CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL Contexts FOR THE EMERGENCE AND TRANSMISSION OF BUDDHISM WITHIN SOUTH ASIA

Interpreting the past is a critical concern for Buddhist communities, despite stereotypes that associate mystical disregard of history with Buddhism and other South Asian religious traditions. Flexible narratives about the past have shaped Buddhist identities by providing models of meritorious action and have contributed to expansion beyond northeastern India by establishing locative links to the Buddha’s presence. Stories about the Buddha’s life and the formation of the saṅgha connect his birth, awakening, teachings, miraculous performances, and recruitment of followers to specific places and temporal frameworks. Hagiographical accounts of the rediscovery of the “True Dharma” (saddharma) taught by previous Buddhas in earlier ages and the turning of the “Wheel of Dharma” (dharmacakra) in the present auspicious age (bhadralkalpa) may seem ahistorical, since the accomplishments attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha are not particular to his own historical circumstances.1 Although restrictive views of history as an objective chronicle of past events would deny any value to traditional identifications of links between causes in past lives and consequences in present or future lifetimes in Buddhist literary sources, maximalist conceptions of history as an effort to understand “how human actions are significant and have a notable impact on our world” (Nattier 1991: 139) provide more scope for understanding why interpretation of past actions was important for present concerns.

The aim of this chapter is to clarify geographical and chronological contexts for patterns and processes in the formation of Buddhism in ancient and early medieval South Asia and its transregional expansion.

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1 For literary traditions about Buddhas of the past, auspicious present aeon (bhadralkalpa), and the future, see Nattier, Jan. 1991. Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist prophecy of decline. Berkeley, Calif: Asian Humanities Press, 19–26; Strong, John. 2001. The Buddha: A short biography. Oxford: Oneworld, 20–21, Table 1.1 and Strong 2004a: 25–49. Nattier emphasizes that “…it is a central contention of virtually all schools of Buddhism that the Buddha’s experience is by definition repeatable and is accessible (at least in theory) to all living beings” (1991: 7–8).
outside of the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the northwestern frontiers of areas of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Beginning with the period of the historical Buddha’s lifetime in the fifth century BCE, the chronological range of this overview extends to the late first millennium CE. A detailed macrohistory of South Asian Buddhism is beyond the intended scope, but significant junctures between political, economic, and social networks for Buddhist mobility are emphasized in an effort to identify factors and catalysts for cross-cultural transmission. An historical-critical approach to literary, epigraphical, numismatic, and archaeological sources elucidates regional variation and different actors, features, stages, and levels of Buddhist movement, which fluctuated considerably with shifting political and commercial alignments. This effort to investigate the role of trade exchanges, intercultural encounters, and inter- and intrareligious relationships in the establishment, expansion, and decline of Buddhist institutions spurs several questions, which are addressed throughout the chapter. What was at stake for Buddhist communities in formulating stories about the Buddha’s present and past lives, describing the formation of the saṅgha, and locating events in regional settings? How did interactions with other groups, including competing renouncer movements, Brahmans, and exogenous migrants, shape Buddhist perspectives and practices? What do available sources from within and outside of Buddhist traditions reveal about the impact of social and economic changes on Buddhist institutions? Which roles did Buddhist models of exchange, patronage, and supramundane power play in commerce and socio-political legitimation?

In the following subsections, which are structured diachronically and regionally, I explore the formation and transmission of Buddhist ideologies and institutions in changing historical and cultural environments, since Buddhist traditions did not originate autonomously or remain static.

A. Initial Phases of the Establishment of Buddhist Communities in Early India
B. Legacy of the Mauryans: Aśoka as Dharmarāja
C. Migrations, Material Exchanges, and Intercultural Interactions in Northwestern Contact Zones
D. Saka Migrants and Mediators between Central Asia and South Asia
E. Dynamics of Mobility during the Kuśāṇa Period
Hagiographic accounts of the Buddha’s religious biography combine legendary narratives with information about the religious, social, economic, and political climate of his time, as viewed through later literary lenses. Rather than separating historical fact from literary fiction in order to demythologize the life story of the Buddha, the analysis of Buddhist literary sources postdating the lifetime of the Buddha and archaeological findings presented here is intended to establish basic chronological and geographical parameters and to understand the contexts in which he and his followers flourished. Although the historical Buddha’s precise dates are difficult to pinpoint, situating his lifetime in the fifth century BCE has widespread implications for South Asian history as well as religious and intellectual traditions during a period of dynamic social and cultural change.

Scholarly consensus on Śākyamuni Buddha’s date, which is in fact the earliest historical date for building a relative chronology of late Vedic religions and ancient Indian political dynasties, has recently shifted in favor of a “short chronology” from a “long chronology” in response to a 1988 symposium in Göttingen and the multivolume publication of proceedings edited by Heinz Bechert. Although a “Nirvāṇa era” beginning with Śākyamuni’s parinirvāna in 543 BCE is attested

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2 Strong 2001 provides a useful overview of hagiographical traditions for the life (and previous lives) of the Buddha according to various literary sources. Strong’s stated goal is to portray the “Buddha of story” rather than the “Buddha of history” since traditional legends “…are certainly more plentiful, more interesting, and more revelatory of the ongoing concerns of Buddhists” (2001: 2). Historicist approaches privileging Pāli and Sanskrit literary sources over vernacular biographies of the Buddha are criticized by Hallisey, Charles. 1995. “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism.” In Lopez 1995b: 31–61 (reprinted in Derris, Karen, and Natalie Gummer, eds. 2007. Defining Buddhism(s): A reader. London: Equinox Pub.).

in Pāli vanṣa literature, Bechert observes that “...there is no reliable second source to corroborate the validity of this chronology” (1989: 97).\(^4\) A “corrected long chronology” places the end of the Buddha’s lifetime in ca. 486 BCE by adjusting the date for the parinirvāṇa 218 years before the Mauryan ruler Aśoka was consecrated in ca. 270–268 BCE.\(^5\) However, literary sources outside of the Pāli tradition support a “short chronology” for the parinirvāṇa only one century before Aśoka’s consecration, therefore corresponding to ca. 370 BCE.\(^6\) The suspiciously round number (100) probably indicates an approximate rather than absolute date, so an “adjusted short chronology” of the Buddha’s death around 400 BCE is now widely favored.\(^7\) This somewhat arbitrary date avoids a problematic link between the beginning of Aśoka’s rule and a second Buddhist communal recitation (saṅgīti) or “council” at Vaśālī, which was also supposed to have taken place a century after the parinirvāṇa but is not as clearly linked with Aśoka as later councils.\(^8\) The issue of determining the date of the historical

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\(^5\) As detailed in the following subsection of this chapter, Aśoka’s 13th Major Rock Edict provides a firm synchronism between the reign of Aśoka and five contemporary Hellenistic rulers in ca. 255 BCE.

\(^6\) Evidence for a “short chronology” of the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa 100 years before Aśoka’s consecration in *Dīpavamsa* 1.24–26 and 5.55–59 supports Bechert’s hypothesis that the long chronology” of 218 years was a later development (1989: 104 ff., 1991: 329–343). The earliest attested link between the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa and Aśoka’s reign a century later occurs in an *avādāna* set during the time of Aśoka “a century after the Blessed Buddha achieved parinirvāṇa” (vaśāsada parinurvude budhe bhagavade) in a first century CE Kharoṣṭhi manuscript (British Library fragment 4.6 recto).

\(^7\) Prebish, Charles. 2008. “Cooking the Buddhist Books: The implications of the new dating of the Buddha for the history of early Indian Buddhism.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15 observes that “…most participants [in the Göttingen symposium] suggested that the Buddha died within approximately a few decades on either side of 400 BCE” (1).

\(^8\) Prebish examines implications of the “short chronology” for the dating of early councils at Rājagaha, Vaśālī, and Pātaliputra, concluding that the Vaśālī council occurred 37 years before Aśoka’s coronation in 268 BCE, followed shortly by a “non-canonical” council at Pātaliputra marking the beginning of Buddhist sectarianism and another “canonical” council in Pātaliputra (attested only in Pāli sources) 18 years later (ca. 250 BCE). Prebish’s argument that “…we should use all the sources available to us, and not just those that affirm a hypothesis that is convenient to our suppositions and anticipated expectations” (2008: 14–15) implies that conflicting sources should be accepted in order to construct a hybrid chronology for the date of the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa.
Buddha is also intertwined with traditional Jain dates for the nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra (alleged to be a Jain contemporary of Śākyamuni) in 528 or 510 BCE. If we follow a short chronology for the historical Buddha’s parinirvāṇa between ca. 400 and ca. 370 BCE, his lifespan of 80 years began in the early-mid fifth century BCE.

| Table 2.1: Proposed dates for the Historical Buddha |
|-----------|---------|---------|
| Birth     | Parinirvāṇa |
| Long Chronology (Nirvāṇa Era) | 623 | 543 BCE |
| Corrected Long Chronology | 566 | 486 BCE |
| Adjusted Short Chronology | ca. 480 | 400 BCE |
| Short Chronology | ca. 450 | 370 BCE |

In addition to situating the historical Buddha’s lifetime in a relatively specific time-frame between the middle of the fifth century and the beginning of the fourth century BCE, it is also possible to locate hagiographical events memorialized in Buddhist literature, inscriptions, monuments, and art in a geographical network of sacred sites. For example, an inscription of Aśoka marks the location where Māyā gave birth to Siddhārtha Gautama in a forest near the village of Lumbinī in southern Nepal:

The King, Beloved of the gods, of Loving Regard, when he had been anointed twenty years, came in person and worshiped, because the Buddha Śākyamuni was born here. He had constructed walls inlaid with stone (?) and had erected [this] stone pillar, because [i.e., to proclaim that] the Lord was born here. The village of Lummini was made exempt from taxation and [subject to paying only] one-eighth share [of its produce].

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9 Śvetāmbara and Digambara dates for Mahāvīra’s nirvāṇa conflict with Hemacandra’s report of a time-span of 155 years before the reign of Candragupta, who began ruling after the Indian expedition of Alexander of Macedon between 327–5 BCE (Bechert 1989: 98–101).

10 218 years before Aśoka’s coronation in ca. 370–368 BCE.

11 100 years before Aśoka’s coronation.

12 Translated by Salomon 1998a: 264 (Appendix, selection 1: Rummindeī Minor Pillar Edict of Aśoka; see Falk 2006: 177–180 for further references and a discussion of silavagadabhiça or –ca, which he translates as “stone railing” instead of “walls inlaid with stone”).
The epigraphic evidence of Aśoka’s commemoration of a visit to the Buddha’s birthplace at Lumbini confirms the localization of pilgrimage practices connected with this event by the middle of the third century BCE. The location of Kapilavastu, where Siddhārtha was raised by his aunt Mahāprajāpati as the son of Śuddhodana, a chief of the Śākya clan, remains controversial. An early set of four sites placing the awakening at Bodh Gaya, initial teaching at Sarnath, and parinirvāṇa at Kuśinagara were later expanded to a list of eight sites, each with their own narrative cycles. Noting that the hagiography of the Buddha grew in tandem with the proliferation of Buddhist pilgrimage places, John Strong remarks: “…‘where’ something happened is as significant as ‘what’ happened there” (2001: 5). Locative connections reinforce claims to antiquity of oral discourses said to have been spoken by the Buddha, doctrinal principles and monastic rules linked with early recitations, and pilgrimage and ritual centers. While Jonathan Z. Smith identifies the promotion of a “locative, imperial worldview” with “scribal elites who had a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place” (1978: 293), Buddhist efforts to localize hagiographic events in northeastern India and the Terai region of modern Nepal did not inhibit or restrict mobility.

Having situated the historical Buddha in northeastern India, what can be said about the society in which he lived and taught? Portrayals of Siddhārtha as a royal prince indicate that he was to be viewed as an archetypal Kṣatriya scion in the traditional socio-religious hierarchy. However, fifth-fourth century BCE social contexts are difficult to reconstruct because Buddhist textual sources from periods later than the time of the historical Buddha tend to reflect their own contemporary social mores. Non-Buddhist traditions prescribing rigid stratification

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13 The sites of Gotihawa and Pipri near Lumbini have been excavated and the surrounding area has been surveyed by Verardi, Giovanni. 2007. *Excavations at Gotihawa and Pipri, Kapilbastu District*, Nepal. Rome: IsIAO.
among the four varnas (Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras) are not descriptive of social realities, but tend to reflect normative models and ideals. Buddhist literary texts consistently reflect these normative distinctions between Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and other wealthy householders (often termed grhapatis) and groups of laborers, servants, and the poor with status largely determined by birth. Rather than challenging social and economic structures, Buddhist arguments against alleged Brahminical claims to purity valorize the superiority of ethical purity over ritual action. Didactic verses collected in the “Brāhmaṇa Varga” of widely transmitted Dharmapada/Udānavarga collections clearly illustrate this critique, which is expressed in the first verse of a Kharoṣṭhī manuscript of the Dharmapada from Khotan:

One does not become a Brahmin by matted dreadlocks, clan, or birth; but having expelled small and large wrongs in every way, an expeller of wrongs is someone called a Brahmin.


18 Bailey and Mabbett 2003: 42–3 cite numerous Pāli passages listing degraded families (nīcā kulā) of candālas, hunters, bamboo workers, chariot-makers, and refuse-removers in juxtaposition to a list of people reborn into high families of wealthy warriors, priests, and householders.


Although the Buddha is sometimes portrayed in modern accounts as a social reformer or revolutionary through selective citation of passages critical of Brahmins,22 social contexts reflected in Buddhist literature are probably best understood against a background of dynamic social change rather than reactions against stagnant social hierarchies.

Buddhist hagiographic traditions clearly acknowledge that Ājīvikas and Jain śramaṇa movements competed for religious and intellectual eminence in northern India when Siddhārtha renounced his duties to become a wandering mendicant. In accounts of the six years prior to his awakening in Bodh Gaya, Siddhārtha encountered other śramaṇa proponents of heterodox viewpoints and ascetic practices.23 Johannes Bronkhorst provocatively argues that a “fundamental spiritual ideology” shared in common by Buddhism, Jainism, and Ājīvikism was “a product of the spiritual culture of Greater Magadha” (2007: 28), which had “…a culture of its own which was different from the culture of the authors of Vedic and early post-Vedic literature” (2007: 9).24 Although Bronkhorst’s attempt to localize shared assumptions about rebirth and karmic retribution in Magadha is not ultimately convincing, his point that early Buddhist doctrines were formulated in the context of debates between different śramaṇa communities rather than in reaction to “Hindu” religious ideas and norms resonates with Louis de la Vallée Poussin’s opinion that “the Brāhmaṇism from which Buddhism sprang is not the Brāhmaṇa and the Upaniṣad, but represents, even better than the latter, the ancient Indian yoga” (quoted by Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 7).

22 Remarking that “To present him as a sort of socialist is a serious anachronism” (2006: 30), Richard Gombrich rejects attempts to portray the Buddha as a social revolutionary (Gombrich, Richard F. 2006. Theravāda Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo. 2nd rev. ed. London: Routledge [1st ed. 1988]).


24 Bronkhorst, Johannes. 2007. Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India. Leiden/Boston: Brill. Also see Bronkhorst, Johannes. 2004. “Hinduism and Buddhism.” In Buswell 2004: 1.329. In my review of Bronkhorst 2007 (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 18.3 [2008], 381–3), I do not accept Bronkhorst’s localization of a single underlying “spiritual ideology” exclusively in Magadha (however broadly he intends to define the cultural region as wherever the historical Buddha lived) because the origins of basic ideas about rebirth, karmic retribution, the self, and ascetic practices probably belonged to a more extensive geographical and cultural milieu.
What is at issue is the extent to which basic theories of a self (ātman) that transmigrates through the cycle of continuous rebirth (the saṃsāra paradigm) originated internally from the Vedic background or were introduced through processes of inter-religious contact, structural developments of rebirth eschatologies, or other external possibilities.25 While certain Vedic ideas and practices (such as animal sacrifice and Brahminical authority) are clearly rejected by Jains and Buddhists, the composers of the early Upaniṣads (particularly the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad and Chāndogya Upaniṣad) were also questioning, challenging, and reformulating Vedic rituals, cosmologies, and established mores. Since śramaṇa traditions and the early Upaniṣads belong to a similar climate of intellectual ferment in northern India during a period of significant social and religious change, scholars have attempted to establish relative chronological relationships and to identify directional influences. In contrast to the consensus view that Buddhism and Jainism “emerged not long after the composition of the early Upaniṣads” (Olivelle 1996: xxiii), Bronkhorst argues that “at least some portions of the early Upaniṣads—perhaps precisely the portions that introduce the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution into the Veda—were composed more or less at the time of the Buddha, or later” (2007: 258). Although K.R. Norman finds “…echoes of Upaniṣadic statements in the Buddha’s sermons” (1997b: 33), especially in the opposition between the Buddhist doctrine of “no self” (Sanskrit anātman / Pāli anattā) and the equivalence between the individual self (ātman) and universal self (brahmaṇ) in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, it is not clear that Buddhists were responding to specific passages in early Upaniṣads.26 Instead of postulating that Buddhist ideas developed in reaction to prior speculations in the early Upaniṣads, it seems quite likely that they emerged from a shared nexus of intense intellectual

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26 Although he acknowledges possible similarities in thought and language, Bronkhorst rejects Norman’s arguments for a specific link between the Buddhist doctrine of anattā as expressed in in the Alagaddūpama Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya I 136) and the equation of ātman and brahmaṇ attributed to Śāndilya in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad by pointing out that the Pāli sutta does not mention the concept of brahmaṇ and the notion of a permanent “immutable” self is “largely absent from the early Upaniṣads” (2007: 217). Bronkhorst dismisses other “superficial similarities” (2007: 218) proposed by Richard Gombrich as evidence for early Buddhist familiarity with Upaniṣads.
and philosophical debate and competition with other śramaṇas and Brahmins in the middle of the first millennium BCE.

Economic conditions of rural prosperity, urban growth, political consolidation, and expanding trade networks contributed to the institutional organization of the Buddhist saṅgha, which emerged in an environment of material prosperity rather than hardship. While agricultural surplus was not the only causal factor of a “second urbanization” in the Ganga-Yamuna doāb following a long hiatus of about a millennium from the “mature phase” of the Indus Valley civilization (ca. 2300–1800 BCE), urban centers remained “predator[s] on the countryside” (Erdösy 1987: 17).27 Although the presence of Northern Black Polished (NBP) ware beginning ca. 550 BCE in the eastern Ganges plain is a sign of “incipient urbanism” (Thapar 2003: 140),28 archaeological evidence does not display traits of “thriving urbanisation” (Erdösy 1987: 14) until the third century BCE. Buddhist literary references to large cities at the time of the Buddha have led many interpreters, including Max Weber, to posit causal relationships between the growth of cities and the emergence of Buddhism.29 However, Gregory Bailey and Ian Mabbett criticize the “urbanization hypothesis” as a “post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy” of “treating effects as causes” (2003: 34). They acknowledge that the Pāli canonical texts on which they depend to support their argument that Buddhism arose after a period of rapid urbanization belong to later periods (2003: 4), but nevertheless base their analysis of economic and social contexts from the fifth century BCE down to the time of Aśoka almost exclusively on this problematic textual tradition, which “does not coincide with the earliest phase of urbanization, but with the more mature period” (Thapar

28 Thapar, Romila. 2003. Early India: From the origins to AD 1300. Berkeley: University of California Press refers to a general pattern in which “Closely placed, small settlements of the Painted Grey Ware gave way to appreciably larger settlements...” (140) associated with NBP. Erdösy, George. 1995. “City States of North India and Pakistan at the Time of the Buddha” in Allchin 1995: 100–105 reviews the chronology for the appearance of NBP, and concludes that 550–400 BCE is the most likely date for its early phase, a date which is considerably later than ca. 700 BCE proposed for the beginning of the NBP phase at Sringeravapura cited by other authorities, including Chakrabarti 1995: 169.
Thus, many features reflected in archaeological and textual sources from this general period in the late first millennium CE, including the expansion of local, regional, and long-distance trade networks, must instead be seen as concurrent with rather than prior or posterior to the formation of early Buddhism.

Later Buddhist, Jain and puranic sources refer back to sixteen “great countries” (mahājanapadas) of ancient India which competed for political and economic preeminence in the mid-late first millennium BCE. Rather than designating states with fixed boundaries, the term

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30 Adopted from Allchin 1995: 116, fig. 7.4.
31 Raychaudhuri, Hemchandra. 1923. Political History of Ancient India from the accession of Parikshit to the extinction of the Gupta dynasty. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1923, 45–79 compiles references to rulers of the mahājanapadas in Buddhist, Jain, and puranic sources, which belong to varying periods. Lamotte 1988 [1958]:
janapada generally corresponds to a “socio-cultural region” (Wagle 1966: 30) composed of smaller units of villages, towns, and cities. Thus, the major janapadas are closely linked with the emergence of urban administrative capitals. The geographical distribution of these territories extended from the Northwest (Gandhāra and Kamboja) to central and southern India (Avanti, Cedi, and Asmaka), with the heaviest concentration in the Ganges basin (including Magadha and Anga at the eastern extreme). This range was much broader than the Brahmanical limits of the “Land of the Āryas” (Āryāvarta), which is defined in the Dharmasūtras and the Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali (probably second century BCE) as “The region to the east of where the Sarasvatī disappears, west of Kālaka forest, south of the Himalayas, and north of the Pāriyātra mountains” (Olivelle 2005: 36).\(^{32}\) The exclusion of Magadhas and other easterners from the Brahminical heartland of Āryāvarta may suggest that they were “still not completely brahmanized” (Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 7). Romila Thapar observes that the widening of geographical horizons in Jain and Buddhist traditions parallels an eastward shift in the religious “epicentre” (2003: 138) from Vedic centers in the west to the northeastern regions where śramaṇa movements originated and flourished.

\[^{32}\text{This definition of Āryāvarta is found in Baudhāyana Dhamasūtra (1.2.9), Vasiṣṭha Dhamasūtra (1.8) and in Mahābhāṣya (I p. 475 l. 3). In Mānavadharmaśāstra 2.21–22 (maybe second century CE), virtually identical boundaries (“The land between the Himalaya and Vindhya ranges, to the east of Vinaśana and west of Prayāga”) correspond to the “Middle Region” (madhyadeśa), while Āryāvarta more broadly includes areas “from the eastern to the western sea” (Olivelle, Patrick, trans. 2004. The Law Code of Manu, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 24).}\]
A realignment of political power among the rulers of northeastern India is illustrated in Buddhist texts, which emphasize the importance of early patrons. During Śākyamuni’s lifetime, the kingdom of Magadha vied with Kosala for control of northern India. Since the Buddha stayed in Śrāvastī, the capital of Kosala, during many rainy seasons (varṣavāsa), King Prasenajit is depicted as a prominent patron, along with his chief queen Mallikā and other local donors, especially the wealthy merchant Anāthapindada. For example, a story about the Buddha’s acceptance of an invitation from Anāthapindada’s female servant Puniga (Sanskrit: Pūrṇikā; Pāli: Puṇṇikā or Puṇṇā) is briefly summarized in an avadāna in a first century Kharoṣṭhī manuscript:

Puniga was the (*maid) of the householder Anasapidiga (Anāthapindada). The Bhagavat was addressed by King Praseniga (Prasenajit). The Buddha did not agree [to his request] . . . and he did not agree [to the request] of all the householders.

This narrative exemplifies the role of female patrons, including individuals like the maidservant Puniga, whose offer to the Buddha to stay in Śrāvastī is deemed more sincere than invitations from Prasenajit, Anāthapindada and other wealthy male householders. However, the localization of Buddhist literary narratives in Kosala is a common archetype, since Śrāvastī during the reign of Prasenajit is the formulaic setting for numerous discourses attributed to the Buddha.

Under King Bimbisāra, a brother-in-law of Prasenajit who was also lauded as a patron of the early Buddhist community, Magadha became the most powerful kingdom in northern India, with the capital at Rājagrha regarded as a wealthy center and major site for the early

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34 Malalasekera 1937: s.v. Anāthapindika, Kosala, Mallikā, Pasenadi (Pāli citations).
35 Allon 2001: 304 (Appendix 2: The Gāndhāri Avadāna of Puniga). A Pāli version of this episode is preserved in Manorathapūranī 4.34–5 (also see Malalasekera 1937: sv. Puṇṇā Therī 3 for further citations to verses attributed to her in Therīgāthā 236–251).
Buddhist *saṅgha*. Ajātaśatru, the infamous parricide who imprisoned and starved Bimbisāra to death eight years before the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*, further consolidated Magadhan control of overland routes and established a small fort at Pāţaligrāma, which later became the city of Pāţaliputra. Despite his connection with a failed attempt by Devadatta to assassinate the Buddha, Ajātaśatru later hosted the Buddha and his entourage in Rājagrha before his final journey to Kuśinagara. Ajātaśatru and his ministers play major roles in the events preceding and following the Buddha’s *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Ajātaśatru continued to rule for another 24 years, followed by five successive parricides, rule by the minister Śiśunāga, and the rise and fall of the Nanda dynasty. Although the historical memory of these figures preserved in religious and literary sources can not be corroborated by coins, inscriptions, or reliable historiographical traditions from outside of South Asia, the emergence of the Mauryan empire based in Magadha coheres well with archaeological evidence for the growth of powerful cities in the prior period.

*Legacy of the Mauryans: Aśoka as Dharmarāja*

Mauryan control of important nodes along overland routes in the Indian subcontinent significantly influenced early patterns for the growth and expansion of the Buddhist *saṅgha*. While the *saṅgha’s*

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37 Chronological details connected with Bimbisāra’s genealogy and reign remain unclear. Raychaudhuri acknowledges that “There is considerable disagreement between the Purāṇas and the Ceylonese Chronicles regarding the chronology of the kings of the Bimbisārian (or Nāga) and Śiśunāga dynasties” (1923: 116). Magadhan dynastic genealogies in Buddhist and Jain sources are compiled by Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 87–104 and Tripathi 1942: 113–114, who gives a separate table following purānic chronologies, which limit his reign to 28 rather than 52 years (Tripathi 1942: 94, fn. 1). According to Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 4, Magadha was organized as a kingdom only during the Buddha’s time. Tripathi 1942: 104–108 comments on economic conditions and Thapar 2003: 152–155 discusses administration. The total of 200 years for the total length of the reign of Bimbisāra, Ajātaśatru, and their successors until the time of the first Nanda ruler in chronologies reported by Pāli vamsas is very suspicious, while purānic alternatives transpose numerous figures.

38 If a short chronology for the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa* around 370 BCE is adopted, only about 30 years is allowed between the end of Ajātaśatru’s reign and Candragupta Maurya’s accession. Pāli chronologies limit the “9 Nandas” to 22 years, but the reigns of Śiśunāga (Susunāga), and Kālāśoka and his ten sons would have to be telescoped from 68 years to less than 10 years. Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 89 doubts the existence of Kālāśoka, thus shortening the chronology.
horizons were initially limited to the Ganges River basin in northern India during the time of the Buddha, the initial extension of Buddhist establishments throughout South Asia was greatly accelerated by high level support from the Mauryan emperor Aśoka, who is portrayed as an ideal patron in Buddhist literature. In comparison to what can only be vaguely known about conditions in the period of the historical Buddha, a wider variety of contemporary sources provide more reliable evidence of religious and political life during the Mauryan period from about the last quarter of the fourth century BCE to the beginning of the second century BCE. As the earliest written evidence for the study of ancient South Asia, Aśokan inscriptions directly indicate conditions in which Buddhist institutions began to flourish by the middle of the third century BCE. The fragmentary reports of Megasthenes, a Seleukid ambassador to the Mauryan court at Paṭaliputra under Aśoka’s grandfather Candragupta, preserve an outsider’s cross-cultural perspective on India seen through Greek lenses. Candragupta and Aśoka are primarily remembered in Jain and Buddhist literature, but the literary images of these Mauryan rulers as exclusive patrons

39 In addition to Hultsch 1925 and Falk 2006 cited in the first chapter (p. 52, fn. 147), also see translations by Bloch, Jules. 1950. Les inscriptions d’Asoka. Paris: Les Belles Lettres; Sircar, Dineschandra. 1967b. Inscriptions of Aśoka. Rev. ed. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India; and Thapar, Romila. 1961. Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas: With a new afterword, bibliography, and index. London: Oxford University Press (revised edition, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 250–266. For further references to important studies of Aśokan inscriptions by Paul Kent Andersen, Colette Caillat, K.R. Norman, Ulrich Schneider, and previous scholars, see the extensive bibliography in Falk 2006: 13–54 and the general survey in Salomon 1998a: 133–140. A running tabulation includes 14 Major Rock Edicts inscribed at 9 locations, 6 Major Pillar Edicts at 6 sites (19–20 Aśokan pillars have been discovered, but not all are inscribed, and some are inscribed with edicts other than the set of 6 Major Pillar Edicts), similar versions of Minor Rock Edicts at 17 sites, separate edicts at 7 sites, 3 locations of cave inscriptions, and versions of Greek and Aramaic edicts. Updated editions of the entire corpus of Aśokan inscriptions remains a desideratum.

exaggerate their religious affiliations at the expense of rival traditions.\textsuperscript{41} The \textit{Arthaśāstra} attributed to Kautilya, Candragupta’s Brahmin minister, presents itself as a guide to ancient Indian statecraft and political economy during the Mauryan period, although it primarily reflects much later third century CE conditions.\textsuperscript{42} In this survey of historical contexts for Buddhist transmission in Mauryan India, inscriptions of Aśoka are privileged over literary sources, which must be approached carefully with an understanding that biases of later periods have influenced how the Mauryan legacy is remembered.

