



*Changing Forms and Cultural Identity: Religious and Secular Iconographies* – Vol. 1  
SOUTH ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART



*Changing Forms and Cultural Identity:  
Religious and Secular Iconographies*  
VOL. 1

# SOUTH ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART

KLIMBURG-SALTER,  
DEBORAH &  
LINDA LOJDA (EDS).



BREPOLS

CHANGING FORMS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY:  
RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR ICONOGRAPHIES.

VOL. 1

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Front cover: Ardhanārīśvara B-1, stone, from Vikramapura, Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, twelfth/thirteenth century. Photos: I. Johne 2004, courtesy of VRM.

Back cover: Īśvara temple, Arsikere, c. 1220 CE.

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*Changing Forms and Cultural Identity:  
Religious and Secular Iconographies*

VOL. 1

**SOUTH ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY  
AND ART**

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KLIMBURG-SALTER, DEBORAH & LINDA LOJDA (EDS).

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# MAITREYA AND THE PAST BUDDHAS: INTERACTIONS BETWEEN GANDHĀRA AND NORTHERN INDIA

KURT A. BEHRENDT

By the time of the Great Kushans when Maitreya imagery first appeared, this iconography seems to have been quite important to the Gandhāran tradition but much less popular in northern India. Between the third and sixth centuries CE these iconographies were not used in northern India, and when they were reintroduced they did not become truly popular until the rise of the esoteric Buddhist traditions. Equally, it seems that the appearance of Maitreya in western India occurred as a result of an introduction from the northwest subcontinent in the late fifth century CE. This distribution of Maitreya imagery in Gandhāra, northern India, and the Deccan reflects observable differences in the character of early Buddhist practice during the first five centuries of the Common Era.

Alfred Foucher, in a 1940 report on the monuments of Sāñcī, suggested that sets of seven trees or of alternating trees and *stūpas* represented Śākyamuni and the past human or mortal Buddhas. Key to his interpretation is that successive Buddhas followed a similar path and that each must have a tree ready to shelter him at the time of his enlightenment and one or more *stūpas* to house his relics (Marshall and Foucher 1940: 199–200). On the *torānas* of Sāñcī *Stūpa* 1, groups of seven trees or sets of seven alternating *stūpas* and trees occur repeatedly. Each set fills an entire face of a cross beam; the large surface area of the six extant groups indicates that this iconography was the most popular subject for depiction at the site. Foucher supported his iconographic interpretation with evidence from



Fig. 1a, b: Bhārhut roundels showing thrones under trees and associated inscriptions; Cunningham 1879: pl. XXIX, nos. 1, 4.

