

The Early Sculptures of Nepal

—*Dr. Steua Kramrisch*

(continued

The same interlocking of drapery and scroll forms part of an image of Padmapani or the "Licchavi caitya" of the Dhvaka Baha, Kathmandu. This monument, the most complex and elaborate of its kind, carries a stupa having a high plinth in two tiers, above an even higher, prismatic substructure, raised on a pedestal of three steps. A niche completely fills each of the four faces of the prismatic substructure whose corners are occupied by high pilasters. They carry an architrave widely projected above two tiers of rafter ends. This architrave provides the base whence the stupa rises. The architectural motifs of the substructure occur on the Dasavatara Temple at Deogarh in Uttar Pradesh. This temple is assignable to about the late sixth century. Each of the four niches of the substructure houses an image, Buddha images are on the north and south sides, both show the varada mudra which gesture characterizes Ratnasambhava whose station is in the south but not Amoghasiddhi whose gesture is the abhaya mudra. The sanghati of the northern Buddha, image shows schematized folds of the drapery that of the southern Buddha is without them. Padmapani and Vajrapani occupy the two other niches. Vajrapani holds the vajra, of which only the upper half is shown, above the head of the Vajrapurusa. These mighty and majestic images are modelled to some extent not unlike the figures of the Devis discussed

above. At the same time they are allied to Gupta sculptures from Bihar. They precede, it would seem, by about one or two generations the sculptures from Apsad and by much more than that the copper image of the Buddha from Sultanganj.

Allied with the Buddhist sculptures is the group of Krsna Kaliyadamana in the Old Palace Kathmandu. This sculpture is in the round. It is one of most outstanding works of the seventh century whose conception surpasses that of the Varaha avatar at Apsar. From a broad base formed by serpent shapes rises defiantly, yet near his defeat, the serpent king. His powerful body rises challenging but his head looks up to his conqueror with an expression whose range can no longer be assessed in its present mutilated condition. It is surrounded by the full glory of his sevenfold serpent hood, as Krsna, the divine, heroic child, places his foot on Kaliya's mitre-like crown. The sturdy body of the child Krsna, having set foot triumphantly on arm and head of Kaliya and seizing one of the serpent hoods, towers above his victim. Vehemence and power imbue the body of the god-child. The delicately featured Nepali face does not hide in its smooth contour an admixture of cruelty. It was not absent either in the face of the king from Mrgasthali. A large halo, perforated around Krsna's head is also the

background of his victoriously raised left arm. Nepali sculpture uses the halo ingeniously as a sculptural accent and compositional climax. In this group, volumes and voids are compacted in a grandiose whole replete with three-dimensional dynamic movement; one could call it "baroque".

The other sculptures of this style are reliefs. In them the phantasmagoria of the rocks contrasts with the wide, curved planes of the figures of one or the other Naga. One of these relief panels is set into the plinth of the Carumati Mahacaitya. Other reliefs, from the same stupa and representing female donors or worshippers are less weighty contributions of Nepali sculpture at this phase. A relief of a vase of plenty (purnaghata), however, vies with Deccani versions of the same subject.

The image of Visnu Anantasayin floating as it appears on the waters of the pond of Budha Nilkantha, belongs to this group of images. The magnificence of this sculpture is now harmed by masses of cement and tiles which fence in the pond.

Another sacred, ancient site, Cangu Narayan, accommodates, though it no longer enshrines, a number of superb images. They appear to date from ca. 700 A.D. to the ninth century. Most outstanding among them are the images of Visnu on Garuda, the image of Trivikrama and the stele of Visnu Narayana-Vishvarupa.

