Buddhist Art along the Silk Roads

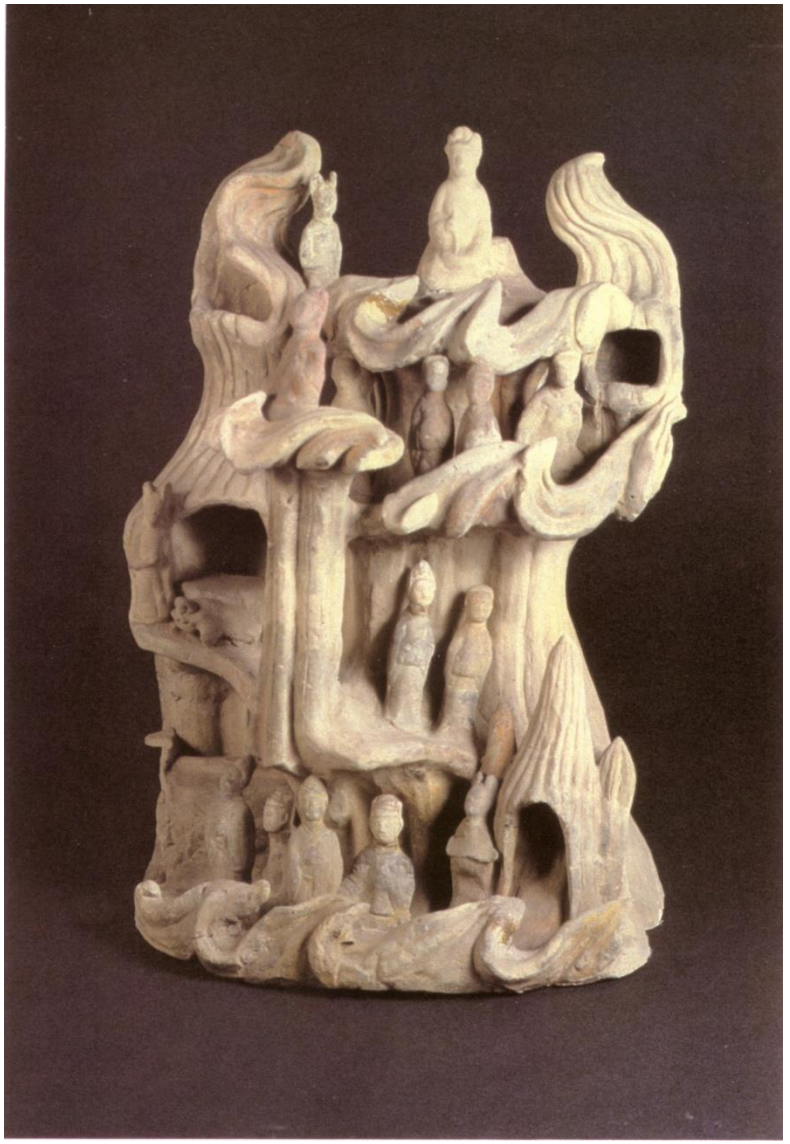
Showing Divinity in Cross-cultural Context

Eurasian Steppes as cultural “high way” 7th-2nd c. BCE

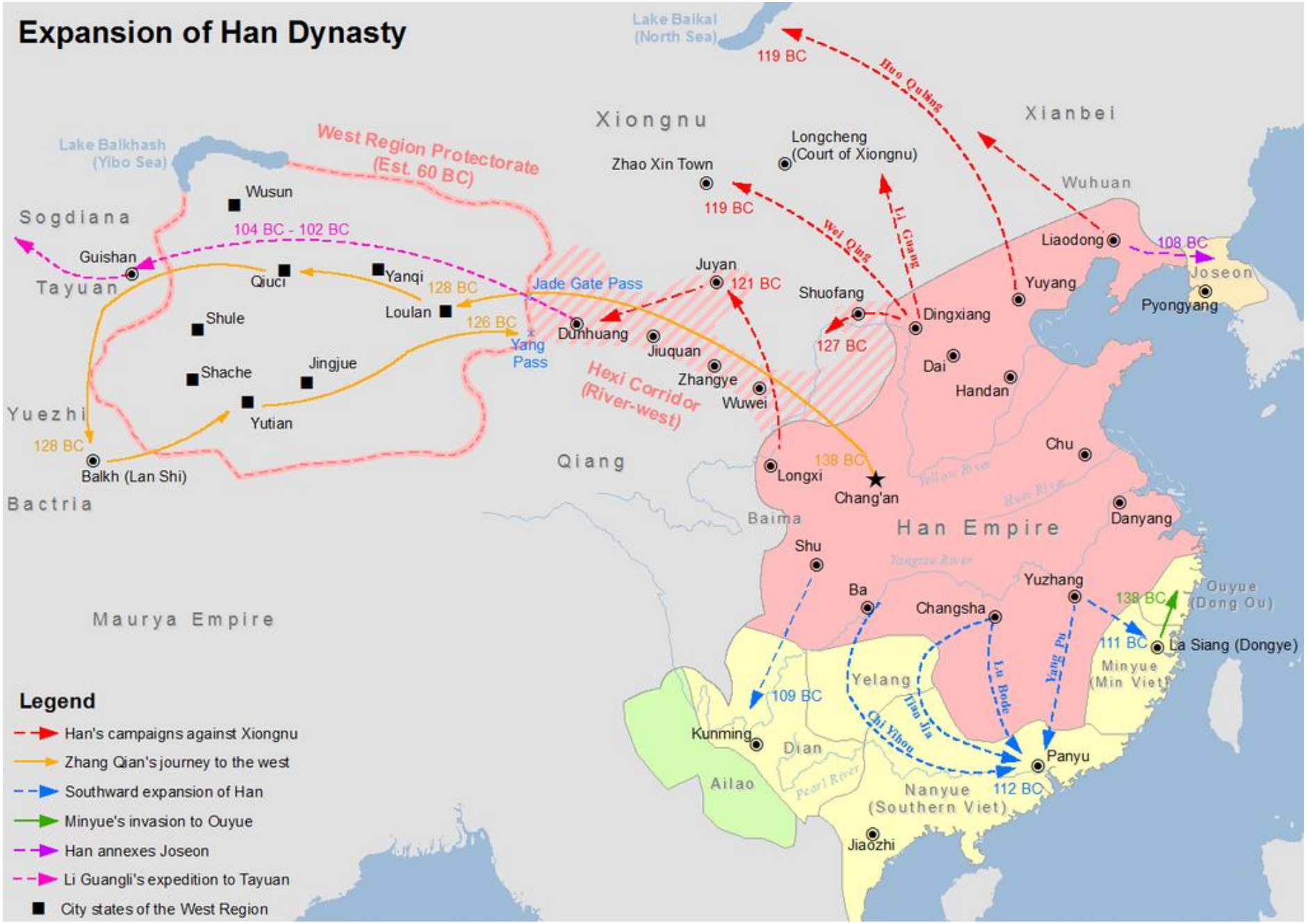
Cross-cultural interaction in Eurasia in Pre-Buddhist times

Knowledge about the “Other”

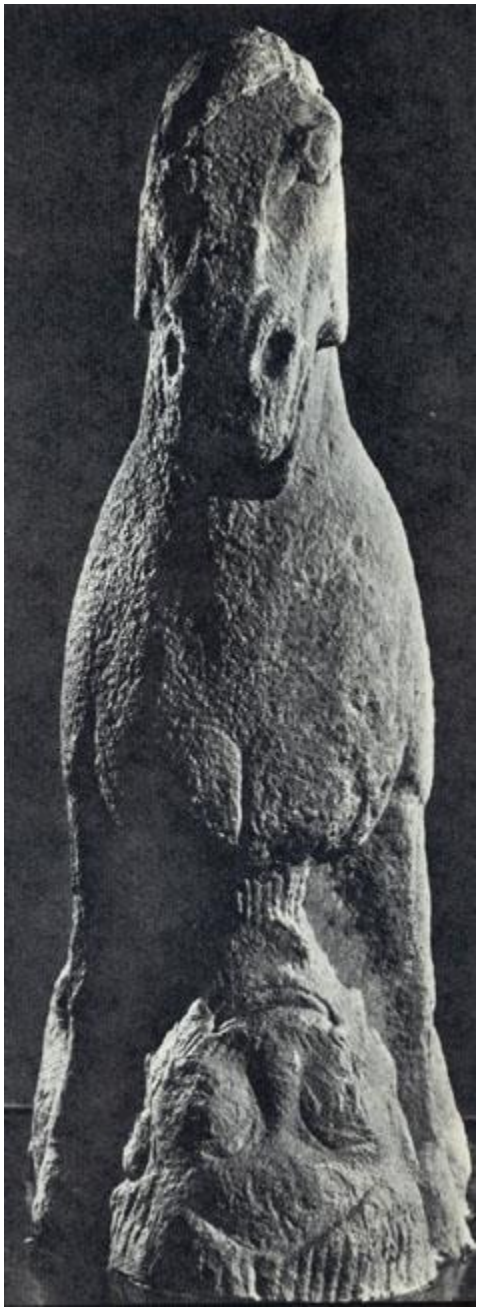
Western Han cosmology, the Canopy Theory of Heaven, and Queen Mother of the West



