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# “Buddha-Mazda” from Kara-tepe in Old Termez (Uzbekistan): A Preliminary Communication

by Boris J. Stavisky

A wall painting depicting the Buddha sitting in the state of meditation (*dhyānamudrā*) was discovered in the autumn of 1979 on the Kara-tepe hill, in Southern Uzbekistan (the ancient land of Bactria-Tokharistan), where systematic excavations have been carried out since 1961 by the joint group of archaeologists and restoration experts of the State Hermitage (Leningrad), the State Museum of the Art of the Peoples of the East (Moscow) and the USSR Central Research Laboratory for the Restoration and Conservation of Objects of Art (since 1979—the USSR Research Institute of Restoration).<sup>1</sup>

As a result of our excavations it has been established that a major Buddhist religious centre existed on the Kara-tepe hill in the periphery of the vast town-site of Old Termez in the 2nd-3rd centuries A.D., the period when the Kushan town of Tarmita (Termez) flourished. The centre consisted of separate complexes which included both cave and ground structures. For instance, the southern tip of the three-peaked Kara-tepe hill revealed three such complexes (A, B and D). They included cave temples and courtyards situated on the slopes of the hill. All these temples and courtyards are basically alike. Each temple was actually a closed premise framed on all the four sides by corridors with two exits leading to the courtyard. Temple courtyards had porticoes, the wooden roofs of which were supported by wooden columns with stone Attic-type bases.

Fragments of Buddhist statues in stone and plaster, stone bas-reliefs, and discs adorned with lotus flowers, and painted and gilded stone umbrellas (*chatras*) are all evidence of the fact that the Kara-tepe complexes were decorated with big and small sculptural elements.

Excavations of the courtyards yielded wall paintings. In the A and

B complexes were found fragments of polychrome paintings depicting figures of donors and two wall paintings of the Buddha and monks under a tree were discovered in the B complex courtyard.<sup>2</sup> The entrance parts of the A and B cave temples yielded fragments of ornamental painting. In 1979 a remarkable wall painting depicting the meditating Buddha was discovered in the D complex cave temple. It was thus evident that figurative paintings as well as sculptures decorated not only the courtyards but also the temples.

Among other finds of Kara-tepe are the numerous inscriptions. Some undoubtedly belong to the heyday of this religious centre's history. These are gift inscriptions and religious dictums on ceramic vessels. They are in the Kharoshthi and Brahmi as well as in the Kushan (i.e., modified Greek) alphabet, and in the so-called "unknown" (or "Kambojian") script of Aramaic origin.<sup>3</sup> There are others, scratched by visitors on the entrance arches and corridor walls, which may be dated from the time of the centre's decline. Some of these graffiti inscriptions—the so-called Bactrian or Kushan, Indian and Middle Persian—seem to date from the end of the 3rd (?)–4th centuries A.D., whereas the Moslem inscriptions in Arabic date from the 10th to the beginning of the 13th centuries A.D.

The wall painting in question was discovered in the course of excavations of the northern corridor. This is on the southern wall, which is close to the passage leading to the cells and to the eastern exit to the courtyard which gave access to the daylight (fig. 1). Unlike the polychrome representations of the Buddha found in the B complex courtyard, this D complex cave-temple wall painting is monochrome. The painter evidently took into account the fact that his creation would get much less light than the murals in the temple courtyards and, not resorting to various colours and hues, produced a splendid piece of art using a single red over white plaster. Executed by a sure hand, the contours of the figure and the folds of the robe (the head, unfortunately, was almost completely destroyed by a later Moslem inscription) makes the representation dimensional and convey the general philosophical mood of the work. Artistic merits of the painting are yet to attract the attention of art historians. However, what we got interested in also was a detail of no small importance—a halo formed by two rows of stylized but clearly discernible tongues of flame (fig. 2 and 3).

