



## Cultural Syncretism in Central Asia

Bactria was at the center of trade routes that connected India, Central Asia, China, and the Hellenistic world. For that reason, it experienced enormous cultural and religious syncretism (merging or blending), as the Gandhara Buddha demonstrates. Similarly, evidence of Nestorian Christianity in China provides evidence for how syncretism may have worked in practice.



00:01

*A map shows the Mauryan Empire and the Seleucid Empire*

Hello, historians, and welcome to South Central Asia circa 280 BCE. We're looking at two empires that occupied some of the same area. And we've got the Mauryan Empire here. You can see that this is the expansion that took place under Ashoka around 250 BCE. So, the Mauryan Empire encompasses the Indus River Valley, this is today what is Pakistan. Over here, we've got this region that is known as Gandara, which is actually, we think, what the name Kandahar in Afghanistan comes from today.

00:34

*Bactria appears on the map on top of what was the Seleucid empire*

So, what we've got here is this intersection between two empires. We've got the Seleucid Empire over here in orange. These are, remember, the remnants, this is one of three remnants of the empire of Alexander the Great. His general Seleucus took this part of Asia Minor stretching into Central Asia. And so, this is, this is the extent of that empire around 280 BCE. What happens in 250 BCE is that a satrapy of the Seleucid Empire called Bactria secedes. It fights a war of independence to establish itself as its own kingdom. This is what we call the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. So, this is around 250 BCE. And it names itself Bactria, after the great city of Bactra, which gives its name to Afghanistan's Balkh province, and up here in the Northeast, you can see the city of Fergana, which is today in Uzbekistan. And if you remember from the article about the Silk Road, this is the very same Fergana where the Han Chinese first encountered those heavenly horses that sweated blood.

01:38

Now, what I wanna talk about is the culture of this purple region of Greco-Bactria, because for many hundreds of years, this region had been passed back and forth between Indian powers and Macedonian powers, right? So it has Hellenic influences and it also has Indian influences. And that means that we're going to be talking about something called cultural syncretism. Let me put that down right here in the middle of China. "Cultural syncretism." And what syncretism is is a mixing of cultural objects. That's, that's really it. It's, it's the, the mixture of cultures and ideas and faiths. Follow me over here, because I am interested in talking about the influence that Greek culture had on Buddhism and vice versa.

02:29

*Two artworks: One is a footprint in stone, which represents the footprint of the Buddha, another is a standing sculpture of the Buddha, (standing Gandara Buddha).*

So these are two representations of the Buddha from around the same time, and, in fact, from around the same region, the region of Gandara, near modern-day Kandahar. So, within the kingdom of Bactria that we saw, sandwiched between Hellenic influences and Indian influences. So, both of these works are from the first century C.E.

*The dharmachakra, which looks like a wheel, is in the center of the footprint's sole, triratnas (other symbols) are on the heel*

But let's talk about this footprint, because this was a pretty common way to depict the Buddha prior to the first century C.E. We see this is what's called an aniconic representation. This, this represents a footprint of the Buddha. You can see here some of the, the themes of Hinduism and Buddhism. So we've got this dharmachakra wheel in the center of the sole. We've got triratnas here, near the heel. We've got, as you can see them very faintly, little swastikas near the, near the metatarsals yonder. And these are all Buddhist or Hindu symbols that, that approach depicting the Buddha, but do not actually put the Buddha into any kind of human physical representation. It's more about what the Buddha has left behind, so that human beings can follow in his footsteps.

**03:43**

*Standing Buddha is wearing Greek clothing*

But around the same time in the same region, we see this. So, this is a statue. This is the standing Gandara Buddha. This, again, dates from the first century C.E., from the same region of, of Bactria. But you can see this is the Buddha wearing Greek clothing. This is a Greek chiton and that's a himation. These are, these are forms of Greek dress, and the Buddha is being depicted in a Greek style. This is very similar to the other sculpture that we're seeing coming out of Hellenistic cultures at the same time. And so what we see when we see this Gandara Buddha, the standing Buddha, we have the combination of Buddhist faith or Buddhist philosophy combining with Greek cultural aesthetics.

**04:30**

And indeed, Buddhism was practiced in this region for many hundreds of years. And since, if you'll recall—let's go back to the map. Because you'll recall that Fergana and Bactra and all of these cities throughout Central Asia—Kandahar is back down here—are on the Silk Road that, that connect the world of what's called this, the west shore, to China. And, you know, through Fergana and through Bactra, you could get to the great centers of India. You can get to Pataliputra and Suvarnagiri and have access to, to the sea routes of trade. Many historians believe that it is through the cities of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom that Buddhism made its way along the Silk Road to the various oasis cities of Central Asia, and from then on, into China.

**05:24**

Now, we see syncretism whenever, whenever cultures combine with one another. And it is said that when Alexander the Great came to the headwaters of the Indus River Valley—remember, this is in upper Pakistan—he brought many philosophers with him to meet with the great thinkers of the Hindu ascetic tradition. And these the Greeks called the Gymnosophists, which means “the naked thinkers,” because these men were so devoted to the practice of philosophy that they, they fasted and they wore either no or very little clothing, because they felt that it got in the way of their pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. And if you make a study of Greek philosophy, you will see the impact that these Indian thinkers had on Greek philosophy during this period, as well.

**06:13**

*Image of the Nestorian Stele, a block covered in Chinese text. There is a cross at the very top.*

Let's talk about some other examples of syncretism. This right here is the Nestorian Stele, or rather this is a rubbing of the Nestorian Stele. This is a giant limestone block that was erected in 781 in Chang'an, the imperial capital of the Tang Empire in China, celebrating 150 years of Nestorian Christianity. If you look very closely, you can see this little cross up here. Ah, there you go. There's your, there's your Nestorian cross. You see, right there. And you can see all this Chinese text that symbolizes the important connection of the Church of the East to Tang China. And what's interesting about this stone monument is the way in which Christianity is described within it. In order to proselytize to a Chinese population, Nestorian Christianity adapted its approach to suit the, the mores of the people that lived there, right? So, in this text, Christ is described in Taoist and Buddhist terms. Let me read you a little bit of the translation.

**07:23**

“A virgin gave birth to the Holy One in Syria. “A bright star announced the felicitous event, “and Persians observing the splendor “came to present tribute. “The ancient dispensation as declared by the 24 holy men “was then fulfilled. “And he laid down great principles for the government of families and kingdoms.”

They're talking about the Messiah here. "He established the new religion "of the silent operation of the pure spirit of the Triune. "He rendered virtue subservient to direct faith. He fixed the extent of the eight boundaries." Now we're getting into some concepts from Mahayana Buddhism. "Thus completing the truth and freeing it from dross. He opened the gate of the three constant principles." Again, these are Buddhist concepts: the impermanence, suffering, and non-self. "Introducing life and destroying death. "He suspended the bright sun "to invade the chambers of darkness, "and the falsehoods of the devil were thereupon defeated. "He set in motion the vessel of mercy "by which to ascend to the bright mansions, "whereupon rational beings were then released. "Having thus completed the manifestation of his power, in clear day, he ascended to his true station."

**08:23**

*"new idea" – the Nestorian  
Stele*

So you can, you can see the way that Buddhist thought is being used to contextualize Christianity, and really, that's what syncretism is all about. It's about taking a new idea, this thing, and putting it in line with this stuff: the eight boundaries, the constant principles, freeing the truth from dross. What these, what these Nestorian missionaries were attempting to do was take these Christian principles and recast them in a Buddhist or Taoist light—taking something and recasting it to fit the context of a new situation.

You can learn anything. David out.