

# Buddhism in Central Asia III

*Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences, Doctrines*

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# Witch Women and Amorous Monkeys: Non-Buddhist Substrata in Khotanese Religion

*Diego Loukota*

## Abstract

This paper surveys the evidence of the non-Buddhist religious traditions that underlie the dominantly Buddhist culture of early historic Khotan, focusing on the indigenous Iranian background as well as on Indic and Sinitic influences. The survey considers the presence of Iranian and possibly Greek gods in Khotan as also non-Buddhist Indic deities and Sinitic cosmological notions, along with the practices of blood sacrifice, fire worship, mountain libations, fertility cults, zodiacal prognostication, and funeral geomancy.

## 1 Introduction

If we believe the ancient texts, the oasis Kingdom of Khotan (ca. 1st c.?–1006), nested in the very middle of the Central Asian silk roads, was in good hands. According to the Chinese version of the *Candragarbhasūtra* (Chin. *Yuezang jing* 月藏經), translated in the sixth century by the monk Narendrayāśas (517–589, Chin. Naliantiyeshē 那連提耶舍), a native of the ancient land of Oḍḍiyāna (modern Swāt valley in Pakistan):

The World-Honored [i.e., the Buddha] entrusted with the country of Khotan the divine son Hard-to-Vanquish and his thousand attendants, the *yakṣa* general \*Sanchi<sup>1</sup> and his thousand attendants, the great *yakṣa* Ram-Footed and his eight thousand attendants, the *yakṣa* Garland of Golden Flowers and his five hundred attendants, the dragon king

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1 In keeping with mainstream linguistic notation, reconstructed forms are preceded by an asterisk (i.e., \*, see the table of symbols). The reconstructions in this passage are from Middle Chinese. All reconstructions of Late Han (LHC) and Middle Chinese (MC) are marked with an asterisk and taken from Axel Schuessler, *Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese: A Companion to Grammata Serica Recensa* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), although simplified in phonological detail for the sake of readability.

Heated-Dwelling and his thousand attendants, the goddess \*Anakinshou, and her ten thousand attendants, and the goddess \*Thanandjali and her thousand attendants [saying]: By joining the divine power of king Vaiśravaṇa, you will now protect and support the territory of the country of Khotan.<sup>2</sup>

The passage above is only one version—the earliest extant—of several lists of the major protector deities of Khotan, who are attested in both text and art: several other minor protective *numina*, whose jurisdiction includes often only a monastery or a *stūpa*, are attested also elsewhere. In the case of the *Candraḡarbhasūtra* list, although through comparison of the various sources one can end up distilling a neat roster of Sanskrit theonyms (i.e., (1) Aparājita, (2) Saṃjñin, (3) Gaganasvara, (4) Suvarṇamāla, (5) Gṛhāvatapta, (6) Aṅkuśā, (7) Sthānavatī, (8) Vaiśravaṇa),<sup>3</sup> if the text is translated directly, as above, one is bound to be struck by how an Indic frame encloses a cohort of deities without clear Indic counterparts or names, and who yet act obediently under the command of the Indic Buddha.

If one looks at the history of the Tarim Basin from the main textual, artistic, and archaeological sources, it is clear that Buddhism deeply pervades every aspect of the history of the peoples of the region throughout the first millennium of the common era. In its Indic homeland and in Sinitic East Asia, as in the rugged landscape of Tibet and in maritime Southeast Asia, we can clearly witness Buddhism having to contend with other religious traditions, which either preceded it and were deeply rooted in local cultural identity, or else came from elsewhere but vied vigorously for diffusion. By contrast, at least on the surface, the pre-Islamic history of the Tarim Basin—the Serindia (Grk. Sērinda) of late Hellenistic antiquity (ca. 3rd–7th c.)—seems to be characterised by the unchallenged primacy of Buddhism as a religious paradigm. An aggravating factor is that unlike in many other corners of the ancient Buddhist world, in the Tarim Basin, Buddhism eventually managed to uniformly win

2 *Candraḡarbhasūtra*, T. 397.13, 368a: [...] 世尊以于填國土付囑難勝天子千眷屬, 散脂夜叉大將十千眷屬, 毘羊脚大夜叉八千眷屬, 金華鬘夜叉五百眷屬, 熱舍龍王千眷屬, 阿那緊首天女十千眷屬, 他難闍梨天女五千眷屬: 「毘沙門王神力所加, 共汝護持于填國土」.

3 For a careful textual and iconographic study of the eight protector gods (Kh. *hastā parvālā*) see Rong Xinjiang and Zhu Lishuang, “The Eight Great Protectors of Khotan Re-Considered: From Khotan to Dunhuang,” *BuddhistRoad Paper* 6.1 Special Issue: Ancient Central Asian Networks, *Rethinking the Interplay of Religions, Art and Politics across the Tarim Basin (5th–10th C.)*, ed. Erika Forte (2019): 47–85.

over the hearts of the rulers and of the elite, which accounts for the uniform Buddhist veneer of the pre-Islamic culture of the area.

However, when Buddhism came to the Tarim Basin and to Khotan in the early centuries of the common era, it did not come in a vacuum. While the introduction of Buddhism in the area does in fact virtually inaugurate the historical era in the region, as it coincides with the introduction of writing, the basin had been inhabited by nomadic and sedentary peoples for thousands of years. Furthermore, the basin lies at a point of supreme geopolitical importance where, now as then, the Indic, Sinitic, and Iranian worlds meet. As far as we can glean from written sources, the peoples of the Tarim Basin seemed happy to envision their own history as an appendage of India's, leaving us mostly in the dark about emic understandings of their pre-Buddhist culture and religion. This apparent wholesale assimilation to Indian culture may have responded to an often unrecognised historical process: I have argued elsewhere that the strong Indian flavor of the culture of the ancient Tarim Basin was at least partly the outcome of a process of reactive ethnic determination that responded to the increasing political grip of the Sinitic East on the area.<sup>4</sup> The assimilation to an Indic paradigm was, however, often more notional than real: the sixth century travel account of Song Yun (fl. 6th c., 宋雲), contained in the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 [Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang] (T. 2092.51, 1019a) mentions that a royal shrine in Khotan zealously guarded the boots of an independent buddha (Skt. *pratyekabuddha*), in apparent contrast with the widespread Indic ideal of ascetic barefootedness.<sup>5</sup>

All these caveats are particularly relevant to the culture of the oasis of Khotan. Khotan appears in Sinitic and Tibetan sources often depicted as an ideal Buddhist country, a source of authoritative texts and teachers where the law of the Buddha flourished unimpeded. This cliché, taken at face value, has made it so that the religion of pre-Buddhist Khotan as well as the non-Buddhist religious traditions that accompanied the development of Khotanese Buddhism have remained largely uninvestigated. The hints that could lead us towards tracing a map of the non-Buddhist undercurrents of the Khotanese religious landscape are admittedly scant, but by no means absent, and the purpose of this paper is precisely to gather and examine a representative selection of this information.

4 Diego Loukota, "Made in China? Sourcing the Old Khotanese *Bhaiṣajyaguruvaiḍūryaprabhāsūtra*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 139.1 (2019): 84–86.

5 Although injunctions against footwear of varying severity are to be found in all the extant *vinayas*, perhaps the most draconian and emphatic one is found in the Pāli *Vinaya*, see *Mahāvagga*, comp. Hermann Oldenberg (London: The Pāli Text Society, 1879), 190.

Sitting at one of the most nodal points of the silk roads, Khotan witnessed the passage of people of bewilderingly disparate origins and religions, who often left traces in its land or even settled there: for example, traces of Christianity and Judaism can be found in pre-Islamic Khotan.<sup>6</sup> Yet, we will focus here on the religious traditions that may have been concurrent with the introduction and consolidation of Khotanese Buddhism, with a focus on the seminal first half of the first millennium BCE. Therefore, we will survey here the religious aspects of the Iranian Śaka/Scythian background of the Khotanese people, the Gandhāran influx that informed the elite cultural register of Khotan, and the religious effect of the political and economic gravitational pull of the Sinitic East.

