

## Hellenistic Residue in Central Asia under Islamic Regimes

**Xinru Liu**

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing

### *ABSTRACT*

Islamic scholars in the Middle Age translated many Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit literature into Arabic. Among the many scholars who contributed to scholarship in the Islamic world, Central Asia produced many outstanding ones during the Middle Age. In this essay, the author hypothesizes that the Hellenistic tradition in Afghanistan and the Transoxiana region never totally diminished. In spite of the many invasions and immigrations passing through the region and political and religious changes there, Greek, Persian, and Indian academic traditions survived. From the mid-8<sup>th</sup> to the mid-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the land of cultural crossing nurtured many versatile brains who either went to Baghdad or stayed there to explore knowledge. Some of them made essential contributions to the culture of the Islamic world, and left great legacies to the intellectual history of the entire world.

Islamic scholars in the Middle Age translated many Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit literature into Arabic, thus helping to preserve the cultural heritages of those ancient civilizations. The case of Greek heritage was especially important because many of the achievements of the classical age would have been forever lost to humanity had not Muslim scholars preserved the texts in Arabic language. Meanwhile, Islamic scholars could not have made all the achievements in natural sciences, technology, mathematics, astronomy, geography, literature, and history without the knowledge they acquired from Greek, Persian, and Indian scholars. Given the well known facts, the question is where and how Islamic scholars acquired their knowledge from the classical traditions. Obviously a simple answer cannot solve this complicated and broad question. In this short essay, the author tries to draw attention to a special corner of the medieval Islamic world, Central Asia, a land that produced many outstanding Muslim scholars during the Middle Age, much out of proportion, in number and in achievement, of its geographic and demographical scope.

The beginning of Greek influence in Central Asia was the brief invasion of Alexander of Macedonia to India. After the Greek army retreated from the Indus valley in 326 BCE, garrison towns, with the name of Alexandria, remained in Bactria and even further east, namely modern north Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan. After the death of Alexander, his successors established Hellenistic states on the conquered territory. One of them, Seleucus Nicator, controlled the territory of the former Persian Empire including its territories in South Asia and Central Asia. On the

direction of India, he soon encountered the offense from the Mauryan Empire rising on the Ganges plain. Afghanistan and Gandhara in northern Pakistan became territories of the Mauryan Empire during the third century BCE. The Greek speaking towns apparently maintained their cultural heritage under the Mauryans, as the Mauryan king Asoka chose to issue his edicts in Greek or Aramaic inscriptions, both in language and script, in the northwest frontier of his empire.

In the region to the north of the Mauryan territory, i.e. Bactria and Transoxiana (the region between the Oxus River and Syr River), Greek garrison towns flourished. Of the many Hellenistic cities, Ai-Khanoum on the Amu River preserved all the major institutions of a Greek polis, such as a gymnasium, an amphitheater, temples, and a palace (Bernard 1973). In the last decade, archaeologists dug into the lowest level of settlement at Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and found foundations of Greek colonies in Maracanda-Frasiab (Bernard 1996: 331–65). Greeks, at least Greek soldiers, indeed settled there and maintained their culture.

In the following centuries, the large scale and frequent migrations of nomadic peoples on the Eurasian steppe swept over the Transoxiana region and north Afghanistan. One may assume that the nomads, namely, the Parthians, Sakas, and Yuezhi-Kushans wiped out the Hellenistic traditions of the region. However, as most of the nomads did not develop a writing system before they came to the region, and most of them decided to settle in there to rule the sedentary agricultural societies, they soon learned to adopt local languages and writings. Greek was among the living languages and valid writing systems. The Sakas, who migrated from Central Asia to Afghanistan and then to India around the beginning of the first century CE, under the pressure of the Kushans, adopted Greek language and script for official purposes. Saka kings had their coins cast with Greek legends and image of Greek deities. For example, the famous Saka King Maues gives himself a title in Greek legend “ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΜΑΥΟΥ”. Though the language and writing is in Greek, the style is very Central Asian: “King of kings, Great King.” On the reverse side of the coin, Kharoshthi script gives the same title of the king, but the image is that of the Greek goddess Nike (Museum Yamato Bunkakan 1985: 81, plates 96–98). The Parthians, a nomadic people who pushed the Hellenistic Seleucids out of Iran and extended their power to Afghanistan, adopted the same linguistic strategy in the former Hellenistic country. When the Kushans conquered Bactria, the nomadic people decided to stay there to rule the sedentary country. The early Kushan rulers of Bactria adopted both the Greek language and the Greek script on their coins, like the Sakas and the Parthians. However, from Kanishka I, the Kushans changed to linguistic preference. They used only Greek letters to record local Prakrit language. On the coins the titles of the kings was no longer “ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ”, but “PAO”. Several inscriptions by the Kushan kings also used Greek letters to denote local Prakrit language. Six of the seven inscriptions found in the Kushan temple at Surkh Kotal, Afghanistan, are written with Greek letters in a Prakrit language (Fussman 1989: 196). The inscription of Kanishka found in Rabota, near Surkh Kotal, is a lengthy text

