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# CARRYING BUDDHISM

## THE ROLE OF METAL ICONS IN THE SPREAD AND DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM

ROBERT L. BROWN



20TH J. GONDA LECTURE 2012





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## Carrying Buddhism: The Role of Metal Icons in the Spread and Development of Buddhism

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## INTRODUCTION

The sixth century in South and Southeast Asia appears to be a period of several major cultural and artistic changes. The period needs to be bracketed by the preceding fifth and the following seventh centuries as the dating of the various shifts and innovative creations can rarely be dated precisely. Just a loose listing of a few of the changes of which I am thinking includes in South Asia the rapid increase in building Hindu temples, major changes in the organization of royal courts in North India, an increase in violence in Indian society, the acceptance of the Brahman caste as socially superior, and Mahayana Buddhism becoming prominent, while in Southeast Asia we have the earliest Indian-related icons occurring with Vishnu images at around 500 CE and the explosion of art that followed, associated with communities of the language groups of the Mon, Pyu, Khmer, and Cham. The essay published here presents an as of yet unnoticed artistic change that occurred in the sixth-century but that had a possibly major impact, not only in terms of art, but also in terms of religious and cultural changes as well.

The artistic change was the creation of metal icons. It is often assumed that metal icons of the Buddha and of other Buddhist deities were of widespread use and distribution in the earliest art of India. The reality, however, is very different, as metal icons became of importance only from the fifth, but more significantly from the sixth and seventh, centuries. Before the sixth century there are very few examples of metal Buddhist icons in India. The history of metal imagery in South Asia is more complicated when considering the use of metal icons in Gandhara, and by extension in China. Yet evidence from Gandhara and China demonstrates a curious story of metal technology that points toward a shift in technology in the sixth century that comes from India and coincides with the sudden burst in numbers of metal icons at this time, not only in India but also in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

The paper begins by proposing the fifth century CE date for the earliest metal icons in India. We need to test to what extent the argument regarding the late appearance of metal icons finds support, and what the argument implies for previous art historical and Buddhological studies. The role of metal images in Gandhara and China is next explored, then metal images in Sri Lanka and in South India. These discussions provide several links among the art from South Asia, China, and Southeast Asia. Turning finally to Buddhism, the paper suggests how the development of metal icons might have affected the development of Buddhist narratives, and in conclusion how the spread of metal icons could have altered some types of Buddhist practices.

The development of art and culture in sixth century South and Southeast Asia needs an extensive and detailed study to determine the nature and importance of the changes and how they can be described and explained. As scholars put together the evidence, the impact of metal icons will, I think, be one of the factors to consider.

#### EARLY METAL IMAGES IN INDIA

The earliest metal icons from India date to the fifth century, but these are very few and their dating is controversial. Even the sixth century produced few metal icons. The lack of early metal icons may strike scholars as surprising, as the scholarly literature has tended to assume that metal work was of importance in Indian art from the earliest periods. For example, M.N. Deshpande writes in a chapter in the book entitled *The Great Tradition: Indian Bronze Masterpieces* that Amaravati was “where a flourishing school of bronze sculpture created metal images of great beauty” (Deshpande 1988, p. 31). We will see, however, in the discussion below that there were probably no metal images produced at Amaravati.

I am not undertaking here to identify all the earliest metal icons from India. My point rather is to place their production beginning very late, particularly when the metal images are considered beside the enormous production of stone sculpture beginning from the Maurya Period (ca. third c. BCE), that is some eight centuries earlier than the metal icon production. Indeed, even the fifth century production of metal icons is slow until about the seventh century. There are virtually no metal icons datable up until the Gupta Period (fourth-fifth c. CE) in North India. Metal images of deities are almost entirely absent (a thorough survey of early metal objects in South Asia is Agrawala 1977). The famous large metal images from Daimabad in Maharashtra are apparently early, perhaps second millennium BCE, although they are surface finds and are unique, making dating difficult, and in any regard they are not icons of deities (Dhavalikar 1988). It is not until the Kushan period (first – third c. CE) that we have metal icons of deities, and these are small and but a couple of examples. Two tiny bronzes of apparently Hindu deities were excavated at Sonkh near Mathura that date to the Kushan period (Hartel 1977, pp. 90-91, Figs. 33 and 34). One is of an animal headed female with a baby standing beside a human male (10.6 cm high) and a second of a male with a spear (9.3 cm high). Hartel dates these sculptures around 100 CE on the basis of their style, and speaks of the sculpture of the couple as “the oldest Hindustic [sic] bronze so far found in India” (Hartel 1977, p. 90).

It is in the Gupta period (fourth-sixth c. CE) that metal icons of deities begin to occur with any frequency, but are still very restrictive. The Jain metal sculptures from Chausa are perhaps the earliest of these images. Found together as a hoard are 18 metal sculptures, including both standing and seated images of Tirthankaras (Fig. 1) (Gupta 1965, figs. XVIII, XIX, XX, XXI). Dates for these sculptures have varied with scholars, although perhaps the most likely date is the fourth c CE, and thus date to the early Gupta period (Asher 1980, pp. 17-18). The Chausa sculptures are of varying quality, but it is to the Gupta period that scholars assign some of the finest metal icons produced in India, almost all of the images being Buddha figures (Fig. 2). It is with some surprise, therefore, when we realize that there are very few metal Gupta-period icons. M. C. Joshi counts a total of thirty-two extant Indian metal images dating to the fifth-sixth



*Fig. 1. Jain Tirthankara: Rishabhath, Chausa, India, Copper Alloy, Fourth Century, H: 21 cms., Patna Museum, (From Deshpande 1988, Figure 5).*



*Fig. 2. Buddha, India, Copper Alloy, Sixth Century, H: 39.4 cm., Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.70.17), (Photograph courtesy LACMA).*

centuries (Joshi 2007). Of these there are twenty-seven Buddha images, four Jain images, and one Brahmanical image. There are no known metal images of bodhisattvas. The use of a sixth century date for the efflorescence of metal icon production may in fact be too conservative. Frederick Asher writes that

...there is no indication of active bronze-working ateliers during the Gupta period or even during the century following the downfall of the Guptas. Such ateliers developed during the eighth century... (Asher 1980, p. 59).

In other words, Asher suggests metal images in India are being produced in any number only from the eighth century.

Turning our attention to South India, we find again that there are few, if any, metal icons datable before the sixth century that come from South India. The South Indian search for metal images is perhaps more complicated than that for the North because of previous scholarship that has focused on what has been called "Amaravati" style Buddha images and their importance for the development of Buddhist art in Southeast Asia. A number of scholars, however, have written about the identification and dating of Amaravati style images (Barrett 1954, Dohanian 1965, Schastok 1994, Brown 2011), and there is broad consensus today that the earliest metal icons associated with the Amaravati style would be sixth century, that is the same date as the earliest metal images from North India. What is recognized today is that the South Indian metal sculptures are complex and vary in style. They are not localized at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, and they differ stylistically from the earlier stone Buddha sculptures. Sara Schastok has argued that the attempt to date the metal icons to dates equivalent to the stone images at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda was due in part to colonial scholars desiring to set up the Satavahana-Ikshvaku period (second-fourth c. CE) as the penultimate artistic period, after which there is a falling off of artistic accomplishment (Schastok 1994, pp. 36-40). That is, that the colonial scholars could not accept that high quality metal sculptures could date after the point in time (fourth c.) when they considered Indian art was in decline. (The Amaravati style bronzes will be discussed further below in relationship to bronze sculpture from Sri Lanka.)