Zhang Qian's diplomatic mission to the Western Region, 138 BCE


Expansion of Han Dynasty
Lake Baikal (North Sea)
119 BC
Huo Qubing
Xiongnu
Xianbei
Lake Balkhash (Yibo Sea)
West Region Protectorate (Est. 60 BC)
Zhao Xin Town
Longcheng (Court of Xiongnu)
Wuhuan
Wusun
Sogdiana
119 BC
Wei Qing
Li Guang
104 BC - 102 BC
Liaodong
108 BC
Joseon
Guishan
Tayuan
Qiuci
Yanqi
128 BC
Jade Gate Pass
Juyan
121 BC
Shuofang
Yuyang
Pyongyang
Loulan
Shule
126 BC
Yang Pass
Dunhuang
Jiuquan
Dingxiang
127 BC
Dai
Shache
Jingjue
Zhangye
Handan
Hexi Corridor (River-west)
Wuwei
Yuezhi
Yutian
Chu
128 BC
Qiang
138 BC
Longxi
Chang'an
Balkh (Lan Shi)
Bactria
Baima
Han Empire
Danyang
Shu
Ba
Yuzhang
Ouyue (Dong Ou)
Maurya Empire
Changsha
138 BC
111 BC
La Siang (Dongye)
Minyue (Min Viet)
Yelang
109 BC
Han Jia
Chi Yihou
Lu Bode
Yang Pu
Kunming
Dian
Panyu
Ailao
Pearl River
Nanyue (Southern Viet)
112 BC
Jiaozhi
Legend
Han's campaigns against Xiongnu
Zhang Qian's journey to the west
Southward expansion of Han
Minyue's invasion to Ouyue
Han annexes Joseon
Li Guangli's expedition to Tayuan
City states of the West Region

Horse Crushing the Xiongnu Barbarian, stone sculpture for General Huo Qubing' s tomb, Xi'an, Shaanxi, late 2nd century BCE.



Bronze incense burner. Probably Achaemenid period. Anatolia (Lydia?), 6th-5th century s.c.

The Mountain-shaped gilt incense-burner from Mao Mausoleum, Shaanxi, 1st c. BCE

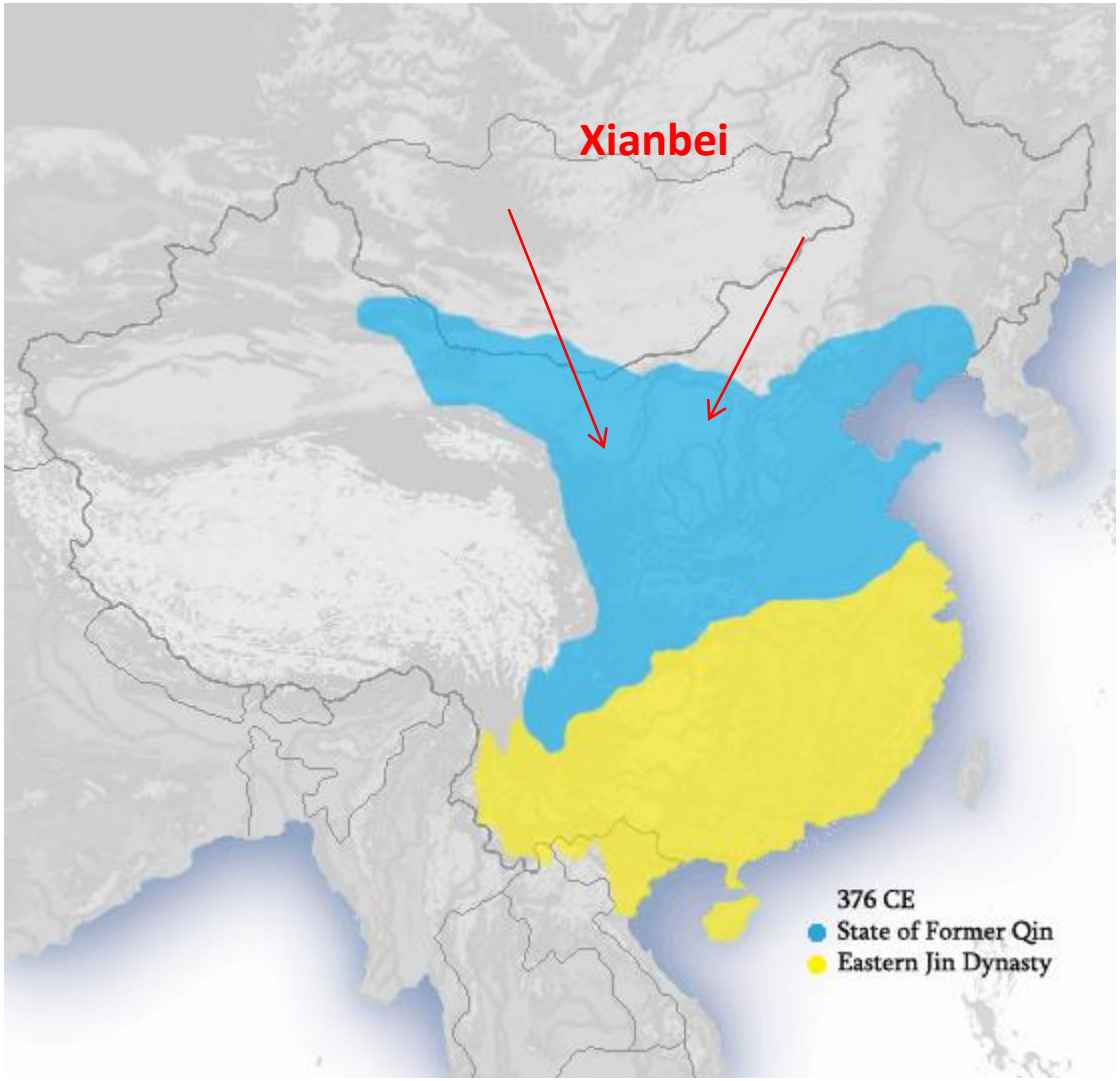
Silver plaque from Oxus Treasure, Tajikistan, 2nd c. BCE

Design on a chariot ornament from Sanpanshan, Dingxian, Hebei (1st century BC)

Gold coin of Kanishka I with an image of the Buddha (c.120 AD)

The earliest Buddha-like images in China (late 2nd century CE)

Period of Division (220-589)

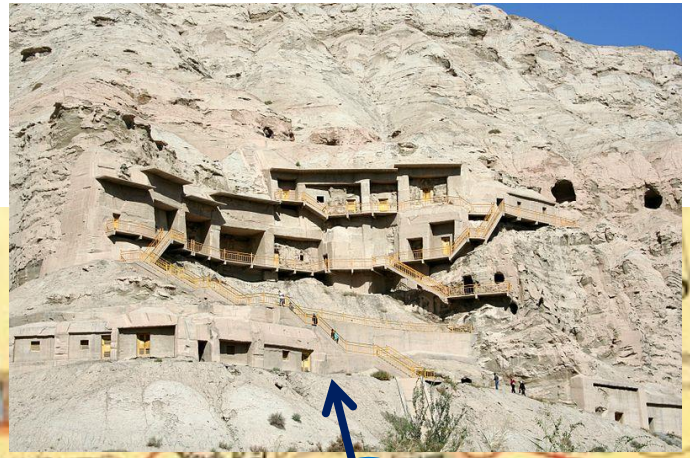


Period of Division (220-589)

Period of Division (220-589)

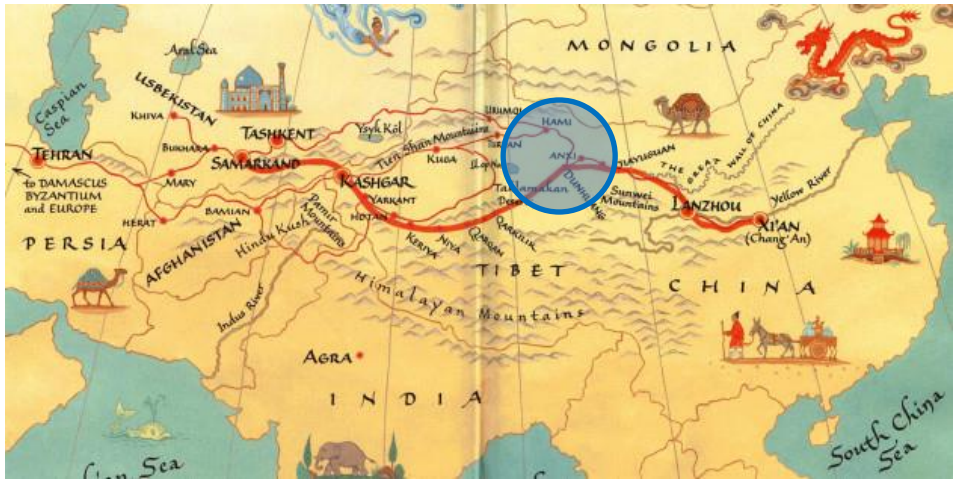
“Barbarians” (Xianbei) Ruling North China

