

# ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES  
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES  
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS  
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ  
WORLD HERITAGE LIST N° 440

## A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : The Mogao Caves

Location : Gansu Province

State Party : China

Date : December 29, 1986

## B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the proposed cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria I, II, III, IV, V and VI.

## C) JUSTIFICATION

In the desert landscape of the extreme northwest of the province of Gansu, are the cliffs of Mogao, which form the eastern edge of Mount Mingsha. The cliffs rise above the Dachuan river, which is 25 kilometres southeast of the Dunhuang oasis. Within the cliffs are the 492 natural cells and rock sanctuaries extending over 1600 meters that make up the famous Caves of a Thousand Buddhas (Qianfodong).

The history of these caves is inseparably linked with that of the first Chinese expeditions against the nomads of the Mongolian steppes and Central Asia. After the almost complete failure of the Expedition of Zhang Qian in the ancient country of Bactria in 139-126 B.C., a long section of great walls was built to protect the northern frontier. In 117 B.C., military posts, like that of Dunhuang, were established. Two years later, the number of these command posts was doubled.

Control of the Hexi pass and the oases route, which was the central segment of the Silk Route that, from the time of the Han dynasty, connected China with the Mediterranean world, was the motivating factor in the incessant conflicts between the Chinese sovereigns and the nomads. The outpost of Dunhuang would remain cut off from the Middle Empire for long periods at a time, and so constituted a sort of cosmopolitan enclave where all the peoples of Asia mingled together. Many foreign religions were represented, and devotees of Buddhism, Nestorianism and Islam could be found in this caravan oasis.

According to an inscription, Buddhist monks first began work on the caves of Mogao in 366 A.D., whereas the State officially recognized Buddhism as a religion only in 444. The majority of the cells and

temples were constructed, however, from the 5th century up through the 14th century, when the region began to decline.

The caves provide a thrilling capsulized look at the history of Central Asia, several great moments of which are illustrated in this unique collection of Buddhist rock art. A number of the largest elements - e.g. the colossal statues of Buddha, frescos that illustrate doctrinal themes, reflecting transcendental teaching - correspond to the period in the 7th century when the Tang Dynasty tightened its control of the Silk Route. The first Tantric themes appear at the time of the occupation of Dunhuang by the Tibetans, from 790 to 851. Following the conquest of Gansu by the Tanguts in 1036, these themes multiplied, encouraged by the proliferation of lama sects under the Western Xia (1036-1227).

With this same invasion in 1036 correspond the some 45,000 manuscripts discovered in 1900 by the Taoist monk Wang Yuan-lu (Wang Guolu) in a cave where they had been hidden at the approach of the Tanguts. Although dispersed, this fabulous collection is one of the essential sources of Asian history.

The group at Mogao, so strongly linked with the history of China, also constitutes an anthology of Buddhist art with paintings and sculptures spanning a period of a thousand years. Preserved there are the Jakata, narrations of the previous lives of Buddha, from the period of the Northern Wei (386-534); under the Sui (581-618), they took on the aspect of circumstantial accounts that featured elegant characters dressed in Chinese fashion. One can admire the oldest known examples of Shanshui - mountain and water scenes - that date from the Tang period. There are other astonishing compositions where the ambitious theological program in no way excluded a welter of anecdotal scenes (caves no. 103 and 220).

Along with this anthology of painting is a veritable in situ sculpture museum. Although the size of some works makes them noteworthy (e.g. the Buddha in cave no. 96, from the Tang period, is 33 meters high), it is generally the variety of designs and their artistic and expressive qualities that capture one's attention.

Having recalled that the caves of Mogao, along with those of Yungang (Shanxi), Longmen (Henan) and Dazu (Sichuan), constitute one of the four major Buddhist rock art ensembles in China, ICOMOS recommends that they be included on the World Heritage List. This property satisfies each of the six criteria outlined in the "Guidelines".

- Criterion I. The group of caves at Mogao represents a unique artistic achievement as much by the organization of space into 492 cells and temples built on five levels as by the production of more than 2000 sculptures carved out of the rock walls, then covered with clay and painted, and the approximately 45,000

square meters of murals, among which are many masterpieces of Chinese art.

- Criterion II. For a thousand years, from the period of the Northern Wei (386-534) to that of the Mongolian dynasty of the Yuan (1276-1368), the caves of Mogao played a decisive role in artistic exchanges between the Middle Empire, Central Asia and India.

- Criterion III. The paintings at Mogao bear exceptional witness to the civilizations of ancient China during the Sui dynasty (cave no. 302 contains one of the oldest and most vivid renderings of the Silk Route theme; the mural depicts a camel pulling a cart), the Tang dynasty (workers in the fields in cave no. 23 and a line of warriors in cave no. 156), and the Song dynasty (the celebrated landscape of Wutaishan in cave no. 61 is an incunabular example of cartography, with its cavalier view of the region, where nothing has been left out - mountains, rivers, cities, temples, roads and caravans are all depicted).

- Criterion IV. The Caves of a Thousand Buddhas constitute an outstanding example of a Buddhist rock art sanctuary.

- Criterion V. Still occupied by Buddhist monks from the end of the 19th century up to 1930, the rock art ensemble at Mogao, administered by the Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Institute, preserves the example of a traditional monastic settlement.

- Criterion VI. The caves are strongly linked to the history of transcontinental relations and that of the propagation of Buddhism in Asia. For centuries the Dunhuang oasis, near which the two branches of the Silk Route forked off, enjoyed the privilege of being a relay where not only merchandise was traded, but ideas as well, as is testified to by the Chinese, Tibetan, Sogdian, Khotan, Uighur and even Hebrew manuscripts found within the caves.

The quality of the proposed property having been established beyond all doubt, ICOMOS should like to attach certain recommendations to its favorable opinion:

1. That the protected zone around the caves be extended to the outer edges of the cliffs and in particular to a large area situated at the foot of the cliff, in order to protect the caves from any infrastructure and construction which would harm the site.

2. That a study program, for which a plan has already been drawn up, be presented at UNESCO in order to augment the capacities of the Dunhuang Research Institute with regard to the conservation, restoration and management of a site which unquestionably is of interest to the international community.