

Reconstruction of the Zurmala Buddhist Stupa in Termez, Uzbekistan

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a reconstruction of the general appearance of the Zurmala Buddhist stupa – one of the non-vernacular architectural structures in Termez. It also analyzed architectural decoration elements, discovered around Zurmala stupa and neighbored territories of the settlement Old Termez. The basis for the reconstruction is the archaeological data obtained from investigation of this stupa and the results of a comparative analysis of stupas located both in the Bactria-Tokharistan region and the entire Kushan state.

Keywords: *Stupa, Bactria, Kushan, Zurmala, architectural decor, reconstruction.*

1. Introduction

Buddhism and Buddhist culture left a profound imprint on the history of the peoples of Central Asia. It was especially manifested in architecture, and particularly in religious buildings, such as temples, monasteries and stupas. The latter are distinguished by their monumentality, spatial composition and architectural decors. Unfortunately, these cult monuments have not survived in their original form. Scant written sources do not give a complete picture of their original appearance. Only archaeological investigations allow their remains and architectural details to be revealed. At present, Buddhist stupas are registered in the south of Uzbekistan (Surkhandarya region), a territory once part of the historical and cultural area – Bactria-Tokharistan. All of them relate to Kushan times, i.e., I-III centuries A.D. (Fig. 1). Many of them, for example the stupas at Ayrтам, Fayaztepa and Karatepa are located on the territory either directly adjacent to the city of Termez, or in its immediate vicinity.

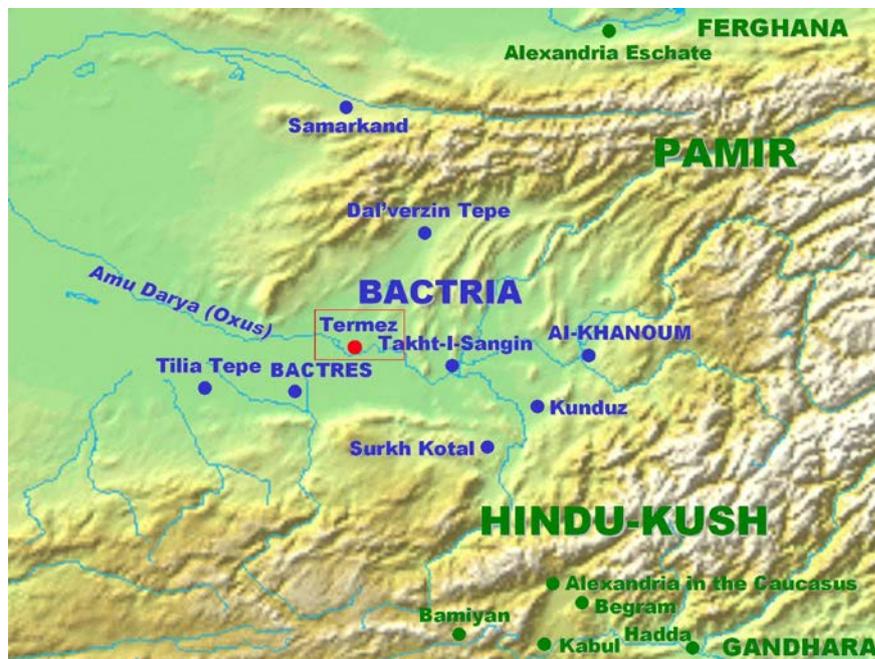


Figure 1. The map of the Ancient Bactria (source: cs.wikipedia.org)

2. The History of Study of the Zurmala Stupa

The Zurmala stupa is located on the southeastern side of the site of Old Termez (10 km from the modern city of Termez). Local historians first noted the monument in the early 20th century. In 1926, A.S. Strelkov, member of the

expedition of the Museum of Oriental Cultures (Moscow), led by B.P. Denike, investigated Zurmala and identified it as a Buddhist stupa. One year later, one of the members of the expedition of the MOC, architect B.N. Zasytkin, on the instructions of “Sredazkomstaris” (Central Asia Committee of Art Heritage), drew the schematic plan of the structure. According to M. Masson, the participants of this expedition discovered near Zurmala a large stone base of a column of classical (attic) profile, deposited then in the Museum [1]. Today, of the monument, the cylinder-shaped body has been preserved, although many parts of its external brickwork have been lost already long ago. On the south side of the building is a pit, left by local inhabitants in search of a reliquary with valuable jewelry items.

