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PAKISTAN AND THE SILK ROAD: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF TRADE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE WITH CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This article reassesses the place of the regions that now form Pakistan within the many overland networks usually grouped under the name Silk Road. It argues that Taxila, Gandhara, Swat, the Peshawar basin, the Upper Indus, and Gilgit were not simply corridors between China, Central Asia, and South Asia. They were places where objects were made, texts copied, images reworked, religious institutions financed, and travellers received or redirected. The study brings together urban archaeology, monastic architecture, sculpture, coins, reliquaries, manuscripts, multilingual inscriptions, and rock carvings. It also reads the accounts of Faxian and Xuanzang alongside material evidence rather than treating the travel narratives as transparent descriptions. Taxila's long urban sequence, Gandharan Buddhist workshops, Kushan political and monetary networks, the Upper Indus petroglyphs, and the Gilgit manuscripts reveal movement that was difficult, segmented, and mediated by local communities. The evidence supports a multidirectional model of exchange: ideas and objects arrived from Bactria, Sogdiana, the Iranian world, the Tarim Basin, and China, but they were selectively transformed before moving onward. Northern Pakistan therefore emerges as an active maker of trans-Asian history rather than a passive bridge between larger civilizations.

Keywords: *Pakistan; Silk Road; Gandhara; Taxila; Upper Indus; Gilgit; China; Central Asia; archaeology; Buddhism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The expression "Silk Road" evokes an attractive image of caravans traveling along a continuous route from China to the Mediterranean. Archaeology, however, presents a more complicated and more useful picture. Long-distance exchange across Eurasia depended on many overlapping routes rather than one permanent highway. Deserts, steppe zones, river valleys, sea lanes, and high mountain passes were connected through regional markets and political centers. Goods rarely travelled from one end of Eurasia to the other in the possession of a single merchant. They were exchanged repeatedly, stored, revalued, and redirected. Monks, soldiers, diplomats, craftsmen, migrants, and pastoral communities travelled beside merchants, and the movement of beliefs and artistic conventions was often as important as the movement of luxury goods. Modern scholarship therefore increasingly speaks of "Silk Roads" or exchange networks, emphasizing multiple centers and local actors rather than a simple line between two great

empires (Hansen, 2012; Høisæter, 2023; Whitfield, 2018).

Within this network, the region of modern Pakistan occupied a strategically important position. Its northwestern plains opened toward Afghanistan and the Iranian world; its valleys connected the Indus basin with the Hindu Kush and Karakoram; and its routes linked South Asia with Bactria, Sogdiana, the Tarim Basin, and western China. These connections were not limited to the territory of the modern state, whose borders are recent. The historical regions discussed in this article—Gandhara, Taxila, Uddiyana or Swat, the Upper Indus, and Gilgit—belonged at different times to Achaemenid, Mauryan, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian, Kushan, Sasanian-related, Hunnic, and local dynastic worlds. Their changing political affiliations demonstrate why the area cannot be understood through a narrowly national framework. Yet modern Pakistan contains an exceptional concentration of the archaeological evidence through which these older connections can be reconstructed (Allchin, 1995; Coningham & Young, 2015).

The central claim of this article is that the territories of northern Pakistan were not merely a bridge between China and Central Asia on one side and the Indian subcontinent on the other. A bridge metaphor can be useful, but it can also make the region seem passive. The archaeological record instead reveals active centers of urban life, craft production, religious patronage, artistic innovation, textual preservation, and political negotiation. Taxila was a long-lived urban complex whose changing city plans and material assemblages reflected its position at the meeting of South Asian, Iranian, and Central Asian systems. Gandharan monasteries were not isolated spiritual retreats; they were connected to routes, donors, markets, and mobile communities. Kushan coinage and art combined symbols from several cultural traditions while helping to create a political zone that crossed the Hindu Kush. Farther north, thousands of inscriptions and rock carvings along the Upper Indus preserve the traces of travellers speaking and writing different languages. The Gilgit manuscripts show that the high-mountain region was also a place where Buddhist texts were copied, stored, studied, and transmitted (Behrendt, 2004, 2007; Zwalf, 1996).

The article uses archaeology in a broad historical sense. Buildings, settlement plans, coins, inscriptions, manuscripts, sculptures, reliquaries, pottery, glass, and rock art are treated as evidence of social relationships rather than as isolated artistic objects. Written sources, especially the travel accounts associated with the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang, are read critically beside the material record. These accounts are invaluable because they describe monasteries, routes, legends, political conditions, and religious practices, but they were composed for Buddhist and courtly audiences and often mixed observation with inherited tradition. Archaeology can confirm some aspects of their descriptions, complicate others, and reveal communities that elite travel narratives overlooked (Beal, 1884; Legge, 1886; Sen, 2006).

