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Greeks and Buddhism: Historical Contacts in the Development of a Universal Religion

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The Buddha and the Greeks

THE religious movement that was founded by the Buddha in the 6th century B.C.E. was divided after his death into many sub-sects and it remained for three centuries roughly limited to the Ganges valley, unable to spread Indian beliefs to foreigners and thus to play any significant role in the international community. Yet, one of the earliest Indian references to the Greeks (Yonas in Pāli; Yavanas in Skt.) occurs in Buddhist literature and is attributed to the Buddha himself. This reference is found in the *Assalāyana Sutta* of the *Majjima Nikāya*, the second book or collection of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, containing medium length discourses.¹ On the occasion of a discourse between the Buddha and a young Brāhmaṇa named Assalāyana, the author has the Buddha speak about the countries of the Yonas and Kambojas, who did not follow the

¹ The *Majjima Nikāya*, along with the *Dīgha*, *Ānguttara*, *Saṃyutta*, and *Khuddaka Nikāyas*, is classified in the first group of the Pāli Canon (*Tipiṭaka*) called the *Sutta Piṭaka* (a collection of the teachings of the Buddha). The Pāli Canon is generally considered to be the earliest available collection of Buddhist texts. The Sthaviravāda (Theravāda) Buddhists believe that it contains the original teachings of the Buddha and that it was fixed during the First Council which took place at Rājagṛha immediately after his death. It was transmitted orally for many centuries until it was first reduced to writing in Āloka-Vihāra in Ceylon, during the reign of Vattagāmaṇī (29–17 B.C.E.). Cf. *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* (hereafter DPPN), p. 818. However, the Pāli Canon continued to develop and must have reached its completion during the first two centuries C.E.

fourfold caste division, but recognised only two classes, namely slaves and free men. This would accurately reflect Greek societies of the classical eras, which were relatively egalitarian. The two countries were mentioned as places in which the master could become a slave and vice versa. This suggests that the Indians knew that the Yonas did not follow the birth-based caste system and that they had a kind of democratic constitution according to which all shared alike in ruling and being ruled in turn. The Buddha's statement is as follows:

“What do you think about this, Assalāyana? Have you heard that in the countries of Yona (yonaratṭhaṇ) and Kamboja (kambojaratṭhaṇ) and other adjacent districts there are only two castes, the master and the slave? And having been a master one becomes a slave; having been a slave one becomes a master?”—“Yes I have heard this, Sir, in Yona and Kamboja . . . having been a slave, one becomes a master.”²

If we accept the validity of the Buddha's statement it would prove that Indians knew, or at least had heard about, a Yona (probably Ionian) state or settlement as early as the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. But as there is not sufficient historical or archaeological evidence upon which to clearly posit the existence of a Greek settlement in the eastern regions of the Persian Empire in those days, the Buddhist text has been considered to be a literary device of later times.³ The “Yona” country is not included in the lists of the states (mahājanapadas) given by the early Buddhist and Jain texts. The *Chullaniddesa* first substitutes Yona for Gandhāra in the list of the sixteen states given in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*.⁴ Many recent scholars have doubted the authenticity of the canon and no definite conclusion concerning the original teachings of the Buddha has been reached.⁵ It is, however, remarkable that an early Buddhist text has observed and utilised the Greek social system in order to advance its own thesis against the birth-based caste system of the

² *Majjima Nikāya*, II, p. 149. The translation is by Horner 1957, p. 341. I have, however, translated the word “ratṭhaṇ” (Skt. rāṣṭram) as “country.”

³ Vassiliades 1997.

⁴ Jain 1974, pp. 196–197.

⁵ For a more complete account of the controversial views about and arguments against the authenticity of the Pāli Canon, see Goyal 1987, pp. 117–119. Most of the traditions agree on the authenticity of three or four Nikāyas, which implicitly contain the majority of the teachings of the Buddha.

Brahmanic tradition. A similar observation occurs also in the thirteenth Rock Edict of Aśoka where the country of the Yonas is mentioned as the only place where the classes of the Brāhmaṇas and the Samaṇas do not exist.

It is also noticeable that one of the earliest Greek references to the Indians, suggests that the Greek captain Scylax, who was a contemporary of the Buddha, also noticed the existing social system of the Indians. His remarks, however, differ as he notices not the alteration but the unaltered division between the ruling and the ruled classes in India. Scylax' statement recorded by Aristotle has as follows:

As we do not find anything corresponding to the great difference that Scylax states to exist between kings and subjects in India, it is clear that for many reasons it is necessary for all to share alike in ruling and being ruled in turn. For equality is meaningful for persons who are of like status, and also it is difficult for a constitution to endure that which is framed in contra-version of justice.⁶

Aristotle's knowledge of India and Indians was very incomplete. He must have heard a few things about Indian ascetics and it is said that he asked Alexander, who was on the point of departure for Asia, to bring him an Indian gymnosophist (naked sophist), but there is no evidence to suggest that he had any knowledge of the Indian religions and Buddhism. The pre-Alexandrian Greek writers, Scylax, Ctesias, Hecataios and Herodotos limited their descriptions to the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent up to the border of the River Indus. Beyond that Herodotos believed there to be a vast desert of sand and the unknown:

Eastward of India lies a track which is entirely sand. Indeed of all the inhabitants of Asia, about whom anything certain is known, the Indians dwell the nearest to the east, and the rising of the sun. Beyond them the whole country is desert on account of the sand.⁷

Asia's frontier in the south is the Red Sea, and in the north are the Caspian Sea and the River Araxes, which flows towards the rising sun. The country is inhabited until you reach India, but further east it is empty of inhabitants, and no one can say what sort of region it is. Such then is the shape, and such is the size of Asia.⁸

⁶ Aristotle, *Pol.*, 7, 13, I, p. 1332b 12; FGtH, No. 709, Fr. 5.

⁷ Herodotos, III, p. 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, p. 40.

Another point of inadequate information was the Greek knowledge of the ancient Brahmanic and Shramanic traditions that prevailed on the Indian Peninsula from the times of the Vedic Ṛṣi-s and the first Tirthaṅkara-s. The remaining fragments from the lost books of the first Greek writers are full of imaginary descriptions of monstrous people, strange animals and fabulous mountains, springs and rivers. They also contain some material of anthropological interest concerning the manners and customs of the overpopulated Indian tribes. However, there exist two important isolated passages from which we might infer that the peculiar way of life of the Indian ascetics had started appearing in the Persian and the pre-Alexandrian Hellenic worlds. The first is a passage of Herodotos⁹ which describes an Indian tribe, apparently following customs very similar to those of the Jain ascetics who killed nothing and chose to die in an idiosyncratic manner. Herodotos describes them as follows:

Some Indians never killed nor cultivated anything. They did not have houses and they lived on herbs. They relied upon a grain the size of millet in a pod which sprang spontaneously from the earth. They boiled it and ate it with the pod. If any one of them became sick then he would leave his community and go to an uninhabited place where he laid down to die. No one cared for him during this time or after his death.

The second fragment belongs to Ctesias,¹⁰ who refers to another Indian tribe living in the mountains that ate and drank nothing except milk. This description corresponds also to reality and illustrates the custom of certain Hindu ascetics to limit the variety of their food and to exercise lifelong fasting.

Ctesias¹¹ also mentions a sacred village existing in the midst of an uninhabited region (desert) about fifteen days distance from Mount Sardo. The village was dedicated to the Sun and the Moon. Every year, when the Sun cooled down, people gathered in this village to perform sacred rites for thirty-five days and then returned to their homes. This is perhaps the earliest reference to the existence of a Sun and Moon cult in ancient India. This cult is not known in Brahmanical literature where there is only an incidental reference to the Sun and Moon in the *Praśna Upaniṣad*. This mentions that Prajāpati (the lord of creation), desirous of offspring, performed austerities

⁹ Ibid., III, p. 100.

¹⁰ Photios, LXXII, 48b, pp. 5-18. [FGrH, No. 688, fr. 45 (44).]

¹¹ Ibid., LXXII, 46a, pp. 14-19. [FGrH, No. 688, fr. 45 (17).]

(tapas) and produced the pair, life (prāṇa) and matter (rayi), which are interpreted as Sun and Moon.¹² They are the masculine and feminine, the bright and dark principles which penetrate the entire creation. These symbols were worked out to a greater extent in later Tantric art and literature, where the two principles are identified with the forms of Śiva and Śakti respectively. Also, in Buddhist literature the Sun and Moon appeared as deities worshipped by a large number of people.¹³

We might accept that an abstract diffusion of ideas had been possible through the movement of legends and myths, which may later have inspired the development of certain philosophical ideas. However, such tales must have lost and gained many nuances as they passed through many mouths and miles on their long journey from one nation to the other. Such an example might be seen in the folk tales of the Phrygian slave, Aesop (middle of the sixth century B.C.E.) and their counterparts found in Indian myths of *Pañcatantra*, *Hitopadeśa*, and the Buddhist *Jātakas*. Some scholars¹⁴ have proposed an Indian origin in Aesop's tales particularly for those describing monkeys, crocodiles, and other tropical animals. But this conclusion involves chronological impossibilities. The Indian texts, in their present form, are a date later than Aesop, yet there is always the possibility that they might have been derived from earlier sources. The dogs' satire on priestly rituals found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*,¹⁵ for instance, suggests that the idea of portraying animals parleying in human tongue was not alien to the ancient Indians. As Halliday rightly suggests the stories were a collective creation of people belonging to different nations and different generations.¹⁶

Alexander, Megasthenes and the Indian Religions

A new era in the relations of the Indian and Greek peoples began in 327 B.C.E. with the campaign of King Alexander III of Macedonia (Alexander the Great) in India. His exploits and his worldwide conquests have been well documented by historians all over the world. However, it is less known that Alexander, apart from being a great warrior, was also very interested in philosophy. Along with his vast army, he also brought several philosophers, namely Kallisthenes (the nephew of Aristotle), Anaxarchos, Onesicritos (the

¹² "ādityo ha vai prāṇah, rayir eva candramāh." *Praśna Upaniṣad*, I, p. 5.

¹³ *Therighāthā*, p. 87; *Vinaya Pinaka*, I, p. 263; *Devadhamma Jātaka*, (No. 6).

¹⁴ See Pawate 1986 and Arora 1981.

¹⁵ I, 13, 1-5.

¹⁶ Cf. Halliday 1933, pp. 46-48.

disciple of Diogenes), and perhaps the Cynic Sicritos and the Sceptic Pyrrho. Several other scholars and writers joined the king's entourage, met with Indian ascetics and noted similarities between early Greek and Indian philosophies. Onesicritos¹⁷ informs us that in his dialogue with Dandamis, an Indian gymnosophist, he pointed out various correspondences between his own philosophical understanding and those of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Diogenes of Sinope. He also noted that Dandamis in his turn criticised the Greeks for replacing the natural law (*physis*) with social conventions (*nomos*).

Though Alexander's stay in India was brief, his adventures and his meetings with Indian sages became, over the centuries, a popular subject in the epics of the Western world.¹⁸ The tradition surrounding his figure was codified in a popular mythico-historical saga known as *Bios Alexandrou tou Makedonos kai Praxes*, written by an anonymous Alexandrian (now known as pseudo-Kallisthenes), who probably lived sometime between the first and the third century C.E. His third book sketches the meeting of the Macedonian king with the Oxydracae (or Sudracae) Brāhmaṇas and the gymnosophists. Further, it describes the prophesy of his own death which he received during his visit to the Sun and Moon sanctuaries. Also included in this book is the story in which Aristotle asked Alexander to bring him an Indian gymnosophist, plus a long letter sent by Alexander to his teacher Aristotle that describes various marvels in India.

The meeting between Alexander and the ascetics of India, especially Dandamis and Calanos has provided the perfect canvas on which are illustrated the differences in each culture's basic view of life. In this first meeting of East and West, the king of kings, representing power and wealth, is contrasted with the naked ascetics, who have renounced all worldly values. This contrast became the source of inspiration for the Hellenistic writers to express their philosophical ideas about religion, renunciation, death and life. However, Alexander's adventures left no impressions on the Indian mind and his name is not found in early Indian literature.¹⁹

After Alexander's death, the Greeks established kingdoms in Bactria and in northwest India, where they remained for more than three centuries.

¹⁷ Strabo, XV.

¹⁸ See Yalouris 1980, pp. 24–31; and Modi 1928.

¹⁹ It was only later, after the Mohammedan invasions, that Indian Muslims were deeply influenced by Persian poetry and became familiar with the name of Alexander (Sikander), who, as a symbol of worldly power, was often contrasted with the poverty of the mystics of Islam. See Vassiliades 2000, pp. 89–90, n. 4.

Although the Indo-Greeks were foreign to India, they seem to have been in the background of several important events in ancient Indian history. The interaction they had with Indians was often in the context of war, but the ethnocentric tendency (of certain historians) to isolate and underestimate them was not always present. There were times when ethnic tribes, under threat of extinction, had to assert their identity by proclaiming the uniqueness of their ideology and the superiority of their race. There were also times when friendly relations and alliances developed and Greek and Indian people took the opportunity to increase their standard of living by exchanging wisdom and inventions.

Battles and enmities apart, this was, undoubtedly the richest and most vital period in the intercultural relations of the two peoples. Classical and Hellenistic Greek writers described India as a country of marvels and ideal landscapes and also as a land where foreigners were well cared for, where truth and virtue were honoured, and where the people were honest,²⁰ just, long-lived, truth-loving and peaceful.²¹ Contacts took place in various fields, such as medicine, science, numismatics, art, literature, astronomy and philosophy.²²

How much religious interaction was there, and to what extent did the Greeks and Indians influence each other? In the early stages, Greeks and Indians were not interested in conversion and indeed retained their polytheistic religions. As their relationship strengthened, however, a mutual interest in learning about each other's religious beliefs developed.

²⁰ Clement, *Stromateis*, III, p. 194.

²¹ For a collection of references, see Arora 1991 and Arora 1996, pp. 177–185.

