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A Historical Perspective on the Central Asian Kingdom of Kucha

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A Historical Perspective on the Central Asian Kingdom of Kucha

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ABSTRACT

The article reexamines the dating of the earliest Buddhist cave paintings in the ancient Kingdom of Kucha, which was located in what is now Xinjiang, paying particular attention to the site of Kizil. Based on multiple Carbon-14 results spanning thirty years, historical and religious documents, and the author's in situ research, the dating proposed is earlier than the traditional one, considered to be circa 500 AD. The latter was formulated, close to a century ago, by the scholar-explorer Ernst Waldschmidt on the basis of the "Indo-Iranian" style and is still used in art historical literature. Relying especially on Kucha's comprehensive history, this paper suggests that the earliest cave paintings might have been coeval with the flourishing of Buddhism in Kucha during the fourth century. Given the centrality of the Tocharian language to the Sarvāstivādin Buddhist school associated with Kucha's monasteries and the relative stylistic independence of Kucha from India, the author recommends adopting the term "Tocharian style" rather than "Indo-Iranian style" to describe artistic production in Kucha prior to the Tang.

Keywords: Tocharian, Central Asia, Caves

In the land of Chü-yi [Kucha, alternatively spelled Kuča] the monasteries are very numerous, well adorned and extremely lovely. Even in the royal palace there stand Buddha-figures, no different from those in the monasteries. Among the monasteries are the following: Tamulan [Dharmārāma], with 170 monks; Monastery of the Northern Mountain, with 60 monks; New *Arāma* of the *ch'ien-mu* King, 50 monks; *Arāma* of the King of Uch-Turfan, 70 monks. The above four are supervised by Fotushemi. There is also the King's New *Samghārāma*, 90 monks.¹

Such were the reflections of two Chinese monks upon returning to Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) in 379. They had just completed their studies in Kucha, a thriving Buddhist station in the Tarim Basin along the northern segment of the Silk Road.

Their words describe Kucha's flourishing monasteries during the fourth century, noting they were "well adorned." And, while they do not specify the decor's subject matter, in all Buddhist countries, decor went hand in hand with sacred space, with no interdiction against the use of either paintings or sculpture. On the contrary, the division of the Buddhist canon governing the monastic community (*Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*), referring to painting, gives detailed instructions on which subject should be used to decorate which sacred space. For example, *jātaka* stories were considered the best subject for ceilings, whitened bones and skulls were to be painted in the monks' cells, and hell scenes were to appear in the lavatories.² The decor of Kucha's rock monasteries seemingly observed these rules, as did the numerous other sites dotting the realm: Kizil, Wenbashi, Tograk-eken, Taitai'er, Kumtura, Kizilgargha, Simsim, and Mazabaha (Figure 1).

¹ The excerpt is quoted by Tsukamoto, *History of Early Chinese Buddhism*, vol. 1, 253–254, originally from the *Bhikṣunipratimokṣa*, *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, vol. 55, 2145, 79c–89a. For an excellent synthesis of Kucha's Buddhism from inception to the fourth century, see Litvinsky, *Die Geschichte des Buddhismus in Ostturkestan*, 55–62.

² Lalou, "Notes sur la décoration des monastères bouddhiques," 183–185; Soper, "Early Buddhist Attitudes toward the Art of Painting," 147–151.

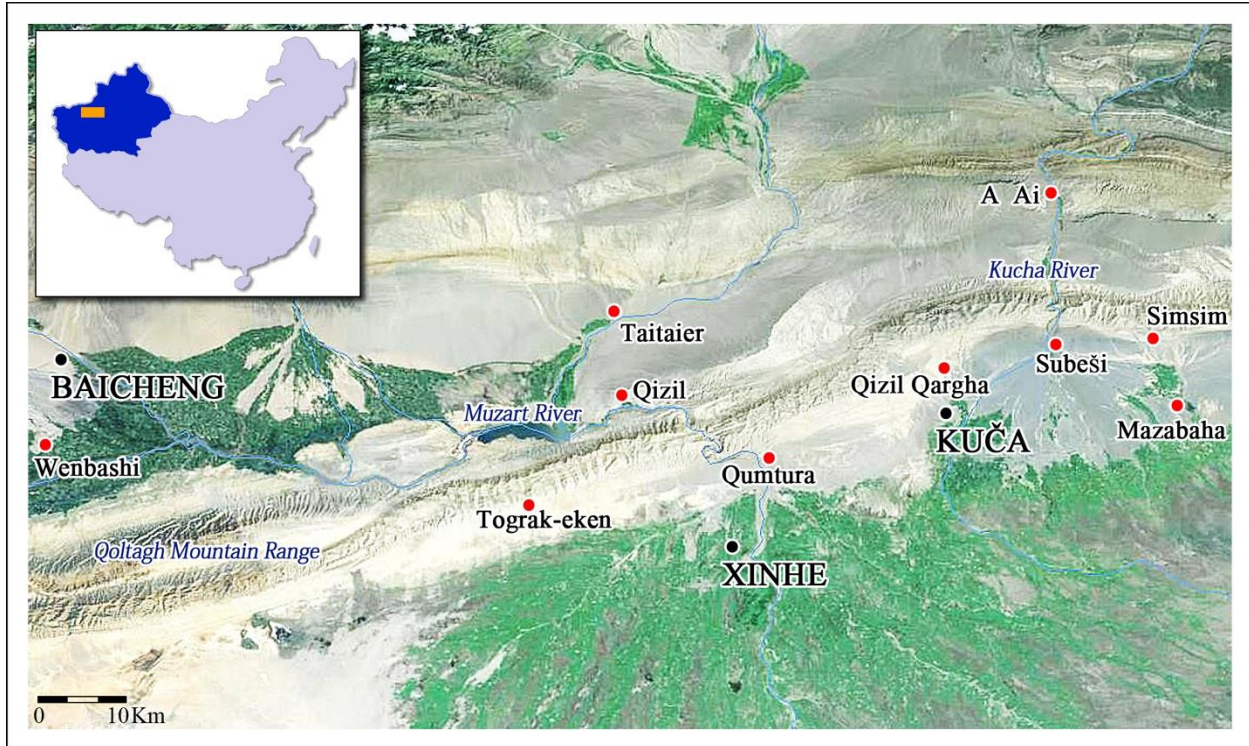


Figure 1. Map of Xinjiang. Image source: Angela F. Howard and Giuseppe Vignato, *Archaeological and Visual Sources of Meditation in the Ancient Monasteries of Kuča* (Leiden: Brill, 2014)

HISTORY OF DATING THE ART OF KUCHA

The opening quotation, in that it is from the fourth century, introduces a debate on the issue of dating that is still ongoing and is yet unresolved, an issue that has intrigued this author since first visiting Kucha's sites, including Kizil, in 1989, and several times subsequently. The challenge is compounded by the lack of inscriptions at the sites, in this respect differing from Dunhuang, and has resulted in the existence of divergent chronologies. For example, the oldest, traditional timeline, proposed in 1912 and in 1933, respectively, by the German scholar-explorers Albert Grünwedel and Ernst Waldschmidt, presented shortly, is still considered valid. Alternatively, scholars have also relied on Carbon-14 dating, in spite of its acknowledged problems. The issue of clarifying which dating more closely reflects the making of Kucha's first cave mural paintings finds urgency in the important German project "Leipzig Kucha Studies," established in 2016 and presently ongoing, of publishing a series of seventeen volumes

by 2030, which discuss the murals of all Kucha's sites. This ambitious undertaking is conducted under the auspices of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig, under the leadership of Professor Monika Zin. The essays, referred *infra*, in volumes 1 and 2, published in 2020 and 2022 respectively, still employ the traditional German dating.

