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Appendix X: Was there Buddhism in Gandhāra at the time of Alexander?¹

(*How the Brahmins Won*, Brill 2016, pp. 483-489)

A recent book by Christopher Beckwith (*Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*; 2015) claims that the Greek philosopher Pyrrho, who accompanied Alexander and his army, became acquainted with a form of Buddhism in Gandhāra (“during his years in Bactria and Gandhāra”, p. 54). This, to be sure, was not the religion of Calanus, for “[t]he sect of Calanus, the Indian ‘Gymnosophist’ or ‘naked wise man’ best known to the Greeks and most described in Greek sources, is a non-Buddhist sect” (Beckwith 2015: 64). The religion that Pyrrho encountered was an early form of Buddhism, far earlier than the ancient buddhist scriptures which, at best, preserve some traces of the early teaching. “[T]raditional ‘early’ Buddhist canonical literature”, Beckwith observes (p. 28 n. 28), “reflects Normative Buddhism ..., a product of the ... Saka-Kushan period.” Pyrrho’s teachings are the earliest and most reliable testimony we have about early Buddhism: “The earliest attested philosophical-religious system that is both historically datable and clearly recognizable as a form of Buddhism is Early Pyrrhonism, the teachings and practices of Pyrrho of Elis and Timon of Phlius ...” (p. 61). And again (p. 62): “... ‘genuinely Early’ Buddhism (or *Pre-Normative Buddhism*) is attested earliest and best in Early Pyrrhonism ...”

Beckwith does not stop here. He also maintains that the Buddha was a Scythian (p. 5 ff.), who spent time in Gandhāra. His teaching was a rejection of Zoroastrianism that had arrived in that region as a result of the Persian conquest of Gandhāra: “Both Early Buddhism and Early Brahmanism are the direct outcome of the introduction of Zoroastrianism into eastern Gandhāra by Darius I.” (p. 9). Early Zoroastrianism, Beckwith points out (p. 8), is “a strongly monotheistic faith with a creator God, Ahura Mazda, and with ideas of absolute Truth ... versus ‘the Lie’ ..., and of an accumulation of Good and Bad deeds — that is, ‘karma’ — which determined whether a person would be rewarded by ‘rebirth’ in Heaven.” The Buddha, he claims (p. 172), “rejected the ideas of karma, rebirth, and Heaven (vs. Hell), which are typical of Early Zoroastrianism, a religion introduced to Central Asia and northwestern India by the Achaemenid Persians”. Brahmanism arrived only later in that part of the subcontinent, and was from the beginning influenced by (early) Buddhism.

These are extraordinary claims. Beckwith bases them on methodical considerations. Unlike virtually all other scholars of early Buddhism, he draws conclusions primarily from datable sources, giving preference to the earliest ones: “My approach in the book is to base all of my main arguments on hard data — inscriptions, datable manuscripts, other dated texts, and archaeological reports. I do not allow traditional belief to determine anything in the book ...” (p. XII-XIII). Apart from Pyrrho, the early authors that Strabo cites — Megasthenes and others — are of central importance: “the received version of Strabo ... preserves

¹ I thank Nathan McGovern for useful comments.

part of the earliest *dated* eyewitness account of Indian philosophical-religious practices and ideas by far. It is therefore incalculably more important than any of the other texts traditionally considered to represent or reflect Early Buddhism” (p. 68). “Indian sources ... are mostly a *millennium* or more younger, have never been properly edited, and consist largely of fantasy” (p. 68 n. 23).

We will consider below how Beckwith proceeds. His restriction of sources is reminiscent of the drunk who lost his keys in the dark and decided to look for them only under the streetlight. Beckwith’s procedure suggests an even more extreme comparison, in which the drunk claims that whatever he finds there must be his keys, simply because he finds them under the streetlight. The early data that Beckwith finds must be the teaching of early Buddhism, simply because they can be dated early. The fact that he has to look for those data in early Greece does not deter him.

Beckwith is aware that in his understanding of early Buddhism he differs from most scholars. Most scholars think Buddhism arose in the same region as Jainism and Ajivikism, approximately at the same time. Buddhism and Jainism (and to some extent Ajivikism) are generally looked upon as responses to a shared problem, linked to the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. For Beckwith, on the other hand, it is important to show that Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikism did not originate in the same region at the same time, and he goes to great lengths trying to prove this.

