



The Sun in Stone—Early Anthropomorphic Imagery of Sūrya in North India

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The paper discusses aspects of the iconographical development and the possible reasons for the depiction of the sun god in North India in Buddhist as well as Brahmanical contexts prior to the third and fourth centuries. It demonstrates that by employing careful art historical analysis of the images themselves and, whenever possible, their position in the larger context of a pictorial program, these images can be valuable resources in their own right for a deeper understanding of the notions connected to and transmitted by these images—particularly if neither inscriptions nor other literary sources are directly related to them.

Keywords: Indian sun god, light symbolism, spread of image types

Die Sonne in Stein – Frühe anthropomorphe Darstellungen von Sūrya in Nordindien

In diesem Artikel werden Aspekte der ikonographischen Entwicklung und die möglichen Beweggründe diskutiert, aus denen der nordindische Sonnengott vor dem 3. und 4. Jahrhundert sowohl in buddhistischen als auch brahmanischen Kontexten dargestellt wurde. Mittels sorgfältiger kunsthistorischer Analyse der Darstellungen und — soweit möglich — ihrer Position in einem größeren Bildprogramm, können diese Bildwerken als eigenständige Quellen dienen, aus denen sich Informationen über die mit dem Sonnengott verknüpften Ideen bzw. die durch seine Darstellung vermittelten Vorstellungen ableiten lassen. Dies ist umso unverzichtbarer, wenn — wie im Fall der frühen Bildwerke des Sonnengottes — weder Inschriften noch sonstige Textquellen unmittelbar mit diesen Darstellungen verbunden sind.

Schlüsselwörter: Indischer Sonnengott, Lichtsymbolismus, Verbreitung von Bildtypen

Introduction

In this paper, using the example of early representations from North India, I analyse the features of images of the sun god before the third and fourth centuries and show how art historical methods can be employed to deal with problems arising from the fact that the specimen bear no identifying inscriptions and are often isolated or fragmented items with little contextual information. In this respect the paper complements the papers by TV Venkateswaran on temple inscriptions in Tamil Nadu, which are not immediately linked to images, and by Antonio Panaino dealing

with Iranian conceptual images of the planets and their visualizations in Iran, Central Asia, north-western India and north-western China. Given the long-distance connections between the formal pictorial aspects of the examples I present with imagery from the Mediterranean and Central Asia, I will demonstrate how art historical approaches can allow us to go beyond a mere identification of all these depictions of celestial bodies, and to uncover the complex, multifaceted notions expressed by them.

The Indian Sun Cult and Its Early Imagery

To set the frame for a more detailed discussion of three selected images a few general remarks shall provide some basic information on the Indian sun god and its imagery. Already the earliest known literary sources, the Vedic *saṃhitās* (*Ṛg-*, *Sāma-*, *Yajur-* and *Atharvaveda*) composed roughly around 1500 BCE and related texts, the *brāhmaṇas*, *āraṇyakas* and *upaniṣads* composed between ca. 1000 to 500 BCE, mention a number of deities with more or less pronounced solar characteristics. Among them are the god Sūrya,¹ whose features indicate that he represents the sun as a celestial body and several other divine entities like Savitṛ, Āditya etc. Though several hymns in the *Ṛgveda* are devoted to Savitṛ and other solar deities, there are a number of other, more prominent divinities. The two major epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and particularly the *Mahābhārata*, also mention the sun god and relate several episodes featuring him, his wives and his son Karṇa. These narratives form, compared to the entirety of stories gathered in these epics, only a rather small part, and are sometimes only loosely connected to the main plot. The even younger *Purāṇas*² are heterogeneous collections of myths, legends, descriptions of pilgrimage sites, delineations of the images of different deities and other topics. They underwent frequent revisions and combine older passages probably dating back to the early centuries CE with large additions sometimes compiled and inserted as late as the fifteenth or sixteenth century. For Sūrya these texts provide more elaborate versions of the myths already present in the older sources as well as new narratives, especially one describing the sun god as healing the leprosy of Kṛṣṇas son Sāmba, who in return builds the first sun temple, installs an image representing the sun god and brings families of priests from a “continent” called Śākadvīpa to India, because none of the priests in India are willing or capable to perform the temple service properly (von Stietencron 1966). It has to be mentioned here that our knowledge of solar mythology is sketchy. One reason is the fact that the sun cult which at times was—judging from the number of temples and

cult images devoted to Sūrya—equal in importance and patronage to the cults of Viṣṇu, Śiva and the Goddess, seems to have lost importance and most of its followers after ca. 1350–1400 CE. As a result the transmission of text collections distinctly devoted to sun worship was interrupted and the texts mostly lost; only a few fragmented narratives continued to be passed on as parts of other collections like the *Purāṇas* mentioned above.