Candragupta Maurya, the founder of the dynasty, seized control of Magadha after rising to power from obscure origins. Candragupta can be identified with Sandrokottos, an Indian ruler who may have encountered Alexander of Macedon during his expedition to Gandhāra, Punjab, and the lower Indus valley between 327–325 BCE.\textsuperscript{43} Based on a reported meeting between Candragupta and Alexander, historians propose that Candragupta probably began to rule between 324–313 BCE.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{42} Kangle, R.P. 1969–. \textit{The Kautiliya Arthaśāstra}. University of Bombay studies, no. 1–2. [Bombay]: University of Bombay, 3 vols. The dating of the text is extensively discussed by Trautmann, Thomas R. 1971. \textit{Kautilya and the Arthaśāstra; a statistical investigation of the authorship and evolution of the text}. Leiden, Brill. Thapar acknowledges that the text was reworked by Viśnugupta in the third or fourth century CE, but still uses the text to treat Mauryan administration based on her opinion that “the institutions are in the main Mauryan” (1961: 224).

\textsuperscript{43} Karttunen 1997a: 36–7, 257–264 suspects that the “Candragupta legend” may be apocryphal, but does not deny the possibility of a meeting with Alexander. Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 218–219 comments on references to the meeting with Alexander in accounts of Justin (15, 4, 12 ff.) and Plutarch (Life of Alexander, 62, 9). Bongard-Levin, G.M. 1998. \textit{Ancient Indian History and Civilization}. Delhi: Ajanta (1st ed. New Delhi: Arnold–Heinemann, 1985), 64 adds further details about the supposed meeting, which could have taken place after Candragupta had initially attempted to overthrow the Nandas. According to Thapar 2003: 177, William Jones first identified Sandrokottos with Candragupta. Also see Raychaudhuri 1923: 137 ff.

\textsuperscript{44} Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 219 claims that Candragupta seized power in 324 BCE, Thapar 2003: 175 states that the Mauryan empire was founded ca. 321 BCE, Bongard-Levin 1998: 65 favors 317 BCE, Karttunen 1997a: 259 suggests that he first participated in an uprising against Macedonian rule in the Northwest between 317–312 BCE, and Bechert 1989: 101 opts for 313 BCE based on Jain sources which date the accession of Candragupta 155 years after the Nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra in 468 BCE.
In exchange for 500 trained war elephants, Candragupta acquired the northwestern provinces (including Gandhāra) from Seleukos Nikator, a successor of Alexander, in 303 BCE.\(^45\) Although the extent of direct administrative control is unclear, the expansion of Mauryan power from Magadha to Gandhāra under Candragupta essentially unified the older mahājanapadas along the “Northern Route” (uttarāpatha) for the first time in South Asian history.\(^46\) According to Jain traditions, Candragupta stepped down to accompany the Jain elder Bhadrabāhu to Śravana-Belgola in South India, where he fasted to death.\(^47\) Candragupta’s successor, Bindusāra, may have extended Mauryan dominion further into the Deccan peninsula and favored the Ājīvikas while ruling for a period of about 25 years, but his reign is not documented as well as those of Candragupta and Aśoka.\(^48\)

The Mauryan empire reached its zenith during the reign of Aśoka (ca. 270–232 BCE), whom Buddhist traditions revere as an ideal emperor (cakravartin), although he is virtually ignored by other traditions until his rediscovery in the nineteenth century. Aśoka’s murky background may support Buddhist literary accounts in which he assumed the throne as “Aśoka the cruel” (Caṇḍāśoka) after a struggle with rival


\(^{46}\) Northern Route (Uttarāpatha) is discussed in detail in the third chapter (pp. 186–203). Fussman, Gérard. 1987b. “Central and Provincial Administration in Ancient India: The Problem of the Mauryan Empire” Indian Historical Review 14.1–2, views Candragupta’s use of military force to expand Mauryan dominion as the impetus for a “complex administration” with a “communications network” (55) along a system of roads described by Megasthenes and referred to in Aśokan inscriptions, but points out that administrative control was not necessarily centralized in Pātāliputra since provincial officials had considerable autonomy.


\(^{48}\) Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 222–3; Thapar 1961: 17–18, 2003: 178. Bindusāra ruled for 27/28 years according to Pāli vamsus, 25 years according to purānī chronologies. These figures can be calculated from the date of Aśoka’s consecration (ca. 270 BCE), although Pāli traditions refer to a 4 year hiatus between the death of Bindusāra and Aśoka’s reign.
contenders, who were eliminated in fratricidal conflicts. However, Pāli narratives of mass slaughter of ninety-nine brothers are likely to have been embellished, since Aśoka refers to his brothers and sisters in inscriptions. In the Divyāvadāna, Aśoka’s subjugation of a revolt while he was serving as heir-apparent prince in Taxila suggests instability before he became the Mauryan ruler, but Pāli chronicles place him in Ujjain instead of Taxila. In any case, the gory details behind Aśoka’s rise to power figure prominently in literary biographies, which portray him as an especially cruel and violent ruler before his transformation into a Buddhist patron.

As discussed in the previous section, dates for the historical Buddha hinge upon Aśoka’s consecration in the middle of the third century BCE. Aśokan inscriptions are not dated in a continuous era that can be correlated with the Common Era, but references to five contemporary Hellenistic rulers in the 13th Major Rock Edict issued after the 13th year of his reign serve as “the bedrock of the chronology of Indian history, interlocking the date of the Mauryas with Hellenistic kings” (Thapar 2003: 182). The synchronism between the dates for these rulers and the internal chronology of Aśoka’s reign establishes almost certain dates for the beginning of his rule between 274–268 BCE, making a consecration around 270 BCE (or slightly later) fairly
This approximate date not only provides the crucial linchpin for the history of South Asian Buddhism, but also has important ramifications for the relative chronology of ancient Indian political, intellectual, and cultural history.

Patterns of distribution of Aśokan inscriptions indicate the geographical extent of the Mauryan empire at its peak (Map 2.2: Distribution of Aśoka’s Inscriptions). Major Rock Edicts located in the Mauryan borderlands demonstrate that Aśoka’s domain eventually extended to ancient Kaliṅga (modern Orissa) in eastern India, the western coast of India (Girnar in Gujarat and Sopara in Maharashtra), southern India (as far as Suvarṇagiri in Karnataka), and the northwestern frontiers in modern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan. While most of Aśoka’s inscriptions are written in Middle-Indo-Aryan Prakrit vernacular languages using the Brāhmī script (which was probably developed for this purpose during the Mauryan period), Major Rock Edicts written in Kharoṣṭhī at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi (in northwestern Pakistan) reflect linguistic and cultural differences within the Mauryan realm. Greek and Aramaic versions of Aśokan inscriptions from Kandahar (southeastern Afghanistan) show that Mauryan officials also used non-Indic administrative languages and scripts for transmitting imperial messages.

In addition to supplying concrete evidence for the dates of his reign and the territorial boundaries of his empire, inscriptions issued by Aśoka refer to administrative policies, patronage of various religious communities, and the application of his principles of Dharma. Aśoka addressed his orders to various officials who were responsible for writing and transmitting his instructions. For example, the Rājukas (rural

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53 Bongard-Levin 1998: 68 proposes an absolute date of 268 BCE for Aśoka’s consecration based on an astronomical calculations of a solar eclipse in 249 BCE, which he proposes to link with Aśoka’s pilgrimage to Lumbini in his twentieth regnal year based on literary references to a solar eclipse during his tour of Buddhist sites. Some additional time may be allowed for communications about contemporary rulers to filter through the ancient world to Aśoka’s court (Karttunen 1997a: 266).

54 Salomon 1998a: 73–75.

Map 2.2: Distribution of Aśokan inscriptions (based on coordinates in Falk 2006)
officials) who were appointed for “the welfare and happiness of the country people” were given “independent authority in judgement and punishment” although he instructs them to allow a respite of three days to men condemned to capital punishment.\(^{56}\) Passages in several inscriptions seem to reflect an ideal view that ethical interactions should transcend social and religious differences. He encouraged his subjects to perform *Dharma* ceremonies which promote “regard for slaves and servants, respect for teachers, restrained behavior towards living beings, and donations to śramaṇas and Brahmins”\(^{57}\) and defined the “gift of Dharma” (*Dhammaṇa / Dhramadane*) as “good behavior towards slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, generosity towards friends, acquaintances, and relatives and towards śramaṇas and Brahmans.”\(^{58}\) Other passages called for generous donations to both Brahmans and śramaṇas and expressed a tolerant attitude towards “all sects” (Bloch 1950: 121) or “religious communities” (Sircar 1967b: 55):

> King Priyadarśin, Beloved of the Gods, honors all religious groups (*pāsamda, prasamda*), both ascetics and householders, with various gifts and honors. But the Beloved of the Gods does not consider gifts or honors to be as valuable as increasing what is essential for all religious groups. This increase in what is essential is manifold, but its basis is restraint of speech, so as not to extol one’s own religious group or denigrate others’ at improper occasions, or only do so mildly on appropriate occasions.\(^{59}\)

Although Aśoka promoted “restraint of speech” (*vacigutti*), the admonition against sectarian polemics reflects intensive competition between groups of Brahmans and śramaṇas for imperial patronage. Inscriptions lauding generosity to Brahmans and recording donations of caves to the Ājīvikas at Barabar indicate that Aśoka’s patronage

\(^{56}\) Translation of in the 4th Pillar Edict issued in his 26th regnal year follows Thapar 1961: 263, who also discusses this pillar edict in more detail (1961: 103–108). Fussman explains that the expression *janasa athe* refers to “the material affairs, the material happiness of the people” (1987b: 57).

\(^{57}\) 9th Major Rock Edict (Thapar 1961: 254).


extended to multiple religious communities and not exclusively to Buddhists.\(^{60}\)

The promulgation of “Dharma” in Aśoka’s inscriptions raise questions about the role of the Mauryan state in the growth of Buddhist institutions during his reign. Before addressing this issue directly, it is necessary to recognize that Aśoka interpreted Dharma broadly as religious piety, personal morality, and social ethics applicable to his entire realm rather than adopting a specifically Buddhist sense of the term. The governing principles of Dharma are succinctly defined in the 2nd Pillar Edict:

Dharma is good. And what is Dharma? (It is) few faults, abundant virtues, compassion, generosity, truthfulness, and purity.\(^{61}\)

Aśoka’s view of Dharma encompasses ideals of nonviolence, tolerance, moderation, and respect for parents, teachers, and elders, which are drawn from a wide variety of orthodox Brahmanical perspectives and heterodox Buddhist, Jain, and probably Ājīvika values. Since Buddhist doctrines of the Four Truths, Eightfold Path, “no self” (anātman), or release from rebirth through the attainment of nirvāṇa are not mentioned in non-Buddhist inscriptions, scholars have debated the extent to which Aśoka intended to implement Buddhist principles or appropriated certain elements to formulate official propaganda to unify disparate religious groups within the Mauryan empire with an acceptable ideology. Although Richard Gombrich and Romila Thapar, for example, hold that Buddhist ideas inspired Aśoka’s formulation of Dharma, K.R. Norman regards his Dharma policy as “exclusively a moral one” with “no hint of anything exclusively Buddhist” (1997b: 117).\(^{62}\) In sets

\(^{60}\) Falk 2006: 258–269 re-examines the architecture and inscriptions of the Barabar caves, and presents a new reading and translation of three donations by Aśoka in his 12th and 19th regnal years. The excavation of caves in the Nāgārjuni hills (nearby Barabar) donated to the Ājīvikas by Daśaratha, one of Aśoka’s descendants, may have begun while Aśoka was ruling (Falk 2006: 257, 276).

\(^{61}\) Bloch 1950: 162; Hultzsch 1925: 120–121; Sircar 1967b: 71; Thapar 1961: 262. It is interesting to note that dharma is translated as eusebeia (“piety”) in a bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription and in partial Greek translations of the 12th-13th major rock edicts in Kandahar (Falk 2006: 242–245; Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 714–715; Pugliese Carratelli and Garbini 1964: 33). Bongard-Levin observes that the Greek term conveys the idea of righteousness, not religious belief and explains that Aśoka’s moral precepts were “traditional ethical principles easily comprehended by various strata of the population regardless of their ethnic origin or religious allegiance” (1998: 79).

\(^{62}\) Gombrich attempts to identify “distinctively Buddhist values” (2006: 131) in Aśokan inscriptions by pointing out similarities with prescriptions for Buddhist lay
of major rock edicts and pillar edicts inscribed throughout the Mauryan domain, Aśoka appears to have maintained a distinction between the official Dharma and his own commitment as a Buddhist devotee, which he clearly expressed in other inscriptions discussed below.

The violent conquest of Kaliṅga was a pivotal turning point that caused Aśoka to express deep remorse and to adopt “Victory of Dharma” (dharmavijaya) as the goal of his rule. In the 13th Major Rock Edict, Aśoka declared that the impetus for him to practice, desire, and teach Dharma was the mass deportation of 150,000 people, killing of 100,000, and the subsequent loss of life of many more resulting from the subjugation of Kaliṅga during the eighth year of his reign. In this singular epigraphic record, Aśoka juxtaposes military conquests to the “Victory of Dharma” by proclaiming:

This Dharma inscription has been written so that my sons and grandsons would not pursue new conquests. They should delight their own minds, regarding real victory (won by) patience and leniency. They must realize Victory of Dharma is the real conquest.

The bloodshed in Kaliṅga may have prompted Aśoka to embrace Jain and Buddhist principles of nonviolence (ahimsā), but the application of this ideal was tempered by the need to suppress rebellions and punish criminals. In the same inscription, a threat to punish forest tribes makes it very clear that Aśoka was not willing to relinquish the use of violence if his power was threatened. Thus, Aśoka’s admonitions morality in Pāli texts such as the Sigālovāda sutta and the Kūṭadanta sutta. According to Thapar, “…much of the ideology of Dhamma which he enunciated was inspired by Buddhism. But to equate it totally with Buddhism and to suggest that Aśoka was propagating Buddhism as a state religion is to read more into the edicts than was intended by the monarch” (1975: 42). Thapar believes that Aśoka’s Dhamma served as a “group of unifying principles” (2003: 201) rather than a narrow sense of religious piety. Lamotte asserted that “Aśoka himself makes a clear distinction between his personal Dharma… and the Buddhist Law” (1988 [1958]: 228).

63 Norman 1997b: 114–115 attributes Aśoka’s Buddhist conversion to remorse for carnage in a war with Kaliṅga, but the chronology of the undated Minor Rock Edicts (which Norman believes were issued in his 11th regnal year) does not necessarily indicate that he became a Buddhist upāsaka after the Kaliṅga war.

64 Norman’s view that “…Aśoka expanded his empire by force, but thereafter devised the principle of victory by morality [Dharma] and commended it to his successors” (1997b: 118) seems apparent from the evidence of the 13th Major Rock Edict.


66 Fussman’s comments on this passage in the 13th Major Rock Edict help to clarify the apparent contrast between the ideal of nonviolence and its application: “…the
against violence coupled with threats against resistance argue strongly against over-idealizing his image as a ruler who governed according to nonviolent principles, since it was still necessary for him to enforce Mauryan power.

Aśoka’s inscriptions recording visits to Buddhist sites and addressed directly to the Buddhist saṅgha deserve particular attention for illuminating early pilgrimage practices, tensions within monastic communities, and the circulation of orally transmitted texts. Aśoka explicitly identifies himself as a Buddhist lay follower in fourteen versions of his Minor Rock Edicts composed in his tenth regnal year and distributed widely throughout the Mauryan empire:

Thus speaks the Beloved of the Gods. More than two and a half years have passed since I became a Buddhist layman (upāsake), but I was not zealous. Now more than a year has passed since I approached the saṅgha and have become more zealous.\(^67\)

His visits to the site of the Buddha’s awakening (sāmbodhi), Siddhārtha’s birthplace at Lumbini and the stūpa of the previous Buddha Konākamana at Nigāli Sāgar indicate a strong proclivity to Buddhist devotional practices.\(^68\) These epigraphic records show that his literary reputation as “the stūpa builder par excellence” (Strong 1983: 109) had some basis, although no Aśokan inscriptions discovered to

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date are connected with the establishment of relics or the construction of stūpas of Śākyamuni.

Three versions of the so-called “Schism edict” written on pillars at Sarnath, Sāñcī, and Kauśāmbī seem to indicate that Aśoka ordered his administrators to intervene directly in the affairs of the Buddhist saṅgha. Common to all three versions is an admonition against causing a split in the community: “Whoever creates a schism in the saṅgha, whether monk or nun, is to be dressed in white garments, and to be put in an uninhabited place.”⁶⁹ Although their interpretation remains disputed, the inscriptions refer to problems of division in the community (saṅghabheda), which Aśoka may have been called upon to police.⁷⁰ K.R. Norman (1997b: 122–129) compares the anti-schism edicts to different Pāli versions of a third communal recitation believed by the Theravāda tradition to have been held at Pāṭaliputra during the time of Aśoka. Norman concludes that the Aśokan inscriptions and Pāli accounts of a third council do not necessarily refer to the same event, but suggests that Aśoka may have indirectly intervened to evict infiltrators who were not Buddhist monks or nuns from a royally supported monastery or monasteries.

A separate Aśokan edict found at Bairat in Rajasthan but brought to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta after its discovery recommends particular texts to Buddhist monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.⁷¹ While some identifications remain uncertain, the seven “discourses on dharma” (Prakrit: dhamma-paliyāyāni / Sanskrit: dharma-paryāyāḥ) referred to in this inscription provide a valuable glimpse of the types of texts that were being circulated through oral transmission in the middle of the third century BCE.⁷² As K.R. Norman observes, “…we can say

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that some sort of collection of the *Buddhavacana* was in existence in Aśoka’s time” (1997b: 142). The short individual verse texts selected by Aśoka belong to a very early stratum of Buddhist literature, probably before they were classified into fixed textual categories of *nikāyas*, *āgamas*, and *piṭakas*. The significance of Aśoka’s recommendation of these texts extends beyond issues of textual classifications and relative chronology, since he explained that his motive for addressing the lay and monastic community was to ensure the durability of the “True Dharma” (Prakrit: *sadhamma* / Sanskrit: *saddharma*). His concern about the vulnerability of the Buddha’s teachings to decline or disappearance was probably not merely formulaic, but grounded in the turbulent political and religious realities of his age.

Buddhist traditions claim that Aśoka played an active role in the transmission of Buddhism by sending missionaries beyond Mauryan India, but his inscriptions do not provide corroboration. In the 13th Major Rock Edict, Aśoka lists realms of contemporary Hellenistic rulers, neighboring kingdoms, and imperial territories where his prescriptions for Dharma are followed, and grandiloquently claims that his instructions are followed even in places not visited by his envoys. Even if such exaggerated proclamations were believable at some level (if Aśoka’s envoys did reach distant lands), the Dharma that was transmitted would not have been the Dharma taught by Buddhist monks and nuns, but the more general imperial ideology brought by royal Mauryan messengers. Similar reservations apply to another passage in the 5th Major Rock Edict in which Aśoka refers to the appointment of “Dharma Ministers” (*dharma-mahāmātras*):

They are busy in all sects, establishing Dhamma, increasing the interest in Dhamma, and attending to the welfare and happiness of those who are devoted to Dhamma among the Greeks (*Yonas*), the Kambojas, the Gandhārans, the Riṣṭhikas, the Pitinikas, and the other peoples of the west.

References to the borderland inhabitants of the northwestern frontiers of the Mauryan empire suggest that the *Dharma-mahāmātras* were...
Mauryan imperial agents rather than Buddhist missionaries. While it is possible that Buddhist monks and nuns may have accompanied diplomatic missions, the strongest support for such an interaction is not from inscriptions, but from much later accounts in Pāli chronicles attributing the conversion of Sri Lanka to Aśoka’s son Mahinda and daughter Saṅghamitta. Although Aśokan Buddhist inscriptions and the remains of Mauryan period stūpas and monasteries generally support his portrayal as an ardent patron of the saṅgha, the expansion of Buddhism during this period should be attributed to relatively stable political and economic conditions rather than state patronage.

A virtual silence in Brahmanical Sanskrit sources with regard to Aśoka’s legacy contrasts sharply with his legendary status in Buddhist literature. Despite Aśoka’s undoubtable historical achievements, characters with the name of Aśoka are rarely mentioned in the Mahābhārata, perhaps in oblique association with demonic asuras. Although “Buddhism was in the air for the poets of the Mahābhārata” (Hiltbeitel 2005: 129), there is not a single explicit reference to the Buddha or to the Buddhist tradition. Such omissions of important historical figures and religious ideologies suggest that Aśoka’s role was deliberately downplayed because of his support for the Buddhist saṅgha in the post-Mauryan period, when the core of the Mahābhārata may have been composed.
Mahābhārata scholars have long attempted to find reflections of Aśoka in certain characters and to identify heterodox ideologies expressed in the treatment of Dharma. Starting with the premise that “…political and religious ideas are profoundly influenced by the events and social trends in which they arise” (1997: 333), Nick Sutton suggests that ideological tensions between Dharma and the use of violence are voiced by “the fictional Yudhiṣṭhira representing the historical Aśoka and other kings of similar inclination” (1997: 334). Sutton argues that their mutual “abhorrence of warfare” (1997: 335) following military conquests in Kaliṅga and the battle at Kurukṣetra illustrate unease with normative Kṣatriya values. James Fitzgerald agrees that a “Double Crisis of Dharma” was precipitated by Aśoka and other rulers who “elevated the world-denying, brahmin criticizing movements to positions of imperial honor equal to or superior to that of the Vedas” (2004: 115). However, Fitzgerald views Yudhiṣṭhira not as a representation of Aśoka but as a rebuttal or refutation of his “blithe embrace” (137) of nonviolence, since Yudhiṣṭhira and his Pāṇḍava brothers and allies justify violent actions to restore Dharma. Thus, the composers of the Mahābhārata in the centuries following Aśoka consciously juxtaposed Yudhiṣṭhira, the ideal Kṣatriya ruler who “stands steady in battle,” to the Buddhist emperor (cakravartin) and Dharmarāja Aśoka. Alf Hiltebeitel accepts the possibility of polysemic juxtapositions between Yudhiṣṭhira and Aśoka, suggests parallels between the Brah-

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79 Hiltebeitel comments that questions about relationships between the Mahābhārata and Buddhism were raised by Adolf Holtzmann, whose ‘inversion theory’ linked Aśoka with a foreign Buddhist Durvyodhana, and, as he puts it, “certain authors are still playing with the same gamepieces” (2005: 108). Biardeau 2002 proposed that the “initial shock” (l’ébranlement initial, 1.103) of Aśoka’s embrace of Buddhism led to a Brahmanical reaction (1.113), resulting in an epic “riposte to the Buddhist menace” (1.136). Biardeau elaborated on this hypothesis in her conclusion: “Épopée et Bouddhisme” (2.747–782).

min general Drona and the historical figure of Puṣyamitra Śuṅga, and notices similarities between the denigration of stūpa (edūka) worship in Mārkaṇḍeya’s ex eventu prophecies of barbarization and criticisms of religious festivals in Aśokan inscriptions. However, he cautions that “one-to-one readings [such as Yudhiṣṭhira as a representation or refutation of Aśoka] may have something persuasive about them without being as singly correct as their proposers propound” (2005: 129). While juxtapositions between Aśoka’s interpretation of Dharma and Yudhiṣṭhira’s reconfiguration of Kṣatriya identity have stimulated scholarly interpretations, reading the Mahābhārata as a response to issues of religious patronage and rivalry during the Mauryan period may circumscribe this complex text too neatly and narrowly. The Mahābhārata may just as likely belong to chronological and historical contexts from the second century BCE through third century CE when Indo-Greek, Saka, and Kuṣāṇa rulers established dominion over northern India and Buddhist institutions expanded beyond central nodes and main routes formerly controlled by the Mauryans.

The historical memory of Aśoka as a model royal Buddhist patron persisted far beyond South Asia, but his impact on ancient Indian political history and non-Buddhist religious traditions is difficult to assess. The dynastic succession after Aśoka is vague, and the Mauryan empire disintegrated within fifty years of his death in ca. 230 BCE. Daśaratha, who may have directly followed Aśoka, donated caves to the Ājīvikas at Nāgārjunī Hill near Barabar and is known in some purāṇic genealogies, but is not mentioned in Buddhist or Jain sources. In the Divyāvadāna, Asoka’s successor Kunāla was sent to subdue a revolt in Taxila, where he was blinded as a result of an order issued by Tiṣyarakṣitā, the chief queen. According to this account, Kunāla’s son Samprati (who is known in Jain literature as a great patron) then became emperor after Aśoka exhausted the empire’s resources by

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81 Hiltbeitel 2005: 113, 126. According to Hiltbeitel, “further reminders of an interface with a Buddhism compounded by mlecchification” (2005: 127) reflect a basic antipathy between Brahmins and heterodox Buddhists. His decoding (following Biardeau 2002: 2.753–758) of Jarāsāṃdha as a representation of Māra (or Aśoka) in juxtaposition to Kṛṣṇa as a figure of Bhakti devotionalism associated with Mathura is less convincing.


making donations to the Buddhist *saṅgha*. The last Mauryan ruler, according to purānic sources, was Bhadratha, who was overthrown by his Brahmin general Puṣyamitra, the founder of the Śuniga dynasty, around 185 BCE. Historians have attributed the rapid decline of the Mauryas within a span of less than fifty years after Aśoka’s death to the impossibility of administering such an immense territory, a cumbersome bureaucracy, an economic crisis marked my devaluation of Mauryan coinage, Brahmanical reaction to official patronage of Buddhists and other śramaṇas, and the failure of Aśoka’s nonviolent Dharma policy to meet the needs of governance or to fulfill Kṣatriya norms. While a completely satisfying explanation can not be offered here, the salient point to note is that political and religious dynamics of the Mauryan period provided a crucial impetus for the expansion of Buddhist institutions, which survived the downfall of the dynasty of the Buddhist tradition’s most famous patron.

*Migrations, Material Exchanges, and Cross-Cultural Transmission in Northwestern Contact Zones*

Movements of people, materials, languages, symbols, and religious ideas and rituals have had numerous impacts on the northwestern frontier of South Asia, which was never an isolated or static enclave. Multiple itineraries used by exogenous migrants for crossing rivers (particularly the Indus and its tributaries in the Punjab), mountain ranges (such as the Hindu Kush, Pamirs, and Karakorum), and deserts demonstrate that permeable geographical boundaries did not hinder mobility. A brief treatment of much earlier material exchanges and migrations introduces themes of contact and mobility, thus setting the stage for the arrival of various groups in the northwestern borderlands after the collapse of the Mauryans in the early second century BCE. The wide distribution of lower Indus Valley seals and other artifacts from the Persian Gulf to Shortughaï in the Amu Darya/Oxus River valley in Badakhshan (northeastern Afghanistan) demon-

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86 Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 354–357; in the *Divyāvadāna* (Strong 1983: 292–294) Puṣyamitra belongs to the Mauryan line, but he is remembered as an enemy to the *saṅgha*.
strates long-distance maritime and overland trade connections until ca. 1800 BCE. Similarities between burial practices associated with the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC, ca. 2100–1500 BCE) and the Gandhara Grave Culture (ca. 1700–1400 BCE) as well as grave sites in Baluchistan suggest a pattern for the movement of Proto-Indo-Aryans from the western Central Asian steppes through the Oxus basin and across the Hindu Kush of central Afghanistan to northwestern South Asia. Nūristānī languages still spoken in northeastern Afghanistan may also represent vestiges of early migrations, since they belong to a separate linguistic branch of Indo-Aryan that appears to have diverged from archaic forms of Old Indo-Aryan (as preserved in vedic Sanskrit). References in the Rgveda to rivers and other toponyms located in modern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan strongly indicate geographical familiarity with the northwestern subcontinent. Protohistoric networks of long-distance trade contacts, archeological evidence of migrations between Central Asia and South Asia, and the spread of Indo-Aryan languages are preludes for later historical contexts of Buddhist transmission to the northwestern frontiers of South Asia.

