

ANSWERS FOR MILINDA: HELLENISTIC INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF GANDHARAN BUDDHISM

Author:
Scott Blair

Faculty Sponsor:
Zinru Liu
Department of History

ABSTRACT and INTRODUCTION

Although few people today have heard of Gandhara, this region in modern Afghanistan and Pakistan played an important role in Buddhism's history. During the beginning of the Common Era, Gandharan Buddhism underwent major changes, culminating in the deification of the Buddha. Gandharan Buddhism ignored the past lives of the Buddha and focused on the miracles he performed before achieving Nirvana, and it was in Gandhara that the first images of the Buddha were created. However, the causes of these changes have remained unclear. The evidence suggests that the presence of Hellenistic Greeks, referred to as Indo-Greeks, played an important role in this development. From the time of Alexander the Great's invasion in the fourth century BCE to the rise of the Sassanids in the third century CE, Greek culture was present in the region and contributed to the development of Gandharan Buddhism. Gandhara was the origin of many of the monks who brought Buddhism to East Asia, and therefore Hellenistic culture played a significant role in shaping modern Buddhism.

When Alexander the Great's army descended upon India in 323 BCE, it set in motion six centuries of contact between the subcontinent and the Hellenistic world. Indo-Greek kings carved out empires along the Indus, while traders from Egypt sailed to India using the seasonal monsoons. Greek writers wrote stories about Plato and Socrates traveling to India, while the Indian monarch Ashoka boasted that he dispatched Buddhist monks to Syria. Hellenistic culture influenced many aspects of Indian civilization; perhaps most importantly it influenced the development of Buddhism. Indeed, Hellenistic culture significantly changed the conception of the Buddha, promoting belief in an anthropomorphic, divine Buddha in a region of Pakistan and Afghanistan then known as Gandhara. It was in this region, with its own peculiar Gandharan Buddhism, that the Buddha known today evolved, largely due to Hellenistic influence.

Although today the Buddha is worshiped by millions as a divine being, the earliest conception of the Buddha was rather different. Early Buddhism was in many ways more a philosophy than a religion. The Pali Sutras, which compose the earliest canon of Buddhist text, stressed "insightful penetration of the analytical teachings of Buddhism" as the key to Enlightenment.¹ To achieve Nirvana, a person had to possess "high ethical and intellectual standards brought to perfection by a long period of training in virtue, knowledge, and concentration, a training that might span over a number of rebirths."² The Buddha himself, according to the Pali Sutras, experienced an innumerable number of rebirths in order to gain the merit necessary to become the Buddha. Nor did early Buddhists view him as a supernatural being, for early Buddhist texts explicitly reject the notion that the Buddha was omniscient.³ While the Buddha possessed supernatural powers, he warned his followers they merely distracted one from achieving Nirvana.⁴ Some early Buddhists, such as the Mahasanghika sect, held that the Buddha was a transcendental being. But they were considered heretics by the mainstream Buddhist community.⁵ The majority of Buddhists believed that upon his death, the Buddha achieved Nirvana and therefore no longer existed; hardly the traits of a god.⁶

These beliefs are reflected in early Buddhist artwork, which rarely displayed events from the life of the Buddha. Instead, reliefs depicted scenes from the Buddha's past lives.⁷ An early discussion between the Buddha and a monk explains why this was so. The Buddha criticized a monk who wanted to see the Buddha's body before he died by saying, "What use is the sight of this vulnerable body? Whoever sees the Dharma sees me, and whoever sees me sees the Dharma."⁸ The evidence therefore suggests that initially the Buddha was not viewed as anything special, and in fact that early Buddhists did not view him as a deity.

