In the Bosom of Khotan?
A Dialogue between Image and Text

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Amongst the wondrous metal images of the Berti Aschmann Collection of Tibetan Art preserved in the Rietberg Museum stands a unique statue 'Bodhisattva with *gadā*' (fig.1). The unidentified Bodhisattva has been attributed to Kashmir and dated from the ninth to tenth century.[2] However, a Tibetan inscription engraved on the top of the lotus base has seemingly gone unnoticed. The reading of the inscription not only allows for the identification of this figure, but also raises the question of its place of production and workmanship. The inscription on the pedestal reads as follows (fig.2):[3]

14 *nub li'i byang chub seMd' rdo rgyal mtshan*
"14 The Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja of Western *Li*"

The inscription opens with a number fourteen written in Tibetan numerals. A small gap separates this number from the first word of the inscription. At the outset, it would seem to suggest that this statue was initially part of a set of images. Alternatively, the statue would have been engraved and listed alongside other miscellaneous religious articles belonging to a particular place. I will return to this point later.

Two words of the inscription are clearly abbreviated. The last two syllables of the Buddhist word *byang chub sems dpa'* (Skt. *bodhisattva*) are cut short. A dot above the term *sems* indicates that the third syllable is shortened by means of an *anusvāra* (Tib. *rjes su nga ro*). The last syllable *dpa'* is equally abridged. Second, the name *rDo rje rgyal mtshan* (Skt. *Vajradhvaja*) is abridged, too. Here, the second syllable of the noun *rdo rje* (Skt. *vajra*) is omitted. The use of abbreviated nouns is common practice in Tibetan epigraphic writing, usually because of

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[2] Helmut Uhlig, *On the Path To Enlightenment: The Berti Aschmann Foundation of Tibetan Art at the Museum Rietberg Zürich* (Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 1995), 120-121.
[3] I am very grateful to Alexandra Von Przychowski from the Rietberg Museum for sharing her own photograph of the inscription.

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space, sometimes for technical reasons. In the present context, the identification of Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja does not pose any problems and is further confirmed by the iconography, as I intend to show.

There is every reason to think that the expression *nub li* might also be an abbreviation of some sort. Therefore, the genitive case suffixed to the word *li* has been provisionally translated 'of'. It could also be rendered as 'from', 'in', or as a clause introduced by 'that', depending upon our reading of the expression 'Western *li*'.

Some remarks on the term 'li' and its derivatives

Dictionaries usually define the word *li* as 'bronze' or 'metal bell'. This term is also used to mean a unit of distance of approximately one third of a meter. The latter can easily be ruled out as far as the inscription is concerned. Moreover, the term *li* is often found in compound nouns pertaining to metal casting (Tib. *li ma*), the oasis of Khotan (Tib. *li yul*), or an artistic style (Tib. *li lugs*) related to Central Asia.

In the context of traditional metalwork, the word *li* is used somewhat loosely by Tibetan authors. It is generally admitted that *li* is employed to designate different types of alloys. Tibetan texts discussing casting and metallurgy speak of red *li* (Tib. *li dmar*), white *li* (Tib. *li dkar*), reddish brown *li* (Tib. *smug li*), or even iridescent *li* (Tib. *li khra*). Overall, these terms seem to reflect the hues of different types of copper alloys that assumed a dominant position in Tibetan and Himalayan metalwork.[4] Incidentally, Pad-ma dkar-po (1527 – 1592) reported in his work on metal images that red *li* and white *li* were found in the hills of Khotan (Tib. *li yul*). They were both regarded as the finest alloys for having been blessed by four different Buddhas.[5]

In some cases, the word *li ma* is used instead of *li*. It introduces a small distinction between metal alloys and metal objects, which is not strictly followed by all Tibetan authors, in particular with regard to sculpture. A chapel inside the Potala Palace in Lhasa, for instance, bears the name of *Li ma lha khang*. It is renowned for housing about eight hundred metal images (Tib. *li ma*) of divine figures (Tib. *lha sku*). Tibetan historian and lexicographer Dung-dkar blo-bzang

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[4] Erberto Lo Bue, "Statuary Metals in Tibet and the Himālayas: History, Tradition and Modern Use", *Bulletin of Tibetology*, 1-3 (1991): 23-24.

[5] *|li dmar dmar [m]dangs cung zad ser ba dang | |li dkar dkar [m]dangs cung zad ser ba yin | |'di gnyis li yul ri la thub dbang bzhis | |byin gyis brlabs pa las 'ongs mchog tu bsngags |*; "Red *li* is red in hue with some yellow, and white *li* is white in hue with some yellow. These two came to be praised as the finest since four Buddhas blessed the hills of the Country of Li (i.e. Khotan)"; Pad-ma dkar-po, *Li ma brtag pa'i rab byed smra 'dod pa'i kha rgyan*, text edited by Tashi Tsering and Ngawang Lungtok (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 2002), 295.

'phrin-las (1927 – 1997) listed a whole variety of mediums, periods, and provenances for these images.[6] In addition to various types of *li* alloys, he noted that Tibetan statues produced during the imperial period were called *chos rgyal li ma*.[7] He also explained that sculptures of Indian origin are classified according to their place of production. Hence, the *Li ma lha khang* contains statues made in Magadha in the heartland of India (Tib. *rgya gar yul dbus ma gha dha*). Other metal images manufactured in East India are commonly referred to as Eastern *li* (Tib. *shar li*), whilst sculptures created in West India are called Western *li* (Tib. *nub li*). In addition, this classification of Indian metal images also includes statues produced in Nepal (Tib. *bal po'i li ma*), Kashmir (Tib. *kha che'i li ma*), and in Khotan (Tib. *li yul gyi li ma*).

In light of the literary tradition, however, the geographical distribution and stylistic development of early metal images is not always recognised unequivocally. This situation is particularly relevant when it comes to Kashmir and Khotan, two springboards for the development of Buddhist figurative art in Tibet. According to Tāranātha (1575 – 1634), who included a chapter about artistic production in his *History of Buddhism in India*, the early formative influences on Kashmiri art came from Central and Western India.[8] Pad-ma dkar-po, for his part, gave a long description of stylistic features found in images produced in the 'Land of Kashmir in Western India'.[9]

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[6] Dung-dkar blo-bzang 'phrin-las, *Dung dkar tshig mdzod* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2002), 1955-1956.

[7] The abbreviated form *chos li* is also found in Pad-ma dkar-po's work on casting and metal images; Pad-ma dkar-po, *Li ma brtag pa*, 301.

[8] *|kha cher yang sngon dbus dang nub rnying gi rjes su 'brang |phyis hasurAdza zer ba zhig gis bris 'bur gnyis ka'i srol gsar ba btod pa'i lugs la ding sang kha che ma zer |*; "Then in Kashmir, the early [tradition] followed the ancient [styles of] Central and Western [India]. Later, someone named Hasurāja initiated a new tradition of both painting and sculpture known as Kashmiri today"; Tāranātha, *Dam pa'i chos rin po che 'phags pa'i yul du ji ltar dar ba'i tshul gsal bar ston pa dgos 'dod kun 'byung*, in *Rgya gar chos 'byung* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1986), 138A.

