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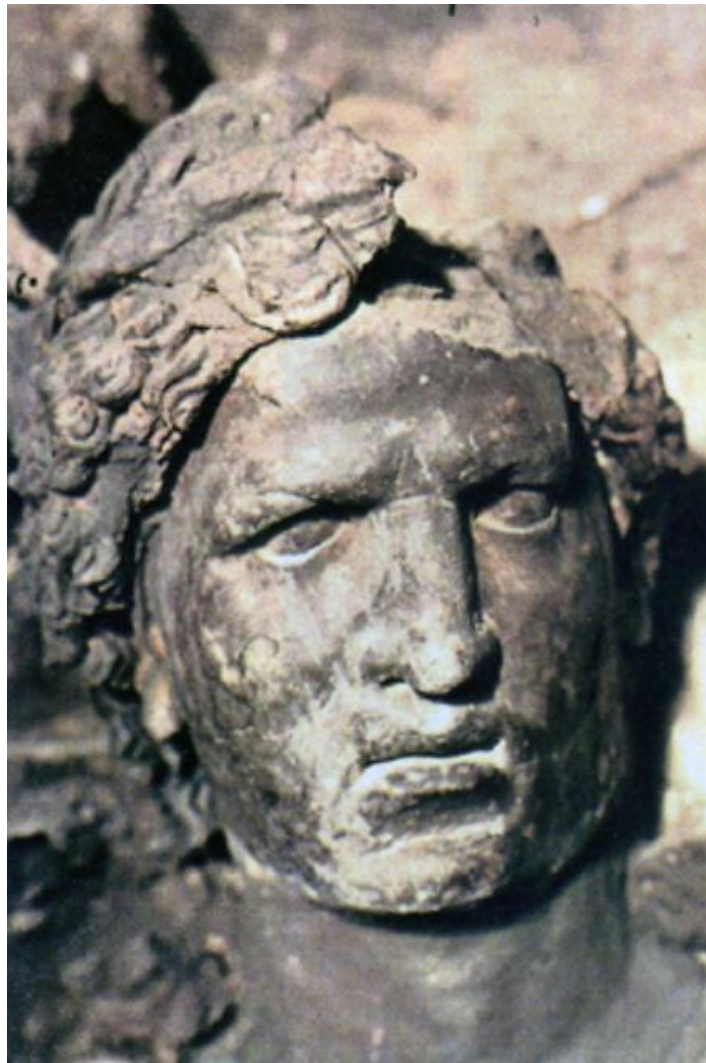
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Alexander the Great and Herakles
as Guardians of the Buddha of Tapa Shotor

Lucas Christopoulos

Tokyo



Frontispiece. Alexander as Vajrapani, detail of clay sculpture of Buddha's First Sermon at Benares. Tapa Shotor, Niche V3. Photo, 1991, from the personal archive of Z. Tarzi.

ABSTRACT

At the ancient site of Tapa Shotor, near Hadda in Afghanistan, two niches (V₂ and V₃) were found that included sculptures depicting Alexander and Herakles standing next to the Buddha. The sculptures were destroyed by the Taliban in 1992. These two niches and their contents are investigated in this paper in their historical context, and the reasons the two iconically Greek figures of Alexander and Herakles came to be adopted by local populations, in traditions that continue even up to today, are extensively explored. Were they placed in Buddhist sites merely as "foreign figures adapted to local Buddhist beliefs," as some have claimed? Or were they reflective of a more deeply rooted inclusion? This article investigates the two figures and their impact on the region—and beyond, as their influence spread through eastern Asia. Rule of the region by Indo-Greeks and Greco-Bactrians lasted more than three hundred years, and this was followed by the rule of the Kushana kingdom, in which these people were still very active. Thus, Greeks and their culture were no longer foreign in Central Asia. Indo-Greek references in Buddhism, or "Helleno-Buddhist Universalism," continued still longer, being adopted by a warlike aristocracy of Greek, Parthian, Saka, and Yuezhi origins, who included traditional Indo-Greek combat sports and other military arts in their education system. This discussion raises deeper questions concerning our received conceptual structures of what constitutes a civilization, suggesting that, rather than defining it solely in a national-historical perspective, we must consider the human beings involved and the often-intermixed character of their traditions.

Keywords: Indo-Greeks, Buddhism, Kushana, Alexander the Great, Herakles, Athletics

INTRODUCTION

Greco-Buddhist (or Helleno-Buddhist) sculptures and other artworks were a beautiful expression of the syncretism between Indian and Greek concepts, a manifestation still shining through the ages, defying any form of nationalism or religious fundamentalism. The tolerance and the questioning expressed in this art reflect the search for a universalist and cosmopolitical idealistic spiritual reality by both Indian and Greek civilizations that led to the highest level of human development, not only in the arts, but also in the sciences and philosophy. It also opened the way to extraordinary achievements of human thought in eastern Asia, with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism through Central Asia and the Tarim Basin (eastern central Asia), to China, Tibet, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan; and the spread of Hinayana (Theravada) Buddhism through the southern Himalayas to Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri-Lanka.

It is not by chance that Islamic fundamentalism, alive among the Taliban, in the 1990s destroyed most of its remaining art monuments, including the ones described in this article, as this resonates almost exactly with the destruction that the Uighurs (uyğur, Old Turkic: 𐰉𐰺𐰽𐰸) and the Kara-Khanid Khanate inflicted during the eleventh century on Buddhist art, monks, and temples in the Tarim Basin and especially in the Khotan kingdom, as related in the Turkic poems of Maḥmūd al-Kashgari (1005–1102).¹

Among the many Greco-Buddhist masterpieces that the Taliban destroyed, two are particularly of interest here. These were at Tapa Shotor (or Tapa-e-Shotor), "Camel Hill," an archeological site situated near Hadda, between Jalalabad in Afghanistan and Peshawar in Pakistan. They were Hellenistic sculptures of Alexander the Great and Herakles standing next to the Buddha (Figs. 1, 2).

¹ Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): "We came down on them like a flood, we went out among their cities, we tore down the idol-temples, and we shat on the Buddha's head!" (pp. 227–228).



Figure 1. Alexander-Vajrapani standing behind two disciples of the Buddha, on the right side of Sakyamuni-Buddha. Tapa Shotor, Niche V3. Photo, 1991, from the personal archive of Z. Tarzi.



Figure 2. Niche V3. Clay. 1.20 × 1.30 m. Alexander as Vajrapani, detail of sculpture depicting Buddha's First Sermon at Benares. Tapa Shotor, Niche V3. Photo, 1991, from the personal archive of Z. Tarzi.

Located within the Khyber Pass, the site was excavated first by Charles Masson (1800–1853) and William Simpson (1823–1899) during the nineteenth century.² Tapa Shotor was then investigated by the DAFA (Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan) in 1922, with Alfred Foucher (1865–1962) and André Godard (1881–1965).³ Jules Barthoux (1881–1965) then continued the excavations of eleven sites, finding about five hundred *stupas* and about thirteen thousand historical pieces. From 1960, Japanese and Afghan archeologists investigated the site, and then Shaibaï Mostamandi, followed by Zmaryalai Tarzi, continued from 1966. After rule by the Taliban was established in 1992, most of the art pieces were destroyed or stolen and sold at the Peshawar market, from 1993 on. These masterpieces of Hellenistic heritage found at Tapa Shotor dated mainly from the second to the fourth centuries, and many are transitional from the Hellenistic to Kushana-period representations of Helleno-Buddhist art. According to Alexandra Vanleene, “The strength and autonomy of Haḍḍa’s art is sufficient to explain its influence, that will be followed from Kapisa to [LC: and to the Tarim and Wei dynasty China] China, through Bactria and Bamiyan.”⁴

I will explain in sections one and two how the two niches (V₃ and V₂) respectively were important regarding the figures of Herakles and Alexander and develop their historical context and development in Central Asia and further east. These two figures have a primordial role in Asia, and they are still worshipped today in modified forms, having participated in the development of local traditions at the “origin” of their history.

² See Elizabeth Errington, *Charles Masson and the Buddhist Sites of Afghanistan: Explorations, Excavations, Collections 1832–1835* (London: The British Museum, 2017).

³ See J. Hackin, “Les fouilles de la délégation archéologique Française à Hadda (Afghanistan) Missions Foucher-Godard-Barthoux (1923–1928),” *Revue des arts asiatiques*, École française d’Extrême-Orient, vol. 5, no. 2 (1928), pp. 66–76.

⁴ Alexandra Vanleene and Haḍḍa Kaboul-Kapiça, “Bāmiyān: trois écoles artistiques de modelage entre l’Inde et la Chine,” in *Autour de Bāmiyān, de la Bactriane hellénisée à l’Inde bouddhique, Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg (19–20 juin 2008)*, ed. G. Ducoeur (Paris: Archeologia Afghana, 2012), pp. 279–298.

1. ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN NICHE V₃ OF TAPA SHOTOR

Therefore, in the first place, the very plan and design of Alexander's expedition commends the man as a philosopher in his purpose not to win for himself luxury and extravagant living, but to win for all men concord and peace and community of interests.⁵

The sculpture found in so-called Niche V₃ represents the Buddha making his First Sermon at Benares (Varanasi). On his right side, King Alexander III, the Great (Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μέγας 356–323 BC), is represented as watching and guarding him, sculpted together with Buddha's first disciples. Three disciples can be seen, with the two situated below Alexander still having their heads shaved, perhaps modeled on the Indo-Greek worshippers of that time. They must represent part of the *Pancavaggiya* (The Group of Five) or be among the first five disciples of the Buddha, or, if not, Greek worshippers of the Buddha. The disciples seem to discuss and analyze what the Buddha is saying, and the face of Alexander seems to match perfectly with the one on a medallion representing him and found in Roman Egypt,⁶ and a bust portraying him, from Giannitsa, near Pella.⁷ Another bust, found near the *Erechtheion* of the Athens Acropolis in 1886, is very similar too, thought to be an original work of the sculptor Leochares around 330 BC and exhibited today at the Acropolis Museum. The marble sculpture representing the head of the king, found in Kerameikos, Athens, and dating to around 300 BC, with a height of 28 cm, has facial features similar to those of one made by Lysippus, showing Alexander the Great in himation, from the late fourth century BC, exhibited at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul: they all depict him curiously “thinking” and “analyzing” with an expression that seems almost exalted and sorrowful at the same time, and definitely very intelligent.

Alexander-Vajrapani,⁸ standing at the right next to the Buddha at Tapa Shotor, was represented

⁵ Plutarch, “On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander,” *Moralia*, vol. IV. 9. 1 (Loeb Classical Library, 1936).

⁶ Medallion depicting Alexander the Great, from Ancient Egypt and Nubia, ca. 215–243. The Walters Art Museum.

⁷ End of fourth century BC, early Hellenistic period. Height 30 cm. Pella Archaeological Museum. Inv. No. ΓΑ 15.

⁸ In the earliest Buddhist art, Vajrapani, the guardian of the Buddha, was represented as Alexander, Herakles, or Zeus. On

with a sophisticated hairstyle, a strong neck, a thick mouth, a straight-bridged nose (the "Greek nose"), and a strong forehead. His appearance is traditionally modeled on the previous sculptures representing him, and it is one of the clearest representations of the king found so far in the East. A silver disc showing Nike driving a war-chariot drawn by two lions, together with Cybele and Alexander depicted as Helios in Heaven, with the moon and a Zoroastrian-type altar on the right side, and dating from the third century BC, is exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The scene reminds us of the story of the Moon-and-Sun prophetic tree of Alexander from Persia.⁹ There is also a statuette representing Alexander on horseback, from Begram, dating from the Hellenistic period, displayed at the Kabul National Museum of Afghanistan. The easternmost representation of the Macedonian king is, however, evidently the Hellenistic silver-gilt plate from Gansu Jingyuan representing Alexander-Dionysos seated on a panther, amongst grape motifs and surrounded by the twelve gods, from the second-first centuries BC.¹⁰

In Tapa Shotor, Alexander is represented as Vajrapani, a Bodhisattva (the last stage before becoming a Buddha), Guardian of the Buddha. The representation of Vajrapani (Sanskrit: वज्रपाणि) as a protector of the Buddha around the second century is a tradition deriving directly from Herakles and Helleno-Buddhism.

In the Mahayana school, Vajrapani became a *Dhyani-Bodhisattva*, or one of the five Bodhisattvas accompanying the *Dhyani* (Sanskrit: ध्यानी, or the first Five Buddhas).¹¹ In the *Vajrayana*,

the different types of Vajrapani, and for more on the similarities between the representations of Vajrapani and Herakles, (sometimes mature and bearded, sometimes young and beardless), see Alfred Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra: étude sur les origines de l'influence classique dans l'art bouddhique de l'Inde et de l'Extrême-Orient* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1918), pp. 48–63.

⁹ On the story of Alexander's encountering the prophetic Sun and Moon Tree, see the "Letter of Alexander to Aristotle" (*Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*), or Ferdowsi (فردوسی), *Shahnameh Timurid* (977–1010 AD). The sun and moon tree/dry tree can be seen on a mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii (120–100 BC), representing the battle between Alexander the Great and Darius III (copy from a Hellenistic painting of fourth-third centuries BC).

¹⁰ See Lucas Christopoulos, "Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China," *Sino-Platonic Papers* no. 230 (2012), pp. 11–12, pl. 2.

¹¹ Vajrapani is also a servant of Indra. See Ananda Coomaraswamy, "A Stucco Head from Central Asia," *Bulletin of Fine Arts, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, vol. 29 (1931), pp. 4–11.

Vajrapani is perceived as the spiritual son of *Dhyani* Buddha Akshobhya (Sanskrit: अक्षोभ्य, Chinese: Achu Rulai 阿閼如来), located in the east of the Diamond Realm (*Vajradhatu*, Sanskrit: वज्रधातु, Chinese: 金剛界 *Jingang jie*) and lord of the Eastern Pure Land *Abhirati*, or “The Joyous.” In Tantric Buddhism, *Vajrapani* was elevated from the status of a *Yaksha* to a Bodhisatva.

At Tapa Shotor, Vajrapani is represented as Alexander mixed with other immortal figures (Alexander-Zeus, Alexander-Dionysos, Alexander-Apollo, Alexander Helios, etc.), just as the divinized king had often been shown earlier. Concerning the historical contact between Alexander and the Buddhists of India, Strabo said that Aristoboulos (Ἀριστόβουλος 380–290 BC), the historian contemporary of Alexander, wrote that the king met two Indian Brahmins (Brahmin, Greek: Βραχμῶνας) who demonstrated indifference to physical pain by enduring the hot sun and torrential rain or by standing on one leg holding a heavy log,¹² just like the ascetic practices of the Sadhus of India today. The Brahmin Kalanos (Greek: Καλανός 398–323 BC), from Taxila, then accompanied Alexander back to Persis, where he, after falling ill, self-immolated in a pyre. His own *guru* was the Brahmin “Dandamis,” (Dandi-Svami), who lived in the woods.

To understand how and why Alexander eventually took his place next to the Buddha in Tapa Shotor about five hundred years after his death, we must understand that he was not viewed as only a simple ruler by the people of Central Asia, Central Asia, and Northern India. The king was also known as Iskandar (Persian: اسکندر) or Sikandar (Persian: سکندر) in classical Persian literature, and he played an important role in Persian legends. He became recognized after the Muslim conquests under the name of “The Horned,” or *Dhû-l-Qarnayn* (Arabic: ذو القرنين).¹³ It is likely that the Han Chinese also knew of him, under the name “*Chiyou*” (Chinese: 蚩尤), as I have already proposed in an earlier article.¹⁴ In

¹² Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.61.

¹³ *Al-Qurʾān* 18/83–98.

¹⁴ *Chiyou* (蚩尤), “The Horned.” This association might also have arrived earlier, from Mesopotamian legends, but his depiction, associating him with wrestling professionalism, high helmets, long spears, “crossed hairs on his head,” two horns, and big crossbows—as well as his being known to have come from the desert—all started during the Qin-Han dynasties. There is no doubt, as a result, that this “horned god” is the same as the Dhû-l-Qarnayn of the Muslims. See Lucas Christopoulos, “Early Combat Sports in China and the Rise of Professionalism (475 BC–220 AD),” *Nikephoros: Zeitschrift für Sport und Kultur im Altertum* (Graz University, Austria; no. 23, 2010). “During the Qin-Han times they said that ... Chiyou had

India, Alexander perhaps became deified as the legendary Hindu god of War, Skanda-Murugan (Sanskrit: स्कन्दमुरुगन् son of Shiva and Parvati), in the *Skanda-Purana*, written around the sixth century, though the association of his name is controversial.¹⁵ Skanda (also known as Kartikeya) was “the Leader of the Armies,” had “six faces” and “twelve arms” (representing the twelve Olympian gods?), and possibly developed in India as a syncretism between the story of Alexander and Indian mythology. In Tamil Sangam literature, in the *Paripatal*, written during the second-third centuries, he is referred to as *Sevel*, “Red spear,” and as *Neduvēl*, “Tall spear,” denoting the 5–7-meter-long *sarisa* spear wielded by the Greco-Macedonians.¹⁶

In the West, his influence was also very important, examples including the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt, and in Rome, where the emperor Caracalla (198–217), who liked to compare himself to Alexander, was restoring the military *phalanx* of the king. The veneration of his feats continues to provide a model for courage, ingenuity, and persistence for “conquering” or fighting kings and military leaders from Asia to Europe, America, and Africa to this day.

In Western Europe in the Middle Ages, his fame continued through the semi-legendary King Arthur of Britain;¹⁷ British and Swiss medieval armies’ use of the halberd, similar to the Macedonian

hair on his temples like swords and spears, and horns on his head. He fought with Xuanyuan (軒轅) using Juedi and nobody could beat him. Today in the province of Ji (Jizhou 冀州), Chiyou festivities are held with two or three people together. They wear ox horns on their heads and wrestle (*Xiangdi* 相軼). The festivities of *Juedi* (角抵) were established by the Han (dynasty) and have been transmitted from that time.” *Han Wei Congshu* (Collection of Han and Wei dynasties books) 漢魏叢書; *shenyi jing* (Unusual divine scripture) 神異經; book 2 (卷二) *shuyiji* (Commentary on unusual stories) 述異記. Ren Fang (任昉), *Southern Dynasty of the Liang* (南朝梁) 上 (Shanghai, 1925). In various Syriac (and Persian) prophetic legends, Alexander had however often replaced the figure of Gilgamesh. See: Tommaso Tesei, “The Prophecy of *Dū-l-Qarnayn* (Q 18:83–102) and the Origins of the Qur’ānic Corpus,” *Miscellanea arabica* (Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2013–2014), pp. 273–290.

