

Article

The Wall Painting of “Siddhārtha Descending on the Elephant” in Kizil Cave 110[†]

Fang Wang

Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig, 04107 Leipzig, Germany; wang@saw-leipzig.de

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Abstract: The mural scene under discussion illustrates Bodhisatva Siddhārtha’s descent into Māyā’s womb, a scene that is also named Māyā’s Dream in art historical studies. Painted as the start of the Buddha’s life sequence in Kizil Cave 110, it is the sole extant case of this story motif in Kucha. Its significance rests on the fact that it bridges Indian and Chinese pictorial traditions in its representation of the miraculous conception of Buddha’s last life. This article analyses the mural’s narrative elements in terms of Indian archetypes, as well as local innovations. The portrayal of Siddhārtha entering the mother-to-be’s womb while riding an elephant is compared with its counterpart motif in Chinese Buddhist art from the mid 5th century. The approach will address the drastic textual and pictorial transformations between the Indian prototype, “Siddhārtha as the elephant”, and the Chinese version, “Siddhārtha on the elephant”, in the conception episode, which reflects the transmission of the Indian belief in embryogenesis and its adaption by non-Indian peoples in Central Asia and China. Reinvestigating this picture and several pertinent literary works, the article attempts to delineate one link in that transformation process.

Keywords: Kizil 110; Buddha’s life; conception; Bodhisatva riding the elephant; Māyā’s dream



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1. Introduction

The conception of Gautama Buddha’s last birth is the exact moment when the Bodhisatva descended from Tuṣṭa Heaven and entered the womb of the mother-to-be, Queen Māyā.¹ This story motif has been envisioned since the earliest phase of Indian Buddhist art,² and art historians typically described it as Māyā’s Dream. Schlingloff (2000; 2013, vol. 1, p. 311) reminds us that the Bodhisatva’s descent into the womb should not be understood as merely a dream or vision; on the other hand, according to ancient Indian embryogenesis, the Bodhisatva as a real soul-being (*gandharva*) came into his mother-to-be’s womb in the phase before the birth. This knowledge draws attention to the disparities in the pictorial representations of the Bodhisatva during his descent into Māyā’s womb as depicted in Indian and Chinese art. The change in figural representation, with the Bodhisatva depicted as an elephant in India and as a human figure riding an elephant in China, raises questions about how the Bodhisatva’s presence was comprehended in these different cultural contexts.

The approach to the topic, i.e., the mural scene of the Buddha’s conception at Kizil Cave 110, must start with an overview of the cave and the sequential pictorial narrative of the Buddha’s life story depicted in the murals. Cave 110 is located on a cliff of the inner valley (Gunei District, 谷内区) in the cave monastery of Kizil in modern Baicheng County, Kuche City, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China. As one of the most important archaeological sites of the Tarim Basin, the Kizil Caves testify to the once flourishing Silk

Road Kingdom of Kucha, which bridged ancient India and China, and especially to the transmission of Buddhist culture (Kijiru and An 1981).

Kizil Cave 110 was rediscovered during the Third German Turfan Expedition in 1906 and was named *Treppenhöhle* (“Stairs Cave”) because of the staircase adjoined its antechamber (Grünwedel 1912, pp. 117–19).³ The cave is renowned for a mural sequence of the Buddha’s entire life found in the main chamber. The sequence is composed of 60 square pictures and each picture carries above it a Tocharian B inscription. The particular picture that is the subject of this essay is the first of 60 pictures in total, which is located in the first register, left wall, main chamber (Figure 1) and is capitalized and referred to as **Picture of Siddhārtha’s Descent** for the sake of convenient reference. The picture was removed and taken to Berlin (Figure 2, also illustr. in Le Coq 1924, p. 34, pl. 6–1; Yaldiz 1987, p. 80, Figure 45-1; Santoro 2003, pl. 1), and today is housed in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin (Figures 3 and 4, the latter is also illustr. in *Kizil Grottoes* 1983–1985, vol. 3, pl. 194; *Saiiki Bijutsuten* 1991, pl. 19).

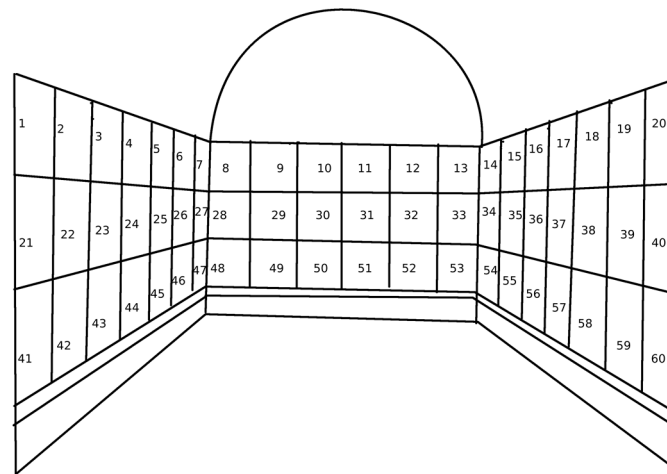


Figure 1. Sketch map of the mural sequence of the Buddha’s life in Kizil Cave 110, revised after Nakagawara (1994, p. 21, fig 2), © SAW, “Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road”, Leipzig. Reproduced with permission.

Before delving into the discourse related to **Picture of Siddhārtha’s Descent** in Kizil Cave 110, however, it is imperative to elucidate the inquiry concerning its style and dating. The current author adopts the conventional stylistic classification of Kuchean paintings, which has been minimally revised since the initial theory of Waldschmidt (1933, pp. 24–30). Accordingly, the murals of Kuchean Caves encompass the First Indo-Iranian Style, or First Style, before the 6th century, the Second Indo-Iranian Style, or Second Style, roughly dating from the second half of the 6th century and continuing into the 7th century, and the Third Style under Chinese and Old-Uyghur influences, beginning with the administration of the Tang Dynasty in Kucha from 650 CE. Kizil Cave 110 is adorned with murals that exhibit the characteristic features of the Second Style in its main chamber. Based on the inscriptions found within this cave, the dating of these murals is speculated to be around the early 7th century.⁴

Grünwedel first identified the picture as Māyā’s dream during his visit to the cave more than a century ago but he failed to deliver an observation of the Bodhisatva.⁵ The Tocharian B caption is only partly legible on the historical photographs and is interpreted as *///kā[tkalñe] ///* (literally: “...entering ...”),⁶ which accords with the pictorial content depicting the Buddha’s conception by entering Māyā’s womb.