So, there are literary sources mentioning the sun god from an early point in time; it is obvious that solar deities were of a certain importance. In terms of visualization there were concerns about how the divine sun moved across the sky and one of the more prominent ideas—shared by India and other Indo-European civilizations—was that of the sun god riding a horse-drawn chariot. This concept exists already in Vedic literature and was maintained through the millennia. The literary sources available are, however, at times difficult to relate to the existing images of the sun god. This holds true particularly for the earliest images. These few early images appear around the first century BCE at several sites across North India, followed by a larger number of images in the first three centuries CE from both Greater Gandhara (parts of modern Afghanistan and Pakistan) in the Northwest of the subcontinent and from the area around Mathura, a city that between roughly the second century BCE and the sixth century CE was a major cultural and trade hub at the western end of the Gangetic plains. The images created in this period follow—as will be discussed below in more detail—the basic Indo-European concept of the sun god riding in his chariot. They do not include, however, certain features particular to the Vedic vision of this chariot, above all the number of seven horses drawing the chariot, which are not only perpetuated in later literary sources but are also represented in Sūrya images after the early 6th century. In addition, especially the images from Mathura display a number of features in their attire that cannot be explained as genuinely Indian, but rather relate to garment types worn by Central Asian nomadic riders. This particular kind of dress is otherwise depicted in Mathura in images of the ruling elites during the Kuṣāṇa period (ca. early second to third century CE).

Attempts to deal with the obvious discrepancies of literary and material sources have resulted in two main lines of interpretation. On the one hand, scholars of Indology and art history have drawn a picture of the sun cult and solar imagery that focusses on the “Indian”, that is, Vedic foundations and describes every aspect of sun worship and every image as developed from these indigenous concepts. These scholars either focus on an iconographical analysis (e.g. Pandey 1971), on philological arguments (such as Srivastava 1972), or combine both (e.g. Cummins 2001). The unusual, non-Vedic characteristics in Sūrya images before the fifth and sixth century CE are either not discussed at all, or are justified as minor variations. Most

of the scholars promoting this position reject the theory that the Central Asian elements in the images and the myth mentioned above about the introduction of priests for a temple cult focused on Sūrya from Śākadvīpa may be indicative of a foreign influence or even the non-Indian origin of the sun cult and its images. A more moderate line of argumentation tries to push back the point of time for such an introduction of a non-Indian sun cult as far as possible into the past (Pandey 1989: 18–23) in order to sustain the notion of a unified sun cult rooted in Indian culture. Emphasis is laid on the idea that the essential ritual of sun worship is directed towards the solar orb itself and all other ritual practices, particularly temple rituals involving images of Sūrya, are of secondary nature and therefore dispensable. In more recent works that reflect the more general tendency in parts of South Asian academia to emphasize the unity and historic continuities of “Hindu culture”, the fact that the veneration of the sun by pouring water toward the rising orb while reciting the *Gāyatrī*, a verse from the *Ṛgveda* dedicated to Savitṛ, is still practiced by devout Hindus today is referred to as additional evidence for the unbroken continuity of Vedic sun worship through the ages.

On the other hand, scholars have argued in favor of a sun cult either introduced by groups from Central Asia, particularly the rulers of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty, or at least heavily influenced by non-Indian patterns of solar worship and imagery (Rosenfield 1967; Gail 1978; Gail 2001). They distinguish between the common veneration of the sun described above and a sectarian sun cult. Their argument is based on the appearance of the sun god in the early sculptures as well as on the myth about the introduction of the temple-based sun cult mentioned before. They compared the particular gear of the sun god and the depictions of members of the Kuṣāṇa elites in stone sculptures and concluded that the introduction of the sun cult most probably occurred during the rule of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty over the northwestern parts of the subcontinent in the second and third centuries or prior to this phase, during the rule of the Śaka, another group of Central Asian origin.

For the earliest anthropomorphic images of the sun god the discussions outlined above are only of limited value since these images were not meant to be venerated in their own right. Below I shall examine three examples of such early depictions and will discuss, why the depictions of the sun god look the way they do, and why the sun god was included in image programs or became part of the iconographical repertoire for the depiction of other deities. For this purpose I shall give a brief overview over the known images and the characteristics of this image type before analyzing each of the three images more closely.



Fig. 1 Bodh Gaya/Bihar. Sūrya on a railing pillar. First century BCE. Bodh Gaya Site Museum. (Photo: Gudrun Melzer)

Contextualizing the Early Images of the Sun God

Depictions of the sun god in an anthropomorphic form are among the earliest identifiable stone images of deities in Northern India. Individual examples can be found from around the first century BCE at sites scattered over North India, such as Khandagiri in modern Odisha, Bodh Gaya in modern Bihar and Lala Bhagat, a village west of Lucknow and northwest of Kanpur in modern Uttar Pradesh. These reliefs are usually part of larger architectural units. The most famous image, the one from Bodh Gaya (Fig. 1), usually dated to approximately the first century BCE, occupies one of the four registers on one face of a *vedikā* (railing) pillar. The second one in the Anantagumpha cave at Khandagiri, datable to ca. 100 BCE, filled the semicircular space below the arch of one of the four entrances to this cave. The image from Lala Bhagat—dated by different scholars to anything between the first century BCE and the second to third century—is part of a sequence of shallow reliefs loosely arranged on one face of a six-sided pillar discovered as a stray find without any documented context.

