

Abstract

Buddhism has survived for more than one thousand years among Turks. This Buddhist era lasts from 4th century when Buddhism was adopted by the Southern Huns (Xiongnu) who established dynasties in North China, until 14th century when Turfan Uygurs completely converted to Islam. Buddhism survived among some Turkish tribes or states even simultaneously or within different periods.

In this paper, we tried to present a brief overview of Buddhist Turks' material cultural heritage dated to the mentioned periods, mainly in Dunhuang and Turfan. The majority of this heritage are formed of Buddhist cave monasteries and temples, the main elements of Buddhist Turkish architecture, valid also for Buddhist world heritage. Most of these caves are fully ornamented with colorful wall paintings depicting the sutra stories, the donors and Buddhas, bodhisattvas, paradise images. Some of them contains also Buddha statues made from wood and earth. Other types of material culture are wooden stakes which are used as inscription tablets unearthed to some temples' floors and the handmade or blockprint miniatures which are found in some Buddhist sutras. Few other examples from Kumtura caves in Kucha region of Eastern Turkestan and from Bamiyan caves in Afghanistan are also given as these caves left traces from Turks' patronage of Buddhism.

Key words: Buddhism, Turks, material culture, cultural heritage, Buddhist cave temple, sculpture, miniature

The Material Cultural Heritage of Buddhist Turks

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Introduction

Buddhism has survived for more than one thousand years among different Turkish tribes and states within different periods. This Buddhist era lasts from 4th century when Buddhism was adopted by the Southern Huns (Xiongnu) who established dynasties in North China, until 14th century when Turfan Uygurs completely converted to Islam. The introduction of Buddhism among Turks dates back to 4th century based on written sources, during the period where Northern China was dominated and ruled by their northern enemies, especially Xiongnu (Baykuzu 2008, 195-198). A series of dynasties of Turkish ethnicity ruled Northern China between 3rd-6th centuries: *Later Chao* (329-352), *Northern Liang* (397-439) and *Northern Wei* (385-550) (Eberhard 1977, 125, 132, 138-139). Although there is no written evidence that *Hephtalites* (also called *White Huns*, descendants of Xiongnu), who ruled Transoxiana and Tokharistan in 5th-6th centuries, converted to Buddhism, it seems quite clear that Turks patroned this religion in this region. Although there are some doubts about the Turkic Khaganate's official adoption of Buddhism, it is known that they had close contact with Buddhism due to the Silk Road traders, Sogdians and to Buddhist monks who were sent by Chinese dynasties Northern Ts'i (550-577) and Northern Chou (556-581) (Klimkeit 1990, 54-55). *Bugut and Khuis Tolgoi inscriptions* found in Mongolia contain texts with Buddhist terms in Brahmi script as the evidence of Buddhism's existence. A second phase of Buddhism propagation among Turks started with Uygurs, heirs of Xiongnu, who established their state in Mongolia by defeating Turkic Khaganate (745). They migrated to Turfan and Gansu towards the end of the first half of 9th century and converted to Buddhism after their previous official religion Manichaeism. Buddhism lived its most glorious period in Turfan and Gansu Uygurs, especially between 10th-12th centuries. Today, there is a minority of Buddhist Uygurs living in Gansu as descendants of Gansu Uygurs and known as *Yellow Uygurs*.

The history of Buddhism among Turks was shortly summarized in our paper published in the first issue of this journal (Zeren 2021). This paper could be seen as the continuation of this earlier publication in order to give a brief overview of Buddhist cultural heritage created by Turks during a millennia. Due to the article's limits, only the principal sites containing major art objects of this amazing heritage will be shortly presented.

Buddhist heritage constitutes one of the most widespread heritage categories in the Asian region. According to G. Wijesuriya “*Buddhist heritage can be considered as the intellectual, tangible, intangible, movable and immovable embodiment of Buddhism which is a formally organised religion that has sustained human life in the Asian region for more than 2 500 years. Throughout this period, Buddhism has been and is the inspiration that shaped and continues to shape many lives and societies in the Asian region. Therefore the religion, as well as all forms of its expression, deserves special attention by society.*” (Wijesuriya 2013, 2-3) As being part of this rich sacred heritage created by Turks, the relevant sites are distributed to many countries today such as China, Mongolia, Afghanistan and most of them are registered or offered as candidates to UNESCO World Heritage List. This demonstrates their worldwide outstanding value which needs to be presented and preserved both for historical and religious reasons. First, this cultural heritage make evidence to the propagation of Buddhism in China and Turkestan from 4th century. Related sites were mentioned in historical sources as part of the trajectory of Buddhist monks (i.e. Fa-Hsien, Xuanzang) who traveled from China to India for pilgrimage reasons and to obtain sutras to translate to Chinese. They were important Buddhist sites situated along the Silk Road, with their temples visited by Buddhist lay people, merchants and monks. Secondly, this paper will also shed light on Buddhist Turks’ cultural heritage which is not still well known worldwide although it has a past of a millennia with amazing contribution .

