

“ XUANZANG AND
BHAGAVATA PURAN

GODS AND CAVES

LITERATURE AND ART OF THE GUPTA ERA

“ Xuanzang, *A Record of the Western Regions*, seventh century CE

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In 627 CE, a 25-year-old Buddhist monk found himself looking out over the dunes of the River of Sand, where “there is neither bird nor animal nor water nor grazing.” The only things he could see under the burning white sun and endless blue sky were the sand, his red horse, and his own tall shadow. The monk’s name was Xuanzang, and what he was doing—crossing the barren desert that lay between China and India—was against the law.

Turkish people related to the White Huns who had caused such trouble for the Kushana were attacking China’s western border, and the Chinese emperor had banned all foreign travel. But Xuanzang was determined to see the places where the Buddha had walked and to find good, clear records of the Buddha’s teachings. The only translations he could find in China were terrible. Xuanzang wrote that “the sounds of the words translated were often mistaken . . . and the sense of the books was lost.” They were so awful, in fact, that they could drive a monk to—well, to cross a desolate desert against the orders of his emperor.

It took Xuanzang more than a year to complete his long and lonely journey along the Great Silk Road to India, the overland route west from China. So perhaps it isn’t surprising that once he had arrived, he stayed for 13 years, visiting Buddhist scholars and tourist sites and gathering Buddhist writings to take home with him.

He probably would have said that the most important part of his trip was the years he spent at the University of Nalanda. Ashoka founded Nalanda as a small Buddhist monastery. By the time of Xuanzang’s visit more than 800 years later, it had grown into the largest university of its time. Xuanzang describes it as an awesome and beautiful place: “One gate opens into the great college, from which



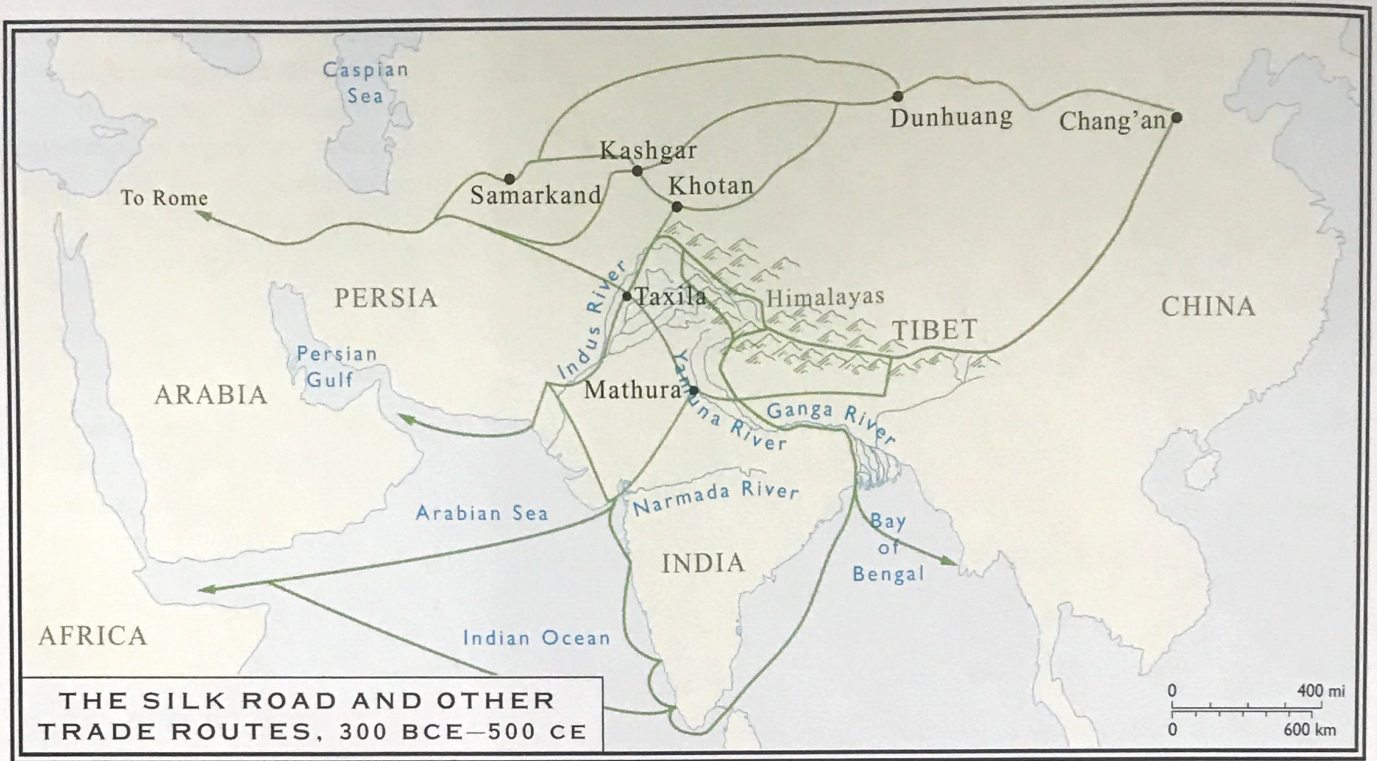
Historians believe this may be a painting of Xuanzang carrying his beloved Buddhist scriptures. It is from a Buddhist cave temple in Dunhuang, a major stop on the Silk Road, which led from India to China.