I start with a summary of several dating schema reached by means of Carbon-14 dating with the proviso that its results are not considered definitive. In 1991 Howard discussed the earliest, German chronologies and paid particular attention to the one proposed in 1989 by Professor Su Bai, first published in Japanese in 1983.³ His dating rested on two factors: (a) Carbon-14 applied to paint specimens, and (b) from which type of caves they originated. Su Bai's methodology relied on archaeology, as his data were collected from caves with different layouts and serving different liturgical functions (caves with a stupa-pillar surrounded by a tunnel corridor, caves with a monumental clay cultic image of the Buddha, monastic cells often equipped with window and fireplace, lastly squarish caves with domical or Laternedecke ceilings). Based on this innovative method, Su Bai's dating spanned the period from circa 300 to 650, further divided into three phases, the earliest inclusive of the fourth century.⁴

Even before Su Bai, other researchers had been interested in Kucha's chronology. In 1946–1947, the artist Han Leran, having twice visited the Kucha caves and copied their paintings, suggested three phases: upper, middle, and lower, spanning from the Common Era to the fifth century. In 1953, Chang Suhong, after his investigation of the Kucha caves, proposed a three-part time frame: (1) circa third to early fourth century, corresponding to the Chinese early Wei-Western Jin period; (2) circa fifth to eighth century in correspondence to Nanbeichao-High Tang; and (3) a last period from circa eighth century to late eleventh century. In 1961, Professor Yan Wenru, of Peking University, led a group of members of the Chinese Buddhist Association and Dunhuang Research Institute to study Kucha paintings. Based on this investigation, Yan Wenru set up the following timetable: (1) third to early fourth century, corresponding to Wei and Jin period; (2) fifth to early eighth century, corresponding to Nanbeichao-High Tang period; (3) mid-eighth to late eleventh century. In addition, Yan Wenru singled out specific

³ Howard, "In Support of a New Chronology for the Kizil Mural Paintings," 68–83.

⁴ Su Bai, "Kezier shiku bufen dongku jieduan huafen yuniandai deng wenti de chubutansuo," 1: 10–23.

caves to illustrate the different chronologies proposed.⁵ In 2009, Wang Zheng indicated that Kucha's cave paintings spanned the fourth through tenth centuries. I underline that, even taking into consideration the uncertain reliability of Carbon-14, all these results anticipate a date before 500 for the start of Kucha's paintings.

Similarly, among Western scholars, in 2010, Marianne Yaldiz, Director of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (formerly Museum für Indische Kunst), Berlin, proposed 400 as the earliest date for cave murals, based on Carbon-14 testing of painting samples originally from the Cave with the Ring Bearing Doves in Kizil, presently in the Museum collection. In her report, Yaldiz also acknowledged the contributions of several other Western scholars regarding this issue.⁶ Lastly, in 2012, Carbon-14 testing was conducted by a team of Japanese specialists—Ikuko Nakagawara, Yoko Taniguchi, Ichiro Sato, and Toshio Nakamura. They tested samples of Kizil paintings taken from murals in Caves 8, 38, 171, 207, and 224, presently in the collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. Out of the five caves, the dating results applied to only three: Cave 8 AD 128–216, Cave 171 AD 255–306, and Cave 224 AD 312–334. Since these results indicated different and very early dates as the starting point of painting in the caves, the team cautioned that their method, which had been successfully applied in Bamiyan and Dunhuang, had not provided reliable results regarding Kizil, and its outcome was not considered definitive.⁷ As unreliable as Carbon-14 is, we still see that all the above results anticipate 500 as a beginning date.

All the timelines formulated by Chinese scholars and German and Japanese Carbon-14 specialists were responding to the 1912 alternative dating by the German scholar-explorers themselves. In 1912, Albert Grünwedel, following his visits to Kizil, Kumtura, and Simsim, classified Kucha's mural paintings according to a First, Second, and Third Style, without a specific timeline. More than once he remarked: "Alle diese Hölen bieten bilder in Gandharastil, mit mehr oder weniger starken indischen Einflüssen [All these grottoes offer paintings in the style of Gandhara, with more or less strong Indian influence]."⁸ Grünwedel, however, did not further qualify the issue.

⁵ Huo and Wang, "Danqing banbo qianqiu zhuangguan—ke zi er shiku bihua yishu ji fenqi gaishu," 201–228.

⁶ Yaldiz, "Evaluation of the Chronology of the Murals in Kizil," vol. 2, 1029–1943.

⁷ Nakagawara, et al., "Berlin Asia bijutsukan shozo no Kizil shorai kaiga no hoshasei tansonendai," 127–137.

⁸ Grünwedel, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten in Chinesisch-Turkistan, Bericht über archäologische Arbeiten von 1906 bis 1907*

In 1916, in regard to style, Grünwedel added a few, mostly overlooked, but quite interesting remarks:

Wir sehen also, daß die Hauptmasse dieser Temperagemälde, und mit ihr die buddhistische Kunst überhaupt, sehr ungeniert aus einem reichen Borne schöpft, so daß sie alle möglichen Stilformen des verschiedensten Ursprungs, um zu prunken, spielerisch und umdeutend verwendet. (...) In der Tat liegt es ganz in der Hand des Malers, ob er ein uraltes ägyptisches oder vorderasiatisches, ob er ein griechisches oder griechisch-römisches Motiv nutzbar machen will, bloß um einmal eine Reihe zu variieren und nicht dieselben Formen zu wiederholen.

[We also notice that the bulk of these frescoes and Buddhist art in general, without any inhibition, draws inspiration from the [cultural] wealth of other countries, therefore using all possible styles of various origin. In this way the frescoes use a variety of styles of different origin, thereby showing off in a playful manner and reinterpreting them.... In truth, it is up to the painter whether he wishes to use an ancient Egyptian or Near Eastern motif, or a Greek or Greco-Roman to offer a variety of interpretations, thereby avoiding a repetition of the same forms.]⁹

In this startling personal statement, Grünwedel seemingly interpreted the art of Kucha as the blend of different foreign styles in a process of transregional transmission.

In 1933, elaborating on Grünwedel's 1912 outline of stylistic progression, Ernst Waldschmidt qualified Kucha's painting style as follows: "Die eine Ausdruckform ist stärker nach dem Westen—Indien und Persien, die andere stärker nach dem Osten—China orientiert [The one form of expression is more strongly oriented towards the West, i.e., India and Persia, and the other towards the East, i.e.,

bei Kucha, Qarasahr und in der Oase Turfan, 5–6; see also citation on pp. 42–43.

⁹ Grünwedel, "Athene-Vajrapāṇi," 175–180.

