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Alexander's Impact on Indian Religions

Alexander is not mentioned in ancient Indian literary sources. Indeed, “Menandros is the only Greek king, not excluding Alexander, to be remembered in Indian tradition”.¹ Almost the only visible traces of his conquests are works of art.² A recent book that has as subtitle “The Legacy of Alexander in Asia” has practically nothing to say about Indian sources.³ This in spite of the fact that the immigrants who arrived with or after Alexander were strongly influenced by Indian culture.⁴

There are, to be sure, Indian literary sources that go back to his time. Parts of Vedic literature were already in existence, other parts were being composed or going to be composed soon. The same can be said about early Buddhist literature and perhaps (but with much less certainty) about early Jaina literature. It is true that, to the best of our knowledge, none of these texts were written down at the time of Alexander: writing may not yet have been used until later.⁵ The early Buddhist texts contain plenty of more or less reliable information about rulers from the time preceding Alexander, i.e. the time of the Buddha, but none about Alexander. More recent Buddhist texts also provide information about rulers that lived after Alexander, including notably emperor Aśoka.⁶ Alexander, on the other hand, is not mentioned in this literature. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that Alexander never got near the region where Buddhism arose, never closer than about a thousand kilometers.

Vedic literature is different. We will see that Alexander visited what was in his time a centre of Vedic culture. It also seems likely that some Vedic literature

1 Sedlar (1980) 64.

2 Charvet/Baldissera/Karttunen (2002) 23: “Paradoxalement, de toutes ces conquêtes, il ne serait resté que peu de chose si n’avaient survécu les œuvres d’art”.

3 Prabha Ray/Potts (2007).

4 On the hybrid culture that arose after Alexander’s Indian invasion, especially among the Indo-Greeks, see, e.g., Wickramasinghe (2021). Note also that “[n]o Seleucid ever put Iranian or Babylonian legends on his coinage, [...] but the Indo-Greeks introduced Indian legends in Indian scripts on their money” – Narain (1965) 165. Vassiliades’ (2000) 62 doubt as to whether Heliodoros of the Besnagar inscription was a follower of Viṣṇu is based on his confusion of the terms *bhāgavata* ‘follower of Bhagavat, i.e. Viṣṇu’ and *bhāgavat* ‘possessor of good luck’. Cfr. Kuiper (1969) 144: “Since the column was called a *Garuḍadhvaje* by Heliodoros himself, who erected it, and since it must have been crowned by a statue of Garuḍa, the word *Vāṣudeḥvasa* can hardly refer to anyone else but Viṣṇu”.

5 See, however, Bronkhorst (forthcoming).

6 See esp. Strong (1983).

was composed during or soon after the time of Alexander. And yet, it does not mention him. The explanation lies in the fact that, where Vedic texts refer to political rulers at all, these rulers are hard to identify. What is more, these texts tend to situate themselves in a more or less remote past (if at all). Vedic literature is timeless, and very little information about the time its texts were composed can be derived from their contents.

This brief characterization might be thought to explain how the two most important religions of early India – Vedism and Buddhism – could remain unaffected by Alexander's invasion. Vedism carried on in its habitual timeless manner, and Buddhism was too far from the region visited by Alexander. This makes it tempting to conclude that Alexander's impact on Indian religions was nil. And yet, we will see that this conclusion is not justified.

Remember that we have already distinguished two regions in northern India. Their centres of gravity are sometimes called Greater Gandhāra and Greater Magadha, respectively. Greater Gandhāra (situated in what is now Pakistan) was a centre of Vedic culture; Greater Magadha (in the eastern parts of northern India) was the region where Buddhism (and some other religions, such as Jainism) had recently come into being. The literary remains to be associated with these two regions are altogether different: part of Vedic literature can be associated with Greater Gandhāra; early Buddhist literature with Greater Magadha.