This detail is certainly not a chance phenomenon. It outlines the syncretic nature of the representation, which combined the image of the Buddha with the attributes of the god of light or fire. That at least

was how the local people understood the image in the period immediately after the Kara-tepe religious centre fell into desolation. This is evidenced by the graffiti inscription, in the Kushan script, close to the Buddha's head, made by a visitor at the end of the 3rd–4th century A.D. (?). The inscription which reads, *Buddha-Mazda*, and may be discerned quite definitely, points to the syncretism of the Buddhist and the local East Iranian Mazdaist cults.

As we know, the fire cult, one of the most widespread cults in human history, has been traced in Hindustan and Central Asia, as well as in other regions from ancient times up to the present. It would therefore be hardly convincing to connect the appearance of the general notion of a “light-bearing” or “shining” Buddha with any local tradition. However, attempts to tie up concrete artifacts in which the notion found embodiment with local cults might be quite legitimate. Thus, the representations of the Buddha with tongues of flame rising from his shoulders, to be seen on two bas-reliefs from the region of Kapiśa (the old Paropamisadae area),<sup>5</sup> can be traced to the same tradition that gave birth to the image of a Kushan emperor with tongues of flame over his shoulder.<sup>6</sup>

It may be noticed that the above-mentioned bas-reliefs from the Kapiśa region, situated at the southern border of Bactria-Tokharistan, have haloes framed with the tongues of flame similar, in the general depiction of the type, if not in style, to that on the Kara-tepe painting. Both the Kapiśa bas-reliefs and the Kara-tepe painting probably refer to the same historic period—the heyday of the Kushan Empire<sup>7</sup>, and seem to have been created at monasteries connected with the Kushan elite.<sup>8</sup> Most probably, in both cases, the “fire halo” has to be explained by East Iranian Mazdaist traditions.

The Kara-tepe “Buddha-Mazda” as well as similar representations with fire haloes await further study. But already at this stage one may venture a question: are not such representations based on an apt artistic method, devised by the Kushan artists in Bactria-Tokharistan and in the neighbouring territories of the Empire, to create the syncretic image of the “light-bearing” or “shining” Buddha? At any rate, as far as I know, the Buddha's “fire halo” has not been found in Indian monuments of the Kushan period. At the same time in China, where the Central Asian followers of Buddhism played a considerable role in its dissemination, this iconographic detail has been familiar since the 5th–6th centuries.<sup>9</sup> It is to be found in Korea in the 6th–8th centuries<sup>10</sup> and in Japan<sup>11</sup> and Thailand,<sup>12</sup> since the 7th–9th centuries.

As to India and Nepal, I have succeeded (thus far) in finding the “fire halo” only in monuments which are dated in the 11th–12th centuries.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. Major publications—*Materials of the Joint Expedition on Kara-tepe*. (General Editor, B.J. Stavisky) (in Russian):

*Kara-tepe, I* — *The Kara-tepe Buddhist Cave Monastery in Old Termez*. Moscow, 1964.

*Kara-tepe, II* — *Buddhist Caves on Kara-tepe in Old Termez*. Moscow, 1969.

*Kara-tepe, III* — *A Buddhist Religious Centre on Kara-tepe in Old Termez*. Moscow, 1972.

*Kara-tepe, IV* — *New Finds on Kara-tepe in Old Termez*. Moscow, 1974.

*Kara-tepe, V* — *Buddhist Monuments on Kara-tepe in Old Termez*. (In the process of publication.)

2. For a colour reproduction of one of them see B.J. Stavisky, *K Yugu ot Zheleznykh Vorot (South of the Iron Gates)*, Moscow, 1977, pp. 88–89, fig. 47; for a drawing cf. B.J. Stavisky, *Kushanskaya Bactriya: Problemy Istorii i Kultury (The Kushan Bactria: Problems of History and Culture)*, Moscow, 1977, p. 231, fig. 40. The scene is reproduced in the book by David L. Snellgrove (General Editor), *The Image of the Buddha*, Serindia Publication/UNESCO, London-Tokyo, 1978, fig. 142 on p. 193, unfortunately a mirror reflection. The second scene is now in the process of restoration.

