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## Sculpture. a. Ancient Period

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► **To cite this version:**

Claudine Bautze-Picron. Sculpture. a. Ancient Period. Lala Rukh Selim. Fine Arts and Crafts, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, pp.91-109, 2007, Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Project. hal-00586441

**HAL Id: hal-00586441**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00586441>**

Submitted on 15 Apr 2011

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The following paper has been published as “Sculpture. a. Ancient Period”, in: *Fine Arts and Crafts*, ed. Prof. LALA RUKH SELIM, volume of the “Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Project”, ed. by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007, pp. 91-109.

## **The Sculpture of Bengal, a stylistic History from the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC till the 12<sup>th</sup> c. AD**

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### Introduction

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### **Introduction**

Bengal comprehends a vast area which includes Bangladesh and the Indian State of West Bengal. It is located at the fringe of the Indian Subcontinent and constitutes a transitory region between the Subcontinent and peninsular Southeast Asia. This geographical position would also prove to be nodal in the organisation of trade with insular Southeast Asia and the diffusion of Buddhism and Brahmanism towards the South Sea from the regions of Chandraketurah/Tamluk and Comilla/Chittagong, whereas North Bengal would hold a fundamental situation in channelling the Buddhist path towards the Himalayas. Considering the artistic production of the region in remote times implies to set aside the contemporary borders: two large cultural and political areas were indeed centred, the first one, on North Bengal, initially around Mahasthan, then shifting in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. towards Paharpur, then further westwards and spreading till recovering the entire or large parts of the contemporary districts of Bogra, Dinajpur, and Rajshahi (Rajshahi division) on the Bangladeshi side, West Dinajpur and Malda (West Bengal) on the Indian side, and the second one, on Southeast Bengal where it spread from the region of Dhaka to Comilla, including early sites on the Lalmai-Mainamati ridge and the later capital of Vikrapamura and its area – thus parts of the Chittagong and Dhaka divisions (Comilla, Munshiganj and Dhaka districts essentially).

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The stylistic development of the sculpture in the region is utmost intricate due to the fact that various media were used, which relate, each of them, to specific ritualistic functions or to particular location within the architectural structure. Due to the rich production of images, it is, however, possible to draw the main lines of the stylistic development, enhancing regional particularities, and encompassing stone as well as terracotta, cast images, and wood carvings.

In the particular context of the religious sculpture in the Delta till c. 1200 AD, style reflects the consensus reached in the representation of particular topics (iconography) through specific physical forms (real or fantastic) and a particular choice of motifs (ornamentation). As such, it is similar to an ever-changing river: iconographic topics are innumerable, the proportions of the physical forms are variable, the choice of motifs changes, and the treatment of those motifs undergoes deep modifications. Iconography is, moreover, not the only way to look at religious images; it does definitely help in identifying, but identification alone is not sufficient in explaining – or trying to explain – the reasons behind specific forms. In short, an image of any god can be, at the level of iconography, identical in the 8<sup>th</sup> and in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. However, the artists of the 8<sup>th</sup> and of 12<sup>th</sup> c. imbued their images with a different perception of the nature of the deity. Within a sculpture, it is not only the central deity who is the object of the worship, but the complete composition which has for function to illustrate the divine nature. Therefore, a proper iconological study should also involve stylistic considerations since the forms of the motifs, as much as these motifs, create a very specific impact on the mind of the viewer.

Images having been produced within the context of the Buddhist monastery and Brahmanical temple, it would appear that these institutions could be made responsible for the style and its variations. Nonetheless, other criteria should be taken into consideration; as a matter of fact, the high concentration of artistic remains in rather well defined regions coincides with the existence of political centres in those regions.

In addition to being a major Buddhist settlement where more than fifty Buddhist monuments had been built from the 7<sup>th</sup> c. and onwards, the Lalmai-Mainamati ridge, in Comilla district, was located within the country of Samatata, or Pattikerā as the region seems also to have been known from the 8<sup>th</sup> c. Also known as Devaparvata, the hill was

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probably never retained as one of the political capitals of the Khaḍgas and Candras.<sup>1</sup> But, the Khaḍgas, with their capital moving within the region, and the Candras, with their capital located at Vikramapura, probably viewed the site as a divine hill, hence its name “Mountain of the Gods”; perhaps related to the royal power, the hill might have been the place where rituals could have taken place at the time of enthronement.<sup>2</sup> Vikramapura, in ancient Vaṅga, located in Munshiganj district, south of Dhaka, was retained as capital by the Candras, the Varmans and the Senas; Varendra in North Bengal was the home-land of the Pālas. The map, moreover, shows how the Lalmai-Mainamati ridge was located on the road coming from the West, and going southwards to Chittagong and Myanmar whereas Vikramapura’s region is positioned at the confluence of the Padma (Ganga) and Meghna.

Varendra spread practically along the left bank of Ganga before the river enters the Delta, and was limited in the East by the Brahmaputra; while being on the most-eastern part of the Indian Peninsula, it opens the way towards Peninsular Southeast Asia and China, as well as to Tibet and south-Himalayan states. It is thus likely that these were regions very actively involved in trading, which might account for the material richness which the abundant artistic production lets surmise. Political power has permanently undergone deep modification, borders of states changed practically permanently, some dynasties ruled over centuries, some only a few decades.<sup>3</sup> The political power, i.e. the rulers, has been but only loosely related, and this in an indirect way, to the artistic production: strictly speaking, we only know of one image actually donated by a member of a royal family, i.e. the now lost “Sarvānī” offered by Prabhāvatī, wife of Devakhaḍga, in the latter half of the 7<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>4</sup> The king did not exert his patronage at this level but in supervising the donation of land or revenue from land for the upkeep of the religious institution.

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<sup>1</sup> A very clear presentation of the available information has been recently published by Abu Imam (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Such rituals are evoked by Xuanzang in relation to a hill located near Gaya in Bihar (Beal n.d., 2, p. 113), they relate evidently to the Southeast Asian concept of the “temple mountain”, where a temple is actually built as image of Mount Meru, centre of the universe and of the kingdom; moreover, Mount Meru, being also the centre of the Buddhist cosmology, the Buddhist themselves might have been involved in such rituals. Only one Brahmanical temple has been traced on the hill whereas nearly fifty Buddhist sites have been listed: this reminds of the situation in Pagan, where only one Brahmanical temple, the Nāt-hlaung, had been erected within the precincts of the old city, being most probably used for rituals at the time of enthronement.

<sup>3</sup> For a good summary of the historical and geographical background, see Biswas 1995, pp. 11-26.

<sup>4</sup> Biswas 1995, pp. 16-17. The Sarvānī is illustrated by: Huntington 1984, fig. 26 (& p. 205); Biswas 1995, pl. 2; Mitra 1979, fig. 61

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The artistic production basically results from the association of three categories of individuals, i.e. the donor, financing the production – usually, but not always, a member of the lay society –, the religious, monk or priest – representing the institution to which the image could be presented and possessing the iconographic knowledge –, and the artist whose work is unfortunately too often disregarded although he occupies the nodal position in the production of the images, being responsible for the proper rendering of the iconography, the quality of the carving and the aesthetic achievement.

