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Transaction Date: 11/4/2025 9:45:09 AM

**Article Information**

Journal Title: Orientations.

Volume: 20 Issue: 3

Month/Year: 1989 Pages: 64-70

**Special Instructions:**

Article Author: Whitfield, Roderick

Article Title: The Monk Liu Sahe and the Dunhuang  
Paintings'

ILL# 233516861



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# Orientations

The monthly magazine for collectors and connoisseurs of Oriental art

MARCH 1989  
US\$5/HK\$30/£3/A\$6



The Dunhuang Caves and Overseas Collections of Dunhuang Art

# Orientations

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 3 MARCH 1989



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*Cover: Avalokitesvara as 'Saviour from Perils'*  
Five Dynasties or Northern Song, mid-late 10th century  
Ink and colour on silk  
Height 84.4 cm, width 61.7 cm  
British Museum, Stein Collection, painting 2-1

Orientations is published every month by  
Orientations Magazine Ltd,  
14th Floor, 200 Lockhart Road, Hong Kong.  
Telephone: 5-8921368 Fax: 5-8344620  
Telex: 62107 IPLPM HX  
Cables: PACOM HONG KONG  
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Orientations Magazine Ltd.  
Typeset by Galley Pi.  
Colour separation by Gilead Graphic Arts Centre.  
Printed by Techpearl Printing Limited.

Publisher/Editorial Director: Elizabeth Knight  
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Subscriptions: Nereus Chum

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# The Monk Liu Sahe and the Dunhuang Paintings

Roderick Whitfield

In the history of narrative painting at Dunhuang, we can see a development from the *jataka* scenes of the Northern Dynasties (386-581), already distinguished from their counterparts at Kizil by the adoption of a continuous narrative, to the wider scenery of episodes from the *Lotus Sutra* in Cave 285, and thence, to the marginal scenes of the Tang dynasty (618-907) which identify the different paradises one from another. In the latter, the narrative is again often continuous, but is arranged in vertical columns on either side of the main Buddha assembly. Towards the end of the Tang dynasty and during the Five Dynasties (907-60), we find that narrative scenes are to be found somewhat more loosely arranged around a central figure: prime examples are the images of Avalokitesvara as 'Saviour from Perils', where the various perils are graphically portrayed around a central figure of the compassionate bodhisattva but without a constricting border line, so that the connection between them is close and obvious (Fig. 1 and cover illustration). The same arrangement is also found in another painting (Fig. 2) from the Stein Collection: number 20 in Arthur Waley's *Catalogue of Paintings from Tun-huang Recovered by Sir Aurel Stein* (British Museum and the Government of India, London, 1931). In *The Art of Central Asia, The Stein Collection at the British Museum* (Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1982, vol. 1, *Paintings from Dunhuang*, I, pl. 22), this author discussed the painting and, thanks to Robert Jera-Bezard's familiarity with the Pelliot Collection, was able to draw attention to another fragment from the same painting surviving in the Musée Guimet. The depiction of the same subject, with identifying cartouches, in Cave 72 at Dunhuang was also noted. However, the story in the texts was not pursued, and Waley's suggested title of *Sakyamuni Preaching on the Vulture*

Peak was retained. The present article seeks to remedy this omission, with the help of a number of other writings which have appeared about the story depicted in the painting. These writings are by Shi Weixiang and Sun Xiushen in China, using the painting seen on the south wall of Cave 72 as a starting point, and by Hélène Vetch in Paris, on the basis of the manuscripts preserved at Dunhuang and transmitted texts.

