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## Iranian and Hellenistic Architectural Elements in Chinese Art

by  
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# Iranian and Hellenistic Architectural Elements in Chinese Art

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With the opening of the Silk Road, many foreign elements arrived in China. In this article I discuss Iranian and Hellenistic influences as they can be found in the art of early Chinese cave temples, using several concrete examples from Yungang. The Yungang caves is a complex of 252 caves located at the southern foot of Wuzhoushan in modern Shanxi province and now protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These grottoes were cut between 460 and 520 AD during the reign of the Northern Wei, the dynasty established by that non-Han tribe, which was responsible for the building of the most splendid Buddhist monuments in China. Buddhism as a foreign religion reached China perhaps sometime in the first century, and Chinese early Buddhist art naturally reflects foreign iconographic patterns adopted from Western art. This is well known. However, in addition to the often discussed main icons, there are also some additional motifs, neglected in most scholarly studies, for which we can find Western antecedents as well. Their predecessors most probably originated in the Gandhāran art of the Kuṣāṇa period, which was influenced on the one hand by the Iranian world, and on the other by the Hellenistic and Roman tradition.

After I had finished this paper I found an article by Suzanne Valenstein concerning the Northern Qi container in the Metropolitan Museum.<sup>1</sup> Valenstein, while looking for antecedents of the container's design, including among other things animal or monster masks, points out their Mediterranean counterparts, prototypes in the *taotie*, and Han examples, and notes as well the animal style of the steppes.<sup>2</sup> She also compares the design of this vessel with Khotanese terracottas as one of

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<sup>1</sup> Valenstein 2007

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 34, 38–39 and 58–60

its possible sources.<sup>3</sup> She mentions Hellenistic prototypes, such as the earthenware appliqués of the frontal lion mask on the sides of vessels excavated at the Dharmarājikā site near Sirkap, as a probable predecessor of Yotkan ceramic material.<sup>4</sup> Setting aside examples from Yungang, Longmen, and Dunhuang, she also refers to other Chinese Buddhist grottoes with masks, such as cave 1 in Gongxian and cave 133 in Maijishan, both also of the Northern Wei period.<sup>5</sup> In this respect we both noticed the same artifacts and similar types of objects and so came independently to the same conclusion. However, she omits the dies found in Taxila, nor does she discuss the lion heads found on the Gandhāran reliefs, lion heads on Roman and Palmyrene funerary art, and the possibly pseudo-Persepolitan capitals in Yungang, which I point out in the present discussion. In my previous paper, presented on September 27, 2014, at the conference of the European Association for Asian Art and Archaeology in Olomouc, I discussed atlantid figures, flying divinities, and garlands in Chinese Buddhist art, again using mainly examples from Yungang. Here I would like to focus on additional architectural decorative motifs, namely column capitals, and at the same time to show the mixture of these motifs with indigenous elements of Chinese origin.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the simple horizontal beams that form the upper part of a typical Chinese building, we also find three foreign types of column capitals in Yungang. The first is composed of a plain abacus and two big volutes and can be seen in caves numbered 9 and 10 (Fig. 1–2).<sup>7</sup> An earlier example of something we might call an Ionic capital is depicted on the mural from the western wall of cave number 268 in Dunhuang, dated to the Northern Liang dynasty (397–439).<sup>8</sup> After the Northern Wei defeated it and conquered the region, they transferred a large number of people from here to the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 33, 49, 58 and 63–64

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 65–66

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>6</sup> This paper was presented on April 9, 2015, at the conference Symposia Iranica held at Downing College, University of Cambridge, UK.

<sup>7</sup> *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1994, fig. 10 (the front room of cave 9), fig. 46 (the front room of cave 10)

<sup>8</sup> *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Dunhuang Mogao ku* 敦煌莫高窟 1982, fig. 6

area of their new capital, and Dunhuang artists accordingly took part in the decoration of the Yungang caves. If we look for antecedents of this type farther west in Central Asia, we'll find two good examples of Ionic capitals in modern Afghanistan and Pakistan, namely capitals from the Greek temple of Janḍiāl in Taxila<sup>9</sup> and the wooden piece from the Greek city of Ai Khanoum.<sup>10</sup> However, Yungang examples are different in that they have two volutes emerging from the abacus. They do not resemble the Greek ones mentioned above or the volutes of the Achaemenid and Mauryan capitals.<sup>11</sup> In fact, they are more like the volutes of one Mathuran capital from the Kuṣāṇa period.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that this Yungang type derives from a simplified Corinthian capital using only side leaves. Ionic capitals are not used in Gandhāran art, while the Corinthian ones are quite common, and the type appears in Central Asia as well. If the source of this capital design is somewhat obscure, we can more clearly see influences in the shaft of the pillar, which is decorated by a floral scroll and a rope pattern. The vine scroll and palmette motifs are of course of Western origin, and the floral design used on the shafts of the columns and pillars is known from Roman art, as I discuss elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Let us turn our attention now to the motif lining the floral pattern. The motif of the rope or interwoven/twisted rope is a very ancient one, found as a decorative border on Greek and Hellenistic pottery as well as architecture.<sup>14</sup> As such it appears on art treasures from Scythian kurgans and Etrusco-Corinthian pottery, as well as on Etruscan jewelry.<sup>15</sup> It serves as a common decorative band on mosaics, and its

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<sup>9</sup> Allchin 1995, fig. 12.17

<sup>10</sup> Dar 1998, fig. 16a

<sup>11</sup> See for example the capital from Pāṭaliputra (Craven 1976, fig. 19)

<sup>12</sup> Czuma 1985, catalogue number 8

<sup>13</sup> In my forthcoming article "From the West to the East: Floral Design—Form and Meaning"

<sup>14</sup> See for example the late geometric amphora from Naxos, from the end of the eighth century BC (Bouzek and Ondřejová 2004, fig. II.32.2), the middle proto-Corinthian aryballos deposited in Boston (Ibid., fig. II.41.1), the oinochoe in the style of the Wild goat from the Southern Ionia, middle II style, the last quarter of the seventh century BC (Ibid., fig. II.48.2), the Megara cup, the second to the early first century BC, Asia Minor (Ibid., fig. IV.26.1).