Around the beginning of the Common Era, however, Buddhism and the nature of the Buddha underwent major changes, which are reflected in the *Milindapanha*, known in English as *The Questions of King Milinda*, a Buddhist scripture written between the first century BCE and the first century CE in Northwestern India. While the conversation between the Indo-Greek king Menander and the monk Nagasena is almost certainly fictional, the work's attempt to explain Buddhist teachings provides an invaluable insight into the beliefs of the peoples of the region, including Indo-Greeks. The *Milindapanha* records so many changes that one might be talking about an entirely new religion. According to the *Milindapanha*, "though a man should have lived for a hundred years an evil life, if, at the moment of death, thoughts of the Buddha should enter his mind, he will be reborn among the gods."⁹ The work also asserts that the Buddha is incomparable to anything else in existence, and pre-eminent among all things.¹⁰ In the *Milindapanha*, the monk Nagasena argues that the Buddha was prophetic and omniscient, and that Buddhist disciples can make rain, stop fires, and "accomplish other things they want to do."¹¹ The only thing that keeps one from calling the Buddha a god is Nagasena's claim that the Buddha ceased to exist upon his death, and even this is clearly in doubt. As Menander puts it in the *Milindapanha*:

If the Buddha accepts gifts he cannot have passed entirely away. He must be still in union with the world, having his being somewhere in it, in the world, a shareholder in the things of the world; and therefore any honor paid to him becomes empty and vain. On the other hand if he be entirely passed away (from life), unattached to the world, escaped from all existence, then honors would not be offered to him. Tear asunder this net of heresy, put it on one side. To you has this puzzle been put. Give to the future sons of the Conqueror eyes wherewith to see the riddle to the confusion of their adversaries.¹²

Or, to put it another way, if the Buddha did not exist, then why did he accept offerings? If he did exist, then to give him offerings would be tantamount to worshiping him as a god. Nagasena argues that gifts to the Buddha generate good karma because the act is valued by the universe, not because the Buddha is rewarding his followers, but Menander would never have asked this question if it had not occurred to contemporary Buddhists.¹³ Other Buddhist works from the early Common Era carry this line of thought to its logical conclusion, and declare the Buddha to be an eternal, transcendental being.¹⁴ Thus the Buddha is no longer merely a wise, powerful being, but rather an immortal savior who wields the powers of a god.

These radical developments in Buddhist texts are reflected in the archaeological evidence. The first century CE witnessed the first depictions of the Buddha on coins, in monasteries, and on reliquaries containing his remains.¹⁵ This period also saw some donors declare that the Buddha was their favorite god, who, they hoped, would bring them benefits.¹⁶ Moreover, interest in the life of the Buddha himself, as opposed to his past lives, increased. The *Buddhacarita*, a play written in the first or second century CE, depicts the historical Buddha as a supernatural being who soars through the heavens and shines like the sun in order to attract followers.¹⁷ Other works claim the Buddha has such godlike traits as a limitless mind and innumerable virtues.¹⁸ The biographies all emphasized eight events in the Buddha's life: his descent from heaven, his entrance into his mother's womb, his birth, his departure from lay life, his defeat of the demons that represent defilements, his attainment of Enlightenment, his preaching, and his death.¹⁹ In short, Buddhism had undergone a dramatic transformation.

How did these changes occur? Perhaps they arose as part of an effort by Buddhist monasteries to attract more lay patronage, or as a result of a new religious fervor which swept across India in the earliest

centuries CE.²⁰ However, the evidence suggests that Hellenistic culture also influenced the development of Gandharan Buddhism.

Before one can determine how Hellenistic culture influenced Gandharan Buddhism, one must consider how Greeks in India viewed the Buddha. This challenge is compounded by a paucity of available sources. No Indo-Greek writings have survived, so the only literary evidence comes from Mediterranean writers, Buddhist texts, and archaeological evidence. That said, it is clear that the Indo-Greeks from the time of Menander viewed the Buddha as a god.

