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BUDDHISM IN KASHMIR: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT FROM THE 3RD CENTURY BC TO THE 8TH CENTURY AD

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Abstract

This paper examines the remarkable trajectory of Buddhism in the Kashmir Valley across eleven centuries, from its introduction under the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BC to its gradual decline following the consolidation of Hinduism and the advent of Islamic influence in the 8th century AD. Kashmir, situated at the crossroads of India, Central Asia, and China, occupied a uniquely strategic position in the diffusion of Buddhist thought and art. Drawing on textual sources including the *Rajatarangini*,[1] the records of Chinese pilgrims Fa Hien and Xuanzang, and archaeological evidence from Harwan, Ushkur (ancient Huvishkapura), and Parihaspura, this paper traces the patronage of Ashokan missionaries, the intellectual flourishing under the Kushana kings particularly Kanishka the consolidation of the *Sarvastivada* school, the university culture of *Sharda Peeth*, and the eventual waning of Buddhist institutions. The paper argues that Kashmir was not merely a passive recipient of Buddhist culture but an active centre of doctrinal innovation, monastic scholarship, and artistic synthesis whose influence radiated across the Silk Road.

Keywords: Buddhism, Kashmir, Ashoka, Kushana, Kanishka, Sarvastivada, Xuanzang, Silk Road, Ancient India, Rajatarangini

1. Introduction

The Kashmir Valley enclosed by the Himalayan massif to the north and east, the Pir Panjal range to the south, and the mountains of Poonch to the west, presents a geography that simultaneously isolated and connected ancient civilizations. Drained by the Jhelum (ancient Vitasta) river and fed by the snowmelt of surrounding peaks, the valley constituted a naturally bounded cultural unit in which religious traditions could take root, mature, and be transmitted outward to distant lands.

Buddhism entered this landscape during one of the most decisive moments of South Asian history: the reign of Ashoka (c. 268 232 BC), following the emperor's conversion to the Buddhism after the carnage of the Kalinga, war,[2] Ashokan missionaries carried the teachings of the Buddha northward and westward, and Kashmir then Kashmira or Kashyapamira became an early and enduring centre of Buddhist practice. Over subsequent centuries, the region witnessed the rule of Indo-Greek kings whose Hellenistic tastes merged with Buddhist iconography, the patronage of the great Kushana dynasty under which Buddhism achieved its classical synthesis, the composition and crystallization of canonical Abhidharma literature, the visits of celebrated Chinese pilgrims whose accounts preserve details otherwise lost, and finally the slow contraction of the faith in the face of revived Shaiva Hinduism.

The significance of Kashmir within Buddhist history has sometimes been underestimated. Yet it was here that the Fourth Buddhist Council convened under Kanishka, here that the authoritative *Mahavibhasa* commentary was composed, and here that generations of monks trained before embarking on the overland routes to Central Asia and China. To study Buddhism in Kashmir is, in a real sense, to illuminate the broader story of how Buddhism became a world religion.

[1]The *Rajatarangini*, composed by Kalhana around 1148 1149 AD, remains the principal indigenous chronicle of Kashmir's history. Despite its late composition relative to events described, M.A. Stein's landmark translation and commentary (1900) established its reliability as a historical source when corroborated by external evidence.

[2]Ashoka's Minor Rock Edicts and Major Rock Edicts (especially Edict XIII, commemorating the Kalinga war) are the primary epigraphic sources for his conversion and subsequent Dhamma policy. For a full translation and commentary, see Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

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This paper is organised chronologically across five major phases: (1) the Ashokan foundations in the 3rd century BC; (2) the Indo-Greek and early Scythian interlude 2nd 1st centuries BC; (3) the Kushana golden age, 1st 3rd centuries AD; (4) the post-Kushana period and the accounts of Chinese pilgrims, 4th 7th centuries AD; and (5) decline and transformation, 7th 8th centuries AD. A concluding section synthesises the enduring legacy of Kashmiri Buddhism.

