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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bactrian-Greek Occupation of Kashmir: Historical and Archaeological Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the impact of the Bactrian-Greeks on the region of Kashmir c. 200 BCE after Alexander's death and the partition of his empire by Alexander's generals. The Hellenic realm of Seleucus and the formation of Bactria as an important satrapy prepared the way for the dissemination of Greek culture in Kashmir. The study addresses different kinds of evidence, such as archaeological, numismatic, literary and anthropological in order to support the evidence of presence and predominance of Bactrian-Greeks in Kashmir. Greek coins, pottery, terracotta figurines and other such finds at sites like Semthan, and references in texts like the Rājataraṅgiṇī, give ample support to this cultural integration. The rule of important Indo-Greek kings like Euthydemus, Demetrius and Menander is discussed, and their role in the development of the region and the extent of their empires. The study also addresses the impact of these rulers on the local infrastructure including the building of dams and irrigation systems that were well established in Zoroastrian practices and in the legacy of the Achaemenid Empire. It explores the effect of Greek culture on the social and cultural life of Kashmir and the lessons learnt from Ibn Khaldun on the imitation of conquerers by the conquered. The discussion of Greek presence in Kashmir and the location of Indo-Greek capitals near Kashmir are noted as significant factors in cultural exchange; in many cases the Kashmiri place names are of Greek origin or have an Indo-Greek connection. Among the significant features of the Bactrian-Greek influence was the use of the coins with inscriptions on the Indian subcontinent, including Kashmir.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bactrian-Greeks crossed the Hindu Kush and settled in the Peshawar region and Taxila, Punjab around 200 BCE. Before dealing with Kashmir's encounter with these events, it is important to clarify the identity of the Bactrian-Greeks. After Alexander the Great's death his vast kingdom was divided among his mighty generals. Thus a Hellenic kingdom was established in Syria by Seleucus, and extended from the Euphrates to the Oxus and the Indus. The Seleucids followed Alexander's example of establishing satrapies in conquered territories and appointing satraps to rule over these territories on their behalf. The territories were basically military colonies, mostly composed of Greek soldiers and commanders of Alexander's military campaigns. One of these satrapies was situated between the Hindu Kush and the Oxus, and was called Bactria. Like other Greek satrapal states, the Bactrian satraps evolved their own ranks and over time gained independence. This process began in the mid 3rd century BCE. Diodotus, aided by his people, revolted against Antiochus, the Seleucid king, by 250 BCE; and by about 240 BCE, Euthydemus claimed independence. This was a time when Emperor Aśoka died and the power of the Mauryas began to wane in the north-west.[1] The Graeco-Bactrians continued to expand southward, including the Kabul Valley and the Peshawar area and Taxila in Punjab.

Euthydemus' successor, his son Demetrius, reigned in Bactria from 200 BCE to 185 BCE. He is renowned for founding a substantial empire encompassing southern Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Seistan, and up to the Indus, Jhelum, and Kashmir.[2] Demetrius' reign was followed by a succession of Indo-Greek monarchs, including Eucratides, Menander, Antimachus II, Philoxenus, Apollodotus, Nicias, Hippostratus, and Hermaeus (also known as Calliope). These rulers, from 200 BCE to 55 BCE, dominated a significant portion of northwestern India and conducted sporadic expeditions to the Ganga basin and other parts of India. The Greeks who settled in Bactria were part of a cosmopolitan milieu, a blend of Hellenic, West Asian, Central Asian, Indian, and Chinese cultures, for which Bactria had been renowned for centuries.[3]

Evidence on Kashmir Under the Bactrian-Greeks

The assertion that Kashmir was under the dominion of the Bactrian-Greeks, also known as the Indo-Greeks or Indus-Greeks, is corroborated by diverse forms of evidence.[4] This includes archaeological, numismatic, literary, and anthropological data, as well as toponymic indications. Excavations at Semthan during Period III uncovered a stratum approximately 40 cm deep, revealing multiple floor levels. Significant artefacts from this era, unequivocally indicative of Greek settlements in Kashmir, include coins minted by Indo-Greek rulers, distinctive pottery, a clay seal portraying an Indo-Greek deity, a fragment of pottery inscribed in Greek with "Dhamorai" or "Dharmo (rajai)", terracotta figurines dressed in Greek attire, and human heads depicting a serene countenance.[5]

