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Sanskrit on the Silk Route

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Sanskrit literature and the Indian pictorial tradition in the paintings of Kucha

—Monika Zin

Until the end of the 19th century, when ancient Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in the sands of the Taklamakan Desert came into the possession of scholars, this area in today’s Province Xinjiang, an autonomous region of the Peoples Republic of China, was considered among the wilds of the world, a no-man’s land between the ancient cultures of antiquity: India, China and the Iranian world. The discovery of the manuscripts resulted in several expeditions being dispatched to Central Asia. The Swedish Expedition (headed by Sven Hedin), the Russian (under Dimitrii Klementz), the British (led by Aurel Stein), the Japanese (financed by Count Otani), the French (led by Paul Pelliot) and several German “Royal Prussian Turfan Expeditions” were sent to the area of Taklamakan to find out and bring home evidence of these previously unknown cultures.

The upper and lower fringes of the Taklamakan Desert turned out to be anything but a cultural desert since several kingdoms were discovered there. Their remains were remarkably rich: dry desert sands preserved even objects of such fragile material such as cloth, palm-leaf or birch-bark manuscripts, items of wood and ceramics as well as paintings – all objects of extraordinary historical importance.

On the northern fringes of the desert lay the kingdom of Kucha, first explored by German expeditions from Berlin. There were four “Royal Prussian Turfan Expeditions” (1st December 1902 – April 1903, 2nd November 1904 – August 1905, 3rd December 1905 – April 1907, and 4th April 1913 – February 1914); they carried the name “Turfan” after their main objective: the area of Turfan on the eastern side of the Northern Silk Route. Indeed, the German expeditions did concentrate on this area, examining sites like Chocho, Sengim or Murtuq. The most significant research findings on the influences of Indian culture on Central Asia were however from the area of Kucha, at the sites of Kizil, Kumtura and Simsim.
Since the region of Kucha is about 1000 – almost impassable – kilometres away from even Gandhara, which marked the northernmost part of Ancient India, the discovery that the art of the region was a proximate offshoot of Indian art was an unexpected revelation. Evidence brought to light that the kingdom of Kucha was dominated by Buddhist monastic culture. It was in the man-made caves not too far from the capital, which were used as monastic complexes, that the Sanskrit manuscripts were discovered; magnificent wall-paintings go back to Indian prototypes.

German expeditions discovered approximately 300 caves in the Kucha region. Known to us today are about 235 caves in the vicinity of Kizil, 113 near Kumtura, 56 in Simsim, 52 in Kizil Gaha, 44 in Mazabaha, approximately 30 in Touhulakeaiken and one in Aai. Approximately one-third of them are decorated with paintings, though in some cases only minor traces are visible.

The paintings are fascinating, because despite being traceable to Indian prototypes their style is mixed with influences from the Mediterranean world, from the Syrian-Iranian, later from East Asia as well. The kingdom of Kucha was a hub of trade routes between the Mediterranean West and China; it was a melting pot of different traditions. The local population, from which the majority of the monks were recruited, spoke Tocharian: an Indo-European language. The language of the religious texts was, as manuscript finds and inscriptions show, usually simplified Sanskrit.

The cave-temples were decorated with paintings showing narrative or devotional themes: scenes from Buddhist tales and legends, images of the Buddhas, Bodhisatvas and the gods; there are also representations of a purely ornamental nature such as stylized landscapes, architectural motifs and a variety of decorative designs. Most of the paintings are, however, narrative in character: they illustrate Buddhist stories with themes taken from the āgamas, vinayas or the jātaka collections.

