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Imagery of Hell in South, South East and Central Asia*

Abstract

Paper depicts development of the imagery of hell in South and Central Asia. Unknown to the oldest Indian literature as a place of punishment the imagery has developed in later Vedic Brahmanic / Hindu literature, in Jainism and Buddhism and penetrated across Asia.

Keywords: Asian arts, hells, imagery, Indian cosmology, Buddhism

Indian Imagery of Hell. The development of the concept

The imagery of hell, as a place of punishment, is unknown to the oldest Indian literature. From the *R̥gveda* hymn VII.104 we can conceptualise an “equivalent of hell”.¹ It is the place beneath the earth, an abyss or pit, and in the infinite darkness lies the serpent (*ahi*) Vṛtra after he had been slain by Lord Indra. This is a cold place of silence and annihilation, the place of disappearance that contrasts with the orderly universe: here there is the surface of Earth and the vault of heaven, here there is *ṛta*, the cosmic law; there is no *ṛta*, is *anṛta*, no light, no heat, no water, no gods, and no men. But this obscure place of darkness is only for anti-divine creatures; ordinary mortals are not in danger of being trapped in it. Rather, the danger that confronts them are the fetters of

* The lecture was held at the International Symposium “Illustrating the Hell: The End of the World Seen in East and West Eurasia” at Mita Campus, Keio University, Tokyo, on March 5th 2013, for the EIRI Project sponsored by the MEXT – Supported Program for the Strategic Research Foundation at Private Universities 2009–2013). The Japanese version of the paper is forthcoming in *The Proceedings of International Symposium ‘Illustrating the Hell: The End of the World Seen in East and West Eurasia’* (working title) (Tokyo: Keio University EIRI Project, March 2014) (sponsored by MEXT – Supported Program for the Strategic Research Foundation at Private Universities 2009–2013).

¹ Brown 1941; for references in the Vedic literature cf. Macdonell 1897, pp. 169–170; Oberlies 1998, pp. 464ff.

Varuṇa, god of *rta*. The fear that stalks them is that they will fall victim to *rakṣasas*, when they follow the path leading to Yama's heaven.²

The Vedic literature knows the Heavenly World (*svarga-loka*) and also the World of the Fathers (*pitṛ-loka*) as the abodes of the departed. The departed are the objects of veneration of their descendants; they partake of the oblations offered to them. Older Vedic literature talks about very long and happy life.³

But then, in later Vedic literature, as in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*,⁴ as also in Jainism and Buddhism, a new concept appears: the idea of transmigration, *saṃsāra* (literally "together-flow", often interpreted as "ocean"). It is no longer just a matter of a fulfilled life, but continues into the next existence that is anticipated, life repeating itself again and again and again. The new life will be good or bad depending on *karma*, the deeds.

With that there emerges a new conception of ethics, since every act that appears to be an act of injustice is to be retaliated to – if not in this life then in a subsequent future. The way for the scrupulous retaliation against every good or bad deed is laid out. God Yama turns from the "chief of the blessed dead" into the ruler who reigns above the hell where evildoers have to suffer.⁵

Since the imagery of hell already appears in ancient Buddhist texts (like the *Suttanipāta*), it cannot be determined with certainty if it was originally Brahmanical/Hindu or Buddhist or for that matter Jaina. In view of the fact that the images which are going to be presented below are primarily Buddhist, some Brahmanical and Jaina descriptions shall be introduced at the outset to show that the imagery of hell was actually pan-Indian.⁶

There is e.g. a story in the *Mahābhārata* about Yudhiṣṭhira who wanders to hell searching for his dead brothers and their common wife, Draupadī, after he failed to meet them in heaven.⁷ The way to hell itself is terrible, Yudhiṣṭhira wanders between heaps of mutilated bodies, food for worms and birds of prey. He crosses the river Vaitaraṇī, carrying hot water, and comes to the hell *kuṇapa* ("carrion hell"), where he sees the forest of blade-leaf trees (*asi-patra-vana*), the iron rocks (*āyasīḥ śilāḥ*), the copper pot (*loha-kumbha*) filled with searing oil, and the tree of torture: the cotton-tree with long thorns (*kūṭa-śālmalika*). Yudhiṣṭhira wants to turn back but he notices from the voices of tormented beings that his presence brings them cool breeze and relief. It appears later that the hell was just a vision (*māyā*) created by Lord Indra to prove Yudhiṣṭhira's virtue,

² Brown 1941, p. 78; for imagery of *rakṣasas* cf. Macdonell 1897, pp. 162–165.

³ *Atharvaveda* XVII.1.27, ed. p. 331; trans. p. 811: "...long-lived, of finished heroism, vigorous (? *vihāyas*), having a thousand life-times, well-made, may I go about."

⁴ For references cf. e.g. Winternitz 1927–1967, Vol. 1, p. 230ff.

⁵ Macdonell 1897, p. 171; for mythology of Yama cf. *ibid.*, pp. 170–174; Oberlies 1998, pp. 386ff.; in the epics cf. Hopkins 1915, pp. 107ff.; in the *purānic* literature: Matsunami 1977.

⁶ Cf. Law 1925, p. 115f.; cf. Onozawa 2001 for analysis of narratives in early Hindu and Buddhist narratives.

⁷ *Mahābhārata* XVII.6, ed. Vol. 19.2, pp. 23ff. and XVIII.3, ed. Vol. 19.3, pp. 13f.; trans. Vol. 12.5, pp. 5f.; cf. Scherman 1892, pp. 48–51; Kirfel 1920, p. 167; for the imagery of hells in Indian epics cf. Hopkins 1915, pp. 109ff.

but this vision seemed to coincide with common imagery and carried a list of the main components of the hells.⁸

This imagery was woven into a system; there are many works that provide a long, systematic listing of hells, often detailing their names and etymology, and describing the torments appropriate for specific misdeeds. Such accounts are primarily known from *purāṇic* literature. In most of the sources the hells belong to the worlds under the earth's surface,⁹ and their descriptions bear similar images.

The number of hells keeps changing. Apparently, the sources with a small number of hells – seven or eight – are older; this is for example the case in the *Mārkandeya-purāṇa*:¹⁰ there is (1) *raurava* (yelling), the hell to which liars and people who committed perjury are sent; they are pushed into the pit with burning coal. In (2) *mahā-raurava* (great yelling), the hell in which the sinners – tied-down – are rolled on a floor of burning copper, while jackals, birds of prey, and scorpions eat at them. The hell (3) *tamas* (darkness) which is cold and terribly dark, and where the icy wind cuts through the bones of the creatures who devour bone marrow and drink blood. The hell (4) *nikṛntana* (destroying), where two potter's wheels are run, is terrifying too: the beings must step on the wheels and are cut to pieces with black strings (*kālasūtra*). In the hell (5) *apraṭiṣṭha* (without soil), the sinners are tied to turning wheels and must rotate on them for thousands of years. The hell (6) *asi-patra-vana* looks like a lovely forest but the leaves of the trees are blades which cut the bodies of evildoers, while the hell (7) *tapta-kumbha* (red-hot jar) is still more terrible: sinners are thrown into boiling oil, and Yama's helpers steer the copper cauldrons.

Other texts of *purāṇic* literature refer to 12, 21, 28, 86 or even 28 *koṭi* ("big number") of hells and label 140 among them "big hells".¹¹ The descriptions put down the type of bad deeds for which the sinners go to these hells. Many of the sins obviously incur punishment; these are killing, selling of one's wife, adultery, immorality, thieving, lying etc. In the case of others one must ask why such deeds are not considered so sinful any longer: big sinners are people who think only of themselves without a thought for others.¹² These were people who engage in senseless cultivation or the wrecking of the trees,¹³ or who eat sweet dishes alone,¹⁴ apparently without sharing them with children.

The Jaina imagery of *samsāra* might be older than Buddhist; there are four forms of likely existence: in the visible world one can be reborn as a human or as animal, in the

⁸ In the Buddhist *Kāraṇḍavyūha* (ed. p. 273), Bali confesses that he shut up 100,000 Kṣatriyas, starting with the five Pāṇḍavas, within the seven gates of hell. The *Mahābhārata* story must have been widely known. I would like to thank Prof. Adelheid Mette (Munich) for this reference.

⁹ It is worth noting that also other theory existed which put them on another continent named *puṣkara*; like that in the *Garuḍa-* and *Vāmana-purāṇa*, for references cf. Kirfel 1920, p. 121.

¹⁰ *Mārkandeya-purāṇa* XII, ed. pp. 85–89; trans. pp. 62–64; cf. Scherman 1892, pp. 23ff.; Kirfel 1920, pp. 167–168; for the names of hells in the *purāṇas* cf. Feer 1886.

¹¹ Kirfel 1920, pp. 147–173.

¹² Ibid. p. 158.

