

The Transmission of Ornaments in Buddhist Art: On the Meander or *Huiwen*

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Keywords: meander ornament, transcultural, Buddhist art, comparative, architecture

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs.01.02.04>

Abstract: Beyond iconographic dimensions, the ornaments in Buddhist art become apparent through the depicted figures and their fashion, as well as other pictorial, architectural elements including patterns and motifs. Taking the meander ornament as an example, it is used as an icon in Buddhist art, however early Buddhist texts and local chronicles provide information on neither its origin nor its meaning; therefore we often have to deal with upper and lower very clichéd connotation. In this paper, the aesthetic and art historical value of the meander ornament, up until the twelfth century CE, based on the selected example, as a phenomenon of cultural transmission and intertwinement is to be discussed with regard to the cultural ‘originality’ and ‘diversity’ among the cultural traditions of the ‘West’ and ‘East’. It reveals the essential process of how ‘foreign’ images were transmitted and reproduced at the ‘local’ (Central and East Asia) religious space, at the same time, how implicated images had functioned as a medium of communication during the transmission.

The decorative frieze which is constructed as a continuous line and shaped by a repeated motif of angled spirals is called ‘meander’ in European culture and is described as *huiwen* 回紋 in China. Scholars generally understand these objects as an ancient Greek ornament, which continued to be reproduced in European and in Asian contexts until today. Meander ornaments’ relationship to Buddhist art becomes apparent through their depiction of Buddhist figures’ robes, as well as other pictorial and architectural elements, including patterns and motifs. However early Buddhist texts and local chronicles provide information on neither its origin nor its meaning, therefore we often have to deal with upper and lower very clichéd connotation. In this paper, the aesthetical and art historical value of the meander ornament as a phenomenon of cultural transmission and intertwinement is to be discussed with regard to the cultural ‘originality’ and ‘diversity’ among the cultural traditions of the ‘West’ and ‘East’. It reveals the essential process of how ‘foreign’ images were transmitted and reproduced at the ‘local’ (Central and East Asia) religious space, and at the same time, how implicated images had functioned as a medium of communication during the transmission.

How Did Academic Debate over Meander Ornaments in Europe Begin?

In the modern transcultural age (1910–1915), art historians were already debating the ‘diversity’, ‘originality’, and cross-cultural nature of ornaments. This history is particularly interesting to contemporary scholars, as the hasty conclusions of earlier work created some serious misunderstandings by today’s standards.

In the 1918 essay ‘Der Zustand unserer Fachmännischen Beurteilung’ [The State of Our Professional Assessment] Mr. Artur Wachsberger harshly complained about the arguing colleagues:¹ at first,

¹ After his dissertation, he worked on Critical Studies on Mural painting in Chinese Turkestan as head of the Berlin Art History Institute of East Asian Art; see Wachsberger, ‘Zur Besprechung’.

German and Austrian scholars discovered the meander pattern on Chinese ritual bronzes of the Shang period. With great enthusiasm, these scholars claimed that scroll ornaments like meander and tendrils were a fundamental element of ancient Chinese arts and that as a result, the origin of the meander should be attributed to China. In contrast, other scientists strongly criticized this argument and stressed that they could not accept it without any elementary research.

From today's perspective, this dispute about meander ornaments' genealogy seems quite strange, though little has changed; there still does not exist fundamental transcultural, comparative research on ornaments. Although scholars in the past hundred years have discussed some of very interesting ornaments in the context of regional studies, as seen in early European sculpture and ancient Greek vases and architectures, there is not yet a systematic analysis of meander ornaments' known transcultural contexts. Within the framework of cultural transmission and intertwinement, this paper aims to present a more accurate definition of meander ornaments in Asia and Europe and their historical value to Buddhist art up until the twelfth century CE, while placing them within a broader and more precise genealogical scope.

How Can We Understand the Terms for Ornament Meander or *Huiwen*?

An ornament meander (Greek: *Μαίανδρος* Maiandros; Latin: Maeander) is a continuous line or border constructed from a repeated motif of an angular spiral bent at right or left angles, producing patterns running in different directions. The expansion and the extension of the meander décor may not always be horizontal, but can run diagonally and vertically in all directions, filling out their fields.