## 2 The Iranian Background

The Śaka languages of the Tarim Basin, Khotanese and Tumšūqese, belong to the Eastern branch of the Middle Iranian languages. The ancient ethnic group that brought the ancestor of those languages to the Tarim Basin is attested in a wide variety of forms according to their source (Grk. *Sákai/Skýthai*,<sup>7</sup> Old Pers. *Sakā*,<sup>8</sup> Skt. *Śakāḥ*, and LHC \**Sek* 塞). It is clear that ‘Scythian’ or ‘Śaka’ was only a broad label for the nomadic Iranian speakers of the Eurasian steppe, and therefore not all the information that we have about these people from ancient (especially Greek) sources necessarily applies to the particular branch that settled in the Tarim Basin. While it is most likely that the Scythians on which Herodotus (fl. 5th c. BCE) based his account lived north of the Black Sea, it is also likely that some cultural elements were shared across the vast

6 For Christianity, see Daniel King, “Syriac Christianity in Central Asia,” in *The Syriac World*, ed. Mark Dickens (London: Routledge, 2018), 583–625; for the Judeo-Persian letters from Khotan see Bo Utas, “The Jewish-Persian fragment from Dandān-Uiliq,” *Orientalia Suecana* 17 (1968): 123–136, and Zhang Zhan 張湛 and Shi Guang 時光, “Yijian xinfaxian Youtai-Bosiyu xinzha de duandai yu shidu 一件新發現猶太波斯語信笈的斷代與釋讀 [A Newly-Discovered Judeo-Persian Letter],” *Dunhuang Tuhufan yanjiu* 敦煌吐魯番研究 [Research on Dunhuang and Turfan] 11 (2008): 71–99.

7 The first term appears to be strictly speaking a Greek rendering of the Persian one, while the second is the proper Greek ethnonym. According to Herodotus, *Histories*, ed. Alfred D. Godley (London: William Heinemann, 1920–1925), 7.64.2, “the Persians call all Scythians Sakas” (Grk. *Pérsai pántas tous Skýthas kaléousi Sákas*).

8 The Old Persian taxonomy is particularly nuanced, distinguishing in various sources between (1) Śakas with pointed hats (Old Pers. *Sakā tigraxaudā*), (2) Śakas who drink *haoma* (Old Pers. *Sakā haumavargā*), (3) Śakas beyond the [Caspian] Sea (Old Pers. *Sakā tyaiy paradrayā*) and (4) Śakas beyond Sogdia (Old Pers. *Sakaibiš tyaiy para Sugdam*).

spectrum of the Iranian-speaking nomads of the steppe. We have, for example, no evident link between the Scythian pantheon outlined by Herodotus and the deities attested in Khotan.<sup>9</sup> As we will see, though, other bits of information on Scythian religion preserved by the Greek sources may echo religious traditions and practices among the Tarim Śaka.

Where exactly the ancestors of the Khotanese and Tumšūqese fall within the Scythian/Śaka spectrum has been the matter of some debate, but there is no strong reason to exclude the ancestors of the Tarim Basin Iranians from the larger Scythian cultural complex of the steppe: in particular, the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 [Book of the Later Han] (completed 445) is unambiguous in stating that by the second century CE there were Śakas settled in the Tarim Basin.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Harold W. Bailey's characterisation of Khotanese and Tumšūqese as "Saka languages" has become standard.<sup>11</sup> A recent genetic study identified two polar haplogroup clusters among Scythian/Śaka burials throughout the Eurasian steppe, which would, however, have merged into a broad cultural and genetic continuum.<sup>12</sup> The linguistic evidence too is contradictory. One important phonetic change that affected almost universally the Iranian languages and even managed to spill into some non-Iranian neighbours like Gāndhārī, namely the fortition of \**u* into *p* after sibilants, is attested in some Scythian words preserved in Greek sources. A possible derivative of the Proto-Indo-Iranian word for horse, \**aćua*, appears as second member in the western Scythian personal name Baioraspos (lit. 'possessing a myriad horses?') which shows this phonetic change also featured in the Avestan derivative *aspa* and in most other Iranian languages, but Khotanese has instead the form *aśśa* with progressive assimilation along with another important outlier, Old Persian *asa*; compare also the Khotanese term for 'white' (Kh. *śśeta*) against Avestan *spaēta*, from Proto-Iranian \**ćuaita*, etc. At the same time, a conjectural Old Iranian lexeme for 'fish', \**kapa*, is possibly present in the form that Herodotus gives as the Scythian name for the Inhul river, Pantikápēs, but is otherwise only attested in the Ossetian languages of the Caucasus and in Khotanese, Sogdian, and their modern neighbours.

9 For a survey of Herodotus' notices on the Scythian pantheon, see Askold Ivantchik, "Scythians," *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, last modified April 25, 2018, last accessed April 28, 2021. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/scythians>.

10 Yu Taishan, "A Study of Saka History," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 80 (1998): 179–184.

11 Harold W. Bailey, "Languages of the Saka," in *Handbuch der Orientalistik, Abteilung 1: Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten*, vol. 4, ed. Bertold Spuler (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 131–154.

12 Martina Unterländer et al., "Ancestry and Demography and Descendants of Iron Age Nomads of the Eurasian Steppe," *Nature Communications* 8 (2017): 1–10.



According to James P. Mallory, one of the main authorities on the archaeology of the Tarim Basin, the study of graves in the region allows us to speculate that the predecessors of the Khotanese and Tumšūqese may have entered the area around the late first millennium BCE: the Śāka graves feature examples of the animal art and exquisite gold jewellery most commonly associated with the Scythians/Śakas and the human remains contained therein include the famous female mummies wearing pointed ‘witch hats’ that recall other descriptions of Scythian attire.<sup>13</sup>

In view of this, it might be opportune to consider generally what we know about the Tarim Basin Śāka/Scythians before focusing specifically on the oasis of Khotan, and with this chronological framework in mind we can begin by contrasting the evidence from the Tarim Basin with what we know about ancient Iranian religion.

Two older Iranian theonyms survive in Khotanese.<sup>14</sup> The Iranian Ahura Mazdā survives as the most basic word for the sun in Khotanese (Kh. *urmaysdān*-). The specialisation of this ancient theonym is shared by Khotanese with several languages of the Pamir Plateau.<sup>15</sup> As Mary Boyce remarks, since light is a main attribute of Ahura Mazdā and therefore Zoroastrian prayer can be directed indifferently towards the sun or the fire, the roots of the Khotanese and Pamirian identification of Ahura Mazdā with the sun probably lie deep in Iranian antiquity.<sup>16</sup> The Khotanese word *urmaysdān*- of course also conventionally translates the name of Sūrya, the Indian Sun God, and it is possible that Ahura Mazdā survived in Khotan as a solar god: an anthropomorphic Urmaysdān is perhaps represented in a Khotanese mural painting.<sup>17</sup> Another ancient theonym is Śśāndrāmatā, which Bailey identified as corresponding

13 James P. Mallory, “Bronze Age Languages of the Tarim Basin,” *Expedition* 52.3 (2010): 44–54.

14 The terms discussed in the following two paragraphs are taken from Harold W. Bailey, “Balysa-,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, last modified December 15, 1988, last accessed April 28, 2021. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/balysa-khotan-saka-barza-tumsuq-saka-a-word-adapted-to-buddhist-use-for-the-transcendental-buddha>.

15 Vasily I. Abaev, *The Pre-Christian Religion of the Alans* (Moscow: Oriental Literature Publishing House, 1960), 15.

16 Mary Boyce, “Ahura Mazdā,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, last modified July 29, 2011, last accessed May 15, 2021. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahura-mazda>.

