

King Aśoka's *Philanthrōpia*¹

Introduction

King Aśoka Maurya (ca. 270 – ca. 234 BCE) is one of the most important and fascinating figures of Early Indian and Early Buddhist history. His reign is the first in Indian history that can be more or less accurately dated, thanks to the messengers he dispatched to five Hellenistic kings whose reigning years are known. Indeed, it is the links between Aśoka and the Hellenistic world that makes him such a tempting figure for anyone interested in cultural exchange and cultural interaction in the vast regions opened up by Alexander for Greek cultural expansion. Moreover, Aśoka must be considered one of the founding fathers of Buddhism. Whatever the Buddha himself taught or introduced, without the royal support of Aśoka, the convert-king, the new religion would never have attained the status and the geographical expansion that it eventually acquired. The dozens of inscriptions, set up by Aśoka all over his realm, are the oldest Indian written sources, and therefore also the oldest Buddhist texts we have. No king before Aśoka had ever bothered to address his people directly in writing, and thereby to divulge even some of his inner thoughts to his subjects. At least two of his inscriptions were in Greek, meant for the Greek-speaking populations of some cities in modern-day Afghanistan which had been annexed by Aśoka's grandfather Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the realm and of the dynasty. Chandragupta, his son, and his grandson each in turn received Greek ambassadors sent by Seleukid and Ptolemaic rulers. What we have, then, is the sudden appearance of inscriptions in India; even inscriptions with philosophical, indeed with the earliest Buddhist content we know of; partial use of the Greek language; and messengers from and to Greek kings. All this makes for an intriguing mix of historical possibilities.

What I intend to do is first to survey briefly the various encounters of Greek and Indian cultures since the time of Alexander, or rather since his successor Seleukos Nikatōr had ceded Alexander's Indian conquests to the rising Maurya empire by his treaty with Chandragupta in 305 BCE. Further, to ascertain the character of Aśoka's inscriptions as an historical innovation. Then, to show briefly how these inscriptions relate perhaps even more to Greek texts and Greek ideas than to Indian or Buddhist ones. Finally, to venture just a little into the questions around Aśoka's position in the development of Early Buddhism. All this will doubtless raise more questions than answers. Speculative as especially the latter part of this exercise must necessarily be, the exercise itself, I hope, may not be wholly fruitless.

Historical overview.

It is well known that from the time of Seleukos I Greek ambassadors made their way to Indian courts and Indian ambassadors were sent to Greek and later Roman courts. The first of these was the famous Megasthenēs, who stayed at the Maurya court at

¹ I wish to thank the participants of the 2012 International Symposium on Ancient World History in China, Tianjin June 16-16 2012, for their remarks and criticisms. Especially, I want to thank Dr Jeffrey Lerner for his various critical observations which have led me to restate some of my views in a more subdued fashion. Needless to say, all possible errors of fact and all possibly unwarranted speculation remain my own responsibility.

Pataliputra for at least a few months, probably a few years, at some time after the treaty between Seleukos and Chandragupta had been concluded in 305. On his return he wrote his well known *Indika* in four books – fragments of which have survived – about the country, its political and social organization, its various peoples, flora and fauna and so on. He seems to have been particularly interested in Indian philosophers and wise men, and he was the first to notice the distinction between the *brāhmana* or official priests and the *śramana* or wandering ascetics. Whether he also mentioned the Buddha is not clear. Of course, Megasthenēs was not the first to have been so interested, for some twenty years earlier there had been Onēsikritos conversing, on behalf of his master Alexander, with the Indian ascetics outside the city-gate of Taxila, as related by Arrian. And there had been the Indian ascetic Kalanos who had accompanied Alexander all the way from Taxila back to Persia. Indeed, the conversation or rather the confrontation between ruler and wise man had become a topos in Greek discourse on kings and philosophers alike – perhaps starting with the famous encounter between Alexander and the Cynic Diogenēs outside the walls of Corinth – and as such it must surely have been at the back of Megasthenēs' mind when he noted his observations on the Indian philosophers, even correcting Onēsikritos' report on some point of detail.

