

## CONSTRUCTION OF THE MOGAO CAVES AND GROTTOS AT DUNHUANG

**Xi Yue**

*Belarusian State University, Nezalezhnasti av., 4, Minsk, Belarus*

The existing Mogao cave area stretches over 1,600 meters and contains a total of 735 caves. There are 492 caves with murals and sculptures, housing 3,390 colored sculptures and approximately 45,000 square meters of murals. The earliest cave at Mogao began its human-based history in 366 CE during the Fu Qin (苻秦) Dynasty and continued through 11 dynasties, concluding in 1368 during the Yuan Dynasty. During the Ming dynasty, starting with the Jiajing (嘉靖) Emperor's closure of the Jiayuguan Pass (1524 CE), the period of decline of the Mogao Caves began. In the 26th year of the Guangxu era of the Qing dynasty (1900 CE), the Cave of Scriptures was discovered in the Mogao Caves, and the period of researches began.

*Keywords:* Mogao caves; Scriptures; Dunhuang; Buddhism; Chinese Dynasties.

## СТРОИТЕЛЬСТВО ПЕЩЕР И ГРОТОВ МОГАО В ДУНЬХУАНЕ

**Си Юе**

*Белорусский государственный университет, пр. Независимости, 4, г. Минск,  
Беларусь,*

Протяженность пещерного комплекса Могао составляет более 1600 метров, и в общей сложности здесь насчитывается 735 пещер. В 492 пещерах находятся фрески и скульптуры, в том числе 3390 скульптур и около 45 000 квадратных метров фресок. История древнейшей пещеры Могао, основанной человеком, началась в 366 году н. э. во времена династии Фу Цинь (苻秦) и продолжалась на протяжении 11 династий, завершившись в 1368 г. при династии Юань. В эпоху династии Мин, с закрытия императором Цзяцзин (嘉靖) прохода Цзяюйгуань (1524 г. н. э.), начался период упадка пещер Могао. В 26-м году правления императора Гуансюя династии Цин (1900 г. н. э.) в пещерах Могао была обнаружена Пещера Писаний, и начался период исследований.

*Ключевые слова:* пещеры Могао; Священные Писания; Дуньхуан; буддизм; китайские династии.

The Dunhuang Caves primarily consist of several large cave complexes, including the Mogao (莫高) Caves (also known as the Thousand Buddha Caves), the Western Thousand Buddha Caves, and the Yulin (榆林) Caves. The Mogao Caves are located 25 kilometers southeast of Dunhuang city, on the eastern side of the Mingsha Mountain, and are the largest cave complex in

Dunhuang. The earliest cave at Mogao began its human-based history in 366 CE during the Fu Qin (苻秦) and continued through 11 dynasties, concluding in 1368 during the Yuan Dynasty. The existing Mogao cave area stretches over 1,600 meters and contains a total of 735 caves, divided into southern and northern sections. There are 492 caves with murals and sculptures, housing 3,390 colored sculptures and approximately 45,000 square meters of murals. The architecture, colored sculptures, and murals of the Mogao Caves together have created the complex that one can consider as a world of Buddhist paradise. The evidence for determining the earliest construction date of the Mogao Caves comes from the inscription on the stele originally located in the Cave 332 (Early Tang), known as the “Da Zhou Li Jun Mogao Caves Buddha Niche Stele” [1]. This stele was erected in the first year of the Shengli (聖歷) era of the Wu Zhou (五周) dynasty (698 CE) by Li Kerang (李克讓).

The inscription tells us a story: in the second year of the Jianyuan era of the Former Qin Dynasty (366 CE), a monk named LeZhun (乐尊) traveled to this area. At that time, as the sun set, it cast slanted rays on the Sanwei Mountain (三危山), making it appear as if thousands of golden lights and images of countless Buddhas were shimmering among the peaks. Moved by this divine light, the monk bowed in worship with utmost sincerity. In his heart, he believed this place to be a sacred land of the Buddha. Subsequently, he began to carve the first Buddha niche into the cliff. Following him, another monk named Faliang also traveled here and carved the second cave nearby. This marks the origin of the Mogao Caves [2]:

…莫高窟者·厥初秦建元二年·有沙门乐尊·戒行清虚·执心恬静。尝杖锡林野·行至此山·忽见金光·状有千佛·遂架空凿岩·造窟一龛。次有法良禅师·从东届此·又于尊师窟侧·更即营造。伽蓝之起·滥觞于二僧…

*...The Mogao Grottoes originated in the second year of the Jianyuan era of the Qin Dynasty. There was a monk named Le Zun, who had been pure in his precepts and tranquil in his mind. Once, while walking in the wilderness with his staff, he came to this mountain and suddenly saw a golden light, which appeared to be a thousand Buddhas. He then carved a niche in the rock. Later, the Zen Master Fa Liang came from the East and built another grotto next to Le Zun's. The origin of the monastery began with these two monks...*

According to the “Comprehensive Record of the Mogao Caves (敦煌莫高窟内容总录)” among the caves that can be dated, there are 7 from the late Sixteen Kingdoms period, 18 from the Northern Wei, 15 from the Northern Zhou, 70 from the Sui, 228 from the Tang (including 44 from the Early Tang, 80 from the Peak Tang, 44 from the Tibetan period, and 60 from the Late Tang), 32 from the Five Dynasties, 43 from the Song (including renovations), 82

from the Western Xia (including renovations), and 10 from the Mongol Yuan period [3].

The primary chambers of the Dunhuang Grottoes can be categorized into six types: central tower-pillar caves, Vihara caves, bucket-shaped caves, Nirvana caves, huge Buddha caves, and back partition caves [4]. During the Ming dynasty, starting with the Jiajing (嘉靖) Emperor's closure of the Jiayuguan Pass (1524 CE), the population of Shazhou began to migrate inward to the Central Plains, leading to a period of decline for the Mogao Caves. [5]

嘉靖三年秋 ( 1524 CE ) · 擁二萬騎圍肅州 · 分兵犯甘州 · ……九疇因力言賊不可撫 · 乞閉 ( 嘉峪 ) 關絕貢 · 專固邊防 · 可之 ·

*In the autumn of the third year of Jiajing (1524 CE), he led 20,000 cavalry to besiege Suzhou, and divided his troops to attack Ganzhou... Jiu Chou strongly argued that the rebels could not be appeased, and requested that the (Jiayuguan) Pass be closed to cut off tribute, focusing solely on strengthening border defenses. This was approved."*

People had nearly forgotten that artistic palace in the northwest desert. In the 26th year of the Guangxu era of the Qing dynasty (1900 CE), the Cave of Scriptures was discovered in the Mogao Caves, containing many scrolls, texts, embroidery, silk paintings, and ritual objects of the V–X centuries, which hold a significant research value.

## References

1. Su Bai. Buddhist Grottoes in China: Archaeological Study of Chinese Buddhism from the III to VIII Centuries (宿白, 中國佛教石窟寺遺跡: 3至8世紀中國佛教考古學). Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2010. P. 7.
2. Dunhuang Academy. Li Jun's Stele of the Mogao Grottoes (敦煌研究院, 李君莫高窟佛龕碑). No. Z1101.
3. Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Institute. A Comprehensive Catalogue of the Contents of the Mogao Grottoes (敦煌文物研究所, 敦煌莫高窟內容總錄, 北京). Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1982. P. 177–184.
4. Xiao Mo. Studies on Dunhuang Architecture (蕭默, 敦煌建築研究, 北京). Beijing: Machinery Industry Press, 2003. P. 295.
5. Zhang Tingyu. History of Ming Dynasty: Hami (張廷玉, 明史·哈密). Vol. 329.