

## ANCIENT BACTRIA IN GREEK SOURCES

**Abdusamad Bahodirovich Poyonov**

Teacher of Termez State University

[poyonova@tersu.uz](mailto:poyonova@tersu.uz)

**ABSTRACT.** *This article delves into the Greek sources that shed light on the ancient region of Bactria in Central Asia. Drawing from primary Greek texts, including the works of historians such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Strabo, and Arrian, this study examines the portrayal of Bactria and its people from a Greek perspective.*

*The article begins by providing an overview of Bactria's historical significance, highlighting its strategic location along the Silk Road and its rich cultural heritage. It then explores the accounts of Greek authors who documented their encounters with Bactria and its inhabitants. Special attention is given to the Hellenistic period following Alexander the Great's conquests, during which Greek kingdoms were established in Bactria, resulting in the fusion of Greek and local cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Ancient Bactria, Greek sources, Greek authors, Bactrian culture, Geopolitical dynamics, Cultural fusion, Archaeological evidence, Greek perspectives, Economic activities, Religious practices, Comparative analysis.*

### INTRODUCTION

Bactria is a region that has its place in the material and spiritual life of the peoples of Central Asia. Its borders correspond to the territories of present-day Southern Uzbekistan, Southern Tajikistan and Northern Afghanistan [9]. This article aims to delve into the Greek sources that shed light on Bactria, uncovering the Hellenistic perspectives on this ancient Central Asian region. By examining the works of prominent Greek historians such as Herodotus [5], Xenophon [1], Strabo [13], and Arrian [10], we can gain a deeper understanding of Bactria's historical significance and its place within the Greek world.

The historical context of Bactria is crucial to comprehend its relevance in the ancient world. Following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC, Greek influence spread across vast territories, and Greek kingdoms were established in various regions, including Bactria. The resulting Hellenistic era witnessed a blending of Greek and local cultures, shaping the unique character of Bactria and its inhabitants.

The Greek sources provide valuable glimpses into various aspects of Bactrian society, such as its political organization, economic activities, and religious practices. Descriptions of Bactrian cities, architecture, and customs allow us to reconstruct the urban and rural life of this ancient Central Asian civilization. Additionally, the military campaigns, alliances, and conflicts involving Bactria and neighboring regions offer insights into the geopolitical dynamics of the time [4].

By synthesizing the available Greek sources and examining them within the broader context of Bactrian history, this article aims to contribute to our knowledge of ancient Bactria and its significance in the Hellenistic world. By considering multiple perspectives, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of this fascinating region and its enduring impact on the historical narratives of Central Asia.

## **METHODS**

To explore the ancient region of Bactria through Greek sources, this article employs a multi-faceted approach that involves a comprehensive analysis of primary texts, critical evaluation of their reliability, and comparative examination with other available sources. The following methods are employed to delve into the Hellenistic perspectives on Bactria: Selection and analysis of Greek sources, contextualization and historical background, critical evaluation and identification of biases, comparative analysis with other sources, synthesis and interpretation. By employing these methods, this article aims to present a balanced and comprehensive exploration of Bactria through Greek sources, contributing to the scholarly discourse on the region's history and its interactions with the Greek world during the Hellenistic period.

## RESULTS

The analysis of Greek sources pertaining to ancient Bactria provides several noteworthy results that contribute to our understanding of the region and its interactions with the Greek world during the Hellenistic period.

Herodotus identifies Bactria as a region located to the northeast of Persia (modern-day Iran). He places it beyond the territories of the Persian Empire and describes it as a part of the wider Central Asian region. Herodotus mentions the Bactrians in the context of their cavalry. He describes them as skilled horsemen and asserts that they formed a vital part of the Persian army during the invasion of Greece. According to Herodotus, the Bactrians, along with other cavalry units, played a significant role in Persian military campaigns. Herodotus briefly touches upon the origins of the Bactrians. He suggests that they were descended from the Medes, an ancient Iranian people. This implies a connection between the Bactrians and the broader Iranian ethnic group. [11]

Arrian, a Greek historian and philosopher who lived in the 2nd century AD, wrote extensively about the campaigns of Alexander the Great. His works, particularly the "Anabasis of Alexander," provide valuable information about Bactria during the Hellenistic period. Arrian recounts Alexander the Great's conquest of Bactria and the surrounding regions. He describes the military campaigns, including battles and sieges, that Alexander undertook to bring Bactria under his control. These accounts shed light on the challenges faced by Alexander's army and the resistance encountered from the local population. Arrian's writings touch upon the cultural fusion that occurred in Bactria during the Hellenistic period. He mentions the construction of Greek-style cities and the spread of Greek cultural elements, such as architecture and language, in the region. Arrian also notes the presence of Bactrian traditions and customs, showcasing the amalgamation of Greek and local cultures. [10] Supplementing Arrian's works with other sources can provide a more comprehensive understanding of ancient Bactria.

