

A Journey “to the Land on the Other Side”

Buddhist Pilgrimage and Travelling Objects from the Oasis of Khotan

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As one of the major centers on the Silk Road Khotan has attracted all sorts of travelers in the course of its history. The rich traffic of people and goods has left a strong multicultural imprint that can be observed in the archaeological material found at various sites of the oasis. Among this material there are some objects that are connected to a specific type of travel, the Buddhist pilgrimage, and that can be generally defined as “portable cult objects.” These objects circulated in Khotan when the place became an important stage on the pilgrimage routes between China and India. Their presence in the oasis represents an interesting body of evidence for the way iconography, style and subjects of Buddhist art were materially transmitted from one place to another and can provide some hints on the flow of the religious traffic in the oasis during the 1st millennium CE.

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The quotation in the title refers to a sentence scratched in Tibetan on the southern wall of the temple cella E.i in Endere, left by some travelers who recorded their making of offerings in order to secure a safe journey and wishing that “they will come again to the land on the other side” (Stein 1907, vol. 2: pl. XII. Full transcription and translation of the writing by A. Francke in Stein 1907, vol. 1, Appendix B: 567–568).

Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Khotan

Pilgrimage in Khotan is part of the larger phenomenon of Buddhist travel along the Silk Road which started with the diffusion of Buddhism in eastern central Asia and became more significant after it took root in China. Although we define the Buddhists who travelled on this network of routes as “pilgrims” and refer to their travel as “pilgrimage”, the two terms do not properly reflect the character of these travelers or their travel, because the “connotation of worship, longing and devotion” associated with these words represents only an aspect of the Buddhist pilgrimage, as observed by Zürcher.¹ The *pilgrims* who started their journey to India from the easternmost boundaries of the Buddhist world were in fact *qiufaseng* 求法僧, that is, monks (*seng* 僧) who travelled in search of the doctrine (*qiufa* 求法). Their primary aim was to obtain the original canonical texts and to learn the Buddhist doctrines practised outside China; the wish to pay homage to the holy places of Buddhism was complementary to this goal. Equally, the traffic of pilgrims in the opposite direction (from the west to China) was part of the same process of acquisition, as many of the travelling monks were involved in the transmission of the doctrine through teaching and translating the Buddhist texts.

While the places of the Buddhist quest were located in India, it seems that the direct traffic of pilgrims between China and India evolved only in the 4th–5th century.² In fact, before this period the centers on the Silk Road would act as primary sources for gathering Buddhist texts. They were not mere points of passage on the road to India, but rather the actual destinations. For Khotan this is clearly attested by evidence provided in the earliest record of Buddhist pilgrimage in Khotan found in the Chinese sources, that of the Chinese monk Zhu Shixing 朱士行 (d. after 282). Zhu Shixing started the journey to Khotan after 260 with the aim of acquiring the complete 25,000 verses version of the Sanskrit text of the *Prājñāpāramitāsūtra* that was available there.³

Without doubt, Buddhist travel to Khotan could become relevant only after an established, locally-supported Buddhist community which con-

¹Zürcher 1972: 61–62.

²Kuwayama 2002: 140–142, and Kuwayama 2006: 107–108.

³We do not have the diary of Zhu Shixing’s journey, and the earliest account is in a biographic note from the beginning of the 4th century. For further details on Zhu Shixing’s mission see Zürcher 1972: 61–63, and Kumamoto 1999: 347–348.

ducted religious activities to a certain extent had grown there. The chronological placement of this process is however problematic due to the lack of clear documentation on the very early stage of Buddhism in Khotan.⁴ While it is possible that some form of Buddhism was practised in Khotan from around the 1st century CE, the earliest remains of monasteries and temples testifying to the flourishing of Buddhist activity in the oasis can not be dated before the end of the 2nd century.⁵ The record of the pilgrimage by Zhu Shixing is important because it establishes, in concordance with the archaeological evidence, that by the middle of the 3rd century Khotan had already become a significant place of “pilgrimage”, especially for Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁶ From that period on, the traffic of pilgrims to Khotan continued—following the vicissitudes suffered by Buddhism in central and eastern Asia—in accordance with the impacts that historical and political events had on communication routes. What we know of this traffic is, however, partial as the only clear historical sources are the Chinese ones. Even if some data can be deduced about the movements of travelers coming from or going to the east, the traffic between Khotan and other countries is less documented, although some information can be found in the Chinese sources. Due to the lack of written documentation on any direct connection between Khotan and India, the similar type of exchange can only be traced through the archaeological material.

⁴From the analysis of the Chinese sources Zürcher observes that a Buddhist monastic community in Khotan was established relatively late in respect to the introduction of Buddhism in China, namely not in the first two centuries CE (Zürcher 1990: 174–175 and Zürcher 1999: 13–15). The same conclusion is reached with different arguments by Yamazaki, who suggests that Buddhism became influential in the oasis only after the 1st century CE, more likely between the 2nd and the 3rd century (Yamazaki 1990: 69–71).

⁵The dates for the remains regarded as the earliest are controversial. So far, evidence is offered by two temples in Karadong, the object of investigation by an ongoing Sino-French project, and dated by Debaine-Francfort to the first half of the 3rd century CE (Debaine-Francfort and Idriss 2001), although it seems that the style of the paintings is more coherent with artistic production attributed to a later period; in particular it has been suggested that it may be compared to works from Afghanistan not earlier than the 5th century (D. Klimburg-Salter, personal communication December 2010). Two bronze heads found by the Otani mission are still considered the earliest datable Buddhist art products from the Khotanese area, although the proposed dates range from the 2nd to the 5th century: second half of the 2nd century CE (Rhie 1999: 266–269), 3rd century (Kumagai 1958), or 3rd to 4th—5th century (Dainobu 1999: 410).

⁶The biography of Zhu Shixing reports the presence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Khotan, this being the earliest dated reference of Mahāyāna in the oasis.

