

A few notes on the Turk Shahi elite and Buddhism. East Asian sources and archaeology

Arina Mrachkovskaya

Abstract

East Asian Buddhist pilgrims portrayed Turk Shahi as Buddhist rulers – they regularly made offerings, provided Buddhist feasts, built monasteries on their donations. However, archaeological evidence shows a more complex situation. Under Turk Shahi reign Brahmanical cults spread through the region, while esoteric Buddhism steadily gained popularity.

Keywords: Turk Shahi, Buddhism, Brahmanical cults, Gandhara, Kabul, Swat.

1. Introduction

In the 6th century, the Turkic Khaganate conquered the Hephthalite confederation (Klimburg-Salter 2010: 40), and – around 650 CE – Kabul became the capital of the Turk Shahi kingdom, who ruled over Kabul-Gandhara until the 9th century, when Hindu Shahi came to power (*ibid.*).

The Turk Shahi period was a very fertile and fortunate period for artistic production and the construction or renovation of worship centres. Sculptors and craftsmen of local regional tradition were apparently employed on a large scale. A new figurative language, and new sculptural types (stelae mainly, but also statues) was also introduced (see Kuwayama 1976), possibly also due to the presence of stonemasons and sculptors connected to the Indian tradition of marble art. Much of these marble materials are of Hindu subject matter, yet it should not be forgotten that during this period, at least in Kabulistan, a great many Buddhist centers were renovated.

In fact, there is evidence of Turk Shahi's support of Buddhism – Buddhist complexes and sculptures dating back to the Turk Shahi period (in particular red clay-based Buddhist high-reliefs; Kimmet 2022). It is really significant that among these statues, some artworks depict the elite and donors, such as the figures from Tepe Maranjan (*ibid.*: 11-12).

Not only archaeological but also text sources provide evidence on the Turk Shahi support of Buddhism through donations and offerings. The Buddhist canon Dazang Jing contains an account of a Turkic queen of Uddiyana, who reigned in the 8th(?) century, asking monk Shubhakarasiṃha to teach her the Law (Inaba 2010: 445). In this paper we tried to find out the correlation between the Turkic elite and Buddhism and the status of Buddhism under Turk Shahi.

2. Turk Shahi in the travelogue of Jibin: Gandhara

One of the text sources which provide information on Turk Shahi and Buddhism is the travelogue *Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Indian Regions* by a Buddhist pilgrim Hyecho. The text includes a description of Gandhara in the first half of the 8th century.

Hyecho writes “The king and military are all Turks, while the local people are Hu and also some Brahmins” (Yang 1984: 48). The Buddhist monk describes the ruling elite as Turks, mentions that there were Brahmins in the country. This means that Brahmanical cults were practised and Buddhism was not the only religion in Gandhara at that period. However, Hyecho claims that the Turkic elite supported Buddhism. It is clear from the following part – “Though the king is a Turk, he reveres the Three Jewels deeply. The king, queen, princes, and generals each build temples and give offerings to the Three Jewels...” (Whitfield 2012: 127). The ruling family made donations, including sponsoring the construction of monasteries. By doing this, they both received merits and perpetuated their names.¹

Hyecho continues: (After donation) for [king’s] wife and elephants, he (the king) would order the monks to set a price so that he could purchase them back again. Besides these things, the monks would sell off the donated camels, horses, gold, silver, clothing and furniture, and share the proceeds (Whitfield 2012: 127). This interesting episode illustrates commodity-money relations in Samgha.² From Hyecho we learn that a monastic community could sell off received gifts. Money, precious metals and gems were divided into two parts: one for Dharma, another for Samgha – donated treasures were sold and the proceeds were distributed among monks (Takakusu 1896: 192). So, monks receive donations, they sell donated gifts, and after trade they use money to fulfil cult needs. This process shows that the monastic community was a part of economic life. Hyecho writes that a king could purchase his wife and elephants back from the monastic community. By writing this, Hyecho portrays the Turkic king as a zealous Buddhist who donates the most precious to Buddha to show his favour to this religion to benefit in a political way. It might also be a symbolic donation, once again, possibly for political purposes.

3. Turk Shahi according to Jibin

Before analysing the next part of the text, we should understand which toponym is not used in the text. Hyecho writes in Classical Chinese and uses Chinese toponym

¹ Another reason for supporting Buddhism might be legitimisation. We will consider the reasons why Turks supported Buddhism in the final part of this paper.

² As A. Bareau writes, the donation system changed from direct to indirect ones; indirect donations produce rent or interest which monks could use to fulfil cult needs (Bareau 1961: 445).

