Begram: along ancient Central Asian and Indian trade routes

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One of the important factors in the rapid development of Silk Road\textsuperscript{1} trade during the early Common Era was the establishment and growth of the Kushan Empire, which had a profound effect on the political and economic stability of much of Central Asia. Descendants of nomadic tribes from the steppes of the Tienshan and Altai mountains, who were pushed westwards by rival groups and who settled in the region of ancient Bactria in the second century BCE, the Kushans’ territorial expansion\textsuperscript{2} brought under their control a large area stretching from modern Uzbekistan in the north to the Indian Ganges Valley in the south. Facilitated by the international trade emphasized by both the Han Dynasty in China and the Roman Empire, the Kushans’ own trade-based economy ensured a steady flow of goods, people and attendant cultures throughout the region. The combination of a large heterogeneous empire plus a trade-enhancing policy of unrestricted movement of merchandise and persons resulted under the Kushans in a commingling of varied religious and artistic ideas. Kushan numismatics clearly demonstrate a mixture of religious images which drew upon deities from Rome, Hellenized Central Asia, Iran and India, a cooptation which can be viewed as part of an attempt to pacify subject peoples and legitimate Kushan rule by reflecting the varied beliefs current across their

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empire. Similarly, the arts of the Bactrian, Gandhāran and Mathurā schools demonstrate varying styles which were allowed to flourish simultaneously within the Kushan Empire. Likewise, the architectural features of both religious and secular structures, while demonstrating certain commonalities, were clearly permitted to display regional differences. From each type of evidence, then, it seems that the Kushan state imposed no strict control over the development of art and architecture within its empire but rather stimulated regional variety in religious and artistic activity.

The aspects of ancient Silk Road trade and exchange most often considered by archaeologists and historians are those which might be categorized as «official» and/or commercial trade. The focus usually remains on actual commodities traded, on the organization of that trade – that is, through governments or private merchants – and on the methods and particular routes by which such commodities traveled. Only to a lesser degree is examination made of the nature and extent of indirect cultural exchange which often, if less obviously, occurs alongside official or commercial trade. What ideas were exchanged along with objects when peoples met during the course of extended cross-cultural contacts? What new forms, images, constructions sparked the imagination of artisans and technicians such that they were moved to incorporate them in their work?

One of the more fascinating but sadly neglected sites dating from the Kushan period is the ancient ruins situated near modern Begram. Begram is particularly interesting in light of the theme of this conference volume, which seeks to examine commercial and cultural exchanges between Central Asia and India. Objects found at this ancient site of Begram, in modern Afghanistan, offer a rare opportunity to examine the region’s trade. In one location were discovered artifacts of broad international progeny: Chinese lacquers, Roman bronzes, glassware and plaster models and Indianesque ivory and bone objects. But more than just official trade, the Begram ivory and bone objects in particular offer an excellent opportunity to view elements of the region’s indirect cultural exchange.

Begram is situated at the confluence of the Ghurband and Panjshir Rivers of eastern Afghanistan, 80 kilometers north of Kabul and approximately 250 kilometers northwest of the legendary Khyber pass. Looking at a topographic map of the region, the location of the site at Begram
is particularly striking. To the south, the Kohdaman Plains stretch all the way to Kabul. To the southeast, the Panjshir River and Valley flow down toward the Jalalabad Plains from which it is a relatively easy journey to the Khyber Pass, today connecting Afghanistan with Peshawar in Pakistan. To the north, a number of passes and river valleys lead to the plains of ancient Bactria, along sites such as Surkh Kotal and Bactra, the capital of ancient Bactria. These passes of the western Hindu Kush mountains were renowned lines of communication between Bactria and India, which carried along their paths not only people and materials but also the cultures attendant thereon. These passes also connected the area of Begram with stations along the Silk Roads from China to the Mediterranean.

In total, Begram’s geographic location provides a suggestive context for a study of the nature of the settlements there and of the finds: Begram’s «crossroads» locale can be easily conceived of not only as particularly well-suited to development as a trading center but also as well-placed for strategic military defense, enhancing the likelihood that the site would have been chosen for significant trade and perhaps production, and the attendant storage of goods and materials.

