

Central Asia: A Melting Pot of Persian, Greek, Indian and Chinese Cultural Traditions

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Abstract

Central Asia comprises (ex-Soviet) West Turkestan and (Chinese) East Turkestan. Culturally, it is linked with the ancient civilisations of Greece, Persia, India and China. Concerning contacts between these regions, we know that Persian emperor Darius I invaded Gandhāra and the Indus valley. Later, Alexander the Great defeated Darius III and conquered the empire's eastern province. All this left an impact on artistic and cultural traditions of the conquered territories and their neighbours. Interactions intensified with the opening of the Silk Routes by Han Wudi after receiving a report by his general, who travelled to the Oxus region to seek an alliance with the Yuezhis, also known as Kuṣānas. The Kuṣānas played a political and cultural role in India and Central Asia. Like Mauryan king Aśoka, Kuṣāna king Kaniṣka adopted Buddhism and helped spreading it beyond India. King Lalitāditya of Kashmir had close connections with Central Asia and Tibet. The Silk Routes became important in the transmission of art and culture, making Central Asia a melting pot and a repository of knowledge.

Key words: Alexander, Aśoka, Buddhism, Central Asia, China, Darius, Greece, India, Kaniṣka, Kashmir, Kuṣāna, Lalitāditya, Persia, Silk Routes, Tibet, Turkestan, Yuezhi

1. CENTRAL ASIA: AREA

The vast area of Central Asia is, on the one hand, home to numerous cultures which communicate with each other and, on the other, deeply indebted to the rich cultural heritage of the ancient civilisations of Persia, Greece, Indian subcontinent and China. Politically, West Turkestan includes the five ex-Soviet republics, - Kazakhstan, Kirgizia (also: Kyrgyzstan), Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – on the one hand, while East Turkestan comprises China's Xinjiang province (officially: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). Culturally, however, it also includes Afghanistan, northwestern India, parts of which (Gandhāra, Taxila, Swat) now belong to Pakistan, as well as Tibet and Nepal in the east, and Iraq, Syria, Iran and Greece in the west.

2. ACHAEMENID PERIOD

For lack of records, the date of Central Asia's earliest commercial and cultural contacts with its neighbours is not known. According to the Behistun inscription of emperor Darius I (522-486 BCE) (Majumdar et.al. 1980, p.61)¹ of the Achaemenid Empire (Majumdar et.al. 1980, p.61)², he ruled over a vast empire that included the whole of Ecbatana, Elam, Parthia, Hyrcania and probably Armenia, Sardis, Babylonia, Egypt, Bactria, Margiana, Syria, Palestine, Phoenicia, Sogdia (Dandamayev, 1999, p.40). Between 519 and 512 BCE he invaded and annexed "Thrace, Macedonia and ancient north-western India" (Dandamayev, 1999, p.45), viz. Gandhāra, now in Pakistan, and sent "a naval expedition to the Indus under the command of Skylax ...", which "paved

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¹ The language of the Behistun inscription is old Persian and it is written in a cuneiform script.

² The Achaemenid, or the First Persian Empire (c.558-330 BCE) was founded by Cyrus.

the way for the annexation of the Indus valley as far as the deserts of Rājputāna. It constituted the twentieth and the most populous satrapy of the Persian empire” (Majumdar et.al., 1980, p.61). These strategic places helped to spread Indian, particularly Buddhist, culture beyond India. It is interesting that, though Darius I was contemporary with Buddha, no reference to him or his teachings is found in this great Achaemenid king’s inscriptions. But the material culture of this period, derived from Assyrian Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greek traditions (Boardman, 1992, p.35) left a great impact on all of Central Asian and Indian lifestyle and language, which are traceable in Buddhist art and texts found in these regions.

3. GREEK LEGACY

After Darius I, the next powerful king, who brought about a phenomenal change in Eurasian culture, is Alexander the Great of Macedon (356-323 BCE). On the one hand, his invasion of Persia in 330 BCE had crushed the world’s mightiest power, the Achaemenid or Persian Empire (Darius III, c.380-330 BCE), and spread Greek, or Hellenistic, culture across the vast conquered region, which included West Turkestan of the Achaemenids as well as India and its neighbours, both on the east and the west. On the other, by appointing the *dharmamahāmātras*, or high officers in charge of religion, to spread Buddha’s teachings to lands beyond the periphery of India, king Aśoka (273-232 BCE) caused a new wave of cultural interactions between India, Central Asia and their neighbours. The period between Alexander’s disappearance and Aśoka’s appearance on the scene, more than half a century, witnessed cultural activities in the area enjoying a mixed flavour of a Graeco-Persian fusion.

