



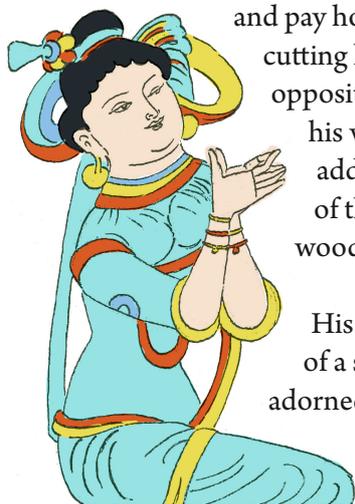
In Buddhism, the tradition of building temples in caves is common and can be seen all over Asia. The practice may have originated in India, the birthplace of Buddhism, but the caves pictured here are situated near Dunhuang, a Silk Road town in the northwest of China.

Today, there are some four hundred and ninety-two cave temples carved out of the sandstone cliff facing the Sanwei mountain at Dunhuang. The caves vary in size and in decoration. Some of the smallest caves are no more than tiny niches, while others are vast chambers containing Buddhist figures over 30 metres high. In total the temples contain over forty-five thousand square metres of paintings and two thousand four hundred sculptures. The caves vary in date but span a period from the early fifth to the fourteenth century AD.

The very first cave temple was excavated at Dunhuang in AD 366. The legend tells of a Buddhist monk Lezun, who stopped to drink and to water his donkey at the Great Spring Valley near Dunhuang before continuing on his way to the West. Resting awhile, he watched the sun set over the Sanwei mountain and was amazed to see a wondrous vision of a giant Maitreya Buddha surrounded by an aura of golden light, from which emerged the image of a thousand golden Buddhas.

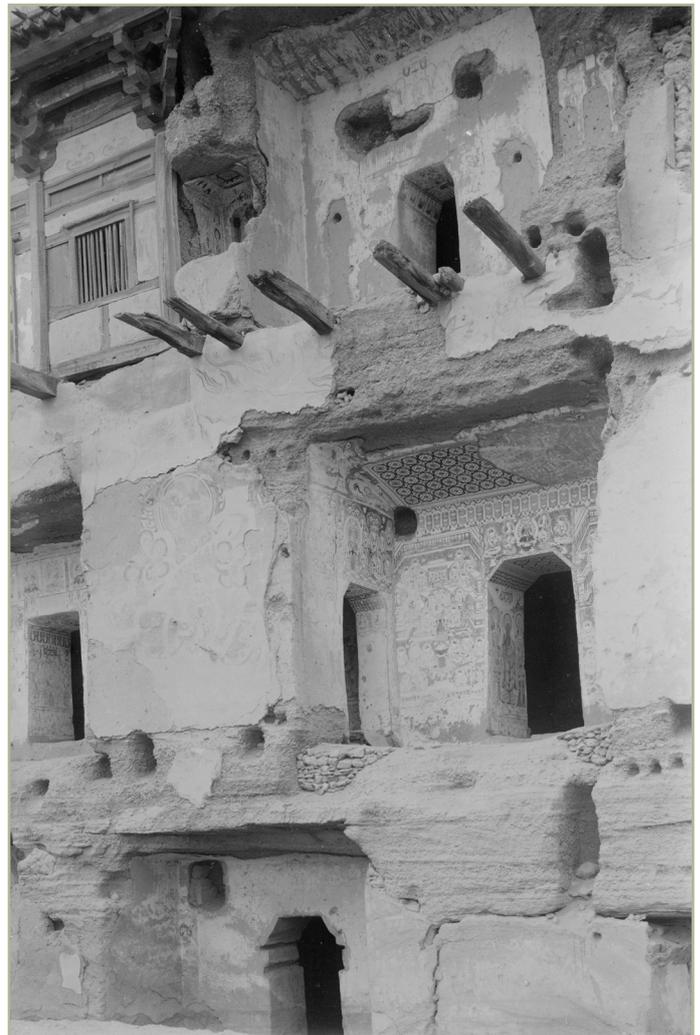
Lezun was astounded by this vision and took it as a sign that this was the holy place for which he had been searching. He abandoned his onward journey in order to settle here and build a cave in which he could meditate and pay homage to the Buddha. After cutting his cave by hand from the cliff-face opposite the mountain, Lezun painted his vision onto the walls of the cave, adding a three dimensional figure of the Buddha constructed around a wooden frame.

