
The Buddha and the Sun Disk: Some Reflections on the Dialectics of Light in a Relief from Matkanai, Pakistan

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Abstract: This paper examines a fragmentary relief from Matkanai (Malakand, Pakistan), housed in the Dir Museum, Chakdara. The relief depicts a solar disk set within a cave, partially obscuring a seated Buddha in *padmāsana*, whose right knee emerges from behind the disk. While Gandharan art is renowned for its use of “luminous” iconographies, such as nimbuses, full-body halos, and flaming shoulders, this example introduces a new visual grammar. The aim of this paper is to offer an interpretation for this relief and to clarify how light and solar metaphors are encoded in this unusual representation of the Buddha.

Keywords: Buddha, Gandharan art, light metaphors, solar imagery, Indra’s Visit to the Buddha, *Indraśailaguhā*, Gods’ Entreaty to Preach the Dharma, Visit of the Sixteen Pārāyana Ascetics

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A fragmentary relief with unusual iconography, which has so far eluded scholarly attention, was uncovered during a digitisation campaign in 2021, at the Dir Museum in Chakdara (inv. no. DMC 2036), in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (**Fig. 1**).¹ It was originally unearthed in 1980 at the Buddhist site of Matkanai, on the left bank of the Swat River in the Ranizai plain, approximately 7 km southwest of Chakdara, during excavations conducted by the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, which confirms its authenticity. To my knowledge, the relief was only published in the delayed excavation report of 2022 (reproduced under fig. 27), where Aisha Bibi, the main author, assigns it to the Kushan period and describes it as a “solar disk in front of the Buddha inside a cave”.²

The relief is carved in a grey schist and measures 20.3 x 21 x 5.8 cm. It is broken on all sides, chipped and displays important concretions. The base consists of a plain band, and the main surface of the relief shows a disk carved inside a cave. The disk features a plain field and a wide border divided by a plain fillet. The border is decorated with radiating drop-shaped sunbeams. Traces of red-brown pigment remain on the lower left part of the disk. Behind it, the right knee of the Buddha sitting in *padmāsana* emerges. The cave was surrounded by flames, the remains of which are still visible on both sides. A globular flask with a central band is depicted on the ground. On the right, the right hand and foot of a figure are preserved.³

Unfortunately, the relief could not be reassembled with any other known fragment preserved in the Dir Museum. Upon discovery, the finds from Matkanai were divided between the Dir Museum and the Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at the University of Peshawar (hereafter referred to as the Peshawar University Museum). It remains possible that additional fragments survive in the storage collection. Despite its fragmentary condition, the extant portion alone warrants examination. It incorporates familiar iconographic elements – the non-(fully)figural representation, the solar disk, the cave setting – however the configuration is highly unusual and ambiguous. The solar disk may be interpreted as forming the Buddha’s upper body or, instead, as obscuring it.

¹ The relief was spotted by Cristiano Moscatelli during the first campaign of the DiGA project. DiGA, short for “Digitization of Gandharan Artefacts Project: A Project for the Preservation and the Study of Gandharan Art from Pakistan” was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research under the funding code 01UG2048X, funding line eHeritage (2021–2024). It was carried out by Serena Autiero, Cristiano Moscatelli, Frederik Elwert and me at the Centre of Religious Studies at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum.

² BIBI et al. (2022: 135–165). The relief is also examined in Ms. Bibi’s unpublished MPhil thesis: BIBI (2020). As in many other Gandharan sites, the chronological sequence of Matkanai is unfortunately disturbed. The author’s attribution of the architectural and sculptural remains to the Kushan period relies on structural and stylistic comparisons with other sites in Swat and I see no reason to question it (BIBI et al. 2022: 142–143).

³ <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/1719570> (accessed 27 June 2025).



Fig. 1. The Visit of Indra or the Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics, schist, 20.3 x 21 x 5.8 cm, Matkanai, Dir Museum Chakdara (DMC 2036), © KPDOAM/DiGA. Public Domain.

To scholars familiar with early Buddhist art, the motif may initially evoke “aniconic” or symbolic representations,⁴ such as those found at Bhārhut, Sāñcī,

⁴ Coined by Alfred Foucher, the term aniconic (“aniconique”; FOUCHER 1911: 55–80), has become one of the most heavily charged concepts in the study of South Asian art, particularly through the opposing views of Susan HUNTINGTON (1990: 401–408; 1992: 111–156) and Vidya DEHEJIA (1991: 45–66). A useful review of the various understandings of the term is provided by DECAROLI (2015: 24–28). In the present article, I use the term to refer to the practice of avoiding figurative representations of the Buddha in favor of symbols. Siding with SECKEL (2004: 3–107), SCHLINGLOFF (1987), DEHEJIA (1991: 45–66), ZIN (1998: 50–74) and DECAROLI (2015: 28), to mention but a few proponents of this widely accepted theory, I understand these not as substitutes or stand-ins for the Buddha, but rather as visual cues that gesture toward the Buddha, his life, and his teachings. By virtue of their allusive power and polyvalence, such signs do more than merely evoke the Buddha and have a dimension beyond the biographical and historical illustration: they encapsulate his achievements, his path, and the enduring presence of his doctrine.

Kanaganahalli, or Amarāvātī, where the Buddha is not depicted in human form but referenced through signs like the empty throne, the *bodhi* tree, footprints, the *stūpa*, the royal umbrella, the flaming pillar, the *dharmacakra*, and the *triratna*. The solar disk, however, is not typically part of this early symbolic repertoire.⁵ Examples of symbolic or non-figural imagery do exist in Gandharan art, though save for rare examples,⁶ they need not be indicative of an early developmental phase. These include reliefs from Butkara I, Butkara III, and Shnaisha, which show symbols like the stupa, the Buddha's footprints or the *dharmacakra* being worshipped, the latter sometimes read as early sermon scenes.⁷ Within this Gandharan visual lexicon, the solar disk is a well-attested motif, appearing in both narrative and non-narrative contexts, and can be regarded as part of its established non-figural vocabulary. In the Matkanai relief, however, the depiction of the Buddha's knees emerging from behind the solar disk within a cave – rendering him at once visible and invisible – challenges our established taxonomies of non-corporeal representation.⁸

⁵ With some interpretative leeway, one might invoke the traditional reading that views the solar disk, governing the celestial order, as a conceptual antecedent of the *dharmacakra*, the emblem of the *cakravartin*, the universal monarch and, by extension, of the Buddha as spiritual sovereign. Yet this connection, discussed by PRZYLUKI (1932: 481–498), COOMARASWAMY (1935a: 24–33), ROWLAND (1938: 72) or SECKEL (2004: 13, 41) remains theoretical. In practice, the solar disk is absent from the iconographic lexicon from these early sites.

⁶ The most famous example is a relief from Butkara I which illustrates the Buddha's descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven through a representation of his footprints carved on the lowest step (FACCENNA 1962–1964: pl. CCXXXIII). On this particular image and its implication for an early aniconic phase in Gandharan art see van LOHUIZEN-DE LEEUW (1981: 389).

⁷ Butkara I: FACCENNA (1962–1964: pls. CCXXIX a, CCXXIX b, CCXXX a, CCXXX b); CALLIERI and FILIGENZI (2002: nos. 88 and 89); Butkara III: RAHMAN (1990: figs. 10 and 11); Shnaisha: FACCENNA (1962–1964: pl. CCXXX).

⁸ In various discussions of the relief, it was suggested to me that the hybrid form could reflect a transitional phase in Gandharan art. I hope that the forthcoming discussion about the technical contrivance of the relief and its narrative content will suffice to refute this hypothesis. Besides, one should bear in mind that an “aniconic” representation is not automatically indicative of antiquity or an earlier stage in the visual representation of the Buddha. As Dieter Seckel aptly observed (here quoted in the English translation by Andreas Leisinger): “Aniconic symbolism spans a historic phase in early Buddhist fairly precisely delimited. To assume, however, that it was abandoned with the advent and the subsequent permanent Buddha image would be quite wrong. To a certain extent, aniconic symbols remain valid as a principle beyond history. The symbols are not simply replaced by figural images. True, images take the place of most aniconic symbols, but the old motifs nonetheless retain a part of their function and even gain new meanings: not instead of or beside iconic images, but rather on a level of meaning higher than that of representational art. Thus, the symbol occupies a place in Buddhist art not only *before* (historically) but also *beyond* (transhistorically) the image” (SECKEL 2004: 55). Therefore, even if the motif on the Matkanai relief were to be interpreted as a “semi-aniconic” representation of the Buddha (which I consider unlikely), there is no reason to treat its hybridity as a chronological indicator. The symbolic mode does not necessarily signal an earlier developmental phase. Rather, it may reflect persistent, transhistorical principles within Buddhist visual culture.

What can also be said at the outset is that, with the solar disk thus *mis en exergue*, the depiction unequivocally foregrounds solar imagery and may be counted among the many “luminous” representations of the Buddha, in keeping with the familiar panoply of the nimbus, full-body halo, and flaming shoulders that permeate Gandharan art. The rich symbolic meanings attached to these motifs have been explored by Rowland, Soper, and Verardi, to mention but the most seminal scholars. Their studies have variously emphasised the conceptual affinities between the Buddha and his Vedic or Zoroastrian precursors such as Indra, Sūrya, and Mithra,⁹ identified parallels with the Iranian concept of *xʿarənah* to support a dynastic reading of the Dharma’s transmission,¹⁰ and demonstrated how certain motifs signify the Buddha’s emission of light during contemplative practices and articulate his mystical anatomy.¹¹ Together, the visual evidence attests to a powerful visual economy in which light imagery is deployed to exalt both the physical and spiritual qualities of the Buddha. This metaphorical construction of the Buddha’s extraordinary nature, particularly through light metaphors and solar symbolism, is paralleled in literary sources where the Buddha is consistently described as the “Light of the World” (*lokapradyota*), the “Man of Light” (*puruṣāditya*), or the “Kinsman of the sun” (*ādityabandhu*), to cite the most emblematic tropes.¹² Another reoccurring trope is the great, infinite radiance that floods the world at transformative events in Siddhārtha’s life. In sum, that the relief from Matkanai should display some kind of light is not particularly disconcerting. The challenge lies in discerning *what kind* of light this is and what its purpose is in this specific visual context. While Gandharan art is known for its engagement with luminous iconographies, this particular relief introduces a distinct visual grammar.

The aim of this article is to offer an interpretation for this relief and to clarify how light and solar metaphors are encoded in this unusual representation of the Buddha. Accordingly, this article is divided into three sections. The first identifies iconographic parallels for the motif of the solar disk with emerging knees. The second reconstructs the likely narrative context of the Matkanai fragment, proposing its association with the following episodes from the Buddha’s life: the Visit of Indra which serves as a prelude to the Gods’ Entreaty to Preach the Dharma and the Visit of the Sixteen Pārāyana Ascetics. Both are associated with cave settings and the theme of radiance, offering plausible

⁹ ROWLAND (1938: 69–84); SOPER (1949a: 252–283; 1949b: 314–330; 1950: 63–85); VERARDI (1988: 1534–1549); QUAGLIOTTI (1991–1992: 73–91).

