



GĀNDHĀRĪ LANGUAGE

GĀNDHĀRĪ LANGUAGE, the language of ancient Gandhāra (q.v.), the area around the Peshawar Valley in the modern North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, lying near the border of the Indian and Iranian linguistic areas.

General. Gāndhārī belongs to the Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) family of Indian languages and is closely related to Sanskrit, Pali, and various Prakrit dialects. Between the third century BCE and third century CE. Gāndhārī served as the literary language and lingua franca of the northwestern part of the Indian Subcontinent. Under the Kuṣāṇa Empire (first to third centuries CE; see [KUSHAN DYNASTY](#)), Gāndhārī spread into adjoining regions of India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Recent discoveries of large numbers of manuscripts in Gāndhārī have shown that during this period Gāndhārī was a major Buddhist literary language. The evidence of historical phonology indicates that some of the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist texts are derived from Gāndhārī archetypes.

Gāndhārī was written in the Kharoṣṭhī script, which is derived from the Aramaic script used in the eastern parts of the Achaemenid Empire, including Gandhāra. This sets Gāndhārī off from all other Indo-Aryan languages, which are written in Brāhmī (q.v.) script and its local derivatives.

Attestation. The Gāndhārī language is attested by four classes of documents:

(1) Over five hundred inscriptions, mainly Buddhist dedicatory or donative records on stone or metal. (*Catalogue of Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions*; Konow;



Salomon, 1998, pp. 74-79)

(2) Buddhist manuscripts on birch bark scrolls or palm leaf *poṭhīs*. Only a few of these have been published, but several dozen are currently under study. (Allon; Brough; Glass; Lenz; Salomon, 1999, 2000, 2003)

(3) Legends on coins of the Indo-Greek (q.v.), Saka, Parthian, and Kuṣāṇa rulers of northwestern India, often with bilingual legends in Greek and Gāndhārī. Such coins led to the initial decipherment of Kharoṣṭhī script by James Prinsep and others in the 1830s. (Salomon, 1998, pp. 209-18)

(4) Nearly one thousand legal and administrative documents on wooden tablets from the kingdom of Kroraina (Shan-shan) in the southeastern Tarim Basin (Xinjiang, China). They are composed in a distinct dialect of Gāndhārī with innovative morphology and loan words from Greek, Iranian, and Central Asian languages. (Boyer, Rapson and Senart; Burrow, 1937; Burrow, 1940)

Structure. Gāndhārī phonology generally resembles that of the other MIA languages. The vowels *ai*, *au*, and *ṛ* disappear, and *aya* and *ava* are contracted to *e* and *o* respectively. In later stages of the language, most single intervocalic consonants are voiced or elided. A feature peculiar to Gāndhārī is the development of intervocalic *-th-* and *-dh-* into *-ṣ-*, probably pronounced /z/. The three sibilants of Sanskrit, *ś*, *ṣ*, and *s*, which merge in other MIA dialects, are mostly preserved in Gāndhārī, though some sibilant clusters undergo special developments, such as *śr* > *ṣ* and *ṣy* > *ś* (e.g., Sanskrit *manuṣya-* ‘human’ > *maṇośa-*). Consonant clusters are generally simplified by assimilation as in MIA; e.g., Sanskrit *sapta* ‘seven’ > *sata* (graphic for /satta/). But some consonant clusters which are assimilated in other MIA dialects are preserved in Gāndhārī, especially those involving *r* and *v*; thus Sanskrit *prasanna-* ‘pleased’ > Gāndhārī *prasaṅ[n]a*, but Pali *pasanna-*. Clusters with *r* are often subject to metathesis, as in Sanskrit *durgati-* ‘bad destiny’ > Gāndhārī *drugadi-*, vs. Pali *duggati*. Sanskrit *kṣa*, which elsewhere becomes *kh* or *ch*, is retained and represented by a special Kharoṣṭhī character.

