



KAKRAK

KAKRAK, a [Buddhist](#) site comprised of a group of caves, in [Bāmyān](#) Province, Afghanistan, about three kilometers southeast of the Bāmyān site. The caves are normally referred to as Buddhist sanctuaries and dwellings of Buddhist monks. Kakrak was discovered at the end of the 19th century by the British military active in that area and was visited by the French scholar [André Godard](#) in 1923. Between June and September 1930, J. Hackin and other members of the *Délégation archéologique Française en Afghanistan* (DAFA; see [DÉLÉGATIONS ARCHÉOLOGIQUES FRANÇAISES ii](#)) studied the site and removed the paintings to take them in the [Kabul Museum](#) and the Guimet Museum in Paris.

All the Kakrak paintings were found in one of the two caves (conventionally called cave 43) that served as a sanctuary and must have been one of the main ambulatories of the site. Recent radiocarbon dating of samples of the murals originally located in cave 43 produced as a result the end of the 7th to the mid-8th century (Japan Center; Miyagi; Morgan, pp. 37, 98; see also Kochesser). The paintings—which share many elements with the Bāmyān ones—had been hidden under a layer of mud, possibly by pious Buddhists who tried to save them from iconoclasts at the time of the Muslim conquest.

Among the monuments that were found at Kakrak originally in a good state of preservation was one approximately six-meter-high statue of a standing Buddha with nimbus and mandorla that was carved into the rock and facing the valley ([Figure 1](#)). The statue was reduced to fragments by the Taliban government of Afghanistan in 2001 in the same manner as the Buddhas of

Bāmyān. The paintings in the Kabul Museum were documented by F. Tissot (photographs, pp. 116-19, catalogued as T.Sh.p. Ka. 227.1 to 235.9; Dupree et al., color plates, no. 13). The fragments of mural paintings in the Guimet Museum (catalogued as MG 17901 to 17906) have been reconstructed, and they present the same composition as do the Kabul Museum specimens: multiple representations of Buddhas disposed according to the characteristic *maṇḍala*. They were originally located in a domed room around a central, sitting Bodhisattva, who was holding a flask and possibly is to be identified with Maitreya Buddha (cf. FONDOQUESTĀN). The *maṇḍala* is constituted by a sequence of circular icons tangential to each other that present one central, colossal, nimbed Buddha within a pearled frame. Outside the pearled frame, eleven circles—each constituted by nimbed Buddhas that are smaller than a central Buddha that they surround—form a second ring. The larger and the smaller Buddhas in these circles perform different hand gestures (Sanskrit *mudrā*), and their garments are not always the same. Continuous rows of smaller Buddhas aligned horizontally appear all around these compositions, and the interstices between one pearled frame containing the bigger Buddha and another one are occupied by figures of Buddhas showing different *mudrās*.

An especially interesting painting of the Kabul Museum collection is the one of the so-called hunter-king that is represented next to two Buddhas seated to his right (Tissot, p. 116; T.Sh.p.Ka.227.1). The hunter-king is a nimbed person sitting on a throne covered with textiles, under a square arch typical of certain Gandharan reliefs. He wears a triple-crescent crown and holds up with both hands a small bow that does not seem to match with two very big arrows that are represented to his right. The forequarters of a dog project from under the king's right side of the throne; the dog's head is lifted and mouth open as if barking at somebody. The name "hunter-king" is due to the figure's crown and the presence of the bow and the dog, even though some scholars proposed to identify him as a Bodhisattva, since the nimbus, the position of the head, and his decorations clearly call to mind this kind of Buddhist figure. However, the hunter-king could be a personification of a local deity in the act of submitting to the Buddha. His iconographical features could have been decided on the base of Indian and local elements, that is to say pre-Buddhist, most likely Zoroastrian, ones.

The Zoroastrian rain god Tištrya seems to be the best candidate, since his iconography in the paintings of the 4th-5th century Afghan site of Ghulbayan

(Ġulbiān) and in 7th-8th century Sogdian art likewise comprised the bow and, above all, the arrow. The presence of the dog too could be considered an appropriate attribute of Tištrya. In Zoroastrian literature, the rain god was identified with the [planet](#) Mercury, and, in fact, the [astronomical-astrological](#) hypothesis seems preferable to the theory of representation of a divinity belonging to a creed that was definitely antagonistic to Buddhism. Exactly as it is possible to observe in the mural paintings at Bāmyān, Kakrak presents a very interesting mixture of Buddhist and pre-Islamic Iranian traditions that share many common features with [Sasanian art](#).

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