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Contacts with the Achaemenid empire of ancient Iran and the Hellenistic successors of Alexander of Macedon initiated a series of cross-cultural encounters in the Northwest. Old Persian inscriptions of Darius I (522–486 BCE) and Xerxes (486–465 BCE) indicate that Gandhāra (Gadāra) and Sindh (Hiduš) in present-day northwestern and southern Pakistan were the easternmost Achaemenid provinces.91 Relying on the account of Scylax of Caryanda, the Greek historian Herodotus (4.44) briefly refers to an expedition sent by Darius I to explore the Indus River around 518–519 BCE.92 This account seems to confirm that the lower Indus valley was included in the domain of Darius I, who received 360 talents of powdered gold in tribute from this province, thus exceeding the amount of revenue from any other province.93 Despite these epigraphic and literary references to Achaemenid tributary provinces in India, it is important to acknowledge significant differences between official images and the difficult reality of administering an empire extending from the Mediterranean to the Indus. Pierre Briant wisely cautions:

93 Herodotus (3.94–95) calculates that 360 talents of gold-dust annually received by Darius from the twentieth satrapy of India (the lower Indus) is equivalent to 4680 silver talents, since gold is worth thirteen times the value of silver. The story relayed by Herodotus (3.98, 102–105) of how the Indians acquired such a large supply of gold by using great ants “in size somewhat less than dogs, but bigger than foxes” (Rawlinson, George, trans. 1942. The Persian Wars. New York: Random House, 262) raises suspicions about the credibility of this figure. Tarn 1985 [1951]: 108 dismisses the story, but Karttunen 1989: 37–38, 171–176 discusses possible sources for the story of the gold-digging ants and points out that the source of the gold was not the lower Indus.
It appears clear that neither the country lists nor the depictions of peoples are intended to give a realistic picture of the administration or the geography of the Empire. Instead, the lists and depictions are primarily the vehicles of the very idea of royal and imperial power. (Briant 2002 [1996]: 183)

The extent of direct Achaemenid control over the northwestern Indian subcontinent remains unclear, especially in regard to Taxila and areas east of the Indus River.

Fragmentary accounts of the *Persika* and *Indika* attributed to Ctesias of Knidos, a Greek physician who served in the Achaemenid court for sixteen or seventeen years until 398/7 BCE, illustrate how fantastic and factual information about India was filtered to a Greek audience through Iran.94 Unfortunately, Ctesias’ account of the Achaemenid network of routes across the Iranian plateau and western Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent has not survived, since the ‘Royal Road’ between Sardis and Susa described by Herodotus (5.52–4) was “just one royal road among many others” (Briant 2002 [1996]: 357).95 As Pierre Briant comments, “…many other itineraries, often much shorter and often following mountain or desert routes, are left out” and “It was in fact impossible to travel by such routes without local guides” (2002 [1996]: 360). While official documents indicate that the main roads primarily served political and military purposes, Briant observes that “information on customs and tolls seems to confirm the breadth and density of trade” (387).

Cross-cultural borrowings from Achaemenid Iran were certainly possible, but Indian sources do not explicitly refer to transmission

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94 Karttunen 1989: 80–85 discusses the “bad reputation” (80) of Ctesias among classical authors and modern scholars, but cautions that “we cannot always use modern criteria when judging ancient authors” (81). Karttunen’s observation that authors like Herodotus and Megasthenes who are viewed as (relatively) more trustworthy were also “fond of marvels” (82) is contested by Parker, who argues that “The marvel, so important to Ctesias’ ethnography with its tendencies towards natural history, became an embarrassment to the development of a new kind of historiography that was beginning to emerge” (30–31). Parker reviews current scholarship, including a commentary on fragments attributed to Ctesias by Lenfant, Dominique. 2004. *La Perse; l’Inde; autres fragments*. Collection des universités de France, v. 435. Paris: Belles lettres. Now also see Nichols, Andrew. 2008. *The Complete Fragments of Ctesias of Cnidus: Translation and commentary with an introduction*. Gainesville: University of Florida Ph.D. Dissertation.

95 According to Photius’ summary, the *Persika* of Ctesias “described the relays (stathmoi), days elapsed, and parasangs between Ephesus and Bactria and India” (Briant 2002 [1996]: 357).
in either direction. The derivation of the Kharoṣṭhī script from Aramaic, which was used throughout the Achaemenid realm, is relatively straightforward, but the development of Brāhmī as a chancery script for writing Aśokan inscriptions may have also been related to an effort to emulate the royal inscriptions of Achaemenid or later Seleukid rulers.96 Achaemenid influences on Mauryan art and architecture have also been suggested, but the evidence for this period of Indian art is very limited.97 The possibility of Iranian influences on later layers of rock art in the Upper Indus valley is stronger, but Achaemenid sources seem unlikely. Nevertheless, the long period of Achaemenid control (however nominal) of the northwestern borderlands prior to the conquests of Alexander of Macedon is likely to have enhanced its already hybrid Indo-Iranian culture by opening additional channels of trade, travel and communication.

**Hellenistic Interactions**

Alexander’s attempt to invade India initiated cross-cultural interactions between Hellenistic and South Asian civilizations in the contact zones between the Indus and Oxus rivers. After conquering the Achaemenid heartland of ancient Iran following the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE, Alexander of Macedon led a large military expedition to Central Asia (Bactria and Sogdia) and the northwestern regions of South Asia (Gandhāra, Punjab, and the lower Indus) between 330–325 BCE.98 Since he retreated down the Indus River following a difficult expedition rather than pursuing further conquests in the Indian subcontinent, the question of whether he intended to subdue only the eastern borderlands of the Achaemenid empire or to complete a world

Fig. 2.1: Heliodoros Pillar in Vidiśā (courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies).
conquest remains open to debate. Along the way, he established garrisons at important nodes where Greek colonists maintained Hellenistic cultural and religious ties long after his death in Babylon in 323 BCE. Although localizations of eponymous “Alexandrias” and other cities purportedly founded during his South Asian campaigns are uncertain, relatively recent discoveries of archaeological evidence from Kandahar (Alexandria in Arachosia) and Ai Khanum confirm the survival of Hellenistic cultural life in border areas of South Asia. In addition to Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of Aśoka in Kandahar (discussed previously), a second century BCE Greek epitaph from the family tomb of a trader named Sophytos, the son of Naratos, indicates that Hellenistic literary culture continued to be cultivated:

For a long time the house of my forefathers was flourishing when the irresistible fury of the Three Fates destroyed it. I, unfortunate Sophytos, scion of the family of Naratos, quite young and deprived of the wealth of my family, who had cultivated the arts of Apollo the archer and the Muses together with the virtue of wisdom, considered how to restore my ancestors' house to a new grandeur. Having borrowed money to make it fructify, I left my country, determined not to return before amassing a great fortune. Therefore, I took up commerce in many cities. I accumulated great wealth without suffering any harm. Here I am, having returned after innumerable years to my fatherland, with much praise and amidst my friends' rejoicing. And at one and the same time, I have reconstructed and beautified my ancestors' house, which was dilapidated, and since the family tomb had fallen to the ground, I rebuilt a new one. And I had this stele erected next to the road so that it will speak thus: look at my accomplishments. Well worthy to be imitated. May my sons and grandsons preserve the house which they owe to me.

99 In assessing the legacy of Alexander in Asia, Holt emphasizes that “We might avoid preconceptions about Alexander’s personality and impact by asking what the king did rather than dreamt…” (1989: 8). Foucher, Alfred. 1942–1947. La vieille route de l’Inde de Bactres à Taxila. 2 vols. Paris: Éditions d’art et d’histoire, argued that Alexander “would do no more than place his feet in the imprints left by Cyrus and Darius I” (2.191).


This inscribed stele shows that Indian merchants like Sophytos, whose name is probably equivalent to Subhūti and whose father’s name may be derived from Nārada in Sanskrit, adapted Greek religious practices and philosophical outlooks while “amassing great fortune” through “commerce in many cities.”

Hellenistic culture also flourished at Ai Khanum, “a full Greek polis” (Karttunen 1997a: 47) located at the confluence of the Oxus and Kokcha rivers in northeastern Afghanistan. Excavations by the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan between 1965–1978 revealed Greek and Iranian temples, a gymnasium, a theatre, an arsenal, and a palace, as well as Greek dedicatory and funerary inscriptions and copies of Delphic maxims set up by Clearchus of Soli. Archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence for the presence of Greek colonists and Hellenized local inhabitants at Ai Khanum (until its abandonment around 145 BCE) demonstrates that long-distance contacts and exchanges between the Mediterranean, Iranian, and Indian worlds continued long after the period of Alexander’s expedition. Although Alexander was not remembered in ancient South Asian sources, recent discoveries associated with his successors who adapted to dynamic political, economic, and religious conditions in borderland outposts challenge the earlier assessments of W.W. Tarn and A.K. Narain, who juxtaposed imperialistic Greeks to proto-nationalistic Indians.
From around 250 BCE until the late first century BCE, Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings successfully established control of regional domains while struggling to defend against Sakas and other groups migrating across Central Asia. Their dynastic history is mostly reconstructed through numismatic analysis of widely distributed coinage, which along with other forms of material evidence reflects a synthesis of Greek, Indian and Iranian languages and writing systems, political titles, religious symbols, and artistic styles. For example, Agathokles, an Indo-Greek ruler around 190–180 BCE, issued a special series of silver coins with the earliest attested images of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva and his brother Balarāma-Saṃkarsana, and another series of bronze coins with either Subhadrā, their sister, or Laksñī, the Indian goddess of wealth and fortune. Osmund Bopearachchi (1993: 23) suggests that
these coins of Agathokles with legends written in Greek, Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī may have been issued for the Indian territories where he had only recently proclaimed himself king. Although his predecessor Demetrius is usually regarded as the first Greek ruler to have made conquests south of the Hindu Kush, on the basis of a recent discovery of a Kharoṣṭhī inscription dated in year 201 “of the Greeks” (yoṇaṇa) and year 73 of the Azes era beginning in 58/7 BCE, Richard Salomon argues that Agathokles may have been responsible for initiating an “Indo-Greek era” in 186/5 BCE. In addition to instituting the first continuous historical era, the Indo-Greek rulers also left imprints in the form of military and political titles, Macedonian month names used in epigraphical dating formulae, and the use of the Greek alphabet for writing the Bactrian language. Contact and exchange was generally limited to the northwestern frontiers, where layers of Hellenistic influence persisted after the last Indo-Greek rulers disappeared from the political scene in the first century BCE.

The presence of Indo-Greeks in the Northwest during the last two centuries BCE has stimulated debates about their responses to religious and cultural features of the Indo-Iranian borderland environment. Although many deities depicted on their coins belonged to the Hellenistic pantheon, Indo-Greek rulers from Agathokles onwards (as well as Sakas, Parthians, and Kuśānas) adopted a wide range of Iranian and Indian deities, Buddhist symbols, and South Asian titles and

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109 Karttunen 1997a: 273–4 discusses the extent of the Indian domains of Demetrius based on literary references, which also associate Greek conquests of India after Alexander with Apollodotus and Menander. A recently discovered Greek inscription of Heliodotus (Bernard, et al. 2004: 333 ff.; Rougemont 2005: 133–4, fig. 2) from Kuliab in Tajikistan recording a dedication to Hestia refers to Demetrius as a “glorious victor” (kallinikos is a laudative epithet) and to his father Euthydemos as “the greatest of all kings” but does not indicate that their dominion extended beyond ancient Bactria. MacDowall, David. 2005. “The Role of Demetrius in Arachosia and the Kabul Valley.” In Bopearachchi and Boussac 2005: 197–206 focuses on the silver and copper coins of Demetrius (also see MacDowall 2007: 99).

110 Salomon, Richard. 2005a. “The Indo-Greek Era of 186/5 BC in a Buddhist Reliquary Inscription.” In Bopearachchi and Boussac 2005: 359–401 (CKI 405: http://www.ebmp.org/a_inscription.php?catid=CKI0405). Salomon discusses other Brāhmī, Kharoṣṭhī, and Bactrian inscriptions that may be dated in this era, which is explicitly attested in a Brāhmī inscription in year 116 “of the reign of the Yavanas” (yavanarajyasya), which would correspond to ca. 70 BCE. Jakobsson, Jens. 2009. “Who Founded the Indo-Greek Era of 186/5 BCE?” Classical Quarterly 59.2, 505–510 speculates that the era may have been promoted by Menander and Antimachus II. I have not yet seen an article by Widemann, François. 2004. “Une confirmation numismatique de l’era yavana de 186/5.” Nomismatika Chronika 23, 37–45.
epithets. W.W. Tarn attempted to explain Indo-Greek patronage of Buddhism as a strategy to gain local support against Indian rulers such as Puṣyamitra, who seized power after the collapse of the Mauryans and restored Brahmanical institutions, according to Sanskrit purānic traditions. Such a juxtaposition between foreign Greek supporters of Buddhism in the Northwest and traditional Indian kings who maintained “Hindu” orthodoxy oversimplifies more complex patterns of religious patronage of multiple South Asian religious traditions.

Greek patronage of Buddhism is most clearly associated with Menander, a powerful Indo-Greek ruler of the Punjab and northwestern India around 150 BCE who issued numerous coins and is known in both Buddhist and western classical literary traditions. However, Menander’s silver coins showing Athena in various martial poses do not indicate a Buddhist affiliation and his bronze coins depict an eclect-

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111 Karttunen 1997a: 309–315 discusses the representation and localization of Greek gods and the representation of local gods in Greek form. In “The Greek Kingdoms of Central Asia” (in Harmatta 1994: 98–129), Paul Bernard observes that “With very few exceptions, the official state pantheon was entirely Greek” (1994b: 114), but temples dedicated to local and Iranian deities at Ai Khanum “owed nothing to Greek tradition” (ibid., 115). Bernard ameliorates this apparent discrepancy between numismatic iconography and religious architecture, archaeology and art by commenting that “the Greeks themselves had probably never, except in their own official state religion, put up any barriers between their own gods and those of their subjects, and so had paved the way to their progressive assimilation” (127). MacDowall, David. 2007b. “Coinage from Iran to Gandhāra—with special reference to divinities as coin types.” In Srinivasan 2007: 233–266 surveys deities depicted on Bactrian, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Indo-Parthian coins.

112 Although Narain 1957: 98–9 effectively counters Tarn 1984 [1951]: 175, similar arguments are adopted by Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 385 and Seldeslachts, Erik. 2007. “Greece, the Final Frontier? The Westward Spread of Buddhism.” In Heirman and Bumbacher 2007: 131–166, who writes that “The Greek struggle with Puṣyamitra gave the Buddhists the prospect of renewed influence . . . What may be sensed is that strategic reasons made some Greeks the promoters of Buddhism and some Buddhists supporters of the Greeks” (141).

tic mixture of ambiguous symbols, including the wheel which could be associated with a wheel-turning emperor (cakravartin) or the wheel of dharma (dhammacakra). In contrast to the numismatic evidence, Pāli and Chinese Buddhist texts invariably portray Menander as an important Buddhist patron. In shorter and earlier versions, Menander is satisfied with the responses of the learned monk Nāgasena and donates an expensive wool blanket and 800 meals to the Buddhist community, but it is only in the expanded Pāli version that Menander (Milinda) relinquishes his throne, converts to Buddhism, and becomes a lay follower (upāsaka). Although the Moralia of Plutarch refer to the distribution of Menander’s relics (mnēmeia), such burial practices are more likely to be connected with Hellenistic hero cults than Buddhist worship of the relics of a lay patron. Thus, Buddhist literary traditions

114 Bopearachchi 1990: 48 and Fussman 1993a: 85–90 agree that the numismatic evidence does not confirm Menander’s conversion to Buddhism, but comments by Paul Bernard (see note 110) on discrepancies between the official state pantheon and religious architecture and archaeology may help to reconcile differences between depictions of deities on Menander’s coinage and his reputation as a Buddhist patron in Buddhist literary traditions.


116 Fussman, Gérard. 1994a. “Upāya-kauśalya: L’implantation du bouddhisme au Gandhāra.” In Bouddhisme et cultures locales: Quelques cas de réciproques adaptations, eds. Fukui Fumimasa and Gérard Fussman. Paris: École Française d’Extréme Orient, 25–26 remarks that Menander’s conversion to Buddhism and assumption of upāsaka status should be understood only in the sense that he was not hostile to Buddhism, since aside from the Milindapañha’s version, there is no other indication that affirms his exclusive preference for Buddhism.

adopt Menander “as one of theirs” (Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 425) but do not prove that he was exclusively Buddhist, since he probably supported a wide array of religious groups seeking his support, just like any other South Asian ruler.

In adopting South Asian models of religious patronage, the distinctive identity of the Indo-Greeks eventually disappeared as they became fully Indianized. While King Menander is praised as a Buddhist patron (if not a convert), a Greek ambassador (yonadūta) named Hēliodōros sent from Taxila to Vidiśā in central India by the Indo-Greek king Antialkidas, refers to himself as a devotee (bhāgavata) of Viṣṇu in a late second century BCE Brāhmī inscription (fig. 2.1: Heliodoros Pillar). Hēliodōros donated a pillar of Garuda, the eagle who serves as Viṣṇu’s animal emblem, during his visit to the court of Kāśiputra Bhāgabhadra, whom historians have attempted to identify with Śuṅga kings listed in purānic genealogies such as Bhadraka/Odraka or Bhāga(-vata). Some Greek names and titles also appear in Buddhist inscriptions from the Northwest and in Buddhist cave inscriptions from western India. However, references to Yavana (or

Press, “A hero cult involves setting apart one particular grave, known as a heroon, from other burials by marking off a special precinct, by bringing sacrifices and votive gifts, and occasionally by building a special grave monument” (1985: 203). Burkert’s comments about connections between the rise and popularity of hero cults during Hellenistic times and the establishment of “effectice presence” in a “specific locality” suggest structural resonances with Buddhist relic cults that may have appealed to a Greek audience in the Northwest.

118 Salomon 1998a: 265–267 (Appendix 2: Besnagar Pillar Inscription of Hēliodōros, fig. 12, with further references on p. 266).
119 Sircar, Dineschandra. 1965. Select Inscriptions bearing on Indian History and Civilization. Vol. 1: From the Sixth Century BC to the Sixth Century AD 2nd ed. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 88–89 suggests that “Bhāgabhadra may be identified with Bhadraka, the fifth Śuṅga king according to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (88, n. 4). However, this identification is dismissed by Narain 1957: 119, who instead identifies Bhāgabhadra with the ninth Śuṅga king known as Bhāga or Bhāgavata. A Śuṅga connection remains hypothetical, since Kāśiputra Bhāgabhadra may have been a local or regional ruler of Vidiśā.
120 Fussman 1994a: 26 points out that only the Kharoṣṭhī inscription of the Meridarch Theodoros may belong to the period of the Indo-Greek rulers in the Northwest, although other Greek names appear in later inscriptions. Since very few Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions (with the exception of the Aśokan edicts) can be dated before ca. 50 BCE, it would be misleading to conclude that “This lack of information on the Greeks in the inscriptions of Gandhāra and Panjab seems to indicate that there was no noticeable Greek influence on Buddhism…” (Dietz, Siglinde. 2007. “Buddhism in Gandhāra.” In Heirman and Bumbacher 2007: 56). For Yavanas in western Indian inscriptions, see Karttunen 1997a: 297–298, who refers to hypotheses for associating them with merchants advanced by Stein, Otto. 1935. “Yavanas in early Indian inscriptions.” Indian
Yona) donors with Indian and Iranian names do not strictly designate Greek descendants, since “…the connotation of Yavana underwent changes from being identified as Greek to Graeco-Iranian, Hellenist Indian, Indianized Greek, and Graeco-Roman or anyone coming from the West” (Ghosh 2007: 291).

Alfred Foucher strongly advocated for the importance of an amalgamation of Hellenistic models with Indian and Iranian traditions in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra. However, Foucher’s theory of a “Graeco-Buddhist” school of art and his arguments for a Greek origin of anthropomorphic images of the Buddha remain controversial. Foucher and other proponents of Hellenistic influences in Gandhāran Buddhist art have struggled to explain a chronological gap between the heyday of Indo-Greek rule in the Northwest in the second century BCE and the first appearance of identifiable Hellenistic features in Buddhist art of Gandhāra only in the first century CE. Lamotte, for example, acknowledged that “…this influence took a long time to become apparent and that although it was implanted during the Indo-Greek occupation, it did not bear fruit until first the Śaka-Pahlava period, and then the Kuśāṇa” (1988 [1958]: 429). This problematic lag between the hypothetical ‘implantation’ and concrete ‘manifestation’ of a proposed Hellenistic ‘synthesis’ in Gandhāran Buddhist art raises questions about the impetus, extent, and significance of the long survival of Greek stylistic features, which were transmitted through numerous intermediaries and are more related to technical

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123 Foucher posited that Hellenism lay dormant in Gandhāra until a combination of factors including the expansion of Buddhism and increasing commerce led to a “rebirth of influence under the Indianized form” (1947: 324) when “the Hellenistic seed bore its fruits under a dynasty not very different from that which implanted it” (1947: 333). Fussman 1994a: 26 points out that the period of Buddhism’s success in Gandhāra is either contemporary with or posterior to the downfall of the Indo-Greek rulers.
detail rather than religious ideology. Maurizio Taddei identified Hellenistic models and narrative motifs in Gandhāran Buddhist art and architecture, but recognized that these foreign elements were appropriated from a wide range of Hellenized cultures extending from the Mediterranean to Egypt, Parthia, and Gandhāra, where local and exogenous groups chose to adopt, preserve, and innovatively develop distinctive styles of art and iconography. Since Italian excavations of an Indo-Greek urban center at Barikot in the Swat valley of northwestern Pakistan have revealed “the undeniable presence of workshops and craftsmen of Hellenistic tradition active in the Northwest” (Callieri 2007: 158), Hellenistic ateliers may have continued to contribute to the mélange of iconographic elements and architectural styles evident in Gandhāran Buddhist art in the early centuries CE.

Relationships between Iranian and Hellenistic cultures and the Buddhist traditions of Gandhāra and Central Asia are addressed further in Old Roads in the Northwestern Borderlands (Chapter 4) and Long-Distance Transmission to Central Asian Silk Routes and China (Chapter 6). A tendency of many earlier scholars such as Foucher and Lamotte to overemphasize the impact of the Achaemenids and Indo-Greeks on the history of Buddhism has been counterbalanced by efforts to downplay ‘foreign’ influence. Interactions between Brahmins who were already well established in the region since vedic times, Buddhist newcomers, socially assimilated exogenous migrant groups, and local intermediaries (like Sophytos) who appropriated Iranian and Greek languages, writing systems, titles, customs, and ideas for their own political and economic benefit contributed to dynamic hybridity.

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124 Fussman, while accepting the possibility of a “synthèse hellénico-Bouddhique” (1994a: 27) long after the end of Indo-Greek political domination, argues that the artistic traditions of Gandhāran Buddhism are ideologically identical to those of Mathura and Amarāvati.


127 Conversations with Georgios Halkias and Damien Janos, modern yavanas in Bochum, Germany, dialogues with Suchandra Ghosh and Abhishek Singh Amar, and the participation of colleagues in a project on Dynamics in the History of Religion between Asia and Europe for the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities (IKGF) have helped to clarify issues related to the synthesis of
Thus, intercultural exchanges in the northwestern borderlands in the late first millennium BCE established foundations for patterns of cross-cultural mobility and transmission which culminated in the following periods of the Sakas and Kuśāṇas.

Saka Migrants and Mediators between Central Asia and South Asia

As Indo-Greek power waned, various groups of Sakas established control of important nodes on networks of long-distance routes used for migrations, trade, and cultural transmission between Central Asia, the Iranian borderlands, and the northwestern Indian subcontinent. Their domination of overland routes corresponds to a critical period of heightened patronage and growth of Buddhist institutions in the first century BCE and first century CE. The profound impact of the Sakas in South Asia is gaining greater recognition, although many previous scholars regarded the Sakas (sometimes called Indo-Scythians) as mere imitators of their Indo-Greek predecessors. For example, W.W. Tarn opined that the “Sacas simply stepped into the shoes of the Greeks” (1984 [1951]: 323). Subsequent Kuśāṇa dominion over a more extensive empire extending from Bactria to northeastern India has overshadowed Saka precedents. Finally, the conflation of Sakas (Śakas) with other immigrant goups (including the Indo-Greek yava-纳斯 and Iranian pahlavas) has obscured their position. Brahmanical xenologies integrate these powerful but impure mleccha rulers into the varṇa hierarchy as degraded Kṣatriyas. Nevertheless, the establishment of continuous Indian historical eras which are still in use, the Azes

128 For a more detailed treatment of Śaka and Kuśāṇa migration routes, see Neelis, Jason. 2007. “Passages to India: Śaka and Kuśāṇa Migrations in Historical Contexts.” In Srinivasan 2007: 55–94. This section is a synopsis of this longer article, but focuses on the relevance of these migrations for patterns of Buddhist transmission.

(Vikrama) era of 58 BCE and the Śaka era of 78 CE, were originally tied to the reigns of Saka rulers, whose chronologies are reviewed below. In addition to linguistic borrowings of Iranian loanwords into Sanskrit and Prakrit languages, the initial use of Sanskrit in official inscriptions and the adoption of poetic conventions (kāvya) in epigraphic eulogies (prāśasti) are connected with Saka centers in Mathura and Gujarat during the first two centuries CE. The active role of Sakas as patrons of Buddhist literature, art and archeology is apparent in early Buddhist manuscripts from Gandhāra, pre-Kuśāna sculptures from Mathura, and Kharaṣṭhī and Brāhmī inscriptions from northwestern and western regions of South Asia, but they also supported other religious groups as well. Sakas and other Iranian and Central Asian immigrants were not merely passive converts to Buddhism, but played active roles as mediators for the trans-cultural flow of Buddhism beyond India.

Saka migrations to South Asia

Saka immigrants, who began to arrive in South Asia around the beginning of the first century BCE, belonged to separate branches of nomadic and sedentary groups that inhabited areas of Central Asia extending from the Pontic steppes north of the Black Sea to western Mongolia. Peoples known as Sakas in Iranian and Kharaṣṭhī inscriptions, Śakas in Sanskrit, and Scythians in western classical sources are broadly associated with material cultures and artistic styles classified as the “Scythian triad” (consisting of bronze and iron weapons, horse-

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130 Damsteegt 1978: 204–216; Sheldon Pollock comments: “The radical reinvention of Sanskrit culture seems to have occurred—at least, it is here that we can actually watch it occurring—precisely where one might expect it, in a social world where the presuppositions and conventions of the vaidika culture were weakest: among newly immigrant peoples from the far northwest of the subcontinent (and ultimately from Iran and Central Asia), most importantly the Śakas (the so-called Indo-Scythians), especially a branch of the Śakas known as the Western Kṣatrapas, and the Kuśānas” (2006: 67). Buddhist (hybrid) Sanskrit inscriptions and literature are discussed in Chapter 1 pp. 44–54.

riding gear, and the so-called animal style). However, these features were shared by a wide range of Eurasian nomads and are not as clearly apparent in South Asia as in Central Asian burial mounds (*kurgans*). Before the period of migration to South Asia, three distinct groups of Sakas appear in Achaemenid monumental art and Old Persian inscriptions issued during the reign of Darius I (522–486 BCE):

1) Sakas “who are across the sea” (*paradraya*) in areas north of the Black Sea are mentioned only in the Naqš-i Rustam inscription, but Herodotus (4.1–162) provides many details about this group of Scythians in his account of the Darius I’s campaign against them (ca. 513 BCE).

