REFLECTIONS ON THE PURPOSE OF THE KUCHA PAINTINGS

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Most of the paintings in Kucha are of a narrative character. Identifying these narrative paintings is crucial to fully understanding the stories that are associated with the area, and thus plays a central part in our understanding of Buddhism as it was practiced there.

As we know, most of the subjects of the paintings were represented multiple times in Kucha. Grünwedel and Waldschmidt often talked of the ‘replicas’ of the motifs, and gave a series of similar representations, primarily the jātaka stories, as examples of this replication. ¹ In order to provide an explanation of the depictions in the paintings, it is extremely important that we take all reiterations into consideration, as a single very elaborately-worked piece can include details which make the identification of the narrative possible. In working together with a team of researchers in Berlin and Munich on the identification of the paintings, each piece of information that we gain as a whole brings us further insight-information regarding an individual picture illuminates the entire group. Likewise, a lack of full understanding of any of the pictures in a group means that the entire group remains unidentified. Unfortunately, there are still a large number of pictures that we can group together but for which we cannot provide further information.

The replication of the pictorial motifs in Kucha leads to simplifications or minimisations of the subjects portrayed. In general, we tend to connect the process of simplification to the date of the motif, with the most elaborate examples being the earliest and the simplest examples being the latest. Although we are not always able to draw on objective evidence for this progression through time, this assumption appears to be correct

in light of the present state of research, and particularly in view of the fact that in some cases the iconography was adopted from Gandhara.\textsuperscript{2}

We should also note that cases such as these where iconography has been adopted from another site are infrequent. As an example of this we can look to the story of the Brahmin Mākandika,\textsuperscript{3} who wanted to offer his beautiful daughter to the Buddha as a wife (fig. 1).\textsuperscript{4} The iconographical element of the story is a Brahmin in front of the Buddha holding a young woman by the forearm. The woman is looking bashfully in another direction. These representations recur several times among the Gandharan reliefs and appear with exactly the same iconography in Kucha (fig. 2),\textsuperscript{5} although here, in Kucha, the Brahmin has the appearance of a Brahmin typical for the area. It is obvious that the iconography was adopted from Gandhara, but it must be noted that we do not really know how the transfer of pictorial forms took place; no sketchbooks or similar sets of clues survived. There is a gap of some 150 years between Gandharan and Kuchean depictions. The theory that Gandharan art was developing in paintings (Zin 2013) cannot be postulated, because so few Gandharan examples were preserved.

The iconography of the Mākandika narrative was adopted by Kucha from Gandhara. However, during this process a ‘minimalisation’ of the depiction took place, in that the scenes depicted became more simplified and less detailed. The numbers of accompanying persons were reduced (fig. 3)\textsuperscript{6} and the depiction in one of the rhomboidal scenes on the vault

\textsuperscript{2} There are other opinions in the literature. Chongfeng Li (2012), for example, takes the representation of the \textit{parinirvāṇa} in Cave 171 (showing the scene of the \textit{parinirvāṇa} and only \textit{stūpas} on the side walls) to be one of the earliest in Kucha, dating them to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} c. CE; while the more complex depictions, with more episodes, are dated later for him; he dates them as late as the 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} c. Apart from the dating problems there seems to be a difficulty with this reasoning, since the Gandharan reliefs from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} century already show established iconography of several episodes. This demonstrates that the complex depictions in the paintings are not the result of the development which took place in Kucha.

\textsuperscript{3} For literary versions and further representations cf. Zin 2005; Tanabe 2013.

\textsuperscript{4} Fig. 1: Gandhara, Hirayama Collection, Japan, illus: Kurita 2003: vol. 1, fig. 225; Tanabe 2007: pl. I–47; Tanabe 2013: fig. 1; taken from Tanabe 2007.

\textsuperscript{5} Fig. 2: Kizil, cave 80, illus. in: \textit{Kizil Grottoes}, vol. 2, fig. 50; drawing by present author.

\textsuperscript{6} Fig. 3: Kizil, cave 14, illus. in: \textit{Kizil Grottoes}, vol. 1, fig. 43; \textit{Mural Paintings in Xinjiang} 2009: vol. 2: 107; drawing by present author.
of cave 186 (fig. 4)\textsuperscript{7} is limited to the Buddha and the Brahmin with his daughter, again repeating the same Gandharan iconography: the father holds the daughter under the arm while she looks away.