John Siudmak, commenting on the Hellenistic-influenced terracottas from Semthan, notes, "The most extensive class of locally produced sculpture is the series of small terracotta figurines and animals, predominately in Hellenistic style, discovered in excavations and as surface finds at Semthan, near Bijbihara."[6] These discoveries at Semthan and other sites in Kashmir include coins from rulers such as Euthydemus, Demetrius, Eucratides, Menander, Antimachus II, Apollodotus, Hippostratus, Lysias, and Hermaeus. Prior to these excavations, surface findings at Semthan had already yielded coins of Indo-Greek monarchs.[7] While it could be argued that these coins might have arrived in the region through trade, the variety of Greek-influenced artefacts found alongside them suggests a more direct Greek presence in Kashmir.

Literary evidence, albeit scant, is found in the Rājataraṅgiṇī, which briefly mentions an Indo-Greek (mleccha) invasion during the reign of Aśoka's successor, Jaluka.[8] Kalhana depicts Jaluka as having repelled the mlecchas and embarked on conquests reaching the oceans.[9] The historical accuracy of Jaluka's actions, including his supposed expulsion of the Indo-Greeks, is debated, with scholars like Romila Thapar and Michael Witzel questioning the veracity of Kalhana's account. Thapar identifies Jaluka with Kunala, while Witzel suggests a different interpretation of Jaluka's identity within the Rājataraṅgiṇī. Despite these debates, it is evident that the Indo-Greeks, upon their arrival at the North-West Frontier, set their sights on Kashmir, leading to their invasion and temporary occupation, as narrated by Kalhana.[10]

Kalhana acknowledges his limited knowledge about Damodara II,[11] Jaluka's successor, suggesting the possibility that this figure could be the renowned Indo-Greek ruler Demetrius (200–185 BCE).[12] In the folk tradition, influenced by the pervasive impact of Sanskrit language and culture from the second century CE

onwards, Demetrius might have been transformed into 'Damodara', which is the sole source Kalhana had for chronicling Kashmir's early history.[13] According to Taran the kingdom of Demetrius included:

> Afghanistan, Baluchistan, most of Russian Turkistan with some extension into Chinese Turkistan, part of North-West Frontier of India, the Punjab, much of the United Provinces with a small slice of Bihar, Sindh, Cutch, Kathiawar and the northern part of Gujarat.[14]

Indeed, it is plausible to surmise that a monarch pursuing an ambitious agenda of conquest would not have overlooked Kashmir, especially given its geographical proximity to the Punjab and North-West Frontier, regions with which the valley had historically maintained close connections. Kalhana attributes to Demetrius (Sanskritised as Damodara) the construction of an extensive dam, referred to as Guddasetu, which was intended to channel water into a settlement he had established along the Damodara − Suda (Damodara Wader).[15] He is credited with building stone dykes as protective measures against floods.[16] It is noteworthy that the Greeks, inheriting the legacy of the Achaemenid Empire, adhered to a policy that emphasised the significance of irrigation, a practice deeply rooted in Zoroastrian traditions.[17] Given that Bactria was a centre of Zoroastrianism, it is hardly surprising to find Demetrius dedicating considerable efforts to the construction of dams and canals in Kashmir, thereby honouring his cultural heritage. Another Hellenic ruler of note, for whom there exists literary evidence of his governance over Kashmir, is the illustrious King Menander (155–130 CE). To quote Taran,:

> A third fragment in Ptolemy gives the names of two provinces in Menander's home kingdom east of the Jhelum: Kaspeiria, which Ptolemy calls the upper Valleys of the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, and which would thus have corresponded to southern Kashmir.[18]

Moreover, the Milindapanha chronicles that Menander (referred to as Milanda in the text) engaged in philosophical dialogues with the Buddhist sage Nagasena, with these interactions purportedly occurring in Kashmir.[19] It is conceivable that the potsherd bearing the inscription "Dhamorai" or "Dharmo (rajai)", unearthed at Semthan, might pertain to King Menander. The enduring renown of Menander in Kashmiri lore is evidenced by the fact that the renowned 11th-century Kashmiri poet Kṣemendra narrates a tale about him, repurposing a story originally associated with the eminent Emperor Kanishka, who lived two centuries prior.[20] The integration of non-conventional sources, such as toponymy, physiognomy, and philology, further corroborates the archaeological and literary evidence suggesting Kashmir's incorporation into the Indo-Greek empire. Among these sources, toponymic references, elaborated in subsequent sections, offer particularly rich and novel insights.

