

Overland Shortcuts for the Transmission of Buddhism

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Introduction: Roads as Ideological Concepts and Everyday Realities

Buddhist discourses on paths of practice and doctrine leading beyond worldly attachments to the “far shore” of Nirvāṇa are grounded in everyday experiences of travel on actual roads.¹ The symbolism of the “Eightfold Path” as the road to the cessation of suffering and the “Middle Way” between extremes of excessive indulgence and ascetic mortification is closely related to the characterization of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni as the re-discoverer of an ancient road. Texts such as Buddhaghosa’s *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*) and Atiśa’s *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*) demonstrate that Buddhist scholars from various traditions framed methods of reaching religious goals in terms of “paths.” Based on the various “*mārga* schemes” for applying meditation techniques and understanding doctrinal positions, Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello argue that “the concept of ‘path’ has been given an explication more sustained, comprehensive, critical, and sophisticated than that provided by any other single religious tradition” (1992, 2).

The project of finding pathways to escape from suffering in the mundane realm of cyclical existences (*saṃsāra*) is not exclusively Buddhist, but abundant Buddhist tropes drawn from physical journeys reflect an institutional history of dynamic movement. For example, the ideal of Buddhist renunciants who have “gone forth”

(*pravrajita*) from domesticity to itinerant wandering is the ostensible basis of monastic dependence on material donations from lay supporters, who receive religious merit in exchange. Epithets of the Buddha as a “caravan leader” (*sārvhavāha*) and narratives about Buddhist traders acknowledge the importance of commercial patronage of Buddhist institutions. Differences over the interpretation and application of the Buddha’s teachings (*Dharma*) underlie polemical juxtapositions between the “inferior vehicle” (*Hīnayāna*), the “superior vehicle” (*Mahāyāna*), and the “diamond/thunderbolt vehicle” (*Vajrayāna*).

While traditional interpreters and modern scholars have focused considerable attention on mapping systems of Buddhist thought, networks of routes that facilitated processes for the transmission of Buddhist ideas and artifacts throughout and beyond ancient India have not received equal emphasis.² Archaeological patterns, inscriptions, images, and other forms of material culture provide evidence of routes traveled by Buddhist monks, nuns, pilgrims, and merchants who acted as agents of transmission. Rather than treating paths as conceptual maps for reaching supra-mundane goals, in this essay I aim to address a gap in the study of the early movement of Buddhists across pre-modern Asia by examining informal networks of capillary routes that connected the main overland arteries of northern India with the so-called Silk Routes of Central Asia. Epigraphic and visual evidence in the form of graffiti inscriptions and petroglyphs along alternative “shortcuts” through the high mountain valleys of northern Pakistan reveals irregular patterns of long-distance transmission instead of a gradual diffusion of Buddhism from India to China along major highways.

“Northern Route” (*Uttarāpatha*) in South Asia

When Buddhist religious institutions emerged after the fifth century BCE, the “Northern Route” (a literal translation of Sanskrit *Uttarāpatha*) served as a major network for administrative control, commercial traffic, and cultural exchange between northern India and the northwestern border regions (Figure 1.1). Rather than a single highway with a fixed itinerary, the Northern Route was a broad collection of flexible arteries on a loosely defined northwest–southeast axis intertwined with multiple feeder routes (Lahiri 1992, 401). However, references to the Northern Route in literary texts and inscriptions more commonly indicate a region or country located relatively to the north rather than a precise set of routes or a definite geographical area. The Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini’s use of the Northern Route as a grammatical example is probably the earliest literary reference.³

Buddhist narrative literature in particular includes many episodes of Northern Route merchants engaged in long-distance trade, such as the story of two merchants named Trapuṣa and Bhallika who became the first lay followers by offering alms to the Buddha just after he attained awakening (*Lalitavistara* 381.4; *Mahāvastu* 3.303). According to cosmographic traditions of Sanskrit Purāṇas, the Northern Route (designated as *udīcya-* or *uttarāpatha*) comprising the northern and

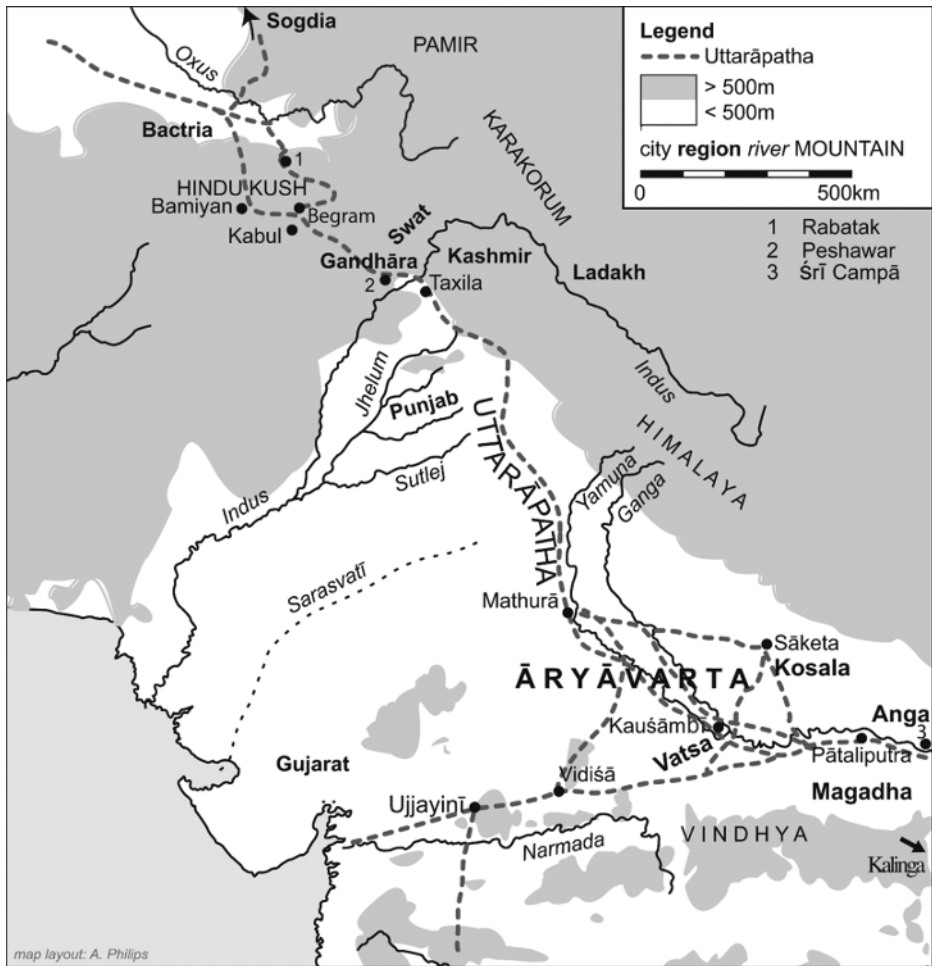


Figure 1.1 Nodes of the *Uttaraṛpatha*.