²² I have already presented extensive comparisons between Greek and Indian philosophies in my papers: Vassiliades 2005a; Vassiliades 2005b; and Vassiliades 2006. For further philosophical comparisons, see McEvelley 2002; Dahlquist 1962; West 1971; Ingalls 1952–53; Garbe 1980, pp. 36–55; and Keith 1909, pp. 569–572. For the first comparative attempts in India (viz. J.R. Ballantyne, H.N. Rande, J.G. Jennings, R.D. Ranade, A.E. Gough, and Beninmadhab Barua), see Pandey 1994; and Barua 1970 (1921). For more general comparisons, see MacDonell 1990 (1925); Nakamura 1992; Raju 1992; Saher 1969; Scharfstein 1978; Masson-Oursel 1926; Radhakrishnan 1982 (1939); Keith 1976 (only the last chapter); and Halbfass 1990 (only the first chapter). A detailed account of the Hellenistic influence on architecture, sculpture, painting, coinage, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, art of writing, literature, drama, religion, philosophy, mythology, fables and folklore of India is found in Banerjee 1961. For further studies in the cultural contacts between India and Greece, see Arora 1991; Doshi 1985; Sedlar 1980; Chapekar 1977; Gupt 1993; Candra 1979; Singhal 1972; Chaturvedi 1985; and Kartunen 1997. For comparisons between Greek and Indian medicine, see Filliozat 1964.

Megasthenes (early third century B.C.E.), who served as ambassador for King Seleucos Nicator at the court of Candragupta Mauryan, showed an intense interest in describing the disciplines and ideas of Indian ascetics, whom he called philosophers (*philosophoi* or *sophistai*), but not gymnosophists. He distinguished between the followers of Dionysos (Śiva), who lived in the mountains, and of the followers of Hercules (Indra or Kṛṣṇa), who lived on the plains. He described extensively the existing Brahmanic and Shramanic traditions. Megasthenes noticed that the Sarmanae were subdivided into several sects but he did not mention the Buddhists. The Hylobioi and the physicians appear to be Jain ascetics and yogis while a third sect of the Sarmanae consisted of specialists in rites and customs concerning the dead.

Aśoka and the Expansion of Buddhism

Buddhism began its transformation to a world religion two generations later under the vigorous patronage of Aśoka, who established Buddhism as the official religion of the Mauryan Empire. Aśoka grew up in a society that had close contacts with the Greeks. Woodcock goes as far as to imagine a possible descent of Aśoka from Greek blood, because his grandfather Candragupta was given the Greek princess, Helen, for marriage by Seleucos Nicator. Woodcock writes:

The treaty between the two kings was settled with a marriage agreement by which a daughter of Seleucos entered the house of Candragupta. Since she hardly had become the wife of any lesser person than the Indian emperor himself or his son and heir Bindusara, the fascinating possibility arises that Ashoka, the greatest of the Mauryan emperors, may in fact, have been half or at least a quarter Greek.²³

Both Candragupta and his son and successor, Bindusāra, had Greek ambassadors in their courts: Megasthenes to Candragupta's court and Deimachos from the court of Antiochos I, the successor of King Seleucos, to Bindusāra's.²⁴ Another ambassador, Dionysios from Ptolemaios Philadelphos II of Egypt was sent to an unnamed Indian king who might have been either Bindusāra

²³ Woodcock 1966, p. 17.

²⁴ Strabo, XV, 1, 12; II, 1, 10, and 19; and Athenaeos, IX, p. 394.

or Aśoka.²⁵ Deimachos and Dionysios are known to have contributed to the West's knowledge of Indian life.

In the course of historical development, several Greeks became subjects of the expanded Mauryan Empire, particularly after the signing of the peace treaty between Seleucos and Candragupta. The presence of foreigners in India was noted by Megasthenes who tells us of the existence of a separate department in Candragupta's government which looked after foreigners.²⁶ Greek mercenaries might also have been employed by Indian kings during this era, as is suggested by Indian references to the Greek armies participating in Indian civil wars. It is also likely that Greek artists, medicine men, astrologers and traders established themselves in major Indian commercial centres.²⁷

The effect of Greek influence on Indian art becomes evident only later in the Graeco-Buddhist sculptures of Gandhāra and Mathura, but there is nothing to support the supposition that Greek artists could have been employed in India at an earlier date. Stone sculpture, little used in India before the time of Aśoka, might be attributed to the Greeks. The certainty that Greek art was well known to Indians is attested by the fact that Greek (Yonaka) statues holding lamps were used as decoration by the Sākyas in Kapilavasthu (Skt. Kapilavastu), the home town of Gotama Buddha.²⁸

The close association of the Indo-Greeks with the Mauryan Indians is further testified in the rock inscriptions (Rock Edicts) of Aśoka. A bilingual inscription in both Greek and Aramaic brought to light in 1958 during excavations in Kandahar, Afghanistan (Fig. 1)²⁹ suggests that the Greeks who settled there had good knowledge of Aśoka's dharmic (ethical and religious) instructions. The Rock Edict has been ascribed to Aśoka, who is called in the inscription "Piodasses" (friendly-looking). It demonstrates his sovereign capacity as a ruler of all things of the earth, his decree that no man shall harm living beings, and the instruction that his subjects must be obedient to their parents and old people. The Greek part of the inscription reads:

²⁵ Pliny, *N. H.*, VI, 17 (21).

²⁶ Strabo, XV, 1, 51.

²⁷ The *Brhatkalpabhāṣya* (III, 4214) and *Āvaśyaka Tikā* (p. 399) refer to a shop called "Kuttiyāvaṇa" where everything living and non-living was available. It is said that there were nine such shops in Ujjeṇī during the reign of Chaṇḍapajjōya. See Jain 1974, pp. 194–195.

²⁸ DPPN, II, p. 699.

²⁹ This is the first inscription in the Greek language and script discovered in India. The Greek text consists of thirteen and one half lines and the Aramaic, which is a paraphrase of the Greek text, covers seven and one half lines. The paucity of Greek inscriptions might be due to a possible destruction of Greek temples and monuments by later invaders and the fact that the archaeology in these areas is still in its infancy.

ΔΕΚΑ ΕΤΩΝ ΠΛΗΡΗ [(.).]ΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ
 ΠΙΟΔΑΣΣΗΣ ΕΥΣΕΒΕΙΑΝ ΕΔΕΙΞΕΝ ΤΟΙΣ ΑΝ-
 ΘΡΩΠΟΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΠΟ ΤΟΥΤΟΥ ΕΥΣΕΒΕΣΤΕΡΟΥΣ
 ΤΟΥΣ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΥΣ ΕΠΟΙΗΣΕΝ ΚΑΙ ΠΑΝΤΑ
 ΕΥΘΗΝΕΙ ΚΑΤΑ ΠΑΣΑΝ ΓΗΝ ΚΑΙ ΑΠΕΧΕΤΑΙ
 ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΩΝ ΕΜΨΥΠΙΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΟΙ ΛΟΙΠΟΙ ΔΕ
 ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΙ ΚΑΙ ΟΣΟΙ ΘΗΡΕΥΤΑΙ Η ΑΛΙΕΙΣ
 ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΠΕΠΙΑΥΝΤΑΙ ΘΗΡΕΥΟΝΤΕΣ ΚΑΙ
 ΕΙ ΤΙΝΕΣ ΑΚΡΑΤΕΙΣ ΠΕΠΙΑΥΝΤΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΑΚΡΑ-
 ΣΙΑΣ ΚΑΤΑ ΔΥΝΑΜΙΝ ΚΑΙ ΕΝΗΚΟΟΙ ΠΑΤΡΙ-
 ΚΑΙ ΜΗΤΡΙ ΚΑΙ ΤΩΝ ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΩΝ ΠΑΡΑ
 ΤΑ ΠΡΟΤΕΡΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥ ΛΟΙΠΟΥ ΛΩΙΟΝ
 ΚΑΙ ΑΜΕΙΝΟΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΠΑΝΤΑ ΤΑΥΤΑ
 ΠΟΙΟΥΝΤΕΣ ΔΙΑΞΟΥΣΙΝ.

In translation this reads:

After ten full years King Piodasse had the Text of Mercy published to men and from this moment he made men merciful, and everything prospering all over the earth.

And the king abstains from (eating) living creatures, and likewise do the people; and those who are hunters and fishers of the king cease from hunting; and if there are people who are intemperate they cease from intemperance by exerting every effort, and they obey their fathers, mothers and elders, too.

In the present life and future time, they will find themselves in better and preferable conditions from every point of view, if they behave in that way.³⁰

Similar proclamations, demonstrating Aśoka's compassionate attitude towards living beings and his association with Indo-Greeks are found in some of his other Rock Edicts. The second Rock Edict describes the provision of medical treatment, shade and water for people and animals throughout his dominion and also in neighbouring countries. In this edict, the Yona King Antiochos (Añtiyako Yonarājā) is mentioned by name.³¹ The fifth and ninth Rock Edicts mention Yonas as the king's subjects devoted to the Dharma.

³⁰ Gallavotti 1959, pp. 185–189. The first short announcement of the discovery was made by the editor of the journal, Scerrato 1958, pp. 4–6. See also, Altheim and Stiehl 1959, pp. 243 ff.

³¹ See Sen 1956, p. 66.

The thirteenth Rock Edict proclaims that there is no country-except the Yonas'-where classes of the Brāhmaṇas and ascetics do not exist.³² At the end of the same inscription, we read that the king's dominion expanded to include different groups of people as well as the Yonas. Everywhere the Dharma instructions of the "devanaṅpiyasā" were prevalent. Even in countries where envoys of Aśoka did not go, people having heard about the Dharma practices and prescriptions, and his instructions, followed the Dharma and would continue to follow it in the future. The names of Greek kings were mentioned in the context of the conquest of the Dharma, in the dominion of King Aśoka and all his borders, stretching as far as six hundred yojanas where the Yonarājā Antiyoko (Antiochos II Theos of Syria, 260–246 B.C.E.) ruled and beyond that, where the other four kings—Tulamaye (Ptolemaios II Philadelphos of Egypt, 283–246 B.C.E.), Aṅtekinē (Antigonas Gonatas of Macedonia 278–239 B.C.E.), Makā (Magas of Cyrene, 300–250 B.C.E.), and Alikyaśudale (Alexander of Epiros or Corinth, 272–258 B.C.E.)—ruled.

From the descriptions above, we might presume that Aśoka, like his predecessors Candragupta and Bindusāra, had received Greek ambassadors in his court and that he had sent his envoys in return. Yet, no Greek literature of that period remains which can help us verify the arrival of these missions. The Buddha and Buddhism were unknown in Greek texts until the early Christian era. The name of the Buddha was mentioned for the first time by the Christian author Clement of Alexandria (154–222 C.E.). He said: "Among the Indians are those philosophers also who follow the precepts of Vouta (Buddha), whom they honour as a god on account of his extraordinary sanctity."³³ In another passage, Clement mentions that the Semnoi (Samaṇas) worship a kind of "pyramid" beneath which they think the bones of some divinity lie buried.³⁴ These "pyramids" could be identified as Buddhist *stūpas*, which usually are bell-shaped piles of earth erected over the bones or ashes of a Buddhist saint (arahant) or on spots consecrated as scenes of his acts. Also, Clement referred

³² "Nathi cā ṣe janapade yatā nathi ime nikāyā-ānatā Yoneṣu-baṅhmane cā, ṣamane cā," (Kālsī version), *ibid.*, p. 98. The inscription in Prākṛit written in Kharoṣṭhī script was found at Shāhbāzgarhī near Peshawar (in present-day Pakistan). Also "Nasti ca se janapade ya(tra) nasti ime nikaya a[ñātra] Yoneṣu (bramaṇe ca śrama)," (Mānshehrā version); and "[ya](ta) [na]sti ime nikāyā añātra Yone[su]" (Girnār version). See Woolner 1993, p. 264.

³³ "Εἰσὶ δὲ τῶν Ἰνδῶν οἱ τοῖς Βούττα πειθόμενοι παραγγέλμασιν, ὅν δι' ὑπερβολὴν σεμνότητος ὡς θεὸν τετιμῆκασι." Clement, *Stromateis*, I, 15, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 194.

to the belief of the Brāhmaṇas in rebirth (*paligenesis*)³⁵ and described the dress and disciplines of the Brāhmaṇa and Samaṇa philosophers. The Buddha's name and the story of his birth from the side of a virgin were also mentioned by Saint Jerome (c. 340–420 C.E.).³⁶

References about missionaries (Dharmamahāmātras) sent to propagate the principles of the Dharma to alien nations, including the Yonas' occur only in Buddhist inscriptions, texts and records. This indicates that the conversion of a significant number of Greeks to Buddhism took place on the Indian sub-continent and was not expanded further. The *Dīpavaṃsa*³⁷ records that the Thera Mahārakkhita who possessed great magical powers, converted the Yona region by preaching the *Kālakārāma Suttanta*. He was sent there after the Third Buddhist Council³⁸ which took place at Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna) during the reign of King Aśoka in 241 B.C.E. More details about his mission occur in the *Mahāvamsa*³⁹ where we read:

The wise Mahārakkhita went to the country of the Yona delivered in the midst of the people the *Kālakārāma Suttanta*. A hundred and seventy thousand living beings attained the reward of the path (of salvation); ten thousand received the pabbajjā (ordination or entering the Buddha's order).

Most of the Greeks who lived under Indian influence were converted to Buddhism, and to some extent their contribution to the spread of this religion was important. The Indianised names of many Yonaka monks found in the Pāli texts and inscriptions attest to this process. The wise Thera called Yonaka Dhammarakkhita (who is remembered as the teacher of Punabbasukutumbikaputta-Tissa⁴⁰) converted the Aparantaka country⁴¹ (Skt. Aparānta "the Western Edge," comprising the territory of northern Gujarat, Kāthiāwār,

³⁵ Ibid., III, 7.

³⁶ *Contr. Jovin.*, Epis. pt. I, tr. 2, 26.

³⁷ "Mahārakkhitathero pi Yonakalokaṇ pasādayi kālakārā masuttanta-kathāya ca mahiddhiko." *Dīpavaṃsa*, 8, 9, translated by Hermann Oldenberg. I have translated, however, the "Yonakalokaṇ" as the Yona region.

³⁸ *Mahāvamsa*, XII, 5; and *Dīpavaṃsa*, VII, 58 and VIII, 9.

³⁹ *Mahāvamsa*, XII, 39–40, translated from Pāli into German by Wilhelm Geiger and from German into English by M.H. Bode.

⁴⁰ DPPN, vol. 2, p. 698.

⁴¹ "Yonakadhammarakkhitathero nāma mahāmāti aggikkhandopama-suttakathāya aparantakaṇ pasādayi." *Dīpavaṃsa*, VIII, 7, translated by Hermann Oldenberg.

