

18

RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS – II^{*}

B. A. Litvinsky and M. I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya

Contents

CHRISTIANITY, INDIAN AND LOCAL RELIGIONS	421
Christianity	421
Indian religions (except Buddhism)	426
Local religions	428
BUDDHISM	432
Written sources	432
Inscriptions in Buddhist complexes	439
Manuscripts from East Turkestan and Central Asia	441
East Turkestan – a major Buddhist centre	447

* See Map 1.

Part One

CHRISTIANITY, INDIAN AND LOCAL RELIGIONS

(B. A. Litvinsky)

Christianity

According to al-Biruni, a Christian preacher appeared in Merv 200 years after the birth of Christ,¹ but Christian preachers must have been in Iran even earlier. In the western areas of the Parthian Empire, ‘Christian communities existed... from the beginning of the second century, and during the century these communities consolidated themselves by some form of organization.’² Under the Parthians, religious minorities, including Christians, were tolerated. They gradually spread eastward and the list of bishops of the Syrian Church in 224 includes the bishop of Dailam, a province to the south of the Caspian Sea.³

During the Early Sasanian period the number of Christians increased, but at the same time persecutions began. They reached their peak under the *mōbad* Kartir (Kirder) (see [Chapter 17](#), Part One), a champion of orthodox Zoroastrianism and of the power of the higher Zoroastrian priesthood. In his inscription at the Ka^cbe of Zoroaster, Kartir records the persecution, in c. 280, of Nazarenes (*n’cl’y*) and Christians (“*klstyd’n*). During the war with the Roman Empire, large numbers of Greek- and Syriac-speaking Christians were taken prisoner. These communities, which used different languages, became increasingly influential. The head of the Eastern Church was the bishop of Ctesiphon (Seleukia), but the other bishops did not always recognize his jurisdiction.⁴ At the synod of 410, the bishop of the diocese of Abarshahr (Nishapur) was mentioned.

It can be assumed that the large Christian community in Khurasan came into existence as early as 334 in Merv and 430 in Herat.⁵ There is some archaeological evidence that

¹ Biruni, [1957](#), p. 330.

² Asmussen, [1983](#), p. 928.

³ Sachau, [1915](#), p. 20.

⁴ Asmussen, [1983](#), pp. 929–32.

⁵ Bartold, [1964](#), pp. 271–2; see also Asmussen, 1983, p. 932.

Christian communities existed in Merv and southern Turkmenistan in general from the third to the sixth and seventh centuries. The necropolis at Merv, which has several Christian tombs, dates back to this time; the ruins of a small Christian monastery and other religious buildings have also been found here. A treasure of early Christian gold medallions and plaques has been found in Geok-tepe, and impressions of seals bearing a Nestorian cross and other objects of a Christian character have been discovered in Ak-tepe (southern Turkmenistan).⁶

The history of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire, including Khurasan, was determined by three groups of interwoven and constantly interacting factors: the history of the Eastern Christian Church itself; the relationship between the Sasanians and the Roman Empire; and the political and religious situation within the Sasanian state. A schism took place at the oecumenical councils in Ephesus in 431 and in Chalcedon in 451, when the Dyophysites, who recognized a dual nature (the human and the divine) in Christ, separated from the main body of the Church. This belief came to be known as Nestorianism, after one of its apologists, Nestorius. The Monophysites (who held that Christ had a single, divine nature) prevailed and the Nestorians had to flee to the east, where they attained the leading position in the Eastern Church.

Throughout the Early Sasanian period, Christians lived under normal conditions and systematic persecutions occurred only when the Zoroastrian priesthood and the state took concerted action against them. Even the persecution under Bahram I and Bahram II (between 273 and 276), which was linked with the activities of Kartir, ‘had no catastrophic consequences for the Christian communities, because Narseh (A.D. 293–302) altered the directions that had hitherto been followed, giving rise to cool relations with the Zoroastrian dignitaries’.⁷ The position changed dramatically under Shapur II (309–379), when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. This led to the long and systematic persecution (lasting almost 40 years) of their brethren in Sasanian Iran. Shapur II’s heirs did not continue his religious policy, however, and under Yazdgird I (399–421), who was hostile to the Zoroastrian priesthood, circumstances again became favourable for the Christians.

The autonomy of the Iranian Church had been stressed at the third synod, in 424;⁸ the number of Iranian Christians had increased considerably and included members of the nobility. Within the Iranian Church a serious struggle then broke out between Nestorianism and Monophysitism, the latter being more rigid and ascetic than the former. Iranian

⁶ Nikitin, 1984, p. 123.

⁷ Asmussen, 1983, p. 936.

⁸ Ibid., p. 941.

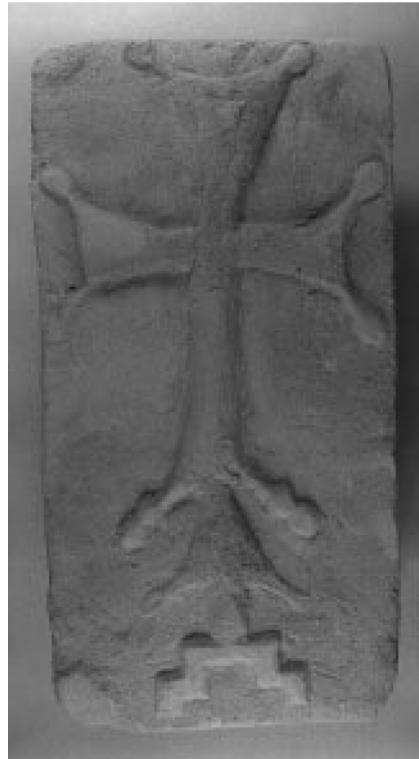


FIG. 1. Sasanian Iran. Bas-relief in stucco representing a cross. (Photo: © Musée du Louvre/Antiquités Orientales.)

Christians, who had only recently converted from Zoroastrianism, were ideologically closer to Nestorianism, which recognized the human nature of Christ and rejected rigid monastic rules. As a result, the synods of 484 and 497 confirmed Nestorianism as the dominant Christian teaching in Iran. This did not mean that Monophysitism was completely ousted, however, and under Khusrau II (591–628) it enjoyed the strong support of Shirin, one of the *shahanshah*'s two Christian wives, and also of his court physician, Maruta of Tagrit (d. 649), who played a considerable role in strengthening Monophysitism. In general, Khusrau II showed great favour to the Christians. Shirin enjoyed wide-reaching influence and is said to have preached the Gospel in the palace; Khusrau had a church and a monastery built for her. There were several Christians among the higher nobility (Fig. 1). An imperial edict was issued permitting Christians to restore churches that had been destroyed. According to al-Tabari, anyone except the magi (members of the priestly caste) was allowed to convert to Christianity.⁹ A rumour arose, which has survived in Persian tradition, that the *shahanshah* himself secretly became a Christian.¹⁰

⁹ Nöldeke, Tabari, 1973, p. 287.

¹⁰ Pigulevskaya, 1946, pp. 234–49.

Many remarkable people were involved in the work of the Eastern Christian Church. One of these was the Catholicos (Patriarch) Mar Aba, a Persian by origin and a former Zoroastrian. A man well versed in Zoroastrian lore, he studied extensively and spoke at disputations in the Academy of Nisibis (see [Chapter 3](#), Part Two) (where he later taught) and in Alexandria, Constantinople and other Christian centres. As a result of the synod summoned by Mar Aba in 544, the organization of the Nestorian Church of Iran was more clearly defined and became more centralized.¹¹ The Arab conquest finally brought an end to the Sasanian Empire: the last *shahanshah*, Yazdgird III (632–651), was killed in Merv (a Christian outpost in the East and a base for Christian preaching in Central Asia). Interestingly, it was the Christian bishop of Merv who arranged Yazdgird's burial.

Although it is known that Christianity came to Bactria (Tokharistan) from Parthia, there is very little information about the Christian community there,¹² and it is unclear whether there was a Nestorian bishop in Balkh.¹³ The Syrian *Book of the Laws of the Lands*, from the school of Bardaishan (d. 222), gives information about Christian women in the 'Kushan country' which, according to Marquart, means Bactria. The statement by the fifth-century Armenian author Elishe Vardapet that Christianity had spread to the land of '*K'ušank*' and from there southwards to India refers to the reign of Shapur II, that is, to the fourth century. In his *Christian Topography*, Cosmas Indicopleustes writes that the Bactrians, 'Huns', Persians and 'other Indians' had many churches.¹⁴ In 549, at the request of the Hephthalites, the Catholicos Mar Aba appointed a bishop for all the Christians in Hephthalite domains. The *History of Mar Aba* tells us that later, at the request of the king of the Hephthalites and of those Hephthalites who were Christians (*Krestyāne haptarāyē*), the Catholicos appointed one of their priests as bishop of the kingdom of the Hephthalites.¹⁵

Christianity was widespread among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. It is known that in 644 Elijah, the Metropolitan of Merv, converted a large number of them – the Türk *kaghan* (king) with all his army 'beyond the river Oxus', that is, in Tokharistan.¹⁶ In 719 several embassies from Tokharistan went to China. Information drawn from one of them shows that Nestorianism existed in Tokharistan, and it is also suggested that there was a link between the Nestorian Church and the ruling circles there.¹⁷ An inscription in Si-an-fu

¹¹ Pigulevskaya, [1979](#), pp. 204–6.

