

Stars and Planets in Chinese and Central Asian Buddhist Art in the Ninth to Fifteenth Centuries

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Abstract

This essay introduces the earliest known representations of planets and other stellar deities in East and Central Asian Buddhist art, especially in China. The five biggest planets, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Mercury, were observed and named at an early stage in China. However, their anthropomorphic representations became popular only after the arrival of Buddhism. It is likely that Western traditions regarding their appearance were transmitted through India. In Buddhist sutras the planets are often described as paying homage to the Buddha and listening to his teachings, and this is how many paintings represent them. A Chinese painting from Dunhuang shows a seated Buddha (the Buddha of the Blazing Light) on a chariot surrounded by the planets, represented as human figures with their attributes. Such representation of this Buddha was always associated with the planets. This essay introduces later Chinese paintings as well as a hitherto misidentified Uyghur example of this representation, and points out that the iconography of the planets remained remarkably constant in East Asian art. The essay also includes relevant sections of sutras, as these determined the iconographic method for showing the planets up to recent times in China, Japan and Korea.

Representations of the Five Planets in Chinese art

The five biggest planets, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Mercury, were observed and named at an early stage in China. They became associated with the five directions and consequently with the five elements. Accordingly their Chinese names, even today, reflect these associations: Venus is called *jinxing* 金星 ('planet of metal'), Mars *huoxing* 火星 ('planet of fire'), Jupiter *muxing* 木星 ('planet of wood'), Saturn *tuxing* 土星 ('planet of earth'), and Mercury *shuixing* 水星 ('planet of water'). The earlier beliefs regarding these celestial bodies were systematised by the third century C.E.

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However, the anthropomorphic representations of the planets became popular only after the arrival of Buddhism in China. It is likely that Western traditions regarding their appearance were transmitted through India. Little new research has been conducted into the origins of the iconography of planets in Western art. At the beginning of the last century Fritz Saxl published an article pointing to the similarities between Arabic scriptures and Western astrological manuscripts.¹ Both in the West and in Islamic art Venus is always shown as an elegant lady, Mars as a warrior, and Jupiter as a judge. Saxl concluded that this pointed to a common source in ancient Babylon. He believed that Mercury corresponded in character to Nebo, the writer god, and Jupiter to Marduk, who signs the decrees of destiny; Ishtar, the goddess, became Venus, while Ninib, the god of war was Mars, while Nergal was represented as the aged Saturn. In medieval Western manuscripts, Saxl argued, Mercury appeared as a scribe or a bishop, as in Christian countries the Church was associated with writing.

Saxl was unaware of the similarities which also exist with Chinese representations, and which point to a common origin of the planet iconography. Saturn is shown as an aged man in China, too. Mercury, who is always male in the West, became a female figure in China, but was still portrayed as a writer holding an inkstone and a brush. In China Venus mostly appeared clad in white, and playing the *pipa*, an instrument that itself came from the West. In Arabic manuscripts Venus also often plays a lute.

In Buddhist sutras the planets are often described as paying homage to the Buddha and listening to his teachings, and this is how many paintings represent them. The Chinese had a strong tradition of performing rituals with the intention of influencing deities favourably, which continued in local Buddhist cults.² This attitude may have contributed to the popularity of the sutras about the Planet Gods offering their services to the Buddha in China. Even after their 'conversion' to Buddhism the planets continued

1 Fritz Saxl, 'Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der Planetendarstellungen im Orient und Okzident,' *Der Islam* vol. 3 (1912), pp. 152-173.

2 Cf Maria Dorothea Reis-Habito, *Die Dhāraṇi des Großen Erbarmens des Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara mit tausend Händen und Augen*, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1993, pp. 270-298, for the legends of the Thousand-armed Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara responding to rituals and *dhāraṇis*.

to exercise their influence and were to be worshipped in order to avoid harm.

In Buddhism, especially in its esoteric form, rituals to influence various powers constitute a most important part of the teachings. By the Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907) these were widely known in China and along the Silk Road. Of course, to the initiated the planets shown in human form were merely the personifications of positive and negative forces, like the figures in a mandala, and mandalas in which the planets appeared also became popular. Indeed this was one of the forms transmitted to Japan through esoteric Buddhism. In Chinese Buddhism the main role of the planets was to avoid natural disasters. Sutras gave step-by-step instructions in order to get the best results:

First use scented water as according to the rules. Paste on a mandala 12 inches wide. With gold and silver utensils or bronze or ceramic utensils make offerings and pay homage to the planets. Recite the before mentioned secret formulas 108 times. Any wish you might have will be fulfilled.³

In popular Buddhism, which became closely entangled with Daoism, the planets shown in an anthropomorphic form were easily recognisable popular images, and these, by the time of the Song dynasty, were also taken up by Daoist writers.⁴ Stars and planets even appeared on talismans (Fig. 1).⁵ Here we see the Pole-star represented as a woman holding some paper and a brush – the popular way to show the planet Mercury (cf. Fig. 3). The lower part of the picture is occupied by an inscription and a large talismanic drawing in red ink, no doubt to bring the owner good luck.

3 *Foshuo shengyaomu tuoluoni, Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter *T.*) 21, no. 1303, pp. 421-422. My translation.

4 S. M. Kochetova, 'Bozhestva svetil v zhivopisi Khara-Khoto' [Planet Gods in Paintings from Khara-Khoto], *Trudy otdela istorii kul'turi i isskustva Vostoka Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha*, vol. 4 (1947) *passim*.

5 Stein painting 170 reproduced in Roderick Whitfield, *The Art of Central Asia. The Stein Collection in the British Museum*, vol. 2, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983, pl. 61. The inscription and its translation are given on p. 338. For the importance of talismans in Buddhism see Tadeusz Skorupski, *Tibetan Amulets*, Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1983, pp. 2-3.

