

Prior to Birth

The Tuṣita episodes in Indian Buddhist literature and art

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Prior to birth, it is said, the Bodhisattva had stayed in Tuṣita heaven and descended from there to assume his last worldly existence. Indeed, the notion that the last birth of a Buddha follows a sojourn in Tuṣita heaven is found in all textual sources that also narrate the birth. However, there are considerable differences in these sources concerning the context of the descent from heaven and in the details narrated. In principal the events prior to birth become more and more elaborate and miraculous.

This article focuses on the relationship of the visual evidence to textual sources. Although I begin with the texts, it should be clear that no preference should be given to any of the sources. Textual tradition(s) and visual tradition(s) not only are inherently distinct but also relate to each other in a variety of ways. These interrelations and transformations can only be understood when the wider context of the occurrence is taken into account as well. In the case of this study, the wider context considered is

¹ This article is a revised version of a section on my MA thesis finished in Vienna, Austria, in 1993 under the direction of D.E. Klimburg-Salter and Ernst Steinkellner. German translations of the *Lalitavistara* have originally been done in the course of a seminar with Ernst Steinkellner. Maurizio Taddei worked extensively with me on the Tuṣita depictions in Gandhāran art. Dieter Schlingloff kindly provided me with the analysis of the relevant sections in Chinese textual sources that have been prepared for him by Valentina Stache-Rosen between 1970 and 1980. Besides these Haiyan Hu-von Hinüber, J.C. Heesterman and Chlodwig Werba helped with different aspects concerning the MA thesis. Now, more than a decade later, the Lumbini International Research Institute headed by Christoph Cüppers not only gave the impetus to revise my previous study by organising an international seminar on the Buddha's birth (which I sadly could not attend then) but also enabled the revision for publication due to a research grant of which this is the first result. Finally, Elizabeth Rosen Stone gave me valuable comments and Harry Falk provided his interpretation of the problematic Bhārhut inscription.

the life of the Buddha and its placement within the relevant text or monument.

Although practically all major primary sources on the life of the Buddha that have come down to us begin with the Buddha's descent from Tuṣita heaven, the secondary literature often ignores this event.² The primary reason for this is the 'historical' approach that is favoured by western and western trained scholars and writers. Thereby plausible details, thus considered possible historical facts, are separated from legendary material to create a life of the 'historical Buddha'.³ This process very much reverses the exaltation process visible in the development in the story of the Buddha's life and, considering the conclusions of Bareau's study on the earliest sources on the Buddhas youth,⁴ appears equally arbitrary. The visual sources, too, may have had their part in the selection visible in secondary literature. As we will see, Tuṣita depictions are rare and often their identification is problematic and the descent itself is integrative part of queen Māyā's dream.

Generally, many of the aspects considered here have already been touched upon by Ernst Windisch in his detailed study on the birth of the Buddha.⁵ He also notes, that the story of the Buddha's birth actually begins with the sojourn in Tuṣita heaven.

Textual Sources

Among the relevant Indian textual sources the *Lalitavistara* (LV) is arguably the latest, reaching its final form in its extant Sanskrit and Tibetan versions as late as the 7th or 8th century (see below).⁶ The LV also contains the most elaborate account on the events prior to birth. The

² This is not the case in accounts based on the Tibetan tradition where the miraculous events are integrative part of the tradition. See for example: Csoma de Körös 1839: 231–232; Schiefner 1849: 2; Köppen 1906: 74.

³ Examples are: Pischel 1910: 15; Oldenberg 1921: 108; Lamotte 1988: 15–23.

⁴ Bareau 1974: 260–274.

⁵ Windisch 1908.

⁶ An even later source on the Buddha's life, the *Jinacarita*, is not considered here, since it has no relevance for the interpretation of the visuals (see Norman 1983: 158).

following survey of the texts begins with those that are least detailed concerning the relevant events and thus show the greatest divergence to the LV.

Given that this survey of the textual sources serves as comparison to visuals, special consideration is taken concerning the illustrative value of the narration. This value may essentially be of two kinds, sequential and in detail. Under sequential illustrative value I understand any information concerning temporal and/or spatial sequences as well as sequences of visually representable action. Dialogues, for example, may be essential in developing the story but are almost impossible to depict. Illustrative details, in contrast, are elements that can be depicted in certain media and/or sizes only. Colours, for example, will only be relevant for discussing paintings, and there are no relevant examples besides those of Ajaṅṭā. Equally the six tusks of the elephant in Māyā's dream can only be depicted if the general size of the scene and the material allows their depiction.⁷

In the Vinayas of the Mahīśāsaka and Dharmaguptaka schools, which are preserved in Chinese translations only,⁸ the birth of the Buddha is not narrated at all.⁹ Instead, these texts focus on the origin of the Śākya-clan, its genealogy and jump directly to the prophecy of the Brahmans. Obviously the Brahmans do not prophecies on the basis of Māyā's dream, since that is not narrated either.

In the canonical Pāli literature there are only two works that also narrate the birth of the Buddha. These are the Mahāpadānasutta (MASu)¹⁰ of the Dīgha Nikāya, which is also partly preserved in a Sanskrit version

⁷ It is likely, that some of the relief sculptures considered here, such as the Amarāvati reliefs, may have been painted originally (Knox 1992: 232).

⁸ Both Vinayas were only translated in the first half of the fifth century (Lamotte 1988: 169–170).

⁹ Bareau 1962: 7-8, 31; Bareau 1995: 16–17, 40. Contrary to the impression left by Lamotte's summaries (Lamotte 1988: 169-170 (1958: 186-187)) these texts do not contain a continuous narrative from birth to enlightenment, but focus on specific topics only, namely the origin of the Śākyas and the prediction and events of the Great Departure.

¹⁰ Edition: Rhys Davids, Carpenter 1903: 1–54. Translation: Rhys Davids, Rhys Davids 1910: 4–41, Walshe 1996: 199–221. Further: Norman 1983: 36.

(Mahāvādānasūtra¹¹), and the Acchariyabbhutadhammasutta. Both declare that the events during the last life of any Buddha are, as a matter of fact, identical.¹²

The MASu first cites the individual circumstances of the last lives of Gotama and his six predecessors¹³ and then only narrates the life – from the descent from Tuṣita heaven to the first sermon – of the first of them, namely Buddha Vipassī / Vipāśyin.¹⁴ The Acchariyābbhūta(dhamma)sutta (ABDSu)¹⁵, in the section on emptiness (Suññatavagga) in the Majjhimanikāya, only focuses on the events from getting reborn in Tuṣita heaven to the birth. The parts common to both texts are almost identical.

The descriptions of these texts contain very little of illustrative value. A number of incidents are said to invariably occur at the time of the Bodhisattva's descent from Tuṣita into his future mother's womb. The descent is undertaken 'mindful and clearly aware'¹⁶, it is accompanied by a radiance illuminating the whole universe, described in great detail, as well as an earthquake,¹⁷ and four gods guard the future Buddha's mother in the four directions.¹⁸ Then the Bodhisattva is likened to a gem, his

¹¹ Editions: Waldschmidt 1953, Fukita 2003. Fukita's edition improves the earlier one considerably.

¹² Strictly speaking, the Acchariyabbhutadhammasutta (ABDSu) does not clarify at all which Buddha's birth it actually describes (Windisch 1908: 103–105). Windisch 1908: 107–137, discusses each sentence of the ABDSu and compares them with other sources on the Buddha's life, namely the Nidānakathā, Mahāvastu and the Lalita.

¹³ While the events are identical the following circumstances are individual for each Buddha: *kalpa*, life span, caste, family name, *bodhi*-tree, number of disciples, principal pair of disciples, attendants, son, parents and capital. The Buddhavaṃsa, focusing on the individual circumstances only, extends this concept to 24 + 3 predecessors of Buddha Gotama (Horner 1975, Jayawickrama 1995).

¹⁴ The relevant sections are: Rhys Davids. Carpenter 1903: 11–13; Rhys Davids, Rhys Davids 1910: 8–10; Walshe 1996: 203–204; Fukita 2003: 52–61.

¹⁵ Edition: Chalmers 1899: 118–124. Translations: Chalmers 1927: 222–226. Horner 1967–76: III, 163–169; Ñāṇamoli, Bodhi 1995: 979–984.

¹⁶ Pāli: *sato sampajāno*. This is not noted in the Sanskrit while it further emphasised by the ABDSu, where also the prior rebirth in Tuṣita and the stay there have been concious.

¹⁷ See also Windisch 1908: 110–112.

¹⁸ The commentary to the MASu by Buddhaghosa qualifies them as the Four Great Kings (Stede 1971: 434).

mother's virtues are expounded and the birth is described. There are neither details concerning the sojourn in Tuṣita heaven among the gods nor is the dream of the queen mentioned.¹⁹

Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*²⁰ is a poem that was composed to emphasize the moral and intellectual virtues of the Buddha²¹ and thus does not focus on mythical elements. Consequently, the story commences with praising the virtues of the future Buddha's parents (verses I,1–2) and the conception. In her dream, Māyā sees a white elephant king entering her body (verses I,3–5). The descent from Tuṣita is not mentioned.²² Aśvaghōṣa is thought to have lived around 100 CE.²³

Somewhat more elaborate on the events prior to birth is the other *mahākāvya* Aśvaghōṣa's, the *Saundarananda*.²⁴ At the beginning of the second canto the virtues of Śuddhodana are extolled (verses II,1–45). The gods searching an appropriate realm for the Bodhisattva noticed his virtues (verses II,46–47). The Bodhisattva decides to be reborn there (verses II,48–49) and, “*walking from the Tuṣita gods to earth*”, takes his

¹⁹ See also Windisch 1908: 6, 104–105.

²⁰ Edition: Cowell 1893. Edition and translation: Johnston 1936, Schotsmann 1995. Translation: Schmidt 1923. Translation from the Tibetan: Weller 1926–28. Translation from the Chinese version: Beal 1883. Analysis: Weller 1939; Weller 1953; de Jong 1990.

²¹ See Johnston 1936: xxxvii–xl.

²² Nevertheless, there is a *śloka* of the *Buddhacarita* narrating the descent from Tuṣita heaven: *cyuto 'tha kāyāt tuṣitāt trilokim uddyotayann uttamabodhisattvaḥ | viveśa tasyāḥ smṛta eva kuṣsau nandāguhāyām iva nāgarājaḥ* || (see Windisch 1908: 35–36, 166). However, this *śloka*, I,19 in Cowell's edition, is part of those verses at the beginning of the first canto that do not occur in the Tibetan and Chinese translations (Cowell 1893: vi). These verses are thus not considered original and have not been included in Johnston's more recent edition. The German translation of Richard Schmidt (Schmidt 1923) is based on Cowell's edition and thus contains the apocryphal beginning verses as well (p. 11–13). Interestingly, Weller 1939: 337–38, considers the ‘unfinished impression’ of the first canto the result of a visual model for the author.

²³ See Lienhard 1984: 132 and 64–70 on the author and his poetry.

²⁴ Edition and translation: Johnston 1928; Jamspal 1999.

rebirth in his family.²⁵ In her dream Māyā sees a white, six-tusked elephant entering her womb.²⁶

The Nidānakathā (Nd)²⁷, an introduction to the Pāli collection of Birth Stories (Jātakatthavaṇṇanā), narrates the spiritual career of the Buddha in three parts. The Dūrenidāna (Distant Epoch) covers the previous lives of the Buddha beginning with Sumedha meeting Dīpaṃkara and ending with the rebirth of Vessantara in Tuṣita heaven. The Avidūrenidāna (Intermediate Epoch) narrates the actual life of the Buddha until his enlightenment, and the Santikenidāna (Recent Epoch) covers the period from the enlightenment to a sudden end after the Buddha received Anāthapiṇḍika's gift of the Jetavana. Essentially the text is a streamlined and complemented compilation of sections known from other Pāli works, some of them being quoted, among them the Buddhavaṃsa, the MASu and the ABDSu.²⁸ The compilation of the Jātakatthavaṇṇanā probably dates to the fifth century or around 500, when also the rest of the Pāli canon was finalized.²⁹

Concerning the illustrative value, the relevant section may be summarized as follows.³⁰ The text first distinguishes three types of proclamations, one of them being the proclamation of a Buddha by the guardian deities of the world (*lokapāladevatā*). Having heard this proclamation, the gods assemble in front of the Bodhisattva and entreat him to become Buddha. The Bodhisattva makes the five reflections (right time, land, place, family, mother) and agrees that it is the right time and dismisses them. With the Tuṣita gods alone, the Bodhisattva enters the

²⁵ *devebhyas tuṣitebhyo 'tha bodhisattvaḥ kṣitiṃ vrajan | upapattiṃ praṇidadhē kule tasya mahīpateḥ* || Johnston, 1928: II,48. It is apparent that Aśvaghoṣa does not use the usual terminology to describe the descent.