¹² Sachau, [1919](#), p. 67.

¹³ Spuler, [1961](#), p. 140.

¹⁴ Bartold, [1964](#), p. 278, note 88; Mingana, [1925](#), p. 302; Marquart, [1961](#), p. 283.

¹⁵ Mingana, [1925](#), pp. 304–5; Altheim, [1961](#), pp. 104–5.

¹⁶ Mingana, [1925](#), pp. 305–6.

¹⁷ Enoki, [1964](#), p. 72, note 114.

(781) mentions a priest named Miles from Balkh.¹⁸ It is known that there were differences in dogma and liturgical practice in the eastern regions, including Central Asia.¹⁹

Christian preachers went from Bactria to Sogdiana, and Syrian sources from 410–415 provide information about the founding of a Metropolitan See in Samarkand. Even if this see was in fact established later, it is still indirect evidence that there were numbers of Christians in this region at an early date. Narshakhi reports the existence of a Christian church in pre-Arab Bukhara,²⁰ and according to Ibn al-Nadim there were ‘dualists’ (i.e. Nestorians) and Christians in Sogdiana in ancient times. Archaeological work has confirmed these reports. As one example, a potsherd bearing a fragment of a psalm in Syriac has been found in the course of excavations in Panjikent. This was a school text, written as a dictation, and judging from the nature of the errors the writer was a Sogdian. It dates from the first half of the eighth century, no later than 740. Nestorian burial-grounds have also been found in Panjikent.²¹

The Christian mission went from Sogdiana to Semirechye, where archaeological and epigraphic evidence reveals the spread of Christianity. A Christian necropolis dating back to the sixth or seventh century and an eighth-century Christian church have been found at the site of Ak-Beshim. Christian inscriptions in Syriac and Sogdian have also been found in Semirechye; and when the Türk tribes came to Semirechye they found Christians there. From the epistle of the Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I, it appears that certain Turkic peoples, probably the Karlukhs (among whom Christianity was particularly widespread), were converted at the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century. One of the most famous missionaries of the Nestorian Church at that time was Shubkhalisho, who preached in Central Asia.²² In 893, when Ismail Samani seized the town of Taraz, there was a large church there.²³

Christianity penetrated even further east and reached the Kyrgyz tribes. A runic inscription in Sudzhi mentions the ‘instructor in the faith’ of the Kyrgyz chief and uses the Syriac title *mar*, which denotes a Christian clergyman. Other Kyrgyz steles with runic inscriptions are marked with crosses.

Christianity penetrated to East Turkestan even before the formation of the Uighur kingdom of Turfan. As East Turkestan had very close links with Central Asia, Christian missionaries (apparently including many Sogdians) made their way there in the fourth and fifth

¹⁸ Sachau, 1919, p. 68.

¹⁹ Mingana, 1925, p. 321. For more information about Christianity in Bactria (Tokharistan), see Litvinsky, 1971, pp. 122–3.

²⁰ Narshakhi, 1954, p. 53.

²¹ Paykova and Marshak, 1976; Paykova, 1979.

²² Nikitin, 1984, pp. 126–7.

²³ Narshakhi, 1954, pp. 86–7.

centuries. They were to play an even greater role in the fifth and sixth centuries, the period during which it appears (according to the earliest Christian texts found in East Turkestan) that the first Christian communities appeared there.²⁴ The translation of Christian works into Middle Persian in Iran and into Sogdian in Sogdiana had already begun. Many remains of Christian texts have been discovered in the sites of East Turkestan, including the library of the ruined Nestorian monastery in the oasis of Turfan. They were written in Syriac, Middle Persian, Parthian, Khotanese Saka, Sogdian and Turkic. Sogdian texts predominate, however, and Sogdian became the second most important language (after Syriac) in the Nestorian Church in Central Asia.²⁵

According to the *Chin-shih* (Chapter 124), the family of Ma Si-ling-tsisa (i.e. Mar Sar-gis) settled in Lintau (in what is now the province of Gansu) in 578. Christian missionaries clearly penetrated even further east and in 635 Bishop Aloben (A-lo-pen in the Chinese sources) reached the T'ang court, bringing with him sacred books and images. The emperor treated him favourably and a Christian monastery was built, marking the beginning of Christianity in China itself.²⁶

Indian religions (except Buddhism)

As an important source of religious teachings, India had a major influence on the peoples of neighbouring countries. This was true of both Buddhism and Hinduism. During the period of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom in northern India and Pakistan, and apparently in Afghanistan as well, the worship of Vishnu was widespread. Vishnu was regarded by his worshippers as the basis of creation and the source of all that exists.²⁷ Judging from certain Indo-Greek coins bearing the image of a humped bull, the worship of Shiva was also widespread²⁸ – he was a fierce god, combining the characteristics of the Vedic Rudra and some non-Aryan fertility god. Shiva rode on the humped bull, Nandi, and was frequently accompanied by his wife, the beautiful Parvati. The linga, a phallic pillar, was often used as a symbol of Shiva.

There is much evidence that the worship of Shiva flourished in northwestern India immediately before the coming of the Kushans. For example, a group of coins of the Indian Saka ruler Maues bears the image of Shiva. In Sirkap (Taxila), in a stratum corresponding

²⁴ Hansen, 1968, p. 93.

²⁵ Nikitin, 1984, pp. 128–30, including a detailed bibliography.

²⁶ Kychanov, 1978, pp. 76–8.

²⁷ Tarn, 1951, pp. 137, 172, 381, 391, 406; Agrawala, 1970; Majumdar, 1970, pp. 30–2.

²⁸ Tarn, 1951, pp. 135–6, 163, 172–3, 213.

to approximately the first century A.D., a bronze seal has been discovered bearing the image of Shiva with an inscription in Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī: *Śivarakṣita* (protected by Shiva).

The worship of Shiva was also widespread in the Kushan Empire, as can be seen from Kushan coins: those of Vima Kadphises, Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva bear a figure of Shiva or of Shiva with his vehicle, the bull Nandi. The inscription *Oēśo* on coins refers to Shiva. It used to be believed that this legend reflected the Prakrit word *haveśa* (in Sanskrit, *bhaveśa*), an epithet of Shiva meaning ‘Lord of Being’, or the Prakrit development *veśa* of the Sanskrit *vṛṣa* (bull).²⁹ The theory has now been advanced that this name is in fact an East Iranian development of the name of the Zoroastrian wind god Vayu, who took on the iconographic appearance of Shiva.³⁰ A stele has been discovered in Mathura with the image of two Kushans worshipping the Shiva linga.

The worship of Shiva also spread to those areas of the Kushan state that are now in Afghanistan, and reached the Amu Darya (Oxus). In Airtam, near Termez, a stone slab has been found with a Bactrian inscription and a carved image of Shiva. In Soazma-kala, near Balkh, a stone slab was discovered bearing the image of a three-headed standing Shiva with a trident and other attributes, which strongly resembles Hercules.³¹ A wall-painting still to be seen in the temple of Dilberjin has a central group depicting Shiva and Parvati mounted on the recumbent bull Nandi,³² which cannot be earlier than the fifth century. Many works of Shivaite art and of Hindu art in general, dating back to between the fifth and the eighth century, have been discovered in Afghanistan. These include some 25 marble sculptures and other works of art.³³ Recent excavations in Panjikent have yielded a large sculptural group of Shiva–Parvati.

Brahmanism played an important role in the religious life of Afghanistan in early medieval times; individual brahmanic images even penetrated into Buddhist circles and can be found in Buddhist sites such as Tepe Sardar. ‘Indianization’ also affected Bamiyan.