Scholars generally believe that 'meander' refers to the winding and twisting Maiandros river in present-day South-Western Turkey,² also mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad*. The meander pattern is also a reference to a Greek key or Greek fret, due to the square pieces sticking

² See also Wilson, *British Museum Pattern Books*, 12.



FIG. 1 *Leiwen* 雷紋 ornament. *Jianghan kaogu* 江漢考古, 1984.3, 109.

out in the pattern. From a morphological perspective, Karl Kerényi supposes that the transformation from a spiral to a meander pattern was related to the technical condition that straight lines were easier to draw, and that the rounded form was thus changed into an angular form early on. Perhaps the most fundamental meander pattern is the meander spiral in the earliest stages of art history. Kerényi and Wilson further associate the meander with labyrinths.³

These patterns exist in different periods and cultures. We can trace the appearance of meander spirals in prehistoric ornamental art to archaeological findings from Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Spain and Italy, in many architectural friezes and bands on ancient Greece pottery from the Geometric Period onwards.

The present-day Chinese term *buiwen* 回紋 (or *Xila buiwen* 希臘回紋) comes from the ritual ceramic and bronze décor *leiwen* 雷紋 (pattern of thunder) of the Xia and Shang dynasty (Figure 1). We find this motif on earthen ware excavated in Shamaoshan, Hanyang, Hebei Province (now in the Hebei Provincial Museum 河北省博物館). Consisting of a pattern of squares within squares, the thunder

³ See above. Kerényi, 'Labyrinth-Studien', 226–73.

pattern resembles the character *bui* 回, the source of its contemporary *buiwen* name.

However, Chinese *buiwen* or *leiwen* sometimes feature running motifs with sharp and irregular angles. Sometimes, meanders build a long frieze pattern around the body of vessels. The height and the length of the meander shape correspond with the main ornaments of the bronze ritual vessels such as the zoomorphic mask motif *taotie* 饕餮.

Where and in What Ways Did Buddhist Art Use Ornament Meanders?

Until the Han dynasty, the *leiwen/buiwen* was the pattern which, above all others, signified Chinese style and taste. Whereas plant tendril (*caowen* 草紋) ornaments were used in various domains of Buddhist art from the beginning of Buddhist representations in India, Central Asia and China, meander ornaments were widespread in Buddhist art in later times, namely during the Tang period.

A good example that illustrates its application can be seen in the four-sided structure of the blue-and-white painted meander frieze as a part of the *tianjing* 天井-arrangements in the ceiling of Mogao Caves, for example cave nos. 27 (Figure 2) and 369 (Figure 3).

The formal structures of a frieze pattern are the simplest meanders. They do not have any broken parts. They always consist of angular lines and show a change of direction: the line first rotates inward and then outward. The pattern has one edge that enters the grid and another that leaves the grid at the same level in order to connect to the next translated pattern.

In comparison to other quadrangular friezes, the illustration of the meanders here is accurately drawn with four horizontal lines in a three-dimensional central perspective.

The ceiling of Yulin Cave no. 2 from the Xixia period shows all three quadrangular friezes of a meander (Figure 4). The first frieze in the center has the same shape as the examples from Mogao Caves nos. 27 and 369. However, the second and third friezes in white and blue have five horizontal lines and comprise two angular sections bonded to one another.



FIG. 2 The meander frieze as a part of the *tianjing* 天井-arrangements in the ceiling of Mogao Cave no. 27. He and He, *Chuangyue Dunhuang-Mogaoku jiuying*, 104–05.



FIG. 3 Drawing of the meander frieze a part of the *tianjing*-arrangements in the ceiling of Mogao Cave no. 369. Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, ed, *Dunhuang yuan moben*, 84, pl. 116.



FIG. 4 Drawing of the meander frieze a part of the tianjing-arrangements in the ceiling of Yulin Cave no. 2. Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, ed, *Dunhuang yuan moben*, 109, pl. 150.



