

Bronzes from Sopara – Seven Buddhas and Maitreya



A rare group of bronzes, depicting Seven Mortal¹ (or Human) Buddhas and the Future Buddha Maitreya, was found in the relic stone coffer from the *stūpa* at Sopara, the ancient port-town Śūrpāraka, 48 km north of Mumbai. These eight bronzes (Fig. 8.1) were discovered in 1882 by Pandit Bhagvanlal Indrajī, and are now preserved in the Asiatic Society of Mumbai.²

The ancient Śūrpāraka or Sopāraka has been mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, *Mahāvamśa*, *Divyāvadāna*, *Śrīpālacharita* and other Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina texts, and in the inscriptions of Nasik, Junnar, Nanaghat, Karle and Kanheri.³ It was known to Ptolemy and the author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, and later also to a large number of Arab and Persian travellers, such as Ibn Haukal Al Beruni, Al Idrisi, etc. This port-town played an important role in the commercial life of western India for more than two thousand years. The brick *stūpa* at Sopara, from which the bronzes were found, was built in about the 2nd century CE and resembled the Sanchi *stūpa* rather than the *stūpas* from the Andhra sites. The jade casket from the Sopara *stūpa* also resembles the one from the Sanchi *stūpa*. Stylistically, the bronzes belong to a later date; presumably, they were placed in the relic coffer when the *stūpa* was opened up for repair.

It is important to note the placement of the eight bronzes in order to appreciate their significance. The circular stone coffer, in which they were arranged, was placed in a three-foot square brick chamber with the support of eight bricks. This brick chamber was located in the centre of the *stūpa* with its walls in the four cardinal directions. The bronzes were arranged on the eight points of the compass and formed a circle or *maṇḍala* around a copper casket, which was placed in the centre of the stone offer.



Fig. 8.1 Eight bronze images, from Sopara stūpa, now in the collection of the Asiatic Society of Mumbai.

The copper casket contained within it four other caskets, placed one within the other, viz., those of silver, jade, crystal and finally gold (Fig. 8.2). The gold casket contained thirteen tiny pieces of earthenware, which Bhagvanlal Indraji suggested were relics of the Buddha's bowl. A thin gold plaque (Fig. 8.3) depicting the Buddha in *dharmachakra-mudrā* was found inside the copper casket.

The front of the copper casket faced east—the main entrance of the *stūpa*. The bronze image of Maitreya (Fig. 8.4), which is larger than the other seven images, was placed in the east, with its face towards the west in the direction of the casket. The seven Buddha images were arranged *pradakṣiṇā*-wise from the left side of Maitreya, starting with the first mortal Buddha Vipasyī to the seventh, i.e., Śākyamuni—all displaying different *mudrās* and under their respective Bodhi trees.⁴

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| (1) Vipasyī | : <i>Dharmachakra-mudrā</i> , ht. 3.5/8", under Pāṭali tree or <i>Bigonia Suaveoleps</i> . |
| (2) Śikhī | : <i>Dhyāna-mudrā</i> , ht. 4.1/8", under Puṇḍarīka or white lotus. |
| (3) Viśvabhū | : <i>Varada-mudrā</i> , ht. 5.3/8", under Śāla tree or <i>Shorea rubusta</i> (Figs. 8.5, 8.6 view from front and back). |
| (4) Krakuchchanda | : <i>Dhyāna-mudrā</i> , ht. 4.3/8", under Śirīsha tree <i>Acacia Sirisha</i> . |

- (5) Kanakamuni : *Bhūmisparśa-mudrā*, ht. 4.1/2", under Udumbara tree or *Ficus glomerata*.
- (6) Kāśyapa : *Abhaya-mudrā*, ht. 4.1/4", under banyan tree or *Ficus indica*.
- (7) Śākyamuni : *Bhūmisparśa-mudrā*, ht. 3.3/4", under pipal tree, *Ficus religiosa* (Fig. 8.7).

