

**Charlotte Schmid**

(2010) *Le Don de Voir: Premières représentations krishnaïtes de la région de Mathurā* (Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient Monographies 193), Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 749 pp. ISBN 978-2-85539-131-1. € 50,-.

This voluminous monograph displays the doctoral research of Charlotte Schmid, submitted in 1995, on the early representations of Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā, the city and region with which this god is associated closely since the early textual sources. The starting point is the collection of Kuṣāṇa period icons of a four-armed male deity, holding a mace, discus and conch, which for most of twentieth century Indology were commonly identified as early representations of Viṣṇu. By consequence the earliest iconographical representations of Kṛṣṇa—as a child—were then thought to date only from the Gupta period, rather late compared to the textual evidence of the *Mahābhārata* indicating the existence of a Kṛṣṇa cult, which, moreover, as is clearly stated in the *Bhagavadgītā*, stresses the importance of seeing God (hence the author's title of her book, "The Gift of Seeing"). Following N.P. Joshi, D.M. Srinivasan and H. Härtel, Schmid argues that these icons were not representations of Viṣṇu, but of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa instead, the adult deity as represented in the *Mahābhārata*, rather than the child god represented from the Gupta period onwards. Against this background, in eight chapters she elaborately discusses all the earliest representations of Kṛṣṇa, including those of his brother Balarāma-Saṃkarṣaṇa, whose importance rivaled or even superseded that of Kṛṣṇa in the early period. Following an interdisciplinary approach, Schmid combines her interpretation of the archeological data with a close reading of the textual sources, especially the *Mahābhārata* and its "appendix", the *Harivaṃśa*, but also Vedic hymns, *kāvya*, etc., finding mutually supportive evidence. With this interesting combination of data and methods, she presents a clear image of the earliest history of Kṛṣṇa representation, and also adds valuable insights to the debate of the development of his cult and of Vaiṣṇavism and the Hindu traditions in general. Nevertheless, the actual evidence is scanty, and the author is always very careful to underline the relative character of her findings because of this fact. The book is written very eloquently, provides an interesting read as it is, and serves as an excellent reference book for Kṛṣṇa-related iconography in Kuṣāṇa Mathurā.

In the first chapter Schmid summarizes and discusses the main theories on the oldest textual evidence regarding Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva, his brother Balarāma-Saṃkarṣaṇa and Viṣṇu, namely alleged attestations in Vedic literature, in Pāṇini's grammar, citations from Megasthenes' description of India and Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*. It is only the last of these which affirmatively attests to the

presence of a cult of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva, the hero as he is later described in the *Mahābhārata*. All previous identifications are uncertain, as Schmid highlights. Patañjali, himself from Mathurā, is important for establishing a link between Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva and this city. The first real narrative material on Kṛṣṇa is found in the *Mahābhārata* proper (i.e. excluding, for now, the *Harivaṃśa*). Strikingly, the *Mahābhārata* connects Kṛṣṇa to Dvārakā, rather than Mathurā, a city here only rarely mentioned in connection to him. Moreover, his companion here is Arjuna, instead of Balarāma. The *Mahābhārata* further testifies to an assimilation of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva with the creator divinity Nārāyaṇa, whom Schmid prefers to see as independent from Viṣṇu. So according to the oldest text strata, Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva and Nārāyaṇa are central, whereas Viṣṇu is of lesser importance.

These results of early textual evidence are in chapter 2 paralleled with archeological and epigraphical data. Schmid here first discusses a handful of inscriptions dating from ca. 150 to 50 BCE, all mentioning Vāsudeva, the Bhagavān, and his followers the Bhāgavatas, sometimes together with Saṃkarṣaṇa, and in relation to Nārāyaṇa. There is no trace of Viṣṇu here. Then the author elaborates on iconographic evidence from the pre-Mathurā period, starting with the clearest examples, namely coins from the 2nd c. BCE found at Ai-Khanoum (modern Afghanistan). These show images of Saṃkarṣaṇa-Balarāma and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, each on one side, positively identified by the attributes with which they have remained associated up to this day: the plough (*hala*) and pestle (*musala*) for Balarāma, and the conch (*śaṅkha*) and discus (*cakra*) for Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. Schmid then reverts back to Besnagar, the site of the oldest inscriptions she previously described, where she hypothesizes that some symbolic representations on capitals may indicate a cult not just of Vāsudeva as indicated in the inscription, but of a Vṛṣṇi collective in this early period. Then Schmid discusses the first “real” images of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva and Balarāma, dating from around the beginning of the common era: two sets from Chilas, modern North Pakistan, which are positively identified by inscriptions, and one from Malhār, in modern Chattisgarh.