¹⁰ TADDEI (1974: 435–449; 1992: 103–107).

¹¹ TADDEI and KLIMBURG-SALTER (1991: 73–103). For an alternative interpretation see RHI (2005: 169–211).

¹² These illustrative examples taken from the *Mahāvastu* are quoted from Nicolas Revire’s study on solar symbolism in early Buddhist literature (REVIRE 2017: 146–147), examined in more detail below. *Mahāvastu* I 175, ed. SENART (1882: 175); trans. JONES (1949: 139); *Mahāvastu* II 302, ed. SENART (1890: 302); trans. JONES (1952: 284).

literary and visual frameworks for interpretation. The third section examines relevant textual counterparts. Drawing on Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Gāndhārī sources, the analysis explores how well-known literary tropes – metaphors, analogies, simile – which imbue the Buddha with a blazing radiance or compare the Buddha to the sun both as a natural phenomenon and a personified god, are materially expressed through sculptural form. In doing so, the article contributes to broader discussions in early Buddhist art and Gandharan visual culture on the aesthetic strategies used to represent the Buddha’s supra-human nature and the critical role of light in that construction.

The solar disk: Iconographic parallels and layered meanings

The solar disk motif is well attested in Gandharan art. Scholars such as Rowland and Verardi have highlighted its Indic and Iranian resonances with Sūrya and Mithra,¹³ while TADDEI (1990: 43–50) pointed to its broader symbolic role within the Buddhist visual lexicon of luminosity, connecting it to the imagery of the flaming shoulders. Verardi, who examined the motif’s context of appearance and its varying interpretative dimensions, offers a twofold reading: first, as a connotation of the Buddha’s radiant body liberated from the fetters at the moment of awakening, and, by extension, of *bodhi*; and second, as a denotation of the light emitted by the Buddha at the *bodhimaṇḍa* and in the context of the First Sermon. The most systematic analysis, however, comes from QUAGLIOTTI (1991–1992: 73–105), whose typological framework and contextual insights remain especially valuable. She examines the motif’s compositional, iconographic, and narrative functions, identifying around twenty reliefs in which the solar disk appears.¹⁴ These are grouped into two main categories: those in which the motif features in a narrative context (Type I), and those in non-narrative contexts (Type II). In what follows, I expand upon Quagliotti’s typology by proposing a slightly different set of subtypes that better accommodate the diversity of visual strategies at play.¹⁵

¹³ ROWLAND (1938: 69–84); VERARDI (1985: 67–101; 1988: 1534–1549, particularly 1542–1544).

¹⁴ In a subsequent study, Quagliotti undertakes an examination of a broader corpus of reliefs that feature the motif she designates as the “*cakra/padma*/solar disk” treating these variants as functionally interchangeable (QUAGLIOTTI 1995–1996: 200–216). While acknowledging a certain degree of semantic and iconographic overlap, the present inquiry will limit its focus to the solar disk.

¹⁵ In addition to these two main categories, Quagliotti identifies, within each group, two further subcategories depending on whether the solar disk is in the foreground (“A”) or partially covered by an atlas, a pillar / column or a tree (“B”) (QUAGLIOTTI 1991–1992: 73–74).



Fig. 2. Brahma and Indra framing the solar disk. Relief usually interpreted as the Gods Entreaty to Preach the Dharma, schist, 5.10 x 26.70 x 23.50 cm, Swat Valley, British Museum (1966,1017.2), © The Trustees of the British Museum. / CC BY-SA 4.0.

I.1. Illustrations of Indra and Brahma framing the solar disk, a representation usually interpreted as the Gods' Entreaty to Preach the Dharma (Fig. 2).¹⁶

¹⁶ As put by Callieri and Filigenzi "The lack of specific details leaves room for doubt about the scene depicted: the Enlightenment, which took place under the *bodhi* tree, or the First Sermon" ("La mancanza di dettagli specifici lascia un margine di dubbio sulla scena rappresentata: l'Illuminazione, avvenuta sotto l'albero della bodhi, o la Prima Predicazione") (CALLIERI and FILIGENZI 2002: 175).



Fig. 3. The First Sermon, schist, 18.1 cm × 25.4 cm × 5.1 cm, Nīmogrām, Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif (NG. 380), © Joan Anastasia Raducha. The CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

I.2. Illustrations of the episode of the First Sermon, showing the solar disk on a pedestal and surrounded by the five monks or framed by antelopes (QUAGLIOTTI 1998: figs 5 and 6).

I.3 Reliefs illustrating the First Sermon where the solar disk appears behind the triple wheel supported by an atlas, a pillar/column (**Fig. 3**).

I.4 One relief depicts the solar disk behind the *bodhi* tree at whose foot the Buddha sits (**Fig. 4**) – a scene that Quagliotti incorrectly interprets as the Buddha's victory over Māra, but which represents the Buddha paying homage to the *bodhi* tree by gazing at it after his enlightenment (BOPEARACHCHI 2016: 19–22 and 31–34).

The second category includes:

II.1 Reliefs showing the solar disk among worshippers either framed by arches or not (**Fig. 5**).



Fig. 4. The Buddha paying homage to the *bodhi* tree, schist, 18 x 32 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum (I. M. 31-1935), © Victoria and Albert Museum, London / CC BY-SA 4.0.



Fig. 5. The solar disk among worshippers framed by arches, 14 x 32 cm, Museum für Asiatische Kunst (I 526), © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst / CC BY-SA 4.0.

II.2 Reliefs where the solar disk appears among different kinds of relics, each separated by arches. This is an arrangement typically found on cornices or on the upper register of reliefs with two superposed registers (**Fig. 6**).



Fig. 6. The solar disk among different relics separated by arches, 6.20 x 22 x 53.40 cm, Takht-i-Bāhī, British Museum (1899,0715.11), © The Trustees of the British Museum / CC BY-SA 4.0.

What this typology immediately reveals is that, when the motif is situated within a narrative context, it is, more often than not, in connection with the First Sermon, or episodes directly preceding it, such as the Gods' Entreaty to Preach the Dharma or the Meeting with the Five Ascetics. Given this evidence, one need not take a large interpretative leap to discern the motif's relation to the Buddha's teaching activity, a line of reasoning indeed pursued by Quagliotti.¹⁷ According to her, the solar disk represents the phenomenon of light emitted by the Buddha at the moment of teaching, as reported in the *Lalitavistara* (FOUCAUX 1884: 341). Yet, for Quagliotti, what is at the heart of the matter is not the light that *shines* but the light that *irradiates*. In this interpretation, she draws heavily on Verardi, who gives a mahāyānic orientation to the iconography and the phenomenon it refers to. He argues that "while a Buddha confines himself to leaving the cosmos realising only the ascending phase, and thus 'shining' without irradiating, the Bodhisattva realises also the descending phase, and his function can be expressed by the symbolism of solar irradiation, through which all things are illuminated" (VERARDI 1985: 83). In other words, the process of Śākyamuni's diffusion of the law is likened to the phenomenon

¹⁷ In full disclosure, it should be noted that this interpretation of the motif is not the only one Quagliotti proposes in her article, which aims to interpret the Victoria and Albert Museum relief which she misreads as depicting the Buddha's victory over Māra. According to the author, in this narrative context, the solar disk symbolises the victory of the Buddha – *bodhi* itself – which is essentially a victory of light over darkness, and hence a solar victory. The fact that the disk appears behind the tree on the relief would likely indicate that the victory is imminent but not complete. QUAGLIOTTI (1991–1992: 87). Examined in the context of the Buddha paying homage to the *bodhi* tree after his awakening, the solar disk may be interpreted as a symbolic device that glorifies the *bodhimanda*, the locus of awakening.

of solar irradiation, a metaphor that emphasises not only the enduring impact of his teaching, but also the sustained nature of the act of teaching itself. To Quagliotti (and Verardi), “it is precisely this irradiation of the Buddha as the Bodhisattva that Gandharan artists have tried to render in representing the Buddha in the ‘First Sermon’ and related episodes in the form of a solar disk: the Buddha of the bodhi in a profoundly Mahayanic sense” (QUAGLIOTTI 1991–1992: 86). While I am not persuaded by the mādhyānic undertones,¹⁸ I do find the layered readings of the motif alluring. An important implication and a lesson for the present analysis, is the recognition (although the author does not make this explicit) of the layered meanings with which the motif is potentially imbued: *bodhi* itself; the splendour of the body of the being who has attained it; the miracle of light production that accompanies the Buddha’s teaching feat; the far-reaching, enduring propagation of the Dharma. The Matkanai relief broadly aligns with this iconographic tradition and, potentially, its metaphorical implications, but also exhibits notable variations: rather than resting on a podium, the solar disk is placed directly on the ground of a cave and, quite crucially, the right knee of the Buddha, seated in *padmāsana* and shown in three-quarter view, emerges from behind it. Although this feature has been noted in passing in relation to a few other reliefs,¹⁹ it has never been systematically explained. Below, we propose a rationale for its appearance in the Matkanai relief, without assuming its applicability to other instances.

The next variation is stylistic in nature and pertains to the motif of the sun disk itself. In other depictions, the solar disk is either plain, incised with a simple fillet, or carved with a saw-tooth motif that, in one case (**Fig. 2**), projects beyond the border. As noted above, at Matkanai, the disk field is plain, bordered by a simple fillet that creates a broad edge adorned with radiating, drop-shaped

¹⁸ The mādhyānic reading proposed by Quagliotti is set against the background of the Tibetan translation of the *Lalitavistara* as well as Verardi’s reading of the iconography. However, this text is much later than the period of Gandharan art. What is more, since the publication of her article, it has become clear that the *Puyao jing*, translated by *Dharmarakṣa in 308 and generally “considered to represent an early version of what later developed into the Sanskrit *Lalitavistara*” (TOURNIER and STRONG 2019: 23–24), is more relevant to the northwest Indian context. While I do not reject the possibility of a mādhyānic reading, I also see no necessity for it. The fact that Buddha Śākyamuni goes on to teach the Dharma after his awakening is not specific to a mādhyānic framework and common to mainstream Buddhist traditions.

¹⁹ These are fig. 5 and fig. 6 (both seen in the antiquarian market at Karachi), fig. 8 and fig. 9 (both in private collections in Japan and published by KURITA (1988: 254, fig. 768 and p. 240, fig. P 4–IX). Two of these were published by VERARDI (1988: pl. IVb and V). To these examples, one may add a relief from a private collection, published by KURITA (2003: vol. 2, no. 770), which illustrates the First Sermon as indicated by the two deer in front of the pedestal and the meditating monks. Instead of the solar disk or the more typical depiction of the Buddha in *abhāya-mudrā* or *dharmacakra-mudrā*, the relief features a variation of the *dharmacakra* motif: a *trīśūla* surmounted by a triple wheel. The knees of the Buddha, seated in *padmāsana*, emerge from behind this intricate emblem.



