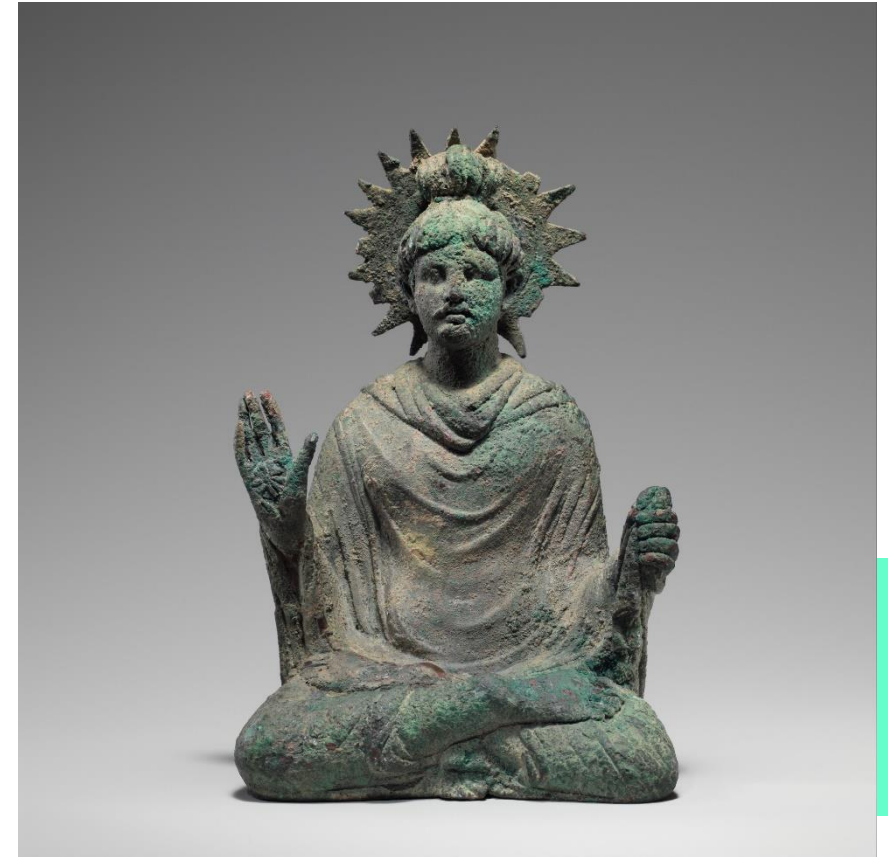


Religion and Art in the Hellenistic Far East

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(He/Him/His)



A seated Buddha, with Greek clothing and an Iranian Solar Halo. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/72381>

Overview

Learning Objectives

- To understand the history of Bactria and Gandhara, as well as the Indo-Greek, Greco-Bactrian, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian and Kushan Empires.
- To understand the religions that existed in the region and how they influenced the Gandhara School of Art



Introduction

- The Hellenistic Far East is a modern label for the easternmost regions of Alexander the Great's conquests. The main regions we will talk about are Gandhara and Bactria.
- Bactria is the region that spans modern day Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and is also the name of an Achaemenid satrapy.
- Gandhara is the ancient name of a region in the modern-day Peshawar basin of Pakistan.
- The Hellenistic Far East describes the Indo-Greek and Greco-Bactrian kingdoms, but the region was inhabited by Greek, Iranian and Indian groups.



Geography

- Bactria consists of many open fields, as well as fertile rivers such as the Amu Darya (which the Greeks called the Oxus). These rivers allow for both nomadic peoples to travel from north to south as well as the formation of large prosperous cities.
- Two examples are Ai Khanoum in Afghanistan, initially an Achaemenid, and then a Greco-Bactrian city, and Takht-I-Sangin in Turkmenistan, a large river cult shrine. Both are near the Panj and Amu Darya rivers.
- Gandhara lies to the east, in the Swat Valley next to the Hindu Kush mountains. Many trade routes go through the valley, secured by mountain passes. This made waystations very rich.
- An example is Taxila, a city mentioned in the Mahabharata. It was the capital of many kingdoms and had many Buddhist stupas where travellers would lodge and donate to monks.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- We begin when Achaemenid records show Bactria and Gandhara amongst Persepolis's tributaries. Both regions are shown in Achaemenid records, but also were known to revolt on occasion.
- Eventually, Alexander the Great arrives in the region to conquer it. Here, he found cities with Greek colonists expelled from Cyrene in Libya, who had married with the local Iranian groups.
- His conquest of the region was very brutal. Some of local kings, like the one in Taxila, welcomed Alexander. Others, like Porus, fought viciously against him.
- After Alexander's death, his Diadochos Seleukos I Nicator took over the region. His wife, Apama, was from Sogdiana further north. His son, Antiochos I, was satrap in the region.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (II)

