

# *Introduction*

Book or Report Section

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Open access

Mairs, R. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9192-9031>  
(2020) Introduction. In: Mairs, R. ORCID:  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9192-9031> (ed.) The Graeco-  
Bactrian and Indo-Greek World. Taylor & Francis, pp. 1-7.  
ISBN 9781315108513 doi: 10.4324/9781315108513-1  
Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/102689/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315108513-1>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION



*Rachel Mairs*

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

William Woodthorpe Tarn opened *The Greeks in Bactria and India* with the words: “I have dreamt of this book for forty years; it is fortunate for me that I had no opportunity of taking it up earlier” (Tarn 1951 [1938], xiii). I suspect, although I have not asked them all, that this sentiment – with the necessary chronological modifications – would strike a chord with most of the contributors to the present volume. The Hellenistic kingdoms of Central and South Asia have not lacked for interested commentators over the past three hundred years. What have been lacking are appropriate moments to attempt an overview of the topic.

When W. W. Tarn and A. K. Narain, the two most important mid-twentieth-century historians of Hellenistic Central Asia, wrote their works, in 1938 and 1957 respectively, hardly anything was known of the archaeological record of the region. Since that time, the pace of archaeological discovery has moved so quickly that it has been impossible for any single scholar to keep up with it. The late Paul Bernard, with his immense and erudite scholarly output, would probably have been the one best equipped to publish a comprehensive survey. Archaeologists have also had more important tasks than writing syntheses of the material. First, the task of excavation itself, which at major sites such as Ai Khanoum or Termez was arduous and time-consuming, and left little time for the excavators to publish the material they had found each season, never mind write anything lengthy for a wider academic audience. Second, of course, the political instability and war which have hampered archaeological work across the region, especially Afghanistan. Both established excavation projects and those which had yet to live up to their immense promise (such as Kandahar) were halted in the late 1970s. There has been an archaeological renaissance since the late 1990s, but we are still living with the legacy of frustrated projects, and the immense, irreparable damage done to cultural heritage and scholarly communities in Afghanistan. An encyclopaedic work on Hellenistic Central Asia in the 1960s–70s would have been immediately outdated; in the 1980s–90s, an elegy for an emerging discipline prematurely curtailed. At the present moment, there is an opportunity to attempt a synthesis which is both wide-ranging and hopeful for the future.

The purpose of this book is to present an up-to-date and comprehensive survey of all the available evidence on the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms, analysed

by experts working at the cutting edge of their respective fields. Although, like any book, it will date as new evidence comes to light and old evidence is subject to new interpretations, this is an appropriate moment to take stock of the past hundred years of archaeological research in Central Asia, and the many centuries of historical, philological and numismatic research which precede this. This book is designed to be used both as a starting point for students and colleagues coming new to the field of Central Asian antiquity, and as a work of reference for those already established in the field. One of the most serious challenges for those of us who teach the history and archaeology of Central Asia at university level has been the lack of an accessible but scholarly introductory work for students, which assumes no prior training in disciplines such as Classical philology, archaeology or numismatics.

This book furthermore brings together scholars who typically publish in a range of languages. For someone undertaking advanced research in the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms, and the archaeology of Central Asia more widely, French and Russian remain the essential scholarly languages. A general work in English has, however, long been a desideratum in the field, particularly given the increasing number of universities worldwide which teach in English. In the future, it is to be hoped that there will be more translations of archaeological and historical works between languages of Europe and those of Central and South Asia.

Collaboration has been central to this book's genesis and production. Archaeology, in particular, is by its very nature a collaborative enterprise. Behind every site report by a small group of authors lies the physical and intellectual labour of a large, multinational team, including not just academics with PhDs and university posts, but workers who bring their own expertise and knowledge of both the archaeological record and local building materials and modes of subsistence. Philology and numismatics, too, are more collaborative than some may imagine. Reading the legends on a bilingual coin of an Indo-Greek king requires training in multiple philological traditions. Most of the contributors to the present volume have presented at an ongoing series of international conferences in the United Kingdom, Germany and the Czech Republic under the aegis of the Hellenistic Central Asia Research Network ([www.bactria.org](http://www.bactria.org)). As this book was put together, contributors, especially within the individual thematic sections, were encouraged to share their chapters in progress with one another.