Before turning to metal icon production in Gandhara, I want to pause to note what the dating of the metal images from North and South India implies for Buddhist art and religion in Southeast Asia. The earliest Buddha images in Southeast Asia, whether stone or metal, date from around the sixth century. The earliest Southeast Asian Buddha icons thus appear at the same time as the proliferation of metal Buddha icons in India. That the Indian metal sculptures



*Fig. 3. Buddha, Sarnath, India, Stone, Fifth Century, H: Sarnath Museum, (Photograph courtesy AIIS).*

were the source for the Southeast Asian sculptures appears likely, given the timing of their appearance, the unlikelihood of heavy stone sculptures being carried to Southeast Asia to be used for models, and the absence of Southeast Asian sculptures reflecting Indian styles earlier than the sixth century. I have argued that the stylistic source for much of the Southeast Asian Buddha imagery was the Sarnath Buddha image type that was developed at the end of the fifth century (Fig. 3), and can be precisely dated in its appearance in China in the mid-sixth century (a topic to which I will return below; also see Brown 2006, 2011). If this is correct, then the long-held theory that Indian artistic relationships with Southeast Asian images came to Southeast Asia in sequential chronological waves, leaving behind characteristics that accumulated with successive iterations of the icon type, is incorrect. Rather, the Indian artistic relationships are basically those of the sixth century for Buddha images. Likewise, whatever forms of Buddhism were carried along with these sixth century icons are also sixth century types of Buddhism, with a probable tangle of Hinayana, Mahayana, and Tantric characteristics. The sculptures do not result from a stepped history of changes due to the introduction of Indic Buddhism progressively through time in a sequential chain.

#### METAL IMAGES IN GANDHARA AND CHINA

We can now turn to Gandhara to review the appearance of Buddhist metal icons. Gandhara, unlike India, demonstrates extensive production of a wide variety of metal objects starting from the first century BCE (see discussion and illustrations in Errington and Cribb 1992). Gandhara's orientation towards the West and the classical traditions supplies much of the content of and explanation for the interest in metal objects. The earliest Buddhist metal icons are about the first c. CE, much earlier than in India. The Bimaran gold relic casket of the first c. CE, while not an icon, displays two iconographically complete relief images of the Buddha (Errington and Cribb 1992, pp. 189-192). But for our focus on India and Southeast Asia, Gandhara becomes of peripheral importance as it is to China that the Gandharan Buddhist icon types will travel, ultimately with little impact on the Buddhist art of India and Southeast Asia.

Two recent articles by Donna Strahan, however, on the impact of metal Gandharan Buddha images on the early metal Buddha images of China suggest a new interpretation of image production in China, and one that will focus on the sixth century as a period of radical change in metal sculpture. We will, in fact, be able to connect the sixth-century changes in China with those in Southeast Asia at the same time through the recent work of another scholar, Pieter Meyers. Strahan and Meyers are not art historians or religious studies scholars but conservation scientists, and they both make their observations using two technical procedures for producing metal sculpture, that is lost-wax casting and piece-mold casting. Strahan demonstrates that the earliest metal Buddha images in China are modeled very specifically on Gandharan image types (Fig. 4); but that while the sculptures in Gandhara are made by lost-wax casting, those in



*Fig. 4. Buddha, China, Bronze with amalgam gilding, dated 338 CE., H: 39.4 cm., Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection, (Photograph courtesy Asian Art Museum, San Francisco).*

China are attempts to copy the Gandharan sculptures but by using piece-mold casting (Strahan 2010, 2012). The Chinese artists' use of piece-mold casting was due to their unfamiliarity with lost-wax casting. Chinese artists had used piece-mold casting to produce elaborate bronze vessels and bells for over a millennium, and turned to this technology when confronted with the task of casting Buddha images. The earliest Chinese Buddha images date to the late third c. CE, with the earliest dated Buddha image being 338 CE. Until Strahan's study, scholars considered that the Chinese Buddha images were cast using the lost-wax method. The two casting methods tend to produce very different stylistic characteristics, with for example the lost-wax method creating free flowing and individual characteristics while the piece-mold method produces more angular and heavy characteristics, and indeed these are found when comparing a Gandharan image with one from China. Strahan elaborates these differences in her two articles.

She then continues in her study to demonstrate that in the late sixth-early seventh c. the Chinese switch casting methods and begin to produce sculptures using the lost-wax method, which by the mid-seventh century is used exclusively. The source for this "dramatic change in both style and technology" is, Strahan argues, due to the presence of "foreigners" in China, although she cannot pinpoint who specifically was involved. My own work would suggest India as the most likely source. During the sixth century in China there was a radical change in style of Buddha images that demonstrates the introduction of Gupta-stylistic characteristics. The Buddha's robe changes in the second half of the sixth century from a Chinese robe "inspired by the robes of Confucian officials [to be] replaced by a close-fitting monk's garment of thin, light material, clearly influenced by Indian dress" (Brown 2011, p. 343, quoting Su Bai). Thus, the Indian related Buddha images in China occur at the same moment that the lost-wax technique is adopted.

Pieter Meyers, the second conservation scientist I mentioned above, is also focused in his research on comparing piece-mold with lost-wax casting, but in terms of which casting method was used for the production of the Dongson metal objects (including drums, bells, and urns) made in northern Vietnam from about the fifth BCE to the second CE (Fig. 5) (Meyers 2011). Meyers argues that the drums (categorized Heger 1) and other objects were cast using piece-mold technology. His argument appears convincing, but it is also controversial given that the dominant opinion of scholars today is that the drums were cast using lost-wax. Meyers position, however, makes sense assuming the bronze casting method used in northern Vietnam at this early period would be shared with the casting method used in China. While lost-wax casting was used for some minor



*Fig. 5. Drum, Vietnam, Bronze, Third Century BCE – Second Century BCE., H: 50.8 cm., Norton Simon Museum, Norton Simon Art Foundation, from the Estate of Jennifer Jones Simon, (Photograph courtesy Norton Simon Museum).*

attachments, and was used around the first c. CE for creating the amazing Dian three-dimensional figural scenes placed as tympanums on drums in Yunnan, piece-mold technology dominated for Dongson production. It appears that the Dongson drums ceased being produced at some point before the fifth c. CE, perhaps several centuries before, which allowed for a break in bronze casting technology. When bronzes begin to be produced again in Southeast Asia they are to create Buddhist and Hindu icons, now using exclusively lost-wax technology. Meyers writes that

With the introduction from India of Buddhism and other Indic religions into Southeast Asia in the fifth century came lost-wax casting of three-dimensional bronze figures. The first known bronzes date to the sixth century (Meyers 2011, p. 39).

