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Akṣobhya's Buddha Land in a Mahāyāna sūtra on Gāndhārī

-ABSTRACT-

Since 2005 a collection of birch-bark manuscripts written in 1st/2nd century Kharoṣṭhī and found in the ruins of a monastery near the Dir-Bajaur border in North-West Pakistan has been studied at Freie Universität Berlin. The process of identifying and cataloguing the 19 fragments is now nearly completed. The first texts – a Gāndhārī version of the Madhyamāgama Dakṣiṇāvibhaṅgasūtra, two Karmavācanā formulae, an extract from the Prātimokṣasūtra and a *raṁṣā* sūtra about the *nāga* king Manasvin – are in the process of editing and will be published soon. Other texts will require a longer period of study, either due to their fragmentary state or due to their size and complex structure. Both these criteria apply to the fragment I am going to introduce in my paper: It belongs to the largest texts attested in Gāndhārī language with more than 640 lines written on both sides of a nearly 2,20 m long scroll. Moreover, it represents a genre of Gāndhārī literature which has been waited for since long – a Mahāyāna sūtra. Its structure and contents center around the figure of the Buddha Akṣobhya. But despite this distinctive feature the text is not identical with any of the known versions of the Akṣobhyavyūha nor with any of the preserved Mahāyāna sūtras which include larger portions of the Akṣobhyavyūha or related texts into their contents. My paper will try to demonstrate a first, still preliminary approach to the new Gāndhārī text, show its basic structural and formal features and define its position within the larger context of Mahāyāna literature. Special attention will be given to the characteristic description of the Abhirati Buddha land as found in the Bajaur fragment. In the same time it is meant as an invitation to discuss this new discovery against the background of ideas about the emergence and early phase of Mahāyāna Buddhism and literature in general.