



## SAKAS: IN AFGHANISTAN

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The ethnonym Saka appears in ancient Iranian and Indian sources as the name of the large family of Iranian nomads called Scythians by the Classical Western sources and *Sai* by the Chinese (Gk. *Sacae*; OPers. *Sakā*). From their realms in the Central Asian plains, the Sakas appear to have moved southwards towards the territories of present-day Afghanistan about the mid-second century BCE, making their way first into [Bactria](#), then through [Aria](#), [Drangiana](#), and [Arachosia](#), and finally the Paropamisadai mountains, up to the whole of the Kabul river valley.

Comprehensive examination of the literary, iconographical, and archeological sources has led to the identification (Bernard, 1987) of one of the two main ethnic groups who put an end to the Greek domination in Bactria with the Sakas. The other group was the Yuezhi (for whom, see [KUSHAN DYNASTY i. Dynastic History](#)), who are mentioned as Sacaraucae by Justin and thus referred to, as Sacarauli, also by Strabo, 11.8.2/511 (Daffinà, 1967, pp. 57-63). Precise attribution of the abundant archeological evidence regarding nomads in Afghanistan, however, remain hypothetical. For example, the ceramic production characterizing the two waves of nomadic “invasions” documented at the Bactrian site of Aï Khanum (see [ĀY KĀNOM](#)) around 145-140 BCE has been attributed specifically to the Sacaraucae and the Yuezhi (Rapin, 1992, pp. 289-92): the goblets on stands are considered the typical vessels of the Sakas, while the handmade, bottle-shaped pots with flat bottoms are taken to belong to the Yuezhi; the pots with tripod bottom are regarded as possibly being held



in common (Lyonnet, 1997, pp. 157-72). Indeed, comparable evidence in the Central Asiatic graveyards points to a distinction between an easterly area, attributed to the Yuezhi, and a western area, attributed to the Saka (*ibid.*, Lyonnet, 1997, p. 165). However, it has also been pointed out that at Ai Khanum, and indeed in the material retrieved with the surface survey of eastern Bactria, a limited quantity of “nomadic” wares have been found along with the pottery of Greco-Bactrian tradition, suggesting a more complex pattern of relationships between the nomads and the Greeks, which would preclude the possibility of a precise ethnic attribution of the wares (Gardin, 1998, pp. 114, 163-64).

Similar caution now seems to be preferred (see Schiltz, 2007) in attribution of the extraordinarily rich nomadic graves of Tillya Tepe, in western Bactria, which are dated within the first half of the 1st century CE. These have long been attributed to the Sakas (Bernard, 1987) on the basis of the comparative evidence available for most of their furniture.

Before the expansion of archeological research in Afghanistan, coinage was the main source of information supplementing the textual evidence. Coins illustrate the literary sources regarding the movements of Saka tribes from Bactria to the eastern borderlands of the [Parthian](#) kingdom between 120 and 80 BCE—a movement which caused at least part of the region of Drangiana to take the name of Sakastan (i.e., Land of the Sakas), present-day Seistan (Daffinà, 1967, p. 73).

In Bactria, a coinage based on imitation of the [Indo-Greek](#) coins of [Heliocles](#) has been attributed to an early Saka principality (Mitchiner, 1976, p. 401). Other Sakas continued their march across Afghanistan and reached Areia (see [HERAT ii. History, Pre-Islamic Period](#)), where the Saka principality apparently ruled under the sovereignty of the [Arsacids](#). Arsacid-style silver drachms minted here from around 85 BCE point to the existence of a semi-autonomous realm, in which the Saka sovereigns countermarked Arsacid coins with their effigy, set on the neck of the Arsacid king’s bust (Mitchiner, 1976, pp. 401-2). The degree of dependence between the Arsacid sovereign and these Saka dynasts is held to be demonstrated by the evolution of the coinage in the region. In fact, we see a transition from the countermarking of normal Parthian drachms (until ca. 40 BCE) to minting from locally-made dies, upon which both an imitation of the Parthian coin type and the local countermarks had been engraved (Mitchiner, 1976, p. 401). Of very particular interest is the production of silver imitations of drachms of the Arsacid kings Orodes II



