Buddha, Lenin, and the Prophet Muhammad Approaching the Landscape and Cultural Heritage of Issyk-Ata

JAMES PLUMTREE*

► **Fig. 1.** *The rock with carvings, Issyk-Ata (photograph by author)*

"If you want a child – go to Manjyly-Ata,
If you want wealth – go to Cholpon-Ata,
If you want health – go to Issyk-Ata,
If you want to be crowned – go to Kochkor-Ata."[1]

Issyk-Ata, a near-fifty kilometer drive to the east of Bishkek, the capital of modern day Kyrgyzstan, is a mere sixty-six hour drive from CEU's Nádor Street campus.[2] While geographically far from the area that József Laszlovszky considers his expertise—or, at least, from what he claims given his familiar response "I'm not an expert" to even the most random of questions followed by a list of relevant (and up-to-date) bibliography—many of the concerns regarding the tangible and intangible heritage of Issyk-Ata are those that he raised for successive generations of students fortunate to study archaeology, medieval studies, and, now, cultural heritage under his tutelage. Fitting with his legendary cross-disciplinary skill in seeing unnoticed connections, his uncanny ability in making the seemingly-anomalous capable of revealing the central concerns of broader issues, and his knack for starting large group projects, it is hoped that a more substantial treatment of this site will follow the method he has developed, carefully outlined, and adhered to through his career.[3]

The remote Issyk-Ata, located at an altitude of 1,775 meters, presents a tantalizing microcosm of the religious and political history of Central Asia. Examination of how the natural landscape has been regarded, and shaped, by human usage reveals how each stage—Shamanist, Tibetan Buddhist, Buddhist Kalmyk, nomadic Islamified and Kyrgyz, Tsarist Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet independence—has understood and used the location, and selected which aspects to curate, conserve, and continue.

For much of its usage by humans, Issyk-Ata has been associated with healing. Its location near the hot springs at the foot of the Tian Shan Mountains

* American University of Central Asia

► **Fig. 2.** *Buddhist relief, with highlighted Tibetan inscription (photograph by Arsen Tangatarov)*

is suggestive of early shamanistic and folk beliefs that appreciated such geological features. The association continued when the area was part of the northernmost region of the Tibetan empire, evident by the survival on one of the sizable rocks (Fig. 1) of a carved relief depicting the Sangye Menla (the Tibetan Medicinal Buddha) and various, partly-eroded, Tibetan mantras, dated from the seventh to tenth centuries (Fig. 2 and 3).[4] The effect of urbanization in the Chui Valley during the following Karakhanid era, and the relationship between Issyk-Ata and the Silk Road, is, unfortunately, little noted. The connection with health, though seemingly continued long after the empire and the empires that followed, had beem abandoned. "Issyk-Ata," the name used by the Islamified nomadic Kyrgyz who assumed control of the Chui valley following the defeat of the Buddhist Kalmyks, means "Warm Father," and indicates that the site is a *mazar*, a shrine associated with a religious figure or event that—in Central Asia—is also used to refer to natural sites considered holy (regardless of whether there is a known association).[5] The hot springs, and their healing attributes, are said to have been acknowledged by the nomads by smearing on the surface of the Buddha rock either—sources differ—water or sheep grease.[6]

