
ON THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT: In the era of 21st century globalization, increasing emphasis is placed on examining the role of world religions in shaping spirituality and advancing global civilization. Spiritual culture has consistently played a crucial role in societal progress, maintaining an inseparable connection with religious beliefs and traditions throughout history. This principle equally applies to Buddhism, which coexisted alongside Zoroastrianism and other faiths for centuries in southern Central Asia, particularly in the historically and culturally significant region of Bactria-Tokharistan.

Central Asia has long been recognized as a pivotal crossroads for diverse religious ideologies, spiritual teachings, and cultural interactions. Leading global research institutions have conducted extensive studies on this subject, producing a wealth of scholarly publications. Collaborative research teams composed of Uzbek and international scholars have focused on exploring Buddhist monuments in Bactria-Tokharistan. Their findings indicate that Buddhism spread to regions such as Margiana, Sogdia, and East Turkestan via Tarmidh-Termez, an essential political, economic, and cultural hub during antiquity and the medieval era.

Given these insights, there is a pressing need for a thorough scholarly investigation into key aspects such as material and spiritual culture, artistic heritage, numismatics, and epigraphic evidence. Additionally, reinterpreting and restoring the original functions of Buddhist monuments through contemporary methodologies and continuing in-depth research remain critical priorities.

KEYWORDS: Central Asia, Buddhism, Southern Uzbekistan, Southern Tajikistan, Northern Afghanistan, Bactria-Tokharistan, Zurmala, Karatepa, Fayaztepa, Tarmidh-Termez, Vihāra.

INTRODUCTION

The region of Bactria-Tokharistan is recognized as one of the prominent historical and cultural areas formed in Central Asia during ancient times. It encompasses the territories of southern Uzbekistan, southern Tajikistan, and northern Afghanistan. At its peak, the region witnessed the spread of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. The influence of these religions and teachings is reflected in the ancient and medieval monuments scattered across Bactria-Tokharistan.

The Buddhist monuments of Bactria, particularly in its northwestern part (modern Surkhandarya region), held a uniquely significant role in the penetration and dissemination of Buddhist teachings in southern Central Asia and neighboring territories. Archaeological research, supplemented by written sources, confirms that Buddhism was one of the dominant religions in this region even before the advent of Islamic culture and religion.

The Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang), who traveled through Bactria-Tokharistan in 629–630 CE, documented that there were 12 Buddhist temples in Tami (modern Termez) and 5 Buddhist temples in Chaganian (Chaganrud, an area along the middle and upper banks of the Surkhandarya River). He further mentioned that these temples housed more than a thousand monks [1, P. 189].

The history and outcomes of archaeological research on the Buddhist monuments of Northwest Bactria-Tokharistan can be categorized into distinct periods: the 1920s–1980s, the 1990s, and the early 21st century.

The current state of research on this subject indicates that the history of Buddhism in Northwest Bactria-Tokharistan was initially reconstructed based on written sources, while archaeological materials were first collected during expeditions conducted in the 1920s and 1930s. Until the 1960s, very little archaeological research was conducted on Buddhist monuments in this region. Only with the initiation of new archaeological expeditions did the scope of scientific knowledge significantly expand.

Despite the extensive studies carried out on the Buddhist monuments of Northwest Bactria and Bactria-Tokharistan as a whole, several questions concerning Buddhist teachings in the region remain unresolved and require further investigation.

Among the key unresolved issues are the mechanisms of the penetration of Buddhist teachings from the Amu Darya to the northern regions and the establishment of early Buddhist structures. Contemporary research aims to define the architectural features of these early Buddhist monuments, identify their ancient Indian prototypes, and explore their repetitive and unique architectural elements.

Additional attention must also be directed toward understanding the fate of Buddhist teachings and structures during the early Middle Ages and the Arab invasion, as well as analyzing the influence of Buddhist architecture on Islamic architecture.

It is evident that discrepancies between archaeological findings and written historical sources contribute to conflicting interpretations regarding the role and significance of Buddhist structures in Bactria-Tokharistan. These inconsistencies affect our understanding of how Buddhist doctrine spread from Central Asia to the wider East.

The Spread of Buddhism in Central Asia.

