

## Report of the Guest Lecture of the BuddhistRoad project

26 February 2021 Imre Galambos (Cambridge)

### **MOVING OUT OF THE TIBETAN PERIOD: STEIN PAINTING 3 FROM DUNHUANG**

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

The ERC project *BuddhistRoad* team invited Dr. Imre Galambos of the University of Cambridge to give a virtual lecture on Stein painting 3 (Ch.xxxviii.005), which had been acquired by M. Aurel Stein at the Dunhuang library cave and is now held in the British Museum. This is a large silk painting showing two standing figures of Avalokiteśvara facing each other, with a donor inscription in a yellow cartouche between them. The inscription contains no date but has been dated to the mid-ninth century based on an assumed reference to the Tibetan period in Dunhuang (781–848). Dr. Galambos examined the inscription and showed that nothing in it could be unequivocally connected with the Tibetan rule, which immediately cast doubt on dating it to that period. Instead, the inscription seems to contain the wishes of donors who lived away from their original home. By restoring the location of a misplaced piece of detached silk, Dr. Galambos was able to read several hitherto illegible words in the inscription.

One significant detail that permitted narrowing down the possible timeframe of the painting was that the inscription was divided into two halves, which read in vertical columns but in opposite directions, moving outwards from a central axis. Thus, the columns of the right half read from left to right, whereas those of the left half, from right to left. As Dr. Galambos has demonstrated in his recent book (*Dunhuang Manuscript Culture*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), this type of left-to-right direction of writing became attested in portable paintings from the Dunhuang library cave only at the end of the ninth century, several decades after the end of the Tibetan period. For this reason, it is likely that Stein painting 3 was commissions in the late ninth or sometime during the tenth century. A comparison with other similar inscriptions and colophons in votive manuscripts revealed that the painting probably dated to the tenth century and could not be linked with the Tibetan period in the region.

In the end, Dr. Galambos discussed how certain assumptions about the linguistic and social conditions at specific periods could lead to mistaken dating. In this case, one of the assumptions



was the nationalistic (even patriotic!) attitude of the core population of Dunhuang, typically portrayed as Chinese, and their hostility towards the Tibetan rule. Yet such sentiments are by no means dominant in contemporary manuscripts and paintings, which instead give evidence of linguistic and cultural diversity.



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