After a long break, in 1964-1965 G.A. Pugachenkova and Z.A. Khakimov measured the structure and conducted small archaeological excavations. Studies have revealed that the structure was built of mud-bricks (32×32×12 cm) typical of the architecture of Kushan Bactria. The author of the publication of excavations cites statistics according to which 1,200,000 raw bricks were used for the construction of the stupa. As the base of the stupa was cleared, a rectangular platform (22×16 m) 1.4 m high was revealed. It is oriented to the cardinal points. On this platform, a huge cylindrical stupa body (13 m high), which is a tower-shaped raw monolith with a diameter of 14.5 m, rested (Fig. 2 a, b). Based on the size of the mud-bricks and fragments of antique ceramics found during excavation, the monument was dated to the time of Kanishka I. Besides the pottery sherds, numerous fragments of stone slabs and various architectural details have been found in the area around the stupa. Among them are sculptural friezes, stone blocks, cornices, towers, pilasters, etc. [2]. Studies of the stupa diameters showed that the close diameter of the stupas was about 14.5-15 m, recorded in the complex of Buddhist structures Nagarjunakonda (stupas Nos. 5, 6 and 21), as well as for the Phil Khan stupa near the city of Jalalabad [3].

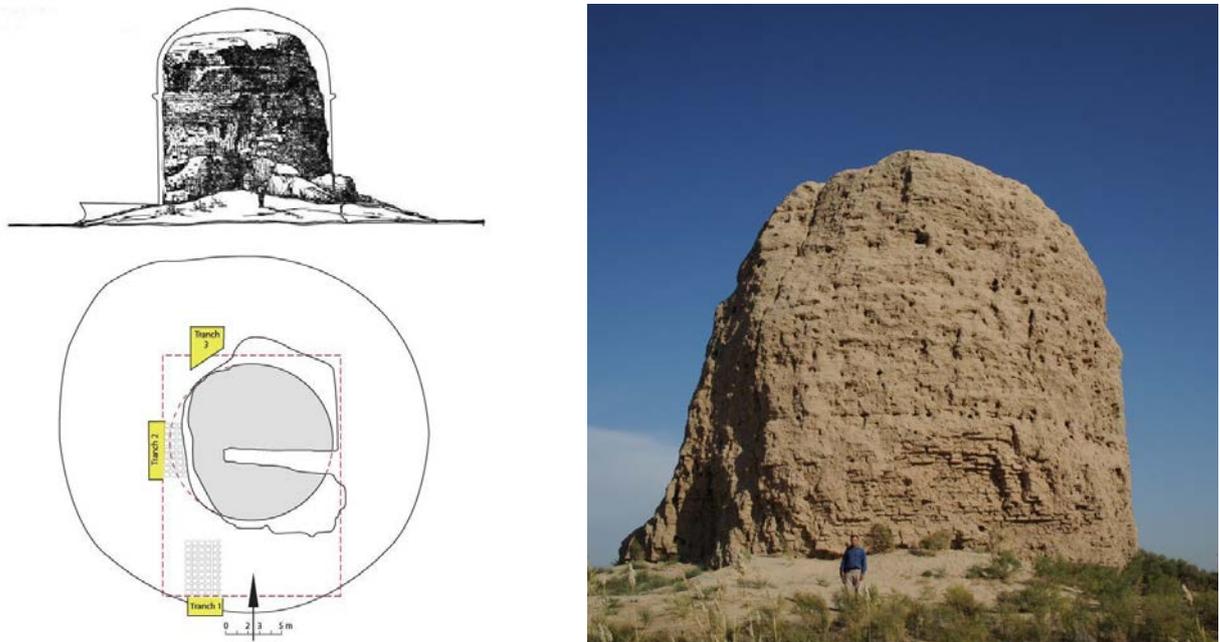


Figure 2. Zurmala Stupa. a) Plan and Drawing Profile (By G.Pugachenkova, 1967);
b) Photo (author H.Furusko, 2008)