²⁶ *svapne 'tha samaye garbham āviśantaṃ dadarsa sā | śaddantaṃ vāraṇaṃ svetaṃ airāvataṃ ivaujasā* || Johnston, 1928: II,50.

²⁷ Edition: Fausbøll 1877: 1–94. Translations: Jayawickrama 1990; Rhys Davids 1998.

²⁸ See Jayawickrama 1990: xi–xv.

²⁹ See J. Dutoit 1921: vol.7: III; Norman 1983: 77–84, 128–30; von Hinüber 1998: 1. There also existed an older version (see, for example, von Hinüber 1998: 41–42).

³⁰ Jayawickrama 1990: 63–67; Rhys Davids 1998: 144–50.

Nandana-Park where he passes away and takes rebirth in Māyā's womb.³¹ The fasting queen Māyā, lying down on the seventh day, dreams that the Four Great Kings carry her into the Himalayas. There, goddesses bath her and placed her on a heavenly couch in the golden abode of the silver mountain. The Bodhisattva descends from the golden mountain in the form of a white elephant with a lotus in his trunk, circumambulates her thrice and enters her.³²

Obviously, the dream is here extended into a side narrative that is essentially out of the actual sequence. Somewhat later it is further stated that from the time of conception the mother is protected by four deities with swords.³³ Continuing by extolling the queen's virtue and the Bodhisattva as gem this section is based on the MASu.

The Mahāvastu (MV)³⁴, part of the Vinayaṭīka of the Lokottaravādin, a branch of the Mahāsāṃghika³⁵, has a structure similar to the Nd. However, the basic narrative of the Buddha's spiritual career is interrupted by numerous stories of previous births. The text has older verses in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit embedded in and connected by Sanskrit prose. The core of the text is said to be very old, but its younger parts, particularly the introduction, are attributed to the 4th century CE.³⁶

First, the MV introduces the (somewhat incomplete) career of a Bodhisattva.³⁷ Then follows the story of the life of Buddha Dīpaṃkara,

³¹ *so evaṃ devatāhi kusalaṃ sārayamānāhi parivuto tattha vicaranto cavitvā Mahāmāyāya deviyā kucchismiṃ paṭisandhiṃ gaṇhi.* Fausbøll 1877: 50.

³² Windisch 1908: 153–55, Dutoit 1921: 84–90.

³³ Jayawickrama 1990: 69.

³⁴ Edition: Senart 1882. Translation: Jones 1949–1956; Leumann, Shiraishi 1957: section on the Bodhisattva career and the ten *bhūmi*; Leumann, Shiraishi 1962: continuing the ten *bhūmi* section. Analysis: Windisch 1909; Leumann, Shiraishi 1962; Oldenberg 1967; Rahula 1978.

³⁵ Senart 1882: I, 2, 13–14, III, 461, 13–14.

³⁶ Winternitz 1983: II, 238, postulates that the oldest core may go back to the 2nd century BCE. The final reduction of the text is thought to date to the 4th century CE (also Rahula 1978: 16).

³⁷ Thereby two independent systems are connected, namely the four practices of a Bodhisattva (*catvāri bodhisattvacaryāṇi*, these are levels of the Bodhisattva development that are characterised by a certain practice) and the ten *bhūmi* (Leumann, Shiraishi 1962; Lamotte 1966–80: v, 2373–81, Rahula 1978: 62).

the first Buddha who prophesied (*vyākaroṭi*) Śākyamuni his future Buddhahood.³⁸ After also Śākyamuni's immediate predecessor, the Buddha Kāśyapa, prophesied his Buddhahood he takes rebirth in Tuṣita heaven. Although the *deva* Śvetaketu, as he is called in Tuṣita heaven, excels the other gods, there is no notion that he actually teaches them.³⁹

The life of Buddha Dīpaṃkara is practically identical with that of Gotama, just the names change. Minor differences, especially the shift of a whole group of verses to another place,⁴⁰ may be the result of the previous oral transmission of the text as is also indicated by many repetitions.⁴¹ Both texts narrate the same events preceding the birth.

Twelve years before his last birth the *Śuddhāvāsa* gods⁴² proclaim the descent and teach the 32 signs of a great man (*mahāpuruṣa*). Consequently, the Pratyekabuddha leave the earth by rising into the sky and having themselves consumed by fire. The Bodhisattva makes his four reflections (time, place, continent, family) and decides on a suitable mother. In the meantime the queen has laid herself to sleep and is visited and protected by Rākṣasa, Yakṣa, and the Four Great Kings ('four lords') and all other kinds of deities. The Bodhisattva then departs and during the descent a radiance illuminates the whole Buddha-field (*buddhakṣetra*) and the earth quakes. The gods mentioned above continue to attend to the Bodhisattva and his mother.

In both lives, that of Dīpaṃkara and that of Gotama, the actual descent is described in two versions consisting of two verses each:

³⁸ In the career of a Bodhisattva this prophesy marks the threshold between the seventh and the eighth *bhūmi* (Jones 1949-1956: I, 2).

³⁹ "He excelled the other devas in the ten heavenly attributes, namely, heavenly length of life This deva named Śvetaketu was learned, accomplished, confident, skilled ..." Jones 1949-1956: I,284.

⁴⁰ For example Jones 1949-1956: I,164-67 and II,9-11.

⁴¹ Single verses and groups of verses from the life have also been used in explaining the tenth *bhūmi*. Among them are even verses that in the actual narration of the life have been replaced by prose (compare, for example, Jones 1949-1956: I,133 with II,3 and I,18 with II,17).

⁴² These are the gods in the five highest heavens of the 17 *rūpadhātu*-heavens (see Kloetzli 1983: 29-30, 33-39; Grönbold 1984: 392-395).

“Lo, I depart.” So did the Exalted One speak out and utter the happy word. And at that very moment the Conqueror’s mother saw in a dream him who had won maturity of fruition, Entering her body in the form of a noble elephant, light of step, flawless of limb, gleaming like snow-white silver, with six tusks, a gracefully waving trunk and a crimson head.⁴³

And:

When the mighty and mindful one passed away from his abode in Tuṣṭita, taking on the form of an elephant of the colour of a snow-white boar, Mindful, self-possessed and virtuous he descended into his mother’s womb as she lay abed high up in the palace, fasting and clothed in pure raiment.⁴⁴

It may well be that these two versions represent different traditions since also the meter of the verses is different. The second version is the only one where Gotama actually takes on the form of an elephant and descends as such. This ‘historicization’⁴⁵ of the descent is even better visible in another verse that is, without obvious connection, quoted in the description of the third *bhūmi*. There the Bodhisattva descends in the body of an elephant (*gajarūpavat*).⁴⁶

⁴³ Jones 1949-1956: II,8 and I,162. *eṣo cyavāmi iti muñci giram subhaṃ vacanaṃ udīrayi ... | atha supinaṃ janānī jinasya tasmim̃ kṣaṇe paśyati varavipākaphalaṃ || himarajatanibho me ṣaḍviṣāṇo sucaraṇacārubhujo suraktaśiṛṣo | udaram upagato gajapradhāno lalitagatiḥ anavadyagātrasandhiḥ ||* Senart 1882: II,8,15–18 (corresponding to I,205,1–4). Senart mentions (I,537) that even a comparison of the two occurrences does not allow to close the gap in the first verse.

⁴⁴ Jones 1949–1956: II,11 and I,164. *so yaṃ mahānubhāvo smṛtimāṃ tuṣṭitabhavanā cyavitvāna | pāṇḍaravarāhakanibho bhavitva gajarūpi ṣaḍḍanto || vīraśayane śayantiye poṣadhikāye viśuddhavasānāye | smṛta saṃprajānakuśalo mātuḥ kukṣisim̃ okrānto ||* Senart 1882: II,11,18–21 (corresponds to I,207,7–10)..

⁴⁵ Windisch uses this term to express the difference of something happening in a dream to an actual event (Windisch 1908: 158, 60, 66). It may well be, that the difficulties to represent a dream visually has ultimately led to the notion that the Bodhisattva actually took on the form of the elephant (Windisch 1908: 173, Foucher 1949: 38, and the depiction of the dream at Bhārhut).

⁴⁶ *māyāyā devyāḥ kukṣisim̃ praviśiṣu sa kumudasadṛśo varo gajarūpavāṃ eva ...*

In the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin (MSV)⁴⁷ the first part of the life story is told in the Saṃghabhedavastu, the 17th and last section. This section begins with the history of the world from its renewal to the genealogy of the Śākya family and the reign of Śuddhodana and then narrates the actual life of the Buddha. The Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra, which is only preserved in Tibetan translation conforms with the description in the MSV.⁴⁸

Following the five reflections (family, place, time, caste and mother) the Bodhisattva informs the gods about his decision and invites them to accompany him. The gods entreat him not to depart, pointing out the erroneous teachings spread all over the world by 18 teachers:⁴⁹

“Here, however, [we] prepare a seat for the Bodhisattva to listen to the teaching across twelve yojana.⁵⁰ And we think, whatever dharma the Bodhisattva staying in the Tuṣita abode will teach us, that dharma we will practise as we have heard it. In this way [the dharma] will, for a long time, be useful, beneficial and lucky for us.”⁵¹

lokālokaḥ tuṣitavarabhavananilayaṃ vihāya ihāgataḥ | Senart 1882: I,98,12–13. Sadly the text is not completely preserved at this point. That this notion also appears here in introductory section of the MV may indicate that it is a fairly late development.

⁴⁷ Edition: Gnoli 1977. Summary: Rockhill 1884. The MSV is the only Vinaya that has been translated into Tibetan, where it is completely preserved. In the relevant sections the Tibetan translations conforms to the Sanskrit version found at Gilgit. See Q 1955–1958: 1030/17, 258a - 261b.

⁴⁸ This text is not identical with a Chinese text of the same name, which rather relates to the Lalitavistara (T 190, trans. Beal 1875). As Beal points out in his introduction, the translation of *abhiniṣkramaṇa*, referring to the great departure of the Bodhisattva, is frequently used as (part of the) title of Chinese Buddha biographies, including some of the earliest translations. The emphasis expressed by this title on the great departure conforms to the shortest biographies preserved in the Chinese translations of the Vinaya of the Mahīśāsaka and Dharmaguptaka schools referred to above.

⁴⁹ The teachers are mentioned in three groups of six each (Gnoli 1977: 39).

⁵⁰ In the Tibetan translation (Q 1930/17, 260b1-2) the 12 *yojana* refer to the Bodhisattva’s seat: *’dir na chos mnyan pa’i slad du byang chub sems dpa’i gdan dpag tshad bcu gnyis pa bsam par bgyi ...*

⁵¹ *iha tu bodhisattvasya dvādaśayojanāni dharmāśravaṇārtham āsanaprajñaptiḥ prajñāpyate; asmākaṃ caivaṃ bhavati; yam asmākaṃ tuṣitabhavanastho bodhisattvo dharmam deśayiṣyati taṃ vayan dharmam śrutvā tathā tathā pratipatsyāmahe; yathāpitad asmākaṃ bhaviṣyati dīrgharātram arthāya hitāya sukhāyeti.* Gnoli 1977: 39.

