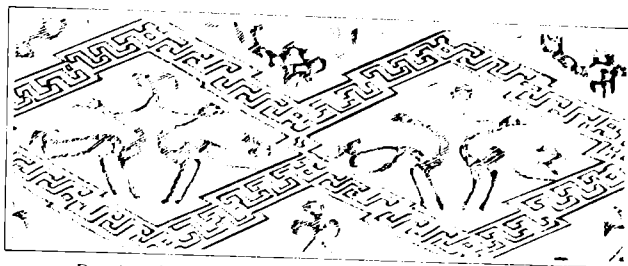


# Orientalisms

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 5 MAY 1995

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Drawing of woven textile pattern of birds inside rhombuses. p. 63

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Cover: Daoist robe (*daopao*)  
Qing dynasty, 19th century  
Embroidered satin  
Length 128 cm, width 166.5 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, 1620-1901

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## Report from Himachal Pradesh

During the course of examining scientifically and systematically the material remains of Buddhist monasteries in Khu-nu (the Kinnaur and sPi-ti [Spiti] regions of Himachal Pradesh), three inscribed bronzes were discovered in the sanctum of the sPyan-ras-gzigs dGon-po (Avalokiteshvara temple) at Tashigang in Kinnaur. Tashigang, the last inhabited village before the Indian border with the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, is situated on the right bank of the Sutlej river. It is located on an international trade route which in former days linked the early mediaeval Indo-Tibetan kingdoms, such as Ya-tshe, sPu-hrans (Purang), Guge, Spiti, Zangskar and Ladakh with



Padmapani  
Avalokiteshvara (left),  
Amitabha Buddha  
(centre) and Gautama  
Buddha (right),  
each inscribed to *lha  
na-ga-ra-dza* (Divine  
Na-ga-ra-dza)  
sPyan-ras-gzigs  
dGon-po  
(Avalokiteshvara  
temple), Tashigang,  
Kinnaur district,  
Himachal Pradesh, late  
10th/early 11th century  
Bronze  
Avalokiteshvara: height  
37.5 cm, Amitabha:  
height 31.5 cm,  
Gautama: 30.8 cm

the kingdoms of Kuluta, Satadru, Chamba (Champak) and Trigarta. This trade route, which passes through Shipki-la, bifurcates into two halves near Namgya. One of its branches goes along the Sutlej to Rampur (capital of the former Bushahr state) and beyond, while the other branch runs through Tashigang to Nako-Chango-Samdo, thus entering into the Spiti and Lahaul valleys. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Avalokiteshvara temple at Tahiganag would have in its possession several sculptures of clay, wood and metal, besides an enormous collection of rare Tibetan manuscripts. The present paper is devoted to three such bronzes bearing inscriptions similar in content and orthography.

From left to right in the illustration, the images are of Padmapani Avalokiteshvara, Amitabha and Gautama (Shakyamuni) Buddha. The two-armed image of Padmapani Avalokiteshvara is the largest; his right hand is in *varadamudra* (gesture of charity), whereas the left holds the stalk of a fully-opened lotus. The *dhoti* is fastened by a jewelled belt, and the *bodhisattva* is further bedecked with a necklace, earrings, wristlets and a long three-stringed *vanamala* (garland of flowers), which hangs down below the knees. An effigy of Amitabha Buddha is distinctly represented in the crown of matted hair. Both the nimbus and the aureole are decorated with an etched design of flames and a row of beads on the inner rim from where the flames originate. The topmost part of the nimbus is crowned by *ni-la* (sun and moon) symbols. An inscription incised on the central section of the rectangular pedestal reads, *lha na-ga-ra-dza* (The Divine Na-ga-ra-dza). The same inscription appears on the pedestal of the other two images.