¹³ Ibid. p. 151 and p. 162.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 150 and p. 165 etc.

invisible in heaven or hell. The developed cosmological concept¹⁵ talks of seven hell-realms deep below, arranged in tiers one below the other, and provided with subsidiary rooms. The names of the hells are different as in the Brahmanical/Hindu or Buddhist traditions: (1) *ratna-prabhā* (gem-coloured), (2) *śarkarā-prabhā* (stone-coloured), (3) *vālukā-prabhā* (sand-coloured), (4) *pañka-prabhā* (mud-coloured), (5) *dhūma-prabhā* (smoke-coloured), (6) *tamaḥ-prabhā* (dark-coloured), (7) *tamastama-prabhā* (pitch-dark-coloured). The sojourn of the beings in the hells corresponds precisely with the amount of bad *karma* accumulated by the individual (not only humans but also animals). The hells are places of terrible torments which the denizens inflict on each other.

But the most important part of this paper is the imagery of hell in Buddhism, since this was what had the greatest influence on all of Asia. As mentioned above, in many cases, it cannot be determined from which of the Indian religions the ideas originated. At this juncture it should at least be mentioned that the entire idea of reincarnation which in many of its aspects contradicts the attitude of the *Veda*, and which was often explained as a non-Aryan belief, was also put down to having its origins in the non-orthodox religions of Jainism or Buddhism.¹⁶

In early Buddhist literature, there are references to the system of possible rebirths (called “ways”, *gati*). These are five:¹⁷ “good ways” are existences as gods or humans, “bad ways” as animals, ghosts (*preta*) and as creatures in hell (*naraka*, *naraya*). There is yet another “good” existence: as *asura*, a titan who fights the gods.¹⁸ The ghosts suffer terrible pangs of hunger, thirst and pain, though not in hell, but in the world of men and animals. Buddhist scriptures always emphasize the following: re-birth in heaven as a god (*deva*) or in hell as a hell-creature (*naraka*) might last long, but it is impermanent too.

There are no more than six possible rebirths (often *asuras* are not mentioned, which makes them just five) but the system is aligned with a complicated cosmology. There is not just one heaven or just one hell but several, each of them different and predestined for different denizens.

Like the heavens that are arranged in successive tiers – like storeys – accommodating the realms of different gods, so also the nether world consists of several hells.

It may be noted that Buddhist texts describing the hells are old.¹⁹ The hells are seven or eight in number; side-rooms, or subsidiary hells, are often added:

¹⁵ Kirfel 1920, pp. 315–328; newly vivid explained by Mette (2010, pp. 233ff.) with references and comparison with Buddhism. For the comparison of the Jaina and Buddhist cosmology cf. Jaini 2009.

¹⁶ Bronkhorst 2007.

¹⁷ The classical formulations are to be found in canonical *sūtras* like *Cuḷakammavibhaṅga* (“lesser discourse analysing the karma”), *Majjhimanikāya* 135 and *Mahākammavibhaṅga* (“greater discourse analysing the karma”), *Majjhimanikāya* 136, cf. the analysis of the text in Anālayo 2011, Vol. 2, pp. 767–781, *ibid.* references to parallel versions; for Chinese and Tibetan *ibid.* fn. 61; for ed. of the Sanskrit version, partially preserved in manuscript fragments cf. *Ibid.* fn. 62; the texts are preserved in Tocharian, Khotanese and Sogdian, cf. *ibid.* pp. 768ff. for references; for Chinese cf. also Schmid 2008.

¹⁸ For different opinion on the question if the *asuras* have their own world cf. Braarvig 2009, p. 261.

¹⁹ An early Pali text *Kathāvattu*, an *abidharma* treatise, i.e. explanation of the *sūtras* spoken by the Buddha, knows already a fully developed conception of hells, cf. Braarvig 2009.

Sañjīva, Kālasutta and Roruva, great and small,
 Saṅghāta, Great Avīci, are names that may well appal,
 With Tapana and Patāpana, eight major hells in all.
 Escape from hence is hopeless, and of Ussadas²⁰ they tell,
 Twice eight times more in number, a kind of minor hell.²¹

Northern Buddhism provides the names of cold hells.²² The usual reference in the texts is: “eight great hells and sixteen side-rooms with cold hells” (*śīta-narakā*).²³ It is only in later Buddhist literature that the number of hells is exponential.²⁴

The process of transferring the imagery of one religion to another can of course continue over long periods of time. We find several names of hells repeated in Buddhist and Hindu sources. The hell *avīci*, in many cases the worst of the hells in Buddhism, is known in many Hindu texts,²⁵ at times also constituting the climax,²⁶ even when not at the 8th but in the 28th position. The texts often borrow ideas and names from each other: the hell *kuṇapa*, where the hero of the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhishṭhira, searches for his brothers, is known in Buddhist literature too.²⁷ Moreover, in Buddhism, the hells are referred to as the “realm of Yama”;²⁸ Yama, who is without doubt a pre-Buddhist king of the departed, is well known in Buddhist scriptures and even officiates as a judge questioning the sinners.²⁹ The institution of the judge does not suit the Buddhist dogma at all, since every being bears sole responsibility for future rebirths; only the *karma* counts and it cannot be changed by any judgement. The Buddhist Yama understands his chance and wishes to be reborn as a human being, to be able to learn the *dharma*.³⁰

²⁰ Pali: *ussada*, Sanskrit: *utsada* or *utsedha*, the word is probably used in the second sense, in the meaning of “annex”; for the discussion about the word, cf. trans. of the *Mahāvastu*, Vol. 1, p. 6, fn. 1, and in the *Yogalehrbuch* p. 31. For the subsidiary hells (“Neben-Höllen”) cf. Demoto 2009.

²¹ *Samkiccajātaka, Jātaka*, No. 530, ed. Vol. 5, p. 266; trans. p. 137.

²² The full list of eight hot and eight cold hells is given e.g. in *Dīvyāvadāna* IV, ed. p. 67; trans. p. 136: “...the Sañjīva (Reviving), the Kālasūtra (Black Thread), the Saṅghāta (Crushing), the Raurava (Shrieking), the Mahāraurava (Loud Shrieking), the Tapana (Heat), the Pratāpana (Extreme Heat), the Avīci (Ceaseless Torture), the Arbuda (Blistering), the Nirarbuda (Blisters Bursting), the Aṭaṭa (Chattering Teeth), the Hahava (Ugh!), the Huhuva (Brrr!), the Utpala (Blue Lotus) the Padma (Lotus), and the Mahāpadma (Great Lotus)”; Kirfel (1920, p. 205) was of opinion that the idea of cold hells must have appeared in the area where the cold can be severe and understood as punishment.

²³ E.g. in the *Yogalehrbuch* 145 V5, ed. p. 129: *aṣṭau mahā-narakāḥ ṣoḍaśotsada-parivārāḥ saha-śīta-narakaiḥ*; cf. Dietz 2003, p. 217.

²⁴ Cf. Kirfel 1920, p. 201; Lamotte 1944–1980, Vol. 2, pp. 955–968, with references.

²⁵ Cf. Kirfel 1920, pp. 149, 153, 156, 157, 159, 162 etc.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 149 (*Brahma-purānā, Viṣṇu-purānā*).

²⁷ *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 7; trans. p. 7; verses ed. p. 11; trans. pp. 10–11; cf. *infra*. fns. 40–41; for other references in Sanskrit Buddhism cf. Dietz 2003, p. 217, fn. 109.

²⁸ E.g. *Samkiccajātaka, Jātaka*, No. 530, ed. Vol. 5, p. 268; trans. p. 138.

²⁹ *Majjhimanikāya* 130, ed. Vol. III, pp. 178–187; trans. pp. 223–230; cf. the analysis of the text in Anālayo 2011, Vol. 2, pp. 747–753, *Ibid.* references to parallel versions; for Chinese *ibid.* fn. 300ff.

³⁰ *Majjhimanikāya* 130, ed. Vol. III, p. 186; trans. pp. 229–230.

Buddhist hells (*nariya*, *naraka*) are described in Buddhist canonical literature;³¹ what we encounter here are not lists of hells as in the *purāṇas* but sermons, delivered by the Buddha for the edification of the monks and laymen (even though cosmological descriptions are also known in Buddhism).³² One of the oldest of such sources are verses incorporated into the *Kokāliyasutta* of the *Suttanipāta*.³³ In many ways, the verses lead us to already known imagery; thus we hear e.g. about the river *Vetaraṇī* (v. 674); about jackals and birds of prey (v. 675); about the forest of blade leaves (*asi-patta-vana*, v. 673); about boiling in the iron pot-cauldron (*lohamyaṃ pana kumbhiṃ*, v. 670); about terrible weapons – like iron spears or hammers (*ayasūla*, v. 667, *ayomaya-kuṭa*, v. 669) – used to sever the sinners, and about evildoers being fed with glowing iron balls (*ayo guḷasannibhaṃ bhojanam*, v. 667).

