CHAPTER THREE
PASSAGES TO INDIA: ŚAKA AND KUŚĀṆA MIGRATIONS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Jason Neelis

Introduction

Numerous passageways through the northwestern frontiers of the Indian subcontinent in modern Pakistan and Afghanistan served as migration routes to South Asia from the Iranian plateau and the Central Asian steppes. Prehistoric and protohistoric exchanges across the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalaya ranges demonstrate earlier precedents for routes through the high mountain passes and river valleys in later historical periods. Typological similarities between Northern Neolithic sites in Kashmir and Swat and sites in the Tibetan plateau and northern China show that “Mountain chains have often integrated rather than isolated peoples.”¹ Ties between the trading post of Shörtūghai in Badakhshan (northeastern Afghanistan) and the lower Indus valley provide evidence for long-distance commercial networks and “polymorphous relations” across the Hindu Kush until c. 1800 B.C.² The Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) may have functioned as a “filter” for the introduction of Indo-Iranian languages to the northwestern Indian subcontinent, although routes and chronologies remain hypothetical.³ In early historic periods, the provinces of Gandhāra (Gadārā) and Sindh (Hiduš) belonged to the

Achaemenid empire of ancient Iran according to inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes. Alexander of Macedon attempted to conquer the eastern Achaemenid provinces in the Panjab and the Indus valley between 327–325 B.C. Although his efforts to establish control of northwestern India were unsuccessful, Hellenistic colonies in Bactria continued to flourish until the middle of the second century B.C. During this period, groups of Śakas and Kuşānas began to migrate from different areas of Central Asia to the frontiers of South Asia. A synthesis of literary references, historical inscriptions, and archaeological material helps to trace their paths to India between the second century B.C. to second century A.D. Stray finds, petroglyphs, and graffiti inscriptions from the Upper Indus region of the Northern Areas of Pakistan illuminate early migration patterns and interactions between Central Asian, Iranian, Indian, and indigenous peoples. The cultural impact and religious patronage of the foreign migrants to South Asia stimulated the transmission of Buddhism along many of the same routes beyond the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia and China.

Saka/Śaka

A broad array of nomadic and sedentary groups inhabiting the Central Asian steppes during the first millennium B.C. are called Scythians, Sakas, Śakas, and Sai or Se in ancient Greek, Iranian,

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5 In this paper, the more original form “Saka” refers to groups of people classed as Sakas, Scythians, Sacae, Sai, or Se in Iranian, Greek, Latin, and Chinese sources, while the Sanskrit term “Śaka” refers to groups within the Indian subcontinent (for the sake of consistency with other contributions in the volume). As noted by Sten Konow, “The genuine form of the name is accordingly Saka, with a dental s, and the Indian Śaka looks like a popular etymology, connecting the name with the base sak, to be strong, powerful, able” (Kharoshṭhī Inscriptions with the Exception of those of Aśoka Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, vol. II, part 1 [Calcutta, 1929], xvi). The term Saka appears in the Shahdaur Kharoṣṭhī inscription of Damijada (damijadasa sakasa) (Konow 1929, 16) and in text P of the Mathurā lion capital Kharoṣṭhī inscription (sarvasa sakastanasa puyae) (Konow 1929, 46–49). A Saka (Gandhārī sago) engages in dialogue with a monk about the disappearance of the Buddha’s teachings in a previous-birth story (pūrvayoga) preserved in an early Buddhist manuscript (Timothy Lenz, A New Version of the Gandhārī Dhammapada and a Collection of Previous-Birth Stories: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 16 + 25 Gandhāران Buddhist Texts, vol. 3 [Seattle and London, 2003], 182–192).