

## The Kushan Empire and Buddhism

**I**t is hard to believe that the Buddha, an austere ascetic, would advise people to accumulate wealth and make investments. But Buddhist traders during the time of the Kushans heeded this advice from him:

Whoso is virtuous and intelligent,  
Shines like fire that blazes.  
To him amassing wealth, like a roving bee  
Its honey gathering,  
Riches mount up as an ant-heap growing high.  
When the good layman wealth has so amassed  
Able is he to benefit his clan.  
In portions four let him divide that wealth.  
So binds he to himself life's friendly things.  
One portion let him spend and taste the fruit.  
His business to conduct let him take two.  
And portion four let him reserve and hoard;  
So there'll be wherewithal in times of need.<sup>1</sup>

By being good Buddhists, the Kushans, who had built an empire that crossed Central Asia and South Asia, came to control a strategic portion of the Silk Road. Originally nomads on the Eurasian steppe, they had become rulers of a sedentary society who benefited from the long-distance trade passing through their territory. Their patronage of Buddhist institutions enabled them to flourish as a commercial power. Buddhist institutions in India, under the patronage of these foreign rulers, also benefited from the trade. With wealth flowing into their monasteries, Buddhists modified their theology and expanded their organizations to create a world religion. From the mid-first century to the mid-third century CE, when the Kushans controlled the main stream of trade, Buddhism spread to China and other Asian countries via the Silk Road.

Ruling a sedentary society with enormous cultural diversity was a challenge the Kushans met very well. Handling the international trade that converged on their domain required them to learn how to read and

write many different languages and scripts and to accommodate many different religious practices. The urban economy flourished with the commercial traffic. Not only were palaces in big cities built with sturdy baked bricks, so were modest dwellings in small towns. Roads linked prosperous cities to ports and frontier towns.

How did the Kushans transform themselves from nomadic conquerors into the successful rulers of a diverse sedentary society? Unfortunately, there is not much in the way of written records to tell us. When they first settled in Bactria, the Kushans had no script to record their stories or transactions, and they never produced a great historian. Thus, to find out how they administered the country and managed the trade, scholars have searched out scattered data in Chinese, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin and deciphered words on Kushan coins and inscriptions on the remains of temples and monasteries.

These fragmentary sources reveal that the Kushan kings relied on existing local institutions, such as caste hierarchies, traders' guilds, and religious organizations, to manage daily affairs. They also adopted parts of the political and cultural legacies of former rulers of the regions they now dominated, including the Persians, Greeks, Parthians, and Sakas. They never built a typical agricultural empire, with a strong bureaucracy to control every aspect of life. Their administration did not even reach the village level to collect a tax from farmers. The Kushans brought with them the beliefs and social structures forged from centuries of living on the steppe, and they mixed many of those customs in with the sedentary life of Hellenistic Bactria. After the Kushan army crossed the Hindu Kush Mountains, the regime also embraced Indian beliefs and practices, including those of the Brahmanical Hindus, Jains, and—most important by far—Buddhists. The flourishing commerce in the Kushan-held areas of northwestern India attracted many believers from the eastern Gangetic plain, as well as some other parts of India. The Kushans synthesized diverse practices into a unique state that became the economic as well as the cultural center of South and Central Asia for at least two hundred years.

For millennia, people on the steppe had practiced ancestor worship and had believed in the supreme power of heaven. The Kushan kings, long before they came to Bactria, called themselves "Son of Heaven" or "Son of God." Ritual occasions such as the inauguration of a chief or engagement in war called for a sacrifice to heaven. The Yuezhi, Saka, and other nomads who migrated to Bactria and further south and west most likely shared similar beliefs about the power emanating from this heaven. The Kushans kept this basic religious tenet from the

steppe. Nevertheless, their unification of diverse groups, mainly the Yuezhi and most likely the Sakas and Parthians, marked a transition from a nomadic tribal system to a state based on territory and agricultural production.

The Kushan kings retained their steppe-style robes and trousers, which sustained their prestige as horse-riding archers, to distinguish themselves from their subjects. In addition to successfully ruling a sedentary society, they patronized the diverse religions that had already found a home in the region. The Kushans were not the first foreign rulers of this land, and their predecessors had also brought their religions with them. The Persian Empire included Bactria from the late sixth century to the fourth century BCE and left in its wake both Zoroastrian fire altars and cults from other parts of the empire, such as the goddess Nana from Mesopotamia. Alexander's campaign brought new gods and did not suppress those that had come before them; the Greek pantheon was inclusive and open. The Hellenistic states of the Seleucids and the Bactrians maintained the Persian and Mesopotamian cults, gods, and shrines. On the southern bank of the Amu River, in the ruins of the Greek city Ai Khanoum, all the major shrines archaeologists have located so far are of Middle Eastern origin.<sup>2</sup>

Greek gods, such as Hercules and Aphrodite, had long been popular in Bactria. A giant marble foot wearing a Greek-style sandal has been found in one of the shrines in Ai-Khanoum. Although it is remotely possible that it belonged to a supreme god of another religion, this foot most likely belonged to a huge marble statue representing Zeus. In general, the shrines and idols in this Greek city on the Oxus look very much like the religious remains in the caravan cities such as Palmyra. The Hellenistic regimes in Afghanistan and the Indo-Greek states east of the Hindu Kush Mountains had also been familiar with South Asian traditions, especially Buddhism. Indeed, the Greek king Menander was hailed in Buddhist tradition as a great patron of Buddhism.

