



Six Jaina Bronzes

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Jain bronze¹ altars can be found in numerous museums and collections outside India. Most of these objects come from western India and were produced between the 11th and 19th century. Older examples are much rarer. It is particularly early modern bronze altars, which were made in large numbers in the 14th to 16th centuries, and their earlier counterparts, that ended up in public, private and community collections. The following remarks are an attempt to bring to notice one group of these hitherto understudied altars, and the research questions related to them, based on a sample of six artifacts held in private and public collections, initially selected because of the close iconographic and epigraphic similarity of certain Pārśvanātha *pañcatīrthika* images in collections in India and Europe.

Although large numbers of these altar pieces exist, an in-depth study of early modern and modern Jain bronzes has not yet been undertaken. While several studies of Jaina bronzes

have been published, none have considered the object as a three-dimensional form. They either focus only on the iconography of the front side² or, where available, on the inscriptions on the back.³ When it comes to questions of authenticity, particularly relevant for the assessment of the historical value of the contents of inscriptions, it is essential to look at the statues from all sides, and ideally, to also investigate the material it is made of.

The six Pārśvanātha *pañcatīrthika* bronzes presented in this article, share many features which raises questions as to their authenticity.⁴ One of these bronzes is an authentic early modern altarpiece from Saṃvat 1503 māgha vadi 4 (6 January 1447) held at the Munich Museum Fünf Kontinente.

The five other bronzes are not as old as their inscriptions seem to indicate, which raises questions about the historical, religious, and pedagogical value of replica Jaina bronzes in general, but also about the uses and the significance of distinctions such as authentic / false or original / imitation. Copies of well-known objects of art are constantly produced for the religious and tourist markets and no one sees any problem with this. It has long been recognised that the symbolic and commemorative value of the artifacts is not dependent on historical authenticity.⁵ These questions will be briefly addressed below.

(Fig. 1) This early modern bronze altar showing Parśva in the centre will serve as the starting point of our analysis. It was acquired as early as 1841 and can therefore be regarded as authentic,⁶ also in view of the intelligible Sanskrit, unique historical information, and style of lettering of the inscription translated and analysed by Johannes Klatt,⁷ although several divergences from the established iconography can be observed.

The overall arrangement of figures and symbols and the structural frame follow a pattern that was fully developed by the 12th or early 13th century and remained largely unchanged afterwards.⁸ In this example the usual nine planets⁹ are shown, and next to the *kalaśa* that surmounts the *parikara*, the usual two leaves of the Aśoka tree are still present, which, together with other elements like the lion throne, divine musicians, and fly whisk bearers are part of the *aṣṭamahāprātihāryas*, the eight great miracles that indicate the Jinas' attainment of omniscience.¹⁰ The placement of the planets below the throne underlines the elevated position assigned to the Jina within the Jain cosmos. At



Fig. 1a & 1b. Pārśvanātha Pañcatīrthika, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich, Acc. No. L 237, Photo © Marianne Franke



Fig. 2a & 2b. Pārśvanātha, Inscribed, Metal, Gujarat, Acc. No. 2007.27.3, © Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh.

the same time, their presence connects the altar to the mythical mount Mandara (Meru); its peak is the highest point of the middle world (*madhya-loka*) and is believed to be the seat of the deified Jina, who rules over the three worlds as *devādi deva*.

The next bronze (Fig. 2) shows a similar general structure and composition, yet some features have already been changed. The main figure of this *pancatīrthika*. Pārśva, is placed under a seven-headed snake hood; above it a parasol is added. On Pārśva's chest a large lozenge-shaped mark is visible, his eyes are wide open and are emphasized with silvery inlays. The central figure is flanked by two standing and, above each of them, two sitting Jinās; they are all placed in individual miniature shrines. The standing Jinās each wear a garment around their hips (*paridhāna*) thus identifying the entire bronze as part of the Śvetāmbara tradition. Above the miniature shrines two elephants appear next to the parasol; the drums they carry in their trunks are hardly recognizable in this bronze due to the strong simplification. An equally simplified drummer above the parasol alludes to the heavenly drumming (*deva-dundubhi*) that accompanies the moment the Jina attains omniscience. Unlike the early modern bronzes, the upper arched end of this bronze is not decorated with delicate patterns but only with a series of rather plain incisions implying a pearl frieze.