northwestern borderlands of the “Āryan heartland” (*Āryāvarta*) was inhabited by various peoples localized in geographical areas extending from parts of Rajasthan and the Punjab to Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia (Sircar 1971, 29–36). The second century BCE grammarian Patañjali and the authors of highly normative *Dharmasūtras* and *Dharmaśāstras* regarded areas to the west of “where the *Sarasvatī* [River] disappears” (*Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 1.2.9 [trans. Olivelle 1999, 134]) in the Thar desert of Rajasthan as outside of the narrower boundaries of *Āryāvarta* and the “Middle Country” (*Madhyadeśa*). From the viewpoint of orthodox Brahmins, inhabitants of the Northern Route were stigmatized as impure due to foreign contact.

In contrast to the ambivalent perspectives towards the Northern Route in some textual traditions, epigraphic sources indicate that road networks played significant roles in political administration, military conquest, and contact among Buddhist

religious communities. The extensive distribution of rock edicts and pillar inscriptions of the third century BCE Mauryan ruler Aśoka at important junctions of routes and in border regions indicate that his domain encompassed most of the Indian subcontinent.⁴ In versions of the second major rock edict issued in about the thirteenth year of his reign, Aśoka emphasized the importance of maintaining road networks: “On the roads wells were excavated and trees were planted for the use of men and animals.”⁵ In the seventh pillar edict (preserved only on the pillar from Toprā in Haryana) issued during his twenty-seventh regnal year, Aśoka lauded facilities available for travelers along imperial roads:

On the roads I have had banyan trees planted, which will provide shade for men and animals. I have had mango groves planted, and every eight *kos* I have had wells excavated and rest houses built. I have had numerous watering places made here and there for the use of men and animals.⁶

References to the establishment of provisions along roads lend support to the reports of Megasthenes, a Seleukid envoy to the Mauryan court around 300 BCE, about a “royal road” leading to the capital city of Palibothra (Sanskrit: Pāṭaliputra, modern Patna) and other roads with pillars to mark distances and junctions with byways (McCrindle 1877, 50, 86).⁷ Rather than proclaiming a “conquest of the directions” (*digvijaya*) as became standard in the inscriptions of later South Asian rulers, Aśoka advised his subjects to “consider the conquest of *Dharma* the real conquest” (Hultsch 1925, 67). Although it is clear from inscriptions at Buddhist shrines and addressed to Buddhist monastic communities that Aśoka was a lay follower (*upāsaka*), the “*Dharma* conquest” was not an effort to propagate Buddhism as an imperial religion (although Buddhist literary traditions make this claim), since he also encouraged patronage of other religious communities (including Jains, Ājīvikas, and Brahmins) and attempted to synthesize their moral principles in his official messages. Nevertheless, the Mauryan road network maintained and improved by Aśoka certainly facilitated the movement of Buddhist monks within the Indian subcontinent during the third century BCE.

South Asian rulers attempted to emulate the accomplishments of Aśoka by claiming control or conquest over rival kings of the Northern Route. The earliest attested epigraphic reference to the Northern Route appears in the Hāthīgumphā inscription of the Mahāmeghavāhana King Khāravela, who claimed to have “terrified the kings of the *Uttarāpatha*” (Banerji and Jayaswal 1929–30, 88; Sircar 1965, 217).⁸ Due to the poor condition of the inscription, the identity of the “kings of the *Uttarāpatha*” remains unclear, but since Khāravela ruled Kalinga (modern Orissa in eastern India) perhaps during the late first century BCE (his dates also remain disputed), contemporary northwestern rulers may have been intended. From the first to third centuries CE, rulers belonging to the Kuṣāṇa dynasty gained control of cities on routes between Bactria and northeastern India. A Bactrian inscription from Rabatak in northern Afghanistan issued during the first year of the reign of Kaniška (127 CE)⁹ proclaims the extension of Kuṣāṇa dominion over India:

In the year one it has been proclaimed unto India, unto the whole realm of the *Kṣatriyas*, that (as for) them – both the (city of) [Ujjain] and the (city of) Sāketa, and the (city of) Kauśāmbī, and the (city of) Pāṭaliputra, and as far as the (city of) śrī-Campā – whatever rulers and other important persons (they might have) he had submitted to (his) will, and he had submitted all India to (his) will (Cribb and Sims Williams 1995–6, 78).

By dominating the capitals of the ancient “Great Countries” (Sanskrit: *Mahājanapada*) – Kośala (Sāketa), Vatsa (Kauśāmbī), Magadha (Pāṭaliputra), and Aṅga (ŚrīCampā) – Kaniṣka and his predecessors not only “submitted all India to their will” but also insured that movement along the Northern Route from Bactria to the Bay of Bengal was unhindered (Fussman 1998, 602). Kuṣāṇa consolidation of control over the primary channels for overland travel and cultural transmission between South Asia and Central Asia had significant implications for long-distance trade and the expansion of Buddhist institutions beyond the Indian subcontinent.

Alfred Foucher (1942–7) proposed that an “Ancient Route” (*vieille route*) extending the Northern Route from Taxila through the Hindu Kush to Bactria was the primary artery for foreign invasions and the spread of Buddhism. Excavations of archaeological sites in Afghanistan have yielded important results that confirm many of Foucher’s statements about intercultural exchanges between India, Iran, Central Asia, and the Hellenistic world. However, the model of a gradual diffusion of Buddhism in a sequential pattern along hypothetical highways from the north-western Indian subcontinent to the Oxus Valley in western Central Asia, the Tarim Basin in eastern Central Asia, and eventually to China is overly simplified. Instead, Buddhist missionary monks, nuns, and merchants utilized a much more extensive network of routes to travel beyond the borderlands of South Asia.¹⁰

