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David Cornélius Andolfatto

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Ripu Malla, a Buddhist Emperor from Western Nepal

David C. Andolfatto

The medieval arts and history of western Nepal remain poor relatives of Himalayan studies. In 1994, Ian Alsop published in this magazine the first study ever dedicated to the metal sculptures of the Khasa Malla kingdom (Alsop, 1994). His contribution to the field is of the greatest value as it brought to light an overlooked 12th- to 14th-century central Himalayan empire, stretching from Uttarakhand to Mustang, and demonstrated its appeal to Buddhism and Buddhist art. The purpose of this paper is to further Alsop's study by focusing on Ripu Malla, a particularly active Khasa Malla ruler of the early 14th century. By doing so, the metal sculptures attributed to the period of the Khasa Malla kings will be contextualized with the artistic heritage of western Nepal, where the rulers had their capitals.

An exceptional feature of Ripu Malla is the variety of documents attesting his deeds, including religious texts, paintings, sculptures, and stone inscriptions. The position of Ripu Malla in the Khasa Malla genealogy is documented by the famous Dullu pillar, also known as Kirtikhamba. This monument, erected in one of the twin capitals of the Khasa Malla empire by the emperor Prithvi Malla (r. 1338–58) in 1357, provides a list of the two lineages from which Prithvi Malla hails. The names of his predecessors from both lines are also encountered in Tibetan documents, although in Tibetanized forms, such

as *Pri ti smal* for Prithvi Malla or *Reu smal* for Ripu Malla (Tucci, 1956). From the Tibetan authors' perspective, these characters are considered as the kings of Yatse (*Ya rtse*), located to the southeast of Purang and identified with the modern Sinja, in the western Nepal district of Jumla. A consistent element provided by Tibetan sources is that the Yatse rulers originate from the royal lineages of Guge and Purang (Tucci, 1956).

Ripu Malla is the eighth Khasa Malla emperor of Yatse. His great grandfather, Kra Calla, was the artisan of a substantial expansion of the Yatse dominion towards Uttarakhand, marked by the conquest of Kartikeyapura, the capital of the Katyuri kings, in 1223. This Kra Calla (*Drakpa de* in Tibetan documents) is described as a 'devout Buddhist' while his mother Sira is famed as a 'benefactress of cows and Brahmans' (from a Baleshwar inscription of 1223; see Joshi, 2009). Sira is obviously a name of Sanskrit or Pahari origin. The few other names of queens that have come to us (such as Dipamala or Ghatalladevi) all show such an origin. These elements tend to indicate that the Yatse dynasties conducted a politics of matrimonial alliances with local (Hindu) Khasa aristocracy in order to ascertain their power on the pluri-cultural populations ruled by them. Kracalla is succeeded by his son Ashoka Calla, who is particularly known from two inscriptions of 1255 and 1278 found in Bodhgaya (Pant, 2009).

Ashoka Calla had at least two sons, Jitari Malla and Ananda Malla. The elder, Jitari Malla, succeeded his father. Subsequently, his son Aditya Malla came to power in 1299, a date after which the latter was sent in exile to a Shakya monastery for a period of thirteen years (Douglas, 2003). This situation was probably caused by disputes between Aditya Malla and the cadet branch of the family, represented by Ananda Malla and his son Ripu Malla. Although we still lack evidence on this matter, it is likely that the two characters are responsible for Aditya Malla's exile in Tibet and that a period of turmoil followed. Indeed, it is only in 1312 that Ripu Malla appears in dated documents.



Fig. 1 Dakini Nairatma
Nepal, Kathmandu valley, c. 1313
Gilt copper, 8.89 x 6.99 x 3.18 cm
Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.85.221)
(Image courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Ripu Malla's name is engraved on the Ashoka pillars of Nigilva and Lumbini, both in the Nepalese Terai region. In Nigilva, the inscription opens with the mantra *Om mani padme hum*, written in Tibetan, followed by the wish for a long and victorious life in Sanskrit. The inscription on the Lumbini pillar is almost identical, with the exception that it also mentions Ripu Malla's son, Sangrama Malla. The Nigilva pillar inscription features a date of Shaka era 1234, which corresponds to 1312 CE. Another inscription bearing the name of Ripu Malla is found in Sinja, the supposed site of the Tibetan polity of Yatse. Here too the text opens with Avalokiteshvara's mantra and is followed by a text in Devanagari script. Next is the colophon of a manuscript of the *Abhisamayalankara*, discovered in Tibet and indicating that the text was copied in Surkhet in 1314, under the auspices of Ripu Malla (Sanskritayana, 1938).

