

A MISIDENTIFIED IMAGE OF BHṚKUṬĪ IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM BANGKOK

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ABSTRACT—This study delves into the misidentification of a seated female figure in meditation, displayed at the National Museum Bangkok, now identified as Bhṛkuṭī. The statuette, dating back to approximately 750–850 CE, showcases unique attributes, such as a distinctive *stūpa* on the deity's hair topknot. Analyzing its iconography, the notice traces the evolution of Bhṛkuṭī's representation from South to Southeast Asia, highlighting her diverse forms and roles in Buddhist art history. The study challenges established norms, proposing a potential import hypothesis, and emphasizes the intricate interplay of regional influences, artistic diversity, and the evolving roles of Buddhist female deities.

KEYWORDS: Bhṛkuṭī; Buddhist Iconography; National Museum Bangkok; Southeast Asian Art

One of the numerous metal statuettes displayed in the National Museum Bangkok shows a seated female figure in meditation with six arms [FIGURE 1]. While information on this statue's original location is unknown, the image came from the Royal collection; it was presented by HM King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–1935) to the National Museum on 17 December 1926. This image has been previously published on several occasions and was first identified as a Tārā (Bowie & Griswold 1960: pl. 36). The statuette was later identified as Tārā or Cundā in an exhibition catalogue for the Gemeentemuseum (Kunstmuseum) in the Hague in 1963, with a possible date to the 9th century CE (Lohuizen-de Leeuw et al. 1963: 20, pl. 20). By 1980, the image was identified as

the Buddhist deity Cundā, presumably because two of her hands display the *dhyānamudrā* or meditation gesture (Piriya 1980: 180; Subhadradis 1980: pl. 35). However, the bowl, one of Cundā's main attributes, is absent, and there are, in fact, more compelling arguments to propose a different identification.

Although the present image under discussion is a little worn, some of the attributes of the deity's hands can be tentatively identified as (1) a rosary, (2) a manuscript, (3) a jewel (*cintāmaṇi*). Seated in a cross-legged position on a double lotus seat resting on a square base, the lotus appears to lack the pearl-rimmed pod that commonly belong to such seats. This female figure wears a diadem with a front triangle and earrings. She is also adorned with a necklace, arm-bands, and bracelets. The large round-shaped mandorla at her back exhibits its intermittent flames along the rim

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and is further decorated by a layer of gold, similar to the figure's lips. The style of the backpiece mandorla and seat is reminiscent to that seen in northeast India during the Pāla-Sena period from the 8th through the 12th century (Sundström 2020: I, 45–46). The deity's hair is assembled in a tall, ascetic hair-style on the top of her head in a manner similar to that seen on stone carvings in the Ellora caves, in western India, and in some statues from northeast India produced during the Pāla-Sena period.

Perhaps one of the most significant iconographic features is the *stūpa* positioned at the front of the deity's hair topknot. The miniature *stūpa* appears to sit on three rings, braids in the hair ensemble. The *stūpa* has a broad round base, with another smaller rounded piece on top; it is completed with a pole or *chattra*.² The profile silhouette of the miniature *stūpa* is similar to that of a pear. This symbol is commonly associated with male images of the Bodhisattva Maitreya. Nevertheless, some iconographic texts mention that the *stūpa* is also used in images of the Buddhist deity Bhṛkuṭī.³ In her *Introduction à l'iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique*, de Mallmann notes Bhṛkuṭī's

connection to Amitābha but based on *Sādhnamālā* number 15 describes the iconographic symbol of a *caitya* as part of the hair ensemble (de Mallmann 1975: 118).