¹⁵ John Boardman, *Alexander the Great*, chap. VI, “The Indian Alexander” (Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 98–103. From the Introduction: “There has been some doubt about whether in Indian languages “Skanda” refers to him. Apart from the real legacy of his conquests, Alexander was also easily inserted into Indian history by some writers without much regard to any evidence or even tradition.”

¹⁶ S. R. Balasubrahmanyam, *Early Chola Art* (Calcutta: New Asia Publishing House, 1966), Part 1.

¹⁷ Antonio L. Furtado, “From Alexander of Macedonia to Arthur of Britain,” *Arthuriana*, vol. 5, no. 3, “The Historical Arthur,” (Scriptorium Press, 1995), pp. 70–86.

long spear *sarisa* (σάρισα);¹⁸ in Africa with Sundiata Keita (1217–1255),¹⁹ the warrior leader of the Mandinka tribe of Northwest Guinea who became the Emperor of Mali; in France with the mounted “Garde Impériale” of the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821).²⁰ And this passes by George Washington (1732–1799)²¹ in North America and Theodoros Kolokotronis (1770–1843) in Greece.²²

18 Edward M. Anson, “The Introduction of the *sarisa* in Macedonian Warfare,” *Ancient Society*, vol. 40 (2010), p. 60. Long halberds were used similarly to the *sarisa* by the Swiss, who usually did not wear any armor, to insure their mobility. A heroic warrior armed with a double-handed long straight sword had the mission of rushing in (and surely dying in the attempt) to make an opening in the “forest” of halberd of the adversary troops, so that his fellow soldiers could penetrate and destroy the formation from within. Halberds had also a “sickle” part to assist in taking down the heavily armored mounted warriors.

19 In the oral traditions of the Mandinka peoples of Senegal, Guinea, Mali, and the Ivory Coast, Sundiata’s epic, called the *Sundiata Keita* (N’Ko spelling: $\tilde{\text{S}}\tilde{\text{D}}\tilde{\text{I}}\tilde{\text{A}}\tilde{\text{T}}\tilde{\text{A}}\tilde{\text{K}}\tilde{\text{E}}\tilde{\text{I}}\tilde{\text{T}}\tilde{\text{A}}$) claimed that he was a successor of Alexander the Great (Dhû-l-Qarnayn). The Moroccan traveler, explorer, and scholar Muhammad ibn Battuta (Arabic: ابن بطوطة 1304–1368) and the Tunisian historian ibn Khaldun (Arabic: ابن خلدون 1332–1406), both having traveled to Mali in the century after Sundiata’s death, recorded the stories of the *Sundiata Epic* but changed the orally transmitted story to include Muslim references, because some of the descendants of Sundiata came to follow Islam. See Ralph Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 98. It is very possible that there was a pre-Islamic historical link going from Eastern Africa to Western Africa 1500 years after the death of the king, and the two historians may have added the name “Dhû-l-Qarnayn” themselves, as it matched the name of the same individual, that is, Alexander.

20 Not only did he model his elite cavalry on the companions and elite riders of Alexander, but Napoleon also declared such ideas as: “If I had remained in the East, I probably would have founded an empire like Alexander by going on pilgrimage to Mecca, where I would have prayed and kneeled.” And: “Alexander had barely outgrown his boyhood when, with a handful of men, he conquered a portion of the globe: but was this, on his part, a mere irruption, a kind of deluge? No, everything was calculated deeply, carried out audaciously, and managed wisely. Alexander proved himself at once a great warrior, a great statesman, a great lawgiver.” In J. Christopher Herold, *Mind of Napoleon: A Selection of His Written and Spoken Words* (Columbia University Press, 1955), chapter 83.

21 George Washington was a passionate admirer of ancient Greek and Roman literature, and he owned five oversized prints of Alexander the Great (e.g., *Virtue Surmounts All Difficulties*; *Crossing of the River Granicus*, 334 BC, engraved by Pieter Stevens van Gunst, Netherlands, ca. 1720). A letter from William Fairfax (1691–1757) indicates that Washington had read and was inspired by both Quintus Curtius Rufus’s *De Rebus gestis, Alexandri Magni* and Julius Caesar’s *Commentarii de bello Gallico*. Fairfax compared Washington to Alexander and Julius Caesar.

22 Theodoros Kolokotronis (Θεόδωρος Κολοκοτρώνη), a major Hellenic warrior for the freedom of Greece from the Turks, defeated Mahmud Dramali’s Ottoman army in August 1822. He always wore a Hellenistic style of helmet, with a crest, such

In Asia, Alexander's "divinization" caused him to transit from a divinized genius of war to a local quasi-religious figure, and he is still perceived as an ancestor of various tribes of Pakistan and Afghanistan today. The fact that his face is depicted alongside those of various Olympian gods on the Greco-Bactrian, Indo-Greek, and Kushana coins, still using Greek script, demonstrates his influence in Central Asia and Northern India from the second century BC to the second century of our era, before the Sassanid conquests. Surprisingly, it did not stop there, as even today several rulers of the Pashtuns, among them the Afridi (Pashto: افریدی) (Fig. 3) tribe from the Khyber mountains, not far from Tapa Shotor, claim their ancestry from Alexander the Great.²³

as were used by the armies of Alexander (and later also by the elite mounted "friends" of Napoleon). He modeled himself on Alexander and referred to himself as a "Hellenas" (Ἑλληνας), and not as a "Roman," as that was the name they bore during the Turkish occupation. N. Spiliadis, *Apomhnymonemata*, (Ἀπομνημονεύματα) (Athens 1851–1857), 1, 211, n. 2: "The old man always calls the Greek soldiers by their national name, which they had formerly lost and came to be called (*Romikoi*) Ρωμαῖοι; he addresses them in a way they can well understand (not in the language of educated people). He addresses them with the distinguished name of their ancestors which for centuries had not resounded in their ears; he reminds them that they are the descendants of heroes, and they feel proud of their origin. Now, in the whole of the Peloponnese, one does not hear any more the word "Romans" (Ρωμαῖοι) at all. Only the Turks use it, but the Greeks use the word *Hellenes* when they address each other."

23 Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans* (London 1958), chap. III, p. 44: "It is often said now upon the frontier that such-and-such a tribe, or even family, claims Grecian or Macedonian blood inherited from Alexander or his soldiers. The Afridis, for instance, have their tradition of an admixture of Greek blood. They point to their Grecian features, and indeed many young Afridi might stand as a model for Apollo, while the Afridi elder can display the gravity of Zeus. There are young Pathan warriors, not only among the Afridis, whose strong classical profile and eagle eye recall the features of Alexander himself. It is said that Alexander's army in its passage through this country left behind deserters who mingled their blood with that of the people of Tirah and the Khaibar (Khyber)."



Figure 3. Pashtun warrior of the Afridi tribe, Afghanistan-Pakistan, 1920, by Major General Walter M. Kirke, Waziristan, Northwest Frontier (1920–1937). National Army Museum, study collection. The Afridi live today in the semi-autonomous region of Dara-Adamkhel, and they claim to be direct descendants of the ancient Greco-Bactrians and the Indo-Greeks, having mainly settled around the Spin Ghar range west of Peshawar in Tribal areas of the modern-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, not far from Tapa Shotor.

The Yavana (Greeks) were still numerous and very active during the Kushana kingdom period (105–250), as shown by the mention of Agisila (Agesilaos) as the architect of the stupa of King Kanishka (Bactrian: KANHḐKI KODANO; 127–150).²⁴ Similarly, in a Buddhist chapel on the west side of the main

²⁴ See Gauranga Nath Banerjee, *Hellenism in Ancient India* (London, 1920), p. 19: “A peculiarly beautiful example of Graeco-Indian workmanship was the priceless reliquary discovered by Dr. D. B. Spooner in the remains of the great Stupa of Kanishka,

building of the Dharmarajika Stupa, in Taxila, was found a steatite vessel containing a vase of silver, offered by a Yavana Greek named "Urasakes" around the time of King Kanishka the Great. Inside the vase was a small casket of gold containing relics of the Buddha, together with a silver scroll bearing the inscription:

In the year 136 of Azes on the 15th day of the month of Asarh—on this day, relics of the Holy One (Buddha) were enshrined by Urasakes, son of Lotaphria, a Bactrian resident at the town of Noacha. By him these relics of the Holy One were enshrined in the Bodhisattwa Chapel at the Dharmarajika Stupa in the Tanuva district of Takshashila for the bestowal of perfect health upon the great king, king of kings, the divine Kushana.²⁵

In the Junnar caves of Maharashtra there are three inscriptions that refer to the (Yavana) Greeks, and one of them is signed "Iriila" or Erylaos, from the second century of our era, during the Kushana period.²⁶ The earliest mention of Yavana engineering workmanship dates from the time of Ashoka, in the Gimar Inscriptions in Kathiawad, which record that Gimar Lake was "furnished with the orders of the Yavana *Raja* Tushashpa for Asoka."²⁷ Whether after their conversion to Buddhism, or as a result of Indian-Greek families with mixed parentage, the Indo-Greeks took Indianized names, as shown in the Nasik caves, with the name of Indragnidatta, son of Dhammadeva, a Yavana from the northern city of Dattamitra (Demetrias) in Sind, and on the sculpted pillars donated by the Greeks Siladhyay and Dhama from Dhanakakata (Benkataka in the Nasik district).²⁸ Minandrasa (Menandros), the wrestler, is also

near Peshawar in 1909. This again was the work of a Greek artist, for it bears an inscription to the effect that it was made by Agesilaos, overseer at Kanishka's Vihar in the Sangharama of Mahasena."

²⁵ Banerjee, *Hellenism in Ancient India*, pp. 19–20.

²⁶ Banerjee, *Hellenism in Ancient India*, p. 30.

²⁷ In Ferhana, further north, a Greek engineer was perhaps mentioned as well in the Han books. See: Christopoulos, "Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China," p. 66.

²⁸ Banerjee, *Hellenism in Ancient India*, p. 20.

mentioned on a votive weight from Peshawar from the late Kushana period²⁹ (Fig. 4, left), and most likely, as noted in the Indian sources (below), the Greeks were also serving in the armies of Kanishka together with other people of Iranian, Indian, or partly Iranian origins (Sakas, Kambojas/Yuezhis, Palhavas/Parthians, etc.) from Bactria and Gandhara during the Kushana period.



Figure 4. Left: Kushana votive weight dedicated to “Menandros the wrestler,” with “Minandrasa,” inscribed on the top right of the panel. Belt-wrestlers holding each other’s fingers. Gray schist. Wrestling scene is from the Peshawar Museum. Right: Kizil cave n.110/13: Life of the Buddha: Siddhartha Wrestling painting, sixth-seventh centuries, Tarim Basin.

After the Persian Sassanian invasion of Central Asia, Greco-Bactrians seem still to have been living in communities in the Badakhshan mountains, and they are possibly mentioned during the late Sassanid reign of Bahram, according to G. W. Leitner: “In 614, Omar (Omar ibn al-Khattâb) conquered Persia to Khorasan, Abdulla Bin Amir (626–678), Governor of Khorasan, subdued Badakhshan, whose (Sassanid) king Bahram Shah, descendant of Alexander, became Muhhamadan, and people ditto in

²⁹ Diana Shuheng Zhang: “Minandrasa”: Kharoṣṭhī script on the upper right corner of the votive weight. It should be read from right to left. The four letters are, from right to left respectively, “mi – na – ndra – sa.”

compulsion."³⁰ It was indeed Abdulla Bin Amir who had defeated Bahram, brother of Isfandiyadh (also brother of Farrukhan, Sukhab I, and Sharam), who also asked for peace with the Muslims.

Marco Polo (1254–1324)³¹ met members of the surviving Greco-Bactrian royal dynasty of the Badakhshan province in the mountains of Afghanistan and bordering Pakistan and Tajikistan, about six hundred years after Bahram, and they told him that they descended directly from Alexander's marriage with the daughter of Darius, and for that reason all the kings of that line called themselves "The one with two horns," or *Dhû-l-Qarnayn* (*Zulkarnain*), in memory of their famous ancestor Alexander (who wore two ram horns on his head after he had visited the temple of Zeus-Ammon in Libya). It is most likely that it was following the conquest of the Muslims at the time of Bahram that the Greco-Bactrian "mixed clans" of Badakhshan had to change their names into Arabic ones. The Kushana period wall painting of Fayaz Tepe, in Uzbekistan, illustrates clearly the local association with a divinized Alexander, depicting his "horns" and a halo around his head (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Wall painting of "horned" Alexander the Great with a halo around his head. Third–fourth centuries. Kushana period. Fayaz Tepe. National Museum of Uzbek History, Tashkent.

³⁰ G. W. Leitner, *Dardistan in 1895* (Woking, 1895), p. 38.

³¹ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, chap. XXV.

Emperor Babur (1430–1483) and his “Memoirs”³² confirmed these claims by recording that some rulers of Badakhshan were said to have a family lineage from Iskandar.³³ Mirza Haidar Dughlat (1499–1551), the author of *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, who was a relative and contemporary of Babur, wrote that Shah Sultan Muhammad Badakhshi (1464–1508), ruler of Badakhshan, was also said to be a direct descendant of Iskandar *Zulkarnain* (*Dhû-l-Qarnayn*–Alexander the Great), son of *Filikus Rumi* (Philip II of Macedon).³⁴ He gave one of his daughters, named Shah Begum, to Yunus Khan (1416–1487), who was probably known by the Chinese under the name of Hazhi Ali (哈只阿力). Yunus was a descendant of Genghis Khan, through his son Chagatai Khan, and the maternal grandfather of Emperor Babur, who was himself a descendant of Tamerlane (Timur 1336–1405) and founded the Mughal Empire (Persian: شاهان مغول 1526–1857).³⁵

Elphinstone Mountsuart (1779–1859), who went to the Kabul area in 1808–1809, mentioned that the ruler of Darwaz claimed a similar ancestry from Alexander.³⁶ John Wood (1811–1871), who was, like Mountsuart, sent to the Kabul Valley by the East India Company, wrote in 1838, in his book, “A Journey to the Source of the River Oxus,” that the local ruler of Talikhan, a city on the borders of Badakhshan province, claimed his ancestry from the Greeks of Alexander as well.³⁷ Alexander Burns (1805–1841) discovered that the princes of Shignan and Wakhan had the same claims,³⁸ and Henry Georges Raverty

32 Annette Susannah Beveridge, *Zahiru'd-din Muhammad Babur* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998).

33 Babur, Emperor of Hindustan, *Memoirs of Zehûr-Ed-Dîn Muhammed Bâbur, Emperor of Hindustan*, vol. 2 (Leyden, 1921), translated by John Erskine, William King, and Sir Lucas White, Jan. 1, 2023.

34 Muhammad Haidar Dughlat, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi: A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia* (London: Sampson Low Marston and Company, 1895).

35 In the *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* it was observed that: “I had heard that Yunus Khan was a Moghul, and I concluded that he was a beardless man, with the ways and manners of any other Turk of the desert. But when I saw him, I found he was a person of elegant deportment, with a full beard and a Tajik face, and such refined speech and manner, as is seldom to be found even in a Tajik.”

36 Elphinstone Mountsuart, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1815).

37 John Wood, *A Journey to the Source of the River Oxus* (London: J. Murray, 1872).

38 Alexander Burns, *Travels into Bokhara: A Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia* (London: John Murray, 1834).

(1825–1906), serving in the British Indian Army, heard similar things from the prince of Roshan.³⁹ The conclusion is that most of the family-connected kings and rulers of the region of Badakhshan linked themselves hereditarily with Alexander the Great, the Greco-Bactrians, and the Indo-Greeks, as noted by Augusto S. Cacopardo.⁴⁰ Today, besides the Afridi, and perhaps other Pashtuns,⁴¹ and Punjab or Himachal Pradesh Indians⁴² (and the Monguors and Liqun people of Gansu, China),⁴³ the main tribal peoples who claim themselves to be descended from the mixed Alexander armies and the Greco-Bactrians are the *kafir* (non-Muslims); the very "easy going" people of the Hunza Valley in Pakistan, on the way to the mountain roads leading to Kashgar and China; two Islamized tribes of Tajikistan named the *Iskandari Pamirski*, or the "Alexandrians of the Pamirs"; and the *Iskandari Kuli*, or the "Alexandrians of the Lake," who live around Iskander Kul Lake, at 2195 meters, in the Fann Mountains. The ones in

39 Henry Georges Raverty, *Notes on Afghanistan and Part of Baluchistan* (1881–1888).

40 Augusto S. Cacopardo, "Are the Kalasha Really of Greek Origin? The Legend of Alexander the Great and the Pre-Islamic World of the Hindu Kush," *Acta Orientalia*, vol. 72 (2011), p. 49. Whatever the writer's motivations are, this substantial research paper is tainted with the evident intention of expelling any historical Hellenic heritage from the local people of Badakhshan and dismissing the reality of a synergy of various cultures and people around the figure of Alexander. He concludes, concerning the transmitted family traditions of the area, that (p. 66): "There is really no grounds on which the idea of a Greek origin of the Kalasha can be based." There exists a continuing thread of statements from Western researchers to the effect essentially that the ancient Hellenes and their civilization have simply vanished from the surface of the Earth and that even the Greeks of today have nothing to do with their ancestors.

41 Sadaf Firasat, Shagufta Khaliq, Aisha Mohyuddin, Myrto Papaioannou, Chris Tyler-Smith, Peter A. Underhill, and Qasim Ayub, "Y-chromosomal Evidence for a Limited Greek Contribution to the Pathan Population of Pakistan," *European Journal of Human Genetics* 15 (1) (January 2007): 121–126.