► **Fig. 3.** *Buddhist relief (photograph by author)*

The connection to healing was continued while the landscape was altered when, following Tsarist colonization, a Russian sanatorium, run by the Semirechensk branch of the Red Cross, was constructed in 1891. Around the time the sanatorium was transferred to the Kyrgyz SSR in 1931, landscaping the site and the construction of Russian-style wooden buildings going up a steep incline appear to have rendered the Buddhist relief a curio rather than a site of medicine. The landscape became indelibly associated with the Soviet period. In addition to storied brick buildings, the site also was changed to accommodate a mass war grave (north of the dining hall, from the time the sanatorium became a military hospital), a small area nearby was provided with the symbols of various national Soviet crests, and a statue of Lenin at the far end of the site.[7] Curiously, in addition to building a pool utilizing the hot springs, this Sovietization also incorporated the Buddhist relief: on the side of the rock, a shallow depiction of Lenin's head side-on in a typical addressing-the-people pose was carved (Fig. 4). The intentions behind this feature are yet to be established—whether it was intended to secularize the original carving or associate the imported ideology with earlier beliefs—nor, for that matter, is it known by what authority the carving was made—whether it was official or merely the product of a self-motivated individual. The extent to which this Soviet production reflected local concerns or Moscow is part of the question to what degree the official atheist values of the state were reflected in the working sanatorium and its residents. The question is made more curious by stories that an Uzbek female shaman, famed for her healing abilities, lived as a hermit at the site until the 1950s.[8] While different sources list different accommodation capabilities, it is more accurate to say that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, use (and funding) of the sanatorium has declined. Interestingly, some who had visited Issyk-Ata for the sanatorium were not aware of the existence of the Buddha relief.

As a consequence of the association with health, Issyk-Ata has been both a place of pilgrimage and a tourist attraction.[9] Each epoch has, in some way, responded to the previous variations,

► **Fig. 4.** *Lenin relief (photograph by Arsen Tangatarov)*

leading to the question of a post-Soviet space. In contrast to the sanatorium, the off-site concrete pool retains its popularity (perhaps owing to its cheap entrance fee). The Buddhist relief has received new attention. In addition to the nearby water being bottled and sold under the name "Issyk-Ata" (formerly with a logo depicting the Buddha carving), trees near to the carving have small bits of cloth (or food packaging) tied around the branches akin to Cloughtie wells (Fig. 5). Though the site is on the itinerary of the predominantly Russian Bishkek Buddhist Society, the large number of these cloths suggests it is unlikely to be a foreign appropriation by a small number of Tibetan traditions (or one connected with New Age beliefs), but more likely a reappearance of a Central Asian tradition of tying cloth at a *mazar* to make a wish.[10] Such actions imply that the rock remains regarded as a holy location.

National independence has brought new features to the site. Adjacent to the entrance of the resort is a recently constructed mosque (Fig. 6). The style is similar to many of the newly built mosques in the region financed by Saudi money.[11] It is therefore now possible to be in the (probably) unique situation of standing beside a stone bearing a carving of both the Buddha and Lenin and hearing the announcement that Muhammad is the Messenger of God. The mix of contexts, all seemingly present and visible, is not, however, some multicultural paradise; like all such sites, there have been attempts to focus on particular elements. With the view that the location is one of local and national importance, the Buddha image has been over-painted with a gold coloured paint with the intention to preserve it (the Tibetan scripts are only partially covered). Pointedly, Lenin no longer receives such protection—currently, his face is subject to a declaration of love.[12]

While the site of the rock can be regarded as a "spiritual commons,"[13] fear has been expressed regarding the future of the site. While the new nation state attempts to create a national identity —one that is both distinctly Kyrgyz and Islamic —the question of balance has proved tricky. The old Soviet distinction between Islamic practice and local folk belief, a distinction that is often only scholarly, has become problematized with the replacement of Soviet authorities with new imported religious authorities.[14] The Buddhist iconography, and the view that regional Islamic customs such as *mazar* and tying cloth to trees are *haram*, has led to some fears expressed that the site will be indelibly altered, and that this current co-existence is a temporary state. Such apprehensions, likely swayed by recent geopolitics,[15] influence impressions of the future of the site. The appearance of seemingly recent Arabic

► **Fig. 5.** *Tree with tied cloth and packaging, and carving in Arabic script (photograph by author)*

► **Fig. 6.** *Mosque (photograph by Arsen Tangatarov)*

script carved into the stone (Fig. 5) leads to some concern; the inscription, however, appearing to wish for help for a mother in Pashtun, is merely another indicator of the diversity of responses to the site.

