

PARINIRVĀṆA REPRESENTATIONS IN THE
ART OF MATHURA:
A Study Based on the Discovery of
a Unique *Parinirvāṇa* Stele from the
Varāha Temple of Mathura

Mathurā has long been famous as a great centre of Buddhist art. Among the Buddhist art pieces, the number of representations of episodes from the Buddha's life story is limited. Every new narrative representation adds an important dimension to the existing knowledge. A new *parinirvāṇa* relief (Fig. 1) was discovered in the Varāha Temple, Mathura. This temple is situated in the heart of the city near the famous Dwarkadhish Temple and is traditionally believed to be one of the most ancient shrines of Mathura, though the present temple structure appears to be only about two to three hundred years old. The relief came to light while visiting the Varāha Temple where it had been placed inside a deep niche of a temple wall and labelled as Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu. On inquiry it could be learned that the relief had been found somewhere in the vicinity of the temple. It had been located inside the niche of temple wall for about 100 years. Accordingly, its real discovery might have been 100 years ago or even earlier.

The relief is considered a new discovery because, to our knowledge, it has not been reported in any literature on the art of Mathura; this is surprising as the temple is quite frequently visited. The labelling of the relief as Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu i.e. Viṣṇu reclining on serpent Śeṣa, is not a deliberate one but rather

comes from the ignorance of the temple priests who, on account of its finding near the Vaiṣṇavite temple and resemblance to a reclining Viṣṇu image, mistook it for a Viṣṇu image.

The stele is 68 cm in height and 50 cm in width. As we shall see, the dating of this unique piece poses some problems¹⁾. Examining it in detail and comparing it with all other *parinirvāṇa* representations known from Mathura seems to the authors to be of more importance than its precise dating.

The number of the comparative *parinirvāṇa* depictions from Mathura is relatively small. Apart from two aniconical representations and three reliefs of which only fragments have been preserved, only seven *parinirvāṇa* remain today. All depictions known to the present authors are listed and represented below as Figs. 2–13 (the list is ordered according to supposed datings of the reliefs even when these are far from being definitively ascertained). None of the reliefs in the list is a freestanding piece. The quite large size of the newly discovered relief and its character as an unconnected piece is extraordinary, and is perhaps of significance for the creation of the separate, monumental *parinirvāṇa* images.

Although the relief from the Varāha Temple is not of the highest artistic quality but is rather roughly elaborated and has been abraded and covered with modern paint, nearly all the details of the depicted scene are still clearly visible.

The Buddha, dressed in a draped robe covering his both shoulders and arms, is lying on the bed with head on a pillow, holding his right hand under his cheek. Buddha's head bears no locks, his hair is plain like the heads of the early so called *kapardins*, crowned by a small and pointed *uṣṇīṣa*, and surrounded by a nimbus decorated by dots or slashes in the middle and half-circles at the edge. The feet of the Buddha are placed one above the other in rather unnatural way for a reclined person with space between the legs.

¹⁾ Vinay Gupta takes it under consideration that the relief bears no substantial Gandharan influence: the presence of Vajrapāṇi in the relief cannot be ascertained and the heavy dress of the Buddha might be explained not as the Gandharan influence but the illustration of winter garbs since it was heavy winter when the Buddha's demise took place. Without influences from Gandhara Gupta proposes dating the piece to the early Kuṣāṇa, supposedly into times of Kaniṣka and calls to the attention the nearly identical size of the famous Katra stele (M.M. No. A 1) from Kaniṣka's time. For Zin the *uṣṇīṣa* and the robe of the *parinirvāṇa* Buddha appear similar to the standing Buddha No. 00.A4 in the Mathura Museum and the decoration inside the nimbus shifts the dating to even later times, cf. below fn. 31.

The construction of the bed is reduced to the horizontal part. The padded layer underneath the Buddha has the appearance of a strip made out of tiny divisions, elaborated in horizontal lines. The layer below consists of irregular vertical lines, possibly indicating a fleece or grass.

There are four persons above the Buddha, as well as four below in front of the bed, and one at the right, by the Buddha's feet; as usual, they are all male. Three of the persons in the upper row are turbaned and ornamented personalities of rank. The first one on the viewer's left side, above the head of the Buddha, is badly preserved; only the contour of the head allows one to recognise the high headgear. The man holds his left hand near his cheek. The hands of the next man are not represented; he wears headgear with an opulent front cockade, big earrings and a necklace. The next person is also richly ornamented with heavy earrings, torque, upper and underarm bracelets. His rectangular headdress allows one to identify him as Indra. The god holds both hands in front of his chest; the right hand is higher, touching his necklace. The person further to the right has neither ornaments nor headgear; the man holds his right hand to his cheek and in his left he grips an object of an indefinable shape by its shaft. The person standing to the right of the bed and touching the Buddha's feet is a monk with shaven hair and a monastic robe.