Capillary Networks as Shortcuts for Buddhist Transmission

More than 50,000 petroglyphs and 5,000 inscriptions demarcate a network of interconnected passageways that directly connected the Northern Route of South Asia with branches of the Silk Routes in eastern Central Asia. Despite the obvious difficulties of crossing the Himalaya, Hindu Kush, and Karakorum mountains, Karl Jettmar noted that “A shortcut between Central and South Asia was possible, partly compensating for the dangers and strains” (1989, xxvii). Routes through the mountain passes and river valleys of the Upper Indus and its tributaries linked Buddhist centers in Gandhāra, Kashmir, and the Swat Valley (ancient Uḍḍiyāna) with the southern Tarim Basin of Xinjiang in western China. Unlike modern traffic restricted to the Karakorum Highway between northern Pakistan and China, ancient travelers could choose their itineraries based on environmental, economic, political, and religious considerations. Marc Bloch made a similar observation about travel in medieval Europe: “from the beginning of his journey to the end, the traveler had almost always the choice of several itineraries, of which none was absolutely obligatory”

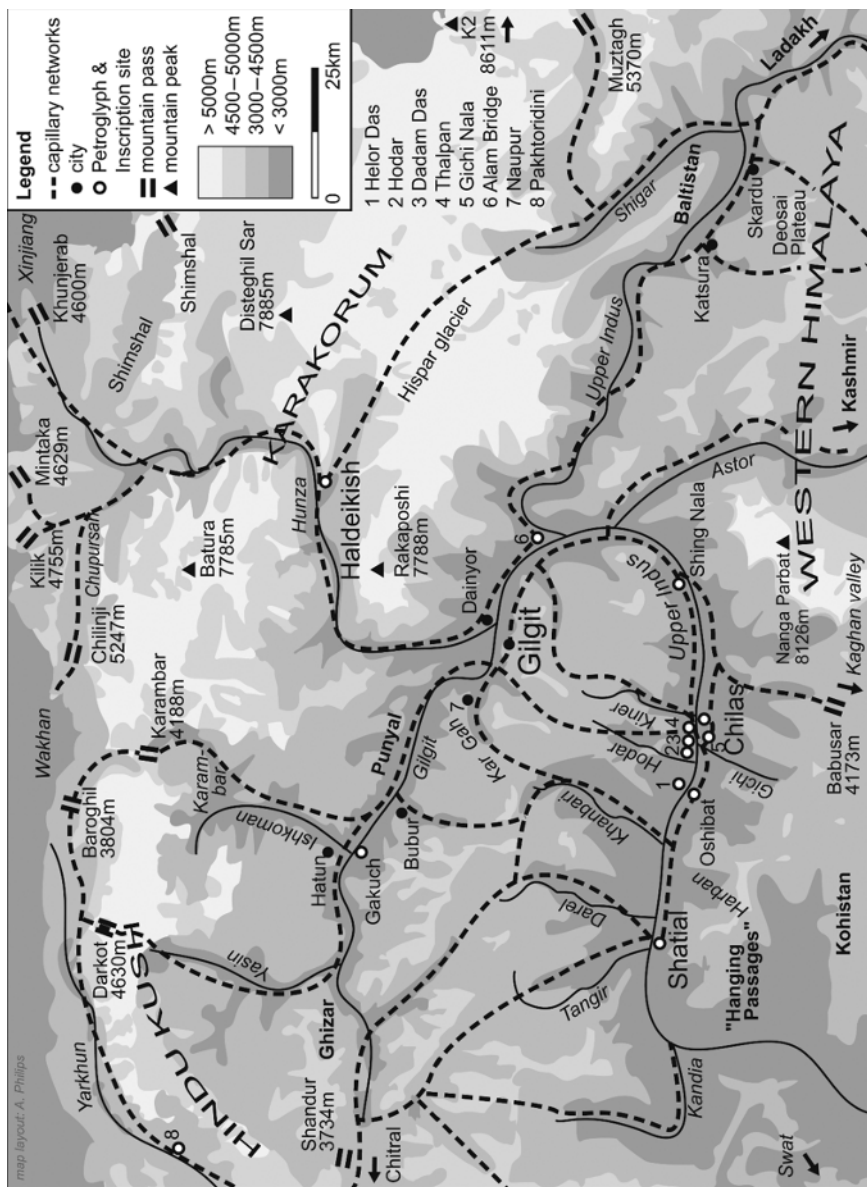


Figure 1.2 Petroglyph and graffiti complexes in northern Pakistan.

(1961, 1.64). Although topographical features constrained the choice of routes, the vast collection of graffiti and petroglyphs demonstrate significant mobility across the high mountain terrain (Figure 1.2). While these informal capillary networks did not replace or substitute for the Northern Route and the Silk Routes of Central Asia as the primary arteries for long-distance trade, they served as alternative pathways for trans-Asian movement across permeable geographical and cultural boundaries.

Informal graffiti inscriptions written by travelers and local residents on rocks located at river crossing places, wayside shrines, village settlements, and hunting trails record temporary visits, religious donations of petroglyphic images, and a vast corpus of personal names reflecting patterns of transregional cultural history. Although the inscriptions are generally brief and formulaic and are often fragmentary, they serve as valuable written evidence for the use of various scripts and languages in a multilingual crossroads during the first millennium. The earliest graffiti inscriptions from the first to third centuries are written in the Kharoṣṭhī script, which was used almost exclusively for writing Gāndhārī, a regional Prakrit of the northwest widely adopted for Buddhist inscriptions and manuscripts (Salomon 1998, 42–56; 1999). Kharoṣṭhī graffiti record numerous personal names formed with components of the Buddhist “three jewels” (*triratna*): Buddha- (*budha*), Dharma- (*dhama*), and Saṃgha- (*sagha*). Onomastic patterns in graffiti clearly indicate that a significant proportion of early visitors and local devotees explicitly identified themselves as Buddhists before the use of Kharoṣṭhī declined in the fourth century.

Most graffiti (about 80 percent) are in varieties of Brāhmī used for writing Sanskrit and hybrid Sanskrit between the fourth and seventh centuries. A transition from Kharoṣṭhī to Brāhmī corresponds with the adoption of Sanskrit as the primary language of Buddhist transmission. Buddhist titles indicate that some writers were Buddhist monks, but since non-Buddhist titles also appear, “not all who traveled along the Indus were necessarily Buddhists” (Hinüber 1989, 52). In addition to Indic inscriptions, a large corpus of Middle Iranian inscriptions (Sims-Williams 1989–92), and smaller numbers of Chinese, Tibetan, Hebrew, and Syriac inscriptions reflect diverse linguistic backgrounds of travelers on these routes.

