CHAPTER IV

Indo-Iranian Relationship in Parthian Era:
(250 B.C. - 226 A.D.)

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Political relationship

4.3 Economic relationship

4.4 Cultural relationship
4.1 Introduction

In 330 B.C. Alexander defeated Darius III. In the decisive battle of Gaugamela a small contingent of Indian soldiers with fifteen elephants fought with Darius against the Greeks. Alexander the Great after destroying the Achaemenid’s empire marched into India.¹

When Alexander of Macedon died in 323 B.C., he had conquered the great Achaemenid Persian empire, which stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to India. His successor as ruler of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran was one of his generals, Seleucus I, who established the Seleucid dynasty. Along the trade routes that linked ancient and newly established cities, Hellenistic art and culture, a fusion of the various Near Eastern and classical Greek traditions, permeated the Near Eastern world. Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the Mauryan dynasty, had friendly relations with the successor of the Macedonian conqueror in Persia. Seleucus Nicator, the Grecian ruler of Persia, sent Megasthenes as the envoy of Hellenistic Persia to the court of Patliputra in India. Commercial and cultural relations between Persia and India continued.² Persian nobles were conspicuous in the courts of Chandragupta Maurya. The Kharoshti script was introduced by the Persian officials in the north western frontier province and continued to be in use till the 4th century AD.³ While in the west the Seleucids faced the Ptolemies, Alexander's successors in Egypt, in the east, a seminomadic confederacy, the Parni, were on the move. From the northeast of Iran they advanced towards the frontier of the Seleucid satrapy (administrative district) of Parthian, near the Caspian Sea. In about 250 B.C., they launched an invasion under their leader Arsaces. Known as the Parthian after their successful conquest of the land, they made their own imperial aspirations clear by instituting a dynastic era in 247 B.C., and subsequent rulers assumed the name Arsaces as a royal title. Under Mithradates I (171–139 B.C.) and his successors, the Parthians grew into the dominant power in the Near East through a series
of campaigns against the Seleucids, the Romans, the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms, and the nomads of Central Asia. The Romans, who were ambitious to dominate the Near East in the style of Alexander, underestimated the capabilities of the Parthian kings and had to negotiate peace under Augustus.

Establishing a primary residence at Ctesiphon, on the Tigris River in southern Mesopotamia, Parthian kings ruled for nearly half a millennium until they were overthrown by Sassanid's armies from southwest.

Parthia⁴ (Persian: Ashkâniân) was a civilization situated in the northeast of modern Iran, but at its height covering all of Iran proper, as well as regions of the modern countries of Iraq, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, eastern Turkey, eastern Syria, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Kuwait, the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the Unite Arab Emirates.

It was the second native dynasty of ancient Iran (Persia). Parthia (mostly due to their invention of heavy cavalry) was the arch-enemy of the Roman Empire in the east; and it limited Rome's expansion beyond Cappadocia (central Anatolia). The Parthian empire lasted five centuries, longer than most Eastern Empires.

The Parthians were members of the Parni tribe, a nomadic people of Iranian origin, who originally spoke an Eastern Iranian language and entered the Iranian plateau from Central Asia. They were consummate horsemen, known for the 'Parthian shot': turning backwards at full gallop to loose an arrow directly to the rear. Later, at the height of their power, Parthian influence reached as far as Ubar in Arabia, the nexus of the frankincense trade route, where Parthian-inspired ceramics have been found. The power of the early Parthian empire seems to have been overestimated by some ancient historians, who could not clearly separate the powerful later empire from its more humble obscure origins.

Little is known of the Parthians; their own literature has not survived. Consequently Parthian history is largely derived from foreign histories, controlled by the
evidence of coins and inscriptions; even their own name for themselves is debatable due to a lack of domestic records. Several Greek authors, of whom we have fragments, including Apollodorus of Artemita and Isidore of Charax, wrote under Parthian rule. Their power was based on a combination of the guerilla warfare of a mounted nomadic tribe, with organizational skills sufficient to build and administer a vast empire - even though it never matched in power the Persian empires that preceded and followed it. Vassal kingdoms seem to have made up a large part of their territory and Hellenistic cities enjoyed certain autonomy; their craftsmen received employment by some Parthians.

Mithradates II was able to reassert some measure of control over the Saka settlers by making the Indo-Parthia into a Parthian subkingdom and turn his attention to consolidating the Parthian empire. It was under Mithradates II that the enduring foundations of Parthian power were laid. He created a period of stability and prosperity based on Portia’s position as the intermediary on the trade routes between the East and West. Direct contact with China was established and treaties to facilitate trade were signed in 115 B.C. It was also during Mithradates II's reign that contact was first made with the Romans under Sulla during his campaign against Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontus. Uneasy, but peaceful, relations were thus established. Mithradates II was an ally of Tigranes the Great of Armeni, who, along with VI of Pontus had been expanding their kingdoms to the extent that they had attracted the attention of Rome and begun a series of devastating wars which were to engulf most of Asia Minor for the next 30 years and result in Rome's expansion into Syria and direct contact with the Parthian empire.

By 129 B.C. the Parthians were in control of all the lands right to the Tigris, and established their winter encampment on its banks at Ctesiphon, downstream from modern Baghdad.

Tribute was one source of royal income; another was tolls. Parthia controlled the Silk Road, the trade route between the Mediterranean Sea and China.
The Chinese explorer Zhang Qian, who visited the neighboring countries of Bactria and Sogdiana in 126 B.C., made the first known Chinese report on Parthia. In his accounts Parthia is named "Ānxī", a transliteration of "Arsacid", the name of the Parthian dynasty. Zhang Qian clearly identifies Parthia as an advanced urban civilization, which he equates to those of Dayuan (in Ferghana) and Daxia (in Bactria). The Chinese historian Fan-ye seems to refer to the Parthian conquest of Kabul before its occupation by the Kushans, i.e. about the middle of the first century A.D.\(^5\)

In 53 B.C., the Roman general Crassus invaded Parthia, but was defeated at the Battle of Carrhae by a Parthian commander called Surena in the Greek and Latin sources, most likely a member of the Suren-Pahlav Clan. This was the beginning of a series of wars that were to last for almost three centuries. At the same time, around the year 1 A.D., the Parthians became interested in the valley of the Indus, where they began conquering the petty kingdoms of Gandara. One of the Parthian leaders was Gondophares, king of Taxila.

Towards the end of 1st century B.C., a line of kings with Iranian names, usually known as Pahlavas, gained the brief suzerainty of North West India. According to legend, St. Thomas (Christian tradition) brought Christianity to the kingdom of one of these rulers – Gondophares.\(^6\)

### 4.2 Political relationship

**Indo–Parthia**

1. Pahlavas:

   The Pahlavas are a people mentioned in ancient Indian texts like the Manu Smriti, various Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Brhatsamhita etc. They are referred to in the Mahabharata and the Puranic literature as Pahlavas as well as Pallavas. They were ancient Persian tribe known as Pahlav, who migrated from Persia to west, south-west and southern India and founded the Pahlava dynasties. They are said to be same as the Parasikas. The emergence of Arsacids in second century B.C. and the subsequent
expansion of their empire over parts of India opened the next phase of Indo-Iranian contacts.\textsuperscript{7}

At the beginning of the 2nd century, the Central India Satavahana king Gautamiputra Sātakarni (106 – 130 A.D.) called himself "Destroyer of Saks (Western Kshatrapas), Yavanas (Indo-Greeks) and Pahlavas (Indo-Iranian)."\textsuperscript{8}