All these influences must have affected the religion and (to a greater degree) the fine arts of Central Asia. The wall-paintings of Panjikent include images directly related to the iconography of Shiva worship, in particular a standing three-headed god. Yet in many details they are quite unlike the Indian prototypes. The clothing of the three-headed deity bears the inscription *wšprkr* (or *wyšprkr*). Linguists suggest that this name links the Sogdian *Vyšprkr* with the name *Oēśo* on Kushan coins, which in turn comes from the Zoroastrian wind god Vayu. *Vēś-parkar* (Veshparkar) is believed to come from the Avestan *Vaiiuš*

²⁹ Rosenfield, 1967, pp. 22 et seq., 93–4, 111, etc.

³⁰ Humbach, 1975, pp. 404–5.

³¹ Fischer, 1957.

³² Kruglikova, 1976, pp. 93–4, figs. 54, 55.

³³ Kuwayama, 1976.

Uparō Kairitiō ('the wind whose action spreads in the upper region'). In Sogdian translations of Buddhist texts, he corresponds to Shiva (Mahadeva) and is described as having three faces. Thus this god with a Sogdian name and found in the art of Panjikent appears in a form connected with the worship of Shiva, which is in keeping with the Sogdian written tradition.³⁴

Local religions

Despite the fact that Nestorianism, Manichaeism and Buddhism spread in the non-nomadic areas of Central Asia such as Tokharistan, Sogdiana and Khwarizm, most of the population continued to profess the local Iranian religion. This could be described as a Central Asian version of Zoroastrianism, which differed substantially from the orthodox Iranian form.

In Sogdiana, according to Chinese sources, 'they honour the Buddhist religion; they sacrifice to the god of heaven', which Chavannes takes as referring to Mazdaism.³⁵ The texts report that believers worshipped a golden image and sacrificed animals to it. Thousands of worshippers came every day to offer sacrifice. According to other information, in Samarkand 'the king and the people did not follow Buddhism, but worshipped fire'.³⁶ There was a temple for ancestor worship in the palace of the Sogdian ruler. The feasts and customs of the Sogdians are also described (in the eleventh century) by al-Biruni. He mentions that the Sogdians celebrated the coming of the New Year, which was connected with ideas about the death and revival of nature. Once a year, the people of Sogdiana mourned the dead. When doing this they lacerated their faces and offered food and drink to those who had died.³⁷

The worship of Siyavush was connected with the worship of the dead. On the first day of the New Year a cock was sacrificed to him. It was believed that the divine youth had died and his bones had been lost. On a particular day, the believers, dressed in black and bare-footed, looked for them in the fields. The custom of burial in ossuaries (ceramic receptacles for bones) was widespread in Sogdiana, Khwarizm, the oasis of Tashkent and Semirechye. When the flesh had fallen away from the bones, these were gathered into the ossuaries, which were placed in a special chamber. Some ossuaries were richly decorated with magnificent reliefs.

Sources relating the Arab conquest mention 'fire temples' and 'idol temples'. They were richly decorated and contained many precious objects for use in worship – for

³⁴ Humbach, 1975, p. 404; Belenitskiy and Marshak, 1976, pp. 78–9.

³⁵ Chavannes, 1903, p. 135.

³⁶ Hui-li, 1959, p. 46.

³⁷ Biruni, 1957, p. 258; see also pp. 236, 255.

example, a pearl the size of a hen's egg is mentioned. The imagination of the Arab conquerors was fired by the size of the gold and silver idols in these temples.³⁸ Firdausi's *Šāh-nāme* also mentions 'fire temples' in Bukhara and Paikent. The ninth-century Pahlavi geographical treatise *Šahrīhā-t Ēran* mentions the establishment of a 'miraculous fire' in Samarkand by Siyavush's son and the placing there for safe-keeping of gold (or gilded) plates inscribed with the text of the *Avesta*. The treatise also mentions the destruction, by Sokandar (Alexander of Macedon), of these plates, after which the Turanian Frasiak (Afrasiab) 'made the dwelling of the gods into temples of the *daevas*'. In Kushaniya stood a temple on whose walls were depicted the ancient kings of various nations.

Sogdian texts mention various divinities. First there is *zrw* (Zurvan). In translations of Buddhist texts this name is used in place of the Indian Brahma. He is called 'King Zurvan' and given the epithet of 'great' and 'king of gods'. His particular iconographic feature was the beard. *Xwrmzt' βγ* (Ahura Mazda, or Orhmazd), the supreme god of Zoroastrianism, is very rarely mentioned. There is more frequent mention of *Ā δβα γ*, who held the second place in the divine hierarchy and was worshipped by *Zrwšc* (Zoroaster). Clearly Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) was also referred to as *Ā δβα γ*. The deity Veshparkar (*wšprkr*) has already been mentioned. All this is evidence of the Zurvanite tendency of Sogdian Zoroastrianism and of certain links with Indian religions. There is also mention of *Vṛ θra γna* (*wš γn*), *Druvāspa* (*δrw'sp*), *Haoma* (*γwm*), *X'arənah* (*prn*) and other gods, among whom one of the most important was the female divinity Nanai. It is significant that the *Amesha Spentas* (see [Chapter 17](#), Part One) occur in personal names. Henning has described the Sogdian religion as 'the impact of Zoroaster's teachings on the native paganism of Sogdiana'³⁹ – perhaps it would be more accurate to say 'the native Iranian paganism'.

Religious iconography and architecture, as well as burial customs, are proof that the local religions of Sogdiana, Khwarizm and Tokharistan were closely related. The principles of the ancient Iranian religion, which was dualistic, served as the unifying factor and idiosyncratic variations of these principles continued to develop right up to the conversion to Islam. At the same time, there were considerable changes in their pantheon and principles, which assimilated many new subjects, elements and figures that did not appear in the west Iranian religion. Some of these inclusions were due to interaction with religious systems of foreign origin (see also [Chapter 17](#)). The religion of the Central Asian nomadic Iranian peoples was even more idiosyncratic. From the fourth to the eighth century they continued the practice of burying the dead in tumuli. Both inhumation and cremation were practised.

³⁸ Belenitskiy, 1954; Gafurov, 1972, pp. 285–7.

³⁹ Henning, 1965, p. 250.

The beliefs of the ancient Turkic and Mongol peoples belong to a completely different religious and mythological system. Their cosmogonic ideas are known from runic inscriptions in honour of Kül-*tegin* and Bilge *kaghan*:

When high above the blue sky was created and down below the brown earth had been created, between the two were created the sons of men. When this took place, the heaven rose up like a roof above the earth.

The rising sun was also worshipped and the east was considered the most important direction: the doors of the *kaghan*'s tent faced east. The earth was seen as square; the *kaghan*'s headquarters was in its centre, where the Türk people lived, while their enemies lived around the periphery. There are hints of a myth concerning a cosmic catastrophe which was part of a cosmogonic myth.

The Turkic peoples, and those belonging to the Siberian Central Asian religious system in general, saw the universe as divided into three parts: an Upper (= Heaven), a Middle (= Earth) and a Lower World (the Underworld) was Erklig (in Mongolian, Erlik *kaghan*). One member of his retinue was Bürt, the spirit of sudden death; he was opposed by Tengri (Heaven), the supreme deity of the pantheon. Tengri determined the order that prevailed in the world and also the destinies of people. The West Turkic people of the Khazar conceived of Tengri as a hero of gigantic size; tall trees were dedicated, and horses sacrificed, to him. According to al-Kashgari, the Turks used the word 'Tengri' to mean 'high mountains' and 'big trees'. According to Chinese sources, it was on high mountains that the Eastern Türk *kaghans* and 'nation' offered prayers to the 'spirit of heaven'. Tengri's divine consort was Umái, the goddess of fertility, protectress of the new-born. Prayers and sacrifices were offered to the sacred 'Earth-Water', belonging to the Middle World.⁴⁰

In the mythology of the ancient Mongol nomads of the steppe (the Hsienpi, Kitans and others), there were two main cosmic principles, Heaven and Earth (cf. the ancient Türk mythology). The Hsiung-nu and Wu-huan worshipped the spirits of their ancestors, heaven, earth, the sun, the moon and the stars. The legends of the Hsien-pi tribes included zoomorphic elements that had their origins in clan totems: a horse, a bull, a deer (elk). The Kitans worshipped abstract gods – which they personified – such as war and fire (sometimes in the form of totemic animals – a white horse or a deer) and also the spirits of their ancestors. They believed that the Initial Order, mounted on a white stallion, had met a celestial maiden in a cart drawn by a cow near the mountain of Mu-ye. Eight sons, the forefathers of the Kitan tribes, were born from the marriage of Initial Order and the celestial virgin.

⁴⁰ Roux, 1956–57; 1962; Potapov, 1978; Klyashtorny, 1981.

