

Small Buddhist Images From Siberia's Far East

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Small Buddhist Images From Siberia's Far East

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Three small Buddhist images of the Nu-chen of Pohai period were discovered in Siberia's far east. Two of them were from the coastal area, and one from near the city of Khabarovsk.

1. IMAGES FROM COASTAL AREA (Figures 1 and 2)

Two small images were picked up by a soldier in a field at Borisovka village, near Ussuriisk city, and now are a part of the collection of a museum attached to the Institute of History, Philology and Philosophy in Novosibirsk. Investigation by V. E. Medvedev, researcher at the institute, confirmed remains of a building of the Pohai period after many roof tiles characteristic of the period were discovered there. Both images are of bronze. Because they are religious objects, the building could be a temple.

The first image is 11.3 cm in height; its surface is rough and partially corroded. There are air holes on the right side and, on the whole, it is not well cast. It is a full-length statue facing front. The face is roundish; eye orbits and eyeballs are slightly shown; eyes half-closed, and the nose is straight. Oval-shaped ears are symmetrically placed on sides of the head. Something like a knot is seen on top of the head.

The emphasized neckline extends to slender shoulders. A ribbon covers the shoulders and is tied at round breasts. Seen from the side, tips of the ribbon seem raised. Hands are joined at the abdomen. Two arched lines, assumed to be pleats of a garment, are shown around the knees, with the upper line forming a large ellipse.

A square projection, seen on the right side of the image, looks like a small box or a sack tied in the middle. The back of the image is flat and smooth except for two small nails by which it might have been affixed to something. A little bigger nail is also found on the bottom.

The second image is assumed to have been made by a different sculptor in a different atelier. Its height is 7.8 cm; it is well-preserved and without any corrosion. The quality of metal seems better than that of the first. Its head seems to be long lost.

The whole body is covered loosely with a garment. The shape of the pleats



Figure 1

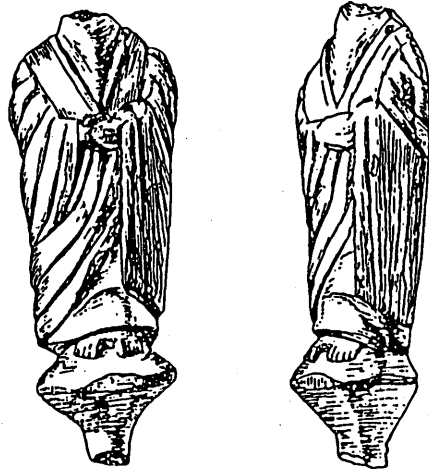


Figure 2

differ on right and left sides. The garment wraps diagonally from the right side of the body. Several pleats run from left shoulder to left arm, and their tips fall along the body. What looks like a collar is seen on the upper body. With both arms covered, the hands are placed on the chest. Under the outer garment, the hem of a robe shows. Feet peep from under the clothes, with toes curved. The image is well made. The feet are placed on a heavy hemispheric pedestal, which is on a broken axle. The backside of the image is smooth and it has a hollow in it.

When A. P. Okladnikov wrote the article that first introduced these two images, he cited the clothes as well as the pose of the second image as Buddhist elements. He wrote that the clothes of the first one look like a wide apron falling in an arc and "remind us of the garment of the stone statue of a government official in the Chin period," found in Ussuriisk (*Dve Bronzovye statuetki Bonaiskogo uremeni iz Primor'ya*). He assumed that the square box on the right side related to duties of a government official. Therefore, Okladnikov wrote, the first image "indicates divinized government official or ancestor, and it is related to family or clan ancestor worship." He wrote that the second image seems to be a statue of a Buddhist priest.

2. SMALL BUDDHIST IMAGE FOUND NEAR Khabarovsk (Figure 3)

Some time in the years 1976 to 1979, archaeologist V. E. Medvedev discovered a gilded bronze Buddha from the 112th tomb in Korsakovo burial ground, which is located on Ussuriiskii Island in the river Amur. The burial ground belongs to the Nu-chen period, late tenth to eleventh century. Height of the image is 5.9 cm. The tomb is 85 cm deep (from the present surface) and its size is 230 cm by 220 cm. Although the tomb was ruined, remains of two persons were found. One body had knees bent with the head placed to the north. The other body lay on its back to the left of the first, also with knees bent. Medvedev said it possibly was a secondary burial. It is noteworthy that teeth and bones of horses were found among accompanying goods in the tomb. The small Buddha was found among fragments of earthenware at the northeast corner of the grave.