Archaeological evidence, though sparse, provides some clues. One piece of evidence is an inscription from a late second or early first century BCE vase, discovered in the Swat region of India which once contained Buddhist relics. The vase, donated by a Greek official known as Theodorus, declares in Sanskrit that "The body of the revered god Sakyamuni is installed by Meridarch Theodorus for the prosperity of many people."²¹ If this statement had not been endorsed by leaders of the Indo-Greek kingdom, Theodorus would not have declared that he was a Greek official on the inscription. Additional evidence from this relic vase suggests that Theodorus regarded the Buddha as a god: it is one of the first Buddhist artifacts to claim that worshipping the Buddha can bring material benefits.²² Moreover, it offers the first recorded instance in Buddhist history of a donor explicitly declaring what he hopes the Buddha will give him. Inscriptions on donations at earlier Central Indian Buddhist sites merely give the name and sometimes occupation of the donor.²³ Theodorus's donation was followed by others, and by the beginning of the Common Era record that donations were made for "an increase in life, strength, health, fortune, and happiness."²⁴

Other sources corroborate the Indo-Greek view of the Buddha as closer to Hellenistic views of divinity than traditional Buddhism. A relic of the Buddha, deposited by one Viyakamitra, a vassal of the Indo-Greek king Menander, recorded that "On the 14th day of the month of Kartikka, in the reign of the Maharaja Menendra.... A bodily relic of the Buddha, which is endowed with life ... was installed."²⁵ If the Buddhists of Menander's realm believed that the Buddha no longer existed, why were his relics endowed with life? Other Greeks, according to inscriptions, donated stupas for the benefit of their parents, "for the presentation of a respectful offering."²⁶ These were significant deviations from orthodox Buddhism.

Literary sources also suggest that the Indo-Greeks viewed the Buddha as a god. For instance, the Roman historian Plutarch noted:

When Menander, who had reigned graciously over the Bactrians, died[,]... the cities indeed by common consent celebrated his funerals; but coming to a contest about his relics, they were difficultly at last brought to this agreement, that his ashes being distributed, everyone should carry away an equal share, and they should all erect monuments to him.²⁷

To Plutarch, this may have indicated that Menander was loved by his people, and he may have perceived it as one of the many Hellenistic ruler cults. Indeed, suggests that Menander viewed himself as a deity, for his queen Agathokleia served as regent for their son after he died, and declared on her coins that she was "godlike."²⁸ Moreover, Menander is shown on many coins with the goddess Athena, and Agathokleia's coins also depict her with the goddess.²⁹ The depiction of Athena on Menander's coins resembles his wife, which means the king may have hoped to imply he had married Athena.³⁰ Such a cult would not be out of place in the Hellenistic world, for the Egyptian Ptolemies held that the king was Zeus and the queen was Hera, while Antiochus IV claimed he was an incarnation of the god Helios.³¹ Thus, evidence strongly suggests that Menander was worshiped like a god in typical Hellenistic fashion. Read from a Buddhist perspective, however, the fate of Menander's remains sounds very similar to the Buddha's, which also were divided among cities after his death.³² Furthermore, *Milindapanha* records that Menander became an arhat, or Buddhist saint, while still a king, and therefore had achieved Nirvana.³³ What does it mean for Menander to be both an arhat and a Hellenistic deity?

It is important to remember that in the Hellenistic world, no "unbridgeable chasm [separated] immortals from the mortals."³⁴ Philosophers in Athens placed offerings before the grave of Socrates, worshipping him as a demigod.³⁵ The monarchs of the Hellenistic world were given divine honors, and

bore titles on their coins such as “God Manifest.”³⁶ Some monarchs were worshiped as gods by individual cities, while others, such as Antiochus III of the Seleucid Empire, instituted a state-wide ruler cult.³⁷ Men and women across the Hellenistic world voluntarily deified great men or thinkers, as the following hymn by a fourth century BCE Athenian in honor of the Macedonian king Demetrius illustrates:

*Hail, son of Poseidon, most powerful god, and of Aphrodite.
The other gods are either far distant, or do not have ears.
But we see you present, not made of wood or stone, but real.
So we pray to you.*³⁸