Although the image of Visnu seated on Garuda has its iconographic antecedents and parallels not only in images from Bihar, and in Mathura of the Kushana dynasty, the seated shape of the god and the flying figure of the bird are combined in one soaring vision and unique conception of the stele in Cangu Narayana. While Garuda's feet rest on the thin plinth whose edge is carved with lotus petals and

which forms the base of the stele, those of Visnu are placed on the winged shoulders of the bird whence the arms of Garuda rise up in an evocative arc whose crescent accompanies the vaulting wings of the sun bird. They form a bowl and it is in this soaring vessel that the seated image of Visnu arises. He is enthroned on the body of the bird with its broad chest inflated with vigor. Its round human head with bulging eyes, in the effort of carrying the god shows a mien of composure. The majestic symmetry of visnu is derived by reduction from the high plasticity of the modelling of the Bodhisattvas of the Licchavi caitya of the Dhvaka Baha. Its firmness had been relaxed, the contour losing much of its tension. Whereas the chest of the Bodhisattva images of the Dhvaka Baha expanded above the high stemmed support of the waist, the torso of the Vishnu image is not only more squat but its triangular contour has little upward surge. Its spread is made by the sculptor of this image the root motif for the organization of the figure of Vishnu. In the vertical plane, parallel with the back of the stele the inverted triangles between the arms and the body—a compositional motif of Gupta age—find their outermost response in the intervals between the first and second pairs of arms. There the distended, and once again inverted triangles are upheld by the second pair of arms, bent in a mannerism which came to stay in Nepali sculpture—so as to carry in their curve the arc formed by the arms and wings of Garuda, towards the halo of Visnu while inscribing this curve to the ascending plumage of the sunbird. Like a prabha-mandala (mandorla) it forms the back slab of the stele.

The triangular theme furthermore is carried forward along the legs bent in the knees until it appears anchored in the shoulders of Garuda where the feet of Vishnu rest. In the thoroughness of its three-dimensional organization, in the forward impact and the upward surge of

the celestial flight, this stele is unrivalled. The upward surge motivates here the pointed shapes of cakra and siras cakra and the entire play of feathers, foam, cloud and curls winging upwards from the body of Garuda into the radiance surrounding Visnu. His weapons are upheld, large and incisive, strengthening the upward movement of the composition and its stability:

The heritage of the "Gupta" tradition is shaped here with Nepali finesse by a master sculptor leading to further, thematically even richer work.

The Vikranta murti in Cangu Narayan is based on the Vikranta murti from Lajampat of the year 467. Its indebtedness is as obvious as is its individuality. While one pointed mystery and triumph inform the image from Lajampat, the exposition of the theme in the image at Cangu Narayan is more full and less telling.

The striding of the god is no longer elastic and convincing with the daring diagonal of its movement. The salient angle of the large right foot on tiptoe, this hinge between the ground and the soaring stride, is now replaced by a footstool on which the foot lies flat. This takes the motion out of the gesture which appears now strained and more a gymnastic feat than the movement of a god. The legs moreover slightly overlap at the crotch, the diagonal sweep of the cosmic step is broken. The arms which in the Lajampat image were flung in unison in a wide arc as if producing and upholding the broad halo around Visnu's head, here are much shorter and are stretched or bent at various angles, stiff and jarring in their contrast they are set off against space, the ground of the relief being cut out on either side of the small, elongated halo and of the body of Visnu. The latter is heavier than that of the Lajampat Visnu and does not narrow in a triangle towards a thin waist as in the Pasupati image. Its

sturdiness is condensed in a chunky shape underlined by the broad belts around the waist and hips.

The spontaneity of the groups in the Lajampat image in their reference to the figure of Visnu is replaced here by a harmonious grouping and interrelatedness. The elegance of the scene of the horse sacrifice rests on the knowledge of a work of the school of Sarnath where a stele shows the leave-taking of the Buddha from his horse and groom. The figure of Lakshmi, on the other hand is freed from her awkward gliding stance on her lotus. Now she is placed on it in her own right, gracious in her movement. The group, near Visnu's right foot of the Naga King, King Bali, and the Earth goddess has been visually clarified by the interpolation of the footstool while it has lost its expressiveness.

