

Vajrapāṇi in the Narrative Reliefs

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The following paper is a summary of a project I have been working on for two years, titled *Mitleid und Wunderkraft. Schwierige Bekehrungen und ihre Ikonographie im indischen Buddhismus* (= *Pity and Miracles. Difficult Conversions and their iconography in Indian Buddhism*). The main purpose of this endeavour, financed by the German Research Society (DFG), has been to analyse literary and pictorial representations of certain episodes in the life of the Buddha. All the episodes narrate incidents in which the Buddha converted, or rather tamed, violent and particularly stubborn individuals. Vajrapāṇi plays an important role in some of these stories.

The stories of conversions analysed in the book include narratives about the taming of evil godlings (Āṭavika, Hārītī, Apalāla, Black Snake from Rājagṛha), of the elephant Dhanapāla, and of the mass murderer Aṅgulimāla. There are also narratives about the conversion of the heretic Śrīgupta, of Brahmin Kāśyapas, and of Nanda, a person engrossed in the pleasures of a hedonistic life. These conversions are of considerable importance in the Buddha legend because all of them are difficult to bring about. The opponents of the Buddha in these episodes are represented as powerful antagonists: they are extremely dangerous, extremely cruel or extremely intelligent. Each conversion therefore confirms the Buddha's power and charisma.

In the episodes with evil individuals, the conversions are presented in a specific way. The attention given to the conversion of the individual is rather insignificant, given that this is the crux of the story from the point of view of Buddhist teaching. Instead the narratives focus on the people who benefit from the conversion of the malefactor and who will no longer suffer from the malefactor's negative actions. For instance, it is not important that Hārītī was saved and set on her way to nirvāṇa, what is of much greater importance in the story is that, thanks to her conversion, she will no longer kill the children of Rājagṛha (for summaries and analyses of texts and the list of known depictions cf Zin 2006: ch 2).

In these episodes, the Buddha is stylised as a protector of oppressed people. This role is frequently emphasised by the representation of the entreaties of the tormented people, asking the Buddha to save them from disaster. In such episodes, the Buddha plays the role of a saving hero which would more usually be fulfilled by a king. The authors of the texts, however, remind us that the fundamental task of the Buddha is the conversion of the malefactor rather than the relief of his or her victims. After hearing people's requests to help them in dealing with an evil individual, the Buddha often states, in dramaturgically improper moments, that the time has come for the malefactor to be converted and that therefore he is going to meet him/her. Immediately after the conversions, the former malefactors are venerated and the authors clearly seem to realise that the process of conversion requires a further explanation. They frequently incorporate additional motifs into the story, which explain the cruelty of the converted individual in terms

of their karmic past. For instance, in her previous life Hārītī was a pregnant woman who lost her child because of the actions of the citizens of Rājagṛha. The chain of cause-and-effect therefore starts prior to the events depicted in the conversion episode, and her present cruelty is just a reaction to the evil that she encountered before. Similar circumstances apply to the other malefactors. In his previous life, Aṅgulimāla died after 99 citizens had hit him with their fingers and so he now takes revenge on them, becoming a mass murderer and cutting off the fingers of his victims (for summaries and analyses of texts and the list of known depictions cf Zin 2006: ch 6).

The stories about conversions are based on narrative patterns known as *topoi*. Patterns of this kind are found throughout the world and include fable motifs, such as the monster that must be given a child every day to devour, the basilisk that kills with its looks, and the Sphinx and its riddles. In the conversion stories, the Buddha, as the hero, confronts a great evil and as a result the local population is liberated from a plague. The difference between these stories and other narratives of heroes delivering people from evil-doers lies in the fact that in the Buddhist stories the malefactor is not killed but converted. The Buddha counters his opponents with power that would be the envy of other heroes, that is, power combined with artfulness and magic. The power of the Buddha always overwhelms the power of evil; however, it is always, in a way, its counterpart. When the snake in the hermitage of Kāśyapa breathes out smoke, the Buddha breathes out smoke as well, when the snake emits fire, the Buddha enters a fire-meditation and defeats the snake (for summaries and analyses of texts and the list of known depictions cf Zin 2006: ch 8).

The profit gained from the conversion is the ultimate objective, and the end apparently justifies the means, even if these means break the existing rules of monastic life. Nanda is kept in the monastery against his will (for summaries and analyses of texts and the list of known depictions cf Zin 2006: ch 9); and violent individuals often receive no other choice than to take refuge in the dharma.

