

TURFAN UYGURS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHIST MATERIAL CULTURE AND ART RENAISSANCE*



TURFAN UYGURLARININ MAHAYANA BUDİST MADDİ KÜLTÜRÜNE VE SANAT RÖNESANSINA KATKILARI**

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Abstract

Turks contributed highly in development of Buddhist religion, philosophy and culture in Turkestan and China starting from the dynasties they established in North China. Many of the first Buddhist sūtras were translated from Indian languages to Chinese and the first Buddhist cave temples were built under the patronage of these Turks' sovereign. Buddhist Uygurs made great contributions, especially to Mahāyāna Buddhism in Turfan and Dunhuang. The renaissance of Mahāyāna Buddhist Art which flourished in Northern India by Kushans happened in Turfan 10th century onwards. This artistic revival in the ancient Buddhist center stressed especially Buddhahood and paradise themes. Prānīdhi scenes gained their gigantic dimensions with Uygurs. The emphasized artistic themes and their new representations have strong links with old Turkic culture and religion. In this paper, we tried to analyze the emergence of some important Mahāyāna Buddhist material culture themes and symbols used by Turfan Uygurs and their contribution to Mahāyāna Buddhist Art Renaissance. As we tried to interpret this Buddhist culture links to the past, we expect to shed light on cultural history of Turfan Uygurs, which continued some of their old beliefs and religious ideas after adopted Buddhism and merged them into Buddhist material culture.

Keywords: *Uygur, Uighur, Mahayana, Culture, Buddhist Art,*

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Öz

Türkler Kuzey Çin’de kurdukları hanedanlıklardan itibaren Türkistan ve Çin’de Budizm, Budist felsefe ve Budist kültürün gelişmesine büyük katkı sağlamışlardır. Kuşanlar Dönemi’nde Kuzey Hindistan’da başlayan Mahayana Budist sanatı örnekleri, Turfan Uygurları arasında 10. yüzyıldan itibaren ortaya çıkmıştır. Mahayana Budizmi öğretisi, her Budistin kurtuluşa ulaşmak (“Buda olmak”) için tanrıların varlığını, onlara inanıp dua etmeyi vurgulayan; Hinayana Budizmi’nin aksine, hikmetten çok, sevgi ve inanca yer veren bir yaklaşıma sahiptir. Dolayısıyla Mahayana Budist sanatı, içinde Budalar, bodisatvalar ve Budist cennette onların maiyeti olarak yer alan bir çok semavi varlıklardan oluşan bir “harikalar dünyasını” Budist anlatıları çerçevesinde sergiler. Bu makalemizde Turfan Uygurlarının Mahayana Budist kültürüne dair eserlerinde işledikleri temaların ve sembollerin ortaya çıkışı ile bunların Mahayana Budist Sanat Rönesansına katkılarını çözümlenmeye çalıştık. Buda olma dileğini anlatan ve ilk olarak MS 5. yüzyılda *Kızıl 38. Mağara*’da küçük boyutta, eşkenar dörtgen madalyon içinde görülen *Pranidhi* sahneleri, dev boyutlarını Uygurlar sayesinde kazanmışlardır. Sanata dair vurgulanan temaların ve bu temaların yeni temsillerinin şüphesiz Eski Türk kültürü ve dini ile güçlü bağları vardır. Makalemizde öncelikle *Pranidhi* sahnelerinin Türk kültüründeki *atarlar kültü* ile ilişkisini sorguladık. Daha önce değerli kültür tarihçimiz E. Esin tarafından belirtilen; ikonografik açıdan Budist mandala ile Türk kültüründeki *kuram* kavramlarının benzerliğinden bahsettik. Budizm’e Eski Hint kültüründen geçen semavi varlıklardan muhafız *Lokapalalar*ın ve Buda’nın özel muhafızı *Vajrapani*’nin askeri görünümünü Türkistan’da kazandığının altını çizdik. Buda’nın ilk vaazını temsil eden *dharma tekerleği* etrafında iki geyik sembolünün Uygurlarda nasıl farklı bir hal aldığını ve olası sebeplerini tartıştık. Sayıları az olmakla birlikte Turfan’daki Uygur Budist cennet tasvirlerinin Dunhuang’da bulunanlardan farklı olarak cennetin nimetlerinden ziyade Buda ile birlikte olmak konusunu işlediğini öne sürdük. Son olarak da Uygur Mahayana Budist sanatının canlı ve gerçekçi üslubunu Eski Türk sanatından miras aldığını; aynı devamlılığın Budist *sutralarda*, özellikle Altun Yaruk’taki Budist anlatılarını duvar resimleriyle kolaylıkla eşleştirmeyi mümkün kılan anlatıcı tarzını örneklerle belirttik. Özellikle *Pranidhi* tasvirlerinde dünyevi sahneleri ve aşkın alt sahnelerini başarılı bir şekilde birleştiren güçlü anlatıcı tarzın bu rönesans açısından önemini vurguladık. Bu çalışmamızın, Budizm’i kabul ettikten sonra eski inanç ve dini görüşlerinin bazılarını devam ettiren ve onları Budist maddi kültürü ile birleştiren Turfan Uygurlarının kültür tarihine ışık tutmasını ümit ediyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Turfan, Uygurlar, Mahayana, Kültür, Budist Sanat,*

Uyghurs who adopted and were highly devoted to Mahāyāna Buddhism since 9th-10th centuries in Turfan, developed a great Mahāyāna Buddhist culture until 14th-15th centuries when they gradually converted to Islam. Uyghurs' Buddhist material culture is quite strong and different from its precursors, in terms of stressed themes, art motives and style, due to their earlier culture which was highly shaped by their older religion called generally *Sky-God Religion*. This paper tries to establish to analyze the links between these two cultures and reveal not only material cultural dimensions of them, but also shed light on intangible cultural sides which oriented Uyghurs to decide which theme, which motives and how to paint in Buddhist cave temple murals, chosen from the rich portfolio of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Mahāyāna Buddhist Art

Mahāyāna Buddhist Art is an imaginative art of devotion, love and faith based on a theistic approach, in contrast with Hīnayāna Buddhist art with its rigid and concrete nature, centered on the Historical Shakyamuni Buddha and his doctrine framed with thick lines of Hīnayāna Buddhist canon. E. Conze expressed that with Mahāyāna, wisdom was replaced by faith and meditation by worship.¹ This radical shift of concepts opened an amazing door to the Buddhist world of wonders plenty of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, other heavenly beings living in splendid paradises. This would surely stimulate mostly the inspiration on art and the visualization of these new concepts through the magical hand of art, which was just the case.