Scriptural background

In Buddhist sutras there were detailed descriptions and even illustrations of the way in which the planets should be shown. For example, a well-detailed description is known from the *Fantian huoluo jiuyao* 梵天火羅九曜 (‘The Nine Luminaries and the Indian art of horoscopy’), attributed to Yixing 一行, who is also linked to other works in Buddhist astrological literature.⁶ Once their iconography was established by the eighth century C.E., it became remarkably consistent: Venus is a beautiful woman clad in white, Mars is a fearful warrior with a red complexion, Jupiter is an official, Saturn an old man and Mercury holds a piece of paper and a paintbrush. The same mode of representations is also known from nineteenth century Japanese Buddhist art (Fig. 2).⁷

In most sutras the Buddha himself expounds *dhāraṇi* to the stellar deities. From the following excerpt it is clear that paintings of the planets were prepared with the intention to aid ritual and to have a profound and direct effect on the donor's life:

At that time Śākyamuni Buddha was in the Heavenly Palace. To the constellations, planets... and the nine great luminaries, as well as the twenty-eight lunar mansions and the twelve zodiac spirits, to all these he said: ‘Today I will expound the ritual for avoiding disasters and the majestic and virtuous *dhāraṇi* of the blazing light that had been uttered by the Sailendrarāja Tathāgatha.⁸ If there are kings and great ministers whose country and land is harmed by the five planets, or Rāhu, or Yuebo,⁹ or the comets... At a clear and pure place raise a ceremonial altar. Recite this *dhāraṇi* 108 times ... Continue like this for the first

6 Angela Howard, ‘Planet Worship’, *Asiatische Studien* vol. 37 (1983), p. 105.

7 Bernard Frank, *Le panthéon bouddhique au Japon, Collections d'Emile Guimet*, Paris: Editions de la Réunion de musées nationaux, pp. 236-239, cat. no. 150-158.

8 Suoluowang = Sailendraraja (king of the Indra/king of the mountain), the name of a past Buddha. *Foguang dacidian*, vol. 2, Taipei, 1988, p. 2978.

9 Rahu is the personification of the moon's eclipse. Yuebo is the personification of the superfluous vapours of Saturn and became equal to the planets together with Ziqi, the personification of the superfluous vapours of Jupiter, on representations of the ‘eleven luminaries’.

day, second day, third day up to the seventh day. Decorate the altar according to the rules. From your heart keep [this] and recite it. All disasters will disappear and they will not cause any more harm. This *dhāraṇi* has been expounded by all Tathāgathas. Those monks and nuns, men and women who preserve and recite this *dhāraṇi* can achieve 800,000 types of lucky things and abolish 800,000 types of unlucky things... They can change disasters into happiness and will all be lucky. The *dhāraṇi* I expounded today has immeasurable merit. It has to be handed down in secret and must not be announced wrongly. Then the Tathāgatha said to the four crowds: ‘If there is a country which is not at rest and disasters have struck, ask the [pure and clear crowd] to raise an altar according to the rituals, and accordingly set up a Buddha image to guard the country, with fragrant grasses, lamps and candles go and pay homage to it.’¹⁰

An important Tejaprabhā composition found in Dunhuang

The earliest dated representation of the planets as anthropomorphic images is on a silk painting, dated the fourth year of Qianning 乾寧 (C.E. 897) by an inscription, which also identifies the subject-matter as ‘Tejaprabhā Buddha and the Five Planets.’ (Fig. 3)¹¹ The planets stand surrounding a carriage supported by clouds, in which Tejaprabhā Buddha is seated: at the back Mercury appears as a woman clad in black, with a monkey in her headdress, and holding a brush and paper; Jupiter is an official with a boar’s head in his headdress and holding a tray of fruit; Saturn leads the ox pulling the cart, and is shown as an old Indian man; Venus plays the *pipa* and has a cock in her headdress; and, on the right, Mars appears as a four-armed warrior with a horse’s head on his head. All these interesting features are described in the sutras. We shall return to the identity of the central Buddha below. This painting is on silk, but another very similar composition on paper was also found in Dunhuang

10 *Foshuo Chishengguang dawēide xiaocai jixiang tuoluoni jing* [Sutra spoken by the Buddha (giving) the *dhāraṇi* of Tejaprabhā of Great Virtue which eliminates disasters and (brings) good fortune], *T.* 19, no. 963, pp. 338—339. My translation.

11 Stein painting 31, The British Museum, London. Ink and colours on silk, H: 80.40 cm; W: 55.40 cm. The full inscription reads: ‘Chishengguangfo and the Five Star-spirits (planets), Qianning fourth year, the eighth day of the first month, Ninth Brother, Zhang Zhundian had it painted’, see R. Whitfield, *The Art of Central Asia*: 1983 (vol 1) p. 323 and pl. 27-1.

敦煌, a sign of the popularity of this subject matter even among less wealthy donors. The latter clearly has a representation of the Northern Dipper on the top – symbolised by circles connected with lines.¹²

These paintings had been deposited in a secret cave near Dunhuang, in Gansu 甘肅 province, Western China. (Fig. 4) Paintings and manuscripts found in the Library Cave at Dunhuang offer a treasure trove for the study of early Buddhism and Buddhist art – including the crucial period during the Tang dynasty (618-906), when many ideas were transmitted to Japan, in a period of openness and multicultural influence. Dunhuang lies at the crossroads, where the northern and southern branches of the Silk Road meet. Hundreds of caves were hewn out of the gravel cliff and decorated with wall paintings over a period of a thousand years between the fourth and fourteenth centuries.¹³ In a small side chapel (Cave 17) tens of thousands of manuscripts and hundreds of paintings on paper and silk were found in 1900. The invaluable material was arranged in remarkably regular bundles. The entrance had been carefully sealed some time in the eleventh century. As a wall painting disguised the opening, the Library Cave - as it is known today - remained undisturbed for nearly nine hundred years until a Daoist monk, Wang Yuanlu, who was looking after the cave temples, accidentally discovered it in the summer of 1900. He stumbled upon the bundles of manuscript scrolls and paintings, which were stacked up to the ceiling in a side chapel of a larger cave temple, numbered Cave 16 today.

By 1900 Dunhuang had been a forgotten and largely abandoned site for some centuries, although Buddhist activities continued on a reduced scale. Because Dunhuang was not well known then, Wang met with little success when he attempted to draw the attention of the authorities to his unique find. The authorities believed that it was expensive and too much trouble to move the large number of scrolls and other paintings and

12 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, BNF Pelliot chinois 3995. Jacques Giès and Monique Cohen, *Sérinde, Terre de Bouddha. Dix siècles d'art sur la Route de La Soie*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1995, p. 261, cat. no. 200.

