

Egypt and the Great Silk Road

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Abstract

The wide popularity of Egyptian faience amulets among populations of different ethno-cultural background, belonging especially to the Helleno-Roman Period, presents a researcher with a considerable number of problems: the place of their production in Egypt itself and possible local copies; the semantics of images on these amulets outside Egypt; & c. These numerous objects make it possible to determine to a certain extent the character of continental trade and to reconstruct the meaning of the figurine for the Egyptian amulets outside Egypt. There is a notion that they were a kind of small change in the international trade. But in any case, by obtaining them the representatives of other cultures besides their aesthetic attraction appreciated their protective abilities. At present there is a vivid interest in the Great Silk Road. This conception adds the importance, which is practically identical to the system of roads that linked the Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions with India and China. As to India, it was in the sphere of sea-trade and its character differed from continental trade. Via Penjab and accordingly inner regions of Central Asia, Baktria was linked with Indian ports, through which a sea-trade with Egypt was taking place. The tracks of this trade are easily discernible due to finds of art works of the Alexandrian School of art style. A collection of such things was kept in the palace of the ruler of Capisa (the present Begram near Kabul in Afghanistan) of the Kushan Empire, which was situated in Central Asia from the 2nd-1st century BCE to the 2nd-3rd century CE. In the sealed treasury these valuable objects —received as gifts or confiscated by the Customs— were placed together with Chinese carved ivory and lacquers. There were glass vessels of the famous Alexandrian glass-blowers and plaster medallions, bronze figurines, the representations of Harpocratēs and Hēraklēs-Serapis being among them. The works of art of the Roman Empire were not only gods, but also samples of many local articles as well as —especially— their image-bearing series. Kushan kings used the iconography of divinities of the Helleno-Roman pantheon representing personages of the local Indo-Iranian pantheon. In the representations of their divinities on reliefs of stupa and palaces, Helleno-Roman and Egyptian iconography of gods was borrowed by the Kushans much more extensively.

KEY WORDS: Great Silk Road, Ancient Trade, Late Antiquity, Asia, India, China, Kushan Kings, Egypt, Faience Artifacts.

I. Introduction

*There opened an abyss full of stars;
The stars are countless, the abyss has no bottom.*

M.V. LOMONOSOV.

These lines are metaphorical to the phenomenal spread of Egyptian faience amulets added to the system of religious notions and beliefs of the ancient inhabited world during the Helleno-Roman Period¹. The number of Egyptian amulets in many museums worldwide is countless. They are kept as a result of archaeological excavations or stray finds from England to China and from Siberia to South Africa.

With the exception of individual finds in the extremely outlying districts these objects were articles of an international

trade along the brisk routes at the turn of the 1st Millennium BCE-1st Millennium CE forming a system of continental roads. The *Great Silk Road* was the main artery of this trade, and Egypt was linked with it by two roads via the Sinai peninsula.

This wide popularity of faience amulets among populations of different ethno-cultural background, belonging especially to the later historic periods, puts a number of problems before a researcher: the place of their production in Egypt itself and the possible local copies; the semantics of images on these amulets outside Egypt, & c. This article deals with Egyptian faience amulets in terms of revealing the 'darkest' sections of the Great Silk Road, which is a question of dispute in written sources. At the same time these numerous objects make it possible to determine to a certain extent the character of continental trade, and help answering the above-mentioned important questions.

II. The Great Silk Road as an Ancient Trade Route

The production of faience objects, which was taking place for a fantastically long time —from the middle of the 4th Millennium BCE to the 4th centuries of the 1st Millennium CE— was intended for all social strata. These objects combined both aesthetical aspect and content. Quite attractive and bright in outward appearance, imitating articles made of precious and semi-precious stones they represented Egyptian gods, people of great social status and numerous religious symbols. Of course, a set of figured amulets changed in one or another period of time. In the dynastic epoch from the Old and New Kingdom, Egyptian religious symbols prevailed while in the Helleno-Roman Period many of them disappeared and were substituted for those which were typical of other cultures, for example: figs, amphorae, bunches of grapes, phallic symbols, and such. However the proper Egyptian representations were preserved. They were images of Isis, Osiris, Horus, Thoth, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris and other gods, as well as sacred animals that were considered as incarnating different gods²: bulls, cows, scarabs, frogs, turtles, & c.

