



BEGRĀM

BEGRĀM, the site of ancient Kāpiśa, is located 80.5 km north of Kabul overlooking the Panjšīr valley at the confluence of the Panjšīr and Ġorband rivers. Its ruins were known in the 19th century and yielded large quantities of coins dating between the period of the Greco-Bactrians and that of the Kushans (cf. C. Masson, “Memoir on the Ancient Coins Found at Behgram, in the Kohistan of Kabul,” *JASB* 3, 1834, pp. 153-75; 5, 1836, pp. 1-29, 537-47). It was not until 1922, however, that the ruins were correctly recognized by Alfred Foucher as those of the important ancient city of Kāpiśa (A. Foucher, “Le vieille route de l’Inde de Bactres à Taxila,” *MDAFA* 1, 1942, pp. 138-45). It has been suggested that the town was originally Alexandria-under-Caucasus, founded by Alexander the Great (cf. W. W. Tam, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1951, pp. 96ff., 460-62; H. Deydier, *Contribution à l’étude de l’art du Gandhāra*, Paris, 1950, pp. 94-97); but there can be no doubt that it was inhabited by the Indo-Greeks, since a coin reverse of Eukratides shows an enthroned deity between an elephant protome and a mountain symbol with the Kharoshthi inscription *Kavisiye nagaradevata*, i.e., “city god of Kāpiśa” (cf. A. K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks*, Oxford, 1957, pp. 63-64). According to the account of Hsüan-tsang, the city was the summer capital of the Kushan empire under Kanishka (cf. S. Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World I*, London, 1884, pp. 54-58).

The site was first excavated by J. Hackin between 1936 and 1940 (*Recherches archéologiques à Begram*, MDAFA 9, 1939; idem et al., *Nouvelles recherches archéologiques à Begram*, MDAFA 11, 1954). His investigations took place in



two distinct areas, one a “new royal city,” which is Begrām proper, and the other an “old royal city,” in what is now Borj-e ‘Abd-Allāh. In the first location he discovered a spectacular collection of precious objects walled in chambers of a large edifice of the Kushan period, possibly a palace or *bāzār*.

The second excavator, Roman Ghirshman, established in 1941-42 the major occupation period of Kāpiśa between the second century b.c. and second century a.d. (*Bégram*, MDAFA 13, 1946). According to both excavators, Kāpiśa’s most important era occurred under the Kushans, at which time much building took place. Ghirshman has claimed that Kāpiśa was devastated by an invasion force under the Sasanian king Šāpūr I in 241 a.d., a campaign which brought about the downfall of the Kanishka I dynasty (*Bégram*, pp. 99ff., 108), although this is by no means certain. The last level of occupation of the city took it from this problematic event to a final destruction in the fifth century, probably by invading Hephthalites.

Although the exact chronology and agents responsible for the destruction of Begrām’s major occupation level are subject to differing interpretations, it is generally believed that the city reached its zenith early in the era of Kanishka I’s dynasty. Begrām’s treasure is now largely in the Kabul Museum, with some examples in Musée Guimet, Paris. It consists mainly of objects of luxury from practically every part of the world known during the Kushan era; and thus underscores the magnitude and quality of commerce across the trans-Asian trade routes, with the Kushans in the profitable position of middlemen linking India, China, and the Roman empire. Chinese lacquer of the Han dynasty was excavated (*Nouvelles recherches*, pp. 295-97), together with a fine collection of ornamental glassware, probably from Roman Alexandria (*Recherches*, fig. 55 and pls. XI, XIX, XXIII; *Nouvelles recherches*, pp. 254-64, pp. 99-109, figs. 250-73). Other Roman objects included bronze statuettes, and a group of bronze, porphyry, and alabaster vessels (*Recherches*, pls. VII-IX, XX, XXIV, XXVI, XXVII; *Nouvelles recherches*, figs. 322-63). Also discovered was a group of nearly 50 plaster casts of *emblemata* with reliefs, perhaps originally intended as designs for silversmiths, also of probable Alexandrian origin (*Nouvelles recherches*, pp. 141-46, pp. 265-75, figs. 274-320). In addition, a large and equally extraordinary group of Indian carved ivory plaques and ornaments made for articles of furniture were excavated, bearing a strong similarity to the sculptural styles of Kushan Mathurā and Amarāvātī under the Āndhras of the Deccan (*Nouvelles recherches*, pp. 19-87, 157-253, figs. 1-239, 466-630).

Benjamin Rowland and others have dated the Begrām treasure to the first and



second centuries a.d. (cf. B. Rowland, *Ancient Art from Afghanistan*, New York, 1966, pp. 24-28). A carved Indian ivory mirror handle from Pompeii is remarkably similar in style to some of the Begrām ivories and must date from some time prior to 79 a.d. (cf. A. Maiuri, “The Ivory Statuette of Indian Art at Pompeii,” *Journal of the United Provinces Historical Society* 19, 1946, pp. 1-9). Rowland is skeptical of Ghirshman’s theory of the destruction by Šāpūr I of Kāpiśa in 241 a.d. and points out that all the objects in the hoard would have been almost a century old by that date, with no more recent additions (loc. cit.). He goes on to suggest that a period of political turmoil in the region after Kanishka I’s death might have been responsible for the destruction level at Begrām, noting that Kushan dynastic shrines at Surkh (Sorḵ) Kotal and Mathurā offer inscriptional evidence of temporary abandonment and decay before restoration by Huvishka.

Whatever the truth may be, the treasure is best available evidence of the extensive nature of trade between the Kushan empire, Rome, and China in the first two centuries a.d. It is unlikely that the hoard’s Roman art objects were actual models for Kushan artistic productions, however. Nevertheless, they do reflect a strongly classicizing taste among the Kushan nobility and wealthy merchant class, and make the hybrid style of Gandhara sculpture of the Kushan period more understandable. This taste was not developed exclusively under the Kushans, but has its roots in the legacy of Bactrian and Indo-Greek culture stretching back in time to Alexander’s Macedonian settlements.

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