

Kṛṣṇa Iconography in Khotan Carpets: Spread of Hindu Religious Ideas in Xinjiang, China, Fourth–Seventh Centuries CE

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Abstract

The article is a continued research study focusing on the significance of the appearance of Kṛṣṇa iconography in Khotan as evidence of the spreading of the Kṛṣṇa worship of Hinduism from India to Xinjiang, northwest China, during the time of Gupta dynasty. Several issues are discussed: accounts of the presence of Hindu religions in Khotan and other places in Xinjiang, art with large quantities of Hindu deities, and historical records of the prevalence of Hindu religions in northern India, Kashmir, and Central Asia. The study suggests that Khotan received Hindu influences beginning from the Kuṣāna time, and especially during the Gupta period. There was likely a community of Hindu believers in Khotan between the third and seventh centuries of Common Era.

Key words: Hindu Art, Knotted Carpet, Khotan, Kṛṣṇa, Silk Road, Textile.

1. BACKGROUND

In 2008, near an ancient cemetery in Shanpula, Luopu (Lop) County, Hetian (Khotan) District, Xinjiang, China, there were discovered five knotted-pile carpets, woven on a wool foundation. The carpets were initially photographed and published in 2010 by Qi Xiaoshan, a professional photographer then at the Institute of Archaeology of Xinjiang (Urumqi). They were dated to the fourth to the sixth century CE by Wang Bo of the Xinjiang Museum (Urumqi) and the Commission of Authentication of Cultural Relics (personal communication, 2011). Following Qi, the author published one preliminary study on the carpets in English (Zhang He 2010) and three studies in Chinese (Zhang He 2011a & b, 2012).

Upon their discovery, the carpets were in relatively good condition, with bright colors and complete measurements. Two larger ones display similar complex compositions teeming with human figures and landscapes in the central field.

One of the two (Fig. 1) has an additional inscription in Brāhmi script woven into the carpet



Fig. 1. Knotted wool carpet; ca. fifth-late sixth/early seventh century CE. Lop, Khotan, Xinjiang, China; 265 x 150 cm. Police Department, Lop County. Photo: Qi Xiaoshan 2009.

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in blue, reading “*ha dī vā*” (Duan 2010). This carpet is the most elaborate, with at least 33 complete human figures. The borders of both of these carpets feature complex decorative designs, with the widest border containing highly stylized, abstract animal forms.

Three smaller pieces show the same design (Fig. 2): two winged figures in the center field, placed upside-down relative to each other and head-to-head, so that each appears to be running or flying. An inscription woven in yellow and blue fills the areas to either side of the figures’ heads. It reads, “*Spāvata meri sūmā hoḍā,*” which translates as “The spāvata-official Meri gave [this] to Sūma” in the Khotanese language (ibid). The subject seems to be a dedication to a god or mortal. The border designs in all three pieces are similar and feature highly stylized animals.



Fig. 2. Knotted wool carpet; ca. fifth-late sixth/early seventh century CE, Lop, Khotan, Xinjiang, China; 123x119 cm; Police Department, Lop County. Photo: Qi Xiaoshan 2009.

The author’s previous studies have suggested that the two larger carpets show narratives of the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa, mainly his childhood stories. In Fig. 1, a small blue figure appears twice in the design, once holding a small

ball, presumably a butter ball, in his right hand, and once holding up his right arm with some geometric motif, as if holding up Mount Govardhan, a gesture that commonly appears in Indian sculptures of Kṛṣṇa from the sixth and seventh centuries. Beside Kṛṣṇa, a female figure plays a flute in a landscape setting with trees, suggesting the *Līlā* dance. Many figures wear *dhoti*; a few figures sit in a typical *lalitāsana* position commonly seen in both Hindu and Buddhist art; and some female figures wear dresses identical to that of Yaśoda on the 5th-century high-relief sculptures on the *Daśāvātāra* (Viṣṇu) Temple in Deogarh. I identified the stories with several possible episodes, including the Prophecy of *Kamsa*, the Butter Thief, holding up Mount Govardhan, naming *Pūjā*, and the *Līlā* dance. I also concluded that the carpets were very likely made in Khotan and for the Khotanese, since the inscriptions on the carpets are in the Khotanese language.