The Kucha paintings were first researched, dated, identified, their style investigated and the influences bearing upon them analysed by members of the “The Prussian Turfan Expeditions”, Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq, who were part of the Kucha expedition, and by Ernst Waldschmidt, who was not a part of the expedition but later undertook a major part of the research work on the material brought back from Kucha.¹

According to the findings of this research² – which is for the most part accepted by Western scholars – the paintings of Kucha were created over a period of approximately four centuries and may be divided into three different styles, the so-called 1st and 2nd Indo-

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¹ Relevant books by Grünwedel, Le Coq and Waldschmidt are listed in the Bibliography, several of them are available online: National Institute of Informatics, Digital Silk Road Project – Digital Archive of Toyo Bunko Rare Books: http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/toyobunko/index.html.en

Iranian Styles, and a third, which differs greatly from the first two in that it has Chinese influence: it is called the Sino-Buddhist Style (or IIIrd Style). The relative and absolute dating of the styles, as well as the question of the inter-dependencies between them, especially in correlation with the paintings of the Mogao Caves of Chinese-influenced Dunhuang, are subjects of an ongoing discourse. Chinese scholars in particular tend to date the Kucha paintings early to provide evidence for the early dating of Dunhuang. There were also opinions advanced that Dunhuang was earlier or contemporary to Kucha; that the paintings of Dunhuang served as prototypes; and that the 1st Indo-Iranian Style was a short-lived trend impacting from abroad – all assessments which are open for further discussion.

As for the “traditional” view advanced by German researchers: the approximate date they assign to the 1st Indo-Iranian Style is the end of the 5th c., the 2nd Style estimated to be about 100 years later.

When they chiselled off parts of the paintings from the walls to send them to Berlin together with manuscripts and diverse artefacts found in the caves, members of the German Expeditions referred to their action as “salvaging” – and they really considered it to be so. Certainly, history could have run a different course; the Islamic population could have destroyed the Buddhist paintings, or the Cultural Revolution could have swept across the Kucha region, but it did not happen. The Germans took a number of murals to Berlin, for the most part the most beautiful of the fragments; several of them were destroyed in the 2nd World War, many were taken away to St. Petersburg. The unsightly holes left behind in the caves do not appear to be the result of “salvaging” but rather of brutal vandalism.

Today, the artefacts and paintings brought to Berlin are held in the Asian Art Museum and form the biggest collection outside of Kucha; the manuscripts are kept in the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

It is not only the artefacts in the Asian Art Museum that are of great academic importance but also its extensive archival material that includes photographs and drawings of the paintings from the time of their re-discovery.

The German researchers, Grünwedel, Waldschmidt and Le Coq, have recognized the importance of the Kucha paintings as an offshoot of Indian art and culture, and have explained them on the basis of Sanskrit texts, manuscripts many of which were even found in these very caves.

After the Cultural Revolution, research was taken up in China. However, due to the language barrier, books in German were mostly ignored in favour of interpretations of the paintings based on Chinese sources. It must be noted too that important research by Chinese academics, Su Bai, the most famous among them should at least be mentioned here – but again because of the language barrier – was hardly known in the West. It is only
in recent years that the two sides have started opening up to each other; in this context, cooperation between the Asian Art Museum and the Kucha Academy in Urumchi plays a significant role.

It takes a while for the eye to get used to the Kucha paintings, but it soon becomes clear that the painters were working with Indian prototypes. Let us take a look at an example of the 1st Indo-Iranian style (Fig. 1), a scene from the Maitrakanyaka story in Kizil Cave 212, referred to as the “Seafarers’ Cave” (Seefahrer-Höhle) by German Expeditions. Firstly it must be noticed that the figures depicted wear light Indian clothes, completely unlike the heavy coats in which the Central Asian donors are represented. By virtue of the fluttering bands on his crown and several asymmetrically arranged necklaces, the main character in the centre of the depiction is evocative of the Gandharan Bodhisatvas. On the left, two Brāhmin ascetics wearing animal skins and piled-up hair look exactly like they do in India – one must not forget that such persons were unknown in the daily life of Kucha, so their physical portrayal must have been wholly influenced by depictions – and, like the woman on the right, they sit on round rattan stools. Such seating has been depicted in art from the time of the reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi or the paintings in the older Ajanta Caves IX and X. It is interesting that in the representations of objects of material culture itself, several elements of the Kizil paintings correspond with representations from the Indian subcontinent, not necessarily with those from Gandhara. But we shall come to this later.