2) Sakas “wearing the pointed cap” (*tigraxauda*) correspond with the Sakas or Scythians with “pointed helmets” (Greek: *orthokorybantioi*) listed by Herodotus (3.92) in the tenth satrapy of Media. In addition to the Naqš-i Rustam inscription, an inscription of Darius at Susa and an inscription of Xerxes from Persepolis refer to this group of Sakas.

3) “Hauma-drinking” (*haumavarga*) Sakas appear together with the previous group in Old Persian inscriptions and are referred to as Amyrgian Scythians by Herodotus (7.64). They originally inhabited regions around the Syr Darya (Jaxartes River) in the Ferghana and Alai valleys of western Central Asia, but also settled in the Helmand valley and southeastern Iran (Seistan). Since this region around the Hamun Lake “is a land where the steppe and the sown are intermingled and nomads are on all sides of the lake which is large in winter while almost vanishing in the late summer” (Frye

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135 Kent 1953: 211–212.

1963: 72), different groups of Sakas may have temporarily settled there in periodic seasonal migrations.\textsuperscript{137}

In other Old Persian inscriptions of Darius at Behistun, Persepolis, and the Susa foundation charter, the Sakas are listed immediately after the satrapy of Gandhāra.\textsuperscript{138} W.J. Vogelsang (1992: 304–315) argues that the Sakas who infiltrated eastern Iran from areas to the north during the first half of the first millennium BCE played major roles in the establishment and maintenance of Achaemenid power. According to Vogelsang, Saka migrations to the Iranian plateau and onwards to the Near East or to the Indian subcontinent can be viewed as a recurring pattern in which nomadic migrants from Central Asia initially disrupted settled life, but eventually “...were adopted within local structures, and either disappeared from view as a distinct ethnic unity, or turned into the new ruling class of the sedentary people, often mingling with the old group of the autochthonous population” (1992: 305). This characterization aids in understanding patterns of migration of exogenous Sakas to northwestern India towards the end of the first millennium BCE, although it is not necessarily the case that all of these groups came to South Asia from eastern Iran.

Chinese historical annals (Shi ji and Han shu) refer to Saka and Kuşāna migrations from the Western Region (Xiyu) of China in Central Asia during the second century BCE.\textsuperscript{139} According to the Han shu (96A.10b, 96B.1b, 61.4b), westward Yuezhi migrations forced the Sai

to migrate south from areas around the Ili Basin (in modern Kyrgyzstan). While the Chinese character transliterated as *Sai* or *Se* (pronounced *sәk/sәg/seg*) corresponds closely enough to Iranian Saka, Gândhārī Saga, and Sanskrit Śaka, distinctions between the Sakas and other groups are not always clear (as is also the case with Iranian and western classical sources describing Central Asian nomadic movements).\(^{140}\) Geographical details about Saka migrations beyond the Western Region (*Xiyu*) are somewhat vague, but the Chinese sources nevertheless indicate that at least one branch of Sakas began to move into the northwestern Indian subcontinent without passing through the Iranian plateau. A passage in the *Han shu* (96B.1b) specifies that the Sai crossed the “hanging passage” (*xuan du*), located between Shatial and Swat in the gorges of the upper Indus River in modern Pakistan.\(^{141}\) *Han shu* (96A.10b) also indicates that the Sakas eventually conquered Jibin, a territory commonly associated with Kashmir or Kapiśa (Begram in Afghanistan), but here perhaps referring to Gandhāra.\(^{142}\)

During the final two centuries BCE, three separate groups of Sakas migrated to South Asia via overland routes from southeastern Iran, Bactria, and the Tarim Basin.\(^{143}\) Despite topographical difficulties of the proposed routes from eastern Central Asia across the Pamir and Karakorum mountains to Swat and Gandhāra, artifacts from the Pamir region and bronze objects with Scythian stylistic affinities from mountain valleys in northern Pakistan and the late survival of

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\(^{140}\) Hulsewé (1979: 104, fn. 210) transliterates *Sai* while Thierry (2005: 451, fn. 39) uses *Se*. Gérard Fussman cautions that Chinese sources do not clearly distinguish the Sai from the Yuezhi, which in his view are “...shifting confederations of tribes without any linguistic, ethnic (i.e. racial) and probably cultural, unity” (Fussman, Gérard. 1996. “Southern Bactria and Northern India before Islam: A Review of Archaeological Reports.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, 252).

\(^{141}\) For localizations of the “Hanging Passage” see Stein, Marc Aurel. 1942. “From Swat to the Gorges of the Indus.” *Geographical Journal* 100.2, 49–56 and Jettmar, Karl. 1987a. “The 'Suspended Crossing'—Where and Why?” In Pollet 1987: 95–101. Benjamin 2007: 107–109 refers to earlier theories of Chavannes and more recent investigators such as Tsuchiya who prefer to associate *xuan du* with the Khunjerab or Mingteke passes that connect Tashkurgan in Xinjiang with the Hunza and Gilgit valleys in northern Pakistan, but localizations identified by Jettmar and Stein are more accurate.


‘animal style’ features in petroglyphs provide evidence of Saka migrations through northern Pakistan. Another closely related branch of Sakas may have migrated to the northwestern frontiers of South after crossing the Hindu Kush following conflicts with the Yuezhi and Bactrian Greeks in Bactria during a period of instability in the second century BCE. Strabo (11.8.2) and Justin (41) attribute the decline of the Bactrian Greek kingdoms to various groups of nomads, including Sacarauloi/Saraucae, with whom the Sakas have been identified. Although Strabo and other classical authors were unclear about distinctions between various groups of nomads, Konow’s remark that “Scythian pressure on the Greek empire in Bactria… seems to coincide with the Indian conquests” (1929: xxii) suggests a scenario in which migratory movements of Sakas and other Central Asians forced Bactrian Greek rulers such as Demetrius and Agathokles to extend their dominions to areas south of the Hindu Kush beginning in the early second century BCE. Since Indo-Greek kings appear to have remained in control of Kapiśa during the second century BCE, a Saka military conquest does not appear to have been likely, but a series of nomadic movements may have been partially responsible for the displacement of Greek rulers first from Bactria and again from Gandhāra, Taxila and the Punjab in the middle of the first century BCE. A third wave of Sakas migrated to the western borderlands of South Asia from Seistan in southeastern Iran and Arachosia in southern Afghanistan after a series of conflicts with the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia between 130–80.

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147 Tarn’s statement that “The beginning of the end for all Greek kingdoms in India was the Saca conquests” (1984 [1951]: 320) assumes that political and cultural shifts necessarily result from military conquests.
BCE.\textsuperscript{148} From areas of the lower Indus valley known as Śakadvīpa or Śākadvīpa (“Śaka continent”) in Sanskrit Purāṇas, this group of Sakas expanded to the Saurāṣṭra peninsula of Gujarat and into the western hinterlands of the Indian subcontinent, where the Kṣaharāta and Kārdamaka lines of Western Kṣatrapas continued to rule until the end of the fourth century CE.

\textit{Saka Rulers in the Northwest}

Numismatic sequences and dated inscriptions are the primary sources for reconstructing chronological frameworks for the dynastic history of Saka rulers in the northwestern and western Indian subcontinent in the first century BCE and early centuries CE. Greek and Kharoṣṭhī coin legends indicate that Maues (or Moa in Kharoṣṭhī) was the first Śaka ruler to declare himself “king of kings” (Greek: \textit{ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ/ Kharoṣṭhī: rajatiraja}) in areas of Gandhāra, Swat, and Taxila in the early first century BCE.\textsuperscript{149} Since his coins are more commonly found in areas of northwestern Pakistan rather than in regions around Kabul or in southeastern Afghanistan, he and his predecessors probably followed routes from the north across the Hindu Kush, Pamir, or possibly the Karakoram mountains rather than migrating from southeastern Iran, Afghanistan, and the lower Indus, as sometimes suggested.\textsuperscript{150}

\textsuperscript{148} Justin (42.1–2) provides an account of relationships with the Sakas during the reigns of Phraates II (who died in 138 BCE during a campaign against the Sakas) and Mithridates II (123–88 BCE), who reached an accommodation with the Sakas (Konow 1929: xxxvii–xxxix; Lamotte 1988: 451–2, Narain 1957: 140–141, Senior 2001: 11–12, Tarn 1984 [1951]: 320).


In addition to issues of coins that reflect his major position as a powerful regional ruler in the Northwest, a Kharoṣṭhī inscription recording the establishment of Buddhist relics in Taxila dated in year 78 “of Mahārāja Moga the Great” (maharayasa mahaṃtasa mogasa) indicates that Saka kṣatrapas (“Satraps”) acknowledged his importance by using a continuous era named after him, although this inscription is the single attestation of such a reckoning system. While Maues himself is not directly connected with material evidence of Buddhist patronage, he appears to have initiated a decentralized administrative network of Saka mahākṣatrapas, kṣatrapas and loosely affiliated subordinates who were avid Buddhist donors.

The most prominent successor of Maues was Azes (Aya in Kharoṣṭhī), who also declared himself “King of Kings” on widespread and voluminous issues of coins following the decline of Indo-Greek rulers, from whom he adopted depictions of Hellenistic deities. Since Azes initially issued coins jointly with Spalirises, an Indo-Parthian official, he appears to have expanded his dominion to Taxila and other areas of northwestern Pakistan from a base in the region of Arachosia in southeastern Afghanistan rather than directly inheriting the regions previously ruled by Maues. Azes’ likely successors (Azilises and

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152 Salomon, Richard. 1974. “The Kṣatrapas and Mahākṣatrapas of India.” Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens 18, 5–25 concludes that these titles attested in Indian coins and inscriptions denote regional subordinates and semi-independent or independent rulers depending on the political context.


Azes II) continued to produce numerous coins, including very common types with a figure on horseback holding a spear or whip.\(^{155}\) Azes is also credited (perhaps in hindsight) with initiating a dynastic era beginning in 58 BCE which later became identified with the so-called Vikrama era still used in South Asia.\(^{156}\) Since this important era (which no longer bears his name) was adopted by later regional rulers who acknowledged the authority of the dynastic lineage of Azes in their inscriptions and coins, his impact on this period of South Asian history deserves greater emphasis. Robert Senior links Azes with “unification of the Punjab and a great increase of wealth, evidenced by his huge output of coinage” as well as “a revolution in religious ideas brought about by the cultural mix resultant from his sitting at the hub of the Silk route” (2001: 65). Such an assessment of Azes’ legacy may be exaggerated by a narrow emphasis on numismatic sources, since Azes, like Maues, is not directly connected to patronage of religious institutions and is not mentioned in literary sources. Nevertheless, the consolidation of Saka power after Azes began to rule in 58 BCE by a confederation of regional rulers who established control of major routes connecting Gandhāra to Mathura had significant implications for political, economic, and religious history.

**Buddhist Patronage by the Apracas and Odis**

Regional Saka subordinates, allies, and officials supported Buddhist institutions by donating relics, building *stūpas*, and giving donations to monastic communities in their domains. Members of the Apraca

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\(^{155}\) Although most other numismatic specialists maintain that the “spear versus whip” criterion for distinguishing coins of Azes I from those of Azes II “holds reasonably well for separating earlier and later Azes’ coins” (Mitchener 1976: 6.481), Senior 2001: 63, 71, 83 argues that Azilises’ coins follow those of Maues and precede issues of Azes and dismisses the distinction between Azes I and II by regarding later coins of Azes as posthumous issues. While the relative chronological sequence remains disputed (and it is beyond my scope to resolve numismatic debates), it is interesting to note that horseriders with whips also appear in petroglyphs from various sites (Hodar, Gichi Nala, Chilas, Thalpan, and Hunza-Haldeikish) in northern Pakistan, but it is not very clear that Azes’ coinage was the source of this imagery.

family in the northwestern borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan made numerous Buddhist donations recorded in Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions dated in the era of Azes.\textsuperscript{157} Although most of these inscriptions lack specific provenance, the domain of the Aparacas was probably centered in Bajaur and extended to Swat, Gandhāra, Taxila, and parts of eastern Afghanistan in the last half of the first century BCE and the early decades of the first century CE. Since the discovery of an inscribed reliquary casket from Shinkot in Bajaur donated by the Apraca king Vijayamitra (who evidently founded the dynasty), other inscriptions record donations of relics by at least four generations of kings, queens, and court officials.\textsuperscript{158} Apraca kings known from Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, coins, and seals included Indravasu, Viṣṇuvarman (perhaps identical to Viśpavarman), and Indravarman, but the dynastic genealogy remains uncertain.\textsuperscript{159} Another important member of the Apraca lineage was the “general” (\textit{stratega}) Aśpavarman, who appears as a character in a Buddhist \textit{avadāna} preserved in first-century Kharoṣṭhī manuscript fragments and whose name is inscribed on a silver saucer found at Sirkap in Taxila.\textsuperscript{160} Since Aśpavarman’s coins overlap with late or


posthumous issues of Azes (II) and the Indo-Parthian ruler Gondophares (see below), he probably flourished from ca. 20–50 CE.161

Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions indicate significant relationships between the Apracas, Odi kings, contemporary Saka ksatrapas, the early Kuṣāṇas, and other local dynasties during a politically turbulent period from the end of the first century BCE to the middle of the first century CE. A silver drinking vessel with an animal-style ibex figure formerly belonging to the “Yagu king” (yaguraño) Kharayosta (or Kharaoosta) that was rededicated as a Buddhist reliquary by Indravarman (Aśpavarman’s father) may indicate that this object was given to the Apracas as a gift in exchange for some form of tribute or assistance.162 The Apracas were also connected by marital alliance with the Odi kings in the Swat valley, since a royal relative and officer named Suhasoma in a Budddhist reliquary inscription of Senavarman (Fig. 2.2: Reliquary Stūpa of Senavarma, the King of Odi) was married to Vasavadattā, according to a Kharoṣṭhī inscription recording her donation of a waterpot.163 Vasavadattā, the donor of the waterpot, may be identified with the sister of the Apraca prince Indravarma, since she is mentioned in a Kharoṣṭhī reliquary casket inscription.164 Since Senavarman’s inscription mentioning Suhasoma also refers to Sadaśkaṇa, a son of the first Kuṣāṇa ruler Kujula Kadphises, the role of the Apracas and Odi rulers as powerful regional Buddhist patrons can be synchronized with the early Kuṣāṇas during a period of dynamic religious activity and political fluctuations at the beginning of the first century CE.165

161 Senior 2001: 92–94.
162 This interpretation of CKI 21 (http://www.ebmp.org/a_inscription.php?catid=CKI0241) is suggested by Salomon 1996b: 442–443.
165 Lines 8g-9b of the Senavarma Inscription(CKI 249: http://depts.washington.edu/ebmp/inscriptions.php) link Suhasoma and with Sadaśkaṇa: maharaja-rayati-raraya Kuyula-Kataphsa-putro Sadaśkaṇo devaputro sadha anakaena Suhasomena aṃmakareṇa sayuga-savalavahaṇa sadha guṣurakehi ca puyita “Sadaśkaṇa, son of the
Fig. 2.2: Reliquary *Stūpa* of Senavarman, King of Oçi (Source: Czuma and Morris 1985: 165, no. 82)
Mathura Kṣatrapas and Mahākṣatrapas

Kṣatrapas and Mahākṣatrapas reigning in Mathura extended Saka administration and religious patronage from the northwestern borderlands to an important cultural and commercial center in the Ganga-Yamuna doab by the late first century BCE. Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions


Fig. 2.3: Mathura Lion Capital (©Trustees of the British Museum)
on a lion capital from Mathura provide keys to understanding links between various Saka families which ruled Taxila and Mathura. Since its discovery in 1869 by Bhagvanlal Indraji, epigraphists have struggled to read and interpret the inscriptions written on all surfaces of the sculpture (on its top, back, sides, front, and bottom). A relatively long passage written on top and on back of a rectangular block joining the adorsed lions commemorates the installation of Buddhist relics and donation of a stūpa and monastery to a Sarvāstivādin monastic community by the “Chief Queen” (agramaheṣi) of Mahāksatrapa Rajula. Although the phrasing is ambiguous, her name may be understood as a compound, Ayasia Kamuia, or as Ayasia, the daughter (dhitra) of the Kamu[ja]. She was apparently the daughter of Kharaoasta, whose name appears twice in the Mathura lion capital inscriptions with the title of “heir apparent” (yuvarāṇa and yuvaraya in Gāndhāri correspond to Sanskrit yuvarāja). Since Kharayosta (a variant of Kharaoasta) is identified as a Mahāksatrapa’s son in a Kharoṣṭhī inscription on the silver goblet rededicated as a Buddhist reliquary by the Apraca prince Indravarman, the Mathura lion capital inscriptions indicate kinship connections between the family of Mathura Kṣatrapas and Saka lineages in the Northwest.

Another Mathura lion capital inscription refers to Mahāksatrapa Kusula Patika, who can be identified with the donor (mahādānapati) of Buddhist relics named Patika, the son of Liaka Kusulaka, the Kṣatrapa of Cukhsa, according to a Kharoṣṭhī inscription from

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166 Konow 1929: 30–49, no. 15, pls. VI–IX; Sircar 1965: 114–119, no. 24, pls XVII–XXII; Thomas, F.W. 1907–8. “The Inscriptions on the Mathura Lion–Capital.” *Epigraphia Indica* 9, 135–147; CKI 48 (http://www.ebmp.org/a_inscription.php?catid=CKI0048). Although Konow attempts to read and interpret the haphazardly written inscriptions on the lion capital as a single epigraphic record, Sircar and Thomas split the inscriptions into separate groups. The Kharoṣṭhī characters vary in size, but do not appear to have been written by separate hands at different times. John Rosenfield suggested that “…a ceremonial gathering at Mathurā of a large number of Śaka princes” (1967: 134) may have served as a context for writing these records, which resemble informal graffiti.

167 Salomon 1996b: 424 (Inscription II: mahāksatrapa–putrasa [y]agurāṃṇa kharā–[jyosta]ṣa…[= CKI 214 (http://www.ebmp.org/a_inscription.php?catid=CKI0241). Since Kharayosta has the title of Yabgu-king (yaguramṇa) in this inscription and the title of heir-apparent (yuvaraya) in the Mathura lion capital inscriptions, it is likely that the Mathura inscriptions were written before he was elevated to the position of Yabgu-king. Yabgu, a Central Asian title corresponding to Chinese xihou, was adopted in Kuṣāṇa coin legends (Hulsewé 1979: 121–123, Rosenfield 1967: 11, Thierry 2005: 462–469, 498). Kṣatrapa Kharaoasta is known as the “son of Arta” and as the father of Hajatria in Greek and Kharoṣṭhī coin legends (Senior 2001: 98–100).
The appearance of the title and name of Mahākṣatrapa Rajula’s son Kṣatrapa Śuḍāsa in the lion capital inscriptions demonstrates that they were written before he inherited the title of Mahākṣatrapa, as Śuḍāsa is known in Brāhmī inscriptions from Mathura, including a Jain āyavati plaque inscription of a female donor named Amohini dated in year 72. If this date is reckoned according to the Azes/Vikrama era of 57–58 BCE, a correspondence with 14–15 CE provides a terminus ante quem for the Mathura lion capital inscriptions as well as the period when Saka historical figures such as Mahākṣatrapa Patika and Yuvarāja Kharaosta were in power. Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions written on the bottom surface of the Mathura lion capital call for the honor (puyae for Sanskrit pūjāyai) of the donation to extend to “all Buddhas, the Dharma, and the Sangha” and to “all of Sakastan.” The somewhat unusual use of the formula with Sakastana may reflect some conception of a Saka domain in the northwestern Indian subcontinent. By establishing themselves as powerful rulers and administrators in Mathura, Taxila, and the Punjab, the Sakas controlled a network of routes that connected the northwestern frontiers with the Indian heartland.

**Indo-Parthians: Mahārāja Gondophares or the Gondopharids?**

By the middle of the first century CE, Saka Kṣatrapas and Mahākṣatrapas in the Northwest evidently served under the nominal authority of Indo-Parthian rulers related to Mahārāja Gondophares. However, the interpretation of numismatic and epigraphic sources for the reign of Gondophares is complicated by the “homonymy problem” (Alram 1999, 37, fn. 123) of several kings with this name or title meaning ‘winner of glory’ during the late first century BCE and early first century CE.¹⁷⁰

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¹⁶⁸ Konow 1929: 23–29, no. 13, pl. V.1; Sircar 1965: 124–125, no. 27; CKI 46 (http://www.ebmp.org/a_inscription.php?catid=CKI0046). See note 151 for references to discussions of the date of this inscription in year 78 of Maues.

¹⁶⁹ Quintanilla 2007: 168–172, 275–276; Sircar 1965: 120–121, no. 25, pl. XXIII. An alternative reading of the first figure in the date as 40 rather than 70 is supported by Senior 2001: 100 on the basis of his proposed numismatic chronology for the coins of Rajuvula (Rajula), but the arguments of Sircar 1965: 125 n. 3 and Quintanilla 2007: 275–6 for a reading of 72 based on epigraphic and art historical evidence are more convincing.

¹⁷⁰ Senior argues that “‘Gondophares’ is in reality a title (Vindapharna—Old Persian for ‘winner of glory’)” (2001: 108) adopted by several successors to an original Gaondophares I, who should be dated before c. 20 BCE. B.N. Puri. 1994. “The Sakas
Gondophares/Guduphara has been identified with King Gudnafar in the Christian apocryphal account of the visit of St. Thomas to India, but these late hagiographical sources do not necessarily provide a reliable basis for clarifying the rather complicated political history of the northwestern Indian subcontinent during the early decades of the first century.\(^{171}\) The legacy of Gondophares and his successors as powerful and Indo-Parthians” (Chapter 8 in Harmatta 1994) adopts the argument that the ‘Winner of Glory’ title “became a sort of family name for many subsequent members of the family” (200). However, Senior’s challenge to the general consensus for dating Gondophares I from c. 19–46+ CE has not received much support (Srivastava 2007: 85–92).

\(^{171}\) According to Fussman, Gérard. 1998. L’inscription de Rabatak et l’origine de l’ère Śaka,” *Journal Asiatique* 286, 624–625, the hagiographical sources only indicate

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historical contexts 125

rulers who expanded Indo-Parthian dominion from Arachosia (southeastern Afghanistan) to Gandhāra, Taxila, Jammu, and the western Punjab is primarily reflected in the production and distribution of coins produced in different mints. The single epigraphic attestation for the reign of Gondophares is a Kharoṣṭhī inscription reportedly from Shahbazgarh or the Takht-i Bahi Buddhist monastery in the Mardan district of Northwestern Pakistan dated in the twenty-sixth regnal year of Mahārāja Gudavhara (maharayasa gudavharasa) and in year 103 of an unspecified era. If the date in year 103 is calculated according to the Azes era of 58/7 BCE, the period of Gondophares’ reign apparently extended from c. 19 CE to at least 45–46 CE, but it is not certain that Guduvhara refers to Gondophares himself or to a successor ruling in his name. Since Gondophares and other members of his family probably seem to have ruled “…by co-operating with powerful forces on the ground and by absorbing them into [their] sphere[s] of influence” through “…a system of absorption allowing local rulers to keep their independence” (Senior 2001: 110), nominally subordinate local rulers (such as the Apraca general Aśpavarman) had significant roles. Although chronological details remain disputed and the role of the Gondopharid dynasty in political history before the advent of the Kušānas is still not clearly understood, Indo-Parthian hegemony in the Northwest in the middle of the first century CE corresponded with “a period of great prosperity and cultural achievement” (Rosenfield 1967: 129).

that an Indo-Parthian ruler with this name was still known in Syria after c. 250 CE, but do not provide evidence that St. Thomas actually met him or that he controlled Taxila. 


174 Senior 2001: 125 proposes that Mahārāja Guduvhara is to be identified to Sases, a descendant of Gondophares who issued coins with legends similar to the titles used in the coins of Gondophares I, but the Kharoṣṭhī inscription provides no indication to confirm this hypothesis.
Kṣaharāṭa and Kārdamaka Kṣatrapas in Western India

The Kṣaharāṭa and Kārdamaka lines of Saka rulers, commonly known as the Western Kṣatrapas, contended for power with the Sātavāhana dynasty from the first century CE. These two groups of Sakas probably came from the lower Indus region of Sind after migrating from southeastern Iran (Seistan) in the first century BCE. The term Kṣaharāṭa appears in inscriptions from Taxila and Mathura and on coins issued by Saka rulers in Sindh and Saurāṣṭra (the Kathiawar peninsula of modern Gujarat). Although the relationship with these Kṣaharāṭas is not very clear, Bhumaka and his son Nahapāna issued coins as Kṣaharāṭa Kṣatrapas in western India. Brāhmī donative inscriptions in Buddhist caves at Nasik, Junnar, and Karle in the Western Ghats by Nahapāna’s daughter Dakhamitrā and her husband Uṣavadāṭa are dated in years 41–6 of an unspecified era. The chronology of Nahapāna’s rule hinges on whether these dates refer to his regnal era or to the Śaka era beginning in 78 CE, which would result in dates corresponding to c. 119–124 CE. If years 41–46 instead refer to Nahapāna’s regnal years, his apparently long reign can be situated in the mid-first century CE, which would permit an identification with Manbanos, the ruler of Barygaza (modern Broach in Gujarat) in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a koinē Greek navigational text dated


176 See p. 115, note 148.


180 Sircar 1965: 164, fn. 1; Mirashi 1981: 1.100–108 assign these dates to the Śaka era. Fynes, R.C.C. 1995. “Religious Patronage of the Sātavāhana Dynasty.” *South Asian Studies* 11, 43–50 supports an identification with regnal years of Nahapāna, corresponding to a period between 66—71 CE. Senior 2001: 132 reckons the years according to the Azes/Vikrama era of 58/7 BCE, resulting in c. 17–12/11 BCE, but placing Nahapāna before the Common Era creates insurmountable problems of relative chronology.
to c. 40–70 CE. While secure dates for Nahapāna’s period are elusive, overstrikes of his coins by the Sātavāhana ruler Gautamiputra Satakarṇi, who is praised for destroying the Śakas, Yavanas, and Pahlavas and for “exterminating the race of the Kṣaharātas” in an inscription of his descendant Vasiṣṭhiputra Pulumāvi, indicate that the Kṣaharāta Kṣatrapas in western India were defeated by the Sātavāhanas. Jain commentaries referring to a conflict between Nahavāna of Bharukaccha (Broach) and the Sālavāhana (Sātavāhana) rulers of Paithāna (the Sātavāhana capital at Pratiṣṭhāna) lend support to the numismatic and epigraphic evidence. Quasi-historical memories of ongoing conflicts between the Sakas and Sātavāhanas in western India are also reflected in the Kālakācāryakathānaka, a medieval Jain hagiographic narrative which connects the origins of the Azes/Vikrama era of 57/8 BCE and the Śaka era of 78 CE with the arrival of Sakas in Ujjainī after they crossed the Indus and conquered Saurāstṛa. The struggle between the Sātavāhanas and the Sakas for control of seaports and routes across the Western Ghats to the Indian hinterland was likely to have been motivated by the lucrative trade in a variety of commodities that circulated in maritime commerce between India and Egypt during this period.

