

THE HIDDEN TREASURES OF BUDDHIST KASHGAR

Marika Vicziany and Angelo Andrea Di Castro

Buddhism was one of many religions which were practised in the oasis of Kashgar. At the western crossroads of the southern and northern Silk Road between China, Central Asia and Europe, Kashgar was a multicultural society even during the time when its Buddhist monuments were built from around the 3rd to 9th century CE: it also included Zoroastrians, Hindus, Nestorian Christians (Syrian Church) and people following shamanism and animistic beliefs. This complexity must be kept in mind when discussing the Buddhist remains of Kashgar.

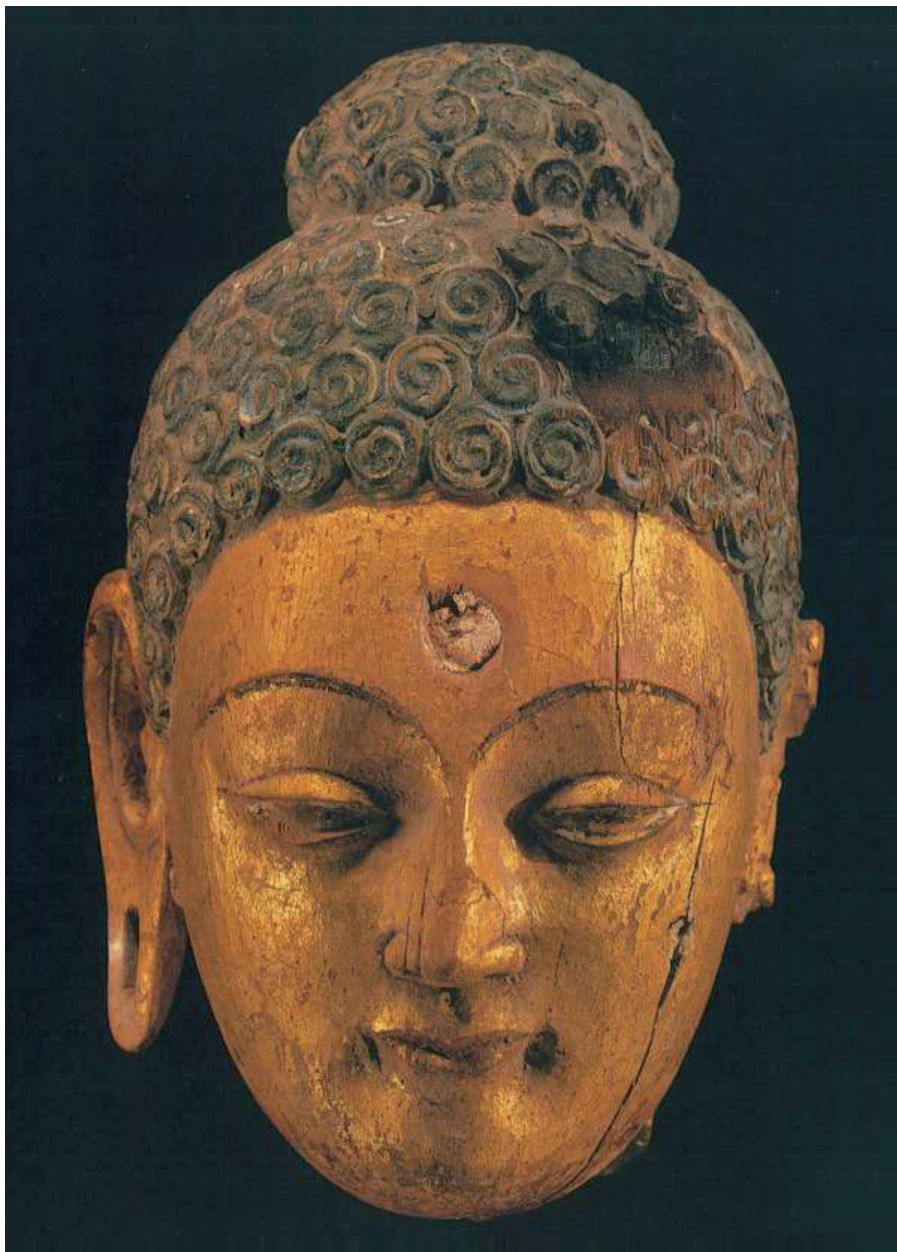
Whether Kashgar had a royal centre which, like Angkor in the 12th – 13th century under Jayavarman VII, was also Buddhist in nature, is not yet known. Certainly, the ruined monuments of Kashgar include forts and possible royal centres such as Khan-oi but we do not know when these were built or the religious preferences of the rulers.

