

Maitreya, the Saviour?: Enigmatic 'Mahābodhisatvas' in Kucha

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Abstract: Narrative art requires pictorial conventions to convey the content of pictures. Artists have to provide information about the social status of a person, the place and time of an event, etc., without employing words. Pictorial conventions have to be consistent to be understandable; any deviation will be detected and is therefore probably meaningful. In paintings from Kucha, a clear distinction is made between the headgear of a king and the hairdo of a Brahmanical ascetic. However, in a number of *jātaka* representations the self-sacrificing king is shown with the hairstyle of a Brahmanical ascetic. There even are *jātaka* paintings in which the Bodhisatva is shown with a mandorla—a feature reserved in Kucha exclusively for the *samyaksambuddhas* and the 'Mahābodhisatvas' like the future Buddha Maitreya. It is obvious that the paintings are transmitting a particular message. But how would a viewer in the past have understood, for example, an image of the King Pradīpapadyota—shown guiding the merchants on their way with his hands burning—represented with the ascetic hairdo of Maitreya... or rather, of Avalokiteśvara?

Keywords: Kucha, Buddhist murals, self-sacrifice, Maitreya, Avalokiteśvara

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Whatever it was that ‘thus have I heard’, it only came down to us because someone wrote it down. There is an inherent danger in this fact since, as we all know, texts do not always provide us with the complete picture; they often omit contextual details of the religious or social dependences necessary for a modern reader to understand them. In some rare cases we get the chance to complement what ‘thus have I heard’ with what ‘thus have I seen’, when a Buddhist landscape preserved *in situ* and associated with a particular people can broaden our understanding of practised Buddhism, or perhaps rather make us realise how little we know.

The temples of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road offer one of the few opportunities for an all-encompassing analysis, as they contain not only the paintings—sometimes even with explanatory inscriptions in Sanskrit, the local Tocharian, and later in Chinese and Uyghur—but also manuscripts of the texts illustrated in the paintings. Is it, however, always the case that we can combine the texts and the paintings of Kucha? It is not; a fact exemplified by the Sutasoma narrative. The Sanskrit version of the narrative of Sutasoma kidnapped by the man-eater Saudāsa¹ as found in Kucha is illustrated in Ajanta, Aurangabad, Kanheri, Kanaganahalli, and Nagarjunakonda.² In Kucha, however, Saudāsa is shown sporting wings—a feature only mentioned in versions written in vernacular languages³ and in

¹ See Schlingloff, *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings*, 96–101 for a description of the manuscript, edition and translation of the Sutasoma narrative; fifth century of originally some 350 sheets containing various subjects, an anthology of lyrical verses, stories about pratyekabuddhas, and various other stories, one of which was identified as the work of the famous Saṅghasena. The version of the narrative related in this manuscript contains the explanation of a man-eater’s obsession with human flesh—his mother was a lioness and brought the newborn to his father—and tells that the man-eater kidnapped the king Sutasoma when he bathed with his wives, as the narrative is depicted in Ajanta.

² Schlingloff, *Ajanta – Handbuch der Malereien* and *idem, Ajanta – Handbook of the Paintings 1*, vol. 1, 260

³ Wilkens, Pinault, and Peyrot, ‘A Tocharian Parallel to the Legend of Kalmāṣapāda’.

Kumārajīva's translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (Ch. *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論).⁴ This is but one of many examples where the version depicted in the paintings deviates from the version known from locally-found texts.⁵

There is a general and well-established consensus, seemingly supported by the manuscripts found in Kucha, observations of Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664)⁶ and the findings from local Tocharian sources, that the paintings of the first and second Indo-Iranian style in Kucha illustrate a pre-Mahāyāna stage of Buddhism. Attempts to identify the Buddha Vairocana in Kucha have not proved correct;⁷ there is also no reason to associate wrathful-looking spirits with the tantric pantheon.⁸ If manuscripts of Mahāyāna texts have been discovered, they were rather imports from other areas.⁹ It may not be a coincidence that those paper scrolls containing the Mahāyāna sūtras in Chinese, including the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, were glued together with the writing facing inwards and cut into *poṭhī* format,

⁴ *Da zhidu lun*, T no. 1509, 25: 88c27–89b11; French translation by Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*. vol. 1, 260–63; see Zin, 'A Bizarre Story about Two Kings'.

⁵ Compare, for example, the illustrations of the *parinirvāṇa* cycle, in which episodes are shown that do not appear to among others found in Kucha *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*. See Zin, *Representations of the Parinirvāṇa Story Cycle*, e.g., occurrence 4, 45–49.

⁶ *Datang Xiyu ji*, T no. 2087, 51: 870a24–25; Beal, trans., *Si-yu-ki*, vol. 1, 19.

⁷ Compare, for example, Jera-Bezard and Maillard, 'Remarks on Early Esoteric Buddhist Painting', opposite view and well-founded interpretation of the 'cosmological Buddhas' as representations of Śākyamuni in Howard, *The Imagery of the Cosmological Buddha*, 33–46.

⁸ Grünwedel in his descriptions of the paintings writes of 'Tantra' or 'Kala-cakra' (e.g. Grünwedel, *Alt-Kutscha*, I 47). Northern Buddhism at the time of the discovery of the Kucha paintings was known from Tibetan sources.

⁹ Compare, for example, Mesheznikov, 'An Unpublished Fragment SI 4645' with references to previous research about a fragment of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* brought to St. Petersburg by the Russian expedition from Kizilgaha; the manuscript has been brought to Kucha from the region of Khotan.



DRAWING 1 Kizil, Cave 123, main chamber, rear wall, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, no. III 9063, drawing by Monika Zin.

in order to write religious texts of traditional Buddhism on them.¹⁰ The attentive viewer of the paintings will also not consider it a coincidence that sometimes the paintings show a deliberately distorted kind of Mahāyāna iconography: the Bodhisatva ‘in pensive mood’—frequently interpreted in Gandhara as Avalokiteśvara—is depicted in Kucha as well, but observing a bird eating a snake (**Drawing 1**), or a

¹⁰ Pan and Chen, ‘The Tip of Iceberg’.



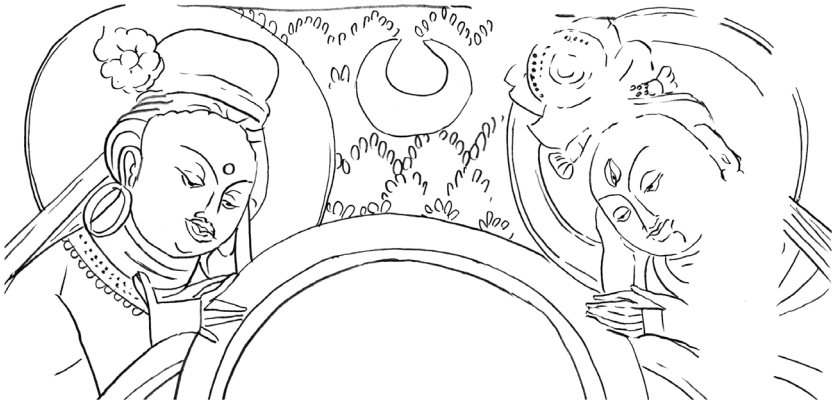
DRAWING 2 Kizil, Cave 227, main chamber, rear wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

ploughman (**Drawing 2**). Certainly, even in South Asia the ‘pensive Bodhisatvas’ can represent other persons and even the meditating Siddhārtha.¹¹ But the painters in Kucha made the interpretation of their images quite unambiguous: the images are linked to the first meditation under the *jambu* tree, i.e., the biography of the ‘historical Bodhisatva’, or at the utmost to the prophesy of the future Buddha Maitreya¹²—but by no means to the ‘transcendental’ Avalokiteśvara from Amitābha’s paradise.¹³

¹¹ See Quagliotti in Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography of Avalokiteśvara*, 97–112, with references to textual sources and previous research.

