

The Imprint of Ajanta in Tibetan Art

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Seminar Paper

Nepalese Section of the Buddhist Route Expedition

21-31 September, 1995

The paintings of Ajanta are a landmark of transcendental importance in Indian art. Because they represent the only well preserved example of ancient mural painting, they are now considered an essential point of reference of the study of not only subsequent Indian art, but also the Buddhist art in the rest of Asia.

The most representative part of the corpus of Ajanta paintings belongs to the V century A.D., a time at which Indian culture reached its zenith, coinciding with the rule of the Gupta dynasty in northern India which has alliances with and was related by marriage to the Vakataka dynasty of the Deccan¹.

The imprint of Ajanta is quite obvious in the rest of the paintings that were painted in India and Sri Lanka; however, it can also be observed, though somewhat diluted by time and distance, in the style of painting that spread from Central Asia, through China, up to Japan and Southern Asia. This paper attempts to show to what extent Ajanta art also had an influence on Himalayan art.

At the same time the Ajanta paintings were being painted, or in the years immediately following this period, a number of caves were painted in the proximities of Ajanta and, in some of these, it is till today possible to see some surviving examples of polychromy. Not far from Ajanta we have the outstanding cave complexes of Aurangabad and Pittalkhora² and, in the state of Madhya Pradesh, the large group of caves of Bagh³.

From these primary locations, the pictorial tradition born in India spread in three directions: towards the northeast, through the international trade routes links to the Silk Route; southward of India and, from there, towards Southeast Asia; and, finally, crossing the Himalayas till Tibet.

¹ The debate on the chronology of the painting is still an ongoing one, although Professor Walter Spink's articles that appeared on the subject in the *Ars Orientalis* journal between 1966 and 1955 prove that, as a matter of fact, the paintings were done in a relatively short period of time in the V century ; to be precise, between the years 462 and 480, according to the latest publication of Spink, W : *Ajanta : A Brief History and Guide*, Bombay, 1995; Asian Art Archives of the University of Michigan.

² The study of Pittalkhora was carried out by M.N. Deshpande: "The Rock-cut Temples of Pitalkhora in the Deccan", in *Ancient India*, 15. 1959, pp. 66 to 92.

³ Dangerfield

The first line of expansion goes from India to Japan passing through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and China.

Few remnants are to be found presently in Pakistan, although the discoveries of D. Facena in Butkara I⁴ prove the existence of a style of mural painting, practically non-existent today in which the Indian tradition merged with the Greco-Buddhist tradition. In Afghanistan there are numerous examples of this type of painting, the most outstanding being Bamiyan, Kakrak and Foladi. Crossing the Pamir Mountains along with trade caravans and Buddhist pilgrims, the pictorial tradition that had taken birth in India reached Central Asia and China where there are complexes having mural paintings such as Qizil, Dandan Oilit, Khotan⁵ and the very large Dun Huang complex, from where the Buddhist painting tradition reached the murals of Horyuji in Japan.

The second line of the expansion of the Ajanta influence started with the conquests of the Chalukyas in the Deccan in the VI century and the construction of their cities: Ahiole, Badami and Pattadakal, partly inspired by the paintings that they saw there, among which Ajanta must have left a deep imprint, as can clearly be seen in the paintings of cave number 4 in Badami. From Badami the stamp of Ajanta spread towards the south in the same way that it reached Badami, namely, through military conquests⁶. The campaigns of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I on Chalukyan territory gave rise to, from the artistic point of view, significant cultural migration. The Pallava king must have seen the magnificent Chalukyan paintings which inspired him to construct his own temples in Mahaballipuram and Kanchipuram. According to texts written in those times, many temples and palaces were decorated with paintings but, unfortunately, only a few of them have survived till today and these are to be found in the temples of Kailasanatha and Vaikunta Perumal in Kanchipuram, and the Telegirisvara temple in Panamalai⁷. In these paintings, although the separation in terms of time and geographical distance is considerable, the imprint of Ajanta is still perceptible, and from there it must have travelled to the countries of Southeast Asia. Pallava art that was in turn inherited from Andhra was the origin and inspiration of all the rest of

⁴ Facena, D. Butkara Rome. 1980.