Chapter 3 focuses on Mathurā, beginning with a discussion on the mythological origins of the city, and its factual history from the 6th c. BCE onwards. From the 1st to the 3rd c. CE, Mathurā was the Indian capital of the Kuṣāṇa empire. This period is described as a “laboratoire iconographique”, during which series of icons emerged from different religious traditions: Buddhist, Jain, different Hindu traditions such as Śaiva, goddess worship, and, of course, Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. Schmid continues with a depiction of Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā from the early textual sources, composed parallel with the Kuṣāṇa presence in Mathurā or at least predating the Gupta era: the *Harivaṃśa* (HV), the Buddhist

*Niddesa* and *Ghata Jātaka* and the *Arthasāstra*. In her discussion of the HV, its date and development, Schmid apparently does not mention the theory of Horst Brinkhaus (1990) that the Kṛṣṇa story was in fact the latest addition to the HV, instead of its kernel. Although it may not make that much difference to her central arguments, a more thorough overview of recent scholarship on the HV, its composition and layers, including articles such as that of Brinkhaus, would have been worthwhile, given the importance of this text in her research. The synthetic monograph of John Brockington (1998), also absent from the bibliography, would have been a good starting point for this. Schmid then commences her description of actual icons, as well as inscriptions testifying to worship of Kṛṣṇa in the area: those of Mora, predating the Kuṣāṇa period, and instances of triads of Vāsudeva, Balarāma and a female figure.

Whereas the icons of the previous chapters were few and isolated, chapter 4 deals with a larger collection of about thirty images, representing a new phase, namely the icons of four-armed Kṛṣṇa alone, previously identified as Viṣṇu instead of Kṛṣṇa. Schmid discusses the icons in great detail regarding their attributes, comparing them to descriptions in texts and occurrences in other icons, their clothes, ornaments, and head dress. Aside from the four-armed icons, Kṛṣṇa also appears in a few rare narrative reliefs in Mathurā during this period. Here the deity only has two arms, in a episode representing the killing of Keśin.

In the fifth chapter Schmid discusses the occurrences of individual icons of Kṛṣṇa's older brother Balarāma in Mathurā prior to the Gupta period, in particular his connection with the *nāga* (serpent) cult. In addition to the icons already identified as Balarāma, either by the presence of his standard attributes (plough and pestle) or by the presence of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, Schmid identifies an additional set of *nāga* deity icons, without Balarāma's standard attributes, as nevertheless being of Balarāma, on the basis of his single ear pendant, as well as his forest garland (*vanamālā*), and his association with a cup. She elaborates on how Balarāma's importance decreased from the Gupta period on, parallel to Kṛṣṇa's rising importance. Aside from depictions of Balarāma as a *nāga*, there are also narrative scenes, devoid of the *nāga* aspect, regarding Balarāma's adolescent battles with Dhenuka and Pralamba, and in some icons of Viṣṇu *Śeṣaśāyin*, the snake is clearly identifiable with Balarāma.

Chapter 6 focuses on the fantastic aspects of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva iconography. It reverts back to the multiple arms of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, and discusses various possible rationales behind their presence: to accommodate the multiple attributes, or as a sign of superior powers. Schmid connects these to other fantastic iconographies, at the center of this chapter, including the infamous Nand's column,

which, as Schmid stresses, symbolizes creative powers, and connects it to the creator-aspect Nārāyaṇa. Another statue, that of the *caturvyūhas*, the four emanations, dating from the end of the Kuṣāṇa period, indicates the development of the *pāñcarātra* system out of the *bhāgavata* cult, and provides a link to the ensuing Gupta period. The chapter concludes with some isolated icons representing a deity with an animal head, horse and boar. At first glance one would see in these early forms of Viṣṇu's *avatāras hayagrīva* and *varāha*, but through careful analysis of the images and parallel texts, Schmid connects them rather to the creative deity Nārāyaṇa instead.