We do not know the occasions on which or the reasons why ambassadors or envoys were sent other than to reestablish already existing friendly relations, and not even in the case of Megasthenēs do we know any further particulars. Be that as it may, some twenty years later another ambassador arrived from the Seleukid court at the Maurya court of Chandragupta's successor Bindusara. This man, a certain Deimachos or Daimachos, a Greek from Plataiai, must in his turn have had some philosophical interest as well, for he was the writer of a treatise *Peri Eusebeias* or On Piety. Of the same king Bindusara we are told in an anecdote by Athenaeus (14. 652-3) that he wrote to Antiochos, Seleukos' son and successor, asking him to send 'sweet wine, figs, and a sophist', a request that the Seleukid king could only partially fulfill, as he explained to his Indian counterpart, since sophists could not so easily be shipped abroad as wine and figs. The request of the king, Aśoka's father, is nevertheless revealing.

Possibly, another Greek philosopher, Klearchos of Soloi, arrived in India at roughly the same time (ca. 280 BCE) – that is: *if* this Klearchos was the man of the same name who left an epigram together with an inscription that had once contained around 147 maxims from the collection of maxims at Delphi on a stele in Aī Khanoum, only five of which have survived. And *if* that inscription can be dated to the years around 280 BCE. For if the date would be brought down by a few decades or more, the identification of that Klearchos with the philosopher from Soloi would indeed be impossible. The latter was a Peripatetic and it is known that he was particularly interested in maxims and sayings of wise men and more generally in the wisdom of 'barbaric' peoples like the Jews and the Indians. If the Aī Khanoum inscription does indeed date from his lifetime, which I still consider to be very plausible, the Klearchos mentioned there can hardly have been anyone else than the Peripatetic philosopher, for *two* philosophers of the same name and interested in the same topic, living at the same time, strains credulity. And having arrived all the way

from Greece to the Greek city on the Oxus river in Bactria it is practically inconceivable that he had not traveled further across the Hindu Kush into India, at least to the city of Taxila. Admittedly, an Indian visit by the philosopher Klearchos is nowhere mentioned in our sources, meagre as they are, but that silence does not carry much weight in my view. Nor does the fact that he seems to have been far from a truthful observer of Judaism, for his contemporary Hēkataios of Abdēra wrote a whole book on the Jews which also contained not a little nonsense.

As for Greek diplomats to India, we hear that Ptolemy II of Egypt, not to be outdone by the Seleukids, sent, in a moment of peace between the two rival kingdoms, an ambassador of his own to Pataliputra, a certain Dionysios of whom practically nothing is known.

The Maurya king Bindusara was succeeded by his son Aśoka around 270 BCE. The Maurya empire was in essence the creation of Aśoka's grandfather Chandragupta who had in 317 BCE or shortly after assumed power in the territories of the former Nanda dynasty, the kingdom of Magadha, that stretched over most of Northern and Central India. Chandragupta had added to this the regions of the Punjab and by his treaty with Seleukos I all the Greek conquests to the south of the Hindu Kush, thus incorporating Greek settlements like Alexandria-in-Arachosia (modern Kandahar) into his realm. His empire-building policy, the first of its kind in Indian history, is often seen as inspired by and as a counterweight to the Macedonian conquests and conquest-states of Alexander and his immediate successors. Chandragupta's son Bindusara consolidated Maurya rule but does not seem to have conquered new territory. Aśoka, on the other hand, waged a bloody and destructive war to subdue Kalinga in modern Orissa along the east coast of India, either as a new addition to his empire or as the suppression of a formerly incorporated region that had rebelled (this, like many other details of Mauryan history such as the exact borders of the empire, remains unclear). Tradition has it that Aśoka after his succession had to fight for his throne against his many brothers and half-brothers and that only after four years he was formally coronated. The Kalinga war took place a few years later, probably in 262 BCE. According to the king's own admission it was this bloody war – with, in his words, 100 000 people killed, another 100 000 dead as a further consequence of the war and 150 000 enslaved – that led him to embrace a policy of non-violence, of adopting the *Dhamma*, of supporting and arranging the affairs of the *sangha*, i.e. the Buddhist community of ascetics, and of preaching the *Dhamma* to his subjects. In short, the king converted to Buddhism and the testimonies of his new policy are to be found in the numerous inscriptions he set up all over his realm. We shall turn to these documents presently.