<sup>15</sup> For example: the silver vessel from Kul-Oba, from the fourth century BC (Smirnov 1980, the fourth photo in the color photo appendix); the Etrusco-Corinthian scales amphora from Caere, 620–600 BC (Svět Etrusků, průvodce výstavou v paláci Hybernia, 1989, fig. B 4.9); part of the ax handle from mound I in Kelermes, from the end of the seventh century or

use continues into the Roman period.<sup>16</sup> The motif decorates the relief with *sfinxa* from Arad<sup>17</sup> as well as the bowls of Phoenician artistic style from Cyprus.<sup>18</sup> It also embellishes the plaques from the so-called Ziwiyeh hoard,<sup>19</sup> but it already occurs in the third and the second millennium BC, seen on many objects, such as the vessel from tomb 1750 in Gonur-depe in Turkmenistan (the third to the early second millennium BC),<sup>20</sup> the fragment of a vessel from Susa in Iran (mid-to-late third millennium BC),<sup>21</sup> the goblet from the Quetta treasure in Baluchistan from the second millennium BC,<sup>22</sup> another example from the temple of Shamash in Mari (Early Dynastic III, the third millennium BC),<sup>23</sup> and on Syrian

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the beginning of the sixth century BC (Smirnov 1980, the second photo in the color photo appendix); the gilded amphora from Chertomlyk (Smirnov 1980, the sixth and the seventh photos in the color photo appendix); another famous metal vessel from Kul-Oba, with warriors, kept in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (Bouzek and Hošek 1978, color appendix, fig. 3, also in Smirnov 1980; the eighth photo in appendix of color figures); or the ritual ware from Chertomlyk Barrow from the fourth century BC deposited in the same museum. For the Etruscan gold earrings or bracelets from Tarquinia kept in the British Museum (museum number 1917,0601.1359) see

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=84095001&objectid=400456](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=84095001&objectid=400456) (28. 1. 2017).

<sup>16</sup> For example, the mosaic from Eretria, 350–340 BC (Bouzek and Ondřejová 2004, fig. IV.22.1). For late Roman mosaics, see the mosaic from the imperial villa in Piazza Armerina, Sicily (Giubelli, figs. on pp. 15–19); the mosaic with the Nereids and Tritons from Carthage (mid-second century AD); or the mosaics from Utica (third century AD), both in the British Museum (GR 18594-2.96 BM Cat. Mosaics 18a, GR 1859.4-2.107 BM Cat. Mosaics 6), etc. There are so many examples it is impossible to name them all.

<sup>17</sup> Moscati 1975, fig. 15

<sup>18</sup> Bowls from Kourion and Idalion (Karageorghis 2000, fig. 299, 305 [Kourion], 306 [Idalion])

<sup>19</sup> Harper *et al.* 1984, fig. 64

<sup>20</sup> Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, 340, fig. 237a

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 342, fig. 241b

<sup>22</sup> The golden goblet from the Quetta treasure in Baluchistan, 1900 BC (*Afghanistan, les trésors retrouvés. Collections du musée national de Kaboul*, 2006, fig. on p. 42; color picture in Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, 384, fig. 271)

<sup>23</sup> Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, 334, fig. 231a

cylinder seals from the second millennium BC.<sup>24</sup> The motif on seals continued, as illustrated by the seal in Neo-Assyrian linear style from Mesopotamia dated to the ninth to the eighth century BC.<sup>25</sup> On one ivory carving in the Syrian style, from the Neo-Assyrian palace in Nimrud, a goat climbing a tree consisting of two intertwined tendrils is portrayed.<sup>26</sup> Other pieces we could mention are the gold gazelle cup from the southwest Caspian region (ca. 900 BC),<sup>27</sup> the faience box with striding monsters of the Early Neo-Elamite period (ca. the ninth to the eighth century BC),<sup>28</sup> and the golden goblet from Kalardascht.<sup>29</sup> As only a part of the motif, in the shape of the numeral eight, it also occurs on jewelry, such as the necklace from unknown context (perhaps Akkadian or the Third dynasty of Ur).<sup>30 31</sup> From the above-mentioned examples, it seems that we should look for the origin of this pattern much deeper in history, perhaps somewhere in the ancient Near East. The motif however is older than the third millennium BC, as it also occurs on Eneolithic pottery from the second half of the fourth millennium BC from the southwest Black Sea littoral, now on permanent exhibition in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg.

Usage of the rope motif on the non-Buddhist artifacts and its occurrence in China by the Han dynasty period is illustrated by an earthenware pot<sup>32</sup> and an earthenware container, a *titong*,<sup>33</sup> both excavated at Xianggangshan and dated to the Western Han period, the second century BC (now in the

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<sup>24</sup> Pittman 1987, fig. 50, 54, and 58

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., fig. 63; another in a peripheral Neo-Assyrian style from Syria is on fig. 82.

<sup>26</sup> Harper *et al.* 1984, fig. 38

<sup>27</sup> Crawford *et al.* 1966, fig. 46

<sup>28</sup> Harper *et al.* 1992, 207, fig. 145

<sup>29</sup> Brentjes 1978, fig. 23

<sup>30</sup> Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, 300, fig. 201

<sup>31</sup> For other Near Eastern pieces see Muscarella 1988, fig. 343, 344, and 473

<sup>32</sup> Lin 2012, catalogue number 124

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., catalogue number 138

Museum of the King of Nanyue). However, this pattern occurs rarely on the Gandhāran reliefs,<sup>34</sup> so it probably traveled eastward on other objects and such luxury items as the sword sheath from tomb IV in Tiliya tepe.<sup>35</sup> In Mathurā it can be seen on the bracelet of a Bodhisattva dated to the Kuṣāṇa period, where it may refer to real jewelry.<sup>36</sup> Rhie also suggests its Mesopotamian origin in a twisted-snake motif.<sup>37</sup> Actually the motif of two intertwined snakes can be found in the art of the steppe peoples, namely among the plaques of the Xiongnu, the neighbors and the most dangerous adversaries of the Han empire.<sup>38</sup> The Parthian bowl kept in the British Museum and said to be from Daylaman in Iran (Fig. 4), possibly from the late second to the early third century, is another example of its usage on metal vessels.<sup>39</sup>

In modern Xinjiang there is an example from Niya: a part of the decoration of a wooden plaque with an elephant and a griffin-like animal.<sup>40</sup> The motif can be found in Buddhist art prior to the Yungang caves in China also, as it embellishes the drum of the painted stūpa on the mural in cave number 169 in Bingling si<sup>41</sup> as well as being painted on halos and mandorlas of some of the local

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<sup>34</sup> But it does appear occasionally. I myself noticed two reliefs with this motif in the museum near the Mogao grottoes. Unfortunately no photography was allowed, and I haven't found them in a publication.

<sup>35</sup> *Afghanistan, les trésors retrouvés. Collections du musée national de Kaboul*, fig. 114

<sup>36</sup> Lerner 1984, fig. 7

<sup>37</sup> Rhie 2010, 141

<sup>38</sup> Minyaev 2000, fig. 2a. Greek art was influenced by the Near East, and the possibility that interwoven designs perhaps had their origin also in animal forms can be suggested even from other types: compare for example the early fourth century AD mosaic from Halicarnassus kept in the British Museum (BM Cat. Mosaics 24) and the lid decorated with intertwined snakes from the temple of Ningishzida in Girsu, Ur III, ca. 2097–1989 BC (Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, catalogue number 316, p. 442).

