

## Report of the Guest Lecture of the BuddhistRoad Project

25 January 2023 Federico Dragoni (Leiden)

### RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC EXCHANGES BETWEEN THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH OF THE TARIM BASIN: TOCHARIANS AND KHOTANESE IN CONTACT (5TH–10TH C.)

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr University Bochum

The BuddhistRoad team invited Federico Dragoni, guest researcher at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics (LUCL). For the past five years, his PhD research at Leiden University has been focusing on language contact between Khotanese and Tocharian in the framework of the NWO-funded project “Tracking the Tocharians from Europe to China: A Linguistic Reconstruction”, concluded in 2022. In his talk, he presented the main findings of his research and their relevance to the study of religious exchanges in the Tarim Basin.

The talk opened with a general introduction to the languages under examination (Khotanese, Tumshuqese, Tocharian A and B) and their respective manuscript traditions in the light of recent research. The first section of the talk described and put into question the existence of a ‘North-South divide’ between Tocharian- and Khotanese-speaking urban centers in the Tarim Basin along religious ([Mūla]sarvāstivādins vs. Mahāyāna) and linguistic (Khotanese vs. Tocharian/Tumshuqese) lines. Recent scholarship on Tocharian and Khotanese seems to be largely affected by this somewhat static conception of the relationships between the two areas. However, it is not clear whether it can be employed as an effective explanatory tool.

An iconic case study is represented by bi 33, one of the earliest witnesses of the famous Khotanese poem known under the title of *The Book of Zambasta*. Having been palaeographically dated to the 5th/6th century, it is reckoned among the earliest written remains of the Khotanese language and belongs to the formative phase of its literature. Noteworthy is the fact that it was unearthed in Šorčuk in the northeast of the Tarim Basin, where Tocharian A was spoken, and not in Khotan itself. This finding requires us to reconsider the concept of a rigid North-South divide.



The research carried out by Federico Dragoni examined this problem from the perspective of language contact and showed that Khotanese influence on Tocharian was much more intense than previously thought and it spanned over almost two millennia, from the early Iron Age until the extinction of the four languages at the end of the 10th century. Among the more recent layers of loanwords, four Buddhist terms borrowed from Khotanese into Tocharian A stand out for their potential importance for the study of religious transfer in the Tarim Basin.

The specific case of Toch A *pissāṅk*, the Tocharian A term for Skt. *bhikṣusamgha-*, serves to illustrate the role of Khotanese in the dissemination of Buddhist culture in Central Asia. Federico Dragoni argued that the Old Khotanese antecedent of the Late Khotanese source of Toch A *pissāṅk*, *bālsamga-*, may in fact be more easily derived from a compound *balysa-samga* (lit. 'buddha-samgha') through syncope, dissimilation, and weakening of the unaccented initial vowel. This interpretation seeks to identify a native Tarim Basin source for a compound *buddha-samgha*, on which Buddhist Sogdian *pwrsk* and Old Uyghur *bursan* 'bhikṣusamgha' are ultimately based (through a Chinese intermediary).

In the final section of the talk, Federico Dragoni sought to explain the remarkable fact that Buddhist lexical influence from Khotanese seems only to have affected Tocharian A, and not B. He argued that the evidence of bi 33 may point to the fact that the presence of a Khotanese religious mission in Šorčuk in the 5th/6th century could have influenced the Tocharian A Buddhist vocabulary. Thus, Khotanese may have directly contributed to the formation of the Tocharian A religious language.

The talk concluded with an inventory of other Khotanese manuscript remains found in the Kuča area. These can be dated to a later period than bi 33 and are in need of further investigations. Furthermore, the Federico Dragoni highlighted the importance of language contact and the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of phenomena of cultural transfer in the Tarim Basin. He also expressed the wish to include data from palaeography and art history in his future research.

