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## A neglected Aspect of the Iconography of Viṣṇu and other Gods and Goddesses

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Precious jewellery from South Asia rarely survived the turmoil of centuries, only some extremely rare examples are known. The know-how of Indian jewellers was evidently famous and praised in this region as shown by a group of pre-Angkorian golden ornaments which clearly trace their source of inspiration in the art of the Calukyas. The study of these ornaments published in 2010 and 2011 brought my attention to the depiction of jewellery on Indian images of gods and goddesses; in a certain way, the present paper is thus an extension of this study, considering specific forms taken by jewels and studying their meaning in the overall understanding of images mainly of Viṣṇu.

Iconographic studies basically deal with the physical aspect of deities, their attributes, attendants, and their vehicles, which are, as a matter of fact, the main categories which allow giving a name to gods and goddesses. Other categories such as dresses and bejewelled ornamentation draw more rarely, if at all, the attention; mention can eventually be made for instance of the deer-skin worn by Avalokiteśvara, of Śiva's tiger-skin, or of the garland of flowers worn by Balarāma and later by Viṣṇu, but the particular form taken by the crown, the diadem, the necklace or the girdle for instance does not seem to have drawn the attention of scholars. However, these ornaments participate closely of the personality of the character who wears them. This is particularly the case of very specific elements, such as the imaginary bestiary and the representation of divine or semi-divine creatures, which are introduced in the structure of jewellery worn by Bodhisattvas in Mathura during the Kushan period and inherited by gods like Viṣṇu and Sūrya in the following period.

### **Bodhisattvas in Mathura**



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

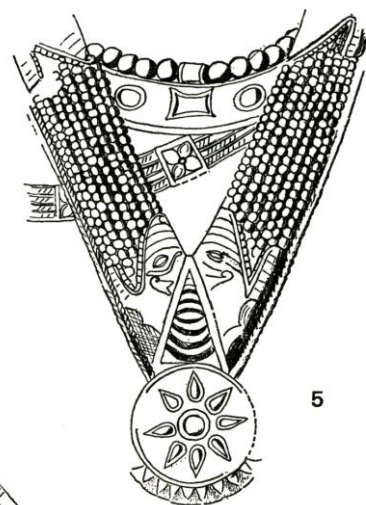


Fig. 3

Images of a Bodhisattva from Mathura depict him wearing ornaments which partly draw their source in the art of Gandhara, for instance the string with small reliquaries falling from the left shoulder across the breast (figs 1-3).<sup>1</sup> His necklace can include the depiction of two or four *makaras*,<sup>2</sup> a motif which also echoes the pair of aquatic dragons, horned animals or putti illustrated in Gandhara (figs 4-5). Other images wear an eagle, probably Garuḍa, in the head-dress (fig. 6),<sup>3</sup> reminding of Garuḍa carrying off the *nāginī*, a motif often encountered in the head-dress of Bodhisattva images in Gandhara (fig. 7).<sup>4</sup> Rows of animal heads, eagle or beaked lion, can be carved in the lower part of the head-dress (fig. 8) whereas crawling centaurs or fantastic animals of Western inspiration are noted at that place in North Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> The art of Gandhara includes further elaborate ornaments such as earrings shaped as lions or winged lions, or two putti-like figures flying toward each other in the composition of the necklace or of the head-dress (figs 4-5, 7). Images from Mathura can also be adorned with the representation of a beaked lion or of a male image sitting astride an eagle at the armlets, or even at the earrings (figs 9-10).<sup>6</sup> Two main categories of motifs are thus listed, the fantastic bestiary and, but less often seen, the representation of divine or semi-divine characters.<sup>7</sup>

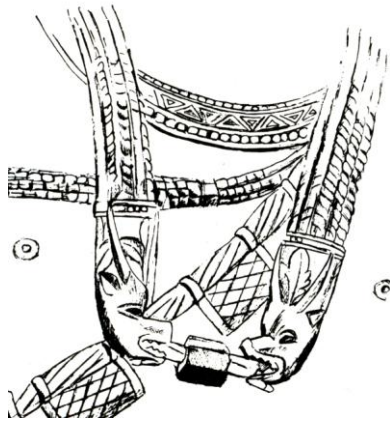


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

<sup>1</sup> Government Museum, Mathura inv. A46. Also reproduced by VOGEL 1930, pl. XXXIVa; MODE 1986, pl. 42; and MITTERWALLNER 1986, pl. 48 & pp. 117-120 (and her footnote 258 for further references).