Interestingly, Greek (or perhaps better: Macedonian) eyewitness accounts of India at the time of Alexander that have reached us (though indirectly) fall into the same two categories. Those who accompanied Alexander left testimonies about Greater Gandhāra and adjacent regions (all of them in what is now Pakistan). Contemporary Greek information about Greater Magadha ultimately comes from the pen of Megasthenes, who arrived there some twenty years after Alexander. Modern historians (as, before them, classical authors) have often combined these different testimonies in the hope of extracting information about India, which they conceived of as a single homogeneous entity. They were mistaken. India was no single homogeneous entity at that time, and the testimonies of the Alexander historians on the one hand and those of Megasthenes on the other differ on a number of crucial points.

One of these differences is of particular interest to us:⁷ the Alexander historians often mention Brahmins and Brahmanical schools but do not mention Śrama-

⁷ In what follows I base myself primarily on McCrindle's translations of fragments on Alexander's invasion (1893) and of the surviving Megasthenes fragments (1877).

nas.⁸ Megasthenes, on the other hand, mentions both Brahmins and Śramaṇas.⁹ The role of Brahmins in the two kinds of sources is quite different. Alexander met Brahmins who played important political roles in their communities.¹⁰ According to Arrianus, there were even Brahmin cities in the Indus valley;¹¹ Alexander killed all 5000 inhabitants of one of them. He also captured another city, which had revolted, and put to death all those Brahmins who had instigated the revolt.¹² He ordered a rebel called Musicanus to be hanged, together with all those Brahmins who had instigated him to revolt.¹³ The Alexander historians also mention Brahmanical schools, most often without realizing that they are doing so, thinking that they are tribes.¹⁴ Plinius is perhaps an exception. He mentions “a number of tribes with the name of Bragmanae”,¹⁵ which means that he knew they were Brahmins. Arrianus refers to the Kāthas (Kathaians/Cathaeans) by name; no need to add that they were defeated by Alexander.¹⁶ Brahmins are no doubt referred to in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* where it states that “the philosophers gave [Alexander] no less trouble than the mercenaries, because they reviled the princes who declared for him and encouraged the free states to revolt from his authority”.¹⁷ On this account, the passage continues, he hanged many of them.

In the surviving Megasthenes fragments, on the other hand, Brahmins are mentioned in only one context, to which I will turn in a minute. They are not

8 Stoneman (2019) 329: “śramaṇas do not occur in the Alexander historians, and it is unlikely that the latter were aware of Buddhists”. Śramaṇas *are* mentioned in the western inscriptions of Aśoka – Kandahar I and Kandahar III; Falk (2022) 158 – but this is under the rulership of Aśoka, when Buddhists settled in western regions!

9 As preserved and misread by Strabo, Megasthenes uses the expressions Garmanes and Pram-nai; see Falk (2022).

10 Note that already the Vedic Brāhmaṇas (the texts) describe political organizations that can be called states: cfr. Rau (1957) 129.

11 Hammond (2013) 171 translates “one of the Brahman cities” where McCrindle (1893) 143 has “a certain city of the Brachmans”. Charvet/Baldissera/Karttunen (2002) 117 think that these were *agrahāras*; this is possible but by no means certain. On *agrahāras*, see Bronkhorst (2011) § II.4. Note that Diodorus and Curtius (but not Arrianus) mention a (different?) city of the Brahmins, called Harmatelis; see Eggermont (1975) 107.

12 McCrindle (1893) 159; Hammond (2013) 180–181.

13 McCrindle (1893) 160; Hammond (2013) 181.

14 Cfr. Witzel (1997) 304 (“The Greek writers quite obviously identified the name of the local Brahmins with that of the inhabitants of the area”); Karttunen (1997a) 31 and n. 60.

15 Eggermont (1993) 49 and 89.

16 McCrindle (1893) 115–116; Hammond (2013) 156–157 and *passim*.

17 McCrindle (1893) 306.

mentioned among the so-called seven castes of the Indians (§ 39–48; 83–86).¹⁸ The highest rank among those seven castes is occupied by philosophers, and these cannot be simply identified with Brahmins. In fact, a different fragment specifies that there are two kinds of philosophers: Brahmins and Śramaṇas (§ 59; 98–101). Here and only here Brahmins are mentioned in the surviving fragments, and it turns out that both Brahmins and Śramaṇas live ascetic lives, though different kinds of ascetic lives.

