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**Kizil: Characteristics and Development of the Groups of Caves
in Western Guxi***

Introduction

Although in the past a few scholars have noted that the caves of the Buddhist site of Kizil were often carved close to one another to form groups,¹ none has hinted at the fact that almost the whole site is formed by groups of caves and that very few caves were carved in isolation from others.² An attentive investigation of the whole site not only reveals that there are two main

* This paper has already been published in Chinese (Vignato 2004). This English version presents slight modifications, but essentially the ideas expressed in the text remain unchanged.

¹ Grünwedel (1912) has pointed out that some groups of caves were present in Kizil, such as 2-4; 35-36; 38-39; 66-68; 82-84; 197-199. Su Bai (1989: 15, 18) also singled out a number of groups: 2-4; 35-36; 38-40; 96-105; 171-172; 222-223. In a later article, Su Bai (2000: 221) called attention to the group 192-193. In his paper, Chao Huashan (1993) offered the most complete and up to date treatment of groups of caves. He identified the groups 2-19 and 24; 27-43; 96-101; 175-180; 181-191; 195-199; 202-219. Chao Huashan (1992) investigated also the Qumtura caves, keeping the same methodological framework, but with slight variations regarding the formation of groups. Other authors have mentioned groups of caves, but have not discussed it directly, therefore are not mentioned here. On the basis of a typological classification of more than 230 identifiable caves in Kizil, my PhD dissertation (Vignato 2005) offers a comprehensive treatment of the issue of groups of caves by individuating two main types of groups and their subtypes; it also indicates the interrelationship of these groups and organizes them into districts. Although the present paper deals only with the western end of Guxi, it is based on data collected from a larger area and a systematic study of the issue in the entire site. For a substantial summary of my dissertation, see Vignato (2006).

² My working definition of 'group of caves' is: a number of caves carved close to one another, often set at the same level, contained within well-defined boundaries which do not overlap with the boundaries of other groups, sometimes connected by architectural elements, such as antechambers or suspended walkways, and usually comprising caves of different types and having different functions. A group of caves was the setting where a fraternity of monks carried out its daily life in a given place: it was a monastery with residential quarters and spaces dedicated to religious activity. In some cases in Kizil there are no residential quarters in a group of caves, suggesting the possibility of surface residential areas connected with the cave-temples.

types of groups of caves – the discriminating factor is the absence (groups of the first type) or the presence (groups of the second type) of one or more central pillar caves – but also indicates that groups of the same type are often found clustered in one district.³ The particularly telling situation of the westernmost district in Guxi (of which fig. 1 offers a frontal view and fig. 2 sketches a plan of the lower row of caves), is described and analyzed in this



paper.

Fig. 1 – Western end of the Guxi district.
(Courtesy of the Xinjiang Kucha Caves Research Institute).

The area of Guxi comprised of caves 1-43 is naturally isolated from the rest of the site. It occupies the westernmost end of the cliff, while to the east no caves are carved immediately beyond cave 43. The colossal image caves 47 and 48 are carved about 15 m above cave 43 and were not accessible from below. The physical setting indicates a separation of this district from the rest of the site.

Furthermore, the typological study of each cave and of the groups of caves carried out in the Kizil site as a whole shows that in the area between caves 1 and 43, both independent caves and the groups they form are quite dif-

³ 'District' is a concept discussed in my dissertation (Vignato 2005: 39-40). After pointing out that the caves of Kizil are better understood as belonging to groups, and indicating that in Kizil there exist discrete groups of caves, I demonstrated that groups of the same type are often concentrated in an identifiable area, which I have called 'district' (区段 *quduan*). The site can be divided into seven districts on the basis of the types of caves or groups of caves contained in them. In fact, a district usually contained only one type of caves or group of caves; if other types were present, these were later additions and altered the original plan.

ferent from what is seen in other districts of the site. In fact these caves have some special features rarely found in other districts and the most represented

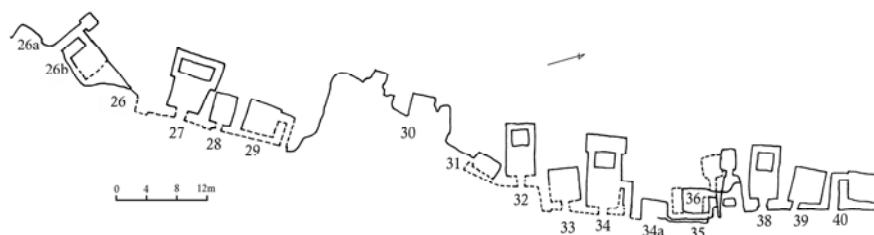


Fig. 2 – Plan of caves 26-40.

type of group in this district is almost completely absent in other districts of the site. This paper discusses the most typical groups found in this section of the cliff without attempting a comparison with other types of groups of caves and their position in other districts of Kizil.⁴

Characteristics of the Groups of Caves

The typical group of caves of the westernmost district of Kizil comprises a monastic cell, usually carved at the side of a group, a square cave at the centre, and a central pillar cave on the other side. This can be clearly seen in four cases: the groups comprised of caves 2-4, 15-17, 27-29 and 38-40. Two other groups are of the same type, but with a slight difference: the addition of another square cave, apparently without front wall. These are the groups 8-11 and 33-35.

The three different types of caves forming a group each had a different function: the monastic cells constituted living quarters for monks, the central pillar caves were intended for ritual activity, the square caves possibly were used as an assembly space where communal activities were carried out. A group of caves indicates not only a special interrelationship among caves, but also an area where a fraternity of monks resided; the three types of caves formed a self-contained monastery.

