

Case Study 5.1: Caves as Storage Spaces

Agnieszka Helman-Ważny

Caves are a repository of data about the past, offering clues on human habitation, art, culture and climate history. They have served across millennia as shelters for communities living in extreme conditions, as well as pilgrimage destinations. They have important archaeological implications, since the inhabitants were surrounded by their household goods, as well as ritual and art objects, including books. Caves are sometimes foundations for temples, preserving objects that would usually be stored in monasteries. The Potala Palace, for instance – Tibet's most sacred site and the residence of the Dalai Lamas – was founded upon a meditation cave used by Tibet's first Buddhist king, Songsten Gampo. Through this association, the cave has become sacred, providing the basis for the establishment of a temple complex.

It is not surprising, then, that large collections of manuscripts have been found in caves over the last two centuries. Probably the best-known is the library discovered in the Mogao cave complex in Dunhuang in the early twentieth century (Fig. 1). A hidden chamber, Cave 17, was packed with manuscripts and paintings. This was the largest deposit of manuscripts ever discovered. The repository was probably created in the ninth century by a Chinese monk called Hongbian, the leader of the local Buddhist community. After his death in 862 CE, the cave became a shrine to Hongbian; a statue of the monk was installed, and manuscripts belonging to him were deposited there. More manuscripts were deposited in the cave over the following 150 years before it was sealed. There is also a large cluster of grottoes in Kucha, notably the Kyzil grotto, where paper and other artefacts have been found; there are clusters near Gaochang, the largest being the Bezeklik grottoes, and Turfan. More recently, mountaineers and archaeologists have discovered such caves in the Himalayas, many of which were used by Buddhists as meditation chambers, while others were storage units or libraries.

Many formerly inhabited cave complexes can be found in Mustang, near Chusang, Choser, Di, Dhe, Sangboche and Monthang. One such complex where manuscripts were found is Mardzong (Fig. 2). Some caves were burial sites – as witnessed by the discovery of skeletons and tomb goods – while others were refuges for hermits who lived in darkness and isolation to meditate. Some caves were (and still are) monasteries, where monks have lived alongside the manuscripts and pieces of art. Murals are still visible on a few walls. The cave complex was probably a monastery where texts were deposited once they were no longer useable: as sacred objects, books should not be destroyed. Caves present a challenge in securing and storing manuscripts. Damage is caused by temperature fluctuation, dirt and dust; birds and other animals have access to them, causing further damage.



Fig. 1: The Mogao cave complex in Dunhuang; photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (2011).



Fig. 2: The Mardzong cave complex; photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (2017).