2. Rethinking the Silk Road through Archaeology

The term "Silk Road" was created in the nineteenth century and later became a powerful organizing concept in history, archaeology, tourism, and international diplomacy. Ancient travellers did not use it as the name of a unified route. They knew particular roads, passes, rivers, caravan stages, ports, and political territories. This difference matters because a modern map can suggest stability where historical movement was seasonal and uncertain. Routes shifted when states expanded or collapsed, when a pass became dangerous, when taxation changed, or when communities redirected traffic toward a more profitable market. The archaeological study of the Silk Roads must therefore begin with networks and nodes rather than with a single line (Hansen, 2012; Jacobs, 2020).

A network approach changes the kinds of evidence historians seek. A luxury object found far from its place of manufacture can indicate long-distance movement. Still, it does not by itself reveal the route, the identities of the carriers, or the meaning attached to the object at its

destination. Context is essential. Coins found in a market quarter, a monastic deposit, a burial, or a hoard represent different activities. Imported glass placed in an elite tomb had a different social role from fragments reused by local craftsmen. An inscription scratched onto a rock beside a river crossing may record presence and memory rather than commercial exchange in the narrow sense. Archaeology is strongest when several categories of evidence converge: settlement patterns identify nodes; inscriptions reveal languages and personal names; coins indicate political and monetary connections; art and architecture show adaptation; and manuscripts trace intellectual transmission.

This approach also draws attention to "capillary routes," the smaller roads that connected major arteries with local valleys and settlements. The northwestern subcontinent was crossed by broad corridors, including routes from Taxila toward Kabul and Bactria, but its actual mobility depended on numerous feeder paths. The Upper Indus illustrates this clearly. Travellers could move through a sequence of valleys and passes connecting Gandhara, Kashmir, Gilgit, the Wakhan region, and the southern Tarim Basin. No route was easy. High altitudes, snow, landslides, river crossings, and the need for fodder limited movement. Yet repeated inscriptions demonstrate that these difficult corridors were used over long periods. Mobility was made possible by local guides, pack-animal knowledge, seasonal timing, places of shelter, and communities able to supply travellers. These local contributions are often invisible in royal histories but are fundamental to archaeological reconstruction (Hauptmann, 2024; Neelis, 2011).

Religion formed part of this infrastructure. Buddhist monasteries required food, land, water, labor, and donors. Their placement near urban centers and routes was not accidental. Monasteries could offer travellers recognizable sacred spaces, social contacts, information, ritual protection, and sometimes accommodation. Merchants and rulers donated to religious institutions because gifts created merit, public reputation, and durable social relationships. In turn, monasteries preserved texts, trained monks, sponsored images, and maintained networks across political boundaries. Jason Neelis has argued that archaeological, epigraphic, and literary evidence points to a close relationship between regional monastic networks and long-distance transmission. This does not mean that monks-controlled trade, or that every monastery was a caravanserai. It means that commerce and religious expansion often relied on the same geography and some of the same patrons (Neelis, 2011, 2014).

3. Geography: From the Indus Plains to the Karakoram

Geography shaped the historical importance of northern Pakistan. The Indus River and its tributaries created a north-south system linking the plains with mountain valleys. To the west, routes through the Peshawar basin and the Kabul River corridor connected Gandhara to Afghanistan and onward to Bactria. To the north and northeast, valleys led toward Gilgit, Hunza, Chitral, Kashmir, the Wakhan Corridor, and passes into the Tarim Basin. To the south and east, Taxila connected with the Punjab plains and the wider cities of northern South Asia. This position allowed the region to participate in several economic and cultural worlds at once.

Taxila occupied a particularly favorable setting near routes joining the Indus crossing, the Kashmir region, the Peshawar valley, and the Gangetic plains. UNESCO describes the site as lying strategically on a branch of the Silk Road that linked China with western regions, and its archaeological sequence includes multiple settlements and religious complexes. The designation is broadly useful, although the earliest phases of Taxila predate the mature trans-Eurasian networks usually associated with the Silk Roads. The site's importance lies precisely in this long duration: earlier regional routes were incorporated into later imperial and commercial systems rather than suddenly created by Han Chinese or Roman demand (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b).

West of Taxila, the Peshawar basin formed the core of ancient Gandhara, extending through the Kabul and Swat River systems. The Khyber Pass is

the best-known passage, but it was one among several corridors. The Swat valley, often associated with ancient Uddiyana, supported dense Buddhist settlement and linked the plains with highland routes. Sites such as Butkara and the monasteries of the wider region demonstrate long-term religious patronage. Takht-i-Bahi, founded in the early first century CE and used for centuries, illustrates the ability of monastic communities to flourish near urban and agricultural resources while occupying defensible or symbolically elevated terrain. The nearby fortified settlement of Sahr-i-Bahlol further shows that monastic and urban life were interconnected (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a).