Consider what he says about Jainism (p. 160):

In the Jainist view, Mahāvīra, the founder of the Jains, was a contemporary of the Buddha, and they knew each other, as did the founders of the other great ancient Indian sects. This is a wonderful story ... Nevertheless, scholars have demonstrated, piece by piece, in many studies of individual contradictory problems in Early Buddhism and other ancient Indian belief systems, that the other traditions have reconfigured themselves so as to be as old as Buddhism, or in some cases, as with the Jains, even older. They demonstrate as clearly as anyone could have done that the story of the Buddha is the oldest of the lot. Although some may wonder why the non-Buddhists made such claims, there are ... many good reasons for them to want to imitate the Buddhists’ success.

This passage contains a rather elementary mistake. It describes the situation the wrong way round: the claim that the Buddha and Mahāvīra were contemporaries is not made in jaina, but in buddhist texts. This, one would think, should have an effect on Beckwith’s conclusions.² In spite of this, he states (p. 70):

we have no remotely credible evidence that [Gautama Śākamuni] knew anything about Jains, Ājīvikas, or other non-Brahmanist sects. ... [T]hese sects are unattested in any dated or datable Pre-Normative Buddhist

² Nathan McGovern points in a personal communication out that Beckwith might argue that this claim in buddhist texts is made under the influence of a contemporaneous claim in jaina texts. Apart from the fact that no such jaina texts have survived, it would make Beckwith’s argument considerably more complicated and *recherché*.

sources. It is because their teachings needed to be refuted and rejected by *much later* Buddhists that they eventually appeared in the written Buddhist tradition, but in works that are patently late doctrinally, full of magic and other forms of fantasy, and unreliable in every other way.

Since in Beckwith's opinion Jainism is much younger than Buddhism, he does not need to bother trying to understand Buddhism and Jainism as contemporary products of one single region. This in any case is Beckwith's position.

We have seen that one reason Beckwith gives to show that Jainism is much younger than Buddhism is shaky. The claim is also confronted with other difficulties: Jainas and Ājīvikas are mentioned in some of the so-called inscriptions of Aśoka. This suggests that these movements were around about a century after Alexander, a century therefore after Pyrrho supposedly became acquainted with Early Buddhism in Gandhāra. Predictably, Beckwith makes a major effort to show that the inscription that refers to Jainas and Ājīvikas, the "Seventh Pillar Edict" (only found in Delhi-Topra), may be "not just spurious, it is probably a deliberate forgery" (p. 249). It is "an obvious forgery from a later historical period" (p. 250). The Ājīvikas are also mentioned in the Barābar Hill cave inscriptions. According to Beckwith, these inscriptions "are (or perhaps should be) attributed to Aśoka's grandson Daśaratha" (p. 236 n. 38). However, this does not constitute evidence for an early date for the Ājīvikas (p. 237-238): "Considering the fact that we have absolutely no reliable historical information on 'Aśoka', and the fact ... that the Major Inscriptions stood in open view for centuries after their erection and must have influenced the later writers of the Buddhist 'histories' in question, it is most likely that 'Aśoka' was not in fact a Mauryan ruler. We do not really know when or where he ruled, if he existed at all; we do not actually know that Daśaratha was the grandson of a *Mauryan* ruler named Aśoka; and so on." In other words, there is no early datable evidence for the existence of the Ājīvikas, and since the Ājīvikas are inseparable from the early Jainas, there is no early datable evidence for Jainism either.

We see from the above that Beckwith systematically questions all evidence that might suggest that there were Jainas and Ājīvikas at the time of the Buddha. This obliges him to reconsider what the term *śramaṇa* refers to. In the Pali canon it refers to both buddhist and non-buddhist (and non-brahmanical) ascetics, including Jainas and Ājīvikas, but this understanding can be ignored, since it is "based on historically unreliable Indian accounts composed and written down many centuries later" (p. 95). The term *śramaṇa* in early datable sources, Beckwith claims, refers to Buddhists only: the term "specifically and exclusively meant 'Buddhist practitioners'." (p. 69). More specifically, the Śramaṇas are one of the five Buddhist varieties that Beckwith distinguishes, and which include, beside Śramaṇas and early Pyrrhonism, early Taoism, the "Dharma of the Mauryan king Devānāmpriya Priyadarśi", and pre-Pure Land (p. 63-64).

