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History of Buddhism in Central Asia

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Annotation: Having emerged in India as a religion and a philosophical teaching, Buddhism had afterwards spread far beyond its birthplace. Central Asia had played a key role in exchanges between ancient India and China. The article discusses Buddhism's expansion onto Central Asia and the region's role in its further expansion to China. The article also demonstrates the significance of Chinese written sources for studying Buddhism in Central Asia.

Key words: Buddhism, India, Central Asia, Tokharistan, archaeological sites, the Surkhan-Darya, the ancient Termez.

Over the last few years, the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan has been paying special attention to the preservation of cultural heritage, including the Buddhist heritage, encouraging a thorough study of Buddhist artifacts and their popularization.

Most Buddhist sites discovered in Uzbekistan are in the south of the country, mainly in Surkhan-Darya region, making its amelioration in terms of attractiveness for international tourists, and primarily for those from East and South-East Asia, a pressing issue.

Great Silk Road has for millennia contributed not only to the development of trade, but also to the convergence of peoples' cultures, traditions, and customs. For millennia, Central Asia has been witnessing crucial ethnic processes, active interaction between cultures, massive trade activity, conclusion of diplomatic treaties and military alliances.

From the time immemorial, Central Asia has been a place where diverse civilizations – Buddhist, Judean, Islamic, Christian, and more ancient ones – had been neighboring, supplementing and enriching each other.

Buddhism played a vital role in the spiritual life of peoples living along Great Silk Road's pathways in ancient times and early Middle Ages.

As is well known, Buddhism as a religion and a philosophical teaching had emerged in India in the 6th century BC, and after a couple of centuries began its expansion beyond India, having become a world religion. Central Asia had become the first region to be targeted by its missionaries.

Many scholars believe that the initial period of Buddhism's history in Central Asia is still a subject of discussion. There are several scholarly versions of when and how Buddhism had spread over the Central Asian region. Some believe it had happened during the Kushan emperor Kanishka's reign (first half of the 2nd century BC) while others refer to earlier periods.

B.A. Litvinsky, a renowned researcher of Central Asia, argues that Buddhism had been already widespread in the 3rd century B.C. and was expanding northward onto Bactria and Amu-Darya. He believes that Buddhism's influence in Bactria can be traced back to pre-Kushan and early Kushan periods. His point of view is based upon historical sources relating to the period from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD.

Scholar P. Bagchi¹ suggests an even earlier period. He believes that it had been the time of king Ashoka's reign (273 – 239 BC)², who was a renowned patron of Buddhism. However, no archeological evidence corroborating this suggestion has been discovered so far.

A renowned Uzbekistan historian E.V. Rtveladze holds that Buddhism had arrived at Central Asia a little bit later, during the Greco-Bactrian Empire's period³. By that time Buddhism had already gained strong ground in Bactria and Western India (Yandharu).

Acad. E. Rtveladze's suggestion is corroborated by numerous archeological discoveries in the territory of the ancient Greco-Bactrian Kingdom⁴. In particular, coins depicting the Buddhist "stupa" minted during the reign of Greco-Bactrian king Agathocles (*circa* 185 – 165 BC) were found⁵ in large quantities on several Northern Bactria's sites⁶.

According to B.A. Litvinsky, it was already in the middle and late Greco-Bactrian period (i.e., in the middle of the 2nd century BC) that Buddhist missionaries and later local adepts of Buddha's teaching had turned up in Afghanistan and then in Central Asia, while in the Kushan period (1st - 2nd centuries AD) its penetration significantly increased⁷.

Basing upon the archaeological data from Buddhist sites' excavations in Northern Bactria, historian B. Stavisky supposes that Buddhism has been present in Bactria in the period of the renowned Kushan ruler Kanishka's reign (late 1st and early 2nd century AD).

Acad. E. Rtveladze singles out three stages of Buddhism's history in Northern Bactria:

- 1) first centuries BC – a period of Bactria's people familiarizing with Buddhism;
- 2) 1st century AD – Buddhism's spread throughout Bactria and construction of first Buddhist buildings there;
- 3) first half of the 2nd century AD – Kanishka's reign. Buddhism is thriving and spreads onto Bactrian cities.