In Kucha, the representation is adapted to the decorative design of the cave. As an example of this we can look at all rhomboidal scenes on the vault in cave 186 (fig. 4), where the Buddha is shown sitting in front of a building with a stūpa-like upper construction, and there are animals (here a bird) denoting the mountain landscape. Such uniform elements are not relevant to the understanding of the scene: they belong to the décor of the cave.

The Gandharan iconography of the scenes is only rarely recognizable in Kucha; sometimes it can still be seen – just barely – but one wonders at how little of it has survived, and the question arises as to whether or not it is even noticeable. Let us take as an example a picture showing the Buddha between a standing man and a woman (fig. 5).\textsuperscript{8} The Buddha has flames coming from his shoulders and is shown seated on a throne under a tree in front of a pond, but these elements have no significant value since they are repeated in all rhombi on the vault. The man on the Buddha’s left is a Brahmin with hair piled high and a flask in his hand. The woman is holding a round object under her right arm. Reliefs from Gandhara (fig. 6)\textsuperscript{9} some 300 years earlier and from a painting from Ajanta,\textsuperscript{10} ca. 100 years earlier, allow this scene to be identified. It is Sumati in front of the Buddha Dīpañkara, and the girl carrying the vase is the one who had sold him the lotus flowers in return for his promise to marry her in this and all future lives. Knowing this, one can look for the flowers in the hand of the young Brahmin in the painting, but they are not to be found (or at least not depicted clearly enough to be understood) and the iconography is only repeated through the raised hand. The most significant elements are not represented, namely the flowers that stood in the air above the Buddha Dīpañkara, Sumati spreading his hair in front of

\textsuperscript{7} Fig. 4: Kizil, cave 186, illus. in: Kizil Grottoes, vol. 3, fig. 53; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009: vol. 3: 158; drawing by present author.

\textsuperscript{8} Fig. 5: Simsim, cave 1, Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2008: 284; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009: vol. 5: 52; taken from Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2008.

\textsuperscript{9} Fig. 6: Gandhara, Peshawar Museum, no. 439, illus. e.g. in: Tissot 1986, fig. 196, Kurita 2003: vol. 1, fig. 9; photo by Muhammad Hameed.

\textsuperscript{10} Ajanta, cave XVII, cf. Schlingloff 2000, no. 72 and 2013, no. 72.
him, or Sumati in the air praising the Buddha who prophesied that he would become Buddha Śākyamuni. Nor do we have the whole setting of the event with Dīpaṅkara walking on the street. To the best of my knowledge, there is no other representation of the narrative with the girl with the flower vase in Kucha. This could, of course, be due to the fact that much of the material has not survived the passing of time. However, it is unlikely that this is the reason for her absence, because if present, such iconography would have been carried over to the praṇidhi scenes with Dīpaṅkara in the Turfan area. There is no evidence of this. Even if the girl were represented in another scene, one which was easier to read, it appears highly improbable that a visitor to the cave – even if he were familiar with the story – would be able to recognize it in this picture.

In most cases there is no Gandharan or Indian iconography to provide a key for the identification of the scenes; the iconography was invented in Kucha. In such examples as we have available, simplification has had a powerful effect. Whilst the representation of the potter Bṛhaddyuti, who washed the feet of the Buddha, was so significant that Grünwedel named the cave the ‘Fusswaschungshöhle’ (Foot-washing Cave) – although Grünwedel had not identified the narrative depicted – other representations are far less comprehensible. What is repeated is the Buddha sitting in the ‘European way,’ the jug in the hand of the kneeling man, and the pottery oven, characterizing his profession. This simplification could be explained as the result of the lack of available space in the rhomboidal fields, but the representations are sometimes so carelessly constructed (fig. 8) that one must wonder if the painter really intended the scene to be recognizable at all.