The first striking feature of Mahāyāna art is the iconism of Buddha appeared initially in Gandhara and Mathura. This newly born portrayal religious art started with Buddha image and continued with the depictions of bodhisattvas, other heavenly beings, humans (monks and lay donators). D. Seckel showed in a very comprehensible and chronological way how the single representation of Buddha in sculpture was replaced by the group paintings where *bodhisattvas*, *arhats*, *yakshas*, *dvarapalas*, etc. were portrayed around the central Buddha figure.² As Mahāyāna invented "innumerable Buddhas within innumerable worlds" concept, this gave inspiration to "Thousand Buddhas" motif in Mahāyāna art, which became the most popular filling motif in Buddhist caves decoration. These art themes and motives were transferred from Northern India to Central Asia and later to China by Buddhist priests, together with Mahāyāna *sūtras* and *shastras*. During this progress of Mahāyāna, it is quite noticeable how Buddhist caves evolved starting from Kizil to Dunhuang, overshadowing the leading Ajanta caves of India with their intensity, variety and innovation of compositions in their decoration.

Turks' Sky God Religion and Its Material Culture

Ancient Turkish culture, dating back thousands of years, is mainly shaped by the national religion of Turks, the earliest religion of Uyghurs as well as Ancient Turks,

1 Conze, 1963, 144-146.

2 Seckel, 1964, 202-206.

called either as “Sky God religion”³ or as Tengrism in literature. M. Eliade mentioned that Altaic people, mainly Turks and Mongols had different understanding for their “Sky God” worshipped as the powerful single God, creator of the cosmos, not transformed to sun, moon or thunderbolt deities in later periods, not married and not had children, not represented with idols.⁴ The faith system of this religion is composed of Sky God, belief on natural powers called “water-land spirits” and ancestor cult.⁵ This religion is also called “universalism”, a system initiated earlier by Chou Dynasty established by Turks⁶ as a religion and state conception.

This universal approach of Turks, building strong relationship between God-universe and man, served as a strong base when they adopted foreign religions. The traditional unwritten law of Turks, called “töre” was strongly shaped by Sky God religion and highly based on ethical values, similar to *dharma* of Buddhism.⁷ Turkish ruler, who was given ruling power (*kut* in Old Turkic) by Sky God, was charged to apply *töre* to the entire world and rule the world in all four directions⁸ like *chakravartin*, “the ideal universal ruler of Indian culture”.⁹ The ancestor cult was applied for the heroes (*alp*) and legendary Turkish rulers, i.e. *Oguz Kagan*, *Alp Er Tunga (Afrasiyab)* as they could still watch, inspire, protect and help their descendants, like *mahārājas*, “four heavenly kings in Buddhism”. Turks’ belief that dead ancestors can still interfere their descendants’ lives, caused them be kept content with offerings, sacrifices and immortalizing them through pictorial and sculptural representations. Portraying humans with individual features such as physical appearance, clothes, accessories and weapons is an important characteristic of Turkish painting art, which could also be motivated by the ancestor cult. (*Fig. 1a, 1b*)

The ancestors’ representations could be made of felt, silk, wood or fabric either in form of puppets (called *tös*) to be placed into the grave instead of the cremated dead, as stone statues placed out of the grave or as small statues/models (called *onguns*) to be kept in yurt to venerate them.¹⁰ The facial death masks found in Minusinsk Basin (Tashtyk Culture) and Ural-Kama Regions that might be associated with Turks.¹¹ Turkish

3 Although there is no information on how Ancient Turks nominated their religion, we chosen to call it “Sky God religion” as it is centered on Sky God faith. Sky God emphasis and monoteistic approach of Altai peoples’ religion was mentioned earlier by M. Eliade, one the most famous religion historians.

4 Eliade, 1996, 63-64.

5 Güngör, 2007, 529-535.

6 Eberhard, 1977, 23.

7 Please refer to the previous work of the author for *töre* and *dharma* comparison: Zeren, 2016, 122-134.

8 Kafesoğlu, 2007, 248-251.

9 *Chakravartin*, being an old Indian term, was also used later for Buddhism. (Zeren, 2016, 134-135.)

10 Esin, 1978, 18-19; Tryjarski, 2012, 392-394.

11 Esin, 1978, 18; Ösi Halotti Maszkok, 2013, 34-39.



Fig. 1a: A Hunnish Ruler or a prince portrait on a fragment of embroidered wool, 1st century, Noin Ula Kurgan, Mongolia, Hermitage State Museum. (<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/shm/shmnoinula.html>)



Fig. 1b: Bust of Költigin (Commander and brother of Turkish kagan), 8th century, Mongolia, Ulan Batur Museum. (Wikipedia)

portraiture becomes apparent in the stone statues called “sin” erected on top of the kurgans and other figurative sculpture of Turkish *kurgans*.¹²

The most characteristic features of Turkish rock art dating back to several millennia B.C.¹³, was its realism and naturalism expressed by graphic delineation technique. E. Esin defined the characteristics of this nomadic art as *vigorous expressionist style, graphic technique, a gift for portraiture, virtuosity in the depiction of animal motifs* and also *the desire to evoke, as strikingly as possible, an impression of reality*.¹⁴ The represented themes were mainly hunting, veneration and worship rituals, war scenes, which served as documentation where the writing was missing, what could also be expressed as “story telling in petroglyphs”. (*Fig. 2, 3*)

12 Esin, 1972b, 251; Çoruhlu, 2007, 200-201. For further information on the relation of Turkish portraiture with these pre-Islamic stone statue tradition, please refer to: Çoruhlu, 2014, 587-614.

