



BACTRIA I. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

i. Pre-Islamic Period

Bactria, the territory of which Bactra was the capital, originally consisted of the plain between the Hindu Kush and the Āmū Daryā with its string of agricultural oases dependent on water taken from the rivers of Balk (Bactra), Tashkurgan, Kondūz, Sar-e Pol, and Šīrīn Tagāō. This region played a major role in Central Asian history. At certain times the political limits of Bactria stretched far beyond the geographic frame of the Bactrian plain (Figure 5; Figure 6).

Bactria in the Bronze and Iron Ages. The first mentions of Bactria occur in the list of Darius's conquests and in a fragment of the work of Ctesias of Cnidos—texts written after the region's incorporation in the Achaemenid empire. Ctesias, however, echoes earlier reports in his mention of campaigns by the Assyrian king Ninus and the latter's wife Semiramis (late 9th and early 8th century B.C.). Thereafter, he states, Bactria was a wealthy kingdom possessing many towns and governed from Bactra, a city with lofty ramparts. A similar picture is presented in the Zoroastrian tradition (Avesta, *Šāh-nāma*), which speaks of the protection given to Zoroaster by a powerful ruler of Bactra (see ii, below).

While the existence of such a kingdom remains hypothetical, archeological



investigations have produced evidence of big oasis communities grouped around a fortress (Dašlī). These communities, like those of the oases in Margiana, were already practicing a well-developed system of irrigation and carrying on trade in products such as bronze and lapis lazuli with India and Mesopotamia.

Bactria under the Achaemenids. After annexation to the Persian empire by Cyrus in the sixth century, Bactria together with Margiana formed the Twelfth Satrapy. Apparently the annexation was not achieved through conquest but resulted from a personal union of the crowns. Indicative of this are the facts that the satrap was always a near kinsman of the great king and that the Achaemenid administrative system was not introduced. The local nobles played a big part and held all real power. Their wealth is attested by the opulence of the Oxus treasure. Bactra occupied a commanding position on the royal road to India. Profits from the east-west trade as well as from the outstandingly prosperous local agriculture enabled the province to pay a substantial tribute (360 talents of silver per annum).

The Bactrians also made an important contribution to the Persian army. At Salamis they were under the great king's direct command. At Gaugamela the Bactrian cavalry nearly turned the scales against the Macedonians. When Darius Codomannus, after his defeat in this battle, sought refuge in the Upper Satrapies, the **Bactrian Bessos** caused him to be murdered and then proclaimed himself king. Despite the resistance by scorched earth tactics conducted by Bessos, Bactria was conquered by the Macedonians and Bessos was delivered to them and put to death on Alexander's order. Bactra then served as Alexander's headquarters during his long campaign into Sogdia. After overcoming all the forces of resistance, Alexander took away 30,000 young Bactrians and Sogdians as hostages and incorporated a large number of Bactrians in his army. At the same time he settled many of his veterans in colonies planned to secure the Macedonian hold on Bactria.

Little information has been obtained from Achaemenid sites in Bactria. Bactra is deeply buried under the citadel (*bālā-ḥešār*) of present-day Balk. Drapsaca and Aornos, mentioned by the historians of Alexander, are usually identified with Kondūz and Tashkurgan, where excavations have yet to begin. More recently it has been suggested that Aornos may have been located at Altyn Delyār Tepe (Rtveladze, pp. 149-52), a site north of Balk where excavation was started but could not be pursued. Other sites from the Achaemenid period are Kyzyl Tepe and Talaškan Tepe on the Sorḳān Daryā, and Taḳt-e Qobād (the



probable source of the Oxus treasure) on the right bank of the Oxus, the citadel of Delbarjīn, and the circular town of Āy Kānom II on the left bank. All show traces of fortifications built of dried mud or large bricks on massive platforms. At none of them has thorough exploration yet been possible.