The central image of Amitabha is shown in a four-armed tantric manifestation on a lotus throne. His two left hands hold the stem of a flower and a begging bowl (*patra*). An upper right hand holds a *vishva ajra* (staff) while the lower is in the *varadamudra*. He is also wearing an incised-patterned *dhoti*, fastened by a string below the navel. The three-pointed crown with a *vajra* (thunderbolt) in the centre is quite unique, and the five-pendant necklace is different from the one worn by Padmapani Avalokiteshvara. An interesting element of decoration is the form taken by the structural joint connecting the elbows of the figures to the vesica; in the other two images this is represented merely by a tube, while in the Amitabha image it has been incorporated into the sculpture's overall design as the horizontal ends of the scarf that wraps around the deity's shoulders. His *vahana* (vehicle), a peacock, is also represented, looking up at the face of the deity.

Gautama Buddha's image, which is slightly broken at the top, is the smallest. This piece bears a close resemblance to a standing

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Buddha in the collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art (acc. no. 60.30). His right hand is shown in *abhaya mudra* (gesture of protection) and the left holds the end of his transparent garment. The surface of the torso is energized with five V-shaped lines. The facial expression is serene. The nimbus and aureole of this statue are much closer to those of Padmapani Avalokitesvara than to the Amitabha.

A stylistic evaluation of these three images would suggest that all were cast at the same time in a workshop, probably in Kinnaur. There are marked similarities in the arrangement of the nimbus and the aureole, the length and breadth of the rectangular pedestals, and the arrangement and style of Avalokitesvara's and Amitabha's sacred thread (*yajnopavita*). Nevertheless, this author would say that the top of the *prabhamandala* of Padmapani Avalokitesvara crowned by sun and moon symbols, which is absent on that of the Amitabha and Gautama images, and the Gautama's plain *ushnisha*, could suggest the work of two different hands. All of the statues, however, have a perfect and balanced treatment; the slight bend to their bodies lends a sense of movement and slenderness to the images.

The most significant evidence for the images being cast at the same time and in the same workshop is provided by all three being inscribed to the divine Na-ga-ra-dza. The inscription also proves to be the images' most intriguing and puzzling feature. Is Na-ga-ra-dza the same individual referred to as *lha-btsun-pa* in the inscription incised on the pedestal of the Cleveland Buddha? Pratapaditya Pal and Heather Karmay (Stoddard) have identified the name Na-ga-ra-dza as that of one of the sons of Ye-shes'od (the late 10th/early 11th century king of Purang-Guge) based on the unanimous statement in late Tibetan literary sources that Ye-shes'od had two sons named Nagaraja and Devaraja. Both father and sons were ordained into the Buddhist priesthood, and handed over the state administration to Sron-ne (the spellings of Sron-ne vary in different literary sources). The Na-ga-ra-dza mentioned in the inscriptions on the pedestal of the bronzes from Tashigang is none other than Ye-shes'od's son. His name along with Ye-shes'od and his younger brother De-ba-ra-dza also occurs in an inscription written on the south wall of the *ardha-mandapa* of the gTsug-lag-khan at the Tabo monastic complex in the Spiti valley. Another inscription from the same temple records that Tabo was constructed in 996 and renovated by Byan-chub'od in 1042. The miniature murals of Ye-shes'od and his two sons at the monastery amply demonstrate that they were responsible for its construction.

The three bronzes from Tashigang provide invaluable information on a bronze sculptural style prevalent in the western Himalayas during the reign of Ye-shes'od and his immediate successors. The divine Na-ga-ra-dza mentioned in the inscriptions is the same *lha-btsun-pa* Na-ga-ra-dza mentioned on the Cleveland Buddha. Since Na-ga-ra-dza was associated along with his father and younger brother with the foundation of the gTsug-lag-khan at Tabo, this author would therefore suggest that these three bronzes from Tashigang and the Cleveland Buddha were cast either in the late tenth or the beginning of the eleventh century. The stylistic analysis with contemporaneous bronzes amply corroborates such a dating.

Laxman S. Thakur

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