In the lower row, in front of the bed, at the right side, another monk sits meditating. It is difficult to identify the details of the three individuals further to the left. All of them can be characterised as lay persons due to the opulent headgear. The man at the left edge of the composition sits on the ground with his right leg stretched; his left leg is bent and serves as support for his left elbow. His left hand supports his cheek – the phrase *kapolaṃ haste dattvā* (literally: 'having placed his cheek in his hand') as sign of grief might be illustrated here (and perhaps everywhere in the relief where the individuals are depicted touching their cheeks). The person further to the right sits with his legs crossed; his hands are not clearly visible. It is not to be ruled out that he holds the *vajra* in his left hand. The third man kneels on his left knee and seems to have an object on his right knee which he supports with one hand upon his knee while touching his forehead with his other hand.

There are two trees in the background – out of the foliage emerge two female tree-spirits holding round objects. These objects are apparently huge flowers or vases with blossoms. At the summit, the entire composition is encompassed by a rounded line which gives the impression of a vault, the possible association that there is a *stūpa* in the background with *harmikā* at

the top is not correct. Two composite creatures are depicted in both upper corners; they are winged lions with rear parts in the form of coils of snakes or dragons. The creatures hold flower garlands in their mouths to adorn an object which has been placed in the middle. The object is a sort of round, flat container with a cover in the shape of a flat dome with a central globe-shaped knob. In the context of the *parinirvāṇa* below, the container must be understood to be a reliquary.

Apart from the vaulted frame of the scene with the reliquary at the apex, most of the iconographical elements of the relief from the Varāha Temple have their counterparts in other *parinirvāṇa* depictions from Mathura (Figs. 2–13), in Gandhara reliefs or depictions in other schools. Several of the details can be explained by means of the literary sources²⁾ or pictorial tradition independent from the literary works³⁾.

As usual, the Buddha in our relief is lying with his head on the left side of the composition. As the *sūtra* says, the Buddha was lying on his right side⁴⁾ so the representation allows us to see his face. The aniconical representation from Mathura (Fig. 3) delivers proof that this convention was already established in the time when the body of the Buddha was not depicted. The convention to represent the head at the left may perhaps be explained by the belief that the Buddha was lying on the bedstead with his head towards the north⁵⁾. If the Buddha's head is pointing north this implies that his feet were directed towards the south. As the same word *dakṣiṇa* denotes both the 'south' and the 'right side' in Sanskrit it may explain the depiction of the legs to the right side in the picture. The *parinirvāṇa* relief (Fig. 3) is the only exam-

²⁾ For the literary sources cf. the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, ed. Waldschmidt (1950–51) and Waldschmidt (1944–48) with comparative analysis of the Sanskrit, Tibetan, Pali and Chinese versions; for references to the textual traditions cf. also Bareau (1970–71) or Schlingloff (2000/2013, no. 8(8), vol. 1: 64).

³⁾ For an overview of pictorial representations of the *parinirvāṇa* cf. e.g. Ebert (1985), Schlingloff (2000/2013, no. 8 (7–8), vol. 1: 65–71); Schlingloff (2000/2013, vol. 2: 11–13: drawings); Brown (2006).

⁴⁾ *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, Vorgang (= instance) 32b.10, ed.: 294; *Dīghanikāya* XVI, 5, 12, ed.: 137, transl.: 149: "And the Exalted One laid himself down on his right side, with one leg resting on the other; and he was mindful and self-possessed."

⁵⁾ Cf. the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, Vorgang (= instance) 32a, ed.: 294; *Dīghanikāya* XVI, 5, 1, ed.: 137; transl. vol. 2: 149: "Spread over for me, I pray you, Ānanda, the couch with the head to the north, between the twin Sāla trees..."; for a comparative analysis of all versions cf. Waldschmidt (1944–48: 189 ff).

ple from aniconical times in which the early illustration of that convention can be observed. In the aniconical representations from the early Amaravati School⁶⁾ the depictions of the bedstead of the Buddha are not preserved,⁷⁾ so it is not known on which side his head was supposed to be lying.