<sup>2</sup> Further references in BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, p. 47 note 86 (and fig. 36).

<sup>3</sup> Lucknow Museum inv. B.25: VOGEL 1930, pl. XXXVI.a.

<sup>4</sup> AZARPAY 1997, pp. 105-120 for a very detailed study of the motif in this context; STOYE 2008, and her notes 2 and 5 for references concerning the enmity between Garuḍa and the *nāga* and their depiction in early Indian art. See *Gandhara* 2008, cats 208-210 and practically all illustrations in AZARPAY's paper for depictions of the topic.

<sup>5</sup> STOYE 2008, p. 269 & *Gandhara* 2008, cat. 208 p. 278.

<sup>6</sup> Further references in BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, p. 47 note 88 (and fig. 37). Concerning our fig. 10, add MITTERWALLNER 1986, pl. 52 & pp. 120-122; SHARMA 1995, fig. 156 and LERNER 1984, cat. 7 pp. 30-35 for the "Kronos image" showing beaked lions at the armlets and at the earrings (and read the observations made in Lerner's footnote 3), and further references in BAUTZE-PICRON 2004, p. 252: Appendix 1, a)A.1 (and fig. 1). Compare here the treatment of the tail of the bird with Garuḍa's tail as depicted in fig. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Reference should be made to a perhaps 4<sup>th</sup>-century cast image of Maitreya (rather than Avalokiteśvara as identified by the Museum, but see the hair dress at the back of the head which reproduces the tiny scrolls as seen on the head of the Buddha), preserved in the Musée Guimet, Paris, inv. MA 12128: it shows the Buddha teaching in the head-dress and two images of the Buddha meditating attached to the armlets (illustrating probably the double aspect of Vairocana). See *Arts Asiatiques* 2006, p. 196.

When he holds the *padma* or is depicted as the Great Compassionate, the Mathura Bodhisattva can be identified with Avalokiteśvara (fig. 2). However, our present issue is not to identify, i.e. to name, the image but rather to ask whether the presence of such elements is not part of the identity of the image: What does it mean to have an image of eagle or lion in the head-dress, of a pair of *makaras* in the necklace, of a mounted eagle at the armlets? Since such ornaments are not generalised but appear in specific iconographies, it is evident that they partake of the personality of the depicted Bodhisattva or, at a later period, of Viṣṇu.

A prominent element of the turban, also seen in Gandhara, is the large sophisticated cockade the central part of which shows an elaborated knot forming the end of the cloth used for the turban.<sup>8</sup> Concentric rows adorned with various motifs form a broad ring out of which the knot emerges; a lion face can also be seen in the central part and the cloth comes then out of its open mouth (fig. 8).<sup>9</sup> In this example, the lion face might appear as a mere ornamental inner ring but the common presence of the animal in the ornamentation of the head-dress during the Kushan and the following periods evidently proves that the motif is carrying a specific concept.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Monstrous faces of a griffin, rather than of a lion, can form a row at the lower edge of the head-dress: in one example, three such heads support probably an eagle which holds a garland and five further same heads are observed on either side of the head-dress (fig. 6).<sup>11</sup> A similar row with four times the forepart of a lion is seen on either side of the head mentioned above (fig. 8). Further examples from Mathura show an image of a Buddha displaying the *dhyānamudrā* seated in front of the cockade which forms like an aura

<sup>8</sup> For instance: CZUMA/MORRIS 1985, cat. 20 pp. 80-81 (with references); MITTERWALLNER 1986, pl. 54; SHARMA 1993, fig. 28 p. 92; SHARMA 1995, figs 30-31, 115, 153.

<sup>9</sup> Also reproduced by VOGEL 1930, pl. XXXVI.b & SHARMA 1995, fig. 154.

