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# Central Asian Nomads in the Spread of Buddhism in Russia

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**Abstract.** The history of Buddhism in Middle Asia and its subsequent transition to Russia is rich in every dimension: in peoples and lands, events, processes, which played an important role in the history of religion, etc. This long journey lasted for centuries, when Buddhism managed to enrich local cultures with its ideas, while demonstrating the ability to transform itself, giving new features to its spiritual achievements and at the same time incorporating them into the cultures of nations that accepted the teachings of Buddha later. India, where Buddhism first originated, and Russia are separated by vast distances, and many peoples of Central Asia made their contributions to the development of local forms of Buddha's teachings. In particular, those were such peoples as Afghans, Parthians, Kushans, Uyghurs, Mongols, Oirats, etc. Buddhism first penetrated into Middle Asia during the era of the Macedonian campaigns and took hold due to its tolerance to and complementarity with the local cults and beliefs. There are two stages in the history of Buddhism in Central Asia: first in its western part (where it would persist until the 7th–9th centuries) mainly among the Turks, then in the eastern part (from no later than the 7th century onwards), when Buddhism would manifest itself among the Zhuzhans (a stele found in the Bulgan aimag of Mongolia). The resettlement of Western Mongolian Oirats to southern Siberia in the second half of the 16th century marks the arrival of Tibetan Buddhism in Russia; however, one can also identify traces of earlier influence of Uyghur Buddhism on these nomads. In addition, the research looks at the way Kalmyks and Indians interacted in the sphere of Buddhism, and at how Buddhism was consolidating its position among the Buryats, Tuvinians and the peoples of Altai. The author mainly focuses on the territory of present-day Russia, although the study of Buddhism history in the territory of the former Russian Empire or the USSR definitely shows a more impressive heritage. The study highlights principal geographical areas and directions of Buddhism advance towards Russia, and indicates the role of certain individuals and peoples.

**Keywords:** Turks, Mongols, India, Tibetan Buddhism, Siberia, Oirats, Buryats, Tuvans, Altai

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# Роль кочевых народов Центральной Азии в продвижении буддизма в Россию

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**Аннотация.** История буддизма в Средней Азии и его последующего проникновения на территорию современной России богата во всех измерениях: по народам и землям, различным сопутствующим событиям и процессам, сыгравшим важную роль в истории религии, и т.д. На долгом пути, длившемся столетия, буддизм смог обогатить местные культуры своими идеями, продемонстрировал способность трансформироваться, придавая новые черты своим духовным достижениям и одновременно «закладывая» их в культуры народов, воспринявших учение Будды позже. Индию, где возник буддизм, и Россию отделяют друг от друга огромные расстояния, и многие народы Средней Азии внесли свой вклад в развитие местных форм учения Будды: афганцы, парфяне, кушаны, уйгуры, монголы, ойраты и др. Впервые буддизм проник в Среднюю Азию в эпоху македонских походов и укрепился благодаря своей веротерпимости и комплиментарности с локальными культами и верованиями. Есть две стадии истории буддизма в Средней Азии — вначале в ее западной части (просуществует там до VII–IX вв. ), в основном у тюрок, затем в восточной (распространяется с периода не позже VII в.), когда эта религия проявит себя у жужаней (стела, найденная в Булганском аймаке Монголии). С переселением западно-монгольских ойратов в южную Сибирь во второй половине XVI в. следует вести отсчет существованию в России тибетского буддизма, но можно проследить следы влияния на этих кочевников и более раннего, уйгурского буддизма. Также отмечен факт калмыцко-индийского взаимодействия в сфере буддизма, укрепления этой религией своих позиций среди бурятов, тувинцев и народов Алтая. Исследование в основном касается территории нынешней России, хотя изучение истории буддизма на территории прежних Российской империи или СССР определенно показывает более впечатляющее наследие этой религии. Выделены основные географические области и направления продвижения буддизма в сторону России с указанием значения отдельных лиц и народов.

