

The impact of the Tang Style on the late Buddhist Art of Afghanistan



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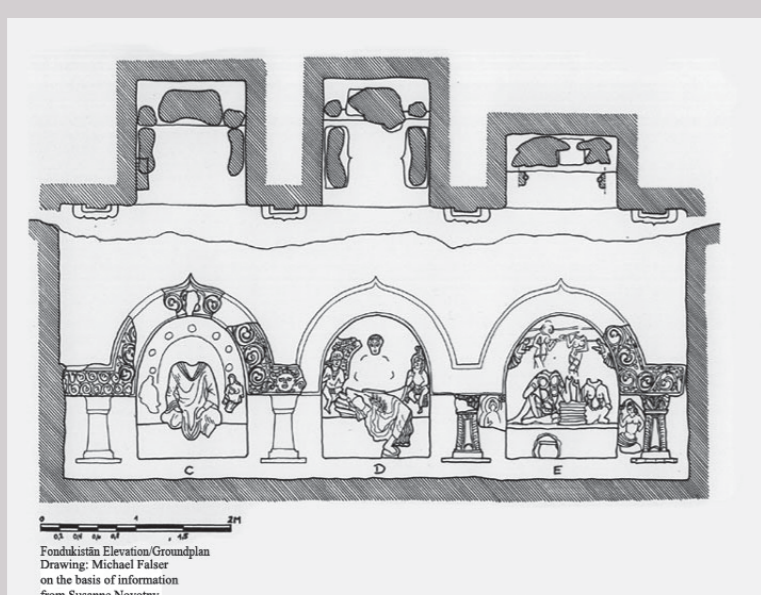
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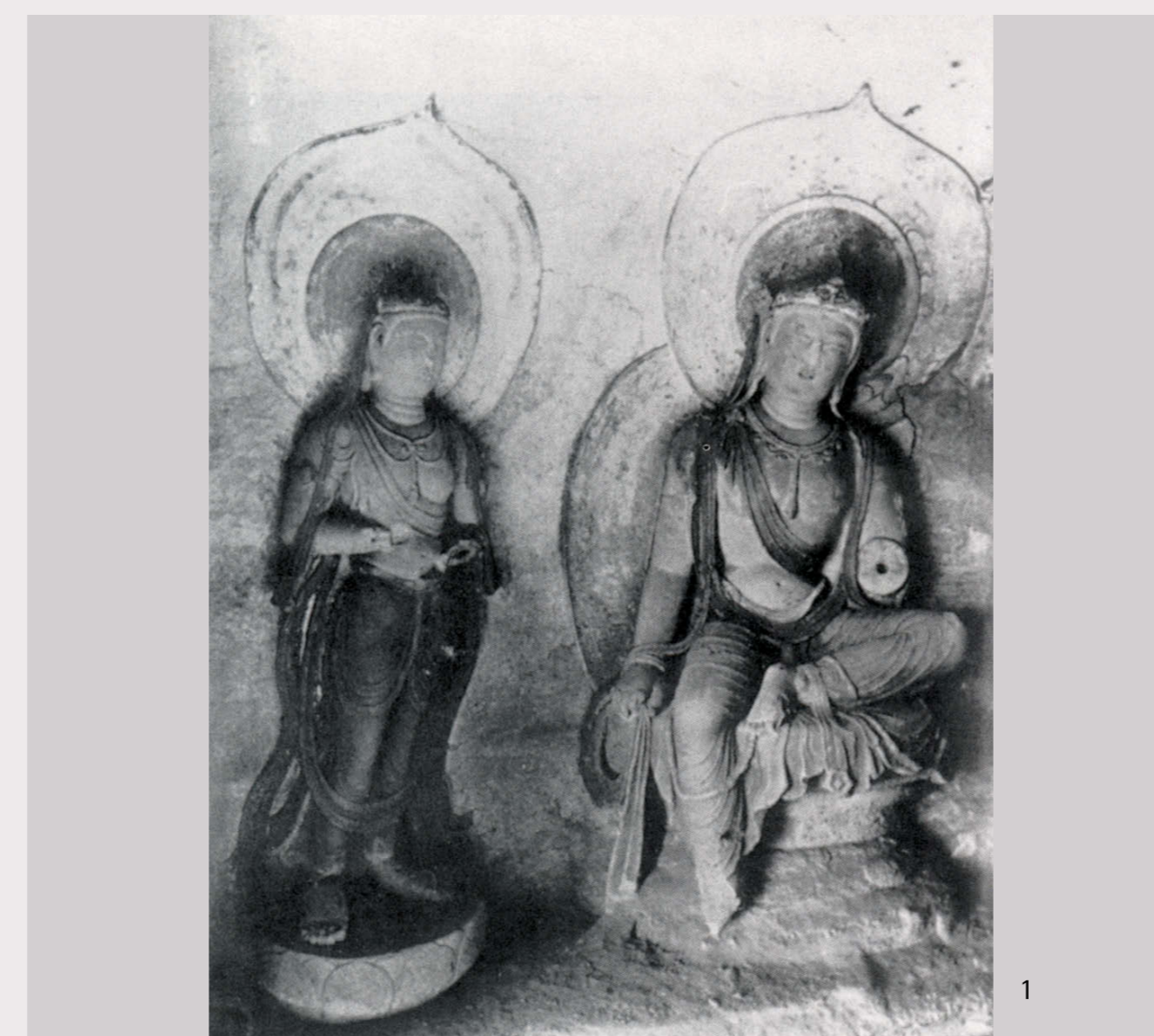
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Empirical