Petroglyphs from prehistoric periods to the present time represent a wide spectrum of styles, motifs, and images ranging from very common simplified drawings of mountain goats (*caprini*) to skillful renderings of Buddhist *stūpas*, portraits, and narratives. Graffiti and petroglyphs were abraded into the desert varnish covering the surface of the rocks, resulting in different levels of patination, which, along with paleographic analysis of any accompanying graffiti, iconographic features, and superimpositions, can serve as a relative chronological guide. Each site has its own distinctive characteristics: concentrations of zoomorphic petroglyphs may indicate hunting grounds or trails into the mountains where game was available, while drawings and inscriptions at complexes located near settlements were more likely to have been produced by local inhabitants than visitors. Although Buddhist images are less numerous than other types of drawings at most sites, they provided a locative focus of veneration at outdoor shrines, and attracted travelers and local devotees, who

added their names in proximity to the drawings, and can therefore indicate routes of transmission. Such visual “relics of instruction” (*uddeśika dhātu*) in the form of drawings of *stūpas*, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and narrative scenes established a Buddhist presence by creating sacred geographies in areas without the resources (at least initially) to support monumental *stūpas* or residential monasteries. My focus on Buddhist petroglyphs and graffiti located at important river crossings is intended to demonstrate links between capillary routes used for trade and cross-cultural transmission without implying that graffiti written by travelers outnumber inscriptions of local residents or that Buddhist images dominate the repertoire of petroglyphs.

Shatial

Over 1,000 inscriptions and 700 petroglyphs located at Shatial Bridge on the upper Indus River mark an especially significant junction of ancient byways used by long-distance traders and Buddhist missionaries and pilgrims (Fussman and König 1997). Shatial functioned as an important “transit station” (*Durchgangsstation*) on routes connecting the upper Indus to the Swat Valley and Gandhāra via the infamous “Hanging Passages” (*xuan du*) described in Chinese accounts (Jettmar 1987). Across the Indus River from Shatial, pathways through the Darel and Tangir valleys lead northwards to Gilgit and Chitral, with further links to Badakhshan and the Oxus watershed in northeastern Afghanistan. From Shatial to the east, the Karakorum Highway follows the course of the Indus River upstream to the Chilas plain. Shatial is unique for a collection of several hundred Iranian visitors’ inscriptions dating from the third to seventh centuries, which were primarily written by Sogdian merchants who controlled a triangular network of trade routes between their homeland in Central Asia, the upper Indus River valley extending to Ladakh (between Kashmir and western Tibet), and China (Sims-Williams 1996, 45–67; Vaissière 2005, 79–81). The longest inscription at Shatial was written by a Sogdian traveler on his way to Tashkurgan in southwestern Xinjiang:

(I), Nanai-vandak, the (son of) Narisaf, came (here) on the tenth (day/year) and have requested the favor from the soul of the holy place Kārt (that) I reach Kharvandan [Tashkurgan] very fast and see (my) dear brother in good (health). (Fussman and König 1997, 208, no. 36: 38; Sims-Williams 1989, 23)

Buddhist veneration of images at Shatial focused on a large triptych with an intricate drawing of a *stūpa* and an illustration of the Śibi-Jātaka (in which the king of the Śibis holds a bird which he has saved by cutting off a piece of his own flesh).¹¹ Densely written Sogdian, Brāhmī, and Kharoṣṭhī graffiti and portraits of devotees prostrating themselves below the images indicate that Shatial was not only a significant node for long-distance trade, but also served as a Buddhist shrine where devotional practices associated with this narrative were localized.

Chilas-Thalpan

Proceeding upriver from Shatial on the upper Indus, several graffiti and petroglyph complexes are located at crossing points, but many of the most impressive Buddhist petroglyphs are concentrated near the modern bridge between Chilas and Thalpan. Paths from Chilas across the Babusar Pass provided limited access during the summer months to the Kagan Valley, which was linked via the Jhelum Valley to Kashmir to the east, while another ancient route to the west through Mānsehrā, where a set of Aśokan edicts was inscribed in Kharoṣṭhī, eventually connected with branches of the “Northern Route” after passing through Hazāra. Routes through Thalpan belonged to a capillary network of mountain trails connecting the tributaries of the upper Indus and Gilgit rivers. At the site of Chilas II (a short distance downstream from Chilas Bridge), about sixty Kharoṣṭhī graffiti belonging to periods from about the first to third centuries accompany petroglyphs of Buddhist monks and dismounted horsemen venerating *stūpas*, images of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, and the goddess Hārītī (Fussman 1989). Iconographic motifs connected with Buddhist, Hindu, and indigenous traditions shed light on the multiple religious proclivities of visitors to this encampment, which was apparently not an exclusively Buddhist shrine.

Donative inscriptions in Brāhmī frequently identify Buddhist petroglyphs of *stūpas*, narrative scenes, and portraits of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as “religious offerings” (*devadharmā* or *deyadharmā*). Epigraphic formulae of donation and veneration commemorated gifts of rock images, which created opportunities for other devotees to worship. By writing their names in inscriptions next to images, visitors and local devotees insured that merit continued to accumulate for themselves and for the beneficiaries of their acts. At sites around Thalpan and Chilas, a local patron named Kuberavāhana donated several ornate *stūpas* as well as visual narratives of Śākyamuni Buddha’s religious biography and a drawing of the Vyāghrī Jātaka in which a Bodhisattva (labeled *Mahāsattva*) makes a gift of his own body to save a hungry tigress and her cubs.¹² Another prominent local patron named Siṃhoṭa donated “religious offerings” (*devadharmā*) of petroglyphs depicting the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya along with *stūpa* drawings at Chilas Bridge. Other inscriptions denote homage to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas associated with Mahāyāna, such as Amitābha, Akṣobhya, Prabhūtaratna, and Ratnaśikhin (Hinüber 1989, 101–2). While designs of elaborate *stūpas* with profuse architectural details and decorative elements and other complex Buddhist drawings are relatively scarce outside of Chilas, Thalpan, Shatial, and Shing Nala (which may have been the site of Buddhist hermitage),¹³ rudimentary images of *stūpas* with only the most basic features show that patronage was not restricted to elite donors. In lieu of erecting *stūpas* and supporting residential monasteries for Buddhist monks and nuns, local donors and travelers along the network of routes established wayside shrines by drawing images on rocks and writing their names in graffiti inscriptions.

