

Greek-Indian Connection — Alexander's Legacy

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Gandhara Buddha, 1st-2nd century AD.¹

Let's just say the mathematical urge is akin to the love of puzzles and mysteries, and it is not confined to the technical or scientific realm, but spills over into questions of history. Various objects or events are discovered that beg for explanations. It may just be the object or event itself, but often it stems from the unexpected time or place it is associated with. The Antikythera geared mechanism that appears to model the motions of the planets or be a clock would join many other examples in the 17th century, but arising alone from the 1st century BC, it is an unexpected and profound mystery. This mystery joins others about where things came from and how seemingly unrelated objects or events can be connected.

In my post, "Causality, Chance, and Connections,"² I have already alluded to one of the biggest mysterious connections that has bedeviled me over the years, namely, the brief suggestion I found in an art book over 50 years ago in the mid-1960s that the human images of Buddha that appeared in statues some four to five hundred years after his life came from the influence of Greek settlers left by Alexander the Great around 300 BC³ in the Gandhara region of then northwest India (now Pakistan) (Figure 1).

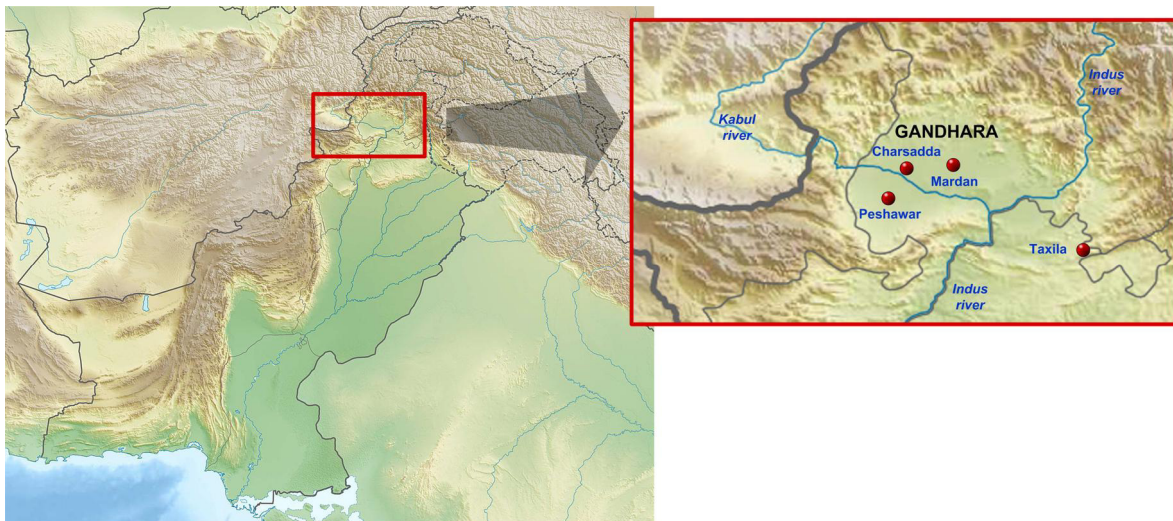


Figure 1 Gandhara Region in Present-Day Northern Pakistan (Wikipedia)

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:BuddhaHead.JPG>

² <http://josmfs.net/2019/03/29/causality-chance-and-connections/>

³ I still use BC/AD for dates. BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) seem like a hypocritical neutrality, since they are the same as the Christian-derived BC/AD. And I like that Jesus was born in 4 BC!.

This 1960s' reference said the Greek influence could be seen in the curly hair (Asian hair is generally straight) and characteristic Greek draping of the folds of the garment the Buddha was wearing.

As I mentioned in that previous post, before the era of *Wikipedia* I could not readily find any further corroboration of this amazing assertion. Something certainly had happened to Buddhism, since from my collegiate studies at the time I knew that the Buddha was originally represented only as a wheel or footprint. So it was not clear to me when the change to full statues occurred or why. I also knew that Buddhism had split into two main versions with the original referred to as Theravada Buddhism and the new version called Mahayana Buddhism (these designations apparently are controversial now). But again, I did not know when the changes occurred. The excuse given was that Indian philosophy was concerned with the timeless and with aspects of human thought and meaning that transcend the physical world and its involvement with historical time.

A decade later in the 1970s I came across a book by Michael Edwardes ([1]) that provided more significant information, but his lack of footnotes and limited bibliography made me feel (incorrectly as it turned out) that the book might belong to the deluge of pop histories about gurus and the East that were flooding the market at the time. So I did not feel I could trust it. It was three more decades to the mid 2000s with the arrival of *Wikipedia* that a dam seemed to burst with the voluminous information I found in a set of 2007 articles. I have done spot checks recently (2019) and it appears that the 2007 information has substantially remained unchanged.