¹² Wang, *An Iconographic Research on the Biography of the Buddha*, picture 21.

¹³ For a brief overview of the understanding of the Bodhisatvas in traditional and Mahāyāna Buddhism in relation to the art of Gandhara, see Miyaji, ‘Aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhist Art in Gandhara’.



DRAWING 3 Kizil, Cave 178, main chamber, left side wall, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, no. III 8725a, drawing by Monika Zin.

In Kucha, the Buddha is usually flanked by Indra and Brahma (**Drawing 3**); examples with Vajrapāṇi and a monk (Ānanda) next to him are also encountered.¹⁴ Triads of the Buddha and two Bodhisattvas, Vajrapāṇi and ‘Padmapāṇi’ (often interpreted as Avalokiteśvara), frequently depicted in Gandhara, Mathura, or Ajanta, are in Kucha not represented.

We can only speculate what may have motivated the Tocharians to hold on to traditional Buddhism and to reject the seemingly attractive beliefs in saints who could be summoned *hic et nunc* from the distant paradises to help. It can be suggested that traditional Buddhism was perhaps an important part of Tocharian identity because it was different from the Mahāyāna Buddhism of other areas on the Silk Road and of the Chinese occupiers. One important question must, however, be asked, and that is whether this demonstrative repudiation of the achievements of Buddhism in neighbouring areas was merely a display of Tocharian ‘otherness’ or a matter of fact in daily religious practice. The answer may not be undisputed but a Mahāyāna—or

¹⁴ Like in Kizil 227, illus. historical photograph taken by French expedition, Musée Guimet, no. AP 7504 (illus. in Zin, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*, fig. 126); *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* 2009, vol. 3, 252, pl. 228.

at least Mahāyāna-like—background should not be ruled out completely. The famous Buddhist *Yogalehrbuch* [Yoga Manual] that was discovered in Kucha speaks of renouncing nirvāṇa to help beings.¹⁵ The general message of the paintings, showing hundreds of sacrifices by the Bodhisatva, suggests that Kucha Buddhism was ideologically not far removed from Mahāyāna ideas. As we will see, there was something like a ‘second understanding’ of the Bodhisatvas in *jātakas*, since the paintings use iconographic features that allude to a saint in the attire of a Brahmanical ascetic—perhaps in one way or another associated with Avalokiteśvara.

At this point, it is worthwhile to recall the fact that not only Buddhology but also art-historical research on South Asia has long pointed out that no clear distinction between traditional and Mahāyāna Buddhism can be made today, and that it may not always have been crucial in antiquity either. Relevant studies of this aspect, especially in connection with identifications and understanding of the Bodhisatvas, that are important also for the essay in hand, are for instance Gerard Fussman’s analysis of the Bodhisatvas in Gandhara¹⁶ or Pia Brancaccio’s analysis of Avalokiteśvaras on the Deccan,¹⁷ whom they regard as a helping saint, not necessarily with Mahāyāna connotations. When analysing paintings of Avalokiteśvara in Ajanta (compare Drawing 12), Schlingloff¹⁸ points to the vision of the meditating monk described in the *Yogalehrbuch*. According to this text, the yogin experiences his own consecration as a Bodhisatva, ‘a redeemer of the frailties of all living creatures’.¹⁹

The research on Kucha must address the question of the identity of all the Bodhisatvas depicted in the paintings. I do not mean here the heroes of the *jātakas* but the ‘Mahābodhisatvas’, the saints

¹⁵ Schlingloff, ed. and trans., *Ein buddhistisches Yogalehrbuch*, 172 (162R4–163R6).

¹⁶ Fussman in Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography of Avalokiteśvara*, 15–26.

¹⁷ Brancaccio ‘Aṣṭamahābhaya Avalokiteśvara’.

¹⁸ Schlingloff, *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings*, 177–78.

¹⁹ Schlingloff, *Ein buddhistisches Yogalehrbuch*, 147 (152V2–V6).

who, like the Buddha, are endowed with head and body nimbi. The textual material does not provide useful information since no other names are transmitted except Maitreya's. Formulae for the announcement of forthcoming donations to the saṅgha discovered in Kucha and Shorchuk list among those persons who should benefit from them 'Maitreya and the other Mahāsatvas' Bodhisatvas' (*Maitreyaprāmukhānāṃ mahāsatvānāṃ bodhisatvānāṃ...*).²⁰ This shows us at least that Maitreya was not the only Bodhisatva in the understanding of the Tocharians.

It appears worthwhile to collect the material and to analyse its context, even if will not yet yield clear results at the present state of knowledge.²¹ The paper in hand will focus on two issues: the rare depictions showing a Bodhisatva characterised by a body nimbus and the hairstyle of a Brahmanical ascetic; and the much more frequent representations of well-known *jātakas* whose hero, even though being a king, is presented as a Brahmanical ascetic.

Before we turn to the analysis of the narrative images, an attempt will be made to scrutinise the necessary elements of recognition, that is, the visual vocabulary: the body nimbi of the Bodhisatvas and the hairstyle of the Brahmin ascetics.

The depiction of nimbi in Kucha is an important criterion to determine the status of the represented persons. Head nimbi appear in Kucha very often; gods and minor deities as well as diverse persons of rank, members of royal families, great merchants, and also high-ranked donors can be endowed with them. Born as human, Bodhisatvas of the *jātakas* are usually also depicted with such a nimbus. Incidentally, this last use of the head nimbus is known, but extremely rare, in Gandhara²²—from where it was probably

²⁰ See Lüders, 'Zur Geschichte und Geographie Ostturkestans', text VIII and IX.

²¹ The forthcoming study on iconography of Buddhas and Bodhisatvas by Ines Konczak-Nagel, *Depictions of Buddhas and Bodhisatvas in the Paintings of Kucha*, will possibly provide answers to several of these issues mentioned here only briefly.

²² Compare a Gandhara relief showing the Viśvantara narrative, illus. Kurita, *Kaitai zoboban Gandara bijutsu*, vol. 2, fig. 868.

adopted in Kucha—and, to the best of my knowledge, never occurs in Andhra or Ajanta.²³

As a rule, monks (including the arhats, such as Mahākāśyapa) are not shown with nimbi. Brahmanical ascetics also appear without nimbi and are thus easily distinguished from the God Brahma (compare Drawing 3) and the Brahmakāyika deities.²⁴ Brahmanical ascetics figuring as heroes of a *jātaka*, for example Śyāma, are occasionally shown without nimbi. It seems that there was no consensus which rule was more important: to show the Bodhisatva with the nimbus or the Brahmanical ascetic without.