<sup>10</sup> A variation of the motif is illustrated with a lion emerging from the cockade, its front legs holding a garland (Photo American Institute of Indian Studies, neg. 355.70 (accession n° 44861) on <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/>).

<sup>11</sup> A proper identification of this character remains difficult; only the upper part of the body is depicted and it is badly defaced. SHARMA 1995, fig. 150 reproduces also this image and considers it to be the face of Maitreya; the author identifies the animal faces and the central figure with “garuḍas” (ibid., p. 217) (see following note).

behind it whereas a row of eagles adorns the side of the head-dress; here again, the presence of the small Buddha allows a identification with Avalokiteśvara.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the depiction of one or many eagles, of a lion face or a monstrous lion face in the head-dress – and nowhere else, it is evident that this refers to the sky where the eagle flies, but also to the sun-light which is referred to by the eagle and the lion.<sup>13</sup> Looking back at the motif of Garuḍa carrying off the *nāginī* prominently present in Gandhara, even if one accepts GUITTY AZARPAY’s idea that a narration related to a *jātaka* could have been underlying it,<sup>14</sup> it remains that this motif as such includes two major elements which stand in a situation of opposition: the bird flies down while the *nāginī* is taken up, the bird flies in the sky while the *nāginī* lives on earth, the eagle symbolizes fire while the *nāginī* represents water, the bird is male and the *nāginī* female. The antagonism between Garuḍa and the *nāga* or *nāginī* has been recognized since long and is also present since a very early period, illustrated for instance on the eastern portico of the Sanchi *stūpa* 1.<sup>15</sup> But these various layers of the antagonism as noted here reflect also the complementary nature of the two characters who conceal the four elements, i.e. earth and water (*nāga* or *nāginī*), sky and fire (Garuḍa or eagle).



Fig. 9

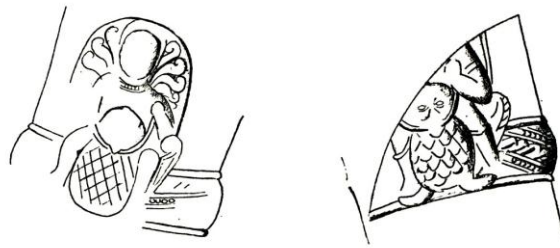


Fig. 10

In Mathura, the eagle can be replaced by the lion (with a beaked face eventually) and the *nāginī* by the *makara* but the symbolism is preserved:<sup>16</sup> the eagle or beaked lion does not indeed only refer to the light but also to the fire of the sun just like the *makaras* of the necklace are perfect images of the water element. These monstrous aquatic creatures swallow the rows of pearls which form the necklace, a clear reference to their basic relationship to the richness of the ocean. Diverging *makaras* are for instance also

<sup>12</sup> The “Kronos image” mentioned above in note 6; a head found in Sanchi (Site Museum, inv. B30: MITTERWALLNER 1986, pl. 55) and Mathura Museum inv. 33.2336: SHARMA 1995, fig. 147 & p. 215. This author is of the opinion that Garuḍa is the mount of Maitreya (ibid., p. 215). Thus Kushan images from Mathura having eagles or eagle-like animals in their head-dress should be identified with Maitreya (ibid., p. 217 apropos the image shown here in fig. 6 or p. 215 concerning his fig. 147). The presence of the meditating Buddha in the head-dress is a constant element of Avalokitevara’s iconography at a later period; the identification suggested here is also based on the presence of the row of animals as seen below. A standing Bodhisattva from Sahri Bahlol and dated in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. wears a Buddha displaying the *bodhyāgrīmadrā* (Gandhara 2008, cat. 200 p. 274).

<sup>13</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2008, p. 530 note 23 (lion); BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, pp. 43-44 (eagle) (each time with further references).

<sup>14</sup> AZARPAY 1997, pp. 117-120.

<sup>15</sup> AZARPAY 1997, pp. 115-116 quoting A. COOMARASWAMY and A. GRUENWEDEL’S studies.