In the pictorial representations of the stories of conversions, Vajrapāṇi is usually present, and, importantly, he participates actively. Such scenes are rare. It is worth pointing out that the way in which we understand the figure of Vajrapāṇi nowadays, was by no means self-evident from the beginning. The person carrying a weapon near the Buddha has previously been interpreted as Devadatta (Grünwedel 1900: 84-92); as Māra (Burgess 1898: 30); as dharma, the third component of Buddhism, presented near the monks (*sangha*) (Vogel 1909); or as “Fravashi”, a Guardian Angel adopted from Zoroastrian religion (Spooner 1916). It is known from the research of Senart (1905), Foucher (1905-51 vol 2: 481ff), Lalou (1956) and, above all, Lamotte (1966) that Vajrapāṇi is a *yakṣa*, a protecting deity. Santoro (1979) interpreted Vajrapāṇi as a protector of legitimate kingship, while Tanabe (2004) took him for the equivalent of Hercules in his role as the guide and protector of the traveller. It is generally assumed that Vajrapāṇi was the Buddha’s guard.

Vajrapāṇi, who stands with his weapon next to the Buddha, does look like his bodyguard. The reliefs from Gandhara, in which scenes from the legend of Vajrapāṇi occur, enable us to investigate further. Vajrapāṇi is not present in the depictions of the Buddha’s childhood. Vajrapāṇi first appears in scenes of the Bodhisatva leaving his hometown of Kapilavastu and in scenes preceding his departure (for example, in the relief from the Private Collection in Japan, ill: Kurita 2003 vol 1 figure 134). From that time, Vajrapāṇi accompanies the Buddha and he appears for the last time in the scene of the Buddha’s death. The appearance of Vajrapāṇi, depicted as he is with a weapon, gives rise to the following question: whom exactly is Vajrapāṇi protecting? It is definitely not the Bodhisatva, if it were, Vajrapāṇi would have to appear by the Bodhisatva’s side in childhood; nor is it the Buddha, because in that case Vajrapāṇi would appear only after the Enlightenment. In fact, talking about protection at all (for instance the protection

in the wilderness after leaving Kapilavastu) is very risky. This is because common knowledge of the basic doctrine deems it to be impossible to wound or kill the Buddha, the Bodhisatva, or even his expectant mother.

From the point of view of Buddhist scholasticism, it is impossible to establish the reason for the appearance of Vajrapāṇi in the scene in which the Bodhisatva leaves Kapilavastu. The self-ordination of the Bodhisatva (by cutting his hair and accepting clothes from a hunter) provides a turning point in the attempt to explain the presence of the perpetual acolyte, but the leaving of Kapilavastu is only the moment when the Bodhisatva decides to abandon the possible role of the cakravartin king, the king of the turning wheel, for the sake of the role of the Buddha. The appearance of Vajrapāṇi at this exact moment may be connected with the Bodhisatva's decision to a certain degree, but understanding the connection is by no means an easy task. The Bodhisatva renounces the role of the cakravartin, instead he chooses the road that will lead him to Sarnath where he will turn the wheel, the dharmacakra (the Buddha after the Enlightenment would frequently call himself "dharmarāja" ie Lalitavistara XV, ed: 214; trad: 189). The only person apart from the Buddha who has a personal yakṣa is the cakravartin king Māndhātara. His yakṣa, Divaukasa, suggests the targets of his next conquests (for the Māndhātara story cf Zin 2001).

In the Buddha legend, Vajrapāṇi only actively protects the Buddha once. This is when Devadatta throws a rock at the Buddha from above and Vajrapāṇi crushes it into little pieces with his vajra (for various versions of the story cf Bureau 1991; Zin 2005). However, this example is not very telling; it is necessary to the story that the stone is crushed, because legend has it that a little splinter hurt the Buddha's toe. Vajrapāṇi is the only one who could crush the stone with his weapon. Moreover, it is yakṣa Kumbhīra rather than Vajrapāṇi who dies as the result of Devadatta's assault, so it is not Vajrapāṇi who protects the Buddha.