The body nimbi are of fundamentally different significance; only the Buddha and ‘great Bodhisatvas’ are endowed with them. The meaning of the body-nimbus can be rather precisely explained based on depictions of the three types of enlightened persons on their way to the ‘city of nirvāṇa’ in some caves in Kumtura which show all the three types: an arhat, a pratyekabuddha and a *saṃyaksambuddha*.²⁵ The monk-arhat is shown without any nimbus; the *saṃyaksambuddha* with nimbus and mandorla. The third category, standing between

²³ There are good reasons to believe that the conventions of showing the *jātaka* Bodhisatvas with nimbus, in the centre of the composition and bigger than the other persons—all features typical of Kucha depictions of the *jātakas*—were first developed in Gandhara. A painting of the *Śibijātaka* from Hadda (judging by the shape of the eyes from the Gupta period) led the author to develop the theory of a lost ‘Gandharan School of Paintings’ (Zin, ‘Buddhist Narrative Depictions in Andhra, Gandhara and Kucha’), which would bridge the temporal gap between the ‘classical’ Gandhara narrative reliefs and Kucha paintings and explain the modifications in iconography.

²⁴ An appearance similar to the Brahmakāyikas is displayed by flying deities and individuals trying to cross the water in a genre of Kucheian paintings which I have tentatively explained as ‘crossing the ocean of *samsāra*’ (Zin, ‘Crossing the Ocean of *samsāra*’; *idem*, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*, drawings 126–37). The swimming persons might be the *gandharvas/aupapākukas*, i.e., beings in a state before the next rebirth.

²⁵ Konczak-Nagel, ‘Representations of Architecture and Architectural Elements’, 49–55.

the first two, a person shown with head nimbus only, must represent the pratyekabuddha (the solitary Buddha, enlightened by himself but without the saṅgha of the monks).²⁶ The same three types—a person with head and body nimbus, with only head nimbus, and without any—are also presented inside the ‘city of nirvāṇa’.

As we see, while the head nimbus can carry different meanings, the body nimbus is used as a characteristic only of *saṃyaksambuddhas*. However, as Drawings 1 and 2 show, this does include the future ones: it signifies that the person is designed to be a future *saṃyaksambuddha*. This differentiation of enlightened persons by means of the presence and type of nimbi is an invention of Kucha.²⁷

The pictorial convention allowing the viewer to recognise what can perhaps be called the ‘level of holiness’ of an enlightened person, or perhaps of light this person radiates, was applied in representations. In thousands of sermon scenes in Kucha, the Buddha(s) are represented with both head and body nimbus. Among arhats meditating in landscapes sometimes appear persons with a head nimbus, who must represent pratyekabuddhas.²⁸ In the median strips of the caves, all three types are shown flying side by side with sun, moon, nāgas in clouds, spirits of wind, and Garuḍa. In terms of quantity, pratyekabuddhas are the most numerous.²⁹

The Bodhisatva in the lunette above the door, usually explained

²⁶ On pratyekabuddha see von Hinüber, ‘Pacceka-buddhas / Pratyekabuddhas in Indic Sources’.

²⁷ With regard to the use of nimbi and mandorlas, different schools of art in South Asia have developed different rules; while in Andhra, for example, the Buddha and also Siddhārtha before enlightenment are always shown with a halo, in Ajanta narrative paintings the Buddha can be depicted without it. In other cases, the Buddhas and the ‘great Bodhisatvas’ are shown surrounded by head or body nimbus. The double nimbus, around the head and the body, is known only from Great Gandhara, but is very rare there, compare Bopearachchi, ‘A Pectoral Depicting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas’.

²⁸ Like in Kizilgaha Cave 30, right corridor, vault above the outer wall, *in situ*, illus. Zin, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*, drawing 117.

²⁹ See Appendix in Zin, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*.

as Maitreya, is always shown with the body nimbus. Sometimes he is presented preaching (**Drawing 4**) and sometimes he holds a bottle in his left hand (**Drawing 5**). These two permutations can be encountered in the paintings executed in the first Indo-Iranian style, too.³⁰ That raises the question of whether it is always the same Bodhisatva. It is conceivable that some of the Bodhisatvas are Maitreya (representations with the bottle) while others represent Śākyamuni in Tuṣita Heaven before his last birth on earth.³¹ Unfortunately, this presumption is all we can pronounce here. As we will see below, the Bodhisatvas in both permutations, with bottle and with preaching gesture, can be shown with the hair of Brahmanical ascetics, a feature that may point to them being Maitreya.

We must also note that multiple Bodhisatvas are already present in the earliest paintings. In Kumtura GK 21, which is decorated with paintings in first Indo-Iranian style, thirteen standing Bodhisatvas are depicted inside the dome.³² They are shown without mandorlas—maybe this convention did not yet exist—and none are characterised by the skin between the thumb and index finger. Out of the thirteen, two are holding bottles while others carry flowers or wave with pearl necklaces, i.e., they adore the temple of the Buddha,³³ just as deities usually do. Today it is impossible to differentiate them, yet

³⁰ Kizil Cave 77, right corridor, outer wall, cornice, *in situ*; illus. Tan and An, *Shinkyo no bekiga*, vol. 1, pl. 163–166; *Kizil Grottoes 1983–1985/1989–1997*, vol. 2, pl. 16–19; *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* 2009, vol. 1, 22, 34–39, pls. 15, 25–29; Zin, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*, drawing 181 (the position of Bodhisatva's hands indicates preaching); on the opposite, i.e. inner wall in the right corridor, also *in situ*, the Bodhisatva is holding a bottle; illus. *ibid.*, drawing 182.

³¹ That the Bodhisatvas in the lunettes might be not Maitreya but Śākyamuni has already been pointed by Howard (Howard and Vignato, *Archaeological and Visual Sources of Meditation*, 122); for references to the discussion concerning the Gandharan Bodhisatvas with the flask, see Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography of Avalokiteśvara*, 34–35.

³² Kumtura Cave GK 21, main chamber, dome, illus. *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* 2009, vol. 4, 14–24, pls. 12–22.

³³ There are no traces of a pedestal for a statue of the Buddha underneath the



DRAWING 4 Kizil, Cave 38, main chamber, lunette above the front wall, mostly *in situ*, detached fragments in Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, no. III 8700, and in the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, Philadelphia, no. C 411; drawing from Grünwedel, *Alt-Kutscha*, II 7, fig. 8, drawing by Monika Zin.



DRAWING 5 Kizil, Cave 171, main chamber, front wall, lunette, illus. Kizil, Cave 171, main chamber, lunette above the front wall, mostly *in situ*, detached fragment in Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, no. III 8900, drawing by Monika Zin.



DRAWING 6 Kumtura, Cave GK 23; right wall; drawing from Grünwedel, *Alt-buddhistische Kultstätten*, fig. 24, drawing by Monika Zin.

it is to be noted that an effort to give them individual features was certainly made by the painters or their principals. That the thirteen are Bodhisatvas is testified by their similarity to individual Bodhisatva figures in Kumtura Caves GK 20³⁴ and 23³⁵—both also painted in the first Indo-Iranian style. In these two caves, such figures and Buddhas alternate; all of them are surrounded by mandorlas. In some cases, the ‘webbed skin’ between the fingers can also be observed. In the caves of the GK district in Kumtura other Bodhisatvas, clad like the Buddha (**Drawing 6**), are also shown. The model of Bodhisatvas being represented in the dome—splendidly clad males standing

cupola, the main representation was in a large painting on the rear wall, see Vignato and Hiyama, *Traces of the Sarvāstivādins*, 93.