FIG. 5 Drawing of the meander frieze a part of the tianjing-arrangements in the ceiling of Yulin Cave no. 2. Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, ed, *Dunhuang yuan moben*, 114, pl. 159.

The third variation we can see in cave no. 10 of Yulinku (Figure 5). The meander composition here has a very interesting feature which appears to show the Chinese character ‘wang 王’ on the inside; in fact, it is a Chinese Song/Xixia variation of a meander which we can regard as an indication of cultural interaction in the field of ornaments studies.⁴

⁴ A wonderful Chinese interpretation of a composition with meander is shown in the woven silk fragment of the Han-period excavated by Sir Aurel Stein. The incorporation of additional elements in intersections enriches it: for example, it combines the free, curved lines of flowers and leaves with the rigid straight ones of the meander. See Stein and Andrews, ‘Ancient Chinese Figured Silks. II’, 71–77.

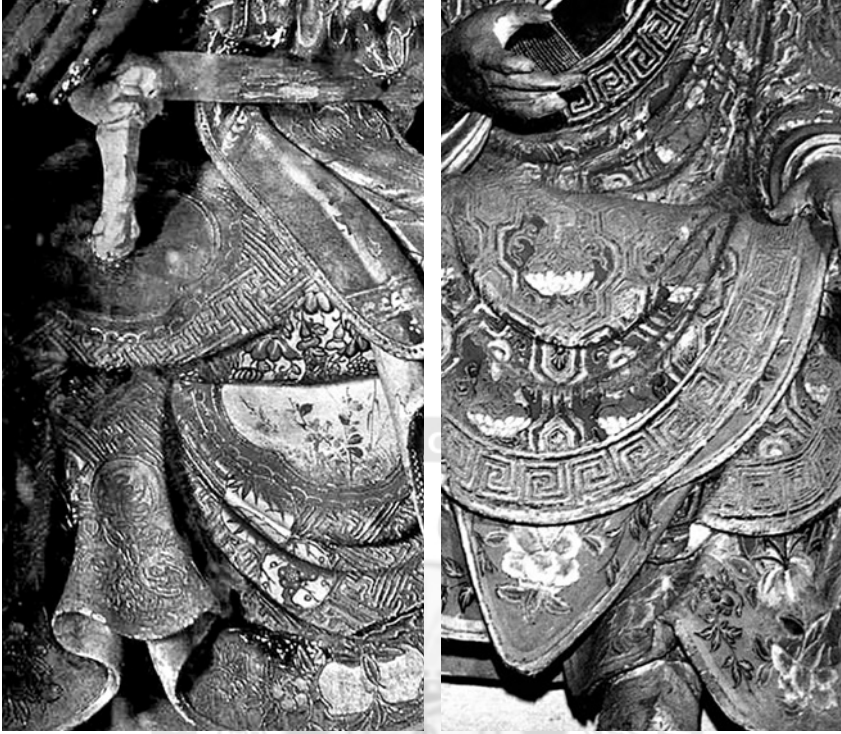


FIG. 6 Details of Luohan statues at Zijinan 紫金庵. Jin and Li, *Zhongguo siguan diaosu quanji di'erjuan*, 2005, 190, pl. 2; 192, pl. 3.

The robes of many Southern Song Luohan statues are richly decorated with collars showing meander patterns (Figure 6). Sometimes, they bear three or four embroidered angular spirals of different sizes, while others bear the simple regular meander pattern. Some of the textiles of monks' robes also show woven meander patterns with a swastika motif in the middle.

Many wall paintings and wooden architecture fragments from Buddhist excavation places and caves in Eastern Central Asia (the present-day Xinjiang Autonomous Region) and paintings and sculptures from Korea and Japan also depict various meander friezes, either isolated or in combination with a swastika.



FIG. 7 Detail, Athena, goddess of war and protector Heroes, 520–550 BCE, Amphora, Attica. Museo Arqueológico Nacional Madrid. Lee-Kalisch and Klohe, *The Wheel of Supreme Bliss*.

Where Do These Meander Patterns Come From—China, Greece, or Other Regions?