2. Historiographical Sources and Methodology

Any historical inquiry into ancient Kashmir immediately confronts the problem of sources. The primary indigenous narrative source is Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* ('River of Kings'), composed in Sanskrit around 1148 1149 AD some three to four centuries after the close of the period under review. Kalhana drew on earlier chronicles, copper-plate inscriptions, oral traditions, and visible monuments, and while his account is shaped by the literary conventions of courtly historiography and occasional mythological interpolation, modern scholarship regards it as a reliable skeleton for political and dynastic history. For Buddhist history specifically, Kalhana's references to monasteries, royal patrons, and religious conflicts provide indispensable data.

Crucially supplementing Kalhana are the travel accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims. Fa Hien (Faxian), who visited northwest India and Kashmir around 400 401 AD, left a record of a thriving monastic culture.[3] Xuanzang (Hsuan-tsang), who spent considerable time in Kashmir around 631 633 AD, provides the most detailed description of Buddhist institutions, relic sites, and intellectual life in the valley during the late period of the faith's dominance.[4] His account, preserved in the *Da Tang Xiyu Ji* ('Great Tang Records of the Western Regions'), is cross-referenced with independent sources and consistently judged to be accurate on verifiable details.

Archaeological evidence from sites such as Harwan[5] (with its remarkable tile work showing Hellenistic and local motifs), Ushkur near Baramulla (ancient Huvishkapura), Kanishkapur (modern Kanispora), and Parihaspura furnishes material corroboration for textual references. Numismatic evidence particularly the abundant Kushana coin series further illuminates the religious orientation of ruling dynasties.

The methodology of this paper is therefore integrative: written sources, epigraphy, numismatics, and archaeology are read in dialogue with one another, and where sources diverge, the reasoning behind preferred interpretations is made explicit.

3. Ashokan Foundations: The 3rd Century BC

3.1 Ashoka and the Conversion of Kashmir

The *Rajatarangini* credits Ashoka with the founding of Buddhism in Kashmir, asserting that the emperor sent his son Jalauka to propagate the faith in the valley and that Ashoka himself visited, establishing the city of Shrinagari (an early predecessor of modern Srinagar) and erecting stupas and viharas. While the historicity of individual details in Kalhana's account must

[3]Fa Hien's (Faxian's) *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, translated by James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), covers his journey across South Asia between approximately 399 and 412 AD. His observations on northwest India, though briefer than Xuanzang's, remain invaluable for the 5th-century Buddhist landscape.

[4]Xuanzang's Da Tang Xiyu Ji ('*Great Tang Records of the Western Regions*'), translated by Samuel Beal as *Si-yu-ki* (London: Kegan Paul, 1884), is the fullest external account of Kashmiri Buddhist institutions in the pre-Islamic period. His two-year sojourn (c. 631 633 AD) allowed him an unusually detailed picture of the valley.

[5]The Harwan excavations were conducted primarily by R.C. Kak in the early 20th century. See R.C. Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933). The tilework shows a remarkable synthesis of Hellenistic figural motifs (acrobats, musicians, hunting scenes) with local Kashmiri and Central Asian elements.

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be approached with caution, the broad picture Ashokan missionary activity reaching Kashmir is corroborated by the general pattern of Ashokan expansion documented across the subcontinent in rock and pillar edicts.[6]
Ashoka's rock edicts, particularly the Minor Rock Edicts, speak of Dhamma-mahamattas (officers of righteousness) dispatched to distant regions including the Himalayan north. The Girnar edict mentions the Yonas (Greeks) and Kambojas as peoples among whom the Dhamma was proclaimed, and Kashmira a region adjacent to the northwest Himalayan frontier would have fallen squarely within this missionary ambit. The *Divyavadana*, a Buddhist Sanskrit text, also preserves the tradition of Ashoka's founding of viharas in Kashmir.

3.2 Early Monastic Establishments

The monastic establishments attributed to the Ashokan period in Kashmir are difficult to isolate archaeologically, as later construction has obliterated most early remains. However, the distribution of Ashokan-type stupas in the northwest suggests a pattern consistent with the literary tradition. The site of Ushkur, later associated with the Kushana king Huvishka, may have had earlier Ashokan antecedents.