42 Kivisild et al., "Origins of Indian Castes and Tribes," *American Journal of Human Genetics*, vol. 72, pp. 313–332 (2003). "Given the sample size of 325 Indian Y chromosomes examined, however, it can be said that the Greek homeland (or European, more generally, where these markers are spread) contribution has been 0%–3% for the total population or 0%–15% for Punjab in particular. Such broad estimates are preliminary, at best. It will take larger sample sizes, more populations, and increased molecular resolution to determine the likely modest impact of historic gene flows to India on its pre-existing large populations." In Himachal Pradesh, the village of Malana, situated at 2652 meters, the people claim to descend from Alexander and his soldiers.

43 See my article: Lucas Christopoulos, "Dionysian Rituals and the Golden Zeus of China," *Sino-Platonic Papers* no. 326 (2022), pp. 55–68.

Hunza belong to the Burusho people,⁴⁴ living also in Nagar, Gilgit, Balistan, Jamur, and Kashmir, India, and all these must be a mixture of Greeks, Yuezhi, Indians, Sogdians, and Saka, who were part of this Helleno-Buddhist warlike coalition living in Central Asia, Eastern Central Asia, and India, all revolving around the figure of Alexander the Great.

Regarding eastern Central Asia, Albert Grünwedel (1856–1935), who participated in the German Turfan expedition (1905–1907), found a painting on the left wall of cave 4 of the Kizil caves that represented the armored Tocharian Vajrapani with mid-length hair and a helmet made in the same style as the one shown on the second-century Kushana goddess Athena exhibited in Lahore Museum.⁴⁵ This syncretic Buddhist painting of the mid-fourth-fifth centuries shows Vajrapani wearing a helmet with two horns,⁴⁶ holding a *chauri*,⁴⁷ and having facial features recognizable as being influenced by Gandharan art, having been partly modeled from earlier Helleno-Buddhist representations of Alexander-Vajrapani (Fig. 6).

44 De-Shuang Huang, Vitoantonio Bevilacqua, Juan Carlos Figueroa, and Prashan Premaratne, eds., *Intelligent Computing Theories: Ninth International Conference, ICIC 2013, Nanning, China, July 28–31, 2013, Proceedings* (Springer). A number of genetic studies of the Pashtuns conducted recently by researchers of various universities and research groups. The Greek ancestry of the Pashtuns of Pakistan was investigated. In this study, the claim of the three populations of the region, i.e., the Pashtuns, the Kalash, and the Burusho, to have descended from the soldiers of Alexander, is considered.

45 Athena, schist, 82.5 × 33 × 13 cm, second century, Lahore Museum.

46 In Tocharian A, “horn” is *kror*, and in Tocharian B it is *kroriyai*. *Karse* (deer, stag) must reflect a PTch **kʷh2só-* “horned one,” an exocentric derivative of **kérh2s* “horn,” with appropriate reduction of the (now) unstressed vowel. One should compare Greek *kéras* “horn” and its derivative *kerasós* “horned” (as if from **kérh2só-* with analogical full vowel). Douglas Q. Adams, *A Dictionary of Tocharian B* (Leiden Studies in Indo-European, no. 10), xxxiv (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999).

47 The *chauri* (or *flabellum*) is a fly whisk that in Gandharan Buddhist art symbolizes the sweeping away of mental distractions and ignorance. It is held by Vajrapani.



Figure 6. Left: Kizil Cave 4, left wall. Representation of a long-haired and armored Vajrapani, mid-fourth-fifth centuries, most likely made after the same earlier models of Alexander-Vajrapani as the one from Tapa Shotor. Right: Drawing in situ by Albert Grünwedel. Vajrapani is wearing armor similar to that depicted on the Orlat bronze plate and on later Tang dynasty elite mounted warriors. He holds the two-handed long straight sword of the cavalry of the Tocharians and the Buddhist *Vajra* at the same time, combining both the military strength of the Buddhist aristocracy and inner *Dharma*.

The assimilation of Alexander from the Indo-Greeks to the Kushana, as a guardian of the Buddha, or, in India, as a protector, began mainly for political reasons. The Indo-Greeks needed to counter the ideological antagonism of the traditional Brahmins of India, so they sought a model that could conform the Hellenistic heritage to the beliefs of Central Asia and Northwest India. The Greeks of King Seleucos Nikator (Greek: Σέλευκος Νικάτωρ 305–281 BC) became allied with the Jain worshipper King Chandragupta Maurya (Sanskrit: चन्द्रगुप्तमौर्य 340–298 BC),⁴⁸ followed by his son Bindusara (297–273 BC), and then by Ashoka Maurya (Sanskrit: अशोकः 304–232 BC), the first Buddhist king of India, known as a *Chakravartin* king (Sanskrit: चक्रवर्ति), or “a Ruler Turner of the Dharma wheel.” It appears that, in this period, Greek military power and resources became allied and assimilated with the Buddhist kings of Northern India and Central Asia.

The Greeks were known as “Yavana” (Sanskrit: यवन) by the Indians, the term being a back-formation from the Prakrit word “Yona” (योन), which is derived from the old Persian “Yauna” (Old Persian: 𐎱𐎠𐎺𐎢), originally denoting the Greeks living in Ionia (Greek: Ἴωνία), or “Ionians,” “Iones” (Greek: Ἴωνες), on the eastern coastal areas of the Aegean Sea in Anatolia, from the time of the early Mycenaean colonies neighboring the Hittites.⁴⁹ The term “Yauna” first occurs in the Behistun inscription of Darius I, dated to 519 BC. As the Ionian Greek travelers were the first Greeks to visit India, the term was probably initially used for them and gradually extended later to include not only the Greeks but also any group of people traveling to India either from Western Asia or the eastern Mediterranean (the eastern Roman world) and of Greco-Roman culture, similarly to the *Daqin* people (*Daqin ren* 大秦人), so named by the Chinese. In medieval Indian literature, the word Yavana was used as a synonym of *Mleccha* or “foreigner.”

The Yavanas established themselves as a community in Bactria and Northwest India about one thousand years before the *Ramayana* era. It is mentioned in *Balakanda* of the *Ramayana* (Sanskrit: रामायण) that the sage (Rishis) Vasishtha (Sanskrit: वसिष्ठ) had allied with Kambojas (Yuezhis), Pahlavas

48 Strabo (Στράβων), *Geographica*, Book XV 2.9.

49 The oldest references to the Greeks in this region in foreign records are to be found in the Hittite archive of 1400 BC known as the “Indictment of Madduwat.” In it is mentioned that Attarsiya, a fifteenth-fourteenth century BC military leader, came from the Ahhiya (Achaean). Attarsiya was Atreus, described as a “man of the Ahhiya,” or a “man of the Achaeans.”

(Parthians), Yavanas (Greeks), and Sakas fighters to counter King Vishvamitra (Sanskrit: विश्वामित्र). In the *Adi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, it is stated that a Yavana king was also present at the *Svayamvara* (marriage) of Panchali, the main female protagonist of the *Mahabharata*. The *Sabha Parva* also records that Nakula (Sanskrit: नकुल), one of the twin sons of the King Pandu, had subjugated Yavanas, Sakas, Pahlavas, and Kiratas warriors, making all of them pay tribute. The *Mahabharata* generally groups the Yavanas together with the Kambojas, the Sakas, and the Pahlavas, and it categorizes them as foreign *Mlecchas*. The *Shanti Parva* and *Anushasana Parva* also mention Yavana kings. The *Udyoga Parva* records that Yavanas, Kambojas, and Sakas supported the Kauravas (Sanskrit: कौरव) at war under the leadership of the Kamboja (Yuezhi) King Saddakshina or Sadashkana (the son of Kujula Kadphises).⁵⁰ Saddakshina was "Vima Takto" *Soter* (Bactrian: Οσημο Τακτοο; 80–90), ruling from Northwest India, Bactria to the Tarim, where he expanded eastward with an army of seventy thousand men, attacking the Han troops and their general, the adventurer Ban Chao (Chinese: 班超, 32–102) at Turfan in 90 AD.

The Helleno-Buddhist cosmopolitan values of Alexander and Ashoka later coalesced into an ideal antagonistic to the Brahmins, and Indian texts mention that the Hindus were killed and persecuted by the foreign Yavana invaders.⁵¹ It was, however, following the assassination in 180 BC of Brihadratha Maurya by his general Pushyamitra Shunga, that the Buddhists perhaps were persecuted and many monks executed by the Brahmins of the Shunga dynasty (185–73 BC). It is at the time of the rise of the Shunga that Demetrios of Bactria, "The Invincible" (Greek: Δημήτριος Ἀνίκητος; 222–167 BC), known by the Indians as *Dha(r)mamita* (The one who will die in the cause of the *Dharma*), conquered India as far as Pataliputra,⁵² naturally being seen by some Buddhist Indians, together with the Greeks, as guardians of the Buddhist monks and the Buddhist faith, because this was a direct cultural and political continuation from the time of Ashoka Maurya.

⁵⁰ Kudjala Kadphises was a follower of Shiva, having the title *Mahiswara*.

⁵¹ Johannes Bronkhorst, *From Alexander to the Guptas*, IV. "Conclusions: How Did the Brahmins Win?" *Handbook of Oriental Studies*, Section 2 *South Asia* (Brill, 2006), vol. 30, pp. 404–412.

⁵² D. C. Sircar, "The Account of the Yavanas in the *Yuga-Purāna*," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 95, issue no. 1–2 (Apr. 1963), p. 13.



Figure 7. Statuette of a horse or elephant rider, most likely Demetrios of Bactria, third century BC. Hellenistic. Supposedly from ancient Athribis, Egypt. Bronze. Height 9 3/4 in. (24.8 cm). Edith Perry Chapman Fund, 1955 (55.11.11). The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

There is also a theory that Ashoka was perhaps Diodotes I himself, as many elements tend to support that they were indeed very similar.⁵³

Curiously, the *Pillars* of King Ashoka mentions all the Greek kings of the former empire of Alexander, except the one who was supposedly his closest neighbor, that is, Diodotes I *Theos*,⁵⁴ and no real coins of Ashoka have been discovered, while coins of Diodotes have been found in the regions where Ashoka was supposedly ruling.⁵⁵ The Yavana (Greek) invasion of Pataliputra through Madhyamika, Mathura, Panchala, and Ajodhya, as referred to in the *Mahabhashya* and the *Yuga Purana*, took place when King Demetrios was alive and Pushyamitra had just ascended the throne.

The *Puranas* (Sanskrit: पुराण), or Hindu literature, written between the fifth and the eleventh centuries, evidently considered Alexander and the Helleno-Buddhist foreigners with abomination, describing them as responsible for all possible atrocities.⁵⁶ The *Mahabharata* (Sanskrit: महाभारत), from which came the name of the legendary King Bharata (Sanskrit: भरत), and to whom the Indians refer as the name of India itself (Bharata), cemented the national history while the Brahmins were fighting the "foreign" Greeks, Sakas, Kambojas (Yuezhi), and Pahlavas (Parthians), the multicultural Helleno-

53 See Pal Ranajit, "An Altar of Alexander Now Standing Near Delhi," *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity*, 2006.

54 F. W. Thomas, "Ashoka," in *Cambridge History of India 1: Ancient India*, ed. E. J. Rapson (Cambridge 1922), p. 453.

55 Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India* (London and New York, 1922), p. 71: "Mauryan emperors had only produced simple punch-marked coins, while even petty Indo-Greek kings issued splendid coins with their image." P. 70: "The period of Indo-Greek rule continued for some time, and this was, in fact, a period of great splendor." "This combination of domination and commerce was copied from the Indo-Greek precedent by the Sakas and Kushanas who became their heirs in Northern India." Coins of Diodotes I were also found in Taxila and Seistan, where he was not supposed ever to have been.

56 "Yavanas will be [present] here for [the propagation of their] religion, [the enjoyment of] pleasures and [the accumulation of] wealth. They will certainly not be crowned kings. The said rulers will perform evil deeds under the influence of the age (i.e., the Kali age). And killing women, children and cattle and slaughtering one another, those rulers will rule the earth in the concluding part of the Kali [age]." See D. C. Sircar, "The Account of the Yavanas in the *Yuga-Purana*," p. 15.

Buddhist coalition forces of Northwest India during the Kushana period.⁵⁷ The *Manusmṛti*⁵⁸ (Sanskrit: मनुस्मृति) of the second century (?) is also very clear about the view held of the Greek conquerors (and other foreign people from non-Indian origins) from the Hinduist point of view, as they are described as *Vrātya ksatriyas*.⁵⁹

In that same tradition, modern Indian nationalism as known through some local historians, and even the famous Sadh Guru (with his diatribe against “Alexander the fool” perhaps pleasing his local customers),⁶⁰ perpetuates of course that image, maybe also pushed by the memories of the British Empire, but the reality has been, it seems, very different for the Indians of the Mauryan, and the Indo-Greek period,⁶¹ with the result that Indo-Greek culture is a model of universalism to all the world, up to this day, and Indian civilization made it possible.

Many Indian kings were independent during the Indo-Greek rule (such as the king of Mathura) or were foreign *Satrapas*, as the Greeks were a minority ruling caste within a large Indian-populated territory, even if the Greeks themselves perhaps had also many Saka Iranian mounted troops and allied Indian kings to support them. They may have been accepted in a sort of partnership by the Indian population. Indo-Greek cities (Fig. 8) enjoyed a wealthy lifestyle, with arts, freedom of religion and

57 “The Brahmins and Visamitra launched a war against the foreign Kshatriyas. Bharata (Sarvathamana), the son of King Dhushyanta, mentioned that he killed many Yavanas (Greeks), Sakas, and Pahlavas (Parthians). Gautamiputra Satakami (first-second century AD) broke the resistance of the foreign Kshatriyas and destroyed a good number of them in a massacre of remarkable violence.” *Mahabharata, Udyoga* 20, p. 158.

58 *Manusmṛti*, 10. 43–5.

59 *Ksatriyas* (Sanskrit: क्षत्रिय) is the second Indian caste, that of the kings, warriors, and nobles of northern India. *Vrātya* (Sanskrit: व्रात्य) is a man of one of the first three castes who did not have the *Saṃskāras* (Sanskrit: संस्कार), the purificatory rites (especially the investiture with the sacred thread) performed over him, making him an outcast. Greeks (and other Helleno-Buddhist *ksatriyas*) were also later referred to as *dasyus* (Sanskrit: दस्यु), or “bandits.”

60 The *guru* seems merely to reflect a narrow-minded local nationalism targeting foreign historical figures, but he provides a good example of what might have happened in the past, in the minds of some Brahmins: “What has he done that is of any consequence or any good to any other human being? What has he done of any consequence or any good to himself? He lived an utterly idiotic life and died a miserable man. He is called *Alexander the Great*, but they forgot his last name—it should be *Alexander the Great Idiot*.”

61 See W. W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 258–260.

leisure (theatre), and commerce and trade that came from an extensive international system of goods going from Eastern India to Burma, Laos, Thailand, Yunnan, and Sichuan in the East to Ptolemaic Egypt in the West.



Figure 8. Ruins of an Indo-Greek city in Jammu and Kashmir, from the time of King Menandros. Photo by Arunansh B. Goswami, for the *Greek Reporter*, 2023.

Zhang Qian (Chinese: 張騫 195–114 BC), the Western Han adventurer and Chinese ambassador, when he finally arrived in Bactria through the Tarim Basin, observed that goods from China were already being imported from Sichuan through Yunnan to Northern India, passing through Burma.⁶² That trade

⁶² “When I was in Daxia (Bactria), I saw bamboo canes from Qiong (邛) and cloth made in the province of Shu (蜀). When I asked the people how they had gotten such articles, they replied. Our merchants go to buy them in the markets of Shendu (India). Shendu, they told me, lies several thousand *li* southeast of Daxia. The people cultivate the land and live much like

route, later called the “Silk Road,” was already in place at the time of Menandros, having been established by Euthydemos and Demetrios, connecting India with Egypt, Central Asia, and China through India. The double-humped Bactrian camel depicted on his coins demonstrates that the trade route connection through Bactria and the Tarim Basin existed under his reign.

The respect of the Greeks for Indian culture and their assimilation to it, together with the numerous intermarriages resulting in children from Helleno-Indian origins may have sustained a positive opinion among the local population toward the Buddhist Greek king Menandros, though some Brahmins might have been enraged to see the Hellenes ruling over the top Indian caste instead of themselves.⁶³ The claims of a strong antagonism between the Buddhists and the Brahmins, however, were exaggerated by later Indian writers. For example, Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar (Marathi: देवदत्त रामकृष्ण भांडारकर 1875–1950), an Indian archaeologist and epigraphist who worked with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), noted that the Greek King Antilakidas, “Bringer of Victory” (Greek: Ἀντιλακίδας Νικηφόρος 115–95 BC), who had his capital city in Taxila, had sent his minister Heliodoros (Greek: Ἡλιόδωρος), son of Dion, to pay a visit and offer a gift in the form of a dedicatory pillar to the king Bhagabhadra (114–83 BC) of the Shunga dynasty in Vidisa. Heliodoros was a worshipper of Vasuveda (Vishnu or Krishna), and a *Baghavata*, having studied with the local Brahmin masters.⁶⁴ Antilakidas’s coins depict Indian deities, perhaps to assure good diplomatic ties with his Shunga neighbors or according to his own personal beliefs or both.

the people of Daxia. The region is said to be hot and damp. The inhabitants ride elephants when they go into battle. The kingdom is situated on a great river.” In Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian), Dawan Liezhuan (Transmission from Bactria): 《大宛列傳》 臣在大夏時，見邛竹杖、蜀布。問曰：『安得此？』大夏國人曰：『吾賈人往市之身毒。身毒在大夏東南可數千里。其俗土著，大與大夏同，而卑溼暑熱云。其人民乘象以戰。其國臨大水焉。』

63 Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p. 260: “This is further shown by the Indian citizens in the cities, and by Menander, like Demetrios, choosing an Indian city to be his capital. Doubtless the Greek hoped to be the predominant partner, but in fact, the Indian element in the empire may have had the preponderance; for the bulk of the population it can have made a little difference whether their king was named Menander or Ashoka, except that we may hope that Greek rule was milder. Nothing quite like this ever happened elsewhere in the Hellenistic world; it probably went beyond anything of which Alexander had dreamt.”