The ruins of Begram constituted a substantial urban settlement incorporating two fortified enclosures: to the north, what was called the «Old Royal City» by Foucher (Foucher 1925: 266) and was locally known as the «Burj-i Abdullah»; and to the south, what has been referred to as the «New Royal City», where most excavations have taken place. The site was initially identified by A. Foucher in the 1920s as the ancient Kâpisî, summer capital of the Kushan emperors (Foucher 1925: 259, 266; 1931: 342). Although subsequent research, in this writer’s opinion⁵, has failed to confirm this identification, it gave early impetus to archaeological investigations of the site which were carried out by the French Archaeological Delegation between 1936 and 1946 (Hackin 1939, 1954; Ghirshman 1946; Hackin, Carl & Meunié 1959). Architectural investigations by Roman Ghirshman indicated to him that the lowest levels of that part of the site called the «New Royal City» are to be dated in the Graeco-Bactrian/Early Kushan period, that is, the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE; that the subsequent two strata correspond to the period of the Great Kushans, up to the 3rd century CE; and the topmost stratum to the 3rd to 4th/5th centuries CE, the later Kushan period (Ghirshman 1946: 99-108). Ghirshman’s asser-
tions were based on analysis of the architectural levels and the numismatic evidence. It should be noted that several scholars\(^6\) have questioned his theories concerning dating of the strata, and one should thus be cautioned against accepting them, standing alone, as precise.

The Begram site is most famous for the discovery during the 1937 and 1939 campaigns (Hackin 1939, 1954), under the direction of Joseph Hackin, of a large number of extraordinary objects neatly stored in two, apparently anciently sealed-off, rooms in that part of the «New Royal City» which the excavators came to refer to as the «Palace». As will be discussed shortly, however, the appellation «Palace» for this structure, and the excavators’ reference to the finds as a royal «treasure» or «hoard», may result from a misapprehension by these early researchers concerning the nature and the dating of the finds.

The objects found in these sealed-off rooms consisted of numerous pieces which evinced a high degree of artisanship and which, fascinatingly, had their origins in various and distant parts of the world: among them, an Indianesque piece of earthenware referred to as the «Kinnari» pot\(^7\), Graeco-Roman objects such as a bronze satyr head, painted glass beakers with analogies to Roman Alexandria, pillar-moulded bowls found also in several sites of the Arabian peninsula and in Arikamedu in India, and plaster medallions. Also found were fragments of Chinese lacquer objects the decoration of which is similar to ones found in Noin-ula, Mongolia and in Lo-lang, Korea, as well as numerous carved ivory and bone objects generally thought to originate either from north-central or southern India\(^8\).

Since their discovery in 1937 and 1939, the ivory and bone objects in particular have been the subject of extensive stylistic analyses (Auboyer 1948, 1954, 1971; Kurz 1954; Stern 1954; Davidson 1971, 1972; Rogers 1952) in an attempt both to indicate their place or places of origin within India and to date the pieces. Since the archaeological evidence seems to indicate that the stratum of the finds corresponds to the broad period of the Great Kushans, initial efforts at stylistically dating the objects permitted placing several pieces two or three centuries apart. This led some scholars to believe that the objects probably had been gathered over several centuries, a hypothesis which simultaneously supported and was confirmed by the assertion that the artifacts as a whole were a royal «treasure» or «hoard», and the particular portion of the site a summer Kushan imperial «palace». This writer’s own
research into the finds and the nature of the settlement, however, has suggested something somewhat different: that the ivory and bone finds could all be dated in approximately the same first century CE time period, and that, consistent with this thesis, the so-called Begram «treasure» could well have been merchants’ commercial stock deposited at the site along established trade routes. For example, stylistic comparisons of the ivory and bone objects with ivories found at Pompeii, at Taxila and in Bactria support this proposed date; similarly, analogous pillar-moulded bowls found on the Arabian peninsula (Haerinck 1988; 1-27) and in India date exclusively from the mid-first century CE; and comparative stylistic dating yields the same results for the Chinese lacquers (Elisseeff 1954).

