

Art of Ancient India and the Aegean. Fortuitous Parallels or  
Cultural Contacts?



“This book provides a general comparative study of the ancient Indian and Greek civilizations. It expresses some original views and insightful possible explanations of the similarities and differences between them. It examines their art in a social context. In this sense, it expands this work in a research area not frequently pursued.” (**Dr Georgia Flouda**, Head of Department of Prehistoric and Minoan Antiquities, Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Crete, Greece)

“The author has touched upon a very interesting yet difficult topic. A must-read for anyone interested in understanding the cultural influences of the Greeks on Indian art and culture. He provides excellent, thought-provoking views with comprehensive information and debate about the subject. I recommend this book because there is no other book in the market that captures this segment of history in such detail. It challenges many traditional views on the subject.” (**Dr Asma Ibrahim**, Founding Director, Museum Archives and Art Gallery Department, State Bank of Pakistan; formerly Post-doctoral Fellow, University of Wisconsin)

“The book is a very informative survey of ancient Indian and Aegean art forms, discussing different aspects of their socio-economic background and influences on one another. The chronology and different categories of art are based on their utility, cultural traditions, and decorations on artefacts. I congratulate Dr Bhalla for this valuable production, which will certainly benefit researchers in this field of study.” (**Dr Anil K. Singh**, Chair, Greek Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and Director of Indo-Hellenic Research Centre)

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# Art of Ancient India and the Aegean

Fortuitous Parallels or Cultural Contacts?

A.S. Bhalla



In memory of

Professor **Costis Davaras** (1933-2021)

Whose writings inspired me to follow in his footsteps in search of  
the truth about ancient Indo-Greek contacts and affinity



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## List of Abbreviations

AJA	American Journal of Archaeology
ASI	Archaeological Survey of India
AWE	Ancient West and East
BCH	<i>Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique</i>
BICS	Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies (University of London)
BSA	Annual of the British School of Archaeology, Athens
CMS	<i>Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel</i>
CNRS	<i>Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique</i> , Paris
EC, MC, LC	Early, Middle, Late Cycladic
EH, MH, LH	Early, Middle, Late Helladic
EM, MM, LM	Early, Middle, Late Minoan
JHSS	Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
SIMA	Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology
SMEA	<i>Studi micenei ed egeo-anatolici</i>