Very few metal sculptures can be directly connected to the Malla kings of western Nepal. When they are, it is through inscriptions bearing the names of Khasa Malla rulers or their queens. One of them, already discussed by Alsop (2005), is the beautiful gilt-copper image of the Dakini Nairatma in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Fig. 1). The base of the sculpture bears the inscription, 'may the glorious Ripu Malla live long' (*śrī ripumallascriramjayatuh*), which is identical to that incised on the Nigilva and Lumbini pillars. As noted by Alsop, this wish is commonly found in the Khasa Malla context but not in the Newari one. We read it again at the bottom of a unique *paubha* painting, in the Fondation Alain Bordier collection, depicting Tara surrounded by two male donors (Fig. 2). The goddess is seated under a canopy of red fabric. The halo around her body is red with a pattern of small circles. The nimbus around her face is coloured a smooth, radiating purple. Tara is seated on a double-lotus pedestal. She maintains the boon-granting gesture (Skt. *varadamudra*) with her right hand while her left one holds the *utpala* lotus. Another identical lotus arises from behind Tara's right thigh. Often poetically described in treatises as having the 'colour of autumn moon' (Skt. *sharaccandrakarakaram*), her white complexion sharply contrasts with the brown skin tone of the two donors represented at her sides. These two men are squatting, with their hands joined in a praying gesture. It is noteworthy that the artist placed a special emphasis in representing



Fig. 2 Tara
Nepal, Kathmandu valley, c. 1313
Pigments on cloth, 29.8 x 24.8 cm
Fondation Alain Bordier (ABP 38)
(Image courtesy of the Fondation Alain Bordier)

the donors' clothes (which appear as warm winter jackets), turquoise hair ornaments and jewellery, moustaches, and long hair. Each donor has a light-purple nimbus, a feature usually reserved for the gods or their attendants. A second halo, of bright red colour, includes Tara and the donors.

As indicated by the short Devanagari text at the bottom of the painting, one of the two human characters must be Ripu Malla, although it is unclear if he is the man with a hair bun, on the left, or the one with a ponytail, on the right. One may venture that the second person is Sangrama Malla, Ripu Malla's son, whose name is recorded in the Lumbini pillar. As we shall see, this view is confirmed by the narrative that the mentioned documents allow us to draw.

In his article on the metal sculpture of the Khasa Malla kings, Alsop formulates the hypothesis that the Yatse emperors invited Newari artists to work at their court in western Nepal. This opinion is justified by the clear Newari influences exhibited in most of the sculptures analysed by this author. In this scenario, influenced by Arniko's career in Tibet, the sculptors created a unique style, one 'pleasing to the taste of their foreign patrons' and defined by a 'lavish gilding, a plump and compact figure, [...] and the lozenge-shaped patterning [on the robes' hems]', as well as the double-lotus base and the 'somewhat exaggerated delineation of the joints of the fingers and toes' (Alsop, 2005). Another feature is the unfinished look of the back of the sculptures' bases. These elements have been used by other art historians to label a growing corpus of images as the Khasa Malla style, with the general idea that Newari artists employed at the Yatse court gave their creations the general stylistic features of Kathmandu valley productions, which included some Pala elements, blended with the Khasa Malla's aesthetic desiderata (von Schroeder and von Schroeder, 2009; Béguin, 2013).

As seducing as this explanation may be, it should be noted that, in western Nepal, in the heartland of the Khasa Malla/Yatse empire, no artistic production of any sort could be found that displays the same stylistic attributes as those identified above as characteristic of the Khasa Malla style. This assessment is grounded on the few publications available for the area (mainly: Sharma, 1972; and Sharma, 2012) as well as the present author's field surveys conducted in situ since 2014. Sculptures, either in wood, stone, or metal, are very rare in western Nepal from the 12th to the 14th century.