<sup>16</sup> It is likely that the function of Garuḍa as *vāhana* of Viṣṇu explains why he disappeared from the head ornamentation, disengaging himself from a mere symbolic meaning. On Garuḍa, see NAGAR 1992.

encountered in the first centuries of our era in the art of Andhra Pradesh: out of the wide open mouth of two *makaras* depicted back to back in the lower part of ornamental medallions, a gorgeous volute arises spreading all around the medallion.<sup>17</sup> In this particular context, the aquatic monster appears as source of life and richness and tradition reports that a pearl hides in the depth of his mouth.<sup>18</sup>

Wearing on his body such symbolic images of fire and water, the Bodhisattva presents himself as if possessing these elements, or being at their source. It may also be that by specifically showing a close relation to these elements, he is considered to master them, to master the antagonism which they may also symbolize, a function strongly present in the personality of the Buddha.<sup>19</sup>

From the fifth century and onward fire, water, air, and earth are all simultaneously symbolically integrated in the image. All four elements are symbolised by four creatures, real or fantastic, which adorn the sides of the “royal throne” as properly described by JEANNINE AUBOYER (1949), a topic which has been particularly illustrated behind the Buddha. The sequence finds then its final form with the elephant symbolizing the earth, the monstrous lion referring to the fire, the *makara* to the water and the *haṃsa* or musician to the air.<sup>20</sup> An example at Aurangabad illustrates an intermediary state where the long neck of the bird emerges of the open mouth of the *makara* and where *nāga* are still preserved in the highest level of the image on either side of the nimbus whereas lions sustain the throne, a position which has been theirs since an early period and which they preserved all through the centuries (fig. 11).



Fig. 11

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<sup>17</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2010, pp. 46-47 & 2011, pp. 41-42 (with further references).

<sup>18</sup> VOGEL 1929-1930, p. 140, quoted by DE CORAL-RÉMUSAT 1936, p. 430.

<sup>19</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2008 considers the meaning of the elephant and of the lion in the personality of the Buddha. The water is in most cases dealing with the Buddha referred to not through the *makara*, but through the elephant; similarly, the lion has there the double function of referring to the air (sky) and to the fire. I do not want to enter here into a more detailed analysis of the topic, but could it be that the depiction of the fantastic bestiary as symbolic representation of the elements refers to the universal nature and his numberless forms which the Bodhisattva assumes in a text like the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* or to the light which emerges out of his voice in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*? (see BAUTZE-PICRON 2004, pp. 231-233).

<sup>20</sup> For a very detailed analysis of the topic, read AUBOYER 1949.

## Viṣṇu in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods

The tradition of wearing jewels adorned with fantastic or real animals will be inherited by images of Viṣṇu in the Gupta period and onward. The lion and *makaras* are indeed observed in Viṣṇu images of the Gupta period at Mathura and Udayagiri before being depicted at Badami in the sixth century and Apsad, where they also adorn images of Sūrya, in the seventh and eighth centuries.

*The necklace and girdle* – Two diverging *makaras* spitting heavy rows of pearls flank the central ring of a necklace adorning a very elegant fifth-century image found at Jaisinhapura, Mathura where they also occur on either side of the central circular medallion of the girdle (figs 12-12b).<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the motif adorns a very elegant necklace seen on a torso of Viṣṇu discovered at Besnagar (fig. 13).



Figs 12-12a-12b



Similarly, the presence of the aquatic monsters is noticed in various sculptures in the royal cave 3 at Badami (A.D. 578) where the animals flank an intricate ornament which has evolved out of the narrower one encountered at an earlier period (figs 14-15).<sup>22</sup> This ornament shows a structure which is often encountered till later periods in sculpture but also in original jewellery, such as the pre-Angkorian girdles referred to above (fig. 16)<sup>23</sup>: A central gem, circular or oval is set within a background of flame-like elements, probably a reference to the scrolls which are actually displayed in original girdles. Although no necklace similar to those illustrated at Badami has been discovered up to now, it is most likely that such ornament must have indeed existed.

<sup>21</sup> Discovered at Jaisinhapura (Mathura): *The Golden Age* 2007, cat 12 pp. 154-5 (5<sup>th</sup> c.); WILLIAMS 1982, pl. 73 (c. 430-460); SHARMA 1993, col.pl. XXXII & p. 149; for a detail photo, see BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, fig. 38.