The *Devadūtasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*³⁴ (parts of the text are also to be found in the *Bālapaṇḍitasutta*)³⁵ at first describes how King Yama questions a sinner, then explaining to him that he had sent him his messengers – old age, illness, rotting corpses – hoping he would start a virtuous life. Since it was of no avail, Yama describes to him the *mahā-niraya* (great hell, known in other texts as *avīci*). The hell is made of iron and surrounded by an iron wall; it is four-cornered and has four gates; the roof and floor are of iron too: glowing iron. Flames curl between the walls of the hell where sinners are burnt, but the sinner “does not die until he makes an end of his evil deed”,³⁶ i.e. until his bad *karma* is cleared. The sentence repeats itself each time before the sinner falls into another hell: from the Great *Niraya* he falls into the great Filth Hell (*gūtha-niraya*) where his skin, flesh and bones are cut up. He falls into the Great Hall of Embers (*kukkuḷa-niraya*), into the great Forest of Silk-Cotton Trees (*simbala-vana*) with burning thorns, into the great sword-leaved-forest (*asi-patta-vana*), from where he falls into the River of Caustic Water (*khārodakā nadī*, referred to in the commentary as *Vetaraṇī*).³⁷ The guardians of the hell pull him out of the water with iron hooks and feed him with glowing metal pellets and melted copper.

Of special significance are descriptions of hells in stories about humans who visited the nether worlds. There are several such narratives of which ancient verses forming part of the *jātaka* deserve mention first. One such narrative, the *Nimi-jātaka*, talks about King Nimi who was so righteous that Lord Indra invited him to heaven. Indra’s charioteer

³¹ For the lists of hells and references cf. Malalasekera 1937–1938, Vol. 2, p. 79; *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, ed. Malalasekera et al., Vol. 5.3 pp. 421–433 (C. Witanachchi); *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Buswell, Vol. 1, pp. 316–318 (S. Teiser).

³² For analysis of cosmological works, incl. *Lokaprajñapti* cf. Mus 1939 (in book illustrations of hells in the Cambodian paintings); Dietz 2003, with references to earlier research. In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* the hells are described in III.58–59, French trans. Vol. 1, pp. 148–156, Engl. Vol. 2, pp. 456–459 (with references.)

³³ *Suttanipāta* III.10, verses 667–678, ed. pp. 128–131; trans. pp. 88–89; cf. Scherman 1892, p. 62.

³⁴ *Majjhimanikāya* 130, cf. fn. 30.

³⁵ *Majjhimanikāya* 129, ed. Vol. III, pp. 166–167; trans. pp. 212–213; cf. the analysis of the text in Anālayo 2011, Vol. 2, pp. 741–746, *Ibid.* references to parallel versions; for Chinese *ibid.* fn. 272ff.

³⁶ *na ca tāva kālaṃ karoti yāva na taṃ pāpaṃ kammaṃ byantihoti*; *Majjhimanikāya* 130, ed. Vol. 3, p. 166.

³⁷ For *Vetaraṇī/Vetaraṇī* cf. Hopkins 1915, pp. 110–111.

Mātali showed Nimi different hells, answered all his questions explaining the sins of the tormented etc., before he brought the king to the heavenly abodes. In the long dialog between Mātali and Nimi we learn about the rules of causality reflected in the suffering of sinners, as for example:

“That tongue see, pierced with a hook, like as a shield
 Stuck with a hundred barbs; and who are those
 Who struggle leaping like a fish on land,
 And roaring, drabble spittle? when I see it,
 Fear seizes on me: tell me, Mātali,
 What sin has been committed by those mortals,
 Whom I see yonder swallowing the hook?”
 Then answered Mātali the charioteer,
 Describing how sin ripens and bears fruit:
 “These men are they who in the market-place
 Hagglng and cheapening from their greed of gain
 Have practiced knavery, and thought it hidden,
 Like one that hooks a fish: but for the knave
 There is no safety, dogged by all his deeds:
 These cruel creatures begat sin, and they
 Are lying yonder swallowing the hook.”³⁸

Mātali shows Nimi the river Vetaraṇī, its malodorous briny waters aglow with flames,³⁹ but the names of the hells, like *avīci* etc., are not mentioned in the *jātaka*, which perhaps is indicative of the antiquity of this story.

The most famous visitor of the hells in Buddhism is the monk Maudgalyāyana (Pali: Moggalana) who wanders alone or with Śāriputra. The wanderings of this monk in other worlds are described in the texts of several schools,⁴⁰ the detailed description in the *Mahāvastu* of the Mahāsāṃghikas being well-preserved. The description here forms the entire “Chapter on Hells” (*naraka-parivarta*) several pages long.⁴¹ However, there are repetitions and inconsistencies; the text seems to follow different sources, as it dwells e.g. on the hell *avīci* in one place right at the end, placing it in the 8th position, but in another place in the 6th; it also mentions the hell *kuṇapa*,⁴² known from the *Mahābhārata*, but without giving its description in the later part.

³⁸ *Nimijātaka, Jātaka*, No. 541, verses 66–70, ed. Vol. 6, pp. 112–113; trans. p. 60.

³⁹ *Ibid.* verse 31, ed. p. 105; trans. p. 57.

⁴⁰ Cf. Panglung 1981, pp. 7, 124, 141, 180 with references; Zin/Schlingloff 2007, pp. 19, 33, 54; in the Chinese and Tibetan literature the stories grow to the long narratives, cf. Berounský 2012, pp. 77ff. with references to sources and previous research.

⁴¹ *Mahāvastu* ed. Vol. 1, pp. 4–26; trans. pp. 6–21.

⁴² *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 7; trans. pp. 7–8; cf. fn. 7.

The “Chapter on Hells” of the *Mahāvastu* repeats many ideas from the *Suttanipāta* and the *Majjhimanikāya* – including the sentence “but they do not die as long as their evil karma is not worked out to the end”⁴³ – e.g. it speaks of the sinners falling into *Vetaraṇī*, being pulled out with iron hooks by the wardens of the hell and fed with pellets of iron and melted copper.

Some ideas are however new:

There they run about in their milliards over many a *yojana*, assailing one another with leaden thongs. Thus has the Master, the Tathāgata, understanding its true nature named this hell *Kālasūtra*, a bourne of evil-doers.⁴⁴

To explain the difficult term *kāla-sūtra*: it means black string, probably originally the “String of Time” or perhaps even “String of the Death”.⁴⁵

In the hell known as *saṅghāta* the sinners are crushed between mountains:

From the surface of the hell *Saṅghāta* mountains rise up on both sides. In between these mountains beings are herded in immense numbers. And the stony mountains come together through the working of men’s karma, and crush many beings like so many fire brands.⁴⁶

And in another place:

This hell is situated between two mountains, is made of fiery, flaming and blazing iron, and is several hundred *yojanas* in extent. (...), and mountains converge to meet each other, and as they do so the doomed shout, “Look at the mountains coming on us! See them come!” The mountains meet and crash them as so much sugar-cane.⁴⁷

We learn also the reason of such suffering:

Those who in this world cause worms to be crushed, or the earth to be dug up (...), or who crush with their finger-nails nits, lice, and *śankuśas*, are reborn there as a maturing of this karma.⁴⁸

The *Mahāvastu* provides several other clear-cut explanations as to why particular sinners provoke a particular kind of torture to be inflicted on them, as for example:

⁴³ *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 17f.; trans. p. 15f; for *Majjhimanikāya* cf. fn. 36.

⁴⁴ *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 13; trans. p. 12.

⁴⁵ For the explanations of the word, cf. Kirfel 1920, p. 202; Scherman 1892, p. 36.

⁴⁶ *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 13; trans. p. 12.

⁴⁷ *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 21; trans. p. 17.

⁴⁸ *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 21; trans. pp. 17–18.