Where as the top of the two earlier Trivikrama reliefs has been broken off, the stele from Cangu Narayan is rounded off by a sun and moon phantasy which makes these luminaries appear like floating flowers on a ground of scalloped clouds. If these stylizations recall some of the motifs on the carved ceilings of cave sanctuaries in Aihole, the bland shapes of the Vidya-dharas carrying garlands are of a different strain and look forward to the image of the Buddha child in a relief from Deopatan. The Trivikrama stele in Cangu Narayan would appear to follow upon the image of Visnu on Garuda. It could be assigned to the late seventh or early eighth century. It seems to be followed by the image of Visnu Anantashayin-Visvarupa at Cangu Narayan. The total vision of Visnu before and in creation is of the god recumbent, withdrawn in *yoganidra*—slumbering on the world serpent and world ocean of a universe dissolved and which is to arise again and of the god manifest carried by the Earth, a towering shape whose four times four heads extend the pillar of his presence

from earth to heaven. These two themes are interlocked in the composition of the stele. Although visnu on his bed of serpent coils occupies but about one sixth only of the height of the relief, other large figures are coordinated with recumbent image. Iconographically the majority are part of the Visvarupa theme; the goddess Earth, the elephants of the four quarters, Garuda, Apsarases, etc. But all of these form one closed compositional unit and occupy a clearly delimited rectangle which forms the lower 'half' of the slab, attracting attention by the eloquent configuration of its actors and to the Anantasayin aspect of the god.

The rectangle filled by these figures ends above the waistline of Visnu Visvarupa, at the height of his second and third pair of arms of the stele ends its ground terminating in the shape of horizontal wall replete with an upsurge of densely set scrolls. They represent the vapors of mid-air or the air ocean where Garuda flies, the Sun bird, his plumage spread out peacock tail-wise and like a halo. The family likeness of this Garuda and the one supporting Visnu is unmistakable. Here, however, his wings are cape-like, a convention which came to stay in Nepali images of Garuda. The flying Apsarases—between this figure of Garuda and the standing figure of a Devata holding a staff (?) in anjali mudra—with their fluttering scarves and sturdy shapes are reminiscent of flying figures from Sondni, Gwalior. The motif of the wind-tossed surf is furthermore taken up by the fluttering ends of Visnu's shawl. Between their loops further flying figures of small size, disport themselves. Mediating between the central vertical theme of Visnu's upright figure supported on the shoulders of the emerging Earth goddess and the flying figures in mid air are the other beings rising from the world ocean, in the shapes of two Naga Kings and the four elephants of the directions. The world ocean, the zone occupied by Anantasayin and the coils of the world serpent is horizontally

divided from the air region by the long staff held in the main right hand of Visnu Narayana. This has its parallel in the makara standard held in the left upper hand of Narayana. This foremost monster of the ocean symbolizes its waters and so does the flask in the right hand of Narayana. His sevenfold serpenthood and the deed shadow groove around his head appear again, reduced in scale and number as the bowl-like composition composed of the haloes of the serpent kings. Their symmetry fixes the bottom of Garuda, the Nagas, Apsarases and the staff bearer whence the column shape of Visvarupa arises.

Out of these large balanced shapes interwoven with deep shadows, Visvarupa, standing on the hands of the Earth goddess and the Nagas, at shoulders height of goddess, in the stance of a cakravartin, carries the four tiers of his four-fold heads. Their volume is set off forcefully against the, in part, cut out ground of the relief and also against the punctuated rhythmical pattern, row upon row, of Devatars. The forceful contrast between the calm and large volumes of Visvarupa and the scintillating pattern of the surrounding relief is framed in the gently rounded top of the stele by the figures of Siva (the left side where Brahma was carved is broken off) and the discs of sun and moon.

The contrast of shapes and the majesty of the upper part of the stele with its static effect rests on a composition replete with movement in its lower part, whence the figure of Visvarupa arises. His trunk serves not only as the pivot of the entire relief but also as the center whose power radiates from his ten arms dispensing his might.

