Does Buddhism have Central Eurasian roots?

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This paper deals with one aspect of Christopher Beckwith's claim (Empires of the Silk Road) that most of the classical civilizations of Eurasia have Central Eurasian roots by concentrating on Buddhism. The wide-spread use of stūpas and similar tumuli in the subcontinent is taken as a possible continuation of a Central Eurasian custom. The conclusion reached is that it is difficult to establish the connection between the Central Eurasian and the South Asian customs with certainty.[1]

There can be no doubt that Central Eurasia exerted an influence on Indian religions. The fact that the Vedic language is Indo-European reveals its prehistoric connection with Central Eurasia, as do various features of Vedic mythology.

The situation is less straightforward in the case of Buddhism. The fundamental doctrinal position without which Buddhism would not have arisen is the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. Buddhism shares this belief with Jainism and other religious movements. Indologists thought for a long time that the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution arose in Vedic circles as a result of inner-Vedic religious developments. Seen this way, Buddhism and Jainism are expressions of developments in and of Vedic religion. If, therefore, Vedic religion shows clear traces of its ultimately Central Eurasian origins, Buddhism and Jainism are no more than further continuations of developments that can in the end be traced back to Central Eurasia.

I have argued in other publications that this picture of the background of Buddhism and Jainism is not correct. The belief in rebirth and karmic retribution did not develop inside Vedic religion. It rather existed, at the beginning of historical time, outside it in a region where Vedic religion held

1 Expanded version of a paper presented at the conference "The influence of Central Eurasian religious beliefs on the cultures of the periphery", held at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum in April 2012.

no sway; this region I call Greater Magadha. In that region Buddhism and Jainism arose as responses to the there wide-spread belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. Subsequently this same belief also came to influence Vedic religion, and finds therefore expression in a few late-Vedic texts.[2]

This leaves us with the question where we have to look to find the roots of Buddhism (and Jainism). Since the languages in which these religions found expression were Indo-Aryan from the beginning, we are tempted to look for Central Eurasian roots for these religions, too. Since both these religions are responses to the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution, one would like to know whether this belief was already held by at least some speakers of Indo-European languages before they entered India. To my knowledge, there is no convincing way to answer this question either positively or negatively.

However, there are other features of Central Eurasian Culture that may have been continued in Buddhism. I am thinking of the defining feature of the so-called Kurgan hypothesis, which "remains the single most popular solution to the Indo-European homeland problem" (Trask, 2000: p. 180-181; see also Mallory, 1989: p 182-185 and Mallory & Adams, 1997: p. 338-341).[3] According to this hypothesis, the tumuli, also called kurgans, that have been found in Central Eurasia, belonged to speakers of Indo-European languages. The hypothesis I wish to consider is that these same kurgans were the ancestors of Buddhist stūpas.[4]

This hypothesis is not new. It was formulated, for example, by Michael Witzel (2003: p. 56), who suggests Iranian influence. I am not in a position to pronounce on this suggestion. Henri-Paul Francfort, in a private communication, informs me that kurgans, or tumuli of the same type have

2 Bronkhorst 2007.

3 Trask further observes: "The hypothesis was championed for much of her career by the Lithuanian-American Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas; it remains the single most popular solution to the Indo-European homeland problem, but it has never commanded anything like general acceptance." See Gimbutas 1997.

4 We exclude Vedic funerary practices from our reflections. About these, Elena Kuz'mina observes (2007: p. 340): "Yet what could be the archaeological traces of the Vedic Aryans funeral ceremony in India? Unfortunately, they leave little hope for an archaeologist. The ashes of an Aryan in foreign parts were sometimes scattered; in other cases a body or a skull and bones or ashes were brought home and buried there; usually there was a commemorative cenotaph. Hence the traces of the first Aryans having migrated to India ought to be sought not there, but in their homeland where the cenotaphs are!"

been identified right into Himachal Pradesh, in northern India, but adds that it is not normally possible to establish a material, stratigraphical or historical connection between the kurgans of northern India either with those from central Asia or with the oldest stūpas. Perhaps kurgans made of earth rather than stone existed once in northern India, but this remains a matter of speculation.[5] Some scholars have proposed that Indo-Aryans entered the subcontinent in different waves, and that the inhabitants of Magadha in particular arrived before the Ṛgvedic Aryans (e.g., Parpola, 2002: p. 254 ff.). This, if true, might be constructed as an argument in support of the kurgan ancestry of stūpas.

I will not say more about these issues. My emphasis will be less on the exact way in which this particular custom presumably arrived in India, and more on its wide-spread use in the subcontinent, which has often gone unnoticed. Subsequently I will argue that the habit to cremate a corpse so as to place some (or all) of its ashes in a stūpa is a secondary development: the Buddhist tradition preserves traces indicating that the bodies of the Buddha and of certain other Buddhist saints were placed in a stūpa without being incinerated.

