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# The Buddhist Monuments of Adjina-tepa

**Vera Fominikh**

*State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg*

Adjina-tepa, a Buddhist monastery of the seventh century, provides important evidence for the history of Buddhism and its arts in Central Asia on the eve of the Arab conquest. The site is located in southern Tajikistan in the valley of the Vakhsh River, one of the main tributaries of the Panj. This part of the Vakhsh Valley has a long history of human settlement: prehistoric man lived on the upper (fourth and fifth) terraces of the valley. Beginning in the fourth-third centuries BCE, the extensive development of irrigation, especially along the eastern side of the valley, made intensive agriculture possible. The evidence of substantial settlement and prosperity continues through the Kushan period and on down to the time of the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For the most part life was concentrated on the third terrace, where it attained its maximum width of some 18–20 km in the region of the city of Kurgan-Tyube (Qurghontepa). Adjina-tepa stands on that terrace.

It is a modest elongated hill, which rises among cotton fields 12 km from Kurgan-Tyube

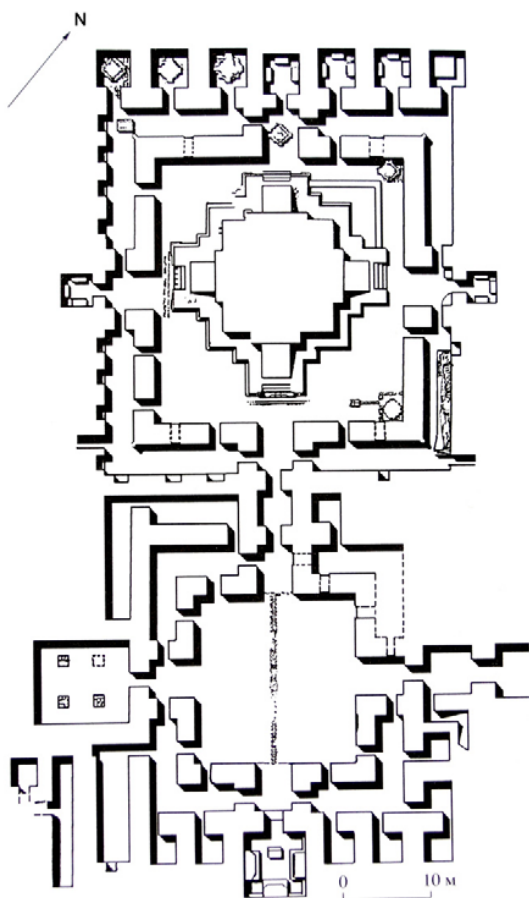
[Fig. 1] and is surrounded on three sides by abandoned irrigation ditches. As Boris A. Litvinskii and Tat'iana I. Zeimal', who supervised the excavations of the site, wrote, "from the road it is an unattractive place — formless mounds, some ditches, thickly overgrown with thorn bushes... Only when one climbs to the top of the hill can one understand that Adjina-tepa is the remains of a complex set of structures. What appears from the road as a formless accumulation of earth reveals when seen from above a rather regular rectangular shape (50 x 100 m), consisting of two equal squares divided by a partitioning wall" (Litvinskii and Zeimal' 1971, p. 14).

In 1960 the archaeologists dug two trenches here which showed that the buildings whose remains form the hill existed in the seventh–eighth centuries. Serious excavations were undertaken beginning in 1961. The features of the architectural layout exposed by the excavations and the remains of painting and sculpture discovered in various parts of the

building show that the ruins of Adjina-tepa constituted a single ensemble of the living quarters and religious structures of a Buddhist monastery [Fig. 2, facing page]. The southeastern half of the monument is the monastery part itself, consisting of structures built in a square around a court (19 x 19 m), which prior to excavation looked like a cup-shaped depression. In the center of the courtyard of the northwest half was a large stupa. The rooms surrounding it had primarily a religious purpose; among them were ones containing small stupas. As the evidence of the floors being on the same level suggests, the two major parts



Fig. 1. Map of Southern Tajikistan showing Vakhsh River and the location of Kurgan-Tyube, to the east of which is located Adjina-tepa. Adapted from: <<http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/tajikist.pdf>>.