Of particular interest is that bronze drums began being produced at some point after the earlier (Heger 1) drums had stopped being made, specifically in Burma and Indonesia (Cooler 1995 & Bernet Kempers 1988), but these later drums, which clearly show a formal relationship to the earlier drums, were made using lost-wax casting. Piece-mold casting was not used for the drums as with the earlier Heger 1 drums. We have then the sixth century as a point when lost-wax technology is introduced (apparently from India) in both China and Southeast Asia as the means to produce Hindu and Buddhist icons, and became the casting technology being used up until today.

#### METAL IMAGES IN SRI LANKA AND AMARAVATI

One of the most intractable and debated problems in characterizing early Southeast Asian Buddhist sculpture is defining the role of art from Sri Lanka. Complicating the problem is identifying and dating Sri Lankan sculpture. The relationship between Sri Lankan sculpture and South Indian sculpture is unclear, making the ability to differentiate the two often impossible, and thus their relationship in turn to the sculpture of Southeast Asia difficult to determine. Rethinking the role of metal sculpture in the context of this much discussed topic may help to clarify some of the evidence. Scholars for almost a century have maintained that Sri Lankan and/or South Indian (Amaravati) metal sculptures were imported to Southeast Asia, with dates as early as the second-third century CE. My argument is that the earliest Sri Lankan and Amaravati bronzes are fifth century (and that is debatable) with the sixth and seventh centuries when bronze sculptures began being made in any quantity.

I mentioned above Deshpande's reference to the "flourishing school of bronze sculpture" at Amaravati. The image Deshpande uses to represent the early metal sculpture from Amaravati is a sculpture other scholars have also used to demonstrate early Amaravati metal images (Fig. 6) (see Sivaramamurti 1963, pp. 9, 69, fig. 1c). Deshpande gives the sculpture a third century date, as does



*Fig. 6. Buddha, Amaravati, India, Bronze, ca. Eighth Century, H: 43.5 cm., Government Museum Madras (Photograph after Deshpande 1988, Fig. 11).*

Sivaramamurti, but neither scholar attempts to argue or justify the early dating in the publications just cited, but simply states it as a fact.

When the Figure 6 bronze was published by T. N. Ramachandran in 1954 (Ramachandran 1954, p. 59), he says it was one of “The earliest and the most interesting bronzes that were acquired from the excavations of the Amaravati stupas.” This is perhaps overstating the case, as it is one of only four images, the other three of which are badly broken, and one is only a head. Ramachandran gives the Figure 6 Buddha a sixth century date (Ramachandran 1954, p. 63). He doesn’t date two of the other Buddha images, but refers the broken head to the fifth-sixth century by comparing it to the Sultanganj Buddha. The Sultanganj Buddha is today considered to date to the seventh century (Huntington 1985, p. 226).

Thus, Deshpande’s flourishing school of bronze sculpture amounts to four mostly damaged fragments. Ramachandran’s statement that Figure 6 is one of the “most interesting” bronzes presents a very distorted picture of the paltry



*Fig. 7. Buddha, Buddhapad, India, Bronze, ca. Eighth Century, H: 31.7 cm., British Museum (1905, 1218.2), (Photograph courtesy British Museum).*



*Fig. 8. Buddha, Amaravati, India, Bronze, Seventh Century, H: 19 cm., Government Museum Madras (Photograph after von Schroeder 1990, Pl. 43B).*

and battered four bronze images from Amaravati. Furthermore, there is nothing to say that these metal images were made at Amaravati in the first place. They were just found there. Their few numbers and stylistic variety suggest that they were probably brought to the site from various places and at various times. Indeed, Deshpande's Buddha is not in the style of the Amaravati stone Buddha images but is very close to an image from Buddhapad now in the British Museum (Fig. 7) which the museum dates to the eighth century, and which is the most likely date for Deshpande's image as well. Thus, there is no evidence for any of the four bronzes found at Amaravati to date before the sixth century nor to have been produced at Amaravati.

When Ulrich von Schroeder published his enormous compendium of Sri Lankan Buddhist sculpture (von Schroeder 1990) he illustrated one of the four bronzes found at Amaravati (Fig. 8). He labels the image as "from South India late Amaravati school" and dates it 600-650. His purpose in including it in his catalogue is because it is in a sculptural style (with the swag of cloth of the lower hem of the robe) that is found on images in Sri Lanka and scattered in many places in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia). He does not include any of the other three images found at Amaravati because (I assume) they are not in the "Amaravati style." Schroeder speaks of the images he associates with this image type, a large group, as "Late Amaravati School," which he dates sixth through eighth century.

The label of "Late Amaravati School" is perhaps unfortunate. Von Schroeder says in his identification of the Figure 8 Buddha found at Amaravati that "This torso of a standing Buddha is actually the only known bronze of the Late Amaravati School which was discovered in India" (von Schroeder 1990, p. 182). This is an astounding observation. In all of India only this one broken metal icon in an Amaravati style has been found. In other words, the "Amaravati" metal sculptures exist not at Amaravati, nor even in India, but as loose and scattered finds in Southeast Asia. An Amaravati school of bronze sculpture doesn't exist. Von Schroeder recognized this and wrote in his catalogue:

In view of the discovery of certain bronze Buddhas in South-East Asia, the existence of a casting tradition in the Late Amaravati Style in Andhra Pradesh has been suggested. The conjecture appears to be highly abstract because of the meager archaeological evidence: a single bronze Buddha image of which only the torso exists (von Schroeder 1990, p. 175).

Given this problem, the use of the term "Amaravati School" for a large group of metal Buddha images that have no connection to Amaravati seems unwise

and misleading. These “Amaravati” style metal icons in Southeast Asia are often called Srivijaya art, although where and even when they were made is not known.

The identification of metal sculpture in Southeast Asia as “Amaravati” is based in part on the misdating by scholars of metal sculptures by comparing them to the early stone sculptures. The Buddha image at Amaravati first appears in stone reliefs at the end of the second c. CE, with freestanding stone icons in the early third c. CE. The stone sculpture apparently ends in the third century, and resumes with a few stone sculptures at Amaravati in a different style in the eighth-ninth centuries (Knox 1992, pp. 215-229 and Barrett 1954). Stone Buddha images continue to be made at other Andhran sites, as at Nagarjunakonda into the fourth century. And newly excavated sites in Andhra Pradesh, such as Phanigiri (Skilling 2008), and Kanganhalli in Karnataka<sup>1</sup> (Dayalan and Nakaniishi 2011) have revealed new styles of stone Buddha image, suggesting that our views of the early stone Buddha images from South India may in themselves have to be rethought.

Pierre Dupont wrote an important article in 1959 that clearly outlines the incorrect thinking with regard to the metal images referred to as Amaravati (Dupont 1959). Dupont uses six metal Buddha images found in several different locations in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, the Celebes (Sulawesi), and Java) to trace their relationships to sculptures from Sri Lanka and India. Some of the icons Dupont feels are imported images, while others are locally made but reveal the Sri Lankan/Amaravati influence. Dupont feels that the large Buddha image found in the Celebes (Fig. 9), with which he begins his article, compares exactly to the stone images from Amaravati. He doesn’t date or even illustrate which stone images he is referring to, and he brings into the discussion a reference to a Sinhalese sculpture for comparison but doesn’t reference nor illustrate it. He ends the discussion by saying that the Celebes sculpture is of Indian origin (“l’origine indienne”) and dates it to the second or third centuries.

