The study of representations of the episodes in the life of the Buddha, as elaborated in China during the early period of Buddhist sculpture, is based in large measure on Chinese Buddhist steles from the 5th and 6th centuries, together with cave reliefs and the rarer reliefs found on votive offerings.

The most commonly depicted scenes, although even these are not numerous, appear on the reverse of steles or sometimes in the spaces available around the front of the main icon. The episodes most frequently encountered concern the birth of the Enlightened One (Mayādevi’s dream, the birth, the ritual bath, the seven steps, the return to Kapilavastu and Asita’s prophecy), followed by scenes depicting the Parinirvāṇa, the offering of the dust, Kāṇḍhaka’s farewell, Śākyamuni’s departure from the palace, the Dipamkara Jātaka, the first sermon and the Māra-vijaya. In general, the events represented in China are fewer than those found in India and concentrate above all on the first part of the Buddha’s life, that is the period before his enlightenment. In many cases the iconographic arrangement’s derivation from Gandhāran art is clearly discernible. However, apart from adjustments to suit local customs and taste, several representations show variations from Indian iconography and in some cases appear to be entirely original. This seems to be the case in the representations on a stele from Henan dated 546, now held in the University of Pennsylvania Museum 1.

The main events surrounding the birth of Siddhārtha are clearly discernible on the reverse of the large, partially preserved mandorla. However, next to these there also appear

1 The University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia (no. C 447).
Fig. 1. The Philadelphia stele (front) [after Siren O., La sculpture..., pl. 184].

certain scenes which are apparently independent of this episode. Moreover, the scenes are bordered by unusual landscape features, which develop vertically along the sides of the mandorla. The work has attracted scholars’ attention since the beginning of the 20th century, appearing for instance in O. Siren’s impressive catalogue of Chinese sculpture and, more recently, in M. Sullivan’s study of the origins of Chinese landscape painting. Nevertheless, in those cases where the scenes in question have not been totally ignored, a convincing iconographic interpretation incorporating all the elements present has not been put forward.

The front of the stele, in the shape of a mandorla (minus the upper part, which has been lost), bears the figure of the Buddha sculpted in extremely high relief and surrounded by a richly decorated mandorla (Fig. 1). The figure is depicted standing with the right hand in abhayamudra and the left in varadamudra and is executed in the mature style of the 6th century but retaining certain features characteristic of the later style of the Northern Wei (narrow, sloping shoulders, trapezoidal neck, archaic smile, large hands with emphatic gestures, formalized treatment of the robe). More successful is the confident rendering of the structure of the body, the graceful delineation of the outlines of the face and feet and

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Fig. 2. The Philadelphia stele (reverse) [after Sīrēn O., La sculpture..., pl. 185].

concern with volume displayed by the folds of the robe arranged on different planes.

On the reverse, the upper two thirds of the available surface are covered in scenes in extremely low relief, while the lower third bears an inscription according to which the work was commissioned by a monk from the monastery of Qixian in Huaizhou (Henan), in 546 (Fig. 2).

The scenes are arranged in two bands and in all probability there was a third in the upper part of the stele, of which traces remain. Of the scenes still visible, those in the upper band depict episodes from the birth of the Buddha. Two others are in corresponding positions in the lower band: on the right, one made up of several details, including the birth of Kanthaka the horse, and on the left, a scene in two parts depicting the ritual bath and the seven steps. On either side of the stele, a landscape with hills and various kinds of trees provides what amounts almost to a vertical frame.

The first scene, on the right of the upper band, depicts the birth of Siddhārtha and is composed according to a model to be found in other representations on steles. The detail of Māyādevī, gripping the branch of the tree only with her right hand, supported by Mahāprajāpatī, is typical of the Gandhāran tradition, while the Chinese idiom is drawn upon for the baby Siddhārtha, shown issuing from the wide sleeve of the gown, which entirely covers Māyādevī, to be received into the hands of a lady. As in most Chinese reliefs of the episode, none of

4 For similar representations of the birth on some other steles see, for
Māyādevi’s Indian sensuality survives in the scene: only a light *tribhanga* recalls the Indian equivalent of the Buddha’s mother. The problem of depicting the birth occurring from the right flank, which was considered too daring for Chinese sensibilities, is resolved as usual by portraying the delivery taking place out of Māyādevi’s sleeve. The row of five women, similar to the imperial figures in the procession shown in Longmen⁵, both as regards the type of gown and the elegant and formal bearing of the women with their hands in their sleeves, is also far removed from Indian representations, which include the gods Indra and Brahmā together with figures kneeling in adoration. A kneeling figure is shown in the foreground on the left, waiting to receive the baby, and once again, given the intimate nature of the episode, Chinese sensibility appears to have dictated that only female figures could be present at the birth and the male figures – divine though they may be – have been replaced by more appropriate Chinese ladies in waiting. At the far left can be found a scene unknown to traditional Chinese iconography, showing three women – the one kneeling in the centre holding a baby in swaddling clothes, which she presents to a fourth woman (perhaps Māyādevi).

In the lower band, starting from the right, there appears a series of apparently obscure images, except for a mare suckling her foal, which refers to the birth of Kanṭhaka parallel to that of Siddhārtha. Above this scene another pair of smaller animals repeats the episode, which Sirén interprets as the representation of the birth of Kanṭhaka in the foreground and echoed above⁶. To the right of the horse stands a tree, in the middle of which appears a small figure who seems to

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be pointing through the leaves at the two pairs of animals. The only interpretation of this particular detail to be put forward seems to be Seckel’s, who suggests the figure is a yakṣī and explains the presence of the tree as a sign of the future tree of enlightenment. 7 Next to and between the two pairs of animals there are other details: two large, drop-shaped elements, the lower carved internally but hard to read, a symmetrical figure which might be a bush and a “bean-shaped” motif, which is also symmetrical.

Side by side on the opposite side of the stele appear the scenes of the ritual bath and the seven steps. The ritual bath scene shows the figure of Siddhārtha between two figures pouring water from vases held in one hand. To their right a huge dragon rears its nine heads over the whole group. Next to this, near the centre, seven open lotus flowers refer to Siddhārtha’s seven steps in the four directions of space, after which he announces his mission during his last life, with one arm raised and the other pointing to the ground, in the pose typical of Chinese iconography used to depict the episode. Lotus flowers and small trees are depicted beneath the group of the ritual bath. 8

The suggested interpretations for the images surrounding the birth of Kaṇṭhaka do not provide a better understanding of the scene and have no iconographic support, either in the accounts found in Indian texts or in similar episodes depicted in the art of Gandhāra. It is difficult to find any reason for the repetition of Kaṇṭhaka’s birth above, nor is the notion that the tree is a reference to the pipal in any way justified; still less the suggestion that the figure perched in its branches is a yakṣī. However, the incongruence between image and text dissolves upon a closer reading of the details and, as will be seen, particularly in the light of the Chinese version of the episodes concerning the birth of Siddhārtha. The problem appears to lie first of all in the pre-iconographic reading. In the first of the images mentioned the two animals

7 Seckel D., *Buddhistische Kunst Ostasiens*, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1957, pp. 286-7. In this regard it should be added that Ashton also explains the pairs of animals as a reference to parallel births, without providing any further evidence, while mistaking the seven lotus blossoms for the miraculous blooms which appeared at the moment of Siddhārtha’s birth. See: Ashton L., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

8 For similar representations on Chinese steles see the iconographic references in note 4.
depicted are taken to be horses, whereas on closer examination they are clearly a sheep and a lamb, while in the second example the prevailing view has it that the figure peering out of the tree is female, when in fact it is male, as can be deduced from the robe open at the chest and the collar, both distinctive marks of images of bodhisattvas to be found in the 6th century. Thus, reinterpreted and linked to the surrounding landscape features in all their variety, the scene can be construed as a rare representation of the miracles at the birth and of the parallel births, both well-known episodes in ancient Chinese translations of the life of the Buddha, for which the original Indian texts have been lost.  