Jibin (罽賓). There are certain difficulties with identifying Jibin. In this we agree with Shoshin Kuwayama and relate Jibin of the 8th century to Kabul, not Kapisi. As after the Turk Shahi usurpation of Kapisi, the toponym Jibin was still used but referred to Kabul (Kuwayama 1999: 60).



Fig. 1 - Head and torso of a female donor figure. Photo by D. Klimburg-Salter.
(from Khawar [Kafir Kot], Afghanistan: Buddhist Clay-based Sculpture from the Early
Period of the Śāhi Kingdoms. URL: <https://shahimaterialculture.univie.ac.at/sourcebook/>)

Hyecho writes “This country is also under the authority of the king of Gandhara. During the summer, the king comes here to spend time in a cool place, and then in the winter, he lives in Gandhara to be where it is warm” (Whitfield 2012: 136). According to this account, Turkic kings had two capitals: Kabul as the winter one and Hund as the summer one. Based on the city location description, we suggest that the city Hyecho visited in Gandhara is Hund (see on that Verdon 2021), while in this part he describes the Kabul region. “The people are most reverent of the Three Jewels and there are many monasteries and monks.” According to Hyecho, Buddhism was the dominant faith in Kabulistan. That should not surprise us, since, as said at the beginning of these notes, archaeological evidence supports the existence of coeval Buddhist centres near Kabul, such as Tepe Khazana and Tepe Narenj. “Every commoner’s household contributes to the founding of temples and gives offerings to the Three Jewels.” (Whitfield 2012: 137).

Hyecho continues “In the big city, there is a monastery called Sahis. Preserved here are relics of the Buddha, including a curl of his hair and some bone sarira [*śarīra*].” (Whitfield 2012: 137). We do not have doubt that that “big city” was Kabul, then the aforementioned monastery could be one of the Buddhist monastery ruins located near the capital of modern Afghanistan. Another interesting detail is the name of the monastery. Although the name would suggest an association with the ruling Shahi in Hyecho’s time, the name is reported as traditional. Before the Turk Shahi the term *śāhi* as a title was used by the Alkhan Huns (Errington 2010: 153; see also Vondrovec 2012: 183) and earlier also by the Kushans (Falk 2010: 80). So, “Shahi monastery” might have simply meant a monastery founded or supported by any of these rulers.

Another evidence of the Turkic elite sponsoring Buddhism is an account of Chinese monk Wukong who travelled to Kashmir in 759–763 CE. Wukong reports on numerous Buddhist sacred places in Kashmir founded by the Turk Shahi ruling dynasty (Stein 1900: 90). Aurel Stein writes that these structures belong to the period of Lalitaditya Muktapida (742–760 CE), under whose reign many Buddhist shrines and stupas were erected (Stein 1900: 90-91). Wukong describes two Buddhist monasteries in Kashmir built on donations of the Turkic elite – Yelitegin and Khatun monasteries (Levi, Chavannes 1895: 18-19). Another monastery, named in honour of a general, might be connected with a Turk minister of Lalitaditya (Stein 1900: 90). In Gandhara Wukong also records a Khatun monastery, built by a wife of a Turkic king (Levi, Chavannes 1895: 21). As M. Inaba considers, the aforementioned monasteries were probably built on donations of the Turk Shahi dynasty members as Kashmir was an important Buddhist centre and both regions were connected through religious networks (Inaba 2010: 450). To conclude, Turks named Buddhist buildings in honour of themselves, they made donations on monastery constructions not only in Kabul-Gandhara, but also regions outside their direct political rule, in Kashmir.



Fig. 2 – Head of a bodhisattva, Tapa Sardar, 7th-8th century CE.
Photo by E. Monti, Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan
(After EASAA: <https://easaa.org/gallery/>)

Fig. 3 – Padmapani Lokeshvara seated on the Rock, Kashmir, 8th century CE.
(After Artstor <https://jstor.org/stable/community.24612954>).

4. Turk Shahi and Buddhism

There is evidence of different Buddhist schools practised in the Turk Shahi kingdom. According to Hyecho, Theravada was practised in the Kabul region, while in Gandhara, both Mahayana and Theravada schools were popular. Moreover, Deborah Klimburg-Salter provides examples of esoteric practices, for instance, *mandala* in Tepe Narenj (Klimburg-Salter 2010: 172). Zaifar Paiman shows another evidence of esoteric influence in Tepe Narenj - the five *jinas* in Chapel 3 (Paiman, Alram 2010: 36).