Dupont’s analysis of the sculpture is confusing as it is not clear if the image comes from Amaravati or from Sri Lanka. The inability of Dupont to suggest one or the other as a source for the imported object (I take his use of the “Indian origin” to mean “not Southeast Asian”?) is because he has no Amaravati or early Sri Lankan metal images with which to compare it. Indeed, that remains true up until today. There are no Amaravati metal images that I can identify,

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<sup>1</sup> A fairly complete bibliography of publications on Kanganhalli is published in Dayalan and Nakanishi 2011. The research focus thus far has been on the relief carvings and their inscriptions rather than the Buddha images, which appear later in date than the relief sculptures.



*Fig. 9. Buddha, Found in the Celebes, Indonesia, Bronze, Sixth-Seventh Century, H: 75 cm., National Museum, Jakarta, (Photograph after von Schroeder 1990, Pl. 42F).*

and the earliest Sri Lankan metal images date to the sixth-seventh centuries at the earliest. While contemporary scholars date the Celebes sculpture to sixth-seventh centuries, and thus three or four centuries later than Dupont, they continue to refer to it as an Amaravati sculpture. Jan Fontein, for example, characterizes it as “one of the group of images in the Amaravati tradition,” due to the way in which the robe is worn, while he associates it with a seventh-century Anuradhapura style (Fontein 1990, p. 180). Nevertheless, he doesn’t in his entry on the sculpture say if he feels it is a Sinhalese import or locally made.

Dupont continues in his article to describe the other metal sculptures found in Southeast Asia as Amaravati and/or Sri Lankan, sometimes saying an image might mix with north Indian stylistic elements. Nevertheless, he has no comparisons to make with any sculptures from Amaravati or with Sri Lankan images. Thus, as argued above, a school of sculpture is created without any sculpture as evidence.

## LINKS AMONG METAL IMAGES IN ASIA

Links among Buddha images from South Asia, China, and Southeast Asia suggest themselves. The problem, as happens frequently when tracing relationships between styles of ancient art, is the difficulty in pinning down any specific moments of connection. The relationship is implied through the visual comparisons, and even shared geographical space and historical interchanges can often be established, but exactly what carried the formal content and by whom is frequently not known. This inability of defining a clear moment of contact is the major weakness of notions of artistic influence.

For example, if the Sarnath Gupta-period Buddha was so influential in both China and Southeast Asia in the sixth century, and if metal images were the main means of this spread, we might expect to find Indian imported sculptures in China and Southeast Asia. No imported images, however, have been found (as far as I know) in China. In Southeast Asia only an intriguing but unusual small stone sculpture found at Wiang Sa in Peninsular Thailand suggests a link with Sarnath sculpture (Fig. 10). Problematizing the discussion further is the apparently small number of Gupta-period bronzes that would make the interchange even more unlikely. Of course, one can argue that it was artists who were moving, not objects, but Indian artists in China or Southeast Asia would produce Indian style objects, not Northern Wei or Dvaravati style sculptures. We are left with Chinese and Southeast Asian artists going to Sarnath, but that these artists would return to China, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam and all produce similarly modified images is equally unlikely.

One link among the art of South Asia, China, and Southeast Asia is the shared lost-wax technology for producing metal icons. The technology appears in the sixth century in China and Southeast Asia, apparently from South Asian sources. But several other connections among the art from these areas of Asia point toward a South Asian source for developments.

For example, the stone sculpture from Wiang Sa (Fig. 10), located in Peninsular Thailand, is often considered an import from India, and thus it might serve as a model for introducing the Sarnath Gupta-period image type to Southeast Asia. I have theorized that a single import could engender an entire school of indigenous sculpture (Brown 1994). In this regard the Wiang Sa image is important to my argument. It is very close in style to some of the Buddha images from Sarnath, as a comparison with an image in the Uttar Pradesh Archaeological Museum (ASI) at Sarnath demonstrates (Fig. 3). Both figures have very similar body proportions. The left legs are tense, the left hips rounded and protruding, with the right legs slightly bent. The unusually long right arms hang beside the



*Fig. 10. Buddha, Wiang Sa, Surat Thani Province, Thailand, Stone, Fifth-Sixth Century, H: 7 cm, National Museum, Bangkok, (Photograph after Baptiste and Zephir 2009, Fig. 3, p. 53).*

body with the open hands large and the fingers webbed. The left arms of both images are broken in a similar way; apparently they were raised holding an edge of the robe (see Griswold 1966, Fig. 23 for a stone sculpture from Sarnath showing this arrangement of the arms).

However, the Wiang Sa sculpture may be a locally made copy of an Indian stone sculpture. The non-Indian characteristics of the sculpture include the very small size of the object, just 17 cm. high in its broken state, but still perhaps only about 21 cm. complete. I know of no such tiny stone images produced at Sarnath. In addition, the Buddha has a very low usnisa and wide-open eyes, both unusual Gupta-period characteristics. A.B. Griswold considered it as “copied from a Sarnath model” (Griswold 1966, p. 62). If so, it is perhaps more valuable for my purposes as it shows a close copying of an Indian model, something very rarely seen in the art of Southeast Asia. It would indicate a moment of adaptation, and specifically of a Sarnath image.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Jacq-Hergoualc’h proposes an image on a votive tablet discovered in Tham Khao Khanab Nam, Muang District, Krabi Province as stylistic similar to the Wiang Sa image (Jacq-Hergoualc’h 2002, p. 144), and thus to its Gupta Period relationships and



*Fig. 11. Buddha, Stupa no. 11, U Thong, Thailand, Bronze, Eighth Century, H: 24.5 cm., National Museum, U Thong, Suphanburi Province, (Photograph after Baptiste and Zephir 2009, Fig. 132, p. 133).*



*Fig. 12. Avalokitesvara, Nalanda Site 11, Bihar, India, Bronze, Seventh-Eighth Century, H: 21.6 cm., Nalanda Museum, (Photograph after Huntington 1984, Fig. 162).*

A second example of artistic exchange may suggest links between China, Southeast Asia, and India. Dvaravati style metal Buddha images sometimes have halos with flame motifs (Fig. 11). While flames decorating halos may seem natural when considering Asian art, in actuality flame motifs on halos in Indian art only appear in the seventh century. In the seventh and eighth centuries flame motifs are usually small and nondescript, and occur almost exclusively

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date. He points out that its find spot is on a likely trans-peninsular route that would include the Wiang Sa location.



*Fig. 13. Jain Tirthankara, Kankali Tila, Mathura, India, Stone, Fifth Century, H: 134 cm., State Museum, Lucknow, (Photograph after Okada, et al. 2007, Fig. 9).*

on metal images and rarely on stone sculptures (Fig. 12). On the other hand, the flaming halos become almost standard on Buddhist icons in China from the early fifth century (Rhie 2010, p. 39)

The early Indian halos are predominantly very simple in their decoration. Most are completely plain, or have only a scalloped edge. But in the Gupta period (fourth-sixth c CE) halos for images of the Buddha and Jain Tirtankara became extremely elaborately decorated, reaching an apex of creativity and beauty in examples from Mathura (Fig. 13). The halo designs are predominantly of jewels and of plants (vines and flowers). These elaborate halos are found on stone sculptures. Metal icons rarely have their halos in tact, but some images have umbrellas over their heads rather than halos (Jamkhedkar 1988, Figure 1). Few Gupta-period images have been published from the rear, which would reveal if they had lugs or other means to attach halos; but the occurrence of lugs would not of course tell us if the halos were decorated with flames.