The Macedonian king Demetrius was deified by the Athenians for saving their city, and he was worshiped for decades after his death. Indeed, worship of him was so common that travelers to the city commented that altars to the king were everywhere.³⁹ There was even one Indo-Greek, Antimachus, who called himself Theos, or God, on his coins, indicating the presence of a ruler cult among the Indo-Greeks.⁴⁰

Like pieces of a puzzle, the evidence falls into place. Officials in the Indo-Greek kingdoms made donations to the Buddhist sangha in the hope of gaining “prosperity for many people,” while Menander was considered a holy figure in Buddhism and worshiped as a god. If one puts the adoption of Buddhism by the Indo-Greeks into this context, it is frankly hard to believe that Hellenes in Northwestern India did not worship the Buddha as a god.

Placing the Buddha in the context of Hellenistic religion leads to some insights into Gandharan Buddhism. Hellenistic worship of the gods emphasizes the miraculous powers of deities and their intervention in one’s every day life. Entire books were written in Hellenistic Egypt on how to gain the favor of a god for one’s personal benefit.⁴¹ For example, the reason that men and women followed Apollonius of Tyana, a Greek sage in the first century of the Common Era, was because he was believed to have supernatural powers.⁴² Many of the monarchs and other notables who were became the subject of biographies that emphasized their deeds. This tradition began in the fifth century BCE, when biographical plays celebrated such heroes as Dionysus and Heracles.⁴³ By the first century BCE, books chronicled how even the king of the gods, Zeus, had earned his divinity by embarking “on a campaign of world conquest... and imparting the gifts of agriculture and law.”⁴⁴ Thus, if Hellenistic Greeks influenced the development of Buddhism, one would expect an increased interest in the Buddha’s supernatural abilities and his life. This is exactly what happened in the centuries in the beginning of the Common Era in Northwestern India, and these changes are depicted in Gandharan art.

Curiously, although early Buddhist sites have numerous images of local spirits, there are none of the Buddha.⁴⁵ Yet this changed in the first century CE, when images of the Buddha began to appear in Gandhara and Mathura, a site in Central India. The images of the Buddha were used differently at the two sites, with Gandharan artists “employing a lively, narrative mode, while those in Mathura tended toward a static, emblematic idiom.”⁴⁶ It is unclear how these images first arose, with some historians linking them to “an increased emphasis on the laity, on devotionalism, [and] the need for a savior,” while others have said it merely reflects the religious preferences of the Greeks, who were accustomed to an anthropomorphic religion.⁴⁷ However, the style of Gandharan images suggests that they were inspired by Hellenistic culture.

Even before creation of such images, Buddhism was in flux. Bhakti, or devotional practices to certain gods, was on the rise in Brahmanism, Jainism, and Buddhism.⁴⁸ Stupa building, which emphasized the Buddha’s remains, became more common from third century BCE, before Hellenistic influence was truly felt on the subcontinent.⁴⁹ Earlier art demonstrates that worshipers had profound feelings for the Buddha, showing them prostrating before stupas.⁵⁰ Yet not until the early Common Era, when Greek artistic influences were firmly established in Gandharan society, was the Buddha given human form.

While traditional Buddhist artwork depicted scenes from the Buddha’s past lives, collected in a series of stories known as the *Jataka Tales*, the life of the Buddha himself generally was not. Even in his

past lives, the Buddha was depicted in early artwork using wheels, footprints, or a bodhi tree, and is never given human form.⁵¹

Gandharan art breaks new ground in several ways. Representations of the Buddha mark a radical departure almost certainly related to Hellenism. How he is shown is also a significant change from earlier Buddhist artwork. Images from the Buddha's past lives, once important, are almost nonexistent at Gandhara. Instead, major moments in the Buddha's life are shown to the exclusion of all others: his birth, his discovery of suffering, his Enlightenment, his preaching, and his death. Thus Gandharan art depicts the events described in biographies of the Buddha, which were contemporaneous with the earliest Gandharan art.⁵² Thus, in Gandharan artwork the Buddha becomes human even as he is deified.

