

# Labour with Complications: Reconsidering the Scene of the Buddha's Nativity

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A beautiful smiling woman giving birth to her child without any discomfort while standing under a blooming tree and assisted by elegant company represents an image that every student of Buddhism will recognise as an illustration of the birth of the future Buddha. Along with the scene featuring the Buddha attaining enlightenment while surrounded by Māra's soldiers and the image of the reclining Buddha entering *parinirvāṇa*, this is certainly the most popular and iconic image of the Buddha legend.

Research on the narrative cycle of Buddha's nativity is extensive, partly because of the question of the historical site where the episode is understood to have taken place.<sup>2</sup> The event itself has been regarded as historical since the time of Aśoka; this is evident from the famous inscription in which he endowed Śākyamuni's birthplace with part of the relics (thus making it a pilgrimage site).<sup>3</sup> In the inscription, Aśoka calls the place *Lumbini gāma* (village),<sup>4</sup> and it only became *vana* (forest) at a later date. The transformation of the story into the narrative of a marvellous birth under a tree in a park is comprehensible. It is quite possible that the specific features of Lumbinī inspired the later narrative from early on; a sacred tree was, after all, actually unearthed at the site (Coningham/Acharya/Davis 2015).

As for the visual representations of the events in Lumbinī, art-historical research attempted to locate them in early art; as no visual representation could be traced in the art of Bharhut or Sanchi, the images of the goddess Lakṣmī were declared to be symbolical representations of the Buddha's birth (Foucher 1934). To us in the present, this may seem to be a rather unnecessary step in

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2 For an in-depth study of the site cf. Deeg 2003.

3 Falk 2012; cf. *ibid.* for the previous understanding of the inscription.

4 *hida Bhagavaṃ jāte ti Luṃminigāme*, cf. Falk 2006, pp. 177–180; cf. *Suttanipāta*, vers. 683, ed. p. 132: *gāme janapade Lumbineyye*.

explaining the missing iconography (which, presumably, bears witness to a narrative which has not yet been developed). However, the fact remains that the Gaja-Lakṣmī imagery disappeared from Buddhist art after the iconography of the birth of the future Buddha was invented.

Jean Philippe Vogel (1929) and Alfred Foucher (1934) recognised that the iconography of Māyā giving birth replicates the pose of a *śālabhañjikā*, ‘a woman breaking (plucking) a *śāla*(-blossom)’. Dating from the earliest period, *yakṣiṇīs* were depicted with one hand extended upward, grasping a tree branch. This *śālabhañjikā* model became the pictorial prototype of the illustration of the Buddha’s birth.

The resemblance between Māyā delivering the child and the *śālabhañjikā* cannot be denied. We might legitimately ask, however, whether the pictorial model should be regarded as the trigger for the emergence of this iconography (or perhaps even for the elements of the narrative), or if instead it was meant to illustrate a previously-existing idea surrounding the birth of the future Buddha. According to the present state of knowledge, the pictorial motif was only a secondary development: the oldest extant depiction of the birth of the Buddha does not use this motif. This first depiction is an ancient painting from the first phase of Ajanta (1st century BCE), in Cave X (Fig. 1),<sup>5</sup> where eight chronologically-placed scenes from the life of the Buddha are shown in a long strip. Coincidentally, this also is the first instance in which a coherent Buddha legend is depicted. Māyā is standing beside the tree. She is holding a branch, though not in the pose of the *śālabhañjikā*. Schlingloff was able to corroborate the interpretation of the poorly-preserved image as a depiction of the nativity scene by deciphering the painted inscription above the scene. Although the *akṣaras* are poorly preserved, the reading *bhagav(aṃ) .... puva(m) d(e)v(e)[h] i* (the Exalted One, .... first ..... by the gods ...) is secure enough to establish it as corresponding to *Majjhimanikāya* 123 “When, Ānanda, the Bodhisatta is issuing from his mother’s womb, *devas* receive him first, men afterwards.”<sup>6</sup>

As we shall see below, the group of gods depicted in the Ajanta painting bears a resemblance to the model of the nativity scene as it was illustrated in Gandhara, not in Andhra. Therefore, we may assume that the god to the left of Māyā (only his right forearm, heavy necklace and an earring are clearly visible)

5 Cf. Schlingloff 2000 and 2013, no. 8(2), vol. 1, p. 47 (drawing); Zin 2018, p. 68, fig. 58 a–b.

6 *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. vol. 3, p. 122; transl. p. 168: “When, Ānanda, the Bodhisatta is issuing from his mother’s womb, the Bodhisatta does not at once touch the earth; the four *devas*, having received him, place him in front of his mother ...”.

is Indra holding a cloth into which he receives the new-born. The child, however, is not depicted, as the painting belongs to the early stage of Buddhist art in which the Buddha is not represented in anthropomorphic form.

