© Lonely Planet Publications

History

As a country, Afghanistan's history is less than 300 years old but it has been playing a key role in the region for over two millennia. The map reveals the reason: Afghanistan sits at the crossroads of Asia, sitting astride the hinterland between Persia, Central Asia and India. These three centrifugal forces have interacted time and again in Afghan history, frequently dividing the country against itself. At other times, Afghanistan has united against invaders and proved a bloody testing ground for foreign empires, as well as occasionally looking beyond its borders to form empires of its own.

FROM THE PERSIANS TO THE GREEKS

The prehistory of Afghanistan has been little studied, but there is evidence of pastoralism and agriculture in the region from around 10,000 years ago. Lapis lazuli from Badakhshan was being traded with Mesopotamia and India for at least 7000 years, and around 1500 BC the country became populated by the Indo-Aryans moving in from the west. Afghanistan doesn't enter written history until around the 6th century BC, when it became part of the Achaemenid Empire of Cyrus the Great. The Persians were the world's superpower of the time, and Afghanistan was divided into satrapies – Ariana (Herat), Arachosia (Kandahar), Bactria (Balkh) and Gandhara (the Kabul Valley). The Bactrians in particular were renowned fighters. At some stage during this period Zoroaster was born in Bactria, giving rise to the Zoroastrian religion that was quickly adopted by the Achaemenids.

Nearly half the infantry and 95% of the cavalry in Alexander the Great's entire empire had to be stationed in Afghanistan to try and pacify the country.

Persia's great rival was Greece, and in 334 BC Alexander the Great launched a huge campaign against Darius III. Just 24 years old, Alexander's military genius quickly conquered the Mediterranean coast and the Achaemenid capital at Persepolis in modern Iran. His kingdom in ruins, Darius fled to Afghanistan where he was betrayed by the Bactrian satrap Bessus, who in turn proclaimed himself king. Alexander was outraged and led his army deep into Afghanistan, sweeping through the south before crossing the Hindu Kush and driving Bessus towards the Oxus (Amu Darya). He captured Bactria and Bessus, who was executed for his resistance.

Martin Ewans' highly recommended *Afghanistan – A Short History of its People and Politics* covers the breadth of Afghan history from Alexander the Great to Hamid Karzai with a sure hand and lightness of touch.

Afghanistan got deep into Alexander's blood. He took his bride Roxanne in Balkh, and founded Bagram as a base for his invasion of India. Moreover he adopted local dress, and tried to set himself up as dictator. Only an eventual troop rebellion quelled his ambition, and he eventually turned for home to die at Babylon in 323 BC, leaving no named heir but having conquered much of the known world.

Alexander left behind ten years of chaos in Bactria, with thousands of Greeks stationed far from home. From the anarchy came Seleucus who began to weld together the foundations of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom. This Hellenistic state deep in Asia sparked a centuries-long period of profound East-West cultural exchange, disseminating the aesthetics of the Classical world and absorbing the influences of both the central Asian steppe and the Indian subcontinent. Ai Khanoum, the easternmost Greek

TIMELINE

330 BC	AD 128
Alexander the Great invades Afghanistan	Kanishka rules Kushan empire from Kapisa (Bagram)

city in the world was a place of gymnasiums and theatres performing the Greek tragedies, temples to the old gods and groves of olive trees.

BUDDHIST AFGHANISTAN

As the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms flowered in the north, a new power rose in the east. In 302 BC north India became unified under the Mauryans, who quickly took control of southern and eastern Afghanistan. A peace treaty with the north was sealed with gifts of elephants and marriages between the Greeks and Indians. Under the great emperor Ashoka, the Mauryans converted to Buddhism, driven by his guilt at the blood spilled for the formation of his empire. Buddhist monasteries thrived across Afghanistan, together with rock-cut edicts from Ashoka exhorting readers to follow a pious life. One found in modern Kandahar was written in Greek and Aramaic.

Into the Land of Bones – Alexander the Great in Afghanistan by Frank Holt is a lively history of Alexander's Afghan campaign and the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms that sprung up in its wake.

Buddhism proved irresistible to the Graeco-Bactrians. After Seleucus the kingdom fell into a tumbling succession of warring factions and dynasties, and the Hellenistic traditions were slowly absorbed by local customs. By 150 BC, they were under pressure from other directions – the Parthians from Iran, and then nomad tribes from the north. These were the outermost ripples of a wave of people displaced by the unification of China under the Qin dynasty. Again Afghanistan's direction was influenced by events in distant imperial capitals. Of the nomads that washed up, it was the Yueh-chih in 130 BC that had the greatest impact, when they united under the name of the Kushans.

The Kushans soon settled, and took the best traditions from the Graeco-Bactrians and the Indians to fuse them with the free-spirited

THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road was never a single highway, rather a network of routes stretching over 8000km from Xi'an in modern China across Central Asia to Damascus and Antioch on the Mediterranean. Similarly, no trader ever passed its entire length. Instead, caravans traded along set stages with goods exchanged and becoming ever more expensive at each stop.

The Silk Road really sprang into life in the 1st century BC, when China exchanged embassies with Parthia (modern Iran) and Ferghana in Central Asia. From these were born the Roman craze for silk, supplied by the Parthians. The fabric was so popular – and expensive – that the Roman Senate even tried to ban it, on moral as well as economic grounds. As the Chinese guarded the secret of its production closely, silk was supposed to literally grow on the trees of the far east.

The Parthians and Bactrians were the most avid traders, sending gold, horses, glass and ivory. In return, China sent porcelain, paper, tea, lacquer – and endless bolts of silk. Ideas became an equally important currency. The Kushans sent Buddhist ideas from Afghanistan to China, and Buddhist art to India. Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity also headed east. Bukhara, Balkh, Yarkand and Dunhuang flourished as great cities of trade and culture.

The Silk Road reached its apogee during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The collapse of the Roman and Han Chinese empires caused a collapse in trade, while the rise of Islam further changed the political and economic balance of the region. The Pax Mongolia that briefly followed Genghis Khan allowed Marco Polo to hit the old trade roads to China, but by the time the region had recovered from the depredations of Timur, the powers of Europe were looking elsewhere. The age of sea exploration had arrived, dealing the final death knell for the Silk Road.

6th century

The Buddhas of Bamiyan carved from cliffside

652

Arab conquest of Herat brings Islam to Afghanistan