

Reconstructing the Culture of Ancient Bactria through Buddhist Sites Across The Amu Darya

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Abstract

The region of ancient Bactria, spanning present-day northern Afghanistan and southern Uzbekistan, played a crucial role in the transmission and transformation of Buddhist culture across Central Asia. Situated along the Amu Darya river, Bactria functioned as a cultural corridor connecting India, Iran, and the Hellenistic world. This paper examines key Buddhist archaeological sites, namely Nava Vihara, TepeRostam, Kara Tepe, FayazTepe, and Zurmala to reconstruct the religious, economic, and material culture of ancient Bactria. It further explores the persistence of Buddhist cultural memory in contemporary societies of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, where Islam is now dominant. By combining textual traditions, archaeological findings, and modern cultural expressions, the paper argues that Buddhist heritage continues to survive as a shared civilisational memory across political and religious boundaries.

Keywords: Bactria, Cultural corridor, Buddhist Sites, Amu Darya

1. Introduction

Bactria is an ancient region lying at the cross junction of present day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Britannica, 2026). The region was also known as Tokharistan. It's strategic location was especially important between 600 BCE and about 600 CE, serving for as a meeting place for (a) overland trade between East and West (b) as an entry point for numerous invaders into the Indian Subcontinent (c) eclectic ideas and philosophies (Ghoshal, 1928).

One such philosophy which strengthened its roots in Bactria was of Buddhist teachings. This led to the establishment of *viharas*, *stupas*, and a vibrant Buddhist community in ancient Bactria



Image 1: Map of Bactria as per Britannica

Modern day archaeological discoveries in both Afghanistan and Uzbekistan reveal a dense network of monasteries, stupas, and cave complexes. These sites not only demonstrate the geographical spread of Buddhism but also provide insight into the socio-cultural life of the region. This paper reconstructs Bactrian culture through these remains and examines how this legacy persists in contemporary memory.

2. Historical Background of Buddhism in Bactria

The introduction of Buddhism into Bactria can be traced back to early interactions between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. According to Buddhist traditions, the merchants *Tapassu* and *Bhallika* were among the earliest lay followers of the Buddha. As per the Buddhist text *Vinaya Pitaka*, these two brothers while travelling along the *Uttarapath* in 6th century BCE, came to Magadha, visited the enlightened Buddha and offered him *Madhugolaka*, a sweet ball of dried fruits that merchants usually carried on long journeys for instant energy. By the end of the visit, they became *Upasaka*, meaning the 'first lay-devotees of Buddha' in the world. As per Buddhist text *Attakatha*, *Bhallika* became a monk. The two brothers are believed to have constructed a stupa in their hometown in the Balkh region of present-day Afghanistan, using eight hair strands and pairing of nails of Buddha. 7th-century Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsiang could mark the location of these stupas, because, according to scholar C.S. Upasaka, "it was in the living tradition of the people" during his visit. This shows that the Buddhist teachings were introduced in Bactria in the very life time of Buddha.

A more structured dissemination occurred three centuries later during the Mauryan period. As per his inscription, Emperor Ashoka has sent *Dhammapracharaka*, such as *Thera Maharakkhita*, to regions identified as *Yona Pradesh*, converging with Bactria (Upasak, 1990). This indicates that Buddhism had already begun to move into Hellenistic-influenced territories.

Around two centuries later The Kushan Empire marked a significant phase in the consolidation of Buddhism in Bactria. Under Kanishka in 1st century CE, Buddhism flourished as both a religious and cultural force. He patronized the Sarvastivadin school of Buddhism and gave open support to countless Buddhist scholars and monks (Upasak, 1990). The region became home to major monastic establishments such as Nava Vihara in Balkh. Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) recorded the presence of numerous monasteries and thousands of monks in the region, highlighting its importance as a centre of learning.

Scholars such as C. S. Upasaka (1978) emphasise that Afghanistan, particularly Balkh, emerged as a major hub of Buddhist scholastic activity. Similarly, U. N Ghoshal (1927) notes that the region served as a bridge through which Indian philosophical and artistic traditions entered Central Asia.

3. Present Day Context:

Geographically speaking, river Amu Darya or Oxus flows right through the region of Bactria (Geology Page, 2015). Today this river serves as the geographical boundary between the independent country of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

In this paper, I intend to examine five key Buddhist sites of Bactria, two of which are located in Afghanistan and three in Uzbekistan, just across the Amu Darya.