[9] *|rgya gar nub phyogs kha che'i yul gyi lha | |li dkar cung zad ser dang lhag par du | |li dmar rdo dang gi gu sha 'dra dang | zi khyim dag kyang 'di la mang bar snang | |sku yi tshugs rigs zhal ras ring zhing tsho[n] | |stod smad chung dang spyan bar dog pa dang | |shangs kyi sgang zlum bzang dang zhal mchu 'thug | |'gying bag bde nyams chung zhing lhu tshigs thung | |phyag zhabs mnyen zhing zangs mchu dngul spyan mang | |na bza' sku la 'khril zhing gos 'khyud ring | |rags zhib 'tsham la gtsug tor nor bu nub | |mu tig thod bcings mu tig do shal dang | |me tog rgyan gyis spras pa'ang srid pa yin | |Padma dbyigs mo chig rkyang 'dab ma che | |pad mgo cung rgyas kha sbyar rkyang pa'ang srid | |gdan khri la sogs ci rigs yod ba yin |*; "The deities from the Land of Kashmir in Western India [are made] of white *li* – slightly yellowish – and in particular of red *li*, stone, enamel-like (i.e. ivory) and also *zi khyim* (i.e. natural copper), which were to be found there in large numbers. The stylistic features of [these] images [include] long and fleshy faces. The upper and lower

Likewise, the Country of Li (i.e. Khotan) in the deserts of Central Asia was also accepted as being part of a larger Indian geography. Located to the north-west of the Tibetan plateau, it is not clear as to why this region came to be known as such in early Tibetan sources. Notwithstanding the homonymic relationship between the term *li*, 'bronze', and the name of the country, Khotan has long had a reputation for its artistic influence in Tibet. The literary tradition recalls, for instance, the episode in which King Srong-btsan sgam-po (r. *c.* 605 – 650) and his army set off to 'Khotan in India' (Tib. *rgya gar li yul*) to assume ownership of sacred statues in order to install them inside the royal temple of Khra 'brug.[10] Similarly, one of the most famous metal sculptures of the Kadampa tradition (Tib. *bka' gdams li ma*) preserved in Tibet is a forty-five centimetre-tall representation of Mañjuvajra (Tib. *'Jam dpal rdo rje*),[11] which is said to have been brought from Kho-

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[parts of the face] are small with a narrow space between the eyes. The nose bridge is round and elegant. The lips are thick. The posture is slightly uptight with short joints and limbs. Legs and arms are slender. Lips are mostly [inlaid with] copper and eyes with silver. The undergarment hugs the body and the robe enfolds its length. Depending on the quality some may be adorned with headdresses [inlaid with] gems, pearl tiaras, pearl necklaces, and floral ornaments. Some may be [seated] on a single and elegant lotus with large petals; some on a single lotus head in full bloom, small or large; some are seated on thrones and so forth according to their types"; Pad-ma dkar-po, *Li ma brtag pa*, 298.

10 *[…] slar yang phyogs bcu'i rgyal ba sras bcas kyis mgrin gcig tu khy[od] [k]yi lha'i 'khor rnams rgya gar li yul lcang ra smug po na sngar sangs rgyas 'o srung gis rab gnas mnga' gsol mdzad ba'i ˙ nye sras brgyad ˙ rje btsun sgrol ma ˙ khro bo dang bcas pa bzhugs yod ˙ de nams khyod kyi lha'i 'khor du bdan drongs shig ˙ 'dzam bu'i gling na rten de las ngo mtshar che ba med ˙ nged rnams kyis kyang grogs byed gsungs pa nam [m]kha' nas sgra bsgrags pas ˙ nang par rgyal po thugs shin tu mnyes te ˙ blon 'bangs rnams bsdus nas ˙ mdang nub lha'i 'khor rnams rgya gar li yul lcang ra smug po gzhugs yod pa'i lung bstan byung bas ˙ de gdan 'dren du 'gro dgos pas khyod rnams dmag dpung sogs la grab gyis gsungs […]*; " […] Once again the Buddhas of the ten directions and the Bodhisattvas unanimously declared: 'The retinue of your divine images, which is at the Maroon Willow Grove of Khotan in India, had been consecrated and enthroned by Buddha Kāśyapa in former times. The Eight Close Sons (Skt. *aṣṭa utaputra*), the venerable Tārā, together with Krodha reside [there]. Bring and establish them as the retinue of your divine statues! There is no sacred images more wondrous [than these] on Jambudvīpa. We too shall provide assistance'. [Their] word having resounded through the sky, the king utterly elated brought together the ministers and the subjects the following day and declared: 'Last night, I had the prophetic revelation that the retinues of the deities are at the Maroon Willow Grove of Khotan in India. Since we must depart to bring them here, you shall assemble the troops' […]". For the Tibetan rendition and a different translation of this passage; see Per K. Sørensen and Guntram Hazod, *Thundering Falcon: An Inquiry into the History and Cult of Khra-'brug Tibet's First Buddhist Temple* (Vienna : Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2005), 62-63, 341-342.

11 Michael Henss, *The Cultural Monuments of Tibet* (Munich-London-New York: Prestel, 2014), 1, 285.

tan to the Land of Snows as part of a civilizing enterprise.[12] A stylistic analysis of these images, when they exist, would certainly be useful to evaluate the historical dimension of these Buddhist narratives. In any case, we are repeatedly told that metal sculptures attributed, whether rightly or wrongly, to Khotanese workmanship were held in great esteem. When Tsong-kha-pa (1357 – 1419) officially declined an invitation made by the Yongle Emperor (1360 – 1424) in 1408, the Tibetan master dispatched sumptuous presents to the Chinese emperor amongst which a 'statue of Avalokiteśvara brought from Khotan'.[13]

Eventually, the term *li*, as in the expression *li lugs*, came to convey a certain Khotanese artistic influence on the art and architecture of the imperial period in Tibet. It is found, for example, in reference to the monastery of bSam-yas that was founded around 780 CE. If Tibetan sources generally agree that the main three-tiered temple (Tib. *dbu rtse*) had been erected following three artistic styles (i.e. Tibetan,