The position of the reclining Buddha in our relief with his right hand supporting his face and the space between his legs (showing that the iconography was developed as a depiction of a standing statue which has only been positioned horizontally) is visible in nearly all known Mathura representations. The only differences we can observe are in Figs. 9–10 where the feet of the Buddha are turned downward. This previously unknown position denotes the later date of these reliefs.

The Gandhara-like robe of the Buddha in our relief covering his both shoulders and arms is repeated in other reliefs as well (Figs. 5–10, 12–13). Exceptional is Fig. 4, in which the Buddha's left arm (one should apparently understand that this includes his back as well) is covered with an ornamented blanket.

As for the form of the head of the Buddha, in the relief from the Varāha Temple, the comparative depictions have been too severely damaged or are too small in size to ascertain the type of Buddha's hair there; only in Fig. 4 and Fig. 10 is it clearly visible that the head was elaborated differently, Gandhara-like,

⁶⁾ From the Amaravati School three old reliefs illustrating the events of the *parinirvāna* cycle are preserved. Two of them show mostly the war of relics in the preserved parts (Chennai Government Museum, no. 99, lower part of an old (*torāṇa*?) pillar, 2nd face, illustrated. e.g. in: Burgess (1887: Pl. 44.4); Sivaramamurti (1942: Pl. 17, 1–3); Ebert (1985: Pl. 5, Fig. 7, Fig. 1b-c drawing); Rosen Stone (1994: Fig. 167); Dehejia (1997: Fig. 125); Chennai Government Museum, no. 170 (dome slab?), illus. e.g. in: Sivaramamurti (1942: Pl. 14.2); Dehejia (1969–70: Fig. 9); Ray (1983: Fig. 37); Roy (1994: Pl. 40); Schlingloff (2000/2013, vol. 2, 13 [8]: drawing). The third relief (Amaravati Site Archaeological Museum, no. 62, lower part of a (*torāṇa*?) pillar, 3rd face, illus. e.g. in: Sarkar / Nainar (1972: Pl. 3, a-b); Ghosh / Sarkar (1964–65: Pls. 39–40); Rao (1984: Pl. 263); Ebert (1985: Pl. 4, Fig. 6, Fig. 1a, drawing); Schlingloff (1987: Fig. 25, 401, drawing); Roy (1994: Pl. 32, mirror inverted, Pl. 33, det.); Dehejia (1997: Fig. 122, drawing); Gupta (2008: Fig. 15c); Miyaji (2010: Pl. II-1.) shows episodes preceding the death of the Buddha and the *parinirvāna* itself, unfortunately, however, the depiction of the *parinirvāna* at the very top of the remaining part is not preserved. The episodes on the relief are labelled with inscriptions cf. Ghosh / Sarkar (1964–65); Schlingloff (1987: 246–48). In the later Amaravati art the *parinirvāna* was not depicted, other topics connected with the death cycle took its place, cf. Zin (forthcoming).

⁷⁾ The interpretation of one relief in Kanaganahalli as a depiction of the *parinirvāna*, Poonacha (2011: Pl. 113A: 291 f) is a misinterpretation; the relief shows the empty bed of the Bodhisatva in connection with the great departure which is represented below.

with more or less stylized locks. The small and pointed *uṣṇīṣa* of the Buddha in the new discovered relief seems, however, not to have counterparts in other reliefs.

The nimbi in Figs. 4–6, 8–9 bearing the ‘elephant nails’ at the edge, very similar to our relief, are simply characteristic for the Mathura school. The dots or slashes surrounding the head of the Buddha have no counterparts among the *parinirvāṇa* representations⁸⁾.

The surface of the bed, with the upper layer divided in strips which have been elaborated in horizontal lines and the layer created below out of irregular vertical lines, as if imitating fleece, looks very similar to other Mathura reliefs, Figs. 4–6 and 12. In Fig. 8 it was probably quite similar as well, but because the relief is so severely eroded that the details are no longer visible. The two layers underneath the Buddha may represent the cloth, *saṃghāṭī*, on which the Buddha was lying between two *śāla* trees, i.e. on the grass⁹⁾. The iconographic feature with two layers of padding underneath the dying Buddha is not to be met in the Gandharan *parinirvāṇa*. Something similar, however, might be observed in the Gandharan statues of the seated Buddhas (apparently originally meant as the grass given to the ongoing Buddha by the grass-cutter shortly before the enlightenment)¹⁰⁾; the layer of irregular lines which is represented there, sometimes with leaves among them, which appear to indicate the ‘real’ seat of grass on the top of the pedestal. It looks possible that the grass-layer was included in the depictions of the *parinirvāṇa* in Mathura as layers of padding out of a blanket and grass upon the conventional bed. The Mathura representations of pedestals for sitting individuals with two layers of padding seem to be dated later than representations of the *parinirvāṇa* displaying this feature¹¹⁾.