His cave was soon followed by that of a second monk, Faliang, who also adorned his niche with images and scenes



to focus his meditation. This pattern, of mural wall-painting along with carved or sculpted figures was to set a stylistic precedent in Dunhuang among pious Buddhists who, keen to demonstrate their faith and social standing, carved hundreds of beautifully decorated cave temples out of the cliff face over the next thousand years.

Many of the caves at Dunhuang contain images of the wealthy and pious patrons who commissioned their construction and decoration, and the wall murals tell us much about their belief as well as the society to which they belonged.

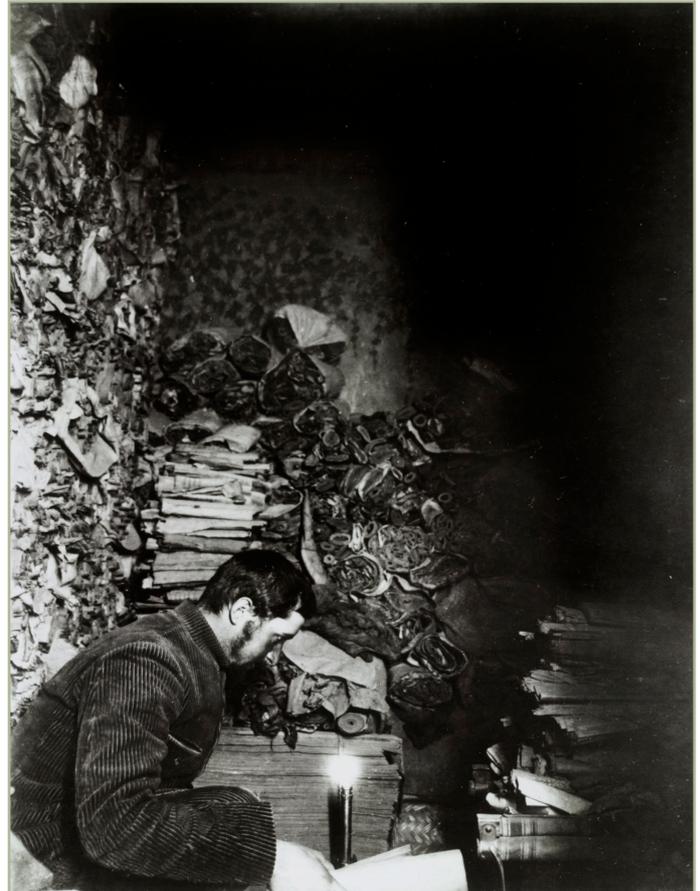


Mogao caves at Dunhuang. 3 April 1914. Photo 392/29(107)
Photographer: M. Aurel Stein. © The British Library Board

Archaeological Discovery at Dunhuang

Around the turn of the twentieth century a hidden cache of manuscripts was discovered at the Dunhuang caves. In a previously walled up chamber, now known as the Library Cave or cave 17, tens of thousands of manuscripts and hundreds of paintings were discovered. Many of the manuscripts were Buddhist texts while others were items related to everyday and official life on the Silk Road. No one is quite sure why the items were hidden here, but it was clear that they had been stored untouched for almost 1000 years. The contents of the cave were variously dispersed, and can now be seen in museum and library collections around the world.

Thanks to important archaeological discoveries such as these, today we know much about the Silk Road, its inhabitants and their beliefs. The Mogao caves are now protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and opened to the public as a tourist destination at certain times of the year. There are strict controls to protect this unique site for future generations and conservation work is ongoing.



Paul Pelliot in the Dunhuang Library Cave, 1908.
AP8187 © Le musée Guimet



Northern Caves at Dunhuang, 1999. Photo 1118/1(10)
Photographer: Colin Chinnery ©International Dunhuang Project



Discussion:

Why do you think the practice of building cave temples was so popular among lay-people as well as monks?

Caves were often richly decorated in the style of the period and depicted patrons as well as political and religious scenes in their murals. Do you think this kind of visual information is as valuable to historians as written accounts of the day?