancient formulas. Weary of eternally repeating the sacred miracles, does it risk treating some still unpublished episode? The idea of taking advantage of this, in order to break free from routine, never occurs to it. It cannot but know that its business is no longer to supply pilgrims with a memento of what they had seen with their own eyes in the course of their visits to the sacred places; [18] it is fully conscious that what it has now to do is to illustrate on a permanent monument the biography of Buddha; but it appeals hardly to grasp clearly the fact that for this new purpose the old procedures, formerly perfectly appropriate to their object, are no longer suitable. Evidently, it was too late to rebel and to shake off the yoke of an artistic tradition which had erelong been strengthened by religious legends; at least it is about this same time that the texts, until then silent on the question, suddenly decide to proclaim - with an excessive precipitation to be contradicted soon after by posterity - the previous incapacity of the artists to portray during his lifetime the ineffable lineaments of the Blessed One.<sup>19</sup> And how otherwise, in fact, explain the persistent absence of his image, whilst so many of the popular divinities were paraded on the pillars of Barhut and Sāñchī?

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<sup>19</sup> *Divyāvadāna*, p. 547

Henceforward there is only one way, in conformity with the living reality, of conceiving the study of the ancient Indian school. Its history is that of a struggle, more or less surreptitious, between the two tendencies which divided it against itself, an irrepressible desire for new scenes and a superstitious respect for its precedents. On the one hand, it experiences a growing need for the form of Buddha to serve as a centre or pivot for the scenes of his Life; and on the other hand, it accepts as an axiom that, in order to represent the Blessed One, it suffices to do what until then had always been done, that is, to evoke him by the sight of one of his three speaking emblems. Watch it at work. The tumulus of the *Parinirvāṇa*, the ultimate end of the career of the Master, was *ipso facto* beside the point, when it was a question of representing some incident in that career. The [19] symbol of the wheel, specialized in the representation of the “First Preaching”, could scarcely be employed again, except on the occasion of the similar miracle wrought at Śrāvastī for the greater confusion of the rival sects. There remained for ordinary employment in miracles of the second rank the heraldic emblem already utilized for the *Sambodhi*. And, in fact, we can well see how the studios of Central India resign themselves once for all to this procedure and accommodate themselves more or less successfully thereto.

All the same, they cannot resist slipping in here and there a few variants, or even trying on occasions some different course. It is under an empty throne, surmounted by a tree, that at Barhut Buddha receives the visit of the nāga Elāpatra; when he preaches in the heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, the motif is in addition graced with a parasol; and this latter, in its turn, takes the place of the tree on the occasion of the visit of Indra or Ajāta-Śatru. At times the throne by itself does the work. In two cases, on the eastern gate of Sāñchī, the school even ventures so far as to avail itself solely of the “promenade”, or *caṅkrama*, of the Master in order to suggest his presence.<sup>20</sup>

But the boldness of its innovations goes no further, and we very quickly reach the limits of its audacity. We have indeed sketched

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cunningham, *Stūpa of Barhut*, pl. XIV, 3; XVII, I; XXVIII, 4 etc.

them above (pp. 4-5), and it would have been superfluous to return to the matter, did we not now believe that we have divined the *raison d'être*, and actually the manner of production, of the strange anomalies which at the beginning of this study we had to confine ourselves to stating.

We have, likewise, explained above how - and now we [20] understand why - the artists came into collision with the impassable barrier of ancient usages, when they had to represent the form of the Predestined One in the course of the first twenty-nine years of his life, at the time when his princely surroundings still hid under a mundane cloak the Buddha about to appear. In truth, we were not able as yet (p. 13) to determine exactly, by the aid of the texts, which episode of his youth the faithful had chosen as the principal object of commemoration, nor in what manner the old image-makers must have set to work to commemorate it.

It is curious to note that the sculptors of the second century shared our perplexities in this regard. Those of Barhut adopted the precise moment when the Bodhisattva descended into the bosom of his mother, when, at least, the latter dreamed that he descended there in the form of a little elephant.<sup>21</sup> Those of Sāñchī do not represent the Conception, save incidentally; on the other hand, they complacently detail all the circumstances of the prince's entry into religion, that is, of his flight on horseback from his native town: they portray the gate of the town and several times the horse, the groom and the Gods: they leave to be understood only the hero of this Hegira. As to those of Amarāvātī, on the stele; where they have set one above another the four grand miracles, they employ indifferently, in order to fill the panel reserved for Kapilavastu, - side by side with the tree of Bodh-Gayā, the wheel of Benares and the *stūpa* of Kuśinagara - now the same "great abandonment of home", where we see nothing but the horse passing under the gateway, now a "nativity", [21] where we see only the mother, to the exclusion of the new-born child.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cunningham, *Stūpa of Barhut*, pl. XXVIII, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent-Worship*, pl. XCH-XXVIII. With regard to this we may note that much later stele of Benares continue to group in