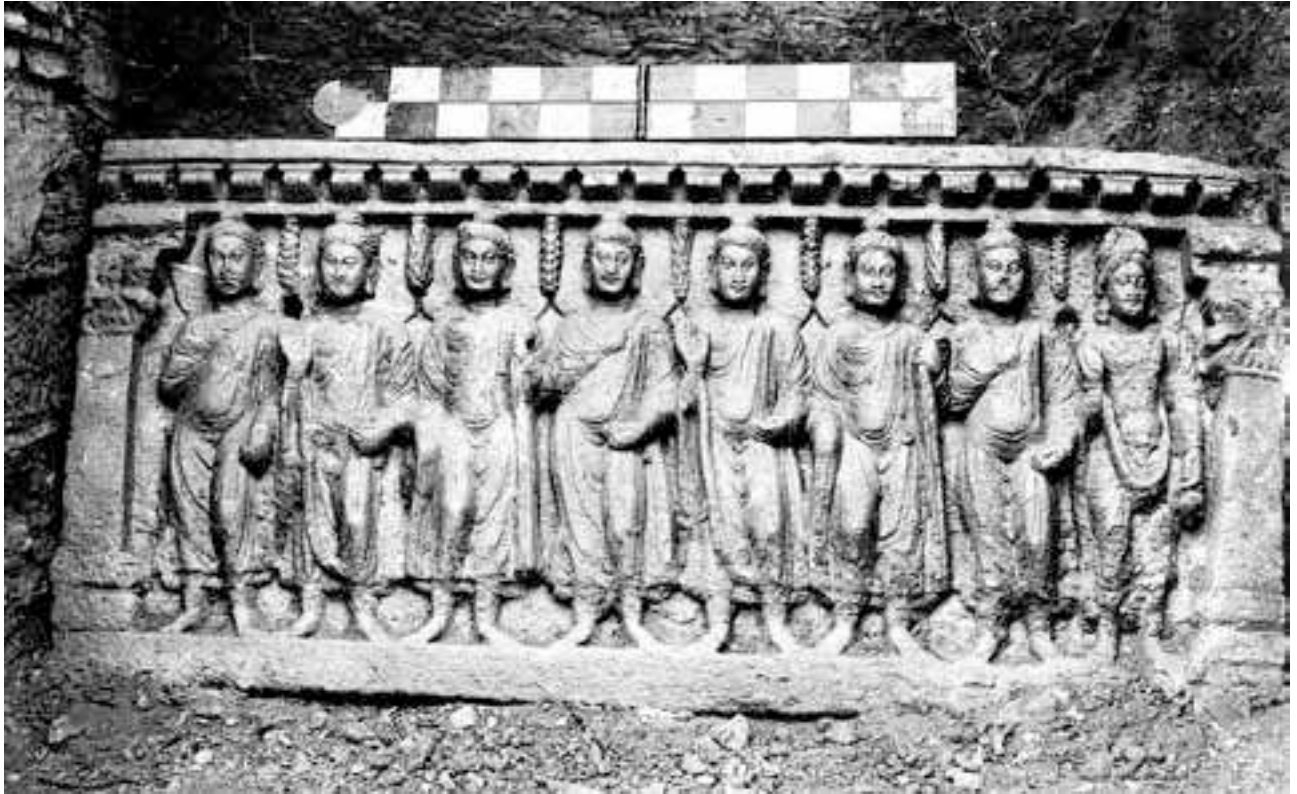


Fig. 2: *In situ* image base showing the seven past Buddhas and Maitreya, from shrine c in court XIV, Takht-i-bāhī, Gandhāra, Pakistan; ASIFC 960, courtesy of the British Library.

Bhārhut, where reliefs showing thrones under various types of trees are identified by inscriptions; six of the past Buddhas are named (Cunningham 1879: 113). In these two examples (fig. 1a, b) inscriptions above the reliefs identify the subject, giving us an understanding of this specific iconography; the inscription on the left can be translated as ‘the Bodhi tree of the Buddha Vipasyin’; that on the right reads ‘the Bodhi tree of the Buddha Konagamena (or Kanaka Muni)’ (Cunningham 1879: 113–14). These reliefs, as well as those at Sāñcī, indicate that past Buddhas were important in this formative period to early central Indian Buddhist communities (Luczanits 2008: 75). It is significant that Maitreya is not mentioned in the inscriptions, nor is this deity identifiable in reliefs from this period.

By the time these ideas reached Gandhāra, sometime in the first century CE and certainly by the period of the Great Kushans, the iconography had been transformed (fig. 2). As Foucher noted, the past Buddhas are shown anthropomorphically as seven identical Buddha figures together with Maitreya, the future Buddha, is dressed as a prince and holds a flask (Foucher 1905: vol. 2, 330). The relief that Foucher used to make this point

is not a particularly early sculpture, as it was found *in situ* in an image shrine at Takht-i-bāhī (shrine c court XIV). Its placement indicates that it probably served as the base of an iconic image (Behrendt 2004: 220–21). However, this iconography of a group of Buddhas and Maitreya is moderately well attested in Gandhāra: nine provenanced reliefs from there are known.