Alexander’s conquests, stretching from Greece to Egypt and into Iran, west Turkestan, Asia Minor, to northwestern India including Bactria in Afghanistan, and Sogdia in today’s Uzbekistan, comprised more than twenty satrapies

bearing his name, which were governed by his men. Greek people from all walks of life settled there, academicians, artists, sculptors, traders and others. In due course of time, their cultural traditions merged with local traditions. When local people commissioned works from these foreign artists and sculptors, their art traditions obviously met with local traditions, blending physical features, dresses, ornaments, architectural elements, decorative motifs and more. Thus, the arts of Gandhara, Mathura, Khotan, Miran, Niya, Tumshuk and Kizil display composite styles, reminiscent of Achaemenid, Greek, Parthian, Sassanian, Indian, Tibetan, Central Asian and Chinese styles.

Here, it may be mentioned that Achaemenid, Greek, Parthian, Sassanian arts have greatly influenced the arts of India, Central Asia and China. Yet, the impact of classical Greek art and, later, Sassanian art on the art of these regions is astonishing.

4. THE GRAECO-BACTRIAN AND INDO-GREEK RULERS

After Alexander’s death, Bactria became a Greek colony and turned into a nucleus of Hellenisation in the East. King Euthydemus fortified the Seleucid Satrapy. He was responsible for extending Hellenistic influences and trade with the Far East. His son Demetrius annexed the Seleucid provinces of Aria (Herat), Arachosia and Seistan in order to gain control over the trade routes by land, between India and the West. He conquered Kapisa (Begram) and Gandhara as well as Gedrosia and Paropamisidae, situated south of the Hindukush. The popular Indo-Greek king, Menander (167-145 BCE), was a patron of Buddhism. One of his coins shows the *dharmacakra* (Wheel of Law) symbol. Bactria remained under the sway of Graeco-Bactrian rule till the rise of the Great Kuṣānas in the 1st century CE.



Map 1. The main Silk Routes – channel of interactions between the East and the West. After Whitfield, S., 2004, *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, pp.8-9

The art of Central Asia exhibits a close relationship with Gandhāra, which in turn was deeply influenced by Greek or Hellenistic art. This new stylistic expression germinated with the invasion of Alexander the Great, who touched the Indian soil in 327-26 BCE, and brought with him to India the great artist Lysippus (NEB, 1975, vol.8, p.371). The Gandhāra style evolved in the 1st century BCE and reached its zenith during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, during the time of the Kuṣāna king Kaniṣka. It may not be too pretentious to put Kaniṣka at par with Alexander in matters of spreading art and culture. The difference between Alexander and Kaniṣka is that the former was responsible for spreading his own culture beyond Greece, while the latter adopted the culture and religion of foreign lands, i.e., India and Hellenised Bactria, and spread this newly assimilated culture within his empire, which in course of time extended up to Kashgarh, Yarkand and Khotan on the Southern Silk Route, in today's Xinjiang province of China.

5. GRAECO-BACTRIAN ART

Khalchayan, situated north of Afghanistan, is an important Central Asian archaeological site in the West, on the right bank of the Surkhan Darya, near the present-day Denau in Uzbekistan. From the 3rd century BCE to the 4th century CE, it was part of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom. The archaeological excavations of Khalchayan throw light on the art and architecture of the Graeco-Bactrians. In addition to the citadel and palaces are finds which show Greek influence such as the portraits of warriors and men wearing helmets similar to those found in Afrasiab. Embossed silver plaques and medallions, sometimes gilded, show busts of ladies with occidental features. A mixture of styles with Iranian and Greek elements paved the way for Kuṣāna art.

Sculptures and small art objects found near the residence of the early Parthian kings reveal strong Hellenistic trends. A number of ivory

rhytons were also discovered in the vicinity. Their shape is Persian (cf. Fig.9) but the relief carvings on them show scenes of the Greek way of life (Albaum, and Brentjes, 1972, pp.101-103, pls 59-61). These reliefs reveal at least twenty Olympic deities, including Zeus and Poseidon, Hera and Demeter, Pallas Athene, Hestia, Artemis, Aphrodite, Apollo and Hermes (Albaum and Brentjes, 1972, p. 83). Some of the rhytons show Dionysian scenes. Such scenes are often depicted on terracotta vessels from Khotan, another important Central Asian site in the East, in a naturalistic way, where Hellenistic influence is strongly felt in the modelling of the Dionysian figures (Figs.9, 10). At the same time elements, like dresses, ewers, rhytons show Persian and Central Asian elements.