<sup>39</sup>

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=14795001&objectId=367684&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=14795001&objectId=367684&partId=1) (28. 1. 2017), registration number 1968,0210.1

<sup>40</sup> Rhie 1999, fig. 5.2d

<sup>41</sup> Rhie 2010, fig. 5.22



Buddhas.<sup>42</sup> Rhie also mentions the frames of the paintings in the so-called Room of the Frescoes near Temple C of the Western Site at Subashi in Kucha, dated to ca. early fifth century.<sup>43</sup> We can add some other Northern Wei pieces decorated with this pattern, for example the bronze figure of Bodhisattva<sup>44</sup> or the pedestal of the bronze Buddha from Boxing in Shandong dated to the year 484.<sup>45</sup> It appears again on two bases from Sima Jinlong's tomb, also of the Northern Wei period.<sup>46</sup> In the Guyang cave in Longmen, it looks like a real rope binding leaves onto the half-column.<sup>47</sup> The fragment of the Tang dynasty mural from Kizil cave 212<sup>48</sup> and the Trübner stele are examples of its usage in a later period.<sup>49</sup> It would seem then that this motif arrived in China from the West, perhaps during the Han dynasty. However, there are some earlier Chinese pieces too, such as the bronze staff head dated to the Shang dynasty<sup>50</sup> and the bronze support in the shape of a tapir dated to the Eastern Zhou dynasty (Jin state), circa the sixth to the fifth century BC, both deposited in the British Museum in London (Fig. 3).<sup>51</sup> Although the Chinese invented their own technology of bronze casting, the knowledge of bronze got

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42 Ibid., fig. 5.41, 7.25a, 7.48a

43 Ibid., 141

44 Rhie 2002, fig. 2.57e

45 Dien 2007, 406, fig. 13. 21

46 *The Genius of China* 1973, fig. 244a and 245a

47 *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Longmen shiku* 龙门石窟 1991, fig. 143–44, 160. A rope pattern below a lotus in the decoration of a capital is known from earlier examples in Indian art, such as the one from Rāmpūrvā, but in Longmen it differs in usage of the inverted lotus petals, so the whole really looks like petals bound by the rope, while on the Rāmpūrvā capital it is hidden below the abacus (Allchin *et al.* 1995, fig. 11. 26).

48 *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Kezier shiku* 克孜尔石窟 1997, fig. 217, cave 212, the eastern wall of the main room

49 This stele is dated by an inscription to 533–543 AD, but shows some parallels in style and subject to later works, and, according to Leidy, the front side may have been recarved. It is not quite certain whether the base is original, but in Leidy's opinion that is possible. (Watt *et al.* 2004, 195)

50 In the permanent exhibition, museum number 1973,0726.16

51 In the permanent exhibition, museum number 1947,0712.333, also available in on-line collections: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=308085001&objectId=256765&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=308085001&objectId=256765&partId=1) (28.1. 2017)

to China probably from the West, perhaps from Afghanistan or Southern Turkestan or from Southern Siberia, where copper had been brought from the Near East, so it would not be surprising if the pattern came from the West as well.<sup>52</sup> But the motif had already appeared in China in the Neolithic period, as is illustrated by the painted pottery jar unearthed at Dadiwan in Qin'an county and belonging to the Late Yangshao culture (Gansu Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Fig. 5). A somewhat similar type of the motif can be seen on one painted pot from the Banshan category unearthed at Zhaiziping and deposited in the Gansu Provincial Museum, or on the Songze culture vessel from the Shanghai Museum, dated to the fourth millennium BC (Fig. 7). Even here the motif is not among the most common; on Yangshao pottery many other patterns are preferred.

It is always dangerous to pronounce a final judgment about a motif as simple as this one; it is possible that it originated in China independently, but in that case it was not prevalent. During the Han dynasty period it was revived, possibly due to the influence from the West, although it is difficult to say that with certainty. However, taking into account all the other Western decorative motifs present, alongside the whole iconography of the Buddha and Bodhisattva in the Yungang caves and the previous relative scarcity of the pattern, we can suggest that it reappeared again in Chinese art in this later period due to Western influence, as a copy of the Roman or Near Eastern motif. Its source can be found perhaps in smaller metal objects used by the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes or metal vessels from the Iranian cultural sphere. Textiles are another possible source of its transmission, as we can deduce from the cloth fragment from the first century AD found in Kerch and now in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg.<sup>53</sup>

The second type of column capital in Yungang is a Corinthianized or Indo-Corinthian capital. Corinthian capitals are known from several Central Asian sites, for example from Tepe Zargaran (Balkh, the third to the second century BC)<sup>54</sup> and the Greek city of Ai Khanoum (the third to the

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<sup>52</sup> Remember also the so-called Seima-Turbino transcultural phenomenon, illustrating how far certain ideas and artifacts can get.

<sup>53</sup> In the permanent exhibition, inv. no. II.1890A

<sup>54</sup> *Afghanistan, les trésors retrouvés. Collections du musée national de Kaboul*, fig. 4

second century BC)<sup>55</sup> in Afghanistan, as well as from Saksanochur in southern Tajikistan or Munchak tepe in Kafinirgan valley and also from Old Termez.<sup>56</sup> In the Kuṣāṇa period Indo-Corinthian capitals form a crowning element of half-columns or pilasters, an element that serves as an almost regular way of dividing narrative scenes on the Gandhāran reliefs.<sup>57</sup> Besides this, we can see from the first century AD onwards capitals combined with figures, a type known in Classical architecture too, but, as the authors of *Crossroads of Asia* pointed out, the manner of using foliage to make a canopy above the figure on Indo-Corinthian capitals might have come from representations of the Buddha and yakṣas under trees.<sup>58</sup> Acanthus leaves often serve as an upper decorative band above a scene too. People in acanthus leaves of capitals can be Buddhist male or female devotees,<sup>59</sup> gods,<sup>60</sup> the Buddha or a Bodhisattva,<sup>61</sup> the whole veneration scene,<sup>62</sup> Vajrapāṇi, etc.<sup>63</sup> Apart from capitals, there are also other combinations of foliage and a figure: yakṣī and goddesses hidden in the leaves in the scenes of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* and Māra's attack.<sup>64</sup> Note also the relief with yakṣī in the acanthus capital supporting the triratna symbol on the relief from Loriyān Tāṅgai.<sup>65</sup> Moving to Central Asia, we find

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., fig. 24

<sup>56</sup> Staviskij 1973, fig. 3 (Saksanochur), 4 (Munchak tepe)

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Khan 1999, fig. 2; there are many other examples.

<sup>58</sup> Cribb *et al.* 1992, 205

<sup>59</sup> For example, capitals from Butkara, Swāt, in Khan 1993, fig. 32–33; other capitals from Butkara can be seen in Tissot 1986, fig. 83.

