

GREEK LITERATURE AND CULTURAL LIFE EAST OF THE EUPHRATES. THE GREEKS AND BUDDHISM*

by

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My PhD dissertation is devoted to the issue of the relations of Greeks to Buddhism in the territory of the Hellenistic Far East, which corresponds to ancient Bactria and Northwest India, from the time of the conquest of these areas by Alexander the Great to the fall of the Indo-Greek kingdom (around 10 AD). The theme of the Greco-Buddhist relations is introduced in the wider context of Greco-Indian relations. The topic, despite its attractiveness, had not so far been fully developed. Perhaps the reason for this is the vastness of the issue or its complexity. A thorough examination of this topic requires a knowledge of both Greece and India, the workshop of the ancient historian and the classical philologist, as well as the indologist, archaeologist and numismatist. For this reason, the project of writing this dissertation was a huge challenge.

The main thesis of the dissertation is the assumption that despite the fact that mutual relationships and interactions between the Greek world and the Buddhist religion were undoubtedly present, still the phenomenon known conventionally as Greco-Buddhism never really occurred.

In the introduction to the work, the major turning points in the study of the Greek presence in India are presented. At the outset the thesis presents some views, erroneous in the author's opinion, held by previous researchers in this

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field, such as the British imperialist view emphasising the missionary aspect of Greek culture¹, and the Indian nationalist position, whose representatives² have been trying to regain the “property rights” to the history of the Greeks in India. Personally, the author agrees with the views of G.R. PARKER³ about the falsity of the monolithic vision of culture, or of R. MAIRS⁴ about the need to study the territories of the Hellenistic Far East in the context of contemporary research on ethnicity, and of S. GARTON⁵ about the need to look at past events in the context of the collective memory. Therefore, the following theories have been chosen as a theoretical basis for further deliberations: M. HALBWACHS⁶ theory of the collective memory and P. NORA’s⁷ theory of the so-called *lieux de memoire*, or “sites of memory”. Moreover, the theories on ethnicity with the main emphasis on the theory of “mixture” (*mestizaje*)⁸ and the concept of transculturalism⁹, and above all, the theory of the so-called “middle ground” by R. WHITE¹⁰, based on the theory of M. de CERTEAU¹¹ about the “strategies” and “tactics”, have been selected to contribute to the theoretical basis of this work.

In the first chapter a broader context is presented for the subject under consideration, which allows one to look at the relationship of the Greeks with Buddhism in the so-called *longue durée* of contacts between the East and the West. The theory by K. JASPERS¹² of the so-called “Axial Age” (*Achsenzeit*) is introduced first. It is regarded here as an intellectual challenge rather than a real phenomenon documented in sources. Then, the early relations between the Greeks and India are shown, with an emphasis on the role of the Achaemenid Empire as an intermediary

¹ Cf. e.g. W.W. TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge 1938.

² E.g. A.K. NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, Oxford 1957.

³ G.R. PARKER, *Hellenism in an Afghan Context*, in: H.P. RAY, D.T. POTTS (eds.), *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in Asia*, New Delhi 2007, pp. 170–191.

⁴ R. MAIRS, *Greek Identity and the Settler Community in Hellenistic Bactria and Arachosia*, *Migrations & Identities* I 2008, pp. 19–43.

⁵ S. GARTON, “*Wild Follies and Ostentations Displays*”: *Reflections on Alexander the Great in India and the Question of Collective Memory*, in: RAY, POTTS, *op. cit.* (n. 3), pp. 1–15.

⁶ M. HALBWACHS, *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by L.A. COSER, Chicago 1992.

⁷ P. NORA, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, *Representations* XXVI 1989, pp. 7–24.

⁸ Cf. e.g. J.L. AMSSELLE, *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere*, transl. by C. ROYAL, Stanford 1998.

⁹ Cf. e.g. M. KRAIDY, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, Philadelphia 2005.

¹⁰ R. WHITE, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, Cambridge 1991.

¹¹ M. de CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. by S. RENDALL, Berkeley 1984.