According to P. Carnegy, the Pahlava are probably those people who spoke Paluvi or Pehlavi, a language of Persia. Buhler thinks that Phalvas and their Iranian prototype Pahlava are corruptions of Parthavas meaning Parthians. The first reference to Pahlavas is found in the Rig-Veda. Vartika of Katyayana mentions Sakah-Parthavah showing that in fourth century B.C., the Parthavas or Pahlavas were known to the Hindus probably by way of commerce. However, it is well possible that the Pahlavs were one of the branches of Parthian stock or Saka origin, known as the Suren-Pahlavs who settled in Sistan Province, South-East of modern Iran.\textsuperscript{9}

**Pahlavas in Puranic texts**\textsuperscript{10}

Pahlavas are referred to in various Puranic texts like Vayu Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Markendeya Purana, Matsya Purana, Vamana Purana etc. as Pahlavas vs Pallavas. Many Puranic texts refer to the Pallavas and Pahlavas indistinguishably, thus attesting that the Pallavas of southern India are also derived from the Iranian Pahlavas. While Vayu Purana mentions Pahlava and Pahnava, the Brahmanda Purana and Markendeya Purana refer to them both as Pahlava as well as Pallava and the Vamana Purana and Matsya Purana note them as Pallava. Bhishama Parava of Mahabharata too has references to the Pahlavas as Pallavas.
Pahlavas in Valmiki Ramayana:

The Balakanda of the Ramayana groups the Pahlavas with the Shakas, Kambojas, Yavanas, Mlechhas and the Kiratas and refers to them as military allies of sage Vasishtha against Vedic king Vishwamitra. The Kiskindha Kanda of Ramayana associates the Pahlavas with the Yavanas, Shakas, Kambojas, Paradas (Varadas), Rishikas and the
Uttarakurus etc. and locates them all in the trans-Himalayan territories i.e. in the Sakadvipa.

**Pahlavas in Mahabharata:**

Mahabharata attests that Pandava-putra Nakula had defeated the Pahlavas in the course of his western expedition. The kings of Pahlava were also present at the Rajasuya sacrifice of king Yudhishtra.

The Mahabharata also associates the Pahlavas with the Shakas, Yavanas, Gandharas, Kambojas, Tusharas, Sabaras, Barbaras, etc. and addresses them all as the barbaric tribes of Uttarapatha, Pahlavas in south-west India. But the Udyoga-Parva of Mahabharata groups the Pahlavas with the Shakas, Paradas and the Kambojas-Rishikas and locates them all in/around Anupa region in western India. It states:

"These kings of the Shakas, Pahlavas and Daradas (Paradas) and the Kamboja Rishikas, these are in the western riverine (Anupa) area.” (It may be remembered that the Daradas in this passage appears to be a copyist's mistake since it is the Paradas and not the Daradas who are a member of the well known Puranic Panca-gana or five-hordes).

This epic reference implies that sections of the Pahlavas, Shakas, Paradas, and Kambojas were also located in western India near Saurashtra and Maharashtra.

**Pahlavas in Mudrarakshas Drama:**

The Buddhist drama Mudrarakshas by Visakhadutta and the Jaina works Parisishtaparvan refer to Chandragupta’s alliance with Himalayan king Parvatka. This Himalayan alliance gave Chandragupta a powerful composite army made up of the frontier martial tribes of the Shakas, Kambojas, Yavanas, Parasikas (Pahlavas), Bahlikas etc (predominantly an Iranian army) which he utilized to defeat the Greek successors of Alexander and the Nanda rulers of Magadha, and thus establishing his Mauryan Empire in northern India.
Pahlavas in Brihat-Katha-Manjari:

The Brihat-Katha-Manjari of the Kshmendra relates that around 400 AD, the Gupta king Vikramaditya (Chandragupta II) had "unburdened the sacred earth of the barbarians" like the Shakas, Mlecchas, Kambojas, Yavanas, Tusharas, Parasikas (Pahlavas), Hunas, etc.

Pahlavas in Kavyamimamsa:

The 10th century Kavyamimamsa of Pt. Raj Shekhar still lists the Sakas, Tusharas, Vokanas, Hunas, Kambojas, Bahlkas, Pahlavas, Tangana, Turukshas, etc. together and states them as the tribes located in the Uttarapatha division.

Migration of Pahlavas:

As noted above, the Pahlava settlements have been noted both in the north/north-west as well as in the western and south-west India in post Christian times. This shows that the Pahlavas had moved to western region around Christian times. This movement of the Pahlavas appears to have been associated with the well known tribal movements of several Central Asian tribes like the Sakas, Yavanas, Kambojas, Tusharas, Rishikas, Paradas etc. which had occurred around second century prior to Christian era. Allied with the Sakas, Kambojas etc, the Pahlavas are believed to have entered India through Bolan Pass. The Pahlavas had set up a dynasty under Venones in Balochistan and Kandhahar. 11

According to Dr Jouveau Dubreuil, “the Pahlavs migrated from Persia to India and founded the Pallava dynasty of Kanchi. They first occupied Anarta and Konkan and later entered southern India via Kuntala or Vanavasa.”12

Venkayya notes:

“The Pallavas of Kāñcipuram must have come originally from Persia, though the interval of time which must have elapsed since they left Persia must be several centuries. As the Persians are generally known to (p.220) Indian poets under the name Pārasīka, the term Pahlava or Pallava must denote the Arsacidan Parthians, as stated by Professor Weber.”13
2. Gondophares

Following the weakening of the Parthian empire after conflicts with Rome and the death of Mithridates II in 92 B.C., the Suren, a noble Parthian family of Arsacid descent, started to make inroads into eastern territories that had been occupied by the Indo-Scythians and the Yuezhi, until the demise of the last Indo-Scythian emperor Azes II around 5 A.D.

Ernst Herzfeld maintained that the dynasty of Gondophares represented the house of Suren, highest of the five premier families of Arsacid Iran, invested with the hereditary right of commanding the royal armies, and placing the crown on the king's head at the coronation. Probably when around 129 B.C. nomad peoples, especially the Indo-Scythians (Sakaravaka "nomadic Saka," or Saraucae) and the Tochari, attacked the eastern frontier of Parthia, defence was entrusted by the Arsacid kings to the Surens; and the latter eventually not only repelled the Indo-Scythians, but pursued them into Arachosia and the Punjab, this event probably representing interitus Saraucarum "the perishing of the Sacaraucae" of Trogus. 14
Around 20 A.D., Gondophares, one of the Parthian conquerors, declared his independence from the Parthian empire and established the Indo-Parthian Kingdom in the conquered territories in an area covering today's Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northern India. The Kingdom's capital was Taxila, (Pakistan) and during the last few years of its decline it was cantered around Kabul (Afghanistan).

The chronology of Gondophares depends on the Takht-i Bahi Kharosát Ahi inscription, erected under erjhuna Kapa (prince Kapa), probably the Kushan chief Kujula Kadphises, a name variously spelt in inscriptions. The paramount ruler was Gondophares (gen. maharayasa Guduvharasa), then in the 26th year of his reign, and the 103rd of an era, no doubt of the Indo-Scythian emperor Azes I. This is now known to be identical with the current Indian "Vikrama" Era, of which year 1 corresponds to 57 B.C. Therefore the date of the inscription was 46 A.D., and the accession year (for this area) of Gondophares 20 A.D., a result perfectly supporting the Acts of Thomas.  

(pic. 29) Buddhist devotees in Indo-Parthian dress (Short decorated crossover jacket and baggy trousers), at the Dharmarajika stupa, Taxila.

(pic. 30) Men in Parthian dress, praying the Buddha. Sorotok, art of Gandhara.