By the time the Yuezhi arrived at Ai Khanoum, it was most likely in the hands of other nomads who had taken it from the Greeks. The conquerors would have captured a city such as Ai Khanoum only after a long siege, most likely killing many defenders and looting the palace and even some of the temples. But it is clear that the Yuezhi, who were shrewd and affluent steppe traders, appreciated the Greek city's marble temples supported by Corinthian columns and also realized that it was in their own interests not to attack its numerous established gods. They also seem to have appreciated the grandeur of the Hellenistic palace, which was far more impressive, if not more comfortable, than their



*Merchants probably used this three-inch-tall bronze bust of Athena as a scale weight in the Roman-Indian trade. It was found, along with several similarly sized bronze statues, in a treasury that dates to Kushan times, in Begram, Afghanistan. The workmanship shows it was made in Hellenistic Egypt, probably Alexandria, in the Roman Empire. Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY*

tents. Under these circumstances, the Yuezhi-Kushans began to exert control over the formerly Hellenistic land.

The first thing to do, of course, was to establish order and collect taxes. When the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian visited the Kushan camps around 128 BCE, before the Yuezhi entered Bactria, there was no supreme king, but numerous Greek-style city-states ruled by their own sovereigns.<sup>3</sup> The Hellenized population had continued to maintain theaters, gymnasiums, and worship of city gods or goddesses. The Kushans probably left these cities alone, and even paid homage to their gods to win the support of the locals. The peoples who had lived in Bactria before the Greeks had also retained their own languages and cultures, as did nomadic groups who had arrived before and after the Yuezhi.

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The Kushans' new state adopted the administrative system the Persian Empire had used to rule the region several hundred years earlier, which Parthian and then Saka rulers had handed down. To control each conquered territory remote from the imperial center, the Persians had employed a satrap, a governor with great autonomy and authority. His obligation was to maintain order and pay a regular tribute to the center. The Kushans named their governors *ksatrapas* and *mahaksatrapas*, both Sanskrit versions of the Persian word for "satrap." The first term is a direct translation; the second has, in addition, the Sanskrit prefix *maha-*, "great." The Kushans used Sanskrit titles because the largest population of the region including Bactria spoke several vernacular dialects of Sanskrit, the language of India's orthodox Brahmanical culture.

The region of Gandhara, southeast of the Hindu Kush, had a similar demographic and cultural composition. In the mid-first century CE, the Kushans extended their power over such Hellenistic cities as Pushkalavati and the city across the Indus River to Pushkalavati's east: Taxila. Farther south, especially in the Yamuna River region, where the Kushans established their southern capital Mathura, Hellenistic influence was less obvious. Mathura was the birthplace of the Vasudeva-Krishna cult of Hinduism, a center of Jainism, and a territory where Buddhism had begun to flourish.

As foreign rulers, Kushan kings and ksatrapas needed to remind their South Asian subjects of their divine origin. To do so, Kushan kings built *devakula*, literally "temples of the divine family." Archaeologists have uncovered two such temples, one in Mat, a village near Mathura, and another at Surkh Kotal, an archaeological site in Afghanistan. Inscriptions dated to the Kushan period mention more royal family temples. Both of those discovered so far contain larger-than-life-size statues of Kushan kings. The statue of the great king Kanishka in Surkh Kotal is almost identical to the one in Mat. The archaeologists who excavated the sites could not determine what deity was actually worshiped in these temples.<sup>4</sup> The statues of the kings may have been either idols or images of patrons of a main deity from the Middle East, Greece, or India. Either way, the *devakula* symbolized the divine nature of the ruling lineage.

In Bactria, Gandhara, and Mathura, Kushan rulers used both Greek letters and the Kharoshthi script (an evolution of the Aramaic script that the Persians had brought to India) to write the various Sanskrit dialects. The inscriptions in the temple of Surkh Kotal are written in Greek letters, and those in Mat are in a Kharoshthi script. Whereas

in Bactria and Gandhara the Greek alphabet was popular, Kharoshthi and Brahmi, another Indian script, were prevalent in the territory surrounding Mathura. Without a written language on the steppe, the Yuezhi-Kushan conquerors adopted the scripts of conquered peoples in order to build an efficient government, maintain a successful tax system, record commercial transactions, and proclaim their own divinity on temple walls.

By the first century CE, the Silk Road trade had created connections from China to the Mediterranean Sea. The international trade passing through the Kushans' territory was quite different in nature from the early horse-silk bartering on the borders of China. The Kushans began to issue coins that both displayed their authority and facilitated the trade. The coins of previous rulers that were already circulating in the markets when the Kushans first arrived in Bactria were inscribed with words in either the Greek alphabet or the Kharoshthi script, regardless of the native tongue of the authority issuing the coins. The Greek authorities in Bactria had issued the best-quality coins of the time, even better than those found in the cities of Greece. On the earliest of these Greek coins, the inscriptions were exclusively in Greek. The profile of the king is well executed on the faces of these coins, and on their backs they often have images of Greek deities. During the second century BCE, this changed: Kharoshthi script was added to the Greek, and Middle Eastern or Indian gods were depicted on the back. Thereafter, the Parthians, Sakas, and Kushans all used both Greek and Kharoshthi.