China]."¹⁰ Waldschmidt was referring to two different, influential styles: the Western being India and Persia, the Eastern being China, possibly implying Later Tang and Uyghur styles. Moreover, he identified three styles and dated them on the basis of paleographic features, which he did not specify, of the Brahmi inscriptions, which accompanied the paintings: the First Indo-Iranian Style (ca. 500), the Second Indo-Iranian Style, circa seventh century, and the Chinese Style (ca. eighth to ninth century).¹¹ Most Western scholars have not challenged Waldschmidt's dating, by which the year 500 coincides with the beginning of Kucha's painting. Waldschmidt also added the following distinction: the First Indo-Iranian Style applied to square caves, while the Second Indo-Iranian Style was unique to central pillar caves, a distinction we still consider valid. Rounder forms enriched by warm tonalities of colors characterize the First Indo-Iranian Style (Figure 2), while in the Second Indo-Iranian style, color prevails over volume and bodies are contoured by sharp lines and enriched by vivid tones of lapis blue and green (Figure 3). Both styles are further discussed below.



Figure 2. Fragment of two Bodhisattvas from a cupola ceiling, originally in Kuntura, (Zweite Kuppelhöhle). Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, Inv. Nr. III 9053. Image source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

¹⁰ Waldschmidt, "Über den Stil der Wandgemälde," vol. 7, 25.

¹¹ Waldschmidt, "Über den Stil der Wandgemälde," vol. 7, 24–31.



Figure 3. Maitreya Pure Land, lunette, originally in Kizil, Cave 224 (Mayahöhle 3. Anlage). Presently in Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, Inv. Nr. 8836. Image source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

In my 2015 collaboration with Giuseppe Vignato, our work was based on all extant Kucha sites visited and studied in 1995 and 2006; it did not discuss dating. Instead, our investigation distinguished between Styles A, B and C, C referring to the Chinese style, while A and B were the same as the German division into the aforementioned First Indo-Iranian Style and Second Indo-Iranian Style.¹² We cautioned that decoration is an inadequate starting point to address Kucha's dating, that there are risks in using style to define it, because "there are specific instances in which one earlier style painting is covered by a layer of a later style, as is the case in the inner left corridor of Kizil Cave 47."¹³ We also pointed out that some original caves were altered at a later time and yet retained their former decor.

Closer in time, in 2020, in the first volume of the aforementioned *Leipzig Kucha Studies* series, Ines Konczak-Nagel, in studying the architecture and architectural elements in Kucha's wall paintings, adopted Waldschmidt's chronology of First and Second Indo-Iranian Style, but did not provide a specific date.¹⁴ In the same volume, Monika Zin, discussing the monk Kashyapa and the First Council painted in Kizil Cave 207, in accordance with Waldschmidt's time table, ascribed the paintings to the First Iranian

¹² Howard and Vignato, *Archaeological and Visual Sources of Meditation in the Ancient Monasteries of Kuča*, 5.

¹³ Howard and Vignato, 5.

¹⁴ Konczak-Nagel, "Representations of Architecture and Architectural Elements in the Wall Painting of Kucha," 91–92.

Style, specifically between 510 and 530.¹⁵ Zin's judgment rested on the research of Satomi Hiyama, who had traced back to the Iranian tradition the origin of the bird motif, symbol of divine kinship, used in the protagonists' crowns. Lastly, in 2022, in volume 3 of *Leipzig Kucha Studies*, Vignato and Hiyama also addressed this issue.¹⁶ They classified the differences of style by adopting the categories Tradition A and B and expanded the time involved with the additional phases X and Y, X referring to a phase preceding A, while Y refers to a phase postdating B. However, they did not indicate a specific time table or clarify whether these categories are another way of referring to the First and Second Indo-Iranian styles of the traditional German chronology. Vignato and Hiyama agreed with Waldschmidt that square caves preceded central pillar caves.

As dating is at the center of any scholarly inquiry about Kucha, we must know which time frame reflects more closely the reality on the ground and best advances our knowledge. I propose the year 300 as the time the caves started to be decorated, with the proviso that cave building may have begun even earlier, and the sites evolved through time, beginning with undecorated caves and proceeding gradually to decorated ones. The validity of an early fourth-century dating is supported by the transmission of Kucha's architectural forms and decorative style to the Buddhist caves of the Gansu Hexi corridor, because the subject matter, style, and architectural elements used in the central pillar caves at the Gansu sites of Wenshushan, Matisi, and Tiantishan are derivative of the Kucha caves.¹⁷

Since no specific date has yet been proposed, and motivated also by the goal of reaching a more precise timetable, this paper explores the following historical issues:

1. The early emergence of Kucha as a state on the Northern Silk Route paralleled by the rise and growth of Buddhism
2. The fourth century: the era of Buddhist centrality in Kucha
3. The nature of Kucha's Buddhism according to in situ documents

¹⁵ Zin, "Representation of the First Council in Kucha," 107.

¹⁶ Vignato and Hiyama, "Traces of the Sarvāstivādins in the Buddhist Monasteries of Kucha," 19 and 160–165.

¹⁷ The caves were built during the Sixteen Kingdoms (317–439), under the patronage of the Northern Liang rulers. Howard, "Liang Patronage of Buddhist Art in the Gansu Corridor during the Fourth Century and the Transformation of a Central Asian Style," 235–271.

4. Since the Tocharians were Kucha's original inhabitants, should its style be called Tocharian?
5. Were Gandharan and Indian art influential on that of Kucha?

The answers to these questions will indicate that the year 500, which was Waldschmidt's starting point, is far too late and is misleading, since it disregards Kucha's history as well as the growth of local Buddhism and its art. A much earlier Kucha time frame than the one suggested by the German scholar-explorers is underpinned by Kucha's local history intertwined with the growth of Buddhism. It values the contribution of other Buddhist cultures but relies on local evidence to understand what is unique about Kuchean art and the distinctive style of Buddhist art it generated.

1. THE EARLY EMERGENCE OF KUCHA AS A STATE ON THE NORTHERN SILK ROUTE PARALLELED BY THE RISE AND GROWTH OF BUDDHISM

In a 1913 study based on Chinese sources, the historian Sylvain Lévi concluded "Quand Koutcha entre dans l'histoire, au deuxième siècle avant l'ère chrétienne, c'est déjà un État florissant, savamment organisé [When Kucha entered history in the second century BCE, it was already a flourishing and skillfully organized state]."¹⁸ Thus, by the first century BCE, Kucha was recognized as a mercantile state in contact with the early Han empire. More recently, scholars have also agreed that "Koutcha était déjà un État florissant doté d'un riche passé lorsqu'il entra dans l'histoire Chinoise à l'occasion des premiers contacts établis avec l'Empire des Han [Kucha was already a flourishing state with a rich past as it entered Chinese history when it first came in contact with the Han empire]."¹⁹ In fact, scholars have recognized that by the year 65 BCE, Kucha undeniably held a prominent status on the Northern Silk Road, as evidenced by the invitation received by the King of Kucha and his wife, the daughter of a Chinese princess, to the Han court. While at court, they were treated lavishly, and the emperor bestowed several precious gifts of jade and silk on his Kucha guests. The Kucha king was so impressed by the trip that, on returning home, he had a palace and garden built on the Chinese model. He even adopted the

¹⁸ Lévi, "Le Tocharien B, Langue de Koutcha," 376.

¹⁹ Trombert et al., *Les Manuscrits Chinois de Koutcha, Fonds Pelliot de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, 9.

