

The Eight Protectors in Tun-huang: The Khotanese Kingdom's Avatars in a Chinese Visual Context

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Between the end of the ninth century and the last quarter of the tenth century a specific iconographic theme appears in some caves in Tun-huang 敦煌, which displays a group of eight deities designated by their captions as “protecting the kingdom of Khotan” (護于闐國). The deities are typically found on the slopes of the caves' entrance corridor ceilings, four on each side. In addition, the ceilings are decorated with other Khotan-related imagery, further underlining the connection to Khotan.

Protector deities of Khotan are mentioned in various texts (Khotanese, Tibetan, and Chinese) produced between the sixth and the tenth centuries. Particularly, in Khotanese texts a group of deities, referred to by the collective name of Eight Protectors (Khot. *haṣṭā parvālā*), gains special importance. These deities are described as having been appointed by the Buddha Śākyamuni with the specific task of protecting the kingdom of Khotan and ensuring its sovereignty.

Literary evidence shows that the Eight Protectors played a fundamental role in the Buddhist religious panorama of the Khotanese people. It is thus not surprising that the importance of their cult is echoed in the art of the Mo-ka'o 莫高 Caves in Tun-huang at a time when Tun-huang was under the rule of the Kuei-i-chün 歸義軍 (848–1036?). The Kuei-i-chün established a close familial relationship with the Khotanese royal house, and a semi-permanent community of Khotanese emerged in Tun-huang during this time. The cult of the Eight Protectors was likely exported to Tun-huang through this community.

After providing an overview of the emergence and the significance of the cult of Eight Protectors in Khotan, this paper will discuss the related imagery as depicted in the Tun-huang caves. The identification of the Eight Protectors of Khotan in Tun-huang itself represents a fairly consistent case, as the visual documentation is corroborated by the respective inscriptions. This paper will instead aim to trace the possible origins and influences of the specific iconographical composition of this group found in Tun-huang. While it is a fact that a clear equivalence of representation of the Eight Protectors in the artistic evidence from Khotan is difficult to detect (due to the fragmentary pictorial evidence in Khotan), recent attention to the theme of Eight Protectors in Tun-huang and findings in Khotanese

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archaeology of the last decades offer new paths for deeper research. The underlining question of this inquiry is: to what extent has the imagery of the Eight Protectors in Tun-huang drawn from Khotanese models and how much have the Tun-huang artists elaborated on the said imagery on the basis of both local and familiar (i.e., Chinese?) visual language?