¹ Bagchi P. Le canon bouddhique en Chine. Les traducteurs et les traductions. T. I. P., 1927. C.11-39. Cited from Ртвеладзе Э. Кушанское царство. Династии, государство, народ, язык, письменность, религии. – Ташкент: Историческая библиотека, 2019. – С.120.

² Note that the years of the reign of King Ashoka vary according to different sources.

³ Ртвеладзе Э. Кушанское царство. Династии, государство, народ, язык, письменность, религии... – С.121.

⁴ Ibid. – С.122.

⁵ Ibid. – С.122.

⁶ Ibid. – С.123.

⁷ Ртвеладзе Э.В. Цивилизации, государства, культуры Центральной Азии. – Ташкент: УМЭД, 2005. – С.161.

Further strengthening of Buddhism's positions is illustrated by the construction of a large Buddhist convent in Dalverzin Tepa in the late 2nd – early 3rd centuries AD.⁸

Consequently, this information allows us to conclude that the emergence and spread of Buddhism in Bactria refer to very first centuries AD, and that in the 1st century AD first Buddhist temples had already been erected there⁹.

The study of Buddhist heritage in the territory of Uzbekistan has been greatly contributed to by local and Russian scholars. The spread of Buddhism and Buddhist architecture in Central Asia is studied in the works of Uzbekistan scholars M.E. Masson¹⁰, G.A. Pugachenkova¹¹, E.V. Rtveladze, L.I. Albaum¹² and others.

N.V. Alexandrova¹³ (Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences) has undertaken a translation into Russian of Xuanzang notes (they were translated for the first time by V.P. Vassilyev back in 1845, but 600 pages of the translation remained unpublished).

Of particular significance is the study of Central Asian Buddhist manuscripts and epigraphic materials that was and is being undertaken by Russian philologists and linguists V.V. Vertogradova¹⁴, M.I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya¹⁵, B.A. Litvinsky¹⁶ and others.

B. A. Stavisky's "The Fate and Fortunes of Buddhism in Central Asia" is dedicated to key artifacts of Central Asian Buddhism. B. A. Stavisky has dedicated several articles to general questions of the history of Buddhism in Central Asia.¹⁷

It was as early as in the period of king Ashoka's reign (273-239 BC) that Buddhism had become the state religion of the vast Indian Kingdom of Maurya (322-184 BC) and afterwards expanded to Bactria, Sogdiana, Eastern Turkestan, and China¹⁸.

⁸ *Ртвеладзе Э.* Кушанское царство. Династии, государство, народ, язык, письменность, религии... – С.127.

⁹ *Ibid.* – С.128.

¹⁰ *Массон М.Е.* Городища Старого Термеза и их изучение. ТТАКЭ, т. I. – Ташкент, 1940.

¹¹ *Пугаченкова Г.А., Ртвеладзе Э.В.* Северная Бактрия – Тохаристан. Очерки истории и культуры (древность и средневековье). – Ташкент: Фан, 1990. – 220 с.; *Пугаченкова Г.А.* Халчаян. – Ташкент, 1966; *Пугаченкова Г.А.* Скульптура Халчаяна. – М., 1971; etc.

¹² *Альбаум Л.И.* Раскопки буддийского комплекса Фаязтепа // Древняя Бактрия. – Л., 1974; *Альбаум Л.И.* Балалык-Тепе. – Ташкент; etc.

¹³ *Александрова Н.В.* Путь и текст: китайские паломники в Индии. – Москва: Восточная литература, 2008. – 366 с.

¹⁴ *Вертоградова В.В.* Индийская эпиграфика из Кара-тепе в Старом Термезе. Проблемы дешифровки и интерпретации. – М., 1995.

¹⁵ *Воробьева-Десятовская М.И.* Памятники письмом кхироштки и брахми из советской Средней Азии // История и культура Средней Азии. – М., 1983. – С.22-96; *Бонгард-Левин Г.М., Воробьева-Десятовская М.И.* Находки санскритских рукописей письмом брахми на территории советской Средней Азии // Санскрит и древнеиндийская культура. Т.1. – М., 1979; Памятники индийской письменности из Центральной Азии. Вып. 2 / Издание текстов, исследование, перевод и комментарии Г.М. Бонгард-Левина, М.И. Воробьевой-Десятовской. – М., 1990.

