



Report of BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture

July 2021 Charles DiSimone (Ghent)

READING TOO CLOSELY: OBSERVATIONS ON MANUSCRIPT COPYING AND PRODUCTION IN GILGIT AND GREATER GANDHĀRA

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The team of the ERC project BuddhistRoad invited Dr. Charles DiSimone (Department of Languages and Cultures, Ghent University) to give a talk on July 08, 2021, as part of our BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture Series. Dr. DiSimone spoke on the practices surrounding manuscript copying and production by scriptoria in Greater Gandhāra between the 6th–8th centuries, and how they may have spread into other areas of Buddhist cultural influence. He started with an outline of the important sites in Greater Gandhāra, an area spanning present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Northern India, for the study of Buddhist manuscripts materials including the Gilgit site, the possible find locations of the Schøyen Collection, and the recently discovered ancient city of Mes Aynak. Mes Aynak is a site of particular significance as it is one of the rare locations where the exact location of manuscript discoveries is known and subject to archeological study.

Dr. DiSimone then went on to describe methods involved in identifying individual scribes, a key piece of information when studying scriptorium affiliation and textual production via manuscript copying. He noted that certain scribes have unique styles of writing the calligraphic Gilgit/Bamiyan type scripts as well as idiosyncratic methods of controlling the level of ink on their writing nib, which may allow scribal identification. He showed a number of examples of this phenomenon seen in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama* and the *Vinaya-vastvāgama* manuscripts showing a possible scribal production relationship between these two manuscript witnesses. He went on to discuss out the practice of manuscript folio repair. This was a practice frequently employed in the creation of birch bark folios that is especially noteworthy because such repair appears to have been performed upon blank folios before any works were copied upon them. It may be that market forces played a role in this practice with folios that had a large amount of repair possibly being the result of material scarcity or an example of a way to sell a damaged luxury item at a lower price. This is a salient new



window into our understanding of the economy behind the transmission of Buddhist textuality.

At this point Dr. DiSimone detailed the new discoveries at the Mes Aynak archeological site that he has been working on. He showed a number of recently identified works from two rooms excavated at Mes Aynak. It was thought that these would be secular documents as they seemingly were found in local administration building, however they have all proven to be Buddhist in nature. This forces a reevaluation of how the Mes Anak site was used by ancient peoples. It seems to have been a cosmopolitan site focused on copper production while simultaneously demonstrating a strong Buddhist influence. An exciting discovery from Dr. DiSimone's research on Mes Aynak is a manuscript bundle that may be identified as the lost Mūlasarvāstivāda *Kṣudrakapiṭaka*. Within this bundle there is also to be found the earliest example of a floral embellishment in any Gilgit/Bamiyan type manuscript found to date. From this embellishment, Dr. DiSimone traced the development of this manuscript feature as it developed within Greater Gandhāra and seemingly spread to other areas such as the manuscript producing great monastic universities of India, the earliest manuscript found within Nepal, and even into Dunhuang where strikingly similar embellishments to those found in Gilgit/Bamiyan type manuscripts are seen in Tibetan language materials. Dr. DiSimone went on to discuss the spread of Gilgit/Bamiyan type manuscripts produced within Greater Gandhāra as they spread to other areas including Dunhuang where a single, partial Sanskrit *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* manuscript has been discovered. This manuscript was copied in the Gilgit/Bamiyan Type 1 script marking its production between the 6th–7th centuries. Remarkably, this manuscript was copied on palm leaf as opposed to birch bark, something that is generally unheard of when it comes to manuscripts the Gilgit type manuscripts produced in Greater Gandhāra. Dr. DiSimone showed several other examples of Gilgit/Bamiyan type manuscripts that were copied on palm leaves, all of which were found outside of the traditional borders of Greater Gandhāra including a number of un-and-understudied manuscripts surviving in Nepal which he has edited and will shortly publish on. Dr. DiSimone ended his presentation by discussing new manuscripts he is working on including *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* material from Greater Gandhāra and by remarking upon the shift to the Gilgit/Bamiyan type 2 script which went on to spread throughout the North Indic world as Siddhamātrkā and into East Asia where it was known as Siddhām and Bonji (梵字). A stimulating question and answer session followed. Dr. DiSimone laid out a view into the



world of manuscript production in a key area along the Silk Road where influences spread both East and West which cannot be viewed in isolation and offered valuable avenues of exploration into the interconnected development of Buddhist transmission within the first millennium.



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