There may be several reasons for Turks, who were not culturally Buddhist, to support Buddhism. As foreigners in the Kabul-Gandhara region, they had no genealogical legitimacy. They also were out of the *varṇa* system, which means, in the Brahmanical view, they could not rule as they were not *kṣatriya*. Turks needed to search for other sources of legitimacy, and they might have found it in Buddhism, which does not accept the *varṇa* system, or does not regard it as a system of separation and social control. Moreover, by the Turk invasion Buddhism

had a long history in the region and, as pilgrims mention, a significant part of the population followed Buddhism. By supporting this religion, Turks showed themselves as a part of society. Moreover, by demonstrating their favour to Buddhism, Turk Shahi could establish diplomatic connections with Buddhist neighbours. Turk Shahi established alliances with adjacent kingdoms of Zabul (Hyecho suggests Zabul and Turk Shahi kings were close relatives), Bamiyan, and Kashmir (Klimburg-Salter 2010: 41). Based on *Rajatarangini*'s description of Shahi princes and a Turkic minister at Lalitaditya court, Aurel Stein suggests that Turk Shahi relations with Kashmir were complicated (Stein 1900: 93). For us, Turks at Kashmir court is an argument to suggest that the two neighbours had complex relationships despite nominal sharing the same religion – Buddhism.

4. Buddhism and Brahmanical cults

Buddhism was not the only religion in the Turk Shahi state. There is also evidence of Brahmanical cults. Xuanzang describes followers of Brahmanical ascetics in Kapisi as naked people or those who put on ashes (Alexandrova 2012: 51). His records are written evidence of the Brahmanical cults' existence in the Kabul Valley before the Turk invasion. Archeological evidence supports the Chinese pilgrim notes. Xuanzang describes two Brahmanical monuments in southern Kapisi. Soshin Kuwayama suggests that these two sites might be Tapa Skandar where a marble Umāmaheśvara statue was found; and Khair Khana where other Brahmanical statues roughly datable to the 7th century were discovered (Kuwayama 1999: 26). Another evidence of Turk Shahi's support of Brahmanical cults is a Gaṇeśa marble statue from Gardez with two lines of inscription in Brahmi, with the preserved name of a donor (a king of Oḍiyāna, i.e. Swat, by the way).³ According to S. Kuwayama, the statue dates back roughly to the 8th century (Kuwayama 2002: 257-259). However, Brahmanical marble statues have been found not only in the Kabul region. Several fragments of analogous Brahmanical marble statues were also found near the temple, located on the top of Barikot hill, excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission from 1998 to 2000 and from 2019 to 2023 (Olivieri 2023: 261). The foundation of the temple is a massive artificial terrace which belongs to a pre-existing Buddhist sacred area (Olivieri 2023: 261).

³ Another was found near Kabul at Sakar-dara. The inscription on the Gardez statue reads: "On the thirteenth day of the bright half of the month of Yestha, the [lunar] mansion being the Visakha, at the auspicious time when the zodiacal sign Lion was bright on the horizon (*lagna*), in the year eight, this great [image] of the Mahavinayaka was consecrated by the supreme lord, the great king, the king of the kings, the Sri Shahi Khimṅāla [Kinghala was Turk Shahi ruler], the king of Odyana". (Translation: Hideaki Nakatani) (Kuwayama 1999: 44, 71; see also Dhavalikar 1971 and Sircar 1966: 44-47).

Radiocarbon dates associated to the finding of the aforementioned fragments suggests that the Buddhist site located on top of the Barikot was rebuilt as a Brahmanical temple in the 7th– early 8th century, and that the possible donors were Turk Shahi (Olivieri 2010: 358, 361).



Fig. 4 - Ganesha, Gardez, 8th CE. (from Dhavalikar 1971).



Fig. 5 - Umāmaheśvara, Tapa Skandar, 7th CE.
(Photo by courtesy of The Committee of the Kyoto University Scientific Mission to
Central Asia; After Shahi Kingdom Database:
<https://shahimaterialculture.univie.ac.at/database/>).

Despite support of Buddhism, Turk Shahi were not Buddhist kings to the full extent. There are several reasons for this. First, we could not find any Buddhist symbols on Turk Shahi coinage. Although a wheel is represented on some coins, A. Rehman suggests that the depicted wheel is a solar wheel, not a *chakra* (Rehman 1976: 183), which correlates with Anna Filigenzi's idea that Turk Shahi experienced a strong impact of Solar cult (Filigenzi 2006: 199).



Fig. 6 – Chorasani Tegin Shahi coin, Kabulistan, 7th-8th CE.
(from Shahi Kingdom Database: <https://shahimaterialculture.univie.ac.at/database/>).

