

# The oldest wooden statue in India

The gods are eternal, but their images perish. In a remote Himalayan village, however, remains an image of the Buddha that may be more than 1200 years old

Tim Malyon



A barley field separates the ruined temple from some of the villagers' houses. In front of the ruins stands a sacred altar, with ibex horns, juniper branches and white scarves

**B**UDDHISM had more or less died out in India by the 13th century. Muslim iconoclasts destroyed many of the monuments to Buddha and statues of Gautama Buddha that remained. Yet even if these images had survived, only a small proportion would have been sturdy enough to endure the passing centuries. All of which makes the magnificent wooden statue pictured here even more remarkable, for it is probably more than 1200 years old.

The statue is of the Buddha Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. I came upon it by chance in February 1984, with the former field director in Ladakh of the Save The Children Fund, Sir Robert Ffolkes, while researching an agricultural development project. We arrived at the village in the evening, after a long and hard day's walk. Next day, our group went to look at the village school. On the way, I glanced to my right and there it was, this awesome, androgynous statue—about 3 metres tall—propped against a ruined wall.

The statue must be very old because its style is distinctly pre-Tibetan (see Box). The wood was bleached; the wind, the cold and the rain had cracked the figure. The statue leans against a ruined wall of plastered stone, probably the remains of the back of the original temple that housed the statue. Scattered around the 6-metre square site are 13 smaller wooden statues, most of them partly buried and seriously eroded. Behind the temple ruins are two ancient

## Style and stance give clues to age

**T**HE statue represents Maitreya, who is destined to be the next Buddha to appear in this world. Maitreya is popular in all the northern Mahayana Buddhist countries (Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and formerly India), where a rich complexity of philosophical beliefs, ritual and iconography reflects the whole history of the Buddhist religion. He is also known, however, to the Buddhism of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, whose emphasis on monastic life and meditation represents the earlier stages of Buddhism. He must therefore be a very early member of the Buddhist pantheon.

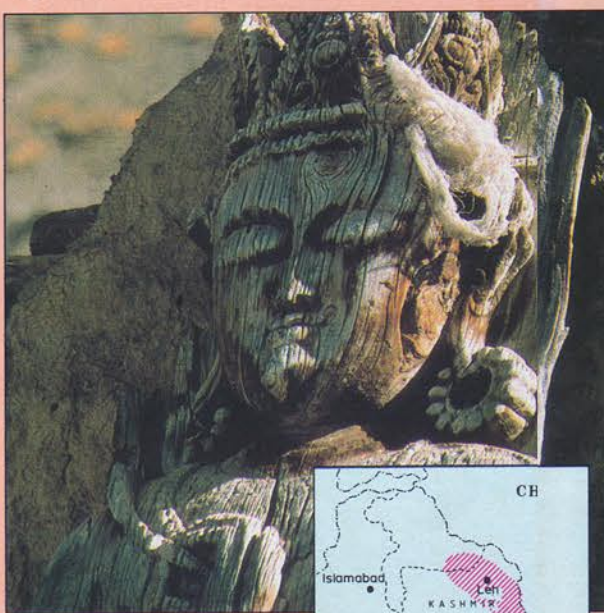
Wooden images seldom last long in the climate of the Indian subcontinent. This one, probably carved around AD 750, has considerable claim to be the oldest wooden image in India. The earliest Buddhist images were made around the time of the birth of Christ. Attempts to date this one start with the historical circumstances of its site, and comparison with brass and stone images in neighbouring areas.

The siting and architecture of the temple, as far as we can tell from its ruined state, suggest a small, simple building—a single, probably windowless

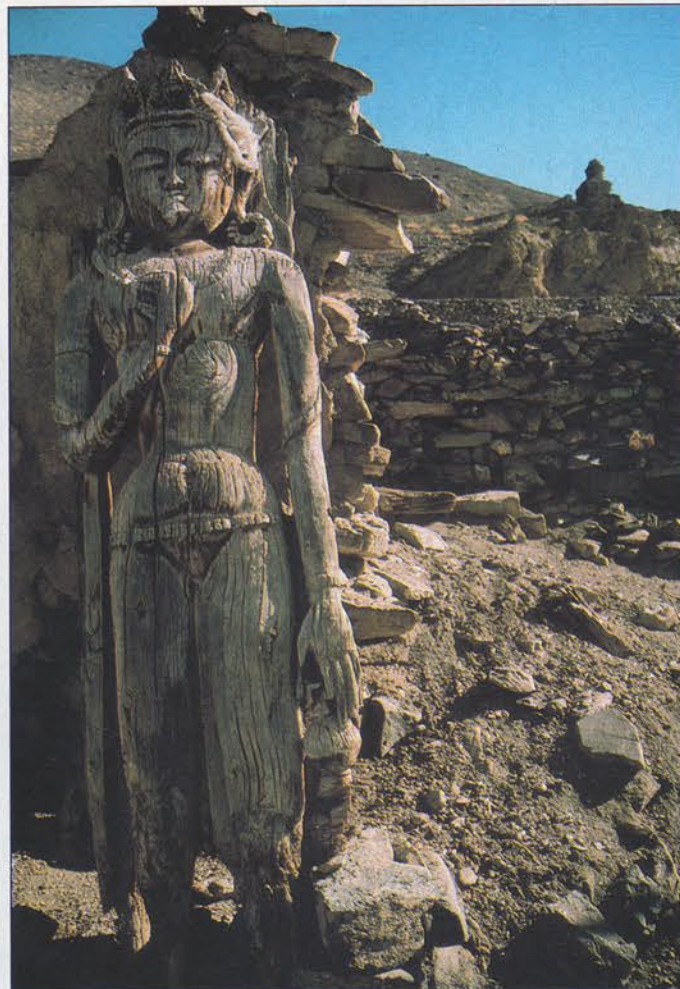
chamber—typical of the local phase of Buddhist activity of the 10th and 11th centuries AD, by which time speakers of Tibetan already ruled the area. Tibetan images of later times are in a different style, influenced more by Nepal, which seems more naturalistic to Western eyes in the proportions and modelling of the face and body.