⁵ Chakrabarti, J. "Impact of Ajanta Mural Technique on the Paintings of Kushana Central Asia", in Parimoo, R. *The Art of Ajanta New Perspectives* New Delhi. 1991. Books and Books. Pp. 537.

⁶ Sivarama murthi, C. *Royal Conquests and Cultural Migrations in South India and the Deccan*. Calcutta. 1964. The Trustees of the Indian Museum. Pp. 7.

⁷ To give a concrete example, the Kailasanatha temple in Kanchipuram has a figure of Parvati leaning with her left leg bent and her foot propped against the wall that bears a striking resemblance to the figure of Queen Maya that appears in Vihara number II of Ajanta, in the scene on the life of Buddha where the queen has just finished narrating the dream of the white elephant to the Brahmins.

Dravidian art, while in the Pandya period paintings were still to be found that bore an astonishing similarity to Ajanta. The technique employed in painting them were also the same.

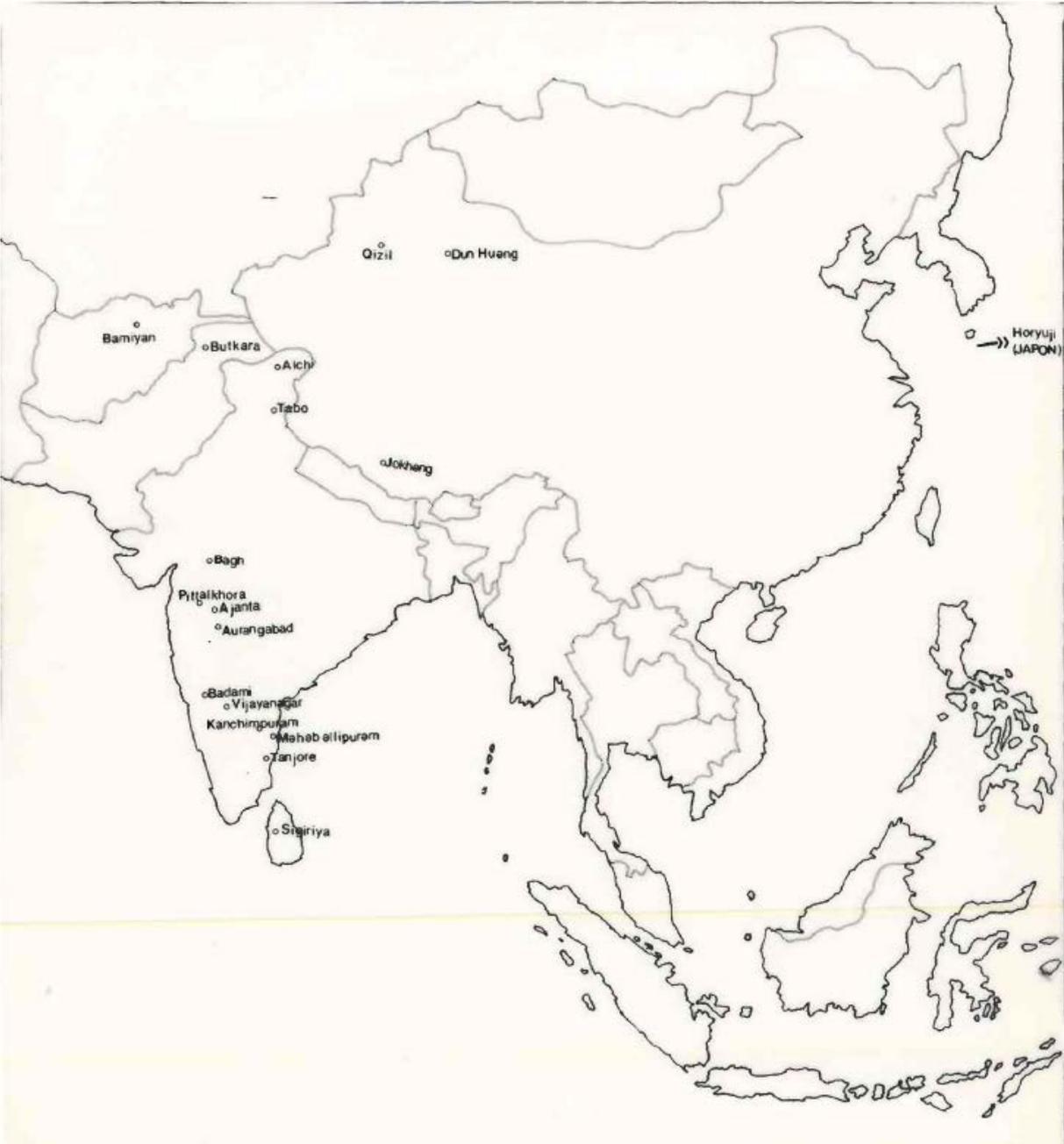


Fig. 1. Map of the spread of the influence of Ajanta in Asian mural painting.

The third route of the spread of the mural painting tradition from India is the one that interests us, namely, the route affecting the Himalayan areas.

The Buddhist artistic tradition prevailed in India in isolated locations even after the revival of Hinduism in the V century and even after the Buddhist centers had disappeared from the south. These places, centered in northern India, were extremely important in the configuration of Tibetan art or lamaistic art. The most important among them were Bihar, Bengal and Kashmir, from where this art spread much later, and where a technique of portable paintings was evolved that were used as covers for holy books. These books were exported all over Asia, and their paintings were highly significant in the propagation of Indian iconography perpetrating tradition the classical Gupta-Vakataka