Apart from small faience objects larger objects were also produced (vessels, figurines, and even statues, shabtis, & c.). At the same time faience figurines imitated other materials, like: gold, different precious stones, crystal, chalcedony, lapis-lazuli, turquoise, & c. As a rule, amulets were worn as necklaces containing different figures, their beads being made not only of faience.

Not only the Egyptians, but inhabitants of remote countries alike —who exchanged these objects for other goods— were using such necklaces. It is possible that Egyptian faience was used as a kind of small change in the international trade. But in any case, obtaining them, the representatives of other

¹ Raschke, M.G.: 'New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Temporini, H., ed.), II, 1978, 9.2.B.

² Sherkova, T.A.: *Egipet i Kushanskoe tzarstvo (topgovie i kulturnie kontakti)*, Moscow 1991, 62 ff; 92ff; 123ff; 136 ff.

cultures, besides their esthetic attraction, they also appreciated their protective magical properties.

The closer to Egypt their adherents lived, it is more likely that the primordial (archetypal) Egyptian implication of symbolism was put into these representations. The farther these objects were taken away along caravan-routes, there are less grounds to believe that their archetypal Egyptian symbolism could be preserved. However, this scheme is not always adequate, a fact which can be explained by the character of contacts between Egypt and various other countries.



FIGURES 1-2. Terracotta statuettes of Serapis and Harpocratēs.
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During the Helleno-Roman Period many representatives of the ancient world not only visited the remote territories of the East, but settled their occupations with trade or handicrafts. In such trading stations they continued their own distinctive way of life, including the devotion to their gods and beliefs in the magical force of amulets. Thus, the local population could learn—and learnt—their meaning, specific destination, symbolism, as well as the meaning of the represented personages on them (divinities, and such).