In the corpus of sculpture produced in Mathurā under the Kushans, only three rather minor fragmentary reliefs can be tentatively identified as showing the past Buddhas (fig. 3a–c). The first and second are fragments of lintels, both of which show three seated Buddhas and a seated Maitreya. The last example (fig. 3c), which R. C. Sharma saw as being influenced by Gandhāra (Sharma 1995: 187–88), unfortunately is also broken, so the identification is not certain. The top section shows life scenes, while in the lower register, to the extreme left, is part of a Buddha in *abhayamudrā*, followed by another, then by a generalized representation of a bodhisattva, and finally by a figure that probably holds a flask, suggesting it is Maitreya. Hence this relief originally may have contained a group of past Buddhas followed by a depiction of Śākyamuni as a bodhisattva





Fig. 3: a. Lintel fragment from Mathurā showing three Buddhas and Maitreya. Lucknow Museum; After Bachhofer 1972: pl. 87.



Fig. 3: b. Lintel fragment from Mathurā showing three Buddhas and Maitreya, Mathurā Museum; After Lohuizen-de Leeuw, 1949: pl. 51.



Fig. 3: c. Lintel fragment from Mathurā, Jamalpur Mound, with life scenes in the top register and row of four Buddhas and Maitreya(?) in the bottom register. Lucknow Museum; After Sharma 1995: fig. 106.



Fig. 4: Standing image of Maitreya from Ahicchatrā, Mathurā, height 28 inches. National Museum New Delhi; After Rosenfield 1967: fig. 54.

and then Maitreya. Although past Buddhas were not a particularly popular subject for depiction in Kushan Mathurā, it would seem that this handful of reliefs can be generally related to the Gandhāran pattern of anthropomorphic groups that include Maitreya. By this period the iconography of the past Buddhas has been codified as compared to the ‘aniconic’ depictions of past Buddhas found at Bhārhut and Sāñcī.

At Mathurā several independent iconic devotional representations of Maitreya are extant; he is shown standing or sitting, dressed as a prince and holding

a water pot (Miyaji 2005: 73–80). Best known is the 28-inch-tall, standing bodhisattva from Ahicchatrā that holds a flask (fig. 4). An inscription along its base reads ‘The image of Maitreya installed for the benefit and happiness of all beings’ (Rosenfield 1967: 231). Hence we have a fairly definitive identification linked to recognizable iconography. On the basis of style, Rosenfield placed this image near the beginning of the reign of Huviṣka, suggesting that it is slightly older than another inscribed Maitreya image (fig. 5), donated in the 29<sup>th</sup> year of Huviṣka’s reign (Rosenfield 1967: 230) or, accepting Falk’s dating of the Kanīṣka era, 182 CE (Falk 2001: 121–36). Rosenfield noted that “these two examples give a dependable chronological reference for a number of other Maitreya images of the Mathura school, which ... are far fewer and visually less elaborate than those in Gandhara, suggesting that the center of his cult was in the northwest” (Rosenfield 1967: 231–32). In fact, including these two inscribed images, I found only eight iconic Kushan period Maitreya images from Mathurā.

Count of Mathurān Maitreya imagery during the Kushan period	
Maitreya together with past Buddhas	3
Seated and standing Maitreya devotional icons	8
Total Maitreya images	11

The situation is quite different in Gandhāra (Luczanits 2008: 249–53; Miyaji 2005: 69–73). Considering only sculptures from excavations or which entered collections in the nineteenth century and discarding broken and incomplete examples where the iconography was not certain, I still was able to identify 121 Gandhāran flask-holding representations of Maitreya (fig. 6a).

Count of Gandhāran Maitreya imagery prior to 450 CE	
Maitreya in narrative panels and in false gables	17
Seated and standing Maitreya devotional icons	76
Maitreya shown on bases of large icons	7
Maitreya as element of triad groups	15
Total of Maitreya images	121
Total if 70 damaged, but likely Maitreya images are included	190

It is important to stress that an additional 70 more damaged sculptures that are likely depictions of Maitreya can be recognized on the basis of figure type, hairstyle, and remnant attachments for the water flask



Fig. 5: Pedestal and lower half of a seated Maitreya, dated to year 29 CE, height 27 inches. Girdharpur, Mathurā, Mathura Museum; After Rosenfield 1967: fig. 32.

(fig. 6b). In other words, there are about twelve images of Maitreya in Gandhāra for every one that has been found in Mathurā.