Before we turn to these points, it is necessary to recall a well-known but perhaps not sufficiently emphasized fact. The ancient Buddhist canon preserves a passage that states in no uncertain terms that stūpas were built for rulers. The statement is put in the mouth of the Buddha, who addresses his disciple Ānanda:[6]

> Ānanda, the remains of a wheel-turning monarch are wrapped in a new linen-cloth. This they wrap in teased cotton wool, and this in a new cloth. Having done this five hundred times each, they enclose the king's body in an oil-vat

5 "Il est certain que l'archéologie, qui fournit quelques kourganes (ou tombes de type kourgane) jusqu'en Himachal Pradesh pourrait être utilisée pour établir le lien que vous cherchez entre le stupa et les sépultures steppiques. Cependant, comme il n'est le plus souvent pas possible d'établir un lien matériel, stratigraphique, historique entre les kourganes des régions du nord de l'Inde et de l'Asie centrale et les plus anciens stupas, je crains que nous ne restions sur notre faim. La question reste ouverte autant que je puisse en juger, mais le manque de cimetières à kourganes dans le nord de l'Inde n'engage pas à poursuivre bien loin les investigations, sauf à considérer qu'il exista des kourganes disparus, je veux dire en terre et non en pierre qui auraient été arasés." (email message of 1.12.2011)

6 DN II p. 141 f.; tr. Walshe, modified. Cp. Waldschmidt 1950-1951: p. 360 f.; Silk 2006: p. 9.

> of iron, which is covered with another iron pot. […] They raise a stūpa at a crossroads. That, Ānanda, is what they do with the remains of a wheel-turning monarch, and they should deal with the Tathāgata's body in the same way. A stūpa should be erected at the crossroads for the Tathāgata.

We will have occasion to return to this passage below. At present we leave this issue alone, and turn to the first point announced above: the widespread use of stūpas and similar tumuli in the subcontinent.

This claim can easily be substantiated in the case of Buddhism. Buddhism in all its forms has been accompanied, and still is accompanied, by the worship of stūpas. These stūpas ideally contain physical remains of the Buddha or of other Buddhist saints. It is true that in India there was a growing tendency to worship the stūpas in their own right, or to put other things than bodily remains in them: manuscripts, or even remains of Buddha statues. This does not change the fact that Buddhist stūpas are primarily tumuli that contain bodily relics of dead saints.

Buddhism was not alone in having stūpas. Jainism too, the other surviving religion that arose in Greater Magadha, had stūpas. Several early textual and epigraphical sources testify to this. One big Jaina stūpa has even been found by archeologists, in Mathurā. For reasons that need further elucidation, stūpas stopped playing a central role in Jainism from around the middle of the first millennium on. The Jaina Śvetāmbara canon contains a late story that explains why: the gods had taken the bodily remains of the Jinas to heaven, so there were none left to worship down on earth.[7]

Ajivikism is a religion from Greater Magadha that has not survived, nor have any of its texts (if it had any). All our information about it is to be derived from other sources. Some of these, studied by Gregory Schopen (1996: p. 571 ff. [337 ff.]), strongly suggest that this religion, too, had stūpas (or at least one stūpa, that of Pūraṇa).

Stūpas, then, were not a phenomenon confined to Buddhism. This is what the Buddhist passage studied earlier states in so many words: stūpas were originally built for political rulers, from where the custom was introduced into Buddhism. And not only into Buddhism. The other religions of Greater Magadha had them, too, at least for a certain period of time.

Presumably the same custom survived in the funerary habits that affected

7 Bronkhorst 2011: p. 225 ff.

holy men of a different type, too, the so-called saṃnyāsins.[8] Saṃnyāsins came to be incorporated into the Brahmanical order of things, but an analysis of their ideas shows that they did not originally belong there, that their ideas originally belonged to Greater Magadha.[9] One of the ways in which they remained distinct, even inside Brahmanism, lay in the fact that their bodies were not incinerated - like those of everyone else with links to Brahmanism - but buried in temporary constructions. Already some para-Vedic texts mention this custom, and it has survived until the present day. In certain cases the bodies of these holy men were put into solid constructions, called samādhi, presumably because the holy man was often believed to remain in a state of deep absorption (samādhi) inside these constructions. There are numerous samādhis of this kind in India. The earliest archeological traces of such constructions date from the 12th century. However, these samādhis should not be looked upon as a new phenomenon, but rather as a continuation of the earlier traditions attested to in those para-Vedic texts. In other words, there are good reasons to think that the tumuli called samādhis continue a tradition that originally belonged to Greater Magadha. Seen in this way, the stūpa-like tumuli that have been and are built all over India are manifestations of one single tradition, whose first historically graspable expressions are the stūpas of Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikism. If these stūpas are themselves descendants of Central Asian kurgans, it will then be possible to say that this particular Central Asian custom strongly influenced not only Buddhism, but other religious currents in India as well.