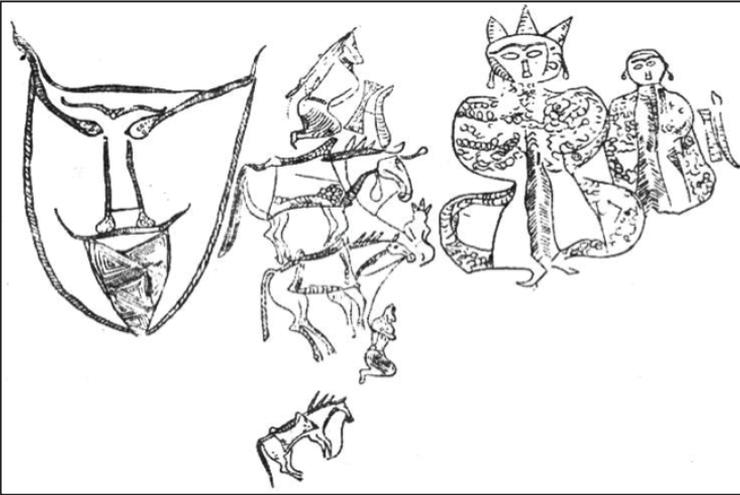
13 Petroglyphs in Turks' motherland areas are generally earliest dated to Mesolithic period starting ca. 10.000 B.C. when Holocene period started after the ending of icelands. (Baumer, 2012.)

14 Esin, 1972b, 251-252.



◀ **Fig. 2:**

A religious (?) ritual scene, petroglyph from Saimaluu-Tash, Kyrgyzhistan. (Somuncuoğlu, 2011, 236.)



◀ **Fig. 3:**

Veneration Scene, Umay or Turkish ruler with attendant and soldiers paying homage, ca. 6th century, Kudirge Kurgan. (Ögel, 2003, L.13.1)

The scenes with its narrative nature seems to accompany the oral tradition of Turks, famous with their epics and legends storytelling. In Költigin Inscription, it is written that the scenes from the dead hero's life were painted to the memorial house (*bark*) walls. Another striking example of Turkish realistic narrative painting is the visualization of the death ritual called “yoğ” exactly in the same way as it was held in **Mayhan Uul Kurgan** from Turks' period in Mongolia, with the small human and animal statues representing contributors to the ceremony. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: Mourning Scene, Mayhan Uul Kurgan, 7th century, Mongolia. (Karcaubay, 2013, 238.)

Buddhism Among Turks and Turkish Buddhist Art Before Uyghur Period

The introduction of Buddhism among Turks dates back to 4th century based on written sources, during the period where Northern China was dominated and ruled by their northern enemies, especially Huns (Xiongnu).¹⁵ Following Chou Dynasty (1050-221 B.C.), whose ethnic composition was heavily based on Turkish tribes, a series of dynasties of Turkish ethnicity ruled Northern China between 3rd-6th centuries, Later Chao (329-352), Northern Liang (397-439) and Northern Wei (385-550).¹⁶ During this period where Northern China was governed by foreign peoples, Buddhism, especially Mahāyāna School, flourished dramatically in China. Buddhism was adopted by foreign rulers as a favorable foreign religion suppressing national Chinese religions like Confucianism and Taoism.¹⁷ Another fact is that Buddhist priests played important roles as intellectuals and statesman in Turkish rulers' palaces to replace the Confucianist elite who refused to support foreign rulers and migrated to Southern China.¹⁸

One of the first documents regarding Huns' adoption of Buddhism is a biography of the Buddhist priest *Fo-t'u-teng* who visited Later Chao Dynasty ruler *Shih-Lo* in 310

15 Baykuzu, 2008, 195-196,198; Esin 1979, 698.

16 Eberhard, 1977, 125,132, 138-139; Gabain, 1961, 23.

17 Eberhard, 1965, 126-127.

18 Eberhard, 1977, 134-137.

at Lo-yang, in Chin-Shou.¹⁹ The rulers of Northern Liang dynasty established by *Ch'ü-Ch'ü* (or *Tsü-küe*) Huns, especially *Meng-Sun*, supported translation works of important Buddhist missionary priests such as *Dharmasema* (*T'an-mo-ch'an*).²⁰ He ordered building of Buddhist cave temples in Ku-tsang (T'ien-t'i shan), Su-chou (Wen-shu-shan) and Dunhuang.²¹ After defeating North Liang Dynasty, T'opa rulers inherited Buddhist culture from them and continued to build cave temples in Shanxi (Yungang), Luoyang (Longmen) and Dunhuang.²² They systematized Buddhist *sangha* and related institutions' activities and managed their official relationship with the state.²³ T'opa rulers were also initiators of the idea of rulers' depiction as "Buddha", emphasizing rulers' religious role to maintain *dharma*. It is well known that the five bronze statue of *Buddhas* within the first five Yungang Caves were made as representing the five rulers of Wei.²⁴ The pilgrim *Sung Yun* narrated that "all Buddha statues look like 'Hu's'."²⁵ This idea could well be grounded on the perception of Buddha by Turks. His nature as *chakravartin* was fitting in totally with the conception of monarchic Turkish ruler as world conqueror. Buddha was called as *Burkan* (Bur+kan) by Turks, derived from the combination of "bur" as Buddha's name loaned from Chinese and "kan/han/kän" suffix which is used to make a title (pointing generally to a high position as "han" -Turkish ruler title).²⁶ It is also typical to meet "our father/ancestor Buddha" expressions in Uygur Buddhist literature.²⁷ This clearly indicates that Turks venerated Buddha as a *Lord, king or ancestor* which helps to understand his iconography in Turkish Buddhist art.

The earliest caves among Dunhuang Mogao Caves that survived until today were built during Northern Liang period. The ornamentation of these caves had strong emphasis on *Maitreya* cult venerated by both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism.²⁸ The colossal Maitreya statue of Northern Liang period built in Cave 275 is one of the first colossal Buddha representations in Northern Buddhism. (*Fig. 5a*) Among the other monumental Buddha statues in Central Asia, one needs to list the two colossal Buddha statues in Bamiyan (*Fig. 5b*) and many others in *Yungang* (*Fig. 6*) and *Longmen Caves*.