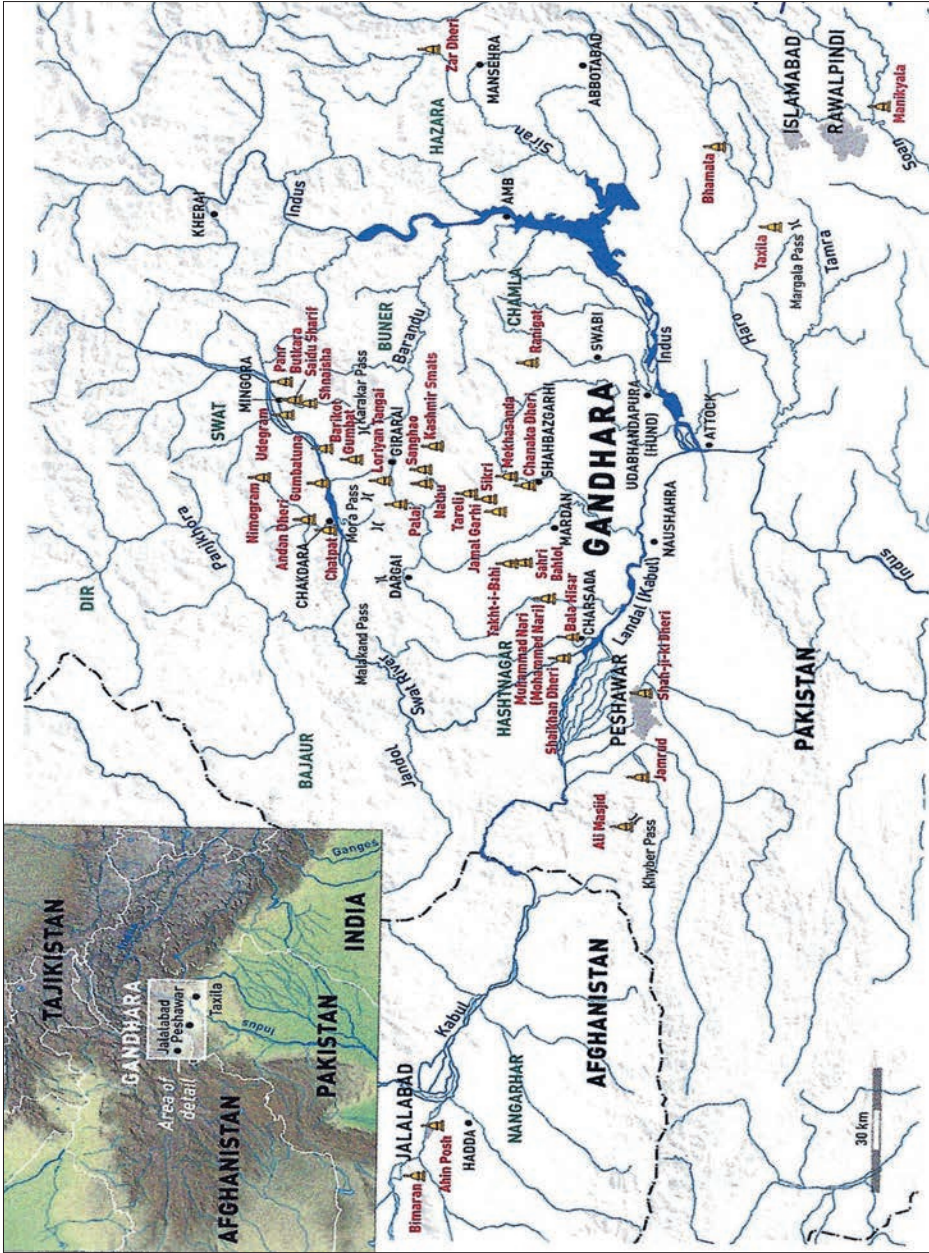
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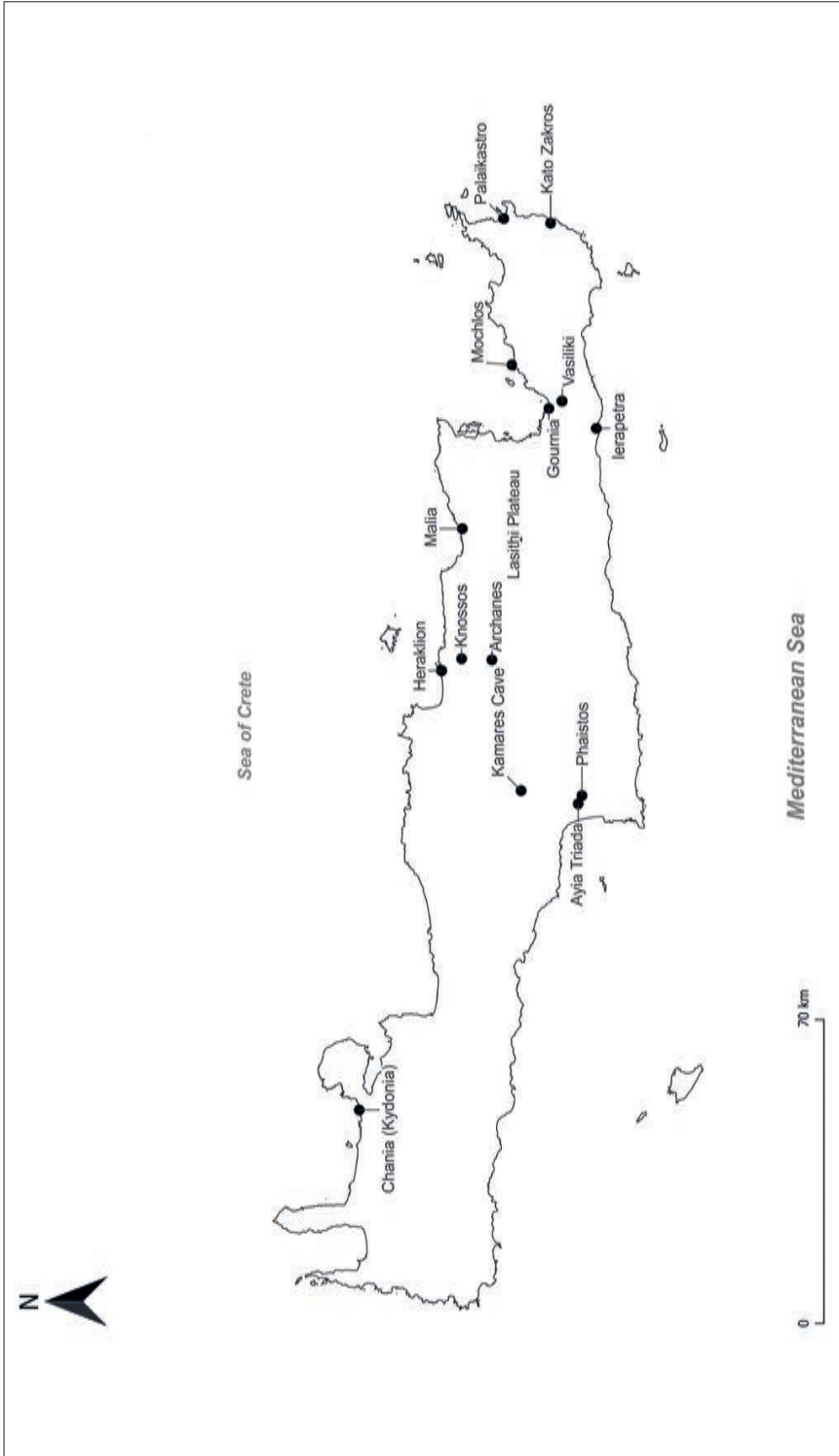