**Ключевые слова:** тюрки, монголы, Индия, тибетский буддизм, Сибирь, ойраты, буряты, тувинцы, Алтай

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## Introduction

The history of the spread of Buddhism among the nomads of Central Asia has received a considerable scientific coverage both in Russia and abroad, with a substantial number of written sources and relevant materials — archaeological or otherwise — being collected and systematized. There have also been numerous publications on the history of Buddhism in Russia, based on a solid source base. It is beyond the scope of this research to consider them all, as they are numerous and not always relevant to the topic stated; besides, it would greatly increase the volume of the article.

At the same time, there seems to be a lack of works on the influence of early Central Asian Buddhism on those nomads who later brought this doctrine (In its Tibetan version) to the territory of Russia. Available publications tend to put more emphasis on Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese sources and contexts (at best from the 13th century onwards), practically ignoring other sources and contexts related to Central Asian Buddhism of earlier periods. Meanwhile, early history (and culture) of Buddhism in the region was undoubtedly a major influence on the process and speed of its adoption by later nomads, in forming the list of their sacred literature, etc. This becomes especially evident when one is studying religious beliefs of Mongolian peoples, including those of their ancestors, as shown in a fundamental study by S. Hurtsbaatar [1].

With this publication, the author intends to stimulate interest among researchers in the subject of the influence of earlier periods of Buddhism in Central Asia on Mongolian nomads, as well as to the peculiarities of the history of the spread of this religion in Russia.

## Buddhism in Central Asia

It is a common belief that Buddhism first made its way from India to Central Asia as early as in the first century A.D. Some scholars, however, attribute it to the earlier time, the era of Alexander the Great (late 4th century BC).

When the sphere of Macedonian campaigns (330–326 BC) expanded to include Central Asia, it led to further establishment of deeper ties and broader interaction between its inhabitants and other peoples of the East. When Alexander the Great was conquering Punjab and his army was advancing down the Indus onto the shores of the Great Sea (Indian Ocean), he encountered bearers of various local spiritual teachings, including those professing Buddhism. During that last campaign, the emperor met Buddhist monks and, after having a talk, allowed them to preach the teachings of Buddha in his empire.

Following Alexander's death, his generals Seleucus and Ptolemy founded their own states (in Asia and Africa), which would eventually crumble. Seleucus' son, Emperor Antiochus I, endorsed the preaching of Buddhist monks throughout his empire, a policy initiated by his father [2. P. 235].

In the mid-third century B.C., an independent Greco-Bactrian state emerged in the larger territory of Central Asia. At about the same time, a Parthian kingdom arose, headed by Arsaces, the founder of the Arsacid dynasty. Unlike the strong Parthia, Greco-Bactria was an unstable entity, with the state of Sogd (Sogdiana) seceding from it, a little later followed by the state of Bactria (about 150 BC).

Sogdiana was located in the basin of the Zeravshan and Kashkadarya rivers with its capital in the city of Marakand (former name of modern-day Samarkand in Uzbekistan). Sogdians played an important role in trade affairs practically all along the Great Silk Road. Around the 2nd century, Sogdiana became an essential region for Buddhism where it grew and developed, with many famous Buddhist monks coming from there [3. P. 110–112].

Bactria is an ancient Iranian name for a vast area of the upper and middle basin of the Amu Darya River and its numerous tributaries — the rivers Panj, Vakhsh, Kofarnihon, Surkhandarya, and Kunduz. At its peak, the Bactrian kingdom exercised a significant influence on its neighbors. In terms of culture, Greek and local traditions crossed there, affecting further cultural development of this immense region. While Zoroastrianism persisted, there were other religious beliefs as well, notably Buddhism. This state ceased to exist circa 135 BC due to internal strife and invasions by the nomadic Yuezhi tribes from the northeast.

The Parthian kingdom partially covered the territory of present-day Iran and the western part of Central Asia, where one of the main centers of the kingdom, Nisa — present-day Bagir village near Ashgabat, Tajikistan — was located. The rulers of Parthia were tolerant towards various religions, and although Zoroastrianism prevailed there, coins of the second half of the 2nd century depicting a Buddhist stupa are found in the area; a large stupa was also erected in the Margiana region (outside Merv) [4. P. 195–196].