When the finds are viewed as first century merchants’ stock awaiting further distribution, they provide an opportunity to examine the region’s official commodities trade during that era and the nature of the settlement of Begram and its relation to other trading partners. The fact, if established, that the goods at Begram traveled from diverse places in the same era and were stored together in one place suggests that the site was a point of consumption, of collection for further distribution, of active trading, or a combination thereof. Considering Begram as a commercial storage and distribution site may help to explain why the rooms in which the objects were found were sealed-off: because of the length of time required for ancient trade to make its way between distant points, there was a need for long-term protection of goods while awaiting further movement.

In addition to matters of commodities trade, Begram presents the occasion to research elements of indirect cultural exchange between Central Asia and India through an analysis of the origin of the ivory and bone objects as suggested by various heterogeneous elements depicted on them. The ivory and bone objects discovered in the two rooms at Begram consist mainly of small plaques and bands, variously engraved [figure 1] or in relief [figure 2] and occasionally displaying traces of red and black paint, and of larger sculptures in high relief which appear almost as if carved in the round. Judging from small drilled holes in the objects, originally they formed the outer decorative layer of furniture, the wooden skeletons of which had long since disintegrated due to burial in humid soil. On the reverse sides of some of the ivory and bone objects were marks in the Kharoshthi and Brâhmî scripts of the
Kushan period, which may have indicated the place of each piece in the various ensembles.\footnote{11}

These ivory and bone objects hardly form an homogeneous group. In addition to various motifs and the use of different carving techniques, it appears that different hands were involved in the creation of the pieces. Indeed, the differences in styles, methods and influences may well be seen to reflect different places of origin of the objects and/or artisans who produced them.

As mentioned above, several of the motifs depicted on the ivory and bone objects from Begram have been identified with, and thus are thought to have originated from, the art of the Indian «heartland», that is, from sites such as Mathurâ and Sanci in central India and Amarâvatî from the Deccan area in southern India. And a comparison of certain motifs seems, at least initially, to bear this out. For example, among the hairstyles of the women depicted in the Begram ivory and bone objects [figure 2] are large buns and loops similar to the style of Bodhgaya and Mathurâ (Czuma 1985: nos. 30-31). Circular ornaments adorning the women’s foreheads [figure 3] also are depicted on reliefs from Mathurâ (Czuma 1985: nos. 24 and 26) and Amarâvatî. Similarities also exist for clothing and scenes depicted. Also, the vyâla-yaksa and
Figure 2. Ivory, Begram n° 34a. 5, Kabul Museum (from Hackin 1954: fig. 9).
mākara (Hackin 1939: figs. 73 and 74) which appear in some Begram objects are known from first century CE Mathura (Czuma 1985: nos. 7 and 8), as is the purnakumbha or «vase of plenty» (Hackin 1939:...
fig. 64). In addition, the architectural designs on the ivory and bone objects (Hackin 1954: fig. 68) compare favorably to early, that is first century BCE to first century CE, monuments of India proper, such as the Stūpa at Sahci.

However, many of these analogies also exist in the art of the north-west region of Gandhāra and certain motifs on the ivory and bone objects may point to this more eclectic region as the location of origin for some of the pieces. These motifs, unfortunately, have been ignored by almost all scholars; at most, there have been brief descriptive nota-
tions. These anomalous motifs appear in a number of forms. In one example, a woman is standing on a makâra in a typical Indian pose. She has a full round face [figure 4] and her hair is done up in curls which encircle her head as a crown. Her long, clinging, pleated tunic with short sleeves, however, is very much in Hellenistic style and is strongly reminiscent not of the Indian south but of the north-west regions of Gandhāra and Bactria, which were heavily influenced by Greek styles.

A second example is a woman standing on a square platform (Hackin 1939: fig. 157). She, too, wears a long tunic with sleeves. Her hair, done up in a style reminiscent of women depicted in Indian art, is crowned by what looks like a twisted piece of cloth from the middle of which protrude three pointed leaf-like ornaments; again, this tiara-type element is known from the northwest region of Gandhāra. Additionally, what differs from both Graeco-Roman style and the Indian styles of Mathurā and Sahcī is that the woman is wearing trousers underneath her tunic. Women wearing pants are, however, frequently depicted in Gandhāran and Bactrian art, from which one could deduce a direct Kushan element. In this regard it can be noted that the women buried in the Tillya-tepe necropolis (Sarianidi 1985) probably wore pants. It is also interesting to note one particular depiction on an ivory of a hunter on horseback (Hackin 1954: fig. 123); round appliques seem to be sewn on his trousers, a technique well known in Saka-Parthian and Kushan costumes from Bactria.