According to the researches, these five carpets are the earliest examples yet found in Xinjiang of ancient textiles filled with human figures depicted in a realistic and narrative fashion. They are also the earliest examples yet found in Xinjiang with Hindu subject matter, and they may be the only surviving early examples of Kṛṣṇa in color. With all of these “earliest” designations, the carpets represent new and important materials for understanding the art, history, and religion of Khotan, as well as Khotan’s place along the Silk Road in the early centuries of our era.

Until the identification of two of the five carpets with Kṛṣṇa subject matter, there were no known Hindu religious practices and artistic representations in Khotan or other places in Xinjiang, except for a few instances in art under the disguise of Buddhism. Obviously, the discovery inspires an interest in finding probable Hindu practices in Khotan, where Buddhism was dominant from at least the second century CE until the beginning of the eleventh century.

The following research study focuses on the significance of the KṚṢṢṢa iconography appearing in Khotan as evidence of the spreading of KṚṢṢṢa worship in Hinduism from India to northwestern China. I will discuss the presence of possible Hindu religions in Khotan and other places in Xinjiang, the existing art that features Hindu deities, and the prevalence of Hindu religions in India and Central Asia.

2. ACCOUNTS OF THE PRESENCE OF HINDU RELIGIONS IN KHOTAN AND XINJIANG

Khotan had been known as a Buddhist country since likely the turn of the first century BCE. By the mid third century CE, it had become a major Buddhist center in the southern part of the Taklamakan Desert. Some Chinese monks traveled to Khotan to study and to obtain Buddhist texts. Zhu Shixing (203–282 CE), a monk of the Mahāyāna school from central China, was the first such monk on record. In 260 CE, while in Khotan, he observed that there were more Hīnayāna followers there than Mahāyāna ones. Once, when he was sending some Mahāyāna sūtras obtained there back home to central China, some Hīnayāna monks reported him to the king of Khotan, saying,

“The Chinese monk intends to violate the official canon via Brahmanical texts. Your majesty is the master of the country. If you do not ban him, the canon will be broken, and the Chinese will be blinded and deafened. Your majesty would be blamed” (Hui Jiao).

This account indicates that the people of Khotan knew not only two schools of Buddhism but also Brāhmanism, and there must have been Brāhmanical books available.

The famous monk Kumarajīva (344–413 CE), from Qiuci (Kuche) on the northern rim of the Taklamakan Desert, studied Hīnayāna Buddhism in Kashmir. During the years he stayed there, he also showed great interest in the Mahāyāna school and in Brāhmanism. In fact, on his way back home, he stopped in Shule (Kashgar) to study Nāgārjuna’s *Mādhyamaka*, a Mahāyāna

sect, and later he converted to Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is said that while in Qiuci, he also looked for the Vedas and Upaniṣads, the classic Hindu books. This account clearly indicates the existence of Hindu texts in Qiuci and its surrounding area.

Above all, some manuscripts of the *Rāmāyaṇa* written in Khotanese and dated to the eighth century CE were discovered in Khotan by Aurel Stein. Although these texts are included in Buddhist texts, the epic of *Rāmāyaṇa* and the integration of the two religions are the primary intention. For instance, by the end of the manuscripts, Rāma is mentioned as Maitreya Buddha, and Buddha himself claimed to be the brother of Rāma, Raishman, meaning “follower of Rāma” (Banerjee 1992, p.104). It appears that the Buddhist copier of the Hindu texts intentionally introduced Hindu ideas to Buddhism through these stories.