- Gandhara was also part of the Maurya Empire. In fact, we can find Edicts in Greek and Aramaic in the city of Kandahar indicating Greek and Persian locals.. These were public statements carved into pillars by the Buddhist Emperor, Ashoka the Great.
- Sometime in the 250s BCE, the Satrap of Bactria Diodotus revolted and established the Kingdom of Greco-Bactria.
- In the early 2nd Century, King Demetrios launched a campaign into northern India. This is considered the beginning of the Indo-Greek kingdoms. His coins reflect this by giving him an elephant helmet, a symbol for India.
- Another famous Indo-Greek king is Menander I. He sponsored Buddhist reliquaries and stupas, while also keeping Athena on his coins. A story recounting his alleged conversion to Buddhism by the sage Nagasena is in the Milindapanha, a Buddhist tale in the Pali language. Pali is a sister language of Sanskrit.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (III)

- Eventually, the Greco-Bactrians were over-run by incursions from nomadic tribes in the north – Ai Khanoum which was a possible capital was destroyed in 145 BCE.
- The Indo-Scythian and Indo-Parthian Kingdoms were formed by these nomadic tribes or satraps who broke off from Parthia. The Indo-Greeks broke up into regional kingdoms. Coins shift from showing Greek deities to showing them alongside Iranian and Indian deities.
- The biggest empire to rise from this period is the Kushan Empire. Originally a nomadic tribe, the Kushans founded a large empire containing Bactria and Gandhara, around the 1st Century CE. They depicted Buddhist, Iranian, Hindu and Greek gods on their coins.
- The most important Kushan king, Kanishka I, was a great sponsor of the Gandhara School of Art, as were many Kushan nobles. He is also said to have sponsored the spread of Buddhism to China. They disbanded in the 4th Century CE.



HYBRIDITY, RELIGION AND ART

- **What is hybridity?** – It is a term describing how different cultures and religions intermix and borrow from each other. This is shaped by society and which culture(s) are considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’.
- In Bactria and Gandhara, you had local Iranian ethnic groups, Persian immigrants, Greek colonists, nomadic groups of all kinds, as well as peoples from all over north and Central India.
- This was a religiously rich region. Cults related to wine were locally prevalent. Greek and Hindu deities appear on coins. Iranian polytheists and Zoroastrians had urban temples and remote shrines. And there were many Buddhists.
- This diversity appears in art throughout Bactria and Gandhara. Cultures mixed and produced new forms of art, while different gods merged or gave their images to each other. We also have the beginnings of Mahayana Buddhism here.



Example I: The Grove of Zeus

- Near the southern Tajik city of Kulob, there lies an example of Greek imperial presence in the region. This is a grove dedicated to Zeus.
- Two kings, Euthydemos and Demetrios I, are attested in an inscription, which is seen here:
- *Heliodotos dedicated this fragrant altar for Hestia, venerable goddess, illustrious amongst all, in the grove of Zeus, with beautiful trees; he made libations and sacrifices so that the greatest of all kings Euthydemos, as well as his son, the glorious, victorious and remarkable Demetrios, be preserved of all pains, with the help of Tyche {Fortune} with divine thoughts.*
- Tyche was a popular Hellenistic deity, showing good fortune and cornucopia and manifesting in each city. We can thus see a great deal of Greek presence in the service of kings at this time.



Example II: Begram Hoard

- The city of Begram is near the Hindu Kush mountains, on a road leading to modern-day Kabul. This strategic location meant many trade routes intersected in this period.
- The French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan excavated a massive hoard of items from the site in the 1930s.
- The finds include ivories with dancing women from India, glass vials from Rome, as well as seal plaques with figures such as Endymion and Selene. Other finds come from China.
- We even have ivory figures of Yakshinis, nature spirits found throughout ancient South Asia. This suggests that the people in Begram were part of truly global networks of trade and culture.



Example III: Butkara I

- Butkara I is a stupa near Mingora, in the Swat Valley. Archaeologists have deduced that it lasted from possibly the Maurya period to the end of the Kushan period.
- Its sponsorship throughout all the Kingdoms of the era is apparent in the art. While a Buddhist site, it depicts many scenes with vines and wine imagery. Between them, scenes of devotees from Central Asia and stories of the Buddha's life.
- Wine cults were found by Alexander the Great in his wars of conquest, which he linked to Dionysus. Dionysiac Greek imagery merged with the region's Iranian wine cults, and eventually was subsumed by Buddhism to appeal to the local populations.
- In fact, some scholars have suggested that wine cultivation for medicine was part of Buddhist monasteries' being embedded in the local economy, thus spreading further in the region.