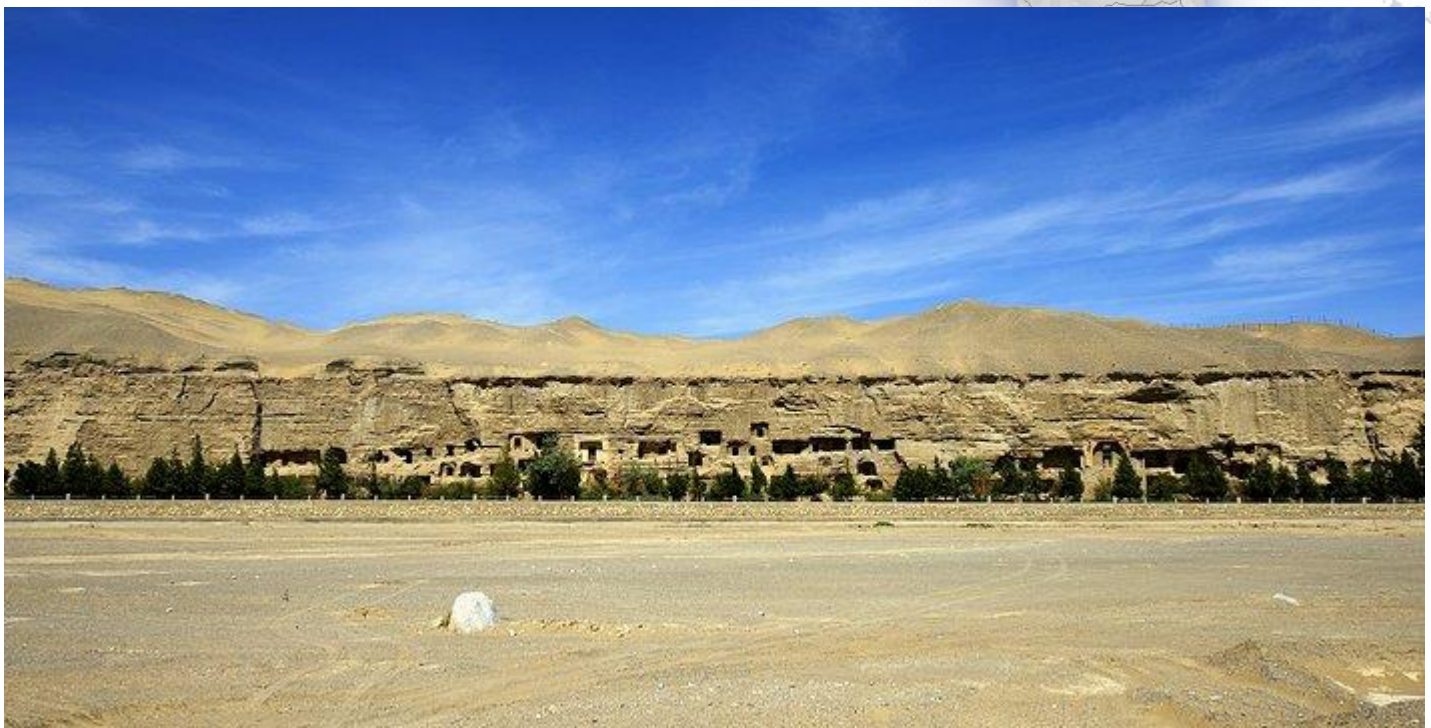
Kizil Buddhist Caves,
3rd -8th c. CE



Anjata Buddhist Caves, 2nd c.
BCE -5th c. CE

Dunhuang Cave Complex, 4-13th c. CE

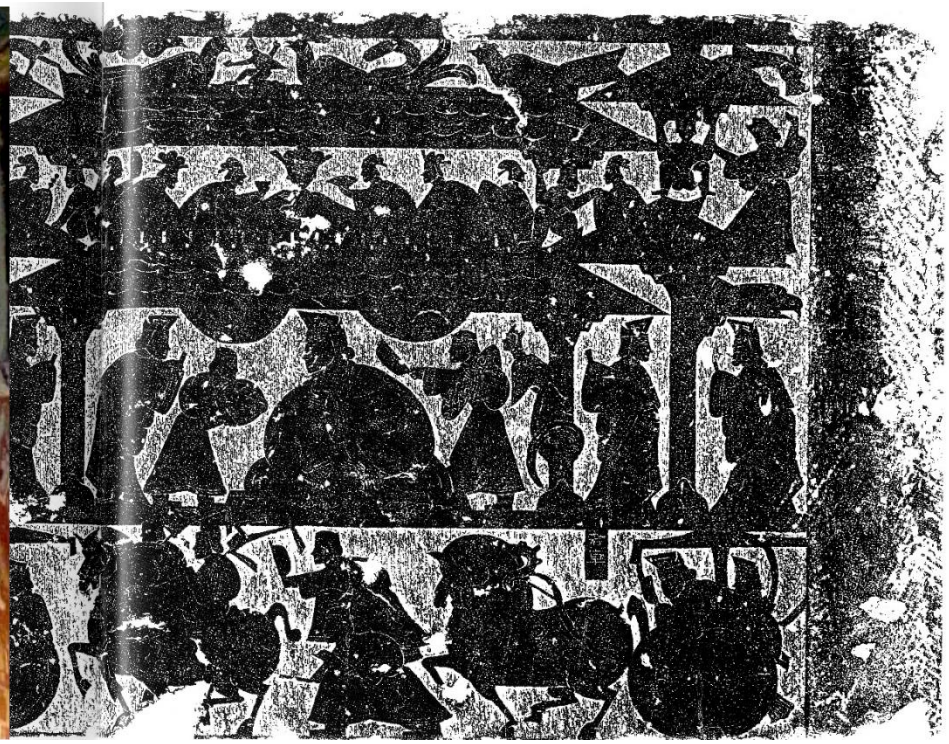




Cult of Maitreya in Mahayana Buddhism, Interior view of Cave 275, Dunhuang, Northern Liang, 4th c. CE, a view at the west wall