Between the 3rd and the 7th century more than fifty monks travelled officially between China and Khotan on pilgrimage.⁷ Among those who left direct accounts on Khotan are Faxian 法顯 (ca. 400), Song Yun 宋雲 and Huisheng 惠生 (ca. 519), and Xuanzang 玄奘 (between 644–645).⁸ The 7th century is the time of major traffic between China and India, which included, in addition to the religious journeys, a number of diplomatic missions exchanged between the two countries.⁹

With the second quarter of the 8th century a period of general change in the central Asian political arrangements began, resulting in a disruption of the normal traffic and a shift of routes. The Korean monk Hyech'o (慧超, or Huichao, 727) and the Chinese Wukong 悟空 (786–787) travelled

⁷This is known from Chinese Buddhist literature, mainly the biographies of eminent monks and the catalogues of the translated texts. Yijing 義淨 (635–713) has left sixty short biographies of Chinese and Korean monks who went to India in his *Da Tang xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan* 大唐西域求法高僧傳 (“Great Tang Account on the Eminent Monks who Searched for the Dharma in the Western Regions”, T. 51 n. 2066). It can be assumed that the number of monks who travelled through Khotan was higher, since not all were included in official records. As underlined by Zürcher the records in these sources represent only the “tip of the iceberg” (Zürcher 1999: 18). For an overview on the Chinese pilgrims who went to Khotan between the 3rd and the 6th century see Hironaka 2007, and on the traffic of texts and translators between China and Khotan in the 3rd to 7th century Kumamoto 1999: 346–355.

⁸Faxian set out from Chang'an 長安, travelled to Dunhuang 敦煌, then to Shanshan 鄯善 through the Gobi desert, then went northwest to Wuyi 烏夷 (or Yanyi 焉夷, probably Qarashar, see Deeg 2005: 82, n. 337), and came to Khotan by cutting through the Taklamakan desert. He stayed in Khotan for three months (*Gaoseng Faxian zhuan* 高僧法顯傳 “The account of the eminent monk Faxian”, T. 51 n. 2085, 857b–c, see Legge 1886: 16–20, or Giles 1923: 4–6 for English translations of the passages on Khotan). Both Song Yun and Huisheng set out in 518 from Luoyang 洛陽 to Uḍḍiyāna and Gandhāra, travelling through Shanshan, then followed the southern Silk route to reach Khotan (The account of the travel is preserved in the 5th *juan* of the *Luoyang jialan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 “Records of the monasteries from Luoyang”, T. 51 n. 2092, 1019a–1021c, see translation in Beal 1869: 179–181; Chavannes 1903: 393–397). Xuanzang arrived in Khotan coming from Khargaliq, on his way back from India. He stayed in the convent of the Sarvāstivādin school, where he spent eight months. He gives full details on the sacred topography of Khotan, describing accurately places of Buddhist worship around Khotan (*Da Tang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記, “Record of the Western Regions under the Great Tang”, T. 51 n. 2086, 943a–945c, tr. Beal 1884, vol. 2: 309–326; and *Da Tang Daciensi Sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳, “The Account of the Great Tripitaka Master of the Great Cien Monastery during the Great Tang”, T. 50 n. 2053, 251a–252b, tr. Beal 1911: 202–211).

⁹Though even in these cases, Buddhism acted as a catalyzing factor (Sen 2001, with regard to the 7th century).

through Khotan in this period.¹⁰ At the end of the 8th century the expansion of the Tibetans into the Tarim basin led to the annexation of Khotan into their empire and caused a further change of dynamics in the movements of people. In the Tibetan sources the importance of Buddhism in Khotan and the role of the oasis as a propagating center is underlined, and especially evidence of an exchange of Buddhist monks between Khotan and Tibet can be detected. The presence of Khotanese monks and workmanship in Tibet is believed to be at the origin of *Li lugs* (the style of Li-Khotan), one of the painting styles identified in traditional Tibetan sources on the history of Tibetan art.¹¹

The absence of contacts with China creates a gap in Chinese literature for historical information on Khotan in the 9th century. Certainly China's political absence in the Tarim and its loss of control over the routes of communication affected the steady flow of pilgrims through Khotan.¹² Moreover, it seems that in the period of the 8th–9th century the tradition of Buddhist learning in Khotan underwent some changes.¹³ The combination of all these factors suggests that Khotan became a less important destination of Buddhist pilgrimage, although Buddhism continued to be practised until the end of the 10th century and probably even a little longer. The available evidence for the 10th century testifies to intense exchange between Khotan and Dunhuang, where the establishment of a large Khotanese

¹⁰Hyech'o arrives in Khotan in 727; he records the presence of a Chinese temple there, the Longxingsi 龍興寺, administrated by a Chinese monk (*Wang Wu Tianzhu guo zhuan* 往五天竺國, “Account of the travel to the five regions of India”, T. 51 n. 2089, 979b, see Kuwayama 1992: 47, 193–194 n. 217). Wukong stayed in Khotan six months in 787 (Zhang and Rong 2008: 262; *Da Tang Zhengyuan xinyi Shidi deng jing ji* 大唐真元新譯十地等經記 “Record of a new translation of the Daśabhūmikasūtra during the Zhengyuan era of the Great Tang”, T. 17 n. 780, 716c, tr. Lévi and Chavannes 1895: 362–363).

¹¹Tucci 1949, vol. 1: 276–277. A group of Khotanese monks fled to Tibet in the 10th century, after a Buddhist persecution had occurred in Khotan (Stein 1987: 35).

¹²Buddhism was also less powerful in China than it was previously due to the persecutions and restrictions enacted by the Tang emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840–846). Nevertheless this did not mean a complete interruption of pilgrimage. Also, depending on traveling conditions, pilgrims preferred other routes (i.e., the maritime route or that through Qinghai region). See for example the interesting evidence of a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim travelling at the end of the 10th century (probably with a group of monks) in Galambos and van Schaik 2010.

¹³As can be learnt from the study of Khotanese documents from Dunhuang. See Kumamoto 1999: 356–360.

community sponsoring Buddhist activity is attested.¹⁴ During the 10th century, the vitality of Buddhist travelling in Khotan (and on the Silk Road in general) was approaching its final stage and eventually came to an end with the conquest by the Islamic Qarakhanids at the beginning of the 11th century.¹⁵

Travelling Objects

The movement and transmission of Buddhist texts along the Silk road was accompanied by a similar transfer of sacred items: all that could serve public or private religious practice, such as images and relics, was transported to other Buddhist centers outside India.¹⁶ In addition to the drawings and copies of famous sacred images from India,¹⁷ “visual Buddhism” travelled also by way of portable cult objects. These include miniature shrines, small images and other portable icons, produced in various shapes and materials which share the characteristic of being relatively small-sized so that they can be easily carried whilst travelling. The function of the portable cult objects is not attached to a fixed place (a worship space in a temple, a monastery or a domestic altar) but is expressly meant for travelling, wherefore they are referred to here as “travelling objects”. During the first archaeological expeditions to central Asia carried out between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, portable cult objects have been found and collected from different sites along the Silk Road. A number of them come from Khotan.

