SOME ASPECTS OF THE CLASSICAL HERITAGE IN AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan is a landlocked country, very mountainous and dominated by the Hindukush range which springs from the Pamir knot and reaches heights up to 7,500 meters. It swings to the southwest to merge eventually in the chains of western Asia. The Hindukush, the 'Indian Caucasus' or the Paropamisades of the Greeks, forms the watershed between the Aral Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Kunar River drains the northern slopes and flows through the Bactrian plain into the Amu Darja, the Oxus of old; the Kabul River and its tributaries south of the chain irrigate ancient Gandhara to end up in the Indus system. Afghanistan's main river, the Helmand, ancient Eynamandros, pours out in the marshy salt lakes of Sistan at the Iranian frontier. Fed by glaciers and thaw, the rivers are subject to quick evaporation.

Extending between 29 and 39 degrees north latitude, Afghanistan belongs to the specific semidesert zone affecting, for instance, Iraq, Tunisia, or Arizona and New Mexico. Only small parts of the country are thus arable. Yet 95% of the population work the soil, frequently still with archaic methods and means. In spite of an elevation of 3,000 feet, fruit trees and vineyards abound north of Kabul. The place name Istalif in the vicinity of the city may a corruption of the Greek word for grapes, sylphino. The vines either climb pergola-like wooden props or they are wound around their own thick old stems in a neat-like arrangement which I cannot recall ever seeing except on a North African mosaic of the mid 4th century in Cherchel where both ways occur. K. M. White, in his book Roman Farming, states that this system, which Columella calls 'vitis characata', was still to be found in parts of the Moselle and Chablis areas at the beginning of this century.

The peasants live in fortress-like farmsteads of mud brick in the plains and in terraced clusters of rubblestone houses in the mountains. Others pursue the seasonal nomadic pasture farming characteristic of large parts of Western and Central Asia. These nomads pass the winters in the milder lowlands and move to the mountain pastures in the spring, living in black goat-hair tents. Dromedaries or camels are their pack animals, goats and sheep their livestock. The few towns and cities have their centers in the bazars, again age-old institutions.

What we learn from the sadly scarce Classical sources, from precious Chinese reports of the Han Dynasty, and from Islamic historians, is that northern Afghanistan, or Bactria, must have been one of the most fertile and densely populated areas of the ancient world, studded with well-to-do walled cities and ingeniously irrigated fields. Trade between China and the West was its other main source of wealth. Most of this economy came to an end with the Mongol invasion early in the 13th century. Though crafts, commerce and art recovered quickly, the irrigation system did not. Thus much of the arable land was reconquered by steppes and desert, helped by overpasturing and destruction of the woods for fuel.

Throughout the 19th century Afghanistan was all but closed to visitors because it was the object of political schemes of Russians and Britons alike, who regarded the country as a vital glacial. Travel and serious archaeological investigation got started only in the nineteen-twenties, when the French School became the most active. Great efforts have been made with much outside help—Russian, American,
German—to bring the country into modern times. It has skipped the railway age. Cars and aircraft today still follow the conventional caravan routes.

The population is of mixed stock, reflecting the countless waves of nomadic incursions from the steppe of Central Asia. Many Indo-European, that is Iranian and Caucasian, it is sprinkled with Turkish and Mongol elements. The official religion is Islam. The main language, Dari, is a form of Persian; the second, Pashtu, is also an Iranian dialect.

We must here disregard the interesting prehistory of Afghanistan which just now begins to emerge, linking the country with the cradle of civilization in Iran and Mesopotamia and with the Indus Valley cultures. Since time immemorial, lapis lazuli has been quarried in the northeastern province of Badakhshan, ancient Sogdiana, and traded to the West.

The country appears on the horizon of the Classical scholar with Cyrus and Darius conquering it through satraps, though with difficulty not only because of its remote and forbidding character but mostly because of the constant threat of the mounted nomads, excellent horse breeders and cunning warriors whose foxtails and tactics have dominated the history of the country. Of related ethnic stock, the Medes had at that time carved their realm out of the Assyrian Empire. They in turn were defeated by the great Scythian incursion of the Near East in the 7th century B.C. The Medes recovered but were unseated by their 'rivals', the Persians, who now had to defend the eastern provinces of their immense empire against the Iranian Saca and their kin.

One has seen a link between the periodic appearances of the nomads and known periods of prolonged drought which necessitated their search for new pastures. But the raids must also have been incited by the invading wealth of the Bactrian plain. The specific dualism of Zarathushtra's religion, which took shape there at that time and which was to be adopted by the Persian court, does reflect the antagonism between the peaceful sedentary way of the peasants and the relentless aggressiveness of the nomads.

