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# Kaniṣka's Buddha Coins — The Official Iconography of Śākyamuni & Maitreya

by Joe Cribb

A clear picture of the development of the iconography of Buddhism is an essential element of the study of the development of Buddhist theology. The detailed examination of surviving material culture can greatly enhance our understanding of the theological developments apparent from the surviving scriptures. In spite of the importance of the reign of the Kushan king Kaniṣka for the development of Buddhism both in its theology and its iconography, it is remarkable that the only concrete official manifestation of that king's beliefs still remain obscured to most students of Buddhism. The objects in question are the coins issued by that king depicting Buddhist images on their reverses.

Whatever else can be claimed for these coins, it can be said without fear of contradiction that these coins were struck during Kaniṣka's reign and at his request. The details and style of the images on them were the responsibility of the artisans involved in their production with or without reference to the king, but the identity of the images and their iconography rested with the king or his closest advisers.

Rosenfield (*Dynastic Art of the Kushans*, Berkeley, 1967, pp. 69–74) has discussed the rationale behind Kaniṣka's choice of reverse types. He logically proposed that the selection of reverse types indicated the nomination of individual deities as associates of the king, "divine companions and supporters of the monarchy" so that the coinage types were propagandist in nature. The deities chosen by Kaniṣka showed that he had adopted for this purpose, not only the religious beliefs of the Parthians who ruled the central part of this empire before the Kushan conquest, but also that of his Indian subjects. The only important cult flourishing in his realm not represented on his coinage was Jainism.

The selection by Kaniška of Buddhist images as reverse types implies the same process as his selection of the other religious images on his coins. Literary sources, although all of a religious nature, are clear testimony to Kaniška's adherence to the Buddhist religion. The coins are an expression of this as well as being concrete evidence of it. His witnessing this on his coinage also demonstrates the nature of his belief in Buddhism. The Buddha is depicted on the coinage in the same way as the gods such as Śiva, Mithra, Ahurmazda etc. By placing the Buddha on a coin, Kaniška has equated his position with that of deities, and thereby implied for him a divine role. Such a bold statement of the Buddha's godhead, is in keeping with the development during the Kushan period of sculptural cult images of the Buddha, as opposed to the early abstention from visual representations of the Buddha.

I have been conducting a detailed numismatic examination of the coins of Kaniška depicting the Buddha and will shortly publish my findings together with a discussion of their iconographic and artistic implications. These coins are not only important evidence of the development of Buddhist iconography, but also represent crucial dated (relatively) parallels to the earliest Buddha images which were created by the sculptors of the Kushan realm at Mathura (and related cultural areas) and Gandhara. I would like here, in advance of my forthcoming detailed study, to outline these findings and point to some of the resulting implications, particularly those of religious significance. Although in the forthcoming publication I will be discussing fifteen difficult varieties of the Buddha-image coins, there are essentially two images presented on the coins—a standing and a seated Buddha. The standing Buddha is shown with three different forms of halo.

## I *Standing Buddha*

- a) Gold coins (stater and  $\frac{1}{4}$  stater) inscribed *Boddo*  
Facing Buddha image, right hand raised in gesture of reassurance (*abhāyamudrā*), left hand at waist level holding handful of cloak (*sanghati*). The Buddha is wearing the robes of a monk—*dhoti*, *uttarasanga* and *sanghati* (over both shoulders). Lines of all three garments are visible. Details of the head are obscured by wear, but the enlarged ears and the dressing of the hair into a topknot (*uśniṣa*) are clear. A numbus (in three arcs) surrounds the head and body of the Buddha; on one coin the arc around the head is marked by an inner arc.

- b) Copper coins (tetradrachms and didrachms) inscribed *Sakamano Boudo*. Buddha image as on a), but the nimbus is drawn as only one arc around the head and the left hand no longer holds the cloak which is now hung over the forearm. (The left arm of the Buddha on coins of this type juts out at an angle from the body so that the hand rests at waist, lower chest or hip level. Also on some coins the rigid stance of the Buddha is replaced by a curved stance with outthrust hip.)
- c) Copper coins (drachms) inscribed *Sakam(ano) Boudo*  
Buddha image as b) but nimbus is drawn with emanating rays.