Fig. 7. Fragment of a bodhisattva statue, 15.5 x 14.5 x 8.4 cm, Matkanai, Dir Museum Chakdara (DMC 1998), © KPDOAM/DiGA. Public Domain.

sunbeams. Except for one relief published by QUAGLIOTTI (1991–1992: 94, fig. 6) – of unknown location and provenance, but likely from Swat – the closest parallels are found in statuary. More precisely, they appear on the nimbus of a couple of Buddha statues, precisely the head of a bodhisattva from Matkanai (**Fig. 7**) and a Buddha statue from Andan Dheri, a site located about 13 km to the north (**Fig. 8**), both preserved in the Dir Museum in Chakdara (DMC 1998 and DMC 001).²⁰ This specific treatment of the motif, with drop-shaped sunbeams, is not commonly found elsewhere in Gandhara, where nimbus designs are generally rather diverse.²¹ Outside Gandhara, the motif recalls the depiction of Sūrya on a railing from Bodhgayā dated to the 1st century BCE. There, the sun god is shown riding a chariot pulled by a quadriga, silhouetted against a large nimbus carved with radiating drop-shaped sunbeams, akin to the Gandharan examples (**Fig. 9**).²² I will return to the significance of the connection with the

²⁰ For DMC 1998 and DMC 001 see <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23824197> and <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23787835> respectively (accessed 27 June 2025). DANI (1968–1969a: 53, pl. 12).

²¹ See FACCENNA and FILIGENZI (2007: pl. 101 and pl. 108) for a typology and BAUTZE-PICRON (1990: 81–97) for an assessment of the Gandharan treatment of the nimbus and halo in the larger context of early South Asian representations of the Buddha.

²² One may also mention in this context, a statue of the Buddha possibly from Mathura in the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin (I 22) published in REVIRE (2016–2017: 4, fig. 1). It displays a similar sunbeam motif in the main field of the halo (instead of on the border).



Fig. 8. Buddha statue, 45 x 58 x 15.5 cm, Andan Dheri, Dir Museum Chakdara (DMC 001), © KPDOAM/DiGA. Public Domain.

sun god and this particular relief below; for now, the stylistic parallel is too distant to project onto our relief. Thus, given the seemingly localized points of comparison, we may cautiously suggest a localised iconographic convention in Swat.

We may add, in this context, that the sun disk from Matkanai was likely painted, as suggested by the traces of reddish pigment. These could be remnants of surface polychromy or the bole-like ochre sometimes applied before the gold



Fig. 9. Sūrya on a railing from Bodhgayā, Bodhgayā site museum, Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain.



Fig. 10. 3D model of the sculpture from Matkanai Dir Museum Chakdara (DMC 2036), © KPDOAM/DiGA. Public Domain.

leaves, as documented elsewhere in Gandhara.²³ Unfortunately, until chemical analysis is undertaken, we cannot determine the disk's original appearance or its intended effect, whether that of a red, fiery sun or a golden finish enhancing its brilliance.

The next feature that sets this relief from Matkanai aside is the technical contrivance with which the motif is treated. In other examples, the solar disk, with or without emerging knees, is carved in relatively low relief, generally seen in frontal view and sometimes in oblique. QUAGLIOTTI (1995–1996: 208) interprets this as “an optical adjustment [...] serving the purposes of perspective, and rendering the solar disk and its features easier to identify during the *prakaṣiṇa*”. On the Matkanai piece, this “optical adjustment” takes on a new dimension. The solar disk looks like a wheel or a plate, placed in front of the Buddha. The relief is deeply carved, causing the edge of the disk to protrude slightly, enough to align with the cave's entrance without fully obstructing it. The partial obstruction of the cave's opening draws the viewer in, inviting them to peer not only into the cave but also behind the solar disk itself, where the fully sculpted thigh complete with detailed folds of the *samghāti* emerges from the stone. To fully appreciate the technical *tour de force*, one may attempt to reconstruct the visual experience of the viewer. Assuming the relief was mounted on one of the stupa storeys, a devotee performing the *pradakṣiṇa* would initially see the solar disk obstructing the cave (**Fig. 10**). As they continued their circumambulation from right to left, they would progressively discern the Buddha's figure. The composition, together with its sophisticated technical execution, produces a dynamic effect: the Buddha is at first concealed and subsequently revealed. To put things differently, the visual strategy conveys the impression of a Buddha who is *hidden* rather than deliberately *withheld*.

The last feature distinguishing this relief from other treatments of the solar disk is the narrative context. Admittedly, the fragmentary condition of the piece complicates interpretation. Be that as it may, certain discernible details allow us to propose tentative hypotheses. The setting – a cave – evokes two narratives well attested in Gandharan art: the Visit of Indra to the Buddha and the Visit of the Sixteen Pārāyaṇa Ascetics. Each of these possibilities is examined on their own merits in the following section. And although, to anticipate any conclusion, we may not be able to determine the story with certainty, it can nonetheless be agreed that the Matkanai relief clearly expands the typological range outlined above. It may thus be identified as a new subcategory within Type I (i.e. solar disk in a narrative context): Type I.5, “Solar disk in visits scenes from the life of the Buddha.”

²³ See for instance the various studies on chemical analysis performed on samples of stone, stucco and clay sculptures published in PANNUZI et al. (2019: 40–81); BONADUCE et al. (2019: 82–89); ZAMINGA et al. (2019: 90–99); RAMASSO (2019: 164–173).

The relief's narrative context: Three possible visits in the life of the Buddha

Several episodes in the life of the Buddha depict encounters with figures bearing a water pot in an attitude of devotion. Such figures may include Brahma or ascetics, whether in contexts of the divine entreaty to preach the Dharma or in conversion narratives, such as episodes involving the Uruvilvā Kāśyapas. As for the cave setting, two episodes offer a reasonable basis for comparison with the Matkanai relief: Indra's Visit to the Buddha, usually known as the visit in the *Indraśailaguhā* and the episode of the Visit of the Sixteen Pārāyaṇa Ascetics. Beyond these, interpretation becomes speculative. In what follows, each hypothesis is considered on its own merits. I will suggest that the Matkanai relief may not represent the conventional *Indraśailaguhā* episode, but could instead correspond to a different episode in which Indra and Pañcaśikha visit the Buddha. This section thus situates the relief within the broader literary and visual traditions of each episode, not only to ascertain its iconography and stylistic affiliations, but also to establish a framework for understanding the potential function of the solar motif in each narrative tradition, as discussed in the final section.

The Visit of Indra to the Buddha

The Visit of Indra to the Buddha is popular in both literary and visual accounts. It is also referred to as the *Indraśailaguhā* episode, after its locus, varyingly named *Indasālaguhā/Indrasālaguhā* ("cave of the *ind[r]asāla* tree") or *Indraśailaguhā* ("Indra's rock cave").²⁴ The story, in its main lines, unfolds as follows: some time after the Buddha's awakening, Indra accompanied by the *gandharva* Pañcaśikha approaches the Buddha while he is absorbed in deep meditation in a cave. To draw the Buddha's attention, Pañcaśikha plays his harp. The Buddha eventually emerges from his meditative state and responds to Indra's inquiries. Despite its absence from major Sanskrit narrative texts such as the *Buddhacarita*, the *Mahāvastu*, the *Lalitavistara*, the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*, and the *Nidāna-kathā*, the episode survives in various Pāli,²⁵ Sanskrit,²⁶

²⁴ The etymology of the toponym found in Pāli and Sanskrit sources is discussed by Lüders and Waldschmidt in connection with the inscription *Idasalaguha* accompanying the illustration of Indra's Visit at Bharhut as well as Sanskrit manuscript fragments from Central Asia. Waldschmidt analyses the Pāli form *Indasālaguhā* and the Sanskrit variant *Indraśailaguhā*, suggesting that the former is an older form and posits that the Sanskrit form may be a later adaptation or misinterpretation. LÜDERS (1963: 109–110) and WALDSCHMIDT (1932: 61). For an overview of the etymology in Chinese sources see RHI (2024: 442, footnote 2).

²⁵ *Sakka-pañha Sutta*, *Dīghanikāya* no. 21, ed. RHYS DAVIDS and CARPENTER (1903: 253–289); trans. WALSH (1987: 221–234).

²⁶ *Śakraprasnasūtra*, Sanskrit manuscript fragments discovered in Turfan and Shorchuk; (WALDSCHMIDT et al. 1965: no. 581). These closely parallel the Chinese translation of the *Chang*

Tibetan,²⁷ and Chinese sources,²⁸ either recounted in full or alluded to.²⁹ It has been the subject of many scholarly studies, most recently by ANĀLAYO (2015) and RHI (2024).

The story of Indra's visit is one of the most frequently depicted episodes in Gandharan art, a popularity which is echoed in India, Central Asia and China.³⁰ In Gandhara, it is attested on at least fifty reliefs, although only about half of these are securely provenanced. The most famous examples and object of much scholarly attention are the large stele from Mamāne Dherī, Jauliāñ and Loriyān Tāngai (**Fig. 11**). Other specimen come from Chatpat (**Fig. 12**), Nīmogrām and Butkara I in Swat, Jamālgaṛhī, Thareli, Sikrī (**Fig. 13**), Takht-i-Bāhī in the Peshawar-Mardan Bassin, Jauliāñ and Dhārmaraḥikā around Taxila, as well as

ahan jing 長阿含經 (*Dīrghāgama*) and the *Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經 (*Madhyamāgama*), *infra*. To this, one may add the Mahāyāna *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka sūtra* (YAMADA 1968).

²⁷ While absent from the Tibetan translation of the *Lalitavistara*, an account of the episode is preserved in the Tibetan version of the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka sūtra* mentioned above. *'phags pa snying rje pad ma dkar po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*, trans. Jinamitra (from Kashmir), Surendrabodhi, Prajñāvarman, and six others (9th century), To. 112.