19 Bazin, 1948, 3-11.

20 Soper, 1958,141.

21 Soper, 1958,141-142, 149.

22 Fisher, 1993, 92-94.

23 Eberhard, 1977, 147-150.

24 Tezcan, 2005, 151-152.

25 Esin, 1978, 63-64.

26 Gabain, 1941, 60.

27 As an example: *kim meniñ kılmiş neçe kılınçlarım erser emgeklig tüş utlılarıg tükel birteçig alkım barça burkanlıg kañlarımnıñ üskinte kırtü köñülin kşantı kılı tegintim* (*Altun Yaruk/108/2-7*) (*Shall I repent in front of Buddha fathers with pure heart for all my bad deeds that will give me pain*). (Tokyürek, 2011,10.)

28 Yaldiz, 2008, 70.

The common point of these magnificent works of art is that they were all produced under Turkish sovereignty. Latest researches in Bamiyan date two Buddha statues mostly to 3rd-7th or 5th-6th centuries which were either Hephtalites²⁹ or Western Turks³⁰ periods.³¹ This magnification of Buddha images as *cakravartin* seems highly related with ancestor cult of Ancient Turks, depicting pictorial representations of ancestors to memorize and venerate them. This custom could be in its turn dated back to Chou Dynasty in China. Confucius declared in his work titled as “The Sayings of Confucius’ Family” that he had seen some portraits of ancient rulers called *Yao, Shin, Jie* and *Zhou*, each with their personal characteristics, either being benevolent or fierce.³²

Uyghur Mahāyāna Buddhist Material Culture in Turfan as an Art Renaissance Phenomenon

Uyghur Mahāyāna Buddhist Art in Turfan was very productive between 9th-12th centuries, in various forms such as caves, architectural elements, sculptures, hand made paintings on murals and textiles. We will focus only on Turfan Uyghurs’ mural paintings in this short paper to highlight the Mahāyāna Buddhist Art Renaissance.

The fundamental doctrinal principles of Mahāyāna Buddhism constitute the main themes of Uyghur Mahāyāna Buddhist Art in Turfan. Buddhahood, eschatology and stories from Mahāyāna sūtras are especially to be noted among them. General Buddhist symbols and art motives like *dharmachakra*, *triratna* (three jewels, *cintamani* in Old Turkic), *children born in lotus flowers* are also depicted in many paintings together with the portraits of Mahāyāna Buddhist pantheon deities, heavenly beings and donors.

The proposed classification on the main categories of Turfan Uyghurs’ mural paintings in Buddhist caves between 9th-12th centuries based on iconography is composed of six main categories³³ :

1. Central Buddha with his attendants (pranidhi and paradise scenes)
2. Central Bodhisattva with his/her attendants
3. Buddhist stories in sūtras
4. Hell scenes
5. Cult scenes on veneration and rituals
6. Donors and priests portraits

29 Litvinsky, 1996, 153,158.

30 Tarzi, 2007, 920-922; Klimburg-Salter, 1989, 91.

31 The testimony of Xuanzang who was the first to describe these colossal statues in a well-condition with their red and blue colors, gilded faces and hands in 630 shows that either they were not destructed by Hephtalites or were restored under Western Turks patronage. (Wriggins, 2004, 45-48.)

32 Zhang, 2002, 12.

33 Zeren, 2015, 658-660.



Fig. 5a: Colossal Maitreya Statue, Mogao Cave 275, Northern Liang Period, Dunhuang. (5000 ans d'art chinois, 1989.)

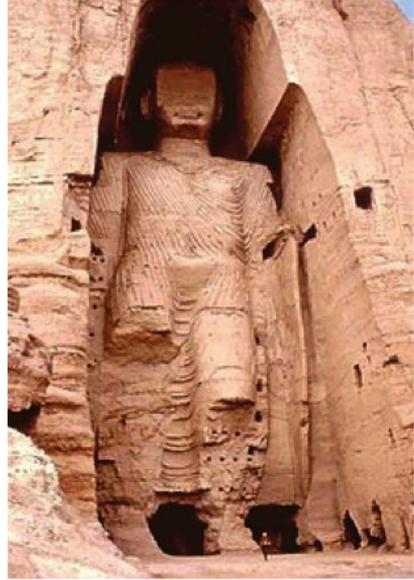


Fig. 5b: Colossal Buddha Statue (55 m.), 6th -7th centuries, Bamiyan, Afghanistan. (Wikipedia.)



Fig. 6: Colossal Buddha Statue, Yungang Cave 20 North Wei Period, ca. 460-470, Shanxi. (Wikimedia Commons.)

In terms of the dynamism reflected in these paintings, we can list relevant categories as portrait, iconic painting and narrative painting respectively. In terms of style, Turfan Uyğur Mahāyāna Art is realistic (even on documentary level), naturalist, but sometimes vigorously expressionist and dynamic. The vast symmetrical and complex compositions differs it from its Buddhist art antecedents, as we will trace below.

a) *Pranidhi's Colossal Buddha Inherited from Ancestor Cult?*

Colossal Buddha representations in Afghanistan and North China were revived several centuries later with *Pranidhi* (or *Prandhāna*) scenes by Turfan Uyğurs. These scenes, iconographically unique in Buddhist art, were found mainly on the side walls of the cave and in a simpler composition on the ceilings of the cave in Bezeklik (14 caves, but especially *Cave 20*), Sengim (*Temple I*), Kocho (*Temple α and β*), Karaşar, and Karahoca.³⁴ Their magnitude as 2 meters tall and their high quantity percentage as one third of total Bezeklik wall paintings needs to be considered as a *Renaissance phenomenon*. Several studies pursued on *pranidhi* scenes allowed us to know that they narrated *vyakarana* theme, showing how Buddha Sakyamuni made vow to other *Buddhas* in the past and got the prophecy of *being a Buddha* in his turn.³⁵ Thus, the main theme of this special type of paintings is the aim for attaining the Buddhahood, the final target in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The oldest *pranidhi* compositions were found in Kizil Cave 38 which dates back to 5th century. However, they are significantly small in dimension and simple in iconography compared to vast symmetrical compositions in Bezeklik Cave 20. Some examples given in *Fig. 7a* and *Fig. 8a* below from Kizil are not easily distinguishable than the other offering scenes. In *Fig. 7a*, a king presents an umbrella to Buddha while in *Fig. 8a*, a merchant presents treasures to Buddha. In her article, I. Konczak compared these representations with similar scenes in Bezeklik Cave 20. (*Fig. 7b and Fig 8b*) Besides their monumental dimensions, the compositions in Bezeklik present more intensive, sophisticated and higher degree of art in terms of space, volume and color usage. The whole surface of the mural painting is filled with Buddha's attendants, bodhisattvas, arhats and even with architectural elements. It is quite easy to identify Bezeklik paintings' original narrative style due to written texts on inscriptions and the top decoration with curtains, imitating a theatrical scene.