³⁴ Kumtura Cave GK 20, main chamber, dome, illus. *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* 2009, vol. 4, 3–10, pls. 1–8.

³⁵ Kumtura Cave GK 23, main chamber, dome, illus. *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* 2009, vol. 4, 27, pl. 25.



DRAWING 7 Simsim, Cave 42, main chamber, dome, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

on lotuses—will be continued in the second Indo-Iranian style (Drawing 7).

The second element mentioned as part of the ‘pictorial vocabulary’ in this essay is the hairdo of Brahmanical ascetics. These ascetics are easily recognisable in Kucha (Drawing 8). Their hair is long, in the



DRAWING 8 Kizil, Cave 80, rear corridor, inner wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

second style often blue in colour, and piled up high in a chignon. Distinctive are the heavy strands of hair that cause the hairdo to protrude behind the ears where it is thus wider than in the upper part of the head. The bun is held together by a tightly wound single strand of hair, frequently decorated with one or two lotus flowers. Older ascetics sport beards, younger ones do not; wearing jewellery is common.

As for the Bodhisatvas, the hairdo of the Brahmanical ascetics, but covered by a crown, is sometimes shown by the Bodhisatvas in the lunettes above the entrances. As is generally known, according to prophesy, the future Buddha Maitreya is going to be born as a Brahmin so that the depiction can be easily explained; Maitreyas in Gandhara are often shown with the long hair of ascetics.³⁶ Their

³⁶ Illus., e.g., in Kurita, *Kaitei zobohan Gandara bijutsu*, vol. 2, figs. 2, 4, 14, 18, 23, 25, 27–32.

hairdo with one or two loops—as explained long ago, reminiscent of the Apollo Belvedere³⁷—differs from the hairdo in Kuchean paintings. That suggests that the artists illustrated their awareness of the prophesy with a visual statement ‘this is a Brahmin’ that was understood by the local viewer, rather than by slavishly repeating forms developed in another context.

Bodhisatvas with long hair covered by a crown in the lunette above an entrance are sometimes presented holding a bottle (compare Drawing 5),³⁸ but can also display a preaching gesture (Drawing 4). The Bodhisatva’s entourage in the Tuṣita Heaven consists of deities. In only one case in Kucha³⁹ they are presented surrounded by mandorlas, in all other preserved cases only by head nimbi. The hairdo of long hair covered by a crown is also to be met in the entourage of the Bodhisatvas (Drawing 4, middle person in the lower row on the left side).⁴⁰

The Bodhisatvas wearing the high pile of hair characteristic for Brahmanical ascetics, but without the additional crown, are a rather

³⁷ See Foucher, *L’art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, vol. 2, pt. 1, 230–36, figs. 422, 424.

³⁸ Like in Kizil, Cave 224, main chamber, lunette above the front wall, detached and housed today in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, no. III 8836; illus. among others in a historical photograph taken *in situ*, Musée Guimet, no. AP 7500; historical photograph in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, no. B 416; Le Coq and Waldschmidt, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien* VI, pl. 17; *Kizil Grottoes 1983–1985 / 1989–1997*, vol. 3, pl. 222; *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* 2009, vol. 2, 150–51, pl. 136; Zin, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*, fig. 153, drawing 420.

³⁹ Kizil, Cave 196, lunette above the door, *in situ*; illus. Tan and An, *Shinkyō no bekiga*, vol. 2, pls. 140; *Kizil Grottoes 1983–1985 / 1989–1997*, vol. 3, pls. 92–93; *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* 2009, vol. 2, 100, pl. 89; Zin, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*, drawing 424.

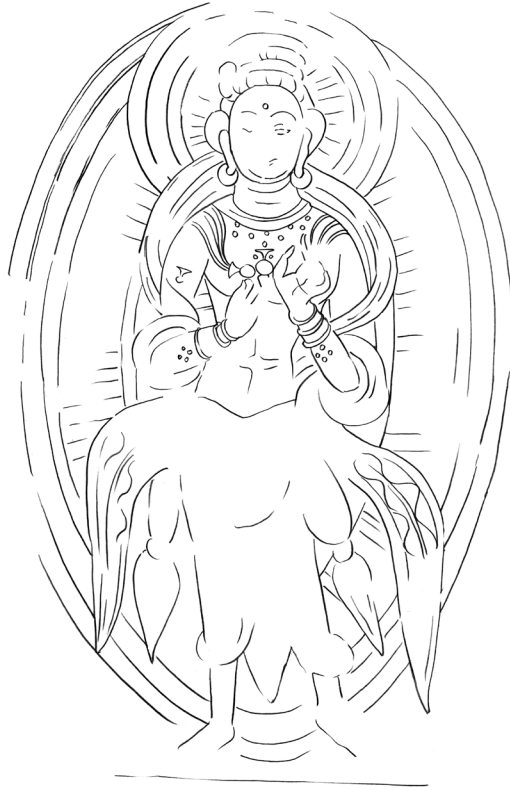
⁴⁰ A desire to distinguish the individuals in the Bodhisatva’s entourage is sometimes observable. For example, a member of the group around the Bodhisatva in the lunette of Kizil Cave 38 is shown without headgear but with long hair profusely adorned with flowers (Drawing 4, left person in the upper row on the left side).



DRAWING 9 Kizil, Cave 176, left side corridor, inner wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

late development in Kucha. In Kizil Cave 176, large Buddhas and Bodhisatvas are located on the walls of the corridors at the rear, a space where the scenes from the *parinirvāṇa* cycle are usually represented.⁴¹ The Bodhisatvas' hairstyle consists of long hair, piled up high and decorated with lotus flowers, but the execution is different and, one is tempted to say, fancy (**Drawing 9**). Perhaps this indicates

⁴¹ Zin, *Representations of the Parinirvāṇa Story Cycle*, esp. 19–30; in this cave only the cremation of Buddha's coffin is depicted on the inner wall of the rear corridor (unpublished and not mentioned in *ibid.*), all other walls show standing Buddhas and Bodhisatvas in mandorlas.



DRAWING 10 Kumtura, Cave 50, main chamber, right side wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

a transition between the Bodhisatva as a prince and the Bodhisatva in the guise of an ascetic, that is, the kṣatriya type and the Brahmin type of Bodhisatva.⁴² In other paintings (**Drawing 10**) the hair does not differ from that of the Brahmanical ascetics. This model probably evolved even later; Drawing 10 shows one of three such Bodhisatvas depicted side by side in Kumtura Cave 50, a cave with illustrations of the *Bhadrakalpikasūtra*⁴³ and illustrations of some imagery unique

⁴² Miyaji, 'Aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhist Art in Gandhara', 272.

⁴³ See Ogihara. 'Shilun Kumutula di 50 ku zhushi zhengbi fokan qianfo tuxiang de chengxu'.