<sup>22</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, figs 40-41 & pp. 49-50 (here figs 15 & 16).

<sup>23</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2010, fig. 8 and BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, fig. 44 & pp. 48-52.

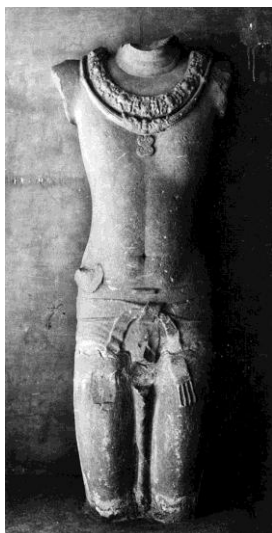


Fig. 13



Fig.14

Fig.15



Fig. 16

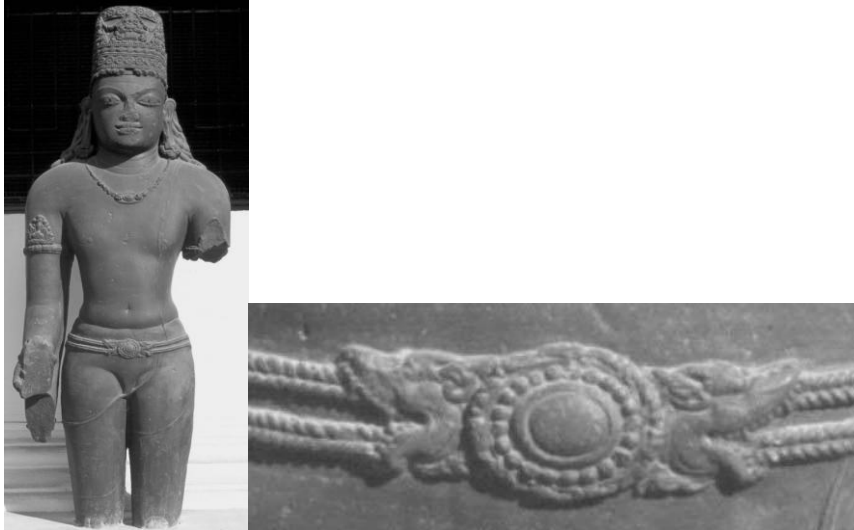
As to the girdle adorned with the two *makaras* seen on the golden jewellery discovered in Cambodia, it occurs in seventh and eighth-century Viṣṇu and Sūrya images from the royal site of Apsad (Bihar) (figs 17-17a).<sup>24</sup>



Figs 17-17a

<sup>24</sup> ASHER 1980, pl. 88, 90 & 194 (here fig. 18). It also adorns a tall 8<sup>th</sup>-century image of Viṣṇu from Dapthu now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata and the Gādādevī of this image which is kept in the Patna Museum (ASHER 1980, pl. 190-191 & p. 87)(here figs 18-18a).





Figs 18-18a

*The crown* – A major element of the ornamentation is evidently the lion face inherited from an earlier period. Four-century images show a large face carved in the central part of a circular medallion which surmounts the tiara and is evidently related to the large circular cockade of the previous period. This is observed for instance in the image of a Vaikuntha preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (fig. 19) or in the Viṣṇu torso of the National Museum, New Delhi (fig. 21): The lion holds with his mouth and paws a heavy beaded row which forms large curves all around the head-dress, this row remaining a common feature of the ornamentation (see also fig. 23); one could not exclude the possibility that this row of pearls practically swallowed by the lion acts, as the *makara* does, as symbol for the richness of the seas.

8

Another rendering of the tiara shows how the lion face alone – thus without the forelegs – arises out of a medallion integrated in the front part, spitting two large bows which spread backwards. This is in particular observed on the facade of cave 6 at Udayagiri, being thus dated around A.D. 402 (fig. 21). Also, the Cleveland head said to be from Besnagar or another image collected at Vidisha<sup>25</sup> show this treatment of the ornamentation. A further variation is illustrated in a seventh-century image probably from Bihar and depicting Viṣṇu seated on Garuḍa: The large face emerges out of a pleated medallion, spitting a garland which is attached to two similar medallions (fig. 22a).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> CZUMA 1977, fig. 36; WILLIS 2009, fig. 28 p. 91 and for a complete view of the sculpture, with its lower and upper parts attached together, see Photo American Institute of Indian Studies, neg. 236.43 (accession n° 34088) on <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/>.