One could argue that more images were produced in Gandhāra during this period and that the wealth of Gandhāran representations is simply a reflection of greater patronage. If we consider the production of major images from the early Mathurā period and compare them to production in Gandhāra, the following data emerge. Again, only substantially intact sculptures were counted; bases, heads, and other fragmentary remains are not included in this data set.

<b>Count of Gandhāran devotional icons of significant scale</b>	
Gandhāran Buddha devotional icons	404
Gandhāran bodhisattva devotional icons	303
Total Gandhāran devotional icons Data are from excavated finds or 19 <sup>th</sup> century collections	707

During the Kushan period a roughly comparable number of large images were produced in Mathurā,

indicating that ample patronage was available in this regional center. Only sculptures that are largely intact were included in this count; again, heads, bases, and other fragments were discarded.

<b>Count of Mathurān devotional imagery of significant scale produced during the Kushan period</b>	
Vedikā uprights with imagery (Buddhist and Jain)	265
Devotional icons of Buddhas	45
Devotional icons of bodhisattvas	24
Jain icons and major reliefs	56
Brahmanical reliefs	47
Goddess icons and large reliefs	76
<i>Nāga</i> and <i>Nāginī</i> icons	14
<i>Yakṣas</i> and <i>Gaṇas</i>	22
Mathurā male figures (donors and large-scale figures)	38
Mathurā total major images Data are from the American Institute of Indian Studies photo archive, which documents the holdings of various Indian museums.	587





Fig. 6: a. Standing Maitreya from Sahri-Bahlol mound H. Peshawar Museum; After Stein 1915: pl. XLb.



Fig. 6: b. Standing Maitreya from Sahri-Bahlol mound C; note that the flask is missing. Peshawar Museum; After Stein 1915: pl. XLa.

Because the surviving sculptural remains from both Gandhāra and Mathurā are dispersed, the data for both are incomplete and the above categories are to some extent subjective. However, by limiting the data collection to early documented finds and excavations, we can draw some broad general conclusions; in particular, it seems that enough evidence survives to give us a sense of the proportional distribution of patronage.

It is perhaps surprising that Mathurā produced nearly as many large images as Gandhāra; note that narrative images and architectural fragments have been excluded from both groups. In Mathurā the Buddhist imagery made up only a minor portion of the total production, while the Jain and Brahmanical traditions drew considerable patronage. In contrast, the Gandhāran Buddhist communities appear to have

monopolized the available patronage. In Mathurā, images integrating Maitreya make up only a little more than 2% of production, while in Gandhāra Maitreya imagery accounts for 17%–27% of the devotional icons, depending on whether one factors in images with damaged iconography. It seems likely that some of the Gandhāran icons postdate the Kushan period, but until we have a better chronological model the above general trends are nonetheless useful indicators.

The two traditions appear to have diverged following the decline of the Great Kushans in the early third century CE. In Gandhāra over the course of the following centuries the fabrication of Maitreya icons was second only to representations of the Buddha, and Maitreya continued to occur in a variety of contexts, suggesting that the associated cult was large and that patronage was active.



Fig. 7: Śiva and Pārvatī from Kauśāmbī, dated to 387/388. Indian Museum Calcutta; After Williams 1982: fig. 31.

In contrast, in northern India Maitreya imagery effectively vanished. Essentially no comparable Maitreya or past Buddha imagery is known from northern or western India from the third to fifth century CE. Instead of Maitreya images, the most common flask-holding deities of northern India in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods are Nāgarājas. Representations of flask-holding Śiva images are also known, a good example being an image of Śiva and Pārvatī from Kauśāmbī (fig. 7) that has been attributed to 387/88 CE on the basis of the inscribed date (Williams 1982: 36–37).