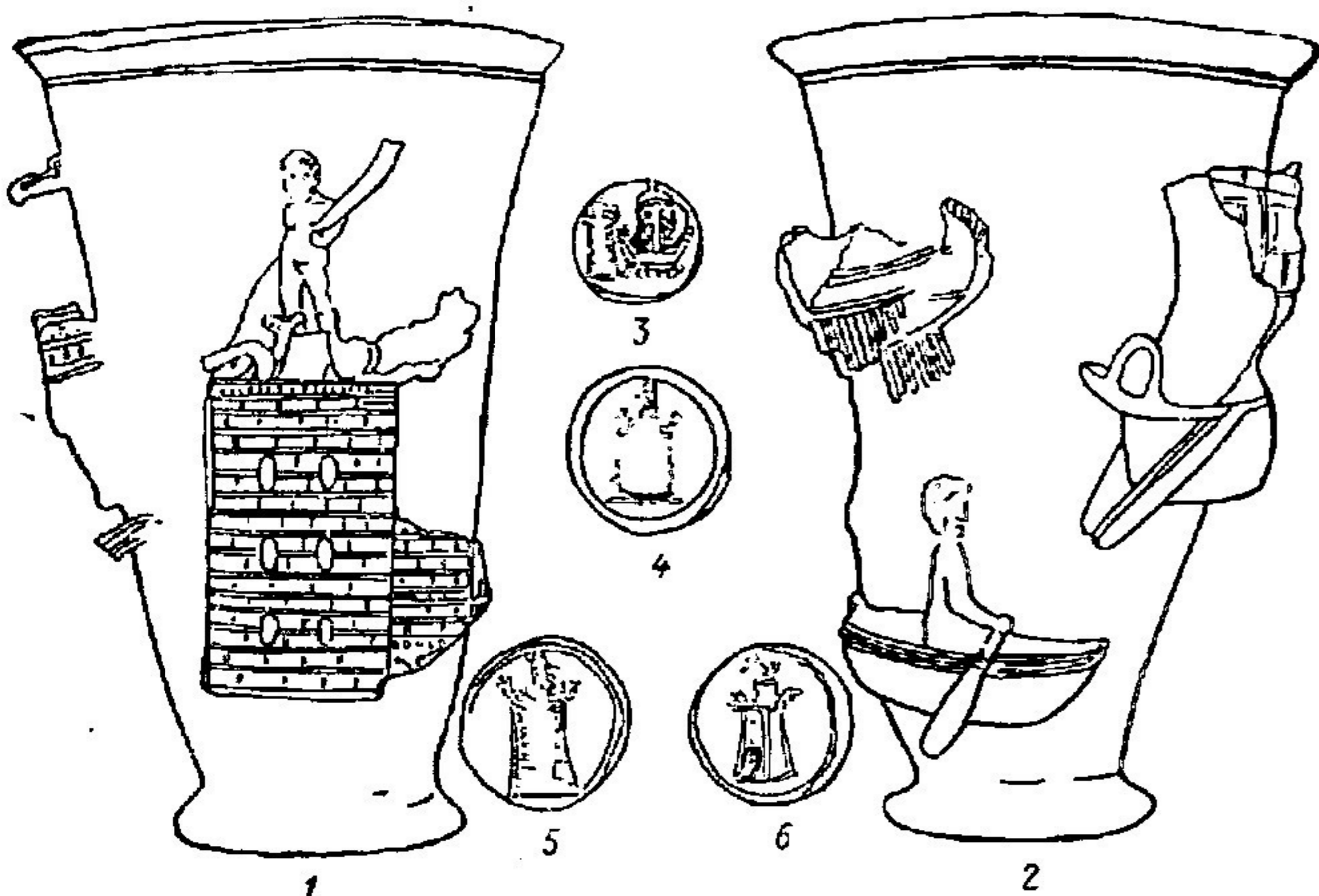


FIGURE 3. Typical examples of glass vessels, from the famous Alexandrian glass-blowers.
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Sometimes the symbolic representations on amulets coincided with the images of local gods and symbols, and in this case the imported amulets became an integral part of the local culture. Such articles were copies and sometimes changed out of all recognition. All these transformations cover a wider

layer of figurative materials, which assuredly evidence several developed trade contacts of ancient Egypt with some countries of the East (in Asia).

At present there is a great interest in the Great Silk Road. This conception adds the importance, which is practically identical to the system of roads that linked the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions with India and China. In the initial, narrower sense this road formed on the basis of the Lazuli Road or Royal Road from Asia Minor and coastal sites of Syria to Central Asia. Egypt was connected with this transcontinental route by two roads: along the eastern Mediterranean coast [Strabōn: XVI, 1, 31, Plinius: V, 68]; or directly via Sinai towards Petra situated on the 'road of incense' [Strabōn: XVI, 4, 2; XVII, 1, 30] and linked with Babylon in Mesopotamia, with Rynokolura and Gaza on the Mediterranean coast [Strabōn: XVI, 4, 24], with Ela in the gulf of Aqaba [Strabōn: XVI, 1, 30], as well as with Near Eastern cities Jerusalem, Jericho and Palmyra.

From the coastal Syrian cities caravans moved further to the Euphrates, to crossings on the border of Parthia. In the 1st-2nd Millennium CE the crossing took place near the site of Bambika, and then the road passed through deserted areas as far as Skena and further to Seleukia and Ktēsiphōn [Strabōn: XVI, 1, 16; Plinius: VI, 122].

The contacts between Egypt and Mesopotamia were traditional and Egyptian articles were numerous especially during the Roman Era. Thus, Egyptian faience and local imitations from different materials occurred in a number of the sites: in the 2nd century BCE in Palmyra, in Parthia and late Parthia; archaeological layers of Dura-Eurōpos, Seleukia and Babylon. There are also similar contacts known on the territory of Iran, and in the coastal part of the Caspian Sea.

From Mesopotamia the road led towards the summer residences of Parthian kings, to Ragi via Kersmanshah and then via Apameia and Hecatompylos to the Caspian gates in Hyrcania [Strabōn: IX, 9, 1; Plinius: VI, 42-43]. According to the Helleno-Roman authors and Chinese dynastic chronicles, the road led to Alexandria (the present Herat), the capital of the country of Aryans. However it is not clear whether it passed through cities of Khorasan or northward, along the hills of Kopet Dagh (where the historic province of Margiana with Nissa as the capital) was situated.