Gilgit-Alam bridge

Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti written on rocks near the confluence of the upper Indus and Gilgit rivers close to Alam Bridge reflect patterns of long-distance travel and Buddhist transmission (Fussman 1978; Humbach 1980a; 1980b). This complex is located at an important junction of regional routes connecting Gilgit with Baltistan via pathways through deep gorges of the Indus River (still used as the main road to Skardu in Baltistan) and with Kashmir across the Deosai plateau or through the Astor Valley (roughly following the “Gilgit Transport Road,” which is no longer used due to border disputes between India and Pakistan). While there are very few petroglyphs of *stūpas* or other images to indicate that this site functioned as a Buddhist shrine, personal names and titles clearly indicate that many visitors were Buddhist travelers or local devotees. Approximately 20 percent of the personal names in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti at Alam Bridge are composed of Buddhist naming elements. Examples of Buddhist titles in Brāhmī graffiti include a novice (*śrāmaṇera*) named Asokakṣema, a “Master of Monastic Law” (*vinayadhara*) named Ratnarakṣita, and a “Śākya monk” (*śākya bhikṣu* often indicates Mahāyāna affiliation) named Satyaśreṣṭhi. Brāhmī graffiti recording the visits of *Palolajo Bhikṣus* were written by Buddhist monks with regional ethnonyms, since Gilgit and the surrounding valleys were ruled by the Palola Śāhis until the early eighth century (Hinüber 2004, 58–9). A Buddhist traveler named Saṃgha-buddhi declared that he came for the “Thousand Buddhas,”¹⁴ which suggests that his destination was a shrine of the thousand Buddhas (*Qianfodong*) at Mogao outside of Dunhuang (Fussman 1978, 41–2) or another site in the Tarim Basin of Xinjiang (see below, pp. 22–5). Since epigraphic formulae of arrival are quite common in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti at Alam Bridge, these inscriptions serve as valuable written records of the journeys of agents of Buddhist transmission.

Hunza-Haldeikish

The northernmost major site of graffiti inscriptions and petroglyphs at Hadeikish in the Hunza Valley also functioned as a significant way-station on the network of capillary routes through the Karakoram Mountains. The Hunza Valley is directly connected to Gilgit to the south by a relatively easy path now followed by the Karakorum Highway, and the Mintaka, Kilik, and Khunjerab passes to the north lead to pathways to the headwaters of the Oxus (in the Wakhan corridor of north-eastern Afghanistan) and to the southern Tarim Basin. More difficult trails over the Shimshal pass and the Hispar glacier have also served as minor feeder routes to the Hunza Valley from the Tarim Basin and Baltistan. Due to constant shifts in the high mountain terrain caused by the movements of glaciers, avalanches caused by earthquakes, rivers, and streams made difficult to cross by swollen snowmelt in the late summer, and extremely vertical topography, the Hunza Valley routes did not necessarily serve as the most practical itineraries, but over 100 Kharoṣṭhī, Brāhmī, Sogdian, Bactrian, Chinese, and Tibetan inscriptions at Haldeikish provide

irrefutable written evidence for the movement of long-distance travelers during the first millennium.¹⁵ Haldeikish is predominated by petroglyphs of mountain goats (the name of Haldeikish is derived from *haldén*, the Burushaski word for a male ibex or a domesticated male goat), which may indicate a connection with hunting expeditions. Four large rock outcroppings form a conspicuous natural landmark near an important ford and provide a convenient resting place for visitors who drew zoomorphic designs and abraded graffiti into weathered patches of desert varnish covering the sandstone and shale surfaces. Since graffiti at Haldeikish primarily record the arrival of visitors in epigraphic formulae similar to those used at Alam Bridge and there are very few Buddhist petroglyphs, this site probably functioned as a transit station for long-distance travelers rather than a shrine for local devotees. Nevertheless, Buddhist personal names (appearing in a relatively higher proportion of the Kharoṣṭhi inscriptions, which outnumber other inscriptions at this site) indicate that Haldeikish belonged to the capillary network of long-distance routes of Buddhist transmission between South Asia and Central Asia.

Buddhist graffiti and petroglyphs along this network of capillary routes show that the early movement of monks and other travelers through this mountain region preceded the erection of *stūpas* or the construction of monasteries with royal or imperial patronage. Instead of using surplus resources to build monumental structures and to support residential communities of monks and nuns, local devotees such as Kuberavāhana and Siṃhoṭa commissioned Buddhist images to be drawn on rocks at wayside shrines (*caityas*). Although there is no clear evidence of Buddhist *stūpas* or monasteries in this region of the upper Indus, Gilgit, and Hunza valleys before the fifth century, elite patronage of Buddhist art, literature, and monastic institutions by the Palola Śāhi dynasty, which ruled Gilgit from the end of the sixth to the beginning of the eighth century, is apparent in royal inscriptions, colophons of a large cache of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts found near Naupur in the Kargah Valley west of Gilgit, and exquisite bronze sculptures inscribed with donative inscriptions and produced by a local atelier (Hinüber 2004). During the latter half of the first millennium, “the combination of international trade and agriculture could have produced a period of prosperity which permitted the flourishing of an active Buddhist culture” (Klimburg-Salter 1990, 817).

Central Asian Transit Zones

Capillary networks in the mountain valleys of northern Pakistan provided shortcuts for the passage of monks, merchants, and other travelers between the northwestern frontiers of South Asia and branches of the “Silk Routes” in the southwestern Tarim Basin. In the broadest sense, the network of overland routes termed the “Silk Road” (*Seidenstraße*) by Ferdinand von Richthofen in the late nineteenth century encompassed many regional itineraries that connected the Mediterranean with East Asia. In eastern Central Asia, northern

and southern routes around the Tarim Basin connected Dunhuang with the Chinese capitals at Chang-an (modern Xian) and Loyang. According to a standard model of diffusion, Buddhist missionaries gradually spread the Dharma beyond the Indian subcontinent to the Silk Routes of Central Asia and eventually to China by moving from one center to another along major trade and travel routes.¹⁶ This process, whereby economically parasitic monks and nuns moved out along major routes in order to establish residential monasteries near cities or prosperous agricultural areas where surplus resources were available for making donations, was termed “contact expansion” by Erik Zürcher (1990, 181; 1999, 9). However, Zürcher recognized that contact expansion does not adequately explain the early stages of Buddhism in the Tarim Basin and China, because Buddhist communities began to flourish in several Chinese centers before *stūpas* and monasteries were established in eastern Central Asia (modern Xinjiang), which prior to ca. 250 remained a “Buddhological vacuum” (Zürcher 1990, 172). To account for this chronological discrepancy between early manifestations of Buddhism in China during the first two centuries and the late appearance of Buddhist institutions in the Tarim Basin, Zürcher proposed that Xinjiang remained a “transit zone” (1999, 13) until economic conditions allowed residential monasteries to flourish after the third century. Zürcher juxtaposed the model of diffusion by contact expansion to an alternative theory of “long-distance transmission” (1990, 182) in order to clarify early patterns in the cross-cultural movement of Buddhism to China, despite an absence of monastic institutions in intermediate transit zones. A brief survey of a few

