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The Unintended Legacy of Hellenism: The Development and Dissemination of the Buddha Image

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The Unintended Legacy of Hellenism:
The Development and Dissemination of the Buddha Image

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“The Unintended Legacy of Hellenism:

The Development and Dissemination of the Buddha Image”

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In the first and second century CE, the first images of an anthropomorphic Buddha emerged from the region of Gandhara in the northern Indian subcontinent that later served as the foundation for subsequent representations of the Buddha. This marked a significant shift in the perception of the Buddha, by which point Buddhism had transformed from a philosophy into a religion. The syncretic nature of the state that occupied Gandhara from the first to the third centuries CE allowed the resulting Buddhist artistic style to adopt elements from various cultures, most notably from the Hellenistic artistic tradition. Through the following five centuries, the northern route of the Silk Road facilitated the spread of both the Buddhist religion and the aforementioned Buddha image into the far reaches of Inner Asia.

The dissemination of the Buddha image, traced through cave complexes from Afghanistan to eastern China, display a progressive Sinitic transformation over time. This phenomenon speaks to the ability of Buddhist art to adapt to other cultural environments, an innovation first established in Gandhara and then evolved further as the image traveled east. However, the simultaneous iconographic continuation from the Gandhari Buddha, seen in the same Sinicized Buddha images almost five centuries later, represents the significant and enduring legacy of Hellenism in Buddhist art.

Table of Contents:

Introduction.....	5
I. Early Religious Art in India.....	7
II. Changes in Buddhist Doctrine.....	10
III. Gandhara.....	15
IV. The Kushan Empire.....	23
V. Mathura.....	29
VI. Developing the Gandhari Buddha.....	35
VII. Central Asia.....	46
VIII. Bamiyan Caves.....	49
IX. Kizil and Bezeklik Caves.....	54
X. Dunhuang Caves.....	61
XI. Yungang Grottoes.....	66
XII. Longmen Grottoes.....	70
Conclusion.....	73
<i>Bibliography</i>	77

List of Figures (Page 41-44):

1. Bodhi Tree, Sanchi, Third century BCE (Source: [Blogspot](#))
2. Standing Buddha, Mathura, Early fifth century CE (Source: [Corbis Images](#))
3. Avalokitesvara, Mathura, Fifth century CE (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))
4. Standing Helios, coin of Kanishka I, Kushan Empire, ca. 120 CE (Source: [Wikipedia](#))
5. King of Kings, Kanishka the Kushan and Standing Buddha, coin of Kanishka I, Kushan Empire, ca. 120 CE (Source: [Wikipedia](#))
6. Yakshi under a flowering tree, Sanchi, Second to first century BCE (Source: [Wikipedia](#))
7. Yakshi, Sanghol, Second century CE (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))
8. Railing Pillar, Bodhgaya, ca. 100 BCE (Source: [Getty Images](#))
9. Apollo Belvedere, Roman copy of bronze Greek original, 120-140 CE (Source: [Wikipedia](#))
10. Vajrapani as Herakles, Kushan Empire, Second century CE (Source: [Wikipedia](#))
11. Standing Buddha, Gandhara, first to second century CE (Source: [Wikipedia](#))
12. Donation of the Jetavana Garden (Source: [Wordpress](#))
13. Buddha of Bamiyan, Bamiyan Valley, Third century CE (Source: [Khan Academy](#))
14. Buddha, Kizil Caves, Kucha, Fourth century CE (Source: [Digital Silk Road](#))
15. Cave 224, Kizil Caves, Kucha, Fourth to sixth century CE (Source: [Digital Silk Road](#))
16. Pranidhi scene, Bezeklik Caves, Turfan, Fourth century CE (Source: [Digital Silk Road](#))
17. Cave 285, Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, Fourth century CE (Source: [Pinterest](#))
18. Five Caves of Tan Yan, Yungang Grottoes, Fifth century CE (Source: [Blogspot](#))
19. The Bath of the New-Born Buddha, Cave 6, Yungang Grottoes, ca. 480-94 CE
(Source: Sherman E. Lee, "The Golden Image of the Buddha," *Artibus Asiae* 18, no. 3 (1955): 226.)
20. Buddha, Longmen Caves, Luoyang, Fifth century CE (Source: [Pinterest](#))

Introduction

Among the most familiar images of the Buddha today, there are several visual features that seem to transcend civilizations, forming an unspoken, almost universal rule for Buddhist iconography. However, it is not difficult to recognize the culturally distinct styles that evolved over many centuries. This dichotomy speaks to Buddhism's ability to adapt to other cultural environments, unlike most other belief systems native to Asia, such as Brahmanism or the Chinese folk religion.

For roughly five hundred years after the death of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, Buddhism had functioned primarily as a philosophy rather than as a religion, with a particular emphasis on the lack of omniscient divinity. Thus, portrayals of the Buddha were rendered purely in symbolism, such as the Bodhi Tree, a footprint, or an empty throne. As a result, this left a gap in the development of Buddhist art, which would allow the subsequent cultural appropriation of the Buddha.

Between the first and the second centuries CE, Buddhist art went through a revolutionary shift in the kingdom of Gandhara (modern day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and northwestern India), manifested in the innovative anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha. However, reverberations of this transition were felt long after this time frame and extended far beyond the region of its origin. As the Buddha image underwent a process of transmission and transformation eastward through the northern route of the Silk Roads, there were iconographical features that remained a continuation of the Gandhari style but also features that reflected the host culture. These images and what they represented were crucial to the formative spread of Buddhism from the first century to the fifth century CE.

I will argue that the historical and geographical circumstances for the syncretic development of an anthropomorphic Buddha image served as the foundation for its subsequent dissemination across various Asian cultures. There was a desire on behalf of the Buddhist monasteries to cater to culturally foreign populations, brought together by the Silk Road, with an effective cross-cultural image of the Buddha. With the import of foreign styles and religious art, the syncretism facilitated by the Kushan Empire in Gandhara contributed to a significant shift in Buddhist values and doctrine. Therefore, the cultural and philosophical disconnect between the Buddha image and the early perceptions of the Buddha allowed subsequent cultures to use the image as a tool to effectively control the population through indications of divine protection.

I. Early Religious Art in India

To fully understand the significant development of the anthropomorphic Buddha, it is imperative to examine earlier conceptions of deities in Buddhism as well as preceding religions. Before Buddhism, a long tradition of Vedism (the precursor to Hinduism) was firmly rooted in the Indian subcontinent. For example, Jitendra Nath Banerjea pointed out that the *R̥g Veda* contains a possible allusion to the image of the god Indra. Though it does not suggest outright idol worship, the image was used as a visual and (arguably) human representation of a conceptually abstract god.¹ According to Ananda Coomaraswamy, Vedic deities were not clear-cut anthropomorphic figures and their images could have been veiled as forces of nature, in comparison to the Greco-Roman pantheon.² On another note, both Vedic and Buddhist texts contain many references to the cults of yakshas (nature-spirits) and nagas (serpent deities), particularly those with the feminine powers of fertility.³ These cults emerged independently from Vedic or Buddhist traditions at the time, and relatively anthropomorphic depictions of these entities were far more realized than their Vedic counterparts. Nevertheless, the influence of these cults on the image of the Buddha would become more significant at a later stage, which I will discuss in the third section.

Yuvraj Krishan argued that the reason for depicting a purely symbolic Buddha in early Buddhist art is unclear. There is no textual or visual evidence for a canonical injunction against the deification of the Buddha in a human form.⁴ However, early Buddhism was more a philosophy than a religion. *The Pali Canon* (the earliest canon of Buddhist text) simply stressed

¹ Jitendra Nath Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta: University Press, 1956), 45.

² Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Iconography in Buddhist Art* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972), 90.

³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of the Buddha Image," *The Art Bulletin* 9, no. 4 (1927): 298.

⁴ Yuvraj Krishan, *The Buddha Image: Its Origin and Development* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishing, 1996), ix.

the “insightful penetration of the analytical teachings of Buddhism” as the key to Enlightenment.⁵ Until the first century CE, the Buddha was only depicted through symbols that correlated with the four significant events in his last human life – a footprint to mark his birth, a Bodhi tree to mark his enlightenment (figure 1), a dharma wheel to mark his first sermon, and an empty throne to mark his death.⁶ Susan Huntington argued that representations of the Buddha, whether through symbols or images, were not primary subjects in early Buddhist art. The emphasis was instead placed on sacred sites, as merit was chiefly derived from embarking on pilgrimages. The Buddha himself, upon his death, instructed his followers to consecrate his remains in structures called stupas, a “traditional sepulcher” previously used for worldly monarchs. These stupas were placed in the four significant locations to the Buddha, reiterated in the symbolic representations of the Buddha. Many early Buddhist reliefs with symbolic depictions of the Buddha were not isolated images, but were actually adornments decorating the architectural structures at these sites. Therefore, the symbolic representations of the Buddha were only secondary to his relics.⁷

It is important to realize the symbolic character of Buddha was not by any means an indication of artistic inhibitions. Other figures, such as his mother, Maya, and his assistant, Chandaka, were rendered as fully realized humans.⁸ So why not depict the Buddha? Rob Linrothe argued that religious art generally seeks to “render the ineffable in time and space,” so in depicting the Buddha, one would delineate the infinite and the transcendent.⁹ Later Hindu art achieved this by conflating the anatomy of animals and humans, adding multiple limbs, while

⁵ Noble Reat, *Buddhism: A History* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1994), 46 .

⁶ Krishan, 1.

⁷ Susan Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism,” *Art Journal* 49, no. 4 (1990): 405-6.

⁸ Krishan, 1.

⁹ Rob Linrothe, “Inquiries into the Origin of the Buddha Image: A Review,” *East and West* 43, no. 1 (1993): 253.

early Gandhari images of the Buddha expressed a similar notion through the insertion of halos and the use of hierarchical scale and position. But in the period between the Buddha's death in the fifth century BCE, to the emergence of Gandhari art in the first century CE, symbolic representation could have been used as a tool to differentiate the Buddha from all other sentient beings.¹⁰ Although yaksas and nagas were deified and enjoyed extended lifetimes, only the Buddha managed to successfully escape the cycle of life and death. This increasing desire to differentiate the Buddha from other deities, even if it was manifested in the active refusal to depict him in human form, would eventually lead to the development of the Buddha image.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

II. Changes in Buddhist Doctrine

Considering the three main belief systems of India – Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism – had never practiced any previous tradition of worshipping a personal deity, how is it that all three became “idolatrous” religions?¹¹ Coomaraswamy asserted that worship did not originate with the monastic community, but with the lay community. Their desire for a higher cult was due in part to the development of theistic cults, such as bhakti (devotion to a personal deity), as the supreme means of salvation.¹² The drive to popularize Buddhism had meant that a level of idolatry needed to be tolerated, and thus Buddhism had evolved greatly from its original intellectual inception.¹³ As the cults of yakshas and nagas yielded to the powerful sway of “higher” religions such as Buddhism, these figures were increasingly incorporated into the narrative as worshippers or guardians of the Buddha.¹⁴

The radical change in Buddhist art from the symbolic to the anthropomorphic can also be explained through a shift in the doctrinal content of Buddhism itself.¹⁵ This is reflected in the *Milindapanha* (The Questions of King Milinda), written between the first century BCE and the first century CE, in which King Menander of the Indo-Greek Kingdom asks his questions about Buddhism to the Buddhist sage, Nagasena.¹⁶ It is important to note that the conversation between Menander and Nagasena was wholly fictional. Nevertheless, the text provides insight into the beliefs of the peoples in the Gandhari region. Nagasena argued the prophetic and omniscient Buddha is incomparable to anything else in existence.¹⁷ Liu Xinru maintained that this text immediately betrays a crisis in Buddhist belief, showing contradictions between Buddha’s

¹¹ Coomaraswamy, “Origins of the Buddha Image,” 297.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Coomaraswamy, “Origins of the Buddha Image,” 300.

¹⁴ Coomaraswamy, “Origins of the Buddha Image,” 298.

¹⁵ Krishan, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Thomas Davids, trans., *The Questions of King Milinda* (New York: Dover Publishing, 1963) vol. 1: 109-110.

personality and his divinity, as recorded in the *Pali Canon*. How could the Buddha be omniscient when it is said that he only extracted his knowledge from reflection?¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, Buddhists held the stupas, housing the Buddha's relics, in a higher regard than the pictorial representations of the Buddha at these sites. However, the act of venerating these relics, particularly among monks, is a point of intense debate.¹⁹ Some scholars maintain that members of the monastic community were initially prohibited from explicitly venerating the relics of the Buddha. Others argued that the relics were venerated both by lay and monastic followers alike, shortly after the death of the Buddha.²⁰ Donative inscriptions from Sanchi and Bharhut in eastern India and rock-cut monasteries in western India reveal that members of the monastic community venerated stupas and relics since at least the end of the second century BCE.²¹ According to Buddhist history, King Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire played a crucial role in the expansion and popularity of stupas. One of the most famous deeds of this idealized Buddhist ruler was his commission of 84,000 stupas after his mission to collect all of the Buddha's dispersed relics.²² *The Lotus Sutra*, perhaps the most influential and widely circulated Buddhist text, stated that donations and offerings to the relics and the erection of stupas were effective methods to accumulate merit.²³ *The Milindapanha* also addresses this sentiment, as Nagasena clarified that the Buddha only forbade monks, not lay people, from the worship of his relics. Nagasena's conflicting views on the spiritual status of lay followers, such as the ability to achieve *arhatship* (a level that immediately precedes Nirvana) in one lifetime, suggests a trend

¹⁸ Xinru Liu, *Ancient China and Ancient India: Trade and Religious Exchanges AD 1-600* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89.

¹⁹ Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Sen, 59.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *The Lotus Sutra (Taisho Volume 9, Number 262)*, translated by Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007), 243.

of increasing interest in the recognition of patronage through granting personal merit and thus advancement towards Nirvana.