Impact

The strong imprint of the Bactrian-Greek culture, which was directly connected to Kashmir for about 150 years, is clearly reflected in the historical context. This was the culture of the ruling elite and naturally left a deep impression on the society and culture of Kashmir. In his shrewd perception, centuries ahead of the modern sociologists and social anthropologists, Ibn Khaldun noticed that the conquered tend to emulate their conquerors in many things, including dress, behavior and overall customs. That this was so in Kashmir under Greek domination is no less true, and the Greek rulers had laid many colonies in the valley of Kashmir, and populated them with Greek colonists.[21] In addition, the Indo-Greek capitals were at Taxila and then at Sialkot (Śagala) which were next door to Kashmir and thus subject to a strong cultural influence. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of complete data and therefore a comprehensive analysis of Greek influences in Kashmir is not possible.[22] A review of the occasional mention in other sources, however, can shed light on the Bactrian-Greeks' influence on the cultural scene in Kashmir.

Immigrations and Settlements

Early events in the history of Kashmir had been characterized by frequent migrations and settlement of people from neighbouring regions. This tendency increased during the times of Kashmir becoming part of larger empires. One of the major tactics of empire-building was to place the conqueror's own officials in conquered lands and station armies in conquered lands. This was an attempt to win the co-operation of the local population and to force assimilation of the conquered people, both physically and culturally.[23] As a result, they brought in administrators and warriors as well as scholars, missionaries, and men of other cultural pursuits

to make their home in the new land. The same pattern is seen in Kashmir in its pre-Pakistan times when it was a part of Indo-Greek empire.

Many of the Kashmiri localities ending in "-hom" (like Monghom, Sirhom, Balahom etc.) are originally Greek military colonies, "hom" being from the Greek "ium". The Greek way of doing this was to attach "ium" to the name of the founder, to some important event or to a feature of the place. Any place named for a non-dynastic person, e.g. Docimium, Zenodotium, etc., was generally of military origin, and named after its founder.[24]

Coinage and Monetary Influence

The Indo-Greek kings are credited with introducing inscribed coinage to the Indian subcontinent, including Kashmir. Their coinage, bearing the rulers' names, titles, effigies, and monograms, was the first to feature the issuer king's identity and ideology. The influence of Greek coinage was profound, shaping the monetary styles of subsequent dynasties like the Scythians, Parthians, and Kushanas, evident in their Greek scripts, divinities, and titles. Greek coins have been discovered throughout Kashmir. Alexander Cunningham was among the first to find Greek and Scythian coins in the Jhelum Valley[25], followed by others like GB Bleazby.[26] These finds included coins from rulers such as Philip II, Alexander, Diodotus, and Euthydemus, some of which may have been commemorative or "pedigree" coins, a Graeco-Bactrian innovation.[27]

While the Mauryas had introduced coinage to Kashmir, it was under the Indo-Greeks that it became widespread. The widespread use of the term dīnārra (derived from the Greek dinarius) for money in Kashmiri Sanskrit literature, replacing the earlier term hār (cowry), is a testament to this change.[28] The term evolved into dyar in Kashmiri, coexisting with the traditional term hār, further highlighting the enduring impact of Greek monetary practices in the region.

The Bactrian (Greek) occupation of north-western India brought about a long period of cultural interaction, far beyond the realm of authority, into religion, art and visual expression. Kashmir, which was located in the path of Bactria, Gandhara and north-western Himalayan region, held a strategic position in this system of exchanges. The result of archaeological finds, literary sources and works of art is that Hellenism arrived in Kashmir through a constant interaction with the Indo-Greek kingdoms and was adopted into the local cultural heritage. Instead of supplanting native art forms, Greek artistic principles became blended with the native religious and aesthetic traditions in what was an entirely new and unique visual culture which continued to be seen under subsequent rulers, especially the Kushanas.[28]