The next extant pictorial representations in chronological sequence are the reliefs from Andhra (1st century CE, and later); these do show Māyā in the *śālabhañjikā* pose (Fig. 2). It might be relevant to note that the iconography here diverges from the representation in Ajanta X not only in regards to Māyā's pose, but also in the recipient of the child. Instead of Indra, here we find four male deities receiving the child. These deities can be associated with the four *devaputras* or four Brahmas mentioned in the Pali tradition.<sup>7</sup> The fact that they are four in number leads us to regard them as potentially representing the Four Great Kings of the cardinal directions. They are holding the cloth, a long piece of fabric, upon which sometimes footprints denoting the first seven steps of the future Buddha are shown.

The new-born is never depicted as a person in Andhra, not even after the anthropomorphic Buddha image had been invented and was present in the area for quite some time. The representation of the *śālabhañjikā* accompanied by four gods with a long fabric was apparently distinct enough and there was no need to change it.

The representations in Gandhara (2nd–3rd centuries) (Fig. 3)<sup>8</sup> combine the models of Ajanta X and Andhra (as many once-extant depictions have been lost to time, we cannot, however, speculate with any certainty on potential intermediate stages of development leading to this combined composition) and add the new-born in anthropomorphically-depicted form. Standing in the *śālabhañjikā* pose, Māyā turns her right side towards Indra, who is receiving the child into a piece of fabric – Brahma and other deities are standing behind him. The child emerges from the queen's right flank. This is the first instance in which the iconography of the image described at the beginning, one of the most common in Buddhist art, is depicted in its complete form.

In *Majjhimanikāya* 123, the text passage linked to the inscription in Ajanta X, it is merely stated that the Bodhisatta's mother gave birth while standing.<sup>9</sup> This is the oldest textual layer. It is only in the *Nidānakathā*, composed at a time when the depictions had long been present, that the grasping of a branch

7 *Cattaro devaputtā*, in the *Majjhimanikāya* 123, ed. vol. 3, p. 122; *cattāro mahābrahmāno* in the *Nidānakathā*, ed. pp. 53–54.

8 Several published e.g. in Kurita 2003, vol. 1, figs. 31–37, 48–53, P1–V, VI.

9 *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. vol. 3, p. 122; transl. p. 167.

is mentioned textually: the branch is said to bend down to make it easy for the queen to grasp.<sup>10</sup> The presence of a tree is further affirmed in the sources of “northern” Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> The *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition,<sup>12</sup> which in many cases can be identified as the literary source for the art of Ajanta and Gandhara, relates that Māyā “saw a blossoming *aśoka* tree, to which she clung to give birth to the Bodhisatva”.<sup>13</sup>

Several texts from the Sanskrit tradition,<sup>14</sup> including the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara*, state that the Bodhisatva was born from Māyā’s right side. The *Buddhacarita* also relates the birth of the Bodhisatva as from the side, but here – and this seems to be an absolute exception – Māyā is said to have laid down upon a bed to give birth (*śayyām ... prapede*).<sup>15</sup> The emphasis placed on the fact that the Bodhisatva emerged from his mother’s right side reflects embryological teachings of the time, in which it is claimed that a male foetus occupies the right side of the womb, whereas a female one stays in left side.<sup>16</sup> It should be mentioned that the *Ekottarikāgama* predicts that the birth of the future Buddha Maitreya will happen in exactly the same way.<sup>17</sup>

Let us now return to the illustrations of the Buddha’s birth. Schlingloff points out that only the more recent biographies specify that the Bodhisatva was born from Queen Māyā’s side while she held onto the tree branch.<sup>18</sup> None of the illustrations, however, show anything else. The pictorial tradition was obviously established; perhaps it was not necessary to mention it in the texts. If we presuppose knowledge of lateral birth, a passage in canonical literature becomes understandable. The Pali *Mahāpadānasuttanta* and

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10 *Nidānakathā*, ed. pp. 52, transl. pp. 69–70: “Having walked up to the foot of the hallowed Sāla tree she wished to take hold of a branch. The branch bent low like the tip of well-seasoned cane and came within reach of the queen’s hand. She stretched out her hand and held it. At that very instant labour pains seized her.”

11 For literary sources cf. Schlingloff 2000 and 2013, no. 8(2), vol. 1, p. 47; no. 64(6), pp. 318–319; Anālayo 2011, vol. 2, p. 707.

12 Ed. Gnoli 1977–1978, vol. 1, p. 44.

13 Schlingloff 2000 and 2013, vol. 1, p. 295.

14 It is only a selection of references based on Anālayo 2011, vol. 2, p. 707, fn. 103: *Buddhacarita* 1.9, ed. p. 1; Olivelle 2008, transl. p. 5; *Mahāvastu* ed. vol. 1, p. 206; transl. p. 163; *Lalitavistara*, ed. pp. 83–84; French transl. p. 77; T 184, ed. vol. 3, p. 463c13; T 185, ed. vol. 3, p. 473c1; T 188, ed. vol. 3, p. 618a17; T 189, ed. vol. 3, p. 625a24; T 193, ed. vol. 4, p. 58b21.

15 *Buddhacarita* 1.8, transl. Olivelle 2008, p. 5.