As the maturing of what karma do nails or rods of iron grow on their hands? Since in this world they have put weapons of war in men's hands, urging them with these weapons to smite such and such a village, city, town, man or beast, so, as the maturing of such karma, iron rods and daggers grow on their hands.⁴⁹

The monk Maudgalyāyana visits the hells and describes them later to his listeners with a didactic intent. In the texts the penalties are not questioned: the bad *karma* must be worked out; only seldom we read that Maudgalyāyana tries to allay the pain of the tormented.⁵⁰

Of a radically different character is the description of the *avīci* hell in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*. Here it is the Bodhisatva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, who is visiting the hell.⁵¹ The presence of this saint of Mahāyāna Buddhism changes the embers into cool winds, the cauldrons in which the sinners boil burst, flames are transformed into ponds filled with lotus flowers.⁵²

Pictorial Representations

Pictorial representations of the hells are numerous, though this is the case only in some traditions. Hells are frequently represented in Tibetan painted scrolls and mural paintings (cf. below) and in late Jaina manuscripts.⁵³ Such representations are, however, not known from the older tradition; it is however quite likely that they existed but did not survive the times due to the perishable medium on which they were executed. The realm of Yama was a favourite theme of wandering preachers who used pictures to illustrate their words.⁵⁴ The 8th century Jaina work *Kuvalayamālā*⁵⁵ talks of such preachers (*uvajjhāo*) as using pictures on cloth (*cittavaḍo*) to illustrate the possible realms of rebirth, among them the hells. As shown by Jain, the tradition continues until modern times, and pictures of the hells form part of the repertoire of story-tellers across India even today.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ *Mahāvastu*, ed. Vol. 1, p. 17; trans. p. 14; similar *Ibid.* Vol. 1, ed. p. 22; trans. p. 18.

⁵⁰ Cf. Panglung 1981, p. 180.

⁵¹ Cowell 1879; Scherman 1892, pp. 62–63.

⁵² The *Kāraṇḍavyūha* (ed. pp. 261–263; summarised in Studholme 2002, pp. 122f.) also narrates Avalokiteśvara's visit to Avīci, which turns the burning hell cold; many thanks to Prof Adelheid Mette (Munich) for providing me with this reference.

⁵³ Cf. Caillat 1981, Figs. 27–28; Mette 2010, Figs. 4–5; cf. also Fig. 9 in Caillat and Fig. 1 in Mette *ibid.* showing scenes in hells in the lower part of the *puruṣa* illustrating the universe.

⁵⁴ References in: Mair 1988, ch. 1: 'Picture-Storytelling in Ancient India', pp. 17–37 and in Jain 1998.

⁵⁵ *Kuvalayamālā* I, pp. 185, 13–18 and II, *Kuvalayamālākathā*, pp. 67, 37ff., cited in Zin/Schlingloff 2007, pp. 13–14.

⁵⁶ Jain 1998, pp. 8–21; cf. also *ibid.* Jain, 'Showmen of Gujarat', pp. 74–89 and the impressive pictures in the book, pp. 15–18.

Not a single such picture has survived from ancient India; however, a Khmer relief in Angkor Wat, Cambodia,⁵⁷ shows a representation of Lord Yama with two groups of beings, one making its way towards heaven, the other towards hell. In Nepal, wooden carvings on braces supporting the roof of the Hariśaṅkara Temple in Patan show various torments inflicted on evildoers in hell.⁵⁸

Depictions of Hells in *saṃsāra-cakras*

With regard to representations in Buddhist art, we have no Indian depictions existing today, which, however, must be explained by the fact that they did not survive the ages. This should be assumed with certainty since hells, as one of the six possible forms of rebirth, form part of the representation of the so-called *saṃsāra-cakra* or *bhāva-cakra*, i.e. pictorial representations of wheels showing possible forms of existence as known in India. In Tibet there are countless depictions of the wheel;⁵⁹ in India, however, only one survived – and it is to be found in Ajanta⁶⁰ – though the section which once represented hells has been destroyed.

Since the Indian prototype has not survived, we have to rest content with Tibetan representations (Fig. 1).⁶¹

Here we have the chain of the twelve components of causal relativity – *pratītya-samutpāda*: “if this is, then that will be”, starting with ignorance at the teaching of the Buddha – being depicted on the rim. The dove (or rooster), the snake and the pig, symbolising the basic sins – desire, anger and stupidity – are depicted in the hub area. The rim and the hub keep the wheel in motion.

The realms of the possible forms of existence (five without the realm of the asuras or six within it) are represented in the sections within the wheel: in Fig. 1 here, both realms are depicted in one double segment without a demarcating line. Creatures of hell, animals and ghosts are shown in the lower part; the gods, *asuras* and humans in the upper. The demon of inconstancy holds the wheel in his claws, showing the impermanence of

⁵⁷ Angkor Wat, Southern Wall, eastern part, illus. in: Maxwell/Poncar 2006, pp. 160–170: “King Yama and the Apparatus of Death”; I want to thank Prof. Adalbert Gail (Berlin) for the information and references to the illustrations in this and next footnote.

⁵⁸ 24 wooden scenes on braces supporting the roof of the Hariśaṅkara Temple in Patan, Nepal, description with German trans. of the inscriptions in Gail 1984, pp. 58–60, ill. Ibid. Pls. 42–43; cf. also Gail 1991, pp. 51–52. The representations repeat Buddhist depictions at the monastery Caturbrahma-mahāvihāra which are provided with Nevarī inscriptions; cf. Ibid. for their translations by Siegfried Lienhard, ed. of inscriptions *ibid.* p. 73; illustrations of carvings at the Caturbrahma-mahāvihāra *ibid.* Pls. 40–41.

⁵⁹ The Tibetan and Nepalese painted scrolls are often reproduced; cf. e.g. Dunnington 2000; Teiser 2006, Pls. 1–6, Figs. 1.3–1.12; for a Mongolian example cf. Meinert 2011, no. 155, illus. vol. 1, p. 293.

⁶⁰ Cf. Zin/Schlingloff 2007; *ibid.* references to previous research, analysis of the relevant textual material as well as comparative analysis of the elements of the Ajanta painting.

⁶¹ Fig. 1. Tibetan painted scroll, State Museum of Ethnology Munich, No. 69-5-1; illus. in: Müller/Raunig (ed.) 1982; © State Museum of Ethnology Munich, Photo: Marianne Franke.

all rebirths within the *saṃsāra*. Only the Buddha knows the way out; without Him the beings will be traversing again and again from one form of existence to another.

The Tibetan pictures show the tortures inflicted in the various hells with some fondness: the beings are cut, boiled and roasted by the creatures, which are often depicted with terrifying animal heads. As the textual tradition says, there are several hells; in pictorial depictions, hot and cold hells are differentiated by the colours used to depict them: red for the former and white for the latter.⁶²

Sometimes the representations of the hells are so heavy with detail that the section in which they are depicted is much bigger than the sections of the other realms (Fig. 2),⁶³ taking up as much as one-third of the entire wheel. The hells are shown separated from each other by walls. Repentant denizens of hell are tormented in all possible ways; one can also see spiky mountains which possibly represent the cold hells.

As mentioned above, the representations are not the invention of Tibetan artists but the continuation of an old Indian tradition. The mural painting from the second part of the 5th c. in Ajanta, cave XVII (Fig. 3),⁶⁴ has preserved the prototype. The wheel was painted with great skill and precision, but unfortunately only its upper half has survived. It is enough, however, to permit a reconstruction of the entire composition showing the wheel in a mountain landscape. Spokes divide the wheel into sections. The orange-coloured rim is divided into parts more or less equal in size. A green-skinned demon holds the top of the wheel and his fangs bite into the wheel's rim.

There are good reasons to believe that the painting corresponds closely with the Central Asian manuscript in Sanskrit found in the Kucha region (i.e. on the Northern Silk Road) by Pelliot,⁶⁵ which is confirmed by the prescriptions in the manuscript concerning the representation of the outside of the wheel, which was apparently followed quite precisely by the painters of Ajanta.

The "manuscript Pelliot" begins with the following situation: Maudgalyāyana, who visits different worlds describes them for the people, but since he cannot teach everywhere, the Buddha gives instructions on how to paint the Wheel of *saṃsāra*.

The wheel is meant to be a water wheel (*ghaṭī-yantra*, literally "pot-mechanism"). The manuscript requires the depiction of more than twelve components of the chain of causal relativity, not only the *pratītyasamutpāda* – "if this is, then that will be" which ends with the category "death" (as it is in Tibet) but also requires further components which should visualise the sad results of the existence: sickness, mourning, lamentation, pain and worry, this prescription explains why the Ajanta Wheel of *saṃsāra* displays more than twelve sections on the rim.

⁶² Illus.: e.g. in Dunnington 2000, Pl. 4.

⁶³ Fig. 2. Wall painting from the temple in Teshiding, after Waddell 1895, p. 91.

⁶⁴ Fig. 3. Ajanta XVII, drawing by the author; ref. to illustrations and the copy in Zin 2003 p. 440, *ibid.* p. 455 the drawing; and Zin/Schlingloff 2007, pp. 52ff. with references, photo and drawings of the entire painting and many details

⁶⁵ *Ms. Pelliot Skt. rouge*, ed. Pauly 1959, ed. and German trans. in: Zin/Schlingloff 2007, pp. 33–41.

The upper part of the painting shows the good, desirable realms of possible rebirth – as god (in the middle), as *asura* (on the left) and as human being (on the right). Only tiny sections remain today from the realms of animals (on the left) and of *pretas* (on the right). The depiction of the hells must have been much larger than other sections⁶⁶ – corresponding with similar compositions in Tibet (cf. Fig. 2) – but in Ajanta virtually nothing survived of this section, so unfortunately we do not have even a single representation of the hells from ancient India.

