

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO XINJIANG:  
NOTES ON SOME TYPES OF BUDDHIST CHAPELS  
(6TH/7TH-8TH CENTURIES CE)

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**ABSTRACT** · This study presents a preliminary comparison between Buddhist shrines in Afghanistan and those in the Khotan oasis, also with regard to certain aspects of their clay sculpture, here analysed from a historical-cultural perspective rather than a technical one. This article focuses on two types of Buddhist shrines or chapels that might appear to be rare within specific regions and sites, but that actually display a significant cross-border diffusion in the late 6th/7th-8th centuries CE if a broader area is taken into consideration, stretching in this case from Afghanistan to Xinjiang. A brief reference is also made to the region of Tajikistan, to highlight how certain traditions were part of broader phenomena of the circulation and diffusion of ideas, thoughts, religious practices and cultural models that deserve further investigation.

**KEYWORDS** · Buddhism, Afghanistan, Khotan, Chapels, Clay Sculptures.

STATE OF THE ART

**I**N the archaeology of Central Asia, in particular Afghanistan and Xinjiang (FIG. 1), it is difficult to find excavation reports that meet the current standards of scientific research. Many important excavations of Buddhist sites were conducted using outdated methods, and even reports on more recent interventions are often vague and inadequate. This is the case for Afghanistan, where research suffered major setbacks from the end of the 1970s to the early 2000s and, after a short recovery phase (characterised however by great difficulties), again since 2021. The same can be said of the Tarim Basin (Xinjiang), including the so-called Southern Route where the oasis of Khotan is located, for which the most important excavation reports are those published in the early decades of the last century, followed mainly by art-historical studies focused especially on the Buddhist period (c. 4th-8th century), and by archaeological fieldwork in recent decades (see below).

The repertory of sculptures and installation types documented in sacred areas has been poorly investigated from both stylistic-technical and iconographic-contextual perspectives.

Most reports focus on the description of sacred areas, but scarce attention is paid to the meanings underlying layouts and installations. Even less explored are chronologies and parallels with other sites and regions, which nonetheless may well reveal traceable connections within the Buddhist ecumene.

However, there are exceptions in the history of archaeology that provide us with reliable relative chronologies, which can also be used as terms of comparison for the histories of other, less documented sites with the aid of stylistic parallels. Two of these exceptions are the Afghan Buddhist sites of Tapa Sardar and Tepe Narenj, the former ex-

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