After Aśoka's death the Maurya empire sharply declined and not long after 200 BCE it completely desintegrated. The reasons for that are again not all too clear, but some historians have blamed Aśoka's policies of non-violence. In the meantime, the Greeks from Bactria had extended their rule south of the Hindu Kush and inaugurated a new period of Greek dominance in Northwestern India in the second century BCE, which coincided with a further expansion of Buddhism in North West India and across the Hindu Kush into Bactria. Perhaps the most famous of these Greek kings was Menandros who reigned in the Punjab and in parts of the Ganges valley and who

would figure as the main character in the later Buddhist dialogue *Milindapanha* ('Questions of Menandros'), in which he is portrayed conversing with the renowned Buddhist monk Nagasena – another example of the topos of ruler and wise man – and, perhaps inevitably, being converted to Buddhism. In little over a century after Menandros the Greek political presence in India finally came to an end but Greek culture would go on exerting some influence for a few centuries more in the mainly Buddhist Gandhara art of North West India and Central Asia.

Ashoka's inscriptions as historical innovation

More than 160 inscriptions of Aśoka have been discovered, both complete and in fragments, containing at least 54 different texts, many of which were inscribed in various copies. Scholars divide the texts into several groups: 14 Rock Edicts, 7 Major Pillar Edicts, at least 18 Minor Rock Edicts, 2 separate rock edicts, minor pillar edicts, 3 cave edicts, and 4 edicts on stone slabs found in Kandahar and in Laghman in the vicinity of Jalalabad in Afghanistan. There are in all six inscriptions in Aramaic (one from Taxila, two from Kandahar, two from Laghman and one bilingual Aramaic-Greek text from Kandahar) and two in Greek (one from Kandahar and the bilingual text already mentioned from Kandahar). The 14 Rock Edicts have been found at 9 places, 5 of which yielded the complete version of all 14 edicts. In one of the Minor Rock Edicts the king complains of scribes who had not accurately written out what he had intended. We have to be careful, therefore, not to lay too much weight on every word of each text. Nevertheless, we can be confident that in the vast majority of cases we hear the voice of Aśoka himself. Perhaps the occasional tinkering with the text by a subordinate testifies to the novelty of the whole enterprise. For it is pretty certain that no one before Aśoka had ever set up inscriptions, let alone inscriptions of such a philosophical and moralistic character.

We can safely say that Aśoka began a tradition of royal inscriptions, an Indian epigraphic habit. Inscriptions in general appear in India only by the time of his reign; the handful of private inscriptions known, from caves and on copper utensils, can hardly predate Aśoka. The use of a script itself was surely older. The *Brāhmi* script had been derived, probably, from Aramaic and went back to the fifth century, the younger *Karosthi* had developed also from Aramaic – and possibly under Greek literary influence as well – around 300 BCE. There are, however, no extant Indian texts in either of these alphabets from before the time of Aśoka. Further, as has been pointed out by others, the royal inscriptions of Aśoka's successors and especially those of later dynasties, differ greatly in style and content from Aśoka's texts. They are almost without exception not in the first person singular as many of Aśoka's inscriptions are and in their content they lack completely his modesty and care for the well-being of the common people. In their exaltation of royal virtues they resemble more the royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings.

The inspiration for Aśoka's first-person address has indeed been attributed to these Persian texts, for instance to the famous Bīsutūn inscription of Darius I. But it is precisely this royal bragging, so to speak, that distinguishes starkly the Achaemenid texts from Aśoka's inscriptions – not to mention the fact that the Achaemenid inscriptions were placed at an height in the rock that made it impossible for passers-

by to read the texts. There is, however, a resemblance between Achaemenid inscriptions and the ones set up by Aśoka in their multilingual character. The inscription of Darius just mentioned is in three languages and Aśoka took care to address his subjects in the languages which they could understand: the Prakrit and Maghadan dialects, Aramaic and Greek – albeit not in the Dravidian languages of the south of his empire. But to my mind this resemblance is not enough of an argument to assume Achaemenid inspiration for Aśoka's inscriptions. After all, by the time of Aśoka's reign the Persian Empire had already passed away for some sixty years and the great Seleukid kingdom, Aśoka's contemporary, also was acquainted with the practice of royal proclamations in other languages than the Greek of its ruling class. In any case, the idea to set up inscriptions in which the king addressed his subjects directly or indirectly – in the latter case by instructing royal officials to oversee the implementation of the king's directions – was a novelty in Aśoka's realm.

