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**Abstract:** This article examines the historical role of the Surkhan Oasis in the spread and development of Buddhism in Central Asia. Due to its strategic geographical location along the Great Silk Road, the Surkhan region became an important cultural and religious crossroads that facilitated the transmission of Buddhist teachings from India to Central Asia and beyond. The study analyzes archaeological findings, including Buddhist monasteries, stupas, inscriptions, and artifacts discovered in the area, which demonstrate the significant presence of Buddhist communities between the 1st century BCE and the 7th century CE. Special attention is given to the interaction between local cultures and Buddhist traditions, as well as the socio-cultural impact of Buddhism on the region. The findings indicate that the Surkhan Oasis played a crucial role not only as a transit point but also as a center of religious, artistic, and intellectual development.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Surkhan Oasis, Central Asia, Silk Road, archaeological heritage, cultural exchange, religious diffusion, Termez

### Introduction

The spread of Buddhism across Central Asia represents one of the most significant processes of religious and cultural exchange in ancient history. Originating in the Indian subcontinent in the 6th–5th centuries BCE, Buddhism gradually expanded beyond its birthplace through trade routes, missionary activities, and political patronage. One of the most important channels for this expansion was the Great Silk Road, which connected India, Central Asia, China, and the Mediterranean world. Within this historical context,

the Surkhan Oasis, located in present-day southern Uzbekistan, played a particularly important role. Owing to its favorable geographical position near the Amu Darya River and major trade routes, the region became a dynamic center of economic, cultural, and religious interaction. During the Kushan Empire (1st–3rd centuries CE), the area experienced significant urban development and religious diversity, which contributed to the flourishing of Buddhism. Archaeological discoveries in the Surkhan region, including Buddhist monastic complexes, stupas, sculptures, and inscriptions, provide strong evidence of the deep roots of Buddhism in this territory. These findings highlight the region's importance not only as a transit zone for religious ideas but also as a local center of Buddhist learning and artistic production. This study aims to analyze the historical, archaeological, and cultural factors that contributed to the spread of Buddhism in the Surkhan Oasis and to evaluate its broader significance in the religious history of Central Asia.

## Materials and Methods

The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, archaeology, and comparative religious studies. The main sources include archaeological excavation reports, historical chronicles, epigraphic materials, and modern academic literature devoted to Buddhism in Central Asia. First, archaeological data from the Surkhan Oasis were analyzed. Particular attention was given to the remains of monasteries, stupas, sculptures, wall paintings, and inscriptions discovered in the Termez area. These materials provide direct evidence of Buddhist religious practice and institutional organization in the region. Second, written historical sources were examined. Chinese travel records, early Islamic geographical descriptions, and regional chronicles were compared to identify references to Buddhist communities and pilgrimage activity. Third, the comparative method was applied to evaluate similarities between Buddhist monuments in the Surkhan Oasis and those in northern India, Afghanistan, and Xinjiang. This made it possible to determine cultural transmission routes and artistic influences. Finally, a cultural-historical method was used to assess the role of trade networks, especially the Silk Road, in facilitating religious diffusion and intercultural communication.

## Results

The research demonstrates that the Surkhan Oasis functioned as one of the major centers of Buddhism in Central Asia from approximately the 1st century BCE to the 7th century CE. Archaeological evidence confirms the existence of large monastic complexes and developed religious infrastructure. The presence of monasteries indicates a stable Buddhist community rather than temporary missionary activity. The architecture shows a

synthesis of Indian, Hellenistic, and local artistic traditions, suggesting active cultural exchange. The findings also indicate that the region served as a translation and educational center. Monks traveling between India and China likely stayed in the oasis, contributing to the dissemination of religious texts and philosophical teachings. Furthermore, the distribution of Buddhist artifacts along trade routes shows that merchants played a significant role in spreading Buddhist ideas. Economic prosperity in the region supported religious construction and artistic production.

## Discussion

The Surkhan Oasis should not be understood merely as a transit corridor but as an independent intellectual and spiritual center. The coexistence of multiple cultural traditions created favorable conditions for the acceptance and transformation of Buddhism. Local populations did not simply adopt foreign beliefs; rather, they integrated Buddhist philosophy with existing cultural practices. This led to the emergence of a distinct regional form of Buddhism characterized by artistic diversity and symbolic adaptation. The decline of Buddhism in the region from the 7th–8th centuries CE correlates with political transformations and the gradual spread of Islam. However, the archaeological record shows that Buddhist cultural influence persisted long after the disappearance of organized monastic institutions. Thus, the Surkhan Oasis illustrates how trade, politics, and culture collectively shape religious diffusion. The spread of Buddhism here was not a linear expansion but a complex process of interaction and adaptation.

## Conclusion

The study confirms that the Surkhan Oasis played a decisive role in the transmission of Buddhism across Central Asia. Its geographical location, economic prosperity, and cultural diversity enabled it to become a major religious and intellectual center along the Silk Road. Buddhism in the region was not limited to missionary presence but developed into a stable institutional and artistic tradition.

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