A recently translated story from the Gandhara region illustrates the cultural impact of Hellenistic culture on earlier conceptions of the Buddha. While traveling through the region, Dhona, a brahman, meets the Buddha and asks him about his identity: is he a god, a gandharva (a Gandharan term for a spirit), or a man? The Buddha says no to each statement, and finally declares, "I am a Buddha, Brahman, a Buddha."⁵³ While in early Buddhism the Buddha was viewed only as an enlightened sage who ceased to be after he achieved Enlightenment, in Gandharan Buddhism his mere presence makes the blind see, the deaf hear, and the crippled whole.⁵⁴ In Gandhara the Buddha acquires the traits of a god, and he is depicted as such.

While philosophers might conjecture that the gods did not take human form, most Greeks believed in anthropomorphic deities.⁵⁵ Images of gods had great importance in Hellenistic religion. People carried them in processions, dream about cleaning them, and thought they could perform miracles.⁵⁶ Artists carved reliefs of religious mythology on the walls of temples. The Parthenon, for instance, was decorated with scenes such as the birth of Athena.⁵⁷ Classical reliefs served the same purpose that stained glass windows did in medieval cathedrals, namely, to illustrate important stories. In the Hellenistic world, reliefs and statues were important parts of religion, and unlike Indian Buddhists, Hellenistic disciples required images and narratives.

The importance of images was only one of many differences between Indian and Hellenistic religions, and therefore only one aspect of the way that Hellenistic culture influenced Gandharan Buddhism. Another example was reincarnation, which was a fringe idea in Hellenistic society, central to Pythagoreanism but little else.⁵⁸ However, it never became the dominant view of the afterlife, and so to Indo-Greeks, interest in the Buddha's final life was far greater than in his past lives. Such beliefs, which took approximately two centuries to be incorporated into Gandharan Buddhism, are strikingly depicted in Gandharan art.

Much of the evidence of Hellenistic influence comes from reliefs and statues that once decorated monasteries. Many friezes which are of an appropriate height to decorate a stupa depict Buddhist iconographic images in unusual contexts. For instance, the figure shown below (Figure 1) was taken from a monastery at Takhi Bahi, and was probably produced in the first century CE.⁵⁹ The characters do not, at first glance, seem pious; the figure on the left appears to hold a bowl of wine. Only two things suggest this scene was Buddhist. First, many of the people portrayed are holding lotus petals, a Buddhist symbol.⁶⁰ Second, although less certainly, the third character from the left is performing a gesture that resembles the Buddhist Abhaya Mudra.⁶¹ The image, removed from the side of a Buddhist stupa, depicts men wearing Greek tunics and women modestly dressed in Greek dresses and shawls. Therefore this frieze combines elements of Greek culture and Buddhist belief, and represents an early form of Gandharan art.



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Figure 1. Side panel from a Gandharan stupa.

Many scenes that include the Buddha mix elements of Greek and Indian culture as the following image illustrates. This scene is believed to depict the donation of the Jetavana Garden to the Buddha by a rich merchant, Ananthapindika (Figure 2).



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Figure 2. The donation of the Jevanta Garden.

There are only two notably Hellenistic features in this relief.⁶⁴ The Buddha, the second figure from the left, wears a long flowing tunic that covers his entire upper body. This contrasts with the clothing he wears on statues from Mathura: a tight robe which left his upper right shoulder exposed.⁶⁵ Second, this scene is flanked by miniature Corinthian pillars which decorated the sides of stupas in the Gandharan region. On the whole, however, there are as many aspects of Indian culture in this scene as there are Hellenistic. The merchants, for instance, are dressed in Indian clothing, and several of them sport mustaches, which would have been considered unattractive by Greeks.