It is worthwhile mentioning here that there are directions in the *vinaya* that the Wheel of *Samsāra* should be painted at the entrance to the monasteries⁶⁷ – which was where it was executed in Ajanta as well as in Kanheri, cave 86.⁶⁸ So there are good reasons to believe that such paintings were executed in other places too, though they did not survive the ravages of time.

The instruction contained in the “manuscript Pelliot” that the beings (floating in *samsāra*) should be depicted on the rim of the water wheel, in vessels attached to the “pot-mechanism” (*ghaṭī-yantra*) was indeed realised in several places, such as in Baodingshan in Dazu (Sichuan),⁶⁹ Western Tibet⁷⁰ or in Japan.⁷¹

A Painted Frieze from Kizil

As mentioned above, the “Manuscript Pelliot” was discovered in the region of Kucha so it should also be presumed that the depictions of the Wheel of *Samsāra* were painted in the area. Only a late, schematic picture has been found, and that too in very poor state of preservation,⁷² which must be due to the fact that the entrances of nearly all the caves were destroyed.

But in the Kucha region, in one of the caves in Kizil, one breathtaking depiction of the hells did survive the times – not as a part of the Wheel of *Samsāra* but as a long frieze.

The painting (Fig. 4),⁷³ which lent its name to the cave (“Teufelshöhle” meaning the “Devil’s Cave”) was placed on the wall, beneath two rows of depictions of the Buddha’s sermons.

⁶⁶ For other interpretations of the wheel with more as six compartments – what contradicts Buddhist dogma – cf. Przyluski 1920 and Teiser 2006, pp. 90ff.

⁶⁷ *Vinayaśūdraka* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins preserved in the Tibetan (ed. Vol. 44, p. 97.3) and Chinese translation (T 1451, ed. Vol. 24, ch. 17, p. 283b2-10); cf. Soper 1950, p. 149; trans. from Tibetan in: Rockhill 1884, p. 48. Cf. Mejer 2010.

⁶⁸ Burgess 1883, p. 70; the painting is no more existent.

⁶⁹ Cf. Howard 2001, Figs. 9, 10 (diagram) and the book cover; Teiser 2006, Pl. 14; Teiser 2009, Fig. 14; cf. *ibid.* for a beautiful example from Yulin (Figs. 10–11).

⁷⁰ Tabo main temple, *illus.* in: Teiser 2006, Pl. 12; Pedongpo cave temple, *illus.* in: Neumann 2002; Teiser 2006, Pl. 13.

⁷¹ Thomas 1902.

⁷² Kuntura, Cave 75, *illus.* in: Teiser 2006, Pl. 10; Teiser 2009, Fig. 7.

⁷³ Fig. 4: Kizil, Cave 198 (“Teufelshöhle mit Annexen”), ca. 600 CE, Berlin, Asian Art Museum (Study Collection), No. MIK III 8432, 260 x 50 cm, *ill.* Le Coq 1924, Pl. 9d; Schlingloff 1961–1963, Vol. 2, Figs. 3–5

The painting which was brought in to Berlin during the 3rd “Turfan Expedition” (1905–1907), shows a series of five hells; they are distinguished by different background colours, from left to right: grey-blue, white, red, grey-blue, red⁷⁴ (with the next scene, now destroyed, presumably further to the left) and decorated both above and below with geometrical patterns.

All five scenes depict torments inflicted by the “devils” on human-like creatures (*narakas*) – the flames burn only the sinners, distinguishing them from the demonic attendants of hell. The scene on the left (the left upper part is broken off) first shows three beings sitting inside a mortar, in which a menial from hell is pounding with a pestle. It is perhaps suggestive of the hell *tapana* where the sinners are crushed with an iron crusher.⁷⁵ The right section of the first compartment shows six beings being boiled in a huge cauldron. Its cover is so heavy that it has a loop on top to be hanged with. The cauldron is standing on stones between which fire blazes. A blue-skinned demon with ears shaped like pots (*kumbha-karṇa*) is jabbing the beings with a trident.

As known from the texts, both in Sanskrit,⁷⁶ as well as in Uighur,⁷⁷ found on the Northern Silk Road, the imagery of the hells does not differ from that prevalent in India. The picture actually takes us to the ideas explained earlier, even where the exact names of the depicted hells cannot always be ascertained with certainty. Even the ancient *Suttanipāta* (cf. fn. 33) carries references about “boiling in the ore pot”.

The following section of the picture, depicted on a white background on which flames glow, clearly shows the creatures of hell being fed. As stated in several texts (cf. fns. 29, 32, 34, 40), the evildoers have to eat iron balls and drink molten copper. It must be one of these “dishes” that the grey-skinned, blue-haired demon, *kumbha-karṇa*, offers as a drink to the naked, red skinned sinner kneeling on the ground with arms fastened to his back. Two other white-complexioned evildoers hold their saucers alone. The sinner on the right carries a flaming plate, while he tries to escape between the flames. The bowl of the sinner on the left does not blaze any longer, but the flames are issuing forth from his ear. Perhaps it is an allusion to the hells *raurava* or *mahā-raurava*, where flames or acrid smoke emanate from sinners’ wounds, scathing their bodies.⁷⁸

(drawings); Härtel/Yaldiz 1987, No. 7, pp. 58–59; *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China / Zhongguo Xinjiang Bihua Yishu*, 2009, Vol. 3, pp. 230–236; © Asian Art Museum, South, Southeast and Central Asian Collections, National Museums in Berlin, Photo: Jürgen Liepe.

The painting is not the only one representation of the hells in the region of Kucha, among the paintings appear first of all the motifs of burning hell-cauldron etc. – for references, cf. Grünwedel 1912 s.v. “Hölle”. In the Study Collection of the Asian Art Museum are also kept fragments of the painting frieze from Cave 175 (“Versuchungshöhle”, Nos. MIK III 8869, 8870, 8871) representing apparently visits of the military clad person in different hells; the painting is, however, in a very bad state of preservation.

⁷⁴ As in many other Kizil paintings the today’s colours can not be taken for the intention of the painters; especially all yellows pigments (in which the flames could have been executed) are totally lost.

⁷⁵ Kirfel 1920, p. 203.

⁷⁶ Dietz 2003.

⁷⁷ Geng/Klimkeit/Laut 1998.

⁷⁸ Kirfel 1920, p. 203.

In the two following sections, with red and blue-grey backgrounds, it appears that the same two sinners are represented, one red and the other white-skinned, this perhaps denoting that the sinners fall into another hell. In the first section, the demonic guardians of hell, who bear boar-heads with long fangs, pierce the sinners with long spears, severing them. In the second section, the demons hold the *narakas* by the hair and attack them with a sword and a long knife. While iron spears are often mentioned (cf. fn. 33), swords are not (*asi* belongs rather to the common name *asi-patra-vana*: “sword-leaved forest”).⁷⁹ The depiction appears to reflect the common imagery of martyrs and not the two specific hells.⁸⁰

By contrast, the next section – the last in the painted frieze – may be regarded as an illustration of a particular hell. Several sinners are represented here between two mountains that are in flames. The mountains are apparently on the verge of moving towards each other and crushing beings wedged between them. To denote that the process repeats itself several times, the heads of two rams in attacking positions are shown on the mountains – a pictorial illustration of the account in the scriptural sources where the mountains are described as “ram-mountains” (*meṣa-parvata*).⁸¹ The painter has represented the hell *saṅghāta* in a very satisfactory way (cf. fns. 45–46).

Kṣitigarbha’s Protection for Beings through Six Kinds of Rebirths

Another interesting depiction of hells on the Northern Silk Road (Fig. 5)⁸² may be traced to Bezeklik in the Turfan region, some 700 km further east from Kucha. The painting is a good two to three hundreds years later, and is executed in a different, Sinicized style; besides, it also visualises different ideas of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The inscriptions are in the Uighur language; they were added later and do not provide any explanations of the pictures.⁸³

The painting brings us back to representations of the different possibilities of rebirth, similar to the Wheel of *Samsāra*. The picture, however, is not shaped like a wheel,

⁷⁹ Cf. also fn. 49: sinners get hands as blades of swords and wound each other.

⁸⁰ The hells are explained as *saṃjīva* and *pratāpana* by Schlingloff 1961–1963, Vol. 2, p. 28.

