



Inscribed Buddhist Tablets from Merv¹

STEFAN BAUMS

LUDWIG MAXIMILIAN UNIVERSITY OF MUNICH

I. Historical Background and Discovery

In the year 1962, during excavations in the south-eastern corner of the Gyaur-kala site in the city of Merv (Turkmenistan), archeologists of the South Turkmenistan Archeological Complex Expedition discovered the remains of a large monastic complex and of a stūpa adjoining it to the north (Masson 1963) (fig. 1). A cross-section of the stūpa revealed five distinct architectural phases, beginning with a plain and modestly-sized drum and platform in the first phase (dated numismatically to the 4th century C.E. or later), and culminating in a large new stūpa in the fourth phase (around 500 C.E.), built on the ruins of the older one, with a drum 11 meters in diameter on a platform measuring 15.6 × 15.4 meters. Unusual features of this new stūpa included a compartment surrounding the drum that could be entered on the western side, and a ceremonial stairway leading up to the platform on its northern side. Already by the end of the 6th century, however, the Buddhist community of Merv abandoned the Gyaur-kala stūpa and resettled outside the city (Pugačenkova and Usmanova 1995: 61).

On the northern side of the abandoned stūpa, to the west of the stairway, the archeological expedition found the buried head of a large buddha statue (75 cm high) and a painted vase containing birch-bark manuscript sheets (Koshelenko 1966).² Close by, a chance find revealed an earthenware reliquary in the shape of a small stūpa (62 cm high) that had been removed from the abandoned stūpa (fig. 2). In its new location, the reliquary was “surrounded by a brick wall reaching to its full height and roofed over with bricks. After the transfer of the reliquary, a niche was built above it around whose edge there were seven identical clay tablets with images” (Pugačenkova and Usmanova 1995: 60, 65–66, 68–70).³ These clay

tablets and the inscription they contain are studied in the following.

II. Description of the Tablets (figs. 3 and 4)

The tablets measure 13.2 × 12.6 cm and are made from grey clay. They were most recently preserved in Samarkand State University (Vertogradova 1998: 202). Two of the tablets have been illustrated in the scholarly literature (Tablet 1: Pugačenkova and Usmanova 1994: p. 165, fig. 17; Pugačenkova and Usmanova 1995: p. 70, fig. 19;⁴ Staviskii 1998: 101; Tablet 2: Mkrtychev 2002: p. 192, figs. 1 and 2). The description and decipherment in this article are based on large-format black-and-white photographs of these two tablets kindly provided by Nona Avanesova (Samarkand State University) and Kazim Abdullaev (Uzbek Academy of Sciences), and by Tigran Mkrtychev (State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow).

In the center of the tablets, a buddha sits cross-legged on a lotus throne. His right hand rests on his leg, while his left hand holds an unidentified rectangular object. The buddha wears a cloak with triangular openings for the arms, and is adorned with a necklace and a crown containing three stylized flowers. His head and body are surrounded by a nimbus, and two ribbons float in the air behind his shoulders. On the left side, a standing figure is turned towards the buddha, head slightly lowered and right hand raised as though in conversation. The figure wears a necklace, and its head is covered by what appears to be a close-fitting hat. Its head and body are likewise surrounded by a nimbus, and a ribbon floats behind its right shoulder. In its lowered left hand, the standing figure holds an object that can be interpreted as a water flask,

