

PICTURE CAPTIONS FROM PREVIOUS PAGE:
 COLUMN 1 (TOP TO BOTTOM): **The Parthenon**; **Qin Shi Huangdi, the first Qin emperor**; **the Great Stupa at Sanchi, a Buddhist monument built in the third century BC**; **human-like creatures in an illustration based on the Greek historian Ctesias's account of India**. COLUMN 2 (TOP TO BOTTOM): **the Athenian statesman Solon debates with students**; **Nalanda monastery in northern India**. COLUMN 3 (TOP TO BOTTOM): **A third-century AD Chinese mural of the Buddha**; **Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya**

When cultures collide

As our map shows, encounters between ancient civilisations created networks between places as far-flung as Greece and India



1 Rome to Athens 2 Greece to India 3 Eastern nomads to Greco-Bactria 4 Buddhists to China 5 Chinese to India

1 Republicans on a political recce

Romans in Athens 454 BC

Just over half a century after the Roman Republic was established, the Roman body politic was in trouble. The political system had been blocked for almost a decade; the Tribunes of the Plebs (officers representing the interests of the everyday people) demanded reform of the system and a rebalancing of power between patrician (aristocratic) and plebian (everyone else) groups. So in 454 BC a three man commission was appointed to travel to Athens – where the democratic revolution had occurred at about the same time as the birth of the Roman Republic – to research how the politics of that city-state worked, and to bring back possible solutions for the crisis in Rome.

By 454 BC Athens was the emerging power of the eastern Mediterranean. An Athenian empire was evolving; memories of its triumph over Persian invaders were still fresh, its people engaged in direct democracy, and the building project that would include the Parthenon was imminent. But it was not Athens' democratic principles and processes that

intrigued the Roman delegation. Rome had no interest in becoming a democracy. Instead it sought to balance rights and responsibilities among the different elements of its society – not equally, but in relation to their perceived worth and service.

The Romans had come to study the laws and reforms of Solon, who had undertaken a systematic review of the Athenian system some 150 years earlier. We can only imagine Athenian reactions as they watched the Romans in deep discussion over reforms the Athenians themselves had surpassed long before, while ignoring the proof of the power of a direct democracy all around them.

After three years of study, the delegation presented its findings in Rome. What followed was farcical. The first 10-man board appointed to write a new constitution failed to complete it; their successors then refused to yield power, till these new 'Ten Tarquins' (as they were known) were ousted. And though the legal code that emerged from this Greek-Roman interaction ended the stalemate in the political system, the class strife inherent in Roman society would continue for centuries to come.



The Parthenon, on the Acropolis in Athens. Construction began in 447 BC, shortly after a Roman delegation arrived to study Athenian politics

2 The success of a slaveless society

A Greek in India 300 BC

Around the end of the fourth century BC, Megasthenes was sent as the official ambassador of the Greek ruler Seleucus 1st Nicator ('Victor') to the court of Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya at his capital of Pataliputra (modern day Patna). Of Megasthenes the man we know little, but excerpts from his *Indika* – sometimes rather creative descriptions of India drawn from his privileged position as ambassador – do survive.

In *Indika* Megasthenes told of giant ants that dug for gold and would take on – and kill – humans to protect it; of men whose feet were turned backwards, and others who had no mouths but fed on smells alone. He told of dogs strong enough to take on lions and flying serpents with urine that could blister human skin.

But Megasthenes also wrote about the great city of Pataliputra, defended by more than 570 watchtowers around its outer walls and with a splendour that surpassed the mighty Persian cities of Susa and Ecbatana. He gave us, too, an eye on the ruler and the inner workings of the Indian court. We're told that

Chandragupta spent his days hunting or hearing legal cases while being massaged with wooden rollers. This leader, Megasthenes wrote, embodied the fate of his capital city, and everything about him mattered to the people. When he washed his hair, a festival was celebrated.

Megasthenes was complimentary about the people of Pataliputra, describing them as tall and proud. He remarked with amazement that Indian society, in contrast to the Greek world, seemed to survive without slaves, and experienced little or no theft. And he explicitly intertwined the very origins, mythologies and gods of his home with those of this Indian world. The god Dionysus, he recounted, invaded India; later, the hero Heracles was born in India and even founded the great capital at Pataliputra.

Nor was Megasthenes unusual in being a foreigner in Chandragupta's court. He wrote that an entire branch of government was dedicated to looking after foreigners living in Pataliputra. Clearly, this was a city at the centre of an increasingly interconnected set of ancient worlds.



This second-century BC four-drachma piece depicts the Indian trident-wielding god Siva, but also incorporates Greek script

Megasthenes wrote of men with no mouths who fed on smells – but also how Indian society survived without slaves

This tapestry from a grave in western China dating from the 3rd or 2nd century BC was probably created in Greco-Bactria – indicating early contact between the cultures



3 The ancient migrant crisis that made headlines in the east and west

Eastern nomads in Greco-Bactria 140s BC

At the end of the third century BC, around the same time that Hannibal was challenging Rome, Qin Shi Huangdi – the 'First Emperor of Qin' – created a unified China under his rule. The construction of this empire and its firm boundaries (including the embryonic Great Wall) inevitably had repercussions for the Qin's relationship with nomadic tribes that lived to the north and west. Decades of aggression, accommodation and appeasement followed, leading to the emergence of one pre-eminent tribe: the Xiongnu. In turn, other nomadic tribes such

as the Yuezhi were forced to yield territory to the Xiongnu and themselves flee west. By the 140s BC, these migrants were arriving in central Asia and began to pour into Greco-Bactria, at the time a rich and prosperous trading kingdom on the outer edge of the Hellenistic empire of the Seleucids.