⁸¹ Cf. Schlingloff 1961–1963, Vol. 2, p. 28; for references to the literary sources cf. Mus 1939, pp. 311ff. Cf. *Sphuṭārthā, Abhidharmakośavyākhyā* by Yaśomitra, ed. (Wogihara) p. 254: *saṅghāto yatra meṣākṛtayah parvatādāya ubhayata āpatantaḥ sattvān pīḍyanti*; similar in the *Yogācārabhūmi* III-V.6, ed. p. 80; *Lokapaññatti*, cf. Denis, Vol. 1, pp. 94f and Vol. 2, pp. 109f, fn. 43. I would like to thank Prof. Marek Mejer (Warsaw) for providing me with textual references. Le Coq (1924, p. 16) was not acquainted with this literary tradition and understood the ram’s heads as a method devised by the painter to depict the movement of the mountains.

⁸² Fig. 5: Bezeklik, Cave 18 (German number: 8), Berlin, Asian Art Museum, No. MIK III 8453, 147 x 95 cm, dated with C14 to 1042–1162 CE; illus. in: Le Coq 1924, Pl. 19; Yaldiz/Gadebusch/Hickmann/Weis/Ghose 2000, No. 316, p. 219; Zin 2003, Fig. 3, p. 456 (drawing); *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China / Zhongguo Xinjiang Bihua Yishu*, 2009, Vol. 6, pp. 159; © Asian Art Museum, South, Southeast and Central Asian Collections, National Museums in Berlin, Photo: Jürgen Liepe.

⁸³ Zieme 1985, pp. 189–190; for the latest research cf. Matsui 2011, pp. 142–145.

because the wheel in motion, that is the act of turning, is not meant to be indicated. Every conceivable form of existence is represented here between wavy beams that emanate from the centre, where the Bodhisatva Kṣitigarbha must have been represented; the lotus throne on the upper edge of the preserved part was presumably his seat.⁸⁴ Kṣitigarbha is the Bodhisatva of Mahāyāna Buddhism who protects beings in all six worlds “until all hells are empty”. It is understandable that Kṣitigarbha was connected with the hells, as well as with Ten Judges. The “Ten Kings” of Chinese Buddhism were known in the Uighur tradition, this being indicated in fragments from preserved manuscripts and book illustrations.⁸⁵ Comparable depictions from Dunhuang⁸⁶ show the characteristic wavy beams radiating from the centre and separating different sectors of possible rebirths.

The realm of the gods is not preserved. On the viewer’s right, the realm of men and animals are depicted; on the left, as counterparts to the animals, are *pretas*, ghosts, whose terrible thirst and hunger are suggested through their skinny bodies, open mouths and surrounding flames. Above the *pretas*, the *asuras* must certainly have been represented.

Represented in the entire lower portion in seven compartments are the hells: three on each side and one, the biggest, in the middle, above the red (empty) cartouche. The hells on the sides are separated by low walls, their floors painted in three colours; the upper ones on both sides are in red, the middle ones in white, the lowest in black. The hell on the viewer’s lower right shows an entrance to a room behind the wall – could this perhaps be the “subsidiary hell”? Standing in this compartment in the right corner is a person with demonic red hair, sporting a military outfit. The figure may be assumed to be Yama, king of the nether world.

Starting with the compartment showing Yama, it may be said that not all actions represented in the hells are self-explanatory. All four persons depicted here are *narakas* or sinners. They are represented with hair held together in a knot, while the attendants of hell are shown with their hair standing on end. In the Yama compartment no one is tormented: one person is seen lying on a bed; the other is seen carrying a similar piece of furniture, perhaps also a bed. This person (who might be a woman) is being followed by another, who is perhaps stretching out his arms to touch her. The last person, a man, is seen kneeling by the bed. It seems that he is communicating with Yama, since both of them have their right hands raised in a manner that is quite similar. Perhaps the four persons are actually only two depicted repetitively? Would the man running behind the

⁸⁴ For analysis of depictions cf. Schmid 2008. According to Schmid such representations of Kṣitigarbha as Lord of Six Ways actually show the solution, the 6th way being the way of becoming the Buddha.

⁸⁵ Gabain 1972, 1973; Zieme 1996; for the Tibetan versions of the narratives of the Ten Kings cf. Berounský 2012, with references; the earliest illustrated copy of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings*, composed in the 9th c., was produced in the beginning of the 10th c. in Dunhuang; cf. Teiser 1994, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Cf. “Kṣitigarbha as Lord of Six Ways” on banners from Dunhuang, illus. in Schmid 2008 (with references). In Kumtura, Cave 75, in which the Wheel of *Samsāra* is represented (cf. fn. 72), also a depiction of Kṣitigarbha (?) is to be found, with its characteristic wavy beams, between which different form of existences are shown, illus.: Teiser 2006, Pl. 9; Teiser 2009, Fig. 8; Mori 2012, Figs. 3 and 5 (a very good drawing).

woman and then kneeling by the side of the bed be the same person, with Yama explaining to him the flagrancy of his deed?⁸⁷

The compartment above the previous one is not easy to elucidate either. In the middle stands an object that looks like a huge container in a shape of a vase with a narrow neck and a flat bottom supported on nine short legs. One person holds another head down inside the opening of the container. Three other persons are placed around; one of them is destroyed, two others kneel watching the occurrence, and stretching their hands, as if expecting something. One is holding a bowl. All the persons represented in the scene are sinners, even the one who appears to be putting another into the container. There is no fire under the container so the torture which is represented here defies explanation.⁸⁸ But perhaps it is not a torture instrument at all? One of the sinners may be taking something out of the container, and the others are waiting for it. Is the container perhaps a bannock oven (with fire inside), as was already noticed by Le Coq,⁸⁹ and the hunger suffered by erstwhile evildoers and depicted here so strong that one of them must undergo burning in the narrow neck of the oven to reach the bread?

Compared to this, the scene above is easily understandable: there is a round cauldron on legs all aflame. Two minions of hell stand around: one with hair standing on end, the other one with a bull's head. One is holding aloft a poor sinner spiked on a long stick, while another holds the same kind of stick inside the cauldron – with what appears to be someone spiked on it too. A huge snake adds to the dreadful atmosphere of the scene; seated on top of a tiny building, perhaps the gatehouse to another hell, it surveys the gory scene from there.

Further to the left, on the other side of a low wall, two very similar snakes are seen in action: they strangle the bodies of two *narakas*, only one still trying to fly, while flames blaze around. The inscription in the cartouche states “this is (a) *preta*”,⁹⁰ which is not correct because it is an attendant of hell who is represented in the compartment: we are here in hell and not in the world of men and animals!

The centre of the composition is taken up by the depiction of mountains, which are not only spiky in shape but also provided with spikes which pierce the bodies of two miserable *narakas*. To the left, the next candidate is being pulled by his hair and garment

⁸⁷ The king looks very similar to the „Tenth King of Transformations“ in the illuminated manuscripts of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings* from Dunhuang, Cave 17 (10th c.); cf. Schmid 2008, Figs. 6 and 9.

⁸⁸ The object was explained by Yaldiz as “concrete mixer-like” but understood also as a mincing machine since the person with the bowl was understood as caching “the rests” into the bowl, cf. Yaldiz/Gadebusch/Hickmann/Weis/Ghose 2000, p. 218.

⁸⁹ Le Coq 1924, p. 28: “Das vierte Bild (...) versetzt uns in ein Backhaus. Ein überaus recht menschlich aussehender Dämon steckt den Körper eines Sünders in den Backofen; drei andere menschliche (?) Wesen umgeben den Ofen. Dieser ist interessant durch seine Form; sie ist uralt und erinnert lebhaft an die heute noch in Ostturkistan üblichen *tonúr*, *tanúr* (...) genannten Backöfen.” In today's Turkey such ovens are called *tandır*.

⁹⁰ I would like to thank Prof. Peter Zieme (Berlin/Tokyo) for this information. It should be noted here that *pretas* and *narakas* were not only here confused, cf. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* III.59, trans. Vol. 2, p. 460: “The king of the Pretas is called Yama; his residence, which is the principal dwelling of the Pretas, is located five hundred leagues under Jambudvīpa...”.

by an attendant from hell, apparently to force him to cross the mountains. Two others have been tied up, waiting for their turn.

On the left side of the mountains too, a huge snake is poised on a top of a gatehouse (?). In this section, one *naraka* lies on the floor, while another is being subjected to gruesome torture: he lies with his extremities all twisted up on a round chopping board, while one of the hell's attendants hammers at him with a sledge mounted on a long beam – an apparatus that he sets in motion with his foot. Another attendant is seen pulling the miserable sinner by his hair. In the left corner of the painting stands an exceptional person, namely a man clad normally and folding his hands in the *añjali* gesture. We do not know if the figure is a new-comer or a visitor to the hell.

The inmates of the hell below are tormented by flames and a black bird. The object that the hell's attendant holds in his hands is no more visible. Le Coq has discerned a “covered pot”.⁹¹ Interestingly, one of the *narakas* is shown running, holding a long stick as if to attack the torturer.