The Brahmanical temple and the Buddhist monastery exemplified two radically different perceptions of the place of man within the society, and of what the society should or could be. This context of opposition must have become very acute during the mediaeval period and found its most evident expression in the artistic production. Although its position within the society got more and more limited, the Buddhist monastery betrays a very dynamic creativity; images which are then manufactured often reproduce extremely complicated iconographies, particularly when cast. The representations of Bodhisattvas are to be understood as positioned within a maṇḍala which is referred to through the presence of the five Buddhas of space carved in the upper part of the sculpture. Maṇḍalas were also illustrated either through a group of small independent cast images or through three-dimensional compositions (fig. 24). The concept of the maṇḍala turns out to be fundamental because it coincides with the conquest of the universe which Buddhism was trying to achieve at a spiritual level but within the limit of the monastery whereas Brahmanism was gaining the upper hand within the society.

Cosmology did not only creep into Buddhist art, but is also present in the composition of Brahmanical images. Thus, images of Sūrya and of Viṣṇu from Southeast Bengal were often, in the 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> c. images of the cosmos: tiny images of the god himself or of series of gods are distributed on the back-slab (figs 12, 13, 15, 16). Such images evoke simultaneously an impression of peace, calm and power because the eye perceives them comprehensively. On the contrary, those integrating the animals that are symbolic of the elements reflect a dynamics of the composition which is itself symbolic of the creativity borne out by the god, but which also imposes a more intricate reading.

Such spiritual and social choices found their path not only in the subject matters to be depicted but also in the way of rendering them. The most commonly met with image

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all through Bengal from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the early 13<sup>th</sup> c. shows the deity carved in high-relief in front of a back-slab which is carved in low-relief: the opposition reflects the complementary nature of the relationship between the religious institution (be it Buddhist or Brahmanical) and the society or the world around it. The deity is at the very centre of the image, occupies most of the space (height, width and depth); it is showing itself and can be attended by characters who are smaller. The tiny human worshippers – who are also those who financed the production of the images – are located at the lowest, i.e. least pure, level of the composition, being at the threshold with the earth. Through their attitude – kneeling, turned towards the deity above them – they draw the world to which they belong into the image, unless this world is to be understood as being a prolongation of the divine nature. Such a perception is made visible at the level of the back-slab which integrates a symbolic representation of the four elements arising out of the deity; through them, the world comes to realisation. Thus the image functions as a dynamic place of exchange between the divine nature and the humans (or the religious institution and the lay society), at the same time that it reflects the divine nature and its creativity which is the place where gods can be properly experimented and which is also the place where the humans can locate themselves.

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Clay has been the most commonly medium used in Bengal where religious monuments have been traditionally built in bricks till a recent period. It has been used till today for the production of items of daily use, but from an early period, around the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. B.C. already, it is evident that a distinction must have been introduced among craftsmen, some specializing in the production of iconic and narrative images found till the Mediaeval period. The Brahmanical narrative images of the Gupta period were most probably distributed within niches on the outer walls of the temple, leading the way to the architectural ornamentation noticed from the 8<sup>th</sup> c. and onwards on the walls of four-sided Buddhist temples.

From the 8<sup>th</sup> till the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> c., the development of Brahmanical orthodoxy led to the massive introduction of stone images, of various sizes, in North as well as, in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c., Southeast Bengal; rarer are the images collected in West and South Bengal. Those images were worshipped within the precinct of temples, in open spaces, below trees, or in private shrines, as it is still the case nowadays in India. The artistic development finds its origins in the art of Magadha, and the stylistic and iconographic

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evolution of the two countries, Bengal and Bihar, will remain parallel and interfere in each other all through the centuries. However, from the 9<sup>th</sup> c. and onwards – more particularly in the 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> c., North Bengal becomes a Brahmanical stronghold exerting its influence towards Southeast Bengal, i.e. the region of Vikramapura, south of Dhaka; and beyond the borders, Bengali Brahmins will hold major position in the royal priesthood of Burma and Cambodia.

Simultaneously, images were cast in various metals. The lost due to history is here extremely heavy since disregarded images were simply melted down and their metal used for items of daily use. But what has been recovered proves how accomplished the artists were. Large lots of mainly Buddhist images, dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c. were collected in Mainamati and the region; other ones, of a later period were found at Mahasthan, or, isolated, all through the Delta; similarly, major groups of Brahmanical icons of the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c. were collected in North and West Bengal.

A further category of images should be mentioned: sculptors were also actively engaged in the architectural ornamentation. Monuments built in bricks prior to 1200 have unfortunately either disappeared or heavily suffered from damages let by history. Beside the terracotta plaques distributed in niches in their lower level, they must have been richly decorated with stuccoes, such as those which survived at the Siddheshvara temple, Bahulara in Bankura district (West Bengal, India).<sup>5</sup> Their art was also used in the carving of architectural elements in stone such as porticoes, door-frames, pillars, and gargoyles which were mostly discovered in North Bengal.<sup>6</sup> It survived within the construction of Muslim monuments in the 13<sup>th</sup> c., applying, as a matter of fact, very elegantly the proscription of images: figurative images, though preserving their outlines, were transformed into flowers incorporated within arabesques (fig. 37).<sup>7</sup>

The Buddhist community was present in the different regions of the Delta, and it is highly possible that the diffusion of Buddhism (and Jinism) at an early period opened the ways for the development of Brahmanical religious orthodoxy from the Gupta period

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<sup>5</sup> Bautze 1999, pls 19-23 & pp. 365-9.

<sup>6</sup> Bautze-Picron 1998, cat. 282 & pp. 14 notes 75-76, 105 notes 22-24, 106 notes 31-32.

<sup>7</sup> Banerji 1999 considers that the mihrabs in the Adina Mosque, Pandua, have been elaborated by re-using “late Pāla-Sena remains”; this might be true in some cases, but the author observes (p. 213 concerning fig. 14) that the upper part of what should be a monstrous face has been partly replaced by a triangular element consisting completely of foliated scrolls; now, the two halves match each other perfectly and it is highly probable that the whole composition was carved by the same artist(s). For a presentation of architectural stone carvings in Bihar and Bengal, see Bautze-Picron 1998, pp. 14-15 & 104-13.

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and onwards. Buddhist settlements became also after the 8<sup>th</sup> c. places of passage for monks travelling from Burma to Magadha, or between Burma and the northern region, Nepal and Tibet. The distribution of artistic material is highly uneven: late, i.e. 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c., stone images were found in North Bengal, isolated images in stone were recovered around or in the major settlements of Mahasthan or Mainamati. Earlier large cast images, often damaged, were similarly recovered at Paharpur and Mainamati; they were aimed at being worshiped within a sanctuary whereas numerous small images (but not as numerous as those discovered in Bihar) had been probably produced for use by monks in their private worship and meditation.