The association of flames with halos apparently indicated light, and I assume that light was what was indicated in early Indian art by the placement of jewel designs and plant motifs on the halos. Light produces the growth and prosperity of living things. Light was implied through the sparkle and gleam of gems, and the growth that light produces by the flowers and vines. The ability of the Buddha to create light is among one of his most defining characteristics, which is underlined repeatedly in Buddhist texts. For example, here is a passage from

a narrative of the Buddha, the *Lalitavistara* (that probably dates around the fifth century CE), describing the light associated with the Buddha:

“Rays of light by the hundred of thousands escape from his body; they spread throughout the great fields of the Jinās [Buddhas], bringing peace to those in the three lower realms....The light from the tuft of hair between his brows eclipses the heavenly light of the sun and the moon, and outshines the mani stone, fire, and lightning...(Bays 1983, p. 533).”

One indication of light being associated with the gems and plants of the early halos is the addition to some of the halos of pointed designs that radiate out from around the head of the Buddha or the Jain Tirthankara (Fig. 13), suggesting rays of light. The gems and plants are not images of light or symbols of light but are contiguous with things that produce light and benefit from light.

The use of flames on halos becomes more complicated when we look at halos from Gandhara in the Northwest area of South Asia. Gandharan halos are largely plain and without decoration. There are, however, some possible examples that have designs on their rims that might be interpreted as flames, but these are very few. The well-known Gandharan Buddha images with flaming shoulders can be considered as perhaps suggesting a connection with flaming halos. The seated Buddha with flaming shoulders from Paitava in Afghanistan, for example, has the flaming shoulders and what appears to be a rim of flames on the mandorla (Rhie 1999, Fig. 1.49).

The appearance and date of the Gandharan (or more precisely the Afghanistan) flame motif in association with the Buddha leads inexorably to Chinese Buddha images. The famous Harvard seated Buddha with flames rising from his back has recently been the focus of several detailed studies. Marilyn Rhie dates it to the second half of the second century, which is about the same date as the Afghanistan Paitava Buddha (Rhie 1999, p. 89). But by the early fifth century the flame halo (or more properly the flame mandorla) is fully formed and found widely in Chinese art, with many of the images clearly dated by inscription to the late fourth and fifth centuries. The flame mandorla decorates both metal and stone sculptures.

As noted above, the flames on Indian Buddhist sculptures appear in the seventh century on Pala style art. They are hesitant and sparse at first, separated by rows of tiny bead designs that space them far apart (Fig. 12). The flames themselves are often worm-like, but create tiny spikes that stick out from the halo. The flames occur predominantly, perhaps exclusively, on metal images. By the eighth-ninth centuries, however, tight rows of flames decorate the halos of

both bronze and stone sculptures. The use of flames to decorate halos in Southeast Asian art is an enormous topic to investigate. The flaming halos of both Hindu and Buddhist sculpture are standard on Central Javanese sculpture, and clearly are related to the Pala style images of India. There is much less evidence for the flaming haloes of Dvaravati style images; but again the undulating forms they take point toward Indian models (Fig. 11).

The apparently complicated development of the flame halo in Asian art will take extended research to sort out, but we can at least say at this point that its earliest appearance is in the Buddhist art of China and that of Gandhara in Afghanistan. In Gandharan art, however, it is extremely rare and confined in date, while in China by the end of the fifth century it is very widespread. In India, on the other hand, flames decorating halos occur from the seventh century, and take a particular form. It is the Indian form that is used in the art of Southeast Asia, placing its appearance in the seventh and eighth centuries. Whether Chinese art was in some way suggestive for the flaming halos in Indian art remains to be seen.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF METAL ICONS ON BUDDHIST NARRATIVES

If we trace the general trajectory of the popularity of visual representations of the Buddha's biography in India, we find that it begins strongly, but after several centuries shows a tremendous decrease in number and variety. The popularity of the narrative tradition begins almost immediately with the earliest Buddhist (indeed Indian) art in the second century BCE; but it is fading by around the fourth century CE. Except for some exceptions, the narratives are reduced both in number of scenes depicted as well as in narrative content to a small corpus by the sixth and seventh centuries. The Jatakas in particular tend to disappear almost completely.

The history of visual Buddhist narratives in Indian art has been studied by a number of scholars. Vidya Dehejia's very detailed and helpful recent book on the topic, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India*, nicely lays out their development. In a Chapter entitled "The Narrative Tradition Recedes," She says that

The shift away from narrative concerns that becomes increasingly evident in post fifth century artistic productions seems to have been connected with evolving Buddhist theology. Mahayanist schools introduced the concept that the Buddha had always been enlightened and that over myriads of eons he

had been responsible for the spiritual attainment of multitudes of celestial bodhisattvas. With such a belief, details of the historic life of prince Siddhartha who became Gautama Buddha ceased to be of immediate relevance to worshippers (Dehejia 1997, p. 239).

The attribution of the decline of the visual narratives to theological or doctrinal shifts in Buddhism is the standard explanation for the artistic changes (Leoshko 1993/94, p. 260). While I do not deny that such a theological shift away from the historic Buddha to the cosmic Buddhas was a factor, I want here to propose another set of changes that may have played a role. These changes, rather than doctrinal, are artistic in nature.

The decline of the visual narrative tradition in India coincides in date (the sixth century) with the rise of the bronze production of icons. My suggestion is that these two phenomena may be linked. I will explore the possibility that the early visual narrative tradition was associated with stupas and the use of stone as the medium for the depiction of elaborate narrative scenes. As stupas began to be built primarily of brick and without stone fences, their decoration turned more to stucco and terracotta, media that did not work as well as stone as carriers of complicated narratives.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on bronze sculpture as icons may have moved devotional practices away from experiencing visual narratives, and bronze does not work well for depicting narrative scenes. The decline in visual narratives in India in the sixth century may, however, have involved yet another artistic medium, paint, and the possibility that complicated visual narratives continued in painted productions after the sixth century.

The Buddhist artistic narrative tradition in stone is almost entirely associated with stupas. The stone narrative scenes occur on the fences and gates that surround the stupas, and on the body of the stupas themselves. The reliefs from Gandhara sites are more difficult to place because they have been removed from their context, but they also appear to have been directly related to stupas. There are exceptions, including the vedika reliefs from Bodhgaya that appear to have surrounded the tree shrine (although just how is extremely problematical), and the porch reliefs of Vihara 19 at Bhaja. If the visual narrative tradition in India is associated with the stupa, it may be helpful to look at what happens to stupa building after ca. 500 CE. On the whole, the building of stupas, particularly large stupas, falls off. Ajanta itself can be used to demonstrate this. Of the 21 caves built in the fifth century, only two are caitya halls, while the viharas

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<sup>3</sup> Terracotta was used to produce spectacular narrative reliefs in later (sixteenth – nineteenth c.) brick temples in Bengal. Even here, however, the extensive images tend to be in panels and bands. (See Michell 1983 and Ghosh 2005).

have been turned into temples for the worship of the Buddha image. Even the stupa in Cave 26 is dominated by a Buddha image. Clearly, the stupa was not of such importance at Ajanta.

