

Spring 2020 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Visions of the Afterlife in Asia
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

The Road to Hell: Buddhist Visions of *Naraka* at Qizil

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This lecture will address the emergence and development of the concept of hell in West, South, and Central Asia, with particular focus on Buddhism. Presenting a cross-cultural perspective, the lecture will first attempt to show how early traditions in West Asia (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Judaic, among others) were devoid of a binary choice of heaven and hell and that ideas of good versus evil and divine reward and retribution, so common in later Christian and Islamic traditions, might have influenced by Zoroastrian cosmological and ethical concepts of the struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

Pivoting to South Asian traditions of the afterlife, one can see a similar trajectory from somewhat vague concepts of a “netherworld” in early Indic thought to more complex systematization of the afterlife in Hinduism and Buddhism with one notable difference, that hell (*naraka*) and the abode of the gods (among other realms) are not eternal but a series of stages in a cyclical process of life, death and rebirth.

Images of Buddhist hell are not common in early Buddhist art and are largely found in Central and East Asia. The second half of this talk will center on the archaeological remains at Qizil (Kizil), an important Buddhist rock-cut cave site near the oasis of Kucha on the so-called Silk Roads, and zero in on a series of murals depicting various Buddhist hells. Discussed will be not only the artistic program of the “Devil’s Cave” and the execution of the murals, but also the rich body of sources that narrate the vivid details of the denizens in *naraka* and those who dared venture there and lived to tell about it.

Keywords (Due to page limitations, I have listed only those connected to the part of the lecture that focuses on Buddhist hell.)

Niraya/Naraka: Pali and Sanskrit terms, respectively, that denote hell realms in the Indic tradition (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naraka_\(Buddhism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naraka_(Buddhism)) for a listing of 8 cold and 8 hot hells)

Yama: god of the south and the realm of the dead

Tipiṭaka/ Tripiṭaka: Buddhist scriptures that include the “three baskets” of the Suttas/Sutras (words of the Buddha), the Vinaya (monastic code), and the Abhidamma/Abhidharma (interpretation), respectively

Devadatta Sutta/Sutra: Canonical text where the Buddha specifies the errors of Devadatta who ends up in hell

Pārājika: First four rules (defeats) of the monastic discipline. If you break one of those you are automatically expelled from the order.

Kathāvatthu: Part of the *Abhidharma* (higher learning – scholarly workings of the teachings) that deals with points of contention among monastic communities

Mahāvastu: Turn of the Common Era “Great Story” that includes narratives of the earlier lives of the Buddha, composed by monks from the Lokottaravada school of Buddhism (located around Gandhara or Bamiyan)

Bhāvacakka/Bhāvacakra: Wheel of worldly existence

Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya: Code of an early Buddhist monastic order

Ajanta: Cave site in the Aurangabad District of Maharashtra, India, 2nd c. BCE – 5th c. CE

Kucha/Kuqa: Ancient Buddhist kingdom along the northern Silk Roads in Western China from 1st to 8th century CE, as well as the name (Qiūcí) of a modern town

Albert von le Coq: German archaeologist who worked in the Kucha region in the early 20th century

Tocharian: Indo-European language discovered through manuscripts uncovered at Kucha dating to the 5th – 8th century CE.

Kumārajīva: 4/5th century CE Buddhist monk from Kucha who became a translator at the capital of Chang’an (modern Xi’an)

Kizil: Buddhist cave temple site to the west of Kucha dated between the 3rd and 8th century CE

Teufels-höhle or *Devil’s Cave*: The cave in which depictions of hell were found at Kizil

Bezeklik: Buddhist cave temple site near Turfan where a painting of hell was discovered

Suggested Readings

Along the Ancient Silk Routes: Central Asian Art from the West Berlin State Museums Härtel, Herbert, and Marianne Yaldi (eds.), Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985.

Braavig, Jens. “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of an Idea.” *Numen* 56 (2009): 254–281.

Gardiner, Eileen. *Buddhist Hell: Visions, Tours and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld*. New York: Italica Press, 2012.

Ghose, Rajeshwari. *Kizil on the Silk Road: Crossroads of Commerce & Meeting of Minds*. Mumbai: Marg Publications on behalf of National Centre for the Performing Arts, 2008.

Harris, S.E. “A Nirvana that Is Burning in Hell: Pain and Flourishing in Mahayana Buddhist Moral Thought.” *Sophia* 57 (2018): 337-347.

Zin, Monika. “The Identification of the Kizil Paintings I-VI.” *Sanskrit on the Silk Route*. Shashibala (ed.). Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2016, pp. 199-285.