This ultra-brief summary of some of the information provided by Greek informants confirms the general picture sketched above. Alexander and Megasthenes visited culturally and religiously different parts of the subcontinent. In Alexander's part there was a strong and politically powerful presence of Brahmins and no trace of the religions that originated in Greater Magadha, esp. Buddhism and Jainism. In the part known to Megasthenes there were Śramaṇas (presumably including Buddhists and Jainas). There were also Brahmins, but they were mainly known for their ascetic lifestyles, not for the role they played in local politics.

All this agrees with what is suggested by the surviving Vedic and Buddhist texts. Vedic literature concentrates on complicated and expensive sacrifices that could only be performed for and by the politically powerful. Brahmins are also mentioned in early Buddhist literature, but here their connection with political power is practically nil.

This, then, was the religious situation when Alexander arrived on the subcontinent. The Vedic Brahmanical tradition was strong in the North-West and had been so for centuries.¹⁹ Buddhism, on the other hand, had not yet reached there. Barely one and a half centuries later, few Brahmins were left in the region, which by now was rapidly losing its reputation. Meanwhile, that same region (Greater Gandhāra in particular) had become one of the most important centres of Buddhism, perhaps *the* most important one. It was here that religious and philosophical developments took place within Buddhism that subsequently influenced all forms of Buddhism both inside and outside the subcontinent (not to speak of all major non-Buddhist Indian philosophies). And the Vedic tradition, which was withdrawing from the

¹⁸ References are to McCrindle (1877). Kuiper (1969) 143 rightly points out that there is no indication whatsoever that Megasthenes was acquainted with Vedic literature. We may add that there is no reason to believe that Vedic literature was authoritative in Megasthenes' day and region.

¹⁹ This should not be interpreted to mean that life was always peaceful for Brahmins in the North-West before Alexander. Witzel (1995) and (1997) has argued that invading Salvās were responsible for an interruption of literary production in that area, and for a general shift of Brahmanical presence toward the east. According to his theory, the North-West had regained its earlier preeminence at the time of the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* and Pāṇini.

North-West, had by now transformed itself into something different altogether, something we can call the 'new Brahmanism' or 'Neo-Brahmanism'.²⁰ It is clearly tempting to consider that Alexander's incursion had set something in motion that had a major impact on these religions. What could that be?

The answer does not lie in the discussions that supposedly took place between Alexander and his followers on one hand and Indian sages on the other. These discussions were remembered in the Hellenistic West and inspired its thinkers for a number of centuries.²¹ India, on the other hand, never recorded these discussions, which therefore left no traces whatsoever on the subcontinent. What *did* leave traces is the slaughter that Alexander and his army inflicted upon the Brahmins and their type of society. Already John W. McCrindle wrote that "in the valley of the Indus [Alexander] could only overpower the opposition instigated by the Brahmins by means of wholesale massacres and executions".²² And A. Brian Bosworth was no doubt right in observing that Alexander's conquest inflicted "the greatest repression the Brahman community had probably suffered at any time".²³ This repression did not end, to be sure, with the departure of Alexander. In spite of his extreme violence, there is only so much he could possibly do during the twenty months of his stay on the subcontinent. But he did set off developments that went on for a long time after him, among these the following.²⁴

The power vacuum left by Alexander's departure,²⁵ and with it the disappearance of a political order in which Vedic Brahmins had played a role, allowed an empire that was centered in the east of India to occupy this region: the Maurya Empire. Being centered in the east, it had no sympathy for Vedic ritual. Moreover, there are reasons to think that on two occasions the region of Taxila rose in revolt against Maurya rulership. Aśoka (at that time a prince and not yet emperor) was sent to deal with the evil ministers that had inspired the first one, his son Kunāla

²⁰ This is the term preferred by McGovern (2018).