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[12] *rgyal ba'i lung gis zin pa'i pho brang gzhal yas khang chen mo ka gnyis ma'i rten gyi gtso bo jo bo 'jam dpal rdo rdje zhes bya ba'i lo rgyus kyi dbang du bgyis na | re phad ma las | rgyal ba yab sras tshur gson dang | |bcom ldan rig gsum mgon po yis | |mtha' 'khob li yul nas bzung ste | |gdong dmar kha ba can gyi dbus | |gti mug byol song mi'i gzugs can | |lha srin gdug pa kha ma bye | |sha za srin po gdug rtsub can | |de dag 'dul ba'i gnyan po ru | |'jam dpal khros pa'i lha dgu la | |gsol ba btab pa'i snang ba las | | 'jam dpal rdo rjes 'dul bar dgongs | |des na phyag na rdo rje yis | |po tA la yi pho brang du | |rje btsun spyan ras gzigs dbang la | |'jam dpal rdo rje bzhengs pa yi | |bdag rkyen mdzad par gsol ba btab | |de tshe rje btsun 'jam dbyangs dang | |spyan ras gzigs dang phyag rdor gsum | |gdug pa can rnams 'dul ba'i phyir | |nor bu rin chen du ma las | |skad cig dran rdzogs nyid la bzhengs | |de tshe mgon po 'od dpag med | |rig gsum mgon po 'khor dang bcas | |rgyal ba sras bcas dpag med kyis | |rab tu gnas pa'i cho ga mdzad | |ces gsungs pa ltar | […]*; "If we follow the historical tradition, the prophesy of the Victorious One tells that the one called Lord Mañjuvajra is the main recipient of worship of the The-Divine-Mansion-Of-The-Two-Pillars [inside] the assembly hall. It is said in the *Re phad ma*: 'Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, listen here! The triumphant protectors of the three families brought [this image] from the confines of the Country of Li (i.e. Khotan) to the heart of the Red Faces' Land of Snows, as a pacifying antidote against the mental obscuration of animals and those having human form, against a repository of pernicious *rākṣasa* and savage *piśāca*. As a remedy, they make supplication to the nine [manifestation] deities of Wrathful Mañjuśrī and visualised Mañjuvajra taming them. Thereupon, Vajrapāṇi requested the venerable Avalokiteśvara in the Potala Palace to confer the conditions for the realisation of Mañjuvajra. At that moment, the three venerable ones, Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, and Vajrapāṇi, created the perfect [image of the deity] in a single instant from a multitude of precious gems in order to tame all pernicious beings. Then, the saviour Amitābha, the protectors of the three families along with their retinues, a myriad of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas conducted the consecration ritual' […]"; Lhun-grub chos-'phel, *Rva sgreng dgon pa'i dkar chag* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1994) 95-96.

[13] *li'i yul nas spyan drangs ba'i spyan ras gzigs kyi sku gcig*. For Tsong-kha-pa's letter and gift exchange; see Heather Karmay, *Early Sino-Tibetan Art* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1975), 80-81.

Indian, and Chinese), they are yet at variance when it comes to the exact sequence and the style of at least one of these floors.[14] In a text ascribed to the fourteenth century, it is stressed that the upper floor of the main temple of the monastery of bSam-yas had been built in Khotanese style (Tib. *li lugs*).[15]

The possibility of a direct influence from Central Asia on Tibetan visual art took a new turn when the term *li lugs* was found by the Italian polymath Giuseppe Tucci on the walls of a chapel at g.Ye dmar in Tibet.[16] At the time, his misreading of the inscription supported the idea that the painted representation of Tathāgatas was following a Khotanese style. More recently, art historian and Tibetologist Amy Heller has argued that the syntax of the inscription indicates the exact opposite, pointing at paintings that, in fact, did not conform to Khotanese style.[17] Based on stylistic evidence and comparative analyses, it was eventually proposed that the expression *li lugs* should not be taken too literally but rather be understood as 'Central Asian style'.[18]

To compound the matter further, Amy Heller has also remarked that technical terms such as *li lugs* and *li ma lugs* are also being used by Tibetan artists today in reference to a style of depiction, in both painting and sculpture, based on the tradition of metal images, as the

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[14] Anne Chayet drew attention to the fact that it is difficult to speak of different architectural styles and stylistic characteristics related to the artwork of these storeys as the building underwent important damage and renovation phases. She suggested that the three types of floor (Tib. *rigs gsum*) mentioned in Tibetan sources might, in fact, reflect construction techniques rather than artistic trends: with a ground floor made of stone, a middle floor made of bricks, and an upper floor constructed in wood; see Anne Chayet, "Le monastère de bSam-yas: sources architecturales", *Arts asiatiques*, 43 (1988): 19-29. The use of three distinct building materials for each storey is further attested in Tibetan sources; see bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan, *rGyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1981), 18, 209.

[15] *dbu rtse rigs gsum bkod pa'i khyad par ni | 'og khang rgya nag bar khang rgya gar lugs | steng khang li yi lugs su bzhengs pa yin |*; "As for the structural characteristics of the three-tiered dBu rtse [temple]: the ground floor is Chinese; the middle floor is in Indian style; the upper floor is built in Khotanese/Central Asian style"; U-rgyan gling-pa, *Pad ma bka' thang* (Chengdu : Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1987), 508.

[16] Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica IV: Gyantse ed i suoi monasteri* (Roma: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1941), 3, 137. And again, Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica IV: Gyantse ed i suoi monasteri* (Roma: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1941), 2, 136.

[17] *bde bar gshegs 'bri ba li lugs mi mthun*; "the painted Tathāgata do not conform to the style of *li*"; Amy Heller, circular note (Nyon: 1996), 1-3.

[18] Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet* (London: Serindia Publication, 1990), 53-56, 65 n.93. Zhang Yasha, "A Study of The Sculptures of Iwang (E-Wam) Temple and an Analysis of Their Art Style", *China Tibetology*, 1 (2004), http://zt.tibet.cn/english/zt/tibetologymagazine/..%5CTibetologyMagazine/..%5CTibetologyMagazine/200312004422102321.htm (as of 1 January 2016).

phrase 'the monastic robe in the style of Indian metal images' (Tib. *rgya gar li ma lugs kyi chos gos*) would tend to indicate.[19]

What are we to conclude from this brief review with regard to the expression 'western *li*' engraved on the pedestal of the Rietberg Bodhisattva? In light of the above, three main lines of enquiry can be pursued here, namely: (i) *li* as a medium, (ii) *nub li (ma)* as a place of provenance, and (iii) *nub li (ma lugs)* as stylistic tradition. As a medium, the inscription would simply state that the Bodhisattva represented was made of a type of alloy ubiquitous in the West, in the same way that some statues are said to be made of gold (Tib. *ser gyi sku*) or silver (Tib. *ngul gyi sku*). This interpretation would accord well with the use of the genitive case (i.e. *li' i*) but is not very probative as far as the geographical reference is concerned. In a less restrictive sense, the term *nub li* could be interpreted as a metal image of Indian origin (Tib. *rgya gar li ma*), which was produced in West India (Tib. *nub li*), as opposed to statues cast in central or East India.[20] We have seen, however, that Tibetans have a rather inclusive understanding of Indian geography vis-à-vis casting and metallurgy. As a result, the traditional classification of Indian metal images and the origin of sculptures produced in the western margins of the Tibetan plateau can be somewhat conflated. A statue manufactured in Kashmir, Swat, Gilgit, or Khotan could still potentially be described as a Western metal image. This leads to the final point where the term 'Western *li*' encapsulates artistic elements representative of images from Western India. This expression would thus suggest a mode of representation, as in *li lugs* or even *li ma lugs*, where artists replicated stylistic elements that were typical of metal images produced from within an Indic-influenced cultural environment. Whatever approach is adopted, a description of the Rietberg Bodhisattva is now in order.

Iconographic and stylistic comments

The 'Bodhisattva with *gadā*' from the Berti Aschmann collection measures 13.5 centimetres (fig.1). It is likely cast in one piece with a partly hollow pedestal.[21] In the absence of a composition analysis, it is reasonable to assume a copper alloy. A separately cast halo is now lost. The figure is seated in *sattvaparyaṅkāsana* on a single lotus base,

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[19] Amy Heller, circular note (Nyon: 1996), 1-3.

[20] The term *nub li* would hence stand for longer sentences such as: *rgya gar nub phyogs kyi li ma* or *rgya gar nub phyogs nas yin pa'i li ma* (i.e. a metal image from Western India).