(Source: http://amiricanhistory.si.edu/collection/numismatics/parthia/frames/pargeo.htm.)
Coins of Gondophares, and his Indo-Parthian successors, including: Abdagases, Orthagnes, and Pacores, besides minor rulers, are widely distributed in the territories described. The numismatic sequence suggests that after the demise of the last Indo-Scythian emperor Azes II, not long before 5 A.D., local rulers such as Indravarma and Sasan in Avacapura (Bajaur), Zeionises in Taxila, Kharahostes, and the Kushan prince Kujula Kadphises west of the Indus, were competing for domination of Gandhara. Kujula seems, on the evidence of one coin-find to have penetrated briefly to Taxila, but was soon expelled by Gondophares. The latter, descending from Drangiana, set up in the former Indo-Scythian Indo-Parthian realm which survived until about 60 A.D. Subordinates mentioned on his coins include again Gadana (= Gad?), and Sasan. Partisans of Gondophares show on their coins the so-called "Gondophares symbol" 🐎, while those of Kujula use a different device 🐐.

The kingdom barely lasted one century. It started to fragment under Gondophares' successor Abdagases. The northern Indian part of the kingdom was retaken by the Kushans around 75. After that point the kingdom was essentially restricted to Afghanistan. The last king Pakores (100 – 135 A.D.) only ruled Sakastan and Turan.

(pic.31) Indo-Parthian man hunting.  (pic.32) Indo-Parthian revelers  (pic.33) Indo-Parthian couple.
(Source: http://amiricanhistory.si.edu/collection/numismatics/parthia/frames/pargeo.htm.)
4.3 Economic relationship

Economic life in the Parthian empire

Agriculture undoubtedly played the most important role in Parthian economy, but few details are known about it. The same applies to handicraft. Our best Information concerns trade. Numerous routes existed for the traffic of goods between East and West,\(^\text{17}\) not only the Silk Road. Although trading of some kind must surely have been carried on beforehand, it only began on a significant level in connection with the sending of an embassy by the Chinese to the court of Mithridates II. 114 B.C.\(^\text{18}\), which is the first known date on which a caravan traveled from China to the west. Isodorus of Charax has supplied us with some sort of survey of the routes in his Parthian
Stations, written around the beginning of the Christian era. From Antiochia on the Orontes various routes led via Dura-Europos or across the Syrian Desert via Palmyra to Seleucia, Ctesiphon, and Vologasia. From there the route led across the Zagros Mountains to Kerman'sah and Hamadan, then on to Marv (Antiochia Margiana). Here it divided, one branch leading via Bukhara and Ferghana past the Issyk Kill into Mongolia, the other. More important one going to Bactria, then on to the “Stone Tower" (probably identical with Tashkurgan or with Darautkurgan in the Alai valley (Kirghizia), where Chinese traders took over the merchandise.

Maritime trade also deserves to be mentioned. The most important port was Charax Spasinu on the Persian Gulf, from where merchandise was shipped to India or sent overland to Seleucia. Besides, the Euphrates with its ramified system of canals played an extensive inscription in Palmyra of the year 137, provides us with an example of these taxes and also of the sorts of merchandise bought and sold at the time. With regard to economic conditions in the Parthian heartlands the ostrich from Nisa are now beginning to yield a certain amount of information but the fall of the western part of the Roman Empire in the 400's A.D. was a serious blow to trade. People went back to self-sufficiency in many places, and, as before, this meant a serious drop in their standard of living. In Western Asia, things were not as bad, and trade continued more or less as before, though the continuing war between the Romans and the Sassanids did interfere, and much trade still passed through Mecca and other cities of the Arabian Peninsula. 19
(pic.35) Coins of the Indo-Parthian king Abdagases, in which his clothing is clearly apparent. He wears Baggy trousers, rather typical of Parthian clothing.

(Source: http://amiricanhistory.si.edu/collection/numismatics/parthia/frames/pargeo.htm.)

Coins of the Indo-Parthian king Abdagases, in which his clothing is clearly apparent. He wears Baggy trousers and a crossover jacket.

(Source: http://amiricanhistory.si.edu/collection/numismatics/parthia/frames/pargeo.htm.)

When the Arabs conquered West Asia and the southern Mediterranean in the 600 A.D., this caused a tremendous revival of trade and of the economy in general. From India to Spain was once again one empire without borders, for the first time since Alexander. Arab trade with Africa also increased greatly at this time.

Influence of Parthian on economics of India:

1. Production of blanket:

   The technique of blanket making in India was to an extent influenced by the Iranians (perhaps Parthia). The Indian border people such as the Kambojas, Kekayas and Madras, who were associated with the manufacture of blanket in all likelihood belonged to the sphere of Iranian influence.²⁰
2. **Silk:**

   According to George Watt, India owed her knowledge and stock of silk to two independent sources: one from central Asia and Persia and another from Assam to Bangal possibly across the Chinese frontier via Manipur.21

3. **Coats:**

   Coats of skins were imported at Adulis, a west Asian port from Persian. India may have imported such products from Persian.22

4. **Varabana:**

   It was a coat type introduced from Iran. Varabana has a Pahlavi orginal and its Persian form is Baravana.23

5. **Valuable Stone:**

   According to Periplus, some Valuable stone like turquoise probably reached India from Korasan in Persian and were thence exported to the Roman world. The Lapis Lazuli or sapphires exported from India to the western world probably came to India from Persian Badakshan and the adjoining land.24

6. **Others goods:**

   The evidence of Periplus indicates the import of so many other cosmetics in the West Indian ports about the beginning of the Christian era of these balsam, clover, aloe, cinnamon, stroax and frankincense are notable.25

7. **Wine:**

   Periplus of the Erythean Sea refers to three types of wine imported into India from Italy, Syria and Arabia through the port of Barygaze.26

8. **Fruit:**

   Some fruit such as -Dadima (pomegranate and Persian and Hindi Anara), Nikocaka in Persian, Hindi Pista, Fig (Persian and Hindi, Anjira), Almond (Persian and Hindi, Badama): come in India from Persian.27
9. Wheat and Jiraka or Jira:

The Sanskrit word Godhuma is supposed to be a modification of the Persian word Gandum. Jiraka is also not indigenous to India (The Sanskrit name Jiraka and the Persian Zira). The plant was indigenous to Egypt. There is reason to believe that Persian served as a mediatory in this respect. There is also a view that it was an Iranian plant which was brought into India by the Scythians.

The chronicles of the Greek Periplus reveal that Indian exports included a variety of spices, aromatics, quality textiles (muslins and cottons), ivory, high quality iron and gems. Considered items of luxury in those days, these were in high demand. While a good portion of Indo-Roman trade was reciprocal, (Rome supplying exotic items such as cut-gems, coral, wine, perfumes, papyrus, copper, tin and lead ingots), the trade balance was considerably weighted in India's favor. The balance of payments had to be met in precious metals, either gold or silver coinage, or other valuables like red coral (i.e. the hard currency of the ancient world).

The antiquity of Indian textile exports can be established from the records of the Greek geographer Strabo (63 B.C. – 20 A.D.) and from the first century Greek source Periplus, which mentions the Gujarati port of Barygaza (Broach) as exporting a variety of textiles. Archaeological evidence from Mohenjo-Daro, establishes that the complex technology of mordant dyeing had been known in the subcontinent from at least the second millennium B.C. The use of printing blocks in India may go as far back as 3000 B.C. and some historians are of the view that India may have been the original home of textile printing.

