

The Visit of the Sixteen Brahmin Ascetics in the Buddhist Art of Kucha: Visual Representations and Literary Sources

Ines KONCZAK-NAGEL

Abstract: This study analyses the iconographic motif of the “Visit of the Sixteen Brahmin Ascetics” in Kuchean cave paintings, depicting the Buddha surrounded by Brahmin ascetics. While Alfred Foucher identified analogous representations from the Gandhāra region as visual translations of the *Pārāyaṇavagga*, the Kuchean murals reflect distinctive Central Asian narrative traditions preserved in the *Xianyu jing*, *Maitreyasamitināṭaka* and *Maitrisimit*. Characteristic iconographic elements include a pairing of elderly and youthful Brahmins (possibly Bāvāri and Maitreya) alongside prostrating ascetics. Examining seven examples, the study demonstrates how the narrative was adapted to emphasise Maitreya’s significance within local Buddhist traditions, particularly in the decorative programme of Kizil Cave 114, which reconfigures conventional iconographic hierarchies.

Keywords: Kuchean Buddhist paintings, Brahmin Ascetics, Sixteen Pārāyaṇas, Bāvāri, Maitreya

Ines KONCZAK-NAGEL, Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig / Leipzig
University, Germany; konczaknagel@saw-leipzig.de;  0009-0002-2526-4179



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In the main chamber of Kizil Cave 114, positioned directly above the entrance within the lunette on the front wall, is a narrative painting depicting the seated Buddha surrounded by Brahmin ascetics (**Drawing 1**).¹ The Brahmins are distinguished by their characteristic topknots, with several bearing flasks in their left hands. They are rendered as figures of varying ages, shown in attitudes of attentive listening, paying homage and prostration before the Buddha. Monika Zin has identified this composition as representing an iconographic motif occasionally encountered in Gandhāran art, where it is conventionally termed the “Sixteen Pārāyaṇas” (ZIN 2023: 499).



Drawing 1. Kizil Cave 114 (Gebetmühlenhöhle), main chamber, front wall lunette, *in situ*. Drawing by Monika Zin.

Researchers participating in the currently active project “Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road”, directed by Zin at the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig, have identified this iconographic motif in further examples of Buddhist cave paintings in Kucha. The present study aims to examine both the textual sources that may elucidate these visual representations and other documented examples of this iconographic theme.

The motif of the Buddha attended by Brahmin ascetics was first identified by Alfred Foucher over a century ago in a Gandhāran relief from Takht-i-bahi depicting the Buddha seated in the centre of a rocky landscape.² In the lower register, positioned before the Buddha’s seat, seven ascetics are represented. Although some figures have suffered damage, their physiques indicate figures

¹ Drawing reproduced in ZIN (2023: drawing 16). Painting reproduced in *Kizil Grottoes* (1983–1985/1989–1997: II, pl. 121).

² FOUCHER (1918: 256, fig. 432). The relief is housed in the Peshawar Museum (no. 1151a–c). See also QUAGLIOTTI (2005: 273, no. II.1).

of varying ages – both elderly and younger individuals – with some bearing walking sticks. All appear distinguished by the characteristic topknots and direct their gazes up towards the Buddha. Foucher designated this representation “La réunion des seize Pārāyaṇas”, implying an assembly of Brahmin ascetics belonging to the *pārāyaṇa* tribe. Foucher further identified the *Pārāyaṇavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* as the textual source for this representation.³

While scholarly consensus maintains that the term *pārāyaṇa* in the *Pārāyaṇavagga* denotes the soteriological path of the Brahmin ascetics rather than their belonging to a certain group,⁴ it appears that in other works referencing the *Pārāyaṇavagga*, or a version thereof, the term was indeed interpreted as designating a group identity. The Sri Lankan *Mahāvamsa* thus includes *pārāyanakasamiti* (meeting with the *pārāyanakas*) within a sequence of pivotal events immediately preceding the Buddha’s decision to enter *nirvāṇa* following a three-month period.⁵ In Kumārajīva’s translation of Kumāralāta’s *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* (T 201), the Buddha declares that he expounded the *dharma* to various audiences, including the sixteen *pārāyaṇas* (*shiliu boluoyan* 十六波羅延).⁶ Both textual sources appear to have informed Foucher’s designation of the depicted subject as “La réunion des seize Pārāyaṇas”. Following Foucher, this designation became accepted for these scenes.⁷

The most widely recognised version of the underlying story informing these representations derives from the *Pārāyaṇavagga*, a collection of verses constituting the fifth section of the *Suttanipāta* (see fn. 3). This text recounts how the Brahmin ascetic Bāvāri, who dwelt in the southern territories (*dakkhiṇāpatha*,

³ *Suttanipāta*, ed. pp. 190–223, vv. 976–1149; English trans.: NORMAN (2001: 127–145). For a summary of this story, see LAMOTTE (1958: 380–381, 776; 1988: 346–347, 699–700).

⁴ The term *pārāyaṇa*, translated as “going to the far shore” (NORMAN 2001) or “the way to the beyond” (BODHI 2017), carries dual significance. It may refer to the physical journey undertaken by the sixteen ascetics to meet the Buddha, but, more importantly, denotes the soteriological goal they achieved through his teachings: *apārā pārāṇaṃ gaccheyya bhāvento maggam uttamaṃ, maggo so pārāṇamanāya, tasmā Pārāyaṇaṃ iti* (*Suttanipāta*, ed. p. 219, verse 1130; English trans.: BODHI 2017: 345; NORMAN 2001: 143). Alternative interpretations of the term *pārāyaṇa* are “the highest (farthest) point, final aim, chief object, ideal” (RHYS DAVIDS and STEDE 1921–1925: 505).