The followers referred to this doctrine as “Dharma” (“The Law of Dharma”) or “Buddhadharma” (“Teachings of Buddha”). The term “Buddhism” was introduced into academic discourse by European scholars in the 19th century. After the death of Buddha, a split emerged among his followers, leading to the formation of two main branches.

The first branch is known as Hīnayāna (The Small Chariot or The Narrow Way of Salvation), which strictly adheres to traditional Buddhist teachings.

The second branch is referred to as Mahāyāna (The Large Chariot or The Broad Way of Salvation), which reformed many aspects of Buddha's teachings, attributed divine characteristics to Buddha, and introduced rituals and prayers into Buddhist practice.

According to Hīnayāna, an individual can attain liberation from worldly concerns by entering a Sangha (a monastic community) and leading a life of seclusion and piety. It was the proponents of Mahāyāna who began using the term Hīnayāna to differentiate other Buddhist schools from their tradition. However, supporters of Hīnayāna insist that they do not identify with this term and advocate for referring to each Buddhist school by its original name.

Mahāyāna, on the other hand, emphasizes compassion and benevolence as central principles for guiding others toward higher spiritual goals. In Hīnayāna, Buddha is viewed as a human teacher who attained enlightenment through numerous lifetimes. In contrast, Mahāyāna venerates Bodhisattvas—enlightened celestial beings who assist others in achieving enlightenment.

According to Mahāyāna, everyone has the potential to attain Buddhahood, leading to the recognition of many Buddhas within this tradition. Buddha is perceived as being omnipresent and representing the ultimate unity of all existence. The primary Bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna are Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya.

The monastic way of life in Buddhism was established by Gautama Buddha during his lifetime. Historical records indicate that Demetrius I, ruler of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, invaded ancient India in 180 BCE and founded an Indo-Greek Kingdom. Under this kingdom, Buddhism flourished, especially during the reign of Menander I (Milinda in ancient Indian texts), who is celebrated in Mahāyāna tradition as a significant patron of Buddhism.

In the 1st century BCE, political transformations in Northwest India further facilitated the growth of Mahāyāna Buddhism and contributed to the dissemination of Buddhist teachings across the region.

Without delving into a detailed review of scientific sources and articles devoted to the spread of Buddhist teachings in Tarmidh-Termiz and Northwest Bactria as a whole, it should be noted that several scholars have addressed this topic.

According to B.A. Litvinsky, the spread of Buddhism into Central Asia occurred on the eve of or during the formation of the Kushan state [2, P. 112].

B.Ya. Stavisky, based on the results of archaeological research conducted on Buddhist monuments in Northern Bactria, associates the penetration of Buddhism into the region with the reign of Kanishka the Great [3, Pp. 156–157].

T.K. Mkrtichev asserts that the large-scale construction of Buddhist structures in Northern Bactria and the spread of Buddhist teachings in this region occurred in the second half of the 1st century CE [4, P. 57].

Sh.R. Pidaev believes that the initial acquaintance of the population of Bactria with Buddhist teachings took place in the 1st century BCE, and during the formation of the Kushan Kingdom, there were likely already significant centers of Buddhist missionaries in the area [5, P. 18].

E.V. Rtveladze suggests that the peoples of Central Asia became acquainted with Buddhist teachings during the rule of the Greco-Bactrian king Agathocles (185–170 BCE), whose coins depicted a stupa on the reverse side [6, P. 10].

Thus, contrary to some existing scientific views, the penetration and spread of Buddhism in Northwest Bactria began earlier than the reign of Kanishka the Great. The spread of Buddhism

into this region occurred through Bactra (modern Balkh). The study of Buddhist structures in the Balkh-Kabul region serves as important evidence supporting this hypothesis.

In the 2nd century BCE, and later during the period when the territories of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom were conquered by the Yuezhi tribes, Tarmidh-Termiz emerged as one of the largest settlements in the region [7, Pp. 14–15]. At the beginning of the Common Era, Buddhism firmly established itself in Tarmidh-Termiz, leading to the construction of the first Buddhist monastery in Central Asia, Fayaztepa.