So, what *is* the story about the Alexandrian Greeks and Buddhism, and why did it seem to be suppressed for so long?

Perhaps the surprise element in this story has diminished in the 21st century with its greater recognition of the contributions of the East to the West, or perhaps the cloud of obscurity is due more to the Western intellectual prejudice that permeated Western academic studies in the 19th and 20th centuries that was my educational milieu. However, I did discover that the West is not solely to blame for the hidden story—more later.

The Greeks and the Buddha

The “Greeks in India” turns out to be a *huge* story and certainly cannot be presented in depth here, and certainly not by a novice such as myself. So I will just try to skim the highlights and suggest a more fruitful place to start would be the vast information now assembled on the subject in *Wikipedia*.

Everyone is probably somewhat familiar with the accomplishments of Alexander the Great and how he took a small band of Macedonians in northern Greece at the end of the 4th century BC and proceeded to conquer Egypt in the south, and then Persia in the east, followed by northern sections of India even further east. (Like young mathematicians who were inspired by the fabulous stories in E. T. Bell's *Men of Mathematics*—since largely debunked by revisionists, to no avail—I was seduced by the melodramatic version of Alexander's conquests by Harold Lamb's *Alexander of Macedon* ([2]).) Alexander left a string of cities in his wake—all named for himself—together with deposits of some Greeks from his entourage (for example, Alexandria in Egypt, and then Alexandria Arion (Herat) and Alexandria Archosia (Kandahar) in Afghanistan, to name only a few) (Figure 2).

After Alexander's brief, but explosive moment in history, his conquered territories were divided among his generals with the Seleucid Kingdom stretching from Mesopotamia in the west to the borders of India in the east. This was a rather unstable situation, and the Seleucid Kingdom soon split off Parthian and Bactrian hegemonies to the east. But the Greek presence sown by Alexander is evident in the Bactrian region, which was designated the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom (250 – 125 BC) (Figure 3), out of which grew the Indo-Greek Kingdom (180 BC – 10 AD) (Figure 4).



Figure 2 Map of Alexander the Great's Conquests and the Subsequent Creation of Hellenistic Kingdoms ([3])



Figure 3 180 BCE
(Greco-Bactrian Kingdom 250 – 125 BCE) (Wikipedia, 2007)



Figure 4 Time of Menander 1st Century BCE
(Indo-Greek Kingdom 180 BCE – 10 CE) (Wikipedia)

So Gandhara lay at the heart of this cross-fertilization of cultures (see the location of Taxila in Figure 1 and Figure 4). This is *Wikipedia*'s description of the fruits of the interaction ([4]):

Greco-Buddhist art is the artistic manifestation of Greco-Buddhism, a cultural syncretism between the Classical Greek culture and Buddhism, which developed over a period of close to 1,000 years in Central Asia, between the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC, and the Islamic conquests of the 7th century AD. Greco-Buddhist art is characterized by the strong idealistic realism and sensuous description of Hellenistic art and the first representations of the Buddha in human form, which have helped define the artistic (and particularly, sculptural) canon for Buddhist art throughout the Asian continent up to the present. It is also a strong example of cultural syncretism between eastern and western traditions.

The origins of Greco-Buddhist art are to be found in the Hellenistic Greco-Bactrian kingdom (250–130 BC), located in today's Afghanistan, from which Hellenistic culture radiated into the Indian subcontinent with the establishment of the Indo-Greek kingdom (180–10 BC). Under the Indo-Greeks and then the Kushans, the interaction of Greek and Buddhist culture flourished in the area of Gandhara, in today's northern Pakistan, before spreading further into India, influencing the art of Mathura, and then the Hindu art of the Gupta empire, which was to extend to the rest of South-East Asia. The influence of Greco-Buddhist art also spread northward towards Central Asia, strongly affecting the art of the Tarim Basin, and ultimately the arts of China, Korea, and Japan.



Figure 5 One of the first representations of the Buddha, 1st–2nd century AD, Gandhara, Pakistan: Standing Buddha (Tokyo National Museum) (*Wikipedia*)

I was fortunate enough to see a beautiful display of this cross-cultural fertilization in a 2008 exhibit from Afghanistan at the Washington National Gallery of Art ([5] Figure 6 – Figure 8).