In the *Mahavastu* (The Great Event), believed to have been compiled anywhere from the second century BCE to the fourth century CE, the Buddha is divinized further: he is apparently not only a divine being but one who seems to exist eternally and transcendentally, electing to stay in the material world out of free will, unbound by karma.²⁴ This text importantly introduces the concept of the eternal Buddha. The historical Buddha Shakyamuni came to be understood as one of infinite manifestations of the eternal Buddha Vairocana, and the idea of numerous Buddhas deriving from an eternal being formed the basis for a rich Buddhist pantheon. Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism emphasized the ideal of the compassionate bodhisattvas, or lesser Buddhas, who act as intermediaries between the Buddha of Grace (*Amitabha*) and the worshipper, and who chose to forgo nirvana until every other sentient being reached enlightenment.²⁵ While Buddhists during the first century CE still adhered to Theravada Buddhism, the emergence of texts that would later become central to the Mahayana tradition began to circulate during this period. The later dominance of Mahayana Buddhism in the Gandhari region can further attest to the fact that many Buddhists grew to be dissatisfied with the original notion that individuals could not seek external assistance in their paths to Enlightenment. The invocation of the bodhisattvas reflects a deep-seated need for divine assistance, as the Gandhari region was historically host to various religions alongside Buddhism, namely Zoroastrianism and the Greco-Roman religion, which required the worshipper to be dependent

²⁴ Liu, 92.

²⁵ Roderick Whitfield, Susan Whitfield, and Neville Agnew, *Cave Temples of Mogao: Art and History on the Silk Road* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2000), 16.

on divine intervention.²⁶ During the fifth century BCE, numerous religious traditions in India challenged the established authority of Vedic Brahmanism and its caste system.²⁷ Religious heterodoxy became prevalent in the Indian subcontinent and thus, religious institutions began to compete for financial support from the lay population. This led to the propagation of anthropomorphic deities in those religions, as a movement to recruit the foreign and the illiterate.

An increase in stupa-construction across northern India paralleled the growing authority of Buddhist monasteries over lay devotees.²⁸ “Buddhist textual sources suggest that the Buddha established monasteries and nunneries during his lifetime to serve as rainy season retreats.”²⁹ Over time, Buddhist monasteries began to acquire wealth and status with the implication that monks were the “Buddha’s rightful heirs and arbiters of Buddhist practice.”³⁰ This development is most apparent in the structural design of the chaitya halls in Buddhist monasteries and cave complexes, which consciously positioned the monks between the stupas and the visiting lay Buddhists. In other words, Buddhist monks placed themselves in a position of authority, as the “physical and metaphysical intermediaries between the Buddha and the laity.”³¹ In addition, the installation of railings surrounding the drum of the stupa carved a path for the lay devotees to “ritually walk around the stupa as a form of worship.”³² This contributed to the increasingly dynamic relationship between the lay worshipper and the relics of the Buddha. Furthermore, the first century BCE marked a shift from constructing stupas from the medium of wood to that of stone. This was an effort to increase the perceived mass of the stupas, to physically emphasize

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Fogelin, 279.

²⁸ Liu, 90.

²⁹ Lars Fogelin, “Material Practice and the Metamorphosis of a Sign: Early Buddhist Stupas and the Origin of Mahayana Buddhism,” *Asian Perspectives* 51, no. 2 (2012): 280.

³⁰ Fogelin, 282.

³¹ Fogelin, 278.

³² *Ibid.*

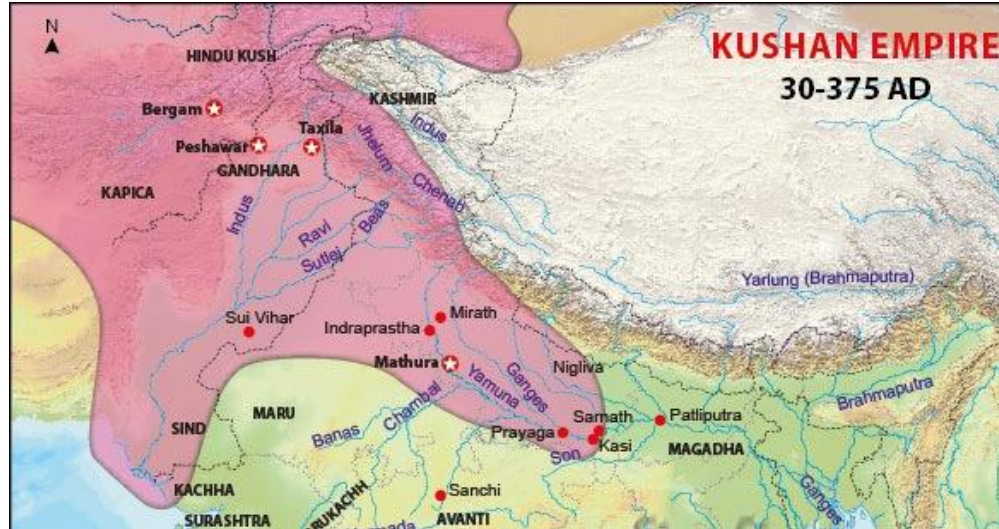
the importance of the stupa and the monastery surrounding the stupa.³³ Ironically, the stone prevented monks from carving a niche inside the stupa to house the relics, and with the absence of the relics, the stupas could no longer be the primary focus of worship. These “physical manipulations of stupas by Buddhist monks led to the detachment of Buddhist signs from their original referents.”³⁴ With the decline of stupa worship, the desire arose for another medium through which to express their devotion — thus, the image of the Buddha gained precedence.

To understand the emergence of newer, revolutionary texts and the systematic manipulation of stupas, it is necessary to analyze the socio-political circumstances that facilitated these changes. In other words, the various states that had ruled over the region of Gandhara, most notably the Kushan Empire, are essential to frame the transitions in Buddhism from the fifth century BCE to the first and second century CE.

³³ Fogelin, 299.

³⁴ Fogelin, 279.

III. Gandhara



(Source: [Maps of India](#))

Gandhara is situated on the borderland between India and Western Asia, and largely stood as the crossroads between multiple cultures.³⁵ Madeleine Hallade argued that three primary events led to the hybrid character of Gandhari art: the conquests of Alexander the Great and the onset of Hellenism; nomadic invasions and the tribal origins of the Kushan Empire; and the growing popularity of Buddhism.³⁶ John Marshall, a twentieth century British archaeologist, divided his research on the development of Gandhari art into three phases: infancy under the Scythians, childhood and early adolescence under the Parthians, and later adolescence and maturity under the Kushans.³⁷ He argued that when external evidence (the history) and internal evidence (the sculptures) are fused, the sequence and the evolution of the successive styles become apparent. In other words, to comprehensively infer developments in a school of art, one must view the images from a historical perspective and an artistic perspective.

³⁵ Sir John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara: The Story of the Early School, its Birth, Growth, and Decline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 1.

³⁶ Madeleine Hallade, *The Gandhara Style and the Evolution of Buddhist Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 13.

³⁷ Marshall, xvi.

Marshall heavily criticized Alfred Foucher, a late nineteenth century French scholar, who first identified the Greek origins in the Gandhari Buddha. In Marshall's perspective, Foucher's limited use of external evidence to assist in the reconstruction of Gandharan Art History was detrimental to the discourse of Gandhari scholarship. For instance, Foucher dated the Buddha statue at Mardan to the first century BCE, when it was in fact from the first century CE, missing the mark by a margin of two centuries.³⁸ This sort of inaccuracy surrounding Gandharan Buddha statues has been a key issue for many historians, as much of the subsequent scholarship written on this topic depends upon the foundational yet problematic research of figures like Foucher. Marshall viewed the history of Gandharan Buddhist Art from a chronological and an aesthetic point of view.³⁹ He outlined its development through the concept of maturity in art, complicated by the union and evolution of two differing types of traditions: Indian and Hellenistic.⁴⁰ Gandharan art was primarily Buddhist, so Marshall concluded that it must be judged first and foremost by "its success in fulfilling its purpose as a sacred art," designed so as to illustrate the history and legends of the Buddhist faith and to glorify the memory of the Buddha himself.⁴¹ In addition, he concluded, Gandharan Buddhist art could only reach its maturity when it evolved as a distinctive style on its own.⁴²

During the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, the region was part of the Achaemenid Empire of Persia. Greco-Roman culture first spread into Gandhara through the conquests of Alexander the Great (335-323 BCE), who conquered the Persian Empire on his way to India and proclaimed

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Marshall, xvii.

⁴⁰ Marshall, 63.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

himself the successor to the “Great King” Darius.⁴³ Alexander’s armies briefly occupied Gandhara in the fourth century BCE, before Chandragupta Maurya later conquered the region for himself.

The beginning of Buddhism in Gandhara dated back to the middle of the third century BCE, when the King Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire sent one of his many missionaries to spread the word of his newly adopted Buddhist faith to the northwest.⁴⁴ Evidence for this mission can be seen in the fourteen edicts engraved on the rocks in Shahbaz-Garhi in Peshawar Valley, which set forth Buddhist principles of ethics and rules of conduct. The earliest examples of stone sculptures of Buddhist motifs date to the reign of Ashoka (274-232 BCE), forged from the handiwork of Greek or Persian-Greek sculptors assisted by local Indian craftsmen.⁴⁵ However, it was not until a century later that stone was employed on a large enough scale to replace wood, the dominant medium. Marshall argued that it was reasonable to assume that its use in Gandhara indicated that this stonework was an influence from the Bactrian Greeks, who were established in the neighboring kingdom of Eastern Punjab.⁴⁶

In earlier Buddhist monuments, stories of the Buddha’s previous births, or *Jatakas*, were predominant. Later, parallel with the transition from wood to stone, there was growing interest in his last life as a human. Eventually the Buddha image took shape, which eventually eclipsed all other images of Buddhist art, particularly in the medium of stone.⁴⁷ Buddhism would thus be appropriated into popular cults and folktales of northern India, reflected in earlier sculptures, as the Jataka tales formed into Buddhist-interpreted fables. Extensive communication between the

⁴³ Hallade, 16.

⁴⁴ Marshall, 3.

⁴⁵ Marshall, 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Persian and Mauryan Empires resulted in the transmission of Achaemenid Persian art into India, including traditions of ornamental architecture such as the bell-shaped capital of Persepolis.⁴⁸

The relationship between Persia and India was briefly put on hold in the second century BCE, with the establishment of the Indo-Greek Kingdom. After a century of Indian rule, Gandhara merged into Hellenistic kingdoms, and sections of the region were ruled by the Greek successors of Alexander, who remained in Bactria.⁴⁹ But how did Buddhism persist under Greek rulership when the Hellenized Greeks subscribed to a different belief system? Marshall suggests that the ethical character and logical reasoning of the Buddha's teachings, with an emphasis on free will, made a strong appeal to the Greek intellect, though the art came to become stylistically Hellenistic.⁵⁰ Under the Indo-Greek kingdom, the great King Menander governed a region stretching from Gandhara to Mathura, and greatly tolerated the dominant Buddhist religion.⁵¹ Throughout their rule, the Greeks were an elite ruling class who imported their minority culture and coexisted with the indigenous culture of northern India. There were many ways in which the Greeks imported their culture. Hallade argued that due to their widespread practical use, coins were the primary method to effectively spread Classical art forms across the Hellenistic kingdoms.⁵² The composite nature of coins exhibited how the foundations of Greek culture intermixed with local elements to produce a new syncretic style.⁵³

⁴⁸ Hallade, 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Marshall, 4.

⁵¹ Hallade, 19.

⁵² Hallade, 20.

⁵³ Hallade, 24.

By the first century BCE, the Scythians, a nomadic tribe who settled in areas surrounding Bactria, took over the region and Gandhara was thus subject to the Parthian Empire in Persia.⁵⁴ According to Marshall, after the Scythians succeeded the Hellenistic kingdoms, they simply adopted the existing Greek artistic tradition, rather than trying to insert their own cultural style.⁵⁵ Nomadic invasions in Central Asia were often linked to Eurasian tribes, who established contact with the surrounding mature civilizations, displacing but adapting to the inhabited host culture.⁵⁶ The nomadic culture persisted long enough to appear in later Gandharan bas-reliefs, in which the Buddha image is surrounded by various figures dressed in typical Indian fashion, while donors often wear a rough and simple nomadic costume, represented by full tunics wrapped at the waist with a belt and long, loose pants.⁵⁷ The Parthian Empire frequently functioned as intermediaries between the Mediterranean and the Indic world, as its geography allowed the region to remain in direct contact with both civilizations.⁵⁸ However, influences of Greek artistic tradition into Gandhara were temporarily weakened as the imposing Parthian Empire cut off the Scythian kingdom from its access to the Western world.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, when the Parthians themselves came to directly rule over Gandhara, Greek art was reinvigorated through Persian commercial contacts with the Mediterranean coast. The subsequent evolution into the Gandhari style was influenced from a Parthian-Hellenistic art.

⁵⁴ Hallade, 17.

⁵⁵ Marshall, 5.

⁵⁶ Hallade, 25.

⁵⁷ Hallade, 27.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Marshall, 6.

But the Gandhari style passed through its adolescence and came to reach true maturity under the Kushans, who overthrew the Parthians circa 64 CE.⁶⁰ The ethnic roots of the Kushan tribe can be traced to the Yuezhi, who had left the Chinese province of Kansu in the second century BCE and settled in Bactria.⁶¹ They soon traded a nomadic lifestyle for a sedentary existence. The leader of one of the clans, Kadphises I, became dominant amongst the tribes by the first century BCE and later founded the Kushan dynasty. By the reign of Kanishka (127–163 CE), the Kushan Empire had stretched northwest to Bactria, northeast to Gandhara, and south to Mathura.⁶²

Marshall stated there were two schools of Gandharan Buddhist art: the earlier flourished in the first and second centuries CE and the later flourished in the latter part of the fourth and fifth centuries CE.⁶³ Although the two schools of Gandhari Buddhist art shared a common ancestry, there were great differences. These two schools were sharply distinguished by their style and by the material used. Sculptors from the earlier school worked almost exclusively in stone suitable for fine carving. The widespread adoption of phyllite stone in place of several types of schists in the early second century CE marked a significant point of transformation in the Gandhari school.⁶⁴ From a sculptor's perspective, phyllite has no advantage over other stones; it is actually more coarse grained and more likely to fracture under chiseling. In the late second century CE, Gandhari art began to incorporate earlier aspects of the "archaic" Buddhist art, linked to the rapidly growing demand for Buddhist sculptures under Kushan patronage, and

⁶⁰ Marshall, xv.