## **A. Stone images**

### **a. North Bengal**

Being at the extreme eastern limit of the Indian Subcontinent, Bengal was apparently only slowly integrated within the cultural Brahmanical mainstream. Although scattered information bears on the presence of Jainism and Buddhism in North Bengal before the Christian era, no artistic evidence of their presence has been so far collected in the region;<sup>8</sup> in the Kushan and Gupta periods, stone images were apparently imported from North Indian sites: a Kushan broken image of the Buddha was collected at Chandraketurgarh, two 5<sup>th</sup> c. images of the Buddha were imported from Sarnath to Mahasthangarh.<sup>9</sup> It is possibly also within the frame of Buddhism that the presence of a broken Skanda image at Mahasthangarh can be explained, dating back to the Kushan or even early Gupta period perhaps.<sup>10</sup> Some depictions of Viṣṇu and Sūrya collected in North Bengal, belong to this rather long period (from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> c.), but they remain isolated testimonies and reproduce iconographic and stylistic models known from the

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<sup>8</sup> Gill 2002, pp. 45-46 where the rare elements of evidence are listed (conflict between Jains and Buddhists in the Mauryan period; 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC inscriptions on the vedikā of the main stūpa of Sanchi, of pilgrims hailing from Pundravardhana; terracottas in “Mauryan” and “Sunga” styles discovered in Bengal; ceramics stamped with “Buddhist” (?) prophylactic symbols, from the early centuries of our era, found at Mahasthangarh).

<sup>9</sup> Gill 2002, pp. 41-51 & figs 1-2 concerning the Buddha found at Mahasthan where it is kept in the site museum, and notes 11 for the Buddha found at Biharail, Rajshahi District and now kept at the Varendra Research Museum, and 33 for the Kushan fragmentary image preserved in the Asutosh Museum (add to it: Saraswati 1962, pl. I.1, Sengupta 1993, pl.5).

<sup>10</sup> Saraswati 1962, pl. I.3 & pp. 11-12; Asher 1980, pl.3 & p. 11 for discussion of the date; Shamsul Alam 1985, pp. 47-48.



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region of Mathura.<sup>11</sup> And thus, it is only from the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. that a continuous development can be followed as far as Buddhist and Brahmanical images cast or carved in stone or terracotta are concerned: Jain images will remain utmost rare.

The first consistent group of images are those inserted in the basis of the Paharpur monument, probably dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup> c. (fig. 1)<sup>12</sup> That iconography has its impact on stylistic issues in imposing rules of composition and specific treatments of the physical features is clearly made visible here. Standing in a frontal position, the god occupies the largest part of the space; the head is square, the eyes are narrow with lids heavily incised and slope upwards towards the temples, eye-brows are strongly marked, the lips are thick and slightly smiling; the shoulders are broad, the limbs heavy but the shapes of the body follow a harmonious line, with a rather narrow waist. Practically no movement is shown; only the required gestures of hands or a slight bending of the body introduce a slight tension within this static composition. The god wears a short or longer skirt, rarely a shawl. This rather ascetic and strict perception of the god disappears, however, behind the extreme care paid to the illustration of elements, i.e. the head-dress and the jewellery, which allow recognizing the divine nature illustrated by those sculptures. Carved in high relief on a flat and unadorned background which is practically completely covered by them, these images breathe peace and power; emerging from the dark niche, their body would have been lightly touched by the light were they not have been at a certain moment buried underground. The frontal view, the utmost attention paid to the ornamentation, the opposition between background and image are permanent elements of the icon which will be preserved all through the centuries.

Parallel to this group, a series of narrative relieves was also distributed in the basement of the monument, most of them related to the saga of Kṛṣṇa (fig. 32). As expected from this type of sculpture, they display much more freedom in their composition, the god is not necessarily shown frontally, but can be profiled and is always engaged in an action. Certain panels retain compositional features noticed above, but in most of them, the narration of the tale proves to be more important than the isolated

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<sup>11</sup> 1) Viṣṇu: Saraswati 1962, pl. I.4; Asher 1980, pl. 12 & p. 21 (4<sup>th</sup> c. AD); 2) Viṣṇu: Asher 1980, pl. 37 & p. 32 (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. at the earliest); Shamsul Alam 1985, fig. 1 & p. 48 (2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD); 3) Sūrya: Asher 1980, pl. 14 & p.21 (4<sup>th</sup> c. AD).

<sup>12</sup> Asher 1980, pp. 92-93 for a discussion and a summary of previous studies concerned with this group of 63 images.

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depiction of the hero. Artists illustrated here in stone what was already since the 5<sup>th</sup> c. commonly reproduced in terra-cotta, but whereas terra-cotta allows to higher achievements in narrative depiction, stone is harder to work, this might explain the less elegant and perhaps naïve, if not coarse carving of some panels.

This group testifies to the existence of a major atelier in the area, even it was made up only for the time of fulfilling a specific contract. A small group of images (figs 2-3) found in the area of Mahasthangarh displays similar features, i.e. heavy features, square face, narrow waist. However, much of the back-slab is not covered by the deity, and the remaining surface is carved with iconographic motifs which have for function to reflect the power of creation of the deity, or illustrate features of his/her divine nature. The image of the deity is shown in high relief whereas the ornamentation on the back-slab will always be carved in low relief, constituting an elaborate scenery from where the deity emerges; as a matter of fact, such a composition will be preserved till the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> c.

The development remained indeed continuous in North Bengal where the production became one of the most important in North India, beside the fact that numerous major and minor iconographic types were illustrated: this situation reflects the importance of Brahmanical orthodoxy in the region, from where it would exert its influence in Southeast Bengal. Images of the 9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> c. still illustrate the fullness of the body shown at Paharpur (figs 4-5). Some of these images present so strong similarities with the production of Magadha, in particularly of Nalanda, that we cannot exclude the possibility that either images or artists travelled all the way from Bihar to North Bengal. The forms are generous and well proportionate, the lines are soft and elegant, the deities are shown in high relief on a plain back-slab, their head surrounded by a nimbus whereas flames run along the edge of the back-slab; although they display an extreme restraint in the attitude, the smile which hovers on their lips reflects their awareness of the devotees' presence and makes them accessible – the gods do not speak, but smile. The human worshippers are depicted at the lowest level of the image, on the front surface of the enlarged pedestal which sustains the gods; this pedestal includes also the vehicle of the god and the image of the lotus, image of the purity and of the water out of which all creation arose. The jewellery turns to be more sophisticated, carefully detailed; an elaborate pendant hangs between the legs, attached to the main girdle; girdles fall in

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concentric bows on the upper part of the legs; a triangular floweret adorn the armlet; a string of pearls runs parallel to the main necklace, etc. An image which should be the perfect reflect of the divine nature emerges.

In the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> and in the 11<sup>th</sup> c. this attempt at reaching the most perfect illustration of the divine nature reaches its full development (fig. 6). The divine image still stands in a frontal position on the vertical axis of the sculpture; forms are not as round as earlier but more elongated; the jewellery tends to cover the body, the floweret of the armlet, for instance, grows and at a later stage, in the late 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> c., loops of pearls and tiny pendants are attached to it. Similarly, a row of loops and pendants is attached at the girdle. The head-dress is higher and the nimbus is practically fully hidden behind the head. The number of attendants increases; they form pairs of various sizes, which contributes to create a hierarchy among them. In opposition to the frontal position of the deity, these attending figures show at times strong bending of their body, or are depicted slightly turned towards the central deity. Thus the central image and the attending figures form a contrasting and simultaneously complementary composition.