⁵ *Ālavakaṅgulimāla-apalāladamaṇaṃ pi ca, Pārāyanakasamitiṃ, āyuvossajjanaṃ tathā* (*Mahāvamsa*, ed. p. 242, verse 30,84; English trans.: GEIGER 1912: 205–206). Turnour, in his 1889 translation of the text, interpreted *pārāyanaka* as “the Pārāyaṇa brahman tribe (at Rājagaha)”, see GEIGER (1912: 206, note 2).

⁶ T 201, ed. vol. 4, p. 296a22–23; French trans.: HUBER (1908: 205).

⁷ Although Zwalf usually designates this iconographic motif as the “Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics”, he also provides the alternative label “Pārāyaṇika [*sic*] brāhmaṇas” (ZWALF 1996: cat. nos. 222, 245). For a catalogue of Gandhāran reliefs depicting “The Sixteen Pārāyaṇas”, see QUAGLIOTTI (2005: 273–275). For discussion of another possible depiction of this subject, with additional bibliography on Gandhāran representations of this theme, see Jessie Pons’s contribution to this volume (PONS 2025).

Deccan), dispatched sixteen disciples to the Buddha with questions he himself was unable to resolve. Prior to their departure, Bāvāri instructed his disciples that the Buddha could be recognised by his thirty-two *lakṣaṇas* and his capacity to respond to unspoken questions concerning their master. The sixteen disciples subsequently journeyed to Magadha, where the Buddha was then residing. Upon their encounter with the Buddha, he immediately addressed their unspoken questions regarding Bāvāri, confirming, amongst other particulars, that their master possessed three specific *lakṣaṇas*: the long tongue, the *ūrṇā* and concealed genitalia.

The text thereafter presents sixteen sections, each containing one disciple's questions to the Buddha regarding the objective of his teaching and the means of attaining it. These begin with the questions of Ajita (*Ajitamāṇavapucchā*), followed by the questions of Tissa Metteyya (*Tissametteyyamāṇavapucchā*),⁸ and proceed systematically through all the named disciples. Piṅgiya, the most elderly and infirm member of the group, posed the final questions concerning the transcendence of birth and decay. All disciples with the exception of Piṅgiya attained arhatship following receipt of the Buddha's responses. Piṅgiya, however, returned to express his newfound devotion to the Buddha, though the text does not explicitly specify the recipient of this declaration – most probably his master Bāvāri. The Pāli commentarial tradition records that the Buddha manifested before Piṅgiya and Bāvāri upon perceiving that their faculties had achieved maturity, appearing in the form of a golden radiance. According to this tradition, Piṅgala subsequently achieved arhatship, while Bāvāri attained the status of non-returner (*anāgāmin*).⁹

The *Pārāyaṇa* appears to be of considerable antiquity and may have existed as an independent text before its incorporation into the *Suttanīpāta*.¹⁰ Parallel versions are preserved within the *Kṣudraka* divisions across the canons of various Buddhist schools (LAMOTTE 1957), while numerous canonical and non-canonical sources use explicit references to the *Pārāyaṇa* (*Boluoyan* 波羅延) or preserve quotations drawn from its verses (JAYAWICKRAMA 1976: 148–150).

The existence of a commentary in the Gāndhārī language explaining specific verses of the *Pārāyaṇa* points to the text's familiarity within Gandhāran

⁸ Ajita and Maitreya (Pāli: Metteya/Metteyya) are variously attested across several Buddhist traditions. While certain texts – primarily early Mahāyāna sources – treat these as alternative appellations of the future Buddha, both the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda schools maintain their distinction as separate figures, the latter designating Ajita as future King Śāṅkha and Maitreya as the coming Buddha. For a comprehensive treatment of this question, see KARASHIMA (2018).

⁹ See the commentaries on vv. 1032–1149 in the *Paramatthajotikā* II (ed. pp. 586–608) and *Cullaniddesa* (ed. pp. 6–56); English trans.: BODHI (2017: 1233–1327).

¹⁰ JAYAWICKRAMA (1976: 148–150); von HINÜBER (1996: 49).

Buddhist circles,¹¹ though whether this necessarily implies transmission of the entire work itself in Gāndhārī remains uncertain. Indeed, it would scarcely be remarkable if only selected portions of the text were transmitted, particularly given that certain verses – most notably the questions of Ajita – constitute frequently cited textual units appearing across several non-Mahāyāna works in diverse languages, as well as within certain Mahāyāna compositions, such as the *Yogācārabhūmi* (ENOMOTO 1989: 34).

A comparable situation pertains to the fragmentary *Pārāyaṇa* remains in Sanskrit recovered at Kizil.¹² The severely fragmentary nature of these texts precludes any definite determination of whether this text was transmitted in Sanskrit in its entirety or merely in selected portions.

Nevertheless, that a story related to the *Pārāyaṇa* circulated in the Xinjiang region is attested by its incorporation into the *Xianyu jing* (*The Wise and the Foolish*),¹³ a collection of tales reportedly compiled by Chinese monks who encountered these stories during a quinquennial assembly (*pañcavārsika*) in Khotan.¹⁴ This Central Asian story diverges from the Pāli *Pārāyaṇa* in several noteworthy respects – while it employs the latter’s narrative framework, it can hardly be considered a direct transmission of the Pāli text itself. Rather, it should be understood as a discrete composition that draws upon familiar structural elements and is variously termed the “Bāvāri Story” or the “Story of the Visit of the Sixteen Ascetics”. A relatively minor variation in this Central Asian story is the characterisation of Bāvāri (Bopoli 波婆梨) as possessing merely two *lakṣaṇas*: blue hair and a long tongue. Of considerably greater significance, however, is the conspicuous omission of the doctrinal questions posed by Bāvāri’s disciples to the Buddha – interrogations which constitute the most substantial portion of the Pāli *Pārāyaṇa* – and the pronounced emphasis accorded to Maitreya (Mile 彌勒) amongst the sixteen disciples. In the *Xianyu jing*, Maitreya receives repeated nominal mentions and assumes a central role within the narrative framework, while the remaining fifteen disciples are referenced collectively as “Maitreya and the others” (*Mile deng* 彌勒等), without individual identification.¹⁵ The text records that following the Buddha’s

