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Incense Burners and/or Lamps in the Kucha Wall Paintings on the Northern Silk Road

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Incense Burners and/or Lamps in the Kucha Wall Paintings on the Northern Silk Road

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In 1925, when Albert von Le Coq published his study on various art historical developments in pre-Islamic art from Central Asia in his *Bilderatlas zur Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Mittel-Asiens*[1] (Le Coq 1925), he also considered various elements of the material culture of Kucha. Among the objects he wrote about were the incense burners carried by donors and monks (*ibid.*, pp. 40–41, 44, figs. 9, 11, 17, 20, 22). The examples he showed were all depicted in the murals at the sites of Kizil and Kumtura; today we also know of murals showing such incense burners in Kizilgaha and Simsim. Later it will be shown that these incense burners alternatively could have been lamps, or examples of a mixed artifact used for both purposes. Because earlier research established and used the term "incense burner," we will continue in this tradition and call the object "incense burner," or more briefly, "burner," though not intending a definitive interpretation.

In Kizil, depictions in nine caves show people carrying incense burners: these are Kizil 8, 13, 63, 67 (Drawing 1 and Fig. 1), 184 (Fig. 2), 186 (Fig. 3), 205 (Fig. 4), 224, and 227. In Kumtura three caves have depictions of people carrying incense burners; see Kumtura 16 (Fig. 5), 23 (Drawing 2), and 34 (Drawing 3). Kizilgaha shows them in three caves: Kizilgaha 11 (Drawing 4), 13, and 14. In Simsim 32 (Drawing 5) we also find incense burners depicted. Later, during the Uighur period (eighth to ninth centuries CE), these burners appear again in wall paintings of a very similar design at Bezeklik, these clearly showing smoke escaping (Drawing 6).

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1 Hereafter referred to as *Bilderatlas*.

Drawing 1. Kizil, Cave 67 (Rotkuppelhöhle), cella right side wall, register 1, drawing by Albert Grünwedel, Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin TA6646

Fig. 1. Present state of preservation of Drawing 1, now in Berlin Museum für Asiatische Kunst III8403 and III8403a. After: ZXBY II pp. 186–187, pl. 164