⁸⁾ The decoration of the inside of the nimbi appears to be a rather late development, cf. for example Sharma (1995: Fig. 121), representing “developed stage”, the Buddha in the National Museum in Delhi, no. 58.12, adopted by the artisans of the Gupta times.

⁹⁾ In the description of the procedure during the earlier sickness of the Buddha on his way to Kuśinagara, it is stated that Ānanda was spreading the robe of the Buddha: *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, Vorgang (= instance) 27.6, ed.: 264; *Dīghanikāya* XVI, 4, 21, ed.: 128, transl.: 139: “Fold, I pray you, Ānanda, the robe in four; and spread it out for me. I am weary, Ānanda, and must rest awhile!’ ‘Even so, lord!’ said the venerable Ānanda, in assent, to the Exalted One, and spread out the robe folded fourfold.”

¹⁰⁾ Cf. e.g. Kurita (2000: vol. 1, Figs. 207–211).

¹¹⁾ Cf. the statues illustrated in von Mitterwallner (1986: Pls. 45) – standing Jina, State Museum Lucknow, no. J 230; Pls. 49 and 51 – so-called “pensive Bodhisattvas”,

One characteristic element of the Mathura representations of the *parinirvāṇa* scene is that the persons behind the Buddha are shown lamenting with arms raised high (visible in Figs. 4–6, 8–10, 13). Such representations have also been seen in Gandhara¹²). It appears that this iconographical element had been transferred from Gandhara to Mathura as both the earliest aniconical representations (Figs. 2–3) do not display it. In our newly discovered relief not one of the mourners is holding his arms high; this might perhaps demonstrate a keeping of the older pictorial tradition or an attempt to create a new independent form for the representation on a larger scale.

Indra, recognisable by his rectangular crown, thus represented since Sanchi¹³), seems to be portrayed among the mourners in Fig. 2 as well. Indra, who is mentioned in the literary sources¹⁴), is only rarely depicted in the *parinirvāṇa* scenes; apart from in the older Fig. 2 and our newly discovered relief, he appears in only one relief from Gandhara¹⁵). Later, Indra is presented in the relief in Ajanta Cave XXVI¹⁶) where he is depicted flying alongside Brahmā to be present at the death of the Teacher.

The monk by the feet of the Buddha must be the old Kāśyapa, who is often represented in this position. The story goes¹⁷) that Kāśyapa was not present in Kuśinagara when the Buddha died; the funeral pyre was not burned until he came and paid respect to the body of the Buddha by touching his feet.

Mathura Government Museum nos. A 47 and 41.2916, Pl. 63 – seated Buddha, Mathura Government Museum nos. 18.1557; all dated by von Mitterwallner in the era of Kanīṣka II.

¹²) Cf. e.g. reliefs illustrated in Kurita (2003: Figs. 481, 483–486, 488–490, 492).

¹³) For the development of Indra's crown cf. Zin / Schlingloff (2007: 61), with references.

¹⁴) Indra (Śakra) comes together with Brahmā Sabhāpati to see the Buddha for the last time cf. the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, Vorgang (= instance) 31k (Sanskrit Sondertext without pendant in Pali) cf. for a comparative analysis of all versions cf. Waldschmidt (1944–48: 6–7); Indra speaks also a verse about transience shortly after the Buddha dies: *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, Vorgang (= instance) 44,5, ed. Waldschmidt: 398; *Dīghanikāya* XVI, 6,10, ed.: 158, transl.: 175: “When the Exalted One died, Sakka, the King of the Gods, at the moment of his passing away from existence, uttered this stanza: ‘They’re transient all, each being’s parts and powers ...’”; for a comparative analysis of all versions cf. Waldschmidt (1944–48: 255–58).

¹⁵) Cf. Kurita (2003: Pl. PIV-1).

¹⁶) Ajanta XXVI, well visible e.g. in: Huntington (1985: Fig. 12.14).

¹⁷) Cf. the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, Vorgänge (= instances) 48–49, ed.: 420–29; *Dīghanikāya* XVI, 6, 19–20, ed.: 162–63, transl.: 183–85; for a comparative analysis of all versions cf. Waldschmidt (1944–48: 289–93).