In order to accommodate one of their major trading partners, the Romans, the Kushans based their coins on the aureus, a Roman gold coin. The Kushan gold, silver, and copper coins bore images of the Kushan kings and numerous deities, including the Sumerian goddess Nana, the Persian gods Oado and Atash, the Hindu gods Vasudeva and Siva, and, of course, the Buddha. The titles of the Kushan kings, inscribed on the coins in various languages, were "King of Kings," "Great King," and "Son of Heaven." The equivalent of the word "king" appears in Greek (*basileus*), Persian (*shah*), or the northwest dialect of Sanskrit (*rao*). A coin found in a Buddhist stupa near Jalalabad in modern Pakistan illustrates Kushan cosmopolitanism. On the face of the coin is a likeness of King Kanishka and the inscription "Raonanorao Kanirki Korno" in the Greek alphabet, representing words in the northwest dialect of Sanskrit that meant "King of Kings, Kanishka, of Kushana." On the reverse side of the coin is an image of the Buddha with a halo. It is one of the earliest surviving images of the Buddha. He is wearing a knee-length robe similar to that worn by the king. Just like the king on the face of the coin,



*The legend on the gold coin of King Kanishka says "King of Kings, Kanishka, of Kushana." The message is recorded in a language local to the northwestern region of South Asia but is written with the Greek alphabet. Greek legacy persisted there long after Hellenistic states disappeared from the region. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY*

the Buddha stands with feet pointing outward, a typical posture of the steppe people who spent so much time on horseback. There is a Kushan royal emblem next to the Buddha's left hand, and on his right there is an inscription in Greek letters meaning "the Buddha."

Multicultural coins and the Kushans' cosmopolitan attitude facilitated the trade that passed through their territory, which had access to both land routes passing through the Parthian Empire and sea routes that linked the ports of western India to ports further west that provided land portages to the Mediterranean. The Kushans also controlled both the steppe and oasis routes of the Central Asian Silk Road. Both the rulers and traders of the Kushan Empire profited from the trade and enjoyed goods from all over Eurasia. Archaeologists have uncovered a great treasury in the palace building at Kapisi (present-day Begram), a town in Afghanistan that served as the summer capital of the Kushan kings. Like later British rulers who could not stand the midsummer heat on the Indian plain in their European suits, the Kushan kings, with their steppe-style boots and robes, found refuge in the cool mountain area. The treasury, with the accumulated riches of 150 years, contained a wide variety of exotic wares, including bronze sculptures from the Mediterranean, Indian ivory carvings, and lacquer ware from China.<sup>5</sup> The only thing "missing" in this collection is silk. Given the poor state of preservation of the other goods, it must have simply disintegrated over the centuries.

The Kushan ruling elite led a luxurious life. They lived in palaces built in Hellenistic, Persian, or Indian architectural styles, rode around on horseback during their leisure time, visited and made donations to various shrines, and also gathered together to enjoy grape wine. This luxurious lifestyle even extends to the religious art—particularly Buddhist—produced under Kushan patronage. Greek, Roman, steppe, and Indian traditions are all obvious in these artworks. In the ruins of a Buddhist monument near Swat in Pakistan, archaeologists have found a series of sixteen carved stone panels that made up the risers of a staircase leading to the main stupa, a tower containing the relics of the Buddha. Corinthian columns with acanthus capitals suggest that the figures are actors in a Greek-style theater. On one panel, three men are playing musical instruments while another three are clapping their hands in time. One of the men is playing a harp, a Greek instrument. Another is playing a drum and a third an unidentifiable musical instrument. They are wearing belted tunics, somewhat Roman in style, but their trousers look like those of the horsemen of the steppe. Their conical hats, a signature of the early nomads, seem to be made of animal hide. So what are we looking at? A Kushan group wearing Roman clothing and playing Greek music?

The figures in another panel look more like Mediterranean peoples. Like Greeks, they wear tunics, but they are wearing boots instead of sandals. The woman in the center is dressed primly in the Greek style, while another woman is focused on her drinking, letting her body drape off her shoulder. A man holding a beaker appears to be her waiter. Another figure carries what is probably a wineskin made of a whole sheepskin. Another "waiter" carries a krater, a large Greek-style wine bowl.

In a third panel, the grapes one figure holds indicate that the wine in the scene is grape wine. He wears a robe in the Gandharan style, which had evolved from the toga, but also a pair of trousers that link him to steppe cultures. The other four feasting figures in the panel wear little. The figures on a fourth panel look Indic, and their lower bodies are covered with something resembling a modern-day dhoti or loincloth. Four of them are holding lotus flowers and look very pious. Figures in Mediterranean-style clothing on a fifth panel are again very cheerful, enjoying the music and the drinking.

This group of sculptures poses interesting questions for theologians and historians of Buddhism. What stories were the panels telling, and what messages were they conveying to the worshipers and pilgrims who came to this Buddhist shrine? They may represent scenes from a drama,

which became a useful means of preaching and proselytizing for Buddhists in Kushan times. A Buddhist scholar closely associated with the Kushans, Ashvaghosha, wrote several plays with Buddhist themes, and fragments have survived in a Central Asian oasis. The pilgrims who visited the site during Kushan times probably knew the stories depicted in the scenes. Scholars haven't been able to decode the stories, but they can tell that these artistic representations reflect the real life of that time. In sites at various seaports, archaeologists have found shards of Roman amphorae, some with a residue of wine. In the city of Taxila in the Gandharan region, excavators have found ceramic, bronze, and silver drinking vessels, all made in Greco-Roman styles.<sup>6</sup> In Buddhist monasteries at Shaikhan Dheri, a site in the Gandharan region, archaeologists have found many wine storage jars and distillation equipment.<sup>7</sup> It is a puzzling find, suggesting that Buddhist monasteries were producing liquor, even though such activities were contrary to their centuries-old monastic discipline.