Larger numbers of images showing the sun god in his chariot were produced during the first three or four centuries CE in the region of Greater Gandhara (in modern Afghanistan and Pakistan) and adjacent regions as well as in the North Indian cultural and trade hub Mathura situated between New Delhi and Agra on the river Yamuna. In Gandhara depictions of the sun god can be found in a variety of places and contexts: on pseudo-Corinthian pilaster capitals from Buddhist monasteries and stūpa sites in Gandhara and neighboring Swat, on round stone trays, as part of a sequence of scenes from the life of the Buddha (e.g. on one of the gables of a cruciform schist reliquary; Allchin 1972: 15–26), and on the ornamental turban fronts of Bodhisattvas (for example Royal Ontario Museum Acc. No. 939.17.8; Jongeward 2002: 126–127). A good number of these objects were discovered during archaeological excavations and it is clear from the contextual information available that none of these images was intended to be the focus of worship. They were all part of a larger visual unit, be it a set of images on the pilasters in a building, a sequence of images depicting episodes of the Buddha's life or as part of the attire of a Bodhisattva.

Examples from Mathura, on the contrary, were often recovered from wells, ponds, in the river bed of the Yamuna or as chance finds. Almost all images from Mathura are small individual sculptures not embedded in a larger visual program and without any larger archaeological context. This means there is no contextual information available as to which purpose these images were made for. A few larger sculptures used to be identified as belonging to the same period. Some, particularly the so-called Gokarṇeśvara colossus (identified as a royal portrait in Rosenfield 1967: 142–143, 148–149, fig. 11 but considered a Sūrya image by other scholars, e.g. Gail 1994; Gail 2001; for photos of the current state of the image today worshipped as Śiva Mahādeva see Gupta 2013: fig. 9.4), are too damaged to allow for a detailed iconographical analysis and precise dating. For others, their dates have to be reconsidered in the light of more recent discoveries like the unique stela of Sūrya seated in his elaborate chariot found in Mathura in 1992 and datable roughly to the early sixth century CE (Frenger 2001). This stela and other new finds (Gupta 2013: fig. 9.14, 9.16) provide evidence that older perceptions have to be revised and that features hitherto deemed characteristic only for sun images from the Kuṣāṇa period (second to third centuries) were in fact continued until at least the fifth and early sixth centuries (Frenger 2001: fig. 2; Frenger 2005: 446, fig. 5).

In this article, I will take a closer look at the famous Bodhi Gaya relief mentioned above and on two of the few Mathura sculptures from the second to third centuries, which present the Sūrya image within a somewhat wider context. One is a lintel fragment showing two registers with undoubtedly Buddhist scenes and a representation of the sun god at the



Fig. 2 a Lintel fragment with Buddhist scenes. Mathura/Uttar Pradesh. 2nd–3rd centuries. Lucknow Museum B.208. (Photo: Author). b Sūrya. Detail of (a). (Photo: Author)

extreme right of the upper register (Fig. 2). The other is a small relief showing a precursor to the classical representations of the Brahmanical myth of Varāha rescuing the earth goddess from being submerged in the cosmic ocean. In it the boar-headed male figure in the center holds two tiny discs with identical depictions of a figure in a chariot in his upper hands (Fig. 3). What can be said safely about all these Sūrya images at the outset is that they—like the images of the sun god from Gandhara—were no individual cult images made to be worshipped within a temple or a similar religious establishment. They were either part of a larger visual program like the relief at Bodh Gaya (Fig. 1), which is but one of several reliefs on the railing that defined the site of Buddha’s enlightenment, part of a larger narrative sequence like in the Buddhist lintel (Fig. 2) or an element in a set of iconographical attributes used to characterize another deity, in this case Varāha (Fig. 3).

The basic elements of the composition in all three images are identical. A chariot drawn by four horses jumping symmetrically to both sides is shown in strict frontality. The main passenger of the chariot is a male



Fig. 3 Varāha holding sun and moon discs. Mathura/Uttar Pradesh. Second and third centuries. Government Museum Mathura 65.15.4. (Photo: Author)

figure who, in the earliest example from Bodh Gaya, is flanked by two additional female figures. In the relief from Bodh Gaya the central figure is further emphasized by a large nimbus with radiating lines suggestive of rays. The other images under discussion do not show a similarly distinctive nimbus behind the deity's head but in the Varāha relief the chariot with its passenger is shown against the backdrop of a disc suggestive of a heavenly body.