[21] A piece of metal fixed to the statue inside the lotus base suggests the presence of a possible tenon.

with his right leg over his left leg. Unlike other seated Buddhist images, the right knee does not rest on the pedestal but is being held in mid-air. The left hand is placed on the hip. The right hand holds the staff of a banner (Skt. *dhvaja*, *ketu*) – broken off above the hand – that was likely topped by a *cintāmaṇi*. The deity wears a *dhotī*-like garment decorated with deeply incised flower patterns tied around the hips with a beaded girdle;[22] traces of red pigment are visible on the right thigh, left calf, and buttocks. A swirling ribbon-like scarf placed over the shoulders is broken off in several places. Silver and copper inlays were used to embellish body parts and jewellery. The eyes and the *ūrṇā*, for instance, are made of silver, whilst the nipples are inlaid with copper. The figure wears bejewelled adornments, namely a necklace with multi-coloured pendants, similarly inlaid bracelets on the upper arms, and a pair of circular earrings. Beaded bracelets are also visible around the wrists and the right ankle, along with a sacred thread (Skt. *yajñopavīta*) over his left shoulder. Finally, an upswept hairstyle – damaged in its upper section – is surmounted by an elaborate crown composed of a beaded headband with flowers on the sides and a central round jewel, three large flower blossoms and crescent moons, from which two long strands of hair fall to his shoulders. Traces of blue paint in the hair and remnants of cold gold are still visible on the face and neck, attesting that the statue was preserved in a Tibetan Buddhist context.

Overall, the iconographic composition of this image exhibits the general iconographic features of a seated Bodhisattva. Moreover, the position of the left hand and the remaining part of the attribute in the right hand (Tib. *phyag mtshan*) are well-suited to support the identification of this statue as Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja, as suggested by the inscription.[23]

The artistic depiction of this Vajradhvaja can be compared to at least two other known metal images (fig.3-4).[24] These sculptures

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[22] Similar flowers can be seen on the *dhotī* of a standing Mañjuśrī attributed to Kashmir schools in Western Tibet in the eleventh century; see Ulrich von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet* (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma, 2001) 1, 152, 40A-C.

[23] This Bodhisattva is often known under the name Vajraketu. For a review of Vajradhvaja-Vajraketu's iconography; see Lokesh Chandra, *Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1999) 13, 3974-3979; Shashibala, *Comparative Iconography of the Vajradhātu-Maṇḍala and the Tattva-Saṅgraha* (New Delhi: Sharadi Rani, 1986) 164-168; Marie-Thérèse De Mallmann, *Introduction à l'iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique* (Paris: Librairie Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1975) 1, 397.

[24] For a general description of figure 3; see Ulrich von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 1, 190, 57A. For a general description of figure 4; see Von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 1, 190-191, 57B.

show two seated figures whose body proportions, modelling, clothing, and ornaments are strikingly similar to the stylistic features of the Rietberg Bodhisattva. They have been identified as the goddess Mālā (Tib. *'phreng ba ma*) and a form of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (Tib. *'jam dpal*) by Ulrich Von Schroeder who attributed these images to Kashmiri workmanship – or schools – in Western Tibet around the eleventh century.[25] These three sculptures represent a closely related corpus of sculptures and point towards a similar artistic tradition or workshop.

Within this group of sculptures, the Rietberg Bodhisattva and the goddess Mālā display strong stylistic similarities. Notwithstanding their respective iconography, the two images are similar in nearly all respects as far as the description and photographic documentation allow us to judge.[26] The goddess from the *Li ma lha khang* in Lhasa measures 13.7 centimetres, as against 13.5 for Vajradhvaja. It is cast in one piece with a hollow pedestal. Both figures had separately cast aureoles. The goddess Mālā is also seated in the noble attitude on a single lotus base, which is the perfect replica of Vajradhvaja's pedestal; here again, a distinctive feature is the fact that the right knee does not touch the ground. The relief work of her garment follows the same fashion, with stripes of eight-petalled flowers outlined in black and the presence of a similar roundel motif on the left knee, whilst traces of red pigment are also visible in the inner thighs. Unlike Vajradhvaja's, Mālā's ribbon-like scarf is not broken off but swirls around her arms, with similar beaded fringes, and two large fork-tailed ends at the level of her shoulders; an interesting element is the later addition of a small thread with a wafer seal attached to the lower left loop of the scarf. The most salient elements for a comparison between these two images are the ornaments; with the major exception, however, that the use of inlays has not been reported in the description of the second image.[27] They include a beaded girdle with a yet slightly different central buckle-like ornament, beaded bracelets and anklets, identical circular earrings clipped onto the earlobes, and

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[25] Von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 1, 190, 57A-57B. The identification of Mālā is congruent with the iconography of the goddess. The image, however, seems to lack female body forms. Alternatively, this statue could be related to the depiction of vajra-bodhisattvas such as Vajrahāsa, Vajrarakṣa, or Vajrayakṣa, who also hold their hands in front of the chest in a similar fashion.

[26] The face of Mālā was later on covered in cold gold and her hair painted in blue according to a Tibetan fashion and religious praxis. The difference of patina between the two images can be imputed to various reasons; including an exposition to the smoke and soot of butter lamps in a traditional Tibetan shrine for Mālā; anti-tarnish cleaning and polishing in the case of Vajradhvaja as remnants of cold gold can attest; and the conditions in which the photographs were taken.

[27] Von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 1, 190, 57A.

a similar headdress. The angle of the photography and the use of cold gold on Mālā's chest does not allow for a clear view of her necklace. The central arrow-like pendant with roundel, however, is reminiscent of the one on Vajradhvaja's neck. Finally, the very distinctive pair of beaded bracelets on the upper arms of these figures, with three dangling ornaments and stylised fleurs-de-lys on top, are identical in all aspects.

In light of the great similarities between these two metal images, it is tempting to reconsider their stylistic provenance. As a reminder, the Rietberg Bodhisattva has been ascribed to ninth-tenth century Kashmir, whilst the goddess Mālā has been attributed to Kashimiri schools in Western Tibet around the eleventh century. There are grounds, I will argue, to refute the first provenance and to question the second attribution.

To begin with, the body proportions of these two figures differ considerably from ninth-tenth century Kashmiri metal images. In particular, the elongated torsos, well-proportioned chests, and lean shoulders do not accord well with the triangular upper body, broad chests, and rounded shoulders of many metal sculptures from Kashmir. In fact, the manner in which the tripartite trunk (i.e. developed chest, slender wasp waist, and pronounced cruciform abdomen) is modelled relate these two sculptures to a Western Indo-Tibetan style. But yet again, the Rietberg Bodhisattva and the goddess from the *Li ma lha khang* differ quite significantly from eleventh-century bronzes from Western Tibet, with their general stiffness and often disproportionate body parts.

Likewise, the facial features of these images seem to defy easy classification, whilst retaining *un-je-ne-sais-quoi* familiar to both Kashmiri statues and metal images from Western Tibet produced between the tenth and eleventh centuries. Stylistically, their heads are rather well-proportioned, avoiding the round and full faces with fleshy cheeks of most Kashmiri images, and the slightly oversized heads with oval faces of later Western Tibetan copies altogether. It combines the heavy upper eyelids with high bow-like brows of traditional Kashmiri works, yet avoids the low foreheads of the latter. In particular, the position of the protruding *ūrṇā* in the middle of the forehead does not accord well with Kashmiri metal images – produced in Kashmir or by Kashmiri artists – in which the tuft of hair is more often than not positioned between the converging lines of the upper eyebrows, almost at the root of the nose. Finally, I see no visual parameters to evaluate with any degree of certainty the nose, mouth, and gently marked chin; while evading the large nose with rounded ridge of early pieces, these features do not seem to conform to the

mannerism of Western Tibetan images based on Kashmiri models either.

