

lHa bla ma Zhi ba 'od's Eighth Century Bronze from Gilgit

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*This paper is dedicated to the monks of Dangkhar,
Heirs of the great translator and royal monk,
lHa bla ma Zhi ba 'od (1016 – 1111).*

In 1973, an officer of the Indian Government registered an exceptional bronze belonging to the monastery of Dangkhar (Tib. *Brag mkhar*) under the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act.¹ The bronze was simply labelled “Buddha” and was dated to the tenth-eleventh century. It is in all likelihood the last time that anyone took any historical interest in this statue, and with good reason as the Buddha had been then locked away by the monks as the most precious and potent living image in their possession, displayed only on rare occasions for the sake of the local community.

In 2010, the members of the restoration team led by the Graz University of Technology were granted the opportunity to view the statue.² It was evident at first glance that the Buddha was not just any kind of bronze, but was indeed a unique work of art. Moreover, it was also apparent that the juxtaposition of two inscriptions on the pedestal, the first one in Sanskrit and the second in Tibetan, would provide a rather different dating. The restoration team was eventually allowed to take photographs of the statue as part of the documentation work. Later that summer, the author was personally entrusted with the study of that bronze.

During the fieldwork which followed in summer 2011, we had hoped to further study the statue in order to compare the recording of the inscriptions based on the photographs taken the previous year. Our request was, however, apologetically denied. In the interim, the monks had performed a divination (Tib. *gzan rtags 'phen pa*) *vis-à-vis* the future of the image, the outcome of which was final. The statue would no longer be shown in public. Yet, the

¹ The fortress-monastery of Dangkhar is located in the Spiti Valley (Tib. *sPi ti*), H.P., India. The Tibetan spelling retained here follows the name of the current monastic complex *Brag mkhar bkra shis chos gling*. The former “capital of Spiti” is also recorded under other denominations such as *Brang mkhar*, *Grang mkhar*, or *Grang dkar* in Tibetan historical sources; see Laurent forthcoming.

² The documentation and restoration of the old monastic complex of Dangkhar started in summer 2010 under the supervision of Prof. H. Neuwirth and DI C. Auer (Institute of Architectural Theory, Art History and Cultural Studies, Graz University of Technology, Austria). The restoration project has been entirely funded by Mr. M. Weisskopf without whom the present research could not have been conducted. The annual reports are available online; see <http://www.savedangkhar.tugraz.at/>.

monks renewed their request and insisted that we proceed with the study of the bronze and its inscriptions.

This paper thus presents some preliminary observations and remarks on this unique artwork. The first section is devoted to the bronze *per se*. The inscriptions are treated in the following section, while a general discussion attempts to situate the production and journey of this remarkable statue. By doing so, we hope that the wishes of the monastic community of Dangkhār shall be fulfilled.

I. Physical description & stylistic analysis

The bronze from Dangkhār [Fig. 1] shows a Buddha seated in *vajraparyāṅkāsa* (Tib. *rdo rje'i skyil krung*) on an impressive dais, with the hands held in *dharmacakra mudrā* (Tib. *chos kyi 'khor lo'i phyag rgya*). A sumptuous cushion is placed on a sophisticated pedestal which bears two inscriptions on the front side. A separately cast mandorla (Skt. *prabhāmaṇḍala*, Tib. *'od kyi dkyil 'khor*) can be inferred due to the presence of two slots at the back of the pedestal and a protruding lug-slot behind the cushion [Fig. 2]. The bronze measures twenty-six centimetres in height and is made of brass.³ Extensive silver and copper inlays were used to embellish the cushion, the undergarment, the eyes, and the lower lip of the Buddha.

The modelling of the body delineates a sturdy silhouette. Some visible features such as the hands and cheeks are fleshy. The face is rather oval and the head slightly oversized. The nose is broad and flat. The eyes are slanted and made of silver inlays. The mouth seems faintly pursed with the upper lip summarily delineated and the lower lip inlaid in reddish-brown copper. Altogether, these physical traits generally conform to the Kashmiri style of Buddhist cast bronzes.⁴

The clothing of the Buddha deserves particular attention. A symmetrically draped garment falls in concentric folds towards the navel which appears underneath. In the back, the folding of the garment follows a similar wavy pattern. The hem of the garment is draped over the left shoulder while its lower part covers the left knee [Fig. 3-4]. A peculiar V-shaped neckline reveals an undergarment made of copper and silver roundels, with similar fabric also visible at the ankles. The addition of a V-shaped neckline to the traditional monastic robe (Skt. *kāśāya*) is a distinctive feature of many Kashmiri bronzes produced in the eighth and ninth centuries. This iconographic innovation, as we shall discuss, seems to have originated in Central Asia before being specifically promoted among the Buddhist communities of Śāhi descent.

³ As recorded by the Indian Government Officer in 1973.

⁴ For a detailed list of these characteristics; see Pal (1973 : 729-30 and 1975 : 30).

