The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia

By the beginning of the 21st century two main lines of production in the Middle East can be identified, namely the Silk Road traders. Christianity and Judaism spread into Central Asia in the same way, as shown by artefacts such as an inscription from Buddhist chronography and a ring with a scene of Daniel in the lion’s den. Many remains have also been found of Zoroastrianism—the first world religion, which was founded by the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra).

Many remains have also been found of Zoroastrianism—the first world religion, which was founded by the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra). The cultures of the Silk Road were not rediscovered until the 18th century, when the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias discovered a sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, and soon replaced trade routes on land. The rise of companies for maritime trade, such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC), brought the story of the overland Silk Road to an end. By this time, Islamic culture was for a long time dominant in Central Asia, and the manuscripts and manuscripts along the Silk Road could be recognized by the blue colour of their covers and outer walls.

The expeditions and the collection
The collection of Buddhist manuscripts rediscovered until the late nineteenth century, when Russia, Great Britain, Germany, France, Sweden and Japan organized the earliest expeditions and competed for the most impressive finds. The Russian expeditions hit their stride after 1905 under the leadership of scholars such as Mikhail Berezovsky, Sergei Oldenburg and Pyotr Kozlov. Dozens of expeditions headed by Russian archaeologists set off for Mongolia, western China, and, in the Soviet period, to the now independent Central Asian republics. In numerous places, they uncovered treasures spanning many centuries, from long before Christ to the Middle Ages. In the Hermitage in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), these were put on display as ancient treasures of the Soviet Union with many examples, as well as the presence of men living in China and Mongolia. To this day, the Hermitage has continued its excavations in Central Asia—for instance, in the Sogdian city of Panjikent in Tajikistan. These projects are now led by experts from the Oriental Department of the State Hermitage Museum, who are also involved in the making of this exhibition.

Martin van Schievene, press and publicity coordinator Arnoold Bijl, exhibition staff member

References
2 idem, 127
5 See for example, VA 780-1893 and 243-1890, Whitworth Art Gallery Rib29 (founder) and Rib30 (founder) on Artfact De 2014 and Textile Museum 31.11 (matress covers)
6 British Museum 21703

NOTHING CERTAIN is KNOWN of the Buddha or his earliest communities. The reason for this is numerous, beginning with the absence of writing in India until several centuries after the Buddha’s lifetime (setting aside the Indus Valley inscriptions, which may be writing, but if so, remain undeciphered). Whatever the Buddha may have preached, and whatever was said about him, therefore, was transmitted only orally for a long time.

The result is that we have a good idea of what certain communities believed about the Buddha, but we know nothing historical. In terms of his community, putatively originally nomadic, at some unspecified time it began to establish settled monastic institutions, but it was likewise hundreds of years before, what we assume to have been, the earliest monastic architecture in wood—long decayed into oblivion—gave way to edifices in stone. Therefore, even the earliest material remains of institutional Buddhism in India are forever lost to us. It is not until the time of the great emperor Asoka in the early 3rd century BCE that we begin to obtain concrete information, much of which comes to us from the inscriptions the emperor had erected throughout the Indian subcontinent. These provide our first clues of the geography of spread of Buddhism, and indicate that already quite some time before the Buddha lived and taught in the North central Gangetic valley, his tradition had spread toward the Northwest, the area now known as Pakistan and Afghanistan, ancient Mathura and Gandhara.

This region has also yielded our earliest written Buddhist manuscripts. While there is no question that Buddhist scriptures (sutra) were transmitted orally, originally and even after the innovation of writing, in the states in which those oral texts existed were naturally entirely ephemeral. Even when we have texts, transmitted in Pali in Sri Lanka for instance, which may in origin have been older, these have been subject to various adaptations over time. The Gandhara Buddhist manuscripts, written on birch-bark, provide us with our oldest sources of Buddhist literature, and demonstrate the highly literate and sophisticated state of Buddhism in the Northwest of the subcontinent from around the first century BCE.

A relay race
Given the geography of Asia, the routes that Buddhism followed in its spread naturally followed the contours of the land, the paths already traced out since time immemorial by traders. These were, of course, modified over time, although in some respects no doubt misleadingly, referred to as the Silk Routes. But of course, it was much more than silk that was traded. Moreover, refined silk is a Chinese product, and the implication that the trading routes inevitably linked China with lands west is also misleading, for these routes were certainly, in terms of volume, much more interregional networks of short-distance trade. This has implications for the transmission of Buddhism too, since it is very much the exception rather than the rule that individuals would travel long distances. We should think rather of a relay race, with each baton being handed from one runner to another, each member of the team remaining within a relatively limited area.

Most of the attention paid to the spread of Buddhism across Central Asia concentrates on its progress north out of the Bamiyan valley, through mountain passes, then eastward, along either the political border of the Taklamakan desert, or the last at home to Kashgar, Kucha, and Turfan, to the south through Khotan, Yuna, and into the remote Dunhuang oasis. However, Buddhism in fact also spread west, into Bactria, the Greek lands once conquered by Alexander, to places such as Termes among the Aral Darya (Izus) river. We do not actually quite how far Buddhism spread west, or why, and when it stopped, and this remains an interesting topic for future research.

Multilingual literature of Buddhism
As Buddhism—its teachings, its scriptures, its practices, and ultimately even its monastic institutions—spread, one important issue was that of language. In what language would believers receive the Buddha’s word? There are two models: either scriptures were preserved in the ‘Church Language’, in the same fashion that Jews generally preserve the Bible in Hebrew in no matter what language they speak, or the texts may be linguistically localized. In Buddhist studies, we find both of these models, and not infrequently, we find them together. That is, texts might be revered in Sanskrit, but at this medium remained foreign to Central Asian people, the texts were either translated, paraphrased or written into local language—often though with the preservation of a significant Sanskrit vocabulary, just as we do when we talk of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the like. This led to a production of a multilingual literature of Buddhism across Central Asia, in languages like Khotanese (Middle Iranian), Sogdian (another form of Iranian), Uighur (Turkish), Tangut (a Tibetan language, written in a variant of Chinese script), Tibetan, and of course, Chinese. The Chinese, as is well known, were relentless in their quest for Buddhist scriptures, and engaged, albeit entirely unsystematically, in the greatest translation project in world history, rendering huge numbers of very arcane texts into an evolving form of written ‘classical’ Chinese. At the same time, there were few languages that were in fact from only its scriptures, and in fact the most vivid and easily accessible’ artefacts of Buddhism and its spread across Asia is found not from the remarkable physical objects produced: sculptures, wall-paintings, banners, and so on. The latter were often produced on silk, a product that the artists could only have obtained in China. But that does not mean necessarily that the objects themselves were produced even within the sphere of Chinese cultural, much less military and political, control. Rather, it is a tribute to the vitality of trade that such goods—luxury goods that they may have been—were widely available along these corridors.

The exhibition show on the Hermitage in Amsterdam highlights a variety of artefacts which are linked along the so-called Silk Routes of Central Asia. Anyone with the slightest interest in this fascinating episode of human history is warmly invited to visit this stunning show.

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Fig 1: Head of a monk (Buddha’s pupil Ananda), Dunhuang, China, 8th-9th century. Loess, clay, plant fibres, wood chips, painted. All images © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.


Fig 3: A silk loom from Maybod, Iran. Photo by Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, 2000.