<sup>60</sup> For example, solar quadriga on the pseudo-Corinthian capital from Abarchinar, Swāt (Rosenfield 1967, fig. 88)

<sup>61</sup> Tissot 1986, fig. 82, capitals from Jamalgarhi (Cribb *et al.* 1992, fig. 203), the capital from the Musée Guimet (<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dd/BuddhaAcanthusCapitol.JPG> visited 4.1.2017)

<sup>62</sup> The capital from the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin, the second to the third century (Fig. 6)

<sup>63</sup> The capital from Butkara, the first to the third century AD, Khan 1993, fig. 30

<sup>64</sup> The relief from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Bussagli 1996, 398), *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and Māra's attack, from the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin (Fig. 8–9)

<sup>65</sup> Marshall 1980, fig. 59

some examples in Surkh-Kotal from the so-called Temple of Kaniṣka and the Platform of the Statues,<sup>66</sup> now with the horizontal border of the geometrical or the vine scroll motif, and also in Termez.<sup>67</sup> From Kara-tepe near the latter site comes the fragment that depicts a man lying on his left hip. Stavisky describes him as a Hēraklēs-like figure.<sup>68</sup> However, the posture of this figure as well as his bigger belly reminds us of Kubera. In addition to these types there are three other unusual examples of the usage of acanthus leaves, the first one being the decoration of the small stūpa in block E in Sirkap,<sup>69</sup> the second a support in the shape of the Corinthian capital of the small stūpa in cella F12 in Kalawān monastery,<sup>70</sup> and the last its inexplicable use as the base of the stūpa on the relief from the Peshawar museum.<sup>71</sup>

In Yungang we often come across pseudo-Corinthian capitals of simplified form, which are usually used at the top of pagodas<sup>72</sup> or pagoda-like structures<sup>73</sup>; these can appear with a head looking at observers or a bust en face as well as without it. On the western wall of the fore chamber of cave 9 (Fig. 10), as well as in the front room of cave 10, they serve as pilasters supporting a roof of a building of Chinese type and separate the main icon from the attending Bodhisattvas, so they appear here in a role similar to their use in Gandhāran art. But their function also resembles the figural borders of many Gandhāran reliefs.<sup>74</sup> This vertical row of figures decorates the central stūpa pillar in Yungang

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66 Staviskij 1973, fig. 5, 6, 8; also in Bussagli 1996, figure on page 215

67 Staviskij 1973, fig. 12

68 Stavisky 1997, fig. 21

69 Marshall 1951b, plate 120a

70 Ibid., plate 73, a

71 Tissot 1986, fig. 33a

72 *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1991, fig. 14 and 16 (the eastern wall of cave 2), also in the rear chamber of cave 8, the southern wall of cave 6

73 *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1994, fig. 14 and 17 (cave 9), fig. 48 and 55 (cave 10), this type appears also in caves 7 and 1 (*Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1991, fig. 148 [cave 7], fig. 8–9, [cave 1])

74 Tissot 1986, fig. 32

caves too, for example in cave 6.<sup>75</sup> The upper part is sometimes devoted to the depiction of persons, usually heavenly musicians or Buddha figures, below arches, like those in Gandhāran and Mathuran art of the Kuṣāṇa period. Single arches as well as connected ones can be used, usually pointed like Indian *caityas*.<sup>76</sup> This type of decoration, embellishing for example the famous Bīmarān casket, is considered by scholars to derive from the Roman column sarcophagi from Asia Minor. It continued to be used in the East too, as we can deduce from the votive stupa of Gao Shan-mu (dated 428 AD) from Jiu Quan in Gansu province.<sup>77</sup> An earlier wooden example from Loulan is dated to the mid-third century AD<sup>78</sup>; the later one (perhaps from the sixth century) comes from K6, the main temple site in Shorchuk Mig-oi.<sup>79</sup> While in Gandhāra birds can be placed between arches (see the Bīmarān reliquary, the fragment from the stūpa Dharmarājikā in Taxila, Kalawān monastery),<sup>80</sup> in Yungang we find there haloed heads or just a simple geometrical ornament.<sup>81</sup>

The third and last type of capitals in Yungang, occurring also in Gandhāran art, that I want to

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<sup>75</sup> *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1991, fig. 62 and 90–91

<sup>76</sup> Gandhāran example from the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin (fig. 11)

<sup>77</sup> Rhie 2002, fig. 3. 27

<sup>78</sup> Rhie 1999, plate XIV

<sup>79</sup> Rhie 2002, fig. 5. 53

<sup>80</sup> Carter 1997, fig. 10 (the fragment from stūpa Dharmarājikā), and Khan 1994, fig. 45 (the frieze from Kalawān)

<sup>81</sup> *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1991, fig. 108 (the western wall of cave 6), *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1994, fig. 8 (the southern wall of the front room of cave 9). The endings of the arches in Mathuran art (Nehru 1989, fig. 87 [Kaṇṭhaka's farewell to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam], Czuma 1985, 90 [part of harmikā]) and Gandhāran single arches are often in the form of a spiral (Khan 1999, fig. 25, Brancaccio 2006, fig. 9.5 [the fragment from Butkara I]; it appears also on the so-called Double-headed Eagle stūpa in Taxila [detail, for example, in Bussagli 1996, 160, fig. 3]). As I discuss elsewhere (see my forthcoming article “From the West to the East: Floral Design — Form and Meaning”), in Kizil the floral ending can also be found, painted above the main icon as well as above additional figures; the same can be seen in Mogao too. In Yungang and on such Chinese steles as the Wei Wen-lang stele (Rhie 2002, fig. 2. 83b), a similar shape of arch is used over the main icons and is terminated according to Chinese taste by dragons (see, for example, the eastern wall of cave 11 [*Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1994, fig. 92] or niches in cave 15 [Ibid., fig. 137–38]).

talk about might have been influenced by pseudo-Persepolitan columns, showing two animals back to back. In early Buddhist art of Sāñcī we observe animals with or without riders on their backs.<sup>82</sup> A similar case is the decoration of the *āyāgapatta* from Kaṅkāli Tīlā, Mathurā,<sup>83</sup> and the ivory piece from the so-called Begram treasure.<sup>84</sup> The winged lion is an ancient Near Eastern motif that was revived by the Achaemenids; the earliest examples of Buddhist remains in stone, the so-called Aśokan pillars, reflect some features of these Persian lions (especially the mane and the musculature). On Persian capitals we have animal protomes sitting back to back, connected into one body<sup>85</sup>; in Sāñcī one animal is usually in the foreground while another is partially hiding behind it.<sup>86</sup> There can be a third animal looking from behind. The list does not consist only of feline creatures, but also includes antelopes or bulls. Some examples in which complete bodies are shown were excavated in Taxila; an example is the fragment found in Dharmarājikā, in which a lion's head is partially visible between images of bulls.<sup>87</sup> On the Gandhāran gable with the preaching Buddha, we see the same style of capitals consisting of two bulls sitting back to back, and a lion head placed frontally between them,<sup>88</sup> similar to the relief at the Calcutta museum,<sup>89</sup> the detail of the stele from the Candigarh Museum,<sup>90</sup> the stele from Sahrī-Bāhlol,<sup>91</sup> and the two bulls without lion from the Fogg Art Museum in Boston.<sup>92</sup> The

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82 [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/88/West\\_Torana,\\_Sanchi\\_03.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/88/West_Torana,_Sanchi_03.jpg) (19. 1. 2017)