11 For iconography of the narrative in Turfan cf. Konczak 2012: ch. 3.2.5.1.
12 For literary versions and further representations cf. Zin 2007; the story tells of a potter who came with his family to the sick Buddha, bringing health-giving food and warm water for his bath; the narrative was rendered in Tocharian A also and was apparently popular, cf. Ogihara 2010 for the school affiliation of the Tocharian version and comparisons with Chinese; for further references to Bṛhaddyuti in series of the praṇidhi paintings cf. Konczak 2012: ch. 3.1.4.2.
13 Fig. 7: Kizil, cave 206 (Fußwaschungshöhle [Foot-washing Cave]) taken from Grünwedel 1912: fig. 362.
14 Fig. 8: Simsim, cave 1, vault, illus. in: Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2008: 285; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009: vol. 5: 53; taken from Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2008.
There are many examples of similarly simplified representations; sometimes it seems, however, that not only the iconographical form was simplified but also that the idea which has been simplified was invented. Accordingly, the viewer could not rely on comparisons with more elaborate representations in order to identify the scene. One must ask, for example, whether the strange object behind the Buddha (picted talking with a man who is standing with his right arm raised high) (fig. 9)\(^{15}\) like a carpet with two oblong items on it was intended to be understood at all. It must be an illustration of the story about the young man Yaśas who, while lamenting how painful life was, crossed the river Bārakā at night to reach the Buddha on the other side.\(^{16}\) Other examples may also have been simplified, yet they still depict the event in a comprehensible way (fig. 10),\(^{17}\) even if the sandals which Yaśas left on the river bank – an important component of the story – are sometimes shown on top of the river (fig. 11)\(^{18}\) as if they were traces left on the water. The painter of cave 58 in Kizil (fig. 9) illustrated this idea in a new way, so differently from previous illustrations that one tends to believe that it was not important to him that the viewer understood his message.

When we consider the vaults filled with simplified pictures, it hardly seems possible that these pictures were meant to be understood. The strictly formal aspect of the entire design was strong: the colours of the rhombi are arranged in strips, precisely repeating the sequence of paints. The rhombi represent the mountain landscape: there are frequent depictions of ponds repeated in all sections, as well as trees or animals. The arrangement of the topics of the paintings primarily follows the formal principles; the jātakas and the scenes with the Buddha are separated. Sometimes there are entire vaults with only jātakas. Where both sorts of

\(^{15}\) Fig. 9: Kizil, cave 58, vault, illus. in: Kizil Grottoes, vol. 1, fig. 163; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009: vol. 2: 212; taken from Mural Paintings in Xinjiang.

\(^{16}\) For literary versions and further representations cf. Zin 2005; the narrative belongs to the story circle of first conversions and is rendered among others in the Catuṣpariṣatsūtra.

\(^{17}\) Fig. 10: Kizil, cave 224, illus. in: Kizil Grottoes, vol. 3, fig 151; drawing by present author.

\(^{18}\) Fig. 11: Kizil, cave 171, illus. in: Murals for Xinjiang 1981: vol. 2, fig 78; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2008: 18; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009: 18; taken from Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2008.
narratives – the jātakas and the scenes with the Buddha – are shown on one vault, they are grouped in distinct rows of rhombi. The vaults filled with stories including the Buddhas often have one row of the jātakas below.

It must be noted that even here the formal aspect plays a role: the narrative of Bṛhaddyuti (cf. n. 12), for instance, is actually a jātaka because it is not our Buddha Śākyamuni that the potter is washing, but a Śākyamuni of previous kalpa. Other examples include the scenes which depict the Brahmin youth Sumati who is worshiping the Buddha Dīpañkara (cf. n. 8f.), the Brahmin standing on one leg in front of the Buddha Tīṣya – an often-repeated scene, as Fang Wang (Wang 2015: 42-44) has recently explained – and the monk in front of the Buddha Ratnaśikhin.19 All of these topics (and likely several others which have yet to be identified) are praṇidhis, i.e. they are jātakas belonging to the previous lives of the Buddha, or even of the Buddhas; they are depicted among the sermon scenes because there is a Buddha in the picture.

