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Monuments of Buddhism in the Regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract: It is known from history that the diplomatic, trade and migration routes connecting different countries and nations passed through the lands of Central Asia. In addition, since ancient times, China has maintained relations with the peoples of Central Asia. Currently, the importance of Central Asia as a bridge connecting China, East Asia and European countries is increasing.

It is known that Buddhism is one of the oldest religions. This religion was brought to Central Asia by noblemen and missionaries through the first system of caravans and waterways that covered all the regions of that time known as the Great Silk Road. This article deals with historical monuments of Buddhism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Key words: religious teaching, missionary, shrine, temple, culture, art, statues, monuments, objects, mint.

It is known that the peoples of the Central Asian region took the lead in mastering both secular and religious knowledge. At the same time, many achievements are associated with the name of our great ancestors who were born and grew up on this land, who made a worthy contribution to the development of culture and science. Also, the fact that people who believe in different religious doctrines such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam have been living together in Central Asia indicates that religious tolerance has developed here. The ancient culture of the peoples of the region has been influenced both externally and internally, and good and close neighborly relations have been established with the surrounding people.

The territory of Kazakhstan has long been a place for various religious doctrines, and even now representatives of different religions and nationalities live in the republic. As of January 2023, the population of the country is 19 million 765 thousand people. As a result of the social polls, religious belief was divided as follows: Islam - 79%; Christianity - 24%; atheism – 3%; Buddhism – 1%; Judaism – 0.5%; those who refused to answer - 0.5%; other recognitions – 2%¹.

¹ Буддизм в Казахстане – как он появился и развивался // <https://o-buddizme.ru/mesta-i-svyatyni/buddizm-v-kazakhstan>

At the end of the second quarter of 2020, 18 denominations and 3816 religious associations were registered in the republic. Accordingly, Islam – 2683 (religious associations); Protestantism – 592; Orthodoxy - 342; Catholicism – 86; Buddhism - 2².

Despite the small percentage of Buddhists among the population, the teachings of Buddha are widespread in some regions of Kazakhstan. There are many monuments of Buddhist culture in this area. However, some of them have not reached our time. The history of Buddhism in the lands of Kazakhstan began even before our era. It can be conditionally divided into three big stages.

The first period (middle of the 1st century BC - 7th century AD). The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia began with the development of the Great Silk Road from India to the Central Asian region, Kazakh lands and the Ottoman Empire. The events take place in the middle of the 1st century BC. Buddhist views were deeply rooted, especially in the Asian states of that time: Sugdiyana, the Parthian kingdom, Kangyu. The spread of religions continued mainly due to missionary theologians. Most often, among them were Sogdians, as well as Kangyus, Yueji, Parthians. In the sources, it is mentioned that they acted in the interests of the powerful Kushan state at that time.

Missionaries were especially active in spreading Buddhism to the world during the 2nd-3rd centuries. It was at that time that the first shrines of Buddhism began to appear. For example: Kara-tepa Buddhist monastery in Termiz; Temple in the Sanzar Valley near Sogdiya; Statues and monuments near Merwa; Ajina-tepa monastery (appeared five centuries later); Temple of Kuva found in Ferghana; Monastery in Suyaba; Ak-Beshim Buddhist Temple, etc. Since the Sogdians settled there, Jettisu has become a kind of center of Buddhism.

By the 6th century, many Turkic peoples living in Central Asia had become acquainted with the Buddha's teachings, and by the middle of the next century, their leaders had joined the ranks of the Buddhists and even began to patronize them.

Between the 7th and 8th centuries, many shrines in Jettisu were built, and most of them resemble examples of Buddhist art from eastern Turkestan. These include any temples, statues, murals depicting Buddhist motifs. Historians have also noticed the influence of Chinese and Indian cultural examples.

It is worth mentioning that excavations are still being carried out in the Taraz area, and scientists have discovered a large underground temple on the site of the ruins of the city of Sayram, which flourished in the Middle Ages.