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The cushion on which the Buddha is seated is not only an aesthetic marvel but also a technical feat of casting. The front edge of the cushion is ornamented with pearl and flower roundels extensively inlaid in silver and copper, while on the sides of the cushion different floral roundels with boldly outlined petals are presented. The top of the cushion is also finely decorated with roundels and arabesque-like motifs. Small copper inlays were also used on both side edges and on top of the cushion. The rear section of the cushion bears no motifs. Finally, a fringe of tassels runs around the upper part of the pedestal below the cushion. Other Buddhist bronzes from Kashmir-Gilgit display the same consummate skill in the rendering of textile motifs. The roundel and floral design is believed to reflect strong Sasanian and Sogdian influences; a cultural trend that developed throughout Asia between the seventh and the ninth centuries.⁵

As for the pedestal, it is a large rectangular throne made of stylised stones and architectural features. The composition is dominated by a central *yakṣa* (Tib. *gnod sbyin*) placed between two columns and a pair of lions. The spirit is seated cross-legged and wears a *dhoṭī* inlaid in copper and silver stripes. His eyes are inlaid in silver while his mouth is made of copper. The symmetrical composition of the pedestal is completed with two roaring lions depicted in profile while their heads face forward. The combination of decorative elements, such as stylised stones, columns, *yakṣa*, and lions, is commonly found on the pedestals of bronzes attributed to the regions of both Kashmir and Gilgit.⁶

Among the many bronzes cast from these two areas, two statues offer more than just fortuitous similarities with the Buddha from Dangkhar. First and foremost is the well-known Buddha of the Norton Simon Foundation [Fig. 5],⁷ and secondly a bronze now preserved at the Potala Palace in Lhasa [Fig. 6].⁸ These three bronzes share not only close stylistic resemblance, but more remarkably a number of technical aspects. Their cushions, for instance, display the very same skill in the use of silver and copper inlays to create roundel motifs. In addition to the rich Central Asian textile pattern, structural similarities also include the stylised stone base with its architectural elements, and figures. The face of the Buddha from Lhasa, along with the uncovered parts of the neck, right arm, hands, and feet, were later painted with cold gold hence dissimulating their original appearance. Compared to the bronze from Dangkhar, the head of the Norton Simon Foundation sculp-

⁵ See Heller (2006 : 178-83).

⁶ Additional figures such as the portraits of donors, bodhisattvas, griffins, birds, and deer may also be represented. For stylistic similarities with the rock base of the bronze from Dangkhar; see Von Schroeder (1981 : fig. 15F, 16A, and 16B).

⁷ For a complete description of the Simon Foundation bronze; see PAL (1973 : 731-35 fig.5 and 1975 : 92 fig.22a,b) and also Von Schroeder (1981 : 118 fig.16A).

⁸ For the bronze conserved in the Li ma lha khang inside the Potala Palace; see Von Schroeder (2001 : 106-9 fig. 19 A-C) or again (2008 : 46-47 fig. 6).

ture seems rounder and less chubby. However, both faces are arguably alike in the stylistic treatment of the eyes, the mouth, the elongated earlobes, and the curly hair.⁹ As for the garb of those three Buddhas, the hem of their upper garment (Skt. *uttarāsaṅga-saṃghāti*) fall behind the left shoulder in careful folds and cover the left knee in the very same way.¹⁰

A detailed comparison of these images, based on stylistic and technical criteria, incontrovertibly shows that these bronzes were manufactured around the same time by artisans belonging to the same atelier or guild. In an attempt to identify the figures of the donors represented on the pedestal, Pal has discussed the possibility that the bronze in the Norton Simon Foundation might have been commissioned by the king Jayāpīḍā Vinayāditya (c.779 – 813) of Kashmir.¹¹ As we shall see, the dedicatory inscription engraved on the bronze from Dangkhar provides an approximate dating but suggests a different origin.

The V-shaped neckline conundrum

As suggested earlier, the apparition of a V-shaped neckline on the *saṃghāti* may possibly be more than just an iconographical innovation induced by a cultural trend. This element, which is often referred to as a cloud collar or cape in recent publications, is believed to have been popular during the Sasanian period (c. 224-651) before being promoted by Central Asian tribes such as the Śāhis and the Tocharians, according to von Schroeder.¹² It does not only appear on later Kashmiri images of Buddhas but also decorates the

⁹ The head of the Buddha from Dangkhar has lost some of its relief due to considerable rubbing off as the original curly hair behind the left ear still attests. The extremity of the nose was possibly polished or damaged too.

¹⁰ The folds of the hem draped over the left shoulder of the Buddha from Dangkhar appear sketchier and may have been rubbed off a little. The adjustment of a mandorla at the back of the bronze may also explain why some elements were not executed with the same attention to detail. Compare for example the hair pattern at the back of each head.