The Bodhisattva entreated thus said to the gods of Tuṣita heaven: "Therefore, friends, hit all musical instruments!" After the gods of Tuṣita heaven have hit all musical instruments, and also the Bodhisattva blew the conch [he said]: "Which of the two, friends, is the higher⁵² sound?" "The sound of the conch, bhagavan."⁵³

"Friends, as this sound of the conch is superior to all [other] musical instruments, so am I, after I have descended to earth (jambūdvīpa) superior to the six dialectics⁵⁴, the six reciters⁵⁵ and the six practitioners⁵⁶ and will reach deathlessness. I will saturate the world with nectar [= deathlessness]. I will blow the conch of impermanence. I will hit the drum of the void. I will roar the lion's roar of selflessness."⁵⁷

⁵² *odārika* is not to be found in this form in the standard dictionaries. For Edgerton 1953: 161. only the meaning 'gross, material' is secured for *audārika* (= Pāli *oḷārika*), while he doubts the examples where it may mean 'great'. In Bechert 1994 the latter is given as the first meaning. Regularly derived *audārika* should go back to *udāra* 'high, lofty, exalted' (see PW: 1131). Pāli *oḷārika* "[scdry deriv. from *uḷāra* .. + *ika*; ..] a.(i) large..; extensive ...; b.(iii) (of sound) loud, high-pitched" CPD: 767–68..

⁵³ *evam ukto bodhisattvaḥ tuṣitakāyikān devān idam avocat: "tena hi māṛṣā sarvavādyāni prahānyantām" iti. tuṣitakāyikābhir devatābhiḥ sarvavādyāni prahatāni; bodhisattvenāpi saṅkham āpūryābhihitam "kataro 'tra māṛṣāḥ odārikaḥ śabdaḥ?" "śaṅkhaśabdo bhagavan."* Gnoli 1977: 39.

⁵⁴ The names of the first group correspond to the six 'heretics' in Mhvy 3545–3550 (Tamura, Imanishi, Satō 1966–68). In the *MSV* this group occurs several times: in the same section when Ajātaśatru is converted, in the Pravrajyāvastu as part of the story of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, and in the Vinayavibhaṅga in the section that discusses the offences that lead to a temporary exclusion from the monastic community. On their teachings see Vogel 1970.

⁵⁵ This is a group of six Brahmans.

⁵⁶ Rendered *sñoms par 'jug pa* in Tibetan, among them are Udraka Rāmaputra and Arāḍa Kālāma.

⁵⁷ *"yathāyaṃ māṛṣāḥ śaṅkhaśabdaḥ sarvavādyāny abhibhūyāvasthitaḥ evam evāhaṃ jambūdvīpam avatīrya ṣaṭ tārīkān ṣaḍ ānuśravikān ṣaṭ ca pratipattrīn abhibhūyāmṛtam adhiḡamiṣyāmi; amṛtena jagat santarpayiṣyāmi; anityatāśaṅkham āpūrayiṣyāmi; śūnyatābherīṃ tāḍayiṣyāmīti; nairātmyasiṃhanādaṃ nadiṣyāmī"* Gnoli 1977: 39.

Having explained this he spoke a verse:

“One lion stirs a multitude of beasts of prey. One vajra cuts many rock peaks. Śakra alone defeats the lords of the Danava. The sun alone disperses darkness repeatedly.

Who among you, friends, desires deathlessness, should take rebirth in the middle country (madhyadeśa). Go⁵⁸ to the six large cities [there].”⁵⁹

Consequently, Śakra prepares the womb of Mahāmāyā and the Bodhisattva descends in the middle of the night in the appearance of an Elephant.⁶⁰ Māyā has four dreams: a six-tusked elephant enters her,⁶¹ she rises into the sky, ascends a high mountain, and a large crowd bows in front of her.

The events described here indicate a rather late date for this section of the MSV. The Bodhisattva appears as teacher of the gods. The group of 18 teachers contrasts with the group of the first six that occurs in other places of the Vinaya as well.⁵⁴ The use of musical instruments as similes and the superior conch, too, may be indicators of a relatively late date.⁶² The section may, thus, be counted among those that lead Lamotte to the

⁵⁸ *iryati*: see Edgerton 1953: 115.

⁵⁹ *iti viditvā gāthāṃ bhāṣate*: “*siṃhaikaḥ pramathati naikaśvāpadaughān, vajraiko vilikhati naikaśṛṅgaśailān | śakraiko vijayati naikadānavendrān, sūryaiko vimathati naikam andhakāram || yo yuṣmākaṃ mārṣā amṛtenārthī sa madhyadeśe pratisandhiṃ gr̥hṇātu; ṣaṭsu mahānagareṣv iriyatha*. Gnoli 1977: 39–40. The last two sentences are combined in the Tibetan translation (Q 1030/17, 161a1).

⁶⁰ *gajanidarśanena rātryā madhyame yāme māmāyāyā devyāḥ kuṣṣim avakrāntaḥ* Gnoli 1977: 40.

⁶¹ *ṣaḍanto me śveto hastināgaḥ kuṣṣiṃ bhittvā praviṣṭaḥ* Gnoli 1977: 40.

⁶² Music was originally not allowed for monks and the simile may well assume a certain acceptance of music in a Buddhist (monastic) context. However, the usage of music is consistent with the MSV that describes image processions of an image of the Bodhisattva under the Jambu-tree accompanied by musicians. A study of Schopen 2005: 128–137. indicates that this may well have been the custom during the Kuṣāṇa period. The emphasis on the conch as the superior instrument may well be connected with the conch that Viṣṇu uses to measure the extend of the ocean.

conclusion that “we cannot attribute to this work a date earlier than the fourth-fifth centuries of the Christian era”.⁶³

In an earlier recension the Lalitavistara (LV)⁶⁴ was a Sarvāstivāda text, but it has been reworked and extended several times.⁶⁵ The extant Mahāyānasūtra, however, only was finalised in the late seventh or early eighth century and is thus not much older than its Tibetan translation.⁶⁶ Like the MV it contains verses in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit.

The LV begins with the sojourn in Tuṣita heaven and ends with the first sermon (*dharmacakrapravartana*, chapter 26). The description of the Buddha’s life is set onto a common teaching frame. In chapter one the Buddha resides with a huge assembly of monks and Bodhisattvas in the Jetavana. At the request of the gods he teaches the Lalitavistara. In the final chapter (27) the Buddha requests Mahākāśyapa, Ānanda and the Bodhisattva Maitreya to teach this text to others.⁶⁷

⁶³ Lamotte 1988: 657 (1958: 727). Lamotte notes that in the MSV Śākyamuni is understood as “*god superior to the gods*” as it is also known from Mahāyāna texts. Gnoli 1977: XIX-XX., in contrast, attributes the MSV to the period of the Kuṣāṇa emperor Kaniṣka (2nd century). For a more differentiated argument on the date of the MSV see also Schopen 2004: 19–25. I assume here that although, as Schopen has shown, much of the text may well go back to the time of the Kuṣāṇa king Kaniṣka the relevant section here is of a later date. In comparison, a teaching Maitreya in Tuṣita heaven is only described in a Chinese source (T 452, translated 455: Lamotte 1988: 706 (1958: 782–783)), but the concept itself certainly can also be proven for the fourth century but, to my knowledge, not earlier.

⁶⁴ Text editions: Mitra 1877; Lefmann 1902 / 08; Vaidya 1958. Translations: Lefmann 1874 (the first five chapters only); Foucaux 1884–92; Bays 1983 (translated from the Foucaux’s French translation); Mitra 1998 (first 15 chapters). Analysis: de Jong 1954; Schubring 1954; Weller 1987; Khosla 1991. Tibetan: Q 763.

⁶⁵ de Jong studies an example of the revisions and extensions of the text (de Jong 1954).

⁶⁶ The suggested date is between the Chinese translation by Divākara (= T 190) 683 CE, which does not yet conform with the extant Sanskrit text, and the Tibetan translation in the early ninth century (de Jong 1954: 313; Weller 1987: 472 (17)).

⁶⁷ *imām ahaṃ māṛṣā asaṃkhyeyakalpakoṇiniyutaśatasahasrasamudānītām anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhiṃ yuṣmākaṃ haste paridāmy anuparidāmi paramayā parindanayā, svayaṃ caivam imaṃ dharmaparyāyaṃ dhārayata, parebhyaś ca vistareṇa saṃprakāśayata*” Vaidya 1958: 318,18–20.

A Bodhisattva named Śvetaketu⁶⁸ resides in Tuṣita heaven. There resound exhorting verses reminding him of the prophecy of Buddha Dīpaṃkara⁶⁹ (chapter two). In chapter three the Bodhisattva Śvetaketu informs the gods about his rebirth in Jambudvīpa. There the gods, disguised as Brahmans, teach the *Vedas* and announce the rebirth to the Pratyekabuddhas, who leave the earth by rising into the sky and having themselves consumed by fire. The Bodhisattva makes the four reflections (time, continent, place and family) and asks the gods in which family he will be reborn. He explains the 32 characteristics of the mother of a Bodhisattva who takes his last rebirth. Finally he teaches a huge assembly of Bodhisattvas, gods and *apsaras* for the last time (chapter four). Thereby he teaches the 108 *dharmālokamukha* that are taught at the time of a Bodhisattva's departure from the assembly of gods.⁷⁰ Each of the chapters is set into a different palace (*vimāna*).

In the fifth chapter, the departure (*pracala*), the Bodhisattva proclaims his departure to Jambudvīpa.

Now the gods of Tuṣita heaven, crying, held the feet of the Bodhisattva and spoke thus: "Satpurṣua, this Tuṣita mansion will, without your presence, cease to be resplendent." Then the Bodhisattva spoke to the big assembly of gods: "This Bodhisattva Maitreya will teach you the dharma." Then, having taken off the headdress (paṭṭamaula, thod dang cod pan)⁷¹ from his head, the Bodhisattva placed it on the head of

⁶⁸ The same name was used in the MV, Ibid., 8,20.

⁶⁹ *smara vipulapuṇyānicaya smṛtimatigatim anantaprajñāprabhākarin | atulabalavipulavikrama vyākaraṇaṃ dīpaṃkarasyāpi* || Ibid., 9,v1.

⁷⁰ *yadavasyaṃ bodhisattvenacyavanakālasamayadevaparśadi saṃprakāśayitavyam* || Ibid., 25,21-22. The *dharmālokamukha* conclude with the last three *bhūmi* in the older form (Vaidya 1958: 25,18-21): the *avaivartikabhūmi* characterised by *sarvabuddhadharmapratipūrti*; the *bhumerbhumisamkrāntijñāna*, in which the Bodhisattva reaches *sarvajñajñānābhīṣekatā*, and the *abhiṣekabhūmi*, which is characterised by showing all the deeds of a Buddha (10 deeds are enumerated). These stages conform to those mentioned in the MV.

⁷¹ As can be concluded from the following *ca* in the Sanskrit and the Tibetan translation, the headdress consists of two parts: *thod dang cod pan* (Q 763, 28a8) = **paṭṭo maulam ca*.

Bodhisattva Maitreya and said: “Without me you, satpuruṣa, will attain the highest, complete awakening.”⁷²

Then the Bodhisattva asks the gods in which form he should enter his mother’s womb, and after some suggestions a god called Ugratejas says:

“As it occurs in the Mantraveda and Śāstra texts of the Brahmans, in that appearance the Bodhisattva should descend into his mother’s womb. But what [appearance] is this? - An Elephant of great dimensions, with six tusks⁷³, covered by a golden net, radiant, with well reddened head and a bursting and dripping body(?)⁷⁴. Having heard of such an appearance the Brahman who knows the Vedas and the Śāstras will prophesy: ‘Indeed, this one will be endowed with the 32 characteristics.’”⁷⁵

⁷² *atha te tuṣitakāyikā devaputrā rudanto bodhisattvasya caraṇau pariṅghyaivam āhuḥ* “idaṃ khalu satpuruṣa tuṣitabhavanaṃ tvayā vihīnaṃ na bhrājiṣyate” | *atha bodhisattvas tāṃ mahatī devaparṣadam evam āha* “ayaṃ [maitreyo bodhisattvo yuṣmākaṃ dharmāṃ deśayiṣyati” | *atha bodhisattvaḥ] svakāc chiraśaḥ paṭṭamaulaṃ cāvātārya maitreyasya bodhisattvasya śirasi pratiṣṭhāpayāmāsa* | *evaṃ cāvocat* “mamāntarena tvaṃ satpuruṣa anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhim abhisambhotsyase” Vaidya 1958: 28,6–11. In the edition of Rajendra Lal Mitra the section in brackets is replaced by the following: *bodhisattvo maitreyaṃ bodhisattvaṃ yauvarājye pratiṣṭhāpya* (Mitra 1877: 43). According Vaidya this edition is based on five manuscripts from India and Nepal (Vaidya 1958: x). Schubring wants to use this gloss and suggests to read the following verb as causative (Schubring 1954: 615).