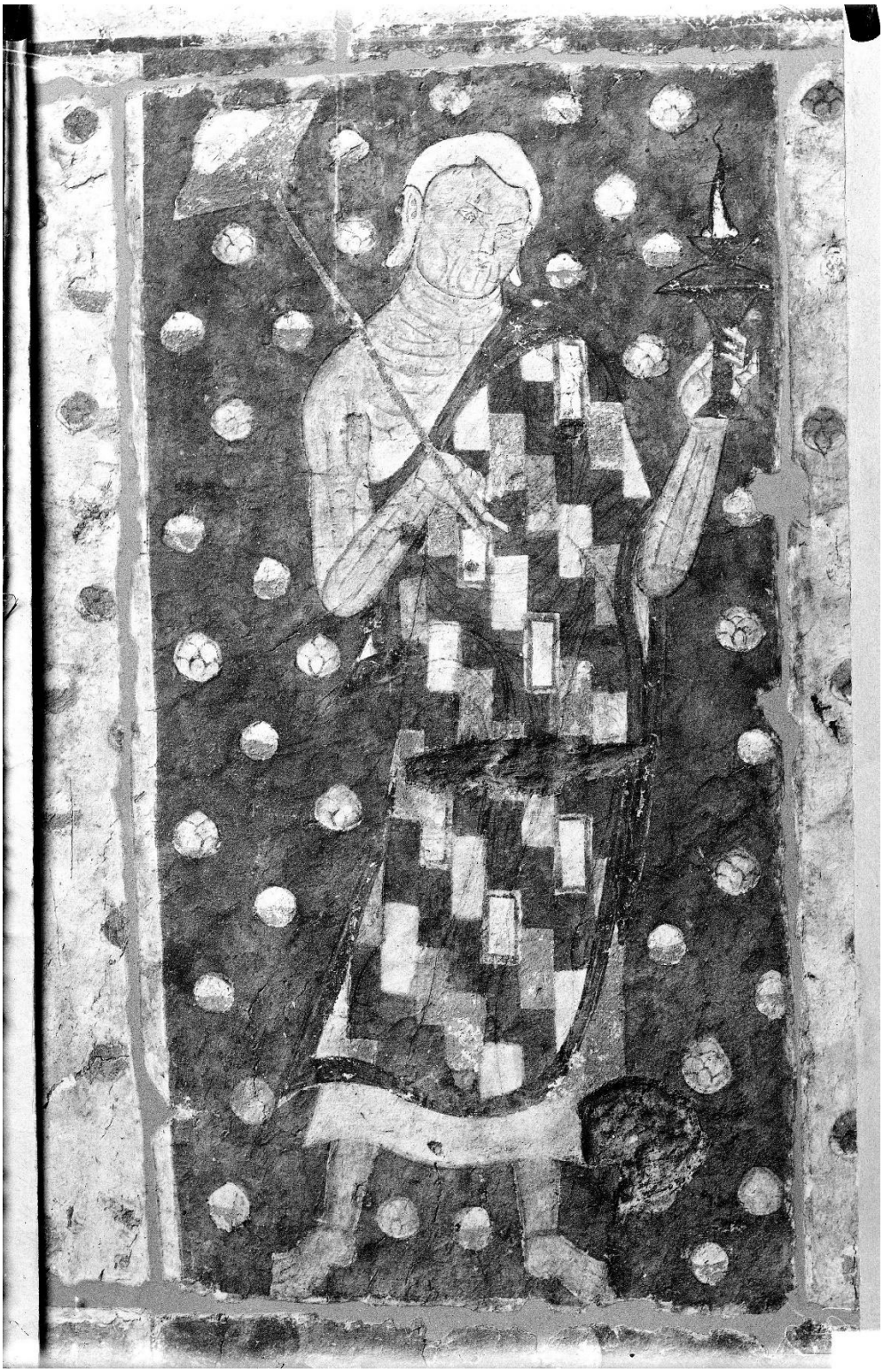


Fig. 2. Kizil, Cave 184 (Drittletzte Höhle), probably once side aisle outer wall, war loss, picture B136 Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin, detail of Berlin no. IB 8445.

Fig. 3. Kizil Cave 186, cella door right (?), formally Berlin IB 8867, now in the State Hermitage VD 866, unpublished. Cf.: Dreyer/Sander/Weis 2002, p. 174 IB 8867.

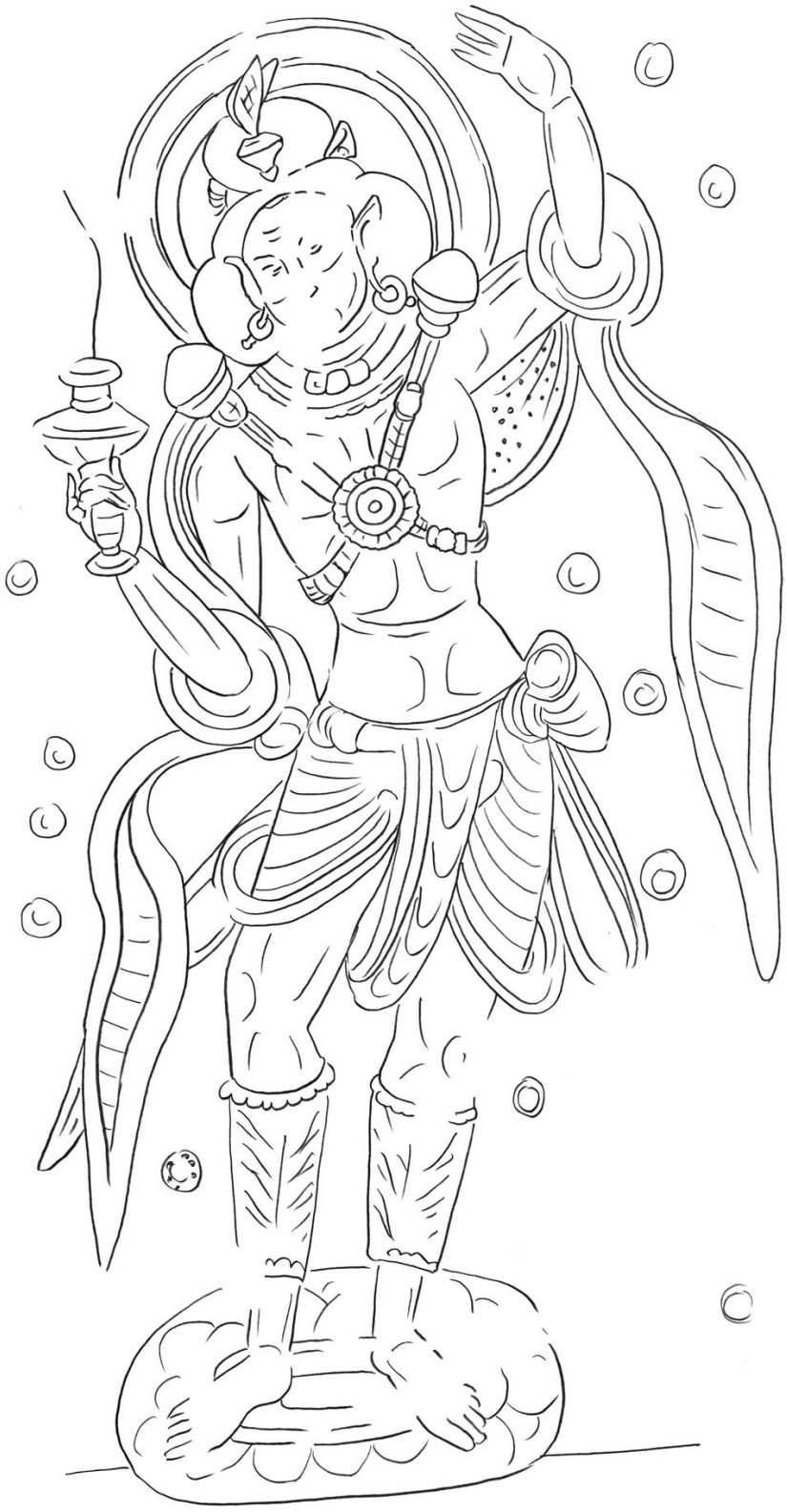
Fig. 4. Kizil, cave 205, cella front wall right side, register 2, lost due to war, Inv. no Berlin IB 8440b. After Grünwedel 1920, fig. 1. For references: Dreyer/Sander/Weis 2002, p. 145 IB 8440 a,b.