For over 400 years — from the late 1st century BC to the mid-4th century A.D. — most of Central Asia was part of the Kushan Empire. The Kushans were nomads who created their state on the ruins of Bactria, occupying most territories of present-day Central Asia, Afghanistan and northern India. The best-known Kushan ruler was Kanishka, who patronized Buddhism in every possible way and whose reign was marked by the organisation of the fourth Buddhist council (circa 100 AD). The Kushans left a unique artistic heritage, a vivid synthesis of architecture, sculpture and painting pertaining to local and non-local cultures (Buddhist complexes of Kara-Tepe, Fayaz-Tepe, Airtam, etc.) [5].

In the early centuries AD, Central Asia became a place of interaction and clash between several forms of religion: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Manichaeism. Buddhism itself became devided into two principal directions: Mahayana (Great Chariot) and Theravada (School of the Elders), giving rise to the struggle between them for influence in Central Asia with its rich and numerous population [6. P. 235–236].

At the peak of Kushan's power, Buddhist communities spread their influence deep into the Surkhandarya valley. The Kushans, for one, constructed major Buddhist edifices in the settlements of Tarmit and Balkh, where Buddhist communities were affluent and influential. As famous Chinese pilgrims Xuan Zang and Hoi Chao evidenced, in Tokharistan (a state that replaced Bactria) people continued constructing Buddhist monuments in the 6–7 centuries [5. P. 158].

The Kushan-Bactrian culture had a syncretic character, incorporating features of both local ancient Bactrian culture and Hellenistic, Saka-Scythian and Indian Buddhist cultures. Following the Kushans' defeat by the Sasanid Iran, Buddhism retained its influence there and further expanded its reach to the Merv oasis (in the Karakum Desert). Here Buddhist buildings were constructed around 4–6 centuries. The north of Bactria and Merv are the farthest (at least to date) known points of northwestern spread of Buddhism.

At that time, this region had close connections with Tibet as well. It seems reasonable to posit that by the 4th century, Buddhism was exerting a certain influence in Tibet. Indeed, an analysis of archaeological evidence and sources demonstrates that one of the primary routes of Buddhism penetration into the eastern lands, to the Chinese and Tibetans, went along the trail that traversed Fergana, Chach (outside modern-day Tashkent) and Semirechye. There was also another process — Buddhism penetration into these regions from Kashmir and Khotan [5. P. 165–167].

In the 7th century, Buddhism in Central Asia started falling into decline. For instance, in Samarkand, it had practically lost its influence by 630 — the above-mentioned Chinese travelers found but a single monastery with a single monk, and themselves came under attack by the locals. However, Buddhism continued flourishing in the Fergana Valley. "Mahayana-sutra-alamkara-karika" mentions a certain Pushkavarti who went to Tashkent to consecrate a vihara, which may lead to conclusion that Buddhism was widely practiced in the Chach area [5. P. 164]. Buddhism persisted longest in the Pamirs (until the 9$^{th}$ century).

While Buddhism was declining in Central Asia, it was beginning to strengthen in the east, in the territory of present-day Mongolia. Undoubtedly, there is a certain connection and interdependence between these waves of Buddhism, which still requires further research; spiritual heritage of the Turkic Khaganate manifested itself in Buddhization of such a well-known Turkic ethnic group as the Uyghurs.

The earliest evidence of Buddhist presence in Mongolia dates back to the early 7th century. This time period was determined following a research by Prof. Solonggod L. Hurtsbaatar of an epigraphic stele found in the Bulgan aimag, Mongolia in 1972.

In Hurtsabaatar's opinion, the inscription on the stele was made during the rule of Zhuzhan nomads. The fact that these nomads were no stranger to Buddhism at that time is evident from its first lines. "We thought of the new Khagan, who will be born with the holy power of Bodhisattva, and who should come from the tribe

of the Khagans and of the prince members of Digin; in doing so we thought of the origin of the Boda Khagan" [1. P. 164].

