

The Fall of the Graeco-Bactrians, Sakas and Indo-Parthians

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About the year 130 B. C. nomads from Central Asia overran the Greek realms in Bactria. From Classical and Chinese sources we presume that the principal actors in this event were the Yuezhi at the head of a nomadic confederacy comprising Sakas, As (Asianoï in Greek) and other tribes. From the Chinese traveler Jang chien, as reported in the *Shih ji* and the annals of the former Han dynasty, we may reconstruct the political picture of the entire region about the year 130 B.C. as follows: in the area of Samarkand to Chach (Tashkent) was a kingdom called Kang ju by the Chinese.

In northern Bactria the Yuezhi ruled over settled Greeks and Bactrians, while to the south of the Oxus river possibly some Greek principalities owed vassal allegiance to the Yuezhi. Presumably the Sakas who preceded the Yuezhi were moving southwards toward India. Two Parthian kings (Phraates, died c. 128 B.C. and Artabanus II, c. 123 B.C.) lost their lives in warfare against the Sakas, after which the Sakas established their rule in Sistan. But under the Parthian king Mithradates II (c. 123-87 B.C.) Parthian rule was asserted over various lands of eastern Iran, present Afghanistan and extending into India. How long Parthian rule was maintained is unknown. Dates of local rulers who struck coins and the areas they controlled are difficult to determine, but it seems that princes designated as Indo-Parthians, and others who were Sakas, ruled small kingdoms from Sistan to the Punjab in the first century B.C. to beyond the first half of the first century of our era. Rulers called Vonones, followed by Spalahora, Spalirises, Gondophares and Pakores are considered Parthians while Maues, Azes, Azilises and Abdagases are considered Sakas. On the other hand, Spalahora and Spalirises are more likely Saka than Parthian names, so one may suppose that the two groups intermarried and were mixed.

Indian sources usually speak of Sakas and Pahlavas or Parthians together, and we may suppose that they divided rule of the vast area between them. The coins, however, are our primary source of information and they frequently are ambiguous since overstrikes of one ruler on another's coins could mean conquest, a vassal relationship, or even an overstriking later than the ruler

depicted on the coins. Also there is a possibility of dual kingship and brother or nephew instead of son succession, all of which makes any reconstruction of this period of history very difficult.

Gondophares has been identified with a king called Caspar in Christian tradition of the apostle St. Thomas and his trip to India. It has been speculated that Gondophares belonged to the Suren family of Parthian Iran with their domains in Sistan. Legends on the coins are in Greek on one side and Kharoshthi on the other, but sometimes the names on obverses and reverses of the coins are different which complicates a reconstruction of history. Obviously this period of history was one of various rulers, sub-kings and vassals with no central authority in contrast to the Roman Empire and the later Sasanian state to the west.

The art of the eastern Sakas was by no means crude or barbaric as may be seen from the many gold objects from the burial tombs of Saka princes from Tilla Tepe in northern Afghanistan. There an ivory comb, a Chinese mirror and many examples of the 'animal style' of the steppes of Central Asia indicate the far-flung trade of the Sakas. The objects from Tilla Tepe are forerunners of the finds in Begram from Kushan times. There is a difference, however, since this art of the Sakas probably represents the end of the extensive use of gold for decoration and art objects. Afterwards silver is the precious metal used for art objects in Central Asia even though the Kushans turned to gold for their coins. Gold never lost its allure for Indians and even to the present gold is more expensive in the sub-continent than elsewhere, while silver is the norm for Central Asia and the steppes.

It is the variety of styles in the small arts of the Sakas and Indo-Parthian rulers which strikes the eye, a prelude to 'so-called' Gandhara art of the Kushans which is predominantly Buddhist. The native art of Central Asia, however, might be characterized as a Graeco-Iranian syncretic art, drawing on many strands. Probably the earliest form of the Buddha image developed in Mathura in northern India and then spread. We may speculate that in Taxila in northwest India Greek influences stimulated the Hellenized Buddha image which was a hallmark of 'Gandharan' art, and this began under Saka rulers. But it received its almost classical form under the Kushans, after which it spread to the oasis states of Xinjiang primarily in the service of Buddhism.

Minor Saka rulers continued to rule in Malwa and elsewhere in India while in Central Asia the Sakas gave their language and culture to the southern rim of the Tarim Basin where their centre was in Khotan. For a long period Hinayana Buddhism was dominant in Central Asia but the more extravagant in its pantheon and art Mahayana sect later gained widespread popularity in Central Asia.

It is probable that many of the episodes in Firdosi's *Shahname* are derived from the epic tales of the Sakas, for Rustam Sagzi, the most prominent hero of the book was a Saka warrior. While many of these tales have been attributed to Parthian minstrels it is probable that the Sakas contributed more than hitherto has been supposed.

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