64 Bimala Churn Law, ed., *D. R. Bhandarkar Volume* (Calcutta: Indian Recherche Institute, 1940), p. 225.

In Taxila, King Apollodotes I “Savior” (Greek: Ἀπολλόδοτος Α΄ Σωτήρ, 180–160 BC), who later participated in the conquest of India together with Demetrios “The Invincible,” before then employed images of both religions on his currency: the elephant, a Buddhist symbol; the crescent star (*Chaitya* symbol), with the *Stupa* arched-hill symbol; and the zebu bull (*Nandipada*), the symbol of Shiva in Hinduism,⁶⁵ most likely to maintain peace and harmony between them during his reign. Menandros II “The Just” (Greek: Μέανδρος Β΄ Δίκαιος, 90–85 BC), the grandson of Menandros *Soter*, had the sitting lion on his coins, similar to the ones sculpted on the Pillars of Ashoka and the gigantic one of Amphipolis guarding the tomb of the Argead kings in northern Greece.

Appolonius of Tyane (Greek: Ἀπολλώνιος; Sanskrit: अपालुन्य 15–100 AD), a Greek adventurer and acrobat born in the Roman Empire who was devoted to spiritual and physical practices, visited India and, according to Philostratus, “remembered his former incarnation, for he shared the Pythagorean belief of the migration of human souls from body to body, both animals and human beings. He preached a rigid ascetism, and condemned all dancing and other diversions of the kind; he would carry no money on his person and recommended others to spend their money on the relief of the poor classes. He visited India, where he consorted with the Brahmins.”⁶⁶

During his visit in India, Appolonius saw that, in Taxila, at the “Temple of the Sun,” was kept a sacred elephant called “Ajax” (Aias, Greek: Αἴας), and there were images of Alexander made of pure gold and others of Porus, though the latter were of black bronze. The black, bronze Porus and the Sun-gold Alexander were probably related to Greek cults combining chthonic and heavenly figures in the same temple, as one was revered at night in a pit, and the other during daylight on an altar.⁶⁷

There of course had been such massacres previously during Alexander’s conquest, and he usually did not spare many of those who had dared to stand against him, including Greeks. But following his war against the Indians, two Indian kings, Poros (Pauravas tribe leader, in Sanskrit: पौरव) and Taxiles

65 The sign appears also as *Tritana* (The Three Jewels) in Buddhism. Vima Kadphises (113–127) will have the same symbolism on his coins.

66 F. C Conybeare, trans., *Philostratus’ The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* in two volumes (London, New York: Loeb Classical Library, 1912): I, II. For the life of Apollonius, see Maxime Rovere, *Le Livre de l’amour infini. Vie d’Apollonios, homme et dieu* (Paris: Flammarion, 2024).

67 Conybeare, trans., *Philostratus’ The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, II, XXIII, p. 181.

(Ambhi), became his allies. And the later achievements of the Indo-Greek period, including the instauration of Buddhism as a state religion in India, Central, and Eastern Central Asia, should be looked upon as a major achievement in human arts, sciences, architecture, engineering, military, and philosophical development. Ashoka himself is known for horrible massacres on his fellow Indians, and he had killed his own elder brother and many of his half-brothers and concubines before his conversion to Buddhism. Based in Gandhara, he also evidently had Greek artists, philosophers, scientists, engineers, concubines, athletes, acrobats, political advisors, ambassadors, and soldiers at his own court, and he most likely spoke the Greek language as well.⁶⁸ Dhamarakkita, the Greek Buddhist monk and teacher of Nagasena, was probably the best example of this cultural admixture, because (similar to King Menandros) he knew the Indian classics as well as the Hellenic ones. A great deal of philosophical speculation, discussion, and argument must have taken place before an agreed-upon Buddhist truth could be established with all its details elaborated. Regarding Dharmaraksita (meaning in Sanskrit:

68 See "Visits of Monique L. Cardell Borg at the Pillars of Asoka. Les Inscriptions De Piyadasi par E. Senart, 1886. Texte dans le domaine public. Corrections modernes: Romilla Thapar, A translation of the Edicts of Ashoka," pp. 255–257: "Indeed, the king dear to the *Devas* wishes to see security reign for all creatures, respect for life, peace, and gentleness. Now this is what the king dear to the *Devas* considers to be the conquests of *Dharma*. It is in these conquests of *Dharma* that the king dear to the *Devas* finds his pleasure, and in his empire and on all its borders, in an extent of many hundreds of leagues. According to Ashoka, *Dharma*, or "Piety," now triumphed from the Hellenistic world to southern India. Now, it is conquest through *Dharma* that the Beloved of the Gods considers the best conquest. And this (conquest by *Dharma*) was won here, on the borders, and even 600 *Yojanas* (approx.) from here, where the king of the Greeks (Yonas) Antiochos reign, and beyond Antiochos where the four kings: Ptolemy, Antigone, Megasthenes, and Alexander, likewise to the south, where the Cholas, the Pandyas lived, and as far as Tamraparni. Likewise, here in the imperial territory, among the Greeks and the Kambojas, the Nabhakas and the Nabhapaktis, the Bhajas and the Petenikas, the Andhras and the Pulindas, everywhere we conformed to the instructions of the *Dharma* of the king dear to the *Devas*. Wherever envoys of the king dear to the *Devas* have been directed, there also, having heard, from the king dear to the *Devas*, the duties of *Dharma*, one now zealously complies and complies with the instructions of *Dharma*. This is how the conquest spread to all places. I found an intimate joy there; such is the contentment that comes from the conquests of *Dharma*. But in truth, contentment is a secondary thing; and the king dear to the *Devas* only attaches great value to the fruits that one secures for the next life. This is why this religious inscription was engraved, so that our sons and grandsons do not believe that they must make some other new conquest. Let them not think that conquest by the sword deserves the name of conquest; that they only see the shock, the violence. Let them only consider the conquests of *Dharma* as a true conquest. They are valid for this world and for the other; let them delight in the pleasures of religion, for these have their price both in this world and in the next."

“Protected by the Dharma”; Pali: Dhammarakkhita), his original name may have been “Demokritos,” not the famous philosopher (Greek: Δημόκριτος, 460–370 BC), but a later namesake. Curiously, the main Buddhist philosophy, appearing about three hundred years after the Buddha during the reign of Ashoka in Kashmir and Tapa Shotor, while Dhammarakkhita was alive (and at the court of Ashoka), was the *Sarvāstivāda* (Pāli: *Sabbatthivāda*; Chinese: *Shuoyiqie you bu* 說一切有部). The “pan-realism” school of *Sarvāstivāda* included *atomism* in its philosophy, as for example concerning the definition of the atom:

An atom (*paramāṇu*, Sanskrit: द्रोणी) is the smallest *rūpa* (“form,” Devanagari: रूप). It cannot be cut, broken, penetrated; it cannot be taken up, abandoned, ridden on, stepped on, struck or dragged. It is neither long nor short, square nor round, regular nor irregular, convex nor concave. It has no smaller parts; it cannot be decomposed, cannot be seen, heard, smelled, touched.⁶⁹

Demokritos based his philosophical theory on the *atomos* (Greek: ἄτομος), meaning literally “indivisible,” or “uncut,” “undivided,” around 430 BC. He believed that the atoms were uniform, solid, hard, incompressible, and indestructible, and that they moved in infinite numbers through empty space. The *atomos* existed not only for matter but also as the expression of the human soul in the form of fire-made *atoms*. His theory of mental perception depended on *eidola*, or images, made of thin layers of atoms, that are constantly sloughed off from the surfaces of macroscopic bodies and carried through the air. The doxographer Aetius,⁷⁰ of the first-second centuries of our era, reports that Demokritos and Leukippos (Greek: Λεύκιππος) had the view that thought as well as sensation are caused by images impinging on the body from outside, and that thought as much as perception depended on images.

Demokritos was committed to an enlightened path in which the good was held to be an internal state of mind rather than something external, according to Pieter S. Hasper.⁷¹ Thought resulted from an interference with a special concourse of soul atoms, probably in the head, which Demokritos called

69 Bhikkhu KL Dhammaji (法光), *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* (The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2015), p. 227.

70 Aetius (Greek: Ἀέτιος) 4.8.5 DK 67 A 30.

71 Pieter Sjoerd Hasper, *Leucippus and Democritus* (Routledge Companion to Ancient Philosophy, 2013), p. 322.

nous (Greek: νοῦς). Various emanations carried from the object to the soul atoms are disturbed by the entry into the eye of air impression stamped by the *eidola* (εἰδῶλα), or the *images*. Thought occurs when *eidōla* themselves penetrate the mind.⁷²

Sautrantika Sthavira Srilata explains the *Sarvāstivāda* concerning the perception of the objects by the mind in similar terms:

It is after having grasped a present [object] that [the mind] can swiftly infer to and from: It can infer that such and such an effect is produced by a past cause of such and such a kind. This cause in turn arose from such and such cause and so on, corresponding to the remote [past]. It is completely from a process of inference that one has the vivid perception [of a past object] as it were present (如現證得).⁷³

It is recorded, however, in the *Mahāvamsa* (XII, *Dīpavamsa* VIII.7) that Dhamarakkhita had taught the Pali-recorded *Aggikkhandhopama-sūtra*, or “The Mass of Fire Comparison.” The *Aggikkhandhopama-sūtra* makes seven Platonic-like philosophical questions comparing a “strong man” action to Buddhist faith, as for example: (question no. 3) “What do you think, monks? Which would in fact be the better? If a strong man were to strike the nether-quarters with a sharp, oil-cleaned sword? Or, to derive enjoyment when rich *kshatriyas*, Brahmins, or householders press the palms together in prayer?”

After Ashoka, the next Buddhist *Chakravartin* king was the Indo-Greek Menandros, “The Savior” (Greek: Μένανδρος “Σωτήρ,” 160–130 BC), or Milinda (Sanskrit: मिलिन्द). The eight-spoke wheel, venerated by Buddhists, appeared on his bronze issues of coins, causing the Buddhist faith and its related philosophies (see the “Questions of King Milinda/Menandros,” the *Milindapahna*) and arts, to flourish, especially in Gandhara, northern India, and then in Sri Lanka. It was during his reign that most of the realistic Buddha worship statues appeared and were transmitted further east from Mathura to Burma, Laos, and Thailand.⁷⁴ One of the most important of these is there to this day: the “Emerald

⁷² Peter J. Bicknell, “Democritus’ Theory of Precognition,” *Revue des Études Grecques*, 1969, p. 322.

⁷³ Dhammjoti (法光), *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ The figure of Herakles on a seal dating probably from the late Indo-Greek or Kushana period has been found in the upper

Buddha" (*Phra Kaeo Morakot*, Thai: พระแก้วมรกต), attributed to Nagasena, the Buddhist teacher of King Menandros, who had "magically" made it. It was made in precious stones instead of gold and silver to avoid the cupidity of humans who would have melted it,⁷⁵ according to "The Sheaf of Garlands of the Epochs of the Conqueror," or *Jinakalamali*.⁷⁶

To conclude this account of the antagonism between the Brahmins and the Buddhism, we note that the historian Awadh Kishore Narain (1925–2013) always tended to divide the Greeks from the Indians culturally during the reign of the Indo-Greeks, even doubting the Buddhist faith of King Menandros, while both literature and archeological findings demonstrate the opposite: "The overthrow of the Maurya dynasty by Pushyamitra was not a result of a Brahmin reaction, and there is no substantial evidence that he persecuted the Buddhists. We are unable to understand why the title *Soter* on Menander coins meant that he was the *Saviour* of the Buddhists and of all who stood for the old Maurya power against the usurper Pushyamitra, when we know how common was this epithet with the Indo-Greek kings."⁷⁷ The epithet *Soter* was indeed common among the Indo-Greeks and the Greco-Bactrians, but it had also a religious connotation, as the role of these kings was to represent the divine power on earth and to rule accordingly; in the case of Menandros, this was the Buddha, as written in the *Milindapanha* and as shown on his coins and on other Indo-Greek archeologic findings in cities build during his rule in northern India.

N. N. Gosh also contradicts Narain by combining information from various Indian written texts, as according to these, Pushyamitra Sunga had offered one hundred *dinaras* for each head of a *Sramana*

Thai-Malay peninsula. See Brigitte Borell, "Herakles on an Intaglio Seal Found at Phu Khao Thong in the Upper Thai-Malay Peninsula," in *Zeitschrift für Archäologie außereuropäischer Kulturen* (2017). Much later, a Greek adventurer from Kephallonia named Konstantinos Gerakis (Κωνσταντίνος Γεράκης 1647–1688) became the chief minister of King Narai the Great (Thai: สมเด็จพระนารายณ์มหาราช), the twenty-seventh monarch of the Ayutthaya Kingdom and the most famous king of the Prasat Thong dynasty.

⁷⁵ The statue is most likely made of jasper, rather than emerald or jade, and clothed in gold.

⁷⁶ French translation of the *Jinakalamali* in George Cœdès, "Documents sur l'histoire politique et religieuse du Laos occidental," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 25 (1925), pp. 54, 112–115 ; pp. 144–150.

⁷⁷ A. K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 99.

(Sanskrit: श्रमण; Chinese: *Shamen* 沙門; Greek: *Sarmanas* Σαρμᾶνας)⁷⁸ living in Sagala. Later, King Menandros, as a Buddhist, went against the will of Pushyamitra, who had wished to make a horse sacrifice, to demonstrate Buddhist compassion and rejection of killing.⁷⁹ Perhaps the best restoration of the society of that period of mixed Greek and Indian elements and the realization of the thought of Alexander, appears in the work of William Woodthorpe Tarn (1869–1957), with the exception that while talking about the idealistic part of the Hellenistic cosmopolitan spirit, he forgot that there was indeed a geopolitical struggle in India over religion, even if it was only superficial.

Such a thing is, to my mind, impossible. It would presuppose a state of war between the Brahmins and Buddhism which did not exist, though there may have been a good deal of tension; and it would run counter there to the deepest feelings of Hellenism. No Hellenistic king would ever have supported one religion against another, for one of the

⁷⁸ *Sramana* is the mostly non-Brahminic conception of monk or ascetic, such as the Buddhists, the Ajivikas, or the Jains in India. Strabo (15.1.59) speaks about *Garmanes* (Γαρμᾶνας), misspelling the *Sarmanes* of Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates*. i. 305: “And of these there are two classes, some of them called *Sarmanae*, and others *Brahmins*. And those of the *Sarmanae* who are called *Hylobii* neither inhabit cities, nor have roofs over them, but are clothed in the bark of trees, feed on nuts, and drink water in their hands. Like those called *Encratites* (Greek: ἐγκρατής) in the present day, they know not marriage nor begetting of children.”

⁷⁹ N. N. Ghosh, “Do the References to the Yavana Invasion of India Found in the *Yugapurana*, *Patanjali*, *Mahabhashya* and the *Malavikagnimitra* Form the Evidence of One Single Event?,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 9 (1946), pp. 93–103. “With this background it is possible to understand Menander’s Indian policy vis-a-vis Pushyamitra Shunga in clear perspective. The growing empire of the Shungas abutted on Menander’s eastern outpost of Mathura from Taxila/Takshashilā (Sanskrit: तक्षशिला) in the north and Vidisa in the south. This was the political motive of his conflict with the Shungas. Added to this was his religious affiliation, which rallied round his banner the Buddhist elements against the Shunga rule. He challenged Pushyamitra’s imperial claim when the latter was preparing to perform a horse sacrifice and the imperial forces guarding the sacrificial horse were camping somewhere in Central India above Vidisa and below Mathura. The challenge was well-timed. It was a resistance to the Horse Sacrifice, bound to invoke enthusiasm of the Buddhist adherents. The nearness of these Imperial forces to Mathura, where a strong Greek force resided, gave him a strategic advantage which he was bound to utilize. According to the *Malavikagnimitra*, the battle took place on the bank of the Sindhu in which the Yavana (Hellenic) force was defeated. A close view of the map of that part of the country will show that the reference in the drama as to the battle ground was correct” (p. 101).

cardinal tenets of Greeks in the Hellenistic centuries was that no man's religion was anyone's business but his own, and except Antiochos IV the rule never seems to have been broken.⁸⁰

The antagonistic reaction that the cosmopolitan cities founded by Alexander, the student of Aristoteles (Greek: Ἀριστοτέλης; 384–322 BC),⁸¹ characterized as they were by free commerce and freedom of religion, may have received from local regionalism in India, is completely countered by the assimilation of Buddhism shown at Tapa Sator. The simple view of that monument raises deep questions within ourselves regarding our perceived cardinal position in religious, cultural, or racial terms. It is clear that some prefer to embrace nationalism, dogmatism, ideological identity, or radical destruction, as the Taliban did. If such a position is not acceptable, we should understand that Hellenism was not about destruction, but rather the expression of the idea of a universal and cosmopolitan man bringing the highest sciences and knowledge available, material or spiritual, wherever and from whomever he finds them. Individuals can then develop their science, art, or commerce freely, without racial or caste discrimination, and that brilliant and to this day unsurpassed ideal was brought to India by Alexander.

⁸⁰ Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p. 176.

⁸¹ See the "Ideal cosmopolitan city" of Plato in his "Republic" (Greek: Περὶ πολιτείας), which must have influenced Alexander in his will to assimilate all the citizens of the world in international cities without disparities, and, especially because of the "politics" (Greek: Πολιτικά) of his own mentor, Aristoteles (Aristotle), extending the citizenship of the cities to any national and from any status of background. Tony Burns ("Aristotle, Stoicism and Cosmopolitan Political Thought," *Cosmopolitanism: Past and Present University of Dundee*, 6–9 June 2007) quotes Heyman: "According to Heyman, juridical equality for Aristotle is based on the notion of 'free status.' Aristotle is of the opinion that 'all free men are arithmetically equal' specifically 'with respect to that status.' In Heyman's account, Aristotle maintains that 'to injure another violates his freedom and disturbs the equality between injurer and victim, giving rise to an unjust gain and loss.' Heyman maintains that for Aristotle the role of corrective justice is 'to annul this injustice and thereby restore equality.'" From Steven J. Heyman, "Aristotle on Political Justice," *Iowa Law Review*, vol. 77 (1991–1992), p. 860.