¹¹ Pal's argument is thin but deserves to be reported here when he suggests that "of the four figures, the two located centrally are no doubt more important than the others. The male, wearing a diadem of pearls, holds what appears to be a musical instrument of some sort [...] If the male was meant to represent a king, rather than a mere musician, then one might identify him as Jayāpīḍā, who is known to have been accomplished in all the performing arts." It follows that "the female of course would represent his queen, and the bearded figure carrying a garland may portray his minister". As for the monk knelt behind the queen "he is very likely the royal preceptor, or an important monk such as Sarvajñamitra" who was a contemporary of king Jayāpīḍā. Pal sensibly concludes that whether or not his identification is accurate "such a spectacular bronze could hardly be anything less than a royal benefaction"; see Pal (1975 : 25-6) In a later publication, however, Pal has suggested a second reading based on a stylistic comparison with a stone stele where a similar female figure holding a pot is the goddess earth, and the whole scene is interpreted as Māra's defeat; see PAL (2003 : 28-29).

¹² See Pal (1973 : 735-36 and 1975 : 25, 41) Von Schroeder (1981 : 108).

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figures of the donors that are often represented on the pedestals of those bronzes. It had been assumed that the collar-cape innovation reflected the ethnic origin of the donors, or the artists, and could possibly denote the social status of the former. In addition to the imitation of garment designs, the high quality execution of these bronzes and the dedicatory inscriptions often recorded on their bases prove that these images were commonly commissioned by wealthy patrons such as local sovereigns and royal family members.¹³

As an iconographical novelty, the V-shaped neckline and other regal adornments were eventually associated with representations of Buddha Vairocana (Tib. *rNam par snang mdzad*).¹⁴ Tantric literature produced in the sixth and seventh century was influential in establishing Vairocana as the teacher of tantra *par excellence*.¹⁵ A lengthy discussion of this corpus of texts would however exceed the scope of the present paper.¹⁶ The socio-political

¹³ For instance the crowned Buddha in the Rockefeller Collection which was donated by Śaṅkarasena, the great lord of the elephant brigade, and her wife, Princess Devaśriyā; see Von Schroeder (1981 : 118 fig.16B) Also, the remaining pedestal of a lost bronze preserved in the Rubin Museum of Art where two of the four donors are the Queen Śrī Paramadevi Maṅgalaḥṣikā and the King Śrī Paṭola Deva Śāhis Vajrādityanandi from Gilgit.; Von Hinüber (2007 : 41-2 pl.6).

¹⁴ The role of the V-shaped collar-cape in the iconographical development of Vairocana remains problematic and, as suggested by Heller, "cannot yet be fully assessed nor used exclusively to determine the identification of Vairocana"; See Heller (1994 : 75-76).

¹⁵ In Mahāyāna literature, the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (Tib. *mDo phal po che*) already contains some "proto-tantric" elements. This sūtra was seminal in disseminating Vairocana's role as the cosmic Buddha and promoting his cult throughout Asia. The last chapter of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, which is independently known as the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* (Tib. *sDong po bkod pa'i mdo*), details the spiritual journey of Prince Sudhana (Tib. *Nor bzang*) and opens with an apologetic account of the historical Buddha as the emanational embodiment (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*, Tib. *sprul sku*) of Vairocana. This narrative eventually found its artistic expression inside the main temple (Tib. *gtsug lag khang*) of Tabo Monastery founded in 996. Sudhana's pilgrimage is here depicted on the southern wall of the temple, as part of a complex iconographical programme which serves a three dimensional architectural and artistic representation of Sarvavid Vairocana's maṇḍala (Tib. *kun rig rnam par snang mdzad kyi dkyil 'khor*). For a review of "proto-tantric" elements in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*; see Osto (2009) For the art and history of the monastic complex of Tabo; see Klimbur-Salter (1997 & 2005) For the depiction and narrative of Prince Sudhana in the main temple at Tabo; see Steinkellner (1995 & 1996).

¹⁶ Among the early so called esoteric canon, works such as the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* (Tib. *De bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas ngan song thams cad yongs su sbyong ba gzi brjid kyi rgyal po'i brtag pa phyogs gcig pa zhes bya ba*), the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṅgraha* (Tib. *De bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi de kho na nyid bsdus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*), and the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi* (Tib. *rNam par snang mdzad chen po mngon par rdzogs par byang chub pa rnam par sprul pa byin gyis rlob pa shin tu rgyas pa mdo sde'i dbang po'i rgyal po zhes bya ba'i chos kyi rnam grangs*) were instrumental in establishing Vairocana as the teacher of tantra and initiated the shift from Buddha Śākyamuni to the figure of Vairocana. For the significance of yoga tantra and the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṅgraha* within esoteric Buddhism in India and Tibet; see Weinberger (2003) For the *Mahāvairocana Tantra*; see Hodge (2003).

environment of their production, as demonstrated by Davidson, contributed to the maturation of tantric literature through the internalization of medieval models revolving around the embodiment of kingship and the exercise of dominion.¹⁷ In this new paradigm, “the Buddha was depicted as a king with his crown, clothed in all the ornaments of royalty” and would now extend his benevolent and mighty power over his specific dominion or maṅḍala.¹⁸ In this process, Kashmir did not only become a major repository of learning and practice for esoteric Buddhism (Skt. *Mantrayāna* Tib. *sngags kyi theg pa*), but assumed the function of a laboratory for new iconographical forms. The V-shaped neckline may well have been an aesthetic response of a regional *élite* to the pervading epiphanies of Lord Vairocana in tantric literature.