This sketch has presented briefly the complex and unique history of Issyk-Ata, and shown how such elements can reveal much about the successive contexts. In his popular Medieval Heritage of Budapest course, József Laszlovszky guides student flâneurs to see how the past is present—and is presented—to contemporary eyes, and provides them with pertinent questions regarding the curating and conservation of such heritage. For one who has spent a long time addressing questions such as changing conceptions and misunderstood details concerning Óbuda while at CEU,[16] it is hoped that he can see Laszlovszkian connections with a distant old Buddha carving and adjacent sanatorium. And, fittingly given Issyk-Ata's main claim to fame, may he long have good health.

Notes

1 The religious context of this saying, "Bala surasang – Manjyly-Ataga, baiylyk surasang – Cholpon-Ataga, den sooluk surasang – Ysyk-Ataga, tak surasang – Kochkor-Atagar bar," is discussed in the introduction of the fifth chapter of Gulnara Aitpaeva and Aida Egemberdieva, eds, *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl: Spiritual Power, Pilgrimage, and Art* (Bishkek: Aigine Cultural Research Center, 2009), 155–157. The most familiar spelling of "Issyk-Ata" has been used for this brief study.

2 The 5,331 kilometer route, suggested by Google Maps, could be followed in typical departmental alumni fashion with assistance during any potential fieldtrip.

3 For instance, see József Laszlovszky, "Space and Place: Text and Object: Human-Nature Interaction and Topographical Studies," in *People and Nature in Historical Perspective*, ed. József Laszlovszky and Péter Szabó (Budapest: Central European University, 2003), 81–104. Fittingly for József Laszlovszky's thoughts on groupwork, while this is only an introduction, I am happy to record the assistance and talents of others. Regarding Kyrgyz, Daniyar Karabaev; Arabic script, Haseeba Zormati and Mursal Ayoubi; for comments on earlier drafts, literature suggestions, photographs and assistance, Anguelina Popova, Arsen Tangatorov, Basira Mir Mahamad, and Borbála Lovas.

4 Identifiable by the traditional features of holding a bowl in his left hand and displaying a healing mudra in his right. P. Stobdan, "The Traces of Buddhism in the Semirech'e," *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* 7 (2003): 9, 15–16. The inscriptions were described as "faded" in the section by A. N. Zelinskiy and B. I. Kuznetsov in *Materialy po istorii i filologii Tsentral'noĭ Azii* [Materials on the history and philology of Central Asia], vol. 3 (Ulan-Ude: Buryatskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1968), 128. I have been unable to locate a copy of their "Tibetskie nadpisi Issyk-Kulja" [Tibetan inscriptions of Issyk-Kul]. For a brief sketch of Chui valley in this period (via its archaeological finds), see Grégoire Frumkin, *Archaeology in Soviet Central Asia* (Leiden/Cologne: Brill, 1970), 37–38.

5 On *mazars*, see Jeanne Féaux de la Croix, *Iconic Places in Central Asia: The Moral Geography of Dams, Pastures and Holy Sites* (Blelefeld: transcript, 2016), 111–134; Gulnara A. Aitpaeva, Aida A. Egemberdieva, and Mukaram Y. Toktogulova, eds, *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan: Rituals and Practitioners in Talas* (Bishkek: Aigine Cultural Center, 2007); and Zemfira Inogamova, "Keeping the Sacred Secret: Pilgrim's Voices at Sacred Sites in Kyrgyzstan," in *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. S. Bergmann, P. M. Scott, M. Jansdotter Samuelsson, and H. Bedford-Strohm (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 265–279.