2. HERAKLES IN NICHE V₂ OF TAPA SHOTOR

Antisthenes was living in Piraeus, and he used to walk eight kilometers every day to listen to him (Socrates). He adopted the man's hardiness and emulated his impassivity, and thus he originated the Cynic way of life and with his "Great Herakles, of Strength" treatise, later Greeks regarded him as the founder of the Cynic school, largely because of his asceticism.⁸²

Alexander, who liked to compare himself to Herakles,⁸³ claimed that he was the latter's descendant through Temenos (Greek: Τήμενος), king of Argos, and his Argead dynasty (Greek: Ἀργεάδαι), and he was often represented with a lion scalp or a lion helmet. The Greek king who conquered India was Demetrios "The Invincible," and he was shown wearing symbolically the scalp of an Indian elephant on his head (Fig. 7), as Alexander had the Nemean lion, to connect himself with the Indian mythological heroes. Demetrios had colonized India together with his general Apollodotos "The Savior," and they are both described by Strato as having subdued "more tribes than Alexander."⁸⁴ See Map.

82 Diogenes Laertius, *Antisthenes*, Book VI.

83 Among numerous examples, see the Greco-Bactrian period Alexander-Herakles head decorating a sword scabbard, found in Takht-i Sangin (Tajik: Тахти Сангин, or the "Throne of Stone"), Temple of the Oxus, third century BC, from Tajikistan.

84 Strabo, *Geography* 11, XI, 1.



Map. Greek kingdoms of India at the time of Menandros *Soter*, around 150 BC. In yellow, Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek territories. In green, raided territories, with Indian allied kings.

One of the most famous representations on Demetrios's coins is that of Herakles crowning himself with a laurel wreath, as a reward for his feats and hardships conquering India. On the currency of his father, King Euthydemus, there is an image of Herakles of the type represented in Tapa Shotor, showing him sitting on a throne covered with the Nemean lion skin and holding his club in his hand, as a sign of settled divine kingship. On the coins of the later King Agathocles and Euthydemus II (Greek:

Εὐθύδημος Β', 180–171 BC), his representation of Herakles (Greek: Ἡρακλῆς, known later as Herakilo, Bactrian: Ηρακιλο by the Kushana) is similar, and the god had a primary position in Euthydemid dynastic symbolism, perhaps because of emphasizing feats of athletic strength and conquest. Herakles then appears as a model of strength and physical achievement, but he had also the meaning of inner virtue, endurance, rigor, and austerity of the mind.

Because of his physical strength, Herakles was the main god of the *palestra*,⁸⁵ together with Hermes and Eros. However, for the athletes he was the primordial model, and this was not only because of his physical force. I have already emphasized the transmission of combat sports practiced in the cities of Central Asia after the conquests of Alexander the Great in an earlier article.⁸⁶ Greek wrestling (*pale*, Greek: πάλη), boxing (*pygmachia*, Greek: πυγμαχία), and *pankration* (Greek: παγκράτιον) among the Parthian and Kushana aristocracy, continued and was an imperative aspect of their education, as important as literature; thus the Buddhist warrior caste of the Kushana was involved in Greek sports with Hellenistic referents, and Herakles was the main one (Fig. 7). In the Pali text of the *Milindapanha*, there is particular mention of a professional rule on Hellenic wrestling in the Olympics, regarding pinning one's opponent on his back:

Just as the wrestler who is able the most quickly to lift his opponent up, and make him fall flat on his back, is considered the ablest pugilist—even so, O Venerable Nāgasena, it is that one of these two things—virtue and vice—which most quickly bears fruit that is, to the world, the more powerful of the two. (So, contends the king.)⁸⁷

85 *Palestra* is the building where the youth formed by Hellenic education practiced combat sports. Hesychius of Alexandria's Lexicon. Kurt Latte, *Hesychii, Alexandrini Lexicon*, (1953): [παλαίστρα] ὅπου οἱ παῖδες ἀλείφονται. "Palestra, where children rub themselves down (with oil)" (vol. III) p. 9, n. 138. All the cities built by the Greco-Macedonians in Asia had a gymnasium or *palestra*. Russell L. Sturzebecker, *Athletic-Cultural Archaeological Sites in the Greco-Roman World. Europe-North Africa, Middle East. Photo Atlas* (West Chester, PA, 1985).

86 Lucas Christopoulos, "Greek Combat Sports and Their Transmission to Central and East Asia," *Classical World Review*, Johns Hopkins University, n. 106.3 (2013).

87 *Milindapanha*, 3: Dilemma as to which is the more powerful, virtue or vice (*kusalākkusala balavatarapaṇā*).

Niche V2 of Herakles, at Tapa Shotor (Figs. 9, 10), dating from the second century, has been extensively investigated by Zetaryalāi Tarzi.⁸⁸ The head of Herakles is sober with a moustache and a beard, in a resting posture that reflects serenity, together with his characteristic muscular and athletic features (the combat-sports type of body), indicating physical and mental strength at the same time. His "wrestler's ears," are indeed those of a wrestler, indicating his regular training in various Hellenic combat sports; his face the one of a boxer, or a *pankratist*, who has received many punches and kicks; and he wears the skin of the Nemean Lion as his symbol of reference. The head of the lion is attached on his left shoulder, with the skin disappearing around his back and reappearing on his thighs. The realism of the head of the lion together with the anatomical design of Herakles are successful and show an artistic prowess that makes it a major masterpiece of the late Hellenistic art of Northwest India. At Tapa Shotor, he is holding the *vajra* (Sanskrit: वज्र), instead of his traditional club as in Greece and the rest of the Hellenistic world, afterward also in Rome.

88 Zetaryalāi Tarzi, "Vajrāpaṇi-Héraclès de la niche V2 de Tape Shotor de Haḍḍa, Afghanistan," *Ktèma Année*, vol. 25 (2000), pp. 163–170.

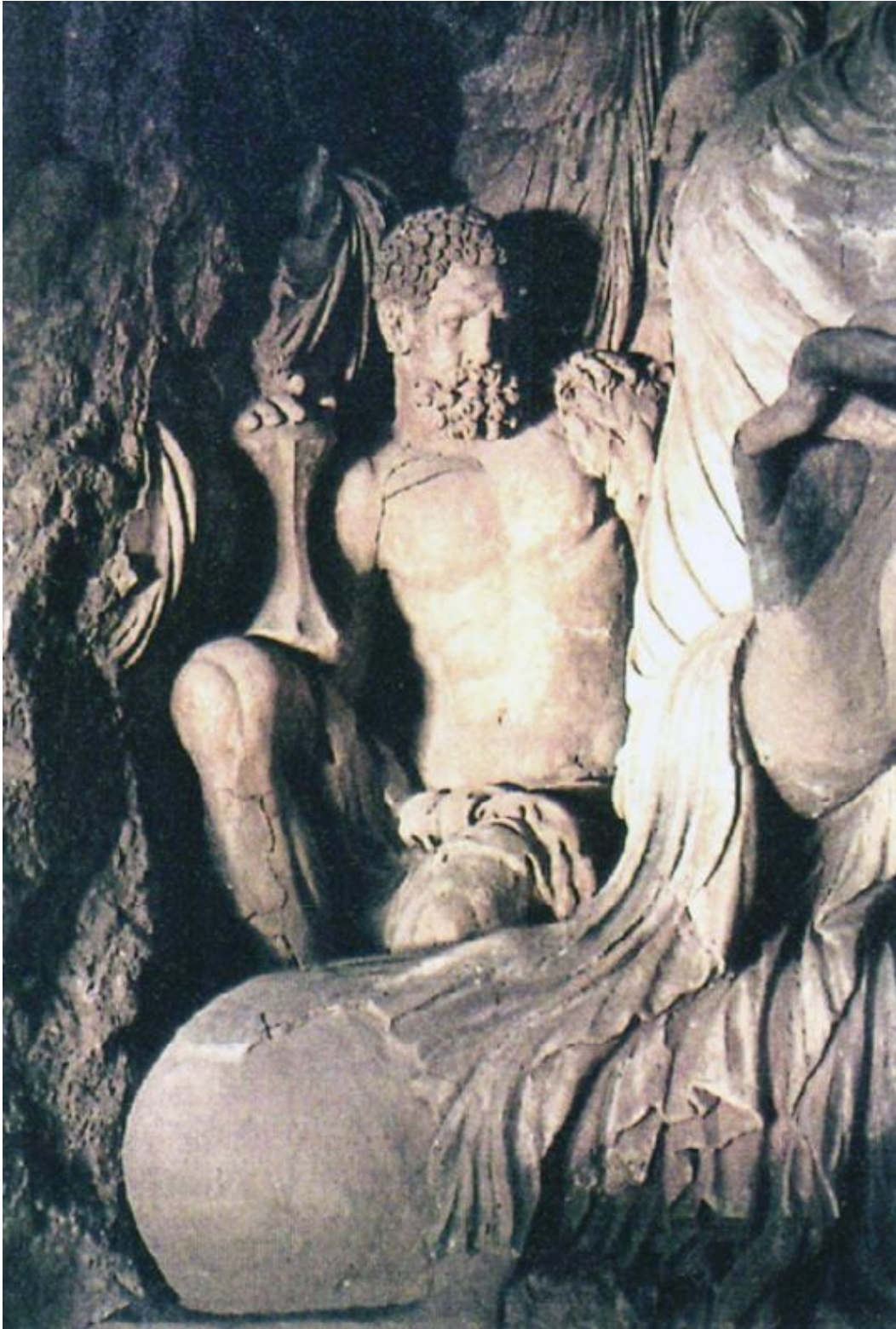


Figure 9. Herakles-Vajrapani standing on the right side of the Buddha, from Niche V2.
Photo, 1991, from the personal archive of Z. Tarzi.



Figure 10. The First Sermon at Benares. Tapa Shotor. Niche V2, 1.25 × 1.40 m. Clay. Herakles-Vajrapani is at the right side of the Buddha, and Tyche-Lakshmi/Hariti is on his left. Photo, 1991, from the personal archive of Z. Tarzi.

In India, the *Vajrapani* is a very old symbol in early Buddhist thought, whose origin is unclear, but a bit like the Zoroastrian concept of *Fravashi*.⁸⁹ *Fravashi* is also identical with the Hellenic concept of the god *Agathodemon* (Greek: ἀγαθὸς δαίμων), or a sort of “guardian angel,” attaching itself to the individual’s body at birth and leaving at its death. In its original form *Agathodemon* had the function of personal servant of Zeus *Soter* (Zeus Savior), and here, represented next to the goddess Tyche *agathe* “Good fortune” (Greek: Τύχη Ἀγαθή), his spouse, it is clearly a Greek mythological representation in Tapa Shotor, with Indian correspondent elements around the new Buddha “Savior” replacing Zeus *Soter*. *Tyche* in the Kushana period will also be known as *Ardoksho* (Bactrian: Ἀρδοκχο), and perhaps she was assimilated as the Indian goddess of fortune, *Lakshmi* (Sanskrit: लक्ष्मी), the spouse of Vishnu, or/also

89 John Marshall, *A Guide to Taxila* (Cambridge University Press, 1918), p. 77, n. 2

the Buddhist goddess Hariti (Sanskrit: हारीती), holding the *Cornucopia*, or the Hellenic “Horn of (goat) Amaltheia” (Greek: κέρασ της Αμάλθειας)⁹⁰ among the Indo-Greeks and the Kushanas. Herakles-*Vajrapani* is, however, always shown surviving the death of the Buddha in Gandhara art representations (Fig. 11).⁹¹



Figure 11. Vajrapani-Herakles during the passage of the Buddha in *Parinirvana*. Gandhara, second century. Below, the *Erotes* are holding a snake-like *chthonic* garland (or a snake-like rope: see Lucas Christopoulos, “Dionysian Rituals and the Golden Zeus of China,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* no. 326, pp. 53–54). Tokyo National Museum. Photograph by the author.

The assumption that: “The adaptation of tutelary guardians reveals the virtuosity of the artists of Hadda, borrowing foreign motives at leisure, to adapt them to Buddhist legend,”⁹² sounds partially

90 The horn of the goat Amaltheia, “Tender goddess,” who nourished Zeus when he was a child in Crete. The divine goat skin was offered to Zeus after her death and became the *aegis* (Greek: αἰγίς).

91 Mario Bussagli, *L'art du Gandhara* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1996).

92 *The Geography of Gandhāran Art: Proceedings of the Second International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 22–23 March 2018*, edited by Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart (Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd., 2019), p. 149.

wrong to me, as there was a complete fusion with the Indo-Greeks, and the differentiation became completely obsolete, as these were not "foreigners" any longer.

Concerning the *vajra* held by Herakles, Etienne Lamotte (1903–1983) had clearly understood the meaning of its symbolism:

Thus, alongside the protective function afforded *Vajrapani* in Buddhist thought, the figure has a quasi-martial role connected with the use of force necessary to effect conversion or submission and one inseparable from the *vajra*, as the thunder used as an offensive and defensive weapon at the same time.⁹³

In Buddhist philosophy, the *vajra* is also a symbol of the victorious power of permanent Buddhist knowledge over the impermanence of illusion and evil. In India, like the thunder of Zeus, it is an attribute of Indra (Devanagari: इंद्र). The *vajra* is the cutting force of the adamant truth, the Buddhist *Dharma*, ready to crush every enemy—but was it very different from the club of Herakles?

The clearest explanation regarding Herakles's virtue comes from Xenophon (Greek: Ξενοφών, 430–355 BC), the student of Socrates (Greek: Σωκράτης, 470–399 BC) and an army leader who went to Persia to fight as a mercenary, afterward writing the story of the "Ten Thousand" in his *Anabasis* (Greek: ἀνάβασις). Xenophon knew about physical hardships, too, and in another book, known in Latin as "*Memorabilia*" (or *Apomnemonematon* Greek: Ἀπομνημονευμάτων),⁹⁴ he describes the story of Herakles during his teenage years, sitting at a crossroads, thinking about which way to go. From one road came a voluptuous woman, and she proposed that Herakles follow her and have pleasures all the time, eat nice meals, and take money from others without working, and that her name was "Vice." The road that crossed it led a different direction, and from that road came another woman. This one was sober and not so attractive, and she said to the young Herakles that if he followed her, he would have to train in hardships, to work, and to do good to Hellas so to receive good from it, and that her name was "Virtue." The young Herakles chose to follow Virtue and, through his challenges and works, he won a place in

⁹³ Etienne Lamotte, *Histoire de Bouddhisme Indien: des Origines a l'Ere Saka* (Institut Orientaliste, 1967), p. 29.

⁹⁴ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34.

Heaven and reached immortality. This association of Herakles and the principle of virtue in Cynic and Stoic philosophy is clearly explained by Diogenes Laertius in his chapter VI, on Menedimos the Cynic (Greek: Μενέδημος ο Κυνικός, third century BC):

(104) They teach, as we see in Antisthenes' *Herakles*, that the end of man is to live according to virtue, a doctrine which they have in common with the Stoics. Indeed, there is great affinity between the two sects; for the Stoics called the Cynics a shortcut to virtue, and Zeno of Kition (Greek: Ζήνων ὁ Κιτιεύς, 334–262 BC) put this thought into practice... (105) They also admit (for example as Antisthenes and his *Herakles*) that virtue can be taught, and that once acquired it is never lost; that the wise man is worthy of being loved; that he does not sin, loves those who resemble him and does not trust in fortune.

A similar “short cut to virtue” and enlightenment through ascetic practices and the discipline of austerity was later perceived by Xu Yun (虛雲 1840–1959) as characteristic of the *Chan* (禪) Buddhist monks, because, compared to the other Buddhist doctrines that relied on philosophical knowledge, it took less time to get practical results, though he believed that both were necessary.

The Indo-Greeks were literate in both Indian and Greek texts, and they are shown in their writings to have been aware of the philosophical association and that the similarities with Buddhism were more than coincidental. The first analogy in which the psychological aspect of Herakles is compared to his physical one was raised in *Phaedo* with Socrates (*Phaedo* 89c) referring to the relationship between Herakles and Iolaus at the beginning of his discussion on misogyny in the middle of the dialogue that bears his name. But the student of Socrates who will insert Herakles much more into his philosophy was Antisthenes (Greek: Ἀντισθένης, 440–362 BC), the first Cynic philosopher, with three treatises attributed to him by Diogenes Laertius (Book VI), taking the god as a main reference and a model: *The Greater Herakles of Strength* (Greek: Ἡρακλῆς ὁ μείζων ἢ περὶ ἰσχύος), *Herakles or Midas*, (Greek: ὧ Ἡρακλῆς ἢ Μίδας), and *Herakles Wisdom or Strength* (Greek: Ἡρακλῆς ἢ περὶ φρονήσεως ἢ ἰσχύος).

Herakles in Classical Greece did not possess the *vajra* yet, as he received that in India, but his double nature (physical and philosophical) made him equal to a Buddhist *Vajrapani* in that he had a

similar achievement, that is, the conquest of oneself by fighting desires, fears, and other uncontrolled states of mind.⁹⁵ The teachings of Diogenes of Sinope (Greek: Διογένης ὁ Σινωπεύς, 403–323 BC) were very similar to those of the Buddhist monks, and his students had their hair shaved as well:

Euboulos (Greek: Εὐβουλος) reports in the work entitled *Diogenes Sold* (Greek: Διογένους Πράσις), that he raised the children of Xenias in the following manner: after the literary exercises, he showed them how to ride a horse, shoot a bow, use the sling, and throw the javelin. He then led them to the *palestra*; but he was careful not to entrust them to the master to exercise them like athletes; he himself exercised them moderately, until a slight redness colored their cheeks and only as a hygienic measure. He made them learn by heart the stories of poets and other writers, as well as his own works, taking care to give them a succinct summary on each point to facilitate the work of memory. At home, he accustomed them to domestic service, and taught them to be content with light food and to drink water. He led them with him through the streets, their heads shaved to the skin, without any ornament, without tunics, barefoot, in silence and with downcast eyes; he also led them hunting. For their part, they took great care of Diogenes and recommended him to their parents.⁹⁶

95 For the Stoics, it is distress (*lupe*), or envy, rivalry, jealousy, compassion, anxiety, mourning, sadness, troubling, grief; fear (*phobos*), or sluggishness, shame, fright, timidity, consternation, pusillanimity, bewilderment, and faintheartedness; lust (*epithumia*), or anger, rage, hatred, enmity, wrath, greed, and longing, or delight (*hedone*), or malice, rapture, and ostentation. For the Buddhist, this is similar to the “Five Precepts” (*pañcaśīla*): No killing, no fraud, no sexual misconduct, no lies, no intoxication.