North of Gandhara, the routes became more difficult and more fragmented. The Upper Indus cuts through steep mountain terrain. Passages from the river valley led toward Gilgit and Hunza, while other paths connected with Chitral, Swat, and Kashmir. From Gilgit and Hunza, travellers could attempt high passes toward the Wakhan and the southern edges of the Tarim Basin. These were not roads in the modern engineered sense. They were route systems dependent on changing environmental and political conditions. Harald Hauptmann's synthesis of the Upper Indus emphasizes access from Khotan through the Wakhan and across key passes of the Hindu Kush and Karakoram. The material record confirms that this mountain zone was repeatedly crossed by people from several linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Hauptmann, 2024).

4. Taxila: Urban Archaeology at a Crossroads

Taxila provides the clearest urban case for Pakistan's place in long-distance exchange. It is not a single city but a complex archaeological landscape containing successive settlements, monasteries, stupas, and other structures. The principal urban sites—Bhir Mound, Sirkap, and Sirsukh—represent different political and cultural periods, while surrounding religious establishments reveal the close relationship between urban wealth and Buddhist patronage. The sequence should not be read as a simple replacement of one foreign civilization by another. It records local continuity combined with repeated imperial interventions and changing patterns of urban organization (Marshall, 1951; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b).

Bhir Mound, the earliest major historic settlement at Taxila, has irregular streets and dense structures that contrast with the planned form of later Sirkap. It developed during a period when the region was connected to the Achaemenid world and later came under the Mauryan Empire. Classical traditions associate Taxila with Alexander's campaign in 326 BCE, but archaeology shows that the settlement's importance was older than the Macedonian conquest. The encounter with Alexander is historically significant because it placed Taxila within Greek accounts and initiated new political formations, yet it did not create the city's regional role. Routes, agricultural resources, craft activity, and political administration had already made the area valuable (Allchin, 1995; Coningham & Young, 2015; Falk, 2006).

Sirkap, generally associated with Indo-Greek and succeeding periods, was laid out on a more regular grid. Its architecture and finds have often been presented as proof of a cosmopolitan city where Greek, South Asian, Iranian, and Central Asian traditions met. The description is justified, but the word “cosmopolitan” should be used carefully. A grid plan or a classical architectural feature does not reveal how ordinary residents identified themselves. The strongest evidence lies in the coexistence and recombination of forms. Religious buildings, domestic structures, coins, ornaments, and decorative motifs point to communities operating in a political environment shaped by Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Indo-Parthian rulers. Taxila was not a Greek colony separated from its surroundings; it was a South Asian city transformed by cross-regional powers and local adaptation.

Sirsukh, associated with the Kushan period, represents another shift. The Kushans created an empire that linked parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northern India. Under their rule, Taxila and Gandhara participated in a political economy that crossed

the Hindu Kush. Urban walls, coin circulation, religious patronage, and artistic production must be understood within this larger framework. UNESCO dates Taxila's period of greatest prominence broadly from the first to fifth centuries CE, corresponding to the flourishing of Buddhist institutions and the region's integration into transregional networks (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b).

Coins are among the most useful forms of evidence for this history. Taxila has yielded coinages associated with multiple dynasties and monetary traditions. Their changing scripts, portraits, deities, metals, and standards record political claims and economic relationships. Coins cannot provide a complete map of trade: they may remain in circulation after a dynasty falls, and their discovery can reflect saving, ritual deposition, or accidental loss. Nevertheless, the variety of coinage at Taxila confirms sustained participation in wider systems. Indo-Greek issues combined Hellenistic royal portraiture with local scripts and symbols. Kushan coins drew on Greek, Iranian, South Asian, and Buddhist religious imagery. This visual plurality was not random decoration. It allowed rulers to communicate authority to diverse populations and to position their empire within several inherited traditions (Bopearachchi, 2003; Cribb, 1997).

The monasteries around Taxila deepen this interpretation. Dharmarajika, Jaulian, Mohra Moradu, and other complexes contained stupas, chapels, cells, courts, sculptures, and reliquary deposits. Their construction required considerable resources. Donations came from rulers, elites, merchants, families, monks, and local communities. The distribution of monasteries around a major urban center supports the argument that Buddhist institutions grew through a relationship with settlement and exchange. Monasteries converted economic surplus into durable religious landscapes. Their images and narratives then travelled through pilgrims, portable objects, memory, and textual traditions (Behrendt, 2004; Jongeward et al., 2012).

Taxila's greatest value for Silk Road history is thus not the discovery of a single spectacular imported object. It is the long archaeological sequence showing how a strategically located city repeatedly reorganized itself under new political regimes while maintaining connections with surrounding regions. Its streets, walls, coins, religious institutions, and craft remain reveal a society that was both local and transregional. The city participated in exchange not by losing its identity, but by continuously producing new forms from inherited and incoming traditions.

