

Trade and Cultural Contacts Between China and the Hellenistic World Through The Silk Road

di Jaume GALIANA LLORCA
Universidad de Alicante

doi.org/10.26337/2532-7623/GALIANA

Resumen: El comercio que se practicó en el mundo helenístico recibió productos de la China Han de manera indirecta, del mismo modo que exportó a esta tierra desconocida a través de sus fronteras de Asia Central habitadas por nómadas. En este artículo queremos mostrar algunos intercambios entre la China Han y los reinos helenísticos, principalmente a través del comercio. De este modo, advertiremos que las rutas y las principales ciudades de lo que hoy en día conocemos como “Ruta de la Seda” tuvieron sus precedentes en aquellas que fueron establecidas en el período helenístico; como las Alejandrías y las nuevas rutas marítimas.

Abstract: The trade that was practiced in the Hellenistic world received products from the Han China indirectly, as well as exported to this unknown land beyond the nomadic borders of Central Asia. In this article we want to show some interactions between the Han China and the hellenistic kingdoms, mainly through the trade. In this way, it will be noticed that the routes and main cities of what we know today as the “Silk Road” had direct antecedents in those that were established in the Hellenistic period, such as the Alexandrias and the new maritime trade routes.

Keywords: Silk Road, Hellenism, Central Asia

Saggio ricevuto in data 26 dicembre 2018. Versione definitiva ricevuta in data 21 febbraio 2019.

Introduction

Classical historiography has inculcated a mistaken view of Hellenism in the peripheral areas of Alexander's empire, and even of its functioning, structure and meaning. Similarly, the advance of research on the Silk Road in early dates has allowed us to dismantle some myths and concepts that were taken for granted.

If we observe the location of the main cities of Central Asia during the Macedonian Empire and its main successor, the Seleucid, we will observe that these cities are located in what were strategic points of the Silk Road throughout the centuries.

Some of these cities correspond to a large extent to the foundations or refoundations that Alexander the Great baptized as Alexandrias or cities that hellenistic kings created after the death of the conqueror. Many of these have endured as urban centers to the present day, and, in later times, they were a place of obligatory passage along the route. Examples of this are Alexandria in Margiana, maybe the current Merv in Turkmenistan, or Alexandria Eschate, now Khokdjent, in Tajikistan.

I would like to warn that in this article we will focus on the territories of present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and, more specifically, on those that were the Hellenistic satrapies of Sogdiana, Ferghana and Margiana, which correspond to a large extent to the current countries referred, for talking about the Silk Road. We will refer briefly to Bactria, in the present north of Afghanistan, since it is a very studied subject and that does not affect us so much in our purpose. In the same way, other provinces that could be considered part of Central Asia we will not study in this article, for the reason of the lack of interest and information in what concerns us: the Silk Road in its relationship with the Hellenistic

presence in Central Asia. In this way, we will notice briefly the importance of the greek presence in India.

That said, it is possible to affirm that the place where these Hellenistic centers were erected throughout the empire by order of Alexander and his successors was not chosen by chance, as it is noticed that they were connected in good measure by the ancient Achaemenian Royal Way and the new routes that will connect by land and sea the Far East with the Mediterranean already in ancient times.

Therefore, what interest did Alexander the Great have in Central Asia, the mountain ranges that separate the Iranian world from China or his eagerness to subdue India? The answer is easy, and will dismantle many myths and associated visions. He conquered these areas because he needed it, for many reasons. In the first place, when presenting itself as the successor of the Achaemenian Persians, it needed to subjugate again all the territory that they conquered to legitimize their authority. Second, and as the Persians did before, because he needed it. If the territories of Central Asia were not defended, the inferior satrapies would be exposed to the frequent attacks of the nomadic tribes. Following this line, Alexander reinforced the border of the steppe with a chain of fortifications and installed in them large military garrisons. And of course, far from widespread visions, because the territory was and remained profitable.

Our image of Central Asia is a desert steppe, populated by hundreds of tribes that fight each other and in which only a nomadic herding economy is possible. However, in this area there were huge cities, which received trade from China through the Silk Road and distributed it throughout the Hellenistic world and the Mediterranean. In addition to this, there were sedentary populations in the fertile lands that are located on the sides of the river valleys, with an enormously productive agriculture.

The contact of the Hellenistic culture largely changed the societies of Central Asia, since the creation of a commercial network throughout the Hellenistic world, with a common language and a monetary system, gave enormous possibilities to the inhabitants of Central Asia, both nomads and sedentary¹, who practiced trade as a necessary complement to their agricultural and livestock economy, motivated by its excellent geographical location.

With the arrival of Greek colonists, firstly with the persians (who deported greeks here²) and after with Alexander (who started his campaign in these territories ca. 330 BC and established colonies) and the seleucids (with a period of recolonization between 312-262 B.C³), this space had a large increase in agricultural production and artisans arrived to settle in the cities, usually established along the routes that connect Central Asia with the Mediterranean⁴, beginning with them a hellenization progress because they started to articulate these territories, making the citizens of the satrapies dependent of these hellenized cities.

The reader will be surprised when we affirm so quickly that there is not, as they would expect, a direct and fluid contact between the Chinese and Hellenistic worlds. The encounter between Greek and Chinese populations took place when Hellenistic domination in India and Bactria (most of it,

¹ R.-N. FRYE, *Asia Central y las culturas nómadas*, in *UNESCO Historia de la Humanidad. Del siglo VII a.C al siglo VII d.C : La eclosión de las culturas clásicas*, 3, Barcelona, UNESCO / Planeta de Agostini, 2004, p. 484.

² There is a study about the presence of greeks in Bactria before Alexander, quoted in some legends and in persian politics with their campaigns in Greece, in: A.-K. NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, London, Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. 2-6.

³ W. TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1938, p. 5.

⁴ FRYE, *Asia Central y las culturas nómadas*, pp. 492-93.

present-day Afghanistan) was already in decline and very reduced, and Greek culture was already very diffused in that society. However, the ideas of both will circulate along the route, both cultures were influenced and surprised together, and some inheritances have arrived, although very distorted, to the present.

It is not our intention here to focus on the political aspects of the period. The reader will find in the bibliography suitable works that will satisfy their curiosity and expand the vision shown here. We will stick to what is strictly necessary and we will refer to the process and not to the concrete facts. Our objective here is to provide a glimpse of the Hellenized space of the Silk Road in Central Asia and its surrounding areas, and how the contact, mostly indirect, between Hellenic and Chinese culture occurred.

Having said that, we would like to point out that because we did not want this article to become a deep and extensive analysis. Some surprising findings and hypotheses have been omitted, especially as regards materials and archaeological objects. We have tried to briefly include the facts that we consider most relevant in the contact between these two cultures, or at least, the most studied and most contrasted. Again, the bibliography that we leave at your disposal will provide those who want to know more new and surprising theories about this fascinating encounter between greeks and chinese.

Routes and commercial traffic

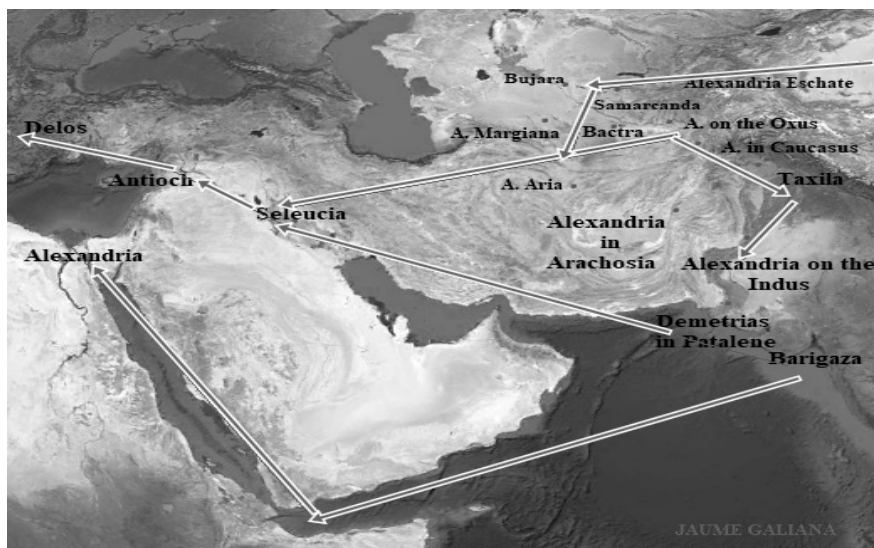


Figure 1 Own elaboration based on satellite image (Google Earth, 2018). The directions of maritime and land trade in the successor kingdoms of Alexander the Great are marked with a line, in clear continuity with the routes of the future “Silk Road”, as well as the main Hellenistic cities through which they pass in both periods in relation to this article.

The term “Silk Road” was coined by European historiography and has produced an erroneous conception of it that we can rethink from the advances in the research of recent decades.

The Chinese conceived it as a set of routes that fostered cultural and material exchange with Western territories. Therefore, and as can be observed in the maps, this route was not a single road, with an exit point and another arrival point, but a set of interconnected routes⁵. When we refer to the “Silk Road” we refer to a series of connected spaces that allowed to place

⁵ S.-K. CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road: Its historical roots and the Chinese imagination*, in «Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies», 2 (2018), pp. 1-2.

valuable and partly unknown products between Western and Chinese culture, which had precedents in commercial circuits that had activity since Prehistory.