Comparative research on the ivory and bone objects has been faced with a major problem: only a very few ivory objects found in and out of the Indian subcontinent could be compared favorably to the ivory and bone objects from Begram. However, an ivory statuette found at Pompeii (During Caspers 1981) provides an excellent stylistic comparison, and it offers to the question of dating the Begram finds a terminus ante quem of 79 CE, when the Vesuvius erupted. Other analogous ivory objects from the northwest regions were found at the site of Taxila (Marshall 1975) in a stratum with a similar terminus ante quem date of 60 CE.

In recent years, a number of ivory finds from the region of ancient Bactria has provided additional comparative material dated to the proto-Kushan and Kushan periods. The discovery of an ivory comb from the site of Dal’verzin-tepe (Pugachenkova 1978) in present-day
Uzbekistan presents the first inscribed ivory which is very similar in technique to objects from the Begram finds. And an ivory comb from the Tillya-tepe necropolis (Sarianidi 1985) in northwest Afghanistan also compares favorably.

Previous attempts – that is, those made without benefit of comparison with the Pompeii, Taxila and Bactrian ivories – at a critical stylistic analysis of the Begram ivory and bone objects have faced a difficult threshold problem: what to compare them with? India had yielded only few ivory and bone objects, certainly not enough to form a clear and complete view of the stylistic development of ivory and bone carving. This lack of material prompted scholars to look to a range of widely dated stone sculptures as sources for comparisons of styles and motifs. The continuing currency of the «treasure» theory – that the Begram objects had been hoarded over time – provided the theoretical liberty to do so.

Dates proposed for individual objects from Begram have ranged from the 1st century BCE to the late 3rd, even 4th, century CE. This disparity in dating arose, it seems, because of a tendency on the part of some scholars to extract individual objects from the «treasure» and to date them outside the archaeological record, based exclusively on stylistic comparisons. Further, there has been a tendency by individual scholars to focus solely on the Indian objects, or solely on the Graeco-Roman finds, or on the Chinese lacquers, without simultaneously taking into detailed consideration the other two groups of objects discovered with them.

This writer’s research attempts to draw together the archaeological evidence of the finds as a whole and to place the stylistic evidence within the archaeological context. Gradually, the widely separated dates proposed for several artifacts have been undermined by subsequent work which argues persuasively that almost all the objects of diverse origins can be attributed to the first century CE. As to the Roman objects, the great majority can be dated with reasonable certainty to the first century CE. Even where a single Romanesque object could be dated later or earlier, a first century date also remains strongly defensible. As David Whitehouse concluded regarding the Roman finds of Begram: «The diagnostic items – the glass, the metal objects, the plaster models and other objects – belong to the 1st and early second c. Few of them can, and none of them must, be as late as the 3rd c.» (Whitehouse
The fragments of Chinese lacquer ware found at Begram are also quite telling with regard to dating the objects as a whole. In part because there are so few of them extant, the lacquer pieces have been largely overlooked in placing the Begram finds in the first century. Analogous lacquer finds in other regions of Asia strongly support the first century CE date (Elisseeff 1954: 151-156). Finally, analysis of the dates for the carved ivory and bone objects, based on analogous ivory finds, on the nature of the settlement at Begram, and on the dates of the two other categories of finds, points with reasonable certainty for these objects as well to the first century CE.

In addition to a changing picture of dates for the objects, the presence of certain Graeco-Roman, Gandhâran stylistic elements, mostly on the incised material, may indicate a different provenance for some objects from that asserted by previous scholars. That is, while some may have been produced in Mathurâ, others of the ivory and bone objects may have originated in the extreme northwest area of Gandhâra, in the region of Begram itself, or in Bactria rather than in heartland India.