3. See *Kara-tepe, I*, pp. 62–81; *Kara-tepe, II*, pp. 32–39, 40–46, 47–81, 82–125; *Kara-tepe, III*, pp. 114–117, 118–121, 122–128; *Kara-tepe, IV*, pp. 47–60, 61–69, 70–81.

4. See *Kara-tepe, IV*, pp. 82–87.

5. For the most recent data see David L. Snellgrove (General Editor), *The Image of the Buddha*, pp. 186–187; figs. 136–137.

6. See John M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*. Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1967, p. 200.

7. See, for instance, H. Plaeschke, *Buddhistische Kunst*. Leipzig, 1974, taf. 27. (3rd–5th centuries); S. Gaulier, R. Jera-Bezard and M. Maillard, *Buddhism in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Part I*. Leiden, 1976, figs. 22, 29 (2nd–3rd centuries).

8. John M. Rosenfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 200–201.

9. David L. Snellgrove (General Editor), *op. cit.*, figs. 155 (437 A.D.); 157 (477 A.D.); 159 (5th century and later); 161 (518 A.D.); 162 (522 A.D.), and 163 (536 A.D.). It should be noted that a fire halo on figs. 155 and 157 is interpreted here, as in a number of other publications, as an element of the Old Chinese tradition. Such haloes are to be found in China up to the 17th century (*ibid.*, fig. 283–1662 A.D.).

10. *Ibid.*, figs. 172 (539 or 599 A.D.); 177 (early 7th century); 178 (around 700 A.D.); 181 (720 A.D.). Cf. fig. 303 (end of the 12th century).

11. *Ibid.*, figs. 188 (last quarter of the 7th century); 197 (middle of the 9th century); and 202 (end of the 9th century).

12. *Ibid.*, fig. 106 (7th–9th centuries).

13. *Ibid.*, figs. 202 (11th century, India); 276 (11th–12th centuries, Nepal).

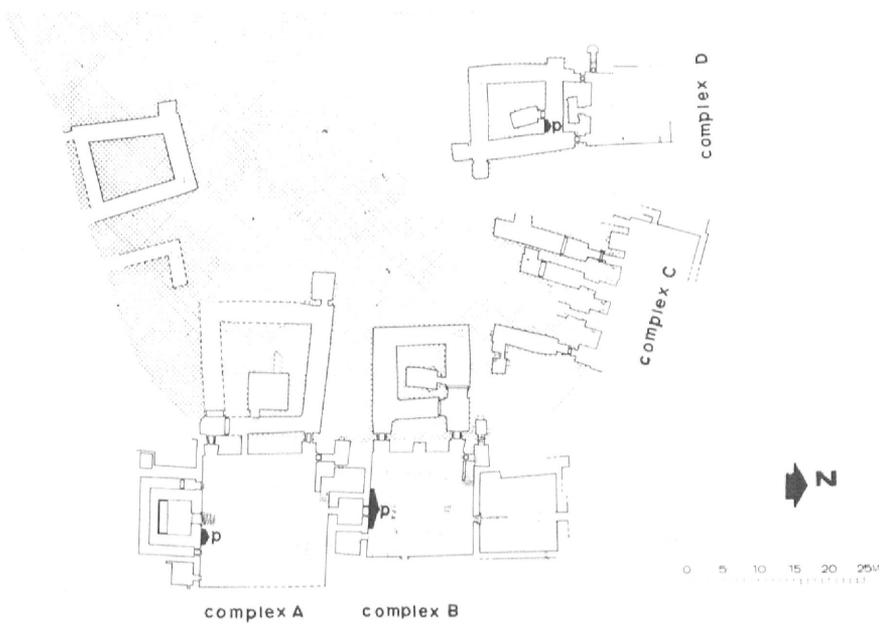


Fig. 1 Plan of excavations 1979 (p-wall-paintings)



Fig. 2 Buddha. The wall-painting in complex D.



Fig. 3 Buddha (a drawing)