The extant medieval statuary displays various styles. We have already mentioned Surkhet, where a volume of the *Abhisamayalankara* was copied under the auspices of Ripu Malla in 1314. The district of Surkhet was undoubtedly an important Buddhist centre during the Khasa Malla kings' time, as attested by the ruins of a large cruciform *shekhari shikhara* temple found at Kakrevihar. The style in presence at the site is attributable to 10th- to 12th-century Maru-Gurjara artists (from Rajasthan-Gujarat), whose influence can be noticed in the central Himalayas from the 7th century onwards; the only feature of these sculptures that can be positively compared with that of the so-called Khasa Malla style is the 'plump and compact figure' (Chanchani, 2019) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Shakyamuni Buddha
Nepal, Surkhet district, Kakrevihar temple
Maru-Gurjara style, 10th–12th century
Sandstone, 93 x 45 cm
Photograph by the author



Fig. 4 Buddhist deity
Nepal, Dailekh district, Dullu, Dharma Gaddi
Kathmandu valley style, 14th–15th century
Stone, 26 x 24 cm
Photograph by the author

Nevertheless, this facial feature was already present in 8th- to 10th-century Maru-Gurjara productions from Masrur and Bajaura (in Himachal Pradesh), for instance. Likewise, the robes on the Buddhas from Kakrevihar do not have the lozenge-shape or rice-grain patterning present on the metal sculptures.

North of Surkhet, the Khasa Malla kings had one of their capitals in Dullu, in the Dailekh district. Only a dozen Buddhist sculptures remain in this locality; they were all intentionally damaged (Fig. 4). Although it remains difficult to ascertain the antiquity of these small images (none higher than 20 centimetres), they evoke 14th- to 15th-century Newari art. A stone bust of a male deity, reminiscent of the Maru-Gurjara style from Kakrevihar, was photographed by Marc Gaborieau in 1969 (Fig. 5). Here too we do not find the elements of the Khasa Malla style. In the nearby pluri-religious pilgrimage site of Padukasthan, an inscribed memorial pillar contains the representation of Buddha, seated in the diamond pose and executing the earth-touching gesture (Fig. 6). The inscription reads: 'Salutation to Buddha. May the glorious Ashoka Calla live long. The temple of Sauna Karki and Sauka Karkayani' (*Oṃ namo budhāyeh | śrīasokaccalladevas ciraṃ jayatuh | sāūna kārki sāūkā karkyāniko devalah*) (see Pant, 2009, p. 317). The reference to Ashoka Calla, Ripu Malla's grandfather, allows a confident dating of the pillar to the second half of the 13th century. Despite the thick patina covering the sculpture, it clearly

appears that the Buddha does not have the same type of robe with a voluminous left sleeve falling on his left thigh. This stylistic attribute is indeed shared by all metal images of the Buddha that have been identified as Khasa Malla (Fig. 7). (See also the results yielded by a search for the term 'Khasa Malla' on the Bonhams website, www.bonhams.com.) Instead, the sculpture displays a local, individual style, a trait shared with most artefacts surveyed in the area.

This rapid overview wouldn't be complete without mentioning the Hindu statuary found in Khasa Malla territory. In the Achham district, the Shaiva pilgrimage site of Vaidhanath counts a number of stone Shiva and Vishnu sculptures. The images in presence, notably two Vishnu Shesashayin, a broken Durga Mahisasuramardini, and a Chamunda, are stylistically attributable to 10th- to



Fig. 5 Bust of a deity
Nepal, Dailekh district, Dullu
Maru-Gurjara style
10th–12th century
Stone, 20 x 11 cm
(Image courtesy of Marc Gaborieau)

12th-century workshops from northwestern India, and especially from Uttarakhand (Sharma, 1972; Sharma, 2012). It therefore appears that the artistic heritage of western Nepal of the Khasa Malla period is not limited to a single style but rather presents a multitude of stylistic idioms. This richness expresses the diversity of visual cultures and of populations that the Khasa Malla/Yatse emperors ruled, as well as the latter's connections with artistic and religious centres from Tibet, India, and the Kathmandu valley.