Map 1 Indus Valley Civilization, Mature Phase (2600-1900 BCE)  
(Courtesy of Wikimedia)





Map 2 Principal sites of the Gandhara region  
 (Courtesy of Wikimedia and Dirk Fabian, ingraphis.de, Kassel)



Map 3 Key Bronze Age sites of Crete  
(Author)



Map 4 The Aegean  
(Author)

# Foreword

The work of a teacher does not end with his death, it finds fertile ground in the hearts of his students and continues to grow by inspiring them in their work. Thus, the pioneering and most significant research of the late professor of Minoan Archaeology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Costis Davaras, to whom this book is dedicated, inspires its author to continue further his comparative study of the prehistoric civilizations of the Indus Valley and the Aegean (that is, Minoan, Mycenaean, and the Cycladic).

Dr A.S. Bhalla expands Davaras' study by defining how prehistoric people perceived art, and exploring its development within their social structures of the time. He points out similarities and differences in how cities were governed and concludes that art found much greater support from the royal and aristocratic families of the Minoan and Aegean civilizations compared to the Indus Valley Civilization.

There are many similarities between the two cultures, which can be found in the structure and development of their cities such as the two-storey buildings, drainage systems and communal baths as well as in their art forms, such as pottery, abstract forms of their terracotta figurines, bull worship and their depictions of a divine presence. The author tries to interpret these similarities by adopting the theory of a web of civilizations extending across the region from the Aegean to the Indus River through Mesopotamia that separates but also unites them. Trade and the movements of nomadic populations opened new avenues of communication and played an important role in shaping common cultural and artistic elements, indirectly connecting the two peoples.

The first indications of a Greek presence in India are lost in the hazy, mythical expeditions of Dionysos and Hercules. They are found later in the writings of Megasthenes and other post-Alexandrian historians. Similarly, early Indian accounts of the description of the Greeks (Yavana-s) as fallen Kṣatriya-s and descendants of Turvasu (Turvaśa) contain many elements of fiction.

Communication between the Greeks and the Indians would extend even further during the Persian Empire, with Ionia becoming its first Satrapy and the Indus River region its twentieth. The first Hellenic semi-historical accounts of India\* can be found in the writings of Scylax of Karyanda, Ctesias of Knidos, Hecataeos of Miletos and Herodotus of Halikarnassos. On the other side, Pāṇini in his grammar mentions for the first time the word "Yavana" using it to signify the formation of the feminine gender (*yavanānī*), obviously referring to the Greek script or the Greek women of the Persian empire. The reference in the *Assalāyana Sutta* of *Majjima Nikāya* to the country of the Greeks (*yonaraṭṭhaṇ* in Pali) that did not follow the fourfold division of the caste system, attributed to Gautama Buddha, is rather a later anachronism.

