

JAN FONTEIN

A ROCK SCULPTURE OF MAITREYA IN THE SURU VALLEY, LADAKH

Near Mulbek, about half-way between Srinagar and Leh, the capital of Ladakh, the main road to Leh follows a winding course between the foot of the mountains and a solitary, fifty feet tall rock, on the face of which the figure of a four-armed Maitreya has been carved. The more than twenty-five feet tall sculpture, carved in high relief (Fig. 1), symbolically marks the transition from Islamic into Buddhist territory, for it is at this point that the *chörten* (*stūpas*) and *gompas* (monasteries) of the Lamaist church begin to dot the landscape.

Since 1974, when the Indian Government lifted the ban on tourist travel to Ladakh, the Maitreya of Mulbek has become a major tourist attraction for the thousands of visitors who travel by bus to Ladakh each summer. The photographs in scholarly publications and guide books usually show the sculpture in its entirety,¹ but in recent years pious Buddhists have erected a small wooden temple immediately in front of it, blocking an unimpeded view of the sculpture, except from the narrow courtyard at its feet. The rectangular holes in the face of the rock indicate that the statue was once protected by a slanting roof, probably made of wood. This roof had already disappeared when William Moorcroft visited the site in 1820, for he makes no mention of it in his detailed description.² A. H. Francke visited Mulbek almost ninety years later. Proceeding from there to Kargil and describing the sites along the road Francke remarked: "People told me that there was a rock with a large Buddhist sculpture at dKar-rtse in the Suru Valley, and that it also contained a Tibetan inscription. I could not, however, go there".³ This almost casual remark, and the fact that relatively modern maps show a village named Khartse in the upper Suru Valley, prompted me last year to leave the beaten tourist track in an effort to locate the statue which Francke had not been able to visit.

Driving by jeep from Kargil through the well-irrigated, green Suru Valley, enclosed on all sides by bare mountains over which tower the snowy twin peaks of the Nun Kun, we reached the village of Sanku (Sanko on most maps). The inhabitants of the area call dKar-rtse village Karchekar, which initially caused a certain amount of confusion, but once this toponymic discrepancy had been resolved, my son Arnout, our interpreter Hussan and I set out for our

¹ David L. Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, vol. I, Warminster: Aris & Philips, Ltd., 1977, p. 7, fig. 4; Margret & Rolf Schettler, *Kashmir & Ladakh*, Essen: Gerda Schettler, 1977, p. 149; Manfred Gerner, *Himalaya*, Goldstadt-Reiseführer, Bd. 210, Pforzheim: Goldstadtverlag, 1976, p. 149.

² W. Moorcroft and G. Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab*, ed. by H. H. Wilson, London, 1841, vol. II, p. 17.

³ A. H. Francke, *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Calcutta: Superintendent Govt. Printing, India, 1914. part I, p. 104.

destination. Heading back towards Barku we followed the left bank of the Suru River, passing a demolished bridge. At the next bend a newly constructed foot bridge gave us a chance to cross the swiftly flowing Suru River. From there we climbed in approximately two hours through hamlets shaded by the ubiquitous willows and poplar trees towards the village of Karchekar – a cluster of farm houses encircling a solitary rock not unlike the one at Mulbek. The Karchekar statue, however, has not been carved from the large monolith, but from the face of a steep mountain slope facing it (Figs. 2, 3, 4).

The sculpture stands about twenty-five feet tall and covers almost the entire height of the face of the cliff. The top of its crown extends to the very top of the cliff while its feet and—possibly—a lotus pedestal are covered by fallen rocks and other debris at the bottom of the precipice. The two-armed, crowned figure of a bodhisattva represents the future Buddha Maitreya. The left hand is lowered alongside the body, its fingers grasping the neck of a vase decorated with floral scrolls. The right hand is raised in front of the chest, its palm turned inward towards the body. The same *mudrā* can be observed in a smaller representation of Maitreya on a stone pillar, one of a group of four statues, that stand at the way-side near Dras, about fifty kilometers to the east of Mulbek.⁴ Like the Mulbek Maitreya, the statue at Dras is one of the four-armed variety, but the two raised outer hands are too damaged to enable us to identify the attributes with certainty. It does seem likely, however, that they too held a string of prayer beads and a flower, just like the statue at Mulbek. Apparently in this area Maitreya could be represented either with the right hand held low, the palm turned outward in *dāna-mudrā*, the gesture of “giving”, or with the hand raised from that position into the gesture made by the Karchekar and Dras statues. The same gesture has been noted in at least two bronzes that are thought to have come from Kashmir.⁵ The most obvious clue to the identification of a statue as Maitreya, i. e. the *stūpa* in the headress, seems to be lacking in the Karchekar statue. The statue can only be viewed from the path at the bottom of the cliff, and the ledge is too narrow to allow us to study it from a distance. The angle at which we view the upper section of the statue, especially the crown, makes it difficult to draw any definite conclusions, and it is, therefore, not altogether certain that the *stūpa* in the headress is absent. Moreover, although most of the details of the carving have been preserved in all their crisp detail, the crown, most exposed at the top of the cliff, has suffered slightly from weathering.