The inscription mentions the name of Niri Khagan, a ruler who can be identified — the one who ruled the Western Turkic Khaganate in 595–604 and was the grandson of Muqan Khagan (553–572). He succeeded his uncle Apa Khagan, following his defeat in 587. Territorially Niri stationed in the northern Tien Shan and, like his uncle, claimed to rule over the entire Khaganate. However, it is unlikely that the text was written on Niri's behalf — the stele was found, as indicated above, in Mongolia, at a great distance (almost 2000 km. straight line) from his lands on the Tien Shan. In addition, the text refers to Niri's death: "We ignited the ancestors' lights for Niri Khagan's and Turug Khagan's resurrection" [1. P. 164].

Niri's troops were defeated by the Tiele tribal confederation with assistance from the Chinese Sui dynasty [7. P. 250]. The region where the stele was found at that time was practically the center of Tiele settlement. Consequently, it might well be assumed that the stele was made by Niri's numerous captured supporters [8. P. 89]. As the text suggests, they were transferred to live on the Tiele lands. It should also be noted that the leading tribe within the Tiele confederation at that time were the above-mentioned Uyghurs, who also came to prominence in that period thanks to their leader, who bore an implying name (title) of Pusa, i.e. Bodhisattva [8. P. 90]. E. Vaissière believes that the stele is a memorial to Pusa's life and was built circa 630. [9].

In any case, this inscription definitely indicates that Buddhism was practiced by Turkic tribes, at least by their ruling strata. Of particular interest is the evidence that Buddhism was no stranger to the Uyghurs, because a mainstream perspective in historical science is that it was not until 840, when their Khaganate fell and the Uyghurs moved to East Turkestan, where they got acquainted with the teaching of Buddha.

## Tibetan Buddhism among Mongols and in Russia

Despite the fact that everyday activities were well under the influence of traditional beliefs and shamanism, Turkic peoples grew to embrace Buddhism. Most Uyghurs, after their Khaganate was defeated by the Kyrgyz in the mid-9th century, moved to the region of Beshbaliq and Turfan and started professing Buddhism in its Tocharian and Sogdian variations. The Chinese source "Songmo Jiven" (12$^{th}$ century) notes: "Uyghurs… worship Buddha most of all. Together they build a temple, with a statue of Buddha of clay and wood (erected) in the center. During each fast, they slaughter rams; some, drunkenly, smear the Buddha's mouth with fingers dipped in blood. Some embrace his feet with both hands and cry out in supplication. This is their way to express love and reverence. When reading holy books they put on chitons worn by Buddhist monks and read in the language of Western India" [10. P. 91].

By the time Mongols started their conquests, the Uyghurs had formed their own version of Buddhism and created a huge corpus of Buddhist literature, translating texts from Tibetan, Chinese, Sanskrit and other languages into Uyghur. They had established close cultural ties with all their neighbors. The Uyghur alphabet (based on the Aramaic script) was accepted by such Mongol tribal confederations as Naiman and Kereit, and spread among the westernmost group of Mongols (Oirats). The Uyghurs became the very first preachers of Buddhism among the Mongol-speaking peoples, primarily among the Oirats, their closest neighbors.

Genghis Khan highly valued the Uyghurs, who had a tangible impact not only on his political decisions, but also on cultural advances of the Mongols in general. V.V. Barthold wrote: "Mongols' first teachers and first officials of the Mongol Empire were Uyghurs" [11. P. 453], and "representatives of the Uyghur intellectuals in service of the Mongols for the most part belonged to the Buddhist clergy" [11. P. 454].

However, the greatest change in the spiritual life of Mongol nations came with the spread of Tibetan Buddhism among them.

Tibetan Buddhism is a local form of its northern variant that began to take shape in the mid-1st millennium A.D. It spread throughout Tibet during the reign of Songtsen Gampo of the Yarlung dynasty.

There are four leading schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The oldest one is Nyingma, established in the 9$^{th}$ century by the famous Tantric master Padmasambhava. The Sakya (founder Konchok Gyalpo, 1034–1102) and Kagyu schools (line of founders — Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa (1012–1099), Milarepa (1040–1123) came later, in the 11$^{th}$–12$^{th}$ centuries; the Gelug school (founder Je Tsongkhapa, 1357–1419) emerged in the late 14$^{th}$ century.