The overwhelming impression on entering most of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, popularly known as Qianfodong (Thousand Buddha Caves), is of the splendid wealth of Buddhist imagery and, in particular, of the countless small images, identical in size but with robes and haloes of different colours, making regular patterns over the entire surface of the walls around the main Buddha groups. Yet the monks and artisans who dug out and decorated the caves with stories of the Buddha's previous lives, narratives from the scriptures and visions of the Pure Land, also found time and space to portray their own experiences, perhaps even to create their own heroes. Some donors, such as the powerful Zhang and Cao families who ruled the area in the tenth century, are prominently depicted as in Cave 156 with the processions of Zhang Yichao (d. 872) and his wife, who liberated Dunhuang from Tibetan rule in 848. The most famous among the monks, as elsewhere in East Asia, were depicted in portrait sculptures and commemorated in small shrines. Cave 17, the 'library cave' which held all the manuscripts and paintings, was originally a memorial chapel to Hong Bian (act. c. 851), chief of the monks in Hexi at the time of Zhang Yichao's liberation. Fittingly, his stucco portrait sculpture has now been recovered from its rather ignominious upper storey retreat and replaced on the dais, which still had a depiction of his shoes, in front of a painting of attendants and

trees. This painting was prized by the painter Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) far above the work of the Southern Song (1127-1279) court painter Ma Hezhi (d. c. 1190).

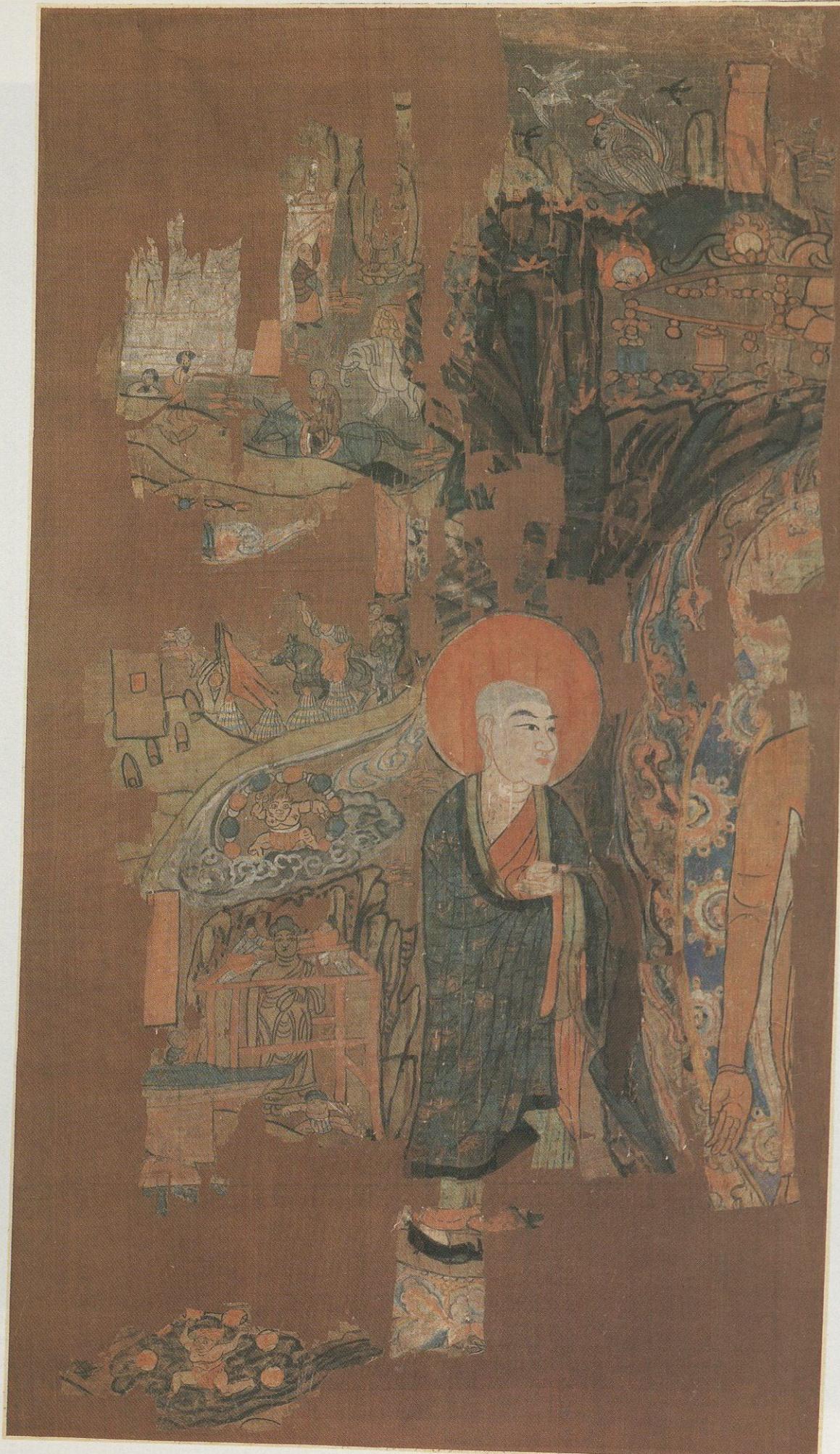
No such claim is made for the painting shown here, which was described by Arthur Waley as 'rough and summary, but very vigorous' (Fig. 2). However, it is interesting in view of the subject and its connection with Gansu province. Perhaps at Dunhuang there was always the impulse on the part of those who made the caves and dedicated the images to add something of themselves or their experiences to embellish the repertoire prescribed in the *sutras*. In the earliest surviving caves, which date from the fifth century, the craftsmen of the Northern Liang (407-439) did not hesitate to place the figures of the Buddha and of Maitreya in niche surrounds which take the form of Han Chinese city gateways, complete with tiled roofs and watch-towers. In Cave 285, there