¹² K. JASPERS, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, München 1949 (Eng. transl. by M. BULLOCK: *The Origin and Goal of History*, London 1953).

in these relations. In this context the example of Scylax of Caryanda is carefully studied in order to show the role of Greek historiography in shaping the image of India. Subsequently, the first direct contact of the Greeks with India during Alexander's expedition is presented. Two issues are shown here in detail, namely the cultural baggage of Alexander and his entourage, and his encounters with the "naked philosophers". This section refers to the Greek perspective on India. As regards the Indian context, the state of Indian philosophy before Alexander is presented with an emphasis on the characteristics of Buddhism from its origins to the time of Aśoka, and the presence of the term *Yavana* in Indian sources. This section is written in the form of a review of the state of research in order to show certain trends in research on this topic and the possible ambiguity of the term *Yavana*. Also attached is a table showing the occurrence of the term *Yavana*.

The second chapter directly concerns the main subject. It is devoted to the edicts of Aśoka, in which the king proclaims victory by *Dhamma* on all his frontiers as far as the lands belonging to the Hellenistic rulers, Antiochus, Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander. Reflections on these edicts are introduced in the context of the reflections on Aśoka, as he is remembered, as a Buddhist ruler known from Buddhist legends, and in history, as the emperor Piyadasi known from his edicts. The extraordinary story is also shown about the discovery of Aśoka as the author of his edicts as a result of J. PRINSEP's deciphering the Brāhmī script¹³, which provided an opportunity to present an excursus about the origin of this script. Then, the relations between the Greeks and Aśoka are presented in the context of the relations between the Greeks and the Mauryas. It is demonstrated that the Greeks had a good relationship with the Mauryas and that they probably supported the Buddhist Mauryas in opposition to the Brahman Śuṅgas, because Aśoka's policy of *Dhamma* corresponded to their needs; namely, it contributed to the development of trade, which in turn caused an increase in the importance of merchants and traders, thus loosening the social system imposed by the Brahmans. In addition, the great Mauryan Empire included a diversity of people and cultures, and therefore Aśoka adopted a policy of tolerance towards dissenting views. In addition, this chapter includes discussion of the original name of Aśoka, the persecution of Buddhists by Puṣyamitra, an inscription from Junāgaḍh relating to *Yavana-rāja* Tuṣāspa and the Śramaṇas, i.e. Indian ascetics, from among whom the Buddha also derived.

The third chapter refers to the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. This chapter fills the chronological gap between the times of Aśoka and the Indo-Greek kingdom and provides a context for the next chapter. Its purpose is to demonstrate that the policy of Aśoka did not have such a huge impact on the spread of Buddhism among the Greeks as it might seem to have had according to the edicts of the

¹³ J. PRINSEP, *Further Elucidation of the lāt or Silastambha Inscriptions from Various Sources*, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal VI 1837, pp. 790–797.

Indian ruler. In addition, this chapter illustrates the situation of the Greeks in India. Since most of the “Greek” material from the Hellenistic Far East comes from the area of ancient Bactria, the examination of this area made it possible to better understand how the Greeks functioned in the East. To this end, two issues were examined in more detail: firstly, Ai Khanoum as a *lieu de mémoire*, and secondly, several Greek inscriptions from the Hellenistic Far East, namely two inscriptions found in Kandahar in Afghanistan; the inscription of the son of Aristonax and the inscription of Sophytos; and one inscription found in Kulob in Tajikistan of a certain Heliodotus, which was also compared with the Indian inscription of Heliodorus. From the examined material it follows that the Greeks in Bactria tried to maintain Greek culture and lifestyle. This was possible due to the weakness of the native culture of Bactria at that time. Thanks to that, Greek culture became the dominant culture in these areas, which cannot be said about India, where Indian culture was so strong that the Greeks had little space to develop their own culture and had to “blend in with the surroundings”.