16 Printz 1925, pp. 124–125; Hara 1980, cf. also Sasson 2009.

17 T 125, ed. vol. 2, p. 788b2, cf. Anālayo 2011, p. 707, fn. 103.

18 Schlingloff 2000 and 2013, vol. 1, p. 318.

Sanskrit *Mahāvadānasūtra* describe the birth of the Buddha using the same wording that we already know from the *Majjhimanikāya*. The “norms” (*dharma-matās*) mentioned here concern every Buddha.<sup>19</sup> While the Pali text only dictates that the Bodhisatva’s mother will be standing while giving birth, and that the Bodhisatva comes out unpolluted, the Sanskrit version adds that the child emerged from the womb “like a sword from its sheath.”<sup>20</sup> The imagery of drawing a sword from the scabbard not only illustrates the swiftness of the birth, but also contains a hint towards a sideways direction of movement; that is, a lateral birth.

Of the depiction of the Buddha being born out of the side of his mother in the Gandharan reliefs it has been eruditely argued that the image is derived from western depictions, namely, illustrations of the birth of Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus (Stoye 2010). Whether the depictions of the standing figure of Māyā could indeed be reminiscent of Zeus seated on a stone is a question we will leave to the Gandhara specialists. Instead, we will address the question of whether this depiction in South Asian art required any impulse from the Mediterranean world at all.

In his essay from 2005, “Physical Aspects of Some Mahāpuruṣas,” Willem Bollée remarked that “the idea of a birth from the hip is as old as the RV”.<sup>21</sup> It seems that he was right, even if his rendering of *pārśva-* as ‘hip’ is debatable. Bollée refers to *Rgveda* IV,18,1–2:

1. *ayām pānthā ānuvittaḥ purāṇo yāto devā udājāyanta viśve ātaś cid ā janiṣṣṭa prāvṛddho mā mātāram amuyā pāttave kaḥ*
2. *nāhām āto nīr ayā durgāhaitāt tiraścātā pārśuvān nīr gamāñi bahūni me ākṛtā kārtvāni yūdhyai tvena saṃ tvena pṛchai*

19 The *sūtra* does not refer to the new-born Śākyamuni but rather to Buddha Vipāśyin as a representative of all Buddhas, cf. Strong 2015, pp. 101–102.

20 Weber 1999, p. 54: “wie ein in der Scheide befindliches Schwert”.

21 Bollée 2005, p. 19; Dayal 1932, p. 298 – was the first (?) to notice that RV IV.18.1 describes the lateral birth: “E. Senart (...) says: “Je veux parler de la légende de Delos sur la naissance d’Apollon; il est aussi impossible d’en nier que d’en expliquer par le hasard l’étonnante conformité avec notre scène, ... une scène toute mythologique, remontant à une époque reculée du développement légendaire.” Apollo also walks about after being born and declares that he must proclaim the will of Zeus; but it is difficult to conceive how the Greek myth could have spread to India before the Christian era. It does not belong to the mythology of the Aryans before the dispersion of the tribes, and nothing exactly like it is found in the *Vedas*. The idea of being born from one’s mother’s side is mentioned in a hymn of the *Rgveda* (iv, 18.1, *ayām panthā anuvittaḥ purāṇo*, etc., vol. iii, page 100.”

1. [Indra's Mother:] Here is the ancient proven path from which all the gods were born. Just from it should he be born full-grown. — Do not cause your mother to fall [= miscarriage] in that way.

2. [Indra:] I will not go out from there — it's a hard plunge. I will go out crosswise, from your side.

Many are the things as yet undone that are to be done by me: I will do battle with one and make peace with another. (transl. Jamison 2014, p. 586)

The first verses of this puzzling and enigmatic hymn recount a “two-verse-exchange between Indra's mother and the as-yet-unborn Indra” (Jamison 2014, vol. 1, p. 584f). Indra – after having been in his mother's womb “a thousand months and many autumns” (RV 4.18.4) – refuses to be born “the normal way” and insists on being born “crosswise from the side” (*tiraścātā ... pārśvāt*). He exits “full-grown, conscious of his great destiny and ready to perform great feats” (Jamison 2014, p. 584). Bollée (2005, p. 15) relates Indra's lateral birth with his splitting of heaven and earth, whereas Jamison suggests that the “voices of various waters that join the dialogue in the middle part of the hymn” not only introduce “benevolent foster mothers” (vss. 7–8), but also link Indra's wondrous birth to the Vṛtra myth, his slaying of the snake and the release of waters (Jamison 2014, p. 585).