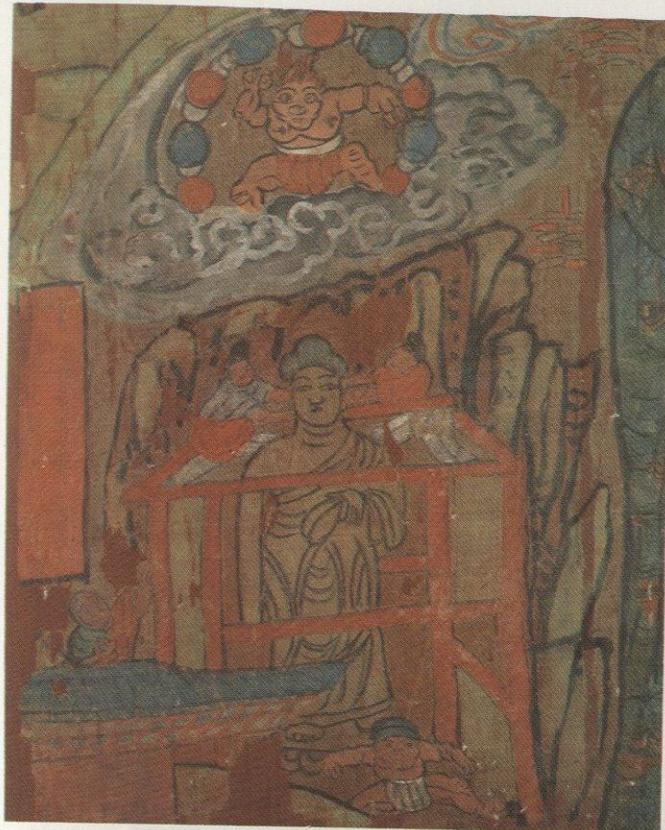


Detail of Fig. 1



(Fig. 1) Avalokitesvara as Saviour from Perils  
Five Dynasties, mid-10th century  
Ink and colour on silk  
Height 86.1 cm, width 54 cm  
British Museum, Stein Collection, painting 28