In its earliest times, Buddhist cave monasteries and temples, built especially in the mountainous regions, fulfilled their sheltering and worship needs. From 4th century onwards with the construction of Ajanta Caves, some of these cave temples and monasteries became a complex within the centuries, but also an art center with statues and wall paintings ornamenting cave interior, thanks to the patronage of Buddhist rulers, statesmen, merchants and people.

The iconic phase of Buddhist art started with Mahayana Buddhism probably flourished in Northern India or Turkestan during Kushan period. Mahayana has also enlarged Buddhist pantheon and its representation with bodhisattvas, lokapalas and other divine beings.

Mogao (Mogaku) Caves, also known as *Thousand Buddha Caves (Qianfodong)* is one of the most adorable Buddhist temples and monasteries complexes, built in Dunhuang – one of the most important Silk Road stops, famous with its “Jade Gate”- within late 4th century and 14th century (Whitfield et al. 2000, 5) **(Photo 1)**. This complex consisting of 492 caves, 45000 square meter surface covered by amazing wall paintings and over 200 statues was included in UNESCO World Heritage List in 1987 (Mogao Caves).

Although it was recorded that the first caves were built by Buddhist monks Yuezun and Faliang, the construction of cave temples as an art center started with Northern Liang Dynasty's patronage. The earliest Mogao caves which can still be visited today are the Caves 268, 272 and 275 (Whitfield et al. 2000, 53). Among these caves, Cave 275 is very special as it is the pioneer of Turkish Buddhist art (**Photo 2**). Northern Liang dynasty established by Turks was not only the initiator of Buddhist cave temples, but also gigantic stone statues representing Buddha, mainly *Buddha Maitreya*. The ornamentation of these caves had strong emphasis on *Maitreya* cult venerated by both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. The colossal Maitreya statue of Northern Liang period built in Cave 275 is one of the first colossal Buddha representations in Northern Buddhism.



Photo 1 Mogao (Mogaku) Caves, Dunhuang (Wikimedia Commons)



Photo 2 Jataka Scene from Mogao Cave 275, 5th century, Northern Liang Dynasty (5000 Ans d'Art Chinois)

The second phase of Mogao caves associated by Turkish Buddhist art started with the invasion of Dunhuang by Tuoba in 439. Among 20 caves from Wei period, the most important ones are Cave 254, 257, 259 and 285 completed in Western Wei period (Whitfield et al. 2000, 60-61) (**Photo 3**). Another 20 caves were built in Western Wei period (535-557), after Northern Wei was divided in two part in 535. Northern Wei dynasty enriched Chinese Buddhist art with the emperor statues under the form of a Buddha or bodhisattva iconography. It is well known that the five bronze statue of *Buddhas* within the first five Yungang Caves were made as representing the five rulers of Wei (Tezcan 2005, 151-152). The pilgrim *Sung Yun* narrated that “*all Buddha statues look like ‘Hu’s.*”(Esin 1978, 63-64). Among the other monumental Buddha statues in Central Asia, one needs to list the two colossal Buddha statues in Bamiyan and many others in *Yungang* and *Longmen Caves*. This idea could well be grounded on the perception of Buddha by Turks. His nature as *chakravartin* was fitting in totally with the conception of monarchic Turkish ruler as world conqueror. The fact that the Buddha was called as *Burkan* by Turks, clearly indicates that Turks venerated Buddha as a *Lord, king or ancestor* which helps to understand his iconography in Turkish Buddhist art. The magnification of Buddha images as *cakravartin* seems highly related with ancestor cult of Ancient Turks, depicting pictorial representations of ancestors to memorize and venerate them. Turks’ belief that dead ancestors can still interfere their descendants’ lives, caused them be kept content with offerings, sacrifices and immortalizing them through pictorial and sculptural representations (Zeren 2018, 306,311) (**Photo 4, Photo 5**).