5. Gandhara, Buddhist Institutions, and Cultural Translation

Gandhara is central to any account of cultural exchange between Pakistan, Central Asia, and China. The historical region broadly included the Peshawar valley and adjacent areas of modern northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, with cultural influence extending toward Taxila, Swat, and the Kabul valley. Its political history was highly diverse. Achaemenid, Mauryan, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian, Kushan, and later rulers-controlled parts of the region. This succession did not simply produce layers of conquest. It created conditions in which artistic, linguistic, monetary, and religious traditions were repeatedly recombined (Behrendt, 2004, 2007; Brancaccio & Behrendt, 2006; Errington & Cribb, 1992).

Gandharan Buddhist art is the most visible result. Sculptures in grey schist, stucco, and other materials represented Buddhas, bodhisattvas, donors, monks, guardians, and narrative episodes. Older scholarship often described the art as “Greco-Buddhist,” emphasizing classical drapery, naturalistic bodies, architectural ornament, and figures related to Greek mythology. Hellenistic influence was real, but the label can imply a simple fusion of two pure traditions. Gandharan art was more complex. It drew on South Asian Buddhist narratives, Iranian royal and religious symbols, Hellenistic visual conventions, Roman-period forms, and local workshop practices. Its makers worked for Buddhist institutions and patrons whose goals

shaped the selection of motifs (Behrendt, 2007; Rienjang & Stewart, 2018; Zwalf, 1996).

The visual representation of the Buddha in human form became especially important. Debate continues over chronology and the relationship between Gandhara and Mathura, but it is clear that Gandharan workshops helped develop influential ways of presenting the Buddha as an authoritative, transcendent, and accessible figure. Robes with rhythmic folds, halos, seated teaching postures, standing images, and narrative reliefs created a visual language that could be adapted across regions. Similarities between Gandharan images and Buddhist art in Central Asia and China do not always indicate direct copying. They demonstrate the movement of iconographic systems through objects, sketches, artisans, monks, and textual descriptions. As images entered new environments, they were adjusted to local materials, patronage, and devotional practices (Behrendt, 2007; Brancaccio & Behrendt, 2006; Rienjang & Stewart, 2018).

Monasteries were the institutions in which much of this translation took place. The archaeological complexes at Takht-i-Bahi, Jamal Garhi, Taxila, and throughout the Peshawar and Swat regions demonstrate different combinations of stupas, chapels, monastic cells, assembly spaces, and service areas. Takht-i-Bahi, founded in the early first century CE and used until approximately the seventh century, is exceptionally well preserved. Its main and votive stupa courts, monastic quadrangle, and circulation routes show that monasteries were organized environments designed for residence, ritual, teaching, commemoration, and the display of donated images. Nearby Sahr-i-Bahlol represents an urban settlement of the same broad period, reinforcing the connection between religious institutions and populated economic landscapes (Behrendt, 2004; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a).

The connection between Buddhism and trade should nevertheless be stated with precision. Merchants did not spread Buddhism automatically wherever they travelled, and monks were not simply agents of economic expansion. Religious transmission required teachers, texts, translation, patronage, and communities willing to adopt or adapt practices. What trade networks provided was mobility and connection. They created repeated contact among people who might otherwise have remained separated. Monasteries near routes could become nodes where information, stories, ritual technologies, and manuscripts circulated. Political rulers sometimes supported these institutions because Buddhism offered ethical prestige, transregional connections, and forms of royal legitimacy (Neelis, 2011, 2014).

The transmission toward Central Asia and China involved translation at several levels. Texts moved from Gandhari or Sanskrit into Central Asian languages and Chinese. Names, concepts, and technical terms had to be interpreted. Images moved too, but they were translated visually. A bodhisattva represented with jewelry and princely clothing could be understood in different political cultures because the image combined local markers of status with Buddhist meaning. Narrative reliefs offered models for telling the Buddha's life in settings where literacy and language varied. Reliquaries and stupas carried architectural ideas that could be reproduced at different scales (Jongeward et al., 2012; Salomon, 1999, 2018).

The relationship with China was therefore neither a direct national connection nor a one-time transfer. It was a long process mediated through Central Asian kingdoms, translators, merchant communities, and monastic networks. Gandhara provided texts, relic traditions, artistic models, and sacred geographies. Central Asian centers such as Khotan, Kucha, and others did not merely pass these materials onward; they translated and transformed them. Chinese patrons and monks then incorporated them into new institutions. Pakistan's Gandharan heritage belongs to this wider history, but its importance lies in the local creativity visible in the archaeological record.

6. The Kushan World: Political Integration, Coins, and Mobility

The Kushan Empire was one of the most important political frameworks for connecting

northern Pakistan with Central Asia. The Kushans emerged from the Yuezhi-related groups that entered Bactria after the decline of Greco-Bactrian power. By the early centuries CE, Kushan rulers controlled territories on both sides of the Hindu Kush and extended power into Gandhara and northern India. The empire's exact boundaries and chronology remain debated, and it should not be imagined as a uniformly administered state. Nevertheless, Kushan rule reduced some political barriers across a large zone and supported the circulation of people, money, religious institutions, and artistic forms (Benjamin, 2007; Kuwayama, 2002; Neelis, 2011).