The lowest hell might perhaps be *avīci* since, as in the descriptions, the fire is issuing forth from the wall.⁹² A blazing red kettle (?) or barrel stands in the middle; an attendant from the hell kneels on its side holding an undistinguishable object made of two small boards and a broad blade (?) or perhaps a sack – a bellows? On the left corner, a terrible torture is underway: a tongue is being torn out. The sufferer is a woman who seems to have neither hands nor feet, and who is kneeling on a red object which is apparently a pillar she is chained up to.⁹³ In the upper part of the section there are two more *narakas*. One kneels with his arms bound to his back; the other holds an unrecognizable oval object.

The entire lower section of the painting, illustrating the possible existence as an inmate of hell, consists of seven hells, clearly separated by walls. Contrary to expectations, the hells do not appear to be arranged in horizontal levels: the left side is very cruel, but the right is not. There are no hell's attendants depicted in two of the compartments but instead a king, apparently Yama.

Even when the depictions carry no allusions – and to the extent I am aware, there are none in comparable depictions either – it appears possible that the representation of the kind-hearted Bodhisatva Kṣitagarbha be seen as bearing elements of compassion towards the suffering *narakas*, suggested in compartments without attendants from the hell or the person observing the occurrences in one of the hells.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Le Coq 1924, p. 28: “...ein straubhaariger Dämon mit einem Deckelgefäß in den Händen.”

⁹² E.g. in the *Mahāvastu* (ed. Vol. 1, pp. 25–26; trans. pp. 20–21): “Flames from its eastern walls beat against the western; from the western wall they beat against the eastern. Flames from its southern wall...”.

⁹³ It seems that the pictorial tradition survived in the Tibetan paintings; cf. Berounský 2012, Pl. 41 showing the scene in quite similar way (even the kneeling *naraka* to the right is repeated). Also the hammer apparatus that can be set in motion with the foot is depicted in one painting (ibid. Pl. 42).

⁹⁴ As mentioned above, the imagery about personages visiting the nether world is old; in earlier Buddhism it was the monk Maudgalyāyana who visited the hells (cf. fns. 40, 50, 65). The tradition survived in Chinese (Mair 1988) and Mongolian storytelling. Mongolian picture-books about Molon toyin visiting the hells were illustrated with impressive pictures of tormented beings, cf. Sárközi 1976 and Sárközi/Bethlenfalvy 1976; for information on Mongolian representations of the hells, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer.

The *Maṇḍalas*

Such an understanding of the depiction of hell should be expected with other Mahāyāna representations too, but it is actually not often to be observed. The depictions are not very common. In the Western Himalayan region, four bad options for rebirth (asuras here are perceived to be bad) are represented outside the Durgatipariśodana maṇḍalas.⁹⁵ There are later Tibetan painted scrolls showing in the lower part torments in hells (reminiscence of the Wheel of *Samśāra*?), while there is a Buddha represented above, apparently indicating the salvation.⁹⁶

The hells appear occasionally on Nevari scroll paintings in Nepal (14th–16th c.) in the form of tiny scenes surrounding the *maṇḍalas* of different deities, like the goddess Vasudhārā,⁹⁷ or the Bodhisatvas Amoghapaśalokeśvara⁹⁸ and Mañjuvajra.⁹⁹ The representations are tiny but meticulously executed, each of them showing a scene in which one or several attendants from the hell torture the sinner each time in a different and extremely cruel way. The depictions represent the punishment awaiting evildoers resulting of their deeds.¹⁰⁰ It is impossible to recognize in scenes showing so many different torments, representations of particular hells mentioned in literature, but there are inscriptions in the Mañjuvajra *maṇḍala* labelling them, and describing for example the scene showing a man whose head is being smashed by two rams attacking him from both sides as the result of killing animals.¹⁰¹

However in the Vasudhārā's painted scroll in the middle of the upper row of the hell pictures, and in Mañjuvajra's scroll in the middle of the left row, the Buddha is represented standing in front of a being burning in fire; in the painted scroll of Amoghapaśalokeśvara, in the right edge down there is a monk flying above a naked crouching person, while

⁹⁵ A relatively well preserved example from the 13th–14th c. is still to be seen on the wall of the Senggye Lhakhang (Seng ge lha khang) temple in Lamayuru, Ladakh. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Gerald Kozicz (Graz) for this information and for sharing his pictures with me.

⁹⁶ Cf. e.g. painted scroll with Buddha Ratnasambhava, Tibet, 18th c., Collection of Rubin Museum of Art (No. P1999.17.3) illus. in Internet: <http://imageserver.himalayanart.org/fif=fpx/865.fpx&obj=uv,1.0&page=image.html&rect=0,0,1,1&hei=400>.

⁹⁷ Painted scroll from Nepal. Dated for 1504 CE, Philadelphia Museum of Arts, No. 1994-148-608, illus. in: Kramrisch 1933, Pl. 40; Kramrisch 1964, Fig. 88 (without hells at the outer edges!); Johne 2014, Fig. 229; I am very much obliged to Dr. Isabell Johne (Berlin) for bringing my attention to such paintings and providing me with pictorial material.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Pl. Pl. 2; according to Kreijger (p. 30) to be dated to mid 14th c.

⁹⁹ Kreijger 1999, Pl. 10; according to Kreijger (p. 46) to be dated to ca. 1525–1530 CE.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 46: "Above the mandalas and extending down the length of the painting are forty square cartouches, several of which portray torments identified by inscriptions as the punishments awaiting in hell if one fails to do sufficient good deeds during life."

¹⁰¹ For reading of the inscriptions I would like to thank Prof. Alexander von Rospatt (Berkeley); identical scene with man whose head is being crushed by two rams is represented at the Caturbrahma-Mahāvihāra in Patan too (cf. fn. 58), illus. Gail 1991, Pl. 40.2, the inscription (cf. *ibid.* p. 51) specifies his sin as (wrong) speech: "Wegen des Vergehens, Reden – wohl falsche – hierher und dorthin verbreitet zu haben, wird einer von Widdern gestoßen".

pieces of clothing are falling from heaven – so apparently the motive of compassion played a role by the depictions.

The representations of hells at the outer edge of the *maṇḍalas* bring us to the most famous “*maṇḍala*” of the Buddhist world, viz. the *stūpa* in Borobudur, Java, of the 8th century.¹⁰² The sequence of themes represented in hundreds of reliefs on the monument is very sophisticated and points to a well-conceived programme.¹⁰³ We encounter the *jātakas* and the depiction of the life-story of the Buddha only in the lowest galleries, while towards the top, the wanderings of Sudhana, who is seeking advice as to how to be a perfect Bodhisatva, are depicted,¹⁰⁴ giving way to endless representations of Bodhisatvas and Buddhas in their paradises in the upper galleries, and culminating in receding Buddhas on the terraces,¹⁰⁵ and an entirely non-visible Vairocana inside the *stūpa* at the very top. It was only in the year 1885, some 80 years after the discovery of Borobudur, that one more level was discovered – 160 reliefs beneath the ground level, the so-called “buried basement”.

Until today it is a point of controversy as to whether this part of the *stūpa* was deliberately placed beneath ground level as per the original plan, or if it was covered later for some compelling reason.¹⁰⁶ One of the theories says that during construction the monument started to “slide” down the hill on which it was constructed, making it necessary to build at its foot a stabilizing ring which covered the bottom-most representations.¹⁰⁷

Whether originally planned to be located beneath ground level or not, the lowest reliefs are very much in keeping with the overall concept of the monument illustrating the possible modes of existence as the result of one’s deeds.

The reliefs were explained by means of several inscriptions as illustrations of the text (*Mahā-*)*Karmavibhaṅga* (cf. fn. 17),¹⁰⁸ but not all depictions – especially representations of particular torments as a result of particular misdeeds as they are illustrated in the Borobudur reliefs – are described in the *Karmavibhaṅga* but known from several other texts (see fn. 38 for example). So perhaps other literary or oral traditions, or even pictorial representations, played a role in the invention of the depictions.

The “buried basement”¹⁰⁹ is interesting due to many reasons: it shows, very vividly day-to-day life in the Java of the 8th century. It also shows the negative sides of life, such

¹⁰² Wayman 1981; Snellgrove 1996.

¹⁰³ Cf. among many others: Krom/van Erp 1927–1931; Mus 1935 and 1998; Sivaramamurti 1961; Theisen 1977; Gomes/Woodward (ed.), 1981.

¹⁰⁴ Fontein 1967, the representations follow the *Gaṇḍavyūha*.

¹⁰⁵ Lundquist 1995.

¹⁰⁶ Namikawa 1971; Lokesh Chandra 1980; Forman 1980, Boels 1985 – to name just a few.