Vajrapāṇi first appears in art at the end of the 2nd century, in Gandhara, Mathura and Amaravati (see British Museum, no BM 11, ill: Barrett 1954, plate 29). Vajrapāṇi appears in the depictions of the stories of conversions in Gandhara and in some reliefs in Nagarjunikonda and Goli. In a relief from Goli, now in the Metropolitan Museum (no 30.29), which depicts the conversion of Nanda, Vajrapāṇi accompanies the Buddha through the streets of Kapilavastu. He is also present during Nanda's acceptance into the monastery and takes part in the episode in which the Buddha takes Nanda to heaven to cure him of his attachment to his wife by showing him divine damsels (Figure 1). In this episode it is suggested that Vajrapāṇi has a theriomorphic character: his hair is combed in the form of animal's ears which are sticking up. This relief is the only one, to the best of my knowledge, which portrays Vajrapāṇi in this way. Vajrapāṇi is not mentioned in any literary versions of the Nanda story and his appearance in the relief may have a special meaning related to the theme of conversion.

In Gandhara, Vajrapāṇi is, in fact, very frequently represented, and depictions of him are not restricted to the scenes of conversion. In the depictions of conversions, in which Vajrapāṇi does not participate actively, Vajrapāṇi is sometimes shown looking in a completely different direction, possibly suggesting that the Buddha does not need any protection (Figure 2). In his role as a passive companion of the Buddha, the manner in which Vajrapāṇi holds the vajra is significant. The vajra is not held aloft and, in most cases, it is in his left hand. The contrary iconography – vajra in the right hand, held over the head – signals the active participation of Vajrapāṇi in the plot. This is apparently an important sign in visual language: already in Ṛgveda Indra is described as vajradakṣina (with the vajra in his right hand) before the assault at Vṛtra (I 101 1; X 23 1). The anthems also include requests to Indra to take the vajra in his right hand (VI 18 9; VI 22 9), that is, to go and fight.

In literature, Vajrapāṇi has an active role in stories of conversions, and in episodes in which terror is instilled into those who are disobedient. His most famous performance is during the

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FIGURE 1: GOLI, NEW YORK, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NO 30.29, AFTER RAO 1984: 435-39.



FIGURE 2: GANDHARA (CHATPAT), CHAKDARA MUSEUM, 134, PHOTO © WOJTEK OCZKOWSKI.

conversion of nāga Apalāla (for summaries and analyses of texts and the list of known depictions cf Zin 2006: ch 3). The story is related to the series of conversions in Gandhara, during which the Buddha managed to convert 7, 700,000 beings. The Buddha's journey to Gandhara, accompanied by Vajrapāṇi, is described in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda*vinaya. This is preserved in the Gilgit Manuscripts as well as in Tibetan and Chinese translations (trad in: Przyluski 1914). Five conversions are described here in detail, among them the taming of the malevolent nāga Apalāla. The king of Magadha Ajātaśatru asks the Buddha to tame this nāga, who damages crops by sending bad weather. The Buddha, accompanied by Vajrapāṇi, goes to Gandhara to deal with this problem. Apalāla becomes furious, rises into the air and continuously flings hail and pieces of ground at them. The Buddha enters into the meditation of love (*maitrisamādhi*), as a result of which hail and pieces of ground turn into sandal and other fragrances. The nāga

throws various kinds of weapon at the Buddha but they change into lotuses. The nāga sends a cloud of smoke and the Buddha responds with the same; he also sends a cloud of smoke. Seeing that, a furious and conceited nāga withdraws to his palace. Then the Buddha decides to threaten Apalāla seriously and orders Vajrapāṇi to attack him. Vajrapāṇi breaks off the top of the mountain using his vajra and it falls down into the lake of the nāgas, filling it completely. The Buddha enters the fire-meditation and fills the shores of the lake with flames, so that the only cool place remains at his feet. Apalāla, who has no other choice, kneels in front of the Buddha and asks why the Buddha hates him so much. The Buddha answers with a question; how could he as a dharmarāja hate anybody? Placing his hand on the nāga's head, the Buddha says that if the nāga quits his evil deeds, he will achieve a life in Trayastrimśa heaven. The nāga, together with his family, takes refuge in the Three Jewels. Vajrapāṇi and the Buddha leave Apalāla no choice but to convert when they damage the lake and set everything on fire. While Apalāla's conversion is clearly beneficial for his victims, the greatest benefit is to Apalāla himself as he only has to wait for a series of rebirths that will lead him to nirvāṇa.