In the same way, the Silk Road was not a single terrestrial route resulted from a commercial agreement. In addition to this, some of the routes that took the products to the West were maritime and should also be considered part of the “great route” without a doubt. The term “Silk Road” leads us to an incorrect generalization, because techniques, ideas and cultural exchange were equally important in this maritime space that connected India with the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf⁶.



Figure 2 Map of the Silk Road, applicable to periods after Hellenistic domination. Compare with the previous map and maps of the Hellenistic kingdoms and you can see the total continuity of the main routes and cities between the Hellenistic period and the subsequent centuries.

The conquest of much of Asia by Alexander the Great in the middle of the IV century BC and the subsequent establishment of the Hellenistic kingdoms at the start of the III century BC

⁶ *Ivi*, p.3.

came in hand with an increase of the geographical knowledge, the monetary and linguistic unity and the establishment of commercial offices specialized in new products, of greater quality than the pre-existing ones⁷. The creation of Greek polis along the conquered territories entailed the prosperity of the regional economy and the creation of a framework favorable to international trade, appearing in them banks and lending houses that allowed the establishment of an international market of source materials⁸. This set of factors brought about by the conquest of Alexander favored international trade, together with the transmission of a right and similar forms of exchange in the newly established Hellenistic world⁹. In this new order, new maritime routes were opened that went from India to the West, through the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea, which brought Chinese products¹⁰ to the Mediterranean indirectly.

The expansion of foreign trade relations was motivated by the virtual absence of Western imports in the whole Hellenistic Central Asia, since they already produced what the new settled populations demanded, which is why they focused on obtaining products that were not capable of producing by themselves and the elites were interested in obtaining, and this is where the current China gained importance in this period.

⁷ S. BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road. Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia*, n.p., Springer, 2017, p. 28.

⁸ G.-T. HALKIAS, *When the Greeks converted the Buddha: Asymmetrical Transfers of Knowledge in Indo-Greek Cultures*, in P. WICK, V. RABENS (eds.), *Religions and Trade: Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2014, p. 72.

⁹ M. ROSTOVITZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica del Mundo Helenístico*, translation of F.-J. PRESEDO, I-II, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1967, p. 1364.

¹⁰ K.-A. BEHRENDT, *The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007, p.7.

Hellenistic Central Asia's foreign trade came mainly from India and from established ties with what is now China, long before traditional historiography considered the "opening" of the Silk Road (when such exchanges have been taking place since Prehistory). The great caravan of the East that brought exotic products from the mysterious "Serica" (the place where silk is produced¹¹) to the West, passed through the set of Hellenistic kingdoms that the generals of Alexander the Great founded after the death of this sovereign (323 BC) and a series of wars between them. The great caravans stopped in the Hellenized cities and the Alexandrias as well as in places adapted for them¹² throughout the territory of these kingdoms, where it can be considered that they established a common market in practically all of the world known by the Greeks.

In this way, the Seleucid kings, descendants of the general Seleucus (who covered Syria, Mesopotamia and the rest of the territories east of Babylon from the start of the third century BC), were for a long time the main owners of the caravan trade between the West and the East, including the products that arrived sporadically from China¹³. These trade routes established in the most distant satrapies of the empire brought to the Mediterranean metals, silk, perfumes and oriental luxury products¹⁴, affordable and demanded by the

¹¹ There were already news of the existence of this mythical land in Greece long before the formation of the Macedonian Empire. The first reference came from an almost mythical account of Ctesias, dated around the V-IV BC centuries, or in the work of Herodotus. (Y. JUPING, *Alexander the Great and the Emergence of the Silk Road*, in «The Silk Road», 6 (n. 2, 2009), p. 15.

¹² P. BERNARD, *The Greek Kingdoms of Central Asia*, in J. HARMATTA (ed.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, II, *The Development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations, 700 B.C to A.D 250*, Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 1994, p. 122.

¹³ ROSTOVITZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica*, p.745.

¹⁴ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 29.

Hellenistic and Achaemenian elites¹⁵, which began to merge into one with the spread of Greek culture in the whole territory. A whole series of new products also arrived from the ports of India, passing through Arabia, tracing the rivers of Mesopotamia to Seleucia in the Tigris, nearly what was formerly Babylon. From this great commercial metropolis they passed to Antioch, on the Syrian coast, where they were also redistributed to neighboring cities such as Laodicea or Seleucia Pieria, or took the land route to Asia Minor, reaching Ephesus or Smyrna¹⁶. From these eastern coasts they went to the Mediterranean, often going to the port of Delos. There was also, from previous centuries, a communication channel of the nomadic world in the north of the Aral Sea, which brought some Chinese products to the Greek colonies of the Black Sea¹⁷.

From this time, there was a massive production of silk in factories and craft workshops of China, which reached the western steppes and from there passed to the western world through the different trade routes inherited from the Achaemenian world and those established after the Macedonian conquest. The sedentary states threatened by the nomads went on to secure commercial routes and to expand commercial traffic because it was preferable to pay to avoid the attack that they faced directly. In many cases, the payment of customs was linked to the protection of the caravans by the territories¹⁸.

The Seleucid Empire later lost its dominion over Central Asia in the middle of the third century BC, after the satrapy of Bactria became independent, giving rise to the Greco-Bactrian kingdom,

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 26.

¹⁶ G.-G. APERGHIS, *The Seleucid Royal Economy : The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleukid Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 77.

¹⁷ ROSTOVITZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica*, p. 1367.

¹⁸ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 31.

which would also take away the easternmost areas of the empire. The later expansion of the Greco-Bactrian king Euthydemus (at the end of the III century BC) to the limits of the current Chinese Turkestan¹⁹ (it seems that they reach the Tarim Basin, in the actual Western China²⁰) led to the establishment of trade routes even closer to the nomadic world (which was related to the Han China) producing an exchange of ideas and products on the border of which we have material records. Following the footsteps of Alexander, largely for commercial interest²¹, the Greco-Bactrians manage to directly dominate the routes that connected the territories of the nomadic borders of China, including which Alexander the Great had conquered decades ago.

However, neither the nomadic invasions, nor the parthians, nor the independence of Bactria stopped trade between the Seleucids and their former territories: commercial traffic and routes were maintained and they continued to direct products towards the West²². The Seleucid political situation led to changed the directions of its commercial routes (but the older never were abandoned), opting for the southern and maritime roads of India in detriment of the road through northern Iran, which passed into the hands of the parthians²³. The Greco-Bactrian kingdom, formed by the independence of the most distant satrapies of the Seleucids, extended towards the

¹⁹ P.-A. SYKES, *A History of Afghanistan*, I, London, Macmillan & Co., 1940, p. 114.

²⁰ TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, pp. 84-87.

²¹ H.-G. RAWLINSON, *Bactria : From the Earliest Times to the Extinction of Bactrian Greek Rule in the Punjab*, Bombay, The "Times of India" Office, 1909, p. 87.

²² S. SHERWIN-WHITE, A. KUERT, *From Samarkand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993, p. 110.

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 66-67.

border of present-day China and towards India between the middle of the third century BC and the start of the second century BC.

To the north of this Hellenistic kingdom in the extremes of the known world, located in the knot of caravans that passed from Asia to Europe²⁴, was located the Transoxiana region, which encompassed much of the Central Asian territory through which the Silk Road towards the West began. The Greco-Bactrians brought Greek culture and government together with local traditions, leaving their influences in this great space for centuries²⁵. In this region there were cities founded or refounded by Alexander the Great who in later centuries would be known for their importance in the journey of the Silk Road²⁶. Some of them are Merv, in present-day Turkmenistan, what is thought was Alexandria (and later Antioch) in Margiana; a fortified city in an oasis, which, serving as a meeting point for the caravans, connected the nearby satrapies with the trade routes from Central Asia (linking the north with Bukhara²⁷ and Samarkand) to India or present-day Iran (and with it, to Asia Minor). In these Hellenistic cities, there was a state road and communications system, with places to attend merchants'

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 9.

²⁵ M. MARTIN, *Early Buddhist Art of China & Central Asia*, I, *Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan-shan* in S.-F. TEISER, M. KERN (eds.) *Central Asia*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2007, p. 164.

²⁶ Now the traditional identification of these cities has begun to be discussed, and also we must consider the creation of new cities by the seleucids and greco-bactrians. See: C. RAPIN, *Alexandre le Grand en Asie centrale. Géographie et stratégie de la conquête des portes caspiennes à l'Inde*, in C. ANTONETTI, P. BIAGI (eds.), *Alexander in India and central Asia moving east and back to west*, Oxford, Oxbow Books, 2017, p.38.

²⁷ SHERWIN-WHITE, KUHRT, *From Samarkand to Sardis*, pp. 82-84.

caravans²⁸. To give another example of this continuity and connection, we can mention the current Herat (Afghanistan), which was the city of Alexandria of Aria, where the Bactrian and the Iranian world united, reaching this polis the trade of China and India from all the epochs onwards, in the direction of the Middle East²⁹.

There was not a single route in the northeast of Iran that connected the oriental satrapies³⁰, there are many more alternatives that allowed the communication of the empire with these territories after the parthian conquests³¹. What we know today as Silk Road was not a single path established as a result of a commercial agreement between states: they were a set of routes circulated since prehistoric times in function of the demand for products of the western states near nomadic borders that China could not produce and in turn, where the Chinese could get interesting products which they did not know or it was cheaper to get from here.