17 See Matteo Compareti, “The ‘Eight Divinities’ in Khotanese Paintings: Local Deities or Sogdian Importation?” in *Proceedings of the Eight European Conference of Iranian Studies*, ed. Pavel B. Lurje (St. Petersburg: The State Hermitage Publishers, 2019), 128–129; Matteo Compareti, “The Representation of Non-Buddhist Deities in Khotanese Paintings and Some Related Problems,” in *Studies on the History and Culture Along the Continental Silk Road*, ed. Xiao Li (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 110–111.

to the Avestan deified principle, 'Bounteous Devotion' (Av. Spəntā Ārmaiti). In the Khotanese version of the *Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*, also known as the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* (T. 665.16), Śśandrāmātā stands for the Sanskrit theonym Śrī, the goddess of splendor and good fortune in an Indic context.<sup>18</sup> The cult of Spəntā Ārmaiti in ancient Iran gave rise to an annual ritual, still attested in Islamic times, and the name survives in many Middle Iranian languages as a calendrical term;<sup>19</sup> moreover the Avestan liturgical hymn *Yāšt* XVII to the goddess of good fortune, Aši, describes her as daughter of Ahura Mazdā and of Spəntā Ārmaiti.<sup>20</sup>

Linguistic evidence also supports a continuation of the Iranian divine taxonomy of deities (Av. *yazata*) against demons (Av. *daēuua*). In Khotanese, the cognate terms *gyasta-* (cf. also the more archaic Tumšūqese *jezda-*) and *dyūva-* render, respectively, the Indic notion of 'deity' (Skt. *deva*), which in a classical Indic context indicates a beneficial divine being, and the Indic notion of 'ghost' (Skt. *bhūta*).<sup>21</sup> The infrequent term *dyūva-* occurs, as also Śśandrāmātā does, in the oldest Khotanese manuscripts of the *Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*, whose archaic language and conjectured early date would account well for the equations of Indic Buddhist terms with their equivalents in the indigenous religion of the Khotanese. Here, the demons (Kh. *dyūva-*) are said to be 'life-sapping' (Kh. *ūśahāra* > Gand. \**oyah*<sup>l</sup>*ā*)*ra*, Skt. *ojohāra*) and children of Hārītī.

In terms of ritual terminology, Khotanese also retains the Indo-Iranian term for 'sacrifice' (Av. *yasna*, Skt. *yajña*) in the form *gyaysna-*. The term occurs in another Old Khotanese translation, the one of the *Saṅghāṭasūtra*, in which it tellingly refers to human and animal blood sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> While in a Zoroastrian context the Avestan term for 'sacrifice' came to mean, generally but with

18 On the connection on Śrī and Vaiśravaṇa, see the rich discussion by Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *The Most Excellent Shine of Gold, King of Kings of Sutras. The Khotanese Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2004), vol. 2, 345.

19 Mary Boyce. "Armaiti," *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, last modified August 12, 2011, last accessed May 14, 2021. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/armaiti>.

20 James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1987), 323.

21 Compare two versions of the phrase that defines Hārītī as the mother of malevolent entities: the Khotanese parallel *Hārīva dyūvānu ūśahārānu māta*, lit. 'Hārītī, mother of the life-sapping demons' and the Sanskrit *Hārītī bhūtamātā*, lit. 'Hārītī, mother of ghosts' in the Sanskrit *Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*; see Skjærvø, *The Khotanese Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*, vol. 1, section 1.13.

22 Giotto Canevascini, *The Khotanese Saṅghāṭasūtra: A Critical Edition* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1993), 81–83.

exceptions, the regular non-violent worship of the gods,<sup>23</sup> in Khotanese the non-violent worship of the Buddha and other deities is regularly expressed by the term for ‘worship’ (Kh. *pajsama-*). The parable in the *Saṅghāṭasūtra* features instead a couple who goes to a priest of the gods (Skt. *devapālaka*) in order to enquire the means to reestablish the health of their ailing son: the priest prescribes the blood sacrifice (alternatively Skt. *yajña, yajana*) of a sheep and of a man. We may remark here in passing that Herodotus mentions the practice of human sacrifice in the cult of the Scythian god Ares.<sup>24</sup>

The terms for ‘priest’ and for ‘temple’ in the *Saṅghāṭasūtra* passage are interesting, too. The priest is termed both *vālaa-* and *māṭṛ-vālaa-* in Khotanese. Giotto Canevascini has preferred to see in the element *māṭṛ-* the *māṭṛkās*, the cohort of Hindu spousal deities, with *-vālaa-* as a derivation of an Indic word for the concept of ‘protector’ or ‘cultor’ (Skt. *pālaka*),<sup>25</sup> but Bailey suggested instead an indigenous Śaka etymon, *\*ma[n]tra-wardaka*, ‘cultivator of mantras’.<sup>26</sup> The temple (in the Sanskrit text given as *devakula*) is rendered as Khotanese *vāna-*. Bailey suggested an origin in the root *van-*, ‘to cover’;<sup>27</sup> Prods Oktor Skjærvø suggests instead that *vāna-* is the Khotanese outcome of an Old Iranian term for the concept of ‘dwelling’ or ‘residence’ (Iran. *\*dmāna*, cf. Av. *dāmāna*, Sogd. *\*dmān*),<sup>28</sup> and therefore, according to this interpretation, the temple would have been a metaphorical residence of the gods. It is interesting to see that this term differs from the ones used for the classical loci of the Buddhist worship, the *stūpa* (Kh. *balsa*, of unclear origin) and the monastery (Kh. *saṃkharma* > Gand. *saṃgh[ā]r[ā]ma*).

The Khotanese term for ‘fire’ (Kh. *dāa-*) is an epithet (i.e., ‘burner’ from a conjectural Old Iran. *\*dāgaka*) and suggests some sort of taboo avoidance of the usual Indo-Iranian terms for ‘fire’ (see Skt. *agni*, Av. *ātarš*, and perhaps the

23 This chapter’s judicious peer reviewer points out that in some corners of the Zoroastrian world such as Nērangestān, animal sacrifice in the context of Zoroastrian liturgy is attested up until the 20th century, as also by Middle Persian linguistic evidence. This curiously parallels the largely non-violent nature of Hindu *pūjā*, with the exception of the *Kālīpūjā*.

24 Herodotus, *Histories*, 4.62.

25 See Canevascini, *The Khotanese Saṅghāṭasūtra*, 81–83.

26 Harold W. Bailey, *Dictionary of Khotan Saka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), s.v. *māṭṛvālai*.

27 *Ibid.*, s.v. *vāna*.

28 See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “vāna-,” in *Studies in the Vocabulary of Khotanese*, vol. 2, ed. Ronald E. Emmerick and Prods Oktor Skjærvø (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1983–1997), 129.

Sanskrit name [M]ātar[īśvan]).<sup>29</sup> Such avoidance may be an outcome of the exalted state of fire and its central role in Iranian religion, which may have encouraged the spread of a euphemism. In support of the practice of fire worship among the Tarim Basin Śaka, we have several archeological attestations of portable altars of fire, accompanied by what may be ritual utensils for the fire worship.<sup>30</sup> The famous embroidered carpet from Noyon Uul in Mongolia, of undisputed Iranian affiliation, depicts what could be a scene of fire worship performed on one of such portable altars (see fig. 2.1).<sup>31</sup> The altars have been found together with kindling sticks, which have also been found in graves associated with the Śaka in the region.<sup>32</sup>

Linguistic evidence allows us, again, to glimpse something of how the pre-Buddhist Khotanese may have envisioned the role of the religious professional. The term universally adopted in Khotanese to render the concept of Buddha is *balyša-* (compare also Tumulqese *bārza-*). One possible etymological analysis of this term put forward by Bailey makes it a cognate of Sanskrit *bráhmaṇ* and *brhas[pati]* as well as Old Persian *brazmanīy*.<sup>33</sup> In the Indic case, the term *bráhmaṇ* designates the activity of the professional caste priest, i.e., the formulation, preservation, and handling of sacred words; the Iranian situation is more ambiguous as the meaning of Old Persian *brazmanīy* is still not settled, but an exalted religious meaning is beyond the question as it occurs paired with the term for the deified principle of truth (Old Pers. *arta*, Av. *aša*)