Han clothing style. By the year 78 CE, the Kucha monarch was known by the family name Bo, the character for 'white' or alternatively for 'silk' (白 or 帛), a name that was used for generations.²⁰

The development of Kucha as a state and the rise of Buddhism were closely connected. By the fourth century, Kucha had become a major Central Asian state situated on the Silk Route, participating in the transmission of trade from West to East. At the same time, it was an important religious center as the direct recipient of Buddhism from several Asian countries. "Buddhist penetration followed two paths: from Bactria, the center of the Kushan possession, to Kashgar and further east [sic]; and from North-Western India and Kashmir to Khotan and the southern oases of East Turkestan. Although no precise information is available about the time when Buddhism penetrated to the northern oases of Turfan and Kucha, quite possibly it became established there at the beginning of the Christian era."²¹ The presence of Buddhism in Kucha in the first century CE means that the construction of Buddhist monasteries very likely started that early, either on the ground or carved into the rock cliffs, although no traces of them remain.

In Kucha, Buddhism continued to grow in the early centuries of the Common Era and even expand beyond its boundaries. For example, in the third to fourth century, several monks of Kuchean extraction, or linked to Kucha, were known to have been proselytizing in China; their patronymic, "Bo," was either a reference to their royal extraction or in homage to the Kuchean royal house that carried it. "There was a thriving exchange between Kucha and China as well, as monks of the former—recorded in the Chinese documents under the clan name Bo—were going back and forth constantly, Chinese monks also going to Kucha to study."²² In 258 the monk Bo Yuan 帛元 is recorded as a sutra translator for the famous White Horse temple of Luoyang. Likewise in 265, in Chang'an, the monk Bo Yuanxin 帛元信 assisted the monk Dharmaraksha in the translation of imported Buddhist sutras.²³ The fact that

²⁰ Liu, *Kutscha und seine Beziehungen zu China vom 2. Jh. v. bis zum 6. Jh. n. Chr.* 2 vol. 1, 11–12; see also Ching, "Tuhuoluoyu shisu wenxian yu gudai Qiuzi lishi," 122–128.

²¹ Litvinsky and Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, "Religions and Religious Movements—II," vol. 3, 421–432. One among several sources.

²² Tsukamoto 1985: vol. 1, 253. The information derives from Lü Guang's biography.

²³ Willems et al. 1998: 130.

these monks, to mention only a few, had sufficient mastery of the language to write Chinese translations of Buddhist texts points to Kucha's level of advancement in Buddhist doctrine and, conversely, to its degree of significance by the fourth century.

2. THE FOURTH CENTURY: THE ERA OF BUDDHIST CENTRALITY IN KUCHA

This article's introductory quotation, from two Chinese monks who returned to Chang'an in 379 after studying in Kucha, confirms the kingdom's fourth century accomplishments. Records also mention the existence of well-endowed nunneries, whose residents, among them Kumarajiva's mother, derived from local nobility. Most notably, in the fourth century, the significance of Kucha's Buddhism is reflected in the person of the famous monk Kumarajiva (344–409/413 CE) and the prevalence of the Sarvāstivādin doctrine whose literature, specifically the Vinaya, is recognized as the source of the caves' decor.²⁴

Here I briefly highlight Kumarajiva's well-known biography: his mother was the sister of the Kuchan king. After abandoning her marriage, she converted to Buddhism and became a nun. She initiated her son into Buddhism at an early age, and the two traveled together to Kashmir, where the young Kumarajiva was trained in Hinayana Buddhism by the monk Bandhudatta of the Sarvāstivādin. He later went to Kashgar to study under the monk Suryasoma. These journeys, undertaken at an early age, speak of the exceptional religious training that was already available by the mid-fourth century. Benefiting from this well-rounded religious education, Kumarajiva's command of Buddhist doctrine included both Hinayana and Mahayana. His fame extended well beyond Kucha.

In 384, General Lü Guang, of Later Qin, invaded Kucha. One objective of the invasion was to bring Kumarajiva to the court in Chang'an. Upon entering the conquered capital, the general commented on its impressive appearance: "The city walls are in three layers; within the city are stupa-mausoleums numbering more than a thousand. The palace of Bo Chun [the King], for sheer majesty, is like the dwelling of the gods."²⁵ Any assessment of the chronology of Kucha's cave sites must be made

²⁴ Lu 2004: 1–43; The Sarvastivadin origin of Kizil visual language is also discussed by Howard and Vignato 2015: 156–157, and more recently by Petra Kieffer-Pülz: 257–282.

²⁵ Tsukamoto, *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism*, vol. 1, 253.

against the historic backdrop of fourth century exchanges with other Buddhist centers, in addition to the in-situ rock monasteries, nunneries, and large-scale convents. These structures were similar to the burgeoning of grandiose religious monasteries being built in Duldur Aqur and Subashi. If this evidence indicates that by the fourth century Buddhism was firmly rooted in the Kuchean society, why would patronage and painted embellishment of the cave temples be postponed until the early sixth century? How can we reconcile the time table established by Waldschmidt, with all the above historical developments?

The ruins of two large-scale and once imposing monasteries, Duldur Aqur and Subashi, are further testimony to the growth attained by Kucha's Buddhism by the fourth century. Duldur Aqur is located about 25 km southwest of present-day Kucha town. The ruins suggest an imposing series of buildings rising on the western bank of the Muzart River, close to the southern section of the Kumtura site. This impressive religious monastery was and still is surrounded by its original bastion-like high walls. Because Chinese archaeologists have not excavated the two sites, the documentation of Paul Pelliot remains our main source of information. He provided plates and description of the monuments after visiting Duldur Aqur April 17–May 28, 1907. Pelliot judged construction at Duldur Aqur to have started in the fourth century CE, expanding through time until the late eighth century.

Le monastère de Douldour-âqur pourrait avoir appartenu, dans son noyau primitive, au groupe de fondations bouddhiques d'une certaine importance qui durent accompagner la prodigieuse extension de la religion du Bienheureux dans le royaume.... Si l'établissement de ce grand couvent à l'Ouest du Mouzart peut remonter au IV^e siècle, sans doute à la première moitié, son activité se serait ainsi prolongée pendant beaucoup plus de quatre siècles jusqu'à la fin du VIII^e siècle

[The Duldur Aqur monastery could have been part, in its early nucleus, of the group of Buddhist buildings of a certain importance which were part of the prodigious extension of the Buddhist religion in the kingdom.... If the establishment of this grandiose convent situated west of the Muzart River can be ascribed to the fourth century, without

doubt to its first half, it would have been active for over four centuries, until the end of the eighth century].²⁶

Duldur Aqur's structures consisted of a number of monasteries, two monumental stupas, smaller shrines and the famous Asheli'er temple (阿奢理貳), which Xuanzang visited in 630, welcomed by the resident monk Moksagupta.²⁷ In the library, Pelliot found fragments of manuscripts, among them a Sarvāstivādin *Prātimoksha sutra*, a compendium of rules regulating monastic discipline. The *Prātimoksha sutra* confirms once more the important role the Sarvāstivādins played in Kucha as recently discussed by Petra Kieffer-Pülz.²⁸ Pelliot retrieved from Duldur Aqur remains of sculptures, architectural embellishments, and fragments of wall paintings, now in the Guimet National Museum of Asian Arts in Paris.²⁹

Subashi, about 20 km northeast of contemporary Kucha, is the other imposing monastic site. Built at two different locations, designated west and east, it is divided by the Kucha River. Subashi's layout and buildings were quite different from Duldur Aqur's, a testimonial to the creativity of Kucha's secular and religious patronage. Leaving Duldur Aqur, Pelliot explored Subashi June 6–July 10, 1907. The extent and extraordinary number of different types of structures, enclosed by a tall wall, suggest that the site must have been the most important religious city of Kucha, with direct links to royal patronage.³⁰ Despite the ruinous state of most of its monuments, the majesty of this complex was still evident to the French team. West Subashi, the larger one, comprised buildings different in scope and size, such as the

26 Hallade et al., *Duldour-Aqur et Soubachi*, vol. 4, 49; Maillard, 1983, pp. 85–89 offers a summary of the site based on Pelliot's remarks taken in situ. She confirms the site's first half of the fourth century date, adding that the variety of the buildings could indicate that the monastery developed through successive centuries.

27 Hallade et al., *Grottes et Monuments d'Asie Centrale*, vol. 4, text, 43.

28 Finot, "Le Prātimokṣasūtra des Sarvāstivādins," 465–558. Kieffer-Pülz, "Sanskrit *Sarvāstivāda Bhikṣuprātimokṣasūtras* from Kizil and surroundings," 257–281.

29 Discussed and illustrated by Rhie, *The Eastern Jin and Sixteen Kingdoms Period in China, and Tumshuq, Kucha and Karashar in Central Asia*, vol. 2, 600–627.

30 Hallade et al., vol. 4, text, 50–59. Subashi's temples and its art are discussed by Rhie, vol. 2, 627–644.

impressive Zhaoguli (照怙釐) monastery, or Temple of the Lorient—also visited by Xuanzang after he left Duldur Aqur—may have surpassed the Asheli'er, in Duldur Aqur.³¹ Within the walls stood buildings with a secular function: they were equipped with tall windows and fireplaces and were suitable for the reception of high prelates and royalty. The paintings, still in situ when Pelliot visited the site, were identified as belonging to “The Room of the Frescoes,” which Marylin Rhie ascribed to the second half of the fifth century.³² A most unusual characteristic of West Subashi was the presence of three different monumental stupas: one with a ramp, another with ascending steps, and a third so deteriorated that its original appearance is unrecognizable (Figure 4). East Subashi, the smaller site, was built and developed on the east bank of the Muzart River, the area being also surrounded by tall walls. At East Subashi's heart is a stupa rising in the center of a court surrounded by a four-meter-high wall, once decorated with sculptures placed in niches (Figure 5). The dry brick stupa was built on a tall, stepped platform supporting a cylindrical drum, a construction similar to the Gandharan type, like the famous Loriyan Tangai, ca. second century CE.³³ This similarity may indicate an early phase of Subashi within a lengthier period of development. Pelliot ascribed Subashi's chronology to approximately the mid-fourth to eighth century, based on the variety of its buildings, some of which had a secular function.³⁴

31 Hallade et al., vol. 4, text, 51 and 52; Rhie, vol. 2, 597–600, offers a translation of Xuanzang's visits to the two temples based on his biography and record of travels.

32 Rhie, vol. 2, 620.

33 Comparison with the Loriyan Tangai stupa and other early Gandharan structures in Rhie, vol. 2, 642–643.

34 “L'ensemble de ces constatations permettrait de situer avec quelque vraisemblance la plus grande activité de ce site entre le milieu du IV^e et la fin du VIII^e siècles.” (These facts, in their entirety, allow placing the peak of this site within the middle of the fourth and the end of the eighth century.)



Figure 4. View of West Subashi site. Photo taken by the author in 2006.



Figure 5. View of East Subashi, stupa court. Photo taken by the author in 2006.

3. THE NATURE OF KUCHA’S BUDDHISM ACCORDING TO IN SITU DOCUMENTS

Linguistic evidence also points to the fourth to fifth centuries as the period when the Sarvāstivādin school was prevalent. The numerous fragmented texts brought back by the German expedition illustrate several aspects of Kucha’s Buddhism: the language used, its chronology, and, most importantly, which Buddhist schools prevailed in Kucha.³⁵ Lore Sander, in her 1991 and 1993 articles, stressed that the fragmented texts can be dated solely by paleographic analysis.³⁶ She pointed out that most of the documents are parts of Sanskrit manuscripts written in various Indian Brahmi script. The texts reveal the presence of two Buddhist schools active in Kucha at different times. The earlier Dharmaguptaka used Prakrit—also known as Gandhari from its place of origin. The Sarvāstivādin used Tocharian A, whose manuscripts were primarily used for liturgical purposes. Most are found around the Turfan oasis and in Shorchuq. Tokharian B is the living language of the Kucha oasis used for all purposes, including translations of Buddhist texts and administrative documents.³⁷

Both schools belonged to Hinayāna, Small Vehicle Buddhism. The Dharmaguptaka preceded the Sarvāstivādin school, which established a leading and lasting presence in the realm, its influence extending to the seventh century. Kucha was unquestionably a Sarvāstivādin stronghold. Analyzing the earlier texts written on palm leaves, likely imported from India, Sander ascribes the fragmented, retrieved documents of this school to the fourth to fifth century. She also points out that paper started

³⁵ The texts were identified, catalogued, and culled in the *Sanskrit Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden*, a project started in 1972 by Ernst Waldschmidt and continued under different leadership by the Akademie der Wissenschaften, Göttingen. According to the German scholar-explorers the majority of the documents were found in Kizil Rotkuppel Höhle, corresponding to Caves 66–67 in the Chinese enumeration. Ching Chao-jung has indicated instead Cave 53 as the discovery cave; see Ching, “Rethinking ‘MQR’: On a location where texts were found in the Qizil Grottoes,” 271–293.

³⁶ Sander, “The earliest manuscripts from Central Asia and the Sarvāstivāda,” 133–145, 62–106. In a 2008 technical article on linguistics, Sander detailed how paleography, the study of ancient handwriting, has contributed to the dating of Tocharian documents; Sander, “Was kann die Paläographie zur datierung tocharischer Handschriften beitragen?,” 277–324.

³⁷ I use the term Sarvāstivādin broadly to include also the Mula Sarvāstivādin group. Ogihara Hirotoshi alerts us that “some different textual traditions of the (Mula-) Sarvāstivādin were transmitted to Tocharian Buddhism at different periods, and they could have originated from different areas.” Ogihara, “The Transmission of Buddhist Texts to Tocharian Buddhism,” 307.

to be used during the fifth century under Chinese influence. Sander explains the limited presence of early canonical sutras and Vinaya texts as resulting from the custom of memorizing sacred texts rather than writing them down. Zürcher, commenting on this same phenomenon, writes that some monks memorized numerous texts and could perform feats of “reciting” that astounded the audience.³⁸

The preeminence of the Sarvāstivādin school in Kucha is undeniable as its Vinaya regulated the monastic community. It also inspired the artistic representations of its numerous *jātakas* and *avadānas*, for example, in the decoration of Kizil Cave 110 (Treppenhöhle), which represents the cycle of Buddha’s past and present lives derived from Sarvāstivādin literature (Figures 6A and 6B). In turn, the paintings were accompanied by explanatory notes, now barely decipherable, written in Tocharian B, the equivalent of West Tocharian.³⁹

38 Zürcher, “Buddhism Across Boundaries: The Foreign Input,” 38. I paraphrased the original.

39 Schmidt, “Die Entzifferung der Westtocharischen Überschriften zu einem Bilderzyklus des Buddhalebens in der ‘Treppenhöhle’ (Höhle 110), Qizil,” 835–866; see also Pinault, “Narration dramatisée et narration en peinture dans la région de Kucha,” 159–164. Both articles carry a reading of the very damaged explanatory text accompanying each painting. Lastly, Zhao Li 赵莉, *Kezi'er shiku bihua fuyuan yanjiu* 克孜尔石窟壁画复原研究 [A Study of the Restoration of Kizil’s Mural Paintings] (Shanghai: Shu hua chubanshe 书画出版社, 2020), Cave 110, 239–263.