⁶¹ Hallade, 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Marshall, xv.

⁶⁴ Marshall, 65.

this mass-production resulted in a rather repetitive and mechanical style.⁶⁵ However, phyllite owed its popularity to its easier access, both in terms of location and the quantity found in those locations.⁶⁶

In the later school, sculptors began to work in a variety of mediums, the most popular being lime-stucco and clay, though some also worked in terracotta. Clay was used in largely enclosed areas, while lime-stucco and terra cotta were used in more exposed areas as the latter materials more effectively prevented the decay of the sculptures from harsh weather.⁶⁷ In other words, early commissions of Buddha sculptures were limited to the Peshawar Valley and neighboring regions west of the Indus, where indispensable schist and other fine-grained stones could be easily quarried. But with sculptural innovations in more varied materials, the Buddha image extended over a much wider region, from east of the Indus in Taxila to the far northwest towards Bactria, which would allow more cultures and peoples to engage in the construction and reverence of the Buddha image.⁶⁸

Persia eventually brought Gandhara back into the fold in the third century, this time under Sassanid rule, before the Kidara Kushans captured the land once more in the fourth century CE. The invasion of the White Huns, or the Ephthalites, in 465 CE, marked the end of Gandhara's rich culture and economic prosperity, and resulted in the destruction of many Buddhist monasteries.⁶⁹ With such a history of conquest and invasion, it is not surprising that the

⁶⁵ Marshall, 64.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Marshall, 109.

⁶⁸ Marshall, 110.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Gandhari people came to be a very cosmopolitan and diverse population – the physical features of many native peoples resemble those of present-day Pathans, Greeks, and Indians.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

IV. The Kushan Empire

The Kushan state existed from roughly the first to the third century CE, with its area of major dominance extending from Gandhara to Mathura.⁷¹ Theological changes in Buddhism can be traced to rich traditions of the Greeks and Romans rendering their gods in anthropomorphic sculptures. In the Hellenistic world, it was believed that, “no unbridgeable chasm [separated] immortals from the mortals,” and Athenian philosophers similarly placed offerings before the grave of Socrates, worshipping him as a demigod.⁷² Additionally, this implied that this act of worship emphasized the miraculous powers of deities and their intervention in the everyday lives of mortals.⁷³ Numismatic collections display the cultural cosmopolitanism of the Kushan Empire. The coins of Kanishka, the most powerful Kushan king, show deities of various religions and cultures (Shiva and Buddha from India, gods Oado and Atash from Persia), despite the fact that the Kushans only used Greek script (see figures 4 and 5).⁷⁴

Artists under the Kushan Empire, therefore, had no inhibitions against representing the Buddha in human form.⁷⁵ In other words, as explained by Yuvraj Krishan, “Greek aestheticism [had] combined with Buddhist religious fervor to create the Buddha image in Gandhara.”⁷⁶ An inscription from a late second to early first century BCE vase, donated by the Greek official Theodorus, further exemplifies this phenomenon. The evidence suggests that from the inscription, “the body of the revered god Shakyamuni is installed by Meridarch Theodorus for the prosperity of many people.”⁷⁷ Theodorus was one of the first to claim in writing that

⁷¹ Liu, 4.

⁷² Thomas Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 47.

⁷³ Jon Mikalson. *Religion in Hellenistic Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 55.

⁷⁴ Liu, 5.

⁷⁵ Krishan, x.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ S. Ghosal, “The Swāt Relic Vase Inscription of the Mediarkh Theodoros.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 23 (1981): 80.

worshipping the relics of the Buddha as a god can bring material benefits. A female donor even claimed to have installed a rudimentary image to venerate the Buddha as her favorite deity. The image bypassed issues with the Buddha's human portrayal by presenting him alongside other Indian deities.⁷⁸ Furthermore, political unification under the Kushan Empire facilitated commercial, cultural, and ideological transmissions throughout a vast region, and often contributed to Hellenic displays of Eastern figures and concepts.⁷⁹ The costumes and rigid poses in standard depictions of the Kushan kings indicate the foreign origins of that empire.⁸⁰ Kings are shown in strict frontal positions, often with the feet apart and pointed forward. The thick clothes carved on the statues indicate their origin from northern regions with a cold climate (in contrast, India has a very hot climate).⁸¹ The style also resembled Parthian fashion with the long caftan flaring out at the knees and feature bearded monarchs, with Scythian facial features and clothing, all foreign to the Indian world.⁸²

Depictions of gods and symbols from various religions indicated the eclectic patronage of Kushan kings.⁸³ As Liu explains, though the rural population vastly outnumbered the urban population in the ancient world, the urban population lived in close proximity to centers of political power, and provided links to rural areas and foreign lands through trading handicrafts, and often controlled large amounts of wealth.⁸⁴ However, it is likely that many converted foreigners in northern India were ambitious merchants, as Buddhist conversion allowed higher

⁷⁸ Liu, 109.

⁷⁹ Liu, 3.

⁸⁰ It is notable that the origins of the Kushan Empire remains a subject of contention: it is generally accepted that the Kushan state was founded by the Yuezhi people, who were driven westward out of Chinese Turkestan by the Hsiung-nu. Most western scholars believe the ethnic background of these people was Tocharian (from the northern edge of the Tarim Basin) but Indian scholars believe them to be Tusharas (from northwestern India).

⁸¹ Hallade, 29.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Hallade, 30.

⁸⁴ Liu, 1.

access to contacts with the majority of merchants in the Indian subcontinent.⁸⁵ In a trend continuing into the late first century CE, many Buddhist communities were largely composed of foreign families located in large urban centers in the Kushan Empire.⁸⁶ Pilgrims consisting of Parthians, Yuezhi, and even Indians beyond the Kushan boundaries had made their way through Central Asian commercial routes into Gandhara. Various traders from the eastern regions realized the advantage of subscribing to Buddhism under Kushan rule over their struggle in networks and roads controlled by the anti-commercial Late Han government.⁸⁷

Political stability brought economic prosperity by the first century CE, allowing the empire to establish contact with western civilizations like Parthia (and by extension Rome) but also east to Han China, as both realms faced the threat of the Huns.⁸⁸ Contact with the eastern and western extremities of the empire influenced Gandhari art, as the scenes and subjects of the religious art were originally Indian, but the style reflected the cosmopolitan culture of the region, seen in the various costumes of figures.⁸⁹ Monastic traditions and religious art seemed to reflect the foreign qualities seen in depictions of Kushan kings, with regard to their style of clothing and their widespread use of the stupa to represent the presence of the Buddha in rituals. Hallade argues that in the early period of Buddhism, monks were wanderers. As the religion moved further north, the monks reached colder climates and began to settle down to form monasteries.⁹⁰ Over time, these monasteries quickly became large centers of religion and art.

⁸⁵ Liu, 116.

⁸⁶ Liu, 139.

⁸⁷ Liu, 140.

⁸⁸ Liu, 1.

⁸⁹ Hallade, 43.

⁹⁰ Hallade, 47.

Monasteries were important religious institutions in that the development of the Mahayana school increased the number of lay Buddhists, as traders and guilds began to financially support monasteries.⁹¹ Given this increasing influx of patronage and donations, the Buddhist monasteries began to receive those who had desired to escape social oppression, and thus had the means to extensively expand the number of lay Buddhist devotees.⁹² Buddhist monasteries also closely followed trade routes across northwest India, located on crucial stopping points for travelers. Therefore, the survival of Buddhist monasteries in the Kushan Empire depended on trade.⁹³ Liu argued that the obligatory social function of the sangha (the Buddhist monastic community) as a gift-receiver was responsible for the eventual domestication of monasteries, as monastic relationships with the lay community became increasingly based on exchange.⁹⁴ Faced with the reality of their increased wealth and status, many monks seemed to have owned more property than allowed by monastic rules in the *Pali Canon*.⁹⁵ However, as these gifts increased in value over time, leading to recruitment and donations of property, the sangha was under increased pressure to either put its property under the disposal of society or to participate in economic activity to benefit the society.⁹⁶ Monastic establishments were connected with urban settlements, trade routes, and imperial domains. The simultaneous distribution of urban development and monastic sites reveal a correlation between urban development and the institutional expansion of Buddhism.⁹⁷ Kushan sculptures reflect this trend, revealing urban settings in Buddhist art. Yaksa sculptures surrounded by the forest and animals were featured on

⁹¹ Liu, 5.

⁹² Liu, 105.

⁹³ Liu, 107.

⁹⁴ Liu, 103.

⁹⁵ Liu, 105.

⁹⁶ Liu, 104.

⁹⁷ Liu, 107.

railings of stupas in Sanchi and Bharhut, but on later railings of Mathura and Sanghol, these yaksas are often set in street scenes (figures 6 and 7).⁹⁸

As a product of this development, the *Sukhavativyuha* sutra depicts the extreme benefits one could achieve through worship and donations, shortening and simplifying the process of accumulating merit and achieving Nirvana.⁹⁹ Bodhisattvas also gained the ability to save others through their own accumulated merit, which implies that it, like goods, can be transferred and exchanged — merit was no longer restricted to an individual's own efforts. Buddhism's dominance during the international trade under the Kushan Empire suggests that Buddhism functioned as a culturally unifying factor.¹⁰⁰ The sutra emerged out of the commercial atmosphere of north India during the Kushan Empire, and supported the growing Mahayana tradition.¹⁰¹

Taken together, there is a strong connection between Eurasian trade and the development of Buddhist patronage. The close correlation between trade routes and distribution of monasteries also suggests that the Buddhist sangha provided valuable services to traders. Archaeological findings suggest that monks even actively participated in trade.¹⁰² In Devnimori, a monastic site in Gujarat, shards of Roman amphora were found with black residue, later revealed to be sedimentation of wine. In Shaikhan Dheri, a Kushan site in Pushkalavati, a storeroom of distillation apparatuses was found in a Buddhist shrine.¹⁰³ Both of these findings suggest that Buddhist monks and monasteries were active in the liquor trading industry to some extent, which automatically defies established Buddhist doctrine. The circulation of luxury

⁹⁸ Liu, 108.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Liu, 101.

¹⁰¹ Liu, 99.

¹⁰² Liu, 122.

¹⁰³ Liu, 123.

commodities stimulated changes in the Buddhist doctrine and the ritual aspect in Buddhism increased the value of goods and enlarged their markets.¹⁰⁴ In the *Pali Canon*, the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha (rules for male monks) clearly states that “should any bhikkhu (monk) engage in various types of trade, [the article obtained] is to be forfeited and confessed.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, “the drinking of alcohol or fermented liquor is to be confessed.”¹⁰⁶ Buddhist monasteries had, rather remarkably, gone from strictly enforced restrictions on engagement with social and economic activities to full-fledged institutions embedded in economic transactions along the Silk Road within a few hundred years.

¹⁰⁴ Liu, 100.

¹⁰⁵ “Bhikkhu Pātimokkha (rules for male monks).” *Pali Canon Online*. Accessed April 24, 2016. <http://www.palicanon.org/index.php/vinaya-pitaka/851-bhikkhu-pa-imokkha>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

V. Mathura

Under Kushan rule in the first century CE, two regions independently developed styles for the Buddha image: Gandhara, with its syncretic style, and Mathura, with a more isolated and traditional Indic style.¹⁰⁷ The city of Mathura was located in the southern region of the Kushan Empire, at a junction linking the Indus basin with the Ganges River and the Deccan Plateau. It was an important center for religion and commerce, seen through the various religions practiced in the area — Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.¹⁰⁸

Mathuran sculptures, which can be seen as a stage in the history of Indian art, exhibit the wide use of reddish sandstone, continuing the traditions seen in the reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi.¹⁰⁹ Later scholars have largely challenged the popular idea, to which Foucher subscribed, that the Buddha image was conceived in Gandhara and then copied in Mathura.¹¹⁰ Hallade, for example, points out that the Mathuran sculptures are often depicted in a tribhanga position, in which the head, body, and limbs of a figure are all aligned at different angles and the lower half of most figures “can be seen through the transparent material of the dhoti.”¹¹¹ In the early stages of the Buddha image’s development, Mathuran sculptors took inspiration from the yaksha (male tutelary spirits from local cults), while Gandharan sculptors adopted features from the Greek deities, particularly that of Apollo, the sun god.¹¹² Hallade concludes the Gandhari style was an

¹⁰⁷ Hallade, 51.

¹⁰⁸ Hallade, 51.

¹⁰⁹ Hallade, 55.

¹¹⁰ J.E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, “Gandhara and Mathura: Their Cultural Relationship,” *Aspects of Indian Art: Papers Presented in a Symposium at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, edited by Pratapaditya Pal (1970): 42.

¹¹¹ Hallade, 56.

¹¹² Hallade, 59.

amalgamation of Indian art and foreign influences and therefore cannot be defined by one culture.¹¹³

The cultural expansion of Buddhism from roughly 500 BCE to 1 CE, with the political expansion of the Mauryan Empire, contributed to the established contact between Gandhara and Mathura.¹¹⁴ Types of terra cotta figurines found in Gandhara could have been produced in Mathura, though it is also possible that Mathuran molds were brought into Gandhara to be locally manufactured.¹¹⁵ As I have mentioned before, the conquest of the Kushan Empire in the first century CE successfully incorporated Gandhara and Mathura into a single political unit and as a result, existing contacts between the two cities increased dramatically.¹¹⁶

Gandhara and Mathura created the Buddha image independently, and both reflected developments in Buddhism such as the decline in the focus on non-anthropomorphic images. In the case of free-standing Buddhist sculptures, both Gandhara and Mathura were highly productive centers, and it was not necessary to import images from the other region.¹¹⁷ However, the two centers did still exert strong influences over the other, as the Kushans stimulated trade across the Empire as prosperity increased. As J.E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw demonstrated, there are numerous reliefs in Mathura and Gandhara depicting figures wearing traditional clothing from the other region. It is unclear whether this suggests that the fashion was adopted or that the reliefs depicted foreigners in their typical dress. The “same uncertainty applies to the representations of hair-styles.”¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Hallade, 3.

¹¹⁴ Leeuw, 28.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Leeuw, 29.

¹¹⁷ Leeuw, 38.

¹¹⁸ Leeuw, 31.