Another stylistic feature can be raised against a Kashmiri provenance or Kashmiri workmanship in Western Tibet. The depiction of the *yajñopavīta* of the Rietberg Bodhisattva, as well as to a large extent that of the goddess Mālā, is of dubious appearance.[28] In both cases, the sacred thread runs down the left side of the body and joins the girdle or, more likely, disappears below the *dhotī*-like garment. Furthermore, the initiation thread does not resurface on the right side of the body, and was clearly not represented on Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja's back. According to art historian and Tibetologist Christian Luczanits it could suggest that the depiction of the *yajñopavīta* was an artistic and iconographical convention no longer clearly understood by craftsmen. This would exclude, in theory, the hand of a Kashmiri master who must have been accustomed to the religious meaning of the *yajñopavīta* and its cultural significance within a Buddhist context. As a result, the simplification of the thread would indicate that the image was, perhaps, made by a foreign artist, either trained in Kashmir or trained by a Kashmiri master.[29]

The possibility that we are dealing here with foreign craftsmanship in a Western Indo-Tibetan idiom becomes particularly interesting when looking at Vajradhvaja and Mālā's pedestals. As noted earlier, the fluted moon disc atop a lotus flower, with a single row of downward-pointing broad lotus petals, double-lobed elements, and alternate sharped-edged petal tips, is the same in both images. The treatment of these petals is generally absent from the art of Greater Kashmir and Western Tibet. It differs substantially from the long, broad, and plain lotus petals that are often associated with the Swat Valley, and which came to influence west Kashmir and Gilgit. One must acknowledge that in a small number of cases, however, the lotus seat of sculptures related to Kashmir and Western Tibetan bear

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[28] Compare with the depiction of the sacred thread in the front and back of figure 4 where it has been stylized; see Von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 1, 190-191, 57B-C.

[29] In the case of the example discussed by Luczanits, the geographical provenance of the artist is attributed to the Western Himalayas. I see no reason to limit the sphere of Kashmiri influence to the East and exclude the possibility of artists from regions to the north and northeast of Kashmir to be included here; see Christian Luczanits, "From Kashmir to Western Tibet: The Many Faces of a Regional Style", Rob Linrothe, *Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, Evanston: Northwestern University, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art), 111, 119.

some resemblance with the rows of lotus petals described above, suggesting perhaps a regional variation of the same theme (fig.5-6).[30]

A good example of this is found at Dras in Lower Ladakh where a stone sculpture representing Bodhisattva Maitreya offers the closest depiction of these lotus petals for the Western Himalayan region (fig.7). The life-size sculpture is dated to the seventh-eighth century by art historian Rob Linrothe who analyses several stone images as part of a wider artistic movement in Zangskar and Ladakh which he assimilates to a 'Kashmiricisation'.[31] Linrothe does not discuss the pedestal of the Maitreya image but notes how the Bodhisattva's vase (Skt. *kuṇḍika*) in the lower left hand is curiously reminiscent of Sogdian and Tang Chinese ewers. With the stone sculpture in Dras, we are certainly reminded of extensive cultural contacts between Kashmir and Ladakh, through which pilgrims, merchants, and artists would often travel to Yarkand or Kothan in Central Asia after the fifth century.[32] In this respect, the lotus base of the Rietberg image would seem to attest to an artistic trend well established further East.

This type of lotus seat appears in Buddhist imagery as early as the sixth century. It is seen in stone and metal sculptures produced in China from the Northern Wei Dynasty (535 – 557) all the way through the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907) (fig.8).[33] Furthermore, sculptures retrieved from the Tarim Basin underscore the long history and popularity of this type of lotus representations in Central Asia. Three

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[30] Figure 5 shows a seated Buddha from the O.C. Sud Collection in Shimla, India, dated from the eleventh century. Compared to the lotus leaves under review, the heart-shaped central part of the petal is yet quite different with the absence of bulging elements. Image taken from Deborah Klimburg-Salter, *Tabo, a Lamp for the Kingdom: Early Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Western Himalayas* (Milan, Skira, 1997), 170. As for Figure 6, it shows a seated Buddha Maitreya from the Nyingjei Lam Collection, currently on display at the Rubin Museum of Art, New-York, USA. This metal image is attributed to Kashmir and dated from the late eighth-ninth century. Here, the lotus petals are more closely related to our images. They still differ considerably in shape, design, and arrangement, with the main petals being positioned largely apart from one another, leaving space for a second row of alternate petals. Image from Rob Linrothe, *Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, Evanston: Northwestern University, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art), 68.

[31] Rob Linrothe, "Origins of the Kashmiri Style in the Western Himalayas: Sculpture of the 7th-11th Centuries", *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (7th to 13th Centuries)*, edited by Carmen Meinert (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 147-188.

[32] For a discussion on trades routes and early stone sculptures in Ladakh; see Phuntsog Dorjay, "Embedded in Stone – Early Buddhist Rock Art of Ladakh", *Art and Architecture in Ladakh: Cross-Cultural Transmissions in the Himalayas and Karakoram*, edited by Erberto Lo Bue and John Bray (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 35-67.

[33] Figure 8 shows a seated Bodhisattva in a pensive pose measuring 54.4 centimetres and dated 544 CE based on a dedicatory inscription; see 金申, 海外及港台藏历代佛像珍品纪年图鉴 (山西出版集团.山西人民出版社: 2007), 121.

images deserve further considerations here. The first image shows a stucco relief fragment that served to decorate Buddhist monuments. The artefact was brought back from Khotan by the Ōtani expedition team and is currently kept in the National Museum of Korea (fig.9). [34] It shows a Buddhas in *dhyānamudrā* seated on a lotus seat seen from above. The double-lobed lotus petals are slightly more elongated, yet, they generally conform to the style of petals discussed here above. Other stucco reliefs with similar petals were also retrieved from the site of Dandān-oiliq to the north-west of Khotan (fig. 10).[35] Finally, a fragment of a wooden panel from Khotan dated to the seventh-eighth century features a seated Buddha flanked by a standing Bodhisattva (fig.11).[36] Notwithstanding its rough cut appearance, the Khotanese version of the Buddha's seat closely resembles the lotus base of the Rietberg Bodhisattva, with its moon disc atop a row of downward-facing lotus petals, double humps, and lower leaf tips.

Discussion

An impressive corpus of Buddhist metal images attributed to North-Western India, Greater Kashmir, Western Tibet and beyond has found its way into museums, private collections, auction catalogues, and academic publications in the last twenty years or so. Although these sculptures seem to form a coherent whole, art historians are often at loss when it comes to locating the exact geographical production of these works. Moreover, very few of them appear to be securely datable objects and the bulk of metal images from these regions are usually attributed quite loosely to the tenth and eleventh centuries. Therefore, it is generally believed that a multitude of small and independent metal workshops developed by the end of the first millennium; usually on the basis of stylistic similarities observed in groups of images, rather than based on archaeological data, epigraphic evidence, and literary testimonies. As a result, these metal statues regularly fall under convenient yet rather imprecise labels such as 'Western Tibet', 'Kashmiri style in Western Tibet', 'Western Himalayas', 'Western Trans-Himalayas', or even 'Kashmiri style in Central Asia'.