The emergence of the Parthian empire at the same time as the greco-bactrians, in the III century BC, took over much of the Seleucid empire in the same way as the greco-bactrians and exercise a philo-Hellenistic policy, and further favored international trade since it opened a greater connection with the nomadic world of Central Asia, from which the Parthians came directly³². The receiving centers of the Parthian Empire trade continued to be the Alexandrias and the Hellenized cities, and

²⁸ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 25.

²⁹ T. BARFIELD, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 62.

³⁰ A good description of these routes can be found in: M.-P. CHARLESWORTH, *Trade Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1924, pp. 100-104.

³¹ SHERWIN-WHITE, KUERT, *From Samarkand to Sardis*, pp.72-73.

³² BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 29.

the directions of the routes were not altered³³. The instability and insecurity caused by the Parthian conquests raised the price, but the demand for the products of the Silk Road was not reduced in the ancient world³⁴. Traditionally, the appearance of the Parthian empire has been considered as the beginning of the Silk Road, but as we have seen it is not entirely true. The Parthians “opened” in a official way what we know as the Silk Road, but most of the directions, roads and cities of the route were part of the trade in the Hellenistic world. Despite this trade with China was not considerable³⁵ and also was not an important source of income for greco-bactrians or indo-greeks³⁶, existed in an indirect way through the circuits used in the future by the Silk Road.

To this setback for the Seleucids in the East, the interference of Rome in Hellenistic politics was added since the romans started to conquer Greece and defeated the hellenistic kings in decisive battles at the start of the II century BC. The Greek port of Delos was free for the Romans after their military victories in Greece and Macedonia, which broke the monopoly of profits of the Hellenistic kingdoms trade³⁷. In Delos the Romans obtained products from the Far East and, therefore, those that came indirectly from China. On this island there were merchants from far away parts of the world, the same ones where the Central Asian caravan routes that carried the exotic products to the Mediterranean passed³⁸. Silk was a product greatly demanded

³³ Ivi, p. 37.

³⁴ ROSTOVITZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica*, p. 1368.

³⁵ C. RAPIN, *Ai Khanum and the Hellenism of Bactria*, in R.-M. CIMINO (ed.), *Ancient Rome and India. Commercial and cultural contacts between the Roman world and India*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994, p. 197.

³⁶ ROSTOVITZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica*, p. 200.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 1366.

³⁸ Ivi, pp. 875,1389.

by the elites of the Roman Empire³⁹, and as we have seen, to achieve it, it had to pass through Central Asia irremediably and travel to the Mediterranean by land or sea. When the romans controlled Egypt, they continued with the indian trade through the Red Sea restoring the initial work of the Ptolemies to facilitate the route and the arrival of these exotics products to Alexandria⁴⁰. In this way, the romans continued to use the trade routes of the hellenistic world to get products from the Far East: the sea route from India to the Red Sea and the land route from Bactria and Parthia to the Syrian coast⁴¹.

Similarly, in the nomadic world contemporary to the Hellenistic kingdoms, the Xiongnu, a nomadic people in the actual northern China and Mongolia, redistributed the tributes given them by the Chinese (including large amounts of silk) by Central Asia through the Silk Road, with which these goods could reach the West. This commercial prosperity led the nomadic elites to favor the arrival of merchants in the territory and the establishment of new routes and treaties. Since this space was inserted from Achaemenian times in the international market, indirectly the subsequent nomadic domination of the territory of Central Asia favored trade, as relations with China increased as well as the influx of their products⁴².

With the massive implantation of cavalry in the Chinese army, partly thanks to the acquisition of strong horses in Central Asia, the Han began to defeat the Xiongnu who threatened the empire in the north of China. From 105 BC, Fergana, who had been a Hellenistic satrapy, was forced to pay a tribute of thousands of horses to the Han (v. War of the Heavenly Horses).

³⁹ CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ CHARLESWORTH, *Trade Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire*, pp. 58-60.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 98.

⁴² BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 32.

The Chinese dominion of the territory allowed the direct diplomatic relationship with the Parthian empire, formalizing already a stable commercial route between the two states. Traditional historiography marked at this time the beginning of the Silk Road, but as we have seen, it is simply not true. In addition, at this time, the Seleucid empire still survived in Syria and receives the products of the commercial routes that were now in the hands of the Parthians, distributing the products through the Mediterranean, which are demanded and acquired by Rome⁴³ (especially through the referred Delos port).

Despite the establishment in the farthest satrapies of the Hellenistic world of the partian and kushan power (a nomadic empire which conquered the Greco-Bactrian kingdom in the middle of the II century BC), the maritime connection between China and the western world was never interrupted, and for a time it was under the dominion of the indo-greek kingdom (a set of greco-bactrian territories in India that became independent after a civil war in the kingdom at the start of the II century BC). In this new scenario, for example, Bukhara and Samarkand increased winemaking due to a strong Chinese demand.

The Kushan Empire, in the same way that the partians did with the seleucids, maintained a policy of continuity with the Greco-Bactrian kingdom as far as routes and commercial traffic are concerned. In addition, the Gandhara Buddhism, of great Greek influence (because it was born in the nucleus of power of the remaining Indo-Greek kingdom), was the one that expanded under the patronage of the Kushan by Central Asia and from there towards China (v. Buddhism reaches China : influences of Hellenistic sculpture). The new faith was not only expanded by Buddhist monks and by the proliferation of monasteries, but also by merchants who showed their religion through trade routes

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 32.

established during the Hellenistic period. The same kushan favored the continuity of the “maritime” route of the Silk, because they directed the caravans from Balkh (in the north of Afghanistan, it is the old Bactra, called Pu-Ho by the Chinese⁴⁴) to India, and from there to the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf⁴⁵, after passing through a large number of Alexandria or cities where a Greek community had settled.

The reinvigoration of the Silk Road by the direct contact with China of these new political entities resulted in an increase in the amount of caravan traffic. The Yuezhi, the nomadic tribe that conquered Bactria and created the Kushan Empire in the middle of the II century BC, ended up completely replacing the Greco-Bactrian world when the Greek identity was diffused and diluted among the population. Once unified by forming the Kushan empire, they indirectly created a state of great Chinese and Hellenistic influence (the kings were considered successors of the Greco-Bactrians and coined money written in Greek)⁴⁶.

Routes and commercial traffic established their stopping points in the oasis cities of Central Asia such as Samarkand (known as Pei-t'ien by the Chinese⁴⁷) and Bukhara, previously Hellenized cities⁴⁸ that belonged to what was known as the region of the Transoxiana, north of Bactria, where routes from China diverged from north to south and east to west⁴⁹. These caravans traversed the mountains of northeastern China and then crossed the deserts of the Chinese Turkestan⁵⁰. In the markets of these large cities of Central Asia the products brought from

⁴⁴ MARTIN, *Early Buddhist Art*, p. 162.

⁴⁵ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, pp. 41, 43.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ MARTIN, *Early Buddhist Art*, p. 162.

⁴⁸ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ MARTIN, *Early Buddhist Art*, p. 162

⁵⁰ BARFIELD, *Afghanistan*, p. 59.

beyond the steppes were sold, and in them there were caravan centers that offered rest and food to the merchants and animals before continuing their march towards the West or towards India. From 130 BC a route connecting the south-east of China with India was opened, where the Indo-Greek kingdom still survived⁵¹, and, in fact, Indian texts have been found in the Chinese Turkestan with words of undoubted Greek origin, related mainly to the monetary system⁵² and business relationships.

Products

Referring to the economy, it should be noted first of all that the impact of the Hellenistic kingdoms on the introduction of a monetary system has been overestimated, especially in such distant areas. In some cases the coin was already beginning to develop before contacting the Greeks, and archeology has shown that there is no such large monetary capital in circulation as was thought. While it is true that the Greeks preferred to interact in the market with currency, the barter is still the preferred method for the populations of these territories, including the Chinese⁵³. We must remember that more than a purchase of products, in the Silk Road there is exchange, and the Hellenistic world was a perfect area to acquire distant products as it created a huge common market of raw materials⁵⁴.

Productions promoted in Central Asia by the Greeks, such as wine and horses, were a product coveted by the Chinese, who

⁵¹ C.-J. PEERS, *Imperial Chinese Armies (1) 200 BC – AD 589*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 1995, pp. 7-8.

⁵² TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p.85.

⁵³ F.-L. HOLT, *Thundering Zeus: The Making of Hellenistic Bactria*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 31, 35.

⁵⁴ HALKIAS, *When the Greeks*, p. 72.

hoped to find them along the “Silk Road”⁵⁵. Oddly enough, Han China was initially interested almost exclusively in the horses of these western areas and not so much for the products arrived in Central Asia. As we have just said, the Chinese were interested in horses⁵⁶, because this was an excellent land for the breeding of these animals (due to the abundance of fodder) and the physical properties that they had here, which made them ideal for war against the nomads and, in this sense, they were used in chariots. Camels were likewise demanded, of which there was a great abundance in Bactria⁵⁷ and the surrounding regions. These animals were indispensable for the caravan trade, and in the case of the Bactrians they were more resistant and had greater load capacity⁵⁸. They got them mainly in exchange for silk and tea⁵⁹.

Other Chinese imports from the circuits of Central Asia consisted of products that could be produced in the Hellenistic world, such as spices, incense, precious stones, leather, fine woods, ivory, glass, wool, manufactures, and new agricultural products, as was the case of wine, already referred to, from which the Greeks spread their cultivation in Central Asia (but it was not brought by them). In turn, the Chinese exported to this space especially metals such as copper, tin, nickel, etc⁶⁰. We have evidence, both written and material, that evidences the indirect commercial contact between China and the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, such as the Zhang Qian descriptions, the expansion of the greco-bactrians to the east of Ferghana and the large amount of archaeological material with chinese and

⁵⁵ CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road*, p. 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ RAWLINSON, *Bactria : From the Earliest*, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁸ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 38.