However, as far as mural painting is concerned, some samples have been preserved only in the trans-Himalayan valleys of the present-day Kashmir that geographically belong to Tibet. Yet it would seem natural that both Kashmir as well as Bihar also inherited the pictorial tradition of Ajanta and that this tradition travelled from there to Nepal and Tibet.

By the XII century the waves of Muslim invaders must have demolished practically all the existing Buddhist monuments in this area making it very difficult to reconstruct the past of this region and determine exactly how long the Indian pictorial tradition survived there after the fall of the Gupta and Vakataka dynasties. But the existence of monasteries clearly linked to the Ajanta style in the trans-Himalayan valleys of Ladakh and Spiti, has led a lot of scholars to believe that this tradition survived in Kashmir from where the same artists must have spread it to Tibet. It would be logical to think that, from the X century onwards, many Buddhists were forced to retract further north and cross over to the other side of the Himalayas where the Islamic invaders had not reach.

In the Spiti and Ladakh valleys, situated on the Tibetan side of the Himalayas, but which today form part of the territories of the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir, we find the monastic complexes of Tabo and Alchi. The walls of both monasteries are covered with extremely well-preserved paintings. These paintings are so closely related to the Indian paintings of Maharashtra that the Indian scholar M.N. Deshpande has even called them "the Ajanta of the Himalayas"⁸. The similarity between both manifestations of mural painting can be seen, first of all, in the technique, that is practically identical: a base made of

⁸ Deshpande, M. N. "Buddhist Art of Ajanta and Tabo", in Bulletin of Tibetology. Vol. X. No.3. 1973. Pp. 1-44.

clay and organic materials covered with a layer of plaster and tempera painting; but, further, from the stylistic point of view, the similarities are also apparent.