We find the most obvious stylistic parallels for the image in several figures of Maitreya carved out of rock faces or on slabs of stone, notably two colossal rock-cut images at Mulbek and Kartse some 50 miles to the west. The flattened relief of the figure strongly suggests a rock-cut rather than a metal prototype. These figures all share the same heavy-jowled face, wide eyes and facial expression, and seem to form a single stylistic group.

The peculiar gesture of the right hand with palm turned inwards firmly links these figures with Kashmir, which was the only region to retain this feature of the older Gandharan style. The general stance and proportions, together with the modelling of the muscles and various minor iconographic features also strongly point to Kashmir. The facial shape and expression, with the heavy jowls, small



The statue rests in an isolated village of Ladakh (shaded area), three days' walk from the nearest road



All photographs by Tim Malyon

The "Gog-po" Buddha. No one in the village will touch or move it, which accounts for its neglected state



Little rain falls—an aid to the statue's survival. Local agriculture depends on irrigation from streams of meltwater

but often full-lipped mouth and prominent chin, and sharply chiselled nose with wide nostrils are characteristic of certain Kashmiri metal and stone statues which have in turn been connected with Chinese Central Asia.

The miniature stupa as an iconographic element in Maitreya's crown makes its first datable appearance in Western India in about AD 500. Dating of Kashmiri art styles is far from precise, however. Experts date some images from as early as the 6th century, but the heyday of Kashmiri art was probably in the 8th century under King Lalitaditya. At this time the fashion for colossal images of stone, metal or stucco was encouraged by Lalitaditya's prime minister, who was of Central Asian origin.

The triangular lobes of Maitreya's crown as well as facial characteristics have also been linked with the roughly contemporary style of Chamba and neighbouring states, which was also under Central Asian influence in the 8th century.

The dating of these stone and wooden Maitreya images to between the 7th and the 10th centuries throws an intriguing light on the history of Ladakh at around the time when it was presumably being incorporated into the Tibetan cultural sphere. **Philip Denwood**

and decaying stupas—mounds containing Buddhist relics.

The setting is spectacular. The village rests in a broad valley about 4500 metres above sea level. The nearest road is three days' walk away, and is cut off by snow for half the year. The only reliable source of water is the streams formed by melting snow: the statue's survival is partly due to a meagre annual rainfall of about 7.5 centimetres.

A "lhatho", a shrine to a deity that protects the household, stands on many of the flat mud roofs of the village houses. Each shrine has ibex and goat horns, sacred juniper and willow branches, white scarves and bright Tibetan prayer flags. These signify the intriguing mixture of Buddhism and animist Shamanism which has characterised the local beliefs for over 1500 years.

According to their "goba" or headman, the villagers believe the ruin was a temple destroyed by Muslim invaders. They say that whenever a Muslim crosses the high pass above the village to the west, where invaders would have come from, then it hails. The Save The Children Fund has a Muslim doctor who is sometimes met by a hailstorm when visiting the village—something he accepts with good-humoured equanimity.

Many religious objects are believed to be buried in the temple grounds. These are never disturbed. Many Ladakhis believe

that sacred sites that are neglected become inhabited by dangerous spirits. To disturb the site is to invoke their wrath.

This belief accounts for the statue's neglect. Villagers swear solemn oaths by its name (Gog-po) yet will neither move nor touch it. Fifty years ago the abbot of nearby Hemis Monastery is reported to have tried to move it. A great dust storm and torrential rain soon followed. The abbot relented, saying that the spirits would harm even him, a powerful lama. The last person to move the statue, according to Tsawang Smanla, the local Tibetan doctor employed by the Save The Children Fund, was an aged Tibetan monk named Zimgar. He was famous for his ability to control the weather and pacify spirits. He moved the statue from its prone position and stood it upright within the ruined temple. An elaborate ceremony was performed to pacify the spirits.

Last year, heavy rainfall caused considerable flooding in Ladakh. Water seeping into the wood will freeze and expand in winter temperatures that reach -25°C. The statue must remain in the village where it now stands, but its age and beauty deserve protection. □

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