In my genealogical investigation I will pursue an analysis of these ornaments ranging from more recent examples back to the earlier ones. In this way, I will follow two different directions in a comparative approach: first, the direction from Central Asia towards the east (East Asia), and second, the direction from Central Asia towards the west (Europe and Western Asia).

The motif of meander with a swastika, also called a ‘double meander’, depicted in the Song-period Luohan statues, already appeared on architecture, sculptures⁵ and ceramics of the Mediterranean (Figure 7) and Black Sea cultures of the Geometric period of Ancient Greece prior to the eighth century BCE.

These variations on the meander-swastika developed in different cultures and periods, like in the case of a Sarcophagus fragment from the Roman Necropolis, Istria in Croatia (Figure 8). Taking on

⁵ See the robes of Ancient Greek Kore sculptures in Acropolis Museum, Athens, ca. seventh–sixth centuries BCE.



FIG. 8 Sarcophagus part, Necropolis Istria, Object no. K 29. Limestone, H. 66 x L. 38 x T. 9 cm, Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula, Croatia. Fischer, 'Die vorrömischen Skulpturen von Nescatium', *Hamburger Beiträge zur Archäologie* 11 (1984) 9–98, pl. 3,1.

the form of various plants leaves, flowers and geometrical variations in the middle or in between, these patterns were also used in Indian religious culture from 200 to 550 CE (Figure 9).

In spite of the appearance of the swastika as an isolated motif without a meander, as on some bowls of the Majiayao culture in China, the meander pattern with a swastika on the inside seems to have been transmitted from ancient Greek culture along the Silk Road into China.

The same can be said about the 'real' or 'classical' meander pattern, which was widespread on cave ceilings during the Tang and Xixia periods. The composition and perspective of the pattern are closer to the Greek keys (Figure 10) than to the old Majiayao Chinese



FIG. 9 Ceiling beam, 2 AD, Amarāvati, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, India. Knox, *Amaravati*, pl. 45.

pattern we see in the National Museum for Asian Art Museum, State Museums in Berlin (Figure 11).

This classic meander pattern dates back to Paleolithic cultures. When we compare the Chinese and ancient Greek meander with the meander of the Paleolithic ivory carving statuette (Figure 12) or cylinder from Mezine in Ukraine, dated 18,000 BCE, there lie more than 16,000–18,890 years in between. Despite this vast temporal distance, the similarity of the patterns gives one the feeling that the same workshop created this décor.

Many academic reports have previously claimed that the meander ornament became widespread in the course of Hellenization throughout Central Asia. But we should refute this hypothesis:

First, we can consider the hook-like meander ornament (Figure 13) seen on a pair of wool trousers dating back to 800 BCE, excavated



FIG. 10 Attic geometric Pyxis A 514, ca 810 bis 790 BCE, Dipylon, Griechenland. Denoyelle, *Chefs-d'œuvre*, 17.



FIG. 11 Majiyao *huiwen*, mid 3,000 BC. National Museum for Asian Art Museum, State Museums in Berlin.

