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iv. POLITICAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONS: SELEUCID, PARTHIAN, SASANIAN PERIODS

Seleucus I (d. 281 B.C.E.), after establishing himself as heir of Alexander in western Asia, led an expedition to India (Matelli, 1987) ca. 305 B.C.E. It ended, however, with the cession of the territories of Paropamisadae, Aria, Arachosia, and Gedrosia to a new Indian king, Candragupta Maurya. This settlement was probably sealed by a marriage contract between the two ruling houses and the delivery of 500 war elephants. Seleucus employed these in his battles with rival Diadochs (Appian, *Syr*. 55; Justin, *Hist. Philipp.* 15.4). Some scholars assume that, in creating the first united political entity of northern India, Candragupta was inspired by Alexander.

That a Greek population was still culturally relevant in the Indo-Iranian frontier is proved by the use of Greek, together with Imperial Aramaic, in the edict that the Mauryan king Aśoka (d. ca. 237 B.C.E.) caused to be engraved in Kandahār (Pugliese Carratelli and Garbini, 1964); there are also mentions of the Yona people in his edicts V and XIII. (See above, section ii.) Along with its

religious message, the Kandahār edict clearly represents a form of the Mauryas' political control over Arachosia. Aśoka's edicts show a connection with Greek philosophy; they may also show a possible Achaemenid inspiration or at least a convergence between the ethical viewpoint of Aśoka and the ethics expressed in the inscriptions of Darius I (Scialpi, 1984).

The claim that some elements of Mauryan architecture and art have a direct Achaemenid origin is only hypothetical. For instance, in Patna, Bihar, at Kumrahar, site of the Mauryan capital city Pāṭaliputra, there was uncovered a hypostyle pavilion with 80 columns of polished sandstone. This building has in the past been considered a derivation of the Apadāna in Persepolis and Susa. However, the Indian building is more a pavilion than a palatial hall; this seems to suggest that it was, rather, designed by local architects, who may have been inspired by descriptions of Persian great halls but who worked in a completely different context (Allchin, 1995, pp. 203, 236-38).

The finely finished surfaces of several stone sculptures of the Mauryan period have been compared to the Achaemenid sculptural tradition (last, Huntington, 1985, pp. 43, 46). According to Sir Mortimer Wheeler, artisans working for the Achaemenid workshops may have emigrated to the new Indian empire after losing their jobs due to the collapse of the Achaemenids (Wheeler, 1974). Subsequent in-depth investigations into the preserved architectural elements of the Mauryan tradition suggest that in reality the Achaemenid inspiration was indirect, mediated by the Seleucids (Nylander, 1988). Greek or Hellenistic influence, which is recognizable in capitals (with volutes that recall the Ionic order), moldings, and some decorative elements such as the acanthus leaf or the honeysuckle, prevails over the Achaemenid, represented by some capitals with animal figures (Boardman, 1994, p. 110; Allchin, 1995, p. 260). Achaemenid art probably transmitted certain ancient Near Eastern decorative elements which can be found in India until the first century B.C.E., such as "the friezes of sharp-leaved lotuses" (Boardman, 1994, p. 111).

While northern India through the second century B.C.E. is characterized by a Greek presence, the Iranian presence becomes more prominent with the rise to power of the Saka people—in Gandhara during the first century B.C.E. and in western India from the first century C.E. Known primarily from their coinage, which follows the Indo-Greek system, the Sakas, and their vassals, played a fundamental role in the flowering of Buddhist art and literature (Lamotte, 1958, pp. 542-43; Salomon, 1997, p. 189). At the same time, analysis of the coinage has revealed the presence of a strong Iranian religious

component that can be easily interpreted with reference to Herodotus's description of the Scythian pantheon (Sinisi, 2004). The tumulus burials at Barrow Cemetery in Kandahār have been attributed to the Sakas (Ball, 1995, pp. 444-48); these may have influenced later funerary customs in some Indian regions (Taddei, 1979).

