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From Chang an to Rome: Transformation of Buddhist Culture

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Silk Road Exposition was held in Nara from April 24 to October 23, 1988. Silk Road, which used to be referred to and studied only by a limited number of scholars and students, is a trade route running through the central part of the inland Eurasian continent. It was so designated in 1877 by Ferdinand F. von Richthofen, scholar of Chinese geology and geography, because Chinese silk products were carried on camels along this route from China west, where they were in demand as luxuries. Numerous difficulties and physical complications had to have been overcome preceding the establishment of the route.

It should not be overlooked that there were many human desires working as driving forces. These varied, ranging from those simply based on animal instinct for life to those indispensable for sublime existence contributing to human progress and development. They also included an evolutionistic desire for better lives, a desire derived from discontent with the present. It was these desires that drove men to risk their lives during long expeditions between East and West, crossing vast desert areas and over plateaus and mountain ranges. Among the objectives and merchandise of which such expeditions were made were silk products.

The expeditions brought not only silk, as the leading luxury, but also non-material things such as language, religion, art, technology, manners and customs. As anthropo-geographer Iizuka Koji once said, "Orientals, especially the Japanese, must try to grasp the Silk Road historically, culturally and artistically as a route along which Buddhism was spread east." His views on Buddhist culture were influential in China as well as Japan. He saw it in a global perspective. Not interested in Silk Road as a mere route that enabled Indian Buddhism to travel east, Iizuka probably regarded Buddhist culture as an encyclopedic system of knowledge covering every sphere of art and science in India and other central Asian countries.

The main road penetrating the center of the Eurasian continent was not the only route for the propagation of Buddhist culture. There were other routes as well, including a steppe road open before the fifth century B. C., and a southern sea route from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea by way of the Strait of Malacca. Moreover, Indian Buddhism was spread west as well as east. In the third century B. C. King Asoka of Maurya sent groups of Buddhist missionaries to the West via the highway in western Asia completed by Alexander the Great. According to Asoka's Rock Edict, he sent them to the five kings of Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Cyrenae, and Ephesos or Corinth to propagate and teach his ideal

political doctrine based on Buddhism. The dispatch was originally meant to be a means of diplomacy and politics, but perhaps it was conceived to a certain extent to influence the West with Indian culture. According to Nakamura Hajime, an inscription by King Asoka tells us that he sent the missions to the Greeks in the West. In 1958 it was revealed that an inscription from King Asoka, both in Greek and Aramaic, had been discovered in south Afghanistan[1]. It shows that King Asoka's spiritual and ideological influence was extended to the Hellenistic world. The Greeks in India (Yavana) seem to have embraced the Buddhist faith as early as the age of King Asoka. Reportedly, some Greeks became bonzes (monks). Such relics as pillars, reservoirs and gates for auditoriums, contributed to Buddhist temples in many places by Greek Buddhists, have survived along with some inscriptions.

Why did the Greeks embrace the Buddhist faith so devoutly? This is attributed to the fact that Buddhism, different from Brahaminism, presents no class or ethnic discrimination. Buddhists say that, "if one peacefully believes in Buddhistic codes and leads a right, peaceful and attentive life, one will enter Nirvana ... even in Greece, China, Vilata and Alexandria as well as in Buddha's country"[2].

It is considerably difficult to provide actual proof of the reported spread of Buddhism in the Roman Empire because of the metaphysical and ideological nature of the question. It is often said that the very origin of the Buddhist image shows an influence of anthropomorphism seen in Greek, Roman and West Asian deities. Many scholars also point out that religions ideas and world views of West Asia and Greece proved to have a great impact at the time of the foundation of Mahayana Buddhism[3].

In one of my writings I refer to the concept of Bustan, of perennial youth and immortality, prevalent in the West Asian search for the Western Buddhist paradise where Amitabha resides. Regarding the grotto of Tak-i-Bustan in the suburbs of Kermanshah in west Iran as one of its original types, I discussed the structure and model representation of the cave, which in my opinion influenced the creation of the *Jodo Henso-zu* (picture of Sukhavat). I also referred to the concept of Paradise as it served to produce the *Jodo Sanbu-Kyo* (triple sutra of Pure Land Buddhism), which describes the Paradise of the West in detail[4]. As for *Toho Ruriko Yakushi Jodo* (eastern Bhechadja—guru paradise of the light of glass), I have my own opinion as well. Probably invented in contrast to the world of Western Amitabha, it was, in my opinion, a compound product of the spice trade of the Moluccas in the South Sea, the demand for medicine, and the Roman glass trade of the Indian Ocean.

The luxurious merchandise of the then-civilized world, discovered in Begram, Afghanistan, proves the vivacity and vigor of East-West trade. Among the merchandise were a great number of rare Roman glass products made near Alexandria. Those products included cups, bottles and balm containers. Around the beginning of the Christian era, a glass blowing technique was developed in the

eastern coastal cities of the Mediterranean, including Alexandria, Sidon and Byblos, where so-called Roman glass was produced. The technique made possible mass production of cheap bottles and goblets. Shipped as wine containers, they were distributed to India and the South Seas. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written by an anonymous Roman navigator, made this distribution known for posterity.