As regards the Indian literary tradition, the subject of the miracles and of the simultaneous births are two distinct events occurring at the moment of Siddhārtha's birth. The former appears in certain biographies of the Buddha, in which extraordinary events surrounding the birth of Siddhārtha are described. It is written that the auspicious event was marked by earth tremors, an all-pervading brightness, the blossoming of trees out of season and the sound of tunes played by invisible musicians, just as had occurred at the time of his conception. The event is accompanied by an atmosphere of peacefulness and bliss; everywhere pain and suffering are

9 These are *Xiuxing hengqi jing*, T. 184 (hereafter referred to as XBJ), translated in the late 2nd century AD; *Taizi ruixing hengqi jing*, T. 185 (hereafter referred to as TRBJ), translated in the early 3rd century AD and *Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing*, T. 189 (hereafter referred to as GXYJ), translated in 436. The texts (and relative reference numbers) are those of the Taishō edition (J. Takakusu, K. Watanabe [eds.], Taishō shinshū Daizokyo, Tokyo, 1924-32).

10 For example, the story is to be found in the *Lalitavistara*, where among the miracles described as occurring at the time of Siddhārtha's birth sight is restored to the blind, the deaf can hear once again, the mad regain their senses, the hungry and thirsty are satisfied, the sick are cured and invalids are made whole. In contrast, the *Buddhacarita* describes the presence of the gods at the event and the trees coming into leaf out of season. For both accounts see: Foucault E. (ed.), *Le Lalita Vistara*, Paris, E. Leroux, 1884, pp. 73-4 and pp. 79-80; Passi A. (ed.), *Le gesta del Buddha*, Milano, Adelphi, 1979, pp. 18-9. The account of the miracles, confined to the earthquakes and the all-pervading brightness at the time of Siddhārtha's conception and birth, exists in certain Pāli texts in reference to the Buddha Śakyamuni's predecessors. In this connection see: Barreau A., “La jeunesse du Buddha”, in *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtrapitaka et les Vinayapitaka anciens*. III. *Articles complémentaires*, Paris, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1995, p. 51.
banished and hostility between animals and among humans suspended. The description does not seem to follow any rigid outline and the details vary in number and order, dwelling according to the text on particular miracles or, more simply, describing the joy at the event felt by the whole of creation. In these biographies one also finds the episode of the parallel births, in which seven births take place at the same instant as the birth of Siddhārtha, three of which recur in all texts: the birth of his bride, horse and groom 11. Although there is no hint in the canonical literature of the seven parallel births thus described, the Vinayaśāstra of the Dharinaguptaka refers to the seven jewels which a universal monarch is destined to have according to natural law 12. Both the list of miracles and the record of spontaneous gifts appearing at the moment of the birth seem to have experienced a certain development over time, varying in number, kind and features.

In India the miracles are not illustrated in detail, but recur in condensed form in Gandhāran representations of the birth, where the detail of the musical instruments hanging over Māyādevī's tree (sometimes including musicians busily playing) allude to the holy music accompanying the event 13. In contrast, the episode of the parallel births is a quite separate

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12 On the list of the Vinayaśāstra (and of other texts which however refer to Śākyamuni's predecessors) see: Bareau A., "La jeunesse du Bouddha", op. cit., p. 55. The seven jewels are listed in the episode of the fortune-tellers who read the prince's destiny through his 32 characteristic signs and foretell that Siddhārtha will be cakravartin, whose symbols are the wheel, the elephant, the horse, the gem, the bride, the minister and the general. The genius of the episode of the parallel births would thus seem to be the list of the seven jewels of the universal ruler, which was later to become a separate episode from that of the 32 extraordinary signs of Siddhārtha's body, coming to be placed contemporary with the birth of the bodhisattva, while the prediction of the prince's destiny was later entrusted exclusively to Asita. In this regard see: Foucher A., La vie du Bouddha, Paris, Payot, 1949, pp. 60-5.