Similarly, the image of the god constitutes the unmovable axis out of which the ornamentation carved on the back of the slab emerges. This ornamentation is highly symbolical of the divine power of creation: animals, real or fantastic, are distributed on either side (figs 4, 8, 14-16, 23). The elephant, symbol of the element earth, supports the leogryph, image of fire; above them, the makara, symbol of water and the haṃsa (goose) or the hybrid divine musicians (a human body is attached to the lower part of a bird) refer to the element air. All are displayed as if arising out of the divine body, hiding in fact the structure of the throne. Full of energy and movement, they seem to jump out of the limits of the back-slab, and refer to the life which finds its source in the central divine image. The ornamentation of the back-slab has also for function to identify the complete sculpture to a sanctuary: this explains the presence of the monstrous face or kīrtimukha, ‘face of glory’, topping the image – as it is found above the lintel of porticoes in Orissa or Java for instance, or the representation of divine couples flying above their clouds and offering garlands to the deity – and reminding of those divine anonymous figures who are distributed on the śikhara of temples. Not only the central deity, but all his/her attendants stand above the corolla of a lotus, all flowers being attached to stalks which find their root in one single knot below the central deity. The utmost animation of the

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ornamentation which strikes first the eye, is in fact elaborated on a well-organized framework, and reflects the life gushing out of the centre.

Late 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c. sculpture betrays an utmost crisp treatment of the carving (figs 7-8). The structure introduced at an earlier period is preserved and the choice of motifs remains identical, but the image reflects an extreme meticulousness in the carving of utmost tiny details, creating large zones carved in low relief where the light gets lost. Pleats follow, for instance, a very nervous movement and end into a frizzy line; small fantastic characters jump out among the animals of the royal throne; tiny curls free themselves from the neatly tied up bun; small lotus flowers are inserted among other motifs, whereas the stem of the lotus on the pedestal spread in large curls and covers the front surface, splitting in a number of flowers, etc. These zones enhance the plain and shining surface of the divine bodies, drawn through sinuous, even if at times hard, lines; this is made particularly visible in images of the Buddha. The image tends to free itself from the dark back-ground, being even at times partly carved in the round.

The dramaturgy of the sculpture has thus for main function to underline the presence of the divine nature, which has been achieved since the 8<sup>th</sup> c., first through the central image of the deity standing alone and covering practically the complete plain surface of the back-slab (Paharpur), second through the structuring of the back-slab and the pedestal, composing three superimposed zones, each bearing very specific motifs and through the crisp treatment of these motifs and the jewellery and head-dress of the deities (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c.), third through the image of the god/goddess freeing him/herself from the back-ground which reflects, as the jewellery also does, an extreme richness (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c.). The various parts of the sculpture interact on each other, enhancing the all-powerful and creative nature of the divine essence which materializes itself through the ornamentation.

### **b. Southeast Bengal**

It is difficult to define with precision the style of stone sculptures prior to 9<sup>th</sup> c. in Southeast Bengal due to the utmost rarity of the images then carved. Those available differ, however, from the early north Bengal school in giving greater importance to the line, and thus to the proximity of the divine nature rather than in underlying its distance from the worshippers through a hieratic unmoving icon (figs 9-10). The volumes are softly modelled, the lines fluid and elegant, and the ornamentation is practically

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inexistent: thus the divine nature shows itself in all its compassion and generosity, with smooth smile, slightly closed eyes, smooth gestures, it is extremely close to the devotee although it imposes itself through its dignity. These images were found on the Lalmai-Mainamati range which imposes itself to the voyager coming from the West, i.e. from ancient Vikramapura, and this explains why the stylistic development will be henceforth entirely related to the school of sculpture which develops in the old capital and its surroundings, being located only 70 km far-off from Lalmai-Mainamati.

Images which can be dated back to the 9<sup>th</sup> or even 10<sup>th</sup> c. betray a strong relationship to Magadha, the stone in which they have been carved as well as their style suggest that either the material or the finished image might have been imported from the region, which thus reflects a situation encountered at the same period in North Bengal (fig. 11).<sup>13</sup> The importance of such sculptures is not to be underestimated for they did not only introduce particular iconographic types, they also constituted a model allowing to understand the divine nature and its relationship to the, i.e. our, world emanating out of it. The deity is depicted in full splendour and expressing his/her power by hiding the bare back-slab where only the edge is adorned with flames and a border of pearls, indicating the aureole, sitting or standing above a pedestal where the devotees, who were also the donors, are pre-eminently depicted. The jewellery, the dresses, and the head-dresses are carved with utmost meticulousness. The forms are round, well drawn through elegant and smooth lines; the faces are slightly fleshy, showing a subtle smile, the eyes are half-opened.

With the bareness of their back-slab which underlines the presence of the deity, those images lead to the first of the three stylistic idioms which developed in the region of Vikramapura in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c.(fig. 12). The body is slender, the head-dress elongated, the waist and shoulders are narrow. Like in North Bengal, the ornamentation is over-abundant although some of the jewellery can present a different form (see for instance the girdle with a double row of loops and pendants). Attending figures stand on

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<sup>13</sup> Asher 1981-83, p. 4. Here is their list: 1° both Gaṇeśa images, dated in the reigns of Gopāla and Mahīpāla (Huntington 1984, figs 50 & 53); 2° Mārīcī collected at Bhavanipur (Bautze-Picron 2001, fig 21 and pp. 272-5 concerning the iconography and the origin); 3° Avalokiteśvara, collected at Vikrampur (Bautze-Picron 1991/92, p. 266, note 59 for the references). Similar examples could be listed in North Bengal, among which the most evident example of import is the Buddha of Satimandagi, Bochaganj, Dinajpur district which was produced in the atelier of Kurkihar, Bihar (Shamsul Alam 1985, fig. 53). Further, the presence of bronzes evidently cast in Bangladesh, in the sites of Kurkihar and Nalanda testifies to the existence of relationship between Magadha and the region of Mainamati (references in note 24).

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either side of the deity, not in the stiffened attitude of the central image, but slightly bent. The pedestal is inserted within the composition of the part of the sculpture which it sustains and does not constitute an independent unit as seen in other stylistic idiom. The whole composition is evidently based on more fluidity between the different parts of the images (deity, attendants, back-slab, and pedestal) at the same time that it does not illustrate any separation between the deity and the human world symbolically represented by the pedestal – where devotees are usually represented (figs 14-16). In a certain way, this trend rediscovers the possibility of making the deity present through its sole presence, as observed at Paharpur in the 8<sup>th</sup> c.

Simultaneously and while preserving the slenderness of the body of the previous group, another stylistic idiom works out the back-slab as observed in the North (figs 14-15). Carved in low-relief, the well-organized ornamentation harmonizes with the high-relieved images of the deity and attendants; the motifs are well-drawn and delimited from each other. The face shows eyes sloping slightly upwards, the mouth follows the same upwards direction, the chin is small; the body is elongated, undisturbed, clearly shaped on the back-slab which can eventually be open. This opening creates a new space, the limits of which remain unknown, and out of which the deity seems to emerge, as an image of certitude which expresses its creative potentialities through the presence of the pyramid of animals seen on the back-slab, or through the miniaturized representations of groups of deities related to the main one (Âditiyas, Avatâras, etc.) – a feature that appears to be a peculiarity of the South-eastern ateliers. The sculpture is thus perceived as a maṇḍala with the central axis being the main image around which the tiny representations irradiate (fig. 16 in particular). Such an understanding of the deity, as ruling over the universe, contributes to create a rather abstract image which practically locates the devotees at the outskirts and lets out the representation of the creation in all its splendour and richness as testified on 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c. images of North Bengal.