3. HINDU DEITIES IN ART IN KHOTAN AND XINJIANG

Although it is known that Mahāyāna and especially Vajrayāna Buddhism adopted many Hindu gods and converted them into Buddhist deities it is an interesting phenomenon that a concentrated artistic representation of Hindu deities is found in Khotan, despite many being in Buddhist disguise. In Khotan alone, quite a large number of images were discovered, at least eleven images of Maheśvara, a major Buddhist version of Śiva, one of the Hindu triad (Zhang Yuanlin 2013), for example, the well-known piece shown in Fig. 3. In it, Śiva’s consort, Pārvati, is also shown, sitting on the lap of Śiva in a popular representation of the couple in Hindu art. The same Maheśvara also appears at least twelve times in the cave and silk paintings of Dunhuang and in several cases in Kuche and Turfan.

Ganeśa, son of Śiva and Pārvati, appears, sometimes with Śiva, several times in paintings on murals and wood found in Dandan Uiliq,



Fig. 3. Maheśvara and Pārvati, on wooden board; ca. fourth–sixth centuries or seventh–eighth centuries CE; Khotan. From Zhang Yuanlin, 2013.



Fig. 4. Ganeśa, on wooden board; ca. fourth–sixth centuries or seventh–eighth centuries CE; Endere. From Huo and Qi, 2006, p163.

Endere (Fig. 4), and Keklik, in the Khotan area. He also appears in a Mani manuscript on silk (Fig. 5)—together with Śiva, represented by his *vajra*, and Viṣṇu in the form of boar—which was found in Astana, Turfan, in 1972. Another Mani manuscript found in Gaochang by a German team, depicts Brahmā with blue hair and beard, Viṣṇu in the form of a boar, and Ganeśa, the elephant god found in a mural painting in Bezeklik, Xinjiang.

In a silk painting from Dunhuang collected by Paul Pellio, there is a three-headed Brahmā sitting on a bird, along with Śiva with Pārvati on his lap sitting on a bull. Depictions of Indra, three-headed multi-armed Bodhisattvas, and Asūras are also found all over Buddhist art in Khotan.

Kubera, or Vaiśrāvaṇa, a Hindu deity of prosperity who became one of the Buddhist heavenly kings, was an important patron god and protector of the Kingdom of Khotan. It is said that he participated in founding the kingdom, so the Khotanese built a temple for him. According to Xuan Zang and other travelers to Khotan in the seventh century, temples to Kubera and images of him were omnipresent in Khotan.

Besides these direct images of Hindu deities, there were also Buddhist deities with Hindu attributes. In Khotan, Vairocana (Fig. 6), the most central of the five Buddhas in both the



Fig. 5. Mantras of Dharani Sūtra, on silk; Turfan. From Qi and Wang, 2008, p115



Fig. 6. Vairocana Buddha, mural; fourth–sixth centuries or seventh–eighth centuries; Khotan. From Bussagli, 1963.

Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools, was the major Buddha of worship. The image of this Buddha found in Damago, Khotan, by Stein, according to P. Banerjee's study (1992), carries core concepts and symbols of the school of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. In Buddhism, Vairocana is believed to be a celestial or cosmic Buddha. This idea of a cosmic deity is a typical Hindu concept, as found in Cosmic Man Puruṣa and Cosmic Viṣṇu. The latter is embodied by Kṛṣṇa. In the *Bhāgavad Gītā*, in the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa is described as one who is everywhere, beyond time and space. He is the sun and moon, the rainstorm and fire, spirit and perception; he is the horse, serpent, elephant and bull, who appeared at the Churning of the Ocean of Milk event; he is also the *vajra* and the cupid, source of all creations, Brahmā and Śiva, and all the divines. Like Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa was born with the *śrivatsa* on his chest.

On the chest of the Khotan Vairocana are found the sun and moon, the *vajra*, fire, the *śrivatsa*, a double-headed serpent on a basket-like object, and a squared pool-like motif, which P. Banerjee has identified as the objects at the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. This Vairocana is nearly a copy of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa.

Although Buddhism incorporates many of these examples, the adoption of major Hindu deities already demonstrates a prevalent Hindu influence. In the Khotan area, the extensive appearance of Hindu deities suggests even a true Hinduism.