The king's inscriptions were not spread evenly across his empire but we find clusters in far apart regions as Karnataka in the South West and another one in the North West including the Aramaic and Greek texts. Why this is so, we do not know. In the North West the Indian texts are written in *Karosthi*, elsewhere in India they are mainly in *Brāhmi*. Many inscriptions are dated according to years after Aśoka's coronation (266 BCE?) or perhaps after his succession (270 BCE?). The major Rock Edicts are the most systematically dated and it is perhaps not without significance that the oldest of these is the Aramaic-Greek bilingual found at Kandahar that has a date of the eighth year of Aśoka's reign (263/2 or 259/8 BCE?). It is the language of this Greek text in particular that has made some scholars wondering – Western scholars, I should add, not their Indian counterparts – if not part of the contents of this inscription as well as of the other Greek text from the tenth year after the coronation (257/6 BCE?) too might be attributed to Greek ideas or if not even the whole enterprise of setting up these royal texts might be explained by direct Greek influence. In my view that was probably the case and that conclusion will be supported, I believe, when we now consider the contents of the king's messages to his people.

Greek and Buddhist contents of Aśoka's inscriptions

Four texts – minor Pillar Edicts – deal with the affairs of the *sangha* or recount the gifts that Aśoka's queen had bestowed on the ascetic community, the visit of the king to Lumbini, and his enlargement of a famous stupa in its vicinity. These, then, are solidly Buddhist documents. Further, in one of the so-called separate rock edicts Aśoka greets the *sangha* and exhorts monks and nuns to follow the teaching of the Buddha which he considers a truthful exposition of the *Dhamma*. This is the only mention of the Buddha in all of Aśoka's edicts. In another cave edict he mentions his gifts to the ascetic community of the Ājīvikas, a sect that resembled the Buddhists in its stress on non-violence. A few more inscriptions address the typically Indian situation by calling for respect for *brāhmana* and *śramana* and preaching the virtues of mutual tolerance and recognition between the various religious sects. All the other nearly fifty edicts contain moralistic proclamations and admonitions, preach non-violence, praise self-discipline and obedience towards one's elders and teachers. This

vast majority of texts has usually been claimed as typically Buddhist and thus as 'Indian' as opposed to Greek in character. But the Greek texts from Kandahar just mentioned give room for doubt.

The Greek inscription from Kandahar contained substantial parts of the Rock Edicts XII and XIII which are known in full from Brāhmi and Karoshti texts. In the first of these the king recommends *eusebeia* and *enkrateia*, that is: the *Dhamma* and self-control, in this case especially self-control in language: not criticizing others and praising oneself but, conversely, praising others, i.e. the other 'schools' or 'sects', for that will bring enhancement of knowledge for everybody and make people steadfast in their *eusebeia*. In the second text it is related how the king in his eighth year conquered Kalinga and was shaken to remorse by all the bloodshed; how since then he propagated the *Dhamma* and preached abstention from killing living beings, obedience and friendliness to one's elders, the mild treatment of slaves etc. In the other and slightly later Kandahar text, with its near-equivalent in Aramaic, the king 'shows' his Greek-speaking subjects the *Dhamma* (*eusebeian edeixen*); tells them that he and his hunters and fishermen now abstain from the killing of living beings; admonishes them to stop being *akrateis* (i.e. without self-discipline), and to obey their parents and elders. The short remnant of Klearchos' inscription at Ai Khanoum dealing with the five stages of a man's life states that as a boy one should be well-behaved (*kosmios*) and as a youth self-disciplined (*enkratēs*). Terms like *enkrateia* or its opposite *akrasia*, and *Eusebeia* – Piety, but in Aśoka's texts used to render the concept of *Dhamma* – certainly refer to a well-known Greek philosophical vocabulary. Of course, this by itself would never be enough to suggest Greek inspiration for Aśoka's edicts. But the connections between the Indian king's texts and the inscription left by Klearchos in Ai Khanoum can be traced much further, as has been shown some twenty years ago by the Russian scholar V.-P. Yailenko in a little noticed article in the French journal *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne*.