of 22 lines, all with Greek letters in Bactrian Prakrit (Sims-Williams 1996). It seems that Hellenistic tradition in the region lingered even well after the Bactrian Greek cities had been lost from the control of the Greeks in the mid-second century BCE.

The Kushan rulers, though abandoned Greek as the official language of the regime, did not give up Greek script. To the end of the Kushan regime, Greek letters appeared on the coins, at least on one side. One of the good reasons to continue to use Greek letters was that the Kushans were trading with the Romans and made great profit from the Silk Road trade. The Roman traders, mostly Greek speaking Egyptians, arrived at the ports on the Indus and the Gulf of Cambay via the Arabian Sea in the first century CE. They were delighted to see that Greek coins and writing were available in the port areas. According to *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a Greek manual for sailors from the Red Sea to Indian coast, “there are to be found on the market in Barygaza even today old drachmas engraved with the Inscriptions, in Greek letters, of Apollodotus and Menander, rulers who came after Alexander” (Casson 1989: 81, #47). The *Periplus* was written around 70 CE, when the power of the Kushans had not extended all the way to the Gulf of Cambay, where the port of Barygaza was located. However, this was a couple of hundred years after the downfall of the Greek rule in Bactria and northwest region of South Asia, and the Hellenistic power never reached the shore of the Gulf of Cambay. If the *Periplus* was telling the truth, then the Greek coins with the name of Greek kings on them had been circulated hundreds of years in regions much larger than the territories of former Hellenistic states. Therefore it is not a surprise that the Kushan rulers kept Greek script on their coins to facilitate the trade with the Greek Speaking Roman traders.

Even after the Sassanids from Iran conquered the Kushan kingdom, Greco-Roman elements remained in the former Kushan Central Asian territory, namely Tukharistan, for centuries to follow. Although those elements were only residues of the past glory of the Hellenistic culture in Central Asia, their persistent presence provided opportunities for the revival of Greek influence on the thoughts of people there for centuries to come.

When the Sassanids extended their power to Afghanistan at the cost of the Kushan Empire around 230 CE, some of the residents of the former Kushan core region probably migrated to oases of Takla Makan Desert. A surge of Kharoshthi documents deposited in the oasis sites during the period suggests commercial contacts, Buddhist missionary activities, and probably also immigrations from west to east (Lin 1988: 12). The Kharoshthi scripts on the documents express a variety of Prakrit languages. The bulk of the documents, mostly found in Niya on the southern edge of the Takla Makan, contained many non-Indian loan words which render great difficulties for translation. The complexity of the language probably reflects the cosmopolitan phenomenon of the former Kushan territory and that of the oases which received many Kushan immigrants. In addition to Indian, Saka, and Chinese elements in the population, Greek personnel and culture could still be discerned. Document No. 324 of Niya is a record of arbitration on a dispute caused by a slave transaction. The

parties involved in the dispute include the Supis, apparently a nomadic group which raided the oasis from time to time; a Chinese who paid two golden stater and two drachmas for a slave looted by the Supis, and a certain Vasu Yonu (Burrow 1940: 60–1). Here the money used was Greek, and the name Yonu is most probably *Yona*, the Prakrit appellation for the Greeks.