The uncertainties surrounding dress and hairstyles mostly applied to depictions of laymen and women – depictions of divinities and monks were comparatively much more distinguishable.¹¹⁹ For example, renderings of bodhisattvas in Gandhara were shown dressed in Indian clothing, with a dhoti and shawl wrapped around the left shoulder in an Indian fashion, and a turban covering the head.¹²⁰ The princely robes that adhered to traditional Indian fashion were used to identify bodhisattvas in Gandhari art: the torso remains nude, the dhoti is tucked in at the waist of the figure, and the dupatta (long scarf) is elegantly draped over the shoulders.¹²¹ The sculptors at Mathura also adopted the style of covering both shoulders of the Buddha from Gandhara, though Mathuran artists devised a representation of wavy hair through “snail-shell curls” and the Gandhari artists quickly adopted that style. The artistic exchange between the two cities was very much a two-way process.¹²² Nevertheless, the number of Gandhari images found in Mathura is slightly higher than vice-versa.

Images of the Buddha from Mathura in the early Kushan period are inscribed with the description “Bodhisattva” instead of the “Buddha.” This may give us further insight into the connection between the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and the increasingly deistic Buddha.¹²³ It may be convenient to assume that the two terms “Buddha” and “Bodhisattva” had been used without much distinction, or even that they were interchangeable in the early period. However, as Junyung Rhi points out, there is no single biographical description of the life of Buddha in the early Buddhist canon that confuses the two terms. “Bodhisattva” is used to refer to Prince Siddhartha up to the point of Enlightenment and the term “Buddha” is used to replace

¹¹⁹ Leeuw, 32.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Hallade, 60.

¹²² Leeuw, 43.

¹²³ Junyung Rhi, “From Bodhisattva to Buddha: The Beginning of Iconic Representation in Buddhist Art,” *Artibus Asiae* 54 (1994): 207.

Bodhisattva to refer to the Buddha Shakyamuni.¹²⁴ Coomaraswamy asserts that the origin of bodhisattva types is inseparable from the origin of the Buddha image.¹²⁵ The existence of a Buddha type with crown and jewels confuses the Buddha and Bodhisattva types further. Normally, the Buddha is strictly depicted in monastic robes and the bodhisattva, whether he is Siddhartha or any other, is depicted in secular royal costume (figure 2).¹²⁶ Bodhisattvas are also distinguished by the attributes held in either hand (Avalokitesvara by the blue lotus, etc.) and by symbols in the headdress (Avalokitesvara wears a headdress featuring the Dhyani Buddhas, etc.) (figure 3).

Although the Gandhara style and Mathura style Buddhas emerged simultaneously in the first century CE, Rhi argued the later transition in the Mathura region from the early Mathura type to the Gandhara type speaks to a significant shift in iconographic meaning, paralleled by the transition from “Bodhisattva” to “Buddha.”¹²⁷ A passage in the *Mahasamghika-vinaya* speaks of situations in which bodhisattva images were worshipped together with the early symbolic representations of the Buddha.¹²⁸ Bodhisattvas, like yaksas, were worshipped not for the sake of enlightenment but as guardians from earthly ills.¹²⁹ The ideal of the bodhisattva is generally considered to be one of the central features of Mahayana Buddhism — the word “bodhisattva” preceded the tradition, but Mahayanists used it to refer to a class of venerated deities.¹³⁰ In addition, patrons who inscribed the bodhisattva type as a “Buddha” or “Bhagavan Buddha Shakyamuni” were almost entirely lay people and a majority of lay people in Gandhara

¹²⁴ Rhi, “From Bodhisattva to Buddha”, 208.

¹²⁵ Coomaraswamy, 289.

¹²⁶ Coomaraswamy, 290.

¹²⁷ Rhi, “From Bodhisattva to Buddha”, 208.

¹²⁸ Rhi, “From Bodhisattva to Buddha,” 221.

¹²⁹ Coomaraswamy, 304.

¹³⁰ Rhi, “Bodhisattvas in Gandharan Art,” 151.

subscribed to Mahayana Buddhism.¹³¹ Whether the Mahayana Buddhist tradition emerged as a result of the development of the anthropomorphic Buddha image or vice versa is a subject of continuous debate. Scholars such as Foucher suggested that the Mahayana school accounted for the entire development of Gandhari art.¹³² However, the testimony of Faxian, a fifth century CE Chinese pilgrim, indicated that most people in the Gandhari region practiced Theravada Buddhism, not Mahayana. Thus, the presumption that Gandhara played a role in the emergence and spread of Mahayana Buddhism cannot be supported by this account.¹³³ Conversely, Rhi argued that most Mahayanists in Gandhara continued to exist within monastic establishments of traditional Theravada schools, which explains why Faxian reported that a majority of Buddhists in Gandhara were Theravada.¹³⁴

Many scholars preoccupied with identifying external sources for the Gandhari tradition (Hellenistic or Roman, and later Iranian) ignored the fact that influences from the West came from multiple sources in various moments in time, which continually mixed with preexisting traditions. Therefore, tracing specific influences in Gandhari art is a highly complex process.¹³⁵ Scholars acquainted with Roman art were inclined to identify Roman influences and scholars acquainted with Iranian art were similarly inclined to identify Iranian influences. As a result, early scholarship of Gandhari art is historiographically problematic. Coomaraswamy argued that Orthodox European scholars believed the anthropomorphic Buddha was created from a foundation of Hellenistic sculptures, and thus images of the Buddha were not so much Indian (or

¹³¹ Rhi, "From Bodhisattva to Buddha," 223.

¹³² Krishan, 51.

¹³³ Junyung Rhi, "Bodhisattvas in Gandharan Art: An Aspect of Mahayana in Gandharan Buddhism," in *Gandharan Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, Texts*, ed. Pia Brancaccio and Kurt Behrendt (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 151.

¹³⁴ Rhi, "Bodhisattvas", 175.

¹³⁵ Junyung Rhi, "Identifying Several Visual Types in Gandharan Buddha Images," *Archives of Asian Art* 58 (2008): 43.

rather Asian) as they were Indianized versions of Hellenistic prototypes.¹³⁶ Foucher himself admitted that this view was driven by a need to instill the notion of Western superiority over the East in his European students.¹³⁷ As such, it was implied that Indians had essentially barbarized Greek models of art. Early arguments for the origin of the Buddha image, whether it be in Gandhara or Mathura, must be viewed in light of the politics of the twentieth century, specifically the British occupation of India, which polarized and distracted European and Indian scholars in their formative studies of the Buddha image.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Coomaraswamy, 287.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Huntington, 406.

VI. Developing the Gandhari Buddha

As mentioned before, Gandhara prospered due to cross-cultural Asian trade, and provided the means for funding major Buddhist architectural and sculptural monuments. As a result, the Kushan royalty acted as patrons to the Buddhist community.¹³⁹ Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman rulers traditionally adopted the Classical image of Herakles to apply his attribute of strength as a propagandist symbol for power. His subsequent image on the coins of Bactrian and Kushan kings suggest this visual representation of power spread to the South Asian world.¹⁴⁰ As Buddhism and the Hellenistic world became increasingly intertwined, Herakles began to redefine the image of Buddhist deity, Vajrapani (figure 10). Vajrapani appeared in the earliest *Pali Canon* passages as a manifestation of Indra, but by the early first century CE, he became an important and independent figure in Buddhism. He is described as a yaksa, and wields his weapon (*vajra*, or thunderbolt) to threaten those who attack the Buddha and aid the conversion of harmful chthonic deities.¹⁴¹ The connection between Herakles and Vajrapani is based on their strong similarities, both in appearance and myth. They are consistently depicted bearded and muscular, both don lion's skin, and the club of Herakles and the vajra of Vajrapani have very similar shape and functions.¹⁴² In literature, Herakles is a suffering hero who must tame his own nature to elevate and civilize the rest of human nature, and Vajrapani had to reform his amoral yaksa nature through dharma and was able to redeem himself by serving the Shakyamuni Buddha.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Homrighausen, 30.

¹⁴⁰ Homrighausen, 27.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Homrighausen, 31.

¹⁴³ Homrighausen, 32.

These scenes reinforced the idea that Vajrapani (and as an extension, Buddha) acted as a broker between humans and the spirit world, subduing evil spirits to protect humans from harm.¹⁴⁴

Early Indian art was executed mostly through the bas-relief medium, and there are very few indigenous examples of rounded sculptures. A large number of bas-reliefs decorated the bases of sculptures and railings, but most were carved on separate slabs of stone and later fitted onto stupas.¹⁴⁵ Traditionally, various scenes from the *Jataka* tales were featured on the stupas. In Gandharan stupas, the last human life of Buddha was a more popular motif, divided by pilasters with pseudo-Corinthian capitals.¹⁴⁶ In depictions of the four main events of the Life of the Buddha (Birth, Illumination, First Sermon, and Death), a seated or standing Buddha is positioned in the center of the panel as a focal point for the secondary figures in the scene.¹⁴⁷ Stylistic precedence was given to the Buddha image, often a larger size than other figures and distinguished by a halo or a throne, to show his superhuman state.¹⁴⁸

Gandhari art, by contrast, is monumental, and the Buddha image is heroic in scale, sporting voluminous drapery with heavy pleats reminiscent of a Greco-Roman style toga.¹⁴⁹ Also, the halo circle around the head of many Buddha statues corresponds with the Greek nimbus, a disc of gold placed behind deities to represent the sun.¹⁵⁰ The typical Gandhari Buddha is also portrayed with his hair tied up in a chignon (figure 11). According to Buddhist scripture, the Buddha should be portrayed with a tonsure as part of his renunciation of the earthly world but in his anthropomorphic form, he is portrayed with wavy hair. One answer for this departure

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 31.

¹⁴⁵ Hallade, 103.

¹⁴⁶ Hallade, 106.

¹⁴⁷ Hallade, 107.

¹⁴⁸ Hallade, 109.

¹⁴⁹ Krishan, 30.

¹⁵⁰ Banerjea, 296.

is that baldness was seen as unattractive by Hellenistic artistic standards (figure 9).¹⁵¹ This style of hair for the Buddha later evolved and became known as an *ushnisha* — a lump at the top of Buddha's head that stands as an auxiliary brain and represents cosmic consciousness and supreme wisdom.¹⁵²

However, not all have seen this as a Greek influence. Indo-Aryan males would wear long hair as a common custom among higher classes, and gods were, in turn, endowed with the same characteristic. Coomaraswamy argued that the Buddha's ushnisha was copied from Indian monarchs, as kings would tie their hair in top knot and put it in a turban as a sign of dignity.¹⁵³ Evidence for the Indian origin of a rounded cranial protuberance with short curls is found on a relief in one of the Bodhgaya railing pillars, dating to 100 BCE (figure 8).¹⁵⁴ With reference to the widely accepted Greek origin of the halo, a similar golden disc was placed on the fire altar in Vedic rituals to represent the sun, as radiance was a quality associated with all the Devas (gods).¹⁵⁵ Interestingly, it is said that the Buddha image was modeled after Greco-Roman manifestations of Apollo, the Greek god of the sun (figure 9). Furthermore, the Buddha images of Gandhara and Mathura are draped fully in cloth, whereas Greek deities are often depicted nude, to reveal the beauty of the physical form.¹⁵⁶ The Hellenistic style of art under the Parthians can be seen through scenes depicting drinking parties, with men wearing either a chiton or a himation leaving the right shoulder bare. Women traditionally wore a long chiton and himation and also left the right shoulder bare, with garlands adorning their heads.¹⁵⁷ These reliefs of

¹⁵¹ George Woodcock, *The Greeks in India* (London: Faber, 1966), 187.

¹⁵² Krishan, 113.

¹⁵³ Coomaraswamy, 302.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Coomaraswamy, 306.

¹⁵⁶ Banerjea, 295.

¹⁵⁷ Marshall, 33-4.

drinking scenes were popular under the Parthians and exerted an influence on the later Buddhist art in the region.¹⁵⁸

The relief depicting the donation of the Jetavana Gardens to the Buddha by Ananthapindika, a rich merchant, displays this syncretism between Greco-Roman and South Asian traditions (figure 12). The two notable Hellenistic features are the Buddha (second from the right), wearing a long flowing tunic that covers his entire torso (in contrast to tight robes that leave the upper right shoulder exposed in Mathuran statues) and the miniature Corinthian pillars that flank the scene.¹⁵⁹ The merchants, on the other hand, show eastern influences: their clothes are Indian in style and several sport mustaches that would have been popular among Indians and Persians but considered unattractive by Greeks.¹⁶⁰ It is significant to note that the Buddha is of the same position, size and appearance as the rest of the figures, with only his halo to distinguish him from the rest of the group.¹⁶¹ All the figures, including the Buddha, have the same countenance: a refined and pointed nose, the same style mustache, and strongly defined cheekbones.¹⁶²

In many reliefs of the Buddha during this time, the halo is of a medium size while the ushnisha is disproportionately large to seem top-heavy. Conversely, in the rounded statues of the Buddha, the halo is disproportionately large, while the ushnisha is shown to be relatively flatter and smaller in size.¹⁶³ Furthermore, in reliefs, the drapery is often roughly carved and coarsely chiseled, but in the statues, the carvings are precise and the folds give a clear sense of form under

¹⁵⁸ Marshall, 38.

¹⁵⁹ Marshall, 41.

¹⁶⁰ Marshall, 47.

¹⁶¹ Marshall, 42.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Marshall, 62.

the robes.¹⁶⁴ Gandhara was the primary center for stone-carvings, particularly of a greyish-blue schist.¹⁶⁵ Sculptures had diverse roles in monasteries – monks and pilgrims venerated the larger, singular statues, while figures in high relief were often located on walls enclosing central stupas.¹⁶⁶ Most of the single statues depicted the Buddha Shakyamuni, or “The Blessed One,” in a rigid frontal position on a decorated bas-relief base.¹⁶⁷ A narrow panel extending from the nimbus often supports the sculptures, and the facial features show a Classical influence in the oval face, eyebrows curving over a straight nose, and wavy hair. The Buddha’s face is often bare, but the occasional mustache indicates a foreign quality, possibly as a consequence of Kushan contact with Persia.¹⁶⁸

Faithful attention to Buddhist doctrine and tradition is also visible in the developing iconography in Gandhara. The half-closed eyes indicate a calm demeanor, and the act of meditation and introspection. Additionally, two of the thirty-two signs of the Buddha’s predestination at birth became central features in Buddhist iconography: the ushnisha and the urna (circle of white hair between the eyebrows, treated as a hollow carved to hold a stone). Finally, the Buddha’s elongated ears point to its distortion from heavy jewelry worn by the Buddha as Prince Siddhartha.¹⁶⁹ The robes of the Buddha reflect those worn by the monastic community, consisting of three garments folded over each other. The *antaravasaka* (under garment) is a type of dhoti covering the lower body down to the ankles; the *uttarasanga* (over garment) is draped from the neckline to the knees, and leaves the right shoulder exposed; and the

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Hallade, 77.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Hallade, 78.