Photo 3 Jataka Scene from Mogao Cave 285, 5th-6th centuries, Northern and Western Wei Period (5000 Ans d'Art Chinois)



Photo 4 Colossal Maitreya Statue, 5th century, Northern Liang Period (5000 Ans d'Art Chinois)

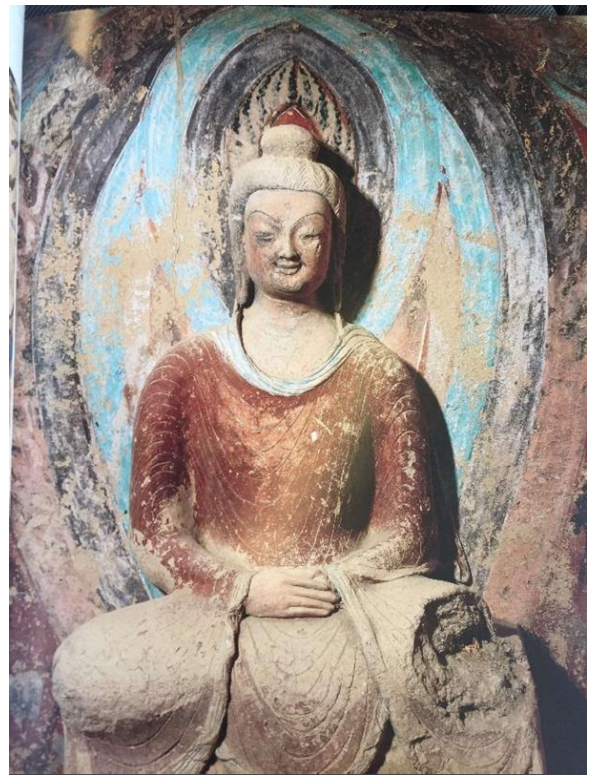


Photo 5 Buddha Statue, Mogao Cave 259, 5th century, Northern Wei Period (5000 Ans d'Art Chinois)

The third phase of Turkish Buddhist art in Mogao Caves started with Gansu Uyghurs who ruled in this region during 10th-11th centuries. L. Russell-Smith put in evidence Uyghur patronage in Dunhuang based on the historical records, the themes, donor portraits and art motives of wall paintings, by a comparative approach with Turfan Uyghur Buddhist art. (Russell-Smith 2005, 58-76).

The majority of donors are the Uyghur wives of Dunhuang local rulers (especially Guiyijun governance), who were portrayed in Cave 61 and 98 (**Photo 6**). According to Russell-Smith, the cave built by Gansu Uyghurs is Cave 409 (**Photo 7**) and other Uyghur donors' portraits were made in Mogao Cave 245, Western Thousand Buda Cave 16 and Yulin Cave 39. Yulin Caves are another Buddhist temples complex in 100 km. east of Mogao Caves, used as a pilgrimage sites. Although the majority of caves are dated by the middle of 14th century, earlier caves with wall paintings and inscriptions were built by Uyghurs (Wilkins 2016, 230-231).

In the west, Bamiyan Buddhist monastery caves complex, built around Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan, was famous with its two giant Buddha statues destroyed by Taliban in 2001 (**Photo 8**, **Photo 9**). This complex was included in UNESCO World Heritage List in 2003 (BV WHC). It is evidenced by Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang's records (Wriggins 2004, 45-48) and the latest archaeological excavations in Bamiyan that these caves were built and survived under Turks' patronage.

Latest researches in Bamiyan date two Buddha statues mostly to 3rd-7th or 5th-6th centuries which were either Hephtalites (White Huns)' (Litvinsky 1996, 153,158) or Western Turks' (Tarzi 2007, 920-922; Klimburg-Salter 1989, 91) periods. Klimburg-Salter proposed that the similarity between Swat, Kapisa ve Hindukush arts dated in 627-737 was a result of local Turkish governance stability, although Western Turks were subject to China within the first half of this period time (Klimburgh-Salter 1989. 37-42).

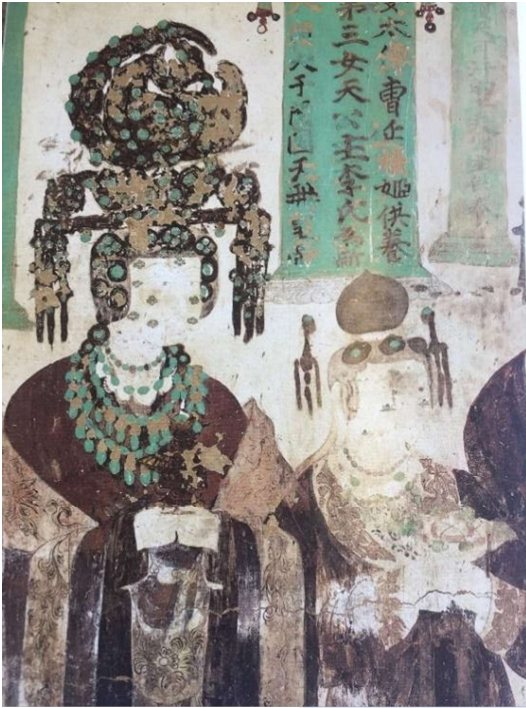


Photo 6 Female donors, Mogao Cave 61, 10th century, Guiyijun period (5000 Ans d'Art Chinois)