Ornamental friezes depict an undulating garland supported by children. This motif, as well as the depiction of male and female busts arranged in the curves of the undulated garland, is derived from Hellenistic art of the 2nd century BCE (Pugachenkova, 1971, p.128). Another favourite motif was the satyr. Pugachenkova observes, "Child garland-bearers, actresses, satyrs, dressed-up maidens, maskaraboz clowns – such is the cast of characters of the Khalchayan friezes. All of them belong to the subject range known as Dionysian – which, as testified by ancient art relics, was extremely widespread in the territory of Central Asia" (Pugachenkova, 1971, p.129). These characters became popular even in the eastern part of Central Asia, particularly in the Khotan area.

The Khalchayan excavations have unearthed some tangible evidences of the musical culture of the people of Bactria. Quite a few figures are shown playing the harp and lute. This suggests that the people of Bactria had a great love for music. Similar examples have also been found from East Turkestan (Fig.1). The antiquities unearthed at Khalchayan give a good overview of the period from the Graeco-Bactrian era (3rd-2nd



Fig. 1. Harp player, wood, Kizil. Courtesy: Museum fuer Asiatische Kunst, Berlin

century BCE) to the downfall of the Great Kuṣānas (3rd-4th century CE). It outlines the development of Graeco-Bactrian art and the entire manner in which it infused the artistic impulses of the Kuṣānas.

From Alexander's invasion (327 BCE) until the time of Kaniṣka (78-110 CE), according to Cribb, Kaniṣka's time is 127 CE (Cribb, 2012, p.49), Gandhāra played a vital role in the history of art on the Indian subcontinent. It was exposed to Achaemenid, Parthian, Greek, Śaka and Kuṣāna art activities, but the elements that are conspicuous and predominate the art of Gandhāra, are derived from the Hellenistic art. This amalgamation was possible only because of continuous contacts between the Gandharans and the Graeco-Bactrian rulers.

6. MAURYAN DYNASTY

After Alexander left for Babylon, Chandragupta Maurya (c.324-300 BCE) became

powerful in India. He founded the Mauryan dynasty. Further, he expanded his kingdom to the east and made Pāṭalipūtra³ his capital. Though he had regained all lost territories in northwestern India, he had good relations with the Greeks - or *yavana*, as they were called - and others. So did his son Bindusāra (c.300-273 BCE) and his grandson Aśoka, who ascended the throne in 273 BCE (Majumdar et.al., 1980, pp.93-95). Later, Aśoka sent emissaries with a mission for religious victory (*dharmavijaya*) to distant lands including the land of the *Yavana* (i.e., Macedonia) and Central Asia, for spreading Buddhism.

Unfortunately, no evidence of artistic activities during the period of Chandragupta and Bindusāra is extant, except for some traces of a Mauryan hall (*sabhā*) found in Pāṭalipūtra (Wheeler, 1971, p. 57)⁴ in 1896, presumably in the style followed by the Achaemenid rulers (No author, 1971; Wheeler, 1971, pp. 22-26). According to Karl Khandalavala, this Mauryan *sabhā* was not constructed by Aśoka but by Kauṭilya or Cānākya for his master Chandragupta and it was known as Chandragupta *sabhā* (Khandalavala, 1971, p.3)⁵. He further says, "The *Sabhā* was so famous that the grammarian Patañjali writing his *Mahābhāṣya*, probably in the middle of the second century BCE, illustrates the use of the word *Sabhā* by the phrase Chandragupta *Sabhā*" (Khandalavala, 1971, flap between pp.4 and 5).

It is thinkable that the great defeat of the Achaemenid empire caused innumerable people to become stateless and jobless. They were forced to take refuge in a region, where a new kingdom was developing into a powerful empire, i.e., India with Pāṭalipūtra as its capital and Chandragupta Maurya its ruler. This wave of refugees included highly skilled architects, master masons, craftsmen, sculptors, artists patronized by the Achaemenid court. In happy days, they were

³ Modern Patna.

⁴ Pataliputra was the ancient name of modern Patna, the capital city of Bihar, eastern India.

⁵ Kautilya was the famous chancellor of king Chandragupta Maurya and the author of Arthaśāstra.

commissioned by the royals and wealthy people of the area to construct palaces or portray sculptures, representing gods, rulers or personalities of the period. In that new situation, they were seeking jobs befitting their mastery on the one hand, while on the other, the new royal household needed to build a capital with palaces with impressive motifs and sculptures, to show their power, grandeur and riches. The reconstructed plan of the ‘Chandragupta *sabhā*’ (Wheeler, 1971, p. 59), excavated at Patna, with remains of huge pillars, remind of the palace of Darius I (Wheeler, 1971, p. 39). This *sabhā* may be the work of stateless artisans, who once built similar gigantic palaces during the golden age of the Achaemenid empire (Wheeler, 1971, p. 56-57).