13 There are three series of Buddhist cave shrines near Dunhuang: the Mogao 莫高 caves, located some 25 kilometres to the southeast; the Western Thousand Buddha Caves 西千佛洞, at about the same distance to the west; and the Yulin 榆林 caves, about a hundred kilometres to the east.

manuscripts to Lanzhou 蘭州 or to the capital. Therefore, when the Hungarian-born British archaeologist, Aurel Stein arrived on the scene in 1907, Cave 17 was still almost untouched; a temporary wall had even been built to protect the finds. Most of the paintings are today divided between collections in Paris, London and Delhi.¹⁴ Many of the images now in the British Museum's Stein Collection can be seen on the British Museum's website, where it is also possible to do a visual tour of Dunhuang.¹⁵ All the paintings are accessible on the British Museum's specialist information site and on the website of the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library, London.¹⁶ The paintings have been photographed with a high quality traditional camera with a digital scanning back. As a result, the images can be zoomed-in to twice the original size, making this an unparalleled research tool for the specialist. Furthermore, thanks to stitched photography, it is possible to move around the caves and zoom in to see details of the wall paintings. Through the Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (MIDA) the images are also linked to other Dunhuang objects all over the world, and to the site itself.¹⁷

Another important source of material is the large photographic collection Aurel Stein left to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in

14 Published in R. Whitfield, *The Art of Central Asia: 1982-1983* (vols. 1-2), and Jacques Giès (ed.), *Les arts de l'Asie centrale. La collection Paul Pelliot du musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet*, vols 1-2, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1995. The paintings in the National Museum in New Delhi remain largely unpublished.

15 The Compass section of the British Museum's website (<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/>) can be searched for Stein-related objects (quick search: Stein) and a tour entitled 'The Cave of the Thousand Buddhas' has also been mounted.

16 See <http://www.thebritishmuseum.net/thesilkroad/>, and <http://idp.bl.uk/PaintSearch>, where over 30,000 manuscripts are also fully accessible. On the digitalization of the paintings in the Stein Collection at the British Museum see Lilla Russell-Smith, 'Digitising Dunhuang', *British Museum Magazine*, Number 42 (Spring 2002), pp. 18-20.

17 Participants in the MIDA project include the British Library, the British Museum, the Musée national des Arts Asiatiques–Guimet, the Bodleian Library, and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. For more information see <http://www.artstor.org/info/collections/mida.jsp>.

Budapest, Hungary. A catalogue was published in 2002¹⁸ but, in 2003, a large box containing about 2000 photographs from the collection of Sir Aurel Stein was discovered in a little-used outside storage building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The importance of this find became apparent immediately when I first examined the photographs in October 2003.¹⁹ There are over 150 photographs of Dunhuang paintings, which make it possible to study the original condition of the paintings, including the now often missing mounts, headpieces and streamers (many of the paintings are now mounted in the same way as a European print, with the triangular headpiece and the streamers detached and kept in different boxes). One of the newly found photographs shows the original condition of the painting of Tejaprabhā Buddha and the Five Planets, discussed above, which seems to have needed relatively little conservation work (Fig. 5).

This painting (Fig. 3) was also exhibited in the important Silk Road exhibition held at the British Library in 2004,²⁰ when it was displayed alongside astrological charts also found in Dunhuang. The centre of the composition is taken by an unusual representation of a Buddha. He is not shown frontally, as is the case with most paintings, but in swift movement on a carriage. The movement is indicated by the banners attached to the carriage flying in the wind. This Buddha has a golden complexion, as if light would emanate from his face. The inscription on the painting identifies him as 'Blazing Light Buddha' (Chishengguangfo

18 Lilla Russell-Smith and John Falconer, 'Catalogue of Photographs Taken or Collected by Sir Aurel Stein', in Éva Apor and Helen Wang (eds.), *Catalogue of the Collections of Sir Aurel Stein*, Budapest: Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2002, pp. 159-350.

19 I first showed some of the photographs during a lecture entitled 'Sir Aurel Stein's Photographs in the Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest' delivered at the International Conference 'The South Asian Legacy of Sir Aurel Stein,' organised by PRASADA De Montfort University, Leicester, in collaboration with the Circle of Inner Asian Art, SOAS, University of London, 6-7 March, 2004. The paper will be published in the conference proceedings: Lilla Russell-Smith and Hilary Smith, *The South Asian Legacy of Sir Aurel Stein*, Turhout: Brepols (forthcoming). The photographs will be catalogued as Phase 2 of a British-Hungarian project.

20 Susan Whitfield with Ursula Sims-Williams (eds.), *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, London: The British Library, 2004, cat. no. 162.

熾盛光佛). Only a few sutras in the Taishō edition of the Tripitaka mention this Buddha by name.²¹ Sutras describing Tejaprabhā and his retinue, which always include the planets and the zodiac, were also found in Cave 17, and may have been used as guidelines to execute the paintings.

Other depictions of Tejaprabhā and the planets

A further example of Tejaprabhā seated in a moving carriage is in the corridor of Dunhuang Cave 61, a wall painting most probably from the Tangut period (twelfth century) (Fig. 6).²² On such later examples the zodiac is also shown, as well as tiny figures of officials representing the Twenty-eight Lunar Mansions. An additional example of this arrangement is a Korean painting now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.²³ All these paintings show the planets as gods paying homage to a central Buddha. According to Sørensen 'Tejaprabhā Buddha is the lord of the Five (or nine) Planets and the Twenty-eight Constellations. As such he is the master of fate and destiny, and the one to whom people pray for good fortune, success and long life.'²⁴

His name, Tejaprabhā, is the Sanskrit equivalent of 'Blazing Light,' so it seems to be a translation of the Chinese name into Sanskrit. Jing Anning argues that Tejaprabhā's attribute, the wheel, is a reference to his original chariot.²⁵ Even if this is so, it should be emphasised that the

21 *T.* no. 963, *T.* no. 964 and *T.* no. 965 are the most important examples. *T.* 19, pp. 337-342.