Hellenistic Bactria. The future of the Greek colonization of Bactria hung in the balance when the colonists rebelled in 326, after learning of Alexander's death, and again in 323; but they were reduced to obedience, and Bactria was then combined with Sogdia to form a satrapy under Philippos. After the establishment of the Seleucid regime, Bactra became for a time the headquarters of Seleucos I's son Antiochos, who was deputed to defend the eastern satrapies against the growing might of the Mauryan empire. The weakening of Seleucid power particularly in the reign of Antiochos II (261-247) enabled first Parthia, then Bactria to secede. The independent kingdom of Bactria was founded by Diodotos. On coins minted at Bactra the figure of Antiochos is replaced with that of Diodotos over the royal title (the figure on the reverse being Zeus brandishing a thunderbolt).

In 208 Antiochos III set out to reestablish Seleucid authority and marched into Bactria. After fending off a move by the Bactrian cavalry to halt his advance, he blockaded their king Euthydemos in the city of Bactra. The siege dragged on for two years, and in the end Antiochos had to recognize Bactria's independence and sign a treaty of alliance with Euthydemos.

The Greco-Bactrian kingdom was bounded in the south by the Paropamisadai (Hindu Kush) and in the east by the mountains of Badaḵṣān. In the west it was in direct touch with the Parthians, who recovered Parthyene after the departure of Antiochos III and seized the Marv oasis. Scholars now generally accept the view that its northern frontier lay on the line of the Ḥeṣār mountains (between the Oxus and Zaratṣān valleys; Bernard and Francfort, pp. 4-16) rather than the view, based on the rarity of finds of Greek coins north of the Oxus, that it lay on that river (Zeimal', pp. 279-90). These frontiers shifted in the course of the kingdom's career. In the north, Sogdia was annexed at an uncertain date. In the south, a campaign of conquest launched by Demetrios I about 190 led to the creation of a Greco-Indian kingdom with its center at Taxila, but relations did not remain close for long. The Greco-Indian kingdom survived for half a century after the collapse of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom.

The Hellenistic period appears to have been a prosperous time for Bactria. One



indication of this is the high quality of its coin issues. Strabo echoes memories of the period when he speaks of “Bactria of the thousand towns.” Until recently, however, archeological investigations, mainly at Balk (Bactra) and Termed, were so fruitless that A. Foucher could speak of the “Bactrian mirage.” The situation has been radically changed since 1964, when the remains of a large city were discovered at Āy Kānom. Excavations, vigorously pursued until 1978, have shown that this city at the confluence of the Oxus and the Kūkča river was the capital of eastern Bactria. Strongly fortified and dominated by an acropolis and citadel, it was built on a regular plan well suited to the site and had a number of fine edifices typical of a Hellenistic city: a *heroon* (monument to the founder), gymnasium, theater, fountain with sculptures, and peristyle courts. On the other hand, the huge palace occupying the central position and the upper class dwellings are clearly influenced by Iranian concepts, while the temples and the fortifications show signs of Mesopotamian inspiration.

The abundant and datable material from Āy Kānom provided guidance for other site investigations, which were pursued with vigor on both sides of the Oxus. These have revealed the great scale of the irrigation projects undertaken to complete the already substantial works of the preceding periods. Furthermore several new sites of towns or fortified settlements were identified and provisionally excavated, though Termed (probably a foundation of Demetrios) remained inaccessible. In general these are sites of towns founded in the later years of the kingdom’s existence; they are smaller than those of the cities founded by the Seleucids and have a markedly military character, with a citadel overlooking a geometrically planned settlement surrounded by ramparts. Noteworthy are the quadrangular town of Delbarjīn in the north of the Balk oasis, and the fortresses of Kay Qobād Šāh, Kāyrābād Tepe, Qal’a-ye Kāfernegān, and Qarabāg Tepe on right bank tributaries of the Oxus. Somewhat later came the discovery of the site on the right bank of the Oxus called Taqt-e Sangīn, which is surrounded by stone fortifications (most unusual in this region); excavations there have uncovered a sanctuary of the Oxus god and yielded abundant materials closely resembling those found at Āy Kānom (Litvinskij and Pitchikian, pp. 195-216).