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- 29 See Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 255–256, n. 3, in which this analysis of the name Mātariśvan is attributed to Stanley Insler.
- 30 See Shen Hui et al. “Wood Usage and Fire Veneration in the Pamir, Xinjiang, 2500 Yr BP,” *PLOS ONE* 10.8 (2015): 1–13, and Wang Se 王瑟 “Pami’er gaoyuan baihuojiao yizhi xin faxian 帕米尔高原拜火教遗址 [New Discovery of Zoroastrian Ruins in the Pamir Plateau],” *Zhongguo kaogu wang* 中国考古网 [Chinese Archeology Network] (2016), last accessed April 18, 2021. <http://www.kaogu.cn/cn/xccz/20161221/56556.html>.
- 31 Sergei A. Yatsenko, “Yuezhi on Bactrian Embroidery from Textiles Found at Noyon Uul, Mongolia,” *The Silk Road* 10 (2012): 39–48.
- 32 Ma Yong and Wang Binghua, “The Culture of the Xinjiang Region,” in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia: The Development of Sedentary and Nomadic Civilizations, 700 B.C. to A.D. 250*, ed. János Harmatta (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 206ff.
- 33 Bailey, “Balyša-.” A competing explanation, put forward from the very beginning of Khotanese studies by Rudolf Hoernle (*Manuscript Remains of Buddhist Literature Found in Eastern Turkestan: Facsimiles with Transcripts, Translations and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), 408), connects *balyša-* with Old Indic *\*brh[át]* ‘lofty’ and the derivatives of the Proto-Indo-European root *\*bʰrǵh-* ‘rise, be lofty’. Ronald Emmerick and Skjærvø have endorsed this interpretation. See Ronald E. Emmerick, “Some Remarks on Translation Techniques of the Khotanese,” in *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien*, ed. Klaus Röhrborn and Wolfgang Veenker (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983), 17–18; Skjærvø, *The Khotanese Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*, vol. 1, lxx.



FIGURE 2.1 Possible scene of fire worship, from the carpet from barrow 31 in the site of Noyon Uul, in Mongolia, early centuries CE

DRAWING BY DIEGO LOUKOTA ON THE BASIS OF SERGEI A. YATSENKO, "YUEZHI ON BACTRIAN EMBROIDERY FROM TEXTILES FOUND AT NOYON UUL, MONGOLIA," *THE SILK ROAD* 10 (2012): 39–48, FIG. 2

central to Zoroastrianism. Paul Thieme conjectured convincingly that the Indo-Iranian term that underlies these cognates must have meant something along the lines of 'sacred formulation'.<sup>34</sup> That the Buddha may have been envisioned among the Śakas as a source of sacred discourse says something about the way the early Khotanese may have envisioned the role of the religious specialist: the most common Khotanese phrase for referring to the Buddha (Kh. *Gyasta balysa*) would translate then quite literally as 'god that formulates sacred speech'. Bailey goes one step forward and posits that the pre-Buddhist religion of Khotan would have been 'Barzaic', presumably with a focus on sacred speech, as opposed to the Zoroastrian 'Mazdaic' model centered on

34 See Paul Thieme, "Brāhman," in *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1971), 122.

‘worship set in the mind’ (*Av. mazdayasna*).<sup>35</sup> Herodotus speaks of a class of professional priests (Grk. *mánties*) among the Scythians, who prognosticate by means of willow branches and were constantly ‘speaking’ as they ‘prophesied’ (Grk. *thespízousi* [...] *légontes*): their craft is, moreover, said to be inherited from fathers to sons (Grk. *patrôie*), which hints at the hereditary priestly class well known from other corners of the Indo-Iranian world.<sup>36</sup> Although no examples of pre-Buddhist Khotanese literature survive, the Khotanese reworkings of Indic Buddhist literature suggest indeed a rich and highly prized indigenous poetic craft that could be explained by a priestly caste with a strong focus on ritual speech, as we know to have been the case in Vedic India. Skjærvø has, moreover, highlighted how old elements of the Iranian epic tradition did survive in Khotan under a Buddhist guise.<sup>37</sup> All of this suggests indeed a deeply rooted cultural appreciation of the elevated dignity of speech, which may have spanned the realms of sacred hymnography to royal panegyric and epic.<sup>38</sup>

Additional elements of religious life in the Iranian milieu of Śaka Khotan can be gleaned from the corpus of Kharoṣṭhī documents from the neighbouring kingdom of Nuava (ca. 1st–5th c., Chin. Shanshan 鄯善). Previous speculation on the indigenous people of the kingdom tended to lean towards positing a Tocharian substratum, but more recent research has not only failed to uncover a substantial Tocharian base but tended to highlight instead a strong Iranian element.<sup>39</sup>

35 See Bailey, “Balysa-.” It should be borne in mind also the Bactrian mural inscription from Kara Tepe <*boddomazdo*> (\**bud mazd*), i.e., Buddha Mazda. See Boris J. Stavsky, “Buddha-Mazda from Kara-Tepe in Old Termez (Uzbekistan),” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 2.3 (1980): 89–94. The phrases *bud mazd* and *gyasta balysa*, both referring to the Buddha, suggest that regardless of the specific divine principle equated with the Buddha, in an Iranian milieu a divine dignity alone was understood to befit the Buddha.

36 Herodotus, *Histories*, 4.67.

37 See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Eastern Iranian Epic Traditions I. Siyavas and Kunala,” in *Mir Curad. Studies in Honor of Calvert Watkins*, ed. Jay Jasanoff and Craig Melchert (Innsbruck: Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft, 1998), 645–658.

38 See Stephanie Jamison, *The Rig Veda between Two Worlds—Le R̥gveda entre deux mondes* (Paris: Collège de France, 2007), 146–148.

39 The *locus classicus* for the Tocharian substratum hypothesis is Thomas Burrow, “Tocharian Elements in Kharoṣṭhī Documents,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 4 (1935): 667–675. Although a fully fledged refutation of this hypothesis is yet to appear in print, there seems to be a broad consensus among Tocharianists to the effect that the Tocharian substratum hypothesis for the Gāndhārī documents from Shanshan in particular lacks evidence. I have heard this *visa voce* from leading Tocharian scholars like Hannes Fellner and Michaël Peyrot.

One of the most certain Iranian elements in the corpus in terms of religious practice is the Gāndhārī phrase *khakhordi stri* or *khakhorda stri*, used to designate women (Gand. *stri*) recorded in the documents to have been hunted and brought to summary justice; they were evidently both reviled and feared (see CKD 58, 63, 248). The term is recorded under the form *k<sup>l</sup>ā<sup>l</sup>khorda* in Buddhist Sanskrit, where it designates evil charms or spells. Thomas Burrow translated the phrase as ‘witch’ and suggested an origin in a form akin to Avestan *kaxvarəda*,<sup>40</sup> according to Christian Bartholomae formed from ‘black’ (Av. *xvarəda*) and the pejorative prefix *ka-*:<sup>41</sup> the Avestan word designates a not better described class of demonic beings, but the word was apparently also loaned to Armenian, where it means ‘charm’. The term *khakhorda* is unlikely to be Khotanese—from *\*ka-xūarda* we would expect in Old Khotanese something along the lines of *\*kahala*, hence possibly Late Khotanese *kauvāle*, ‘sorcerer’—but dialectal features might be at play here and the survival of an older Iranian designation for black magic remains likely.<sup>42</sup>

Another enigmatic element of possible religious significance and Śāka affiliation, as much as it may not ring any bells among specialists of Iranian antiquity and could well have been a local development, is an event termed *vaṣḍhiḡa* in the documents (CKD 140, 622, 634, 637). The event involves a pilgrimage to the mountains and the bringing of food and alcohol. The *vaṣḍhiḡa* is performed both by low-status subordinates (CKD 622, 634) and by aristocrats alike (CKD 637), always only by men. The suggestion that the *vaṣḍhiḡa* involved some sort of religious festivity, presumably in honour of mountain gods or spirits, has featured in the work of various scholars.<sup>43</sup> The phonetic value of the term is difficult to recreate, but if *vaṣḍhiḡa* is cognate with the Khotanese

40 Thomas Burrow, “Iranian Words in the Kharoṣṭhi Documents from Chinese Turkestan II,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 7.4 (1935): 781.