¹⁶ *Литвинский Б.А.* Буддизм и буддийская культура Центральной Азии (древность) // Московское востоковедение. Очерки, исследования, разработки. – М., 1997. – С.57-59; *Литвинский Б.А.* Буддизм в Средней Азии (Проблемы изучения) // <http://annales.info/books/bsa1.htm>

¹⁷ *Ставиский Б.А.* Судьбы буддизма в Средней Азии. – М., 1998; *Ставиский Б.А.* Была ли Средняя Азия ретранслятором буддизма? // Эрмитажные чтения памяти В.Г. Луконина 1995-1999 годов. Тезисы докладов. – СПб., 2000. – С.18-19.

¹⁸ *Ртвеладзе Э.В.* Цивилизации, государства, культуры Центральной Азии... – С.159.

The history of Buddhism's spread in Central Asia and the region's role in the advancement of this religion to China are rather closely connected. We must start examining this matter from missions dispatched by Ashoka to Arachosia and Gandahara¹⁹, as well as materials on early stages of Buddhism in Afghanistan. It appears that the Buddhist missionary activity was unfolding both northward towards Bactria and north-westward towards Parthia's borders.

Central Asia, including Bactria and Parthia, served as a steppingstone for the preaching of Buddhism in China.

According to B.A. Litvinsky, Central Asia natives had made a significant input to Buddhism's spread throughout China. The first generation of translators included two Parthians: An Shigao and his disciple An Xuan, three Yuezhi, Zhi Lauqia-chan, Zhi Liao and Zhi Liang, and two Sogdians, Kang Mengxiang and Kang Juyuai. An Shigao was the first to start a systematic translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, setting up a group of translators. According to different sources, he is attributed between 34 and 176 works and translations²⁰. The second generation translators that worked in the second half of the 2nd and in the 3rd centuries AD, had also translated into Chinese a significant number of Buddhist books.

According to some sources, up until the fall of the Western Jin Dynasty (i.e., till 316 AD) translators of Buddhist books into Chinese comprised six or seven Chinese, six people of Indian and sixteen of Central Asian origin (six Yuezhi, four Parthians, three Sogdians, two Tokharians from Kucha and one Hotanian)²¹. They translated into Chinese many fundamental Buddhist books, thus laying a foundation of the Chinese Buddhism.

There were two pathways of Buddhism's spread in China: immediately from India and from certain historical cultural areas of Central Asia where Buddhism, before its first appearance in China, already had been strongly rooted.

Noting the significant role of certain areas of Western Central Asia, namely Parthia, Bactria, and Sogdiana, in the spread of Buddhism, that is corroborated by Chinese written sources, Acad. E.V. Rtveladze refers to scholarly opinions to the effect that Buddhism had appeared in China between the first half of the 1st century BC – middle of the 1st century AD.²²

History of the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia and the region's role in the advancement of this religion to China are closely connected. That was the region through which Buddhism spread along the Great Silk Road, reaching Dunhuang, the center of the Chinese Buddhism where in the early 20th century a massive evidence left by Buddhist monk and pilgrims from Central Asia was discovered.

Amongst the most renowned written artifacts are "Xiyu ji" ("Notes on the journey to the West") by a Chinese monk Xuanzang²³, "Wang Wu Tianzhugo Zhuan" ("Notes on pilgrimage to five states of

¹⁹ Литвинский Б.А. Буддизм в Средней Азии (Проблемы изучения) // <http://Annales.info/books/bsa1.htm>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Data acc. to: Ртвеладзе Э.В. Цивилизации, государства, культуры Центральной Азии... – С.163.

²³ For more detailed information on Xuanzhang and his works refer to: *Xin Hai*. Da Tang Xuan Zang. 大唐玄奘. 心海法師. (Xuanzang of the Great [era] Tang). – 北京: 文化艺术出版社, 2018. – 222 页; *Qian Wenzhong*. Xuan Zang Xiyu ji. 钱文忠. 玄奘西域记. (Travel to the Western Countries of Xuanzang). – 上海: 上海书店出版社, 2017. – 239页; *Da Tang Xiyu ji*. Dong Zhiqiang yizhu. 大唐西域记. 董志翘译注. (A journey to the Western countries in the Great [era] of the Tang. Translation and commentary by Dong Zhiqiang). – 北京: 中华书局, 2012. – 449页.