## II *Seated Buddha*

Copper coins (tetradrachms) inscribed *Mētrauo Boudo*

Facing Buddha image seated in the lotus posture on a throne (on one coin the throne is covered with a cloth which hangs between its legs.) His right hand is raised in the gesture of reassurance and the left rests on his upper thigh holding a water flask (*kamaṇḍalu*).

The Buddha is wearing the robes of a *Brahman-dhoti* and *uttarasanga* and *sanghati* (over left shoulder only) and jewellery, earrings, necklaces and bracelets on wrist and upper arm. His hair is dressed in a topknot (*uśniṣa*). A nimbus surrounds his head (except on one specimen where it has possibly been omitted by mistake).

The standing image is identified both by its iconography and the accompanying title *Śāyamuni* (sage of the *Śākya* people) as the historical Buddha, Gautama. In Gandharan images and in all except the very earliest Mathuran images the *Śākya*muni Buddha is depicted in the same guise, i.e. wearing monastic robes with the outer garment over both shoulders and his hair dressed into a topknot. (The treatment of details on the coins is paralleled by only a few of these images and the implications of these parallels will be discussed in the forthcoming publication). The official view of the iconography of *Śākya*muni Buddha as shown on the coins is seen to reflect that exhibited in the contemporary sculpture.

The seated image is identified by its iconography as what is normally called a "Bodhisattva" figure. The inscriptions on the coins indicated that the image is intended to be Maitreya the Buddha-to-come. It is normal to speak of Maitreya as a Bodhisattva because his enlightenment is a future event, but the coin inscription clearly names

him as a Buddha i.e. as the Maitreya Buddha. Although not as common in Gandharan and Mathuran statuary as Śākyamuni, images of Maitreya from those two schools survive and exhibit the same iconography i.e. princely robes and ornaments, long hair dressed in a topknot and water bottle held in left hand. As in the case of the standing Buddha the official image of Maitreya on the coin parallels the contemporary sculpture. Both Śākyamuni and Maitreya are shown on the coins making the gesture of reassurance (*abhāyamudrā*). This gesture is the most common found among the Buddhist sculptural images of both Gandhara and Mathura.

The identity of the standing Buddha has long been recognised. Even though only the inscriptions on the gold coins and on the copper didrachm have as yet been correctly read, it was generally accepted that the inscriptions indicate the same identity for the images as their iconography. My examination of these coins has shown that all the copper coins have the same inscription *Sakamano Boudo* or an abbreviation of it.

The identification of the seated Buddha figure as Maitreya is made here for the first time. This image has previously been viewed as a variant for the standing Śākyamuni Buddha. Its iconographic features have been overlooked and the inscription on the coins showing it has been misread as being either a blundered version of the inscription on the standing Buddha type copper coins or as a separate inscription reading according to some *Bago Boudo* = Bhagawat Buddha (meaning Lord Buddha or Buddha the God) and according to others *Go Boudo* = Gotama Buddha. There is no evidence on the coins for such readings. The reading proposed here *Mētrauo Boudo* is confirmed by the iconography of the image.

Various misinterpretations have been made of the gestures made by these images. The forthcoming publication of my study of these coins will show that only the gesture of reassurance (*abhāyamudrā*) is depicted on them. There is no basis for the suggestion that the standing Buddha is making any of the following gestures: *vitarkamudrā*, *dharma-cakramudrā*, *varadamudrā* or *vyakhyanamudrā*, or that the seated Buddha is making any of the following: *varadamudrā*, *dhyānamudrā* or *dharma-cakramudrā*.

The images presented on the coins are therefore two straightforward representations of Śākyamuni and Maitreya with orthodox iconography conforming to the images found in contemporary sculpture. The treatment of the images on the coins makes it clear that they are derived from such sculpture. The current convention on Kaniska's

coinage for portraying the deities used as reverse types showed them with a curved frontal stance with head turned right (occasionally left), and right hip thrust out, but both the Buddha images being based on sculptural prototypes. (Most of the other reverse types of Kaniska are derived from other coin types.) The sculptures in question are those produced at Mathura and a few related narrative relief sculptures from Gandhara. (The details of this relationship will be discussed in the forthcoming publication.)