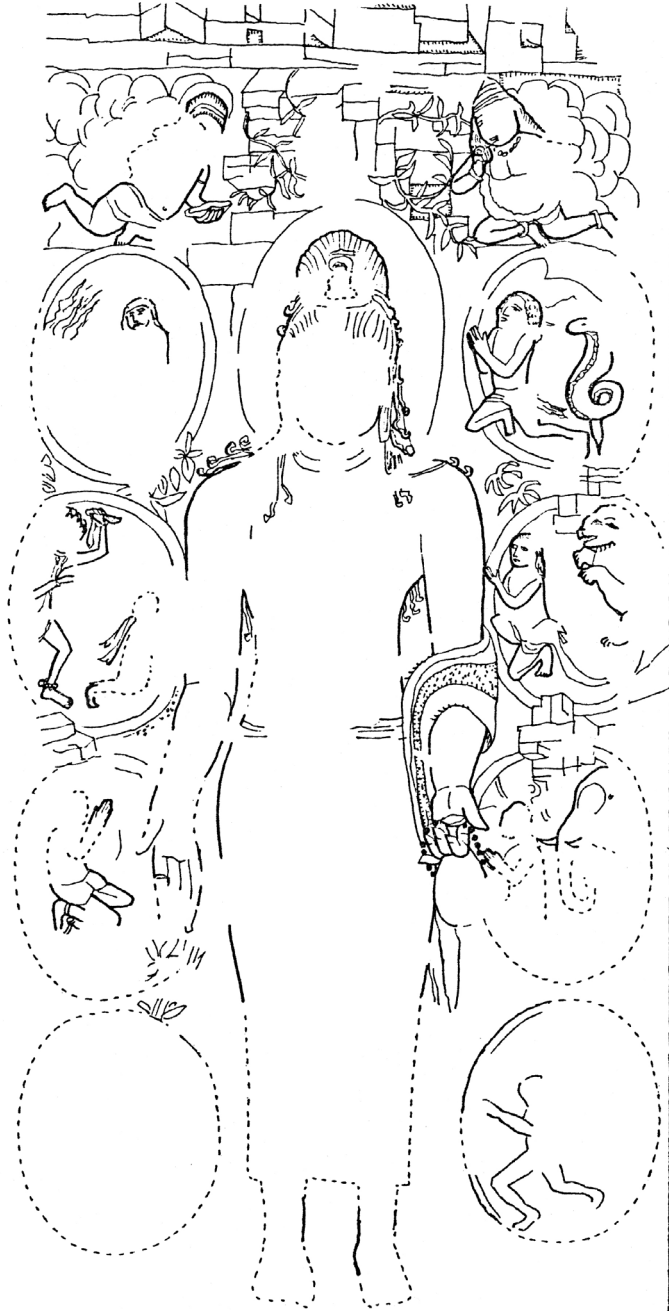
DRAWING 11 Kizil, Cave 197, main chamber, left side wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

for Kucha. In the lunette of the front wall the triad of the Buddha between two Bodhisattvas is depicted standing upon a pond; from its water lotus flowers are growing with boys sitting in them. Perhaps they represent beings in the *antarabhava*?

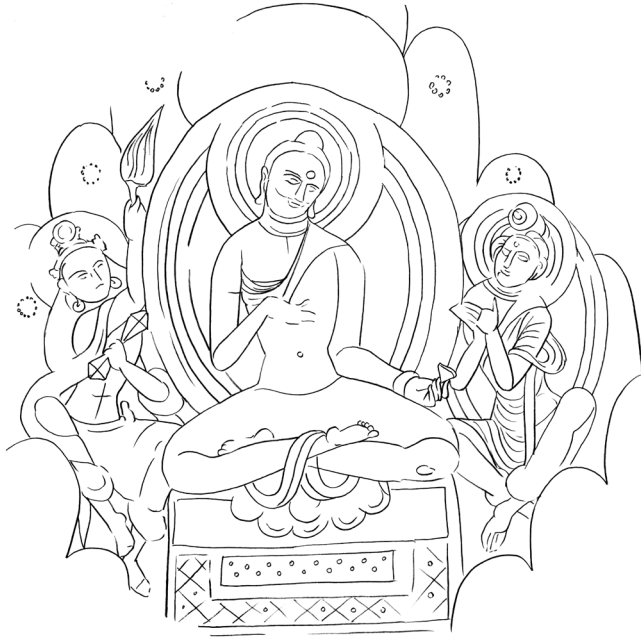
In general, it seems that in Kucha there are only a few examples of Bodhisattvas surrounded by mandorlas while at the same time displaying the hair style of Brahmanical ascetics and, rather, they belong to the later caves of the second Indo-Iranian style. We can observe a desire to differentiate them by providing each with altered attributes and a slightly dissimilar hair style (**Drawing 11**).

To my knowledge, a tiny figure of a Buddha or a stūpa nestled in the hairdo of a Bodhisattva does not appear anywhere in Kucha paintings of the first and second Indo-Iranian style. Attributes like the large lotus flower and the animal skin are also not shown. Similarities with Avalokiteśvara as represented, for example, in the paintings of Ajanta (**Drawing 12**) are there, but only to a certain, limited extent.

But let us focus on the narrative paintings. A unique representation in Kizil Cave 196 (**Drawing 13**) shows the Buddha and a Bodhisattva with body nimbus and hair of a Brahmin. I cannot conceive of any other explanation for this representation but that a Buddha is shown 'forwarding' Buddhahood to a future Buddha⁴⁴



DRAWING 12 Ajanta, Cave 17, veranda, left front wall, *in situ*; drawing by Matthias Helmdach, drawing by Monika Zin.



DRAWING 13 Kizil, Cave 196, main chamber, barrel vault, left side, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

who might be Śākyamuni or Maitreya, even though, as we have seen, Maitreya in Tuṣita (Drawings 4–5) is never depicted in such a way without a crown. The tiny object in the left hand of the Buddha, held in an exceptional way, might perhaps be the hem of his robe as the object has the same colour as Buddha's robe, but perhaps it is also an allusion to the robe symbolising the maintenance of the dharma as referred to in the legend of Mahākāśyapa awaiting Maitreya's arrival to hand the *pāṃśukūla* (rags-robe) of Śākyamuni over to him.⁴⁵

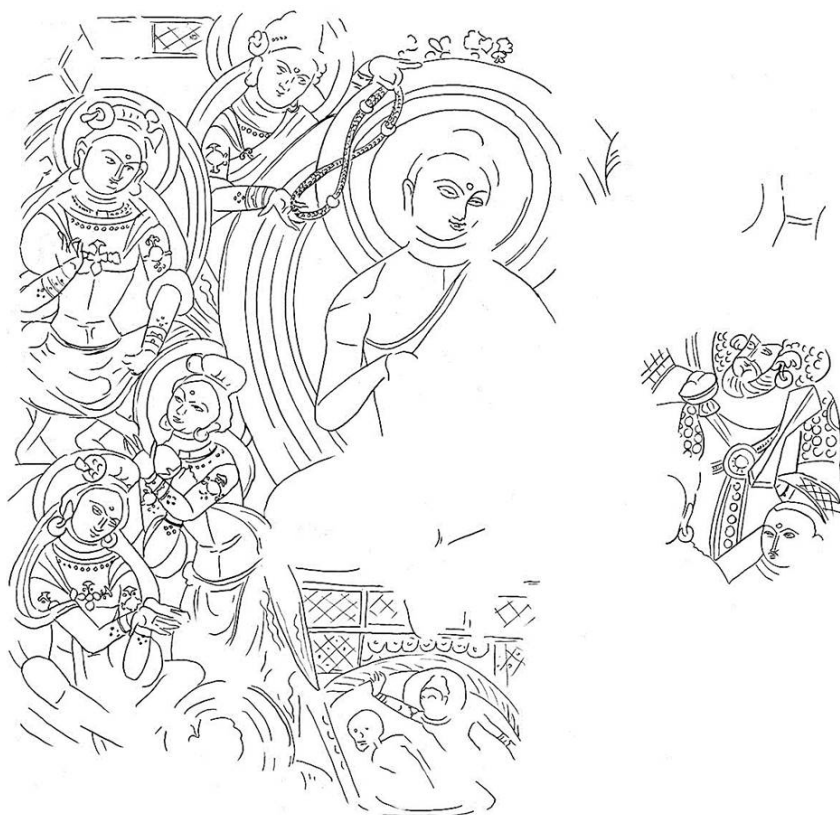
⁴⁴ An intrusive, i.e., later added painting in Ajanta Cave X shows a similar scene: in front of the seated Buddha stands a Bodhisatva with piled-up hair, see Zin, *Ajanta – Handbuch der Malereien II*, 480, illustration 14 on page 489 (drawing); for references cf. *ibid.*, 480, note 67.