The close proximity of these early images to classical Mediterranean representations of Helios and Sol in their *quadrigae* was recognized already in the nineteenth century. Western archaeologists and historians at that time were familiar with the highly praised art and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. It is therefore no surprise that in his reports for the *Archaeological Survey of India* Alexander Cunningham chose the relief at Bodh Gaya, the legendary site of the enlightenment of the Buddha in modern Bihar, as a starting point to discuss and compare Greek and Hindu images of the sun (Cunningham 1873: 97, pl. XXVII). Obviously for him and other knowledgeable Western scholars of Classical Antiquity there was no doubt that such Indian images followed in the wake of the great Classical tradition of Greece and Rome, thus making it easy to accept this dependence. Since this first identification, the fact that the iconography is that of Sūrya as well as its dependence on models from Classical Antiquity have sometimes been disputed among art historians. For the North Indian images it has been suggested that they do not draw on foreign sources,

but rather go back to indigenous Indian concepts already laid down in the Vedic *saṃhitās* (e.g. Banerjea 1956: 429–430). In turn, for representations from Gandhara it has been occasionally suggested that they do not show the sun god at all, but illustrate instead a crucial episode in the early life of Buddha Śākyamuni. Here the young prince leaves the palace in the capital Kapilavastu with his chariot and encounters an old man, an invalid, a corpse and a wandering ascetic—a confrontation with different forms of suffering and the realities of human life that according to the legends led to his renunciation, and initiated his search for a way to leave the cycle of death and rebirth. In general, however, attributing these images as representations of the sun god is today accepted by scholars of Indian art history.

Apart from this basic identification, however, further-reaching conclusions about why the sun god was shown in stone reliefs all over North India are difficult to reach. None of the Sūrya images from the time before ca. 500 CE do bear any inscriptions relating to the sun god,³ therefore it is not even known whether they were seen as images of Sūrya, as the Iranian sun god named Miθra/MIIRO, as the Greek Helios or—maybe the most probable supposition—as all three depending on the cultural background and the contextual understanding of the individual viewer. These hitherto only insufficiently studied interrelations between the solar deities of South and Central Asia, Iran, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean are also touched upon by Antonio Panaino in his article for the present volume (p. [8]).

Another valuable source for the understanding of later iconographical contexts and developments, the already mentioned “iconographical texts,” comprised describing the appearance of images of different deities, does not exist for the earliest period. It is only with the rise of Brahmanical cults like Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and the Devī (Goddess) cults that texts explicitly describing the appearance of their images come up and the earliest of these texts, chapter 58 of Varahamihira’s *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* (Bhat 1987: 549–563) and the *Pratimālakṣaṇa* part of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (Bhattacharya 1991), can only be dated to the early sixth and the eighth to ninth centuries respectively, which means they are considerably later than the images under discussion.

The early Vedic texts may at least provide us with some general information about how the sun was imagined as a personified celestial body. As mentioned before they describe a number of deities with more or less prominent solar features. For many of them the actual extent of their solar characteristics has not been properly determined yet. Equally there are several ideas how the sun moves across the sky. Not all of these were passed on beyond the Vedic period but the idea of the sun driving across

the sky in a horse-drawn chariot and being revealed or lead by a female named Uṣas, “dawn”, is the most persistent. Sūrya is further described as bringing light and dispelling darkness and as having piercing rays, an idea maybe alluded to by the two archers accompanying Sūrya in the Bodh Gaya relief. Other features ascribed to the sun, such as the ability to take up water from the earth during two thirds of the year and to give it back as rain during the remaining third—thus creating another time unit, the seasons—are connected to this basic function as bearer of light (Macdonell 1897: 30–32). Later texts elaborate and expand these features but the basic notions of the sun as a provider of light and warrantor of natural order are perpetuated.

The solar chariot is several times described as *ekacakra*, “having one wheel”—probably an allusion to the solar orb—and as being drawn either by one horse with seven heads or, more frequently, by seven horses. These are sometimes interpreted as the seven rays of the sun. Later they are associated with the seven Vedic meters or—probably even later, after the introduction of the planetary week to India (Benedik 2007)—with the seven days of the week. Looking at the early images it is obvious that they do not take up this detail. Their most obvious and constant feature is the even number of horses—four or in a few cases only two—in front of the chariot. But why was a visual model so obviously digressing from the traceable indigenous ideas of the sun’s appearance acceptable to the viewers? How and why was it integrated into the image programs of different sites and into different iconographies? Literary sources do not provide any immediate answers to these questions. By employing art historical methods it may be possible to get a glimpse into why these Sūrya images were created, and which ideas and concepts were connected with the sun god at the time of their emergence.