When Alexander appeared on the scene in 330 after Ctesiphon, in pursuit of the satrap Lessus and had murdered Darius III and had made himself King of Kings, he encountered settlements of Greeks in Bactria, sent there to exile by the Achaemenids. The more than three years Alexander spent fighting in present-day Afghanistan, Soviet Turkistan and Pakistan proved to be the most difficult in his whole campaign. Not all of the military outposts and cities, mostly called Alexandrias, which he founded can be located with certainty, Alexandria Eschat, near modern Khostchen/Leihabad, on the banks of the Syr-Darya, the luxuries, were meant as a bulwark against the nomads who had routed him in several skirmishes. He was to reconize part of his cavalry according to their superior tactics. Alexandria in Arachosia seems to be modern Kandahar. Alexandrea Caucasus, north of Kabul, near modern Charikar, we shall hear more of presently.

The Greek outpost, certainly at first not more than modest villages fortified by mud-brick walls, had a rough start, but they became the nuclei of flourishing Hellenistic cities under the Seleucids, who had inherited the eastern part of Alexander's empire. About the middle of the 3rd century, the Greek satrap of Bactria wrecked independence from the Seleucids. With Bactria Balish near modern Mazar-i-Sharif as capital, the new kingdom of Bactria reached its height under Euthydemus and his successors after 200 B.C. They benefited too from the weakening of Seleucid power caused by Rome's intervention in Asia Minor.

The silver tetradrachms of those Bactrian kings are among the most beautiful portraits ever mintage. We show some of them here: Demetrius, son of Euthydemus, wears the elephant scalp to commemorate his Indian campaign which reached the Ganges. Antimachus, who may have been his brother, wears the Macedonian crown (a broad-brimmed hat); the coins of one Heliodore and one Archelaus have the 1st century B.C., when a new wave of Saka tribes reduced the Bactrian holdings to the region around Kabul. The Iranian territories lost by the Seleucids had meanwhile solidified in yet another empire, that of the former nomad chief of the Parthians—formidable soldiers and politicians who would become the most feared, almost immortal enemy of Rome, and who would remain so for a century.

Mithridates II of Parthia, who reigned from 123 to 88 B.C., is the first of the greats of the early Parthian kings, succeeded in subduing the Iranian Sacas and resented them in southern Sakastan where they established short-lived Hellenized kingdoms of their own. The region still bears their name: Sasanian.

Mithridates' portrait, created by an able artist who was probably not a Greek, is impressive. A curious change has taken place, though there is a certain difference in time between it and that of one of his predecessors, Mithridates I, from about 150 B.C., which is still purely Greek. Not only does he face left, contrary to the portraits on the vast majority of Greek coins, he wears the skewed kafan of the mounted nomads and his beard and hairdo recall those of the Achaemenids—certainly a conscious rejection of the Hellenic tradition of which he retains only the royal diadem. There is a change in style too—the lively and subtle modulation of the facial features of the Bactrian kings has given way to a 'frozen', almost rigid, surface. We shall encounter more of this presently.

4 Tetradrachm of Mithridates II of Parthia (123-88 B.C.), B.C.O., portrait of Mithridates, Rev. a Parthian king. Minted at Seleucia-on-Tigris.
5 Tetradrachm of Heliodore, c. 100-150 B.C. O., portrait of Heliodore, Rev., Zeus, with thunderbolt.
6 Tetradrachm of Archelaus, c. 120 B.C. O., helmeted spear-thunderer portrait, Rev., Zeus with thunderbolt.
But we must look back for a moment to recall that Alexander had been forced to turn back by his troops in the Punjab when he tried to push on into the Ganges plain. He only grudgingly consented. Taxila was one of the military colonies founded there. But already his successor, Seleucus Nikator, had been unable to retain the Indian territories of the empire comprising eastern and southern Afghanistan. He ceded them to the able rulers of the Indian Maurya dynasty, Chandragupta-Sandakrotos, in exchange for 500 war elephants. These were to decide the battle of Panipat in 321 against Antigonos in Seleucus’ favor.

Chandragupta’s grandson, Ashoka, was a convert to Buddhism and, like many converts, eager to proselytize. Through him, the ruler over almost all of India, Buddhism was to spread in Afghanistan and Parthia and eventually to reach China. One of Ashoka’s impressive rock edicts recommending the non-violence of the Buddhist creed to his realm at large has recently come to light in a Greek and an Aramaic version near Kangahar. Previously, his edicts had been known from a series of sandstone columns in various parts of India. One from Old Delhi bears an inscription in Brahmi, a script derived from Aramaic, which had been the lingua franca of the Persian Empire. The new Kangahar inscription proves how deeply Hellenized the region had already become in the 3rd century B.C. The most grandiose monuments of this new religion are the colossal Buddha statues hewn out of the soft rock of the Bamian valley in central Afghanistan.