⁴⁵ For references to the narrative cf. Deeg 'Das Ende des Dharma'; Silk 'Dressed for Success'; Zin, 'Representations of the First Council in Kucha', 147–61.



DRAWING 14 Simsim, main chamber, left side wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

In other paintings the representations of a Bodhisatva are more complex and less comprehensible. Here, we compare two square sermon scenes. One of them, in Simsim Cave 42, of which only the right side has been preserved (**Drawing 14**), can perhaps be interpreted as an enlightenment that led to the state of a Bodhisatva and the announcement of Buddhahood. The Bodhisatva is depicted here twice, each time with both head and body nimbus and the hairdo of a Brahmanical ascetic. He worships the Buddha with his hands held together and then falls to his feet. What is distinctive about the depiction is that the Bodhisatva is shown in a circle of flames, which might perhaps indicate the moment of enlightenment.



DRAWING 15 Kizil, Cave 179, one of the side walls; taken to Berlin, left side: no. IB 9172, was destroyed during the Second World War, right side: Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, no. III 8660; reconstructive drawing by Monika Zin.

The other sermon scene, from Kizil Cave 179 (**Drawing 15**), is better documented, although it was taken to Berlin and partially destroyed during the Second World War. The left side of the scene again shows the Bodhisatva twice, but here he is the one who is being worshipped. The reason why he is worshipped is shown below: there is a male person in the water, next to a skeleton, whom the Bodhisatva has apparently saved.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Zin, 'Visualizing a Teaching', 116–18.

Stories of the Bodhisatva Maitreya saving people from danger exist but are very rare;⁴⁷ the saviour from danger par excellence is of course Avalokiteśvara.⁴⁸ Avalokiteśvara surrounded by people pleading for his help while the threats they fear are shown behind them, the so-called ‘litany’ to Avalokiteśvara the saviour or Aṣṭamahābhaya-Avalokiteśvara, is a popular theme in central Indian Maharashtra, including the paintings at Ajanta (Drawing 12) which were dominated by traditional Buddhism.⁴⁹

Even without being able to explain the scene, based on the established format of a sermon scene in Kucha⁵⁰ it can be stated that the events shown below the Buddha and on the left side, with the man in the water and in front of the Bodhisatva, belong to the content of the sermon, i.e., the Buddha narrates them.

One scene in a frieze in Kizil Cave 175 (**Drawing 16**) attests to the fact that a Bodhisatva surrounded by a body nimbus (like in our

⁴⁷ See Leese, ‘Ellora and the Development of the Litany Scene’, who interpreted Bodhisatva, the saviour from perils (like our Drawing 12) as Maitreya; see Zin, ‘Visualizing a Teaching’, 118.

⁴⁸ An overview with references to the earlier research in Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography of Avalokiteśvara*.

⁴⁹ As noted already, a clear-cut distinction between the traditional schools and Mahāyāna is not possible; among other reasons because monks of both affiliations could live together in one monastery. In Ajanta, this can be demonstrated. The programmes for the cave paintings were obviously designed by monastic scholars of the traditional school, while the individual endowments—showing only the Buddhas and Bodhisatvas—were rather of the Mahāyānist character (Zin, ‘Ajanta Paintings and Mahāyāna Buddhism’, a and b, the latter in Japanese). As Schlingloff, *Ajanta – Handbuch der Malereien I* and *idem, Handbook of the Paintings I* has demonstrated, the predominant school in Ajanta must have been the Mūlasarvāstivāda, as the paintings mostly illustrate versions from its writings. Interestingly, at least four depictions of Avalokiteśvara belong to the pictorial programme of cave painting (Zin, *Ajanta – Handbuch der Malereien II*, nos. 44.1, 44.2, 44.4, 45.6, drawings *ibid.*, 113, 429, 436), designed by Mūlasarvāstivāda monks, others are later individual donations.

⁵⁰ See Zin, ‘Visualizing a Teaching’.



DRAWING 16 Kizil, Cave 175, right corridor, outer wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

Drawings 13, 14, and 15) can indeed be represented in the illustration of a narrative.⁵¹ The scene belongs to a frieze on the outer wall in the right corridor; it is only fragmentarily preserved and its lower part is missing. The architectural structure that forms the upper edge of the frieze indicates that three scenes in a palace setting are depicted here; they are separated from each other by small towers. Little remains of the scene on the left side; it appears that there was a person on the ground in front of the throne but of this person, only the nimbus is preserved. The scene on the right side shows a king between two ladies, of whom the one on the right tells something with lively gestures. The middle scene is highly unusual. The king in the centre of this scene is accompanied by an attendant on one side but a Bodhisatva displaying a body nimbus on the other, who is obviously giving assistance to a person who raises his arms towards him. It is not possible to give a reliable explanation of this scene, but

⁵¹ *Jātakas* are not infrequently depicted on strips directly above the floor. However, the iconography of the *jātakas* is repetitive and the scenes depicted here have no replicas to my knowledge. The main chamber in Cave 175 did once show a narrative in its lowest part, directly above the floor, representing in multiple scenes a hero's fight against demons (Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, nos. III 8869–8871; illus. Zin, *Gods, Deities, and Demons*, figs. 157–61 and drawings 437–441). The same story, or a story of similar character, was continued on the frieze of the outer wall in the left corridor. Large parts of this mural have been destroyed, but it is certain that demons were shown there.



DRAWING 17 Kizilgaha, Cave 16, left corridor, barrel vault, left side, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.

it is clear that the painting shows a ‘Mahābodhisatva’ as a part of a narrative, that is, as an acting person in a story. Is it conceivable that it is Maitreya? It seems rather unlikely, since he is not in the middle and is shown smaller than the king in the centre.

A most curious depiction has been preserved in a lozenge in Kizilgaha 16 (**Drawing 17**). The person in the centre is not the Buddha. This is certain since the bare upper body of the person is preserved.

His hair is unfortunately destroyed, but there is no doubt that he was surrounded by a body nimbus. This indicates that he must again be a ‘Mahābodhisatva’. He is shown talking to two individuals. The interpretation of the left person is secured by a comparison with a later Chinese painting:⁵² It is a hungry ghost, a preta, shown with an enormously enlarged thyroid gland—a truly illustrative indication of a preta who is said to be unable to swallow food and drink. Since the Gupta period in South Asia, Avalokiteśvara has been depicted with pretas,⁵³ imagery that surely goes back to his eminence as *mahākārunika*, the embodiment of all-embracing compassion. Our image in Kizilgaha 16 is, however, amidst *jātaka* representations, i.e., narratives of Bodhisatvas being the Buddha Śākyamuni in previous lives; immediately next to it are illustrations of the narratives of Śāśa, Siṃhakapi, and Pradīpapadyota.