If the migrants in the Takla Makan oases maintained traces of Greek culture and usage, how did the Hellenistic culture survive in Tukharastan, or Bactria, the former Hellenistic and the Kushan core regions? It seems that the Hellenistic elements disappeared totally along with the Kushan culture after the invasions of the Hephthalites and the Turks. However, when Xuanzang visited the area in 630 CE, he noticed that in Tukharastan, though also under the control of the Turks, as were all other Central Asian countries he had passed by so far, the language was different, and the language was recorded in 25 signs, which combined into words. Reading of the writing is from the left to right, which is different from the Kharoshthi writing from right to left, and even more different from Chinese which was written in vertical lines from above to the bottom of a piece of paper. Written documents were quite numerous, even more than that of Sogdian region to the north (Ji et al. 1985: 100). Therefore, in Tukharastan, the written language could not be anything else but Greek. Literary tradition impressed Xuanzang to the extent that he claimed that the literatures were even more numerous than in Sogdiana, the homeland of the famous trading community of Central Asia. Thus the region, by the mid-seventh century, was still a stronghold of Greek literature.

Arabs started the conquest of the Transoxiana region in 704 CE, and finished the campaign by 751 at the Talas battle with Tang China. This process began only a few decades and finished about a hundred years after Xuanzang's visit of the strongly Buddhist region. Buddhism survived in the region under the Islamic regime for a while, but what about Greek language and writing? After the region entered Islamic cultural sphere, did the Greek cultural remains in the Transoxiana region contribute to the Islamic cultural developments?

Under the Abbasid Caliphate, Islamic scholars absorbed classical Greek, Persian, and Indian knowledge, and made great achievements in mathematics, science, technology, art, etc. During the golden age of the Abbasid Caliphate, i.e. the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, scholars from Transoxiana region made their journey to Baghdad to join the House of Wisdom or House of Knowledge. After the caliphate lost control on regions far from the center, Islamic scholarship continued to develop in the transoxiana region, and was still based on the knowledge from Greek, Persian and Indian literatures.

In Baghdad, the famous Barmaki family who served the Abbasid Caliphate for several generations came from the city of Balkh, the city called Bactra in Hellenistic times. According to Mas'udi, the historian of the Abbasid Caliphate, Barmak the Elder managed the *Nawbahar* in Balkh before he joined the Islamic cause (Mas'udi

1989: 131). The *Nawbahar* of Mas'udi is like *navavihara* in Sanskrit, namely the New Monastery. Xuanzang called it *nafusengjialan* in Chinese, or *nava sangharama* in Sanskrit. According to Xuanzang, the New Monastery was the most prestigious and wealthy Buddhist center in Balkh. All its hall and statues of the Buddha were richly decorated with precious jewels which often invited robberies by greedy chiefs and kings. Nevertheless, due to the protection of *Vaishravana-deva*, the Buddhist deity who guarded the northern heaven, the monastery survived many robbing attempts. In the most recent incident, as Xuanzang heard, a prince of the powerful Kehan of the Turks stationed his troop nearby in order to rob the monastery. The prince saw the guarding god piecing his chest with a long pike in dream, and died of a heart attack after he woke up from the dream (Ji et al. 1985: 117). So even the Turkish power which controlled the region at the time of Xuanzang did not succeed to rip off the treasures of the monastery. In charge of the most prestigious and powerful institution of Balkh, the Barmaki family weathered many invasions to the region and managed to keep themselves and the wealth of the monastery intact.

There is no information about how the Barmaki family survived the initial attacks of Arab military force to Central Asia. Maybe moving to Baghdad to serve the Abbasid caliphs was also one of the strategies to protect the family's interests in Afghanistan. The Barmakis certainly held great power in the court of caliphs after they migrated to Baghdad, while keeping frequent contacts with their homeland. No one knows exactly when and how the Barmakis converted to Islam, but their contribution to establishing the state structure and culture of the Abbasid caliphate is well known. Mas'udi spent many pages detailing activities of several generations of Barmakis in the service of the caliphate. To build a bureaucratic system for the caliphate, the Barmakis probably were even responsible for bringing paper making, among many inventions in the east, from Central Asia to Baghdad (Bloom 2001: 49).

The Barmaki family, as vazirs of the caliphs, supported many cultural activities, including collecting and translating Persian, Greek and Sanskrit literatures into Arabic. There is no way to ascertain their knowledge of Greek literature, but at least they were aware of the significance of Greek literature enough to make the effort to have it collected and translated. Following the steps of the Barmakis, many scholars from Central Asia went to Baghdad to seek their future.