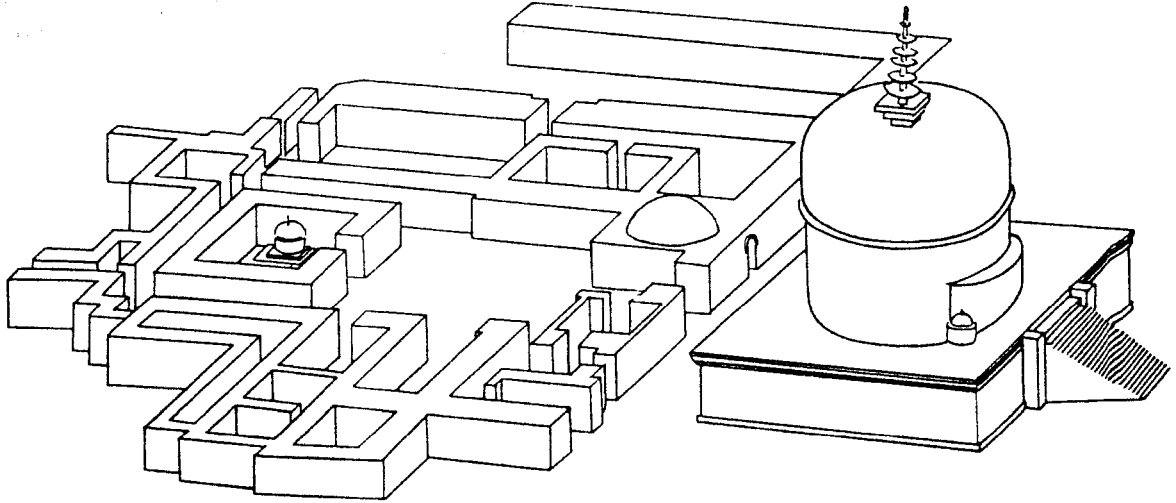


Fig. 1. Gyaur-kala monastery and stupa. After Pugachenkova and Usmanova 1994: 151.

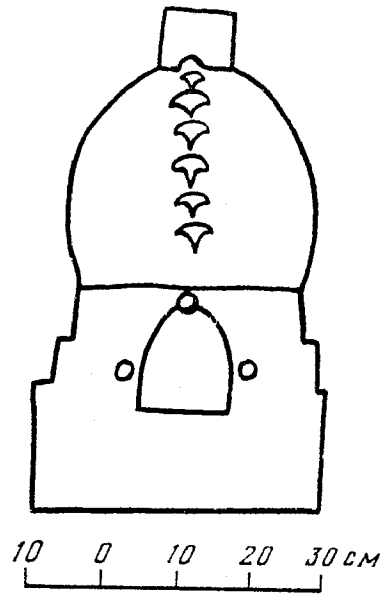


Fig. 2. Gyaur-kala earthenware reliquary. After Pugachenkova and Usmanova 1994: 163.



Fig. 3. Merv Tablet 1 (mirrored). Photo: Courtesy of Nona Avanesova and Kazim Abdullaev.



Fig. 4. Merv Tablet 2 (mirrored). Photo: Courtesy of Tigran Mkrtichev.

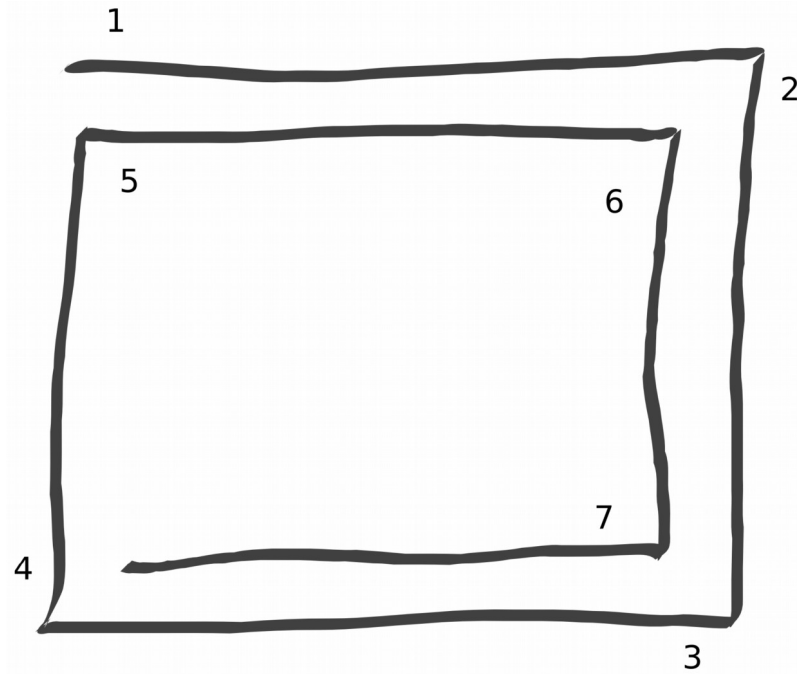


Fig. 5. Arrangement and order of lines on tablet matrix.