We will not enter into the controversy about the dating of the bronzes or about the view that the bronzes were imported from eastern India. I may, however, mention briefly that Rao Bahadur K. N. Dikshit⁵ in 1939, and later Douglas Barrett in 1956, drew attention to the peculiar stylistic feature of the end of the robe drawn over the left shoulder and hanging in a pleated fold on the figures of Buddhas, and suggested an affinity with the Pāla bronzes of eastern India. Dikshit suggested that the bronzes were brought from eastern India to the Deccan in about the 7th–8th century. But at the same time, he also pointed out certain differences from the Pāla school, such as the absence of decoration on the *prabhāvalī* (aureole) and the presence of long stems of trees on the backs of the bronzes (Fig. 8.6).

The Maitreya image from Sopara has been compared by S. Gorakshkar⁶ with some Jaina bronze figures from Rajanapur Khinkhini in Vidarbha belonging to the Deccan Karnataka Style, and is dated to the 9th century. When closely examining these bronzes again, I would like to draw attention to some of the Deccan features particularly as developed in Western Chālukyan and early Rāshtrakūṭa art in regard to the facial features of figures, the crown of Maitreya and the arrangement of the *upavīta* (sacred thread) and *udarabandha* (waistband). These elements compare well with

Fig. 8.2 Five relic caskets.



stone sculptures in the Deccan-Karnataka style at Pattadakal and Ellora (Tin-thāl, Daśāvātāra cave) datable to c. 750.⁷

As there is no inscriptional evidence available, it is not known to which particular school of Buddhism the Sopara *stūpa* belonged. The worship of Past Buddhas was prevalent both among the Hīnayānists and Mahāyānists, and Maitreya also was held in great veneration by them. Both these schools believed that a Buddha is one who is endowed with the thirty-two major and eighty minor auspicious marks or *lakṣhaṇas*.⁸ The early Hīnayānists recognized twenty-four Past Buddhas, with the particular Bodhi trees under which they attained Enlightenment.⁹ The *Nidānakathā* devotes the whole of the 'Distant Epoch' to an account of the twenty-four Buddhas, during whose lifetime the Bodhisattva was born in different forms. The Mahāpadanasutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya* deals with the life of the previous six Buddhas, particularly that of Vipasyī, whose life story is almost similar to that of Śākyamuni Buddha. The *Lalitā Vistara*, recognized by the Mahāyānists, mentions fifty-six Buddhas. Among the last seven Tathāgatas are: Vipasyī, Śikhī and Viśvabhū of the preceding *kalpa*, and Krakuchchanda, Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni of the present cycle. Thirty-two different names have been recovered from several lists of the Mahāyāna texts. The last seven are often called 'Sapta Mānusha Buddhas'.¹⁰

Sculptural representations of the Past Buddhas are seen from the 2nd century BCE onwards. In the early Hīnayāna art of Bharhut, there are inscriptions attached to the Bodhi trees of the former Buddhas, except that of Śikhī, whose relief may have been missing or destroyed.¹¹ At Sanchi also there are six architraves on the gates of *Stūpa* 1, on which are depicted



Fig. 8.3 Gold plaque depicting the Buddha in *dharmachakramudrā*.



Fig. 8.4 Future Buddha Maitreya.



Left:

Fig. 8.5 Past Buddha Viśvabhū.



Right:

Fig. 8.6 Past Buddha Viśvabhū (back).

Bodhi trees and the *stūpas* of the Seven Buddhas. Particularly noteworthy is the architrave of the Western Gateway, where along with the trees of the Seven Buddhas, the Nāgapushpa tree of Maitreya has been depicted.¹²

Thus, in the Hīnayāna context of Sanchi, we can already see (1) Maitreya's association with the Seven Buddhas, (2) Nāgapushpa tree associated with Maitreya¹³ and (3) Maitreya's tree facing the west. The bronze image of Maitreya from Sopara also faced west.

The art of the Mahāyāna Buddhists also has representations of Maitreya along with the Seven Mānusha Buddhas. One noteworthy example is the painted door lintel (Fig. 8.8) of Ajanta Cave XVII¹⁴ where there are label inscriptions below each figure for identification. Each Buddha sits below his particular tree of Enlightenment, and Maitreya sits below the Nāgapushpa tree. The *mudrās* displayed by the first four are the same as in case of Sopara's first four Buddhas. But the following variations can be seen in representation of *mudrās* of the last three Buddhas, viz., Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni at Ajanta and Sopara:

	Ajanta painting:	Sopara bronzes:
Kanakamuni:	<i>abhaya-mudrā</i>	<i>bhūmisparśa-mudrā</i>
Kāśyapa:	<i>dhyāna-mudrā</i>	<i>abhaya-mudrā</i>
Śākyamuni:	<i>dharmachakra-mudrā</i>	<i>bhūmisparśa-mudrā</i>

What is especially interesting is that both at Ajanta and Sopara, the third Buddha Viśvabhū is largest in size, while the image of Śākyamuni is small. This seems to suggest the prevalence of some orally transmitted, though not fully crystallized, iconographic canons regarding the depiction of the Past Buddhas in the Deccan.