Jamison compares Indra's desire to exit his mother's womb in an unusual fashion to that of “many heroes world-wide” (2014, p. 584). In her study on “Birth narratives in Indo-European Mythology” Pagé (Pagé 2014 p. 181, see also Oberlies 1998, pp. 251 ff.) confirm that the story of Indra's birth follows universally and cross-culturally attested patterns of “heroic birth”, patterns that are also found in the Indo-European mythological and narrative systems. Besides the motive of “birth from the side” we find other typical ingredients of a “heroic birth” in RV 4.18. These include an unusual period of gestation, a child that decides when to leave its mother's womb, and a new-born who is fully grown, taking his first steps and asserting his power in the world (RV 4.18. 2c-d) *bahūni me ākṛtā kārtvāni yúdhyai tvena sám tvena pṛchai*. According to RV 1.61.14a–b and RV 4.17<sup>22</sup> earthquakes occur when Indra is born, and his birth is associated with both water and snakes. All of these

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22 RV 1.61.14ab ...*bhiyā girāyaś ca dṛḥhā dyāva ca bhūma janīśas tujete* “... in fear of his birth both the firmly fixed mountains and heaven and earth thrust against each.” (Jamison 2014, p. 181). RV 4.17.2cd *ṛghāyānta subhūvaḥ pārvatāsa ārdan dhānvāni sarāyanta āpaḥ* “ [At your birth] ... the well-founded mountains throbbed, the wastelands shuddered, and the waters ran.” (Jamison 2014, p. 582)

elements are also found in the heroic biographies of e.g. Celtic mythology (Pagé 2014, pp. 152, 177), and, as we will see, some of them appear in the narrative of the Buddha's birth, at least in the Sanskrit Buddhist textual tradition, and in the Buddhist texts from Central Asia translated from Indian sources. The Bodhisatva himself decides when to descend from Tuṣita and when to leave his mother's womb. His mother gives birth in an unusual position (while standing – for the exception found in the *Buddhacarita* see above, fn. 15), he emerges from his mother's side (*pārśvāt*, *pārśvena*) without causing her pain, takes seven steps, looking at the four quarters, and declares this to be his last existence (see e.g. *Buddhacarita*, 1.15). The air is filled with scent and the earth quakes, though no life is destroyed (MV II 10). Last but not least, water is mentioned, and comes in the form of two streams that fall from the sky, bathing both the new-born and his mother, although both are – as is pointed out explicitly – completely undefiled. There is no doubt that the motive of a sideways birth existed in India dating from the *Rgveda* onwards, and even though we cannot be sure how well the Buddhist public knew the *Rgveda*, stories of miraculous births where children emerged from their mother's side, or from other parts of her body, were certainly in circulation. The narrative of Māndhātār – who in many ways was considered a counterpart to Indra, even among the Buddhists (Zin 2012) – relates (*Mahābhārata* III.26.25) that he was born from out of the side of his father:

“A hundred years passed, then the great-spirited king's left side split open and a son like another sun came out in great splendour; and King Yuvanāśva did not die, which was miraculous.” (Van Buitenen 1975, p. 464)

In Buddhism, too, Māndhātār is said to be born from his the father, although here the story tells us that he emerged from his father's head. In *Buddhacarita* 1.10 Māndhātār appears in a list of several other individuals born in an ‘unnatural’ way:

“As Aurva from the thigh, as Prithu from the hand, as Mandhatri from the head he who was Indras peer, as Kakshivat from the armpit, so was his [i.e. Bodhisattva'a] birth.” (Olivelle 2008, p. 5)

According to Bollée, the superhuman character of the Bodhisatva reflected in the accounts of his birth can be explained by his nature as a *mahāpuruṣa*. There is probably more to it than Bollée surmises. Minoru Hara was the first

to draw attention to the parallels between Sanskrit versions of the Buddha Śākyamuni's birth narrative and Indian medical texts, as well as their conceptualization of gestation and birth. Hara points out that the Buddha, thanks to his being *ayoniya*, also is completely free from *janma-duḥkha* and the horrors of gestation and actual birth (Hara 1980, p. 156). According to Kritzer (2009) and also Sasson (2009) a further dimension becomes visible; here, we find reflections concerning the purity and cleanliness which is endangered by the pollution that is associated with childbirth.

It is questionable whether all of this, however, is able to provide an answer to the varied questions concerning representations of the iconography of the birth of the future Buddha. Let us look again at Fig. 2, the relief from Amaravati. As earlier stated, the relief dates back to the so-called “aniconic period”, when the Buddha, as well as the Bodhisatva in the period before attaining enlightenment, was not depicted in the figure of a person. The Bodhisatva is not present, but there is also no evidence of space in which his figure could be imagined emerging from the queen's side. The queen is holding her left arm up, and not her right arm; her right arm is closer to where the gods are standing and is held akimbo. Her arm thus covers or even blocks “the path” between the queen's flank, through which the Bodhisatva was to be born, and the cloth held by the gods. And yet, he has been born; we see his footprints as evidence on the cloth. This type of depiction is so illogical that it has even been claimed of one relief in Kanaganahalli<sup>23</sup> (Quintanilla 2017) that the image was originally intended to be an illustration of another episode, and was only subsequently inscribed *bhāvato j(ā)[ti]* (The birth of the Lord).<sup>24</sup> This scepticism is understandable, yet the iconographical conformity of the Kanaganahalli relief to other examples from the region allows us to ascertain that it was indeed intended to be the representation stated in the inscription.

