

Qizil: an Interpretation of District Six, Caves 109-121 in Gunei

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Abstract For over a century studies on the caves of Kuča were mainly focused on the paintings; little attention has been dedicated to cave architecture, while the way caves related to one another forming a living monastery has gone almost completely unnoticed. In previous studies I proposed a division of the site of Qizil in seven districts: among these, District Six was the one which presented most interpretative difficulties. In recent years the iconography of five painted caves has been the object of many studies, but the remaining 18 undecorated ones have been systematically ignored. Realizing how this district keeps on stimulating art historians' interest – other relevant studies are presently being carried out – the present work offers a more complete description and analysis by focusing on the unique assemblage of caves and groups of District Six; some essential features never mentioned before are also introduced here. Finally, the provisional interpretation of District Six as a special ritual area will contextualize it in the overall site of Qizil.

Summary 1 Description. – 2 Analysis of Some Elements. – 2.1 Internal Stairways. – 2.2 Repair and Renovation of Damaged Caves. – 2.3 Paintings and Painting Style. – 3 Interpretation. – 3.1 Function of the Caves. – 3.2 Monastic Cells: Who Lived in Them? – 3.3 Meditation Cells and Meditation. – 3.4 Conclusion.

Keywords Qizil caves. Caves function. Meditation cells. Soot.

For over a century the study of the Buddhist caves of the kingdom of Kuča, set on the northern artery of the Silk Road, north of the Taklamakan desert, has mainly focused on the paintings and texts found in them.¹ Successive generations of scholars have worked to achieve a better understanding of the kind of Buddhism which was practiced in this small kingdom, but much remains to be done. Scholarship needs to shift its focus from the study of selected images and individual caves to a more comprehensive approach that considers the rock monasteries in their entirety and follows their development through time. Formed of almost 400 caves hewn at different heights in the towering cliffs that run alongside the Muzart River, Qizil is the largest and most complex rock carved monastery of the ancient king-

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dom of Kuča. The division of the site in seven functional districts serves to clarify our understanding of the site (Vignato 2006). District Six is the most difficult to interpret since it defies the precise functional definition, which is readily achieved in the other districts.

Although there is still no clear cut understanding of the role of District Six within the Qizil rock monastery, an extensive amount of scholarly endeavour has been expended on the iconography of the few decorated caves therein – the paintings from a handful of caves continue to draw the attention of art historians. In providing a preliminary description, analysis and interpretation of District Six this paper will discuss its unique assemblage of caves and cave groups. These features indicate the successive phases of development in this district and so by examining them an improved understanding of District Six can be reached. This should include the specific location of this district within the site of Qizil and of all the 23 remaining caves within the district, in addition the way caves related to one another, and of the successive phases of carving, remodelling and use. This will lead to a more accurate interpretation of this district and, consequently, of the iconography concentrated in its five painted caves (Fig. 1).

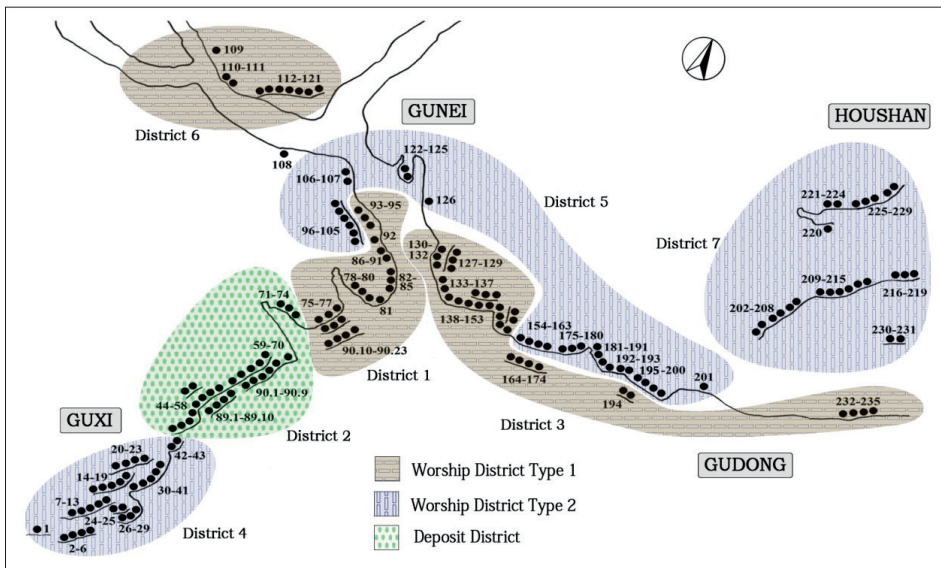


Figure 1. The layout of the rock monastery of Qizil. Besides the traditional naming of its different sections, the coloured parts indicate my proposed division in seven districts; District Six is in the upper left corner

1 Description

Scholars rarely consider the physical characteristics of the location at which a cave is carved. The relative position of a cave in the site, its relation to neighbouring caves, the quality of the rock in the general area, the daily amount of direct sunlight exposure, the distance from sources of humidity are all elements which, although they rarely appear in present day studies, would have been the primary concerns of the planners and builders of the caves. Take District Six in Qizil: it is located in the western section of Gunei. At this point the bottom of the gully only receives a few hours of direct sunlight a day. It is also damp almost year round with the humidity rising after even light rain. This explains why the caves are concentrated in the upper section of the northern cliff. This location would have received a greater number of sunlight hours in addition to being away from the damp. The district is only accessible from the South. Having walked through most of the north-south stretch of Gunei, the first visible cave is a monastic cell. The other caves come into view one after the other as one walks further into the valley. The arrangement is in sharp contrast with that of Guxi, Gudong and Houshan. Those caves receive more sunlight hours and are further removed from sources of humidity. However, the most significant detail is that these caves were carved in highly visible locations and could be seen from afar. From this we can ascertain that District Six was not a prime location, a site of last resort rather than the location of earliest caves.

District Six is the most difficult to interpret of the districts in Qizil, because it does not present a clear functional identity. In contrast, the other districts display a much more uniform content relying on caves or groups of caves of the same type. This lack of uniformity indicates that the caves in District Six underwent several alterations, restorations and additions, which moved the function of the district away from its original purpose. An understanding of the function of the district is further complicated by late caves which were carved into the remaining sections of viable rock due to a lack of space in other districts. The caves along the gully will be described from east to west (Fig. 2).