In earlier days those glass objects must have been sold at high prices. With disclosure of the secret of the glass-blowing technique using a tube, however, their popularity diminished. It may be assumed that, filled with balm and medicine instead of wine, they found their way to various Kushana and Parthian cities at the center of the Silk Road, going up the Indus and the Ganges. Many luxury items, such as painted goblets, fish-shaped balm containers and ribbed plates, were found hidden in the secret treasury of Begram. Probably ordinary jars or bottles were doomed as disposable. Fragile and delicate glassware could not be carried in quantity on the backs of camels. It was most natural that they should be transported by ship along the Indus and other rivers as far as Central Asia. Looking at those glass bottles containing balm and medicine, Kushana Buddhists must have deemed the balm islands in the east of the Indian Ocean and Erythraean Sea as the Paradise of Bhechadjaguru, who could not only heal physical disease but also refresh and comfort the mentally afflicted. Those islands were their *Toho Ruriko Yakushi Jodo*.

The westward spread of Buddhism stopped with the dispatch of missionaries. However, it is to be noted that a few Buddhist statues have been excavated outside the realm of the Roman Empire. One of them was excavated at a north European Viking site. It is strange to imagine Vikings crossing the Persian Plateau to appear on the banks of the Tigris on a ship of the desert instead of aboard their characteristic dragon-headed ship. Yet, is the Tigris the eastern limit of Viking traces to be found in Asia?

In 1955 archaeologists were digging carefully at a site in the Swedish commercial city of Helgo by Lake Malaren, when they caught sight of something made of bronze. Circumstances of its discovery were carefully recorded. There was no doubt that it originated in the era of Vikings in East Sweden. The archaelogists held their breath at the sight of the unexpected plaster article, a Buddhist image of high artistic quality. Only a little more than eight centimeters high, with a golden urna in the forehead, it showed Buddha sitting on a lotus flower, cross-legged with soles upward. Reportedly, specialists are engaged in a comparative examination to date this object in the history of fine arts[5]. I have not had opportunity to see this figure, which is in storage in a museum in Stockholm.

Judging from what is shown in the museum catalogue, the figure sits with legs crossed on the lotus seat, with flower petals and sepals downward. Its right hand, resting on the knee with palm shown, represents a variation of the wish-giving mudra, while its left hand holds part of its costume with the upper arm crooked. Fine carved lines represent a flowing water pattern on the thick robe falling over its

shoulders with no constriction of three paths. Big eyes and nose brighten the oval face. Hairlines are carved in waves with coils of hair given in fine lines. These features are typical of a Kashmir Buddha image. Excavations of third and fourth century works in northwest India and Central Asia turned up similarly shaped relics. Although it would be a mere conjecture to trace the fate of this figurine, it seems to have been an exotic image brought home by a Viking by way of the amber trade route. It probably was not an object for worship. Likewise, a Parthian site in West Asia produced a fragment of stone Gandhara relief sculpture in which a Buddha image or worshiper in a sitting position is represented, presumably constituting a part of the depiction of Buddha's life. No other conjecture would be possible but to consider that it was brought home by a Buddhist Parthian.

A Gandhara sculpture has reportedly been discovered among Roman remains in Britain's Northumberland. Lord Marshall, who led a large-scale excavation of Taxila in Pakistan, referred to it in his report. He noted, "According to the late professor Harvelfield, several fragments of Gandhara relief sculpture were discovered at the Roman wall in Northumberland. Based on conjecture, he explained why they had been left there: This Roman territory was once partly occupied by an army previously stationed in Mesopotamia, a member of which must have come to Northumberland with this work of art."[6]

My intention of examining the Gandhara sculpture, thus referred to by Lord Marshall, has never been realized in spite of my several trips to England. Anyway, there is far greater likelihood of encountering a work of Gandhara sculpture at the site of the Roman-British post than at the Viking commercial city of Helgo. As mentioned in his notes, it was quite possible for Roman mercenaries who were posted in Mesopotamia to cross the Strait of Dover. The following statement is concerned with mercenaries posted to a Syrian city famous for international trade, Palmira, in particular: "The [Palmyrans] traveled all over the world, not only as traders or financiers but also as soldiers. The Romans employed a large number of Palmyran soldiers in their military forces. It was recorded that the Palmyrans were sent to distant Northumberland when the Romans constructed castle walls there"[7]. The Palmyran mercenaries definitely carried Gandharan statues to Northumberland in the northeastern part of Britain. Whether the possessors of those statues were Buddhists is another question, however.

I have tried to examine various remains in Central Asia from the viewpoint of Buddhist culture spreading eastward. Such a viewpoint not withstanding, I have paid too much attention to the western part of Silk Road. I wonder if it would be biased to attribute the failure of Buddhism to spread farther westward via Silk Road to lack of interest in Indian Buddhist culture on the part of West Asians. The fact that Hellenistic culture or West Asian culture seems to have spread eastward because of differing potentials in cultural energy may explain the situation more persuasively. Originating in northwest India, Buddhism shed its provincialism as it spread along the main line of Silk Road.