41 Christian Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* (Strassburg: K.J. Trübner, 1904), s.v. *kaxvarəda*.

42 Pace Harold W. Bailey (*Dictionary*, s.v. *kauvāle*) and Mauro Maggi (“Kauvāle,” in *Studies in the Vocabulary of Khotanese*, vol. 3, ed. Ronald E. Emmerick and Prods Oktor Skjærvø (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Verlag, 1982–1997), 42). Thanks to Prof. Chen Ruixuan (陳瑞翹) for the latter reference. He also provided ample and wide-ranging commentary on this paper as discussant during the *BuddhistRoad* final conference in July 2021. Although every remark was intriguing and relevant, exploring all the paths laid open by him will require a separate treatment in the future.

43 Mariner E. Padwa, “An Archaic Fabric: Culture and Landscape in an Early Inner Asian Oasis (3rd–4th Century CE Niya)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007), 256; Nagasawa Kazutoshi 長沢和俊, “Shiruku Rōdo-shi kenkyū シルグ・ロード史研究 [Research on the History of the Silk Road]” (PhD diss., Waseda University, 1979), 223.

verb *bāysdai-* ‘to observe, be watchful’ it may have had the conjectural meaning of ‘observance’.

Documents CKD 157 and CKD 361 from Niya mention specific deities (Gand. *devata*, Skt. *devatā*). While the phrase *bhatro devata* may be simply a generic Indic epithet meaning auspicious deity (Skt. *bhadra devatā*), the other, *acokisǰiya devata*, remains opaque. The document is unfortunately broken in all but the passage that contains the name of the god, but the Gāndhārī sequence “[...] *a co ki sǰi ya de va ta sa*” must not necessarily be read, as it has been so far, *acokisǰiya-devataša*,<sup>44</sup> but can be easily resegmented to “[...] the courier (*aco*). The deity Kisǰiya’s [...]” (Shanshan Gand. [...] *aco kisǰiyadevataša*), as the words for courier (Shanshan Gand. *aco*, *acovina*) are ubiquitous in the corpus. The graph *ǰ* in all likelihood represents either a voiced palatal fricative or a mere palatal glide (cf. spellings like *aprameǰa* for *aprameya*), and so the pronunciation of the written form <*kisǰiya*> must have been close to *\*/kisǰijǰa/* or *\*/kisǰija:/*. One may postulate then that the conjectural theonym Kisǰiya could be related to the Eastern Iranian root ‘grow exuberantly’ (Iran. *\*kais-*) suffixed with *-ǰya*: Bailey postulated *\*kais-* as underlying Khotanese ‘abundant, luxuriant’ (Kh. *kīśśāna*) and perhaps also an unidentified tree name (Kh. *kīśauka*) as well as the Sogdian term for ‘luxuriant vegetation’ (Sogd. *kysn’k*).<sup>45</sup> As tenuous as speculations based only on etymology are, Kisǰiya may have been a deified principle of abundance or growth.

I will mention here only in passing that the record of Khotanese art features an interesting array of divine figures, conventionally marked as such by a halo. Matteo Compareti has investigated this artistic corpus in his previously referenced studies, particularly in the comparatively late painted boards from the site of Dandan Uiliq. Although offering only a few tentative identifications of Iranian deities (Nana and Urmaysdān)—the others being left with provisional monikers such as ‘the god riding a horse’, ‘the god riding a camel’, and ‘the silk god’—Compareti convincingly dispels the earlier speculation of a Sogdian origin for these gods, most richly featured in late Khotanese art, stressing however the numerous Indo-Iranian Kushan iconographic elements that they display.<sup>46</sup>

44 Auguste M. Boyer, Edward J. Rapson, Emile Senart, and Peter S. Noble, *Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions Discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in Chinese Turkestan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920–1929), § 361.

45 Bailey, *Dictionary*, s.v. *kīśśāna*.

46 See Compareti, “The ‘Eight Divinities’ in Khotanese Paintings,” 117–141; Compareti, “The Representation of Non-Buddhist Deities,” 88–120.



### 3 Theistic and Epic Indic Echoes

One of the most remarkable facts of the early history of the Tarim Basin is that although actual political and military subjection of the area to Kuṣāṇa Gandhāra (ca. 1st–3rd c.?), if it ever took place, must have been short-lived, the vibrant culture of Gandhāra shaped the cultural makeup of the Tarim Basin for about a millennium. The Gāndhārī language, no longer recorded after the third century in its homeland, was used for administrative purposes beyond the Pamirs in the Tarim Basin for at least another two centuries, and the art, religion, and material culture of Gandhāra shaped indelibly the elite register of Serindian society. It will be opportune then here to review briefly what we know about the religious landscape of Gandhāra in the early centuries of the common era. Gandhāra, and in particular the region of Suvāta, modern Swāt, seem to have been early areas of Indo-Aryan penetration in the Indic subcontinent and therefore an important centre of Vedic culture, but it is fairly clear that by the turn of the common era the orthodox brahmins of Gangetic India already considered Gandhāra to be outside and beyond the ‘circle of the noble ones’ (Skt. *āryavarta*). Buddhism in turn does not appear unequivocally in the archaeological record up to the third century before the common era and does not become archaeologically frequent until the Kuṣāṇa Dynasty.<sup>47</sup> Buddhist art and architecture of high quality, as well as numerous Buddhist books and inscriptions are attested from about the first to fourth centuries of the common era. Gandhāran Buddhists were keen to see their homeland as a promised land of the Buddhist religion, from where the teachings of the Buddha could spread to the rest of the world.<sup>48</sup> The richness of the record of Buddhism in Gandhāra should not, however, be unequivocally interpreted as evidence that Buddhism was the dominant religion in Kuṣāṇa Gandhāra. The royal record, in particular, is mixed: from the second century BCE up to the last demise of the

47 Pierfrancesco Callieri, “Buddhist Presence in the Urban Settlements of Swāt, Second Century BCE to Fourth Century CE,” in *Gandhāran Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, Texts*, ed. Kurt Behrendt and Pia Brancaccio (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 60–82.

48 Particularly telling in this regard is the first story in the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā Dṛṣṭāntapañkti* [Garland of Examples Adorned by Poetic Fancy] by the Gandhāran author Kumāralāta (fl. 3rd c.), in which a Gandhāran merchant visits Mathurā and converts to Buddhism a group of brahmins who worship Viṣṇu and Śiva. The praise of the converted brahmins includes etymologising Gandhāra as the ‘holder of the earth’ (Skt. *gāṃdhāra*) on account of the support of Gandhārans for Buddhism. For a study of the story with an edition of the Tibetan text and translation, see Michael Hahn, “Kumāralāta’s *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā Dṛṣṭāntapañkti* Nr. 1. Die Vorzugleichheit Des Buddha,” *Zentral-Asiatische Studien des Seminars für Sprache- und Kulturwissenschaft Zentralasien der Universität Bern* 16 (1982): 309–337.

Kuṣāṇas in the early fourth century, the rulers of the area most often associated themselves in coinage with non-Buddhist religious effigies and symbols: the coinage of the Indo-Greek king Agathocles (r. 190–180 BCE) features Zeus, the deified Alexander, Saṃkarṣaṇa-Balarāma and Vāsudeva; the famous Kuṣāṇa issues with the Buddha Śākyamuni and Maitreya, while highly significant, are marginal when compared with the host of Iranian, Greek, and non-Buddhist Indic deities depicted therein. Some rulers of this region openly patronised Buddhism, as in the case of Senavarman (fl. 1st c.), of whose existence we know thanks to the repair of a *stūpa* that he recorded in an elaborate inscription on a golden sheet.<sup>49</sup> The Kuṣāṇas seem to have sponsored Buddhist monasteries,<sup>50</sup> but possibly not more often than they sponsored the establishments of other religions, and the Kuṣāṇa royal shrine of Surkh Kotal in Tukharistan (Bactria, fragmented today among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and northern Afghanistan) is a classic Mazdean fire-shrine with, if anything, some traces of Śaivite iconography.<sup>51</sup>

Viṣṇu/Vāsudeva and Śiva/Maheśvara, originally minor gods of the Vedic pantheon, are of especial relevance for Gandhāra. Once again, early coin issues from Gandhāra are some of the earliest non-textual attestations of these gods. Their temple-based cult seems to have generally irked the orthodox faction of Vedic brahmins, who tend to speak with utmost contempt of temple priests (Skt. *devalaka*).<sup>52</sup> Both of these gods are attested in Gandhāran art: Verardi attributes the lesser visibility of iconography tied to Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism to “their taking root in rural areas” and to “the fact that the trading class—an object of scorn for the authors of the early Kali Age literature—did not find representation among them.”<sup>53</sup> In tandem with the diffusion of the cult of early Hindu gods, we should also mention that by the early centuries of the common era, Greek gods were still present and relevant in Gandhāra, sometimes equated with Indic gods, and featured in art and coinage.