¹⁶⁸ Hallade, 79.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

sanghati (overcoat) is thickly draped over both shoulders.¹⁷⁰ The cold climate in Gandhara required all three pieces to be worn, though the two undergarments barely show through in sculptures of the Buddha. In Mathura, the *sanghati* is seldom seen and thus, the right shoulder is exposed in Mathuran sculptures of the Buddha and the thin material of the undergarments display the outline of the body.¹⁷¹

The medium of stucco may have been equally important to Gandhara as the stone carvings, but its perishable material leaves only small fragments to analyze.¹⁷² Stucco was considerably cheaper, more accessible, and flexible than schist, which contributed to its popular use in conjunction with stone sculptures. However, the perishability prevented the medium from being used for many single statues.¹⁷³ The frontal rigidity of the schist sculptures contrasts with the natural and less austere forms of stucco. The higher yield of stucco art allowed sculptors to achieve the sophisticated quality in many Hellenistic sculptures from the Mediterranean.¹⁷⁴ Stucco sculpture was often painted, using red for lips, the robes, and a base for gilding with black or dark grey used for the hair and pupils of the eyes. These painted stucco sculptures later disseminated through Central Asia to northern regions of China, as high relief sculptures in cave temples began to supersede the freestanding sculptures.

¹⁷⁰ Hallade, 83.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Hallade, 138.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Hallade, 139.



Fig 1. Bodhi Tree, Sanchi,
3rd century BCE



Fig 2. Standing Buddha, Mathura,
Early 5th century



Fig 3. Avalokitesvara, Mathura,
5th century CE



Fig 4. Standing Helios
(ΗΛΙΟΣ), coin of
Kanishka I, Kushan
Empire, ca. 120 CE
note: Helios was the
Hellenistic god of the Sun



Fig 5. Left: King of Kings, Kanishka the
Kushan (ΒΑΟΝΑΝΟΡΑΟ ΚΑΝΗΘΚΙ
ΚΟΡΑΝΟ)
Right: Standing Buddha (ΒΟΔΔΟ)
Gold coins of Kanishka I, Kushan
Empire, ca. 120 CE



Fig 6. Yakshi under a flowering tree, Sanchi, 2nd-1st century BCE



Fig 7. Yakshi, Sanghol, 2nd century CE



Fig 8. Railing Pillar, Bodhgaya, Shunga Dynasty, ca. 100 BCE



Fig 9. Apollo Belvedere, Roman copy of Greek original, 120-140 AD

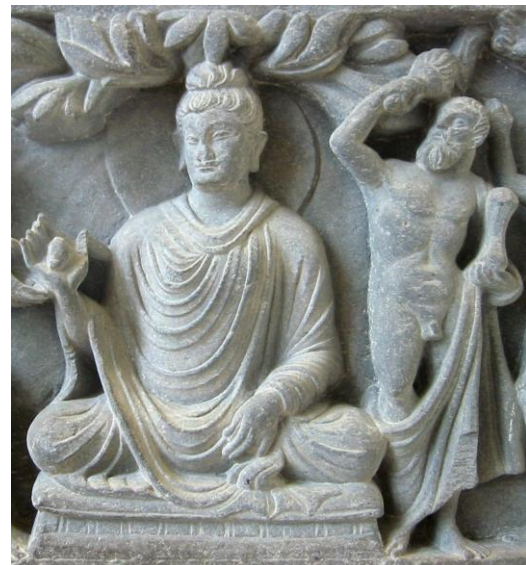


Fig 10. Vajrapani as Herakles (right), 2nd century CE



Fig 11. Standing Buddha, Gandhara, 1st-2nd century CE



Fig 12. Donation of the Jetavana Garden

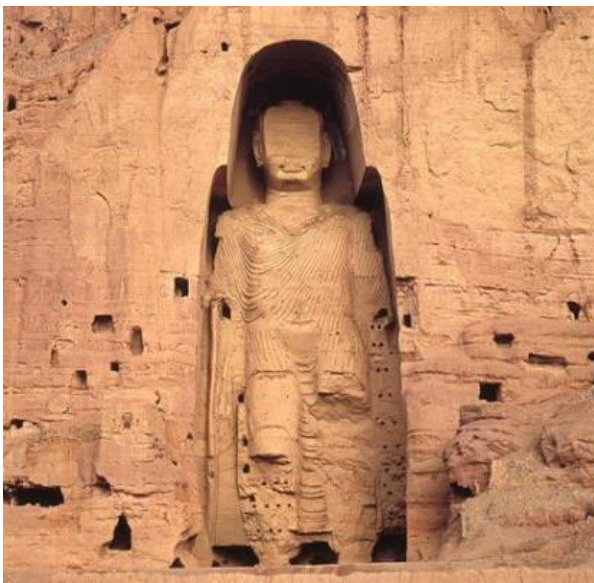


Fig 13. Buddhas of Bamiyan, Bamiyan Valley, 3rd century CE

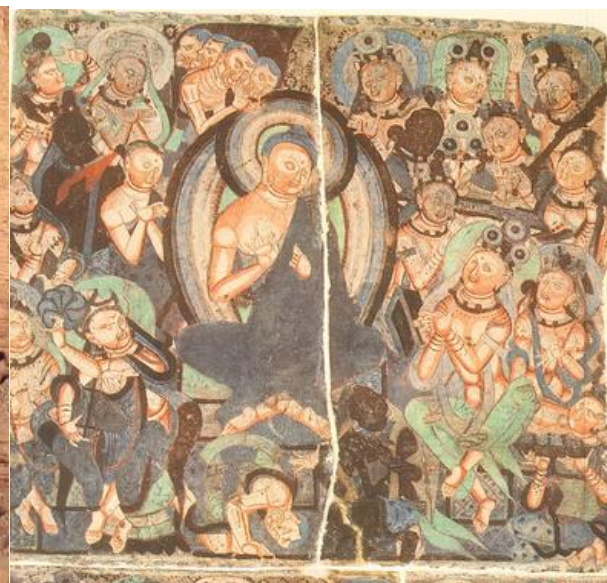


Fig 14. Buddha, Kizil, Kucha, 4th century C.E.



Fig 15. Cave 224, Kizil, Kucha, 4th–6th century C.E.



Fig 16. Pranidhi, Bezeklik, Turfan, 4th century C.E.

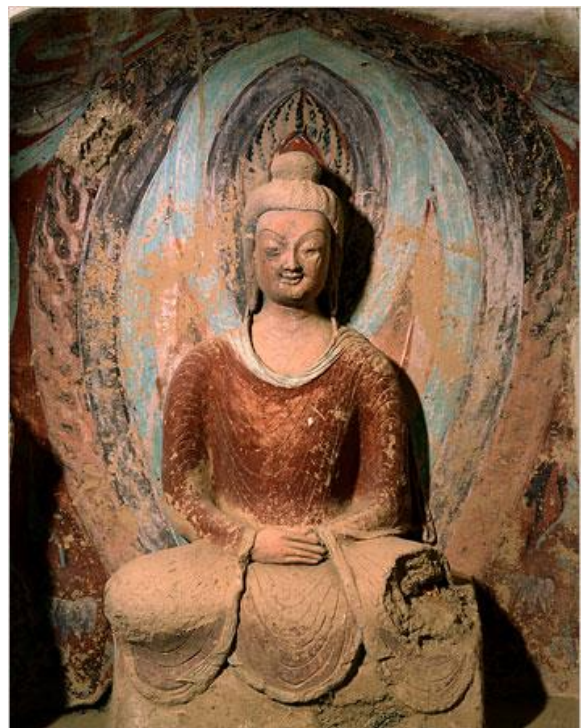


Fig 17. Cave 285, Mogao Caves, 4th century C.E.



Fig 18. Five Caves of Tan Yan, Yungang Grottoes, 5th century CE



Fig 19. The Bath of the New-Born Buddha, Cave 6, Yungang Grottoes, ca. 480-94 CE

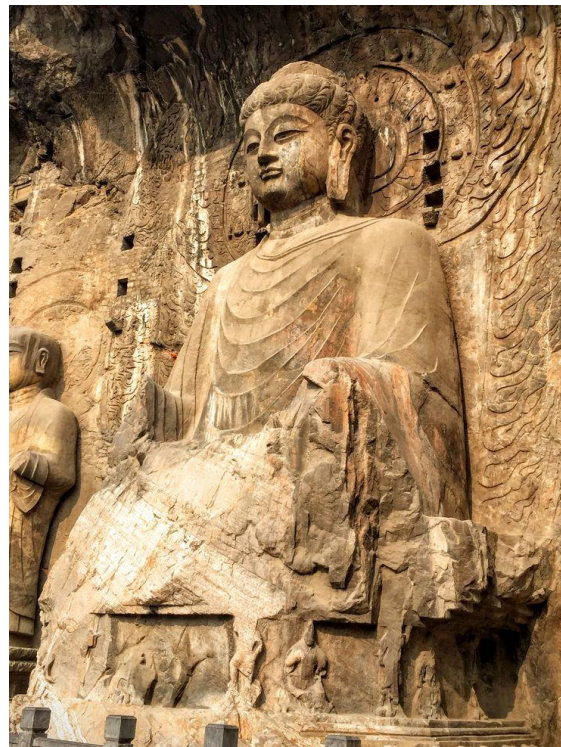
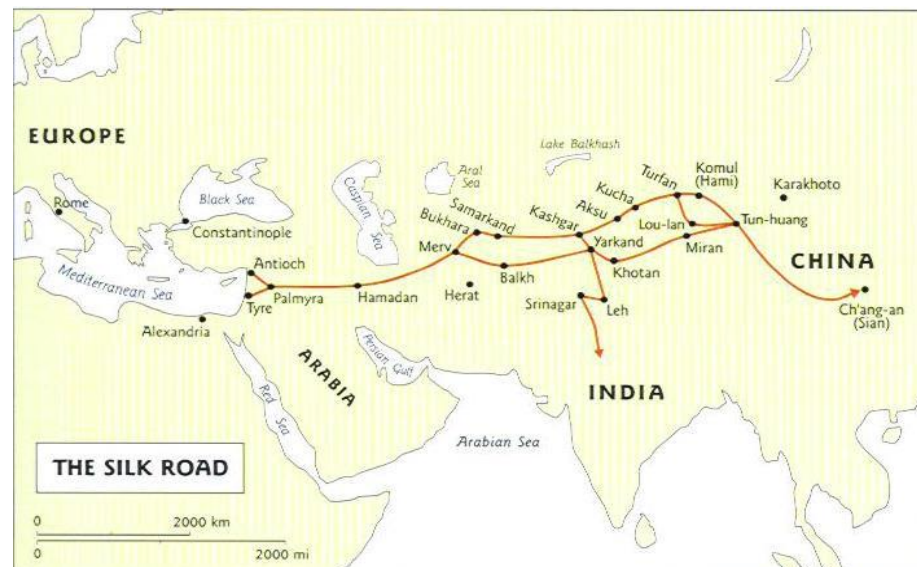


Fig 20. Buddha, Longmen, Luoyang, 5th century CE

VII. Central Asia



From Dru C. Gladney, "Central Asia and China: Transnationalization, Islamization, and Ethnicization," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 441.

Tukharistan (northern Afghanistan) and Sogdiana (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) encompassed crucial way stations that facilitated trade between China and India, and became the homeland of Central Asian Buddhists.¹⁷⁵ By the first century CE, the two areas became the site of a major junction where the routes going east and west met the routes going north and south. Buddhist missionaries from India moved to Central Asia and monasteries were located in the midst of this commercial activity.¹⁷⁶ Sogdian traders most likely played a role as trading agents for the Kushan Empire. Two Sogdians, known in Chinese as Kang Ju and Kang Mengxiang, helped translate Buddhist Sanskrit texts into the Chinese language by the second century CE.¹⁷⁷ At that time, the only place to study both the Sanskrit language and Buddhist texts was India. In fact, Kanishka of the Kushan Empire was a well-known royal patron in Chinese Buddhist

¹⁷⁵ Xinru Liu, "A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam," *Journal of World History* 22, no. 1 (2011): 56.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Liu, "Silk Road Legacy," 58.

literature.¹⁷⁸ Politically, the numerous city-states in Central Asia never unified into a single polity and often fought for hegemony in the region.¹⁷⁹ In the third century CE, the rise of the Sassanids led to the decline of the Kushan dynasty.

The constantly changing political situation led populations to rely heavily on nongovernmental institutions for social stability and local security. Zoroastrian and Buddhist establishments often provided religious and social cohesion lacking in the central states.¹⁸⁰ After the second century CE, monasteries began to function as popular rest stops for caravans crossing the Hindu Kush between India and the northern regions of Central Asia. Monks, pilgrims, and merchants brought a wide array of traditions, shown in wall paintings with donors wearing long tunics of thick and richly embroidered cloth, a product of Indo-Iranian influence.¹⁸¹ However, the constant political instability halted the production and evolution of Gandhari art.

Accommodating as the White Huns were in the northern regions of Central Asia, the southern regions (into the Indian subcontinent) suffered from violent attacks, and saw the destruction of many Buddhist monasteries.¹⁸²

There is evidence that Sogdian merchants practiced Buddhism, but also Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism. Tombs of wealthy Sogdian merchant in western China revealed that those who built elaborate graves followed Zoroastrian funeral rites.¹⁸³ However, Sogdian Zoroastrianism is far different from Persian Zoroastrianism — there was no strong, centralized monarchy in Sogdiana and so Mazda Ahura was not the only patron god.¹⁸⁴ Sogdian people worshipped gods

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Liu, “Silk Road Legacy,” 57.