We of course have stupas being built after the fifth century. At Ratnagiri and related sites in Orissa, for example, but these are made of brick and are without stone fences or gates or any relief carving. The Dharmekh stupa at Sarnath as it stands today is sixth or perhaps seventh century – again brick covered with a veneer of stone that does carry relief carving - but decorative and non-narrative. But at sites like Nalanda and Paharpur, the focus of the monastic establishment was not a stupa but a new type of stepped brick structure, or perhaps more accurately, was a monument that included stupas but was not a single stupa as seen at the earlier sites. Indeed, many small so-called votive stupas were set up at such sites as Ratnagiri and Nalanda, stupas made of brick, stone, or both together, some of which have niches in which at times tiny stone carvings of some of the eight formulaic narrative scenes of the Buddha were placed. In short, stupas as carriers of depictions of the Buddha's biography rarely exist after the fifth century in India, except for the votive stupas types just mentioned.

The use of brick for Buddhist monastic structures dominates construction after the sixth century in India. Nalanda can be used to demonstrate this. The site appears to begin in the fifth century, and brick is the material used for building. As with brick architecture everywhere, the preferred material used for decoration is stucco. This is clearly shown at Nalanda by the completely stuccoed fifth level brick structures, dating to the seventh century, that were revealed during the excavation. As at Ratnagiri and Paharpur, stone at Nalanda is used sparingly and for specific areas only in the architecture.<sup>4</sup> The rock-cut tradition of Buddhist architecture more or less ends at exactly this time, the seventh century, with the great Caves 10 and 12 at Ellora. The point is that the visual narratives rely on stone relief carving; without the use of stone, there are few narratives depicted.

Dehejia's book chapter on the decline in ca. 500 AD follows a chapter on the wall paintings at Ajanta, suggesting, not inaccurately, that the last major display of Buddha narratives in India was the Ajanta paintings of the second half of the fifth century. What are we to make of the Ajanta murals? Art historians tend to argue that the Ajanta murals are not unique, but are the lucky preservation

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4 Certainly, geographical area has much to do with these changes, as Buddhist monuments became more and more concentrated in eastern India. Frederick M. Asher has argued that the use of brick as the primary building material in Pala-period India led, among other things, to the reduced creation of sculpture in stone. See Asher 1998, pp. 313-328.

– due to the early abandonment of the caves shortly after they were made – of what was a common practice of mural painting in early India, almost all examples of which have been destroyed. If, indeed, the Ajanta murals, which are almost entirely devoted to narrative depictions, are not unique, it is possible that the narrative tradition did not so much end with the Ajanta paintings, as begin there in a fluoresces using a new artistic medium.

There are remnants of wall paintings in other caves that indicate a long-standing and widespread tradition of mural painting. The caves at Bagh show that the complicated and detailed mural style of Ajanta existed elsewhere at the time. These paintings date from about the same time as those at Ajanta, and comprise equally complicated scenes of multiple figures. The Bagh murals are today almost entirely destroyed, and we have only the copies painted by A.K. Haldar and other artists in the 1920s of what then remained of the paintings.<sup>5</sup> Monika Zin has recently identified a complex scene some 13 m. long, the remains of which can still be seen on the porch between Caves IV and V, as the story of King Mandhatar, a story that appears in a wide variety of texts, including as a Jataka.<sup>6</sup> She points out that the style and date of the Bagh paintings are essentially the same as those at Ajanta. The King Mandhatar narrative reads from right to left, and basically follows the chronology of the story. The identification of an extended narrative displaying a series of episodes using many figures, as with the paintings of Ajanta, allows us to argue that the Ajanta narratives in paint are not unique.

Otherwise, bits of wall painting are extant from many other cave sites, such as Kanheri, Pitalkora, Ellora, and so on.<sup>7</sup> This material, however, tends not to be narratives, but icons of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, and as in the case of Pitalkora, are paintings added in the fifth century or later to caves excavated hundreds of years earlier, in the first century BCE. Interestingly, there are also traces of wall paintings from this first period of cave construction (second BCE to second CE), strongly suggesting an ongoing tradition. For example, there are painted jatakas and scenes of worship in Ajanta Cave 10 dating to the second or first century BCE that are found under the later fifth century paintings.

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5 These paintings were used to illustrate an article on the paintings in *The Bagh Caves in Gwalior State*, ed J. Marshall (Marshall 1927; reprint 1987). See Marg 25, no. 2 (June 1972) for reproductions of some of the paintings. Some of these paintings can still be seen in the Gwalior State Museum.

6 Zin's discussion includes an exhaustive discussion of the textual sources for the King Mandhatar story. The complete mural in a detailed line drawing has been published by Dieter Schlinghoff as a foldout section in Schlinghoff 2003.

7 For a bibliography of the evidence for early wall paintings see Schlinghoff 2000.

It is difficult to know how extensively the Buddha's biography was depicted in the wall paintings in the Buddhist caves. The Ajanta and Bagh paintings, however, do not reveal any tentative development, suggesting they were part of a fully developed stylistic tradition. Likewise, that they were carried forward in now-lost murals, many perhaps in built structures of wood, can be argued on the basis of what is seen as the mural painting style being influential in the manuscript, thangka, and mural traditions of South Asia from the eleventh century on (Gray 1981, pp. 27-29). In other words, an argument can be made that the Ajanta style of painting continued during the five centuries between the cave murals and the eleventh-century (re)occurrence of the Indian painting tradition, because the two periods of paintings share styles, motifs, and principles of organization.

Only a brief outline of the relationships between these two periods of painting is given here, but it demonstrates how the argument would be made (for references arguing the continuity of the painting tradition see Kramrisch 1933, pp. 129-147; Ray 1968; Ghosh 1971; Pal and Meech-Pekarik 1988, *inter alia*; and Losty 1982). Similarities in styles and motifs can be broadly shown (while making clear that the later painting examples come from a variety of geographical areas as well as a variety of local styles).<sup>8</sup> The telltale use of the farther eye, that is the unnatural forward extension of the far eye when presenting a face in three-quarter view, first occurs at Ajanta, and is then used in eastern Indian manuscript painting as well as in the wall murals at Alchi. Likewise, the practice of highlighting in a light color, often white, of the central areas of body parts with a darkening toward the outer borders, in order to give a sense of weight and corporality to the figure, is used at Ajanta and in both the later manuscript and mural traditions. There is a shared tendency to use color as a solid field, without modulations. Certain motifs are shared, such as the cubical or geometric depiction of rock formations and mountains, as well as the use of the landscape as a staging area for figures rather than as an artistic focus in itself. Such a list of shared styles and motifs, which can be expanded, suggests a continuity of painting practices from Ajanta to the eleventh century.