In this regard, some bronzes manufactured in northwest India during the eighth and ninth centuries ambiguously represent a fusion of Buddha Śākyamuni (Tib. *Shākya thub pa*) and the transcendent Vairocana. For example, the striking altarpiece preserved in the Rockefeller Collection is paradigmatic of the aesthetic conflation between these two figures that are often shown making the gesture of the turning of the wheel. While the crowned Buddha seated on a lotus between a pair of stūpas displays all the attributes of a body of enjoyment (Skt. *sambhogakāya*, Tib. *longs sku*), the two deer and the dharma wheel on the pedestal suggest that the sculpture represent Śākyamuni's first sermon.¹⁹ The study of the dedicatory inscription indicates that the donors were members of nobility from Gilgit and dates the sculpture to the first half of the eighth century.²⁰

Furthermore, the recast of Śākyamuni's enlightenment in tantric terms and his subsequent conflation with Vairocana is clearly indicated in a short *sādhana* composed by Jayaprabha (Tib. *rGyal ba'i 'od*) around the end of the eighth century and the beginning of the ninth century. The passage is worth citing:

On a lion throne, upon a lotus, is seated the Bhagavān, Vairocana, with a golden complexion, crowned uṣṇīṣa, and satin garments. It is said that Śākyamuni's clothing, colour, and form can also be venerated thusly.²¹

¹⁷ In particular chapter 4 “The Victory of Esoterism and the Imperial Metaphor”; Davidson (2002 : 113-68).

¹⁸ See Davidson (2002 : 168).

¹⁹ See Von Schroeder (1981 : 118 fig.16B).

²⁰ For the names of the donors and the translation of the inscription see footnote 13 and Von Schroeder (1981 : 118 fig.16B).

²¹ We are grateful to Dr Amy Heller for drawing our attention to this passage and its implications to the subject at hand.

pad ma seng ge gdan de la sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnam par snang mdzad gser gyi kha dog thor tshugs dang dbu rgyan dang cod pan can dar la'i stod g.yogs dang smad g.yogs can nam |

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The Tibetan idiom *ji skad du*, which usually marks a reported fact or quotation, highlights that by the ninth century the idea of interchangeability between the two figures is rather common in tantric literature. Moreover, this passage also implies that early representations of Vairocana must not have departed greatly from those of the historical Buddha, and therefore did not necessarily follow strict textual antecedents. This situation probably corresponded to a formative phase during which artists were not necessarily familiar with the emerging tantric literature but had to answer the specific demands of instructed patrons, hence contributing to the progressive establishment of new iconographical forms.

Consequently, the statues preserved at the Norton Simon Foundation and at the Potala in Lhasa are instrumental in understanding the bronze from Dangkhar and its genesis. As stated earlier, these three bronzes were without a doubt cast by the same artisan-craftsmen. Despite the great stylistic and technical similarities, the Buddha from the Norton Simon Foundation possesses a somewhat classical facture, if not archetypal, that the two other avoid. The historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, is shown with his right hand in *bhūmiśparśamudra* (Tib. *sa gnon*) symbolising the moment of his enlightenment. Furthermore, his body displays the marks of Buddhahood such as the *ūrṇā* (Tib. *mdzod spu*) on his forehead. The thirty-two *mahāpuruṣa lakṣaṇa* (Tib. *skyes bu chen po'i mtshan*) were initially understood to be the physical characteristics of Siddhārtha Gautama attained upon his enlightenment. This might explain why, as a possible early attempt to represent Vairocana, the *ūrṇā* was omitted from the forehead of the Buddha preserved in Dangkhar. As for the upper garment, the elegance of the drapery is the aesthetic pinnacle of earlier Buddhist statuary. Except for the V-shaped neckline, the upper garment worn by the Buddha from Lhasa, which falls in large and graceful arcs, perfectly matches the one found on the Buddha from Dangkhar. These three images thus offer a significant iconographical sequence, which may not necessarily reflect a chronological order, where the artisan-craftsmen progressively incorporated "dress novelties" while conforming to the main canonical requirements.

Compared to the classical depiction of Śākyamuni, it is now quite evident that the artists responsible for the bronze from Dangkhar attempted to integrate or accommodate new concepts. The V-shaped neckline worn in an impossible fashion is after all emblematic of a period of iconographical adjustment. Whether the statue from Dangkhar can be formally identified as a representation of Lord Vairocana is ultimately of little significance as other bronzes produced in Kashmir-Gilgit during the eighth and ninth century demonstrate that an iconographical conflation based on emerging tantric

shak ya thub pa'i cha byed dang kha dog dang dbyibs ji skad du grags pa 'ang rung ste |; see (P 3489: 361b).

literature and socio-cultural norms existed between the historical Buddha and his transcendent form.