²¹ See below.

²² McCrindle (1893) 17.

²³ Bosworth (1998) 200. Already Paulus Orosius (fifth century CE) characterised Alexander as someone "whose taste for human blood, either of his enemies or even of his friends, was never slaked" and who "always thirsted for fresh gore", as quoted in Fear (2007) 41.

²⁴ Cfr. Bronkhorst (2014).

²⁵ Marshall (1918) 10: "Alexander had intended the permanent annexation of the North-West, and for that purpose he left colonies and garrisons behind him to consolidate what he had won, but within six years of his death, which took place in 323 B.C., Eudemus, the Greek Governor, withdrew from the Indus valley with all the forces he could muster to assist Eumenes against Antiochus, and about the same time, or perhaps even earlier, Candragupta drove out the Greek garrisons east of the Indus, and proceeded to incorporate Taxila and the other states of the Panjab into the Empire of Magadha".

with those who had inspired the second one, when Aśoka had become emperor.²⁶ These north-western ministers were presumably Brahmins, and Aśoka's reputation as an extremely cruel ruler²⁷ (before his conversion to Buddhism) leaves little doubt that these Brahmins were not treated gently; in a sense Aśoka may have continued the job begun by Alexander. The demise of the local states in which Vedic Brahmins had had their place as executioners of court rituals and as counselors, moreover, deprived those Brahmins of their most important source of income. Nor did the fall of the Maurya Empire in the first half of the second century BCE bring relief to the north-western Brahmins. Invading Greeks and Scythians (Śaka) made their life miserable (if they were lucky enough to get away with it). This time we have direct testimony of their suffering. A number of texts – most importantly the *Yuga Purāṇa* – describe the Brahmanical misfortunes, and lay the blame with the Greeks and the Scythians in particular. The author(s) of these texts thought that these misfortunes were an indication that the end of the world was near.

It appears, then, that the north-western Brahmins had a rough time from Alexander onward, interrupted perhaps by one or two short periods of respite. Details are hard to come by, but the consequences were unmistakable. The region of Gandhāra was a centre of Brahmanical culture when Alexander arrived. A few centuries later, few Brahmins remained. This is confirmed by a number of sources, among these the following.²⁸

A number of texts describe the extent of the 'land of the Āryas' (*āryāvarta*).²⁹ For its western limit they use a somewhat obscure expression, often translated as the place "where the Sarasvatī disappears". This place is situated in the Thar Desert that today separates the territories of India and Pakistan. Patañjali the grammarian adds an interesting remark. Composing his *Mahābhāṣya* toward the end of the second century BCE,³⁰ he specifies, in the midst of a technical grammatical discussion, that the Śakas and the Yavanas live outside this territory. Since Patañjali's Yavanas are the Indo-Greeks and his Śakas the Indo-Scythians, both of whom established themselves in succession in Gandhāra and Panjab roughly at his time (the Indo-Greeks certainly already before him), their mention confirms

26 Bronkhorst (2016b) § I.1.1.

27 See Strong (1983) 40–43.

28 For a more detailed discussion of what follows, see Bronkhorst (2016b) § I.1.3.

29 Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* on P. 2.4.10, ed. Kielhorn/Abhyankar (1962–1972) I, 475; on P. 6.3.109, ed. Kielhorn/Abhyankar (1962–1972) III, 174, cfr. Deshpande (1993) 96–97; *BaudhDhS* 1.2.9–17; *VDhS* 1.8–16. Patañjali's 'land of the Āryas' may approximately coincide with the realm of the Śuṅgas; see Bronkhorst (2021).

30 For Patañjali's date and region, see Bronkhorst (2016b) § I.2.1.

our suspicion that the western limit of Brahmanism at his time may have been situated somewhere near the present border between India and Pakistan. This excludes Gandhāra from the territory that Patañjali had in mind. For Patañjali, therefore, Greater Gandhāra was no longer a core area of Vedic Brahmanism.