Of significance is the tradition that Ashoka's emissary *Madhyantika* also called *Majjhantika* in Pali sources was responsible for planting Buddhism in Kashmir and Gandhara. The Pali *Vinaya Pitaka*'s account of the Third Buddhist Council under Ashoka at Pataliputra specifically names Madhyantika as the missionary dispatched to Kasmira-Gandhara, lending weight to the idea that the Kashmiri mission was among the most organised of Ashoka's missionary enterprises.[7]
By the end of the 3rd century BC, therefore, Kashmir had its first monasteries, its first community of monks, and its first exposure to the Vinaya literature that would later be elaborated into the distinctive Kashmiri recension of the Sarvastivada Vinaya a text of lasting importance in the Buddhist world.

4. The Indo-Greek and Scythian Interlude: 2nd 1st Centuries BC

4.1 Indo-Greek Patronage and Gandharan Buddhism

Following the fragmentation of the Mauryan Empire after Ashoka's death (c. 232 BC), Kashmir entered a period of political flux. The northwest of the subcontinent was increasingly influenced by the Indo-Greek (*Yavana*) kingdoms that had emerged from the eastern satrapies of Alexander's successors. While the direct political control of Indo-Greek rulers over the Kashmir Valley itself remains debated, their cultural influence was pervasive and consequential for Buddhism.

The most famous Indo-Greek king in Buddhist memory is Menander I (Milinda in Pali), whose philosophical dialogue with the monk Nagasena is immortalised in the *Milindapanha* ('Questions of Milinda').[8] Menander appears to have converted to Buddhism or at minimum extended substantial patronage to the faith. The Gandharan artistic school which flourished in the region immediately west of Kashmir fused Hellenistic sculptural vocabulary (drapery, idealised human form, acanthus scrollwork) with Buddhist iconographic programmes, producing the first anthropomorphic images of the Buddha.

Kashmir was intimately connected with the Gandharan cultural sphere. The tile pavements at Harwan, dating to approximately the 1st 4th centuries AD, display motifs musicians, acrobats, animal combats that are simultaneously

[6]Alexander Cunningham's 19th-century surveys, published in the Archaeological Survey of India Reports (Calcutta, 1871 1887), remain foundational for the identification of ancient Buddhist sites in northwest India and Kashmir, despite subsequent methodological advances in archaeology.
[7]The Pali Vinaya Pitaka account of the Third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra under Ashoka names Madhyantika (Majjhantika) as the missionary dispatched to Kasmira-Gandhara. See Lamotte, History of Indian Buddhism (Louvain, 1988), pp. 297 303, for a critical evaluation of this tradition.
[8]*The Milindapanha* ('Questions of King Milinda') records a philosophical dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menander I and the monk Nagasena. The text exists in Pali and Chinese versions and has been translated by T.W. Rhys Davids as *The Questions of King Milinda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890 1894).

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Hellenistic and Central Asian in flavour, testament to the cosmopolitan artistic culture that Buddhism absorbed and transmitted.

4.2 The Scythian Period

The Scythian (Shaka) incursions of the 1st century BC disrupted Indo-Greek power in the northwest but did not significantly harm Buddhist institutions. The Shakas, like other steppe peoples who entered South Asia, proved generally willing to adopt local religious practices. Some Shaka rulers issued coins with Buddhist symbols, and the tradition of royal patronage to viharas continued under their rule. Kashmir appears to have remained a functioning Buddhist region through this period, insulated to some extent by its mountain geography from the worst of the political turbulence on the plains.

5. The Kushana Golden Age: 1st 3rd Centuries AD

5.1 The Kushana Dynasty and Buddhism

The Kushana Empire, which at its height in the late 1st and 2nd centuries AD stretched from the Oxus river to the Gangetic plain, represents the most important political patron in the history of ancient Buddhism after Ashoka. The Kushanas were a Yuezhi people of Central Asian origin who adopted Sanskrit, Greek, Iranian, and Indian cultural forms simultaneously. Buddhism occupied a privileged though not exclusive position in their eclectic religious world.