The harbor of Kodungallur is very ancient. Even a hundred years before the birth of Lord Jesus, the city had established trade links with Asia Minor and Syria, which were under the Roman Empire and also Egypt. Even in those good old days, on an average, at least one shipload of cargo left daily from Egypt for Kodungallur. It is said that the major chunk of our country's export business took place through the harbor, because of which very many ships always berthed in this harbor. There were also copious
numbers of go-downs, spacious through fares, which facilitated healthy and brisk trade. Historical accounts of renowned foreign scholars and our own 'Purananuru' bear testimony to these facts.

Many records further declare that merchandise like pepper, cardamom, spices, sandal, ivory, and muslin, silk, pearl and the like were exported. Liquors, porcelain, glassware, chandeliers, tin, lead and such commodities were imported. Because of such massive and brisk trade activities, a sizable portion of the Roman wealth was brought over to India through Kodungallur. They further promulgate that by exporting pepper, otherwise known as 'Black Gold', pure gold was imported into India.  

**Impact of war between Persia and Rome on trade**

In 331 B.C. the conquests of Alexander the Great united West Asian culture with Greek culture, and created one trade world from India to Spain. This further increased the amount of trading that was going on. The Hellenistic period was one of great expansion of trade and cities. After Alexander's death, the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms of The Hellenistic Age maintained trade contacts with India over two routes, one by Land and the other by sea. The most frequented route was the caravan road that began in Syria or Asia Minor, crossed Mesopotamia, then skirted the Iranian plateau to either Bactra (modern Balkh) or Kandahar before crossing the Hindu Kush to reach Taxila in India.

The sea route began either at the Red Sea ports of Egypt or at the head of the Persian Gulf and moved along the coast to India. At the same time, Rome was gradually conquering the Mediterranean and trade was expanding through that means as well. Under the Han Dynasty, Chinese people also began to trade more with their neighbors and as far as Rome.

The establishment of the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire in the first century B.C. also increased trade, as a trader could go from India all the way to England.
and cross only one border. Arabian trade routes to India became very important to the Romans, because they were often at war with the Parthians, and later with the Sassanids.

The wars between Rome and the Parthian Empire, which took place roughly from 53 B.C. to 217 A.D., were a unique episode in classical history. Although Rome conquered nearly the entire civilized world around the Mediterranean, Rome could never conquer Parthia.

When Roman expansion reached Mesopotamia, the Parthian Empire had already been prospering as a major power whose outskirts reached far into the east and trade routes ran deep into China. When Roman and Parthian borders finally met, the centuries that followed were a time of diplomacy and war between two empires of distinct cultures and methods of war.  

Trade was the other major driver of transnational flows of goods, information, and people across the Near East. Roman and Hellenistic interests in the region were not entirely strategic and political. Trade routes across Arabia, Egypt, and onto the Indian Ocean were also of considerable importance. Parthia, in effect, became one of the links in east-west trade, for about 115 B.C. Mithridates [II of Parthia] received an embassy from the Emperor of China, and the two rulers concluded a treaty designed to facilitate the movement of international commerce in which Iran, as a transit state, formed a vitally important link. Parthian coins have been found in the Caucasus, the Volga region, and even in eastern Turkistan, indicating extensive trade networks reaching from Durra Europos (Syria) to Merv (Turkmenistan), while the Parthians also had a share in trade routes that in part bypassed Parthia: - helped open Roman trade Rome's interest in the region went beyond the matter of imperial glory for its own sake. The issues were significant economic interests as well were quite significant. In the middle of the first century, the Kushans, a group belonging to the confederation of the Yueh-chi or Tokhari, under their king Kujula Kadphises, came south out of Central Asia and occupied Bactria, apparently seized Merv from the Parthians, and established the Kushan frontier at Hyrcania.
Thus, when Hyrcania, with the Kushans on its northern and eastern flanks, attempted to break away from Parthia and assert its independence in 58 A.D., this provided Rome with the opportunity, by means of an alliance with Hyrcania, to establish an Important trade route to China and India. Goods from the east were now able to pass down the Oxus, cross the Caspian Sea, and connect with the Black Sea through the Cyrus River, without the need to cross Parthian territory at any point.36

Palmyra would come to exhibit Semitic, Aramaic, Babylonian, Greek, Parthian (especially in artistic conventions), Iranian and Roman elements in its language, culture and administrative structures, clearly indicating its east-west linkages across key trade routes. 37 It had a large caravanserai, as well as temples of Bel, Arsu and Azizu.38 The long periods of relative peace between Rome and Parthia allowed Palmyra to flourish as a caravan city that hosted a network of expatriate trading communities stretching from the Mediterranean deep into the Parthian empire and as far as India, with its merchants also owning ships in 'both Roman and Parthian ports'. Palmyra would evolve from a prosperous caravan city to virtual autonomy, followed by a final effort to set up itself as a powerful and independent kingdom under Odenath and Zenobia, leading to its eventual crushing by Roman forces in A.D. 272, reducing it to 'little more than a cross-road oasis', with trade diverted in part to Aleppo and Chalcis.39

Other trade and 'border' cities, small states and fortified cities acted as conduits for trade and cultural contact. These included at various times: Edessa (used for a time by emperor Constantius as his 'forward headquarters, later on the centre of the independent kingdom of Osrhoene), nearby Comagene, Petra, Nisibis (a key strategic fortified city more important in trading terms after the destruction of Palmyra), Amida, Gerasa (Jerash), Singara (heavily fortified by the Romans), Carrhae (Harran), Callinicum (Raqqa, a trade centre), Gordyene and Hatra, which had been heavily fortified by the Parthians. More widely, Merv, Petra, Zeugma, Antioch, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, and Damascus formed part of extensive east-west trade networks.40
Parthia became the controlling focus of the region interposed between the Hellenistic world and the great cultural systems of India, Central Asia and China.

**Sea Traffic to India**

By the late first century B.C., after Egypt and Syria had succumbed to Rome, Roman capital and appetite for the luxury goods of ivory, pearls, spices, dyes, and cotton - greatly stimulated trade with the East. By this time, however, the existing trade routes had serious disadvantages. The Parthians, whose kingdom extended from the Euphrates to the borders of Bactria, were levying heavy tolls on the caravan trade, and the Sabaean Arabs of southwest Arabia had cut off the Red Sea route at Aden and were in control of much of the overseas trade with India. From Aden, the Sabaean sent Indian goods north by caravan to Petra, which grew rich as a distribution point to Egypt via Gaza and to the north via Damascus.

Augustus broke the hold of the Parthian and Arab middlemen on the Eastern trade by establishing direct commercial connections by sea with India. By 1B.C., he had reopened the Red Sea by forcing the Sabaean out of Aden and converting it into a Roman naval base. Ships were soon sailing from Aden directly to India across the Arabian Sea, blown by the monsoon winds recently discovered by a Greek mariner named Hippalus. From May to October the monsoon blows from the southwest across the Arabian Sea, while the counter monsoon blows from the northeast between November and March. Thus, direct round-trip voyages, eliminating middlemen and the tedious journey along the coasts, could be made in eight months. Strabo, a Greek geographer during the time of Augustus, stated that 120 ships sailed to India every year from Egyptian ports. Augustus claimed that "to me were sent embassies of kings from India," probably to specify the towns within the Roman Empire and in India where foreign merchants might freely conduct their business and practice their own customs and religions.

During the first century A.D., Roman-financed ships reached the rich markets of southern India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Christianity may have reached India at this time. Indian Christians claim that their small group of about 2 million was founded by St.
Thomas, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, who may have sailed to India about A.D. 50. In A.D. 166, according to the Chinese History of the Later Han Dynasty, some merchants from Ta Ch'in ("Great Ch'in," the Chinese name for Rome), claiming to represent "King Antun" (the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus), arrived in South China by sea across the Bay of Bengal and around the Malay Peninsula.