¹¹ Six sections of a Gāndhārī commentary on early Buddhist verses explain passages from the *Pārāyaṇa* concerning the questions put to the Buddha by Bāvāri’s disciples Ajita, Mettagū, Jatukaṇṇi and Posāla; see BAUMS (2009: 44, 50, 358–362, 389–395, 403–441, 561, 567–568, 569–573).

¹² SANDER and WALDSCHMIDT (1980: 236–238); WILLE (1989: 198–200).

¹³ *T* 202, ed. vol. 4, pp. 432b–434a; English trans. in Ji (1998: 7–13). The Bāvāri story is summarised in LAMOTTE (1958: 780–781; 1988: 704). The Tibetan and Mongolian versions of *The Wise and the Foolish* (*Xianyu jing*) do not include this story.

¹⁴ For a thorough study of the textual history of the *Xianyu jing*, see MAIR (2012).

¹⁵ In his English translation, Ji renders the Chinese name for Maitreya (Mile 彌勒) with the Tocharian A name equivalent of Metrak, thus translating *Mile deng* 彌勒等 as “Metrak and the others”; see Ji (1998: 7–13).

responses to their unspoken questions regarding their teacher Bāvāri, the sixteen Brahmin ascetics prostrated themselves with their heads and faces touching the ground, whereupon all became *śramaṇas*. Piṅgiya then returned to Bāvāri to provide him, his former teacher, with a comprehensive account. Upon receiving this report, Bāvāri was overcome with sorrow, for while he yearned to encounter the Buddha personally, his advanced age of one-hundred-and-twenty years and physical frailty precluded him from undertaking the demanding journey to Śrāvastī. The Buddha, perceiving Bāvāri's thoughts, visited the ascetic at his abode and expounded the *dharma* to him. Thereupon Bāvāri attained the status of an *anāgāmin*.

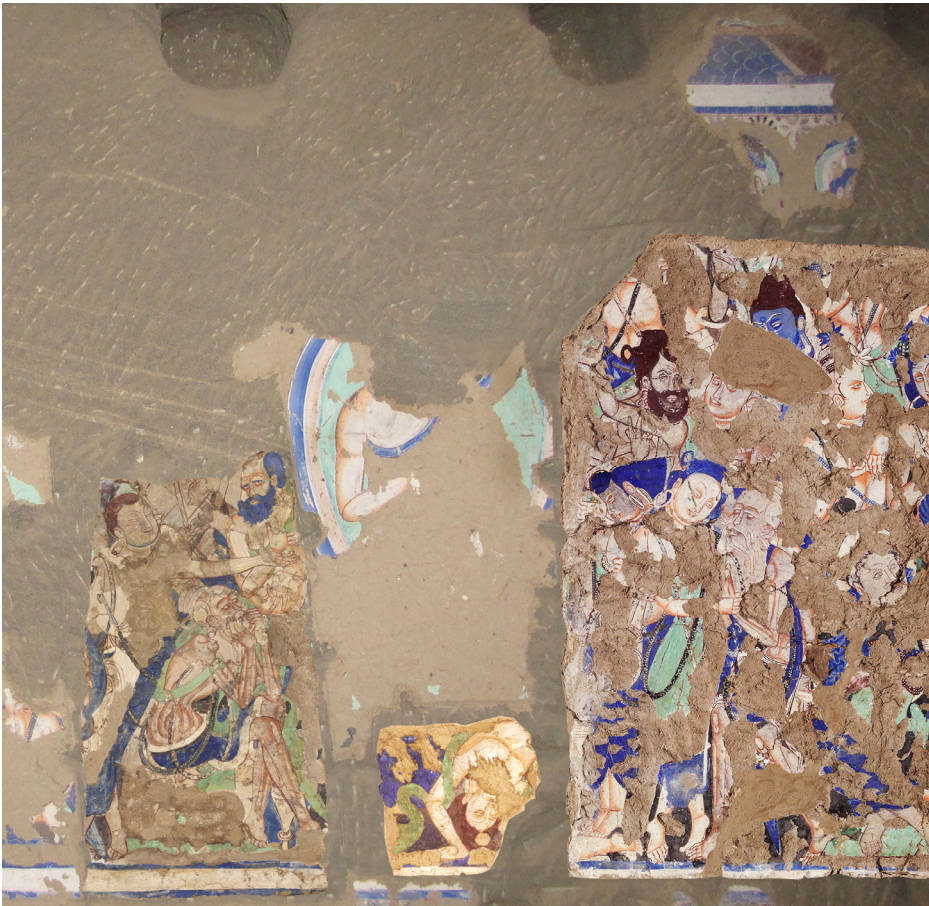
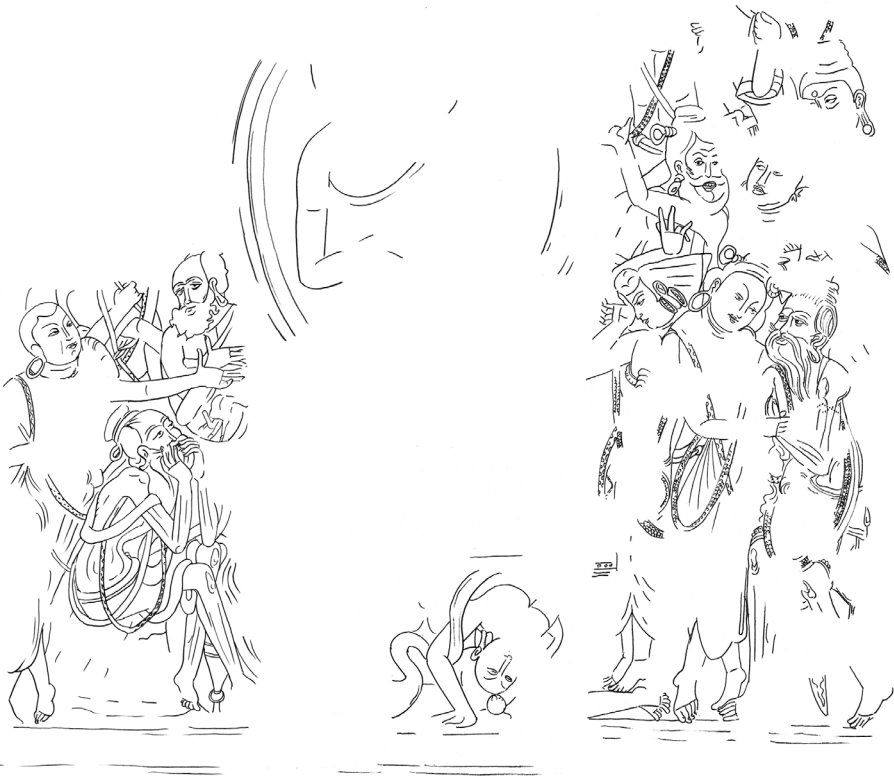