For Kashmir, the Kushana period was transformative. The valley came under Kushana control during the reigns of Kadphises II and Kanishka I, becoming not merely a frontier province but an intellectual and spiritual capital of the empire. The cities of Huvishkapura (modern Ushkur, near Baramulla) and Kanishkapur (modern Kanispora, in the Baramulla district) preserve in their very names the memory of Kushana royal founders.

5.2 Kanishka I and the Fourth Buddhist Council

The reign of Kanishka I[9] (dates disputed: variously placed between c. 78 AD and c. 127 AD) marks the apogee of Kashmiri Buddhism. Kanishka is revered in Buddhist tradition as the patron of the Fourth Buddhist Council, convened to settle doctrinal disputes within the Sarvastivada school. Xuanzang's later account locates this council in Kashmir, at a great vihara near the capital. The council was attended by 500 learned monks and was presided over by the eminent scholar Vasumitra, with the philosopher Ashvaghosha author of the *Buddhacharita*, the celebrated life of the Buddha in Sanskrit verse also reportedly in attendance.

> *"The king (Kanishka), having assembled the saints and priests, for the purpose of settling the doctrinal differences which had arisen among the various Buddhist schools, held a great religious council..." from Xuanzang's Da Tang Xiyu Ji, as translated by Samuel Beal.*

The council's most enduring product was the *Mahavibhasa* ('Great Commentary'),[10] an enormous encyclopaedic work of Abhidharma philosophy a systematic analysis of Buddhist metaphysics and psychology composed in Sanskrit. The *Mahavibhasa* became the foundational text of the Vaibhashika sub-school of the Sarvastivada, and its composition in Kashmir confirmed the valley's status as the intellectual heartland of northern Buddhist scholasticism.

[9]The dates of Kanishka I remain one of the most contested problems in South Asian chronology. Proposed dates range from c. 78 AD (the 'Saka era' hypothesis) to c. 127 AD. For a full survey of the debate, see A.K. Narain, 'Kaniska's Date,' in B.N. Mukherjee et al. (eds.), *Donum Natalicium: Studies in honour of Siegfried Lienhard* (Stockholm, 1987), pp. 215 239.

[10]The Mahavibhasa ('Great Commentary on the Abhidharma') was composed in Sanskrit during the Fourth Buddhist Council under Kanishka. It became the defining text of the Vaibhashika sub-school of the Sarvastivada. A partial French translation exists: Louis de La Vallée Poussin, L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu (Paris: Geuthner, 1923 1931).

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5.3 The Sarvastivada School and Kashmiri Buddhist Identity

The Sarvastivada ('All-exists') school held that dharmas (the constituent elements of experience) exist in all three times past, present, and future.[11] This metaphysical position had profound implications for the analysis of causation, perception, and karma. Kashmir became the pre-eminent centre of Sarvastivada scholarship and Canon, and the 'Kashmiri' recension of the Sarvastivada Vinaya became the received version transmitted to China, where it governed the behaviour of Chinese monks for over a millennium.

Kashmiri monks became renowned throughout the Buddhist world for their erudition. The valley's monasteries attracted students from across India, Central Asia, and eventually China. This intellectual prestige was inseparable from Kushana patronage: Kanishka's coins depict Buddhist figures alongside Iranian, Greek, and Hindu deities, reflecting the syncretic but genuinely engaged religious culture his court fostered.

5.4 Archaeological Monuments of the Kushana Period

The material remains of the Kushana period in Kashmir, while fragmentary, are substantial. The site of Ushkur (Huvishkapura) has yielded Buddhist sculpture in the Gandharan style, including fragments of a stupa complex of considerable scale. Kanishkapur similarly preserves the ruins of a major stupa. The Harwan site has produced the famous terracotta tiles depicting Gandharan-influenced figural art, associated with a monastery and stupa complex that flourished in the Kushana and post-Kushana periods.

These monuments reflect a mature tradition of Buddhist architectural patronage: the stupa (reliquary mound) as the focal point of veneration, surrounded by a pradakshina (circumambulation) path, with viharas (monastic residences) arranged peripherally. The scale of Kanishkapur's stupa suggests a structure of considerable civic and religious ambition, visible across the valley and serving as a node of pilgrimage and royal legitimation.