²⁸ *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經 (*Dīrghāgama*), *Shidi huanyin wen jing* 釋提桓因問經, trans. by Buddhayaśas and Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 in the early 5th century (T. I no. 1(14)62b28–66a3); *Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經 (*Madhyamāgama*), *Shiwen jing* 釋問經 (*Indraśakrapariprcchāsūtra*), trans. by Gautama Saṃghadeva in the late 4th century (T. I no. 26(134)632c27–638c4); *Dishi suowen jing* 帝釋所問經, trans. by Faxian 法賢 (11th century) (T. I no. 15 246b3–250c6); *Za baozang jing* 雜寶藏經, “Dishi wenshi yuan 帝釋問事緣” (*Samyuktaratnapīṭakasūtra*), trans. by Kimkārya and Tanyao in the middle of the 5th century (T. IV no. 203 476a17–478b8), trans. by WILLEMEN (1994: 144–154) and CHAVANNES (1934: 53–69); Faxian, *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan* (T. LI no. 2085), trans. DEEG (2005: 401–404); Xuanzang, *Datang xiyu ji* (T. LI 925a23–28), trans. BEAL (1884: vol. 2, 180). In addition to this group of texts which Rhi labels the *Sakka-paiṇha/Sakraprasna* group because of their close affinity with the Pāli *Sakka-paiṇha Sutta*, the author discusses three more texts which, as we will see, are determining for the interpretation of the Matkanai relief: the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* 太子瑞應本起經, trans. by Zhi Qian in the early 3rd century (T. III no. 185 479c17–480b1), the *Puyao jing* 普曜經, trans. by Dharmarakṣa in the early 4th century (T. III no. 186 527a25–528b10), and the *Beihua jing* 悲華經 (*Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka sūtra*), trans. by Dharmakṣema in the first half of the 5th century (T. XX no. 157).

²⁹ *Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經 (*Samyukta-āgama*), T. II no. 99 133b24–134a6, 144c20–145a7, 257a28–b14.

³⁰ Overviews of the various studies on visual representations are provided by ZIN (2023: 350–355) and RHI (2024: 444–446, 460–646). More specifically, for analyses of visual representations of the episode from ancient India, Gandhara and Afghanistan see: Bhārhut: LÜDERS (1963: pl. 40); Bodhgayā: COOMARASWAMY (1935b: pl. 48.1); Sāñcī: MARSHALL and FOUCHER (1940: vol. 2, 35b); Kanaganahalli: ZIN (2018: no. 13, 57–60, pl. 8); Mathura: SHARMA (1995: figs 61–64, 106, 169); Nāgārjunakoṇḍa: LONGHURST (1938: 48–49); Gandhara and Afghanistan: SOPER (1949a: 252–283; 1950: 63–85); TSUCHIYA (1986); AKIYAMA (1988); LI (2000); QUAGLIOTTI (2005: 271–291); FILIGENZI (2005: 93–111); NAKANISHI (2006). For studies dedicated to Kizil see: YAO (1997); LI (2000); ZHU (2009: 491–509); RHIE (2002); ZIN (2023: 344–384).

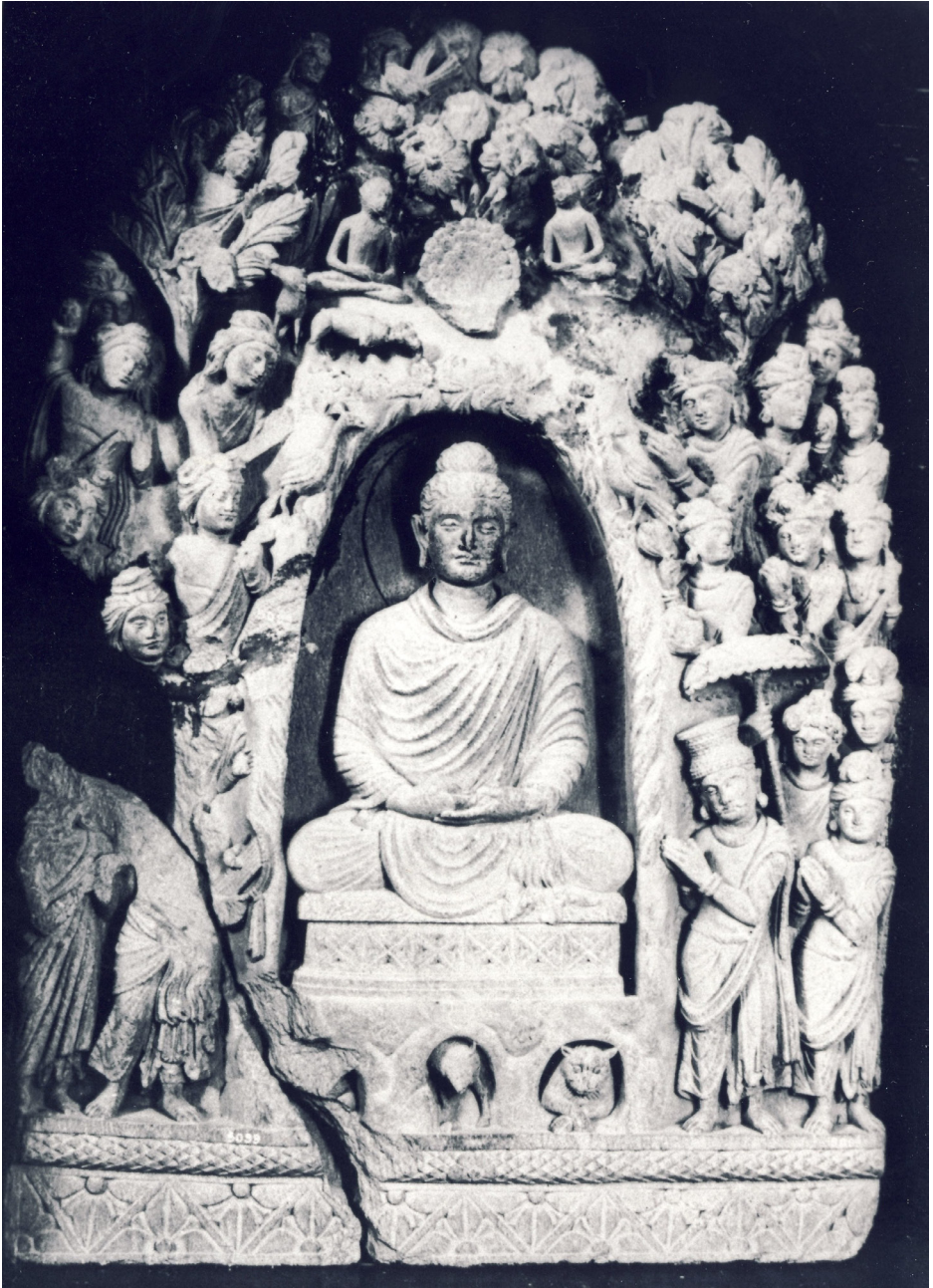


Fig. 11. The Visit of Indra, Loriyān Tāngai, H. 120 cm, Indian Museum, Kolkata (5099/12263/36), © Archives Francine Tissot, courtesy of Osmund Boparachchi. The CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.



Fig. 12. The Visit of Indra and the Mahāparinirvāṇa, Chatpat, 47.5 x 16.5 x 6.2 cm, Dir Museum, Chakdara (DMC 756), © KPDOAM/DiGA. Public Domain.

Shotorak and Guldara in Kāpisā.³¹ Altogether, this corpus provides a valuable sample of the various modes of representation of the episode from different regions of Gandhara and can serve as a basis to reconstruct the fragmented relief from Matkanai.

Unsurprisingly, the cave, the locus of the encounter, is a consistent feature across all representations. On the Matkanai relief, however, its treatment with stacked boulders, more closely resembles the depictions from Sikrī (**Fig. 13**) or Chatpat (**Fig. 12**),³² rather than those from Loryān Tāngai (**Fig. 11**) or Mamāne Dherī. In these examples, emphasis is placed on the lush natural environment of the Buddha's cave retreat, with the exterior populated with flora and fauna arranged in superposed registers, or, as in the fragment from Shotorak, signalled by the prominent presence of lions in the foreground. The flaming motif incised on the surface of the cave also finds parallels. It appears on the relief from Sikrī (**Fig. 13**), as well as on steles from Loryān Tāngai (**Fig. 11**) and Jauliāñ, though in these two cases, with notable variations in treatment: as flames bordering the rim of the cave. As Rhi remarks, this flaming element only occurs in a limited number of examples and likely symbolises the fiery radiance that the Buddha

³¹ Mamāne Dherī: von DRACHENFELS and LUCZANITS (2008: 232, no. 177); Jauliāñ: MARSHALL (1951: vol. 1, 384, vol. 2, 718–719, pl. 221); Loryān Tāngai: FOUCHER (1905–1951: vol. 1, 493, fig. 246); Chatpat: DANI (1968–1969b: 84, pl. 44b and p. 98, no. 117, pl. 60a); for an illustration see <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/detail/23789169> (accessed 15 July 2025); Nīmogrām: <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/N714QDPXQS7NT8B> (accessed 18 July 2025); Butkara I: FACCENNA (1962–1964: vol. II–2, 79, pl. 310a–310b); Jamāgarhī: ZWALF (1996: vol. 1, no. 220); Thareli: MIZUNO and HIGUCHI (1978: pl. 106, no. 1); Sikrī: von DRACHENFELS and LUCZANITS (2008: 223, no. 158), INGHOLT (1957: no. 129); Takht-i-Bāhī: INGHOLT (1957: no. 134); Dharmarājikā: MARSHALL (1951: vol. 1, no. 136); Shotorak: MEUNIE (1942: 63, no. 28, pl. 96); Guldara: FUSSMAN and LE BERRE (1976: p. 20, pl. 21, no. 23 and pl. 22, no. 24).

³² For other examples see ZWALF (1996: vol. 1, no. 219); SENGUPTA and DAS (1991: 27, no. 260); von DRACHENFELS and LUCZANITS (2008: 231, no. 175).



Fig. 13. The Visit of Indra, Sirkī, H. 33 cm, Lahore Museum, Lahore (5099/12263/36), © Archives Francine Tissot, courtesy of Osmund Bopearachchi. The CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

emitted during meditation. We should emphasise here, that the literary accounts diverge on this point. This is a nuance that Rhi seems to have overlooked, but one worth bearing in mind and we will return to its implications for the Matkanai motif below.

The pot discernible at the bottom right of the fragment is specific in form, featuring a protruding spout and grooves around its shoulder.³³ This is a *kunḍikā* (or *kunḍaka*), a water vessel. Though its presence might seem incidental at first glance, it is in fact crucial for the identification of the episode and for potentially linking it to a specific literary tradition. The *kunḍikā* is a cultic vessel commonly carried by ascetics, but it is also an attribute of Brahma. As generally understood, Brahma is not associated with Indra's visit; this is true, at least, of the *Indraśailaguhā* episode as recounted in the literary traditions referenced above, which Rhi classifies as the *Sakka-pañha*/*Śakraprasna* group, so named for their alignment with the *Sakka-pañha Sutta*. These texts identify Indra and Pañcaśikha as the Buddha's sole interlocutors. On this basis, there would be no apparent reason to attribute the water pot to Brahma, nor to assume that the now-lost right fragment once bore his image. Some literary accounts, however,

³³ Interestingly, a comparable type of vessel has been found in the archaeological assemblage of the nearby site of Barikot. For a discussion of its form and an overview of its typological precedents, see CALLIERI and OLIVIERI (2020: vol. 1, 175–176, vol. 2, pl. 2).

introduce a different scenario, or rather include an entirely different narrative, in which Brahma appears alongside Indra and Pañcaśikha in the context of a cave. These include the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing*, a text supposedly translated by Zhi Qian in the early 3rd century,³⁴ and the *Puyao jing*,³⁵ generally regarded as the Chinese translation of a textual precursor to the *Lalitavistara*, attributed to the early 4th century monk Dharmarakṣa (see fn. 18).