Fig. 5. Kumtura, Cave 16 (Kinarī, Höhle 14), front wall, lunette. Parinirvāna of the Buddha. Berlin, no. IB 8912, lost due to war. After: Le Coq/Waldschmidt 1933, pl. 30. Cf. *ibid.*. pp. 64–65; Dreyer/Sander/Weis 2002, 179 IB 8912; ZXBQ 1995, IV, p. 160 pl. 160; Zin 2020, pp. 260–261, fig. 79, fns. 770, 772.

Drawing 2. Kumtura, cave 23, site aisle right, outer wall, drawing by Albert Grünwedel. Berlin no. IB 8631. After Grünwedel 1912, fig. 53. Cf. Dreyer/Sander/Weis 2002, p. 156 IB 8632.

Drawing 3. Kumtura, cave 34, cupola, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin. Cf. Kuche Kumutula shiku 1994, pl. 64; *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China: Kucha 2008*, p. 233; *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China 2009*, vol. IV, p. 146, pl. 143.

Drawing 4. Kizilgaha, Cave 11, side aisle right, outer wall, *in situ*, drawing by Monika Zin. Cf. *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China 2009*, vol. V, p. 181, pl. 168.



Drawing 5. Dancing *yakṣa*, Simsim, Cave 32, rear area, inner wall ceiling, drawing by Monika Zin. Cf. *Mural Paintings in Xinjiang of China 2009*, vol. V, p. 48, pl. 45

Drawing 6. Demon with incense burner, Bezeklik 20, entrance, war losses Museum, inv. no. Berlin: IB 6890. Drawing, Grünwedel after: Dreyer/Sander/Weis 2002, p. 124, IB 6890.

The shape of these incense burners (in German: *Räucherlampen* or *Weihrauchbrenner*) is more or less the same and follows the type depicted on the Kucha murals of the first and second Indo-Iranian style: a long shaft rises from a foot and is topped by a goblet-like vessel, that, in some cases, can also have a mushroom-like rim. In this cupola- or mushroom-shaped upper part of the vessel, the incense or oil was burned. The top of the burner is rounded or globular, and in some cases small holes are shown that could have been used to let the incense smoke escape, or, alternatively, might have held the wick.

Insofar as we can judge, the burners appear to represent items made of hammered metal, so they are a toreutic product. Today the color of the incense burners in the murals is mostly grayish. If this was so when the murals were freshly painted, it could mean that silver was meant as the manufacturing material. Unfortunately, no corresponding real incense burner from Kucha has ever been found archaeologically by the German, French, Russian or Japanese expeditions that have explored there, and as far as we know, neither have Chinese colleagues found this type of burner. Only modern excavations at Kucha could offer the possibility of such an archaeological find, but it has been decades since any excavation has been carried out.

Albert von Le Coq in his *Bilderatlas* shows several murals depicting people carrying burners, but the text of his book does not mention or discuss them. Only later, in his book of 1928 (Le Coq 1928, p. 168), does he give an explanation, very short, in which he claims that this type of burner can be traced back to Achaemenidian and Greek prototypes. Some important studies on incense burners in general were done by Karl Wiegand (1912, pp. 1–97), mainly focusing on the Classical Mediterranean world (Fig. 6). More recently, Bernhard Goldmann, Prudence O. Harper and Souren Melikian-Chirvani investigated incense burners in the world of the Iranians (Goldmann 1991, pp. 179–188; Harper 2005, pp. 47–56; Melikian-Chirvani 1993, pp. 111–130) (Fig. 7). I believe it is very likely that the Gandharan incense burner (Fig. 8) existed in the older Iranian, Achaemenid, tradition, in combination with Greek models. In Gandhara these cultural traditions have co-existed ever since Alexander the Great occupied the area, so it is very likely that it is here that this type of burner was designed, later finding its way to Kucha.

Fig. 6. Incense burner, Tuch el Karamus, Egypt, late fourth century BCE, Cairo JE 38089 and JE 8090. After: Stone 2004, figs. 24–25.

Fig. 7. Achemaenid incense burner mid-sixth to fifth century BCE, loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, L.1998.26. Stone 2004, fig. 20.

Fig. 8. Incense burner, Taxila, Sirkap second-to-first century BCE, copper 14.5 × 10 × 10 cm. Taxila Museum, inv. no. 2453, Sk./30-216/2 Drachenfels/Luczanits, eds., 2008, 341 no. 259. Marshall 1951, II, 596; *ibid.* III, pl. 176, no. 323.

In 1921 Le Coq published a very short article about incense burners found by the German expeditions (Le Coq 1921), but the type discussed here is not represented among them, simply because there were, as mentioned above, no such archaeological finds. Those incense burners found were seven in number, all made of terracotta and having beaker-like, round shapes (Dreyer/Sander/Weis 2002, pp. 282–283, 287). Three of these incense burners originated in Kumtura, and four came from Tumshuk; unfortunately they were all lost during the bombing of Berlin in World War II.[2]

We now know that many artistic motifs in Kucha, as well as elements of the material culture, can be traced back to Gandharan and Indian models and traditions. However, much remains to be done in any future studies of incense burners and lamps in pre-Islamic Central Asia, apparently a topic of low interest for colleagues working in this field. In no way have we here reached a level on par with the field of classical archaeology at the University of Munich, with its project "Neus Licht aus Pompeji. Eine römische Kultur des Lichts."[3]

In 2004, Elizabeth Rosen Stone (2004; see also Carter 1993) published an elaborate bronze incense burner from Gandhara, now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 9); and with Stone's article a groundbreaking step toward understanding incense burners in Central Asia was taken.