NOW THAT'S DETERMINATION

The story goes that soon after he had left China, Xuanzang realized he was lost and without water. He looked back and saw the last Chinese watchtower in the distance. For a moment, he was tempted to return. But then he remembered that he had taken an oath that he would rather die facing west than live in the east. So he pressed on. Not long afterward, his horse left the path and would not return. Xuanzang thought he was lost for sure. But his horse had smelled water, and a few minutes later he staggered into an oasis that saved their lives.

are separated eight other walls, standing in the middle. The richly adorned towers, and the fairy-like turrets, like painted hilltops; are congregated together. The observatories seem to be lost in the mist, and the upper rooms tower above the clouds.”

Buddhist kings and wealthy merchants all over Asia supported the university. The king of Burma sent ships filled with jewels to pay for restoring the buildings in the tenth century. Buddhists could study there for free, and non-Buddhists either paid a fee or worked for the university as



IT'S HARD TO SAY NO TO A KING

One of the reasons Xuanzang's journey took so long is that he was not the only Buddhist who wanted to learn more about his faith. The Buddhist king of the oasis at Turfan was typical. He was so excited about having someone who could teach him more about the Buddha that he wouldn't let Xuanzang out of his city gates (that were in the shape of giant Buddhas). Finally, Xuanzang stopped eating until he was allowed to leave.

laborers. Xuanzang later wrote that the entrance exams were so difficult that only about one out of every five foreign students who applied was admitted.

At Nalanda, Xuanzang studied Buddhist scripture such as the *Tripitakas*, the *Sutras*, and the *Jataka Tales*, stories of the Buddha and his previous lives. At some point in his studies, he may have visited the Ajanta caves, whose painted walls taught Buddhist scripture in a slightly different way. Like Nalanda, the caves at Ajanta were first a monastery and then became a kind of Buddhist university. But the caves at Ajanta stored images, not just books. Like a stained glass window in a medieval European cathedral, the walls of the caves were filled with pictures of sacred stories painted by the monks. Many of the painted stories came from the *Jataka Tales* and they were meant to teach people about the Buddha, just as the stories in medieval stained glass were meant to teach Christians about Christ.

The walls of the caves were covered with a strong plaster made of lime that coated the rough rock surface and made a smooth, tight canvas. After the plaster was dry, the monk-artist would sketch in his subject with a charcoal

pencil. Then he would paint the outlines, fill them in with base colors, and let that dry. Finally he would add shading and details.

If Xuanzang were a scholar visiting the caves at Ajanta today, he would probably not be studying Buddhism, but life at the Gupta court. The paintings show us the simple clothing styles and elaborate jewelry that people wore in Gupta times. They also tell us that the people of the Gupta age believed that beauty helped people learn about spiritual things.