I have deliberately exercised a light editorial hand in matters of disagreement among authors. There are few certainties in Central Asian studies, and one of the great pleasures of working in the field is its atmosphere of robust international debate. Several of the contributors to this volume, for example, have conflicting views on the ancient name of Ai Khanoum and the date of its foundation. The same sources (for example, the *Shiji*) are discussed by several contributors, from different perspectives. The question of the ancient border between Bactria and Sogdiana remains highly contentious, and it is only appropriate that this volume reflects the full range of views. Readers may follow up the references and make up their own minds. Nor have I enforced any particular theoretical agenda. As Section 2, in particular, will make clear, Central Asia lies at the heart of complementary and competing scholarly modes of analysis - Marxism, post-processualism, postcolonialism, globalisation theory - as well as at the heart of Eurasia. Section 6 may serve as a good example of the diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives which may be brought to bear on material from Hellenistic Central Asia.

## HELLENISTIC CENTRAL ASIA: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

This volume is not designed to be read from start to finish. Some readers may wish to start in strictly chronological order, with the Achaemenid material in Section 7. Although chapters cross-reference one another, none assume any knowledge of material in other contributions. One thing this book does not contain is a narrative account of the political history of the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. This is because such a history is impossible in anything other than the very broadest lines, and it would be irresponsible to give the impression that one could write it. Although he casts a long shadow over this book, Alexander the Great is also not treated at length, and deliberately so.

A very basic historical orientation may serve to set the scene for the chapters that follow. In the 330s and 320s BC, Alexander the Great and his army conquered the Achaemenid Persian Empire, including its Central Asian provinces. Areas across modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan came under the nominal control of Alexander and his Graeco-Macedonian army. What this meant in practice was often that the same local officials who had administered Central Asia for the Persians continued to do so for the Greek and Macedonians, at least in the short term. With Alexander's conquest came settlement by soldiers from his army and other immigrants from the Mediterranean world. It is impossible to quantify the number of immigrants. Greek and Roman historians writing much later give unreliable figures for the numbers of soldiers left in garrisons to secure the conquered territory. As several of the contributions to this volume discuss, it is possible to see the impact of the Graeco-Macedonian conquest and settlement in constructions at major archaeological sites, and in changing patterns and intensity of the exploitation of the land and its products.

Once Alexander had left Central Asia for India and Mesopotamia, his hold over it weakened: opposition came both from the people of Central Asia itself, and his own troops who had been left to garrison the region. Over the following decades, Alexander's successors, the Seleukid dynasty, attempted periodically to re-establish firmer control over Central Asia, but their priorities were elsewhere. By the mid-third century BC, a state centred on Bactria was effectively independent, under a father and son, both named Diodotos. The 'Graeco-Bactrian' kingdom which survived in the region until the mid-second century BC is not actually named as such in any ancient source: the term is a modern one. Around the turn of the third-second centuries BC, a new Graeco-Bactrian dynasty began a series of successful conquests in what is now southern Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India. The dynasties which ruled over fragmented territories in this region are referred to conventionally in modern scholarship as 'Indo-Greek', and lasted until around the turn of the common era.

Within this basic historical framework, there is much that is controversial: the date of Bactrian independence, the order and relationships of Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings, and the processes by which their rule came to an end. These questions and more will be explored by the contributors to this book. The most controversial question of all in Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek studies has long been that of the cultural and ethnic affinities of these kingdoms and their inhabitants. This is a theme that will run through much of the present volume.

## OUTLINE

Section 1 sets the Greek kingdoms of Central Asia within their wider geopolitical context. This book seeks to move away from the longstanding scholarly cliché by which the states of Central Asia are characterised solely by their ‘in-betweenness’ – culturally, politically, geographically. It is crucial, however, to situate them not just with regard to the neighbouring polities with which they interacted – and from which they in some cases derived their own sense of their political and cultural identity – but also in relation to the considerable bodies of scholarship generated on these regions.