96 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book VI.2 “Diogenes,” 30–31. Εὐβουλος δέ φησιν ἐν τῷ ἐπιγραφομένῳ Διογένους Πράσις οὕτως ἄγειν τοὺς παῖδας τοῦ Ξενιάδου, μετὰ τὰ λοιπὰ μαθήματα ἰππεύειν, τοξεύειν, σφενδονᾶν, ἀκοντίζειν· ἔπειτ' ἐν τῇ παλαίστρᾳ οὐκ ἐπέτρεπε τῷ παιδοτρίβῃ ἀθλητικῶς ἄγειν, ἀλλ' αὐτὸ μόνον ἐρυθήματος χάριν καὶ εὐεξίας. [31] Κατεῖχον δὲ οἱ παῖδες πολλὰ ποιητῶν καὶ συγγραφέων καὶ τῶν αὐτοῦ Διογένους, πᾶσάν τ' ἔφοδον σύντομον πρὸς τὸ εὐμνημόνευτον ἐπήσκει. Ἐν οἴκῳ τ' ἐδίδασκε διακονεῖσθαι λιτῇ τροφῇ χρωμένους καὶ ὕδωρ πίνοντας, ἐν χρῶ κουρίας τε καὶ ἀκαλλωπίστους εἰργάζετο καὶ ἀχίτῳνας καὶ ἀνυποδήτους καὶ σιωπηλοὺς, καθ' αὐτοὺς βλέποντας ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς. Ἐξήγε δ' αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐπὶ κυνηγέσια. Οἱ δὲ καὶ αὐτοῦ Διογένους ἐπιμέλειαν ἐποιοῦντο καὶ πρὸς τοὺς γονεᾶς αἰτητικῶς εἶχον. Ὁ δ' αὐτὸς φησι παρὰ τῷ Ξενιάδῃ καὶ γηγράσαι αὐτὸν καὶ θανόντα ταφῆναι

Two famous “Greek philosophers,” who were first of all qualified warriors and athletes (as had also been such men as Xenophon, Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras, etc.), became engaged in bloody battles on horseback and on foot for many years, as they endured the worst hardships while following Alexander to India as companions.⁹⁷ Their names were Pyrrhon of Elis (Greek: Πύρρων ὁ Ἡλείος, 360–270 BC) and Anaxarchos (Ἀνάξαρχος 380–320 BC). Because, unlike the later Indo-Greeks, they probably could not speak Indian languages, they may have received a less deep transmission of the teachings from their Indian Buddhist or Brahmin masters. Yet they seem to have learned the teachings very well and practiced the precepts fully. Diogenes Laertius (chap. X–XI) gives a brief summary of their lives and thought. Pyrrhon, wishing to detach himself from all sensorial attachment to and even any opinion in the mundane world, decided to live a poor and simple life in Elis, in the Peloponnese, from which he had come. After a long journey of wars and adventures, he hoped to attain *ataraxia* (Greek: ἀταραξία), or “unperturbedness,” “equanimity,” an “at-peace state of mind,” and he founded the philosophical

πρὸς τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ.

⁹⁷ Most of the famous Greek philosophers followed the gymnasium and *palestra* education system, and some of them were very skilled. Plato was famous for his wrestling skills (Diogenes Laertius, Book III, 4), and Pythagoras had excelled in boxing during his youth, even beating the adult-category fighters (Diogenes Laertius, Book VIII). The Hellenic association with the mind was however emphasized for the first time by Plato (*Theaetetus*, 169a–b: “It is not easy, Socrates, for anyone to sit beside you and not be forced to give an account of himself and it was foolish of me just now to say you would excuse me and would not oblige me, as the Lacedaemonians do, to strip; you seem to me to take rather after Sciron”). Mixing the skills of wrestling with philosophy and dialogue argumentation was a very Socratic thing. Wrestling was also compared with the art of rhetoric during the Eastern Roman Empire, as by Libianus of Antioch (314–394), for example, who also practiced wrestling and “used his wrestling tricks against his mentor” in his dialectic, according to a letter of his relative Bassianus in 360. Nilus Ankyranus (?–430), the disciple of John Chrysostom, made the same association of soul and physical combat in his *Narratio* (3.10–14), saying that when teaching young students combat sports, the *paidotribes* (“trainers”) should provide them instructions as to how to resist their passions and should “attach them to the rock (of virtue),” as mariners would attach their boats against the storms (of passion) in the ports. In China, the same association would most likely start after the institutionalization of Greek wrestling that took place after Qin-Greco-Bactrian contact: Zhuangzi in his *Renjianshi* 人間世 (Man in the World), also makes that association between his philosophy and the art of wrestling: “Skillful wrestlers begin with open trials of strength, but always end with masked techniques (to gain the victory); as their excitement grows excessive, they display much wonderful dexterity” (且以巧鬥力者，始乎陽，常卒乎陰).

school of Pyrrhonism. The "ten tropes" (Greek: δέκα τρόπους) of Pyrrhonism,⁹⁸ were indeed very similar to Buddhist precepts.⁹⁹

Anaxarchos even seems to have put into practice the Buddhist precepts of impermanence that he had learned in India. In Cyprus, there was a tyrant called Nicokreon (Greek: Νικοκρέων, fourth century BC), who became an ally of Ptolemy. Nicokreon personally hated Anaxarchos because of a joke about him that Anaxarchos had made publicly during a banquet in the city of Tyr, at which many generals were assembled. Nicokreon later captured Anaxarchos, who had been forced to land on Cyprus, and he ordered that he was to be pounded to death in a mortar. The warrior-philosopher told him directly, with irony, "You can pound the bag of Anaxarchos, but you cannot pound me!" Nicokreon, enraged again, threatened him with cutting out his tongue. Anaxarchos then bit out own tongue out completely and spat it out in the face of the tyrant, demonstrating his total rejection of the material world.

The multiple representations of Herakles in India and Central Asia during the rule of the Greco-Bactrians, the Indo-Greek, and the Kushana reveal the deep impact of Greek education among local Iranian or Indian people, seen clearly in the Herakles of Mathura (Fig. 12).

⁹⁸ The "ten tropes" system was devised by the Pyrrhonic philosopher of the first century named Aenisidimos (Greek: Αἰνησίδημος).

⁹⁹ See: Adrian Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonian Buddhism: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Routledge, 2021).

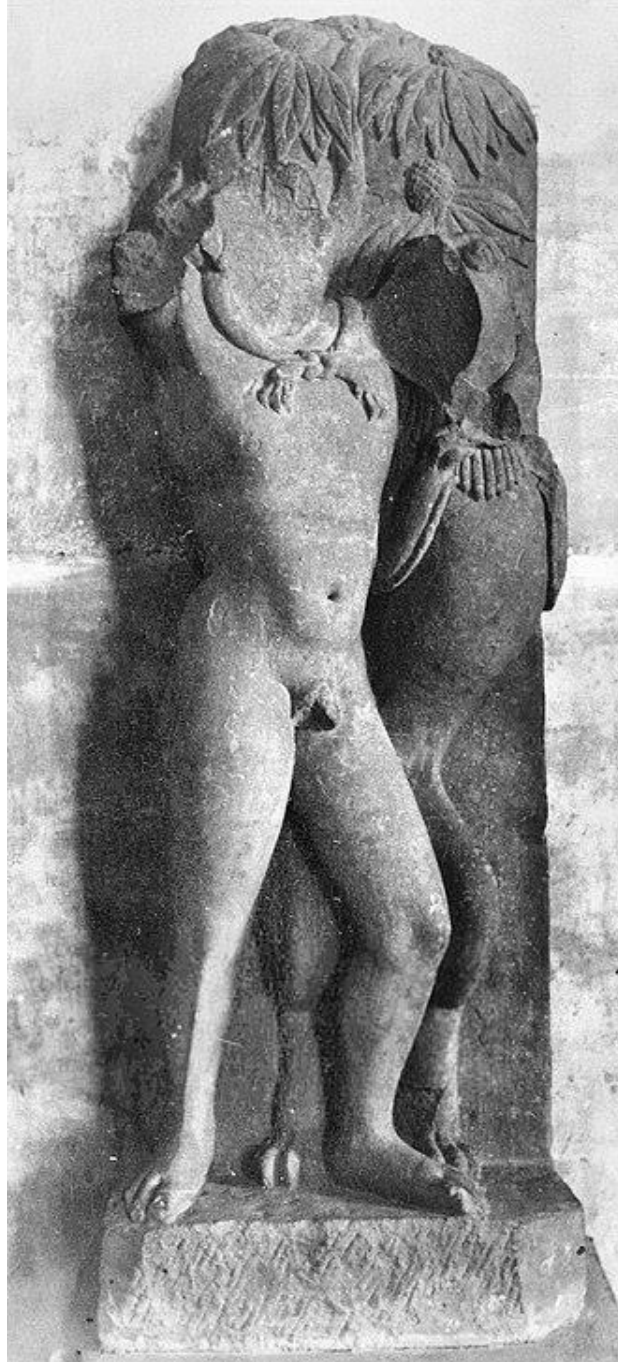


Figure 12. Mathura Herakles, second century. Red sandstone, 74 cm tall. Indian Museum, Kolkata.

In the athletic education system of the gymnasium, local elements were comprehensively involved, and this from the time of the Seleucid empire. We can then understand why the god Herakles

became so important from Parthia to Kushana. During the Parthian times, Greeks were still, it seems, in charge of the gymnasium and the *palestra*, as they were involved in athletic professionalism as a national standard and requirement.¹⁰⁰ The Parthians were more engaged in archery competitions and added this to their games.¹⁰¹ But Herakles was still a major god among the people, symbolizing austerity and strength. His figure as depicted during the Parthian reign resembles the one we have seen at Tapa Shotor. The statue of Hercules sculpted on a mountain in Behistun (Persian: هرکول تندیس), Iran (Fig. 13), as a gift to the satrap Kleomenes by the Seleucid governor Hyakintos, in 148 BC, also reclines comfortably, receiving the harvest of his works on earth, his club left on the wall, together with his Parthian *gorytos* (leather bow-case); he is holding a bowl so as to receive his reward, reminding us of the story by Xenophon.



Figure 13. Herakles from Behistun Mountain, Iran. The statue was sculpted in 148 BC and dedicated in the name of “Herakles *Kallinikos*” (Ἡρακλῆν Καλλίνικον, “Herakles glorious in victory”). 147 cm long.

¹⁰⁰ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.12. See also Christopoulos, “Greek Combat Sports and Their Transmission to Central and East Asia,”

¹⁰¹ Christopoulos, “Greek Combat Sports and Their Transmission to Central and East Asia,” pp. 433–434.

A similar statue representing Herakles standing, dating more than two hundred years later, and made from the same model by the Parthians, is holding the same bowl, and it can be seen today at the Tokyo National Museum (Fig. 14, left). What these Parthian depictions of Herakles seem to tell us is: “Work hard, practice, fight, and face challenges with austerity, both mental and physical. Remain unmoved, calm, and victorious over adversity, and you will finally receive these fruits as your reward.”



Figure 14. Left: Parthian Herakles from Hatra, Iraq, first-second centuries. Limestone. Tokyo National Museum. Photograph by the author. Right: Tri-color Tang dynasty pottery figure of a tomb guardian with the attributes of Herakles. Shaanxi Historical Museum.

We can also understand that this struggle for physical challenges was coupled with psychological and philosophical precepts, as the mind is not divisible from body. This Hellenic model melded marvelously with the Indian one.

That assimilation was made possible by the Greek *palestra* educational system, and such a building and system was constructed in every city built by the Greeks in Asia, just as were the agora, the theater, and the royal buildings. In the case of India, Indian thought seems to have gradually replaced the Greek, as the Indo-Greeks, now culturally cut off from the Western world, had become part of the local culture, and had been so for several generations, living as they did in a predominantly Indian environment, yet they still transmitted the knowledge inherited from their glorious ancestors from the Kushana period, and they do so up until this day.

Combat sports were assimilated along with philosophical concepts in the war-like Helleno-Buddhist aristocracy that had issued from Central Asia, and, accordingly, Buddhism developed its own "philosophic combat sports," much praised by the populations of Asia. That is a major reason why Herakles was important and extremely popular among them, especially in the Hellenistic East, where he eventually replaced the figure of Gilgamesh and became identified with Verethragna (see below). During the second century, Greek athletics, symbolized by Herakles, started to gain popular interest from the Kushana kingdom (Fig. 15) in India to Asia Minor, Africa, and Greece.



Figure 15. Wrestler's votive weight depicting Herakles holding the Nemean Lion skin and his club, shown together with the royal Lion. On the reverse is a wrestling scene (possibly of Prince Siddhartha) with Herakles-Vajrapani, who is perhaps holding a type of *rhabdos* (referee whip stick). Schist. 26–34.9 cm. Gandhara, first century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The second century after Christ was a period of renaissance for Greek Athletics. Italy, the Greek mainland, Greek settlements in Asia Minor and Africa—All experienced a general revival of interest in athletic training, competitions and athletic studies ... the four major festivals of Greece seem to have regained their old brilliance with throngs of visitors present. ... For those who would learn of the historical development of Greek athletics from its beginnings, the second century is an important one. Many of the learned men of that period, especially those whose origin was Asia Minor, followed the general trend toward antiquarianism and devoted time to a study of Greek athletics in the past.¹⁰²

During the late Olympic games, most winners in combat sports were no longer Greek. The earlier disregard shown by the Romans toward Greek athletics was the main reason they were not as developed in the western part of the Empire, being perpetuated only in small Greek colonies in Italian cities or in Greece itself, and they had already lost their past association with military training.¹⁰³ The last Olympic victor was a Parthian-Armenian prince named Varaztad, who won in boxing in 385 AD.¹⁰⁴ According to

¹⁰² Rachel Sargent Robinson, *Sources for the History of Greek Athletics*, Engl. transl. (Chicago Ridge, IL: Ares Publishers, Inc., 1927, revised ed., 1955), pp. 174–175.

¹⁰³ Greek athletics was not popular in Rome, being mainly categorized as a practice for what they saw as “little effeminate Greeks” (*Graecari, Graeculi*), “crazy about their gymnasiums.” Instead, gladiator fights, bloody and deadly fighting shows, met their standards for their Circus. The exotic pastimes of the gymnasia had an even worse reputation after the emperor Nero (66–68 AD) participated in the Panhellenic games and returned to Rome with 1,800 victory wreaths (Suetonius, *Nero*, 23–26, 53). Julius Cesar himself, when fighting during the Civil Wars against Greek mercenaries, declared that he would face “an army educated in the Greek gymnasia, listless because of their *palestra* (combat sports) courses and hardly able to bear arms” (Lucian, *Phrasalia* VII, 279). Seneca, the Roman from Spain, similarly wrote in his later years (62–65): “I do not include wrestling and the whole course of study compounded of mud and oil in my Liberal Arts curriculum; otherwise, I should have to include perfumers, cooks and the others who cater to our senses. For what is there “liberal” about the students of these subjects who are ravenous takers of emetics, whose bodies are fat while their minds are emaciated and torpid? Or do we really think that this sort of training is liberal for our young folk who used to be taught by our fore-fathers to hurl a javelin, standing erect, to cast a stake with a twirl, to guide a horse, to handle weapons?” Seneca (*Epistles* 89, 18–19).

¹⁰⁴ The last Olympic victor in the boys’ boxing was an Athenian called Aurelios Zopyros in 385.

the historian Mose of Chorene, following this, he was appointed by Theodosius as king of Armenia in 390 AD, where he reigned for five years.¹⁰⁵

This shows the close relationship of Greek combat sports and a warlike aristocracy in elements of the Parthian and Kushana populations. According to Thomas Scanlon's table concerning the Olympic winners of the late Roman Empire (181–385 AD),¹⁰⁶ 55 percent came from Asia, 8 percent came from northern and central Greece, 7 percent came from the Peloponnese (Achaia), 28 percent came from Egypt and North Africa, and 1 percent came from Crete. Greek athletics was practiced in central and southern India as well during Roman times, among the remnants of "Romans" in the Deccan plateau and in southern India.¹⁰⁷ During the late Olympic games, most of the winners in combat sports were no longer Greeks, but rather Asians, and, toward the end, Theodosius had forbidden these to participate, in his edict in 393 directed against the "pagans," though professional athletic contests still thrived all through Asia, especially in southern India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and China.¹⁰⁸ In India, the *Harivamsha Purana* (chap. 30, Trial of Arms), written by Acharya Jinasena in 783, gives a very clear and detailed description of the combat sports events in India:

¹⁰⁵ Ernst Von Lasaulx, *Der Untergang des Hellenismus und die Einziehung seiner Tempelgüter durch die christlichen Kaiser. Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie der Geschichte* (Munchen, 1854), p. 110.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas F. Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (Oxford University Press, 2002), Table 2.4.

¹⁰⁷ A terracotta bust of Apollo from the first century can be seen in India's Erode Museum (Kaimagal Kalvi Nilayam), in Tamil Nadu, suggesting that the cult of Apollo was celebrated in Southern India during the Indo-Greek and Kushana period. A stadium was erected for sports and archery, according to the *Adiparva Mahabharata* (1.1.9), and a place for wrestling games, according to the *Harivamsha Purana*, chap. 29. Description of the Arena: 2–15: "The place of assembly was supported by octagonal painted pillars, fitted up with terraces, doors and bolts, with windows circular or crescent; shaped and accommodated with seats with cushions; and it shone like the ocean whilst large clouds hang upon it, with spacious substantial pavilions fitted up for the sight of the combat; open to the front but screened with beautiful and fine curtains, crowned with festoons of flowers and glistening with radiance, like autumnal clouds." An Indo-Greek style of the Kushana period amphitheater has also been excavated at Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, near Nagarjuna Sagar in the Palnadu district, with Buddhist sculptures erected around the theater, together with a sculpted relief of Dionysos drinking wine.