However, this Northern trend found also its way in the region of Vikramapura, particularly in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. (fig. 14). As a matter of fact, we find images where the concept of the god positioned at the centre of the universe and surrounded by tiny representations of other deities or of himself has been preserved and merged with the idea of the creation born out of the deity. The back-slab combines both concepts, being, as a result, completely covered by the ornamentation (figs 15-16). However, the motifs are clearly

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separated, the lines are strongly marked, and the artists introduced different depths in the carving of the ornamentation, thus accentuating the dramaturgy: the animals of the royal throne and the avatāras are carved on low relief on either side of the god, the divine garland-bearers and the monstrous face show more depth; the creation and the universe centred on the deity are clearly displayed in the back-ground. On the contrary, the attendants and the vehicle are carved in high-relief, being parts of the divine personality.

Also in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. (figs 15-16), the taste for reflecting the gorgeousness of the creation through an utmost detailed carving and a very nervous line in the rendering of tiny motifs – a trend essentially developed in North Bengal – is present; it does, however, blend with the regional fundamental tendency towards distinctness, preserving bare spaces on the back-slab which enhance the crisp and intricate ornamentation.

A particular and limited aspect of this stylistic idiom deserves to be noted, which exclusively comprehends 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> c. images of the Buddha which have been found from Dhaka to Chittagong, and relate to some of the cast images found at Jhewari (fig. 17). It does preserve a clear structure, allowing a perfect reading of a rather complicated iconography which betrays the existence of contacts with Pagan. Such an image shares with the Brahmanical images from Vikramapura the introduction on the back-slab of small divine representations: of the Buddha himself and of the Buddhas of the past here, of the avatāras, the Āditiyas, or the Dikpālas on the Brahmanical images. The heaviness of the limbs, however, like the facial features of the Buddha remind more of his images in Pagan.

Thus the school of Southeast Bengal emerged with its own conception of style where the clearly drawn composition contributes to emphasize the distance between the deity and the world on which he/she rules. Although the evolution runs parallel to the way followed in the North, showing taste for an utmost refined carving, this notion will remain basic through all the development.

### **c. West & South Bengal**

West & South Bengal, which covers most of the Indian State of West Bengal, is a wide region which incorporated the artistic impact of the neighbouring regions. Due to this geographical position, it did not develop a strong stylistic unity such as the one observed in North and in Southeast Bengal. Images, stone as well as bronzes, collected in the

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northern district of Murshidabad, relate thus to the North Bengal stylistic idiom and their study is here included within this geographical context whereas images from Purulia, Bankura and Midnapur districts in West Bengal relate to the artistic production of the bordering regions of Orissa and Bihar (now Jharkhand).<sup>14</sup>

## **B. Cast images**

### **a. North Bengal**

Probably one of the earliest cast images recovered in North Bengal, the gilded Avalokiteshvara from Mahasthangarh (fig. 18) reflects, like other images from the 7<sup>th</sup> c. & 8<sup>th</sup> c., the impact of the Sarnath atelier in the Delta – as it is also observed in Bihar. The elongated body, the fluid lines following a restrained movement, the soft smile, are all features present in contemporary images of the Buddha found at Bhasu Bihar and in North Bengal.<sup>15</sup> Like on Nalanda bronzes of the 8<sup>th</sup> c., the back-slab is usually carved through: the aureole is attached to the back of the central image through struts adorned with flowers, whereas flames of various sizes run along the edge of the slab.<sup>16</sup> As far as one may suggest, it would appear that the stylistic development of the early phase, from the 7<sup>th</sup> till the 9<sup>th</sup> c. runs parallel to the evolution observed at Nalanda, an observation which can be corroborated by the fact that the material has been basically collected in the area of Mahasthangarh and is chiefly Buddhist.

Apart from the influence originating at Sarnath in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. and the existence of relationship to the monastery of Nalanda in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c., the art of the region also assimilated features noticed at Mathura. Some isolated testimonies which prove the existence of contacts between the regions of Mahasthangarh and Mathura at an earlier period;<sup>17</sup> a 9<sup>th</sup> c. representation of a seated four-armed Bodhisattva (fig. 19) includes a nimbus, the structure of which is based on the much earlier 5<sup>th</sup> c. nimbus of Mathura where a lotus spread in the central part, partly hidden by the head of the Buddha. The

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<sup>14</sup> Banerji 1929 and Sengupta 2005 for a clear presentation of the situation.

<sup>15</sup> Ray & alii 1986, figs 30-34, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Ray & alii 1986, figs 35, 53, 58-60, 61, 66-71, 73-75.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the question and a presentation of the available Brahmanical images, see Gill 2002, pp. 53-57. The Buddha image from Namuja (here fig. 3) belongs to the same trend: the representation of folds draws its origin in Mathura but has been here most probably channelled through Nalanda.



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flower presents elongated petals and covers most of the perfectly circular nimbus,<sup>18</sup> introducing a motif which becomes a common feature in the ornamentation of the back-slab in the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> c. images of North Bengal. This bronze introduces also a clear structure of the back-slab, with the nimbus standing above the architectural structure of the throne (lintel lying above the two vertical posts); although the back is open, the fear of emptiness imposed the introduction of the two geese on either side of the nimbus, thus integrating the two main parts, i.e. the nimbus and the throne, within a single composition united by the continuous outer line.

This structure is encountered in Brahmanical images of the 9<sup>th</sup> c. (fig. 20). The outer line is continuous and helps to unify the composition: the god and his attendants stand all separately in front of the widely open lower part of the back-slab which is only constituted by the lintel lying above the posts; struts reminiscent of those encountered at an earlier period but now deprived of the flowers help to consolidate the image; the upper part is constituted by the large circular nimbus flanked by the scrolls of the birds' tails.<sup>19</sup> All elements of the image are independently represented, separated by space. As such, this perception of the deity, emerging out of the emptiness, differentiates itself from the more compact vision of the god in the contemporary cast images from Southeast Bengal. Another point of distinction concerns the pedestal which is in the North fully compact whereas in the Southeast, it preserves empty space within which iconographic motifs are included.

This tendency will remain permanent in the subsequent centuries, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> c.,<sup>20</sup> when the deities are cast in the round and the back-slab constitutes a separate unit (fig. 21), which explains that it may have been eventually lost in some cases.<sup>21</sup> The result is that artists could produce extremely intricate compositions where all figures stand on their own, such as, for instance, in the marriage scene from Mandoil. Elements are drawn from previous centuries, such as the large flower acting as nimbus which is pre-eminently displayed on this bronze, being not hidden by the head of one of the deities. The full pedestal stands now above feet: in course of time, its height will increase

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<sup>18</sup> Ray & alii 1986, fig. 121; Asher 1980, pl.229; Huntington 1984, fig. 267.

<sup>19</sup> Image collected at Mahashtan; Huntington 1984, fig. 268; Asher 1980, pl. 230. A further similar bronze in the British Museum, from Bogra district (perhaps Mahasthangarh ?) is illustrated by Asher 1980, pl. 231, or Ray & alii 1986, fig. 204.

<sup>20</sup> Huntington 1984, figs 273-276; Ray & alii 1986, figs 186-187, 189-192, 263-264, 268-269.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Ray & alii 1986, fig. 186.

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through the multiplication of levels, thus elevating the deity from above the earthly level. Although the back-slab can still be hollowed out, the slanting struts have disappeared and a broad plain band fringed with flames and supporting the umbrella unifies the composition.