To this nucleus, other caves could be added after the initial set-up. The expansion of the original group usually included two monastic cells, carved in a characteristic mirror layout: the corridors were set at the outer ends, while the main chambers of the two cells were separated by a rock wall. This is ex-

⁴ Caves not taken into consideration are caves 1, 1a, 1b, which are small caves isolated from the main area, and central pillar cave 7 whose situation is unclear, since it does not seem to form a group with the caves surrounding it and the cliff west of it has collapsed.

emplified in caves 5-6, 18-19 and 26-26b.⁵ This enlargement of the monastery indicates that the main concern was the creation of additional living quarters and not additional worshipping spaces. Thus, these cave expansions do not indicate an alteration to the basic nature of the monastery, but were merely a response to an increasing monastic population.

The following descriptions of each of these typical groups outline the main features of the group and propose a reconstruction of its development. The ordering of the groups described gives priority to the clearest examples, and should not be taken as indicating a chronological development.

Caves 38-40

Caves 38-40 (fig. 3) are the most representative example of the type of group discussed in this paper. The entrance to the three caves is carved in the main wall of a common antechamber, still visible and originally furnished with a front wooden structure, apparently a balcony. The plan of the three caves gives still stronger evidence of their connection and of the fact that they were carved as part of a unified plan.

Cave 38 is the best-known cave of Kizil, well preserved and beautifully painted. The themes of the décor of the main chamber are found in most of the central pillar caves in Kizil: a story of the preaching of the Buddha,⁶ preaching scenes on the lateral walls, alternating rows of *Jātakas* and *Avadānas* on the ceiling,⁷ a median strip with the representation of the Buddhist universe at the centre of the ceiling,⁸ Maitreya preaching in the Tushita heaven on the lunette above the entrance door, surrounded by *devas*. On each side of the door is a medium-sized niche capable of hosting a seated clay image. On both inner and outer walls of the corridors are painted *stūpas* with a seated Buddha in

⁵ A different orientation of the monastic cells added in a second phase and on a different level to the pre-existing part of the group can be explained by the fact that the setting up of these new caves was not part of an initial plan, so the positioning of the new caves was dictated by the direction of the cliff façade.

⁶ Grünwedel (1912: 44, 63, 80, 99, 101, etc.), Yao Shihong (1996: 1-17), Li Chongfeng (2000) interpret the story as the Buddha preaching into Indra's cave. A different interpretation is offered by Huo Xuchu (2000: 273): he suggested that the story represents Brahma imploring the Buddha to teach the *Dharma*. I believe that problems remain with the identification of this important painting. In fact, although the presence of Pankasika on one side of the niche is evident, the personage represented on the other side is in most cases an unidentified *deva*, and there are no indications of the presence of Indra or Brahma. These two have distinctive iconological marks in Kizil when painted as part of the *nirvāṇa* narrative as, for example in the left corridors of caves 80, 178, 179 and behind the reclining Buddha in the *nirvāṇa* scene, as in cave 38.

⁷ Usually the ceiling was completely decorated with *Jātakas* or with *Avadānas*; in the latter case sometimes the row of half diamonds next to the cornice presents depictions of *Jātakas*.

⁸ The median strip is found in almost all central pillar caves. Although the content and the number of elements contained in it differ, in its most complete form it shows Sun and Moon gods at the two ends, a Garuda at the centre, and between them flaming Buddha, Rain and Wind gods.

them; on the outer wall of the rear extension is represented the *parinirvāṇa* scene, while on the inner wall a row of *stūpas* is painted below two small niches which originally hosted small seated Buddha images.

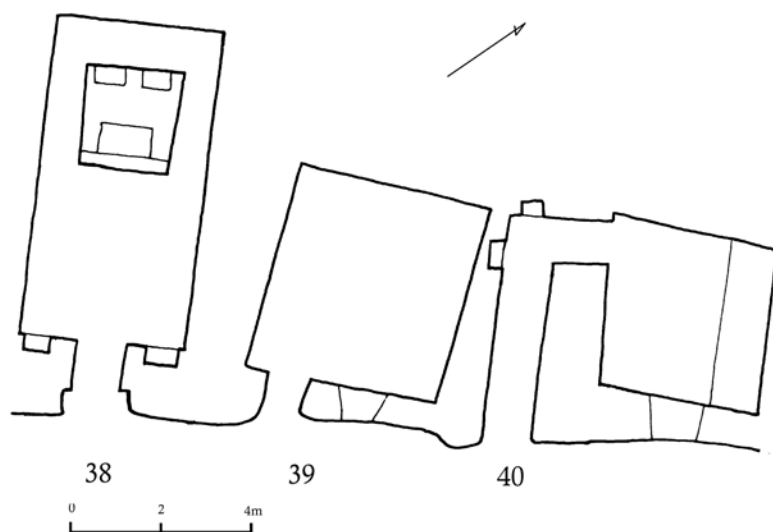


Fig. 3 – Plan of the 38-40 group.

Cave 39 is a square cave with a domed ceiling whose walls were not painted but finished with a layer of plaster and a white-wash of lime.⁹ In the front wall is a large window similar to that in cave 9. Cave 40 is a monastic cell lacking a deposit room at the end of the corridor.

There are no clear indications of the expansion of this group; it seems that the three caves were carved at the same time, judging by the unifying ante-chamber with balcony in front of them.¹⁰ It is possible that cave 36, added in a

⁹ The reddish lines forming frames on the main and lateral walls are often taken as an indication that this cave was not completed. I disagree with this interpretation, since in none of the painted square caves in Kizil is the layout of the decoration composed of three large paintings, on the main and each lateral wall; furthermore, the typical square cave in the groups of this type in this area of Guxi is left unpainted, indicating that the function of this type of cave did not require any décor. I suggest that the drawing of frames on the walls of this and other caves (square cave 222 and the monastic cell 225) was but a trial for a new layout of paintings. If this supposition holds true, it could be taken as a clue for a late dating of the caves with the decoration layout in large panels surrounded by a painted frame (such as caves 67, 83, 116, 118), and an early abandonment of the caves with a trial sketched frame (39, 222, 225).

¹⁰ The façade of the cliff where the entrances and windows of caves 38, 39 and 40 are carved is chiselled so as to present a unified wall; above and below the doors is a row of construction

later period,¹¹ was intended as an addition to the living quarters, but was accessed independently by a staircase carved in the cliff.

Caves 14-19

The group comprised of caves 14-19 (fig. 4) forms the third row of caves of the westernmost district of Guxi and is easily identifiable. The original nucleus is formed by three caves.

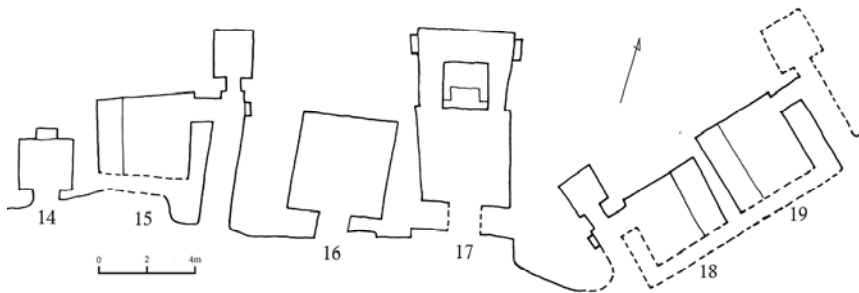


Fig. 4 – Plan of the 14-19 group.

Cave 15, a monastic cell, contains one of the best-preserved fireplaces in Kizil.

Cave 16 at the centre, on approximately the same level as cave 15, is a well carved square cave with a longitudinal, much flattened barrel-vaulted ceiling which was not plastered.

The central pillar cave 17 is set about 160 cm higher than caves 15 and 16. The décor of the main chamber follows the traditional formula of central pillar caves as described above for cave 38. However, the décor of the back area presents some novelties. On the outer walls of both corridors, close to the main chamber, was painted a cosmological Buddha.¹² The décor of the outer

holes placed at regular intervals; see photograph in Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu wenwu guanli weiyuanhui *et al.* (1989: pl. 75). From the study of similar and better preserved structures, it appears that these holes were intended for the setting up of a suspended wooden balcony, long since collapsed.

¹¹ The antechamber of caves 38-40 did not extend to include cave 36, since there is a portion of the cliff separating the antechamber in 38-40 from the one of cave 36; this last is placed in a higher and more inward position than the one in front of the three caves. The position of cave 36, carved above cave 35 and at a higher level than the caves of this group, suggests a date later than both the 38-40 and the 33-35 groups.

¹² The painting of the cosmological Buddha at the entrance of the right corridor is now in the Berlin Museum für Indische Kunst. It is illustrated in Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu wenwu guanli weiyuanhui *et al.* (1997: pl. 181). The attribution of this painting to cave 13 is a mistake that has created much misinterpretation of the iconographic programs of the Kizil caves and should be de-

walls continued with two rows of pagodas, while the lateral walls of the back section each present a shallow niche, originally hosting a seated Buddha image. The inner walls of the lateral corridors are decorated with pagodas similar to those on the outer walls. The main theme is the *nirvāṇa* scene, painted on the outer wall of the back section while the painting on the inner wall of the back section is completely lost.

The group was expanded by adding the monastic cells 18 and 19, carved at approximately the same level as caves 15 and 16, with corridors on the outer sides, thus mirroring each other.

Cave 14, the latest addition to the group, is a square cave presenting a décor similar to that seen in the main chamber of the central pillar caves, a very atypical decorative solution.

The layout of the group thus indicates three stages of development: caves 15, 16 and 17 mark the first phase; caves 18 and 19 the second; and cave 14 the final phase.

Caves 2-6

The group comprised of caves 2-6 (fig. 5) is the lower row in the westernmost part of Guxi. Part of the cliff has collapsed, taking down the front part of the three caves forming the original nucleus, caves 2, 3 and 4; nevertheless, the types of caves can be identified.

Cave 2 is a monastic cell similar to others found in this district. Cave 3 is a transverse rectangular cave, with a door close to the left wall. Part of its painted décor remains on the right wall and on the rear wall, but the theme of the painting has not been identified. The presence of paintings makes this cave a particular case, since the other square caves of this area are not painted.

Cave 4, a central pillar cave, is much damaged; the reconstruction of the décor of the main chamber shows many similarities to most central pillar caves, as described above. The small fragments of paintings remaining in the corridors seem to indicate the story of King Ajatasatru, a well-known episode of the *parinirvāṇa* cycle.¹³ At a later date the monastic cells 5 and 6 were

finitively corrected. The correct placement of the cosmological Buddha is on the outer wall of the right corridor of cave 17. This placement is established on the basis of the symmetry of décor usually found in the caves of Kizil, the similarities to the painting in the left corridor, and the fact that the measurements of the painting now in Berlin correspond to the missing area of the painting on the right wall.

¹³ This narrative cycle is also found, with slight variations, in caves 98, 101, 178, 193, 205, 219 and 224. Yao Shihong (1996: 18-32) has studied this narrative cycle. The identification of the scene on the outer wall of the right corridor as the descent from the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven, leaves room for doubt, while the other identified themes are more certain: on the inner wall of the right corridor the story of King Ajatasatru; in the back section the *parinirvāṇa* scene on the outer wall and the cremation scene on the inner; and in the left corridor the fight for and division of the ashes on the inner wall and the first council on the outer. Cave 4 is the only cave in

carved. Cave 5 presents an unusual feature, a large niche carved on the outer wall of the entrance. This seems to have been a substitute for the deposit room usually found in the monastic cells of this area. The reason why the deposit room was not carved at the end of the corridor can be understood by looking at the plan of the group. Cave 5 was carved very close to and with a different inclination than cave 4, therefore the carving of a deposit room at the end of the corridor would have damaged the existing cave 4.