2 The numbers are: IB 7136; IB 7137 a, b; IB 7138 on p. 282; IB 7661; IB 7662 on p. 283; IB 8998; IB 9000 on p. 287. A request for photos of more still-existing small finds of incense-burners and lamps has been send to the Museum of Asiatische Kunst in Berlin, but could not yet be answered because the collections are being moved from Dahlem to the Humboldt-Forum.

3 Cf. https://www.klass-archeologie.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/d-pr; for more detailed information, see Bielfeldt 2014.

Fig. 9. Incense burner H 82.6 cm loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: L.1999.74.2. After Stone 2004, fig. 1.

In Gandharan reliefs, portable burners very similar to the ones shown on Kuchaean murals can be found; a very good example is a piece shown by Wladimir Zwalf (1996, vol. 1, p. 233, no. 299, and color-plate XI) (Fig. 10) from Swat. The scene depicted shows a group of monks participating in a ritual surrounding a *stūpa*. The relief dates to the Kushan period of the second to third century CE. On the right side of the relief one can see a monk holding an incense burner very close in shape to those we find in Kuchaean murals.

Fig. 10. *Stūpa* worshiped by monks and a lay couple, Swat 15 × 19.3 × 5 cm, British Museum, London: OA 1902.10-2.29. After: Zwalf 1996, pl. XI, no. 299.

Portable incense burners must have had an even longer history in Gandhara, however, because, from the excavations of Sir John Marshall at Taxila-Sirkap, we have an incense burner made of copper, 14.5 × 10.0 × 10.0 cm. It is dated to the second to first century BCE, i.e., the Indo-Scythian Period (see Fig. 8). Unfortunately, this Indo-Scythian incense burner was found without the cupola-shaped rim it almost certainly once had. I am convinced, however, that the smaller portable incense burners shown on Gandharan reliefs (cf. Fig. 10) represent a step on the way to the design of the burners depicted in the murals of Kucha.

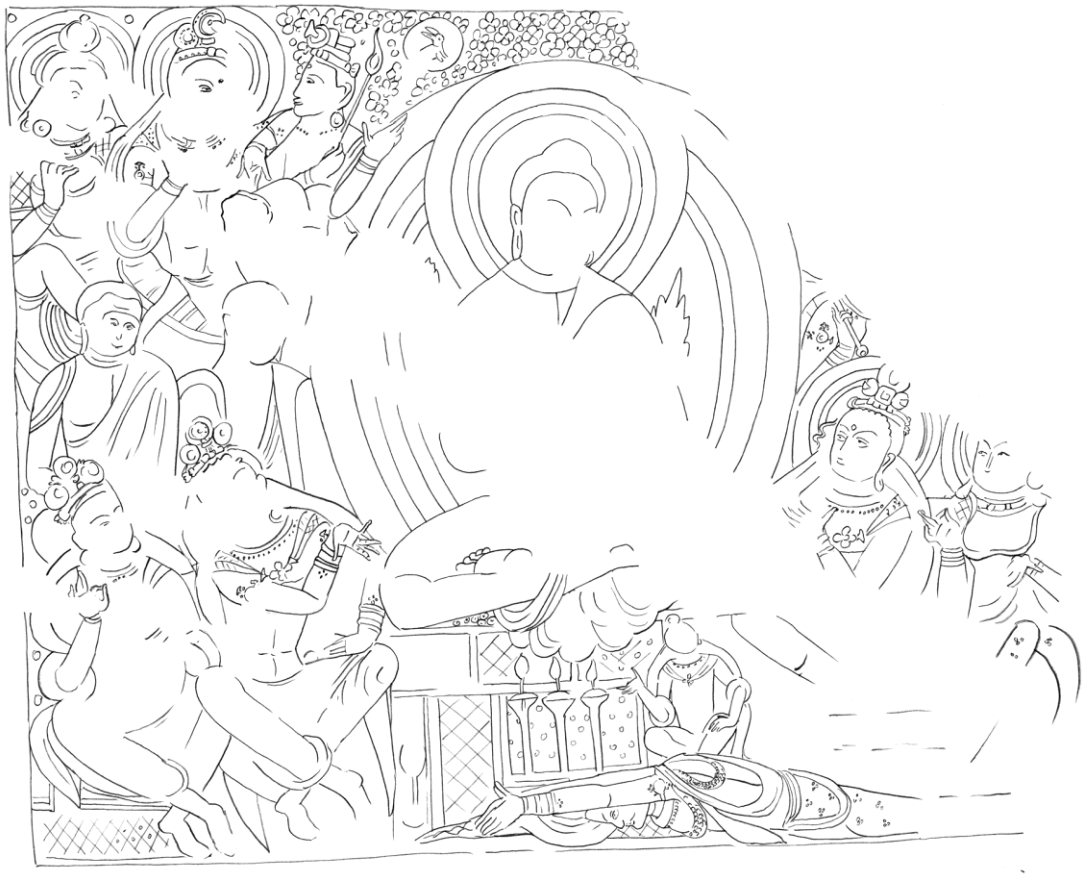
What remains a mystery, however, is whether the so-called burners were used to burn incense of whatsoever kind, or instead they were true lamps, intended to give light. The question cannot be totally resolved. In only a few of the murals in Kucha does a flame appear on top of the burner; in the majority there is nothing to be seen, neither a flame nor the ascending smoke of burning incense.

