

Report of the Guest Lecture of the BuddhistRoad Project

14 December 2022 Birgit Angelika Schmidt (Berlin)

INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE MATERIALS AND PRODUCTION OF BUDDHIST CLAY-BASED SCULPTURES FROM THE NORTHERN SILK ROAD—A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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

The BuddhistRoad team invited Birgit Angelika Schmidt, Graduate Conservator and Research Fellow at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin and doctoral candidate at the Institute for Near Eastern Archaeology at the Freie Universität, Berlin. Her research focuses on the clay-based sculptural production from pre-islamic archaeological sites along the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert in Eastern Central Asia. In her talk she gave insights into her ongoing research which is based on the technical examination of around 400 sculptural fragments, that are part of the so-called Turfan Collection at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin.

Focusing on material compositions as well as technical aspects of those sculptures, Birgit Angelika Schmidt first outlined what could be said about the object's history between their archaeological finding sites and their museums contexts nowadays. The international expeditions carried out at the beginning of the 20th century contributed to the fact that a large number of objects are spread all over the world. Furthermore, she pointed out that due to the fragmentary character of these objects, there is very often lack of data regarding their archaeological contexts and as a result, there are also problems with regard to possible dating.

Following this introduction, Birgit Angelika Schmidt gave a geological description of the archaeological sites, distinguishing between rock-cut architecture and surface buildings that prove evidence of monastic Buddhist settlements. Due to the fact that clay has been the most important building material she gave a detailed definition of that term. She highlighted that the construction and design of the interior spaces within Buddhist architecture were done layer by layer in coordinated and interrelated work steps. Therefore, she does not only consider the wall paintings and the sculptures to belong together regarding their pictorial representations and contents, but also in technical terms. She also emphasised the immense value



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and importance of working with colleagues in China to put the materials in the various collections worldwide into context with the in-situ situation in the long term. Furthermore, a comparison with the neighbouring regions such as Greater Gandhāra (present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan) in the West and Dunhuang and beyond in the East is of relevance, as much research has been done there in recent decades.

After Birgit Angelika Schmidt marked the framework within her work operates, she presented her methodological approach in the second half of the talk. She described her cluster analysis, based on identifying patterns within local workshops and comparing them in terms of similarities and differences within a regional network. She gave insights into her database and the inventory she carried out, followed by her description of the different categories and criteria (such as size classes, relief types and typologies) for cataloguing and sorting the large number of sculptural fragments and for enabling a quick and dynamic access to each object and its associated data in the long run. Based on her observations, the sculptural technique along the edges of the Taklamakan is limited to modelling, therefore an inner armature and anchoring devices for support are necessary from a certain figure height upwards. Based on historical photos and selected objects, she displayed these observations in her talk. In the last part of her lecture, she examined the special role of the heads and described her series of experiments to show how they might have been produced, based on the use of moulds.

Birgit Angelika Schmidt concluded, by bringing up the network idea again and summarised that the production techniques at the different archaeological sites did not differ greatly, due to the fact, namely that the artists and craftsmen were technologically limited by the resource of clay as a material and by modelling as a technique. The closing discussion on the one hand focused on the transfer and transmission of artistic knowledge and on the other was followed by a lively conversation about clay-based sculptures.