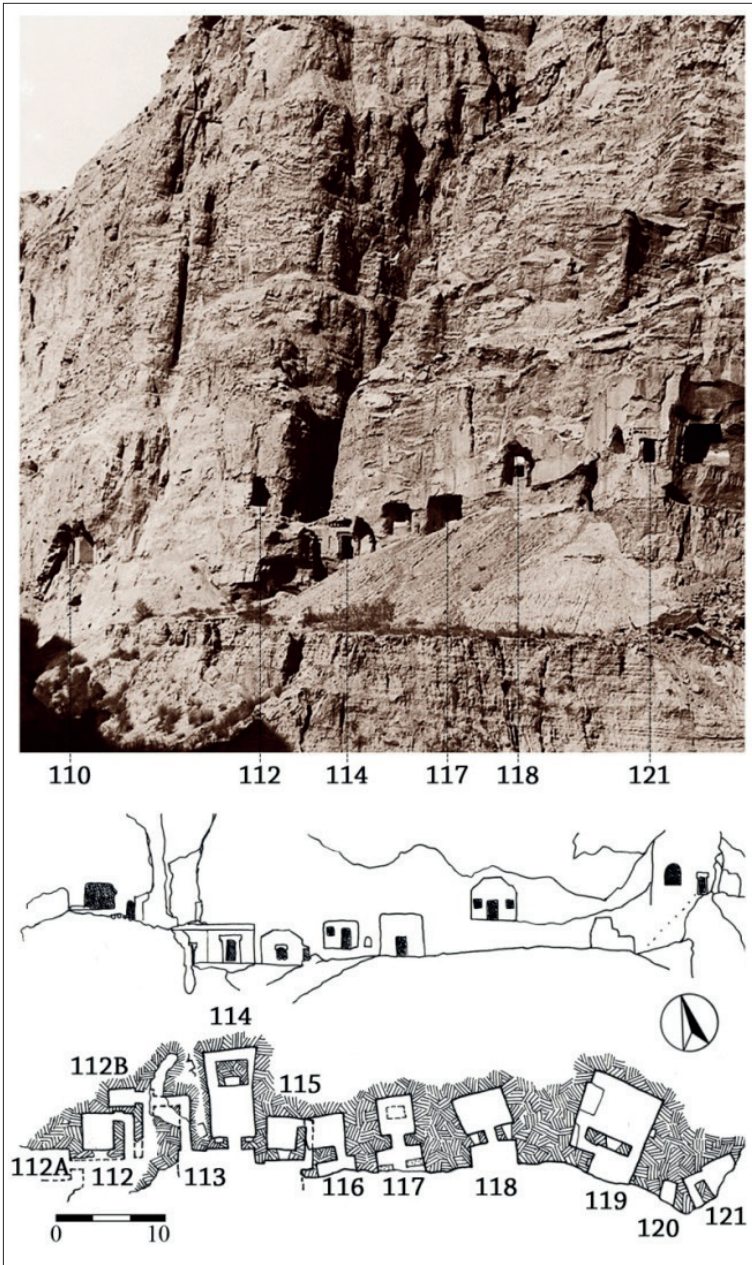


Figure 2. Plan, prospect and photograph of District Six. (Photograph: © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst/Photograph)

First is the group formed by Caves 120 and 121. It is carved in a high position on the cliff and is visible from a relative distance. Cave 120 is a small square cave well plastered with no traces of paintings. Its shape and size suggest it was a meditation cell. Cave 121 is a regular monastic cell, the front wall of the main chamber has completely collapsed, but the fireplace well preserved. Note the location, Cave 121, a monastic cell, overlooks the only entrance into the district. This sort of cell, which might have served as a residence for a gatekeeper or guardian, is a common feature in the rock monasteries of Kuča.

The group is currently inaccessible. A major collapse occurred during the monastic period. The cliff face collapsed for a depth of approximately three meters. This caused significant damage to not only the original tunnelled staircase, traces of which are still extant, but also the stone carved antechamber of the group. The staircase was subsequently restored and a cantilevered timber structure was built in front of the two caves to replace the antechamber. Through these repairs, the two caves could be still kept in use (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Caves 120 (center, upper position) and 121 (right). Note the straightened section of the rock and the traces of carved steps below Cave 120. Notice also the postholes used for the restoration of the stairway as well as those used for the installation of the soffit of a cantilevered structure above the doorway of Cave 121. Cave 119 (right) is below and to the left; Cave 119A I in front of it, covered by wooden poles

Below and to the west lies Cave 119. It is a large cave that has so far evaded any significant scholastic attention. Its final incarnation appears to have been as a lecture hall. The abundant construction marks still extant allow for a clear reconstruction of the transformation and development of this cave. The antechamber has a longitudinal rectangular plan. The front section of the chamber is damaged. It is comparatively small for such a large main chamber. Even more unusual is the presence of two entrances. One, a doorway leads straight through the main wall into the main chamber, while the other, carved into the right wall of the antechamber, leads to a short corridor which then turns ninety degrees before entering the main chamber through its front wall. A closer examination reveals that the main chamber was created by merging two smaller and independent caves, each of which had its own entrance. At some point the requirement for a cave of this type and function was deemed so important to the functioning of this district that two smaller caves (storages?) were sacrificed in its construction. The importance of the cave can be inferred from the numerous renovations it underwent, which I detail below (Fig. 4).

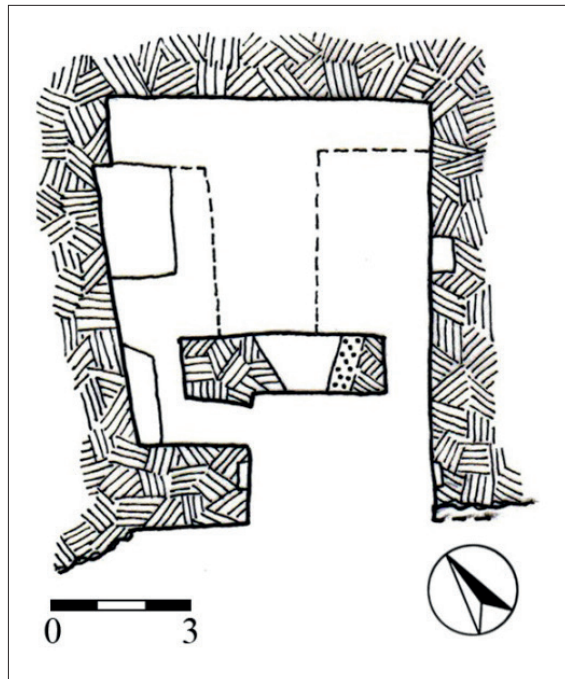


Figure 4. Plan of Cave 119.
The dotted lines indicate the size of two original cells which were successively merged into one cave in a late period

Cave 119A was discovered in 2000 in front of Cave 119. The cave has partially collapsed. Only part of the main chamber and a narrow tunnel with four small cells opening on its main and side walls are extant (Xinjiang Qiuci

shiku yanjiusuo 2001, pp. 62-63; Howard, Vignato 2015, pp. 87-97). Although asymmetrical and without traces of plaster, it can be interpreted as a meditation cave, since comparable caves can be found in the Kuča area (Fig. 5).

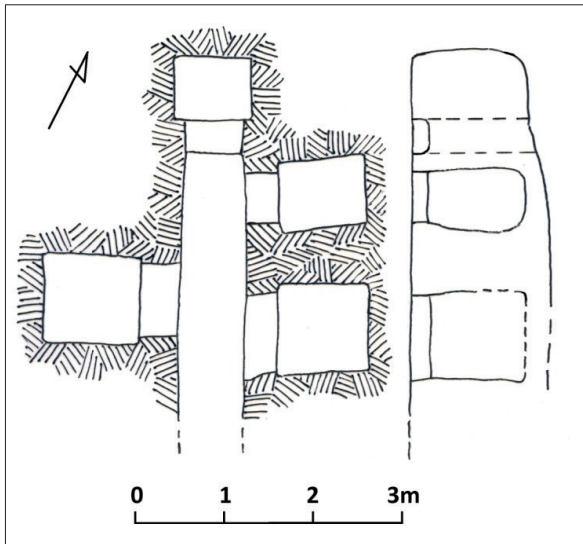


Figure 5. Cave 119A, plan and section. Adapted from: Xinjiang Qiuci shiku yanjiusuo 2001, p. 61

Caves 116, 117 and 118 take up the central section of the cliff face. They are carved at different levels and relatively far from one another. Any likely connecting passages between the caves were lost in the collapse of the cliff face. There is nothing to indicate a unified plan. All three are square caves are markedly different in size, plan (of both the antechamber and the main chamber), and ceiling type. All three caves were decorated in Style A (First Indo-Iranian Style), forming the highest concentration of decorated caves in the district. The narrative and layout of the décor of each of the three caves is different.

Cave 118 is unique in several ways. Starting with the stone carved antechamber which shows signs of having collapsed and been successively remodelled. The ceiling of the main chamber is a transversal barrel vaulted ceiling, unusual in a square cave. The carving of this cave is exceptionally precise. This can best be seen when looking back at the front wall of the main chamber. From this perspective the matching oblique angles of the lintels of the doorway and both windows can be clearly observed. Such mathematical attention to detail is not found in any other cave in Kuča. The layout of the décor is also unique. The centre of the main wall, opposite to the doorway, is decorated with a single scene - the Story of King Māndhātara enclosed within one of the largest and most complex decorative frames in Kuča (Satomi Hiyama 2010). A band of decoration (circa 40 cm

wide) runs along the three walls, intersected by the windows and doorway on the front wall. Most of the narrative was concentrated in the upper part of the cave, that is on the ceiling and the two lunettes. This layout is not replicated in any other cave in Kuča (Fig. 6).

