

Avalokiteśvara of the “Three and a Half Syllables”: A Note on the Heart-Mantra *Ārolīk* in India

This article examines rare epigraphical evidence engraved on three inscribed Bodhisattva sculptures dated to the second half of the first millennium from Sarnath, in Uttar Pradesh, Telhara, and Bargaon, in Bihar. The inscriptions contain the heart-mantra *ārolīk*, i.e., the “three and a half syllables” connected to Avalokiteśvara and the “Lotus Family.” The fragments from Bihar probably depict a six-armed Amoghapāśa, a specific iconographic form of Avalokiteśvara, while the Bargaon inscription is the only identified occurrence in Sanskrit epigraphy of the *Amoghapāśahṛdayadhāraṇī*, composed in South Asia and transmitted to East Asia in the mid-to-late first millennium. The heart-mantra *ārolīk* is also known in esoteric and tantric Buddhist sources still preserved in Sanskrit originals or Chinese and Tibetan translations. Our study concludes on the broader implications for the identification of Avalokiteśvara in early Indian Buddhist art.

Keywords: Avalokiteśvara; Amoghapāśa; *Amoghapāśa-hṛdaya-dhāraṇī*; heart-mantra *ārolīk*; “three and a half syllables”; Indian Buddhist art.