Kāśyapa is often characterised as an aged monk with wrinkles on his face, which is sometimes realised in the Gandharan reliefs¹⁸. In most cases he is represented as a monk of indistinct age, often touching the feet of the Buddha.

In the preserved comparative material from Mathura, Kāśyapa appears in just two instances (Figs. 4¹⁹) and 7, possibly also in Fig. 8) which, however, might be a consequence of the fact that the right parts of several of the reliefs have been destroyed.

Given that the identification of Kāśyapa can be taken as certain, it may seem worthwhile to consider who the person standing behind the feet of the Buddha may be. The man is without hair, and the object he holds is, unfortunately, barely recognisable. The man might be a monk with a frond – compare the frond in the hand of the monk in Fig. 3 – it might, however, also be the naked ascetic whom Kāśyapa met on his way from Pāvā to Kuśinagara. The story goes (cf. fn. 17) that Kāśyapa deducted from the *mandāra* flower which the ascetic was holding that the Buddha must have died; the flower fell down from heaven, as part of the miraculous appearances accompanying the outstanding moments in the life of the Buddha. The scene of the meeting of Kāśyapa with the naked ascetic is represented several times in reliefs from Gandhara²⁰

¹⁸ E.g. in a Gandhara relief kept in the Victoria & Albert Museum, no. I.M. 247–1927, illus. in: Kurita (2003: Fig. 482); Kāśyapa with the face of the old man is often realised in Kucha (e.g. in caves 48, 107, 114, illus. in: *Kizil Grottoes* 1983–85, Vol. 1, Fig. 156, Vol. 2, Figs. 105, 148); it is quite possible that his old age is represented in connection with another story involving this monk, which was quite popular in Kucha, where his age plays a role: Kāśyapa causes a miracle and bows down in front of the Buddha to demonstrate to the King Bimbisāra that in spite of his age he subdues himself to the teachings of the young Buddha.

¹⁹ As a quite interesting fact, it should be noted that in our Fig. 4 (the relief from the Government Museum in Mathura, no. J.17) Kāśyapa is depicted as wearing a patchwork monk's robe of the kind which is represented in Mathura several times, and which was not only worn by him but also by other monks (cf. e.g. Figs. 5, 12) or the Buddha. Such a monk's robe will be characteristic for Kāśyapa in the paintings of Kucha, which gives one more reference to the observation that the Central Asian paintings are influenced not only from Gandhara but often directly from continental India.

²⁰ Cf. for example reliefs from Kafir Kot, today in British Museum, illus. e.g. in: Kurita (2003: Fig. 486); relief from a private collection in Japan, illus. Kurita (2003: Fig. 487), relief in the Freer Gallery of Art, no. 49.9G, illus. Kurita (2003: Fig. 483), of relief from Loriyan Tangai in Indian Museum, Kolkata, illus. Kurita (2003: Fig. 481).

and in paintings of Kucha²¹). The bald person on our *parinirvāna* standing above Kāśyapa may perhaps be the ascetic with the huge heavenly flower.

The row of the persons in front of the bed in our relief is clearly divided between Subhadra on the right and the group of mourners on the left. The meditating last convert²²) is depicted here without his threefold staff, or perhaps the staff is reduced to the tiny object protruding from behind Subhadra's left shoulder which could be the top-most part of three crossed sticks (this little object has no counterpart on the other side of the bed). In the comparative material the threefold staff is represented in reliefs Figs. 2, 4, 6–7, 10–11, 13; although the last, apparently the latest one, would not be identifiable without knowledge of the earlier tradition.

As the story goes, the last convert, the wandering ascetic (*parivrājaka*) Subhadra, reached enlightenment before the death of the Buddha; in the reliefs he is shown in deep meditation, free of all passion, not paying the slightest attention to the events taking place around him. In several reliefs in Gandhara, Subhadra is shown twice, not only meditating in front of the Buddha's bedstead, but also while coming to the place of the *parinirvāna* holding his threefold staff across his shoulder²³). In Gandharan reliefs Subhadra is often shown with his head covered with cloth. Sometimes there is a single lock of hair visible from underneath the cloth which apparently