2. Architectural and decoration elements, found around of the Zurmala Stupa

Noteworthy among them is the famous stone bas-relief found in the northeastern part of Zurmala in the late 1960s. The fragment, in a much-damaged state, is 60 cm high. It is made of a block of white limestone. On the flat face of the block is a two-tier composition, associated with Buddhist symbolism. The upper register depicts a Bodhisattva seated cross-legged in *podmasana* under the sacred tree of Bodhi. In the lower register is a Buddha surrounded by the laity. His hands are in *dharmachakramudra*. The faces of both characters were mostly broken, but their head halos still remained. The plate, apparently, was part of an entire multi-figure composition, depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha. In addition, around the stupa were found stone slabs and blocks, which probably were part of this platform design. One of the plates is rectangular (35×27×3 cm), and the other with a relief ledge framing its two faces (40×27×6 cm). G.A. Pugachenkova also notes that one of the blocks (38×30×30 cm) was profiled with a roller with two shelves and represented a thrust on the body of the cylindrical stupa body (Fig. 3 a, b).

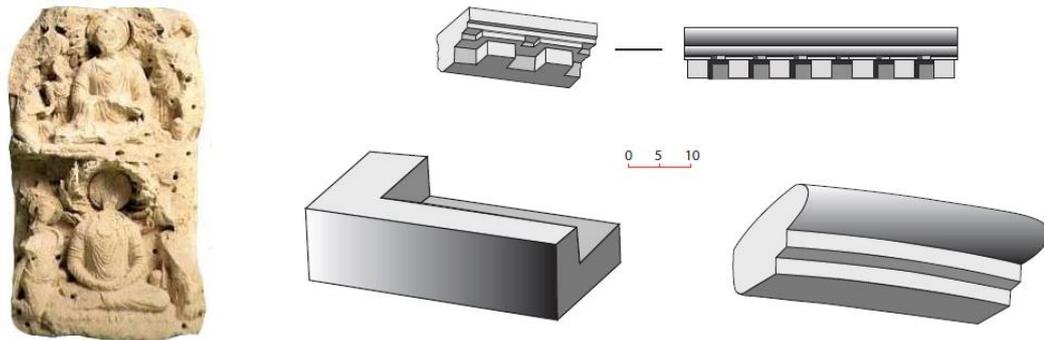


Figure 3. Architectural decors, discovered around Zurmala:
a) Relief with Buddha image; b) Profiled cornices and plinths (tracing by author)

Numerous fragments of such plates and blocks were also discovered during research in Ayrtaam, Karatepe and on other Buddhist monuments in the district of Termez. In particular, the Ayrtaam excavations brought out three fragments of profiled cornices (their sizes varying from 16 cm to 46 cm), which crowned the horizontal thrust on the body of the stupa. On one of the plates, traces of ocher remained, which served as a primer to cover the gilding [4]. Stone architectural details were widely used in the design of stupas. The main source for the manufacture of these architectural details for the ancient settlements of Old Termez was limestone deposits located near the Eagle Mountain Hill – Khodja-Gulsuar. This monument is located 30 km from Termez, upstream along the Amu-Darya [5]. Petrography analysis of the architectural details from Karatepa showed that: "The limestone studied is homogeneous in mineral composition and is represented by calcite (CaCO_3). The admixture of clay is insignificant (less than 1%), which does not give grounds for attributing the breed to the category of limestone. In Karatepa, Fayaztepa ancient local architects and sculptors used local limestone, as evidenced by the similarity of the mineral composition, the fauna complex and the texture of the rock rocks from the monuments and from the deposit on the Eagle's Hill" [6].

Another stone frieze, found near the stupa Zurmala in 1983, also probably included its design. It is broken off from all four sides. The remaining height is 38 cm, width - 34-41 cm, thickness - 12-17 cm (Fig. 4 a). The fragments of several horizontal rows of images. In the lower row in the intervals of the acanthus leaves consistently placed relief images of the heads of lions. In the middle row, inside the horseshoe-shaped arched niches, decorated with triangular "dentils", pectoral human figures. In the third row above the miniature arches of acanthus leaves, interspersed, triangles are continuously located. Finally, in the upper row of the frieze image of the fence. Judging by the tracks in some places of the fragment, the red paint (ocher), it was probably gilded [7].