The archaeological finds from Semthan are one of the most evident proofs of Hellenistic art in the Kashmir region. The excavations carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India unearthed many terracotta figurines that show clear Greek stylistic elements. According to John Siudmak, these figurines constitute the largest group of locally-made sculpture from Semthan and reflect a predominantly Hellenistic style. They are very different from the more decorative and stylised artistic traditions found in earlier Indian terracotta production, both in terms of their naturalistic modelling, which charts the course of human form, and the careful rendering of the human face and the realistic treatment of drapery. The figures are dressed in clothing that closely resembles the Greek chiton and himation, which are not commonly found in native Indian art until after the Greeks began to have a significant impact on them. These finds point to a possible not only to trade but to the transfer of artistic knowledge, either from immigrant artisans or from the local artisans who learned Hellenistic techniques.[29] These finds are given greater meaning when considered in terms of the broader developments in art across Gandhara. Indo-Greek rule of Bactria and north-western India led to the development of one of the major centers for the mixing of Greek art forms with Buddhist religious practices, Gandhara. During Indo-Greek era the Kashmir had maintained uninterrupted political, commercial and cultural links with Gandhara. Taxila, one of the main Indo-Greek capitals, was an important conduit for the spread of artistic ideas into the Kashmir Valley. The trade, travel of monks, craftsmen and administrators between these regions allowed for the spread of art- and architectural styles and religious imagery. Therefore, it is important to look beyond the Kashmirian context and view the development of art in the broader Hellenistic cultural horizon that spanned Bactria to the north-western Himalayas.[30]

One of the most enduring legacy of Greek artistic traditions was the use of naturalism in the representation of sculpture. The earlier religious art in India generally adopted symbolic means of

representation, using symbols like Bodhi tree, empty throne, Dharma wheel or footprints to indicate the presence of Buddha. By contrast, Hellenistic art had long produced very naturalistic depictions of the human figure, with anatomical precision, strong sense of proportion and expressive facial modelling. The influence of Greek art brought in new sculptural styles that slowly led to alterations in religious depictions in north-western India. While Kashmir did not produce as many Buddha images as did Gandhara, the vocabulary of the artistic language that spread to Kashmir was certainly part of the same cultural context that had firmly established Hellenistic naturalism.[31] It can be said that Greek artistic influences are further demonstrated in the debate surrounding the possible source of the anthropomorphic depiction of Buddha. Strongly influenced by Hellenistic culture, many scholars have suggested that it was Gandhara which was crucial in creating the first human representations of the Buddha in the early centuries of the Common Era. In these images, the Buddha is a quasi-idealised figure with harmonious proportions, well-sewn drapery and placid faces, which broke with previous symbolic traditions. The way the flowing robes are handled is very similar to the folds seen in Greek sculpture, especially in sculptures of philosophers and deities. While the exact origin of the anthropomorphic Buddha images has been a subject of controversy, there is general scholarly consensus that Hellenistic artistic traditions played an important role in the visual language that enabled the development of the Buddha sculptures in Gandhara. In such a geographical and cultural context, Kashmir was indelibly involved with the spread of these artistic innovations.[32]

Another relevant indicator of cultural transmission is the use of greek decorative elements in the ornamentation of buildings. Within Gandharan religious architecture, Corinthian capitals, vine scrolls, acanthus leaves, rosettes, bead and reels mouldings, and floral friezes became widespread, and spread to neighbouring regions. A capital featuring Corinthian columns was famously used in Classical Greek architecture, first constructed in the fifth century BCE, and was especially popular in Hellenistic architecture. These capitals were more than just decorative, they expressed a sense of aesthetic superiority in the use of the acanthus leaves, which were elaborately carved underneath the capital's volutes. It is common to find Corinthian columns in combination with Buddhist architectural elements in the monasteries and stupas of Gandhara.It is not unusual to find Greek decorative elements integrated into religious monuments in Gandhara. While the architectural remains of early Kashmir are comparatively few, the region's constant interaction with Gandhara is a strong indication of the impact of similar artistic traditions on local architectural production, notably in the Kushana era.[33]

