

The deer goddess of Tabo

Research on the iconographic setting of a female protector in the Western Himalaya

The monastery of Tabo (Spiti valley, Himachal Pradesh) was founded in the year 996 by the royal lama Ye shes'od.¹ During the first artistic phase a hitherto unknown goddess was installed as a tutelary deity above the doorway in the vestibule of the main temple (fig. 1).² Although the image of this deity was severely damaged by water, the iconographic setting is preserved and contains an important indication for the hierarchical position and religious function of this goddess.

Spatially separated by two brown stripes or wooden sticks from her retinue, the goddess received her own honorific, pictorial space. Just once more this motive is adopted in the representation of the royal founder depicted on the south wall of the vestibule (fig. 2).

While the textile design and the drapery of the figures' enclosures clearly differ, they find their counterparts in a common artistic genre: as pointed out by Klimburg-Salter, in style and technique the earliest paintings in Tabo are best compared to a group of silk banners excavated in Dunhuang (fig. 3).³ On some of these banners a similar, frugal mode of spanning a textile behind a single deity is shown, as is the case for the representation of the tutelary goddess of Tabo. Moreover, several non-iconic, patterned banners and textile fragments from Central Asia provide the physical prototypes for the vertical striped textile design used in Tabo (fig. 4).⁴ The upper portion of decoration of the donor depiction - the zig-zag decorative band combined with a series of lotus flowers – equally constitutes a frequently used canopy for the Bodhisattva images of various banner paintings (fig. 5).

In summary, the iconographic setting of the tutelary deity and the royal founder find their possible counterparts in a common artistic genre of Central Asia. In further details, the categories of temple banners discussed here also inform us about the ceremonial function and the religious status of these two prominent figures. As tradable artefacts, the



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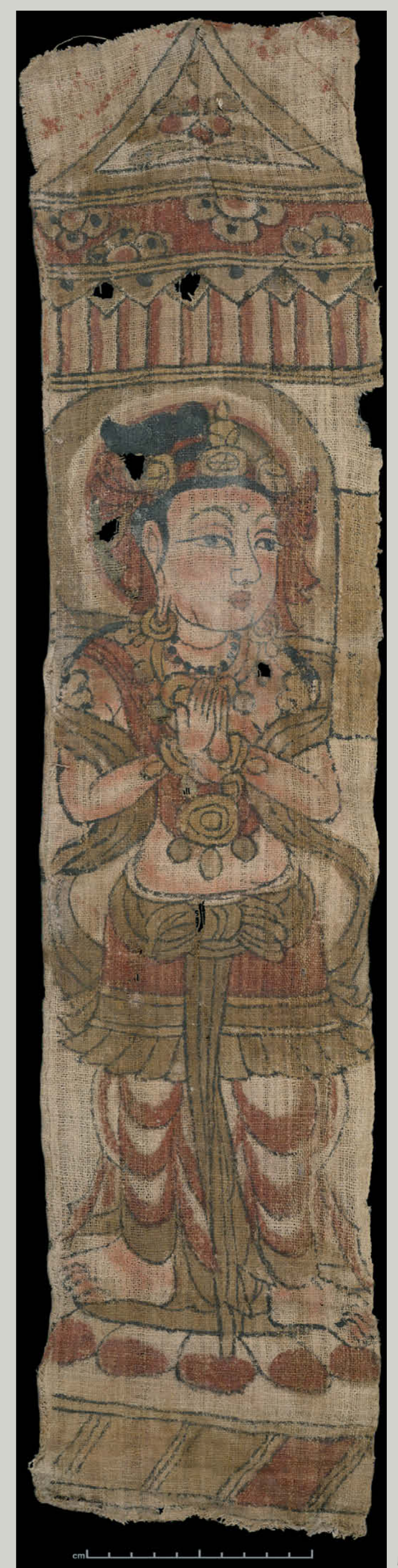


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banner paintings demonstrate an important source of artistic exchange, while their place of origin and stylistic tradition is hard to define. My further research therefore aims to find comparable artistic prototypes *in situ*. Also of importance are certain iconographic features not discussed here that continue to be used to characterize the image of the protectress. These include the retinue of eighteen women as well as her *vāhana*, the antlered deer. The character and symbolism of these iconographic features should shed some light on artistic traditions in the Western Himalayas at the turn of the first millennium and further define the religious-cultural background of this female deity and its worshippers.



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1. The two main phases of construction for the main temple of Tabo in 996 and 1042 are documented by inscription. The chronology of the artistic decoration of the main temple is based on these dates and has been studied in detail by Klimburg-Salter, D. (1997) *Tabo, a lamp for the kingdom*, Milan.

2. An inscription categorizes the goddess belonging to a group of ancient Tibetan female spitiits, called *smān*, combined with the unfamiliar name "Wi-nyu-myin.", see Luczanits, C. (1999) *Inscriptions from the Tabo temple*, Rome, p.114.

3. Klimburg-Salter (1997), p. 209; the group of banners has been excavated by Sir A. Stein in Cave 17 (Ch.Ivi.001-0010). Stylistically the paintings may relate to the art of Khotan or western Tibet. See Whitefield, R. & Farrer, A. (1990) *The Caves of the thousand Buddhas*, London, p. 62, Fig. 34, 35, 36; as well as, Gropp, G. (1974) *Archäologische Funde aus Khotan, Chinesisch-Ostturkestan.*, p. 94, and Klimburg-Salter, D. (1982) *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path*, Los Angeles; pl. 58, p. 132.

4. The patterned textiles were used for decorating a place of worship; Bhattacharya-Haesner, Ch. (2003) *Central Asian Temple Banners in the Turfan Collection of the Museum für Indische Kunst*, Berlin, p.73, fig. 5, 6.

Fig. 1 mural painting, the protectress of Tabo © WHAV

Fig. 2 mural painting, the royal donor of Tabo © WHAV

Fig. 3 painted silk banner, Dunhuang, Bodhisattva with Lotus © British Museum: 1919, www.britishmuseum.org

Fig. 4 patterned banner, Dunhuang © Victoria and Albert Museum, http://idp.bbaw.de/database

Fig. 5 painted hemp banner, Dunhuang, Avalokiteśvara © British Museum: 1919, www.britishmuseum.org