Fig. 1. Kizil Cave 224 (Māyāhöhle, 3. Anlage), main chamber, left side wall, reg. 1, no. 2. Reconstruction based on surviving fragments: central Buddha figure *in situ*; left and lower central portions at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C., Gift of John Gellatly (nos. 1929.8.325.15, 71.1 x 40.7 cm; 1929.8.325.16, 27.7 x 27.9 cm; CC0); right portion in Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin (no. III 9189, 58 x 83 cm).



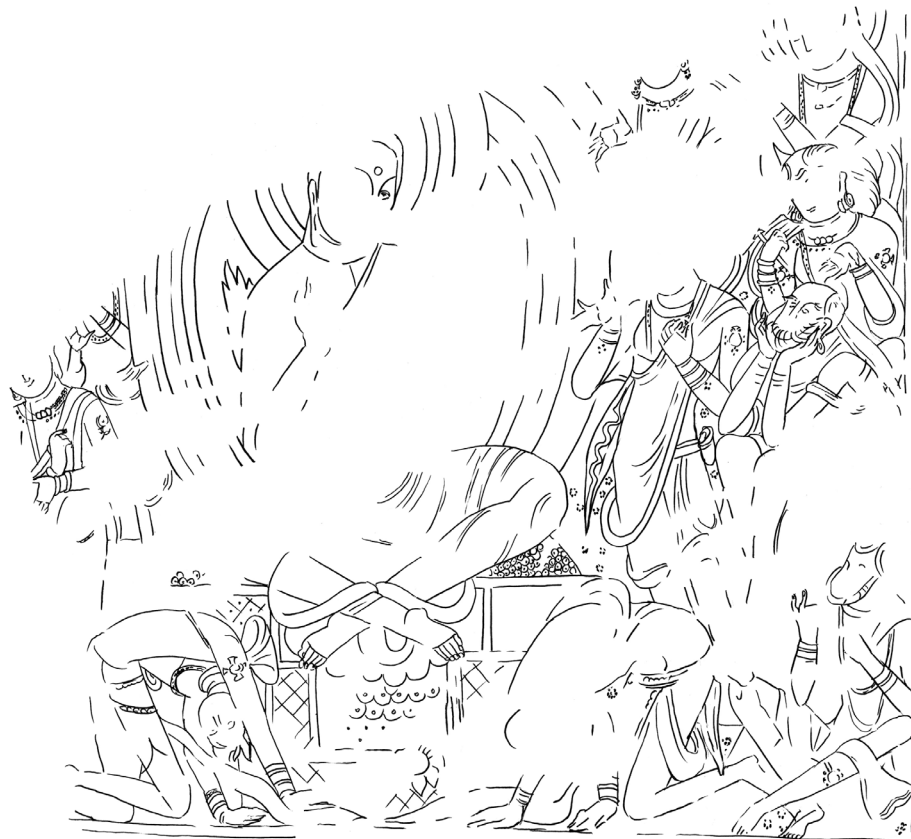
Drawing 2. Drawing of Fig. 1 by Monika Zin.

This textual account concerning the prostration of the sixteen ascetic Brahmins before becoming *śramaṇas* finds iconographic expression in the Kuchean artistic tradition, where the prostration of at least one Brahmin figure constitutes a recurring visual motif. The extant representation preserved in Kizil Cave 114 (Drawing 1) and the composition formerly adorning the left wall of the main chamber in Kizil Cave 224 (**Fig. 1, Drawing 2**)¹⁶ – of which only portions of the central Buddha remain *in situ* – exhibit comparable iconographic approaches. Each depicts a single kneeling Brahmin ascetic prostrated before the Buddha's seat, his head touching the earth in precise accordance with the description preserved in the *Xianyu jing*. The representation adorning the right side wall in the main chamber of Kizil Cave 63 (**Drawing 3**),¹⁷ while sharing thematic affinities with the composition from Kizil Cave 224, presents a distinct

¹⁶ For an alternative reconstruction of the painting, omitting the lower central portion, see ZHAO et al. (2020: II, 722–723, fig. 50). For the original *in situ* description, see GRÜNWEDEL (1912: 174, d 2).