⁷³ Lefmann 1874: 178–79, suggested that the six tusks refer to the two actual tusks and the four molars that have grown together. See also Janert 1977: 71–72.

⁷⁴ Since the suggested explanations (for example Schubring 1954: 615) are equally unsatisfying I have chosen a literal translation of this peculiar description (see also Lefmann 1874: 179). Most likely the ‘bursting and dripping’ refers to an adult male elephant during *musth* (pers./engl) when a secretion originating at the temples runs down the sides of the head (see Janert 1977: 69–70).

⁷⁵ *yathā brāhmaṇānāṃ mantravedaśāstrapātheṣv āgacchati tā dṛśenaiva rūpena bodhisattvo mātuḥ kuḥṣāv avakrāmitavyaḥ* | *tatpunaḥ kīdṛśam? gajavaramahāpramāṇaḥ śaddanto hemajālasamkāśaḥ suruciraḥ suraktaśīrṣaḥ sphuṭitagalitarūpavān* | *etac chrutvā rūpaṃ brāhmaṇavedaśāstratattvajño vyākaraṣitaś ca* | *ito vai bhāvī dvātriṃśallakṣaṇopetaḥ* || Vaidya 1958: 28,16–20.

Finally, the Bodhisattva is venerated by countless gods and departs from Tuṣita heaven. In the presence of the gods he takes place on the lion throne Śrīgarbha.⁷⁶ Countless gods carry the great palace and *apsaras* praise the Bodhisattva in their singing.⁷⁷

Chapter six, the descent into the womb (*garbhāvākṛānti*), sets the descent on the 15th day of full moon. The Bodhisattva becomes a young elephant with six tusks, a reddened⁷⁸ head and golden teeth and enters his mother from the right side.⁷⁹ Māyā sees the elephant in her dream⁸⁰ and describes it in a verse.⁸¹

I have not dealt with the numerous non-canonical Chinese sources on the life of the Buddha since they appear to provide no information that is relevant to the argumentation of this article. Unless mentioned otherwise, these sources have only been available to me in the form of text analysis provided by Dieter Schlingloff and secondary sources.⁸² However, these are not detailed enough that they can be used to develop a more comprehensive account of the development of the textual sources.

All texts appear to contain Tuṣita heaven, at least in the form of the reflections, and the dream of Māyā.⁸³ It would be interesting to know,

⁷⁶ See Vaidya 1958: 38,30–39,1.

⁷⁷ See Vaidya 1958: 39,24–26.

⁷⁸ The term *indragopaka* denotes an insect used in making a red dye.

⁷⁹ *iti hi bhikṣava: śīśīrakālavinirgato vaiśākhmāse viśākhānakṣatṛānugate ṛtupravare vasantakālasamaye taruvarapatrākīrṇe varapravarapuṣpasamkūsumite śītoṣṇatamorajo vīgate mṛduśādvale susamsthite tribhuvanajyeṣṭho lokamahito vyavalokya ṛtukālasamaye pañcadaśyāṃ pūrṇamāsyāṃ pośadhagrhitāyā mātuḥ puṣyanakṣatrayogena bodhisattvas tuṣitavarabhavanāc cyutvā smṛtaḥ samprajānan pāṇḍuro gajapoto bhūtvā śaddanta indragopakaśīrāḥ suvarṇarājīdantaḥ sarvāṅgo 'hīnendriyo jananyā dakṣiṇāyāṃ kuṣāv avakṛāmat* Vaidya 1958: 43,1–6.

⁸⁰ *himarajatanibhaś ca śadviśāṇaḥ sucaraṇa cārubhujāḥ suraktaśīrṣaḥ | udaram upagato gajapradhāno lalitagatir dṛḍhavajragātrasaṃdhiḥ ||* Vaidya 1958: 43,8–11.

⁸¹ *himarajatanikāśaś candrasūryātīrekaḥ sucaraṇa suvibhaktaḥ śadviśāṇo mahātmā | gajavarū dṛḍhasaṃdhīr vajrakalpaḥ surūpaḥ udari mama praviṣṭas tasya hetuḥ śṛṇuṣva ||* Vaidya 1958: 44,12–15 (v 6), same as 45,3–6 (v 10).

⁸² For example the summaries and references found in Beal 1883: xvi–xxx; Bareau 1962: 202–205, or Bareau 1995: 46–49).

⁸³ Possibly, this is also valid for the earliest text on the Buddha's life translated 68–70 CE (Beal 1983: xvi–xvii). The text itself, however, is not preserved.

when the Bodhisattva first occurs as the teacher of gods in Tuṣita heaven.⁸⁴ It is remarkable, that none of the Chinese sources mentions the transference of the crown to Maitreya as it is narrated in the LV.⁸⁵ In China the descent itself is depicted showing the Bodhisattva riding the elephant. Apparently, the Chinese is ambiguous at this point.⁸⁶

Although issues of the chronology and the relationship of the sources are certainly problematic, the Indian textual sources clearly indicate a development for the events prior to birth. As Bareau has worked out in great detail, the canonical sources themselves undergo a considerable development in the first centuries after the Buddha, the birth and the events preceding it being not mentioned at all originally.⁸⁷ The canonical sources that do mention the descent are interestingly those that do focus on the group of seven historical Buddhas and not on Śākyamuni alone. These texts establish that the events of any Buddha's life follow a set pattern. Further, it is not the descent itself that is described but the miracles that occur with it and indicate the conception of a very special being.

In what is probably the earlier strata of an actual event taking place in Tuṣita heaven, the Bodhisattva is requested by the gods to be reborn (Nd) or decides on the right time himself (MV). The gods accompany and protect him, respectively his future mother, during the descent. In a further development, the Bodhisattva teaches the gods in Tuṣita heaven (MSV, LV). Consequently, the role of the god changes from supporting the rebirth to trying in vain to prevent it. In the MSV they point out the heretics on earth and that teaching them in heaven would be much more effective, in the LV they emphasise the loss for the heavenly abode. The Bodhisattva reacts quite differently at this stage, in the MSV he encourages

⁸⁴ I once noted down that Taisho 185, a Buddha-biography translated between 222 and 280 CE describes the BS such, but am unable to control this. If this is indeed the case, this would be surprisingly early. Maitreya appears not to have been understood as teaching there before the fourth century.

⁸⁵ Foucher 1905–51: I, 232, n.2; Foucher 1949: 36.

⁸⁶ See Beal 1983: xix, n.1.

⁸⁷ Bareau 1962, and Bareau 1974. Accordingly, not even the personal name of the Buddha's mother is known, since Māyā derives from *mātā*, the term for mother (see von Hinüber 1994: 13–14).

the gods to become reborn with him while in the LV he appoints a successor to replace him in heaven, namely Maitreya.

In the more embellished stories, the description of descent oscillates between the Bodhisattva's active role in it and the dream of his future mother, the latter signifying both the descent and the conception. While in the earlier stratum of texts it is clear that the descent and Māyā's dream are the same event viewed from different angles, in later sources a sequence of events develops that increasingly separated the departure from Tuṣita heaven and the dream. Only one set of verses in the MV explicitly lets the Bodhisattva take on the form of an elephant, while the LV lets him become an elephant in the narration of the dream sequence only.

Such ambiguity in the textual sources can in part be referred back to the oral tradition these accounts are based on. In fact, much of the relevant information is found in the verse sections of the text. Although in the texts these verses, too, have been edited and reformulated,⁸⁸ they are generally thought to represent an older stratum of the text. It is quite likely, that these verses have been handed down orally. If one can speak of a textual (including oral) tradition concerning the events under discussion at all, it is the verses that represent it.

Although the events prior to birth become increasingly elaborated, relatively little of the narration has illustrative value. In the most elaborate form the sequence of events may be summarised as follows: the Bodhisattva stays in Tuṣita heaven (Nd, MV, MSV, LV), the gods announce his impending rebirth on earth and the Pratyekabuddhas immolate themselves (MV, LV), the Bodhisattva communicates with the gods and/or teaches them (MV, MSV, LV), he crowns his successor Maitreya there (LV), he descends (MASu, ABSu, SN, Nd, MV, LV), Māyā dreams of an elephant entering her womb (BC, SN, Nd, MV, MSV, LV) and descent and/or queen are protected by gods (MASu, ABSu, MV, LV). The description of the elephant in Māyā's dream contains considerable illustrative details, in one account he is holding a lotus in his trunk (Nd). Only in the LV is the descending Bodhisattva transported in a palace.

⁸⁸ See, for example, the study of Windisch 1909.

The succession of the sources documents a development that can be paralleled with the increasing incorporation ideas associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism, but does not strictly represent a chronological succession. In fact, the problems concerning the chronology of the texts and the temporal, geographic and doctrinal ranges they were used in are too complex to be treated appropriately here.

Visual Sources

While in the case of a text, its content can essentially not be contested once the language and the vocabulary are established, the appropriate evaluation of visual sources is much more problematic, since much of it depends on interpretation. This is even more so the case, when the episode is rather secondary and not enclosed in a clear narrative sequence.

The Buddhist narratives discussed in the works of Alfred Foucher, especially those on Gandhāran narrative art, are exemplary and still a point of reference.⁸⁹ In the absence of captions his interpretations are based on comparison to the literature and the depiction of similar compositions and motives. Goal has been to identify as many of the depicted narratives as possible. His comparative approach has also been decisive for N.J. Krom's monumental analysis of the narrative reliefs of Barabudūr⁹⁰, Dieter Schlingloff's extensive studies of the narratives in the art of Ajaṅṭā, including those of the Life of the Buddha,⁹¹ and Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter article on Tuṣita depictions.⁹² Focusing on the modes of visual narration Vidya Dehejia, too, follows the traditional identifications and attributions in all cases discussed here.⁹³

Concerning the present topic Schlingloff notes: "The episode is recounted in all the texts without any variations of content that are relevant

⁸⁹ Foucher 1905-51: I,285-89. Due to his familiarity with the textual sources, he even considers episodes, such as the giving of the crown to Maitreya, that have not been depicted in the narrative depictions he studied.

⁹⁰ Krom 1925; Krom 1927.

⁹¹ Schlingloff 1988: 1-48; Schlingloff 2000: 39-71, 294-380. Most remarkable are the extensive bibliographic references to each scene offered by these works.

⁹² Klimburg-Salter 1988.

⁹³ Dehejia 1997.

for the pictorial representation.”⁹⁴ It is my hope that my analysis of the textual sources above and the visuals following demonstrates that this is not the case once one abandons a purely comparative viewpoint in the favor of a more contextualised approach.

The earliest relevant depictions are preserved from the Bhārhut railing. On the basis of his interpretation of the inscription, Heinrich Lüders identified the middle scene on the west gate, the Ajātaśatru / Ajātasattu pillar (left side)⁹⁵ as the gods informing the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven that it is time to become reborn.⁹⁶ The inscription of this panel says: *Mahāsāmāyikāya Arahaguto devaputo vokato Bhagavato sāsani paṭisaṃdhi* and is translated by Lüders: “*Descended from (the hall of) the Great Assembly, the angel [for devaputo] Arahaguta (Arhadgupta) appraises the Holy One of (his future) incarnation.*”⁹⁷ I am certainly not in the position to discuss the inscription as such, but the way Lüders bases his translation on the depiction itself certainly indicates that its interpretation is problematic.⁹⁸ Neither is a heaven mentioned in the inscription nor has the name of the god, a certain Arahaguto, been found anywhere else but in Bhārhut.⁹⁹ There, the same god accompanies the Bodhisattva at the great departure.¹⁰⁰

Currently I can not offer a conclusive alternative interpretation of the scene, but a consideration of its context may help to place the event. The scene above Arahaguto’s visit to the Buddha shows the turban venerated in Trāyastriṃśa heaven in the course of a *cūḍā* feast.¹⁰¹ The scene below,

⁹⁴ Schlingloff 1988: 16. The interpretation of the relevant episodes has not changed in his more recent study (Schlingloff 2000: 39–51).