Gāndhārī morphology is likewise similar to that of other MIA languages, but more flexible and less standardized. For example, the endings of the masculine and neuter nominative singular of noun stems in *-a* varies among *-e*, *-o*, *-u*, or *-a*, even within the same text, as a result of the neutralization of vowels in word final position with consequent graphic ambiguity (Fussman, pp. 460-61, 471-73). Similarly, the locative singular endings *-e*, *-u*, *-o*, *-a*, *-mi*,



and *śpi* alternate freely. Among verb forms, the future stem is *-iśa-* (< Sanskrit *-iṣya-*). Preterite verbs are expressed either by derivatives of old aorists such as *adhrikṣe* ‘I saw’ (compare Sanskrit *adrākṣam*) or by periphrastic constructions with the past participle, as in *aho . . . ṇidiṭhu* ‘I was designated’ (= Sanskrit *aham nirdiṣṭah*).

The lexicon of Gāndhārī is primarily Indic in origin and largely common to other Indo-Aryan languages, but it includes some words characteristic of the northwestern dialects, such as *śpasa* ‘sister’ instead of *bhaginī* and *baṭa* ‘stone’ instead of *pāṣāṇa* (Salomon, 1999, pp. 133-34). Derivatives of such regional vocabulary are sometimes found in the modern Dardic languages (see [DARDESTĀN ii.](#)), such as Torwali *bāṭ* ‘stone’. Besides the Indic component, Gāndhārī has some loanwords, particularly from Greek and Iranian. Greek loans involve administrative terms such as *stratega* ‘general, commander’ (< *strategós* [στρατηγός]; Salomon, 1999, pp. 141, 148), *meridarkha-* ‘meridarch’ (< *meridárchē* [επιδραρχη]; Konow, p. 2), and *sa(dera)* ‘stater’ (< *statēr* [στατηρ]; Salomon, 1999, p. 148), and calendrical terms, especially Macedonian month names, for example *avadunaka-* ‘Audunaios’ (αυδυναιος; Konow, p. 154). Iranian loanwords also typically occur in the administrative and calendrical sphere; for example, *kṣatrapa* ‘satrap’ (< Old Persian *xšaçaṣpāvan-*; Salomon, 1999, pp. 142-44), *erzuna* ‘prince’ (< Saka *alysānai/eysānai*; Konow, p. 61), and *kṣuṇa* ‘date’ (= Khotan Saka *kṣuṇa*; Konow, p. lxxiv).

Historical development. Gāndhārī developed in three stages. Early Gāndhārī is best attested in the sets of Aśoka’s major rock edicts at Shāhbāzgarhī and Mānsehrā. At this stage, intervocalic consonants were mostly retained as in the original Old Indo-Aryan form; for example, *siyati* (later *siyadi*)= Sanskrit *syāt* ‘would be’ (Shāhbāzgarhī XII.8). In the middle stage, found in inscriptions and manuscripts from the first century BCE to the middle of the second century CE, intervocalic consonants are voiced, elided, or modified to fricatives (Fussman, pp. 455-65). But in late Gāndhārī of the later second and early third centuries CE, the natural phonological developments are masked by extensive re-Sanskritization of the written language, whereby many consonants which had changed or disappeared in the spoken language were restored to their underlying Old Indo-Aryan form; for example, *sapta* ‘seven’ = Sanskrit *sapta* instead of earlier *sat[t]a* (Salomon 2001, p. 245). Some late documents written in Kharoṣṭhī script are in fact practically indistinguishable from Sanskrit (Salomon, 2001, p. 246).

Literature. Buddhist literature attested in Gāndhārī manuscripts comprises a



wide range of genres, including both original Gāndhārī compositions and texts translated from other MIA languages. The best represented genre is *sūtra* (Allon, Salomon, 2000), including a collection of some two dozen scrolls constituting an anthology of *sūtras* (Salomon, 2003). Other important genres include *avadānas* (legends; Lenz, part 2), *abhidharma* (scholastic treatises), commentaries, and *stotras* (hymns). The *Dharmapada* is extant in two manuscripts (Brough; Lenz, part 1). Gāndhārī literature as known to date consists mainly of texts of “mainstream” Buddhist schools such as the Dharmaguptakas, but there is at least one instance of a Mahāyānistic text, the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra*.

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