Buddhist Cave and Han-period Shrine

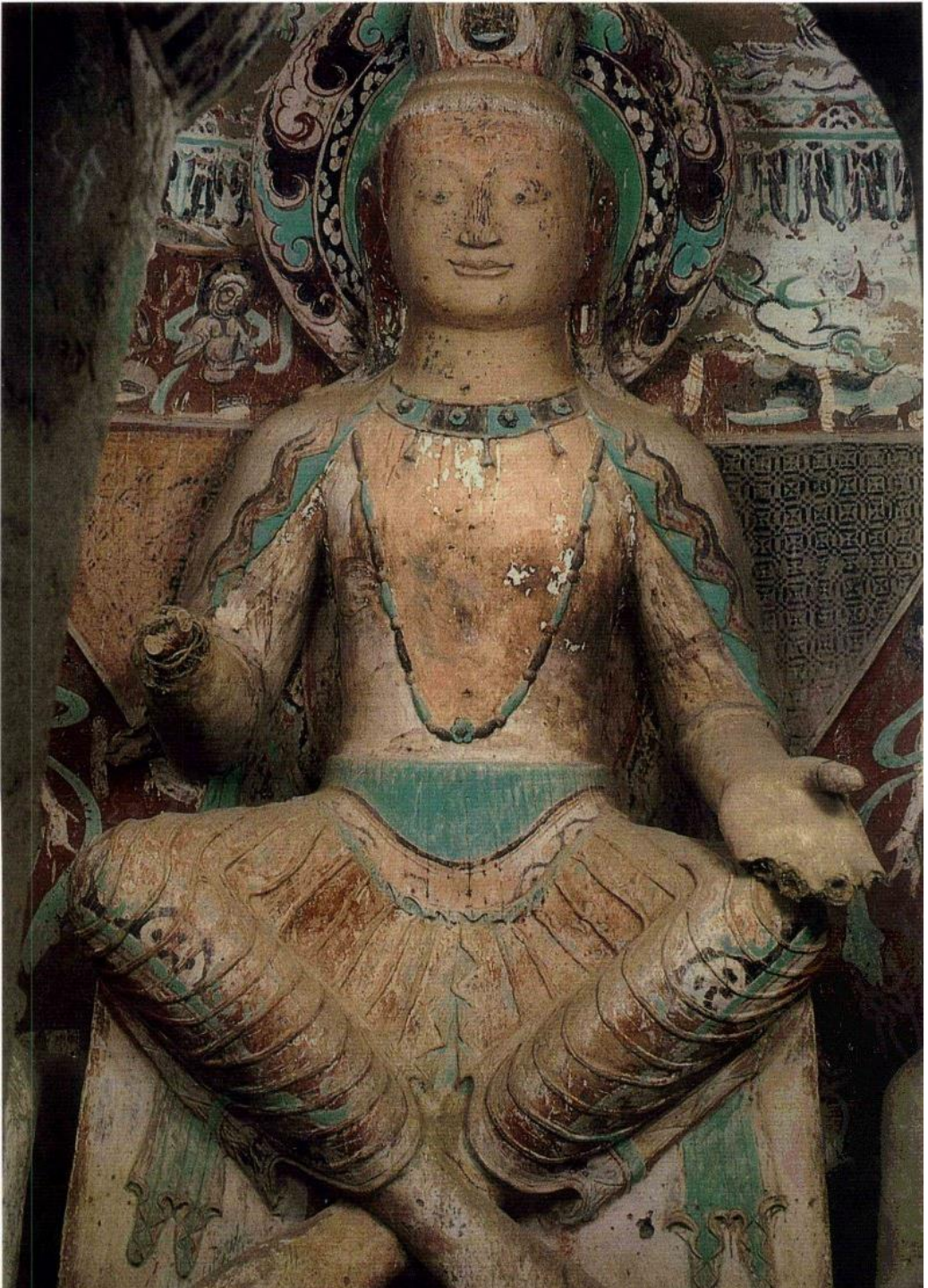
The Wu Liang Shrine, 151 CE

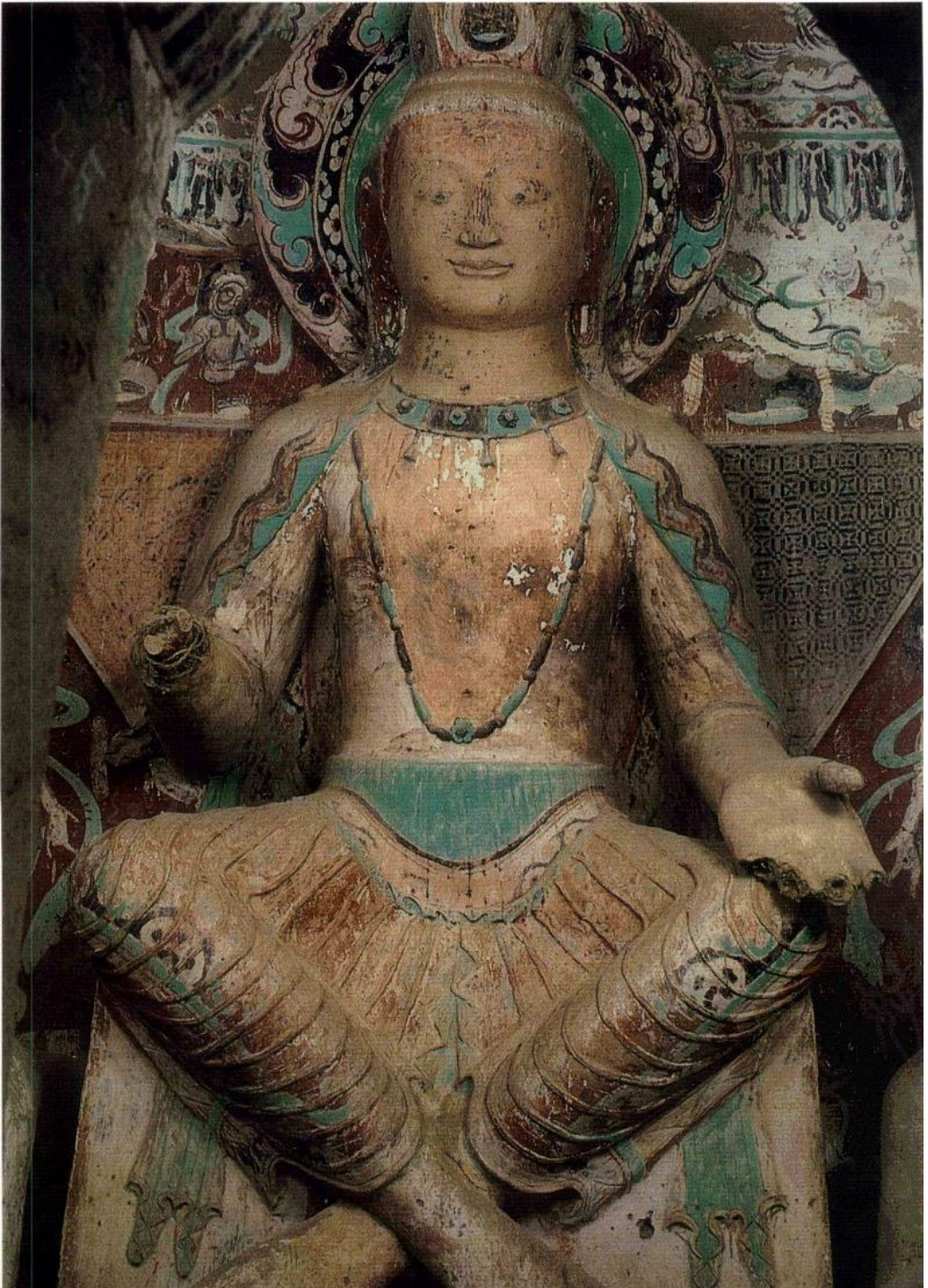


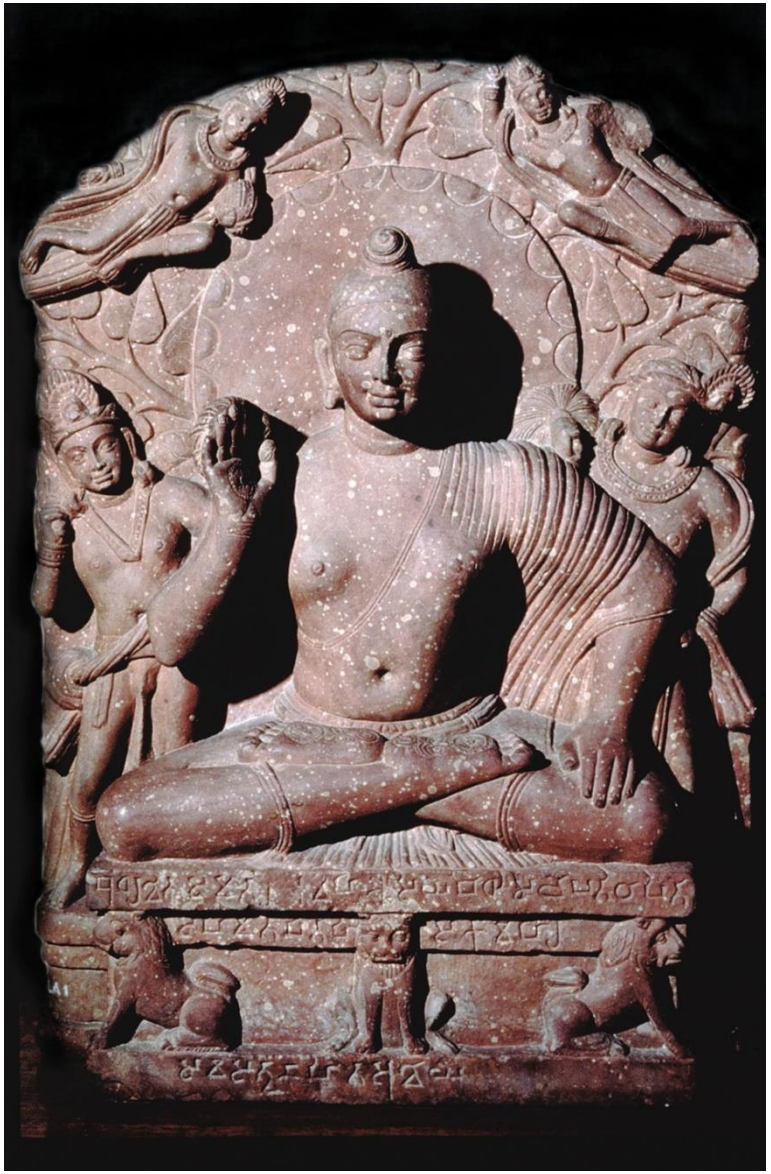
Homage scene in Wu family Shrines, 2nd c. CE

Chinese Buddhist Cave and Indian Prototype

The Great Chaitya in the Karla Caves, Maharashtra, India, 1st century CE.