22 For a reproduction see Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo [Dunhuang Cultural Research Institute] (ed.), *Zhongguo Shiku: Dunhuang Mogaoku* [Chinese cave temples: the Mogaoku in Dunhuang], Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987, vol. 5, pl. 159.

23 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ref. No. 11.4001, reproduced in black-and-white in Tomita Kojiro and Tseng Hsien-chi, *Portfolio of Chinese Paintings in the Museum: Yuan to Ch'ing periods*, Boston, 1961, pl. 100 and in colour on the museum's website (<http://www.mfa.org>).

24 Henrik H. Sørensen, 'Typology and Iconography in the Esoteric Buddhist Art of Dunhuang,' *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, vol. 2 (1991-92), p. 301. In most sources there is agreement on the Chinese name of this Buddha: however, different authors have rendered the Sanskrit name in different ways.

cakra, the wheel, is the symbol of the sun in ancient India. The Buddha is turning the wheel of the Law as *cakravartin* (World Ruler),²⁶ and this may have been a model for the iconography of Tejaprabhā. By the late ninth century, by which time the representation of Tejaprabhā was formed in Dunhuang, the connections between the sun, the planets and earthly rulers were well established. In this context it seems understandable that Tejaprabhā came to symbolise the Buddha's rule over time and space, and his control over calamities. In Japan the idea of the *cakravartin* Buddha as the controller of the skies was taken to its logical conclusion in related images of Śākyamuni of the Golden Wheel (Jap: Shaka Kinrin). In these mandalas the Buddha appears as seated on Mount Sumeru, the cosmic mountain emerging from the cosmic ocean, surrounded by the representations of the planets in circles, and on more detailed examples the zodiac as well.²⁷

The ruling Liao 遼 Emperors also adopted the idea of Tejaprabhā as *cakravartin*. A print showing Tejaprabhā, found in the famous pagoda at Fogong Monastery 佛宮寺 in Yingxian 應縣 county, northern Shanxi 山西 province, was placed inside a statue of Śākyamuni to help achieve the apotheosis of the Liao Emperor Xingzong 興宗, who had been born in Yingxian, and died in 1055 following a giant stellar explosion of a supernova in the previous year. The pagoda itself was built in 1056.²⁸

The Tanguts occupied Dunhuang from the second half of the eleventh century, but their powerbase was further north-east, in today's Ningxia province. At least 24 images showing the planet gods were found at their main site in Khara-Khoto dating to the eleventh-thirteenth centuries.

25 Anning Ting, 'The Yuan Buddhist Mural of the Paradise of Bhaiṣajyaguru,' *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 26 (1991), pp. 155-156.

26 Gösta Liebert, *Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religions*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, p. 52.

27 For a discussion of this imagery in Japan see the essay by Tsuda Tetsuei in this issue.

28 Marilyn Gridley, 'Images from Shanxi of Tejaprabha's Paradise,' *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 51 (1998-1999), pp. 7-15.

These are mostly arranged in a mandala form. Numerous related *dhāraṇīs* were also found.²⁹

Tejaprabhā in Uygur art

Branches of Uygurs dominated the area east and west of Dunhuang by the end of the tenth century. Their most important cultural centre was near today's Turfan. The Uygurs migrated south after the fall of their Kaghanate in the 840s, and the two most important groups eventually settled east and west of Dunhuang, with Qočo (Gaochang 高昌 in Chinese, near today's Turfan) and Ganzhou 甘州 as their respective centres. Silk Road trade was therefore dominated by Uygurs in this area, who could cut off the roads in the narrow Hexi corridor at times of conflict with Dunhuang. By the third decade of the tenth century, despite short spurs of conflict, the Chinese rulers of Dunhuang became allies of the Uygurs, and intermarried with the family of the Ganzhou Uygur *kaghan*. I have demonstrated the increasing influence of Uygur patrons in Dunhuang in the tenth-eleventh centuries elsewhere.³⁰

The Uygurs also depicted Tejaprabhā and the Planet Gods on a wall painting which had been misidentified in the literature as the 'Paradise of Bhaiṣajyaguru' (Fig. 7).³¹ This now destroyed mural holds further clues to the transmission of religious iconography from the Uygur area to Dunhuang, the Tangut, the Liao and ultimately to China. Detailed comparative studies between the Dunhuang and Bezeklik wall paintings

29 The majority of these show individual planet gods. Mikhail Piotrovsky (ed.), *Die Schwarze Stadt an der Seidenstrasse, Buddhistische Kunst aus Khara Khoto*: Milan: Electa, 1993, p. 230. See also S. M. Kochetova, 'Bozhestva svetil v zhivopisi Khara-Khoto' (Planet Gods in Paintings from Khara-Khoto), *Trudy otdela istorii kulturi i isskustva Vostoka*, vol 4 (1947), pp. 471-502. For the mandalas see N. A. Nevsky, 'Kult nebesnih svetil v tangutskom gosudarstve XII veka' (Cult of the Heavenly Bodies in the Tangut state in the 12th century), N. A. Nevsky: *Tangutskaja filologija* [Tangut philology], Moscow, 1960. Nevsky's argument has now become available in English as an Appendix to Kira Samosyuk, 'The Planet Cult in the Tangut State of *Xi Xia*' - The Khara Khoto Collection, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, vol. 5 (1997/98), pp. 353-368, 'Appendix: A Twelfth Century 'Stellar Magic Circle' from Khara Khoto', *ibid.* pp. 369-376.

30 Lilla Russell-Smith, *Uygur Patronage in Dunhuang: Regional Art Centres on the Northern Silk Road in the Tenth Century*, Leiden: Brill, 2005.