Returning to Ripu Malla, the epigraphic records of Nigilva and Lumbini suggest that he was on pilgrimage in the Nepalese Terai region in 1312. This journey was further extended by a passage to the Kathmandu valley, where Ripu Malla arrived in February 1313. This event is reported in the *Gopalarajavamshavali*, a Newari chronicle, where it is said that Ripu Malla took part in the bathing ritual of Bungadyah (a Newari form of Avalokiteshvara worshipped in the village of Bungamati) and went to Pashupatinath (Douglas, 2003). It was not the first time that a Khasa Malla emperor visited the valley. In 1287, 1288, and 1289 already, Ripu Malla's uncle, Jitari Malla, looted the region and took part in Bungadyah's bathing ritual. Jitari Malla's son, Aditya Malla, took the throne from Ripu Malla between 1314 and 1316. Following his father's example, Aditya Malla also pillaged the valley in 1321 and 1328.

Ripu Malla seems not to have raided the Kathmandu valley. The available documentation confirms that his visit was mainly motivated by his religious character. In this context, the *paubha* and the sculpture of Dakini Nairatma, both of Newari style, can be interpreted as objects acquired by Ripu Malla or offered to him from a Newari workshop during his pilgrimage of 1313.

Ripu Malla is known from inscriptions dated between 1312 and 1314. Although his reign was one of the shortest of the Khasa Malla dynasty, he appears as one of the most prolific kings in terms of religious activities. Our seminal study of Ripu Malla's career leads to a reassessment of metal sculptures attributed to the Khasa Malla rulers. The contextualization of these objects reveals that artistic idioms of the concerned period and area are, in fact, multiple. It is safe to say at this point that an entity such as the Khasa Malla/Yatse empire cannot be essentialized to a single style or type of artistic production. One may consequently question



Fig. 6 Sculpture of Shakyamuni Buddha in the niche of a memorial pillar
Nepal, Dailekh district, Padukasthan
Second half of the 13th century
Stone, niche 60 x 43 cm
Photograph by the author

the validity of a so-called Khasa Malla style and the modalities of accession to art during the medieval period. Undoubtedly, the metal statuary in question is the art of an elite with financial and geographical access to foreign artistic centres. The Khasa Malla kings may have acquired metal sculptures and paintings through the looting activities involved in their territorial conquests and various raids



Fig. 7 Crowned Shakyamuni Buddha
Khasa Malla style, 14th century
Gilt copper, 24.9 cm
Fondation Alain Bordier (ABS 184)
(Image courtesy of the Fondation Alain Bordier)

across the Kathmandu valley. Another way was through patronage or direct purchase from artists, as suggested here with Ripu Malla. The agency of foreign patrons is documented across the Himalayan range for earlier periods (Graldi, 2018), as well as for the twentieth century (Lichtenberg-Van Mierlo, 1984). This cultural mobility is generative of a dense nexus composed of a variety of actors, beliefs, cultures, and artistic networks.

The existence of Newari metal workshops in western Nepal itself is doubtful. If they existed, the workshops had no visible impact on the local artistic culture. In this regard, it is relevant to say that the Khasa Malla/Yatse rulers acquired religious art objects from Newari artists active in the Kathmandu valley or in Tibet. Court members also acquired such objects. This is illustrated by a metal sculpture of Machig Labdrön in the collection of the Fondation

Alain Bordier (Fig. 8). The object was most probably purchased by one of Ripu Malla's ministers. The base of the sculpture contains an incised dedicatory inscription in Devanagari: 'May the victorious Medanimalla live long. [In the year] 1234 [1312 CE] of Shaka' (*śrī medanimalla śriram jayatu | śāke 1234*). Newari artists thus produced styles in vogue in the circle of their patrons, although these were not necessarily Khasa Malla kings. Indeed, numerous sculptures identified as Khasa Malla are not inscribed, and their original locations are unknown. Metal analyses may be able to inform the place of fabrication. Nevertheless, unless investigations on the places of collection (such as monasteries) and physical analyses are carried on the whole of the corpus, the identity of these sculptures' makers, owners, or patrons, and their actual connection to the Khasa Malla rulers, will most likely remain unknown.

David C. Andolfatto, PhD, is an archaeologist and postdoctoral researcher at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris.



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Fig. 8 Machig Labdrön
Khasa Malla style, 1312 CE
Gilt copper, 15 cm
Fondation Alain Bordier (ABS 252)
(Image courtesy of the Fondation Alain Bordier)