

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, were 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.

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.

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.

Stausberg, Michael. "Hell in Zoroastrian History." *Numen* 56:2/3 (2009): 217-253

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.