Kushan coinage is a particularly rich source because it combined multiple languages and divine images. Early Kushan issues adapted existing coin types; later gold and copper coins displayed rulers and deities associated with Greek, Iranian, South Asian, and Buddhist traditions. The use of Bactrian written in Greek script on many issues reflects the empire's Central Asian political inheritance, while the religious images reveal an effort to communicate with diverse constituencies. The appearance of the Buddha on coins of Kanishka is historically significant, but it should not be used to describe the ruler as exclusively Buddhist. The wider pantheon shows a policy of representing several sacred traditions within imperial imagery.

Coins facilitated transactions, taxation, military payments, and royal communication. Their distribution across Bactria, Gandhara, Taxila, and northern India demonstrates economic integration, though not every area used the same denominations in the same way. Gold issues were connected to elite and long-distance economies, while copper served more ordinary exchange. Coin hoards can indicate wealth accumulation or insecurity, but isolated finds in settlements often provide better evidence of circulation. Numismatics also helps establish relative chronologies for archaeological layers and sculptures, although the continued use of old coins complicates precise dating (Bopearachchi, 2003; Cribb, 1997; Rienjang & Stewart, 2018).

The Kushan period is often described as a high point of Silk Road trade. This description is reasonable if it does not imply unrestricted movement or a single imperial trade policy. The empire occupied a central position between Han China, the Iranian world, and South Asia. Its territories included routes toward the Tarim Basin and access to markets connected with the Indian Ocean. Goods could move north-south as well as east-west. South Asian spices, textiles, ivory, and precious materials entered wider networks; Central Asian horses, metals, and other products moved south; and Roman-period objects and coinage reached regions connected with Kushan markets. The empire's importance lay less in controlling the entire Silk Road than in linking several regional systems.Religious patronage formed part of Kushan political culture. The period saw major growth in Buddhist sites in Gandhara and Mathura, although dating individual monuments to specific kings is often difficult. Royal support mattered, but so did donations from local elites and non-royal communities. The relationship between Kushan expansion and Buddhism was mutually useful without being exclusive. Buddhist institutions gained resources and mobility, while rulers could associate themselves with sacred authority and transregional prestige. The resulting art and architecture later influenced communities beyond the empire's borders. The Kushan case supports the article's broader argument. Political power could expand the scale of mobility, but it did not erase local difference. Gandhara and Taxila remained distinctive centers within a larger imperial world. Their workshops, monasteries, and urban communities selected from imperial and foreign forms. The archaeological result is not cultural uniformity but structured diversity: shared coins and symbols existed beside local building techniques, languages, and devotional practices.

7. The Upper Indus: Rock Art, Inscriptions, and the Archaeology of Movement

The Upper Indus provides the most direct archaeological record of travellers moving between northern Pakistan and wider Central

Asian networks. Along the Indus and associated valleys, thousands of images and inscriptions were carved onto boulders and rock faces. Major concentrations occur around Shatial, Chilas, Thalpan, and other stations. The corpus includes animal images, hunting scenes, human figures, stupas, bodhisattvas, narrative compositions, personal names, religious formulas, and short records in several scripts and languages. Together they form one of the world's most important archives of movement through a mountain landscape (Hauptmann, 2024; Jettmar, 1989).

The modern documentation of this material developed through Pakistani-German cooperation. Karl Jettmar and Ahmad Hasan Dani were foundational figures, and the long-running project associated with the Heidelberg Academy systematically recorded sites along the Karakoram Highway and neighboring areas. The scale is remarkable. Published project summaries count tens of thousands of petroglyphs and thousands of inscriptions across many assemblages. Numbers vary as documentation expands and classifications change, so they should not be repeated as if permanently fixed. What matters is the density, chronological range, and diversity of the material (Hauptmann, 2024).

Shatial is especially important because its inscriptions preserve evidence of travellers associated with Iranian and Central Asian worlds. Sogdian names and graffiti are prominent, alongside inscriptions in other languages and scripts. Sogdians were among the major merchant communities of late antique and early medieval Central Asia, with networks extending across the Tarim Basin and into China. At Shatial, their inscriptions often record names rather than commercial contracts. Such brief graffiti cannot tell us what each traveller carried or whether every named person was a merchant. Yet the concentration of Sogdian writing at a strategic junction confirms repeated passage by people connected to Sogdian networks. The site transforms the general claim that Sogdians travelled widely into material evidence located in Pakistan.