¹⁰⁷ There are also other theories that the reliefs were covered because the Buddhism in the region turned towards Mahāyāna and the scenes showing no compassion towards the tormented hell beings were no more suitable.

¹⁰⁸ Lévi 1929; the text is best known from the Sanskrit *Mahākarmavibhaṅga*, ed. Lévi 1932; for Borobudur cf. also Fontein 1989.

¹⁰⁹ There is a comprehensive photographic documentation of the reliefs from the 19th c., published by Krom/van Erp (Vol. 3, Pls. 1–20; descriptions in: Vol. 1, pp. 47–98) today available online. To allow the today’s visitors to see the “buried basement” some reliefs on one of the corners of the monument were left uncovered.

as war, death or mourning.¹¹⁰ It also shows a class of human-like creatures, described in literary sources as *virūpa* (ugly).¹¹¹ Some of the reliefs illustrate crimes and their corresponding penances in the same pictorial item: thus (Fig. 6)¹¹² we have depictions of fishermen first at work out at sea, then carrying the fish, and then already in hell, being boiled in a cauldron. There are some other similar representations in which it is sometimes easy to recognise the causal relationship between deed and punishment, and sometimes not.¹¹³ One relief clearly shows that the punishment for cooking tortoise soup is being boiled alive, while the second part of the representation in which the attendants of hell attack a woman and throw people into a pool (?) is less understandable. A person who drinks is made to walk on sharp shells (?),¹¹⁴ a person who kills animals and birds is made to walk on blades.¹¹⁵ What was the crime of the person whose tongue is being pierced with a spike (Fig. 7)?¹¹⁶ Perhaps he was feigning friendship (he is represented on the viewer's left, seen touching a person of rank in a friendly manner) and betraying secrets to another man (on the viewer's right). The scene matches the description in the old *jātaka* verses of the punishment meted out to the deceiving merchant (cf. fn. 38).

The purpose of this paper was to present an outline of the imagery of hell(s) in those parts of Asia that were influenced by Indian culture. The material, including that contained in the footnotes, is by no means exhaustive, though the major ideas and works of art have at least been mentioned.

It appears that with the spread of Buddhism, Indian imagery, whose origins cannot be traced back to a single religion, penetrated across Asia. It is important to know that the idea of hell as a place where evildoers have to atone for their bad karma was unknown in the earliest imagery from India; it was however to appear with the concept of the *samsāra*. With the rise of Mahāyāna, suffering in the hells came to be alleviated by the boundless compassion of the Bodhisatvas.

Buddhist ideas spread across the whole of Asia. This is evident not only in literary but also pictorial traditions, as for instance with the ox-headed menial from hell in one of the Kizil paintings (cf. Fig. 4), whose appearance was to remain typical for a "devil" right up to present-day representations in Tibet or Japan. It may be assumed that in all probability the ox-headed menial from hell had his appearance shaped in Ajanta itself. In India, where all ideas of the hells originated, not even a single representation has survived the ages. Why was this so? *Anityatā* – transience – may well have been the reason. This quintessentially Indian idea, according to which not even a sojourn in hell lasts forever, makes us ponder over how much more transient are works of art.

¹¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Krom/van Erp 1927–1931, Vol. 3, Figs. 0.1–0.5, 0.32, 0.65.

¹¹¹ Cf. *ibid.* Figs. 0.21–0.22; the reliefs belong to the series today uncovered and are often illustrated.

¹¹² Fig. 6: *ibid.* Fig. 0.109.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* Fig. 0.89.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* Fig. 0.90.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Fig. 0.91.

¹¹⁶ Fig. 7: *ibid.* Fig. 0.88.

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Fig. 1. Tibetan painted scroll, State Museum of Ethnology Munich, No. 69-5-1,
© State Museum of Ethnology Munich, Photo: Marianne Franke



Fig. 2. Wall painting from the temple in Teshiding, after Waddell 1895, p. 91

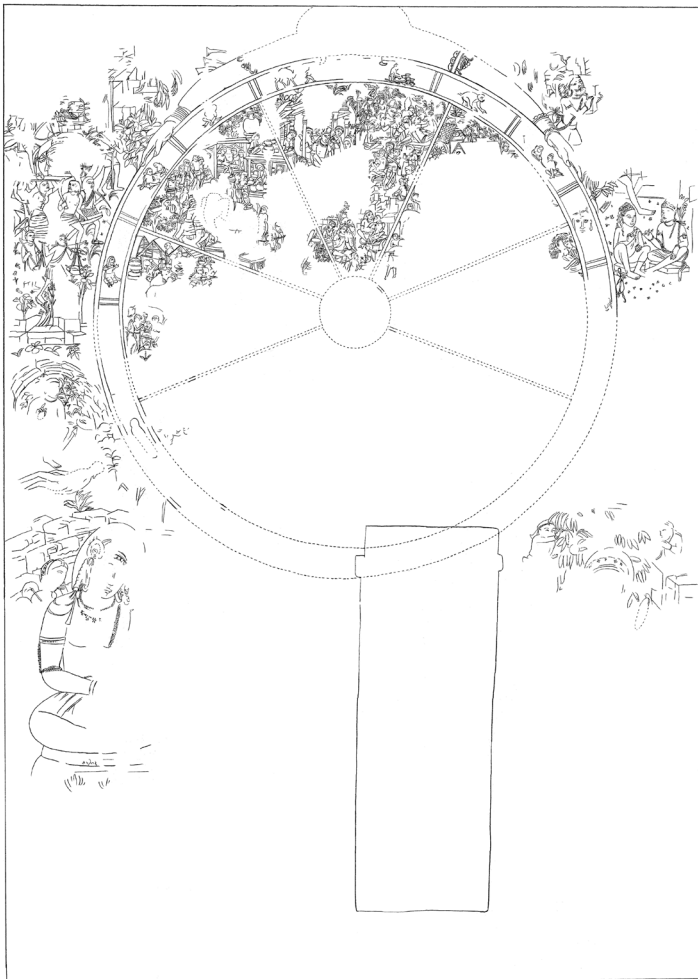


Fig. 3. Ajanta, Cave XVII, porch, left side wall, drawing by the author

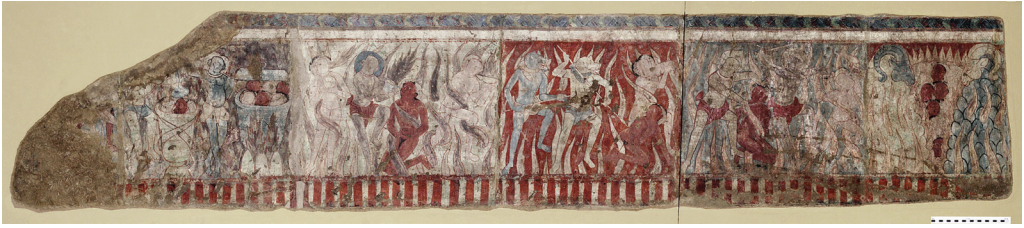


Fig. 4. Kizil, Cave 198 (“Teufelshöhle mit Annexen”), Berlin, Asian Art Museum, No. MIK III 8432, © Asian Art Museum, South, Southeast and Central Asian Collections, National Museums in Berlin, Photo: Jürgen Liepe



Fig. 5. Bezeklik, Cave 18, Berlin, Asian Art Museum, No. MIK III 8453; © Asian Art Museum, South, Southeast and Central Asian Collections, National Museums in Berlin, Photo: Jürgen Liepe



Fig. 6. Krom / van Erp 1927-31, Vol. 3, Fig. 0.109

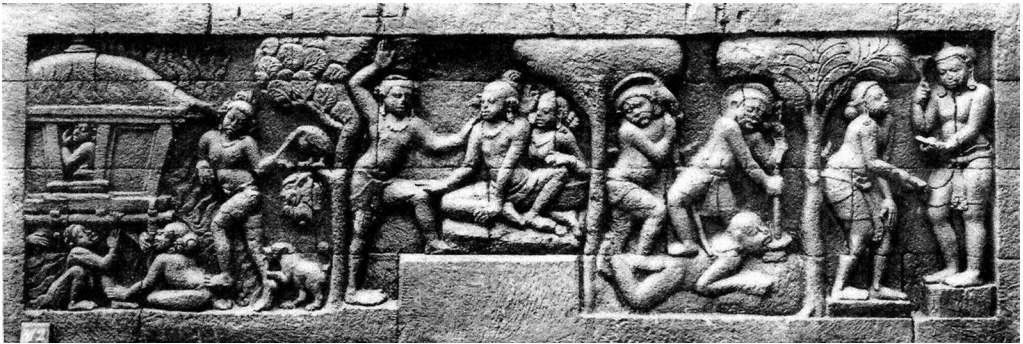


Fig. 7. Krom / van Erp 1927-31, Vol. 3, Fig. 0.88