The Maitreya sculpture displays many of the stylistic features of the bronze statues that are generally thought to have been made in Kashmir or by Kashmiri artists, even though archaeological and epigraphical evidence connecting these statues with the valley of Kashmir is not nearly as abundant as one would wish it to be. Maitreya is shown wearing an elaborate crown and profusely decorated ear ornaments. The hair falls down over both shoulders in regularly braided plaits. Around the waist the bodhisattva wears a band consisting of two strands of beads, held together by a button in the shape of a flower. The folds of the *dhoti* are only summarily indicated. A long scarf sweeps down from both arms to the ankles. All these features are well-known from numerous bronzes. The round face with puffy cheeks and protruding chin and the pronounced abdominal muscles around the navel are equally characteristic of

⁴ Snellgrove and Skorupski, *o.c.*, p. 7, fig. 3 (left).

⁵ Pratapaditya, Pal, *Bronzes of Kashmir*, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975, nos. 38 and 39.

Kashmir bronze statuary. The clearly delineated knee caps, however, are not common in the art of Kashmir. The closest parallel is a 9th century bronze from the Chamba valley.⁶

The paucity of datable pieces makes dating of the bronzes a hazardous undertaking, and the same, obviously, applies to this rock sculpture. It does seem evident, however, that the closest stylistic affinity is with bronzes that are thought to date from the 9th or 10th century A.D. The easily transportable bronzes found their way into all corners of Tibet and Ladakh and there is usually no reliable indication of their ultimate origin. The rock statuary of Mulbek and Karchekar indicates that what is known as the Kashmir style extended deeply into the neighboring areas of Western Ladakh. There is a considerable amount of literary evidence of the missionary activities of Buddhist ecclesiastics from Kashmir in Ladakh, Central Asia and China. That artists accompanied and followed these missionaries is a well-known phenomenon in the Buddhist world. To find evidence of it in Western Ladakh is, therefore not surprising. However, it is of interest to note that monumental rock sculpture in the style generally associated with Kashmir appears to be found only in Western Ladakh, whereas in Kashmir itself no examples of monumental dimensions have been found. Kalhana's *Rājatarangini*, the principal historical source for Kashmir, describes "a Great Buddha which reached up to the sky", erected by King Lalitāditya Muktāpida (early 8th century A.D.) in his new capital Parihāsapura. This statue, however, was cast in bronze, and even though it survived the reign of King Harsa (1089–1101),⁸ it became, in later times, a victim of the widespread destruction that accompanied the eclipse of Buddhism in Kashmir.

In Ladakh, an area much less fertile and affluent than the valley of Kashmir, the local Buddhist communities may never have had the resources to commission bronze statuary of monumental size. By creating their monumental sculpture in stone, a less costly and more durable material, the Buddhists of Ladakh left a legacy that was unlikely to be despoiled for monetary gain and too large to be easily destroyed by religious fanatics.

The inhabitants of the Suru Valley were converted to Islam hundreds of years ago as the adherents of the Shi'ite sect infiltrated into the area from the West. The nearest Buddhist monument in Zanskar is Ringdom Gompa, about two marching days from Sanku village. It would seem, therefore, that the Maitreya statue stands isolated in territory that was completely converted to Islam long ago. However, a glance at the map shows the existence of a direct route across the Rasila pass to Mulbekh, a distance of only 35 km. as the crow flies. The two large statues may, therefore, be more closely connected than is evident to the traveler who follows the main roads.

The above quoted passage from Francke's book is followed by the phrase: "Another sculpture from Shinggo is found pictured in Drew's book of travel". Having no immediate access to Drew's book I initially assumed that there existed a third statue of this type in the Shinggo valley, an area which is, at this time, not open to curious visitors. However, when I was finally able to consult Frederic Drew's *The Jummo and Kashmir Territories*⁹ it turned out that the statue sketched by this intrepid traveler is none other than the Maitreya of Karchekar.

⁶ Pal, o.c. no. 84b.

⁷ M. A. Stein, *Kalhana's Rājatarangini*, Westminster Archibald Constable & Co, 1900, vol. I, p. 142 (*Rājatarangini*, IV, 203).

⁸ Jean Nadou, *Les Bouddhistes Kāsmiriens au Moyen Age*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968, pp. 51–52.

⁹ Frederic Drew, *The Jummo and Kashmir Territories, a geographical account*, London: Edward Stanford, 1875, p. 257.

As Drew correctly identifies the statue as “Chamba” i. e. Maitreya, one may assume that he was accompanied by a Ladakhi who was conversant with Buddhist iconography. Francke obviously mistook Sankhoo for Shinggo. The other information supplied by Francke, i. e. that the Suru Valley statue carried a Tibetan inscription, does not seem to be correct either. A cursory inspection of the face of the rock, too brief because of the rapidly advancing hour, revealed no trace of any inscription.