The rounded mandorla or backpiece for this statuette is somewhat anomalous. A filled or solid backpiece with a smooth rim and intermittent flames is common in northeast Indian bronzes, but the additional pearl-rim seems absent as far as we can ascertain from the present state of the figure and from available photographs at our disposal (kindly shared by Nicolas Revire). Similar known examples with the missing pearl-rim are a few Avalokiteśvara statuettes from Indonesia as well as bronzes from Bangladesh and Odisha (Mitra 1978: fig. 112; Sundström 2020: II, pls 43, 51–52, 56).⁴ The lotus seat is unusual in that the top is flat. More commonly, a pearl-rimmed pod or something similar covers the top of the seat. Additionally, the base of the statuette has feet, rare in Southeast Asia, but frequent in northeast Indian bronzes, leading to hypothesize that the statuette was an import from this region and not a local product from peninsular Thailand.

While Bhṛkuṭī may not be the most famous of the Buddhist deities, her first known appearance in a text may be in the *Āryamañjuśrī(ya)mūlakalpa* (1.50), in which her name is mentioned among a longlist of “WisdomQueens” (*vidyārājñīs*), including a certain Tārā.⁵ Her role as one

² Subhadradis Diskul (1980: 34) noted the possibility of a *stūpa*, but was uncertain. Additionally, he dated the statuette to the 9th or 10th century CE.

³ There are also *sādhana*s that describe Bhṛkuṭī as including a miniature effigy of the Buddha Amitābha at the front of her hair topknot (Bhattacharyya 1958: 152). Conversely, Bhṛkuṭī is not the only Buddhist deity to have been depicted with a miniature *stūpa* in this location. Stone statues of Marici from Odisha show her with the same iconographic attribute. However, Marici can be easily identified with her three heads. Marici has also been depicted with a miniature buddha figure in front of the hair ensemble at the top of her head. See for example: <https://id.smb.museum/object/796196/marici> (accessed 8 November 2023).

⁴ For an almost complete example showing a seated buddha with the rounded mandorla and intermittent flames on the rim, see: https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/huntington/show_detail.py?ObjectID=7367 (accessed 6 November 2023).

⁵ See the translation from Tibetan here: <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh543.html#translation> (accessed 2 October 2023). This text



FIGURE 1: Six-armed Bhṛkuṭī seated in meditation, possibly imported from northeast India, approx. 750-850 CE, National Museum Bangkok, H.: 18 cm, copper alloy with partial gilding, inv. no. ศว ๓ (SV 3) © Nicolas Revire

of many female deities continues in other Buddhist texts such as the *Sarvatathāgatā-chintyadharmadhātumudrāpaṭala*, in which we find the first written iconographic information about Bhṛkuṭī. This text also describes a *mudrā* (lit. “seal” or ritual hand gesture) named after her (Ghosh 1980: 150).⁶

According to Mallar Ghosh, the oldest known appearance of Bhṛkuṭī in Indian art may be found at the main temple of Nalanda in stucco reliefs (Ghosh 1980: 154) dating back to the early 7th century. Unfortunately, the stucco is now missing the heads of all the accompanying figures of Avalokiteśvara. While it is likely that one female figure represented Bhṛkuṭī, the evidence is now lacking. We do find, however, surviving depictions of Bhṛkuṭī in the Ellora caves of Maharashtra. The earliest image there shows her with Mahāmāyūrī in the antechamber of Cave 6, dating back to the early 7th century as well (Malandra 1993: 92). In these representations, Bhṛkuṭī is depicted with two arms. An antelope skin rests sometimes on her left shoulder and arm, similar to depictions of the standing ascetic Avalokiteśvara found in the same cave complex of Ellora. She also possesses a tall ascetic hairstyle, in front of which a miniature *stūpa* is depicted, allowing us to clearly identify her (de Mallmann 1975: 118). Over time, Bhṛkuṭī became a fixed companion of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. For instance, in Cave 12 at Ellora, she is portrayed on the viewer’s right hand side as

part of a triad flanking Avalokiteśvara in the center together with a seated Tārā on the left hand side. The miniature *stūpa* at the front of her tall hairstyle is again clearly visible [FIGURE 2]. In this depiction, she holds the water vessel (*kamaṇḍalu*) as one of her attributes.