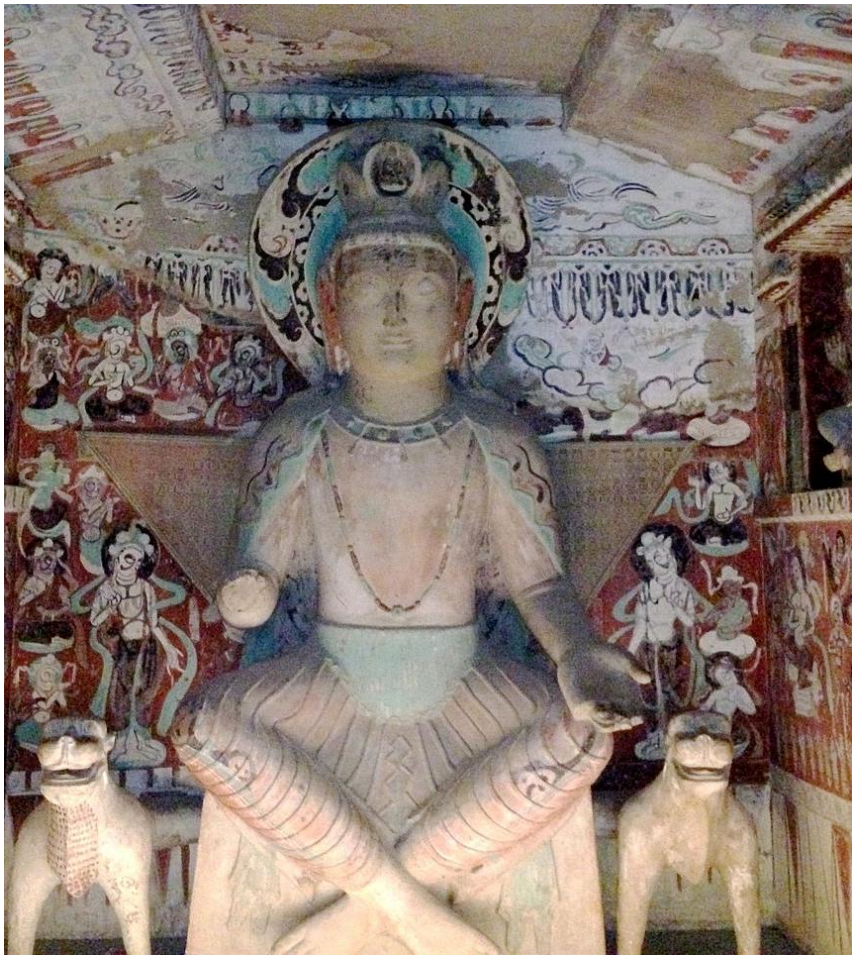




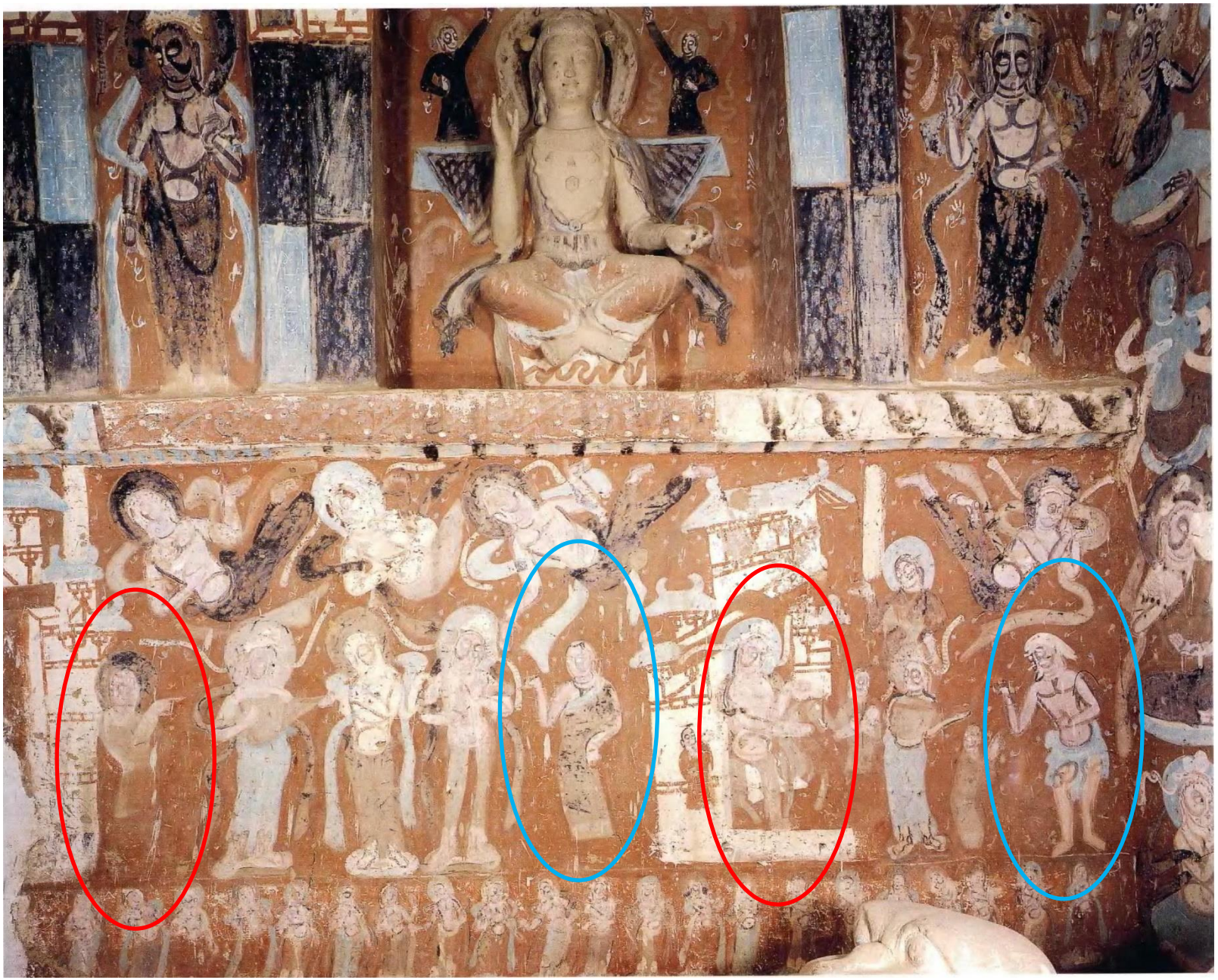


Buddha images in Mathuran Style in India (2nd c. CE)

Buddhist Impact on Funerary Art



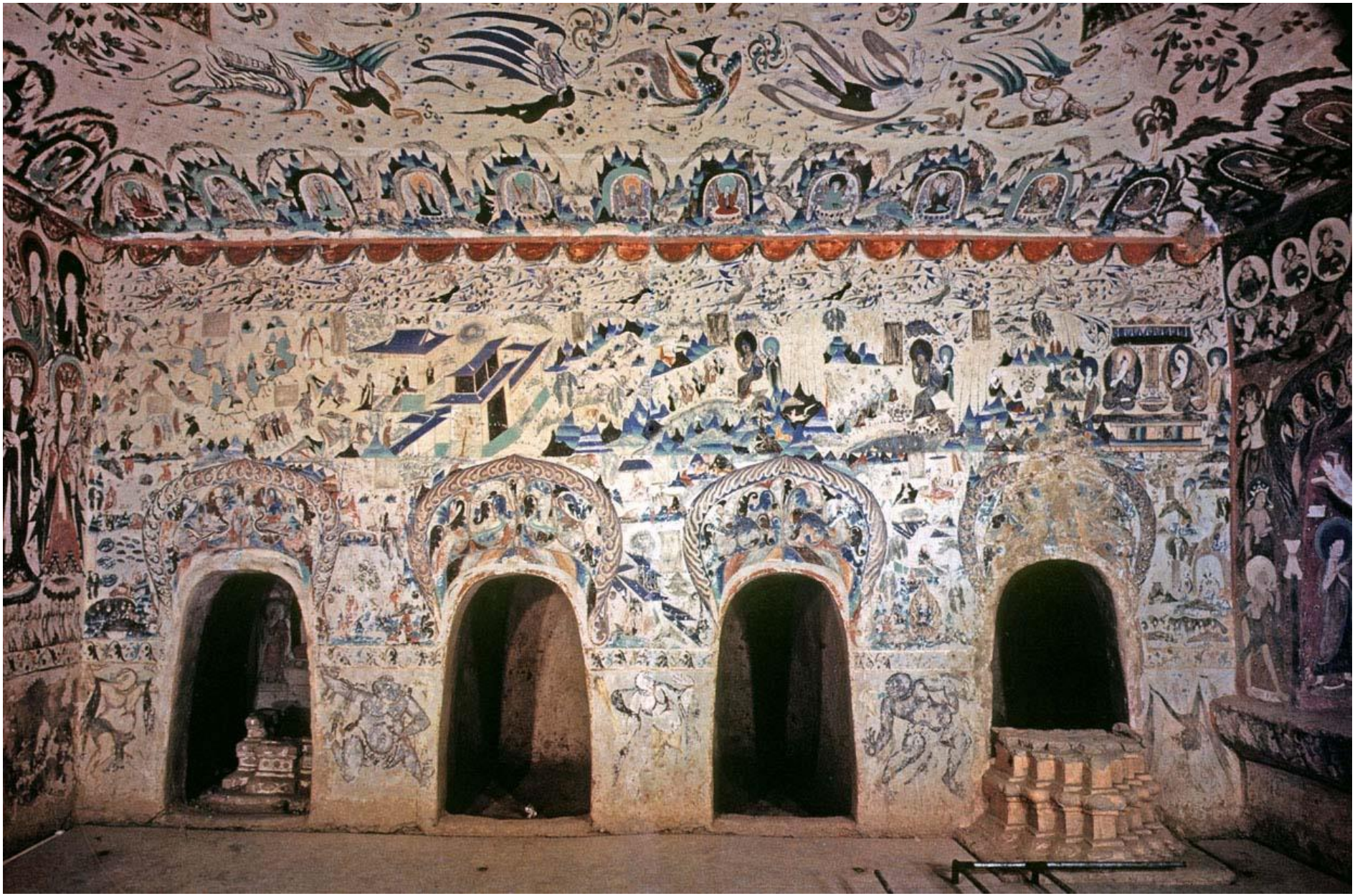
Tomb occupants, Northern Qi, late 6th c. CE



Narrative murals (Jataka) depicting the Four Sights Siddhartha witnessed in his first journey out of the city. Cave 275.

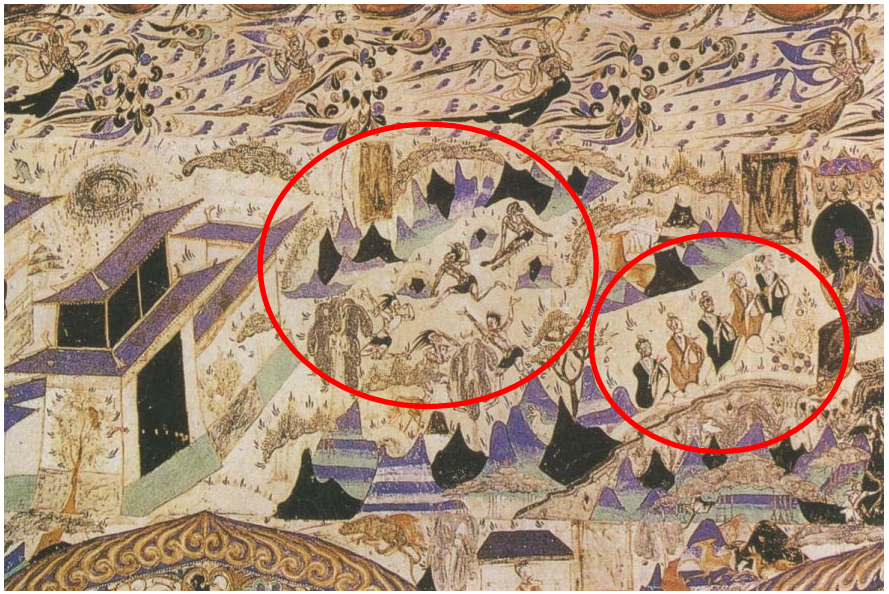
Narrative murals (Jataka) depicting the Four Sights Siddhartha witnessed in his first journey out of the city. Cave 275.