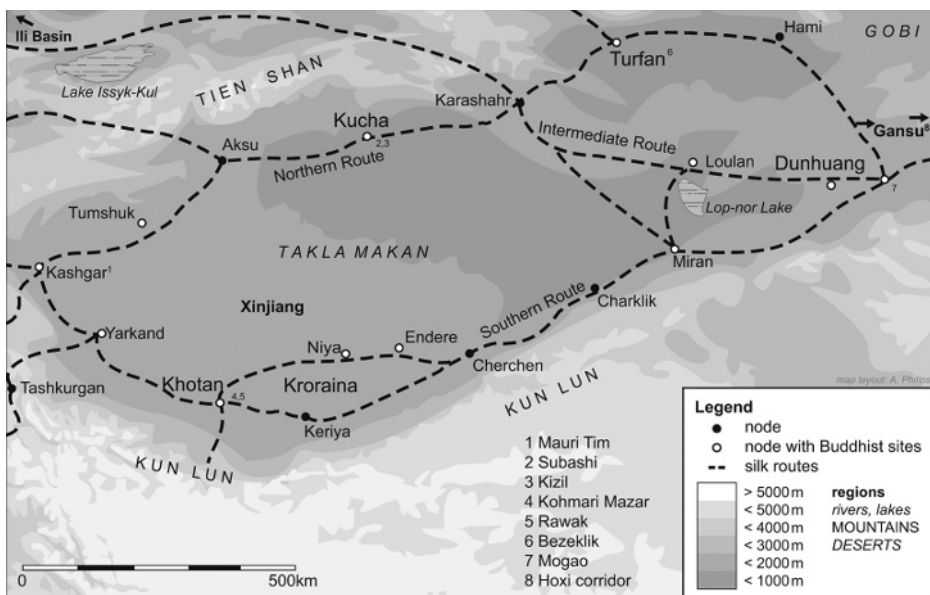


Figure 1.3 Tarim Basin silk routes.

nodes in the Tarim Basin demonstrates intersections between South Asian, Iranian, and Chinese economic and cultural spheres in eastern Central Asia (Figure 1.3).

Khotan

Khotan, the major city of the southern Silk Route for most of the first millennium, maintained economic and religious connections with the northwestern frontiers of the Indian subcontinent and tribute relationships with China (Whitfield 2004, 34–42, 133–68). Bilingual coins of Indo-Scythian (Saka) and Kuṣāṇa rulers from South Asia and coins issued by Khotanese kings with legends in Chinese and Kharoṣṭhī suggests ties between Khotan and Gandhara via capillary routes across the Karakoram in the first century. An incomplete manuscript of a Gāndhārī version of the *Dharmapada* found in a cave at Kohmārī Mazār (Brough 1962) may have been brought from Gandhara to Khotan, which was visited by Chinese monks in search of texts in Indian languages. Small Gandharan stone sculptures, including an image of emaciated Siddhārtha belonging to a portable diptych (Härtel and Yaldiz 1982, 61–2), and molded terracotta figures of Herakles/Serapis with Harpocrates (Rhie 1999, 265–6) arrived in Khotan via long-distance networks for trade and cultural transmission. While Khotan flourished as a regional commercial and religious center of the southwestern Tarim Basin and served as a connecting point between China, India, western Central Asia, and Iran, *stūpas* and monasteries were not apparently constructed before the third century. M. Rhie tentatively concludes that “Buddhist establishments may have been rather well established in Khotan by 200 A.D.” (1999, 322), but she dates sculptures from the Rawak *stūpa* located northeast of Khotan in the late third to early fourth centuries. Thus, Zürcher’s model of initial long-distance transmission of Buddhism through Khotan, which later became a major Buddhist center on the southern Silk Route, accords with a lack of archaeological evidence for residential Buddhist monasteries before the late third century.

Silk Route oases of Kroraina: Niya, Endere, Miran, and Loulan

Oases located east of Khotan along branches of the southern Silk Routes in the Tarim Basin functioned as nodes in regional trade networks and as centers for Buddhist art and architecture. Close to 1,000 Kharoṣṭhī documents in the Niya Prakrit dialect of Gāndhārī from sites around Niya, Endere, and Loulan provide interesting snapshots of commercial relationships involving administrative officials, local merchants, and Buddhist monks in the southern Tarim Basin during the third to fourth centuries. An epithet of a Kroraina/Shan-shan king (probably Aṃgoka) describing him as a Mahāyāna devotee (*Mahayana-[saṃ]prastī[da]ṣa*) in a recently discovered Kharoṣṭhī inscription from Endere provides epigraphic evidence for Mahāyāna patronage sometime in the middle of the third century (Salomon 2002, 10).

Buddhist paintings from Miran in the fourth and fifth centuries display stylistic similarities with the artistic traditions of Gandhara, Swat, and Kashmir in the northwestern Indian subcontinent but also reflect ties with the art of Iran and western Central Asia (Rhie 1999, 385). At least five *stūpas* in the Loulan area on the northern shore of Lake Lop Nor, including a very large monumental *stūpa* within the city walls, reflect the roles of Loulan as the capital of the Kroraina kingdom, a prosperous commercial center on an intermediate route through the Tarim Basin, and the headquarters of the regional Buddhist *saṅgha* (Rhie 1999, 402).

Kucha

Mural paintings in cave monasteries, Buddhist manuscripts, and archaeological remains of *stūpas* from sites around Kucha in the northwestern Tarim Basin display various continuities with Buddhist artistic and literary cultures. Buddhist paintings from the Kyzil caves, the earliest of which may belong to the fourth and fifth centuries, demonstrate stylistic affinities with artistic traditions of Swat, Gandhara, Sassanian Iran, and China (Härtel and Yaldiz 1982, 47; Rhie 2002, 719). Collections of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts (including some Kharoṣṭhī fragments) from the second to sixth centuries suggest links with centers of Sarvāstivādin Buddhist scholasticism in Kashmir, Gandhāra, and possibly Mathurā. Graffiti and caravan passes written in Tocharian (or Kuchean) testify to long-distance travel by Buddhist monks and merchants during the seventh century. Among the archaeological remains at Subashi, the ancient urban center of Kucha, are two large monastery sites with small circular *stūpas* encased within larger *stūpas*, which Rhie attempts to date from the second or third centuries “if not earlier” (2002, 644), but the arguments for such early dates are inconclusive.