4. PREVALENCE OF HINDU RELIGIONS IN NORTH INDIA, KASHMIR, AND CENTRAL ASIA

As early as the second century BCE, Hinduism and Kṛṣṇa subject matter in art had already appeared in northern India and Bactria. In Mathura, the legendary hometown of Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma, there was found an inscription praising Kṛṣṇa, as well as a statue of Balarāma (Banerjee 1978, Srinivasan 1981). In Bactria, there was found a coin with images of both Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. The well-known Heliodorus pillar (113 BCE) records Greek Bactrian ambassador Heliodorus from Taxila as a *Bhāgavata*, or a devotee of Vaiṣṇavism. During the Śakas' rule in northwestern India (c. 200 BCE–400 CE), King Maues (80–60 BCE), who was based in Gandhara and Taxila, made one of his coins with a Balarāma image. The well-known gold Bimaran casket connected to Saka King Azes (r. 60–20 BCE) has the image of a Buddha flanked by the Hindu gods Brahma and Indra.

When the Kuṣāns came into power in Bactria, Gandhāra, and northern India, Hindu motifs became more popular, since some Kushans practiced Hinduism together with other religions such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Greek religions. In Mathura, there was discovered a stone carving of Vasudeva carrying the baby Kṛṣṇa, crossing the Yamuna River (P. Banerjee 1978). In

Bactria, representations of Hindu gods such as Śiva are found in mural paintings. The great Kuṣāna king Kaṇiṣka, himself a Buddhist and Zoroastrianist, incorporated Hindu deities into his belief. On his casket were cast images of Buddha, Brahmā, and Indra, as well as relief images of Kaṇiṣka himself and the Zoroastrian sun and moon gods.

Khotan had direct contact with the Kuṣānas. The question of whether the Kuṣānas once governed Khotan is still debatable, but there is evidence of Kuṣāna presence in Khotan and other places in the West Region. For example, in Khotan there were unearthed Kuṣāna coins of the first and second kings, Kujula Kadphises (c. 30–80) and Vima Taktu (c. 80–95), and more than twenty Kaṇiṣka (c. 127–140) coins. Also, according to the *Hou Hanshu (Book of the Later Han)*, written 432–445 CE, the Kuṣānas once helped the Han dynasty defeat the Jushi rebellion in Turfan. The Kuṣāna king asked for a Chinese princess as reward; his request was refused, resulting in a battle between the Kuṣānas and the Chinese. In 90 CE, the Kuṣāna general Xie, leading an army of 70,000 soldiers, attacked Khotan, but he was defeated by Ban Chao, the Han general in the West Region. After Ban Chao left, in 102 CE, Kuṣāna coins were still being used in Khotan, including Kaṇiṣka coins, which indicates continuous contact between the Kuṣānas and the Khotanese.

Once the Kuṣānas moved to the Gandhāra region, they adopted the Gandhāra language Prākṛit and the Kharoṣṭi script. It might have been these Kuṣānas who brought both the language and the script to Khotan. Hundreds of Kharoṣṭhi documents in the Prākṛit language, dated to the third to the fourth century CE, were found in Niya and Loulan by Stein and Chinese archaeologists; they are the best examples of Kuṣāna influence, if not government, in Khotan. In these documents are such Hindu names as Vasudeva and Vasu. Vasudeva is the name of Kṛṣṇa's father, and later

of Kṛṣṇa himself. The Vasus are eight Hindu deities described in the *R̥gveda* who attended Indra and Viṣṇu. In the Khotan Kharoṣṭi documents, “vasu” is used as the title of local officials (Atwood 1991).

The last king of the Kuṣāna dynasty also named himself Vasudeva (c. 190–225), as if to signal that he was a devoted believer of Vaiṣṇavism/Kṛṣṇaism. During his reign, this king sent a diplomat to the Chinese Wei dynasty, where the emperor of Wei honored him with a title as the Pious Friend of Wei, King of Da Yuezhi (Kuṣāna; *Stories of Three Kingdoms—Book of Wei* 《三国志魏书》; Conf. John Hill 2009). Such diplomatic visits would have raised Chinese awareness of foreign religions.