Figure 2. Picture of Siddhārtha's Descent, mural scene, ca. the 7th century. Historical photography taken by the 3rd German Turfan Expedition, no. B1082a, B1086 in the archives © Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen, Berlin/CC BY-SA 4.0.

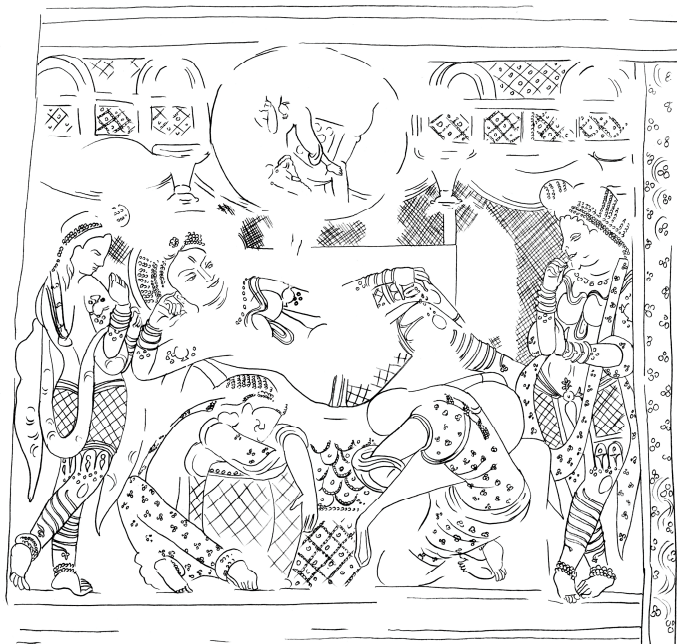


Figure 3. Drawing of Siddhārtha's Descent in Kizil Cave 110. Drawing: Monika Zin (SAW, "Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road", Leipzig). Reproduced with permission.

The picture shows an interior bedchamber with a windowed roof visible at the top. In the middle, Queen Māyā is marked with a halo. She reclines in bed, lying on the right side of her body. Two pairs of maidservants surround the bed. One pair are musicians, asleep on the floor with their arms resting on their instruments. The musician on the left has a drum and the one on the right, turned away from the viewer, holds a pear-shaped lute. The other pair are two maidens standing in the *contrapposto* style at each end of the bed, both facing inward to guard the queen. The woman on the left raises her hands, holding a stick (perhaps a weapon), while the one on the right stands with hands in the "pensive" gesture,⁷ raising the fingers of her right hand to her cheek and supporting her elbow with

her left hand. None of the women in the picture is aware of the presence of the Bodhisatva, who is descending, riding on top of an elephant, towards his sleeping mother-to-be.



Figure 4. Picture of Siddhārtha's Descent in Kizil Cave 110, mural scene, ca. the 7th century. Fragment III8376a © Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen, Berlin; photograph by Lippe, Jürgen. Reproduced with permission from SAW in collaboration with Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin.

One may note the eclecticism of miscellaneous Indian archetypes as well as localised Kuchean innovations in the picture. As to its symmetrical composition, Santoro (2003, pp. 120–21) points out influences from Gandhāran reliefs; the two female bystanders on either side of the bed are modeled after the *yavanī* figures, i.e., the “western” female guardians employed by the court in Gandhāran art (Figure 5, also illustr. in Zwalf 1996, fig. 141). On the other hand, the Amaravati relief slabs frequently show servant maidens sleeping on drums in the foreground, denoting the palace environment at night (Figure 6, also illustr. in: Fergusson 1873, pl. 91, Figure 4; Coomaraswamy 1928, pl. 20; Coomaraswamy 1965, Figure 7; Stern and Benisti 1952, pl. 58; Knox 1992, pl. 61; Schlingloff 2000; 2013, vol. 1, no. 64 (2) [9] (drawing)). However, as Santoro indicates, a pair of musician maidens, crouching in a head-to-head symmetrical posture, derives directly from the Gandhāran prototype in “leaving the wives” scenes of the grown-up Siddhārtha. In these cases, the cessation of music in the palace indicates that it is night, although the detail relating to the music is seldom mentioned in textual accounts about the conception episode.

The roof, topped with round windows, here differs from the common trapezoidal frame represented in Gandhāra; instead, it is akin to the ancient Indian type as exemplified in Sanchi Stūpa I (Figure 7, also illustr. in: Fergusson 1873, pl. 33; Marshall and Foucher 1940, vol. 2, pl. 50a1; Sivaramamurti 1974, Figure 413; Schlingloff 2000; 2013, vol. 2, no. 64 (2) [2] (drawing)) and Andhran art. The two maidens in front of the bed wear costumes commonly seen in the so-called Second Indo-Iranian Style of the Kuchean murals; the head-dress, the wrapping bodice, and the long skirt with half sleeves are repeated many times in Kucha. The other two female attendants, and the recumbent Māyā near the center, are scantily clad in a knee-length skirt. The bold display of women's bodies differs from the Gandhāran tradition and goes back rather to the southern regions of India, as do the multiple bracelets and the spiral anklets. For example, the Māyā figure depicted on the Sanchi Stūpa I (Figure 7), and those on the Amaravati slabs, wear similar bracelets, as well as a girdle around the waist, with little fabric covering. Such Indian influences were imported

from the First Indo-Iranian Style paintings of the Kucha Caves, such as the woman figure lying supine in the story known as “the Buddha’s sermon on Śrīmatī’s death”⁸ from Kizil Cave 84 (Figure 8, also illustr. in: Grünwedel 1920, II 90, pls. 32, 33). Her bracelets are depicted intricately and the beaded girdle is even closer to Indian originals. The women, depicted as sparsely attired in the current picture of Kizil Cave 110, adopt the given models of the First Style of Kucha and add new elements, such as the diaphanous skirt with beautiful pendants; the skirt is repeatedly depicted in the Second Style paintings of Kucha, such as the recumbent women of Kizil Cave 163 (for the illustration, see *Kizil Grottoes 1983–1985*, vol. 2, pl. 70) and Cave 189 (for the illustration, see *Kizil Grottoes 1983–1985*, vol. 3, p. 192, pl. 169).

