A HITHERTO UNIDENTIFIED NARRATIVE COMPOSITION IN THE AMBULATORY OF THE CELLA IN THE MAIN TEMPLE AT TABO (HIMACHAL PRADESH)¹

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The aim of this paper is to present an exact description of an 11th-century narrative painting located in the ambulatory of the cella in the main temple (gtsug lag khang) at Tabo, as well as to identify its theme.

After describing the narrative paintings I will discuss possible identifications of the theme.

Methods adopted to identify the theme of the narrative:

a) Comparison of the paintings with canonical sources that are extant elsewhere at Tabo in pictorial form; e.g. the Gaṅḍavyūhasūtra in the assembly hall ('du khang) and the Bhadrakalpikasūtra, situated in the ambulatory of the cella;

b) Using fragmentary manuscripts extant in the library of Tabo to discover the theme of the composition;

c) An analysis of possible connections between the narrative painting at Dunhuang and this narrative painting;

d) Comparison with the reliefs at Borobudur in Java (c. 8th century) which show the Vajradhātuṣṭaṇḍa, narrations of the life of the Buddha and the Gaṅḍavyūhasūtra as found at Tabo, as well as comparison with representations of Jātakas and Avadānas, and with other hitherto unidentified reliefs.

Finally I shall propose an hypothesis for an explanation of the paintings based on the historical context and the inscriptions in the temple at Tabo.

The temple at Tabo in the Spiti valley of the Indian Himalayas has been well documented in Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter’s book Tabo, a Lamp for the Kingdom (1997). Her study (1997: 71–171) provides the basis for my work on the narrative painting in the ambulatory.

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DESCRIPTION

The lower part of the outer east, south and north walls of the cella ambulatory is covered by a continuous painted frieze which starts from the left of the entrance to the cella, finishing at its right (Plate 1). The frieze is roughly 42 cm high and its lower edge is approximately 70 cm above floor level. The total length of the frieze is approximately 15.3 metres (Plate 2).

The present working hypothesis is that the paintings of the frieze were created during the period of renovation under Byang chub ’od, referred to in the so-called ‘Renovation Inscription’. This inscription relates that “earlier, in the monkey year, the ancestor, the Bodhisattva [i.e. Ye shes ’od], erected this temple. Then, after 46 years, the great-nephew lHa btsun pa Byan chub ’od, motivated by the thought of enlightenment, restored this temple” (Steinkellner and Luczanits 1999: 21). These indications have been interpreted to mean that the temple was erected about 996 and the restoration was carried out around 1042. “However 984 and 1008 would also be theoretically possible” (Klimburg-Salter 1997: 46).

The painted composition consists of narrative units accompanied by framed inscriptional panels, which are, however, empty. A brief summary of the paintings will suffice to convey the events represented in the pictorial narrative. It begins on the east wall as would a sutra, with a Bodhisattva asking a Buddha to preach. In the next scene a Buddha is preaching, adored by three monks on his right and a deity and three laymen on the left (Plate 3). Following the frieze to the corner and to the south wall, there is a figure wearing western Tibetan dress, adorned with a nimbus and wearing a Bodhisattva crown with ribbons and earrings. We will find this protagonist in every scene from now on (Plate 4).

In the next scene the hero is chasing after an antelope (Plate 5). In one of the next scenes he meditates then turns towards a group of Buddhas, adoring them (Plate 6). After that he visits a house in a town, and in the following scene we see him listening to an ascetic (Plate 7).

The last two recognisable scenes on the south wall show a house inhabited by a man and three women, together with four horse-drawn vehicles. This group of vehicles is headed by a man and a woman and the protagonist with a woman, followed by two women in each remaining car.