The images on the coins show therefore not only that Kaniska's adherence to Buddhism was closely related to that of his subjects as exhibited in the sculptural manifestations of their devotion, but also that the images he chose to portray the Buddha were closely modelled on these sculptures.

Among the sculptures from Mathura dateable to the reign of Kaniska either from their inscriptions or from their style there are sculptures of both Śākyamuni and Maitreya exhibiting close parallels of detail to the coin images. The Kaniska reliquary excavated at Peshawar and the casket found at Birmanan also show the same close parallels.

It should be noticed that not only does the Birmanan casket's Buddha (Śākyamuni) image show these close parallels to the image on the coins, but the identity of the seated figure on the coin suggests a new interpretation of the unidentified coinage depicted on the casket. It has long been recognised that the Birmanan casket depicts (each image is repeated twice) the Śākyamuni Buddha making the gesture of reassurance (within an arched niche) attended on the left and right by Indra and Brahma (also in niches) turned towards the Buddha bowing their heads and making the gestures of worship (*añjalimudrā*). Behind Indra and Brahma is a fourth figure (also in a niche) whose identity has not been ascertained. He is depicted facing forward like the Buddha, but is making the same gesture as Indra and Brahma. Also his halo and the position of his legs are the same as the Buddha's. His dress is similar to the two Hindu deities, a *dhoti* tied at the front and a cloak thrown across his chest and his left shoulder, hanging down from both hips. He wears jewellery, a necklace, earrings and bracelets on wrist and upper arm. His hair is tied in a topknot like the Buddha's but is worn long over the ears. The iconography of this figure is that of a Bodhisattva. The *añjalimudrā* is not a common gesture in Buddhist iconography except for worshipping figures, but all other features, particularly the halo and topknot point to such an identity. Although his characteristic water

bottle is absent, I propose that this figure should be identified as the Maitreya Buddha. The appearance of Maitreya on Kaniṣka's coinage and among the sculpture dateable to his reign point to the importance of his cult at that date and no other "Bodhisattva" images are known to have been made during or before his reign. The casket can be shown to belong to the period of Kaniṣka's reign (see M. Bussagli "The problem of Kaniṣka as seen by the Art Historian," A.L. Basham (Ed.) *The Date of Kaniṣka*, Leyden, 1968, pp. 39–56) and as stated above, exhibits a style very closely related to Kaniṣka's coinage. The identification of the fourth figure on the Bimaran casket as the Maitreya Buddha is therefore in keeping not only with its iconography but also with contemporary religious beliefs and practices.

The cult of Maitreya, although later associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism, was already present among the beliefs of the Hīnayāna Buddhist sects flourishing in and before Kaniṣka's time. The reliefs decorating the Sanchi Stupa (c 100 BC) refer to the cult of Maitreya, the Buddha-to-be with depictions of the tree under which he would attain enlightenment. The earliest dated cult figure of Maitreya (dated year 29 of Kaniṣka era i.e. in the reign of his successor Huviska) is dedicated for a Hīnayāna sect, the Dharmaguptakas. Contemporary literary evidence for the cult of Maitreya among other Hīnayāna sects has also survived. The coin image adds another piece of evidence to this.

In conclusion the Buddha images used on Kaniṣka's coins show that his adherence to Buddhism was a close reflection of the cults prevailing in his realm. They demonstrate that Kaniṣka's faith involved devotion to Śākyamuni and Maitreya, who were looked upon by him as having quasi divine status, by means of devotional images. Furthermore Maitreya was considered by him to be a Buddha as opposed to a Bodhisattva. Such an attitude clearly foreshadows the manifestations of Mahāyāna faith which began to appear in Gandharan sculpture soon after Kaniṣka's reign. It also gives an indication that the nature of Kaniṣka's adherence to Buddhism was a key factor in the development of such beliefs in the Kushan realm and their subsequent spread to Central Asia and thence to China.



Gold stater, inscribed *Boddo*, enlarged 2X  
(British Museum Coll.)



Śākyamuni Buddha image from gold stater, enlarged 4X







Copper tetradrachm, inscribed *Mētrauo Boudo*, enlarged 2X  
(British Museum Coll.)



Maitreya Buddha image from copper tetradrachm, enlarged 4X