¹⁰⁸ See my article on medieval Chinese combat sports: "Combat Sports Professionalism in Medieval China (220–960 AD)," *Nikephoros: Zeitschrift für Sport und Kultur im Altertum* (Graz University, Austria, no. 26, 2013).

32. They wrestled with each other in various ways, by mutually entwining, laying hold of, letting go the adversary, throwing on earth and taking up in the air.

33. By mutually pulling to and casting back, striking with fists, elbow, fore-arms and knees, interlacing the arms, kicking and striking blows as hard as stones and shaking their heads awry, those two heroes, as if made of the essence of rocks, fought that dreadful contest without weapons.

In the Buddhist caves of Kizil, a Tocharian painting showing the “Boddhisatva Siddhartha fighting,” dating from the sixth-seventh centuries, and using the Greek word *makhe* (Greek: μάχη), for a wrestling match (Fig. 4, right), demonstrates the continuity of Helleno-Buddhist combat sports references from Gandhara to the Tarim Basin (Eastern Central Asia).¹⁰⁹ Earlier in the Kushana Empire, similar references to Eros, one of the patron saints of the *palestra*, can be seen in a fresco of the third-fourth centuries at the Lahore Museum. The Buddha is represented in a Greco-Buddhist palace with, on his right, two scenes with two Eros-like youths, one in a wrestling match and the other in a boxing contest.¹¹⁰ One scene, perhaps representing the Boddhisatva Siddhartha training in combat sports or in Hellenistic armed fencing (*thureomakheia*) in an Indo-Greek palestra,¹¹¹ can be seen at the Nara

¹⁰⁹ Cave 110/13. Life of the Buddha: Sidhartha wrestling. Sixth to seventh centuries. See Claus T. Schmidt “Interdisciplinary Research on Central Asia: The Development of the West Tocharian Caption of a Cycle of Mural Paintings of the Life of the Buddha in Cave 110 in Qizil,” *Die Sprache* no. 40:1, p. 80: “[*tan*](*e*)*podhisatve me a*” interprets the hitherto unknown verb *me*— or *mesk*—according to its etymological proximity to *meske*=connection, coupling, as a characteristic feature of wrestling, and translates: “Hier ringt der Bodhisattva” (“Here fights the Boddhisatva”). Tocharian B inscription: *mesk* (from Tokharian A; *mask*), “to fight.”

¹¹⁰ Stele with scenes from the life of the Buddha and Erotes. Mohammed Nari, Khyber. Pakhtunkhwa Province, third century CE. Schist H. 46 7/16 × W. 13 × D. 3 3/8 in. (118 × 33 × 8.5 cm). Lahore Museum, G-109.

¹¹¹ Armed fencing in the Hellenistic *palestra* was divided in two disciplines: *Oplomakheia* (οπλομαχία): Armed duel with the round shield and the spear (*oplomachia en aspidioi kai dorati*) and the *Thureomakheia* (θυρεομαχία): Armed duel with the oval shield and the Greek makhaira, a game very much practiced by the elite Macedonian aristocracy (*Thureos ke makhairia*). See: Marcel Launey, *Recherches sur les armées Hellénistiques, les armées et le gymnase* (E. de Boccard, 1950), p. 820. For the Kizil caves and Gandhara representations of armed fights with Siddhartha, see: Monika Zin, “The Identification of Kizil

National Museum (Fig. 16), as well as in many other Helleno-Buddhist combat sports frescoes from Gandhara.

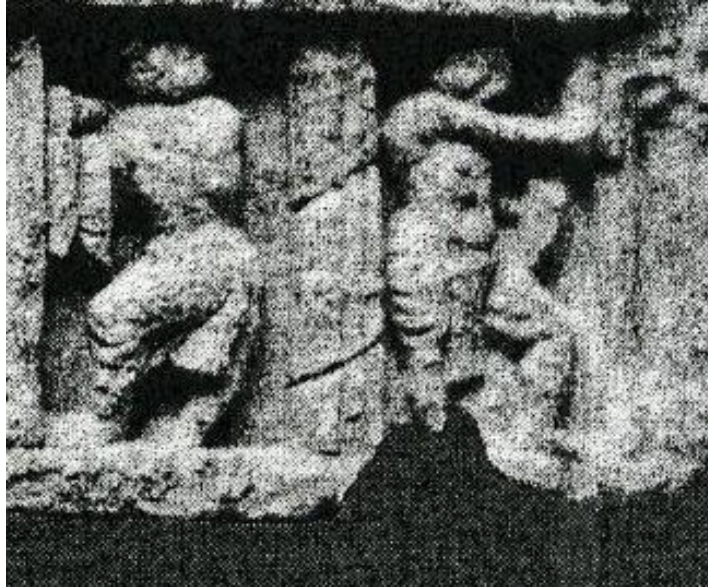


Figure 16. Prince Siddhartha practicing combat sports (or fencing with a square or oval shield as in *thureomakheia* military practice) in an Indo-Greek *palestra*.

In China, Herakles was represented in later sculptures as a “tomb guardian” (Fig. 14, right), or depicted next to the Buddha in Buddhist monasteries, or worshipped as the figure of Jingang-Vajrapani (金剛).¹¹² In the “Transmissions of Famous Monks” (Chinese: *Gaoseng zhuang* 高僧傳), of Hui Jiao (慧皎), the Vietnam-born (Chinese: Jiaozhi 交趾) Sogdian Buddhist traveler Kang Senghui (Chinese: 康僧會 ?-280 AD) will use a metaphor with Herakles–Jingang smashing around him with his club while talking with Sun Quan (Chinese: 孫權 182–252) (Chinese: *Jingang zhichu buneng sui* 金剛之杵不能碎).

Even before Greco-Buddhist art arrived in China, the famous ten-meter-high (Chinese: *gao*

Paintings III (5. kalamacchedya, 6. Sundarika-Bhāradvāja),” in: *Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift* 12 (Berlin 2008).

¹¹² The figure of Herakles during Tang dynasty China was often used as a “tomb guardian” (*Wengzhong* 翁仲). See: I-Tien Hsing and William G. Crowell, “Herakles in the East: The Diffusion and Transformation of His Image in the Arts of Central Asia, India, and Medieval China,” *Asia Major*, third series, *Academia Sinica*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2005), pp. 103–154.

sanzhan 高三丈) twelve chryselephantine statues (Chinese: *Shier jinren* 十二金人)¹¹³ of bronze and gold, representing the Di (barbarian) people (Chinese: *Jindi* 金狄, *Yidi* 夷狄, *Changdi* 長狄) of Qinshi Huangdi (秦始皇 259–210 BC), taken in Gansu Lintao (臨洮) in 221 BC and shown with their characteristic hairbands visible (Chinese: *Wengzhong touji changchu* 翁仲頭髻常出),¹¹⁴ are evidently similar to earlier representations of the Greek gods, including Herakles.

They must have been erected when the Greco-Bactrians of King Diodotes or Euthydemus met with the Qin kingdom around 230 BC, with a plan to limit the conquest of the easternmost portion of their kingdom, following their alliance with King Ying Zheng (嬴政), arriving from the desert at eastern Gansu.¹¹⁵ Alexander had similarly dedicated twelve statues of the Olympian gods, to mark the easternmost border of his kingdom after he stopped his conquest of India along the Hydaspes (Jhelum) River, near what is today Bhera in Punjab, after the rebellion of his own army in the summer of 326 BC.¹¹⁶ Yan Shigu (Chinese: 顏師古; 581–645), commentator on the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, calls them *Wengzhong* (Chinese: 翁仲), or “tomb guardians,” and as the statues of the gods placed in front of the mausoleums or on altars in houses during the Classical Greek and Hellenistic periods, they had the same meaning of *Wengzhong* (ancestor, family relative) and were known as ancestral (gods) or *Progonos* (Greek: Πρόγονος) by the Greeks.¹¹⁷ Si Mazhen (Chinese: 司馬貞; 679–732) in chapter 2 of the *Shiji suoyin* (Chinese: 史記索隱) also called these colossal statues *Wengzhong*.

113 Lukas Nickel, “The First Emperor and Sculpture in China,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 76, issue 3 (October 2013), pp. 413–447; Christopoulos, “Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China,” pp. 11–12.

114 *Shihu zaijing* 《石虎載經》，於此沈沒。」二物並存，水所以湧，所未詳也。或云翁仲頭髻常出，水之漲減，恆與水齊。晉軍當至，髻不復出，今唯見水異耳。嗟嗟有聲，聲聞數里。按秦始皇二十一年，長狄十二見於臨洮，長五丈餘，以為善祥。鑄金人十二以象之，各重二十四萬斤。坐之宮門之前，謂之金狄，皆銘其胸云。

115 See the Greco-Sinitic association *Psammos* (Greek: ψάμμος) with *shamo* (Chinese: 沙漠) in Language Log: <https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=59024>

116 Arrian of Nicomedia, *The Anabasis of Alexander* 5.28.1b–5.29. Pliny (vi. 21), says that Alexander erected the altars on the farther bank of the Hyphasis, whereas Arrian, Diodorus, and Plutarch say they were on his side of the river. Curtius (ix. 13) does not specify the side of the river.

117 Robert Parker, *Ancestral Gods, Ancestral Tombs: The Household and Beyond: Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford

Li Si (Chinese: 李斯; 280–210 BC) and Meng Tian (Chinese: 蒙恬 ?-210 BC) had written inscriptions dedicated to the grandeur of the emperor Qin both on the chest (Chinese: *qixiong qian* 其胸前)¹¹⁸ and on the back (Chinese: *mingqihou* 銘其後)¹¹⁹ of these statues of gods.

The word *Wengzhong* is unknown in China before these statues and denoted the same (Greek) *Progonos*. These inscriptions are like the ones carved in both Greek and Parthian on the thighs of a bronze statue of Herakles, dedicated by a Parthian king, from Mesene (Meshan), in Mesopotamia. The Parthian king Vologaeses IV (147–191) had dedicated a few lines to Herakles in 151 BC. The Greek version mentions Herakles, while the Parthian (Middle Persian) refers to the god as Verethragna, his Persian and Bactrian (named *Orlagno*), warlike heroic equivalent. Following Alexander, during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Verethragna and Herakles became joined in the same cult, and Herakles served as a model for combat sports in the *palestra* of the people of Iranian origins in Parthia. After the advent of Greco-Buddhism in Central Asia and India, Herakles became simply mixed with Vajrapani, as noted earlier. The founding of the cities of Persia, Central Asia, and Northwest India on the same Greek model, with an agora, a theater, and a *gymnasium* (and a *palestra*) following the Hellenic model of education during Hellenistic times, was adopted by the locals, and the associated cults and rituals were mixed with their own past heroic figures and gods. It happened very naturally, as they followed the same education in the *palestra*, encouraged to do so by the Greek, Parthian, and Kushana rulers, living in a multi-cultural society, and participating in sporting competitions that were, as today, borderless in terms of nations, with the elements of human heroism and the attainment of victory being more important than that of race or nation.

University Press, 2007).

¹¹⁸ *Shujing zhu* (水經注): 按秦始皇二十六年, 長狄十二見于臨洮, 長五丈餘, 以為善祥, 鑄金人十二以象之, 各重二十四萬斤, 坐之宮門之前, 謂之金狄。皆銘其胸云: 皇帝二十六年, 初兼天下, 以為郡縣, 正法律, 同度量, 大人來見臨洮, 身長五丈, 足六尺。李斯書也。故衛恒. *Mengzhuan* 《敘篆》曰: 秦之李斯, 號為工篆, 諸山碑及《銅人銘》, 皆斯書也。

¹¹⁹ *Sanfu Huangtu* (三輔黃圖): 收天下兵, 聚之咸陽, 銷以為鐘鐻, 高三丈。鐘小者皆千石也。銷鋒鏑以為金人十二, 以弱天下之人, 立於宮門. *Sanfu Jiushi* 《三輔舊事》云: 鑄金狄人, 立阿房殿前。坐高三丈, 銘其後曰: 「皇帝二十六年, 初兼天下, 改諸侯為郡縣, 一法律, 同度量, 大人來見臨洮, 其大五丈, 足跡六尺。」銘李斯篆, 蒙恬書。董卓悉椎破銅人、銅臺, 以為小錢. *Han Jin Chunqiu* (漢晉春秋) 曰: 或言金狄泣, 故留之。石虎取置鄴宮, 苻堅又徙之長安, 毀二為錢, 其一未至而苻堅亂, 百姓推置陝北河中, 于是金狄滅。

These colossal statues were dedicated to the emperor Qin in a similar fashion, and that evidently implies a connection between the two peoples, as there are no previous examples in Chinese history for the term *Wengzhong*, dedicated inscriptions on the statues, representations of Di people with long hairbands, or the size of these sculptures.

About a hundred years later, the Han emperor Han Wudi (漢武帝 157–87 BC) sent his general Huo Qubing (霍去病 140–117 BC) to conquer Gansu, and the Han armies took a kingdom subject to the Xiongnu in Wuwei (武威), capturing a three-meter-high bronze and gold statue of Zeus holding Demeter, Nike, or Athena in 121 BC. It belonged to a king named Xiutu (Chinese: Xiutu *wang* 休屠王), or *Soter*, whose two sons were adopted by Wudi as his own family members. One of the two, Midi (Chinese: 日磾 134–86 BC),¹²⁰ was a champion in wrestling (Chinese: *Juedi* 角抵).¹²¹ His Chinese name was associated with the *Wengzhong* (翁仲) sculptures, as “Wengshu” (翁叔), and thus Demeter/Demetrios was the last prince of the Greco-Saka kingdom of Lixuan (驪軒) in Gansu,¹²² not far from where Ying Zheng had taken the twelve chryselephantine sculptures

The Buddhist martial figure of Jingang-Vajrapani, the patron of combat sports in China, had a substantial cult following, as demonstrated by the warrior monks of Shaolin Temple (Shaolin *si* 少林寺), where he was the main subject of the painted or sculpted models of mental and martial athletic strength. To the combat sports practiced in some Buddhist circles in China were added new methods, brought from the warlike Helleno-Buddhist aristocracy of India, Central Asia, and the Tarim Basin, and

¹²⁰ Jin Midi (金日磾), the heir of King Xiutu from Wuwei, in Gansu province, was a “Demetrios” from the lineage of the Euthydemid dynasty (the last Euthydemid prince of the Greco-Saka kingdom of Gansu, which lasted about a hundred years). Indeed, his name is the phonetic translation of a foreign name, and it means “day dyed in black,” referring to “black-dressed Demeter” (in mourning after her daughter Core was kidnapped and taken to the underworld). His Chinese name (*zi* 子) was “Wengshu” (翁叔), and it meant “ancient harvester,” referring to both “Demetrios,” and “of Demeter,” the goddess of crops and harvest. His honorific title “lord” or “marquis” of Dujing (稔敬侯) is made of the character *du* (稔), meaning “bundle of grains” and *jing* (敬) or “respected.” The “Lord respectable of the bundle of grains,” would be the posthumous title of Demetrios/Midi.

¹²¹ Lucas Christopoulos, “Dionysian Rituals and the Golden Zeus of China,” *Sino-Platonic Papers no. 326* (2022), pp. 67–115.

¹²² *Hanshu* (漢書) (Han dynasty annals), chap. 28 (Xia), Dilizhi (Yan Shigu explanations) (地理志, 顏師古注).

these formed the legacy of a strong warrior caste of Buddhist monks.¹²³ The new methods were mainly inherited from the Indo-Greek *palestra* of Gandhara, including the use of open hands and using the fingers, legs, knees, and elbows to fight in what developed into a real science of close combat.¹²⁴

In the fifth century, in the wooded mountains of Songyue (嵩嶽), or Songshan (嵩山), in the Henan (河南) province of northern China, the Xianbei emperor of the Wei dynasty, Xiao Wendi (孝文帝 471–499 AD), also named “Tuoba Hong” (拓拔宏), built a monastery for the traveling monk Batuoluo (跋陀羅) or “Buddhabhadra,” who came from Central Asia in 495 AD.¹²⁵ After Batuoluo, the famous Boddhidarma arrived at the Shaolin temple. Boddhidarma, known in Chinese as Putidamo (菩提達摩) or Putidamo (菩提達磨), came from southern India,¹²⁶ perhaps originally of Iranian origin, and I presume issued from the past Helleno-Buddhist warlike aristocracy of India described earlier.¹²⁷ Both Buddhabhadra and Boddhidarma are traditionally said by several martial arts schools, up until today, to be the founders of the Shaolin boxing tradition (*Shaolin quanshu* 少林拳術).¹²⁸

In Luoyang, as in Hellenistic Central Asia, eastern Central Asia, and Gandhara, some Buddhist temples in the vicinity also served at times as training places for martial arts (*Wuchang* 武場) and for warriors practicing wrestling, as described in the “Stories about the Buddhist Temples in Luoyang.”

123 See the Northern Zhou period (557–581) wrestling scene showing people of the “Western Regions” and a referee, in Mogao cave no. 290 in Dunhuang.

124 See Christopoulos, “Greek Combat Sports and Their Transmission.”

125 *Weishu* (魏書) (Wei dynasty annals), chap. 114, *Shilaozhi* (釋老志). *Zhonghua Shuju* (中華書局). “又有西域沙門名跋陀，有道業，深為高祖所敬信。詔於少室山陰，立少林寺而居之，公給衣供” (Beijing, 1974–1999), p. 2021.