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[34] It is believed that these ornamental motifs adorned larger statues dated from the Tang Dynasty; see 金申, 海外及港台藏历代佛像珍品纪年图鉴, 580.

[35] M. Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 2, LIV, D.II.

[36] A sixth-seventh century date is generally given for the wood carving preserved in the National Museum in New Delhi. For a later date adopted here; see Linrothe, *Collecting Paradise*, 33.

It is interesting to note that the complexity of this situation may have been experienced in Tibet as well, conceivably as early as the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries. Judging from a literary genre dedicated to metallurgy and casting (Tib. *li ma brtag pa*), metal images were identified and grouped under four distinct headings: Indian, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Chinese. In the case of statues made in Indian style, sculptures were then classified according to their provenance, with further distinctions between images ascribed to Central, Eastern, Western, Southern, or Northern India. It is in this context that the term 'Western *li*', which came to be incised on the lotus base of the Rietberg Bodhisattva, must be considered. But as we have seen, Western metal images cast in Indian style could easily include a variety of sculptures produced in North-Western India, Kashmir, or even Central Asia.[37] Whilst caution may be appropriate with regard to the Tibetan classification of Indian metal images, the question remains as to whether Tibetan Buddhist masters, artists, and craftsmen were able to clearly identify the provenance and artistic trend of sculptures sometimes produced centuries before them.

In this regard, the inscription on the Rietberg Bodhisattva is unique. First of all, it does not seem to have any equivalence with other known bronzes bearing meritorious or devotional inscriptions.[38] Secondly, Tibetan inscriptions engraved on metal sculptures from Kashmir in the eleventh century offer the means for a palaeographic analysis. A comparison of the headed script (Tib. *dbu can*) used to inscribe these statues reveals that the engraving of the Rietberg Bodhisattva can hardly be attributed to that period.[39] In this con-

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[37] In a recent article about the collection of metal sculptures kept in the *Li ma lha khang* in Lhasa, a Tibetan researcher from the Potala Palace notes that Western Indian images include statues from Kashmir (Tib. *kasmir*), *Ti li dza* (?), and Xinjiang (Tib. *yu gur*); see bDe-skyid, "Pho brang po tA la'i li ma lha khang gi li ma'i sku brnyan skor cung zad gleng ba", *Pho brang po tA la*, 1, 2012, 45-49.

[38] Meritorious inscriptions usually bear the name of a donor and the reason for its commissioning (e.g. the death of a relative). Conversely, a devotional inscription may simply give the name of the figure portrayed but would usually be accompanied with expressions such as 'I bow down' (Tib. *phyag 'tshal lo*) and 'homage to' (Tib. *la na mo*).

[39] The writing style of the inscription on the Rietberg Bodhisattva differs significantly from Tibetan inscriptions datable to the eleventh century with their rounded letters /la/ and /'a/, stretched vowel *gi gu*, and typical subjoined /ya/. For example, the Kamru Avalokiteśvara bearing the name of the eleventh century translator Vīryabhadra (Tib. *Byi rya ba dra*); see Amy Heller, "Observations on an 11th century Tibetan inscription on a statue of Avalokiteśvara", *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, 14 (2008): 107-116; many engraved sculptures in the possession of members of the royal family of Guge, such as the Buddha from Dangkhar offered to Lha bla-ma Zhi-ba-'od; see Lobsang Nyima (Yannick) Laurent, "Lha bla ma Zhi ba 'od's Eighth Century Bronze from Gilgit", *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, 26 (2013): 195-214; a statue of a Buddha in Kashmiri style acquired by King rTse-lde;

text, the singularity of the formula supports the assumption that Tibetans were aware of metal sculptures of non-Tibetan origin – possibly even workmanship – either past or present. This would explain, perhaps, why it was felt necessary to label both the identity and artistic affiliation of this image. With his face painted in cold gold, it is reasonable to believe that the Bodhisattva image was worshipped and preserved alongside other Buddhist memorabilia and curiosities of a distant past, which so often fill up Tibetan shrines.

In the same way, the goddess Mālā in Lhasa was equally revered as a 'religious artefact'. As most sacred metal images in the hands of the Tibetans, her hair was painted blue, her face covered with gold, and her facial features redrawn out of devotion. But this image had also been a gift before being installed in the *Li ma lha khang*. The wafer seal attached to her scarf attests to a tradition of gift giving whereby religious hierarchs or rulers would generally bestow sculptures of spiritual significance; due to their symbolic value, provenance, or history. A small thread was then attached with the personal seal of the donor – whose identity is now lost in the case of Mālā – and sometimes even listed in an official document dispatched along with other presents. [40]

As memorabilia and Buddhist relics, Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja and the goddess Mālā ended up in Tibet at a time that can no longer be specified. Nonetheless, their identical size and stylistic resemblance call attention to a similar artistic trend and even workshop production. More importantly, these elements strongly suggest that the two

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Amy Heller, "Indian Style, Kashmiri Style: Aesthetic of Choice in Eleventh Century Tibet", *Orientations*, 32, 10 (2011): 18-23; and also sculptures belonging to the royal prince Nāgarāja (Tib. *Na gar a dza*) amongst which the standing Buddha from the Cleveland Museum of Art; see Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path: Esoteric Buddhism Art on the Trans-Himalayan Trade Route* (Los Angeles: UCLA Art Council: 1982), 103. I am grateful to Amy Heller for sharing the visual material needed for these comparisons.

[40] On the general practice of precious gifts, including old gilded statues; see Emma Martin, "Fit for a King? The Significance of Gift Exchange between the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and King George V", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 25, 1 (2014): 71-98. A well-documented case is the famous Buddha image offered by the Thirteen Dalai Lama to Russian explorer and agent Pyotr Kuzmich Kozlov (1863 – 1935). The body of the statue was wrapped, sealed, and marked with the message "To be offered to Kozlov" (Tib. *kho dzo lob par sprod rgyu*). The sacred image was then entrusted to Agvan Dorzhiev (1854 – 1938) with a letter from the Dalai Lama in which the religious monarch requested his emissary to ensure that the statue would arrive according to the attached list of gifts (Tib. *'bul rgyu tho*). For a photograph of this Buddha; see Yulia I. Elikhina, *Abode of Charity: Tibetan Buddhist Art* (Saint Petersburg: The State Hermitage Publishers, 2015), 120. For the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's letter; see Jampa Samten & Nikolay Tsyrempilov, *From Tibet Confidentially: Secret correspondence of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to Agvan Dorzhiev, 1911 – 1925* (New Delhi: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives), 52, 89, 121.

pieces were initially part of a set of images. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that these two figures are not the most common deities of the Buddhist pantheon, nor do they figure prominently in popular Buddhist imagery. It seems only reasonable to locate the production of these two sculptures within the sphere of higher esoteric Buddhist praxis. In fact, there is little doubt that they had once belonged to the same ritualistic context before being scattered to the four winds.