It must be noted that the Kharoṣṭi documents found in Khotan and Loulan appeared within a very short period of time between about 245–46 and 324–25 CE (Atwood 1991, Harmatta 1999). Among more than 400 documents in Niya alone, fifty have dates, and forty-five of these fifty carry dates within the seven-year period between 263 and 270 CE (Brough 1965). So many documents appearing within such a short time suggests a sudden wave pouring into the region. It may not be a coincidence that the Kuṣānas were overthrown by the Sassanians in 241 CE and that the Kuṣāna Prākṛit language and Kharoṣṭi script appeared in the Tarim in 245–6 CE. Could there have been Kuṣāna migrants to the Tarim?

As we know, the Kuṣānas were believers in various religions, and some of their kings were Hindus. With so many accounts of Khotan's direct contact with the Kuṣānas and the possibility of their settlement in the Tarim, it appears to me that Hinduism was not only known to the Khotanese but also likely practiced in Khotan during the time of the Kuṣāna and a little later.

Hinduism became dominant in India during the Gupta dynasties (320–646), all the way to Kashmir in the north, because the ruling Guptas

were Hindus. From Chandragupta II (c. 380–415) onward, all Gupta kings called themselves Bhāgavata Vaiṣṇavas—devotees of Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa. One of the coins of Chandragupta II bears the inscription “Chandragupta Vikramāditya, King of Kings, and a devotee of Viṣṇu.” Under Chandragupta II, the Guptas brought about a golden age in politics, economics, the military, science, religion, and art. As the Guptas expanded to the west and north, conquering the Śakas and Kambojas, they once again brought Hindu beliefs to these places and people. As mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, the Śakas worshipped Śiva, and according to the *Rājatarangini*, the Kashmiri people were also believers in Hinduism before Aśoka spread Buddhism to Kashmir. Although both peoples later became Buddhists, there might still have been Hindu followers.

In the time of Chandragupta II, the Chinese monk Fa Xian (334–422) visited Darel, in Kashmir, where and when Buddhism was still strong, as he recorded. But he also described the prosperity of the Gupta dynasty, under which Hinduism became dominant. We know now, from ruins and archaeological discoveries, that during Fa Xian’s visit, Hinduism had already settled firmly in Kashmir, as well as in many other places in India; Hindu temples were built in Srinagar around the fifth century CE and in Bhawan around the late fifth to the late sixth century. When another Chinese monk, Xuan Zang (602–664), visited Kashmir and India, he witnessed the drastic decline of Buddhism and the prevalence of Hinduism.

The time of the Guptas was a time of art, and the Guptas supported both Buddhist and Hindu art. Many Hindu temples were built in India during this time. One of the earliest is the Daśāvātara (Viṣṇu) Temple at Deogarh, built in the fifth century CE. Represented in large sculptures on this temple are not only famous episodes of Viṣṇu but also of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood. Interestingly, the clothing style of Kṛṣṇa’s foster

mother, Yaśodā, as depicted in the sculptures on this temple is the best match to the ladies’ dresses on the Shanpula carpets in question.

The Guptas must have influenced Central Asia and Xinjiang, because the Brāhmi script, as standardized by the Gupta dynasty, began to be used in the Tarim Basin. The Khotanese were among the peoples who used Gupta-Brāhmi script. From about the fourth century to the beginning of the eleventh century, the people of Khotan used this script to write the Khotanese-Śaka language. More than two thousand Khotanese texts were discovered in Khotan and Dunhuang in the 20th century. This standardized Gupta script in Khotanese is also woven into the Shanpula/Khotan carpets.

