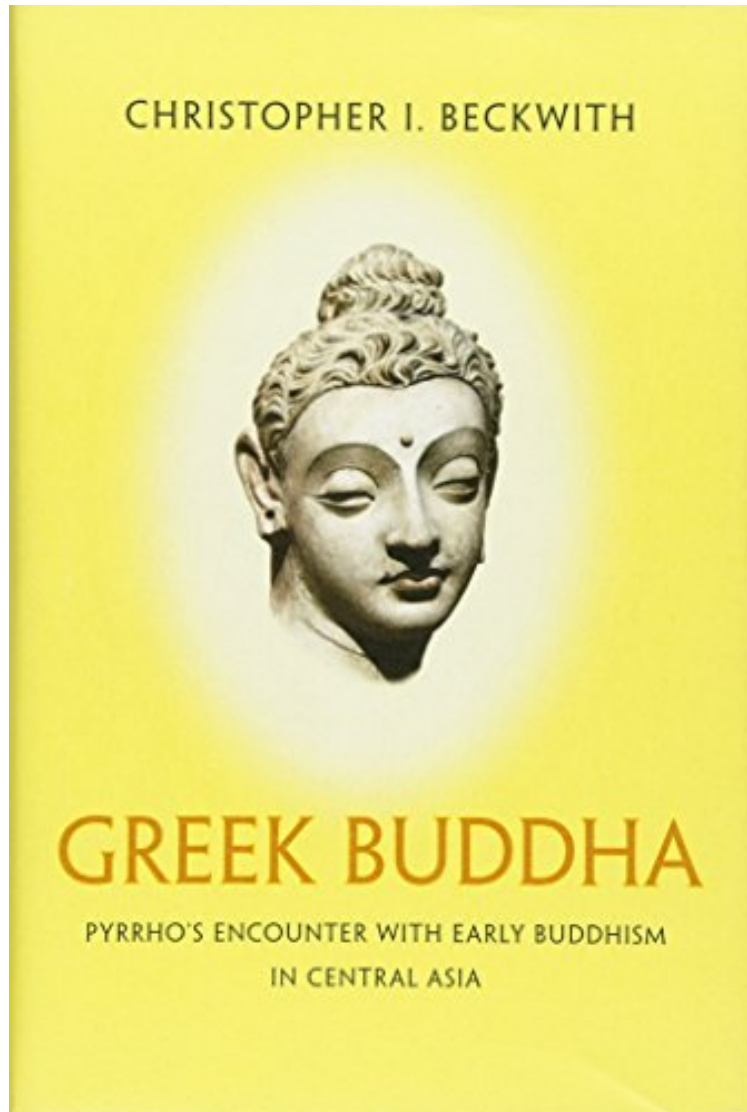


[Free pdf] Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia

Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia

Christopher I. Beckwith
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Christopher I. Beckwith : Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia:

35 of 36 people found the following review helpful. Interesting but controversial speculation about very early BuddhismBy Seth Zuih SegallFour centuries lie between the time the Buddha lived and the time the earliest known