II. The inscriptions

There are two inscriptions engraved on the lower part of the pedestal [Fig. 7]. The first one is recorded in proto-śāradā script while the second inscription is written in Tibetan *dbu chen*. The first inscription, which runs on two lines, helps to identify the name of the donors, their origin, and the date of donation. The second inscription, which was added later on in the lower right hand corner of the base, provides the name of a single individual.

I. The main inscription on the base reads as follows:²²

/1/ # saṃ 88 mārga śu di 15 deyadharmo yaṃ śākyabhikṣuṣuṣṭikavarmanā sārddhaṃ mā
/2/ tāpitroḥi ācāryopadhyāyebhyaḥ | (rādāhu)puru(śa)kena (paphaṭonena)

“In the Year 88, on the 15th day of the bright half of Mārga[śirṣa]. This is the pious gift by the Śākyabhikṣu Vīkavarman together with his parents, the teachers and instructors. Together with the (Rādāhu)-Burusho Paphaṭona (Papharṭana).”

II. The second inscription reads:

lHa bla ma zhi ba 'od

The style of the dedicatory inscription is consistent with other inscribed bronzes from Kashmir-Gilgit. The reading of the first line and the first half of the second line is almost certain. The beginning of the inscription is preceded by the *siddhaṃ* symbol and opens with the date of donation. The bronze was offered in the year 88, on the fifteenth day of the month *Mārgaśirṣa* which corresponds to the months of November-December.²³ In conformity with the hundred-year revolution based *laukika* era, the exact century is not mentioned as a result of which the calendar year for that figure can be either 712 or 812. The main donor is the Buddhist monk (Skt. *śākyabhikṣu*) Vīkavarman. The second syllable is not absolutely certain and an alternative reading such as *vīra-*^o cannot be excluded. The other donors mentioned are the mother and father (Skt. *mātāpitarau*) of Vīkavarman as

²² We are entirely indebted to Prof. Oskar von Hinüber without whom this inscription would have remained silent. The following translation and analysis are the fruits of his generosity and erudition; personal communication, February 2012.

²³ Prof. von Hinüber remarks that a reading 87 of the two figures cannot be excluded but seems less likely; personal communication, February 2012.

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well as his teachers (Skt. *ācārya*) and preceptors (Skt. *upādhyāya*). The sentence ends with a concluding punctuation character (Skt. *daṇḍa*).

The reading of the second half of line two is highly conjectural and the possible designation of an additional donor as *puruṣakena* is of utmost importance. As noted elsewhere by von Hinüber, compounds in *°puruṣa* or *°vuruṣa* may reflect an early form of the word Burusho.²⁴ In this context, the additional contributor named Paphaṭona, or alternatively Papharṭana, must have been from the Upper Indus. The occurrence of a Burusho name would hence connect this bronze to Gilgit as it was expected from the stylistic point of view. The composition of the inscription and the consistent use of case endings suggest that the name of the last benefactor must have been added slightly later. The reason for the commissioning and meritorious donation is not stated.

The reading of the Tibetan inscription does not pose any problem. The name of Zhi ba 'od, and the title (Tib. *lHa bla ma*) associated with it, refers to a member of the royal family of the Guge-Purang Kingdom (Tib. *Gu ge Pu hrang*) in West Tibet.²⁵ Although most of the biographical details of his life remain unknown, the main information regarding this charismatic figure of the later dissemination of Buddhism (Tib. *bstan pa phyi dar*) can be summed up as follows.

Born Yongs srong lde in the dragon year 1016, the third son of King lHa lde (r. 996 – 1023/4), and younger brother of Byang chub 'od (984 – 1078), he came to be known as Pho brang Zhi ba 'od when he received his full ordination at the age of forty, in 1056. lHa bla ma Zhi ba 'od was a disciple of the notorious *lo tsā ba* Rin chen bzang po (958 – 1055) and eventually became the first translator of royal descent. He translated six major works, commissioned the translation of at least three other texts,²⁶ and most certainly took part in the religious council held in Tholing (Tib. *mTho lding*) where he must have spent most of his life.²⁷ As the religious centre of the kingdom, Tholing was the recipient of a variety of pious benefactions and constructions. Zhi ba 'od and his nephew King rTse lde, for instance, were responsible for the edification of the three-storey gSer khang which involved the commitment of more than two hundred master-artists and artisans. The temple was completed within five years in 1071.²⁸ Zhi ba 'od also bestowed the main temple of Tholing (Tib. *dBu rtse*) with clay statues representing the complete cycle of

²⁴ "Auf eine ethnische Zugehörigkeit scheinen die auf *°puruṣa* oder *°vuruṣa* endenden Komposita zu deuten, wenn man darin eine frühe Form des Wortes « Burusho » sehen darf." ; see Von Hinüber (2004 : 146).

²⁵ For his complete royal title *bod kyi dpal lha btsan po*; see Karmay (1980 : 3).

²⁶ For a detailed list of his translation works and subsequent analysis of their colophons; see Karmay (1980 : 4-10).

²⁷ The religious council (Tib. *chos 'khor*) of Tholing started in the fire dragon year 1076 and is believed to have lasted for a year and a half; see Vitali (2003 : 65).