All in all, if we go back to the role of Buddhism in Gandhāra, the safest assumption seems to be that its popularity was concentrated within the urban

49 Richard Salomon, “The Inscription of Senavarma, King of Oḍi,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 29.4 (1986): 261–293.

50 Mark Allon, “A Unique Gāndhārī Monastic Ledger Recording Gifts by Vima Kadphises,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 42 (2019): 1–46.

51 Gérard Fussman, *Surkh Kotal en Bactriane, I Architecture* (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1983).

52 See for example *Manusmṛti* 3.152, 3.180 and *Mahābhārata* 13.24.15 and especially 12.77.8, where temple priests are said to be ‘outcastes among brahmins’ (Skt. *brāhmaṇacaṇḍala*).

53 Giovanni Verardi, “Buddhism in North-Western India and Eastern Afghanistan, Sixth to Ninth Century AD,” ZINBUN: *Annals of the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University* 43 (2011): 147–183.



FIGURE 2.2 Vāsudeva raising Mt. Govardhana (?). From a carpet from Sanpul, Khotan, ca. 6th century  
DRAWING BY DIEGO LOUKOTA ON THE BASIS OF DUAN QING, “ACROSS-REGIONAL AND LOCAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MYTHOLOGIES: ON THE BASIS OF OBSERVING THE LOP MUSEUM CARPETS,” IN *NON-HAN LITERATURE ALONG THE SILK ROAD*, ED. LI XIAO (SINGAPORE: SPRINGER SINGAPORE, 2020), FIG. 1.2

mercantile classes, whose diaspora beyond Gandhāra is well-documented; their dominant adherence to Buddhism is also clear. The Gandhāran elite and the ruling class, which would remain non-native for several centuries, seem to have been much more eclectic in their religious preferences and therefore far less exclusive in their support of Buddhism.

Returning now to the Tarim Basin and to Khotan, we can fully expect that, given the major role that Gandhāra had in shaping the culture of the region, the rich religious *mélange* of Gandhāra was transported with all its intricacies beyond the Pamirs. Viṣṇu/Vāsudeva and Śiva/Maheśvara are both represented in Khotanese art, although the caveats here are that, on the one hand,

the representations are not particularly early and, on the other, that both gods were eventually absorbed into canonical lists of deities who protect Buddhism in the Sinitic traditions of the twenty-four (or twenty) *devas*, which include both Viṣṇu and Śiva along with such Hindu gods as Sarasvatī and Brahmā. For the Khotanese repertoire of Śiva/Maheśvara, the work of Riccarda Gallo underlines however the continuity of the Khotanese iconography with the art of Dunhuang (敦煌) and of China.<sup>54</sup> As for Vāsudeva, a very significant piece of evidence is a series of sixth century brightly coloured carpets from Sanpul that according to Zhang He portray scenes of the childhood and youth of Vāsudeva.<sup>55</sup> The most crucial detail is a scene with very clear affinities to contemporary representations of Vāsudeva raising mount Govardhana from India and South East Asia (see fig. 2.2). In Late Khotanese secular documents, a high official (Kh. *ṣau*) identified with the *vaiṣṇava*-sounding name Viṣṇadatta is often mentioned.

An Indic god in a liminal position within Khotanese religion is Vaiśravaṇa/Kuvera, the god of wealth, commander of the armies of the *yakṣas* and one of the protectors of the cardinal directions in Buddhism. A host of Chinese and Tibetan sources make this god the head of the octad of protector gods of Khotan, and the main divine patron of the kingdom.<sup>56</sup> Valerie Hansen has collected passages from Chinese sources that describe the temple of Vaiśravaṇa that once stood in the capital of Khotan: it is described as a richly adorned wooden building of seven stories, with the god housed in an upper chamber.<sup>57</sup> One may add to all of this a passage from the Tibetan *Li yul lung bstan pa* [Prophecy of the Li Country (i.e., Khotan)] to the effect that Vaiśravaṇa was worshipped together with his consort, Śrī.<sup>58</sup> Ancillary attendant gods are ubiquitous in the Buddhist world, but a temple devoted to the exclusive worship of a specific god (Skt. *devakula*) would be extraordinary at least from the point

54 See Riccarda Gallo, "The Image of Maheśvara: An Early Example of the Integration of Hindu Deities in the Chinese and Central Asian Buddhist Pantheon" (MA thesis, SOAS, 2013), 21–26.

55 See Zhang He, "Figurative and Inscribed Carpets from Shanpula-Khotan: Unexpected Representations of the Hindu God Krishna: A Preliminary Study," *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology* 5 (2010): 59–73, and "Krishna Iconography in Khotan Carpets—Spread of Hindu Religious Ideas in Xinjiang, China, Fourth-Seventh Century CE," *Indian Journal of History of Science* 51.4 (2016): 659–668.

56 Rong Xinjiang and Zhu Lishuang, "The Eight Great Protectors of Khotan," 50–58.

57 Valerie Hansen, "Gods on Walls: A Case of Indian Influence on Chinese Lay Religion?" in *Religion and Society in Tang and Sung China*, ed. Patricia Ebrey (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 80–82.

58 Ronald E. Emmerick, *Tibetan Texts Concerning Khotan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 20–21.

of view of contemporary mainstream Indic Buddhism, and may speak about the mode of temple worship that was then starting to become normative for Hindu gods.

Also, in connection with Vaiśravaṇa we should mention that one of the eight protector gods of Khotan, Saṃjñin (LMC \*Sanchi 散脂) is, at least in the Sinitic context, understood to be identical to Pañcika, the main general of the *yakṣa* army of Vaiśravaṇa and consort of Hārītī, the well-known Buddhist goddess of fertility and childbirth.<sup>59</sup> Although Hārītī does not feature under that name in the roster of the eight protector gods, she is mentioned along with Saṃjñin/Pañcika as an appointed tutelary deity for Khotan in the *Prophecy of the Li Country*.<sup>60</sup> An exquisite comb of bone fretwork from Yōtkan, now in the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm (item number 1903.11.0359), features Saṃjñin/Pañcika and Hārītī, who in this representation holds the cornucopia that distinguishes her in Gandhāran statuary. Vaiśravaṇa, for his part, is also associated with fertility: the story of the foundation of Khotan reported by Xuanzang (600/602–664, 玄奘) tells how the first king of the country beseeched Vaiśravaṇa for a son, and when the god granted his wish, the king built the magnificent temple to Vaiśravaṇa mentioned above as a token of gratitude.<sup>61</sup>

Both of the Sanskrit epics appear mentioned and briefly summarised in a passage of the *Book of Zambasta* (5.2–6),<sup>62</sup> the Khotanese tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is further attested by a famous Late Khotanese manuscript.<sup>63</sup> As for the *Mahābhārata*, one of the Gāndhārī tablets of Shanshan contains a loose parallel (CKD 523 rev.3) of a verse from the *Udyogapārvaṇ* section of the *Mahābhārata* (5.36.44).

The modes of religious specialists associated with the milieu of the epics may potentially be attested in the environs of Khotan too. The secular corpus of Gāndhārī documents from the site of Niya mentions brahmins once, within the compound that conventionally indicates the full spectrum of religious

59 The most recent and thorough survey on Hārītī and her association with childbearing seen from the Buddhist monastic codes can be found in Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Nuns, Monks, and Other Worldly Matters: Recent Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 131–156.