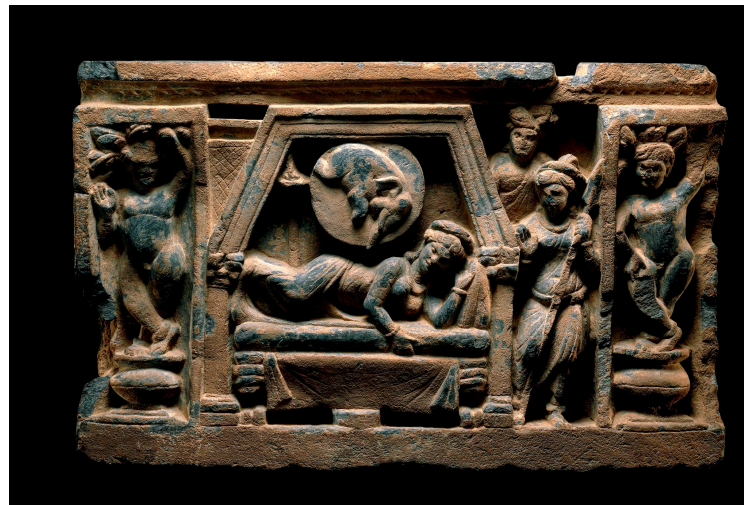


Figure 5. Conception of the Bodhisatva, relief panel, ca. the 2nd to 3rd century CE, no. 1932,0709.1, housed in The British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum/CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 6. Nativity cycle, relief, drum slab, ca. the 1st century CE, no. 1880,0709.44, housed in The British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum/CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 7. Conception of the Bodhisatva, relief, ca. the 2nd century BCE. Sanchi I, eastern gateway, inner face of north pillar. Photography by Li Jingjie.



Figure 8. Lying woman, mural painting, removed, ca. the 5th to 6th century CE; originally from Kizil Cave 84, main chamber, back wall. Archive photographs no. B 132, B 238, A 388 © Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. Reproduced with permission from Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin.

2. Siddhārtha Descending as an Elephant in Indian Art

The earliest imagery of Siddhārtha's conception is found on a medallion relief from Bharhut Stūpa in the 2nd century BCE in the aniconic antiquity (Figure 9)⁹ and, from then on, throughout the Gupta period, during which the mature iconic artistic language was commonly applied (Quagliotti 2009, pp. 349–416), Indian art has consistently chosen an elephant as the represented form of the descending Bodhisatva to the mother's womb, though sometimes the elephant is abbreviated due to limited space. According to traditional Indian embryology, the Buddha-to-be was once conceived of as a white elephant, and the belief is early attested to in textual form at sites such as the Aśokan rock edict in Girnar (dated to circa 280 BCE) and Buddhist scriptures.¹⁰ The elephant is a symbol of royalty, mercy and intelligence in Indian Buddhism (Deeg 2010, pp. 93–128), and the selection of the elephant to be the theriomorphic form of the Bodhisatva is thus no wonder. In the conventional writings of the Buddha's biography, the Bodhisatva distinguishes himself from other beings; for example, the *Lalitavistara* notes that the Bodhisatva in the Tuṣṭita abode had an interrogation with his retinue deities about which form he should take in order to enter the womb of the future mother; the deities answered that, out of miscellaneous forms—Indra, Brahma, the great king, Vaiśravaṇa, and other living beings like *gandharva*, *kinnara*, *mohoraga*, etc.—the six-tusked elephant was the superior form.¹¹



Figure 9. Conception of the Bodhisatva, medallion relief, around the 2nd century BCE, Bharhut; housed in Calcutta Indian Museum. Photograph by Melzer, Gudrun.

However, at the beginning of the 5th century CE, the famous pilgrim monk Faxian 法顯 reported that he once saw a statue of Queen Māyā at the site of the ancient Kapilavastu palace, and it is suggested that he saw imagery of the Bodhisatva riding the white elephant in order to enter the womb at the same time.¹² Deeg (2010, pp. 106–7) has offered the alternative explanation that the description could be Faxian’s own comprehension based on his reading of Chinese literature, since there is no depiction of the Bodhisatva’s descent on an elephant in artwork found at Indian archaeological sites, nor is there any mention of it in contemporaneous Indian texts.

3. Siddhārtha Descending on the Elephant

Our **Picture of Siddhārtha’s Descent** demonstrates a notable difference between all Indian archetypes in depicting the descending Bodhisatva as a human figure riding an elephant. Being much abraded, the depiction was mistaken as a mere elephant and was only recently corrected by researchers.¹³

The historical photograph shows a saddled white elephant heading down to the recumbent Māyā and the Bodhisatva, as a small, fair-skinned boy, rides it, with his two hands placed before the naked breast, and the left leg and foot exposed to the viewers; both the elephant and the boy are surrounded by an aureole, which might have previously been decorated with gold leaf and which may account for the meticulous scrapes along the contour which this painting has suffered. The heads of the Bodhisatva and the elephant are completely damaged. The halo encircling the descending Bodhisatva originated in the pictorial tradition of Gandhāran reliefs and might perhaps embody the sun disk, illuminating the darkness of the ignorance of the world (Schlingloff 2000; 2013, vol. 1, p. 313; Li 2004, pp. 89–90).

In contrast to Indian artistic traditions, the imagery of the Bodhisatva coming down on the elephant prevailed in Northern China from the second half of the 5th century onwards. One of the earliest examples known to us is an engraved Maitreya statue made in Xingping County, Shaanxi Province, in 471 CE (Figure 10a, illustr. also in Li 1996, Figure 2, rubbing; Spiro 2001, pl. 5.2). The back panel of the statue shows rectangular pictures in the style of localised craftsmanship, illustrating the narrative of Dīpaṃkara Buddha and Sumati and the life legends of Buddha Gautama. In the episode of the conception, the Bodhisatva is shown as a naked boy riding a galloping elephant; both are surrounded by a round disk. He approaches a roofed palace of the Chinese type, in which a few horizontal lines indicate both Māyā and the bed she is lying on. Heavenly flowers float in the background and, in the foreground, a tray with jewels denote the wealth and fortune accompanying the miraculous event (Figure 10b).