Both the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*³¹ and the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*³² state that no Brahmins are seen among the Yavanas, the Śakas and the Kāmbojas. The *Assalāyana Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN II, 149) states that the four *varṇas* do not exist among the Yonas and the Kāmbojas;³³ and an inscription of Aśoka claims that there are no Brahmins and Śramaṇas among the Yonas. These texts have to be read with caution. We do not know how many Greeks remained in Gandhāra after Alexander's departure. They were back, to be sure, after the collapse of the Maurya Empire.

Then there are some Brahmanical texts. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (9.3.1.24) speaks in very negative terms about the inhabitants of the region of the seven rivers that flow westward, i.e. the Panjab.³⁴ The *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* enumerates the names of tribes that a good Brahmin should not visit, among them the Gāndhāras in the North-West.³⁵ The Gāndhāras evidently lived in Gandhāra, a region that by this testimony was situated outside the realm where orthodox Brahmins lived at that time. The correct understanding of these Brahmanical passages depends, to be sure, on chronological considerations that cannot be taken up here.

It appears that Brahmanism at the time of Patañjali and perhaps already before him spread mainly eastward and southward, starting from the 'land of the Āryas'. This impression is confirmed by research about Vedic schools.³⁶ These schools migrated toward the East and the South, or even the North (Kashmir,³⁷ Nepal), but it seems they never returned to the North-West.³⁸ Several late-Vedic texts know Gandhāra as a more or less remote region, and none of the Vedic

31 *MBh* 13.33.19–21.

32 *MDhŚ* 10.43–44. On the absolute and relative chronology of *Mahābhārata* (including *Anuśāsanaparvan*) and *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, see Bronkhorst (2012).

33 The question whether this reference to the Yonas implies that this part of the *Sutta* was composed after Alexander divides scholars. *A priori* this seems plausible to me, but others disagree; see Analayo (2011) 551–552 with n. 116 and references and (2012) 245–246.

34 Cfr. Witzel (1997) 302.

35 *BaudhŚS* 18.13; cfr. Witzel (1987) 202.

36 See, e.g., Witzel (1981–1982), (1985) and (1987).

37 See Witzel (1994) esp. 259–260, on the immigration of Brahmins into Kashmir, initially mainly from the centre of Manu's Āryadeśa. Patañjali himself may have been an immigrant in Kashmir.

38 Witzel (1981) 116 n. 25 wonders, without proof, whether there have been 'missionaries' who travelled toward the North-West to spread their ideas about ritual. The issue whether Brahmanism spread through missionaries who preached their views about ritual can be questioned.

schools appear to be found there.³⁹ The regions to the west of those inhabited by Vedic Brahmins are home to the despised Bāhikas,⁴⁰ literally, outsiders. The term *bāhika* is often confused with *bāhlika* or *bāhika*,⁴¹ which designates the inhabitants of Bactria. The inhabitants of Gandhāra are depicted in the *Mahābhārata* as being beyond the system of *varṇas*, like fishermen.⁴²

The western boundary of India appears to have become, and remained for some time, the river Indus. And indeed, Arrianus' *Indikā* clearly distinguishes between regions east of the Indus and those to the west of it.⁴³

Finally some observations – made by Michael Witzel – about the *Mahābhārata*:

Especially the treatment of the northwest is very interesting. The 'bald' (clean-shaven) Greeks of the Bactrian and the Panjab Greek kingdoms are frequently combined with other barbarians (*mleccha*). On the other hand, they are somewhat surprisingly called 'all-knowing'. But, they do not have a 'proper' social order with four classes but only two, free men and slaves. They drink alcohol, eat, dress, and marry in improper ways. They inhabit an area that one should not go to, which echoes Bodhāyana's and Manu's concerns [...]. However, all of the Panjab was seen, already in the later Veda ([*ŚBM*] 9.3.1.24), as an area of ruffians and barbarians whom one should avoid.⁴⁴

The claimed absence of *varṇas* or of Brahmins in the north-western regions (those primarily inhabited by Yavanas [*yona*], Kāmbojas and Śakas) is significant; after all, the *varṇa* system of society can be looked upon as a core feature of Brahmanism. The absence of *varṇas* in a region is almost by definition an indication that Brahmanism does not prevail there. It does not, of course, exclude the possibility that individual Brahmins live in that region, for the mere presence of Brahmins does not guarantee the prevalence of Brahmanism as a social system.

