



AŚOKA II. AŚOKA AND IRAN

ii. Aśoka and Iran

In 305 or 304 B.C., Seleucus I Nikator ceded by treaty to Candragupta Maurya all the territories situated south of the Hindu Kush, conquered first by the Achaemenids and later by Alexander: Arachosia (the region of Kandahar), parts of Paropamisadae (the mountainous country south of the Hindu Kush; the frontier would have run through Laghman where inscriptions of Aśoka were found), a part of Aria (to the south of Herat?) and of Gedrosia (probably Balūčestān), Punjab and Sindh (A. Foucher, *Vieille route de l'Inde* II, Paris, 1947, pp. 208-09, 271). Henceforth, these territories, first attached to the Achaemenid empire under Cyrus the great and Darius and Achaemenid satrapies for two centuries, belonged to an Indian dynasty established in the valley of the Ganges. Both Candragupta, who began his march to the empire there, and Aśoka, who might have been viceroy in Taxila when young, knew this region very well. It is a remote area open to Iranian influences and which even included populations that were clearly Iranian, like the Kamboja, who are named in Aśoka's Rock Edicts V and XIII and whose location should be sought somewhere between Kabul and Kandahar, for instance in the neighborhood of Ġaznī (Foucher, *op. cit.*, p. 271; E. Benveniste, *JA*, 1958, pp. 46-48).

In their Indian satrapies, the Achaemenids had established a bureaucracy using Iranian language and Aramaic script. The influence of this bureaucracy was so lasting that seventy years after the fall of the Achaemenid dynasty, Aśoka felt the need to have his edicts translated in "Arameo-Iranian" (Humbach's "Aramäoiranisch"). In Taxila, Pol-e Darunta, and Kandahar there



existed bilingual translations of Āśoka's edicts in Aramaic script, where each group of Indian words was first translated in Arameo-Iranian and then followed by the original Indian words written in Aramaic script. At the end of each translated passage the word SHYTY is added, probably Iranian **sahyatai* "it is spoken," cf. Old Persian *aθahya* "it was said" (H. W. Bailey apud S. Shaked, *JRAS*, 1969, pp. 118-22; already G. Morgenstierne apud H. Birkeland, *Acta Orientalia* 16, 1937, p. 233 n. 1). In Kandahar, there also existed an Arameo-Iranian/Greek bilingual resume of the first Rock Edicts. In Laghman two short rock inscriptions, a kind of milestones, in Arameo-Iranian were discovered. One of them seems to mention Tarmid (Termed) and proves the existence of a route connecting India and Bactria at this time (J. de Menasce in *Israel Oriental Studies* 2, Tel Aviv, 1970, pp. 290-92).

Thus, the Achaemenid bureaucracy had continued to function under the Mauryas. The early inscriptions of northwestern India, of which the oldest are the Āśokan edicts, are written in the so-called *kharoṣṭhī* script, clearly derived from Aramaic writing. The names of two Āśokan officials, who were natives from the northwest or from Iran, are known. In Brahmagiri, at the end of Minor Rock Edict I, we read *Capadena likhite* (in *brāhmī* script) *lipikareṇa* (in *kharoṣṭhī* script), "written by Capada, the scribe." The inscription of Rudradāman I at Junāgaḍh in Surāṣṭra has preserved for us the remembrance of Tuṣāspa, *yavanarāja*, i.e., "Iranian king," of Āśoka Maurya, who had brought improvements to a great dam built there under Candragupta. The Āśokan inscriptions bear traces of Iranian influences probably transmitted through that bureaucracy. In the expression *dhammalipi* "text of the dharma," by which Āśoka designates his edicts, *lipi* is a borrowing from Iranian *dipi* "writing," with *l-* by analogy with Sanskrit *LIP* "to smear" and *LIKH* "to write;" *dipi* is even found in the northwestern copies, Shāhbāzgarhī and Mānsehrā (*dhramadipi*), where one can also note many instances of Iranian *nipiš* instead of Indian *LIKH* "to write" of the other copies. The formulaic parallels between Āśoka's inscriptions and the Achaemenid ones have also been noted (E. Sénart, *Inscriptions de Piyadasi*, Paris, 1881-1886, II, pp. 296-97), but these are sentences too common to be significant by themselves. We should not exclude the possibility that Āśoka was consciously imitating the example of the great Achaemenid kings having his edicts engraved on rocks and mountains.