6 This confusion may be resolved when the long encounter between the remnants of the once-settled Buddhist community and the Islamified Kyrgyz nomads can be mapped—with the usual caveats—in nineteenth-century ethnographical reports and twentieth-century archaeological studies. See, for instance, F.V. Poyarkov, "Iz arkheologicheskikh èkskursiĭ po Pishpekskomu uezdu i po beregam ozera Issyk-Kulya" [Archaeological excursions along the Pishpek uyzed and on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul], *Pamyatnaya knizhka Semirechenskogo oblastnogo statisticheskogo komiteta* [Memorandum of the Semirechensk Regional Statistical Committee] 2 (1898), 1–32.

7 It is hoped that a more detailed—and verifiable—chronology of the site, including what treatments were available (and its frequently mentioned treatment of Chernobyl-related illnesses), will follow. The sanatorium is briefly mentioned in Patricia Erfurt-Cooper and Malcolm Cooper, *Health and Wellness Tourism: Spas and Hot Springs*

(Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2009), but sadly does not feature in Maryam Omidi, *Holidays in Soviet Sanatoriums* (London: Fuel, 2017).

8 As above, archival work, and oral history, may help illuminate this tangled relationship. Interestingly, one online message board describes her in markedly Russian Orthodox terminology: "neryashlivaya pokhozhaya na ved'mu, kak vse yurodivye" ("slovenly like a witch, like all holy fools").

9 Lawrence Mitchell, *Kyrgyzstan* (Chalfont St Peter: Brandt Travel Guides, 2012), 128.

10 This detail is discussed in the chapter "*Ziyorat*" in Maria Elisabeth Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); and David Montgomery, "*Namaz*, Wishing Trees, and Vodka: The Diversity of Everyday Religious Life in Central Asia," in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, ed. Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 355–370. Such traditions can be authorized, albeit by regional authorities: Reuel Hanks notes that the trees near the enormous Koran stand in the Bibi Honim mosque complex in Samarkand often have tied clothes featuring prayers, see his "Civil Society and Identity in Uzbekistan: The Emergent Role of Islam," in *Civil Society in Central Asia*, ed. M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel C. Waugh (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 147. See also Amots Dafni, "Why Are Rags Tied to the Sacred Trees of the Holy Land?" *Economic Botany* 56 (2002), 315–327.

11 Investigating the flurry of mosque-building in Kyrgyzstan (from 39 in 1991 to some 2,300 in 2016), Yanti Hölzchen's fieldwork in Bishkek and the northeast of the country noted two-thirds of the new constructions by money from Saudi Arabia (with others supported by other Arab states); for a summary, see "Kyrgyzstan Experiencing Mosque Building Boom," *Eurasia Review*, accessed September 15, 2018 https://www.eurasiareview.com/12032016-kyrgyzstan-experiencing-mosque-building-boom/. In contrast, Turkish funds supported the construction of the large Ottomanesque Bishkek Central Mosque.

12 Close inspection of the Lenin relief reveals traces of gold paint.

13 The term is from Aibek Samakov and Fikret Berkes, "Spiritual Commons: Sacred Sites as Core of Community-Conserved Areas in Kyrgyzstan," *International Journal of the Commons* 11 (2017), accessed November 5, 2018, https://www.thecommonsjournal.org/articles/10.18352/ijc.713/.

14 For similar issues in other contexts, see the aforementioned "*Ziyorat*" chapter in Louw, *Everyday Islam*; Montgomery, "*Namaz*;" Gulnara Aitpaeva, "Sacred Sites in Kyrgyzstan: Spiritual Mission, Health and Pilgrimage," in *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. S. Bergmann, P. M. Scott, M. Jansdotter Samuelsson, and H. Bedford-Strohm (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 249-263; and Dávid Somfai Kara, "Conflict between Traditional and Modern Muslim Practices," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 61 (2016), 469–481.

15 For a detailed study of this context, see Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

16 See, for instance, his co-authored "'A Castle Once Stood, Now a Heap of Stones…': The Site and Remains of Óbuda in Medieval Chronicles, National Epics, and Modern Fringe Theories," in *Medieval Buda in Context*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Martyn Rady, Katalin Szende, and András Vadas (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 92–114.