A strong tendency to raise the deity is noticed: the pedestal is constituted of superimposed layers of mouldings resting above feet; the back-plate has more presence than in earlier time, giving prominence to the image of the deity who stands above a high double lotus (fig. 22). The preference for wide open space behind the deity which was so much evident in the early period, can still be here noticed since large rectangular spaces are hollowed out behind the lower part of the deities. But on the whole, the image breathes peace and calm; the body of the deities is elongated and movements are still restrained; through loosing their nimbus, the attendants grow since the space allotted to them remains proportionally the same.

Images of the late 11<sup>th</sup> c. and 12<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>22</sup> depart from the earlier ones in including a back-slab with motifs otherwise noticed in stone images, such as the monstrous face topping the image or the animals symbolizing the four elements (fig. 23). The overall composition is comparatively less clear than in the earlier images with the plain band. The high pedestal can be partly hollowed out. The movements of the attendants can be exaggerated with a strong bending of the body; the images of the deities are loaded with overwhelming jewellery. Whereas the identification of the earlier images was easy, whereas the eye of the viewer could apprehend them globally and directly, the intricate iconographic and ornamental composition imposes now a longer time of reading; the eye gets lost in tiny details all illustrated with attention. Some of the 12<sup>th</sup> c. bronzes simultaneously reflect the divine nature as the ultimate source of life and its presence within any sign of life.

This presence is particularly felt in Buddhist three-dimensional compositions illustrating a maṇḍala (fig. 24):<sup>23</sup> the lotus within which all figures are included is the symbol par excellence of the eternal life, it opens itself and discloses the Buddhist

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<sup>22</sup> Huntington 1984, figs 271, 277, 282; Ray & alii 1986, figs 237-238, 242, 275-276

<sup>23</sup> The most famous one was discovered at Chandipur, near Pathargatha in Bhagalpur district, Bihar (see for instance Bhattasali 1929, pls XV-XVII & pp. 45-53). One should briefly here notice that common stylistic features are noticed between 12<sup>th</sup> c. cast images of Vishnu and of Buddhist deities which were recovered in Bengal, more particularly in North Bengal, and in Bihar, making the attribution to a region very difficult when the image appears without known provenance on the Western art market.

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cosmos which it contains in its heart (fig. 24a) and it closes itself, with its secret life hidden from the outer world (fig. 24b). As such, these lotus-maṇḍalas are highly symbolical of the Buddhist thought and of the situation of the Buddhist community within the society at that late period. The deities integrated within these compositions are shown as individual images, breathing energy, the forms are round and smooth, the movement is dynamic.

### **b. Southeast Bengal**

The earliest cast images discovered on the Lalmai-Mainamati ridge and in the region date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> c. Moreover, images from this part of the country were also recovered at Nalanda and Kurkihar, in Bihar, as well as in the island of Java, attesting thus of a very flourishing influence in the 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>24</sup> Other isolated images were found in regions located eastward, in the Sylhet and the Indian Tripura districts, attesting thus that the Lalmai-Mainamati hills held a major position as cultural, i.e. political, religious and art-historical, centre. Beside Mainamati, another large group of cast images was recovered at Jhewari.

These images betray a smooth rendering of the surface (fig. 25): the body reflects a soft modelling, the movements are delicate and fluid; the face, unfortunately very often rubbed out, presents a tender, if not compassionate, smile and shows half-open eyes; without any fold being indicated, the dress clings to the body, underlining the shapes of the limbs. Locks of hair fall on the shoulders and the head-dress often presents a round shape. The divine image is elegantly outlined in front of a plain back-slab adorned with rows of pearls and flames running along its edge and bearing an umbrella, unfortunately often broken away, to which wide loops are attached. The pedestal can be highly elaborated with lions prowling above elephants on either side of the drapery; in contrary to the back-slab, it is widely open. Variations can be of course noticed: images of the Buddha can sit in front of a back-slab which is open through with struts bearing open

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<sup>24</sup> 1° At Kurkihar: see Ray & alii 1986, fig. 265; Mevissen 1999, pl. 8.4 & 120, footnote 11 for further references. 2° At Nalanda: see Bautze-Picron 2004, fig.23 & p. 255 appendix 33 with further references & Mitra 1979, fig. 109. 3° Bronzes collected in Java and their impact on the development of the art of the bronze in the island have been catalogued and studied by Lunsingh Scheurleer & Klokke 1998, pp. 27-30 & cats 14-17. 4° A Vishnu image collected at Kumarpur, Rajshahi district, is most probably also a product from the ateliers located in Southeast Bengal, unless it is based on a South-eastern model (Asher 1980, pl. 239; Ray & alii 1986, fig. 130 – with further references).

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flowers – thus reminiscent of images encountered at Nalanda and in North Bengal; another variation shows that the lower part of the back-plate is open through, supporting a plain nimbus. On the whole, variations in the composition are numerous and testify to a rich creativity.<sup>25</sup>

This tradition apparently culminated in the 9<sup>th</sup> or early 10<sup>th</sup> c. with the production of human-size cast images such as those recovered in the last fifteen years on the ridge (fig. 26). Through its evanescent smile, the face simultaneously displays the feeling of compassion and manifests the experience of meditation in which the Bodhisattva is sunken. If the features are clearly drawn – incised lines follow the eye-brows or underline the thick lips, the eyes show the classical form of the lotus petal, the line of the forehead is horizontal –, the lines are never hard but always smoothly and elegantly delineated. The face preserves the roundness noticed in the smaller images, which evidently contributes to the impression of imminent presence of the Bodhisattva, making him accessible. Similarly, the perfect distribution of the volumes in the representation of Vajrasattva is intermingled with the slenderness of the limbs and the strength of the chest.

Whereas some of the bronzes found at Jhewari, near Chittagong,<sup>26</sup> clearly relate to the first group of images mentioned above, a number of images of the Buddha were most probably produced locally (fig.27). They present a very large head covered by a cap of extremely tiny curls and the cranial protuberance tends to lose its particular shape. The heaviness of the limbs, the eyes – eventually widely open –, or the treatment of specific motifs, such as the lap of the dress on the left shoulder ending in a straight horizontal line, are features reminiscent of stone images like the one seen at Betagi. These features make the presence of the Buddha accessible, which is also evidenced in the stone images through other means: the central depiction arises out of the shrine; the plainness of the depiction is clearly in contrast with the extremely complicated, if not confused, iconographical and ornamental carving around it. This presence to the world of the Buddha differentiates itself from the meditative mood and expression of compassion betrayed by the images from the Lalmai-Mainamati ridge.

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<sup>25</sup> Asher 1980, pls 247-53; Huntington 1984, figs 252-55; Ray & alii 1986, figs 37, 40,42-43, 166-167, 195, 207; Shamsul Alam 1985, figs 25-28; Mitra 1979, fig. 113. The Shiva collected at Barisal (Asher 1980, pl. 25”, Ray & alii 1986, fig. 167), although found in the region, shares its composition with the 8<sup>th</sup> c. cast images from North Bengal.

<sup>26</sup> Mitra 1982 & Bhattacharya 1989; Huntington 1984, figs 256-62; Ray & alii, figs 214-31; Shamsul Alam 1985, fig. 29; Mitra 1979, figs 28, 85-88, 91-92.