Human figures on Gandharan sculptures often look Greek or Roman, but those in Mathura, Sangol, and other Buddhist sites in central India look Indian. On a Buddhist stupa made with red sandstone from Mathura, a group of beautiful girls in a vineyard dance around kraters of wine on the ground. Either they wear short skirts or their bodies are simply wrapped with a piece of thin cloth. The textiles look so thin and fine that one assumes the artist meant to depict silk. While musicians play in the background, a group of dwarfs, beneath the main figures, ladle wine from a krater and frolic with each other. The drinking and dancing are obviously Hellenistic, but the faces and figures of the dancers and musicians appear more Indian than Greek.

Again it might seem difficult to make out the Buddhist context of this work of art. But as Buddhist institutions benefited from the economic prosperity of northwestern and western India, they became part of the region's lively urban cultural life. And it was from there that Buddhism developed into the most powerful religion of India and Asia east of Iran. Kushan cosmopolitanism prepared Buddhists to proselytize in diverse societies. At the same time, dramatic transformations within Indian Buddhist institutions and theology made the religion distinctly different from what it had been during its early days on the Lower Ganges Plain.

In the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, the Buddha had explained that life is full of suffering; all this suffering is caused by desire, and only the termination of desire can end suffering. One should therefore follow the right approaches in order to achieve the termination of suffering and

reach the state of *nirvana*: *nir* means "none," and *vana* means "state of existence." The Buddha proposed a set of disciplinary methods called the "Eight Right Approaches" for his disciples and lay followers, who were financial supporters of his school of thinking.

The teachings of the Buddha were simple and logical. There was no need for intervention from supernatural powers, and there was no room for miracles. In this period of social, political, and economic upheaval, the numbers of the Buddha's followers in India grew quickly and the new teachings took root in many cities on the Gangetic plain. However, this Buddhism faced a serious obstacle to its spread to other lands: Asians outside Indian culture could not grasp the concept of *nirvana*, which was based on the uniquely Indic concept of rebirth. (A creature is reborn into another after its death, so that the suffering starts again. Only through *nirvana* would the endless suffering cease.) Why would people want to be in a state of "nonexistence"? For peoples outside the Indic culture who did not believe in rebirth, the concept of *nirvana* was puzzling.

The Buddha and his disciples led simple lives, wandering from town to town to preach while begging for food. They were satisfied with one meal a day and never had a permanent residence. The Buddha actually died on the road. But this simple lifestyle was hard to maintain without the support of a stable group of lay believers, and the Buddha and his disciples could not till the land, because tilling killed insects and the act of killing would cause more suffering in one's future lives. Someone else had to do the dirty work to feed them. As the Buddha's disciples increased in number, they organized themselves into a *sangha*, literally "gathering" or "congregation." Once the number in a *sangha* reached a few hundred monks, only the great cities could afford to receive the Buddha and his disciples, and only prosperous traders could afford to feed them. Meanwhile, the patronage of Buddhist *sanghas* brought prestige to the urban residents in an agriculture-based society. The Buddha himself advised merchants to accumulate wealth by making investments and working diligently like bees so that the Buddhist *sangha* could gain sufficient financial support from lay believers. The creation of wealth was not only beneficial to society but also brought religious merit to the donor. This mutual dependence produced a natural alliance between the commercial communities and the Buddhist *sangha*.

This relationship was crucial to the expansion of the religious order of Buddhism to areas outside India during the Kushan period. The international trade and urban prosperity under the Kushans drew the center of Buddhist activities to the west and northwest of the Indian

subcontinent during the first and second centuries CE. During the Kushan period, stupas, or monuments containing the relics of the Buddha, as well as pilgrimage sites commemorating the Buddha's life sprang up in Mathura and Gandhara. Statues of the Buddha were erected and became idols for worship. Yet in the early Buddhist texts, the Buddha was only a sage, an enlightened one, who had vanished into the realm of nirvana and left behind his teachings to guide his disciples. He was not a god and therefore was not worshiped in the form of an idol. A significant development in Buddhist theology between the fifth century BCE and the first century CE underlay this dramatic change in religious practice.