A separate branch of Western Kṣatrapas apparently called Kārdamakas succeeded the Kṣaharāta Kṣatrapas and continued to rule in Gujarat, Ujjainī, and parts of western India until 415 CE. The origins of this family are uncertain, but a reference to a Kardama king who was reborn as a pig as a result of selfishness in Kharoṣṭhī manuscript fragments suggests links with Sakas in the Northwest.
The earliest attested figure in this line of Saka Kṣatrapas was Caśṭana, the son of Ysāmotika (or Zāmotika), who issued inscriptions dated in years 6, 11, and 52 of the Śaka era of 78 CE, an astronomical era perhaps connected with the beginning of Caśṭana’s rule. The dates in these inscriptions indicate that Caśṭana had an unusually long reign of 52 years (until at least 130 CE). While D.C. Sircar and V.V. Mirashi maintain that Caśṭana was appointed Kuśaṇa viceroy after Nahapāna’s death “with instructions to recover the lost areas of the satrapy from the Sātavāhanas” (Sircar 1969: 86), this reconstruction is largely based on the identity of the Śaka era with a later era initiated by Kaniṣka and the possibility that an image of Caśṭana appears in a Kuśaṇa dynastic shrine outside of Mathura. The expansion of the dominion of Caśṭana and his descendants to Ujjayinī and other areas of western India does not indicate that they served as Kuśaṇa subordinates, but instead acted as independent regional rulers who filled a void after the downfall of the Kṣaṇarātas and a temporary decline of the Sātavāhanas in the middle of the second century CE.

analyzes Indian literary references that suggest connections to a Kardama River in Persia (commentary on Arthaśāstra 2.11) or to a royal lineage of Kṣatriyas traced back to Kārmukameya (Rāmāyana, Uttarākanda, 100.19–20), but Shrava 1947: 68 contends that Kardamaka refers to the Kardama area near modern Siddhapur in Gujarat.

Mirashi 1981, 2.115–9, nos. 45–9, 153–6, no. 63 and Sircar 1965, 173–175, nos. 63–66. Mirashi, Sircar, and Raychaudhuri 1923: 266 deny that the Śaka era of 78 was initiated by Caśṭana, while Fynes claims that Caśṭana’s accession date “is almost certainly marked by the commencement of the Śaka era in AD 78” (1995: 44). Falk 2002: 94 suggests that the beginning of the Śaka era may reflect the beginning of Caśṭana’s rule of Ujjayinī on an auspicious date, since the first day of Caitra (April), 78 CE corresponds with the conjunction of the sun, moon, and Jupiter in Ares. The longevity of this era may be linked to its usefulness in casting horoscopes.

Falk, Harry. 2001. “The yuga of Sphujiddhavaja and the era of the Kuśānas.” Silk Road Art and Archaeology 7, 121–136; 2002: 91–95, has called attention to the fact that the Śaka and Kaniṣka eras are treated as separate reckoning systems in the Yavanajātaka. Rosenfield 1967: 145–146 (fig. 3) provisionally labels an image from the Maṭ devakula as “the Caśṭana statue” but acknowledges that Lüders (1961: 145–147, §100) reads mastana rather than ṣastana, which is very difficult to reconcile with Caśṭana’s name in Brāhmī inscriptions and coins of the Western Kṣatrapas. For further details about the dating of the Kaniṣka era, see Early Kuśaṇa Genealogy and Chronology pp. 133–137.

A Sanskrit inscription praising Caṣṭana’s grandson Rudradāman clearly reflects the historical and cultural impact of the Western Kṣatrapas. The inscription dated in 150 CE (Śaka year 72) commemorate repairs to an embankment on Lake Sudarśana at Junagadh, where the Girnar version of Aśoka’s Major Rock Edicts was inscribed approximately four centuries earlier.\(^\text{190}\) The composition of this eulogy (praśasti) of Rudradāman’s exploits in ornate classical Sanskrit rather than Prakrit was a significant innovation in Indian cultural history.\(^\text{191}\) Mahākṣatrapa Rudradāman is praised as a skilled and learned lord of territories extending from the lower Indus (Sindhu-Sauvīra) to coastal areas just to the north of modern Mumbai (Aparānta, with its capital at Sopāra). According to the claims in the inscription, he twice conquered the Sātavāhana ruler (Sātakarni), who is described as “Master of the Southern Route” (dakṣināpatha-pati). Despite the agonistic relationship with the Sātavāhanas, a Sanskrit inscription recording a donation of a water cistern in a Buddhist cave at Kanheri (within the urban area of Mumbai) refers to a marriage alliance between the Kārdamakas and the Sātavāhanas.\(^\text{192}\) A Sātavāhana queen who donated the water cistern was a Kārdamaka descendant and the daughter of Mahākṣatrapa Ru-, probably to be identified with Rudradāman or another Western Kṣatrapa.\(^\text{193}\) The Kārdamakas consolidated their

\(^{190}\) Kielhorn, Franz. 1905. “Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman; the Year 72.” Epigraphia Indica 8, 36–49; Mirashi 1981: 2. 121–130 (no. 51); Sircar 1965: 175–80 (no. 67). Falk 2006: 118–120 (Fig. 6 is a very clear photograph of part of the Rudradāman Sanskrit inscription), 287–288 (Girnar dam) examines the Aśokan edicts and the site of the dam built by Rudradāman. A later inscription issued during the time of Skandagupta is discussed later in this chapter under Shifting Networks of Political Power and Institutional Patronage during the Gupta Period, p. 155.

\(^{191}\) Comments on the Junagadh inscription of Rudradāman by Pollock 2006: 67–73 highlight its significance as a turning point in Sanskrit literary culture, but his contention that a “desacralization of Sanskrit” (70) was initiated by the Sakas “in the interests of a new cultural politics” (73) seems hyperbolic, since earlier trends towards Sanskritization are evident in religious donations from Mathura.


\(^{193}\) Bühler, Georg. 1883. “On the Relationship between the Andhras and the Western Kṣatrapas.” Indian Antiquary 12, 272–274 noted the marital link between this family of Western Kṣatrapas and the Sātavāhanas. The Kārdamaka royal lineage (kārdamakarājavamśa) is only referred to in this inscription.
position as a regional power through marital ties with the Sātavāhanas as well as other dynasties in the Indian subcontinent.

The Kārdamaka lineage of Western Kṣatrapas continued to rule areas of western India from their bases in Ujjayinī and the Kathiawar peninsula until the end of the fourth century CE. In addition to the marriage between the Kārdamaka princess and the Sātavāhanas discussed in the previous paragraph, the Western Kṣatrapas also established marital alliances with the Licchavīs of Vaiśālī in the Buddhist heartland and the Iksvākus in the Krishna-Godāvari delta in the eastern Deccan, where the queens belonging to this dynasty made Buddhist donations at Nāgārjunakonda. This regional dynasty of Kārdamakas issued inscriptions, coins, and seals (including a monastic sealing of the “Mahārāja Rudrasena vihāra”) until the period of the impe-


rial Guptas, when they lost control of ancient Mālava and Saurāṣṭra.\textsuperscript{197} As regional counterparts, rivals, and successors to the Kuśānas and the Sātavāhanas, the Western Kṣatrapas and Ikṣvākus controlled an important network between coastal ports for long-distance maritime trade and hinterland nodes in western and eastern India with thriving Buddhist communities in the second and third centuries CE.

\textit{Saka Summary}

By establishing themselves as powerful sovereigns at critical nodes in western and northwestern India, the Sakas of Ujjayinī, Mathura, and Taxila controlled important routes belonging to overland and maritime trade networks. Although their role in social, religious, and cultural transformations in this dynamic period of South Asian history has not (until recently) received as much attention as earlier Hellenistic or later Kuśāna impacts, various donors connected with Saka courts directly contributed to the growth of Buddhist religious institutions. The establishment of relics in \textit{stūpas} and gifts to Buddhist monasteries by Mahākṣatrapa Patika in Taxila, the Apraca Prince Indravarman and his wife Uttarā, King Senavarman in Oḍi, Queen Ayasia in Mathura, and the Western Kṣatrapas are widely attested in Kharoshṭhī and Brāhmī inscriptions. References to Mahākṣatrapa Jihonika, Stratēga Aśpavarman, the Kardamaga King, and other Sakas in Gāndhārī \textit{avadānas} acknowledges and reflects their supporting roles in “the great flowering of Gandhāran Buddhism” (Salomon 1999a: 180). The Sakas, like the Sātavāhanas and other dynasties with whom they competed, conformed to the traditional role of Indian rulers as donors to multiple groups without necessarily adopting an exclusive religious identity.\textsuperscript{198} Perhaps their adoption of Indian patterns of rulership, appropriation of South Asian religious symbolism on issues of coins, and use of Gāndhārī, other regional Prakrit languages, and Sanskrit in inscriptions facilitated their gradual acceptance as Kṣatriya rulers. However, a distinctively Saka cultural identity is difficult to recognize in literary sources that tend to reflect the ideological values and anachronistic


\textsuperscript{198} Fynes 1991; Marshall 1951: 1.57–58.
historical memories of much later periods. Nevertheless, recent discoveries of manuscripts and inscriptions support Sten Konow’s characterization of the Sakas as “the great intermediators” (1929: xxvi) who imported Iranian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian elements into South Asia and exported Indian religious and cultural ideals to Central Asia with the transmission of Buddhism.

**Dynamics of Mobility during the Kušāna Period**

Kušāna control of a network of routes between western Central Asia and the northern Indian subcontinent accelerated patterns of cross-cultural exchange, long-distance trade, and religious transmission from the first to third centuries CE. The Kušāṇas belonged to a branch of the Yuezhi (as their ancestors are known in Chinese sources), which had migrated from eastern Central Asia to Bactria under pressure from other nomadic groups during the second century BCE.¹⁹⁹ The early Kušāṇas followed similar routes as the Indo-Greeks and Sakas into the northwestern borderlands of South Asia.²⁰⁰ Kujūla Kadphises, who established the Kušāna line of emperors, expanded his domain across the Hindu Kush to Swat, Gandhāra, and Taxila by the middle of the first century CE, apparently overlapping with contemporary Gondophrad rulers (discussed previously). By the time of his grandson Kaniška (whose second century CE date is discussed below), the Kušāna realm extended beyond the northwestern urban centers of Taxila and Mathura to the traditional capitals of the ‘great countries’ (*mahājanapadas*) of Kosala, Vatsa, Magadha, and Anā in northeastern India, according to a Bactrian inscription from Rabatak in northeastern Afghanistan.²⁰¹ The list of these four cities was prob-

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¹⁹⁹ Annotated translations of primary Chinese historical sources (*Han Shu* 96A and *Shi ji* 123) by Hill 2009, Hulsewé 1979, Thierry 2005, and Zürcher 1968 are referred to in note 139. Also see Benjamin 2007 for a synthesis of Chinese literary sources, archaeological evidence, and western classical sources for the Yuezhi migration to Bactria.

²⁰⁰ Neelis 2007: 79–91 gives an expanded treatment of Kušāna migrations, genealogy, and chronology in South Asia. See the previous subchapters for nomadic movements and the downfall of the Indo-Greeks.

²⁰¹ The Rabatak inscription claims that Kaniška captured the cities of Sāketa [ancient Śrāvasti] (*sagedo*), Kauśāmbi (*Kōzambo*), Pātaliputra [modern Patna] (*Palabotro*), and Śrī Campā (*Ziri Tambo*). The inscription was first published by Joe Cribb and Nicholas Sims-Williams. 1995–1996. “A New Bactrian Inscription of Kanishka the Great.” *Silk*
ably intended to reinforce claims that Kaniška “submitted all India to his will” (Sims-Williams 2004: 56), since “he who controlled these four janapada controlled India down to the Bay of Bengal” (Fussman 1998: 602). By administering a network from the Oxus basin to the Ganges delta, the Kušāñyas effectively unified major nodes of the northern routes known as the Uttarāpatha. Kušāña administration of this artery of commercial and cultural exchanges facilitated long-distance movement of merchants and missionaries between South Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia.

**Early Kušāña Genealogy and Chronology**

Recent scholarly advances have helped to resolve (or at least clarify) longstanding disputes about early Kušāña history, genealogy and chronology. Chinese historical annals indicate that the Yuezhi predecessors of the Kušāñyas originally inhabited the region between the Qilian and Tien Shan mountains before conflicts with the Xiongnu forced them to gradually migrate westwards across the Tarim Basin to the Ili River Basin at the beginning of the Han period from c. 207–162 BCE. By c. 128 BCE (after the downfall of Bactrian Greek kingdoms), Yuezhi migrants were settled north of the Oxus River on the border of

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202 See Chapter 3: Trade Networks in Ancient South Asia—Northern Route (Uttarāpatha) pp. 186–204.

203 According to Thierry’s analysis (2005: 448, 490–491 [texts 3–4]) of relevant passages in *Han shu* 96A and *Shi ji* 123, the original homeland of the Yuezhi should be localized in territories to the west of Dunhuang. Also see Benjamin 2007: 45–97 (who accepts the standard localization of the Yuezhi homeland in Gansu) and Liu, Xinru. 2001. “Migration and Settlement of the Yuezhi-Kushan: Interaction and Interdependence of Nomadic and Sedentary Societies,” *Journal of World History* 12.2, 268, who refers to Lin, Meicun. 1995. The Western Region of the Han-Tang Dynasties and the Chinese Civilization [in Chinese: Han Tang xiyu yu Zhongguo wen ming]. Beijing: Wen wu chu ban she, 64 ff. For comments on complex intertextual relationships between *Han Shu* 61 and 96 and *Shi ji* 123, described by Zürcher as “probably a patchwork made up of fragments of *Han shu* 61 and 96” (1968: 358), also see M.A.N. Loewe’s introduction to Hulsewé (1979: 13–25), Fussman 1998: 631 ff., and Thierry 2005: 427–428, who rejects the previous hypotheses of Zürcher and Loewe that *Shi ji* 123 was reconstructed from *Han shu* 61.
Bactria (designated as Daxia in Chinese sources) when the Han emissary Zhang Qian arrived on a diplomatic mission seeking an alliance against the Xiongnu. According to some of these sources, the Yuezhi realm was divided into five separate districts (yabgus), which were eventually unified by the Yabgu of Guishang named Quijiuque, who can be identified with Kujūla Kadphises, the putative founder of the Kuśāna dynasty.

Over his very long career (he lived past 80 years of age) Kujūla Kadphises crossed the Hindu Kush and conquered neighboring territories of the Indo-Parthians, the Kabul valley, Puṣkalāvatī, and Gandhāra. As he acquired power in these areas, Kujūla Kadphises assumed the titles of “Kuśaṇa Yabgu steadfast in dharma” (kuśaṇa yavugasa dhramaṭhidasa) and “Great King, King of Kings” (maharaja rajatiraja) in Kharoṇṭhi legends on coins. His coins are patterned after the posthumous issues of Hermaios, the last Indo-Greek ruler of the Kabul valley, and the bull and lion coin-types of Jihoniga, a Saka Mahāksatrapa in the Punjab between ca. 30–40 CE. Royal portraits of Kujūla Kadphises adopted from gold coins of the Roman emperor Augustus (31 BCE–14 CE) provide a general terminus post quem. It is not possible to fix an absolute chronology for Kujūla Kadphises based on Chinese literary references or numismatic sources, but a reference to his son Sadaṣkāna in the Kharoṇṭhi reliquary inscription of Senavarman pro-

205 The five districts (Chinese xi hou corresponds to yabgu) are referred to in Han shu 96 A (but not in Shi ji 123) and in Hou Han shu 118.9a (History of the Later Han compiled by Fan Ye [398–446 CE] based on General Ban Yong’s report on the Western Regions prior to 125 CE (Thierry 2005: 492–493, text 7; Zürcher 1968: 367). Grenet, Frantz. 2006. “Nouvelles données sur la Localisation des cinq Yabgus des Yuezhi.” Journal Asiatique 294.2, 325–341 convincingly argues that the five districts were located north of the Oxus River in an arc from the Gui (Wakhsh) valley (with a headquarters at Hucuo perhaps localized at Takht-i Sangin) to Termez.
206 Identification of places conquered by Quijiuque/Kujūla in Hou Han shu 118.9a remain uncertain, but Fussman’s explanation (1998: 637–638) that the general order in which these territories are listed (Gaofu/Kabul—Puda/Puṣkalāvatī—Jībin/Gandhāra) reflects the sequence of Kuśāna conquests seems plausible.
207 Bopearachchi and Rahman 1995, 37–44; for other examples, see Errington and Cribb 1992, 66, no. 34, 81, no. 75; Mitchiner 1976, 8.681–682, Type 1044–1045; and Rosenfield 1967, 12, Type I, coins 1,2,3.
209 Errington and Cribb 1992, 66–68, no. 35; Mitchiner 1976, 8.688, Type 1053; Rosenfield 1967, 13–14, Type II, coins 4,5.
vides a synchronism with the Apracas in the early-mid first century CE. However, if Kujula Kadphises was acknowledged as a powerful Kusāna sovereign by subordinate rulers of the Odī dynasty in the Swat valley sometime during the first half of the first century CE (as indicated in the Senavarman inscription), his reign would have overlapped with the Indo-Parthian overlord Gondophares (ruling from ca. 20–46 CE). This quandary has raised questions about relationships between the Gondopharids and the early Kusānas, since epigraphic and numismatic evidence indicates that both lines exerted considerable influence during the middle decades of the first century CE, with the Kusānas eventually dominating.

The Bactrian inscription at a sanctuary (bagolaggo) in Rabatak (northern Afghanistan) with images of Iranian gods and goddesses constructed during the first year of the reign of Kaniska has clarified the genealogical succession of three generations of Kusāna rulers following Kujula Kadphises. In the passage: “for King Kujula Kadphises (his) great grandfather, and for King Vima Taktu (his) grandfather, and for King Vima Kadphises (his) father, and also for himself, King Kanishka” (Cribb and Sims-Williams 1995/6: 80), Joe Cribb identifies Vima Taktu with a Kusāna ruler who issued numerous coins with the title of ‘Soter Megas’ (“Great Savior”). Extensive distribution of this ruler’s coins reflects an extension of Kusāna hegemony from northern

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210 See Buddhist Patronage by the Apracas and Odīs (pp. 117–120) for a discussion of the synchronism proposed by Salomon (1999a: 141–149; 2007: 276–277) based on the marital link between the Apraca princess Vasavadatta and the Odī courtier Suhasoma attested in Kharoshthi inscriptions (CKI nos. 242, 249, and 369).

211 The chronology of Gondophares based on references in Christian apocryphal literature and a Kharoshthi inscription reportedly from Takht-i Bahi (CKI 53) is detailed in Indo-Parthians: Mahārāja Gondophares or the Gondopharids? (pp. 123–125)

212 See note 201 for complete references.

Afghanistan to northern India as far east as Banares during his reign in the late first century CE. Vima Kadphises, who is clearly identified as Kaniṣka’s father in the Rabatak inscription but whose name is not really legible in other epigraphic sources,\(^{214}\) issued the first Kuṣāṇa gold coins and adopted grandiloquent titles such as “King of Kings” in Greek coin legends, and “Great King, King of Kings, Lord (King) of All the World, Great Lord (King), Savior” in Kharoṣṭhī.\(^{215}\) The style of depicting Vima Kadphises in a standing pose making an offering at a small altar mostly found on his copper coins is adopted in images on coins of later Kuṣāṇa emperors as well as royal statues in shrines at Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan and Māt across the Yamuna River from Mathura and in petroglyphs from Shatial and Khalatse on the upper Indus River.\(^{216}\)

An absolute date for the beginning of a continuous era initiated by Kaniṣka is disputed, but recent findings have raised significant doubts about an identification of the Kaniṣka era with the Śaka era of 78 CE.\(^{217}\) A formula for calculating the difference between the Śaka and “Košāṇa” eras in the Yavana-jātaka (79.15), an astronomical treatise written by Sphujidhvaja in 269 CE, clearly distinguishes between “the number of years that have passed of the Košāṇas” (koṣāṇatābdasamkhyā) and the “the time of the Śakas (i.e., the year in the Śaka era)” (kālah śakānām).\(^{218}\) The formula apparently indicates that 149 years sepa-

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\(^{217}\) The issue of dating the Kaniṣka era has been the subject of significant scholarly debate: Basham 1968; Rosenfield 1967: 253–258 [Appendix 1: “The Era of Kaniṣka”]; Zwalf 1996: 1.357–358 [Appendix 1: “A note on ancient eras”]; Falk 2001 and Falk 2002: 95–97. Fussman 1998: 641 and Senior 2001: 1.130 still favor an initial date for the Kaniṣka era in 78 CE, maintaining the hypothesis that the Western Kṣatrapas were subordinate to the Kuṣāṇas and adopted the reckoning system from their overlords.

rate the two eras, but Harry Falk (2001: 130) calculates 127 CE as the beginning of the Kośāna era (which is assumed to be equivalent to the Kanisa era) by subtracting 100 from 149 years and by adding 49 to 78 CE. Falk’s proposal that one hundred years must be omitted from the formula seems likely, since there are very strong arguments for the omission of numerals for hundreds in inscribed sculptures and other inscriptions with dates in the Kanisa era. Although Spujiidhvaaja and other astrologers were not aware that 127 CE (rather than 227 CE) was the initial date of the historical Kośāna/Kanisa era, Falk’s proposed resolution to longstanding debates over a separate Kanisa era coheres quite well with current understanding of early Kuśāna dynastic history. However, the solution remains hypothetical until an inscription dated in both the Śaka and Kanisa eras confirms Falk’s interpretation of the formula in the Yavanajātaka.

Paradigms of Patronage under Kanisa and Huviśka

Buddhist literary traditions liken the Kuśāna emperor Kanisa to a second Aśoka, but epigraphic and numismatic evidence indicates that he probably supported multiple religious communities. Evidence for Kanisa’s patronage of Buddhist institutions is primarily based on accounts of Chinese Buddhist visitors as well as Sarvāstivādin and

\[ \text{of the Kuśānas in combination with 149 (change into) the time of the Śakas. Subtracting from this (Śaka time [plus 56]) the elapsed (yuga, i.e. 165 years) (produces) the elapsed years of the second yuga} \ (2001: 127). \text{Depending on Utpala’s commentary on Brhajjātaka 7.9, Pingree translates: “(If one takes) the number of years of the Kośānas which have passed and adds 149, then, subtracting from this number the year in the Śaka era, (one obtains a year in which) another yuga ended” (Falk 2001: 122). Both Pingree and Falk regard the Śaka and Kośāna (Kuśāna) eras as separate reckoning systems, but Falk proposes that the purpose of the formula is to synchronize the two reckoning systems in order to calculate the number of years that had elapsed since an astronomical yuga of 165 years began when the sun and moon enter Ares in conjunction at sunrise on mēnasamrkānti (in 22 and 187 CE).} \]

\[ \text{Lohuizen De Leeuw, Johanna E. Van 1949. The “Scythian” Period: An approach to the History, Art, Epigraphy and Palaeography of North India from the 1st Century BC to the 3rd Century AD. Leiden: Brill [reprint, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995], 235–262 and Lohuizen De Leeuw, Johanna E. Van 1986. “The second century of the Kanisa era.” South Asian Studies 2, 1–9 proposed that the numerals for hundreds were omitted from many Kanisa era dates. Falk, Harry. 2004. “The Kanisa era in Gupta records.” Silk Road Art and Archaeology 10, 167–176 proposes that Kanisa era dates with omitted hundreds are also found in some Gupta inscriptions. Patterns of either very low or high numbers suggest that hundreds are omitted from Kanisa era dates in Kharoṣṭhī graffiti from northern Pakistan.} \]
Mahāyāna texts preserved in Chinese, Tibetan, Central Asian, and Iranian languages rather than contemporary Indian Buddhist texts and inscriptions. Faxian and Xuanzang as well as later Chinese pilgrims and Al-Bīrūnī credit Kaniṣka with the construction of the monumental Shāh-ji-ki Dheri stūpa in Puruṣapura (modern Peshawar). A copper casket found at this site and inscribed with a Kharoṣṭhī inscription was once believed to have been a Buddhist reliquary donated by Kaniṣka, but is now recognized as a “perfume box” given by two administrative superintendents of the “fire-room” in “[Mahārāja Kaniṣka’s monastery” ([mahara]jasa kaniṣkasa vihare) in the city of Kaniṣkapura. While this epigraphic evidence links Kaniṣka with a major monastery in Peshawar, Buddhist imagery on Kaniṣka’s coins is relatively limited, since Iranian, Hellenistic, and Indian deities are more frequently depicted. As Ellen Raven remarks:

Buddha’s image was not employed before Kaniṣka on Kuśāṇa coins, and never again after him. The Buddha is just one of a wide range of deities, from the pantheons of Iran, the Hellenistic world, Rome, and India, selected to express the king’s concern for material abundance and prosperity of his realm, military triumph, legitimacy of his rule, and divine sanction for his kingship.

Buddhist narratives with Kaniṣka as a prominent figure have been composed in or translated into Chinese, Tibetan, Central Asian, and Iranian languages, but he is not mentioned in Pāli literature or in Sanskrit purānas. A connection between Kaniṣka and the convening of a

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222 Raven 2006: 287.

223 Rājatarāṅgini 1.168–172 (Kalhaṇa’s 11th century Sanskrit chronicle of Kashmir) refers to the founding of towns and Buddhist shrines and monasteries in Kashmir by Hūṣka, Juṣka, and Kaniṣka 150 years after the Buddha’s Nirvāṇa, which may reflect local historical memories of Kuśāṇa patronage posterior to the time of Aśoka (Stein,
Buddhist council in Kashmir, Gandhāra, or Jalandhar (in the Punjab) which supposedly led to the writing of Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma texts on copper plates is probably a “pious fabrication” (Rosenfield 1967: 32) modeled on Theravāda accounts of a third council in Pātaliputra sponsored by Aśoka. Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist traditions also portray Kaniṣṭha as a literary patron of Aśvaghōṣa, the author of the Buddhacarita and Saundarananda, and claim that Mātrceta wrote a “letter to Mahārāja Kaṇīka” (Mahārājakanikalekha) to instruct him in Buddhist principles.225 Buddhist claims that Kaniṣṭha was a sympathetic lay devotee and a Buddhist monarch probably have more to do with hagiographic topoi associating him with Aśoka than with his direct and certainly not exclusive patronage of Buddhist institutions.

