

SYNOPSIS

Tracking the unprecedented Buddhist reliquary cult began with the utter disbelief at the absolutely goal-oriented, thoroughly thought-out, accomplished and well-ordered group of artworks created by visionaries who have come together to a virgin land, to produce a new culture unlike anything before in the world. Or, was the groundbreaking undertaking being supervised by experts from far, say the powerful cult center at Alexandria, which we may single out from known material evidence. Alexander the Great was in fact the first reference point to the sturdy Greek angle in the Buddhist reliquary cult in South Asia. The unprecedented movement during the early Christian period impulsively conjured up a renaissance of Alexander's creative workforce in the vast Greco-Kushana kingdom. By then the Greek terrain had acquired prodigious Roman traits. It is proved by the fake Corinthian capitals strewn in Ai Khanoum north of Afghanistan. The strange memorials ornamented with acanthus of regeneration correspond to similar mortuary shrines in Gandhara. These are as frontal as the clump of acanthus leaves displayed atop the short memorial pillars (Cippi / Cippus) framing series of standard dedicatory frieze installed on the domical funerary monuments in Gandhara. In the category of Greek grave stele these sculptured reliefs in Greco-Roman style are much more complex in conception and composition. The pied piper of populism is the toga clad iconic Buddha in adlocutio pose or holding a bowl of magic potion, more likely a barley brew mixed with honey and mint (pennyroyal) to set him on his trip to the Elysian Fields.

The Eleusinian Mysteries & Endless-Knot in Buddhist Art Arputharani Sengupta

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INTRODUCTION

Walled by Poseidon and rings of sacred mountains the Delta-shaped Indian subcontinent surrounded by islands had strategic importance to the New Elysium. Celestial music of Gandhrvas floated across perfumed Gandhara and Mathura just like Arcadia flowed with honey and wine. Among the numerous clusters of necropolises Amaravati rising on the Wheel of Time (Kalachakra) is a unique monument to the Immortals. More often than not dancing apsaras and amorous couples in Buddhist viharas present us with open-and-shut arcs that show gratifying eroticism central to Greco-Buddhist mortuary cult. The seed for its astonishing formation was planted at a time when transnational trade and religious doctrines were together taking the Roman highways planned for global colonization. In a rapidly changing world the discovery of a pristine land surrounded by Ocean is contingent to flourishing Silk Road trade and newly

harnessed monsoon winds. The geographical conditions seem to have provided an escape route from Hades and an ideal prop for the ladder to Olympus (Heaven). It is otherwise hard to discern why the two millennia old tradition of the Greek Mysteries thriving within its own sacred enclave suddenly took on the expansionist route of its brand-new competitor preaching an alternative doctrine of redemption, rebirth and eternal life. Apparently the circumstances seem favorable to the Greeks as a people to create an alternate universe, a sacred sanctuary well beyond the reach of Roman conquests. The geographical goal seems to come from both political and religious uncertainties of the time. The doctrine of redemption, rebirth and glorious afterlife was common to all, and precisely for that reason the believers in Egyptian and Eleusinian Mysteries, Mithraism and Orphism were easily assimilated into the fold of Christianity. At the triumph of Christianity in the fourth-century the latest Buddhist cult instituted in the easternmost corner beyond the then known world declined and disappeared along with the ancient religions in the west.

Contemporary to fledgling Christianity the incredibly fully-formed Greco-Buddhist cult in a remote corner grappled with the same kind of concerns, such as shared culture in the midst of diverse tongues and ethnic identities streaming through the northwest frontier region and across north India. The solutions to pan-nationalism of Greek culture reveal who the stakeholders are. The unifying element is a new script and common tongue; the earliest edicts inscribed in stone are in Aramaic, Greek and Prakrit constituting a mixture of these and other tongues tumbled into an amalgamated located language. In the instructive channel of Mahayana Buddhism a collection of rebirth stories called Jatakam unfurls former lives of Buddha in the wondrous landscapes of Benares. The “basket” of Jatakam parables in Sri Lankan Pali is different from Theravada tradition in Pali literature. Both conspicuously exclude Prince Siddhartha of Kapilavastu in the presumed timeline of Achaemenid Persia and Pythagoras of Somas (570-495 BCE). The story of Siddhartha meaning “one who has accomplished an aim” holds collective connotation. In fact all the names introduced by Greco-Buddhist funerary cult and in general quite a number of new words in Prakrit are coined with cryptic meaning with the intent to exclude the uninitiated in the Mystery. Miraculous life of Gautama Buddha in the Prakrit version of Buddha-Carita datable to early 2nd century CE is from Xinjiang. Even Sanskrit source reciting Buddha’s uncanny Virgin Birth and Dream of Maya were exclusive unread copies worshipfully preserved in underground stone vaults in Central Asia and Gilgit. There are the compelling life travels strung together with supernatural encounters on heaven and earth of a kind so extraordinary it belongs to its own unique genre of the Book of Dead. With Eyes Wide Shut we take in the Dream Making business of Mahayana Buddhism; the overnight miracle of rock-cut mansions and necropolises stockpiled with effigies of togate Buddha are accepted with astonishing credulity.

