

Legendary accounts and Buddhist monasteries. An archaeological and art-historical reassessment of ancient Buddhist ruins in the Khotan oasis (Xinjiang, China).

This research project aims at investigating the role of pictorial representations of Buddhist legendary accounts as possible conveyors of information on the identity, origin, and function of Buddhist monasteries and temples in ancient Khotan — one of the major kingdoms that flourished during the 1st millennium CE along the network of routes commonly known as the Silk Road.

Depictions of Khotanese local legends are known mainly from wall paintings and wooden votive panels discovered in the oasis. Generally the source of said depictions can be found in the Buddhist literature that has circulated within and outside of Khotan during the second half of the 1st millennium CE. Particularly relevant for this research are the accounts in the Tibetan texts concerning Khotan wherein most of the kings are mentioned in relation to miraculous stories leading to the founding of monasteries.

The starting point of this study is the material from the ruins of a large Buddhist monastic complex (6th/7th c. to 10th c. CE), recently found in Domoko, southeastern Khotan. I suggest that the subject of one of the wall paintings alludes to a specific legend on the origin of a famous monastery founded by the royals of Khotan, indicating, thus, a direct connection between the Domoko monastery and the Khotanese royal family. To understand the nature of this connection is among my main research goals, and represents a first step in: deciphering the logic behind the choices of depicting specific legends in specific places; comprehending what purposes the depictions of local legends served; and providing clues on the function and on the identity of the extant Khotanese Buddhist monastic complexes. The interpretative model used for the Domoko monastery can be applied to critically re-examine other Buddhist sites in Khotan. The method should prove to be an effective tool to anchor the thus far scattered evidence within an archaeological context and a firmer historical frame. Embedded into a more cohesive setting, the pictorial representations of the Buddhist legends from Khotan should bring us closer to an accurate and broad understanding of possible relations among different sites and, it is hoped, reveal clues on the existence of a network of religious establishments systematically supported by the ruling class.