

PAKISTAN AND THE SILK ROAD

THE TAXILA CONTEXTS

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East and West always had their meeting points. From time immemorial the plateau of Iran and the Oasis of Ariana acted as clearing houses between the Mediterranean countries and Pakistan, mainland India and China. There has always been continuous coming and going of the caravans¹. The land-mass now forming Pakistan was the most active in these East-West contacts.

Early history of this region is neither clear enough nor concerns us here. Coming directly to the historical times, it was Darius I who, for the first time, brought Gandhara and India in contact with the Western world by establishing commercial relations between the countries that have never previously traded with each other². Alexander's invasion of Pakistan and its consequences expanded these contacts and made them more effective and durable. As demands of the Eastern luxuries increased in the West in the following centuries, so was enhanced the importance and significance of the routes through which these commodities were transported. The trade of these over-land routes was never completely interrupted despite vicissitudes and the best efforts of the Romans to divert it to the sea³.

Taxila acted as a focal point in these east-west routes. Indeed it was gateway to India. All land routes from the west and north have to pass through this city. From times immemorial there had been three trade routes which connected Pakistan and India with the Mediterranean countries – two routes by land and one by sea⁴ (Fig.):

A. From Obia on the Black Sea reaching northern Bactria through the river valleys of Aral-o-Caspian Steppes and the Oxus Valley⁵. From Bactria one branch of it off went to

¹ Herwin Schaefer, "Two Gandhara Temples and Their Near Eastern Sources." *Journal of American Oriental Society*, LXII (1942): 61-68.

² Roman Ghirshman, *Iran*, p. 185; H.G. Rawlinson, *Intercourse between India and the Western World*. Cambridge: 1926, p. 275; E. Herzfeld, *The Persian Empire*. Weisbaden: 1968.

³ H. Schaefer, op. cit., p. 67; M.P. Charlesworth, *Trade-Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire*. Hildesheim: 1961, pp. 57-74.

⁴ Charlesworth, *Ibid.*, p. 58; W.W. Tam, *77e Greeks in Bactria and India*. Cambridge: 1928, pp. 361-67.

⁵ Strabo, *Geography*. Loeb Classical Library: 1961, p. 509; G.T. Garrat (ed.), *The Legacy of the India*. Oxford: 1967, p. 11.

Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, etc. and another bent down to cross Hindukush on way to India via Gandhara and Taxila. An Offshoot of this route used to connect Taxila with Khotan⁶ through the difficult passes of Karakorum and Kashmir Valley.

B. The second route, emanating from Syria once tapped all the Mediterranean trade. After traversing the Syrian Desert and Euphrates and Tigris valleys as well as Iranian plateau, it used to meet the Olbian route at Bactria, followed it down to Trudria to join there once again with the Khotan-Kashmir route. It was along this trade route that a series of towns were planted by Alexander and his successors which at their climax controlled the destiny of these routes.

C. The sea route also existed from times immemorial. But, during the last two centuries BC, it got greatest impetus under the Roman Empire when their commerce with the Subcontinent and China was disrupted by hostile Parthians in between⁷. The Searoute in the main consists of a passage from Arsinoe at the head of Gulf of Suez to the Red Sea (Myos Hormos, etc.), then to the open sea to India⁸. Before the discovery of the Monsoon, the journey was preferred along the coastlines of Arabia, Southern Iran and Pakistan, thus first touching the port of Barbaricon at mouth of the Indus and then going to Barygaza⁹ and further south. At times the Persian Gulf Route also became important and taped the traffic between Barbaricon and Seleucia through its ports such as Charax, Gerrha, Ommana¹⁰, etc. Though the evidence is not conclusive, but it appears almost certain that Taxila was connected with these sea-routes in more than one way. One of these routes went up from Barbaricon to Uch (Alexandria-on-the Confluence of the Indus), Multan and Taxila, or from Barygaza to Mathura and then to Taxila.

Intercourse between the Subcontinent and the West, prior to Alexander's invasion, was of indirect nature. Apart from the mythical voyages of Heracles and Dionysos¹¹ and the accounts of Greeks such as Ktesias and Skylax¹² in service of the Persians, there is hardly any evidence to suggest that Greeks had any direct communication with the Indusland, i.e.,

⁶ Tarn, op. cit., p. 365.