Middle Ages (8th-13th centuries). By the beginning of this period, a strong development was observed in the state of Tibet, which was already dominated by its own direction of Buddhism in the neighboring regions. Chinese culture was also of great importance. However, in the 10th century, Islam became the official religion of the Karakhanids. Buddhist philosophy not only declined, but was also persecuted. But this religion did not lose its existence during this time.

The agreement of mutual forces with the leader of the Naimen led by Kuchluk has changed. He forced Muslims to renounce their faith, was punished for it, and spread the ideas of Buddha. In honor of this, a temple was even built in the village of Qiyalyq.

Recent period (until the last century). By the 14th century, the Dzungars entered the territory of the Kazakhs, who formed a very powerful Dzungarian Empire, which existed here for a long time. They also

² Какие религии исповедуют в Казахстане и почему важна свобода вероисповедания?
<https://informburo.kz/special/kakie-religii-ispoveduyut-v-kazahstane-i-pochemu-vazhna-svoboda-veroispovedaniya.html>

recognized the Buddhist religion and built sacred temples. For example, by the beginning of the 18th century, there were almost sixty shrines here.

Buddhist temples were also built in Jettisu. Thus, 58 Lamaist temples and monasteries were built on the map of Dzhungaria compiled in 1716-1733.

Lamaism, more precisely Vajrayana Buddhism (Tibetan Buddhism), Buddha and Tibetan scriptures are associated with paintings on stones. The most famous place with many petroglyphs is located two hours from Almaty on the right bank of the Ili River, in the Kapchagay Gorge, called Tamg'ali-Tas (stone with signs or inscriptions). This place marked the crossing of the Ili River along the Great Silk Road.

In fact, this place is known not only for animals, primitive people and their rock paintings, but also for images of Buddha.

According to information from various sources, these regions were famous not only for their rock paintings, but also for their healing properties. It is said that settlers often came here to treat their illnesses.

Stele of Tekelia. Another monument of Buddhism is the Tekelia stele. It is located around the city of Tekeli, about 290 km from Almaty and 40 km from Taldykorgan. Stella looks like a three-meter stone, similar to a pyramid, on which the carved images are clearly visible. The first, the image of the Buddha Stupa, represents the Mind of the Buddha. Stupani holds a Snow Lion in its paws, which is considered the bravest and most honest animal in the world in Tibet. The second is the Kalachakra symbol (a Buddhist tantra about the structure of the universe) and its mantra. It is located near the Black River.

A distinctive feature of the stella is that it is engraved with Buddhist images and inscriptions. The upper plane of the stone is engraved with the symbol of the Kalachakra, a magical monogram of ten syllables. On it is an inscription in Tibetan script, the meaning of which remains a mystery to this day. Below them is a stupa - a structure built in honor of important events in Buddhism.

Ablaikit. 15 in the second half of sr. The Dzungar tribes of Western Mongolia entered Eastern Kazakhstan. They intended to establish a large nomadic empire in this area. For this, the Jungars built fortresses and temples. The Ablaikit Monastery is located near Ust-Kamenogorsk in the Kalbinsky Range of East Kazakhstan and in the Kent Mountains of Kyzylkent near Karkaralinsk. It was built in 1654 by Jungari Taishi (leader, elder among Mongolian peoples) Ablai. That's why the name of this temple is "Ablai" and "kit" or "hit" (translated from Hungarian "fortified monastery"). It was an example of a Lamaist (a form of Buddhism) castle monastery.

To this day, only the ruins of the Ablaikit monastery have survived from the temple. They are located in the territory of the Ulansky district of the East Kazakhstan region.

For many years, Ablaykit has attracted the attention of scientists and travelers. The first description of the monastery was made in the 17th century by the Russian ambassador Fyodor Ivanovich Baykov, who accompanied Taisha Ablai. In the 18th century, the Russian researcher Vasiliy Shishkov made the first plan and sketches of the structure. Excavations have been actively conducted in the area of this temple in recent years.

In 1758, Chinese troops defeated the Jungians and settled in their city, but a century later, a wave of anti-Chinese uprisings broke out, during which the Chinese were expelled. Even after many wars, some temples built of stone remained intact.