As concrete evidence does not confirm that Kaniṣṭha was a Buddhist convert like Aśoka, historians of this period theorize that his support of Buddhism was due to a political need to promote his status as a cakravartin by making donations to diverse groups in the expanding Kuśāna domain.226 Although he acknowledges that Kuśāṇa rulers and officials under Kaniṣṭha sponsored a variety of religious institutions (including Buddhist stūpas), Xavier Tremblay contends that the Kuśāṇas were

225 Rosenfield 1967: 30–34 refers to other literary figures (“theologians” is somewhat misleading, since their topics extended beyond theological concerns to philosophy, doxography, biography, and monastic law) such as Vasumitra, Pārśva, Samgharaṇa, Dharmatrāta, and indirectly Nāgārjuna, since the Suhrālekha attributed to him was probably the model for Mātrceta’s Kaṇikalekha. As Rosenfield emphasizes, “...these associations can not be taken at face value, for in the pious, pseudo-historical records of the faith, the names of great kings were often linked with those of great writers” (1967: 30).
226 Rosenfield 1967: 29–30 (“...Kanishka’s patronage of the faith must have been essentially politic...Kanishka may well have been, like Constantine, attracted by a variety of religions and guided as much by the exigencies of politics as by his own spiritual needs”). Verardi, Giovanni. 1983. “The Kuśāṇa Emperors as Cakravartins. Dynastic Arts and Cults in India and Central Asia: History of a Theory, Clarifications, and Refutations.” East and West 33, 225–294 argues against Rosenfield’s thesis of a distinctive dynastic cult of the Kuśāṇas, but maintains that their patronage of Buddhists, Brahmans, Jains, and other religious groups was due to their need to represent themselves as cakravartins in order to address “...the problem of their own legitimation on Indian soil” (1983: 268). Chattopadhyay, Bhaskar. 1975. Kushāṇa State and Indian Society: A Study in Post-Mauryan Polity & Society. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 179 and Sircar, Dineschandra. 1971b. Some Problems Concerning the Kuśāṇas. Dharwar: Kannada Research Institute, 3 agree that a “catholic religious policy” (Sircar 1971b: 3) was favored, although Chattopadhyay argues in favor of syncretism and against eclecticism.
Mazdeans and rhetorically asks: “Must then the whole of Buddhist lore around Kaniṣka (none of which is earlier than the fifth century) be a pious fake?” (2007: 87) \[227\] Such a question rests on an assumption that Kaniṣka and other Kuśāṇa emperors sublimated their own individual religious identities in order to govern a vast domain encompassing diverse religious cultures between the Oxus basin in ancient Bactria and the Ganga-Yamuna doāb in northern India. However, as Gérard Fussman (among others) has pointed out, acceptance of the Buddha’s teachings (Dharma) did not require lay devotees to give up their own Hindu, Iranian, indigenous, or other religious beliefs and practices. \[228\] Although he did not necessarily favor Buddhists over other Indian or Iranian religious groups, under his aegis conditions of material prosperity fostered an increase in the production of Buddhist art and literature, and it is not accidental that the Senior collection of Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts was deposited in a stūpa inside a pot inscribed with a date in the twelfth year of his reign (ca. 140 CE). \[229\]

Buddhist inscriptions, manuscripts and archaeological remains clearly indicate significant growth of monastic institutions and attest the emergence of the Mahāyāna movement during the long reign of Huviṣka. Since the dated inscriptions of Kaniṣka end in year 23 of his era (corresponding to ca. 150–151 CE if the era began in 127 CE) and the dated inscriptions of Huviṣka begin in year 26 (ca. 153–154 CE), Huviṣka’s immediate succession is somewhat uncertain. The tremendous output of gold coins and inscriptions dated between years 26 and 64 (until ca. 191 CE) indicate that Huviṣka ruled for at least 35 years during a prosperous phase of South Asian cultural and economic history. \[230\] A Mathura Brāhmī inscription from the time of Huviṣka’s

\[227\] Tremblay, Xavier. “The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia-Buddhism among Ira-

\[228\] Fussman 1994a: 25, 42.


\[230\] Rosenfield observes that “The numismatic and epigraphic traces [of Huviṣka’s rule] are the most copious of any Kushan prince” (1967: 59) and calls the gold coins issued by Huviṣka a “veritable shower of gold” (1967: 60). His suggestion (based on the predominance of Iranian deities represented on Huviṣka’s coins) that “the tastes and interests of the Kushan princes were somewhat at variance with that of their subjects, as might be expected in a feudal social order imposed by foreign invaders” (1967: 73) neglects an “in-built conservatism” (Errington and Cribb 1992: 51) in numismatic designs, which do not necessarily reflect personal convictions or religious identities of rulers.
successor Vāsudeva (dated in year 77, corresponding to ca. 204 CE) refers to “the monastery of the mahārāja rājātirāja devaputra Huviṣka” (Lüders 1961: 68, § 31). This epigraphic evidence to Huviṣka’s monastery at Jamalpur mound in Mathura parallels epigraphic and literary references to Kaniṣka’s monastery in Peshawar. As during the time of Kaniṣka, Kuśāna subordinate officials who recorded donations to numerous religious groups in inscriptions sometimes shared their religious merit with their overlord, Huviṣka. For example, the “principal lot” (agrabhaga) of merit is assigned to Mahārāja Rājātirāja Huviṣka in a reliquary vase inscription from Wardak in central Afghanistan dated in year 51 (ca. 178 CE).231 Nascent Indian Mahāyāna traditions are attested in a Mathura Brāhmī inscription on the pedestal of “an image of the Blessed One, the Buddha Amitābha” (Schopen 1987b: 111) dated at or near the beginning of Huviṣka’s reign (year 26).232 Huviṣka was portrayed as a Mahāyāna follower “who has set forth on the (Great) Vehicle” (Salomon 2002b: 256) in a version of an avadāna narrative preserved in fourth century Buddhist Sanskrit manuscript fragments in the Schøyen collection.233 A literary parallel to a similar story set in Huviṣka’s court is preserved in the Chinese translation of the Kalpanāmanḍitikā or Sutrālāṅkāra (Dazhuanyan lun jing).234 However, Prasenajit of Kosala rather than Huviṣka is the king in a shorter version in the *Saṃyuṭaratnapiṭakasūtra or *Kṣudrakapiṭaka (Za bao zang jing).235 The Mathura inscription and the narrative with


Huviṣka as a Mahāyāna follower do not prove that he played a role in the promotion of Mahāyāna, but do seem to indicate that “the time of Huviṣka was a pivotal one in the development of the Mahāyāna” (Salomon 2002b: 261).

**Vicissitudes of the Later Kuśānas**

Following the period of Huviṣka, the dynastic fortunes of the Kuśānas gradually declined during the reign of Vāsudeva and his successors in the third century CE. Brāhmī inscriptions dated in Kaniṣka era years from 64 or 67 (ca. 191–194 CE) to 98 (ca. 225–6 CE) demonstrate that Vāsudeva ruled for at least thirty years. His apparently Vaiṣṇava proper name and his coins with images of Śiva (Ooesho) standing in front of Nandin (his bull vāhana) reflect a trend towards greater Indianization.236 The territory controlled by Vāsudeva may have been reduced to regions of North India and parts of the Punjab, since he is not mentioned in inscriptions from the Northwest, and the burial of his coins around Taxila suggests a crisis.237 According to Rosenfield (1967: 104–105), at least two other Kuśāna rulers were named Vāsudeva, but it is not necessary to add more Vāsudevas to the Kuśāna genealogy if the Kaniṣka era begins in 127 CE rather than 78 CE. A later Kuśāna ruler named Kaniṣka (II) who copied Vāsudeva’s coin types appears to have directly succeeded Vāsudeva after the first century of the Kaniṣka era (ca. 227 CE).

Brāhmī inscriptions from Mathura and Sāñcī dated in years 24 and 28 during the reign of an otherwise unknown Kuśāna ruler named Vāsiṣṭha probably belong to the second century of the Kaniṣka era (with corresponding dates in 251–2 and 255–6 CE).238 A Kharoṣṭhī

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236 Rosenfield 1967: 104; Sircar, Dineschandra. 1971c. “Vāsudeva-Krṣṇa and Nārāyaṇa in Early Vaiṣṇavism.” In *Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 16–38, states that Vāsudeva’s name “…indicates the Bhāgavata leanings of the later Kuśānas who had an important gubernatorial centre at Mathurā” (22). However, the Śiva and Bull motif on his coins (which appeared earlier on the coins of Wima Kadphises) indicates that Vāsudeva’s religious identity was not exclusively Vaiṣṇava.


238 A Brāhmī inscription on an inscribed pillar (yūpa) from Iśapur near Mathura is dated in the 24th year “of the reign of mahārāja rājaṭirāja devaputra sāhi Vāsiṣṭha” (Lüders 1961: 125–6 [§94]), and another Brāhmī inscription on a fragment of a seated Buddha probably from Jamalpur mound in Mathura is dated in year 28, but the reading of Vāsiṣṭha’s name is uncertain (Lüders 1961: 63 [§28]). A Brāhmī inscription on the
An inscription found at Ārā near Attock on the Indus River in northwest Pakistan refers to a son of Vāsiṣṭha (Vāsiṣṭha) named Kaniṣṭha (III) ruling with full imperial titles in year 41 (ca. 268 CE), which seems to indicate that the Kuśāṇas were still acknowledged as powerful rulers in this region.\(^{239}\) While scholars have suggested that Vāsiṣṭha and a nephew named Kaniṣṭha vied with Huviṣṭha, it seems more likely that the numerals for hundreds have been omitted from the Kaniṣṭha era dates in inscriptions of Vāsiṣṭha and his son named Kaniṣṭha (III), whose reigns fall in middle to end of the third century CE.\(^{240}\) Thus, they probably came into conflict with Shapur I, the Sasanian ruler of Iran from 241–271 CE, who claimed to have conquered part of the Kuśāṇa realm possibly as far as Peshawar by ca. 260 CE.\(^{241}\) Kushano-Sasanian rulers continued to produce Kuśāṇa-type coins until the fourth century period of the Sasanian ruler Shapur II (309–379 CE). The political history of the former territories of the Kuśāṇas in the northwestern borderlands from the late third to early fourth century CE is almost as opaque as the end of Kuśāṇa rule in Mathura and the Ganga-Yamuna doāb, which is likewise “lost in the general obscurity which hovers over North Indian history in the later third century” (Rosenfield 1967: 115).

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\(^{240}\) Rosenfield 1967: 57–60; Harmatta, János, et al. 1994. “Religions in the Kushan Empire.” In Harmatta, ed. 1994 posits a “triple kingship” (323) after Kaniṣṭha I when Vāsiṣṭha, Huviṣṭha, and Kaniṣṭha II all ruled in year 30 of the Kaniska era, but a Bactrian inscription at Airtam and the Kamra Kharoṣṭhi inscription (CKI 158, cited in the previous note) do not support this speculative reconstruction.

Kuśāna Conclusions

From about the second half of the first century CE to the middle of the third century CE, the Kuśānas maintained control over important nodes on a network of overland routes connecting Bactria in western Central Asia with the heartland of northern India. A chain of cities from Termez in the Oxus valley to Bagram in the Hindu Kush, Peshawar in Gandhāra, Taxila in the Potwar plateau of the Punjab, and Mathura on the Yamuna River linked the multicultural empire of the Kuśānas to the Northern Route (uttarāpatha). Although the Kuśānas did not directly administer western Indian ports ruled by the Western Kṣatrapas or the so-called silk routes in the Tarim Basin, it is likely that alliances with regional rulers allowed the Kuśānas to act as intermediaries between trans-Asian overland and maritime networks. Kuśāna power was linked to long-distance trade in luxury items such as silk from China, jade from Khotan, lapis lazuli from northeastern Afghanistan, and other precious commodities which appear in lists of the “seven jewels” (saptaratna) in Buddhist texts. The stability of overland commercial routes controlled by the Kuśānas helped to generate material surpluses used to support religious institutions, which received ample donations recorded in Kharoṣṭhī, Brāhmī, and Bactrian inscriptions. Kuśāna emperors such as Kaniśka and Huviśka are credited with the construction of stūpas and monasteries in Peshawar and Mathura and appear in narratives as exemplary rulers comparable to Aśoka and Prasenajit, but their direct role in the growth of Buddhist monasticism was probably less significant than local officials and lay donors whose offerings of relics, images, and other meritorious gifts helped to establish and maintain residential communities of monks and nuns. Kuśāna facilitation of commercial exchanges, dynamic mobility, and cross-cultural contact between South Asia and Central India.


243 Liu 1988/2009 and 1998 proposes that the development of a Buddhist commercial ethos was result of Kuśāna period prosperity.
Asia was a significant catalyst for the expansion of Buddhist networks during this crucial period in the first three centuries CE.

Shifting Networks of Political Power and Institutional Patronage during the Gupta Period

Following the Kuṣāṇa period, Buddhist institutions successfully adapted to economic and political transitions, despite commonplace assertions that “Buddhism in Gupta India was losing out to Brahmanism” (Liu 1988: 128). A brief interlude of perhaps less than 50 years, sometimes referred to as a “Dark Interval” (Tripathi 1942: 234–236), between the post-Kuṣāṇa phase in the late third century and the beginning of the Gupta period in 319 CE was marked by the ascendence of various regional powers, such as the Western Kṣatrapas, Ikṣvākus, and Vākāṭakas.\(^{244}\) Epigraphic records of permanent endowments (akṣayanīvī), gifts of landed property, and interest-earning donations that enabled monasteries to reduce their dependence on individual donations attest to the persisting strength and accelerating growth of Buddhist institutions.\(^{245}\) Buddhist art and architecture at Bodh Gaya,

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\(^{244}\) The cultural impact and patronage patterns of the Western Kṣatrapas and Ikṣvākus are discussed earlier in this chapter (Kṣaharāta and Kārdamaka Kṣatrapas in Western India, note 195 for the Ikṣvākus), and the Vākāṭaka patterns of institutional support are treated in the following subchapter (Vākāṭaka Networks of Religious Patronage).

\(^{245}\) Schopen 1994c (“Doing Business for the Lord”): 533–534 (= 2004: 52–53) points out that akṣayanīvī grants dating from as early as the 1st–2nd centuries CE before the Gupta period in Andhra, Kānhrē, and Mathura were widespread instruments for
flourishing Buddhist and Jain ateliers at Mathura, and numerous high quality Buddhist sculptures with Gupta period inscriptions from Sarnath reflect an acceleration rather than slackening of artistic production at Buddhist shrines in north India.  

Although it is beyond the scope of the overview in this chapter to address internal developments within Buddhist traditions, Gregory Schopen has persuasively demonstrated that epigraphic formulae referring to monks as Śākyabhikṣuṣ, textual production of Mahāyāna sūtras, and doctrinal elaborations associated with prominent figures mark the institutionalization of Mahāyāna during the Gupta period. Historians such as Ramashankar Tripathi argue that the “catholicity of the age” (1942: 274) and the “beneficent rule of Gupta emperors who were men of catholic culture” (277) was responsible for the vitality of Buddhist literary and visual culture. While some Gupta subordinates acted as Buddhist donors, the Guptas themselves generally drew on Vaiśnav imagery and language to portray themselves as “supreme devotees” (paramabhāgavatas), perhaps in a conscious effort to legitimate themselves as supreme rulers. The impact of this official propaganda appears to have been limited to dynastic temples, such as those at Udayagiri, and does not seem to have adversely affected Buddhist communities, since Buddhist monuments located within walking distance at Śāñcī continued to prosper. Therefore, the pattern is one of increased Buddhist artistic and literary output, which was probably stimulated by a competitive religious atmosphere.

supporting a variety of religious institutions. Also see Maity, Sachindra Kumar. 1970 [1957]. Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period (Cir. AD 300–550). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 36–42.


Vākāṭaka Networks of Religious Patronage

The Eastern and Western Vākāṭakas dominated the northern Deccan from the late third to fifth centuries and effectively controlled overland networks across India.249 Recent excavations of an Eastern Vākāṭaka temple complex at Mansar near Rāmagiri in Maharashtra and ongoing research in the Buddhist caves at Ajanṭā patronized by the Western Vākāṭakas have reaffirmed their cultural and religious significance.250 The historical and geographical origins of the early Vākāṭaka kings remain obscure, but a relationship with Nāga rulers who succeeded the Kuśānas in Mathura and Vidiśā is indicated by epigraphic references to the marriage between the daughter of Bhavanāga, the Bhāraśiva king of Padmāvatī (identified with Pawāyā about 125 miles south of Mathurā in Madhya Pradesh) and Gautamiputra, the son of Pravarasena I, a “Vākāṭaka emperor” (samarād-vākāṭaka) from ca. 275–335 CE.251 After Pravarasena’s reign, the Vākāṭaka genealogy split into two separate lines of the Eastern Vākāṭakas ruling in Nandivardhana (in ancient Vidarbha outside of modern Nagpur) and the Western Vākāṭakas in Vatsagulma (modern Basim further to the southwest).252 By the end


252 Bakker 1997: 168 (Appendix II) and Mirashi 1963: v–vi provide genealogical charts of separate Vākāṭaka lineages, but Mirashi cautions that “The Vākāṭaka chronology is still more or less conjectural” (v). Although many scholars view the Eastern Vākāṭakas as the “main branch” or interpret the predominance of one line over the
of the fourth century, the Eastern Vākātakas had become allies with the Guptas through a marriage between Rudrasena II (a grandson of Gautamiputra) and Prabhāvatī Guptā, the daughter of Candragupta II (reigning ca. 376–415) and Kuberanāgā (who belonged to one of the Nāga families). Following her husband’s death in 405 CE, Prabhāvatī Guptā reigned as a powerful dowager queen and continued to exercise significant influence over her sons Dāmodarasena (reigning ca. 415–422) and Pravaresena II (422–457), who shifted his royal residence to Pravarapura (modern Mansar) and constructed an impressive temple to Śiva named Pravareśvara.253

In apparent contrast to the Eastern Vākātakas, who depicted themselves as devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva in their inscriptions and established a network of Hindu temples and shrines around Rāmagiri, the Western Vākātakas are directly linked with elaborate Buddhist cave complexes at Ajanṭā and Ghaṭotkacā during the reign of Hariṇeṣa at the end of the fifth century (ca. 460–478).254 While some caves at Ajanṭā were excavated as early as the first or second centuries BCE (nos. 9, 10, 12), praśasti inscriptions indicate that Hariṇeṣa’s minister Varāhadeva was the donor of the Ghaṭotkacā cave and Ajanṭā cave 16, while a local ruler who was subservient to Hariṇeṣa donated Ajanṭā caves 17 and 19.255 Buddhist paintings and architecture in the Ajanṭā caves not only serve as valuable art historical evidence, but also reflect the cir-


254 Spink 2005: vol. 2, 3–8, 174–196 limits the period of construction and painting of the later Ajanṭā caves to a “Short Chronology” of ca. 462–480, when a crisis following the death of Hariṇeṣa lead to “breakdown of patronage.” However, Williams 1982: 181–187, von Stietencron (in Bakker 2004: 107–108), and other scholars (including Schlingloff and Zin, see note 264 below) hold that a longer range must have been necessary. Bakker 1997: 41 points out that the Buddhist caves were not dedicated by Hariṇeṣa himself, and probably continued to be excavated after the Aśmakas had gained control of the area from the Western Vākātakas.

culation of both mainstream and Mahāyāna texts (such as Āryaśūra’s Jātakamālā and probably the Saddharmapuṇḍarikā-sūtra) as well as widespread symbols such as the “Wheel of existence” (bhavacakra). Hans Bakker suggests that control of an important north-south trade route through Ajanṭā connecting Ujjainī to Pratiṣṭhāna stimulated Buddhist donations by Western Vākāṭaka courtiers, while Eastern Vākāṭaka donations of land grants to Brahman communities and temples can be attributed to a prosperous rural agrarian economy.

Bakker’s hypothesis of a correlation between the growth of a significant Buddhist complex at Ajanṭā and a network of overland trade routes belonging to the Dakṣināpatha corresponds well to the general pattern in which Buddhist shrines and monasteries are located on or near major trade networks. However, a strict dichotomy between urban patronage of Buddhists and rural support for Brahmans would be misleading, since many important Buddhist shrines (like Ajanṭā) are found far away from cities.

Gupta ‘Golden Age’ Reappraised

A persistent historiographical dichotomy between the ‘Golden Age’ of imperial Gupta rulers who are portrayed as quasi-nationalist supporters of “vigorous Brahmanic revival and restoration” (Bhandarkar 1920: 51) and a decline of Buddhist institutions with the withdrawal of

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257 Bakkker 1997: 44–45. According to Bakker 2004: v, one main north-south itinerary from Prayāga (Allahabad) at the Ganga-Yamuna confluence to Pratiṣṭhāna (Paithan) on the upper Godavari River passed through the Western Vākāṭaka kingdom, while another north-south route from Kauśāmbī to the lower Krishna-Godavari delta (formerly the domain of the Iksvākus) passed through the capital of the Eastern Vākāṭakas. East-west routes through the territories of the Eastern and Western Vākāṭakas from Dakṣiṇa Kośala (modern Chattisgarh) to western coastal ports at Sopara and Kalyan bisected the north-south arteries.

258 Routes and nodes of this network are investigated in more detail in the subchapter on the Southern Route (Dakṣināpatha) in Chapter 3 (pp. 205–217).
foreign support does not withstand scrutiny. Claims that “Brahmanical Hinduism became dominant all over India, and other religious systems were more or less neglected” (Chatterjee 2005: 199) are typically followed by retractions (“...but Buddhism retained its hold in many centres”), since Buddhist material and cultural contributions as well as internal developments during this period are difficult to overlook. Michael Willis traces the modern construction of a Gupta ‘Golden Age’ to Vincent Smith, for whom “...the reign of a great monarch in a golden age would have to have been long, happy and glorious” (2005: 142–143). Romila Thapar has questioned “...the notion of a uniformly Golden Age that encompasses an entire society” (2003: 280) and argues that “the Gupta period is the threshold to a marked mutation of north Indian society during the late-first millennium AD rather than a revival or renaissance” (2003: 282). The Guptas appropriated precedents set by earlier Indian rulers by revising and reinventing the past, so that their dynastic names, titles, inscriptions, and dating systems can seem like “a historical palimpsest” (Thapar 2003: 283).


262 Áli, Daud. 2004. Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press also highlights the significance of the “Vākātaka-Gupta imperial formation” as the beginning of a “400–year period (c. 350–750 CE) which saw the development, crystallization, and proliferation of a common political culture throughout all major regions of the subcontinent” (2004: 20).
Gupta origins are uncertain, but a marriage between Candragupta I and Kumāradevī, a Licchavī princess in Magadha, where Buddhist institutions maintained a very strong presence, probably allowed them to initially consolidate their power in northeastern India. Since this region (ancient Magadha) was also the homeland of the Mauryas, the personal name of Candragupta may deliberately recall this earlier line of rulers founded by a figure with an identical name. The Guptas emulated the Kuṣāṇas by giving the imperial title of Mahārājādhirāja to Candragupta and successive Gupta rulers and by striking coins based on Kuṣāṇa models. The Guptas continued to use the Kaniṣṭka era (with hundreds omitted) in inscriptions dated “in the continuous year” (kālānuvartamāṇa-saṃvatsare) along with a “victorious royal year” (vijayarājya-saṃvatsare) of the Gupta era beginning in 319 CE. Since the Gupta era was not used until the time of Candragupta II, who began ruling sometime before 388 CE, Candragupta I and his successor Samudragupta are somewhat arbitrarily assigned reigns of 20 to 25 years.

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263 Bhandarkar et al. 1981 suggests that since Kumāradevī was apparently the Licchavi ruler’s only child, “she naturally succeeded him to his kingdom and administered it along with her husband” (1981: 6). A link with the Licchavis is clear from the Allahabad pillar inscription, which indicates that Samudragupta was the ‘daughter’s son of the Licchavi, born from mahādevi Kumāradevi’ (l. 29: licchavi-dauhitrasya mahādevyāṁ Kumāradevyāṁ=utphannasya).  
266 Following Falk 2004: 169–172, the date of the Mathura pillar inscription of year 61 “in the continuous year” is calculated from 327 CE rather than 319 CE.
The commemoration of Samudragupta’s exploits in a classical Sanskrit inscription written on an Aśokan pillar at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers marks an important juncture in South Asian political and cultural history. Thapar remarks that “It is curious that he should have chosen this pillar, carrying the pillar edicts of Ashoka, suggesting either that he was claiming some historical continuity or, if the earlier inscriptions could still be read, that he was taking a contrary stand to the views of Ashoka” (2003: 283). Although the first four lines (two verses) of the inscription are damaged, the genealogy of early Gupta rulers near the end of the inscription specifies that Mahārājas (Śrī)Gupta and Ghaṭotkaca and Mahārājādhirāja Candragupta preceded Samudragupta. The epigraphic eulogy (praśasti) in praise of Samudragupta’s military expeditions and personal qualities was composed by a court poet named Hariśena. This ornate composition of mixed prose and verse is regarded as an impressive example of the campū style of Sanskrit poetry (kāvya) and represents a significant transition from Prakrit to Sanskrit in royal inscriptions, since “From this point on, all the inscriptions of the Guptas and their neighbors an feudatories in northern India were written in correct classical Sanskrit” (Salomon 1998a: 92). Daud Ali (2004: 83) argues that ubiquitous references to ‘fame’ (kīrti, yaśas) in this inscription of Samudragupta and thousands of other praśasti show that building a reputation was probably an important motivating factor.

Caution is necessary in interpreting the claims of conquest attributed to Samudragupta, however, since the “the conventional bombast and rhetorical exaggeration of the praśasti style” (Salomon 1998a: 229) was not intended to serve as an objective account of historically verifiable events. Thus, Hariśena’s claims that Samudragupta increased his glory by “capturing and then liberating” twelve southern kings of Daksināpatha and “violently exterminating” eight kings of Āryāvarta in a ‘conquest of the directions’ (digvijaya) can not be accepted at face value, since his military expeditions were probably limited to

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267 Fleet 1888: 1–17 (no. 1); Sircar 1965: 262–268 (no. 2).
268 Ali 2004: 46 comments that Harišena was awarded the titles of ‘officer for peace and war’ (sandhivigrahika), ‘princely counselor’ (kumārāmātya), and ‘great leader of the forces’ (mahādaṇḍanāyaka) for assuming various service functions in the royal household, and was probably treated on a level similar to military retainers and vassals (2004: 46). Richard Salomon remarks that “…the composition of such panegyrics was perhaps more a labor of daily bread than of love” (1998a: 236).
269 See also Salomon 1998: 110–113 for further discussion of epigraphic praśastis.
regions directly to the south and east of the Narmada River valley not controlled by the Vākātakas and to territories adjacent to the Ganga-Yamuna doāb. References to Kuśāna successors in the Northwest as Daivaputra-Śahi-Śāhānu-Śāhis and to the Western Kṣatrapas (probably) as Śaka-Muruṇḍas together with the Simhalas “and all the other island-dwellers” (sarvva-dvīpa-vāsibhir-) more likely reflects a vague awareness of distant rulers and peoples than submission to Samudragupta.

Samudragupta issued a series of gold coins with the emblem of Garuḍa (the mount, or vāhana, of Viṣṇu) and another series of coins and seals commemorating the performance of a horse sacrifice (aśvamedha). Later Gupta inscriptions of Kumāragupta issued in year 96 (415/6 CE) and of Skandagupta (reigning ca. 456–467) refer to Samudragupta as “the restorer of the Aśvamedha sacrifice that had long been in abeyance” (Fleet 1888: 44, 51). While numismatic and epigraphic evidence reflects the religious proclivities of Samudragupta and the Gupta dynasty, R.C. Majumdar’s statement that “there can be hardly any doubt that his reign marked a distinct revival of the old glory and influence of the Brahmanical religion which had suffered decline since Aśoka made Buddhism the dominant religion of India” (1954: 15) pushes this evidence too far, since his impact on religious beliefs and practices beyond the royal court was relatively limited.

After Samudragupta’s reign, there was a succession dispute between Rāmagupta and Candragupta II, who eventually consolidated Gupta dominion. Jain image inscriptions from Vidiśā referring to Mahārājādhirāja Rāmagupta and gold coins issued by Kācagupta.

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270 Fleet 1888: 12–13 (lines 19–21). For efforts to localize the rulers who are said to have been conquered, see Bhandarkar, Chhabra and Gai 1981: 12–25 and Sircar 1965: 265. Following La Vallée Poussin 1935: 45, it is necessary to read between the lines of fantastic formulae which “give an aspect of vassality to their diplomatic relations,” since the foreign countries were completely independent.

271 Raven 1994 thoroughly examines Gupta gold goins with the “Garuda-Banner” issued by rulers from the Samudragupta to Skandagupta and discusses epigraphic references and images on royal seals and Gupta period art, concluding that “…the valiant king of birds, Garuḍa Vainateya, is the perfect representative of Gupta kingship, might and glory” (1994: 196), and symbolizes a bond between Gupta kings and Vāsudeva/ Viṣṇu. Lindquist, Steven. 2003. “Enigmatic Numismatics: Kings, Horses, and the Aśvamedha Coin-type.” South Asian Studies 19, 105–112 argues that the images of the horse and Śrī on the Aśvamedha coins of Kumāragupta I and Samudragupta fulfill narrative and representational purposes, since the king can be identified with the horse and the queen with Śrī.

(probably identical to Rāmagupta) lend credence to Sanskrit and Arabic literary references to a struggle between Rāmagupta (Rawwāl in Arabic) and Candragupta (Barkamāris) in which Candragupta killed Rāmagupta and took his wife Dhruvadevi after Rāmagupta was defeated by the Śakas (Western Kṣatrapas). As Michael Willis remarks, rivalry for the Gupta throne was fiercely contested:

Each king was forced to engage in a vigorous struggle for political, military and ritual supremacy. The system was sufficiently precarious and predatory that the king’s attempt to create a working circle of power could come unraveled at any moment (2005: 144).

Rāmagupta’s “circle of power” appears to have been restricted to the Mālava region around Vidiśā and it is uncertain that he ruled for very long (ca. 375–380 is a very rough estimate).