The last period of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom is marked by the reign of Eucratides, who overthrew Demetrios and thereby started a long conflict with the descendants of Euthydemus who remained in power in India, which continued under his successors. The protracted hostilities probably explain, in



part, why the kingdom lost strength and succumbed to a nomad invasion, which ended Greek rule in the region. It is known that Āy Kānom was abandoned by the Greeks and pillaged by neighboring populations in 147. According to the Chinese traveler Chang Chien, Ta Hsia (Bactria) in 130 consisted of a multitude of petty principalities, lacking a supreme chief but all under the domination of the Yüeh Chih tribes whose camping grounds lay on the right bank of the Oxus.

Pre-Kushan Bactria. The subsequent period is extremely obscure. It is known from the Chinese historical work *Hou Han Shu* that the Yüeh Chih occupied Lan Shih, which many scholars identify with Bactra. This is taken to mean that Bactria then came under the direct rule of the Yüeh Chih. The exact date of the occupation is unknown. The work goes on to describe the political situation in Bactria: “The Yüeh Chih . . . moved into Ta Hsia (Bactria) and divided this kingdom into five *hsi-hou* (*yabgū*), namely those of Hsiu-mi, Shuang-mi, Kuei-shang, Hsi-tun, and Tu-mi.” Strabo, who possessed only indirect information because the presence of the Parthian empire prevented contact, gives us to understand that Bactria was conquered by several nomad groups: the Asii/Asiani, the Tochari, and the Saraucae (*Geography* 11.511). Although Strabo’s statement is difficult to reconcile with those in the Chinese sources, archeological evidence obtained from excavations of several large nomad cemeteries on the right bank of the Oxus shows that many of the newcomers were natives of the northwestern steppes and belonged to the Sauromatian/Sarmatian ethnic group.

According to Trogus Pompeius (quoted by Justin, *Prologi* 42), “the Asiani became the kings of the Tochari, and the Saraucae (Sacaraucae) were destroyed.” This statement tallies with the account in the *Hou Han Shu* which tells how one of the chiefs who shared Ta Hsia overcame the others and founded the Kushan dynasty in Bactria: “More than a century after (the arrival of the nomads in Bactria), the *hsi-hou* of the Kuei-shang, named Ch’iu-tsiu-ch’ü, attacked the other four *hsi-hous*. He proclaimed himself king. The name of his kingdom was Kuei-shang.” Comparison of the two texts leaves no doubt as to the identity of the Asiani with the Kushans.

The Tochari, from whom eastern Bactria was to acquire the name Ṭokārestān, were for a long time thought to be identical with the Kushans. Their language may have belonged to the Indo-European “centum” group used in the oases of the Tarim basin. These matters, however, remain problematical and controversial.



As for the Sacaraucae, they are thought to have settled in western Bactria after they had pillaged Bactra. Probably attributable to a dynasty of chiefs of this tribe are the tombs discovered in 1978 at ʾTelā Tepe in the Šebergān district, a site in one of several oases along the Sar-e Pol river west of Bactra which were developed and settled at that time. The extraordinary profusion of the finds of jewelry and gold artifacts, often encrusted with precious stones, in these tombs has prompted comparison with the treasure of Peter the Great in the Hermitage Museum at Leningrad. All the items can be dated from the first century B.C. and first century A.D. The workmanship attests the continuing impact of Greek culture (e.g., buckles with figures of Ares or Dionysos in his chariot), the strength of Bactrian traditions akin to the art of the steppes (e.g., scabbards with encrusted dragon ornamentations, ear pendants in animal style), and the presence of East Asian influences (e.g., Chinese mirrors, Mongoloid features of human figures).