Exactly the same problem came up for Elizabeth Stone while discussing the technical use of the large incense burner in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Stone 2004, p. 92). Gandharan burners are often depicted with an open lid and ascending flames or smoke, the lids being supported securely by their hinges. In Kucha the burners are never shown open, and they exhibit no hinges. In the case of the Gandharan burners, Elizabeth Stone decided that they were used as real lamps or torches (Stone 2004, p. 92) (Fig. 9). If one looks again at the incense burner in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Stone 2004, p. 70), one can easily see that the cupola-shaped rim is pierced with various geometric forms and with swastikas; all these holes would easily have let out the smoke of the burning incense. The only alternative explanation is that such burners had a double or shared purpose as incense burners, but alternatively also as a kind of fire altar.

But I remain cautious about deciding whether what we see on the Kucha murals suggests that we are dealing with incense burners or lamps. When we observe a real flame like that depicted in Kizil 184 (Fig. 2), it seems adequate to decide the matter. But this is not always the case, and from several burners nothing ascends.

In Kizil 63, three candelabras are shown standing in front of the Buddha (Drawing 7), and again here we can clearly make out flames; unfortunately one cannot see the feet of these candelabras to decide about possible Western classical Mediterranean origins outside of Kucha. Further, it is not quite clear whether candles or any other substances are depicted as being set on fire on those three

candelabras, or, if, in antiquity, when the mural was in a better state, there were lamps on the upper platform. Regarding India, Oskar von Hinüber (2010, pp. 7–8 with fn. 27) discusses the early use of candles, but also could not arrive at a clear solution. A comparison for those three candelabras can be found on a Gandharan schist relief, from Takht-i-Bahi (Fig. 11), now housed in the British Museum, where the "Great Renunciation among Women" is depicted. On that relief one sees lamps at the tops of the candelabras, and on the right candelabra even the flame of the lamp can be seen. Gandharan lamps, often heart-shaped, triangular or square and made of schist are known from antiquities collections, for example from the Hirayama Collection (Tanabe 2007, pl. IV, nos. 67 and 68) (Fig. 12). From what we know from the lists of what was lost in World War II, the more primitive lamps from Kucha all had a rounded, not seldom beaker-like, shape.



Drawing 7. Kizil, Cave 63 (Kāśyapahöhle), cella side wall left, register 1, no. 3, *in situ*, King Ajatasatru and his physician Jivaka visit the Buddha, drawing by Monika Zin. Identification in Hamada 2003, further discussion in Arlt/Hiyama 2015.

Fig. 11. *Stūpa* drum (?) panel showing the Great Renunciation among the Women, Takht-i-Bahi, Pakistan. 15 × 27.3 × 5.1 cm, British Museum, London: OA 1900.4-14.12. After: Zwalf 1996, no. 174.

Fig. 12. Gandharan oil lamps, schist, Hirayama Collection, Japan. After Tanabe 2007, pl. VI-068.

Again, no flame can be found in Kizil 67, where a donor seems to talk to a monk to his left side (Drawing 1, and Fig. 1). The same is true for the donor ladies following him from the right side. In Kizil 186, one of four monks holds a burner (Fig. 3), without a flame of ascending smoke. Again the same can be said about King Totika in Kizil 205 (Maya-Höhle) (Fig. 4). In Kizil 227 two of three monks again carry incense burners with no flame or smoke ascending. In Kizilgaha 11 a donor holds a burner, and again we do not see a flame or smoke (Drawing 4). In Kumtura 23, now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, a male donor, with his family and two monks, holds a burner, but nothing ascends from it (Drawing 2). A *yakṣa* from Kumtura 34 holds a small vessel without the typical stem and foot (Drawing 3). Monika Zin has interpreted this in her drawing as having a large burning flame.

The question whether our burners in the murals of Kucha are lamps or incense burners cannot properly be resolved, especially because we only see them on the murals but completely lack any archaeological findings of that specific type. Further, we have to admit that, while the depictions of burners in Gandhara usually are dated to the second to third century CE, the depictions of our burners on the murals of Kucha date to the fifth–sixth centuries CE. This gap could perhaps be explained by the conservatism of the Kuchaeans (i.e., Tocharians), who preserved things and traditions they had taken over from Gandhara and India. The other possibility is that the burners of Gandhara continued to exist in the same shape and design until the times of the Tocharians of Kucha.

Of the figures who carry burners in the murals of Kucha, we can identify three groups: monks, female and male donors, and *yakṣas*. As mentioned above, in Kizil 205 we even find King Totika depicted with a burner, and he uses exactly the same type that we usually find in Kucha, so nothing better or more elegant or elaborate in style than the ones other donors or monks carry. What seems to be clear is that all those in Kucha who adorn the Buddha use the same type of burner, be they monks, the aristocracy, kings, lay people, or *yakṣas*.

Apart from Gandhara and Kucha, at no other location along the Silk Road has that exact type of burner been found. A more common type of burner along the Silk Road, having also a longer history and development in Gandhara, is one with a long handle (Jäger 2011; Hinüber 2010; Falk 2006), but these are not depicted on the murals of the first and second style of Kucha. What can be mentioned additionally here is, that the early Chinese mountain censer, *boshanlu* (Erickson 1992; Rawson 2006) has meanwhile also been traced back to Achaemenid-Iranian origins (Rawson 2006). A direct

connection between our Kuchaean burners and the *boshanlu* of early China seems possible, but this hypothesis remains to be investigated.