In written sources this road is mentioned not earlier than the 9th century CE, while archaeological finds evidence its earlier use. Egyptian small objects belonging to different epochs are among them. As far back as in the Achaemenid Period an alabaster vessel with the inscribed name of the King Artaxerxēs was brought to Nisa.

In Uzboy (the region of the Eastern seashore of the Caspian Sea), in a burial of the first centuries CE there were found Egyptian faience amulets, including a figurine of the god Bes. It should be said that in the Middle Ages the main Amu Darya riverbed was curved towards the Caspian Sea and passed by through the present deserted Usboy; according to Strabōn, the Amu Darya was the river of various trade contacts with India.

The Chinese also knew that tradesmen and merchants lived in the Amu Darya region, and they went into land and sea trade not only with neighboring countries, but with more remote

ones as well³. It can be supposed logically that Egyptian objects—including faience amulets—spread by this way to the cities of Khorezm, and actually the layers of the 1st century CE contain a lot of them.

But the cities of Khorezm were not the ultimate destinations of the trade going farther to the East; it was one of the branches of the Great Silk Road. The road passed to China and India via Margiana or Khorasan, and the branching took place in Bactria. It was the main part of the whole transcontinental route, the cross roads in its way on the roads leading to different directions.

The centre of these crossroads was the city of Bactria (present Balkh). The capital was located in the steppe part of the Amu Darya left bank, and from the West the road passed there through Alexandria of the Aryans. This can be confirmed by Chinese dynastic chronicles containing the description of dozens of Parthian cities.



FIGURE 4. Bronze figurine of Harpocratēs.
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From Bactria the roads branched off: one road led to India (through this, it was possible to get to this country from Arya via Drangiana); the other road led to China. The most disputable question regarding the whole picture of the Great Silk Road is how the road passed from Bactria to China. This is described by Roman and Chinese written sources. However the toponyms mentioned there do not correspond to a geographical map if we speak only about one road.

It is most likely that in the narration of the sources the displacement of information about several roads took place, at least about three roads passing from Bactria via China: through Fergana, Karategin and the Alay valley or the southern region⁴. The area of East Turkestan (Western China) to the Southern Tjan Shan region was the point where (according to the Chinese sources) the northern road was passing.

The road of the Pamyra region led to the southern road in East Turkestan, along the spurs of Kunlun. Both the Eastern Turkestan roads met in the East in Loulan, and in Yrkend in the West.

³ Velgus, V.A.: *Izvestia o stranah i narodah Afriki i mopskie svasi v basseinah Tihogo i Indijskogo okeanov*, Moscow (*Kitajskie istochniki panee*, XI v) 1978, 157.

⁴ Piankov, I.: *Shelkovij put ot Gierapokja v Seriku: aziatski utshastok*, Dushanbe (*Pamirovedenie*, II) 1985.