The Sun God as Provider of Natural Order

India has long been famed for its ancient astronomical knowledge, and since even the oldest literary sources, the Vedas, make it abundantly clear that there was a need for a precise determination of time to make sure that sacrifices took place at the proper moment, it cannot surprise that astronomy or *jyotiṣa* was seen as one of the six *vedāṅgas* or auxiliary sciences. But the images of the sun under discussion are no scientific or, more precisely, astronomical depictions. Apart from the large body of knowledge gathered around the movement of stars, planets and—most importantly—the moon and the sun, another perspective on the sun existed in ancient India

and this approach, though also based on empirical observation, included more abstract ideas. On this level, the sun was first of all the provider of essential order—by bringing light and dispelling darkness it guaranteed the basic form of time, day and night and thus the fundamental frame for the existence of all beings. Light was in ancient India—as in many other cultures—synonymous with security while the lack of light was equated to danger and everything evil and demonic. On a more sophisticated level the sun was a symbol for knowledge that dispels ignorance just as light dispels darkness, and a bearer of the inner energy *tejas* that is identical with the life energy every being carries within itself. It was believed that this energy was particularly strong in spiritual leaders, ascetics and in worldly rulers. In fact, the very term used in Sanskrit to denote a ruler, *rāja*, is derived from a verb root *rāj* that may mean “to rule”, but also “to shine, to glitter” (Monier-Williams 1899: 872.3). Among the foremost tasks of every ruler, exemplified by the ideal universal ruler, the *cakravartin*, is the maintenance of every form of order and regularity—an order equally essential as the structure provided by the reliable alternation of day and night. It is therefore not surprising that the anthropomorphic visualization of the sun from its earliest beginnings has been reflecting the contemporary attire of the ruler and that this connection has remained stronger and more obvious than between other deities and the ruler.

A closer look at the early images shows, that they do indeed reflect the contemporary apparel of the ruler—the Bodhi Gaya image (Fig. 1) as well as those from Khandagiri and Lala Bhagat, show the central male figure with all the insignia of an ancient Indian ruler including a large parasol above his head, an opulent turban, heavy ear-plugs and necklace, accompanied by two female attendants.⁴ His upper body is bare, which is in keeping with the dress traditions of the subcontinent. The right hand is raised in a greeting gesture while the left rests on the rim of the chariot, which in itself is another part of the regal paraphernalia. This is well documented by contemporary reliefs from Buddhist sites like Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh depicting royal processions. In these reliefs the king is invariably shown in a chariot with two or four horses. The slightly later images from Mathura (Figs. 2 and 3), as well as those from Gandhara do reflect changes in the appearance of the ruler. At the time, both regions were dominated by the Kuṣāṇa dynasty, a nomadic group from Central Asia, whose rulers were depicted on coins (Rosenfield 1967: pl. II–IV) and in large-scale stone sculptures from Māt near Mathura (Rosenfield 1967: 138–153, fig. 1–3) wearing the heavy boots and thick coats or loose, embroidered tunics and wide trousers characteristic of Central Asian nomadic horse-people. Images in both regions pick up this changed appearance; among our three examples the figure of the sun god in the lintel fragment (Fig. 2b), though

considerably abbreviated due to the limited space, is exemplary in showing the god in a fitted tunic with a central vertical border and decorated sleeve seams. His right hand holds a short bulky object. It represents either a small version of the club that features in the impressive image of the Kuṣāṇa ruler Kaniṣka (Rosenfield 1967: fig. 2), the club-like object held by the ruler in some coin portraits of him and his successors (Rosenfield 1967: pl. III–V), or a lotus bud maybe related to the long-stemmed lotus seed-cases held by the ruler in the well-known Kaniṣka reliquary in Peshawar Museum (Rosenfield 1967: fig. 60a). The left hand of the god rests on the pommel of an almost invisible sword, another object also present in the depictions of Kuṣāṇa rulers.

These newly introduced attributes as well as the face with heavy features and a pronounced moustache are closely related to the depictions of the Kuṣāṇa rulers and members of the nomadic ruling elites in general. This remarkable exactitude with which Sūrya images incorporated changes in the appearance of contemporary rulers was continued for several centuries.⁵ It shows that the relation between the sun god and the ruler was not the repetition of a once established iconographical convention but a ‘living’ feature. Artists and viewers alike obviously understood the reference to the ruler as an essential part of the sun image. This close relation is almost certainly rooted in the fact that the sun god, as described before, warrants the perpetuation of order on a cosmic level just as the ruler does on a more practical level. The sun god in this sense symbolizes some of the most crucial provisions an Indian ruler had to make for his subjects—a stable and reliable order as well as the necessary basis for communal prosperity.

At this point we have to recall the fact that the early images of the sun god uniformly reject the particular “Vedic” version of the chariot drawn by seven horses in favor of the *quadriga*. A plausible explanation for the wide acceptance of this image type may be that Vedic texts were probably not regarded as authoritative by the Buddhist communities responsible for the erection of the Bodh Gaya railing and the building to which the lintel once belonged. It obviously was more important to emphasize the regal aspect of the sun god in the early images than to follow the description of the Vedic texts, and it was therefore easy to adapt a foreign image type for use in a non-Vedic context.