Central Buddha, *chakravartin*, is represented in a cosmological aspect, as the *world axis*,³⁶ as Buddha Shakyamuni was conceived by Uyğurs as an heroic ancestor and universal ruler who attained Buddhahood. The unique fact that Buddha wears a dress with long jewellery in Bezeklik paintings³⁷ could be explained by Uyğurs portraying

34 Zu, 2012, 69.

35 Konczak, 2012, 43.

36 Esin, 1979, 719.

37 Zu, 2012, 70.



Fig. 7a: Pranidhi Scene, (in situ) Wall Painting, Kizil Cave 38. (Konczak 2012, Fig. 3.)



Fig. 7b: Pranidhi Scene, (lost) Wall Painting, Bezeklik Cave 20. (325 x 460 cm.) (Le Coq, 1913, Tafel 21.)



Fig. 8a: Pranidhi Scene, (in situ) Wall Painting, Kizil Cave 38. (Konczak, 2012, Fig. 5.)



Fig. 8b: Pranidhi Scene, (lost) Wall Painting, Bezeklik Cave 20. (Le Coq 1913, Tafel 22.)

Buddha's "enjoyment/glorious body" or "body of bliss" (*sambhogakāya*) out of his three bodies (tri-kaya),³⁸ as this is visible in the pure lands describing often much sensory imagery including jewel trees. To our understanding, this is inherited from the realism and documentary eligibility of Turkish painting tradition.

Uyghurs' *pranidhi* scenes are amazing compositions where two worlds (one mundane and the other transcendent or supramundane) were combined in one scene, in an harmonical way.³⁹ While the transcendent life is expressed by the Central Buddha, the worldly life is represented with the portrait of the person representing earlier incarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni vowing to be Buddha, his offerings and scenes from his life. This multiple worldly scenes add also a time dimension to these paintings.

b) Mandala Relationship with Kuram?

Mandala, being mainly the schematic representation of the cosmos, has another meaning in Buddhist art, which is a *picture of a group where heavenly beings are hierarchically and symmetrically placed around a central holy figure according to sacred texts*.⁴⁰ In mandala format, Buddha is mostly surrounded with his attendants with his attendants (usually another Buddha, some *bodhisattvas* and *arhats*, *Vajrapani* or *other yakshas*) placed at the four corners. (**Fig. 9**) These compositions were obviously designed as figurative *mandalas*. This is the same geometrical pattern as we see in mandala paintings exhibited in Hermitage State Museum. In Old Turkic culture, the most intimate attendants of Hun ruler, called "four corners" were the four leaders ruling in four regions mapping to four directions.⁴¹ This concept was strikingly found its mate in "four *lokapālas/mahārājas*" motif frequently used in Uyghur Buddhist literature and art.

Esin underlined that *mandala* might have originated in Turkestan during Kushan period, by inspiration from Inner Asian state governance concept. Turkish and later Chinese peoples reflected their conception of world on a circular diagram where tribal leaders and directional rulers were depicted surrounding the central monarch.⁴² This setting where

38 Seckel, 1964, 155-156, 182. (Seckel mentions that the colossal Buddhas from Bamiyan were originally covered with jewellery and ornamental chains and suggests that Buddha image with jewellery can be explained with his *sambhogakaya* body and his identity as *cakravartin*, which were later combined in Buddha Vairocana. Conze claims that the represented Buddha image is always his *sambhogakaya* body with 32 main and 80 auxiliary *lakṣanas*.)

39 Seckel gives in his book a hanging scroll depicting "Amitabha appearing from behind the mountains" from Japan, dated as first half of the 13th century (Seckel, 1964, Plate 31, 212-213.) as an interesting illustration example to show the finite and infinite worlds together not as mutually opposed, but as approximating to one another and linked. There are much more earlier and frequent examples as such in Turfan from Uyghur period.

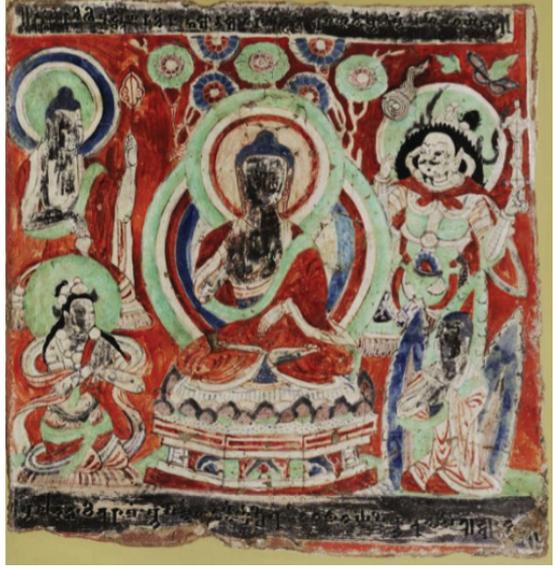
40 Gaulier, Jera-Bezard and Maillard, 1976, 43.