²¹) Interestingly, both art schools are apparently following different literary traditions: while the Gandharan reliefs consequently show Jaina monks (the so-called *ardhaphālakas* carrying a small piece of cloth upon their arm, cf. Jaini 1995) which is referred to in the *parinirvāna* version according to the Dharmaguptaka School calling the ascetic *nirgrantha* (the text is preserved in Chinese translation, *Sūtra of (the Buddha's) Travels to Preach* (...) Taisho Fig. 2 (the episode with the *nirgrantha* ed.: 325); German translation in Weller (1940: 195), while the version of the (Mūla)-Sarvāstivādins (which is the usual textual tradition illustrated in Kucha) talks about Ājīvika whom Mahākāśyapa met. In Kucha (Kizil, cave 198 "Teufels-Höhle"), it is an Ājīvika who is represented, illus. in: Le Coq von (1924: Pl. 4); the Kucha iconography of the Ājīvikas as naked ascetics with a ring in the penis (to the best of my knowledge not represented or referred to) is surely ascertained by the inscribed representation of the Ājīvika Upaga in Kizil, cave 110 "Treppen-Höhle"; for inscription and references cf. Schmidt (2010: 853).

²²) Cf. the *Mahāparinirvānasūtra*, Vorgang (= instance) 40, ed.: 366–84; *Dīghanikāya* XVI, 5,23–30, ed.: 148–53, transl.: 164–69, for a comparative analysis of all versions cf. Waldschmidt (1944–48: 234–38).

²³) Cf. e.g. reliefs represented in Kurita (2003, Figs. 485, 496, 500).

signifies a special class of the wandering ascetics which he belonged to²⁴. This iconography was not present in the reliefs known to us from Mathura and the representations of Subhadra seem to make him rather similar to the meditating Buddha.

The group of three mourners on the left side of the row in front of the bedstead has only partial equivalents in the known pictorial material. The man on the left side supporting his head with his left hand has a counterpart in Fig. 5. His stretched leg can be seen as the second person from the relief Fig. 4. The entire group of individuals who seem to be helping each other in their despair reminds us of the Gandharan relief presently located in London²⁵ but Vajrapāṇi from this relief cannot be identified in Mathura (if the *vajra* was represented here at all it was being kept by the person second from left, not the person with the stretched leg who is Vajrapāṇi in Gandhara relief), and the individual character of other men cannot be determined either.

Comparable to the relief Fig. 3, the *śāla* trees in our newly discovered piece are shown behind the bed and lean towards the centre. Figs. 2–4 also display the tree-spirits (in Fig. 4 the tree-spirit is male). Our relief contrasts with the typical portrayal of the tree-spirits which are usually shown in the foliage; in our relief they are on the top of the trees.

Among the preserved material, our newly discovered relief shows similarities to the reliefs Figs. 3–4 in other aspects as well: the panel has been given a frame made out of flanking pillars with composite animals on the capitals. These animals are winged lions which carry at least some similarity to our relief, even though the animals here are placed in the space between the vaulted line and the corners of the wall. The composite beings on the corners above the arch have some resemblance to *makaras* on tympanums from Mathura²⁶.

The placing of a scene inside a vault is quite a rare feature but has parallels among Mathura reliefs. The representation of the Buddha which was re-cut

²⁴ The ascetic from the story about the Buddha and the skull taper, for example, are represented in such a way, cf. Taddei (1979 and 1983).

²⁵ Victoria & Albert Museum, no. IS 7–1948, illus. in: Rosenfield: (1967: Fig. 85); Ebert (1985: Fig. 32); Parimoo (1882: Fig. 43); Kurita (2003: Pl. P IV.3); Parimoo (2010: Fig. 67).

²⁶ Like the tympanum in the Government Museum in Mathura, no. I.1 (illus. e.g. in: Sharma 1995: Fig. 67; Czuma 1985: Fig. 7.1; Gupta 2013: Figs. 4.22), the similar piece in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, no. 26.241 (illus. in Czuma 1985: Fig. 7) or the tympanum from a Jaina sanctuary in Kankali Tila, kept in the National Museum in New Delhi, no. J 555 (illus. e.g. in: Vogel 1930: Pl. 57; Rhie 2007: Fig. 223).

into a *Śiva-liṅga*²⁷⁾ (Krüger / Letz 2006) displays the lower part of the vault which must have had its apex exactly above the “liṅgam” on the viewer’s right (i.e. the only preserved) side. At the right edge of the scene in the relief there is a pointed space filled with what seems to be the tiny remains of the object/animal which once filled the triangular surface between the straight right rim and the vault above the scene. Whether the object is the end of the tail of the *makara* as in our relief, or a wing of a *garuḍa*, is impossible to ascertain.