The context of this relief is equally important. In early Buddhist art, scenes from the Buddha's life are shown in isolation or in no clear chronological order.⁶⁶ By contrast, Gandharan reliefs portray the Buddha and others as they "move freely and naturally in a great variety of poses" which moved in a sequential narrative from one stage of the Buddha's life to the next.⁶⁷

Other aspects in Gandharan art illustrate the departure traditional Buddhist teachings. For instance, many of the friezes focus upon miracles the Buddha performed.⁶⁸ The scenes display the Buddha as a living, breathing, person who wielded miraculous powers and accomplished heroic feats for the good of mankind. Many reliefs portray the gods Indra and Brahma giving the Buddha his first bath; others portray the Indian goddess, Mara, testifying to the accumulated merit of the Buddha.⁶⁹ Yet for all

the supernatural attributes he possess in Gandharan art, in some ways the Buddha appears more human than he ever did in artwork from central India. Gandharan artists were the first to show him as a dying man surrounded by mourners.⁷⁰

The importance of these scenes cannot be underestimated. In the Ganges region, and even central India, Buddhism had been present for centuries by the first century CE, and Brahmanic thought for longer still. For the heterogeneous peoples of Northwestern India, concepts such as reincarnation and karma were unfamiliar. Images of people weeping before the dying Buddha, or of him leaving a palace, however, could speak to anyone. Greek religion emphasized the miracles and deeds of its heroes and gods, fostering epics and plays about their lives. It is not surprising that Buddhist stupas were adorned with the story of the Buddha, given that Greek temples were painted with mythological scenes. The newfound interest in the Buddha's life, manifested in Gandharan artwork and biographies, is similar to, and inspired by, interest in the deeds of Hellenistic deities.

The first century CE also saw the development of devotional images of the Buddha, such as the seated Buddha shown below. This figure (Figure 3), only six inches high, represents one of the earliest devotional images of the Buddha known to exist.⁷¹ Although the subject matter is not Hellenistic, the artistic style is. His head is idealized and looks more like Hellenistic portraiture than anything known from Indian art.⁷² His earlobes are of normal proportions, and his garment is rendered in a natural manner with irregular folds. Even his hair, which is often curly in later artwork, is straight.⁷³ The mere fact that the Buddha has hair is surprising, since as a monk he should be portrayed with a tonsure. Instead, he is depicted as a weary, yet young man. This is not particularly surprising, as baldness was considered unattractive by Hellenistic artists, and in other artwork his hair resembles that of Hellenistic gods.⁷⁴ The Buddha's halo, which was extensively used in Hellenistic artwork, may also signify Hellenistic influence.⁷⁵



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Figure 3. Bronze casting of the Buddha.

Some art historians have suggested that this sculpture, with its prominent ears, low brow, wide face, and close eyes is derived from sculptures of Roman emperors from the Julio-Claudian dynasty. This may be so, although evidence suggests that Hellenistic artwork had been familiar in Gandhara long enough for this to be a familiar style.⁷⁷ Despite its Hellenistic features, however, it is clearly an early piece of artwork with the sort of mistakes one would expect. For instance, the Buddha's feet are actually backwards, hardly the mistake that one would expect if such images had been in common use. Thus, this statue, suffused with Hellenistic traits, is one of the earliest depictions of the Buddha. Moreover, both the statue and relief embody the Hellenistic emphasis on the human figure. In Hellenistic reliefs, people were

depicted dramatically, with exaggerated stances and “the distortion of facial features which readily accompany heightened emotion.”⁷⁸