Image 2: Map of 5 Buddhist sites discussed in this paper across the Amu Darya (Source: Personal Illustration)

These sites are located on the map here. They are,

1. Nava Vihara
2. Takht –e Rostam
3. Zurmala
4. FayazTepe
5. Kara Tepe

4. Buddhist Sites in Afghanistan: South of the Amu Darya

The sites in Afghanistan are located just beneath the Amu Darya. They are situated in Balkh and adjoining Samangan provinces of Afghanistan. This region was called Ballhik Pradesh in Sanskrit texts, which served as the capital of Bactria (Upasak, 1990). Owing to presence of vibrant Buddhist viharas and stupas, the region was also referred as ‘little Rajgriha’. Also called as the “mother of cities,” Balkh was a major centre of Buddhist learning (Adamec, 1979).

4.1 Nava Vihara

When Chinese traveler Hiuen-tsiang reached Balkh, he noted about 100 viharas with over 3000 monks in the region (Beal, 1906). The Nava Vihara, also known as Nava Sangharama, gained prominence as a scholastic institution and centre of advance learning. It was the most sacred monastery as it housed a pot and a tooth relic of Buddha that were preserved here. Owing to these sacred objects, Nava Vihara gained prominence as a centre of Hinayan (Later Theravada School), and so much was its repute that a staunch Mahayana scholar like Hiuen-tsiang decided to stay here. (Beal, 1906) Hiuen-tsiang's accounts describe it as a place where only highly learned monks who had at least composed some Shastras in Buddhism were admitted.



Image 3: Nava Vihara (Source: Open source on internet)

Another Chinese traveler I-tsing visited this vihara in 700-712 CE, speaks of high standards of studies pursued by the monks here (Upasak, 1990). He noted 52 monks from China had travelled to study in Nava Vihara, and that Sanskrit was understood and also taught in Nava Vihara. Thus, Nava Vihara was a great centre of Pariyatti, dealing with theoretical knowledge of Buddhism, acquired by studying the scriptures and understanding the philosophy and tenets through rigorous readings of Shastras. (Upasak, 1990)

4.2 TepeRostam

TepeRostam, excavated by Alfred Foucher in 1924, represents a unique architectural form (Vaissière, 2020). This gigantic stupa, after its excavation, was termed as TepeRostam by the locals in the Samangan region. The circular structure, constructed with dried mud bricks, suggests a stupa-like function. The vastness of this stupa can be gauged by its size, which is 200 feet diameter of its circular mound, which is 60 feet high. The dome of the stupa is 100 feet in height and 200 feet in diameter (Upasak, 1990). Its external plastering and decorative elements indicate the use of aesthetic techniques to enhance religious significance.



Image 4 and Image 5 (from left to right): Side view of TepeRostam, Top view of TepeRostam (Source: Open source on internet)

Upon its excavation, believing the stupa held treasure, it was ransacked by locals and hence nothing has been recovered from this stupa.

5. Archaeological Sites in Uzbekistan: Buddhist Presence North of the Amu Darya

Detailed information of archaeological evidence from the Buddhist era can be found in the sprawling campus of Termez Archaeological Museum in the southern province of Surkhandarya in Uzbekistan, which houses countless artefacts from numerous stupas in the region. All three sites taken as a case study for this article are from the aforesaid province.

5.1 Zurmala Stupa

The Zurmala Stupa, located near Termez city in Uzbekistan, is one of the earliest Buddhist monuments identified in Uzbekistan. It is also the first stupa to be discovered in the 20th century by A. Strelkov in 1927 (Ulmasov, 2018). Constructed during the Kushan period of 1st century CE, it reflects architectural features similar to Indian stupas while also incorporating local materials such as mud bricks.



Image 6: Zurmala Stupa (Source: Personal Collection)

Excavation and my personal visit reveal that the stupa likely contained a reliquary chamber, suggesting its ritual importance. The use of square bricks with distinctive structural features of one line and two holes indicates a regional adaptation of Buddhist architectural forms. As per the information provided by the Archaeological Department in Surkhandarya, the stupa is 14.5 x 16 meters in its dimensions (Ulmasov, 2018).

According to Abdullaev (2007), Zurmala represents a synthesis of Indian religious symbolism and local construction techniques.

5.2 FayazTepe

FayazTepe, excavated in 1963 by L.Albaum, provides a more comprehensive understanding of monastic life above Amu Darya (Houal, 2023). Barely 10 kms from Zurmala Stupa, with fragments of pottery containing Brahmi, Punjabi, Kharoshti and Bactrian scripts, confirms that this was a truly international site, with visitors, scholars and monks coming to the monastery from across the known world.