To the west, Central Asia bordered upon and was sometimes part of the Hellenistic world, an expanse of empires in south-eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa founded in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BC. Rolf Strootman explores the crucial role played by Central Asia and Central Asians in the formative years of the Seleukid Empire – in Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau – and the role in turn played by the Seleukid Empire in the formative years of the independent Hellenistic kingdoms of Central Asia.

To the south-east, Central Asia also bordered upon and was sometimes part of major empires, notably the Maurya Empire under Chandragupta and his successors. Sushma Jansari argues that “it is not possible to understand Central Asia (broadly conceived) without some reference to Mauryan India”. Her chapter demonstrates the wealth of South Asian textual and archaeological sources not usually taken account of by historians of the Greek and Roman world.

In the north, Sören Stark looks at the interactions of Bactria and Sogdiana with the nomadic world of the steppe and the complex elite networks which existed across large parts of Central Eurasia. Moving to the north-west, Jacopo Bruno’s chapter on Parthia shows how archaeological research on southern Turkmenistan and north-eastern Iran reveals intensive, long-lasting connections with Central Asia and the Iranian plateau. The independent Parthian kingdom, from the mid-third century, had close political connections with both the Seleukid Empire and Bactria.

Lukas Nickel’s chapter on Bactrian relations with China places Central Asia at the centre of a still more expansive Eurasian world system. While evidence from Central Asia itself for connections with China is scarce, Chinese written and archaeological evidence points to intensive interaction, and the political, economic and cultural relevance of Central Asian affairs to China.

Section 2 surveys the intellectual history of studies of the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. This intellectual history is also a political history. Omar Coloru shows how the first Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins became known in Europe, against a backdrop of Western European and Russian colonialism in Central and South Asia. Drawing extensively on unpublished archival documents, Annick Fenet explores the political and intellectual history of the *Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan* (DAFA) and its work at Bactra during the twentieth century. Svetlana Gorshenina and Claude Rapin enlarge upon the Russian context, showing how intellectual trends, in particular Marxist theory, shaped approaches in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Both chapters show how this colonial historiographical legacy determined twentieth-century approaches, including both the historical works

of Tarn and Narain, and the archaeological work of the DAFA at sites including Ai Khanoum.

The third section provides an in-depth regional overview of the Hellenistic-period archaeology of Central Asia. The authors draw on material from their own recent field projects, as well as decades of preceding research, to offer the most up-to-date and comprehensive available survey of the archaeological evidence from and on the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek states.

Laurianne Martinez-Sève's survey of the material from Afghan Bactria includes the most famous site in the region, Ai Khanoum, but also places it in its regional context, with other important urban and oasis sites. Ladislav Stančo presents the material from the Surkhan-darya region of southern Uzbekistan, archaeologically the most thoroughly known in the region, and from which identification of new Hellenistic sites continues. Gunvor Lindström provides a ground-breaking survey of a much-neglected area in the archaeology of Central Asia, southern Tajikistan, integrating neglected Soviet-era discoveries with analysis of more recently excavated sites. Moving to the north, Bertille Lyonnet discusses how Sogdiana – often considered alongside Bactria – followed a separate political history for much of the Hellenistic period and concludes that “though the overall political domination of the Greeks was of short duration in Sogdiana, the impact of Hellenism in material culture was strong and long-lasting”. Gabriele Puschnigg aims to restore Margiana from its “fringe position in the Hellenistic narrative” and examines the extent to which political change in the Hellenistic period did and did not bring corresponding changes in material culture and lifeways.

Warwick Ball examines the Hellenistic connections of Arachosia, Drangiana and Areia – regions that at this period were “more Indian and Iranian than Greek” – and questions the extent to which historical connections and Greek epigraphy in the region amount to an actual Greek cultural or demographic presence. Luca Maria Olivieri's treatment of the archaeological material from the north-western Indian subcontinent shows that sites previous taken as indicative of a strong ‘Greek’ presence (in particular Taxila) cannot in fact act as evidence for this, whereas exciting new material (including DNA analysis) from sites in the Swat valley gives a valuable new insight into the cultural, population and political impact of Indo-Greek rule.