Of course, a complete catalogue with a full study of individual objects is outside the scope of the following pages. From the material that has

¹⁴Zhang and Rong 2008: 196–223. The ties between the two oases were particularly strong also due to marriages between the Cao 曹 family ruling in Dunhuang and the Khotanese royals.

¹⁵The date for this event is commonly placed in 1006 (Kumamoto 2009).

¹⁶Particularly in China, where the demand for religious items from India reached its peak in the 7th and 8th centuries and was one of the main aspects of commercial traffic between the two countries (Sen 2001: 23–28).

¹⁷As evidenced by the silk paintings found in Dunhuang (7th–8th century). See Rowland 1947: 5–20; Soper 1964/1965; Klimburg-Salter 1982: 126–129. These were meant to be used by artists to reproduce images from the Buddhist motherland and thought to be faithful representations of the real images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.



Figure 6.1 Fragment of a stone portable shrine, H. 3,8 x W. 3,1 cm (after Stein 1907, vol. 2, pl. XLVIII, Kh.003g)

been published a sample has been extrapolated and observed as a category reflecting an important phenomenon of the Buddhist artistic production that contributed, along with religious texts, to the transmission and diffusion of themes, styles and iconographies of Buddhism as manifested in Khotan. Furthermore, by looking at the available data of this sample a first attempt will be made to acquire further evidence for the spatial and temporal patterns of Buddhist travel to Khotan.

The portable cult objects from Khotan can be roughly divided into two groups with regard to shape: single images of Buddhas or bodhisattvas, either in the round or as small plaques, and portable shrines with hinged leaves. These objects were executed in stone, wood, or metal.¹⁸

Objects in Stone Travelling cult objects in stone found in Khotan are represented by fragments of portable shrines that were originally in the form of a diptych or triptych, which through hinged leaves could be

¹⁸A small object in terracotta was published by Ol'denburg in 1898 and recently reported again by Elikhina (2008: 33). It is a moulded image of a sitting Buddha, ankles crossed, right hand in *abhayamudrā*, the whole body encircled by a halo with wavy rays emanating from the figure. Ol'denburg dated the object to the 4th–6th century and identified the central figure as Maitreya based upon the sitting position usually attributed to this Buddha. The actual location of the object is unfortunately unknown and further research is not possible. Other small objects in terracotta are among the antiquities recovered by Stein, Trinkler and Hedin, but it seems more likely that they were part of the decoration of larger statues rather than mobile cult objects. This does not exclude the possibility that a production of portable cult object in terracotta existed, but a closer examination of the excavated objects in the different collections would be necessary.



Figure 6.2 Fragment of a stone portable shrine, H. 4,3 x W. 3,5 cm (after Rowan 1985, pl. 3). Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, III 4849

folded when carried. They are made of soapstone or schist, a stone typically available in Northwest India. The fragments in general belong to a body that seemed to have been produced in the area of Gandhāra-Kashmir.¹⁹ Stone portable shrines did not survive in great number,²⁰ and examples that have been published form a small group within a late Gandharan production commonly attributed either to the 5th–6th or the 7th–8th centuries.²¹ At least five known specimens within this category were collected in Khotan (FIGURES 6.1 to 6.4 and 6.6).²² From these examples

¹⁹Barrett 1990: 57; Behrendt 2010: 304.

²⁰At least judging from the published pieces, but it could be possible that their number is higher than we know. Some examples have been exhibited and described in catalogues: see Lerner 1984: 40, cat. n. 10, Zwalf 1985: 101, ns. 133, 134, Lerner and Kossak 1991: 109–112, cat. ns. 78–81). A small overview on the stone portable shrines can be found in Rowan 1985, and, more recently, in Behrendt 2010. According to Behrendt some 44 examples are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

²¹There is some disagreement on the dating. In contrast to Barrett 1990: 57 (original publication: 1967), who advocates the later date, Lerner states that the portable shrine fragments can not belong to the 7th–8th century. His analysis based on the style led him to conclude that these objects “fit comfortably into the 5th and 6th centuries” and are “a bridge between Gandharan and Kashmiri sculptural traditions” (Lerner 1984: 40). See also Lerner and Kossak 1991: 109.

²²Three specimens were published by Stein: B.D.001.a (Stein 1907, vol. 1: 209, 220–221, vol. 2: pl. XLVIII), Kh.005 (Stein 1907, vol.1: 221–222, vol. 2: pl. XLVIII, now at the British Museum, inv. n. 1907,1111.1), Kh.003.g (Stein 1907, vol. 1: 220–221; vol. 2: pl. XLVIII, now at the National Museum of India, New Delhi); one comes from the Hoernle collection (British Museum: inv. n. 1902,1220.176, published in Zwalf 1985: 134). Another similar



Figure 6.3 One leaf of a stone diptych, H. 8,3 cm (photo courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum 1902.1220.176.AN318672)

we can observe that the diptych, two leaves originally attached with a metal hinge, seems to have been the more common type. The two leaves are sculpted on both sides, external and internal. The external sculpture forms a large figure (as large as the complete shrine), while on the interior scenes from the life of the Buddha are arranged in framed registers. The number of scenes represented depends on the size and shape of the shrine. The iconography and the spatial arrangement follow rather faithfully the style of earlier Gandharan reliefs, but some iconographies have been recognized as belonging to a later, post-Gandharan, production.²³ As for the figures modeled on the exterior, three types generally recur: a crouched figure, carrying a basket on the shoulder (the “basket bearer”); the brahman Asita; an elephant with a rider.²⁴

object is at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin (inv. n. III 4849, Härtel and Yaldiz 1982: 61–62). The object Kh.003.h (Stein 1907: vol. 2, pl. XLVIII), which according to Stein may be a piece of a miniature shrine, is excluded for the moment from this list because it is too fragmentary.

²³This is the case for the scenes of Siddhārtha’s haircutting (*cūḍāchedana*) and of the fasting Buddha. For the later chronology of these iconographies within the Gandharan production see Taddei 2003: 597–599, and Behrendt 2010.

²⁴Rowan 1985: 253–258, also for the iconographical background of these types.