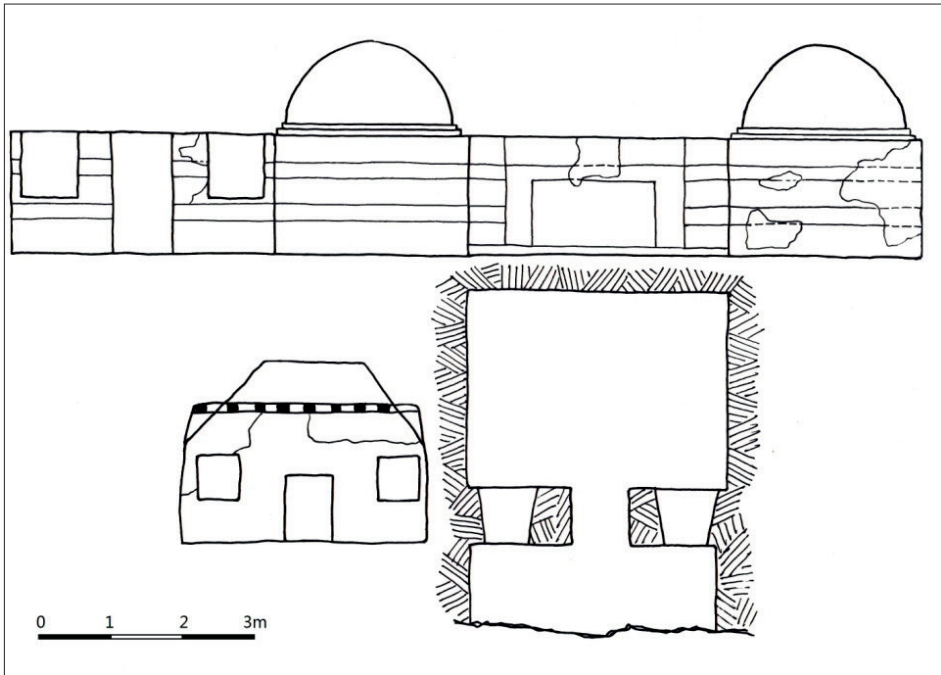


Figure 6. Cave 118. Below: plan and view of the restored façade. Above: the disposition of the paintings on the four walls of the main chamber (starting from the left): front wall, right wall, main wall, left wall

The iconography of Caves 118, as well as that of Cave 117, 116 and 110 below, was first investigated by Grünwedel (1912, pp. 102-119), thereafter large sections of these paintings were removed to Germany and are stored in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin – some were lost during World War II.

Cave 117 presents another set of interesting features. Its antechamber, wider than the main chamber, is the largest antechamber in District Six; its original depth cannot be established since the front section of it has collapsed. Not only is it large, but its floor is also carved at a lower level than that of the main chamber. The ceiling consists of carved rafters, imitating timber architecture, set against a flat ceiling. There are at least three different layers of painting in the antechamber, main chamber and the reveals of the doorway between the two rooms. The plan of the main chamber is square, somewhat irregular, topped by a truncated pyramid

ceiling. An altar set slightly back is atypically rectangular, as most of the extant altars in square caves Qizil are perfectly square. This altar would have held the statuary which would have served as the main focus of worship. The narrative painted on the main wall would have acted as a background to said statues. A right understanding of the décor is complicated by the fact there are three superimposed layers of paintings, of which part are in the original place, others are in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. The final hurdle is the thick strata of soot covering walls and ceiling which serves to further obscure the paintings. The paintings are displayed in rows of seated Buddha and in horizontal registers. The identification of the painted narrative requires in depth investigation (Zin 2015, pp. 19-27). Sections of this décor are presently kept in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin.

The importance of this cave for future research cannot be underestimated. Once the themes and style of the three strata of the paintings are completely understood and described, we will have the clearest evidence not only of the development of style, but, most importantly, a clear view of the successive stages of development of the narrative, and the evolution of the doctrine therein implied. Scientific testing of pigments from each of the layers of painting would likely shed light on the materials and techniques used in different periods. This data could then in turn be compared with materials from other caves. These murals can shed considerable light on several aspects of these caves if appropriately studied.

Cave 116 is the last of the three caves painted in Style A. Its relative position, compared to that of the Caves 115 and 177, suggests that it was the last of the three to be carved. Part of the rock-carved antechamber collapsed but was later restored by adding a cantilevered structure. The plan of the main chamber is a transverse rectangle topped by a transverse barrel-vaulted ceiling with a flat crown. The structure is somewhat similar to that of Cave 118, with a similar cornice around the four walls. The front wall, however, is different with a doorway on the left and a relatively small window on the right. The placement of the paintings is again unique: the main painting, surrounded by a large cornice, occupied almost entirely the right wall; it is presently heavily damaged, but it might have represented a monk (or Buddha?) seated in meditation. The other painting occupied the left lunette; presently its content is barely visible and originally showed monks meditating in cemeteries (Howard, Vignato 2015, pp. 108-109). The decor included also an ornamental strip painted in the upper-middle section of the walls (Fig. 7).

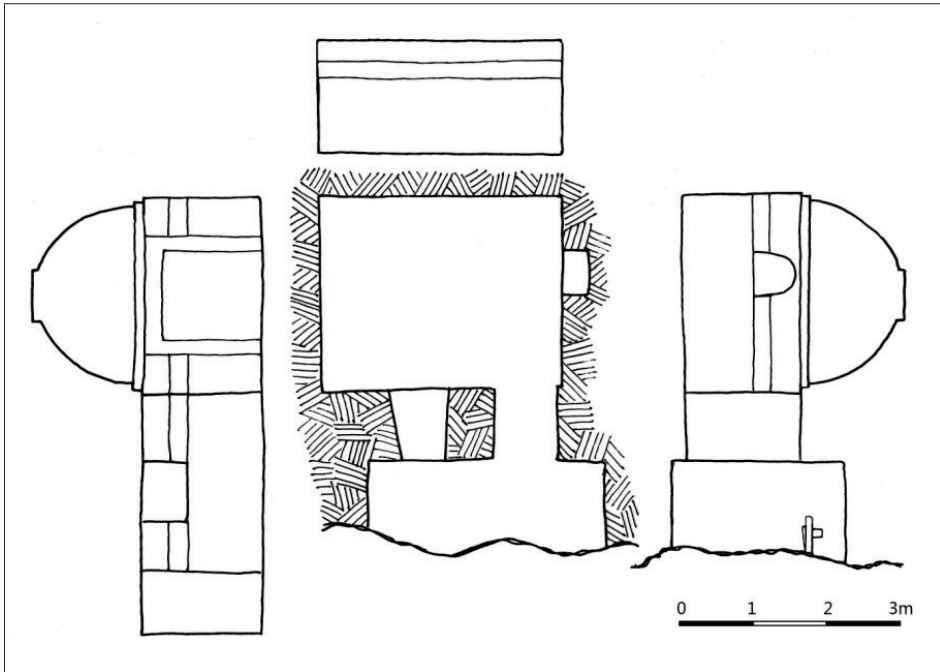


Figure 7. Cave 116. Plan and disposition of the paintings on the four walls of the main chamber (on the left): front wall and right wall; (above) main wall; (right) left wall of the main chamber and left wall of the antechamber, with the marks of a groove used for the support of the cantilevered wooden structure in front of the cave

Continuing westwards, the next few caves form the most complex group in the district. The original core consisted of central pillar Cave 114 and monastic cell Cave 115, each with its individual antechamber carved out of the rock. A collapse has seriously damaged the antechamber of Cave 114, causing the loss of crucial information. The remaining features, however, are sufficient to reconstruct the original state of the group. The caves were completely carved out of the rock and accessed through a doorway carved in the front wall of the antechamber of Cave 114. Cave 115 was then accessed through the doorway carved into the left wall of the antechamber of Cave 114. Following the collapse of its original antechamber a timber balcony was then installed (described below). It is likely during this phase that the group was expanded by widening the antechamber westward to make space for Cave 113 – although this is a numbered cave it was actually an internal stairway giving access to the caves carved further up the cliff (Fig. 8).