As mentioned above, it was not possible to find whether the Kuchaean incense burners, as I call them, really were incense burners, because sometimes they are also interpreted as oil lamps used to give light (Sander 2015). We will return to this problem below.

The lack of any archaeological find of a Kuchaean burner of course makes modern investigations that could tell us what was burned in those burners impossible. If we decide to connect Kucha at a deep level with India, then it is likely that substances were set alight to give a cave a good smell. A recipe for an ancient Indian incense was published by Bertold Laufer (1896). Similar ingredients are mentioned by Harry Falk (2014–2015) and Wolfgang Zwickel (1990). Substances used in such incense mixtures were: frankincense from Southern Arabia, *galbanum* from Iran, *styrax* from Turkey and the Levante, spikenard from India and the Himalayas, myrrh from Eastern Africa, kostwurz from India and sandalwood from India.

Like so many other luxuries, spices for incense could have been brought over the Silk Roads from all those regions mentioned above; also, Gandharan incense traders are now known by their names from inscriptions in the cave called Hoq on Socotra Island, Yemen (Strauch, ed., 2012). Frankincense may always have been important for incense in Kucha too. It must have been a luxury that only the Kuchean aristocracy could afford. From antiquity forward, the price for frankincense has been immense (Müller 1978; Groom 1981; Zwickel 1990).

Some specialists have discussed whether lamps or incense burners were used in the caves of Kucha, with the absence or presence of soot on the walls of caves seen as a key factor. For Robert Sharf (2013), the total absence of soot or oil deposits proves that the caves served a mortuary function. This would mean that the caves were hewn out of the rock and painted and were never visited again, but this sounds very unlikely. Angela Howard (2017) argues that the absence of soot does not prove Sharf's hypothesis at all. More importantly, she asserts that Chinese Buddhist traditions of mortuary practices and ideas, as known from Longmen (van Alpen, ed., 2001), cannot and should not be assumed to have been transferred to Kucha.

Giuseppe Vignato (2016) comes to another conclusion about soot: at least caves 114 and 117 at Kizil show clear remains of oily and sticky soot, caused by devotional lamps. It remains unclear whether

Vignato had in mind the incense burners or lamps depicted in the murals when discussing this soot. Both caves, 114 and 117, in Kizil, had statues, so his conclusion should be cited here: "The fact that devotional lamps were lit painted with statues, while in others this practice was not followed, suggest[s] that different rituals took place in the caves" (Vignato 2016, 168). This raises the question of whether those two caves are representative, and how many more caves in Kucha show soot. Only scientific examination of the soot could prove what really was burned in the caves. Real oil (of whatever kind) might be expected to leave a different soot than burned incense.

The fact that our burners are clearly comparable to several of those from Gandhara, held in the hands of persons depicted in the reliefs—for example, that monk close to a *stūpa*, now housed in the British Museum (Fig. 10)—seems to direct us to the assumption that the Gandharan burners are the ancestors of the Kuchaean ones. But the question of whether it is smoke or a flame that ascends from the burner, in images like those mentioned above, cannot be answered and must remain speculative.

In the background of this discussion is the older question: how important was Iranian influence on Gandharan Buddhist culture and arts? Harald Ingholt (1957, p. 36), anticipated by A. C. Soper (1949–1950), clearly saw this Iranian influence; Katsumi Tanabe followed this path in 1984 (Tanabe 1984). In 1987, when Giovanni Verardi (1987) published an important article in which our portable burners are declared to be portable fire altars, a long and ongoing debate broke out about the fire cult and its origin in Buddhism.

The cult of fire in Iran has an ancient history: in Zoroastrianism, the god Ahura Mazda was believed to represent himself in the flames of a fire burned on a fire altar (Schippmann 1971). Agnes Stache-Weiske (1990) tried to show that neither *vedic* nor Iranian sources can explain the fire symbolism in Gandharan reliefs and sculptures, but rather that fire was instead a symbol for meditation and in particular for the First Meditation of the Gautama Bodhisatva. Without mentioning Stache-Weiske, David Allan Scott in the same year, 1990, collected together all available data on what he called "the Iranian face of Buddhism" in Gandhara and pre-Islamic Central Asia (Scott 1990). One might believe one or another theory, but, in a region where since oldest times, Iranian, Indian, Hellenistic-Roman and other influences have met and mixed through the communications of people speaking with each other and exchanging knowledge, syncretistic ideas certainly developed. To an Iranian, whether a Kushan or of any other Iranian ethnicity, it perhaps did not seem strange to put a fire altar in front of a statue of

Buddha, to adorn or worship him. For someone from farther south, i.e., from the Indian subcontinent, it would perhaps have seemed more normal to burn incense in front of the Buddha.

Against this background, it makes little sense to debate the depicted Kuchean burners in the murals. One must leave open the question whether it is smoke or fire that is shown atop them, Two examples are of interest in this connection: in the Hirayama Collection (Fig. 13), we find the following scene on the right side of a Gandharan schist relief showing a group of musicians. To the right, we see a large burner from which three thick whirling spirals escape; a person to the left seems to feed the censer. Here, on the basis of these specific details, I would decide for smoke.