Gandhari and Pali Buddhist texts were committed to writing. Since religions are never static affairs, these texts undoubtedly diverged to some extent from the Buddhas original teachings, but exactly how far and in which ways is uncertain; our knowledge of the gap between the earliest Buddhist teachings and early canonical Buddhism is basically a vast, empty chasm. Unfortunately for us, the Buddhas Indian contemporaries lacked both a written language and an understanding of how history differs from mythology and hagiography. Indulge me in a thought experiment: Imagine that you and I live in a preliterate society. Imagine that nothing Abraham Lincoln ever said or did was written down, either at the time or subsequently. Imagine that there are no photographs or drawings of him. Imagine that there were no documents pertaining to the Civil War no quartermasters inventories, no Mathew Brady photographs, no slave diaries, no rosters of those who served, no records of Lincolns speeches. Imagine too that there is no written record of the presidents who served before or after Lincoln. All that exists is our memory of what our parents and teachers told us face to face, based on their memory of what their parents and teachers told them. If this was so, how accurate would our knowledge of Lincoln be today? How much of what he said would be accurately remembered and generally agreed upon? Think of all the apocryphal Lincoln quotes that currently float through the Internet in all their glorious inaccuracy. Now imagine that another three hundred years passes before the orally transmitted knowledge of Lincoln is finally set down on paper. How much more inaccurate would those ideas about Lincoln be? This is the state we find ourselves in when it comes to the Buddha. Christopher Beckwith's new book, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrhos Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (2015, Princeton) is a fascinating attempt to fill this historical void with educated speculation. Beckwith urges us to make his own mental experiment. He suggests that we bracket off almost everything we think we know about early Buddhism from canonical sources, and instead invites us to follow him as he attempts to reconstruct early Buddhism from sources closer in time to when the Buddha actually lived, namely the stone edicts and pillars of the Mauryan kings, the records of ancient Greek travelers, recent archeological findings, and the earliest Chinese Taoist texts. Beckwith pays special attention to one such Greek traveller: Pyrrho of Elis, a young artist who travelled with Alexander the Great to Gandhara in the years 327-325 B.C. where Pyrrho met with and was influenced by a group of early Buddhist practitioners. Pyrrho returned to Greece espousing a radical new philosophy Pyrrhonism which bore more than a surface resemblance to the Buddhism he encountered in Gandhara (as has been noted previously by scholars like Georgios Halkias). For example, Pyrrho cultivated apatheia (passionlessness) in order to develop ataraxia (inner calm). He made explicit use of the fourfold negation of the tetralemma [five centuries before Nagarjuna!]. He was celibate, lived in simplicity, engaged in meditation, and was regarded by his neighbors as a holy man. He recommended an attitude of not-knowing in regards to pragmata, or disputed ethical questions. Pyrrho viewed pragmata as having three primary characteristics: they were inherently adiaphora (undifferentiated by logical differentiation possibly a parallel to the Buddhas anatta), astathmeta (unbalanced possibly a parallel to the Buddhas dukkha) and anepikrita (indeterminate possibly a parallel to the Buddhas annica). The degree to which Pyrrhos three qualities of pragmata actually map one-to-one onto the Buddhas three marks of existence is a question I'll leave to better philologists and philosophers than myself, but I found Beckwith's argument intriguing. Beckwith then takes his argument a step further. He notes that concepts like karma and rebirth are mentioned by neither Pyrrho nor Megasthenes (another traveling Greek who served as Seleucus Nicator's ambassador to Chandragupta from 302 to 298 B.C.). Based on this, Beckwith asserts that these ideas weren't a part of early Buddhism. This seems like an awfully big assumption to make, especially since Pyrrho himself wrote nothing we only know of his thoughts through the writings of his contemporaries and students. In addition, while Pyrrhos philosophy may have been based on Buddhism, he may not have adopted all of Buddhism's tenets; he may have picked and chosen those ideas that were most consonant with his Hellenic background. While Beckwith is correct that we have no hard evidence that karma and rebirth were Buddhist beliefs prior to 100 B.C., absence of evidence is not the same thing as evidence of absence. The most we can say is that he may be right. Beckwith also speculates on the Buddha's ethnicity. He argues against the canonical assertion that the Buddha was a native Magadhan born in Lumbini, and argues instead that the name "kyamuni" (Sage of the "kyas) suggests that the Buddha was a "kya, i.e., an ethnic Scythian (a Central Asian people who dominated the steppes). Of course the epithet "kyamuni" doesn't necessarily imply that the Buddha himself was actually foreign-born. Alternatively, the Buddha could have been descended from Scythians who migrated to Magadha somewhat earlier, perhaps as early as 850 BC as Jayarava Attwood has speculated. One interesting implication of the Buddha's possibly Scythian origin is that he may have developed the Dharma, at least in part, in response to Zoroastrianism, the religion of Darius's Achaemenid Empire which stretched from the Balkans to the Indus Valley. If so, Buddhism can be understood, in part, as a rejection of Zoroastrian monotheism and cosmic dualism. Beckwith suggests, following the controversial chronology suggested by Johannes Bronkhorst, that early Buddhism preceded the Upanishads and, then goes off on his own to suggest that it also preceded Jainism. He believes that these allegedly later religious traditions adopted aspects of Buddhist teachings and then projected their own origin stories into an imaginary pre-Buddhist past to lend them greater authenticity, in much the same way that the Mahayana would later claim greater antiquity for its own sutras. Beckwith can find no support for the early existence of Jainism in the kinds of data he deems acceptable. The Greek travelers, for example, fail to mention it. The earliest datable references to Jainism are found in the post-100 B.C. Pali literature. Beckwith believes