The fact that Buddhism flourished among Mongols had objective reasons: first, its spread coincided with the rise of Mongolian statehood; second, Buddhism did not contradict the interests of principal social strata; third, other religions had a relatively weaker impact compared to that of Buddhism. Given the existence of various religious views in medieval Mongolian society, the emergence of Buddhism was accompanied by its assertion as a dominant religion well above other beliefs, and its transformation into state ideology.

From the mid-13th century, the Oirats began to move from the upper reaches of the Yenisei River (their homeland) somewhat to the south, invading the eastern fringes of the Dzungarian Basin, including the Altai region. However, three centuries later, from the mid-16th century onwards, the Oirats, having come under the pressure from their neighbors (Turks, Eastern Mongols), began migrating towards Southern Siberia. One example is the Torgut and Derbet Oirats, who started descending down the Irtysh River. They were migrating along the banks of the rivers of Irtysh, Tobol, Om, etc., and soon came into contact with Russian authorities. One of the most important outcome of the said migration was that it actually meant the emergence of Tibetan Buddhism in the territory of Russia.

A part of the Oirats, better known as Kalmyks, further migrated to the Volga-Caspian region in the 1630s, and some 60 years later, circa 1690s, established the Kalmyk Buddhist Khanate over there. The leader of the Kalmyk sangha was traditionally appointed by the Dalai Lama, and it was those Kalmyk's connections with Tibet that revived Russia's interest in that distant land. In their new homeland, the Kalmyks managed to establish close relations and became close spiritual companions of the Indian merchants living in Astrakhan. This issue has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention, although it represents an interesting page in the history of Buddhism in southern Russia.

Famous researcher and traveler S.G. Gmelin, following his trip to Persia in the late 18th century, wrote that he had collected a lot of information on the Indians and Kalmyks, and hoped to eventually bring his numerous notes in order and publish them [12. P. 1]. However, he was killed in the Caucasus some time later and his notes got lost.

Naturalist and ethnographer P.S. Pallas also explored relations between the Kalmyks and Indian merchants in Astrakhan. After visiting the Kalmyks in the 1760s, he wrote: "I was told in confidence that the Indians in Astrakhan, among whom are Brahmans, not only recognize Kalmyks as their brethren, but also revere as gods some Kalmyk burkhans, especially Burkhan Ayusha [Buddha Amitayus. — *B.K.*] and Jakjimmuni [Buddha Shakyamuni. — *B.K.*]" [13. P. 492]. He even assumed that the "Lama faith" (Buddhism) and the Kalmyks themselves originated from the Indians [13. P. 492].

Another special topic related to Kalmyk-Indian ties is a sandalwood statue of Buddha. The statue is believed to be a "living image" made during the Buddha's lifetime and transported from Bodh Gaya in India to Bactria in the 4th century by a Buddhist monk called Kumarayana. He reached the town of Kucha (Kocho), where he found a patron in the figure of a local ruler. A little later, he dropped his vows and married Jivaka, the sister of the ruler. They had a son, Kumarajiva (344–413), who was later renowned as a translator of Buddhist texts. In 384, he was taken to China, bringing Sandalwood Buddha with him. The statue was kept and revered in various Chinese capitals. Under the Mongol Yuan dynasty, a temple was erected for the statue in Kaifeng, while the Qing dynasty built a new temple just outside the Forbidden City. Sarat Chandra Das wrote that the statue "is stored in the temple of Zandan-xi in Beijing and was seen (by S. Ch. Das) in 1885" [14. P. 996]. In 1900, during the Boxer Rebellion, the temple of Sandalwood Buddha was destroyed, and a few years later the statue turned up in Transbaikalia.

Russian archives store records attesting to Kalmyks' exceptional attitude to Sandalwood Buddha. As the records evidence, Kalmyks' Tseren-Donduk Khan sent a delegation to Lhasa to see the Dalai Lama in 1729. On their return they brought a 14-page notebook that contained "… a story of Zandan Zhuu

temple which is in Beijing, which belongs to the Kalmyk spiritual teachings…". This indicates that the Kalmyks knew this statue from the Central Asian period of their history, and the Chief Kalmyk Lama Shakur specifically sought this information [15].