Image 7,8,9 (from left to right): Fragments of inscription in the premise of FayazTepe and pottery shards (Source: Personal Collection)

The complex includes residential cells for monks, corridors for studies, and ritual spaces and also a space for a community kitchen. Its layout suggests an organised monastic community engaged in both religious practice and daily activities.



Image 10, 11 (from left to right): Side view of the site, reconstruction of the site as depicted in Termez Archaeological Museum (Source: Personal Collection)

One of the most significant features of Fayaz Tepe is the presence of early Buddha images also indicates the development of iconographic traditions in the region (Houal, 2023).

5.3 Kara Tepe

Kara Tepe is perhaps the most important Buddhist site in Uzbekistan. Located on the right banks of the Amu Darya, it consists of both surface structures and underground cave complexes on an area of 8 hectares. Excavated by A.S. Strelkov in 1928 the site dates to the first century CE and shows strong parallels with Indian rock-cut architecture (E. Tsantini, 2015).



Image 12, 13, 14: Kara Tepe from various angles (Source: Personal collection)

Excavations have uncovered manuscripts, sculptures, and wall paintings, including statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The use of caves for monastic purposes suggests adaptation to local geography while maintaining continuity with Indian Buddhist traditions.

Scholars such as E. Tsantini argue that Kara Tepe demonstrates the integration of Buddhist spiritual practices with environmental conditions of Bactria.

6. Reconstructing Bactrian Culture through Buddhist Excavations

6.1 Religious Culture

Bactria emerged as a meeting point of diverse philosophical traditions. Buddhist monasteries functioned not only as religious centres but also as institutions of higher learning. The distinction between *pariyatti* (theoretical knowledge) and *patipatti* (practical application) was maintained in these institutions.

Chinese pilgrims, namely Hiuen-tsiang and I tsing reported the presence of numerous monasteries and monks, indicating a vibrant religious landscape. The movement of scholars across regions contributed to the exchange of ideas and practices. Hiuen-tsiang noted 100 viharas and 3000 monks in Balkh. Monks and scholars from East and West flocked to study and practice.

6.2 Economic Culture

The construction of monasteries and stupas required substantial resources. Patronage have to have came from various sections of society, including merchants, local elites, and rulers. This indicates that Buddhism was integrated into the economic fabric of the region.

Trade routes passing through Bactria facilitated the movement of goods as well as religious ideas. The Silk Route played a crucial role in sustaining these interactions, which is cemented by the presence of massive Buddhist viharas and stupas in the region.

6.3 Material and Artistic Culture

Archaeological evidence shows the use of mud bricks, clay, and plaster in construction. Artistic styles reflect a blend of Indian, Hellenistic, and local influences of Bactria. This is particularly evident in sculptures and decorative elements.



Image 15 and 16: Images of Buddhisatva and Buddha from KeraTepe as presented in Termez Archaeological Museum (Source: Personal collection)

The presence of inscriptions in multiple scripts highlights the linguistic diversity of the region. It also indicates the role of Bactria as a cultural interface.

6.4 Interaction with Other Cultural Traditions

Bactria was not exclusively Buddhist. It was also influenced by Zoroastrianism and Greek culture. Balkh is traditionally associated with Zoroaster, and the region shows evidence of Hellenistic artistic traditions.



Image 17: CheshmeShafa (Source: Open internet source)

CheshmeShafa is the oldest fire altar known to originate from Afghanistan, also dating to the Bactro-Achaemenid period, was found and excavated in Bactria by the Franco- Afghan Cooperation Mission. This is a testament to inherent inclusivity for philosophies and ideas of the region. This coexistence of cultures contributed to the development of a unique syncretic environment. Buddhist art in Bactria often incorporates elements from these traditions, resulting in distinctive stylistic features.

7. Continuity of Buddhist Legacy in Contemporary Times

Although Buddhism declined in Bactria after the Islamic conquests, its cultural imprint did not disappear. In both Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, traces of Buddhist heritage continue to exist in tangible and intangible forms.

7.1 Tangible Heritage

Museums and archaeological projects have preserved many artefacts from Buddhist sites. International organisations such as UNESCO and countries like Japan and France have also undertaken efforts to safeguard cultural heritage in the region.

However, these sites have faced threats from looting and conflict. Reports indicate that some sites have been damaged in the search for artefacts.

7.2 Intangible Heritage

More subtle forms of continuity can be found in language and cultural expressions. Proverbs and idioms often reflect philosophical ideas that resonate with Buddhist teachings. The exploration of Pashto and Dari Persian proverbs in Afghanistan reveals an intricate tapestry where Buddhism subtly weaves itself into the cultural and linguistic expressions of the people. These proverbs, handed down through generations, serve as living testimonies to the unconscious integration of Buddhist principles into the Afghan character.