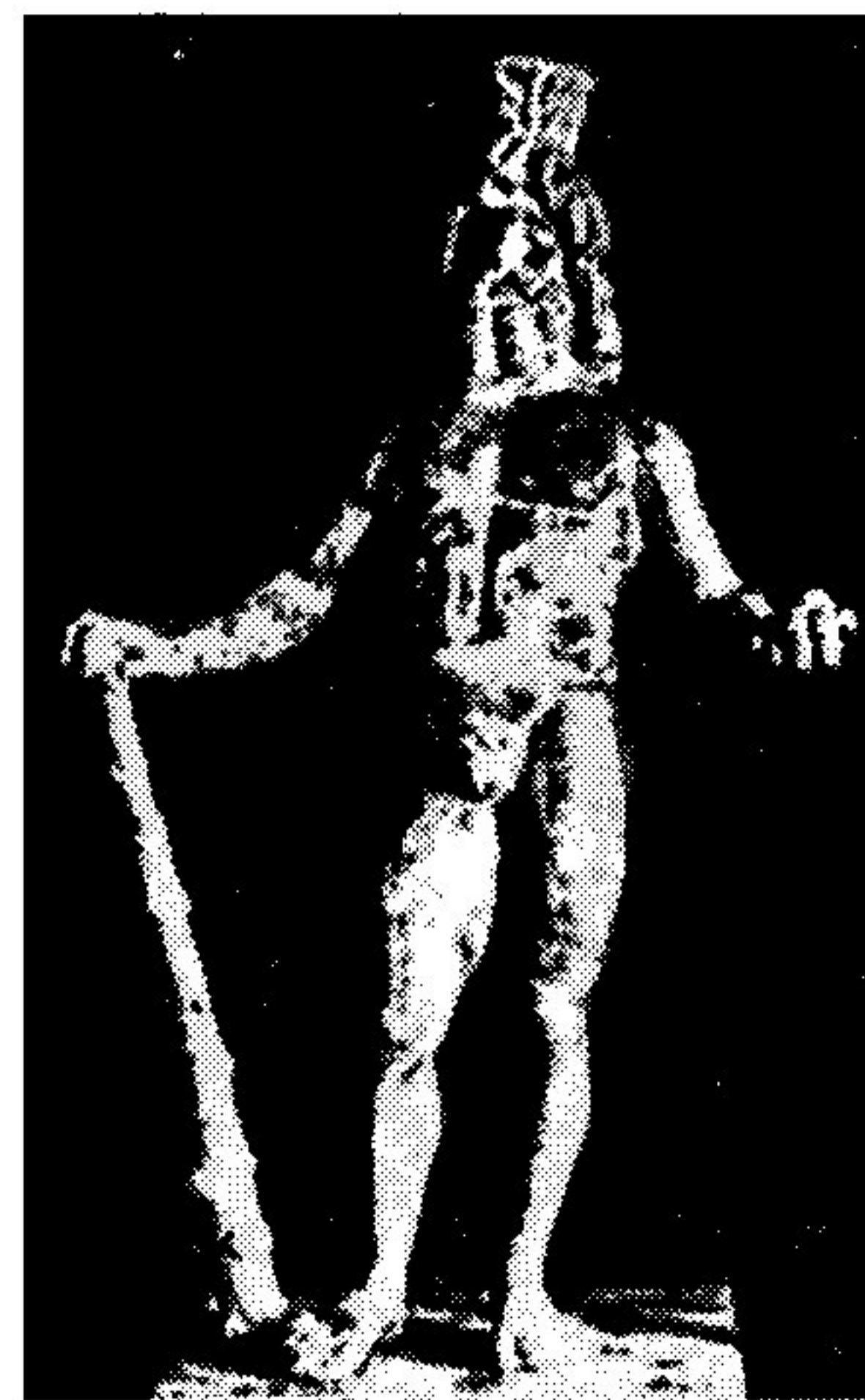


FIGURE 5. Bronze figurine of Hēraklēs–Serapis.
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It should be pointed out that Egyptian articles were found in the East Turkestan both in the sites along the northern road and the southern one. The articles include not only faience amulets and beads, but also terracotta figurines of Egyptian gods: Serapis [Fig. 1] and Harpocratēs [Fig. 2]⁵. They could be brought by different of the above-mentioned roads passing through Central Asia.

The Egyptian objects of minor plastic arts number many dozens and even prevail over a hundred. However, if we draw the places of finds on a geographical map it seems probable that the main road through Central Asia to China passed through the Fergana region. We should remember that the Egyptian faience objects (as mass finds) were most typical of the Central Asian country between two rivers and covered the region from the middle current of the Amu Darya to Samarkand and Ferghana at least in the 1st century BCE



FIGURE 6. Another figurine of Harpocratēs.
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That was the picture of the spread of small Egyptian faience objects along the Great Silk Road to China; they were known along its whole length. The situation to the south of Hindu Kush, on the way to India, was different. Only in Taxila, the capital city in a large bend of Indus, where the local Porus ruled when Alexander the Great conquered India, there were revealed a few Egyptian faience figurines. Egyptian amulets

⁵ Maillard, A.: 'A propos de deux statuettes en terre rapportées par la mission Otani: Serapis and Harpocratēs en Asia Centrale', *Journal Asiatique*, CCLXIII, 1975.

were also found in other royal burials in Tilla Tepa (Afghanistan)⁶. However, these are local copies made of lapis lazuli, gold and turquoise. Further information to the South on the Egyptian faience amulets is lacking.