The Mongols themselves had a dualistic system. Their supreme deity was Tengri (Heaven), the creator of all that exists, who determined the fates of men and affairs of state. He was called blue and eternal, and was viewed as the male principle. His counterpart was Ütügen, the goddess of Earth, who was associated with notions of fertility and the rebirth of nature. Ütügen was the feminine principle just as Umai was in ancient Türk mythology. The Mongols also worshipped the sun, which was regarded as the mother of the moon. There were distinctly totemic ideas in their legends.⁴¹ Ancient Altaic religious and mythological systems and religious practices were shamanistic.

The religions of Central Asia not only co-existed, but also interacted, and competed for adherents. The religions which penetrated into Central Asia, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism and Christianity, had to establish themselves in an environment where other beliefs existed, whether Tokharian, Iranian (the Khotanese Sakas, Sogdians, Bactrians, Khwarizmians, etc.) or Altaic (ancient Turkic and Mongol). Even the spread of the ideas embodied in Zoroaster's teaching did not have the same consequences among the eastern Iranians as in western Iran, because a substratum of local beliefs and rituals survived. There were considerable differences between Central Asian and Persian Zoroastrianism. In other cases, several religious systems were superimposed, for example in the case of the spread of Buddhism, Manichaeism and Christianity among the Turks and Uighurs, whose shamanistic beliefs remained, to a greater or lesser degree, the substratum of their spiritual concepts.

As this process continued over many centuries, only a few traces were left of the local religion. This was, for example, the case with the Khotanese Sakas, whose conversion to Buddhism was so complete that almost nothing remained of their original, ancient Iranian religion; the same is true of the Tokharians. The Sogdians, who kept many elements of their original religion, were in an intermediate position. There was also interaction between the various new religions, both local and imported, which had a developed written tradition. This led to borrowings, the transference of religious concepts and ideas, and syncretism.⁴²

⁴¹ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949; Rintchen, 1959; 1961; 1975; Tucci and Heissig, 1970; Zhukovskaya, 1977; Neklyudov, 1981.

⁴² Asmussen, 1965.

Part Two

BUDDHISM

(*M. I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya*)

Written sources

As mentioned in previous chapters, the enormous territory encompassing Central Asia and East Turkestan constituted a single region in the final centuries B.C. and during the greater part of the first millennium A.D. This is explained by its common ethnic character, its shared historical fortunes, the similar geographic and economic circumstances that conditioned the character and pace of its socio-economic development, and the region's cultural similarity. A basic factor determining this cultural similarity was Buddhism, which was accepted over the entire territory as a doctrine of moral ethics, an ideology and a religion.

The spread of Buddhism beyond the boundaries of India took place at the time of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (c. 268 B.C.), and found expression in his edicts engraved on pillars and rocks at various points throughout the empire. In the propagation of Buddhism and Indian culture in Central Asia and East Turkestan (of which Ashoka Maurya was the initiator), an important role was played by the Parthian, Saka and Kushan rulers of north-western India. A major influx of Buddhist missionaries into these territories occurred among the Kushans. The principal route of Buddhist expansion lay through Bactria and the western possessions of the Kushan Empire. Part of this territory (northern Bactria on the right bank of the Amu Darya, or Oxus – later Tokharistan) now forms part of Middle Asia (southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). Recent archaeological findings have shown that Buddhism and Indian culture permeated every area of Central Asia, leaving direct evidence in the form of inscriptions and religious structures, as well as profound traces in the cultural substrata of the local peoples. Buddhism only ceased to play an important role in the region from the end of the eighth century, after the arrival of Islam, and in the northern region of Central Asia (in Semirechye) Buddhist religious centres were evidently still functioning as late as the tenth century.



FIG. 2. Fragment of a manuscript on paper from the collection of N. F. Petrovskiy (no. SI P/7). Text in Sanskrit *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*.

On the lower level an inscription in Khotanese Saka.

Script in South Turkestan Brāhmī. Coloured illustration: Buddha receiving offerings.

In the Kushan period, Buddhism also began to be actively propagated in East Turkestan. Buddhist penetration followed two paths: from Bactria, the centre of the Kushan possessions, to Kashgar and further east; and from northwestern India and Kashmir to Khotan and the southern oases of East Turkestan (see [Chapter 15](#)). Although no precise information is available about the time when Buddhism penetrated to the northern oases of Turfan and Kucha, it probably became established there at the beginning of the Christian era. In 300 Chinese sources report the presence in Kucha of 1,000 Buddhist temples and sanctuaries; and in the fourth century Kucha became an important centre of Buddhist education, where translators were trained for China. It was from here that Kumarajiva, the celebrated translator of Buddhist texts, whose school was considered one of the most authoritative in China, was invited to that country. Judging by the borrowing of some Prakrit Buddhist terms from the Khotanese Saka language into the Tokharian languages, Buddhism came to the Tokharians from the south, in other words, from Khotan ([Fig. 2](#)).

One of the most important results of India's cultural influence on East Turkestan was the dissemination of ancient forms of Indian writing – Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī – which were adopted by the local peoples (who had no script) to set down their languages. From the adaptation of Indian Brāhmī to the writing of the Tokharian A and B languages in

the northern oases of East Turkestan (Turfan and Kucha), a version of Brāhmī known as Central Asiatic slanting Brāhmī emerged.

In Khotan and Kashgar, Indian Brāhmī was adapted to the writing of the Saka language (one of the East Iranian languages current in the area), which was the tongue of the original population. From this adaptation another version of Brāhmī emerged – Central Asiatic upright Brāhmī, the writing of the southern oases. These processes had evidently been concluded by the fifth century. Palaeography is today used as one of the criteria for dating manuscripts in the Brāhmī script and for determining where they were copied.

Another form of ancient Indian writing which found its way into East Turkestan and Central Asia was Kharoṣṭhī, long thought to be a chancery hand which had spread to north-western India from the Achaemenid chancery. The Kushans promoted it to the rank of official state script and it was employed in Bactrian territory alongside the local Bactrian writing system. Besides two versions of the Bactrian script, other forms of writing which gained currency in Central Asia included Parthian, Sogdian, Khwarizmian and Pahlavi (Middle Persian). This is evidently the reason why the Indian scripts, Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī, did not develop local versions here; and in the following centuries their use was confined to a Buddhist context, where they appeared in inscriptions on monastic ceramic ware and similar articles, on reliquaries and in Buddhist manuscripts ([Fig. 3](#)).

In East Turkestan, no inscriptions on monastic ware have been discovered, but in the first and second centuries, local coins with a ‘Sino-Kharoṣṭhī’ legend were being minted in Khotan. The largest find of written monuments in Kharoṣṭhī characters is an archive of official documents on wooden strips, dating from the mid-third to the mid-fourth century and found in the southern oases of Niya and Kraina in the territory of the small, independent, ancient state of Kraina in the oases of the Taklamakan desert.

The inscriptions on monastic ceramic ware and reliquaries (deposited in Buddhist religious buildings) and Buddhist manuscripts are the main written sources that have enabled modern research to determine the territorial spread of Buddhism, the time when this propagation took place, and the principal Buddhist schools and centres which have influenced the region’s history and culture. The Buddhist manuscripts found in East Turkestan and Central Asia remain the only original texts of the Buddhist canon known anywhere in the world. Even in India, virtually none of these texts has been preserved. Some of the Buddhist writings, and commentaries on them, found in India are merely in the form of late copies. Questions as to how the doctrinal, philosophical, dogmatic and religious tenets of Buddhism came to be established in the territories of India and beyond, and what transformation these aspects of Buddhism underwent in the new cultural milieu, can be answered



FIG. 3. Clay pot with an inscription in Brāhmī. Found in Afrasiab near Samarkand.

only on the basis of the information obtained from the manuscripts of East Turkestan and Central Asia.

A large group of Buddhist texts, found in the territory of East Turkestan and in the ideologically, religiously, culturally and (for almost a century) administratively associated Dunhuang, were written (or copied) in these areas in Chinese, Tibetan and Uighur. For copying the Buddhist texts, the Turks, among whom Buddhism started to be professed as early as the sixth century, used the Uighur (Sogdian in origin), Brāhmī (seventh–eighth centuries) and Tibetan (eighth-century) scripts. Turkic Buddhist manuscripts and xylographs have been found in Turfan, Dunhuang, Miran (south-west of Lake Lop Nor) and Suzhou. The territories in which Buddhist texts in Indian scripts have so far been found are listed below, together with a brief description of the texts themselves.

EAST TURKESTAN

- (a) Manuscripts written in Brāhmī characters (Indian and slanting), in Sanskrit and in Tokharian A and B, have been found in the northern oases – Turfan and Kucha – as well as in Dunhuang (for details of the manuscripts, see below).