Gupta temples were also places of beauty. The Guptas believed that when they were in a temple, the gap between

Rows of buddhas meditating on the walls of the Ajanta cave in India represent the Buddha teaching at the city of Sravasti, where he multiplied himself hundreds of times to show the power of his teachings.



them and their gods was closed. They built their temples with designs that followed strict rules. Temples faced east, into the rising sun. A series of gates and entrance halls helped people to orient themselves to the order of the universe. At last the worshippers arrived at the center of the temple, called the “sacred womb.” From there, the only direction is up, through the umbrella-shaped spire to the heavens.

“ Xuanzang, *A Record of the Western Regions*, seventh century CE

Xuanzang wrote that “The rafters and roof beams [of temples] are carved with strange figures, and the doors, windows and walls are painted in various colors.” The “strange figures” were statues of the gods, which were made



This chaitya, or chapel, is from one of a series of Buddhist caves in Ajanta, India. The seated image of the Buddha and a domed stupa with the ashes of the Buddha or a saint would have been the focus of worship.

from stone, wood, metal, plaster, painting, sand, and jewels. These statues were either “fixed”—part of the temple—or “movable,” which meant they could be picked up and used in religious parades and processions. The gods were invited to live in the “fixed” statues full time, but were invited to enter the “movable” statues only when these were used for worship. (That’s why it’s okay for children to play with figurines that were first made for worship—the god left when the worship was done.)

The *Puranas*, a collection of Hindu myths, explain how people should worship the statues (the “Me” is the statue):

When offering Me the bath with fragrant water, the Vedic mantras . . . should be recited. With clothes, sacred thread, jewels, garlands, and fragrant paste, My devotee should decorate my form suitably and with love. With faith, My worshiper should then offer Me water to wash, sandal, flower, unbroken rice, incense, light, and food of different kinds; also attentions like anointing, massage, showing of mirror, etc., and entertainments like song and dance; these special attentions and entertainments may be done of festive days and even daily.

“ Bhagavata Purana, 800–1000 CE

The rules about carving a statue were very strict. The forehead should be broad like that of an elephant and the arms and legs slender and smooth like the trunk of a banana tree. The hands and feet should be like a lotus, with long slender fingers like the bean pod. The position of each part of the body had special meaning, especially the hands. Hand positions, called *mudras*, were also important in Indian dance and drama.

After 13 years of study, Xuanzang decided that he had learned enough, and he started the long journey back to China, carrying 657 Buddhist texts written on paper and palm leaves and some astonishing memories of the greatness of Gupta culture. A new emperor was on the Chinese throne, and he was eager to hear all that he could about the glory of India. This new emperor didn’t care that Xuanzang had broken the ban on foreign travel.

RELIGIOUS WRITINGS OF SOUTH ASIA	
Vedas	<i>Oldest Hindu scriptures. The earliest is the Rig Veda, a collection of hymns. The most recent are the Upanishads, which can only be learned with the help of a teacher.</i>
Puranas	<i>The Vedas-made-easy, for ordinary people who did not have time for study. Also described as Hindu myths</i>
Mahabharata, including Bhagavad Gita	<i>Beloved Hindu poem about Prince Arjuna</i>
Ramayana	<i>The story of Prince Rama and his beautiful wife Sita</i>
Jatakas	<i>Stories about the Buddha's previous lives that explain karma, or the law of consequences</i>
Panchatantra	<i>Many of these are animal stories for children</i>
Tripitaka	<i>Buddhist sermons and teachings</i>
Sutras	<i>Mahayana Buddhist sermons. The most famous is the Lotus Sutra, which explains the idea of a bodhisattva, or teacher</i>

When his curious countrymen asked him about the wonders Xuanzang had seen, he was polite, but he made it clear that he had gone to find the word of the Buddha—not to be corrupted by the lavish art, music, dance, and drama of the Gupta court. But the emperor wanted to know everything about Gupta culture, and finally Xuanzang agreed to write a book—just one: *A Record of the Western Regions*—about what he had seen. When he finished the book, Xuanzang took his Buddhist manuscripts and spent the rest of his life translating them from Sanskrit into Chinese, happy to have the word of the Buddha at last.