The comparison with the preserved representations brings one to the conclusion that no other separate larger depiction of the *parinirvāṇa* scene has been discovered from Mathura previously – all other scenes are (or were) parts of larger compositions out of several scenes from the legend of the Buddha²⁸⁾, or (Fig. 13) the scene makes up just a part of the decoration and nearly vanishes between the ornaments – so that features such as the framing of the depiction with vaulted lines or the composite creatures at the corners remains exceptional among the reliefs known to us and must be seen as unique.

In the context of the newly discovered relief and consideration of where the iconography of the *parinirvāṇa* scene was created, the relief in Fig. 2 deserves special attention. This relief is presumably the oldest known depiction of the *parinirvāṇa* in Mathura. The preserved piece is part of the bigger composition which, without doubt, showed diverse scenes from the life of the Buddha; the object on the left edge is part of the triple stairs by means of which the Buddha came down from the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven after teaching *dharma* to his mother.²⁹⁾ The (aniconical) representation of the dying Buddha between two *śāla* trees was replaced here by the coffin, which, however, is being adorned by the lay worshippers, i.e. different to what is portrayed in the later Gandhara reliefs.³⁰⁾ The relief certainly belongs to the time where neither the Buddha nor the monks were represented in person. The last convert

²⁷⁾ Mathura Government Museum, M.M.36.2661, illus. e.g. in: Sharma / Dawson (2003: p. 77), cf. Krüger / Letz (2006); Gupta (2013: Fig. 6.1).

²⁸⁾ While Figs. 7 and 11 are too fragmented to establish the context, it can certainly be stated about Fig. 12 that the monks at its left side belonged to the representation of the first sermon. Cf. the representation of the first sermon to the left of the *parinirvāṇa* (our Fig. 8) on the drum of the votive *stūpa* from Dhruv Tila (Mathura, Government Museum, no. N. 2, illus. in: Vogel (1930: Pl. 6b); Sharma / Dawson (2003: Fig. 11 f); in Sharma (1995: Fig. 170) and nos. 8–9.

²⁹⁾ For the literary and pictorial tradition cf. Schlingloff (2000/2013: nos. 84–87), or Strong (2010 and 2012).

³⁰⁾ Cf. e.g. reliefs published in Kurita (2003: Figs. 502–504).

Subhadra is also missing (perhaps as he was considered too similar to the Buddha whose images were avoided?) but his attribute, the threefold staff with hanging net-bag, can be seen depicted there.

The relief Fig. 2 is older than all known representations of the *parinirvāṇa* from Gandhara and provides us testimony that the iconography of the scene, or at least some of its elements, was created in Mathura. It must be noted that neither the tree-spirits nor the threefold staff of Subhadra are mentioned in the literary sources; their use in Gandhara goes back to the pictorial tradition from Mathura.

As mentioned above, because of the unique value of the newly discovered relief, it is difficult to date. To Zin the piece does not appear to be very early; when comparing the robe of the Buddha and the shape of his hair and *uṣṇīṣa* with the statues of the Buddhas, the most similar sculpture appears to be the Buddha no. 00.A4 in the Government Museum in Mathura³¹), which can be dated to the advanced 2nd century. Vinay Gupta sees a possibility that the piece could date back earlier to the time of Kaniṣka I (cf. fn. 1).

Even though the dating of the relief is difficult to define, we can be certain that it is earlier than the large separate *parinirvāṇa* reliefs from Gandhara. Behrendt (forthcoming) takes the large scale *parinirvāṇa* images as a Gandharan invention and he considers them (on the side of two other motives, the fasting Buddhas and the Dīpaṅkara Buddhas) as a diffusion of Gandharan forms after the late 5th century, after the collapse of Gandhara caused by incursion of the Hephthalites or Hūṇas. The examples from Gandhara which he provides³²) – the ca. 1 m wide *parinirvāṇa* on the base of the Bhamala *stūpa* in Taxila³³), and the 3 m wide image attached to the west face of *stūpa* 1, in the monastic area of the Dharmarajika (Taxila) Court A, both in stucco and from the c. 5th century – may be convincing as a prototype for the later large representations in India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia. Our newly discovered relief brings evidence, however, that the idea of representing *parinirvāṇa* as an outsized separate relief may not necessarily be Gandharan. In his paper, Behrendt repeats his older the-

³¹) Mathura Government Museum, no. 00.A4, illus. e.g. in: Vogel (1910: Pl. 14a); Mode (1986: Fig. 47); Sharma (1995: Fig. 97); Gupta (2013: Fig. 4.28).