Additional Layers of Meaning

Apart from the general concept of the sun god delineated before each depiction may have carried other, additional layers of meaning. To detect

these further messages transmitted by the images it is important to take into account once again the context each image is embedded in.

The Bodh Gaya relief (Fig. 1), as mentioned before, is part of a sequence of scenes on the terminal pillar of a *vedika* from Bodh Gaya, the site where according to legend Buddha Śākyamuni attained enlightenment. Bodh Gaya was an entirely Buddhist site at the time the railing pillar was created. The pillar itself shows—below the Sūrya relief—a scene usually identified as the birth of Siddhārtha, the future Buddha, while the other two sculptured faces of the pillar are covered with architectural elements that serve as separators and several scenes that may be referring to events in the life of Buddha Śākyamuni, too. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the image of the sun god in this context is also related to the life of the Buddha. Several suggestions have been made to explain the presence of the sun god among the scenes on the railing. Whether the relief refers to the genealogy of the Buddha, who according to Buddhist tradition belonged to the Ikṣvāku dynasty that traced their origins back to a son of the sun god (Srinivasan 1992: 41), or whether the relief rather alludes to the central event in the life of the Buddha, his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, the very site the relief belongs to (Leoshko 1988), remains undecided. If it refers to the enlightenment this would indicate that what is called *bodhi*, literally the “awakening,” or Siddhārtha’s “becoming fully aware” (Monier-Williams 1899: 733.1–2) was already expressed by means of a light metaphor at this very early stage. Yet, the relief may as well be a general visual reminder of the essentially dual nature of the Buddha who, as a sage told his parents immediately after Siddhārtha’s birth, was to become either a spiritual leader or an ideal worldly ruler, a *cakravartin*. In fact, it is not even necessary to decide in favor of one of these interpretations. Maybe a certain degree of ambiguity in images like this was accepted or even intended to allow viewers with different individual backgrounds to connect to it. In any case it is certain that the image of the sun god was included in the sequence of images because it carried such a secondary layer of meaning that went beyond the mere illustration of the sun as a heavenly body. Whether the inclusion of solar imagery into the visual program of the Buddhist site was in any form inspired by the existence of a non-Buddhist cult of the sun god remains unclear. The existence of numerous Sūrya images dating roughly to the ninth and into the eleventh centuries in this part of Bihar—including some of impressive size, such as an example at the Bharani Ghat in Gaya—indicates that the region was a center of Sūrya worship several hundred years after the railing was erected. Sometimes it has been assumed that the abundance of such later anthropomorphic sun images bears witness merely to the continuation or extension of the aforementioned general practice of venerating the rising sun (e.g. Singh et al. 2009:

103–106; equally Singh 2009: 81–84). However, neither literary nor material sources can verify that the inclusion of Sūrya into the image program of the Buddhist site was inspired by the presence of such older traditions. Such assumptions rely, as one author (Singh 2009: 81) admits, entirely on “mythological evidence,” while “the sculptural or inscriptional sources are not available for earlier periods.”

In the second image under discussion, the fragmented door lintel from Mathura (Fig. 2), the sun god also serves as a carrier for a secondary meaning. Therein, the image of the sun god occupies the position on the extreme right of the upper of two registers containing Buddhist motives. While the lower register was filled with the Buddhas of the past, that is, a group of predecessors of the Buddha, Śākyamuni himself and the additional figure of the future Buddha Maitreya on the right, the upper register showed a sequence of scenes from the life of Śākyamuni. Due to the fragmented state of the object it is unknown how this sequence continued after the central scene of *Indrasailāguha*, the visit of god Indra to the Buddha, who was meditating in a mountain cave. For this image of the sun god, too, it has been argued that it was included into the register as a reminder of the Buddha’s genealogy (Srinivasan 1992: 39–40). This possibility cannot be ruled out, but the argument in its favor is weakened by the fact that the next scene does not depict the birth of the Buddha; the females belong to the scene showing the victory over the demon Māra immediately before the enlightenment, representing Māra’s beautiful daughters, who were ordered to distract the Buddha, thus preventing him from being enlightened. It is likewise possible that the sun god was complemented by a similar depiction of the moon god Candra on the opposite end of this register. In this case, rather than alluding to the genealogical background of the Buddha, the pair of sun and moon god may have served to stress the time-transcending, eternal, cosmic dimension of the events depicted. This is further supported by the Buddhas in the lower register, who as a group represent the continuity of the Buddhist doctrine through the ages—from the distant past represented by the first six Buddhas over the current era represented by Śākyamuni into the future when Maitreya will be reborn to become the next Buddha.

