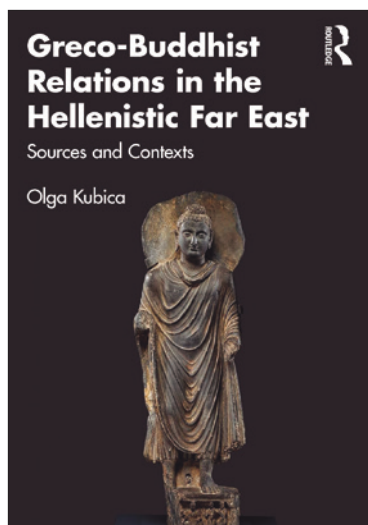


GRECO-BUDDHIST RELATIONS IN THE HELLENISTIC FAR EAST



KUBICA, OLGA (2023). *Greco-Buddhist Relations in the Hellenistic Far East. Sources and Contexts*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge. X, 232 pp., 27.99 £ [ISBN 978-1-03-219300-7]

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One of the most intriguing and, at the same time, most complex issues concerning the study of ancient societies is the relationship between the Greek world and Buddhism. It is challenging to gain insight into the matter due to the limited availability of sources. Greek sources that explicitly mention Buddha are no earlier than the 2nd century CE, while those that date back to Alexander’s expedition and the Hellenistic age are fragmentary and sometimes so ambiguous that there is always a risk of extrapolating from ancient authors’ statements more than is warranted. In addition to the inherent complexity of the tradition, this field of study requires a depth of expertise that extends beyond the classical disciplines, encompassing also archaeology and Indology. Olga Kubica is a gifted scholar who has managed to

combine all of these skills, and with her book, she offers a clear and thorough review of the main issues and the current state of knowledge on the subject. The author's aim is to present an analysis of the relations of the Greeks with Buddhism in a broader context, taking a different approach than that of the 19th-early 20th century scholars who focused mostly on the search for traces of Greekness in the East. To achieve this, Kubica also draws on methodological tools from modern anthropological research, ethnic identity and memory studies. In particular, this last aspect is crucial to understanding written and oral sources, especially when analyzing texts that attempt to translate Indian religious and philosophical concepts into Greek. The study of memory, which is inherently subjective, malleable, and dialogic, offers a valuable lens through which to understand the nuances of Hellenism. It is within this cultural and social context that Greek-Buddhist relations are embedded. In the six chapters that make up the work, the reader will have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the history of contacts between Greeks and Buddhism. The chapters then move on to explore more specific topics, such as the figures of Aśoka and Menander I, two rulers who played a significant role in the spread and patronage of Buddhist communities in India. The work also delves into the art of Gandhara and late sources on Buddhism in India. The book is accompanied by two appendices, in which the author provides the Greek text and English translation of Aśoka inscriptions from Kandahar, as well as some Greek inscriptions from Hellenistic Bactria and Arachosia. Another strength of Kubica's work is its ability to present complex topics in a clear and organized manner. This is a welcome change from studies that use a convoluted style, which can sometimes give the impression that the author is trying to conceal a lack of substance or clarity. We would be remiss if we did not mention that Kubica's work extends beyond a mere review of the sources and history of the studies. Her analysis is meticulously documented and offers a comprehensive perspective on the subject matter. The entire work provides readers a wealth of original insights that could potentially inform future research. It is certainly a valid thesis to propose that a phenomenon such as "Greek-Buddhism", understood as a syncretism between classical Greek culture and Buddhism, never existed, or that it might emerge in isolated cases. It also merits attention the analysis conducted on the *Vita Apollonii* of Philostratus, in which Kubica endeavors to demonstrate that for his description of the Indian sages, Philostratus may have drawn on information about Buddhist communities gathered by the Syriac scholar Bardaisan at the time of his meeting with the Kushan diplomatic delegation to Emperor Elagabalus (ca. 218 CE).

As is often the case with works of such depth and breadth of thought, some conclusions may be open to further discussion and debate. I do find myself somewhat troubled by the hypothesis that Menander II *Dikaios* was the historical personality behind the main character of the *Milindapañha*. From a historical perspective, Menander II (ca. 90-85 BCE) was an ephemeral Indo-Greek ruler. From the information that can be discerned from his personal name and the iconographic apparatus on his coins, we can infer that he based his consensus on leveraging the memory of Menander I (ca. 165-130 BCE). The latter had a much longer reign and undoubtedly had a greater impact on the northwestern Indian territories he ruled. It is worth noting that archaeological evidence from excavations conducted at Barikot and Butkara I by the Italian archaeological mission in Pakistan seems to indicate that support for the Buddhist communities during Menander's reign was indeed a reality. Before the written redaction of the *Milindapañha*, generally fixed at the 1st century BCE, a whole set of anecdotes about Menander I must already have been circulating in oral form in the Buddhist communities. It is, naturally, always possible that over time the two figures of namesake rulers may have merged into one in the collective memory.

In conclusion, we should all be grateful to Olga Kubica for publishing such an excellent work, which will doubtless be an essential reference for all those scholars who intend to study these fascinating aspects of the encounter between Greece and *Alien Wisdom*.