31 See Lilla Russell-Smith, *Uygur Patronage in Dunhuang*, pp. 104-110.

have been hindered because many Uyghur murals have been destroyed. Of this mural, too, there is only a colour reproduction available today.³² This mural was originally in Cave 18 at the most important Uyghur cave temple site at Bezeklik near Turfan (Fig. 8). It was then taken to Berlin by one of the German ‘Turfan expeditions’ at the beginning of the twentieth century, and then exhibited in the Museum of Ethnography, where it was destroyed along with many other wall paintings during the bombing raids of the Second World War. It originally measured 325 cm x 345 cm, and was placed opposite to a large-scale composition of Subhūti, also reproduced by Grünwedel (Grünwedel’s Cave 8).³³ Grünwedel was puzzled by the layout of this cave temple, as it included a section where two side chambers had been walled off, rendering them no longer accessible at the time of his visit.³⁴

Following the fashion of Paradise illustrations, as known from Dunhuang, an enthroned Buddha is portrayed with two attendant bodhisattvas and additional figures surrounding them. The central Buddha holds no special attribute, and has been identified as Bhaiṣajyaguru by von Le Coq and in Chinese publications.³⁵ As the central Buddha does not hold Bhaiṣajyaguru’s usual attribute, a bowl, we have to turn to the attendant figures surrounding him for further clues about his identity. There are two seated major bodhisattvas turning towards the Buddha, four bodhisattvas stand on both sides of his lion throne, and behind him are monks and additional bodhisattvas. The figures that demand special attention are those standing in the two

32 Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, MIK III 8451. Caren Dreyer, Lore Sander and Friederike Weis, *Dokumentation der Verluste III, Museum für Indische Kunst - Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, Berlin: Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2002, p. 147.

33 For a description of the cave temple see Albert Grünwedel, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten in Chinesisch Turkistan*, Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1912, pp. 253-259.

34 A. Grünwedel, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten*: 1912, fig. 529.

35 Albert von Le Coq, *Die Buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien* Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, vol. 4, 1924, pp. 25-27; Zhongguo bihua quanji bianji weiyuanhui [Complete edition of Chinese painting editorial board] (ed.), *Zhongguo Xinjiang bihua quanji* [Collection of wall paintings from Xinjiang, China], vol. 6, *Baizikelike, Tuyougou* [Bezeklik, Toyok], Shenyang: Liaoning meishu chubanshe, 1995, pl. 101 and p. 40.

corners, and who are smaller than the rest of the assembly: twelve on the right and nine on the left. The twelve on the right can be identified as the representatives of the Chinese zodiac from their headdresses. The nine on the left have so far not been identified. However, these figures can represent the nine luminaries or planets, according to the standard iconography well known from Chinese Buddhist and Daoist art.³⁶ They are led by the Sun and the Moon, represented as a Chinese emperor and an empress holding the sun and moon disks in their hands.

On the mural from Cave 18 the members of the zodiac are shown as deities, each with their attributes in its headdress. On the other side, behind the sun and moon, shown as an emperor and empress, stands Jupiter, as an official, holding a tray of fruit with a boar's head in his headdress. Venus plays the *pipa* and has a cock in her headdress. Mercury, represented as a woman, holds an inkstone and has a monkey in her headdress, while Saturn is a sage with a bull's head on his head. Finally, Mars appears as a four-armed warrior with a horse's head on his head. The two guardian demons with snakes in the corner are Rāhu and Ketu, derived from Indian astrology.

As we have seen above, the Buddha closely associated with the planets was not Bhaiṣajyaguru but Tejaprabhā; therefore this painting seems to be the earliest example of a new compositional type: the planets with a centrally seated Tejaprabhā. This Tejaprabhā composition is an important example of the links between the Uygurs, Dunhuang, the Tanguts and central China. The compositional arrangement as well as many of the ornamental details link this piece to tenth–twelfth century Dunhuang art, but it is recognisably the work of an Uygur artist.³⁷ Despite the heavily damaged condition of the painting stylistic features similar to the style of Uygur wall paintings may be recognised – for example, the characteristic facial features, and the colourful, wavy pattern of the halo behind the Buddha. Furthermore, there are Uygur inscriptions in the cartouches in the lower part of the composition, dividing a row of small scenes from each other.³⁸

36 For the attributes of the planets see Angela Howard, 'Planet Worship,' pp. 104-119.

37 For a detailed discussion about Uygur art and its stylistic links with Dunhuang see L. Russell-Smith, *Uygur Patronage in Dunhuang*: 2005.

38 According to von Le Coq, *Die Buddhistische Spätantike*, vol. 4, 1924, p. 27, the cartouches were left empty and must have been filled in with names later.

Further examples of the centrally seated Tejaprabhā

In other cases resembling the Bezeklik example, Tejaprabhā is enthroned in the middle in a far more symmetrical composition: the planets surround the throne as worshippers. The earliest examples are known from the eleventh century, from Tangut and Liao finds. The most widely reproduced painting on silk is from Khara-Khoto.³⁹ Another Tangut example probably dates from the twelfth century and was found in the Hongfo pagoda 宏佛塔 in Helan 賀蘭 County, Ningxia 寧夏 province.⁴⁰ Even though this type was rare in the early period, this is the composition that is known from later Chinese Buddhist art. The best example of such late, full version of the compositional type with a centrally seated Buddha is today in the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, in Kansas City (Fig. 9).⁴¹ This has been dated to the thirteenth century and was originally in the main hall of Guangsheng 廣勝 Lower Monastery in Hongdong 洪洞 County, southern Shanxi. Another mural from the front hall of the lower monastery depicting the same subject is now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, in Philadelphia, and is one of the latest examples dating from the Ming 明 dynasty (1368-1644).⁴²

Marilyn Gridley has already drawn attention to the similarities between the Liao print found at Yingxian and the much bigger mural from the

This was confirmed by Peter Zieme (e-mail communication, September 2000), who stated that these inscriptions are not legible on the reproduction.

39 State Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Ref. No. x-2424. M. Piotrovsky (ed.), *Die Schwarze Stadt an der Seidenstrasse*: 1993, cat. no. 57.

40 Rob Linrothe, 'Tangut Buddhist Art', *Monumenta Serica*, vol. 13 (1995), fig. 2.

41 See Marilyn Gridley, 'Images from Shanxi of Tejaprabha's Paradise,' pp. 7-15. See also Meng Sihui, 'Chishengguangfo xinyang yu bianxiang' [Tejaprabha beliefs and representations], *Forbidden City*, 1998, vol. 2, pp. 34-39.

