Kucha is located on the northern Silk Road, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China.

There are ten Buddhist cave complexes in the Kucha region: Kizil (the largest and most well-known), Kumtura, Simsim, Kizilgaha, Mazabaha, Wenbashi, Tuohulake‘aiken (Tograk-eken), Taitai‘er, Subashi, and A‘ai. There are nearly 600 numbered caves in Kucha. Of these caves, about a third are (or once were) decorated with murals.

These paintings are predominately of a narrative character, illustrating the story of the Buddha’s life, or his deeds in former lives (jātakas). The representations of the episodes connected with the Buddha’s death (known as the parinirvāṇa cycle) have an important role in these cave murals. The textual basis for these paintings was likely provided by scriptures of the Mūlasarvāstivāda School, both in Sanskrit as well as versions in the vernacular language of the region, Tocharian B.

Between 1902-1914 the area was explored by the German Turfan Expeditions, led by Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq. Today, numerous artefacts and fragments of the paintings are located in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin.

Suggested Readings:

Most of the literature concerning the Kucha paintings can only be found in German:


A solid overview can be found in:

The following texts are available in English:


