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The Case of the “Repainted Cave” (Kizil, Cave 117)

Monika Zin

Dedicated to the Thinius family and all those friends whose support I enjoyed during my four years in Berlin

A large fragment of a wall painting in the Study Collection of the Asian Art Museum in Berlin-Dahlem is a captivating picture (Fig. 1): it is immediately clear that at least two layers of murals are visible (Fig. 2). GRÜNWEDEL, who first described the cave, was of course fully aware of this and he gave the cave the name „Übermalte Höhle” (“Repainted Cave”). GRÜNWEDEL does not mention that the Prussian Expedition wanted to remove the painting and take it to Berlin. It appears that during the Fourth Expedition LE COQ decided to do so because GRÜNWEDEL could not examine the murals which he thought among the most beautiful and remarkable in the entire site. The photographs from the cave in its current state show that the Prussian Expedition excised the upper part of the back wall, i.e. the main wall, facing the entrance, and two smaller parts of each side wall. The computer-generated reconstruction of the original state created by ZHAO Li from the Kucha Research Academy (Fig. 3) allows one to perceive the wall as it was before the removal of parts of the paintings; however, for reasons which will be explained below, it seems that the piece in the lower right corner of III 9102 might not belong to the back wall but is probably a separate fragment from one of the side walls.

Cave 117 – located next to the “Seahorse Cave” („Hippokampenhöhle”, Cave 118) which is painted in the First Indo-Iranian Style is peculiar for several reasons. The cave has an antechamber, which was not only repainted, but also re-built in antiquity, the earlier truncated pyramid ceiling being successively transformed into a flat ceiling. The three-dimensional “wooden construction” was painted and completed with perpendicular underbeams which made up the coffered ceiling. The roughly square irregular chamber has a ceiling in the form of a flat frustum with a square coffer in the middle. The coffered ceilings of the antechamber and chamber, and the walls of the cave, are covered with rows of sitting Buddhas. The walls of the chamber are also decorated with other paintings, as is the section in the Museum in Berlin (Figs. 1-2). Above the entrance to the chamber from the antechamber, in the door lintel, the Buddha is depicted worshipped by a Nike-like deity crowning him with a wreath.

As GRÜNWEDEL noted, the paintings in the “Repainted Cave” are in the First Indo-Iranian Style as also are those, for example, in the “Peacock Cave” („Pfauenhöhle”.

1) Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, inv.no. III 9102, ca. 325 x 154.5 cm. The painting was brought to Berlin in 1914 by the Fourth Royal Turfan Expedition; hitherto unpublished.
2) GRÜNWEDEL 1912: 117 „Gemälde, welche zu den schönsten und merkwürdigsten der ganzen Anlage gehörten …“
3) I am grateful to Prof. Giuseppe VIGNATO (Beijing) for this information and for sharing with me his knowledge about the alterations made to the cave. District Six of Kizil, to which Cave 117 belongs, will presumably be the topic of one of VIGNATO’s forthcoming papers.

6) „Es ist eine jetzt leere Höhle von ziemlich quadratischer Form: Seiten[and] 3,48 m tief, Tür[and] nur 3,11 m (Türrbreite 1,25 m), während die Rückw[and] 3,38 m breit ist. Vor der Tür, welche auß[en] 1,55 m misst, lag noch eine fast 4,40 m breite Vorhalle, die zerstört ist. Der Plafond der Cella bildet ein etwas unregelmäßiges Feld, welches viel kleiner als der Boden der Cella mit schrägaufsteigenden Seiten. Die Höhe bis zur Decke beträgt 3,70 m, während die Vorhalle mindestens um 50 cm höher war.“ (GRÜNWEDEL 1912: 117).
7) „Erwähnen möchte ich nur noch, dass auf dem Türsturz der Cella eine Buddhafigur dargestellt war, welcher eine Devatā in der Gestalt einer antiken Nike einen Kranz aufsetzt.“ (ibid.).
8) „Sicher ist, daß über der Tür prachtvolle Gruppen von Musikern dargestellt waren, etwa im Stil „d[er] Pfauenhöhle“.“ (ibid.).
There (Fig. 4), in the top layer of the decoration of the walls, the deities standing on balconies have been depicted waving flowers and garlands and playing different musical instruments in adoration of the Buddhas who are standing in the middle of the balconies on each wall. Further down, scenes from the life of the Buddha have been represented in two registers, one below the other.

A comparison of the details of the paintings from the “Peacock Cave” and the “Repainted Cave” (Figs. 5, 6a-b)
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Fig. 3   Kizil, Cave 117 (“Übermalte Höhle”), in situ, back wall. Photograph and reconstruction by Zhao Li

shows not only significant similarities, but also that the latter set of paintings (which GRÜNWEDEL could not see because of the layer of soot covering the walls) are even finer than the first. This is confirmed particularly when we compare, for example, the way the hands are depicted in the “Repainted Cave”, or the tightening of the drumhead – which in the “Peacock Cave” has merely a form of a geometrical chequer which could not span the skin of the drum. In several places in the better-preserved parts of the “Repainted Cave”, we see an accuracy and beauty of painting not seen again in Kucha, as for example in the delicate flower-garland waving around the weapon of one of the Vajrapānīs in the lower part of the mural (Figs. 7a-b).

The overall design of the whole layer of this First Style painting in the section kept in Berlin (Fig. 8) makes the composition clear: in the upper part there is a balcony on which nimbatte deities are standing, and, below, a row of Buddhas and Bodhisatvas seated on lotus flowers and being adorned by attendants, presumably all Vajrapānīs.

The painting is edged above and below with charming but unfortunately poorly preserved delicate foliage, originally reddish brown on the white background. The line of deities in the upper row contains ten male persons visible only above the waist. This is not different from the paintings in Ajanta – the painters did not account for the fact that in reality there is no space for the people’s lower parts behind the balcony fence.\(^{10}\)

The ten pictured deities are, from left to right, a musician playing the \(v\dot{\text{?</}}\); a deity bowing down towards the Buddhas in the lower row (this is the only one without a halo, apparently because of the difficulty of representing such an unusual position), a deity holding a tray with offerings, a musician with a drum, a person with his hands together in the gesture of adoration, a person waving a garland of flowers, a musician playing cymbals, two persons holding flowers on long stalks (the second with an interesting wing-like headgear),\(^{11}\) and a deity scattering...
flowers(?) out of a pot or sack which he is holding with the opening pointing downwards. All deities are richly clad and ornamented; their vibrant gestures, waving shawls, and the bands of their headgears flattering in the wind make the composition vivid and charming.

The railing of the balcony balustrade repeats the form of old Indian fences of *stambhas* and *stûpas*. The balustrade is supported by massive beams which are shown in perspective from the centre of the composition. Below we see a decorative pattern representing an adaptation of the Mediterranean laurel-wreath tied by ribbons.

The Buddhas and the Bodhisatvas in the lower row all sit upon beautiful white lotus flowers. Their bodies are surrounded by round nimbi, which can also be seen around their heads; typical for Kucha, the head nimbi are placed inside – or nearly completely inside – the body nimbi. The Buddhas and the Bodhisatvas all display a meditating gesture, their hands laying on their laps. All worshippers standing between the Buddhas and the Bodhisatvas appear to be Vajrapânis. They are all nim-bate and richly decorated; they wear opulent shawls upon their naked upper bodies and have a variety of hair arrangements and headgears.

Beginning from the left-hand side, the lower row shows the following persons: a poorly preserved worshipper in whose left hand quite a large vajra is recognizable, adoring a Bodhisatva who is sitting with crossed legs holding his feet upon the leaves of the lotus. Another Vajrapâni stands further to the right, oriented towards the Buddha, next in the row. The Buddha is clad in a grey robe covering only his left shoulder; the face looks beautiful and youthful, the ुर्याद at the forehead is visible, the hair is black, and the ुष्ण is, for Kucha, quite big.

There is a tiny Buddha under the canopy by the left knee of the Buddha, perhaps an allusion to the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī? In photographs from the cave it can be seen that a similar diminutive Buddha is depicted in at least one other place: only the research in situ can make it clear whether the representations of the miniature Buddhas occur
in specific places. The present author supposes that such a Buddha was depicted in the very centre of each wall.

Further to the right, the adjacent Vajrapāṇi stands adoring the next figure on the lotus, who is a relatively well-preserved Bodhisatva, opulently decorated with many necklaces covering his chest and a headgear with at least one lotus flower. The worshipper at the right-hand edge of the painting fragment was oriented towards the next meditating person who has not been preserved. A separate piece of the painting, which is fixed in the Museum reconstruction further to the right, seems not to have belonged originally in this position. Such a positioning of this part of the painting does not leave enough space for a meditating person between the two fragments; it destroys the alternating sequence of the Buddhas and the Bodhisatvas, and it leaves a tiny part of the nimbus on the right-hand side, suggesting that the person inside it must have been depicted on the adjacent wall. This seems quite impossible from observation of the well-designed composition of the mural but needs to be checked in situ.

It appears that the fragment (which in itself makes a closed composition with a Buddha between two worshippers) belonged originally to another wall.

The representation of the adoring deities present on the balcony adoring the Buddhas and Bodhisatvas is similar to that in the “Peacock Cave” (cf. Fig. 4) and the differences might stem from the architecture of the cave and the overall decorative scheme. In the “Peacock Cave”, the Bodhisatvas were placed above, in four corners of the ceiling around the cupola, and the Buddhas were standing in the middle of the balconies between the adoring deities, leaving more space for the narrative representations below. It is not impossible that the lowermost part of the mural in the “Repainted Cave” depicted narratives. In the photography of the wall provided by Zhao Li (cf. Fig. 3), three male persons appear standing next to each other in the lower right corner and this can hardly be part of a scene of adoration.

The important difference between paintings in the “Peacock Cave” and the “Repainted Cave” might be that in the former painting there are female persons among the deities, which is not the case in the latter, at least in the fragment in Berlin. This might suggest representations of different heavens. According to the imagery of Buddhist cosmology there are heavens without women; it must be noted that there are no female deities adoring the Bodhisatvas in the corners of the ceiling on the side of the cupola in the “Peacock Cave” either.

The name given to the cave by Grünewald originates in the fact that another layer of paintings is visible. As is
Fig. 7 Kizil, Cave 117 („Übermalte Höhle“); a) Detail of Fig. 1, right edge of the lower row; b) Drawing by the author

shown by the reconstruction drawing of the Berlin fragment (Fig. 9), these paintings represent just two rows of seated Buddhas surrounded by body nimbi with halos within them.

One can see that at least five of the Buddhas were wearing orange robes. The nimbi look white today. It is very difficult to recognize the layers in the lower right-hand part of the painting, where the nimbi of both layers are represented exactly one above the other. In some places it is impossible to be sure which layer the turquoise paint of the nimbi belongs to. The light red colour of the parts of the bodies of the second and fifth deities on the balcony seems to be the result of lightening by another layer of pigment. A microscopic examination of the layers of the painting is needed.

Leaving room for not even the slightest doubt, GRÜNWEDEL decided that the earlier First Style paintings, with the deities on the balcony, were painted over with boring rows of Buddhas; he even suggested the reason for this repaint, namely that the earlier representations were open to condemnation in the eyes of the rigid vinaya defenders as too vivid and full of the joys of life, so they decided to cover them with representations of meditating Buddhas.12)

However, with the help of a magnifying glass, one can see that it is the layer with the orange Buddhas that is painted over (Fig. 10). It is astonishing, but the paintings in the First Indo-Iranian Style are not the lower layer: they are painted over the rows of the Buddhas.

What can be said about the Buddhas underneath, which predate the First Style? The Buddhas in the repainted fragments in the Museum in Berlin do not provide much information, but they were apparently similar to the other Buddhas throughout the cave. About these (according to incomplete photo materials available to the present author) it can be stated that they do not correspond to the Second Indo-Iranian Style: we see neither “shadows” on the faces nor the blue colour of the hair, which are characteristic of the Second Style. GRÜNWEDEL described the Buddhas as very particular and not previously known in Kucha. He connects them with a much later style known to him from the Turfan region.13) This possibility must of course be kept in mind, but because these murals are underneath the First Style paintings, which for various reasons can be dated to ca. 500 CE, such an early dating of the Turfan Buddhas is hardly possible.

It seems possible (especially when comparing the Berlin painting with photographs of the Buddhas in the antechamber of the “Repainted Cave”, which were also repainted) that there might even be two layers underneath the First Style paintings: the lowermost Buddhas in orange...
robes seem to have been repainted first with grey colours which were subsequently covered with the representations including the deities on the balcony.

The Buddhas in all the layers display the characteristic shape of the halos with the head nimbus within the body nimbus.\(^{14}\) This form has been identified in Bamiyan, and from the area of the southern Silk Road. The paintings with such nimbi datable to earlier than Kucha’s First Style can be found in cave 169 in Binglingsi, Gansu Province, Northwest China, which can be dated to the year 420 CE, and in the early caves in Dunhuang.

\(^{14}\) The body nimbus is not found in the Gandhara reliefs and appears only in later paintings (cf. KHAN 2000), but it appears on the famous Kaniška coins with the legend BODDO and on engravings on the Kharakurum Highway (cf. BANDINI 2010) – none of these nimbi has, however, the form like that seen in Kucha with the head nimbus inside the mandorla.
It is possible that all Kucha originates in Binglingsi, but the reverse is also possible, or – a third possibility – both Binglingsi and Kucha might be based on a common ancestor, perhaps the lost Gandharan School of Paintings. Future research and analysis, we can only hope, will enlighten us.

The paintings may be of the earliest Kuchean style – probably not a genuine style but an imitation, though we do not know its source. Perhaps what we see as the earliest layer is the painting in the epigonic late Gandhara style, in use in Kucha before the “Pax Haephthalianna”, which allowed for a free flow of ideas between Central Asia and Gupta India, bringing new impulses from Indian art and leading to the emergence of a genuine Kuchean style of paintings. This we call the First Indo-Iranian Style.

While discussing the scientific implications of the discovery of the layer of paint below the First Style, we must bear in mind that long before the First Indo-Iranian Style, in the 3rd and 4th century, Kucha was a flourishing Buddhist kingdom. Monks in Kucha, or hailing from Kucha, translated several Mahāyāna texts, while the pictorial creations of the First and Second Indo-Iranian Styles illustrate texts of the Hinayāna schools, without even the slightest allusion to the Mahāyāna. Might it be that the series of Buddhas underneath the paintings in the First Indo-Iranian Style are not simply remnants of the earlier style but also of Mahāyāna, which was popular in the area at an earlier date?

The latter suggestion is, however, only a hypothesis, open for further discussion. The question of whether the “Repainted Cave” can give us tangible evidence for the relative chronology of the paintings in Kucha is one that must be analysed both by the Conservation Department of the Asian Art Museum and by our colleagues and friends from the Kucha Research Academy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


15) For the theory that later Gandharan art had developed characteristics which were transferred to the Kucha paintings (including nimbi of the Bodhisatvas in the jātakas for example) in the medium of paintings that are nearly completely lost to us, cf. ZIN 2013.

16) Cf. Hiyama 2014: ch. III-1, with references to previous research.

17) Cf. e.g. Litvinsky 1999: 55ff.

18) Cf. ibid.: 56-57.
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Beobachtungen von GRÜNWEDEL können völlig bestätigt werden, da die Malereien tatsächlich feinste Einzelheiten zeigen (Fig. 7), wie sie sonst in Kizil nirgends zu finden sind. Während GRÜNWEDEL aber überzeugt war, dass die Bilder der Musiker nachträglich mit einer Schicht der ausdruckslosen Buddhareihen übermalten wurden (siehe Fußnoten 12-13), ergibt die nähere Untersuchung der Oberfläche des Bildes (Fig. 10) ein anderes Ergebnis: Die Reihen der Buddhas bilden die untere Schicht, die Malereien im 1. Stil liegen darüber.

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