Figure 6A. Interior of Cave 110, main hall. Image source: Zhao Li 赵莉, "Kezi'er shiku bihua fuyuan yanjiu" 克孜尔石窟壁画复原研究 [Research on the Restoration of Kizil Cave Paintings]. 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2021), 240, fig. 1.



Figure 6B. Rows of *Jataka* stories, reconstruction. Cave 110, main hall, right wall upper center. Image source: Zhao Li 赵莉, "Kezi'er shiku bihua fuyuan yanjiu" 克孜尔石窟壁画复原研究 [Research on the Restoration of Kizil Cave Paintings]. 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2021), 248, figure 12.

4. SINCE TOCHARIANS WERE KUCHA'S ORIGINAL INHABITANTS, SHOULD ITS STYLE BE CALLED TOCHARIAN

There is an ongoing debate about the proper use of the name Tocharian and its derivative Tocharistan, because it has been argued that the people of Kucha referred to their language as Kuchean or Agnean, not as Tocharian.⁴⁰ In his July 29, 2023, letter to this author, Victor Mair pointed out: “Nearly all the best scholars of Tocharian I know (e.g., J. P. Mallory, Douglas Adams, Donald Ringe) realize the problems with the name, but they continue to use it nonetheless.” Mair also indicated the following statement by Douglas Adams:

Tocharian was and is problematic. Hubristically I would recommend my own ‘Some Observations on Peoples, Places and Languages in the Tarim Basin in the First Millennium AD’ (*JIES* 29 (2001): 1–28. There I take the position that the name is not so misplaced and awful as some have thought. But as to why it has stuck despite widespread dissatisfaction is that no one has thought of anything better. (“Tarimian”?) The whole matter is complicated by the fact that while we know the native designation for Tocharian B (*kuśiññe*) or Kuchean in English) the native designation for Tocharian A is much disputed.⁴¹

At which point Victor Mair ends his letter quoting Adams’ remarks to him, by simply stating “’Tis a puzzlement.”

Two markedly different styles are identifiable foremost in Kizil, in some Kumtura caves and also in Kucha’s other sites. Waldschmidt addressed their styles as “First and Second Indo-Iranian Style.” The First Style was used in the decoration of square caves with a cupola or a Laternedecke ceiling; it is associated with richly bejeweled, rounded figures painted with soft gradations of beige to brown and green hues, their faces highlighted with white (see aforementioned Figure 2). The Second Style, instead,

⁴⁰ Mallory and Mair, *The Tarim Mummies*, 280–284.

⁴¹ Victor Mair, personal communication, July 29, 2023.

was used in the decoration of central pillar caves with vaulted ceilings; it relied on stylized, hardly voluminous bodies delimited by crisp lines and enlivened with striking contrasts of blue and green; this contrast is, indeed, a foremost characteristic of Tocharian paintings (see Figure 3). Recently Yoko Taniguchi has commented on this brilliant coloristic effect, derivative from lapis: "The Buddhist paintings of Kucha reflect a high standard of technological [sic] expertise, which is attested by the wide and varied range of painting materials and techniques employed.... The luxurious materials used for Kizil paintings make them [one] of the most expensive paintings in Central Asia.... The profuse resources, which used exotic materials and the skills required to apply them, are indicative of the lavishness that the Kucha kingdom invested in the painting of Buddhist temples."⁴² Lastly, the Third Style includes Mahayana themes, and the images have affinity with Chinese style, very likely resulting from Kucha having become part of the Chinese Protectorate in 648 (Figure 7). Notwithstanding the problems linked to the use of the term Tocharian, like other scholars I will continue its use to stress the creative contribution of the people of Kucha.

⁴² Taniguchi, "Painting Materials and Techniques: A Comparative Study of Different Styles in Kizil—with a Focus on Caves 167, 69[2] and 224," 283.



Figure 7. Kumtura Cave painting. Lunette, Cave 21, detail. Image source: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kumtura_Cave_Painting_1.jpg

Likely progenitors of the Tocharians, for example, were the earlier Afanasevo (3300–2500 BCE) and the later Andronovo (1700–1500 BCE), both mobile, pastoral cultures whose people abandoned their tribal status. By circa 1000 BCE, Andronovo people had moved south to settle in the Tarim Basin area, specifically in the land which became Kucha. When, in 1979, forty-two ancient tombs were discovered in Xinjiang (lower Kongque River valley), their discovery cast further light on the origin of the Tocharians. The tombs revealed the Gumugou culture, whose people had Caucasoid features with physical characteristics similar to Northern Europeans. Moreover, the 1994 discovery of Xinjiang mummies, also with Caucasian features, indicated that these residents of the Tarim Basin were quite likely Tocharians.⁴³

An analysis of documents written in Tocharian B, the everyday language used in commercial transactions and literary pieces, further supports the argument that the style of Kucha be called

⁴³ Xu, "Tocharians and Buddhism," 2.

"Tocharian." Georges-Jean Pinault has discussed the application of Tocharian B to both economic records and theatrical pieces. Pinault has examined account books, commercial and administrative documents, ledgers showing donations to the monasteries, payments to laborers working on monastic land, documents about the acquisition of goods and land, and, lastly, permits or laissez-passer of caravans. All these interactions are specifically linked to monastic life and indicate the clergy's dominant role in Kucha's economy.⁴⁴

In addition, Pinault has discussed a Buddhist drama inspired by Prince Siddharta's Great Departure, whose narrative appears to derive from the *Lalitavistara sutra*.⁴⁵ This not only had a musical accompaniment, but the peculiarities of the composition also included dialogue alternating with verse and a commentator for the audience in the person of a jester, a presence which likely points to the influence of India on Kucha's theatrical tradition.⁴⁶ One such secular performance could have inspired the intriguing side decoration of the famous reliquary found in the ruins of Subashi and now in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum, from the 1906 Ōtani expedition (Figures 8A and 8B). The reliquary's entire surface is beautifully decorated: the lid carries medallions filled with winged putti playing musical instruments. The side band appears to refer to a secular theatrical play by displaying fancily attired actors, some wearing masks, energetic dancers, and musicians. Most important, Tocharian nobles are actively participating in this exuberant display. On the basis of Kucha's historical development attained by the fifth century, I ascribe to this time the making of the reliquary.

44 Pinault, "Aspects du Bouddhisme pratiqué au Nord du désert du Taklamakan, d'après les documents Tokhariens," 91–102.

45 Pinault, "Narration dramatisée et narration en peinture dans la région de Kucha," 150–156.

46 Zin, "Der Vidūṣaka jenseits der Bühne," 30–41; Arlt and Hiyama, "Theatrical Figures in the Mural Paintings of Kucha," 313–348.