In Chapter 7, some rare instances of Viṣṇu representations during the first three centuries of the common era in Mathurā are discussed. Contrary to Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa and the Vṛṣṇis, Viṣṇu is not even mentioned in epigraphy. It is only in the Gupta era that he becomes more present and significant. The first icons Schmid describes here are three icons of an eight-armed deity in action. At least one of these has been identified as the Viṣṇu of the *trivikrama* myth, subjugating the demon king Bali. Schmid, however, nuances this identification and demonstrates parallels to the Vedic *trivikrama* aspect, of Viṣṇu defeating demons and crossing the worlds, without the presence of Bali (who is absent from the reliefs). There is already some agreement with some aspects of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, hinting at their later identity. From the end of the third ~ beginning of the fourth century, Viṣṇu begins to appear, first in a form very similar to the four-armed Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, with just a difference in a particular hand gesture, and in the switching of some arms. In some cases a halo is added. To identify these as Viṣṇu and the Kuṣāṇa era icons as Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, despite their great similarity, is, as Schmid argues, correct because the iconography of Kṛṣṇa changes over time: new forms of Kṛṣṇa emerge, leaving the four-armed form for Viṣṇu. The changes in iconography thus reflect developments within the religion, themselves suggested by epigraphical evidence. Under Viṣṇu many different deities were assimilated, albeit with a particular hierarchy with Nārāyaṇa and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa as his most important parts. Another aspect of Gupta development is that the Kṛṣṇa character becomes more identified with a cowherd deity, especially represented as a child-god, in Kṛṣṇa. This child Kṛṣṇa is represented as a human, still growing into his divinity: he has only two arms and none of his attributes. The iconography of the child Kṛṣṇa (as well as that of the other child-god Skanda) is further linked to the specific conception of divine kingship of the Guptas, and their obsession with lineage, argued by evidence from some inscriptions.

The eighth and final chapter focuses on another episode of the Kṛṣṇa biography, popular during the Gupta period for representation, namely the lifting

of Mount Govardhana. Schmid commences with a study of this myth in the HV, discussing it in the light of the Kāliya story, and the Vedic myth of Indra's slaying of Vṛtra, and concluding that the Govardhana myth testifies to Kṛṣṇa vanquishing Indra, and taking over his position, paralleling a practical change in the cult. After the textual study, she describes the occurrences of Kṛṣṇa Govardhanadhara icons in North India dating from the Gupta period, and goes into great detail in her examination of the single image of Govardhanadhara from Mathurā, discussing at length issues related to these representations and their link to Mathurā. She speculates on the relationship of the Govardhanadhara myth with local deities, namely *yakṣas*, but also and especially the *nāga* cult. In this last, the notable absence of Balarāma comes to the fore. Schmid further connects the myth with that of Viṣṇu as *vāmana* and *trivikrama*, and draws parallels between representations of Kṛṣṇa on the one hand, with those of Viṣṇu's *avatāras* on the other, by focusing on the sequence of Pāthaghāṭā in Bihar, a sequence that apparently represents different episodes of the Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu myths, identified by Schmid as surrounding the episode of Śiśupāla's death.

Summarizing the main findings from her previous chapters, Schmid provides additional support for her work by drawing parallels between the occurrences in text and stone of Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu and their development, and those of Skanda/Śiva. After the main text of the book, the author provides a description of the corpus and a photographs of most of the icons.

Though the book has been composed to a high standard, there are some instances of carelessness. In footnote 924, for instance, the author refers to her own articles on goddess representations, Schmid 2004, 2006 and *à paraître*, none of which are listed in the bibliography. Another example concerns the multiple references to a textual source, the *Bālacarita*, for which no context or even an author is mentioned anywhere. This reader assumed it to be the play named thus attributed to Bhāsa. The work does not figure in the bibliography (primary sources), and references made in the text to other authors discussing the work (Couture 1992, Couture 1994, on p. 423) do not figure in the bibliography at all, or are unclear (p. 423, reference to Couture 2006, but the bibliography lists a Couture 2006a and 2006b). Also, though Schmid is explicit that she was not able to take into account the work of Sonya Quintanilla (2007), it would have been of considerable added value if she nevertheless could have spared the extra time to engage with it, at least for those passages where they share the same material or interest, for instance in Quintanilla's identification of the Balarāma of Nanakpur (2007: 93), absent from Schmid's book. But in spite of these criticisms, there should be no doubt that Charlotte Schmid's book is the result of sound scholarship and that it

will remain a very significant reference book on Kṛṣṇa for a long time to come.

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