The appearance of the Śaka language and Gupta script in Khotan might have been the result of the Guptas’ expansion, which pushed some Śaka groups passing through Kashmir and Pamir into the Tarim Basin. Although the Śakas were among the original residents of Khotan (Zhang and Rong 2008), the earlier documents found in Khotan were written in Kharoṣṭī in the Prakrit language. There are two possibilities for the replacement with the Khotanese-Saka language and Brāhmi script in Khotan: First, the local Śakas became dominant in power and brought their own language and writing into official use by adopting the Gupta Brāhmi script, and second, some new Śaka groups who came as the result of the Gupta invasion in the homelands of the Śakas and Kambojas (Kashmiri) in northwest India brought the Gupta script with them. In either case, the adoption of the Gupta script in Khotan proves the Gupta impact.

According to some studies (Rapson 1990), the Śakas of the Western Satraps in the northwest of India stopped using Greek and Kharoṣṭī scripts and began using only Brāhmi script in the second century CE until the conquest of the Guptas. Almost all scholars of the Khotanese-Śaka

language agree that Khotanese-Śaka has a close relationship with the Śaka language in northwestern India (Bailey 1979, Harmatta et al 1999). It is possible that the Śakas from the northwest brought the new Gupta Brāhmi script to Khotan and stimulated the local Śakas to use their own language with the new script.

The new Śakas might have come via Kashmir. It has been noted that Kashmir became a major trading and religious pilgrimage route between China and India during the Guptas' time because of political power changes in the north, mostly in Bactria, such as the invasion of the Sassanians, the attacks of the Rouran and the Hephthalites, etc., where Kashmir had been a popular route (Liu Xinru 1988). The Chinese monks Fa Xian, Zhi Meng and their contemporaries all came to India via Kashmir. Zhi Meng, a monk of the fourth to the fifth century CE, traveled with five other Chinese monks to India and witnessed that Kashmiri monks were busily visiting the Chechen River area east of Khotan. If Buddhist monks traveled to this area, other religious people could also travel there, for Hinduism would become a major religion in Kashmir under the Gupta Empire.

Khotan itself was a country of many religions. As quoted earlier, Khotan was described by Zhu Shixing of the mid third century CE as a place where both the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna schools were practiced, with the possibility of Brāhmāṇism. The Tibetan manuscript *Religious History of the Li Country* (Li=Khotan; Dunhuang P.t. 960) from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) observes that the Khotanese were obsessed with demons and did not believe in the sacred religion (i.e., Buddhism) nor did they respect Buddhist monks. During the time of the Five Dynasties (907–960), Gao Juhui, the ambassador to Khotan sent by the Later Jin dynasty, reported that the Khotanese liked ghosts and demons as well as Buddha (*Records of Ambassador Gao Juhui in Khotan* 《高居诲使于阗记》). *History of Khotan*

in the Old History of Five Dynasties (《旧五代史-于阗传》) records, “Khotan’s customs are those of Zoroastrianism.” *History of Song Dynasty—History of Foreign Countries* (《宋史-外国传》) records that Li Shengtian, King of Khotan, sent Mani priests as his representatives to visit and bestow gifts upon the Song court. By the tenth century, an Arab writer wrote that Khotan was inhabited by Muslims, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists. In such a religiously tolerant environment, there could be Hindu believers as well. The appearance of the carpets with Hindu Kṛṣṇa subjects and Gupta script would be a product of such communities.

5. CONCLUSION

The accounts of Hindu texts in Khotan; images of Hindu deities in Khotanese art; frequent visits of monks and war refugees between Kashmir and the Tarim; the prevailing Hindu religions in north India, Gandhara, and Bactria, etc.; the adoption of the Prakrit language and Kharoṣṭi script, and later the Śaka language and Gupta script, in Khotan; and eventually the appearance of the carpets with Hindu subjects and Gupta script in the Khotanese language in Khotan—all of these support significant Kuṣāna and Gupta influences in the Hindu religion and art of Khotan. They also strongly suggest a community of Hindu believers in Khotan between the third and the seventh centuries CE.

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