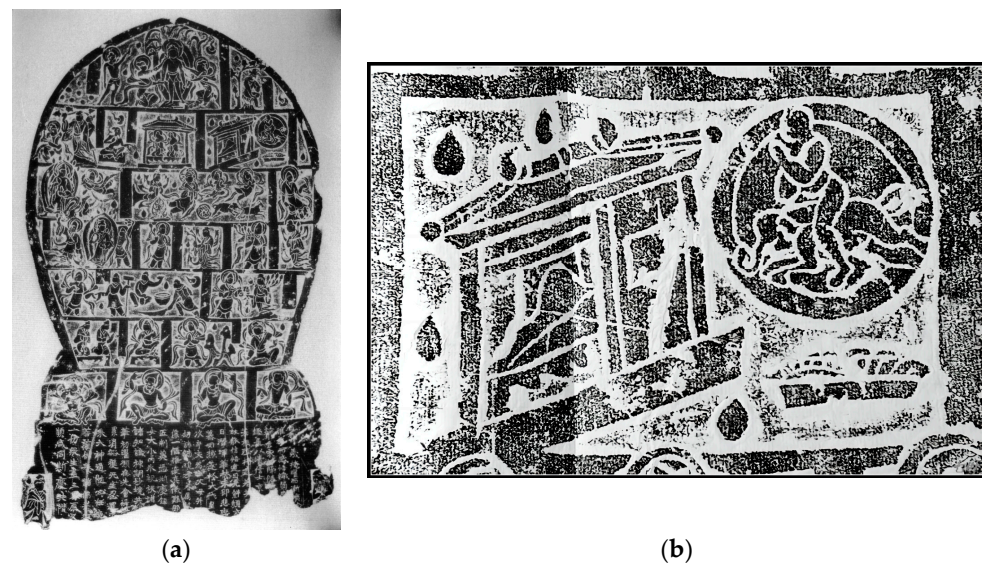


Figure 10. (a) Back side of the Buddhist stele with Maitreya Statue, dated to the 5th Year of Huangxing (471 CE, 皇兴五年), Northern Wei Dynasty, with the inscription, housed in the Forest of Stone Stele Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. Photography by Li Jingjie. (b) Conception of the Bodhisatva, detail from Figure 10a.

The representation of the Bodhisatva riding an elephant developed its different variations in the “Sinicization” process (Li 2004, pp. 89–90).¹⁴ For example, the episode in the relief from Yungang Cave 6, dated slightly later than 490 CE (Figure 11, illustr. in: *Yun-Kang 1951–1956*, vol. 3, p. 177, pls. 176a.), frees the Bodhisatva on the elephant from the surrounding disk and replaces this with a retinue of musician deities and parasol holders accompanying his descent. The influences of the artistic renovations stemming from the Central Plains were transmitted to the Dunhuang Grottoes, in which the earliest mural example of Mogao Cave 431 dates from 525–545 CE. It shows a dynamic portrayal: the Bodhisatva sits on a galloping elephant surmounted by a canopy, and scarves, ribbons, and beautiful flowers, all painted with swift strokes, are floating in the air (Figure 12, also illustr. in *Dunhuang shiku quanji 1999–2004*, vol. 4, pl. 3).

The textual basis for the Bodhisatva riding an elephant may be found in Chinese scriptures from around the 2nd century CE, which antedate the above-introduced mature iconography by at least two hundred years.¹⁵ Scholars have long held the opinion that the change of iconography from the elephant to the elephant rider was a result of the mentality of the Chinese, who could not accept the Indian notion that the Buddha takes the shape of an animal when he comes into the world (Stein 1921, p. 855; Li 2004, pp. 76–84). Viewing the problem from a philological perspective, Deeg (2010, pp. 114–16) attempts to reconstruct the shift of the textual description from “the elephant” to “riding on the elephant” in the translation process, via Central Asia/North West India. He supposes that the Prakrit/Gandhārī of North-Western Indic vernacular language plays an intermediary role in translating the Middle-Indic phrase into Chinese, and the early Chinese Buddhists might have misunderstood the Prakrit/Gandhārī description of “Bodhisatva as the elephant” to be “Bodhisatva riding on an elephant”. The Gandhāran people shared the same understanding as those of Southern India, but the Chinese formulated their new legend. The argument accords with the artistic shreds of evidence, since even the late miniature portable shrines from Gandhāra and Kashmir, which roughly date to the 5th century, and which were disseminated along the Silk Road and into China,¹⁶ remained loyal to the ancient Indian belief that the Bodhisatva descends in the shape of an elephant (Figure 13, illustr. also in (Behrendt 2007, p. 81, cat. no. 64; Hameed 2015, cat. no. 5, Figure 25).

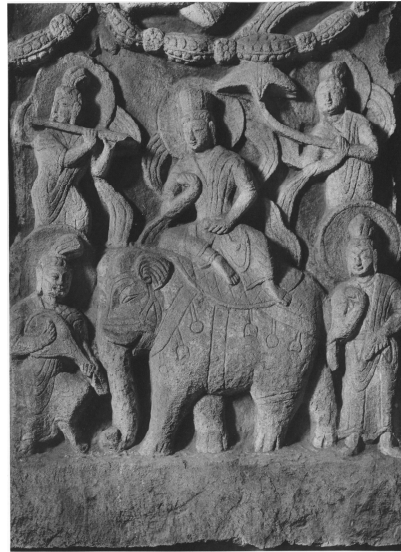


Figure 11. Conception of the Bodhisatva, relief panel, shortly after 490 CE. Yungang Cave 6, central pillar, north face, lower story. Published online, last access on 20 March 2023 <http://hdl.handle.net/2433/139100> Kyoto University Research Information Repository (KURENAI) © Kyoto University.



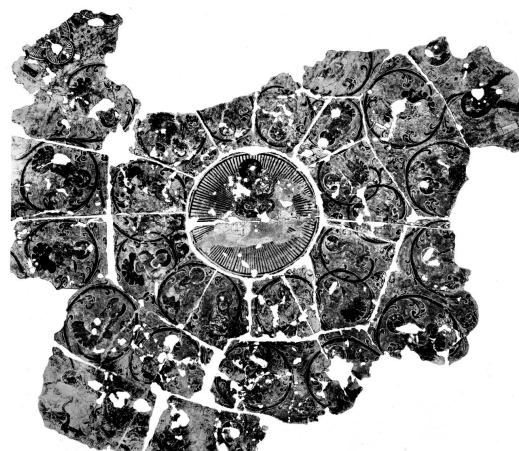
Figure 12. Bodhisatva's descent on elephant, mural paintings, 525–545 CE. Mogao Cave 431, main chamber, central pillar, south face, eastward of the niche. Online Source: <http://5b0988e595225.cdn.sohucs.com/images/20190809/c12e6a6b148d4cc180c9484f837c5b2d.jpeg> (accessed on 20 March 2023).