and it seems very likely that here we have a representation of the bodhisattva Maitreya. A richly decorated stūpa is depicted in the distance on the right, its body perched atop no less than four stacked platforms and surmounted by a spire with at least four parasols, decked out with garlands and banners, and ending in three prongs (possibly representing the three jewels of Buddhism).

The two figures and the stūpa are surrounded by an inscription in seven lines that starts in the top left above the head of the Maitreya figure and runs around the rim of the tablet in a clockwise spiral, such that the feet of letters always point towards the central scene (fig. 5). The script is a regular Gupta Brāhmī of the 3rd to 5th centuries C.E. (Sander 1968: pl. 9–20, group A); the language of the inscription is Sanskrit.

One puzzling and important property of the tablets is that—based on the evidence of the photographs and all published illustrations—the scene and inscription are represented in mirror image of their natural orientation, which may explain why neither a complete reading nor an accurate translation of the inscription has yet been published.⁵

The reason for this state of affairs would appear to be that the tablets were produced from a matrix—most likely a copper plate—that was not originally intended for the purpose of making reproductions by impression. Readability of the inscription was evidently of secondary importance to those who produced the clay impressions and arranged them in the niche above the reliquary. The above description of the scene and inscription on the tablets is based on their proper orientation, and in the illustrations in this article the tablet is horizontally flipped to make the inscription readable and present the composition as originally intended.

III. Reading and Translation of the Inscription

In the following, both witnesses for the inscription are presented line by line, with Tablet 1 on top and Tablet 2 below. In general, illegible portions on one or the other tablet can be due either to insufficient contact of the matrix with the clay, or to subsequent damage.

Line 1

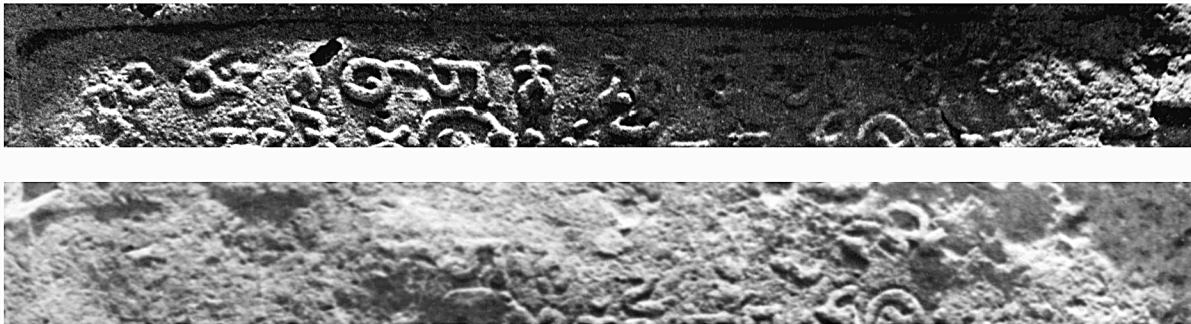


dharmāhe[tavaḥ ||] (*ye dharmā he)tupra[bha]v[ā] (*he)tu[s] t[e]

The first word is *dharmāhe[tavaḥ]*, with a reasonably clear *ta*, and a *va* of which only the top part remains. The visarga can be barely made out on Tablet 1, and is not visible on Tablet 2. The double-daṇḍa punctuation mark is clear on Tablet 1, and the upper tip of its left half is preserved on Tablet 2. In view of the following, *dharmāhetavaḥ* should be taken as a dvandva compound “factors and (their) cause,” stating the topic. It is followed by a long gap until almost the end of the line on Tablet 1, but Tablet 2 has a smaller gap followed by *tupra[bha]v[ā]*, and

then a lacuna until the end of the line. The reading so far makes it likely that we have to do with the so-called *ye dharmā* formula (Skilling 1999), and this is borne out by the following. The next to last akṣara on Tablet 1 is a clear *tu*. No trace of preceding *he* or of the expected anusvāra is preserved, and the following akṣara is a conjunct starting with the angular shape of what appears to be a *s*, followed by *t[e]* with an indistinct vowel mātrā. I propose to read a Hybrid Sanskrit accusative singular form *hetus* (Edgerton 1953: § 12.27).⁶