FIGURE 7. Representations of Kushan gods, that borrowed Helleno-Roman and Egyptian iconography.
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Judging from the above, we can conclude that the merchandise of these objects was a characteristic feature of exclusively continental trade. As to India it was in the sphere of sea-trade and its character differed from continental trade. Via Penjab (and accordingly inner regions of Central Asia) Bactria was linked with Indian ports, through which a sea-trade with Egypt was taking place. The tracks of this trade are easily distinguishable and read due to finds of artifacts of the Alexandrian School of art style.

A collection of such things was kept in the palace of the rulers of Capisa (the present Begram near Kabul in Afghanistan) of the Kushan Empire which flourished extending in most parts of Central Asia from the 1st and 2nd centuries to the 3rd century CE⁷. In the sealed treasury these valuable objects received as gifts or customs were found together with Chinese carved ivory and lacquers⁸. There were glass vessels of famous Alexandrian glass-blowers [Fig. 3] and plaster medallions, bronze figurines, and among them representations of Harpocratēs [Fig. 4] and Hēraklēs–Serapis [Fig. 5]. The representations of Harpocratēs were discovered in a palace complex of Taxila⁹ [Fig. 6]. It was in the streets of the capitals and noisy markets where merchants from different countries gathered and put in motion the international trade.

Chinese written sources tell us about the prospering sea-trade between Egypt and North–Eastern India. The famous Chinese silk was brought to India through Bactria. It was taken across by sea to Egypt and from there to Rome. Undoubtedly the Chinese silk was sold along the continental route. However it

is known from historical sources that there was no direct trade between China and Rome, but through Parthia which gained much profit. Kushanian kings who controlled North India tried to take the leadership by direct sea-trade with Egypt, including Chinese silk.

Finds of Roman gold and silver coins in hidden treasures of India evidence a considerable volume of Indo–Egyptian sea-trade¹⁰. In North India they were preserved in Buddhist stupas, sometime alongside Kushan coins. All these holy architectural objects (stupas) were situated rather densely in a large bend of the Indus river adjoining the road to Bactria, the main province of the Kushan Empire.

The works of art of the Roman Empire were not only gods but samples of many local articles as well, especially their image-bearing series. Kushan kings used iconography of the gods of the Helleno–Roman pantheon representing personages of the local Indo–Iranian pantheon. In the representations of their gods on reliefs of stupas and palaces Helleno–Roman and Egyptian iconography of gods was borrowed by the Kushans in a much broader context¹¹ [Fig. 7].

III. Conclusions

To sum up, the Helleno–Roman and Egyptian art became integral elements of the Kushan art and culture. We have good grounds for saying that helleno–Egyptian Serapis and Harpocratēs were also worshipped in the Kushan Kingdom.

Strictly speaking, opening an active regular sea-trade in the Indian Ocean was the result of the centuries–old searches of the shortest way from the Helleno–Roman world to India and China. A shipping route took less time and made it possible to trade rapidly; and above all, not to be trapped in the political instability on the continent.

The Parthian barrier was a reality, which should be taken into consideration. That is why the interests of the local merchant classes were limited by Mesopotamia, which traditionally had an economic and cultural propensity for the Eastern Mediterranean region, and also for the Helleno–Roman world.

Further to the East, various articles from the eastern Roman provinces and Egypt were exported by trade-agents, who had an unstable and mobile style of life. In this way objects were handed over from hand to hand towards the East.

Thus, one can say that the trade along the Great Silk Road was of interrupted distance nature. The vague character of the road on its eastern section described by Helleno–Roman authors is indicative in this respect.

In this way, passing from hand to hand, numerous Egyptian faience amulets were exported from Egypt, becoming a fact of the culture–adherent and not of the Egyptian culture.

⁶ Saryanidi, V.I.: *Afghanistan: Cokrovitha ipimjannich tzarei*, Moscow 1983.

⁷ Sherkova: *op. cit.*, 30–51.

⁸ Hackin J.: 'Nouvelles Recherches archéologiques à Begram: 1939–1940', *MDAFA*, XI, 1954.

⁹ Marshall, J.: *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations, I–III*, Cambridge 1951.

¹⁰ Sherkova: *op. cit.*, 103 ff

¹¹ Rosenfield, I.M.: *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, Berkeley–LA 1967, 67, tab. III/57, IX/186, 187.