Figure 6 A Roman-Egyptian glass goblet depicting figures harvesting dates, from Begram. Photo: Thierry Ollivier/Musée Guimet ([5])

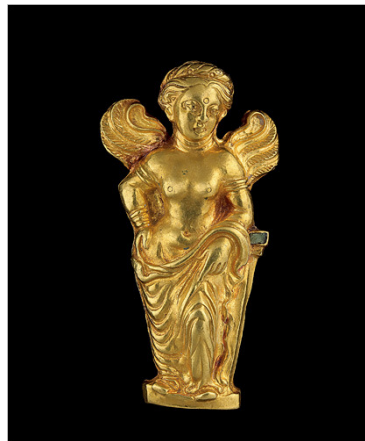


Figure 7 Some of the pieces show a blending of cultural influences like nothing else in the exhibition. A small solid-gold Aphrodite that was once decorated with little pine-nut pieces of turquoise has a Greek “Winged Victory” drape, sickle-shaped wings and an Indian beauty mark. ([5])

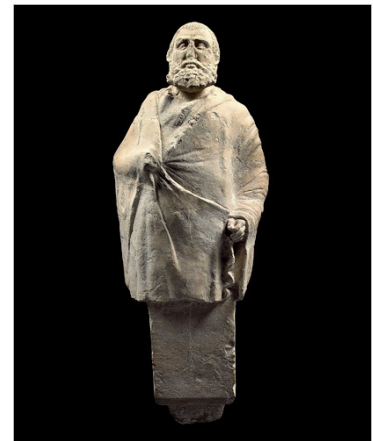


Figure 8 From the Greco-Bactrian city of Ai Khanum, founded in 300 B.C. by a follower of Alexander the Great ... [comes] ... a full-length statue of a man named Stratos who grasps the folds of his robe in one hand, a gesture that might have influenced centuries of statues of Buddhist sculptures. ([5])

The tale is further elaborated, especially with emphasis on the cross-cultural influences culminating with the Kushans (1st – 3rd century AD), in Aatish Taseer's article ([6]).

The Kushans, descendants of pastoral nomads ... emerged like a wind out of the Eastern steppe around the second century B.C. They were heirs to a dazzling hybridity, which included the first ever confluence of Greece, China, Persia and India. Evidence suggests that it was under their reign that a reconstituted form of Buddhism, known as Mahayana (Great Vehicle) Buddhism, flourished and was transmitted along Kushan-controlled trade routes, deep into the East, through China, and eventually Korea and Japan. ...

One aspect of the Mahayana version of Buddhism that distinguished it from its predecessor was the expansion of the role of a bodhisattva that grew out of the shift in emphasis toward the person of the Buddha, the compassionate suffering man.

The purpose of the bodhisattva is to achieve enlightenment and to fulfill the vow to become a buddha. The bodhisattva also foregoes entrance into nirvana in order to remain in the world as long as there are creatures to be saved from suffering. ([7])

Some scholars argue that this shift is due to Greek influences ([8]). Philip Jenkins ([9]) discusses the Greek influence on Indian statuary and in particular the Greco-Buddhist figures of the bodhisattvas. He contrasts this successful syncretism of Hellenistic ideas in foreign garb with the Jewish resistance to similar pressures in the 2nd century BC via the Maccabean Revolt. I can't tell if Jenkins is suggesting the Greco-Buddhist assimilation in the bodhisattvas is just artistic or if it also reflects the influence of Greek philosophical ideas as well.

The Hidden Story

After my discovery in the 1960s of a possible link between Greek sculpture and the images of Buddha, why couldn't I find any further extensive corroboration of that until fairly recently (2007)? A fascinating book by Charles Allen, *Ashoka* (2012)([10]), shed some light on the mystery. There were two aspects to the issue: one was the suppression of any recognition that Buddhism even existed in India and the other was the repudiation of any western influence in early India, such as from the Greeks. Allen offers two basic explanations, one involving the original British Orientalists in the 19th century and the other the 20th century Indian historians.

As part of the British colonial (roughly 1750 – 1950) effort to investigate the nature of the Indian culture they inhabited, Allen mentions how the early domination of Horace Hayman Wilson, secretary of the Asiatic Society for over twenty years, thwarted any research or evidence found that did not pertain to Sanskrit and Brahmanism (aka Hinduism), such as the Brahma script and Buddhism. He also discounted any idea that most of the Brahman temples and monuments were situated over Buddhist originals and that Ashoka was a Buddhist. Eventually, British researchers who continued to investigate Ashoka and Buddhism turned to French investigators who were open to the idea, and in fact strongly supported the views of Greek influence. The combined antipathy to the ideas and to the French drove the main British investigators to largely ignore the evidence. So what information that was published ended up largely in French journals, in French, which is not something I would have ready access to.

The other factor mentioned by Allen was modern Indian Hindu nationalism, especially as India was gaining its independence in the 1940s and 1950s, that viewed India as “untainted by foreign influences”; its history and culture evolved solely within itself.