²⁸ See Vitali (1996 : 311-316) and (1999).

Sarvavid Vairocana (Tib. *Kun rigs*).²⁹ Finally, lHa bla ma Zhi ba 'od is remembered for his religious ordinance (Tib. *bka' shog*) issued in 1092 in which he severely condemned apocryphal works, perverted tantras (Tib. *sngags log*), and called for the upholding of the *bka' gdams pa* tradition.³⁰ The demise of the royal monk and translator in the iron hare year 1111 marks the end of the later diffusion of Buddhism in West Tibet.

It is unfortunately unclear how the royal priest and translator found himself in the possession of an eighth century bronze from Gilgit. This does not represent, however, an isolated case as religious objects and implements of great value would easily be bestowed as tokens of political allegiance or religious fervour. Besides, many such objects, Kashmiri bronzes in particular, found their way into the belongings of the royal family of West Tibet.³¹ The concluding section of this paper attempts to retrace the journey of the bronze from Dangkhar and must henceforth be taken with all due caution.

III. From Gilgit to Spiti: a narrative

Based on stylistic criteria, it has long been assumed that the Buddha Śākya-muni in the Potala collection and the one from the Norton Simon Foundation were connected to the Palola Śāhis of the Gilgit Valley [Fig. 8] although no tangible evidence has ever been available to provide definite ground. In this regard, the Buddha from Dangkhar with its dedicatory inscription confirms that these three images were undeniably executed by specialist artisans belonging to the same region, if not the same atelier, and approximately at the same time.

According to the date given in the inscription (712/812), the period of production of these bronzes can thus be inferred as being the first half of the eighth century.³² This period does not only correspond to a culmination of Buddhist artistic patronage under the reign of King Nandi-

²⁹ By doing so, Zhi ba 'od seems to have followed in Byang chub 'od's footsteps and conformed to a religious and artistic trend as his older brother adopted a similar iconographical programme when he had the monastery of Tabo renovated in 1041/2; see footnote 15 for the bibliographical references.

³⁰ See Karmay (1980 : 11-17).

³¹ For example, three bronzes conserved at Tashigang (Tib. *bKra shis sgang*) in Upper Kinnaur (Tib. *Khu nu*), H.P., bear the Tibetan inscription of Lha Na ga ra dza (988 – 1026), Ye shes 'od's younger son; see (Thakur 1997 : 971) In addition to these three images, at least fifteen other inscribed bronzes belonging to the former have been documented; see Von Schroeder (2001 : 84) Also, a Buddha from Kashmir-Gilgit with a two line Sanskrit inscription engraved on the base on which the name of king rTse lde (Tib. *mNga' bdag chen po rTse lde*) was later added; see Heller (2001).

³² Von Schroeder surprisingly dates the production of the Buddha Śākya-muni from the Potala 7th century while the bronze from the Norton Simon Foundation is dated 750 – 850; see Von Schroeder (1981 : 118 fig. 16A and 2001 : 106-9 pl. 19A-C).

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vikramādityanandi,³³ who ruled the kingdom of Belur (Tib. *Bru zha*) in the Gilgit Valley between c. 696 – 715,³⁴ but also precedes the conquest of the area by the expanding Tibetan Empire sometime between 720 and 745. A dating of a century later seems therefore less likely.

Despite the paucity of historical data regarding the Palola Śāhis of Gilgit, the small kingdom of the Upper Indus once hosted a thriving Buddhist culture as indicated by the recovery of Buddhist manuscripts, the presence of petroglyphs, rock inscriptions, and the high quality Buddhist bronzes produced in the area.³⁵ Wealthy groups of donors, which often involved *donatrices* of royal decent, played an active role in commissioning or donating images of great value. Their names and titles came down to us in the form of dedicatory inscriptions. Occasionally, they were represented on pedestals and book covers, clothed in their most flamboyant attire.

As suggested earlier, the feudalisation of early medieval India and the promotion of esoteric Buddhism (Skt. *Mantrayāna* Tib. *sngags kyi theg pa*) through the agency of royal or aristocratic patronage hence prompted aesthetic innovations. In this regard, the artists of north-western India, those of Kashmir and Gilgit in particular, gradually incorporated novelties based to a greater or lesser degree on written sources. This formative phase of iconography played an essential role in the depiction of Buddhas, notably as universal rulers (Skt. *cakravartin* Tib. *'khor los sgyur ba*), rendering their identification sometimes difficult.³⁶

As art historians often struggle to find textual antecedents to iconographical models, the apparition of a V-shaped neckline on Buddhist bronzes reaffirms the role performed by socio-political norms in the production of new doctrinal forms and their material illustrations. The formal identification of the Buddha from Dangkhar remains thus problematic. It can be seen as Buddha Śākyamuni at best, as an artistic attempt to illustrate the transcendental nature within the plane of immanence or, from the art historical point of view, as a possible early representation of Vairocana.