41 Esin, 1972a, 346.

42 Esin, 1979, 705.

Fig. 9:

Buddha Shakyamuni and his attendants,
Wall painting, Bezeklik Cave 26,
Museum für Indische Kunst.
(Ghose 1999, Cat. No. 71.)



each attendant takes position based on his title is called *kuram* in old Turkish.⁴³ This concept might be projected to *mandala* as the central Buddha or bodhisattva surrounded by other Buddhas, bodhisattvas, heavenly beings or arhats. This Buddhist iconography continued later during many centuries in Turkish and Ilkhanid miniatures depicting the world ruler with his attendants.

c) Lokapāla and Vajrapāni Depicted in Warrior Aspect

The lokapālas with their military aspects was told to have initially appeared in Turfan⁴⁴ (*Fig. 10*), drawn with some epolettes and arm bands in the form of ferocious animal mask, lion, tiger, boar or elephant, similar to the lokapala unearthed from Astana grave no. 206.⁴⁵ Recently, similar guardians sculptures were unearthed from Mayhan Uul Kurgan where they are displaced as lokapalas. (*Fig. 11*)

Vajrapāni in some Pranidhi scenes was for the first time drawn in a warrior aspect, as indicated by J. Hackin. (*Fig. 12 a, b*) This disguise is typical for Turkish warrior wearing helmet with wings or tiger fur as headgear. Thus, assigning Buddha's attendants a warrior appearance seems inherited from old Turkish culture. This practice was later taken by Kansu Uyğurs too, who depicted lokapālas in similar aspect in the four corners in some Dunhuang Mogao Caves, i.e. Cave 61.

43 Kaşgarlı Mahmud, 1941, 413.

44 Baker, 2004, 27. Esin also indicated that lokapalas, called "küzetkici" ("watchman") in Old Uyğur appeared with ancient Turks' dress. (Esin, 2006, 287-290.)

45 Baker, 2004, 22.



▲ **Fig. 10:** Two lokapālas, details from lost mural painting. Berlin Museum für Indische Kunst, IB 6879. (Le Coq, 1913, Tafel 33.)

◀ **Fig. 11:** Guardian Sculpture, Turk Khaganate Period, 7th century, Mayhan Uul Kurgan, Mongolia. (Karcaubay, 2013, 238)



▼ *Left* **Fig. 12a:** Vajrapāni like a warrior. Detail from lost mural painting, IB 6884. (Le Coq 1913, Tafel 17.)

▼ *Right* **Fig. 12b:** Uyghur Warrior (Alp) with tiger-head hat, painting on textile, Chotcho, Berlin Museum für Asiatische Kunst, MIK III 4799. (Along the Ancient Silk Routes, 1982, Fig.123.)



d) A New Dharma Wheel Interpretation

An iconic painting or “cult scene” from Turfan Uygurs’ Mahāyāna art is another lost mural painting unearthed by A. von Le Coq from Bezeklik. The inscription read by P. Zieme⁴⁶ confirmed that it represents the first preaching of Buddha in the Deer Park. Although three-fold dharma wheel symbol with two flanking deers is typically seen in Buddhist temples or monasteries (*Fig. 13*), Uygurs invented a new form of representing this historical scene.



Fig. 13: Pair of deers facing *dharmachakra* representing Buddha’s first sermon at Deer Park, Jokhang Temple, Lhasa. (Wikimedia Commons.)

In the Uygur painting in *Fig. 14*, one male and one female aristocratic donor, two wind deities and four deers are placed symmetrically around an unusual *dharmachakra* wheel. The central *dharmachakra* wheel in motion as evidenced from wind deities, has a trident and a crown with four pins at the top and a support with five legs. It seems there is a strong emphasis on Buddhist numerology where the sacred numbers 3, 4 and 5 point to *triratna*, four noble truths and five precepts respectively. Three-fold wheel has respectively 4, 13 and 13 spokes from center outwards although the traditional

number of spokes is 8 symbolizing the noble eightfold path. No proposal was made on the meaning and argumentation of 13 spokes in the second and third fold so far.

Another radical change for this worldwide Buddhist symbol is the deer pair (probably one male and the other female due to different shapes of antlers) at the each side of the wheel. We propose that four deers, symbolizing the first hearers of Buddha preaching in Buddhist iconography, represent here the four classes of *sangha*, monks, nuns, male lays and female lays. We can ask ourselves why gender was highlighted in this painting, compared to typical depictions with two deers. As mentioned above, Turks had an universalist and affectionate approach for the entire cosmos, including the nature and all beings. There are numerous Turkish coins dated from Turk Khaganate period depicting “kagan” and his wife “katun” together in the same hierarchical size. It is well known that *katun*, having her own army and power in the state, were helping *kagan* in the state administration. This gender equality, supported by the existence of monogamy in old Turkic culture, is thus visible from the iconography of donor couple drawn in the same size, in contrast with Chinese portraiture.

⁴⁶ Zieme, 2012, 8.



Fig. 14: Cult Scene with Dharmachakra, (lost) Mural Painting, Bezeklik Cave 12, Berlin Museum für Indische Kunst. (Le Coq, 1913, Tafel 38c.)

e) Emphasized Topics in Paradise Scenes

One important school of Mahāyāna Buddhism is *Pure Land Buddhism* taking its roots from India, although many scholars argued that commentaries on Sukhavati sūtras and Amitayus Visualization Sūtra might be produced in Central Asia.⁴⁷ This cult around *Buddha Amitabha* and his paradise *Sukhavati* was very favoured in Turfan as we can observe from Toyuk Meditation Caves 20 and 42 dating approximately from the 5th century.⁴⁸ N. Yamabe thus concluded that Turfan could be the birthplace of Visualization Sūtras and related texts as many passages in these texts were reflected visually in the meditation paintings in the caves.⁴⁹

Previously, A. Stein mentioned that all *Sukhavati* paradise scenes designed in *mandala* format were produced in Turfan.⁵⁰ Both Grünwedel and Stein declared that these heavenly *mandalas* representing paradise originated in Turfan.⁵¹ R. Petrucci highlighted that *pranidhi* scenes were preferred in Turfan while paradise scenes were preferred in Dunhuang.⁵² Generally, paradises of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna were depicted in very different ways due to the different conceptions of faithfuls and artists. First, in Toyuk meditation caves of 5th century, paradise was vowed by priests via visualization of its single components known from Buddhist sūtras. Secondly, paradise was depicted based

47 Williams, 2009, 238-239; Yamabe, 2002, 123.

48 Yamabe, 2002, 143.

49 Yamabe, 2006, 419-430.

50 Stein, 1921, 883.

51 Esin, 1968, 93.

52 Petrucci, 1921, 1402. This proposal matches fully with the current material in our hands.

on the composition of central Buddhas and bodhisattvas with their *parivaras*, inspiring from mandala format.⁵³ With this mandala format, paradise paintings could be easily resized from mural to portable ramie or silk paintings as talismans. We believe that this concept was especially preferred by lay faithfuls as the level of abstraction compared to meditation scenes was quite minimized (although same scenes could well be used in cave monasteries). This might be the preferred scene for praying special Buddhas depending on the request. However, we do not encounter an eschatological sense and find explicitly the “intention of rebirth in paradise” in these scenes. Finally, we have the paradise scenes with naked children born from lotus bods, heavenly beings venerating Buddhas and this represents direct expression of lay faithfuls’ final aim. The rich Mahāyāna Buddhist art heritage in Turfan includes examples from all these categories.