We might ask ourselves how readily these depictions could be identified at all. As for the jātakas, the answer is most probably yes: the pictures show the most significant moments of the narratives, so in seeing them the viewer would likely be able to recall the complete narratives and to praise the Buddha for good deeds in his previous lives. As for the scenes with the Buddha in the middle, it appears that many of them were not recognizable. We also have several examples showing no iconographical clues, although the setting is still there: the Buddhas sit in mountain landscapes and speak to other people (so that the paintings cannot be taken for the series of the Buddhas, buddhapiṇḍi) or, in some cases, the people are missing and the Buddhas are simply turned towards a person who is not depicted in the image at all (fig. 12).20 The pictures suggest the narratives but no effort was made to convey the story. Sometimes another process is visible in the depiction: the pictures are made to be distinct from each other, as if denoting “various narratives are depicted here” when, for example, the setting is definite: this story plays out in

19 Cf. Konczak 2012: ch. 3.1.4.3.
20 Fig. 12: Kizil, cave 110, Kizil Grottoes, vol. 2, fig. 117; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009: vol. 2: 18; taken from Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009.
the park, this one in a building, and in this one the Buddha sits in the cave (fig. 13).21

Just as with the jātakas, the depictions were there to illustrate the glory of the Buddha, presenting the stories as examples. But the glory of the Buddha deserves more accuracy; many pictures were done carelessly and were surely cheaply made. Is it only our ignorance that prevents us from recognizing or identifying the scenes?

The main questions of this paper revolve around the purpose of such depictions: What are they? What was the reason for a representation which gives only the impression of portraying narrative content but was, at least in many cases, not a recognizable narrative for the viewer?

Our knowledge about the visual programme of the caves is advanced enough to risk forming a hypothesis. The pictorial decoration of numerous caves in Kucha, the so-called ‘central pillar caves,’ was governed by a strict programme which typically placed the Buddha in the niche surrounded by the representation of the indrasailaguhā, the parinirvāṇa cycle at the back, the future Buddha in the tuṣita heaven above the entrance door, sermon scenes on the walls of the main hall and the simplified jātakas and sermon scenes on the vault. All these representations carry narrative contents. The narrative character of the depictions was surely of enormous importance in Kucha.

The convention of placing the narratives in the rhombi on the vault was a Kuchaean invention. What the entire design illustrates – conventional mountains between heaven above and the ocean below – is difficult to explain. In this case, it appears important to make reference to the very old pan-Indian convention of representing mountains in sanctuaries, which was related to the belief that the gods live in the Himalayas (Zin 2008).

The mountain landscapes represented in the 1st Indo-Iranian Style do not show narratives in the rhombi,22 but rather illustrate the romantic imagery of the mountains, known as topos in Indian literature, and which

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21 Fig. 13: Kumtura, cave 63, illus. in: Kumtula Grottoes 1985: fig 144; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2008: 227; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009: vol. 4: 89; taken from the Mural Paintings in Xinjiang 2009.

22 Cf. e.g. vaults in caves 77, 92, 118, in Kizil.
can be found again, for example, in Kālidāsa’s descriptions in the Kumārasambhava, the wanderings of Sudhana in the Divyāvādana or the Bower Manuscript.

Following the 1st style, in which there were simply mountains with animals, birds, meditating sages and so on, the Kucheans’ devotion to narrative led them to include narrative depictions in the 2nd style – minimalised, as they needed to be, but most definitely present – in each of the lozenges decorating the vaults. Śaśas are jumping in a fire, Viśvantaras are giving children to the Brahmin, Śibis are offering their flesh to save the dove, and the Buddhas are converting Hārītīs and Aṅgulimālas or showing their omnipotence in order to save Jyotiṣka or Sudāya.

It may well be that each story was intended as a sermon of the Buddha preaching in the central niche; it must be noticed, however, that this is only one of the types of the stories depicted in the mountains; there are other episodes from the Buddha’s vita that are not encountered there even once, such as those from his youth or from the parinirvāṇa cycle, which are, of course, also topics of Buddha’s sermons. The question remains open as to whether we understand the conventions, according to which some narratives belong to the ‘mountain pictures’ and others do not, but what is obvious is that the conventions were there. The visitor to the caves was confronted by the series of stories in the rhombi.

Thus it becomes less important whether he or she could understand any – or all – of them: the pictures were expected to be there to complete the programme of the cave.