83 Czuma 1985, figure 5 on page 29

84 Bussagli 1996, figure on page 238

85 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Perspolis.jpg> (19. 1. 2017)

86 [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/88/West\\_Torana,\\_Sanchi\\_03.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/88/West_Torana,_Sanchi_03.jpg) (19. 1. 2017)

87 Khan 1994, fig. 107, Marshall 1951b, plate 215, no. 38–39

88 Rhie 1999, fig. 2. 43

89 Tissot 1986, fig. 34

90 Ibid., fig. 74

91 Ibid., fig. 128

92 Ibid., fig. 81

bulls-and-lion type also decorates the medium-sized *stūpa* in 'Alī masjid.<sup>93</sup> The third creature can even be a man, as on the capital decorated by winged griffins with a human half-figure from Shahrinaw, which is strangely combined with acanthus leaves, or, on another capital, with horned and winged lion-like monsters from the same locality.<sup>94</sup> We find another extraordinary Central Asian variety in Sham Qal'a on the left bank of the Oxus River, not far from Surkh Kotal, where the human being is hidden in acanthus foliage below a pair of bulls and a lion. Another capital decorated with winged griffins, a lion, and a scaled pattern in its lower band comes from the same site.<sup>95</sup> The last piece in this unusual composite style is the capital from Kara tepe.<sup>96</sup> In Yungang, lion protomes turned back to back to form one body can be seen on the western wall of the fore-chamber of cave 12; another animal, at their back, is shown biting at them.<sup>97</sup> Although it does not serve here as a capital in the proper sense, it should be included in this group, if we consider its similar function as a dividing element in the scene, in the same position as Bodhisattvas and other beings as well as other Western motifs in Yungang. The same animal mask appears at the triangle above the main icons. At the top, two bird spirits are added. Although birds are quite common as a decoration in Gandhāran art, these must come from the Chinese tradition, and they are used in a similar fashion on Han dynasty reliefs. The roof of the building in Yungang cave 12 is embellished by another bird en face, of the type known earlier from bronzes of the Warring States period.<sup>98</sup> Finally, other lion or animal masks were used on the northern wall of the rear chamber of cave 7 in combination with a curtain.<sup>99</sup> In Guyang cave in Longmen the monster mask is depicted holding garlands in its mouth.<sup>100</sup> The lion head motif did not

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<sup>93</sup> Rhie 2010, fig. 8. 26b–c

<sup>94</sup> Staviskij 1973, fig. 15 and fig. 14

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., fig. 10 and 11

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., fig. 9

<sup>97</sup> *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1994, fig. 102

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, the bronze pushou from Yi-Xian in Hebei from the fifth century BC. The bird is described as a phoenix (*The Genius of China* 1973, fig. 135).

<sup>99</sup> *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Yungang shiku* 云冈石窟 1991, fig. 142

<sup>100</sup> *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟, *Longmen shiku* 龙门石窟 1991, fig. 163

disappear in later times: it decorates for example the ceiling of the Western Wei cave 285 in Mogao<sup>101</sup> and the stone pagoda dated to the Northern Qi dynasty.<sup>102</sup>

Except for its above-mentioned use on column capitals and, of course, as the pair of lions supporting the Buddha's throne, symbolizing the royal power as well as the Śākya clan, lions occur in Gandhāran art, together with elephants and atlantid figures like the supports of bases of the levels of the stūpa. Lion heads serving as water spouts are also quite frequent, usually in scenes portraying the submission of the nāgas, where water plays a significant role, being associated with these beings. Such use certainly comes from Roman prototypes such as the piece from Kourion on Cyprus.<sup>103</sup> The lion motif repeated in rows as a decoration of a building is relatively common among the Gandhāran pieces; lion heads appear on entablature or below the cornice, as on the above mentioned relief with *stūpa*, other examples being the relief from Shahri Bāhlol and the stele from Candīgarh.<sup>104</sup> As an ending of arches we can see it on the triad from Loryān Tāngai.<sup>105</sup> While the fragment from the Haḍḍa region shows it combined with garlands on the pedestal of the Buddha statue,<sup>106</sup> on the one from Gumbatuna in Swāt it forms a balustrade decoration.<sup>107</sup> On the stone fragment from Butkara, lion heads alternate with eagles or birds of prey, in lotus blossoms.<sup>108</sup> Fragments with lion heads alternating with flowers were discovered in Taxila too, for example, pieces with honeysuckle from building/chapel L in the area of the stūpa Dharmarājikā.<sup>109</sup>

Lion heads used on entablature are actually an element known from Greek art, being used for

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<sup>101</sup> Whitfield 1995, fig. 284

<sup>102</sup> Fong 1965, fig. 22–25

<sup>103</sup> Karageorghis 2000, fig. 462

<sup>104</sup> Juhyung Rhi 2006, 151–82, fig. 7. 10

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., fig. 7. 15

<sup>106</sup> Rhie 2010, fig. 8. 34d

<sup>107</sup> Khan 1993, fig. 28

<sup>108</sup> Fabrégues, fig. 7

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., fig. 5–6



example on the temple of Artemis in Magnesia upon the Meander (the third to the second century BC) or the temple of Athēna Polias in Priēnē (in the second half of the fourth century BC). We can see an example of this motif, although greatly simplified, in the main room of cave 20 in Qumtura, an early cave from approximately the late fourth century.<sup>110</sup> In the Greco-Parthian city of Sirkap, some metal pieces perhaps used, according to Marshall, as dies for jewelry made of gold and silver, or as molds for jewels with faience, were found.<sup>111</sup> Marshall thought that they were copies of Greek lion masks with ring in mouth used on jewelry and as a source of the Indian *kīrtimukha* motif.<sup>112</sup> Both heads have horns like those in the Achaemenid art of the so-called Oxus treasure. Certain similarities can be observed on another piece from Kucha, the wooden carving from Subashi, that Rhie considers to be one of the rare objects that survived from monastery D, dated probably to around the late fourth or the early fifth century AD.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, when talking about lion masks in Yungang, we mustn't forget taking into account another probable antecedent of Chinese origin, that is, the so-called *taotie* motif known previously from bronzes of the Shang and Zhou periods. As we see, the motif continued to be used during the Zhanguo period and again appears on Han dynasty bronze and pottery vessels and other objects.<sup>114</sup> The combination of the head with a ring in a shape of a doorknocker can also be found on Han stone tomb reliefs, often with the Red Bird of the South above, like the one from Wan de-yuan tomb, Sui de in Shaanxi,<sup>115</sup> or on the door leaves from Yu-lin tomb<sup>116</sup>; another example is from Sichuan.<sup>117</sup> During the Northern Wei period the motif of the monster mask occurs on sarcophagi such

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<sup>110</sup> Rhie 2002, fig. 4. 82b

<sup>111</sup> Marshall 1951b, plate 172, no. 98 and 114. Lion heads as such appear on earrings of the Gandhāran Bodhisattvas; ring earrings with this ending are popular in Greek jewelry, and such an ending also occurs as a decoration of Scythian torques.