Illustrated here is a gilded Tumshuk Buddha, found by German 'Turfan' Expeditions between 1905 and 1914. Tumshuk, thanks to the exploits of Albert von Le Coq, Pelliot and others, is well known by international art critics who since the early 20th century have admired the collection of artefacts and manuscripts in the misnamed 'Turfan' collection of the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin and in the Guimet Museum in Paris. Von Le Coq commented on this gilded Buddha head in his published report of 1922-1926 (vol. 1, Plate 42a, 28) and other authors published reports in the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, knowledge about the importance of Tumshuk has been well established for almost 100 years.

By contrast, it is ironic that appreciation of the cultural importance of Kashgar, less than 200 kms south of Tumshuk, is lacking. Our research re-positions Kashgar to the centre of Buddhist studies in western China, a place it deserves despite the shocking neglect of the treasures of that oasis city. We would like to propose that the serene, 11 cm long, 5th-6th century gilded head of the Tumshuk Buddha provides an example of the hidden treasures that could be found in Kashgar, if only Kashgar were to be systematically excavated and studied.

The hidden treasures of Kashgar remain just that – hidden or in a few cases only recently discovered. An example of the sophisticated pottery of the Kashgar area is also illustrated

HEAD OF BUDDHA, 5TH - 6TH C., TUMSHUK. SOURCE: HÄRTEL, HERBERT AND YALDIZ, M., 1982, *ALONG THE ANCIENT SILK ROUTES. CENTRAL ASIAN ART FROM THE WEST BERLIN STATE MUSEUMS, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.*



here, discovered at excavations on the Yawaluk site 30 years ago. Known as the 'Jar with Three Handles' it dates from the 6th century and displays Sogdian stylistic elements. The medallions decorating the midriff are distinctively Persian or Bactrian in style and speak to the exchange of goods, people, ideas and styles between Afghanistan/Persia, the Hindu Kush and Kashgar (Watt et al. 2004: 190-191).

According to the former Director of the Kashgar Museum who found the vase, its method of construction is typical of the Buddhist period

in Kashgar (Qadir 2007, and interview in Kashi, June 2014). Sogdian émigré communities had been established in this area from the Kushan period (1st to 3rd centuries CE) and the merchants who formed the core of these communities brought with them Buddhist monks (Vicziany and Di Castro, forthcoming 2015). From the 6th century these monks were followed by Manichaean preachers (de La Vaissière 2011) who added another layer of complexity to the religious character of Kashgar.

The jar was initially displayed in the local Kashgar museum but as its importance was

recognised it was relocated to the Xinjiang Museum in Urumqi a few years ago. International appreciation came in 2004-2005 when it was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Watt et al. 2004: 190-191). Despite its significance and the possibility of finding more treasures of this quality, excavations of Dakiyanus/Yawaluk have been sporadic, very short, unsystematic and typically not driven by research objectives but attempts to salvage pieces of Kashgar's past.

The last excavation in late 2000 lasted only 18 days. The current Yawaluk site, located on the right hand side of the National Highway 314 that crosses the Chakmak River, is part of the original site which was much larger and incorporated the site now called Dakiyanus on the left hand side of the highway on the road from Kashgar to Urumqi via the town of Artush some 43 kms to the north (Qadir 2007; Qadir 2014). Despite the limitations, Qadir and his team were able to confirm that the two sites on either side of Highway 314 belonged together, that both dated from between 200 and 800 CE, and that both reflected predominantly Buddhist characteristics displayed on many clay tablets, pottery pieces and birch bark manuscripts with Brahmi script.

On the basis of many temple decorations found on the western Dakiyanus side, they surmised that this was the location of a Buddhist temple and that the eastern side, characterised by many millstones, had a much longer history of settlement (Qadir 2014). A comparison between our own photos of the area and google satellite images with the maps drawn by the French explorer Paul Pelliot in 1906 highlights the extent to which modern infrastructure development has degraded the integrity of this site (Di Castro, Vicziany and Zhu, forthcoming 2015).

Despite its neglect, Kashgar may well represent one of the major and earliest entry points for Buddhist and other religious ideas into China. Other archaeological sites of Xinjiang, strung along the northern-eastern route from Kashgar to Urumqi and Turfan are likely to have been reached much later, yet they have attracted the greatest amount of excavation, research and conservation effort.

