

## THE NORTH-WESTERN BORDERLANDS OF ANCIENT INDIA AND THE SPHERES OF GREEK INFLUENCES

Dr M N Rajesh,  
Assistant Professor  
Department of History,  
University of Hyderabad  
Hyderabad-500046

**Abstract:** This paper argues that there was considerable Greek influence in ancient India and is evidenced by the fact that we have mid-field remains in the form of epigraphy, numismatics and iconography to support our claim. Most of these developments occurred in the north-western borderlands of ancient India. This is also the region where Indian contacts with Persia and Central Asia took place. The invention of Alexander the Great was short-lived, but after the collapse of the armies of Alexander, the Seleucid generals took over an established colony in Bactria that was a typical outpost of the Greeks in Central Asia. Here they established the city of Ai Khanum that was modelled on the city of Alexandria and hence one finds many examples here of the Greek influences. These influences are not just a direct replica of the influences, but also in an Indian context, and therefore there is a considerable mixing, resulting in hybridity. This hybridity is apparent in the iconography, both in the subject matter and also in the method of treatment.

With regard to the subject matter, we find that Indian deities like Siva and Vishnu were not a part of the Greek pantheon of gods were incorporated into the coinage system of Bactria under Agathocles. Further, we also get more clear ideas when we delve deep into the treatment of the Buddha statue that was unmistakably dressed in a Greek toga and also invested with Greek features. Apart from this, the concrete historical situation also reveals

many more contacts that have been elaborated in this paper. The paper concludes with the observation that there is a clear possibility of lingering Greek influence based on material evidence.

Alexander the Great, is credited with having brought about large-scale Greek influences in ancient India that has survived even till this day many different forms. However, we have scanty evidence of Greek influences even before the invasion of Alexander. But the significant jump starts with the establishment of certain communities of Greeks settled in Bactria and the regions that led to the north of India in Central Asia<sup>1</sup>. These are primarily settlements of traders in the oasis town Central Asia. However, the rise of Alexander the Great and his idea of a world empire, United, large swaths of territories from as far as Egypt in the westernmost extremity to Macedonia and Greece that was the heartland of Alexander's empire to the some northern India and Eastern India, particularly the city of Patna that forms the easternmost extremities of Greek influence in the ancient world.

While there has been a significant number of writings about the empire built by Alexander the great, there is a significant decrease in the historical works that are composed in the period after the collapse of the Greek empire of Alexander. We have the rise of different rulers who established colonies in north-west India and also in the regions of Bactria that survived for at least two generations<sup>2</sup>. The primary source material for reconstructing the history of Greek influence from this region is the coins of the Indo Greeks<sup>3</sup>.

Before going to this topic, one also talks about the role of the Greek influences that came by at the ocean. Influences that came through the sea were primarily in South India and most of the coins that have been excavated, belong to the Roman period, and hence there is less focus

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<sup>1</sup> Tarn, William Woodthorpe. 2010. The Greeks in Bactria and India. Cambridge University Press. p.15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.82. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Mohan, Mehta Vasishtha Dev. 1967. The Indo-Greek Coins. Indological Research Institute, p.14.

on the Greek connections<sup>4</sup>. The Greeks were known as Yavanas or the people who came from the Ionia, as the ancient Indians confused the region of Ionia for the whole of Greece, and thus the name Ionia and Ionian whose Indian rendering was Yavana. Incidentally, the Indian term for curtain in the Sanskrit language is Yavanika that is clearly dated from the term Yavana and points out to the Greek influence. We also have a lengthy debate on this topic, and it has recently been proved that such conclusion is wrong, historically speaking, and this is part of the presidential address of the ancient section of Indian history Congress that put an end to this point in the debate<sup>5</sup>. There are many phases of Greek influence and the first starts with the early Greek writers who have some knowledge of India and among these is the pre-eminent name goes to Scylax of Caryanda. While there are early Greek writers who wrote about India, their writing skills not anyway influence India, but only brought about some knowledge of India to the ancient Greeks.

