

Leipzig Kucha Studies 1

Essays and Studies in the Art of Kucha



Leipzig Kucha Studies

Series Editors

Eli Franco and Monika Zin

Volume 1

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Foreword by the Series Editors

The present book – the first of seventeen volumes scheduled for the series “Leipzig Kucha Studies” – unites the first results of the long-term research project (2016–2030) “Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road” that appear in print. The project, conducted under the auspices of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig, focuses on an impressive corpus of wall paintings datable to approximately the fifth to tenth centuries CE and located in the Buddhist cave complexes of the ancient kingdom of Kucha (Kuča) on the Northern Silk Road, the present-day Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China. These narrative and devotional paintings form one of the most important sources for our understanding of the religious and intellectual history of Buddhism in Central Asia during the first millennium.

Numerous manuscripts of works belonging to various genres of Buddhist literature, which were once kept in the caves, provide insight into the religious and philosophical world of the monks who inhabited them. However, the manuscripts have only survived in fragmentary form and were in many cases not written in the region, but brought to Kucha from India or China. The wall paintings, on the other hand,

were created on-site to cater to the spiritual needs of both the monks and the local lay community. While the fragments of several Sanskrit manuscripts found in the region, such as the plays of the Buddhist poet Aśvaghoṣa, the so-called *Yogalehrbuch* on Buddhist techniques of meditation and contemplation, the treatise on Sanskrit metrics called *Chandoviciti*, and the “Spitzer Manuscript”, which preserves an early Buddhist philosophical work, became the subjects of editions and thorough studies, the Kucha wall paintings have never been systematically studied in Europe after they had been discovered and important preliminary research conducted on them in the early twentieth century. The methodical documentation and study of the caves at Chinese institutions started only in the 1980s. Due to language and other barriers, however, European and Chinese research went on largely independently of each other. The project was set up to foster communication between Western (in the broadest sense of the term) and Chinese scholars concerning the exploration of the paintings as highly significant source material which reflects the beliefs and daily practice of Buddhist monks and lay people during the second half of the first millennium CE in the Kucha region.

In a first step, the project is devoted to recording and annotating all surviving paintings of the region in a digital information system, including the fragments that were removed from their original sites by several expeditions organized by Prussia and other countries at the beginning of the twentieth century. These fragmentary paintings are found today in numerous museums and art collections. The digital information system, which we expect to become accessible online soon, is being used both for the ongoing research on the paintings and for the publication of its results. It is instrumental in achieving the larger aim of the project, namely the documentation, analysis and evaluation of the iconographical and narrative programmes of the caves in a historico-cultural context, including the identification of the literary sources of the paintings and, whenever possible, of their affiliation to specific Buddhist schools and traditions. In the process, influences of pictorial traditions from India, Iran, European classical antiquity and China are also examined. In general, the project provides a platform for research on the history of Buddhism of the region and on the spread of Buddhism from South to East Asia.

Since its establishment and initiation in January 2016, the project has positioned itself as the largest existing centre for research on the Buddhist murals of Kucha and as one of the few institutions internationally that are engaged in training a new generation of scholars who will be qualified to deal with questions related to the complex history of Buddhist art in Chinese

Central Asia. This was, and is, only possible due to the generous resources of the “Akademien Programme” (<https://www.akademienunion.de/en/>), which is coordinated by the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, and the continuous support provided by numerous cooperation partners in Europe, China, Japan and the USA, the most important among them being the Kucha Research Academy in Urumchi (Ürümqi), Xinjiang. The project also receives invaluable support from the Museum für Asiatische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, and we would like to thank in particular its Director, Prof. Lars-Christian Koch, and the Curator of the Central Asian Collection, Dr. Lilla Russell-Smith. The project is hosted by the Philological–Historical Class of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Leipzig. Our sincere thanks go to the management of the Academy, namely its former and present Presidents, Prof. Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer and Prof. Hans Wiesmeth, its General Secretary, Dr. Christian Winter, and the Secretary of the Philological–Historical Class, Prof. Wolfgang Huschner, for their valuable support. We would also like to thank the members of the project’s Advisory Board, headed by its indefatigable chairwoman, Prof. Angelika Berlejung (Leipzig University / Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig), and consisting of Prof. Max Deeg (Cardiff University), Prof. Phyllis Granoff (Yale University), Dr. Dieter Maue (Cölbe-Schwarzenborn), Prof. Markus Mode (Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg) and Prof. Michael Zimmer-

mann (University of Hamburg). The University of Leipzig supports the project by generously providing ample office space and the required infrastructure for the team of researchers. We extend our particular thanks to the Rector, Prof. Beate A. Schücking, the Head of Administration, Prof. Birgit Dräger, and their teams for their sympathetic support of the project.

The three studies gathered in this first volume of the project's publication series entitled *Essays and Studies in the Art of Kucha*, provide insight into the different types of information to be gained from the paintings. The first study, "Painted Buddhist Cosmology: The Pictorial Programme of Central Pillar Caves in Kucha" by Ines Konczak-Nagel, is an analysis and interpretation of the pictorial programme of a typical "central pillar cave". She demonstrates how the Buddhist cosmology of the three *dhātus* (*kāma*-, *rūpa*- and *ārūpya-dhātu*) is projected on the different levels of the paintings on the cave walls. The second study by the same author, "Representations of Architecture and Architectural Elements in the Wall Paintings of Kucha", is part of an ongoing extensive analysis of the material culture depicted in the paintings. Its examination will considerably enhance our knowledge of certain aspects of the now extinct local Tocharian culture of Kucha. Little is known about the

Tocharian people apart from their speaking an Indo-European language; the preserved paintings and manuscripts are therefore an invaluable source of information about their culture, including their religious beliefs, and every-day life. The third study, authored by Monika Zin, "Representations of the First Council in Kucha: The Monk Kāśyapa in the *Parinirvāṇa* Cycle and the Furtherance of Buddhist Teaching", explores the representations of the Buddhist monk Mahākāśyapa and a cult of this figure that seems to have flourished in the Tocharian kingdom of Kucha.

Forthcoming volumes will include studies on the painted ornamental decoration of the caves, on monks, minor deities and donors as well as further aspects of material culture reflected in the paintings. The monographs and essays will be authored by members of the project team and affiliated scholars.

What remains is to express our hope that the research presented in this and the following volumes of the "Leipzig Kucha Studies" will prove to be of interest and use to all scholars concerned with the rich cultures and religions of Chinese Central Asia, and that the series will especially foster scholarly and public interest in the fascinating history of Buddhism in the Kucha region.

Eli Franco & Monika Zin