⁷ M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities*. Oxford: 1932, pp. 96-102; M.A.R. Colledge, *The Parthians*. London: 1967, pp. 80-81.

⁸ Charlesworth, op. cit., pp. 63.

⁹ Barygaza of Greeks, Barigukaccha of Sanskrit and modern Bharoach or Broach at the mouth of Narbada River. See Rawlinson in Garrat, op. cit. p. 14.

¹⁰ Charlesworth, op. cit. p. 67; Colledge, op. cit., pp. 77-84.

¹¹ Strabo (X.1.7) says that these stories are "untrustworthy and mythological." He further regards them as fabrication of flatterers of Alexander.

¹² Herodotus, *The Histories*, Vol. IV., p. 44; Rawlinson, op. cit., p. 155.

Pakistan or India that is that is Bharat¹³. What was the commercial out-put of these routes immediately before and after Alexander is difficult to judge¹⁴. That the Greek soldiers who were forced by Alexander to settle in Asia¹⁵ formed for a few centuries an Oriental 'Hellas' in the heart of Asia and kindled the light of Greek civilization, is now abundantly clear from the discoveries made at Ai Khanum¹⁶. The long condemned Bactrianmirage is now becoming a reality. For a few centuries these Greeks controlled all the east-west trade passing through Bactria of Three-Roads¹⁷. The Taxila-Khotan Route, though in use since ever, was exploited only by the Greeks after they had lost Bactria to the nomads (Periplus). The famous Rock Edicts of Asoka (274-232 BC) at Shahbaz Garhi (on Taxila-Bactria Route) and at Mansehra (on Taxila-Kashmir-Khotan Route) well testify that both these routes were functioning at least immediately after the death of Alexander the Great. These routes were instrumental in introducing Greek influence on the art and architecture of Mauryan dynasty¹⁸. Wheeler's notion of unemployed craftsmen of the extinct Achaemenian empire marching along the well-trodden trade-route in India' in search of new jobs is not an exaggeration¹⁹.

Secession of the Bactrian Greeks from the Seleucid Kingdom by Diodotus in c.250 BC is roughly contemporary with the foundation of the Parthian Kingdom by Arsaces which gradually came down like a wedge between the Seleucid and Roman Empires on the West and Bactrian Kingdom on the East. This put the famous Silk Route in danger. The constant threat of losing Bactria to the nomads further aggravated the issues. Whereas Romans and Seleucids were fighting hard with the Parthians over this route, the Bactrian Greeks, now isolated and pushed eastward, were in search of other outlets. The Parthians emerged more and more strong out of these hostilities and Bactrians were completely isolated. But still they were not ready to lose control over the Silk Route. It was at this moment Taxila assumed even more importance for Greeks. Rather, it was their only hope to survive commercially. Thus Chinese Silk Route, instead of going westward through Bactria, was diverted to Khotan-Taxila route

¹³ A gold coin of Croesus, oblong but with rounded comers (6th cent. B.C.) is known from Mari on the Indus near Attock (See Chapter: "Roman Influence," f.n. 2). This perhaps was brought and left here by some voyager of Skylax of Caryanda who was ordered to explore the Indus down to its mouth. A similar coin of Croesus is also known from Afghanistan (*Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1914, pp. 486-89).

¹⁴ Our main sources are three: Periplus of the Erythrean Sea., trans. by Schoff Pliny's *Natural History*, Bk. VI, Chaps. xxi-xxiii and Ptolemy's *Geography of India*. All these writers learnt much about the coast but little or nothing about the northern India (and Pakistan). Much has been built up on the information supplied by them, but it should not be accepted without reservation as far as they deal with the interior (Tam, p. 351).

¹⁵ Arrian, *India*. London: Loeb Classical Library, 1958, IV, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶ Paul Bernard, "Ai Khanum on the Oxus: A Hellenistic City in Central Asia," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 53 (1967): 71-95.

¹⁷ Strabo, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. XV, pp. 2-8.

¹⁸ Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*. 3rd rev. ed. Harmondsworth: 1970, pp. 59-75.