The fourth chapter is devoted to Menander and the Indo-Greek kingdom. Its main purpose is to demonstrate how the fact that the Indo-Greek ruler is the main character in the Buddhist dialogue *Milindapañha* made some European researchers, especially those with classical training, try to interpret the dialogue in the context of Greek literature and trace the Greek influence, while it should be analysed in the context of Buddhist literature, especially the extant Chinese version of this dialogue. Because the dialogue shows Menander’s conversion to Buddhism, sources relating to Menander which may shed light on the character of this ruler are presented in this chapter. In the course of the analysis of these sources, one may come to the conclusion that perhaps they relate to two different Menanders, one of the second century BC and the second from a later period, probably from the turn of our era, as evidenced by the Bajaur reliquary inscription. At the end of this chapter, a section on Gandhāra in the times of Menander is included, providing an introduction to the next chapter.

The fifth chapter concerns the region of Gandhāra, or rather Greater Gandhāra. As a context for considering the Greek influence in Gandhāra, the archaeology and chronology of the region is discussed. Theories on three types of Greek influence are examined here: in art, language and Buddhist religiosity. As regards the Greek influence in the art of Gandhāra, the views of A. FOUCHER are presented. He coined the term *l’art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra*¹⁴ to determine the Greek impact on the creation of the anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha, and the polemic with his views is expressed by A. COOMARASWAMI¹⁵, who argued in favour of the Indian origin of these images. In the conclusion it

¹⁴ A. FOUCHER, *L’art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra: étude sur les origines de l’influence classique dans l’art bouddhique de l’Inde et de l’Extrême-Orient*, vols. I–III, Paris 1905–1951.

¹⁵ A. COOMARASWAMI, *The Origin of the Buddha Image*, *The Art Bulletin* IX 1927, pp. 287–329.

is asserted that the truth is somewhere in between. The Greeks undeniably had a huge impact on the art of Gandhāra, but not only on Buddhist art, which is why the term Greco-Buddhist art seems to be inadequate. Due to the vastness of the topic, it was unreasonable to analyse all the Greek motifs in the art of Gandhāra, so the analysis is limited to the most popular theme of Heracles-Vajrapāṇi. As regards the Greek influence in the language of Gandhāra, the origin and development of the Gāndhārī dialect is examined and the works preserved in this dialect are discussed, such as *Gāndhārī Dhammapada* or the British Library Fragments. These passages show that the Gāndhārī dialect was created through complicated transcultural processes and therefore many influences can be detected here, including Greek (e.g. loanwords). Moreover a theory is presented of the establishment of the Dharmaguptaka sect by a Greek monk, which seems insufficiently documented; and the theory of the impact of Greek papyrus on the adoption of the scroll form for Gāndhārī texts is also presented, although this may be an example of accommodation to a foreign model. As regards the Greek influence on Buddhist religiosity, the views of S. BLAIR¹⁶ are presented about the impact of the Greeks on the perception by Buddhists of the Buddha as a god, which seems to be possible, although difficult to prove unambiguously.

The last chapter does not apply directly to the Greeks living in India, but to the Greeks who lived in the Mediterranean world. Two sources which have been discussed here, namely the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus and *Ἰνδικά* by Bardaisan, are dated to the period long after the fall of the Indo-Greek kingdom, but they relate to the aftermath of Greco-Buddhist relations. Both of these works were written in the third century AD, but the *Life of Apollonius* supposedly refers to earlier times, namely to the first century AD. However, as is clear from the analysis of the text, the state of knowledge about India represented in this work relates rather to the times of Philostratus than of Apollonius. Thus, these works are analysed for the image of India in the eyes of the Greeks in the third century AD. Especially valuable is the account of Bardaisan, because he took his information on India and on the Buddhist Order first-hand, namely from Indian monks sent to the emperor Elagabalus.

In addition, the Greek versions of the edicts of Aśoka are attached to the thesis with a translation by the author of this dissertation, photos and descriptions of the coins of Menander from the Garstang Museum in Liverpool, and Greek inscriptions from the Hellenistic Far East: the inscription of the son of Aristonax, the inscription of Sophytos, and the inscription of Heliodotus, also with translations by the author.

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¹⁶ S. BLAIR, *Answers for Milinda: Hellenistic Influence on the Development of Gandharan Buddhism*, TCNJ Journal of Student Scholarship XI 2009, pp. 1–11.