There is no architecture built of freestone in India before the Maurya epoch; its appearance is, in all probability, tied to the coming in India of Iranian architects and handworkers who were deprived of employment by the



disappearance of the Achaemenid empire (M. Wheeler, *Flames over Persepolis*, London, 1968, pp. 127-45). This influence is very clear in Pāṭaliputra/Patna where in 1912/13 the ruins of a palace attributed to Candragupta, but which could equally well be attributed to his successors Bindusāra or Aśoka, were discovered. A large hypostyle hall has been uncovered that recalls the Achaemenid palaces (*apadāna*). Similarly, the so-called Aśokan columns, many of which were erected after Aśoka, present a complex melange of Iranian influences (material, polishing of the stone, elements of the capital) and of Indian elements (monolithic shafts, method of erection of the columns, recomposition of the capitals, called, for that reason, Indo-Persepolitan, symbolism of the monument; J. Irwin, *Burlington Magazine* 115, November 1973, pp. 706-20; 116, December 1974, pp. 712-27; 117, October 1975, pp. 631-43; 118, November 1976, pp. 734-53). Some art historians even see the hand of Hellenistic carvers in the most beautiful of these monuments (especially Sārnāth).

During the reign of Aśoka, Iran was under the sway of the Seleucid (Greek) rulers Antiochus Theos (261-247) and Seleucus II Kallinikos (246-226). Antiochus is named twice in Aśoka's inscriptions. According to Rock Edict II, Aśoka sent Antiochus and the kings who were his neighbors medical treatments for animals and men, medicinal plants, roots and fruits. According to Rock Edict XIII, he succeeded in converting him to the politic of *Dharma*. It is to be noted that from his point of view that surely meant that the Seleucid king recognized Aśoka's suzerainty (G. Fussman, *Annales ESC*, 1982, p. 628). In any case, we cannot doubt that the relations between the Indian and the Hellenistic worlds were very close under Aśoka. Thanks to the inscriptions of Kandahar, we moreover know that in Arachosia, an historically Iranian territory, a Greek (Aśoka *yona*, Sanskrit *Yavana* < Ionian, Greek *Iáwōn* "Ionian") colony was established, important both by reason of its numbers and its politico-economic influence. It was for the sake of this colony, established there since the time of Alexander, that at least Rock Edicts XII and XIII had been translated into Greek and that a resume of the first Rock Edicts had been drawn up in Greek. The literary quality of these texts proves that the Greeks of Kandahar had remained in constant contact with the Mediterranean world; this contact could only have occurred through the intermediary of Hellenistic Iran. Neither can it be doubted that the Greek community in Kandahar played an important role in the relations between Hellenistic Iran and Maurya India. From this community Aśoka recruited his envoys to the Hellenistic world, or those who guided them and served them as interpreters (D. Schlumberger and



L. Robert, *JA*, 1958, pp. 5 and 12-13).

It can be assumed that the contacts between Iran and India under Āśoka did not stop there, but there is no evidence of commercial relations between these two empires, although hoards of punch-marked coins dating from Maurya times have been found in Bactria (Ai Khanoum/*Āy Kānom* and the Oxus temple in Taḳt-e Sangīn): These hoards are best explained as parts of the booty made in India by the Greek rulers of Bactria and brought back home. It is not impossible that Greek or Hellenized Iranian artisans came to look for jobs in India (M. Wheeler, loc. cit.), but this can not be proved at present. The square and apparently regular plan of Śiṣupālgaṛh in Orissa is often attributed to Hellenistic influences coming through Iran, but the town has not been sufficiently excavated to allow certainty; it is not even clear that it was founded in Maurya times.

The Singhalese chronicles also report that under Āśoka, eighteen years after his coronation, the Buddhist *vibhajyavādin* monks of Pāṭaliputra, Āśoka's capital, sent the *arhant* Mahārakkhita to convert the *Yonaka-loka* "the Greeks," i.e., Arachosia and perhaps the Iranian countries situated further to the west. He is supposed to have preached the *Kālakārāmasuttanta* (*Aṅguttara-nikāya*, ed. Morris and Hardy, Pali Text Society, London, 1885-1910, II, pp. 24-26), converted 170,000 (or 137,000) people and ordained 10,000 monks. It is impossible to know whether, in this legend, everything is anachronistic and exaggerated, or whether the first Buddhist establishments in Kandahar effectively go back to the Maurya period. In any case, the only *stūpa* and Buddhist monastery ever found in Kandahar (G. Fussman, *Arts Asiatiques* 13, 1966, pp. 37-56) can not in their present state be attributed to so early a date (S. W. Helms, *Afghan Studies* 2, 1979, pp. 2-4; *ibid.*, 3-4, p. 14). At the same time, according to the same sources, a Greek or an Iranian, Yonaka Dhammarakkhita, converted the Aparāntaka (western coast of India) (E. Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien* I, Louvain, 1958, pp. 320-38).

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p. 33; S. Chattopadhyaya, *The Achaemenids and India*, Calcutta, 1974, pp. 13, 57-58, 69-70 (outdated, but very complete on the Indian sources).

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On Áśokan pillars and Achaemenid art, see also J. Irwin, "The True Chronology of Áśokan Pillars," *Artibus Asiae* 44/4, 1983, pp. 247-65; N. R. Ray, *Maurya and Śunga Art*, Calcutta, 1965, is still useful; S. P. Gupta, *The roots of Indian art*, Delhi, 1980, specially pp. 284-313, denies any such influence.