In the scenes of the conversion of Apalāla found in Gandhara, Vajrapāṇi is frequently depicted in two different ways. In one, he is positioned near the Buddha with the vajra in his left hand. In the other, he has the weapon lifted up in his right hand and, hanging out of the rocks, he threatens the terrified family of Apalāla (Figure 3; in especially elaborate reliefs, the artists depicted the landscape with animals and a hunter [cf a relief from Barikot in Swat, ill: Kurita 2003 vol 1 figure 637]). Vajrapāṇi is quite often shown flying (Figure 4). In several reliefs, like in one from Sanghao Vajrapāṇi jumps from one rock to another while the nāgas flee the lake whose



FIGURE 3: GANDHARA, PESHAWAR MUSEUM, NO 336 N.N. 98,
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shores are sprouting flames (Bombay, Prince of Wales Museum, no 17, ill ie Foucher 1905-51, figure 274; Moti Chandra 1974, figure 35). A particularly detailed relief in Calcutta (Indian Museum, no A 23 4575, ill: Kurita 2003, figure 456) even shows the lake with its burning shores completely filled with rocks, as it is written in the text. The lake is sometimes represented with water flowing out of it (Lucknow State Museum, no G 47 109, ill: Joshi and Sharma 1969, figure 20) – the nāgas as water creatures cannot live without it. Another representation of it is as a well with an outlet in the form of a lion’s head taken from classical art (about this *siṃhamukha* motif, as the origin of the so-called *Kīrtimukha* ornament cf Zin 2003: no 10).

The story of the conversion of Apalāla is also depicted in Nagarjunikonda (ill: Rosen Stone 1994, figure 211, 218-20). It is shown in three very similar reliefs. As with the journey of the



FIGURE 4: GANDHARA, PESHAWAR MUSEUM, NO 428 N.N. 95, PHOTO © WOJTEK OCZKOWSKI.

Buddha to Gandhara, it is the version known nowadays from the vinaya of the *Mūlasarvāstivādin* that must have served as a literary basis because the story is unknown in Pali literature. *Vajrapāṇi* is presented only once: he is in a dynamic pose having thrown the vajra, and is standing with his back to the spectators (Figure 5). The depiction of the vajra is unsymmetrical which must mean that the weapon is stuck in the rock.

The image of *Vajrapāṇi* throwing his weapon is encountered in some reliefs depicting another conversion, that of the evil yakṣa *Āṭavika* (for summaries and analyses of texts and the list of known depictions cf Zin 2006: ch 1). This story is less well-known and is preserved in no more than a dozen depictions, found in Gandhara and Central Asia. The primary motif of the story, the dialogue between the Buddha and yakṣa, is very old and already present in the *Suttanipāta* and the *Samyuttanikāya*. The developed versions of the narrative are preserved in numerous later versions; none of these, however, constitute a coherent story. The original narrative is no longer preserved. It does, however, seem to be depicted in reliefs. The reliefs correspond most closely to the version from T 212 and T 203, the commentaries on *Udānavarga*



FIGURE 5: NAGARJUNIKONDA, NAGARJUNIKONDA MUSEUM, PHOTO © MONIKA ZIN.

(trad Huber 1906 and Chavannes 1910-34 vol 3: 94-98). Both texts mention the parents who are depicted in the reliefs. However, the versions in T 212 and T 203 do not narrate all the episodes, so in order to understand the narrative, one must also resort to other texts. The story of the fight between the Buddha and Āṭavika is known in Pali and Tibetan and, in addition, from a manuscript in Old-Turkish. The story of yakṣa Āṭavika is as follows: everyday the citizens of a particular town send a man to be devoured by yakṣa Āṭavika; the monster eats the person he is offered but does not devour the rest of the people (in Pali: but does not devour the king). One day this fate touches the son of a citizen who decides to call the Buddha for help. When the desperate parents bring their child to the yakṣa (in Pali: the prince, as the very last child in the kingdom is brought by the soldiers), the Buddha states that the time has come for Āṭavika to be converted. When the Buddha comes to the yakṣa's dwelling place, the yakṣa is not there, but when he returns and sees the Buddha on his throne, he becomes furious. Flames belch from his eyes and he grasps various types of weapons, however, the flames are put out and his weapons come apart. Āṭavika threatens to drive the Buddha mad, and then to catch him by his feet and throw him over the Himalayas if he fails to answer certain questions. The Buddha replies that it is impossible to do him any harm but he agrees to answer Āṭavika's questions; as the result of his answers, Āṭavika is converted and returns the child. The reliefs from Gandhara show the child's parents – the mother's loose hair indicates her grief – on one side of the Buddha (cf Kurita 2003, figure 343-47). On the Buddha's other side is Āṭavika, after his conversion, bringing the boy back. In the unpublished relief from Peshawar the scene is laid out in a similar way – the doorkeeper of yakṣa, who is mentioned in the texts, is on one side of the Buddha (Figure 6). In the upper part of the Peshawar relief, however, something new appears: there is a fight taking place between two flying individuals. In the context of our story, it might be the fight between