Example IV: Gandhara trays

- The palettes are made of steatite or schist. They are concave dishes, 4 x19 cm in diameter, and the majority measures slightly less than 10 cm across. Almost all of them show decoration on the inner side. This decoration has anything from erotic, to mythological, to partying imagery.
- The palettes may have been used as votive offerings. Depictions of Greek deities such as nymphs on sea monsters or Herakles, could mean entirely different things.
- A popular motif is people on sea monsters or horseback, possibly as Vahanas or vehicles in the Hindu fashion. There are influences from Parthian horse depictions, and Greek sea monsters.
- Another motif is people partying in a very Greek way, with reclining chairs. This may have depicted common celebrations in the region.



Example V: Takht-I-Sangin

- Takht-I-Sangin (Tajik for Throne of Stone), is a sanctuary near the Amu Darya river in Tajikistan. It is apparently linked to the river Vakhsh, or Oxus for the Greeks.
- Water cults are important for purity in Iranian religions, both Zoroastrianism and Iranian polytheistic religions. This is why the sanctuary is here. In addition, it is probably as old as the Achaemenid Empire, since it's near the findspot of a golden hoard from the period called the Oxus Treasure.
- Within the temple, we have some interesting findings. Inside, there is a small shrine of a satyr called Marsyas. A dedication on it comes from a man with an Iranian name, called Atrosokos. His dedication is in Greek.
- This is called 'cultural convergence' by scholars. Two cultures here, Greek and Iranian, have come together in a similar cult and merged their art. Atrosokos is borrowing Greek words to express a local form of worship.



Example VI: Tapa Shotor

- Tapa Shotor is a small complex of worship caves near the site of Hadda, in Afghanistan.
- The site is important for a very specific depiction. Inside one of the stupas, you can see the Buddha lying in meditation pose.
- Next to him are two figures; his protector, the Bodhisattva Vajrapani (Thunderbolt-bearer), and Hariti, a demoness who became a Buddhist convert and became a protector of children.
- Vajrapani is depicted with the form of Herakles, the son of Zeus. Hariti is shown as Tyche, personifying luck and prosperity. We can thus see that people had no qualms about borrowing the image of one deity for a completely different one.



Example VII: Heliodoros Pillar

- This pillar is outside Bactria and Gandhara, but shows the global reach of cultural interaction in this period.
- In Sanchi, a famous Buddhist site, we have large pillar erected by an Indo-Greek king. Antialcidas Nikephoros (ca. 115 to 95 BCE or 130 to 120 BCE): reigned from his capital at Taxila but saw fit to erect this pillar at Sanchi for diplomatic reasons. The diplomat who organized it was Heliodorus: an Indo-Greek ambassador whose name was given to the pillar by archaeologists.
- The language is Prakrit, a local Indian language of the time. It is dedicated to a precursor cult of modern-day's Vaisnavism, centred on Vishnu. It also includes a verse from the Mahabharata:
- *This Garuda-standard of Vāsudeva, the God of Gods, was erected here by the devotee Heliodoros, the son of Dion, a man of Taxila, sent by the Great Yona King Antialkidas, as ambassador to King Kasiputra Bhagabhadra, the Savior son of the princess from Varanasi, in the fourteenth year of his reign. Three immortal precepts (footsteps)... when practiced lead to heaven: self-restraint, charity, consciousness*



Glossary of Key Terms

Key Term	Definition
Ai Khanoum	Uzbek for 'Lady Moon': Possibly the city of Alexandria on the Oxus or Eucratideia: An archaeological site situated in today's Takhar Province in Afghanistan. It boasts a mixture of Achaemenid and Greek architecture and was an important city of the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek Kingdoms.
Taxila	A large city in the Peshawar Basin. It was one of the main centres of the Gāndhāra school, and an important city for many polities such as the Indo-Greeks and the Kuṣāṇas.
Butkara	A Buddhist Stūpa near Mingora. It is situated in the Swāt Valley. It provides an array of examples of the Gāndhāra style.
Takht-I-Sangin	(Tajik: "Throne of Stone") an archaeological site near the the source of the Amu Darya, in southern Tajikistan. During the Hellenistic period it was a city in the Greco-Bactrian kingdom with a large temple dedicated to the Oxus (Vakhsh river).



Glossary of Key Terms

Key Term	Definition
Zoroastrianism	A religion that used to be practiced in Iranian-speaking regions, including Gāndhāra. It relates around Ahura Mazda, a supreme deity, and places significant emphasis on fire worship.
Buddhism	A Dharmic religion founded by Siddharta Gautama/the Buddha. Buddhism expanded throughout South Asia from the 5th Century BCE. Buddhism entrenched itself in Gāndhāra and received patronage from Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian and Kuṣāṇa Kingdoms.
Shaivism	One of modern Hinduism's main denominations that reveres Śiva as the Supreme Being. It might have some precursors in Gāndhāra.
Vaisnavism	One of the major modern-day Hindu denominations. It considers Viṣṇu as the Supreme Lord. Some of its precursor cults were popular in Gāndhāra.



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Thank you