⁹⁵ Cunningham 1879: pl. xvi.

⁹⁶ An alternative identification, albeit not convincing either, has been suggested by Barua 1979: 14–16.

⁹⁷ Lüders 1941: 170–172; Lüders 1963: 87–88. This interpretation is also followed in Schlingloff 1988: 4, Schlingloff 2000: 46, and Dehejia 1997: 88–89.

⁹⁸ “*The interpretation of the inscription is to be based on the sculpture.*” Lüders 1963: 87.

⁹⁹ See also Dehejia 1997: 106.

¹⁰⁰ Cunningham 1879: pl. xx. Dehejia 1997: 92–94, fig. 66.

¹⁰¹ See MV, Jones 1949-1956: 161. At Bhārhut, the scene is identified by two inscriptions.

identified as king Ajātaśatru's veneration of the Buddha, gave the pillar its name.¹⁰² The other face of this entrance corner pillar of the West gate shows the miracle of Śrāvastī and the descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven, equally in three scenes.¹⁰³ Thus, on both narrative faces of the pillar the Trāyastriṃśa heaven takes the upper position, while the lower position is occupied by an earthly event. Indeed, if the scenes at Bhārhut are related to each other, they are always arranged in a spatial hierarchy.¹⁰⁴ As such, it is unlikely that a Tuṣita scene is placed on a middle panel and that the hall or palace supposed to be mentioned in the inscription is not depicted. Further, there are also two winged deities among the gods in the scene that contradict a Tuṣita identification. If the scenes depicted are somehow related, then the event took place after the great departure, since the headdress is already in heaven.

If we exclude the identification of this event, the earliest examples of Buddhist narrative art only feature the dream of Māyā prominently. The famous depiction of the dream in a medallion of the Bhārhut railing is even identified by inscription: *bhagavato ūkraṃti* – “the descent of the *Bhagavat*”.¹⁰⁵ In this famous depiction a huge decorated elephant hovers above the sleeping queen lying on a bed.¹⁰⁶ The decoration of the elephant, a headband with tangles and bells at the side of the head, signifies that this is a royal elephant rather than a wild animal.¹⁰⁷ The queen is attended by three maids, the one in the background standing in veneration, the other two seated in front of the bed, with the back towards the viewer,

¹⁰² Contrasting to Lüders' claim this pillar alone is sufficient proof that heaven and earth can not be differentiated on the basis of the composition or the symbols the Buddha is represented by (see Lüders 1941: 171).

¹⁰³ Cunningham 1879: pl. xvii. Dehejia 1997: 13–14, fig. 8 shows both faces of the pillar.

¹⁰⁴ Also the Sāncī narratives are dominated by their spatial arrangement.

¹⁰⁵ Lüders points out that the *ū-* cannot stand for the usual *ava-* but may replace *upa-*, in this case the *bhagavat* would be approaching rather than descending (Lüders 1941: 45; Lüders 1963: 89).

¹⁰⁶ Cunningham 1879: pl. XXVIII. Harle 1994: fig.6. Sharma 1994: 23. Dehejia 1997: fig.57.

¹⁰⁷ At Bhārhut this distinction is clearly made (compare, for example, Cunningham 1879: pls.xii, xv, xix, xxv, xxvi; Dehejia 1997: figs.1, 32, 57, 62, 82).

attending with a fly whisk and possibly an offering.¹⁰⁸ Curiously, both sitting attendants have their left hand raised to the ear. A lamp placed at the feet of the queen indicates that this is a night scene, and a pitcher stands at the floor to the side of the queen's head.

Except for the fragmentary depiction of the great departure, no other scenes of the Buddha's youth can be regarded as securely identified among the Bhārhut narrative relief sculptures.¹⁰⁹

A similarly huge elephant is featured in the depiction of the dream at Sāñcī as well. There, the scene is found on the upper edge of the large central panel on the inner face of the eastern gateways north pillar. It depicts the return of the Buddha to the city of Kapilavastu with a royal procession moving towards a place where the Buddha trod (*caṅkama*)¹¹⁰ outside the city. On some reproductions, two maids can be recognised to the sides of Māyā's bed.¹¹¹ The panel immediately above shows one of

¹⁰⁸ I feel that the gesture of this attendant is too ambiguous to conclude that it is an expression of astonishment at the sight of the elephant (this has been suggested by Lüders 1941: 45–50, and is followed by Dehejia 1997: 86) and this indicates that here an actual event is depicted.

¹⁰⁹ I also do not follow Lüders' identification of the dancing *apsaras* on the south gate pillar, the so-called Prasenajit pillar (Cunningham 1879: pl.xv. Dehejia 1997: fig.34), as standing for the birth of the Buddha (Lüders 1941: 52–62). The traversing pillar shows that the three panels on the pillar have to be read together and thus refers in its totality to the Buddha Śākyamuni's enlightenment. The Buddha's enlightenment is represented by his enshrined *bodhi*-tree, underneath this, the gods of the different heavens, including an emphasised demon and a frustrated Māra, refer to the story of the enlightenment. The dancing *apsaras* below celebrate the event with dance and music. As such it represents a curious mixture of narrating an event of the past and documenting the actual place and customs of worship at a later time as it is characteristic for early Buddhist narrative art. Dehejia 1997: 44–46, reads the story in the same way, but emphasises the past event of enlightenment over the veneration of the place at later times. However, the visit of the gods, the frustration of Mara as well as the performance of the *apsaras* can also be interpreted as referring also to the veneration depicted in the uppermost panel.

¹¹⁰ See Lüders 1941: 32–40.

¹¹¹ Marshall, Foucher 1940: vol.2, pl.50a. In the text the authors state (vol.1, p. 202): “it now serves as a notice that the principal place of the scene is Kapilavastu.” Further: Fergusson 1873: pl.xxxiii; Sivaravamurti 1974: fig.413. Rao 1994: P.10.

those almost generic veneration scenes with gods assembled around a seat in front of a garlanded tree.¹¹²

No scene of Sāñcī has been identified as representing the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven, the same pillar that shows the conception also features the successive heavens, each of them with identical features. Each of the heavens is actually a palace with the gods seated between its columns. The central god sits in *lalitāsana* and holds a thunderbolt (*vajra*) and a flask.¹¹³

Although reliefs dedicated to the life of the Buddha are frequent in Gandhāran art, there is only one that presumably shows the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven, namely a unique panel of the Sikri Stūpa (Lahore Museum).¹¹⁴ In this relief, the main image wears a turban, a necklace and earrings together with monastic dress, and he is seated in meditation on a lotus with down-turned petals. Four turbaned and bejewelled figures flank the central image in the foreground, four more with hair-knot and nimbus are in the background. All of them direct the veneration gesture (*añjalimudrā*) towards the central image.¹¹⁵

There are a number of other depictions in Gandhāran art that have been identified as representing the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita. However, due to the variety of the depictions and the complexity of the questions involved they need to be studied separately and in greater detail.¹¹⁶ Here, only the main argument can be summarized.

¹¹² On the basis of the tree, a *Nyagrodha* (*ficus indica* or *ficus benghalensis* linn), the scene is identified as depicting the instigation of the gods to teach (*adhyeṣaṇa*; see Marshall, Foucher 1940: vol.1, 210 and vol.2, pl.50a).

¹¹³ Marshall, Foucher 1940: pl.49, a+b. Dehejia 1997: fig.97.

¹¹⁴ This identification has been suggested by Foucher 1903: 248–253, and no better explanation for the relief has been suggested since. On Sikri see also Alam 1994; Dar 1999 / 2000: 19–43.

¹¹⁵ Ingholt 1957: fig.8; Marshall 1960: 79–80, fig.74; Dehejia 1997: fig.161. The style of the Sikri reliefs is highly unusual. The emphasis of the central figure in size and posture prefigures the later iconic representations.

¹¹⁶ I have already dealt with the relevant Gandhāran depictions that are found within a narrative context (Luczanits 2005). The wider issue of Tuṣita heaven representations and their relationship to Bodhisattva Maitreya is the subject of a separate monograph I am currently working on.

Often depictions of a Bodhisattva holding a flask in his left hand are interpreted as Tuṣita scenes. Most frequently, the Bodhisattva is identified with Maitreya, but some authors also consider him as Śākyamuni.¹¹⁷ The relevant depictions show the central Bodhisattva seated in meditation, displaying *abhayamudrā* with the left hand and holding the flask (*kalaśa*, *kamaṇḍalu*) in the right. He has his hair bound in a knot, wears jewellery and often has a nimbus. He may be seated on a simple throne covered with a textile, a footstool in front of it, and underneath an umbrella or baldachin. Alternatively his throne is a lion-throne (*siṃhāsana*) with a baldachin carried by pillars to which cherubs with fly-whisks are clinching. Further, the Bodhisattva is surrounded by a number of personages, mostly wearing a turban, of which at least one makes a gesture of conversation or discussion.

There are two examples of such a scene within a fairly clear narrative sequence. Well known is the panel from the Musée Guimet, Paris, attributed to southern Swat.¹¹⁸ This relief features two scenes, to the right the birth of the Buddha, to the left the discussion scene in a paradisaal setting indicated by the balconies to the sides of the central pavilion. Probably less well known is the false window gable from the Cleveland Museum of Art that contains five scenes to be read from top to bottom.¹¹⁹ These are, the birth, the discussion scene, the Bodhisattva amusing himself in the harem, the Bodhisattva leaving the sleeping women and the great departure.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ In particular Lobo 1987; Lobo 1991.

¹¹⁸ MG 26360 (formerly in the Louvre), l: 58,5 cm, h: 22 cm, d: 9,1 cm. Published in Foucher 1905-51: I, fig.164; Lobo 1987: abb.8; Kurita 1990: 24, fig.45; Lobo 1991: no.2, fig.2; Giès, Cohen 1996: 233-234, no.177.

¹¹⁹ Inv. no. 58.474, gift of George P. Bickford, h: 68 cm, w: 41,3 cm. Published in Marcus 1967: 254, fig.13; Czuma 1985: 188-89, no.01.

¹²⁰ Other relevant reliefs are, for example: — Munich, Völkerkundemuseum, no. 12-57-1 (Sammlung Cassirer), "Bituminöser Tonschiefer", h: 26cm; published in Scherman 1928: abb.17; Meunié 1942: pl.XIII, 46; Lommel 1974: fig.3; Mallebrein 1984: 29-30, no.15 (identified as Maitreya); Lobo 1991: no.1, fig.1. — Taxila, Dharmarājika Stūpa, Taxila Museum, phyllit, h: 8 3/4in; published in Marshall 1916: 16, pl.IX, e; Meunié 1942: pl. XIII, 47; Ingholt 1957: fig.37; Marshall 1960: 102, Lobo 1991: no.6, fig.5.

While the succession of the depicted events can – and has been – disputed for the first example, there is no doubt from the second one that the relevant scene is chronologically to be placed between the birth and the great departure. I have discussed these and other relevant depictions at length elsewhere¹¹⁵ and came to the conclusion that the only way these scenes can be read without making Śākyamuni and Maitreya iconographically indistinguishable is to interpret them as depicting the life of Maitreya, rather than Śākyamuni. The relevant scene would then have no narrative function as such but would serve as the indicator that here the life of Maitreya is depicted. Thus, the scene refers to the paradisaical context of Ketumatī, the city in which Maitreya is to be reborn.