For merchants from outside India to understand Buddhism, Buddha needed to be a god, and piety had to bring more tangible benefits than nirvana. During the Kushan period, around the first couple of centuries CE, a new text, the *Sadharmapundarika*, or the *Lotus Sutra*, prescribed a way for ordinary followers to achieve salvation:

83. Others, who had images of [Buddhas] made of the seven precious substances, of copper or brass, have all of them reached enlightenment. . . .
88. Those who offered flowers and perfumes to the relics of the [Buddhas], to Stūpas, a mound of earth, images of clay or drawn on a wall;
89. Who caused musical instruments, drums, conch trumpets, and noisy great drums to be played, and raised the rattle of cymbals at such places in order to celebrate the highest enlightenment;
90. Who caused sweet lutes, cymbals, tabors, small drums, reed-pipes, flutes of—or sugarcane to be made, have all them reached enlightenment.<sup>8</sup>

By making donations to Buddhist monasteries, believers could rest assured that they would be carried across the ocean of sufferings in the *mahayana* ("great vehicle").<sup>9</sup> The rise of the Mahayana school of Buddhism during the Kushan period changed the direction of Buddhist development. In theory, Mahayana Buddhism emphasized the elusiveness of physical reality, including material wealth. It emphasized the doctrine of eliminating material desire to an extent that many followers found hard to understand. Traders, accustomed to material transactions, easily grasped the idea of making payments for religious merits. During a time when the society was unprecedentedly rich, this new approach encouraged them and other wealthy urbanites to make very generous donations. Newly affluent Buddhist monasteries came to possess many material things, including grandiose stupas and monastic buildings.

To bridge the gap between the doctrine of self-denial and the materialism of the time, Mahayana Buddhism introduced a host of new deities as intermediaries. Known as bodhisattvas, they were people who had already merited nirvana but decided to stay outside its threshold in order to help others to cross the ocean of suffering. Among the numerous bodhisattvas, Avalokiteshvara, the hero of the *Lotus Sutra*, stands out in Mahayana history. He was said to be the most approachable bodhisattva and one who would go out of his way to help anyone in trouble, such as traders on a sinking ship plying the ocean or caravans threatened by robbers in a desert. Worshiping him with material wealth was even more rewarding than worshiping the Buddha, who remained immune to its allure.

Maitreya, Amitabha, and most other bodhisattvas had their own paradises to accommodate worshipers who were not yet ready for nirvana. They could stay in one of these paradises while waiting to be reborn into this world. The "Western Pure Land" of Amitabha was the most welcoming to Mahayana Buddhist followers, since Amitabha promised that whoever invoked his name when facing death, no matter what he had done in his lifetime, could be rescued and transported to his paradise. Amitabha's Western Pure Land, like other heavens and bodhisattvas' lands in the Mahayana belief system, was pleasantly decorated with silks and the "Seven Treasures": the various jewels listed in the inventories of merchants of that time.

The bodhisattvas replaced the old, monotonous, cyclical scheme of perpetual rebirth with a scheme that was totally new and colorful. The Mahayana vision of future lives was no doubt much more attractive to the pragmatically inclined. Rebirth into a beautiful heaven was much more desirable than reaching nirvana. For merchants, making donations was a much more satisfying and practical approach than self-denial. The gifts given in the name of the Buddha or bodhisattvas became the property of Buddhist monasteries. Wealthy monasteries used the donations to build stupas decorated with the Seven Treasures and temples decorated with sculptures. Because these Buddhist monasteries and monuments were so beautiful, evoking the paradises of the bodhisattvas, they attracted even more worshipers and donors.

The material wealth described by Mahayana Buddhist texts reflects the actual conditions of monasteries at that time. No longer wandering around, begging for their daily food, Buddhist monks settled in permanent residences. Large begging bowls carved in stone were set at the gate of the monasteries. The donations were no longer cooked rice or bread but gold or silver coins and valuables. Buddhist texts such as the *Lotus*

*Sutra* and the *Western Pure Land Sutra* specify the kinds of jewels Buddhist followers should donate to the Buddha and bodhisattvas according to the concept of the Seven Treasures.<sup>10</sup> The lists of the Seven Treasures vary in different texts, but they all include gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, pearls, red coral, and perhaps emeralds or some other greenish stones.

With tremendous wealth in their hands, Buddhist monasteries became large economic enterprises, engaging in all kinds of business, including trading, investing, and the making of alcohol. The most important activity became building, maintaining, and expanding monasteries in order to promote Buddhism. The artistic achievements of Buddhist artists were unsurpassed. To make a monastery look like a paradise, the monks festooned stupas and buildings with silk and gems. The kinds of gems and silks encountered in the international trade along the Silk Road appear frequently in Mahayana Buddhist texts and were displayed on those monuments. In the *Western Pure Land*, "there are some trees of two gems, viz. gold and silver. There are some of three gems, viz. gold, silver, and beryl. . . . There are some of seven gems, viz. gold, silver, beryl, crystal, coral, red pearls, and diamonds as the seventh."<sup>11</sup> To illustrate the beauty of Buddhist heavens and to make their monasteries as beautiful as those heavens, Buddhist writers and priests strove to produce the most splendid combinations of colors as well as the most impressive displays of gems. The very commodities traded along the Silk Road came to characterize Buddhist art. Gold and silver represented not only their values in trade but also the colors yellow and silver. Crystal was treasured all the way from Rome to Han China, but the best specimens came from India. Red coral from the eastern Mediterranean is in the inventory of the *Periplus*, and at some archaeological sites other red stones were used in its place. Pearls, either from the Persian Gulf or southern India, were mostly white, but there were also red pearls. Multicolored stones, such as striped agate, cat's eye, opal, or carnelian were also necessary. The overall visual effect was supposed to be shiny, with a combination of golden yellow, silver, lapis blue, transparent crystal, red, green, and an iridescent quality. In this combination, the lapis lazuli blue stood out as the most striking and valued color. The ancient world valued lapis lazuli much more highly than people do today, and at that time its only major source, Badakshan in Afghanistan, was under the control of the Kushans. In the centuries that followed, in murals and statues of the Buddha, the hair of the Buddha took on a blue color, and celestial beings were depicted using lapis lazuli blue. In fact, lapis lazuli blue became the most characteristic color of Buddhist art wherever it spread.

