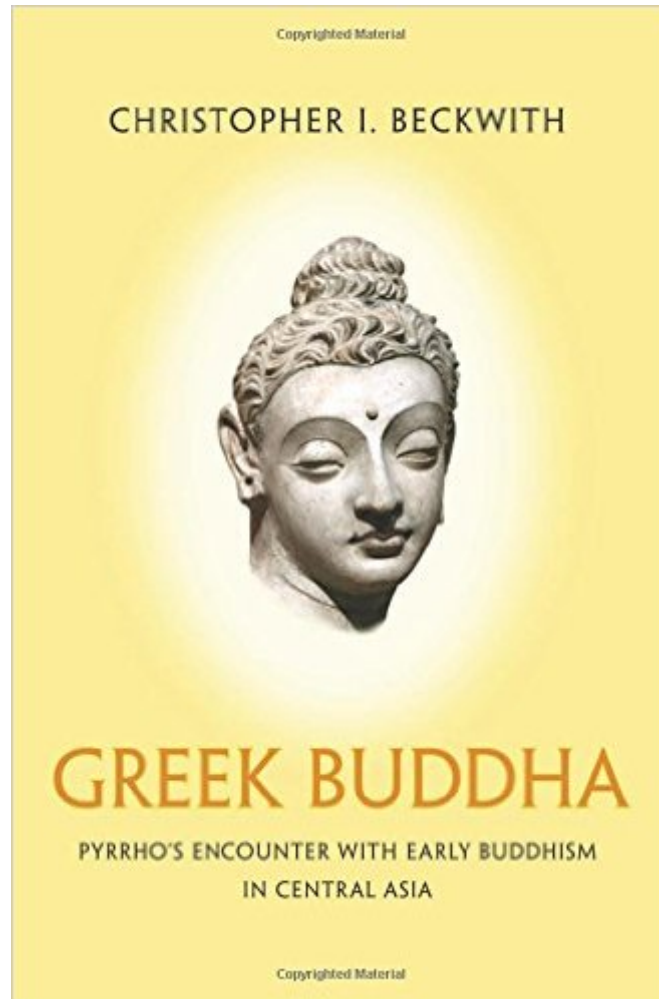


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# Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter With Early Buddhism In Central Asia



## Synopsis

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.

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## Customer Reviews

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.

Four 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 Buddha's 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 Buddha's 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 Lincoln's 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: Pyrrho's 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 differentia "possibly a parallel to the Buddha's *anatta*), *asthmeta* (unbalanced "possibly a parallel to the Buddha's *dukkha*) and *anepikrita* (indeterminate "possibly a parallel to the Buddha's *annica*). The degree to which Pyrrho's three qualities of pragmata actually map one-to-one onto the Buddha's three marks of existence is a question I 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 Pyrrho's 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've 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 K'ao, and that K'ao-Tan could plausibly have been pronounced Gaw-tam 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 Pyrrho's influence on David Hume, the provenance of the Mauryan stone edicts and pillars, the linguistic facility of Alexander's entourage, and Pyrrho's place in the stream of Greek philosophy. Beckwith's discussion of the connection between Pyrrho's 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's 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 weren't 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.

This is a bold book about the early relationship and reciprocal influences between Buddhism and Greek philosophy, mediated, among other events, by Alexander the Great's military campaigns in India. I liked the topic and general idea more than the actual execution. For one thing, my Buddhist friends tell me that the author gets some things more than slightly wrong, in the pursuit of his own interpretation of early Buddhism. You can check some of the professional reviews on the web, which seem to confirm the point. Also, there is a bit too much speculation about Pyrrho himself and his more or less radical departure from other Hellenistic thinkers. Even so, this is certainly a stimulating book, which if nothing else will spark your interest in early Greek and Indian philosophy, always fascinating subjects to think about. I have published two full length commentaries on Beckwith's book at my [how to be a stoic \(dot org\)](http://howtobeastoic.com) blog.

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.

This is an extraordinary scholar and very well written book. "Pointing at Moon" or Heart of the comparative philosophy. A Milestone. Will remove much of studies of Pyrrhonism and Buddhism as well. And it's a good precedent for another excellent work: Pyrrhonism, by Adrian Kuzminski. I recommended so much. Humberto Martínez, México.

I'm having trouble finishing this book, which seems to be mostly a scholarly pastiche of others' work,

to prove what seems obvious, at least to me: geography and history both indicate that there must have been an encounter between early Buddhist teachings and Greeks in northwestern India. Pyrrho's philosophy does indeed resemble these early Buddhist teachings, although he had little ultimate impact on Greek thinking, being considered mostly an oddity. Worth reading, but somehow declares its conclusions to be more startling than I find them to be, though others may disagree.

Fantastic.

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