Above the shoulders of the Karchekar Maitreya appear two apsaras, their hands folded in *añjali*. Beside them two large square holes indicate that the statue was once protected by a wooden roof, just like the statue at Mulbek. Perhaps a more thorough investigation of the area will reveal the location of the monastery that must once have housed the monks who paid homage to this great, monumental statue of the Buddha-to-be¹⁰.

¹⁰ Two of the photographs accompanying this note were taken by Stuart Cary Welch who, following the directions I had given him, was able to reach the site at a time of day when the sun does not cast heavy shadows over the statue.



Fig. 1. Rock-cut Maitreya near Mulbekh, Ladakh.
Copyright W. Böhning, Ethnographic Museum, Portheimstiftung, Heidelberg.



Fig. 2. Rock-cut Maitreya near Karchekar, Suru Valley, Ladakh. Photograph Fontein



Fig. 3. Karchekar Maitreya. Photograph Stuart Cary Welch

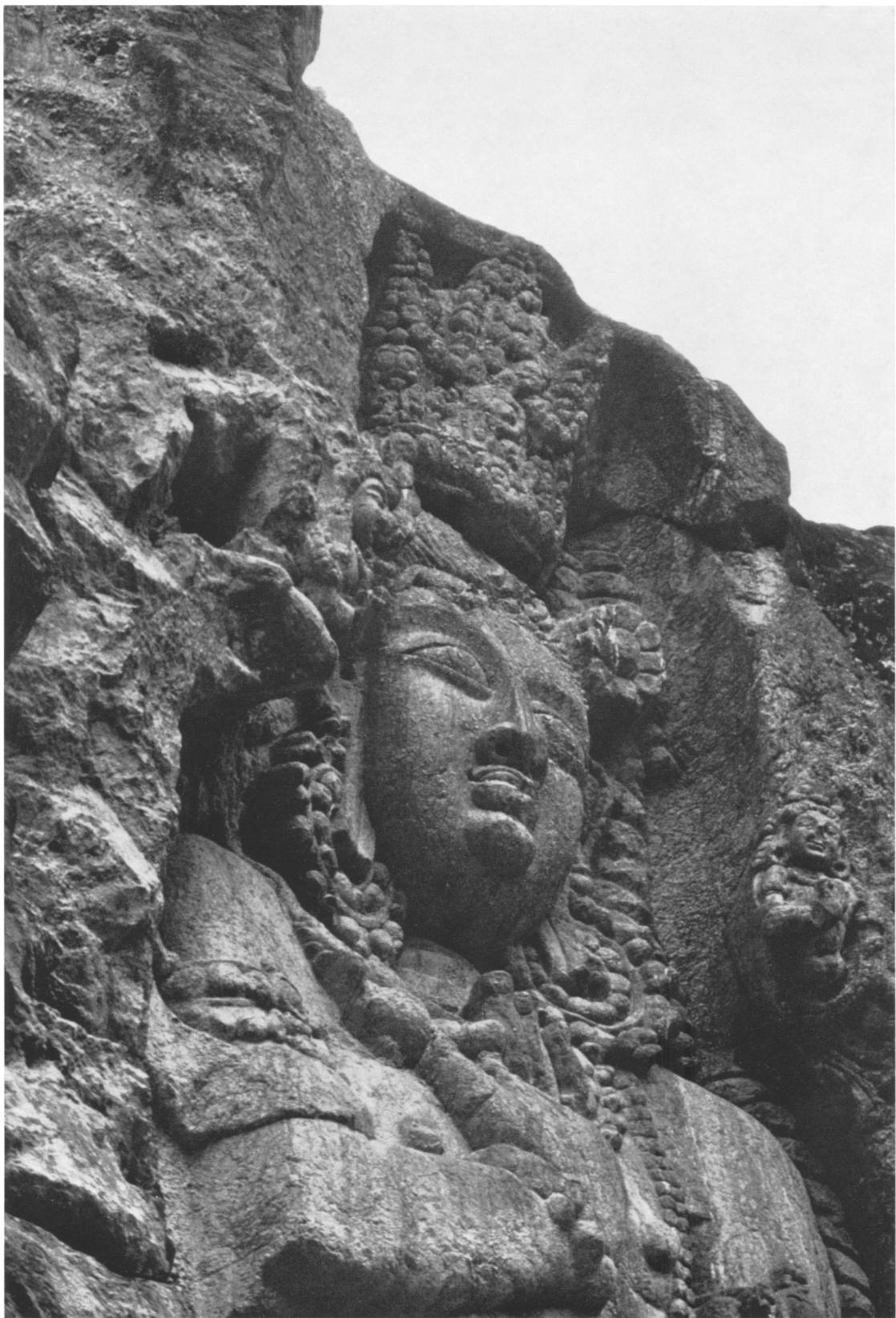


Fig. 4. Karchekar Maitreya, detail. Photograph Stuart Cary Welch