Turfan

While northern routes through the Turfan oasis probably eclipsed southern routes around the Tarim Basin by the fifth century (Rhie 1999, 392), local Buddhist communities flourished prior to changes in itineraries. A local dynasty patronized Buddhism in Turfan by the end of the fourth century, and the earliest literary evidence for local Buddhism is a translation by Dharmarakṣa dated to 296 (Hansen 1998, 40–1). Buddhist manuscripts from monasteries in and around Turfan and cave paintings from Bezeklik provide ample evidence of Buddhism “above the ground,” but there is little evidence for Buddhist items in tomb inventories “below the ground” until the sixth century (Hansen 1998, 50). Early evidence for Buddhism in Turfan supports Zürcher’s hypothesis of long-distance transmission, since “Monasticism seemingly leaped across an underdeveloped Central Asia to the wealthy cities of China, only filtering back to Central Asia when economic conditions allowed it” (Hansen 1998, 38).

Paths of Buddhist Transmission to China

This survey of routes of Buddhist transmission in the Tarim Basin indicates that Buddhist institutions in the transit zone of eastern Central Asia did not precede the first manifestations of a lasting Buddhist presence in China during the later Han period. An imperial edict issued in 65 provides the earliest “hard evidence” for “hybrid court Buddhism” at Pengcheng (Zürcher 1990, 159–60). Later in the second century, foreign translators associated with the “Church of Loyang” transplanted an “embryo of metropolitan, ‘ecclesiastical’ Buddhism” (Zürcher 1990, 163). The earliest foreign translators were not Indian, but bore Iranian ethnonyms.¹⁷ Since Parthians such as An Shigao (who arrived ca. 150 in Loyang) and Sogdians like Kang Senghui (deceased by 280) were not from the Tarim Basin, they present a “...curious situation [in] that the earliest Buddhist missionaries going to China did not come from the oasis states of ‘Serindia’ but all the way from western Central Asia, crossing the immense vacuum of Sinkiang, and settling in China at the other end of it” (Zürcher 1999, 14). Other eminent translators, including Lokakṣema (active ca. 180–190 in Loyang) and Dharmarakṣa (active ca. 284 in Dunhuang), were described as Yuezhi, an ethnonym connected with either the southeastern Tarim Basin or the Kuṣāṇas in Bactria and South Asia (see above, p. 15). Kumārajīva was born in Kucha in the fourth century, but his father was Indian and he traveled to Kashmir with his mother before returning to Central Asia and China. Although traditional biographies claim that Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva came from the Tarim Basin in the third and fourth centuries, there is surprisingly little archaeological evidence for Buddhist monasticism in eastern Central Asia prior to periods when they began their extraordinary careers as prolific translators of Mahāyāna *sūtras* and other Buddhist texts from Indic languages into Chinese.

Routes of eminent monks from South Asia

Many, if not most, eminent Indian Buddhist monks in Chinese hagiographies compiled by Sengyou (ca. 515), Huijiao (ca. 530), and Daoxuan (664) either came from the northwestern frontiers of South Asia or traveled through this region on their overland journeys to Central Asia and China (Bagchi 1927–38; Shih 1968; Zürcher 1999, 30–2). Several figures are associated with the region of Jibin, which is often translated as Kashmir and sometimes as Kapiśā (located near Begram outside of Kabul in Afghanistan), but the term often refers more generally to the northwestern regions of South Asia, including areas of northern Pakistan. While literary accounts specify that monks from Jibin – such as Buddhayaśas, Dharmayaśas, Dharmamitra, Vimalākṣa, and Puṇyātara – traveled overland to Chinese centers via the Tarim Basin, other eminent figures, including Buddhabhadra, Guṇavarman, and Buddhajīva, followed circuitous maritime

itineraries. Several sixth century Indian monks (Narendrayaśas, Vinītaruci, and Vimokṣasena) came from Uḍḍiyāna, which is localized in the Swat Valley of northwestern Pakistan.

Certain hagiographical accounts provide information about the itineraries of monks who traveled through northwestern India to Central Asia to China. For example, a Gandhāran monk named Jinagupta from ancient Peshawar (*Puruṣapura*) traveled through Afghanistan (*Kapiśā*) and the Pamir range to Tashkurgan, via the southern Tarim Basin to Khotan, and through the Gansu corridor to Xian (Bagchi 1927, 276–9; 1938, 446–57). An eminent western Indian monk named Dharmagupta also traveled through Afghanistan (*Kapiśā*), across the Hindu Kush, and via Tashkurgan, Kashgar, and Kucha to Xian and Loyang (Bagchi 1938, 464–7). Dharmakṣema, a master of protective spells (*dhāraṇīs*) from the “Middle Country” (*Madhyadeśa*), studied in Jibin before going to Kucha and the court of the northern Liang ruler at Lanzhou, where he was murdered in 433 (Bagchi 1927, 212–23; Zürcher 1999, 42–3).

Chinese Buddhist travelers to India

Accounts of Chinese pilgrims supply geographical details and information about Buddhist communities and shrines on long-distance routes used by other Buddhist travelers as well as merchants, diplomatic missions, and sometimes soldiers who traveled to and from South Asia. The famous Chinese traveler Faxian described a shrine to Maitreya in the vicinity of the upper Indus around 400, but archaeological evidence has not been found to confirm his report. Zhemong and other fifth century Chinese pilgrims traveled via similar routes to worship the relic of the Buddha’s bowl at Nagarahāra (Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan), but many details of their itineraries between Central Asia and northwestern India remain unclear (Kuwayama 1987, 711–13; Shih 1968, 144–5). In the beginning of the sixth century, Song Yun and Huisheng travelled through the southern Tarim Basin to Tashkurgan, crossed the Pamir Mountains to northeastern Afghanistan, and continued via Chitral to the Swat Valley. Xuanzang provides a detailed report of his journey from China to India from 627 to 645, although his information about Buddhist communities on the northwestern frontiers (such as the Maitreya shrine visited earlier by Faxian) is sometimes based on secondhand reports rather than firsthand observations. Zürcher cautioned that Chinese pilgrims, Indian missionaries, and translators memorialized in hagiographies represent only “the tiny tip of the iceberg, the élite of scholar monks” (1999, 18) and suggested that many more anonymous foreign monks fulfilled roles as *thaumaturges*, meditation teachers, and ordination experts (1999, 52–7). Like the more famous figures whose long-distance journeys are sometimes outlined in religious biographies, these itinerant monks followed overland networks which connected the Tarim Basin to the northwestern frontiers of South Asia.

