

Art of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road along the Taklamakan Desert

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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:

GRÜNWEDEL, Albert, 1912, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten in Chinesisch-Turkistan, Königlich Preussische Turfan Expeditionen*, Berlin: Reimer.

GRÜNWEDEL, Albert, 1920, *Alt-Kutscha, archäologische und religionsgeschichtliche Forschungen an Tempera-Gemälden aus Buddhistischen Höhlen der ersten acht Jahrhunderte nach Christi Geburt, Veröffentlichungen der Preussischen Turfan-Expeditionen*, Berlin: Otto Elsner.

LE COQ, Albert von, 1924-1926, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien = Ergebnisse der Kgl. Preussischen Turfan Expeditionen, III-V*, Berlin: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt (Repr. Graz, 1974-1975).

LE COQ, Albert von & WALDSCHMIDT, Ernst, 1928-1933, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien = Ergebnisse der Kgl. Preussischen Turfan Expeditionen, VI-VII*, Berlin: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt (Repr. Graz, 1975).

A solid overview can be found in:

YALDIZ, Marianne, 1987, *Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte Chinesisch-Zentralasiens (Xinjiang) = Handbuch der Orientalistik, 7.3,2*, Leiden.

The following texts are available in English:

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- HÄRTEL, H. / YALDIZ, M., 1982, *Along the Ancient Silk Routes: Central Asian Art from the West Berlin State Museums. An exhibition lent by the Museum of Indische Kunst, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, April 3 – June 20, 1982*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- HOWARD, Angela F. / VIGNATO, Giuseppe, 2015, *Archaeological and Visual Sources of Meditation in the Ancient Monasteries of Kuča*, Leiden/Boston: Brill (Studies in Asian Art and Archaeology 28).
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- SANDER, Lore, 1979, Buddhist Literature in Central Asia, in: *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Vol. 4*, ed. J. Dhirasekera, Colombo: Government of Sri Lanka, pp. 52-75.
- SANDER, Lore, 1991, The Earliest Manuscripts from Central Asia and the Sarvastivada Mission, in: *Corolla Iranica: Papers in Honour of Prof. Dr. David Neil MacKenzie on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday on April 8th, 1991*, edd. R.E. Emmerick / D. Weber, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp. 133-150.
- SHARF, Robert H., 2013, Art in the Dark: The Ritual Context of Buddhist Caves in Western China, in: *Art of Merit: Studies in Buddhist Art and its Conservation, Archetype Publications, Courtauld Institute of Art*, edd. D. Park / K. Wangmo / S. Cather, pp. 38-65.
- SHEEL, Karma (ed.), 2010, *India on the Silk Route. Papers presented at the International Conference on India on the Silk Road, held at Varanasi in March 2006*, Delhi: Buddhist World Press.
- ZIN, Monika, 2005-2013, The Identification of Kizil Paintings I-VI, in: *Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift* 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17. Repr. in: *Sanskrit on the Silk Route*, ed. Shashibala, Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2016, pp. 199-285.