<sup>112</sup> Marshall 1951a, 583

<sup>113</sup> Rhie 2002, fig. 4.40b, 633

<sup>114</sup> For example, Lin 2012, catalogue number 47 (bronze *zhong* from tomb no. 2 at Dongdongshan), 119 and 120 (bronze *fang* and *hu*, both from Xianggangshan)

<sup>115</sup> Hsio-Yen Shih 1960, fig. 1

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., fig. 20

<sup>117</sup> Richard 1950, fig. 5 and 6

as the one from the Nelson-Atkins Art Museum. The beast is not provided with the ring in this instance, but it holds in its mouth a cloud scroll.<sup>118</sup> Recently, in 2000, a new example came to light from Song Shaozu's tomb of the Northern Wei dynasty.<sup>119</sup> Here the doorknockers (*pushou*) decorated walls of the house-shaped sarcophagus. Together with the vine motif these have a much more Western look. Heads with horns are said to be found in another Datong tomb dated to the late fifth century, as well as on sarcophagi from the sixth century; Annette Juliano suggests an Achaemenid origin for this motif also.<sup>120</sup> Other foreign imports are: a haloed being, with a scarf between its horns, and another kneeling figure, which the author compares to the inhabited vine pattern known for example from Sima Jinlong's tomb, and the obviously Western floral and palmette design. Juliano also noticed a similarity between the lotus roundels decorating Song Shaozu's sarcophagus and those over entrances to Yungang caves 9 and 10, and considers the possibility of the same workshop or artists for both works.<sup>121</sup> Another *pushou* from Ningxia province contains Western borrowings too, for it consists not just of an animal mask, but also of two figures with *uṣṇīṣa*, and thus it combines the ancient Chinese *taotie* motif, the motif of the dragon tamer, and Buddhist elements.<sup>122</sup> A pair of composite mythological creatures, intended to ward off evil, placed beside doorways during the Han period — *bixie* and *tianlu* — also have the characteristics of the lion, the former being sometimes depicted as a winged feline creature with two horns, the latter having only a single horn.<sup>123</sup>

Felids attacking other animals is an ancient motif, frontally seen for example on the relief

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<sup>118</sup> Luo Shi Ping 罗世平 2005, 40, 43

<sup>119</sup> Juliano 2012, fig. 27

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>121</sup> The motif of the monster mask continued and can be seen, for example, on the stone coffin unearthed in Sanyuan county and dated to the Tang dynasty, now in the permanent exhibition of Beilin bowuguan (the Forest of Steles Museum) in Xi'an. The monster masks on this coffin also have horns.

<sup>122</sup> Juliano and Lerner 2001, catalogue number 17a, b (the Northern Wei period)

<sup>123</sup> There is also another mythical feline-like creature, *suanni*, which is capable of running five hundred li in a single day, and which, often associated with *tianma*, occurs on bronze mirrors (Dewar 1994, 310).

from Persepolis, and of course a basic motif of the so-called animal style of the steppes.<sup>124</sup> The earliest examples of this style, according to Jessica Rawson, date "to the sixth century BC and laid the foundation for Han and later imagery."<sup>125</sup> In her opinion, during the Han dynasty these were associated with good omens, and belt-plaques with this exotic subject, like the one from Shizishan, Xuzhou, in Jiangsu province, "seem to have been popular with the Han elite."<sup>126</sup> As for lions as such, two bronze weights in the form of lions, dated to the Western Han dynasty, also were discovered at Shizishan.<sup>127</sup> The author of this catalogue refers to the originally Indian or Central Asian practice of the taming of fierce animals that was popular among imperial family members in the Han period.<sup>128</sup> Rawson considers them to be inspired by Western Asian or steppe examples and mentions as their prototypes a gold weight from Nanjing and ubiquitous bronze weights from Iran in the shape of crouching lions with loops on their backs.<sup>129</sup>

Lions occur in India also as a decoration on other objects; the lion head once embellished a terracotta pot from Mathurā of the Kuṣāṇa period.<sup>130</sup> Terracotta examples, centrally depicting lion heads, were among the finds from Khotan. The Khotanese terracottas are usually dated to the period from the second to the third or fourth century AD.<sup>131</sup> The use of lion heads on funerary monuments is in fact well known in the Roman world, they are often carved on sarcophagi like the one with Selēnē

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<sup>124</sup> See, for example, the belt buckle with walking tigers from Southern Siberia dated to the third century BC, or the belt buckle with a lynx attacking an argali from Eastern Siberia, the second to the first century BC (Bunker 2002, catalogue numbers 64 and 80).

<sup>125</sup> Rawson 2002, 26

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>127</sup> Lin 2012, catalogue numbers 35 and 36

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 139

<sup>129</sup> Rawson 2012, 28

<sup>130</sup> Czuma 1985, catalogue number 51

<sup>131</sup> The genuineness of some of the finds from Khotan previously associated with Yotkan in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg has been questioned (Stančo 2015, note 5)

and Endymion, dated to the early third century,<sup>132</sup> or the marble strigilated sarcophagus dated ca. 220 AD, both deposited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>133</sup> Another, belonging to a child, from the British Museum and also dated to the third century, shows lion heads with rings in mouths serving as doorknockers.<sup>134</sup> There are interesting pieces from Palmyra, whose art had an impact on the Gandhāran style, that depict horned-lion-head doorknockers, which decorate the local funerary reliefs.<sup>135</sup> The Yungang pseudo-Persepolitan capitals as well as the monster masks on Song Shaozu's sarcophagus subsequently combine the ancient motif that already existed in the Shang and Zhou periods, with the new form reaching China perhaps around the time of the Han dynasty and again during later centuries.

## CONCLUSION

Many questions still remain unanswered, notably the exact way by which the design was transmitted to China, and the significance of these motifs for the Chinese. Were they only copies taken over from Western art with purely decorative function, or did they have a special meaning? The meaning of the *taotie* motif, which has been studied by many, is uncertain. Monster masks on the pieces discussed above seem to be associated with an auspicious symbolism and a protective function: the above-mentioned Northern Qi container from the Metropolitan Museum is covered with a relief decoration including horned lion heads or monster masks. Above the masks the character *ji* (auspicious) is inscribed. Valenstein suggests that the two sets of masks can also be interpreted as connoting a spirit or supernatural creature and intended to avert evil. In this respect, she also refers to an apotropaic

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<sup>132</sup> Accession number 47.100.4a, b, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/47.100.4/> (28. 1. 2017)

<sup>133</sup> Accession number 2005.258, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2005.258/> (28. 1. 2017)

<sup>134</sup> Museum number 1996.0301.1,

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=34857001&objectId=421549&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=34857001&objectId=421549&partId=1) (28. 1. 2017)

<sup>135</sup> The banquet of Malku and A'abī (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek NCG 1159-60), or another example in the same museum: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/58/Ny\\_Carlsberg\\_Glyptothek\\_-\\_Palmyra\\_Portr%C3%A4t\\_4.jpg/1280px-Ny\\_Carlsberg\\_Glyptothek\\_-\\_Palmyra\\_Portr%C3%A4t\\_4.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/58/Ny_Carlsberg_Glyptothek_-_Palmyra_Portr%C3%A4t_4.jpg/1280px-Ny_Carlsberg_Glyptothek_-_Palmyra_Portr%C3%A4t_4.jpg) (4. 2. 2017)

function of monster masks in the decoration of Chinese tombs of the fifth and sixth centuries, and she mentions the concept of monster masks — often Gorgōn — on Greek shields.<sup>136</sup> The character *ji* in her opinion may be an abbreviated form of *jiguan* (auspicious light), and this hypothesis is supported by a fragment of Chinese silk found at Dulan xian and dated perhaps to the Northern Dynasties period; on it the character *ji* is placed close to monster masks.<sup>137</sup> If in the case of a monster or lion mask we see a mixture of Chinese and Western motifs, in the case of other elements such as Corinthian capitals or a continuous arcade, their Western origin is undeniable, although they were transformed by Gandhāran and Central Asian art. The design of the Northern and Southern dynasties period was then strongly influenced by foreign elements, and, while some of these were new imports from Central Asia through trade or as diplomatic gifts, through contacts with nomadic peoples, and through the spread of Buddhism and its art, others, such as the rope motif, were ancient patterns reaching China much earlier than the official date of the opening of the so-called Silk Road. These might be from the Near East, although their independent origin and development in China cannot be excluded. We also must remember that some designs arrived in China not only once but repeatedly in history, and perhaps through several different ways; they then became a part of the Chinese artistic vocabulary, so it is now very difficult, if not impossible, to decide with absolute certainty upon their exact origin and way of transmission, even if their Western antecedents are obvious. This is also the case, of course, with the Western floral motifs common in Chinese Buddhist art, including the art of the Yungang caves.

In conclusion we then can say that we see in Yungang native Chinese patterns known since the Bronze Age taking on a more Western appearance, mixed with the Western design perhaps arriving in China through the examples of small metal objects and precious items made from other materials and, perhaps, in the case of Buddhist iconography, also through drawings and portable shrines and venerated objects brought by travelers and pilgrims. Yungang art, created by a non-Han nomadic tribe, reflects all these influences and thus belongs among the distinctive monuments of early Chinese Buddhist art, and provides as well unique evidence of historically significant intercultural contact.

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<sup>136</sup> Valenstein 2007, 31

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 35

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Fig. 1. Yungang cave 9, front room, photo by Klára Štiplová



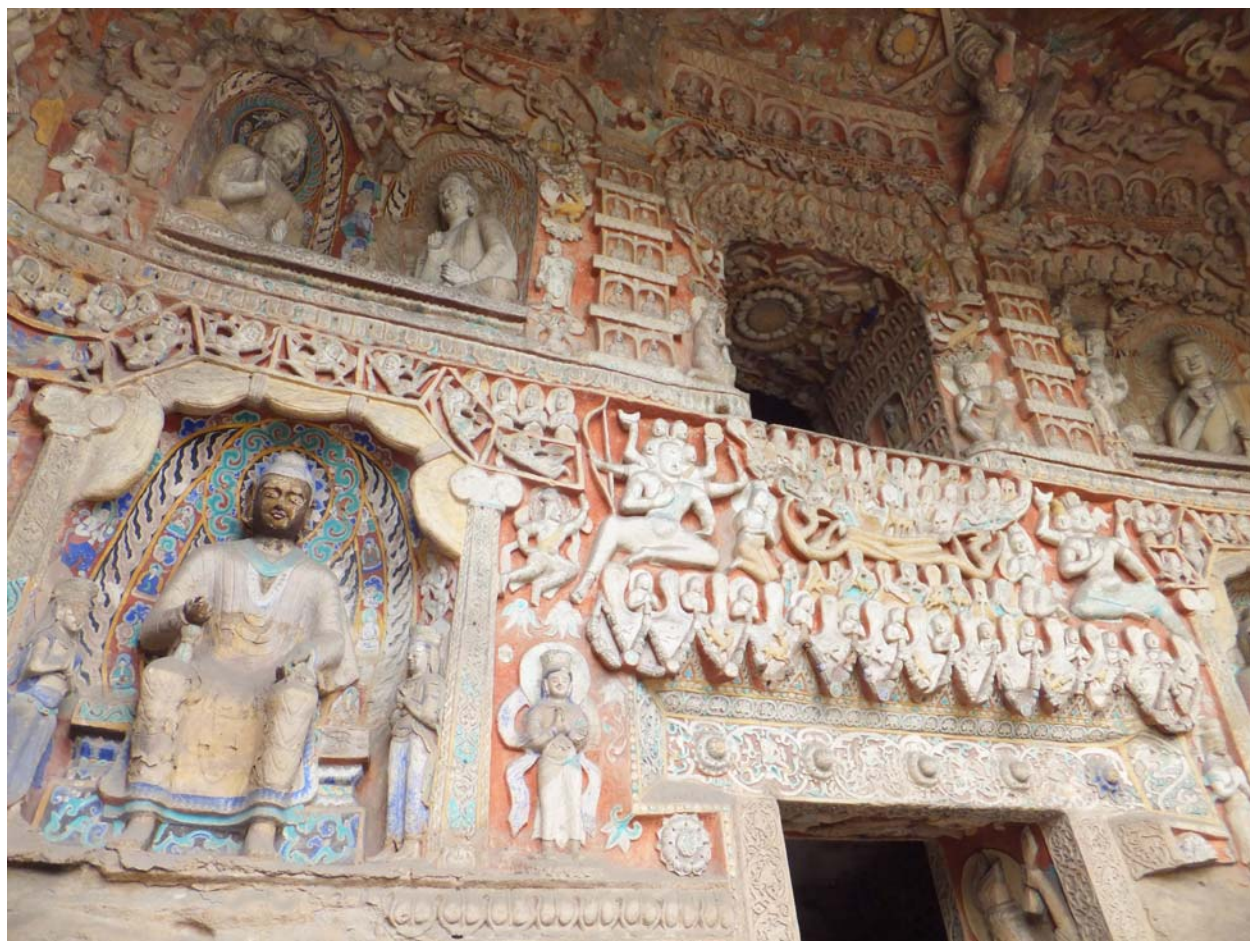


Fig. 2. Yungang cave 10, front room, photo by Bao Do





Fig. 3. Bronze support in the shape of tapir, Eastern Zhou dynasty, © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 4. Parthian bowl (? Daylaman in Iran), © The Trustees of the British Museum