Given that the Chinese literature and the iconography of the Bodhisatva riding the elephant during conception are chronologically earlier than Kizil Cave 110, it remains debatable whether there were previous but lost pictorial models in the First Style murals, or even earlier. In fact, the mural sequence of Buddha's life in the First Style from Kizil Cave 76 does not preserve the motif of conception but starts with the birth (Grünwedel 1912, pp. 87–91). At a range of peripheral Buddhist locations in the Tarim Basin,¹⁷ we can only find one other pictorial counterpart from a dome mural in Toyuk, Turfan, that is dated after the formation of the Idikut Uyghur Kingdom in 866 CE (Figure 14a,b). The mural shows a concentric medallion containing a haloed man on a galloping elephant and which is filled with radiating rays in the background. On the other hand, the overall decorative scheme of the cave murals adopts the mature scheme of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Turfan region, for example, incorporating the Mahāyāna Bodhisatva figures into the floral patterns. The central medallion showcases the emphasis on the symbolism of illumination more than the

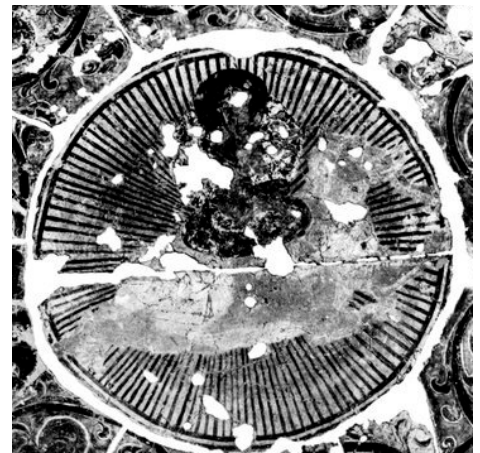
storytelling. The abraded surface, however, fails to present more details of the rider, who is seated with crossed ankles on the elephant's back rather than bestride it.



Figure 13. Conception, relief, the upper scene of the three-sided miniature shrine, acc. no. 1994.489, around the 5th century CE © The Trustee of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York/CC BY-SA 4.0.



(a)



(b)

Figure 14. (a). Conception, mural, after 866 CE, originally from Toyok Shrine VI, discovered by Stein, dome. Photography after Andrews (1948), vol. 2, pl. 10. (b). Detail of Figure 16a, central medallion showing the Bodhisatva riding an elephant. Published online, last access on 20 March 2023: <http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/toyobunko/LFc-57/V-2/page/0013.html>, doi:10.20676/00000259. NII “Digital Silk Road” © Toyo Bunko.

With regard to the local textual evidence in Kucha, there are so far no known Tocharian B writings known concerning the descent of the Bodhisatva Siddhārtha. A glimpse of the relevant Buddhist texts perhaps helps to elucidate the Kuchean people's understanding of the Bodhisatva's conception.

The Indian tradition of the Bodhisatva entering Māyā's womb as an elephant was attested to in Khotanese manuscripts.¹⁸ Likewise, it must not have been too difficult for the Kuchean people to accept the metaphorical shape of Siddhārtha as an elephant, because there were numerous illustrated *jātaka* stories with the Bodhisatva represented as an elephant in previous births, as well as elephant imagery in the three-animals tale in the Kucha

Grotto monasteries,¹⁹ but this is not to say the Kuchean people did not conceive of the Bodhisatva as descending to Māyā while riding an elephant; rather, they might have known of the notion at the latest in the 5th century.

A piece of evidence is provided in bulk commentaries of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (T no. 1509, 大智度論), which was translated by the prestigious Buddhist scholar Kumārajīva, of Kuchean origin, into Chinese between 402–405 CE after he immigrated to China. The text was previously assumed to be an Indian commentary written by the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna but is now hypothesized by modern scholars to retain much of Kumārajīva's own knowledge and opinions.²⁰ It describes the “accomplishment of the conception of the Bodhisatva” as him riding the white elephant when entering the mother's womb:

Da zhidu lun, T no. 1509, 25: 418c28–29: “處胎成就”者，有人言：菩薩乘白象，與無量兜率諸天圍遶、恭敬、供養、侍從，入母胎。Concerning the accomplishment of the conception of the Bodhisatva, according to some, the Bodhisatva mounted on a white elephant, surrounded, venerated, respected, esteemed and served by innumerable Tuṣita gods, penetrated along with them into the womb of his mother.

(Revised translation after Migme Chödrön 2001, vol. 5, p. 2024)

In the range of Chinese texts pertaining to the Turfan oasis, the description of the descending Bodhisatva on the elephant is sometimes taken for granted. The Chinese meditation text, *Sūtra on the Ocean-Like Samādhi of the Visualization of the Buddha* (T no. 643, 觀佛三昧海經), which presumably originated in Turfan around the early 5th century (Yamabe 1999), provides a detailed description of the Bodhisatva coming down to the mother-to-be riding the elephant.²¹

4. Hybrid Versions in Literature

Another group of Chinese literary texts presents a similar story of the Bodhisatva's descent on an elephant, albeit with the alteration that Queen Māyā only saw the white elephant with its six tusks in her dream.

The two early scriptures are T no. 195 (*Sūtra of the twelve-year travel of the Buddha*, 佛說十二遊經)²² and T no. 193 (*Vajrapāṇi-Buddhacarita*, 佛本行經),²³ which were translated during the 4th and 5th centuries and have no certified original counterparts among Indian literature. Given the unclear source material and somewhat irregular narratives, scholars have not given adequate attention to these texts.

The former text describes the Bodhisatva's conception as his descent on the vehicle of a white elephant, escorted by heavenly beings, while Queen Māyā attains a vision of the white elephant in her sleep (T no. 195, 4: 146b27–c6).