This invasion of Greco-Bactria was recorded by western sources such as Strabo and Justin, whose description of the nomadic tribes certainly echoed other contemporary accounts of the Yuezhi. But what makes this moment all the more remarkable is that this takeover of Greco-Bactria by the nomads

was also described in the eastern Chinese sources. In 138 BC, the Han emperor Wu sent an ambassador, Zhang Qian, west looking for allies against the Xiongnu, who were then still powerful. Returning more than 10 years later, Zhang Qian's accounts, preserved in the great historian Sima Qian's *Shiji*, told how by then the Yuezhi had Greco-Bactria completely under their sway. As a result, this event – the martial meeting of east and west in central Asia – is one of the first to be recorded in both eastern and western histories, and a key moment in the story of ancient global interconnection.

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4 Lost and found in translation

Buddhists in China 2nd century AD

In the mid-second century AD, as Buddhist ideas began to find receptive audiences in China, two Buddhists from central Asia travelled east along Silk Road trading routes, settling in the great city of Luoyang, capital of the Han dynasty. The first, An Shigao, was later identified as a prince of the Parthian empire who had given up his wealth, position and claim to the throne to become a Buddhist monk and missionary, one of the earliest known translators into Chinese of Indian Theravada Buddhist texts written in Pali. This was no easy task. Few, if any, people could speak both the Chinese and Indian languages, so simultaneous translation was not possible. Instead, a Buddhist master would discuss the texts with a scribe who had some idea of both languages, creating a rudimentary version that was then polished by Chinese intellectuals. The final version, though, could not really be checked for accuracy by the original Buddhist monk.

The process was made all the more complicated by the sheer variety and number of Buddhist texts pouring into China. At the same time as An Shigao was working in Luoyang, another émigré to the city, Lokaksema, was helping translate texts of Mahayana Buddhism. There was an irony in his movements: Lokaksema was from the Kushan empire established in central Asia in the wake of the Yuezhi takeover of Greco-Bactria back in the second century BC. As a descendant of the Yuezhi, Lokaksema was – in travelling to China – in some ways repeating in reverse the journey his ancestors had made centuries earlier.



A 7th–8th century AD mural from Turpan Oasis, a strategically significant centre on Xinjiang's northern silk route

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5 The world's first student exchange programme

Chinese travellers in India

Fifth to seventh centuries AD

The traffic in Buddhists wasn't only eastward. In AD 399, a Chinese Buddhist monk called Faxian, then aged 65, began a journey on foot heading west along Silk Road routes, eventually arriving at the Indian capital of Pataliputra that had been visited by Megasthenes centuries earlier. Faxian described the sinister mood of the Gobi desert: "There are neither birds above nor beasts below. Gazing on all sides as far as the eye can reach in order to mark the track, no guidance is to be obtained, save from the rotting bones of dead men which point the way."

Faxian commented, too, on the people he met at Pataliputra in terms that echoed those used by Megasthenes: "The people are numerous and happy: they have not to register their households, or attend any magistrates... the kings govern without decapitation or other corporal punishment. The criminals are simply fined. Even in the case of repeated attempts at wicked rebellion, they only have their right hands cut off." Faxian finally returned to China some 15 years later, accompanied by numerous Buddhist texts.

Over 200 years later, during the Tang

dynasty in AD 670, another Buddhist monk, Yijing, set out west from China. He, too, went in search of Buddhist teaching and texts, and his journey lasted for 25 years. He travelled from Sumatra to India and north to the Buddhist monastery at Nalanda, not far from Pataliputra and Bodhgaya, where Buddha found enlightenment. By Yijing's time Nalanda was a famous seat of learning, with studies involving not only Buddhist texts but also grammar, logic and Sanskrit.

Yijing stayed at Nalanda for 10 years before returning to China with 400 new Buddhist texts. He wrote of his journeys, discoveries and insights, describing the strong Buddhist communities he encountered in Sumatra, Java and Bali, arguing for the early support of Buddhism by the Indian Gupta kings in the late third and early fourth centuries AD, and noting the daily schedule of meditation and study at Nalanda. In many ways, he was an early example of a university exchange student. ■

"No guidance is to be obtained [in the Gobi desert], save from the rotting bones of dead men which point the way"

An illustration showing Xuanzang (c602–64), one of a number of Chinese Buddhists drawn along the Silk Road route to India



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Michael Scott's latest book, *Ancient Worlds: An Epic History of East and West*, was published by Hutchinson on 1 July. Find out more at michaelscottweb.com. Michael will be talking at *BBC History Magazine's History Weekend* in Winchester this autumn – see historyweekend.com