Louis Robert, who had published and commented on some Ai Khanoum texts in 1968, dated our inscription to the years around 280 BCE and identified the Klearchos mentioned in it with the philosopher Klearchos of Soloi, had observed that this Klearchos must have set up a central stele on a base containing his dedicatory epigram and flanked on either side by another stele and all three of them in front of the *hēroön* of Kineas, the heroized founder of the city. Since Robert had identified the remnants of the inscription as maxims 46 and 47 of the collection of Delphic maxims assembled by the Greek author Sosiadēs he concluded that the three stelae together must have contained the whole collection of between 140 and 150 sayings. We know that these maxims from Delphi and others attributed to the Seven Sages enjoyed a renewed popularity and were published in several collections of which fragments have been preserved; the collection of Sosiadēs being the most complete (and preserved for us in the *Florilegium* of Stobaeus in the fifth century CE). In the small city of Miletoupolis in Asia Minor a similar stele on a base containing 56 Delphic maxims had been discovered in the beginning of the 20th century, and another collection of maxims is known from the gymnasium of Thera. Yailenko concluded that in Ai Khanoum likewise the stelae with Delphic maxims erected in front of the sanctuary of the city's founder must have served as the moral code for the inhabitants

of this new *polis*. Assuming that all the maxims that we know from Sosiadēs' collection were thus engraved at Ai Khanoum – and had been in the possession of Klearchos who claimed to have meticulously copied them himself at Delphi – Yailenko then had the idea of comparing Aśoka's texts with the contents of this wider collection of Greek maxims. The results are, to my mind, very revealing.

In a series of his edicts Aśoka proclaims that to make people know the *Dhamma* and to admonish them to live according to its principles is the surest way to their happiness. The corresponding terms in a number of Greek maxims are *to dikaion* and *ho nomos*: live in obedience with the laws, live according to what is just. The obedience to parents, elders and superiors is repeatedly mentioned in Aśoka's edicts and the same idea of obedience and respect for the ancestors we find in the Delphic maxims. Aśoka advises to be courteous and generous towards one's friends and acquaintances; the Greek maxims contain many advices in the same spirit; only the king's recommendations that a pupil should respect his teacher and that a master should care about his slaves have no corresponding items among the Delphic maxims. General recommendations of Aśoka to be benevolent towards all people and to pity those in misery have their counterparts too among the Greek sayings, with the exception of his appeal to patience. Where the *Dhamma* prescribes a high measure of self-control, we find among the Delphic maxims several exhortations to self-discipline in various respects. Aśoka's stress on non-violence, on benevolence towards all living beings, including animals, has its corresponding admonitions from Delphi: do not resort to violence, do not use violence against a mortal man. Likewise, the vices to be avoided or suppressed are nearly all the same in Aśoka's edicts and in the Delphic maxims: dishonesty, bad temper, anger, arrogance, envy, inconstancy, obstinacy, cruelty.

For most scholars there has been no doubt that all of Aśoka's moralistic exhortations can be explained on the basis of the king's Buddhist convictions. After his conversion the king, as so many converts to a new faith are apt to do, started to preach in order to let all his subjects share in the bliss of his newly found faith. And indeed it is not all too difficult to see in his edicts the spirit of Buddhism as we know it today. That his ideas might have been derived from another source, let alone in large part from a non-Indian source, seems inconceivable to most historians. Yet there is more to all this than appears at first sight. Twice Aśoka himself mentions a source for his maxims and it is not the preaching of the Buddha but the wisdom of the ancestors that he points to (in one of the minor Rock Edicts, where he advises that a pupil should respect his teacher, and that a man should behave well towards his family and relations; further in Pillar Edict VII where he notes that even the kings of old tried to teach the *Dhamma* to the people, but without success). As mentioned above, he only once refers to the teaching of the Buddha by considering it, as it were in passing, a just rendering of the *Dhamma*. All this does in my view not amount to very much. The single mention of the Buddha, the few references to the ancestors, and the overall presentation of the *Dhamma* as Aśoka's *Dhamma*, or rather an already pre-existing *Dhamma* to which the teaching of the Buddha only conforms, suggest to my mind that we do not have a sort of Buddhist ethical catechism here that the king was eager to spread among his people. Moreover, as Yailenko rightly pointed out,

Buddhist literature that contains a similar ethical program as the precepts of Aśoka is all of later date, often centuries later. And then not even all of Aśoka's precepts can be found in that literature; certainly there is not one Buddhist work from India that contains all of them. And besides, *if* the whole of Aśoka's preaching would have been derived from the Buddhist teachings of his day, why would the king have gone to such extremes as to publish these moralistic precepts in a large number of inscriptions that few people could read instead of simply referring the people to the Buddhist monks and sages and exhorting them to listen to their sermons? In view of all this I am inclined to assume a Greek rather than an Indian-Buddhist source for the king's edicts, both for the fact of their existence and for most of their contents.