42 This and all the above examples, with the exception of the Bezeklik wall painting, are published in line drawing form and analysed in detail by Meng Sihui in his excellent article, 'Chishengguangfo bianxiangtu tuxiang yanjiu' (Research on *bianxiang* images of Tejaprabha), *Dunhuang Tulufan yanjiu*, 2 (1997), pp. 101-148.

Guangsheng Lower Monastery.⁴³ However, the print is very small and perhaps for this reason no seated bodhisattvas are shown. Sūryaprabhā and Candraprabhā are the two attendant bodhisattvas seated on the two sides of Tejaprabhā in the Guangsheng Lower Monastery mural. They can be recognised from the sun and moon disks in their headdresses. The sun and moon are also represented in human form as part of the retinue of the planets. The same two seated bodhisattvas also appear on the Philadelphia mural. However, on the earlier paintings the composition is arranged around the single central figure of Tejaprabhā, and none shows the seated attendant bodhisattvas.

It is, therefore, very likely that the Bezeklik wall painting is the earliest mural representing Tejaprabhā in this manner.⁴⁴ This is the first known large-scale composition to depict Tejaprabhā with two seated attendant bodhisattvas in addition to a large retinue. Even though the bodhisattvas have no special attributes, they are clearly in the same position as Sūryaprabhā and Candraprabhā in the later mural at the Nelson Atkins Museum. In Bezeklik this arrangement may have its origin in the tenth- to twelfth-century Paradise compositions, which remained a popular subject in Dunhuang during the Tangut period (1036/74-1227).

More work must to be done with regard to the small scenes under the main Buddha assembly scene. These are very difficult to see in most reproductions of the now destroyed mural, and the cartouches were left empty, with personal names added only later. However, closer observation reveals that the small scenes resemble book illustrations representing Kṣitigarbha and the judgment of the Ten Kings. This subject was popular both in Dunhuang and among the Uygurs. In the lower row standing next to the second red cartouche there is a tiny figure dressed as a monk with a staff and a bowl in his hands: these are the attributes of Kṣitigarbha. As the scene above shows a Buddha, and therefore cannot be a representation of Kṣitigarbha, further research will be needed to reveal the connections between Tejaprabhā and Kṣitigarbha among the Uygurs. Von Gabain has already drawn attention to the fact that the Uygur Kṣitigarbha manuscripts emphasise the importance of the stars much

43 M. Gridley, 'Images from Shanxi of Tejaprabha's Paradise,' p. 9.

44 Even though it cannot be dated securely it is unlikely to be later than the mid-thirteenth century as by that time the Haydu-Duwa rebellion had broken out, which eventually destroyed the Xizhou Uygur Kingdom. Geng Shimin, 'The Uigur Kingdom of Qočo', M. S. Asimov and C. E. Bosworth (eds.), *History of Civilisations of Central Asia*, vol. 4, Paris: UNESCO, 1998, p. 203.

more than Chinese ones do in Dunhuang.⁴⁵ It is also known that the *nakṣatras*, or moon stations, were represented in detail in Sengim.⁴⁶ Tansen Sen has linked these depictions to some representations of Tejaprabhā, and to Liao tombs, already hinting at a connection with cults concerning the dead.⁴⁷ He has pointed out the close links between the astronomical paintings on the ceilings of Liao tombs to the star mandalas depicting the planets and the lunar mansions. Sen also refers to Uygur examples of related ceiling design from Sangim and Toyoq. A future comparative study may reveal yet more about the way Buddhist rituals and iconography used in Dunhuang and Qočo mutually influenced each other, and were passed on to the Liao.

The mural in Bezeklik Cave 18 is an excellent example of a compositional type that evolved from many different sources, and is a proof of the close links of Uygur art with the Tanguts and the Liao, and through them with the development of later Chinese and Japanese art. From the tenth century important iconographic and stylistic inventions initially originating in the art of non-Chinese peoples entered Chinese culture. As the Liao 遼 (907-1125), the Tanguts or Xi Xia 西夏 (1036-1226), the Jin 金 (1115-1234) and the Yuan 元 (1260-1368) were dynasties of non-Chinese origin ruling China or important parts of it, many of their innovations were then taken up and passed into mainstream Chinese religious thought and art. The Uygurs remained the cultural advisors of the Mongols even after the latter established the Yuan dynasty.⁴⁸ Chinese intellectuals have traditionally had an extremely strong sense of their country's long history, the character of 'Chineseness' and the importance of the 'Central' as opposed to the borderlands up to the present day. As we all know today, even the name of China is 'Central

45 A. von Gabain, 'Kṣitigarbha-Kult in Zentralasien, Buchillustrationen aus den Turfan Funden,' Herbert Härtel - Volker Moeller (ed), *Indologen-Tagung 1971*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1973, pp. 63-68.

46 Albert Grünwedel, *Bericht über archäologische Arbeiten in Idikutschari und Umgebung im Winter 1902-1903*, München: Verlag der K. B. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1905, pls. 26-27.

47 Tansen Sen, 'Astronomical Tomb Paintings from Xuanhua: *Mandalas?*,' *Ars Orientalis*: vol. 29 (1999), pp. 31-54.

48 Robert Marshall, *Storm from the East: From Genghis Khan to Kublai Khan*, London: BBC Books, 1993, pp. 22, 72, 195.

country' (Zhongguo 中國). In contrast with this prevailing view, in the period under discussion the regional ideas often became the basis for shaping the thinking of the centre. Growing awareness of these issues has only just begun to filter into general works on Chinese history.⁴⁹

The iconography of the planets became so constant that in all contexts they can be instantly recognised. The Buddhist method of representing the planets was also borrowed by the Daoists, and the established iconography remained remarkably constant in China. Two hitherto unpublished paintings originally used in the Shuilu 水路 or Water-Land ritual illustrate the consistency of the iconographic tradition. They originally belonged to a set of banners painted on imperial command in 1454.⁵⁰ The planets and the zodiac were also represented among Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian deities. As part of the worshipping audience they symbolised natural forces paying their respect to the central Buddha. The deities of the zodiac appear in Chinese outfits, holding attributes well-known from Western horoscopes too. The planets are also dressed as high-ranking Chinese courtiers. Venus is shown as a beautiful young woman; her attendant holds her attribute, the *pipa*, here wrapped up in silk. Mars is shown red as a war-like figure with his attribute, the horse, behind him. Saturn is an old man with a bull. On the second banner Jupiter appears as a high official holding a peach, and behind him stands Mercury, holding the writing brush. Among the other figures we can see the Sun and the Moon facing each other on the two banners as the Chinese Emperor and Empress.