Approximately 30 reliefs belonging to the area of Andhra illustrating the birth of the Bodhisatva have been identified, from Amaravati, Ghantasala, Kanaganahalli, Phanigiri, and Nagarjunakonda, i.e. from the 1st to the 4th century. A single example from Amaravati (Fig. 4) dating from the 1st century (?) shows the queen – as in the reliefs from Gandhara – with her right arm held upwards, i.e. with an “open” path between the queen's flank

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23 Zin 2018, no. 2(17), illus. Aramaki / Dayalan / Nakanishi 2011, p. 70; Poonacha 2011, pl. 85, description pp. 267–268; Nakanishi 2012; Stone 2015, fig. 3.8; Quintanilla 2017; Zin 2018, pl. 10, pp. 66–69.

24 Nakanishi / von Hinüber 2014, III.2,3, pl. 32, p. 92.

and the gods. This relief (or rather only the uppermost part featuring the heads of Māyā and the gods) has only been preserved through a drawing made in the beginning of the 19th century,<sup>25</sup> making it impossible to verify whether the drawing actually corresponded to the relief. If it did match the relief, it would be evidence that this fashion of illustrating the birth of the Bodhisatva (who, however, certainly was not shown as a person) was familiar in Andhra dating back to a fairly early period (maybe even predating the depictions in Gandhara). All of the other examples from Andhra depict the event differently. In these examples, the arm of the queen is blocking the path between her flank and the deities. Most of the examples echo the model from our Fig. 2: The queen holds her left arm akimbo, and the gods are placed further to the left, behind her elbow. However, there are also examples (from Nagarjunakonda and Phanigiri) that show the scene in mirror image (Fig. 5). Here, too, the gods stand to the side of the queen's elbow but are located on the right side of the scene. There are also four images that appear to be the latest examples in the progression of the development of the image. In these examples, the queen's arm is not akimbo, but either hangs downward (Nagarjunakonda, no. 45)<sup>26</sup> or is depicted in a pose that appears as though the queen is reaching for her earring with her hand (this appears no less than three times in Kanaganahalli).<sup>27</sup>

In all reliefs, including these latest examples, Māyā's arm blocks the space between her flank and the deities. However, in all reliefs, it is this side which is highlighted by Māyā's standing pose, featuring her hip thrust out as if the child was meant to emerge from this location. This may seem illogical, but it is so consistently applied – over the period of some 300 years – that it is difficult to imagine it as unintentional. It appears that the motif of the *śālabhañjikā* is of a rather symbolic character here. The child is not intended to emerge from the same side of the queen's body as the arm holding the branch. Māyā exposes her flank towards the gods by the holding her arm

25 Drawing by C. Barnett from March 1817, housed in the British Library as Mackenzie's "The Amaravati album", drawing, no. WD 1061, folio 57.

26 Illus. Stone 1994, fig. 110.

27 According to Arlt (forthcoming) the relief on the frieze from the southern projection (illus. Poonacha 2011, pls. 30 B and 124 A) – the only one in Kanaganahalli showing Māyā with her arm akimbo – should probably be dated to around 120 CE, while others (pls. 122 C, 125 D) were created later – this appears to be true of the large slab as well (cf. fn. 23); one of these later examples is dated by the inscription to 136 CE.

akimbo – this is the side from which one should imagine the Bodhisatva coming out from his mother’s womb.

Paintings in Central Asia present yet another model which can be found in the region of Kucha. The model of representation used here corresponds to the tradition of Gandhara, in that Māyā is holding onto the tree branch with the arm that is closer to the gods (in most cases, this is her right arm) and thus turns the side of her body from which the child is to emerge towards the gods.<sup>28</sup> The child, however, does not emerge from her flank. In all examples, without exception, the child emerges from the queen’s axilla (Fig. 6). The strange object resembling a bubble which materializes from the queen’s armpit is a diminutive mandorla surrounding the (undepicted) body of the Bodhisatva. In Kizil Caves 99<sup>29</sup> and 175<sup>30</sup> the child is shown with his head downwards facing towards the cloth held by Indra. Depictions where the Buddha (or rather: the future Buddha) is not shown and only the empty mandorla surrounding him has been portrayed are exceedingly rare in Kucha. They might signal the adoption of an iconographical pattern. In several examples, it is impossible to determine whether the depiction was meant to indicate only a mandorla or a mandorla and a child, as those areas in the murals, clearly once gilded have been deliberately destroyed.

We do not have any textual parallels for this puzzling representation. In Pali and Sanskrit texts, the Bodhisatva is said either to have descended from his mother’s womb: *mātu kucchismā nikkhamati* (*Majjhimanikāya* 123, 3.3 cf. also *Mahāpadānasutta*, *Dīghanikāya* xiv. 1. 25f. = *Mahāvādānasūtra* 62: *mātuḥ kukṣer niṣkrāntaḥ*; also in *Saṅghabhedhavastu* I.45), or to have appeared from or emerged through his mother’s side: *parśvāt ... jajñe* (*Buddhacarita* 1.9) or *bodhisatvo smṛto samprajāno mātaram abādhayamāno dakṣiṇapārśvena prādurbhavati* (*Mahāvastu* 2.20).