Aśoka's Philanthrōpia and Aśoka's place in the development of Buddhism

We have no reason to doubt Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism. His revulsion to the bloodbath of the Kalinga war was surely sincere. But to what sort of Buddhism did he convert? Certainly, it proclaimed non-violence, but so did other Indian sects like the Jainists and the Ājīvikas to which his mother is said to have belonged. What is less certain is what moral precepts the Buddhists of Aśoka's day preached and what metaphysics they taught. Aśoka's Buddhism, as expressed in his edicts, was of a peculiar sort, certainly not conforming to classical Buddhist doctrines. The concept of nirwana is lacking; instead, we find references to a blissfull paradise in the hereafter and even to the possibility of conversing with the gods for those people who fully practice the *Dhamma*. Earthly blessings, too, are the reward of the pious. Moreover, in the eyes of the king in principle *all* people could arrive at a state of ultimate happiness, if not in this life, then in the hereafter. Although the *sangha* of monks and nuns is mentioned a few times, it not clear what their status is, and the now classical Buddhist idea that only the ordained could achieve to enlightenment and that the common people had to hope for their chance only in a future life, is certainly absent.

It has been suggested, convincingly in my view, that where Aśoka speaks of the gods with whom the pious people would mix he is referring to an older idea expressed at the end of a Vedic hymn that exhorts the sacrificers to 'sit down, arrived in heaven, mixed among the gods'. What Aśoka meant, then, was that not only the brahmanic priest of old could reach this company of the gods, namely in a state of ecstatic vision, but that even for the common people that exalting visionary experience had now become a possibility. We have here a substratum, so to say, of classical Buddhism, a substratum with shamanistic overtones that would lend itself to all sorts of magical practices against which, or rather against the misuse of which, various Buddhist tracts and rules would warn (I need not go into the vast subject of magical practices in Buddhism here). If this was part of the character of Aśoka's Buddhism we might even suppose that his Buddhism was mainly a doctrine of world-renouncement and non-violence; indeed, as tradition has it, a world-renouncement less extreme than the self-mortification practiced by some of the wandering ascetics, but nevertheless essentially a-social and focused on the personal state of otherworldly bliss for the steadfastly striving individual. It is not at all clear that this early Buddhism would have engendered the set of moral codes typical of a harmonious society that we find in Aśoka's edicts.

This leads us back to the possible Greek inspiration for these edicts. The moral code as left by Klearchos in Ai Khanoum must have easily appealed to a king who had adopted a new, non-violent, worldview but who could as a king not simply side with the Buddhist 'sect', however much he may have admired its legendary founder. He made a pilgrimage to Lumbini, restored a famous stupa not far from there, and erected at least one of his well-known pillars – inscribed monoliths crowned with twin lions the significance of which is not altogether clear – in Sarnath, honouring the spots of the Buddha's enlightenment and first sermon and inaugurating a practice of Buddhist pilgrimages centred on these places. Nevertheless, other 'sects' were honoured by him as well and the king admonishes his people to respect all wandering ascetics and also the priestly *brāhmaṇa*. The Greek maxims were well adjusted to his now at least in theory pacifistic kingdom. How exactly Aśoka came to know of this corpus of Greek wisdom will probably remain a mystery for us, but historical possibilities are not lacking. Klearchos himself may have gone on to India, a copy of these wise sayings in his luggage. Even if he did not go further than Taxila he might have left his precious specimens of wisdom there as a present for his Indian hosts just as he had done in the Greek city of Ai Khanoum. If the Klearchos inscription there would be dated a little later, say to 270-260 BCE, we might still assume a Greek traveler from that city bringing the text of these maxims across the Hindu Kush to Taxila. Aśoka is said to have been governor in Taxila for some years during the reign of his father Bindusara. It is perfectly conceivable that after his conversion to Buddhism he remembered the wise sayings of the westerners and had them brought to him again (and probably translated, although it is not impossible that during his stay in Taxila he had acquired a little knowledge of Greek himself) or that, as a newly convert, he was particularly open to such texts of wisdom if these were by then just brought into the land by some wise man from the world of the *Yona*. We may recall king Bindusara's request to king Antiochos to send him among other things a Greek sophist or wise man. We have to assume a genuine interest on the part of some Indians and of some Greeks in each other's ideas that had started already in the fourth century BCE and on the Greek side perhaps even earlier, ever since the first contacts between Greeks and Indians at the royal courts of Persia since the later 6th century BCE. And there was Deimachos, royal envoy and author of a book 'On Piety', coming to India at some time between 290 and 260 BCE and most probably by way of Ai Khanoum. *Eusebeia*, moreover, was not only used as a translation for *Dhamma*, it was also in the Hellenistic world one of the cardinal virtues of a king.