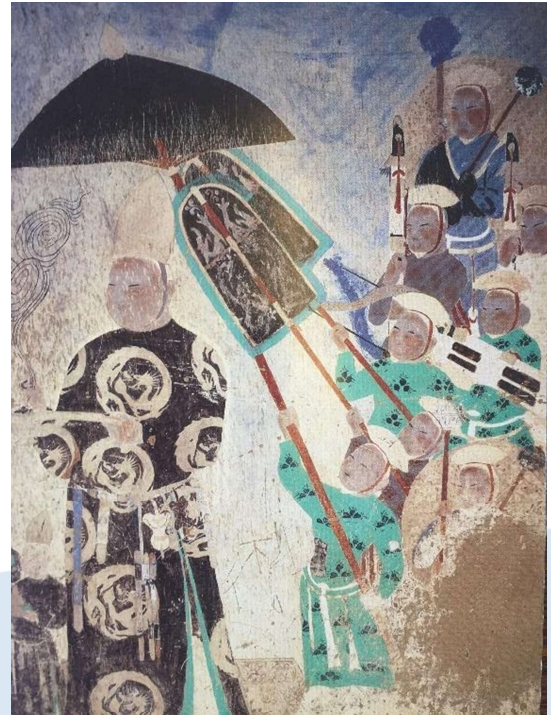


Photo 7 Male donors, Mogao Cave 409, 11th century, Gansu Uygur period (5000 Ans d'Art Chinois)



Photo 8 Bamiyan Caves, 6th-7th centuries (Wikimedia Commons)

The testimony of Xuanzang who was the first to describe these colossal statues in a wellcondition with their red and blue colors, gilded faces and hands in 630 shows that either they were not destroyed by Hephtalites or were restored under Western Turks patronage.



Photo 9 Colossal 55 m. height Buddha Statue destroyed by Taliban in 2001, 6th-7th centuries (Wikimedia Commons)

Kizil Cave complex built in Kucha Region between 3rd-9th centuries is the oldest and well preserved complex with its 349 caves decorated by amazing wall paintings and sculpture and accepted in UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014 (*SR WHC 1; SR WHC 2. 67*). In these caves, several inscriptions and manuscripts written in Brahmi, Chinese, Old Turkic Runic, Uygur and Chagataid were found (*SR WHC 2, 72*). Turkic Khaganate period art works were also discovered in Kizil, Kumtura and Sorchuk Caves in Eastern Turkestan by A. Grünwedel, P. Pelliot and A. von Le Coq. As an example, in Kumtura Cave Nr. 46, a Runic inscription was found by P. Pelliot and then re-visited in Turfanexpedition (1913-1914). P. Zieme interpreted the reading as the names of three or four persons among whom *D(a)rm(a)r[uč]*, Darmaruci was a famous ruler (*Zieme 2015, 218-219*) (**Photo 10**).



Abb. 2: Photographie der Kumtura-Inschrift im Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin

Photo 10 Old Turkic Runic Inscription, Kumtura Eremitenhöhle (Ch. Nr. 46), Turkic Khaganate period, photo taken during Turfanexpedition (1913-1914) (Zieme 2015)

Buddhist Uyghurs made great contributions, especially to Mahāyāna Buddhism in Turfan and Dunhuang. The renaissance of Mahāyāna Buddhist Art which flourished in Northern India by Kushans happened in Turfan 10th century onwards. Uyghur Mahayana Buddhist art in Turfan was very productive between 9th-12th centuries, in various forms such as, caves, architectural elements, stone and wooden sculptures, handmade paintings on murals and textiles, miniatures, manuscripts and block printed books. As a result of Turfan expeditions organized by European countries and Japan in the beginning of 20th century, collections of artifacts are currently stored and exhibited in Berlin Museum für Asiatische Kunst, St. Petersburg Hermitage State Museum, London British Museum, Paris Musée Guimet, New Delhi National Museum, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum, Ryukoku Museum, Seoul National Museum and some private collections.