During the reign of Kanishka (first half of the 2nd century CE), Tarmidh-Termiz became an ideological center of Buddhism in Central Asia. From this hub, Buddhist missionaries spread the teachings into Sogdiana via the Temir-Darvaza route, northwest through the Oxus Valley, into Margiana, and to Eastern Turkestan through the Pamir and Alay mountains. Buddhist missionaries are believed to have reached as far as China and Tibet [8, P. 10]. Research findings indicate that an early Buddhist structure existed at Fayaztepa in the first half of the 1st century CE, which was later transformed into a grand Buddhist monastery [9, Pp. 53–66; Pp. 67–72; P. 36].

The stratigraphy of ancient Indian inscriptions suggests that Karatapa dates back to the first half of the 1st century CE. According to Sh. Pidaev, in the second half of the 1st century CE, a ground-level Buddhist structure was built on the northern outskirts of the future religious center, which became the second Buddhist complex in Tarmidh-Termiz during the Kushan period [10, P. 34]. It should be emphasized that the implementation of such large-scale construction projects was only possible with the support of a central authority favorable to Buddhism or an economically powerful Buddhist community. It is likely that both conditions existed in Tarmidh-Termiz at the beginning of the Common Era. The right bank of the upper reaches of the Amu Darya River served as the initial route for the spread of Buddhism, as evidenced by the Fayaztepa and Karatapa complexes. Chronologically following them are the Ayrtaam Buddhist monument [11, Pp. 72–76] and, possibly, Ushtur-Mullo [12, Pp. 70–86; P. 164].

During the era of the Great Kushan Kingdom, along with the transformation of the Karatapa Buddhist center into Khadeuka-vihāra (“The Vihara of the Ruler”), three additional Buddhist complexes were built in Tarmidh-Termiz:

The Zurmola Stupa – an impressive Buddhist structure, A structure located on the northern outskirts of the medieval Termiz rabat, of which only the basement level remains [13, Pp. 118–119; Pp. 320–321], Chingiztepa, where archaeological and epigraphic evidence confirms the existence of Buddhist monuments [14, Pp. 128–129].

On Dunyotepa, the presence of Buddhist structures remains a subject of debate, but decorative architectural elements suggest that Buddhist monuments may have existed there during the Kushan period.

The second route for the spread of Buddhism from Tarmidh-Termiz followed the upper reaches of the Chaganrud River (Surkhandarya). Along this path, Buddhist structures were discovered in Dalvarzintepa, as well as in other settlements in the region [15, P. 197; Pp. 90–97; Pp. 81–95].

The third route extended through Iron-gate. Within a 30 km radius of this area, Buddhist monuments have been identified, while within a 70 km radius, examples of Buddhist art have been

uncovered. Further north, in regions such as Poyonkurgan, traces of Buddhist motifs on craft items are notably absent [16, Pp. 18–30; 25–30].

CONCLUSION

Significant scientific insights into Buddhist architecture, art, material culture, and epigraphy have been obtained through the study of Buddhist monuments in Northwest Bactria-Tokharistan. These findings are of critical importance for expanding our understanding and advancing scholarly perspectives on the history of Northwest Bactria-Tokharistan, including the Buddhist temples of Tarmidh-Termiz.

In Northwest Bactria-Tokharistan, Buddhist teachings first entered the Tarmidh-Termiz region via the Balkh-Kabul route. Buddhism played a significant role in shaping the ideological life of the people of this region, especially in its central city, Tarmidh-Termiz. Buddhist communities acted as crucial intermediaries in propagating the doctrine. The architectural design of Buddhist monuments, epigraphic analysis, and the activities of Buddhist missionaries collectively indicate that Tarmidh-Termiz served as a unique “bridge” for the spread of Buddhism to Central Asia and the Far East.

An analysis of Buddhist epigraphic samples suggests that representatives of the Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvāstivāda schools were active in Buddhist complexes in Tarmidh-Termiz.

Fayaztepa and Karatepa ancient Indian inscriptions include terms such as “Acera” (Teacher), “Dharmakathika” (Propagator of the Doctrine), and “Mahadharmakathika” (Great Preacher of the Doctrine). These references indicate that extensive propagation of Buddhist teachings occurred at the Karatepa temple. Furthermore, the architectural features uncovered through recent research reveal that the Fayaztepa Monastery was specifically designed to support Buddhist worship and provide monastic education.

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