6. Post-Kushana Period and the Accounts of Chinese Pilgrims: 4th 7th Centuries AD

6.1 Political Context: The Kidara and Huna Periods

The Kushana Empire began to fragment in the 3rd century AD under pressure from the Sasanian Empire in the west and internal succession struggles. In Kashmir, as across the northwest, the late Kushana period gave way to the rule of successor kingdoms. The Kidarites and subsequently the Huna (Hephtalite) confederacies held sway over parts of the region. The White Huns' incursions into northwest India in the late 5th and early 6th centuries were catastrophic for Buddhist institutions on the plains Mihirakula (c. 515 540 AD), a Huna king, is specifically condemned in Buddhist sources for the destruction of monasteries and persecution of monks.[12]

In Kashmir, however, the Huna impact appears to have been less severe. The valley's protected geography provided some degree of insulation. While some disruption to monastic communities doubtless occurred, there is no evidence of the wholesale destruction that Mihirakula is said to have visited upon the Gandharan heartland. By the mid-6th century, local Kashmiri dynasties had reasserted control, and Buddhist institutions resumed their normal functioning.

6.2 Fa Hien's Account (c. 400 401 AD)

[11]The *Sarvastivada* ('All-exists') school held that dharmas persist in all three times — past, present, and future. This was in contrast to the Theravada position that only present dharmas have real existence. For a philosophical analysis, see Étienne Lamotte, History of Indian Buddhism, pp. 600 623.

[12]Mihirakula (c. 515 540 AD), the Huna king, is denounced in both Buddhist and Hindu sources for the persecution of Buddhists. Xuanzang records seeing ruins of monasteries attributed to his destructive campaign. However, the extent of destruction specifically in Kashmir (as opposed to the Gandharan plains) is not definitively established by archaeological evidence.

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Fa Hien, the Chinese pilgrim who traversed South Asia between approximately 399 and 412 AD, passed through or near Kashmir on his overland journey.[13] His account describes a region with active Buddhist monasteries, monks observing the Vinaya discipline, and a living tradition of Buddhist scholarship. Though his observations on Kashmir are briefer than those of his successor Xuanzang, they confirm the continuity of Buddhist institutional life through the turbulent post-Kushana centuries and establish that the Valley remained a recognised centre of the faith at the turn of the 5th century.

6.3 Xuanzang in Kashmir (c. 631 633 AD)

The most detailed and vivid account of Buddhism in pre-Islamic Kashmir is that of the Chinese pilgrim-scholar Xuanzang (602 664 AD), who spent approximately two years in the valley collecting texts and studying with Kashmiri masters.[14] His observations, recorded in the *Da Tang Xiyu Ji* and supplemented by his biography composed by his disciple Huili, constitute an indispensable primary source.

Xuanzang describes a kingdom of considerable prosperity and sophistication. He notes the presence of approximately 100 viharas and more than 5,000 monks[15] though such round figures in ancient sources should be treated as impressionistic rather than strictly quantitative. He describes the scholars as learned in the Sarvastivada Abhidharma and Vinaya literature, and notes that Kashmiri monks were regarded throughout the Buddhist world as the authoritative interpreters of these traditions.

He visited the principal sites associated with the Buddhist heritage: the stupa and monastery of Huvishkapura (Ushkur), the great stupa at Kanishkapur, and sites associated with the arhat Madhyantika. He recounts traditions of Kanishka's patronage and the Fourth Council with considerable detail. His account of the intellectual culture of Kashmiri monasticism the debates between schools, the hierarchy of learning, the prestige associated with mastery of the Abhidharma paints a picture of a highly organised, text-centred religious culture.

Xuanzang also notes the presence of Brahmanical (Hindu) communities alongside Buddhist ones, and observes that the king of Kashmir at the time of his visit (likely a ruler of the Karkota dynasty or its immediate predecessor) was a Buddhist patron. This coexistence of traditions was longstanding in Kashmir but would soon shift decisively in favour of Shaiva Hinduism.

