A quantitative analysis of the Buddhist paintings in Kucha on the Northern Silk Road (5th – 10th century) provides many surprises. Among the most important results is the high number of demons represented in the paintings. Almost every cave contains images of demons venerating the Buddha; their appearance and the weapons they carry vividly illustrate how dangerous they are. On the other hand, we also encounter deities of very similar appearance, who take on the role of protective deities. They are placed at the cave entrance or in the squinches of the dome – here they ward off attacks on the temple covering all directions. A number of elements in the appearance of the deities were taken from India; the nāgas display cobra hoods and Viṣṇu and Śiva are included among the demons. Other iconographic features – such as ears in the shape of pots – are not found in the Indian imagery, but are the literal visualization of an Indian expression (kumbhakarna). In most cases, however, the demons depicted do not follow any Indian prototypes. Unknown to India are elements such as the two long objects appearing on their heads – usually explained as feathers – and the frequently depicted calf warmers made from fur. There are many indications that the ancestor of these demons is the shepherd god Pan with his horns and goat legs.

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