Menander and the Adoption of Buddhism

The best illustration of the conversion of several Yonas to Buddhism is found in the Buddhist text *Milindapañha* (Questions of King Milinda), which records conversations between King Milinda (supposedly King Menander) and the Buddhist elder monk Nāgasena.⁴⁸ According to the text, Milinda carefully listens to Nāgasena's teachings and at the end of each discourse replies with the stereotypical, "very good, Nāgasena." The author finally presents King Milinda's conversion to Buddhism and his enlightenment:

And afterwards, taking delight in the wisdom of the elder, he (King Milinda) bequeathed his kingdom to his son and abandoning the household life for the houseless state, developed great insight and attained Arahantship.⁴⁹

There is, however, no historical evidence that the Bactrian King Menander (supposedly King Milinda) embraced Buddhism. None of the twenty-two different coins bearing his name shows any sign of his conversion. Although some scholars have tried to identify the sign of the wheel depicted on a few of Menander's coins (Fig. 2) with the Buddhist Dharma Cakra (the Wheel of the Doctrine). The original form of the Dharma Cakra (found on the Aśoka pillars) has twenty-four spokes (representing the Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Limbs of the Four Noble Truths), their pointed ends touch, but do not cross the rim, which is as thick as that of a wheel. The cakra depicted on the coins of Menander consists of eight spokes whose pointed ends protrude slightly over the linear rim.⁵⁰ Its design reminds us of the golden disk embossed with the star emblem of the Macedonian dynasty. On coins of the Indo-Greek kings it occurs only on those of Menander, but the

⁴⁸ Topics under discussion are concerned with individuality, renunciation, intelligence and wisdom, good conduct, faith, perseverance, mindfulness (*suti*), identity, salvation, suicide, rebirth, karma, time, causation, the first beginnings, becoming, formation of qualities, the soul, sensation and ideas, perception, conditions, purgatory, Nirvāna, Buddha and Buddhas, body, passion, memory, sorrow and peace. Other topics include such things as snoring, the ideal teacher, gifts and honours, trees, thinking powers, the lives of various kings and outstanding Buddhist personages, meditation, the abolition of regulations, esoteric teachings, fear of death, Dharma, schism of the cult, preaching, foolishness, kindness and punishment, dismissal, falsehood, love, women, omniscience, various dilemmas in solving social problems and explanations of the life and character of the Buddha, problems of inference, voluntary extra vows, and similes of Arahantship.

⁴⁹ *Milindapañha*, VII, 7, 21.

⁵⁰ See Srivastava 1969, fig. 30.

Kachchh and Sind)⁴² by preaching the *Aggikkhandopama Sutta*. More details about the mission of this Yona Thera are given in the *Mahāvamsa*, which records:

The Thera Dhammarakkhita the Yona, having gone to Aparantaka and having preached in the midst of the people the *Aggikkhandopama Sutta* (the discourse on the parable of the flames of fire), gave to drink of the nectar of truth to thirty-seven thousand living beings who had come together there, he who perfectly understood truth and untruth. A thousand men and yet more women went forth from noble families and received the pabbajjā.⁴³

Another Greek Buddhist, the Yona Mahādhammarakkhita Thera, is said to have come along with thirty thousand monks, from Alasandā to the foundation ceremony of the Mahā Thūpa.⁴⁴ From the exaggerated number of monks, we might infer that during this time Buddhism was popular in the city of Alasandā, which is generally identified with Alexandria founded by King Alexander in Paropamisadae near Kabul.⁴⁵ The converted Yonas preserved certain rituals and beliefs from their original religion. This is indicated in the *Anguttara* commentary, where the Yonakas are spoken of as moving around, clad in white robes, in memory of the religion which was once prevalent in their country.⁴⁶

The expansion of Buddhism to the Yona country has been well preserved in the memory of the Ceylonese Theravāda Buddhists, who even today recite in their daily prayers the following stanza, “I bow my head to the footprints of the silent saint (Buddha) which are spread on the sandy bank of the Narmada River, on the Mountain Saccabhadda, on the Mountain Sumana, and in the city of the Yonakas.”⁴⁷

⁴² Fleet, JRAS, 1910, p. 427.

⁴³ *Mahāvamsa*, XII, 34–36, translated by Wilhelm Geiger and M.H. Bode. See also, *Mahāvamsa*, XII, 4.

⁴⁴ *Mahāvamsa*, XXIX, 39; and *Dīpavamsa*, XIX, 6.

⁴⁵ See Arrian, III, 28 and IV, 22.

⁴⁶ DPPN, vol. 2, p. 699.

⁴⁷ Yaṇ nammadāya nadiyā puline ca tīre,
Yaṇ saccabhadda girike sumanā ca lagge,
Yaṇ tatta yonaka pure muninoca pādaṇ,
Taṇ pāda lañcanamaḥaṇ sirasā namāmi.

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⁵⁰ See Srivastava 1969, fig. 30.

symbolism of the wheel was used in Greek tradition. Anaximander, like the Jains and Buddhists, perceived both the Sun⁵¹ and the Cosmic Order⁵² as wheels. In the Orphic tradition, the cycle of reincarnation was known as the “wheel of birth” and in the Dionysian cult it was represented by the circular dance. The epithet “dikaios” (dhramikasa) following the name of Menander on some of his coins is not exclusively Buddhist.

Most of his coins portray the Goddess Athena (Pallas) hurling a thunderbolt, which suggests that he kept his Greek religion. Plutarch’s statement that King Menander died in a military camp indicates also that he did not renounce his kingdom and army to become a Buddhist monk, as it has been recorded in the *Milindapañha*. Plutarch’s description is as follows:

A certain Menander ruled with equanimity and died in a military camp. The cities in other respects joined together in celebrating his obsequies, but over his relics a dispute arose among them, which was settled upon by agreeing that each one was to take back an equal share of his ashes so that memorials might be set up among them all.⁵³

The above description of the funeral and the distribution of the ashes of the king in different cities has striking similarities with that of the ashes of the Buddha in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, where it is said that after the body of the Buddha had been cremated, a dispute arose amongst the representatives of eight different states (*viz.* Ajātasattu of Magadha, Licchavī of Vessālī, the Sākyas of Kapilavatthu, the Buli of Allakappa, the Koliya of Rāmagāma, the Brāhmaṇa of Vetṭhadīpa, the Malla of Pāvā, and the Malla of Kusinārā), all of whom considered themselves worthy to receive a portion of the relics of the Blessed One. Originally, the Malla of Kusinārā refused the others’ claims by saying: “The Blessed One died in our village domain, therefore, we will not give away any part of the remains of the Blessed One.” The dispute was finally resolved by coming to an agreement that they should divide the remains of the Buddha into eight equal parts and that each one would erect a mound (*thūpa*) over them in his country, so that mankind could trust in the Enlightened One.⁵⁴ Although, the Buddha and Menander

⁵¹ Aetios, II, 20, 1; 21, 1; and 24, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, II, 2, 4.

⁵³ *De Republicae Gerendae Praecepta*, p. 821.

⁵⁴ *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, pp. 236–240 [Bibliothetica Indo-Tibetica Series (hereafter BITS) XII.], and Davids 1992, pp. 49–63.

were cremated in a similar manner, this should not be taken as an indication that Menander became a Buddhist. On the contrary, the similarity occurs because the body of the Buddha was treated like that of a king. The Venerable Ānanda stated that the body of the Tathāgata should be treated in the same way as the remains of a universal monarch.⁵⁵ It is also possible that Plutarch had heard the popular story of the Buddha and applied it to the personage of Menander.

The *Milindapañha* was compiled at a later time than that of Menander and it is believed that many parts of the text are spurious.⁵⁶ The meeting and discussion of Milinda with the six heretical teachers, for example, is a clear plagiarism of the *Silakkhandha Vagga* of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, where King Ajātasattu of Magadha is said to have visited the same sophists.⁵⁷ The inclusion of Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta (Mahāvīra) and Makkhali Gosāla (leader of the Ājīvakas) as contemporaries of Milinda⁵⁸ adds to the scepticism concerning the historical accuracy of the text. Both these teachers are known to have been contemporaries of the Buddha. What can be said with greater certainty is that Menander, who had expanded his kingdom into the Gangetic plains, where Buddhism was flourishing, was a secular leader, who recognised and protected both the beliefs of his Greek and Buddhist subjects. Moreover, regarding the positive description of the Yona country given in Buddhist texts,⁵⁹ we might infer that the Greek king sympathised with Buddhist causes and for this reason became popular within the Buddhist communities. "If the Greek king was not himself actually a member of the Buddhist Order, he was at least such a great benefactor that the community looked upon him as one of their own."⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, p. 230 (BITS, XII).

⁵⁶ The original version of the *Milindapañha*, which might have been written in Sanskrit or Prākṛit in Northern India, has been lost. It was preserved in Ceylon, where it had been translated into Pāli. From its Pāli form, it was translated into Sinhalese in the eighteenth century by a monk named Sumāgala, and is called the *Saddharmādāsava*; it contains a few additions. The text occupies a unique position, second in importance only to the *Tipitaka*. From Ceylon it was transferred, in its Pāli form, to Burma and Siam and in these countries it is also highly reputed. See Davids 1993, vol. 1, p. xi. Cf. DPPN, vol. 2, p. 637.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, pp. 165–181 (BITS, XII).

⁵⁸ *Milindapañha*, I, pp. 11–14, trans. Davids 1993, vol. 1, p. 8.

⁵⁹ For example, "There is, in the country of the Yonakas, a great centre of trade, a city that is called Sāgala, situated in a delightful country, abounding in parks and gardens and groves and lakes and tanks, a paradise of rivers and mountains and woods" (trans. Davids 1993, vol. 1, p. 2). Sāgala (also Sāgalā), the city in which King Milinda met Nāgasena, has been identified with Sialkot in Recha Doad. See Narain 1980, p. 172. In various *Jātakas*, Sāgala is mentioned as the capital of the Madda kings. It was evidently called Sākala. Cf. DPPN, II, p. 1089.

⁶⁰ Zimmer 1951, p. 505. Quoted also by Woodcock 1966, p. 114.

A similar friendly attitude towards Buddhists seems to have been held by the predecessor of Menander, Agathocles. On a unique coin issued by him, there is a depiction of a Buddhist *stūpa* and the legend “Akathukreyasa”; on the reverse is a tree inside a railing with the legend “Hirañśame.” The coin, like others issued by the same king, is monolingual and inscribed exclusively in Kharoṣṭhī. From this coin, it is evident that some Greeks were familiar with Buddhist symbols and that Agathocles favoured communalism in his dominion. No theory of conversion to Buddhism or other religions, however, can be established on the basis of numismatic evidence alone. Several rulers are known to have issued coins with local deities not belonging to their personal religion. Kaniṣka, a Buddhist emperor, for instance, issued coins with Iranian, Greek, Hindu and Buddhist deities and Akbar, a Muslim emperor, issued coins with the popular Indian deities Sītā and Rāma depicted on them. From the observations above, we might conclude that Agathocles, like Menander after him, was well-acquainted with the predominant Buddhist religion of the Indians to which several Indo-Greeks had also been converted.

Despite the broad claims of mass conversions by Aśoka and Buddhist texts, there is no substantial evidence to prove that Buddhism spread with any great speed or that it had reached the Greeks living outside the Indian states. The majority of the Bactrian Greeks maintained their religion as it is indicated, a) by the recorded descriptions in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and in the book of Philostatos *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, b) by the Greek statues, monuments and the names of Greek gods written in the inscriptions discovered in the ruins of the capital of Eukratides (170–145 B.C.E.) near the village of Ai-Khanum; in the royal cemetery “Tilia Tepe” in northern Afghanistan; and also in other regions such as the Peshawar valley, Taxila, and Kashmir, and c) by the Greek deities depicted on the coins not only of the Graeco-Bactrian kings, but also on coins of many foreign rulers in post-Bactrian times.

Gandhāra—the Rise of Graeco-Buddhist Art

The representation of the Buddha and other Indian deities in human form has been ascribed to a Greek artistic influence, as early Buddhism did not encourage the worship of the Buddha as a god. However, we do not have a single image of him belonging to the Indo-Greek period. The earliest representation of the Buddha in human form is found in the sculptures of the Hellenistic Gandhāra School that flourished in the Peshawar valley (known as Gandhāra in the *R̥g Veda*) from the first to the fifth centuries C.E. (Figs. 3–7) This was

a major era of Hellenistic culture, and Alexander himself stopped there for three years until 326 B.C.E., when he started his campaign towards the Indus plain. Upon his death, his empire was divided. Seleucos took the eastern part of the empire, including the provinces of Bactria and India. Gradually, the Seleucid kingdom began to decline and from the third century C.E. a new independent kingdom was established in Bactria. For three centuries, this region was ruled by the descendants of the Greeks who had settled there. The Greeks in Bactria remained free, albeit cut off, while the rest of the Greek world fell to the Romans. In the extreme east, from the River Oxus to the Indian Pentapotamia, the Bactrian Greeks established bustling Greek cities such as Taxila, Sāgala (Euthymedia), Alexandria-Bucephalia, Nicaea, Demetria in Patalene, Dionysopolis and Peukolaitis in Gandhāra and the two Alexandrians on the River Indus, in which the Greek language and arts were taught and achieved great glory. This is testified by recent excavations, especially in Taxila, and the discovery of many coins, sculptures, metallurgy, jewellery, ceramics, terracotta, Ionic and Corinthian capitals as well as other architectural features that are attributed to the Greeks who lived there.⁶¹

The art of Gandhāra was developed after the fall of the Indo-Greek kingdoms (c. 25 B.C.E.) by the Parthians, Śakas and Kuṣāṇas conquerors that succeeded the Greeks and adopted their language and art (Figs. 8 and 9).⁶² The Greek influence as attested on the statues of the Buddha and Indian deities is quite evident. The serene expression and the curly hair of the Buddha reflect the luminous form of Apollo, and his tunic, with its rippling folds, is similar to the tunic worn by Greek and Roman philosophers. Zeus (Jupiter) holding thunderbolts in the form of Vajrapāṇi, is often depicted beside the Buddha (Fig. 10).⁶³ Some statues of the Buddha are decorated with ivy leaves and acanthus motifs suggesting a strong influence from the Dionysian repertory, which prevailed in the art of the region for many centuries. Several other themes and symbols from Greek religion and mythology are depicted on seals, soft stone, medals, and terracotta. They were used as decorations in Buddhist art, which developed in various regions of the Indian Peninsula and Afghanistan. These include deities such as Hercules, Dionysos, a variety of figures of Silenoi and Maenads from the entourage of Dionysos, as well as scenes from Greek mythology, such as Bacchanalian scenes,⁶⁴ marine subjects,

⁶¹ Karamanou 2004.