After: Fominikh 2003, fig. 1

Fig. 2. Plan of Adjina-tepa.

of the complex probably were built at approximately the same time.

The basis for dating Adjina-tepa is the finds of money: seven years of excavation yielded some 300 coins. The collection contained primarily cast copper coins quite similar to the issues of Samarkandian Sogdia in the second half of the seventh to first half of the eighth centuries. The construction of the monastery seems to have occurred in the middle of the seventh century. The functioning of the site as a Buddhist monastery then lasted about a century, during which time renovations and repairs of the buildings and their decoration occurred. The Arab conquest of the region, which extended over many years up to the middle of the eighth century, led to the abandonment of the monastery, after which the best-preserved part of the buildings was reoccupied primarily as a production center by craftsmen. Coins found in the layer identified

with that final period of its use include Arab dirhams from 741/2, 751/2, and 779/780 CE.

The architecture of the monastery embodied the achievements and experiments of Central Asian architects intertwined with the achievements of the architectural schools of neighboring regions and countries. Construction materials included foundations made of large clay blocks, above which were layers of unbaked brick. Baked brick was used on floors and facings. Gypsum plaster was used extensively to cover surfaces such as that of the stupa. Both the stupa court and that of the monastery are faced on all four sides by eywan vestibules. Apart from the eywans, the architecture features vaulted ceilings of corridors and domes over some of the smaller rooms, with squiches at the transition zone connecting the square walls with the round dome. Such features here are amongst the earliest found in Central Asian architecture and probably point toward a close connection between the architecture of Buddhist structures and early Islamic period forms such as those found in domed mausolea and madrasas. The small arched galleries are an innovation designed in part to relieve pressures created by the vaults and domes. In general, one can speak of a creative mastery of architectural forms which looks both back to earlier developments and forward to the Islamic period.

While for the most part the artistic decoration of Adjina-tepa has been preserved only in a fragmentary state, the site yielded more than 500 works of art: sculptures, reliefs, and mural paintings. At one time, the walls and ceilings of almost every room forming the perimeter of the stupa were decorated, as were several rooms in the monastery half of the site. The painting was done soon (or immediately) after the construction of the whole building. In the subsequent stages of renovation during the century the monastery was active, the painting in general was not renewed but simply painted over with different compositions.

The painting fragments include specifically religious imagery, donor images and decorative motifs. It is difficult to reconstruct iconography, except to note that there were scenes of the Buddha and disciples and "thousand Buddha" compositions with rows of seated Buddhas with nimbuses and mandorlas [Fig. 3, next page].





After: Litvinskii and Zeimal' 1971, pl. 14, p. 173

Fig. 3. A seated Buddha. Mural painting from room 28.

Possibly here were illustrations to the *Lotus Sutra*. The artists' skill in depicting Buddhist images can be seen in the variation of the multiple Buddha images, which do not simply



After: Litvinskii and Zeimal' 1971, pl. 9, p. 169

Fig. 4. A female head. Mural painting from room 1.

reiterate a single pattern. Preserved among the paintings are parts of a composition depicting an elegant female head in three-quarter view [Fig. 4], her hair elaborately coiffed and wearing elaborate gold jewelry. It seems as though the artists were less skilled when depicting the donors, where the models may well have been members of the local population of Tokharistan. In the rubble under the floor was a sizeable fragment showing two male figures in white clothes in a pose of deep genuflection [Fig. 5]. Their hands extended forward and to the right hold gifts in gold and silver bowls. A pearl-decorated band can be seen above the heads, separating them from whatever the now lost figures were in the upper register.



After: Litvinskii and Zeimal' 1971, pl. 4, p. 165

Fig. 5. Two donors. Mural painting from room 31.

The rubble with sculptured remains and fragments of murals covers the floor of the room in the sanctuary in a thick layer as much as 75 cm deep. The compactness of the rubble and its richness allows one to posit that it was intentionally formed: sculptures which stood on pedestals were toppled onto the floor and broken. All that remained of figures at one time arrayed on pedestals were parts of the folds of garments which draped over the walls of the facade of the sanctuary. In the southern corner of the room (between two pedestals) was found the upper part of the head of a large sculpted figure with appliqué curls of hair in spirals, painted in blue. The diameter of the head was about 90 cm. Apparently a huge statue of a divinity was in this room. Judging from the size





Fig. 6. Head of a Bodhisattva. Moulded clay. From room 27.