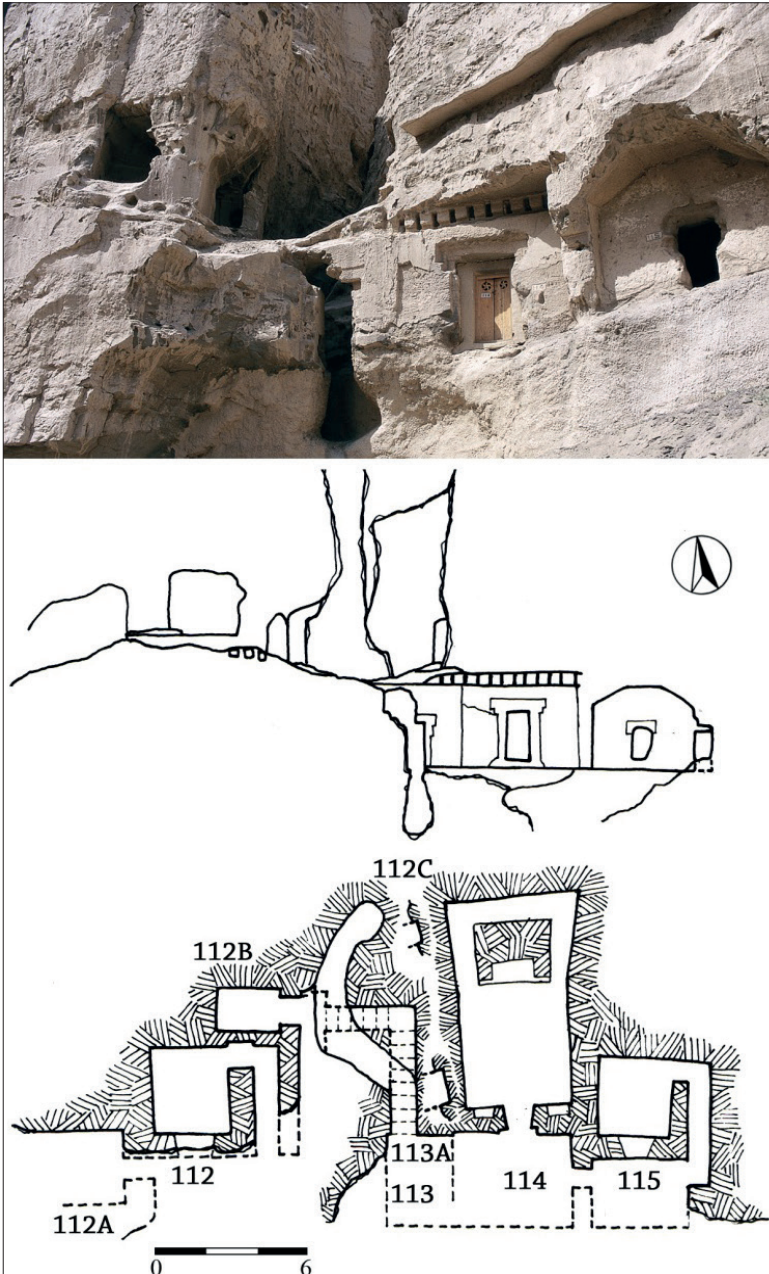


Figure 8. Group 112A-115. The original core of the group was formed of Caves 114-115. It was then enlarged to comprise the stairway Cave 113 and all the other caves, carved at the upper levels – Caves 112A, 112, 112B, 112C, 113A

A cursory examination of characteristics of Cave 114, reveals it to be a regular central pillar cave all be it with a uniquely large niche at the centre of the main wall. This was surrounded by the remains of a three-dimensional rendering of a mountainous landscape. On the main wall of the niche - not visible when the main statue was in its place - was painted a bodhisattva. A repository was excavated into the floor of the niche and then covered with wooden planks. Atypical was also the complex wooden structure forming the cornice on the side and front walls. One peculiar feature of the decor in the rear areas is the rows of nuns painted on the inner walls of the corridors. Again, all the paintings are blackened with soot.

The fact that monastic cell Cave 115 could be accessed only through the doorway opened on the left wall of the antechamber of Cave 114 means that Cave 115 was either a contemporary or later feature, and that the two caves were related. A door was installed over the entrance to the monastic cell in order to grant the occupant some privacy. The atypical plan of the entrance areas of the monastic cell, with one extra stretch of the corridor than normal also served to improve privacy.

The superimposed features on the cliff irrefutably establish that the internal stairway - Cave 113 - was a later addition to the core group formed by Caves 114 and 115, a crucial piece of information that assigns a relatively late dating to all the caves reached through it. They are monastic cell Cave 112 and three meditation cells intended for prolonged periods of meditation - Caves 112A, 112B and 113A. Still higher up is a small cell. It is regularly carved with an arched soffit, plastered and painted with uniform firebrick paint - provisionally called Cave 112C; it is a meditation cell of the type used for short periods of meditation. A more detailed discussion of the caves of this upper section of the group is beyond the remit of this paper, but as the above description indicates the caves in the upper reaches were carved chiefly for meditation with one residential cave, the monastic cell Cave 112. Since none of these caves were decorated Cave 114 remained the exclusive ritual focus of this enlarged group.

Caves 110, 111 and 111A, form a small group carved in a very high position on the cliff. They are relatively isolated in comparison to the caves described so far. Due to their location at the inner most end of the district they had to be carved very high on the cliff since this was the best possible location, in terms of rock quality and sunlight hours, even though it required the construction of an inner staircase in order to reach them safely. The remains of the stairway are now clearly visible due to the collapse of a large section of the cliff. The stairway ended on a level with the floor of their shared antechamber. This chamber was originally carved completely out of the rock. The antechamber displayed an 'L' shape plan, with a wider space in front of Caves 111 and 111A, while the space in front of Cave 110 was narrower (Fig. 9).