The latter text, T no. 193, provides a sophisticated and masterful example of Chinese writing, which gives rise to the hypothesis that the compilation might have been crafted first-hand by Chinese Buddhists rather than being a second-hand translation. T no. 193 is worth special attention because philologists have discovered several exclusive phraseological correspondences with the written shreds of Tocharian B manuscripts (Pan and Loukota 2022), even though the respective paragraphs do not focus directly on the description of the birth cycle. Literally, T no. 193 states that the white elephant resembled a silver mountain, while Bodhisatva riding on the elephant appeared like the sun shining over a white cloud during the descent to Māyā's womb.²⁴ After Māyā woke up, she recalled the pleasant dream and told the king of a vision that included a six-tusked white elephant king approaching her.²⁵

In addition, a source from a later period, the *Mahāsammatarājasūtra* (T no. 191, 眾許摩訶帝經 *Zhongxu mohedi jing*),²⁶ describes a conception episode narrating the same four dream omens of Queen Māyā as those in the Mūlasarvāstivādin *Sanḥabhedavastu*, of which one omen is the white elephant descending from heaven into Māyā's belly (T no. 191, 3: 939a6–9). On the other hand, it has a unique account of Indra and the deities of the desire heaven watching the Bodhisatva descending on the six-tusked elephant from Tuṣita

heaven to Māyā (*T* no. 191, 3: 938c19–23), which is a new feature compared to the earlier Mūlasarvāstivādin texts.

It may, therefore, be said that the three hybrid textual versions in Chinese combine both the Bodhisatva's descent as an elephant and his riding the elephant. Such literature probably reveals the fact that foreign peoples beyond India could not comprehend the Bodhisatva in the shape of an elephant, but they still admired the ancient Indian traditions. Therefore, they shifted the vision of a single elephant to the status of a dream and promoted the vision of the Bodhisatva riding an elephant to the status of an actual event.

The hybrid writings hint toward the feeling that the human Bodhisatva riding the elephant is preferred to the more orthodox version. This notion of hierarchy is important for understanding **Picture of Siddhārtha's Descent** in Kizil Cave 110 and the beliefs held at Kucha; there is also a strengthened sense of the same hierarchy between the two visions in a literary source from the neighboring Turfan region: the Hami *Maitrisimit* which includes a biographical narration of the future Maitreya Buddha.²⁷ Being posterior to the Kuchean artistic production of the time, the Hami *Maitrisimit*, is of great referential value for the mural sequence of the Gautama Buddha in Kizil Cave 110, since it can provide an exclusive textual basis for certain pictorial details. The 11th Chapter of Hami *Maitrisimit* reproduces the birth events of Maitreya Bodhisatva in a structure highly analogous to the common Buddha biography. An interesting description of the mother's four dreams in the episode of dream interpretation²⁸ hint that the mother has dreamt of a young boy riding an elephant²⁹ and, moreover, acknowledges that the omen is even more auspicious than the dream of a descending elephant.

5. Summary

Having re-investigated **Picture of Siddhārtha's Descent** in Kizil Cave 110 and several pertinent literary works, this essay has attempted to establish a link in the transformation process in the belief in Siddhārtha's miraculous descent, i.e., from his elephant avatar in the Indian tradition to his riding an elephant in Chinese understandings. The picture under discussion presents several Indian prototypes and stays nearer to Indian culture in general than to the Chinese style. On the other hand, in light of the assessment given above, one cannot rule out the possibility of a reverse cultural flowing from China to Kucha.

It has been a widespread scholarly consensus to believe that Kucha played a pioneering role in the transmission of Buddhism to Northern China because of its geographical location on the Silk Road. However, further reflection is necessary on this rare import of Chinese imagery westwards to Kucha.

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Notes

¹ The main relevant sources are listed as follows:

Pali: *Nidānakathā*, p. 50; transl. pp. 66–67.

Sanskrit: *Mahāvastu*, ed. vol. 2, pp. 9, 20, 11, 18–21, transl. vol. 2, p. 9. *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya Saṅghabhedavastu*, ed. vol. 1, p. 40, 9–18. *Buddhacarita*, chapter. I, pp. 3–11; transl. pp. 2–3. *Lalitavistara*, ed. pp. 30–54; ed. transl. pp. 19–28. *Saundarananda*, ed. chp. 2, v. 49–50; transl. p. 12.

Chinese: *T* no. 184, 3: 463b12–16. *T* no. 185, 3: 473b21–22. *T* no. 186, 3: 491a27–b6. *T* no. 187, 3: 548c10–19. *T* no. 189, 3: 624a20–27. *T* no. 190, 3: 683b11–14. *T* no. 191, 3: 938c19–23. *T* no. 193, 4: 58a11–14. *T* no. 195, 4: 146b27–c6. *T* no. 643, 15: 667b6–19. *T* no. 1509, 25: 418c28–29.

Khotanese: *The Book of Zambasta*, ed. transl. Emmerick, pp. 378–79.

² For the references of major research, see (Foucher 1949, p. 38; Fischer 1980, pp. 229–95; Miyaji 1987, pp. 189–214; 1988, pp. 255–93; Schlingloff 2000; 2013, vol. 1, pp. 307–13, 376–79; Quagliotti 2009, pp. 349–416; Deeg 2010, pp. 93–128; Zin 2015, pp. 178–205).

³ For the references of western expeditions in Xinjiang, see (Dabbs 1963).

⁴ The assessment of the chronology of Kizil Cave 110 and its murals is a multifaceted undertaking. The methodology and supporting arguments employed in this regard are extensively expounded upon in the forthcoming doctoral dissertation of the present

author to be submitted to Institute for South and Central Asian Studies, Leipzig University, 2023. As regards the epigraphical analysis of the Tocharian B inscriptions found in the cave and the hypothesis positing their dating to approximately 600 CE, I am grateful to Dr. Michaël Peyrot for his insights shared in his report *Dating Kuchean: Usefulness and uselessness of chronological clues from the Tocharian B language, script and texts* on 25 July 2018: Workshop “Archaeology and Vinaya Precepts”, Leipzig.

(Grünwedel 1912, p. 118); in English (translated by the current author): “Dream of the Māyā. The companions of the sleeping Māyā are reminiscent of Indian prototypes. One figure from the picture is now in the museum. The white elephant is represented floating in the air above the lying Māyā but its image is badly destroyed”. He did not notice the boy figure riding the elephant.

Schmidt (2010, p. 843) deciphered the Toch. B verb *ka[calñe]* (meaning “put, set (down)”) in the inscription. Dr. Pan, Tao suggests a new revision of *kā[tkalñe]* “entering” in his private correspondence with the current author, 15 September 2019. Pan’s decipherment recalls the Bharhut inscribed caption *bhḡavato ūkramti* “the conception of the Bhagavan” (Hultsch 1885, nos. 10–11. Pali. *okkami*, Skt. *upakrānti*, see Lüders 1963, pp. 89–92), or the Sanskrit word *avakrānti* or *avakram* in the biographical literature of the Buddha.