India”) by a Chinese pilgrim of Korean origin Hui Chao²⁴ and many others who had passes through the territory of Uzbekistan on their way back from India.

According to Chinese monks who visited the region in the 7th – 8th centuries, there was an abundance of Buddhist convents there.²⁵

Indeed, archeological excavations have revealed a whole series of Buddhist monuments in the territory of Central Asia. Most of Uzbekistan’s ancient monuments are concentrated in Surkhan-Darya region. Not being very big, Surkhan-Darya region is in many senses incredible. The region is in the southernmost part of the country, at the intersection of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. Significant part of the region is occupied by the Surkhan-Sherabad Valley circumscribed from three sides by mountain ranges: Kutitantau and Baisungau from the west, Hissar Range from the north and Babatag from the east, being open only to the south, towards Amu-Darya.

Amongst the most significant Buddhist monuments are Khalchayan, Dalvarzin Tapa, Ayritam, Kyzyl Tapa, Bandykhan, Kampyr Tapa and others. There are extant unique Buddhist monuments on the ancient Termez archeological site: several Buddhist convents, including Qara Tapa cave temple and Fayaz Tapa convent. They included sanctuaries, stupas for keeping Buddhist relics and were decorated by paintings and sculptures of Buddha and Kushan rulers.

Archeological data show that ancient Termez was one of the largest centers of Buddhism in the region. First discoveries in Old Termez, being fragments of Buddhist sculptures, were made in 1928 by the Museum of Oriental Culture’s expedition headed by B. Denike.²⁶

At that time, as A. Strelkov, one of the expedition’s members, was examining several caves in the northwestern part of the ancient site on the Qara Tapa hill, he had interpreted them as rooms of a Buddhist cave convent. Later he suggested that the hill in the southeast of Old Termez fortress, the Zurmal Tower, may be a ruin of a gigantic Buddhist stupa.

In 1961, a joint expedition headed by B. Stavisky had begun the perennial study of Qara Tapa.²⁷ A group of unique Buddhist monuments had become a valuable finding of this perennial work, and the monuments were included to the historical chronicle as the Qara Tapa Buddhist Religious Center.. Concluding documents were published in six issues of the Qara Tapa Expedition Materials. Hundreds of papers on architecture, epigraphy, ceramics, numismatics and monuments’ various technical and technological aspects resulted from the study of Qara Tapa artifacts.

Further research was carried by a joint Uzbek-Japanese expedition headed by K. Kato (Japan) and Sh. Pidayev (Uzbekistan) in 1996. Results of their work were later published in Japan and Uzbekistan²⁸.

Another Buddhist monument, the Fayaz Tapa hill, located to the northwest from Qara Tapa, had been studied by L. Albaum from 1968 to 1976. A large convent was discovered there. Not far from the northeast corner of the old site, L. Albaum found the remnants of foundations. Artifacts found there helped the scholar to identify the location as a Buddhist religious building²⁹.

²⁴ Hui Chao. Hui Chao Wang wu Tianzhuguo zhuan. 慧超. 慧超往五天竺国传. (Notes on pilgrimage to the Five States of India) // http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2089_001.htm

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Буддизм в Термезе // <https://www.advantour.com/rus/uzbekistan/termez/buddhism.htm>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Пидяев Ш. Қадимги Ўзбекистонда буддавийлик ва буддавий мерос: китоб-альбом. – Т.: Ўзбекистон, 2011. – 120 с.

²⁹ Буддизм в Термезе // <https://www.advantour.com/rus/uzbekistan/termez/buddhism.htm>

Thus, on excavation sites in the territory of Old Termez innumerable stone architectural fragments and decorated statues of Buddha were found.

Other sources of the history of Buddhism from Old Termez are terracotta statues of Buddha discovered both as a result of archaeological excavations and in the process of material collection in the territory of the ancient city. In all probability, many Buddhist religious buildings were constructed in northeastern parts of Qara Tepa and Fayaz Tepa in the middle of the 1st century AD.

Few Buddhist building survived to our day. Some of them were probably destroyed by the Arabs in the time of the Arab Conquest (8th – 9th centuries).

All those circumstances had put an end to the functioning of the Buddhist infrastructure in Termaz and outskirts. Monks inhabiting Termez Buddhist convents had, most probably, migrated to the Kashmir area where at that time a staunchly pro-Buddhist Karkota dynasty ruled.

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