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Āṭavika and Vajrapāṇi which is not described in any of the preserved texts. Other reliefs depict the scene going on over people's heads. In a relief from Calcutta it is possible to identify the person throwing the stone, despite a poor state of preservation of this piece – this is Āṭavika (relief from Jamalgarhi, Indian Museum, no G 21 (A23284) ill: Foucher 1905-51 vol 1 figure 253; Kurita 2003 vol 1 figure 345). The assault of Vajrapāṇi on Āṭavika also seems to be depicted in one relief in the Peshawar Museum (Figure 7). On the right-hand side, Āṭavika is bringing a boy to the Buddha, while on the left-hand side, a yakṣa-like person holds an unusual round object in his right hand. In my opinion, this is Vajrapāṇi with the vajra, shown from an extremely untypical perspective, that is, from the bottom.



FIGURE 6: GANDHARA, PESHAWAR MUSEUM, NO 1.L, PHOTO © WOJTEK OCZKOWSKI.



FIGURE 7: GANDHARA (SAHRI BAHLLOL), PESHAWAR MUSEUM, NO 471, PHOTO © WOJTEK OCZKOWSKI.

The vajra is depicted in this way very rarely: one instance of this perspective is found in the beautiful relief in the Victoria and Albert Museum (no IS 78-1948, ill: Ackermann 1975, plate 35; Kurita 2003 vol 1 figure 374). This shows two scenes: the conversion of Nanda and the conversion of the heretic Śrīgupta.

If there is a correspondence between representations of Vajrapāṇi participating actively in events and the stories of conversions, it is worthwhile considering his role and the meaning of the vajra in the Buddha legend. The two oldest references to Vajrapāṇi in literature (*Majjhimanikāya* ed vol 1: 231-32; transl: 285; *Dīghanikāya* ed vol 1: 95; transl: 117) are very telling about his character. One reference is the story preserved in Pali as well as in 'northern' sources about the encounter between the Buddha and a certain young Brahmin Ambaṭṭha (Sk Ambāṣṭha); in the *Majjhimanikāya* about a nirghranthaputra, that is Jaina. Ambāṣṭha and the nirghranta do not answer the Buddha's questions. Ambāṣṭha knows the answer, but he is in a quandary: if he gives the answer, he will con-

tradict his earlier argument and lose face in front of the Brahmins who are present. The text relates that, when Ambāṣṭha keeps stubbornly silent, Vajrapāṇi stands above him with the vajra and threatens to crush his head into seven pieces. Ambāṣṭha finally gives the answer because of this appearance by Vajrapāṇi (the threat to crush the malefactor's head into seven parts is also uttered by Indra [Jātaka 519, ed vol 5: 91, gāthā; transl: 50; about the motif of the shattered head cf Witzel 1987]). In the Mahāyāna-Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra (Lamotte 1966: 120) the monk Kāśyapa asks the Buddha how the doctrine of love towards all creatures can be reconciled with Vajrapāṇi's violent act, had he crushed the head of a young man. The Buddha explains that what Kāśyapa sees is a vision (nirmāṇa). However, the story proves that Vajrapāṇi's weapon was understood not only as a pure threat but also as a weapon capable of causing real harm. The story of Ambāṣṭha has not been identified among the reliefs in Gandhara. However, I believe that it is found in Kizil in Central Asia. In two of the paintings in Kizil, which are known from the drawings by Grünwedel (Grünwedel 1912, figure 353) (Figure 8), Vajrapāṇi is standing holding the vajra over the head of a young Brahmin who is surrounded by his colleagues.