Trade developed greatly under the Parthians and many Parthian coins have been found beyond its ancient boundaries. M. E. Masson reports finds of these in Volga, in the Caucasus, in Chinese Turkistan and elsewhere. Parthian art objects have also been found in Olbia and other sites in south Russia.

Eastward Mithridates I extended his control into Margiana, Aria and Bactria, thus completing Parthian control of the overland trade routes between east and west, the Silk Road and the Persian Royal Road. This control of trade was to be the foundation of Parthian wealth and power, and was jealously guarded by the Arsacids, who always attempted to maintain direct control over the lands through which the major trade routes passed.

**Role of Silk road in Parthian trade with India-China- Rome**

The silk industry in China can be traced back to the second millennium B.C. It seemed that a major part of the workforce of that time was involved in the production of silk. In the second half of the thirteenth century, the silk industry in China had reached the same level of sophistication as the European industry of the eighteenth century. The delicate goods would reach the markets in Persia and Rome through a long route that came to be known as the Silk Road. The road stretched from a city which is now called Hsian, in China's Chanxi Province, and passed through the southern part of Gobi Desert to reach western Turkistan. It then passed through Sin Kiang and Kashghar to reach Jihun. After passing through such major cities of the time as Samarkand, Bukhara and Merv, the Silk Road then reached the Iranian border. In Iran, the Silk Road connected the cities of Tous, Neishapour, Damghan, Gorgan, and Rey before it divided in Qazvin. One of its branches went toward Azarbaijan and Trabazan, and the other branch ran through
Hamadan, Baghdad or Mosul, Antakya and Sardis to reach Istanbul and then Rome via the Mediterranean Sea.

The road with its branches connected India to Tous via Peshawar, Kheibar, Kabul, Qandahar and Herat. A vast part of this road was under the control of the Soghdian and Ayghouri caravans. The caravans connected the big cities located along the Silk Road. Economic exchanges between the West and the East were carried out by the caravans. Caravans laden with silk from China, spices and precious stones from India, silver goods from Iran, Byzantine cloths, turkic slaves, Afrasiabian ceramics and many other goods, moved through the Kara-Kum and Kyzyl-Kum deserts, the boundless steppes of Sary-Arka; passed over the ridges of the Pamirs and Tien-Shan, the Altai and the Karatau Mountains; crossed the rivers Murgab and Amu Darya, Syr Darya and Djaik. Realizing the economic significance of the Silk Road, some countries coveted the riches and prosperity that this road would bring to any place that was on its route. India was one such country which was able to utilize the Silk Road to export its cotton products, herbal medicines, precious stones, jewelry, and iron and steel products.⁴²

(Map.5) Silk Road (Source:www.schoolnet.ir/~zeynab/pages/groups/english/silk.htm)
The Parthian dynasty ruling over Persia made huge profits from customs duties levied on goods transported on the Road that stretched from Euphrates to Turkistan in China and then joined the Silk Road. The Parthian dynasty, which was in favor of expanding East-West trade relations, closely supervised the road. The Silk Road linked various civilizations. Although it is not known exactly when the road was built, its remains date back to the pre-Christian era. This road made a great contribution to the development of human civilization. In Iran, the Silk Road was of special importance. Considering the role of silk in ancient times, it can be said that the history of Iran and the Silk Road were intertwined. The Silk Road connected old centers of Iranian civilization that were located along the route. The trade and cultural exchange between the two great countries of Iran and China were carried out via the Silk Road.

During the Parthian era, the Silk Road was an important route for the exchange of goods between various countries. Some steps were taken to repair and expand the Silk Road during the reign of the Parthian Emperor Mehrdad II.

In this period Iran signed the first trade agreement with China, which was under the rule of the Huns. Chang Ki Yen was the head of a 100-man delegation that visited Iran. In his account of his travel to Iran, he gave some very interesting information about life in the Parthian Empire. He wrote about a region located on the shores of the Caspian Sea. He said that the people of the region devoted their time to farming. They were especially good at cultivating rice. He went to Babol and Hamadan. According to the Chinese envoy, there were clever businessmen in Iran who made silk and shining paints. In the year 97 A.D., another ambassador named Kam Ying was sent to Iran. After him, another ambassador came to Iran who wrote, "the Romans intend to enter into silk trade with China via Iran but the Parthians are reluctant to let them do so. They themselves want to be the intermediary in China's silk business." During the Parthian era, there were customs offices along Iran's border with other countries. They registered all goods imported into, or exported from, the country and reported those to special canters. Iran, as a country located between China and Europe, played a key role in connecting various cultures and civilizations that existed along the Silk Road. After so many centuries, the
road still invites all governments along its course to expand their ties and revive their old culture and civilization.\textsuperscript{45}

\section*{4.4 Cultural relationship}

\textbf{Culture of Parthian:}

\noindent \textbf{Parthian Carpets}

Most historians substantiate the fact that making thread out of animal wool and weaving carpets out of wool and thread began and thrived at the time of Parthian kings in Iran. The histories of Tabari and Noruznameh testify to this fact with the authors of both attributing knitting and cloth making to the time of the Parthian dynasty.

The most authoritative source available in this regard is the Shahnameh by Hakim Abolqassem Ferdowsi which attributes the Parthians as the first Iranians knitting and spinning.

In the Kozlov Collection (Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg), there is a fragment of Parthian wool embroidery dated to the first century B.C. to first century A.D. The face is of startling individuality and comparable to the contemporary numismatic portraits. Pope finds in this portrait a worthy antecedent of the Sassanids metal relief portraits.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{Parthian Rhytons}

Parthian craftsmen created exquisitely beautiful drinking horns called rhytons from metal and other materials such as ivory. The animals on these vessels included the ram, horse, bull, ibex, supernatural creatures, and female divinities; some bear royal inscriptions. Rhytons of precious materials were luxury wares probably used at royal courts such as the Ivory rhyton in the collection of the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

\textbf{Parthian Jewelry}

The Parthians were so much attached to dazzling makeup and ornaments, which was popular in the east of Iran and which they had learned from the dependent nations
that the Goths and Germans were influenced by such ornaments and they even imitated the Parthian beatification style for their make up. Jewelry and make up was so popular among the Parthians that it even stretched to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean and influenced the Merovingians in the later years. They were using various types of adornments, pendants, tiny pins, rings and precious stones, the most delicate and beautiful perfume, beautiful earthenware and glass beads to defy ill omens, ornamented belts and fasteners, fetters (to bind the forehead), hair holders and thousands of other ornaments." 47

**Parthian Architecture**

Parthian architecture was characterized by the use of sun-dried or kiln-baked bricks, with vaults to roof the buildings. The Parthians developed the Iwan, an open-fronted vaulted hall. They are often covered with carved stucco reliefs, some of the finest examples of which are found at Uruk and Ashur. The palace at Ashur has the earliest example of four Iwans opening onto a central square. This form of architecture supplanted Hellenistic styles in Iraq and Iran, and was adopted by the Sassanians and continued to set the model for architecture in the early Islamic period.

While glaze was used on vessels and even coffins in the Parthian period, little architectural evidence exists of glazed brick. On vessels and other glazed items, turquoise and light green glaze were the most popular colors. Fresco painting was more popular for the decoration of buildings.

An architectural form known as ogee to Europeans and zigzag molding to Iranian architects is of Parthian origin. Parthian architects constructed palace walls with cut stones. They also used stucco to render the walls. The themes of their stuccos were geometrical lines and floral designs. In stone carving, a popular theme was equestrian statues in relief.