Such phenomena are, of course, well known from the pictorial syllabus of several religions. In the Indian Buddhist context we can recall the so-called aṣṭamahāprātiḥāryas,23 showing the Buddha surrounded by seven scenes which have been reduced to an extreme minimum.24 The scenes might be comprehensible to today’s art historians who have been able to examine the prototypical forms, but not to a person who had just a single art-object. This was no different in the case of the simplified

23 The term seems to be only an art history label; the word is known to us from the Jaina mythology, where it is used to describe ‘eight great miracles’ which followed the enlightenment of the Jina. For the development of the main events of the life of the Buddha towards the standardisation in eight scenes, cf. Williams 1975; J. Huntington 1987.
24 For representations cf. e.g. S. Huntington 1984: figs. 37, 54, 153.
pictures in Kucha: they are apparently more easily recognizable to us, familiar as we are with the development of the iconography and with comparisons to other pictures, than they would have been to the visitors to the caves in ancient times.

It is important that we also mention one very interesting phenomenon which is to be observed in the caves. We can see that scenes that correspond with each other in some way are often placed opposite each other. One example of this is in the elaborated ‘sermon scenes’ in the 1st and 2nd style, in Kizil, cave 207 (Malerhöhle [Painters’ Cave]), where two pictures of the active Vajrapāṇi holding the glowing vajra above the head of the disobedient person25 are composed symmetrically and placed exactly opposite each other on the left and right walls. Another example is in cave 178 (Schluchthöhle [Ravine Cave]),26 where two scenes depicting the veneration of the Buddha by different gods and genies mirror each other. The phenomenon can also be observed on the vaults where, for example, the picture showing King Prabhāsa galloping on the love-crazed elephant is placed opposite the one depicting this very same elephant in the second part of the story in front of glowing iron balls27 on the other site of the vault.28 Such pictorial conventions show that the viewer must have been familiar with them and have known that he or she should look to the other side of the cave for the continuation of the subject matter. The carefully planned design of the paintings also shows that the dynamism of the impact on the visitor is intended to be effected not only by the separate pictures but by the overall programme of the cave. This effect is not yet legible for us; it might be intended to create the best conditions for the practice of meditation or perhaps to

26 Cf. Grünwedel 1920: II 65f.; the pictures seem to illustrate sūtras in character of the Mahāsamāja and the Āṭānāṭikasūtra, cf. paper of Ines Konczak in the present volume.
27 For the literary and pictorial versions in the popular Kizil narrative of King Prabhāsa, who decides to leave the worldly life after seeing that the best animal training cannot affect the passions of the elephant, cf. Schlingloff 2000: Nos. 53–55 and 2013: Nos. 53–55.
28 Cf. Grünwedel 1920, fig. 42 (3rd row, 1st lozenge) and fig. 43 (2nd row, 1st full lozenge); the paintings are kept today in the Asian Art Museum Berlin, nos. III 8449 and III 8450.
create, by means of images of the deeds of Buddha, a sort of ‘protected space.’ Such an effect could also be brought about when the scenes were not recognisable.

The researchers working with the Kucha paintings will of course continue to attempt to provide an explanation for even the smallest pictures in the pictorial programme: this must be done, because only by clarifying the literary tradition underlying the pictures can we learn more about the Buddhism of the area. Whether having an exact explanation for every particular picture was especially important for pious visitors to the caves is a question I would prefer to leave open for further discussion. It seems possible that the programme of the cave – which was there to bring the visitor redemption and perhaps also to bring the Buddha’s blessing for a safe journey – might have been fulfilled simply by having the scenes praise the glory of the Buddha the teacher.

References


—. 2013. “Buddhist narrative depictions in Andhra, Gandhara and Kucha – sim-
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Fig. 1: Gandhara, Hirayama Collection, Japan.

Fig. 2: Kizil, cave 80.
Fig. 3: Kizil, cave 14.

Fig. 4: Kizil, cave 186.
Fig. 5: Simsim, cave 1.

Fig. 6: Gandhara, Peshawar Museum, no. 439.
Fig. 11: Kizil, cave 171.

Fig. 12: Kizil, cave 110.
Fig. 13: Kumtura, cave 63.

Fig. 14: Kizil, cave 58.