³³ Among the most spectacular bronzes donated by King Nandivikramādityanandi is the Crown Buddha Śākyamuni preserved in the Pritzker Collection. The statue was commissioned in 715/16 and bears many structural similarities with the three Buddhas discussed in this article; see Heller (2006 : 181-83) Also, a bronze of a Buddha holding a scripture in his left hand from the Pan-Asian Collection, which was donated in 714/715 by the king of the Belur Kingdom and which is dubiously identified as Tathāgata Akṣobhya by von Schroeder; see Von Schroeder (1981 : 118-119 fig. 16C) Both bronzes display the figure of King Nandivikramādityanandi on their base. As shown by von Hinüber, the Bhagadatta family of Gilgit was a “truly devoted Buddhist royal family”; see Von Hinüber (2003).

³⁴ The geographical delimitation of the Belur Kingdom has been subject to much discussion; see Denwood (2008 : 13-15)

³⁵ For a comprehensive monograph on the Palola Śāhis of Gilgit; see Von Hinüber (2004).

³⁶ Quite surprisingly, a bronze from Gilgit depicting a Buddha holding his hands in *dharmacakra mudrā* is nominally identified as Lord Viśvabhū thanks to a dedicatory inscription dated 723/24; see Von Hinüber (2007 : 40-1).

Whatever the initial intention, the Buddha commissioned by the Śākya monk Vīkavarman in the year 712 must have appeared perfectly canonical when it was offered about three hundred and fifty years later to the rather conservative lHa bla ma Zhi ba who never missed the opportunity to describe himself as a Śākya'i dge slong.³⁷

While cultural ties between West Tibet and north-western India during the late tenth and eleventh centuries involved the comings and goings of Tibetan translators, Indian paṇḍitas, master craftsmen, artisans, and merchants, it is yet our contention that the Buddha of Vīkavarman might have found its way to West Tibet through the matrimonial alliance formed between the royal family of Guge and the Kingdom of Gilgit.

It is 'Od lde (993 – 1037), Zhi ba 'od's older brother, who sealed this alliance. Following his accession to the throne of Guge-Purang in 1024, the new king incorporated Maryül (Tib. *Mar yul*) to the kingdom and settled in Shel from where he administered his dominion.³⁸ It is probable that he married rGyan ne of Gilgit in the fire ox year 1037 in order to secure the north-western border of the kingdom. Unfortunately, the situation deteriorated quite rapidly and 'Od lde had to undertake a military campaign against the Muslim Qarakhanid Turks (Tib. *Gar log*) of Gilgit that same year. The King of Guge was defeated and made prisoner. He eventually escaped and died of poisoning when he reached the capital of Balti (Tib. *sBal ti*). His demise was quickly followed by the sack of Tholing still in the year 1037.³⁹

This episode certainly highlights the political ties and friendly relationship that existed between the two Buddhist kingdoms. Whether the sumptuous bronze of Vīkavarman was offered to 'Od lde following his wedding with rGyan ne is a matter of pure speculation. It seems certain, however, that the statue from Gilgit came into 'Od lde's younger brother's possession only after 1056 when Yongs srong lde had his name changed into lHa bla ma Zhi ba 'od as it came to be inscribed on the base thereafter. The fine depiction and the high degree of execution of that bronze must undoubtedly have appealed to the royal monk. Moreover, as a translator and a monk himself, the dedicatory inscription written in the holy language of Sanskrit and the pious gift of a *śākyabhikṣu* from the past surely stirred his sense of filiation and orthodoxy.

How long the bronze remained in the possession of the royal monk and translator, and how it ended up in the Spiti Valley is an altogether different matter. Again, it seems plausible that an object of such prestige must have been passed down from one generation to the next, or in this case from un-

³⁷ See Karmay (1980 : 3).

³⁸ The kingdom of West Tibet was referred to as *mNga' ris skor gsum* and included the regions of Guge, Purang, Piti, Upper Kinnaur, Zaskar (Tib. *Zangs dkar*), and Ladakh (Tib. *La dwags*) also known as Maryül.

³⁹ These events were reported in various Tibetan sources and commented at length by Vitali; see Vitali (1996 : 281-93).

Lha bla ma Zhi ba 'od's Bronze from Gilgit

cle to nephew as it is not clear whether Zhi ba 'od ever had any offspring.⁴⁰ It is therefore through his nephew King rTse lde that Zhi ba 'od's personal belonging might have reached Spiti. This hypothesis is supported by a short passage in the *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* which recalls that when King rTse lde was brutally murdered by a dissident branch of the royal family, three of his sons found refuge at Sang grag Brang mkhar, a toponym which suggests that a fortified palace could have overlooked the Spiti river as early as the last quarter of the eleventh century.⁴¹

This short detour through the land of speculative history should not obliterate the remarkable contribution of this bronze to the study of epigraphy, art, and history of Buddhism. From the eighth century up to today, the Buddha now preserved at Dangkhar Monastery in the Spiti Valley has been protected and worshipped as a unique image of devotion, acquiring over the centuries the longevity and sanctity of its guardians.

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⁴⁰ See Heller (2010 : 65-7).

