

# The Buddha and his Disciples: Depictions of Arhats in Early Indian Art

The *arhat* is a central figure in Buddhist soteriology and embodies the tension between the calmness of awakening and the supernatural powers accompanying this attainment (Swearer 1987: 404). He represents the soteriological ideal of Theravāda Buddhism and the concept of the *arhat* is already firmly established in the early strata of the Buddhist Pāli canon. Nevertheless, *arhats* have not yet been identified in early Indian Buddhist art, although their depictions are very common in later Chinese and Tibetan art.

My research aims to document evidence for the earliest depictions of *arhats* in Indian art and to trace their subsequent development. Therefore, the first five disciples of the Buddha, Ajñāta Kauṇḍinya, Mahānāman, Vāṣpa, Aśvajit and Bhadrājit serve as a starting point. They are commonly represented on Gandhāran reliefs surrounding the Buddha during his first sermon (fig. 1). Although the textual sources of Gandhāran art are still debated, in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. the Buddhacarita of Aśvaghōṣa already describes the first disciples of the Buddha as having reached the status of *arhats*. Thus the five monks around the Buddha may be seen as early representations of *arhats*.

Other disciples of the Buddha are also connected with the status of an *arhat*. An interesting example from the early 8<sup>th</sup> century is seen in a very well preserved fragment of wall painting from cave G in Bāmiyān that shows a bearded monk (fig. 2). The painting was associated with a *parinirvāṇa* scene on a ruined *stūpa* in the cave. As every *parinirvāṇa* scene in Bāmiyān shows Mahākāśyapa worshipping at the feet of the Buddha, the image from cave G can be identified as Mahākāśyapa. Another wall painting in cave N shows a bejewelled Buddha in the center of a three-Buddha-composition (fig. 3). Klimburg-Salter (2005: 542) identifies the five figures surrounding him as the five patriarchs or *arhats* and suggests that the first of the five monks could be Mahākāśyapa (fig. 4).

## Future work

The evidence collected thus far provides a basis for tracing the interrelation of the development of the concept of the *arhat* and his depictions. In the course of future research, more art historical evidence will be analysed, also taking into consideration the textual sources. The distinguishing marks of the *arhats* and their pictorial development will be defined.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

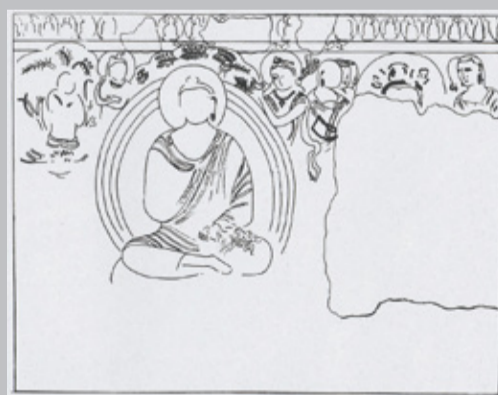


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

## Images:

- Fig. 1. The first sermon, Loriyān Tangāi, Indian Museum, Calcutta (Klimburg-Salter 1995)  
Fig. 2. Mahākāśyapa, cave G, Bāmiyān, Kabul Museum (Higuchi 1983: plate 4,1)  
Fig. 3. Bejewelled Buddha with five monks, Bāmiyān, cave N, east wall (Higuchi 1983: plate 79,2)  
Fig. 4. Drawing of east wall in cave N, Bāmiyān (Miyaji 1971: plate 105)

## Literature:

- Higuchi, T. (1983). *Bāmiyān. Art and Archaeological Researches on the Buddhist Cave Temples in Afghanistan 1970–1978*. Vol. I: Plates (Murals). Dohosha, Kyoto.  
Klimburg-Salter D. (1995) *Buddha in Indien. Die frühindische Skulptur von König Aśoka bis zur Guptazeit*. Wien, Milan.  
Klimburg-Salter D. (2005) Mahākāśyapa and the Art of Bāmiyān. C. Jarrige and V. Lefèvre (eds.). *South Asian Archaeology: Proceedings of the Sixteenth International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists, held in Collège de France, Paris, 2–6 July 2001*, 525–49.  
Miyaji, A., Kotera, T., Kosaku, M. (1971) *Bāmiyān: report on the survey of 1969*. Nagoya.  
Swearer, D. (1987) Arhat. In: M. Eliade (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. I. New York, London, 403–5.