The use of Hellenistic style is also evident in floral decoration. Throughout Gandharan art, a new range of architectural elements such as vine scrolls, rosette decoration on sculptural panels and acanthus foliage on architectural members was adopted. The motifs had been used in Greek art long before they were introduced by the Buddhist workshops. The fact that they appeared in Buddhist settings illustrates that religious connotations of art forms could be detached from their religions and be part of different religious ideologies. The decorative vocabulary of Greek language was thus transformed from a symbol of Greek religious identity into an aesthetic tool.[34] The mixing of Greek and Buddhist iconography is also evident. One of the most popular is the depiction of the Buddha's protector, Vajrapāṇi, who is often depicted with the face of the Greek hero Heracles. In Gandharan sculptures Vajrapāṇi appears as a muscular guardian carrying a club, resembling the one used by Heracles in Classical mythology. This did not mean the incorporation of Greek religion into Buddhism. Instead, Buddhist artists used a well-known Hellenistic heroic portrait for the purposes of conveying Buddhist concepts of strength, protection and spiritual power to a variety of audiences living within a culturally and linguistically varied context in north-western India. The use of this kind of artistic translation reflects the adaptability of Buddhist art and its ability to absorb foreign artistic styles without any doctrinal changes.

Some scholars have also commented on the early Buddha images that bear similarities with Apollo images in terms of the facial features and hair topknot (wavy hair gathered into a topknot), the symmetrical facial proportions and the youthful idealisation. Similarities should not be seen as a case of literal copies of Greek gods and goddesses but as a sign of the Hellenistic sculptural traditions that might have shaped the artistic principles and approaches of the Buddhist sculptors. The aim was not to copy a religion but to develop an art in the closest possible manner to that of Greek sculpture.[35] Greek and indigenous arts were not so much changed by Greek influence as they both influenced each other. Craftsmen in the area adapted foreign art techniques to reflect local religious needs and values, but they were selective in their choice of techniques.

Greek realism combined with Indian spirituality gave birth to an art tradition distinct from both its Greek and Indian roots. The resultant synthesis was to become one of the hallmark features of Gandharan art and later spread throughout Kashmir, Central Asia and ultimately China via the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Routes. Buddhist monks who were moving from Kashmir to Khotan, Kucha and Dunhuang carried with them religious texts but also artistic conventions that had developed over many years in the north-west of the subcontinent due to intercultural contact.

This blend of art styles was preserved and promoted by the Kushana Empire. Territories once under the control of the Indo-Greek rulers were passed on to the successors of the Indo-Greeks, rulers like Kaniṣka, who carried on many of their artistic styles. Greek legends were still used on Kushana coins for a long time, and religious sculpture still used Hellenistic conventions with Indian and Iranian elements. This cosmopolitan artistic atmosphere is evident in the various Buddhist monasteries built in the Kushana era across Kashmir. The Greek artistic vocabulary continued to be used well beyond the time when the Indo-Greek political entity ceased to exist. Artistic traditions were more enduring than political structures, and lasted to influence religious iconography and building ornament for a number of centuries.[36]

It is therefore not possible to explain the art and religious development of ancient Kashmir only by the internal evolution. Archaeological remains from Semthan, the spread of Gandharan artistic style, the use of Hellenistic decorative elements, the modification of Buddhist iconography and the preservation of these traditions under the patronage of Kushana rulers all show that Greek art played a significant part in the cultural evolution of Kashmir. The Hellenistic input is not cultural domination; it is an example of a process of adaptation, of the reinterpretation of foreign styles in a local religious and social context. The synthesis was one of the longest lasting legacies of Indo-Greek political rule in Kashmir, that it left behind in the way that it affected the language of religion and art.

CONCLUSION

Bactrian-Greek period was a significant part of the history and culture of Kashmir. This period, from approximately 200BCE to 55BCE, witnessed a series of Indo-Greek rulers which has deeply influenced the cultural, social and economic landscape of Kashmir. While the archaeological, numismatic and literary evidence is an independent testimony of the deep influence of the Bactrian-Greeks in Kashmir, together they provide a convincing evidence of the same. Although little remains of the Greek settlements except for the coins and pottery and other artifacts found there, the evidence is clear and speaks volumes about the degree of Hellenization that was achieved in the region. Although infrequent, literary mentions of the Greeks in Kashmir highlight their impact on the region's history and its people. The assimilation of Greek culture into the Kashmiri ethos, as seen from the assimilation of Greek names, practices and coinage, is a fine example of the deep intercultural exchange that took place during this period. Moreover, the establishment of Greek colonies and the introduction of inscribed coinage by the Indo-Greek kings not only signify political dominion but also indicate a transfer of technological and administrative skills. The continuing use of Greek words in local languages and the presence of place names in Greek influenced languages further underlines Greek influence on the culture and language in Kashmir.

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