**Astronomy**

Astronomy was evidently an important part of Parthian science, primarily for calendar purposes. In addition, the Parthian king of kings was called the "brother of the
sun and the moon," perhaps indicating the importance of astrology to the Parthians. The crescent moon and star motifs appear on many coins adjacent to the king's portrait

**Some Parthian Influence on Indian culture:**

The Parthian empire was actively involved in cultural and commercial interactions with India. In later Parthian times, the borderland areas of Kabul, Kandahar and Seistan, which formed part of Gandhara, were also referred to as "white India". The name"Gujarat", the region in western India, is associated with the Gujjar tribe that were partly descended from the Indo-Scythians or Sakas who were Iranian peoples, and fought against the Parthian Empire.

The history of Gujarat from c. 78 to c. 400 is sometimes shown as the Kshatrapa (Satrap) period, when the suzerainty of the Parthian empire was gradually replaced by the Sakas. The Indo-Scythian rulers of this time included Nahapana, Chashtana, Jayadaman and Rudradaman. Over time the rulers assumed Hindu names. Also, the Ranas of Udaipur, the heads of the Sisodia clan of the Rajputs are believed to have originally been Iranians who came to India towards the end of sixth century A.D., The Pallavas (Sanskrit for Pahlavas) are also believed to have originated from Iran.

About the beginning of the Christian era the Indo- Greeks, the Parthians, the Scythians and the Kushans by dint of their political superiority, numerical strength and above all attractive dress patterns appear influencing the Indian mode of dress. Indian are often seen wearing long trousers and short sleeved tunics, a fashion which unlike indigenous Indian costume is tailored to a close fit and varies in length. The aristocracy also seems to have followed the rulers in this respect. In the art of Ajanta some people are dressed undoubtedly in a similar dress. Certain details of this dress such as the pointed ends at the side of the tunic and rows of buttons on the trouser front were, however, Parthian features. These were either directly imitated from the Parthians or learnt through the Scytho- Kusans.
Stavaraka:

Stavaraka seems to have introduced India around the beginning of the Christian era from Iran (Parthian). Its Pahlavi form was Stavrak Varabana, a kind of heavy coat, generally known as a constituent of northern dress was made of it. In the seventh century it was favoured for dress as well as decoration.\(^5\)

Coats of skins were imported at Adulis a west Asian port, from Persia. India may also have imported such products from Persia. In Gandhara sculptures some Figures appear wearing a half–sleeved coat, which by virtue of its stiffness and thickness seems as if made of skin.\(^6\)

Kancuka:

Kancuka thus came in to vogue around the beginning of the Christian era. It became very popular in the Gupta period. The nobility, however, patronized the tailed cut type which was originally a Parthian coat style. In the second and third centuries of the Christian was popular in the Gandhara. Kancuka continued to be a popular dress in the seventh century AD.\(^7\)

Cap:

The fashion of caps became popular in Mathura as well owing to the long Saka rule there. It continued in use during the Gupta period, but the arrival of the Hunas in fifth century A.D. added to the popularity of the conical Phrygian cap. The Turkmen cap popular in the Kashmir region was probably introduced by the Scythians from central Asia. The fashion of the squat caps met at Mathura may have however, come from Iran.\(^8\)

Acchadana (Sheath):

Acchadana an apron worn around the shoulders with a knot on the chest in front was originally an Iranian dress. (Parthian). The depiction of Surya and his attendants in Acchandana on the Iranian pattern in the art of Mathura also suggests this. It continued to be popular in the seventh century A.D.\(^9\)
Alamkara (Ornaments):

The extent of foreign impact on Indian jewelry is best indicated by the archaeological discoveries of Taxila. The ornament types seen here reflect Scytho-Parthian, Kusana and Hellenistic cultural trends in the life of the country. The vogue for incrusting jewelry which arose at Taxila in the first century A.D. was probably a result of Parthian influence. 57

Prasadhana (Toilet):

Some toilet objects also came into vogue due to foreign impact is indicated by the Taxila finds. Some copper mirror types exclusive to the Saka-Parthian strata at Sirkap are clearly copied from the western prototypes. 58

Trace of Buddhism in Ancient Iran (Parthian Era)

A joint Iranian-Japanese archeological team found out the traces of Buddhism in an area near Sabzevar city in Khorasan province. Architectural style similar to Buddhism temples, local narrations, the similarity between Sufism and Buddhism, and the historical evidence all indicate the existence of tendency toward Buddhism in Iran during Ancient times.

According to Hamid Fahimi, head of joint Iranian-Japanese team, “The joint Iranian-Japanese team started excavations in this historical site in order to find traces of Buddhism in ancient Iran. They believed that they might find one of Buddhism ancient temples in this area.

Last season some excavations were carried out in 19 historical sites in Zanjan, West Azarbaijan, Kurdistan, Hamadan, Central Khurasan, and Khurasan-e Razavi provinces. “Since more evidence from the existence of Buddhism in ancient Iran was found in Pirastir area about 12 kilometers west of Sabzevar city, this area attracted more attention in this respect. Pirastir historical site is located in Pirastir village. The name "stir" is derived from “Sadir” and Sadir means a place where Buddhism temple is situated. Fahimi also believes that many Sufism values have their roots in
Buddhism, and there are many stories in this respect. The story of Ibrahim Adham's life (Ibrahim Adham, a ninth century Sufi of Khorasan, was the Prince of Balkh who governed a large northeastern province in Persia) is very similar to the story of Buddha's life. Therefore, studying Buddhism and Sufism cautiously and compare them with each other will lead to identifying the influence of Buddhism on Sufism beliefs in ancient Persia.\(^5^9\)

According to a Buddhist legend preserved in Pali (an ancient Prakrit language, derived from Sanskrit, which is the scriptural and liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism), the first instance of Buddhism entering Iran seems to have been during the life of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni (6\(^{th}\) century B.C.) The legend speaks of two Merchant brothers from Bactria (modern day Afghanistan) who visited the Buddha in his eighth week of enlightenment, became his disciples and then returned to Balkh (major city of Bactria) to build temples dedicated to him. Whatever the historical validity of this story, there is a strong evidence to show that Balkh did become a major Buddhist region and remained so up until the Arab Muslim invasion of the 7\(^{th}\) century.

Under the reign of King Ashoka of the Indian Maurya dynasty (324-187 B.C.), Buddhism was helped to spread throughout the surrounding region. After his only conquest of Kalinga, Ashoka was so full of sorrow and remorse that he resolved to refrain from violence, took the vows of an upsaka (lay Buddha) and dedicated the rest of his life to helping spread Buddhism to distant parts of his Kingdom. A great number of Buddhist missionaries were sent to spread the teachings of Buddha, and rock edicts set up by Ashoka state that he sent some to his North-West territories.

In 1958, edicts inscribed on rock pillars promulgating the ethical standards of Buddhist teaching were discovered in Qandahar, Afghanistan and in 1962 a long inscription entirely in Greek (later identified as parts of Ashoka’s edicts) was found in the surrounding area. During the first century Balkh was famous throughout the region for its Buddhist temples and the Greek scholar Alexander Polyhistor mentions Buddhism's relationship with Iran and refers to Balkh and its temples specifically. It is widely agreed
that without Ashoka’s patronage of Buddhism, it would have remained another minor Hindu sect as opposed to the world religion it is today.