Prior to the reintroduction of Maitreya as an attendant paired with Avalokiteśvara within the Pāla canon of esoteric deities, the only northern Indian Maitreyas that I am aware of are three post-Gupta examples. The first is a monumental 9-foot-tall Buddha from Mathurā that

has a small Maitreya standing between his legs (fig. 8a), a unique iconography, to my knowledge. The other two flask-holding examples are both from Sārnāth. The first is an independent devotional icon of Maitreya (fig. 8b), while the other seems, from the presence of the fly whisk, must have originally been part of a triad (fig. 8c). Looking at the Gupta and post-Gupta production, it is clear that representing the Buddha was preferred, though Avalokiteśvara also appears occasionally. The relative lack of Maitreya images suggests that his cult was not important in northern India at this time. The total production of large-scale imagery at Mathurā and Sārnāth during the fourth–seventh century period, the Gupta and post-Gupta time, shows that bodhisattvas, regardless of their specific iconography, were not a focus of patronage; rather, this support went to the production of images of the Buddha.

Count of Sārnāth and Mathurān devotional imagery of significant scale produced between the fourth and seventh centuries CE	
Devotional icons of the Buddha	68
Devotional icons of Maitreya (see above)	3
Devotional icons of Avalokiteśvara	7
Devotional icons of Tārā	3
Stele with embedded Buddhist narrative scenes	10
Jain devotional icons	25
Brahmanic devotional icons	41
Goddesses	15
Total of fourth - seventh century large images from Sārnāth and Mathurā	172
These data were drawn from the American Institute of Indian Studies photo archive, which documents the holdings of various Indian museums.	

Although the ideological meaning of Maitreya imagery is outside the scope of this paper, a few general observations can be made. Jan Nattier noted that Maitreya never really took the form of a world changer, nor was he a cosmic Buddha of the heavens; rather he was a non-Mahāyāna bodhisattva who guaranteed the continuity of the Buddhist tradition set down by Śākyamuni (Nattier 1988: 36). Nattier argued that only a minority of Maitreya texts exhibit any Mahāyāna elements, and she suggested that this tradition was established outside of the Mahāyāna fold, noting that one who follows Maitreya becomes an arhat rather than a bodhisattva (Nattier 1988: 35). She pointed out that Mahāyāna texts do not associate Maitreya





Fig. 8: a. Detail of Maitreya between feet of a monumental standing Buddha, post-Gupta, height 9 feet 1 inch. Lucknow Museum; After Kim 1997: fig. 32.



Fig. 8: b. Standing Maitreya holding a flask, post-Gupta period, height 2 feet. Archaeological Museum Sarnāth; After Kim 1997: fig. 110.



Fig. 8:c. Standing Maitreya with a flask from a triad, post-Gupta. Archaeological Museum Sarnāth; After Kim 1997: fig. 109.

with a golden age, but rather with the undesirable ‘final five hundred years of the law.’ In the Lotus *sūtra* Maitreya asks unintelligent questions, and in the *Maitreya Simhanānda sūtra* it is stated that the desire to see the Buddhas of the future is one of the faults or defilements of the Hīnayānists (Nattier 1988: 36). This has interesting implications in light of the regional significance of the Maitreya tradition proposed here.

When the Chinese pilgrim Faxian visited South Asia in about 400 CE he described the people of Gandhāra as mostly studying the Little Vehicle (Hīnayāna) and in Udayana (Swat) he noted that the 500 *saṅghārāmas* all belong to the Little Vehicle, without exception (Beal 1884: xxxi). The very Buddhist communities that we have strong reason to believe were actively venerating Maitreya.

Faxian wrote that in northern India near Sāṅkāśya the Buddhist community ‘belongs promiscuously to the systems of the Great and Little vehicle, and dwell together’ (Beal 1884: xli). He noted other Little Vehicle monasteries on the Ganges (Beal 1884: xliii) and in Bihar (Beal 1884: lvi). Near Śrāvastī he identified places associated with past Buddhas, but in this instance he made no mention regarding Maitreya (Beal 1884: xlix). Significantly, both Faxian (Beal 1884: lxviii) and Xuanzang (Beal 1884: 46) mentioned that at Sārnāth the Buddha predicted the coming of Maitreya, so perhaps the appearance of the two post-Gupta Maitreya images (fig. 09b, c) might be understood in this context.