Candragupta II succeeded in expanding the Gupta domain during a long reign of over thirty years (ca. 380–415). His own marriage with Kuberanāgā, a Bhārāśiva Nāga princess, and the marriage between their daughter Prabhāvatī Guptā and the Eastern Vākātaka ruler Rudrasena II cemented alliances with important allies in northern and central India. His conquest of the Western Kṣatrapas in Ujjayinī and Gujarat at the beginning of the fifth century (ca. 409/10 CE) was a signal event, since the Guptas now controlled important links between overland networks and ports in western India. Legends associating Vikramāditya (an epithet of Candragupta II) with the establishment of the Azes (so-called “Vikrama”) era of 58 BCE anachronistically recall his campaigns against the Western Kṣatrapas. By building monuments for worshipping Viṣṇu in the form of Nārāyanā, Varāha

\[\text{\footnotesize{\cite{273}} Bhandarkar et al. 1981: 46–52 provide a detailed account of the inscriptions, coins, and versions in literary sources, including Višākhadatta’s "Devi candraguptam" (lost but fragments preserved in Nātyadarpana), Bāna’s Harṣacarita, Bhoja’s Śrīgārpakāśa, Rājaśekhara’s Kavyamimāṃsa, and the Majmālut-Tawārikh. Majumdar 1962: 17–18 (with further references) and Tripathi 1942: 248–249 doubt the veracity of the Rāmagupta ‘romance.’ However, Bakker, Hans. 2006. “A Theatre of Broken Dreams: Vidiśā in the Days of Gupta Hegemony.” In Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke, eds. Martin Brandtner and Shishir Kumay Parda, Delhi: Manohar, 165–187, esp. 166–170, assesses the literary sources, epigraphic references in later Rāṣṭrakūṭa prāṣasti inscriptions, and coinage of Rāmagupta and Candragupta II to demonstrate how Candragupta II consolidated political power through matrimonial alliances following a successful coup d’état.}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize{\cite{274} La Vallée Poussin 1935: 47.}}\]


(boar) and Narasimha (man-lion) at Udayagiri outside of Vidiśā, Candragupta II explicitly identified himself as a “supreme devotee” (paramabhāgavata). However, a donation by Amrakārdava at the nearby site of Sāñcī stūpa 1 during the reign of Candragupta II shows that patronage of Buddhist communities by members of the Gupta court continued.

After a period of relative stability during the first half of the fifth century, the strength of the Gupta dynasty declined precipitously as a result of internal turmoil, external threats, and the growing autonomy of regional subordinates. Kumāragupta I, a son of Candragupta II and Dhruvadevī, ruled for at least thirty years from ca. 415–447. Inscriptions issued during his reign are mostly Brahmanical donations, although a few Jain and Buddhist inscriptions are attested. After Kumāragupta, there was another succession dispute between his brother Ghāṭotkacaguptā and his bastard son, Skandagupta. At Junagadh, on the same rock inscribed with the Girnar version of Aśoka’s major rock edicts and Rudradāman’s praśasti inscription of 150 CE, an elaborate Sanskrit inscription records the construction of a temple to Viṣṇu and repairs to the dam on Sudarśana lake between 455–458 CE by a local subordinate of Skandagupta named Cakrapālita, whose father Parṇadatta had been appointed governor of Saurāṣṭra. Another private donor of five Jain images at the village of Kakubha (modern Kahāum in Gorakhpur district in northeastern Uttar Pradesh) in 460 CE effusively praised Skandagupta:

Lord over a hundred kings, who is like Śakra (Indra), whose audience hall is fanned by the breeze from the bowing of the heads of hundreds of kings, who was born in the lineage of the Guptas, whose glory has spread afar, and who prospers above all others.

278 Fleet 1888: 29–34 (no. 5); Williams 1982: 37.
279 Dates for Kumāragupta I are fixed by the Bilsad pillar inscription of Gupta year 96 (415–416 CE) and the Dāmodarpur copper-plates of Gupta year 128 (447 CE) (Willis 2005: 136).
282 Fleet 1888: 56–65, no. 14; Sircar 1965: 307–316. The appointment of Parṇadatta and his son Cakrapālita as hereditary Gupta regional administrators apparently resulted from a practice of “appointing protectors (or ‘mini-Guptas’: gopṭrṇ) in all countries” (sarveṣu deṣeṣu vidiḥyā gopṭrṇ, line 6, verse 7).
In the Bhitarī stone pillar inscription, Skandagupta claimed to have restored the fortunes of his faltering dynasty by conquering the Hūṇas.\textsuperscript{284} Skandagupta was followed by a quick succession of Gupta rulers: Narasimhagupta, Kumāragupta II, and Budhagupta within a single decade (468–476/7 CE).\textsuperscript{285} Seals of Budhagupta and Viṣṇugupta from Nālandā provide evidence for the establishment of this important center of monastic scholarship in the Gupta homeland.\textsuperscript{286} Vainyagupta himself acted as a Buddhist donor in the Guṇaighar Copper-Plate inscription of 507 CE from the Comilla district in modern Bangladesh, but this is the only example of direct Gupta patronage and belongs to the latest phase of Gupta dynastic history.\textsuperscript{287} The limited distribution of inscriptions and seals of Vainyagupta and Viṣṇugupta seem to indicate that a short-lived Gupta resurgence at the beginning of the sixth century was restricted to Bihar and Bengal. The Guptas relied on a network of allies to establish and maintain control of critical regions, but their former regional subordinates asserted themselves and groups of outsiders, particularly the Hūṇas, filled the void as Gupta power declined.

Table 2.4: Vākātaka-Gupta Genealogy and Chronology\textsuperscript{288}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eastern Vākātakas</th>
<th>Western Vākātakas</th>
<th>Guptas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vindhyaśakti (c. 250)</td>
<td>Ghaṭotkaca (c. 300–319)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pravarasena I (c. 275–335)</td>
<td>Candragupta I (c. 319–350)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gautamiputra\textsuperscript{290}</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudrasena I (c. 335–360)</td>
<td>Sarvasena I (c. 330–355)</td>
<td>Samudragupta (c. 350–375)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{284} Fleet 1988: 52–56, no. 13; Sircar 1965: 321–324. Bhitarī may have been an imperial mausoleum for the Guptas (Bhandarkar et al. 1981: 83). Huns (Sanskrit Hūṇas) are discussed in more detail in \textit{Kidāras and Huns in Northwestern Indian subcontinent}.

\textsuperscript{285} The chronology of later Gupta rulers is uncertain, but the genealogy and dates presented in Table—follow Willis 2005, whose reconstruction differs from Bhandarkar et al. 1981: 84–89 (who place Narasimhagupta last in a series of four brothers beginning with Vainyagupta).


\textsuperscript{287} Sircar 1965: 340–345.

\textsuperscript{288} Based on Bakker 1997: 168–171 (Appendices II–III); Bakker 2008; Willis 2005: 135, fig. 1.

\textsuperscript{289} Marriage with Kumāradevī (Licchāvī princess).

\textsuperscript{290} Marriage with daughter of Bhavanāga (Bhāraśiva ruler).
### Table 2.4 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eastern Vākātakas</th>
<th>Western Vākātakas</th>
<th>Guptas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prthvīsena I (c. 360–395)</td>
<td>Vindhyāsakti II (c. 360–400)</td>
<td>Rāmagupta (c. 375)²⁹¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudrasena II²⁹³ (c. 395–405)</td>
<td>Pravarasena II (c. 400–415)</td>
<td>Candragupta II (c. 375/380–415)²⁹²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divākarasena (before c. 419)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Kumāragupta I (c. 415–447)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dāmodarasena (c. 415–422)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Purugupta²⁹⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pravarasena II (c. 422–457)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ghaṭotkacagupta (c. 448–455)²⁹⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narendrasena (c. 457–475)</td>
<td>Devasa (c. 450–460)</td>
<td>Skandagupta (c. 456–467)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hariṣeṇa (c. 460–478)</td>
<td>Narasimhagupta (c. 467–474?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prthvīsena II (c. 475–495)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kumāragupta II (c. 474–476)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Budhagupta (c. 477–488)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vainyagupta (c. 508)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Viṣṇugupta (c. 515?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cross-cultural Transmission between South Asia and Central Asia, ca. 500–1000 CE**

Competition for economic, political, and religious power affected patterns of cross-cultural contact and exchanges between South Asia and Central Asia during a period of instability after the downfall of the Guptas in the middle of the first millennium CE. Local and regional

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²⁹¹ Perhaps identified with Kācagupta (immediate successor of Samudragupta), first husband of Dhruvadevi in *Devicandraguptam*.
²⁹² Marriage with Kuberanāgā (Bhāraśiva Nāga princess).
²⁹³ Marriage with Prabhāvatī Guptā (daughter of Candragupta II), who continued to rule from c. 405–419.
²⁹⁴ Son of Kumāragupta, did not rule.
²⁹⁵ Perhaps married to Atibhāvatī (his niece), the daughter of Prabhāvatī Guptā and Rudrasena II (Bakker 1997: 17).
polities emerged, solidified, and expanded their domains in the Indian subcontinent while acting as patrons of competing Buddhist, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and other religious movements. Ronald Davidson links the “early medieval vitality” of Indian religions, literature, and art to “the valorization of regional identity” and a “discourse of divine power” whereby “the gods became kings even as the kings became gods” (2003: 74). The systematic use of imperial metaphors of divine apotheosis in public inscriptions and literary texts composed in the courts of rulers who aspired to fulfill the cakravartin ideal of universal overlordship provides a political-historical context for the development of a “mature synthesis of esoteric Buddhism” (Davidson 2002: 114) and the monastic institutionalization of Śaiva Tantrism, both of which provided rival rituals of consecration (abhiṣeka), powerful texts and formulas (mantras), and religious ideologies to confer royal legitimacy. Volatile political alliances, changing military alignments, and fluctuating migration patterns did not result in insular stagnation, but often caused shifts in transregional routes for commercial exchanges and religious transmission. Contemporary sources from this period, including the accounts of Chinese travelers, inscriptions of visitors to Indian Buddhist centers, and material artifacts found far way from their original contexts, attest significant mobility via overland and maritime itineraries. The emergence of new trade networks and merchant communities (such as the Sogdians in Central Asia) and macroregional conflicts between Indian, Chinese, Central Asian, Tibetan, and Arab forces had major impacts on cultural transmission, sometimes prompting the creation of new ties and in other cases constraining access. The re-emergence of the northwestern borderlands as a contact zone between South Asia and Central Asia deserves special emphasis, since Buddhist literary and material cultures flourished at nodes for long-distance trade and political administration loosely con-


297 Sanderson, Alexis. 2009. “The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period.” In Genesis and Development of Tantrism. Shingo Einoo, ed. Tōkyō: Sankibō Busshorin, 41–350 provides a detailed survey of royal patronage of Buddhism (pp. 70–116), but argues that Śaivism absorbed or provided the models for Buddhist Tantrism (252). His claim that the repertoire of Śaiva rituals and theory promoted economic, policial, and social processes that encouraged “intellectual and aesthetic vigour” (253, n. 590) applies equally well to a Buddhist impetus.
trolled by a network of rulers affiliated with the Kidara and Alchon Huns or local dynasties like the Palola Şahis of Gilgit.

Kidāras and Huns in the Northwestern Indian Subcontinent

Like their Saka and Kuşâna predecessors, the Kidāra and Alchon Huns migrated to the Indo-Iranian borderlands from Central Asia as a result of Xiongnu nomadic expansion. Although relationships between Hunnic groups known as the Hūnas in Indian sources (and Chionites or Hephthalites in western sources) remain unclear due to conflicting reports about their origins and identities, they filled a significant gap by asserting control of areas between the eastern frontier of the Sasanians and the northwestern borderlands of the Guptas and their allies beginning in the fifth century CE. Based primarily on analysis of coins and seals, a group identified as the Kidāras emerged as autonomous rulers of large areas between Gandhāra and western Central Asia in the fifth century (ca. 430–477). Chinese sources based on the report of Dong Wan’s mission to the Western Regions in 437 CE affiliate the Kidāras (Juduoluo) with the Yuezhi (rather than the Xiongnu), but the testimony attributed to him may have been copied from or harmonized with later historical texts. The Kidāras portray themselves as “restorers of the previous order” (Grenet 2002: 298–224). Grenet’s dates are adopted, although the chronological range for the Kidāras is highly uncertain, since the Chionites with whom they are sometimes identified are assigned to a period beginning in the fourth century immediately after the Sasanians lost control of Bactria in the mid-370’s during the rule of Shapur II (Grenet 2002: 206). La Vaissière’s hypothesis that “…all the nomadic kingdoms that flourished in Bactria between the middle of the fourth century and the middle of the sixth century can trace their origin back to a single episode of massive migration in the second half of the fourth century (circa 350–370), and not to a whole set of successive migrations” (2003 [2007]: 122) alleviates problematic associations between the Chionites and Kidāras, while leaving a significant lag before the Kidāras emerged as regional political power.

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299 Grenet, Frantz. 2002. “Regional Interaction in Central Asia and Northwest India in the Kidarite and Hephthalite periods.” Proceedings of the British Academy 116, 203–224. Grenet’s dates are adopted, although the chronological range for the Kidāras is highly uncertain, since the Chionites with whom they are sometimes identified are assigned to a period beginning in the fourth century immediately after the Sasanians lost control of Bactria in the mid-370’s during the rule of Shapur II (Grenet 2002: 206). La Vaissière’s hypothesis that “…all the nomadic kingdoms that flourished in Bactria between the middle of the fourth century and the middle of the sixth century can trace their origin back to a single episode of massive migration in the second half of the fourth century (circa 350–370), and not to a whole set of successive migrations” (2003 [2007]: 122) alleviates problematic associations between the Chionites and Kidāras, while leaving a significant lag before the Kidāras emerged as regional political power.

300 Passages referring to the Yuezhi affiliation of the Kidāras and Hephtalites in Wei shu (“History of the Wei”) chapter 102.8b (p. 2278), Bei shi (“History of the Northern Dynasties”) chapter 97.11b (pp. 3230–31), Zhoushou chapter 50 (p. 918), and Suishu chapter 83 (p. 1854) indicate that in the sixth century when the textual passages were redacted, the origins of the groups which occupied the former territory of the Kuşânas were no longer clearly understood (La Vaissière 2003 [2007]: 120).
206–7) of the Kušāṇas or Kushano-Sassanians by adopting the title of Kidāra kuṣāna śahi on Brāhmī coin legends. However, the title of Kidāra kuṣāna śahi does not necessarily indicate that the Kidāras were related to the Kušāṇas, but ruled the former Kušāṇa territory.301 Keeping these caveats in mind, Shōshin Kuwayama reconstructs a scenario in which the Kidāras migrated to northwestern Pakistan after gaining control of five kingdoms north of Gandhāra and established a capital at Puruṣapura (modern Peshawar) based on passages in the Weishu:

The king of Da Yuezhi called Jiduoluo (Kidara), brave and fierce, eventually dispatched his troops southward and invaded North India (present-day Pakistan), crossing the great mountains to subjugate the five kingdoms which were located to the north of Gandhāra.302

Brief Chinese references to Kidāra rulers coupled with distribution of their coin-types on both sides of the Hindu Kush from northern Gandhāra, Swat and Bannu (in present-day Northwest Pakistan) to Samarkand in ancient Sogdia have resulted in different interpretations of their relationships with regional contemporaries. Since Kidāra coins fit into a continuous series with those issued by their Kushano-Sasanian predecessors, Robert Göbl (1967) views the Kidāras as erstwhile regional allies of the Sasanians against the Alchon Huns. Adopting the perspective of the Chinese accounts, Kuwayama (1989, 1992) also holds that the Kidāras were opponents of a subsequent ‘wave’ of Xiongnu invaders who drove them out of Bactria (which Kuwayama refers to as Tokharistan) and into the northwestern frontiers of South Asia. Frantz Grenet (2002) questions the loyalty of the Kidāras to the Sasanians, since they “cashed in on the military threat they exercised against Iran” (2002: 209) by exacting tribute from Sasanian rulers such as Yazdigird II. While acknowledging a long struggle between

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the Kidāras and Hephthalites (identified with the Alchon Huns) for control of Bactria and Sogdiana, Grenet draws attention to evidence for coexistence between the last Kidāras and the first Hephthalites who seem to have been on “hunting terms” (2002: 212) in depictions on two Gandhāran silver bowls found in Swat and in Chīlek, north of the Sogdian capital in Samarkand. Grenet surmises that the Kidāras (and the Alchon Huns who later supplanted them) “…sought to control the mountainous nexus of trade routes linking Bactria, India, China, and Sogdiana” (2002: 207). The expansion of the Kidāra and Hephthalite Huns to Sogdia entailed a process of “Bactrianisation” (Grenet 2002: 208) whereby Indian cultural elements (including Buddhist elements) were introduced to some areas of western Central Asia which had not been exposed to the initial phases of long-distance transmission in earlier periods.

By acting as political and cultural mediators between India, Iran, and Central Asia, the Alchon Huns (identifiable with the Indian Hūṇas, Chinese Yida or Yada, and Hephthalites in Western historical sources) aided the development of overland trade and expansion of Buddhist networks in the fifth and sixth centuries, despite their exaggerated reputation as oppressive barbarians in Chinese and Sanskrit literary sources. While the Alchon Huns had much in common with the Kidāras (including similar origins in mass migrations from Central Asia to Bactria in the fourth century), they consciously distinguished themselves by abandoning Kuṣāṇa titles, using Bactrian and Brāhmī instead of Pahlavi on coin and seal legends, and developing distinctive styles of ornamentation and portraiture (particularly their artificially deformed craniums or “steeple heads”).303 They played a prominent role in Central Asian geopolitics in the fifth and sixth centuries by engaging in conflicts and enacting alliances with a series of Sasanian rulers (helping Peroz rise to power between 459–484 and sheltering Kawad I between 484–488), and expanding their dominion west to the Merv oasis (probably during the reign of Kavad I) and north to

Sogdia (by 509 CE). The Alchon Huns began to exchange diplomatic missions with the Chinese court in 457 CE after consolidating their stronghold in eastern Bactria, eventually took control of routes across the Hindu Kush away from the Kidāras, established themselves as overlords of northwestern India, and directly contributed to the downfall of the Guptas, whose position in central India eroded as the Hūnayas (whom Skandagupta claimed to have defeated) made significant inroads as far as modern Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

The Alchon Huns appear in several inscriptions, including two Buddhist donations that demonstrate religious patronage of monasteries in northern Afghanistan and Pakistan. The recent publication of a Sanskrit inscription on a thin copper scroll belonging to the Schøyen collection provides valuable information about the identities of Alchon Huns who are named in a list of secondary donors who received credit for the erection of a relic stūpa. If Gudrun Melzer’s identification of year 68 as a Laukika era date corresponding to 492/3 CE is correct, this inscription supplies a fixed point in the chronology of the Alchon Huns.
Huns.\textsuperscript{307} Khiṅgila (with the title of \textit{mahāśāhi}) and Toramāna (titled \textit{devarāja}), who were already well-known historical figures (but apparently not father and son, as previously supposed), are listed together with male and female contemporaries: Mehama (like Khiṅgila, a \textit{mahāśāhi} during whose reign the donation was made), Javūkha (a \textit{mahārāja} who was the son of Sādavikha), a queen, and two “mistresses of the great monastery” (\textit{mahāvihārasvāminī}) named Arccavāmanā and Sāsā.\textsuperscript{308} The primary purpose of this long and ornate inscription is to record the establishment of a reliquary \textit{stūpa} (\textit{tathāgatacaityo dhātugarbha}) by the ‘master of a great monastery’ (\textit{mahāvihārasvāmin}), whose official title of \textit{Tālagānika-Devaputraśāhi} may indicate that he belonged to the ruling family of the Tālagān region east of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan, which was the geographical heartland of the Alchon Huns.\textsuperscript{309} At the beginning of the inscription, an extensive quotation from a Mahāyāna sūtra (\textit{Śrīmatībrāhmaṇī pariprāchā}) about the teaching of dependent arising by the Buddha to the Brahmin woman Śrīmati is followed by the introductory verses to Nāgārjuna’s \textit{Mūlamadhyamakakārika}. Melzer (2006: 252) suggests that these citation may indicate the use of \textit{Pratītyasamutpāda} texts in consecration rituals. The invocation of passages from Mahāyāna sūtras and the concluding seven verses composed in classical Sanskrit meters show that monasteries supported by the Alchon Huns in a region “adorned with \textit{stūpas} resembling a multitude of autumn clouds” (Melzer 2006: 277) were linked to Buddhist scholastic and literary networks.

The Alchon Hun rulers Toramāna and Javūkha are also associated with the donation of a monastery in another Buddhist inscription from Kura in the Salt Range in the western Punjab.\textsuperscript{310} The primary

\textsuperscript{307} Melzer 2006: 263–4 considers other possibilities, including the Gupta era of 319/20 CE, the Kaniska era (with hundreds omitted) beginning in 127/8 CE, and the era of the Tochi Valley inscriptions of 223 CE, but her arguments in favor of the Laukika/Saptarśi era (later used by the Palola Śāhis of Gilgit, as discussed in the following subchapter) are convincing.

\textsuperscript{308} Melzer 2006: 257–262 discusses the historical context of these rulers, whose names and titles are attested in lines 37–39 of the inscription’s donative formula (274).

\textsuperscript{309} Melzer 2006: 256; Grenet 2002: 210 suggests that eastern Bactria may have been the original base of the Hephthalites, and argues that the later Hephthalites continued to control the area around Surkh Kotal in the Surkh-ab valley on the route between Kunduz and Kabul.

donor named Roṭa-siddhayṛddhi, a ‘master of the monastery’ who was the son of Roṭa-jayavrddhi, a ‘master of many monasteries’ (aneka-vihārasvāmino), extended the merit of the donation to his own brothers, wives, sisters, sons, and daughters and to all of the queens, princes, and princesses of Mahārāja Toramāṇa and Śāha Jāvkha (written Jaūvkha), and expressed the wish that his religious offering (deyadharma) be used for the “attainment of supreme knowledge by all beings.” The names and titles of the Masters of the Monastery, whose “special prosperity” (vīśeṣa-vṛddhi) was “praised and honored by the lord of Naścīra” (Bühler 1892: 241), corroborates Gregory Schopen’s hypothesis that some Buddhist monasteries were privately owned and inherited by prosperous families responsible for their maintenance and supervision. The last line of the inscription seems to have been intentionally defaced, and the designation of the Mahiśāsakas (ācārya mahīś[ākānām]) as recipients of the donation may have been forged. Although this area has not been carefully surveyed for Buddhist and other archaeological remains, the significance of a monastery located at Kura is probably related to efforts by Hun rulers such as Toramāṇa (and his son Mihirakula) to maintain access to the “salt road” between Kashmir and the Salt Range.

311 Since the copper scroll inscription (Melzer 2006) clearly differentiates Toramāṇa from Jāvkha, earlier interpretations of Jāvkha or Jaūvla (as read by Bühler in line 10) as an epithet of Toramāṇa should be discarded, although the relationship between Jāvkha and Toramāṇa remains unclear. Epigraphic parallels for this donative formula are compiled by Schopen 1979: 5–9 (-2005: 227–231), who argues that this standardized formula does not necessarily indicate Mahāyāna affiliation.


314 Kuwayama 1992: 6–7 (part 1) connects the importance of the salt trade between Kashmir and the Punjab to the location of the military camp of the Hephthalite ruler near Jhelum. With the assistance of Mohammad Usman, I was able to visit the site (“Kutte Mar”) in 1996, and although few surface remains were visible there, numerous other archaeological sites in this part of the Salt Range may belong to this historical period. I have found my unpublished notes (“Ancient Remains in the Salt Range”) online at various websites, including: http://www.reference.com/browse/Salt+Range. For references to articles by Michael Meister and Pakistani scholars on Hindu temples from the 6th to 11th centuries in the Salt Range and along the Indus River, see: http://www.arthistory.upenn.edu/meister/pakistan.html, including Meister, Michael. 2010. Temples of the Indus: Studies in the Hindu Architecture of Ancient Pakistan. Leiden:
Other epigraphic records of religious donations made by local subordinates of Toramāṇa demonstrate that Hūṇa rule in India did not necessarily alter patterns of non-Buddhist patronage. An inscription written on a colossal red sandstone sculpture of the boar *avatāra* of Viṣṇu as Varāha at Eran (ancient Airikīṇa) in western Madhya Pradesh clearly indicates that a family of local Brahmin *Mahārājās* who had ruled under the Guptas until at least 484–5 CE switched their allegiance to *Mahārājādhirāja* Toramāṇa within the first year of his Indian conquests.315 This expression of obeisance by a local feudatory named Dhanyaviṣṇu who had a Vaishnava temple constructed at this site shows that the Hūṇa domain extended deep into the former territory of the Guptas, but does not really support Upendra Thakur’s Hinduization argument that the “culturally weak” victors (the Hūṇas) “succumbed to the overwhelming cultural superiority of the vanquished and gradually forgot all about their earlier faiths and beliefs” (1967: 260). The adoption of Vaishnava symbols such as the conch and the appearance of Lakṣmi on some coins issued by Toramāṇa hardly “point to his strong leanings to the Brāhmanic religion” or “mark his emergence as a convert to Hinduism” (Thakur 167: 261), since other issues with fire altars and polyvalent disks (*cakras*) circulated more widely.

A copper-plate inscription dated in the third year of Toramāṇa’s reign found near Sañjeli in Gujarat records donations of commodities by local and long-distance merchants to a Vaishnava temple of the deity Jayasvāmin.316 The temple was built by Virādhyika, the queen-mother of *Mahārāja* Bhūta, a regional overlord (*viṣayapati*) subservient to Toramāṇa, who is given Gupta imperial titles (*Paramabhatāraka Mahārājādhirāja*). As Ranabir Chakravarti notes, donations to this

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temple by a mercantile organization (*vaniggrāma*) of local and long-distance merchants who came from Kanauj, Ujjayini, and Mathura indicate that the district headquarters of Vadrapāli “…can be viewed as a nodal point in the overland supra-local trade network” (2008: 397) and “…combined religio-cultural activities with administrative functions and commercial transactions” (2008: 398). The construction and repair of a sun temple not very far way at Mandasor (Daśapura) in the neighboring region of Mālava by a guild of silk weavers demonstrates that commercial patronage of non-Buddhist temples sustained religious establishments during a period of considerable dynastic flux in the fifth and sixth centuries as the Hūnas contended with Guptas and emergent regional rulers for control of pivotal links between the Indian hinterland and the western coast.\(^\text{317}\)

Literary traditions associate Toramāṇa’s son Mihirakula with religious oppression and the downfall of Hūṇa power in India, but the evidence from epigraphy and archaeology is ambiguous. In an inscription dated in Mihirakula’s fifteenth regnal year, a local donor of a sun temple in Gwalior praises Toramāṇa and Mihirakula as powerful sovereigns, indicating that the hegemony of the Hūṇas continued to be acknowledged in areas of north-central India during the early-mid sixth century.\(^\text{318}\) However, the Aulikara rulers of Daśapura in the Mālava region resisted Hūṇa domination, according to the Rīsthal inscription of Prakāśadharman, who made grandiose claims of defeating Toramāṇa in battle, using the tusks of his vanquished elephants to make ivory seats for ascetics and dedicating the females of his harem to the temple of Lord Vṛṣabhadhvaja (Śiva).\(^\text{319}\)


\(^{318}\) Fleet 1888: 161–164, no. 37, pl. 22B; Sircar 1965: 424–426, no. 57. Sircar 1965: 424 gives c. 515–545 CE as an approximate range for Mihirakula’s reign, but the claim by the contemporary Aulikara ruler Yaśodharman to have made Mihirakula subservient in his undated Mandasor stone pillar inscriptions (Fleet 1888: 142–150, nos. 33–34, pl. 26B-C; Sircar 1965: 418–420, no. 54) aids in fixing a date for Mihirakula, since another inscription from Mandasor was issued while Yaśodharman was ruling in Mālava year 589, corresponding to 532 CE (Fleet 1888: 150–158, no. 35, pl. 22; Sircar 1965: 411–417, no. 53).

\(^{319}\) Salomon, Richard. 1989. “New Inscriptional Evidence for the History of the Aulikaras of Mandasor.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 32, 1–36, lines 12–14, vv. 16–18. The Rīsthal inscription is dated in 515 CE (Mālava year 572). Salomon points out that this date does not mark a *terminus ante quem* for the reign of Toramāṇa, since “the rhetorical claim of his submission to the Aulikara king proves nothing more than that the two came into conflict, and that Prakāśadharman was not conquered by the Hun” (1989: 27).
stone pillar inscriptions, Yaśodharman, who apparently succeeded Prakāśadharman, also claims to have subjugated Mihirakula, “whose forehead was pained through being bent low down by the strength of [Yaśodharman’s] arm in obeisance” (Fleet 1888: 148). In this prāśasti to Yaśodharman’s superiority over Mihirakula, the poet Vāsula remarks that Mihirakula did not render homage to anyone else except Śiva (Sthānu), which leads some historians (such as D.C. Sircar) to suggest that Mihirakula was indeed a Śaiva ruler, although it seems more likely that this convention is more directly related to the importance of Śiva as the family deity (iṣṭadevatā) of this branch of the Aulikaras.