⁵⁹ CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road*, p.10.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

hellenistic influences found in the Tarim Basin (current western China) or some sites inhabited by greco-bactrians.

According to M. Rostovtzeff⁶¹, an artisan technique of vitreous tableware known as *millefiori*, made in Ptolemaic Egypt, reached China, where its use was widespread. It consisted of a new treatment of glass, melting and joining fragments of colored glass, which gave an appearance in the objects produced of having incrustations of precious stones, which in China was used in jewelry (especially in necklace beads). Western glass objects were always appreciated by the Chinese; the crystal produced in the Roman Empire (heir to the production of the Hellenistic kingdoms) arrived by sea through India, where it reached China by land routes⁶².

According to Strabo (XI, XI, 1⁶³) “[the grecobactrians] they extended their empire even as far as the Seres and the Phryni.” The seres were undoubtedly the inhabitants of “Serica”, the land where silk was produced, that means, the current China. In Greco-Roman sources there were a few references to Serica, located always beyond the mountain ranges present in the limits of the Indian and Scythian world, or what is the same, beyond the furthest borders of the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. Unfortunately, in this context we can not speak of a reference to Han China, but to the more western peoples of the current Chinese Turkestan, which, although they will later be incorporated into the Han Empire, were not exactly the same as one might have thought. Following the hypothesis of several

⁶¹ ROSTOVITZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica*, p. 365.

⁶² J.-A. MILLWARD, *Eurasian Crossroads. A History of Xinjiang*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 18.

⁶³ STRABO, *Geography*

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Strab.+11.11.1&redirect=tr>
ue> (Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

experts, Narain⁶⁴ compared them with Chinese sources and identified the beings and the phyrni with the su-le and p'u-li peoples, inhabitants of the westernmost part of the current Chinese Turkestan, precisely the place where more material evidence has reached us between the contact of the Hellenistic and "Chinese" worlds.

Some of these evidences are silk articles or garments⁶⁵, as well as iconography and Hellenistic techniques in handicraft productions of China's western border. They could have started to arrive due to the Greco-Bactrian expansion already referred to the steppes of northeastern Central Asia, near the borders of the Han Empire. As we will see, we have even received a representation of a supposed Greco-Bactrian soldier in this art of Chinese border⁶⁶.

In the deserts of western China, it has been possible to conserve tissues that were traded on the Silk Road, some of which show Hellenistic influences⁶⁷. An example is the "man of Yingpan", the burial of a rich man who wears a wool tunic with motifs typical of the Hellenistic world, like naked people fighting⁶⁸. However, the best example of trade between present-day China and the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the consequent exchange of ideas and techniques, is given by the

⁶⁴ NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, pp. 170-171.

⁶⁵ A. TAMIS, *Sino-Hellenic cultural influences from the Alexandrian East Era*, Conference Alexander, the Greek Cosmos – System and Contemporary Global Society sponsored by the Academy of Institutions and Cultures (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), 134-139, n.d, n.p, <https://www.academia.edu/4450119/SinoHellenic_cultural_influences_from_the_Alexandrian_Era_in_Asia> (Last consultation: 17-12-2018), p. 137.

⁶⁶ S. WAHAB, B. YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, I, New York, Infobase Publishing, 2007, p. 41.

⁶⁷ R.-A. JONES, *Centaurs on the Silk Road: Recent Discoveries of Hellenistic Textiles in Western China*, in «The Silk Road», 6 (n. 2, 2009), p. 23.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 24.

so-called “Sampul tapestry⁶⁹”, discovered near the Yingpan man. It is a woven piece of wool dating from 100 BC found again in a tomb, which is represented in the upper part a centaur playing the flute while riding. This mythological being also carries a *kausia*⁷⁰ (a Macedonian hat widespread in Central Asia) and the skin of a lion, object related to Heracles. In the lower part, there is a lancer with western features, which, despite this, the decoration suggests (according to Robert A. Jones) that it is a Scythian or a Persian⁷¹, although it could also be a Greco-Bactrian soldier. The piece is thus a magnificent example of the cultural syncretism carried out in the Eastern Hellenistic kingdoms, such as Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian. Without being able to doubt the presence of Greek influences for the figure of the centaur, the influences on Persian decorations such as flowers and the orientalizing clothing of the soldier is another example of the cultural exchange between the Achaemenian (Persian) Empire and its Hellenistic successors, which in this case they were arriving towards the present China by the ways that later will be recognized like the main ones of the “Silk Road”.

⁶⁹ Ivi, pp. 25-27.

⁷⁰ L. CHRISTOPOULOS, *Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China (240 BC – 1398 AD)*, in «Sino-Platonic Papers», 230 (2012), p. 15.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 26.



Figure 3 The so-called “Sampul tapestry”, now exposed in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum.

These timid contacts produced news in China about large cities in the West eager to acquire products manufactured in the Han empire (it seems that some came to the markets of Bactria, v. Zhang Qiang).

Another proof of the relationship between the Hellenistic world and the Chinese was the metal alloy of cupronickel that the Chinese used to make armor and the Greco-Bactrian kings Euthydemus II, Pantaleon and Agathocles used to mint coins⁷². This demonstrates the export not only of Chinese metal to the Hellenistic world, but also the diffusion of technologies and techniques, because this alloy was not known in Europe until 1751⁷³, and the chemical analysis showed that the alloy used in Bactria is from a Chinese origin. This fact responds in my opinion to the need for urgent metal in the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, which was currently distributing many territories among viceroys, who needed to coin money to reaffirm their

⁷² WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 42.

⁷³ TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p. 87.

authority over rivals. For Tarn⁷⁴, the expedition of Euthydemus towards the Chinese Turkestan was due to the need to obtain metals, above all, due to the need to reopen the Siberian gold routes, an objective that was not achieved. Narain thought that was unnecessary, because little gold coin was used in this kingdom⁷⁵. What was achieved is nickel, which is reflected later in the coins of these kings. However, it is not possible to affirm a commercial route that supplies Bactria with nickel continuously, because it was not minted again⁷⁶. Rather it seems that they obtained some quantities of this metal sporadically through the farthest border of the kingdom.



Figure 4 Top: Nickel coin of the Greco-Bactrian king Agathocles, representing the Greek god Dionysus. Bottom: the same coin, coined with the cupronickel alloy.

⁷⁴ Ivi, pp. 109-111.

⁷⁵ NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, p. 26.

⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 27.

In fact, much of Chinese exports to the Greco-Roman world consisted of metals, highlighting the demand for Chinese steel in the Roman Empire⁷⁷. Therefore, we must eliminate the view that silk is only sought, since it could also be found in the Near East at later times (although it was preferred to get the Chinese, of higher quality⁷⁸).

Although the Greeks lost control of Central Asia after the invasion of the Yuezhi tribe, the Indo-Greek kingdom, a set of Greco-Bactrian satrapies in India that became independent, continued in northwest India, allowing the Hellenistic world to directly conserve the maritime route of the Silk Road for longer⁷⁹.

The migration of the Yuezhi to Bactria was recorded in a Chinese source known as *Shi-chi*⁸⁰ and the writings of the Chinese ambassador Zhang Qiang:

[the yuezhi] were defeated by the xiongnu, they moved far away. They passed [Ferghana] and westward as far as [Bactria], which they attacked and subjugated. Finally they settled their imperial court north of the Oxus river.... [Bactria], situated in the south of the Oxus river, is more than two thousand li to the south-west of [Ferghana]. They are sedentary, and have walled cities and houses, and the same customs as the [Ferghana]. They have had no great kings or chiefs, but some cities and towns had small chiefs. Their soldiers were weak and feared fighting. They were skilful in trade. When the [yuezhi] migrated westward, they attacked and defended them and subjugated all the [Bactria]. The population of [Bactria] is approximately more than one million.

⁷⁷ ROSTOVITZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica*, p. 1342.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 1249.

⁷⁹ WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 42.

⁸⁰ Translation of this fragment by K. Enoki, collected in NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, p. 129. I changed the Chinese names by their "Hellenistic" equivalent to facilitate understanding.

There are some other Chinese sources that deal with the yuezhi invasion and assent. We are not going to reproduce them, because they repeat what we have seen and only extend it in names of tribes or places of difficult interpretation, so it is not of our interest now. The sedentary lifestyle, the walled cities with a governing authority (which Tarn identified with the magistrates or governors of the cities designated by the Greek kings, who would now occupy the vacuum of authority⁸¹ that caused the conquest), the commercial prosperity and the military weakness, are characteristics of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom in decadence. When Zhang Qian visited Bactria and told us all this, the Yuezhi dominated the territory since a few decades, and had not yet fully acculturated it⁸².

CHINESE EXPORTS	CHINESE IMPORTS	CENTRAL ASIAN EXPORTS	CENTRAL ASIAN IMPORTS	ROMAN EXPORTS	ROMAN IMPORTS
Silk Satin Jade Lacquerware Spices Paper Ceramics Iron Steel Leather products	Gold and other precious metals Glass and glassware Cavalry horses Harnesses Bows Elephant's tusks and ivory products Jewelry	Golden peaches Jade Dates Race and cavalry horses Carpets Tapestry Bronze objects Harnesses Bows Elephant's tusks and ivory products Indigo Spices Sapphires Corals Pearls	Silk Gold and other precious metals Lacquerware Cavalry horses Harnesses Bows	Gold and other precious metals Cut precious stones Amber Pottery Textiles Glass and glassware	Silk Satin Ivory products Spices Paper Jade Lacquerware Cavalry horse Slaves Jewels Pearls

Table 1. Own elaboration table that collects the imports and exports of the Silk Road in the period immediately after the fall of Hellenistic political power in the most distant areas of Central Asia. All the information is work of S. Barisitz. Note that imports and exports subsequent to the Hellenistic political domain, are in clear continuity with the previous activity, both in routes and in products.