³⁹ The *Yajurveda-Vṛkṣa* mentions several schools that were supposedly situated *yavanadeśe*. Witzel (1982) 192, who provides this information, points out that the dates of composition of the different versions of this text remain unknown. He suggests that the text here speaks of the Greek Panjab, or of regions in Sindh, later also in Panjab, that were occupied at an early date by the Moslems.

⁴⁰ Witzel (1987) 202 n. 100 thinks that Bāhika is a kind of nickname for peoples whose real names were Ārāṭṭa et Madra. See further Witzel (1989) 128 with nn. 66 and 67.

⁴¹ MW 730 s.v. *bāhika*.

⁴² E.g. *MBh* 12.65.13–16; 12.200.40–41.

⁴³ Wirth/von Hinüber (1985) 614; Charvet/Baldissera/Karttunen (2002) 31 and 33; Hammond (2013) 142. Cfr. Thapliyal (1979) 4: “during the greater part of the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era the Indus appears to be the substantial western boundary of India”. Karttunen (1989) 158 observes: “In later literature the Indus river is sometimes mentioned as India's western frontier, but probably this was not the opinion of Herodotus and his predecessors”.

⁴⁴ Witzel (2006) 485.

However, the negative remarks about Gandhāra in certain Brahmanical texts, and the prohibition for good Brahmins to visit it, can be read as strong indicators of a weak presence, or even total absence, of Brahmins. All in all, our Brahmanical textual sources allow us to believe that there were few Brahmins left in and around Gandhāra during the centuries just before and after the beginning of the Common Era.

Interestingly, Greater Gandhāra had by now become an important centre of Buddhism. This happened under the Maurya Empire, most notably under the rule of Aśoka, as is confirmed by numerous sources.⁴⁵ This had a profound effect on that religion, arguably not least because of its contacts with Hellenistic culture in that region.⁴⁶ Whatever the details, new forms of Buddhism arose in Greater Gandhāra that subsequently spread far and wide, including back into other regions of the subcontinent. These new forms include the Abhidharma usually associated with the Sarvāstivāda school, and Mahāyāna.⁴⁷ The former of these two (Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma) profoundly influenced all of Buddhist philosophy, both inside and outside the subcontinent, and all of classical Indian philosophy that is not Buddhist (and therefore Jaina or Brahmanical).⁴⁸ Note in passing that it did *not* influence Pyrrho, a Greek philosopher who allegedly accompanied Alexander on his expedition to India:⁴⁹ there is no evidence that Buddhism reached Greater Gandhāra before the Maurya Empire.

Brahmanism did not only lose one of its most important geographical centres. No doubt because it lost its main source of income, both in Greater Gandhāra and in other regions that were part of the Maurya Empire, it also totally changed its character. Globally speaking, it seems justified to say that the new Brahmanism that replaced it was much more self-centered than its predecessor had been. It emphasized the self-sufficient nature of Brahmins, the private rituals they engage in, the isolated lifestyle they choose for themselves if they can, and the beginninglessness of all that relates to Brahmanism: the institution itself, the Veda from which they derive their authority, and the language of the Veda, which is also their means of communication. The Brahmanical vision of society and the state can be looked upon as an extension of this self-representation: society and the state should be such that Brahmins can live the lives they are sup-

45 Lamotte (1958) 327; further Fussman (1994); Dietz (2007); Seldeslachts (2007).

46 Bronkhorst (2016b) § III.2.1.

47 See Bronkhorst (2013) and (2018).

48 See, e.g., Bronkhorst (2000), (2002), (2013), (2016a) and (2018); Dessein/Teng (2016).

49 As claimed, for example, by Kuzminski (2008) and Beckwith (2015); see also Flintoff (1980).

posed to live. The supernatural powers that Brahmins claimed to possess provided extra encouragement for others to comply.⁵⁰