Traditionally, it is believed that mural painting spread both from the valleys of Kashmir, Spiti and Ladakh, as well as from Bihar, to the rest of the Himalayan regions where it met with the Chinese tradition in order to give rise to the painting of the great lamaistic monasteries. From this point of view, the role of Ajanta is important insomuch as it marks the beginning of the entire mural tradition, but here we shall try to show that Ajanta played a much more definitive role in Himalayan painting that is normally attributed to it. This affirmation is based on three ideas:

- i) The technical and stylistic similarities that exist between the Ajanta paintings and many of the lamaistic murals, as well as the evident iconographic coincidences.
- ii) The fact that in Ajanta some elements that are also characteristic in Tibetan art have been depicted for the first time.
- iii) The very clear link that exists between the Jokhang (the oldest monastery in Tibet) and the stone complexes of Maharashtra.

There are many iconographic similarities that exist between Ajanta painting and Tibetan painting which are perfectly logical if one bears in mind that India is the birthplace both of Buddhism as well as its first artistic manifestations that, from very early times, spread to the rest of Asia thanks to the great international trade routes. Therefore, many of the Tibetan decorative elements, such as mandalas, imaginary and monstrous creatures and, of course, iconographies of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas along with their attributes, are actually inspired in Indian elements. In the very beginning -and this can be observed in the sculptures on the first storey of the Jokhang in Lhasa- the images also have a strong Gupta flavor in them, as can be observed in the elegance of their forms, in the restraint and conceptual idealism that they portray, that clearly evokes Indian images of the IV and V centuries A.D. This imprint of the Gupta dynasty is still evident in the Tibetan monasteries of the XI century, as in the case of Dratang where the figures, belonging to different ethnic groups (as in Ajanta) are arranged in a rather unconventional manner around the Buddha. This style, prevailing in the language of the Ajanta murals, is reminiscent of the cosmopolitan life of the palaces and also of the worldly and uninhibited private life of their inhabitants.

Likewise, it is very difficult to look at the Tibetan Bodhisattvas without remembering the images of the two Bodhisattvas on either side of the sanctuary of Vihara number 1 in Ajanta: Vajrapani and the famous Padmapani whose extraordinary strength and artistic

qualities must have led to a definite impact on the entire art of expansion. Similarly, the naturalism of some scenes and the way plant motifs are dealt with cannot but – in some cases – remind us of how these same motifs were dealt with in Ajanta.

The technique used in painting these murals is also very similar in both cases: tempera applied on a layer of plaster spread, in turn, over a base of organic materials. In both cases, color is applied in a large variety of tones, thus giving volume to the figure and modeling it after the red or black outlines have been drawn with freehand calligraphic brush strokes. Both in Ajanta as well as in the Tibetan paintings of the early temples it is possible to make out the drawing of the painting's guide lines under the coat of color on the layer of plaster so much so that in many places a double line can be seen outlining the figures. This type of mural painting, although very widespread later on in Asia, actually originated in Ajanta.

But, over and above all the influences of a general nature of Ajanta paintings on Tibetan art, it is essential to point out two definite elements in order to establish the connection between them: firstly, the scene in cave number 17 of the Ajanta complex known as "the Zodiac" and, secondly, the type of scenographic composition used in the murals .

On the veranda of Vihara number 17 in Ajanta, on the left hand side (occupying exactly the same position as the Wheel of Life in the lamaistic monasteries) there is a highly deteriorated painting in which there is a circle divided into several sections and each section depicts different scenes. Ever since the first visit of Hr. Ralph to Ajanta in 1828, this painting has been known as "the Zodiac"⁹, and Foucher compared it to the Tibetan wheel of transmigration, as has also been stated later by Waddell¹⁰.

The Wheel of Life, or the Wheel of Transmigrations, depicts all those living beings that have not yet reached a state of spiritual liberation and describes the twelve causes of evil that obstruct the way to Nirvana. According to Waddell, the outer circle of the painting in Ajanta depicts these twelve *nidanas*, or causes of existence.

⁹ In Schlingloff, D. Studies in the Ajanta Paintings. Identifications and Interpretations. New Delhi. 1988. Ajanta Publications. Pp. 172 (Note 2).

¹⁰ Waddell "Notes on Some Ajanta Paintings", in Indian Antiquary Vol. XXII. January 1893. Pp. 8-11. Waddell's interpretation of this painting was first given in a paper in the Bengala Asiatic Society, in February 1892.