- (b) Manuscripts written in Brāhmī characters (Indian and upright), in the Khotanese, Tumshuq Saka and Sanskrit languages, have been found in Khotan and Kashgar.
- (c) Manuscripts written in Kharoṣṭhī characters in Gandhārī, in which a local non-Indian substratum is traceable, have been found in the oases of Niya and Kraina to the

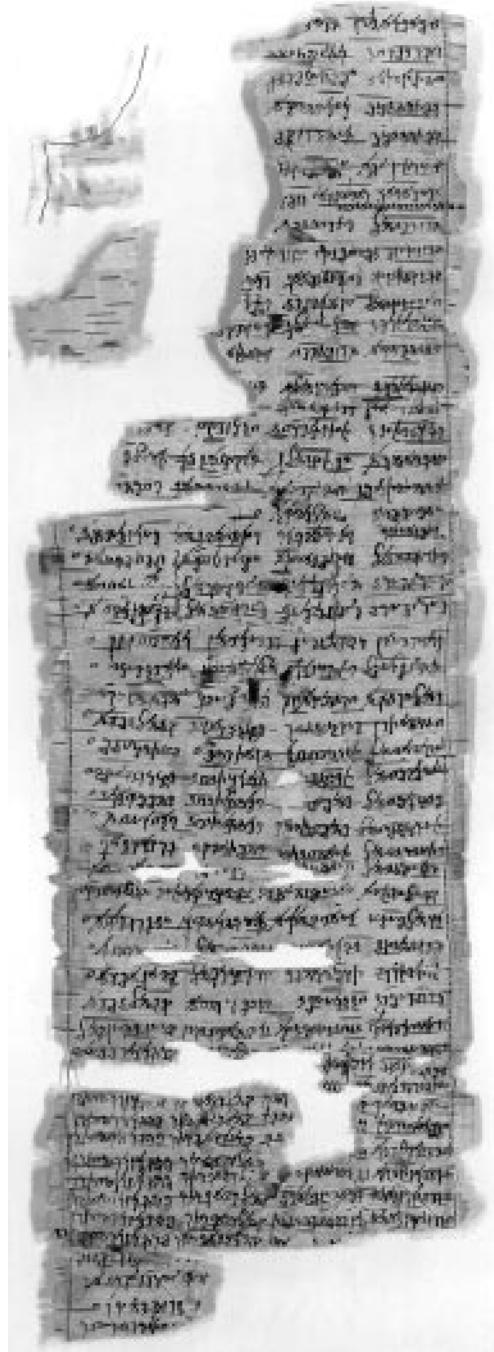


FIG. 4. Manuscript on birch bark in Kharoṣṭhī script with the text of the *Dharmapada*. Photo: © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

south of Lake Lop Nor (around 800 official documents on wooden strips, including many texts concerned with the activities of the local Buddhist community and the performance of religious rituals).

- (d) A manuscript in the Kharoṣṭhī script in Gandhārī, on birch bark, containing the text of the Buddhist Hinayana sutra, the *Dharmapada* (Fig. 4), has been discovered in Khotan.
- (e) A small fragment of palm leaf bearing a text in the Kharoṣṭhī script in Gandhārī, and evidently an excerpt from the Hinayana version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* sutra, has been discovered although the location of the find is unknown. The fragment, which has not been published, forms part of the S. F. Oldenburg Collection in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. The fragment shows that the Kharoṣṭhī script was used for making manuscript copies of Buddhist canonical texts, and that the *Dharmapada* find is not an exception.
- (f) The only known dedicatory inscription to a Buddhist community, in Gandhārī and written in Kharoṣṭhī characters, was found in Lo-yang.

BACTRIA (TOKHARISTAN)

- (a) In the Kushan period, Old Termez was a prominent Central Asian Buddhist centre and many remnants of religious buildings have been found in the region, including the Buddhist monastery of Kara-tepe and the Fayaz-tepe monastic site. The Old Termez area has provided a large quantity of ceramic inscriptions written in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī script connected with the activity of the Buddhist community of Mahasamghika. Dedicatory inscriptions on reliquaries and other objects have also been found.
- (b) The castle of Zang-tepe, 30 km to the north of Termez, probably had a Buddhist stupa. Fragments of various Sanskrit manuscripts written in Brāhmī script on birch bark have been recovered.
- (c) Round the demolished Buddhist stupa at the palace of Kafyr-kala (in the town of Kolkhozabad in the Vakhsh valley), scorched remains of manuscripts in Brāhmī script, written on birch bark, have been recovered from the débris.
- (d) At Balkh, excavations of the Buddhist complex have brought to light a broken piece of pottery with a Buddhist dedicatory inscription written in Kharoṣṭhī characters.

-
- (e) In southern Bactria, a copper vessel has been found with a dedicatory inscription, in which mention is made of the Buddhist school of Dharmaguptaka.

MERV OASIS (TURKMENISTAN)

In Merv, archaeologists have discovered an important Buddhist centre, with temples and a number of stupas. In one of the stupas in Merv, and in another stupa opened by chance in Bairam-Ali, immured vessels with two Buddhist manuscripts have been found: both were written in Sanskrit in Brāhmī characters and inscribed on birch bark. One of them has been restored and is preserved at the Institute of Oriental Studies in St Petersburg; the other is undergoing restoration in Moscow.

SEMIRECHYE (KYRGYZSTAN)

In the Krasnorechensk site, in the Chu valley, excavations have been in progress for many years on the site of the Buddhist temple. In 1985, in the passageway not far from the 11-m-high statue of Buddha in Nirvana, manuscript fragments in Sanskrit, written in Brāhmī characters on birch bark, have been found.

KAPISA REGION (AFGHANISTAN)

As regards contacts between Iranian and Indian cultures,⁴³ the numerous finds of Buddhist relics – monasteries, stupas and rock inscriptions – show that Buddhism flourished in the Kushan period. Ceramic, reliquary, vase, wall and rock inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī script have been discovered in the following areas: Wardak, Begram and Gul Dara (all near Kabul); Tor Dheri (in Pakistani Baluchistan); and Dasht-i Nawur (a trilingual rock inscription in Bactrian, Kharoṣṭhī and an undeciphered script similar to Kharoṣṭhī). Manuscripts in Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī characters have also been found in the Bamiyan monastery (Afghanistan).

MOUNTAIN AREAS NORTH OF GANDHARA

The diffusion of Buddhism in this territory over a lengthy time span, from the Kushan period to the Muslim conquest, is attested by the many rock inscriptions left by Buddhist pilgrims and by reliquary inscriptions from Bajaur, Tirah, Swat, Gilgit and Hunza written in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī scripts. In the first millennium B.C., the Gilgit and Hunza areas were crossed by Buddhist pilgrims, merchants and traders travelling between Central Asia,

⁴³ Identified by Fussman, 1989, p. 445. Thanks to Fussman's brilliant work, devoted to the palaeography of inscriptions in Indian scripts and to the Gandhari language, the study of Indian inscriptions can, for the first time, be placed on a scientific basis.

India and East Turkestan. It was in Gilgit, in the early 1930s, that Sir Aurel Stein made one of the most outstanding discoveries of the century – a Buddhist library of the seventh century, immured in a stupa and comprising Buddhist manuscripts, on birch bark and paper, written in Sanskrit in Brāhmī characters. Most of the manuscripts relate to the canon of the Mulasarvastivada Hinayana school.

NAGARAHARA (HADDA/JALALABAD AREA)

This area is rich in Buddhist monuments of the Kushan period. Many inscriptions written in Kharoṣṭhī script have been found on Buddhist reliquaries, vessels and walls in the monasteries of Bimaran, Hadda, Jalalabad and Basawal.

Inscriptions in Buddhist complexes

The contents of the inscriptions listed above provide information about the geographic spread of Buddhism and its various schools; about the chronological sequence of the diffusion process; and about the names of those who professed the religion. In some cases, this information can help to establish the ethnic group or native language of the donor or proprietor of the object, or the social status and occupations of the followers of Buddhism.

Chronologically speaking, Buddhist inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī characters encompass the period from the first century B.C. to the second century A.D. (the earliest attested dating is 58 B.C. and the latest A.D. 129). Inscriptions in Brāhmī characters, on the other hand, bear no dates. Through palaeography and an analysis of the accompanying material, they may be dated approximately to the fourth–fifth centuries A.D.