49 See Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000. In July 1998 Hansen, Professor of History at Yale University, organised a conference completing the project 'The Silk Road Project: Reuniting Turfan's Scattered Treasures,' aimed at exploring the contribution of non-Chinese peoples to mainstream Chinese culture.

50 EO 664 and EO 665. These paintings are unpublished as yet, and I am grateful to Dr. Caroline Gyss-Vermande for drawing my attention to them. Thirty-four of these banners are kept today in the Musée Guimet in Paris, with two additional ones in Cleveland. Each painting bears an imperial seal and is inscribed in gold: 'Donated on the third day of the eighth month in the fifth year of the Jingtai reign of the Ming dynasty.' They will be published in my forthcoming article 'Planet Gods in Dunhuang and Beyond', Roderick Whitfield and Wang Tao (eds.) *Art and Religion in Pre-Modern China* (vol. 2.), London: Saffron Books, pp. 121-132 (forthcoming).

The planets were still represented with the same attributes in nineteenth century Japan, as shown by a set of coloured wooden figurines today at the Musée Guimet in Paris (Fig. 2).⁵¹ Only Saturn is represented differently, fully dressed as a high priest, and holding a box of incense. Although Mars has only two hands, he is still a red-skinned warrior, Mercury holds a paint brush and paper, Jupiter holds fruits and Venus plays the *pipa*. This demonstrates the extraordinary continuity of the iconographic types for representing the planets, which survived for such a long time and over a very large area.

51 Bernard Frank, *Le panthéon bouddhique au Japon, Collections d'Emile Guimet*, Paris: Editions de la Réunion de musées nationaux, pp. 236-238, cat. nos. 152-156.

Fig. 1 Talisman of the Pole-star. Stein painting 170. Tenth century, ink and colours on paper. H: 42.7 cm W: 30 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

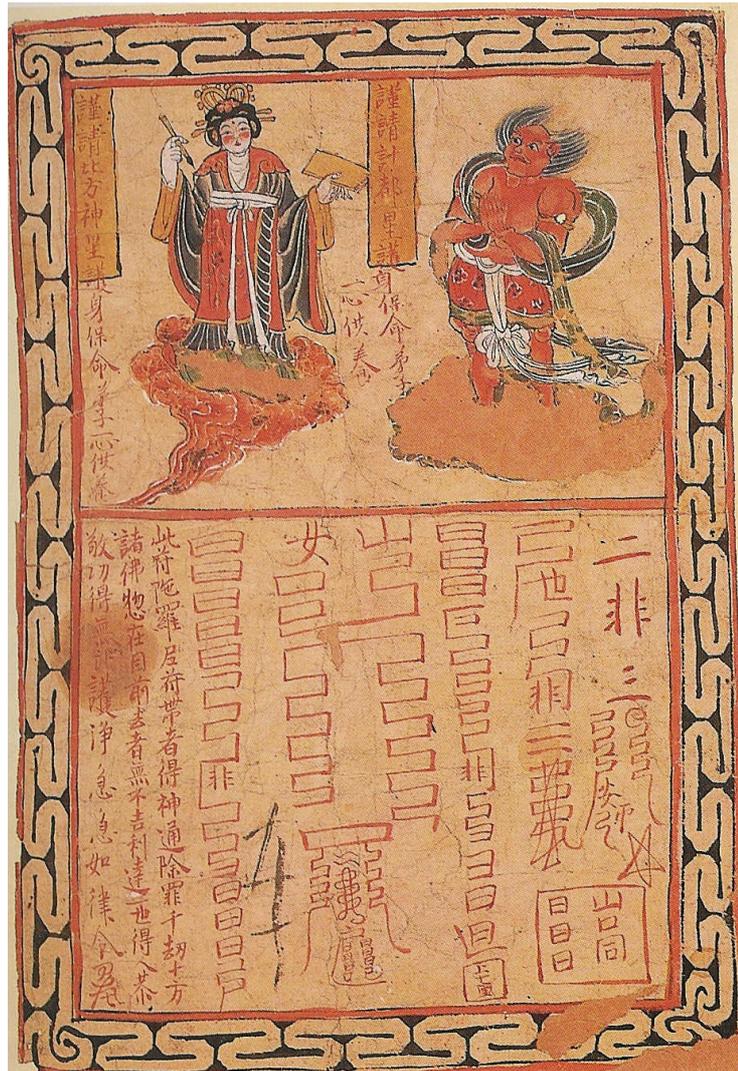


Fig. 2 Japanese Planet Gods. Top. Left to right: 1) Mars; 2) Mercury; 3) Jupiter. Bottom left to right: 4) Venus; 5) Saturn. Line drawing by Lilla Russell-Smith, after Bernard Frank, *Le panthéon bouddhique au Japon*. Collections d'Emile Guimet, Paris: Editions de la Réunion de musées nationaux, pp. 236-238, cat. nos. 152-156.



Fig. 3 Tejaprabhā Buddha and the Five Planets. Stein painting 31. Ink, colours and gold on silk. H: 80.4 cm W: 55.4 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.



Fig. 4 View of the Mogao caves at Dunhuang. From *Zhongguo shiku. Dunhuang Mogaoku* [Chinese cave temples. Dunhuang Mogao caves], Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo [Dunhuang Cultural Research Institute] (ed.), Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987, vol. 5, pl. 97.