Buddhist Uyghur literature lasted at least five centuries and left a variety of texts in different scripts, contexts, writing, paper and book styles and materials (paper, wood, stone, textile), most of them reached us in fragments (Zeren 2015, 438-561). The six biggest collections of manuscripts are St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of Russian Academy of Sciences, British Library Stein Collection, Berlin Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften Turfanforschung Collection and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Bibliothèque Nationale Pelliot Collection and Musée Guimet; Ryukoku University. There are also other collections in Beijing, İstanbul, Ankara, Stockholm, Helsinki (Elverskog 1997, 24). Wooden stake inscriptions giving the dates of monastery construction and the name of the donors were found on the floor of some monasteries (**Photo 11**). The illuminated manuscripts contained colorful miniatures which depict some scenes of the Buddhist sutras, paradises or hells (**Photo 12**). Some other manuscripts contained black and white blockprint illustrations in late periods.

In addition to afore mentioned Mogao and Yulin Caves, some of Toyuk Caves and Bezeklik Caves built by Buddhist Turfan Uyghurs, which are currently found in UNESCO World Heritage Candidate List (*SR WHC 3*), should be noted as Buddhist Turks' masterpieces (**Photo 13**). Bezeklik cave complex, built near Murtuk River, was named based on the amazing decoration of cave interiors as "bezeklik" means "ornamented place" in Old Uyghur. The complex was initially discovered by A. Grünwedel and further excavated by A. von Le Coq's team. The most famous cave with its sculpture and wall painting design and themes was Cave 20 (previously numerated as Cave 9), devoted to Avalokiteshvara and dated to 9th-10th centuries. Cave 20 were also famous by Uyghur male and female donors depicted on the two sides of the corridor. These are Uyghur secular aristocrats who contributed to the construction and ornamentation of Buddhist cave temple. (**Photo 14, Photo 15**).



Photo 11 Old Uygur wooden stake inscriptions from Kocho and Sengim, 10th-11th century, Berlin Asiatische Kunst Museum (Turks - A Journey Of A Thousand Years)



Photo 12 Old Uygur Daśakarmapathāvadānamālā work fragment with a miniature (Wilkins 2016)



Photo 13 Bezeklik Caves, Turfan, Turfan Uygur period (Wikimedia Commons)



Photo 14 Uygur Male Donors, Bezeklik Cave 20, 9th-10th century, Berlin Asiatische Kunst Museum (Wikimedia Commons)



Photo 15 Uygur Female Donors, Bezeklik Cave 20, 9th-10th century, Berlin Asiatische Kunst Museum, (Wikimedia Commons)

Colossal Buddha representations in Afghanistan and North China were revived several centuries later with *Pranidhi* (or *Prandhāna*) scenes by Turfan Uygurs (**Photo 16**). These scenes are iconographically unique in Buddhist art to represent *vyakarana* theme, showing how Buddha Sakyamuni made vow to other *Buddhas* in the past and got the prophecy of *being a Buddha* in his turn (Konczak 2012). *Pranidhi* scenes were found mainly on the side walls of the cave and in a simpler composition on the ceilings of the cave in Bezeklik (14 caves, but especially *Cave 20*), Sengim (*Temple I*), Kocho (*Temple α and β*), Karashar, and Karahoca (Zu 2012, 69). Their magnitude as 2 meters tall and their high quantity percentage as one third of total Bezeklik wall paintings needs to be considered as a *Renaissance phenomenon* (Zeren 2018).

Conclusion

Buddhist Turks afore mentioned with few samples from their existing cultural heritage served Buddhist doctrine and culture during a millennia. It is not possible to study the flourishing period of Chinese Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism without the contribution of Northern Dynasties established by Turks. Many of the first Buddhist sūtras were translated from Indian languages to Chinese and the first Buddhist cave temples were built under the patronage of these Turks' sovereign. We tried to present in this article few examples on material culture heritage of Turkish Buddhism, either in form of text –Turkish runic and old Uygur scripts- or image –mural painting and sculpture, starting from Northern Liang and Northern Wei dynasties. We mentioned shortly about the patronage of Turks, either from Hephtalites or Turkic Khaganate periods, in Bamiyan Buddhist cave complex. Finally, we discussed about Buddhism among Uygurs very shortly as there is a huge literature for these Turks who stayed Buddhist during five centuries and shaped also the Buddhist culture of Xia Xia and Mongols. Buddhist Uygurs made great contributions, especially to Mahāyāna Buddhism in Turfan and Dunhuang. The renaissance of Mahāyāna Buddhist Art which flourished in Northern India by Kushans happened in Turfan 10th century onwards.

As seen via these few examples, the material culture of Buddhist Turks deserve more research as most of their caves and cave complexes are registered as UNESCO World Heritage List member or candidate.



Photo 16 Praniidhi Scene, Lost wall painting, Bezeklik Cave 20, 9th-10th century, Berlin Indische Kunst Museum, IB 6884, 325 cm x 590 cm (Le Coq 1913)

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