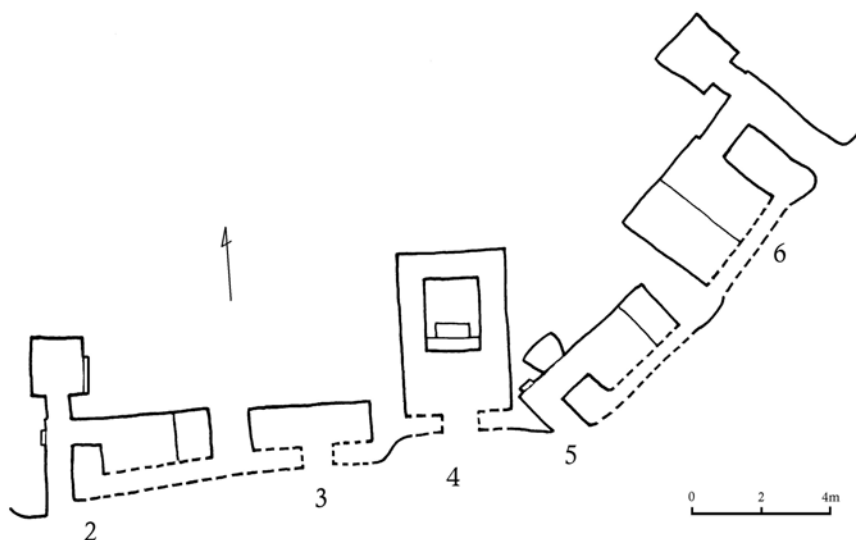


Fig. 5 – Plan of the 2-6 group.

The monastery seems to have developed in two periods: in the first the original nucleus comprising caves 2, 3 and 4 was set up; in the second it was expanded by the addition of monastic cells 5 and 6.

Caves 8-11

In the second row in westernmost Guxi, between the groups composed of caves 2-6 and 14-19 is the group composed of caves 8-11 (fig. 6).¹⁴

this area presenting this narrative. It is possible that cave 4 was chronologically related to the other caves presenting the same stories.

¹⁴ The identification of this group is more complex. It remains difficult to clarify the situation of cave 7, a heavily damaged central pillar cave right of cave 8. I do not consider this cave as belonging to the 8-11 group since all groups in this district have only one central pillar cave. Most probably cave 7 formed a monastery with some other caves in a now collapsed part of the cliff which have affected the right wall of cave 7.

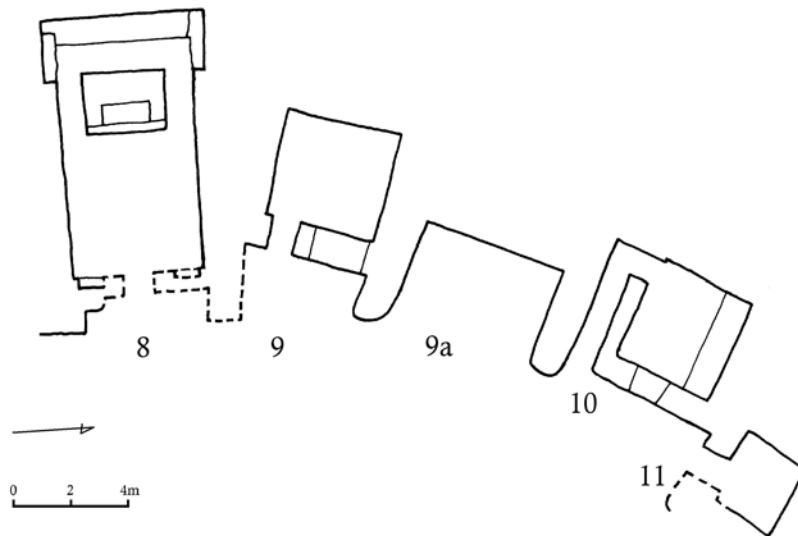


Fig. 6 – Plan of the 8-11 group.

Cave 8 is a central pillar cave of large dimensions, furnished with a large back chamber. It was elaborately decorated; the well preserved paintings of the main chamber are the traditional ones found in most central pillar caves. The paintings of the corridors, now in the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, represented sixteen Kuchean donors with swords.¹⁵ In the back chamber is a platform for a now missing *parinirvāṇa* statue, while the inner wall was decorated with the scene of the fight for and division of the ashes.

Cave 9 is a square cave with a domed ceiling; the door is set to the right in the front wall and a large window to the left. A large wooden frame around these two architectural elements covered almost the entire façade; a similar layout is seen in only one other case in Kizil, in cave 39. White lime was applied over the plaster, but the cave was not painted.

Cave 9a, a square cave set next to cave 9. Apparently it did not have a front wall but in spite of this the cave was considered finished and was used, since gesso was applied to the floor (gesso was usually applied at the completion of a cave).

Cave 10 is a monastic cell without deposit room; cave 11, a cave of small dimensions and without plaster, was possibly intended as a substitute for the deposit room.

¹⁵ Su Bai (1989: 18) has indicated that the medallion motifs appearing on the dress of the donors is similar to those on the silk unearthed in the cemetery of Astana in Xinjiang and in Sanyuan county in Shaanxi, dated between 582 and 678.