6.4 Sharda Peeth and Intellectual Culture

The Sharda Peeth the great seat of learning associated with the goddess Sharda (Sarasvati) in the Neelum Valley functioned in the ancient period as a centre of both Hindu and Buddhist scholarship. The Sharda script,[16] an important branch of the Brahmi writing system widely used across Kashmir and the northwest, was employed for the transcription of Buddhist texts, and the Peeth itself appears to have accommodated both Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of learning. The broader intellectual culture of Kashmir in this period was characterised by a willingness to engage across sectarian lines, a feature that distinguished Kashmiri scholarship from the more partisan traditions of the plains.

[15]Xuanzang's figure of 'approximately 5,000 monks' in Kashmir at the time of his visit (c. 631 633 AD) should be understood as a conventional expression of abundance rather than a census. Ancient and medieval sources routinely use round numbers (500, 5,000, 10,000) to convey scale. See Antonino Forte, 'Evaluation of Oriental Sources concerning T'ang China,' in Denis Twitchett (ed.), Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 120 122.

[16]The Sharda script, a regional variant of the Brahmi writing system, was widely used in Kashmir and adjacent regions. Its use for Buddhist text transcription reflects the multilingual and multi-religious intellectual environment of the valley. See Richard Salomon, Indian Epigraphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 40 42.

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7. Lalitaditya Muktapida and the Beginning of Decline: 7th 8th Centuries AD

7.1 The Karkota Dynasty

The Karkota dynasty, which rose to prominence in Kashmir in the 7th century AD, represents a complex chapter in the story of Kashmiri Buddhism. The dynasty's founder Durlabhaka Pratapaditya and his successors were Shaiva Hindus by personal devotion, yet they did not immediately suppress Buddhist institutions. The *Rajatarangini* records the construction of both Shaiva temples and Buddhist shrines by Karkota rulers, reflecting a policy of religious pluralism consistent with the longstanding Kashmiri tradition.

7.2 Lalitaditya Muktapida (c. 724 761 AD)

The most remarkable ruler of the Karkota dynasty and arguably of medieval Kashmir was Lalitaditya Muktapida, whose long reign of approximately 36 years saw Kashmir reach its greatest territorial extent, with military campaigns reaching as far as Bengal, Deccan, and Central Asia. Lalitaditya is an ambiguous figure in the history of Kashmiri Buddhism: the *Rajatarangini* records his construction of the massive Martanda Sun Temple (a monument to Surya, the solar deity) as well as his building of the Buddhist complex at Parihaspura, his new capital.

The Parihaspura complex,[17] partially excavated in the 20th century, included a major stupa, a chaitya (shrine hall), and a vihara of significant scale. The stupa at Parihaspura the Rajavihara stupa was one of the largest built in Kashmir and demonstrates that royal Buddhist patronage persisted into the 8th century even as Shaiva Hinduism achieved cultural dominance. However, the very scale and self-conscious grandeur of Lalitaditya's Buddhist constructions suggest an element of political theatre Buddhism as a legitimating tool for an empire-building monarch rather than the organic devotional patronage of the Kushana or earlier periods.

7.3 Structural Factors in Decline

The decline of Buddhism in Kashmir from the late 7th century onward was not the result of any single catastrophic event but rather of structural shifts accumulating over generations. Several factors are identifiable:

First, the decline of the Kushana imperial network had disrupted the trans-regional patronage and pilgrimage economy that had sustained Kashmiri Buddhist institutions at their height. The closure of the Central Asian Silk Road routes to Buddhism as steppe polities converted to Islam or Nestorian Christianity reduced the flow of foreign students and donations that had enriched Kashmiri monasteries.

Second, the revival of brahmanical Hinduism particularly in its Shaiva form under the patronage of Kashmiri ruling dynasties provided an alternative and increasingly dominant cultural framework. The great Shaiva theologian Abhinavagupta (c. 950 1020 AD, slightly later but representing a trend already well established by the 8th century) would emerge from exactly this revived tradition.