And the more diverse possible provenance for the ivory and bone objects begins to open up a view of Begram as a central part of a larger network of trade and cultural exchange, rather than as merely an outlying royal curiosity. The presence of the many plaster models at Begram adds to this shifting view of the site and the region. The plaster models serve to undermine the royal treasure theory – no great value in plaster models – and also to raise the intriguing possibility that Begram was not merely a crossroads storage site but a trading center with its own workshops or ateliers. While the plaster models may have been simply lower level trade ware to be handled by merchants operating out of Begram, it is also possible that the models were directly used by workshops or ateliers in Begram itself. And the possibility that workshops and ateliers existed at Begram prompts a reevaluation of the issue of how and from where the ivory and bone objects arrived, and indeed the very supposition that they came from somewhere else.

A number of possibilities arise concerning the provenance of the Indian-style ivory and bone objects. The simplest is that the completed objects were manufactured in India and then transported along trade routes to Begram. A second possibility is that although the ivory and bone objects originated either in Mathurâ or in the Sâtavâhana region, they were transported to Begram in parts and were assembled
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there. This could explain the marks which appear on the backs of some of the ivory pieces and which may have existed on more. If such assembly did regularly take place at Begram, at least some workshops may have been maintained there.

A third possibility, however, is that at least some of the ivory and bone objects were actually carved at Begram by Indian, Indian-trained or Indian-influenced artisans who had settled at the site because of the active trade occurring there. Such a theory is supported by ancient Indian literature (see Jâtakas 1973, I: 174-177; Dwivedi 1979: 18) which seems to indicate that not only did ivory carvers locate themselves together within cities, with their work significantly organized, but that they were also direct buyers of ivory and worked for themselves as a more direct part of a commercial economy than is usually attributed to artisans of the time. Further, from Jâtaka stories (see Jâtakas 1973, II: 172ff.) it is also clear that some ivory artisans were itinerant, suggesting that the carvers of the Begram ivory and bone objects could have moved to and worked in Begram as part of Silk Roads trade in the region. Some of the stylistic components of the ivory and bone objects point to the extreme northwest region of Gandhâra, indicating established ivory artisanship at least that far north. And northern distribution of incised ivory and bone ware, as represented by finds from Tillya-tepe, Dal’verzin-tepe and Taxila, may indicate local production specifically for Silk Roads trade.

Whether or not Begram was an active manufacturing site, the nature of the objects found there, when viewed against the backdrop of Begram’s geographical location, suggests the site’s place in the patterns of movement along ancient trade routes between India and the regions of the West and the Far East. The Indo-Caspian Highway is thought to have run from Bactria over the Amu Darya river toward the Caspian Sea and then on to the Mediterranean; Begram was thus strategically located to connect both with routes to and from India and with the Silk Roads between China and the West. Sea routes, too, linked the Roman world with the Indian subcontinent in the first century CE. The distribution of first century CE pillar-moulded bowls in the coastal areas of the Arabian Gulf, as well as in Arikamedu on the south-eastern coast of India, suggest that there existed at the time a sea trade from perhaps Syria or Alexandria in Egypt to as far as the east coast of India. The similar pillar-moulded bowls of Begram may have travelled via sea to the port of Barygaza at the mouth of the Indus, for example, and
then north to connect with Silk Roads trade. The painted glass beakers and bronzes found at Begram are also thought to have originated from Alexandria, as indicated by analogous finds and iconographical research. Stylistic comparison of the Chinese lacquers to similar finds from sites in Mongolia, China and Korea demonstrate that they were manufactured in China during the Han Dynasty, which means that they travelled via the Silk Roads down to Begram. This might also indicate that sea routes all the way to China from the Indian peninsula had not yet been firmly established.

Another reason may have existed why considerable trade moved through Begram, a reason which has been mentioned in passing but never fully explored in the literature about the region. Central Asia in general and the Begram area in particular may have had local products – cultivated, manufactured or existing naturally – which were valued, even coveted by the Roman, Chinese and Indian worlds and which were traded for goods such as those discovered at Begram. The area of modern Afghanistan was already known in the third millennium BCE as the producer of lapis lazuli from the Badakhshan mountains, northeast of Begram. From the finds at Tillya-tepe (Sarianidi 1985) it is clear that Bactria had an established tradition in metal smithing, and analogous gold jewelry pieces in Taxila (Marshall 1975) indicate a trade in those commodities. Similarly, the finds at Dal’verzin-tepe (Pugachenkova 1978) in modern Uzbekistan included gold bars with Kharoshthi writing on them, which suggests contact with the southern part of modern Afghanistan.