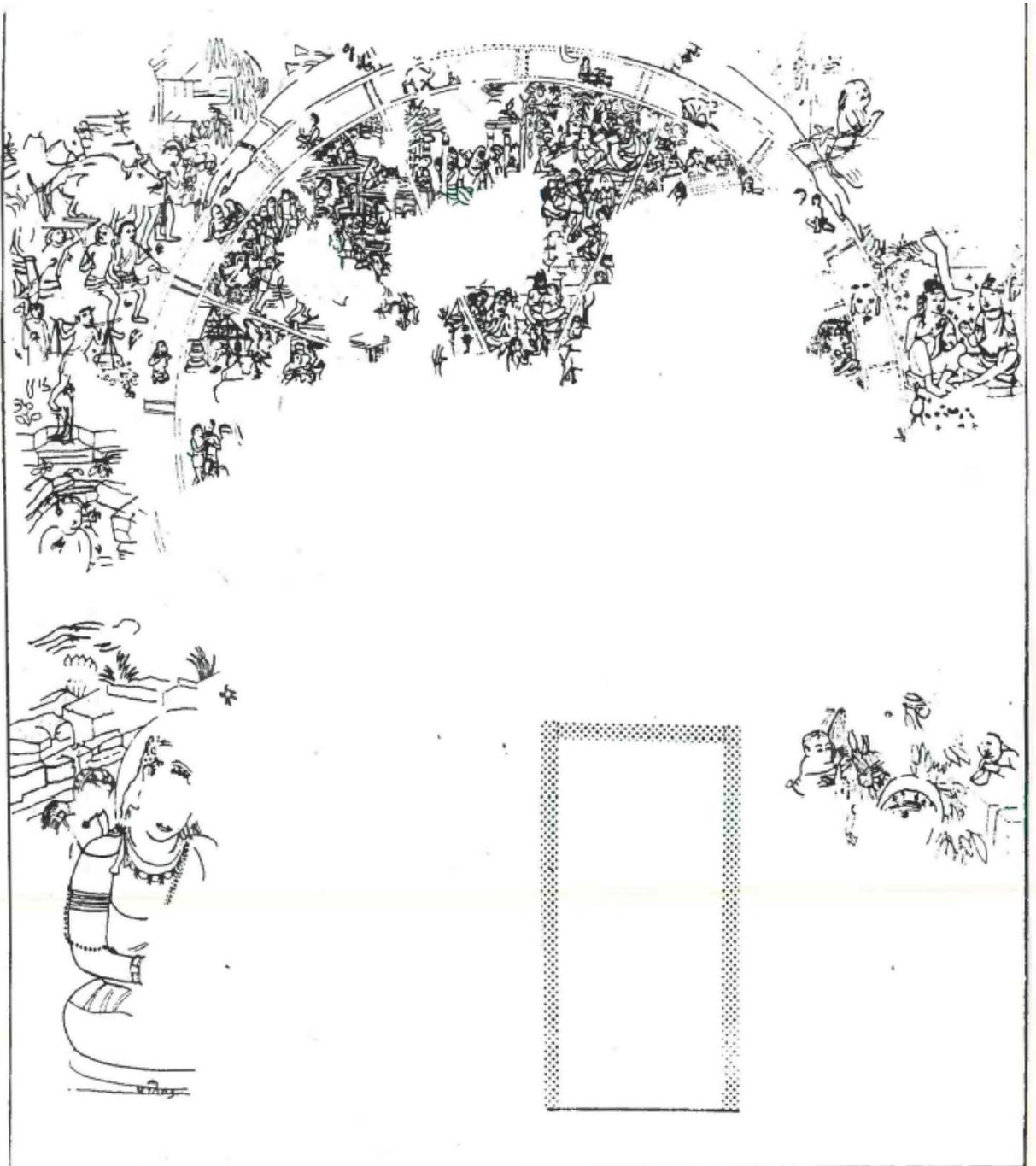


Fig. 2. "The Zodiac". Mural Painting in Ajanta. Vihara XVII. Drawing by Schlingloff.