and unusual scene in Gandhāran art, characterized by the depiction of the birth of Kaṃṭhaka and, in some cases, of Chandaka. The episode is generally set in a stable, where a mare is shown feeding her foal, while next to this, when the scene is included, a mother washes her baby in a tub\textsuperscript{14}.

While iconographic references to Gandhāran art are of no help in deciphering the scenes depicted on the Chinese stele (except only in the case of the birth of Kaṃṭhaka), Chinese literary sources provide a wealth of useful material. In these, the tales of the miracles of the birth are described in meticulous detail, numbering precisely up to 32 or 34 miraculous events, which are similar in content in the three lists but sometimes appear in a different order. The passages most relevant to the interpretation of the representations on the present stele seem to be the three episodes describing the withered trees coming into leaf (miracle no. 3), the blooming of lotus flowers the size of cartwheels (no. 5) and the appearance of the spirit of the tree in human form (no. 32)\textsuperscript{15}.

As regards the parallel births, the episode recurs in Chinese sources immediately following the hermit Asita’s interpretation of the special signs on Siddhārtha’s body. Among


\textsuperscript{15} Miracle no. 3 is described identically in XBJ (T. 184, p. 464, a 4-5) and in TRBJ (T. 185, p. 473, c 10): ["The third (miracle): in the world all the withered trees put out fresh leaves and flowers."] The GXYJ (T. 189, p. 625, b 19-20) has it slightly differently: [The third (miracle): all the dry wood came out in bloom again and the world spontaneously gave birth to rare and special trees"]: It is interesting to note that the expression \textit{gùojìe}, which is here translated as "world", is understood to mean "the borders of the kingdom" outside the context of Buddhism. This second meaning might account for the depiction of a lush landscape on the "borders" of the stele, in an arrangement which is unique in the figurative vocabulary of medieval steles.

For miracle no. 5, XBJ (T. 184, p. 464, a 6) and TRBJ (T. 185, p. 473, c 11-12) are identical: ["The fifth (miracle): the dry earth gave birth to lotus flowers the size of cartwheels."] And the GXYJ (T. 189, p. 625, b 21) is also virtually the same: ["The fifth (miracle): the dry earth gave birth to precious lotus flowers the size of cartwheels."]

Miracle no. 32 is described in the same way in the XBJ (T. 184, p. 464, a 25-26) and in the TRBJ (T. 185, p. 474, a 1): ["The spirit of the tree appeared. He bowed his head and waited respectfully."] The GXYJ (T. 189, p. 625, c 14-15) renders this as: ["All the spirits of the tree took human form and came forth to serve respectfully."] I should like to thank Dr Stefano Zacchetti for his invaluable suggestions and corrections regarding translations.
the numerous simultaneous births, all strictly male according to the Chinese texts, are those of Kantha the horse, Candana the elephant and Chandaka the groom, to which the GXYJ adds lambs and calves.  

On the strength of the Chinese versions it is thus possible to modify previous readings and to recognize the depiction of two pairs of animals as a reference to the numerous births parallel to Siddhartha’s (specifically, the birth of Kantha and that of a lamb), while some of the other elements can be interpreted as recalling the miraculous events: the appearance of the spirit of the tree, the luxuriant trees (rendered by the landscape on the borders of the stele) and the blooming of huge lotus flowers (represented on the left by lotuses as large as trees). Other elements next to and between the two pairs of animals – the two “drops”, the sort of symmetrical shrub and the “bean-shaped” motif – would also seem to be connected with the miraculous events (possibly the spontaneous appearance of “treasures”), but these are poorly defined and difficult to decipher.