that those Pali Suttas that treat the Buddha and Mahavira as contemporaries are useful fictions designed to address Buddhist-Jain disputes that were current during the era in which they were actually composed. Even more fascinating is Beckwith's speculation that Laotzu and the Buddha were one and the same person, and that Taoism grew out of very early Chinese contact with Buddhism. Beckwith does a linguistic analysis of Laotzu's actual name (Lao Tan) as recorded around 300 B.C. in Chuangtzu. He argues that Lao is the same as Kao, and that Kao-Tan could plausibly have been pronounced Gaw-tan in certain old Chinese dialects, making it intriguingly close to Gautama, with the final /a/ being dropped due to canonical monosyllabicization. This is a linguistic argument far beyond my powers to evaluate. If true, it makes for a wonderful story of how Buddhism first influenced the formation of Taoism, and then several hundred years later, Taoism returned the favor in coloring how the Chinese translated and understood the Mahayana Sutras. What goes around comes around. In any case, Beckwith believes it to be no accident that similar theories arose nearly simultaneously in Greece, India, and China during the Axial Age, and that there was a greater degree of intercourse between these cultures than has previously been thought. There is much more to Beckwith's book, including discussions of Pyrrhos' influence on David Hume, the provenance of the Mauryan stone edicts and pillars, the linguistic facility of Alexander's entourage, and Pyrrhos' place in the stream of Greek philosophy. Beckwith's discussion of the connection between Pyrrhos' quasi-Buddhist philosophy and David Hume's examination of the problem of logical induction serendipitously coincides with Alison Gopnick's recent speculation about how Hume may have become familiarized with Buddhist thought during his stay at the Royal College of La Flèche. Like the parallel emergence of novel philosophies during the Axial Age, the parallels between Hume's philosophy and Buddhist insights may be due to more than mere coincidence. There are problems with the Beckwith book, to be sure. As mentioned above, it's impossible for a non-scholar like myself to evaluate Beckwith's claims. While some seem plausible, others seem more of a stretch. I suspect it's better to think of them as hypotheses which can spur future research than to think of them as strongly supported facts. I should also note that Beckwith could have benefited from a better editor to help him eliminate some of his repetitiveness. He can, at times, worry a point beyond all endurance. Some readers might be tempted to dismiss Beckwith's theses as being largely irrelevant to Buddhist practice. They might think, What does it matter, in the end, whether the Buddha was really a Scythian or one-and-the-same person as Laotzu? What matters is how one is coming along in one's practice and realization. While I'm sympathetic to that point of view, I think it's a mistake. Our hypotheses about who the Buddha actually was and what the Buddhist project is ultimately about deeply inform our approach to practice. Consider, as one example, Stephen Batchelor's recent historical reimagining of early Buddhism and his proposal that doctrines of karma and rebirth were nearly as central to it as some contend. Beckwith's arguments buttress Batchelor's, and together their ideas have the potential to significantly inform the future dominant direction of Western Buddhist practice. Even if Beckwith's arguments turn out to be deficient in many of their particulars, Beckwith successfully points to the limitations of taking the Pali Canon's account of Buddhist history at face value. Buddhist texts need to be read with a certain degree of suspicion. They need to be read alongside contemporaneous Greek and Chinese sources, checked against emerging archeological findings, and understood within the context of our growing understanding of Central and Southern Asian history. I'm incapable of doing this myself and I have no way of judging the ultimate worth of Beckwith's arguments. On the other hand, I look forward with interest to whatever lively discussion ensues.