Texts in the different languages of Buddhism in Central Asia reflect the wording of the Indian sources. A badly abraded West Tocharian fragment from Kizil, Kucha, gives us the text THT 291b, a3 *mātri katsāmem sū lnaṣṣā(m)*

28 The scene is depicted in Kizil 76, 99, 110, 175, 193, 205 and on a fragment in Japan from unknown cave; as in our Fig. 6, the scene was depicted on the cloth shown by the minister Varṣākāra to King Ajātaśatru when the minister informed the king of the Buddha’s death; eight more such depictions are known (Zin 2020, occurrence 20, pp. 79–81), but the birth scene has been preserved only in two.

29 Kizil, Cave 99, left corridor, outer wall, illus. Tan / An 1981, vol. 1, pl. 197.

30 Kizil, Cave 175, rear chamber, right lunette, illus. Tan / An 1981, vol. 2, pl. 98; *Kizil Grottoes* 1983–1985 / 1989–1997, vol. 3, pl. 36; *Mural Paintings* 2009, vol. 2, p. 240, pl. 203.

‘... he emerges from his mother’s womb’. The expression *mātri katsāmeṃ länt-* aligns with the Skt. *matuḥ kukṣer niṣ-kram-*. Unfortunately, we do not have enough context to determine whether the passage is related to the birth of the Bodhisatva. In an East Tocharian fragment belonging to the *Maitreyasamitiṅātakam* we find a corresponding phrase, in this case clearly in the context of the birth of the Bodhisatva: TA 257 (THT 890) *pol(k)ā(ts) tärkräṣṣ oki mācri kā(tsāṣ) (lä)c sām wsāṣi letky o(ki)* ‘Like lightning out of a cloud, he emerged from the womb of his mother ‘like a golden liana’.

In the parallel Old Uyghur text, chapter 11 (9v 18) of the *Maitrisimit*, a text that – according to colophons – was translated from East Tocharian, which in turn can be traced back to an Indian original, the part of the body from which the Bodhisatva is born is given as *ködrüm*. This term, a hapax, is translated as ‘hip’ (Hüfte) in Geng, Klimkeit and Laut (1988, p. 350). Jens Wilkens, however, in his *Handwörterbuch des Altuigurischen*, translates it as ‘(Körper) Seite, Flanke’ (Wilkens 2021, p. 399). These two distinct renderings remind us that translations are interpretations and can be biased according to the textual or pictorial representations the translators follow.

The narrative of the Bodhisatva’s birth in the Khotan Sakan *Book of Zambasta* contains several of the elements of a “heroic birth” mentioned earlier; among them we find the lateral birth. Fol. 403<sup>v</sup> 217-219:

- 217 *kau baudhisatvā merä kvāy’sāna dāstä*  
*hvaramkya kvā’sa kho sarbandä urmaysde 7*  
 218 *śśakkrā brahmānā thaunu vīrī nāndä*  
*gyastūñi rraṣṭu hamatä śśando västātä 8*  
 219 *nai ju vā merä ttu skyātu chādrä kvā’sa*  
*surai kāḍe ysātä nandä nāgä vanandä 9*

When the Bodhisatva appeared from his mother’s side, (it was) on the right side, like the rising sun. Śakra, Brahma received him in a cloth. The divine One himself stood upright upon the ground. At that time there was no hole for him in his mother’s side. Very pure he was born. Nanda the nāga ... (Emmerick 1968, p. 383).

According to Wang Fang (forthcoming) most of the Chinese sources indicate that the Bodhisatva was born from 右脇, i.e. the right flank of his mother, 右脇 meaning the “side of the body from the armpit down to the waist”. Different artists developed their own individual interpretations of the term, partly

influenced by Gandharan representations. While the infant emerges from the waist in an early relief from Shaanxi Province (461 CE according to the inscription), a different relief from the same province dated 10 years later shows the Bodhisatva emerging from her armpit. Later on, this iconography becomes the standard representation in Chinese Buddhist art. Interestingly, Daoists of the 5th and 6th centuries appropriate the Buddha's birth story to fabricate Laozi's *vita* but differentiate meticulously in terms of wording. Whereas the Bodhisatva emerged 'from the right flank', Laozi came out 'from his mother's left armpit' (左腋).<sup>31</sup>

There are further examples reminiscent of the Kucha paintings where the child emerges from out of his mother's armpit. As in Dunhuang, Queen Māyā is demurely dressed, but there can be no doubt that also here the child emerges from his mother's armpit or sleeve.<sup>32</sup>

The model from the Kucha paintings is repeated in some paintings in Western Tibet. In at least three paintings in Ladakh, found in Dukhang,<sup>33</sup> in Guru Lakhang (Fig. 7), and in Kanji,<sup>34</sup> the Bodhisatva is shown emerging from the axilla. Unlike in the representations in Kucha, however, the child is not surrounded by a mandorla, and Queen Māyā is presented fully dressed.

In Ladakh, however, we also encounter the Gandharan representation with the child emerging from the mother's flank. This model is typical of Tibet. It is the model of Pala art, where the little Bodhisatva "flies" out of the queen's side.