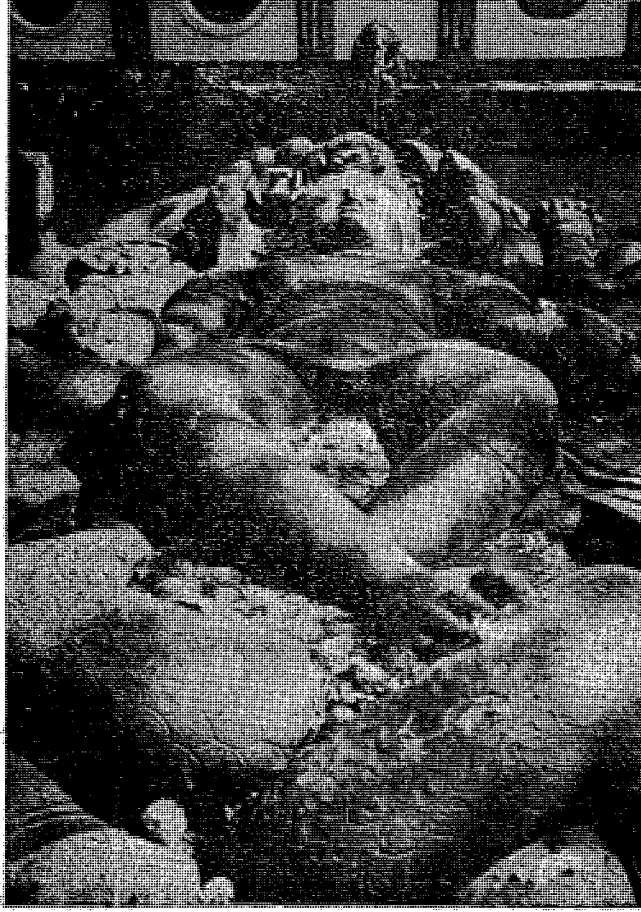
Affinities are obvious to sculptures in the Deccan, as of Narayana and Visnu Anantasayana from Aihole, Central India (the flying apsarases), North Gujarat (images of Visvarupa and Orissa (the Raksasas on the sikhara of the Parasuramesvar Temple, Bhuvaneshwar) But such mainly iconographical and partly stylistical



तपस्या गरिएको पार्वतीलाई ब्रह्मचारीरूपी शिवको छल, नगल, काठमाडौं ।
Siva in the disguise of a young Brahmachari before Parvati, Naghal, Kathmandu.

प्राचीन नेपाल

Ancient Nepal



जलशायी नारायण, बूढानीलकण्ठ, काठमाडौं
Jalashayi Narayan, Budhanilkantha, Kathmandu.

similarities revealing as they are of the awareness by the Newari sculptor of vast Indian resources of more than one tradition, do not detract from the uniqueness and consistency of his own work. It invests with elegance the powerful Indian forms and transposes their depths of realization into a calm assessment of their effect. The shapes appear more smooth and their impact is controlled. The linear clan which was at its strongest in the Trivikrama panels of the fifth century has now slowed down and combines with an ordering of the plastic masses and of light and shade resulting in a harmonious maturity of the composition. It errs on the side of being at times too studied, too conscious.

From the stele of Visnu enthroned on Garuda, in Cangu Narayan, to that of Narayana-Visvarupa the shape of Visnu's body has changed. If the shape of the former, seen against that of the Bodhisattvas of the Dhvaka Baha had lost its powerful modelling and the contour its tension, the body of Visvarupa and also that of Narayana by a further reduction are given a tubular shape. The shoulders remain very broad without, however, the chest retaining its width. The waist, in proportion appears broader. The modelling of the chest, is now pent up, in front and does not spread to the arms which appear hinged to the shoulders.

A standing image of Visnu Sridhara, accom-

panied by Laksmi and Garuda is still further removed from the Bodhisattva type of the Dhvaka Baha. The taut and unified plasticity has given way to a relaxed contour along a modelling whose schematism is enhanced by a dwelling descriptively on its several parts such as the chest of Visnu or the thighs of Laksmi. They are singled out by a more detailed attention given to them and tend to arrest the eye of the beholder instead of compelling it to follow the entire shape in its plastic, breathing continuity. The stele of Visnu Sridhara moreover though it owes no debt to Pala sculpture yet shows a parallel type of form and can be assigned to the ninth century. The progressive hardening of the plastic form is particularly evident in an image of Narasimha at Cangu Narayana. This image, with rock formation which here occupy the lower part of the stele and the stiff Naga figures there in has taken to itself some of the formulae which particularly belong to images of Uma-Mahesvara. These images have nothing in common with the Pala type of this deity. They point once more towards the Deccan, with the cave temples in Elura.

The image of Visnu Sridhara from Cangu Narayan, assignable to the ninth century, terminates the "early" sculptures of Nepal and inaugurates a standardization of image—making parallel to that of the Pala school.