¹⁹ R.E.M. Wheeler, *Flames Over Persepolis*. London: 1968, pp. 127-142.

down to the mouth of Indus or Barygaza²⁰. It is in this light that we should view the attempt of Demetrius to conquer Punjab, Sind, Surashtra on the south and the countries of Pamirs on the north. What he actually wanted was to have control over Silk Route on the one hand and search new outlets by sea-ports²¹. On the other hand, Romans were also ready to pay any price for these trade routes. The hostilities and warfare that ensued between the Parthians and the Romans during centuries to come did nothing but to strengthen the former's hostility towards the latter. The peaceful moments were few²². Thus though the land routes through Parthia never completely ceased to exist²³, a continuous threat of warfare, lack of security of caravans, Roman discouragement of the use of these land-routes, etc., hampered physical contacts between Romans and the people of Gandhara. A little Roman influence that we find in this region corresponds to those momentary peace time activities when the Romans and the Parthians entered upon short-lived peace treaties²⁴.

How much trade went thorough Parthia and how much through the newly opened Khotan-Taxila route, is difficult to say. What we know is that Parthia also went on growing wealthy on the land-trade which still poured through it²⁵. What was important to Greeks, now in control of Taxila, was the trade with the Seleucid Empire through Seleucia, because there is very little pointing towards Egypt. Three routes became more frequent:

- A. East-west route through Bactria-Ecbatana-Seleucia, etc.
- B. Southern route – through Seistan, to Gulf of Ormuz, up the Persian Gulf, Charax and Seleucia, etc.
- C. Sea-route directly from Barygaza or Demetrius-Patalane near Karachi to the Persian Gulf and up to Seleucia through Charax.

In any case, Seleucia, Dura Europos and Palmyra in Syria and not Alexandria (Egypt)²⁶ were the clearing houses down to the period of last Greek rulers till the latter half of

²⁰ As a proof of this, a Chinese jade, a Japanese scallop-shell and an Indonesian Orangutan have been found at Taxila-all from Greek periods (*Archaeological Survey of India, 1926-27*, p. 118, no. 14. *Ibid*, 1929-30, p. 91. no. 111, and Tarn, op. cit., pp. 363-365).

²¹ Rawlinson, op. cit., p. 71.

²² Rome ultimately was successful the cheaper sea-route, but she could never control the land-route through Parthia (See Warmington, op. cit., p. 23 and Colledge, op. cit., p. 172). For struggle over these routes between the Romans and Parthians, see M. Rostovtzeff, op. cit., pp. 96-102 and Colledge, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

²³ Colledge, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

²⁴ Rostovtzeff, op. cit., pp. 96-102.

²⁵ Tarn, op. cit., pp. 338, 362, 365 and 367.

²⁶ At maximum we can say, as Marshall has said long before: "Alexandria, no doubt, like Rhodes, Pergamon, Antioch, Seleucia and many other cities contributed her quota to the development of Hellenistic art in general,

the first century BC²⁷. The India ambassadors from Porus in the Punjab to Augustus, whom Nicolas Damascus met at Antioch, evidently had traversed the land-route through Seleucia rather than the Red Sea route²⁸. By the time a direct voyage to Egypt became more usual, the Greeks had lost everything in India – their cities and ports²⁹.

During the second half of 1st century BC and the first three centuries of our era, Khotan-Taxila trade seems to be quite proliferous³⁰. During the reign of the last Greek King, Hermaeus, Greeks were trying to get into touch with China through Khotan independent of Bactria. Indian speaking traders went as far as Chinese limes. There have been Indian settlements in Chinese Turkistan, especially in Khotan district, Greek names have been found in Khotan documents and a number of clay sealing of Greco-Roman types have been found at Nysa and other places near Khotan³¹. The establishment of Roman Empire in 30 BC and the Romanization of Western Asia are closely coincident with the end of the last Greek kingdom east of Hindukush³² and the disappearance of the defense of Greek culture in Pakistan and India. Though from Augustus onward, favourable political conditions and discovery of monsoon favoured a lucrative trade with India and the Western world through a direct sea-route – maximum during Trajan-Kushan period³³, but these contacts were only with the western coast of Southern India. About the interior, the Romans knew little or nothing³⁴. Though more than one embassy are reported to have been sent by Kushan rulers to the Roman

and through this medium exerted an indirect influence on India, but more than this, it is impossible to my mind to concede. Her influence from her geographical position is probably less than that of Seleucia or Antioch, and none of these cities can be proved to have materially inspired the art of India." Sir John Marshall quoted by G.N. Banerjee, *Hellenism in India*. Calcutta: 1920, p. 69.