A depiction of the Buddha praised by various gods serves as an example of the 2nd Indo-Iranian Style (ca. A.D. 600) (Fig. 2a). Of special importance are two six-armed deities represented on both sides of the Buddha (reproduced here as drawings, Fig. 2 b–c), which even at first glance can be recognized as Viṣṇu on Garuḍa and Śiva with Pārvatī on the bull. The deity on the left side is blue-complexioned and holds a conch. The one on the right is dark, though due to the oxidation of the pigments, the colour one sees today is probably not the original, wears an animal skin and is shown with three faces. Both gods seem to hold Sun and Moon discs in their upper arms.

It is hardly possible to infer how Indian gods were understood in Kucha; Hindu temples were not known in the region but, as we see, at least the depictions of the gods were there. Both gods are wearing calf-muscle warmers, which are typical of demons in Kucha. In several

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3 Fig. 1: Kizil, Cave 212 (Seefahrer-höhle), Berlin, war los, illus. : Grünwedel 1920, Pl. 19-20

4 Identified by Grünwedel (1920) according to the Divyāvadāna XXXVIII.

5 Fig. 2a: Kizil, Cave 181 (?) Hochliegende Höhle), Berlin, Asian Art Museum, No. MIK III 8725, illus. e.g. in: Grünwedel 1920, Pl. 26-27; The Kizil Grottoes 1983-85, vol. 3, fig. 205; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang, vol. 3, p. 111; figs. 2 b–c: drawings by the author. Cf. A similar Viṣṇu in Kizil, Cave 224 (Māyahöhle der 3. Anlage), Berlin, Asian Art Museum, No. MIK 8862; illus. in Grünwedel 1912, fig. 172; The Kizil Grottoes 1983-85, vol. 3, fig. 220; Grünwedel 1912, fig. 397b (drawing) – there is a hare represented inside the Moon disc here alongside Śiva with Pārvatī ibid. Fig. 410 (drawing)
instances, the Hindu gods were represented among the soldiers of Māra’s army, attacking the meditating Bodhisatva under the Bodhi Tree. This might signify a struggle between two religions, but it might also simply indicate the deployment of Indian iconography.

Sun and Moon discs held high (one is perhaps a misunderstood *cakra*) would in course of time become attributes of the Asuras, whose iconography will find its way right up to the Far East. ⁶

To ascertain the literary tradition of the stories depicted in the Kucha paintings is a difficult task. Two important issues one needs to dwell on are, essentially: first, that a large number of Sanskrit manuscripts have been found in the caves and, second, that Chinese Buddhist literature is of a twofold nature: in many cases there are translations of the Sanskrit originals (the Sanskrit texts are sometimes preserved, even if only as tiny manuscript fragments, and sometimes not), and only in a part of them are there original Chinese texts without a Sanskrit archetype. The first category of these sources must be assigned to the Sanskrit tradition. According to this criterion, the paintings in Kucha of the 1st and 2nd Style belong to Sanskrit Buddhism. As per our present state of knowledge, the paintings can best be explained by means of the text composed in Sanskrit (sometimes preserved in the original version, sometimes as Chinese or Tibetan translations).

We can cite here as example one very graphic case of the dependence of the Kucha paintings on Sanskrit. The *sūtra* that describes the last weeks in the life of the Buddha is the *Mahāparinibbāṇasuttanta* (Pali),⁷ the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (Sanskrit), the latter work preserved in the incomplete manuscript found also in the Kucha region⁸ and in Chinese and Tibetan translations.⁹

As evidenced by the present author,¹⁰ one episode from the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* was quite frequently depicted in the art of Gandhara – the story of the Mallas and the stone. The episode occurs on the very last day of the life of the Buddha and talks about a group of young men from Kuśinagara in the country of the Mallas, who were sent by the citizens of their town to clean the road in anticipation of the esteemed guest’s visit. The men found a huge stone lying on the road and tried in various ways to shift it to the side. Even when they tried with all their might, they were not able to move the stone in the least. While