5. Turk Shahi and Brahmanical cults

The 7th–8th centuries was the time of international trade. In such cosmopolitan atmosphere not only goods but also ideas and thoughts spread through trade routes. For example, Tang-influenced style paintings were found in Bamiyan and Indian-Kashmiri style Brahmanical statues were excavated in the Kabul region (Klimburg-Salter 2008: 133). In the 7th–8th centuries Brahmanical centres, as well as Buddhist ones, expanded in Afghanistan due to economic affluence (Klimburg-Salter 2008: 132).

During Brahmanical cults spread, such phenomena as Brahmanical implications at Buddhist sites appeared. For example, K.A. Behrendt reports on Brahmanical statues in Buddhist monasteries (Behrendt 2010: 306; see e.g. at Tepe Sardar). A. Filigenzi reports on four reliefs in Tindo Dag (Swat), placed not far from each other, three of which are Buddhist but the fourth depicts Brahmanical deities – Surya, Vishnu and Ganesa (Filigenzi 2006: 200). This is an example of two religions coexisting in one place. There are also interesting images which can be interpreted as Shiva Maheshwara, the esoteric conception of Avalokiteshvara (Behrendt 2010: 307). According to K.A. Behrendt, there might be interactions between ascetic Buddhism and Brahmanical ascetic practices that led to ideological exchange (Behrendt 2010: 307). If Buddhism shifted towards esoteric practices and there was an ideological exchange between Buddhism and

Brahmanical cults, Turk Shahi could support both as esoteric Buddhism and Brahmanical cults were steadily gaining popularity. Because of ideological exchange, Buddhist esoteric practices and Brahmanical cults were closely related. The interaction can be observed not only in archaeological but also in written sources. First, there is evidence that Tantric mantra was an adaptation of the Shivaite formula (Behrendt 2010: 306). Second, based on the Adivaraha-Perumal temple inscription, we can see that Buddha was considered as one of the ten Vishnu avatars already in the 7th–9th centuries (Salomon 2017: 12). Moreover, veneration of Vasudeva and Buddha took place. There is a Turk Shahi marble mutilated pedestal probably from Swat, the pedestal bears an inscription (Salomon 2017: 15-17). Although a *vāsudeva-pratimā* writing, the text has characteristics of Buddhist donative texts (*ibid.*). The aforementioned examples illustrate deep interconnections between the two religions.

6. Conclusions

In written sources such as accounts of Hyecho and Wukong Turk Shahi are represented as patrons of Buddhism – they sponsored feasts, made donations, and built monasteries, under their reign large monasteries functioned, Samgha received offerings. We suggest that Buddhism for Turk Shahi was a source of legitimacy as Turks were out of the varna system. Buddhism was also useful for diplomatic relations since Turk Shahi political neighbours patronised this religion. However, Turk Shahi relations with this religion are more complex. The Turks did not use Buddhist symbols on coinage. Moreover, they made donations not only to Buddhism but also to Brahmanical cults, which gained popularity.

As a result of Brahmanical cults and Buddhism interaction, syncretistic deities and the presence of Brahmanical statues in Buddhist sites appeared. Turk Shahi supported Buddhism, but it was not the only religion they demonstrated favour for. Although monasteries still flourished and the ruling elite made donations, Brahmanical statues in Buddhist monasteries, rebuilding monasteries into temples, and the fact that Buddhism was not the only religion supported by the elite – all of this allows us to suggest that Buddhism under Turk Shahi began to fade away, yielding to other religious practices.

References

- Alexandrova, N.V. (2012) *Dai Tang Xiyu ji (Notes on the Western Lands [composed under] the Great Tang)*. Vostochnaya Literatura Publisher: Moscow.
- Bureau, A. (1961) Indian and Ancient Chinese Buddhism: Institutions Analogous to the Jisa. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 3: 443-451.
- Behrendt, K.A. (2010) Fasting Buddhas, Ascetic Forest Monks, and the Rise of

Esoteric Tradition. In M. Alram, D. Klimburg-Salter, M. Inaba, and M. Phisterer (eds.), *Coins, Art and Chronology II. The First Millennium C.E. in Indo-Iranian Borderlands*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Wien [henceforth: *Coins, Art and Chronology II.*], pp. 299-328.

Dhavalikar, M.K. (1971) A Note on Two Gaṇeśa Statues from Afghanistan. *East and West*, 21, 3-4: 331-336.