Tibetan textual sources – as expected – render the Sanskrit originals quite faithfully. The Bodhisatva is said to have been born from his mother's womb or his mother's right side. In the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, two different terms for Skt. *kukṣi-* 'womb' represent different stylistic registers: *rum dral nas = kukṣiṃ bhittvā*, as said by Māyā herself and *lhums nas bltam pa = kukṣer niṣkrāntaḥ*, as said by the narrator.<sup>35</sup> The Tibetan version of the *Buddhacarita* states that

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31 Wang Fang, private communication, 31.3.2022. Cf. also Bumbacher 2012, p. 215. We are extremely grateful to Ms. Wang for sharing her unpublished manuscript (Wang forthcoming) with us.

32 Like in Cave 290, east side of gabled ceiling, upper register, right side, illus. *Mogao Grottoes*, vol. 1, pl. 176.

33 Illus. Ham with Amy Heller and Likir Monastery 2019, p. 144, left, above.

34 Private communication with Prof. Amy Heller (Bern), Dr. Gerald Kozicz (Graz), Dr. Heinrich Pöll (Graz); we would like to thank the aforementioned for drawing our attention to the paintings in Ladakh.

35 K1 ga 278a7-278b1 = *Saṅghabhedavastu* ed. Gnoli 1977–1978, vol. 1, p. 40, resp. K1 ga 280b2–4 = *Saṅghabhedavastu* ed. Gnoli, vol. 1, p. 45; cf. *Mahāvīyutpatti* 7153: *mṅal lam lhums sam rum du 'jug pa = garbhāvakrāntiḥ*. Johannes Schneider, private communication (24.3.2022), draws our attention to this stylistic subtlety of the translator.

the Bodhisatva appeared from his mother's side (*rtsib logs*, cf. *rtsib* 'rib'), obviously a loan translation of Skt. *pārśva-*, etymologically a *vrddhi*-derivation from Skt. *parśva-* 'rib'. However, younger Tibetan genealogies claim that the Bodhisatva was born from Queen Māyā's *mchan khuñ*, which, according to the *Mahāvvyutpatti*, is the equivalent of the Sanskrit *kakṣa* 'armpit'.<sup>36</sup> So, for example, in the 18th century *List of Great Patrons of the Teachings* we find: *sgyu 'phrul lha mo'i mchan khuñ* [[424b3]] *g.yas nas sku bltams pa'i tshé* 'born from Mahāmāyā's right armpit'.<sup>37</sup> A similar passage is found in the *The Chronicles of Ladakh, Genealogy of the Śākya*s. Here, too, it is claimed that Śvetaketu (Bodhisatva Śākyamuni) (cf. Buswell/Lopez 2014, p. 883) was born from his mother's *mchan khuñ* (Francke 1926, pp. 26 and 74). Last but not least, in the narrative of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon is said to have been born from the right armpit (*mchan khuñ*) of his mother. In his dissertation *The Emergence of a Myth: In search of the origins of the life story of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon*, K.N. Gurung (2011, p. 68–69) claims that "In Tibetan literature, this way of birth is reserved for great figures", and that "... the story of the manner of the Buddha's birth was borrowed to compose the story of the birth of Shenrab." Gurung continues, explaining that various reasons for birth from the armpit are provided in different texts: "According to the *rGya cher rol ja*, it was to prevent pollution by the supposed impurities of the mother's genital organ. Impurity is not mentioned in the *mDo 'dus*; instead it is written that the baby could not be born from the mother's womb because it was blocked by Māra."<sup>38</sup> The motive of the "armpit-birth" has seemingly become a standard concept in Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, and is found in contemporary archaeological publications, artefact descriptions, and media. Babu Krishna Rijal writes in his article *The Birth Place of Lord Buddha* (1984, p. 1): "A male child came forth from the right side of her armpit, and walked seven steps and proclaimed the following words ...". Similarly a note from an exhibition 2014 in Shanghai in the *Global Times* tells us that "visitors can see this through the exhibits, which depict stories such as how his [the Bodhisatva's] mother dreamt of an elephant entering her body and soon after found she was expecting a baby; how he was born out of his mother's armpit; and how he

36 Mvy. 3971.

37 Johannes Schneider, private communication (24.3.2022). The passage is from *The collected works of Longdol Lama*. Fasc. 'a, 3a3. (= *A List to Describe the History of the Great Patrons of the Teachings both Kings and their Ministers from Both India and Tibet*).

38 Gurung 2011, p. 69.

meditated for 49 days under a Bodhi tree before he finally became the Buddha.”<sup>39</sup> Last but not least an article on *Dzempa Chunyi: The Twelve Acts of the Buddha* from the *National Newspaper* of the Kingdom of Bhutan, states: “In the third act, the Buddha was born miraculously in Lumbini, allegedly from the right armpit of his mother. He is believed to have taken seven steps right after his birth and declared: “I am the supreme in the world.”<sup>40</sup>

We are left with a question. Did the concept of being born from the armpit originate in individual artists’ representations which then became standardized in the text, or was there some linguistic background to the phenomenon? Body part terminology and the question of how speakers of different languages perceive, categorise and conceptualise the human body as an “entity with parts”, has been a field of interest both in linguistics, anthropology and cognitive science. Names for body parts do not only provide insight into how languages conventionally segment the body (Enfield et al. 2006, p. 138), cross-linguistically they also present unique possibilities to study the impact of “universal versus culture specific principles of semantic categorisation” (Majid 2006, p. 242). Diachronically, body part terms are of special interest since they seem to be particularly susceptible to semantic change such as extension (both metaphoric and metonymic), shift of reference, semantic transfer and taboo replacement.