Rhi, who has carefully analysed these texts, has shown that their accounts of the encounter diverge significantly from the *Sakka-pañha/Śakrapraśna* group, with Brahma's participation representing only one among several discrepancies that together constitute a distinct narrative.³⁶ Both texts situate Indra's visit shortly after the Buddha's awakening, in a cave to which he has withdrawn after spending seven days by the pond of the *nāga* Mucalinda. The story is therefore set in the vicinity of Bodhgayā rather than in the *Indraśaila* cave near Rājagrha. There, in deep *samādhi*, he contemplates the roots of transmigration and hesitates to preach the Dharma, uncertain to find an audience capable of grasping its depth. Each text introduces its own nuances in recounting the subsequent events. The *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* reports that it is Brahma who first perceives the Buddha's hesitation, and dispatches Indra, accompanied by Pañcaśikha, to persuade the Buddha otherwise. The *Puyao jing*, by contrast, has Indra himself discern the Buddha's reluctance and approach him on his own initiative. In both accounts, however, it is ultimately Brahma who succeeds in convincing the Buddha to teach.

As Rhi highlights, the dialogue between the Buddha and his interlocutors does not resemble the doctrinal inquiry found the *Sakka-pañha/Śakrapraśna* group, but instead takes the form of an urgent plea for him to preach. In this respect, Pañcaśikha does not sing a song of love but performs song of supplication.³⁷

³⁴ T. III no. 185 479c17–480b1.

³⁵ T. III no. 186 527a25–528b10.

³⁶ The Mahāyāna *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka sūtra*, likely known in Gandhara, also seems to place the episode directly after the Buddha's enlightenment (RHI 2024: 457–458). Before Rhi, Huo had already drawn attention to these texts and emphasised their connection with the murals of Kucha depicting events shortly after the Buddha's enlightenment (HUO 1990; reprinted in 1994 and 2006). Unfortunately, these articles – written in Chinese – have remained largely unnoticed in Western scholarship. As Zin notes, although Huo does not explicitly mention the episode of Indra's visit, his analysis points in the right direction for identifying literary parallels with the Kucha paintings (ZIN 2023: 347).

³⁷ This alternative reading of the story, which centres on the “critical juncture in the emergence of a real Buddha” (RHI 2024: 445), offers a persuasive argument for understanding the popularity of the episode in Gandhara. Previously, the popularity of the episode was largely accounted by the inclusivist undertones of Indra's conversion (who becomes a stream-enterer in the Pāli version) and his humbling (see for instance ANĀLAYO 2015: 9–10). This idea was already supported by Soper, among others, although he emphasised that the episode's popularity also stemmed from the significance of the light symbolism it embodies, an imagery transmitted

As becomes clear, these variations establish a different narrative climax, one centered not on the articulation of doctrinal content, but on the dramatic tension over whether the Dharma will be communicated at all. The author rightly underscores that “the visit of Indra and Pañcaśikha is told here as part of another famous episode from the Buddha’s life, the Entreaty to Preach prior to the Buddha’s First Sermon”.³⁸ In this light, the attribution of the *kunḍika* to Brahma becomes more plausible. We may thus identify the Matkanai relief as a depiction of Indra’s Visit, understood as a prelude to the Gods Entreaty to Preach the Dharma and disambiguated from the *Indraśailaguhā* episode. This identification and the connection with the narrative tradition reflected by the two texts is supported by other evidence.

The history of the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* and the *Puyao jing* and their interrelationships, as analysed by RHI (2024: 451–453), is too complex to explore fully here. Nevertheless, the relevance of the *Puyao jing* to the Gandharan context has been demonstrated by several scholars. Salomon, Ducoeur and Rhi himself have drawn connections between the narrative tradition represented by this early Chinese translation of a precursor to the *Lalitavistara* and illustrations of the episodes of the Bodhisattva riding to school and the Buddha’s austerities.³⁹ The relief from Matkanai may thus bear witness to the circulation, in the south of the Swat valley, of a narrative tradition whose Indic original is now lost but preserved in the Chinese translation of the *Puyao jing*.

The existence of several Gandharan reliefs portraying Brahma in a cave setting may confirm the relevance of this narrative tradition. Rhi mentions a relief in the Chandigarh Museum and, tentatively, a relief from Giri which does not show Pañcaśikha, but the Buddha in a cave, flanked by Indra and Brahma.⁴⁰ To these examples, one may add a relief from the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin, which depicts Brahma – identifiable by his water pot, his ascetic hairstyle and his nimbus – kneeling to the left of the cave entrance.⁴¹ Unfortunately, the exact

from the West and reinforced by indigenous figure cults in ancient India (SOPER 1949a: 252–283). For an overview of different theses put forward to explain the popularity of the story in Kucha, see ZIN (2023: 347–353).

³⁸ Zin, who accepts Rhi’s interpretation for certain depictions of the encounter that include Brahma, draws attention to the reference to “an earlier meeting” in the *Indraśailaguhā* episode as preserved in the *Dīghanikāya*, Sanskrit fragments, and the Chinese *Dūrghāgama* and *Madhyāgama*. This would suggest that the narrative of Indra’s visit shortly after the enlightenment was already part of the canonical tradition (ZIN 2023: 347–353). For alternative explanations for the presence of Brahma in the paintings of Kucha see ZHU (2009: 491–509).

³⁹ SALOMON (1990: 255–273; 1993: 275–276); DUCŒUR (2014: 385–424); RHI (2006–2008: 156–183). For the general relevance of the *Puyao jing* to Gandhara see TOURNIER and STRONG (2019: 24–25).

⁴⁰ BHATTACHARYA (2002: no. 96) and von DRACHENFELS and LUCZANITS (2008: no. 176).

⁴¹ The relief (I 5813) is accessible online: <https://id.smb.museum/object/1713943/erz%C3%A4hlende-szene-fragment-der-g%C3%B6tterk%C3%B6nig-indra-besucht-den>

provenance of this piece remains unknown, but the greenish tint of the stone and the treatment of Brahma's drapery with uninterrupted lines suggest it was also produced in the Swat valley.

The literary tradition reflected by the *Puyao jing* and the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* may also help explain the Buddha's three-quarter view in the Matkanai relief (and possibly also in the Berlin piece), partially obscured by the cave. As noted above, in other depictions of the episode, the Buddha is typically shown frontally, seated in meditation. The posture in the Matkanai relief finds visual parallels in reliefs from Sikrī (Fig. 13), Chatpat (Fig. 11) and the relief in the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin,⁴² where the Buddha is oriented toward the cave's interior, seemingly turning his back on his interlocutor, Pañcaśikha. According to Rhi, this position may signal the Buddha's initial reluctance to teach, as recounted in both texts.

The connection between the Matkanai relief and the account preserved in these texts is significant not only for reconstructing the relief's narrative context, but also for informing our interpretation of the solar motif. These sources include a Visit of Indra and Pañcaśikha as a prelude to the Gods' Entreaty to Preach. If the *kundikā* depicted at the lower right of the Matkanai relief does indeed belong to Brahma, then the presence of the solar disk aligns with the typological scheme detailed in the first section and can be related to the Buddha's teaching feat.

The Visit of the Sixteen Pārāyaṇa Ascetics

While the interpretation proposed above appears plausible and could well suffice, there is good reason not to dismiss the alternative identification with the Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics. This episode also known as the Bāvāri legend, relates how sixteen ascetics are sent by their brahman teacher, Bāvāri, to seek out the Buddha during his residence in Śrāvastī, to inquire into the goal of his teaching and the path to its realisation. Each ascetic approaches the Buddha individually and, deeply impressed by his responses, converts to Buddhism and enters the monastic fold. Most famously, the story is preserved in Pāli, as part of the *Suttanipāta*, forming the content of the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta* ("The Chapter on the Way to the Far Shore").⁴³ The textual history of this *sūtra* is

-meditierenden-buddha-in-einer-h%C3%B6hle-indrashailaguha%3B-rankendekor-rechts (accessed 18 July 2025).

⁴² See also a relief in the Lahore Museum (GR-386/1401) (von DRACHENFELS and LUCZANITS 2008: no. 175), and a relief from Nīmogrām in the Swat Museum Saidu Sharif (NG313): <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AN7I4QDPXQS7NT8B> (accessed 15 July 2025); RHI (2024: 456, note 26).

⁴³ *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta*, *Suttanipāta* no. 5, 976–1149, ed. ANDERSEN and SMITH (1913: 190–223); trans. NORMAN (1992: 127–145). For a generally assessment of this *sūtra* see LAMOTTE (1958: 380–381, 775–782).

notably complex, not least due to the fragmentary nature of the manuscripts preserved.⁴⁴ Although the Pāli version is the only complete recension, individual verses, blocks of the text, approximate parallels, or synthesised versions are also preserved in Sanskrit,⁴⁵ as well as in Chinese⁴⁶ and Uyghur translations.⁴⁷ In what follows, we draw on these texts not in an attempt to identify the direct source of our illustration – the historical and geographic contexts of their production would preclude such a claim – but rather to sketch the literary backdrop of a story that was evidently popular. Evidence of its resonance in the Gandharan context is in fact provided by a Gāndhārī commentary on selected verses from the *Kṣudraka* section of an early Buddhist canon. As examined by Baums, this commentary discusses several verses from the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta* alongside verses drawn from at least two other source collections: an *Arthapada* and a *Dharmapada* or an *Udāna*.⁴⁸

That the story was known in Gandhara is confirmed by the extant representations, suggesting it enjoyed a certain degree of popularity. However, it appears to have had little iconographic resonance beyond Gandhara,⁴⁹ and its visual depictions have received comparatively less scholarly attention than those of Indra's

⁴⁴ Ines Koneczak-Nagel offers an insightful and comprehensive analysis of the legend in this volume, examining its etymology, the complex literary history of the narrative, and its connections to Maitreya as well as its reception in Kucha; readers should turn to her study for further details on the points addressed in my own article. See KONCZAK-NAGEL (2025).

⁴⁵ These are Sanskrit manuscripts from Turfan (SHT IV, no. 50; SHT VI, no. 1581 and no. 1582). SANDER and WALDSCHMIDT (1980: 236–238); WILLE and BECHERT (1989: 198–200). The questions of Ajita are also found quoted in works such as the *Yogācārabhūmi* (ENOMOTO 1989: 34).

⁴⁶ The *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經 (*Scripture of the Wise and the Foolish*), T. IV no. 202, 330a–491c, is the only known Chinese text to include any portion of the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta*. However, there is no evidence that the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga* was ever fully translated into Chinese (ZIEME 2003: 45), the *Xianyu jing* embeds the story of Bāvāri within a broader narrative concerning Maitreya. LÉVI (1925: 318–329) observed that this integration, linking the Bāvāri legend to the future Buddha Maitreya, finds its most developed expression in the *Maitreyasamitināṭaka*, a dramatic text structured into twenty-seven sections and devoted to the complete career of Maitreya. Fragments of this work, preserved in Tocharian, were edited by SIEG and SIEGLING (1921: nos. 212–216).