For example, temples near Lake Balkhash existed until the second half of the last century, and at the beginning of the same century a temple was built in the village of Medeo near Almaty.

Kayalik settlement. Another Buddhist temple is located in the territory of Kayalik village, which historians identify with the medieval settlement of **Kayalik**.

This area dates back to the 13th century, but is in a worse state of preservation than Ablaykit. Once upon a time, representatives of three religions - Buddhists, Muslims and Christians - lived peacefully here. Therefore, this place is a symbol of tolerance, religious tolerance.

Findings of silver and copper coins minted at the Kayalik mint show that this city was once a major political and commercial center protected from enemy attacks by a four-meter fortress wall at the foot of the mountains. Since 2014, the Kayalik settlement has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

When it comes to Buddhist cultural monuments preserved in the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan, it can be noted that Buddhism was of great importance during the time when their ancestors lived in Eastern Turkestan, Southern Siberia, and Altai, before they were moved to Tian-Shan in the 15th-18th centuries³.

Ethnic Kyrgyz who migrated to Tien-Shan in the late Middle Ages called the statues of the Turko-Mongol modification of the Medieval Buddhas and Burkhan "any Buddhist image called God, they always worshiped them and brought sacrifices to them"⁴. Among the Burkhans worshiped by the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs in Northern Tien-Shan, there were carved Buddha and Bodhisattva stones in places where there are ancient rock paintings, in mineral springs, and at the crossings of trade routes. "Healing Buddha" settlements in Shakyamuni, Avaloka-teshvara, Issyk-Ota (Kyrgyz ridge), Tamg'ali-Tas (Kapchigai, Zailiysky Olatov) gorges have already become widely popular.

These four groups of epigraphic monuments on large stones in the southeastern zone along the Issyk-Kul river continue in the Kazakh part of the mountains, where Kyrgyz and Kazakhs are called by the same name, namely Tamg'ali-Tas. this was later proven⁵.

It is recorded in historical sources that medieval Buddhist monuments existed only in the Chui Valley and the Issyk-Kul region⁶. The medieval inhabitants of the Chui Valley adopted various religions - Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Hinduism, and later Islam. But Buddhism has a special place among them. This can be determined by archaeological finds and found manuscripts.

Over the years, archaeological excavations have excavated the ruins of Buddhist temples and unearthed ceramics, clay, stone and bronze, creating an important collection of artifacts.

In 1953-1954. L.R. Kizlasov found Buddhist objects in the settlement of Ak-Beshim, which was named "The First Buddhist Temple" in historiography⁷. The scientist's research results were published in the foreign press, which made it a world heritage site⁸.

³ Джуманалиев Т.Д. Очерки политической истории кочевников Притяньшанья в древности и до конца XVII века. – Бишкек, 2007. – 436 с.; Мокеев А. Кыргызы на Алтае и на Тянь-Шане. – Бишкек, 2010. – 117 с

⁴ Горячева В.Д. Индо-буддийский компонент культурного наследия Кыргызстана // Проблемы культорогенеза и культурного наследия. – СПб, 2009.

⁵ Горячева В.Д. Новые находки индо-буддийской культуры в Кыргызстане // Индия и Центральная Азия. – Ташкент, 2000. – С.205-212; Горячева В.Д. Индо-буддийский компонент культурного наследия Кыргызстана // Проблемы культорогенеза и культурного наследия. – СПб, 2009.

⁶ Кольченко В.А. Буддизм и другие «индийские» религии средневекового Кыргызстана // Религии Центральной Азии. Т.2. Буддизм. – Самарканд: МИЦАИ, 2019. – С.57-164.

⁷ Кольченко В.А. Буддизм и другие «индийские» религии средневекового Кыргызстана // Религии Центральной Азии. Т.2. Буддизм. – Самарканд: МИЦАИ, 2019. – С.60.

⁸ Кызласов Л.Р. Археологические исследования на городище Ак-Бешим в 1953-1954 гг. // ТКАЭЭ, Т. 2. Москва, 1959. – С.155-227.