The stone diptych fragments found in Khotan cover all the three types: two fragments of a basket bearer-type (FIGURES 6.1 and 6.2), one example with Asita (FIGURE 6.3), and one fragment showing on the exterior a rider with a casket (FIGURE 6.4). For this last type, an example of how it might have appeared in its original state is offered by a complete item, but in ivory, found near Dunhuang (FIGURE 6.5). The object shares the same architecture as the stone portable shrines, but in a more elaborate way. While there is general agreement for a date of the late 7th to early 8th century for the ivory diptych, the presence of some “heterogeneous elements” (Soper 1965: 224) has challenged previous studies on the question of its geographical provenance and on whether the object could have been produced in central Asia.²⁵

The last example of a stone portable shrine from Khotan is represented by a fragment of a triptych, built with a central leaf and two lateral leaves carved on the three sides (FIGURE 6.6). One well-preserved leaf of this type from Gandhāra is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Another nearly identical specimen is in the Peshawar Museum.²⁶ This shape of triptych seems to have been transmitted into the Tarim basin, and from there to east Asia, being “translated” into a different medium, wood, probably because of the availability of this material and of familiarity with a wood

²⁵Soper, for instance, identifies typical Chinese characteristics, or “far Eastern treatment” of some elements of the diptych, and proposed that the piece is a copy of Chinese manufacture of an object of foreign origin, possibly taken to China from “Chi-pin” (Jibin 罽賓, here probably referring to Kapiśa (Soper 1965: 222); for the different interpretations among scholars of the term Jibin see Sen 2003: 246, note 6). Barrett considers the diptych an original made in Northwest India (Barrett 1990: 58). Rowan explains the possible Chinese characteristic and some Persian elements by attributing the place of manufacture to a location “on the frontiers of Kashmiri influence—a Buddhist frontier familiar with Gandharan diptych form and narrative cycles, Hindu style and Chinese decorative arts (...), located in the midst of trade routes” (Rowan 1985: 282). Many of these elements link the ivory diptych to the artistic production of Khotan, which would match the conditions described by Rowan as to the possible place of the diptych’s production. Soper already takes this hypothesis into consideration. The sculptural production from Khotan provides some material for stylistic comparisons. However, there seems to be a lack of evidence as to a tradition of ivory carving in Khotan. Ivory objects are, in fact, not common among the archaeological material of the oasis, and the few that have been found there are usually recognized as imported. It is interesting that all the authors, by analysing the “Gansu ivory diptych” from different perspectives, came to the same conclusions for its date.

²⁶Metropolitan Museum of Art: inv. no. Kronos Collection 1994.489, dated to the 5th–6th century (Lerner 1984: 40–41, n. 10, Behrendt 2010: 318, fig. 13). The specimen at the Peshawar Museum is briefly described in Allchin 1972: 25, pl. IXb.



(a) Exterior H. 2,5 x W. 2,2 cm (after Stein 1907, vol.2, pl. XLVIII: Kh.005)

(b) Interior of FIGURE 6.4(a) (photo courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum 1907.1111.1. AN325550)

Figure 6.4 Fragment of a stone portable shrine



Figure 6.5 Ivory diptych found in Gansu, H. 15,9 x W. (open) 17, 3 cm (after Flood 2009: 56–57, Figs. 30–31)



Figure 6.6 Fragment of a stone portable shrine, H. 4,7 x W. 2,7 cm (after Stein 1907, vol. 2, pl. XLVIII, B.D.001.a)

carving tradition that had long been established there, as can be seen from the architectural decorations from Niya and Loulan.²⁷

Wooden Portable Shrines The wooden portable shrines preserved belong primarily to a production that has been recognized as typical for central and eastern Asia. It seems that most of the surviving items from the Tarim basin were found in the oases of the northern branch of the Silk Road, such as Kucha and Turfan. From the remaining examples, we can observe that both the diptych and the triptych formats were produced.²⁸ With few exceptions, frontal iconic scenes replaced the Gandharan style Buddha life narratives. The diptychs display single images (one per leaf), while in the case of triptychs the main image (usually a Buddha with side figures) occupies the central panel, and other accompanying figures are arranged in the side panels. An elaborate example of the latter type is the triptych from the Nelson Gallery, Atkins Museum, probably made in Turfan around the 9th century.²⁹ This format travelled eastward to China where it became, in a broad sense, standardized in shape and content, as

²⁷It cannot be excluded that wooden portable shrines existed already in the Gandhāra-Kashmir area, but the archaeological evidence so far available has remained silent.

²⁸Although fragments that seem to belong to triptychs are more numerous.

²⁹Granoff 1968/1969: 82–87 proposes a date between the second half of the 9th and first half of the 10th century, while Klimburg-Salter opts for a 9th century date (Klimburg-Salter 1982: 124, pl. 54). An earlier date, the end of the 8th to the beginning of the 9th century, is suggested instead in Giès and Cohen 1995: 396, n. 279.



Figure 6.7 Wooden portable shrine, H. 12,5 x W. 20 cm (after Hermitage Museum 2008: 100, n. 53). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, GA-308

can be observed from a fair number of examples surviving in China, Japan and Korea, attributed to the Tang period onward (7th–8th century).³⁰

Two specimens of wooden portable shrines were found in Khotan. One diptych (FIGURE 6.7) is in the shape of a lotus bud when closed, and the leaves are sculptured only on the interior.³¹ On one leaf there is a Bud-

³⁰See for example the foldable shrine property of the Kongōbuji 金剛峰寺 monastery in Wakayama, Japan, 7th–8th century, commonly believed to have been brought from China to Japan by the monk Kūkai 空海 (Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師, 774–835). Two other Chinese specimens were exhibited in 2010 at the Nara National Museum (Nara National Museum 2010: 91, 144; cat. n. 112, from a private collection dates to the 8th century; cat. n. 113 belongs to the Jakushōji 寂照寺 monastery in Mie Prefecture, Japan, and is dated to the 7th century).

³¹The diptych is part of the Petrovskij collection and has been published in exhibition catalogues (1998, Tōbu Museum, Japan, and 2008, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg). To my knowledge no other study on this object exists beside the description given by Dr. J. Elikhina (Tōbu Museum 1998: 69, n. 42; Hermitage Museum 2008: 100, n. 53; Elikhina 2008: 32–33). The object does not have a clear archaeological provenance, but is reported to have been acquired in the city of Khotan. I am grateful to Dr. Elikhina who provided me with useful material for this and other objects from the Khotan collection when I visited the Hermitage Museum in March 2009.

dha in *abhayamudrā*, seated on a high throne with legs pendant, the feet (missing) rest on a lotus flower with two rows of petals pointing downwards.