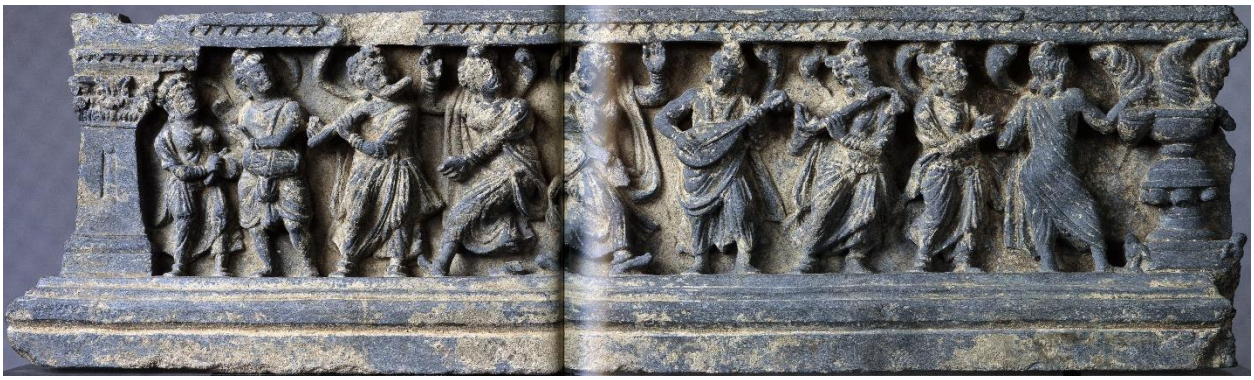


Fig. 13. Gandharan schist relief with *nāgas* dancing and playing music, Hirayama Collection, Japan. After: Tanabe 2007, pl. I-5.

Maybe it is possible to open the above mentioned large Gandharan incense burner in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 9) and do scientific research, including tests for remains of what possibly was burned in it; but, again, that is something for the future. Whether this could help us in the case of the Kuchaean burners is doubtful as long as we have no such burner as an archaeological find.

Apart from the issue considered above, other important questions remain regarding the use of lamps in the caves of Kucha. In the twenty-first century we are used to having bright light day and night via electricity. In archaic societies, of course, much more primitive ways were used, usually open fire from camp-fires, wooden torches, and small and large lamps. The lamps worked with oil made of plants or animal fat. The question how the caves were lighted sufficiently for painting the murals is still unsolved. While the possibility of using large mirrors to illuminate the caves by reflecting available

sunlight has been mentioned, we do not even know whether these existed. If no large mirrors were used, the only remaining possibility is the use of torches. But the idea that the painters worked by torchlight is questionable, because after a relatively short time the cave would have been full of smoke from the burning torches, and it is hard to believe much work could be done in such circumstances.

How much light was necessary for whatever ceremonies took place in the caves is a connected problem. The fact that most caves were completely painted must lead us to the point that those who came to the caves to perform whatsoever ritual also had a desire to see the depicted scenes in order to commemorate and adore the Buddha. Without light it was impossible to see the paranirvana scenes in the back of a central pillar-cave. Without lamps a visit to the caves seems impossible, or at least most difficult. Even if one imagines viewing a cave only when direct sunlight illuminated at least certain parts of it, and any wooden structure built directly in front of the caves would have prevented even full sunlight from delivering enough light to see the paintings. According to Giuseppe Vignato (2016–2017, p. 23), wooden tables may have stood in front of the main statue of a Buddha, serving as places for offerings and other ritual implements, such as oil lamps and incense burners.[4]

Taking lamps to the caves must have been mandatory for everyone who wanted to see the murals and adore the Buddha. Although we do not know for certain if lamps, and possibly also incense burners, were brought to the caves as votive objects, most likely they were. Although the above-mentioned finds by the Turfan expeditions of terracotta incense burners are now lost to war, from the registration cards of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, we know that two of the three burners from Kumtura were found in the "Mittlere Schlucht," while the third was found in cave 14. The four terracotta burners from Tumshuk were all found close to free-standing temples.

It can be speculated that more incense-burners and lamps had been present but were lost when local people cleared out the caves for Albert von Le Coq and Albert Grünwedel. Both scholars were more interested in the murals than in possible small finds.

Burning incense during all kinds of rituals remains a normal procedure in Buddhism. Accordingly, it is not unlikely that the everyday activity of burning incense, with its implements, was never really the focus of researchers.

4 "Here might have been the place for oil lamps or incense burners." (Vignato 2016–2017, p. 23).

Depicted in the murals of Kucha we find lay people, among them the aristocracy, kings and queens, monks, and *yakṣas* adoring the Buddha—with burners. Obviously this was a widely practiced procedure all along the ancient Silk Roads. From Faxian's travelogue we know that the king of Khotan himself, whose kingdom was situated on the southwestern edge of the Silk Road in the Tarim Basin, honored the Buddha, while there was a big annual procession during which a large Buddha statue was brought to the city on a cult car (Deeg 2005, pp. 511–513). It is especially recorded that the king burned incense in front of the Buddha statue. In contrast to Kucha, which was certainly completely dedicated to Hinayana Buddhism, Khotan belonged to Mahayana Buddhism, but burning incense in front of Buddha statues was a common, shared tradition. That both cities must have had early and direct ties via a route which linked Karadong, belonging to Khotan, and Kucha came to public awareness through a Chinese-French archaeological expedition early in the 1990s (Debaine-Francfort/Idriss/Wang 1994).