Based on the proposed dating, no meditation scenes were made during Uygur period. It seems that Sukhavati paradise with its trees of seven jewels as depicted in meditation caves, was mentioned only in Uygur Buddhist texts without any artistic representation. Unfortunately, there are currently no any remaining examples of splendid paradise scenes from Turfan in contradiction to Dunhuang. However, we have few examples of heavenly mandala which depict a Buddha’s paradise or Buddha field from Uygur period. The first one is the representation of Buddha field belonging to *Buddha Tejaprabha*. (**Fig. 15**) This is the iconic paradise scene where the faithful is contemplating paradise out of the scene.

The second example is only a drawing of a mural piece found in Kocho by Grünwedel, depicting *Buddha Amitabha*’s paradise, where a bodhisattva venerates Amitabha on the right and newly born Buddhists from lotuses play in a garden. (**Fig. 16**) The only dynamism in the painting is given by the children playing. The watcher could identify himself with bodhisattva or children in this scene.

The last example found in Bezeklik, the most complex one, should represent a paradise of a destructed Buddha at the top venerated by *three lokapālas* (?) and an *arhat*. (**Fig. 17**) This is a very interesting painting as it looks like some Dunhuang paradise paintings in which a different story was illustrated vertically on the two sides. However, it seems that the same arhat or priest was illustrated everywhere in whole painting. It is highly narrative, dynamic painting which offers also an integrated composition with

53 Seckel separates these kind of paradise scenes seen most effectively at Dunhuang and all over eastren Asia in wall paintings and scrolls from mandalas. Although “they give a literal illustration of the texts, but at the same have as their central group a large configuration serving as a cult image”, mandala is “not an illustration to a text, a visionary image of a future state of redemption – a living realization, as it were, of the holy personages depicted. Instead, it is a far more theoretical and speculative construction, an abstract and schematic diagram of the world.” (Seckel, 1964, 211, 214). However, in the scenes that we mention i.e. Buddha Tejaprabha’s paradise, there is nothing than the strong hierarchy of holy figures which may be considered as “mandala” although not arranged in circular form.



Fig. 15:
Buddha Tejabrabha's
Paradise, Bezeklik Cave 8,
9th-10th centuries. (Le Coq,
1924. Tafel 17.)

repeated motif in every scene and makes easier the watcher to identify himself with this *arhat*.

These few evidences indicate that the strongest emphasis in paradise scenes for Uyğurs is “to be with Buddha” instead of the attractiveness of visions, odours or other material values of paradise itself, usually described in detail within Sukhavati Sūtras. This theory is further supported by the fact that Buddhist Uyğurs preferred to call “paradise” as “place/field of God or Buddha; country or land of Buddhas or Sukhavati (Uyg. *tengri yiri, Burkan yiri, burkanlar uluşı, sukavati uluşı*.)”⁵⁴



Fig. 16: A scene from Amitabha's Paradise,
Drawing of a Wall Painting. Kocho.
(Grünwedel, 1906, Fig. 135.)

It is quite striking to recognize both *mandala* and paradise compositions together within Uyğurs' *pranidhi* scenes in addition to the narrative representation of *vyakarana* theme.

54 Tokyürek, 2011, 90-91, 186, 204, 422-424.

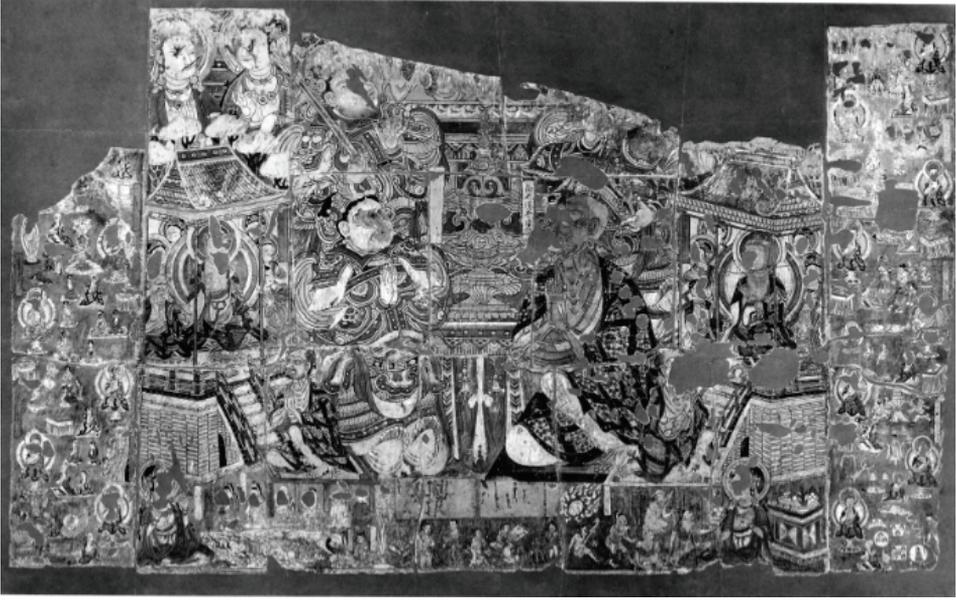


Fig. 17: A Narrative Paradise Scene, Bezeklik, 9th-10th centuries. (Le Coq, 1924, Tafel 18.)