That there was indeed a certain interest in the subject of the miracles associated with the birth of Siddhartha during this period is supported by the famous painting in cave 290 in Dunhuang, contemporary with the stele, in which several miracles are extensively depicted. Even though it is not possible to find a direct correspondence between representations in the two works (over twenty miracles are depicted in the painting and only three on the stele), if the proposed reading of the stele is accepted, the carvings would constitute another example of depictions of these miracles to add to the single Dunhuang specimen known so far. Moreover, it is in-

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16 GXYJ (T. 189, p. 626, a 22-24): “[On the same day the members of the Sakyas begat five hundred male children. In the king’s stables the elephants bore little white elephants, the horses gave birth to white foals and even the cattle and sheep bore multicoloured calves and lambs. So that each species amounted to five hundred].”

17 For the miracle of the appearance of hidden treasures see: XBJ (T. 184, p. 464, a 7-8) and the GXYJ (T. 189, p. 625, b 22-23).

18 In a recent study, Eichenbaum-Karetsky P., “A Chinese Illustration of the Guoqiu xianzai yinguo jing at Dunhuang”, Journal of Chinese Religions, 16, 1988, pp. 54-72, puts forward a date for the painting of around the mid-6th century and has demonstrated the close relationship between the painted cycle and the written text (the GXYJ in particular), suggesting it had an important role at the origin of the iconography.
teresting to note on the strength of these two works that towards the mid-6th century the literary sources appear to provide the opportunity for new departures in Chinese iconography based on episodes in the life of the Buddha which are entirely original when compared with the Gandhāran tradition. Although, in the absence of Indian material, the depiction of this subject in Gandhāran art cannot be ruled out, these two Chinese works nonetheless provide interesting examples of the relationship between text and image and of an iconography developing independently of India.

This situation (i.e. the growth of an iconography very likely based on Chinese texts) can also be found in certain representations of the episode of the parallel births, in which reference to Gandhāra is confined to the birth of Kaṅṭhaka. In addition to the Pennsylvania stele, there are two other similar reliefs. The first is in the Guyangdong in Longmen and includes two pairs of animals, one above the other, as in the Pennsylvania stele, with a woman holding a baby in her arms seated next to them. This last group, which might be interpreted as depicting the birth of Chandaka, is rendered in a particularly sinicized manner and is not even vaguely reminiscent of Gandhāran models. So, here too the myriad births which occurred simultaneously with that of Siddhārtha are alluded to by the two pairs of animals: the group in the foreground seems to be a mare suckling her foal, while the species of the animals in the smaller one above is a matter for conjecture.

The most interesting example of the method of representing the parallel births is undoubtedly the stele in the Nelson-Akins Museum in Kansas City, dated 537 and originating in south-western Shanxi (Fig. 3). The representation appears on the left side of the stele within a rectangular panel, with illustrations of the episodes of the birth, the seven steps and, just below the birth, the parallel births, followed by Asita's prophecy. The Chinese artist has here added a pair of fig-

19 Longmen wenwu baoguansuo, Longmen shiku, Beijing, Wenwu chubanshe, 1978, fig. 34.
20 The stele has been the subject of study by Sickman L., whose conclusions are to be found in “A Sixth-Century Buddhist Stele”, Apollo, XCVII, March, 1973, p. 223. Sickman reads the last episode (Asita's interpretation) differently and overlooks the detail of the two women, while recognizing the birth of Kaṅṭhaka. The scene with the Indian hermit is taken to be a de-
Fig. 3. The Kansas City stele (detail of left side) [after Sickman, "A Sixth-Century..., fig. 8].