Buddhist imagery is another major component. Stupa carvings appear in many forms, sometimes accompanied by donors, worshippers, or inscriptions. These images were not merely illustrations of buildings elsewhere. Carving a stupa could function as a devotional act, creating merit and sacralizing a stopping place. Bodhisattva images and narrative scenes similarly brought Buddhist sacred presence into the mountain corridor. Marike van Aerde's study of early Buddhist rock carvings argues that their distribution and iconography provide empirical evidence for routes beyond Gandhara through the Karakoram. The carvings show how a religious visual language developed in the Gandharan world could travel into and through mountain environments (van Aerde, 2019).

Multilingualism is one of the corpus's greatest historical contributions. Kharosthi and Brahmi link the region to South Asian and Gandharan writing traditions. Sogdian, Bactrian, Middle Persian, and other inscriptions connect it with Iranian and Central Asian communities. Chinese and Tibetan evidence in the wider high-mountain region reflects later political and religious movement. The distribution is not uniform, and each inscription must be evaluated palaeographically and contextually. Still, the coexistence of scripts demonstrates that the Upper Indus connected several literate worlds.

The relationship with China can be understood through route connection rather than through a large number of explicitly Chinese objects. Passages through Gilgit, Hunza, and the Karakoram linked northern Pakistan with the southern Tarim Basin and routes toward Khotan and Kashgar. Buddhist motifs, manuscripts, and traveller accounts fit this geography. A person moving from Gandhara toward China could travel through multiple Central Asian communities, changing guides, languages, and political jurisdictions. The Upper Indus was one option among several, not the exclusive road. Its archaeology is important because it preserves direct traces of this difficult, segmented movement (Hauptmann, 2024; Kuwayama, 2002).

8. Gilgit Manuscripts and Chinese Pilgrims

The Gilgit manuscripts provide a different form of evidence for Pakistan's place in trans-Asian exchange. Discovered in the Gilgit region in the twentieth century, the collection includes Buddhist texts written in forms of Sanskrit using Gupta and post-Gupta Brahmi scripts. UNESCO dates important portions to approximately the fifth and sixth centuries CE and notes that the corpus contains works such as the Samadhiraja Sutra and the Saddharmapundarika, or Lotus Sutra, as well as material concerning ritual, philosophy, medicine, iconometry, and narrative. The manuscripts are significant not simply because of their age, but because they demonstrate the presence of a community capable of copying, preserving, and using complex Buddhist literature in the high-mountain region (UNESCO, 2017).Manuscripts are archaeological objects as well as texts. Their writing material, script, format, corrections, arrangement, and place of deposition offer evidence about production and use. A manuscript found in a stupa or sacred structure may have been stored as a library text, deposited ritually, or preserved after damage. The Gilgit corpus cannot be reduced to a list of doctrines. It represents labor by scribes, access to exemplars, knowledge of language, and the support of patrons or institutions. Its existence implies connections with other Buddhist centers from which texts and writing practices could circulate.

Gilgit's location made it well suited to this role. It was connected southward to the Indus and Gandharan regions, westward toward Chitral and the Wakhan, eastward toward Baltistan and Kashmir, and northward toward Hunza and Central Asian routes. The highland setting did not isolate it from intellectual exchange. On the contrary, local rulers and monasteries could benefit from controlling and supporting movement through strategic valleys. The Palola Sahi rulers associated with the Gilgit region appear in inscriptions and manuscript colophons, demonstrating the relationship between local political authority and Buddhist patronage. This is a valuable reminder that Silk Road culture was sustained by small and medium-sized polities as well as by large empires (Hauptmann, 2024; Kuwayama, 2002).The manuscripts also help explain how Buddhism moved toward China. Chinese translations were rarely produced from abstract “Indian originals” without intermediate histories. Texts circulated in particular languages and recensions. Monks carried manuscripts, memorized teachings, and worked with translators. Central Asian kingdoms and communities served as major centers of translation. A Sanskrit manuscript in Gilgit and a Chinese translation elsewhere may not be directly related, but they belong to overlapping textual worlds. The distribution of related works across South Asia, Central Asia, and China shows that Buddhist literature moved through networks of copying and interpretation.

Chinese pilgrim records add a human perspective to this process. Faxian left China around the end of the fourth century and travelled through Central Asia into the northwestern subcontinent before continuing across South Asia. His account describes Buddhist communities, sacred sites, and the search for disciplinary texts. Xuanzang travelled in the seventh century through the Tarim Basin and Central Asia, crossed the Hindu Kush, and visited regions associated with Gandhara and Taxila. He returned to China with a large collection of texts and became a major translator. Yijing later travelled mainly by maritime routes, demonstrating that connections between China and South Asia were not limited to overland paths (Beal, 1884; Legge, 1886; Sen, 2006). These accounts are primary historical sources, but they must be handled carefully. Pilgrims selected information according to religious interests. They often reported miracle stories, sacred measurements, and legendary associations. Place names are difficult to identify, and later copying can affect texts. Nevertheless, their descriptions provide information unavailable from archaeology alone: the reputation of sites, the condition of monasteries, doctrinal affiliations, travel difficulties, and the emotional meaning of pilgrimage. When read with archaeological evidence, they show that places in modern Pakistan were known to

Chinese Buddhists as part of a sacred and intellectual geography.