Interior view of Cave 285, Dunhuang, Northern Wei, 5th c. CE

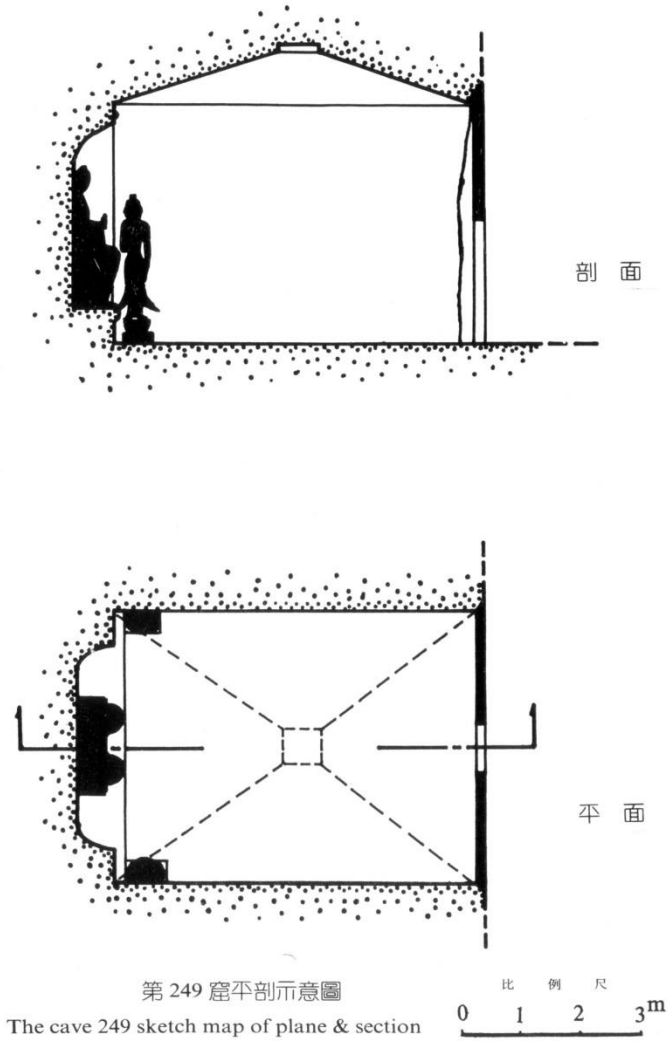


Interior view of Cave 285, Dunhuang, Northern Wei, 5th c. CE

Dunhuang Cave 285

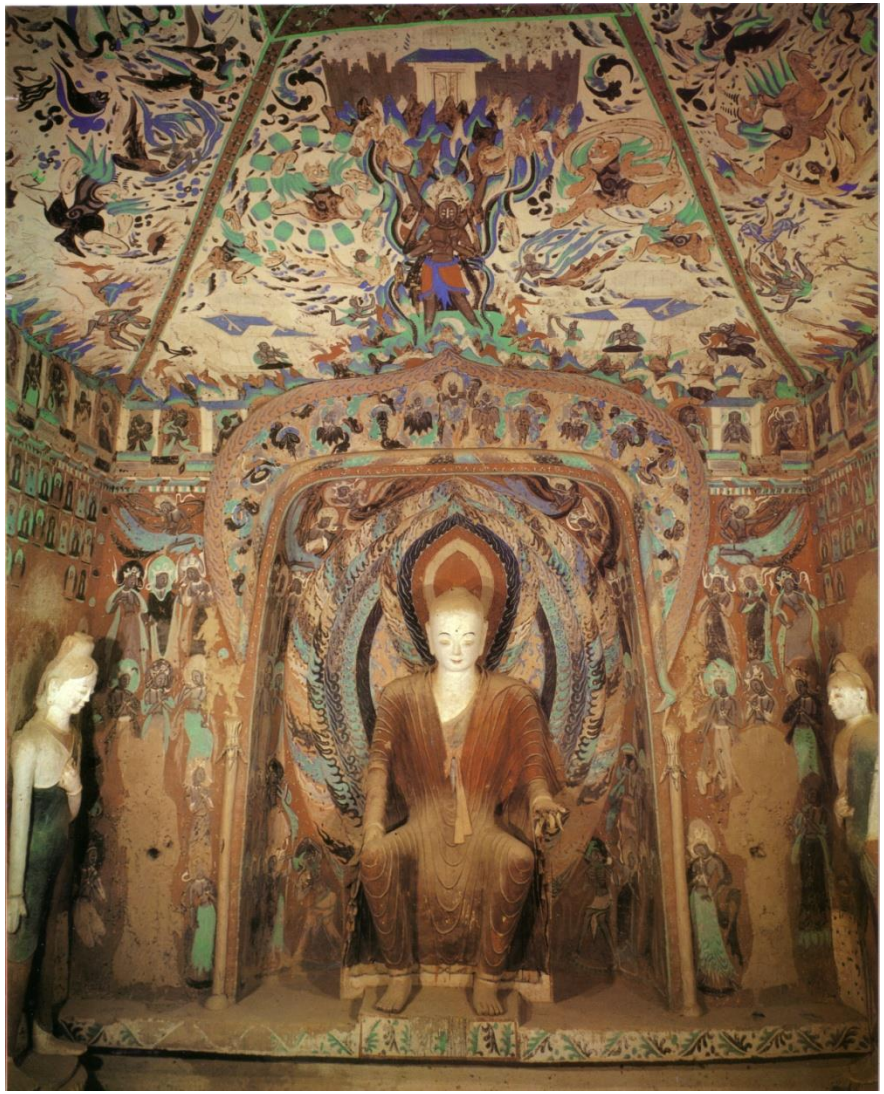


Narrative murals depicting the 500 hundred bandits converted into Buddhism

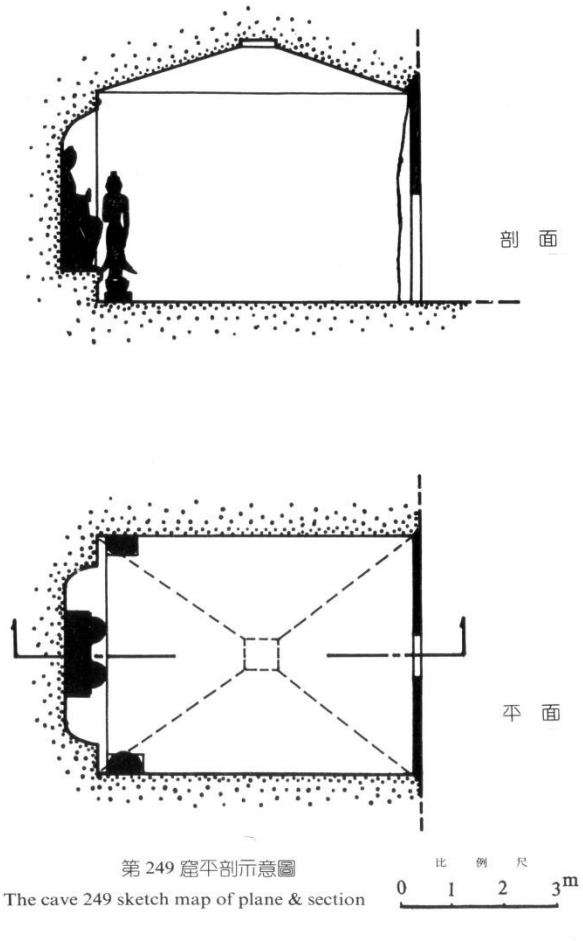


第 249 窟平剖示意圖

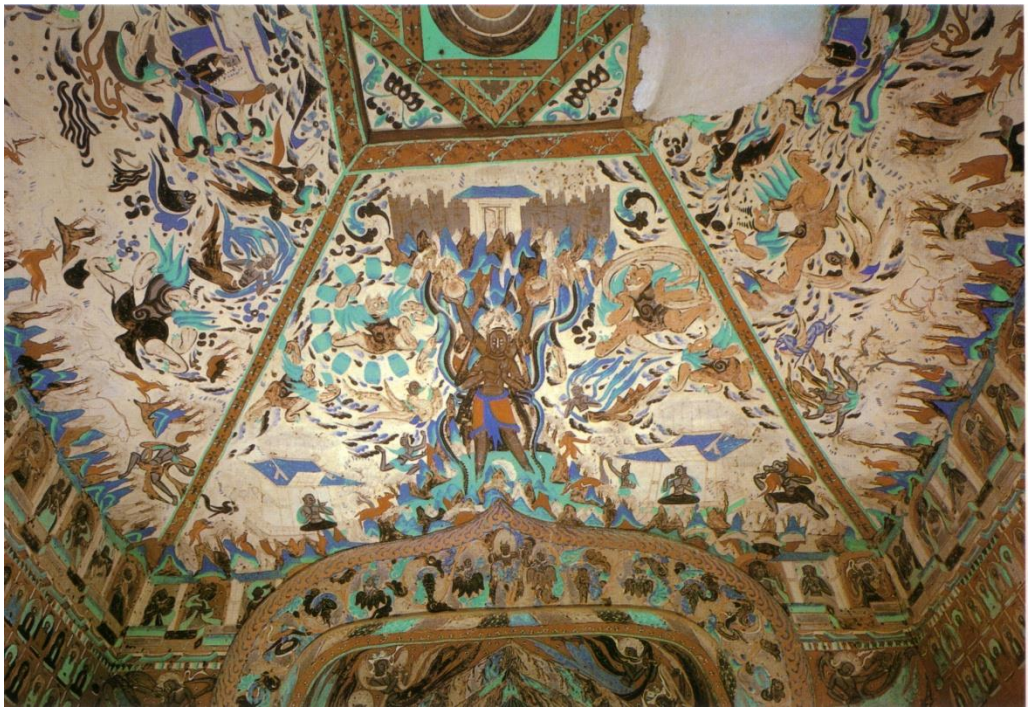
The cave 249 sketch map of plane & section