In 2012, on a cotton field, 400 m to the south of the Zurmala Stupa, a stone block was accidentally found, which was then taken to the Termez Archeological Museum [8]. It is a rectangular block ($37 \times 27.5 \times 16.5$ cm) with an image in the low relief of the pilaster. The top part of the pilaster, ending with the capital, is heavily broken. The lower part of the surface also carries traces of significant damage. On the plate, only the middle link is well preserved - the trunk of the pilaster, decorated with a weakly marked panel, underlined by a bar along the perimeter. The panel on the bottom is connected at right angles, and in the upper part, it forms a semicircle resembling a crescent moon. On the surface of the panel, there is a relief figure standing. Behind the head of the figure is a wide flat halo. The looming *ushnisha* on the top of the head allowed the researchers to assume that this character is a Buddha (4 b, c).

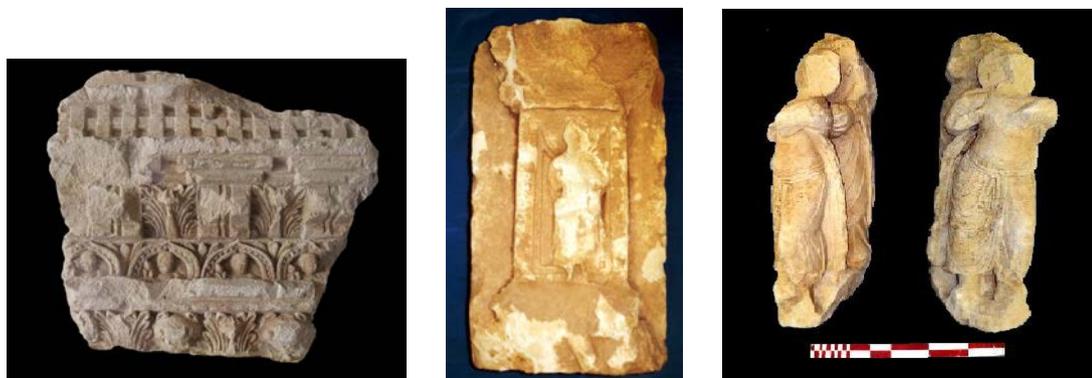


Figure 4. Architectural and Sculpture elements, discovered around of the Zurmala Stupa:
a) Frieze, b) Pilaster with Buddha image, c) Sculpture (Source: author)

Similar pilasters and their fragments were found at Ayrtaam, Karatepa and other Kushan monuments. The stone block from Ayrtaam, triangular in shape, was most likely a part of a corner pilaster. The block is decorated with stepped shelves, finishing with panels and narrowing inside. A decorative block resembling a hanging curtain was also found on the Karatepa Buddhist complex [9].

In the course of the excavations of the main stupa of the Buddhist complex on the northern hilltop of Karatepa, numerous stone architectural details were found. A two-tier platform (the lower tier was 14.6×22.4 m in size and 1.55 m in height, the upper one - 12.3×13.4 m and 0.76 m high) was excavated here, and also the remains of the cylinder-shaped body of the stupa (9 m in diameter) were uncovered. The structure was made of mud-brick $32 \times 32 \times 12$ cm in size (as characteristic of the Kushan period) and *pakhsa* (row-break blocks). On the eastern side of the platform was a staircase. Around the stupa, a large number of stone blocks, capitals, *harmika*, fragments of *chattrā* (an honorary umbrella) and other architectural details and decorative elements adorning the stupa platform were collected. The stupa is dated by scholars. On the basis of a coin of Kanishka III, to the 3rd AD [7].

Pilasters of the same type were found during the excavation of Surkh-Kotal. As in Karatepa, these pilasters decorated the platform, located next to a large temple built in honor of the Kushan king Kanishka I [10]. Another platform of the stupa, lined with stone blocks, including blocks with pilasters was revealed during the excavations of Tepe-Zargaron near Balkh [11]. Similar pilasters with a relief image of a human figure are well known in the territory of Gandhara. For example, the Buddhist stupas of Ranigat (now the western part of the city of Islamabad) of the early Kushan period were decorated with relief pilasters. In particular, the pilaster of the Great Stupa platform (12×12 m), located in the "Western Square", is decorated with images of Buddha and other Buddhist characters [12]. The similarity of the Bactrian finds with the Gandharan manifests itself not only in the pilasters, but also in the cornices, garlands, vaulted figures, and merlons, which indicate the close ties of these historical and cultural regions.