Legend also attributes the erection of 84,000 stupas (Buddhist memorial monument or a monument or reliquary representing the enlightened mind) to Ashoka and while this figure may be somewhat exaggerated, "The famous 7th century Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang observed a large number of Stupas in the Ashokan style (which were markedly different from the ones built later by the Kushanas) in the north-west, three at Taxila, five in Gandhara three near Jalalabad and dozens in Qandahar" 60

The Greco-Bactrian Kingdom was another major force in the development of the region. "Perhaps the best parallel to the Greek settlement in Bactria would be the British to India in the 19th century".61 The eventual demise of the Maurya dynasty was followed by the weak rule of the Sunga and Kanva respectively. The Greek king of Bactria exploited this period of weak rule and managed to take Gandhara, the Punjab and the Indus valley while his General Menander conquered Pataliputra in Northern India.

During his reign there, Menander adopted a policy of religious tolerance and treated Buddhist communities under his command with benevolence. He was immortalized by a grateful Buddhist monk, in a treatise called the "Milindapanha" or the questions of Menander. There was then the reign of the nomadic Sakas who absorbed some of the Buddhist religion as can be seen by the discovery of Buddhist inscriptions they left behind. The nomadic people known as the Parni, later to become widely known as the Parthians then came to power around 75 A.D. but were defeated by the Kushana Dynasty.

The development of Mahayana Buddhism is closely associated with the Kushan rule and in particular the development of "Ghandaran" Buddhist art, an amalgamation of Greek, Iranian and Indian influences. We will return to examine the phenomenon of Ghandaran art later as it is fundamental in understanding the thin line between influencing and being influenced that is so characteristic of this period and
region. So far it seems that Buddhism had met little or no opposition from "rival"
religions of the time.

This was to change under the Sassanian Dynasty when Zoroastrianism was
declared the state religion of the empire in 224 A.D. Under instruction from the highly
influential Mobad (High Priest) Kartir, Buddhists were persecuted and Buddhist temples
were burnt down. However, contrary to popular belief amongst scholars, there exists very
strong evidence to suggest that around the same time, practising Buddhist communities
continued to exist in places such as Sistan (where the aforementioned Saka steppe tribe
eventually settled), Baluchestan and Khorasan.

Recent excavations in Khorasan have unearthed coins bearing the head of
Buddha, following the Greek influenced tradition of coins bearing religious deities
significant to the people of the region. A Satrap of Khorasan known only as Piroz minted
the coins. The Buddhists met even more hardship at the hands of the White Huns or
Hephtalites who invaded in the 5th century. Buddhism had a period of calm when the
White Huns were defeated by the more tolerant Turks who allowed the religion to
continue. 62

Buddhism eventually demised with the Arab Muslim invasion of the 7th
century. The Muslims considered Buddhists idol worshipers and did all they could to
destroy "heretical" temples and deface artwork. Even one of the most famous testaments
to Buddhism in the middle east, the massive Buddha rock carvings at Bamiyan were
vandalized, a task that was tragically completed when the Taliban blew up what remained
of the statues in 2001 with explosives, tanks, and anti-aircraft weapons.

The colossal Buddhas were cut at immeasurable cost (probably in the third and
fifth centuries A.D.) into the tall, sandstone cliffs surrounding Bamiyan, an oasis town in
the centre of a long valley that separates the mountain chains of Hindu Kush and Koh-i-
Baba. The taller of the two statues (about 53 meters or 175 feet) is thought to represent
Vairocana, the "Light shining throughout the Universe Buddha". The shorter one (36
meters or 120 feet) probably represents Buddha Sakyamuni, although the local Hazara people believe it depicts a woman.  

The two colossi must once have been a truly awesome sight, visible for miles, with copper masks for faces and copper-covered hands. Vairocana's robes were painted red and Sakyamuni's blue. These towering, transcendental images were key symbols in the rise of Mahayana Buddhist teachings, which emphasized the ability of everyone, not just monks, to achieve enlightenment. While the dates of the statues are somewhat equivocal, the aforementioned Buddhist monk Hsuan-Tsang, who traveled to India to bring back to China copies of the original sutras of the Buddha's teachings, bore witness to the statues in 630-31 A.D.  

Iran and Buddhism: Mutual influences:

As mentioned before, the relationship between Iranian people and Buddhism begins very early in the Buddhist timeline, the Pali legend even claiming that the historical Buddha had two Iranian disciples. Also, "most of the early translations of Buddhist texts are attributed to Monks from western central Asia, amongst them Iranians such as Sogdians and Parthians".  

In the same way that Iranian scholars famously contributed to the propagation of Islam during the Muslim period, Iranian scholars were also instrumental in the spread of Buddhism.  

According to Chinese historical sources, the first missionary Buddhist monks to travel to China were Parsi scholars, amongst them An-Shi-Kao (pinyin Ān Shígāo) was a prince of Parthia, nicknamed the "Parthian Marquis", who renounced his throne in order to serve as a Buddhist missionary monk.  

The prefix An in An Shih Kao's name is an abbreviation of Anxi, meaning Parthia in ancient Chinese: Anxi is a transcription of "Arsaces", the founder of the Arsacid Dynasty of Parthia. Most Parthian visitors who took a Chinese name received the An prefix to indicate their origin.
In 148, An Shih Kao arrived in China at the Han Dynasty capital of Loyang, where he set up a centre for the translation of Buddhist texts. He translated thirty-five texts from the Theravada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism.

An -Shih-Kao is the first Buddhist missionary to China to be named in Chinese sources. Another Parthian monk named An Hsuan is also said to have joined An-Shih-Kao at Loyang around 181 A.D., where he took charge of translating Mahayana texts.  

There are also several other mentions of Iranian people in Chinese sources; An Huvan was another prince from the Parthian tribe who has been praised for his good morals and motives. An- Huvan also preached Buddhism in China and grew so famous in virtue that he was appointed as a colonel of the cavalry by the Chinese emperor.

The most obvious example of Iran's influence on Buddhism is to be found in "Gandharan" the style of art that developed under the Kushans and is closely linked with the development of Mahayana Buddhism. Scholars agree that, "It seems probable that both [development of art as well as development of Mahayana school of thought] arose from the contact between Greek, Iranian (Parthian) and Indian influences".  

One of the main characteristics of Gandharan art is that we can see the first instance of the representation of the Buddha in human form, previously he was considered beyond the reach of artists. A main characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism is that it stresses the idea that the historical Buddha should be regarded as one of many Buddhas as opposed to the idea of an unattainable ideal. Also we begin to see the idea of the layman attaining Enlightenment emerging in Mahayana and this is reflected in the more frequent portrayal of laymen in religious Buddhist art.

The oldest dated monument attesting Mahayana Buddhism was found in Gandhara dating back to the late 1st century A.D. and is in a distinct Indian/Iranian Shahnameh style. Also the famous image of the "Persian Boddhisattva", a Khotanese painted panel from 8th century A.D., stylistically resembles a Bodhisattva while showing
a very strong influence of the Persian art of the period, the face even closely resembles that of the Persian hero from the Shahnameh, Rostam.

Iranian influence is also found in the figure of the Buddha Amitabha, the way he is so closely related to eternal light and endless life is very similar to the Iranian Time God, Zurvan. Scholars agree that this notion of Iranian influence is certainly possible especially during the formative phase of Central Asia when Iranian and Indian concepts came into close contact.

