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Begram, the *Periplus* and Gandharan art

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Begram is a large archaeological site at the foot of the Hindu Kush, 60 km. north of Kabul. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is a pilot and commercial guide to the western Indian Ocean, compiled in the Roman world in the 1st c. A.D. Gandharan art is the generic name applied to the Buddhist sculpture of northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, much of which was made between the 2nd and the 4th or 5th c. The relationship between these three is the subject of the present article. It has long been recognized that the Buddhist art of Gandhara contains elements derived from the art of the Mediterranean. The modern consensus holds that these elements were introduced from the Roman world in the 1st or 2nd c. A.D. By redating the cache of Roman objects from Begram in Afghanistan this article focuses attention on the question of when the western elements were assimilated and how they arrived.

The cultural background

In 331 B.C. Alexander the Great defeated Darius III at Gaugamela and became master of the Achaemenid empire, which extended from Turkey to Pakistan. The next year he marched into central Asia to secure the Achaemenid satrapies of Bactria and Sogdiana. In 327 he conquered Swat and the Punjab. His army then refused to go farther, and the expedition turned towards home. After the death of Alexander in 323, the empire was divided among his generals, Seleucus becoming king of a large part of Mesopotamia and all territory farther east. Thereafter this huge area was ruled as an independent state, known to us as the Seleucid empire.

In the late 3rd c. B.C. the two northeastern satrapies of the Seleucid empire, Parthia and Bactria, revolted and declared themselves independent. The Seleucid ruler, Antiochus III, mounted a punitive expedition against Bactria in 208. The expedition failed and Antiochus formally recognised Bactrian independence. At the same time, however, he crossed the Hindu Kush and imposed an indemnity on the Mauryan ruler Subhagasena, whose kingdom comprised parts of India, Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. Clearly the Mauryans were in no condition to resist invaders, and, after the departure of Antiochus, the Bactrians took advantage of their weakness. Euthydemus, the Bactrian king, annexed the Mauryan provinces of Sistan and Arachosia in southern Afghanistan; his successor, Demetrius, made further advances. Later, under Apollodotus I and Menander, the Bactrians conquered a wide territory in eastern Afghanistan, the Punjab, and the Indus valley.

At about the same time, a series of migrations that were to change the political geography of Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India began on the borders of China. The Yueh-chi migrated westwards into Kazakhstan, displacing the local population, the Sakas, some of whom were pushed westwards into Sistan and Herat. The Yueh-chi themselves crossed the Oxus some time between c.120 and 100 B.C. and occupied Bactrian territory north of the Hindu Kush. By about 80, the Sakas had established themselves over a wide area south of the Hindu Kush and created a kingdom in the Punjab, based on Taxila near Islamabad.

Following the occupation of Bactria, the Yueh-chi split into 5 principalities. About the beginning of the present era, one of them, the Kushans, conquered the other 4 and gained control over eastern Afghanistan, the Punjab and the Indus valley. In the south and east, however, their control did not last. About A.D. 25, a new power emerged in these regions, when Gondophares established the short-lived Scytho-Parthian kingdom.

About A.D. 78 the Scytho-Parthians lost their eastern territories to an anonymous Kushan king known by the Greek title that appears on his coins, *Soter Megas* (Great Saviour). This 'nameless king' eventually ruled an empire that stretched from Bactria to the Ganges. His successor, Vima Kadphises, consolidated the Kushan empire. He was succeeded by 3 great rulers, Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva. The chronology of the 'great Kushans' is far from certain, although most western scholars