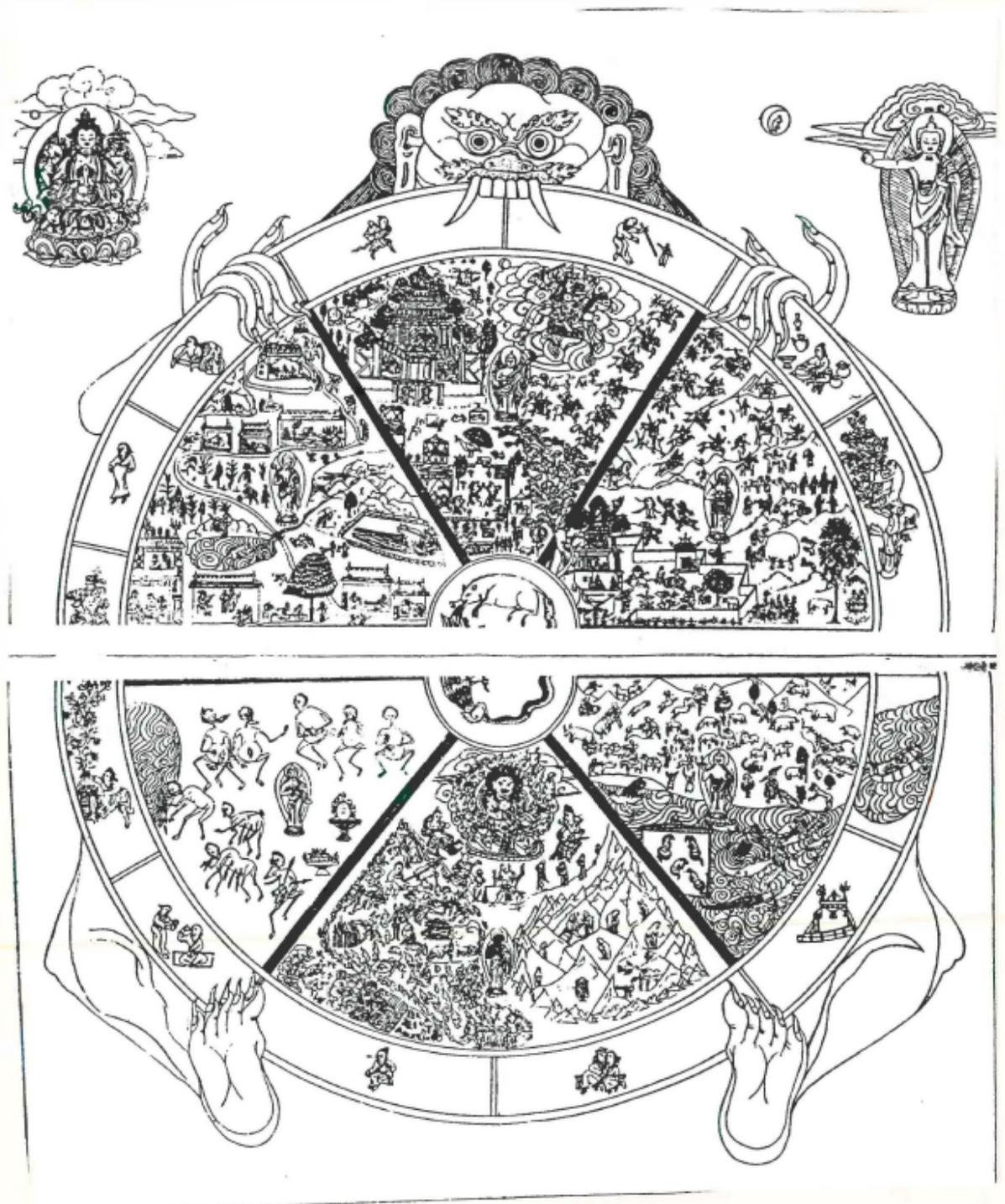


Fig. 3. Tibetan Wheel of Life.