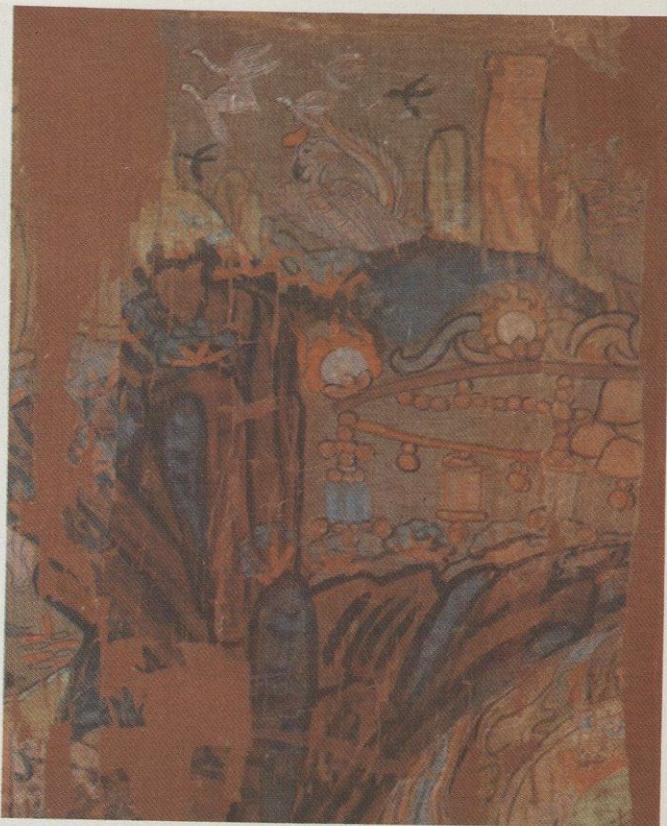
are scenes of hunting and a delightful sow with a litter of piglets foraging in the woods around the hermit cells of meditating monks, while on the ceiling, depictions of strange beasts from the Chinese *Classic of Mountains and Seas* recall the decoration of Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) tombs.

The Dunhuang oasis may have been hospitable to travellers about to face the privations and dangers of the desert journey to the west, but was still a long way from metropolitan China, and reminders of home must have helped to bridge the distance for those who found themselves posted here. Indeed, some of the dangers to which travellers and merchants were exposed, such as attack from brigands or extortionate tolls levied by local officials, are graphically portrayed in the landscape settings of the wall paintings in the Tang caves. Increasingly during the Northern Liang, Avalokitesvara or Guanyin, also known as 'He who regards the Cries of the World', was

the deity to whom such travellers appealed. In paintings which illustrate the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* and the vow of Avalokitesvara, various predicaments are depicted around the large central figure of the deity (Fig 1 and cover).

This is the arrangement which is adopted in the painting identified by Waley as *Sakyamuni Preaching on the Vulture Peak* (Fig. 2). Although the greater part of the painting is missing, enough remains to reveal part of the central figure of the standing Buddha, in a characteristic pose with the right hand stiffly extended, seen also in two further items from the Stein Collection: the great embroidery depicting the Buddha, two bodhisattvas, and two *luohans* in the British Museum and the painting of *Famous Images* in the National Museum in New Delhi. The haloed monk who stands beside the Buddha is not the disciple Ananda who usually appears in this position; this monk's head is turned slightly more towards the Buddha than is usually the case with Ananda, and he appears to gesture towards the Buddha with his right hand.

Behind the figure of the monk are other scenes which compress a good



(Fig. 2a) Detail of Figure 2 showing the reconstruction of the Buddha image

(Fig. 2b) Detail of Figure 2 showing 'Vulture Peak' above the Buddha's canopy

deal of detail into a small space. Immediately behind him is a scaffold erected around a statue of the Buddha in the same pose, set in front of a mountain with deep clefts; two men climb on the scaffold and reach out with both hands to the head of the image (Fig. 2a). Just visible on the left is the figure of a monk, again wearing blue and orange robes and pointing up to the image. Above and below are thunder gods on clouds, each brandishing a ring of thunder drums. Above this scene, a rank of soldiers in armour stands guard for a procession of men on horseback with flags; still further up, a monk on a mule leads an elephant laden with scrolls, and outside the walls of a city the same monk in orange, blue and brown robes repeats his pointing gesture towards a still smaller Buddha image in the same posture. A mountainous landscape, with birds flying above and a vulture perched on top, is the setting for the canopy above the central figure (Fig. 2b).