\* The word "India" is used here in its wider sense, denoting the Indian subcontinent, as it includes areas now located (after India's partition in August 1947) in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The two civilizations came into direct contact with each other after Alexander the Great's campaign in India, which bridged the great gap that had separated the Eastern and Western worlds for eons. His descendants continued the contacts by establishing Indo-Greek kingdoms in Bactria and northwestern India, where they ruled until they were finally defeated by the Parthians and the Kushans around 25 B.C.E.

The native population would eventually absorb the Greeks who campaigned in India. Many would convert to Buddhism, especially after the expansion of the Mauryan Empire and the annexation of a vast part of their territory by Ashoka the Great, the third Mauryan Emperor. The marriage of the two cultures influenced several fields such as medicine, astrology, philosophy, theater, and numismatics. But the most distinct influence was in art, as the Greeks, continuing their tradition in sculpture, were the first to produce statues of the Buddha, giving him an Apollonian form. This art form took its name from the region of Gandhāra where it developed and continued for several centuries even after the fall of the Indo-Greek kingdoms.

In Chapter 5 of his book, Dr Bhalla looks for Graeco-Indian influences in the art of Gandhāra, from which many tangible historical and archaeological findings can lead to safer conclusions, in contrast to the prehistoric era where the existing evidence is fainter and often hypothetical. Apart from the Apollonian form of the Buddha, other strong Hellenistic elements can also be distinguished in Gandharan art such as the presence of Hercules and Zeus guardians of the Buddha in the form of Vajrapāṇi, Corinthian style capitals with the meditating Buddha depicted in the centre as well as everyday images from Hellenistic life.

The term "Graeco-Roman art", used in the Anglo-Saxon world to refer to Graeco-Buddhist art, needs some clarification. The Indo-Greek kingdoms, where the Gandhāran art form flourished, never came under Roman rule. Therefore, it represents a continuation of the Hellenistic art developed by the descendants of Alexander integrated into Indian culture.

The Apollonian smile of the Buddha and the Herculean strength of Vajrapāṇi continued to adopt new forms over time, carrying, through the Buddhist faith, the continuity of the Graeco-Indian artistic tradition to Tibet, China and to the ends of the Far East.

Athens

Dr Dimitrios Th. Vassiliadis

President, Indo-Hellenic Society for Culture and Development,  
Founding Member, Indo-Hellenic Friendship League, New Delhi, and  
Professor, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens



## Preface

This book is a product of a pure accident. The idea for the subject was born during a group visit to the Cycladic Art Museum in Athens, and my conversation with our competent guide, Dr Metaxia Routsis, concerning the Cycladic figurines on display. To my pleasant surprise, many figurines looked uncannily similar to those dating back to the Indus Civilization (also of the Early Bronze Age) that I had seen in museums in India and elsewhere. A modest plan to write a short comparative paper gradually morphed into a more ambitious project.

Much has been written on the Aegean civilizations, and, to a lesser extent, on the Indus and on modern art for art's sake. But many beautiful and artistic objects (from figurines to seals and jewellery, besides magnificent buildings), which are the symbols of the skill and ingenuity of prehistoric craftsmen and artists from the Indus Valley, have remained obscure for centuries. Both 'utilitarian' artefacts and 'prestige' goods were produced in the prehistoric societies of the Indus and Aegean cultures such as the Minoan, Mycenaean and the Cycladic. But the Indus artefacts, especially high-quality seals and ornaments, have suffered from relative neglect. Early Western and Indian archaeologists and historians described the Indus artefacts as 'drab' and unimaginative, and alluded to the failure of its craftsmen to take advantage of available technical knowledge. This book challenges this view by presenting many beautiful objects that match the quality and attractiveness of the Aegean artefacts. It is an attempt to redress the balance in the appreciation of two major civilizations, the Indus and the Aegean.