Figure 6.8 Fragment of a wooden portable shrine, H. 33 x W. 12 cm (after Tanabe 1999: 241, n. 245). National Museum, New Delhi, Har. 029 (99/6/6)

The Buddha is placed into a structure (a hut or a cave) with an oval-shaped entrance. The other leaf displays a bodhisattva in *padmāsana* sitting on a cushion over a throne covered by a cloth with chequered pattern and flanked by two lions. The bodhisattva is surmounted by an arch with volutes and carinated extrados. The right hand is missing; the left hand rests on the knee. The bodhisattva seems to wear a tunic with borders decorated by small parallel vertical lines (a fringe?). The peculiarity of this diptych is that it is carved out of two different materials: the shell is made of wood, while the images within it are made of a resinous material, *sandarach*,³² which is quite rare among the products of Khotan and of the Tarim area in general, a fact that would suggest that at least the material may have been imported from elsewhere. The question still remains whether this rare and probably precious material was worked in Khotan or in other centers along the trade routes. It is also possible that the figures and the shell were worked separately in different places and at different times.³³ The bodhisat-

tva wearing a tunic links the image to a central Asian context, and it is common in the Khotanese area as well. Kucha and Turfan should also be considered as a possible source for the diptych since—judging from the number of wooden miniature shrines found around the two areas—it seems likely that some workshops for this kind of production existed there.

³² *Juniper sandarak* (*sandarach* or *sandarac*). Elikhina 2008: 32.

³³ This hypothesis is suggested by Elikhina. She attributes the figurines to a Gandharan context (3rd–4th century) and the shell to a Kuchean manufacture dated to the 6th century (Elikhina 2008: 32, Hermitage Museum 2008: 100). Since *sandarach* is also a rare material within the sculptural production of Gandhāra, further arguments would be needed before taking the hypothesis into consideration.



Figure 6.9 Fragment of a wall painting from Khadalik (after Stein 1921, vol. 4, pl. XI, Kha.i.C.0097)

The second example of wooden shrines from Khotan is a fragment that belonged probably to the central panel of a triptych (FIGURE 6.8). Its exact archaeological provenance is not clear, but it is probable that it was dug out of some ruins in the desert northeast of Domoko.³⁴ The object may have been produced in Khotan, since some elements in the design are common to other findings of the area. The composition, with a central, larger figure of a bejeweled Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, flanked by two standing bodhisattvas recalls a wall painting fragment from Khadalik (FIGURE 6.9), although there the bodhisattvas are represented slightly turned toward the central image, while in the wooden panel the figures are decidedly frontal.³⁵ The pattern of the halo, with

³⁴Stein 1928, vol. 2: 1053–54, vol. 3: pl. XIV, Har.029. The object was acquired by Harding in Khotan and is now in the central Asian collection of the National Museum of India (Biswas 2009/2010).

³⁵The painting comes from the shrine Kha.i (Stein 1921, vol. 4: pl. XI, Kha.i.C.0097). The connection with Khadalik was first noticed by Granoff (1968/1969: 84).

waves emanating from the center of the figure, is the same as found in some other objects collected in Khotan, for example, a fragment of a



Figure 6.10
Fragment of a
wooden halo from
Khadalik (after
Stein 1928, vol. 3,
pl. IX, Badr.069)

wooden halo acquired by Stein (probably also from Khadalik) (FIGURE 6.10), or the fragment of a bronze relief in the Sven Hedin collection.³⁶ Khadalik is close to Domoko, and it is considered (together with Dandān-oiliq) to belong to the last, mature phase of Khotanese art. Chronologically this phase has been placed in the 7th–8th century, but it is possible that it lasted longer, up to the 9th century. The carved panel can be dated, on the basis of style analysis, to the same context.³⁷

Metal Objects A fair number of small images in metal, mostly in bronze, have been found in Khotan.³⁸ If we look at the Buddhist artistic production in Khotan, bronze is not among the most used materials, although there is textual evidence of metal-work

in Khotan.³⁹

Apart from two large bronze heads,⁴⁰ the rest of the Khotanese bronze production is represented by very small to medium-small size figurines which might have been used as amulets or portable images. In general they are single-figure sculptures (Buddha or bodhisattva) cast in the round, seated or standing on a pedestal. When the pedestal is missing its presence is suggested by a tenon at the base of the image. The range of sizes is in average from 3 to 10 cm for the standing figures (by far the

³⁶The wooden halo is described in Stein 1928, vol. 1: 113, and vol. 3: pl. IX, Badr.069. The bronze relief fragment is published in Montell 1938, pl. III, 5: it was purchased in Khotan town, but its archaeological provenance is unknown.

³⁷Granoff 1968/1969: 84. Biswas 2009/2010 dates the piece instead to the 6th century.

³⁸The term “bronze” here is intended for generic copper alloy, defined as such in the literature consulted.

³⁹Rémusat 1820: 16 (“Les habitans sont habiles à fabriquer des vases de cuivre”). I am not aware of any archaeological investigation that could prove the existence of copper mining in the area, although there was local processing as proven by remains of moulds. In Chinese documents of the Qing 清 period (1644–1911) it is reported that copper was available in Aksu and Kucha, and that Khotan imported copper from there, while Khotan was rich in gold, with mines located in the Keriya area (Fletcher 1978: 72–73).

⁴⁰These have been collected by the Japanese expeditions. See FOOTNOTE 5.



Figure 6.11 Bronze figurine of Avalokiteśvara, H. 7,5 cm, (after Elikhina 2008: 34, fig. 8). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, GA-1078



Figure 6.12 Bronze figurine of Avalokiteśvara, H. 4,5 cm, (after Elikhina 2008: 35, fig. 9). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, GA-1073



Figure 6.13 Bronze plaque with Avalokiteśvara (State Hermitage Museum), H. 8,8 cm (after Elikhina 2008: 34, fig. 6). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, GA-1075



Figure 6.14 Bronze plaque with Avalokiteśvara, from Kumrat (after Qi and Wang 2008: 82, fig. 3)



Figure 6.15 Bronze seated Buddha with a halo of Seven Buddhas, H. 16 cm (after Giès and Cohen 1995: 107, n. 55). Museums of World Culture, Sweden, 1903.11.344

better represented category) and 7 to 15 cm for the sitting ones. European, Japanese and Russian collections include a fair number of these “figurines” and if one starts to collect and compare the available documentation, these artefacts may turn out to be a significant category in the panorama of Khotanese archaeology. As the workmanship of the examined sample is generally quite rough and the objects are rather small, little can be deduced on the basis of stylistic features. Because of this, Khotanese craftsmanship in bronze is considered poor and has not received much attention in scientific literature.⁴¹ When objects demonstrate a high grade of elaboration in the workmanship, they are generally thought to be of foreign origin.