After: Litvinskii and Zeimal' 1971, pl. 47, p. 193

of the head, if this statue was a seated one, its height would have been about 4 m; if a standing figure, it would have measured about 7 m. Moreover, there were other less sizeable sculptures: the head of a Buddha, the head of a Bodhisattva [Fig. 6], etc., all of which provide important

the renowned sculptures from the Monastery of Fondukistan in Afghanistan [cf. Figs. 7, 8].

The best known archaeological discovery at Adjina-tepa was the clay statue of the Buddha in Nirvana. The excavation in 1966 of the circumambulation corridor (room 23) unearthed a larger than life-size clay statue of a Parinirvana Buddha, whose lower parts from the waist down and left arm and hand (extending down along the body) were largely well preserved [Figs. 9, 10, next page]. Only fragments of the upper body, head and right hand were found. The original length of the figure was approximately 12 m. The robe was draped over the body in artfully sculpted folds and painted red, with the exposed skin of the face, hands and feet painted white.

The statue was removed in 72 pieces and preliminary conservation undertaken initially under the supervision of and primarily following methods developed by P. I. Kostrov for preserving paintings and clay sculpture at Panjikent. The restoration work was continued by L. P. Novikova. When the statue was removed, the underlying support structure of brick was left in place: that is, it was the layers of moulded clay which were saved for reassembly.

There was a long hiatus in the reconstruction work, which was resumed in the year 2000 under the supervision of the author of this article (Fominikh 2003). Since the drying out of the fragments over more than three decades had led to distortion of the original shape, and since the processes used to preserve the paint had resulted in differential coloring of various pieces, the restoration process was extremely complicated. The sculpted layers were re-mounted on a



(left) after: Litvinskii/Zeimal' 1971, pl. 40, p. 188; (right) © 2007 Daniel Waugh



Fig. 7 (left). Torso of a Bodhisattva. Moulded clay. From room 25.

Fig. 8 (right). A Naga king. Moulded clay. Ghorband Valley, Afghanistan, Fondukistan Monastery, Niche D, 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Musée Guimet, Paris.

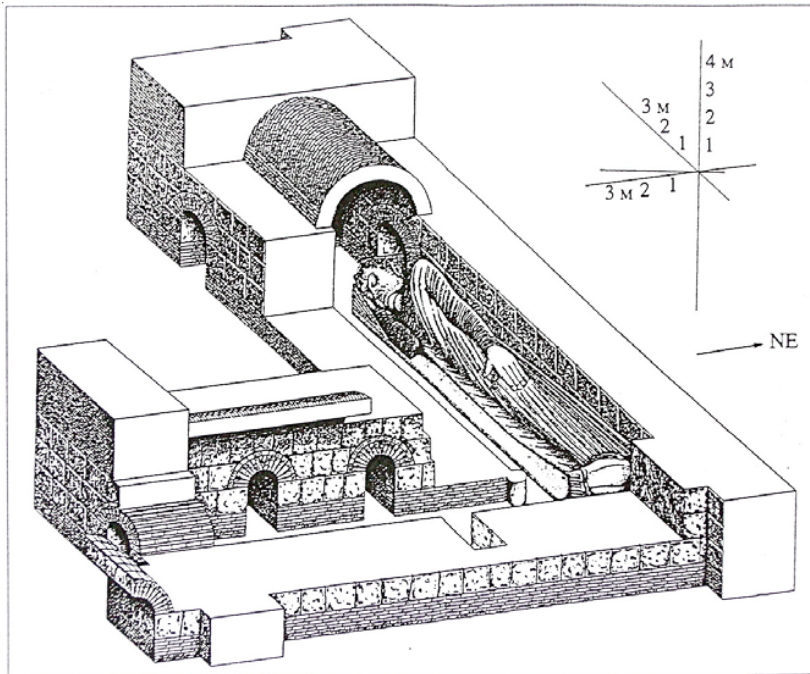
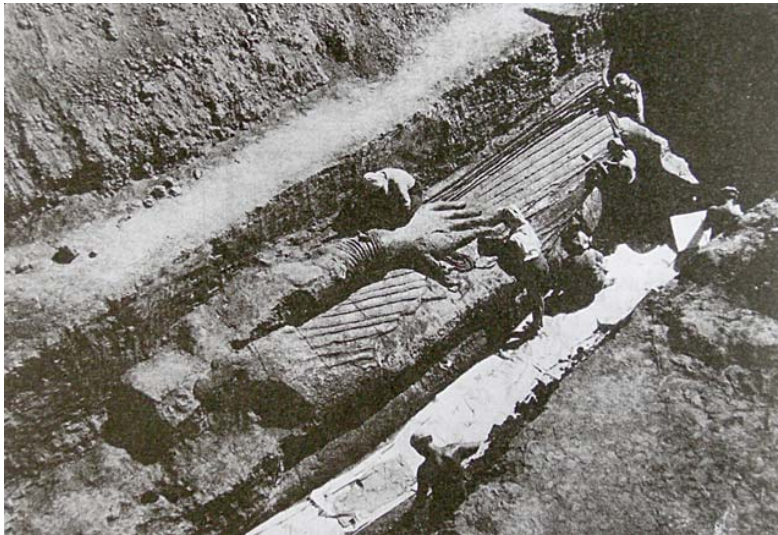