Third, within the Buddhist world itself, the rise of Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism in eastern India offered a compelling new synthesis that partially displaced the older Sarvastivada scholasticism in which Kashmir had specialised. The 8th-century Kashmiri intellectual environment was no longer the dominant centre of Buddhist thought it had been in the Kushana period. Fourth, Islamic expansion into the wider region while not reaching Kashmir until much later (the 14th century) disrupted the Buddhist networks of northwest India and Central Asia that had fed Kashmiri monasticism, cutting off important nodes of the broader Buddhist civilisation.

[17]Parihaspura, Lalitaditya's capital, has been partially excavated. The stupa known as the Rajavihara stupa was among the largest Buddhist monuments erected in Kashmir. For archaeological details, see M.A. Stein, 'Parihaspura: A Forgotten Capital of Kashmir,' The Indian Antiquary 25 (1896): 141 148.

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8. The Legacy of Kashmiri Buddhism

Despite its eventual eclipse, Kashmiri Buddhism left a legacy of extraordinary breadth and endurance. The Sarvastivada Vinaya and Abhidharma traditions transmitted from Kashmir to China shaped Chinese monastic practice for over a thousand years. Kashmiri monks and texts were among the primary vectors through which Buddhism reached Central Asia and China during the crucial centuries of transmission from the 1st to the 7th century AD.

The Gandharan-Kashmiri artistic synthesis the first fully realised Buddhist figural art, fusing Hellenistic, Iranian, and Indian elements established the visual vocabulary of the Buddha image that subsequently spread across Asia, from the cave temples of Dunhuang to the sculptures of Borobudur. This artistic legacy is perhaps the most universally visible contribution of the Kashmiri Buddhist world.

Within Indian intellectual history, the Kashmiri contribution to Abhidharma philosophy particularly through the *Mahavibhasa* and the works of thinkers like Vasubandhu, whose *Abhidharmakosa* ('Treasury of Higher Doctrine')[18] was composed after his training in the Kashmiri Sarvastivada tradition before his conversion to Mahayana is foundational. Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa* remains one of the most widely studied texts in East Asian Buddhism to this day.

Finally, the model of the Kashmiri learned monk deeply versed in Sanskrit learning, philosophically sophisticated, trained in textual criticism and dialectical debate influenced the culture of Buddhist scholarship across the Silk Road world and contributed to the distinctive intellectual character of Buddhism as it evolved into a truly pan-Asian civilisation.

9. Conclusion

From the Ashokan mission of the 3rd century BC to the fading of Buddhist institutions in the 8th century AD, Buddhism in Kashmir traced a trajectory of remarkable vitality and historical consequence. Introduced by imperial missionary enterprise, fostered by the cosmopolitan patronage of the Kushana dynasty, elaborated into a sophisticated scholastic tradition by generations of Kashmiri monks, and preserved in the accounts of devoted Chinese pilgrims, Kashmiri Buddhism was never a peripheral phenomenon but a central node of the Buddhist world.

The valley's unique position geographically protected yet culturally porous, politically significant yet intellectually independent allowed it to function as a crucible in which diverse strands of Buddhist thought, art, and practice were received, refined, and retransmitted. The Sarvastivada school's dominance, the Fourth Buddhist Council, the *Mahavibhasa*, the Gandharan-influenced art of Harwan and Ushkur, and the accounts of Fa Hien and Xuanzang together testify to a tradition of extraordinary richness.

The decline of this tradition was gradual, structural, and in many respects irreversible by the 8th century, as the political, cultural, and economic conditions that had sustained it shifted beyond recovery. Yet the legacy of Kashmiri Buddhism in Chinese monastic law, in Abhidharma philosophy, in the spread of Buddhist art across Asia endures as one of the most significant contributions of the ancient Kashmir Valley to the heritage of human civilisation.

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[18]Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa* ('Treasury of Higher Doctrine') was composed after his training in the Kashmiri Sarvastivada tradition, before his conversion to Mahayana. It remains among the most studied texts in East Asian Buddhism. English translation: Leo Pruden (trans.), *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, 4 vols. (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1988 1990).

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