The unique opportunity to work firsthand with the original objects from the Buddhist collections in the National Museum in Kabul, Afghanistan, presented the starting point for my ongoing doctoral research. In the context of the art of the Western Asian regions of the Tang empire in general and of the late Buddhist art of Afghanistan in particular, my research addresses the question as to whether certain iconographic or stylistic features associated with the Tang International Style can be identified in the Buddhist art from the early eighth century in Afghanistan. In a paper published in 1988, Marilyn Rhié outlined the international character of much Buddhist art produced during the first half of the Tang period. Rhié argued that especially around 700–730 C.E. the interrelation of the Buddhist art of Afghanistan with the art of Kashmir, China, Korea, and Japan reached its peak. Especially in the Buddhist monasteries of Fondukistān and Tepe Sardār (fig. 2–4) we encounter a distinctive style that scholars have termed “international”. Examples from Bāmiyān, Kakrak, Fondukistān (Hindu Kush) and Tianlongshan (Shanxi province) exhibit many facets of this newly defined artistic vocabulary, a style characterized by sensuous figures with elongated proportions, softly modelled bodies, and elegant yet subtle movements (fig.



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1,5,6,8). The assumption in scholarship that the “Tang International Style” is applicable to the Buddhist art of Afghanistan is based solely on Rhié’s 1988 article; yet it has been readily adopted by other scholars. For instance, in his most recent publications, Giovanni Verardi uses the phrase “Tang International Style” in discussing the art of Afghanistan. However, to date there has been no broad study that addresses this problem specifically. My study examines the applicability of the term in the Buddhist art from the early eighth century in Afghanistan.

Theoretical

Using the methodology of comparative stylistic analysis, historical documentation, and interdisciplinary interpretation, my research stresses the peripheries of the Tang Empire and the importance of Tang influence in the arts of the kingdoms of present-day Eastern Afghanistan, as well as the complex interactions of art and politics.

For Afghanistan, we are confronted with poor historical sources, whereas Chinese Buddhist art is rather securely dated. Therefore, demonstrating stylistic connections with Chinese art would help to establish a chronology for art objects from Eastern Afghanistan. Comparisons with contemporaneous art production in Xinjiang could prove



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particularly helpful. Comparative analyses should reveal shared common elements in the religious beliefs and art of the two regions, thus contributing to a better understanding of developments of regional styles during the Tang period at large.

Mutual influences and their regional interpretations are certainly a fact. Despite many differences, art objects from Eastern Afghanistan, from Kashmir to Xinjiang show many features shared with art from the far east of the Tang Empire. It is only possible to understand these features by supplementing stylistic analysis with relevant historical, social, cultural and political evidence.

Exploring the phenomenon of a Tang International Style requires understanding complex processes of intercultural exchange. Deciphering these influences and identifying prototypes are the central challenges of my research.