29 of 29 people found the following review helpful. Cat among the pigeons
By Toronto
It is hard to imagine anyone other than Beckwith being able to carry off such a tour de force -- he is an expert in the murky world of Central Asia during the ancient (and medieval) world, which requires a mastery of multiple languages, the archeology of the Silk Road, the historiography of the Medes, Persians, Alexander the Great, and the Indian northwest generally. Essentially, he puts flesh on the very, very old (and sometimes wacky) hypotheses concerning the cross-fertilization of the Greek and Buddhist worlds in the 6-3rd centuries B.C.E. Related work has been carried out over the years by various reputable scholars (e.g. Walter Burkert on the Near Eastern influences on the Greeks comes to mind; and Kuzminski's recent book on Pyrrhonism covers some of the same ground). The central hypothesis here, which was sketched out a long time ago by Jaspers in *The Axial Age*, but now tightened, is that all roads lead out from the earliest Buddhism to, gulp, Pyrrhonian scepticism, the early Brahmanic teachings, Jainism, early Taoism, and later, normative Buddhism. Beckwith depends for all this on a mix of archeological findings in recent years, and his reading of the garbled surviving texts concerning the meeting of Megasthenes and Pyrrho during and a little after Alexander's foray into northwest India. It will be interesting to see how the scholarly community reacts to this very strongly argued version of the story -- this is the first time that I have seen reference to the Buddha being a Scythian! I should say that this book is in some ways easy to read, but it is structured very oddly, and is very, very repetitive, as the author incrementally repeats his claims a number of times, and the same evidence is gone through multiple times in different contexts.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Great Scholarship
By Al Rapaport
Very scholarly book, but has some quite amazing theories based on very sound scholarship and is well written. Has changed my understanding of early Buddhism. Not an easy read for the casual reader, but if you're a Buddhist Geek you'll love it.

Pyrrho of Elis went with Alexander the Great to Central Asia and India during the Greek invasion and conquest of the

Persian Empire in 334/324 BC. There he met with early Buddhist masters. Greek Buddha shows how their Early Buddhism shaped the philosophy of Pyrrho, the famous founder of Pyrrhonian scepticism in ancient Greece. Christopher I. Beckwith traces the origins of a major tradition in Western philosophy to Gandhara, a country in Central Asia and northwestern India. He systematically examines the teachings and practices of Pyrrho and of Early Buddhism, including those preserved in testimonies by and about Pyrrho, in the report on Indian philosophy two decades later by the Seleucid ambassador Megasthenes, in the first-person edicts by the Indian king Devanampriya Priyadarsi referring to a popular variety of the Dharma in the early third century BC, and in Taoist echoes of Gautama's Dharma in Warring States China. Beckwith demonstrates how the teachings of Pyrrho agree closely with those of the Buddha Sakyamuni, "the Scythian Sage." In the process, he identifies eight distinct philosophical schools in ancient northwestern India and Central Asia, including Early Zoroastrianism, Early Brahmanism, and several forms of Early Buddhism. He then shows the influence that Pyrrho's brand of scepticism had on the evolution of Western thought, first in Antiquity, and later, during the Enlightenment, on the great philosopher and self-proclaimed Pyrrhonian, David Hume. Greek Buddha demonstrates that through Pyrrho, Early Buddhist thought had a major impact on Western philosophy.