Some recent books have shone even further light on the matter: Beckwith (2015) ([11]), Boardman (2015) ([12]), Stoneman (2019) ([13])

Modern Tragedy

The pivotal influence of the Middle Eastern region from Mesopotamia to eastern Afghanistan in the transmission of ideas and culture between the West and the East, launched by Alexander's incredible conquest, seems to have been buried over the centuries through strife and conquest. Original Mesopotamian Jewish enclaves have finally been routed by the wars in Iraq. Centuries-old evidence of the intermingling of East and West in the Bamayan statues of Buddha in Afghanistan have been destroyed by the fundamentalist Taliban. The tantalizing archaeological digs that unearthed the Greco-Indian treasures in Eastern Afghanistan are threatened again by modern strife and prejudice. I can only hope that our recent welcoming of migrants from this magnificent region will preserve and expand our knowledge and appreciation of this ancient country.

One other modern tragedy I have yet to mention is that of Iran. In exploring the East-West transmission of ideas I have come to appreciate the major role Iran and its ancient Persian cultures have played in Western development from the time of Alexander to the Western Renaissance. And of course there is its profound influence on the history of India, especially in the Mogul period. Its modern anachronistic fundamentalist theocracy sadly thwarts what should be a rich interchange of history and culture with other nations.

References

- [1] Edwardes, Michael, *East-West Passage: The Travel of Ideas, Arts and Inventions between Asia and the Western World*, Taplinger Pub. Co., New York, 248 pp. 1971
- [2] Lamb, Harold, *Alexander of Macedon*, Pinnacle Books, 1976 (first published 1946). Book blurb: "In a breathless tale of the extraordinary Alexander the Great, a master storyteller recreates the high drama which was this infamous demi-god's life. Here is the handsome young prince who chose books over the beautiful young women and men sent to tempt him; the youthful conqueror who ordered bloody massacres but grew sick with self-loathing afterward; the brilliant general who battled his way into the unknown to learn the mysteries of life; the ascetic who brought his people richness and luxury beyond their wildest dreams; the despot who, in a dozen years, altered the entire thrust of history; the heir to a kingdom no mortal had ever before dared to claim."
- [3] "Empire of Alexander the Great," *Atlas of the Bible Lands*, C. S. Hammond & Co., 1959. p.B-18
- [4] "Greco-Buddhist Art", *Wikipedia*, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Buddhist_art), originally retrieved in 2007, and then again in 2019. The only change was BC/AD became BCE/CE. I perversely kept the original.
- [5] "Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul, May 25 – September 7, 2008", National Gallery of Art, 2008. (<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2008/afghanistan.html>, https://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/05/23/arts/0523-AFGHAN_index.html)
- [6] Taseer, Aatish, "How the Buddha Got His Face", *T-Magazine*, New York Times, 11 May 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/11/t-magazine/buddha-statues-face.html>)
Taseer concentrates on the Kushan Empire (1st – 3rd AD) in India which followed the empires discussed above (3rd – 1st BC), especially the Mauryan Empire that included Ashoka. He expands the source of influences from the Greeks to include the Persians, Chinese, and Indians themselves.
- [7] "The Bodhisattva Ideal" *Britannica*
(<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism/Mahayana#ref300363>)
- [8] "Greco-Buddhism" *Wikipedia* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Buddhism>)

- [9] Jenkins, Philip, "Of Greeks, Gods, Buddhas, and Graven Images" *Anxious Bench*, www.patheos.com, December 27, 2019.
(<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2019/12/of-gods-buddhas-and-graven-images/>)
Jenkins considers the impact of the Hellenistic period following Alexander's conquest. He compares the seeming success of the Greek influence on Indian culture, in particular their statuary, with the Jewish resistance to similar pressures in the 2nd century BC via the Maccabean Revolt.
- [10] Allen, Charles, *Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor*, Abrams Press, 480 pp. 2012

Recent References

- [11] Beckwith, Christopher I., *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 304 pp. 2015. Beckwith's thesis is that the Greek philosopher Pyrrho (365/360 – 275/270 BCE) was strongly influenced in his thinking by his encounters with Indian philosophers during his sojourn in India with Alexander's army.
- [12] Boardman, John, *The Greeks in Asia*, Thames & Hudson, 240 pp. 2015 Besides explanatory text, Boardman produces a variety of clear photos, many in color, of statues, coins, sculptures, artistic objects, and building façades and architecture representing a range of interactions between Greek and Asian cultures.
- [13] Stoneman, Richard, *The Greek Experience of India: From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 549 pp. 2019 Among a plethora of topics, Stoneman explores the historical controversies over Greek influence in Indian art and sculpture.

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