(57-38 BCE) and Phraates IV (39-2 BCE), bearing on the obverse die an engraved countermark showing an oval border of dots, within which is a beardless, helmeted head in profile to the right (Simonetta, 1958, pp. 161-66; pl. I, 7-15; see also Walton Dobbins, 1971, p. 138 and fn. 1; Sellwood, 1980, pp. 293, 295). Two numismatic types are distinguished by M. Mitchiner (1976, pp. 410-11, types 611-12), attributed to a sole 'King A,' circa 40 to 1 BCE. Mitchiner follows A. M. Simonetta in attributing these issues to the mint of [Alexandria Areion-Herat](#).

The typical portraits shown by these countermarks are also found on engraved gems, namely a group of nineteen honey-colored, chalcedony pieces of various shapes and collected in a wide area centered on eastern Afghanistan and the northwest of the Indian subcontinent but reaching as far as Xinjiang and Funan in China. These depict busts, probably male, with head in profile to the right and frontal upper body rendered by means of three globular segments. These gems have proved attributable on safer ground to the Saka presence in Afghanistan, just on the basis of comparative coin evidence (Callieri, 2005). The numismatic data taken as a whole seem to confirm an Afghanistan origin, regardless of whether the theories about a mint in Herat are founded or not. The most interesting cultural factor, apart from the political point of vassalage to the Arsacids, lies in the choice made by the Saka clients of an iconographic type of clear Indo-Greek derivation, as rightly pointed out by [R. Ghirshman](#) (1946, pp. 88-93).

Not all of the Sakas who arrived on the western Afghanistan plateau settled in Areia; a strong Saka presence is also recorded around 100 BCE in Drangiana and Arachosia: here the coinage of Vonones and his successors has been attributed to a Saka kingdom under a Parthian cultural influence, evidenced by the name of the first king. His Scythian ascent accords well with the new iconographic type of the obverse, which shows the king with spear and mounted on horseback (Mitchiner, 1976, p. 439-43).

Archeological evidence of the Saka realm in Seistan is still lacking, whereas illustration of the Saka presence in Arachosia has been suggested on the basis of archeological evidence from Old [Kandahar](#) (Ball, 1997). A number of pottery sherds retrieved on Sites E and F of the British excavations belong to a distinct stratigraphic period (Period IV), between the mid-2nd century BCE and the beginning of the 1st century CE. The "Spiral Burnished Ware," already used in the [Hellenistic](#) period and so typical of the following periods, is absent; orange fabrics and inturned forms predominate, as well as jars with a very distinct



profile; the decoration includes incised wavy lines and slashes. A Parthian coin of the 1st century BCE at Site F seems to confirm attribution to the Saka period. A vast cemetery to the S south of Old Kandahar also evidences a large number of tumulus burials of various dimensions, belonging to the *kurgan* type of Central Asian nomadic cultures. While some of these burials can safely be dated to the 11th and 12th centuries CE, W. Ball has proposed that the origin of the type may date back to the presence of a nomadic Saka component in the population of the city (Ball, 1997, pp. 447-48).

Farther east, the area of the Paropamisadai seems to have been subjugated by other groups of Sakas with the first incursion of the ruler Moga or Maues (ca. 90-57 BCE), in the Greek legend on his coins, who around 80 BCE seems to have come to power in the framework of the Indo-Greek kingdoms, possibly arriving in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent directly from the Pamir mountains (Bivar, 1984).

A strong Saka presence in eastern Afghanistan starting from this first wave is indicated by the presence of Saka coins in the foundation deposits of many [Buddhist stupas](#) of the area, as well as the large percentage of Saka coins in the hoards of Mir Zakah, a site in Paktiya Province, Afghanistan. which, Since the first discovery of more than 11,000 coins there in 1947 (Curiel and Schlumberger 1953), material from Mir Zakah has continued to yield impressive new discoveries (Bopearachchi, 1999, p. 110).