The process of cultural influence worked both ways and Buddhism has also left its mark on Iran. The town Bukhara derived its name from "Bahara" from the Sanskrit "Vahara" meaning temple or holy place but referring to a Buddhist place of worship specifically. Sogdians of the time pronounced the phonetic sound "H" as "Kh" therefore the town became known as Bukhara. There are also many villages with "Bahar" in their names that still exist to this day. Buddhism was at one point adopted as the state religion of the Sassanian court under King Piroz, although this may have been for more political reasons as the King was forced to flee from Persia by the conquering Arabs and adopting Buddhism was a way to gain favour with the Chinese whom he planned to ask for military assistance.

Although many ancient sources are fragmentary and it is at times hard to establish an accurate picture of the past, it is clear to see not only the influential role that Buddhism played in the development of Iranian civilization but also the importance of the past that Iranians played in the development of Buddhism, an often-overlooked part of Buddhist history.

**Gandhara Art**

Gandhāra (also Ghandara, Ghandahra, Chandahara, and Persian Gandara, Waihind) (Urdu: گندھارا and Persian: گندهارا) is the name of an ancient Mahajanapada in the present day northern Pakistan (the North-West Frontier Province and parts of northern Punjab and Kashmir) and eastern Afghanistan. Gandhara was located mainly in the vale
of Peshawar, the Potohar plateau and on the northern side of the Kabul River. Its main cities were Peshawar and Taxila.

The Kingdom of Gandhara lasted from the 6th Century B.C. to the 11th Century A.D. It attained its height from the 1st century to the 5th Century A.D. under Buddhist Kushan Kings. After it was conquered by Mahmood of Ghazni in 1021 A.D., the name Gandhara disappeared. During the Muslim period the area was administered from Lahore or from Kabul. During Mughal times the area was part of Kabul province.68

The Gandharas were settled since the Vedic times on the banks of Kabul River (river Kubha or Kabol) up to its mouth into Indus. The region is known as Peshawar Valley. Later the Gandharas crossed the Indus and included parts of north-west Punjab of Pakistan. Gandhara was located on the grand northern high road (Uttarapatha) and was a centre of international commercial activities. It was an important channel of communication with ancient Iran and Central Asia.

The boundaries of Gandhara varied throughout history. Sometime the Peshawar valley and Taxila were collectively referred to as Gandhara. The Swat valley was also sometimes included. However, the heart of Gandhara was always the Peshawar valley. The kingdom was ruled from capitals at Pushkalavati (Charsadda), Taxila, Purushapura (Peshawar) and in its final days from Udabhandapura (Hund) on the Indus.69

**Gandhara under Graeco-Bactrians, Sakas and Indo-Parthians**

The decline of the Empire left the sub-continent open to Greco-Bactrian expansion. Southern Afghanistan was absorbed by Demetrius of Bactria in 180 B.C. Around about 185 B.C., Demetrius, King of Bactria invaded and conquered Gandhara and the Punjab. Later, wars between different groups of Greek settlers of Bactria resulted in the independence of Gandhara from Bactria and the formation of the Indo-Greek kingdom. Menander was the most famous king. He ruled from Taxila and later from Sagala (Sialkot). He rebuilt Taxila (Sirkap) and Pushkalavati. He became Buddhist and is
remembered in Buddhists records due to his discussions with a great Buddhist philosopher in the book Milinda Panha.

Around the time of Menander’s death in 140 B.C., Kushans overran Bactria and ended Greek rule there. Around 80 B.C., Sakas, diverted by their Parthian cousins from Iran moved into Gandhara and other parts of Pakistan and Western India. The most famous king of Sakas was Mauues who established himself in Gandhara. The Pashtu (or Pakhtu) now spoken in North Western Pakistan and Afghanistan is said to be based on Saka’s language.

By 90 B.C. Parthians took control of eastern Iran and around 50 B.C. put an end to the last remnants of Greek rule in Afghanistan. By around 7 A.D. an Indo-Parthian dynasty succeeded in taking control of Gandhara. Parthians continued to support Greek artistic traditions in Gandhara. The start of the Gandharan Greco-Buddhist art is dated to the period between 50 B.C. and 75 A.D. Around 40 A.D. Thomas the Apostle visited India and encountered the king Gondophares.

**Discovery of Gandhara**

By the time Gandhara absorbed in to Mahmood of Ghazni’s Empire, Buddhist buildings were already in ruins and Gandhara Art had been forgotten. After Al-Biruni, Kashmiri writer Kahana wrote his book Rajatarangini in 1148 A.D. He recorded events about Gandhara, its last royal dynasty and capital Udabhandapura. The history and art of the Gandhara remained unknown to the inhabitants of the area and rest of the world until 19th century.

In 19th Century A.D., British soldiers and administrators started taking interest in the ancient history of the Indian Subcontinent. In the 1830s coins of the post Ashoka period were discovered and in the same period Chinese travelogues were translated. Charles Masson, James Prinsep and Cunningham deciphered the Kharosthi script in 1838.
Chinese records provided locations and site plans of Buddhists shrines. Along with the discovery of coins, these records provided necessary clues to piece together the history of Gandhara.

In 1848 Cunningham found Gandhara sculptures north of Peshawar. He also identified the site of Taxila in the 1860 From then on a large number of Buddhist statues were being discovered in the Peshawar valley.

Marshal performed an excavation of Taxila from 1912 to 1934. He discovered Greek, Parthian, and Kushan cities and a large number of stupas and monasteries. These discoveries helped to piece together much more of the chronology of the history of Gandhara and its art.

After 1947 Ahmed Hassan Dani and the Archaeology Department of Peshawar University made a number of discoveries in the Peshawar and Swat Valleys.

Gandhāra is noted for the distinctive Gandhāra style of Buddhist art, a consequence of merger of Greek, Syrian, Persian and Indian art traditions. The development of this form of art started in Parthian Period (50 B.C. – 75 A.D.). Gandhāran style flourished and achieved its peak during the Kushan period from 1st Century to 5th Century. It declined and suffered destruction after invasion of the White Huns in the 5th century.

Indo-Parthians soldiers in military attire are sometimes represented in Buddhist friezes in the art of Gandhara (particularly in Buner relies). They are depicted in ample tunics with trousers, with a pointed hood and heavy straight sword as a weapon. With the right hand, some of them are forming the Karana mudra against evil spirits. In Gandhara, such friezes were used as decorations on the pedestals of Buddhist stupas. They are contemporary with other friezes representing people in purely Greek attire, hinting at an intermixing of Indo-Parthians (holding military power) and Indo-Greeks (confined, under
Indo-Parthian rule, to civilian life). Another relief is known where the same types of soldiers are playing musical instruments.
Notes and References

1. Basham, op.cit., p.49.
2. Jorfi, op.cit., p.70.
3. Ibid, p. 69.
4. Parthia derives from Latin Parthia, from Old persian Parthava-, a dialectical variant of the stem Parsa-, from which Persian derives. Ashkanian appears to have come from the Sassanian chronicles, from which they entered in Ferdowsi's epic poem Shahnama.
5. Majumdar, op.cit., p.120.
9. Ibid.
10. All the information under this sub-heading is taken from the following source:
12. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p.47.
22. periplus, p.6. cited in Thapliya, Ibid.
23. Thapival, Ibid., p.58.
25. Ibid.
27. Thapival, ibid., p. 89-93.
28. Ibid., p. 94.
29. Ibid., p. 98.
30. www.ancientindia.co.uk/staff/indus/resources.html.
34. Jeffrey, op.cit., p.11.
37. Ivanovich, op.cit., pp. 133,149-150.
40. Ibid., pp.260-261.
45. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Thapliyal, op.cit., p.44.
52. Ibid., p.49.
53. Ibid., p.51.
54. Ibid., p.60.
55. Ibid., p.56.
56. Ibid., p.60.
57. Ibid., p.72.
58. Ibid., p.79.