

The Reappearance of the Buddha A Preliminary Study on the Lost Clay Statues in the Caves of Kucha*

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Tra le circa 800 grotte buddhiste dell'antico regno di Kucha (nord del Taklamakan, Xinjiang, Cina), circa un terzo presentava un impianto decorativo, solitamente incentrato su una statua; alcune di esse ne contavano oltre 150. Tuttavia poiché nessuna delle statue è sopravvissuta nella sua interezza gli studi iconografici si sono concentrati sulle pitture. Ai fini di un'accurata comprensione delle grotte e dell'iconografia, in queste pagine si insisterà sulla necessità di ricostruire il numero, la dimensione, la postura, i materiali e le tecniche di costruzione delle statue a partire dalle tracce che rimangono nelle grotte stesse.

For over a century the study of the caves of Qiuci in China and abroad has mainly focused on the paintings. Recent scholarship has perpetuated this trend. This is largely because, although there are extant portions of paintings both within the caves and in museums outside China, very little of the statuary remains.¹ There is not even one complete statue in situ and the few fragmentary ones in museums do not cover the whole spectrum of statues which would once have been present in the caves.²

The profusion of studies on the paintings has created an unbalanced and one-sided understanding of the caves, since at the core of each decorated cave there stood, except for in very few cases, a statue. In order to study the form and function of the caves, it is thus necessary to "re-locate" the (now lost) statues in their original places.

This paper constitutes a preliminary investigation into the number and posture of the statues originally installed in the caves, in addition to examining the materials and techniques used in their construction. One of the paper's main purposes is to stress the importance of the statuary for our comprehension of the caves. It aims to recreate the appearance of the caves when the statues were in them.

Caves with Statuary

In almost all the decorated caves in Kucha the main image was a statue. Although most appear to have only contained a few key statues, several of the caves would have

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² Statue fragments remain in only a few caves, such as Kizil New Cave 1[2], Cave 196.