In several murals in Kucha, another very peculiar amalgamation of iconographic elements can be observed. As all iconographic markers are part of the ‘pictorial language’ they have to remain unchanged to enable the viewer to understand the pictures. So, whenever a modification occurs, it carries a meaning. As said above, the heroes of the *jātakas* in Kucha are depicted with head nimbus but without body nimbus. Yet, one significant exception to this rule can be found. As far as I am aware, it concerns only one *jātaka*, the story known by researchers as the narrative of Sañjāli, a Brahmin ascetic in whose *jaṭā* hair birds built a nest and who remained motionless until the young birds fledged.⁵⁴ While most depictions of this *jātaka* show the ascetic seated under a tree and, conforming to the rules of depiction mentioned at the outset, as a Brahmin without nimbus (**Drawing 18**), at least four images in Kizil Cave 17 (**Drawing 19**), Cave 101 (**Drawing 20**),

⁵² Compare a representation of pretas in a Chinese painting on silk, thirteenth century, in Otsu City Museum of History, Shin Chion-in, Shiga Prefecture, Japan, illus. in Rotman, *Hungry Ghosts*, pl. 3.

⁵³ See Bhattacharya ‘Pretasantarpita-Lokeśvara’.

⁵⁴ For depictions in Kucha and literary sources cf. Waldschmidt in Le Coq and Waldschmidt, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien VI*, 47–48; Chang, *Die literarischen Vorlagen der Jātaka-Malereien*, 245–57.

Cave 178 (**Drawing 21**), and in Kumtura Cave 63 (**Drawing 22**) show him surrounded by head and body nimbi. The hair, Brahmin attire, the hieratic pose, together with the fact that the no-nimbi rule was broken, turn these images into something quite extraordinary. It seems to be not just a *jātaka* but rather a picture of an embodiment of the *mahākāruṇa*. The figure again reminds one of Avalokiteśvara.

Something else extraordinary can be observed among the *jātaka* representations: repeatedly, the appearance of a Brahmanical ascetic, or at least the characteristic hairdo, was used in depictions of the sacrifices of the Bodhisattvas. None of the versions of, for example, the story of Pradīpapadyota report that he was a Brahmin. Pradīpapadyota was a king who, in order to save the merchants lost in the desert, set fire to his hands bandaged with oilcloth to show them the way. Pradīpapadyota in Kucha is depicted with ascetics' hair, and sometimes—as it is the rule for Brahmanical ascetics—without nimbus (**Drawing 23**).

Depictions of kings displaying the hairdo of a Brahmanical ascetic while accomplishing some kind of self-sacrifice are frequent, and even King Śibi,⁵⁵ who gave his flesh to the dove, is occasionally shown with the hair of a Brahman ascetic (**Drawing 24**, left side). His hair is represented in the same way as the hair of the ascetic Kṣāntivādin⁵⁶ in the scene next to the right.

An important tool is here taken out of the hands of researchers who want to interpret the paintings and establish the version of the stories they are based on. There are *jātakas*—for example, the famous Vyāghrī narrative⁵⁷—where, depending on the version, it is either a

⁵⁵ For depictions in Kucha and literary sources cf. Waldschmidt in Le Coq and Waldschmidt, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien VI*, 44–45; Chang, *Die literarischen Vorlagen der Jātaka-Malereien*, 290–317.

⁵⁶ For depictions in Kucha and literary sources cf. Waldschmidt in Le Coq and Waldschmidt, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien VI*, 11–12; Chang, *Die literarischen Vorlagen der Jātaka-Malereien*, 146–48.

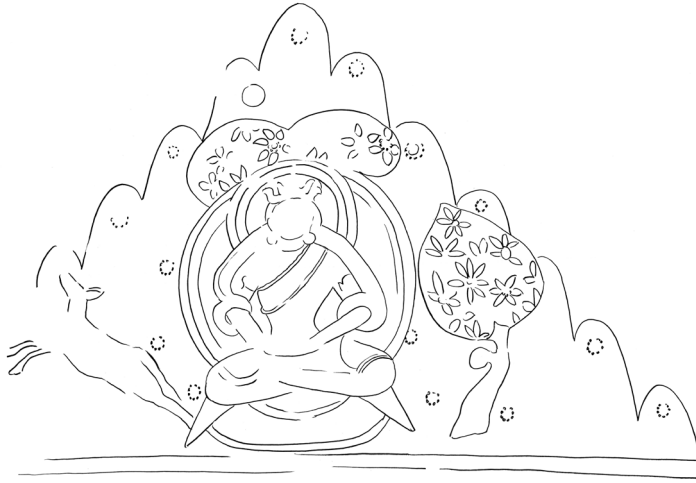
⁵⁷ For depictions in Kucha and literary sources cf. Waldschmidt in Le Coq and Waldschmidt, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien VI*, 24–25; Chang, *Die literarischen Vorlagen der Jātaka-Malereien*, 226–44.



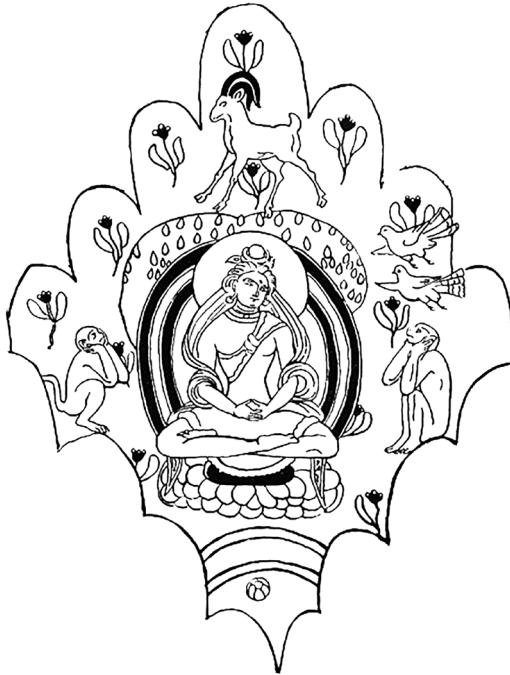
DRAWING 18 Kizil, Cave 206, left corridor, inner wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.



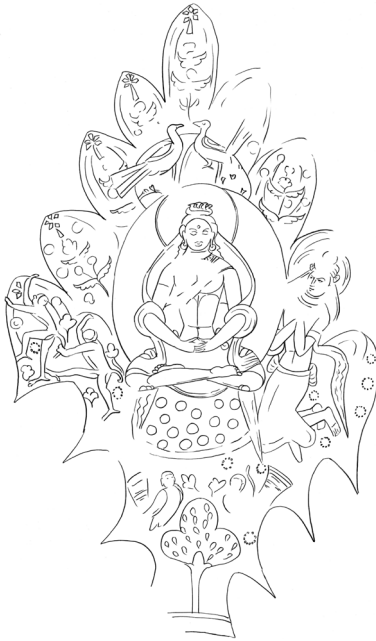
DRAWING 19 Kizil, Cave 17, main chamber, barrel vault, right side, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.