The archeological discoveries relating to pre-Kushan Bactria point to continuance of the agricultural and urban development observed in the later part of the Greco-Bactrian period. The case of Āy Kānom is exceptional; here the only occupants were now a small garrison lodged in the citadel, the role of chief city of eastern Bactria having reverted to Kondūz. In addition to finds made at nomad cemeteries, such as Tūlkār, Bīškent, and Tūpkāna (Litvinskiĭ and Sedov, 1984), materials have been unearthed from sites of towns founded in the previous period which continued to live and flourish without a break, such as Delbarjīn and Qaḷ'a-ye Kāfernegān. Other settlements of smaller size from this period were elaborately fortified with ramparts and covered galleries in a quadrangular layout, as at Kohna Qaḷ'a, Aĭrtam, and Saksanošūr. Real towns arose at Delvarzīn Tepe on the Sorkān Daryā, at Zar Tepe on the right bank of the Oxus, and at Yemšī Tepe which was probably the seat of the local rulers interred at ʾTelā Tepe (Sarianidi).

Bactria under the Kushans. The history of the Kushan empire presents, as is well known, many difficulties due to the paucity and heterogeneity of the Greco-Roman, Syrian, Indian, and Chinese sources. The only documentation of Kushan origin consists of coin legends, seals, and votive inscriptions whose dating remains problematic because several different eras are used in them.

This empire spread far and wide from its nucleus in Bactria and finally comprised a vast area stretching from Central Asia to India. As a result, Bactria gradually lost its political importance and became merely one province among many others.



Even so, Bactria appears to have prospered during the Kushan period. Thanks to trade expansion made possible by the prevalence of peace, Bactra became a major commercial center. The city was one of the chief halts on the silk road and the crossroads of routes leading westward to Marv, northward to Termed, Čaġānīān, and Kāšgar, and south-eastward to Kondūz, Sorḵ Kotal, Begrām, and thence to India. People were able and willing to travel, and among them were Indian monks who brought the religion of the Buddha to Bactria with the encouragement, so it seems, of the powerful Kushan king Kanishka. Numerous monasteries were founded in the region at that time: at Termed (Qara Tepe), Zar Tepe, Kondūz, Bāmīān, Begrām, and elsewhere. The art types of the Buddha flashing fire and the Buddha gushing water were probably conceived in the Bactrian monasteries under the influence of Mazdean and Zoroastrian concepts (Staviskii).

In the Kushan period a Bactrian alphabet based on the Greek was created for monumental use, and excavations at Delbarjīn and near Termed have uncovered fragments of texts in a cursive Bactrian script. (See [bactrian language](#).)

A substantial increase of the area under cultivation in Bactria took place in the Kushan period. New lands were irrigated, e.g., at Bīškent and along the lower course of the Vaḵš, while the valleys of the Balḵ, Kondūz, and Sorḵān Daryā rivers were important producers. Urbanization showed similar progress. Some forty urban sites, including fifteen of more than 15 ha, have now been located; all have dimensions fit for medium-sized or large towns. Besides the main cities of Bactra (Zariaspa, Lan Shi), Kondūz, and Termed (Qara Tepe), the following towns deserve mention: in southern Bactria, Delbarjīn, Begrām (famous for the find of a treasure-store containing objects from Alexandria in Egypt and from India), and the sanctuary Sorḵ Kotal (with a great temple at the top of a flight of steps, dedicated to an apparently eclectic collection of gods headed by a deity personifying the victory of the temple's founder Kanishka; Schlumberger, le Berre, and Fussman); north of the Oxus, Delvarzīn, Aīrtam, Zar Tepe, Qaḷ'a-ye Kāfernegān, and Ḳaḷčajān. All these sites attest the remarkable development of urban life which characterized Kushan Bactria.

It was in the Kushan period, however, that the name Bactria fell out of use. We do not know what name the region then bore. The geographer Ptolemy, writing in the second half of the second century A.D., states that it was then inhabited mainly by Tochari. In Middle Persian and Armenian, the name Balḵ denotes only the capital city. By the end of the Kushan period, Bactria had



come to be known as Ṭokārestān. After the conquest of the region by the Sasanians, Ṭokārestān formed the core of their province of Kūšānšahr. In the Chinese sources Tu Kho Lo, undoubtedly a transcription of the new name, replaces the older Ta Hsia.

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