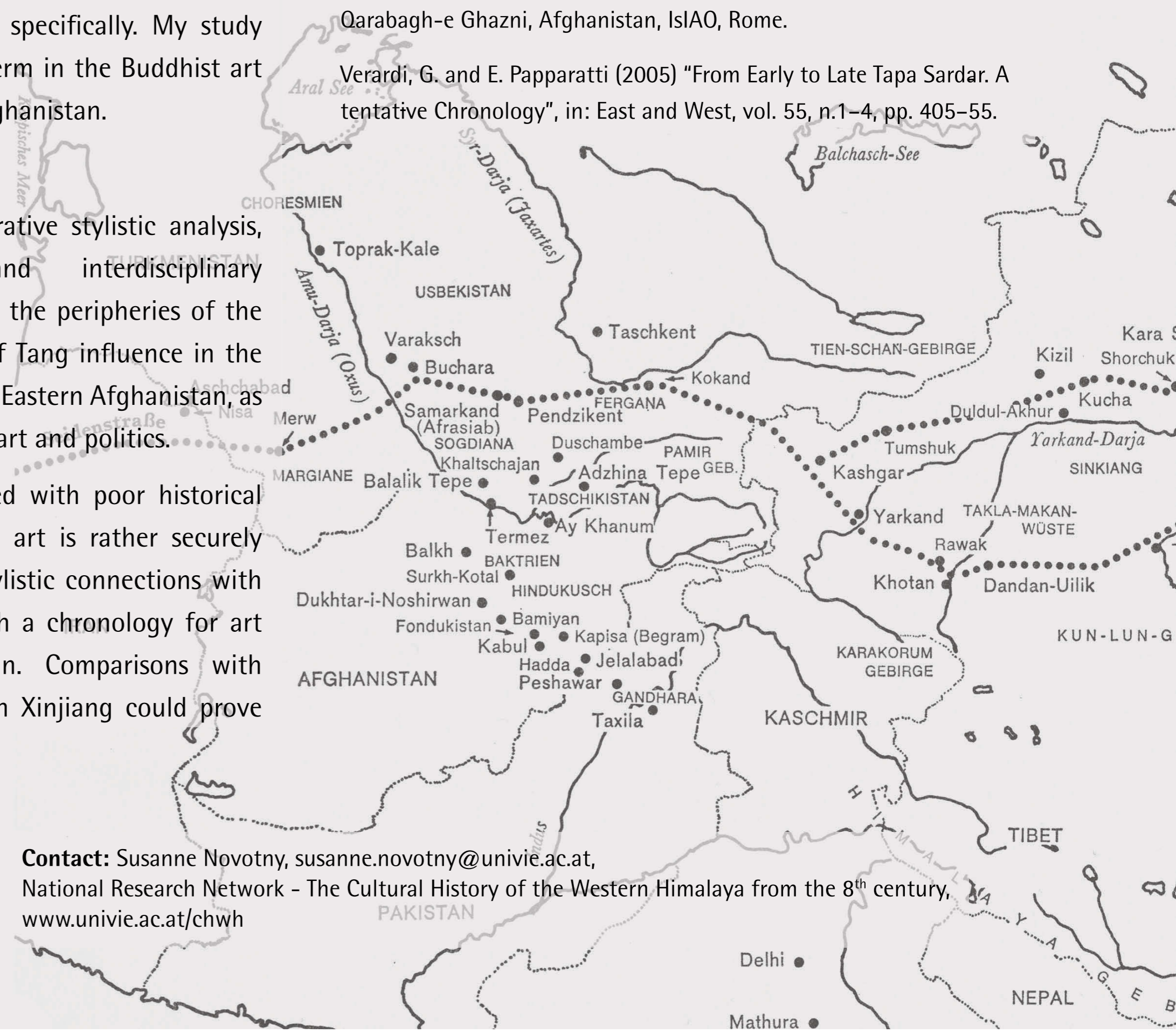
My research addresses the question of the requirements for and the mechanisms of the intensive cultural exchange that took place between the Tang empire and its peripheries as manifested in the visual arts. Detecting the multiplicity of the cultural and regional factors for this phenomenon is only possible through interdisciplinary research.

Literature:

Rhié, M.M. (1988) *Interrelationships between the Buddhist Art of China and the Art of India and Central Asia from 618–755 A.D.* Supplemento n. 54 degli *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale*, 48, 1, Naples.

Verardi, G. and E. Papparatti (2004) *Buddhist Caves of Jaghurı and Qarabagh-e Ghazni, Afghanistan*, ISIAO, Rome.

Verardi, G. and E. Papparatti (2005) “From Early to Late Tapa Sardar. A tentative Chronology”, in: *East and West*, vol. 55, n.1–4, pp. 405–55.



Pictures:

1. Bodhisattva, Tianlongshan Cave 14, after Li Yuqun & Li Gang 2003, fig. 55
2. Bodhisattva, Fondukistān; Kabul Museum (Kabul Museum 2005)
3. *nagā* kings, Fondukistān; Kabul Museum (Kabul Museum 2005)
4. Bodhisattva, Tepe Sardār (ISIAO)
5. Buddha medallion, Bamiyān, Niche 'i', (D. Klimburg-Salter 73)
6. Buddha, Fondukistān; Kabul Museum (Kabul Museum 2005)
7. Reconstruction of East-side elevation, Fondukistān (Novotny/Falser 2006, WHAV)
8. Buddha, Kakrak; Kabul Museum (S. Novotny 2005, WHAV)