The objective of Monash University's Kashgar Research Project is to place Kashgar back into the centre of attention, as it once was when the British, Russians and Chinese fought to control this crossroad as part of the 'Great Game' between 1813 and 1945. Our research goes beyond the traditional focus by European and Chinese scholars on ancient texts and relics and seeks to reconstruct the total human



and natural environment in which the relics and monuments were located. In defining and dating the evidence about human settlement patterns and water/land usage we have also started to build a comparative model showing how the challenges of Kashgar's oasis environment differed from the monsoon climates of Angkor, Bagan and Anuradhapura.

We were inspired in this work by the comparative study of monsoon Southeast Asia by Roland Fletcher (2012: 285-320). Our model has allowed us to generate some hypotheses about the differences: while tanks and canals in Kashgar remain an important feature of rural and urban areas today, we have found no evidence so far for the massive water storage systems that defined the Buddhist sites of monsoon South and Southeast Asia.

Underground springs from the Tianshan and Pamir mountains provided a gentler and more regular supply of water to the rivers of Kashgar and also facilitated the construction of what appear to be relatively uncomplicated *karez* wells that were fed by underground water through capillary action.

In April 2013 and June 2014 we discovered the remnants of three lines of *karez* on the outskirts of Kashgar with 48, 7 and 3 wells respectively (Di Castro, Vicziany and Zhu, forthcoming 2015). None of these have been excavated or dated. Di Castro located the *karez* through a careful study of satellite images which we then verified by ground inspection. When were these built and by whom? Are we looking at the remnants of a more extensive irrigation system from Buddhist times or

SATELLITE IMAGE SHOWING OLD AGRICULTURAL FIELDS AROUND THE MORI TIM STUPAS WITH THE DOTTED LINE OF KAREZ RUNNING THROUGH THE MIDDLE. THE STRAIGHT LINES ARE OLD IRRIGATION CHANNELS.



were they built later? We found evidence suggesting that the nearby Chakmak River may have shifted no less than three times: were these irrigation projects responding to these changes? If so, then historically the town of Kashgar may have also shifted three times.

The Buddhist sites of Kashgar take the form of a disparate series of scattered stupas and monasteries that were most likely also the focus of human settlements. From the monastery on Haizilaitimaomu Mountain near Upal in the southwest to the stupa of Mori Tim northeast of Kashgar is a distance of some 70 kms while some 40 kms separate the site of Yawaluk/Dakiyanus in the northwest from the grassy mound of the stupa of Topa Tim in the east. Visible from Yawaluk/Dakiyanus is a fifth Buddhist site, namely the caves of the 'Three Immortal Buddhas' (Di Castro, Vicziany and Zhu forthcoming 2015). No reliable dating of these five sites exists, so we cannot say whether they represent successive or co-terminal settlements.

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang visited Kashgar in c.644-645 CE and reported that there were 'several hundreds of Sangharamas' or Buddhist settlements which probably included temples, monasteries, gardens and cultivated areas. Certainly the soils adjacent to the Mori Tim site are very old, and it is here that the remains of *karez* are to be found. But again, without thorough scientific analysis of the soils and *karez*, we can say nothing about the age of this material evidence.

Xuanzang reported that the Sangharamas had some '10,000 followers' and specialist libraries housing many Buddhist manuscripts (Vicziany

and Di Castro, forthcoming 2015). How these people and facilities were distributed and the kind of economy that supported all this activity remains unknown. There was also a large floating population of passing merchants, pilgrims, warriors and soldiers of fortune – all of which needed to be supported.

Kashgar's Buddhist structures are seriously eroded, covered by salty sands or destroyed as a result of a long history of continuous invasion and warfare. There are no impressive above ground structures of reflected royal or religious glory that we find in Angkor, Bagan or Anuradhapura. None of this has dented our hypothesis that Kashgar was probably one of the earliest Buddhist sites of Central Asia and the possible entry point for Buddhism from the Indian sub-continent into the region. Whatever impressive structures might have existed here were pounded by men, horses, donkeys and camels into the dry soils of an oasis civilisation fed by the glacial meltwaters of the highest mountains in the world. Kashgar is also a region of many sandstorms and local legends speak of old cities covered by the sands of the Taklamakan desert.

Despite such hazards, the extant height of the Mori Tim stupa is 11.582 m (Di Castro 2008: 261). This is the most famous stupa in Kashgar, although it is also neglected. Unlike the Sunday market of Kashgar, it is not a favourite with visitors simply because they have no idea why it is important or where it stands. Taking into account the disintegrated top portion of the stupa and the missing umbrella (*chattra*) it would have originally been much higher, visible from a long distance because it sits on high land (Di Castro 2008: 261).