Line 2

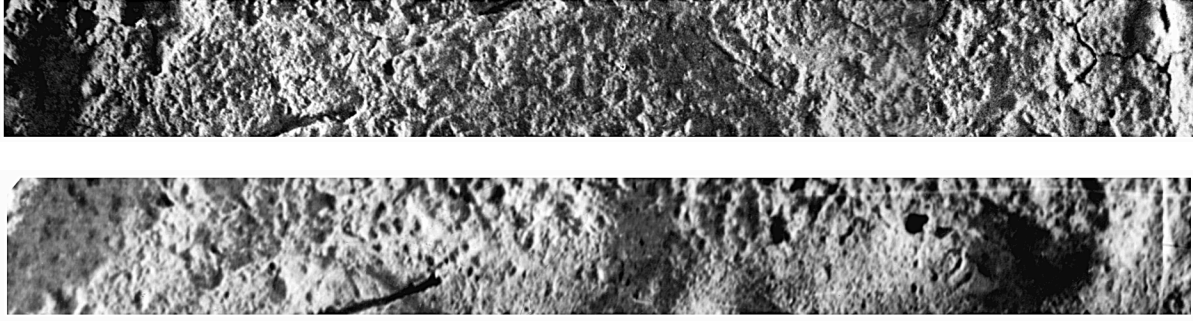


ṣā[ṃ] tathāgato hy avada[t*] te[ṣ](*āṃ ca)

This line is exceptionally well preserved on Tablet 1. After concluding the last word of the preceding line as *t[e]ṣā[ṃ]*, the words *tathāgato hy avada[t*]* can be read without a doubt. In the last akṣara, the top line of the virāma and top of the letter *ta* are clear, and only the bottom of *ta* is indistinct. Tablet 2 preserves parts of each akṣara of these words starting with *thā*. Of the

last two words, only the akṣara *te* can be read clearly on both tablets, and a corner of *ṣā* appears to be preserved on Tablet 2. In place of the remainder of this akṣara and following *ca*, both tablets contain a raised patch of clay, suggesting that in this corner the matrix itself was damaged.

Line 3

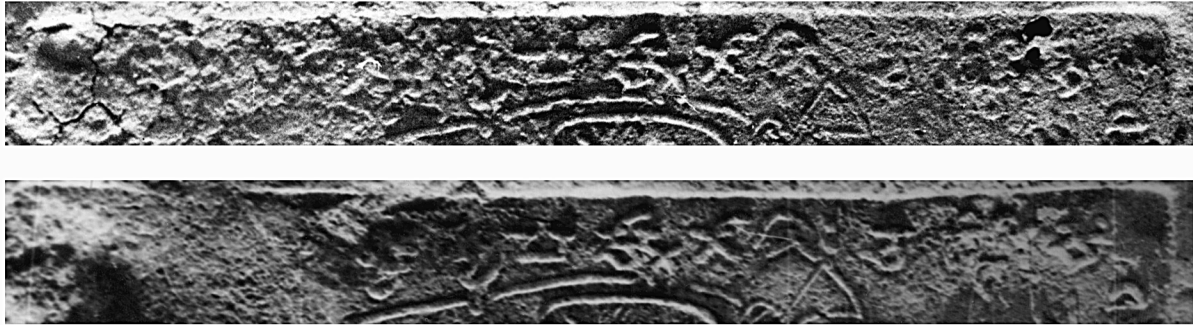


(*yo nirodha evaṃvādī mahāśramaṇaḥ)

This line is completely lost on both tablets, with a stretch of rough clay surface taking its place, and again it seems not unlikely that the matrix

was damaged along this edge. The available space would have allowed for completion of the remainder of the *ye dharmā* formula as reconstructed.