At the top of the arch, a *kalaśa* is framed not by the iconographically prescribed leaves of the Aśoka tree but by a pair of birds.

Next to the standing Jinās, two fly whisk bearers (*cāmaradhāra*) are placed; above each of them the head of a makara is visible. They form part of the *gaja-vyāla-makara* group that is placed on the left and right edge of the bronze. The throne of the central figure shows two lions and two elephant protomes. To the right and left of the throne, a yakṣa and yakṣiṇī are seated. Due to the lack of detail in their depiction they cannot be identified. Older bronzes would have depicted Kubera and Ambikā, after the 10th/11th century Gomukha and Cakreśvarī.

The pedestal of this altar also shows the planetary deities (*graha*), though in this case not all eight or nine of them are depicted. Instead, two groups only of three flank the central group that used to represent the wheel of the doctrine (*dharmacakra*) between two gazelles. Their contours in this altar rather resemble one half of a lotus flower. Below the *dharmacakra* the pedestal is superimposed with a sitting figure. Usually, a female deity is shown in this position who is interpreted as Śāntidevī or Prasādadevī. On the corners of the pedestal there is the donor couple; the fact that they are shown with a chest mark – a feature traditionally reserved for the Jinās – is remarkable.



Fig. 3a & 3b (above) Pārśvanātha, Inscribed, The South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection Trust (SADACC) Norwich Acc. No. 275.2

Fig. 4a & 4b (above) The South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection Trust (SADACC) Norwich Acc. No. 275.1



Fig. 5a & 5b. Private Collection, Priyanka Shah, Ahmedabad

The inscription on the back is barely readable beyond the year and month and makes no clear sense, even at the end of the text which is more legible. Only by creatively projecting formulaic expressions used in similar inscriptions recording the names of the consecrating monk and the sponsors of the image some structure of meaning can be imagined.

Sam. 1331 varṣe kasla [kārtika] [= October/November 1275] [ṭhā]kurāya Kha[śa]rāḍa Sāgarāya[va] śrīryā [->bhāryā] Ku...nāe [->Kujāe] Uṣara [=Ukhara] lasapa māśrā [->bhāryā] Kudā pramukha galakā [->bhāryā?] rāma ṭharāya raṃ Śrī nyam (kā)ritam kāsa(?) pratis[<ṣ] ṭhitam raṣa pra [?] prī [->Śrī ?] Śrī Rata[?]trīravasūri rāṃ [->paṭṭe] p[<ṣ?]riyakā rāb[<ṣ?]āka

The almost illegible name of the consecrating monk Rata-trīvasūri or Ravatrīvasūri (see also Bronze No. 3 & 4) has no etymological meaning and is not evident in the published historical record. The *svastika* engraved on the backside of the image is a decorative element usually not found in medieval bronzes.

Sam. 1331 varṣe kasla [kārtika] [= October/November 1275] [ṭhā]kurāya Kha[śa]rāḍa latā gorāya[<va] śrīryā [->bhāryā] Ku...nāe [->Kujāe] Ukhara lasaya māśrā

[->bhāryā] kudā pramukha galakā [->bhāryā?] rāma ṭharāya raṃ Śrī ... nyam [kā]ritam kāsa (?) p[r]atis[<ṣ] ṭhitam ra ṣa prī pī [->Śrī Śrī?] Śrī Ravatrīravasūri rāṃhe [->paṭṭe] Ś[p?]riyakā rāba[ṣ?]āka

That bronzes such as No. 2 were not individually produced and their inscriptions not individually composed, is evinced by the next altars. Similarly, the also barely readable inscription of the bronze Acc.No. 275.2 of the SADACC in Norwich, UK (Fig. 3), is identical with the inscription of the bronze held by the Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh described above (Fig. 2) even down to some of its illegible parts.

With regard to its iconographical features it is even closer and almost indistinguishable from our next example (Fig. 4), also from the SADACC (Acc. No. 275.1).

Sam^o 1334 varṣe kasla [=kārtika] [=September/October 1277] ... piya parāḍa Latā Gagerā [->Gaṅ-esa?] prāmā [->bhāryā] Ku...nāe [->Kujāe] Uparana layā ... [bhāryā kudā] pramukha galata [->bhāryā] rā ... [->rāma] ... tharāya ... [->raṃ Śrī nyam?] vīrta [->bimba] kā[ritam]^o pratisth[itam]^o Tapāgacha Śrī Śrī Śrī Ratatrīravasūri rāṃhe [->paṭṭe] śrītakari rara... [?] śāta

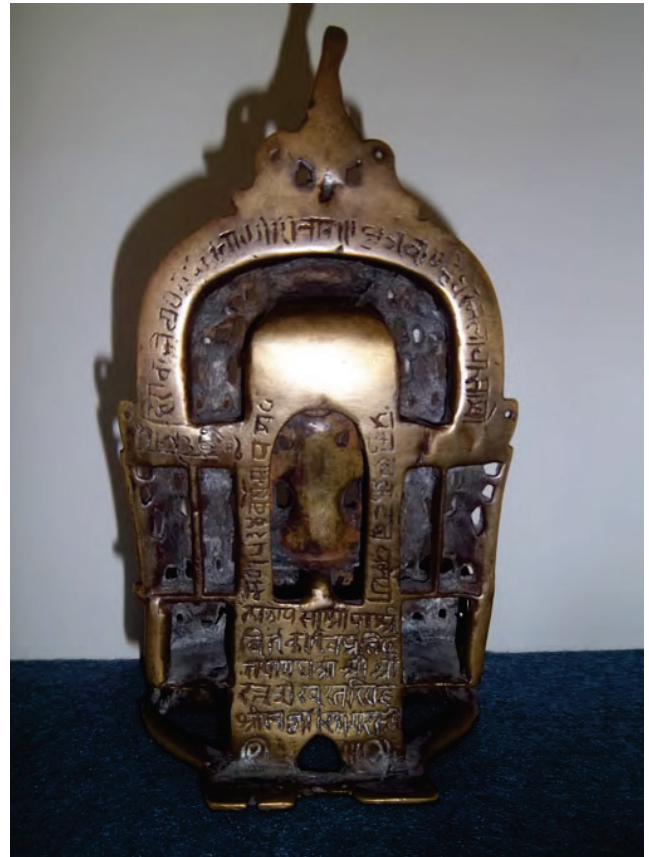


Fig. 6a & 6b. Private Collection, Patrick Krüger, Bochum

Bronzes no. 3 & 4 not only share the here clearly readable name of Ratatrīravasūri in their otherwise different and hardly decipherable inscriptions, they are also more or less identical in layout and closely related with the altar piece discussed before (no. 2). For example, they also show but six of the usual nine *grahas*, and the leaves besides the *kalaśa* are replaced by birds in both examples. As their surfaces are less abraded, individual details are clearer than Fig. 2 and the incised contours accentuate certain elements. The striation pattern is very pronounced in all three altars (Bronzes 2, 3 & 4), but the pearl frieze that adorns the outer edge of the round arch has been executed with more care in No. 3 & 4. Among the details that are clearer in No. 4 is the deity positioned in the center front of the pedestal and the *dharmacakra* which was obviously replaced by a half lotus. This probably goes back to a misinterpretation by the artist of the representation of this motif. In No. 3 & 4 the wheel and the gazelles are merged and the wheel is merely shown as a semi-circular shape with incised lines alluding to the original motif. Despite the slightly better execution, like No. 2, these bronzes, too, in their robust, somewhat clumsy shaping differ considerably from their medieval precursors. The engraving of signature *savastikas* on the backside of No. 2, 3, & 4 is innovative and at variance with the established pattern and suggests a shared origin.

Sam^o 1354 varṣe magha [māgha] sa [śuklā] śrī [=9] budhayasa [=23 January 1298?] Hirā Vāmadā vya[vahārī]^o Rāula tā ...[->bhāryā?] Gaurī nāmnyā Phumicanda Dharama Vapasā [Vayasā?] Śrī Śrī Pamagha bane yā [vā?] ku[tumba] śreyase Śrī Śrī Pāsīrī [?Pārsva] bimba karita p[r]ati[ṣṭhitam] Tapāgaccha Śrī Śrī Ratnaśekhara sūri rāho [->paṭṭe] Śrī Lahetara-rāma ra sū[ribhi]

From an iconographical and art historical point of view this example of a *Pārsvanātha* pañcatīrthika depicted in Fig. 5 reflects a transitional stage. While it retains features of the older representations such as the two leaves next to the *kalaśa* above the arch and does not show chest marks in any figure but the Jina, it shares a certain degree of laxness in the execution of other elements. For example, while it is obvious that more than six *grahas* were meant to be depicted, their heads are not fully outlined but seem to dissolve into a sequence of incised lines. The same holds true for the central group of two gazelles flanking the wheel. Here, the features are too vague to decide whether the entire group was actually depicted or altered.