<sup>26</sup> ASHER 1980, pl. 107 & pp. 61-62. For further similar examples from Eastern India, see ASHER 1980, plates 65 (Konch), 82 (Rajgir), 101 (Benisagar).



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

The Viṣṇu torso of the National Museum, New Delhi mentioned above (fig. 20) integrates a further interesting feature, i.e. the two diverging *makaras* seen below the lion. Some examples include large depiction of the aquatic monsters, such as in an example preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art.<sup>27</sup> A further torso in the Mathura Museum integrates an elaborated bejewelled ornament resting on a pair of diverging *makaras* right above the forehead and topped by the lion face (fig. 23) whereas this ornament is only partly depicted under the *makaras* in the Delhi example.



Fig. 22



Fig. 22a



Fig. 23

The leonine face and the *makaras* will be progressively integrated within a single large triangular bejewelled ornament which hides the front part of the tiara: the profiled diverging *makaras* support a large precious or semi-precious stone which is set in an elaborated set of tiny scrolls which spread symmetrically all around. The composition as such resembles the one of the girdle or necklace where the pair of *makaras* is also depicted.

On one of the Gupta heads preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art, the lion face clearly reminds of the fantastic *kīrtimukha* with two large scrolls unrolling on either side,

<sup>27</sup> CZUMA 1977, fig. 34 & pp. 105-6.

thus above the *makaras* (fig. 24).<sup>28</sup> Another example in this museum shows one of the most elaborated head-dress of this type, probably datable in the sixth century: the lion face is entirely kept within the round medallion showing the very typical Gupta row of pearls at its rim; it spits the arched rows of pearls which are held on either side by two roaring *vyālas* whereas the two diverging *makaras* are profiled in the lower part of the ornament, thus sustaining it and holding pearls in their wide open mouths (fig. 25).<sup>29</sup> The roaring leogryphs occur also in an image from Samalaji approximately dated around AD 535-540.<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 24

Fig. 25

The *makaras* supporting a central gem set within tiny scrolls are observed on a golden Khmer head-clasp (fig. 26), the overall composition of which is strongly reminiscent of Indian models as seen in an earlier publication.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, a tiara worn by Viṣṇu in cave 3 at Badami introduces pairs of them sustaining circular medallions.<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 26

In an example discovered in Cambodia, two horse-riders run toward each other on either side of the broad elaborated central ornament of the girdle. Two similar riders are

<sup>28</sup> CZUMA 1977, fig. 34 & pp. 105-6.

<sup>29</sup> CZUMA 1977, fig. 35 & pp. 106-7.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by BAUTZE-PICRON 2010, p. 50 after SHASTOK 1985, fig. 34 (further references in BAUTZE-PICRON 2010, note 34).

<sup>31</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2010, pp. 46-49.

<sup>32</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, fig. 32.

observed on a seventh-century lintel found at Sambor Prei Kuk, now kept at the Musée Guimet, Paris. But these or a similar motif are already observed on a much earlier example preserved at the Mathura Museum which is probably the portrait of a ruler of the Kushan period:<sup>33</sup> The motif is there depicted on small square plates which alternate with circular ones showing the triton, a motif noticed at Mathura.<sup>34</sup> Whoever may be here depicted this type of jewellery shows how images of fantastic creatures or even of deities are introduced as part of the ornamentation and impart a certain meaning to the image, an observation which applies up to much later period as illustrated for instance by a pair of eleventh-century earrings depicting Lakṣmī.<sup>35</sup> Other divine images are observed in the same group of pre-Angkorian jewels, i.e. Indra and Brahmā; this motif of the divine image integrated within a jewel is also observed in India, for instance a Buddha image adorns the aigrette in the head-dress of Padmaniddhi on the façade of cave 19 at Ajanta, or a dwarf, perhaps Vāmana, is seen in the tiara of Trivikrama in cave 3 at Badami.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