Some works (FIGURES 6.11 and 6.12) can be compared to the small gilded bronze single-figure altars common in Chinese Buddhist artistic production from the 4th–5th century. The shape of the pedestal in both cases is unmistakably Chinese, as is the style of the garments and the pose of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin 觀音) in FIGURE 6.11. These works might have been imported or been inspired by Chinese products. Two identical plaques, also representing

⁴¹The most extensive discussion is in Montell 1938: 83–95. He notes that the craftsmanship of these objects is such that it is difficult to make a stylistic discourse.

Avalokiteśvara (FIGURES 6.13 and 6.14) can be regarded as Chinese in style and probably date to the Tang period (around the 8th century). One of the two plaques (FIGURE 6.13) was acquired by Petrovskij and is now preserved at the Hermitage State Museum, while the second one (FIGURE 6.14) is reported in Chinese publications as having been found at the site of Kumrabat (Karakash county).⁴² It is highly probable that the example from the Petrovskij collection was found in the same area. The site of Kumrabat yielded the ruins of a Buddhist temple with mural paintings and stucco statues. Unfortunately the site, which has been assigned to the Tang period (7th–9th century), was already in a very poor state when reached by the Xinjiang Archaeological Survey in 1990; only its existence and a small number of artefacts could be reported.⁴³

Beside the connection with China, some other bronze findings have rather local elements, for example, a bronze plaque with a seated Buddha and seven small Buddhas depicted in the halo (FIGURE 6.15) and the standing figurine of Buddha in *abhayamudrā* holding a loop of his garment (FIGURE 6.16).⁴⁴ They both have striking similarities with the stucco production of Dandān-oiliq: especially the standing Buddha which is nearly identical to the small Buddhas decorating the halo of a larger image from temple D.II in the treatment of the



Figure 6.16 Bronze figurine of a standing Buddha in *abhayamudrā*, H. 9 cm (after Hermitage Museum 2008: 79, n. 32). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

⁴²Elikhina 2008: 34.

⁴³Khotan Survey 2004: 21; Li Lingbing 2006: 58.

⁴⁴The plaque was collected in Yotkan by S. Hedin and is in the National Museums of World Culture, Sweden, inv. n. 1903.11.344.A-C (Montell 1938: 84, 107; pl. I,1a-c; Giès and Cohen 1995: 107, n. 55). The standing figurine of the Buddha in *abhayamudrā* is made of two separate parts joined together. Originally a base or a pedestal must have been part of the whole. The figurine is now at the State Hermitage Museum, Petrovskij collection, inv. n. GA-1071. Its archaeological provenance is unknown; probably it was acquired from a local market in Khotan as were many objects from this collection. See Hermitage Museum 2008: 79, n. 32; Elikhina 2008: 35 (identified there as a Vajrapāṇi).

hair, the shape of the eyes and the folding of the upper garment (FIGURE 6.17).⁴⁵ The same facial features can be found in the terracotta from Yotkan as well, thus the latter may be regarded as a “marker” for a local product.

A find that is unique in the panorama described above is a statue unearthed in 1989 in the district of Domoko (Damagou 达玛沟, Chira County; FIGURE 6.18). The image represents a Buddha in *vajraparyāṅkāśana* performing the gesture of *dharmacakramudrā* with the small finger of the left hand touching the tips of the thumb and the index finger of the right hand. The left hand holds a corner of the *kāśāya*. The right shoulder is left bare and the *kāśāya* is folded in regular, symmetrical pleats on the left shoulder. Eyes and *ūrṇā* are inlaid with a white metal (probably silver). The Buddha sits on a lotus with its petals turned downwards and resting on a square throne, where an inscription in Sanskrit is incised. The inscription does not bear a date; its content is a devotional statement and lists the names of donors belonging to the same family. The script has been recognized as an early variant of Śāradā (proto-Śāradā). According to v. Hinüber, who studied the inscription, some of the names of the donors are common to those from the Gilgit area, while the script cannot be earlier than the 7th century CE.⁴⁶

While images of similar style are rare among the archaeological material of the Tarim basin (the only image to my knowledge is the one found in Khotan), they appear quite often in private and public collections of Himalayan art, and their place of production is commonly identified with the areas of Kashmir, Gilgit and Swat. Palaeographic research in the last decade has provided further evidence for the dating of a large group of bronzes bearing dedicatory inscriptions in proto-Śāradā scripts, with dates and names of donors. This production is mainly connected to the Palola Śāhi Dynasty, settled in the Gilgit valley from circa the 5th to the 8th century CE.⁴⁷ These studies have helped to establish a firmer chrono-

⁴⁵The site of Dandān-oiliq is assigned to the 7th–8th century, or even up to the 9th century (Gropp 1974:41–42). A complete agreement on the dating of the sites and consequently on the archaeological material from Khotan has not yet been reached. See for example the differences in the chronology of Gropp (1974:41–42) and that of Williams (1973:109–112).

⁴⁶The statue is not from an archaeological context. It is currently on display at the Khotan Museum. For the study of the inscription see v. Hinüber 2004:64–66.

⁴⁷On the Palola Śāhi see Jettmar 1993 and the studies by Fussman 1993, and v. Hinüber 2004. On the statues see v. Schroeder 2001, vol. 1:62–67, pls.19–24.



Figure 6.17 Stucco relief from temple D.II, Dandān-oiliq (after Stein 1907, vol. 2, pl. LIV)

logical frame for a production that extends to adjacent areas, i.e., Kashmir and Western Tibet, up to the 10th century.

If not for the data provided by the inscription, the piece from Domoko could well find a place among other Buddhist bronze statues from Northwest India. The similarity to the Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, or to a statue of Buddha from a private collection with an inscription in Sanskrit and Tibetan, dated to 700–725, has been suggested in previous studies; on the basis of such comparisons, a date of the first half of the 8th century has been proposed for the piece of Domoko.⁴⁸ A group of bronzes bearing dated inscriptions and manufactured probably in the Gilgit ateliers in an earlier period (end of 6th to beginning of 7th century) offers other elements of comparison: for example, the treatment of the *kāśāya*, the symmetrical arrangement of the pleats over the left shoulder and the facial features of both the Buddha donated by the monk Ratnacittin in the year 70 (FIGURE 6.19), and the seated Bud-

⁴⁸Patry Leidy 1997 and Heller 2001. The Buddha from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is published in Pal 1975: 96–97; v. Schroeder 1981: 114–115, 14F. For the sculpture from a private collection see Heller 2001: fig. 1.