By the seventh century when Xuanzang traveled through northern India he mentioned Maitreya a bit more, although this deity is still essentially absent from Xuanzang’s larger account. Besides the numerous mentions of Maitreya in the Gandhāran area, Xuanzang noted that the temple doors at Bodhgayā are flanked by 10-foot-tall white silver images of Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya (Beal 1884: vol. 2, 119). In Konkanapura he mentioned a 10-foot-tall sandalwood image of Maitreya (Beal 1884: vol. 2, 254) and in Kosala he told of a king who wished to donate a Buddha cast in gold in the hope that it might endure until the coming of Maitreya (Beal 1884: vol. 2, 215). In Ayodhyā, Xuanzang described an Asaṅga bodhisattva going up to the palace of Maitreya to receive the Yogācārya śāstrā and other texts, and he continued this discussion with reference to being reborn in the heaven of Maitreya on a lotus (Beal 1884: vol. 2, 226–28). This last mention suggests that a new conception of Maitreya might already have been emerging in northern India by this time.

In western India Maitreya appears in many of the post 5<sup>th</sup> century rock cut sites (Miyaji 2005: 73–80). The earliest reappearance of Maitreya and the historic Buddhas appears to have occurred at the late fifth-century site of Ajaṅṭā, where the seven past Buddhas and Maitreya were painted over the lintel of the entrance to cave 17 and are represented in relief in cave 26. Sculpted representations of the past Buddhas and Maitreya can also be found at Aurangabad, Kānheri, and Ellora. A small number of flask-holding bodhisattvas appear at Ajaṅṭā, Bāgh, Aurangabad, and Ellora, though here the identification with Maitreya is much less secure. For example, at Aurangabad a representation of the litany presents the small Avalokiteśvara images with a *stūpa* in the headdress (Brancaccio 2011: 160–61). At Ajaṅṭā cave 26, another representation of the litany of Avalokiteśvara shows him holding a flask (fig. 09). This kind of fluidity within the iconography is also apparent in the late north Indian tradition; a Pāla period stele with the past



Fig. 9: Litany of Avalokiteśvara from Ajaṅṭā cave 26, late fifth century CE; Kim 1997: fig. 127.



Fig. 10: Seven past Buddhas and Maitreya holding a lotus, Bihar, Pāla period, Indian Museum; After Kim 1997: fig. 193.



Fig. 11: Seated Buddha with flanking bodhisattvas, past Buddhas and narrative elements, fourth–early fifth century CE, height 41 inches, found in the village of Mohammed Nari, Gandhāra Pakistan. Chandigarh Government Museum; After Burgess 1897: fig. 112.



Buddhas presents Maitreya holding a lotus (fig. 10). Once the ninth–twelfth century Pāla esoteric Buddhist tradition was established, however, the popularity of Maitreya reemerged to some extent though Maitreya is consistently presented as an attendant together with Avalokiteśvara in triads centered on the Buddha (Miyaji 2005: 96–99).

### Conclusions:

While the concept of past Buddhas was important to the northern Indian Buddhist communities of Bhārhut and Sāñcī, it seems that Maitreya had yet to emerge. Under the Kushans in Gandhāra, the seven past Buddhas began to be represented together with a flask-holding Maitreya. This iconography persisted in the Gandhāran tradition and was incorporated into late imagery; a group of seven Buddhas and Maitreya are found on the Mohamed Nari stele now in the Chandigarh Museum (fig. 11). Maitreya was also represented in the narrative tradition, as an independent devotional icon and as an element of triads.

While some experimentation with Maitreya iconography is seen in Mathurā, both the representations of the past Buddhas and the flask-holding devotional icons seem to follow the patterns of the popular Gandhāran types (figs. 3, 4). Only eleven representations of Maitreya are extant in northern India from the time of the Kushans, and then such imagery seems to have vanished altogether, suggesting that the veneration of Maitreya was not important in this area. Twelve times more Maitreya images were produced in Gandhāra than in Mathurā, indicating the relative importance of this deity in these two regions. This disparity in image production would suggest that Maitreya ideology may

have originated in the northwest rather than in northern India.