f) Vivid and Realistic Style of Narrative Paintings

One of the characteristics belonging to Turfan Mahāyāna Art of Uyghurs, is the strong storytelling style observed on some wall paintings in Bezeklik. Narrative Buddhist representations, categorized mainly as scenes from the Buddha Sakyamuni's life, from the jātakas (or avadānas) and from sūtras, go back to aniconic period of Buddhist art with examples from Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravati.⁵⁵ The vivid composition leaving almost no space in the whole painting, reflect the high-level dynamism of Buddhist figures like bodhisattvas, devas, devatas, vidyārājas, brahmins, lokapālas, Garuda or lay figures like rulers, warriors or donors in motion. In parallel to rising of popular Mahāyāna Buddhism among Uyghurs, we see examples of narrative scenes, especially from *Altun Yaruk Sūtra* (*Golden Light Sūtra*, *Suvarnaprabhasa Sūtra*) in Turfan, depicted in lost murals from Berlin Museum für Indische Kunst and the Turfan Collection in Hermitage State Museum.⁵⁶ (Fig. 18) It is obvious that the source of this thematic shift from meditation scenes to narrative scenes from sūtras in Turfan Mahāyāna art is closely related with the gaining importance of *Altun Yaruk*, the most venerated sūtra by Uyghurs. This sūtra,

55 Seckel, 1964, 262.

56 Zhang, 2007, 391-392. Zhang indicates that these mural paintings by Uyghurs found in Bezeklik, Beşbalık and Dunhuang are unique as no trace is left from paintings from Central China (Chang'an and Luoyang as known from written records).

considered as a ritual book rather than a philosophical book due to the large number of *dharanis* inside,⁵⁷ was classified under Tantric Buddhist literature by some experts for the same reason.⁵⁸ There are many episodes suggesting that a specific Buddha, bodhisattva or a heavenly being must be called for help by drawing a *mandala* in the center of which his or her image is to be placed and related *dharani* was repeated several times.

As other Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist faithfuls, Uyğurs believed that *dharanis* were the sacred words which would bring salvation and immediate help. Visualization and meditation training and rituals were not needed especially for lay people of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Other striking features of *Altun Yaruk*, which show some parallelism with old Turkish culture, are the strong emphasis made to the importance of rulers, *cakravartin* and the four *mahārājas* protecting the virtuous rulers, in the introduction, 11th, 12th and 20th chapters of the Uyğur version. These themes were exactly transferred in Uyğur Mahāyāna Buddhist Art within *pranidhi* scenes as Buddhas appearing as world axis and *cakravartin* which will bring the law in whole world. Four *mahārājas* took also their place in most of the narrative scenes in their military dress as protectors of four corners, *lokapālas*.

Hopefully, the realistic style of these paintings allow researchers to map them well with known Buddhist stories from *Altun Yaruk*. An important mural painting found in Bezeklik Cave 20 has in its center a tree of life motif emerging from a pool where two dragons swim and the other two dragons hold up the precious dharma jewel called *cintamani*.⁵⁹ (Fig. 19)

On the right part of the scene, an Uyğur woman which seems to be an aristocrate, holds three jewels in her hands and her server is depicted behind. On the left, a Brahmin



Fig. 18: Drawing of a Brahman from Illustration of Golden Light Sūtra, Bezeklik Grotto 10, Mission Oldenburg, 1909, Hermitage State Museum, Tu-575. (Zhang, 2007, Fig. 9.)

57 Zieme, 1996, 5.

58 Köves, 2009, 96, 115-116.

59 Esin, 2004, 131, R.208



Fig. 19: Cult Scene Representing a Story From *Golden Light Sūtra*, (lost) Mural Painting, Bezeklik Cave 20. (Le Coq, 1913, Tafel 32.)

with his novice looks up at the tree and seems to say complimentary words. The two vidyārājas, a blue one and a red one, stand out at the lower corners of the painting within a background of flames. This scene was considered as a lower portion of a larger painting where the male personage was identified either as ascetic *Vasu* or *Brahma* in a brahmin's disguise and the female personage either as Śri Devi or *Vasundhara*.⁶⁰ We proposed that this scene probably represents the story in Chapter 15 of Uygur version about *Goddess Sarasvati*.⁶¹ In the mentioned story, *Sarasvati*, the Mother of Earth, makes vow to Buddha that she will help the priests that learn Golden Light Sūtra by enhancing their rhetorical ability and ensure to expand the dharma jewel all over the world. In the second part of this story, a Brahmin called *Kondini* reads a poem to praise her and Sarasvati teaches him a magical *dharani*. The entire scene seems to immortalize and visualize this part of the most loved Sūtra of Turfan Uygurs.

Conclusion

To summarize, Turfan Uygurs were great contributors to express Mahāyāna Buddhism essentials in a complex, but integral composition consisted of self-meaningful detachable art motives. Few examples in this paper show that Mahāyāna Buddhist material culture in Turfan implemented radical changes in themes, art motives and compositional

60 Gaulier, Jera-Bezard & Maillard, 1976, 52; Esin, 1982, 5.

61 Çetin, 2012, 183-188.

styling within Uyghur period. We tried to list the reasons we define these radical changes as “Mahāyāna Art Renaissance” as following:

- “Back to doctrinal basics of Mahāyāna” with stronger emphasis on Buddhahood, Pure Land (paradise) and Golden Light Sūtra stories;
- Re-structured Prānīdhī Scenes, Reborn in monumental composition, figurative heavenly mandala format, imitating paradise scene, having both iconic and narrative nature;
- Re-formed Paradise Scenes, No meditational paradise scenes, different scenes from iconic to narrative nature and sometimes complex settings having mixed structure of different styles;
- Convergence of prānīdhī, mandala and paradise scenes focusing on “being Buddha or “being in Buddha field” themes;
- Harmonious co-existence of mundane and supramundane worlds in narrative painting.

Striking realism, naturalism, narrative style and compositional integrity within a complex scene take its sources from Turks’ strong relationship with the nature and the entire cosmos and their universalist approach. These main constituents of Turkish painting art were inherited and applied to Mahāyāna Buddhist art by Uyghurs, many centuries later.

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