Line 4



(*catvāri) [smṛt]yupastānāni ca[tvāri saṃ]

The first word of this line is lost on both tablets, still probably due to damage of the matrix. The first visible akṣaras (clearer on Tablet 2 than 1) are *smṛtyupa*, followed by *stā* (instead of correct

sthā) and *nāni*. In the next word, *ca* and subscript *va* are clear, while only garbled traces of the other letter shapes remain. The line concludes with *saṃ*, the first akṣara of the following word.

Line 5



myakprahāṇāni catvāro [ri](*)dh(*ipā)dāḥ

The word continues with *myakprahā* and (visible on Tablet 1 only) *ṇāni*. Together with the preceding, the word *saṃmyakprahāṇāni* suggests the beginning of the list of the *bodhipakṣika dharma* (Gethin 1992), and this is confirmed by the rest

of the inscription. The next item is *catvāro [ri]-(*d)dh(*ipā)dāh*, with the spelling *ri* in place of initial *r*. The akṣaras *ro ri* are not visible on Tablet 1, but otherwise the states of preservation of both tablets are similar.

Line 6

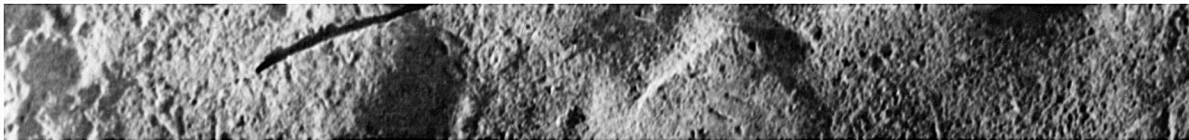


paṃcendṛ(*yā)ṇi [·] paṃca balāni [·] sapta

The fourth item in the list is *paṃcendṛ(*yā)ṇi*, with the spelling *ḍṛ* for *dri*, and *yā* accidentally omitted by the scribe or engraver of the matrix. Only the last akṣara of this item is visible on Tablet 2. The fifth item, separated from the preced-

ing by a punctuation dot, is a very clear *paṃca balāni*. This in turn is followed by a small dot and the number word *sapta* (only the first akṣara of which is visible on Tablet 1).

Line 7



(*bo)[d]dhya(*ṃ)[g](*ā)[ni ā]ry(*ā)[ṣṭā](*ṃ)[ga](*mār)[ga](*h)

The last line of the inscription, located upside down at the bottom of the tablets, concludes the *ye dharmā formula*. The first akṣara and the last two akṣaras are mostly lost on Tablet 1, but the remainder of the sixth and seventh items of the formula (*boddhyaṃgāni* and *āryāṣṭāṃgamārgaḥ*) are legible with only occasional lack of clarity. The only trace of this line that can be made out

on Tablet 2 are parts of the two akṣaras *ni ā*. Both tablets show a sharp incision at their lower right corner, at the beginning of this line. Keeping in mind that line 3, which would have appeared just outside the present line, is lost without trace because of possible damage to the matrix (see above), it is possible that the sharp incision on both tablets was caused by a bent-over edge of the matrix.

Combining the individual lines in their proper order, we arrive at the following text and translation for the inscription:

[1] dharmāhe[tavaḥ ||] (*ye dharmā he)tupra-
[bha]v[ā] (*he)tu[s] t[e][2]śā[m] tathāgato hy
avada[t*] te[ś](*āṃ ca) [3] (*yo nirodha evaṃvādī
mahāśramaṇaḥ) [4] (*catvāri) [smṛt]yupastānāni
ca[tvāri saṃ][5]myakprahāṇāni catvāro [ri]-
(*d)dh(*ipā)dāḥ [6] paṃcendr<*yāṇi [·] paṃca
balāni [·] sapta [7] (*bo)[d]dhya(*m)[g](*)ā[ni ā]-
ry(*ā)[ṣṭā](*)m)[ga](*)mār)[ga](*)ḥ

Factors and their cause: Those factors that arise from a cause—the Tathāgata has declared their cause and which cessation there is of them. Thus speaks the great ascetic. Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Four Right Abandonings, Four Bases of Magical Power, Five Faculties, Five Forces, Seven Limbs of Enlightenment, the Eightfold Path of the Noble Ones.