It is legitimate to regard the oldest groups of inscriptional finds as the most representative. To judge from the finds made in Buddhist monasteries and temples, dedicatory inscriptions were usually made on earthenware that was donated to the Buddhist community. Another type of earthenware inscription is found on articles belonging to people living in the monasteries. In the area of Middle Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, etc.) where a number of monastic complexes have been excavated – Kara-tepe, Fayaz-tepe, Ajina-tepe, Merv, Dalverzin-tepe, Ak-Beshim, Kuva, Krasnorechensk urban region, and many others⁴⁴ – over 100 inscriptions have been found, both on whole pottery vessels and on shards. The majority of these relate to the Kara-tepe monastery

⁴⁴ Staviskiy, 1963, pp. 171–6; Litvinsky, 1971, pp. 110–33.

and have been published in the works of Grek, Vertogradova, Harmatta and Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya.⁴⁵

An important historical and cultural inference can be drawn from a study of the inscriptions on ceramic ware and other articles: it is that followers of the Mahasamghika Hinayana school settled in the Old Termez region. This is the only written evidence to show that, in the Kushan period, the doctrine of this school permeated to the extreme westerly point of the Kushan Empire. It is known that Mahasamghika was one of the most ancient Buddhist schools which broke away after the schism within early Buddhism in c. 350 b.c. According to the written sources, the language in which this school started to codify its doctrine was Prakrit. The inscriptions found show that, in the west, this Prakrit was *Gandhārī*, written in *Kharoṣṭhī* script.

Another Buddhist school which, judging by inscriptions, permeated beyond the frontiers of India was Dharmaguptaka. A third school, the name of which is attested in Buddhist manuscripts found in Central Asia, was Sarvastivada. Its establishment belongs to the period of Kanishka's rule, and evidently took place in Kashmir. The language employed by the adherents of the Sarvastivada school, and in which, according to Buddhist tradition, they codified their canon at the time of the Kashmir Council in the early second century, was Sanskrit. The findings of written sources have confirmed the information derived from Buddhist sources. The adherents of the Dharmaguptaka and Sarvastivada schools used the *Brāhmī* script and the Sanskrit language. It is possible that the Kara-tepe ceramic inscriptions in *Brāhmī* characters were made by followers of the Sarvastivada school.

The written sources from Central Asia do not yet enable us to discuss the dissemination of Mahayana in this area. The local inhabitants evidently continued their traditional adherence to Hinayana, which, to judge from the paintings and sculptures found in Buddhist temples and monasteries, broadly represented early Buddhism in all its aspects. The division of Buddhism into two main systems – Hinayana and Mahayana – took place in Indian territory only at the beginning of the Christian era. Starting from religious dogma (the sutras), it then made the transition to philosophical doctrine and the methods and functions of the mental techniques of yoga practice. The Buddhist texts found in manuscripts in East Turkestan have enabled us to follow how this division took place, and how, in the core of Hinduism and early Buddhism, the foundations of the three main systems (Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana) emerged, systems which have persisted to the present day.

The names of personal donors show that they included several Buddhist pilgrims from India, chiefly from the north-west. It is probable that the monasteries were founded by

⁴⁵ Grek, 1964, 1972; Vertogradova, 1983, p. 87; Harmatta, 1969, pp. 32–9; Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, 1983.

missionaries from that area, and the scribal schools that existed in the Kara-tepe monastery were linked to the scribal traditions of Kashmir and north-western India. The bulk of the donations were made by local inhabitants with Iranian names or names whose origin is unknown. People came to the monasteries with their relatives and probably lived there for some time. Among the donors were monks and lay people, and persons who performed economic functions within the monasteries. All of them made a ‘gift of faith’ (*deya-dharma* or *dana-mukha*) for the sake of their health and the health of those close to them, in order to ensure eternal life, to increase their religious merit and for favourable rebirths.

Manuscripts from East Turkestan and Central Asia

The manuscripts found in the oases of East Turkestan, Gilgit and Central Asia represent the canonical literature of a number of Hinayana and Mahayana schools, together with tantras and a quantity of writings of the Vajrayana school, which was established in Central Asia at the end of the first millennium. The establishment of Buddhist doctrines in this area took place simultaneously in a variety of cultural traditions, between which there were close contacts and much interaction. Without recourse to Chinese and Tibetan translations of Buddhist sutras, it is impossible to follow the history of Buddhist texts in other languages.

Collections of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts, copied in East Turkestan, are at present preserved in Europe, Japan and India. Manuscripts found in Middle Asia are preserved in St Petersburg, Ashgabat, Tashkent, Bishkek and Delhi. The total number of Sanskrit manuscripts probably amounts to some 5,000 preserved items (around 100,000 sheets and fragments).

The earliest manuscripts in Brāhmī characters known to science date from the Kushan period. They comprise three manuscripts from the German Turfan collection, one manuscript from Bamiyan, numerous small manuscript fragments on palm leaves from the collections of Petrovsky and Berezovsky (probably of the second–third centuries) and some sheets of a manuscript found in Bairam-Ali (probably dating from the third–fourth centuries).

The manuscripts confirm that, during the Kushan period, the Buddhist doctrine had already acquired a fairly large number of adherents throughout the territories of East Turkestan and Central Asia, and that their contents encompass excerpts from different parts of the Buddhist canon and passages from various Buddhist authors. The Turfan manuscripts, for example, include excerpts from the writings of the Indian scholar Ashvaghosha, one of the first authors of Buddhist drama and poetry. Indian tradition holds that Ashvaghosha was a contemporary of Kanishka, who was his mentor and patron. After

Kanishka's death, Ashvaghosha set down his actions in poetry. The creative heritage of Ashvaghosha in Central Asia is represented by passages from all his main works: the poems known as the *Buddhacarita*, which describe the life of Buddha Shakyamuni; the poems entitled the *Saundaranandakāvya*; and the Buddhist drama the *Śāripūtraprakarana*, a biography of Shariputra, one of the Buddha's pupils. Ashvaghosha's drama was unknown to Indian literature prior to the discovery of the early manuscripts in East Turkestan.

The presence of Buddhist literary texts in Sanskrit of the Kushan period goes hand in hand with the codification of the Sanskrit canon of the Sarvastivada school in Kashmir at the Buddhist council in the time of Kanishka. Although there is no doubt that sutras already existed in Sanskrit at this time, the question as to which type of Sanskrit was represented in these early sutras has not finally been resolved, despite much research. Investigation into the language of Buddhist texts started at the beginning of the twentieth century with the works of Lüders. The designation of this language as 'Hybrid Sanskrit' was introduced following the appearance in 1953 of Edgerton's grammar and dictionary.⁴⁶ In the view of modern scholars, the term 'hybrid language' arises from the 'transposition' of Prakrit texts into Sanskrit, as a transitional stage to literary Sanskrit. As investigations have shown, grammatical and orthographic peculiarities depend not only on the degree of grammatical competence and education of the communicator, but also on the special features of the mother tongue. It seems more neutral to refer to this Sanskrit as 'Buddhist', which also designates the sphere in which it was used.

It is clear that, in the fifth century, Sanskrit canonical texts started to be copied on a regular basis in local Buddhist centres in East Turkestan, chiefly in Khotan. At the same time, the translation of Buddhist texts into the Khotanese Saka language was also undertaken in Khotan. No information is available concerning the starting point for translations of Buddhist texts into the Tokharian languages. The earliest Tokharian manuscripts, copied in the northern oases of East Turkestan, date from the seventh century.

The gradual transformation of East Turkestan into an international Buddhist centre, in which great numbers of manuscripts were copied, translated into various languages, transmitted to both East and West and preserved in monastic libraries and the houses of local inhabitants, is attested by the discovery here of a large number of copies of these texts in various languages and several scripts. The earliest Tibetan Buddhist manuscripts (dating from the mideighth century) have been found in East Turkestan, and it was here that the Tibetans began to translate Mahayana canonical texts into their language.

In the northern oases, Tokharian, Uighur and Chinese translators worked on translations of Buddhist texts throughout the second half of the first millennium. The

⁴⁶ Edgerton, 1953.

monasteries of Dunhuang maintained close cultural contacts with Turfan and Kucha. The earliest Chinese manuscripts from the Dunhuang library belong to the third–fourth centuries. Buddhist translation and literary activity in the Turkic languages started at a fairly early date but, with a few exceptions, the written texts of the seventh–ninth centuries are modest. The colophons of some manuscripts also mention translations from Tokharian A ('the language of Karashahr') and Tokharian B ('the language of Kucha'). A number of translations from Sanskrit and (probably) Sogdian are known.