The small Buddha is facing front and has a long face; eyes are long and half-closed; nose thin and slightly flat; mouth small and slightly round. A horizontal relief belt above the eyebrows seems to be a part of the hairdo, which is a semicircle knot. There is no sign of ears; both sides of the head are smooth and flat. Shoulders are slender. The Buddha is wearing cape-like clothes over a robe. Because the whole body is covered with garments, the figure is not clearly seen. It is

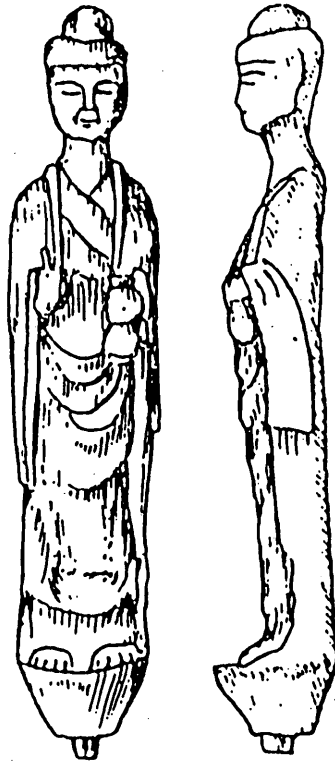


Figure 3

assumed, however, to be fairly solid in build.

In his left hand, the Buddha holds a water flask, which has a round body with long and slender neck. On the bottom of the pedestal on which Buddha stands there is a nail that might have been affixed to something—the same as the second image found in Borisvoka village. The excavator, Medvedev, doubted that the image was of the same time as the tomb. He indicated that the image could have been made earlier.

“People in the Amur Basin could have obtained the Buddha from the coastal area of Pohai. The image might have been brought to Pohai from Kokuryo approximately in the latter half of the seventh century, when Buddhism was introduced to Pohai,” Medvedev wrote in 1986. He said the Buddha had been in use for centuries before it was buried.

CONCLUSION

I believe these three statues are all Buddhist images, having both differences and likeness in features.

The first image wears a topknot, and the ribbon from the shoulders is a chest ornament. Two arc-shaped pleats around the knees are *tenne*, scarf of god, and the square box on the right side is also part of this. The eyes are half-closed. Both characteristics indicate the image is Avalokitesvara. Therefore Dr. Okladnikov's interpretation, that it is a statue of “a divinized government official or ancestor ... related to ... ancestor worship,” is not appropriate. The two hollows on the back must have been for attaching a halo.

Dr. Okladnikov assumed the second statue to be that of a priest. I believe it is a figure of Buddha because the entire body is covered by clothes. The heaviness of the clothes suggests the exceedingly cold weather of Pohai.

As to the third statue, from Korsakovo burial ground near Khabarovsk, I interpret the topknot to be a protuberant part of the head and the bottle in the left hand as a vial instead of a water flask. The clearly shown collar of the inner robe and the outer garment with many pleats are both Buddhist monk's clothing. Considering all these characteristics, the statue could be Bhaisajyaguru-vaideya.

About the date of the third statue: Because the body and the pedestal were cast in one mold, I agree with Dr. Medvedev on the Kokuryo dynasty of the seventh century. Although the second statue also was cast in one mold, I think it was made later than the third statue for reasons previously indicated. The first statue could be the newest of the three, probably belonging to the tenth or eleventh century.

Although it is widely known that Buddhism spread to Pohai, not many Buddhist images made of metal were found there. Therefore these three are significant. The small image found in Khabarovsk is important evidence that Buddhism was diffused among the Tungus who lived along the river Amur's midstream.

Medvedev also said he found lotus patterns among the discoveries. Thus Buddhism saturated, though partially, the shamanistic world of Siberia in the early medieval age.