The royal art tradition of Chandragupta’s time continued during Aśoka’s reign, too. Extant artefacts of his time clearly point at their Achaemenid source. The artists, who carved a number of Pillar Edicts with huge animal figures mounted on top of bell-shaped capitals, enjoyed the royal patronage. These pillars, inscribed with the message of the Buddha in Brāhmī script, selected by king Aśoka, remind of the tall pillars with animal capitals on top and bell-shaped structures a little below them found in the royal palace Apadana of Darius I in Persepolis (Albaum and Brentjes, 1972, p. 60). It may be mentioned that like Greek pillars, the Apadana pillars are fluted. Such a mixture of Greek and Achaemenid elements is not accidental, it is the outcome of close proximity and artistic fusion. The technique of remarkable polish on the Aśokan pillars and capitals, made of Chunar sandstone (Albaum and Brentjes, 1972, p. 60) is still a mystery today and, it is still believed to be the artistry of Persian sculptors.

Besides the monumental royal art of Aśoka, numerous terracotta figurines of his time were found in India, namely from his “capital city of Pāṭalipūtra and its environs and also from other

centres in the Ganga valley” (Sankalia and Dhavalikar, 1969, p. 40), Bulandibagh, Mathura, Basarh. They are mostly heads and busts, decorated with jewellery. A few complete figures, with their elegantly draped tender physique and intricately designed arm, head and ear ornaments that embellish their delicate faces with Hellenised features, remind of the terracotta figurines from Tanagra in Boeotia, north of Athens, Greece, of the 4th-3rd centuries BCE. They are sophisticated and, in style, look rather urban than folkish.

Equally, Mauryan terracottas were used neither as ritual objects nor toys. According to Devangana Desai, these beautiful figurines “reflect the tastes of the royal family and the *śreṣṭhin* (mercantile) class who had acquired a dominant position in the social and cultural life of the period” (Desai, 1969, p.73). They were “obviously meant for decorating palaces of the royal and aristocratic families. And they were possibly produced by the *rāja-kumbhakāras* (royal or skilled potters)” (Desai, 1969, p.73-74). According to her, terracotta figures from Pataliputra, “are neither the work of Greek craftsmen nor imitations of Greek terracottas” (Desai, 1969, p.73), because the terracotta ladies’ ornaments are typically Indian. The faces and their features (Desai, 1969, p.73, fig.nos.2, 3, p.74, fig.no.6), however, are not truly Indian. They do show a foreign touch. It is plausible that training in Hellenistic ateliers or the admiration for Greek art tradition reflects in the artwork of the creators of these fascinating ladies. One of Desai’s examples shows a special type of headdress that is found on a 4th-5th century CE terracotta male head from Khotan (Fig.2). This type of headdress, or crown, shows a mixture of Palmyrene, Sogdian, Gandharan (Fig.3) and Central Asian elements, found between the 2nd and 10th century CE, and it shows west Asian influence (Bhattacharya–Haesner, 2003, p.293). Such crowns that have a solid base with a vertical structure resembling a city wall are commonly worn by the tutelary



Fig 2. Crowned head, terracotta, Khotan. Courtesy: Museum fuer Asiatische Kunst, Berlin



Fig. 3. Crowned head, schist, Gandhāra. Courtesy: Museum fuer Asiatische Kunst, Berlin

deities of the cities of Palmyra and Hatra of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE (Stierlin, 1996, p.148, fig.120; p.175, fig.157; p.202, figs.186, 187).

7. OPENING OF THE TRADE ROUTES

To establish trade links with the West, Chinese emperor Han Wudi opened a route between 138 and 115 BCE, which was later (19th

century) called Silk Route. By the 1st century, Chinese silk had reached Egypt via Central Asia (NEB, 1975, vol 8., p.389), Afghanistan, Persia and, probably, northwestern India (map). Soon, this region was throbbing with the movements of traders, pilgrims and travellers from different parts of the world, exchanging goods, as well as ideas and cultural traits. Artistic interactions between East and West, from the 2nd century BCE to about the 10th-11th centuries CE reflect the diverse influences that streamed into this region. The trade routes and their branches linking neighbouring countries became important channels for communication. They transmitted art and culture, and Central Asia became a melting pot, a repository of knowledge and world heritage.

