

# Depiction types of scenes from the Life of Buddha Śākyamuni on wooden portals in Himachal Pradesh



1.



5.



6.



3.



2.

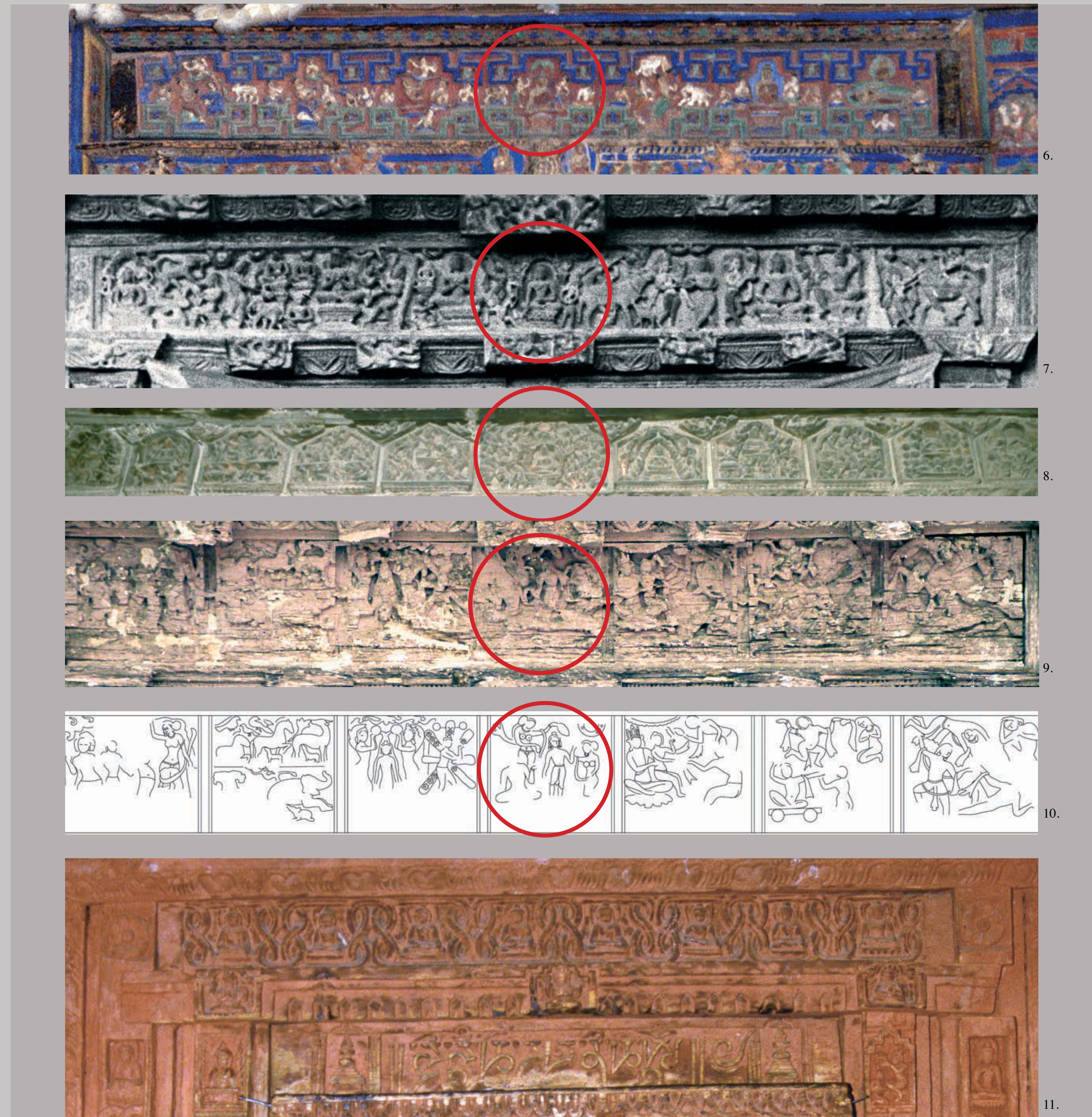
With the second diffusion of Buddhism (*phyi dar*) in Western Tibet, from the 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century C.E., artists created an independent, linear-chronological, manner to depict the life of Buddha Śākyamuni, according to the needs of the new Buddhist community. The majority of Buddhist temples from this period in the Western Himalayas, show elaborate carved wooden portals as part of their decoration. All these illustrations show episodes from the life of the historical Buddha, beginning with his stay in *Tuṣita* heaven and ending with the *māravijaya* or his *parinirvāṇa*.

