TRANSLATING BUDDHIST TEXTS INTO HELLENISTIC KOINE
(MARGINAL NOTES TO THE GREEK TRANSLATION
OF ASHOKA'S EDICTS) [1]

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Linguistic interaction in ancient times was particularly pronounced in the Hellenistic era. The spread of the Greek language after Alexander the Great's campaigns led to the emergence of numerous situations of bilingualism, many cases of which were recorded by ancient authors [2]. As a rule, we have no bilingual texts available outside Egypt. The only exception is the area known as the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms (see the map, fig. 1). The earliest evidence of bilingualism is the inscriptions of Ashoka for which Greek equivalents have been found [3]. The area, in which interaction took place between the Middle Indo-Aryan dialects (Prakrits) and Greek, includes the northwest of contemporary India, northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan [4]. In the Hellenistic era, contacts between languages [5] took place on the periphery of the two cultures, although from the point of view of the history of Prakrits we must mention the particular cultural significance of Gandhāra [6], which played a special role in the formation and spread of Buddhist ideas. It is well known that the Buddhist way of perception presupposes a particular worldview [7]. And thus Gandhāra turns out to be not only the main contact zone between India and the West, but also the area from which Buddhism spread to Middle and Central Asia. So we can discuss the question of whether the Greek translations of Ashoka's edicts should be included in the overall picture of the irradiation of Buddhism from Gandhāra.

Indian grammarians of the 10th—5th centuries BC called the spoken language of north-west India udichya (udicāya), which means northern. The term “Gandhāri Prakrit” came in use only after the appearance of the H. W. Bailey's [8] article. The Gandhāri theory, which a number of contemporary researchers support, is based on the supposition according to which the formation of Gandhāri as a literary language started in the period when texts mainly connected to Buddhism were written in it. As any other literary language, it was probably based on the spoken dialects used in the far north-west of India, but at the same time different texts show a different degree of Sanskrit influence [9].

It should be specially mentioned that by the time of the Greek-Indian cultural and linguistic contacts both of them already had well developed traditions of fixation of the texts, and also a number of literary genres, which correlated only partially. Though bilingual inscriptions are comparatively few, the materials on Indo-Greek bilingualism are of considerable interest [10]. The contacts took place most of all in Gandhāra and the adjacent areas, where numerous coins with bilingual legends of Indo-Greek kings were found, and where king Menander ruled, tales about whom remained in the Pali text "The Questions of Milinda" [11] (fig. 2).

The interaction of the two traditions occurred both on the level of oral communication (about which we can only make guesses based on indirect data, for example, on the sufficiently accurate phonetic reproduction of proper names on the coins of the Indo-Greek kings [12]), and in written interaction, in which a contradiction arose between the basically syllabic Indian Kharoṣṭhī script (fig. 3) and Greek alphabetic script based on phonetic principals.

At present the majority of the researchers share the opinion that Kharoṣṭhī script (3rd century BC—4th century AD) was developed on the basis of the north-east Prakrit, and reflected features peculiar to it [13]. There is a feasible theory according to which Kharoṣṭhī script was created by some inventor after the Aramaic model (that is under the direct influence of the script skills in use in Achaemenid offices). Thus the terminus ante quem is considered to be 325 BC, when, as a result of Alexander the Great's campaign, the Achaemenid Empire was destroyed along with its bureaucratic script tradition [14].

It is not at all clear if Ashoka's edicts (3rd century BC) [15] have anything to do with this script tradition. The study of the style of Ashoka's inscriptions revealed a number of rhetorical elements that were used in