⁸¹ TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p. 299.
⁸² Conclusion of NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, p. 138, after comparing some passages of the *Shi-Chi*, the *Ch'ien Han Shu* and the *Hou Han Shu*.

The continuity of the Hellenistic commercial circuits and their mechanics is explained by the configuration of Alexander's successor kingdoms, which, by including the local populations in the functioning of their states, allowed their policies to transcend after their fall as political entities. The cultural relations of syncretism were very strong and left visible consequences over many subsequent centuries. The Yuezhi did not exterminate the Greco-Bactrians or end up in a coup with the Hellenistic culture, on the contrary. During the first generations after the conquest the contact between Hellenistic and nomadic culture was intense and it is a visible fact in the great amount of materials of the time that archeology has been revealing.

Following this line, by Central Asia the Kushan Empire (arisen from the unification of the yuezhi) expanded the Hellenistic art and its artistic and artisanal techniques, because they considered it a good of high value. That is why Greek and even Roman pieces appeared in their burials (the best example is the Kushan burial of Tillya-Tepe). Therefore, Hellenistic art continued to develop in non-Greek states of Central Asia for centuries after the fall of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom⁸³. All this, the nomadic world added a direct contact with the Chinese world, which imported a greater number of objects. As a result, we can observe in the archaeological record the presence of Greco-Roman materials along with some from Han China⁸⁴.

Another example of this appreciation of Hellenistic art by the nomadic world is that of the Kushan king Kanishka, a follower of some Greek policies. He expanded the trade in the Silk Road motivated to his direct origin in the nomadic world bordering the Chinese empire. Archeology has shown that its treasures also included Chinese pieces and others from the western

⁸³ M. PFROMMER, *Metalwork from the Hellenized East. Catalogue of the Collections*, Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1993, pp. 2-4.

⁸⁴ HOLT, *Thundering Zeus*, p. 136.

Mediterranean world⁸⁵, which either exported on purpose or continued to be produced in their territories.

From the 1st century BC, in Alexandria in the Caucasus (or A. Kapisa, now Bagram, Afghanistan) was found a collection of glass objects, bronzes, plaster medallions, porphyry and alabaster objects from the Greco-Roman world together with fragments of Chinese pieces, as boxes and cans of lacquer and objects of ivory and bone. The archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler in his day stressed that although the area does not have much evidence, was a place of passage from the Far East to the Mediterranean. They are an excellent sample of the variety of objects collected by both the Greek and nomadic rulers of Alexandria in the Caucasus (or Kapisa) who brought the caravans⁸⁶ that were traveling from Central Asia to India.

The Chinese products continued arriving to the ports of the western coast of India, where they were transported through Bactria, so Greeks and Romans could acquire them there. We can not forget that, although the Greco-Bactrian kingdom fell, in north-western India the Indo-Greek remained for a longer time. This kingdom, emerged from the independence of Greco-Bactrian satrapies in India, continued the commercial policies of its predecessors. Cosmas Indicopleustes, a merchant of Alexandria of the VI century BC, commented in his chronicles the existence of China and the Silk Road, which he said had two slopes: one by sea through India and another land that crosses the steppes of Central Asia and crosses Iran⁸⁷. It is a statement that corroborates the hypotheses reached previously, showing once again the clear continuity between the Hellenistic

⁸⁵ WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 46.

⁸⁶ H.-P. RAY, *Trade Networks in North-West India and Bactria: The Material Record of Indo-Greek Contact*, in D.-N. JHA (ed.), *The Complex Heritage of India : Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2014, p. 352.

⁸⁷ TAMIS, *Sino-Hellenic*, p. 134.

period and the subsequent ones as far as commercial routes are concerned.

Zhang Qiang

At the time when the Greco-Bactrian kingdom was conquered by the Yuezhi nomads (who would make up the Kushan empire), a Chinese traveler contacted directly the Greeks settled in the territory. How was it possible? The structure of the territory created by these Hellenistic monarchies led to the survival of the greek communities in some urban environments. The Greeks were a group of the population more, in clear demographic decline, until their identity was completely blurred with the passage of time. The communities, grouped in cities or fortified villages, had a leading authority in charge of paying the taxes demanded by the yuezhi.

As it has been seen previously, this type of organization came from the territorial configuration of the hellenistic monarchies, and was warned by the chronicle of the Chinese ambassador Zhang Qian.

Zhang Qian reached the ancient Hellenistic satrapies, now dominated by nomads from present-day China, in search of military aid against the Xiongnu, a warlike tribe from northern China that the Great Wall could not stop. Although the Chinese emperors had recognized the Xiongnu territories, and also had offered them daughters in marriage in exchange for peace and paid high taxes, they did not respect the pacts and they continued to plunder China. Emperor Wu Ti decided to attack them and when it was learned in China that they had attacked the Yuezhi and forced them to migrate to the mysterious western regions,

Zhang Qian, a court official, volunteered to propose an alliance⁸⁸.

He left in 139 BC with an escort of one hundred men, but they were captured by the Xiongnu, with whom Zhang Qian lived a few years as a slave and had a son there with a Xiongnu. Ten years later he escaped with his family and a few men and headed west to fulfill his mission. He reached Ferghana (Dayuan), Sogdiana (Kangju) and Bactria (Daxia), contacting the Yuezhi, which he found established along the Oxus River (the current Amu Darya, where the main centers of Greco-Bactrian power were).

Zhang Qian said in his chronicle that these lands were full of walled cities, which is an indicator of the works of fortification and acculturation carried out by the Hellenistic kingdoms in these territories⁸⁹, although it would not be true to say that the walls of the cities correspond exclusively to the time of Greek domination, as has traditionally been asserted, it is true, as archeology corroborates, that the construction of most of the fortifications of the cities was made in Hellenistic times.

This Chinese traveler highlighted the monetary system present in these regions, which corroborated the material evidences that demonstrate the circulation of the Greek currency during centuries after the fall of the Hellenistic kingdoms and the coinage in the same Greek style by the nomadic kingdoms that replaced them. This fact was expressed by Zhang Qian in this way: "The coin was made of silver with the face of the king on the obverse. As they are the king died, the coin had to be changed immediately. The face of the new king would appear on the new coin"⁹⁰. In the same way, he noticed the great variety of

⁸⁸ CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road*, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Y. JUPING, *Alexander the Great and the Emergence of the Silk Road*, in «The Silk Road», 6 (n. 2, 2009), pp. 17-18, extracted from the *Shi-Chi*.

⁹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 19.

languages spoken in the territory (as well as the capacity to understand each other), the agricultural vocation of the economy, some of the physical features of the inhabitants (which could also be identified with the colonist population with Greek dominance, such as “sunken eyes” and thick beards). He also stated that they were good merchants, but lousy soldiers⁹¹, which is easily related to the disappearance of the Greco-Bactrian state, in which the cities passed to pay tribute to the nomads.

According to Yang Juping⁹², it is possible that Zhang Qian observed scrolls written in Greek that had to be imported from Pergamum. Another surprising fact is that it highlighted the presence of Chinese objects, such as bamboo and textiles, in the markets of Bactria, which was reported to the Bactrians in India⁹³, another example of the indirect arrival of Chinese products in hellenized spaces.

However, the Yuezhi did not accept the offer of alliance and Zhang Qian returned to the Chinese court, after being imprisoned again for a year by the Xiongnu (this tribe has traditionally been considered the forerunner of the well-known Huns in Europe, but the descriptions and movements of their populations recorded in the sources do not coincide⁹⁴).

But the traveler did not give up despite the initial setback, and started a second mission that began between 118 and finished in 115 BC. Accompanied by 300 men and hundreds of heads of cattle, gold and silk destined to be given to the kingdoms of

⁹¹ From the chronicle of Zhang Qian quoted in H.G. RAWLINSON, *Bactria : The History of a Forgotten Empire*, London, Probsthain & Co., 1912, p. 94.

⁹² JUPING, *Alexander the Great*, p. 19.

⁹³ *Shi-Chi* (123, The Account of Dayuan), available in: S. QUIAN, B. WATSON, *Records of the Gran Historian : Han Dynasty*, II, n.p, Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 231-253.

⁹⁴ PEERS, *Imperial Chinese Armies*, p. 4.

Central Asia (Bactria, Fergana, Sogdiana, etc.), which ended up establishing diplomatic relations with China.

Zhang Qian said in his chronicle that there was a different kind of tribe from the majority local population⁹⁵. Possibly he was referring to the Hellenistic elite present in the cities. This hypothesis is reinforced by knowing by the coins that some Greek nobles continued reigning over small communities in valleys of difficult access⁹⁶ of these territories.