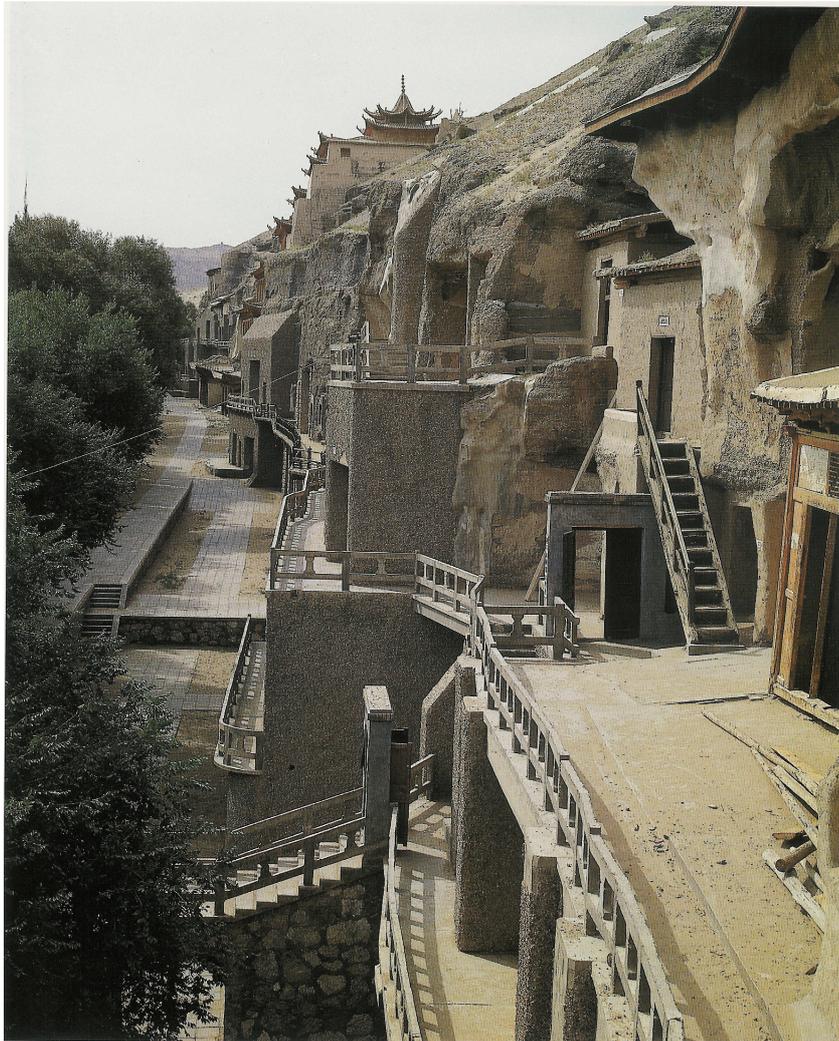


Fig. 5 The original condition of Stein painting 31. Photograph by Aurel Stein. Stein Photo 38/2(9), Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary.

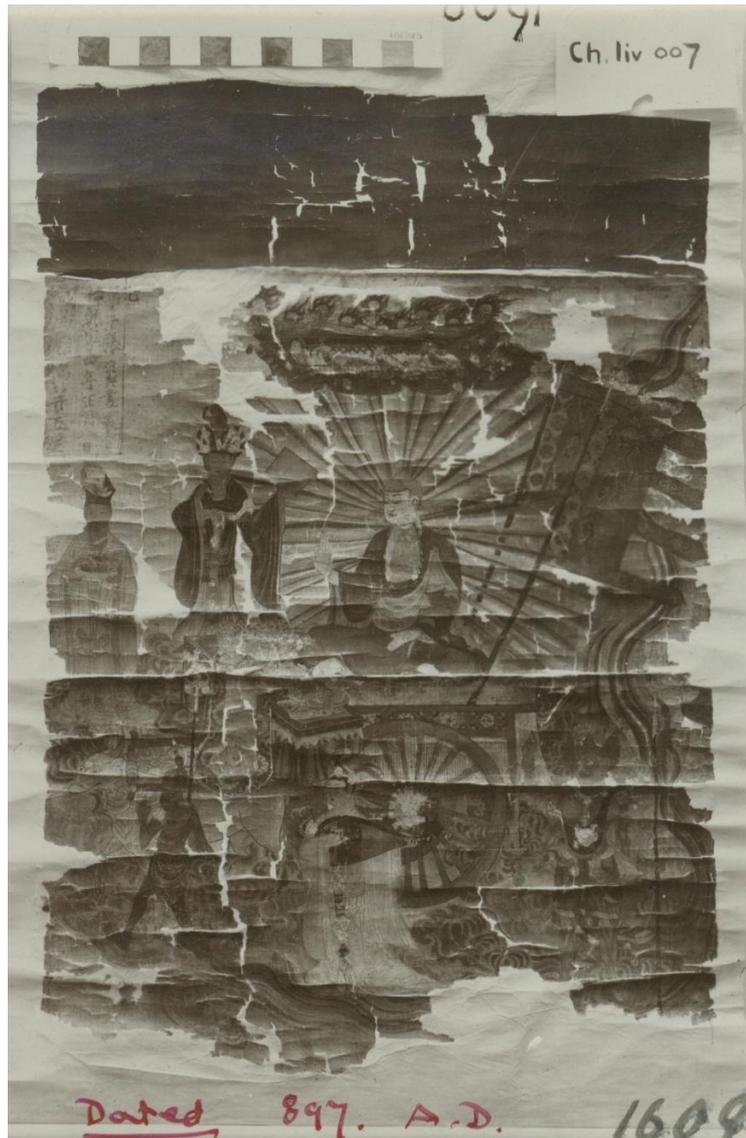


Fig. 6 Tejaprabhā Buddha with his retinue. Wall painting in the corridor of Dunhuang Cave 61. From *Zhongguo shiku. Dunhuang Mogaoku* [Chinese cave temples. Dunhuang Mogao caves], Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo [Dunhuang Cultural Research Institute] (ed.), Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987, vol. 5, pl. 159.



Fig. 7 Tejaprabhā Buddha with his assembly. Now destroyed wall painting from Bezeklik Cave 18 (MIK III 8451. H: 325 cm W: 300 cm. ©BPK, Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin.



Fig. 8 View of the Bezeklik caves. © Lilla Russell-Smith



Fig 9 Tejaprabhā Buddha with his assembly. Thirteenth century. From the main hall of Guangsheng Lower Monastery, Hongdong County, Shanxi province. 32-91/1. Wall painting, H: 713.74 cm W: 1483.36 cm. © The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