The type of the carved wooden portals derives from decorated portals of the Gupta and Post-Gupta eras. This kind of decorated façade was used both for Buddhist and Hindu temples. Today there are only few examples that survive in Northern India. These include the Buddhist examples of the portal of the 'du khang in Alchi and, the portal of the bCu geig zhal in Wanla, both in Ladakh (fig. 1-2); the portal of the dKar chung lha khang in Nako, Kinnaur (fig. 3); and the portal of Lha Chuse in Kanji, Ladakh.

Detailed comparisons with examples from Tholing and Khojarnath (fig. 4-5) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) show that this

type of decoration was characteristic for Western Tibet, with the *Lalitavistara* serving as one of the main sources for the narration. Except for Wanla (fig. 2), probably the latest example, all the above mentioned portals show, or have most probably shown, 2/3 of the episodes on their vertical panels. The most important scenes are depicted on horizontal lintels. In Alchi, Tholing and Khojarnath (fig. 1 and fig. 4-5), the **enlightenment** (fig. 6-7) or the *māravijaya* (fig. 8) can be seen in the center, while the portal of Nako (fig. 3) seems to show as the central episode, the *bodhisattva* preparing for the first visit to the temple (fig. 9-10).

The only requirement for the donors and the artists seems to have been to depict the entire life story on the portals, starting with the *Tuṣita* episode and ending with the *parinirvāṇa*. Within this framework, a variety of episodes were depicted. While earlier examples, like Tholing or Khojarnath, always show the *parinirvāṇa* or the *māravijaya* in the center, the decoration of the younger portals, like Nako, seem to be more varied. The most recent example of this decorative scheme, the portal of Wanla (ca 14<sup>th</sup> c.), does not have any depictions of the Buddha's life on the lintel (fig. 11).



## Pictures:

1. Portal of the 'du khang in Alchi, Ladakh (D. Klimburg-Salter 1981, WHAV)
2. Portal of the bCu geig zhal in Wanla, Ladakh (C. Luczanits 1998, WHAV)
3. Portal of the dKar chung lha khang in Nako, Kinnaur (V. Ziegler 2002)
4. Portal of the gSer khang in Tholing, Ngari (E. Ghersi 1935, ISAO)
5. Portal of the 'du khang of Khojarnath, Ngari (J. Poncar 1993, WHAV)
6. Lintel, portal of the 'du khang in Alchi, Ladakh (D. Klimburg-Salter 1981, WHAV), Detail
7. Lintel, portal of the gSer khang in Tholing, Ngari (E. Ghersi 1935, ISAO), Detail
8. Lintel, portal of the 'du khang of Khojarnath, Ngari (J. Poncar 1993, WHAV), Detail
9. Lintel, portal of the dKar chung lha khang in Nako, Kinnaur (V. Ziegler 2002), Detail
10. Lintel, portal of the dCu chung lha khang in Nako (© G. Kozicz 2007)
11. Lintel, portal of the bCu geig zhal in Wanla, Ladakh (C. Luczanits 1998, WHAV), Detail

## Literature:

- Foucaux, E. (1884), *Le Lalita Vistara. Développement des Jeux, L'histoire du Buddha Çakya-Mouni depuis sa naissance jusqu' a sa prédication*, traduit du Sanskrit en Français par Ph. Ed. Foucaux, Annales du Musée Guimet, tome sixième, Paris.
- Klimburg-Salter, D. (1988), The Tucci Archives Preliminary Study 2: The Life of the Buddha in *Western Himalayan Monastic Art and Its Indian Origins: Act One*, in: *East and West*, ISMEQ, Vol. 38 (1-4), Rom, 189-214.
- Luczanits, C. (1996a), *Early Buddhist Woodcarvings from Himachal Pradesh*, in: *Orientations* 27 (6) 1996, Hong Kong, 46-53.
- Luczanits, C. (2002), *The Wanla Bkra shis gsum brtsegs*, In: *Buddhist Art and Tibetan Patronage. Ninth to Fourteenth Century*, Deborah Klimburg-Salter & Eva Allinger (eds.), PIATS 2000, Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000, edited by Henk Blezer, Vol. 2 of 7. Leiden, Brill: 115-125.
- Pöll, H. (2005), *Wooden Temple Doors in Ladakh. 12th-14th centuries CE.*, in: *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Mumbai* 79, Mumbai, S. 191-204.
- Tucci, G. (1937), *Khojarnath, 1° Luglio*, in: *Santi e Briganti nel Tibet Ignoto, Diario della Spedizione nel Tibet Occidentale 1935, 1937-X V.*, Milano, 38-43.