What, then, was Alexander's impact on Indian religions? He cannot have had a *direct* impact. It is highly unlikely that he had any notion of Indian religions. The discussions that he or (more likely) some of his fellow-Greeks had with Indian sages did little beyond contributing to "the Hellenistic (but certainly not classical) Greek view that the philosophers of India possessed some special wisdom".⁵¹

The invading Greeks were perhaps unaware that one of the religions they encountered in India, Vedic Brahmanism, was closely associated with (and was in a way part of) a specific political setup. By destroying the states of north-western India, they took away the foundations and undermined the very reason of existence of Vedic Brahmanism. Vedic Brahmanism was what the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann might call a primary religion.⁵² It was a priestly religion, not unlike the priestly religions of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. As such it was indissociably linked to one single culture, to one single society, and to one single language. It had a close association with the rulers of the society to which it belonged, for whom it provided ritual services. Like other primary religions, Vedic religion had no exclusive truth claims of a religious nature, and did not try to make converts. Like other primary religions, it depended for its survival on the continued existence of the society to which it belonged.⁵³ Alexander's invasion and subsequent events made sure that this society did not continue to exist.

It is at this point almost inevitable to ask the following question: what would have happened if Alexander had *not* invaded the subcontinent? This is a counterfactual question. Historians tend to be very critical about such questions, which are not about anything that *did* happen but rather about what did *not* happen. In spite of this, it is hard *not* to ask such questions, at least implicitly.⁵⁴ Some scholars have asked such questions about Alexander. They have asked what might have happened if Alexander had not left India and had continued his conquests on the sub-

50 The new Brahmanism took primarily two forms: "1. Brahmanism created or codified a number of rules for Brahmins that assured their separate identity. 2. Brahmanism acquired, refined or codified a number of skills that Brahmins could offer to outsiders, both rulers and others" – Bronkhorst (2017) 577; see also Bronkhorst (2015).

51 Sedlar (1980) 32. See further Karttunen (1997b), (2002) and (2012).

52 Assmann (2003).

53 Bronkhorst (2015).

54 Ferrie (2023) 54: "[...] counterfactual reasoning is what makes humans special [...] we do it all the time. *What if I said this instead of that? What if I took the earlier flight? What if I didn't eat those hot peppers?* Testing our hypothesis allows us to determine the causes of things, which is usually beneficial".

continent?⁵⁵ Our question at present is different and in a way its opposite: what might have happened if Alexander had never reached the subcontinent?

Our question is not an invitation to freely speculate about all that might have happened. It is rather a question about the causal role that Alexander's invasion played in subsequent events. It is a question about causality. One cannot consider the impact of Alexander on Indian religions without considering what might *not* have happened to Indian religions *without* Alexander. Without the counterfactual question no claim about Alexander's impact can ever be made. One could in that case only describe a sequence of events without proposing that some of these events may have influenced subsequent ones. The sequence of events would thus be without inner logic or coherence, and might as well be replaced by a different, totally unrelated, sequence of events. In brief, and to repeat it once more, the question of Alexander's impact on Indian religions cannot even meaningfully be raised without thinking about what would *not* have happened to Indian religions *without* Alexander (everything else being the same). Claiming that Alexander's invasion brought about certain changes in Indian religions is equivalent to claiming that those changes would *not* have taken place if Alexander had *not* invaded the subcontinent (all else being equal). This is not a matter of unbridled speculation, but of logic.⁵⁶

What would *not* have happened to Indian religions without Alexander's invasion? We have come to think that Alexander's incursion started a process that led to the collapse of a political situation in the North-West that the priestly religion we call Vedism was part of. As elsewhere in the world (Egypt, Mesopotamia), this collapse meant the disappearance of this priestly religion. This same collapse, moreover, opened the door to future conquests by other powers that had no sympathy for the kind of state in which Vedic ritual had its place: the Mauryas, followed by the Indo-Greeks, Scythians, and perhaps others.