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⁶ Cf. Zin, Cosmological Matters – The Depictions of Sun and Moon in Kucha and Beyond.
⁸ Main manuscripts used for the edition have been found in Shorchuk and Tumshuk, some fragments (Ms. 376) were discovered also in the “Red Cupola Cave” (Rotkupelhöhle) in Kizil, cf. Waldschmidt 1950, pp. 3-6.
¹⁰ Zin 2006, pp. 340ff (the article is available online in JSTOR and on the homepage of the Institute of Indology at the Ludwig-Maximilans-Universität in Munich or: Monika Zin “Publikationen”).
they were still working at it, the Buddha arrived and after asking them if they would like
him to shift the stone, he demonstrated his superhuman strength. With only one hand he
threw the huge stone in the air, made it shatter into small pieces, then making it whole
again, catching it with another hand, and finally putting it down on the side of the road.
After this display of superhuman power, the Buddha sat down on the stone and delivered
a sermon to the young Mallas. This is an important sermon about the powers of the
Buddha;11 powers inherited from his parents, power deriving from his merits, from his
wisdom, from his supernatural powers and his extraordinary power of creation. The young
men from Kuśinagara asked if there was any power greater than the powers of the Buddha
– yes, he answered, the power of impermanence, which on that very day will seize control
over his body. The young Mallas understood that the Buddha was going to die, and they
despaired. To calm them down, the Buddha explained to them the impermanence of the
world, showing them the finger-marks of giants on the stone, who aeons ago were using it
for weightlifting – even these giants, like everything else, had passed away.

The story of the stone on the last day in the life of the Buddha correlates very well with
the sermon on the powers of the Buddha, and his discourse on impermanence. Also of
significance here is the double connotation of the word malla – which stands for a citizen
of the country of the Mallas, whose capital was Kuśinagara, but also for an athlete. Reliefs
from Gandhara (which can be dated back to at least A. D. 200, if not earlier) show us in
several instances that the story was indeed known as part of the Parinirvāṇa cycle since
it was represented next to it. 12 This is important for one reason: the narrative is known
in many literary versions,13 but there are only two which relate it in connection with the
Buddha’s death. These stories are contained the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra and the Ekottarāgama.
The latter is too late to be the source of depictions in Gandhara,14 which leaves only the
Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra. The crucial point here is that the story within the sūtra is the so-
called “Sanskrt special text” ("Sanskrit-Sondertext" in Waldschmidt’s edition, Vorgang 31.
74) – it does not appear either in Pali or in Chinese or Tibetan. Whatever the reasons for
this may have been,15 it was apparently the version of the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra which was
known in Gandhara.

11 Cf. Waldschmidt 1948.
12 Cf. e.g. Zin 2006, fig. 11.
14 It rather appears that the opposite is the case since the Ekottarāgama describes the stone as
quadrilateral, which is evidenced in depictions in Gandhara; these depictions use the motif of “the
15 The Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra was also known in the Gāndhārī language (cf. Allon/Salomon 2000) and
could have included the story with the stone. For ongoing research on the Gāndhārī manuscripts, cf.
for inst. the latest article by Baums (2014) and the homepage of the project at the Ludwig-Maximilians-
Universität in Munich: http://www.gandhara.indologie.uni-muenchen.de/
What is significant for the present article is that the story about the stone is represented in Kucha as well. The depiction (Fig. 3 a-b) shows an “athlete” (wearing only a skimpy loincloth typical for the depictions of “wrestlers” – as for example in Gandhara) with the huge stone behind him – which he was probably trying to shift with a staff he is holding – and the Buddha holding the stone in one hand. The representation is placed next to the depiction of the Buddha in parinirvāṇa at the rear side of the cave.

The study of the paintings of the Kucha region remains a project in progress; many depictions still await elucidation and there are very many open questions in terms of influences from pictorial traditions, development of style etc. What we always need to keep in mind is that the material which we encounter today is only a fraction of the old artistic production. We can for example take for granted that there was a development of forms from the reliefs of Gandhara to the paintings of Kucha. This is visible everywhere, examples being that the heroes of the jātaka stories are not shown with a nimbus in Gandhara but always in Kucha, or that the Buddhas in Gandhara do not have mandorlas, though in Kucha they do. Research has no answers to such matters yet, perhaps there existed a Gandharan School of Paintings which is lost to us today? In the only surviving example of Gandharan painting showing jātakas, King Śibi has a nimbus. Perhaps there were other pictorial traditions that are lost today.