The “pensive” posture named by art historians denotes a contemplative or in-trance state; for the pictorial references, see (Quagliotti 1996, pp. 97–115).

The fragment III 8444a is nowadays housed in Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, cf. (Grünwedel 1920, II 90, Figure 4 (drawing), pls. 32, 33; Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China: Kucha 2008, p. 39). The girl was identified by Grünwedel (1920, II 64) as Śrīmātī, the sister of Jīvaka and a devout Buddhist who fell in love with a monk and suddenly passed away, and the Buddha made a sermon in front of her corpse.

See (Lüders 1963, pl. 35; Schlingloff 2000; 2013, vol. 2, no. 64(2) [1] (drawing)). It is necessary to pay attention of the two fundamental traditions of Indian Buddhist art concerning the representations of the Buddha and Bodhisatvas, that is, “aniconic” and “iconic”. The former tradition avoids depicting the human form of the Buddha in physical or anthropomorphic form, but by means of symbols, and proceeding to it, the latter tradition comes to represent the human form of the Buddha or Bodhisatva, for the references, see (Seckel 1976; Seckel and Leisinger 2004).

The 13th Aśokan Edict from Girnar: ...[sa]rvaśveto hasti sarvalokasukhāharo nāma, literally: “...the entirely white elephant bringing indeed happiness to the whole world”, see (Windisch 1908, p. 7; Hultsch 1885, pp. 26–27). Schlingloff (2000; 2013, vol. 1, p. 311) quoted the common descriptions in the biographical literature of the Buddha, including *Nidānakathā*: *setavara-vāraṇo hutvā*; MSV *Saṅghabhedavastu*: *gajanidarśanena*; *Mahāvastu*: *gajarūpi śaddanto*; *Lalitavistara*: *pāṇḍuro gajapoto bhutvā śaddanta*. In addition, scholars assume the two engraved elephant images at Dhauri and on the Samkisa pillar in the 2nd century BCE are metaphorical representation of the descending Bodhisatva to earth, cf. (Verardi 1999–2000, p. 70; Quagliotti 2009, p. 404, fn. 2).

Lalitavistara, ed. 28: *gajavaramahāpramāṇaḥ śaddanto hemajālasamkāsah surucirah suraktaśīrṣah*. Interestingly, the older Chinese translation, *Puyao jing* (普曜經) includes another episode with the tale about an elephant, a horse, and a rabbit crossing the river to stress the superiority of the elephant shape, which sheds light on the Mahāyana Buddhism, T no. 186, 3: 488b17–26. “又問：‘以何形往？’答曰：‘象形第一。六牙白象頭首微妙，威神巍巍、形像殊好，梵典所載其為然矣，緣是顯示三十二相。所以者何？世有三獸：一、兔，二、馬，三、白象。兔之渡水，趣自渡耳；馬雖差猛，猶不知水之深淺也；白象之渡盡其源底。’ Translation by the present author: “(It was) replied, ‘Of all, the elephant shape is most superior. The head of the six-tusk elephant is so fine and beautiful, full with splendour and majesty, extraordinary in the shape and form, as recorded in Brahmanical scriptures. The elephant shape demonstrates the 32 *lakṣaṇas*.’ Why would one say so? As for the (following) three animals in the world: the first is a rabbit, the second is a horse and the third is a white elephant; on the occasion of crossing the river, the rabbit can only deliver itself to the other bank; the horse is powerful but it does not know about the depth of the water; only the white elephant can cross by completely touching the river bed.”

Faxian zhuan jiaozhu (Zhang 2008, p. 70): 白淨王故宮處，作太子母形像，乃太子乘白象入母胎時。 Translation by the present author: “At the ancient palace of King Śuddhodana, a statue of the mother of the prince was erected, which indicated the moment of the prince riding on an elephant and entering his mother’s womb.”

The first analysis of the pictorial detail was published in *Saiiki Bijutsuten* edited for the exhibition “Central Asian Art from the Museum of Indian Art, Berlin” held at Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, 2 April–12 May 1991; see also (Nakagawara 1994, p. 26; Schlingloff 2000; 2013, vol. 1, p. 313; Li 2004, pp. 89–90).

It is noteworthy that later on in the early 6th century, Yungang Cave 37 provided a local development of a human figure riding the galloping elephant and carrying the infant Bodhisatva in his arms as he brings the Bodhisatva down to the future mother, which is an innovation beyond textual sources. For references to the picture, see (Yun-Kang 1951–1956, vol. 6, p. 15, pl. 74b; Li 2004, Figure 6). For more examples from Northern China, see (Li 2004, pp. 77–95).

Deeg (2010, p. 114) argued that the earliest Chinese scriptures containing such recounts (T no. 184, T no. 185) corresponded with the late Han Dynasty; while contemporary mural depictions of a human figure on a white elephant in tombs already existed in Shandong Province and Inner Mongolia, which are related to the conception of the Buddha. However, in the beginning phase of Chinese Buddhism, the Chinese natives absorbed only unsystematic Buddhist elements into their funerary customs, which disobeyed the orthodox Buddhist doctrines, and such imagery, deprived of the necessary story-telling context of the Buddha’s life, was more likely painted to cater to native funerary beliefs of ascending to heaven.