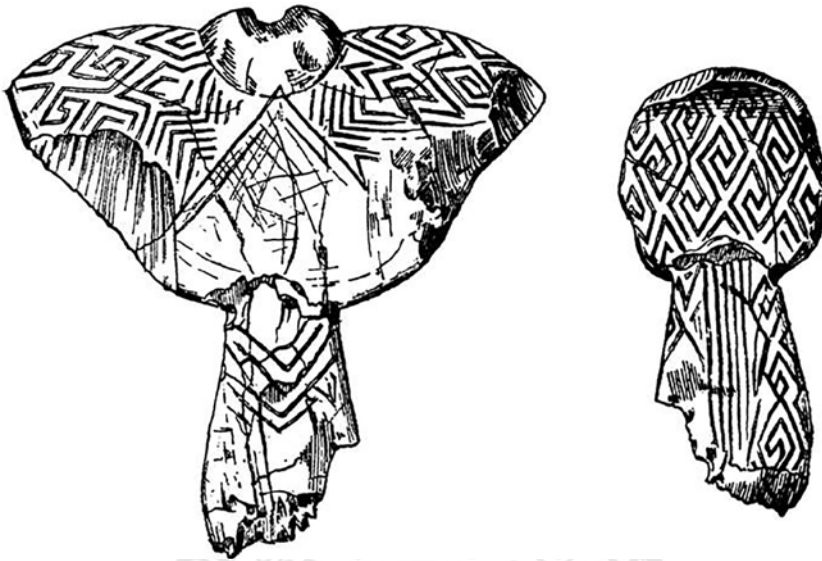


FIG. 12 Statuette, ivory-carvings, 18,000 BC, Paleolithic culture, Mezine, Ukraine. Salmony, 'Some Palaeolithic Ivory-Carvings', fig. 2 b.

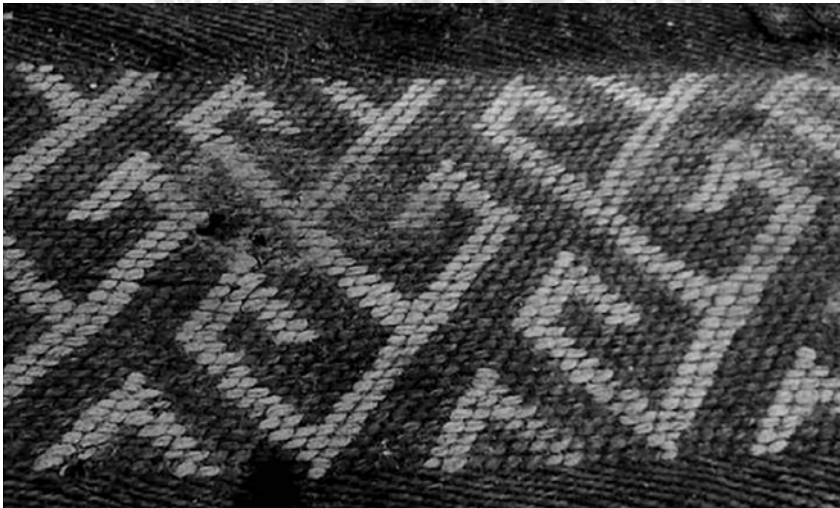


FIG. 13 Detail of the wool trousers IM 21-23, 800 BC, Yanghai Turfan, Xinjiang. Silk Road Fashion project, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut and Freie Universität Berlin.



FIG. 14 Reconstruction of the marble Figure, Xibeigang M 1004. *Wenwu* 1982/12, 84, fig. 1.

in Yanghai near Turfan and regarded as the world's oldest trousers. The excavation sites and the archaeologists' findings show no visible or recorded Greek influences at that time; and a so-called Eurasian man wore the trousers.

Secondly, we see the same meander pattern on the bronzes of the Zhou period,⁶ and even earlier on the fragment of a robed and kneeling marble human figure fragments from Tomb no. 1004 in Xibeigang of the Shang period (Figure 14).

The shape of ancient Greek meanders of the eighth to fifth century BCE is also extremely similar to the meanders of Central Asia and Shang bronzes of the twelfth century BCE.

As a result, we can say that, firstly, some of the meander variations used in Buddhist art during the Tang-Song-Xixia periods, could have been transmitted from the Mediterranean and Black Sea region.

⁶ See for example the Typ *zun*, Zhou dynasty, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge (Mass.), USA.

However, this transmission was not due to the process of Hellenization, but rather happened through the Silk Road later on.⁷

Secondly, some variations of the ancient meander pattern were transmitted from Ukraine, the oldest source of this pattern, via an unverifiable ancient route to almost all regions of the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Area, Central Asia, and East Asia.

Or, it is also possible that, just like the phenomenon of the swastika motif, human beings create the same signs everywhere? The similarities seem too close. The meander pattern is timeless and universal and has the same features independent of region of origin.

What Does This Mean, Especially in the Context of Buddhism?