Cave 249, Dunhuang, Western Wei, mid-6th c. CE



第 249 窟平剖示意圖
The cave 249 sketch map of plane & section

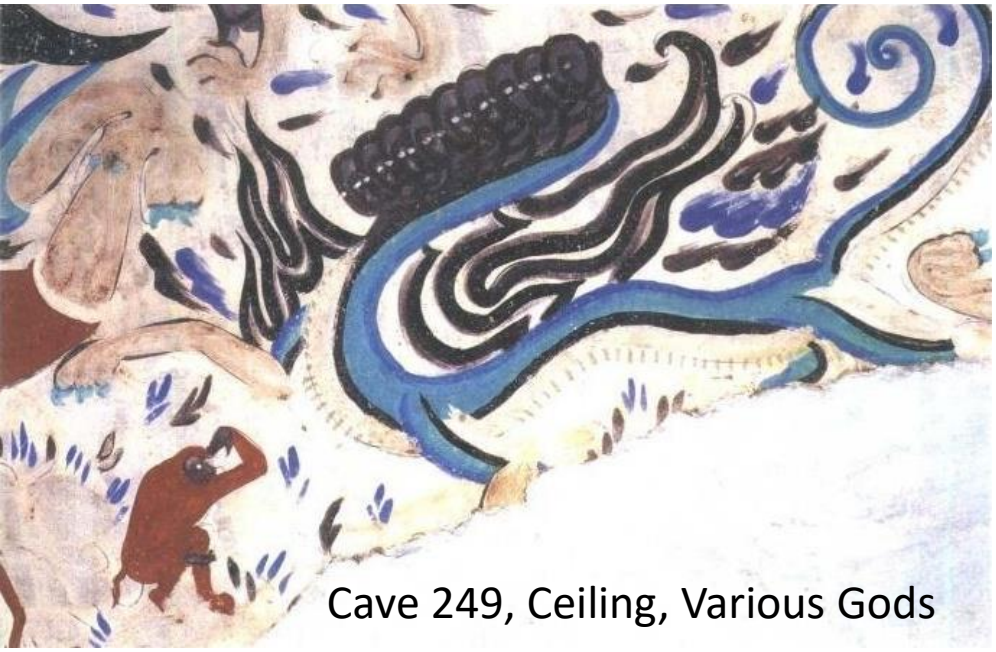


Four-armed and four-eyed King Asura guarding the Mt. Sumeru and Heaven Gate on the ceiling, with animal-headed gods of Wind, Rain, Thunder, and Lightning

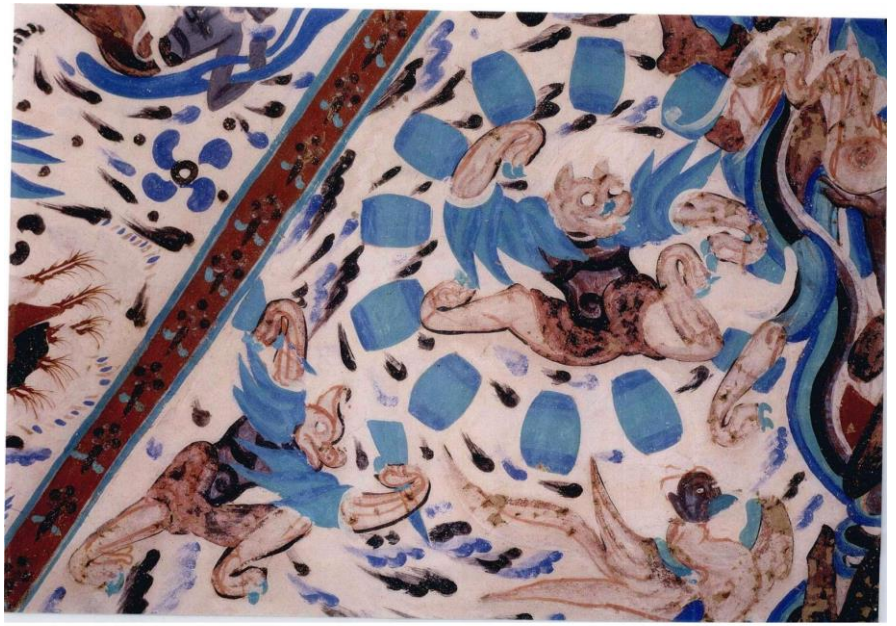
Cave 249, West Slope of Ceiling, King Asura

七〇　乘車仙人及其侍從　　第二四九窟

Cave 249, Ceiling, Queen Mother of the West

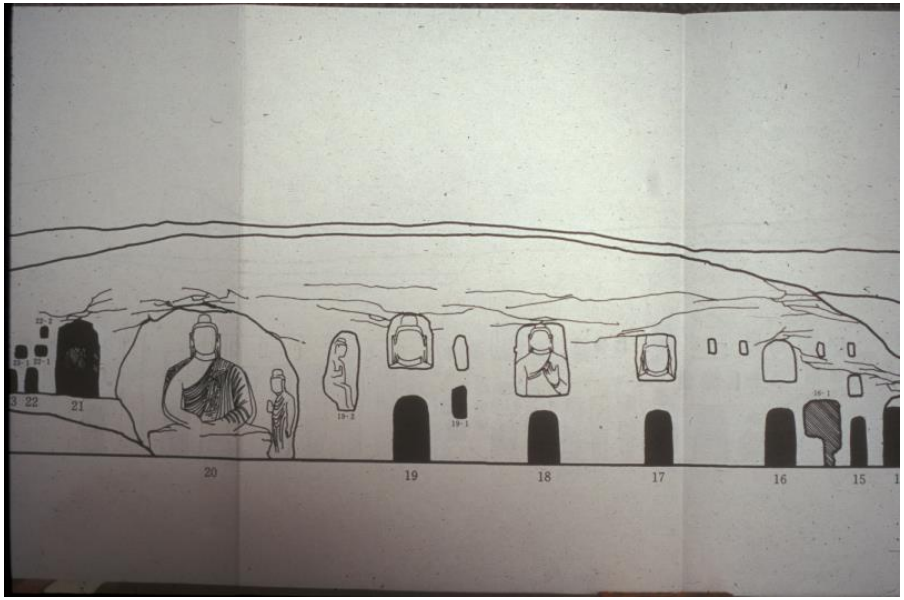


Cave 249, Ceiling, Various Gods



七一　雷神、電神　　第二四九窟

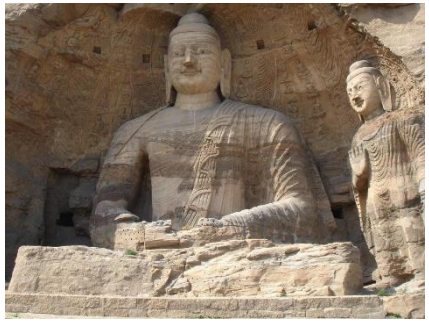
Yungang Cave Complex, Datong, 5-6th c. CE



Early Stage:
Five Monumental Caves
(460-480 CE)