Cave temples, paintings and sculptures created in areas along Silk Road

expressed completely new ideas in technology and formation. Those works must have attracted the heart of wealthy oasis merchants who were becoming ever wealthier by means of East-West trade. Soon there were oasis cities of commerce, scattered from Mesopotamia to the Iranian Plateau, with the same style and form as cities built by Hellenistic masons. With victory gates, columned roads, temples, amphitheaters, complete water works and orderly streets crossing at right angles, Oerasa, Palmyra, Hatra, Dura-Europos and other cities show the style and planning of Hippodamos. In Central Asia, examples of Hellenistic masonry are to be found in structures constructed by piercing horizontal holes in natural rock walls. The staircase and shrine at the Zoroastrian temple of Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan are among those examples. However, images of Buddha, shrines and temples made using natural rock walls are distinctly more numerous as one goes farther east. This may be attributed to differences in the style of living, manners and customs between East and West.

The people of Greece and West Asia built temples in the urban, busy districts to facilitate performance of rites for communication between man and deities, while Buddhists preferred unworldly quietude. Bacchanalian orgies, originating in harvest festivities where priests and shrine maidens played the part of sacred prostitutes, were suitable only in the uproarious crowds of cities. Buddhists, on the other hand, wishing to reach the other world through quiet and refined self-emancipation and meditation, chose to build small temples and shrines in distant, unworldly mountain forests. Valleys with clear springs and streams were also favored sites. Their quest for quietude and solitude resulted in a great number of cave temples ranging from Bamian, Kizil, Kumtura, Bezeklik, Mogao grotto of Dun Huang, Mai-chi-shan, Ping-ling-ssu to Tatung Yunkang and Lung-men. Oasis cities were places for merchants—the world of trade, consumption, pleasure, glory and defeat. The world where one could long for the other world and commune with deities and Buddha had to be located in distant places detached from earthly affairs.

Buddhists sought to build ideal lands in locations within half-a-day or one-day round-trips from their earthly homes. They constructed a number of stone temples in various locations selected for this purpose. It is unknown who initiated this idea—Buddhist monks or laymen. People of different colors, tribes and nationalities, with different languages, manners and customs mingled together in chaotic coexistence in oasis cities. Naturally, some of them must have worshiped gods who prefer clamor. Loyang and the capital of the Northern Wei period, Tatung, have today changed so completely that it is hard to imagine the prosperity and wealth of that time. According to *Temples in Loyang* by Yang Hsuan-chih, there were many temples with towers standing side by side in the castle cities where citizens reportedly massed during temple festivals. It is possible that oasis cities were also furnished with grand temples with spired towers; *Ta-t'ang hsi-yu-chi* by Hsuan-chuang, and his biography *Tz'u-en chuan*, refer to temples in contemporary oasis cities. They report that there were more than a hundred temples within

Kucha's boundaries, where five thousand monks lived. Those numbers, however, must apply to the entire oasis where the city was located. Yet remains of those temples have disappeared under flowing sand, leaving no traces. Having undergone considerable destruction, suburban caves of Thousand Buddhas of Kizil, Kumtura and Su-bashi still retain wall paintings and statues vividly showing us not only the structure of shrines and temple buildings but also expressions and manners of monks, donors and patrons.

Figures in the wall paintings of the remains at Kizil clearly show that the temple was constructed by the Iranians from West Asia. The remains at Kumtura depict the Hans or Sinicized Uighur, with sculptures and paintings representing a mixed style of Han and Hsiyu, and is particularly apparent in the formative sense and Yui-ch'ih iron-wire style. The Greco-Iranian style shown in the wall paintings and the depiction of human figures at Bamian as well as decorative designs and patterns also spread east. Degrees of their acceptance and digestion were different depending upon the tribes and nationalities of Buddhists in the oasis cities. The Miran at Ropnol was distinctly Greco-Iranian, whereas remains farther west in Bezeklik follow the Chinese Tang style.

Central Asia saw the blooming of Sogdian civilization during the period of K'ai-yuan t'ien-pao of China. Sogdians founded city states in the Fergana Basin and near Samarkand. It was those Sogdians who were admired by the Chinese and the Hujen in Hsiyu. Excavation of remains of oasis cities, including Afrasiyab, Pandjikent, Varakhsha and Merv, made it possible to imagine various phases of Sogdian lives including religion, language, manners and customs, social economy and culture. As self-acclaimed descendants of the Sasanids who had held the Iranian Plateau under their control, the Sogdians made their language an international common language, and showed remarkable ability in trade. Although their manners were based on the Persian style of West Asia, they developed cosmopolitan culture by also digesting the aesthetics and designs of Tang China. Their wall paintings and furniture offer evidence of their achievement.

Notes

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