²⁷ Tarn, op. cit., pp. 338, 362, 365 & 367.

²⁸ Strabo, XV, 1.73 and Plutarch, LXIX. One of these ambassadors, named Zarmanochegas or Zamaras (Sarmanacharya) from Bargosa (Barygaza) burnt himself to death in Athens. There is evidence of at least four Indian embassies who called upon Augustus during his principate. One of these has just been mentioned. This embassy carried with it a letter written in Greek on parchment. Another embassy came from a king 'Pandion' from South India (Strabo).V .1.4). The third embassy was received in Spain in 26 or 25 BC and the fourth was in Samos in 21 BC. Horace (Carmen Secular) mentions still another mission. For details see R.E.M. Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers*. Harmondsworth: 1955, pp. 161-62 and Warmington, 35 ff. For Indian embassies to other Roman Emperor of latter periods see Wheeler, op. cit. pp., 161-62, Pliny, VI.84 and Charlesworth in Coleman Norton, *Roman Economic and Social History*, Princeton.

²⁹ Tarn, Op. cit., pp. 363-65.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 365.

³¹ Sir M. Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan*. Oxford: 1907, p. 357; Tarn, op. cit., p. 365.

³² Tarn, Ibid., p. 364.

³³ Rawlinson, op. cit., pp. 163-64. Some scholars have suggested that the main land-route from China to Europe was diverted by the Kushans down to the Indus and across the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf (Charax) (H. Ingholt, *Gandharan Art in Pakistan*. New York: 1958). This conclusion is unproved. Another scholar (Dani, "Kushan Civilization in Pakistan", *Journal of Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, 14, no. 1, 1969, p. 6) doubts if Kushans at all entered the area of the Sea. It was more advantageous for them to remain masters of the land-routes.

³⁴ Strabo, XV, 1.4.

emperors³⁵ (one in the time of Trajan) and a number of Roman pots have been discovered on the coast of South India³⁶, but the Roman evidence from South India traversing towards north-west is very negligible³⁷. Direct land contacts between the Roman Empire and Gandhara were always hampered. Parthians blocked this passage till 164 AD – the date when Parthians lost Dura Europos – and from circa AD 250 onward, Persian renaissance under Sassanians cut all hopes of direct Roman contacts with Gandhara and Taxila³⁸. Even in South India there has been witnessed a distinct falling off quantity of the Roman coins in the third century AD onward which indicates a real decline of commerce³⁹. At Taxila proper, unfortunately, we have not much evidence regarding this period, except a very rich and varied yield of glyptic art. The portion of the city of this period has been very poorly excavated. But the way this city (present day Sirsukh in Taxila Valley) was fortified and a great number of religious establishments surrounding it clearly prove that Taxila kept its importance and significance till it was ruthlessly destroyed in or about 456 AD.

The question of Taxila's position via-a-vis the three routes connecting Pakistan and India with Central Asia and the Western world have taken us too far. But it was necessary because the evidence has an important bearing on the nature and source as well as of chronology of the influence which acted upon the cultural life of the region of Pakistan culminating in the birth of the hybrid Gandhara art. These trade routes were nothing more than commercial highways. Along with commercial commodities⁴⁰ travelled ideas and techniques as well. Introduction of stone instead of wood for building purposes and for sculptures in India and Pakistan is regarded as the result of communication between the empires of Alexander, of Seleucids and of Mauryans⁴¹. The commercial contacts led to social and political contacts and the new social orders more than often result in visible and invisible changes in form and spirit. This is true of the contacts between Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent and the western world for about five hundred years on either side of the beginning of the Christian era. The West got the maximum of the 'material' but subcontinent got the maximum of the spirit of the Western civilization. Thus we read about Greek Ambassador Heliodorus of

³⁵ Rawlinson, op. cit., p. 164.

³⁶ R.E.M. Wheeler, *My Archaeological Mission to India and Pakistan*. London: 1976, pp. 43-52 and Ibid., *Still Digging*. London: 1955, pp. 171-173.