The Gilgit manuscripts and pilgrim accounts together demonstrate that the transmission of Buddhism required physical objects and embodied travel. Ideas did not move independently of people. Manuscripts had to be copied and protected; pilgrims needed food, guides, and political permission; translators needed linguistic training and institutional support. Archaeology restores this material dimension to intellectual history. It also highlights Pakistan's role not only as the homeland of influential Buddhist art, but as a region where texts were preserved and where travellers encountered living religious communities.

9. What Was Exchanged? Goods, Images, Languages, and Practices

The phrase "trade and cultural exchange" can become vague unless the exchanged materials and processes are identified. Archaeological evidence from Pakistan points to several overlapping categories. The first is commercial material: coins, metals, stones, beads, glass, textiles, food products, medicines, animals, and crafted objects. Organic goods are often poorly preserved, so archaeology overrepresents durable materials. Silk itself rarely survives in Pakistan's climate, and its absence from many sites does not mean that textiles were unimportant. Coins, stone, and glass are easier to identify, but even they require contextual analysis.

Precious and semi-precious stones illustrate complex supply chains. Lapis lazuli from sources in Afghanistan could move through Bactria and Gandhara, while garnet, turquoise, carnelian, and other materials circulated through South and Central Asian networks. A finished ornament found at Taxila may represent several stages of movement: extraction, rough shaping, transport, final manufacture, sale, use, and deposition. Beads from Gandharan contexts show shared forms across Bactria and the northwestern subcontinent. Their distribution indicates both trade and the movement of craft knowledge. Religious objects moved through similar processes. Reliquaries could contain sacred remains and function as focuses of patronage. Small sculptures, amulets, seals, and illustrated manuscripts were portable. Architectural forms such as stupas could not move physically, but their designs circulated through memory, drawing, description, and the experience of pilgrims. The stupa images carved in the Upper Indus show how monumental architecture could be translated into a small rock image that created sacred meaning along a route (Jongeward et al., 2012; van Aerde, 2019).

Languages and scripts were among the most consequential forms of exchange. Kharosthi connected Gandharan administrative and religious traditions; Brahmi and its later forms became important for Sanskrit and regional writing; Bactrian in Greek script represented Central Asian imperial and administrative culture; Sogdian served communities active across Central Asia and China. Translation between these languages reshaped Buddhist concepts. Translators had to decide whether to reproduce a foreign sound, choose an approximate local term, or explain an unfamiliar concept. The resulting Chinese Buddhist vocabulary was therefore a historical creation produced through sustained contact. Artistic exchange worked in the same selective way. Gandharan artists did not copy classical models mechanically. They used drapery, architectural frames, vine scrolls, winged figures, and bodily poses within Buddhist programs. Central Asian and Chinese artists later selected from Gandharan conventions while combining them with local forms. This is why influence should be understood as a chain of creative decisions rather than as the movement of a fixed style. The Silk Roads connected workshops, but each workshop remained embedded in its own material and religious environment.

The evidence is therefore strongest when trade and culture are not separated. A merchant's donation could finance an image; a monastery could preserve a text carried along a commercial route; a coin could spread political iconography; and a precious stone could become part of a reliquary. Pakistan's archaeological record shows that economic movement created opportunities

for cultural contact, while religious and political institutions gave objects new meanings.

10. Limits, Debates, and the Problem of Overstatement

The archaeological connection between Pakistan, Central Asia, and China is substantial, but it is easy to exaggerate. Popular accounts sometimes present every ancient route in northern Pakistan as "the Silk Road" and every foreign-looking artifact as evidence of direct trade with China or Rome. Such claims can produce attractive heritage narratives while weakening historical accuracy. A rigorous article must distinguish direct evidence, reasonable inference, and speculation.

Direct evidence includes inscriptions in identifiable languages, coins with known issuing authorities, manuscripts datable by script and context, and objects whose materials or production techniques can be traced. Even direct evidence requires interpretation. A Sogdian name at Shatial demonstrates the presence of a person connected to Sogdian language and naming traditions, but it does not automatically identify the person's occupation or cargo. A Chinese pilgrim's account proves that a tradition was recorded, not that every miracle or local legend was historically factual. Reasonable inference connects several categories of evidence. The location of monasteries near routes, donor inscriptions, urban wealth, and traveller accounts together support a relationship between Buddhism and mobility. No single monastery need be labelled a trade station. Similarly, the combination of Kushan coins, political geography, and artistic exchange supports broad regional integration even when the empire's exact borders remain uncertain.