⁶² Cf. Sharma 1995, pp. 141 ff.

⁶³ For references, see Doshi 1985, pp. 18–19.

⁶⁴ See Sharma 1995, p. 125.

Atlas, Tritons fighting with gods, centaurs,⁶⁵ and so on (Figs. 11–13). A predominant female figure is depicted in the statues of the Hellenistic goddess Tyche (goddess of luck) of each city who eventually became popular in the form of the Hindu goddess, Lakṣmī. Another predominant female figure in Gandhāra Hellenistic art is Hariti, who appears frequently with a male companion and a child (Fig. 14). Most of the Indian sculptures carry a narrative, depicting various scenes from the life of the Buddha, his teachings, death and attainment of Nirvāṇa. The art of Gandhāra flourished from the first up to the fifth century C.E. The Hellenistic representation of the Buddha's form in statues and terracotta was spread by the Kuṣāṇas further south in Mathura and India, where it adopted a more Indian art style. Through the Silk Road, a major thoroughfare for trade and travel between Byzantine, Central Asia and the Far East in ancient and medieval times, Gandhāra art crossed a wide range of climates and cultures and reached the Buddhist monasteries of Central Asia and China, which, in turn, influenced the arts of Korea and Japan.

A few Greeks (Yavanas) also appear on the list of pious donors in the Buddhist caves of Karle (seven records), Nāsik (one record), and Junnar (three records), in the State of Maharashtra which were created during the first and second century C.E. (Figs. 15 and 16).⁶⁶ As the places of the donors' origin have not yet been identified, it is not certain whether they were members of existing Greek Buddhist communities of South India or not. The existence of Greek communities in South India and Ceylon has been recorded in contemporary Tamil literature and a few centuries later in the *Christian Topography* of the Alexandrian geographer, Cosmas Indicopleustes (first half of the sixth century C.E.).

A few rock inscriptions in Greek script (called Bactrian Greek or Hephthalite) have been discovered in recent times in Afghanistan. Their style is later than that of the Kuṣāno-Sasānian coins and is similar to the style which was employed by the Hephthalites and the Turkī Sahis of Kabul. One of them reads in Greek:

ναμω ο βοδο
 ναμω ο δουαρομο (u has the phonetic value of h)
 ναμω ο σαγγο⁶⁷

⁶⁵ See Srivastava 1991, pp. 14–25.

⁶⁶ See Shastri 1993, pp. 58–66.

⁶⁷ Discovered in 1957 by Bombaci and Scerrato, members of the Italian Archaeological

This corresponds to the Buddhist formula “*Namo Buddhasya, Namō Dharmasya, Namō Saṅgasya*” (I bow to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Buddhist community), suggesting that in later times Buddhism was present in this region and its followers were using the Greek script. However, as this script was used by several foreign people after the fall of the Indo-Greek kingdoms in Bactria, it is not certain whether the authors of these inscriptions were ethnic Greeks or not.⁶⁸

Philosophical Influences and Parallelisms

There is now tangible evidence indicating that after the campaign of Alexander, certain educated Indians became familiar with the Hellenic epics, poetry, mythology, and drama, which inspired them to introduce Greek religious ideas into their own. One such example was presented by Derpett, who compared the *Third Homeric Hymn of Apollo* with the story of the birth of the Buddha and concluded: “At any rate we can posit the Homeric hymns as a source of Buddhist inspiration and embellishment.”⁶⁹ A similar view was shared by Arora who, quoting the Greek authorities, stated that certain Indians were familiar with the Greek language, the Homeric epics and the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, thus concluding that some Greek impact on Indian legends actually took place. He also compared the episode of Vijaya in the Ceylonese text *Mahāvamsa* with the tale of Odysseus on the island of Circe.⁷⁰

Nakamura⁷¹ has drawn parallels in post-Christian times by showing that the parable of the prodigal son⁷² is similar to the *Lotus Sūtra* of Mahāyāna Buddhism (first or second century C.E.) and to the story found in sixth-century Vedāntic literature. He has also pointed out the similarity between the Buddhist tradition and the teachings of Asclepius, who as healer and saviour

Mission in Jagatu (Ġaġatū) in Afghanistan. See Humbach 1967, pp. 25–26; and also Scerrato 1967, p. 11. The second inscription is incomplete and no precise meaning can be drawn from it.

⁶⁸ See also, the use of the Greek script on the coins and inscriptions of Kuṣāṇas and other nomads of Bactria as well as on a well-preserved inscription found at Surkh Kotal (Afghanistan). Cf. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XXIII (1960), pp. 47–55; and *Journal Asiatique*, 1958, pp. 345–440.

⁶⁹ Derpett 1992, p. 57.

⁷⁰ Arora 1985, pp. 48–52; and Arora 1981.

⁷¹ Nakamura 1992, p. 376.

⁷² Luke, 15: 11–32.

called all mankind to himself, and the deification of wisdom (Gr. *sophia*, Skt. *prajñāpāramitā*) in both Greek and Buddhist traditions.⁷³

Another comparativist, N.J. Allen, realizes notable similarities in the narratives of the lives of the Buddha and Odysseus as they are found in early Buddhist scriptures and Homer's *Odyssey*. In his conclusive remarks, Allen points out: "A great deal in the Buddha's biography has Indo-European roots, but at this stage I cannot offer any clear account of the paths along which this ancient tradition reached Buddhism."⁷⁴ However, he continues with his initial hypothesis, suggesting a hidden "proto-hero," which brings us back to the Proto-Indo-European Theory. As Allen himself admits in the introduction of his paper, many teachings and narratives about the Buddha's life are later additions and not actual historical events. It will therefore be much easier to explain the existing similarities in the two traditions by looking at the post-Buddhist rather than the pre-Buddhist era. It remains, however, a challenging option to expand our visionary search in mythological realms and long-lost prehistoric archetypes shared all over the Indo-European world from India, through Iran and Greece to the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

We cannot fail to notice the remarkable similarities that exist between the Hellenic-Christian and Mahāyāna Buddhist concepts of the Trinity. Unlike the Orthodox Hindu tradition that perceives the divine Trinity on the grounds of the triple empirical function of the world, i.e., creation (Brahmā), preservation (Viṣṇu) and destruction (Śiva), the Buddhists like the Greeks concentrate on an existential and metaphysical differentiation. The so-called *trikāya* theory of the Mahāyāna defines the Buddha by three bodies of enlightenment. These are the *dharmakāya*, the body of ultimate reality that corresponds to the Pure Spirit of the Hellenic and the Father of the Christian Holy Trinity; the *sambhogakāya*, the body of experience (or joy) that corresponds to the mind of the Hellenic and the Holy Spirit in the Christian Trinity; and the *nirmānakāya*, the Buddha's conditioned, human body of flesh and blood that corresponds to the physical historical body in the Hellenic and the Son of God, the Christ in the Christian theology. The three rather abstract and remote aspects, faces or persons of the divine Trinity are based on our human existence and are present in every moment of our daily experience.

The majority of the Indian philosophical systems developed in areas and times closely associated with the presence of the Indo-Greeks, who had come

⁷³ Nakamura 1992, p. 381.

⁷⁴ Allen 2005.

from their fatherland with a rich philosophical and dialectical heritage. This historical association gives rise to questions concerning a possible Greek influence on the systematisation and development of the Indian philosophical traditions. Burnet in his short reference to Indian philosophy admits that the Indians were the only ancient people, besides the Greeks, who ever had anything that deserved the name of philosophy. He, however, suggests that Indian philosophy arose under Greek influence:

No one now will suggest that Greek philosophy came from India, and indeed everything points to the conclusion that Indian philosophy arose under Greek influence. The chronology of Sanskrit literature is an extremely difficult subject; but, so far as we can see, the great Indian systems are later in date than the Greek philosophies they most nearly resemble. Of course the mysticism of the Upanishads and of Buddhism was of native growth; but, though these influenced philosophy in the strict sense profoundly, they were related to it only as Hesiod and the Orphics were related to Greek scientific thought.⁷⁵

Vidyabhushana held similar views when he compared the Aristotelian syllogism with its Indian counterparts and concluded that the logical theories of Aristotle migrated from Greece to India between the second century B.C.E. and seventh century C.E.⁷⁶ An earlier version of Greek influence on Indian philosophy was presented by Shahrastānī (1086–1153), an Arab philosopher who claimed that two disciples of Pythagoras, one of whom was Qalānūs, came to India to spread the teachings of his master. An Indian disciple of Qalānūs, named Brāhmaṇan, became the founder of the Brahmanic philosophy.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Burnet 1963, p. 18.

⁷⁶ Vidyabhushana 1918, pp. 469–88. In this paper, Vidyabhushana examines the historical development of the four distinct subjects of Nyaya philosophy and compares Aristotle's logic with its counterparts found in the *Caraka-Samhitā* (78 C.E.), Akṣapāda (c. 150 C.E.), Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd century C.E.), Maitreya (400 C.E.), Vasubandhu (c. 450 C.E.), Dignāga (c. 500 C.E.), Dharmakīrti (7th century C.E.), and Uddyotakara (7th century C.E.).

⁷⁷ See Halbfass 1990, p. 28. Alberuni (vol. I, p. 34) probably mentions the same person under the name "Galenos." He says that the Greek philosopher wrote a book called *Exhortative to the Arts* in which he said: "Excellent men have obtained the honour of being reckoned among the deified beings only for the noble spirit in which they cultivated the arts, not for their prowess in wrestling and discus-throwing." Alberuni (vol. I, p. 33) also said that the ancient Greeks (*viz.* Solon of Athens, Bias of Priene, Periander of Corinth, Thales of Miletos, Chilon of

While the depth and the deep roots of the Indian philosophical traditions make one feel that such a thesis may be propounding extremist views, the observations above do lend fuel to the enquiry regarding whether, or to what extent, the Indian philosophical systems were influenced by Greek thought or not. Certain influences seem to have taken place and the whole topic will be a rewarding area of future research. Parallels can be drawn (i) between the theory of atoms, as was expounded by Leukippos and Democritos and appears in the later Buddhist, Jain and Vaiśeṣika atomic theories; (ii) the Greek and Mahāyāna metaphysical and dialectical speculations; and (iii) between the democratic institutions shared by the Greek states and Buddhist *saṅghas*.

The Buddha's main concern was the emancipation from suffering. He did not encourage discussions on metaphysical problems that he considered self-deceptions. The fact, however, that he did not affirm the existence of an eternal substance, spiritual or material (*puḍgala-nairātmya*), led his successors to develop a substantialist and pluralistic cosmology. Amongst the early Buddhist schools, Theravāda recognised twenty-eight material elements (*rūpa-dhamma*) that made up the totality of worldly existence. They were classified into two groups: primary (*mahābhūtas*) and secondary (*upadarūpas*). The atomic theory is a post-canonical development. The Vaibhāṣikas recognised two kinds of atoms: unitary atom (*dravya-paramāṇu*) and aggregate atom (*saṅghāta-paramāṇu*). The former is the smallest unit of matter; it is partless and has no spatial dimensions. The latter is a combination of unitary atoms that originates and ceases simultaneously. The *dravya-paramāṇu* resembles the atoms of Democritos, but the Vaibhāṣikas, like other Buddhists, did not admit permanent existence.⁷⁸ They developed the doctrine of momentariness (*kṣanabhangavāda*) according to which everything in the world, including matter and mind, is in a continuous flow. One after the other the atoms come

Lacedaemonia, Pittacos of Lesbos, Cleobulos of Lindos, and their successors) held nearly the same view as the Hindus in matters concerning the unity of the world, the first cause, and the dream-like nature of transitory objects. He, however, does not seem to believe in the diffusion of ideas.

⁷⁸ Democritos is closer to the Jains, who were perhaps the first in India to proclaim that material objects including the senses, mind, and breath consist of independent atoms (*paramāṇu*). Like Democritos, they did not maintain any qualitative difference in the original nature of atoms, but differentiated them in a secondary stage by developing the qualities of savour, colour, odour and tangibility. The Jain atoms are the smallest parts of matter that cannot be further divided. They are invisible, qualitatively alike, and infinite in number. When they come together, they form the compound bodies (*saṅghāta* or *skandha*) of the material world including the senses, mind and breath.

into being and disappear the next moment. The succeeding atom is not a transformation of the old, but something new that comes into being depending on the impressions (*vāsanās, saṃskāras*) left by the old. The Theravādins did not recognise the *dravya-paramāṇu*. Their atoms (*rūpa kalāpa*) correspond to the *saṅghāta-paramāṇu* of the Vaibhāṣikas which find striking similarities with the “seeds” of Anaxagoras. Like Anaxagoras, the Buddhists maintained that the four primary elements were present in every material object, but unlike him, they did not admit a quantitative difference amongst them. The opposite qualities in the “seeds” were united in different proportions; the Theravādins held that they existed equally. The distinction between different *rūpa kalāpas* and compound objects was due to the difference in intensity.⁷⁹

The Pythagorean doctrine of rebirth (*paligenesia*) finds parallels in India, particularly in Sāṅkhya and Jain philosophies, which accept the plurality of souls and recognise human effort (discriminative knowledge according to Sāṅkhya) as a necessary condition for the purification (realisation of the undefiled purity according to Sāṅkhya) of the soul. Pythagoras’ belief in the regression of human souls into animal bodies is similarly found in Indian texts. The Indian philosophers, like Plato in Greece,⁸⁰ regarded future life as a result of present actions. The doctrine of transmigration and its association with the Law of Karma was further developed and elaborated upon in Jainism, Buddhism and later philosophical schools.

The most striking resemblance to Pythagoras’ explanation that he had knowledge of his previous lives due to the grace of god (Hermes)⁸¹ occurs in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, where the Buddha recalls his past seven incarnations and gives details about their social ranks, names, attainments and emancipation. The Buddha explains that his ability to recall all the facts of his past lives was due to his own penetrating discernment and the (grace of) the deities (*devas*) who made these matters known to him.

Memories from previous lives are also revealed in the *Jātaka Pāli*, which contains five hundred and forty-seven stories of previous lives of the Buddha as recounted by the Buddha himself. Here, the Buddha, like Pythagoras’ associate Empedocles, includes amongst his former births animals, such as a monkey (*vānara-jātaka* and *kuṇidēsaka-jātaka*), hare (*sasa-jātaka*), parrot

⁷⁹ See Karunadasa 1991, pp. 44–53.