3. Graphical Reconstruction of the Zurmala Stupa

Whether there were any structures around Zurmala, it is difficult to judge. Since, not including some exploration pits, conducted earlier, did not determine any type of structure. Further excavation to expand the cotton field deprived the cultural layers around the stupa. But, traditionally, near the stupas a monastery or a temple with cells of living monks and auxiliary-economic buildings was always built. The obtained observations allow us to reconstruct the original appearance of the Zurmala stupa in the form of a monumental structure of 16 m in height. The rectangular podium was erected to the south, where probably there was a staircase. It was covered with white stone plates with statues on them - high reliefs. On the lower edge of the perimeter were a plinth, and the upper edge of the cornice passed on the dentils, architectural and sculptural details painted in red, and possibly gilded (Fig. 5).

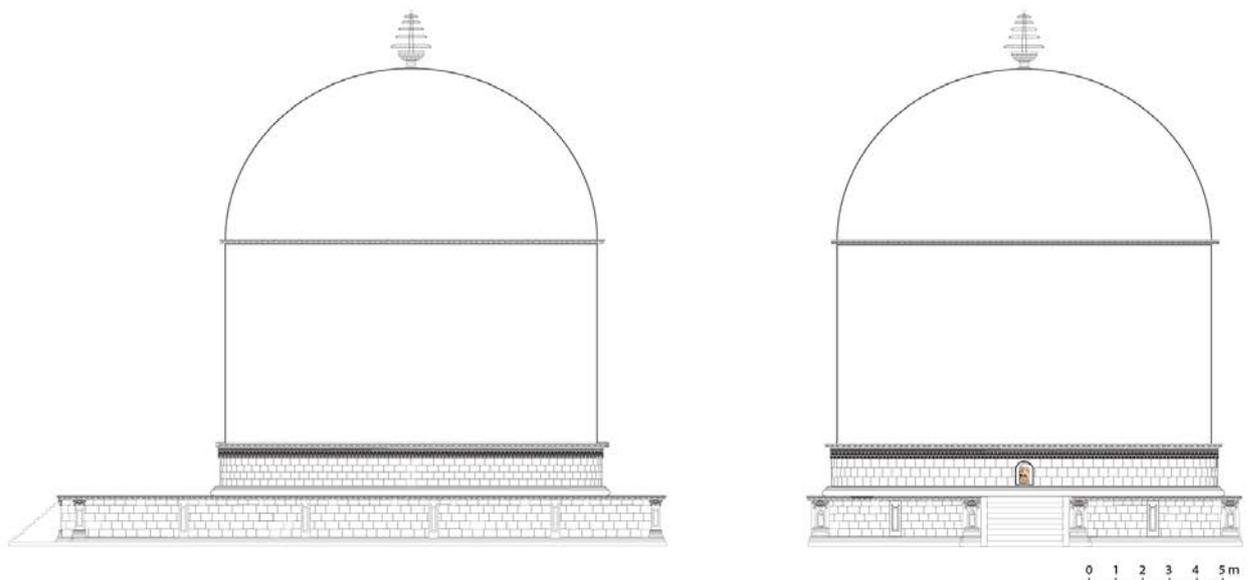


Figure 5. Reconstruction of the Zurmala Stupa (Drawing & tracing by author)

The cylindrical body (diameter 14.5 m), faced with red brick, was completed with a stone eave, above which the hemispherical wedding of the stupa began. Traditionally, the Buddhist stupa ended with a small square

superstructure *harmikā* and *chattra* above it. They consist of several (but, necessarily, odd numbers) disks, usually stone ones, that pierce to the *yasti* (wooden trunk), deeply attached to the dome. This expressive artistic and semantic part of the stupa on Zurmala has not been preserved and has not yet been found on its surroundings. But, its individual details and fragments were discovered on other nearby Buddhist monuments, as in Ayrтам, Karatepa. It can be assumed that the stupa Zurmala also had a similar part of the structure.