For Gandhara, Faxian mentions that, in front of a prominent temple in Nagarahara / Xiluo,[5] countless people sold flowers as well as incense (Deeg 2005, p. 525).

Such incense-burning practices must have been common all along the Silk Road, where Buddhist communities flourished, and very likely burning incense was also practiced by other religions in those regions. As for Christians—at this time and place, Nestorians—it seems likely they burned incense, similar to orthodox Christians in Byzantium. The same might be true for Manichaeans (Gardiner/Lieu 2004). Zoroastrians, as we know, practiced this from antiquity until modern times (Yamamoto 1981; Boyce/Altenmüller/Spuler 1982).[6]

Deeply connected with incense-burning is the question of *gandhakuṭī*, and we must mention *gandhakuṭīs* in the caves of Kucha.[7] In medieval Indian monasteries, the *gandhakuṭī* is the special or "private," and perfumed, chamber of the Buddha, in the center of the architectural groundplan, where the Buddha was adorned. Among the offerings presented to the Buddha in the *gandhakuṭī* were especially incense, perfumes and flowers (Norman 1908; Strong 1977; Schopen 1997).

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5 A place that can be identified as close to modern Jalalabad, Afghanistan; cf. Deeg 2005, p. 124 with fn 570, and pp. 524–525.

6 For a modern account of Zoroastrian incense, cf.: http://www.zoroastrians.net/2009/05/23/how-to-make-zoroastrian-incense-bakhoor/

7 I could not find any reference about this in the special literature concerning Kucha.

After reading an article by Harry Falk connected with incensing (Falk 2014–2015), one feels obligated to follow this question a bit more intensively. I briefly cite Harry Falk here (translated from the German):

> Buddhist cult statues stood centrally in a room on the middle-axis of the architectural construction plan of temples; its designation "fragrance cabin" (Gandhakuti) tells how this room was sensorially recognized.

It must be mentioned that there is only one such *gandhakuṭī* per monastery. The problem for Kucha and its cave temples is that we do not know which caves belonged to which monastery and how many monasteries there were in Kucha.[8] One more problem is that we do not really know how many freestanding monasteries there were closer or even farther away from the caves, which could then be the proper monastery these caves belonged to. At first glance, no solution to the problem of how to localize *gandhakuṭīs* in the painted caves appears. A very speculative suggestion is that those caves could be named *gandhakuṭī* if they show the often mentioned incense burners in the hands of female and male donors and aristocrats, as well as in the hands of monks. Not all caves have depictions of incense burners; but perhaps those which depict them could be called *gandhakuṭīs*. The number of caves in the region of Kucha is close to six hundred; about a third are (or once were) decorated with murals; and of these two hundred caves, sixteen show the incense-burners. Even if one misses one or another cave depicting them, those sixteen caves (plus a small number perhaps of others that have been overlooked) speak their own language, perhaps able to claim that they are *gandhakuṭīs*.

8 According to Liu 1969, vol. 1, pp. 30–33, and vol. 2, p. 150, there were one thousand monasteries and *stūpas* in Kucha during the fourth century CE. Interesting to learn is that all these one thousand monasteries were situated within the castle of the capital. The question arises if these monasteries later directed the building of the cave-temples.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately no burner of that very specific, standardized type that is depicted on the murals of Kucha has been found by archeologists. No other style of burner is found in the paintings of the first and second Indo-Iranian style. From finds by the Turfan expeditions, we know that different types of burners once existed in Kucha; unfortunately, these finds, which were mainly made of terracotta, were lost during World War II. Only those of the standardized type, very likely toreutic works, were used in those ceremonials shown on the murals. The paintings cannot be used to clearly answer the question of whether what I here have simply and abbreviatedly called burners could not also have been lamps too; maybe both functions were combined in one such type. As a result it is impossible to answer the question what material was burned in those vessels, i.e., which kind of incense or what kind of oil was used. What on one day might have been used as an incense burner, could perhaps after cleaning been used as a lamp; or the other way round! Both light and incense were offered to the Buddha at Kucha, as is still common in Buddhist countries today.

So far no scientific analysis of soot from the Kucha caves have been published, so it remains unclear whether incense was burned in them. In China, Korea and Japan, as well as in other Buddhist countries, incense is still burned in front of temples. Possibly the incense in Kucha was also only burned in front of the caves, not in them.

Another problem remaining is the question of light conditions in the Kuchaean caves. The painters needed light for painting, very likely using burning torches or lamps. The deeper the caves were cut into the rock, the less it was possible to paint without lamps or torches. By which ways using sunlight was possible stays unclear, but even if it were used, that must have been possible only on sunny days. The question whether large mirrors were used to bring sunlight into the caves must stay speculative, because no evidence for this has survived. A further question one would like to know the answer to is, how many monks, nuns and lay people actually visited the caves at any one time and took part in cult ceremonies offering incense and light to the Buddha.

Today we are used to seeing the Kuchaean murals with electric light. In antiquity, visitors to the caves saw the paintings only in the flickering light of lamps and torches, and that must greatly have enhanced the mystical atmosphere of the place and its paintings.

It is interesting to see how many important questions and problems can arise from only one depicted object in the material culture of Kucha. The future will bring up many more such questions and problems as we go on to study other objects of Kuchaean material culture.

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