Al-Khwarizmi (c. 780–850), who modified the Indian digitals into Arabic numerals and invented Algorithm and Algebra, came from Khwarizm of the Transoxiana region. In Baghdad, he worked in the House of Knowledge which was the center of translating Greek, Persian and Sanskrit works into Arabic. The knowledge of those languages was a prerequisite of the scholars working in that facility. Al-Khwarizmi was familiar with the geography of Ptolemy and corrected many mistakes of Ptolemy (Bloom 2001: 145). Presumably, Al-Khwarizmi acquired the language skills in Transoxiana before he set out for Baghdad.

Among the renowned philosophers in Baghdad, Al-Farabi (d. 950) was from a Turkish military family of Transoxiana. He studied in Baghdad following Hellenistic

Christian teaching, i.e. school of Alexandria. He considered himself a Muslim but considered religion was the matter of commoners in a good society. The society believing in a single god should have been the place to build an ideal political society, as adopted from Plato (Hodgson 1977: 433–37). In addition to Plato, he translated and studied many Greek works, both philosophy and literature. The first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the period when Al-Farabi was active in Baghdad, saw the strong presence of Turkish Mameluk or slave troops there. Arisen from Eurasian steppe, Turkish military power came to the center of Islamic empire with violent force. Al-Farabi, however, represented another face of Turkish culture from Central Asia, the culture preserved in Transoxiana region in spite of many invasions from the steppe.

During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the central power of the Abbasid caliphate was in shatters, many scholars from Transoxiana no longer went to Baghdad to look for jobs but seeking patronage from local sultans and amirs. Separated from the Byzantium, the only major source of Greek literature of that time, those scholars were still very familiar with sciences of Greek authors. Al-Biruni (973 – c. 1050) came also from Khwarizm region. He was captured by Mahmud of Ghazni in Afghanistan and was sent to India to study astronomy and other sciences. In his book about India, he compared every theory in Indian sciences with the respective Greek theory:

The heathen Greeks, before the rise of Christianity, held much the same opinions as the Hindus; their educated classes thought much the same as those of the Hindus; their common people held the same idolatrous views as those of the Hindus. Therefore I like to confront the theories of the one nation with those of the other simply to account of the close relationship, not in order to correct them (Sachau 1910: 24).

Al-Biruni made this statement in the first chapter of his book, as he felt it was a difficult job to explain the complicated thinking written in difficult Sanskrit language to his fellow Muslim scholars. He felt compelled to compare Hindu philosophy and sciences with those of the Greeks. He and his Muslim scholarly audience obviously were familiar with all important Greek works and authors.

Ibn-Sina, or Avicenna in western literature (980–1037), a contemporary of Al-Biruni, never went to Baghdad either. His life story illustrates how education of scholars was carried out in 11<sup>th</sup> century Central Asia. His father was born in Balkh, then moved to Bukhara in present Uzbekistan where Ibn-Sina was born. His father hired tutors to teach him the *Koran*, and *adab*, or Arabic secular literature. Then he studied philosophy, geometry, and Indian mathematics under various teachers. He learned the geometry of Euclid quickly, but had real hard time with the metaphysics of Aristotle. He read the book 40 times and remembered every word, but still could not understand it. Finally, he was enlightened by an introductory book of Aristotle, written by Al-Farabi, which he bought from the local market (Lewis 1987: 177ff). The *Canon of Medicine* by Ibn-Sina was the text of medicine both in Middle East and Europe of that time and for centuries to come. Education and accessibility of scholars and books from several classical traditions in the Transoxiana region paved the way for Ibn-Sina to accomplish the works which had influence to a large area of Eurasia.

The Transoxiana region produced many outstanding scholars for the Islamic world. Greek authors and writings were an essential component of their knowledge structure. The sources of the Greek knowledge could have been the contemporary Byzantium. Meanwhile, the tradition of Greek knowledge of the Transoxiana region, the western part of Central Asia, never totally ceased to exist from the days of the Hellenistic state of Bactria to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the hey day of Islamic scholarship. Thus the Transoxiana region was probably also a source of Greek scholarship in the Islamic world.

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