Beckwith does not mention the fact that the Alexander historians do not mention Śramaṇas.³ The early datable sources that do, include the authentic

³ Karttunen 1997: 56 ff. Halkias's (2014: 74) claim to the extent that "Alexander and the philosophers at his court had knowledge of Indian religions comprising brahmins and

“Aśokan” inscriptions, and the testimony of Megasthenes and other foreigners. In spite of Beckwith, these sources never unambiguously use the term to refer to Buddhists only. He says the following about them (p. 103):

Observations by foreign visitors and the usage by the ruler Devānāmpriya Priyadarśi in the authentic Major Inscriptions of the Mauryas in the early third century BC agree that there were Brāhmaṇas, Śramaṇas, and “other sects”. That unambiguously means that the followers of the “other sects” *could not* be Brāhmaṇas or Śramaṇas. Moreover, the so-called Seventh Pillar Edict on the Delhi-Topra column refers to the Jains and Ājīvikas as *pāsaṃḍā* ‘(philosophical-religious) schools, sects’, *not* as *śramaṇas*.

We can skip Beckwith’s weak and unconvincing attempts to show that Megasthenes’ Śramaṇas are Buddhists and Buddhists only (p. 67 ff.), and turn directly to the Inscriptions. Brahmins, Śramaṇas and “other sects” (*pāsaṃḍā*) are indeed mentioned in the Thirteenth Rock Edict, but this passage tells us nothing about what exactly the term *śramaṇa* refers to; it merely suggests that *pāsaṃḍā/pāsaṃḍa* (Skt. *pāṣaṇḍa*) is a general term that can also cover Brahmins and Śramaṇas.⁴ The Seventh Pillar Edict refers to the *saṃgha*, the Brahmins and Ājīvikas, the Nirgranthas (= Jainas), and to various (other) sects (*pāsaṃḍa*) (Beckwith p. 96); this confirms our impression that *pāsaṃḍa* is a general term. Here the text clearly refers to Buddhists, without using the term *śramaṇa* (it uses *saṃgha* instead). For Beckwith this merely confirms that the Seventh Pillar Edict is late (“an obvious forgery from a later historical period”; see above).

One would expect Beckwith to deny that the Buddha had any links with the region of Magadha at all; wasn’t the Buddha a Scythian who protested against the Zoroastrianism that was present in Gandhāra? In point of fact, he is ambiguous about this. On one hand he admits that the Buddha may have reached his enlightenment in Magadha, and that Early Buddhism may have spread from Magadha northwestward into western Gandhāra, Bactria, and beyond (p. 11). This would leave the question why a doctrine critical of Early Zoroastrianism should have been proclaimed for the first time in a region where Early Zoroastrianism was completely unknown. On the other hand, he maintains that certain facts necessitate the Buddha having lived in a different region from Magadha, such as Gandhāra, which then “agrees ... with his rejection of specifically Zoroastrian ideas, which were hardly known in Magadha before the Middle Ages” (p. 166). He is evidently not disturbed by the fact that “[n]o ancient Buddhist source relating to the Buddha’s times, ... no *sūtra* has any allusion to Gandhāra or Sindh, at that time loosened [sic] parts of the Achaemenid Empire” (Fussman 2009: 9).

In spite of his rejection of the early buddhist texts in favour of datable sources, Beckwith does some cherry-picking from those canonical texts where

śramaṇas, the so-called *samanai* ... in the Greek sources” is not based on any evidence I know of.

⁴ The fragmentary Greek version of the Thirteenth Rock Edict from Kandahar speaks of “Brāhmaṇas, Śramaṇas and others debating the dhamma” (p. 95). Unlike Beckwith, we cannot draw conclusions from this.

this suits him. He justifies this in the following words (p. 29 n. 28): “study of the inner logic of the Buddha’s own teachings (to the extent that it is agreed what they were) ... allows inclusion or exclusion of various elements”. Unfortunately, here he makes again a major mistake. As one of the characteristics of his reconstructed early Buddhism — indeed as the Buddha’s “most important, distinctive, striking teaching” (p.121), “the Buddha’s basic teaching” (p. 251 note ii) — he mentions *anātman* “no (innate) self (-identity)”: “it is applied to all dharmas, including humans, so it of course includes the idea of the human ‘self-identity’” (p. 30-31); “dharmas do not have inherent self-identities” (p. 35); “‘things’ (including people) do not have inherent self-identities” (p. 82). Unfortunately for Beckwith’s theory, research has shown that the early buddhist canon does *not* deny a self (or self-identity),⁵ and that the more recent buddhist preoccupation with the topic is based on a tendentious reinterpretation of those texts.⁶ This removes one of the most important reasons to link up Pyrrho with early Buddhism, for “[Pyrrho] taught that *pragmata* ‘matters, affairs’ — including people — do not have their own innate self-identity (... Greek *adiaphora*).” (p. 92).