8. THE ŚAKAS AND THE KUŠĀNS

By 135 BCE the Bactrian Greeks were driven out of Bactria by a nomadic tribe of Scythian origin from Central Asia known as the Śakas. With the coming of the Śakas, the power of the Greek rulers was constricted only to the Kabul valley. However the Śakas did not rule for long as they were overpowered by another Central Asian sedentary tribe, the Yuezhi, known as the Kušāns. Originally, they belonged to the Gansu province of northwestern China. Under the pressure of the Xiongnu, or Huns, they fled to the Oxus region. By 145 BCE, they were in the more developed urban area of western Central Asia – Bactria in northern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan, and Choresmia in Turkmenistan. Kujula Kadphises, the founder of the Kušāna empire, united the Oxus region and gave his clan a dynastic name so that the four defeated tribes and his own would merge into one nation (Rosenfield, 1967, p.11). They became powerful and played a great role in India and Central Asia, both politically and culturally.

Kujula Kadphises ended Parthian rule in the area and expanded his kingdom from Bactria and the Kabul region to include a large part of

northwestern and central India. He also established commercial and political links with the Roman empire of Augustus (Rowland, 1967, p.74). Archaeological material from explorations followed by excavations in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and India show that Kushan prosperity reached its peak in all spheres in the early decades of the 2nd century CE, particularly during the reign of the third Kushan ruler Kanishka I (Bhattacharya–Haesner, 2012, p.361). The stratigraphy of the excavations at Khalchayan, Dalverzin Tepe, Termez, Airtam and others in southern Uzbekistan until now shows that the Kuṣāna dynasty ruled there from about the second half of the 1st century BCE to the middle of the 3rd century CE. Settlements along the rivers Surkhan and Amu are uninterrupted and they are of a rather large size (Pugachenkova, et al., 1991, p.43).

Adaptability, liberality and tolerance are the qualities that helped the Kuṣānas to make a name in history. They adopted the cultures and religions of the lands where they settled and later ruled. Thus, the figure of Śiva on the coins of Vima Kadphises shows the king's inclination towards the new religion. His successor Kaniṣka I, the great Kuṣāna ruler, became famous not only for extending and strengthening the Kuṣāna empire, but also for spreading Buddhism beyond the boundaries of its land of origin and giving it the importance of a world religion. Like the Mauryan king Aśoka (c.273-232 BCE), the Kuṣāna king Kaniṣka (c.2nd century CE), converted to Buddhism and took a keen interest in the spread of Buddhism beyond India. After Aśoka, it was during Kaniṣka's reign that Buddhism spread beyond India, and Khotan seemed to be one of the earliest kingdoms in eastern Central Asia to embrace Buddhism (Bhattacharya–Haesner, 2012, p.362).

The Buddhist art that emerged under Kuṣāna patronage, mainly of the Gandhāra and Mathura schools and iconic in nature, had a

magnetic impact on artists of the Buddhist world. Even after the decline of the Kuṣāna empire, its beauty and uniqueness deeply influenced the art of Central Asia in general and Khotan in particular, between the 2nd and 9th centuries CE (Bhattacharya–Haesner, 2012, p.361).

9. GANDHĀRA ART AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CENTRAL ASIAN ART

The development of Gandhāra art is difficult to describe accurately. Archaeological finds assign its beginning to the end of the 4th century BCE – coinciding with the commencement of the Seleucid era in Bactria. The artistic activities during this period are purely Graeco-Iranian in nature. But with the emergence of the Kuṣānas on the horizons of Gandhāra, a new stylistic trend developed which may be titled as the 'Graeco-Indian Style' (Fig.4).



Fig. 4. Bodhisattva, schist, Gandhāra. Musée Guimet, Paris. Photo by author

The development of Buddhist art took place during the time of the Great Kuṣānas. Probably, the earliest Buddha image was depicted on the coins of Kanīṣka. These coins portray Kanīṣka on the obverse and a Buddha figure with the legend 'Boddo' in Greek letters on the reverse. Of these, one type shows a standing Buddha, while the other a seated Buddha. These Buddha images, in two different postures, were probably the sources of inspiration for sculpting seated and standing Buddha figures in Gandhāra and throughout Central Asia. They show the Buddha wearing a *saṅghāti* (monastic robe) covering both shoulders. It has a typical collar as seen on Gandhāra and Central Asian Buddhas. All the standing Buddhas are shown with their right hand placed near the chest or near the right shoulder in *vyākhyānamudrā* (gesture of teaching), *varadamudrā* (gesture of giving away) or *abhayamudrā* (gesture of giving assurance). The left hand always grasps some folds of the robe in the case of a standing Buddha, while with the seated Buddha, it rests on his left knee. Besides *abhayamudrā*, the seated Buddhas show other hand gestures, e.g. *dharmacakrapravartanamudrā* (gesture of preaching the Wheel of Law), *vyākhyānamudrā*, *dhyānamudrā* (gesture of meditation) or *bhūmisparśamudrā* (gesture of touching the earth as witness). These forms almost became conventions for artists of all over the Buddhist world from the second century onward. One of the earliest examples, a Kuṣāna coin, combines a circular aureole and an oval mandorla framing the head and body of the Buddha, respectively. To represent the Buddha or any divine figure, this iconic feature has been adopted faithfully by artists in Central Asia.