Being a king it must have been clear or made clear by others to Aśoka that his missionary effort of setting up his edicts over vast stretches of his empire was an enterprise worthy of a king. Who better could have conveyed such an idea than a Greek royal ambassador! We must not forget the prestige, cultural as well as military, that the *Yona* or *Yonaka* enjoyed in the Indian world. It does not require an effort of the imagination to see before us, so to speak, a Greek ambassador expounding to his royal Indian host on the qualities of the ideal king. In the Hellenistic conception of kingship the king should reign for the well-being of his subjects, he should be a Benefactor and a Saviour from external foes. In bestowing all sorts of blessings on his subjects the king would manifest his superhuman nature and present himself as

philanthrōpos. Originally, *philanthrōpia* or 'love of men' was a quality of the gods, but ever since Xenophōn in the fourth century it had become part of the ideology of idealized kingship, and in the Hellenistic world it even became a common place quality of a king. Inscriptions attest to countless royal Benefactors, Saviours, and *Philanthrōpoi*. This, I presume, triggered Aśoka's epigraphic program: to be *philanthrōpos* as the kings his contemporaries were and let his subjects know, in the Greek manner of inscriptions, how to obtain happiness in this life and in the hereafter. For, to be sure, the contents of Aśoka's *philanthrōpia* were not exclusively Greek. The moralistic maxims may have suited his non-violent conviction well, that conviction itself was rooted in Buddhism, in the early Buddhism of his day.

When Aśoka sent out his ambassadors or missionaries to Sri Lanka, to the westcoast of present-day Myanmar, to the lands of the *Yona* and the *Kamboja* (i.e. the Greeks and the Iranians in the North West of his realm) and, surprisingly, to the Hellenistic kings Antiochos II, Ptolemy II, Antigonos of Macedon, Magas of Cyrene and Alexander of (probably) Epirus, it is tempting to assume that he expected the same recognition of the *Dhamma* and the same willingness to act upon that recognition in a royal manner, that is by propagating the new doctrine, as he himself may have shown when he became acquainted with the Greek moral code and the Greek concepts of true kingship. If so, he must certainly have been disappointed in the lack of response from any of his counterparts in the Greek world.

Finally, as to the development of Buddhism, Aśoka certainly was responsible for a major expansion of Buddhism beyond the borders of India. Less certain, but in my view quite possible, may be a shift in emphasis, under the royal patronage, away from the individual ascetic and towards the community of the *sangha* and a more institutionalized division between monks and laymen, and also towards a more coherent set of ethical rules for society as a whole. Likewise, partly thanks to Aśoka and directly or indirectly under Greek philosophical, more precisely Epicurean influence, Buddhist metaphysics may have undergone a shift towards a materialistic worldview, towards atheism and the accompanying concept of nirwana. This may come as a surprise for those of us who believe that all these concepts stem from the Buddha himself who lived in the sixth century BCE. That dating, however, is certainly wrong, and the Buddha may have lived at any time between 500 and 300 BCE, even not so long before the time of Aśoka. Moreover, we know very little with any certainty about his life and his teachings. Greek influence on early Buddhist ideas is not at all far fetched. But to expound on that is another story.

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