DRAWING 20 Kizil, Cave 101, main chamber, barrel vault, left side, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.



DRAWING 21 Kizil, Cave 178, main chamber, barrel vault, left side, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, no. III 8449, from Grünwedel, *Alt-Kutscha*, vol. 2, fig. 44.



DRAWING 22 Kumtura, Cave 63, main chamber, barrel vault, left side, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.



DRAWING 23 Kizil, Cave 114, main chamber, barrel vault, left side, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin.



DRAWING 24 Kizil, Cave 178, main chamber, barrel vault, right side, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, no. III 8450, from Grünwedel, *Alt-Kutscha*, vol. 2, fig. 45.

prince or a young Brahmin who gives himself up to the hungry tigress and her cubs. Considering what was said above, the appearance of the Brahmin (Drawing 24, upper part) can thus not be taken to determine the version.

It is hardly to be expected that in Buddhist paintings of Kucha a visual sign enabling the viewer to recognise a Brahmanical ascetic was applied without meaning. The intention to glorify the Brah-

min state can be excluded as motivation. We rather can assume the application of additional iconography to indicate that this is what the sacrificing Bodhisatva looks like. This, however, manifests an awareness of the constant iconography of a Brahmanical ascetic and apparently a meaning behind it. This meaning is not tangible to us today but a connection of this iconography with rescue from danger and with self-sacrifice is clearly documented. The story of a 'Mahābodhisatva' who speaks with pretas (Drawing 17) may have been ranked among the *jātakas*, but nevertheless these stories existed, and the Bodhisatva marked with bodily nimbus, who rescues beings from the water (Drawings 15–16) and protects young birds (Drawings 19–22) were certainly imbued with a particular significance.

Perhaps in Kucha all these stories were linked with Maitreya, as it is apparently Maitreya next to the Buddha (Drawings 13–14). The ascetic hair of the Bodhisatva in the pensive mood (Drawing 2) also seems to indicate that the painting shows Maitreya rather than Śākyamuni. It may be significant that the only time the term *mahākāruṇika* (a 'great compassionate one', mostly used to describe Avalokiteśvara) occurs in Tocharian (Tocharian A), it is probably referring to the Buddha or Maitreya.⁵⁸ The name 'Avalokiteśvara' is not mentioned in Tocharian texts.

As noted at the outset, the paintings of Kucha in many cases do not illustrate those versions of a story contained in the Sanskrit manuscripts discovered in Kucha but rather versions familiar from the local tradition and Kumārajīva's translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*.⁵⁹ Yet, the similarities between the paintings and the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* do not necessarily reflect the knowledge of Kumārajīva's text. They may rather result from the fact that Kumārajīva, who was a native of Kucha, incorporated into his

⁵⁸ Manuscript in Tocharian A, no. A 311, THT 945, a1; photograph of the manuscript, transliteration, transcription and translation available online. See Carling, 'A 311'.

⁵⁹ Compare for instance the representations of the first council in Kizil (esp. in Cave 114), see Zin, 'Representations of the First Council in Kucha', 131.

translation local versions of the stories which were also familiar to the painters. But perhaps it was more of the ‘Mahāyāna lore’ well known in the region? Perhaps the common knowledge in the region included knowledge of the Bodhisatva ideal, just as there was obviously a notion that the Bodhisatva was to be depicted with ascetic hair.

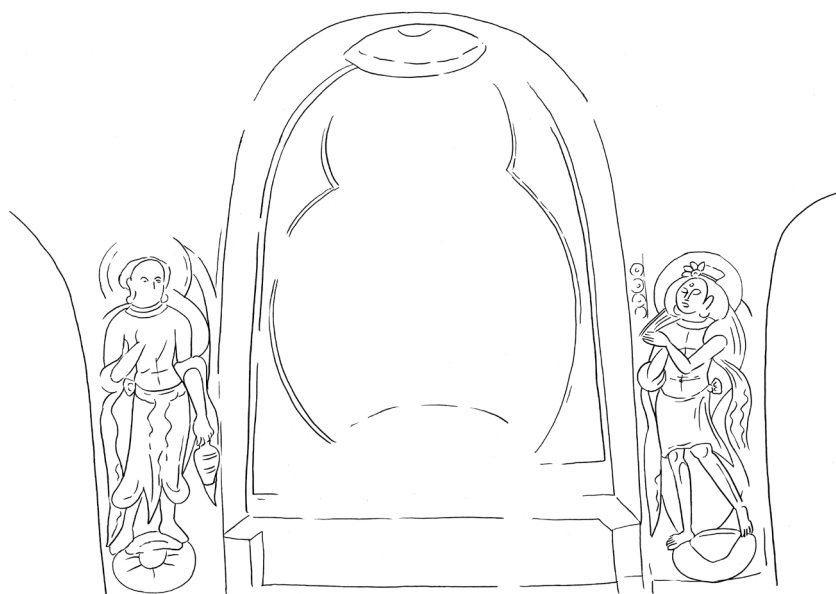
The *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* retells *jātakas* to illustrate its own Mahāyāna issues, for example, to demonstrate how the Bodhisatva fulfils the six *pāramitās*.⁶⁰ The narrative of Śibi is given as answer on how the Bodhisatva fulfils the *dānapāramitā* and the *jātaka* of Sañjali (called here Śaṅkhācārya) is used to explain how the Bodhisatva fulfils the *dhyānapāramitā*—were the Tocharians perhaps aware of the Mahāyāna-like connotations of the *jātakas*?

Avalokiteśvara was invoked in Ajanta (Drawing 12). Avalokiteśvara is, of course, a Mahāyāna saint and the dangers depicted are listed in the Mahāyāna texts, such as the twenty-fourth chapter of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* (the twenty-fifth chapter in Kumārajīva’s translation). Whether the depictions of the helping saint presuppose knowledge of the texts shall be left open here. As already mentioned, the images of Avalokiteśvara in the Deccan area should be understood as a reflection of the devotion of itinerant merchants.⁶¹

As for Kucha, much remains unexplained for the time being and further research is needed. The awareness of the Tocharians of the Mahāyāna saints may considerably change our perception of Kucha Buddhism. In this regard, a new reconstruction of the mural fragments housed in St. Petersburg has revealed an unexpected fact. In Kizil Cave 17, the cave with a multitude of depictions representing self-sacrifices on the vault (Bodhisattvagewölbehöhle), there were two Bodhisatvas surrounded by body nimbi standing on lotus flowers on the sides of the cult niche, one of them holding a bottle (**Drawing 25**). With the sculpture of the Buddha in the niche, they formed an unexpected triad. In this case, again, the potential presence of some concept of ‘Mahābodhisatvas’ suggests itself as a possible explanation

⁶⁰ Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, vol. 1, 255–67.

⁶¹ Brancaccio, ‘Aṣṭamahābhaya Avalokiteśvara’.



DRAWING 25 Kizil, Cave 17, main chamber, rear wall; after reconstruction by Zhao Li, detached fragments in Hermitage nos. ВДсэ 705 and ВДсэ 901, drawing by Monika Zin.

for this unexpected occurrence; further research into the original arrangement of now dispersed paintings will certainly reveal more of these surprises. In any case, it is worthwhile to keep an eye on the field of Buddhist visual culture, as things can be hidden there which ‘thus you will never hear’.

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