In effect, these two metal figures would not have had much of a presence outside a three-dimensional *maṇḍala*. It is generally believed that such meditational supports – and the esoteric texts that accompanied them – were available in North-Western India, Kashmir, and Central Asia by the tenth century, if not earlier. Series of individually cast deities of small sizes, which are usually ascribed to the broad category of Western Indo-Tibetan images, highlight the development of three-dimensional arrangements of particular *maṇḍalas* during the following centuries.[41] If the textual tradition suggests the use of a large array of root texts and esoteric imagery, an important number of artistic depictions known to us today points to the visual representations of Buddha Vairocana's *maṇḍala*.

The rise of Buddha Vairocana from the mid-sixth century onwards did not only turn him into an iconic figure in China and Central Asia, but also contributed to promoting the royal cult of the Tibetan Tsanpo (Tib. *btsan po*) in Tibet by the eighth century.[42] The rapid visual transformation of Vairocana, linked to the development of esoteric literature, eventually culminated in a distinctive period of architectural and artistic expression during which Vairocana's *maṇḍalas* gained popularity in Central and then West Tibet.[43] Not so surpris-

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[41] For an example of free-standing figures of a three-dimensional *maṇḍala*, see four of the sixteen vajra-bodhisattvas attributed by Ulrich von Schroeder to Kashmir schools in Western Tibet. These images measure between 17-18 centimetres and date from the eleventh century; see Von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 1, 170-171, 49B-E.

[42] For the multifaceted aspects of the artistic development of Buddha Vairocana; see Christian Luczanits, "The many faces of Buddha Vairocana", Jan Van Alphen (ed.) *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide* (New-York: Rubin Museum, 2013), 13-23.

[43] A relevant evidence from Central Tibet is provided by the main temple of *bSam yas* monastery. According to the description in the *rGyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*, it is recalled that the principal image of the third floor is Sarvavid Vairocana hence attesting to a general depiction of a *vajradhātumaṇḍala*. It is worthy of note that the sixteen vajra-bodhisattvas of his retinue are all subsumed under the mention of Vajradhvaja; *steng khang gi gtso bo sangs rgyas rnam par snang mdzad kun tu zhal re re la 'khor gnyis re| byang chub sems dpa' nye ba'i sras brgyad| nang gi lha byang chub sems dpa' rdo rje rgyal mtshan la sogs pa phyogs bcu'i sangs rgyas byang sems| khro bo mi g.yo ba dang phyag na rdo rje| bzo rgya gar gyi lugs su bzhengs|*; "In the upper chapel, the main [image] is Buddha Sarvavid Vairocana – each head having two retinues –, the eight close sons, the inner deities [of the *maṇḍala*] Vajradhvaja and

ingly perhaps, Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja and the goddess Mālā feature amongst the core assembly of this deity.

According to prescriptive expositions found in tantric literature, the root *maṇḍala* of Vairocana known as *vajradhātumaṇḍala* is usually composed of thirty-seven deities, namely five *tathāgatas* or *jinas*, sixteen vajra-bodhisattvas, eight offering goddesses, and four gatekeepers. Within this arrangement, Vajradhvaja features as one of the sixteen vajra-bodhisattvas, whilst Mālā with her garland is usually depicted as one of the eight offering goddesses.[44] Traditionally, they both reside in the southern quarter of the *vajradhātumaṇḍala*. The question therefore arises whether the number fourteen in the inscription could refer to a set of free-standing images and their position within this specific *maṇḍala*. From a simple structural arrangement, whereby each *tathāgata* is surrounded by four vajra-bodhisattvas, Vajradhvaja would indeed occupy the fourteenth position as part of Ratnasambhava's retinue.[45] But in some Tibetan painted representations his position is swapped with Bodhisattva Vajrabhāṣa's (Tib. *rdo rje bzhad pa*) and thus Vajradhvaja comes fifteenth. This way of counting the deities of the *vajradhātumaṇḍala* does not conform, however, to the textual traditions established in Tibet. In the *Sarvatathāgata Tattvasaṃgrahanām Mahāyānasūtra* (Tib. *de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi de kho na nyid bsdus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*) Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja is listed sixteenth. Likewise, if we follow Ānandagarbha's commentary, the list of deities exactly coincides with the Tibetan ritual practice of *Kun rig rnam par snang mdzad* (Skt. *sarvavid vairocana*).[46] Here again, Vajradhvaja occupies the sixteenth position.[47]

This last arrangement, for instance, served as the basis for the iconographic programme of the main temple at Tabo in 1042. It replicated a three-dimensional architectural and artistic expression of the *vajradhātumaṇḍala* of Sarvavid Vairocana.[48] It is worth noting some iconographic divergences between our metal images and the clay

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so forth, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions, the wrathful Acala and Vajrapāṇi, the workmanship of which is in Indian style"; bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan, *rGyal rabs,* 21, 208.

44 She may also appear under the form of Vajramālā, for instance in the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgrahatantra*; see Shashibala, *Comparative Iconography*, 1986, 37-38.

45 The four vajra-bodhisattvas surrounding each *tathāgata* are represented clockwise, starting with *tathāgata* Vairocana in the centre, Akṣobhya in the East, Ratnasambhava in the South, Amitābha in the West, and Amoghasiddhi in the North.

46 Shashibala, *Comparative Iconography*, 1986, 37-40.

47 I am grateful to dKa'chen bLo-bzang dus-'khor from Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in India for confirming the exact sequence of the thirty-seven deities of *Kun rig*.

48 Klimburg-Salter, *Tabo*, 1997, 100-103.

sculptures in Tabo, particularly in the ritualistic hand gestures (Skt. *mudrā*).[49] If it is difficult to say whether these iconographical departures are based on different textual traditions or due to regional and artistic variations, they raise once again the knotty problem of the provenance of our images.

In the course of this paper, several pieces of evidence challenge the view that the 'Bodhisattva with *gadā*' in the Rietberg Museum should be attributed to Kashmir or to Kashmiri workmanship in Western Tibet. The presence of a closely related bronze in Lhasa shows that both images were likely to belong to a same set of free-standing metal sculptures used to provide visual support for the visualisation of a *vajradhātumaṇḍala*. This type of artistic expedient, as we have seen, is linked to the rise of esoteric literature and the representations of *maṇḍalas*. The production of these two metal images is thus in line with religious praxis and artistic depictions well-established in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

From a stylistic point of view, the Rietberg Bodhisattva and the goddess Mālā generally conform to a trend of metal images datable to the turn of the first millennium. As expressed earlier, a series of stylistic features are however at variance with well-known examples of sculptures produced in Kashmir and Western Tibet around that time. In particular, the exceptionally fine depiction of Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja displays bodily proportions and facial features that cannot be easily categorised. Furthermore, the oversimplification of the sacred thread on both images raises justifiable doubts as to the Kashimiri origin of these statues. Finally, and to compound matters, the uniqueness of these metal works is further emphasised by a choice of lotus seats quite unusual for the regions of Kashmir and Western Tibet, although largely attested in Central Asia and China.