To come to the above conclusion I also studied how the life of the Buddha actually begins in Gandhāran art. Not unexpectedly, possible Tuṣita scenes are much more rare than depictions of Māyā's dream.¹²¹ Further, Māyā's dream is often shown in combination with the prediction of Buddha Dīpaṃkara. Of those friezes that have scene(s) between the dream and Dīpaṃkara, only one can be interpreted as Tuṣita.¹²² Thus, the life of the Buddha in Gandhāra commonly begins with the story of Dīpaṃkara, rarely another Jātaka follows,¹²³ and the last life then commences with Māyā's dream.¹²⁴ Rather than plainly focusing on the

¹²¹ In Butkara we find the dream of Māyā occurring five times, the interpretation of the dream four times, the birth ten times and only two panels with a flask-bearing Bodhisattva venerated by attendants (WS.60, WS.107, Faccenna 1964). The two latter panels are from the collection of the late Wali Saheb of Swat (information received from Maurizio Taddei).

¹²² Japanese private collection, Kurita 1990: I, no. 17. In this scene a moustachioed figure, seated on a throne with the knees wide apart and heels touching each other, holds a bunch of flowers in his right hand. Two venerating male figures sitting in the same pose flank the main image. Schlingloff (Schlingloff 1988: 304–307) suggests identifying the scene as representing the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven. Indeed, if this is a Tuṣita scene, the unusual iconography of the main figure shows that the depiction of this topic was not well established.

¹²³ Dar 1999 / 2000 notes that besides the Dīpaṃkara depictions no Jātakas are found in Sikri.

¹²⁴ Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky 1992 begins her account of the Life of the Buddha with Dīpaṃkara followed by the nativity.

story of the Buddha's last life these depictions emphasise the spiritual development of the Buddha as Taddei repeatedly pointed out.¹²⁵

Independent of the narrative of the life of the Buddha, Gandhāran art also shows the Bodhisattva Maitreya in Tuṣita heaven. These depictions may even be iconographically identical to the discussion scene but also somewhat simpler. It is not clear when the Tuṣita representations came up, but it can be considered quite certain, that by the end of the second century, Maitreya's presence there was established.

The relief sculptures of Amarāvātī and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa are considerably more elaborate than those prior to the Common Era.¹²⁶ By the time the major Andhra reliefs were carved antropomorphic Buddhas were already depicted in the Northwest.¹²⁷ Dating from the second to the fourth century, the Andhra reliefs oscillate between the symbolic representation of the Buddha, as was the rule for the earliest Buddhist art, and the depiction of his image. This alone allows to expect that the conception of the Buddha's life has considerably changed since the earliest depictions. In fact, the Āndhra reliefs do not only depict the Buddha-to-be in Tuṣita heaven, but there is also a separate scene for the descent independent of Māyā's dream.

Besides the short birth cycle beginning directly with Māyā's dream¹²⁸ or the birth¹²⁹, there are occasional depictions of an extended cycle in the later reliefs of Amarāvātī and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. I am focusing here on two exceptional renderings of the topic in the Amarāvātī and use those of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa only in comparison, the first one to introduces the extended cycle and the second one to show the innovative nature of the narrative reliefs at the site. Most of the relief sculptures from the Great Stūpa at Amarāvātī are attributed to the second and third centuries on the

¹²⁵ Taddei 1993; Taddei 1995; Taddei 1999.

¹²⁶ No scenes of relevance have been found at the smaller sites of the region.

¹²⁷ In the Northwest the transition from the symbolic representation of the Buddha to that of his image took already place in the 1 century CE.

¹²⁸ For example: Amarāvātī: Rosen Stone 1994: fig.84, fig.189 (four scenes on a square drum slab), the latter being the same as Knox 1992: no.61.; Nāgārjunakoṇḍa: Rosen Stone 1994: fig.36 (details 41 and 42, site 6), fig.65 (details 83, site 9).

¹²⁹ The *āyaka*-platform friezes Rosen Stone 1994: fig.158, 209, 28.

basis of inscriptions mentioning the Sātavāhana kings, the first of them being Śrī Vāsiṣṭhīputra Puḷumāvi (first half of the second century).¹³⁰ The Sātavāhana are followed by the Ikṣvāku dynasty based at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and ruling from c. 225 beyond 300 CE.

The first example which I will discuss is a coping stone now in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, with three scenes to be read from left to right, the narration thus being represented on the inner face of the railing.¹³¹ Line drawings of the three scenes have already been utilized by Fergusson, Burgess, Foucaux and Foucher.¹³² The first scene illustrates the Bodhisattva seated on his throne in Tuṣita heaven. His right hand is raised performing an argumentation gesture while the left rests on the thigh. He wears the same type of jewellery that is also used for the other gods. The 17 gods surrounding him mostly make gestures of veneration, just the two gods flanking the throne brandish a fly-whisk (*cāmara*). The gods in the foreground are seated, while those in the background stand. Between those kneeling in front of the throne is a bowl of flowers(?).¹³³ The succeeding scene then shows the actual descent. A host of *gaṇa* carries a palanquin with the Buddha-to-be in the form of an elephant.¹³⁴ The accompanying gods and *gaṇa* play music and dance and one of them carries an

¹³⁰ Knox 1992: 13–14.

¹³¹ Sivaravamurti 1974: fig.416; Dehejia 1997: fig.140.

¹³² In one drawing: Fergusson 1873: pl.lxxiv. In the drawings the relief is shown in three parts: Foucaux 1884–92: 42, 50, 55; Burgess 1886: figs.7, 17, 65; Foucher 1905–51: figs.146–48.

¹³³ In a Nāgārjunakoṇḍa example the Bodhisattva performs *abhayamudrā* and has a nimbus (Longhurst 1938: pl.XIX, c (“The exhortation of the gods to the Bodhisattva”) and d; Snellgrove 1978: fig.50; Klimburg-Salter 1988: fig.6; Rosen Stone 1994: fig.192 (attributes the panel to site 3)). The descent alone is depicted in Rao 1956: pl.XLIV, called “Mayas Dream”; and Parimoo 1982: fig.2A. The continuation of this relief is in the National Museum, New Delhi, and shows the interpretation of the dream, birth, visit to temple and Asita (Sivaravamurti 1974: 74). Sivaramamurti 1942: pl.XXX, 1, shows another example for the descent at Amarāvati.

¹³⁴ A miniature palanquin may also be represented in Māyā’s dream of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa site 6 (Rosen Stone 1994: detail fig.42, site 6), but it is definitely recognizable in the two *āyaka*-frieze representations of the newly excavated and unpublished site of Kaganhalli, Gulbarga (photos WHAV CL00 39,05 and CL00 42,09–11).

umbrella. The third scene then depicts the dream of Māyā, her bed guarded by four gods or the Four Great Kings.¹³⁵

The continuation of this story is preserved in the British Museum.¹³⁶ Again divided into three scenes it shows the interpretation of the dream, the birth and a scene in the palace.¹³⁷ In the birth scene the Bodhisattva is shown symbolically only, seven footprints cover the cloth and an umbrella hovers above the first of them. While the Bodhisattva is represented in his heavenly and miraculous forms, he is not shown as a human. These reliefs are attributed to the later phase of Amarāvati and thus to the third century.¹³⁸

The second, highly exceptional relief from the Great Stūpa at Amarāvati, is dedicated to the descent alone.¹³⁹ Here, the descent is spread over four separate fields on the top of a railing pillar. The main scene in the central flute underneath the top half lotus shows the elephant being carried to earth in his palanquin by a group of *gaṇa* and attended by gods. The half lotus above represents Tuṣita heaven. In the centre is the now empty throne with the footprints of the Bodhisattva on it and a tree to its back. Three gods each, mostly with gestures of veneration, sit to the side of it. Underneath them four more gods, also with *añjalimudrā*, are looking after the descended Bodhisattva or have decided to accompany him and dive towards the central scene. The fluted panels at the sides underneath the lotus contain more of the attending gods, some diving towards the

¹³⁵ Amarāvati: Burgess 1886: pl.xxviii,2; Sivaramamurti 1974: 97. Nāgārjunakoṇḍa: Longhurst 1935: 149-50, pl.XXXIX, (f) (horoscope and birth following); Fabri 1936: pl.XLV, (d), fragment, description: "Probably the mahābhiniṣkramaṇa of Prince Siddhartha".

¹³⁶ Knox 1992: 100-101, no.41, Dehejia 1997: fig.141. The way the scenes are divided and the decorative bands on the upper and lower edge prove that these two reliefs succeed each other.

¹³⁷ According to Knox 1992: 101. this scene represents prince Siddhārtha with his harem. This would mean that there are no further nativity scenes. However, this may rather be the adoration of the infant Buddha as Dehejia maintains (Dehejia 1997: 162).

¹³⁸ Knox 1992: 101.

¹³⁹ Burgess 1886: pl.xi,1, Sivaramamurti, "Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum," pl. xxx, 1; Burgess 2005: pl.13 (slab no.139).

others, some oriented towards the pavilion as adoring spectators and some moving along with the pavilion towards earth.

In Amarāvātī such an extended birth cycle is further shown in the small medallions decorating the dome of the Stūpa. For example, Stūpa relief OA 1880.7 - 9.87 shows four scenes preceding the birth, the dream of Māyā in the centre being lost.¹⁴⁰ Independent of the birth cycle depictions, Knox also identified a number of reliefs on the front face of the *āyaka*-platforms as representing the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven.¹⁴¹ If this identification is right, the scene itself is a very generic veneration scene, its emphasis on the front face of the *āyaka*-platform would be surprising. There is actually no *āyaka*-frieze yet known that shows the Tuṣita heaven.¹⁴²

Concerning the Tuṣita scene, it is unclear if the *mudrā* performed by the Bodhisattva in the Amarāvātī example is to be understood as *vitarkamudrā* in the sense of a teaching gesture. In the comparative examples the Bodhisattva performs the more usual *abhayamudrā*.¹³² The notion that a Bodhisattva has the ability to teach the *dharma* presumes rather developed forms of ideas associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism which are not yet evident in the MV. Thus, Foucher's¹⁴³ interpretation of the Amarāvātī scene as representing the teaching Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven may be far fetched. More likely it is to be understood as a general gesture of discussion, such as the Bodhisattva informing the gods about his decision to get reborn and the result of his investigations.

¹⁴⁰ Knox 1992: 149–151, no.77. This relief is unusual in that the central scene was the dream of Māyā, in other examples it is commonly the birth that is depicted in the medallion above the entrance (Knox 1992: no.68(?), 70, 71, 72, 75). Knox 1992: no.74, in contrast, may show the same events as no.77.

¹⁴¹ Of these the identification of the respective scene in Knox 1992: no.69., and 78 appear plausible. For the roundel of *stūpa* slab no.76 the identification is impossible since the Bodhisattva is shown meditating. Slab no.75 the central scenes are identical to those of 76, with the exception that the Bodhisattva shows *abhayamudrā*.

¹⁴² Knox 1992: no.37, also identified an *āyaka*-frieze scene as Tuṣita, but the continuing narrative and the occurrence of women in the scene exclude this identification.

¹⁴³ Foucher 1905-51: 288-289.

In Ajañṭā the Tuṣita episode is found in two painted cycles of the Buddha's life, those of caves 2 and 16,¹⁴⁴ both attributed to the second half of the fifth century.¹⁴⁵ The two depictions are quite similar, but only the one in cave 2 is preserved in its entirety.¹⁴⁶ Cave 2 preserves only the birth events up to the presentation of the newly born to a *yakṣa*, while cave 16 contains the story up to the events just before enlightenment.¹⁴⁷ According Schlingloff both cycles follow the description in the MSV.¹⁴⁸

In cave 2 the scene is placed in an open square pavilion that also separates it from others. The Bodhisattva sits frontally on a throne with backrest, both legs pending from the seat in European fashion (*bhadrāsana*). He occupies approximately a third of the available space. His hands are in *dharmacakramudrā*, he wears a knee-long dhotī and the jewellery of a Bodhisattva. His high crown distinguishes him from the other gods. He has a nimbus and the cushion of the throne back forms an aureole. The sides of the backrest are decorated with *makara*-heads. The Bodhisattva is flanked by four bejewelled gods sitting with their legs crossed at the ankles on cushions. The two in front perform *añjalimudrā* and the ones in the back gestures of communication. There are two more attendants with fly-whisks.