The fantastic bestiary is basically observed in the Mathura images of Avalokiteśvara during the Kushan period before being integrated by various images of Viṣṇu in the subsequent periods. However, representations of the god from North India from the eighth century and onward do not include this complex ornamentation; if the animals simply disappear from the jewellery, they do not altogether fully vanish from the image. As a matter of fact, a topic which has been progressively elaborated during the fifth and sixth centuries in the Buddhist caves of Maharashtra includes the animals in a sequence which is strictly fixed. This topic, properly named “royal throne”, adorn indeed the sides of the throne which is carved in low-relief all over North India behind the images of the god who is par excellence the god of royalty, i.e. Viṣṇu, but also behind Sūrya, or certain aspects of the Devī, e.g. It includes, from bottom to top, the elephant (symbol of earth), the leogryph (*vyāla*, *vyāghra*)(symbol of fire), the *makara* (symbol of water), and goose (*haṃsa*) or fantastic musician, half bird, half human (*gandharva*)(symbol of air); each of them appears in a pair depicted profiled on either side of the deity and inserted within the architectural structure of the throne; all are profiled outwards as if thus emerging out of the image of the deity which is the unique source of the symbolized elements, a concept which is traced back to the Kushan period but is now more clearly articulated.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Based on the partly preserved inscription, it has been identified as being a portrait of Caṣṭana; see VOGEL 1930, pl. III & pp. 22 & 92 (with further references) and CZUMA/MORRIS 1985, cat. 43 pp. 112-3.

<sup>34</sup> Compare to VOGEL 1930, pl. IX.b & LIX.d.

<sup>35</sup> Kept in the Hyderabad Museum (AHMAD 1949, plates I-II). The extremity of the heavy club held by Kaniṣka is covered with the depiction of a *makara* which seems to swallow it; for a detailed and pertinent study of this motif, see VERARDI 1983, pp. 258-60.

<sup>36</sup> BAUTZE-PICRON 2011, figs 32-33 & p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> For remarks on the presence of the motif in the art of Bengal, where it is practically generalized, see BAUTZE-PICRON 2007, p. 98. Later local developments would also require further study: armlets are for instance adorned with a monstrous face in Karnataka and Maharashtra or are shaped as snakes at a later period, or *makara* earrings are noted in the mediaeval period; for these, see POSTEL 1989, figs V.17 p. 108, V.39-41 p. 116. And for the depiction of an early *makara* turning around the arm, see LOTH 1972, pl. 59.6.

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## Illustrations

1. Government Museum, Mathura. Photo courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, neg. 22.26 (accession n° 484)(see fig. 3)
2. Private collection (see fig. 9). Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
3. Drawing after Loth 1972, pl. 24.5 (see fig. 1)
4. Drawing by Anne-Marie Loth after Tissot 1985, pl. XXXIII.1
5. Musée Guimet, Paris (see fig. 7). Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze

6. Lucknow State Museum. Photo courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art
7. Musée Guimet, Paris (see fig. 5). Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
8. Lucknow State Museum. Photo courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art
9. Private collection (see fig. 2). Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
10. Drawing after Loth 1972, pl. 59.7 & 8
11. Aurangabad. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
12. Government Museum, Mathura. After *The Golden Age* 2007, cat. 12
13. Central Museum, Gwalior. Photo courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, neg. 236.35 (accession n° 34080)
14. Badami, cave 3. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
15. Badami, cave 3. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
16. Private collection. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
17. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
18. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
19. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
20. National Museum, New Delhi. After *The Golden Age* 2007, cat. 11
21. Udayagiri, cave 6. Photo courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, neg. 74.42 (accession n° 913)
22. Cleveland Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze
23. Government Museum, Mathura. Photo courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, neg. 19.66 (accession n° 1590)
24. Cleveland Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Asian Art Archives, University of Michigan
25. Cleveland Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Asian Art Archives, University of Michigan
26. Private collection. Photo courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze