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A Re-examination of a Kaniṣka Period Tetradrachm Coin Type with an Image of Mētrago/Maitreya on the Reverse (Göbl 793.1) and a Brief Notice on the Importance of the Inscription Relative to Bactro-Gandhāran Buddhist Iconography of the Period

In an earlier issue of this journal, Joseph Cribb presented an article, "Kaniṣka's Buddha Coins—The Official Iconography of Śākyamuni and Maitreya," in which he published for the first time a number of coins representing Maitreya Buddha.[1] However, some of these coins raised more questions than they answered. Cribb himself corrected the reading for some of the coin inscriptions from Mētrauo Boudo to Mētrago Boudo in his subsequent paper, "The Origin of the Buddha Image—The Numismatic Evidence."[2] In addition, some iconographic details were still left unresolved and the relationship of the coins to particular image types was not thoroughly explored.[3]

I am most indebted to Joseph Cribb for allowing me access to the extensive Kuṣāṇa numismatic holdings in the British Museum, to William F. Spengler for his suggestions, and to B. N. Mukherjee for sharing his many rich and creative ideas and his vast enthusiasm. The *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Iconography* project, from which this article is a "spinoff," has been and is being supported by numerous granting agencies and offices of The Ohio State University. Those granting agencies whose support bears directly on this article are: The National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kress Foundation, and the Smithsonian Institution. Those Ohio State University offices bearing the most direct relationship to this article are the College of the Arts, the Department of History of Art, the Office of the Vice President for Research and The Office of International Studies.

1. Joseph Cribb, "Kaniṣka's Buddha Coins—The Official Iconography of Śākyamuni & Maitreya," *JIABS* 3.2 (1980): 79-88.

2. Joseph Cribb, "The Origin of the Buddha Image—The Numismatic Evidence," *South Asian Archaeology 1981: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 231-244.

3. One important question is the problem of why boudo, i. e., buddha, is used as the term for what is clearly a bodhisattva image. While there is no definitive answer for the Bactro-Gandhāran usage, it may be suggested that the Chinese may have learned their usage of the term *fo*, buddha, for virtually all of the deities in the Buddhist soteriological system from such a Gandhāran

One coin in particular, identifiable for sake of convenience as Göbl 793.1,[4] in the British Museum collection, has been the source of considerable additional study (Figure 1).[5] Cribb originally read the inscription as *Mēt[r]auo Bou[do]* (𐨨𐨣𐨿[𐨮]𐨁𐨟𐨪 𐨪𐨟[𐨃𐨪]) and interpreted the image as one of Maitreya who was actually known as Mētrago (𐨨𐨣𐨿𐨮𐨁𐨠𐨪) in Kuṣāṇa Greek lexicography (Figure 2). This variation in orthography was well within the limits of known variants and posed no particular problem to those of us who are concerned with the inscriptions on these coins. Indeed, the coins themselves are usually in poor to terrible condition and Cribb had rendered the field of Kuṣāṇa studies a service by deciphering several very difficult coin inscriptions. However, although his identification of Mētrago/Maitreya would prove to be correct, there were several errors in his reading.

It is no criticism of Cribb that this problematic coin soon gave rise to another reading. B. N. Mukherjee, apparently working only from published 1:1 photographs, saw the reading in an entirely different light and read it as 𐨁𐨨𐨣𐨟𐨪𐨟𐨪, i. e., Amitābha (Figure 3).[6] If this reading was accurate, it would have been an important addition to the slowly growing body of Amitābha/Sukhāvatī information for the Bactro-Gandhāran region.[7] Mukherjee is well known for his many contributions to Kuṣāṇa studies and, in all candor, because I believe that a clear understanding of the Amitābha cult in Gandhāra is key to a better understanding of initial transmission and early development of what was to become East Asian "Pure-Land" Buddhism, I frankly hoped that he was correct. An inscribed tetradrachm of Kaniṣka's

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practice. More study will be necessary before the solution to this intriguing linguistic question is known.

4. The number is that used by Robert Göbl in his *System und Chronologie der Münzprägung des Kušānreiche* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984) pl 79.

5. For those readers who wish to follow the arguments regarding the reading of the letters on the coin carefully, I have added an appendix of Kuṣāṇa Greek letters as they appear on the coins. Please see Appendix I.

6. B. N. Mukherjee, "Amitābha on Kushāṇa Coins," *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India* 49 (1987 [1991]): 44-45.

7. John C. Huntington "A Gandhāran Image of Amitābha's Sukhāvatī," *Annali dell 'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 40 (n.s. 30) (1980): 651-672; John Brough, "Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara in an Inscribed Gandhāran Sculpture," *Indologica Taurinensia: Official Organ of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies* 10 (1982): 65-70.

reign would have been "good" evidence of both the cult and its date in Bactro-Gandhāra. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

In either case, the reading of the coin was critically important for the study of Bactro-Gandhāran Buddhist iconography, for it could either identify an image of Amitābha or an important variant type of the Mētrago/Maitreya image as found in the Buddhist sculpture of the region. My current work on the Bactro-Gandhāran volume of my *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Iconography* has led me to examine as much of the iconographically relevant inscribed evidence as possible. Simply stated, my research indicates that there is ample technical evidence that neither Cribb's nor Mukherjee's readings is correct. However, each reading is problematic for different reasons. My first clue to the error of Mukherjee's reading was my observation as an iconographer, not as an epigraphist—that the image in the center of the field is a bodhisattva (Figure 4), not a buddha. Specifically, he wears armbands or armlets on both arms, something that is unknown on images of buddhas in the Bactro-Gandhāran sculptural idiom. On the other hand, Cribb's interpretation relied on what would have to have been characters in impossible positions and an erroneous reading of several of the characters.

In his first article, Cribb read the inscription as Mē[r]//auo Bou[do] by reading counterclockwise from 11:00 to 9:30, to 7:30 as M Ē T (ΜΕΤ); then jumping to the top right to 1:00, 2:00, 2:30, 3:00, and 4:00 as AY[U]OBOY[U] (ΑΥΟϐΟΥ), with the last two letters crammed together in what, at first impression appears to be a single ligature (Figure 2). While Kuṣāṇa Greek (like classical Greek inscriptions on pottery, for example) is written every which way imaginable: right to left, left to right, tops of the letter towards the inside, tops of the letters towards the outside, and so on, a break in the line such as Cribb proposed would be most unusual. Clearly, this reading was questionable, but, given the frequent irregularities of Kuṣāṇa Greek inscriptions, not out of the question. Note in particular that Cribb assumes that the *rho* for MET[R] and both the *delta* and the *omicron* from his reading of BOU[DO] are missing, giving his interpretation a somewhat demanding reliance on three missing letters across the bottom.

Mukherjee's reading is based on two epigraphical errors and I think it will be both instructive and possibly cautionary to go through the process of examining just what went wrong in his interpretation. Several years ago, at the 1984 Kuṣāṇa Studies conference in

Lucknow,[8] Mukherjee announced during the discussions following a paper that he had identified a Kaniṣka tetradrachm with the reverse inscribed with the name Amitābha. His article was not forthcoming, however, until 1991.[9] To fully understand what actually transpired, it must be understood that Robert Göbl's monumental corpus of Kuṣāṇa numismatics, *System und Chronologie der Münzprägung des Kušānreiche*, had been published in 1984, detailing hundreds of types of Kuṣāṇa coins, sometimes with several examples from similar or even the same dies.[10] In Göbl's volume, the majority of the coins are published actual size, in accordance with standard numismatic practice. However, for technical study, one-to-one reproduction has serious drawbacks. When coins are in poor condition, if they have been poorly photographed, or worse, when they are in both poor condition and poorly photographed, this can lead to very serious problems. Indeed, for detailed study of coins it is often necessary to use enlargements (I prefer about 10 diameters), drawings made from the actual coin, and photographs made in acute angle raking lighting from several positions around the coin in order to glean the most information from the surface of the coin.

Apparently working only from small (1:1) published photographs of the coin, Mukherjee read the *tau* at 7:30 as an *alpha* and what is actually a *gamma* at 4:30 as an *upsilon* (Figure 3). Given the very poor condition of the coin and the actual appearance of both letters in the photographs in both Cribb and Göbl's publications, I freely admit that, at first, I did not initially find Mukherjee's reading to be based on unreasonable interpretations of the letters in question. On the contrary, even computer enhancements of the presumed *alpha*, generated from the published images in Göbl and Cribb's first article, suggested that Mukherjee was correct. However, by using other resources, it was clear that Cribb's original interpretation of the letter at 7:30 as *tau* was correct. As for the letter at 4:30, in the reproductions that Mukherjee apparently used there is visually the appearance of a small tab on the outside of the bend in the letter *gamma,* which made it look like an abbreviated limb of an *upsilon*, usually rendered U in the transliteration of Kuṣāṇa Greek although Mukherjee's "Y" is not incorrect.

8. Organized and presided over by Dr. R. C. Sharma, then Director of the Lucknow Museum. (Regrettably the proceedings have yet to be published.)
9. See note 7.
10. See note 5.

A careful examination of the coin itself,[11] and using large photographic silver halide prints of the coin (Figure 1), a set of eight slides made of the coin in rotating raking light, and various computer enhancements of selected images from this group leaves very little doubt as to what is and is not present in the inscription (Figure 5). The letter *tau* at 7:30 is a *tau* and there is little chance for it to be anything else. In comparison to the *mu* and *eta*, it is upside down, but, because letter orientations vary in Kuṣāṇa coins, this is not a problem. At 4:30 the double ligature is actually two letters, a *gamma* and an *omicron*. As may be seen from Figure 1, the small tab is not there. There simply is no stroke on the *gamma* extending into the opening of the *omicron* as suggested by the Göbl photograph, and, thus, while it is reversed, it is a *gamma* followed by an *omicron*. The *beta* is, like the *gamma*, reversed, but is an obvious letter as is the *omicron* following it. Counterclockwise from those is a clearly rendered *upsilon* which is arranged vertically in relation to the figure in the center of the coin, and after that an obvious *delta* also arranged vertically. Curiously, the *delta* at 1:00 is very unclear in most photographs, resembling an *omicron* in some cases and in others simply an engraver's error or possibly even a damage. However, Figure 1 shows it clearly and that is why I have selected this particular photograph to illustrate the coin.

According to the foregoing, it is my reading that there is an uninterrupted counterclockwise reading, of M-ē-t [r] [a] g-o B-o-u-d [o] (ΜΗΤ[ΡΑ]ΚΟ ΒΟΥΔ[Ο]), accepting that there are two missing letters in the 6:00 position. Thus, we have another Mētrago Boudo coin, although not read in quite the way Cribb saw it.

When a preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Kuṣāṣa studies panel[12] at the 21st Annual Conference on South Asian Studies held at The University of Wisconsin at Madison in November of 1992, a well-known collector of Kuṣāṇa coins, William F. Spengler, shared from his collection a second specimen apparently from the same dies as the British Museum example (Figure 6). Significantly, it was struck in such a manner that the presumed missing *alpha* and *rho* are still present (albeit transposed from the expected spelling). Thus, the actual reading is "Mētargo Boud[o]" (ΜΗΤ[ΑΡ]Ο ΟΒΟΥΔΟ) (Figure 7). With the *gamma* and the *beta* reversed, the *tau*, *upsilon* and *delta* aligned with different orientation than the other letters which

11. Courtesy of Joseph Cribb, Keeper of Indian coins at the British Museum.
12. Organized by Drs. Martha Carter and Carolyn Schmidt.

are radially aligned relative to the circumference of the coin and the *rho* and *alpha* transposed, it is indeed a very difficult inscription. However, in the discussion about the coins at the meeting, William Spengler cogently noted that the best die cutters were probably engaged in producing the dies for the gold staters of the Kaniṣka era and that much less skilled craftsmen were at work on the copper tetradrachms. As we have just seen, coins of the Göbl 793.1 type seem to have been particularly the work of either a marginally literate or possibly even illiterate die cutter.

One cannot fault either Cribb or Mukherjee for their readings and certainly neither had the benefit of a second coin from the same dies confirming the "missing letters" presented to them. Mukherjee's erroneous reading illustrates the problems of dealing with secondary and even tertiary materials—we all must do it, but one needs to be careful and, the more problematic the piece, the more careful one must be. Both Cribb and Mukherjee have contributed greatly to Kuṣāṇa numismatics, far more than I ever even hope to, and it is certainly not my intention to be critical of the work of either of these friends. Quite the contrary, the inscriptions on these coins are as difficult as any in the Asian numismatic world, often fragmentary, with, as we have just seen, misspellings and often in such poor conditions that they are nearly impossible to read. Even with the computer based analysis techniques that I am using, there are many problems that are simply beyond technological solutions. The study of such coins needs the skills and intuitive sense of someone like either Mukherjee or Cribb to solve the problems that the coin presents.

Although I have been a relatively serious numismatist for more than thirty years, my numismatic interests are in other regions of Asia, and, relative to Kuṣāṇa coins, my intellectual goals are vastly more limited than either Cribb's or Mukherjee's. I am simply looking for contemporeaneously inscribed identifications of Buddhist images for inclusion in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Iconography.* In this context, it must be noted that Cribb's analysis of the iconography of these coins[13] also needs updating in light of the inscriptive evidence actually present on the coin and in light of what it is now possible to see in the image on the coins. First of all, his identification of major Bactro-Gandhāran images as the Buddha Śākyamuni must be

13. Cribb, "Kaniṣka's Buddha Coins—The Official Iconography of Śākyamuni & Maitreya," 81-84.

considered to be very tentative at best and, in many cases, probably wrong. Images of Buddha Maitreya (Ketumatī Maitreya) exist in Bactro-Gandhāran art and, except for minor details of pedestals, these images are indistinguishable from Śākyamuni images.[14] Thus, any image of a standing buddha without a pedestal or an inscription (of which there is only one known at present) simply cannot be identified as to whether it is Ketumatī Maitreya Buddha or Śākyamuni Buddha, or even another Buddha.

Regarding this point, it must be understood that images of Maitreya in both the buddha and bodhisattva forms were very popular in Bactro-Gandhāran Buddhism. Indeed, a survey of the more than 3000 photographs of Bactro-Gandhāran material in The John and Susan Huntington Photographic Archive at The Ohio State University reveals that a majority of individual standing bodhisattva images are representations of the Bodhisattva Maitreya,[15] proving beyond any doubt the popularity of Maitreya among the image-dedicating practitioners of Buddhism in the Bactro-Gandhāran regions. This probably reflects the popular desire to be reborn in either Tuṣita Paradise or at the time of Ketumatī here in the Saha world some 25,000 years after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha. While such a Bactro-Gandhāran "pure-land" cult was not described by the Chinese pilgrims, nor has it been substantiated by extant historical literature or inscriptions, the evidence of the cult as known in other contexts, especially China, and the very significant number of Maitreya images in itself would seem to demonstrate the presence of the cult in Bactro-Gandhāra.

In his first article, Cribb stated that all the images of Mētrago/Maitreya that he illustrates are depicted displaying *abhāyamudrā*.[16] However, this is neither accurate nor is it an accurate

14. John C. Huntington, "The Iconography and Iconology of Maitreya Images in Gandhara," *Journal of Central Asia* 7.1 (July 1984): 149-152.

15. It must be acknowledged that if one counts the small life narrative events and scenes, then the Buddha Śākyamuni does predominate, but in major individual images, the identifiable depictions of Maitreya actually predominate over the those of Śākyamuni Buddha

16. Cribb, "Kaniṣka's Buddha Coins—The Official Iconography of Śākyamuni & Maitreya," 82. Actually, Cribb's statement is unclear. The first part of the paragraph says, "The forthcoming study of these coins will show that only the gesture of reassurance (*abhāyamudrā*) is depicted on them." "These coins" appears to refer to Mētrago/Maitreya images described in the preceding paragraph. However, the subject of the next sentence is the stand-

impression of images of Maitreya on Kuṣāṇa coinage. In the corpus compiled by Göbl,[17] four types of Maitreya/Mētrago coins are listed: numbers 790, 791, 792, and 793. Of this group, numbers 790, 791 and 792 all have an image of Mētrago/Maitreya with his right hand raised and the left hand resting on his left leg. In the 790 and 792 types the right hand is in *abhāyamudrā* and, for example, in the 790.1 coin traces of Mētrago/Maitreya's usual attribute of a bottle (*kamaṇḍalu*) can be seen quite clearly in computer enhancements (Figures 8 and 9). This seems to have been a popular type of image in the Bactro-Gandhāran region and several intact or nearly intact stone examples survive. One of the best preserved stone examples of the type is presently housed in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (Figure 10).

However, of special interest to the issue of the varieties of *mudrā* displayed by Mētrago/Maitreya images in Bactro-Gandhāra is the coin illustrated as 791.1 in Göbl. The figure of Mētrago/Maitreya appears to have been represented with the right hand making *vitarkamudrā*, a very rare gesture for him in Gandhāra. This gesture is clearly visible in the illustration in Göbl. To date, I have not yet found a stone image of Mētrago/Maitreya making *vitarkamudrā* and the coin may represent either a very rare type or a single image that is no longer known.

More importantly, the Göbl 793.1 type coin (Figure 1) in the British Museum example illustrates Maitreya/Mētrago making *dharmacakra-mudrā* and, in the Spengler example (Figure 6), the thumb of the proper right hand is clearly visible at the top of the right hand, giving absolute certainty that the palm of the hand is toward the chest of the figure and not extending away from the chest as would be necessary in the *abhāyamudrā* gesture. Moreover, even in examples of the coin type where the thumb cannot be seen, the position of the right hand in front of the chest and the angle of the left arm, which extends across the chest instead of angling down towards the left leg, make it certain that both hands were in front of the chest—exactly the position that is demanded by the Bactro-Gandhāran version of *dharmacakramudrā*. Significantly, there is neither a bottle nor a vase associated with Mētrago/Maitreya in the coin image. This is the exact pattern of some tentatively identified Gandhāran stone images of Mētrago/Maitreya.

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ing buddhas and it is possible that "these coins" refers to the standing buddhas. My observations are based on taking his sentence structure literally.
17. See note 5.

Prior to the correct reading of the inscription and analysis of the image on this particular coin type, certain stone images were identified as Mētrago/Maitreya on the basis of key secondary characteristics, such as hair arrangements,[18] but inscriptive evidence has been lacking.

One of the best preserved stone images of the type is in the Peshawar Museum (Figure 11). It exhibits dharmacakramudrā and has been identified as Mētrago/Maitreya primarily because of the long looping hair arrangement of the *jaṭāmukuṭa,* which is often pointed out to be reminiscent of the hair style on the Apollo Belvedere. This particular type of hair arrangement has long been identified with Mētrago/Maitreya images in Bactro-Gandhāra, but the usual attributes are lacking. With the reading of the Göbl 793.1 coin type and the accurate analysis of the image type on the coin, it is clear that exactly this type of Mētrago/Maitreya image is intended. Thus, the coin type adds another inscriptional identification to the iconography of Mētrago /Maitreya in the Bactro-Gandhāra region.

A note on the drawings accompanying this article:

The drawings of the coins have been prepared by two distinct means. The first method, for example, used for the Göbl 790.1 coin, was done by tracing a scanned image in a good drawing program on a Macintosh computer. Using enlargements of the coin with high resolution computer technology it is possible to work directly over a photograph of the coin at a magnification of as much as 1600 diameters, which allows for much greater accuracy than the usual eye copies. The second method of drawing is to make a composite drawing using the technique described above but from several different sources. In this case, the drawing does not reflect either a single speciman or any one view of the coin, but a composite of several different coins, or, in the case of the British Museum's Göbl no. 793.1, photographs of the same coin.

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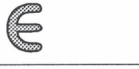
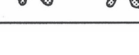
18. Huntington, "The Iconography and Iconology of Maitreya Images in Gandhara," 148-149.

Appendix I

Greek letters occurring on Kuṣāṇa coins

Letters in the following chart have been drawn from inscriptions on the coins of Kaniṣka I. Those to the left occur most commonly; less common variants follow.

A Alpha		A
B Beta		B
Γ Gamma		G
Δ Delta		D
E Epislon		E
Z Zeta		Z
H Eta		Ē Hē
Θ Theta		Th
I Iota		I
K Kappa		K
Λ Lambda		L
M Mu		M
N Nu		N

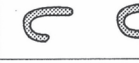
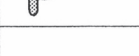
Ξ Xi		X
O Omicron		O
Π Pi		P
P Rho		R
Σ Sigma		S
T Tau		T
Y Upsilon		U Y
Φ Phi		Ph
Χ Chi		Ch [X]
Ψ Psi		Ps
Ω Omega		Ō
"Sha"		Sh Ś



Figure 1. Reverse of a copper tetradrachm of the reign of Kaniṣka I. British Museun Collection. Göbl 793.1

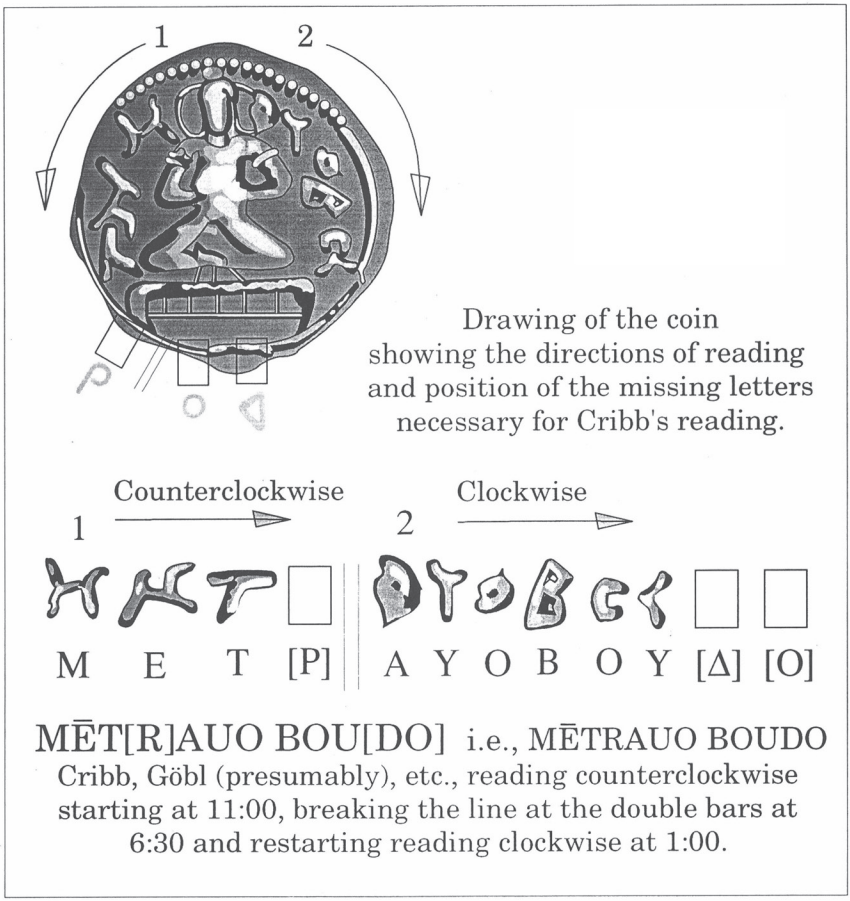


Figure 2. Cribb's reading of the inscription on Göbl 793.1.



Drawing of the coin showing the key problematic letters.



A M E T O B O Y

AME□TOBOY (sic. for U), i.e., Amitābha

Mukherjee's reading clockwise starting at the lower left letter (7:00) based on Göbl 793.1. Boxed figure omitted.

The real source of the problem

Appearance of the Kuṣāṇa-Greek letters as seen in the photograph of the coin as published in Göbl.

 *Alpha* in the first position.

 *Upsilon* in the final position.

The same letters seen in both British Museum photograph and JCH photographs.

 *Tau*

 *Gamma*

Figure 3. Mukherjee's reading of the inscription on Göbl 793.1.



Figure 4. Composite drawing of the reverse of Göbl 793.1 showing the image of Mētrago/Maitreya.

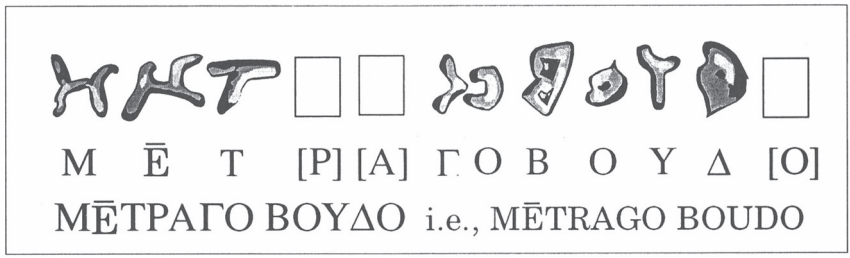


Figure 5. The reading of the inscription on Göbl 793.1 suggested in this article.



Figure 6. Reverse of a copper tetradrachm of the reign of Kaniṣka I. William F. Spengler Collection.



Figure 7. Drawing of the British Museum coin (Göbl 793.1) with the letters *alpha* and *rho* added in the position in which they occur on the Spengler coin.



Figure 8. Reverse of a copper tetradrachm of the reign of Kaniṣka I. Berlin Museum Collection. Göbl 793.1. (After Göbl.)



Figure 9. Drawing of the reverse of a copper tetradrachm from the reign of Kaniṣka I. (The *alpha* is lacking in the inscription which, therefore, reads: Mētr□go Boudo.) Göbl 793.1.



Figure 10. The Bodhisattva Mētrago/Maitreya originally displaying *abhāyamudrā* and carrying the *kamaṇḍalu*.
Royal Ontario Museum Collection.



Figure 11. The Bodhisattva Mētrago/Maitreya displaying a variant of the Bactro-Gandhāran version of *dharmacakramudrā*.
Peshwar Museum Collestion.