The relative position of the caves in this group, the impossibility of expanding it further, since it was compressed between two other caves, 7 to the west and 12 to the east, and the fact that there are no other monastic cells close to it seems to indicate that this group remained as originally planned.

Caves 33-35

The group comprised of caves 33-35 (fig. 7) deserves particular attention, since it presents a development of the group type. The group was initially composed of cave 33, a painted square cave, and cave 34, originally a monastic cell. Groups of the first type are found in the central area of the site, principally between cave 71 and cave 174, and represent a completely different group type. The monastic cell 34 was transformed into a central pillar cave at the time in which other caves were being added to the initial group.¹⁶ The carving of a new series of construction holes on the main wall of the antechamber of caves 33-34,¹⁷ in a position higher than the original one, presumably took place at the time of this transformation, which included the addition of caves 34a and 35.

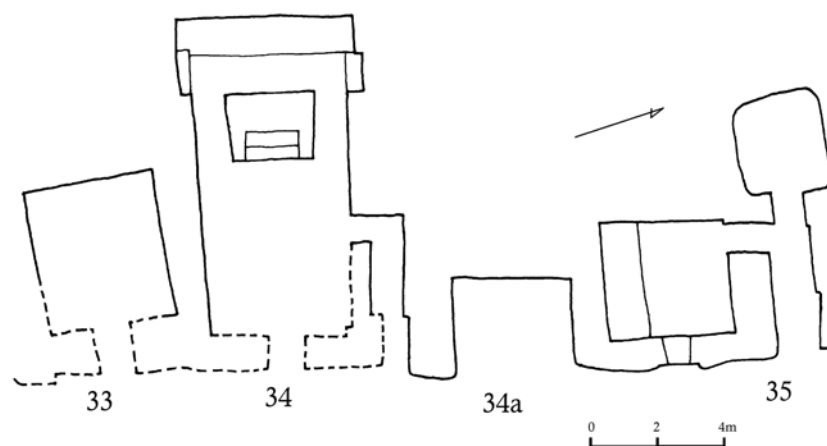


Fig. 7 – Plan of the 33-35 group.

¹⁶ The fact that monastic cell 34 was transformed into a central pillar cave indicates not only the temporal succession between it and the subsequent central pillar cave, but, most importantly, a temporal sequence between the two types of groups. From this I deduce that groups without central pillar caves were present in an early period even in this district of the site, but were later discarded in favour of the type of group we are describing in this paper. A similar but less evident case could be the group comprised of caves 27-29.

¹⁷ See illustration in Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu wenwu guanli weiyuanhui *et al.* (1989: pl. 75). In the photograph it is possible to see that the construction holes in the lower row have been filled with mud and subsequently covered with a stratum of plaster, while a new upper row of holes has been carved intended to support a taller wooden structure.

The décor of cave 33, a square cave with a domed ceiling, can be reconstructed in spite of the damage. It consisted of three large standing Buddha images painted on the rear and each lateral wall. With the transformation into a central pillar cave, the original corridor of the monastic cell 34 was closed, its outer section used as a niche was painted, possibly hosting a statue.

Cave 34a is a small cave: from the plan of the group it can be inferred that it was a cave without front wall, presenting thus a situation quite similar to that of cave 9a; its usage remains uncertain. Cave 35 is a well preserved monastic cell with all the elements typical of the caves of this district.¹⁸

This monastery shows two different phases of development: during the first phase it was composed of the square cave 33 and the monastic cell 34, a group of the first type; in the second phase it was transformed into a group typical of this area by preserving cave 33, transforming cave 34 into a central pillar cave, adding cave 34a and the monastic cell 35, thus becoming a group of the second type. The elevation and possibly the widening of the antechamber, whose traces can still be seen, may have happened during this transformation.

Caves 26a-29

Caves 27- 29 (fig. 8) form the original nucleus of this group which is set to the east of, in a lower position and with a different inclination than, caves 2-6.

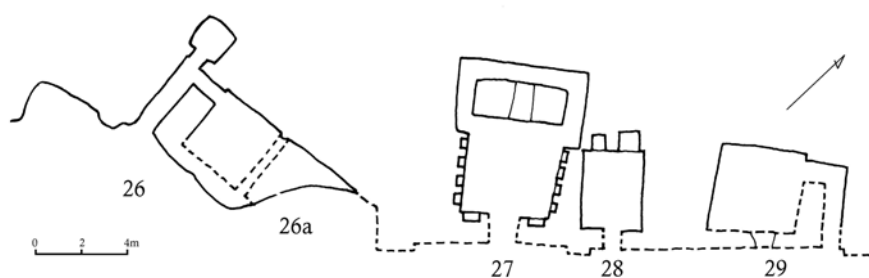


Fig. 8 – Plan of the 26-29 group.

¹⁸ Grünwedel (1912: 62, 63) and Su Bai (1989: 15) have suggested that monastic cells 35 and 36 formed a group. This interpretation is not correct. First, from a drawing by Grünwedel (1912: 62) we can see that the stairway leading to cave 36 had the lower few steps turning eastward, so the entrance to the stairway was in a much lower position than and relatively far from the entrance of cave 35: the entrances of the two caves were thus distant from each other and on different levels, a situation very different from the misleading features seen today, after the collapse of part of the cliff. Second, the typology of the groups of this area suggests that cave 35 belonged to caves 33-35, while cave 36 is probably a later addition to the 38-40 group. Third, the later dating of cave 36 can be clearly seen in the periodization of the monastic cells (Vignato 2005: 22-27). These two caves are to be considered unrelated and belonging to two different groups.

