The formation of Buddhist languages as exemplified by the case of Tocharian

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The two Tocharian languages (A and B) belong to the set of Central Asian languages who reflect the spread of Buddhism from India to the North, first to Iranian speaking territories, and ultimately to China and to the steppes of Mongolia, roughly from the last centuries BCE until the 15th century CE. These languages belong to different linguistic families: Middle Iranian languages (Khotanese and Tumshuqese Saka, Sogdian, Bactrian, Parthian) and Tocharian languages continue two distinct branches of the Indo-European language family, while Old Turkic (alternatively Old Uygur) is the earliest representative of the Turkic language family. Although the surveyed languages are quite different, both under genetic and typological aspects, they reflect some common trends in their respective Buddhist corpuses.

A major issue for the Buddhist communities of these regions was the elaboration of a Buddhist vocabulary. This has been achieved partly by loans from the languages of the Buddhist missionaries, the first of them spoke varieties of Middle Indic, and mostly Gāndhārī. The impact of Middle Indic is obvious in the most ancient layers of borrowings in Iranian and Tocharian languages. In further layers, the influence of Sanskrit became increasingly prevalent, because the local Buddhist scholars translated texts which had been previously put into Sanskrit. But the different communities were not influenced by the Indian culture at the same level. In order to convey the Buddhist faith into various classes of the society, it was also felt necessary to create genuine local expressions of Buddhist concepts which often compete with loanwords. This process implied often some level of abstraction in the formulation of philosophical concepts. To some extent, the translation of Buddhist terms into Tocharian can be compared to the transposition of Greek philosophical terms into Latin.

With the introduction of Buddhist literature, the local writers were also urged to follow the stylistic habits and to adopt literary genres that were originally part of the learned Indian tradition, and foreign to their native culture. In addition to the translation of canonical texts, those Buddhist scholars became able to compose narratives and poems that are original compositions based on Buddhist material and framework.

There has been also a large import in the Tarim Basin of sciences and techniques of Indian pedigree, among them grammar, philology, medicine, etc. The ongoing studies of Tocharian texts and of the varieties of the Tocharian B language have highlighted the differences between the literary and sacred form of the language and the everyday language which is recorded in profane documents. Several

lexical items of the vocabulary of both Tocharian languages point to the very learned level of the local culture. There is no doubt that the Tocharian scholars, at the time when they developed a specific variety of the Turkestan Brāhmī script, around 4th century CE, aimed to promote a Buddhist canon, or at least a corpus of authoritative texts, in Tocharian B. A similar process probably took place also, and independently, for Tocharian A, even though the manuscripts in the latter language are more recent. This endeavor of the Tocharian Buddhist communities lasted as long as they were lavishly supported by local rulers.

However, one should raise the question of earlier contacts of Tocharian speakers with Buddhism at earlier times, that is around or shortly before the beginning of CE, at the hypothetical epoch of Common Tocharian, the language anterior to the separate fates of Tocharian A and Tocharian B.
The paper will review these issues and compare the peculiar features of Tocharian learned languages as compared with other languages of Buddhism which have also enjoyed a strong Sanskrit influence, for instance Khotanese Saka. The inquiry will consider several levels of language use: morphology of borrowed nouns, syntax, style, vocabulary.