¹⁷ The painting is documented in a photograph from the German Turfan Expeditions (1906–1914), preserved in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin (no. B 1635).

iconographic treatment of this theme. Here, two Brahmin figures are positioned on their hands and knees before the Buddha's seat in attitudes of reverence, their heads directed towards, though not in direct contact with, the ground.



Drawing 3. Kizil Cave 63 (Kāśyapahöhle), main chamber, right side wall, reg. 1, no. 3, *in situ*. Drawing by Monika Zin.

Of particular significance in the wall paintings from Kizil Caves 114 and 224 is one distinctive iconographic motif: the representation of a youthful Brahmin¹⁸ attending to his elderly companion, grasping his hand while simultaneously encircling his shoulders in what constitutes an apparent gesture of support as they approach the Buddha. In Kizil Cave 114 (Drawing 1), this paired arrangement occupies the leftmost portion of the composition. The younger figure is depicted with vigorous physical features, presenting a stark contrast to his aged counterpart, who appears enfeebled and bent with the weight of the

¹⁸ The youthful Brahmin appears in ascetic vestments only in Kizil Cave 114 (Drawing 1); in all other instances discussed in this article, this figure is depicted wearing standard Brahmin attire.

years, distinguished by a lengthy beard and relying upon a gnarled walking staff held in his right hand. Immediately adjacent to this grouping, positioned directly beside the Buddha, the elderly Brahmin ascetic is rendered anew, seated upon a seat of lesser elevation than the Buddha's, adopting a posture of concentrated attention. Whether the young Brahmin ascetic prostrate before the Buddha constitutes a second rendering of the figure from the Brahmin pair remains a matter for conjecture; nevertheless, the apparent correspondence of armlets would appear to support such an interpretation. In Kizil Cave 224 (Drawing 2), this Brahmin pairing contains a comparable counterpart in the composition's rightmost edge. Here too, the elderly Brahmin ascetic – again characterised by his flowing beard – receives dual representation, with his second appearance depicting him seated in focused attention beside the Buddha in the painting's left portion.

Further corroboration of the consistent deployment of this Brahmin pair as an iconographic motif in conjunction with one or two prostrating Brahmin figures emerges from a now-lost painted section formerly adorning the right wall in the main chamber of Kizil Cave 205, which survives only in a drawing by Grünwedel (**Drawing 4**).¹⁹ In this composition, the paired figures reappear alongside a prostrate figure positioned behind them, the latter bearing ear ornaments identical to those of the younger figure in the pair. Grünwedel, who provided a condensed description of the entire composition – now in a severely deteriorated state – identified the younger figure of the pair as potentially feminine, recording: “ein alter bärtiger Brāhmaṇa, eine Būßerfrau (?) heftig umarmend, daneben liegt eine männliche Figur platt auf der Erde” (an elderly bearded Brahmin vigorously embracing a penitent woman (?), beside them a male figure lies flat on the ground; GRÜNWEDEL 1912: 164, f 4). Grünwedel's documentation presents considerable interpretative challenges and contains apparent inconsistencies. His report implies that the prostrate figure was positioned beside the Brahmin pair, while his drawing indicates placement behind them. One possible explanation of this discrepancy is that his drawing constitutes a form of collage, depicting a prostrate figure behind the Brahmin pair that was originally placed beside them to the viewer's left of the Buddha, though this would represent a highly unusual departure for Grünwedel's otherwise systematic documentation methods. More perplexing still is Grünwedel's description of a male figure lying flat on the ground, as his drawing depicts the prostrate figure kneeling with the right leg bent at a right angle, the foot firmly planted, and the head bowed to touch the ground while facing rightwards. The figure therefore adopts a prostrate attitude

¹⁹ For extant remnants of the painting *in situ*, see *Kizil Grottoes* (1983–1985/1989–1997, vol. 3, pl. 108); ZHAO et al. (2020: II, 596, fig. 3). A 1907 photograph from the Pelliot Expedition shows identical deterioration (Musée Guimet, Paris, no. AP7098; <https://guimet-photo-pelliot.fr/notice/notice.php?id=432> [accessed 7 August 2025]), indicating major loss between Grünwedel's 1906 documentation and Pelliot's visit. The damage may have resulted from the Third German Turfan Expedition's extraction attempts, though this remains unverified.



Drawing 4. Kizil Cave 205 (Māyāhöhle, 2. Anlage), main chamber, right side wall, reg. 1, no. 4, left portion of the painting, now largely destroyed. Drawing by Albert GRÜNWEDEL (1912, fig. 374).

from a kneeling position rather than lying completely flat. Additionally, among the surviving *in situ* remnants of the painting, the rightward-oriented feet of a prostrate figure that was placed to the viewer's right of the Buddha remain discernible, thus indicating that the head of this figure was directed leftward. This evidence may suggest the original presence of two prostrate figures, comparable to the arrangement found in Kizil Cave 63 (Drawing 3); yet no second prostrate figure features in Grünwedel's textual description. Furthermore, this prostrate figure to the right of the Buddha was not depicted flat but rather with bent legs, indicating that he likewise cannot correspond to the one Grünwedel described as lying "platt auf der Erde". These discrepancies notwithstanding, the presence of the Brahmin pair, the prostrate figure(s), and Grünwedel's documentation of additional Brahmins within the broader compositional framework provide compelling evidence that this painting once depicted the visit of the sixteen ascetics. The identical ear ornaments worn by both the younger figure of the pair and the prostrate figure documented in Grünwedel's drawing may suggest that the youthful Brahmin ascetic appears twice within the composition: once as part of the pair and again in prostration before the Buddha.