⁴¹ See Vitali (1996 : 125). This passage is of utmost importance for the history of Dangkhar. In the present state of preservation, the fortress-monastery bears no architectural, epigraphic or iconographical evidence of dating back to this time. Furthermore, a rounded fortified tower known as Takkar (*Brag mkhar*) has also been documented in Zanskar; see Howard (1995 : 81-2).

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Figure 1

Buddha from Dangkhar. 8th century, Gilgit. Bronze with silver and copper inlay, 26 cm high. Front view.

Photo: L.N. Laurent, 2010. Retouching: M. Lindén, 2012.
Photograph © Lobsang Nyima LAURENT



Figure 2

Buddha from Dangkhar. 8th century, Gilgit. Bronze with silver and copper inlay, 26 cm high. Top view.

Photo: L.N. Laurent, 2010. Retouching: M. Lindén, 2012.
Photograph © Lobsang Nyima LAURENT



Figure 3

Buddha from Dangkhar. 8th century, Gilgit. Bronze with silver and copper inlay, 26 cm high. Back view.

Photo: L.N. Laurent, 2010. Retouching: M. Lindén, 2012.

Photograph © Lobsang Nyima LAURENT

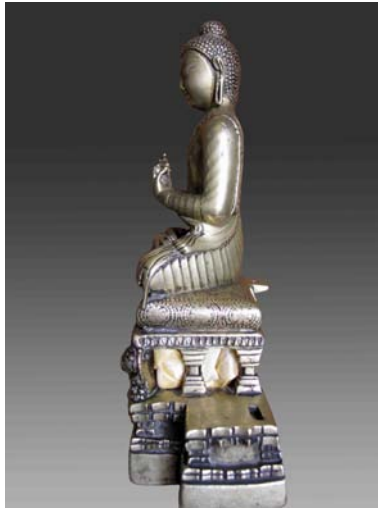


Figure 4

Buddha from Dangkhar. 8th century, Gilgit. Bronze with silver and copper inlay, 26 cm high. Side view.

Photo: L.N. Laurent, 2010. Retouching: M. Lindén, 2012.

Photograph © Lobsang Nyima LAURENT



Figure 5

Buddha and Adorants on the Cosmic Mountain, c. 700 India: Kashmir, 675-725
Bronze with silver and copper inlay. 13-1/4 x 9-1/2 x 4-3/4 in. (33.7 x 24.1 x 12.1 cm)
F.1972.48.2.S. Photograph © The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena



Figure 6

Buddha Śākyamuni delivering the first sermon in the Deer Park of Sarnāth
North-Western India: Patola-Shahi of the Gilgit Valley; 7th Century
Potala Collection: Li ma lha khang: inventory no 1383. (Photo: Ulrich von Schroeder,
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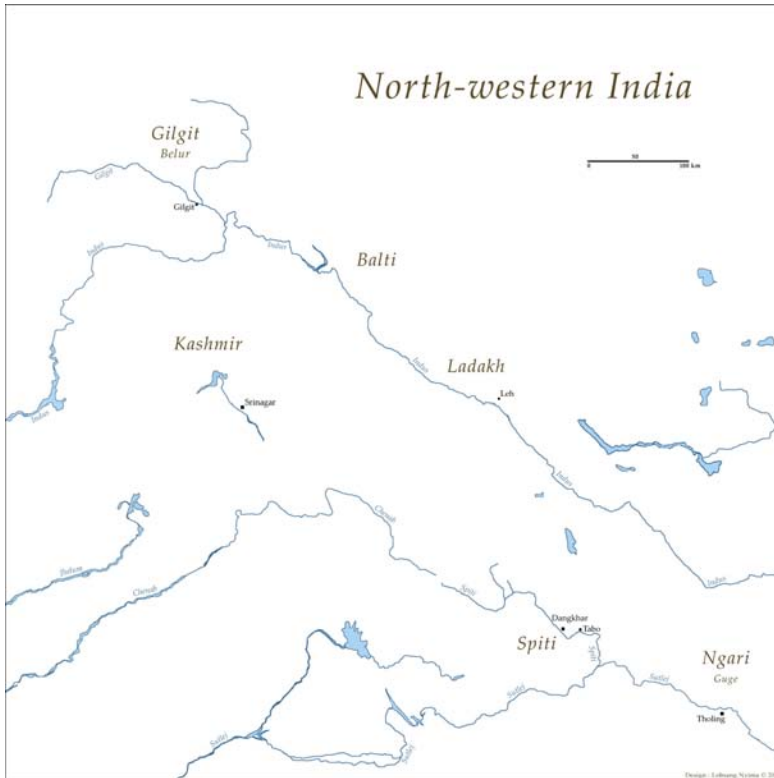
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**Figure 7**

Detail inscription. Buddha from Dangkhar. 8th century, Gilgit. Bronze with silver and copper inlay.

Photo: L.N. Laurent, 2010

Photograph © Lobsang Nyima LAURENT

**Figure 8**

Map. North-western India.

Design: L.N. Laurent

Image © Lobsang Nyima LAURENT