It is only with the coming of Alexander the great that the large-scale influences of Greeks were felt in India, primarily because of dinner was involved in this encounter. The Indo Greek kingdoms that emerged in the aftermath of Alexander's invasion issued many coins and these form an important source<sup>6</sup>. Demitrios is credited with having issued many coins, and they have survived till date and are available as historical material in the museums. From these coins begin reconstruction to need a monetary history of ancient north-west India but also to raise the influences on the later monetary history after the Greeks. This is clearly evident in the use of emblems on the obverse and the reverse of the coins. The coinage clearly portrays the king as a person with a crown on his head. The headdress is slightly different from the Indian idea of the Crown that does not include surface and the early

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<sup>4</sup> Ray, H.P., "The Yavana Presence in Ancient India." In Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient Vol. 31, No. 3 (1988), P. 313.

<sup>5</sup> Errington, Elizabeth, Ancient India and Iran Trust, and Fitzwilliam Museum. 1992. The Crossroads of Asia: Transformation in Image and Symbol in the Art of Ancient Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ancient India and Iran Trust.p.69.

<sup>6</sup> Sagar, Krishna Chandra. 1992. Foreign Influence on Ancient India. Northern Book Centre.p.102.

coinage. One of the points to be mentioned here is that there is being very less research on Greek coinage in India as the bulk of the coinage that has surfaced from archaeological excavations belong to the Roman coinage of. Therefore, there is a stress on Roman coinage, and by extension, and Roman influences. While it is true that the Roman coinage is more found in South India, the Roman influences are distinct from the use of the Greek influences. Though Greek influences are also found in South India, as evidenced in the Sangam poetry where there are references to the Yavanas, Roman influences have overshadowed the Greek influences on South India<sup>7</sup>. Further, the Roman influences were only by the sea, and not by the overland trade route, which is surprising since ancient Rome was connected to China and had a very strong commercial connection with China, but we have a large number of Roman coins in South India<sup>8</sup>. The Greek influences, on the other hand, are predominantly through the overland routes that are originally the military routes from Greece to Persia and from there to India. Therefore, we also have a certain amount of Persian influence that is mediated the Greek influence to come to India.

Another area of confusion regarding the Greek and Roman influence is in the area of iconography with particular references to the Gandhara School. Most of the artefacts of the Gandhara School of Art and founded in what is now modern-day Afghanistan, north-west India and one of the most important sites here is the city of Ai Khanum, which is in the northernmost part of Afghanistan. In this site, along with Peshawar and Taxila, the most numerous artefacts have been found<sup>9</sup>.

Ai Khanum is also important as it was founded on the model of Alexandria and since Alexandria was supposed to be the greatest exemplar of urban life modelled on Greek ideas,

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<sup>7</sup> Cobb, Matthew A. 2018. Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century C.E. BRILL.p.164.

<sup>8</sup> Suresh, S. 2004. Symbols of Trade: Roman and Pseudo-Roman Objects Found in India. Manohar.p.38,70.

<sup>9</sup> Narain, A. K. 1987. "Notes on Some Inscriptions from Ai Khanum (Afghanistan)." Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik 69: p. 277–82.

the city of Alexandria was replicated as the ideal model<sup>10</sup>. There are many speculations about many little Alexandria's being built on the borderlands of India and Central Asia in what is known as Greco-Bactrian kingdoms. This one site of Ai Khanum is enough to underscore the importance of the Hellenic influence. The reasons for this are as follows, the discovery of gold coins in the excavations shows the commercial importance of the place as it is situated on the important trade routes. The straight routes connected the oasis towns of Central Asia with Persia on the west, India, on south Central Asia on the north and the region of Tibet and by extension would China to the Eastern. Some of the important artefacts were not produced here but suggested the interaction with India<sup>11</sup>. In one way, to summarise the geographical location of Ai Khanum, it can be said that it was located on the northernmost tip of what is and Afghanistan, and therefore and extremities of the borderlands that formed a gateway to India. At this time India was ruled by the Mauryan dynasty in the aftermath of Alexander's invasions, and the influence of Ai Khanum is also pass table in the Mauryan dynasty<sup>12</sup>.