Fig. 9 (top). The Parinirvana Buddha — drawing reconstructing its original appearance and location.

Fig. 10 (middle). The Parinirvana Buddha in situ during excavation.

wooden frame, the missing sections filled in with an approximate reproduction, and the seams then smoothed over. As Maurizio Taddei noted, the “most significant comparison, in terms of both typology and chronology” for the Adjina-tapa Buddha is with the somewhat later one found at Tapa-Sardar in Afghanistan (Taddei 1974, p. 114). Despite the fact that the latter is less fully preserved, it helped considerably in the reconstruction of the Adjina-tapa Buddha. The restored statue

After Fominikh 2003, p. 137



After: Litvinskii and Zelman', pl. 3, p. 164

may be seen today in the National Museum of Antiquities in Dushanbe [Fig. 11].

The architecture, painting and sculpture of Adjina-tapa bear witness to the high level of development of these arts in Central Asia in the region of southern Tajikistan in the early Middle Ages. Its architecture contains innovations which anticipate buildings in the Islamic period. The painting and sculpture bear witness to the flourishing Buddhist culture of southern Tajikistan on the eve of the Arab





conquests. The monumental Parinirvana Buddha is a particularly important example of Buddhist sculpture which deserves to be better known.

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### About the author

**Vera A. Fominikh** has worked as an artist-restorer in the the Laboratory for the Scientific Restoration of Monumental Paintings in the State Hermitage Museum since 1983, where she is now the lead senior restoration specialist. For 17 years she participated in the Central Asian expeditions of Boris Marshak, working in Panjikent, Paikent, Samarkand and Dushanbe. Since 1994 she is a member of the St. Petersburg Union of Artists.

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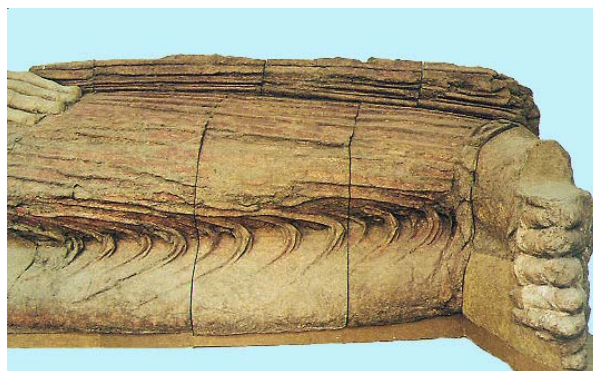
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Fig. 11. The reconstructed Parinirvana Buddha, on display in the National Museum of Antiquities, Dushanbe.



After: Fominikh 2003, pl. 7b