His description of Ferghana shows us the typical features of the Hellenistic territory, now tributary of the Yuezhi and subject to his authority, since it corroborates the production and organization carried out by the Hellenistic kingdoms in the territory (remember that in Fergana remained the city of Alexandria Eschate). It speaks to us of a mixed society, of sedentary and nomadic farmers, in clear continuity with the society before the Yuezhi. There grow cereals such as wheat and barley, large quantities of alfalfa for horses and Zhang Qian highlighted the enormous production of wine, a culture expanded and demanded by the Greek society installed⁹⁷. Likewise, the walls of the cities that this Chinese traveler stood out again, according to Tarn's analysis, had to be work in this area undoubtedly by the Greeks⁹⁸. Both the Chinese sources, including Sima Qian, and Strabo, agreed in highlighting the role of winemaking in this territory⁹⁹, which although it could well be driven by the Greeks to be a custom of his aristocracy, was not a contribution from him.

⁹⁵ TAMIS, *Sino-Hellenic*, p. 137.

⁹⁶ SYKES, *A History of Afghanistan*, p. 124.

⁹⁷ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 32.

⁹⁸ TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p. 47.

⁹⁹ JUPING, *Alexander the Great*, p. 18, from Strabo's *Geography* and the *Shi-Chi*.

The experiences of Zhang Qiang, between 39 and 113 BC¹⁰⁰, were collected in different works and contributed to increase the geographic knowledge of the “western regions” in Han China¹⁰¹. It is considered that the traveler introduced in China some products popularized in Central Asia that he had seen there, such as alfalfa, nuts, carrots and grape wine (and with it, winemaking itself) in China after seeing them in Ferghana¹⁰².

On the other hand, he described the horses of the Ferghana region as “heavenly” and able to sweat blood (fact related to some typical disease of the animal). These equidae were superior to those used by the Xiongnu and the Chinese, and the Emperor Han showed great interest in acquiring them¹⁰³, which triggered the so-called “war of the Heavenly Horses” that we will see next.

The war of the Heavenly Horses

As the Hellenistic empires had done, Han China raised fortified agricultural colonies in Central Asia to protect their interests from the nomadic hordes¹⁰⁴, populating these garrisons also with members of the army¹⁰⁵. This policy carried out by the Han on their Central Asian border led to a direct contact with the Kushan, which resulted in an increase in cultural exchanges and trade. It was in this moment when the Silk Road expanded and Buddhism, coming from India, began to penetrate strongly into China through the western regions¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁰ For example, in the compilation of ancient texts called *Tzu Chih T'ung Chien*. See: PEERS, *Imperial Chinese Armies*, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Works like the *Shi-Chi* or the *Han-Shu*. See: MILLWARD, *A History of Xingjiang*, p. 20.

¹⁰² BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 32 (v. note 43).

¹⁰³ *Ivi*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁴ CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ MILLWARD, *A History of Xingjiang*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁶ *Ivi*, p. 24.

Therefore, we see that for centuries after the Hellenistic domination of Central Asia their socio-economic structure and organization of the territory survived. Broadly speaking, Central Asia became a set of areas controlled by local powers, which had a bureaucratic elite that managed the agriculture and livestock. The main crop were cereals and grapes (to winemaking, a custom expanded by the Greeks but present in earlier times). In this territory, Buddhist communities from India settled, which founded many monasteries¹⁰⁷ in the area.

It was in this context of interference by Han politics in Central Asia when the war of the Heavenly Horses in the Fergana Valley occurred¹⁰⁸ (this valley had been a satrapy of the Seleucid Empire and the Greco-Bactrian kingdom before). This conflict took place between 104-101 BC¹⁰⁹. The objective was to secure caravan routes to the Middle East and get quality horses for the Chinese army. The ambition for these animals is collected in the chapter 123 of the *Shi-Chi*, a compendium of historical facts, in which it is said: “The Son of Heaven [the emperor of China] is pleased by the horses of Ferghana and the ambassadors always wanted to meet them¹¹⁰.”

The kingdom of Ta Yuan / Dayuan or Ferghana (which as we noticed, had been a Hellenistic satrapy that passed into the hands of the nomads), had large numbers of horses excellents for war. This fact reached the ears of the emperor. They were very necessary in China to be able to fight the nomadic tribes of the border effectively, so they were first sued as tribute. However, the “king” of Ferghana refused the request of the Chinese. It is possible, as Yang Juping¹¹¹ points out, that it was the leading

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 27.

¹⁰⁸ PEERS, *Imperial Chinese Armies*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ MARTIN, *Early Buddhist Art*, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ CHRISTOPOULOS, *Hellenes and Romans*, p. 5.

¹¹¹ JUPING, *Alexander the Great*, pp. 18-19.

aristocracy of the cities who had the government and the ability to direct these proposals, similar to the councils of the Hellenistic courts.

The presence of an authority in Ferghana is linked to the largest city in the territory, which was Alexandria Eschate. Either it is a ruler established by the nomadic conquest of the territory or was a Hellenistic ruler tributary of them, the sources did not indicate it, but it must be one of the two options. Most likely, the ruler was a saka (Scythian, nomadic), as Narain explains¹¹², since a Chinese source tells us that a saka ruler named Mu-kua was attacked by Chinese troops in Ferghana in 102 BC. In any case, the Greek community should not have disappeared from the city, much less the elements from the Hellenistic world that were inserted in this space before.

In this way, the Chinese general Li Kuang-Li was sent with 6000 horsemen and 20,000 infants (according to the chronicle) to take the horses by force. They arrived after a long march through the desert that left the army with virtually no supplies, so they had to withdraw and bring reinforcements. 60,000 men join the campaign, with the aim of forcing the cities of the region to cooperate due to the large number of soldiers. Although this number of warriors seems very exaggerated, the policy of coercion as a method of obtaining taxes is most likely to be carried out. Some cities responded to this show of strength by giving food to the Chinese army and cooperating with them; however, those who opposed it were attacked. General Li lost a large part of his army, but managed to defeat the “king” of Fergana and take 3000 of the precious horses to China. In fact, it is not that they took the city, but established a series of tributes and thereby brought about the opening of a connection between the Han Empire and Ferghana, which provided silk and Chinese

¹¹² NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, p. 142.

lacquerware in exchange for the production of the valley, much appreciated by the Chinese (as we have already seen, horses, wine, etc.¹¹³).

In this campaign, the Chinese army had to contact descendants of communities settled during the Hellenistic period (recently finished), so they had to face also against some Greeks (it is worth noting that in this time the Indo-Greek kingdom still survived in the northwest of the India, although his territory was already very reduced).

The supposed Chinese Embassy to King Hermaeus

It is believed, from the interpretation of a written source kept in China, that an embassy of the Han China contacted the Greek king Hermaeus (who would have reigned between 50-30 BC according to Tarn¹¹⁴, but now scholars consider a late date), who would have asked for military aid to the Chinese against the Kushan¹¹⁵. These kushan (old yuezhi) in some occasions governed the communities of Greek colonists and even included in their empire small Greek principalities that rendered vassalage to them¹¹⁶.

During the reign of Hermaeus there seems to have been an increase in trade, for currency was found even in the Chinese Turkestan¹¹⁷ at a time when the Greco-Bactrian kingdom had already been invaded by the nomadic world (and had installed

¹¹³ R.-N. FRYE, B.-A. LITVINSKY, *Estados oasis de Asia central*, in *UNESCO Historia de la Humanidad. Del siglo VII a.C al siglo VII d.C : La eclosión de las culturas clásicas*, 3, Barcelona, UNESCO / Planeta de Agostini, 2004, p. 503.

¹¹⁴ TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p. 326. Tarn consulted the story in the *Ch'ien-Han-Shu* with the help of other scholars.

¹¹⁵ TAMIS, *Sino-Hellenic*, p. 137.

¹¹⁶ FRYE, *La caída de los grecobactrianos: saka e indopartos*, p. 494.

¹¹⁷ TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, p. 338.

kings in the territory). This reinforces the vision of an inheriting space of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom that has not yet been completely dominated by the nomadic invaders, which continued the commercial activities of previous periods, this time reaching further thanks to the presence of nomads, direct connoisseurs of the Chinese world.

The supposed embassy is collected in the *Ch'ien-han-shu*, a book of classical Chinese literature that collects facts of the Han Dynasty¹¹⁸. According to Tarn, it explained that W'ou-ti-lao (Spalyris), king of Ki-pin (Kabul, current capital of Afghanistan, near some hellenistic power centers), killed a group of Chinese ambassadors. The son of this king (Spalagadames) would have sent an embassy to China with gifts for make peace, and Wen-chung, a Chinese general, escorted this embassy. The son of W'ou-ti-lao (Spalagadames) tried to kill General Wen-chung, but he discovered the plot and allied himself with another king, Yin-mo-fu (the Greco-Bactrian king Hermaeus), son of the king of Yung-kiu (which would mean "of the Greek city"). Both attacked Ki-pin (Kabul) and killed the son of W'ou-ti-lao, staying Yin-mo-fu (Hermaeus) as vassal king of China in this city. This Yin-mo-fu (Hermaeus), during the reign of Emperor Ching-ti (37-7 BC), attacked the escorts of a Chinese embassy and had to send one to the emperor to apologize.

This fact supposes a way to explain the ephemeral recovery of the Hellenistic power in Bactria (present Afghanistan), although it is based on the interpretation of the names given by the Chinese chronicle. Despite they were attributed to this Greco-Bactrian king by experts, others differ and attribute it to nomadic kings. Thus, Narain criticized this interpretation¹¹⁹, stressing that Ki-pin could not be Kabul or the names of the other

¹¹⁸ The story presented below is based on the analysis of the *Ch'ien-han-shu* made by TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, pp. 339-350.