60 Emmerick, *Tibetan Texts Concerning Khotan*, 8–9.

61 *Datang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 [Records of the Western Regions of the Great Tang Dynasty], T. 2087.51, 943b–c.

62 For the title of the *Book of Zambasta* see Diego Loukota, “Ne Hāde Vajjropamā Vaśārā: Indic Loanwords in the Khotanese Book of Zambasta and the Chronology of the Spread of Buddhism to Khotan,” *BuddhistRoad Paper* 1.7 (2023).

63 Harold W. Bailey, “The Rāma Story in Khotanese,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59.4 (1939): 460–468.

specialists (Shanshan Gand. *śramaṇnabramamaṇna*, Skt. *śramaṇabrāhmaṇa*) (CKD 554). By the third or fourth century, this compound, of illustrious Aśokan pedigree, may have become simply a generic designation of religious professionals, regardless of creed; there is, however, a slim possibility that a certain class of priests or officiants may have been termed *bramaṇna* in the settler-colonial context of the Tarim Basin of the early centuries CE. These putative brahmins, if they were there at all, were most likely associated with the theistic temple cults and may have been the officiants of the sacrifice of a cow to the auspicious deity (Shanshan Gand. *bhatro devata*) recorded in CKD 157. (Neo-)Orthodox Vedic Brahmanism like the one formulated in the *dharmasāstras* is not clearly attested in the early centuries CE in Gandhāra or in the Tarim Basin. A small but telling sign of this is that the rich body of manuscripts of Sanskrit grammar of the region emphasises treatises that do not include a description of Vedic Sanskrit, such as *Kātantra* and *Kaumāralāta*.

Another element that points to a connection with the religious models that imbue the epics concerns the Yōtkan clay figurines. As per Mark A. Stein's assessment, Yōtkan would have been the ancient site of the capital of Khotan, and the site of the temple of Vaiśravaṇa,<sup>64</sup> but unfortunately the site has been continuously inhabited since antiquity and no horizontal excavation has ever been conducted; on top of that, the archaeological context of the figurines is lost, as neither Stein nor Sven Hedin, who collected the largest number of these, were able to conduct proper excavation at the site and relied instead on the mediation of local treasure hunters. Although there is great thematic diversity among the figurines, a very large number of these features monkeys (fig. 2.3a–b), and these can be divided into two main classes: (1) monkeys engaged in masturbation, copulation, or childcare, or else (2) monkeys playing musical instruments. Stein remarked on the surprising fact that the Rhesus monkey, widespread as it is in what was once Gandhāra, has never been endemic to the Tarim Basin or to Khotan:<sup>65</sup> the image of the monkey must therefore have come from elsewhere, in all likelihood from Gandhāra, although the Sinitic East could also have been a source.<sup>66</sup> Bearing in mind that the monkey was therefore a foreign animal in Khotan, it is inevitable to be reminded of the central role that monkeys play within the Rāma narrative cycle, which we know to have circulated in Khotan. The Khotanese *Rāmāyaṇa* contains monkey

64 Mark A. Stein, *Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), vol. 1, 200–202.

65 Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, 208.

66 Prof. Chen Ruixuan (personal communication) notes too that the words for monkey (Chin. *hou* 猴) and marquis, high civil official (Chin. *hou* 侯, synecdoche for civil service promotion) are and were homophones in Chinese (LHC \**go* 猴/侯).

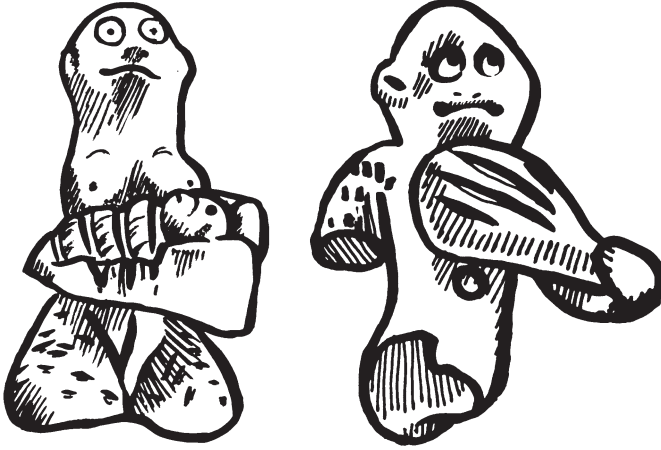


FIGURE 2.3A–B Monkey figurines from Yötkan, early centuries CE (item numbers 1901.23.0042 and 1903.11.0037). Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm  
DRAWING BY DIEGO LOUKOTA ON THE BASIS OF THE ONLINE MUSEUM CATALOGUE (LAST ACCESSED FEBRUARY 5, 2023, [HTTP://COLLECTIONS.SMVK.SE/CARLOTTA-EM/WEB](http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web))

narratives unknown to Valmiki's, and therefore it is possible that now lost narrative cycles concerning monkeys spun off the narrative matter of the *Rāmāyaṇa* were once widespread in Khotan. Another seductive possible connection of the Yötkan monkeys with the Rāma narrative concerns a passage of the vulgate of Valmiki's *Bālakaṇḍa* in which the monkey general Gandhamādana is said to be the son of Vaiśravaṇa (Skt. *danadasya sutah*, 1.16.491.5). One figurine in the British Museum (MAS.159/Yo.00166), also from Yötkan and made not from clay but from the precious jade that made Khotan famous, features a monkey in the posture that the Chinese termed 'Serindian kneeling' (Chin. *hugui* 胡跪). Its head is surrounded by a halo, which conventionally identifies gods in Khotanese art. The jade figurine is unlikely to represent the divine Hanumat, omitted from the Khotanese *Rāmāyaṇa*, but it may represent the monkey prince Naṇḍa, who in the Khotanese narrative takes the role of companion of Rāma in the attack on Laṅkā.

The fact that the monkey figurines of Yötkan emphasise mating and breeding is not surprising given the colourful sexual behaviour of the Rhesus monkey.<sup>67</sup> As for the musical aspect of the monkeys, while it might be simply

67 Joshua Seinfeld, "Macaca Mulatta (Rhesus Monkey)," *Animal Diversity Web*, last accessed May 28, 2021. [https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Macaca\\_mulatta/](https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Macaca_mulatta/).

a metaphor of the pleasures of life, we might remark too that whereas in a Buddhist context Vaiśravaṇa is typically characterised as the king of the *yakṣas*, the epic descriptions sometimes make him the king of the scent-eaters (Skt. *gandharva*), synonymous with music.<sup>68</sup> The monkey is also associated with good luck and prosperity in the extant guides to zodiacal prognostication in Gāndhārī and Khotanese from the area.<sup>69</sup>

The figurines are very small—about 5 cm in length on average—and the fact that they often bear holes suggests that they could be threaded and worn on the neck or sewn to clothing.<sup>70</sup> It seems reasonable to conjecture that the Yōtkan monkeys may have been tokens, amulets, or exvotos linked to a cult that emphasised fertility (reproduction and motherhood) and prosperity (a leisurely life embodied through the performance of music), perhaps associated with the famous shrine where the tutelary divine couples of Vaiśravaṇa and Śrī and also their close associates Saṃjñin/Pañcika and Hārītī may have been worshipped as divine embodiments of the conjunction of wealth and fertility. In contrast with the Buddha images from Yōtkan, all made from bone or metal, the facture and humble material of the monkey figurines are undoubtedly cheap and unsophisticated but also lively and original: they speak to us about a more popular register of religion than the one we can access from written sources and from more highbrow art.

Finally, we can briefly survey the possible continuation of deities of Greek origin. As mentioned before, Greek religious and mythological elements are well-represented in Gandhāra and therefore also in the early historic Tarim Basin. A famous cloth from Niya features Heracles and Tyche; the famous Sanpul pant-leg, although possibly imported from Tukharistan, features a centaur.<sup>71</sup> The list of the eight protector gods of Khotan of the *Candragarbhasūtra* that

68 Washburn Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* (Strassburg: Karl Trübner Verlag, 1915), §83, §88, §93.