In 1955-1958, a group led by archaeologist L.P. Zyablin discovered the second Buddhist temple in Ak-Beshim⁹. Apart from the well-preserved architecture, the temple also contains many clay Buddhist sculpture finds and other artifacts. In 1961-1962, research on Buddhist topics was continued in the settlement of Krasnaya Rechka under the guidance of Kyrgyz archaeologist P.N. Kozhemyako.

Speaking about the history of Buddhism in northern Kyrgyzstan, V. D. Goryacheva and S. Yes. Peregudova believed that there were no Buddhist structures here before Xuanzang, but there may have been Buddhists among the settlers "from Sogd and Tokhariston". In the 7th and 8th centuries, this region was "one of the main routes of spread from India to Central Asia and the Far East and became an important center of Buddhism."¹⁰

At the end of the 90s of the last century, B. Ya. Stavisky published a general monograph on Buddhism in Central Asia¹¹. He noted that "the Chui Valley was an important center of Buddhism in Central Asia" in the 7th-10th centuries. It also notes the "significant influence of Xinjiang and through it Tibet and China and partly India, primarily Kashmir, on the development of Buddhism in our region and the new archaeological data confirming a Sogdian or Tokharistan origin."¹²

Buddhist monuments in the Chui Valley clearly show the cultural connections between Jettisu Buddhist communities - from China and Eastern Turkestan to Northern India and Tokharistan. However, a large Buddhist settlement largely separated the cities of the Chui Valley. According to him, some rulers and nobles were ardent Buddhists, They built temples, brought gifts, sponsored sankhi¹³. Buddhist artifacts found in temples in Kyrgyzstan also testify to the great popularity of the Mahayana bodhisattva cult, and at that time the patron saint of merchants and travelers was the saint bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Perhaps this is the origin of the idea that the main spreaders of this doctrine were merchants and artisans traveling with caravans along the Great Silk Road.

In fact, trade routes were the main basis reflecting the direction and speed of various communications. According to written sources in East Turkestan, North China and Korea, the main spreaders of Buddhism in the 6th-10th centuries were the existing nobility and wealthy strata of that time. At the same time, a close connection between the ruling princes and the sankhi can be noted.

According to Tibetan and Khotan documents, temples were built mainly by rulers and court nobles. They also invited the best architects and artists to build and decorate the temples. But since the temples had their own funds, cultivated fields and workshops, and were engaged in trade and agriculture, it can be assumed that the social environment of the Buddhist sankha was very diverse.

Thus, the findings of the Buddhist religion found in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan show that in the 30s of the 7th century there were no Buddhist monasteries and temples. Perhaps, in the early Middle Ages, Buddhism was widespread among some of the people who migrated from Sughd or Tocharistan (where it entered India). This is evidenced by high art objects made of ceramics, bronze and stone, made according to Kushan traditions.

In the 7th-8th centuries, this region was an important center of Buddhism, which was one of the main routes of its spread from India to Central Asia and from the Far East to the west.

⁹ Зяблин Л.П. Второй буддийский храм Ак-Бешимского городища. – Фрунзе, 1961.

¹⁰ Цит. по: Кольченко В.А. Буддизм и другие «индийские» религии средневекового Кыргызстана // Религии Центральной Азии. Т.2. Буддизм. – Самарканд: МИЦАИ, 2019. – С.62.

¹¹ Ставиский Б.Я. Судьбы буддизма в Средней Азии. – Москва, 1998. – С.168.

¹² That source. -p.165.

¹³ Литвинский Б.А., Смагина Е.Б. Манихейство // Восточный Туркестан в древности и раннем средневековье: Этнос. Языки. Религии. – М., 1992. – С.11-24.

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4. Кольченко В.А. Буддизм и другие «индийские» религии средневекового Кыргызстана // Религии Центральной Азии. Т.2. Буддизм. – Самарканд: МИЦАИ, 2019. – С.62.
5. Ставиский Б.Я. Судьбы буддизма в Средней Азии. – Москва, 1998. – С.168.