In the third example (Fig. 3), the pair of anthropomorphic images of sun and moon are not shown in a Buddhist context but in the upper pair of hands of a four-armed human figure with a—now partly damaged—boar head. This is probably one of the earliest examples of *Nṛ-Varāha*, the semi-anthropomorphic form of the boar incarnation that is the third of the ten classical *avatāras* (incarnations) of Viṣṇu. Only a comparison with other contemporary sculptures of different Brahmanical deities can ascertain that these two tiny discs, each displaying a small chariot driven by

a single figure, actually represent the anthropomorphic sun and the moon. Small stone sculptures of the goddess Mahiṣāsūramardīnī kept in the Berlin Museum of Asian Art (Acc. No. I 5817), or in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Acc. No. M 84.153.1) hold two discs marked with the solar orb and the crescent respectively. Equally, a seated Śiva in a relief from Musanagar, Uttar Pradesh (Maxwell 1988: 46–50, fig. 1.4, pl. 17), shows a figure emanating behind the seated main aspect of the god. This figure holds the solar orb and the crescent in his two raised hands.⁶ In fact, this particular image of *Varāha* is a crucial piece of evidence since it shows that the early images of Sūrya without any larger context were indeed properly identified.⁷ Furthermore it is also significant because this is the first case of a Brahmanical context for an image of the sun god. It is obvious that the sun and moon in this image are not the focus of worship but, similar to the Buddhist examples, are employed as attributes to define the qualities of the deities who carry them. In this case it is more difficult to trace the potential meaning the image transmits. The pair of sun and moon may simply indicate a cosmic dimension of the deity that holds them. It may as well allude to the time-transcending context of the narrative, similar to what has been suggested before for the lintel fragment. Another, less obvious possibility is to interpret the pair of sun and moon in the hands of all the deities mentioned above as an allusion to their ascetic, superhuman qualities. For Śiva, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī,⁸ the *Varāha* and the *Trivikrama* incarnations of Viṣṇu, in other words, all those deities who at an early stage of their iconographical development can carry sun and moon as attributes, asceticism seems to have been a part of their divine ‘personality’. The corpus of extant images shows, however, that the iconographical element of the two luminaries was by no means compulsory for any of them. For most deities the ascetic connotation gradually eclipsed in the course of the first centuries CE while it became the dominant feature of Śiva. The term *tapas*, which denotes ascetic practices and the spiritual energy they generate, also can simply refer to the natural heat emitted by a fire or the sun (Monier-Williams 1899: 437.1). Hence one might be inclined to assume that the image of the sun is used in these images as an attribute to denote the presence of *tapas* and the supernatural powers derived from it. Since this does not account for the presence of both the sun and the moon, another approach may be better suited to explain the presence of this pair of attributes. The ascetic abilities of a being usually manifest themselves in a number of superhuman powers; though lists of these powers given in both early Buddhist and Brahmanical texts vary in content (Sarbacker 2013: 37–38), what they do have in common is that most of the abilities listed are difficult to visualize—among the few that can be depicted is the ability to increase the size of one’s body. This particular capacity is vividly

described in several legends reporting the miraculous deeds of Buddhist and Hindu ascetics whose superhuman abilities were referred to by describing them as “touching the orbs of the moon and the sun” (for example the “unorthodox”, that is non-Buddhist seer Rakṣita in a story from the Mahāvastu; see Jones 1949: 236⁹). They can manipulate the course of sun and moon or even stop time altogether by growing in size until they can reach the heavenly bodies, grab and hold them. Taking this into account, sun and moon in the hands of a god may also be interpreted as a means to visualize an inherent ascetic aspect by alluding to this particular ability.

Conclusion

To sum up: up to the fifth century the images of the sun god neither bear inscriptions providing any relevant information, nor can they be immediately related to any literary sources providing explanations for their inclusion into the visual programs of Buddhist sites—and possibly also places affiliated to other religious communities—and into the iconography of different Buddhist and Brahmanical entities. The careful analysis of the examples presented in this paper, taking into account the larger context of the individual image, can already provide valuable insights into why such images were created, and which concepts contemporary viewers as well as the patrons and artists responsible for the overarching framework of these visual concepts may have recognized in these images. The iconography of the sun god was closely related to the appearance of contemporary rulers right from the beginning. That this close connection was essential for the figure of the sun god is obvious from the changes encountered in the times of Kuṣāṇa dominance over Gandhara and Mathura.

The reason for this close connection may be best explained by the fundamental function of the sun as light bearer and dispeller of darkness; these essential tasks of the sun mean that it is providing the most basic kind of order in the universe. To be able to provide a reliable framework within which all beings can safely live their life according to their individual *dharma* is also one of the foremost tasks of the ideal worldly ruler, the *cakravartin*, and this analogy of duties is at least one of the roots of the visual similarities between the sun god and the king.