126 *Xu Gaosengzhuan* (Further Transmissions of Famous Monks), in: *Taisho shinshu Daizokyo* (The Tripitaka in Chinese) Revised, Collated, Added and Rearranged. Together with Original Treatises by Chinese, Korean and Japanese Authors. Edited by Pr. Dr. J. Takakusu and Pr. Dr. K. Watanabe. Published by the Taisho shinshu Daizokyo Kanko kai (Society for the Publication of the Taisho Tripitaka), Meijirodai, Bunkyo-ku, Book 50. *Xu Gaosengzhuan*, chap. 16. Transmissions of Boddhidarma to Hui ke. 達摩傳五慧可。菩提達摩南天竺婆羅門種。” (Tokyo, 1927–1960), p. 2060.

127 *Luoyang qielanji jiaozhu* (洛陽伽藍記校注) (Stories about the Buddhist Temples in Luoyang with Explanations). Fan Xiangyong (范祥雍 校注, *Gudian Wenxue Chubanshe* (古典文学出版社) “菩提達摩者波斯國胡人也,” *Fubian* 1. (附編一) (Shanghai, 1958), p. 356.

128 See the “Shaolin” chapter in: Christopoulos, “Combat Sports Professionalism in Medieval China (220–960 AD).”

In Luoyang, in front of the Buddhist temple of *Chanxu* (禪虛), at the west of the road of the *Daxia* gate, there was a place where experienced warriors in arms practiced martial arts. There was the cavalryman (*Yulin* 羽林) Ma Sengxiang (馬僧相) who distinguished himself in *Juedi* (wrestling).¹²⁹

The Buddhist communities of northern China in the sixth through eighth centuries became a refuge for many kinds of monks, from the most eminent to the worst thugs, as the monasteries functioned as independent social organizations. Many outlaws used the monastic robe to hide from society, as Diao Luzi (調露子) mentions in his *Jueli* (Wrestling records):

In former times, there were valiant monks traveling in all directions, following the winds of change. They were aficionados of *Xiangpu*-wrestling, and they drank alcohol before wrestling for victory. They did not know how to read or how to write, but they worked with their forearms everyday instead.¹³⁰

Yang Xingmi (楊行密 852–905 AD), for instance, was the son of a farmer, and he became the founder of the Kingdom of Wu (吳國 902–937 AD). During his childhood, he dreamed that he competed against the god *Jingang-Vajrapani* in wrestling, after which he wished to equal him in fame. He became physically very strong and skillful in wrestling and distinguished himself on many battlefields. Ultimately, he carried out a coup against the Tang by killing his own commander, before ruling the state on his own.¹³¹

129 *Luoyang qielanji* (洛陽伽藍記) (Stories about the Buddhist Temples in Luoyang), *Zhonghua Shuju* (中華書局), chap. 5. “禪虛寺大夏門御道西，前有閱武場終歲甲士習戰千乘萬騎常在於此。羽林馬僧相善角抵戲” (Beijing, 2006), p. 207.

130 Diao luzi (調露子), *Jueli ji* (角力記) (Wrestling records). Song Dynasty (宋). “昔有沙門有勇四方颯風往往相慕多被相撲嘗與數輩壯夫飲酒散連,” p. 16.

131 Diao luzi (調露子), *Jueli ji*, p. 11: “王愚子者，揚州人也。屬楊氏子涓乘中原多故，遂偽立國曰大吳。時愚子形若涂漆，少小時嘗夢與金剛對舛物似木薪如是兩轉因覺有力遂好相撲少有對偶偽吳武義年中卒。有子號王八四幼便受父訓拳手亦高而性尚儒學讀書問談不素亦自嫌粗行次，應奉國主李昇、景、煜，皆好此戲令充對頭

In Southeast Asia, the influence of the Hellenistic *palestra* still exists today. For instance, in Burma, Maung Gyi (Burmese: မောင်ကြီး), the former Director of Physical Education of Burma, and the main teacher of Bando martial arts in the United States, used to transmit to his students the teaching that the wrestling techniques of the Burmese martial arts and the *kukri* knife came from the soldiers of Alexander the Great, while its boxing techniques were influenced by China. In Burma, bare-hands martial arts is called "*thaing*," which means "total fight" in Burmese, just as *pankration* means "total fight" or "total control" in Greek. The Muaythai boxers of Thailand wear gloves in the fashion of the ancient boxers, and they perform a war dance with boxing and kicking, following the music, just as during the games and "war dance" events in ancient Hellenistic festivals. In Tibet, itinerant monks called the Dob-Dob braided their hair in the form of goat-horns and were also the inheritors of the Greco-Buddhist combat sports, from "The One with Two Horns" (Alexander), participating in stick fights, the long-jump, and running competitions. They served as bodyguards in the *gelugpa* monasteries, such as Sera, where many of them protected the religious Buddhist authorities.¹³² In Japan, the warrior monks of the Kofukuji temple (興福寺) in Nara, for example, who worshipped Kongo *Rikishi* (金剛力士), "Kongo the Wrestler," as the patron of their martial and Buddhist spirit (Fig. 17), also partook in the tradition of the old Hellenic-Buddhist *palestra* of Gandhara, as it passed through China.

供奉近江南不知所在。”

¹³² A. Rolf Stein, *La Civilisation Tibétaine* (Paris: Dunod, 1962).

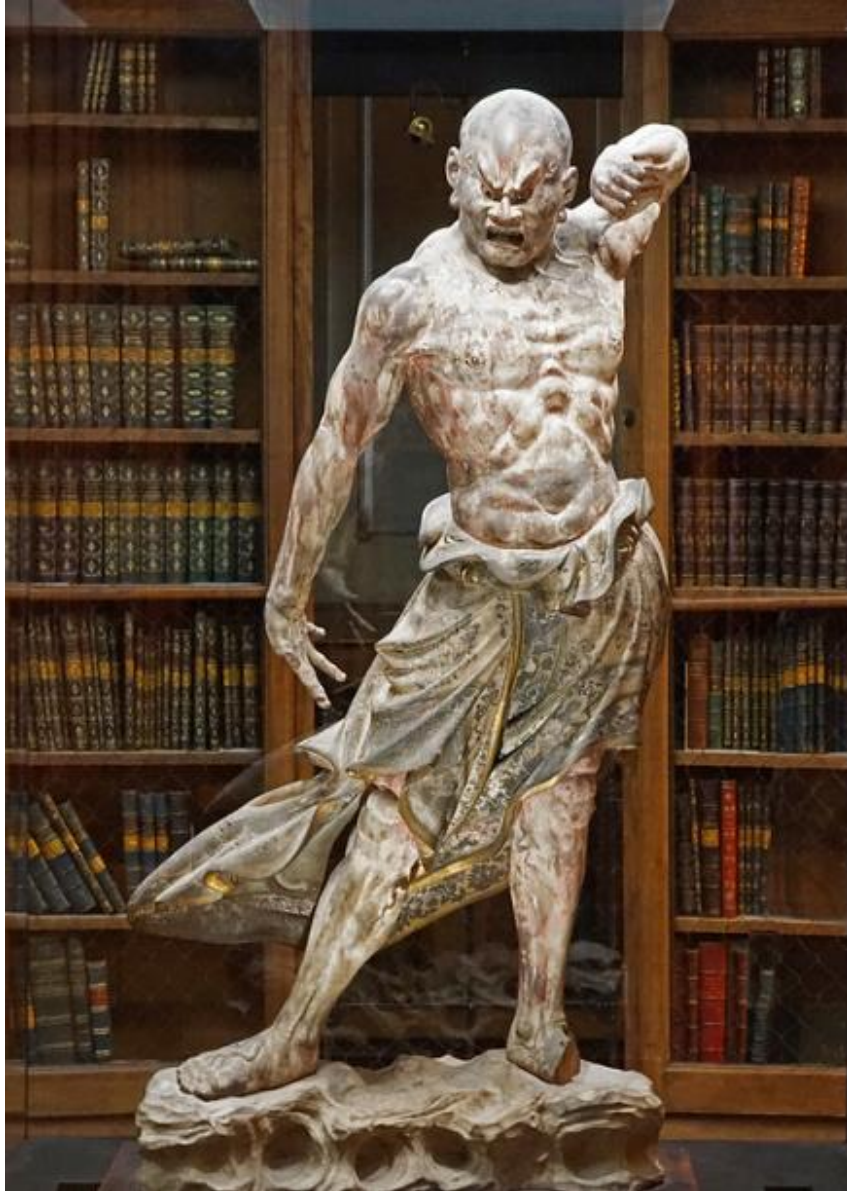


Figure 17. Kongo Rikishi from Kofukuji Temple. Nara. Early Kamakura Period (1185–1333). Created by a sculptor of the Kei School (*Kei ha* 慶派), it is a masterpiece of realism, with dramatic movement, inlaid crystal eyes, wind-whipped robes, bulging muscles, and protruding veins.

The inhabitants of what were once the Tamil kingdoms of Pandya, Chola, and Chera today practice a fighting martial art named *kalaripayattu* (in Malayalam: കളരിപ്പയറ്റ്) with bare hands, sticks, swords, and round shields, much as in the ancient Hellenistic weapons-training exercise of the *Thureomakheia*.

Kalari is a type of *palestra* in which students practice the martial art of *payattu*. The *kalari* is a pit, and the earth is dug out about one meter deep in a rectangular plot of ground measuring twelve meters in length in an east-westerly direction and six meters in breadth. The dug-up soil is piled around the pit and rammed into strong ridges. The floor is also leveled and rammed. The area is thatched-roofed with the support of two main pillars, one in the east and one in the west. The entrance of the *kalari* is on the eastern side. The athletes practicing combat sports in the *kalari* wear only a loincloth and apply oil on their bodies, as was the custom in the *palestra*.¹³³ The masters from Southern India maintain that these techniques and methods of warfare training were introduced about two thousand years ago by Agastya in the south and Parashurama in the north of Kerala, at the time of the Indo-Greeks and the Kushanas in northern India. Agastya and Parashurama were the mythical creators of these arts, described as "legendary wisemen" (*Rishis*), and they could be seen as divine "Super-Brahmins."

Agastya (also named Agasti, or "mountain") is famous for his extraordinary achievements in the *Mahabharata*,¹³⁴ where he is associated with the sacred mountain of South Vindhya. The legend is that Mount Meru started to grow and became a huge size, and Agastya ordered it to become smaller again because he wanted to cross it to go south. Mount Meru assented, and Agastya told it that it could grow again when he had crossed back — but Agastya never went back to the north.

Agastya is considered to have greatly contributed to astrology and medicine. He had three famous disciples: Therayar, Tholkappiar, and Mahavatar Babaji. Parashurama, or "Rama with an axe" (Sanskrit: परशुराम) was a fearsome Brahmin fighter who learned the art of weaponry with Shiva himself, according to the legend, and he is associated with *kalaripayattu* because of his extraordinary fighting skills and his force. The bare-hands techniques of *kalaripayattu* can definitively be traced to the *Valmiki Ramayana*, written some time from around the third century BC to the third century of our era, during the time of the Mauryan, the Indo-Greek, and the Kushana rule.

In Book 6, the *Kishkindha Kanda*, or the "Book of War," mention is made of a bare-hands type

¹³³ Chirakkal T. Sreedharan Nair, *Kalaripayattu: The Complete Guide to Kerala's Ancient Martial Art* (Chennai: Westland Books, 2007), pp. 3–4.

¹³⁴ *Mahabharata*, Book 3, Vana Parva, section 97, Samayapalana Parva. Translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguli.

of combat sport featuring the use of the open hand in a fight, when Dvidida, the brother of the monkey king Sugriva (Sanskrit: सुग्रीव) hits Yupaksha on the chest,¹³⁵ before throwing him on the ground and killing him.¹³⁶ Later, Kumbhakarna attacked the monkey king Sugriva with his fist, and then Sugriva in his turn used his fist “which shone like a solar disc,” killing Kumbhakarna.¹³⁷ Sugriva would later influence the Chinese legend of Sun Wukong (孫悟空), the “Monkey King,” in the famous novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記).

The *Ramayana* began to be recorded perhaps at the time of the Hellenic presence in India and the foundation of the Indo-Greek *palestra*, but it was definitely compiled from the poems of Valmiki (*devanāgarī*: वाल्मीकि) around the fifth century of our era. This allows the presumption that bare-hands combat sports were influential at that time, following the depictions in Kushana sculpture described earlier. Indo-Greek athletics are evident not only in the numerous sculpted wrestling or boxing scenes of the Kushana period but also are reflected in the *Milindapanha*, as mentioned earlier, and in the *Mahabharata*, with heroes fighting in wrestling, boxing, and pankration.¹³⁸ The *Mahabharata* is

135 *Valmiki Ramayana*, Book 6, chap. 76. Yuddha Kanda, p. 32.

136 *Valmiki Ramayana*, Book 6, chap. 76. Yuddha Kanda, p. 35.

137 *Valmiki Ramayana*, Book 6, chap. 76. Yuddha Kanda, pp. 87–93.

138 *Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Book 2, Jarasanda-Badha 23. “Then those tigers among men, those heroes of great prowess, with their bare arms as their only weapons, cheerfully engaged themselves in the encounter, each desirous of vanquishing the other. And seizing each other’s arms and twining each other’s legs, (at times) they slapped their arm-pits, causing the enclosure to tremble at the sound. And frequently seizing each other’s necks with their hands and dragging and pushing it with violence, and each pressing every limb of his body against every limb of the other, they continued, O exalted one, to slap their arm-pits (at time). And sometimes stretching their arms and sometimes drawing them close, and now raising them up and now dropping them down, they began to seize each other. And striking neck against neck and forehead against forehead, they caused fiery sparks to come out like flashes of lightning. And grasping each other in various ways by means of their arms, and kicking each other with such violence as to affect the innermost nerves, they struck at each other’s breasts with clenched fists. With bare-arms as their only weapons roaring like clouds they grasped and struck each other like two mad elephants encountering each other with their trunks. Incensed at each other’s blow, they fought on dragging and pushing each other and fiercely looking at each other like two wrathful lions. And each striking every limb of the other with his own and using his arms also against the other, and catching hold of each other’s waist, they hurled each other to a distance. Accomplished in wrestling, the two heroes clasping each other with their arms and each dragging the other unto

supposedly influenced by Homer: Dion Chrysostom (40–120) wrote that his poems were still sung in India of his day.¹³⁹ The fighting competitions of the *Mahabharata* seem indeed to resonate with chapter 23 of the *Iliad*, when Epeios fought Eurylaos in boxing, and Odysseus wrestled Aias.

The Brahmins ruled Southern India between the seventh and ninth centuries, and they institutionalized special buildings called *salais* for the practice of Vedas studies and military training. The art of *kalaripayattu* became strictly associated with the Brahmins and Indian mythology.

In the *Agni Purana* (Sanskrit: अग्नि पुराण), written between the eighth and the eleventh centuries, four types of martial arts training are listed from the most respectable to the least:

- (1) Bow and arrows
- (2) The spear
- (3) The sword
- (4) Bare hands

Even today, the bare hands techniques (*verumkai*) of *Kalaripayattu* are taught last, after body exercises (*maipayattu*), defense and attacks with wooden weapons (*kolethaari*), and defense and attacks with sharp weapons (*angathaari*).

The Parthians also perpetuated combat sports, practicing them in the *palestras* of Mesopotamia. Modern Iranians now call this the "sport of the heroes," or "*varzeš-e pahlavānī*" (Persian: ورزش پهلوانی), and traditionally claim that the art came from the Arsacid times, featuring wrestling together with weight training with tools made of two heavy wooden bludgeons or metal shields, and bow-shaped iron

himself, began to press each other with great violence. The heroes then performed those grandest of all feats in wrestling called *Prishtabhanga*, which consisted in throwing each other down with the face towards the earth and maintaining the one knocked down in that position for as long as possible. And employing his arms, each also performed the feats called *Sampurna-murcca* and *Purna-kumbha*. At times they twisted each other's arms and other limbs as if these were vegetable fibers that were to be twisted into chords. And with clenched fists they struck each other at times, pretending to aim at limbs while the blows descended upon other parts of the body. It was thus that those heroes fought with each other."

139 Dion 53.6 "For example, it is said that Homer's poetry is sung even in India, where they have translated it into their own speech and tongue." Many scholars have already credited Dion and confirmed that the stories of the *Mahabharata* are linked with the *Iliad*, including Christian Lassen (1800–1876), Max Duncker (1811–1886), and Albrecht Weber (1825–1901), in his *History of Indian Literature* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1974).

weights, practiced in special buildings. The tradition came from Seleucid times, continued through the Philhellenic Parthian kings and their institutionalization of Greek athletics, up to today. In Pakistan, the art is known as *koshti* (Urdu: کشتی), coming from Punjab, and it is a mixture of *varzeš-e pahlavānī* and *malla-yuddha*, or Indian wrestling, coming earlier from the Indo-Greek *palestra*, where Herakles-Vajrapani was serving as a physical and religious visual model of strength.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented what is known about the destroyed statues in Tapa Shotor and what they illustrate about the heritage of the region. It also suggests a perspective for our own times: Were the Talibans and their savagery able to destroy the very deep meaning of these statues in Tapa Shotor? The answer is, resolutely, no. Instead, the event demonstrates exactly the opposite: in the eyes of History, the destruction will always be seen as representing the lowest and darkest part of the human mind. This article also attempts to “resuscitate” the statues by explaining their original meaning and purpose, though it may in fact be that, in a certain sense, they were never destroyed, but rather only their sculpted stone forms were, an act specific to a particular time and in a precise geographical region of the world. Inasmuch as these statues embody the expression of a deep concept inherited from a syncretism of Indian Buddhist and Hellenic Universalism, their meaning goes above any dogmatic worldly ideology, and Alexander and Herakles as guardians of the Buddha still speak, and they shine out to our eyes and other senses.

Should we then give up on that vision of a man reaching the highest possible state of understanding and enlightenment through individual practices and freedom of art and thought? Should we format ourselves into certain categories and modes of thinking, and see individuals as closed and defined in “boxes,” with reference points established by dogmatic entities? These artworks and their meaning insist that we should not.

What these statues teach us ultimately is that the human mind is always trying to evolve and to excel to its highest degree. That effort may meet challenges and even tragedy at any time in this material world, but the goal can never really be destroyed, because it is a natural and biological process as well

as one enforced by the will. It will always be reborn and grow again in different forms, rising above the barbarism of mankind.

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