A transition from a two-armed to four-armed form of Bhṛkuṭī occurred in northeast India. Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann (1948: 166), in her monograph on Avalokiteśvara, included a table of Bhṛkuṭī’s iconography in association with Avalokiteśvara. Her examples were for Bhṛkuṭī alongside Avalokiteśvara, not as a solitary figure. A common set of iconographic features for her form with four arms usually consists of a rosary in the upper right hand and the lower right hand displaying the *varadamudrā*. The upper left hand holds a three-pronged staff and the lower left hand a water vessel. A second variation would be that the two lower hands display the “salutation” hand gesture (*anjalimudrā*).⁷

The four-armed form of Bhṛkuṭī is the version predominately seen in Odisha. The majority of the Bhṛkuṭī images from eastern India are also found in connection with Avalokiteśvara stone statues. In images dated to the 8th century and onward, as well as the bronze statuettes from the Achutrajpur hoard, dated to the 10th century CE, Bhṛkuṭī is shown with four arms. The most common iconographic combination of attributes is a rosary in the upper right hand with the lower right hand in the “boon-receiving” gesture (*varadamudrā*). Her upper left hand holds a three-pronged staff and the lower left hand holds a water vessel. The miniature *stūpa* is consistently present at the front of her hair ensemble.

dates approximately to the 8th century CE; however, some parts may have been composed at an earlier date.

⁶ Bhṛkuṭī is mentioned in the *Saṁnipāṭaparivarta*, *Maṇḍalavidhānaparivarta*, *Rājavyākaraṇaparivarta* and the *Hevajratantra* in different configurations of characters without iconographic information (Ghosh 1980: 149–150).

⁷ For example, see Banerji 1933: no. 3860.



FIGURE 2: Triad with a seated Avalokiteśvara at center, flanked by seated Tārā (viewer's left) and Bhṛkuṭī (viewer's right), wall panel relief, Cave 12, Ellora, Maharashtra, India, approx. 700–730 CE © Nicolas Revire

However, the six-armed form of Bhṛkuṭī appears not to have originated from the Indian subcontinent. Although six-armed Bhṛkuṭī images are depicted in Tibet, the iconographic attributes for this form are weapons such as sword, club, or bow (Ghosh 1980: 171, 179). Alice Getty (1914: 110) described another six-armed Bhṛkuṭī as being the Blue Tārā, but that form would have three heads, rather than just one. This is certainly different from the six-armed statuette of Bhṛkuṭī at the National Museum Bangkok.

Bhṛkuṭī is not the only female deity from insular Southeast Asia who has been depicted with six arms. There are examples of other female figures with six arms from the region, but they have not yet been identified (Mechling 2020:

II, fig. 6.82 and 6.189). The more common number of arms for these female deities, however, are two, four, or eight. A frequent iconographic attribute for the female deities with multiple arms is that the frontal right hand displays the *varadamudrā* and holds a jewel in the palm of the hand. We see this for a four-armed and eight-armed figures, also in the National Museum Bangkok, as well as in several others from Indonesia including the Buddhist deity in the Sambas hoard (Subhadradis 1980: pl. 36; Piriya 1980: pl. 50; Mechling 2020: II, fig. 5.88).

Stylistically the Bhṛkuṭī statuette located in the National Museum Bangkok has close ties with the art of northeast India. The statuette might once have been part of a triad featuring Avalokiteśvara at the center flanked by another Tārā as a



FIGURE 3: Triad with a standing Avalokiteśvara at center, flanked by seated Tārā (viewer's left) and Bhṛkuṭī (viewer's right), from Central Java, approx. 825–850 CE, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H.: 19.2 cm, bronze with silver inlay, acc. no. 1987.142.22 © The Met

companion, although surviving images do not corroborate this hypothesis. If indeed this statuette under discussion was produced as a solitary image, it would be relatively unique. As we have seen, Bhṛkuṭī is typically depicted alongside other Buddhist figures, male and female. However, in Javanese art, a greater number of images depicting Bhṛkuṭī have survived. Some of these images remain integral components of a triad with Avalokiteśvara and a Tārā [FIGURE 3], while others appear as stand-alone figures, though they might have originally been part of an ensemble.

