GREECE, THE FINAL FRONTIER?
THE WESTWARD SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Erik Seldeslachts (Ghent)

1. Introduction

The apparent absence of Buddhism in the ancient and early medieval West presents a striking contrast with the success of the religion all over South, Central, East, and Southeast Asia. This makes one wonder whether the West was really untouched by Buddhism. There are irrefutable proofs that Buddhism did spread westwards, at least far into Iranian territory. Although there is little hard evidence, there are indications that it also reached the Graeco-Roman world. Not only did Buddhism have an impact on Westerners in the East, but Buddhists were probably present in the West. Moreover, for several centuries it may have taken part in the interaction among different Western and Eastern philosophies and religions.

Before taking a look at the evidence, it may be useful to assess which circumstances contributed to or hampered the westward diffusion of Buddhism. In India and beyond, the spread of Buddhist monasteries supported by communities of lay-followers was to a great extent determined by political and socio-economic factors. Firstly, the protection and promotion by powerful rulers and secondly, the patronage of rich merchants active in urban centres along trade-routes. These conditions were only partly fulfilled in the relations of South Asia with the West. In the early period of the development of Buddhism, from the fifth to the early second century BC, there were many military and political links between East and West. Trade was also important, but it was mostly carried out through intermediaries, and direct trade-routes were only marginally developed. By the second and first centuries BC, military and political contacts between Indians and Greeks were largely confined to Bactria, Eastern Iran and Northwest India, where the Greek colonists (the Graeco-Bactrians and Indo-Greeks) became

---

1 Heitzman 1984, pp. 121, 132–133.
culturally increasingly iranianised and indianised, while they lost political contact with the West. At the same time, new direct trade links were established, in which South India became more important thanks to the developing monsoon trade. In the first two centuries of our era, the sea-trade between the Roman Empire and India was at its height, but political connections became restricted to occasional Indian embassies to Rome. Buddhism never enjoyed state sponsorship in the West, but small Buddhist communities there could have thrived on merchants from Buddhist countries or local converts in cosmopolitan cities like Alexandria in Egypt or Antioch in Syria. Conversely, the successive economic and political crises that shook the Roman World between the late third and the fifth century must have adversely affected such communities. By the way, the partial collapse of international trade in this and later periods may have heralded the onset of the disappearance of Buddhism in India itself. Finally, before it could become a mass movement, western Buddhism was drowned in the anti-pagan drives that were organised when Christianity made it to the top. Let us now take a look at each of the periods and factors in more detail.

2. From the Achaemenids to Alexander the Great

For the period of the Achaemenid dynasty in Persia (559–330 BC), there is no evidence that Buddhism was already spreading westwards. There is, to be true, the story told in several versions in Buddhist literature, that two merchants, Trapuša or Tapassu and Bhallika or Bhalluka, hailing from the neighbourhood of Balkh in Afghanistan, became the first lay followers of the Buddha and then monks, and built stūpas and monasteries in their region of origin. According to the Mahāvastu version, stūpas were erected in the cities of Keśasthālī (Kesh, now Shahrisabzi in Uzbekistan?), Vālukṣa (Balkh?) and Silukṣa or Śīlā (?). However, since not the least archaeological or other trace exists of Buddhist presence in Bactria during Buddha’s own time or even during the entire Achaemenid period, one may suppose that this story does not date from that period, but was fabricated much later,

---


3 Mahāvastu 3.310 (Jones 1956, p. 297).