It is important to note that the majority of Sanskrit Buddhist texts found in East Turkestan are not complete works, but merely excerpts and fragments, without headings or colophons. Due, however, to the unbroken tradition, from the manuscripts found in East Turkestan and Dunhuang, the Buddhist Hinayana canon and the principal Mahayana schools are the most fully represented in translations. This has allowed researchers to assess the structure of the canons of the various Hinayana schools, and the scope of the canonical literature of Mahayana.

HINAYANA, MAHAYANA AND VAJRAYANA

In the first millennium, the Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana systems of Buddhism were represented in the region. No details are known about the sharp contradictions and hostilities that existed between the advocates of these systems, although it seems that the masses followed those who were victorious in open dispute. Between the northern and southern oases, however, there was a traditional doctrinal divergence connected with the cultural milieux defined by the Tokharian and Saka languages. Basically, Hinayana texts were popular in Turfan, Kucha and Karashahr and a huge body of Buddhist Hinayana literature was preserved in translation. Malov has suggested that virtually the entire Hinayana canon was translated by the Uighurs into their language and kept in monastic libraries.⁴⁷

In the southern oases – Khotan and Kashgar – the findings have mainly been of Mahayana texts since only the texts of this school were translated into Khotanese and Tibetan. The great majority of Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang contain Mahayana writings, with an insignificant number of Hinayana texts. In Middle Asia, on the other hand, only Hinayana writings have so far been found and we have no information concerning the dissemination of Mahayana in the region.

Towards the end of the first millennium, Vajrayana writings, sutras with a large number of incantational *dhāraṇīs* (formulae), collections of *dhāraṇīs*, magical formulized mantras, and so on, appeared throughout the territory of East Turkestan: they were in the Sanskrit,

⁴⁷ Malov, 1951, p. 142; Laufer, 1907, p. 302.

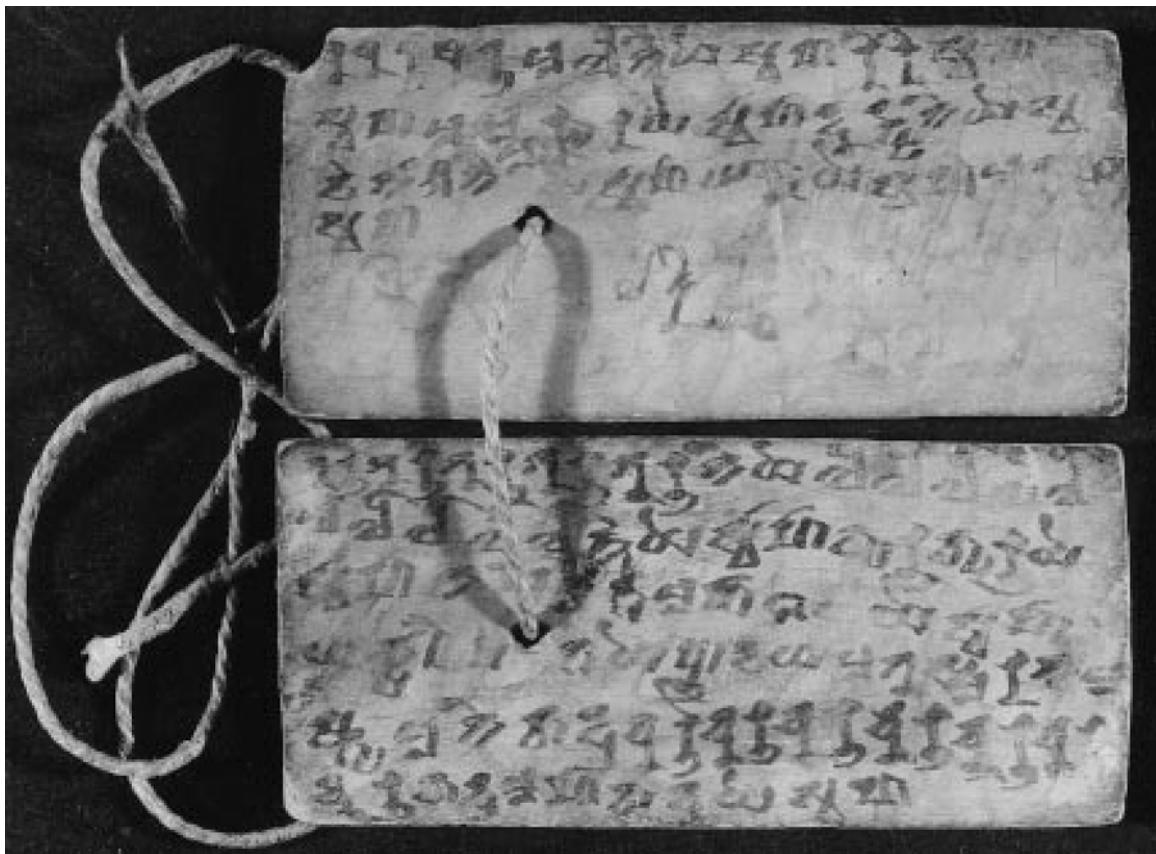


FIG. 5. Wooden tablets with incantational *dhāraṇī*. Script in North Turkestan Brāhmī. Found in Kucha by the archaeological mission of M. M. Berezovskiy.

Tibetan, Khotanese, Chinese and Uighur languages (Fig. 5). A rupture in the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism is apparent from this material. Mahayana, with its basic concept of Nirvana and its attainment by the path of the ‘great wisdom’ (*mahāprajñā*), gave way to more attractive and quicker methods, realizable in a single life-span, of achieving salvation in ‘Sukhavati, the world of bliss’, the ‘pure land of Bodhisattva’. In difficult situations in life, recourse was had to the reading of *dhāraṇīs* and mantras, which explains their great popularity. Many magical texts were inserted into the Mahayana texts, thus achieving canonical status. As a result, Mahayana sutras began to be used for the attainment of practical blessings in life.

Among the Hinayana sutras, those which included *jātakas* and *avadānas* (stories in which Buddhas or Bodhisattvas were reborn in human or animal form) continued to spread. Moral and ethical exhortations in verse form (of the *Dharmapada* type) were exceptionally popular. These not infrequently served as models for poetic imitations: Buddhist poetry in the Turkic languages, for example, includes 1,500 verses of this kind, in which the customary and favourite forms of folk poetry were used. Collections of *jātakas* and *avadānas*

appeared that had been borrowed from the Buddhist canon. A synopsis of one such collection, compiled for Buddhist homilies, was found in Bairam-Ali in manuscripts of the third–fourth centuries. Analogous collections have been preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

The pragmatic character assumed by Buddhist doctrine towards the end of the first millennium was evidence of its incipient decline. With the loss of political backing by local rulers, Buddhism was forced to relinquish its status as an independent religion and make the transition to the sphere of spells and magic cults.

THE HINAYANA SCHOOLS

A second conclusion that can be drawn from the manuscripts found in East Turkestan and Central Asia is the existence of Sanskrit canons for most of the Hinayana schools. The 1982 Göttingen symposium established the existence of at least seven different versions of the *Sūtrapitaka*, relating to different schools. Fragments have been found of the *Vinayapitaka* of three schools, represented by the adherents of Sarvastivada, Mulasarvastivada and Dharmaguptaka. Research has shown that the majority of the Hinayana texts from East Turkestan belong to the Sarvastivada and Mulasarvastivada schools.

The structure of the Hinayana canons, and the distribution of the sutras over the various *āgamas* (sections), has not yet been precisely established. Sutras have been found which relate to four *āgamas*: *Dīrgaṇḍīgama*, *Madhyamāgama*, *Samyuktāgama* and *Anguttarāgama*. The proper arrangement of the *āgamas* within canons of the various schools has not been settled. A number of sutras were particularly popular, and were used independently of their relationships to the *āgamas*. The finding in Bairam-Ali of a manuscript in which the colophon has been preserved enabled the structure of the *Vinayapitaka* of the adherents of Sarvastivada to be determined precisely (Fig. 6). Besides the general compositions for all schools (the *Prātimokṣa* sutra and comments on it), the canon was found to include special writings of the *karma-vācana* type, i.e. collections of rules for the performance of rites by monks and nuns.