Which of these three compositions is the most archaic and best preserves for us the aspect of the “souvenirs” which the pilgrims of the fifth century were already able to purchase at Kapilavastu? This is a question which we at present find very difficult to answer. If, again, on this point we confide ourselves to the numismatic documents, they will persuade us that from the beginning a certain wavering manifested itself in the choice of the artists and the faithful. Most of the Buddhist coins devote two abbreviations, instead of one, to the Nativity alone; at least, of the five usually associated symbols, the lotus, the bull, the tree, the wheel and the tumulus, the two first must correspond simultaneously to the first of the four great miracles. Apparently, the lotus recalled those which had sprung up spontaneously under the seven first steps of the Master, whilst the bull, almost always flanked by his zodiacal emblem, incarnated the traditional date of the birth, the day of the full moon of the month Vaiśākha. On other occasions, but more rarely, the bull is replaced by an elephant, a plastic reminder of the Conception.<sup>23</sup> It may be [22] also, although we possess no concrete proof of this, that the gate through which the Bodhisattva had been cast by his vocation out of the world may, at an early date, have found copiers and amateurs. But these are merely accessory questions: what is important here is that only the traditional avoidance of images, inherited from the humble pioneers of former

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the scheme of Kapilavastu the birth (with or without the conception, the seven steps, or the bath) and the great departure (see pl. IV, 3A and cf. *Anc. Mon. Ind.*, pl. 67-68, etc.).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the tables of D. B. Spooner, loc. cit., pp. 156-157. As for the above mentioned interpretations of the lotus and the bull, we, for our part, give them as simple conjectures. In any case, we may at this point observe that in later Buddhism the lotus has retained the symbolical significant of “miraculous birth”, and that the bull appears again with its astronomical value on one of the best-known bas-reliefs of the Lahore Museum (cf. A Grunwedel, *Buddhistische Kunst in Indien*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed., p. 121, or *Buddhist Art in India*, p. 129). The lamented Dr. Th. Bloch in one of his last articles (*Z. D. M. G.* 1908, vol. LXII, pp. 648 and sqq.) thought he recognized in a defective photograph of this bull with the hanging tongue the image of a wild boar, and he built up a whole theory on this mistake: it suffices to refer the reader anxious to clear up this matter with his own eyes to Burgess, *Anc. Mon. Ind.*, p. 127.

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days, can give us the key to the later improbable compositions, child-births without children, rides without riders.



*Buddha Meditating (Gandhāra)*

V

This is not all. The sculptors of the second century verify our hypothesis not only in what they reproduce and in what they imitate of the works of the past: we may maintain that they do this, also, indirectly, in what they innovate. However unreflecting and mechanical their submission to custom may have been, the forced absence of the protagonist from the scenes of his own biography could not help but inconvenience them considerably. Let the career of the Blessed One be no more than a monotonous tissue of conversations more full of edification than movement; yet only a small number of episodes allowed of being portrayed independently of the principal personage. With the aid of what subjects were the artists to cover the numerous medallions, the long stretches, or the high gates of the *Stūpa* balustrades?

The first expedient of which they [23] bethought themselves was to turn to the previous existences of the Master, at the time when under all animal forms, and later under all social conditions, he was qualifying by means of perfections for the final attainment of the Bodhi. Thereby we explain why the sculptors of Barhut preferred to dip into this treasure of tales and fables. In treating this new matter they were no longer trammelled, as when illustrating the last life of the Master, by a custom which had been elevated into a law. Accordingly they have no scruples in representing the Bodhisattva in each scene, and it is with a perfect liberty of mind that, at the time of his penultimate terrestrial existence, they give to Viśvantara the features which they so jealously abstained from lending to Siddhārtha (cf. above, p. 6). Representations of Jātakas are far from being unknown at Sāñchī: but the decorators of the gates had recourse once again to another stratagem in order to slip between the links of tradition.

It goes without saying that in all the scenes posterior to the *Parinirvāṇa* the absence of the figure of the Blessed One became perfectly justified and at the same time ceased to be an inconvenience to the artist. Thus, they soon took pleasure in cultivating this part of the Buddhist legend. According to all probability they began by illustrating the famous “war of relics”,

which the death of the Blessed One nearly precipitated. Encouraged, apparently, by this trial, they did not fear to attack even the cycle of Aśoka, and to represent at one time his useless pilgrimage to the *stūpa* at Rāmagrāma, and at another his solemn visit to the tree of the *Sambodhi*. Thus, under the pressing incentive of necessity, the native school, incapable of openly shaking [24] off its slavery, had artificially created for itself a double means of escape, in the legends previous to the last renaissance or posterior to the final death of Buddha. For our part, we do not doubt that, if it had continued to develop normally and according to its own rules, we should have seen the number of these sham historical pictures or these illustrations of popular stories increase at the expense of the old fund of pious images.