¹¹⁹ NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, pp.154-155.

kings could identify with those of the nomadic kings and highlighted that the attribution to Hermaeus was a weak assumption.

L. Christopoulos proposed a new interpretation following the line of Tarn¹²⁰. Accepting that Yin-mo-fu is Hermaeus, he proposed a contest not between Greco-Bactrians and nomads, but between Greco-Bactrians and Indo-Greeks (wars between them were very frequent). This author proposed that W'ou-ti-lao was the Indo-Greek king Apollodotos II, to whom his son Hippostratos replaced. Hermaeus would have taken advantage of the presence of a large Chinese army to jointly take over the kingdom of Hippostratos, and the Hermaeus coins founded in China would evidence the commercial and diplomatic relationship between his kingdom and the Han Empire.

Anyway, it showed the intrusion of Chinese interests in this area, where there would still be communities descended from the Greek settlers and where we also know for sure that the Greek currency and language continued to be present for centuries, so inevitably the Chinese had to see these reminiscences of the Hellenistic domain in the territory.

Buddhism reaches China: Hellenistic influences on its sculpture

The Buddhism is a religion emerged in India that came to China through commercial and diplomatic activities that took place between the Han Empire and the nomadic kingdoms of Central Asia; mainly through the routes that nowadays we tend to unify with the name of “Silk Road”.

The main space in which Buddhism developed and expanded, from northwest India to Central Asia, was under Hellenistic

¹²⁰ CHRISTOPOULOS, *Hellenes and Romans*, p. 53.

political rule until a few decades before Buddhism expanded into China. The Greek influence in Buddhist art is evident, but surprisingly it is a very unknown fact in a general way, so we will explain it briefly below (by sticking to the Hellenistic origin of Buddhist art extended to China, we will not mention some previous Greek contacts with the Buddhist religion, nor to some possible Hellenistic philosophical influences present in Buddhist schools later expanded by Asia). The saddest thing of all is that in much of the history and art books this fact is attributed to a sporadic adoption of Roman techniques, or an “ephemeral” step of Alexander the Great in India, demonstrating a total ignorance of the survival of the Hellenistic culture in Central Asia and India, in which successor states of Alexander such as the Seleucid, Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms continued to dominate this great space during later centuries and gave rise to an impressive phenomena of cultural syncretism.

The main protagonist and responsible for the expansion of Buddhism to China was the Kushan empire. This kingdom, recalling what we have said before, was formed due to a migration of the nomadic Yuezhi tribes into Greco-Bactrian territory caused by the pressure of the Xiongnu, nomadic tribes of northern China who also threatened the Han Empire. The Yuezhi conquered the Greco-Bactrian kingdom and divided it, but after a time of political chaos they unified and formed the Kushan empire and continued its expansion. However, it is often forgotten (or rather, not taken into account) that the Kushan empire was a very Hellenized political entity, since much of its territory was made up of tributary cities to the nomads, which were inhabited by an amount considerable of Greek colonists. Many of these corresponded to the famous Alexandrias¹²¹ (named in Chinese as Li-chien) or refounded cities during

¹²¹ TAMIS, *Sino-Hellenic*, p. 135.

Hellenistic rule. Although the Chinese traveler Zhang Qian visited Bactria but did not see the Greco-Bactrian kingdom as a political entity, arriving only a few decades after his fall, it is evident from his chronicles and from the archaeological record available that he contacted Greek communities as well as saw Greco-Buddhist art and Hellenistic coins of Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings, which circulated through these territories for many centuries¹²².

Similarly, Buddhism, which was born in India, was a religion sponsored by the Hellenistic kings of these areas and expanded with them to Central Asia through present-day Afghanistan. One of these most important kings for the Buddhist religion was the Indo-Greek king Menander; in fact, one of the most important works of ancient Buddhism was *The questions of Milinda* or *Milindapañhā*. Milinda is none other than the king Menander, and the text is a dialogue of Platonic style (between teacher and student), in which Menander questions his doubts towards the Buddhist monk Nagasena, who ended up convincing him and converted him to Buddhism (from this way, it would be the first “western” converted to the Buddhism of which we have constancy, although the Buddhism had already penetrated previously in areas of Hellenistic dominion). The text was also translated into Chinese during antiquity, at a time when the Chinese were beginning to pilgrim to India to learn the Buddhist faith. On the other hand, it should also be noted that Buddhism was a religion adopted by many Greeks, due to the state’s promotion of it and the similarities it had with some Greek philosophies such as Epicureanism¹²³. In the same way, different authors have seen stoic influences in Buddhism (notions of virtue, honor and equality) and in consonance, Buddhist ideas

¹²² Ivi, p. 136.

¹²³ BERNARD, *The Greek Kingdoms of Central Asia*, p. 114.

that are going to repeat themselves in Christianity (weakness and forgiveness of sins¹²⁴).

Having said that, we can now understand why in Northwest India, the nucleus of the Indo-Greek kingdom, a Buddhist art school was developed in the Gandhara area and applied techniques and models of Greek sculpture to Buddha's sculptural representations. Although it is certain that the moment of greater splendor of this artistic school was not during the Indo-Greek kingdom, but in later moments, the hellenistic influence was maintained during centuries and it must be considered¹²⁵ as its origin. Surprisingly, this type of Hellenized Buddhist art was the one that expanded to Central Asia and later to China. Also in Gandhara was born the Mahayana Buddhist school, which was the most adopted later in present-day China, Japan and Korea¹²⁶.

The influences of Greek sculpture in Buddhist art have been unnoticed during all this time, but they are a demonstrated and easily recognizable reality as we will see below. After the beginning of Greco-Buddhist art in the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms, the Kushan themselves sponsored the expansion of Buddhism by founding a large network of monasteries and hiring artists from Gandhara to carve Hellenistic-style Buddha statues¹²⁷. Obviously, in these sculptures a completely Greek representation can not be generalized: the face, the style and the accessories of the sculptures were typically Indian¹²⁸. As Y. Krishan expressed

¹²⁴ WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 48.

¹²⁵ BEHRENDT, *The Art of Gandhara*, p. 4.

¹²⁶ WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 48.

¹²⁷ BARFIELD, *Afghanistan*, p. 364.

¹²⁸ WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 48.

“The art of Gandhara is Indian in its theme: the subject matter is the life of Buddha. But it is foreign in its technique and style¹²⁹.”

The Hellenistic influence will lead to these sculptures to be sculpted in a monumental way and to be of round bust, as were most of the Greek sculptures. The toga that dresses Buddha is parallel to the Greco-Romans, even with the same technique to reproduce the folds of the dress; this was none other than a copy of the Greek *himation*, a mantle wrapped around the shoulder that in Greek sculpture is represented by the folds attached to the body of the statue. The parallelism with the typical sculpture of Buddha is evident, in which Buddha wears a toga full of folds rolled in the shoulder. The Buddha's own representation is a contradiction in itself, and all due mostly to Hellenistic influence. In the first place, the fact that Buddha was adorned with jewels and luxurious objects comes into contradiction with a person who decided to lead an ascetic life. Similarly, Buddha in his statues has his hair in a bun in Greek style (which is known in Greek sculpture as *krobylos*) and also the bodhisattvas¹³⁰, although Buddha and the main figures of the Buddhist religion shaved his hair, in the same way that Buddhist monks do today. Bodhisattvas are initiates in Buddhism who decide to lead a holy life to obtain enlightenment, both individually and collectively. That is why the communities dedicated sculptures to them¹³¹, to which the same Greek techniques used with the Buddha will be applied.

The most important hellenistic influence in the Buddhist art was the change of conception of the Buddha figure. Previously he was represented by symbols and icons belonging to the Buddhist tradition; but the Greeks only conceive an

¹²⁹ Y. KRISHAN, *The Buddha Image: Its Origin and Development*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996, p. 30.

¹³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 117.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*.

anthropomorphic form of the deities, and, therefore, they were among the first to represent the Buddha as a god-man¹³². Prior to Greek political dominance and Hellenistic cultural contact, representing Buddha in a human form was almost heretical and it was not realized¹³³. Also some elements of Greek religion were incorporated into Buddhism, such as the deities Heracles or Atlas, who identified themselves as bodhisattvas¹³⁴.

The expansion of Buddhism to China through Central Asia coincided at a time when the Han dynasty was strengthening as a power and begins to be able to overcome external threats and to consolidate the Chinese state. The confrontation with the nomadic tribes led the Han to expand their territories in Central Asia, a fact that allowed contact with merchants of the former satrapy of Sogdiana (present-day Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), who came from the hellenized cities-oases in Central Asia that had adopted Buddhism¹³⁵; in the same way that Indian merchants established in Central Asia helped to spread this religion¹³⁶.

As generally accepted, the arrival of Buddhism in China was through Central Asia, especially since the change of era. After the initial contact, the Chinese acceded directly to the Buddhist world of the north of India, since the new devotees of this religion took advantage of the commercial circuits to pilgrim to the sacred places of India and to deepen in the teachings of Buddha¹³⁷.

¹³² WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 48.

¹³³ KRISHAN, *The Buddha Image*, p. 10.

¹³⁴ WAHAB, YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, p. 48.

¹³⁵ MARTIN, *Early Buddhist Art*, pp. 3-4.

¹³⁶ BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, p. 29.

¹³⁷ CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road*, p. 11.