In many cases, an extremely interesting aspect may be noted, namely that the Kucha paintings often correspond not with the art of Gandhara but with the art of the subcontinent further to the south. First of all, mention must be made of the jātakas in which the hero is an animal. Such narratives were very seldom depicted in Gandhara but were extremely popular in Kucha. These paintings have such conspicuous counterparts in Indian art that the possibility that there were Indian prototypes that found their way to Central Asia seems obvious. Let us compare the depiction of the Vānarajātaka in Ajanta and in Kizil (Fig. 4 a-b). There could be so many possibilities to represent a monkey being killed, such as

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16 Cf. the statement in Zin 2006 (p. 337) “we have no knowledge about possible counterparts in the art of Central Asia” is no more valid.

17 Fig. 3 a-b: Kumtura, Cave 46, illus.: Grünwedel 1920, Fig. 74-75, p. 36 (drawing); The Kumatula Grottoes, 1985, Pl. 122; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China 2009, vol. 4, p. 77.

18 Odani (2012) also identifies the same episode in cave 110 in Kizil (Treppenhöhle), in the last but one scene (the last being the parinirvāṇa), which would confirm that the Kucha region was familiar with the Sanskrit text of the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra. Unfortunately the painting has not been published yet and the drawing by Nakagawara (1997) does not substantiate the interpretation.

19 Cf. Zin 2013 (the article is available online on the home page if the Institute of Indology at the Ludwig-Maximilans-Universität in Munich: Monika Zin “Publikationen”).

20 Fig. 4a: Ajanta, Cave 17, cf. Schlingloff 2013, No. 29, cf. ibid. for references to the literary and pictorial tradition; illus. e.g. in: Takata 2000; Pl. 16b; further references in Schlingloff 2013, vol. 1, p. 138; Fig. 4b: Kizil, Cave 17 (Bodhisattvagewölbehöhle), illus. e.g. in: The Kizil Grottoes 1983-85, vol. 1, Fig. 67.
showing him lying under a tree by the side of the round pond, with his murderer holding a stone in both hands and lifting it high. The similarities between both depictions make the influence of the Indian pictorial tradition both plausible and perceptible. Our second example is even more telling (Fig. 5 a-b) because the Indian counterpart is much older and even more distant – it is part of a relief from the stūpa in Kanaganahalli (Karnataka) which can be dated to the 1st century. It narrates the story of a wise monkey-king who advised his people to drink water with straws to protect themselves from a rākṣasa living in the pond. Here again – one can envisage several possibilities of representing the scene, such as for instance, the depiction of a round pond with the huge face of the rākṣasa in it.

Research aiming to study Sanskrit culture on the Silk Route, which started with the “Prussian Turfan Expeditions” 114 years ago, is still in progress in distant Berlin.

Bibliography


21 Fig. 5a: illus.: Poonacha 2011, Pl. 69B; Zin 2011, Fig. 5, Fig. 5b: Kizil, Cave 17 (Bodhisattvagewölbehöhle), illus. e.g. in: The Kizil Grottoes 1983-85, vol. 1, Fig. 67.


Takata, O., 2000, Ajanta Paintings, Tokyo.


Fig. 1: Kizil, Cave 212 (Seefahrer-höhle), Berlin, war los, after Grünwedel 1920, Pl. 19-20

Fig. 2a: Kizil, Cave 181 (? Hochliegende Höhle), Berlin, Asian Art Museum, No. MIK III 8725, after Grünwedel 1920, Pl. 26-27
Fig. 2b-c: Drawings by the author

Fig. 3a: Kumtura, Cave 46, after Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China 2009, Vol. 4, p. 77

Fig. 3b: Drawing by Grünwedel, after Grünwedel 1920, Fig. 74-75
Fig. 4a: Ajanta, Cave 17, after Takata 2000, Pl. 16b

Fig. 4b: Kizil, Cave 17 (Bodhisattvagewölbbehöhle), after *The Kizil Grottoes 1983-85*, vol. 1, Fig. 67

Fig. 5a: illus.: Kanaganahalli, after Zin 2011, Fig. 5

Fig. 5b: Kizil, Cave 17 (Bodhisattvagewölbbehöhle), after *The Kizil Grottoes 1983-85*, vol. 1, Fig. 67