The other Mahāyāna caves at Ajanta—Nos. IV and VII—have sculptural portrayals of the Seven Buddhas on the door lintel. In Cave IV, all the Buddhas are in *dhyāna-mudrā*, and in Cave VII in *dhyāna* and *dharmachakra-mudrās*. Maitreya accompanies the Buddhas on the lintel of Cave VII and is shown in *varada-mudrā*. However, Bodhi trees are not shown. In Cave XXVI of Ajanta, dated 481, the Past Buddhas are represented sitting below their respective Bodhi trees.

Not far from Sopara, at Kanheri, the Mahāyāna sculptural additions to Cave II and III include the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya. Here, the Bodhi trees are not shown. At Aurangabad, in the inner chapel of Cave VII, six Buddhas (in two groups of three) flank Śākyamuni Buddha seated in the *dharmachakra-mudrā*.¹⁵ At Ellora in Cave XII, Seven Mānusha Buddhas are represented in *dhyāna-mudrā*.¹⁶ This cave has representations of deities from the Vajrayāna pantheon such as Rakta-Lokeśvara, Shaḍāksharī-Lokeśvara and the Śaktis of Dhyānī Buddhas.

Thus, we see representations of the Seven Mānusha Buddhas in the Hīnayāna art of Bharhut and Sanchi, and nearer Sopara in the Mahāyāna art of Ajanta and Kanheri; and also in the art of Ellora and Aurangabad associated with Vajrayāna influence.¹⁷ But it should be noted that the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya are not central figures at these places, as they are at Sopara.

With the rapid changes taking place in the Buddhist pantheon from the Gupta period onwards,¹⁸ we find that the number of Mānusha Buddhas was gradually reduced to four, which included Śākyamuni and the three others of the present cycle, viz., Krakuchchanda, Kanakamuni and Kāśyapa. To these Four Buddhas was added Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, making the Five Manusha (mortal) Buddhas, corresponding to Five Dhyānī (transcendental) Buddhas and Five Dhyānī Bodhisattvas.¹⁹



| Fig. 8.7 Śākyamuni Buddha.