¹⁸¹ Hallade, 67.

¹⁸² Hallade, 71.

¹⁸³ Liu, “Silk Road Legacy,” 59.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

from a variety of religions as every urban household chose their own supreme patron god and a host of minor deities. These household pantheons often included both imported and local deities.¹⁸⁵ Liu argued it was possible Xuanzang's account of firebrand wielders attacking Buddhists was misinterpreted. According to Liu, it may have been a local fire ritual, with roots in Zoroastrianism, practiced as a way of worshipping the Buddha.¹⁸⁶ After all, trade from the Buddhist monasteries would not have been so prominent if Buddhists were attacked regularly, and Kushan kings had patronized both religions.

Furthermore, the original inspiration for the Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, may have links to the Zoroastrian cult of the savior, Saosyant, or the Persian-Greek Messiah Mithras Invictus, both introduced into Gandhara before the advent of bodhisattvas.¹⁸⁷ The names "Maitreya" and "Mithra" have the same meaning and share the same Indo-European root. In Buddhism, Maitreya means the "Benevolent (Friendly) One". In Brahmanism, Mitrah is a god of friendship. Lastly, the Indo-Iranian word "mitra" means friendship (god of the friendship contract). I do not believe these striking similarities in terms are a coincidence.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Liu, "Silk Road Legacy," 60.

¹⁸⁷ Sen, 89.

VIII. Bamiyan Caves

Balkh, the most important city in Tukharistan, was once known as Bactra, the capital of Hellenistic Bactria. Greek cultural features were especially important in this region after the conquest of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE.¹⁸⁸ Xuanzang mentioned that the Greek language was still being used in the region into the seventh century CE, which was later supported by the discovery of more than 150 documents inscribed with Greek letters expressing the local Bactrian language, dating from the second to the mid sixth century CE.¹⁸⁹ Traveling southeast from Balkh toward the Bamiyan Valley, Xuanzang came into contact with the two colossal (over a hundred feet) sandstone statues of the Buddha (figure 13), which date to the late third century CE, after the collapse of the Kushan Empire. The nomadic group that ruled Tukharistan (Hephthalites in Greek records, Huna in Indian records) during this period was friendly to Buddhism and even patronized it.¹⁹⁰

The Bamiyan Valley, in the southern edge of the Hindu Kush, came to be an important location on the road linking Bactria and India in the first century CE under the Kushan Empire.¹⁹¹ Buddhist cave temples are typically found in isolated locations, elevated on hills. Takayasu Higuchi significantly pointed out that this was not convenient for the instruction of the laity, one of the main functions of a Buddhist temple.¹⁹² There are very few cave temples in Gandhara, due to the lack of suitable cliffs to be hollowed out for caves. However, in Afghanistan, there were a great number of cave temples, particularly in the Bamiyan Valley. The

¹⁸⁸ Liu, "Silk Road Legacy," 61.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Liu, "Silk Road Legacy," 62.

¹⁹¹ Hallade, 155.

¹⁹² Takayasu Higuchi and Gina Barnes, "Bamiyan: Buddhist Cave Temples in Afghanistan," *World Archaeology* 27, no. 2 (1995): 282.

Afghani caves were much smaller and simpler than their Indian counterparts.¹⁹³ Along the northern roads of the Tarim Basin in China, cave temples were numerous in Kizil (Kucha region) and Bezeklik (Turfan region).¹⁹⁴ Among the many cave complexes that sprouted along the northern Silk Road to the east of China, the Bamiyan caves were the westernmost Buddhist cave temples. Higuchi stated that it was not clear why there were no more caves as far west as there were east, or why Buddhism did not spread further westward, but the Bamiyan caves exhibited Persian and Byzantine (western) influences, which were then later transmitted to the eastern caves.¹⁹⁵ The Bamiyan caves were located on a crossroads of cultural exchange: China to the east, India to the south, Persia to the west, and Bactria to the north.¹⁹⁶

The two Buddha statues in Bamiyan were thirty-five and fifty-three meters tall and the thick folds in the robes were carved by fixing ropes on the statue and later covered with a layer of stucco. The stiff and thick drapery was directly adopted from Gandhari art.¹⁹⁷ Hallade argued that Gandhari art had “transcended both iconography and style.”¹⁹⁸ The artistic style of the two Buddhas of Bamiyan were closely related to the sculptural art of Gandhara and displayed the product of the syncretism between Indian, Persian, and Greek aesthetic traditions from the region. The idealized image of the Buddha that disseminated through Central Asia retained the facial features and half-closed eyes from Classical art but also kept the dhoti and stylistic throne from Indic art.¹⁹⁹ The mural decorations in the Bamiyan caves rarely depict the Jataka tales, in which the Buddha is represented in his previous lives as animals. However, the parinirvana scene

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Higuchi and Barnes, 283.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Higuchi and Barnes, 287.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Hallade, 166.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

of the Dying Buddha is featured in seven caves.²⁰⁰ This could indicate a permanent shift from early Buddhist art and motifs towards the widespread normalization of the anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha.

A group of three apsaras, types of flying deities, are shown in the murals from the West Grand Buddha niche. They are depicted flying up and adorning the Buddha from above. The flying Nike figures from Palmyran funeral relief plates and Roman sarcophagi shared this similar motif, with the figures flanking both sides of the central sculpture.²⁰¹ Similar renditions of these apsaras were later featured in the murals of the Dunhuang and Yungang caves in China.

Ultimately, the Bamiyan caves show a sophisticated synthesis of various elements: Buddhism from India, and sculptural styles from Sassanian Persia, Byzantium, and the Tocharian region in Central Asia.²⁰² The Bamiyan Buddhas featured hybrid Sassanid features, later transmitting to the Tarim Basin, seen in the caves of Kizil, and further to Dunhuang, on the border of the Kansu province.²⁰³

Higuchi argued that the western Buddha sculpture seemed to be more architecturally sophisticated than the eastern Buddha sculpture, which was carved first, with its greater access to the balcony surrounding their heads to “allow circumambulation during worship.”²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, both sculptures represent a great departure from previous examples of sculptural traditions in Buddhist art. In Gandhara, the stupa and the Buddha sculpture were the two main objects of worship. Although the largest Buddha sculptures in Gandhara did not measure higher than ten meters, the number of stupas erected far exceeded that of Buddha sculptures in the

²⁰⁰ Higuchi and Barnes, 296.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Higuchi and Barnes, 299.

²⁰³ Hallade, 172.

²⁰⁴ Higuchi and Barnes, 291.

region.²⁰⁵ In Bamiyan, only two stupa platforms have been discovered and preserved, while the colossal sculptures of the Buddha are featured center staged.²⁰⁶ Higuchi argued that the innovation and construction of such monumental sculptures was an influence from the west of Bamiyan. In ancient Egypt, it was tradition to sculpt royalty from large rocks, and in ancient Greece and Rome, there were often large renditions of sculpted gods.²⁰⁷ An additional innovation of the Bamiyan Buddhas was the circumambulation tunnels surrounding the feet of the Buddha sculptures. These were absent in the Indian cave temples, but in the later caves in Kizil, there are tunnels to the back of the Buddha leading into a niche.²⁰⁸ Since the ninth century, the Bamiyan caves have been the target of planned desecration – Genghis Khan, Aurangzeb, the Taliban have all incrementally contributed to the destruction and as of today, the two Buddhas of Bamiyan have been eliminated.²⁰⁹

Individuals engaged in the spread of Buddhism further east to China share two characteristics: they are foreigners (either coming in from abroad or already residents in China) and in ninety percent of the cases, they held clerical statuses.²¹⁰ The remaining source materials deal almost exclusively with one group: foreign masters engaged in the translation of Buddhist texts, often regarded as their major contribution.²¹¹ The bulk of the information is even more selective, focusing on “high class translators,” who were patronized by the secular elite and active at few monasteries.²¹² Buddhist biographical sources of these translators show strong propagandist tendencies as these texts were often written to demonstrate the respectability of the

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Higuchi and Barnes, 293.

²⁰⁸ Higuchi and Barnes, 299.

²⁰⁹ Higuchi and Barnes, 300.

²¹⁰ Erik Zürcher, “Buddhism Across Boundaries: The Foreign Input,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 222 (2012): 1.

²¹¹ Zürcher 2.

²¹² *Ibid.*

sangha and tended to focus on the foreign master's relations with the court and the aristocratic elite.²¹³

It is important to note that early large-scale Buddhist art in Central Asia and China were mainly cave excavations, but in north and northwest India (the core of the Kushan Empire), the main forms of Buddhist buildings were stupas and viharas. The cave of Bamiyan, however, were the major exception, situated in western Asia.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

IX. Kizil and Bezeklik Caves

The Kizil caves were considered to be the “most important Buddhist sanctuary...of the former Central Asian kingdom of Kutch,” and with 236 caves, it is also the largest Buddhist cave complex in the region.²¹⁴ The exact dating of the Kizil caves is still debated, projecting a range from the third century to the sixth century CE, but compared to the early Dunhuang caves to the east, many scholars believe the earliest caves date to the fourth century CE.²¹⁵ Kucha had a “strategic situation on commercial highways which linked India and the Western world with the Chinese empire,” attracting numerous Indian missionaries and Chinese pilgrims, including Xuanzang.²¹⁶ Interestingly, the style of the Kizil caves is less sinicized than the Kumtura caves, only twenty km to its east, and gave these caves a purer Kuchan identity.²¹⁷

With the collapse of the powerful Han, Kushan, and Parthian empires, various nomadic groups gained the means to play major roles in forming the “ethnic and political history” of Central Asia.²¹⁸ These oasis states in Chinese Turkestan had a mix of agricultural and nomadic populations, with an existing monarchic state structure and a hierarchical system of vassalage that had promising growths of feudalism.²¹⁹

The simultaneous expansion of overland trade and Buddhism into the region allowed for the religion to successfully integrate into Kuchean state and social structures.²²⁰ Buddhism first

²¹⁴ Emmanuelle Lesbre, “An Attempt to Identify and Classify Scenes with a Central Buddha Depicted on Ceilings of the Kyzil Caves (Former Kingdom of Kutch, Central Asia),” *Artibus Asiae* 61, no. 2 (2001): 305.

²¹⁵ Lesbre, 308.

²¹⁶ Lesbre, 307.

²¹⁷ Lesbre, 308.

²¹⁸ B. A. Litvinsky and Guang-da Zhang, “Historical Introduction,” In *The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250-750*, Vol. 3 of *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996), 19.

²¹⁹ Litvinsky and Zhang, 25.

²²⁰ Guang-da Zhang, “The city-states of the Tarim Basin,” in *The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250-750*, Vol. 3 of *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996), 291.

spread among the aristocrats in Kucha.²²¹ Most Kucheans who traveled to China had the surnames Pai or Po, which denoted royal or aristocratic origins. Kucha maintained the archaic relationship between kingship and monasteries in early teachings of Buddhism, implying the “relative superiority of spiritual authority over their mundane authority of kingship.”²²² In fact, the kings in Kucha often visited the monks for consultation, rather than ordering monks to come to the royal palace. Buddhist monasteries in Kucha had a relatively ordered religious hierarchy, and were not beholden to financial support of secular political authority. In contrast to monasteries under the Kushan Empire, Kucheans were closer to the ideal in early Buddhism, encouraging self-sufficiency.²²³

As mentioned before, the Tarim basin was at a crossroads, and Kucheans came to reflect a “peculiar syncretism of various heterogeneous civilizations.”²²⁴ The source of Buddhist iconography in the Kizil caves can be traced back to the Gandhara region, under the Kushan Empire. Buddhist cave temples in Kucha functioned similarly to those in India, due to the continuity of the tradition through the Bamiyan Caves serving as an intermediary.²²⁵ In addition, the Yuezhi (Kushans) were often equated with the native Tocharians from Kucha, displayed by the phonetic similarities in their languages.²²⁶ Historical evidence suggests the Kushans originated from the same location that later Tocharians resided, which would further the notion that Kucha had strong ties to a Gandhara legacy that can be seen in the art of the Kizil caves.²²⁷

²²¹ Mariko Nambu Walter, “Tokharian Buddhism in Kucha: Buddhism of Indo-European Centum Speakers in Chinese Turkestan before the 10th Century C.E.,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 85 (1998): 5.

²²² Walter, 15.

²²³ Walter, 30.

²²⁴ Zhang, 298.

²²⁵ Zhang, 299.

²²⁶ J.P. Mallory, “The Problem of Tocharian Origins: An Archaeological Perspective,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 259 (2015): 11.

²²⁷ Mallory, 14.

The common ethnic culture and socio-economic development in the territory of Central Asia and Chinese Turkestan owed much to the unifying nature of Buddhism. Buddhism became “accepted over the entire territory as a doctrine of moral ethics, an ideology and a religion.”²²⁸ Chinese sources recorded over one thousand Buddhist temples and sanctuaries in Kucha and by the later fourth century CE, Kucha was an important center of Buddhist education and translations.²²⁹

The cave art in Kizil from the third to the eighth century CE showed extensive adherence to external artistic traditions, particularly the Indo-Hellenic style.²³⁰ One third of the Kizil caves (approx. eighty caves) were worship caves, and the rest were devoted to meditation, habitation, or religious teachings.²³¹ Fifty-one worship caves were dug around a pillar for circumambulation, designed much like those in preceding Indian caves and the Bamiyan caves. In one instance, the Buddha sits on a rectangular throne in a meditative position, wearing monastic robes with the right shoulder uncovered (figure 14).²³² Though the image is painted and not a sculpture, there is a clear move to emphasize the roundness of the figure, through the purposeful shading and the outline of a circle on the shoulder, a technique in drawing three-dimensional figures on a two-dimensional plane. Interestingly, the opened robes exposing the right shoulder reflects many early sculptures of the Mathuran Buddha, in contrast to the fully covered Gandhari Buddha. Gupta influence from India also reached the Kizil caves, namely in the subtle shading on paintings in Cave of the Treasure and the accentuated hips of bodhisattva sculptures.²³³

²²⁸ B. A. Litvinsky and M. I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, “Religions and religious movements — II,” in *The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250-750*, Vol. 3 of *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996), 431.

²²⁹ Litvinsky and Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, 432.

²³⁰ Mallory, 10.

