

The Visual Language of Meditation

Foreword

All the startling innovations that Vignato describes in the preceding chapters concerning the building of the sites – the formation of groups of caves distributed in specific districts and the use and transformation of different cave layouts depending on their specific function through time – substantially alter the perception scholars have had in the past towards Buddhist art and monasticism in Kuča. We do not want to downplay at all the importance of the impressive pioneering work undertaken, especially by the German and by the French scholars in the area of Kuča. In fact their plans, drawings and records of paintings and sculpture have been invaluable in our reconstruction of the caves and their original decoration. The fragments of paintings kept presently in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, have been essential to our study.¹ But these earlier German expeditions, headed by Alfred Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq, could not possibly be undertaken on a comprehensive, exhaustive scale in regard to all the Kuča sites. Similarly, the French expeditions headed by Paul Pelliot only focused on Subeši and Duldur Aqur alone.² It is, thus, inevitable that extending the sphere of inquiry to most, if not all the available sites in Kuča, as

Vignato has done through his fieldwork, has profoundly changed our understanding of the Buddhist art of this kingdom on the northern artery of the Silk Road. Besides becoming aware of the existence of multiple types of caves, the momentous presence of meditation caves at the various sites shed light on the function of caves, their murals and possible doctrinal sources which inspired them. Meditation cells in the proximity of the aggregate of caves used by monks for liturgical and living purposes were a constant feature of most Kuča sites. Meditation also became a key factor in the décor of Kuča's central pillar caves.

No doubt the decoration of Buddhist caves was not left to random choices by the monastics. Almost a century ago, the French scholar Marcelle Lalou using Tibetan sources wrote about rules found in the *Mulasarvastivadin vinaya*, or discipline text, which indicated where specific themes were to be painted in the monastery and which colors ought to be used. Alexander C. Soper expanded on the theme by tapping into a variety of texts; his translation offers a list of numerous episodes of Buddha's life which are in fact painted in Kuča caves – the Shravasti miracle, Buddha's Parinirvana and King Ajatasatru's reaction to the loss of the Founder, to mention a few. More recently, Erik Zürcher used again the same textual sources of his predecessors to review the conventions regulating the painting of specific iconographies and their fixed location in sacred and residential spaces.³ These conventions applied literally to surface buildings, not to cliff temples; consequently, we do not have a complete correspondence between text and décor in the Kuča caves. However, it is undeniable that in the decoration of Kuča caves specific themes correspond to specific locations, with rare exceptions.

Moreover, scholars who have studied these caves generally agree that their décor centered in particular on the previous and last lives of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, a program which offers few variations but is applied differently depending on whether it occupies a central

1 A record of all the mural fragments taken to Berlin, those lost and those still extant, is in Caren Dreyer, Lore Sender, and Friederike Weis, eds., *Dokumentation der Verluste, Museum für Indische Kunst* (Berlin: Staatlicher Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 2002).

2 The German expeditions to Central Asia extended well beyond the territory of ancient Kuča. The first expedition (1902–1903) led by Alfred Grünwedel, director of the Indischen Abteilung des Berliner Museums für Völkerkunde (1904–21), explored Turfan, Karashar, and Kuča; the second expedition (1904–1905), led by Albert von Le Coq, explored Turfan, Hami, Shorchuq, and Kuča; the third expedition (1905–1907), led by Alfred Grünwedel, (von Le Coq participated until June 1906), explored Tumshuk, Kuča, Shorcuk, and Turfan; the fourth and last expedition, led by von Le Coq, explored Tumshuk, Kuča, Shorchuq, Turfan, and Hami. See Herbert Härtel, *Along the Ancient Silk Routes. Central Asian Art from the West Berlin State Museums* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982), 24–46. Caren Dreyer offers the most recent account of the four expeditions and the leading role of Grünwedel in them; see Toralf Gabsch, *Auf Grünwedels Spuren. Restaurierung und Forschung an zentralasiatischen Wandmalereien* (Berlin: Koeler & Amelang, 2012), 15–27. On Pelliot's explorations see Hambis, *Douldour-Aqour et Soubachi*.

3 Marcelle Lalou, "Notes sur la décoration des monastères bouddhiques," *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* 5 (1928): 183–85; Alexander Coburn Soper, "Early Buddhist Attitudes toward the Art of Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 32 (1950): 147–51; Erik Zürcher, "Han Buddhism and the Western Regions," in *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China, Studies Presented to Anthony Hulsevé on the Occasion of His 80th Birthday*, eds. Wilt L. Idema and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1–20.

pillar cave or a square cave. Groups formed of square caves and monastic cells, without central pillar caves, create a category apart from groups with at least one central pillar cave. The absence of the central pillar no doubt entailed ritual differences as well as the décor. The structural diversity implies that in square caves there was no ritual of circumambulation and that no main image was displayed on the main wall. On the other hand, based on Vignato's work, we are aware of the presence in square caves – Qizil 76, 81, 90–13, 117, 149A, South Monastery of Qumtura Cave 20 – of a central altar which could have been used in a *pradakshina* rite. Moreover, the painting style and subject matter of square caves also differ from those used in central pillar caves. For example, in square caves, the Parinirvana and the Shravasti miracle are rarely represented. In contrast, these two themes are practically constant features of central pillar caves. These marked divergencies might even imply that the two group types served different ritual purposes as a response to the needs of different doctrinal schools, possibly even at different times.