Final and more lasting penetration by the Sakas in eastern Afghanistan and the northwest of the Indian subcontinent took place about 20 years later, this time probably starting from Sakastan. The king leading the Sakas was now Aya, in Greek [Azēs](#), who celebrated his victory by inaugurating an era as from 58/57 BCE, known in India as the Vikrama era (Salomon, 1982, p. 68). The political history of the Sakas is not well known, although most scholars now agree on the existence of two kings named Azēs, with an [Azilises](#) between them (MacDowall, 1985; Mitchiner, 1976, vols. 5, 6; Smith, 1997; Bopearachchi, 1999; Senior, 2001). A monetary crisis evidenced by the introduction of copper in the silver coinage occurred around the end of the reign of Azēs II, marking the decline of the dynasty, which was wiped out with the arrival of a branch of the Parthians from Seistan around 20 CE.

For the production of their coinage, which is well attested throughout eastern Afghanistan as well as the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, the Sakas availed themselves of the same workshops as the Greeks, and many of the



iconographic types are a continuation of the earlier types. On the other hand, the introduction on the obverse of the image of the king mounted on a horse, in the place of the Hellenistic bust of the king, which was introduced by Vonones in Sakastan and by Azes I in the northwest of the subcontinent, represents a clear indication of the nomadic heritage of the Sakas. Similarly, the introduction of new deities on the reverse, or the assumption of new attributes by the existing deities of Greek origin, can be attributed to the dynasty's "Scythian" background; an interesting key to interpret the developments is offered in Herodotus's (4.5-7) *logos Skythikos* (Sinisi, 2001).

Most of the archeological sites of the Saka kingdom in eastern Afghanistan and the northwest of the subcontinent show that the Hellenistic fashion had by now reached the élites, to the extent that even the terracotta production, traditionally linked to a cultic and conservative environment, took on a naturalistic style. In this process, the Sakas cannot be considered as the inspirers of the new fashion, which has its roots in the century of Indo-Greek domination (Callieri, 2001). On the other hand, the new chronology of the origin of the Buddhist art which developed in the region, established by the Italian excavations in Swat (Pakistan), shows that their role in the patronage of Hellenistic arts was far more significant than previously supposed (see e.g. Marshall 1960, p. 5-6).

The same patronage is to be seen behind the diffusion of Buddhism in the region, which is now evidenced by an important epigraphic document. A group of five pottery pots, allegedly found in the area of Haḍḍa, near Jalālābād in eastern Afghanistan, were acquired by the British Museum; these carry Buddhist dedicatory inscriptions in Kharoshthi script and have been dated to the 1st-2nd centuries (Salomon, 1999, pp. 183-91, 151). Pot A was a gift of Vāsavadattā, wife of Susoma (ibid., p. 198). Both names are otherwise unattested except on two reliquaries. Thus, with some degree of confidence, this Vāsavadattā can be identified with the royal lady of the same name who is recorded in a reliquary inscription of Indravarman, ruler of Avaca (Bajaur, Pakistan); his sister Vāsavadattā is one of those intended to share in the merit of the offering (Salomon, 1982, p. 60). The Susoma of Pot A can be identified with the Suhasoma named on a reliquary inscription of Senavarman, the king of Oḍi, a vassal kingdom of the Sakas (possibly Swat, Pakistan), which dates between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE. It refers to the son of the Kushan "king of kings" Kujula Kadphises, and it names Suhasoma as a senior bureaucrat (his description is military), to whom is applied the epithet *anakaā*,



i.e., Greek *anankaios* “client of the king” (Salomon, 1999, pp. 151-53). Thus it is observed that the patronage of Buddhism was practiced in the high ranks of the Saka courtly entourage.

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