(Fig. 3) Episodes from the story of the miraculous image of Mount Yugu  
Detail from the south wall of Cave 72  
Mogao caves, Dunhuang

In volume one of the Kodansha catalogue of the Stein Collection, this author followed Waley's identification, while drawing attention to the south wall of Cave 72 at Dunhuang, in which the same subject is depicted, but with far more scenes. Some of the scenes have cartouches relating to the story of the miraculous image that had 'flown from India', but which lacked a head (Fig. 3). The lower part of the wall has been totally lost through damp caused by the accumulation of sand, but the upper part is well enough preserved. Figure 3 also shows the image surrounded by a scaffold and the failure of attempts to repair it depicted with a substitute head having fallen to the ground in front of the image. When Robert Jera-Bezard of the Collège de France, Centre de Recherches sur L'Asie Centrale et la Haute Asie in Paris recognized a fragment in the Pelliot Collection (Fig. 4) as being part

of the same silk painting, it was as if the missing head, actually depicted in the Paris fragment (Fig. 4a), had been restored, although several other episodes in the story must have been depicted in the parts still missing.

Of the several versions of the story that have survived, a passage in a Tang dynasty compilation, the *Fayuan Zhulin*, seems to focus on the same episodes of the story as the paintings:

In the first year of the Dayan reign of the Great (Northern) Zhou (435) there was a monk named Liu Sahe of Lishi: his biography is in the *Lives of Eminent Monks (Gaoseng Zuan)*. Successively, he travelled along the Yangzi river, paying homage at the pagoda in Mouxian (in Zhejiang province). Arriving in Jinling (Nanjing) he opened the reliquary of King Ashoka, afterwards travelling west to Liangzhou, 170 *li* west of there, on the eastern border of Panhe prefecture (in Gansu province), he looked north to Mount Yugu in the distance and bowed to it. Since no-one knew why he did so, they asked him and he replied: 'A prodigy will be seen to appear from the steep slopes of this mountain. Should its wondrous appearance be complete, then there will be

happiness and peaceful times for the world. But if some part should be lacking, then the world will be in turmoil and people will suffer'.

Some eighty-seven years later, in the first year of Zhengguang (519), there was a great thunderstorm and a stone image thrust out of the mountainside. It was eighteen feet high, of marvellous appearance, but without a head. People climbed up and ordered craftsmen to choose stone (to carve a new head), but in spite of their efforts, the head would not stay put. So what the monk had long foretold came true.

In the first year of the (Northern) Zhou dynasty (557), in a stream seven *li* to the east of Liangzhou, a stone appeared, shining brightly in darkness, to everyone's amazement. It was indeed the head of the statue, and fitted perfectly when put on the body, though it had been missing for over forty years, and though it was found over 200 *li* from the body. Once the image had its missing part restored, lights shone everywhere and the sound of bells echoed around, no-one knew how.

Later in the (Northern) Zhou dynasty, in the first year of Baoding (561), a 'Temple of the Auspicious Image' was erected. Towards the end of the Xiande reign (572-77), the head once more fell off of its own accord. Emperor Wu sent the King of Qi to investigate. He set the head back on and put soldiers to guard it. But in the



(Fig. 4) Fragment with scenes from the story of the image of Mount Yugu  
Late Tang or Five Dynasties, 9th-10th century  
Ink and colour on silk  
Height 72 cm, width 28 cm  
Mission Pelliot Collection, Musée Guimet



(Fig. 4a) Detail of Figure 4 showing the head of the miraculous image of Mount Yugu



(Fig. 4b) Detail of Figure 4

morning it had fallen down again, just as before. There followed a time when the faith declined and the state perished. All this is recorded on the tablet of the (Northern) Zhou dynasty monk Daoan. But in spite of the (Northern) Zhou's persecution of the faith, the image itself was not destroyed. (Under the Sui dynasty [581-618]) in the Kaihuang reign (581-89), when the Law was restored, the temple was re-established. In the fifth year of Daye (609), Emperor Yang came west and personally went to pay his respects. He changed the name of the temple to Xiantong Daochang. The image is still there today: many have tried to depict it, but none have been able to get it right. (Translated from the Chinese by RW)