The parallel depiction in cave 16 has the same elements, but the scene is less separated from the other ones. The gods sit on flat mats or directly on the floor. In both cycles the Tuṣita depiction is directly followed by the dream of Māyā.

¹⁴⁴ I do not count the life of the Buddha in cave 10 among these. Schlingloff assumes that the life of the Buddha there started with a depiction of the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven (Schlingloff 1988: 4; Schlingloff 1999: pls.23–24; Schlingloff 2000: 39–46). However, the very few remains of that scene speak as much against a Tuṣita identification as against a dream of Māyā. Neither the woman attending with a fly-whisk nor the man with a helmet-like headdress are possible in Tuṣita heaven (Schlingloff 1988: 4, ch. 1, fig.1,1; Schlingloff 1999: pl.23).

¹⁴⁵ Cave 16 is apparently slightly earlier since it is thought that this cave stands at the beginning of the fifth century building phase (Spink 1974: 757; Schlingloff 1988: 14; Spink 1991: 71–99).

¹⁴⁶ Yazdani 1930–55: II, pl.XIX; Okada 1996: 150–151. Line drawings: Schlingloff 1988: ch.2, fig.1,1 (cave 16) and ch.2, fig.2,1 (cave 2).

¹⁴⁷ See Schlingloff 1999: pls.17, 37–38.

¹⁴⁸ Schlingloff 1988: 14.

The painted lives of Ajaṅṭā are the latest extended cycles of the Buddha's life until those preserved in the Western Himalayas. In the sculptural art preserved from the second half of the first millennium the life of the Buddha only occurs in the form of the major events.¹⁴⁹ Eventually, these are canonised as the eight great events, four life events and four great miracles, each of them associated with a pilgrimage place.¹⁵⁰ As has been already apparent from the sculptural art discussed so far, the depiction of the events becomes increasingly iconic in character. This trend continues and the narrative element becomes more and more reduced until it is barely recognizable in the art of the Pāla and Sena dynasties in north-east India.

Klimburg-Salter¹⁵¹ has tried to bridge the hiatus in Tuṣita depictions with her identification of certain icons as representing the Buddha-to-be in Tuṣita heaven. These depictions have no narrative context and their identification is regionally and temporally confined to the late Buddhist art in North-west India (present day Kashmir, Pakistan and Afghanistan).¹⁵² Also in their iconography these depictions are not directly comparably with the narrative ones.¹⁵³

Martin Lerner published a bejewelled and crowned Buddha similar to those in the Hindu Kush that actually occurs in the context of the Buddha's life.¹⁵⁴ Besides this main scene the carving also shows the birth

¹⁴⁹ This development is already visible in the art of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, when major scenes of the life of the Buddha are collected to be represented on the *āyaka*-platform frieze facing the entering visitor. The best example for this development is a panel of Site 3 attributed to the late 3rd century (Rosen Stone 1994: figs.158, 209, Dehejia 1997: fig.157).

¹⁵⁰ Early variants of canonised events in the Gupta period are discussed in Williams 1975. See also Karetzky 1992: chapter 12.

¹⁵¹ Klimburg-Salter 1988: 200–202.

¹⁵² The examples Klimburg-Salter uses are from the Hindu Kush, 7th–9th centuries, and Greater-Kashmir (the wider region around the Kashmir valley), 8th to 10th century (see Klimburg-Salter 1989: 99–104).

¹⁵³ In this context the Buddha-to-be wears monastic dress and jewellery including a crown, a bejewelled cape, have 'shoulder effulgences' in the shape of a lotus rosette on a crescent, a begging bowl (*pātra*) and perform *vitarkamudrā* (Klimburg-Salter 1988: 200–202).

¹⁵⁴ Lerner 1985: no.26.

and the Māra's temptation. On the main scene the bejewelled Buddha in monastic dress sits in meditation on a lion throne and teaches (*dharmacakramudrā*). He is flanked by two four-armed gods or Bodhisattvas, each of them with a flask as one attribute and seated with the legs crossed at the ankles on small stools. Other gesturing figures are depicted underneath them while the seven jewels (only three of them preserved) are carved on the lower edge. In the upper part of the relief are musicians. From the depiction it remains unclear if this scene has to be read narratively or iconic. Both the four-armed attendants and the seven jewels would be unusual in the context of the Buddha's life. I thus tend to read this scene as an iconic one representing the trans-temporal and trans-spatial nature of a fully matured Bodhisattva who displays the life of a Buddha for the benefit of all beings.¹⁵⁵

In Central Asia, too, there are no depictions that can contribute to the development of the Tuṣita episode in the context of the Buddha's life.¹⁵⁶ To see the final development of the story as recounted in the literature and as it may well have once been represented in India as well, one has to look beyond the Indian subcontinent.

The *stūpa* of Barabudur, on the Indonesian island of Java, was begun towards the end of the eighth century and finished in the first decades of the ninth. At the beginning of the tenth century a new base was added.¹⁵⁷ The huge *stūpa* is also exceptional with regard to the life of the Buddha. There are as many as 120 scenes arranged in chronological succession dedicated to the subject and their literary source is known, the Lalitavistara. Thus, the story ends with the first preaching at Sārnāth.¹⁵⁸ There are no depictions of the teaching events, the miracles or the *parinirvāṇa* in Barabudur.

¹⁵⁵ A similar concept is used in the Alchi Sumtsek, where the Buddha's life is shown on the dress of Bodhisattva Maitreya (see Luczanits 1999).

¹⁵⁶ The most extensive depiction of the Buddha's life in the cave with the staircase (Treppenhöhle) of Kizil / Quizil begins with Māyā's dream (Yaldiz 1987: 79–80, abb.45,1).

¹⁵⁷ Dumarçay 1978: 4–5; de Casparis 1981: 59; Williams 1981: figure 4; Nou, Frédéric 1994: 46.

¹⁵⁸ Krom 1927: 227–229.

Although the text is followed precisely, there are some peculiarities to the depictions that make the identification of the different scenes difficult and reduce their value as indicators how the events may have been depicted in contemporaneous India. The scenes are crowded with secondary figures not directly related to the event itself. The main figure can only be identified by its position and may be depicted differently in the diverse scenes although it is supposed to represent the same person. The action to be represented is often reduced so much that it cannot be recognized any more.¹⁵⁹ The peculiarities may go back to the production process, since the artists are thought to have worked on the basis of keywords engraved on the stone.¹⁶⁰

The Life of the Buddha is shown in the upper row of the first gallery wall and surrounds the monument in the direction of ritual circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇa*). The first scene shows the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven seated in a palace, bejewelled and with *vitarkamudrā* (scene 1).¹⁶¹ The gods and goddesses attending him play musical instruments or hold offerings. In the following picture (scene 2) the Bodhisattva announces his rebirth. He is shown as in scene 1, but in half profile on the right side of the panel. Scenes 3 and 4 depict the teaching of the Brahmans and the god's proclamation of the Buddhas birth to the Pratyekabuddhas. Scene 5 is dedicated to chapter 4 of the LV, where the Bodhisattva teaches the gods. The following picture shows him bestowing his crown to Maitreya (scene 6).¹⁶² The Bodhisattva sits on the central throne and is directed towards the standing Maitreya to his right. His hands are raised as if he has just given his crown to him. The crown, held by Maitreya in both hands, is only preserved in its outlines, but it is clear that it does not differ

¹⁵⁹ These peculiarities are even more evident in the depictions of Sudhāna's pilgrimage from the Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra (see Fontein 1966: 148).

¹⁶⁰ Fontein 1966: 150–151. For example, a throne is always shown as lion-throne and not only where it is mentioned in the text.

¹⁶¹ See Krom for a detailed description of the different scenes (Krom 1927: I, 101–115, III, Series 1.a, pls.I–VII). The numbers given here are taken from his description. Further depictions of all panels: Nou, Frédéric 1994: 232–234, Ia1–13.

¹⁶² Krom 1927: series 1.a, Plate III.

from those the Bodhisattva and the surrounding gods wear.¹⁶³ Again, the attending gods hold different kinds of offerings.

Following the consultation of the gods concerning the form to be taken for the descent (scene 7) two scenes are dedicated to queen Māyā with king Śuddhodana (scenes 8 and 9). Two more pictures show the discussion among the gods (scene 10) and the assembly at the time of the Bodhisattva's departure (scene 11). The Bodhisattva, depicted in meditation, then descends in a palace carried by the gods (scene 12).¹⁶⁴ Along with the scene of bestowing the crown this scene is the clearest indication that the depictions are in concordance with the description in the LV. In the following scene, the dream of Māyā, the Bodhisattva is shown as an elephant with an umbrella floating above him (scene 13).

This survey of the visual sources yielded comparatively few depictions dedicated to the scenes prior to birth with the exception of Māyā's dream. In addition, while Māyā's dream is easy to recognize even when the context is lost, the identification of other relevant events is often problematic. Indeed, such scenes can only be identified with certainty once they are part of a chronologically arranged sequence. Further, there appear to be considerable differences from site to site concerning the selection of the events and their rendering.

For an interpretation of the overall development of the topic it is crucial to determine if the Tuṣita is actually depicted in Bhārhut or not. I have chosen not to accept the customary identification since neither the inscription nor the context of the panel give a decisive clue. Nevertheless, even if this scene indeed represents the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven it is

¹⁶³ Taking the picture at face value, one tends to read the action in the opposite direction: "It seems that the text has not been followed literally, the Bodhisattva does not put the tiara straight on to the head of Maitreya, and we can not be sure which of the two is the Bodhisattva and which Maitreya. One might think that the person seated on the throne here, as elsewhere, must be the Bodhisattva, but the gesture of the hands of this figure is not that of some one who has offered something; the figure standing is thus evidently the Bodhisattva who has just removed his tiara and is on the point of giving it to Maitreya." (Krom 1927: I, 106). This reading is contradicted by the fact that the standing figure, who then would be Śākyamuni, has no *uṣṇīṣa*. However that may be, the way the scene is represented indicates that the artist did not have a clear idea of the action to be represented and the function of the respective protagonists within it.

¹⁶⁴ Krom 1927: Series I.a, pl.v.

from a tradition that has not yet come down to us in any form.¹⁶⁵ Once Tuṣita can be securely identified, as at Amarāvātī, its iconography is fairly stable with a central god surrounded by fellow gods only. While early representations emphasise the veneration later ones show also elements of communication, a development that parallels the texts.

With the exception of the extended cycle in the Andhra reliefs and Barabuḍur, the descent from heaven is not depicted as a separate scene. With the exception of the LV the texts, too, contain no details about the descent. Their focus is either the way the Bodhisattva has to appear in Māyā's dream (Nd, MV, MSV, LV), or the form in which the Bodhisattva is to descend (MV, LV). Accordingly the descent is commonly depicted as the dream of Māyā and, from the earliest depictions onwards, in fairly consistent iconography.

Interrelation and Transformation

Both, textual and visual sources on the events preceding the birth show that they are in essence peripheral to the story of the Buddha's life. Following Bareau the only reason for inventing these stories is the exaltation of the historical personage to a divine one.¹⁶⁶ Since the effect is the goal, the range of means that can be used to achieve this effect can be quite varied in the case of a less canonised minor event. Thus, both also show a continuous expansion of the topic over time and considerable variation in detail.

In the textual sources the details of the event may be less important than, for example the narrative logic of the text, its doctrinal background and the educational and/or psychological effect that is to be achieved with the story as a whole. The sources themselves make it also clear, that not everything can be changed at free will. In our case, pre- or non-Buddhist beliefs and memorized verses are the conservative force hampering the development in the case of established events.

The donor, his religious advisor and the always anonymous artist, too, may wish to achieve a certain effect based on an overall concept. For

¹⁶⁵ Neither could there be a text found that can be directly related to the inscription nor is the Tuṣita known as being inhabited by winged beings.