THE TWO STUPAS AT THE MORI TIM SITE WITH A CLOSE UP VIEW OF ONE KAREZ WELL. PHOTO: A.A. DI CASTRO



Next to Mori Tim is a second stupa, some 10.363 m high and between them the outline of other structures that had associated purposes - perhaps residences, meditation rooms, workshops or rooms for storing and cooking food (Di Castro 2008: 263-269). By comparison, the stupas of Anuradhapura from 340 BCE onwards ranged from 10 to 106 m in height, with the earliest stupa, Maha Saeya (c.243 BCE) measuring 13.5 m (Coningham and Gunawardhana 2013: 465,14).

Topa Tim, another stupa located some 10 kms to the south of Mori Tim, was re-discovered by Abdurëhim Qadir as recently as 2003 (Di Castro, Vicziany and Zhu, forthcoming 2015). Its circular base suggests that it could be the oldest stupa in this part of China and Central Asia but it is increasingly being compromised by agricultural and road developments. High resolution satellite images of the Topa Tim area show that a new, wide road now passes between this stupa first described by Stein and the nearby mound (probably the remains of a monastery) (Di Castro, Vicziany and Zhu, forthcoming 2015). During our field observations in 2013 and 2014 we photographed fragments of a stucco figurative frieze scattered on the disturbed ground.

In addition to those sites defined by Buddhist structures, we have three ancient urban settlements in Kashgar - Shule some 20 kms to the north of modern Kashgar, Khan-oi some 5 kms from Topa Tim and Eskishahar, on the southern outer rim of modern Kashgar (Di Castro, Vicziany and Zhu, forthcoming 2015). Were these urban centres developed sequentially or where they contemporaneous and how, if at all, are they related to the

A FRAGMENT OF STUCCO AT THE TOPA TIM SITE SHOWING ITS SIZE RELATIVE TO A LONG MARKER PEN. PHOTO: A.A. DI CASTRO



Buddhist sites? The scattered nature of these three urban areas and the five Buddhist sites is certainly suggestive of what Fletcher has called 'low-density, agrarian based urbanism'. However, without any dating or scientific study, we cannot be sure.

In the last few months Kashgar has become the focus of national and international attention because it will form a critical part of the newly declared official Chinese infrastructure project called 'One Belt One Road'. This strategy seeks to rebuild the old 'Silk Roads' to reconnect China to its western and southern neighbours by land and sea. It provides an unprecedented opportunity to document and preserve the Buddhist heritage of Kashgar. Trade and

tourism could make significant contributions to the economic prosperity and stability of this part of western China. However, a large investment of effort and money is also needed into scholarly research that can help Kashgar to reclaim its place in the cultural relations of China, Central, South and Southeast Asia.

There is an urgent need to minimise the risk of missing this opportunity by too great a focus on the economics of trade and development. In working with Chinese and Australian scholars, Monash University's Kashgar Research Project hopes to contribute to a balanced growth strategy in which cultural objectives are as important as economic ones. Our methodologies are informed by the latest approaches and technologies being applied to the study of Angkor, Bagan and Anuradhapura. Manuscripts and relics need to be located within a broader understanding that pays careful attention to the dating, scientific study and holistic analysis of human settlement patterns, water and land management practices and the political-monastic environment that gave rise to Buddhist Kashgar.

Professor Marika Vicziany is the Director of Monash University's Kashgar Research Project and Dr Angelo Andrea Di Castro is the Deputy Director.

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TAASA REVIEW

THE ASIAN ARTS SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA INC.
ABN 64093697537 • Vol. 24 No. 3, September 2015
ISSN 1037.6674

Registered by Australia Post. Publication No. NBQ 4134

EDITORIAL • email: editorial@taasa.org.au
General editor, Josefa Green

PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE

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DESIGN/LAYOUT

Ingo Voss, VossDesign

PRINTING

John Fisher Printing

Published by The Asian Arts Society of Australia Inc.
PO Box 996 Potts Point NSW 2011
www.taasa.org.au

Enquiries: admin@taasa.org.au
www.facebook.com/taasa.org

TAASA Review is published quarterly and is distributed to members of The Asian Arts Society of Australia Inc. TAASA Review welcomes submissions of articles, notes and reviews on Asian visual and performing arts. All articles are refereed. Additional copies and subscription to TAASA Review are available on request.

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