This text explains features of the painting such as the scaffold, the soldiers on guard, the city of Liangzhou represented by the fortress-like building, Mount Yugu which appears more than once as the setting, the unprecedented Buddha head in the Paris fragment (Fig. 4a), and the band of musicians celebrating its safe return (Fig. 4b). While it is clear that there are earlier versions of the story than this one—as the text itself, completed in 668, refers to Liu Sahe's biography in the *Lives of Eminent Monks*—it



(Fig. 5) Fragment once attributed as a portion of Figure 2  
 Ink and colour on silk  
 Height 23.5 cm, width 16 cm  
 Stein Collection, British Museum, painting 87

seems likely that the paintings were inspired by such later elaborations of the legend. The events surrounding the appearance and subsequent history of the miraculous image are close enough to Dunhuang itself for the story to have become popular there. Cave 72 includes a labelled portrait of Liu in addition to the narrative scenes on the south wall.

The different textual traditions have been analysed by Hélène Vetch, who first wrote about Liu Sahe in 1981. In a second article, she has combed the printed and manuscript material, identifying four groups of texts which cover the main aspects of his legend: his descent to hell (five texts); his pilgrimages to the stupas said to have been erected in China by King Ashoka (fifteen texts); his predic-

tion about the image on Mount Yugu and his death in the north-west (eight texts); and the popular cult of Liu Sahe (two texts).

With so many texts, written from different points of view, it was inevitable that there would be contradictions about many aspects of Liu Sahe's life, such as his birthplace and the dates of his birth and death. A whole legend surrounded this figure, with colourful details about his early life as a hunter of stags, his encounter in the underworld with the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, and the prediction concerning the apparition of the miraculous image of Mount Yugu, whose condition afforded an insight into the state of the people. There is plenty here to account for the popular cult of Liu Sahe which is attested to in manuscripts of the tenth century from Dunhuang, but it was the prediction about the miraculous image that lent itself most readily to pictorial depiction, both in wall paintings and on silk. Skipping rapidly over the early events in Liu Sahe's life, the *Fayuan Zhuolin* version also elaborates on the miraculous image.

With exemplary thoroughness, Hélène Vetch distils from this wealth of material an approximate chronology for Liu Sahe:

Born about 343 in Shanxi or Shaanxi, he suffers a catalepsy at Xiangyang in Hubei in 373; brought back to life, he goes back to Shaanxi to undertake religious training and becomes a monk under the name of Huida; between 373 and 396, he makes pilgrimages to the south of the Yangzi; on 17 November 420 (according to the Northern Liang calendar), he comes to Zhangye in Gansu and becomes an itinerant preacher for conversion, especially to the east, in the district of Liang prefecture (now Wuwei); becoming aware of his approaching death, he goes back west; in 435 on the outskirts of Panhe (west of present-day Yongchang) he predicts the revelation of a miraculous image to the north on Mount Yugu; and still pressing westwards, he dies in Su prefecture, west of Jiuquan sub-prefecture. (Translated from the French by RW)

As a footnote to this too brief account of the legend of Liu Sahe as it features in the art of Dunhuang, this author would like to note that the small fragment showing a bullock cart with musicians (Fig. 5), identified in volume one of *The Stein Collection at the British Museum* (see Fig. 112) as part of the missing right half of the British Museum painting (Fig. 2), is in fact a fragment of a different painting: close examination shows silk and colouring to be distinct. It is hoped that further study will show whether this, surely part of a similar narrative sequence, also depicts the story of Liu Sahe and the miraculous image of Mount Yugu.

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#### Suggested further reading

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'Liu Sahe: Traditions et Iconographie', *Les Peintures Murales et les Manuscrits de Dunhuang*, Colloque franco-chinois organisé par la Fondation Singer-Polignac Paris, 21-23 February 1983, Paris, 1984.

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