...ures just above the traditional pair of horses alluding to the birth of Kāndhaka. The figure on the right is recognizably a pregnant woman, shown seated and attended by another woman standing behind her ready to assist at the birth. The first woman’s seated position and her condition are quite unmistakable, owing to the clear arrangement of the folds of the gown, which reveal the legs to be held slightly apart, while higher up the material is free of folds and appears to be stretched over a rounded belly. The group’s position in association with the birth of Kāndhaka, and the arrangement of both below the birth of Siddhārtha, following a scheme already noted in the Philadelphia stele, suggests this is a reference to the parallel births, more precisely to Chandaka’s.

From the analysis of the two examples of the miracles of the birth mentioned (the Philadelphia stele and the painting in cave 290 in Dunhuang) and of the three referring to the...

...iction of Māyādevi or Mahāprajāpati feeding the baby Siddhārtha, while Kondanna the fortune-teller looks on. In this case too the pre-iconographic reading is mistaken (inevitably leading to the wrong iconographic conclusion), since the figure with Siddhārtha is sitting with his right leg resting on his left knee and intently observing the baby he is holding in his arms. This position seems inappropriate for either Māyādevi or Mahāprajāpati and above all it is characteristic of Asita’s stance in several Chinese reliefs. In this regard see the episode of Asita’s interpretation on an early-6th century stele in: Kuhn D., Chinas Goldenes Zeitalter, Dortmund, Braus, 1993, Kat. Nr. 85; and the relief on the pillar-pagoda in the 6th cave in Yungang representing the same episode in: Zhongguo meishu quanjí. Diaoshubian, Beijing, Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988, vol. 10, fig. 42.
parallel births (Guyangdong relief in Longmen, Kansas City stele and Philadelphia stele), it seems evident that as far as both episodes are concerned neither a Chinese nor an Indian iconographic model seems to have been employed in China. By contrast, the correspondence between the images and the contents of the Chinese texts, and the artists' decision to choose to depict one detail of the story rather than another as the fancy took them, or to illustrate in different ways the same episode described in a text, on the one hand goes to prove their adherence to the written source as the instrument of their iconographic elaboration, and on the other rules out the existence in China of an established iconography for these two episodes. More specifically, it may be suggested that the artists of the works in question made use of tried and trusted iconographies for the images relating to the birth, the seven steps and the ritual bath, and inserted the scenes of the miracles and/or parallel births elaborating them from the written sources.

The sum of these considerations would tend to suggest that the soil in which Buddhist narrative art in China grew had several constituents, the principal being Gandhāran models, the importance given in China to Chinese texts and the artists' own personal knowledge (i.e. the circulation of iconographic models in China), which would vary in proportion according to the production centre. Each has to be given its due weight in the study of the episodes concerning the life of the Buddha sculpted during the medieval period.

21 Except for the iconographic model for the birth of Kanthaka, which is of Gandhāran origin, which was widespread in China.

22 The regional nature of the iconography based on the life of the Buddha seems evident in the case of the parallel births, the representations of which come from a geographically circumscribed area (Henan and southwest Shanxi) and were produced over a strictly limited period (during the first half of the 6th century). They do not appear in Yungang, for example, where the largest number of reliefs of the life of the Buddha are to be found.
NOTES ON BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY

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GLOSSARY

guojie
Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing
Henan
Huaizhou
Longmen Shiku
Qixiansi
Taizi ruiying benqi jing
Xiuxing benqi jing
Zhongguo meishu quanji. Diaosubian

国界
過去現在因果經
河南
懷州
龍門石窟
栖賢寺
太子瑞應本起經
修行本起經
中國美術全集。雕塑編

ABSTRACT
The article offers an iconographic reading of scenes depicted on the reverse of a mid-6th century Chinese Buddhist stele. According to the author’s suggested interpretation, the episodes from the life of the Buddha represented include the miracles at the birth and the parallel births. The problem of the origins of the images for both episodes, the former having no equivalents in Gandhāran art and the latter having only a single element of Indian origin, is discussed in the light of Chinese translations of Buddhist texts, which seem to lie behind these iconographic developments.

KEY WORDS