CHAPTER SEVEN

ANTEDEDATING KANIŠKA:
MATHURA SCULPTURES OF CA. 50–100 CE

Introduction

In this chapter we examine several architectural bas reliefs and large-scale sculptures carved in the round from Mathura that I attribute to ca. 50–100 CE, plus or minus about twenty-five years. Unlike the preceding period of ca. 15 CE during the time of Śoḍāsa, there have not yet been discovered any sculptures of this later period with inscriptions that refer either to a date with clearly attributable era or to a known ruler whose dates are as certain as those of the mahākṣatrapa Śoḍāsa. The primary extant evidence for the succession of rulers at Mathura after the reign of Śoḍāsa and up to the commencement of the reign of the Kušāṇa kings is numismatic. Coins with the names of four kṣatrapa rulers who appear to have been successors of Śoḍāsa have been found at Mathura. These four are Toraṇaḍāsa (or Bharaṇaḍāsa), possibly Vajatama, Śivadatta, and Śivaghoṣa.1 The coins are few, the names are not known from any other sources, and we do not know the duration of their reigns. No coins of the first Kušāṇa king Kujula Kadphises have as yet been found in Mathura. Cunningham has reported only that coins of the unnamed Kušāṇa king Soter Megas (probably Vema Takto, Kaniška’s grandfather) have been found at Mathura.2 Coins of Vema Kadphises, Kaniška’s father, have been recovered in Mathura, but in the same archaeological strata as those of Kaniška.3 Thus, it is uncertain whether either Vema Takto or Vema Kadphises actually ruled in Mathura, or whether their coins simply made their way there with the expansion of the Kušāṇa empire to include Mathura, whenever that event actually took place. Probably the most likely, though unprovable, succession of rulers of Mathura during the first century CE and up to the time of Kaniška, whose reign appears to have begun in 127 CE is as follows: the kṣatrapas Śoḍāsa, Toraṇaḍāsa (or Bharaṇaḍāsa), Vajatama (?), Śivadatta, and Śivaghoṣa, followed by the Kušāṇa kings Vema Takto, Vema Kadphises, and Kaniška. Possibly the Śaka era of 78 CE coincides with the conquest of Vema Takto (Soter Megas) and expansion of the Kušāṇa empire into Madhyadeśa.

Consequently, because of the lack of objects inscribed with a year that yields a date during this period of ca. 50–100 CE or with the name of a ruler who was in power during this time, we must rely on a visual analysis of sculptural styles to determine to the best of our abilities which works of art were produced during this period. Fortunately, we

are familiar with the stylistic traits of sculptures produced during the time of *mahākṣatrapa* Soḍāsa, as discussed in detail in Chapter Six, as well as of those produced in the following period during the reign of Kaniṣka. A group of sculptures combines both, and these I attribute to the phase intervening between the reigns of Soḍāsa and Kaniṣka. Thus, the sculptures described in this chapter retain some elements that link them to the sculptural styles of ca. 15 CE while concurrently exhibiting features that foreshadow the well-known types of figuration seen in art produced during the reign of Kaniṣka (ca. 127–150 CE). Like the five *āyāgapatas* datable to 50–100 CE, notably the Chaubiṇḍa *āyāgapata* (Fig. 160) and the Vasu *śīlāpata* (Fig. 168), the sculptures of this period evince a tightening of forms and a decreased interest in depicting textural variation and ornamental design.

Among the sculptures to be discussed here, four include representations of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form—a significant quantitative increase from the single known example from the time of Soḍāsa, the Buddha on the Isāpur railing (Fig. 262). ⁴ Although there is some differentiation in the mode of portraying the Buddha, a greater degree of confidence in representing his form is seen in the art of ca. 50–100 CE. By the late first century CE, the human image of the Buddha is not only represented on a small scale in narrative contexts, but also on a large scale, as an iconic image of worship. Hence, from the corpus of hitherto discovered examples of the anthropomorphic Buddha image dating to the first century CE, we can discern a crescendo in frequency and assurance in depicting his image, such that the large quantity of famous Buddha images that date to the reign of Kaniṣka cannot be viewed as arising suddenly, or *ex nihilo*.

A note of clarification of nomenclature is necessary at this point. Some might consider the works of art included in this chapter as belonging to the Kuśāna period, because although they date earlier than the time of the Kuśāna emperor Kaniṣka, they have been dated to the time when Kaniṣka’s Kuśāna predecessors ruled. Simply stated, the problem is this: When did the Kuśāna period begin at Mathura? Did it begin with the first Kuśāna emperor in India, Kujula Kadphises, whose coins have been found at Mathura? (There is some epigraphical evidence that one of them ruled in Mathura; see Appendix I.20.) Or did the Kuśāna period at Mathura begin with Kaniṣka himself, since we have secure epigraphic and numismatic evidence of his having been an influential ruler at Mathura? For our purposes in this study, any of these three possibilities is acceptable, though I favor the third: in terms of art history, the Kuśāna period at Mathura began with the reign of Kaniṣka, because many sculptures dated by inscription mention him and his successors by name. Our understanding of the Kuśāna style at Mathura begins with the time of Kaniṣka. It would be helpful for determining a better alternative name for this period if we had a clearer idea of the political history of Mathura after *mahākṣatrapa* Soḍāsa and before the Kuśāna king Kaniṣka. Since we do not, the use of dates to define the parameters of the period will have to suffice. I am concerned here with establishing a definition of styles and the content of the school of sculpture prior to the time of

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⁴ There may be more than four images of the Buddha datable to this time period, such as one of those discussed by P. Pal, in “A Pre-Kushana Buddha,” Fig. 1. However, this sculpture is so heavily eroded that details of carving are difficult to analyze.