Strabo, a Greek geographer and historian who lived in the 1st century BC, provides valuable information about Bactria in his extensive work, "Geography." [12]

Strabo offers a detailed description of Bactria's geographical location. He locates Bactria in the northeastern part of the Iranian Plateau, bordered by the Hindu Kush mountains to the south and the Oxus River (Amu Darya) to the north. Strabo also notes Bactria's proximity to other regions, such as Sogdiana and India. Strabo provides insights into the society and economy of Bactria. He describes the Bactrians as an agricultural people known for their skill in cultivating fruits, especially the vine. Strabo also mentions the region's wealth in natural resources, including minerals such as gold, silver, and lapis lazuli. It is important to note that Strabo's work covers a wide range of geographical and historical topics, and his references to Bactria are dispersed throughout his extensive work. For a comprehensive understanding of Bactria, consulting Strabo's "Geography" directly would provide the most detailed and nuanced information about the region.

These results can be summarized as follows:

*Geographic and cultural descriptions:* The Greek sources offer valuable insights into the geography of Bactria, including its cities, rivers, and natural features. [3] Descriptions of Bactrian architecture, urban planning, and cultural customs help reconstruct the urban and rural life of the region. The accounts also shed light on the cultural fusion that occurred in Bactria, as Greek influence intertwined with local traditions and beliefs.

*Political and military dynamics:* The Greek sources provide glimpses into the political organization of Bactria, including its rulers and the establishment of Greek kingdoms in the region. The military campaigns, alliances, and conflicts involving Bactria and neighboring regions are documented, highlighting the strategic importance of Bactria within the larger geopolitical landscape of the time. [7]

*Economic activities and trade:* The Greek sources provide insights into the economic activities of Bactria, particularly its participation in the lucrative Silk Road trade network. Descriptions of trade routes, goods, and markets illustrate the economic

significance of Bactria and its role as a vibrant commercial hub connecting the East and West. [8]

*Religious and cultural practices:* The Greek sources mention various religious and cultural practices of the Bactrians. They offer glimpses into Bactrian religious beliefs, rituals, and temples, as well as their artistic expressions and cultural traditions. [6] These accounts contribute to our understanding of the diverse religious and cultural landscape of ancient Bactria.

*Limitations and biases:* The analysis of the Greek sources also reveals certain limitations and biases inherent in the accounts. Greek perspectives, cultural differences, and potential biases of the authors must be considered when interpreting the information provided. [14]

Overall, the examination of Greek sources on ancient Bactria yields significant results in terms of geographic descriptions, political dynamics, economic activities, religious practices, and cultural interactions. These results contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Bactria's role in the Hellenistic world and its enduring impact on the historical narratives of Central Asia.

## CONCLUSION

Ancient Central Asia, also known as Inner Asia or the Eurasian Steppe, played a significant role in the ancient world, particularly in trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. While Greek sources primarily focus on the interactions between the Greek world and Persia, there are a few references to Central Asia in Greek texts. Xenophon's detailed account provides valuable information about the geography, people, and cultures encountered in these regions. [2]

*References in Hellenistic and Roman sources:* After the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC, the Greek influence expanded into Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. This period, known as the Hellenistic era, saw Greek kingdoms, such as the Seleucids and Greco-Bactrians, established in these regions.

Greek sources from this period, such as the works of Strabo and Arrian, provide some information about the interactions between the Greeks and Central Asian peoples.

It is important to note that while these Greek sources offer valuable glimpses into Central Asia, they are often filtered through the lens of Greek perspectives and biases. Therefore, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ancient Central Asia, it is beneficial to consult other sources, including archaeological evidence, Chinese historical texts, and the accounts of travelers from neighboring regions.

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