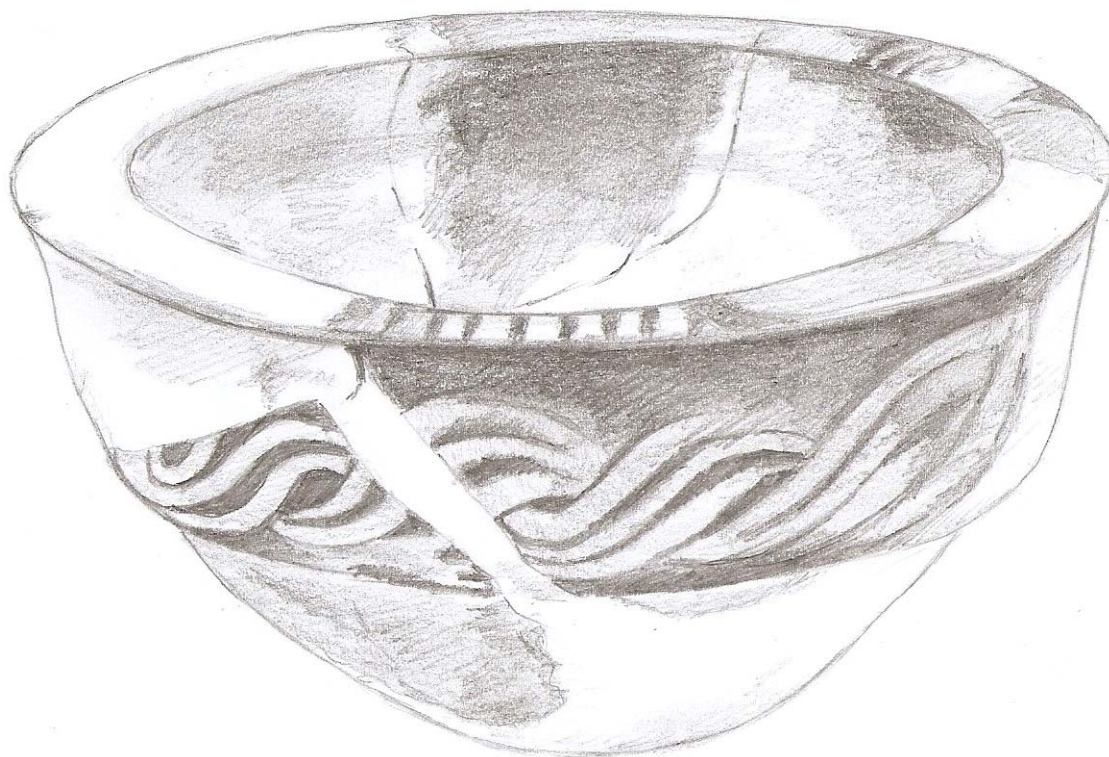


Fig. 5. Painted pottery jar from Dadiwan, the Late Yangshao culture, the Gansu Provincial Institute of Archaeology, drawing by the author



Fig. 6. Gandhāran capital with veneration scene, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Jürgen Liepe





Fig. 7. Vessel of the Songze culture, the Shanghai Museum, drawing by the author



Fig. 8. Gandhāran relief with Māra's attack, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst /Iris Papadopoulos





Fig. 9. Gandhāran relief depicting the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Georg Niedermeiser



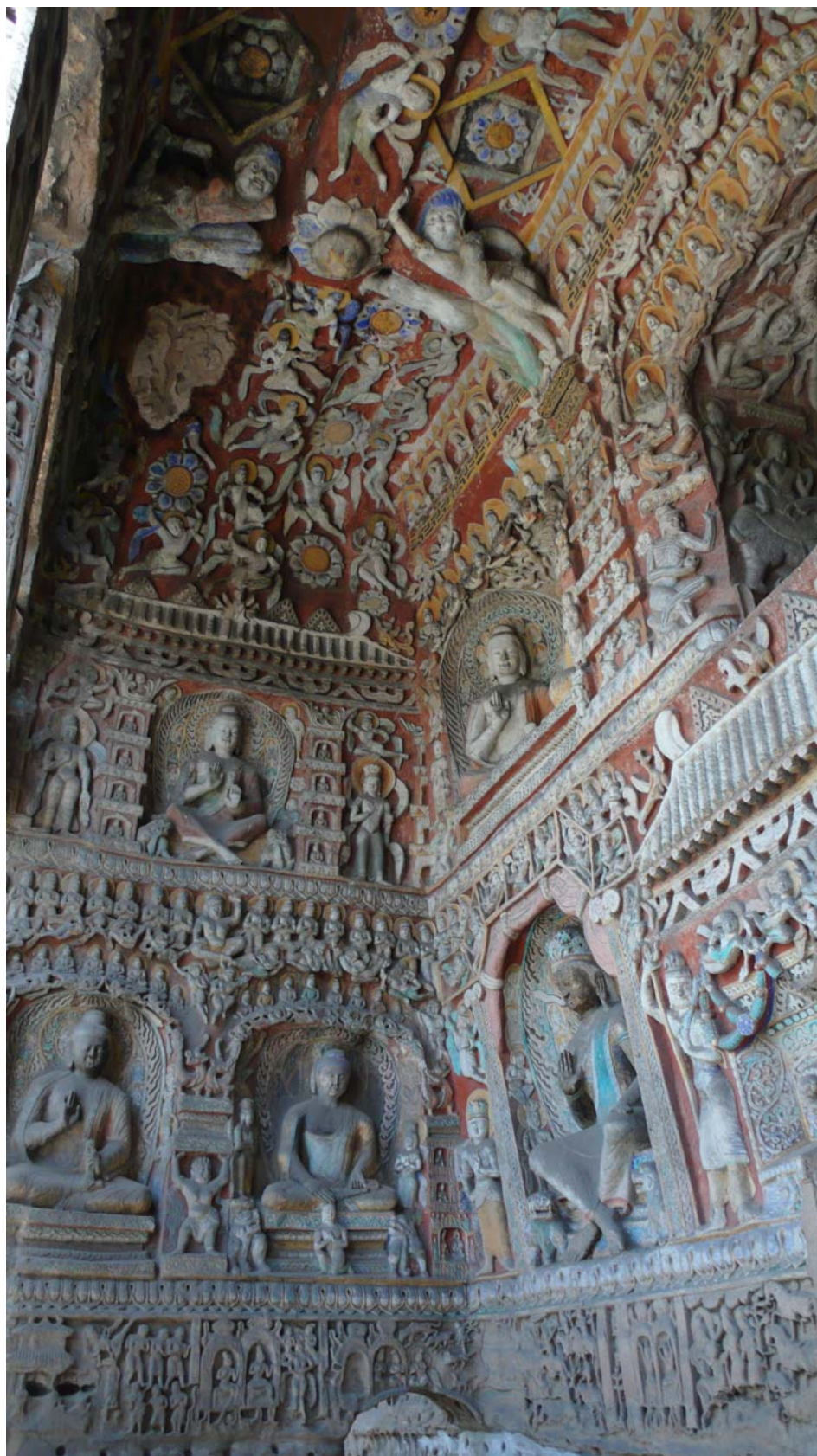


Fig. 10. Yungang cave 9, front room, photo by Klára Štiplová



Fig. 11. Gandhāran relief with Siddhārtha's bath and Māyā's return, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst



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