⁸⁰ See Vassiliades 2004. Cf. Pande 1974, where the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation is treated not as a floating mythical or speculative idea but as a logical complex derived from yogic experience.

⁸¹ Diogenes Laertius, VIII, 4. (DK, 14 A 8.)

(*kālabāhu-jātaka*), jackal (*jambuka-jātaka*), heron (*kuntani-jātaka*), and so on. In these stories, however, we find moral principles closer to the didactic teachings of Aesop and *Pañcatantra* than to any metaphysical theory about the evolution of the soul.

In the *Buddhavaṅsa* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the Buddha gives details about each one of the twenty-five Buddhas (including himself) and ends with the prophesy that Metteyya Buddha would come into this world in the future. This concept of the reappearance of the saviour lord is unknown to the Greeks. However, we do find several stories with a repeated incarnation context, especially that of the unusual life of Persephone, the daughter of the goddess Demeter, who lived alternately above and below the earth, i.e., she was periodically reincarnated; and of the life of Aristeeas of Proconnesus.⁸²

The transmigration of the soul through all possible lives finally leads to self-realisation and salvation from the cycle of rebirths. Both Indian and Greek believers in transmigration hold the view that man could realise the divine nature of his soul and thus liberate himself from the passions that had bound him in the physical body. In Greece, the ideal of salvation was taught in the Orphic communities and was associated with the worship of Dionysos. Pythagoras, however, endeavoured to differentiate his theory from the purely mythical explanation of the Orphic religion and explained the union of divine and human existence as the harmony of the soul or psyche with the cosmic music caused by the movements of the stars and planets. The purified psyche, leaving behind the three-dimensional objects of the physical world, is absorbed in a constant ecstasy as it revolves with the cosmic music in the ether and contemplates the gods and the divine numbers which formed the reality in the realms of pure thought.

The aim of the true philosopher was to become like (*omoiosis*) a god and to become righteous with the help of wisdom.⁸³ An experience of the divine nature of the soul could be obtained by the final release from the earthly elements. The soul released from the “wheel of birth” becomes once more an immortal god and enjoys everlasting bliss. At this stage, the soul attains an abundance of what it desires as suggested by the Orphic formula “I have fallen as a kid into milk.”⁸⁴ Almost all the Indian philosophers expressed parallel

⁸² Herodotos, IV, pp. 14–15.

⁸³ Plato, *Theaetetos*, 176 b–d.

⁸⁴ Material rewards after death were also promised by Museus who advocated feasting and everlasting drunkenness of the just in “the symposium of the saints” in Hades. Plato, *Republic*, 363 c.

soteriological beliefs. They unanimously held that spiritual emancipation enables man to free himself from the shackles of ignorance and from the bondage of worldly misery. Closer to the Indian concepts of liberation and bliss (*ānanda*) is the following saying attributed to Pythagoras by the Arab philosopher, Alberuni:

Let your desire and exertion in this world be directed towards the union with the First Cause, which is the cause of the cause of the cause of your existence that you may endure forever. You will be saved from destruction and from being wiped out; you will go to the world of the true sense, of the true joy, of the true glory, in everlasting joy and pleasures.⁸⁵

The later Pythagoreans considered their teacher as a perfect example of the purified soul, who could realise his divine status during his lifetime. His teachings were indisputable and the saying “autos efa” (he said) was uttered whenever there was a need to establish the authority of a rule or theory. Numerous miracles were attributed to Pythagoras, which served as models for later biographies of philosophers and sages. The citizens of Croton went so far as to consider him an incarnation of the Hyperborean Apollo. Pythagoras, however, did not say he was a god, at least in the Indian sense of *avatāra*. Unlike the Indians, the Greeks in general did not deify their teachers. They built statues for the preservation of the memory of their great philosophers, but no temple was dedicated to Pythagoras or any other distinguished mortal.

The Pythagorean initiations also resembled the Shramanic traditions in India. The Buddha and Mahāvīra, like Pythagoras, dismissed birth and sex distinctions. The initiation into their monastic orders was based solely on ideological and ethical grounds. Greek and Indian orders were aristocratic, based not on birth or wealth but on the rule of the noble. Their societies were open to all without discrimination as to gender and social status. In certain cases, slaves could also be initiated into the mysteries and become eminent teachers. The only condition for admission was that the candidate should be sincere in his desire to learn and possess a good character. This exclusivity, however, caused finally the destruction of the Pythagorean school known as

⁸⁵ Alberuni, vol. I, p. 88. Compare with Euripides, who identifies the happy man with the philosopher: “Happy is he who has learned to search into causes, who discerns the deathless and ageless order of nature, whence it arose, the how and the why.” Likewise, Anaxagoras and Democritus defined happiness occurring as a result of freedom that emerges from abstract thought.

“homakoeion” when Pythagoras offended Cylon, a noble and a powerful man, by refusing him admission into the school on the grounds of his bad character. Here, we might trace some similarities with the poisoning of the Buddha by Cunda in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, but somehow the Buddhist order survived in India at least until the Mohammedan invasions.

In the hierarchical structure of the Pythagorean society, at the top we have the genuine “Mathematikoi,” who like the monks of the Buddhist *saṅghas*, shared meals and held their possessions in common, but unlike them, they followed Pythagoras’ example and had families. Being a householder and living a practical life were not seen as incompatible with the pursuit of divine knowledge. On the contrary, the Pythagoreans advocated that one should have children because one should leave behind him future worshippers for the gods. On this point, Pythagoras is closer to the Brāhmaṇas who regarded study, procreation, self-discipline, and love towards all living beings as sufficient means for the liberation from the cycle of rebirth.⁸⁶ Closer to the Brāhmaṇas is also the Pythagorean emphasis on mystical speculations and secrecy,⁸⁷ although, the oral transmission of knowledge was common practice in all the ancient spiritual traditions in India.

Like the Indian monks, the Pythagoreans distinguished themselves physically by adopting some external characteristics (but of a different nature such as long hair and white dress) and avoided animal sacrifices. They were not allowed to engage in business, or defend themselves in court and emphasised non-violence. Pythagoras encouraged friendship (*philia*) by defining a friend as another self and advocated the sharing of everything amongst friends and the members of his society. The basic Pythagorean attitude towards nature, man and gods might be seen in the following verse recited by the eldest member after dinner when the disciples were about to depart: “Do not harm or destroy cultivated land or fruit trees nor an animal which is not harmful to humanity. In addition have a respectful and noble attitude to the gods, demons and heroes, as well as to parents and benefactors.”

⁸⁶ “He, who after having come back (from the house of the teacher) settles down in a home of his own, continues the study of what he has learnt and has vigorous sons, he who concentrates all his senses in the self, who practices non-hatred to all creatures except at holy places, he who behaves thus throughout his life reaches the Brahma-world, does not return hither again.” *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VIII, 15, 1.

⁸⁷ See for example, Satyakama Jābāla’s warnings to his pupils: “One should not tell this to one who is not a son or to one who is not a pupil” *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, VI, 3, 12. Similar statements occur also in the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, III, 2, 6, 9; *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, VI, 22; *Maitrī Upaniṣad*, VI, 29; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, III, 11, 5; and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, III, 2, 11.

Gotama Buddha advocated similar rules concerning non-violence⁸⁸ but he did not prohibit flesh-eating. The monks could eat whatever was offered to them with devotion. It is said that the Buddha himself died after eating poisoned “tender pig” (*sūkara-maddava*) offered by Cunda.⁸⁹ The Pāli Canon instructs subjects to abstain from accepting uncooked meat, to fast after mid-day, and to abstain from destroying all seeds and vegetation.⁹⁰

The belief that only the like could know the like, i.e., that only a pure person could appreciate divine wisdom and the purity of the gods, led to the introduction and development of a host of purification rituals (*katharmoi*) and sacraments (*orgia*). These included silence, mnemonics, abstinences, pure feeding, medicines, and gymnastics centred on the purification of the body, mind, and soul. These disciplines also served as a means to protect the practitioner from being carried away by worldly passions and delusions and dragged down into moral degradation. The importance of music was explicitly recognised because it could cure mental ills, train emotions, and purify the passionate and aggressive parts of the psyche. Music was also at the centre of worship as it was considered to be of divine origin and accompanied the devotional hymns to the gods. Philosophy was employed to purge the soul from interior bondage, as well as to aid the realisation of its divine nature and the attainment of tranquillity and perfect supremacy over oneself. The Pythagoreans advocated a practical and dynamic discipline based on the control (*egrateia*) of oneself over undesired compulsions. They were perhaps the first to recognise that the intellectual appreciation of moral principles was not sufficient for the practice of a virtuous life. They had to back it up by a regulated set of internal and external techniques and exercises, which formed a part of the moral training of their members.

Similar to Pythagoras, methods of education and practices (*yogas*) were developed by various orthodox and unorthodox Indian schools in accordance with their own metaphysical doctrines and ethical values. The Shramanic traditions emphasised personal effort and purification through moral actions, ethical disciplines and meditation. They never paid any great respect to intellectual knowledge alone, but always combined theory with some sort of

⁸⁸ *Samyutta Nikāya*, I, 165; *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I, 151; *Theragāthā*, I, 879; *Dhammapada*, 225, 261 and 270; etc.

⁸⁹ *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, 189 ff. (BITS, XII). See also, *Cakkavati Sutta*, 103, where the Buddha says that sālī rice cooked with meat was considered the best food of his time.

⁹⁰ *Brahmajāla Sutta*, 10 and *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, 194. Included in “Cūla Śīla” or Minor Morality (BITS, XII).

spiritual, moral, mental, and physical training. Right understanding (*sammādiññhi*), right thought (*sammāsaṅkappa*), right speech (*sammāvācā*), right action (*sammākamanta*), right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), right effort (*sammāvāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammāsati*), and right concentration (*sammāsamādhī*) constituted the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-atthāṅgikamagga*) that leads to final liberation.

The Meeting of Religions

Apart from the ideological and technical similarities, there is evidence of close historical contacts between the Hellenistic Near East and the India of the early centuries of the Christian era. Such an example is the mission of Apostle Thomas to the court of Gondophernes (Gondophares) of Taxila (21–46 C.E.), which is described in the *Acts of Saint Thomas*, an apocryphal work of the third century C.E., attributed to Bardesanes of Edessa.⁹¹ By the early years of the Christian era, Greek trade and shipping to the ports of India and Ceylon had increased enormously and small communities of Indian merchants and immigrants had established themselves in the cosmopolitan centres of Egypt and Syria. The discovery of a gravestone with a wheel and trident in the Hellenistic city of Alexandria attests to the fact that the Indian immigrants brought their customs and religions with them.⁹²

Another valuable source of information is the fascinating explorer's tale of Scythianos, a Saracen born in Palestine. The story tells us that Scythianos traded with India and during his visits acquired knowledge of Indian philosophy. Settling afterwards in Alexandria, he made himself conversant with the lore of Egypt. With the help of his disciple Terebinthos, he encapsulated in four books the peculiar doctrines which are said to have formed the basis of the Manichaeans. Terebinthos, however, surpassed his teacher. He proclaimed himself learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and declared that his name was no longer Terebinthos, but that he was a new Buddha; such was the name he assumed. He also said that he was born of a virgin, and had been brought up in the mountains by an angel.⁹³

With the increase of trade contacts, exaggerated and fabulous stories about India and Indian ascetics gained in popularity and the centre of Eastern

⁹¹ See Vassiliades 1999.

⁹² Flinders Petrie is inclined to this view. See Simpson 1898. Quoted also in Tarn and Griffith 1952, p. 248.

⁹³ Archelaos, *et Manetis Dispuratio*, I, 97. (AIDCL, p. 185.)

mysticism began to shift from Egypt to India. Indian *brāhmanas* and *śramaṇas* were now added to the long list of Persian, Chaldeans and Egyptian magicians.⁹⁴ Several theologians and Gnostics such as Dion of Prusa (known as Chrysostomos), Origen, Dionysos Periegetes, Aelian, Clement of Alexandria, Bardesanes and others praised Indian ascetics for their devotion to God and the renunciation of the pleasures of the world.

Monasticism, an important characteristic of the Christian religion that was passed down from the ascetics of Mount Sinai to the Greek Hesychasts, has often been compared with Indian asceticism. In comparing the ascetic practices of the Hesychasts with those of the Buddhist monks, we observe that both recite prayers continuously and that they synchronise them with respiration⁹⁵ and the turn of the rosary. They also make use of other common practices, such as concentration, meditation, fasting, celibacy, and so on. The aim of these practices is to liberate the individual from desires for earthly things and assist him to realise higher truths. Hesychasts and Buddhist monks followed similar external practices but there is an essential difference in regard to the role of God. The a-theistic Buddhists believe that the highest attainment, Nirvāṇa, can be possible through personal effort and the help of Bodhi-sattvas while the Christians preach absolute surrender to God, whose grace is the Alpha and Omega of the entire spiritual life. In regard to devotion, certain influences seem to have taken place in post-Christian times but it is very difficult to say that the development of devotional trends in Mahāyāna Buddhism was due to such early Christian influences.

Indian influence is also evident in the pagan and Christian Gnostic communities, which flourished in the Hellenistic Near East. The Christian Gnostics denied the literal meaning of the scriptures and the historical character of Christ and saw only an esoteric meaning based on *gnosis* (divinely inspired knowledge). Vassilides (Bassilides), a Gnostic theologian who lived in the first half of the second century C.E., taught doctrines quite similar to those found in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, something that led Radhakrishnan and Kennedy to think that he was influenced by them.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I, 24, where it is said that Indian *brāhmanas* and *śramaṇas* enjoy the same status as Egyptian sages and the learned Magi of Persia.

⁹⁵ See *Philokalia*, vol. IV, pp. 220 ff. The respiration practices seem to have been known to the Gnostic schools, as suggested in the *Philosophumena*, ascribed to Hippolytos. Cf. Gnoli 1953, p. 100.

⁹⁶ See Radhakrishnan 1939, pp. 203–205. References are from Kennedy 1902, pp. 383–412. See also Kazanas 2005.

Vassilides taught that there were three hundred and sixty-five heavens, each superior and less concrete than the one below,⁹⁷ and that the ultimate region, the absolute first principle and cause of all those below it, is altogether “nothing” (non-Being). God is above space, time consciousness and even Being itself. He is to be worshipped in silence. He contains everything in Himself potentially, even as a grain of mustard seed contains the whole plant. The creation is the result of His will. Vassilides, like the Buddhists, believed that suffering is the fundamental principle of all existence and that human personality is a complex consisting of the five elements. He propagated the doctrine of rebirth and supported the view that birth is a result of our acts in former lives, governed by an inflexible necessity that leads our souls towards their final purification.