Mihirakula is depicted as a violent tyrant and as a persecutor of Buddhists in the accounts of Chinese visitors to South Asia, but his rule in Gandhāra, the Punjab, and Kashmir does not appear to have had a negative impact on the growth of Buddhist monasteries. Song Yun, an official Wei envoy, visited the court of the Hephthalite (Heda) ruler in eastern Afghanistan in 519 CE with Huisheng and continued traveling to Swat and Gandhāra in 520 CE. In contrast to the ruler of Swat, who is depicted as a diligent Buddhist vegetarian, Song Yun described the Hephthalite ruler of Gandhāra as a bloodthirsty enemy of Buddhists:

The nature of the king is violent and cruel, very often conducting massacres. He does not believe in the Buddhist faith, but well worships their own heathen gods. As all the inhabitants in the country are Brahmans who respect Buddhism by much reading the sutras, so it is deeply against their wishes that they suddenly have such a king.

In contrast to John Marshall (1951: 1.76–7) and other historians (cited by Kuwayama 2002: 108) who claim that the Hephthalites destroyed Buddhist monasteries in Taxila and elsewhere, Kuwayama emphasizes that “no statement is made in any paragraph proving that the

321 Sircar 1965: 419, n. 4 states unequivocally that Mihirakula was a devotee of Śiva. From a numismatic perspective, Grenet observes, “This ruler’s own religious sympathies are expressed by the Shivaite trident and bull symbols prominently displayed on his coins” (2002: 211).
Hephthalite king killed Buddhist monks or destroyed Buddhism in Gandhāra” (1992: 4 / 2002: 110). He cautions that Chinese Buddhist monks were especially concerned with “extinction of the True Law” and attributed persecution of Buddhism in Gandhāra to Mihirakula because he was a known historical figure associated with cruelty. Kuwayama’s criticism may be applied to Xuanzang’s recapitulation of Mihirakula’s attempt to persecute Buddhists when he ruled Śākala (modern Sialkot in the Punjab) “several hundred years ago” (Li 1996: 114). Xuanzang described Mihirakula as “a man of talent and intelligence with a bold and furious nature” (Li 1996: 114) who ordered the destruction of Buddhism and expulsion of monks after a royal servant (rather than a learned monk) was appointed as his Buddhist preceptor. The narrative of Mihirakula’s alleged persecution of Buddhism is linked with a story of his capture by King Balāditya of Magadha, whose mother spared Mihirakula from capital punishment. While it is tempting to identify Balāditya with a later Gupta ruler (such as Narasimha Balāditya), Balāditya was a common epithet and the story as well as Mihirakula’s subsequent campaigns against Gandhāra from a base in Kashmir appear to be anachronistic. Although Mihirakula is described in the Rājatarangini as a “royal Vetāla (vampire) day and night surrounded by thousands of murdered human beings” (Stein 1900: i.291), a major Buddhist shrine at Harwan was built during this period of Hephthalite rule. Despite a reputation for cruelty in several literary sources, Mihirakula and his Hūṇa predecessors may be compared to other “foreign successors [who] legitimated their presence in the same way that the new Indian dynasties clung to some Gupta formulae” (Williams 1982: 102). The Hūṇas were probably expelled from central India by the middle of the sixth century, but continued to be perceived as foreign threats to north India from the Punjab, Kashmir and the northwestern frontiers.

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325 Stein remarks that the “legendary anecdotes…reproduce faithfully the popular tradition regarding the king such as had developed in Kāshmir within a century of his death” (1900: 1.78). Kak, Ram Chandra. 1933. Ancient Monuments of Kashmir. London: India Society [reprint, New Delhi: Sagar publications, 1971] and Paul, Pran Gopal. 1986. Early Sculpture of Kashmir. Leiden: Sneldruk Enschede, 39 ff. describe the Buddhist remains at Harwan.
326 Thakur 1967: 140–163 discusses additional Buddhist (Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa) and Jain references to the Hūṇas and Mihirakula, as well as references to the domain of King Gollas west of the Indus River in the account of Kosmos Indikopleustes (Topographia Christiana), an Alexandrian merchant who visited western India around
In the aftermath of the Hūṇas’ departure from North India, regional dynasties contended for imperial power, but Hūṇa rule in pockets of the northwestern frontier continued to have a significant impact on patterns of Buddhist transmission between South Asia and Central Asia. Frantz Grenet argues that “a second Buddhist conquest of Central Asia” during the Hephthalite period was “more far-reaching than the first one in the Kushan period” (2002: 213). In support of this assertion, he refers to Pierfrancisco Callieri’s identification of an early sixth-century soapstone statuette of a female playing a harp imported from Gandhara or Kashmir to Merv, where it was deposited in a stūpa with a reliquary, Brāhmī manuscript fragments, and other small figurines. Although an earlier stūpa may have been established in Merv sometime prior to this period, material evidence of contact between Buddhist cultures in northwestern India and western Central Asia supports Callieri’s hypothesis that “the westward expansion of Buddhism may therefore have profited from the temporary political subjugation of Margiana” (1996: 399) by the Hephthalites in the fifth and sixth centuries.

The Hephthalites also had an impact on the establishment of a triangular network for long-distance trade dominated by Sogdian merchants. Over 600 Sogdian graffiti and Bactrian inscriptions in the

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530 CE. Schwartzberg, Joseph. 1992 [1978]. Historical Atlas of South Asia. Chicago: University of Chicago Press proposes that the Hūṇas were assimilated into Indian society while continuing to wage wars against the Mauryas and other post-Gupta rulers of north India. The Hūṇas were stereotyped as enemies to be conquered in the northern direction in epigraphic prāsāstis and Sanskrit literary epitomes of heroic conquests, according to Pollock 2006: 244 (referring to an inscription written during the reign of Nārāyanapāla, 875–932 CE, extolling anachronistic conquests of Hūṇas by his Pāla predecessors).


Upper Indus valley, particularly at Shatial, indicate that long-distance commerce flourished while the Hephthalites controlled adjoining regions. Étienne de La Vaissière points out that the frequent appearance of the ethnonym Hun (xwn) in these inscriptions “...is historically inconceivable before a conquest of Sogdiana by the Huns, followed by a period of calm and fusion between the Sogdian population and the nomadic invaders” (2005: 81–82). Kuwayama attempts to attribute shifts in trade and pilgrimage routes between South Asia and Central Asia to changes in the political landscape with the rise and fall of the Hephthalites. Between 550–560 CE, the Hephthalites lost control of western Central Asia and Tokharistan (northern Afghanistan) to Turkish chieftains allied with the Sasanians. Afterwards, the sphere of Hephthalite rule was confined to the Surkhab valley (the middle course of the Kunduz River in northeastern Afghanistan), although they maintained a network of castles on routes to Bamiyan and an affiliated dynasty of Nezak Shahs held power in the Kabul valley until their defeat by the Arab general Qutaiba in 709–710. Following the decline of these Hephthalite successors, other local and regional dynasties emerged at important nodes in exchange networks and acted as Buddhist patrons and agents of transmission.

Whitfield, ed. London: British Library, states: “the Huns’ invasions in Central Asia gave way to the sole domination of the Sogdians on the caravan routes of Central Asia” (23).


330 “Hun” (Sogdian xwn) is well attested as a component of names in at least 15 Sogdian inscriptions from the Upper Indus (Sims-Williams 1989–92: 2.80 [glossary]). La Vaissière 2005: 82–83, 87, 108 proposes that an absence of Hun patronyms may indicate that Sogdian merchants ceased to use routes through the Upper Indus when the Hephthalites split the Kidâra kingdom in the first half of the 5th century, but such a short chronology for the Sogdian presence in the Upper Indus region is unlikely.

331 Kuwayama ties a “drastic change” (2002: 149, 194) in the itineraries of Chinese pilgrims and Indian monks from earlier routes through the Karakorum and eastern Hindu Kush to later patterns of travel through the western Hindu Kush (particularly Bamiyan) to the decline of the Hephthalites around 550 CE. However, Brâhmi and Proto-Śāradā inscriptions from the Upper Indus demonstrate continuous movement through the 7th century instead of a disruption in the 6th century. The epigraphic evidence from northern Pakistan is treated in greater detail in Chapter 5: Capillary Routes in the Upper Indus.


Palola Śāhis of Gilgit: Élite Patrons in a Buddhist Enclave

The Palola Śāhis, a local dynasty of rulers in Gilgit from the late sixth to early eighth century CE, supported the production of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts and bronze sculptures at an important administrative and cultural hub in a network of deep valleys in the Karakorum mountains. Manuscript colophons, stone inscriptions, and inscribed bronze sculptures serve as primary sources for Oskar von Hinüber’s reconstruction of the chronology and genealogy of this family of Buddhist patrons. A collection of manuscripts discovered in 1931 west of Gilgit near the village of Naupur in the Kargah valley clearly demonstrates that local Buddhist literary culture flourished during this period. The extensive range of Buddhists texts, including 532 folios of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya, represented in the Gilgit manuscripts seems likely to have belonged to a monastic library, despite arguments to the contrary by Gérard Fussman and Gregory Schopen based on an absence of architectural evidence of monastic structures. Although absolute dates for the manuscripts can not be determined, Hinüber proposes a terminus ante quem around 630 CE based on the use of the so-called Round Brāhmī script before its replacement by Proto-Śāradā.

335 Fussman, Gérard. 2004. “Dans quel type de bâtiment furent trouvés les manuscrits de Gilgit.” Journal Asiatique 292, 101-150 dismisses earlier identifications of the quadrangular tower that contained the manuscripts as a “hollow stūpa” belonging to a royal monastery and instead suggests that it was the dwelling or chapel of an individual eremitic Buddhist teacher (ācārya) or a lineage of teachers. Schopen, Gregory. 2009. “On the Absence of Urtexts and Otiose Ācāryas: Buildings, Books, and Lay Buddhist Ritual at Gilgit.” In Colas and Gerschheimer, eds. 2009: 189–219 rejects Fussman’s theory that this building served as a residence and chapel for Buddhist monks who performed protective or healing rituals, and instead conjectures “…that it was a kind of sacred workshop, a combination of genizah and scriptorium, where old, unusable, or returned manuscripts (i.e., those with donor colophons or donors’ names in them) were kept, along with some master-copies, and where new manuscripts were manufactured and were for sale (i.e., those without donor-colophons or donors’ names in them)” (2009: 203). Manuscripts and other materials were excavated by Kaul Shastri, Madhusudan. 1939. “Report on the Gilgit Excavation in 1938.” Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society 30.1, 1–12 + pls. 1407–1434. Another substantial collection of 454 folios of a Sanskrit Dirghāgama manuscript was reportedly recovered from the site in 1998 (Fussman 2004: 104, n. 8).
336 In support of ca. 630 CE for the transition from Round Brāhmī to Proto-Śāradā, Hinüber refers to the colophon of a Saṃghāṭa-sūtra Proto-Śāradā manuscript dated in year three (saṃvaiśare tṛṭyē 3) of an unspecified era (2004: 25–26, no. 10), which
Names of early Palola Śāhi rulers, family members, and court officials appear among the lists of donors in colophons of Buddhist manuscripts and dhāranīs (brief textual formulae conferring protection and other benefits). Three rulers, Vajrāditya-nandin, Vikramāditya-nandin, and Surendravikramāditya-nandin, are listed along with their wives among the donors of Mahāyāna sūtras in formulae beginning with the phrase: “this religious offering” (deyadharma yam or devadharmo yam). Various forms of the name of the Palola Śāhi successor Navasurendrāditya-nandin is written in three Mahāmāyūrī fragments and incorporated into copies of the Vimaloṣṇīṣa dhāraṇī. As co-donors who received religious merit for their sponsorship of Buddhist manuscripts labeled as “religious offerings” and as donors whose names have been inserted into dhāranīs, Navasurendra, his Palola Śāhi predecessors, their wives, and courtiers participated in the Mahāyāna ‘Cult of the Book’ in which devotees worship the Buddha’s dharmakāya by following exhortations to have many of the sūtras preserved in the Gilgit Sanskrit manuscripts written down.

Navasurendra has full imperial titles in a Sanskrit stone inscription at Hatun in the Ishkoman valley written in the Proto-Śāradā script and dated in year 47 of the Laukika era, corresponding to 671 CE.

would correspond to 627/8 CE if calculated according to the same century of the Laukika era as the Hatun inscription of year 47 (671 CE) and the Dainyor inscription of year 62 (687 CE). Hinüber’s terminology is adopted here, although “Round Brāhmī” is also referred to as “calligraphic ornate script” or “Gilgit/Bāmiyān Type I,” which is distinguished from “Gilgit/Bāmiyān Type II” (Proto-Śāradā) by changes in writing the character for ya.


The inscription records the excavation of an irrigation canal and the founding of a town by Makara Simgha, an official under the Palola Śâhis who simultaneously held the titles of Great Treasurer, Supreme Minister, Great Chief of the Feudatories, and Military Commander of Gilgit.341 Another damaged Sanskrit inscription at Dainyor, near the confluence of the Gilgit and Hunza rivers, with the name of his successor, Jayaman-galavikramāditya-nandin and dated in Laukika era year 62 corresponding to 687 CE, may have recorded a land grant, but the details remain uncertain.342 The distribution of graffiti inscriptions with names of people with Palola titles or ethnonyms located near the confluence of the Gilgit and Indus rivers at Alam Bridge and at various sites in the Chilas plain of the Upper Indus suggests that the Palola Śâhis exerted considerable influence in the Gilgit valley and surrounding areas of northern Pakistan in the seventh century.343

Numerous bronze sculptures inscribed with names of Palola Śâhi queens, kings, and family members with dates in the seventh and eighth century attest to their direct patronage of a local atelier.344 The earliest inscriptions record donations of an image of the Buddhist goddess Prajñāpāramitā holding a manuscript (labeled as a Perfection of Wisdom text) by Maṅgalahamśikā, the Chief Queen of Vajrādityanandin, who belongs to the early seventh century [Fig. 2.4].345 The pedestals


341 These titles contain the earliest reference to the toponym of Gilgit (Giligittā) and Makara Simgha is described as Kāñjuti (Kaṇudīya), an ethnonym still applied to Burushos, as recognized by Stein 1944: 9 and Fussman 1993b: 14, n. 6. Fussman 1993b: 15 comments that Iranian sarāṃgha (Persian sarhanga/ Middle Iranian srng “hero”) demonstrates local adoption of non-Indian titles.


345 Hinüber 2007 has published donative inscriptions of Maṅgalahamśikā (not included in Hinüber 2004). The copper alloy sculpture (41 cm in height) of Prajñāpāramitā is illustrated in Sotheby’s auction catalog of Indian and Southeast Asian Art (1 April, 2005: 60, no. 5) and another pedestal inscription recording a donation by Queen Maṅgalahasrikā (identical with Maṅgalahamśikā) together with Śrī Pātola-deva Śāha Vajrādityandin, Torabhaṭṭarikā, and the treasurer Raṇādhira is in the collection
Figure 2.4: Bronze image of Prajñāpāramitā, donated by Maṅgalahamsikā, Chief Queen of Vajrādityanandin (Source: Hinüber 2007, plate 1)
of small bronze images of the Buddha are inscribed with the name of Surendrādityanandin and dated during the reign of Navasurendra in 645–645 CE. Jayamahaṅgalavikramāditya-nandin, the Palola Śāhi ruler known from the Dainyor inscription of 687 CE, donated a very large bronze sculpture of a seated Buddha dated in 706/7 (Laukika year 82) and another standing Buddha along with his wives, children and courtiers. His successor, Nandivikramāditya-nandin, donated two exquisite bronze images dated in 714 and 715 CE (Laukika years 90 and 91). In the earlier image, a jeweled Buddha acknowledges the patronage of this Palola Śāhi ruler by placing one hand on his head while holding a manuscript in the other hand. In the second image, the ruler himself holds a manuscript, perhaps reflecting the role of his family in Buddhist literary production. Another ornate bronze sculpture dated just one week prior to Nandivikramāditya-nandin’s inscribed bronze of 714 CE was a gift of the princess Devaśrī and her husband, the treasurer Śaṅkarasena, who are depicted in postures of reverence kneeling on lotuses and holding wreaths and incensers at the base of the sculpture. These dated bronze images donated by Palola Śāhi rulers and their families belong to a larger group of Buddhist bronze images that were produced by a local atelier of artists whose output demonstrates important links between the stylistic heritages of Gandhāra and Swat and traditions of Buddhist art in Kashmir and Tibet.

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346 Hinüber 2004: 190, pl. 36 notes that the 14.3 cm Buddha of Surendrādityanandin was brought from Tibet to the Qing/Manchu court, and is now included in the Collection of the Treasures of the Palace Museum in Beijing, China. The Buddha of Laukika year 20+ (the inscription on the pedestal is broken after the numeral 20) was donated by Varṣa, the son of a treasurer, during the reign of Navasurendra, who is known from dhārani and the Hatun inscription of 671 CE (Laukika year 47).

347 Hinüber 2004: 31–38, nos. 12–13. These sculptures now in the Jhokang Palace in Lhasa and Tsaparang were probably brought to Tibet following the downfall of the Palola Śāhis during the period when Gilgit and surrounding valleys in northern Pakistan were occupied by a Tibetan military force between 720–745 CE.


Shortly after the heyday of Buddhist patronage by the Palola Śāhis in the beginning of the eighth century, their realm became a key battleground in the struggle between the Tibetan and Chinese empires for control of long-distance routes through the high mountain borderlands. After Little Bolor (presumably controlled by the Palola Śāhis) made an alliance with Tang China in 717 CE to deter growing Tibetan influence in the Karakorum and Pamir mountains, Tibetan forces occupied the region in 722 and 737.\textsuperscript{350} Huizhao (Hye Ch’o), a Korean monk who traveled from Kashmir to Bolor, reported that Greater Bolor was controlled by Tibetans and Lesser Bolor was under Chinese dominion before 727 CE:

Greater Bolor was originally the place where the king of Lesser Bolor resided. It was because the Tibetans have come that he fled and shifted his residence to Lesser Bolor. The chiefs and common people remained and did not come.\textsuperscript{351}  

In 747 CE a Chinese expedition of 10,000 men led by the Korean general Gao Xianzhi crossed the Pamirs and defeated a Tibetan garrison in the Wakhan valley of present-day northeastern Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{352} The Chinese force reached Gilgit through the Yasin valley and subsequently conquered the capital of Baltistan (Great Bolor), located at present-day Katsura near Skardu, in 753.\textsuperscript{353} As a result of the intense conflict between Tibet and China for control of this strategic region in the middle of the eighth century, the Palola Śāhi dynasty disappeared, but religious and cultural exchanges between this region, Central Asia, and the Tibetan plateau are likely to have intensified.\textsuperscript{354}


\textsuperscript{354} Bru-za (or ‘Bru-zha/Drusha), corresponding to Little Bo-lu-luo in Chinese sources and Bolor in Arabic and Persian sources, is related to the ethnonym Burusho and the Burushaski language still spoken in Hunza, Nagar, and Yasin (Beckwith 1987: 116, fn. 44). Padmasambhava’s links with Swat (Uddiyāna) and the foreign origins of the Bon religion in Bru-za (Gilgit region) are probably literary tropes. Nevertheless, Stein, R.A. 1972 [1962]. \textit{Tibetan Civilization}. Stanford: Stanford University Press, observed: “one cannot but be struck by the stress both Buddhist and Bonpo tradition lays on...
Table 2.5: Genealogy and Chronology of the Palola Śāhi Dynasty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ruler:</th>
<th>Date: (Laukika year in parentheses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vajrāditya-nandin</td>
<td>ca. 585–605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vikramāditya-nandin</td>
<td>ca. 605–625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surendravikramāditya-nandin</td>
<td>ca. 625–644/655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navasurendrāditya-nandin</td>
<td>ca. 644/655–685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayamaṅgalavikramāditya-nandin (I)</td>
<td>ca. 685–710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandivikramāditya-nandin</td>
<td>ca. 710–715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surendrāditya</td>
<td>ca. 715/720–?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The singular patronage of Buddhist literature and art by the Palola Śāhis in Gilgit contrasts with complex patterns of support for religious institutions affiliated with multiple traditions by their northwestern neighbors and North Indian contemporaries. The survival of at least eight Buddhist monasteries in Gilgit long after the period of the Palola Śāhis is attested in a Khotanese Śaka account of an itinerary from the Tarim Basin (via Gilgit) to Kashmir during the reign of Abhimanyugupta (958–972 CE). However, the number of small monasteries in Gilgit and other places along the route through the Upper Indus region pales in comparison to countless small monasteries and a large monastery with a dharmarāja stūpa and five hundred rock cells in Kashmir. While overlapping with the period of the Palola Śāhis, the Kārkotās (ca. 625–855/6 CE) ruling in Kashmir identified themselves as Vaisnavas, but continued to establish and support numerous Buddhist establishments against the backdrop of a flourishing Śaiva literary culture. For example, in the Rājatarangini, Kalhaṇa refers to King Bon’s foreign origins, which it locates to the south-west of Tibet where India meets the fringes of Iran” (1972: [2]35).

355 Adapted from Hinüber 2004: 99.
Lalitāditya Muktāpiḍa’s construction of Vaishnava temples and Buddhist monasteries, which shared the same complexes at Huśkapura and his royal capital at Parihāsapura:

At Huśkapura this noble-minded king built the splendid [shrine of Viṣṇu] Muktasvāmin and a large Vihāra with a Stūpa. (4.18)

At Parihāsapura (“which mocked the residence of Indra”):

That king, who was free from passions, built the ever-rich Rājavihāra [royal monastery] with a large quadrangle (catuḥśālā), a large Caitya, and a large Jina [Buddha image]. (4.200)

Into the image of Muktākeśava [Viṣṇu] he put 84,000 tolakas of gold. (4.201).

And collecting as many thousands of palas of silver, that pure-minded [king] made the famous [statue of] Parihāsakeśava [Viṣṇu image]. (4.202)

With just as many prasthas of copper he made the glorious [statue of] the ‘Great Buddha’ (Bṛhadbuddha) which reached up to the sky. (4.203)

Although he does not refer to the Palola Śāhis, Kalhaṇa describes relationships between the rulers of Kashmir and the Hindu Śāhis, who ruled from a capital at Udabhāṇḍapura (modern Hund) at an important crossing of the Indus River located to the north of the modern bridge at Attock from 870–871 until 1026 CE. From their base, the Hindu Śāhis occupied a primary hub on routes between South Asia and Central Asia, maintained fortresses at Barikot and Udegram in the Swat valley, embellished Hindu stone temples in the Salt Range, and presumably supported local Buddhist communities until Bhīmapāla, the last Hindu Śāhi, was killed in battle against the Ghaznavids.

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358 Translated by Stein 1900: 1.140, who identifies this monastery with the Wukong’s Moung-ti Vihāra.
359 Translated by Stein 1900: 1.142, who also provides an archaeological description of the site in an appendix (2.300–303, Note F).
Several northern Indian contemporaries of the Palola Śāhis remained major patrons of Buddhist institutions, but rulers who identified themselves as Buddhists generally tended to dominate peripheral border regions in the eastern subcontinent. Inscriptions issued by the Maitrakas of Valabhī, who succeeded the Guptas and Hūṇas in Gujarat from the sixth to the eighth century, demonstrate complex patterns of religious patronage. The Maitrakas typically referred to themselves as Śaivas (parama-māheśvaras), but approximately a quarter of their inscriptions record donations to Buddhists (including a famous monastic center at Valabhī). In the account of his visit to Buddhist sites in North India, Xuanzang portrays King Harṣavardhana of Kanyākubjā (Kanauj) as a major Buddhist patron and convert who was targeted by “heretics” in a failed assassination attempt, but Harṣavardhana’s own inscriptions and Bāna’s poetic account of his deeds in the Harṣacarita depict him as a Śaiva. After his death in 647/8 CE, the Pālas of Bihar and Bengal (ca. 750–1200), who struggled with the Pratihāras of western India and the Rāṣṭrakūtas of the Deccan for control of the Ganga-Yamuna heartland, explicitly identified themselves as Buddhists (parama-saugata) and were responsible for constructing and expanding many of the great Buddhist monasteries in eastern India. However, their support for Buddhist institutions hardly precluded patronage of Śaiva temples and monasteries, which flourished in a competitive religio-political environment of appropriation and mutual exchange of rituals, iconography, and esoteric ideologies. The Bhaumakaras in Orissa (ca. 736–950) and the Candras in southeast Bengal (ca. 850–1050) followed the Pāla lead in adopting Buddhist epithets while supporting a variety of religious institutions. Buddhist institutions continued to feature prominently in South Asian intellectual and cultural life, particularly in northwestern and northeastern borderland areas which served as bases for expansion across the Himalayas to Tibet and via maritime networks to Southeast Asia.

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Conclusions

This overview of ancient and early medieval South Asian historical contexts provides a framework for understanding diachronic processes in the formation and expansion of the early Buddhist saṅgha across regional and cultural horizons, with a general emphasis on the northwestern frontiers of the Indian subcontinent from the time of Aśoka to ca. 750 CE. Having completed a whirlwind tour of over a thousand years of South Asian Buddhist history, a pause to reconsider the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter highlights significant patterns.

Passages from inscriptions and texts reveal that much was at stake in shaping Buddhist religious identities through the development of narratives about the historical Buddha (whose parinirvāṇa probably dates between 400–370 BCE), previous Buddhas, their prior lifetimes, and early followers. By drawing connections between these figures and places in particular chronological frameworks of the past, present and future, hagiographical narratives illustrate core doctrinal beliefs, situate authoritative discourses understood as buddhavacana, establish institutional precedents, justify ritual practices, and promote exchanges of material donations for religious merit. These versions of Buddhist history had important ramifications for building networks of patrons (including but not restricted to powerful rulers and wealthy merchants) and transferring real and imagined religious topologies linked with the Buddha to locations outside of his original homeland, particularly to prosperous cities and agricultural areas.

Interreligious contacts, intrareligious debates, and encounters with exogenous groups played significant roles in shaping and changing Buddhist practices and ideologies. The emergence of Buddhist traditions of renunciation and the elaboration of doctrines of karmic retribution resulted from competitive dialogues with other śramaṇa movements (such as the Jains and Ājīvikas) and later Vedic traditions undergoing processes of reformulation. Internal contestation of monastic vinaya regulations and disputed interpretations of which teachings to attribute to the Buddha caused divisions in the saṅgha (saṅghabheda). Alternative goals and practices systematized (to varying extents) in texts and images associated with “vehicles” (Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna) developed in response to internal and external challenges. Intercultural exchanges with migrating groups, especially in
the borderland regions of the northwestern Indian subcontinent, had
definite impacts on Buddhist material culture, as reflected in synthe-
theses of Indian, Iranian, Hellenistic, and local features in art and archi-
tecture. Indo-Iranians, Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Kuṣāṇas, and Huns who
established various degrees of control over routes connecting Central
Asia to South Asia greatly enhanced patterns of cross-cultural contact.
Inscriptions recording donations by rulers, family members, and offi-
cials associated with these social outsiders demonstrate that their con-
tributions to the expansion and consolidation of Buddhist institutions
also aided their assimilation by providing cultural legitimation. Poli-
tial and religious dynamics were closely intertwined with social and
economic changes, since Buddhist monasteries were often clustered
near hubs of commerce and administration on long-distance regional
routes which Indian and non-Indian rulers vied to dominate.

Religious economies of exchange based on the awarding of merit for
material support of Buddhist monks and nuns had important histori-
cal ramifications within and outside of South Asia. The literary legacy
of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka as a cakravartin who donated gener-
osly and exclusively to the saṅgha provided an exemplary model for
later Buddhist rulers. However, his edicts endorsing (mostly) nonvio-
lent victory by imperial dharma and promoting donations to other
śramaṇas and brahmins were less univalent. Whether or not the Bud-
dhist model of Aśoka was in fact emulated by later rulers (such as
Menander and Kanis̄ka), the normative ideal of generous patronage
to Buddhist and other religious institutions required basic conditions
of commercial or agricultural prosperity, which in turn depended on
local, regional, and long-distance economic networks. Changing pat-
terns of patronage and exchange affected the religious economy, since
dynastic turmoil, abandonment of old routes and the development of
new networks, and a general shift toward permanent endowments by
merchant guilds and land grants by rulers had significant implications
for the fortunes of Buddhist monasteries. Thus, paths for Buddhist
transmission did not remain stable or fixed, but adapted to fluctuating
economic and political conditions.