THE MAHAYANA SUTRAS

The range of Mahayana writings discovered in manuscripts in East Turkestan does not enable us to assert that this school of Buddhism possessed its own canon in India, constructed on the same principle as the Hinayana canon, the *Tripitaka*. In Sanskrit, as in the other languages, only sutras have been preserved. Fragments of 25 Mahayana sutras have,

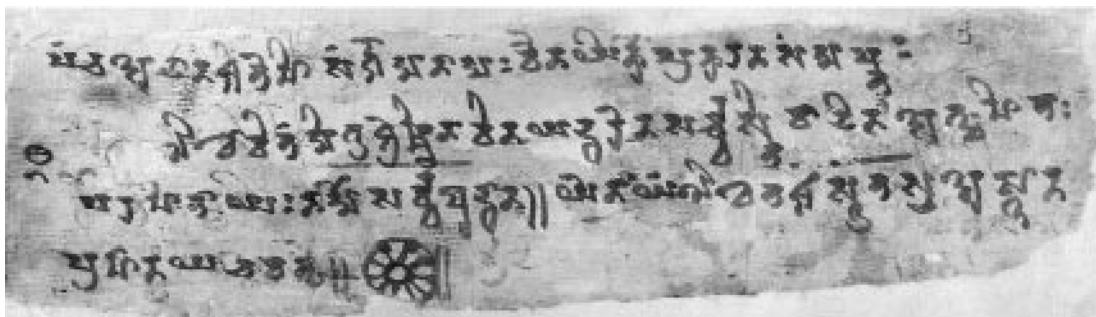


FIG. 6. Manuscript on birch bark from Bairam-Ali (Merv oasis).
Script in Indian Brāhmī. Text from Buddhist canon of Sarvastivada.

for example, been preserved in the Khotanese Saka language.⁴⁸ Khotan maintained permanent links with Kashmir and the monasteries of northern India. The range of literature in circulation in Khotan has been found to be identical to that discovered in the Gilgit library.⁴⁹

Central Asia has yielded a large quantity of Mahayana texts, allowing a picture to be drawn up of the Buddhist schools and cults that held sway in the various cultural traditions. Among the schools, that of the *Prajñāpāramitā* held the foremost position. Significant quantities of its manuscripts have been found in all languages (except the Tokharian languages). The *Prajñāpāramitā* literature has been well researched, thanks to the work of Conze.⁵⁰

The cult of the Buddha Amitabha, the lord of the west in Sukhavati (the world of bliss) was particularly popular among the peoples of Central Asia. In East Turkestan, the cult underwent further development and in the second half of the eighth century a special, apocryphal version known as the *Aparamitāyur* sutra arose, which was disseminated in all the local languages. The manuscripts found in Gilgit show that in India, too, the doctrine of ‘Sukhavati, the world of bliss’, became, in the second half of the first millennium, one of the chief Mahayana concepts.

In East Turkestan, yet another Mahayana school – that of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarikā*, or ‘Lotus sutra’ – experienced an important transformation. From this, the cult of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara separated out and underwent further, independent development. In East Turkestan, the 25th chapter of the ‘Lotus sutra’ was translated into every language, and the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who was eulogized in it, was transformed into a

⁴⁸ Emmerick, 1992.

⁴⁹ Hinüber, 1979.

⁵⁰ Conze, 1977.

major deity, providing a shield against all earthly ills and gaining the status of protector of Tibet.

The sutra of ‘Golden Radiance’ – the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa* sutra – underwent an analogous development in Central Asia. In the transformation of its text, preserved in a variety of versions and editions in many languages, it is possible to follow the growth of basic Mahayana doctrine into Vajrayana. The *dhāraṇīs* from the sutra of ‘Golden Radiance’ were also disseminated as a means of protection, and the reading of its text – thanks to a special preface added to it in East Turkestan that was in harmony with Buddhist tradition – afforded protection against being reborn in hell.

Besides the sutras existing in the popular milieu, important philosophical Mahayana sutras have been found in East Turkestan. These bear witness to the dissemination of the doctrines of two philosophical schools: Madhyamaka, which was established in India by Nagarjuna (150–250), and Yogacara, which derived its tradition from Asanga (310–390). An almost complete Sanskrit text of the sutra which provides the fundamentals of both schools (the *Mahāratnakūṭa-dharmaparyaya* or *Kāśyapaparivarta* sutra) has been discovered in East Turkestan.

East Turkestan – a major Buddhist centre

The pinpointing by archaeologists of the sites where manuscripts have been found, their palaeography, and the linguistic peculiarities preserved in their texts show that Buddhist centres were active in the territory of East Turkestan in the first millennium. In these centres (Turfan in the north and Khotan in the south), Buddhist texts were translated from Sanskrit and then Prakrit languages into the local idioms, and were then disseminated by copying and printing from wooden blocks (xylography). The centres’ activities encompassed areas in which two local cultural traditions – the Tokharian and the Khotanese – were diffused. Both Turfan and Khotan experienced the powerful influence of the Indian and Iranian cultures, while in the north the cultural influence of China, and in the south that of Tibet, was felt.

The high level of literacy of the population of East Turkestan and Dunhuang was undoubtedly linked to the presence of a large number of Buddhist monasteries. In Tokharian manuscripts, the most frequently mentioned monastery is that of Yurpishka in Shorchuk, in the Kucha district, which was a major centre for the copying of manuscripts during the period of Hsüantsang’s visit to Kucha in the first half of the seventh century. From 650, the role of Karashahr probably started to grow (Kucha was devastated by the Chinese and the Turks) and in the eighth–ninth centuries Turfan assumed the leading position. In the

middle of the ninth century, after the disintegration of the Uighur *Kaghanate*, one Uighur branch established a small state in the Turfan oasis with its centre at Beshbalyk – later to be known as the Kocho state. The Buddhist centre moved there and, by the middle of the thirteenth century, Kocho was the single small island of Buddhist culture in the ocean of Islam, which engulfed the whole territory of East Turkestan.⁵¹

In the south, at the end of the seventh century, Khotan was gradually becoming an international Buddhist centre, encouraged by the tense political situation in the neighbouring countries. A period of wars and internal disorders had radically altered the situation in Central Asia and India. Among the inauspicious events for Buddhism, the following should be mentioned: the seizure of Central Asia by the Arabs in the eighth–ninth centuries; the persecution of Buddhism in T'ang China; the attempt to eradicate Buddhism from Tibet during the reign of gLang-dar-ma (836–842); the decline of Buddhism in India and the schism within the Buddhist community there; and, finally, the Muslim conquest of India. It is evident from the documents that regal power in Khotan continued to be strong, and afforded protection to Buddhism. The increase in the number of Buddhists is attested by the growing number of Buddhist centres referred to in the written sources in Tibetan, and of copies of Buddhist writings dating from the eighth and ninth centuries.

It is probable that this period saw an influx into Khotan of Buddhists from neighbouring regions. Vajrayana texts circulated in Khotan at this time and Tibetans, too, participated in the creation of Vajrayana cults. It was perhaps in Khotan that the features of Tibetan tantra developed that were to determine the fortunes of Buddhism in Tibet. The active and creative role of the Khotanese Buddhist centres is clear from the part they played in formulating the Buddhist canon and perfecting its structure. For example, at least three collections of sutras were compiled in East Turkestan that were not in circulation in India: the *Mahāratnakūṭa*, the *Mahāvataṃsaka* and the *Mahāsannipāta*. The assimilation of Buddhist doctrine and Indian culture evidently proceeded more vigorously in Khotan than in the northern oases.

Translations from Sanskrit and the Prakrit languages, and the compilation of collections of sutras and didactic, narrative writings, took place not only in Khotanese Saka, but also in the Tibetan and Chinese languages. It was in Khotan that the earlier, unaltered versions of many Mahayana sutras were preserved, and Chinese pilgrims in quest of Buddhist works started to travel not to India, but to Khotan. Finally, Khotan was the site of the creation of apocryphal works, on the basis of which the cults of individual Buddhas, patron

⁵¹ Gabain, 1973. In 1986, Hamilton published 36 Uighur fragments of the ninth and tenth centuries from the P. Pelliot Collection and the British Library. These include many unidentified Buddhist fragments. The manuscripts relate to the period of existence of the Kocho state (see Hamilton, 1986).

Bodhisattvas and protectors evolved, as well as a number of abstract Buddhist categories of evil personified as demons and evil spirits, such as the *kleshas*.

The foregoing justifies the assertion that, towards the end of the first millennium, Khotan was transformed into an international Buddhist centre of the East. This was the region in which Sanskrit versions of the Buddhist sutras were in circulation; these versions were then adopted as the basis of Chinese, Tibetan, Tangut, Uighur and Mongol Buddhism.

The Buddhist centre in Khotan ceased to exist at the beginning of the eleventh century after its seizure by the Turks. As mentioned above, the sole Buddhist centre that continued to function in this region was Kocho, where the basic translations of Buddhist literature into the Uighur language were codified in written form. However, this lies outside the period covered by the present volume.⁵²

⁵² We express our deep gratitude to S. G. Klyashtorny for giving us access to his work before it was published (Klyashtorny, 1992). See also Litvinsky, 1992.