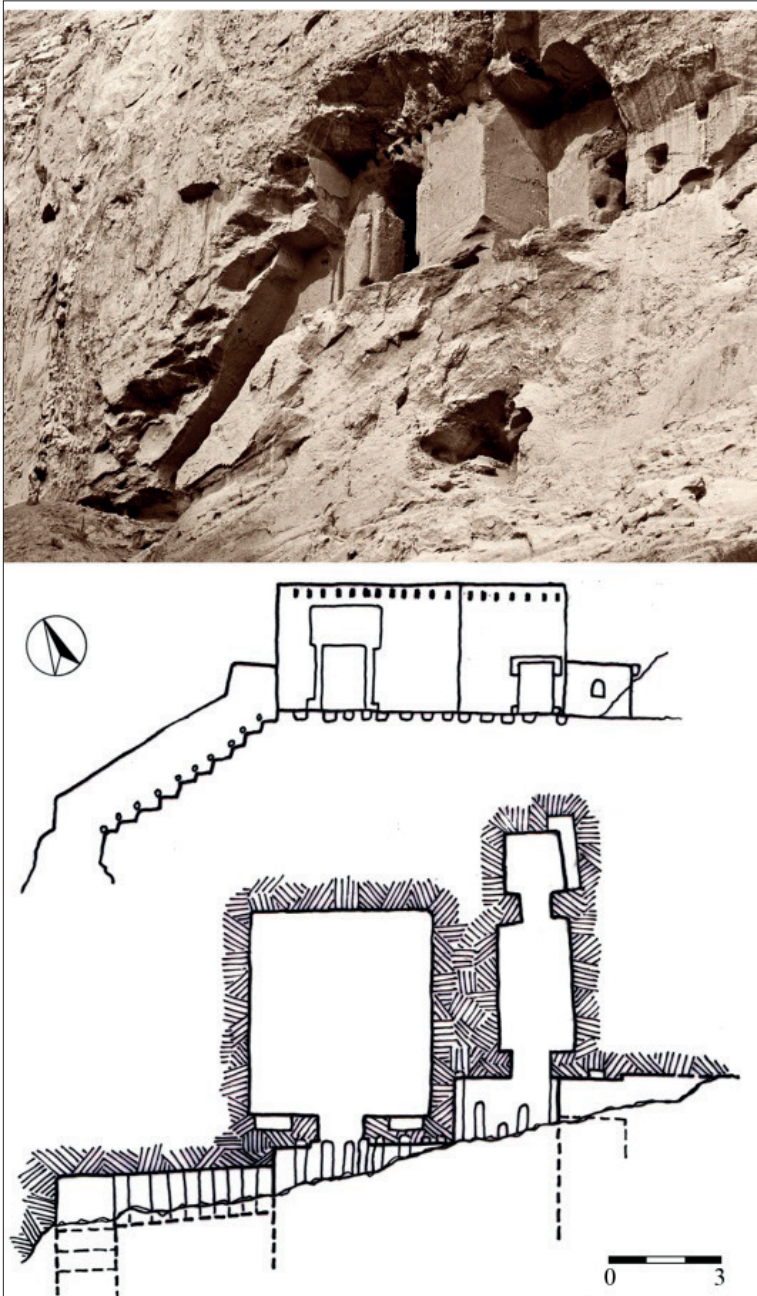


Figure 9. Group 110-111A. Notice the stairway from the left and the partially remaining rock-carved antechamber in front of the caves

The first cave encountered upon reaching the top of the stairway was Cave 110, a square cave the side walls of which show the largest number of episodes of Shakyamuni's life of any cave in Qizil. The longitudinal barrel vaulted ceiling creates a lunette above the main wall with a representation of Mara's temptation of Shakyamuni, this is balanced by a second lunette above the doorway, which depicts a Bodhisattva preaching in a heavenly palace (Fig. 10).

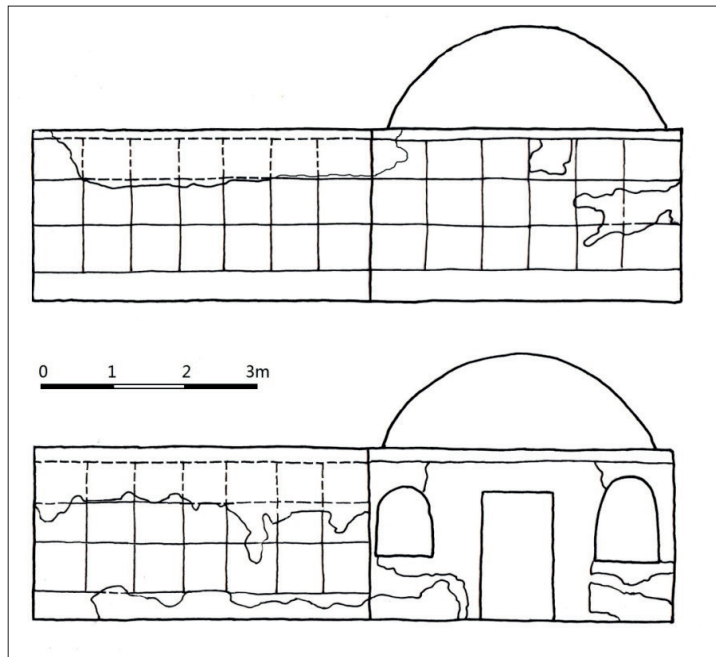


Figure 10. Cave 110, layout of the paintings in the lateral walls. Top, left to right, right and main wall. Below: left and front walls

Cave 111 has an atypical structure, the only cave of this type in Kuča: besides the shared antechamber, it consisted of undecorated main and inner chambers plastered but not whitewashed, and although there are no traces of the fireplace, it is blackened by soot. These characteristics, together with the fact that the cave was sufficiently large as to allow a person to sleep within it, suggest that it might have been used as a monastic cell. Lastly, on the left wall of the antechamber a doorway gave access to Cave 111A, placed at a right angle compared to Caves 110-111. This cave has now completely collapsed, but we can still identify it by the remaining inner reveal of its doorway, the marks used to install the door-frame and part of the right wall of the main chamber. This cave can be interpreted as a storage cave on the basis comparison with similar caves.

The westernmost end of District Six is the head of the valley. It is the

most secluded area in Qizil. The gorge was formed and then unceasingly reshaped by the gushing rainwater which collects in the plateau above and then finds its way out in this direction. After every collapse the newly exposed façade weathers and erodes, to collapse and expose new sections of the cliff, in a relentless process. The damage of the cliffs in the last few centuries has been severe, as can be ascertained by briefly surveying the area. We might safely assume that there were originally more caves the few that remain. Hopefully those preserved, Caves 109, 109A and 109B, are a significant sample. All damaged to a different degree, we can see that although they are all different in plan and size they can all be assigned to the meditation cave type. The most interesting feature is a row of four meditation cells collectively called Cave 109B, carved in a very high position and presently unreachable. The dimensions of the small and much damaged Cave 109 suggest that it was a cell for individual meditation; Cave 109A, the front part of which has collapsed. It is well plastered and whitewashed and has the same shape and width as the tunnelled caves of Subeši and Mazabaha, which are considered to be meditation cells for collective meditation. If my interpretation of these caves is correct, the area we are considering, the most remote in Qizil, was dedicated to meditation (Fig. 11).

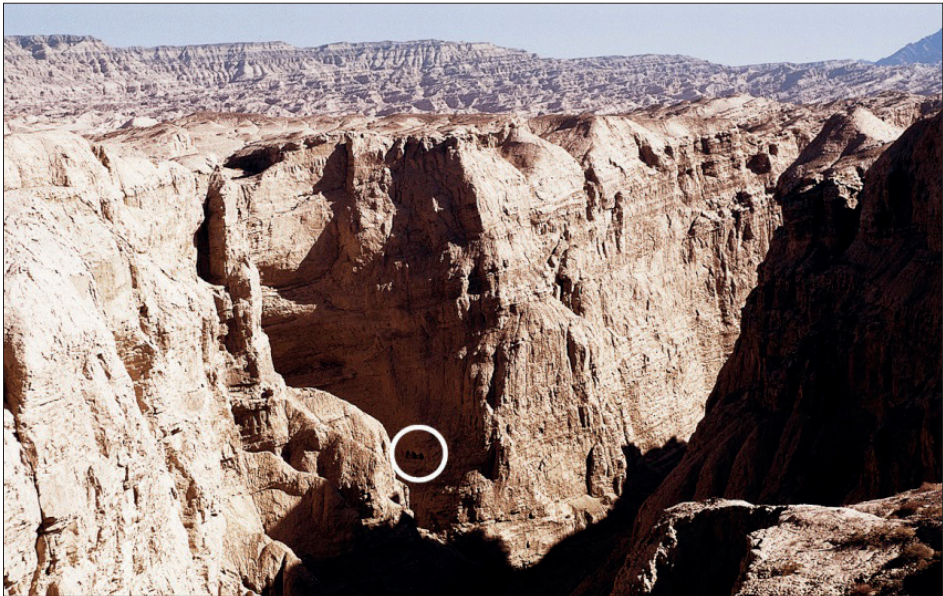


Figure 11. Cave 109A, actually four meditation cells, in its surroundings. The cells appear as small dots at the centre of the cliff

2 Analysis of Some Elements

2.1 Internal Stairways

A functional rock monastery was not simply the sum of a larger or smaller number of caves and surface buildings, some of them decorated and others were devoted to humbler functions. To be operative a monastery needed to have its different parts – districts, groups and individual caves – connected in a meaningful way. Regrettably, the structures that linked caves and groups to one another are among the most damaged features of the site, not to mention the most understudied. The types of structures referred to here can be described as ‘connective architecture’ (McDonald 1986, pp. 32 ff.). Although there are many forms of connective architecture – paths or walkways, assembly spaces in the open, structures connecting a number of caves, tunnels and stairways – this paper will only discuss one type, namely the internal stairway, which is crucial to the understanding of District Six in Qizil.