Cave 27 is the most atypical central pillar cave in Kizil. Its main niche, intended for a large standing statue, perforates the central pillar, that is, reaches through to the back section, a unique case in the whole Kucha area. On each side of this main niche are carved three vertical rows of small niches that originally hosted small images, making 59 niches in total on the central pillar's main wall.¹⁹ On each lateral wall 13 larger niches in three rows each hosted a standing Buddha image. The ceiling presents no narrative, being composed of large carved panels adorned with lotus flowers. The décor of the main chamber is thus completely different from other central pillar caves. The plan of the corridors and the layout of the painting in the back area of the cave are also atypical. The identifiable themes of the corridors centre on the *nirvāṇa* cycle: on the outer wall of the back section is a *parinirvāṇa* scene, while on the inner wall is a scene of the cremation of the Buddha on one side of the niche and the division of the ashes among the eight kings on the other.

Cave 28 is a longitudinal rectangular cave of small dimensions, with a ceiling in the shape of a truncated pyramid and two niches, possibly carved at a later period, on the main wall.

Cave 29 is a much-damaged monastic cell. The collapsed area has been repaired with cement in modern times, but there are also traces of earlier repair, such as the elevation of the ceiling of the main chamber and the addition of a low platform made of sun-dried bricks.

The monastic cells 26 and 26b were carved west of cave 27, in a higher position. Their layout, corresponding to that of caves 5-6 and 18-19, is identifiable in spite of heavy collapse. Cave 26b is furnished with a deposit room now filled with debris. The cement wall supporting cave 27 prevents ascertaining whether there was originally a deposit room at the end of the corridor of cave 26. Cave 26a, an irregular small cave carved west of cave 26b, could be a later addition to the group.

This monastery was set up in at least two main phases: in the first, it comprised caves 27, 28 and 29; in a second phase, two monastic cells were added.²⁰ Cave 26a could belong to this phase or have been added at a later time.

¹⁹ It is commonly believed that all these niches were intended for the setting up of small statues of the Buddha, but I disagree with this interpretation. During my fieldwork I noted differences in carving of the small niches that indicated they were intended to contain a central (seated) figure, flanked by two (standing) figures of different nature.

²⁰ There could have been an earlier phase than the two described above. Cave 27 seems to have been originally a square cave, subsequently transformed into a central pillar cave. Indications of this transformation are the atypical layout of its corridors and the closeness of the left corridor to the right wall of cave 28, an unusual construction feature in Kizil, miscalculation which resulted in the collapse of part of the thin rock wall separating the two caves. Unfortunately, the state of degradation of the sandstone does not allow for a definitive confirmation of this hypothesis. The original group could comprise monastic cell 29 and two square caves, 27 and 28, *i.e.* a group of the first type was transformed into a group of the second type, a situation similar to caves 33 and 34 described above.

Other Groups of Caves

Two other groups of caves could be included in the type being discussed, even though they present a slightly different layout compared with the groups described above. The rectangular cave 12 and adjacent cave 13, a central pillar cave, seem to form a group with the monastic cell 24 carved just below them. This group is thus set on two levels.

The second group is composed of the monastic cell 30, the square cave 31 and the central pillar cave 32, now heavily damaged. These caves are carved on a curvature on the cliff and do not present a common façade.

Associated Caves

To complete the monastic setting of this district, besides the groups of caves described above there are two groups of meditation caves. Caves 25, 25a, 25b, 25c were reachable through a tunnel situated below cave 24. A few more meditation caves (definitely three, possibly more) were carved west of cave 12.²¹

Special Characteristics of Caves in Western Guxi

Not only the groups found in this area are of a different type compared with the groups found in other areas of Kizil, but also the caves forming these groups differ from the caves of the same type found in other parts of the site. Some differences are outlined below.

²¹ Parts of these caves were covered with cement during the reinforcement of the cliff carried out in 1988; some traces of one remain west of cave 12. Their presence can be seen in some early (unpublished) photographs taken during the German exploration at the beginning of the twentieth century. A photograph giving an idea of the situation can be seen in Beijing daxue Kaoguxi *et al.* (1997: 168). Although little has been written about them, meditation cells in the Kucha area were quite numerous. They can be divided into two main types. The first type is composed of meditation cells carved in the proximity of other caves. In this case the cells are quite standardized in size: 120 cm high, 100-120 cm wide and 70-80 cm deep. These cells present a barrel vaulted ceiling and often form groups. In Kizil, besides the two groups mentioned above, other meditation cells can be seen: in Gunei, there are four meditation cells sharing a common antechamber, numbered 109a; in Gudong, between cave 200 and the path ascending to Houshan, there are two groups of them (which have not been numbered); in Houshan there are some more meditation cells, such as caves 216a, b and 223a. Meditation cells of this type can be found in other sites as well. In Kizilgaha the meditation cells are grouped in the western part of the site, facing outwards. The largest group of meditation cells is found in Tukurakeaiken: about 40 meditation cells are carved in four rows set one above the other. The second type of meditation caves is often found in the proximity of a large surface temple. It is composed of deep tunnelled caves, with meditation cells carved on both lateral walls, quite regular in size. The best preserved example is Subashi cave 5. Subashi caves 2, 3, 7 belong to the same type. This second type of caves can be seen as far away as Qikexin, Yanqi (Oldenburg 1995: 203-4).

Monastic Cells

The typical monastic cell in Kizil is formed by a corridor,²² an entrance and a main chamber. Wooden doors were set at the beginning of the corridor and at the end of the entrance. On the front wall of the main chamber was a window, originally furnished with a shutter. On the same wall as the entrance a fireplace was carved. Most of the monastic cells of the area we are considering present some special features that make them different from monastic cells in other districts of Kizil.

First, a deposit room was carved at the end of the corridor: this is a common convention among caves of this area, while it is a rare exception in the other districts of Kizil.²³ These depositories are of small dimensions: 160-200 cm in height, 115-270 cm in depth, 150-240 cm in width. They were roughly carved and not plastered, usually presented a flattish ceiling and had a small wooden door. They probably were used to store goods.