While Hellenistic culture played a role in Gandharan artwork, it is unclear how important it was. Perhaps local artists merely chose to use anthropomorphic models that were available to them, and the ideas behind the Hellenistic models they were not significant. Moreover, Gandharan artwork combines traits of Persian and Indian artwork as well as Hellenistic influence. For instance, in the relief that was previously shown (Figure 2) while the Buddha and his monks wear long flowing robes reminiscent of Greek clothing, the other characters are dressed as Indian notables. Hellenistic influence fades over time in Gandharan artwork, while Indian elements come to the fore. For example, this Buddha statue displayed below (Figure 4) from the third century CE depicts the Buddha in his role as Prince Sakyamuni. The Buddha’s clothing, jewelry, and hairstyle are clearly Indian, yet even here Greek influence is present. His features are still finely hewn, and his clothes maintain the drapery one would expect from Hellenistic art.⁷⁹



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Figure 4. The Buddha dressed as an Indian prince, before his departure from the palace.

Clearly, there was extensive Hellenistic influence on Gandharan artwork. But does influence on artwork indicate influence on Gandharan Buddhism itself? Although the evidence is not conclusive, it strongly suggests that Hellenistic culture played an important role. The *Milindapanha*, which presumably reflects the northwestern Indian attitude towards the Greeks, notes that in Menander’s capital “streets, squares, cross roads, and market places [were well laid out]. Well displayed are the innumerable sorts of costly merchandise with which its shops are filled. It is richly adorned with hundreds of alms-halls.”⁸¹ In other words, Buddhist monks considered the Indo-Greeks to be a prosperous and civilized people.⁸² This should come as no surprise, for evidence suggests that some of them became monks, and brought their culture with them when they entered monasteries.⁸³

Travelers to northwestern India in the early Common Era also noticed the Hellenistic culture of the region. Apollonius of Tyana, a first century mystic and, reported that a Gandharan king knew Greek and practiced javelin tossing “after the manner of the Greeks.”⁸⁴ An Afghan inscription by the Kushan king Kaniska states that, in 120 CE he changed the official language of government from Greek to a local language.⁸⁵ Moreover, Gandharan texts were written on birch bark scrolls, which were rolled and unrolled like Hellenistic papyrus scrolls, in contrast to traditional Indian books, which were written on palm leaves.⁸⁶ This suggests that the monks of Gandhara were familiar enough with papyrus scrolls to imitate them. Furthermore, Greek loanwords were adopted into Gandhari, the local language.⁸⁷

One problem with the hypothesis of Hellenistic influence on Gandharan Buddhism is the fairly large gap, almost two centuries, between the period of Indo-Greek kings such as Menander and the first Buddha images. Given the anthropomorphic nature of Hellenistic religion, one might well ask why it took so long to create images of the Buddha. Since no texts explain why people began to portray the Buddha in human form, answering this question is difficult. But there is a possible explanation.

Preexisting aniconic beliefs may have been too strong to allow the creation of Buddha images. Buddhism had not created images of the Buddha since his inception, so it is not surprising that it took time for this tradition to be broken. Buddhist images were placed in monasteries, and even if lay followers considered the Buddha a god, monks were slower to accept this belief. This would also explain why the earliest depictions of the Buddha were small statues and modest reliefs on stupas and coins, all less objectionable than monumental architecture.

In this light, it is not surprising that the donor of the earliest dated Gandharan Buddhist sculpture was a monk.⁸⁸ This source would have given the image respectability it might have otherwise lacked, especially if depictions of the Buddha were a new development. However, once artists began carving images of the Buddha, the practice spread rapidly throughout Gandhara and indeed the rest of India.⁸⁹ Clearly, Hellenistic influence helped create the concept of a divine Buddha.

Buddhism has not been practiced in the Gandharan region for over a thousand years, and stupas and monasteries that once echoed with the chants of monks are now silent. Nomadic invasions and changing trade routes devastated the monasteries in the seventh century, and Islamic invasions ensured the religion would never revive.⁹⁰ Yet Gandhara witnessed the flowering of a new and vibrant form of Buddhism, which spread across the Silk Road into East Asia.⁹¹ The faith may be gone, but Buddhists across the world still owe a debt to the Indo-Greeks who first carved the Buddha out of wood and stone, and prayed to him.

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