The Christianised version of the legend of the renunciation of the Buddha found in the epic *Barlaam and Josaphat*, might be seen as having made an even more profound impact upon Greek literature. This work has been traditionally attributed to Saint Ioannis (John) of Damascus (d.c. 750 C.E.) who might have taken it from India or from the Manichaeans.⁹⁸ The story describes the life of Josaphat, an Indian prince who was converted to the Christian faith. The prince had been born to a mighty Indian king named Abeneer who despised and persecuted the Christians. Soon after Josaphat’s birth, one astrologer had told his father that his son would renounce the world and be converted to Christianity. The king was determined to prevent this prophesy and placed his son in a magnificent palace where he thought he would live happily in the midst of worldly pleasures and be sheltered from the ills of the world. However, the expectations of the king were not fulfilled. The prince started self-questioning and one day left the palace. There he encountered a leper, a blind man, an old man, and a corpse lying by the roadside. Thus, he came to realise that man’s life is subject to disease, old age, and death. While the young prince was in this stage of deep dissatisfaction, Barlaam, a Christian monk disguised as a jewel merchant, approached him. He promised to show him a precious stone in his possession but finally succeeded in instructing him in the Christian dogma and baptised him. Upon learning of this, Josaphat’s father was deeply disturbed and tried to lure his son back by offering him half of his kingdom but all his efforts were in vain. Finally, Josaphat converted his father to Christianity and he left for the forest where he spent the rest of his life as an ascetic.

⁹⁷ Hippolytos, *Refut.*, VII, 20. (*Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. XII, p. 473.)

⁹⁸ See Schulz 1981 and Rau 1983.

Though the names of the heroes and the religion differ we can not fail to recognise that the story of *Barlaam and Josaphat* is similar to the accounts of the Buddha's life which were already recorded in the *Vinaya* and *Sutta Piṇaka*, the *Buddhavaṅsa*, the *Nidānakatha Jātaka*, and the Pāli commentaries.⁹⁹ The Buddha's biography tells us that eight *brāhmaṇas* said that the newly-born Gotama (also known as Siddhattha) would be either a universal monarch or a Buddha but the youngest of them, named Koṇḍañña, made the prophesy that he would definitely be a Buddha. Gotama's father Suddhodana, who was the chief of Kapilavatthu, built three palaces with the hope that his son would contentedly live in great luxury. He also gave him a wife and took every precaution to prevent him from becoming an ascetic. However, at the age of twenty-nine, Gotama left the palace and saw a man of extreme age, a sick man, a corpse, and an ascetic who praised renunciation. These incidents created in Gotama's heart a strong desire for meditation and led him to renunciation. Several years later when he attained Nirvāṇa, he returned to his home town and met his father who, through his son's influence, accepted the spiritual path and became a Buddhist sage (*sakadāgāmi*).

Both stories underline the misery of the world and praise renunciation as the path towards salvation. Josaphat's conversion and the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment (Nirvāṇa) through personal effort virtually represent the difference between the theistic Christian and a-theistic Buddhist thought. We may conclude that the Indian practices were variously modulated to fit the traditional Christian faith and practices.¹⁰⁰ The parallel search for philosophical truth and understanding made the diffusion of ideas possible. The significance of the meeting of the Indian and the Hellenic worlds reaches far beyond their own time and countries. The vast gap that divided East and West for millennia was bridged and the world took yet another notable turn in its vast and intricate destiny.

⁹⁹ See DPPN, vol. 1, p. 788, n. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. "The possible Oriental influence would seem to have been however so fully transfused and dissolved as to become thoroughly merged with the Orthodox faith. Apart from the undeniable phenomenological affinities with yoga, which should perhaps be sought in the common substratum of the human soul, Hesychasm is indissoluble grafted on Christian dogma and inserted in the Christian atmosphere" (Gnoli 1953). See also, Gregorios 1985, pp. 29–34. For a comparative study between Orthodox Christian and Indian iconography, see Upadhyaya 1994.

ABBREVIATIONS

- BITS *Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series*. Samath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies.
- DPPN *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*. Edited by G. P. Malala Sekera. 1937, 38. Reprint. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

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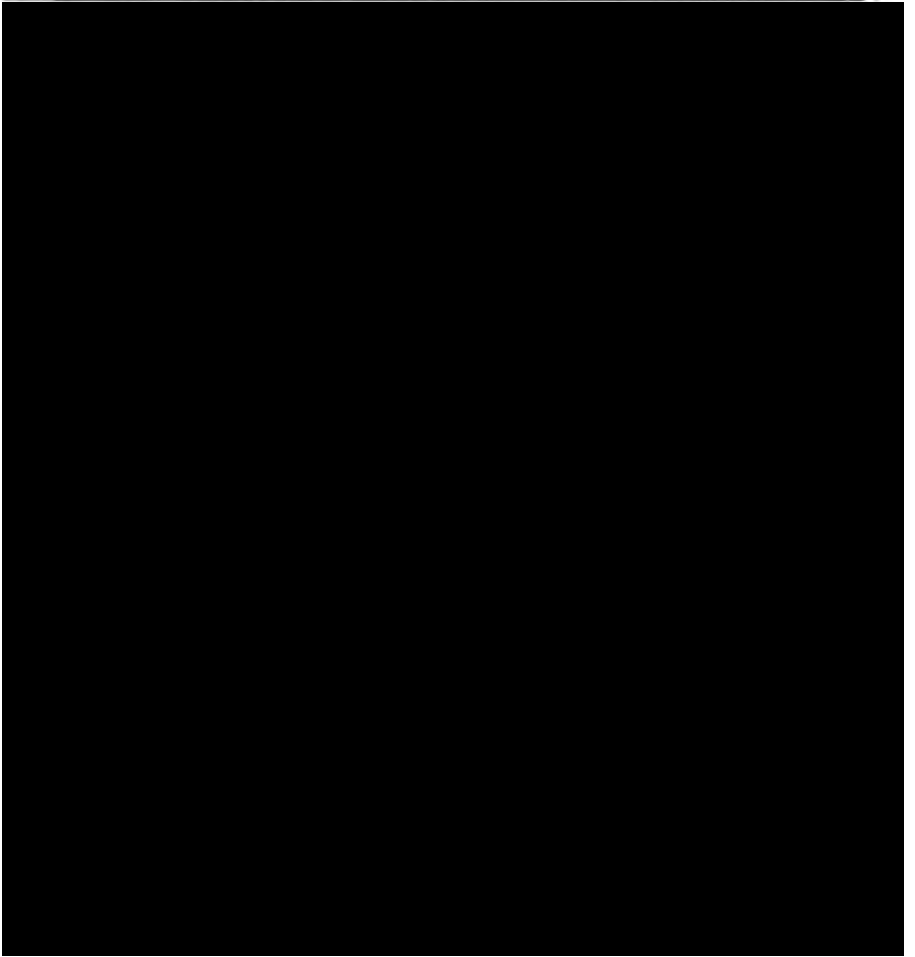


Figure 1. The bilingual inscription of Aśoka, discovered near Kandhahar, Afganistan in 1958, limestone, ht. 54 cm., 3rd century B.C.E., The American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon.

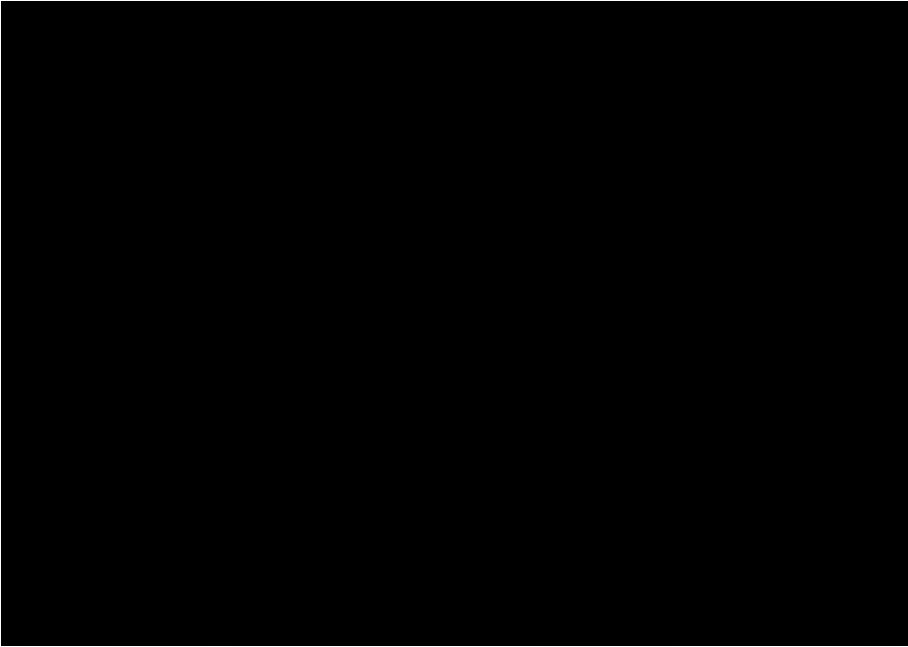


Figure 2. Menander coins: left and middle, Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, Varanasi; right, Narendra Singhi Collection, Kolkatta.

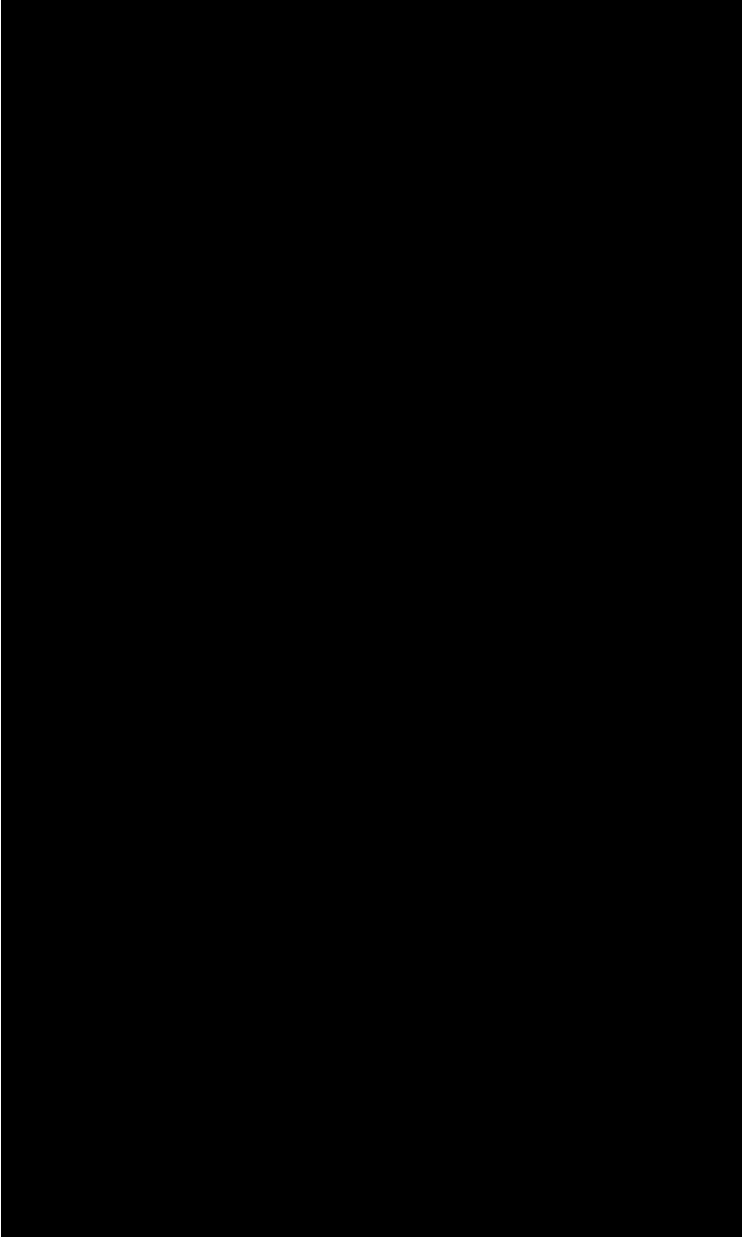


Figure 3. Emaciated Buddha's head, Gandhāra style, Pakistan, schist, 2nd century C.E., Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, Varanasi.

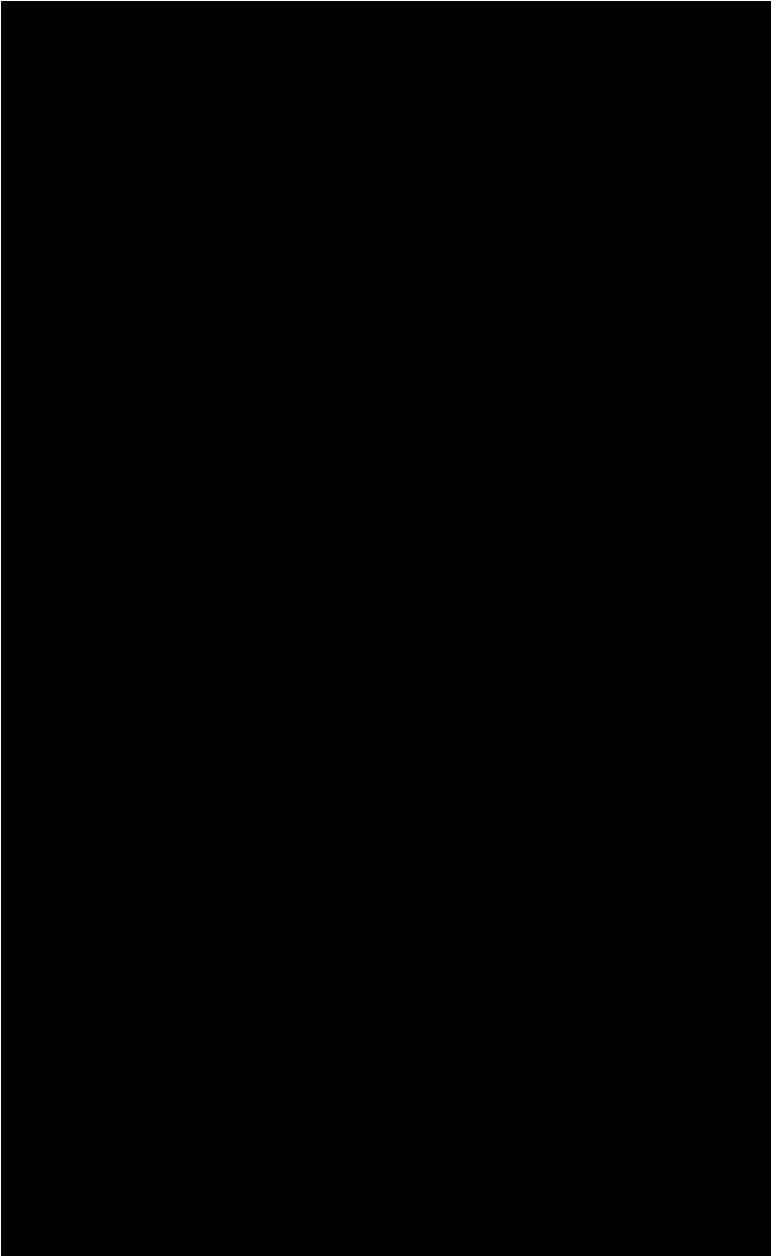


Figure 4. Buddha's head, Gandhāra style, Pakistan, stone, 3rd century C.E., Narendra Singhi Collection, Kolkatta.