Surrounded by a pavement of glass tiles, the stupa at Dharmarajika monastery in Taxila displays these splendid colors. When archaeologists excavated the site, they found fragments of various gems scattered around the monastic buildings.<sup>12</sup> Buddhist texts mention that incense made from frankincense and other fragrances was used during monastic services. Imagine a pilgrim walking into one of the Kushan monasteries: the faint smoke and fragrant smell of incense would make him feel like he was entering another world, apart from the urban noise and foul smells. Around the stupa and the railings, he would see colorful silk banners or festoons fluttering in the wind and the Seven Treasures, sewn onto flags or strung on sculptures, sparkling under the sun. Walking around the clean and transparent glass pavement and up the stairs, he would try to discern the meaning of the sculptures while appreciating the beauty of the artworks.

At the same time that trade attracted Buddhism to the northwestern and western regions of south Asia and made monasteries rich, Mahayana Buddhist texts served to increase the value of silks, incense, and gems. When monasteries grew into large institutions, they provided hospitality to traveling traders. Since the time of the Buddha, monks were accustomed to traveling along the trade routes in the company of merchants from city to city. They often took shelter during the rainy seasons, since the torrents of the South Asian monsoon greatly restricted travel. If the road was in a mountainous region, roadside caves were ideal. As monks and traders' caravans traveled the same routes year after year, they no doubt took shelter in the same caves season after season. In this way, the caves gradually became permanent places for worship and accommodations. In the first few centuries CE, when the Silk Road trade passed through India, hundreds and hundreds of Buddhist cave temples appeared on the northwestern part of the Deccan Plateau, along the routes linking the western Indian seaports to the core region of the Kushan Empire. When Mediterranean ships arrived at the western Indian coast, they anchored at Barygaza, Sopara, and Kalyana. From these ports, mountainous routes through the Deccan Plateau carried the cargo either north to Ujjain, Mathura, and Gandhara, or south to the Tamil country. As donations from traders enriched the cave monasteries, the natural caves along the routes were soon enlarged into cave temples and residences.

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the region from time to time. Still, the monks continued to excavate their caves, and traders kept coming and going and even making deals in them. Huge halls dug deep into the cliffs of the mountains, which were often solid rock, became major cave shrines. Monks carved rock into the shapes of wooden arches. In those early Buddhist caves of the

northwest Deccan, the center of worship was the stupa, a symbol of the Buddha's relics, which was also carved out of the rock. In the centuries that followed, all schools of Buddhism came to accept the Buddha's divinity, and images of the Buddha became objects of worship.<sup>13</sup>

Many donors recorded their donations by inscribing them on the walls, along with their names and titles. Some of these donors called themselves "Yavana," an Indian term for Greeks or Romans. The term here was used to refer to anyone from the northern shores of the Mediterranean. The Yavanas who made donations to Buddhist monasteries could have been Buddhist devotees, or perhaps they were just paying their respects to the religious institution that provided lodgings and a place for commercial dealings in a foreign country. Since Buddhism never required formal conversion or any ceremony to become a devotee, making a donation was meritorious enough to demonstrate one's devotion to the religion and to win the trust of the monastery. The Yavanas may well have been Roman traders who came to the ports by ship and ventured inland to pursue more business; they also could have been traders from the formerly Hellenistic states of northwestern India who came down to the ports to sell silks and furs in exchange for Roman goods.

There were also the names of traders who specialized in certain kinds of goods such as fragrances; local traders who called themselves "householders," a title for influential traders living in cities; and artisans belonging to the guilds of various professions. The wives, mothers, and other female relatives of these people often made their own donations to secure good fortune for their men on the road and make special wishes for their loved ones. Even traveling monks and nuns recorded their donations to the monasteries.<sup>14</sup> Monks and nuns continued to have their own incomes and savings even after joining a Buddhist sangha, it seems. The presence of Buddhist caves made the desolate mountain routes much more accessible for all.

Caves along the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf in southern Iran, specifically in Haidari and Chehelkhana, show a strong similarity to the inland Buddhist cave temple tradition.<sup>15</sup> Buddhist monks, along with the traders, may well have made efforts to propagate their faith in that direction, but if they did, there were no significant consequences in the Gulf. These cave temples, Buddhist or not, were soon abandoned.

Buddhism spread far more successfully along the northern land routes. Given the terrain, cave temples were not feasible in the plains around Mathura, or even in Gandhara. Afghanistan, however, had



suitable terrain for excavating shrines and residences in caves. In addition to the many freestanding stupas and monasteries, cave shrines and monastic cells developed there in the early centuries CE. Buddhist cave temples featured images of both the Buddha and bodhisattvas. This type of cave sculpture continued to flourish long after the collapse of the Kushan regime and reached its apex in the fifth century CE. Destroyed by Taliban extremists in 2001, the gigantic standing Buddha carved in the rock mountain at Bamiyan, a valley in the Hindu Kush Mountains, exemplified this continuing tradition. Indeed, one might consider the monumental Buddha in Bamiyan as the starting point of the Central Asian Silk Road, which from Afghanistan to China was dotted with Buddhist cave shrines and monasteries.