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Twelfth c. images cast in Southeast Bengal show a shift in the stylistic idiom and reflect similarities with images produced in North Bengal at the same period (fig. 28).<sup>27</sup> It shifts away from the earlier structure showing the lower part of the image supporting the deity cast in the round whereas the back-slab constituted a fully closed space behind the icon. Icons are cast in the round above a compact pedestal and stand in front of a back-slab which is open and constituted by a broad plain band fringed with flames, each of them individually attached to the band; a lotus flower can eventually be open behind the head of the deity. The rich ornamentation which adorns the deities is balanced by the plain band of the back-slab; details are shown with utmost delicacy. This refined art reflects the divine power as an image of richness; the abundant jewellery practically acts as a dress.

### **C. Terracotta images**

Whereas stone and bronze were both used for representing icons, thus cult images, terracotta has been a medium with a wider range of uses. The production of stone and bronze images required importing the material from neighbouring countries, but the soil of Bengal has always been an inexhaustible source of earth used for the construction and ornamentation of monuments till the most recent period, and for the representation of deities, as it is still the case today in the Brahmanical society.

Burnt terracotta has been used in the earlier period, from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. till the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c., for depicting deities in a compositional structure foreshadowing the one of the later stone and cast images. It has also been retained as main medium for quadrangular plaques illustrating narratives in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> c., or representing deities and fantastic scenes till a later period, the 9<sup>th</sup> c. The easiness with which the material can be manipulated explains the high degree of stylishness reflected in the ornamentation of monuments; all through the centuries, monuments were built in bricks and adorned with an exquisite stuccoed ornamentation.

This highly refined work had already reached its peak in the very first school of Bengal sculpture known to us; numerous terracottas dating back from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> c. B.C.

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<sup>27</sup> Huntington 1984, fig. 280; Ray & alii 1986, figs 261, 272; Bhattasali 1929, pls XXIX, L-a.

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till 2<sup>nd</sup> c. A.D. have been recovered at Chandraketugarh, a site, or area, located Northeast of Kolkata, illustrating iconographic and stylistic models which have been also discovered in other Gangetic sites, such as Kausambi (fig. 29).<sup>28</sup> However, the production at Chandraketugarh was by far one of the most important to have ever been achieved while the aesthetics reached a high-level quality which remained unrivalled.

In the iconic plaques, the deity stands facing the viewer; her large round face, open eyes, broad hips, generous breast, her restrained movements, the richness of her jewellery, all elements meet more evident “iconographic” elements such as the gesture of generosity (*varadamudrā*), the coins, the ears of corn, the lotuses, in order to illustrate the concept of the goddess identifiable with the nature; she distributes her unlimited richness; she is of unbounded fertility. Artists excelled in minutely presenting heavy ornaments which cover the body of the goddess and her attendants; the composition is very clearly drawn with the goddess facing us whereas her attendants are smaller and distributed in various positions around her: as such, these features will remain permanent in the aesthetics of the Delta. Being malleable, terracotta allows the artist to infuse a dynamics in the movement which will remain unknown in stone carving but be extolled in the depiction of narratives, of real or fantastic motifs drawn from the nature, and of various characters.

Terracotta remained used in the following centuries for representing deities, as seen with the image of the Sun-god that was discovered at Mahasthan, dating probably from the 6<sup>th</sup> c.,<sup>29</sup> or with a perhaps slightly later head (figs 30-31). The smooth dress outlines the elegant lines of the body and the softness of the volume; its plainness, moreover, is balanced by the detailed carving of details, such as the typically Gupta row of large beads around the neck, the curls of the hair falling on both shoulders, the beaded belt to which the sheath of the sword is hanging, the folds of the shawl which fall on either side in vertical and slightly undulating lines. It is likely that at Mahasthan, like at Mainamati, the production of terracottas must have extended on a long period; some of the images found at Mangalkot, in the vicinity of Mahasthan, reflect the facial features of

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<sup>28</sup> Bautze 1995; Haque 2001; Chakravarti 1998: for a catalogue of Bengal terracottas preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. Another site near Mahasthan, Mangalkot, has yielded an extremely large collection of “snake-deities”, belonging probably also to the 6<sup>th</sup> c.

<sup>29</sup> Asher 1980, pl. 41 & p. 34; Gill 2002, fig. 5, p. 55 & note 38 for further references. Two medallions from the site belong to the same period: Saraswati 1962, fig.45.

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the Gupta style with thick sensual lips, the large eyes with heavy lids sloping towards the temples, the round face surmounted by curly hair whereas other ones reflect a much more simplified version with wide open and bulging eyes, flat lips, hard lines. At the moment, it is rather difficult to decide whether this rendering reflects a contemporary but poorer tendency, perhaps produced by less qualified artists, or a later (or earlier?) development.

The Rāmāyāna reliefs collected at Palashbari, also in the vicinity of Mahasthan, constitute an example of the unsurpassed achievement reached by Bengali artists in the course of the 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> c. (fig. 33).<sup>30</sup> Those panels form a sequence of independent scenes, all characterized by a harmonious composition where the characters are depicted in high relief if not practically freed from the back, and arising out of the inner space to hide partly the frame surrounding the panel. They show a large variety of movements and convey with strength their feelings through numerous facial expressions and their wide open eyes.

The Rāmāyāna panels were certainly distributed in rows on the outer walls of a brick temple, a tradition which was going to be preserved in the following centuries. Major Buddhist sites have indeed yielded such series of square panels, at times still found in situ. Be it at Mainamati in the 7<sup>th</sup> c., Paharpur in the 8<sup>th</sup> c., or Jagjivanpur in the 9<sup>th</sup> c. All panels show a broad frame around the central recess out of which the images emerge, partly covering the frame. Most plaques from Mainamati & Mahasthangarh (fig. 34) retain the vivacity, the energy and the elegance of the Gupta period, which elegantly merge into the iconographic topics to be depicted: semi-divine beings are seen flying, warriors are depicted rushing, animals, real or fantastic are shown in various activities. The images are carved in very deep relief, which introduces an organic interaction of dark zones framing the main character whose presence is even more stressed through the fact that he completely covers the space of the panel. The volumes are full, the lines nervous but elegant. It is precisely this rendering of the movement which ties all the panels together: the warriors form an army, all rushing and in a threatening mood, the animals reflect the world of the nature within which semi-divine characters emerge.

On the contrary, later plaques, such as those at Paharpur, show more flatness; the characters or animals usually remain within the limits of the frame; the lines are harder,

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<sup>30</sup> See Bhattacharya & Pal 1991 (and their p. 62 for further references). See also Sengupta 1992 for a presentation of sites having yielded terracottas in North Bengal.

The following paper has been published as “Sculpture. a. Ancient Period”, in: *Fine Arts and Crafts*, ed. Prof. LALA RUKH SELIM, volume of the “Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Project”, ed. by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007, pp. 91-109.

the facial features simplified. What comes through at Paharpur, is the tendency to present the characters as individual icons and no more as part of a large iconographic program; and true, beside the topics already noticed at Mainamati and which are here repeated (warriors, animals, semi-divine beings), images of deities and of human characters are observed. These are shown in a frontal view, or slightly profiled, leading the way to the panels of Jagjivanpur (fig. 35). Beside the fact that the iconographic program is practically identical to the ones encountered in earlier sites, the terracottas of this 9<sup>th</sup> c. site breathe an extraordinary presence; the figures are tall, covering – like at Mainamati – the frame of the panels; the warriors and the musicians are profiled and are usually seen running, full of energy whereas those seen in frontal view and seated peacefully depict Bodhisattvas. Although the images do not betray any more the plasticity of the surface noticed at Mainamati, the relative flatness of the carving is balanced by the fluid movement of the outlines.