The inscription is more readable than No. 2, 3 & 4, though not entirely legible and meaningful. Surprisingly, the inscription

of bronze No. 5 overlaps with the inscription of our last example, bronze No. 6, which is iconographically similar as well.

Sam^o 1534 varṣe māgha śa^o [=śuklā] 1 budhejaya
[=15 January 1298 Wednesday] Hirā Vāmedā^o...
[vya(vahārī)^o Rāu]la tā^o[bhā^o->bhāryā?] Gorī nāmnāyā
vugavā^o ... Hedharana Lācā bhāryā [?] pramukha
kuṭaṃba sameyā lokāya [?] sā Śrī Pārśva bimṛta
[=bimba] kārita prati[ṣṭhitaṃ]^o Tapāgaccha Śrī
Śrī Śrī Ratnaśekhara[<sū]ri paṭṭa [->paṭṭe] Śrī
Lakṣamīsāgarasī[†]

Mention should finally be made of a few unusual features that can be observed in most of the last five evidently more recent altar pieces discussed here. Firstly, the representation of the lozenge-shaped chest mark (*śrīvatsa*) – traditionally limited in use to the Jina himself – on the figures of the donor couple placed in the pedestal as well as those of the *yakṣa* couple (Fig. 2–4, 6). Secondly, the elephant protomes, visible on the throne base between the lions in all examples, have a rather anthropomorphic appearance (Fig. 2–6), which may indicate that the artists were not familiar with the symbolism of such a throne. Finally, the clumsy execution of the figures in all these altars distinguishes them from the much more delicate bronzes of the early modern period exemplified by the bronze from Munich (Fig. 1). This decline in the artistic and technical quality of the individual object already began in the 13th century when the number of altars produced increased rapidly, triggering a process of stylization and abstraction that resulted in a loss of iconographical detail. It accelerates even more when altars are no longer produced using the traditional lost wax casting technique.

Duplication factories and processes of authentication

Our preliminary survey and analysis of unexpected regularities amongst bronzes in modern public and private archaeological and art collections, triggered by chance observation, has brought surprising new facts to light. Amongst the images under discussion bronzes No. 2–4 and No. 5–6, which show close resemblances, are held in different collections in India and Europe, without information on their provenance, demonstrates that replica Jina bronzes circulate widely and have now penetrated both museum and private collections via the art market. The fact that despite close resemblance the clumsily produced images are not identical indicates that a certain amount of effort went into the production of these imitations, though details of iconography and inscription were not taken care of or deliberately produced as to be unrecognisable.

During the last forty years, the trade in historical Jaina bronzes has continuously grown, particularly the second-hand market, which serves not only museums and private collectors but also Jaina temples which seek to augment their collections. Even newly manufactured bronzes are only worthy of worship (*pūjanīya*) after a three-day long consecration ceremony conducted away from the eyes of the public by an *ācārya*, including ablutions (*abhiṣeka*), and the eye-opening ceremony (*añjanaśalākā*), through which the image is made “alive.” In the *mūrtipūjaka* Śvetāmbara traditions, old, second-hand images with inscriptions are generally not accepted for worship, especially if they are younger than the 16th century. Even so, images that were excavated from more than 8 feet underground are regarded as venerable after a (re-) consecration following textual prescriptions.¹²

Old Jaina bronzes can be bought on the Indian art markets. It is well known that many of the pieces offered are purpose made in private foundries north of Delhi run by non-Jainas specialised in crafting copies or newly designed bronzes in the style of the 13th to 14th centuries, when the early mass production of such bronzes peaked, particularly of Pārśvanātha and Śitalanātha statues, because it is difficult to trace originals from such a wide pool. No report seems to exist about these workshops. It has however been observed by one of the present authors that duplicates are made by a sand-casting method, using two moulds.¹³

Since only originals are regarded as worthy of worship, it is the duty of the heads of the temple trusts to get historical images selected for acquisition checked by experts, who look at the type of metal used, for instance for the inlays of the eyes of the images (old images use silver, new images iron or other less precious metal), and the execution of the *aṣṭaprātihāryas*. The inscriptions are checked for repetitions of the recorded names of consecrating *ācāryas*, donating family members, time and place, carving style of the script, and meaningfulness of text. Finally, the *ācāryas* of local Jain mendicant orders are consulted and their verdict based on expert evidence is respected.