Facial features and other details of the Buddha figure on the coins are not clear, but his robe shows a Western Classical touch. Innumerable coins of the Kuṣāna dynasty show gods and goddesses of either the Western Classical or Brāhmānic pantheon. The folds of

the *saṅghāti* and the way of showing Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa* – snail-shell curls, achieved by alternate nail-shaped incisions – are Hellenistic in nature. In the art of Central Asia these elements were adopted and adapted (Fig.5). The Bodhisattva figures from Fandukistan (Afghanistan) and Kizil (an oasis city on the Northern Silk Route) of the 6th and 7th centuries CE are excellent examples of a fusion of Graeco-Indian style.



Fig 5. Buddha, wood, Tumshuk. Courtesy: Museum fuer Asiatische Kunst, Berlin

The undulated garlands being carried by *putti* and the male busts have their roots in the Hellenistic art of the 2nd century BCE. These motifs are found in Gandhāra and appear to have spread to Central Asia (Bhattacharya and Haesner,

2012, p. 76) during the 3rd-4th centuries CE⁶. One excellent example of this on the dado of the northern wall of Temple V at Miran, an oasis city on the Southern Silk Route, shows garland-bearers (Fig.6) - some playing musical instruments, others doing nothing. The *putti* remind of little Eros figures of Greek mythology.



Fig. 6. Garland bearer, wall painting, Miran. Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

The figures painted on the walls of the stupa at Miran and the figure with a *caduceus* (a staff) woven into the woollen tapestry from Loulan (Stein, 1929, pp.231, 246,253, pl.XXX) seem to be executed by Western artists and artisans. Their facial features - blond hair, large wide-open eyes, fair complexion with a tinge of pink - and the *chiaroscuro* - to produce a three-dimensional effect - are purely Greek in character (Fig.7). The figures recall the funerary portraits of the tomb chambers of Palmyra in Syria (259 CE) and the encaustic mummy portraits from the Fayyum tombs in Egypt, datable to the early Christian era.



Fig. 7. Hermes, woollen tapestry, Loulan. Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

The three-line inscription on the leg of an elephant painted on the southern wall of the circumambulatory passage of Temple V at Miran is written in Kharoṣṭi script – a script used by the Kuṣānas. It bears the name of an artist called Tita (probably derived from Titus) who apparently received 3000 *bhammakas* (Stein, 1921, p.530) for his work. This is an important piece of information because it mentions the remuneration of the painter as well as his name. The name Tita was a popular personal name throughout the Graeco-Roman provinces in the Near East (Stein, 1921, pp.530-531). The inscription as well as the style of this and other wall paintings at Miran clearly indicate that they were executed by foreign artists commissioned by the local ruler.

⁶ According to Benjamin Rowland, “Gandhāra sculptures have little to do with Greek art either in its Hellenic or Hellenistic phase, and are much more closely related to Roman art”, op. cit., p.76. Sherman E. Lee is also of the opinion that Gandhara art was mainly influenced by Roman art elements: *A History of Far Eastern Art*; p.99. Historically, and according to archaeological evidence, this statement is not acceptable. The people of Gandhara had more contact with the Greeks than the Romans. The art of Gandhāra was more influenced by the Graeco-Bactrian than Roman elements. The discovery of Surkh shrines in 1951 and the excavations at Ai Khanoum in 1964 in Bactria prove that the art of Gandhāra is closely related to Hellenistic art. Excavations at Ai Khanoum, situated on the bank of the Oxus on the Afghan side, reveal it to be a Greek city. Greek sculptures and inscriptions found at Ai Khanoum underline the fact that the art of Gandhāra and its adjacent cities are purely Graeco-Bactrian and not Roman.

The other example, a gold reliquary studded with rubies, was found at a *stūpa* at Bimaran in Afghanistan. The body of this round casket is schematically designed with architectural, figural and floral motifs in repoussé technique. Resting on typically Greek pillars, there are eight ogee arches, each of them arching a standing figure in two identical groups, Brahmā, Buddha, Indra and a devotee, - altogether eight figures. The Buddha figure represented here shows a close similarity to that struck on the coin of Kaniṣka. Similar architectural pillars as well as Indo-Ionic pillars are commonly found in the art of Central Asia (Stein, 1921, Vol. III, pp.1216, 1217 and Vol.IV, pl.CXXVIII, Mi.xiv.003).