In the first century CE, Buddhism began to spread out of the core areas of the Kushan Empire, by land routes that went from Afghanistan through other parts of Central Asia to China. Monks and their trader patrons brought with them Buddhist texts and built monasteries along the way. The texts also brought a new written language. In what was Gandhara (eastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan), scholars have found a large quantity of Buddhist scrolls written in the Gandhari language—a Sanskrit dialect—with the Kharoshthi script.<sup>16</sup> Gandhari most likely was the daily language of the Kushans after they established their empire. From Gandhara, this script spread to east and north to various parts of Central Asia. In the centuries that followed, Kharoshthi became the main script in the Tarim Basin (now a part of China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region) for writing local languages.

The Kushan Empire ultimately fell to Iran's Sassanid Empire in the third century, but their script survived in the oases around the rim of the Takla Makan Desert. Scholars have long debated why this script prevailed. The Kharoshthi documents from the oases include administrative records, correspondence, and archives from Buddhist monasteries. Kushan refugees may have brought the script with them, or traders may have started the practice. The most important carriers of the script may well have been Buddhist institutions established in the oases.

The population in many oases was also growing, with new residents coming in from the steppe. Neither the original population nor the immigrants from the steppe had a written language before the coming of the Kharoshthi script. During the Han and thereafter, Chinese people used their native writing for administrative and diplomatic documents in the oases, but non-Chinese residents did not. Because the Chinese writing system does not spell out the sound of words, it cannot be used to write the sounds of other languages. In contrast, Kharoshthi was an

alphabetic script that could be used to record the sounds of other languages and thereby transform them into written languages.

Languages spoken in the Tarim Basin (the larger geographic region that contains the Takla Makan Desert) in that period were mostly various dialects that had Indo-European roots. The Kharoshthi script fit well into the region's linguistic complexity. However, the variety of tongues has made deciphering the Kharoshthi documents of Central Asia exceedingly difficult for present-day scholars. While the Chinese language and script continued to be used for some official purposes, the Kharoshthi script was the writing system used for Buddhist texts and daily transactions. Sometimes both scripts appear on one medium. The coins found in Khotan, an oasis town on the southern rim of the Takla Makan Desert, have Chinese characters on one side and Kharoshthi letters on the other side.

The vast majority of the Kharoshthi documents are from the site of Niya, a town on the southern rim of the desert that had a huge Buddhist stupa at its center. The thousand or more fragments written in this script include documents in the form of wooden tablets, leather, silk textiles, and paper and legends inscribed on metal coins, while the Buddhist texts are on birch bark. These documents give a glimpse of the life of the Niya people and their role in trade. Silk textiles—not local products—were used as currency in the local trade, along with a variety of coins. Horses were a valuable commodity. The Buddhist monastery was an important political institution in the oasis. One Kharoshthi document from Niya is a record of the sale of a vineyard. The deal was apparently sealed in the Buddhist monastery, and several Buddhist monks were involved in the transaction as witnesses. Another document is a regulation for the local monastery; all the monk offenders were to pay their fines in bolts of silk textiles.<sup>17</sup> In addition to Kharoshthi documents, a number of Chinese documents written on wooden slips and silk textiles survive from the same site and the same period. All these thin slices of wood and pieces of inscribed silk have provided a wealth of information about the Chinese, the lost Indo-European languages, and life in ancient Niya. These records indicate that a vineyard was a salable commodity in Niya; thus, viticulture and winery must have been popular at the edge of desert. The monastery had much authority, if monks were witnesses in legal transactions. In addition, monks owned rolls of silk, and were disciplined by fines.

By the later third and early fourth century CE, China's imperial unity had dissipated, but Niya, as well as probably some other oasis states, remained under the suzerainty of the Western Jin, a successor state.

After a new wave of nomads flooded northern China, Central Asia, and Afghanistan in the fourth century, in the absence of any secular hegemony, Buddhist institutions began to take over control of the Silk Road. It would take another century or so for the most recently arrived nomads in China to establish themselves as patrons of the Silk Road.