Section 4 treats the written sources on the Greek kingdoms in Bactria and India. Although few in number, these sources are diverse in their language (e.g. Greek, Latin, Chinese, Pāli) and medium (literary texts transmitted through the manuscript tradition, inscriptions, documents on perishable materials). I survey the Greek epigraphic and documentary evidence from Central Asia itself, all of which has emerged from excavations or the antiquities market since the mid-twentieth century. In the same chapter, I review the Greek and Roman historical sources on Central Asia. Olga Kubica treats references to the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms in Indian literary and epigraphic sources, with a particular focus on the *Milindapañha*, a Buddhist dialogue which features the Indo-Greek king Menander as an interlocutor. Juping Yang surveys the Chinese historical sources which deal with the ‘Western Regions’, including the Hellenistic world, Parthia and the eastern Roman Empire.

In the introduction to Section 5, Simon Glenn outlines the history of Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coinage production, and examines the methodologies used (and abused) by scholars. Sushma Jansari examines the contentious Sophytes coinage

and presents new evidence assigning it to the Sophytes whom Alexander encountered in the Punjab. Jens Jakobsson uses numismatic and historical evidence to re-evaluate the date of Bactria's independence in the mid-third century BC. Olivier Bordeaux uses die studies to explore how conflict shaped the monetary policies of the early Graeco-Bactrian kings. Shailendra Bhandare discusses competing interpretations of political succession and territorial control under the later Indo-Greek kings, and offers new solutions.

Section 6 is broadly concerned with issues of culture and identity in the interpretation of archaeological material from Hellenistic Central and South Asia. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the scholarly emphasis was firmly on the 'Greekness' or otherwise of the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. The multiplicity of authorial voices in this section shows how far the debate has moved away from a focus on Greek ethnicity, towards nuanced interpretations of material culture which do not privilege any single ethnic group or culture. Guy Lecuyot examines the residential architecture of Ai Khanoum as a hybrid, colonial creation. Milinda Hoo offers a globalisation paradigm for Central Asia aiming to "humanize cultural interaction by foregrounding human experiences of social relations rather than settle at their existence." Suchandra Ghosh explores what stylistically Greek religious imagery means in Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek visual culture, and how Greek gods were used as symbols of royal power. Lauren Morris presents a fresh analysis of the Begram hoard, and proposes that "the appeal of the Roman objects was determined less by their simple foreignness or their association with the Roman Empire and its cultural koine, than local associations with the cultural world of the Greeks, entangled with the social memory of Greek rule in this space."

Section 7 examines the Achaemenid foundations and Kushan legacy of the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. Xin Wu, in her study of the archaeological and written evidence on the region in Achaemenid period, shows how Achaemenid rule in Central Asia set the precedent in many ways for the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom's extensive bureaucracy, urban settlements and use of coinage. Cameron Petrie surveys the literary and archaeological evidence on north-western South Asia in the Achaemenid period and explores how Achaemenid imperial control was manifested in these regions. The Kushan Empire is outside the scope of this volume, and will be the subject of a separate volume in the Routledge Worlds series, edited by Joe Cribb. Cribb has also contributed a chapter to the present volume, in which he examines the survival and evolution of Greek culture in the period after the fall of the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. The Graeco-Buddhist art of Gandhāra is also outside the scope of this volume, although I hope that much of the material contained here will be of interest to scholars of Gandhāra.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks go to the contributors. It has been a privilege to work with so many colleagues whose work I admire, who have set research agendas in the field over the past decades, and who will continue to do so in those to come. I would also like to thank those colleagues who were unable to contribute themselves, but

nevertheless offered inspiration and advice. At Routledge, special thanks are due to Ella Halstead, Lizzi Risch and Amy Davis-Poynter. Editorial work was undertaken during a trying time, and could not have been completed without the support of my family, and the outstanding staff of the UK National Health Service.

## REFERENCES

- Narain, A. K. (1957) *The Indo-Greeks*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.  
Tarn, W. W. (1951 [1938]) *The Greeks in Bactria and India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.





**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>