

## THE BUDDHA OF BANGEMURA TOL GILLES BEGUIN



In Bangemura tol, in the western part of Kathmandu, a grey sandstone stele, slightly bluish, representing the Cakyamuni Buddha, stands at the entrance of a shop. It appears in all its aesthetic integrity in this photograph from the 1970s. Since then, set on a cement pedestal covered with fragments of bathroom tiles, it has lost all its magic. In other places of the Newar country, inconsistent heritage conservation policy regarding the maintenance of great statuary *in situ* has given rise to numerous thefts and vandalism that are much more serious.

The work, which may date from the mid-sixth century, is one of the oldest representations of Buddha in the valley. Its style is strongly influenced by the standard type spread by the workshops of Sārnāth in northern India from the end of the fourth century and which attained perfection approximately 50 years later.

The Blessed One, standing, distributes favours with the right hand (*varada mudra*), the other, closed, holds up the fold of a garment from above. A thin incised line marks the waist of the garment underneath. He leans on his slightly bent left leg. At his feet two donors of indistinct gender pay homage to him.

As on numerous stelae from the Sārnāth workshops, the figures clearly stand out from the background, unornamented, but encircled by a double, delicate row of flames and pearls. The wide surface thus formed was perhaps originally painted.

The face echoes Gupta canons : half-closed eyes, intangible smile, strongly marked cranial excrescence (*usnisa*), a hairstyle of juxtaposed tiny curls, etc.

Until the end of the sixth century, Licchavi statuary retained a slightly provincial aspect. The thick-set body and the face with flattened features are characteristics found in other works. In the seventh century an abrupt change created the masterpieces we know.