Giant seated Buddha, Cave 20, Yungang, 460-480 CE

55 meters



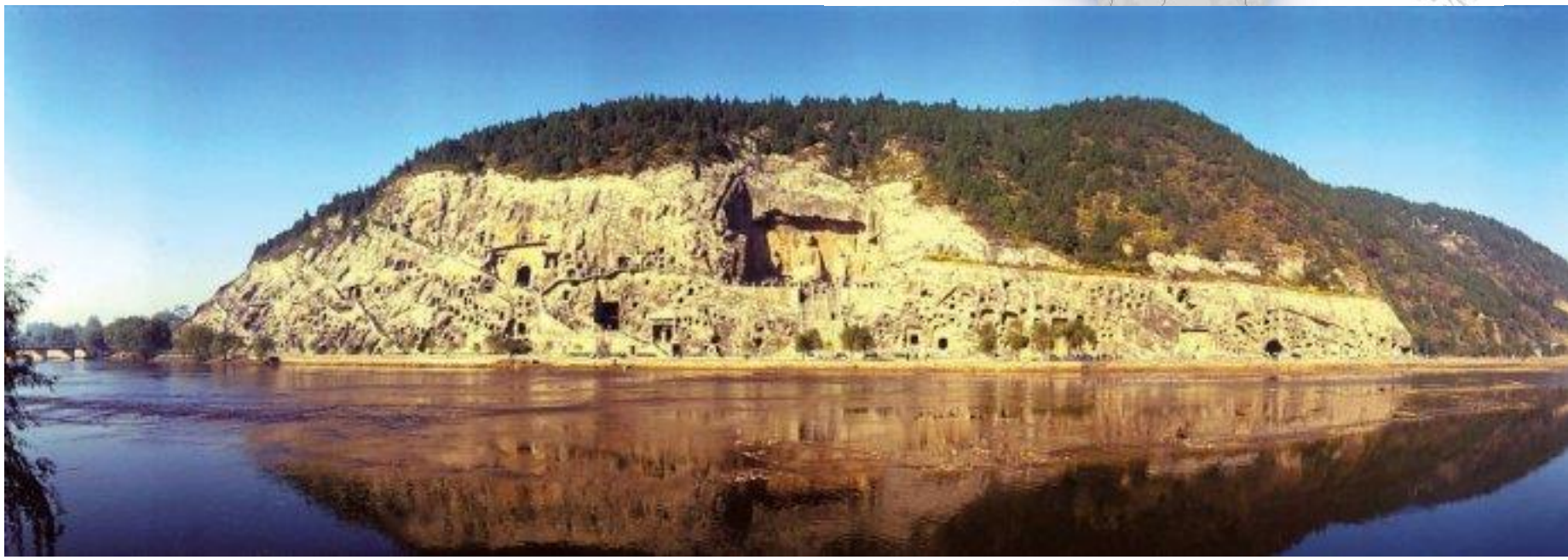
13.7 meters

The Bamiyan Great Buddha, Afghanistan, 5th c. CE

Comparison: Northern Wei and Han Sculptures

Late Stage:
Seated Bodhisattva, 480-490 CE

The Longmen Cave Complex at Luoyang, Henan (after 495)

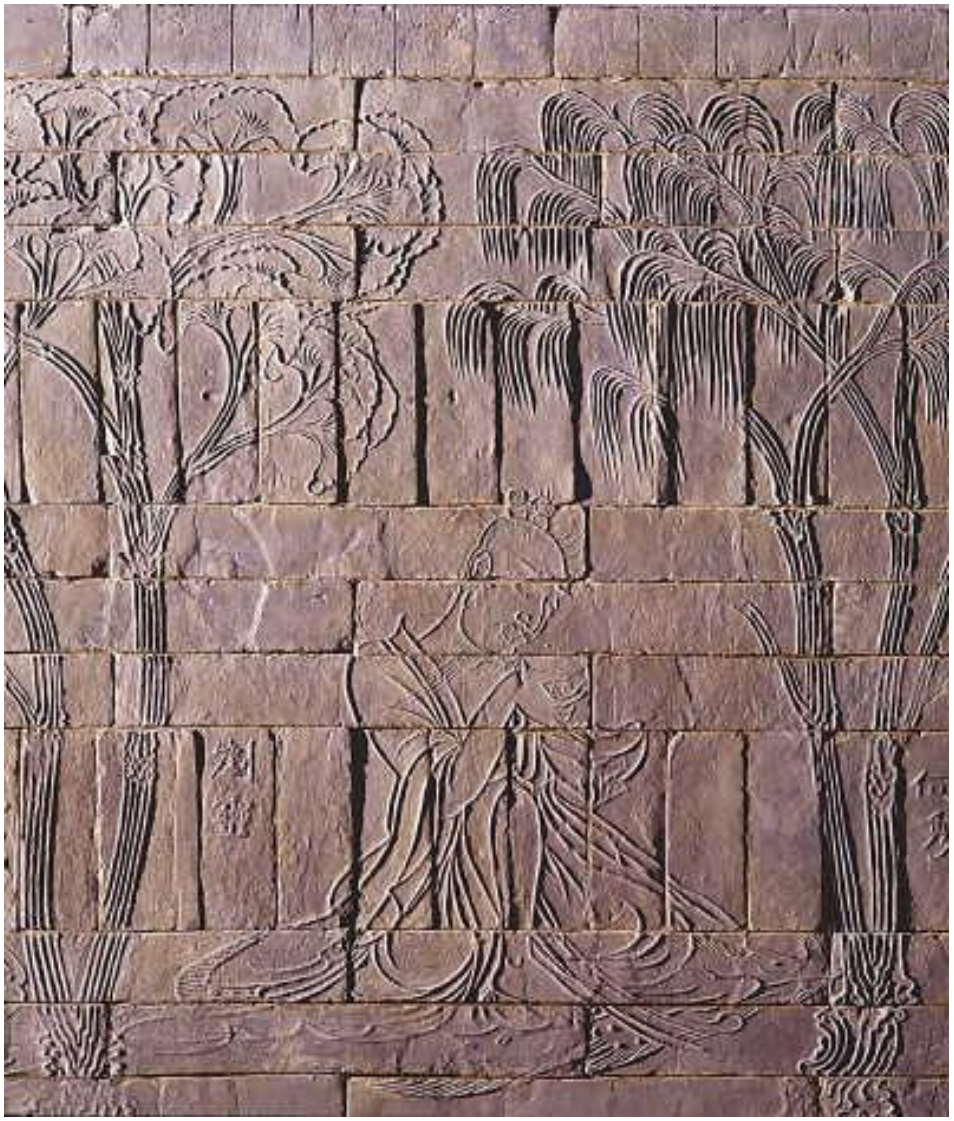


Virmalakirti, Longmen Cave, early 6th c. CE

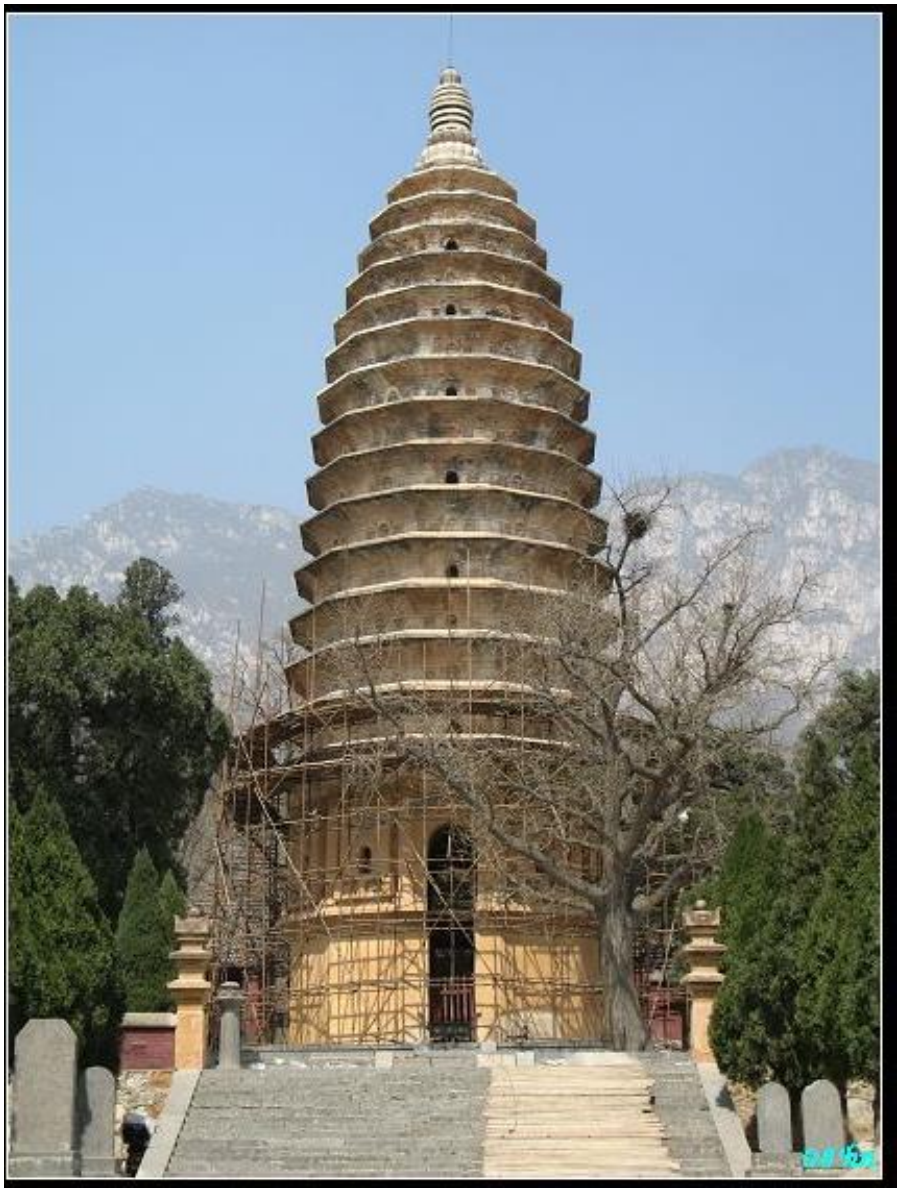
Interior of Cave Guyang, early 6th c. CE

Longmen: “Empress worshipping the Buddha,” Northern Wei, early 6th century

Longmen: Celestial beings (apsaras), Northern Wei, early 6th century



Rong Qiqi and the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, Southern Qi, late 5th c. CE.



Indian Sanchi stupa, Han dynasty pottery tower, and the Songyue pagoda, Northern Wei (early 6th century)