⁴⁷ These include Old Turkish fragments from the Turfan Collection, such as Mainz 700 (T III M 194), Mainz 699, U 1945 (T III M 184) + U 2028 + U 1188 (T III M 184), Mainz 707 (T III M 194), Mainz 757 (T III M 194), and U 1946a, b (T III M 184). For editions and translations of these fragments, as well as an overview of their textual parallels with Pāli, Sanskrit, and Chinese sources, see EHLERS (1982: 175–185); ZIEME (1997: 743–759; 2003: 31–47); WILKENS (2010: 40–41); and CENGİZ (2024: 2–16). Some of these materials are also likely part of the broader Maitreya legend.

⁴⁸ BAUMS (2009: 44, 302–306). More specifically, these are: the *Ajitamāṇavapucchā*, the *Mettaḡūmāṇavapucchā*, the *Jatukaṇṇimāṇavapucchā* and the *Posālamāṇavapucchā*.

⁴⁹ The story is depicted in Kucha, Kizil Cave 114 where it is likely connected with the broader narrative concerning Maitreya (ZIN 2023: 449, see also footnote 38).

visit, with Raducha's, Quagliotti's and Filigenzi's studies remaining, as far as I am aware, the most comprehensive to date.⁵⁰ In Gandhara, the episode is possibly attested on some thirty reliefs, roughly half of which stem from an archaeological context. This figure, however, must be treated with caution, as many of the documented specimens are fragmentary and depict only groups of ascetics, sometimes shown in interaction with the Buddha, at other times lacking the key narrative elements of the cave.⁵¹ Such fragments may illustrate a different episode altogether, such as the conversion of the Kāśyapas. The number of reliefs that can be securely identified as representations of the Bāvāri legend and that originate from a documented archaeological context is limited to six. These include the stele from Takht-i-Bāhī (**Fig. 14**), one relief from Chatpat (**Fig. 15**), two from Butkara I, and two from Nīmogrām (**Fig. 16**).⁵²

In these reliefs, the Buddha is typically depicted seated cross-legged in *padmāsana*, performing the *abhaya-mudrā*, a gesture commonly associated with teaching or dialogical encounters. He is flanked by two groups of ascetics, which, based on the surviving compositions, we can reasonably assume were originally arranged symmetrically around the cave. This cave retreat setting finds justification in literary sources, which mention that the ascetic brahmins had travelled long distances to meet the Buddha who was residing in the *pāsāṇaka cetiya* at the top of a mountain.⁵³

⁵⁰ Gandharan illustrations of the episode have been briefly addressed by SOPER (1949a: 258ff), FOUCHER (1905–1951: vol. 2, 255–257), ZWALF (1996: 222); RADUCHA (1985: 89–102); QUAGLIOTTI (2005: 271–291) and FILIGENZI (2005: 93–111).

⁵¹ This is for instance the case with the panel from Shotorak preserved in the British Museum (OA 1968.8): ZWALF (1996: no. 263); one in the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul (64.7.1): MEUNIE (1942: 26, 47–48, no. 155, pl. 8, 24 and pl. 19, 62); one from Tapa-i-Kafariha or Bagh-gai in the Guimet Museum (MG 3466): DAGENS (1964: 18, pl. IV–14); three from Saidu Sharif in the Swat Museum (S301, S326, S620): FACCENNA (2001: pl. 118, pl. 119, pl. 123); one from Chatpat (Dir Museum, Chakdara, DMC 507), see <https://heidicon.uni-heidelberg.de/detail/1748555> (accessed 14 July 2025); one from Matkanai (Dir Museum, Chakdara, DMC 2033): <https://heidicon.uni-heidelberg.de/detail/1719569> (accessed 14 July 2025).

⁵² Takht-i-Bāhī (Peshawar Museum, no. 1151a–c): INGHOLT (1957: no. 106); Butkara I (3444 and 4015, 1748): FACCENNA (1962–1964: vol. II–2, 29–30, pl. 92, pl. 93a, pl. 93b, pl. 94, pl. 95, pl. 96). Numbers 3444 and 4015 belong to the same relief; Chatpat (Dir Museum, Chakdara, DMC 558): DANI (1968–1969b: 98, pl. 60a); Nīmogrām (Swat Museum. Saidu Sharif, NG136): FACCENNA (2001: pl. 139b), see also NG448: <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/QYUOAVQBULNGQ85> (accessed 14 July 2025). Other examples from an unknown provenance include a relief in the British Museum (1917, 0501.2): ZWALF (1996: no. 222); a relief in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.81–1949): ACKERMAN (1975: 126–127, pl. LVa); one in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (no. 20 81.13, no. 8): SARLA D. NAGAR (1981: no. 8); two reliefs in the Museo delle Civiltà, Rome (no. 4772, Varia 668 and no. 4795 varia 720): QUAGLIOTTI (2005: II.6 and II.7).

⁵³ *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta*, 1013–1014; ed. ANDERSEN and SMITH (1913: 194–195), trans. NORMAN (1992: 130). A similar passage is attested in the Old Uyghur version: *paśanak t[agk]a* (Mainz 699, line 003) in CENGIZ (2024: 4–5).



Fig. 14. The Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics, Takht-i-Bāhī, H. 73 cm, Peshawar Museum, Peshawar (1151), after KURITA (2003: vol. 1, no. 440). The CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.



Fig. 15. The Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics, Chatpat, 41.7 x 15.2 x 5.1 cm, Dir Museum, Chakdara (DMC 558), © KPDOAM/DiGA. Public Domain.



Fig. 16. The Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics, Nīmogrām, 16.1 × 67.9 × 5 cm, Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif (NG136) © Raducha, Joan Anastasia, University of Wisconsin, <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/A4EGEL2EGHRSEW8M>. The CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

Several visual parallels to the depiction of the Buddha’s cave retreat on the Matkanai relief can be found in examples from Chatpat, Nīmogrām, and the piece housed in the British Museum, all of which feature similarly stylised boulder formations. These form a coherent iconographic group that is distinct from the stele at Takht-i-Bāhī, whose composition is identical to its counterpart depicting Indra’s Visit. The flame-like motif incised on the cave surface in the Matkanai relief may also find a visual analogue in a relief from the British Museum (**Fig. 17**), where “radiating patches”, interpreted by Zwalf as possible representations of vegetation, might alternatively be read as a fiery motif. Unfortunately, the state of preservation of the other examples does not permit a definitive assessment of whether similar motifs were originally present.

The ascetics approaching the Buddha are depicted at various ages, as suggested by their bodily features and hairstyles, and appear in diverse postures. Some join their hands in devotion, others lean on walking sticks or raise a hand to their forehead or head. All carry water pots similar to the one seen in the Matkanai relief. Notably, the positioning of the ascetics flanking the cave entrance in the reliefs from Nīmogrām, Chatpat, and the British Museum may clarify the presence of the water pot and shed light on the identity of the devotee in the Matkanai panel. These figures are shown kneeling in *añjali-mudrā* which may account for the presence of the water pot on the ground in our piece. In short, the central motif of the Matkanai relief could be transposed into any of these related compositions without disrupting the narrative coherence of the Bāvāri legend.

As for the luminous element so prominently featured in the Matkanai relief, possible resonances may be found in two other examples: another relief from Matkanai (**Fig. 18**) and a fragment from a private collection (HIRUMA 1986: no. 83). Although these omit the cave motif, they depict ascetics in attitudes of devotion before the Buddha. They show the Buddha performing the *abhaya-mudrā*, seated in *padmāsana* and standing respectively. In both instances, the Buddha is silhouetted against a full-body halo.



Fig. 17. The Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics, 4.7 x 20.7 x 27.6 cm, British Museum, London (1917,0501.2) © The Trustees of the British Museum / CC BY-SA 4.0. Public Domain.



Fig. 18. The Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics, Matkanai, 28.5 x 12.2 x 5.5 cm, Dir Museum, Chakdara (DMC 2033), © KPDOAM/DiGA. Public Domain.

At this point, the narrative identity of the Matkanai relief remains open to interpretation. On the one hand, there is enough contextual evidence to support either reading; on the other hand, the relief is too fragmentary to allow for the exclusion of one interpretation over the other. The hesitation, however, is not merely the result of its poor state of preservation. Indeed, the striking compositional affinities between the two episodes have been repeatedly noted and interpreted as symptomatic not only of a shared narrative scheme – a (group of) reverent(s) seeking council from the Buddha meditating in a cave – but also of a shared symbolism, related to light. This luminous dimension can be traced back to Soper, who links the motif of the Buddha in the cave to solar mythology, more specifically to the Mithraic tradition and its iconography.⁵⁴ In its essence, the solar analogy and the cultural permeation between the Buddhist and Iranian mythological and iconographic repertoires hinge on basic idea of “the enormous importance to mankind of the sun and of fire as powers of good” (SOPER 1950: 71). The composition therefore stages a conceptual metaphor in which light signifies knowledge and darkness stands for ignorance. Building on this interpretation, Quagliotti and Filigenzi have infused the compositions of the Visit of Indra (in their discussion, interpreted in the sense of the *Indrasailaguhā* episode) and the Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics with additional flavour.⁵⁵ The authors draw attention to iconographic details, especially armed figures flanking the cave, identified variously as Vajrapāṇi or Skanda/Kumāra/Kārttikeya, to support readings that remain complementary despite variation. They commonly interpret these deities either as protectors of the Buddha and the Dharma, concealed within the darkness of the cave and awaiting revelation, or as embodiments of lay virtues aligned with the pursuit of enlightenment. The presence of Skanda, traditionally considered to be an attendant of Sūrya, has further been taken to reinforce the solar resonance of the scene. To these authors, the basic solar metaphor of the Buddha as a radiant source of knowledge is thus extended to encompass notions of protection, revelation, and religious aspiration.

The polyvalence of the solar disk

While the preceding discussion has helped situate the motif within plausible narrative frameworks and hinted at its symbolic and metaphorical solar resonance, I believe there is still more to be extracted from the relief. In this section, I turn to literary traditions that resonate with the Matkanai scene, not to propose direct sources for its imagery, but to suggest that certain narrative turns and literary tropes reveal further dimensions embedded in the motif. This approach does not diverge radically from earlier interpretations, but rather offers a more nuanced, fine-grained reading of the solar disk and its layered

⁵⁴ SOPER (1949a: 252–283; 1950: 63–85).

⁵⁵ QUAGLIOTTI (2005: 271–291); FILIGENZI (2005: 93–111).

significance. In what follows, I examine each scenario, building on the visual and symbolic cues gathered thus far in our interpretive toolbox.