An essential characteristic of the Ajanta paintings, however, is lacking in the later material, that of the narrative quality itself. Most of the paintings – on manuscript pages and covers, on cloth paintings (*patas*), and on walls – are iconic or show brief scenes of the by-then standard eight scenes of the Buddha's life (Leoshko 1993-94, pp. 251-76). While this appears to suggest that the narrative tradition had died out in painting, as it had in stone, we must keep several points in mind. For one, the extant evidence is only the tiniest fraction

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<sup>8</sup> The geographical areas include eastern India and Kashmir, Bangladesh, and the Himalayan areas of the modern nation states of India, Tibet, and Nepal.

of what must have been the original corpus of eleventh and twelfth century painting. The one painting type that we would most expect to be used for narrative scenes, that of wall painting, has no extant examples at all in India itself. What exist is, as at Alchi and Tabo, in a Tibetan milieu that shows a variety of influences, including Central Asian. Nevertheless, there is a rich tradition of ancient literary references to the occurrence of wall paintings in India. There is also one manuscript cover dated to ca. 1100 from Nepal that shows the narrative of the Vessantara Jataka. As Jeremiah Losty points out, this lone example of a complicated Buddhist narrative argues that

If the divinities painted in the Pala and Nepalese Mss. are to be regarded as scaled-down versions of icons as wall paintings, it would follow that this cover is a version of a full-size fresco of this subject, and indeed with its fluid transitions from one episode to the next it recalls the narrative technique employed in large-scale wall paintings at Ajanta (Losty 1982, p. 35, illustrated in Pl. V).

It seems that the manuscript painter, working 600 years after the painters at Ajanta, was connected to a shared narrative tradition of Buddhist painting.

While the Ajanta paintings thus can be placed within an ongoing tradition, arguing that they are not unique productions, they do appear to be an amazing fluorescence that depicts the Buddha's biography at a new level of complication and completeness hitherto seen only in stone relief sculpture. The question is did the medium of paint allow for the narrative tradition to continue after Ajanta?

Stone was used to produce icons from the beginning of Buddhist art, while metal began being used for this purpose in the fifth-sixth centuries. As discussed above, there is very little bronze sculpture before the fifth and sixth centuries in India. What do exist are mostly small and inconsequential objects. There are a few Kushan bronzes, and even during the Gupta period bronzes are rare. Indeed, many of the so-called Gupta-period bronze Buddha icons (of which there are few in any regard) are probably later than the Gupta period, being sixth and seventh century. The medium of bronze works well for making individual icons. What the medium of bronze does not work well for is depicting narrative scenes. It is interesting in this regard that Sheila Weiner in her study of Ajanta directly links the loss of the narrative tradition to the Buddha image itself. She says "In time the narrative tradition seems to have been almost totally overwhelmed by the image" (Weiner 1977, p. 115). The rising importance of the medium of bronze parallels the increasing focus on the image.

The two media of stone relief carving and paint are needed for depicting visual narratives. Both are essentially two-dimensional and allow the depiction of multiple figures and the contextual details necessary to suggest the precise story. The media of stucco and bronze do not work as well. There has been considerable scholarly focus on the development in later Indian art of the eight Great Miracles, scenes of the Buddha's life that become standardized by around the seventh century and are repeated frequently, often in groupings, from then on. It is difficult, however, to see these scenes as narratives. They can suggest or refer to a narrative, but are themselves a visual shorthand that stresses the icon, not the story. Dehejia calls them accurately "imagistic narratives," and notes that they are relatively rare in Pala-period sculpture (Dehejia 1997, p. 215).

We may return to the question of to what extent the waning of the visual narrative tradition can be explained by Buddhist doctrinal changes. The increasing interest in Buddhas other than Sakyamuni Buddha, an aspect of what we call Mahayana Buddhism, was specifically mentioned. Nevertheless, one may question if there was any significant falling off of interest in Sakyamuni and of his biography in later Indian Buddhism. The various written versions of the biography were not, as far as I know, ignored. Indeed some of the most involved textual biographies, such as the *Nidana Katha* and the *Lalitavistara*, were being composed when the visual narrative tradition was waning, perhaps in the fourth and fifth centuries.

While any detailed evaluation of the relevance of Sakyamuni Buddha in the early Mahayana cannot be undertaken here, a very brief comment is needed. Our understanding of Mahayana Buddhism is presently undergoing a radical rethinking, which for our purposes includes arguments that Hinayana groups with Sanskrit texts were dominant in India through the Gupta period (ca. sixth century). The appearance of what are considered cosmic Buddha images, specifically those organized directionally with identifying mudras, are rare during this period, and indeed are rare throughout Indian Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> Mahayana Buddhist monks up until their first appearance in inscriptions of the late fifth/

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9 The earliest evidence for the existence of directional Buddha images appears to be the fifth century. Fa Hsien, who was in India at the beginning of the fifth century, mentions the tradition in Magadha of building a cart with a five-storey bamboo structure that has Buddha images placed in niches on the four sides. The cart is part of an elaborate festival for monks and laypeople (Legge, trans, 1975, p. 79). Also, four stone Buddha images were placed in the four directional entrances of Stupa 1 at Sanchi in the fifth century (see Huntington 1985, pp. 196-198). See also Gregory Schopen, "The Inscription on the Kusan Image of Amitabha and the Character of Early Mahayana in India," in *Figments and Fragments of Mahayana Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers*, pp. 247-277.

early sixth centuries appear to be marginalized and ridiculed groups, often projecting an embattled front in which their texts are diatribes against mainstream monastic groups. The early Mahayana monks are not innovators but highly conservative practitioners who want a return to the pure Buddhism of the past, and as such are critical of the value of standard Buddhist ritual practices, including the worship of stupas, relics, and images. They rather advocate ascetic regimens, meditation, and recitation of texts, ritual practices that are internal, individualized, and text oriented. The early Mahayana sutra literature is especially harsh on those monks who promote images and relics as means of producing donations from lay people. If this thumbnail description is more or less correct, there is nothing about the Mahayana that, during the time we are focused on here, would suggest an interest in artistic representations of any kind, or in the promotion of cosmic Buddha worship.

#### BUDDHISM AND THE SPREAD OF METAL ICONS

The appearance of metal icons had an impact on the Buddhism that developed after the fifth-sixth up until about the eighth century. The metal icons allowed Buddhism to prosper outside of the monastic institutions that dominated Buddhism at this time. In certain geographical areas, specifically in some places in Southeast Asia, metal images appear today spread across the landscape without any indication of institutional or official placement. In fact, the occurrence of enormous numbers of Buddhist (and indeed Hindu) metal images in places like Central Java, Angkor, and Mon-period Thailand have never been explained by scholars or archaeologists as to for whom they were made or where they were placed. Obviously the uses and placement of the metal images need not be the same across such different cultural and religious divides, yet that we can say almost nothing about how these often very small images were used is surprising. One thing we can say is that they didn't exist until about the sixth century, and so we can at least look to that period to see what perhaps changed in terms of religious practice or art historical development.

The sixth century thus appears as a period crucial to the initial creation of Buddhist metal icons in India and Southeast Asia, and for the initiation of a new style in China. I have already mentioned the appearance of metal icons in Southeast Asia and the possible implications for how Buddhism spread in Southeast Asia, assuming the icons brought with them some processes or beliefs that affect Buddhist practice. I have some thoughts on possible Buddhist practices that the metal icons could affect

I have shown that the creation and proliferation of Buddhist icons in bronze in around the sixth century had effects on Buddhist art, and assumedly on Buddhist practices, in China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The proliferation of metal icons could have impacted Buddhist practices, relying on the nature of the objects. The metal images perhaps allowed Buddhism to move out of the royal and monastic environments. The portability of the metal icons, their size, costs, and durability, put the objects into the hands of people not connected to the royal courts and to the monastic centers.