#### D. Wood Carving

The climate is not very congenial to the preservation of images carved in wood, and only some utmost rare architectural elements or cult images have reached us.<sup>31</sup> Dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c., they were recovered from Southeast Bengal and relate directly to the contemporary stone sculpture of the region (fig. 36). The material allows an extremely smooth and detailed rendering of the surface, which is more difficultly achieved in stone carving. The movements of the body and limbs are extremely measured, restrained but imbued with energy and life. Carved eventually in the round, those images express perhaps at the best the high level of achievement reached by the artists of the Delta.

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<sup>31</sup> To be mentioned are: 1) a capital from Sonarang, Dhaka District, including an image of Vishnu, seated (Bhattachali 1929, pl. LXXIV & p. 228; Dasgupta 1990, pl. 22); 2) two pillars, from Rampal, Dhaka District (Bhattachali 1929, pl. LXXVII-LXXVIII & pp. 273-4; Dasgupta 1990, pls 27-28, 29 & 31); 3) a panel with niche adorned with a woman, found at the North Kazi Qasba, Dhaka (Dasgupta 1990, pl. 16; Biswas 1995, pl. 48); 4) a similar panel with a man from Vikrampur (Haque 1963, p. 13); 5) a lintel found in Vikrampur (Bhattachali 1929, p. 274). Beside these architectural elements, three iconic sculptures are known, showing respectively Vishnu (Bhattachali 1929, pl. XXVIII & pp. 82-83), Garuda (Bhattachali 1929, pl. XLI & p.109; Biswas 1995, pl.49) and Avalokiteshvara (Haque 1963, pp. 12 & 17). See Dasgupta 1990, pp. 49-80, in particularly pp. 51-54, 65-66 & Biswas 1995, pp. 46-47.



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## Conclusion

This short survey of the stylistic development of the sculpture from Bengal does not fully make justice to the richness in the carving which can be observed in each of the region, trying to focus on the main stylistic trends which shaped the development. Although they all made use of one single model from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> c. all through Bengal, the inspiration of the artists was extremely rich and the quality of their work could reach a very high level. They succeeded in infusing the forms with a subtle elegance, and the carving often reveals itself to be the most elaborate among the schools of North India at the period. Moreover, this essay is only but a modest attempt at showing how the study of forms can as well as iconography if not more in specific situations enlighten the religious dimension of art in defining the qualities of the divine and its relationship to the universe and the human beings. It also reveals the position of the art object as a micro-cosmos, reflect of the society and its different components, i.e. the religious institution and the lay society, which interact.

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### Captions

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1. Vāyu, Paharpur Museum
2. Lakṣmī, Mahasthangarh Museum
3. Buddha, Mahasthangarh Museum
4. Viṣṇu, Paharpur Museum
5. Skanda, Mahasthangarh Museum
6. Sūrya, Mahendra, Kushmandi, West Dinajpur District, Varendra Research Museum
7. Sadāśiva, Rajibpur, Dinajpur District, Indian Museum, Kolkatta, dated in the reign of Gopāla IV
8. Buddha, Dinajpur District, Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi
9. Avalokiteḍvara, Mainamati Museum
10. Buddha, Mainamati Museum
11. Mārīcī, Bhavanipur, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka
12. Sūrya, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka
13. Sūrya, Kulkudi, Faridpur District, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka, dated in the reign of Govindacandra
14. Viṣṇu, Paikpara, Vikramapura, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka, dated in the reign of Govindacandra
15. Viṣṇu, Vikramapura, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka

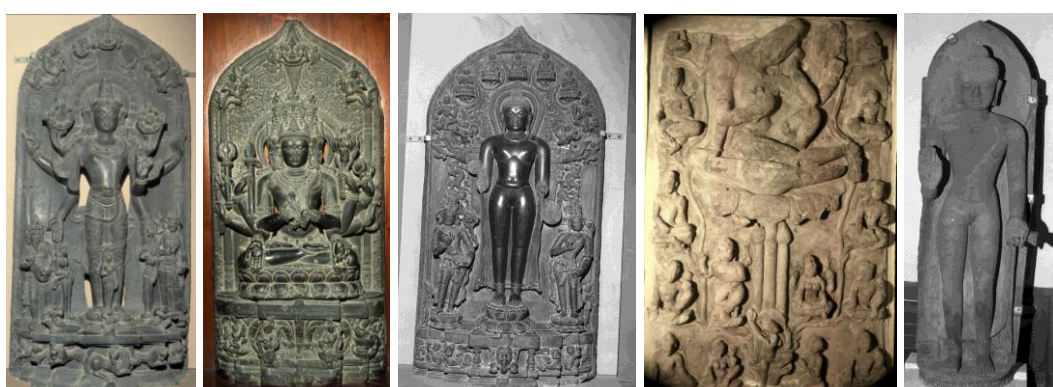
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16. Viṣṇu, Vikramapura, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka
17. Buddha, Betagi Monastery
18. Avalokiteḍvara, Mahasthangarh, Bogra District, Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi; after Asher 1980, pl. 228
19. Avalokiteḍvara, Mahasthangarh, Bogra District Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi; after Asher 1980, pl. 229
20. Viṣṇu, Mahasthangarh, Bogra District, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, after Asher 1980, pl. 230
- or: 20b Viṣṇu, Mahasthangarh, Bogra District, The British Museum, London
21. Marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī, Mandoil, Rajshahi District, Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, © Gerd J. Mevissen
22. Viṣṇu, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, previously: Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (see Ray et al 1986, fig. 269)
23. Viṣṇu, North Bengal, The Cleveland Museum of Art
24. Maṇḍala, private collection
25. Sitātapatrā, Comilla district, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka
26. Avalokiteḍvara, Mainamati Museum; after Harunur Rashid 1997, p. 191
27. Buddha, Jewari, Indian Museum, Kolkatta; after Bhattacharya 1989, fig. 24
28. Viṣṇu, Sonarang, Vikramapura, Indian Museum, Kolkatta; after Bhattacharya 1929, pl. XXIX
29. Female deity, Chandraketurah, private collection
30. Sūrya, Mahasthangarh Museum
31. Male head, Mahasthangarh Museum
32. Kṛṣṇa fighting Keśi, Paharpur Museum
33. Rāma breaking the bow, Palashbari, Mahasthangarh, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka; after Bhattacharya & Pal 1991, fig. 6
34. Flying figure, Mahasthangarh Museum
35. Drummer, Jagjivanpur. After Sengupta 1407 BS, p. 59.
36. Standing woman, Uttar Kazi Qazba, Dhaka, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka
37. Door-frame, detail, Dinajpur District, National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka

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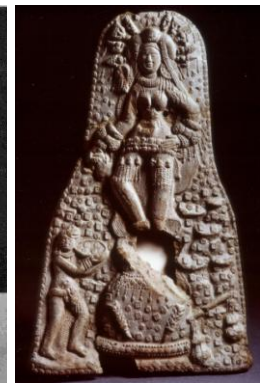
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