²³¹ Lesbre, 309.

²³² Lesbre, 310.

²³³ Hallade, 218.

There are also images depicting the Buddha subduing other deities, representing Buddhism's superiority over other religions and traditions.²³⁴ The Buddha's superiority is depicted in two ways: the figure or deity, at the expense of the Buddha's demonstration of superiority, is represented either in an act of aggression against the Buddha or in a submissive position relative to the Buddha.²³⁵ Mara, the Buddhist god of desire, is considered to be the most powerful deity defeated by the Buddha. He is depicted with a halo over his head, sitting on a comparable throne to that of the Buddha's, to signify his divinity. Emmanuelle Lesbre also suggests there are hints of Zoroastrian elements in the figure of Mara, which could point to possible tensions between the two religions in Central Asia.²³⁶ The ogre Atavaka from the yaksa cult is another deity subdued by the Buddha in the Kizil caves. He is depicted with a naked chest and a simple loincloth, similar to the appearance of an Indian from a low caste, but also sports a halo over his head.²³⁷ In addition, many scenes depict figures making grand gestures of donations to the central Buddha figure.²³⁸ Cave 171 shows the first offering the Buddha received — an alms bowl given by the Four Celestial Kings, one of whom is dressed as a military chief in the style of the local indigenous fashion, kneeling down to present the bowl to the Buddha.²³⁹ Cave 31 also shows a further break with early Buddhism, depicting the Buddha painting his own portrait, as if to allow the spread of his cult based on his image.²⁴⁰

Earlier paintings in the Kizil caves reflect a strong Greco-Roman and Gandhari influence, while later paintings show a syncretic blend of Indic style and indigenous Kuchean style and

²³⁴ Lesbre, 314.

²³⁵ Lesbre, 320.

²³⁶ Lesbre, 314.

²³⁷ Lesbre, 315.

²³⁸ Lesbre, 333.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Lesbre, 343.

coloring.²⁴¹ What remains consistent throughout the caves is a “lack of Chinese influence on stylistic features.”²⁴² Foreigners were differentiated by their distinct facial features and clothing. For example, Indian warriors were depicted wearing Persian garb (see figure 15). The local culture in Kucha had a distinctly Persian feature — cave 92 was square with a rounded ceiling, reflecting Persian architecture, much like the caves in Bamiyan.²⁴³ Furthermore, the diadems on the Maitreya Buddha, decorated with beads, can be traced to the crowns of the Sassanian kings, as symbols for divine kingship.²⁴⁴

The chronology of the Kizil caves has thus been grouped under two styles: Gandharan, which dated to the sixth century, and Indo-Iranian, which dated to the first half of the seventh century; but many scholars believe that the earlier artwork dates to the third and fourth centuries.²⁴⁵

While Kucha had its own center of culture and Buddhism that was independent from Chinese influence, Turfan, by comparison, was constantly under the rule of Chinese warlords, in spite of the close proximity of the two regions.²⁴⁶ Kocho, in which Turfan is located, was the most powerful of the western oasis city-states, primarily controlled by wealthy and politically influential clans.²⁴⁷ However, relations with mainland China that had pulled the region towards a policy of Sinification incensed these local clans, since the presence of foreigners often led to a competition for power.²⁴⁸ In 60 BCE, the Han occupied the Turfan region and held firm control until the first century CE, which left a significant legacy of Sinitic culture and influence with the

²⁴¹ Walter, 21.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ Walter, 22.

²⁴⁴ Walter, 23.

²⁴⁵ Lesbre, 346.

²⁴⁶ Walter, 17.

²⁴⁷ Zhang, 306.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

importation of Han political and martial institutions.²⁴⁹ In the first century CE, the Han dynasty in China and the Xiongnu competed for dominion over Turfan and eventually, the region stayed loyal to China with the installation of Han garrison troops.²⁵⁰

Traditionally, the Kocho king had direct control over all the land to the extent that his permission was needed for the lay population to donate land to a monastery.²⁵¹ A system of levying taxes distinguished the lay population and the monks, as the monks had lower rates of taxation, and given Turfan's strategic location along the Silk Road, Buddhism flourished with the construction of temples and grottoes. It reached its peak during the period of the Sixteen Kingdoms (304-439), with the Bezeklik Caves.²⁵² The caves strongly indicated the religious patronage of imperial families in Turfan — over forty temples were named after these families, which reflected the growing power of the clans as Buddhist temples morphed into glorified family shrines. Zhang Guang-da argued that as a result, “Buddhist power merged with that of the aristocratic families of Kocho.”²⁵³

A pradhini scene in the Bezeklik caves shows a continuation from the Buddhas in the Kizil caves, with the depiction of donors from various cultures. The three donors standing below the three bodhisattvas, on either side of the Buddha, are shown in distinctly Central Asian costumes, including elaborate headdresses, thick beards, and tunics reminiscent of Kushan kings. Interestingly, the bodhisattvas, and the Buddha's facial features are reflective of the substantial Sinitic population, inserting themselves into a position of higher authority into the native tribal social structure. The Buddha in this scene, however, still shows the distinctive top-knot crowning

²⁴⁹ Guang-da Zhang, “Kocho (Kao-ch'ang),” in *The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250-750*, Vol. 3 of *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996), 304.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ Zhang, 309.

²⁵² Zhang, 311.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

his head in the Gandhari images, and displays the traditional monastic robes from northern India, with the deep lines marking the drapery as a suggestion of thick folds indicative of Greco-Roman influence.

X. Dunhuang Caves

The monasteries of Dunhuang maintained close and significant contact with Kucha and Turfan, to its west.²⁵⁴ Buddhism gradually spread northwest into China between the first half of the first century BCE and the middle of the first century CE.²⁵⁵ The Chinese first came into contact with the religion when an emissary named Zhang Qian was sent to Bactria in 138 BCE by the Former Han court to forge an alliance with the Yuezhi against the nomadic Xiongnu. Upon his return, he reported a trade route linking southwestern China to India.²⁵⁶ Subsequent war with the Xiongnu led to a Han political dominance in Central Asia.²⁵⁷ The relationship between Han China and Central Asia quickly became a two-way exchange, as the main path of the Silk Road during the first two centuries CE went through Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent.²⁵⁸ After the disintegration of the Kushan Empire, the Indian political center shifted from the north to the Middle Ganges plain.²⁵⁹ As Buddhism in Gupta India gave way to Brahmanism, Buddhism in China consequently increased.²⁶⁰ Daoist and Confucian rivals responded by making the argument that Buddhism was a foreign religion and had no traditional roots in China, and thus was not compatible with the Chinese people.²⁶¹ However, dialogue between Xuanzang and his Indian hosts at the Nalanda monastery addresses these concerns: Xuanzang argued that the

²⁵⁴ Litvinsky, 442.

²⁵⁵ Liu, 139.

²⁵⁶ Sen, 3.

²⁵⁷ Liu, 13.

²⁵⁸ Liu, 19.

²⁵⁹ Liu, 21.

²⁶⁰ Liu, 128.

²⁶¹ Sen, 9.

“Buddha established his doctrine so that it might be diffused to all lands.”²⁶² This was a crucial point in China’s adoption of Buddhism.²⁶³

From the fourth and fifth century, the Dunhuang caves represented the early stages of Chinese Buddhist art, bearing the legacy of Gandharan stylistic influences.²⁶⁴ Dunhuang was originally founded as military base in 111 BCE, when the unifying Han dynasty expanded from its base in Yellow River Valley. The garrison defended China against the neighboring Xiongnu, nomads from the central Asian steppes, whose incursions from the north led to the construction of the Great Wall.²⁶⁵ Dunhuang literally translates to “blazing beacon,” referring to the town’s role as a frontier outpost of the Han Empire. Dunhuang became a bustling desert crossroads due to its proximity to the most difficult stages across the Silk Road into the Tarim Basin – many travelers stopped at this oasis town to rest and also pray for safe passage.²⁶⁶ Dunhuang quickly prospered due to access to the Qilian water range and protection by the armies of Han China.²⁶⁷ The large and fertile desert crossroads would seemingly absorb many cultural influences as a center of commerce on the Silk Road.²⁶⁸ In the middle of the fifth century, Turkic nomads, the Toba, displaced the warlords ruling small, rival kingdoms in northern China. The Toba unified

²⁶² Sen, 11.

²⁶³ Tansen Sen argued that one of the earliest Buddhist images in China, dating from the late second century CE, was engraved on Mount Kongwang, where it is interspersed with local, often Daoist, motifs that indicate early amalgamation of Buddhist doctrine with indigenous ideas. Later sculptures in Mt. Kongwang also include some Daoist images, as the site was originally an important Daoist region, and the Buddha was initially worshipped together with Daoist deities. Thus, to the indigenous Chinese devotees in the earliest stage of Buddhism in China, the Buddha appeared as a god. Liu Xinru argued (p.141) that Chinese artists often did not have access to Indian models, and instead based on their works on the translations of Chinese Buddhist texts. As such, the carvings represent an ideological transmission rather than an influence of style. However, it is likely this depiction of the Buddha was transmitted from central India through the maritime route linking India with the eastern coast of China. As I am following the dissemination of the Buddha image across the land route of the northern Silk Route, it would not be wholly relevant to my research.

²⁶⁴ Liu, 144.

²⁶⁵ Whitfield, 11.

²⁶⁶ Whitfield, 5.

²⁶⁷ Whitfield, 14.

²⁶⁸ Whitfield, 10.

northern China, founded the Northern Wei dynasty, and exerted direct control over the oases along the Silk Road.²⁶⁹ Northern Wei emperors, despite their origins as a “barbarian” peoples, adopted the traditional Chinese culture and were instrumental in facilitating its development that had become stagnant under the warlords. The Northern Wei also established Buddhism as a primary religion, as powerful families and the educated followed the imperial court and converted to Buddhism.²⁷⁰

Within Dunhuang, there were three sites of Buddhist shrines: the Western Qianfodong (Western Thousand Buddhas Caves), the Yunlin Caves, and the Mogao Caves. The tall cliffs were strategically chosen to suitably cut into meditation niches and temples. The first caves at Mogao were dug in the late fourth century by wandering monks, and the last were carved out in the mid-fourteenth century under Yuan dynasty of Mongols.²⁷¹ The construction of these Buddhist caves and shrines was highly expensive. With the lure of gaining merit and safe travel in trading, local merchants sponsored the building in groups, as one of the few who had the means to do so in the region.²⁷² The Mogao caves later emerged as a center for Buddhist culture, where many visitors, pilgrims and merchants alike, prayed and meditated to seek rebirth into the Pure Lands.²⁷³ In the tradition of Mahayana Buddhists, making images of the Buddha or copying the sutras were central acts of religious devotion, and a way to seek to escape from the cycle of rebirth.²⁷⁴ This was a convenient shortcut from learning centuries of translations, interpretations, and preachings to genuinely understand Buddhist philosophy.²⁷⁵

²⁶⁹ Whitfield, 19.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ Whitfield, 5.

²⁷² Whitfield, 20.

²⁷³ Whitfield, 22.

²⁷⁴ Whitfield, 51.

²⁷⁵ Liu, 143.

The movement of cave and statue construction in China gained momentum in the third and fourth centuries, its peak during the Northern Wei. Many donors sponsored cave 285 in Mogao, but its principal donor was the prince of the Northern Wei dynasty.²⁷⁶ The elaborate decoration suggests aristocratic patronage, and the scenes exhibit a “world of opulence and peril.” The Mogao caves were more than a religious and artistic mecca for Chinese Buddhism – it transformed from a simple retreat center for solitary hermits to a “richly adorned showcase of Chinese imperial power.”²⁷⁷ Another interesting feature in cave 285 is the depiction of Hindu gods and mythical deities of China serving the central Buddhist deities, which is a clear nod to the original syncretic nature of Buddhist images and iconography. Cave 275 furthers this sentiment, as the Maitreya Buddha figure is depicted wearing the traditional clothing of a Kushan king, though the Tushita Heaven in which Maitreya resides, is typical of Han architecture with a fortified city, brick watchtowers, and tiled roof.²⁷⁸ The Maitreya’s seated position is a loose adaptation, with the legs diagonally crossed at the ankle. This is often seen in Central Asian statues and in China under the Wei dynasty (fifth to sixth century CE), but never in India.²⁷⁹ It can be argued that this would suggest the Maitreya has origins as an Indian or Central Asian deity, but China would become the primary host of Buddhism.

Cave 295 effectively represents this neo-syncretic nature of the Buddha image in Mogao (figure 17). As the previous syncretic development of the Buddha image merged the Hellenic, Central Asian, and Indic styles, the image in Dunhuang displayed a blend of Hellenic and Sinitic styles. As before, the top-knot from the Gandhari images remains consistent and very prominent

²⁷⁶ Whitfield, 60.

²⁷⁷ Whitfield, 69.

²⁷⁸ Whitfield, 55.

²⁷⁹ Hallade, 189.

in the Mogao sculpture. In addition, the drapery of the monastic robes retains a distinct Gandhari style, mirroring the thick and protruding neckline of the robe, which in turn reflected the neckline seen in Apollo Belvedere (figure 9).

On the other hand, there are also clear deviations from the Gandhari foundation, particularly in the overall thinning of the robes and the facial features of the Buddha. The lines outlining the folds in the robes seem to become less distinct as the image moved east through Afghanistan and Chinese Turkestan. The sculpture in Mogao does not imply the same weight that the Gandhari sculptures implicitly carried. In addition, the facial features of the Buddhas in Mogao hold clear Sinitic characteristics, to mirror the dominant Sinitic population present in Dunhuang, compared to the minority population in Kizil and Bezeklik. The Mogao caves in Dunhuang paved the path for the development of a further Siniticized style in Buddhist art, seen in the caves of Yungang and Longmen.