Figure 6.18 Bronze seated Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, found in Domoko, H. 42 cm (photo: E. Forte, WHAV EF10 1000.954, courtesy: Khotan Museum)



Figure 6.19 Bronze seated Buddha donated by Ratnacittin, H. 37,5 cm. Norton Simon Museum, F.1973.29.S (Photo Courtesy: The Norton Simon Foundation)



Figure 6.20 Bronze seated Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* (private collection), H. 23 cm (after Siudmak 2013, pl. 125. Photo courtesy: John Siudmak)

dha (although not in *dharmacakramudrā*) of the year 92.⁴⁹ Aside from these similarities, however, the bronze of Domoko displays elements that are peculiar to this piece and that might point to a tradition that had developed in different workshops and centers, although still inspired by the Gilgit ateliers. Further similarities are to be found in the bronzes from the Potala palace collection, especially a group attributed to the Kārkoṭa dynasty, that have the same type of rectangular moulded pedestal and flat lotus base with multiple rows of petals turning downward.⁵⁰ Finally,

⁴⁹The Buddha of Ratnacittin has been dated by Fussman precisely to the year 594, rejecting P.G. Paul’s date of 694 (Fussman 1993: 31). The Buddha of the year 92 is assigned to 616 CE (Fussman 1993: 29–32).

⁵⁰See especially the pedestal of the standing Buddha Śākyamuni of the Li ma lha khang, v. Schroeder 2001, vol. 1, pl. 28 and v. Schroeder 2008 pl. 3B (dated circa 650–700 CE). Other bronzes attributed to the Kārkoṭa from this collection have similar pedestals (v. Schroeder 2001, vol. 1: pls. 15, 17, 36; the Buddha from pl. 36 is a crowned Buddha and is dated to a later period, 8th–9th century).

despite being smaller in size a piece also attributed to Kashmir and from the second half of the 7th century has nearly the same physical and facial characteristics as the bronze of Domoko (FIGURE 6.20).⁵¹

To this point, it could be assumed that the Buddha from Domoko was produced outside Khotan in an area that probably had Gilgit and Kashmir as its centers of irradiation. A question remains as to the way the sculpture reached Domoko.

As evidenced from the inscriptions, this type of bronzes was mainly commissioned by members of the higher society. These bronzes were regarded as particularly precious objects, bearing a specific symbolic and doctrinal value. Most probably their possession implied a particular status and the transfer of such objects, treated as treasures, may have served within a certain circuit as prestigious gifts that conveyed a political as well as religious significance. In this perspective the ways these treasures were transmitted become particularly elusive. The direct contacts between Khotan and Gilgit or Kashmir, or between Khotan and other countries adjacent to the areas where these bronzes originated, occurred at different levels (economical, political, religious) and in different periods; also, these contacts should count as factors that facilitated such transmission. For example, the import of a large number of Buddhist bronze images from northwestern India to Tibet when Bolōr (Baltistan) was conquered by the Tibetans in the second quarter of the 8th century certainly activated other channels of circulation of this production. The possibility that the Buddha of Domoko reached Khotan through contacts with Tibet, especially when the kingdom was part of the Tibetan empire, should also be considered.⁵²

⁵¹The sculpture was previously in the collection of S. Eilemberg and then of S. Digby. See v. Schroeder (1981: 114-115, pl. 14G), who dated it to the 9th century.

⁵²This hypothesis is suggested in Matsumoto 2005: 80, and Heller 2001: 19-20. The presence of Buddhist bronze statues from the Kashmir and Gilgit areas in Tibet is attested also by recent archaeological excavations; see for example the two bronze statues recovered from the Phyi dbang monastery in western Tibet (Huo and Li 2001: 129, pls. 195-196) which are of the same typology as the Domoko Buddha (Śākyamuni in *dharmacakramudrā*) but with a different pedestal. One of the two is attributed to the Kārkoṭa Dynasty and dated to circa 7th century (v. Schroeder 2008: 42-43, pl. 4).

Concluding Remarks

In analyzing the portable cult objects from Khotan, we are confronted with three difficulties: often uncertain archaeological provenance,⁵³ determining the place of production, and the chronological attribution. Instances in which all three factors are known are rare, thus leaving a sometimes substantial uncertainty in the reconstruction of an artifacts' history (which must remain in the realm of hypothesis until new material and study provide further evidence).

Those objects whose archaeological provenance can to a certain extent be determined fall into two large groups with regard to the place of creation: local or foreign. Even this basic differentiation is not always easy to establish. Among the samples presented, the material from which the objects are made is sometimes indicative of their origin, as is the case with portable shrines made from schist, clearly a product from Northwest India. On the other hand, the portable shrines in wood seem more likely to belong to local production, connected with other workshops along the Silk Road, notably those in Kucha and Turfan, and circulated in the Tarim basin. The concept of Buddhist wooden foldable shrines may have been inspired by the stone portable shrines from Northwest India, but the iconographic choice (at least in Khotan) seems to exclude narratives from the Buddha's life. It is possible that the latter preference resulted from an active choice of Khotanese workshops, since the wooden portable shrines found in other centers of the Silk Road present layouts and subjects that are often closer to the post-Gandharan examples in stone. But it is also possible that this choice was due more generally to a certain chronological context, where there is a tendency to discard narrative scenes in favor of iconic ones.

It is interesting to note here that Buddhist travelling objects in ivory are not found among the archaeological material from Khotan. Production in ivory appears generally to be nearly absent in Khotan, and the objects

⁵³For many of the ancient Buddhist artifacts from the Tarim basin found at the turn of the 20th century, the archaeological provenance is undetermined. In this period, when interest in Silk Road antiquities grew, small artifacts became one of the most suitable and popular items to be sold at the local markets. In this respect, these travelling objects maintained their function as transferable and portable items even in modern times, although within a different “ideological” context.

that have been found there are considered as having been imported from Northwest India.⁵⁴

With bronze objects the panorama seems more diverse: we cannot exclude the possibility of the existence of local bronze workshops in Khotan. The style of some examples can be compared to that of paintings and artifacts recovered from archaeological sites of the area, thus suggesting a local manufacture. Other bronze objects may have travelled from China and India. Beside these observations, the bronze artifacts from Khotan nevertheless need further research as the published material would require a systematic assessment, including, if possible, analysis of the metal.