In studying caves carved in a high position on a cliff, the first question that needs to be considered is how they could be reached safely. Different solutions were possible, and the cave-makers chose the one that could best fit the nature and inclination of the cliff. The one preferred in District Six was the internal stairway.

Internal stairways are stairways carved into the cliff; they are sloping tunnels with carved steps, which made the ascent to an upper level of the cliff easy and safe. This type of architecture was relatively common in Qizil. In District Six there are three examples: the one climbing up to Caves 110-111A, a second giving access to Caves 112-113A, which has been numbered as Cave 113, and a third one leading to Caves 120-121.

Of the three internal stairways in District Six, the one giving access to the group formed by Caves 110-111A is the best preserved and so its construction is easier to understand. The collapse of a large section of the cliff where this group was carved caused damage to the rock-carved antechamber and the internal stairway – to an estimated depth of at least two meters. This collapse exposed the inner stairway, but it remained sufficiently safe to be kept in use (Fig. 9). A detailed reconstruction of its original structure can be achieved from the extant features. From the shape of the ceiling we know that it comprised two flights of stairs with a landing between them. A lower short flight of stairs, perpendicular to the cliff façade, led to the landing; from the left side of the landing, a second longer flight, that ran parallel to the cliff façade, led to the antechamber carved in front of the caves. The steps were not perfectly identical, the riser height was 25 to 35 cm, while the tread depth was 35 to 40 cm. Based on similar and better preserved internal stairways, we can assume that the lower entrance was protected by a door; marks for the installation of a second door at the top of the stairway are still clearly visible.

The second is Cave 113, which is an internal stairway. It currently serves as a channel for the flow of rainwater into Gunei and therefore almost all evidence of its former use has been eroded. The steps are not easily discerned, likely why the official comprehensive catalogue of the Qizil caves does not identify this cave correctly, recording it as a square cave. It consists of two flights of steps and a landing. The entrance retains installation marks for a door-frame. The first flight cuts straight into the cliff face to a height and depth of approximately ten steps before coming to a landing. A second, shorter, flight of steps then continues from the right side of the landing (Fig. 12).



Figure 12. The left wall of stairway Cave 113. The steps have been almost completely eliminated by the water gushing through, with few traces remaining in the lower section of the wall. Notice the space appositively carved in the reveal for the open shutter, aiming at allowing for the maximum width of the passage

Caves 120-121 were carved in a very high position on the cliff. The exterior section has crumbled down almost completely, destroying the stairway leading to the antechamber and the two caves that lead off it. Only a few marks reveal the original situation. Relying on them and on the data offered by the two other internal stairways described above, it can be as-

sumed that the first flight of steps cut perpendicular into the facade, this was then followed by a landing and then another flight of steps parallel to the cliff facade. In this respect the internal stairway was much similar to other structures of the same type; what is unusual is the presence of large square postholes carved at a regular distance on the cliff, just below the level of the steps, as if to support a string-board. Their presence suggests that the internal stairway collapsed and was restored by carving postholes and inserting beams into them, while the opposite end was supported by a wooden structure. Once the springboards were secured, the wooden steps could be installed (Fig. 3). Following the collapse of the original internal stairway, the caves in such a high position on the cliff were kept in use by constructing an outer timber stairway, which rested against the cliff, as a replacement of the earlier stone carved one.

All of the internal stairways in District Six underwent repairs, although they were not as dramatic as those described in the case of the stairway leading to Caves 120-121. The soft mudstone of the steps evidently wore down easily and required regular up-keep. Small peg-holes were carved into the inner and out walls of the stairway on a line with the outer lip of each step. Rods were then inserted into these holes and a layer of gesso was then poured over the tread. The gesso is now lost, but these small peg holes present in all the internal stairways indicate that regular maintenance was taking place.

Before leaving this topic, the sheer amount of rock which had to be removed in order to build an internal stairway needs to be considered. The volume of stone which need to be excavated was in some instances superior to that of the caves it served. The internal stairways required a great amount of labour. Extra labour would also have been required carve caves in the upper reaches of the cliff, I have suggested – relying also in a large set of other data – the following general rule for Qizil: the lower reaches and best part of the cliffs in Qizil were exploited first, while the upper sections of the cliffs – which required large amounts of extra work – were only used after the more convenient sections were fully used up.

2.2 Repair and Renovation of Damaged Caves

All the caves have suffered a great deal of damage. A quick look at the cliffs where the caves were carved leaves no doubt about the degree of deterioration suffered since the monastic period when the site was occupied. Larger or smaller collapses appear to have occurred throughout the period of occupation. Work would have been required following these collapses in order to keep the caves in use. In District Six repairs and renovations are so numerous that almost the whole range of restoration techniques employed in Kuča can be observed here. Caves of one type were often

transformed into other types of caves or caves that were added to preexisting groups. Partly collapsed rock-carved antechambers were repaired by installing cantilevered timber structures. In terms of internal structures architectural elements within a cave could be modified by chiselling away or adding material; new plaster or successive coats of whitewash could also be applied. In the case of decorated caves they were often partially or completely repainted. The fact that the caves in District Six underwent heavy restoration demonstrates that the development of this district was not a straightforward process and what we see today is the result of a prolonged period of cave construction and restoration. The importance of making a precise distinction among elements of different periods present in a cave and the need to assign them to the period they belong to before undertaking any kind of specific studies of a cave cannot be over stated. Without this basic work, elements belonging to different periods are looked upon as contemporary which in turn undermines the research.

Caves 110-111A being well preserved provides the clearest case study. As previously mentioned it was reached through an internal stairway and had a rock carved antechamber which was shared by all of the three caves that formed the group. A reconstruction of the doorway, its frame and of the internal stairway clearly indicates that the whole antechamber was completely carved out of the rock. We might safely assume that light entered through one or more windows carved in the front wall as in the case of the Five Joined Caves (68-72) in Qumtura, a clear example of such a solution.

After their construction, the caves were used until the exterior section of the cliff collapsed, causing great damage to the front part of the antechamber and exposing the stairway; at that point the three caves could no longer be safely used. A large repair was then undertaken with the aim of replacing the collapsed section of the rock carved antechamber with a cantilevered timber structure. Thirteen grooves were carved across the remaining sections of the floor. Robust joists were then inserted into the beams projecting outwards (presently circa 90 cm long in front of Cave 110 and circa 170 cm in front of Cave 111). Smaller holes carved just below the ceiling on the main wall held rafters (12 postholes in front of Cave 110 and 7 in front of Cave 111). Once joists and rafters were in place and connected by vertical posts, they formed a solid timber structure imbedded into the rock, which was further stabilized by wooden planks fastened onto joists to form the floor, while railings inserted between the vertical posts ensured safety. A roof protected from the elements as well as from the inevitable falling rocks. The exposed stairway was considered sufficiently safe, in spite of the missing outer wall, and so was not restored. Indeed, it remained in use until a decade ago (Fig. 9).

Similar repairs of collapsed antechambers are numerous and show that it was a common practice to bring damaged caves back into use. For ex-

ample, the restoration carried out in front of Caves 113-114. This group originally developed from the original core consisting of Caves 114 and 115, each with its individual antechamber carved out of the rock. After a collapse of the exterior part of the cliff caused a major damage to the antechamber of Cave 114 – the antechamber of Cave 115 was spared for the most part – restoration was carried out by inserting a cantilevered timber structure very similar to that in front of Caves 110-111A. This new timber antechamber also incorporated Cave 113 (Fig. 8).