XI. Yungang Grottoes

The two principal Buddhist cave temples associated with the rule of the Northern Wei dynasty were the Yungang Grottoes at Datong (first Northern Wei capital from 386 to 494) and the Longmen Grottoes near Luoyang (second Northern Wei capital from 495 to 534).²⁸⁰ For a century, the Northern Wei dynasty “unified northern China in 439 and created one of the strongest nomadic empires” in China.²⁸¹ The dynasty deepened the exchange between indigenous Chinese cultures and Buddhist cultures. The Northern Wei implemented Chinese-style administration and bureaucracy, and their imperial sponsorship of Buddhism allowed the religion to rapidly spread into the countryside.²⁸² The royal family and its ministers ordered the excavation of major caves and commissioned carvings of numerous Buddha statues in Yungang and Longmen, in addition to constructing major stupas and statues in capital cities.²⁸³

The rulers of nomadic tribal origins used Buddhism to ensure their claim to power, with the five colossal statues of the Buddha, carved in Yungang in the 450s, which were meant to represent the five founding emperors of the Northern Wei as incarnations of the Buddha (figure 18).²⁸⁴ This benefitted Buddhists, as sculptures survived religious persecution and Buddhism expanded across the jurisdiction of the rulers. It also benefitted emperors, as the recognition as an incarnation of the Buddha gave sanctity to their regimes. By equating the rulers with Buddhas on such a large scale, the sculptures suggested the divinity of the five rulers.²⁸⁵

Emperor Wu, as one of the most devout Buddhist rulers of China, rebuilt the Ashoka stupa in the early sixth century CE. He strategically used Buddhist rituals and paraphernalia to

²⁸⁰ Dorothy C. Wong, “The Origins of Buddhist Steles Under the Northern Wei,” in *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2004), 43.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Liu, 163.

²⁸⁴ Liu, 151.

²⁸⁵ Wong, 51.

secure the support of the monastic community and the lay Buddhists in asserting imperial authority over a fragmented and chaotic China.²⁸⁶ Wu Zetian similarly secured crucial support from Buddhist monasteries to legitimize her authority, as she became de facto ruler of the dynasty after her husband, Emperor Gaozong, died in 683. She eventually usurped the Tang throne and declared the founding of the Zhou dynasty.²⁸⁷ While Confucianism provided no scope for women to hold the position of emperor and Daoism's founder was supposed to be the ancestor of the ruling Li family of the Tang dynasty. Buddhism had no vested interests in maintaining the Tang dynasty. As a result, Buddhism was declared the state religion of China and Empress Wu Zetian added the name Maitreya to her royal titles.²⁸⁸

There was a well-founded desire of the Chinese to mold the Buddhist doctrine according to its own cultural requirements.²⁸⁹ Buddhism was frequently presented as a part of Chinese culture to ensure its survival in a socio-political setting that was undergoing dramatic changes.²⁹⁰ In many sculptures, the Buddha is represented as the manifestation of a Chinese native, bearing numerous physical features similar to the native population. In the Yungang caves, dating from 480-94 CE, an image type is shown on sandstone reliefs of the life of the Buddha (figure 19).²⁹¹ The image is of a man-child in a rigid, frontal pose with long arms held stiffly at the sides. He is nude save for a tight-fitting loincloth and his hands are shown in two positions: palms held facing out and palms against the thighs. The figure is backed by a mandorla (full body halo with a pointed top).²⁹² The representation suggests the image is the new-born Buddha, but his stiff immobility put this in sharp contrast with the relatively natural figures of others in the narrative.

²⁸⁶ Sen, 61.

²⁸⁷ Sen, 95.

²⁸⁸ Sen, 96.

²⁸⁹ Sen, 139.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ Sherman E. Lee, "The Golden Image of the Buddha," *Artibus Asiae* 18, no. 3 (1955): 225.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

A gilt bronze version of the new-born Buddha (figure 19) is similar to the type seen in Yungang, and reinforces the new-born's conception as an icon, a recurring concept from Asvaghosha's *Life of the Buddha*.²⁹³ Descriptions such as "rays of his glory" "gold-like" "upright and firm" "calm and collected" "brightness" smoothly coincide with this gilt bronze image.²⁹⁴

Like the standard Gandhari iconography, the Buddha's hair is styled in an ushnisha, composed of tightly curling strands, with an inlaid urna on the forehead. There was once a halo or mandorla (projecting tang at the back of the head) but seems to have been broken off. The arrangement of the Buddha's monastic robes in the Yungang style also stemmed from the Gandhari sculptures of the Buddha.²⁹⁵ However, the flattened folds on the diagonal hemline across the chest and bead patterns indicated the association of Sassanian metallurgy through Central Asian styles — there is a similarity with the Kizil Caves in the treatment of drapery. On the other hand, the appearance of figure is unrealistic with an effect of majesty and awareness, which is not so synonymous with the Hellenistic type.²⁹⁶ The gilt bronze sculpture is a hybrid of many cultural influences, recalling the Gandharan prototypes. The presence of foreign (not Chinese) style and iconography of the early Northern Wei sculpture was often due to issues of assimilating textual and visual imports.²⁹⁷ There were numerous Gandhari sculptures of the third and fourth centuries in schist, providing the prototype for the Chinese sculptures at Yungang.²⁹⁸ The dominance of the *Lotus Sutra* in Buddhist iconography could account for the fact that nearly every image of the new-born Buddha is a part of the Bath scene, emphasizing the baptismal

²⁹³ Lee, 226.

²⁹⁴ Lee, 227.

²⁹⁵ Wong, 48.

²⁹⁶ Lee, 228.

²⁹⁷ Lee, 230.

²⁹⁸ Lee, 229.

ritual as a sense of initiation paired with annual celebrations of the Buddha's birth.²⁹⁹ The incised and inlaid parts of the Buddha's body and base recall some pre-Buddhist Chinese techniques from Luo Lang (Han) and possibly Qincun (Chou).³⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the immobility, foreign to the linear movements of Chinese norm, is an archaic expression, but the monumentality and somber awareness in such a small size conveys a purely aesthetic experience.³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ Lee, 232.

³⁰⁰ Lee, 236.

³⁰¹ Lee, 237.

XII. Longmen Caves

From the Later Han period, nomadic tribes from the north and west began to migrate south into mainland China, which contributed to the disintegration of the Han Empire as nomadic invasions caused significant political and social upheaval in the region.³⁰² The Tuoba clan of the Xianbei people, originating from northern Manchuria and Mongolia, founded the Northern Wei dynasty.³⁰³ Dorothy C. Wong argued that “the Northern Wei’s success can be attributed to a skillful synthesis of three cultural heritages: the nomadic military tradition, Chinese administrative experience, and Buddhist ideology.”³⁰⁴ Local Chinese administrators continued to directly govern the territory with their places in positions of authority discouraging revolts, but the foreign nomadic rulers maintained their tribal heritage and social stratification.³⁰⁵

The Northern Wei adopted and sponsored Buddhism to share a religion with the peoples they had conquered to establish “an ideological tie to the indigenous people,” much like the Kushans’ usage of Buddhism in northern India.³⁰⁶ In both India and China, Buddhism was innovative and universal, where dominant traditional religious systems were restricting and delineating. In India, Buddhism was an inherently inclusive religion unlike orthodox Brahmanism, which did not accept foreign invaders (or would have placed them in a low caste level).³⁰⁷ The Buddhist concept of divine kingship facilitated the growth of state cults under the Northern Wei, as emperors often recruited foreign Buddhist monks as their advisors and became generous patrons of Buddhist art. Many capital cities of nomadic kingdoms transformed into

³⁰² Wong, 44.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Wong, 45.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ Wong, 46.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

centers for the translation and study of Buddhist texts.³⁰⁸ The secular authority of the Northern Wei rulers came to be identified with the spiritual authority of the Buddha, in an effort to establish a theocracy as a means to gain absolute authority.³⁰⁹

To accompany the royal patronage, lay Buddhist populations organized themselves into groups, called *yi*, and affiliated themselves with local temples — the *yi* raised many steles commemorating their collective religious, social, and regional identity.³¹⁰ These *yi* associations have no parallel in India, so it is assumed to be a unique development in China. The *yi* greatly contributed to the Yungang and Longmen Grottoes, in addition to the sponsorship of the imperial court.³¹¹ This suggested a significant broadening of Buddhist patronage across social and ethnic lines — images of the *yi*'s clothing in Longmen indicated nobles of nomadic origins, depicted by their tall headdresses and tunics.³¹²

In many ways, the Longmen Grottoes can be seen as a continuation of the Yungang Grottoes, given their mutual sponsorship under the Northern Wei dynasty. Longmen displays a further Siniticization of the Buddha, building from the increasing Sinitic style of the Yungang Buddhas, and disconnecting from the style of Gandhari art (figure 20). The Yungang Buddha is robust and implies heaviness in the sculpture, with a coarse surface due to the sandstone medium.³¹³ The Longmen Buddha, however, is slim and proportionally elongated, with an elegant refinement in its features due to the use of polished limestone.³¹⁴ The Yungang Buddhas

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁹ Wong, 47.

³¹⁰ Wong, 43.

³¹¹ Wong, 51.

³¹² Wong, 52.

³¹³ Wong, 59.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

are also executed in high relief, while the Longmen Buddhas are much flatter, indicating a growing preference of Sinitic stylistic techniques.³¹⁵

Nevertheless, there remains a clear connection to the early Gandhari anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. The most prominent link is the top-knot that remained at the top of the Buddha's head. This feature is, without a doubt, the strongest link that connects all the Buddha images from the first century Gandhari style to the fifth century Sinitic style. Also, ridged lines emphasize the drapery of the monastic robes, which remain relatively consistent from its Gandhari origins, as it is still wrapped around both shoulders and gives indication to a form beneath the robes. This illustrates that even with the drastic gaps in time and space (as well as culture) that separate the Gandhari Buddha from the Longmen Buddha, there are links that imply a clear line in the evolution of the image. However, the sheer disparity between the two styles cannot be overemphasized – even with a timeframe of roughly five hundred years, it is remarkable how far the image was adapted to conform to the styles of various local cultures.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

According to early Buddhism, the Buddha could not have been represented as a human-like figure, as he was not a localized deity or power, but a universal and transcendental figure. Once the Buddha became anthropomorphically rendered, the figure immediately lent itself to various cultures that had adopted the image. That being said, since the very inception of Buddhism, there has always been a “powerful impulse to worship the deity and to translate that worship through visible signs and tangible symbols.”³¹⁶ The image that did develop in the first century CE took on a very syncretic, Hellenistic style. However, within a century of its emergence, the Buddha image began to adapt to the different cultural environments that Buddhism came into contact with, as the religion spread eastwards towards mainland China. There is a significant question as to why the Buddha image came to be so varied over time, while other religious art remained relatively universal.

Buddhism originally began as a strong reaction against the rigid social structure in India under the Brahmanical caste system, and its advocacy for equality resonated particularly among the lower castes. Early texts upheld this view by emphasizing the Buddha’s own mortality, suggesting that his deification would once again invoke a spiritual hierarchy as Brahmanism did before. However, the growing wealth and status of Buddhist monasteries under the royal patronage of the Kushans contributed to their integration into the economy from the trade networks established by the empire. Monastic dependence on donations from lay devotees led these institutions to appeal to the foreign populations brought together under the Kushans, who had previously adhered to Zoroastrian or Greco-Roman traditions involving gods and deities. As a result, a cross-cultural image emerged that was made possible by the emergence of doctrines

³¹⁶ Srivastava, 1.

that suggested the Buddha's divinity, as these texts were already so far removed from the original concept of the Buddha in the early texts. The simultaneous development of the Buddha image and Mahayana Buddhism indicated a shift towards the emphasis of the Buddha himself, rather than the established doctrines outlined in early Buddhist texts.³¹⁷

Two iconographical features remained consistent in the Gandhari Buddha image as it traveled east—the ushnisha and the drapery of the traditional monastic robes. However, the cosmopolitan culture of the Kushans and their ethnically heterogeneous population, allowed for subsequent cultures to interpret and claim the Buddha's facial features to reflect their own peoples. Moving into Chinese Turkestan, the Buddha image became more Sinicized as it permeated regions with centralized state structures and a higher regard for Han Chinese culture. Though the ushnisha remained consistent even to images from Longmen in the fifth century, the drapery in the robes resembled more Sinitic styles, with flatter folds and a looser fit that mirrored traditional Chinese costumes. The image was further Sinicized under the patronage of the Northern Wei rulers of mainland China, operating much like the Kushans in northern India. Buddha images were even commissioned to take on the face of a specific emperor, in an explicit effort by the foreign minority to project theocratic authority over a native majority.

The institution of ruler cults in the Gandhari region can be attributed to Alexander the Great's conquests, as he was often worshipped as a god throughout the Hellenistic states since his installation as pharaoh in Egypt. Indeed, the very essence of Hellenism advocated cultural syncretism, initiated by a foreign minority. It is logical, therefore, to assume that the innovation and promulgation of the Buddha image was a product of Hellenic governance.

³¹⁷ Fogelin, 301.

However, the historiographical issues surrounding the syncretized Buddha image are highly problematic. The early foundational scholarship regarding the Buddha image was highly embedded in the context of Western imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and significantly shaped subsequent research. There is an inherent implication of superiority associated with the word “influence,” in that those who are doing the influencing are often the more advanced culture, as opposed to the influenced.

The Buddha image has often been portrayed as an advanced foreign imposition onto a less advanced native culture. Since the original Buddhist artistic tradition did not create anthropomorphic images, it is traditionally understood to be more “primitive” than the Hellenistic artistic tradition, which emphasized the anthropomorphic image above all else. As the image moves eastwards, the implication still persists, with the suggestion that the indigenous culture adopting the image was “influenced” by the image’s Hellenistic roots. On the other hand, the Buddha image is not simply a product of Hellenic influence – after all, Buddhism itself was an Indian export. In addition to an Indic influence, a progressive Sinitic influence appears as the image moved further east into China, a tradition largely independent of any Hellenistic influence.

It is also important to question for whom the image of the Buddha was made. In the mission to Hellenize, or “civilize” Asia, the cross-cultural image was an effective means to placate a native population under a foreign minority rule. On the other hand, the Buddha image was arguably born out of a desire to cater to these foreign populations. In this case, it would be the foreigners, not the natives, who needed the cross-cultural image to understand Buddhism, and the balance of “superiority” would tip in favor of the native Buddhists.

Ultimately, we cannot view each Buddha image as culturally independent from another. The variety of contemporary Buddha images in Asia had previously existed in a larger exchange

that transcended culture, and initiated a cross-fertilization of artistic styles and iconography between the major Asian centers of art and culture along the Silk Road, from the first century to the fifth century CE.

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