What is certain, however, is that the Rietberg Bodhisattva was acquired by Tibetans in later times as the writing style of the inscription cannot be attributed to the eleventh century. They correctly identified the bronze as Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja, which suggests that the banner in his right hand was not broken when they engraved his name, and recognised the foreign provenance of this image. His face and neck were covered with gold, his hair painted blue. It was probably installed on a shrine and the number fourteen was assigned to him, perhaps as part of a list of religious items (Tib. *brten deb*) belonging to a particular chapel or monastery. I am of the view that the unusual inscription incised at the feet of Vajradhvaja eventually operated as

[49] In the case of Mālā's hands, they are turned towards her chest in the metal image from Lhasa, whilst they used to hold the garland outwards in Tabo. Likewise, the left hand of the Rietberg Bodhisattva rests on the upper thigh, whilst Vajradhvaja/Vajraketu's left fist is held upside-down at the thigh in Tabo.

the caption of a museum showcase. It helped pilgrims and non-monastics to identify a rather secondary deity.[50] Most importantly, it drew attention to its foreign workmanship production, highlighting its sacred and most revered origin as a metal image from West India.

Combining stylistic observations with a review of the term 'Western *li*', we cannot exclude the possibility that the Rietberg Bodhisattva and the goddess Mālā in Lhasa were produced further East, in regions that once fell under the general conception of Western India. The actual presence of copper ore deposits located north of the Kunlun Mountains between Yarkand and Khotan,[51] the recurring accounts of Khotanese artistic influence in Tibetan sources, and the long political history and cultural connections between Tibet and the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Khotan provide a valid contextual framework to locate the production of these images. As we have seen, Tsong-kha-pa's gift to the Yongle emperor underlines the fact that Khotanese sculptures were still familiar in Tibet in the fifteenth century. Together with those from Kashmir and North-western India, Khotanese statues were soon to be categorised as *nub li* in specific Tibetan texts discussing the metal casting of images.

Notwithstanding a dearth of material vestiges and artefacts attributed to the latter phase of Khotanese Buddhist art, from the eighth to the beginning of the eleventh century, Khotan had long been a pilgrimage destination and transit point for the spread of Buddhism between India and China.[52] Luxury goods, Buddhist texts, and devotional objects circulated through the southern and northern routes of the Silk Road along with traders, monks, and pilgrims. Portable shrines and statues retrieved from Khotan demonstrate interactions between Kashmir, Gilgit, and surrounding cultures. A Kashmiri statue of a seated Buddha excavated in Domoko, for instance, bears witness to the vitality of cultural exchanges in the region, prefiguring perhaps for their Tibetan neighbours competing aesthetic trends.[53]

It is equally noteworthy that in a few cases Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja appears in literary texts related to Khotan. He is mentioned,

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[50] The labelling of deities and religious figures – in particular statues – for the sake of pilgrims and worshippers is still a current practice inside Tibetan chapels and temples today. Their names are usually handwritten or printed out on paper and these modern captions are variously fixed, taped, or glued to the religious images.

[51] Lo Bue, *Statuary Metals in Tibet*, 1991, 14.

[52] Erika Forte, "A Journey 'to the land on the Other Side', Buddhist Pilgrimage and Travelling Objects from the Oasis of Khotan", Patrick Mc Allister et al. (ed.), *Cultural Flows across the Western Himalaya* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 151-187).

[53] Heller, "Indian Style, Kashmiri Style", 18-23.

for instance, with other great Bodhisattvas of the *bhadrakalpa* in a Khotanese translation of the *Sumukhasūtra* commissioned in 943.[54] More significantly, he grants protection against the red-faced Tibetans by pronouncing a *dhāraṇī* for the safeguard of Khotan in the Tibetan recension of a text known as the *Vimalaprabhāparipṛcchāsūtra*.[55] Despite these brief literary occurrences, the statue of Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja in the Rietberg Museum should likely be connected to the development of esoteric literature and the figure of Vairocana, as we have seen.

The cult of Buddha Vairocana had strong roots in Central Asia and China even before the emergence of tantric literature. As a Buddha of cosmic dimensions he features prominently in the *Avataṃsakasūtra* literature, a corpus of Mahāyāna texts fully translated into Chinese by the Indian monk Buddhabhadra (359 – 429) from an original Sanskrit version acquired in Khotan in the fifth century. In it, the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* already announced in essence the doctrinal concept of *dharmadhātu*. With these texts, images of Vairocana started to circulate by the mid-sixth century. The cosmic Buddha thus became an important theme in Khotanese and Central Asian paintings where he is depicted as the source of all existing phenomena in the universe.[56] Whilst painted representations of *maṇḍalas* have not been found amongst Khotanese vestiges, minor iconographic themes suggest that the ancient Buddhist kingdom acted as "a transitional stage in the evolution of the art of Vajrayāna".[57] However, there is material evidence of representations of *vajradhātumaṇḍalas* produced under the Tang in the late eighth and ninth centuries. Esoteric Buddhist art at Dunhuang, where the activity of Khotanese Buddhist patrons is largely attested in the tenth century,[58] underscores "a unique blend of cross-cultural iconographical themes and styles (…) that are often

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[54] Ronald E. Emmerick, "The Khotanese *Sumukhasūtra*", *Indologica Taurinensia*, 23-24 (1997-98): 387-421.

[55] Lokesh Chandra, "Suvarna-bhasottama and the defence of Serindic Khotan", 年西域文献座谈会 (中国国家图书馆: 2006). http://www.nlc.gov.cn/newhxjy/wjls/wjqcsy/wjd17g/201011/P020101123697628704580.pdf (as of 1 January 2016). Frederick William Thomas, *Tibetan literary texts and documents concerning Chinese Turkestan. Part I: Literary texts* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1935) 32, 139-258.

[56] For example, the mural fragment of a Cosmic Vairocana from Khotan preserved in the National Museum in Delhi; see Joanna Williams, "The Iconography of Khotanese Painting", *East and West*, 23, 1-2 (1973): 117-118, 131. Also, a painting of Buddha Vairocana in Cave 13 at Kizil in the ancient kingdom of Kucha; see Denise Patry Leidy, *The Art of Buddhism: An introduction to its history and meaning* (Boston-London: Shambhala, 2008), 70.

[57] Williams, *The Iconography of Khotanese Painting*, 116.

[58] 張廣達 / 榮新江, 于闐史叢考, 西域歷史語言研究叢書 (北京: 中國人民大學出版社, 2008).

strongly informed and influenced by those of India, Tibet, and the Uighur kingdom in Turfan".[59] The Islamic takeover of Khotan by the Qarakhanids around 1006 likely prevented an artistic expansion of some of the most sophisticated forms of esoteric imagery, which were to flourish in Western Tibet in the following centuries.

As a result of these epigraphic and stylistic considerations, I propose to read the inscription engraved on the statue of the Berti Aschmann collection as follows: "A metal image of Bodhisattva Vajradhvaja from Western [India]". The singularity of this formulaic phrase confirms the great mobility of religious objects within the Buddhist world. It underscores the Tibetans' fascination for Buddhist images from the holy land of India, a geographical notion that was extended to the Buddhist kingdoms of the Silk Road. By exhibiting a combination of features reminiscent of the art of Western Tibet and the art of the Tarim Basin, the Rietberg Bodhisattva reminds us of the complex artistic interplays at work by the turn of the first millennium. Last but not least, it recalls once again the important role attributed to Khotanese imagery and artists in the Tibetan literary tradition, a recurring trope that still awaits more tangible evidence.

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[59] Henrik H. Sørenson, "Esoteric Buddhist Art under the Tang", *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, edited by Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørenson, and Richard K. Payne (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 401-418.

Figure 1

Figure 2

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Figure 10

Figure 11