69 See Or.11252/1, r43–46 from the British Library: “A man is born in the year of the Monkey. He will have to go to foreign [?] land and he will have many sons and he will be good with respect to \*gift(s). He will have many servants and horses.” (Kh. *makala sabya hve ysaīyi hāysai śaṃdā tṣuñai hīme u pūrai pha hīmāre [u h]aurina śīri hīme bisai pha hīmāri u aśa*). Text and translation from Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts from Chinese Turkestan in the British Library: A Complete Catalogue with Texts and Translations* (London: The British Library, 2003), 82–85. See also CKD 565, rev. b5: “[Under the asterism of the] monkey, there is ease for all tasks.” (Shanshan Gand. *makaḍa ca sa{r}va karyāna lahu*).

70 Gösta Montell, “Sven Hedin’s Archaeological Collections from Khotan: Terra-cottas from Yotkan and Dandan-Uiliq,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 7 (1936): 190.

71 Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road. A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39; 144.





FIGURE 2.4  
Pan and maenad, Gandhāra, early  
centuries CE, now in a private  
collection in Japan  
DRAWING BY DIEGO LOUKOTA  
ON THE BASIS OF TANABE “THE  
DIONYSIAN IMAGERY,” 11

opens this article starts with a ‘great yakṣa with the feet of a ram’ (Chin. 殺羊脚大夜叉); later versions of the list replace this deity with the Sanskrit name Gaganasvara (lit. ‘Sound of Heaven’). No Gandhāran representations of the Hellenistic ram-footed Pan or satyrs survive, yet there is a Gandhāran relief featuring two vignettes of a ram-horned Pan embracing a maenad in a frieze of clear Dionysian affiliation—see the hanging bunch of grapes—now in an undisclosed private collection in Japan (fig. 2.4).<sup>72</sup> The representation of the god Gaganasvara in Cave 98 of Mogao (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟) seems to have horn-like elements in his headdress (fig. 2.5), and this feature might be an echo of the iconographic attributes of a god with caprine features whose origin might be sought in the Hellenistic representations of Pan.

72 Tanabe Tadashi, “The Dionysian Imagery from the Mediterranean to Gandhāra,” *Ancient Punjab* 8 (2020): 11.



FIGURE 2.5  
The great *yakṣa* Gaganasvara,  
from Mogao Cave 98,  
9th–10th centuries  
DRAWING BY DIEGO LOUKOTA  
ON THE BASIS OF RONG AND  
ZHU, “THE EIGHT GREAT  
PROTECTORS OF KHOTAN  
RE-CONSIDERED,” 69

#### 4 The Sinitic Influence

At this point we should mention also the early influence of the Sinitic East. The medium of the Chinese language inaugurates the historical records of the Tarim Basin: the earliest secular documents, coins, and inscriptions of the area are all either completely or partially in Chinese.<sup>73</sup> This early Sinitic influence soon gave way to the Gandhāran paradigm that would infuse the whole cultural makeup of the basin with the Indic flavour that characterises it up to the advent of Islam. In spite of the active adherence to Indic models, the successive imperial polities of the Sinitic East remained throughout the first

73 For documents and coins, see Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 36, 48; for the second century Liu Pingguo (劉平國) inscription see Ching Chao-jung 慶昭蓉, “Lüelun gudai Qiuci wenshu zhizuo chuantong zhi mengnie 略論古代龜茲文書製作傳統之萌蘖 [Brief Discussion on the Origins of the Tradition of Record Production in Ancient Kuča],” *Nairiku ajia gengo no kenkyū* 內陸アジア言語の研究 / *Studies on the Inner Asian Languages* 33 (2018): 45–46.

millennium the main political and economic force of gravity for the Tarim Basin. It would be only natural then if along the lines of economic and political hegemony, cultural and religious elements would be transmitted too. We know from the Chinese garrison in Loulan that the Chinese military colonists based in the region read and studied a variety of texts that included astrology and cosmology.<sup>74</sup> The most enduring Sinitic inheritance to the region may be, in fact, precisely the twelvefold Sinitic animal zodiac. Recent discoveries of bamboo slips from the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE, 秦) have finally laid to rest early speculation on the non-Sinitic origin of the animal zodiac.<sup>75</sup> Guides to prognostication on the basis of the Sinitic zodiac are attested in Gāndhārī and in Khotanese,<sup>76</sup> and although a thorough study of Khotanese names remains to be done, the presence of zodiac names, well attested in a Sinitic context (albeit in a mostly popular cultural register) is also reasonably well attested in Khotan and its environs. One very well-attested individual from the Niya corpus in Gāndhārī bears a variously spelled name (<Ṣaḡamovi>, <Ṣaḡamoya>, <Zaḡimovi>, <Ṣaḡamoi> = \*[za:jəmuwji]) that perhaps contains in its second part the Khotanese term for ‘tiger’ (Kh. *mūyi*-). From CKD 843, probably a payroll originally from Niya or from Khotan itself, written in Kharoṣṭhī but possibly not in Gāndhārī and still poorly understood, we have the personal name Śazdha, which in all likelihood represents the term snake (Kh. *śaysda*-). Furthermore, from late Khotanese secular documents we have ample attestations of people bearing the names Makala, ‘monkey’ (Kh. *makala*) and Mulaka, ‘mouse’ (Kh. *mulaka*).

Further Serindian and Khotanese echoes of Sinitic cosmology can be found in funeral accoutrements. A rich, but unfortunately pillaged Shanshanese grave of about the fourth century has frescoes signed in Gāndhārī by the painter but featuring an Iranian-looking scene of a drinking party in the afterlife, as well as depictions of buddha-worship; the coffin, however, is decorated with the Chinese sun-crow and moon-toad, as well as a Chinese funeral unicorn (Chin. *xiezhi* 獬豸) of the same type found in Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220, 漢) graves in the Hexi Corridor (Chin. Hexi zoulang 河西走廊) and Turfan.<sup>77</sup> Another, much later Khotanese coffin now in the Hetian County Museum from the Later Tang

74 See Henri Maspero, *Les documents chinois de la troisième expédition de Sir Aurel Stein en Asie Centrale* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1953), 62.

75 Chen Sanping, “Yuan Hong: A Case of Premature Death by Historians?,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123.4 (2003): 845.

76 See fn. 69 above.

77 Lin Meicun 林梅村, *Sichou zhi lu kaogu shiwu jiang 丝绸之路考古十五讲* [Fifteen Lectures on the Archaeology of the Silk Road] (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2006), 107–126.

Dynasty (923–935, 後唐) features on each side, instead, the four symbols of the cardinal directions (i.e., (1) the blue-green dragon of the east, (2) the red bird of the south, (3) the white tiger of the west, and (4) the murky warrior of the north). As much as the evidence is scant, it seems possible that the rich Sinitic cosmological models and traditions of funeral geomancy permeated the culture of the Śakas of Khotan.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

A detailed study of Khotanese Buddhism understood in its own specificity remains to be written. Khotanese is a dead language without living descendants, and Khotanese culture experienced a radical makeover with the advent of Islam into the Tarim Basin from about the second millennium CE. Moreover, the difficult political situation of Xinjiang (新疆) and the tragedy of the Uyghur people, who in part descend from the ancient peoples of the basin and continue the traditional ways of life of the region, complicate investigation into the ancient culture of Khotan. All of these factors make research into ancient Khotan, including its variegated religious landscape, both urgent and more difficult than ever, as in the current political climate international participation and cooperation in archaeological and ethnographic research is impossible. Yet, ancient Khotan is a prime example of the fecund symbiosis of various cultural influences, and its own brand of Buddhism bears witness to the unique cultural hybridity of the ancient kingdom. A history of Buddhism in Khotan that avoids the simplistic approach of seeing merely a transposition of an Indic model, as it has been so often the case, should take into account the vibrant religious undercurrents that shaped the introduction and diffusion of Buddhism into this ancient land.