Figure 5. Buddha and devotees standing next to a pillar with Corinthian designs, Pakistan, blue schist, c. 2nd-3rd centuries C.E., Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.

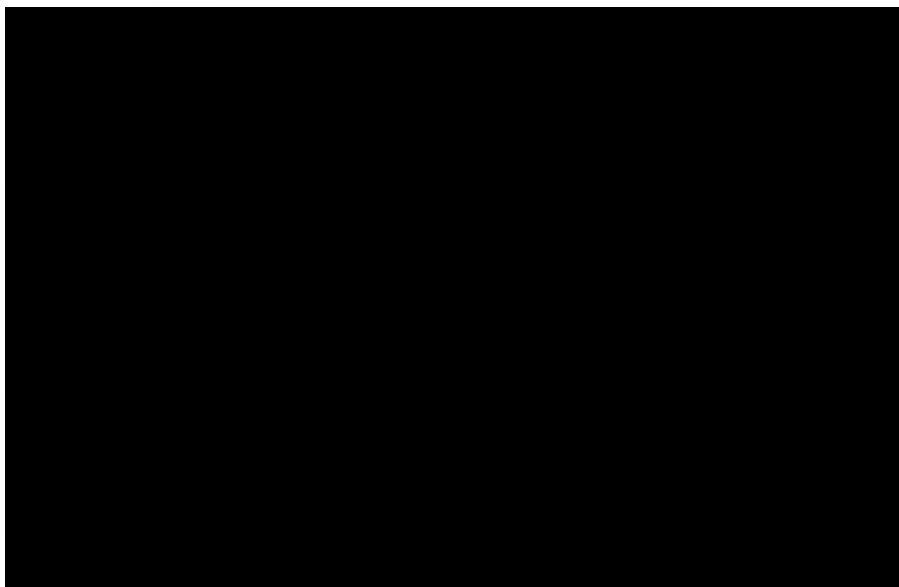


Figure 6. Buddha accompanied by a naked ascetic, Pakistan, blue schist, c. 2nd-3rd centuries C.E., Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.

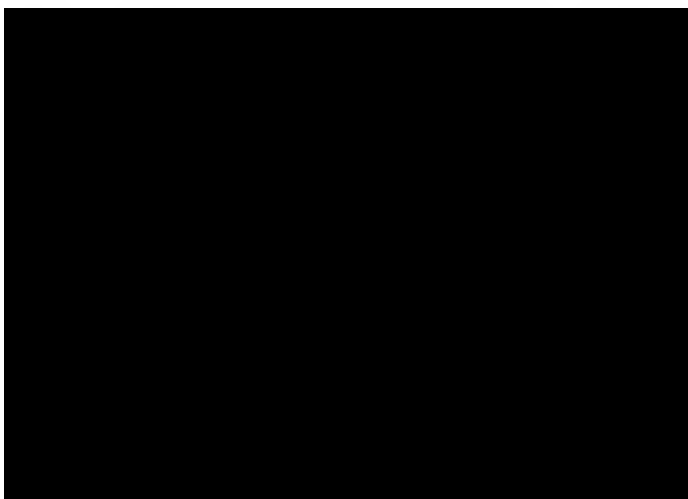


Figure 7. Buddha eating with monks, Pakistan, blue schist, c. 2nd-3rd centuries C.E., Museum of Asiatic Art, Corfu, Greece.



Figure 8. Gold coin inscribed with an image of King Kanishka standing at an altar (front side). The Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum at the Banaras Hindu University. The inscription “PAONANO PAO KANEPKI KOPANO” (shao nano shao kaneshki koshano) in Greek-Kushan script means “the King of Kings, Kanishka Koushana.”

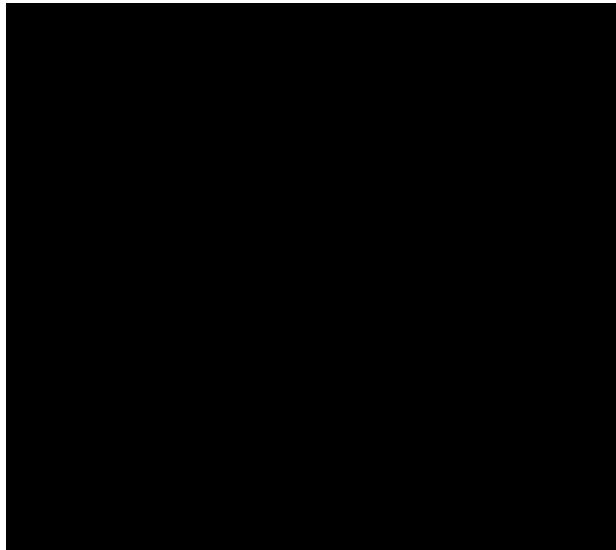


Figure 9. The back side of Figure 8. The form of the Buddha can be seen, and the name BOΔΔO (Buddha) is inscribed in Greek script.

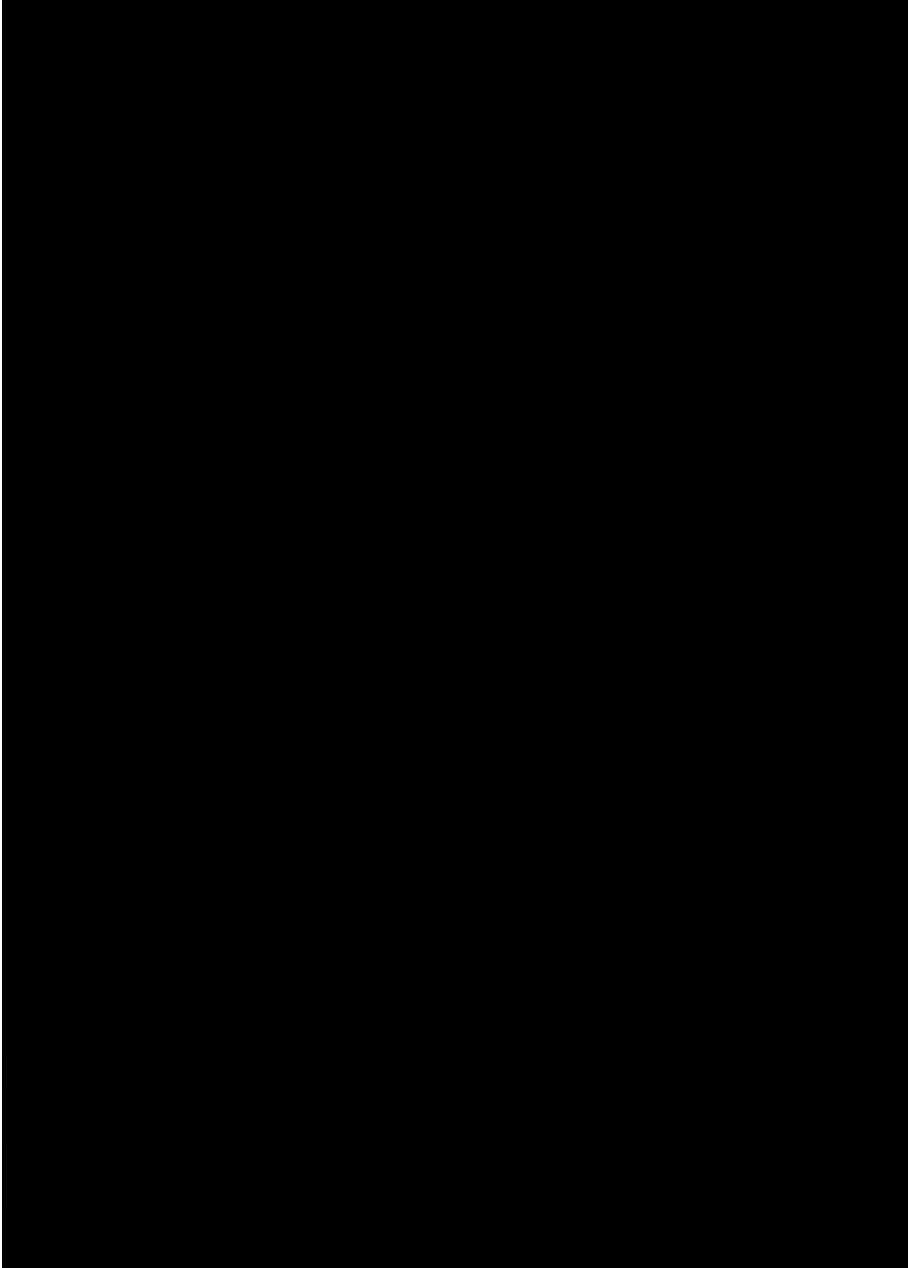


Figure 10. Buddha with Vajrapāṇi, Pakistan, schist, c. 2nd-3rd centuries C.E., Lucknow Museum.

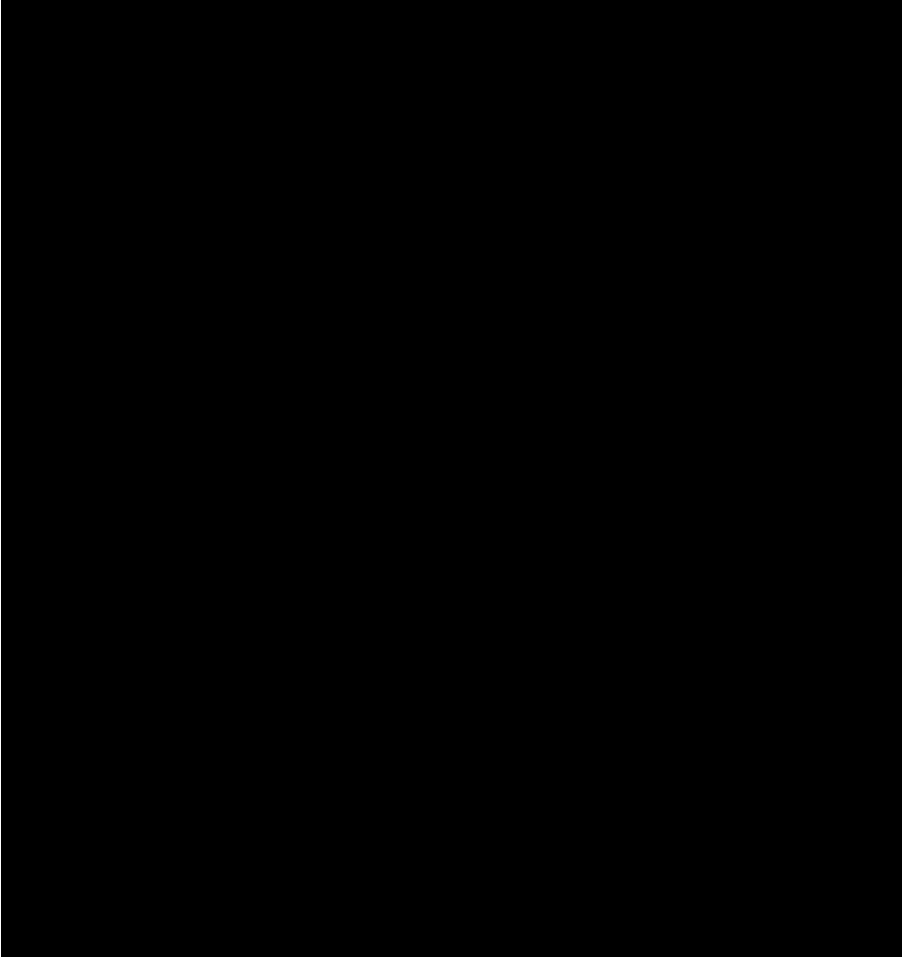


Figure 11. Railing pillar, a centaur on lotus medallion, sandstone, 2nd-1st centuries B.C.E., Bodh Gaya Museum.

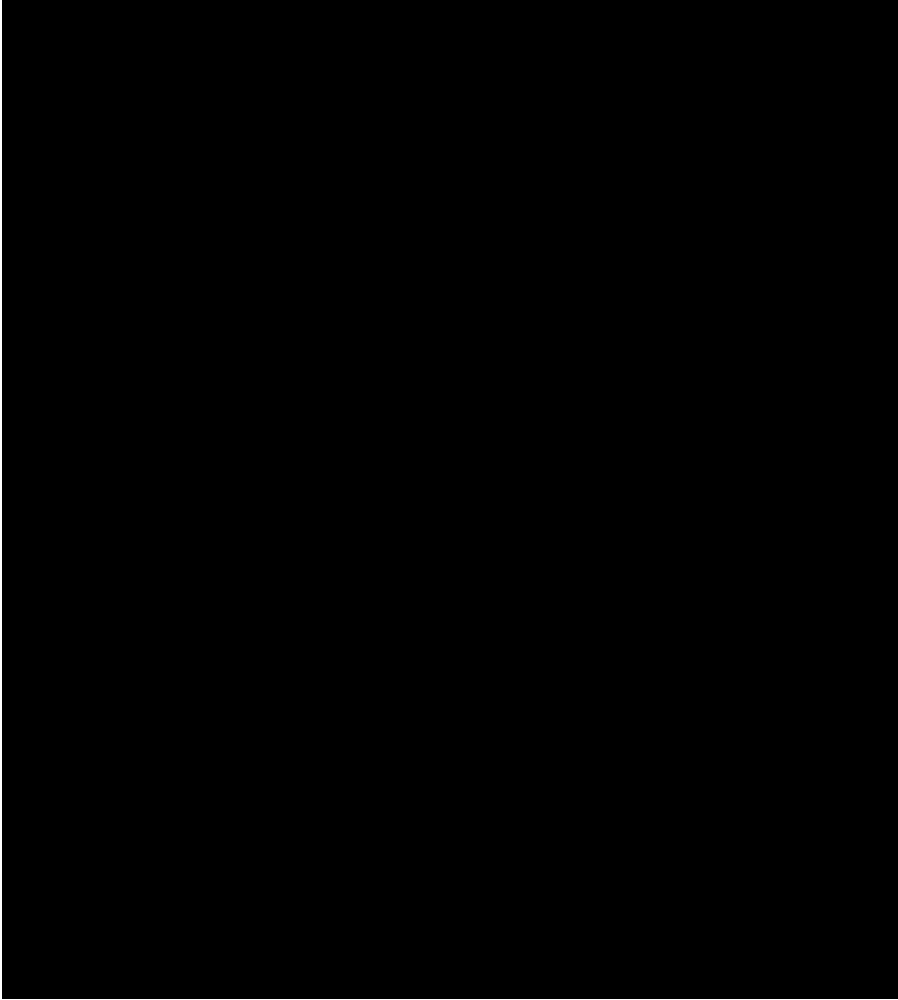


Figure 12. Railing pillar, Pegasus on lotus medallion, sandstone, 2nd-1st centuries B.C.E., Bodh Gaya Museum.