The great Saka invasion of the late 2nd century B.C., already referred to, put an end to the Bactrian kingdoms but did not obliterate Greek civilization, which was firmly established in the towns and villages with their mixed Greek and Iranian population. This, at least, seems to have been the impression of the roving Chinese ambassador, Chang k’ien, who established a direct commercial link between Han China and the West about 128 B.C. It was actually in western China, in mountainous Kansu, that the latest Saka invasion had started in 165 B.C. The tribes of the Hsiung-nu, old foes of Han China, unsettled a group of Iranian tribes called Yel-dech (jade peddlers) by the Chinese. They were driven west, pushing the Sacas into Bactria, Parthia and even northern India. After a period spent in Transoxania, one of the five Yel-dech tribes, the Kusanas, invaded Afghanistan about the end of the 1st century B.C. A succession of able kings, Kanishka being the greatest among them, secured for the Kusanas an empire which reached from Khotan at the border of China to Iran, and from the Aral Sea to the Indian Ocean. As yet we have no clue to the about 150 dated monuments of the main Kusana era—which spanned almost a century—because we do not know when it started. The most likely date for Kanishka’s floruit seems to be the 1st half of the 2nd century A.D. His was apparently an enlightened reign characterized by religious tolerance, artistic, cultural and artistic creativity.

Whereas until very recently coins seemed to be the only survivors of the Greek period in Bactria, a wealth of objects from Kushan have since the early 19th century, come to light in northwest India. This ‘Greco-Buddhist’ art, or Gandhara art as it is called, owed its existence to the spread of Buddhism which Kanishka seems to have furthered. Indian art proper had not yet developed so as to represent the Buddha in person when depicting the legends of his earthly career. There appears on one of the gold coins, inscribed with the name of Herakles, an elephant head, and on another one, a boar's head. Under the Kusanas he comes to life only in the countless narrative reliefs and stupas found in the ruins of Buddhist monasteries in northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan—the Kushan stupas of Gilgit south of Kabul is an example—but also in sometimes almost lifelike statues—an orientalized Greek god.

This art has a very special flavor and elegance related to and yet distinct from contemporary Indian art and deeply influenced in style and secondary subject matter by Hellenistic art. Its very existence seemed a miracle. How could it have developed if there were seemingly no Greek prototypes to draw from in all of Iran, Central Asia and India? Scholarly battles have raged over the question for almost half a century. The Roman school, with quite a following in this country, tried to explain the fertilization by the intense trade with the Roman Empire which not only moved across the silk road in the north—but often endured there—military arch-enemy—but also braved the Indian Ocean after about 100 B.C. Whole fleets regularly set out from ports on the west coast of India, rich in spices, silver and gold, to trade with the Roman Empire. Thus, the Romans showed that the Indian Ocean was not a landlocked sea, but was open to sea traffic. The trade with the Romans was of considerable importance to the Chinese, either directly or indirectly, through the middlemen in the western Indian Ocean. The Sassanians began to use the Greek alphabet for the first time in their inscriptions. This alphabet was used by the Chinese in the 1st century B.C. and came into use in the Indian subcontinent at about the same time. The Chinese used it extensively in their inscriptions, including the famous inscription of the king of Taxila and K’apiška Begram (north of Kabul)—Alexander’s city and their most important city.

When the French discovered at Begram a hoard of such luxury goods in the late thirties while excavating this major Kushan trade and strategic settlement, the scope and sophistication of that culture at once became apparent. Hidden about the middle of that century A.D., probably under the threat of an invasion by the Sassanians under Shapur I (A.D. 241-
7.8. Porphyry vessels, probably from Alexandria.


10. Statue of Komishka, Mathurā Museum. 2nd century A.D.

But were these objects of minor art enough to explain the rise of Gandhāra art? It didn’t really help to look south to the astonishing contemporary finds at Mathurā, the age-old city on the holy Ganges and traditional birthplace of the god Krishna. The art of Mathurā is as composite as that of Gandhāra, but the Indian element prevails. A rich supply of fine spangled red sandstone nearly served the local sculptors who catered to all creeds—Jains, Buddhists, Brahmins, Hindus—and to the dynamic ambitions of the ruling Kushans.

About 100,000 excavations near Mathurā in what must have been a family sanctuary of the Kushans yielded the ever-lividine—sadly headless—statures of Kushan kings, stylistically quite distinct from the rest of the local output. One representing Komishka is identified by an inscription. A metal halo seems to have been attached to his head. He stands in his ancestral outfit: the girded riding kafan and the coat of the Scythian or Sacca nomads, the baggy trousers tucked into the huge felt boots. His right hand rests on a mighty club, the left holds a sword, the belt carefully wrapped around the sheath. This impressive statue has little to do stylistically with the supple grace of the contemporary Gandhāra art.