Several examples portray the people of Bactria and Gandhāra as they play instruments and enjoy music. Similar examples occur in Chinese Turkestan, depicting the musical culture of Central Asia. Apart from the figure of the lady playing the harp (Stein, 1921, Vol.IV, pl.III)⁷, a number of miniature terracotta monkey figures from Yotkan, of the 4th-5th centuries CE, are found playing various musical instruments: lute⁸, harp, syrinx, flute, cymbals, drums and so on. This indicates that the Central Asians were as proud of their musical culture as the Bactrians and Gandhārans. The citizens of Kizil and Khotan on the northern and southern Silk Route, respectively, were most prosperous and highly accomplished people. They were famous for their love of music (Fig.8) and renowned for their scholarship. A number of Buddhist texts and ample examples of sculptures showing persons playing musical instruments testify what is recorded in the travelogues of the pilgrims, namely Fa Xian and Xuanzang. The physical features of the dancers, musicians and their musical instruments display their place of origin, i.e., Greece, Iran, Palmyra (Syria) and western Central Asia.



Fig. 8. Monkey enjoying playing his lute, terracotta, Khotan. Courtesy Museum fuer Asiatische Kunst, Berlin

Like the Bactrians and the Gandhārans, the Central Asians excelled at modelling figures showing various human emotions. The sculptures of Sorchuk, on the northern Silk Route, show stucco heads reminiscent of satyr figures from Khalchayan (Pugachenkova, 1991, figs 43 and 44) and Gandhāra. The expressions, especially of the laughing old woman or the weeping man, are very realistic. These two eloquently modelled sculptures are comparable to the satyr-figures seen in Greek art and in Khalchayan.

Bas-reliefs from Gandhāra show compositions with figures aligned in superimposed registers. To convey a sense of space and perspective, the sculptor used the images facing front or in three-quarter profile. For this purpose, the sculptor divides the surface into an imaginary network patterned like lozenges. Artists of Central Asia followed the same compositional formula. In one fragment, six male figures are portrayed. They stand in three rows that form imaginary lozenges. Some of the figures are in profile while others face the viewer. By this technique, the artist tried to project space, movement and perspective, much the same as Gandhāra sculptors.

⁷ Yo.0066 in the Stein Collection of the British Museum, London.

⁸ Terracotta figure from Yotkan, in the Pre-Stein Collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Mauryan, Parthian and Sassanian art is important to understand the posterior art, namely the Kuṣānas and eastern Central Asia. Western Central Asian art in general and the art of Kampyrtepe, Termez, Airtam, Fayaztepe, Dalverzintepe, Khalchayan, Ajinatepe, Penjikent in Uzbekistan in particular had, by and large, developed from the fusion of two major art traditions, Achaemenid and Hellenistic. With the spread of Buddhism during the times of Aśoka and, later, Kuṣāna king Kaniṣka, the art of this area welcomed Indian tradition by embracing Buddhist art and iconography. The result of this union can be distinctly observed in two famous schools of art, Gandhāra and Mathura. They are contemporary, and the artists of both schools have enjoyed the patronisation of the Kuṣāna ruler, Kaniṣka the Great.

Later, Hellenism imbibed with Indian Buddhist art travelled to Central Asia (both west and east Turkestan) and inner China. Like the Achaemenids and Greeks, the other foreign powers, namely the Parthians, Sassanians and Tibetans, also had a cultural effect on India and Central Asia, though to a lesser degree. Some Greek motifs and iconographic elements merged with those of Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanian and west Central Asian origin, and later found their way into the Buddhist and Brāhmānic art of India. With the spread of Buddhism in the times of Aśoka, Kaniṣka, the Gupta dynasty (4th-5th century CE) and Lalitāditya Mukṭāpīda of the Karkota dynasty of Kashmir (first half of the 8th century CE) (Mitra, 1971, p.108), artists adopted local motifs and styles and tried to merge them. Thus, in the art of Chinese Central Asia we meet with various art traditions (Figs.9, 10).

In the 7th century, the period between the post-Gupta dynasty and king Lalitāditya Mukṭāpīda, Tibet became a powerful kingdom and saw a cultural renaissance under the legendary ruler Srong-btsan-sgam-po (616-650 CE), also known by the name Naradeva. He became the king



Fig. 9. Dionysian figure with Greek features holds a drinking cup and an Iranian rhyton within a Sassanian roundel, detail from a terracotta vessel, Khotan. Courtesy: Museum fuer Asiatische Kunst, Berlin



Fig. 10. Another detail from the same vessel: the person with Irano-Sassanian dress holds a Sassanian ewer. Courtesy: Museum fuer Asiatische Kunst, Berlin

of Tibet in 629 CE at the age of 13 only (Banerjee, 1973, p.221) and ruled as a devout Buddhist till 650 CE.