Note that north-western India had been conquered before Alexander, most recently by the Achaemenid Empire, which had done so some 200 years before him.⁵⁷ But it seems that Achaemenid rule had not interfered with local state for-

⁵⁵ Toynbee (1969) § IV.3; Grainger (2007).

⁵⁶ Cfr. Ferguson (1997) 18: "There are [...] two distinct kinds of counterfactual which have been used by historians: those which are essentially the products of imagination but (generally) lack an empirical basis; and those designed to test hypotheses by (supposedly) empirical means, which eschew imagination in favour of computation". Of course, our counterfactual question is neither of the two, even if attempts to answer it enter dangerous territory.

⁵⁷ See Karttunen (1989) 32–38.

mation and had left the Vedic states more or less unaffected.⁵⁸ There is reason to think that the Persians had lost control over the area by the time Alexander arrived.⁵⁹ We know that Alexander and his successors in the North-West had far less tolerance with respect to Brahmins. Alexander destroyed the Brahmanical states that opposed his conquests, and killed countless Brahmins. The Mauryas overcame the same opposition, and discontinued Brahmanical customs and privileges. In the case of the Indo-Greeks and the Scythians, testimony of Brahmins from that region has survived who thought that the end of the world had arrived.

Let us reflect a little more about what might have happened if Alexander had not invaded the subcontinent. If the Mauryas had not been able to include the North-West into their empire (profiting from the power vacuum that resulted from Alexander's conquests) and the Brahmanical statelets would have been able to maintain their independence, Greater Gandhāra would not have become the Buddhist centre that it actually became. The Buddhists of that region would not have developed their religion into the completely new directions that they did (especially after coming into contact with Hellenistic culture), and Buddhism and Indian philosophy would not have become what they actually have become.

There is, clearly, an element of speculation in these claims. And yet, if we ever want to do more than merely recording what the early texts tell us and reach an understanding of *why* particular developments took place in the way they did, we have to try to look beyond those texts and engage in a minimum of speculation. Strictly speaking, this is not speculation but theory formation. The natural sciences have learned long ago that they get nowhere without 'speculation', that theory formation is of its essence. I suggest that the study of history can and should, also in this respect, learn from the natural sciences.

58 Llewellyn-Jones (2022) 140: "The Persian satrapal system depended very much on cooperation with local power-holders, and the satraps frequently repurposed existing, well-established, regional practices in their governance". Petrie/Magee (2012) 10: "[I]t appears that the Achaemenids encouraged, or acquiesced, to existing political structures in the Peshawar Valley rather than reorganize them"; Petrie/Magee (2012) 18: "one of the clearest insights to come out of the most recent fieldwork at Akra and Charsadda is that the Achaemenids annexed polities that had existed at the western edge of South Asia from at least the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, and turned them into their easternmost provinces [...]. In this, it is not clear whether the Achaemenids encouraged or acquiesced to such an arrangement".

59 Heckel (2020) 223: "The prominence of local dynasts in the area east of Parapamisus and the absence of any overarching authority suggest that, at least when Alexander entered the area, there was no Achaemenid Satrap of Gandhāra. This would support the view that the Persians had effectively lost control over the area".

Abbreviations

<i>BaudhDhS</i>	<i>Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra</i> , ed. Olivelle (2000).
<i>BaudhŚS</i>	<i>Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra</i> , ed. Kashikar (2003).
<i>MBh</i>	<i>Mahābhārata</i> , ed. Sukthankar (1933–1966).
<i>MDhŚ</i>	<i>Mānava Dharmaśāstra</i> , ed. Olivelle (2005).
MW	Monier Monier-Williams, <i>A Sanskrit-English Dictionary</i> , Oxford 1899.
ŚBM	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (Mādhyandina)</i> , ed. Weber (1885).
<i>VDhS</i>	<i>Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra</i> , ed. Olivelle (2000).

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