³²) Behrendt does not list the relief from the Victoria & Albert Museum (our fn. 25) which is 122 cm wide.

³³) Marshall (1951: Pl. 118b), Behrendt (forthcoming: Fig. 6).

sis³⁴) that the monumental images and the shrines to house them belonged to the latest additions to the Gandharan sacred areas. The original provenance and function of our relief from the Varāha Temple is not known, but it is a quite large image in a shrine and as such it should be considered as a possible model for separate *parinirvāṇa* depictions.

If the question of whether such shrines originated in Gandhara or Mathura should, however, remain open for further research, it must be stressed here only that Mathura played a considerable role both in the creation of the iconography of the *parinirvāṇa* scene as well as in the establishment of this particular scene out of different events from the life-story of the Buddha as a separate large scale depiction.

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³⁴) Behrendt (2004: 186–87 and 253–54).

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Fig. 1. Newly discovered slab, Mathura, Varāha Temple, photo Vinay K. Gupta



Fig. 2. Fragment of a slab with scenes from the life of the Buddha, New Delhi, National Museum, for descriptions and representations cf. Ashtana (1985–86: Fig. 8.1); Sharma (1995: Fig. 180); Schlingloff (2000/2013, Vol. 2: 11 [5] drawing); after Sharma 1995



Fig. 3. Pillar, Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum, no. F.1975.05.S, Rhie Quintanilla (2007: Figs. 249, hole), 254 (*parinirvāṇa*), description Rhie Quintanilla (2007: 194–99) dating in the time of Śoḍāsa; after Rhie Quintanilla (2007)



Fig. 4. Part of a slab with scenes from the life of the Buddha, Mathura, Government Museum, Mathura, no. J.17, illus. in: Vogel (1930: Pl. 53b); Parimoo (1982: Fig. 50); Ebert (1985: Fig. 34, 46); Parimoo (2010: Fig. 74); photo Monika Zin



Fig. 5. Slab with scenes from the life of the Buddha: Rajghat, Mathura, Government Museum, Mathura, no. H. 1, illus. in: Vogel (1910: Pl. 6a); Vogel (1930: Pl. 51a); Parimoo (1982: Fig. 88); Ebert (1985: Fig. 44); Mode (1986: Fig. 9); Sharma (1995: Fig. 168); Parimoo (2010: Pl. 14); photo Vinay K. Gupta



Fig. 6. Frieze with scenes from the life of the Buddha, Kolkata, Birla Academy of Fine Arts, illus. in: Mode (1973: Pl. 85c); Parimoo (1982: Fig. 87); Parimoo (2010: Pl. 13); after Parimoo (2010)



Fig. 7. Fragment of a *parinirvāṇa* scene, Mathura, Government Museum, Mathura, no. 79.115, illus. in: Gupta (2009: Fig. 42); photo Vinay K. Gupta



Fig. 8. Drum of the votive *stūpa* with scenes from the life of the Buddha: Dhruv Tila, Mathura, Government Museum, no. N. 2, illus. in: Sharma / Dawson (2003: Fig. 11 f); photo Monika Zin



Fig. 9. Part of a frieze with scenes from the life of the Buddha, Mathura, (previously Government Museum, Mathura, no. H.7), Gorakhpur Museum, illus. in: Vogel (1930: Pl. 53c); Ebert (1985: Fig. 45); after Vogel (1930)



Fig. 10. Frieze with scenes from the life of the Buddha, Ramnagar, Lucknow, State Museum, no. 46.17, illus. in: Williams (1975: Fig. 13); Parimoo (1982: Fig. 25); Sharma (1984: 246); Schlingloff (2000/2013, Vol. 2: 11 [6] drawing); Parimoo (2010: Fig. 42); after Parimoo (2010)



Fig. 11. Fragment of a *parinirvāṇa* scene, Govindnagar, Mathura, Government Museum, no. 76.101, illus. in: Sharma (1984: Fig. 164); Sharma (1995: Fig. 179); Parimoo (2010: Fig. 76); photo Vinay K. Gupta



Fig. 12. Fragment of relief depicting the *parinirvāṇa*, Mathura, No. H. 9, Government Museum, Mathura, illus. in: Sharma (1995: Fig. 178); photo Vinay K. Gupta



Fig. 13. Architectural fragment, Govindnagar, Mathura, Government Museum, No. 44.3118, illus. in: Joshi (1966: Fig. 85); Parimoo (2010: Fig. 75); Gupta (2009: Fig. 43); photo Vinay K. Gupta