Apart from the big coinage of the Seleucids for his successors of the Imperial Greeks and managed the kingdoms as satraps after the collapse of the Imperial Greeks. Of great importance is the coinage of Agathocles, who was the king of Bactria and was an Indo Greek king. What is important about his coinage is that apart from the usage of the Greek language. There is also a bilingual quince, and these coins depict Imperial deities like Balarama, Siva and Vishnu that are clear pointers to the spread of Puranic religion in this region. This is one of the important points since it is assumed that would most of the artefacts related iconography are Buddhist, but the example would of the quince found at Ai Khanum and

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<sup>10</sup> Errington, Elizabeth, Ancient India and Iran Trust, and Fitzwilliam Museum. 1992. The Crossroads of Asia: Transformation in Image and Symbol in the Art of Ancient Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ancient India and Iran Trust.p76,82.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Dube, S. N. 2012. Ideas and Movements in the Age of the Mauryas: With Special Reference to Pāli & Ardhamāgadhī Sources. Indian Institute of Advanced Study.p 2379-280.

issued by King Agathocles pronounce otherwise<sup>13</sup>. We are more sure are wrong when they come to iconography part as the large depictions of the Buddha clearly demonstrate. Before going to analyse the iconography of the Buddha statues of one as to understand the contextual setting in the evolution of iconography in the Buddhist tradition.

The early Buddhist and Jain religious traditions did not depict the Buddha or the Mahavira in an anthropomorphic form, and both of them were depicted only in an aniconic form. With the beginning of the early ideas of depicting the Buddha in the human form, it was implemented in north-west India among the Kushans by the first century C.E. The Buddha was represented as a mighty figure standing tall with well-built frame and in a typical posture showing the hand gestures, known as the mudras. There are five main mudras associated with the Buddhist religion, and the Buddha is shown predominantly in the form of a person in the position of the Abhaya mudra<sup>14</sup>. This means the fear not, position, and implies that the subjects need not fear anything as that Buddha is the protector. The Buddha being the protector was the truth, but the power behind the truth was the royalty who oppose the idea that, since they had elected the statue, they were the patrons of the statue and by extension the patrons of protection. The Buddha in the Gandhara tradition is shown with a strong moustache, wavy hair and sharp facial features that are reflected in the treatment of the cheekbones and the jawbones. Further, the ornaments on the body and the dresses also unmistakably Greek<sup>15</sup>. It is the Greek toga that covers the body of the Buddha would and as such he represents a Greek for seven rather than someone was represented in the Indic tradition that is seen in the Mathura School of Art<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> "Foreword" by A.K.Narain in Brown, Robert L. 1991. Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God. SUNY Press.p.vii.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenfield, John M. 1967. The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans. University of California Press.p.360.

<sup>15</sup> Errington, Elizabeth, Ancient India and Iran Trust, and Fitzwilliam Museum. 1992. The Crossroads of Asia: Transformation in Image and Symbol in the Art of Ancient Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ancient India and Iran Trust.p214,217.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p217.

From the about discussion on coinage, historical influences and art, we can surmise that there were large scale influences by the Greeks in India and also later by the Indo Greeks. The theatre of this influence was the north-western regions of India. We also get a clear idea that most of these influences came via aspects of not only political patronage by the kingdoms established by the Seleucid Greeks but also on account of trade and religion that crisscrossed and met on the borderlands of the trade routes which connected India, Persia and Greece with Central Asia. Thus, the influences which were created by the Greeks and later the Indo Greeks are a result not of direct transplantation of Greek idea, but also the result of a hybrid situation that led to emergent hybridity that has survived in the form of material remains and also in the realm of ideas.

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