The answer to the question of the roots of this art seems within reach when the brilliant French archaeologist, the late Daniel Schlumberger, discovered another dynastic sanctuary of the Kushans at Surkh Kotal at the edge of the Baluchistan plain. Perched on a hilltop, approached by enormous terraced slabs and surrounded by brick walls with battlements, is a square building of apparently Persian design which seems to have housed a fire altar. The architectural members in limestone were clearly of Greek descent: Attic bases, Corinthian pilasters and capitals. And so were the letters of the recovered inscriptions: Greek, used to spell out an Iranian dialect. The fragments of stone sculpture—portrait statues again—vividly recall the finds from Mathurā. Scans of clay sculpture are stylistically very
It was an additional windfall when the remains of a Buddhist sanctuary came to light, built concurrently in the plain below and displaying Gandharan iconography. It not only proved that Buddhism had spread north of the Hindu Kush at the time but, more important still, that what had so far been known as Gandharan art could not have risen alone in the hitherto isolated area but must have had forerunners farther north in the Bactrian realm.

Schlumberger, much encouraged, predicted that the "missing link", the real Graeco-Iranian settlement which so far eluded the archaeologist, would be discovered in Bactria one day. Just those Greek cities through which—if not the syntax at least some of the accidents—of Greek art had been handed on to the Kushans. It was Schlumberger himself who, in the sixties, proved the correctness of his theory by discovering just such a Greek settlement at Ai Khanum on the Oxus at the Russian border. Well placed strategically and supplied with all the amenities of a Greek city or polis—acropolis, walls, gymnasium, civic center, with the hero shrine or heron of the founder, Kineas, a Thessalian cavalry officer of the Seleucids—Ai Khanum is an excellent example of the adaptation of Greek forms to local traditions and circumstances—mud or brick walls on stone foundations, as well as the ground plan and elements of a hypostyle hall adjoining the market place, have strong Persian affinities; also, some of the architectural members in stone display a strangely orientalizing flavor, foreshadowing, for instance, the leafy Gandharan capitals.

It was again Schlumberger who brilliantly and cogently drew up the pedigree of Kushan art by placing it alongside the other great non-Mediterranean descendant of Greek art—the Parthian art of Palmyra. Though both owe much to the direct encounter with Hellenistic art, he has shown how the Iranian element doubtfully influences both: 1, in its older Achaemenid form reflected mainly in architecture; 2, in its late Hellenistic Graeco-Iranian version determining the architectural ornament and the sculpture. Apart from parietal affinities—both Parthians and Kushans were of Iranian nomad stock and wore nomad costume—he lists many parallel features in Palmyrene and Kushan art: frontalities in reliefs and sculpture; a very limited concept of plastic values—sculpture has in both cases a tendency towards flat stela-like formulae; typical are graphically or ornamentally conceived folds and hair.

For the idea of a dynastic sanctuary like Surkh Kotal, Schlumberger convincingly refers to the gigantic funerary monuments of Antiochus I, ruler of the petty kingdom of Kommagene in the Taurus mountains, which dates from the mid 1st century B.C. There a Graeco-Persian pantheon and ancestry are being emphasized to lend legitimacy to a local dynasty which had carved out for itself a precarious existence between Parthians and Romans. We do encounter again the impressive, almost idol-like rigid classicism referred to already when looking at the coin portrait of Mitridates II of Parthia. It is the trade mark of much of the 1st and 2nd century A.D. art of Palmyra and Hata in Mesopotamia and of the court art of the Kushans.
Kushan Gandhāra art is more lively as it has a story to tell—the life of the Buddha—and is not unlike early Christian art, where we can also speak of a narrative mode applied to the life of Christ and a court mode applied to Christ in majesty. That Gandhāra art should seem more Greek than any Parthian monument (though both are offsprings of one Hellenistic Greek-Iranian realm) is due to the fact that Afghanistan was definitely more deeply Hellenized than Parthian Persia. The Parthian monuments we have looked at came from the Semitic centers at the western fringes of the empire, from Haire, Dura and Palmyra, where gods and the deceased have been revered and honored since time immemorial. The Iranians knew no religious art proper; theirs was—since the Achaemenids—an art of the court, of the King of Kings, his courtiers and vassals performing ceremonies as seen in the sculptures at Persepolis. Whereas the Parthian art of those west Semitic centers we just mentioned was to play a vital part in the formulation of early Christian art, Kushan art paved the way for the glorious development of Buddhist art in east Asia.

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Credits
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