



## AJINA TEPE

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**AJINA TEPE**, the present-day name of the mound covering the ruins of an early medieval Buddhist monastery (*sarighārāma*). It is situated twelve km east of the town of Kurgan Tube (Tajik SSR), in the Wakhsh valley (the river Wakhsh is one of the main tributaries of the river Panj, i.e., the Āmū Daryā). The site is one km north of an early medieval town, whose ruins are now known as Chorgul Tepe. Before excavation Ajina Tepe had the shape of a double mound on a rectangular plan stretching from northwest to southeast. The raised perimeter of the mound measured 50 by 100 m, and its height above the surrounding site was 4-6 m. The configuration of the top of the mound was that of two squares of equal size separated by a low earth wall. The higher, southeastern square had a cup-shaped depression in its center, while in the center of the northwestern half was a small mound with steep sides and a narrow depression encircling its foot. During 1961 and 1975 the mound was subjected to intense archeological excavation, carried out by the joint expedition of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, the State Hermitage, and the Academy of Sciences of the Tajik SSR. The head of the expedition was B. A. Litvinskiĭ, and T. I. Zeĭmal was his deputy. Today this monument has been completely excavated.

Ajina Tepe represents the remains of an ensemble comprising the temple premises and the monks' living quarters of a Buddhist monastery. Its southeastern half is the actual monastery, consisting of buildings enclosing a square courtyard (19 by 19 m)—the cup-shaped depression. In the center of the northwestern half a stupa was erected, and the surrounding chambers



were for mainly religious purposes. Both parts were built on the same four-*ayvān* plan (see below) and communicated by a doorway in the center of their common side. The *sarighārāma* was built of *paḡsa* and unfired bricks measuring 52 by 26 by 10 cm (a characteristic size for the 5th-8th centuries). A more precise date is indicated by the find of hundreds of coins contemporary with the monastery: copper coins of north Ṭokārestān and single Sogdian coins current during the second half of the 7th century A.D. and the first half of the 8th. The monastery was destroyed and deserted during the Arab conquest of this territory (737-50). Consequently this complex existed for approximately one hundred years (from the middle of the 7th century to the middle of the 8th). Later, in the second half of the 8th century the ruins of the monastery were utilized as living quarters and workshops.

In the middle of each side of the monastery courtyard is an *ayvān* (a three-walled chamber with its open side facing the courtyard), out of which an arched doorway led into a square or somewhat smaller chamber, a cell. The back wall of the cell of the northern *ayvān* had a doorway leading into the *ayvān* of the temple (here one chamber or cell had two *ayvāns* facing in opposite directions). The same arrangement existed in the eastern *ayvān*, but here the *ayvān* faced the outer eastern side of the complex, forming a portal. The *ayvāns* were interconnected by right-angled passages. On some sides a parallel, outer corridor was found; on others, small cells (*hojras*).

Behind the southern *ayvān* was the main sanctuary of the monastery half. This is a square chamber (7 by 7 m) on a higher level than that of the *ayvān*. Stepped, figured pedestals with small quarter domes topping their outer sides were arranged along the back and side walls. The wall space between them was occupied by low platforms. Pedestals, sanctuary walls, and sofas were completely covered with decorative painting, while sculptured figures stood on the pedestals. The central figure, judging from the size of its head, must have been some 4 m tall.

The temple premises behind the *ayvān* of the southwestern face of the courtyard comprise a large (10.3 by 9.5 m), very high (still standing to 6 m), four-columned hall for religious gatherings (*upasthānasġwāla*). The cells (3.3 by 3.4 m) were for the greater part one-roomed, and those at the corners two-roomed. There was also a second story, of which practically nothing remains save for a ramp leading up to it.

The temple (northwestern) half had an outer row of chambers only along the



northwestern face. Here, on the same axis as the monastery sanctuary, was a second, smaller one flanked by six lesser sanctuaries. The access to these was from the passages of the northwestern face. The passages of the southwestern and southeastern faces were intersected by arched niches, in which sculptured figures of the Buddha in various *mudras* were placed on pedestals. In the southern section of the southeastern passage was a 12m high figure of the Buddha in nirvana.

Much of the courtyard was occupied by a stepped, star-shaped stupa (maximum measurement 25 by 25 m), its angles oriented toward the four cardinal points. The base of the stupa consists of two platforms: a lower (height 1.3 m) and an upper (height 4 m). The base of the lower platform has the shape of a stepped plinth. In the center of each side there is a projecting flight of steps guarded by balustrades. Above the base was a cylindrical drum (partly preserved) and a dome (destroyed). The brick and *paḁsa* monolith of the principal stupa was decorated with painting. At each corner of the courtyard stood a miniature votive stupa of the same type. Similar stupas (2.3 by 2.5 m along each side) were set in some chambers of the northwestern face. Three clay models of stupas were also discovered of which one contained a tablet with a Buddhist prayer formula.

The materials used at Ajina Tepe are *paḁsa* (mostly for the foundation and walls) and unfired brick (25-26 by 50-52 by 10-12 cm); walls are 2.2-2.6 m thick; doorways and arches are surmounted by arches of unfired brick. These are true arches, but they vary in construction and outline. The ceilings of the oblong chambers are vaulted (3.2-3.6 span), and at the base of the vault there are five or six rows of inward overhanging brick impost. The vault itself follows the type formed by inclined sections. The square or semi-square chambers are roofed by cupolas on *trompes*. Small galleries lighten the thrust on the spaces between parallel vaults and cupolas.