According to Alfred Salmony, the angular spirals of Mezine were considered as representing shells or snails in the context of funerary rites.⁸ Other scholars understand the bird object with a meander from Mezine, carved from ivory mammoth tusks, to be a shamanistic item for funerary purposes, often a symbol of the soul or of the spirit in flight from death or as a symbol of eternity. If this were true, we could say the same concerning the Chinese Mawangdui meander, where two variations of meander patterns are depicted as carrying Lady Dai. However, as we already have seen, the meander in Buddhist art is not used in the context of funerary rites.

What does the meander pattern mean, especially in the context of Buddhism? Early Buddhist written source do not provide information on its 'origin', nor on its meaning; I therefore put the following speculative suggestion: the meander signifies infinity and unity, and this connection was shared with ancient Greece. The 'hui' meander in China, consisting of squares on the inside, conveying a revolving or return, is a symbol of reincarnation.⁹

⁷ Here, as evidence for this, it is very interesting to consider that the plant tendril pattern was widespread during the period of Gandhāra Buddhist art, but the meander ornament was not.

⁸ Salmony, 'Some Palaeolithic Ivory-Carvings', 104–18.

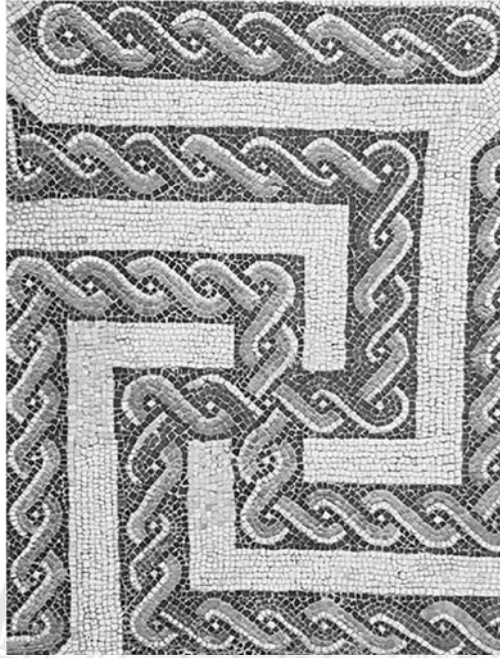


FIG. 15 Detail of the geometrical mosaic, 4. Jh. Villa, triclinium, Soria, Spain, Museo Arqueológico Nacional Madrid. Lee-Kalisch and Klohe, eds, *The Wheel of Supreme Bliss*.

When the meander patterns contain the swastika (*sv-asti*, meaning, well/it is')⁹, it symbolizes the heart of the Buddha in Buddhist paintings. It emphasizes the meaning of infinity and the power of reincarnation in multiple ways. We can compare this to the ancient Greek meander, the Egyptian ankh-key of life (see Figure 7), or the Roman mosaic meander made by the symbol elements of eternity (Figure 15); that is, the endless beauty seen in the cosmological order and universal nature.

The meander motif probably has almost the same meaning as the mystic symbol and universal pattern of the swastika, in connection with the Chinese written character *wan* 卍 (萬), and is used as a

⁹ Alfred, 'Chinese Flower Symbolism', 121–46, 125.

¹⁰ See Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 344.

symbol of ‘ten thousand’. Its literal meaning is ‘myriad’, ‘thousand’ or ‘hundred’, denoting a larger, uncountable number.

To sum up: on the one hand, I would argue that the transcultural potential of the meander, which I have proven above, increased with its appearance in Buddhist art from the Han period on. We cannot fundamentally understand transcultural aspects of the aesthetics of abstraction before this time; no one knows the exact meaning of this ornament. However, this issue requires our attention, especially in studies on Buddhist transmission, inasmuch as it is an ornament with a recognizable visual idiom in Buddhist art, enriched by multilayered cultural associations and intercontinental tastes of an ever-globalized early ancient-modern world. The transmediality of meander ornaments offers a possibility for aesthetic studies through dating and analyzing Buddhist items.

On the other hand, the meander ornament functions as a universal tool of humanity’s communication, it reflects trends, and at the same time, it is timeless. With regard to comparative studies, we can see how the meander features correspond with certain elements of its own local cultures in spite of very different excavation places and cultures, dating times, and various carriers, materials, and depicted techniques. It reveals the essential transmission process of universal patterns.

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