IV. Discussion

Pugačenkova and Usmanova 1995: 69 suggest that while the clay tablets were produced in Merv, the matrix that was used for their production was imported “from some large centre of Buddhism,” on the evidence of the script of the inscription and the form of the depicted stūpa. It is true that the stūpa shown on the tablets is very different in construction from both the great stūpa of Gyaurla and the small stūpa reliquary next to which the tablets were placed (figs. 1 and 2). Stūpas of the kind that we see on the Merv tablets—with a tall body, surmounted by a spire and parasols that in the side view assume a diamond shape, adorned with garlands and banners—are depicted in the rock carvings of the upper Indus valley. A particularly striking parallel is a composition in Chilas I that combines a central standing Maitreya (right hand raised, ribbons on both sides of his head, nimbus surrounding head and body), a stūpa of the type in question in the background on the right, and another standing figure with raised hand and nimbus on the left (von Hinüber 1989: p. 86, nos. 83–84a and pl. 158). It is thus very likely that the matrix used for the Merv tablets—probably a copper plate—was brought to Merv from the Greater Gandhāran cultural area.

The first of the two parts of the inscription—the *ye dharmā* formula—has its canonical source in the exchange between Śāriputra and Āśvajit, in which Āśvajit presents the formula, a verse in the āryā meter, as a summary of the teaching of the Buddha. The account in the Pali Vinaya (I 40.19–29) is as follows:

kiṃvādī panāyasmato satthā kimakkhāyīti.
ahaṃ kho āvuso navo acirapabbajito adhu-
nāgato imaṃ dhammavinayaṃ. na tāhaṃ sak-
komi vitthārena dhammaṃ desetum, api ca
te saṃkhittena atthaṃ vakkhāmīti. atha kho
Śāriputto paribbājako āyasmantaṃ Assajiṃ
etad avoca: hotu āvuso,

appaṃ vā bahuṃ vā bhāssassu
atthaṃ yeva me brūhi
attheneva me attho
kiṃ kāhasi vyañjanaṃ bahun⁷

ti. atha kho āyasmā Assaji Śāriputtassa pari-
bbājakassa imaṃ dhammapariyāyaṃ abhāsi:

ye dhammā hetuppabhavā
tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha
tesaṃ ca yo nirodho
evaṃvādī mahāsamaṇo

ti.

“What is the doctrine of your teacher, sir, what is his instruction?” “Now I, sir, am new, have recently gone forth, have only just now come to the teaching and discipline. I cannot show you the teaching at length, but I shall tell you the meaning in brief.” Then the mendicant Śāriputta said to the venerable Assaji: “So be it, sir,

Speak a little or a lot,
just tell me the meaning.
The meaning is what I need,
why should you make a lot of words?”

Then the venerable Assaji spoke this exposition of the teaching:

“Those factors that arise from a cause—
the Tathāgata has declared their cause
and which cessation there is of them.
Thus speaks the great ascetic.”

Śāriputra subsequently repeats the stanza to Mahāmaudgalyāyana. The account of this repe-

tition in the Mahāvastu (III 62.8–9) preserves an early Sanskrit version of the *ye dharmā* formula:

ye dharmā hetuprabhāvā
hetun teṣāṃ tathāgato āha
teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha
evaṃvādi mahāśramaṇaḥ

Other Sanskrit versions (such as the one on the Merv tablets) exhibit different Sanskritization strategies (using, in our case, *hy avadat* in place of *āha*); Skilling 1999 proposes a typology of the variants of the formula.