Metal icons could be made in a variety of sizes, including very small images, of which we have hundreds of examples. As I said above, we have no idea how most of the metal icons were used, where they were kept, and why they were valued. Perhaps the many metal images we have today (and the assumption is that this number is only a small part of the total as metal images were systematically melted down for their valuable metal over the centuries) were given to the monasteries as gifts and simply stored. But the easy movement of the metal icons, and that most of the examples we have today are chance finds, often by farmers, do not provide much evidence for their exclusive storage in monasteries.

Metal icons are not only easily carried, but allow for a variety of monetary values. A small bronze image, while expensive for many, would not demand an elite or royal patron. At the same time, the metal icon can be made increasingly expensive not only by increasing its size but by making it in a costly metal, such as silver or gold, or by adding insets of gems or using a gilding.

Buddhism can move with texts and with teachers, both of which involve sophisticated and learned people, and both of which are located mostly in elite and monastic environments. Art can also exist in the elite and monastic environment, but the metal icons could, and apparently did, move out of this environment. This is hardly surprising, as we merely have to look to the distribution of Buddha images in Thailand today to see that most images are in the hands of the common people, from the images in most Thai restaurants to images worn as amulets by Thai men (and today many women). How these literally thousands of images are regarded, how they are used, is not monitored by texts or by monks, but by popular and often idiosyncratic understandings.

Is it possible that the use of metal icons in the sixth century created the opportunity for a popular Buddhism by placing images into the hands of non-monastic practitioners? Jason Neelis in his recent study on *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks* (Neelis 2011) demonstrates how a non-monastic popular Buddhism functioned in the upper Indus before official elite patronage

by the Palola Sahi dynasty of Gilgit formalized royal patronage in the seventh century. Neelis says that

The enigmatic absence of a Buddhist institutional presence before this period did not mean that Buddhists were missing from the transit zone of the upper Indus. Instead, this overview of Buddhist petroglyphs and inscriptions has demonstrated that traders, itinerant monks, and local patrons began to localize religious topologies and narratives long before elite patronage led to increased level of Buddhist literary and artistic production in Gilgit (Neelis 2011, p. 287)

The non-institutional Buddhism that Neelis is talking about expressed itself in terms of art created by apparently non-artists (the petroglyphs) and personal brief comments, akin to graffiti, by visitors (the inscriptions he mentions). The two Buddhisms, the institutional and the non-institutional, can exist together, and art can function easily, as it does in the upper Indus sites, in both contexts, whereas texts and monks tend primarily to the institutional context.

The creation of metal Buddhist icons in the sixth and seventh centuries introduced in some areas (such as Southeast Asia) a new source for expressing Buddhist sentiments. The icons would be accessible to non-elites, easily moved to new environments, able to localize Buddhism outside of the monastic institutions, and honored as treasured objects. The enormous numbers of metal icons produced at this time argues that they were highly successful. Metal Buddhist icons and the sixth-seventh centuries appear to form potent relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Our discussion of metal Buddhist icons in Asia during the first millennium has involved topics that tie together South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. The discussion began with the observation that very few metal icons were produced in India until about the sixth century CE. The assumption that metal imagery was of importance in early Indian art is incorrect. The sixth-seventh century date for the rapid increase in the production of metal icons is true for both North and South India. In North India the so-called Gupta bronze Buddha images appear. Some 30 of them are known, although their dates are still guesses and where they were made is not known. Likewise in Andhra in South India, the earliest metal images are of the Buddha and date to the same sixth-seventh century period.

The relationships among metal images in India, Gandhara, China, and Southeast Asia were explored in several ways. The conservation studies demonstrating the switch from piece-mold casting to lost-wax casting of bronze images in China in the sixth century suggest a new influence coming apparently from India. It is also in the sixth century that the Northern Qi Buddha sculptures reveal radical changes reflecting styles of Indian Buddha sculpture. The change to lost-wax casting technique is seen in Southeast Asia as well at the same sixth-century date in terms of the technology switching from piece-mold casting as seen with the Dongson drums, a change in technology that Pieter Meyers relates to the introduction of Buddhist and Hindu icons from India.

Other possible linkages between Asian traditions having to do with metal sculpture include the introduction of flame motifs on Buddha image halos. In this case, the “influence” may be from China to South Asia.

The importance of Amaravati bronze icons for the spread of Buddhist imagery to Southeast Asia is one of the most often stated art historical facts in the scholarship. The paper argues that not only were Amaravati bronzes not of importance in the creation of Southeast Asian sculpture, but that in fact there are no Amaravati bronzes at all. Rather, the so-called Amaravati bronzes are sculptures found scattered across Southeast Asia, objects we often call Srivijaya sculptures, but we still don’t know their sources; but any role of Indian art appears unlikely. Related to these Southeast Asian icons are metal images that begin to be produced in Sri Lanka at about the same time, again the sixth-seventh centuries, and in a similar style. These Srivijaya and Sri Lankan objects remain to be fully understood.

The end of the visual narrative tradition of the Buddha’s life in India that takes place in the sixth-seventh centuries may be tied to changes in the artistic materials used for depicting the stories. There was a turn to the use of brick for building stupas in India at around this time. Previously, stone was often used, along with stone fences placed around the stupas. The visual narratives, often very complex, were usually carved on the fences, or sometimes also on the walls of the stupa itself. With the use of brick, the stupas decreased in number and size, usually didn’t have fences, and were decorated primarily with stucco or terracotta images. The use of the narratives as decorations was reduced. Simultaneously the efflorescence of the bronze sculpture began. Bronze and stucco as artistic media did not easily allow for complex narrative depictions. The visual narrative tradition may have continued, but in paint, which along with stone are the two artistic media that best create complex narrative scenes.

Finally, the question of how metal icons might have affected the spread and development of Buddhism in some areas of Asia was raised. The portability,

small size, and low price of metal icons allowed them to be owned by individuals and carried outside of the monastery context. My conjecture is that art confined to monasteries was usually in stone or wood, often large in size, and highly valued. Metal icons allowed lay people in particular to carry Buddhism into homes and villages, without the presence or participation of monks. This could have been a powerful form of Buddhism, as the textual tradition was also largely institution based, with access primarily by monks and religious specialists, and inaccessible directly by lay people. Thus, the metal icons could have provided a unique and direct accessibility outside of the monastic context for laymen and laywomen. This could help to explain the enormous numbers and popularity of metal icons produced from the sixth century in parts of Asia.

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The J. Gonda Fund Foundation of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences supports the scholarly study of Sanskrit, other Indian languages and literature, and Indian cultural history. The Fund is a legacy of Indologist Jan Gonda, who was a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Each year the Gonda Fund organises and publishes the Gonda Lecture.

The Twentieth Gonda Lecture was held in 2012 by Robert L. Brown, Professor of Indian and Southeast Asian art at the University of California in Los Angeles, and Curator of South and Southeast Asian art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on the role of metal icons in the spread and development of Buddhism.