A second special feature of the monastic cells of this district is that they were all provided with a low platform, rarely seen in the monastic cells of other districts of the site.²⁴ This platform was approximately 30 cm high, 100-120 cm wide, set along the lateral wall opposite the entrance and fireplace, extending from the rear to the front wall. Two different types can be noted. Some were carved out of the rock and then covered with plaster or the same gesso as used on the floor. Platforms of this kind are usually well preserved and clearly visible, such as in caves 2, 5, 10, 20, 22, 24, 35, and 36. In other caves, platforms were built with sun-dried bricks. These are more difficult to identify, since in most cases the bricks are now missing. Traces remain in caves 6, 15, 18, 19, 29 and 40 where a better-preserved plaster is still present with its white lime indicating the length and width of the platform. In some of these caves traces of a reddish strip, usually painted at the base of a wall, runs at about 30 cm from the floor, indicating the presence and dimensions of such a platform.

An important feature is that the concentration of monastic cells in this relatively small district is the highest in Kizil. In the area we are investigating

²² A few monastic cells belonging to the latest period of activity in Kizil have no corridor; the door is carved directly in the front wall, as caves 62, 64 and 234.

²³ There is no deposit room at the end of the corridor of cave 5: because of its different inclination compared with cave 4 (see fig. 5) there was not enough room to carve a deposit room. The larger than usual niche in the entrance could have been intended to fulfil the same function. Cave 10 does not have a deposit room; cave 11, a small cave close to it, could fulfil this function. Similar situations could be monastic cell 36 and the small chamber 37; cave 40, which lacks a deposit room, and the small cave 41 next to it. Furthermore, very few of the more than 50 remaining monastic cells carved in other areas of Kizil have a deposit room – for instance caves 51/52, 57, 90-21, 90-23, 94, 93, 158, 140 and 162; in most of these cases the carving of the deposit room was executed in a second period.

²⁴ Monastic cells in other areas of Kizil that present a platform are caves 62, 64, 90-17, and probably 75.

there are 18 monastic cells, out of a total of about 70 caves of this type among the approximately 335 caves of the whole site of Kizil. Not only was the monastic cell an essential feature of groups in this district, but also the groups were expanded by adding new monastic cells, so that in the last period monastic cells outnumbered the decorated caves in this district (11 central pillar caves and 3 square caves). This is in contrast to other districts of the site, where no monastic cells were added to pre-existing groups, and in fact some were eliminated by being transformed into caves of other types.²⁵

Square or Rectangular Caves

The rectangular caves of this district, in spite of being of different types both in plan and in the solutions adopted for windows, cornice and ceiling, have a major common characteristic in that they are not painted and some have not even been plastered.²⁶ Since the majority of the square caves in this district are left undecorated, it seems improper to consider them unfinished; it appears that their function did not require any décor. This is the opposite of what happens in other districts of the site, where rectangular caves belonging to groups are often elaborately decorated, or at least plastered and covered with white lime.

It is difficult to say with certainty what the function of these caves was: they were surely not intended as living quarters or for worshipping activities, yet their central position indicates they were an important feature of the monastery. Possibly they were intended for communal activities.

Central Pillar Caves

The main characteristic that distinguishes the type of group we are studying is that it contains one central pillar cave, functioning as the centre of liturgical activity. The central pillar caves found in this district vary in architectural type, the main differences being the presence or absence of a back chamber, the use of niches, and solutions for the cornice. All but cave 27 have a barrel-vaulted ceiling decorated with a quite standardized pattern. Most of the cave's iconographical variations take place in the back area, as in the central pillar caves of other districts of the site. These variations could offer interesting clues to the chronological development of the central pillar cave, and

²⁵ In other districts of the site monastic cells were systematically eliminated by transformation into central pillar caves (caves 98, 171 and 198, for example) or square caves with paintings (cave 189). Other monasteries were expanded by adding new central pillar caves (such as caves 107b and 180). The transformation of cave 34 into a central pillar cave in this area is, as discussed, a different case.

²⁶ There are three rectangular caves with paintings in this area. In cave 3 part of the paintings are preserved, but the identity of the narrative is unclear. Cave 33 was completely painted, as noted above. The well decorated cave 14 is a later addition to the group 15-19 and does not have the same function of the square cave in the original nucleus.

should be studied in conjunction with the development of the central pillar caves in the site of Kizil,²⁷ or, better still, in the whole Kucha area. However, some special features individuate the caves of this type in the area between caves 1 and 43. Caves 8, 27 and 34 are the only three caves in Kizil that have elongated niches on the front wall to host life-size standing Buddha images; caves 8 and 38 are the only two caves in Kizil presenting three large preaching scenes on each lateral wall of the main chamber.

The Development of Types of Cave Groups: Chronological and Functional Implications

The investigation and analysis of Kizil caves reveal that the site was developed over a long period of time. Deeper understanding can be gained by dividing the site into different districts based on the different types of groups of caves present in them. The differences could indicate a chronological development and/or that different districts performed different functions within the site. This paper describes and analyzes the classic type of monastery found in a discrete district in western Guxi.

This district is one of the simplest in Kizil, since one main type of monastery lasted over a long period of time, composed of an original nucleus of three caves – a monastic cell, a square cave and a central pillar cave – and expanded usually by the addition of two monastic cells placed at one end of the group. With such expansions and the addition of new monasteries, this relatively small area became overcrowded, a fact indicating both its long period of use and its importance.