In conclusion, this writer’s research does not purport to reject outright the hypothesis that the so-called Begram «treasure» was a royal collection or perhaps a customs depot where trade taxes in kind were protected. However, it does suggest another hypothesis: that both the finds and the nature of the settlement at Begram may indicate that the site was a center for trade, and perhaps for production of bone and ivory. The site was well situated to be connected through various routes with trading partners in Bactria, at Taxila and at Alexandria, and with areas of China along ancient trade routes between Central Asia and India, suggesting that the region was indeed an active hub of cultural exchange.

In both public imagination and academic focus, Central Asia has long been marginalized as a land-locked region between the so-called «great» civilizations of China, India, the Middle East and Europe. Most atten-
tion garnered by the region has rested on its role as a transit zone for these other civilizations. The art of ancient Central Asia has been most often explained in terms of the impact on it by these civilizations, rather than by examination of its own distinctive elements. Further, a lack of historical documents from the region has prompted many scholars to rely on non-local written sources – which are therefore necessarily limited and suspect – for the creation of a Central Asian history. As Andre Gunder Frank has put it: «history is usually written from a national perspective. Sino-centric, Indian-centric, Persian-centric, Islam-centric and other histories omit adequate reference to Central Asia and its great influence on their own histories. “Civilized” people write their own histories about themselves and not about their “barbarian” neighbours» (Gunder Frank 1992: 2).

Slowly, however, over the past decade, international scholarship has begun to focus on the «centrality» of Central Asia. The political opening of Central Asia for direct contact and research, combined with an increasing academic interest in the region and a focus on its centrality in the development of contacts between the ancient East and West, has provided significant impetus for joint archaeological projects which are expanding the historical record to indicate how instrumental were Central-Asian cultures and social structures – such as the Kushans at Begram - in determining the particular ways in which Silk Road trade developed.

NOTES

1. Greek and Roman sources mention the peoples in East Asia as making silk and hence called them the «Seres» and the area «Serica». However, the term Silk Road in this article is used not only for the routes of institutionalized trade in silk between China and the Mediterranean, but as a metaphor for all overland trade during the early Common Era between China, Central Asia, South Asia and the Mediterranean.

2. One of the main reasons for the rise of the Kushans may have been that they managed to seize control of that portion of Silk Road trade which flowed through Bactria, and that their later annexation of the Indian subcontinent included control of sea trade routes from the Mediterranean and the Arabian peninsula.

3. The Kushans did sponsor the building of certain religious monuments, but how much control they exercised over the stylistic components of those monuments is unclear. The only clear, if not total, uniformity in artistic expression seemed to have occurred in the design of their royal edifices and sculpture.

4. The site was apparently founded in the Graeco-Bactrian period but remained a small military stronghold till the Kushan period, during which it reached its zenith.


7. See Hackin 1954: figs 241-242. The pot is in the shape of a bird-woman. Her hands are held in ‘anjali’. Her mouth forms the spout of the jar and on top there is a projecting opening in which the liquid was poured.

8. Almost all the objects were published in the two excavation volumes Mémoires de la Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan, by Hackin 1939, 1954.


10. For detailed description of the reconstructions by J. Carl and P. Hamelin see Hackin 1939, 1954. Some of Carl’s suggestions that some of the carving formed part of small containers or boxes were later reconsidered by Hamelin who took them to be small tabourets.

11. Unfortunately, most of the ivory and bone carvings were too damaged to recognize any markings on the reverse sides.

12. Since almost all clothing worn by the deceased were eroded, any reconstruction attempts should be approached with caution. However, the position of the golden clothing ‘appliqués’ do suggest that the women wore pants.

13. See Hackin 1954, for a description of the plaster medallions.

14. Not all translations are identical. But in some renderings (Pal 1978: 46) the group of travellers is described as ivory workers who go from Benares to Ujjain.

15. One of the ports mentioned in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a record of organized trade between the Roman world and the East (translated from the Greek and annotated by W. Schoff, 1912).

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