Speculation becomes problematic when national or civilizational claims outrun the evidence. Modern Pakistan, China, and the Central Asian republics did not exist in their present forms during the periods discussed. It is legitimate to describe archaeological sites by their modern locations, but ancient movement should not be projected backward as a relationship between modern nation-states. The phrase "Pakistan-China connection" is useful for contemporary readers only if it is explained as contact between historical regions now located within those states. Finally, the evidence is shaped by excavation history. Colonial archaeology often privileged monumental Buddhist art and classical influence. Sculptures were removed from their architectural contexts and distributed among museums. Illicit excavation continues to destroy information by separating objects from findspots. Areas that are difficult to access remain understudied, and rescue projects are constrained by funding and security. The surviving record is therefore not a neutral sample of the past. A responsible interpretation acknowledges these gaps rather than presenting a complete map of ancient exchange (Ray, 2018; Zwalf, 1996).

11. Heritage, Conservation, and Contemporary Significance

Pakistan's Silk Road archaeology has major contemporary value, but heritage preservation must be separated from political slogan. Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi are UNESCO World Heritage properties, and the Gilgit manuscripts have international documentary significance. Museums in Taxila, Peshawar, Swat, Islamabad, and elsewhere preserve important collections. These sites support education, tourism, and international cultural cooperation. They also provide Pakistan with a history that connects South Asia, Central Asia, Iran, and China without reducing the country to any single civilizational identity (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).The greatest threats are physical and institutional. Urban encroachment, road construction, pollution, erosion, looting, and insufficient site management affect major archaeological areas. UNESCO has previously expressed concern over illegal excavation at Taxila, illustrating how the art market can destroy context even when an object survives. At Sahr-i-Bahlol, settlement growth threatens the remains of the fortified city. Conservation requires trained personnel, documentation, legal enforcement, community participation, and stable funding rather than occasional

beautification projects (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

The Upper Indus faces a particularly difficult conflict between heritage and development. Hydropower and transport projects may alter or submerge extensive sections of the archaeological landscape. Documentation is essential, but preservation cannot be reduced to photographing images before destruction. Rock carvings derive meaning from their relationship to crossings, paths, river terraces, and neighboring carvings. Where relocation is unavoidable, records should include three-dimensional models, spatial data, inscriptions, geological context, and oral knowledge from local communities. Public access to research archives would also allow Pakistani scholars and students to participate more fully in interpretation (Hauptmann, 2010, 2024).

Community involvement is crucial because archaeological landscapes are part of inhabited regions. Conservation that excludes local people may create resentment or fail after external funding ends. Education programs can connect rock art, manuscripts, and Buddhist sites with local histories of mobility and diversity. Tourism must be managed to avoid vandalism and uncontrolled construction. Revenue-sharing and local employment can make preservation materially meaningful. The contemporary significance of this heritage is therefore both national and transnational. It can strengthen Pakistan's historical scholarship while showing that the region's past was created through interaction. It can also provide a model of connected history in which China and Central Asia are not distant external actors but parts of networks that included local communities in the Indus and Gandharan worlds.

12. Conclusion

The archaeological evidence demonstrates that the territories of modern Pakistan occupied a major position within the networks known as the Silk Roads. This position did not depend on a single road or a continuous flow of caravans between China and the Mediterranean. It developed through a changing system of cities, monasteries, river valleys, mountain passes, political regimes, and local communities.

Taxila shows how a long-lived urban center adapted to Achaemenid, Mauryan, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian, and Kushan political worlds while maintaining regional importance. Gandhara reveals the creative transformation of South Asian, Iranian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian forms within Buddhist institutions. Kushan coinage and patronage demonstrate political integration across the Hindu Kush without cultural uniformity. The Upper Indus inscriptions and carvings preserve direct traces of travellers and devotional practices in the mountain corridors linking Gandhara with Central Asia. The Gilgit manuscripts show that these highlands were also centers of textual production and preservation. Chinese pilgrim records confirm that places in modern Pakistan belonged to a sacred geography known far beyond the subcontinent.

The strongest conclusion is not that Pakistan was simply a transit bridge. Its communities produced objects, images, texts, and institutions that influenced wider Asia. At the same time, they received and transformed materials and practices from Central Asia, Iran, and the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Exchange was multidirectional, selective, and uneven. It involved cooperation and patronage, but also conquest, taxation, danger, and decline.For historians, the value of archaeology is that it makes this connected past material. Coins reveal political communication; monasteries reveal organized patronage; inscriptions preserve individual presence; manuscripts record intellectual labor; and rock art turns routes into landscapes of memory. Together, these sources establish Pakistan as an active region in the history of exchange between South Asia, Central Asia, and China. Preserving this evidence is not only a national responsibility. It is essential to understanding how Eurasian history was made through movement, translation, and local creativity.

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