The inner vaults and walls were painted, and many chambers were covered with decorative painting. All the walls and vaults in the passages of the temple half were covered with rows of images of seated Buddhas. The inner surface of each vault contained no fewer than four rows of such images separated by horizontal strips. In each row the figures were set correspondingly below those of the row above. At the summit of the vault the heads met. The background of the decorative painting is dark blue. Each figure set within an oval *mandala* is seated with feet tucked in on a beflowered pedestal. The gestures of the arms (*mudra*) and the turn of the head are individualized. The



figures differ in the colors of their clothing (white, yellow, pink, greenish), as well as in the color of the background within the *mandalas*. In some chambers the decorative painting consists of many-tiered compositions on varying scales; in these, one large Buddha (some 2 m in height) dominates the other figures, which are approximately half life-size. One of the most striking examples of Ajina Tepe's painting is a depiction of gift-bearers. On a bright red background are two seated male figures turned to the right. They are clothed in rich kaftans with inlaid belts, from which hang daggers and swords. The faces are finely executed, reproducing the local ethnic type. One of the men holds a fluted gold dish, the other a silver goblet, both containers filled with fruit. These personages are evidently members of the Ṭokārestān aristocracy taking part in a scene of the *Stifterbild* type.

The sculptural ornamentation of the monastery is rich and varied. The majority of sculptured figures are of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and *devas*. The Buddha in nirvana occupied an entire chamber. The gigantic figure (the length of its foot is almost 2 m) reclines on its right side on a pedestal with a headrest representing a cushion. The right arm rests on the cushion supporting the head, while the left arm is stretched along the body. The Buddha's body is covered by the folds of a *sanghati* with only the hands and partly the sandaled feet showing. The red robe is belted with a rope; hands, face and toes are painted white; the sandals have yellow soles and red thongs. The head is partially destroyed, but the perfect line of the oval of the lower part of the face and neck, the small, softly shaped chin slightly touched by a smile, and the beautifully outlined lips produce a deep impression. Still more perfect are the heads of the Buddhas of smaller size, many of them masterpieces. Besides the idealized figures of sacred personages, there were figures of monks, members of the aristocracy, and others. There are, for instance, the head of an old monk and the figure of a "prince" showing elements of realistic rendering. Sculptured shapes of animals have been discovered, such as of a horse and of birds, as well as some decorative moldings.

The art of Ajina Tepe exemplifies a vigorous Ṭokārestān Buddhist school, which achieved the peak of its development (as did the other Central Asian Buddhist schools) in the 7th to the beginning of the 8th century. Ṭokārestān Buddhist art achieved originality through a synthesis of Indian and Bactrian art. It shares some essential features with the art of Gandhara and shows traces of influence from the Gupta tradition. Clear links exist with the late Gandharan sculpture of Hadda and the art of Fondūqestān (see [Afghanistan](#)



vii). At the same time there are parallels with the work of eastern Turkestan.

Ajina Tepe embodies the attainments and strivings of Central Asian architects closely intermingled with those of the architectural schools of neighboring provinces and countries. Some attainments of Iranian Sasanian architecture are reflected. E.g., analogies can be traced with the great palace of Fīrūzābād: 1. size (100 by 50 and 103.5 by 55 m); 2. two-part construction; 3. use of *ayvāns*; 4. the connection between the two halves of the edifice being given the form of domed chambers with *ayvāns* facing both courtyards; 5. precise planning along a lengthwise axis with bilateral symmetry; 6. vaulted passages adjoining the dome (known in a number of Sasanian monuments).

The architectural ideas found in Ajina Tepe proved productive for the further development of Buddhist architecture. The skirting passage for *pradakṣiṇa* which appeared in Ajina Tepe was later used in Paharpur (Bangladesh) and in the Bebe and Lemyethna temples (Burma). The idea of a four-*ayvān* edifice, fully developed in Ajina Tepe, became one of the dominating ideas of the medieval (“Muslim”) architecture of Central Asia and eastern Iran. E.g., *madrasas* and caravanseries followed this plan. V. V. Barthold made the suggestion, founded on written sources, that the *madrasas* owed their origin to the influence of Buddhism and that the first *madrasas* appeared on territories on both sides of the Āmū Daryā attached to Balḵ (*Sochineniya* II/2, Moscow, 1964, p. 30). The translation of Hoi-Chao’s text, published after Barthold’s death, bears direct witness to the fact that as early as the 8th century (726 A.D.) there were “many Buddhist monasteries” on the territory of Kottal itself (*SPAW* 1938, p. 452); this is corroborated by some toponymic data and by excavated Buddhist monuments of the 7th to the beginning of the 8th century—Ajina Tepe, Kāfer Qaḷ’a, Qaḷ’a-ye Kāfernegān. Ajina Tepe with its four-*ayvān* composition can be regarded not only as the starting point of the development of this highly important (for the next thousand years) method of architectural planning, but also evidence for a genetic link between the Muslim theological school—the *madrasa*—and the Buddhist monastery and of the probable first appearance of the *madrasa* on the territory of Ṭokārestān.



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