CHAPTER THREE

PORTRAITS, WORSHIP AND DIVINE IMAGES

In the preceding pages, we have seen that early Indian portraits share a lot of features with images in general, and representations of deities in particular. Besides, among the preserved portraits, a vast majority is still in temples, or at least comes from them; many of them are also linked, in one way or another, to divine images. All this raises a lot of tricky questions: had the commemorative value of portraits, as we have observed it on a social angle in the previous chapter, also a religious perspective? If so, had it anything to do with death and ancestor worship? On the whole, did portraits receive some kind of cult? This is what I will try to examine in this chapter.

1. Portraits, commemoration and death

I have already mentioned one of the first clearly attested example of commemorative portraits: Nanaghat. Let me just remind that only the feet of the seven characters carved on the wall of the cave remain today, but we know their identity: Śimukā, founder of the Sātavāhana dynasty, Śirī Sātakarnī, probably the second king of the lineage, Nāganikā, his widow and patron of the monument, three Sātavāhana princes and one of their vassals and father of Nāganikā. For J. Rosenfield, the ‘sanctuary’ was one of the oldest examples of portraits in India and could have served as a prototype for other sanctuaries, such as Māt. However, he explains the existence of these images by the links (both commercial and political) between the Sātavāhanas and the Iranian or Iranized Kṣatrapas. There is no doubt that such links existed, but once again, without rejecting the possibility of artistic influences—which in this case are not demonstrated—it is very likely that we are facing a position of principle.

Besides, this cave has sometimes been brought together with the shrine in which the third act of the Pratimānāṭaka takes place; it has also been compared with the devakulas at Māt and Surkh Kotal. However, Giovanni Verardi has made his point that all these connections were not always consistent, since at Māt and Surkh Kotal the royal
statues were installed in a temple dedicated to a deity (or deities) and were probably considered as attendants, whereas Nanaghat may not have been a cult place at all but, instead, a place excavated by the Sātavāhanas in order to exalt their dynasty while offering a resting dwelling to the travellers.¹

All we can say is that Nanaghat’s originality lies more in the fact that, to date, it seems to be the oldest example of a gallery of family portraits, in a monument the function of which remains, for the rest, quite mysterious. The commemorative value is obvious but the living (Nāganikā, at least) and the dead (Śimukā and Śīrī Sātakarnī, for instance) are on an equal footing. In other words, it does not indicate that commemorative portraiture was always associated with the after-life.

The repeatedly used example of Bhāsa’s Pratimānātaka—the date of which is relatively early (if compared with the first preserved images)—has undoubtedly helped to reinforce the idea that portraits are necessarily posthumous. However, the idea was based solely on this text in which, as already noted, it is not expressly said that portraits of living people should not be made. It is also noteworthy that Bharata himself questions the idea. Anyway, this play demonstrates the existence of commemorative portraits and, a few centuries after, we find the same in the Raghuvamśa by Kālidāsa:

Rāma, who was a treasury of affection, distributed houses provided with suitable furniture to his friends; then, with tears in his eyes, he entered the house which contained the offerings for his father, his father who remained only as a picture!²

Another example of a portrait which is at the same time sort of divine image can be found in the Tamil epic by Ilakōvatikal, the Cilāppadikaram (The Tale of the Anklet, third-fourth century). In the third book, after having burnt Madurai to avenge her husband’s death, Kannaki flees to the mountains; she last appears to a group of country girls then ascends to heaven and becomes goddess of Fidelity. Immediately, the villagers start addressing a cult to her; but this new worship is rapidly adopted and somewhat appropriated by the Cēra king who orders the quest of a stone in the Himalaya to have an image of the

² 14.15: veśmāni rāmah pariharvanti viśrānya sauhārdhanidhiḥ suhṛdbyah / bāspāyamāno balimanniketam ālekhyāśasya pitur viveśa //.