CHAPTER 3

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 Mulāsarvastiviḍaṇ 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 Shakyanuni, 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).
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 pradakśhina 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 Indrashailaguhu 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 the vault were filled with the relics and their deposit into the pradakśhina pradakśina 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.

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

6 Zürcher, was, therefore, skeptical about

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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 yan de shiku,” in Qixia fujiao wenhua lunji (2001): 305–51.

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...