FIGURE 8: KIZIL, HÖHLE 207 (MALERHÖHLE) = GRÜNWEDEL 1912, FIGURE 353.

As far as I know, Vajrapāṇi – apart from smashing the rock flung by Devadatta and the stories about threatening the disobedient beings – does not appear in the older literature. However, the reliefs from Gandhara and the paintings from Central Asia show him hundreds of times. In the scenes with the heretics, Vajrapāṇi is quite often depicted with the raised vajra and he seems to participate in events (ie Kizil Cave 80 ill: Xu 1983-85 vol 2 figure 46). He is not, however, mentioned in the texts, as if his presence in such situations was obvious for everyone.

So, what is the vajra? What is the object that Vajrapāṇi raises to strike horror into those who are disobedient to the Buddha's teaching. In the Veda, 'vajra' means thunderbolt and it is Indra's weapon. In the Vedic texts there are descriptions which enable us to make assumptions about the appearance, material and function of the vajra. From these descriptions it seems certain that the authors described Indra's particular metal weapon and not a mythological phenomenon. It is said that the vajra is made of metal, that its blade can be sharpened, that it is flung, that it revolves, and that it makes a noise while flying. Three types of artefacts are preserved from the Copper Hoard Culture (CHC), all of which have been identified as the vajra from Ṛgveda. These are the so-called harpoon (Rau 1973), an anthropomorphic figure (Das Gupta 1975) and a bar-celt (Falk 1993). Falk's identification of the vajra as a bar-celt seems to be the right one; the Avestan word vazra means a 'hammer'.

However, what is true for the Vedic epoch is not necessarily applicable to Buddhism. There is an enormous gap between CHC and the first depictions of the vajra in art of the 1st c BC. None of the three objects from CHC resembles the Buddhist vajra, as none of them is symmetrical. It seems that, by the time the vajra started to be represented in reliefs, there was no memory

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of the shape of a Vedic weapon. The oldest vajras are represented in Sanchi I (Sanchi I, Eastern gateway, ill: Marshall and Foucher 1940 vol 2 plate 49) and Sanchi III (Sanchi III, gateway, ill:

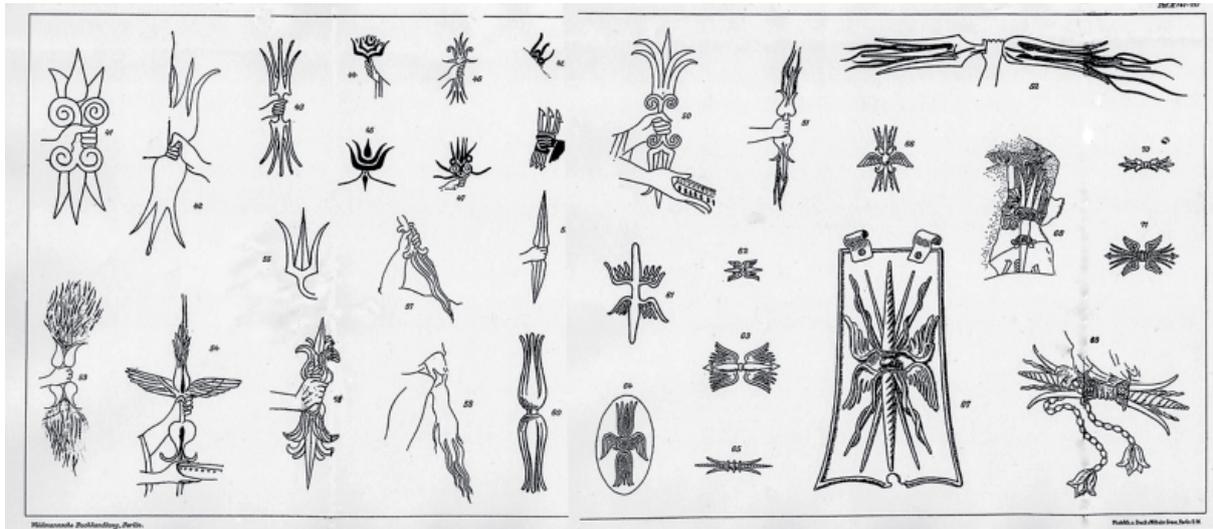


FIGURE 9: = JACOBSTHAL 1906, TAFEL 1.