After a hiatus during the fourth and fifth centuries, Maitreyas were again created; two of the three extant post-Gupta Maitreyas are from Sārnāth. Faxian and Xuanzang told of a prediction by the Buddha of the coming of Maitreya at Sārnāth, and this may help to explain his appearance at this site. In western India the emergence of Maitreya imagery occurred in the fifth century at about the time that Gandhāra proper fell into decline. Given the lack of Maitreya and past Buddhas in western India prior to the fifth century, it seems likely that this imagery came into western India as a direct result of contact with the northwest. Trade routes along the west coast and inland via Ujjain would have provided access to Gandhāra and more distant markets linked to the Silk Road. On the Deccan plateau in the fifth century, in addition to Maitreya and past Buddhas, we also see the punctuated appearance of Dīpankara imagery, and it is at this time that monumental Buddhist images become popular and widespread - traditions already well developed in the northwest. The fluidity of the western Indian Maitreya iconography indicates that these images are not part of a long-established tradition but rather reflect experimentation with a new bodhisattva type.

The relative popularity of Maitreya in Gandhāra as compared to northern and western India suggests that the Gandhāran Buddhists were following a different ideological trajectory at the time of the Great Kushans. The fact that the emerging Maitreya iconography appears to follow the Gandhāran typology, coupled with the exponentially larger numeric production of Maitreya images, may indicate that this tradition originated in the northwest.

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Fig. 2: *In situ* image base showing the seven past Buddhas and Maitreya, from shrine c in court XIV, Takht-i-bāhī, Gandhāra, Pakistan; ASIFC 960, courtesy of the British Library.

Fig. 3: a. Lintel fragment from Mathurā showing three Buddhas and Maitreya. Lucknow Museum; After Bachhofer 1972: pl. 87.

b. Lintel fragment from Mathurā showing three Buddhas and Maitreya, Mathurā Museum; After Lohuizen-de Leeuw, 1949: pl. 51.

c. Lintel fragment from Mathurā, Jamalpur Mound, with life scenes in the top register and row of four Buddhas and Maitreya(?) in the bottom register. Lucknow Museum; After Sharma 1995: fig. 106.

Fig. 4: Standing image of Maitreya from Ahicchatrā, Mathurā, height 28 inches. National Museum New Delhi; After Rosenfield 1967: fig. 54.

Fig. 5: Pedestal and lower half of a seated Maitreya, dated to year 29 CE, height 27 inches. Girdharpur, Mathurā, Mathura Museum; After Rosenfield 1967: fig. 32.

Fig. 6: a. Standing Maitreya from Sahri-Bahlōl mound H. Peshawar Museum; After Stein 1915: pl. XLb.

b. Standing Maitreya from Sahri-Bahlōl mound C; note that the flask is missing. Peshawar Museum; After Stein 1915: pl. XLa.

Fig. 7: Śiva and Pārvatī from Kauśāmbī, dated to 387/388. Indian Museum Calcutta; After Williams 1982: fig. 31.

Fig. 8: a. Detail of Maitreya between feet of a monumental standing Buddha, post-Gupta, height 9 feet 1 inch. Lucknow Museum; After Kim 1997: fig. 32.

b. Standing Maitreya holding a flask, post-Gupta period, height 2 feet. Archaeological Museum Sārnāth; After Kim 1997: fig. 110.

c. Standing Maitreya with a flask from a triad, post-Gupta. Archaeological Museum Sārnāth; After Kim 1997: fig. 109.

Fig. 9: Litany of Avalokiteśvara from Ajañṭā cave 26, late fifth century CE; Kim 1997: fig. 127.

Fig. 10: Seven past Buddhas and Maitreya holding a lotus, Bihar, Pāla period, Indian Museum; After Kim 1997: fig. 193.

Fig. 11: Seated Buddha with flanking bodhisattvas, past Buddhas and narrative elements, fourth–early fifth century CE, height 41 inches, found in the village of Mohammed Nari, Gandhāra Pakistan. Chandigarh Government Museum; After Burgess 1897: fig. 112.