The Buddha of Domoko stands out as a special case because of the rarity of such a find within the Tarim area. The sculpture is indicative of the circulation of a special production that implied not only religious but political values, and that may have involved a network based on political and family ties rather than exclusively religious ones. This production belonging to the 7th to 8th centuries would connect Khotan with the areas of Kashmir and Gilgit. Whatever route the Buddha of Domoko may have taken before reaching Khotan, it is not impossible that it derived from direct contact with these areas. In addition to the connection through the Buddhist network, recent studies have evidenced the close ties that existed between Kashmir and Khotan and with other kingdoms of Northwest India during the 8th century at the level of marriage alliances.⁵⁵ It may be significant that a route directly connecting Khotan and Kashmir was still in use in the 10th century.⁵⁶

⁵⁴One is a fragment of a loving couple (*mithuna*), carved in the round and found by Stein (1907, vol. 1: 209, 222, vol. 2: pl. XLVIII) attributed to Northwest India, from the “post-Gandhāra period 6th–7th century” (Whitfield and Farrer 1990: 168–169, n. 140). The other object is a plaque displaying a *maṇḍala* of Vajravārāhī from the Sven Hedin collection at the National Museums of World Culture, Sweden, manufactured possibly in Kashmir between the 7th and 9th century (published in Montell 1938: 98–99, briefly discussed in Williams 1973: 122; for the identification of the subject see Banerjee 1998 who proposes a date of the 9th–10th century; for a further discussion see Chandra 2007, who tends to attribute the object to the 10th century).

⁵⁵It seems that at the beginning of the 8th century the royal families of Kashmir and Khotan were indirectly related by marriages with princesses from the Kābulśāh family (Inaba 2010: 446–451).

⁵⁶Bailey 1936. Further evidence for the circulation of this production in the Khotan area—although it must be carefully handled because its archaeological provenance remains vague—comes from a fragment of a bronze statue now at the State Hermitage Mu-

A suggestion as to the place of origin of the portable objects does not automatically answer the question of establishing over which route they arrived in Khotan. Even if the place of production can be ascertained, we can only draw a production map, but not itineraries of the travel done by the objects. This production map would roughly tell us that travelling cult objects found in Khotan testify to traffic which occurred from the 5th to the 8th century, and which involved direct or intermediate contacts with China (around the 5th and 8th century), Northwest India (Gandhāra, in the 5th–6th century), the oases of the northern branch of the Silk Road (Kucha and Turfan, between the 5th/6th and the 7th century), the areas of Swat, Kashmir and Gilgit valley (around the 7th and 8th century).

Studies of the itineraries of the Buddhist pilgrims travelling along the Silk Road have evidenced that in the 4th–5th centuries Gandhāra was considered the center of Buddhism and was thus the primary destination for pilgrims. During this period, Khotan was a near obligatory passage on the routes connecting China, the Tarim basin and India. In the 5th and 6th centuries the pilgrims travelling between China and India often came to Khotan from the northern centers of the Silk Road, such as Qizil and Kucha; accordingly there was a certain exchange between the northern and the southern oasis via the Qizil-Khotan route.⁵⁷ At the beginning of the 6th century a change of itinerary occurred, and by the 7th century the routes to India crossed the areas around Kapiśi and Bāmiyān. In the second quarter of the 7th century Kapiśi therefore became a main passage point in the Buddhist itineraries. During this period one of the itineraries still went through Khotan, but instead of going directly to Gandhāra after passing the Pamirs/Onion Mountains via Tashkurgan, the route headed to Kapiśi and Bāmiyān.⁵⁸ The existence of an alternative itinerary which connected Khotan to Kashmir and Uḍḍiyāna without passing through Yarkand, and started from south of Guma (Pishan 皮山), should also be

seum (Hermitage Museum 2008: 85, n. 38). The fragment is said to have been acquired in Khotan. Despite being fragmentary, elements of a similar statuary from the Swat region, which are also attributed to the 7th–8th century, can be recognized, such as the Buddha Śākyamuni seated on a lion throne (v. Schroeder 2001, vol. 1: 40–41, pl. 6) from the greater Swat region or Uḍḍiyāna, attributed to the 7th–8th century. Other comparable examples are in v. Schroeder 2001, vol. 1: 48–49, pl. 10E-F; 50–51, pl. 11E.

⁵⁷Such is the case of Faxian, and probably Zhimeng (智猛, d. 453; Kuwayama 2002: 144).

⁵⁸Kuwayama 2002 and 2006.

noted.⁵⁹ This route was in use from the Han period (first half of the 1st century BCE) to the middle of the Tang (middle of the 8th century). It seems that the area of the Guma oasis constituted a secondary hub of roads connecting Khotan directly with the areas of Northern India and Western Tibet.⁶⁰ This channel of communication may also be meaningful when considering that Tibet was also a possible intermediary that took part in the network of exchanges of cult objects from the 7th century on.

The portable cult objects introduced here provide just a glimpse of the cultural exchanges occurring in Khotan in the first millennium and leave us with many open questions. Although some of the objects' attributes are difficult to define at the moment, and thus leave much room for conjecture, the present selection appears to fit well within the general outline given by studies on Buddhist travel itineraries and other historical sources. This promising congruence shows that it is possible to discover plausible patterns within an — at least partly — uncertain set of data. A systematic cross-subject study should prove the most effective path towards establishing a less fragile spatial and temporal framework in order to understand the modalities of the Buddhist traffic and its impact on the artistic production in central Asia.

⁵⁹According to Li Chongfeng (2005) this itinerary was known as the “Jibin Route” in Chinese literature. However, from this study it is not totally clear how different the Jibin route was from that taken by Faxian and other monks such as Zhimeng and Fayong 法勇 to reach Northwest India between the 4th and the 6th century.

⁶⁰One of the routes was the “Salt Route” that went from Tibet to Sangzhu 桑株 in Pishan county, after crossing the Kunlun. This route had been in use much earlier than the expansion of the Tibetans into Central Asia and the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet (Wang Xiaofu 2009: 24–26, 29–32).

Abbreviations

The translations of Chinese and Japanese titles are taken from the works themselves.

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