Images of the bronzes no. 2–6 discussed in this article were scrutinised by Tapāgaccha Jaina *ācāryas* in Ahmedabad, and all were rejected as fakes (*khoṭa*).

A systematic investigation of Jaina bronzes held at different collections and on offer in the art market will have major implications for the art market and, more importantly, for the study of Indian history through art, epigraphy, and prosopography.

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Notes

- 1 The term "bronze" in this context refers to a category of objects and not to the material used. The development of Jain bronze images is closely related to the contemporary stone sculptures, particularly regarding the motifs depicted and the iconography used in the images.
- 2 Shah 1959, 1982, Sharma 1975, Krüger 2008. Iconographic descriptions are generally of single images, finds or collections only.
- 3 Buddhisāgara 1917, 1924, Parikh & Shelat 1997 (Analysis: JPD). Translations of individual inscriptions: Klatt 1892, Cort 2012, Wright 2013, 2014, Andhare 2015, JPG 2021, and others.
- 4 The bronzes are held in public and private collections in India and Europe. However, the sample could have been extended. About 50 duplicate bimbās have been identified by Priyanka Shah in Mūrtipūjaka temples in Ahmedabad / Amadāvāda. The inscriptions and most, but not all, of the iconography of the following two Anantanātha pañcatīrthikas are identical, The Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh Acc. No. 4959-D & The South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection Trust (SADACC) Norwich Acc. No. F.159.3: *Sam^o 1617 Mā[gha]^o [or Mārḡaśīrṣa] vadi 1 gurau Pol[ravāla?]^o suvadi Tārāgrāma vā[stavya]^o Bhaṇṣāśālī gurātana vya^o Vārāla Śalya Mānasa Parataba ma^o Sā^o Śrī Anantanātha bimba kārītaṃ pratiṣṭhitam Tapāgaccha Śrī Somavimalasā[^oūrī]*.
- 5 On conflicting value regimes in Jaina art and architecture, evident in the religious value of "inauthentic" Jina statues lacking "historical value," see Flügel 2022: 224, 228f., 243.
- 6 Inv.-No. L-237. The piece belongs to the Indian collection of Christophe-Augustin Lamarepicquot (1785–1873), who purchased the bronze between 1826 and 1830. In 1841, the entire collection was acquired by the Bavarian King Ludwig I. and was inventoried in 1843. See Flügel 2016: 104–106.
- 7 Klatt 1894: 183; 2016: 649, likely the first translation and study of a Jaina bronze inscription.
- 8 See Krüger 2008, 2011. Klaus Bruhn 1985: 151 developed the theory of "slots/slotfillers." According to him, fixed spaces within the overall layout ("slots") were filled with certain motifs, following a predetermined pattern. While the position of each individual visual element is prescribed, certain elements can replace each other, following fixed rules. .
- 9 The planets (*graha*) were represented since the 6th century in anthropomorphic form or reduced to their heads; three-dimensional or incised, they were shown in front of the throne of the main figure or on a crimp surrounding the base. Early cult images show eight planetary deities (*aṣṭa-graha*); from circa the 11th century onwards, nine planets (*nava-graha*) are depicted. The number of grahas depicted is thus a reliable means to determine a relative dating for such cult images. See Mevissen 2000.
- 10 On the symbolism of the *aṣṭamahāprātihāryas* see Krüger 2020: 92–99 and on the use of visual metaphors in the representation of the omniscience of the Jina see Krüger 2022.
- 11 For sī read sūrī or simha.
- 12 The same applies to stone images. See Flügel 2022.
- 13 The technique of sand casting was employed in this context mainly to save time and expenses, compared to the more time consuming and technically challenging cire perdue casting. Sand casting furthermore allows for the multiple reproduction of one model while the amount of detail reproduced is limited.