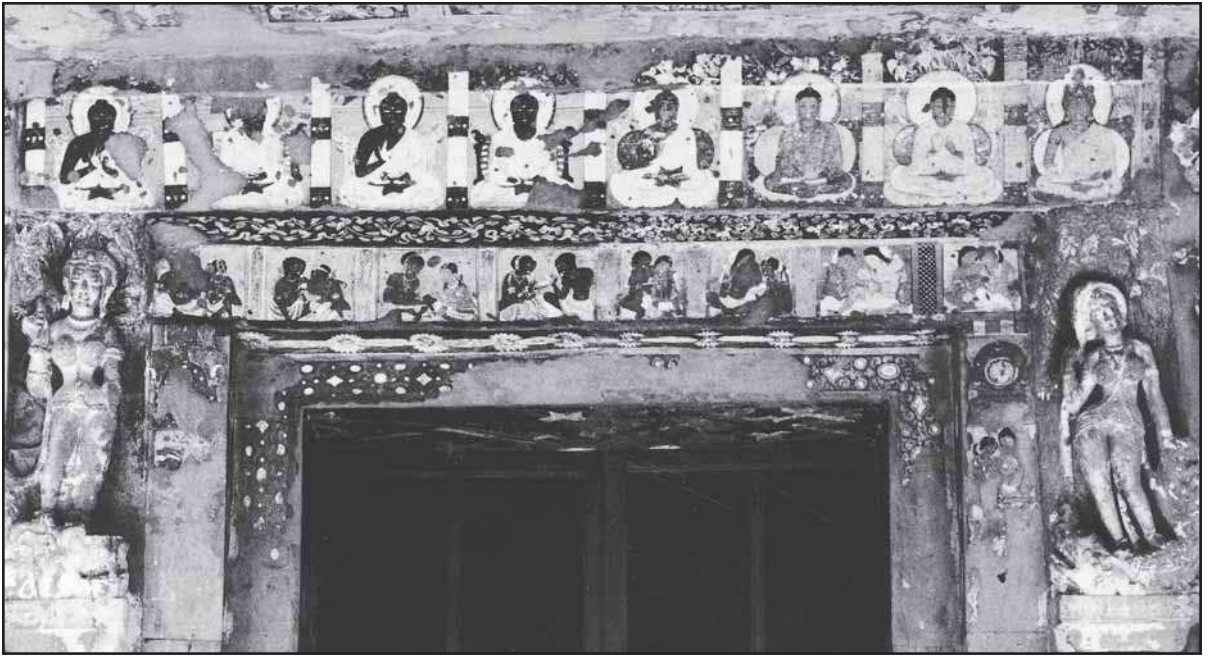


Fig. 8.8 Painted door lintel, Ajanta Cave XVII.

The Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien (c. 410) mentions *stūpas* of the Four Past Buddhas in the northern Indian regions of Shravasti, Kapilavastu, etc.²⁰ Hsuan Tsang, who travelled in Konkaṇa and other areas of Maharashtra in 641, notes the prevalence of both the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna schools. He also mentions *stūpas* of the Four Past Buddhas in these regions, and a huge sandalwood image of Maitreya near the capital of Konkaṇa.²¹ Thus, it seems that the worship of the Four Buddhas and Maitreya was in vogue from the Gupta period onwards.

A very significant piece of information about the worship of the Seven Buddhas by the Hīnayāna Sāmmītiya sect²² has been provided by Hsuan Tsang. He says that in Malwa, King Śīlāditya (who had reigned 60 years before his visit) had built near his palace an extremely artistic temple in which were installed images of the Seven Buddhas. The Hīnayāna Sāmmītiya Sect was widely prevalent in many Buddhist centres, such as Valabhi, Sindh, Avanti, Ahichchhatra, Sankisa, Ayodhya, Kapilavastu, Varanasi, etc. as noted by the Chinese pilgrim. However, at many of these places, Hsuan Tsang reports *stūpas* of the Four Buddhas.

Thus, when the worship of the Seven Buddhas was undergoing transformation, and that of Dhyānī or Kuleśa Buddhas and Dhyānī Bodhisattvas gaining prominence, the bronzes of Sopara preserve for us an important aspect of this older cult. Moreover, unlike their representations on the gateways and door lintels in both the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna monuments as noted above, they, along with Maitreya, are the principal figures surrounding the relics at Sopara.

Maitreya has been given great importance at Sopara. He sits on a higher pedestal and is the largest among the Sopara bronzes. Pandit Bhagvanlal Indraji suggested that he faces west “because on gaining Buddhahood, he will pass through the eastern gateway, open the relic chamber, and from the gold casket, take out the fragments of Śākyamuni’s bowl”.²³ He records a belief that Śākyamuni’s bowl had passed earlier from one Buddha to another, as a symbol of the office of the Buddha. So the other Buddhas are present to witness the event of Maitreya’s entering the relic coffer to get his begging bowl from Śākyamuni, his predecessor.

It is important to note that the figures are seated in a circle around the centre, i.e., the relics in the casket. The placement of the bronzes (Figs. 8.09, 8.10) in eight cardinal directions and in a circle reminds us of figures on an eight-petalled lotus *maṇḍala*. The entire scheme at Sopara—of placing in the centre five caskets, one within the other,

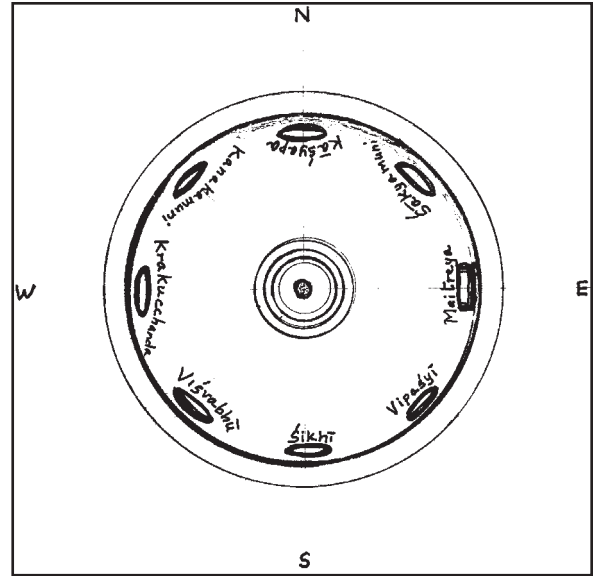


Fig. 8.9 The placement of bronzes in cardinal directions.