Theravada proscribes the graven image; this brand of spiritual religious movement very similar to the Essenes (Therapeutæ and Qumranites) is given to Insight Meditation (Vipassana) communicated largely through lucid intellectual discourse recorded in Gandharai and Pali literature. On the other hand Mahayana Buddhism by popular demand is an extension of

Bacchanalian Eleusinian Mysteries tailored to the changing times. Eleusinian initiations to the Mysteries in the lesser and the greater form continued for two millennia. The greater initiation took place less often, the populist lesser form accessible to all Greek speakers was conducted on a yearly basis. Mahayana, literally the Great Boat, was a popular mortuary cult on the pivot of a new era. Riding the revisionist wave Mahayana Buddhism established itself in seductive funerary art and architecture. Mahayana with astonishing global reach was the populist Lesser Way to achieve magical immortality exemplified by Amitabha (Buddha) of immense radiance and endless life. The equally passionate Hinayana the Small Boat testifying temperance and contemplation is the Greater Way. Hinayana Buddhism is a philosophic movement that strikes forward in a narrow and difficult path to essentially learn about Samsara, that is how to break the cycle of death and rebirth and avoid the suffering that befalls the ignorant. Dichotomy in Mahayana and Hinayana is bridged by “Buddha the Enlightened One” and the pledge to cure human malady in entirely different ways. There are multiple Buddhas in the exchange of ideas; Mahayana catering to the departed is an esoteric cult engaged in magical postmortem healing (therapeuo). A graded initiation system is common to both; the progress in Hinayana from novice to Maha Thera or The Great Elder is equal to Greek Mega and Thera meaning King / Chief of the island of Thera in the Aegean. About 631 BCE a group of emigrants from Thera founded Cyrene, ancient Carthaginian Greek colony in Libya. For two centuries they flourished under eight generation of Battus, their first king. Among the ports established by them Berenice (Berenike / Banghazi) had close links to Buddhist South Asia. Berenice Euhesperides of Libya is not to be confused with Berenice or Berenice Troglodytica, an ancient seaport of Egypt on the west coast of the Red Sea. Archaeological expedition from the University of Delaware led by Steven E. Sidebotham found Indian products in the Roman district of Berenice where a potsherd yielded Tamil Brahmi graffito “Korra”, a byname for Persephone derived from Greek kore for maiden. The Greek Queen of the netherworld is literally ‘death's maiden’ or Virgo Mortis in Latin.

Sartre affirms that every age has its own needs; in every age the circumstances of history choose a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch by creating situations that can be expressed or transcended only through art and literature. The sudden, frenetic drive to excavate manmade caves across widespread regions in Central and South Asia evidence technology transfer. Winds of transformation transfigure painted cave mansions and flow eerily through moist undying night of countless caverns and crumbling subterranean corridors that once resounded with cult rituals. Incredibly, even before these archaeological wonders came into existence the Buddhist caves existed in imagination. Votaries of Mithraism in the Roman world called their place of worship “cave” even if they actually were or not and focused their devotion to Mithras in a grotto very similar to the Indrasal Cave of Buddha. For whatever reasons, by the 2-nd-Century CE the trend to go down into the bowels of the earth had spread to the hypogeum in Palmyra and the catacombs of Rome where early Christians took to worship in the underground cemeteries evidently to escape persecution.