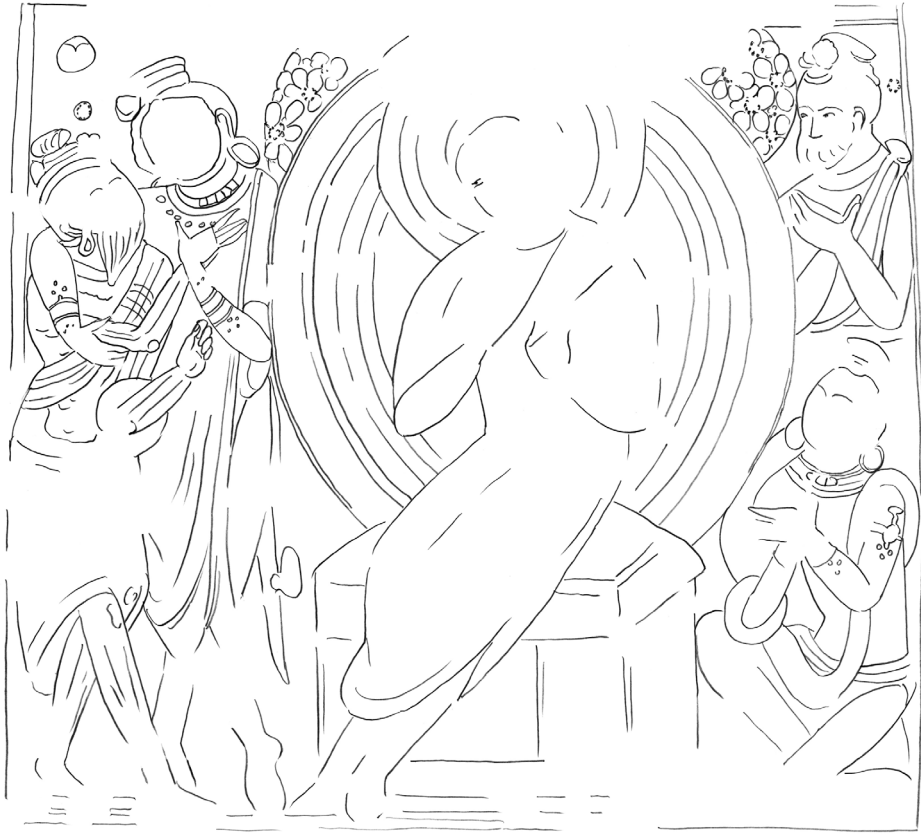
Fragmentary remains preserved on the right wall of the main chamber in Kizil Cave 17 retain only the Brahmin pair in complete form, in what was evidently a larger composition (**Drawing 5**).²⁰ Behind this pair, part of an additional figure remains visible, with hands elevated to chest level in what appears to constitute a reverential gesture with the palms presumably clasped together. The lower right section of the extant portion contains what may represent the vestige of a figure in prostration, comparable to that depicted in the painting from Kizil Cave 205 (Drawing 4). Given the iconographic correspondence with other examples containing this motif, this evidence further suggests that the original composition represented the visit of the sixteen ascetics.

The distinctive character of the Brahmin pair proves sufficiently recognisable that other paintings may be identified as depicting this story of the sixteen ascetics' visit even in the absence of prostrate figures, as exemplified by a scene adorning the left wall of the main chamber in Kizil Cave 99 (**Drawing 6**). This representation, considerably more modest in scale than the other depictions at Kizil, accommodates merely four Brahmin ascetics flanking the Buddha, owing to its restricted dimensions. Particularly noteworthy in this painting is the apparent departure from iconographic schema observed in the aforementioned works: while the elder member of the Brahmin pair typically appears twice – once among the group and again in a seated position beside the Buddha – here it is the younger figure who receives this dual treatment, with both representations of the youthful Brahmin ascetic exhibiting similar ornamental details, including annular ear ornaments, armllets and necklaces.

²⁰ The painting is reproduced in TAN and AN (1981: I, pl. 56); ZHAO et al. (2020: II, 120, fig. 7).