Figure 8A



Figure 8B

Figure 8A, 8B. Details show Tocharian nobles among actors and musicians. Tocharian reliquary from Subashi, Otani Expedition. From Subashi, Kucha, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China. Height: 31 cm, diameter: 38 cm. TC-557. Tokyo National Museum. Image source: ColBase: Integrated Collections Database of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan (https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tnm/TC-557?locale=en). Image numbers: TC-557_E0041502, TC-557_E0041503.

No consensus exists on the dating of this reliquary. In 1957, Kumagai Nobuo tentatively ascribed it to the fifth to seventh centuries, although he also seemed inclined to accept an earlier date, based on the 1914 article by Hatani Ryōtai, "Seiki no bukkyō [Buddhism in Western Lands]." ⁴⁷ Hatani's dating of the reliquary indicated the wide time span between the two great Buddhist figures, Kumarajiva (fourth century) and Xuanzang (seventh century), both being foremost representatives of Kuchean Buddhism. Akiyama Terukazu discussed the three additional reliquaries found by the Pelliot expedition in Subashi and ascribed their making to the sixth to seventh centuries. ⁴⁸ Lastly, in a recent article, Katsuki Gen'ichiro describes the reliquary's iconography and speculates that such objects may have been popular during the sixth and seventh centuries, on the basis of sharing that same style. ⁴⁹

The patrons of Kucha's caves, the Tocharian nobles, are represented in several picture-portraits. In examining the painting originally in Kizil Cave 8, *Schwertträger Höhle* (Figure 9), presently in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, the affinity of the painting style with that of the reliquary in the Tokyo National Museum is undeniable. The Cave 8 portraits show the Kucheans' distinctive Caucasoid lineage: reddish-blond hair and perhaps beards, and blue eyes. Each of these Tocharian knights wears a three-quarter-length brocade tunic over tight trousers and carries a long sword, while a short dagger hangs from his waist. Their very distinguished physical presence does not evoke a similarity or relationship to an Indian model, nor a Persian for that matter. Since we call these inhabitants of Kucha Tocharians, i.e., speakers of the Tocharian language, to be consistent, should not the Kucha style of dress be called "Tocharian"? In light of the existing stylistic differences, whether a distinction should be made between Tocharian Style 1 and Tocharian Style 2 is an open question, not addressed in this paper.

47 Hatani Ryotai, "Seiki no bukkyō," chapter 5, in Kumagai, "A Painted Casket from Kucha, East Turkestan," 265 (or 27).

48 Akiyama, "Periot (Pelliot) shorai no Subashi shutsudo mokusei sari yoko sanshu," 266–284; The reliquaries are presently in the collection of the Guimet National Museum of Asian Arts, Paris.

49 Katsuki, "Sarira Container 舍利容器 [Shari yōki]," 34–37.



Figure 9. Tocharian donors, originally in Kizil, Cave 8 (16 Schwerträgerhöhle), Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, Inv. Nr. III 8691. Image source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

The economic transactions written in Tocharian B highlight the clergy's primary role in the Tocharian community. The theatrical pieces, also in the same language, open a window on the cultural life of the latter. Tocharian B language was the language of choice in the country's economy and literature. Thus, its use strengthens the argument that Kucha's paintings are Tocharian rather than Indo-Iranian derivatives.

5. DID GANDHARAN AND INDIAN ART INFLUENCE KUCHAN ART?

The total loss of Gandharan paintings starkly contrasts with the abundance of Gandharan tridimensional works. It is, therefore, difficult to accept Grünwedel's speculation about the possible influence of Gandharan paintings on Kucha's. Assumptions about Gandharan painting style and subject matter/iconography are necessarily related to similarities found in extant monuments with sculptural

reliefs in Central Asia and India.⁵⁰ To the writer’s knowledge, no one has yet dealt with the possible influence of Gandharan paintings on Kucha’s art. In contrast, eminent scholars have considered this problem in reference to other geographic areas. Anna Filigenzi, for example, discusses the process by which Gandharan art’s derivative style developed by pointing to the frieze reliefs at the Saidu Sharif stupa of Swat, Afghanistan, as the possible source of inspiration for fresco fragments from Miran, a site on the easternmost stretch of the Southern Silk Road, geographically unrelated to Kucha.⁵¹ Ciro Lo Muzio’s thorough discussion of a Gandharan influence adopts Filigenzi’s method of derivation and extends the geographic area to include Butkara I in Swat, Jinna Wālī-kī-Ḍherī near Taxila, and Patvano Gatai, all locations in North Pakistan.⁵² In his conclusions, Le Muzio does not explicitly link Kucha to any possible Gandharan sources. That the lost Gandharan paintings may have been influential on Kucha’s painting has not yet been proven, remaining an open question.

The situation is also problematic when one considers the possibility of Indian art, specifically that of Ajanta (Figure 10), having influenced that of Kucha. In his essay, “Traditions of Indian Narrative Painting in Central Asia,” Schlingloff reaches such a conclusion: “In Central Asia, younger ones [he means later paintings], representing the ‘Second Indo-Iranian Style’ are about one century later, that is, 600. *Jātakas* are the main theme of the paintings in Kizil, too. Consequently, many of the *jātakas* in Kizil correspond with those painted in Ajanta. It is well known that, not only the themes of the Kizil paintings, but also many of the individual features of the configuration, were taken over from Indian topics.”⁵³ Schlingloff, thus, affirms that Ajanta and Kucha share the same narrative and that Ajanta—being the precursor—is the model. Indeed, the art of Gandhara, Ajanta, and Kucha shared the same Sarvāstivādin textual sources, which relate Buddha’s last and former lives, the major theme of these three artistic centers. However, sharing the same doctrinal source does not necessarily mean that the art of Kucha is dependent on Ajanta art.

⁵⁰ Howard and Vignato, 163–172.

⁵¹ Filigenzi, “From Daidu Sharif to Miran,” 67–89.

⁵² Lo Muzio, “The Legacy of Gandhāra in Central Asian Painting.” This 2014 article is an expansion of his 2012 article on the same topic, “Notes on Gandharan Painting.”

⁵³ Schlingloff, “Traditions of Indian Narrative Painting in Central Asia,” 286, 288.



Figure 10. An example of Ajanta paintings: *Bodhisattva Padmapani*, likely dated to 477 AD. Image source: Mary Binney Wheeler, 1978. Detail of a mural painting of Bodhisattva Padmapani (Avalokitesvara), Cave 1, Ajanta, Maharashtra, India. South Asia Art Archive, Mary Binney Wheeler Image Collection. https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS37691_37691_41109358.

Unlike Ajanta, Tocharian paintings do not strive for realistic effects, nor seek the sensuality of Ajanta in portraying feminine beauty. Tocharian artists, instead, seemingly focused on the religiosity of the subject matter and avoided contemporary social relationships. The musicians of Kizil's Cave 38, for example, do not reflect the human world even if their musical instruments belong to it (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Kizil Cave 38, east lateral wall topmost section, Two Heavenly Musicians, detail. Image source: Tan and An, et al., *Xinjiang Murals: The Thousand-Buddha Caves at Kizil* 新疆の壁画: キジル千仏洞 [Shinkyō no hekiga : Kijiru Senbutsudō], vol. 1, fig. 89. (Kyōto: Bi no Bi; Peking: Zhongguo waiwen chubanshe, 1981).