According to Waddwell.

In the diagrams corresponding to the drawings published by Schlingloff, D. and Waddell, L.A.¹¹ some of the existing concomitance and differences between the veranda painting of Vihara 17 of Ajanta and the Tibetan Wheels of Life can be perceived. The connection between the two seems evident, both depict a figure holding a great radially divided wheel; in the case of Ajanta the arms and hands of the figure holding the wheel can still be distinguished, though the face and the lower portion have disappeared. Regarding the divisions on the wheel, while the Tibetan wheels have six, the Indian one has ten and, therefore, instead of showing the twelve *nidanas* in the outer circle, it should be showing twenty. Nevertheless, the motifs on the outer circle that can be made out can certainly be identified as the same as those of the Tibetan wheels: the monkey, symbol of the conscience that "in ignorant people springs uncontrolled from object to object"¹²; the embraced lovers, that refers to sensual perceptions; the woman offering a glass of wine to the man, the symbol of desire, and the blind camel being led through the desert, as an allegory of unconscious desire¹³. The preserved portion of the Ajanta painting would correspond to what in the Tibetan wheels is the paradise of the gods, something that could also coincide perfectly with the scene depicted in the Indian art, though it must be born in mind that Indian art is much more naturalistic than Tibetan art and that the scene, while adhering the style of Ajanta itself, is much closer to the cosmopolitan and mundane day-to-day life in the Vakataka palaces.

The second aspect that is considered definitive for purposes of highlighting the influence of Ajanta on Tibetan art is the type of compositions used in the paintings. The Ajanta murals are characterized by scenographic type compositions having no formal limits. The scenes are threaded together, one merging with the other, in such a way that there is narrative continuum in which the most important moments are framed either in architectural pavilions, or else in circular compositions that attribute additional emphasis to them and make the spectator focus his attention on them. This type of composition avoids both the linear sequence of the scenes and the classical western perspective of the inverted pyramid producing an effect that is more akin to cinema or Japanese makimono.

If we take the example of the scene of Hahajanaka Jataka's dancing girl, in Vihara number 1 in Ajanta, an unmistakable similarity would be noted with the scene pertaining to Shalu (XI century to XIII century) which depicts a spinning dancer whose rotated movement looks similar to that of the Ajanta dancer. She is also surrounded by musicians that follow her with

¹¹ Schlingloff, D. Op cit. and Waddell, L.A. Tibetan Buddhism. New York. 1972. Dover.

¹² Blanche, C.O. and Geshé, T.W. Mystic Art of Tibet. Boston. 1987. Shambala.

¹³ Waddell, L.A. Tibetan Buddhism New York. 1972. Dover. Pp. 113.

their eyes and gestures, though in a less subtle and more expressive manner than in Ajanta. Surprisingly, the scene is being watched from the left hand side by an unabashed pair of lovers sitting in an architectural pavillion, very similar to those of Ajanta. Although both the clothing as well as the expressions of the figures originates from Pala art, the composition and the way the background is treated as if it were a stage backdrop decorated with little flowers can be clearly linked to Ajanta.

The type of composition used in Ajanta is absolutely original and easy to distinguish, and it is very probable that it shaped not only Tibetan mural painting but also the compositions used in Chinese and Japanese painting.

Finally, we must highlight the very strong link that exists between Ajanta and the Jokhang, the oldest temple in Tibet, situated in Lhasa.

The construction of the Jokhang dates back to the first half of the VII century A.D. and is attributed to King Songtsen Gampo. Not only is it the oldest temple in Tibet but, also, it is the most sacred and venerated. Therefore, its influence on the construction of the rest of the Tibetan buildings is indisputable.

The similarities existing between the first storey of Jakhang and the Ajanta caves are so many and so pronounced that it would seem appropriate to think that either the person who made the Tibetan complex personally saw the Indian complex, or else Nepal had similar structures made of wood that were inspired by the Indian ones and these served as a bridge to Tibet.