These proverbs, known as *ZarbulMisal* in Dari Persian and Pashto languages of Afghanistan, serve as linguistic and cultural gems that reflect the wisdom ingrained in the Afghan consciousness. These popular proverbs not only adorn the languages but also encapsulate age-old wisdom passed down through generations.

Three Pashto proverbs stand out:

1. دنيا د تاوانونه بازار (Duniya da tavanooon bazaar), meaning, The world is a marketplace of suffering,
2. دنيا هيس شى نده (Duniyahes chai nada) , meaning, "The world is Nothingness"

3. انسان هيس شي نده (Insaanhes chai nada), meaning, "Human beings are nothing".

These proverbs, while seemingly simple, carry profound philosophical echoes that resonate with the core tenets of Buddhism.

The first proverb, "*World is a market place of suffering*", strikes at the heart of the Buddhist understanding of existence. *Dukkha*, the first of the Four Noble Truths, encapsulates the pervasive nature of suffering in human life. The Pashto proverb not only acknowledges the ubiquity of suffering but also hints at the Buddhist journey of understanding its root cause and seeking a permanent solution.

The second proverb, "*World is Nothingness*" echoes the Buddhist concept of *shunyata*, or emptiness. Acharya Nagarjuna, a prominent Mahayana Buddhist philosopher, elucidated the idea that all phenomena, including ourselves, are devoid of inherent, independent existence. They are instead conditioned by a chain of causes and effects, constantly arising and ceasing. The proverb's reference to nothingness highlights the illusory nature of material existence, a concept central to Mahayana Buddhism.

The third proverb, "*Human beings are nothing*", resonates with the Buddhist concept of *anatta*, or non-self. *Anatta* asserts that there is no permanent, unchanging self or soul. Instead, we are composed of a complex interplay of physical and mental phenomena, constantly changing moment by moment. The proverb's reference to the insignificance of the self points to the Buddhist understanding of the illusory nature of personal identity.

In Dari Persian, another Afghan language, a proverb echoes the impermanence inherent in Buddhist thought: دنيا در گذر است (Duniyadarguzarast), meaning, "The world is passing." This concept aligns with the Buddhist teaching of *Anicca*, emphasizing the transient and ever-changing nature of the world.

I have personally observed that such proverbs are used organically across various contexts and age groups in Afghanistan. It underscores that they are embedded in the collective Afghan psyche. These linguistic traces suggest that cultural memory persists even when religious practices change.

Scholars such as Dupree (2005) argue that Afghan society retains layers of pre-Islamic cultural memory. Similarly, studies in Uzbekistan highlight the continued relevance of historical identity in shaping contemporary narratives.

8. Discussion

The archaeological and textual evidence demonstrates that Bactria was a major centre of Buddhist activity. Its location along the Amu Darya facilitated cultural exchange and contributed to the spread of Buddhism across Central Asia.

The sites discussed in this paper illustrate different aspects of Bactrian culture. Tepe Rostam and Kara Teperepresent monastic adaptation to geography, FayazTepe reflects organised community life, navaVihara represents scholarly pursuits in a monastery of international repute, and Zurmala highlights ritual architecture.

At the same time, the persistence of Buddhist cultural memory in contemporary societies challenges the notion of complete cultural discontinuity. Even in predominantly Islamic contexts, elements of earlier traditions continue to influence cultural expressions.

9. Conclusion

The study of Buddhist sites along the Amu Darya reveals the richness of Bactrian culture and its role in the broader history of Buddhism. Through archaeological remains and textual accounts, it is possible to reconstruct a vibrant cultural landscape that once connected diverse regions.

Yet, the significance of this heritage extends beyond the past. It continues to shape identities and memories in the present.

When I stood at Kara Tepe, the Amu Darya flowed quietly at a distance of barely two hundred meters. On the opposite bank lay Afghanistan, where armed patrol vehicles moved along the horizon. The river, once a conduit for monks, merchants, and ideas, now marks a political boundary.



Image 18: View of Amu Darya from KeraTepe, and view of Afghanistan on the other side (Source: Personal collection)

It is the same river, but it tells two different stories today.

And yet, beneath these differences lies a shared past. The people on both sides may be separated by geography and history, but they remain connected through a collective memory of their Buddhist heritage, preserved not in monuments alone, but in language, belief, and cultural consciousness.

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