Fig. 8.10 The placement of bronzes in the stone coffer, around the relic caskets.



surrounded by the eight images in the cardinal directions, and their placement in turn in a circular stone coffer, which, again, supported by eight bricks has been installed in a square brick-chamber with its sides aligned with the cardinal directions—shows a highly planned and measured arrangement. It is, however, not possible to say whether this arrangement is akin to Vajrayāna *maṇḍalas*. In the absence of epigraphical material, it is also difficult to say whether the *stūpa* belonged to the Hīnayāna Sāmmītiya sect or to the Mahāyāna School. What we can say with certainty is that this is a unique group of bronzes, as metal images of the Seven Buddhas and Maitreya have not been so far found elsewhere in India or Asia.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The use of the words 'Mortal' or *Mānusha* and *Dhyānī* is made for the purpose of iconographic distinctions, irrespective of whether these are found in early Buddhist texts. The usage is common in the Buddhist iconographical writings of Benoytosh Bhattacharya, N. K. Bhattasali, Alice Getty, J. N. Banerjea and others.
2. Bhagvanlal Indrajī, "Antiquarian Remains at Sopara and Padana", *JBBRAS*, 1881-82, pp. 273-328.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 299-302. Douglas Barrett, "A Group of Bronzes from the Deccan", *Lalit Kalā*, Nos. 3-4, 1956-57, p. 42.
5. K. N. Dikshit, "Buddhist Relics from Sopara Re-examined", *Dr. Bhagvanlal Indrajī Commemoration Volume of the Journal of the Gujarat Research Society*, 1939.
6. S. Gorakshkar, 'Jain Metal Images from the Deccan-Karnataka', *Marg*, XXXIII, 3, 1980.
7. Devangana Desai, "Sopara Bronzes in the Asiatic Society of Bombay", paper presented at the Bicentenary Seminar of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 12-14 Jan., 1984.
8. B. Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, reprint, 1968, p. 76.
9. R. S. Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism*, p. 94.
10. Alice Getty, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism*, 1914, p. 10. Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
11. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. II, ii, *Bharhut Inscriptions*, Ootacamund, 1963, p. 82, Pl. XXXIII. At Bharhut, Aśoka tree is shown as Bodhi tree of Vipaśyī.
12. Debala Mitra, *Sanchi*, Archaeological Survey of India, 1965, pp. 40-41.
13. Early independent images of Maitreya have as his characteristic emblem an *amṛita-ghaṭa* (nectar pot) in the left hand, A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas*, reprint, 1971, p. 31; Getty, *op. cit.*, p. 22. This gives place to a bunch of Nagakesara flowers more frequently from about the 5th century CE onwards. J. N. Banerjea in *The Classical Age*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, p. 398. But Sanchi is one early site where Maitreya's association with Nāgapushpa can be clearly seen.
14. H. Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, Vol. II, Pl. 169.
15. John C. Huntigton, "Cave Six at Aurangabad: A Tantrayāna Monument?", *Kalādarśana*, ed. Joanna G. Williams, p. 51, Fig. 7.
16. R. S. Gupte, *The Iconography of the Buddhist Sculptures of Ellora*, Aurangabad, 1964, pp. 3, 58, 97, 150, pl. 2C.
17. Huntigton, *op. cit.*; Gupte, *op. cit.*
18. J. N. Banerjea in *The Classical Age*, p. 398; and in *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, pp. 278ff.

19. Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.*, pp. 42ff; N. K. Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1929, p. 19; Getty, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
20. J. Legge, *The Travels of Fa-Hien*, pp. 63ff.
21. T. Waters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, pp. 237ff.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 242ff.
23. Indraji, *op. cit.*, pp. 299, 310.