Monika Zin in the last twenty-five years more than once has expressed staunch support for the traditional German chronology, which she still supports. In a 2013 presentation at Kyoto University, she stated: “Gandhara—Kucha—Turfan: this is the sequence which indicates the flow of artistic representations from India to China,” which can be interpreted to affirm that Kucha might have acted merely as a transit area rather than as an independently creative one.⁵⁴ Zin also considers the possibility that Gandharan paintings, whose problematic survival is discussed above, might have been a model for Kucha’s. She does agree with Schlingloff that Kucha is dependent on Ajanta, if seen from the perspective of their painting arrangements: “The planned narrative program, representing certain scenes in certain spots, connects Kucha much more with the non-linear representation of India.”⁵⁵ In a 2013 Kyoto University presentation, Zin also referred to chronology: “Notwithstanding the similarities with Ajanta or the dissimilarities with Gandhara, many scholars tend to date Kizil quite early, immediately following

⁵⁴ Zin, “Buddhist Narrative Depictions in Andhra, Gandhara and Kucha,” 35.

⁵⁵ Zin, “Buddhist Narrative Depictions in Andhra, Gandhara and Kucha,” 39.

the Gandhara reliefs, i.e. early fourth century. To me the traditional dating by Waldschmidt, which starts with circa 500 CE, still looks convincing.⁵⁶ Zin has not engaged in a discussion of a possible earlier date, nor offered the reason(s) for her judgment. Since Zin is actively guiding the “Leipzig Kucha Studies,” a multi-volume project, it can well be that she will elaborate on her reasoning for her chosen chronology in the future.

In a 2015 article Zin focuses on a series of abbreviated stories—*jātakas* and *avadānas*—enclosed in rhombic shapes decorating the ceiling of several of Kucha’s caves, a convention she recognizes as indigenous to Kucha. She identifies the content enclosed in each rhomboid painted in the ceiling of Kizil Cave 38 (Figure 12).⁵⁷ Zin remarks that the rhomboid’s scalloped contours represent mountains, an arguable interpretation. This identification, however, enables her to underline the similarity with the pan-Indian convention of representing mountains in Indian sanctuaries according to the belief that gods live in the Himalayas. Professor Zin’s reasoning may derive from her extensive knowledge of Indian art which she projects on Kucha’s art as well, but as I stated above my personal experience of Kizil caves gives me a different perspective. Therefore it seems a stretch to recognize mountains enclosed in such tight spaces, but Zin is confident that the scalloped contours illustrate mountains, known as a *topos*, in Indian literature, citing *Kālidāsa’s* description of the *Kumārasambhava*. Moreover, she maintains that the carefully planned design of the paintings enclosed in the rhomboids has a specific impact on the viewer: “It might be intended to create the best conditions for the practice of meditation.”⁵⁸ I suggest another interpretation: to meditate while sitting in a cave and straining one’s neck to focus on the ceiling’s tiny rhombic spaces would have been uncomfortable. Although one can argue that monks were accustomed to austerity and discomfort, perhaps more to the point, as Giuseppe Vignato and I demonstrated in our 2014 publication, Kucha’s monks preferred to meditate in unadorned caves specifically established for that purpose.⁵⁹ This article affirms Zin’s primary interest and thorough knowledge of iconography, namely the interpretation of images and symbols used in a work of art.

⁵⁶ Zin, “Buddhist Narrative Depictions in Andhra, Gandhara and Kucha,” 42.

⁵⁷ Zin, “Reflections on the Purpose of Kucha Paintings,” 373–384.

⁵⁸ Zin, “Reflections on the Purpose of Kucha Paintings,” 381.

⁵⁹ Howard and Vignato, 87–97.



Figure 12. Kizil Cave 38, crest of ceiling, partial view, showing examples of scalloped rhombic shapes. Image source: Tan and An, et al., *Xinjiang Murals: Kizil Thousand-Buddha Caves* 新疆の壁画: キジル千仏洞 [Shinkyō no hekiga: Kijiru Senbutsudō], vol. 1, fig. 112. Kyōto: Bi no Bi; Peking: Zhongguo waiwen chubanshe, 1981.

In conclusion, the originality of Kucha’s art is built to a significant degree on its own interpretation of Buddhist teaching and its own distinctive style. This is not to deny any outside influence, but Kucha’s originality becomes evident when one visits its religious compounds and takes note of the rich complex of caves that display an exclusively indigenous approach to size, arrangement, and decoration. Kucha consisted of eight large rock monasteries distributed throughout the kingdom for a total of 650 extant caves—at Kizil Qargha, Simsim, Mazabaha, Kizil, Tograk-eken, Wenbashi, Taitai’er, and Qumtura. In addition to the cave sites, Duldur Aqur and Subashi stood as imposing religious cities, likely administered directly by the court and upper clergy. The arrangement of the rock monasteries varied depending on the extent of each site as well as on the terrain. For example, only the forty-four caves of Mazabaha were built on an arid plateau, while the 235 numbered caves of Kizil were set on a fertile location with abundant water and trees. In Kizil, it is clearly visible that the size of the site determined whether the caves were employed for worship, for monastic gatherings or residence, or for meditation. In contrast, the Mazabaha caves relied on chiefly undecorated, tunnel-shaped caves, accessed through a very large antechamber and perhaps suitable only for meditation (Figure 13).

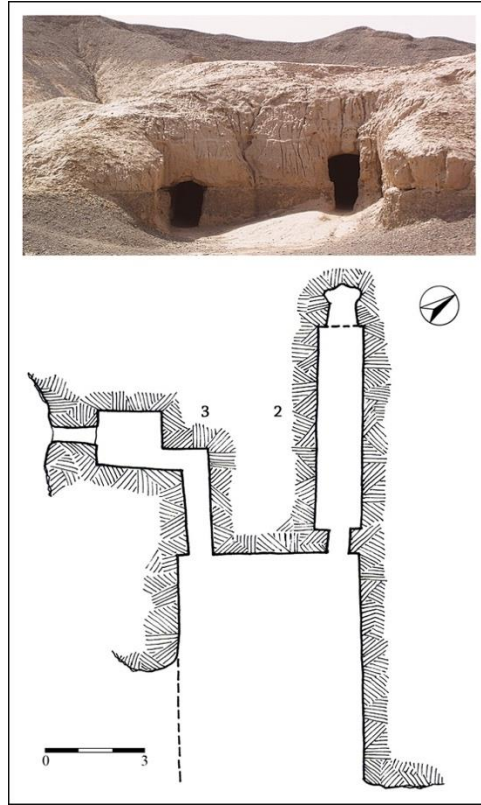


Figure 13. Mazabaha, Caves 2–3 antechamber. Image source: Angela F. Howard and Giuseppe Vignato, *Archaeological and Visual Sources of Meditation in the Ancient Monasteries of Kuča* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), fig. 25, p. 23

Kucha's cave decoration used the indigenous Tocharian art style in its two versions: weightier and softer forms rendered with tonalities of warm colors, and almost weightless bodies enriched by vivid tonalities of lapis blue and green. Although Kucha shared the Buddhist faith and scriptures with other Asian sites, Ajanta to mention one, its interpretation—chronologically and artistically—asserted its independence. Defending or looking for a sequential derivation from other cultures is a misrepresentation of Kucha, as it was an impressive religious world unto itself, and its distinct identity arose from its native monasticism.

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