Conclusions

Journeys of eminent missionaries and pilgrims, itinerant traders, travelers, and other agents of Buddhist transmission who are memorialized in literary hagiographies, graffiti inscriptions, and images drawn on rocks attest to the use of networks of ancient paths that connected South Asia, Central Asia, and China. Their pursuit of worldly goals of economic profit through trade in precious commodities overlapped with the generation of religious merit, which was accumulated by making donations and performing acts of devotion at shrines along the way. Monks and merchants followed flexible itineraries that changed according to shifting economic, political, and environmental conditions. The movements of various groups (like the Kuṣāṇas) migrating into the Indian subcontinent, missionaries exporting the *Dharma* beyond South Asia, Sogdian traders establishing a triangular network extending from western Central Asia to the upper Indus and China, and Chinese pilgrims visiting shrines on routes to India demonstrate that cultural transmission flowed in more than one direction. Rather than adhering to a regular pattern of diffusion from one monastic center to another on major routes where sufficient economic surpluses were available, the transmission of Buddhism across pre-modern Asia was largely due to travelers who took shortcuts in a decentralized network of capillary byways.

Notes

- 1 Except where otherwise indicated, all dates are CE. Versions of this essay were presented in 2008 at an American Oriental Society panel on cross-cultural transmission of Buddhism between South and East Asia, and in a lecture for the Center for Buddhist Studies and Silk Road Initiative at the University of California, Berkeley. I thank Phillip Green (University of Florida) for comments.
- 2 In Neelis 2011, I examine connections between patterns of early Buddhist transmission and networks of trade and travel routes in significant detail.
- 3 *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 5.1.77: *uttarapathenāhṛtm* “brought from the Northern Route” or “one who has come via the Northern Route” is used as a synonym for **uttarapathika* to explain the application of *-ka* and *-ika* suffixes (*ṭhañ* in Pāṇini’s terminology).
- 4 Falk 2006 is a very useful guide to new discoveries and publications of inscriptions from the reign of Aśoka (ca. 272–232 BCE) with a thorough bibliography and numerous maps. Fussman comments on the distribution of Rock Edicts “near road junctions and important sites on the perimeter of the Empire, often even on the frontier” (1987–8, 68).
- 5 The translation is based on the Girnar version of the second major rock edict (Hultsch 1925, 3). Other versions (Hultsch 1925, 186) have *magesu* instead of *paṃthesū* for “roads” but the terms are synonymous.
- 6 This translation follows that of Thapar (1997, 265), based on the edition by Hultsch (1925, 132). Thapar’s translation of *nimṣi[d]iyā* as “rest houses” is preferred to Hultsch’s “flights of steps (for descending into the water)” (1925, 135).

- 7 Megasthenes Fragment 4, referring to a royal road 10,000 *stadia* in length, is preserved by Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.11, who further quotes details about the construction of roads with pillars set up every ten *stadia* “to show the byways and distances” (*Geography* 15.1.50 = Megasthenes Fragment 34). According to P. H. L. Eggermont (1966, 277) the account of Megasthenes was the partial basis for a description of stages in the route from Peucolatis (Sanskrit: Puṣkalāvātī, modern Charsada) to the Ganges delta by Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 62.1–4), which may have also shared a common source with a more detailed list of Indian cities preserved in Ptolemy’s *Geography* (7.1.42–81).
- 8 Although the condition of the inscription is poor, the reading *vitāsaṣṣati utarāpadharājāno* is clear.
- 9 The initial date of the continuous era initiated by Kaniṣka is still disputed, although arguments in favor of a separate era from the “Śaka era” beginning in 78 are strengthened by the dynastic genealogy of the Bactrian inscription from Rabatak. Falk (2001) has attempted to establish that the “Kuṣāṇa era” of Kaniṣka was initiated in 127 based on a passage in an astronomical text (*Yavana-jātaka*) for calculating dates according to separate eras. See Neelis 2007 for a detailed treatment of Kuṣāṇa and Saka migration routes.
- 10 See Neelis 2006 for a re-assessment of Foucher’s “Vieille Route.”
- 11 Fussman and König 1997, 178–9, Scene 34:A, pl. Vb, refer to previous publications. Based on paleographic analysis of graffiti, Fussman (1994, 43) dates the drawing to ca. 300–350. The Śibi Jātaka is also illustrated in a set of petroglyphs at Thalpan which includes a depiction of the Rṣipaṇcaka Jātaka (Bandini-König 2003, 118–22, Scenes 30:D, 30:X). Thewalt (1983) compares and evaluates petroglyphs of Buddhist Jātakas from the upper Indus in relation to other Indian Buddhist artistic and literary traditions.
- 12 The petroglyph of the Vyāghrī jātaka at Chilas was initially published by Stein (1944, 20–1). Now see Bandini-König 2003, 43–9, Ensemble 30, Scenes 30:A–B, pl. 41, IVa–c, Va, for updated readings of Brāhmī inscriptions that identify Kuberavāhana and his teacher Mitragupta with figures kneeling in prostration.
- 13 Bandini-König and Hinüber (2001) analyze and catalog inscriptions and petroglyphs from Shing Nala (upstream from Chilas and Thalpan) and Gichi Nala (between Chilas and Shatial).
- 14 The original Brāhmī (with *sandhi* indicated by “=”) is quite clear: *buddhasahasrakāraṇam=saṅghabuddhir=abhyāgatam=āsi* (Fussman 1978, 41, no. 22, 12; Humbach 1980a, 108). The use of three different forms of *s-* and a complex periphrastic past tense (*abhyāgatam=āsi*) displays Saṅghabuddhi’s paleographic skill and grammatical talents.
- 15 Initial readings of inscriptions by Dani 1985 have been revised by this author in his Ph.D. dissertation (Neelis 2001).
- 16 For example, E. Zürcher states that Buddhism “must have slowly infiltrated from the northwest, via the two branches of the continental silk road which entered Chinese territory at Tunhuang, and from there through the corridor of Kansu to the ‘region within the Passes’ and the North China plain” (1959, 22–3).
- 17 For biographical information and dates of early foreign translators, I rely on Nattier 2008.

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