

Caves of the Thousand Buddhas

Dunhuang, a small city in Gansu Province, is located near the crossroads of the ancient Silk Road. It is made famous largely by the Buddhist Grottoes, known as the Mogao Grottoes, which are one of the world's most important sites of ancient Buddhist culture. The grottoes, also known as Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, preserve nearly a thousand years of Buddhist cave-temple architecture, clay sculpture, mural paintings, and manuscripts, dating from the 5th to the 14th centuries.

The rediscovery of the caves and their treasures in 1900 opened a new field of study that uses the monuments and documents found at Dunhuang to illuminate the complex cultural interactions of ancient Central Asia. The Dunhuang finds reflect periods of Chinese, Tibetan, and Uygur control, and the images and texts reveal the impact of many other Asian regional styles and languages. The intermixture of Indian, West Asian, Central Asian, and Chinese elements reveal a dynamic, eclectic, and thoroughly multicultural context that had a profound impact on the later development of narrative literary forms as well as on Buddhist image-making. This early internationalism has an echo in the contemporary distribution of Dunhuang material and Dunhuang studies around the world. The discovery of a sealed-up library of manuscripts and painted scrolls at the Mogao Grottoes led to the acquisition of significant collections of such portable items by museums and libraries in London, Paris, St. Petersburg (Leningrad), and New Delhi.

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