The Sakas were succeeded by the Parthians with their collateral family branch of Sistān, whose rule extended over the northwest—the Gondophares (q.v.) dynasty (the term now is considered as a dynastic title). During the first half of the first century C.E. the Buddhist art of Gandhara arose with its innovative figurative language of Hellenistic character. It is not possible to follow interpretations of some typical Gandharan stylistic traits as due to an assumed "Parthian" influence (Huntington, 1985, pp. 120-22). Yet the Parthian presence is visible in some types of dress with tunic and pants and in the use of facial marks (Faccenna, 1996). The introduction of Persian-derived terms into Sanskrit (Mayrhofer, 1956), such as *kṣatrapa-* (satrap) or *gañjavara-* (treasurer), has also been ascribed to this period (Sircar, 1973, p. 13).

A stronger wave of 'Iranism' appears with the conquest of northern India by the Kuṣāṇas (see KUSHAN), who already controlled the western part of Central Asia. The inclusion of the two regions in a single political entity promoted a cultural osmosis in either direction. The divine pantheon seen on the Kuṣāṇa coinage facilitates understanding of this exchange, for the Indian iconographies are frequently identified in the accompanying Bactrian legends as Iranian divinities (Göbl, 1984). Similarly, in the Bactrian inscription from Rabatak (Robāṭak) in northern Afghanistan, Indian and Iranian gods are mentioned together (Sims-Williams and Cribb, 1995-96). The monarchist ideology of the Kuṣāṇas, itself saturated with Indian concepts (Verardi, 1983), is manifested by external expressions in which the Iranian tradition is asserted with pride (Fussman, 1977).

The presence of elements of Iranian speculative thought within Buddhism now is seen as no more than a mere possibility linked particularly with the direct involvement of Iranians (Emmerick, 1990, p. 43); indeed, there has been a tendency for some scholars to place too much importance on such elements (Scott, 1990). Most of those factors that have been called Iranian influences on Buddhism can be explained more clearly when viewed within the culture of the subcontinent (Fussman, 1994, pp. 31-38). For instance, the fire altar represented on the bases of many Gandharan images can be well understood only if interpreted according to Indian conceptions (Verardi 1987, 1994).

On the other hand, an aspect of Indian religiosity with a clear Iranian origin is found in the cult of the solar divinity, so important in northern India that even Indian tradition, which is usually not willing to admit external influences, recognizes it as linked to the Iranian world. According to the *Samba-Purāṇa* and the *Bhaviṣya-Purāṇa*, eighteen members of the caste of the Magi of Śākadvīpa (probably Sakastān), migrated to India to dedicate themselves, as Brahmins, to devotion to the anthropomorphic image of a solar divinity named Mihira (Scheftelowitz, 1933; von Stietencron, 1966; Panaino, 1996). This divinity is clearly linked to the Iranian Mithra; in later Brahmanism it is Sūrya who is the solar divinity, and he is characterized by Iranian-Central Asian dress ("from the north"), exactly as indicated in the *Bṛhat-Samhitā* (58, 46-48) and similar to the idol of the great temple of Multan mentioned by Eṣṭaḵri.

The introduction of Indian elements into Iran is linked to the expansion of Buddhism westward (see Tardieu, 1988); it is Buddhism, in particular, that connects the east (Paropamisadae) and south (Arachosia) of Afghanistan to the Indian cultural sphere. The theory that regards two Parthian princes as among the earliest translators of Buddhist texts into Chinese and, accordingly, dates the penetration of Buddhism into Bactria to the first century B.C.E.–first century C.E. (Koshelenko, 1966) is now doubted (Staviskiĭ, 1998, p. 156), and the date of the introduction of Buddhism into Bactria remains problematic (Emmerick, 1990, p. 492). Another piece of evidence, the foundation of the first *stūpa* of Merv, originally was placed within the second century C.E., but re-analysis of the archeological and numismatic remains has made necessary a new dating to within the fourth century C.E. at the earliest (Callieri, 1996; Staviskiĭ, 1998; Mkrtycev, 2002, pp. 28-30). A penetration of Buddhism into Khorasan still is considered possible on the basis of data from the Islamic period (Melikian-Chirvani, 1990). The spread of Buddhism into southern Iran seems confirmed by some of the rock monuments located along the Persian Gulf southwest of Bušehr, which can be interpreted as monastic Buddhist settlements (Ball, 1986).