- 16 Hameed (2015) provides a corpus of miniature portable shrines from Gandhāra and Kashmir with his own numbering. The two examples containing the conception episode are the shrine cat. no. 5 housed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the ivory diptych cat. no. 17 found in Yulin and housed in National Museum of China, Beijing (acc. no. 1952 ICL). The latter scene shows Queen Māyā sleeping in bed, the maiden crouching on ground and two deities, with damaged heads, witnessing the event with palms held together in *añjali*. The elephant is absent due to the limited space. However, the whole diptych, when closed, depicts the form of a man riding the elephant; this has been identified by Yan (1955, pp. 80–88) as the descending Bodhisatva riding the elephant. The idea was later repudiated by Soper who argued that the carriage elephant is loaded with a reliquary, cf. (Soper 1965, p. 222; Rowan 1985, pp. 251–304).
- 17 In the mural décor of Kumtura Cave 16, main chamber, southern wall, there is a depiction of the Bodhisatva riding on a six-tusked white elephant, heading for a roofed building, but it belongs to a Mahāyānist paradise illustration of wall paintings in the Tang Manner of the so-called Third Style, rather than the narrative of the Buddha's life; nor does it represent Mañjuśrī, cf. (Liu 2017, pp. 155–57).
- 18 *The Book of Zambasta* gives an account of the descent of the Bodhisatva: “Because of this great compassion, he at once gave up life with the gods among the Tuṣṭa-gods. Then, in the form of an elephant-foal, he then filled the whole world with light. He made worthy of the Śākya-race those who were Ikṣvākus, his father Śuddhodana, his mother Queen Māyā. As a sunbeam (enters) a room, so by night he entered the side of Queen Maya on the right. Why did he appear in the form of a white elephant? So that wise men knew him before. With every excellence, he is pure, well tamed. Since he has white tusks, pure, he will practise *śīla*. He has six tusks because he will proclaim the six great, good *anusmṛtis*, which remove all *kleśas*. Those arose great light in all directions: he will remove all dark, black ignorance. With his trunk, he touched his mother's right side: he will instruct all other beings in *pradakṣiṇā*.” (Translation by Emmerick 1968, pp. 378–79).
- 19 The craftsmen working for the Kumtura Caves must have known about the tale, for they painted the three animals together on the zenith of the vaulted ceiling as part of the “city of *nirvāṇa*” iconography in Kumtura Cave 28, cf. (Yang 2017, pp. 76–86; Konczak-Nagel 2020, pp. 49–51).
- 20 For an overview of scholarly opinion, see (Zhou 2000, pp. 155–65). Moreover, Chang (2020) has proven certain exclusive connections between some *jākata* representations in Kuchean murals and the text *T* no. 1509.
- 21 *Guanfo sanmei hai jing*, *T* no. 643, 15: 667b11–12: 一一日光有金色象，菩薩化乘，乘象之時，萬億瑞應不可宣說。 Translation by the current author: “In every ray of the sunlight, there is an elephant of the golden color. When the Bodhisatva shows himself as descending on the elephant, there are thousands of billions of auspicious miracles beyond description.”
- 22 *Fo shuo shi'er you jing*, *T* no. 195, was translated by Kālodaka 迦留陀伽 in 392 CE and speculated to be apocryphal; for the analysis of the mixed identity of the text, cf. (Pu 2019, pp. 93–121).
- 23 *Fo ben xing jing*, *T* no. 193 was traditionally ascribed to Baoyun 寶雲 (died in 449 CE), who was a fellow pilgrim monk with Faxian 法顯 to India. Radich (2019, pp. 229–79) checked the phraseology of *T* no. 193 and suggested the translation should be in a tightly interrelated group with *T* no. 7, *T* no. 189 and *T* no. 192 established in the 5th century. The English title *Vajrapāṇi-Buddhacarita* of *T* no. 193 is adopted from the forthcoming collaboration essay of Pan/Loukota, who gave their oral presentation on the 34th DOT (Deutscher Orientalistentag, Freie Universität Berlin, 12–17 September), and I am grateful for the kind information they provided.
- 24 *Fo benxing jing*, *T* no. 193, 4: 57c24–58a2: 菩薩乘象王，如日照白雲；諸天鼓樂舞，普雨雜色花。日精之明珠，光照耀王宮；降神下生時，現瑞甚微妙。 Translation by Deeg (2010, p. 112): “...(he) had his vehicle appear to be let everybody know: (it is) an elephant white as a silver mountain. The bodhisatva is sitting on the king of the elephants (who) looks like a white cloud upon which the sun is shining. All gods (*deva*) beat the drum, performed music and danced; a rain of multicoloured flowers spread; like a bright pearl of the essence of the sun he illuminated the royal palace. When he descends to be born (i.e.: conceived) miraculously, magnificent omens appear”.
- 25 *Fo benxing jing*, *T* no. 193, 4: 58a11–14: 妙后寐寤尋憶夢，諸根寂然喜踊躍；舉目四向遍察視，玉顏怡悅蓮華色。即啟王曰：唯願聽，夢中所見甚吉祥：大白象王有六牙，忽然來至在我前。 Translation by the present author: “Queen Māyā woke up and remembered the dream, feeling pacified and joyful. She looked around, with the beautiful and delightful face of the lotus colour, and spoke to the king: ‘May thou listen to me, I had a dream with the auspicious vision that a great, white elephant king with six tusks instantly came to me’”.
- 26 *Zhongxu mohedi Jing*, *T* no. 191, is highly regarded due to the high-quality translation and its strong affinities to the Mūlasarvāstivādin School. The translator Faxian (Dharmabhadra 法賢, also named Tianxizai 天息災) from Kashmir was ordained in Nalanda Temple in India, and came to the capital of Northern Song Dynasty in China in 982 CE; there he took charge of the translation work until his death in the year of 1000 CE; cf. (Lin 2007, pp. 43–47).
- 27 As summarized in Ji et al. (1998), the work is not preserved in any Indian or Chinese language and it has three parallel versions of the provenance in Tarim Basin, with one Tocharian A script from Karashar (roughly in the 7th or 8th Centuries) and two Old-Uyghur scripts separately from Sangim (roughly in the 8th or 9th centuries) and from Hami. The Hami *Maitrisimit* written in 1069 CE as stated in its colophon has the longest corpus in preservation; for a whole edition, see Geng (2008). Compared to the fragmentary Karashar and Sangim parallels, the Hami *Maitrisimit* provides a lengthy account in terms of the life story of Maitreya Buddha, despite here being unavoidable lacuna due to the damage.

- ²⁸ (Geng et al. 1988, pp. 322, 341; Geng 2008, p. 283). Prof. Peter Zieme suggests to give a new reading and interpretation concerning the passage of four dreams in the private correspondences with the present author (6 January 2022), and the forthcoming academic fruit is awaited.
- ²⁹ Hami Maitrisimit, ch. 11, folio 3a24–28, transliteration and the German translation in (Geng et al. 1988, p. 341, fn. 32): “Diejenigen Frauen, die träumen, daß im Traum ein Jüngling einen Elefanten besteigt, diese Frauen werden einen Sohn gebären, der sicherlich ein Buddha-cakravartin-König wird”; I attempts to give the English translation here: “Those women who dream that a boy in the dream mounts an elephant, they will give birth to a son who will surely become a Buddha-cakravartin king”. For the emendation in Chinese translation, see (Geng 2008, pp. 283, 314).

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T = Taishō shinshū daizōkyō (see 3. Secondary Sources, Takakusu & Watanabe, et al.)
 Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭, eds. 1924–1932. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 [Buddhist Canon Compiled under the Taishō Era (1912–1926)]. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai 大正一切經刊行會.
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