Errington, E. (2010) Differences in the Patterns of Kidarite and Alkon Coin Distribution at Begram and Kashmir Smast. In *Coins, Art and Chronology II* [cit.], pp. 147-168.

Falk, H. (2010) Names and Titles from Kuṣāṇa Times to the Hūṇas. In *Coins, Art and Chronology II*, pp. 73-90.

Filigenzi, A. (2006) Sūrya, the Solar Kingship and the Turki Śāhis: New Acquisitions on the Cultural History of Swat. *East and West*, 56, 195-203.

Inaba, M. (2010) From Kesar the Kābulšāh and Central Asia. In *Coins, Art and Chronology II*, pp. 443-456.

Kimmet, N. (2022) Red Clay-based Buddhist Sculptures in the Śāhi Kingdoms: Material and Technical Considerations from the Kabul Valley to the Himalayan Foothills. In: *Sourcebook for the Shahi Kingdoms*. <https://shahimaterialculture.univie.ac.at/sourcebook/>

Klimburg-Salter, D. (2008) Buddhist Paintings in Hindu Kush ca. VII to X centuries. In É. de la Vaissière (ed.), *Islamisation de l'Asie centrale. Processus locaux d'acculturation du VIIe au XIe siècle*. Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes: Paris, pp. 131-160.

Klimburg-Salter, D. (2010) Corridors of Communication Across Afghanistan VII to IX Centuries. In *Paysages naturels, Paysages culturels du centre de l'Afghanistan : Hindou-Kouch, Lacs de Band-e Amir, Vallée de Bamiyan*. Paris: CEREDAF, 167-186.

Klimburg-Salter, D. (2010) Cultural Mobility, a Case Study: the Crowned Buddha of the Kabul Shāh. In *Coins, Art and Chronology II* [cit.], pp. 39-58.

Kuwayama, S. (1976) The Turki Śāhis and Relevant Brahmanical Sculptures in Afghanistan. *East and West*, 26, 3-4: 375-407.

Kuwayama, S. (1999) Historical Notes on Kāpsī Kābul in the Sixth-Eighth Centuries. *Zinbun*, 34: 25-77.

Kuwayama, S. (2002) *Across the Hindukush of the First Millenium*. Kyoto: Institute for Research in Humanities Kyoto University.

Levi, S.É. Chavannes (1895) Voyages des pèlerins bouddhistes: L'Itinéraire d'Ouk'ong (751-790). *Journal Asiatique*, 1: 5-48.

Olivieri, L.M. (2010) Late Historic Cultural Landscape in Swat. New Data for a Tentative Historical Reassessment. In *Coins, Art and Chronology II* [cit.], pp. 357-370.

Olivieri, L.M. (2023) Temples of Swat: the Śāhi archaeological landscape of Barikot. In H.P. Ray, S. Kulshreshtha, and U. Suvrathan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu Temples: Materiality, Social History and Practice*. Routledge: London and New York, pp. 253-274.

Paiman, Z., and M. Alram (2010) Tepe Narenj: A Royal Monastery on the High Ground of Kabul, with a Commentary on the Coinage. *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archeology*, 5, 33-58.

Rehman, A. (1976) *The Last Two Dynasties of Shahis: An Analysis of Their History, Archeology, Coinage and Palaeography*. Canberra: Australian National University [Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad].

Salomon, R. (2017) What Happened to Buddhism in India? *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 41, 1-25.

Sircar, D.C. (1966) Three Early Medieval Inscriptions. *Epigraphia Indica*, 35, 44-60.

Stein, M.A. (1900) Kalhana's Rājatarāṅginī, A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr. (Vol. 1). Archibald Constable and Company: Westminster.

Takakasu, J. (1896) *A Record of The Buddhist Religion as translated in India and the Malay Archipelago by I-Tsing*. Clarendon Press: Oxford.

Vondrovec, K. (2010) Coinage of Nezak. In *Coins, Art and Chronology II* [cit.], pp. 169-190.

Whitfield, R. (2012) *Korean Buddhist Culture: accounts of pilgrimage, monuments and eminent monks*. Chun-il Munhwasa: Paju, Republic of Korea.

Yang Han-Sung, Jan Yun-Hua, Lida Shotaro, Laurence W. Preston (1984). *The Hye Ch'o Diary: Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India*. Asia Humanities Press & Po Chin Chai Ltd: Berkeley-Seul (Republic of Korea).

Verdon, N. (2022) Wayhind (Modern Hund) in Early Medieval Historical Sources. In: *Sourcebook for the Shahi Kingdoms*.
<https://shahimaterialculture.univie.ac.at/sourcebook/>