Conclusion

According to experts, once there, in the countryside, there was probably a whole complex of Buddhist buildings, but already in the middle ages, this area was occupied by fields. Only the main building - a huge stupa survived the century. Even its volumes that have reached us are ten times greater than the volume of stupas that were discovered during excavations at Ayrтам, Karatepa, Fayaztepa and other stupas in the territory of southern Uzbekistan. This stupa and buildings around it had special significance in the district of Ancient Termez in the Kushan period.

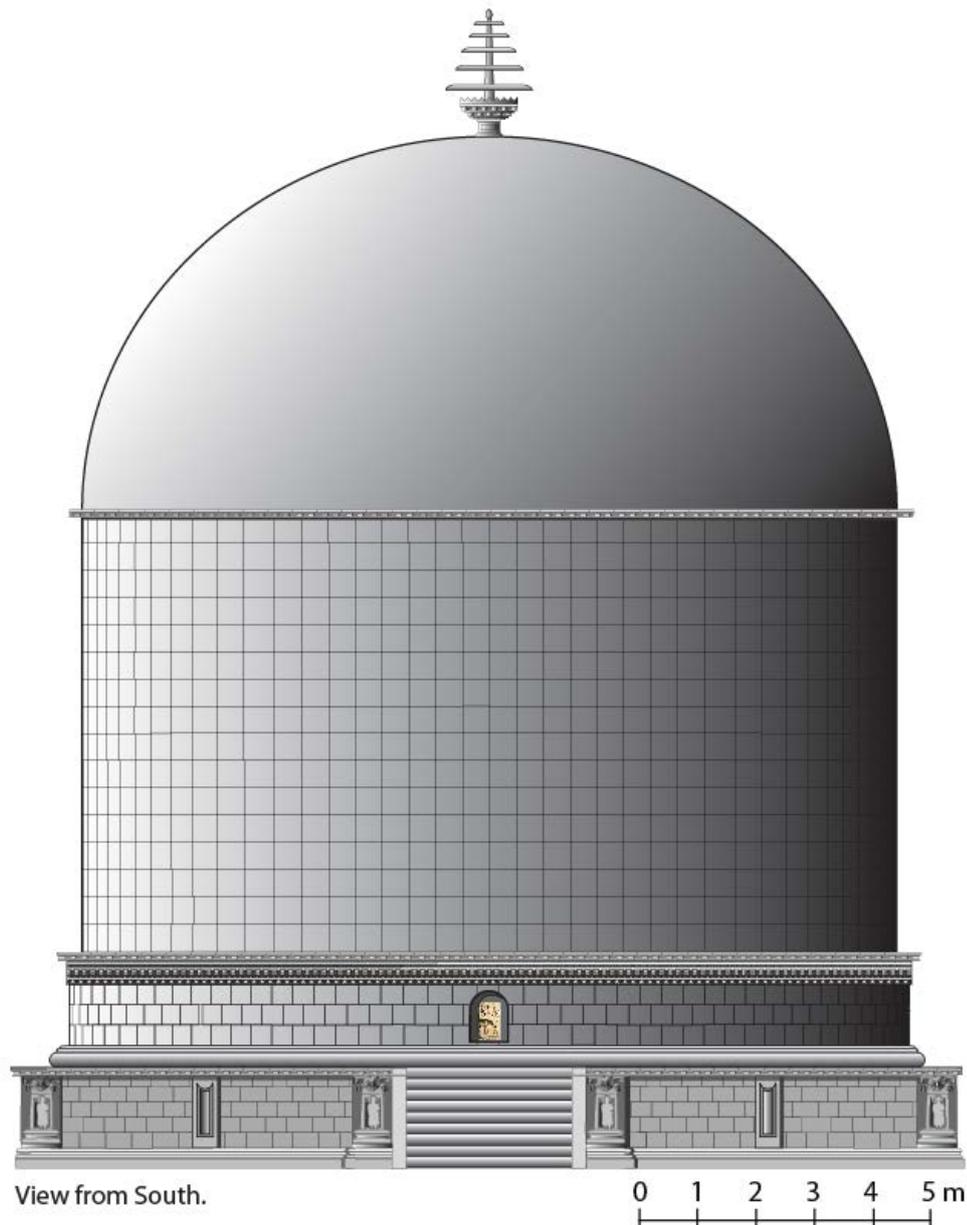


Figure 6. Reconstruction of the Zurmala Stupa. View from South (drawing & tracing by author)

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