¹⁶⁶ Bareau 1995: 266.

us today, this desired effect of the narrative is much harder to grasp since commonly only fractions of it are preserved. In addition, from its beginnings Buddhist visual culture is amalgamated with a more mundane vocabulary of fertility, fortune and marvel. The conservative element may here be coined visual vocabulary and visual tradition.

Given how little a whole group of texts says about the events prior to birth, it is surprising that the dream of Māyā features so prominently in the earliest Buddhist art that it can even be used as a marker of Kapilavastu, as in the Sāñcī depiction. The enormous size of the elephant in both early depictions and its characterisation as royal domestic animal at Bhārhut may well indicate that these depictions precede the textual versions that have come down to us. In any case, they appear to be the result of a narrative tradition concerning great births in a royal context.

The scarce information in the earlier texts, such as the MASu, also make it unlikely that any Tuṣita depiction preceded the beginning of the Common Era. In fact, the prominence of the depiction of the seven Buddhas of the past on the gateways of Sāñcī Stūpa 1 makes them, as a group, the most important topic represented and the only one that can be considered programmatic.¹⁶⁷ At Bhārhut, too, medallions are dedicated to the seven Buddhas. However one interprets this probably undervalued fact, it is clear that these early depictions, like the MASu, are oriented solely towards the past Buddhas.¹⁶⁸ The MASu, however, only mentions the descent from Tuṣita and does not dwell on the sojourn there. These all are reasons to view the identification of the Tuṣita scene at Bhārhut with scepticism.

In fact, only in the third century can the Tuṣita heaven episode be clearly identified. There the events are shown in a form that remained peculiar to the region and time, namely third to fourth century Andhra. In Gandhāra, in contrast, the last life of the Buddha usually commenced with Māyā's dream. The Gandhāran convention may also have been instrumental for the Qizil cycle of the Buddha's life. The Tuṣita scene of

¹⁶⁷ See Dehejia 1997: 120, 29.

¹⁶⁸ Since in all cases the group hinted towards consists of seven, it can be excluded that any of the trees refers to Maitreya, as has been assumed for one separate panel on the south gateway Dehejia 1997: appendix three.

the Sikri Stūpa remains unique and is also fairly late (circa fifth century).

Nevertheless, it is likely that the expansion of the episodes in Tuṣita heaven goes back to developments in Gandhāran Buddhism, but these developments were independent of the life of the Buddha. Depictions of the Bodhisattva Maitreya are first found in art of the Kuṣāṇa realm, either made in Gandhāra itself or in Mathura. Indeed, already by the time of Kaniṣka (second quarter of the first century CE), Maitreya was deemed important enough to be shown on copper coins. It is not clear if already then Maitreya was thought to be residing in Tuṣita heaven, but this notion certainly soon gained popularity in the region, as numerous legends of visits to Maitreya testify.¹⁶⁹ Maitreya and the development of his iconography play an integrative role in the development of the life scenes prior to birth the discussion of which goes far beyond the aims of this article.¹¹⁵

With regard to the development of the Buddha's life, too, Gandhāran art is of pivotal importance. No general program for the Buddha's life events can be extracted from Bhārhut or Sāñcī¹⁷⁰ and if scenes are interlinked they are commonly so on the basis of spatial considerations. Spatially guided arrangements also rule most of the narrative paintings of Ajañtā. Gandhāran art, in contrast, not only invented the strict chronological sequence for the life of the Buddha,¹⁷¹ but also shows a changed attitude towards the Buddha's life. Rather than focusing on the previous and last lives of the past Buddhas and the veneration of the relic-traces they left, Gandhāran art emphasises the development of the past individual besides turning it's focus towards the present and the future. Beginning with the first oath in front of the remote predecessor Dīpaṅkara, the Gandhāran life of the Buddha emphasises the spiritual career of a Buddhist aspirant across many lives culminating in the final live of a Buddha.

Similar more comprehensive concepts for the Buddha's life are visible in the Nd and the MV. Both commence with the remote past and

¹⁶⁹ Most important are those concerning the Maitreya image at Darel, present-day Northern Pakistan, and the five Maitreya(nātha) texts.

¹⁷⁰ Dehejia 1997: 97–101, 22–30.

¹⁷¹ Taddei 1993; Taddei 1999.

the oath in front of Buddha Dīpaṃkara. The Nd then follows successive previous lives of Śākyamuni until, as Vessantara, he becomes reborn in Tuṣita heaven with only one life remaining. With Dīpaṃkara extending the row of Buddhas further into the past, this concept essentially is fully compatible with the older notions. The MV takes a much more innovative approach by connecting the prophesied Bodhisattva with each of the intermediate Buddhas. Each of these Buddhas re-enforces the prophecy and the Bodhisattva is thus linked directly to all his predecessors. Combining this element with the career of a Bodhisattva, the MV represents an early stage of Mahāyāna ideas. Both texts may well have incorporated the Gandhāran emphasis on the spiritual career.

Amarāvātī and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa are commonly interpreted in comparison to and in direct continuation of the earliest Buddhist art, since in the early Andhra reliefs the Buddha is not yet depicted in human form.¹⁷² However, the narrative cycles in the reliefs of the Ikṣvāku period (3rd to early fourth century)¹⁷³ clearly testify the incorporation of some of the developments summarized for Gandhāran art. For example, the relevant Andhra reliefs of the extended birth cycle are arranged in chronological sequence, although this is not the only mode scenes of the Buddha's life are depicted there.

Among the literary sources only one verse of the MV clearly indicates a descent in the form of an elephant as it is found in Amarāvātī. But the MV, or any other text, does not account for all details represented such as the descent in a palanquin carried by the gods. Thus, the extended birth cycle of Amarāvātī is more explicit than any of the preserved literary sources. As with the dream at Bhārhut, the cycle likely represents a version of the legend that has not come down to us. This version also had a restricted temporal and regional spread and one may therefore speak of a local tradition. This tradition, visually or literary, may in turn have influenced the descent in a heavenly pavilion as it entered the final version of the LV.

¹⁷² A notable exception is the detailed study of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa by Rosen Stone1994.

¹⁷³ Rosen Stone1994: 12–20.

To further assess the relationship of the Andhra depictions to the MV, one may look at the episode of the visit to the temple immediately after the birth that is characteristic to the Andhra representations. In the MV it is the temple of goddess Abhayā,¹⁷⁴ while the Andhra depictions show a god.¹⁷⁵ A similar episode is narrated in the MSV, where the deity is the Yakṣa Śākyavardhana.¹⁷⁶ Again, the MV is close in general, but not in detail.

Remarkably, the Andhra depictions also do not continue the focus on the past Buddhas that is so characteristic for Sāñcī and still omnipresent in Gandhāran art. Obviously, with a wide range of Jātakas depicted the exemplary past deeds of the Buddha remain an important matter, but his predecessors apparently were not depicted at all.

Depictions of Maitreya in Tuṣita as well as of other Buddha worlds or paradises in Gandhāran art¹⁷⁷ testify a new focus towards the present and a more or less remote future. His presence in Tuṣita heaven makes Maitreya immediately accessible and rebirth at the time of his last life becomes a remote goal. The elaboration of the Tuṣita events, especially the depiction of the sojourn there, likely have to be interpreted in the light of these decisive developments.

Later Gandhāran reliefs (fourth century and later) show the Bodhisattva Maitreya teaching in Tuṣita heaven. By that time the Bodhisattva ideal as it is expressed in Mahāyāna Buddhism was already fully developed. In Ajañṭā, by the end of the 5th century, Śākyamuni, too, is teaching in Tuṣita. The earliest account of the Buddha legend describing the Bodhisattva teaching there is the MSV. Although this links the Ajañṭā depiction and the MSV their relationship is not visible in any further detail.

Since long, the Bodhisattva has developed into an ideal to be followed and the Buddha images became the focus of cultic activity. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are considered to be present at any time and in any world

¹⁷⁴ Senart 1882: I, 223 and II, 26.

¹⁷⁵ For example Knox 1992: no.60; Dehejia 1997: fig.154.

¹⁷⁶ Gnoli 1977: I, 48. Schlingloff has identified the scene for the Ajañṭā depictions of the Life as well (Schlingloff 1999: 17,13 and 37,13).

¹⁷⁷ This is how I interpret depictions such as the Mohammad Nari stele that are often associated with the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī.

system and only display their exemplary deeds for the benefit of all beings. The artistic programs of Cave 2 and 16 at Ajañṭā demonstrate this relationship visually. Both life representations are found on the side walls of the respective caves and in their entirety once covered approximately a third of the wall.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, they are just one narrative among many other Jātakas. The main topics found on the main wall and in the Cella area are miraculous events, repeated Buddha representations, Bodhisattva icons and the cult images in the cellas themselves. Thus, rather than being a main topic, at Ajañṭā the life of the Buddha has become one among a number of edifying birth stories.

Both the Bodhisattva ideal and the deification of the Buddha opened up new ways to final release that make the exemplary life of the Buddha less and less relevant. As a result the life gets reduced to main events that become increasingly iconic in character. With the establishment of Buddhism in new areas, such as Java and later Tibet, the life of the Buddha attains new importance again. The extensive depiction at Barabaḍur, based on an extended textual source that has just reached its final stage, is evidence of this trend. Only here, the transmission of the crown to Maitreya, his successor in Tuṣita heaven, is actually depicted.

This curious and unique episode can be seen as a continuation and solidification of the interconnection of future Buddhas with those of the past, as it is already expressed in the MV. The bestowing of a crown, is a clear reference to both, the anointment of a prince as successor and the Tantric initiation rite. In both rituals, the simple diadem of earlier periods was replaced by the more complex crown. One may thus conclude, that the development of the Tuṣita episodes reflect all major steps in the development of Buddhism itself, from the oldest teachings to the emerging way of the *mantra* (Mantrayāna) or diamond vehicle (Vajrayāna).

¹⁷⁸ See Schlingloff 1999: pls.13–20, 28–38.

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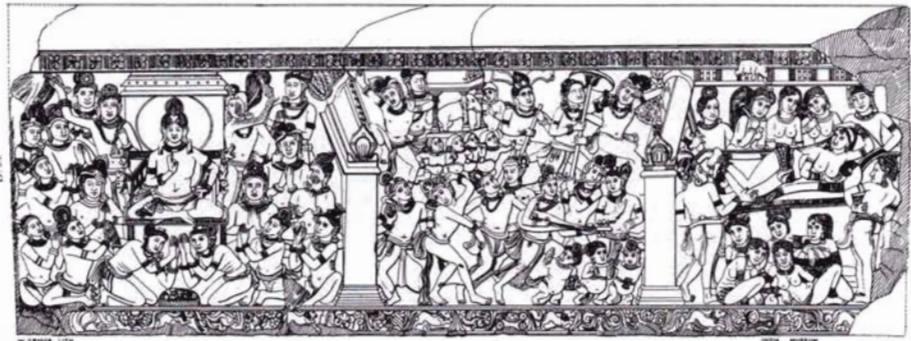
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Luczanits 1



“The descent of the Bhagavat”, Bharhut, vedika pillar; Indian Museum, Calcutta, Acc. No. 93; after Coomaraswamy 1956: fig.61.

Luczanits 2 a & b



Tuṣita, descent and dream, Amarāvati, vedika railing; Government Museum Chennai; drawing after Fergusson 1873: pl.lxxiv; image after Sivaramamurti 1974: fig.416.

Luczanits 3, 3a & 3b





Descent from Tuṣita heaven, Amarāvati, vedika pillar; Government Museum Chennai; photo C. Luczanits 2007 D5035.

Luczanits 4



The Bodhisattva in Tuṣita heaven, Ajañṭā, Cave 2; after Yazdani
1930–55: II, pl.xix.

The Birth of the Buddha

Proceedings of the Seminar
Held in Lumbini, Nepal, October 2004

Edited by

Christoph Cueppers,
Max Deeg and Hubert Durt

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Cover: Nativity of the Buddha, 9th century, stone, h: 84 cm
Courtesy of the National Museum, Kathmandu

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