Except for cave 43,²⁸ the caves in this area are painted in the Iranian or second pictorial style, as defined by Grünwedel (1912: 5-6), who noted that most of the paintings in the central pillar caves in Kizil belong to this style, while the Indian or first pictorial style is usually found in square caves. However, in western Guxi even the painted square caves – caves 14, 3 and 33 – are in the second pictorial style, indicating the strong influence of the style in this small district. In this paper it is not possible to offer a more detailed account of

²⁷ A detailed typological study and chronology of all the central pillar caves in Kizil is presented in Vignato (2005: 10-22).

²⁸ The *in situ* investigation reveals that cave 43 was abandoned after being carved and left undecorated. In a second phase statues were set up and the cave was partially painted. The statues were larger than those allowed for at the time of the carving, so that it was necessary to enlarge both the main niche (about 20 cm on both sides and in height) and the *nirvāṇa* couch (the addition of a row of sun-dried bricks approximately 30 cm wide in front of the rock-cut couch). On the lateral walls of the main chamber three large standing Buddhas were painted in Chinese style. Ma Shichang (1992) has already demonstrated that the painting belonging to this type in the Qumtura caves can be dated between the mid eighth and mid ninth centuries. It is reasonable to assume the same date for the décor (not the carving) of this cave.

the paintings and of the themes represented, since a comparison should be done in the wider context of all the paintings found in Kizil.

As well as the type of group forming the classic type of monastery described in this paper, two other types of groups are present in this area. Caves 33 and 34 formed a group composed of square cave and monastic cell. It is possible that caves 27-29 were originally a group formed of a monastic cell and two square caves, cave 27 being transformed in a later phase into a central pillar cave. This is a clear indication that groups of the first type predated groups of the second type.

The other type presents a monastic cell and a central pillar cave, such as in caves 42 and 43 (fig. 9). Caves 20-20a and 22-23 seem to belong to the same type, although these present some smaller caves carved in their proximity. From the relative position of these groups, the typological classification and the fact that in most cases the caves were not completed, this last type of monastery seems to have developed at a later phase.²⁹

From consideration of the development of types of groups it is possible to trace the development of the district of Guxi comprised of the area between

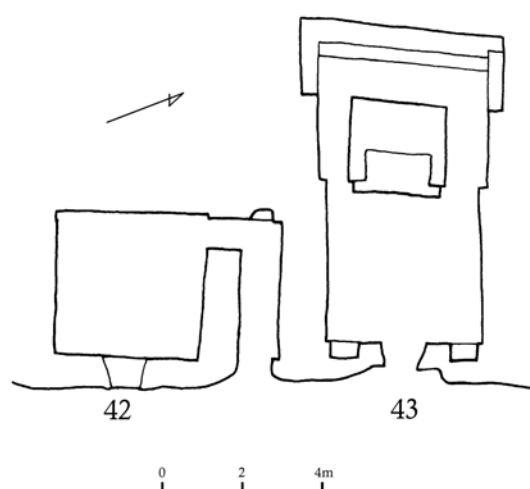


Fig. 9 – Plan of the 42-43 group.

²⁹ For the situation of cave 43 see preceding note. The central pillar caves 20a and 23 were not finished. For a more detailed description, see Beijing daxue Kaoguxi *et al.* (1997: 113, 135). It appears that the three groups of this type were not finished. Fragments of statues were found in cave 20a whose small niche on the main wall of the main chamber appears too small for such a tall cave. In fact, similar caves in the Kucha area, such as caves 26 in Simsim and 21 at Kizilgaha, present large niches carved on the four sides of the pillar, therefore it is possible that the carving of the niche and the setting up of statues in this cave was a later addition, a phenomenon similar to that in cave 43.

caves 1 and 43. Three major phases can be noted: in the first the typical monastery presented monastic cell and square cave; in the second and most flourishing phase a type of monastery developed which comprised central pillar, square cave and monastic cave cell, eventually expanded to include additional monastic cells; in the third phase a new type of monastery appeared, formed of a monastic cell and a central pillar cave. At the time of its abandonment the westernmost district of Guxi was still expanding.³⁰

The study of this district of Kizil emphasizes that the most important changes occurring in the site were those concerning the layout of monasteries: the investigation and identification of different types of monastery and their development is essential for the assessment of the type of Buddhism lived in Kizil. Most of the relevant data emerging from the district considered in this paper are in fact concerned with the setting up of living quarters, worshipping spaces and the communal area of the monastery; variation of themes, pictorial style and narrative as studied by the art historian cannot but be limited to painted caves and therefore cannot cover the whole range of data concerning the type of monastic life lived in these monasteries. Moreover, since the modifications of the monastery deal directly with the much-regulated daily life of monks of the Small Vehicle, detailed analysis of the changes in the structure of the monasteries could lead to the individuation of the monastic codes of discipline followed in Kizil. An example can be drawn from the group 33-35, where a monastery composed of a monastic cell, a central pillar cave and two square caves, a group of the second type, replaced a previous one composed of a monastic cell and a square cave, a group of the first type: this change in the monastic setting indicates that a different type of space was sought by the local community of monks, possibly because the previous one could not fulfil the needs of the community living in it. A second example hinting at a particular code of discipline could be drawn from the special features of the monastic cells mentioned in this paper and not found in the monastic cells of other districts of Kizil. Since the typological analysis of the monastic cells in Kizil site have shown that these features cannot be interpreted as chronological developments, they could be taken as indicating that different types of Buddhism, requiring monasteries or living quarters with a different layout, were practiced simultaneously in different areas of Kizil.

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³⁰ It seems that the monastic cells 20 and 22 were both utilized at a time when the new central pillar caves were not yet completed, indicating that the expansion of the site was probably due to a lack of living quarters. This also indicates that the abandonment of this district of Kizil happened quite abruptly, when the area was still expanding.

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