The contextualization of the images under discussion furthermore shows that none of these early images is a cult image in its own right; in each case the sun god is neither the focus of worship, nor the main figure of a narrative—nor, should be added, is he represented merely to indicate daytime in a narrative context. On the contrary, he is always a side figure,

included in a larger composition or in an overall visual program consisting of several images of equal importance and is always transmitting an additional meaning, although not all levels of meaning may be identifiable to the modern viewer and in some cases several different meanings were intended or their incorporation was at least acceptable.

It is significant, however, that the earliest anthropomorphic representations despite them formally being adaptations of a model from Classical Antiquity, already went beyond simply copying this image type, and were more than just representations of the heavenly body. The artists built on the Mediterranean model, but they modified and enhanced it to suit the particular needs of the Indian contexts. By doing so, they emphasized the essential qualities of the sun that warranted the perpetuation of cosmic order in its most basic form. In addition, the image of the sun served as a symbol carrying additional information. The depictions alluded to occurrences in nature that were observable by everybody, especially the daily sunrise. By doing this, the deified sun in ancient India became an image that was able to convey additional meaning and to serve as a visual metaphor even for highly abstract concepts like those of spiritual awakening (bodhi), imagined as enlightenment, or the possession of superhuman powers.

Endnotes

- 1 Sūrya is but one of the many names and epithets of the Indian sun god; since it is used frequently throughout literary sources and the name for the followers of the later sun cult, Saura, has also been derived from it, it will be used here as a name for the Indian sun god in general.
- 2 The Indian literary tradition is essentially an oral one. Even extensive texts of several thousand verses were usually recited from memory. While with Vedic texts the precise transmission was vital for the success of sacrifices and other rituals, narratives such as Epics and Purāṇas were always subjected to a certain amount of changes and additions.
- 3 Among the images discussed in this paper, only the base of the Varāha relief from Mathura (Fig. 3) bears an inscription, which does not refer to any iconographical detail of the image but merely records its donation by a donor named Rakaji (Janert 1966). The Lala Bhagat pillar bears a, possibly later added inscription in the hitherto undeciphered shell script (Mukherjee 1990).
- 4 Only the Bodh Gaya image shows these females as archers aiming at two small figures outside the chariot, who are visible in the area above the heads of the two outer horses. These archers, who do not appear in the Sūrya images of the Kuṣāna period in Gandhara and Mathura, probably reinforce the idea of the sun dispelling darkness personified here as anthropomorphized adversaries. They reappear in sculptures from Mathura around the fifth century and become a standard feature of Sūrya images. Later iconographic texts identify them as Uṣas (dawn) and Pratyūṣas (dusk), an identification that cannot be traced back to Vedic text levels.
- 5 An image from Mathura datable to the fifth or sixth century now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (<http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1972.45>) still shows

- a similar precision in incorporating the physical features like the full beard and the high, probably deformed head shape, but also the mannered way of holding a flower. All these elements can be encountered in contemporary coin portraits of the Central Asian Alchan Huns dominating the area at that time; for example Vondrovec 2008 (37: Type 66A, 61, 318, 81; 38: Type 49–51, 82; 39: Type 62, 316).
- 6 Apart from the deities mentioned, there are also early Gupta period (ca. 400 CE) images of Viṣṇu Trivikrama in a cave site in Ramgarh (Berkson 1978: 227, fig. 1, 7; she does not recognize the discs as sun and moon). In Śiva iconography the pair of attributes was continued until at least the sixth century CE, for example in the colossal image from Parel. In Central Asia, deities derived from Indian prototypes of Śiva and Viṣṇu that hold sun and moon discs in two of their raised hands can be found as far east as Dunhuang on the west wall of the main chamber of Cave 285 that dates to the sixth century CE; here they flank the central niche.
 - 7 In the small space allocated to the depiction of both deities on these discs, no distinguishing marks for sun and moon have been added; their position obviously was sufficient to identify the pair of them and a precise identification of each image was thus not needed. In larger images from both, Mathura and Gandhara, a crescent shape behind the shoulders was sometimes added. Though these images are often taken to be Sūrya images, the crescent most probably indicates an image of the moon god Candara; cf. the famous example from Jamalgarhi in Gandhara, today in the collection of the Indian Museum Kolkata (Acc. No. G.58; Rosenfield 1967: fig. 89) or an image from Mathura in the collection of the National Museum New Delhi (Acc. No. 72.130; cf. Asthana 1999: 49, cat. no. 50).
 - 8 Śiva is the ascetic god par excellence, but Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, too, in the earliest sources is described as a young, chaste, ascetic woman “blazing with tapas” (Taittirīya Āraṇyaka 10.1; Divakaran 1984: 272; see also Granoff 1979; 146); the powers she gains through her ascetic practice are what enables her to kill the buffalo demon.
 - 9 I am most grateful to Monika Zin for bringing this particular story to my notice.

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