The antechamber of Cave 118 was likewise carved out of the rock. Its plan was rectangular with a truncated pyramid-like ceiling, a fairly common ceiling type in antechambers serving a single cave. The collapse of the cliff face between Caves 116 and 119 destroyed the front part of the antechamber of Cave 118. The cave was subsequently kept in use by adding a cantilevered timber structure, whose installation marks are still clearly visible. The repair was somewhat complicated by the shape of the ceiling which called for short lateral walls, made higher by cutting away the sloping sides of the truncated pyramidal ceiling to join a newly carved horizontal groove on the main wall just above door and windows. The inner ends of the rafters were then inserted into this groove to form the upper section of the cantilevered structure and also the support for a dropped ceiling. The level of the floor, lower than the one in the main chamber, is the result of heavy erosion which has obliterated the grooves carved on the floor where the joists that formed the foundation of the cantilevered structure were inserted. Some of the postholes which held the inner ends of these joists are still visible at the foot of the main wall in spite of modern restorations. Two grooves carved at about 150 cm from the floor on both lateral walls, seem to have been used to insert reinforcements of the front part of the newly set up wooden structure (Fig. 6).

A very similar restoration was carried out in the antechamber of Cave 116, the process here was more straightforward, since the original ceiling was flat and there was no need to elevate the lateral walls to set up the cantilevered structure. In this case, the outermost of the three layers of plaster was used to embed the beam into the horizontal groove carved on each sidewall at about 150 cm from the floor, a structure similar to that seen in Cave 118 (Fig. 7).

The front part of the antechamber of Cave 117 was not restored after the collapse. In this case a different solution was devised. The original floor of the antechamber was approximately 30 cm lower than the floor of the main chamber. This can be ascertained from the percussion marks on the remaining three walls. The present floor level of the antechamber is approximately 80 cm lower than the main chamber. It seems that after the collapse of the front part of the antechamber its floor was excavated as to facilitate the access from below and, because of the closeness to the ground, there was no need to build a timber balcony.

Modifications were also carried out in the antechamber of Cave 119, which in spite of the collapse of its front part it was not restored with timber structures. The height and width of the window was modified by carving a corresponding area of the ceiling controlled the amount of light entering the main chamber, this modification served to improve the functionality of the main chamber.

Other larger or smaller repairs were carried out within the main chambers. The walls of the main chamber of Cave 119[2] are covered with five layers of plaster, each of these were covered with several coats of white-wash. These minor repairs, each of which was part of routine upkeep of the cave, are important because they indicate that the cave was used for a prolonged period of time. The fact that it was regularly whitewashed, when it was not completely re-plastered, suggests that it was an important cave. The gesso flooring in the main chamber of Cave 117 is another case of a routine repair. Since the space used to circumambulate the altar was limited and saw a lot of foot traffic which meant that, this part of the gesso flooring was given to wear out. In this case the damaged part was sawn out and eliminated. The resulting hole was then filled with new gesso.

2.3 Paintings and Painting Style

There are only a few painted caves in District Six: Caves 110, 114, 116, 117 and 118. In square Caves 116 and 118 the paintings are concentrated in the main chamber, while the antechambers appear to have been simply whitewashed. The antechamber of Cave 117, instead, was fully painted. All these caves were painted according to the typical canon of Style A (First Indo-Iranian Style, see Howard, Vignato 2015, pp. 4-5). Cave 114 is the only central pillar cave in this district. As is customary in central pillar caves its main chamber and rear areas were both painted in Style B (Second Indo-Iranian Style). The same style was used to decorate Cave 110, a square cave. The iconography of the paintings in these five caves has been discussed for over a century and it will continue to be the object of future studies. Suffice to say that narrative in each cave differs from that of others – as discussed above. It is remarkable that the layout of the painting is also different in each cave, this in addition to the atypical layouts and subjects represented, which are unique in Kuča. A very concise account of the different layouts clarifies this situation.

The three caves painted according to Style A – Caves 116, 117 and 118 – each had a distinct layout. Cave 116 presents two large paintings. One occupies the right wall, while the other fills the left lunette – that is, one occupies a lower section of the cave the other an upper section in the opposite wall, creating an asymmetry that is further accentuated by the



Figure 13. Median strip of Cave 114 (top) and Cave 118 (bottom). Notice the straight line of the diamond grid pattern in both caves, unseen in other caves of Qizil. (Source: *Zhongguo shiku* 1996, pls. 128 and 150)

horizontal band of decoration that runs along the walls. The barrel vaulted ceiling was simply covered by a layer of whitewash and left undecorated. Cave 118 is architecturally similar to Cave 116, the main painting is on the main wall; horizontal bands of decoration run along the side and front walls. Most of the paintings are concentrated in the upper section of the cave, which includes both lunettes and the ceiling, a very peculiar and unique layout. Cave 117 was completely painted, including antechamber and main chamber. Both chambers have three layers of paintings, each following different themes, the last one covered by thick layer of soot, which makes the reading of the décor very problematic.

We turn now to the two caves painted in Style B - Caves 110 and 114 - which were fully painted. The paintings of Central pillar Cave 114 are typical for this type of cave: on the apex of the ceiling is a median strip and diamond grids on the two haunches, along the sidewalls are panels with preaching scenes, and themes connected with the nirvana in the rear areas; the chief exception is the painted Bodhisattva in the large niche of the main wall (the background for a now lost statue). Cave 110 the layout of the painting of consists of three superimposed rows of square panels on

the main and side walls; the largest representations were painted on the lunettes above the main and front walls; the ceiling was decorated with a median strip and diamond grids on the two haunches.

The situation of District Six, compared with that of other districts of Qizil, is uncharacteristic. Usually Style B paintings in Qizil are found in central pillar caves which are the ritual centre of a group. In this regard cave 114 can be considered a typical case, while Cave 110 is not. Square caves painted in Style A are typically perfectly square in plan with a domed ceiling, forming groups with monastic cells. The three caves painted in Style A do not present these traits and each of the three caves presents a narrative and layout that are unique cases in Kuča. A further complication is the presence of unusual features in both Caves 114, painted in Style B, and 118, painted in Style A. In both instances the median strip is enclosed by wavy lines, while in most caves the median strip is much indented, since it is formed of the space left by the diamond grids on the two haunches of the ceiling (Fig. 13).

Moreover, another uncommon element in the median strip of Caves 114 and 118 is a strainer (?) carried by one of the flying monks (or is he a Buddha?). These are the only two instances in Kuča in which this implement is depicted. In summary, Cave 114 and 118 differ in architecture, content of the décor and painting style, but share common elements in the layout and content of the of the median strip.

Although iconographic studies will continue to be carried out by specialists, this paper aims to stress the interesting elements emerge when we compare varied components or aspects of painted caves from the same district. The results of such comparisons can lead to a better understanding of the caves, their purpose and function.

3 Interpretation

3.1 Function of the Caves

The rock monasteries of Kuča present a variety of cave types, not always properly labelled. These misnomers in turn jeopardize the correct interpretation of the cave function. Moreover, caves of the same type may not necessarily have fulfilled the same function. The research methods for studying the caves from a functional perspective are still in a pioneer phase, careful attention needs to be paid to several elements, such as the relative position of a cave in the site and its relation to its neighbouring caves. These factors are highly likely to shed new light on the way a cave was used (Vignato 2010, p. 132). In District Six important information about original function of the cave can also be garnered from the analysis of another over looked factor, the soot. In Qizil, a significant number of

caves are covered with soot; the surface of some caves is darkened to such an extent that the paintings are almost unidentifiable. A thorough survey of the site reveals the presence of different kinds of soot: thick and dry soot produced by the burning of combustible material in the fireplace is usually found in monastic cells; oily and sticky soot produced by devotional lamps is found in decorated caves; and finally thin dry soot resulting from occasional fires belongs to a post-monastic period.