The Sasanian conquest of the entire Indo-Iranian frontier, which according to Šāpur I's inscription on the Kaʿba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam occurred early, brought new direct rule by a Persian dynasty in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. The domain of Kušānšahr was entrusted, with the title Kušānšāh, to the crown princes of the Sasanian noble family. Its creation has been dated by various scholars to the fourth century C.E. (Nikitin, 1999) or, more correctly, to the third century C.E. (Cribb, 1990); and the event is a

significant moment of exchange between Iran and India, even with the complex problems of history and chronology. The creation of a coinage that, along with Kuṣāna tradition, brings typical Indian iconographies, such as Śiva and the bull Nandin, combined with undoubtedly Sasanian images of kings, more than any other evidence indicates the level of cultural interaction that ensued in this political situation. The importance of the Kušānšāhān within the Sasanian political framework seems to be confirmed by the image of the lotus flower on which Mithra lies in the first relief of Ṭāq-e Bostān (Carter, 1981; Kröger, 1981, p. 443), as well as by the stucco portraits found at Ḥājiābād and identified as representing the Kušānšāhān (Azarnoush, 1994, pp. 102-16, 237-38).

The Parthians, and later the Sasanians, were linked with India above all by navigation of the Persian Gulf. The commercial contacts between the two sides seem to have been carried out by Palmyrene, and then by Syrian, merchants. Manichean sources cite a journey made by Mani to India, which was the beginning of the religion's missionary envoys. From the fourth century C.E. there followed the missions of Christian Nestorians to the coast of southern India. The communities that resulted from these missions are still flourishing, and their antiquity is attested by monumental crosses with Pahlavi inscriptions (Cereti, Olivieri, Vazhutanapally, 2002).

Some elements suggest that contacts existed between Gupta India and Sasanian Iran (Kröger, 1981, pp. 446-47), but the region of the Indo-Iranian frontier where Sasanian influence is most visible, after the very strong "Indianization" which had followed the diffusion of Buddhism and Kuṣāṇa domination, is Afghanistan. Different stylistic and iconographic elements typical of Sasanian art appear in Buddhist works in stucco and particularly in paintings, even after the end of Sasanian rule; these appear to such a degree that the French archeologist J. Hackin coined the term "Irano-Buddhist art." In the Afghan region those separate elements of Sasanian inspiration can be linked to with more complex iconographic themes, such as the image of Mithra on a chariot painted on the vault of the 35 m high Buddha of Bamiyan (see BĀMIĀN; Grenet, 1993).

However, in the southern section of the Indo-Iranian frontier, Sasanian characteristics are quite rare. The presence of mold-made pottery in the harbor settlement of Banbhore, Sind, seems connected to an evolution of the ceramics tradition of the entire frontier region, rather than due to a Sasanian presence that is evidenced only by a few Arab-Sasanian coins (Khan, 1963, pp.

13-16).

The beginning of domination by the Hūṇa people, the Indian term for the Huns (q.v) who supplanted the Sasanians in political control over the Indian-Iranian frontier, did not diminish the importance of ongoing cultural exchange between India and Iran. For example, the seals of the Hephthalites (q.v) are characterized by typical Iranian onomastics, but transcribed, no longer in the Bactrian script, but rather in Brāhmī characters. The Huns' presence in India facilitated an expansion of the Bactrian language toward the southeast, which was still attested during the eighth century C.E. by the trilingual Arab-Sanskrit-Bactrian inscriptions in the Tochi valley (Bannu District, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan). In those inscriptions is mentioned a Bactrian era, the foundation of which has been assigned to the Sasanian conquest of Bactria (Sims-Williams, 1999). During these centuries, immediately preceding the process of Islamization, the traits of Sasanian inspiration are recognizable in the sculptures of Kashmir (Huntington, 1985, pp. 357, 369), particularly in the shapes of some crowns, crown ribbons, and hairstyles. Even in medieval Ladakh the paintings of the Buddhist monastery at Alchi depict Sasanian-style medallions with beaded borders (ibid., p. 384).

According to a number of sources, two important aspects of the Iranian culture of the Sasanian period were imported from India under Ḵosrow I (r. 531-79), both by the court physician Burzōē/Burzōye (see BORZUYA): the Indian collection of tales, the *Pañcatantra* (later translated into Pahlavi and then into Arabic) and the game of chess (Panaino, 2000; Abka'i-Khavari, 2001). Indian astronomy and astrology also exerted great influence on Sasanian (and Islamic) science and beliefs (see ASTROLOGY AND ASTRONOMY ii.).

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