A famous example for semantic change is Skt. *kukṣi-*, in dictionaries traditionally and rightly rendered as ‘belly, pregnant belly, womb’. Stephanie Jamison convincingly argued however, that *kukṣi-*, etymologically connected with *kósa-* ‘cask, pail, cup’ (going back to an underlying \*‘hollow, cavity?’), and in Vedic mostly attested in the dual form *kukṣí-*, originally meant ‘the two cheeks’, in Rigvedic hymns often referring to Indra’s cheeks (filled or to be filled with Soma) (Jamison 1987, pp. 71–81). By metaphoric extension *kukṣí-* in late RV and post-RV texts also refers to the ‘buttocks’ (du.) (*ibid.*, pp. 79–80), and then – in singular form – to the ‘pregnant belly’ of a woman (Jamison 1987 p. 80). First in later Sanskrit the meaning ‘belly’ of the now singular *kukṣi-* becomes predominant, and this is the meaning retained both in Middle and Modern Indic languages (*ibid.*, p. 81).

Sanskrit *pārśva-*, a *vṛddhi*-derivation from *parśva-* ‘rib’, literally meaning ‘belonging to the ribs’ (cf. Engl. *ribcage*), became extended into a more general (vague) meaning ‘side or flank of the body’, secondarily even into ‘flank of

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39 *Kuensel* 2015-08-02, <<https://kuenselonline.com/125296/>>.

40 *Global Times* published 2014-12-8.

a mountain', 'flank of an army'. Research into semantic typology suggests that body part categorisation is not universal,<sup>41</sup> and that there can be large variation in the extension (referential range) speakers of an individual language give for the terms referring to individual body parts (Majid 2006, p. 242). Among other examples, Majid cites the Punjabi term for armpit, *kəc* (< Skt. *kakṣa*- 'armpit') that "extends for some speakers down the side of the torso, i.e. the area of the torso which is hidden by the arm when it is against the side of the body" (Majid 2006, p. 249).

Mapping variation in semantic breadth (vagueness) and the referential range of body part terms in one language with the semantic breadth and referential range of body part terms in another, was the challenge that translators of Buddhist texts and also artists representing the texts visually, had to meet. It also left room for interpretation.

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<sup>41</sup> Enfield et al. 2006, p. 146, Majid 2006, p. 242.

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## List of Illustrations



Fig. 1 a-b: Ajanta, Cave X, left side wall, copy by John Griffiths, no. 10L-K, photograph © Ajanta Archives of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Research Centre “Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road”; drawing by Monika Zin CC BY-NC-SA



Fig. 2: Nandayapalem, Amaravati, Kalachakra Museum, no. AM-25; photograph © Wojtek Oczkowski



Fig. 3: Gandhara, Lahore Museum, no. 1033; photograph © Muhammad Hameed

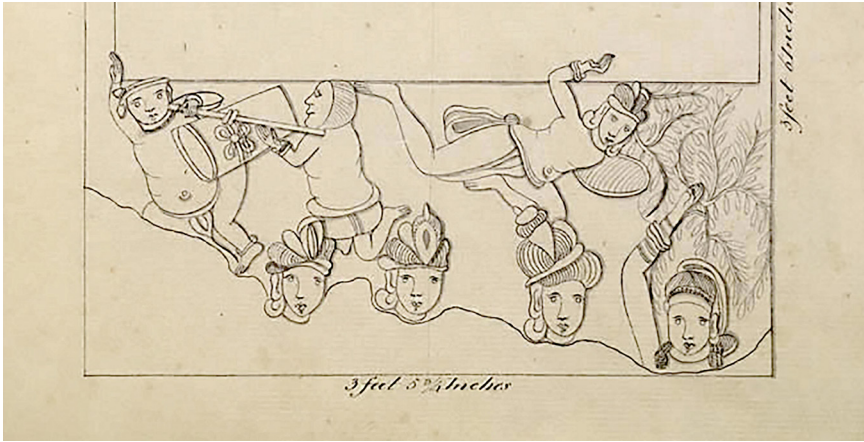


Fig. 4: The British Library, Mackenzie album, folio 57, available as: “Drawing of two fragments, from Amaravati album” <<https://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/amaravati/images/c0330-04large.jpg>>



Fig. 5: Nagarjunakonda, New Delhi, National Museum, no. 50.17; photograph © Wojtek Oczkowski



Fig. 6: Kizil, Cave 205, left corridor, inner wall; drawing by Grünwedel, Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, no. TA 6631 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, CC BY-NC-SA



Fig. 7: Ladakh, Guru Lakhang, East wall; photograph © Heinrich Poell