On account of the distinct structural and decorative dissimilarities just described, in this chapter I focus mainly on central pillar caves and on monumental image caves, more specifically, on images and imagery which derived from meditation. In a typical central pillar cave, the overall décor celebrated the historical Buddha in the following way: the façade of the central pillar showed the post-Enlightenment Indrashailaguha episode, while the side walls of the main chamber carried preaching scenes; the barrel-vaulted ceiling was neatly divided into two sections by the ceiling's axial strip embellished with cosmic symbols and additional images of Buddha or monks; the two sections of the vault were filled with *avadanas*, a kind of moral story, and *jatakas*, stories of Buddha's previous lives.⁴ Paintings of the Parinirvana cycle – the final release, the cremation and the distribution of the relics and their deposit into stupas – covered the walls of the rear areas of the cave. In the lunette over the cave entrance was usually painted a bodhisattva in Tushita Heaven. In this chapter I also extend my inquiry to the monumental image caves, where elements of this same decoration were used. In these caves, however, the décor underwent important iconographic developments such as the overly emphatic use of sculpture to the extent that tridimensionality overwhelms two-dimensionality.

4 Emmanuelle Lesbire, "An Attempt to identify and Classify Scenes with a Central Buddha depicted on Ceilings of the Kyzil Caves (Former Kingdom of Kutcha, Central Asia)," *Artibus Asiae* 61.2 (2001): 305–51.

Chapter Four discusses Central Asian meditation literature. The analysis of the documents leads to the conclusion that meditation was not only extremely important among the monastic communities of this kingdom, but it was also linked to the Sarvastivadin School, which remained faithful to Mainstream Buddhist teaching – this terminology is used as the equivalent of the Hinayana term – throughout the period of Buddhist activity in Kuča. The present investigation leaves aside the much-debated issue of chronology, as I choose, instead, the general parameters of 200 to 650 CE to embrace the most vigorous and productive period of Buddhist activity in this Central Asian kingdom.⁵

It is generally accepted that Buddhism entered Kuča between the first and second centuries CE, a dating which I deem to be already on the conservative side. Zürcher, however, was skeptical about such an early spread of Buddhism along the northern artery of the Silk Road, specifically in Kuča. He referred to the oases as transit stations that enabled the passage and spread of Buddhism from India, to Gandhara, and then to China, the final destination; in his view, the existence of an organized Buddhism in Kuča as early as the Common Era was impossible since the local economy was not developed sufficiently to support "parasitic" monastics. In his view, a true economy in the area could only take shape later, once military colonies were set up by the Chinese, requiring the construction of an irrigation system, which, in turn, supported the growth of agriculture.⁶ Zürcher, was, therefore, skeptical about

5 The scholar Su Bai was the first to propose a new dating different from the earlier German chronology. Su Bai, "Kezier shiku bufen dongku jieduan," 10–23. A pioneer work was that of Yan Wenru, "Xinjiang Tianshan yi nan de shiku," 41–59. Additional systems have been subsequently proposed by Huo Xuchu 霍旭初 and Wang Jianlin 王建林, "Danqing banbo qianqiu zhuanguan: Kezier shiku bihua yishu ji fenqi gaishu 丹青斑驳千秋壮观: 克孜尔石窟壁画艺术及分期概述 [Motley Array of Turquoise and Red Colors, a Thousand Years of a Magnificent Site. Outline of the Painting and Chronology of Qizil Caves]," in *Qiuci fojiao wenhua lunji*, 201–28. All these systems offer chronological variations. For a discussion of Su Bai's groundbreaking dating, see Howard, "In Support of a New Chronology for the Kizil Painting," 68–83. Boris Anatolievich Litvinski, *Die Geschichte des Buddhismus in Ostturkestan* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), 55, lists the opinions of several scholars on the issue of the origin of Kuča Buddhism, which oscillate between the earliest date of 250 BCE, immediately after the First Council, to the latest ca. 250 CE.

6 Zürcher, "Han Buddhism and the Western Regions," 158–82. In a later publication, in 1993, Zürcher's opinion was even more radical as he asserted that Xinjiang remained a mere transit zone, which acted as a long-distance transmission based on incidental