There is one important difference between the stūpas of Buddhism and Jainism on one hand, and the constructions built for saṃnyāsins and other Hindu ascetics on the other. Stūpas contain the incinerated remains (or parts of those) of Buddhist or Jaina saints, whereas the bodies of saṃnyāsins are not incinerated.

I have argued elsewhere that the line, not here reproduced, according to which the body of the king is cremated, is a later insertion. In other words, the body of a world-ruler was adorned and put in a tumulus, called stūpa in the Buddhist texts. The body of the Buddha may have undergone a similar treatment.[10]

8 Bronkhorst 2011: p. 208 ff.

9 Bronkhorst 1993: p. 1 ff.; 2007: p. 67 ff.

10 Bronkhorst 2011: p. 206.

This is not the moment to repeat the various arguments that plead in favor of an original absence of cremation in this account, and in the account of the treatment accorded to the dead body of the Buddha. To put a long story short, Buddhism became early in its history a religion of relic worshipers. Bodily relics of the Buddha accompanied the new religion wherever it went, and obviously a large supply of such relics was required to fulfill the needs of the faithful. The presumably earliest story, according to which the whole body of the Buddha had been put into one single stūpa did not therefore respond to expectation, and the story was improved, telling henceforth that the body of the Buddha had been cremated, and parts of the ashes and other remains distributed, originally to a small number of followers, to be subsequently divided, by Emperor Aśoka, into 84'000 portions.

The custom of putting the dead bodies of respectable persons - religious saints this time - into tumuli was not confined to Buddhism, as we have seen. Apart from Jainism, which abandoned the practice after some centuries, and Ajivikism, which disappeared, the custom survived among saints who were considered renouncers (saṃnyāsins).

This, then, is the hypthesis I propose to consider: The tradition of tumuli built for religious saints that existed, and still exists in India in various forms is a continuation of the habit of building tumuli for rulers that appears to have characterized Central Eurasian Culture. The form in which this habit survived in India is different from what we believe was the case in Central Eurasia. Most importantly, Buddhist stūpas and Hindu samādhis were not built for rulers, but for saints. The Buddhist texts claim, however, that the building of stūpas is a continuation of a custom that until the time of the Buddha had been reserved for kings, for world-rulers to be precise. Since there is no obvious reason why this claim should have been invented, we may be justified in taking the text at its word: Buddhism continued a tradition that had been secular, reserved for kings, and turned it into a religious custom.

The main obstacle this hypothesis has to face is the following: The archeological record has two big gaps. Traces of the Central Eurasian kurgan culture date from the second millennium BCE. The Buddha lived at least a thousand years later. This has led certain scholars to reject the possibility of a

historical link.[11] We may add that no pre-Buddhist tumuli have been found in the region of the Buddha. Then again, no samādhis have been identified in the archeological record from before 1200 CE. This has led some to postulate Islamic influence.[12]

One fact may explain both these gaps. The tumuli built for renouncers are not always elaborate structures. Sometimes they are very simple, made of earth, so simple that they are quickly washed away during the rains. Tumuli may have been simple for most of their history, and have left no archeological traces during most of that time. This, of course, is pure speculation for the time being.

The hypothesis is confronted with another difficulty. In an article called "Immigrant monks and the protohistorical dead: The Buddhist occupation of early burial sites in India" (1996a), Gregory Schopen has drawn attention to the fact that many Buddhist stūpas were built on megalithic burial grounds, including tumuli. Schopen states, for example (p. 239 [370]):

> The general resemblance and possible connection between an equally generalized Indian megalith and the Buddhist stūpa have been noted more than once. F. R. Allchin, for example, has said in regard to the "relic chamber" in a Buddhist stūpa that "these chambers were no more than stone cists and were often identical to the cists of the southern graves." He has as well noted that "there is close proximity in time of the earliest surviving stūpas and the cist graves" and asserted an "essential correspondence of their parts"; but he has declined to discuss the origins of either.[13] Piggot too has argued for a "correspondence" between the wooden pillars surrounding the old stūpa at Bairat and presumed "wooden fences … surrounding cairns and barrows" in pre-Mauryan India.[14]

The implicit suggestion is that stūpas continue a tradition of burial mounds that was initially present in southern India. If this is correct, the link

11 So Fussmann (2003: p. 803 n. 53) : "On ne peut [pas] dire que le kourgane survive dans le stupa bouddhique, monument d'origine funéraire certes, mais qui apparaît fort tard en Inde (pas avant le V^{e} siècle avant notre ère) et ne peut donc dériver des kourganes du II^{e} millénaire avant notre ère."