The Buddhist tradition and modern scholarship have generally taken the *ye dharmā* formula as equivalent to the formula of Dependent Arising, one of the two central insights of the Buddha (the other being the Four Truths),⁸ and the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Xuanzang and Yijing report on the Indian Buddhist custom of producing copies of the formula on objects that would assume the status of relics and could be installed in stūpas (Skilling 2005: 693). Modern archaeology has provided ample confirmation for this practice in India itself (see Boucher 1991 for further references; Sander 2002 is a notable example on a copper plate), as well as in Southeast Asia (Skilling: 1999, 2003) and in the Northwest (Taddei 1970; Vertogradova 1990; Strauch 2000).

Inscriptional combinations of the *ye dharmā* formula with other doctrinal formulae (the *bodhipakṣika dharma* in the case of the Merv tablets) are also known from other parts of the Buddhist world. One of the Maunggun gold leaves (6th–7th c. C.E.; Tun Nyein 1898–1899; Finot 1912), for instance, contains the *ye dharmā* formula followed by (1) the four *ṛddhipāda*, (2) the four *samyakpradhāna*, (3) the four *smṛtyupasthāna*, (4) the four *āryasatya*, (5) the four *vaiśāradya*, (6) the five *indriya*, (7) the five *cakṣu*, (8) the six *asādhāraṇa*, (9) the seven *bodhyaṅga*, (10) the *āryāṣṭāṅgikamārga*, (11) the nine *lokoṭtaradharmā*, (12) the ten *bala*, (13) the fourteen *buddhajñāna* and (14) the eighteen *buddhadharma*. Items 3, 2, 1, 6, 12, 9, 10 from this list, in this order, constitute the *bodhipakṣika dharma*;⁹ see Bronkhorst 1985 for a wider discussion of the relationship of the *bodhipakṣika dharma* to other lists of doctrinal terms. Conversely, the Śrī Kṣetra gold leaves (5th c. C.E.; Falk 1997) and the Nakhon Pathom stone inscription (ca. 6th–7th c. C.E.; Skilling 1997: 123–33) combine the full *pratītyasamutpāda* formula with the

bodhipakṣika dharma, illustrating the equivalence of the former with the *ye dharmā* formula.

The Merv tablets are the only example so far of a combined *ye dharmā* and *bodhipakṣika dharmā* inscription, in the Northwest or anywhere else, and they deserve special attention for the juxtaposition of these formulae with their iconography, and because of the rich information that is available for their secondary ritual use in the relic deposit next to the Gyaur-kala stūpa.

Notes

1. It is a pleasure to present this article as a small token of gratitude to my teacher Richard Salomon, in appreciation of his scholarship and humanity, and in happy recollection of our travels to Central Asia in 2005 and 2006 that brought us closer to the enigmatic objects of this study.

2. The manuscript sheets remain unedited in the Grabar Scientific Conservation Center in Moscow (Vorob'eva-Desiatovskaia 1983: 69; Vertogradova 1998: 202).

3. According to Vertogradova 1998: 201–2, ten tablets were found. Vertogradova goes on to state, incorrectly, that three anthropomorphic figures are depicted on each tablet.

4. It is unclear whether the rubbing reproduced in Pugačenkova and Usmanova 1995: p. 69, fig. 18 is of the same tablet.

5. Von Hinüber 2004: p. 996, fn. 18 transcribes the first two lines of the inscription.

6. Von Hinüber 2004: p. 996, fn. 18 similarly reads the last akṣara as *st(*e)*, but reconstructed the phrase on the basis of Tablet 1 only as *(*ye dharmahetuprabhāvā)s t(*e)ṣāṃ*, deviating from the expected formula.

7. Alsdorf 1968: 64–66 compares this verse (printed as prose in Oldenberg's edition) with its Sanskrit parallels and discusses metrical problems in its various versions.

8. A notable different opinion is that of Lamotte 1958: 547 who refers to the formula as the “stance fameuse communiquée autrefois par Aśvajit à Śāriputra et qui résume si bien les quatre vérités saintes,” presumably influenced by the presence of the word *nirodha*.

9. The ten *bala* of the tathāgata here take the place of the five *bala* of the shorter formula.

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