ibid vol 3 plate 96). Several generations later, in Mathura, the vajra is depicted in three sculptures of Indra (Mathura Government Museum, no 00E24, ill: Vogel 1930, plate 38b; Lucknow State Museum, no B19, ill: Sharma 1995, figure 152). From these it is clear that the appearance of the vajra was not yet normalised, however, it was always a symmetrical object from which prongs come out in each direction. The further development of the form of the vajra in the hand of Indra, Vajrapāṇi, or later tantric deities, can be easily investigated on the basis of hundreds of preserved examples. In the paintings in Ajanta, it may be seen that the prongs actually correspond to rays. These are difficult to represent in stone (Zin 2003: no 43). Comparative research carried out during the 19th and early 20th centuries (see Jacobsthal 1906) discovered a striking resemblance between the weapon of Zeus, the keraunos, and Asian representations of the thunder weapon (Figure 9). These include the Indian and Tibetan vajras. Today, after 100 years, the accuracy of that comparative research must be confirmed: the Indian vajra does correspond to the keraunos. There is no other object which is symmetrical and has rays, which could be compared to Indra's weapon. The iconography may have been transported via coins and small objects of art. The loan is a very apt one: the keraunos of Zeus corresponds to Indra's weapon in most essential details. The difference lies in the fact that the keraunos only has a mythological meaning – as lightening in the hand of the God of Heaven – and does not have a material existence as a particular metal weapon, capable of being sharpened and so on. The keraunos is an object which produces heavenly fire and, it is depicted as such in art. In artistic representations, Zeus holds an object in his hand from which flames emanate. It is written in the Veda that the vajra shone while it was flying and also, that it could burn the enemy (Ṛgveda VII 104 4, cf Das Gupta 1975: 40), these, however, are apparently metaphoric expressions, as nothing is said about flames or fire. In Buddhist tradition, Indra raises the burning weapon over the malefactor (jalita ayakūṭa: Jātaka no 347 ed vol 3: 146 transl: 96-97). Likewise, Vajrapāṇi holds the vajra while he is standing above Ambāṣṭha and it is described as flaming, blazing and burning. Paintings from Central Asia, which in my opinion depict this story (Figure 8), show fire falling from the vajra. Thus the Buddhist vajra is not a particular weapon; rather it is a mythological object

producing flames. It is represented with the same form as the keraunos, with two exceptions: the image in Gandhara and a painting in Kizil that copied Gandhara.

It is precisely in Gandhara, where the contacts with Mediterranean art were the strongest, that this form of the vajra is unknown. The representation of Vajrapāṇi is also different here, as it is commonly acknowledged, and a lot has been written about what it shares with the iconography of Heracles (Vogel 1909; Flood 1989; Santoro 1991; Carter 1995; Schwab 1998). The Indian loan from Greek culture is again wise: Heracles – like Vajrapāṇi in the stories of conversion – is a hero with especially difficult tasks. The iconography of Vajrapāṇi wearing a lion's skin headdress makes it impossible to tell him apart from Heracles sometimes (ie the sculpture from Swabi, ill; Kurita 2003 vol 2 figure 919). This is unless he appears with the vajra, which is very different from Heracles' club (cf ie the Vajrapāṇi from the Kamakura Collection, ill: Sérinde, Terre de Bouddha, figure 75). The club is never symmetrical and looks like what it is, namely the irregular bough of a tree, often reinforced with stones or teeth. The Gandharan vajra, on the other hand, is always symmetrical and has a concave part in the centre. In well-crafted reliefs that are in a good state of preservation, it is possible to see that the sidewalls of the object are joined, creating sharp blades. There may be four or more of these sidewalls; if they are numerous, the bottom of the vajra takes the shape of a circle. Sometimes the top and bottom parts are depicted as the polished edges of a jewel. These precise representations of the vajra allow us to exclude the possibility that it is simply a form of the keraunos.