Besides, some of the Oirats' sacred works were based on Uyghur rather than on Tibetan texts, and the earliest known source on the history of Buddhism among Oirats (epigraphic, mid-13th century, with excerpts from Buddhist and Confucian texts) was written for the Oirats by the Uyghur Buddhist monks. Put together, the aforementioned facts make it obvious that a more objective perspective to the history of Mongolian peoples requires a thorough study of the early influence of Buddhism on its course.

Buddhism also established itself in the territory of Southern Siberia. Here local peoples (Buryats, Tuvinians and Altaians) sooner or later accepted Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhism of the Tibetan Geluk School penetrated into the territory of Buryatia in the 17th century. In the early 18th century it spread throughout Transbaikalia, and in the 19th century, after a fierce struggle with shamanism, Buddhism came to Pribaikalia region.

In the territory of Tuva, remainders of Buddhist temples (khure) date back to the 13th–14th centuries. However, there, just like in Altai, the spread of Geluk Buddhism should be attributed to the period when these territories became part of the Oirat Dzungarian Khanate (second half of 17th — mid-18th centuries). It is interesting to note that those peoples belong to different ethnic families: Kalmyks and Buryats belong to Mongolian peoples, while Tuvinians and Altai peoples are Turks.

However, it would be a mistake to link the presence of Buddhism in Russia solely to Mongolian peoples and the time of Oirat migration to South Siberia in the late 16th century.

Basing on available data, one can conclude, that Buddhism first penetrated into the territory of present-day Russia in the 7th–8th centuries. It was Chinese Buddhism in the Bohai state, partly located in the southern part of modern Russian Far East.

The ruins of Bohai Buddhist temples were discovered in the valleys not far from the modern-day city of Ussuriysk, about 80 kilometers away from Vladivostok. They were named Kopytinsky and Abrikosovsky temples after the name of the hills where they were unearthed. The findings included several small Buddha figurines made of baked clay.

Later, remains of other Buddhist temples were discovered nearby (for example, Kraskinsky temple) dating back to the 10th century. Another temple in the same Primorsky Krai was excavated on Obryvisty Cape. It dates back to the 13th century, the period of the Jurchen Jin dynasty [16]. Buddhism did not last long here, abandoned by the locals due to shamans' activities as the ties with the subsequent dynasties of Yuan and Ming grew weaker.

## Conclusion

Russia possesses a living Buddhist heritage representing various periods of its spread within Russia's territory. They are mostly connected with the history of nomads professing Buddhism: Kalmyks (descendants of the Oirats), Buryats, Tuvinians and Altai peoples. Buddhism got incorporated into their everyday life and has been an important factor behind their ethical values, folk festivals, traditions and customs.

Yet it is important to remember that Buddhism, having originated in India, not only retained a number of important "Indian" features, but also throughout centuries fostered closer ties of various groups of Buddhists directly with Indians who might not have even been Buddhism followers. Before reaching Russian lands, Indian Buddhism passed through many empires, nations and cultures, from the Middle to the Far East, through Central Asia, Tibet, China and Mongolia. Buddhism found itself enriched and made more flexible through adaptive civilization patterns of the entire continent, capable of uniting nomadic and sedentary cultures and customs into one vast Buddhist civilization. A significant number of Central Asian Turkic-Mongolian nomads one after another became devoted adherents of Buddhism. This shift in religion inter alia contributed to the formation of state-like structures among those groups. The spread of Tibetan Buddhism of the Geluk School among Mongolian-speaking and a number of Turkic-speaking nations represented another phase in the penetration of Buddhism further northwards — to Russia, where it would gain a foothold in the Volga-Caspian and South Siberian regions.

A review of archaeological evidence, along with archival and other related sources, reveals a long history of Buddhism in Russia that is closely connected with the broader history of Buddhism in Eurasia. This history encompasses various historical phenomena and processes that brought Buddhism from India to Russia. By studying Buddhism throughout its entire complex history, it becomes possible to identify Russia as a vibrant example of Buddhist diversity. This, in turn, provides a scientific basis for understanding the relevance and mediating role of Buddhism across various spheres of life.

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