King Srong-btsan-sgam-po was greatly inspired by the Indian cultural heritage, especially by Buddhist philosophy and religion. Kashmir was a famous centre of learning; it flourished due to renowned scholars in Buddhist and Brāhmānic philosophy. Inspired by his two Buddhist queens - Thi-btsan, daughter of king Amśuvarman of Nepal, and Wencheng, daughter of emperor Taizong of China (Banerjee, 1973, p.222)- he sent

many intellectuals to Kashmir for learning. Among them was the famous scholar Thon-mi Sambhota who studied under Devavitsimha, another famous scholar. Thon-mi Sambhota 'invented' a script for the Tibetan language as hitherto no form of writing existed in Tibet. The alphabet evolved from an ancient Indian script of the 6th-7th centuries CE. He wrote several books on Tibetan grammar and the Tibetan writing system (Banerjee, 1973, p.224). Srong-btsan-sgam-po as a dynamic ruler was curious to know about other cultures, and wanted to accumulate knowledge for the betterment of his country. For this purpose, he sent intelligent young men to China, India and Nepal. His contributions to Tibet's cultural and religious life are of paramount importance. Interesting enough, it also had a great impact on the Buddhist art and iconography of India, Central Asia and China.

Throughout history, Tibet and India have had peaceful relations and respected each other's traditions, culture and religion. The proximity of India enabled Tibet to remain in constant touch with the land of the Buddha. From the time of its great ruler Srong-btsan-sgam-po, many Tibetan Buddhists have come to India to learn about Buddha and his teachings at the source. Likewise, many Indian scholars visited Tibet, and in several cases lived in Tibet, to pursue their academic activities mainly relating to Buddhism. During the time of the Pala rulers of eastern India (750-1165 CE), Indians and Tibetans had spontaneous cultural, academic and religious interactions. The art traditions of Kashmir, eastern India and Nepal strongly reflect in Tibetan Buddhist art.

Between the 7th and 10th century, Tibet had close contacts with India, Nepal, Central Asia and China. In fact, as a powerful kingdom, Tibet invaded Khotan twice in the 7th and 8th centuries. In c. 759 CE, Tibet conquered Dunhuang. By 766 CE, it had captured Gansu province, the strategic trade corridor between the East and the West in general, and Central Asia and China in particular.

During Tibetan rule, especially in the 8th and 9th centuries, Dunhuang art experienced a strong Indo-Tibetan influence, and this style may be called the Indo-Tibetan School of Dunhuang. Being Buddhist, the Tibetan rulers patronised Buddhism, attracted monks, scribes and artists and built many monasteries there. Walls of monasteries were elaborately painted with Buddhist themes. According to the documents of Shazhou, about forty-eight caves were carved in Dunhuang province under the Great Tibetan rule. Of these, Cave nos. 231 and 365 have readable inscriptions, stating the dates of the carving of these caves. Cave 365 was started by monk Hongbian in 832 and completed in 844 under Tibetan king Khri-lde gtsug-rtzan, while Cave 231 was carved by monk Yin Jiazheng in 839, during the reign of Tang emperor Wenzong. They rehabilitated "more than eight hundred monks, nuns, army officers and soldiers who had been captured by them from this region", i.e., Shazhou, or the Dunhuang area (Tan Chung, 1994, p.162).

This resulted in a cultural fusion, deeply rooted in religious life, and it influenced the art and iconography of both east and west Central Asia as well as China. Interestingly, in some cases the iconographic elements of one place lost their original significance when transmitted to another and acquired a new, quite different interpretation.

10. CONCLUSIONS

The theme of this paper is vast, difficult to squeeze into a limited space. Ancient texts, travel reports of pious pilgrims, travellers and traders, along with archaeological material, help to understand the cultural diffusion. One point, clear from historical data, is that the movements of people - often invasions - bring forth cultural and social mobility. In such cases, the contributions of warring kings and military cannot be ignored. This is recorded not only in history but also in art with inscriptions, for example in huge rock carvings of Achaemenid ruler Darius I.

Such carvings and sculptures not only show events like the victory of Darius I or defeat of Darius III by Alexander the Great, but also the recruitment of foreigners into an army or of the kings' 'own' soldiers as well as common people's dresses and ornaments; they also provide information about daily life and many other things. They are like an illustrated page from history. The opening of the Silk Routes was a great event not only for China, but also for the world. Zhang Qian's extraordinary journey is recorded in a painting with Chinese inscriptions, on the wall of Cave no.323 in Dunhuang. This 8th century 'docu-painting' is based on earlier records. His journey opened the door to the world. Central Asia became the main channel of communication between China and rest of the world. As a result, Central Asia turned into a melting pot of peoples, religions and cultures.

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