The book covers both indirect as well as direct influences of Greece on Indian art. Apart from the *indirect* influence via Mesopotamia during the Bronze Age, also examined are the subsequent *direct* contacts as a result of Greek domination following the conquest of Alexander the Great over northwestern India (Gandhara region). Harappa and Mohenjodaro are the two most important centres of the Indus Civilization (both located in what is now Pakistan), as are Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi of the Indo-Greek period.

I owe a great deal to a number of Greek and non-Greek scholars, notably the late Dr. Costis Davaras, whose significant contribution to the comparative study of the Minoan and Indus civilizations is well known. I was fortunate to have had very fruitful and stimulating correspondence with him for several months prior to his death in late 2021. As a modest tribute to his memory, the book attempts to carry forward his pioneering work. I would also like to acknowledge with gratitude other scholars who have contributed to this work in various ways. During a trip to Athens in September 2017, I discussed my research idea with Dr Metaxia Routsis at the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens, and Dr Kostas Paschalidis, Curator at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Subsequently, I had the benefit of exchanging views on the subject with Professor Dimitrios Vassiliadis, President of the Indo-Hellenic Society for Culture and Development in Athens.

Contacts with the following academics in the United Kingdom and the United States were most helpful: Dr John Bennet, Professor of Archaeology, University of Sheffield and former Director, British School in Athens; Dr Yannis Galanakis, Associate Professor in Classics (Classical Art and Archaeology), University of Cambridge, and Fellow of Sidney Sussex College; Professors

Cameron Petrie and John Ross of the University of Cambridge; Dr Adam Green of the University of York; Professors John Younger of the University of Kansas and Philip Betancourt of Temple University, Philadelphia; and Dr Marie Nicole Pareja, University of Pennsylvania, Marshall University USA, and Executive Director, Bronze Age Aegean Study Initiative (ABASI), currently based in Oxford. Avril Mayall from Cambridge provided timely assistance by unearthing very useful material on Gandhara art. To all I express my deep gratitude.

During a field visit to Crete in September 2021, I discussed my research with Professor Pavlina Karanastasi, Head of the Department of History and Archaeology, University of Crete, and Dr Georgia Flouda, Head of the Department of Prehistoric and Minoan Antiquities, Heraklion Archaeological Museum. Dr Flouda read several draft chapters and offered valuable comments and suggestions. She was a constant source of inspiration throughout the process of writing the book.

In India, I benefited from advice and suggestions from Professor Veena Oldenberg, City University of New York, now retired and based in Gurugram (India), and Professor Naman Ahuja of Jawahar Lal Nehru University, New Delhi. The late Dr Bhaskar Balakrishnan (1947–2024), a dear friend and India’s Ambassador to Greece from 2005 to 2007, was very helpful in providing useful contacts in Greece, notably, Professor Dimitrios Vassiliadis who contributed a Foreword to the book. It was Bhaskar’s lasting mission to promote economic, diplomatic, and cultural relations between India and Greece.

In Pakistan, Ms Noorjehan Bilgrami, Director of the KOEL Art Gallery, Karachi, and Founding Member of the Indus Valley School of Art, and Dr Asma Ibrahim, Founding Director of the Museum Archives and Art Gallery Department, State Bank of Pakistan, contributed to my work in different ways. Their indispensable help is deeply appreciated.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to three reviewers for their very valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of the manuscript. Their suggestions helped to sharpen the focus of analysis. However, any errors and omissions or commissions remain my sole responsibility.

Messrs David Davison and Mike Schurer, the Publisher and Editor, respectively, of Archaeopress Oxford, were most supportive throughout the preparation of the manuscript. My wife, Praveen Bhalla, patiently and skilfully edited the entire manuscript, for which she deserves my sincere gratitude. Last but not the least, I am grateful to the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Athens, Ephorates of Antiquities of the Argolid and the Cyclades, the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, and the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion, the National Museum, Karachi and National Museum, New Delhi, for granting permission to use several images of prehistoric artefacts related to Indian and Greek art. Also to the staff of the National Museum (New Delhi), the National Museum (Karachi, Mr Ammar Omar) and Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (Dr Paul Collins, Curator of Ancient Near East and Adele Kimberly, Ashmolean Picture Library) for supplying images of prehistoric artefacts related to Indian and Greek art, and to staff members of the libraries of art and archaeology of the City of Geneva and the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne for their timely assistance.

A. S. Bhalla