Indeed, I can only think of one explanation for the form of the vajra in these representations. The weapon of the Gandharan Vajrapāṇi derives from a different meaning of the word vajra; it is not a thunderbolt but a diamond. This meaning of the word 'vajra' is unknown in Vedic literature, but it does appear in the epics. In the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, the authors seem to describe the vajra like fire like (Mahābhārata V 9 22 transl: 203), like the vajra of hundred segments (Rāmāyaṇa I 45 18 transl: 212), a vajra which must be made from bones of the demon Dadhica is described like large, sharp, six-cornered, and with a terrifying sound (Mahābhārata III 98 10ff transl: 417) – but the references probably only repeated set epithets. The word 'vajra' is used in the epics for Indra's weapon, and in epithets of Indra, such as vajrapāṇi, vajrahasta or vajradhara are used repeatedly. The vajra is also encountered, however, meaning a diamond. In the Mahābhārata (II 27 26 transl: 82), it is mentioned in a list of "priceless gems and pearls, gold, silver, vajras and precious coral". In other places in epic literature, like in the Rāmāyaṇa (III 53 8 transl: 203), we find a reference to pillars ornamented with gold, silver, vajra and beryl, and also, (III 11 29 transl 113) to Viṣṇu's bow being inlaid with gold and vajra. In the epic poem it is used in a simile – as hard as vajra. This is written of the claws of Garuḍa (Mahābhārata I 218 20 transl: 156), and of someone's hands (Rāmāyaṇa I 39 18; transl: 99).

In the Buddhist texts vajra (Pali: vajira) is understood as referring to Indra and Vajrapāṇi's weapon, but 'vajra' also means a precious stone. In the Milindapañha (ed: 267; transl vol 1: 85), like in Mahābhārata, vajra is listed among other precious stones. This meaning also appears in later literature, like in the Commentary to Dhammapada (I 387 transl vol 2: 61), where the teeth of a beautiful girl are compared to a necklace made of vajra. The definition of vajra as the hardest element has been present since the epoch of canonical literature as can be seen from the following references (Dhammapada 161 ed: 45-46 transl: 45): "evil crushes the foolish like a vajira breaks a precious stone", in the Milindapañha (ed: 278; transl vol 2: 100): "owing to its exceeding sharpness vajira cuts precious gems, pearls and crystals". Only once is it suggested that there is something better than vajira: (Milindapañha ed: 118; transl vol 1: 165-66: "there are numerous stones from the ground, sapphire, emerald, lapis lazuli, vajira '...' but the Jewel of a cakravartin (cakkaratimaṇi) shines most brightly". Thus the understanding of vajra as a diamond was common and well known in the times of the art of Gandhara.

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Precious stones were presented as crystals in art. They may be observed in the example of depictions of the cakravartin king. In Amaravati, Mathura, Gandhara and Central Asia, his maṇiratna has the shape of a crystal with at least four walls with clearly marked edges (Zin 2003: 357, for Mathura Sanghol: Gupta 1987, figure 15; for Gandhara: Nishoika 2001, plate 1; Gandhara 2009, p.311, figure 6). From the stone, rays or flames often flare out. The similarity



FIGURE 10: GANDHARA PESHAWAR MUSEUM, NO 1858,
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of the Gandharan vajra to the representations of precious stones is considerable; the difference lies in the concave part which allows the vajra to be held in the hand. This relates to the shape of the vajra since first depictions at Sanchi.

In the Pali version of the Ambāṣṭha story there is a reference to a burning metal prong (*ādipta ayaḥkuṭa*), whereas in the same place in Sanskrit and Tibetan, a metal prong is not mentioned at all. Instead, the description is confined to a stereotypical image of the vajra as fire: vajra, flaming, blazing, burning, becoming a single flame (*vajram ādiptaṃ pradīptaṃ samprajvalitaṃ ekajvālībhūtaṃ Ambāṣṭhasya mānavasopari murdhino dhārayati*). The meaning of vajra as an object made of metal is not documented here.

In the art of Gandhara, the vajra is depicted with the meaning of a 'diamond' (Figure 10). The form of the Gandharan vajra failed to survive; however, the meaning of adamantine weapon which was depicted would become obligatory for the centuries which followed and would gain a philosophical meaning as the object crushing all obstacles and the very essence of the Buddhist teaching. Also, the Gandharan Vajrapāṇi, with his aggressive attitude towards stubborn candidates to conversions, is, beyond any doubt, a predecessor of the later vajra-bearer,

Dharmapālas. But perhaps something is depicted in Gandhara which we do not understand. The jewel-carrying person next to the Buddha, who appears when the Buddha leaves Kapilavastu and starts on his way to turn the dharmacakra, and who is especially active when the Buddha helps people tormented by monsters, may have a lot in common with the representations of the cakravartin king and his maṇiratna.

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