The light of samādhi

If the relief does depict the Visit of Indra and Pañcaśikha as a prelude to the Gods' Entreaty to Preach, it follows that the motif of the solar disk resonates with the interpretive framework proposed by Verardi and Quagliotti and may be understood as symbolising the irradiation of the soon-to-be-teaching Buddha. Yet the motif's full significance may extend beyond this initial reading, for the theme of light plays a significant role in the various literary versions of the episode. This aspect has been dealt with by Rhi but more systematically by ANĀLAYO (2015) as part of a broader effort to identify stages in the textual development of the Buddha's miraculous displays involving fire. All the versions consistently describe the emission of a great light. Whereas RHI (2024: 448) indiscriminately ascribes this to "the fiery light emanating from the Buddha in mediation [...] consistently present in the textual tradition", the sources diverge in the circumstances and origin of the miraculous phenomenon. A brief excursion into accounts from the *Sakka-pañha*/*Śakrapraśna* group is therefore appropriate, as it provides a contextual backdrop against which the specific account in the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* and the *Puyao jing* can be appreciated.

As Anālayo underlines, the radiance evoked in literary accounts is explicitly attributed to the *devas* themselves (namely Śakra, Pañcaśikha, and the Trayastriṃśa gods) in the *Sakka-pañha Sutta*, where it is said to arise "through the divine power of the gods" (*devānaṃ devānubhāvena*),⁵⁶ illuminating Mount Vediya upon their arrival. So intense is their radiance that local villagers believe it was on fire. This attribution is ambiguous or at best implicit in the Sanskrit version (WALDSCHMIDT 1932: 65–67), the *Zhong ahan jing* (T. I no. 26(134) 633a8–633a13), the *Dishi suowen jing* (T. I no. 15 246b21) and the *Za baozang jing* (T. IV no. 203 476a28, tale 407). The *Chang ahan jing*, the Chinese version of the *Dīrghāgama*, gives a different explanation. Here, the radiance of the mountain is also traced to the presence of the Buddha who was meditating:

At that time the Blessed One had entered concentration on fire and Mount Vediya completely appeared to be on fire. Then the country people, on seeing this, said to each other: "Due to the power of the Tathāgata and the devas, the Mount Vediya appears to be on fire".⁵⁷

(ANĀLAYO 2015: 13)

⁵⁶ *Sakka-pañha Sutta*, *Dīghanikāya* no. 21, ed. RHYS DAVIDS and CARPENTER (1903: 253–289); trans. WALSH (1987: 321–334).

⁵⁷ T. I no. 1(14) 62c10–62c14. The special place of this text has already been noted by CHAVANNES (1934: 55).

This, of course, resonates with reliefs such as the stele from Mamāne Dherī and Loriyān Tāṅgai mentioned above, which depict flames emerging from the Buddha's shoulders and/or carved on the rim of the cave. It is worth mentioning in this context, that in art historical terms the motif of fire constitutes an iconographic convention for representing meditation and the figure's absorbed state.⁵⁸ Applied to the relief from Matkanai, however, this interpretation would compel us to the uncomfortable conceptual leap of equating the light of the sun with that of fire.

The *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* and the *Puyao jing* offer a slightly different explanation for the emission of light, potentially more fruitful for interpreting the Matkanai motif. Both accounts report that, having pondered the possibility of preaching the Dharma and initially refraining from doing so, the Buddha entered deep meditation. At that moment, a radiance is said to have shone from his *ūrṇā*, illuminating the seven heavens or reaching “the Lord of the Gods”, as recounted in the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* and the *Puyao jing* respectively. Immediately thereafter, either Brahma (in the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing*) or Śakra (in the *Puyao jing*) perceives the Buddha's resolve to leave the world to its grim fate.⁵⁹ It is unclear whether a causal relationship should be inferred here, and whether it is this light that heralds the Buddha's regrettable intention. We can only speculate. The rest of the story is already familiar, but one final point may be worth mentioning: the motif of the illuminated seven heavens is echoed in Pañcaśikha's song, or, more accurately, his plea. In the *Puyao jing* the *gandharva* begs the Buddha to illuminate the seven heavens with radiance and fragrant virtues.

With this in mind, the solar disk may be interpreted as the radiance emanating from the Buddha as he sits in meditation, illuminating the seven heavens. In this instance, the solar disk may not primarily symbolise a quality of the Buddha or serve as a representation of *bodhi*, as suggested by Verardi, but may rather convey the visual manifestation of the light that radiates from him and, by metonymy, function as an alternative visual convention for depicting *samādhi*, that is, a metaphorical use of solar light to evoke the trance of meditative absorption.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ It must be said here, that Anālayo suggests that such imagery may have influenced the literary tradition of the *Dīrghāgama*, where “the metaphorical motif of the ‘fire of *samādhi*’ used in art would have supported the idea of a *samādhi*, which results in the visible appearance of fire as a phenomenon observable by those nearby, even if they themselves are not engaged in or proficient at meditative practice” (ANĀLAYO 2015: 19).

⁵⁹ T. 185.480a.3 and T. 186.527b.14.

⁶⁰ Of particular relevance here is the painting on the rear wall of the niche in Cave 63 at Kizil, which contains a depiction of the Visit of Indra. The composition features an elaborate nimbus and mandorla for the now lost statue of the Buddha, with two ornamented beams extending to the right and left from where the Buddha's *uṣṇiṣa* would have been. See ZIN (2023: 381). This raises the question of whether Kucha artists also attempted to render a similar event in the account of Indra's Visit.

This reading also helps explain the presence of emerging knees, as the light appears to emanate from the Buddha rather than merely standing in for him.

The light of the kinsman of the Sun

Should the Matkanai relief instead depict the legend of Bāvāri, the solar disk may assume a different, though still related, function. The emphasis on radiance finds an echo in passages from the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta*, where the Buddha is likened to the sun. When they reach the Buddha's retreat, the ascetics Ajita and Jatukaṇṇi gaze upon the Buddha who is described in the following terms:

1016. *Ajito addasa Sambuddhaṃ vītaraṃsi va bhāṇumaṃ
Candaṃ yathā pannarase pāripūriṃ upāgataṃ.*

1016. Ajita saw the fully-awakened one, like the sun with straight rays,⁶¹ like the moon come to fullness on the fifteenth day.

(trans. NORMAN 1992: 130)

1097. *Bhagavā hi kāme abhibhuyya iriyati
ādicco va paṭhaviṃ teji tejasā:
parittapañṇassa me bhūripañṇa
ācikkha dhammaṃ, yam ahaṃ vijañṇam
jātijarāya idha vippahānaṃ.*

1097. The Blessed One indeed dwells having overcome sensual pleasures, as the brilliant sun [overcomes] the earth by its brilliance. One of great wisdom, preach the doctrine to me who am of little wisdom, so that I may know the abandonment of birth and old age here.⁶²

(trans. NORMAN 1992: 139)

In the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta*, Ajita and Jatukaṇṇi compare the Buddha to the sun through two terms: *bhānu* and *ādicca* (Skt. *āditya*). Each potentially carries a distinct mythological and symbolic weight. The first may stress the radiant force of the natural phenomenon, which shines with “straight rays” (*vītaraṃsi*), while the second more directly evokes the personified god.⁶³ In these verses, solar imagery serves both to underscore the Buddha's radiant presence and to affirm his role as a dispeller of darkness and defilements. Although the Pāli account cannot be directly mapped onto the Gandharan relief, evidence preserved in the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Old Uyghur versions suggests that this literary trope, or at least the broader theme of blazing light, circulated beyond the Pāli tradition.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi has a different reading here – with “*Ce sataraṃsiva* (Be *sataraṃsiṃ va*)” – and translates “like the sun with hundred rays” (BODHI 2017: 326 and note 227, 1358).

⁶² *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta*, *Suttanipāta* no. 5, 1016 and 1097, ed. ANDERSEN and SMITH (1913: 195, 212).

⁶³ MONIER-WILLIAMS (1899: 137 and 751).

⁶⁴ In the Old Uyghur version, the brahmins, portrayed as an undifferentiated collective, gaze

This literary trope is well-established and permeates Buddhist literature. Throughout the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta*, as in many other Buddhist texts, the Buddha is time and again likened to the sun, variously named Sūrya, Āditya, or Virocana, through similes, metaphors, and epithets.⁶⁵ The broad semantic range and mythological connotations of these terms suggest that this association extends beyond the sun as an astral body to encompass its role as a divine embodiment of cosmic light and sovereignty, as celebrated in both Vedic and Purāṇic traditions. The entities and functions from which the Buddha derives his solar qualities, and the metaphorical logic underlying them, have been widely examined; it will suffice here to recall only the principal lines of reasoning.⁶⁶

At its most fundamental level, the sun casts light and dispels darkness. This natural function is conceptually mapped onto the Buddha, who illuminates the world with knowledge and dispels the darkness of ignorance. Thus, the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta* refers to him as “[t]he darkness-thruster [who] is seated alone, brilliant, that light-maker Gotama”.⁶⁷ Likewise, Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita* celebrates the Bodhisattva as “this sun of knowledge [who] will blaze forth in this world to dispel the darkness of delusion”.⁶⁸ In the *Divyāvadāna*, he outshines his enemies

upon “the perfectly wise divine Buddha, like the sun” (*kalu kūn*, Mainz 699, T II, line 15) [...] (CENGIZ 2024: 4–5). The surviving Sanskrit fragments contain traces of words such as *jvalita* and *jvalatī* (blazing, shining) or *tejasānvitā* (endowed with fiery energy), though they appear in contexts too fragmentary to allow detailed interpretation. The *Xianyu jing* takes a different turn and reports that the Buddha emits light when Maitreya and his companions approach and then wraps his tongue around his head or face and displays his penis. T. IV no. 202, 432b.13–436c.6.

⁶⁵ These entities, the multi-faceted concepts they encompass, and their associated cultic practices, have generated an extensive scholarship. For foundational studies see SRIVASTAVA (1972), STIETENCROON (1966), Lalita Prasad PANDEY (1971), Durgha Prasad PANDEY (1989) and GAIL (2001). For overviews, see WITZEL (2018) and GANSTEN (2018). For more recent reassessments in light of new documentation, see FRENGER (2001; 2005; 2020).

⁶⁶ The Buddha’s association with Sūrya and with solar deities more broadly, has been examined in both textual and material contexts, notably by SENART (1875: 504–507), COOMARASWAMY (1935a, 1935b), ROWLAND (1938), ROSENFELD (1967), BOPEARACHCHI (2021; 2022: 941–954). Particularly valuable for the present discussion are the contributions by Nicolas Revire and Marion Frenger. Revire, surveying a remarkably diverse range of sources, including the Pāli Nikāyas, hagiographic accounts of the Buddha’s life, Chinese and Tibetan translations and commentaries, as well as later Mahāyāna and Tantric materials, aims “to define precisely how the Buddha is said to relate to the sun, in one aspect or another” (REVIRE 2017: 143–156). By casting such a wide net, he compiles an illustrative catalogue of examples from which this study draws. FRENGER (2020), who approaches the question through early North Indian imagery of Sūrya and its integration within wider Buddhist visual programmes (rather than from the perspective of Buddhist imagery), provides an incisive synthesis of the conceptual logics underpinning these associations.