"The book offers a new and refreshing approach. It repeatedly calls for more work in various fields, and it should be hoped that scholars do not shy away from taking up the many challenges it raises."--Matthew Neale, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies"Beckwith weaves into Greek Buddha long-standing questions about the origins of Buddhism, contact between Buddhism and ancient Greeks following the incursion of Alexander the Great into Central Asia in the fourth century BCE, and the nature of ethical knowledge. . . . This is excellent scholarship, and Beckwith presents his thesis with skill, insight, and scholarly probity."--Choice"Beckwith makes a stronger case than anyone else to date that Pyrrhos thought and early Buddhism are too similar for coincidence."--Richard Bett, Common KnowledgeFrom the Inside Flap""Greek Buddha "is a profoundly thought-provoking work. It is chock full of daring yet substantiated premises, which makes for genuinely exciting reading. Whether or not everyone will accept all of Beckwith's stimulating findings, they will surely come away from their encounter with this remarkable book with a greater appreciation for the interconnectedness of Eurasian history and culture."--Victor H. Mair, University of Pennsylvania"In "Greek Buddha," Beckwith again demonstrates the indebtedness of European culture to the profound interactions that occurred between the ancient peoples of Europe and Asia. Focusing on Pyrrho--founder of the skeptic school of thought--and his contact with early Buddhism, Beckwith weaves a rich tapestry of sources to shed new light on the complex processes of cultural exchange."--Peter B. Golden, professor emeritus, Rutgers University"This intriguing, interdisciplinary book contains challenging findings that will provoke a reinterpretation of literary and archaeological sources, and fuel discussions and debates among scholars of Asian and European intellectual history, Buddhist experts, comparativists, classicists, and philosophers of all traditions and persuasions. At every step, Beckwith's encyclopedic knowledge of Asian and Western history and culture, and his versatile linguistic skills are masterfully brought together."--Georgios T. Halkias, University of Hong Kong"Presenting an important and fascinating topic, this book's daring arguments leave readers feeling like they are accompanying the author on an against-the-odds adventure. An exciting work by an excellent scholar."--Justin E. H. Smith, Universite Paris DiderotFrom the Back Cover"In Greek Buddha, Beckwith delves into the writings of the Ionian philosopher-skeptic Pyrrho. Beckwith's discoveries, set forth in this elegantly argued book, upend received truths on the philosophical geography of Eurasia. Even the nonspecialist will thrill as Beckwith carefully traces core teachings of Buddhism to the world of Greek thought. Here is a book that is as provocative in its method as in its conclusions. Solid scholarship lives on these pages, and will live, too, in the inevitable debates to which this tour de force will give rise."--S. Frederick Starr, author of Lost Enlightenment"Greek Buddha is a profoundly thought-provoking work. It is chock full of daring yet substantiated premises, which makes for genuinely exciting reading. Whether or not everyone will accept all of Beckwith's stimulating findings, they will surely come away from their encounter with this remarkable book with a greater appreciation for the interconnectedness of Eurasian history and culture."--Victor H. Mair, University of Pennsylvania"In Greek Buddha, Beckwith again demonstrates the indebtedness of European culture to the profound interactions that occurred between the ancient peoples of Europe and Asia. Focusing on Pyrrho--founder of the skeptic school of thought--and his contact with early Buddhism, Beckwith weaves a rich tapestry of sources to shed new light on the complex processes of cultural exchange."--Peter B. Golden, professor emeritus, Rutgers University"This intriguing, interdisciplinary book contains challenging findings that will provoke a reinterpretation of literary and archaeological sources, and fuel discussions and debates among scholars of Asian and European intellectual history, Buddhist experts, comparativists, classicists, and philosophers of all traditions and persuasions. At every step, Beckwith's encyclopedic knowledge of Asian and Western history and culture, and his versatile linguistic skills are masterfully brought together."--Georgios T. Halkias, University of Hong Kong"Presenting an important and fascinating topic, this book's daring arguments leave readers feeling like they are accompanying the author on an against-the-odds adventure. An exciting work by an excellent scholar."--Justin E. H. Smith, Universit Paris Diderot