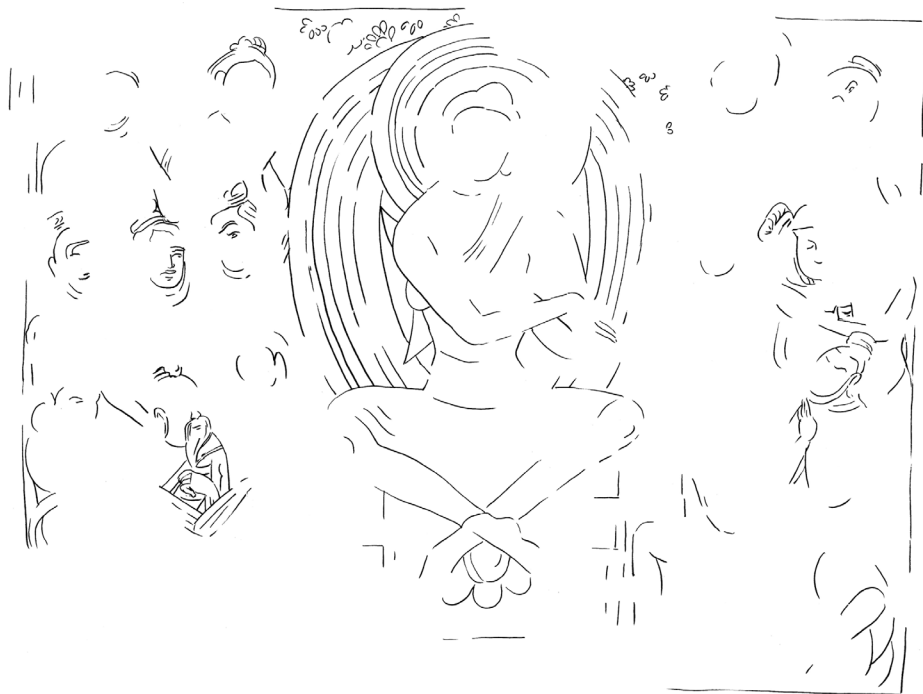


Drawing 5. Kizil Cave 17 (Bodhisattvagewölbehöhle), main chamber, right side wall, reg. 1, no. 4, left portion of the painting *in situ*. Drawing by Monika Zin.



Drawing 6. Kizil Cave 99, main chamber, left side wall, reg. 3, no. 5, *in situ*. Drawing by Monika Zin.

The left wall of the main chamber in Kizilgaha Cave 13 may preserve another representation of the story of the sixteen ascetics' visit (**Drawing 7**), though the severely deteriorated state of the painting renders this attribution provisional. Yet, several features lend credence to this interpretation: the central Buddha appears surrounded by various Brahmin ascetics identifiable by their distinctive topknots, while an aged Brahmin wearing a long flowing beard is seated beside the Buddha. However, other aspects of the composition challenge this identification: notably, the absence of any prostrate figure despite sufficient compositional space for such a representation, and the apparent lack of the distinctive pairing of young and elderly Brahmin ascetics that characterises other examples of this iconographic type. Nevertheless, given the deteriorated state of the painting, it cannot be excluded that this pair was originally depicted, for instance, in the right portion of the composition.



Drawing 7. Kizilgaha Cave 13, main chamber, left side wall, reg. 2, no. 1, *in situ*.
Drawing by Monika Zin.

In summary, the Buddha sermon scenes discussed above feature Brahmin ascetics, identifiable by their distinctive topknots, among other characteristics, and are depicted – with the sole exception of Kizil Cave 114, where the painting occupies the lunette above the main chamber entrance – on the side walls of the main chambers alongside other Buddha sermon scenes. Characteristic iconographic motifs include a Brahmin pair comprising an elderly and a youthful figure, with the younger one apparently guiding and supporting the elder, as evidenced in Kizil Caves 114, 224, 205, 17 and 99 (Drawings 1–2, 4–6). It remains plausible that in Kizil Cave 63 and Kizilgaha Cave 13 (Drawings 3, 7), this motif was originally present in the deteriorated portions of the paintings. A further recurring motif consists of one or two prostrate Brahmins positioned before the Buddha, as observed in Kizil Caves 114, 224, 63, 205, and possibly in Kizil Cave 17 (Drawings 1–5). The Brahmins surrounding the Buddha and those in prostration correspond to the story of the sixteen Brahmins’ visit to the Buddha, as recounted in the *Xianyu jing* (T 202; cf. fn. 12), wherein these figures enter the Buddhist order after receiving the Buddha’s answer to their unspoken question regarding their teacher Bāvari. Of particular significance in this story, which differs in such fundamental aspects from the Pāli *Pārāyana* that it ought

not to be entitled as such, is the figure of the Brahmin Maitreya, the future Buddha. Given this emphasis upon Maitreya, it is conceivable that the youthful Brahmin depicted in these paintings represents this figure, possibly appearing twice in some cases within the same composition: once as part of the Brahmin pair and again in an attitude of veneration, either prostrate before the Buddha (Drawings 1, 4) or seated beside him with hands clasped in a reverential gesture (Drawing 5).

What the *Xianyu jing* fails to elucidate is the precise identity of the pair of Brahmin ascetics. One may posit that these figures represent Maitreya accompanied by his teacher, the Brahmin ascetic Bāvāri – whose considerable age the *Xianyu jing* records as one-hundred-and-twenty years – with Maitreya conducting him to the Buddha's presence. Such an interpretation would, nevertheless, constitute a departure from the textual narrative, which explicitly states that Bāvāri did not accompany his disciples upon their journey to the Buddha, but rather remained at his dwelling in the southern regions. It would appear that the Kucheans may have sought to conflate distinct episodes from the broader narrative cycle, particularly the subsequent occasion when the Buddha himself visited the aged Bāvāri, thereby enabling Maitreya's teacher to receive the Buddha's instruction. This encounter appears to find representation through the figure of the elderly Brahmin seated beside the Buddha, receiving his discourse (Drawings 1–2), whereupon he attained the status of an *anāgāmin* and achieved liberation from rebirth in the Kāmadhātu.

This interpretation finds corroboration in other evidence suggesting that the relationship between Maitreya and his teacher Bāvāri held particular significance in the Tocharian A *Maitreyasamitināṭaka*,²¹ which similarly incorporates the story of the sixteen ascetics. The inclusion of this account in both this text and its Old Uyghur counterpart, the *Maitrisimit*,²² demonstrates that the story circulated not merely throughout the broader region of present-day Xinjiang, but specifically along the Northern Silk Road networks. Both texts centre upon the future Buddha Maitreya and incorporate the story of the sixteen ascetics within Act or Chapter II, respectively, which concerns Maitreya's path to becoming a monk. The intimate bond between Maitreya (Metrak) and his teacher Bāvāri (Bādhari) receives particular emphasis in a surviving fragment of the *Maitreyasamitināṭaka*, which describes how Bāvāri grasped Maitreya's hand before the sixteen disciples departed for the Buddha. The passage portrays

²¹ The story of the sixteen ascetics survives in the fragmentary Tocharian A *Maitreyasamitināṭaka* manuscript recovered from Shorchuk, see Ji (1998: 68–142). Initial manuscript fragments were discovered by the Third German Turfan Expedition in 1906, with forty-four additional fragmentary leaves found in 1974 (Ji 1998: 1).