⁶⁷ *eko tamanud’ āsino jātimā so prabhaṅkaro, Gotamo bhūripaññāno, Gotamo bhūrimedhaso. Pārāyaṇa-vagga Sutta, Suttanipāta* no. 5, 1136, ed. ANDERSEN and SMITH (1913: 220); trans. NORMAN (1992: 144).

⁶⁸ *vihāya rājyaṃ viṣayeṣv anāsthasīvrāiḥ prayatnair adhigamya tattvam | jagaty ayaṃ*

through the radiance of his wisdom.⁶⁹ The sun is also endowed with a cosmic function: it imposes order upon the world, like a sovereign ruler, an authority derived from its role in generating the inexorable alternation of day and night. Within this symbolic framework, Siddhārtha Gautama also assumes sovereignty. Regardless of the destiny foreseen by the sages, whether as a spiritual guide or as a *cakravartin*, a universal monarch, his role is to ensure world order. By choosing to become a Buddha, he thereby affirms the universal scope of his message. In this respect, the *Mahāvastu* calls him “this Light of the world, the world’s Guide, he who is the foremost seer of the Śākyaans, kinsmen of the sun.”⁷⁰ This latter epithet adds yet another layer of the Buddha-sun connection, this time mythological. The phrase “kinsmen of the sun” (*ādityabandhu*), also found in *Pārāyana-vagga Sutta*,⁷¹ refers to the Śākya lineage, which Buddhist sources explicitly link to the legendary Ikṣvāku dynasty, itself said to originate from the solar deity.⁷²

This “Buddha-sun connection” manifests through multiple modes of expression, and it would be impossible to detail all the numerous instances of this equation. We may, however, focus on two particularly telling examples, beginning with early images of Sūrya and the Buddha from the Kushan and early Gupta periods from the region of Mathura. These depict both figures seated in *bhadrasāna*, wearing

mohatamo nihantum jvalisyati jñānamayo hi sūryaḥ || (*Buddhacarita* 1.69). “For quitting his realm, detached from pleasures, realizing the truth through arduous efforts, this sun of knowledge will blaze forth in this world to dispel the darkness of delusion” (ed. and trans. OLIVELLE 2008: 24–25). See also: *adbhutānām ca dharmānām viśuddhiḥ upalabhyate | tvām prāpya puruṣāditya tamontakaram acyutaḥ* || *Mahāvastu* I 175, ed. SENART (1882: 175); “O Man of Light, thanks to thee, the steadfast dispeller of darkness, the pure radiance of wondrous states is won” (trans. JONES 1949: 139).

⁶⁹ *tāvad avabhasate kṛmir yāvan nodayate divākaṛaḥ | virocana udgate tu vairavyārto bhavati na cāvabhāsate* || *tāvad avabhāsitam āsa tārkkikair yāvan noditavāms tathāgataḥ | sambuddhāvabhāsīte tu loke na tārkkiko bhāsate na cāsya śrāvakaḥ* || (*Divyāvadāna*, ed. COWELL and NEIL 1886: 352.2–353.2, 163). “The insects shine so long as the sun does not rise. Once the sun rises, the insects become confused and cease to shine. Similarly, these dialecticians (*tārkkika*) shone while the Tathāgata remained silent. However, once the perfect Buddha has shone in the world, the dialecticians and their *śrāvakas* keep silent” (trans. SKORUPSKI 2001: 44).

⁷⁰ *yatra te lokapadyotā āgatā bodhi prāpuṇe | krakucchando koṇākamuni kāśyapo ca mahāmuni* || *taṃ deśaṃ lokapadyoto upāgame lokanāyako | yo so vādityabandhūnām śākyaṇām paramo muniḥ* || (*Mahāvastu* II 302–303), ed. SENART (1890: 302–303). “Where those Lights of the world, Krakucchanda, Koṇākamuni, and the great seer Kaśyapa, came and achieved enlightenment. To that place has come this Light of the world, the world’s Guide, he who is the foremost seer of the śākyaans, kinsmen of the sun” (trans. JONES 1952: 284).

⁷¹ *Pārāyana-vagga Sutta*, *Suttanipāta* no. 5, 1128, ed. ANDERSEN and SMITH (1913: 219); trans. NORMAN (1992: 143).

⁷² In the *Pabbajjā Sutta* for instance, Siddhārtha Gautama tells king Bimbisāra that his family belongs to the “Ādicca” lineage. *Pabbajjā Sutta*, *Suttanipāta* no. 3.1.423, ed. ANDERSEN and SMITH (1913: 74); trans. NORMAN (1992: 51).

regal tunics with central decorative bands, and bearing a club or sword. Together, these are features modelled on Kushan royal portraiture. These iconographic parallels have been interpreted either as reflections of the genealogical connection between the Buddha and the sun, or as a token of their shared royal or cosmic authority, a theme for which Kushan portraiture is particularly apt.⁷³ The second example is the relief from Bodhgayā previously mentioned. The solar deity who is depicted riding his quadriga is carved onto a *vedikā* pillar near a scene of Siddhārtha's birth. This juxtaposition is one of several examples in which Sūrya is embedded within the broader visual programme of Buddhist sacred spaces.⁷⁴ Such representations may simultaneously honour the Buddha's solar descent and metaphorically evoke *bodhi*, conveyed through the symbolism of light. Such iconographic and compositional strategies, playing on visual analogy and visual proximity, reaffirm the solar dimension of the Buddha and the fundamentality of the connection. From this perspective, the solar motif from Matkanai may constitute another means of articulating the intimate connection between the Buddha and the sun. In this case, the Buddha, compared by his beholder to the radiant sun, literally assumes the form of the sun. The visual motif thereby transforms the metaphor into a tangible, perceptible reality. The Buddha's knees remain visible behind the disk, perhaps to preserve the human scale and posture of his seated body, maintaining the recognition of his corporeal form even as he is iconographically and metaphorically linked with the sun.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of visual and textual parallels, the fragmentary relief from Matkanai can most plausibly be interpreted as depicting one of two visits to the Buddha, either by Indra, Pañcaśikha and Brahma as a prelude to the Gods' Entreaty to Preach the Dharma, or by the Pārāyaṇa ascetics. Should one of these interpretations be preferred? Admittedly, given the popularity of the narrative cycle revolving around the First Sermon in Gandharan art, it is statistically more likely that the relief illustrates the former episode. The presence of a solar disk in this context would be consistent with the broader Gandharan visual tradition, which frequently associates this motif with scenes related to the Gods' Entreaty to Preach the Dharma and the Buddha's First Sermon. That said, the alternative interpretation cannot be entirely dismissed. Although the Visit of the Sixteen Pārāyaṇa Ascetics is less represented in the wider Gandharan corpus, it remains a coherent reading. Moreover, the collection of the Dir Museum has yielded

⁷³ REVIRE (2016–2017: 3–14); FRENGER (2020: 400–402). This system of iconographic and symbolic correspondence fostered by the Kushan's proclivity for solar imagery which fitted well into their concept of divine kingship (van LOHUIZEN-de LEEUW 1989: 78).

⁷⁴ COOMARASWAMY (1935b); LEOSKO (1991: 230–234); FRENGER (2020: 402–404). For similar examples from Bhāja, Bhārhut, Mathura, Gandhara or Bāmiyān see SRINIVASAN (1992: 41); Shanti Lal NAGAR (1995: 151); BOPEARACHCHI (2021; 2022: 941–954); BAUSCH (2025: 311–323).

a high number of reliefs from Chatpat and Andan Dheri⁷⁵ featuring rows of ascetics, suggesting that this episode may have enjoyed greater regional popularity on the right bank of the Swat River. In the absence of the missing fragments, however, a definitive identification remains elusive.

Though fragmentary, the Matkanai relief offers a window into the conceptual and artistic strategies through which early Gandharan sculptors articulated the Buddha's supra-human nature. As this study has demonstrated, the motif of the solar disk cannot be reduced to a single function. Rather, it operates within overlapping value systems, narrative, symbolic, and metaphorical. It may be interpreted as a manifestation of the radiance of the liberated Buddha's body, as a symbol of *bodhi*, or as the light of Dharma radiating at the moment of teaching. When considered in the context of the two narrative episodes, the solar disk also signifies the luminosity emitted by the Buddha in *samādhi*, heralding his imminent teaching act. At the same time, it may be read as the materialisation of a literary trope that recurs in the *Pārāyana-vagga Sutta* and permeates Buddhist texts that explicitly liken the Buddha to the sun, a connection that the stylistic treatment of the disk in the Matkanai relief, with its straight, radiant rays, reifies. Ultimately, these various interpretations may be understood as different facets of the same prism, each building upon a fundamental conceptual mapping between the Buddha, the Dharma, knowledge, liberation and light. While solar imagery carries an undeniably powerful semantic charge in this regard, the Buddha's mythological association with solar deities further strengthens the foundational logic of this Buddha-sun connection.

Needless to say, the meanings ascribed to the solar disk are shaped, to some extent, by the narrative tradition in which the motif is embedded. The range of these associations may thus be narrowed or redirected depending on the narrative context. Still, the interpretive conundrum that the Matkanai relief constitutes, an equation with multiple unknowns so to say, also serve as a productive heuristic device in this respect. It reveals the interpretive processes that can potentially unfold as the viewer encounters the Buddha behind the solar disk. The motif condenses layered meanings which can trigger a network of metaphorical and symbolic associations. These are channelled and shaped by the viewer's familiarity with literary sources, narrative conventions, theological discourses and mythological frameworks. While not all viewers may have grasped every layer of meaning, it is likely that some did. In this sense, the motif's very ambiguity, its resistance to fixed iconographic categorisation and its detachment from full bodily representation, grants it a polyvalence that is particularly effective for staging the Buddha's presence. Through its tactile immediacy and spatial emplacement within the darkness

⁷⁵ A number of relevant examples are catalogued in the DiGA database. These can be retrieved through a "ascetics" keyword search. <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/pool/diga>.

of the cave, this visual strategy renders the Buddha's luminous nature both perceptible and tangible.

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Abbreviations

DiGA	Digitization of Gandharan Artefacts Project: A Project for the Preservation and the Study of Gandharan Art from Pakistan, see https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/pool/diga (accessed 18 July 2025).
DMC	Dir Museum in Chakdara.
IsMEO	Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.
ISMEO	Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente.
KPDOAM	Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
SHT	<i>Sanskrit-Handschriften aus den Turfanfunden</i> .
Skt.	Sanskrit.
T.	<i>Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō</i> . Ed.: TAKAKUSU and WATANABE (1924–1934).

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