It is no longer a secret to anyone that the regular sweep of this evolution was brusquely interrupted by a veritable artistic cataclysm. The Hellenized sculptors of the northwest, strangers to the native tradition of Central India, satisfied to the full; and even outwent, the wishes of their Buddhist patrons by creating for their use the Indo-Greek type of Buddha. Immediately their colleagues of the low country, seduced by this wonderful innovation, greeted with no less enthusiasm than the laity the rupture of the magic charm which had weighed so heavily and so long upon the ancient Buddhist school. We have already remarked upon the fact of the rapid diffusion of the new type (p. 7): it is now clear to us that its adoption did not come into direct collision with any dogmatic prejudice. Always docile interpreters of current ideas, the texts set themselves henceforth to guarantee, by the aid of apocryphical traditions or an abundance of miracles, the authentic resemblance of those portraits whose possibility they were a moment ago denying.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> By apocryphal tradition we mean those relative to the statue of sandal wood, carved even during the life-time of Buddha and attributed by Fa-Hian (trans. Legge, p. 56) to Prasenajit of Śrāvastī, and by Hiuan-tsang (trans. Stan. Julien, I, pp. 283 and 296) to Udayana of Kauśambī, whose example had only been imitated by Prasenajit (cf. Beal, *Records*, I, p. XLIV and 235; II, p. 4). As regards the miracles, see those which are related to us concerning the image of the temple of Mahābodhi by

The reason is [25] that, in reality, the new mode did not expressly infringe any ritualistic prohibition: it did nothing but overthrow the artistic procedures of composition, and the bonds which fell were of a purely technical kind. We have seen clearly enough how the image-makers of the basin of the Ganges had slowly suffered the spider's web of custom to weave itself around them, and how, not daring to tear it apart, they had already endeavoured to free themselves from it. Under the stroke of the revelation which came to them from Gandhāra their emancipation was as sudden as it was complete: but even through this unexpected development we are prepared to follow up the test to which we have submitted our theory and from which it seems to us to have so far issued with honour.

The history of the ancient regime in Buddhist art prior to the Gandhārian revolution may, in fact, be summed up somewhat as follows. We have every reason to suppose that there was, first, from the fifth century onwards, local production at the four great centres of pilgrimage, and conveyance into the interior of India, of rude delineations copying the "sacred vestiges" actually still visible above ground in the sites of the miracles. It was these naturally unpeopled tableaux which, thanks to time and distance, ended by being regarded as systematic representations of the four principal episodes in the life of the Blessed One, and which, joined to some routine variations composed in accordance with the same formula, served, before as well as after Aśoka (middle of the third century B.C), for the decoration of religious foundations; finally, on the monuments of the second century (still before our era) [26] we remark already tentatives towards freedom from the tyranny of the ancient customs by recourse to subjects previous or subsequent to the last existence of Buddha.

However, the school of the north-west comes on the scene. By reason of the very fact that it has been almost entirely removed from these traditional influences, it must, in our system, present characteristic signs quite different from those of the ancient school.

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Hiuan-tsang (trans. Stan. Julien, I, p. 465; Beal, II, p. 120) and Tāranātha (trans. Schiefner, p.20).

Now, the conclusions of an extensive study which we have long dedicated to the Greco-Buddhist bas-reliefs, seem to have conspired in favouring, point for point, the reverse of the preceding propositions. What we have observed at Gandhāra is, first, the almost total disappearance of legendary scenes later than the cycle of the *Parinirvāṇa*, as also a marked diminution in the number of Jātakas; in the second place, there is an indefinite multiplication of episodes borrowed from the youth or the teaching career of the Master, whose corporeal image occupies now the centre of all the compositions; finally and correspondingly, there is an extreme rarity of symbolical representations.<sup>25</sup>

In any case - and this is our concluding argument - the old emblems do not disappear completely. Not only at Gandhāra, but even on the latest productions of medieval India, not to mention the Lamaist images of the present day, these survivals of a former age continue to manifest themselves. If the *stūpa* is regarded as having on nearly all the new representations of the *Parinirvāṇa* become superfluous, the Tree of Knowledge never falls to rear itself behind the Buddha of the *Sambodhi*, whilst the wheel between the two gazelles, either back to back or face to face, continues to mark the throne of his First Preaching. And thus [27] the decline of Buddhist art is linked to its most distant visible origins, the only ones (need we specify?), which have been taken into consideration here.<sup>26</sup>

Such, at least, is the theory which we could not refrain from submitting to the appreciation of Indianists. Taken altogether, it is only an attempt at synthesis, an effort first to coordinate logically, then to organize in accordance with the laws of an historical development, a series of facts already known. In this sense there is not one Buddhist archeologist, commencing with Fergusson and Cunningham, who has not contributed to it, and it may be found more or less devoid of originality. Our whole ambition would be precisely that it should give, when read, the impression of being

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, pp. 266, 270, 427 etc.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Art greco-bouddhique*, fig. 208 and 209 and *Iconographie bouddhique de l'Inde*, fig. 29 et 30: the latter is a representation of the *Parinirvāṇa*, still surmounted by a *stūpa*.

already public property. That would be the best of symptoms; for none is better adapted to produce a belief that - except for the retouches which the progress of research will inevitably give to it - it is destined to endure.