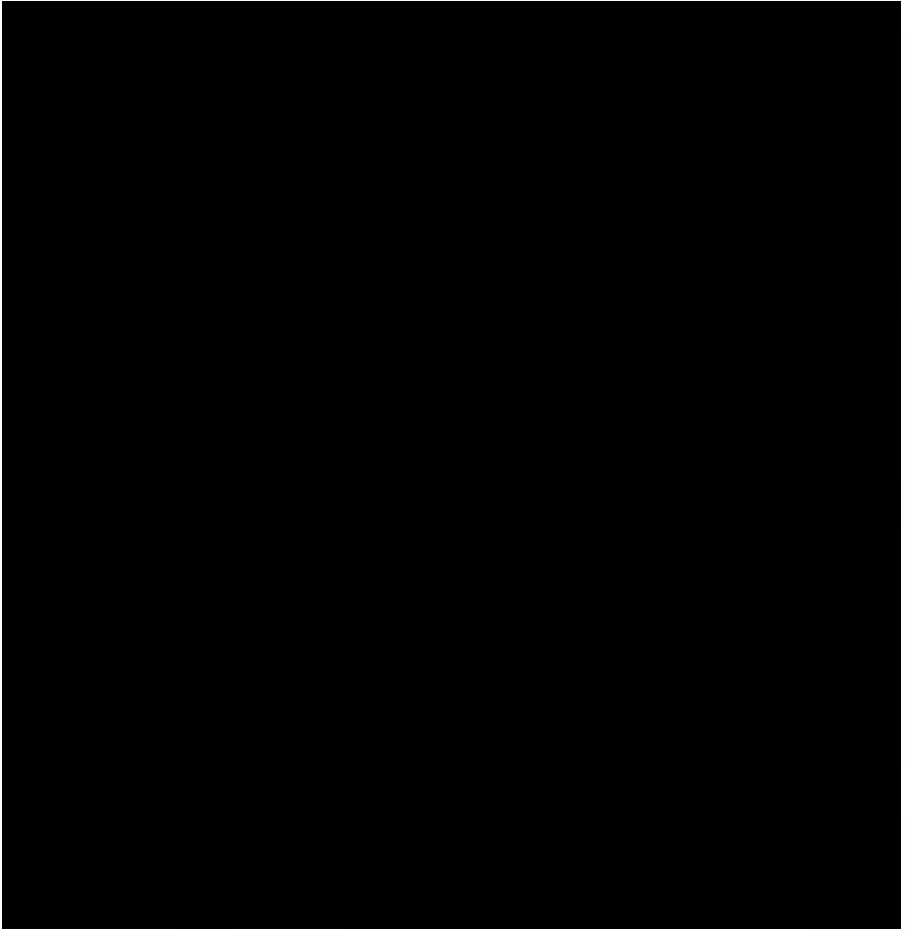


Figure 13. Railing pillar, a mermaid on lotus medallion, sandstone, 2nd-1st centuries B.C.E., Bodh Gaya Museum.

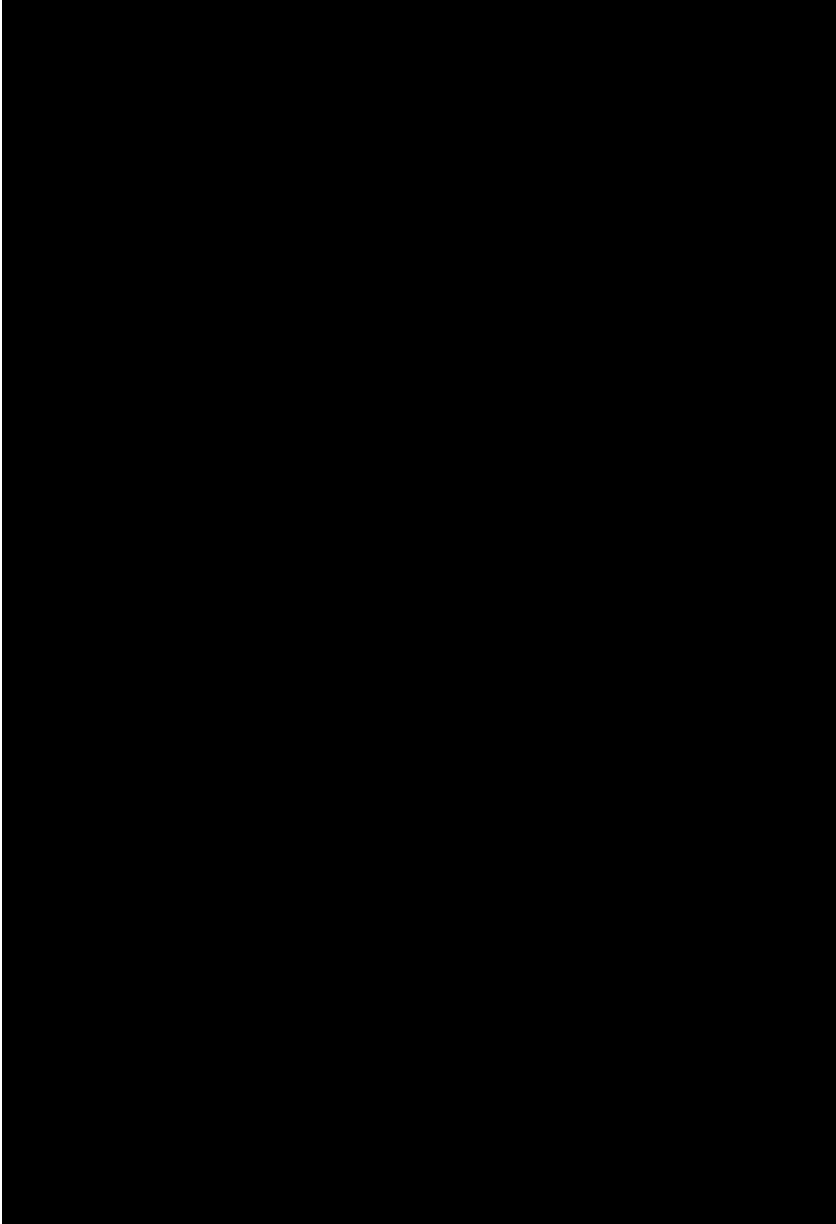


Figure 14. Bas-relief representing a couple, a female with a wine cup (?) and a bearded male playing with a child beside a grapevine. Hellenistic style, Hadda, Afghanistan, limestone, c. 3rd-4th centuries C.E. (Courtesy: Kabul Museum).

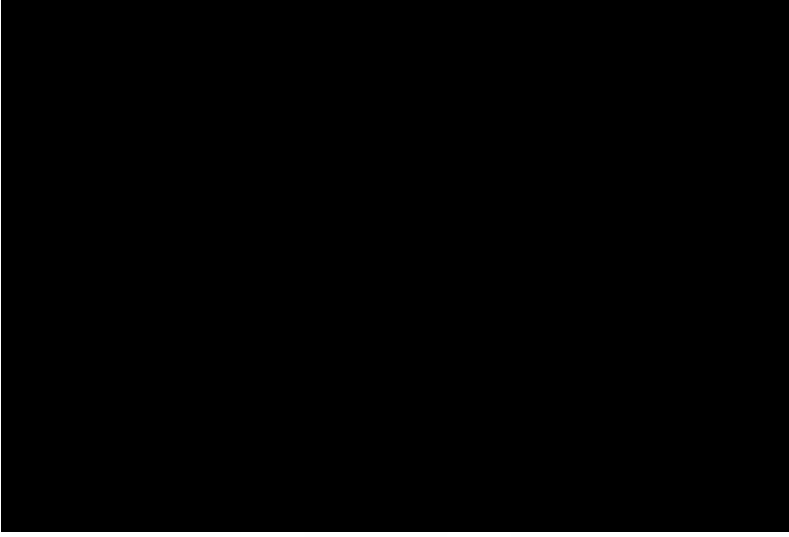


Figure 15. Caitya Buddhist Cave 48 on right and adjoining caves on left, Deccan trap, Eastern Group, Junnar, Pune dist., Maharashtra, 2nd century C.E., The American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon.

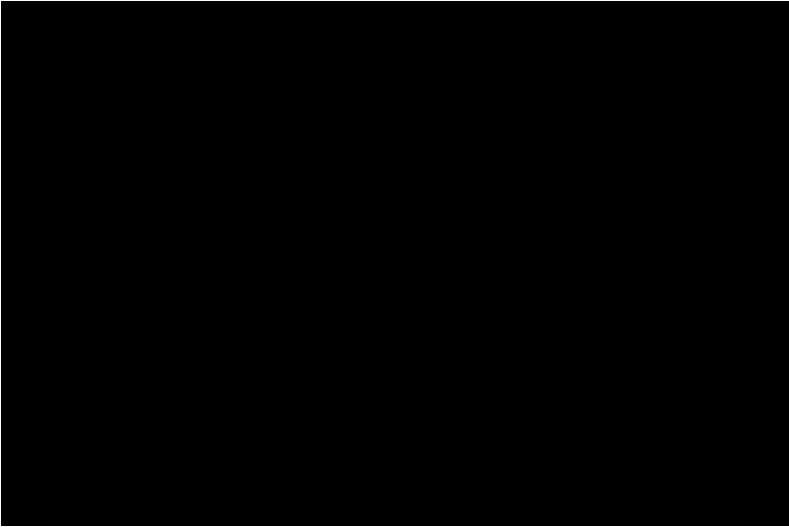


Figure 16. Buddhist Cave 17, veranda, front wall and door with inscription over the left stating that “the excavation of this *caitya grha* is by the Yosaka Indrāgnidatta, son of Dhammadeva,” Deccan trap, Nasik dist., Maharashtra, 2nd century C.E., The American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon.

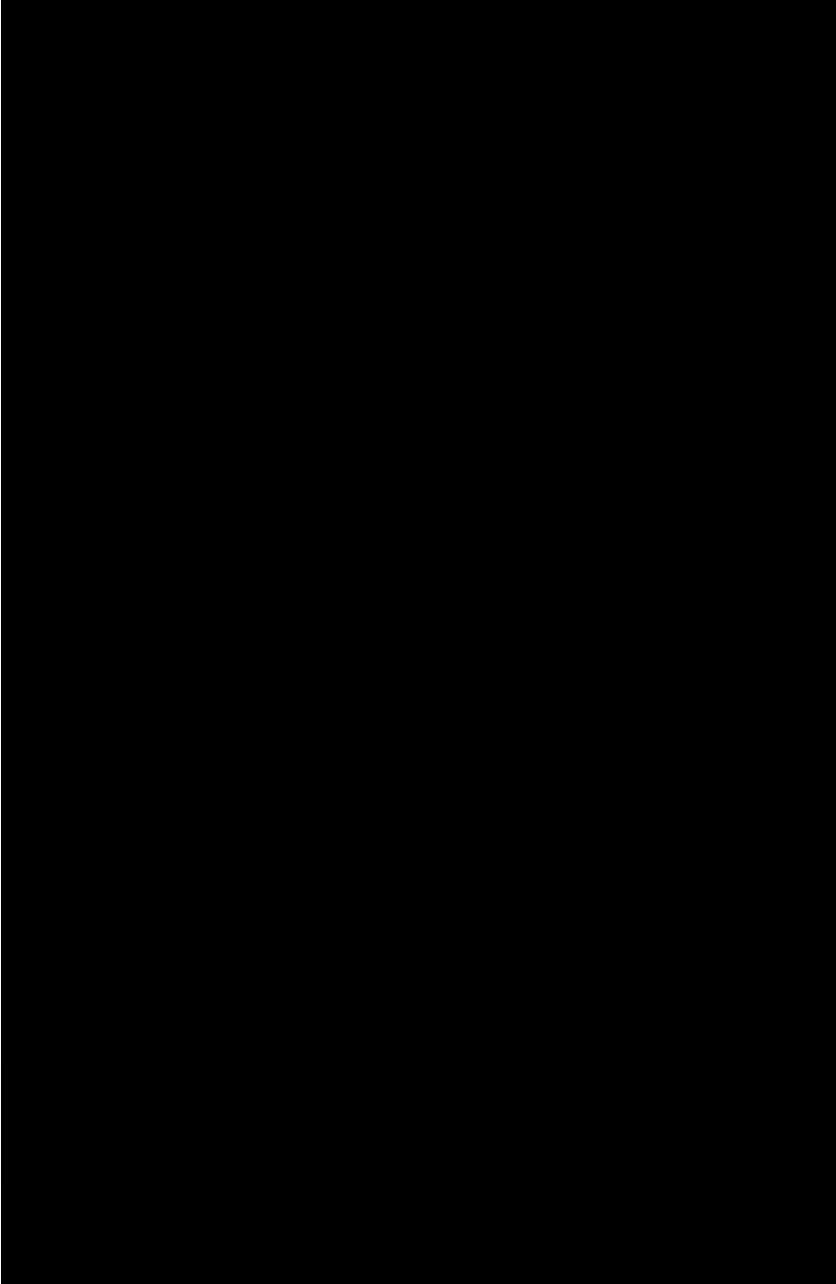


Figure 17. The Greeks in Bactria and India.