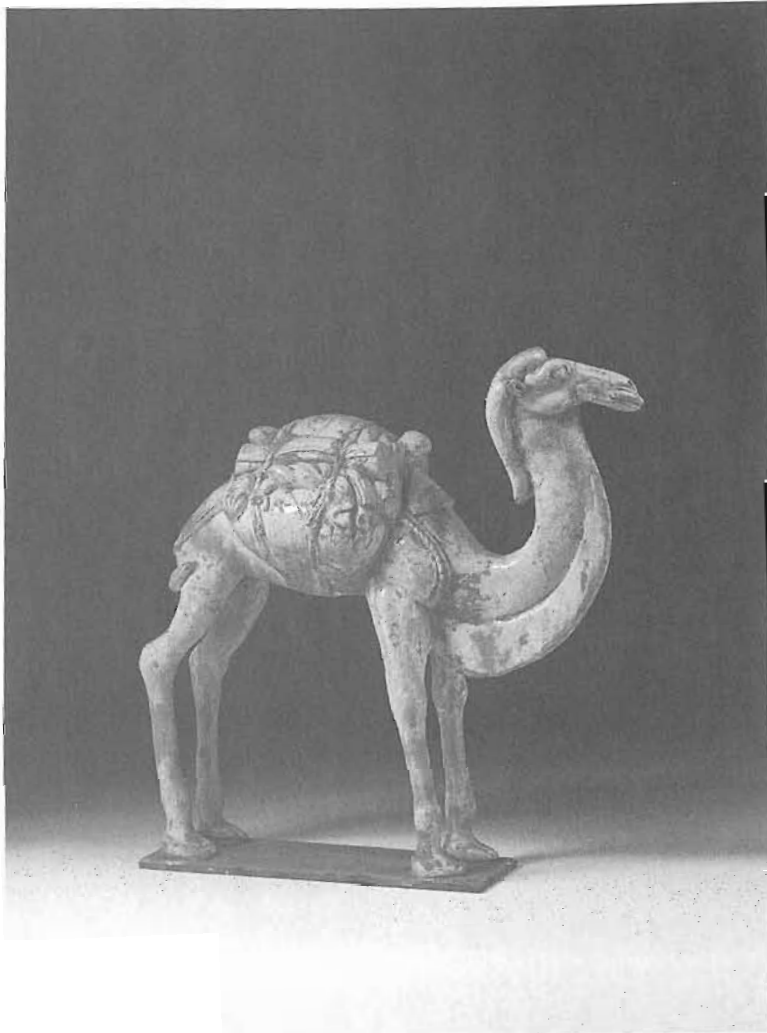
Although Buddhism did not have a significant presence in Iran, Buddhist traders from Kushan territory maintained contacts with people in Iran by overland routes, and some early Buddhist converts in Iran even helped to spread Buddhism to China. Several of the earliest Buddhist preachers in China were actually Parthians from Iran. These early contacts between Iranian Buddhists and China most likely paved the way for other religions such as Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism to travel from Iran to China along the Silk Road. Manichaeism emerged in Iran in the third century and spread both westward to the Mediterranean and eastward as far as China. The Manichaeism that spread to China shared similar iconographic forms and vocabulary with Buddhism. To some extent, Buddhist missionary efforts in Iran resulted in a Buddhist-styled Manichaeism, instead of a Buddhist institution in Iran.

During the Kushan era, Buddhist teachers—a group that included Parthians, Indians, and Kushans—established the Buddhist institution in China. In many cases, these teachers' countries of origin are obvious from their Chinese names. The Han Chinese, as well as their descendants for many centuries thereafter, liked to give Chinese names to foreigners, with surnames that were often abbreviations of the Chinese name for their countries of origin. Thus, in China, all Parthians shared the surname "An," after their dynastic name, Arsacid, and all the Kushans shared the surname "Zhi," which was taken from Yuezhi, the Chinese name for the confederation when it lived on the steppe. In the Later Han capital Luoyang, many traders and Buddhist priests with the surnames An and Zhi were active in propagating their faith. An Shigao, a priest who settled in Luoyang in 148 CE, was said to have been a prince in his own land who had given up his privileged life to preach Buddhism in China. An Shigao, together with another Parthian, the merchant An Xuan, initiated the systematic translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese. The early translations were poor in quality and only fragments survive. Some twenty years later, Zhi Loujiaqian, a Kushan monk, and Zhu Foshuo, an Indian, together with several Chinese collaborators, translated several important Mahayana Buddhist texts into Chinese.<sup>18</sup> Even so, it is quite likely that their translations circulated only within the city of Luoyang. Throughout the Han Dynasty, intellectual Buddhist activities in China do not seem to have engaged the

Chinese populace. All the foreign Buddhist preachers and traders in Han China—Parthians, Kushans, or Indians—were sponsored by Buddhist establishments located within the Kushan Empire.

Just as carved statues and decorated shrines had helped spread Buddhism in the Kushan Empire, they made it easier for people in foreign countries to understand and relate to the Buddhist teachings. Small Buddhist icons appeared all over Han China as aids to the Parthian, Kushan, and Indian teachers and their Chinese students who struggled over Sanskrit dialects and Chinese translations. Amateur Buddhist artists contributed sculptures depicting the Buddha's nirvana at a large-scale Buddhist shrine in a group of carvings on boulders in Kongwangshan, near Lianyungang, a coastal city now in Jiangsu Province near the Shandong border. Though the traces of the Buddha, in a supine position, are badly eroded, the figures surrounding him, mourning his departure, make the scene recognizable as a portrayal of his nirvana. Two small standing images of the Buddha are strikingly similar to the Buddha on a Kushan coin issued by Kanishka. Both on the coin and at Lianyungang he is shown wearing a knee-length, steppe-style robe and with his feet pointing outward. In other words, these are Kushan Buddhas. The worshipers also look like Kushans, with their conical hats and equestrian robes.

By which route and what means Kushan Buddhism reached this eastern edge of China is still debated. The lack of skill of the rock carvings indicates that the images probably were not intended for an established community but served a temporary need, such as a place of worship for those traveling outside their homeland. This shrine is nevertheless clear and definite evidence for the arrival of Buddhism—more specifically, Kushan Buddhism—in second-century China. The Kushan Empire and the Mahayana Buddhism it fostered were responsible for the landmarks on the various branches of the Silk Road that led from India to China.



# The Silk Road in World History

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*Frontispiece: In the golden days of the Silk Road, members of the elite in China  
were buried with ceramic camels for carrying goods across the desert, hoping to enjoy  
luxuries from afar even in the other world. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

*For Weiye and Yafeng, scientists who also understand history*