The first similarity that is most striking is the organization of space. The Jokhang temple has a quadrangular foundation, with a square space in the center surrounded by chapels among which the central and leading chapel is the sanctum sanctorum, the place that houses the most venerated image of Tibet: the Jowo Sakyamuni. This structure is exactly the same as the structure of the Viharas of Ajanta except for the fact that the side chapels in the Jokhang are not used as cells for the monks, as is the case in Ajanta, but are used as sanctuaries. The reason behind this difference is possibly that, while the building was originally designed as an authentic Vihara, that is to say, as a monastery, with the passing of time the cells could no longer serve their intended purpose of housing the monks in the light of the pressing need to add new images of worship: Lamas and deities that gradually enriched the Buddhist pantheon¹⁴.

¹⁴ Vitali, R. Early Temples of Central Tibet London. 1990. Serindia. Pp. 74.

Although it has been repainted and touched up on a number of occasions, the Jokhang offers some proof of what it must have been like in the early times that is extremely interesting for the topic under consideration. It is very significant to see how the oldest portions of the complex present overwhelming similarities with the Indian complex of Ajanta; among them we could mention the rows of lions carved in wood that go round the courtyard and, at times, are considered to be of Gupta origin. These lions have an unquestionable equivalent in the rows of lions carved in stone that appear on the door frame of cave number 1 in Ajanta, around the stupa of Chaitya number 26 and decorating like atlantes, the jambs of the doorway of Vihara, number 1.

The door frames that decorate this first storey of the Jokhang should also be compared to those of the main doors of the Ajanta caves, more particularly so the door frames of Vihara 1, that undoubtedly, at that time must have been the most attractive and lavish of them all.

Another element that definitely connects the two monuments being talked about here, are the pillars. On the first storey of the Jokhang some pillars are still remaining that date back to the times of the temple's foundation; these pillars, having a square base and consisting of several geometrical structures placed one on top of the other and ending with a crown of an inverted lotus flower and a wide decorated abacus, are practically identical to those in Vihara number 1, especially as far as their decorative motifs are concerned: zebus, apsaras, kinnaras, yakshas and griffins.

As regards painting, it is very difficult to precisely gauge the influence of Ajanta on the Jokhang due to the massive destruction it suffered during the Cultural Revolution. But, if we were to assume that some of the paintings could have been redone in keeping with the original designs, then one can also find similarities with Ajanta. Among the similarities we could underline the perspective of a moving focus, to which we have already referred when talking about compositions; this way of conceiving space gives rise to sceneries with small stages or pavilions, almost like theatrical platforms on which the moments of maximum tension in the story are painted. But besides the organization of the narrative highlights, there are some specific coincidences between the two Buddhist complexes. Among these coincidences we can draw attention to the depiction, on the right hand side of the wall of feet, of some demoniacal characters that appear in the mural narrating the story of the construction of the Jokhang. These figures are literally copied from various characters appearing in Viharas number 17 and 16 in Ajanta: the former belong to Simhala Avadana, and the latter to a painting that has not been totally interpreted traditionally called "Devils in front of the

Monastery", which could have some connection with the theme depicted in the Lhasa monastery.

To conclude, it must be said that there is a strong link between the Ajanta caves and Tibetan art. This influence could have been the outcome of a logical transmission through other artistic depictions that were closer to Tibet: Pala and Kashmiri art, Nepalese art and even the art of Central Asia, on which the imprint of Ajanta was firmly marked through the great transcontinental trade routes. Nevertheless, the strong resemblances that exist between Ajanta and the Jokhang, as well as the absence of similar buildings in the above mentioned regions, make us think that there was really a direct influence from Ajanta on the Tibetan temple and that, from there, it spread to the rest of the lamaistic art in the region. It is extremely difficult to venture a hypothesis on how this contact came about, although everything seems to indicate that the artists who started the construction work in Jokhang had personally seen the Ajanta caves.