Figure 5. Top left: head of the Apollo Belvedere (Vatican Museums), with the hair in a bun. Above right: Buddha sculpture of the Gandhara school (Tokyo National Museum), with a sculpted clothing similar to those of Greek sculptures and the same hair collected. Bottom left: Maitreya bodhisattva sculpture (Musée Guimet, Paris), with hair similar to Apollo and Greek-like clothing. Bottom right: sculpture of the east pediment of the Parthenon, showing the typical representation of Greek clothing in sculpture.

Conclusion

As Yang Juping said in his article¹³⁸, Chinese diplomacy (represented by the figure of Zhang Qian) was as important as the conquests of Alexander the Great (and its results) in the configuration of what we know today as the “Silk Road”.

We have seen that the term of the route is a historical construction that simplifies this important commercial

¹³⁸ JUPING, *Alexander the Great*, p. 15.

phenomenon, and that does not take into account the Hellenistic and even prehistoric predecessors that had this commercial circuit, a route that “united” the East with the West.

Once we take into account these explanations, we see that we can not understand the roads and the main points of the Silk Road without the development that took place in the Hellenistic world, which laid the foundations of this route, with so many importance in later centuries. The most important fact is not the set of roads, which are a Persian heritage and the traditional communication routes of the territories traced back to prehistoric times, but the most important centers of the Silk Road throughout its existence were cities founded or refounded by Alexander the Great, or highly Hellenized urban centers during the kingdoms of the successors. In addition of this, the products demanded by the Mediterranean world after the official “opening” of the Silk Road and even in medieval times were also present and traded (indirectly), in a remarkable way in the Hellenistic kingdoms.

However, we can’t suppose a direct contact between Chinese and Greeks, but the arrival to both political entities of products and ideas indirectly when these elements circulated in Central Asia. They were two worlds that through the nomads of their borders started to exchange their two cultures, without getting to know each other.

What we may consider a direct contact, of which we have somewhat doubtful evidences, were not relevant events because the Greek identity was already very diluted or even subordinated to nomadic kingdoms that appeared later. However, as investigations of both written and material sources advance, it becomes more evident that Hellenistic influence, both materially and culturally in Central Asia and China, is neither superfluous nor sporadic; and we are sure the future findings will surprise the academic community in a not too distant future.

Bibliography

G.-G. APERGHIS, *The Seleucid Royal Economy : The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleucid Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004

T. BARFIELD, *Afghanistan : A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010

S. BARISITZ, *Central Asia and the Silk Road. Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia*, n.p, Springer, 2017

K.-A. BEHRENDT, *The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007

P. BERNARD, *The Greek Kingdoms of Central Asia*, in J. HARMATTA (ed.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, II, *The Development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations, 700 B.C to A.D 250*, Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 1994, pp. 96-126

M.-P. CHARLESWORTH, *Trade Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1924

L. CHRISTOPOULOS, *Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China (240 BC – 1398 AD)*, in «Sino-Platonic Papers», 230 (2012)

S.-K. CHURCH, *The Eurasian Silk Road: Its historical roots and the Chinese imagination*, in «Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies», 2 (2018), pp. 1-13

R.-N. FRYE, *Asia Central y las culturas nómadas*, in *UNESCO Historia de la Humanidad. Del siglo VII a.C al siglo VII d.C :*

La eclosión de las culturas clásicas, 3, Barcelona, UNESCO / Planeta de Agostini, 2004, pp. 484

R.-N. FRYE, *La caída de los grecobactrianos: saka e indopartos*, in *UNESCO Historia de la Humanidad. Del siglo VII a.C al siglo VII d.C : La eclosión de las culturas clásicas*, 3, Barcelona, UNESCO / Planeta de Agostini, 2004, pp. 494

R.-N. FRYE, B.-A. LITVINSKY, *Estados oasis de Asia central*, in *UNESCO Historia de la Humanidad. Del siglo VII a.C al siglo VII d.C : La eclosión de las culturas clásicas*, 3, Barcelona, UNESCO / Planeta de Agostini, 2004, pp. 501-503

G.-T. HALKIAS, *When the Greeks converted the Buddha: Asymmetrical Transfers of Knowledge in Indo-Greek Cultures*, in P. WICK, V. RABENS (eds.), *Religions and Trade : Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2014, pp. 65-115

F.-L. HOLT, *Thundering Zeus: The Making of Hellenistic Bactria*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999

J. JAKOBSSON, *The Greeks of Afghanistan Revisited*, in «Nomismatika Khronika», 26, Athens, Hellenic Numismatic Society, 2007, pp. 51-88

R.-A. JONES, *Centaurs on the Silk Road: Recent Discoveries of Hellenistic Textiles in Western China*, in «The Silk Road», 6 (n.2, 2009), pp. 23-33

Y. KRISHAN, *The Buddha Image: Its Origin and Development*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996

G.-A. KOSHELENKO, *Las culturas helenísticas de Asia Central*, in *UNESCO Historia de la Humanidad. Del siglo VII a.C al siglo VII d.C : La eclosión de las culturas clásicas*, 3, Barcelona, UNESCO / Planeta de Agostini, 2004, pp. 492-494

M. MARTIN, *Early Buddhist Art of China & Central Asia*, I, *Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan-shan in Central Asia*, edited by S.-F. TEISER, M. KERN, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2007

J.-A. MILLWARD, *Eurasian Crossroads. A History of Xingjiang*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007

A.-K. NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, London, Oxford University Press, 1957

C.-J. PEERS, *Imperial Chinese Armies (1) 200 BC – AD 589*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 1995

M. PFROMMER, *Metalwork from the Hellenized East. Catalogue of the Collections*, Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1993

C. RAPIN, *Ai Khanum and the Hellenism in Bactria*, in R.-M. CIMINO (ed.), *Ancient Rome and India. Commercial and cultural contacts between the Roman world and India*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994, pp. 197-204

C. RAPIN, *Alexandre le Grand en Asie centrale. Géographie et stratégie de la conquête des portes caspiennes à l'Inde*, in C. ANTONETTI, P. BIAGI (eds.), *Alexander in India and Central Asia moving east and back to west*, Oxford, Oxbow Books, 2017, p.37-38

H.-G. RAWLINSON, *Bactria : From the Earliest Times to the Extinction of Bactrian-Greek Rule in the Punjab*, Bombay, The “Times of India” Office, 1909

H.-G. RAWLINSON, *Bactria : The History of a Forgotten Empire*, London, Probsthain & Co., 1912

H.-P. RAY, *Trade Networks in North-West India and Bactria: The Material Record of Indo-Greek Contact*, in D.-N. JHA (ed.), *The Complex Heritage of India : Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2014, pp. 347-372

M. ROSTOVTZEFF, *Historia Social y Económica del Mundo Helenístico*, translation of F.-J. PRESEDO, I-II, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1967

S. SHERWIN-WHITE, A. KUHRT, *From Samarkand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993

P.-A. SYKES, *A History of Afghanistan*, I, London, Macmillan & Co., 1940

A. TAMIS, *Sino-Hellenic cultural influences from the Alexandrian East Era*, Conference Alexander, the Greek Cosmos – System and Contemporary Global Society sponsored by the Academy of Institutions and Cultures (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), 134-139, n.d, n.p,
< https://www.academia.edu/4450119/Sino-Hellenic_cultural_influences_from_the_Alexandrian_Era_in_Asia > (Last consultation: 17-12-2018)

W. TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1938

S. WAHAB, B. YOUNGERMAN, *A Brief History of Afghanistan*, I, New York, Infobase Publishing, 2007

F. WOOD, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2004, pp. 36-44

Y. YUPING, *Alexander the Great and the Emergence of the Silk Road*, in «The Silk Road», 6 (n. 2, 2009), pp. 15-23

Figures

Figure 1 Author's elaboration based based on satellite image from Google Earth (2018)

Figure 2 Silk Road in the I century AD

<https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruta_de_la_seda#/media/File:Silk_Road_in_the_I_century_AD_-_es.svg>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

Figure 3 Probable Greek soldier, woollen wall hanging, II century BC - III century AD, Sumpul, Urumqi Xinjiang Museum

<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:UrumqiWarrior.jpg>>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

Figure 4 Agathokles nickel coin with [Dionysos](#) and panther with Greek legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΓΑΘΟΚΛΕΟΥΣ, from Classical Numismatical Group

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agathocles_of_Bactria#/media/File:Agathokles_Dionysos_and_Panther.jpg>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

Bactria: Agathocles, Cupro-nickel dichalkon or double unit, c. 185-170 BCE

<<http://coinindia.com/2607-Agathocles-Ni-double-89.05.jpg>>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

Figure 5 Gandhara Buddha, Tokio's National Museum

<[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grecobudismo#/media/File:Gandhara_Buddha_\(tnm\).jpeg](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grecobudismo#/media/File:Gandhara_Buddha_(tnm).jpeg)>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

Picture of the Apollo Belvedere scanned from “A Short History of the World” of H.G. Wells

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Apollo_Belvedere#/media/File:A_Short_History_of_the_World_p0161.jpg>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

The [Bodhisattva Maitreya](#), 2nd century, [Gandhara](#). Musée Guimet, Paris

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Buddhist_art#/media/File:KushanMaitreya.JPG>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

Woman seated on a chest, from Parthenon east pediment, made by Fidias, ca. 447–433 BC

<https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ropaje#/media/File:East_pediment_E_Parthenon_BM.jpg>

(Last consultation: 23-12-2018)

Tables

Table 1 Table about the products exchanged between the West, Central Asia and the Han China in periods prior to the considered opening of the Silk Road, based on the information provided S. Barisitz, *Central Asia and the Silk Road. Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia*, n.p, Springer, 2017, pp. 39.