²² THOMAS (1990). Fragments of the *Maitrisimit* containing the story of the sixteen ascetics has been discovered in Hami.

Bāvāri's tearful expression of distress at both the imminent separation from his disciples and his own inability to encounter the Buddha and receive his teaching.²³

Although only fragments of the story survive in both the *Maitreyasamitināṭaka* and the *Maitrisimit*, the extant passages suggest that the account was considerably elaborated, thereby distinguishing these versions from that preserved in the *Xianyu jing*. In what other respects these versions differed remains an open question owing to the fragmentary state of the *Maitreyasamitināṭaka* and the *Maitrisimit*. The absence of the concluding portions renders it impossible to ascertain how these narratives ended. One might conjecture that the missing sections described Maitreya's escort of his teacher Bāvāri to meet the Buddha, thus allowing the elderly Brahmin to witness the Buddha's discourse, as portrayed in the Kuchean paintings. It remains equally plausible, however, that the pictorial source was derived not from the *Maitreyasamitināṭaka*/*Maitrisimit* recensions, but rather from a now-lost textual tradition containing such an episode. That additional versions of this narrative circulated throughout Central Asia is evidenced by Old Uyghur fragments recovered at Bezeklik (Murtuk).²⁴ While these cannot be securely attributed to any specific work, one may reasonably assume that the text derives from an antecedent lost version of the story, whether in Chinese or one of the Central Asian vernaculars (ZIEME 1997: 743; 2003: 31).

In conclusion, the positioning of the sixteen ascetics' story within the entrance lunette of Kizil Cave 114's main chamber (Drawing 1) merits particular attention as a significant deviation from established iconographic conventions, as Zin has previously observed (ZIN 2023: 499). This cave displays a decorative programme that stands as an exception in Kuchean art. Most notably, the principal niche in the rear wall, which commands immediate visual attention upon entering the chamber, presents a meditating Bodhisatva adorned with nimbus and mandorla rather than the conventional Buddha figure.²⁵ This figure may be identified

²³ Ji (1998: 82–83). This fragment (no. YQ II.4) belongs to a manuscript of the Tocharian A *Maitreyasamitināṭaka* recovered at Shorchuk (Qigexing) near the Buddhist temple ruins in 1974 and is housed in the Xinjiang Museum, Urumqi. See also CEToM YQ II.4, <https://cetom.univie.ac.at/?m-yqii4> [accessed 8 August 2025].

²⁴ The Old Uyghur Bāvāri story survives in fragments from a chapter devoted to Maitreya's life within a larger text collection. These fragments were recovered during the Third German Turfan Expedition (1906–1907) and are housed in the Depositum der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung, under the class marks U 1945 + U 2028 + U 1188, Mainz 699. For editions, translations and analysis, see ZIEME (1997: 745–753, 2003: 33–44, 2005: 533–534); WILKENS (2010: 31, 302–306, cat. nos. 412, 416); CENGIZ (2024: 2–16).

²⁵ For reproductions of the main chamber's rear wall niche, see *Kizil Grottoes* (1983–1985/1989–1997: II, pl. 120); *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China: Kucha* (2008: pl. 35); *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China* (2009: I, pl. 162); ZHAO et al. (2020: I, 266, fig. 1).

with considerable confidence as Maitreya himself. The implications of this iconographic choice extend throughout the chamber's visual organisation. Given that Maitreya already occupies the position of greatest prominence as a great Bodhisatva in the main niche, the entrance lunette requires alternative treatment. Conventionally, this space would accommodate a Bodhisatva depicted in Tuṣita heaven, awaiting an auspicious moment for descent to earthly Buddhahood. Instead, this location houses the narrative of the sixteen ascetics' visit to the Buddha, which recounts Maitreya's assumption of monastic vows during his final earthly existence prior to his prophesied descent as the future Buddha. The linear arrangement of the seven former Buddhas beneath this scene, comprising the six Buddhas of the past together with Śākyamuni, reinforces the concept of Buddhist succession and emphasises the unbroken continuity of *dharmā* transmission across cosmic epochs.

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Abbreviations and primary sources

<i>CEToM</i>	<i>A Comprehensive Edition of Tocharian Manuscripts</i> (CEToM). Created and maintained by Melanie Malzahn, Martin Braun, Hannes A. Fellner, and Bernhard Koller, https://cetom.univie.ac.at/ (accessed 8 August 2025).
<i>Cullaniiddesa</i>	Ed.: STEDE (1918).
<i>Mahāvamsa</i>	Ed.: GEIGER (1908). English trans.: GEIGER (1912).
<i>Paramatthajotikā</i> II, 2	Ed.: SMITH (1917).
<i>Suttanipāta</i>	Ed.: ANDERSEN and SMITH (1913). English trans.: NORMAN (2001), BODHI (2017).
<i>T</i>	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> 大正新修大藏經 [Taishō Edition Tripiṭaka]. Ed.: TAKAKUSU et al. (1924–1934).

- T 201 *Da zhuangyan lun jing* 大莊嚴論經, Kumāralāta's *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* (Nj. 1182, trans. Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 between 402–412 CE), ed. vol. 4, pp. 257a–348b. French trans.: HUBER (1908).
- T 202 *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經, **Damamūkanidānasūtra* (Nj. 1322; compiled by Huijue 慧覺 et al. 445 CE), ed. vol. 4, pp. 349a–445a.

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