One Javanese example of a stand-alone Bhṛkuṭī also shows the lips highlighted in gold [FIGURE 4], which is fairly

reminiscent of our statuette from the National Museum Bangkok. This two-armed form, originally found in Bumiayu district, Brebes regency, Central Java, wears an elaborate diadem. The miniature *stūpa* at the front of her hair topknot once again confirms identification as Bhṛkuṭī.

With open eyes and a gold-highlighted *ūrṇā* and lips, this Bhṛkuṭī is adorned with a necklace, earrings, armbands, and bracelets. A sash (*yajñopavīta*), crosses her body just below her natural waist, decorated with a line and dot pattern. Here, she sits in the half cross-legged position on a single lotus seat, unlike our specimen from the National Museum Bangkok. Additionally, she lacks a mandorla or



FIGURE 4: Seated, two-armed Bhṛkuṭī from Bumiayu, Brebes, Central Java, approx. 800–850 CE, Museum Nasional Indonesia, H.: 16 cm, bronze with gold inlay, inv. no. 6590 © Kern Digital Library, OD-13995

halo. Her lower garment is decorated with lines and dots, as is the sash, as well as a floral pattern. This particular statuette has been named a Tārā by both the Kern Digital Library and the Huntington Digital Library,⁸ however, due to the presence of the miniature stūpa in front of her hair topknot, we feel quite confident to identify it more precisely as the Buddhist deity Bhṛkuṭī.

⁸ See: <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:5153>, and https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/huntington/show_detail.py?ObjectID=30126861 (accessed 10 October 2023). Additionally, the figure was identified as Tārā in exhibition catalogues (Fontein 1990: 192; Sedyawati 1997: 93).

The Javanese bronzes have been dated to approximately 775–850 CE. However, peninsular Thailand likely had a different development than Java in terms of local artistic language, even though there are similarities between the two areas. Piriya Krairiksh (2012: 252) hypothesized that the statuette was imported from Odisha and dated it to 800–850 CE, primarily based on its similarity with another statuette found at Achutrajpur. Mathilde Mechling (2020: I, 195) also noted that the backpiece was similar to those found in Odisha and Java. While there are indeed some obvious stylistic similarities with statuettes from Odisha, there are also stylistic links with other areas, such as Bangladesh as mentioned above.

In conclusion, the examination of the seated figure statuette in the National Museum Bangkok reveals a fascinating evolution of Bhṛkuṭī's iconography from South to Southeast Asia. This transition spans multiple regions and time periods, reflecting the dynamic nature of Buddhist art.

Starting with the portrayal of Bhṛkuṭī with two arms and the distinctive presence of a miniature stūpa at the front of her hair topknot, we see her emergence in early texts and her role among the Vidyārājñīs. As we progress through the centuries, she evolves, acquiring jewelry and four arms, frequently found alongside a certain Tārā, flanking the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

Unexpected aspects of the Bangkok statuette, including the atypical backpiece of the rounded-mandorla and a potential import hypothesis, challenge

our understanding of Bhr̥kuṭī's regional and historical spread. Intriguingly, the flat top of the lotus seat deviates from the norm, where a pearl-rimmed pod typically covers it. This anomaly adds to the statuette's uniqueness. The number of arms for the deity may be a local development or influenced by external factors. All of these factors influence the dating of the piece to approximately 750–850 CE, a slightly broader date than given by Piriya Krairiksh. It is likely

that the statuette was imported, either from the Bangladesh region or Odisha in northeast India.

Overall, the study of Bhr̥kuṭī's iconography highlights the complex interplay of regional influences, evolving roles of Buddhist female deities, and artistic diversity across time and space. It underscores the significance of individual statues as pieces of a broader narrative in the rich tapestry of Buddhist art history.

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