12 So Bakker (2007: p. 35): "How to explain that we have no archaeological evidence of this sort of ancient monuments of yogins, whereas we have innumerable ones of Buddhist saints?"

13 Schopen refers here to F. R. Allchin, "Sanskrit eḍūka - Pali eluka", BSOAS 20 (1957) pp. 1-4.

14 Reference to S. Piggot, "The earliest Buddhist shrines", Antiquity, Vol. 17, no. 65 (1943) pp. 1-10.

between stūpas and Central Eurasia become more tenuous, and a bit harder to maintain. Of course, it is not inconceivable that an aspect of the Central Eurasian Cultural Complex reached southern India before it took shape in the stūpas of the Buddhists and others. But obviously, the simple theory of Central Eurasian roots would have to be stretched to accommodate such recalcitrant facts, and looses thereby some of its plausibility.

This takes us to the more general question why influence would have to be postulated to explain the wide-spread existence of in principle rather simple constructions such as burial mounds. Is it not conceivable that burial mounds were "invented" many times over, in different places and at different times? If the simple existence of burial mounds, of whatever shape, proves Central Eurasian influence, such influence would have to be accepted for ancient Egypt, with its spectacular pyramids, too.[15] Yet no one has yet made this claim. We cannot but conclude that more evidence is required before we can conclude with confidence that stūpas continue a Central Eurasian custom. This additional evidence might be of different kinds. If stūpas were found that contained the bodily remains of rulers along with those of their circle of close followers (the comitatus members), the parallelism with the Central Eurasian custom would be striking (even though one would wish to convince ourselves that the funerary custom to bury rulers along with their closest associates was really an exclusive feature of the Central Eurasian Cultural Complex). Additional evidence might also take the shape of a package of Central Eurasian features, not necessarily directly related to each other, that reappeared in areas where stūpas were used. But to my knowledge no such additional evidence exists.

In spite of these reservations, let me briefly restate the hypothesis we are considering. Early Indo-Aryan immigrants brought with them, from Central Eurasia, a custom of putting the intact bodies of dead rulers in tumuli. This custom survived in the Indian subcontinent, initially or after a detour through the south, in the region where Buddhism and Jainism arose, i.e. the eastern part of the Ganges valley. However, before this custom made its first appearance in our sources, it had been modified in the following manner: rather than rulers, it was now religious leaders who received this honour. A further modification followed soon after, but only in Buddhism and presumably Jainism: the body of the religious leader was now cre-

15 Burial mounds are also found in America.

mated before the remains were put into one or more tumuli. This second modification was in all probability a response to the increasing importance of Brahmanical religion. Brahmanical religion, too, had Central Eurasian roots, but had not preserved the concern with tumuli. Quite on the contrary, dead bodies had here become sources of impurity that had to be cremated and discarded as soon as possible. The concern with purity, along with the need for relics, influenced Buddhism to the extent that it also began to cremate its dead bodies. In spite of this, the custom of inhumating the intact non-cremated bodies of religious saints in tumuli came to be incorporated, as a marginal custom, into Brahmanism, where it survives until today.

At the end of his book *Empires of the Silk Road*, Beckwith states (pp. 318-319):

> The earliest of the great civilizations known from archaeology - the Nile, Mesopotamia, Indus, and Yellow River valley cultures - were born in the fertile, agricultural periphery of Eurasia. But modern world culture does not derive from them. It comes from the challenging marginal lands of Central Eurasia.
>
> The dynamic, restless Proto-Indo-Europeans whose culture was born there migrated across and "discovered" the Old World, mixing with the local peoples and founding the Classical civilizations of the Greeks and Romans, Iranians, Indians, and Chinese. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance their descendants and other Central Eurasian peoples conquered, discovered, investigated, and explored some more, creating new world systems, the high arts, and the advanced sciences. Central Eurasians - not the Egyptians, Sumerians, and so on - are our ancestors. Central Eurasia is our homeland, the place where our civilization started.

These are high claims. There may be some or even much truth in them. But the claims are not obvious. I do not think that Beckwith's book has fully established them, and I am under the impression that much further research is required before we can feel secure to accept or reject them. My own reflections about the use of tumuli in India illustrates the difficulties. These tumuli may continue a Central Eurasian tradition, and the idea has a certain appeal. Crucial evidence to prove it is however hard to get. I hope others will be more successful than I.

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