³⁷ James Fergusson, *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture, Vol. I*. London: 1855, pp. 12-13; W. Simpson, "The Classical Influence on the Architecture of the Indus Region and Afghanistan," *Journal of Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series (1894), p. 110.

³⁸ Rawlinson, op. cit., p. 166.

³⁹ Charlesworth, op. cit., p. 61.

⁴⁰ For commodities of trade see Warmington, op. cit., pp. 145-272; Charlesworth, op. cit., p. 61; M. Sehadri, "Roman Contacts with India," *Archaeology*, 19, no. 4 (1966), pp. 245-47 Tam, pp. 364-67.

⁴¹ G. N. Baneljee, *Hellenism in Ancient India*. Calcutta: 1920; Ferguson, op. cit., pp. 150-51.

Taxila professing himself to be a Hindu⁴² and Indian offering dedications to Pan at Redesiya in Red Sea⁴³. Similarly, if we find Indian terracotta at Memphis in Egypt⁴⁴, and Indian dancing girl in South Arabia⁴⁵ and an ivory statue of Indian goddess Lakshmi in Pompeii⁴⁶, at the same time we read about *Yavana* carpenters busy in South India and Ceylon⁴⁷ or we can trace out Greek courses of Indian astronomy and Mathematics⁴⁸, etc., etc. What comes out of this discussion is clear enough:

i. It was Darius I, who, in historical times, brought Gandhara and the rest of Pakistan and India in contact with the Western World for the first time. However, the first real contact of north-west parts of Indo-Pakistan *with* the Mediterranean countries was first established by Alexander the Great and his successors and flourished unhampered through land and sea routes.

ii. All these routes have to pass through Taxila and thus Taxila was benefitted by this constant flow of traffic by more than one way.

iii. The main land-route through Seleucia ever remained strongest and the most effective as far as the region of Gandhara and Taxila is concerned. As a result of this the Bactrian Greeks, who were in this region from 4th to 1st centuries BC, never lost contact with the Mediterranean countries especially with Syria. As such these Greeks themselves remained the main source of Hellenic as well as Hellenistic culture and art in this region for centuries. Occasionally, the new blood from Seleucid Empire, Asia Minor and from Mainland Greece helped maintain their classical spirit.

iv. The sea trade was solely confined to southern India and except for sporadic finds there is no evidence of western influence moving towards north-west from southern India. There is no satisfactory evidence suggesting contacts with Alexandria.

v. The end of Hellenistic kingdoms in the West and the establishment of Roman Empire had not much effect on the cultural life of North West of Pakistan. The Greek rule in the Subcontinent also came to an end coincidentally at the same time. But the Greeks were replaced by Phil-Hellenistic dynasties of Scythians and Parthians and not by Phil-Romanist.

vi. The Roman influence, whatever its nature, is at its best during Kushanas who followed Scythians and Parthians. But even during this period the contacts with Roman world

⁴² *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society, Great Britain* (1909): 1055.

⁴³ Charlesworth, op. cit., p. 59.

⁴⁴ W.M.F. Petrie, *Memphis I* (1909): 16-17. pl. xxxix.

⁴⁵ *Archaeology*, 7 (1954): 254.

⁴⁶ *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 59 (1939): 228, Fig. 12.

⁴⁷ Charlesworth, op. cit., p. 71.

⁴⁸ R.A. Jairazbhoy, *Foreign Influence in Ancient India*. London: 1963, pp. 69-76.

were of indirect nature. The direct relations were barred first by the Parthians till the middle of the 2nd century AD and then by the nationalist Sassanians.

vii. The typical Hellenistic impact on the art and architecture of Gandhara and Taxila is the outcome of century's diffusion of classical ideals in this region and not the result of importation of artists from Rome under Kushanas.

viii. Birth of Gandhara at Taxila and elsewhere is independent of political and diplomatic contacts which existed between Roman Empire and Kushanas. Whatever Roman elements there are, and there are quite many, these are dove-tailed with the intercourse between North-Western Pakistan and the Mediterranean world that continued un-interrupted from Alexander onward. The Romans acted as a drop-scene of a long drama and were not the actors of a new play staged by Kushanas.