There is no need to go into further details. Contentwise there is no connection between early Buddhism and Pyrrho’s philosophy. The question that remains is: why should anyone ever think so? Here, I think, the answer is clear. Beckwith thinks that the Buddha was a “Sage of the Scythians”. This is his translation of the Sanskrit term Śākamuni. Unfortunately this Sanskrit term is never used; the term used is Śākyamuni, which is not immediately open to Beckwith’s interpretation. Beckwith therefore maintains that Śākyamuni is a wrong Sanskritization, that the correct Sanskritization would be Śākamuni. Either way, it is the Sanskritization of an earlier Middle-Indic word. Unfortunately for Beckwith, this term “is unattested in the genuine Mauryan inscriptions or the Pali Canon” (p. 5). “It is earliest attested, as Śākamuni, in the Gāndhārī Prakrit texts, which date to the first centuries AD (or possibly even the late first century BC)” (p. 5-6). Beckwith admits that it “is arguable that the epithet could have been applied to the Buddha during the Śāka (Saka or ‘Indo-Scythian’) Dynasty — which dominated northwestern India on and off from approximately the first century BC, continuing into the early centuries AD as Satraps or ‘vassals’ under the Kushans — and that the reason for it was strong support for Buddhism by the Sakas, Indo-Parthians, and Kushans.” Beckwith rejects this possibility, as he rejects the idea that the Buddha was born in a north-Indian tribe or family that, for whatever historical reason, was called Saka (or Śāka, Śāka, Śākya). For him it is

⁵ This does *not* necessarily mean that early Buddhism *accepted* the existence of a self: it simply does not raise the issue. This is very far from Beckwith’s claim that the rejection of a self (or of self-identity) is basic to the Buddha’s teaching. See also the following note.

⁶ See Oetke 1988: 59-242; further Bronkhorst 2009: 123-125. The Sanskrit term *anātman*, and the Pāli equivalent *anattā* even more, is ambiguous, and can mean “is not the self” or “has no self”. Only the former interpretation (which does not deny the existence of a self) is demonstrably valid in the canonical scriptures, whereas the latter interpretation is adopted in more recent texts. Beckwith (p. 33) quotes a passage where Gethin correctly translates “they are not self (*anātman/anattā*)”, but overlooks the fact that this goes against his own interpretation.

certain that the Buddha was identified as a “Sage of the Scythians”. He does not explain why Buddhists who believed that the Buddha came from a different region altogether would still maintain that he was a Scythian.

There is a more fundamental difficulty with Beckwith’s interpretation of Gāndhārī Śakamuni. Stefan Baums, in a personal communication (6.10.2015), points this out in the following words:

In Sanskrit ... we have Śaka for the people and Śāka as the adjective. The intervocalic -k- in these words would be voiced to [ɣ] in Gāndhārī and should be written -g- ..., never -k-. The ethnonym is in fact attested in Gāndhārī, four times in one of the avadānas,⁷ and once in the compound Sagastana on the Mathura Lion Capital.⁸ Here the word uses the Iranian initial s, but certainly has the expected intervocalic -g-.

Turning to Śākyamuni, we have more than twenty attestations in Gāndhārī inscriptions and manuscripts, and in every single one of them the name is spelled with a -k-, which in Kharoṣṭhī orthography stands for double [kk] (as in Pali Sakkamuni).⁹ We even have the spellings Śakimuṇi and Śākyamuna, though you may wish to consider the latter a Sanskritization.

A fundamental general weakness of Beckwith’s arguments is that he is not willing to consider that there can be undated sources that yet contain historical information. As pointed out earlier, this is like maintaining that the lost keys must be under the streetlight, because if they were anywhere else one would not see them. This may make some sense to scholars who are used to working with Chinese or other non-Indian materials. Indologists have learned to work with non-dated materials (i.e., to look for keys in the dark), and not all of their work is for this reason worthless. Exclusive insistence on dated material would not just undermine all we think we know about historical Buddhism, it would bring down much else in its destructive élan. Fortunately there is no justification for imposing this limitation. So one thing is sure: nothing in Beckwith’s book compels us to think that there were Buddhists in Gandhāra at the time of Alexander.

⁷ Baums refers to the following entry in the *Dictionary of Gāndhārī*:

[http://gandhari.org/a_dictionary.php?searchs=saga\\$](http://gandhari.org/a_dictionary.php?searchs=saga$)

⁸ Baums refers to the following entry:

[http://gandhari.org/a_dictionary.php?searchs=sagastana\\$](http://gandhari.org/a_dictionary.php?searchs=sagastana$)

⁹ [http://gandhari.org/a_dictionary.php?searchs=śakamuni\\$](http://gandhari.org/a_dictionary.php?searchs=śakamuni$)