

Scenes of Hell and Damnation in Dunhuang Murals

The descriptions of the various hells in Buddhist eschatological and cosmological literature constitute one of the most fascinating speculations on the characteristics of otherworldly realms elaborated by this religious system, which provides extravagant details on sinners' atonement processes. While a number of important works have focused on the illustrated manuscripts of the *Sūtra on the Ten Kings*, which portrays the ten judges of Chinese "purgatory," the visual narrative describing the theme of hell damnation, as seen in Dunhuang murals, has received less attention. Preliminary research has shown that these illustrations can be divided into at least three different categories: hell representations found in scenes illustrating various *sūtras*; damnation scenes in cosmological charts; and mural paintings of Dizang/Kṣitigarbha showing bureaucratized representations of the underworld featuring the Ten Kings "system." This paper sets out the major characteristics of the visual vocabulary of hell representations in Mogao murals that fall into the first two categories.

Keywords: Dunhuang; Buddhism; medieval China; mural paintings; hells.