In District Six, some caves are covered with soot; I leave aside the monastic cells which are covered with the thick dry soot described above and consider the painted caves. Walls and ceiling of the main chamber of Cave 117 are covered with thick strata of oily soot which almost entirely obscures the paintings. As previously mentioned, Cave 117 presents three layers of painting. A closer scrutiny reveals that the soot covers only the top layer of the paintings, but there is no soot in the lower ones. The ante-chamber has no traces of soot. These observations suggest that the practice of burning a devotional lamp in the main chamber, possibly in front of the statue set on the altar only occurred in the late monastic period, after the final repainting.

Cave 114, the only central pillar cave in District Six, is a beautifully decorated cave whose paintings are blackened by heavy soot which is particularly thick on the ceiling. The fact that the soot layer in this cave is not as thick here as in Cave 117 does not necessarily implies a shorter period of usage, but may be due to other factors, such as the larger size of this cave, or the air flow caused by the corridors which could have dispersed the soot. In this case the devotional lamp was likely placed in front of the statue in the main niche, used for a prolonged period of time. Notice that Caves 117 and 114 were the only two caves with statuary in District Six.

These are the only painted caves in District Six that retain traces of soot. Cave 110 and 118, and to a lesser extent the poorly preserved Cave 116, display vivid colours with no trace of soot. The fact that devotional lamps were lit painted caves with statues, while in others this practice was not followed, suggests that different rituals took place in the caves.

Other meaningful data can be inferred from the fact that Cave 119[2] - a lecture hall resulting from the merging of two earlier smaller caves - was frequently restored. Up to five successive layers of plaster were applied to its walls, each one covered by numerous coats of whitewash, as if the cave underwent regular maintenance. This suggests a prolonged usage which required frequent upkeep. This type of maintenance was not undertaken in the other caves, the lack of décor negates the possibility that it was required in order to fulfil this cave's specific function.

The data emerging from fieldwork and the study of elements present in the caves - intentional or unintentional - do not offer a final assessment of the development of the district and the use of its caves. They suggest, however, that the development here was not a linear and straightforward

process. In terms of this process, here are a few concrete facts. Firstly, the group comprising central pillar Cave 114 and monastic cell Cave 115 was expanded by adding a second monastic cell and a few meditation cells, reached by means of through an appositely carved inner stairway. Secondly, Cave 117 was painted and repainted three times. This repainting was not just a restoration of the existing images, but actually saw the introduction of new themes. Thirdly, the lecture hall Cave 119[2] was a late addition to the district that called for the merging of two smaller caves. Cave 119 was transformed into a lecture hall because at the time, this new cave type was deemed essential to the day-to-day function of the district. From this it can be ascertained that there was more than one factor which influenced the construction of the monastery. These clearly went through different phases over time.

Caves 114, 117 and 119 all shows signs of continuous use and/or restoration and were therefore significant to the function of the district. In Cave 114 which was the ritual centre of a group, expanded over time, a lamp appears to have burned continuously in front of the Buddha image. Cave 117 was certainly an important cultic cave, changes to the content of the paintings were likely due to doctrinal changes. Following the final renovation of the paintings a lamp set on the altar in front of the main statue set on top of a central altar. Finally Cave 119 was an unpainted cave intensively used and saw regular upkeep. It is clear that these three caves were the lynch-pins of ritual and communal activity in District Six.

3.2 Monastic Cells: Who Lived in Them?

Since most of the published photographic material and the research focuses on the decorated caves, there is a common misperception within the scholastic community as to the component factors of the rock monasteries of Kuča. Few of the art historians who study the caves of Kuča are willing to accept that there were more monastic cells than central pillar caves in Qizil. This is not a matter of conjecture, but of straightforward calculation. In approaching the analysis of the site without consideration for any of the undecorated caves such as monastic cells, meditation cells and deposit caves, several preposterous theories have been suggested concerning the nature of the site. For instance, it has been suggested that the art was designed for the enjoyment of noble patrons and the populace. This overlooks the monks and the fact that there were a considerable number of them living in the rock monasteries of Kuča. The percentage of monastic cells in District Six is quite low, with only three monastic cells of the typical Kucheans type (Caves 112, 115 and 121), while Cave 111, an exceptional type seen only once in Kuča, might be a special form of monastic cave. The number of monks cannot be clearly ascertained, but it

can be safely assumed that the resident monastic population of this district was not very large.

Although, as mentioned above, Cave 121 was a typical Qizil monastic cell, it may have had a special function, since it overlooked the only entrance to the district. It formed a small group with meditation cell Cave 121. Caves 112 and 115 were two monastic cells in a same group. Cave 115 formed the original group together with Caves 114. A likely increase of the monastic population can be the reason of the expansion of the main chamber of Cave 115, and of the subsequent construction of Cave 112 at an upper level. It is interesting to note that groups comprising caves carved at different levels in Qizil are rare; the only other known instance is the group formed by square Cave 12, central pillar Cave 13, monastic cell Cave 24 and meditation cells Caves 25, 25A, 25B and 25C – as well as a two other meditation cells west of Cave 12. Both groups, in other words, had a ritual centre as well as living and meditation places. The interesting fact is that in the side corridors of both central pillar caves – Caves 13 and 114 – are painted processions of nuns (Fig. 14).



Figure 14. Qizil cave 13, outer wall of the right corridor. The fact that all figures have a long right sleeve suggests they were nuns. (Photograph: © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst/Photograph)

The identification of nuns is based on the fact that they wear a long sleeve covering their right arm and shoulder, differently from the monks whose arm and shoulder were bare. Moreover, in both cases the monastic cells are relatively isolated from the other caves, as if to ensure a higher degree of privacy. It is possible that a small community of nuns resided in these two groups. Chinese sources record the fact that noblewomen from the kingdoms around the Taklamakan were sent to Kuča to receive some Buddhist training (Takakusu, Watanabe 1924-1934, vol. 55, no. 2145); could they be hosted in these caves? This argument could even be taken further to suggest that the whole of District Six was occupied by nuns.

3.3 Meditation Cells and Meditation

If the interpretation of the typology of caves offered in this paper is correct, then meditation cells most common cave type in District Six. In the westernmost section of this district there was a concentration of meditation cells of different types, the remaining ones being five individual cells and a cave for communal meditation. Three larger caves, suitable for overnight residence were part of this group which was accessed via the stairway Cave 113, while another small cave for individual meditation is visible in the upper reaches of the cliff. Cave 119A is a monastic cell consisting of a narrow chamber with four lateral niches carved on its main and side walls. Lastly, Cave 120 was a cell suitable for overnight residence carved in a high position on the cliff, next to cave 121. All four types of meditation cells known in Kuča are found in this district. They include individual cells carved in isolation or in a row, larger cells for prolonged periods of meditation, tunnel-shaped caves with cells carved off their side walls, and tunnel-shaped caves without cells carved along their sides (Howard, Vignato 2015, pp. 87-97).

From the above it can be seen that more than a score of monks/nuns could meditate at the same time in the meditation cells of District Six. Although this number is not impressively large, it is significant for such a small district, with only three monastic cells. This would indicate that one of the primary functions of this district was meditation.

3.4 Conclusion

This concise presentation of District Six only serves to provide the briefest of insights into the inner workings in District Six, one of the smallest and most complex districts in Qizil. A full accounting of all relevant features would likely require several volumes. In addition to a summary presentation of the caves, this paper serves to highlight a number of often understudied issues, such as connective architecture, repairs, a few issues related to caves devoted to worship, and also a preliminary interpretation of the function of the caves. Since monks (perhaps nuns) lived, worshipped and meditated in these few caves, District Six can be regarded as a sample of a typical monastery in Kuča.

Finally, the study and interpretation of rock monasteries cannot depend solely on elements of iconography and style of the cave wall paintings. Wall paintings must not be separated from the framework in which they were created, nor can we ignore their location within the cave, or the general context in which the cave was carved. In short, these cave wall paintings are not paintings hanging on the walls, but a strongly contextualized type of immovable art.

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