

Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art

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The chronology of *stūpa* relic practice in Afghanistan and Dharmarājikā, Pakistan, and its implication for the rise in popularity of image cult

Wannaporn Rienjang

Introduction

The Buddhist complex of Dharmarājikā is located in the fertile valley of Taxila, in the present day province of Punjab, northern Pakistan. The site was excavated by Sir John Marshall between 1913 and 1916. The excavations revealed the main *stūpa* and several smaller, subsidiary *stūpas*, chapels and monasteries (Figure 1) (Marshall 1916; 1918; 1920; 1951). Of the approximately forty excavated subsidiary *stūpas* and twenty chapels, only eighteen *stūpas* and three chapels yielded deposits.¹ Information on these *stūpa* and chapel deposits has been obtained from the published excavation reports: *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Reports* between 1913 and 1916, and *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried out at Taxila under the Orders of the Government of India between the Years 1913 and 1934* (Marshall 1918; 1918; 1920; 1951).

Information on almost all *stūpa* deposits in eastern Afghanistan has been obtained from records of the nineteenth century explorers: Charles Masson (1800-1853), Martin Honigberger (c. 1875-1868), James Gerard (1795-1835), and Lieutenant Robert Pigou (1816-1841) (Errington 1987; 2017). Most of the information on these *stūpa* deposits comes from Charles Masson who excavated more than fifty *stūpas* (Errington 2017). Masson is also the most systematic amongst his contemporaries, whose published and unpublished records, drawings, and sketches provide sufficient detail on the finds, including associated coins and their find spots in each *stūpa* (Errington 1999; 2017).

Not all *stūpa* deposits contained coins. At the Dharmarājikā, of approximately forty subsidiary *stūpas* excavated, ten contained coins (approximately twenty-five percent), while coins were not found in any of the chapel deposits. In eastern Afghanistan, however, a larger proportion of *stūpa* deposits containing coins is evident. Out of the sixty-four excavated Afghan *stūpas*, twenty-seven contained coins (approximately forty percent).² This paper investigates the changing nature of *stūpa* deposits over time. It achieves this by analyzing the coins and associated finds in *stūpa* deposits across the Dharmarājikā Buddhist complex and eastern Afghanistan. The paper proposes that the decreased numbers and the poorer nature of *stūpa* deposits that were found with coins whose dates are later than the second century AD may imply that after this period different modes of merit-gaining or worship may have become more popular than establishing relics inside *stūpas*.

¹ At the time of Marshall's excavations, all that were left on the subsidiary *stūpas* were the drums and circular or square bases (Marshall 1951: 240). It is therefore possible that some *stūpas* may have contained deposits above the drums which were no longer extant by then. As for the main *stūpa*, parts of its dome, drum and base were present at the time of Marshall's excavation. Marshall mentioned that the main *stūpa* was, however, looted prior to his excavation, as evidenced by a trench driven through the centre of the *stūpa* dome (Marshall 1951: 238, pl. 47 a, b).

² The identification of coins from approximately twenty *stūpa* deposits in Afghanistan that are in the British Museum was carried out by Elizabeth Errington and Joe Cribb (Errington 2017; Errington & Cribb 1992). The re-identification of Kushan coins from *stūpa* deposit of Tepe Maranjan 2 in Kabul, Afghanistan, excavated by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology and briefly published by Gérard Fussman (2008), was carried out by Joe Cribb upon examining photographs of the coins in combination with their dimensions and weights (personal communication, August 2015).

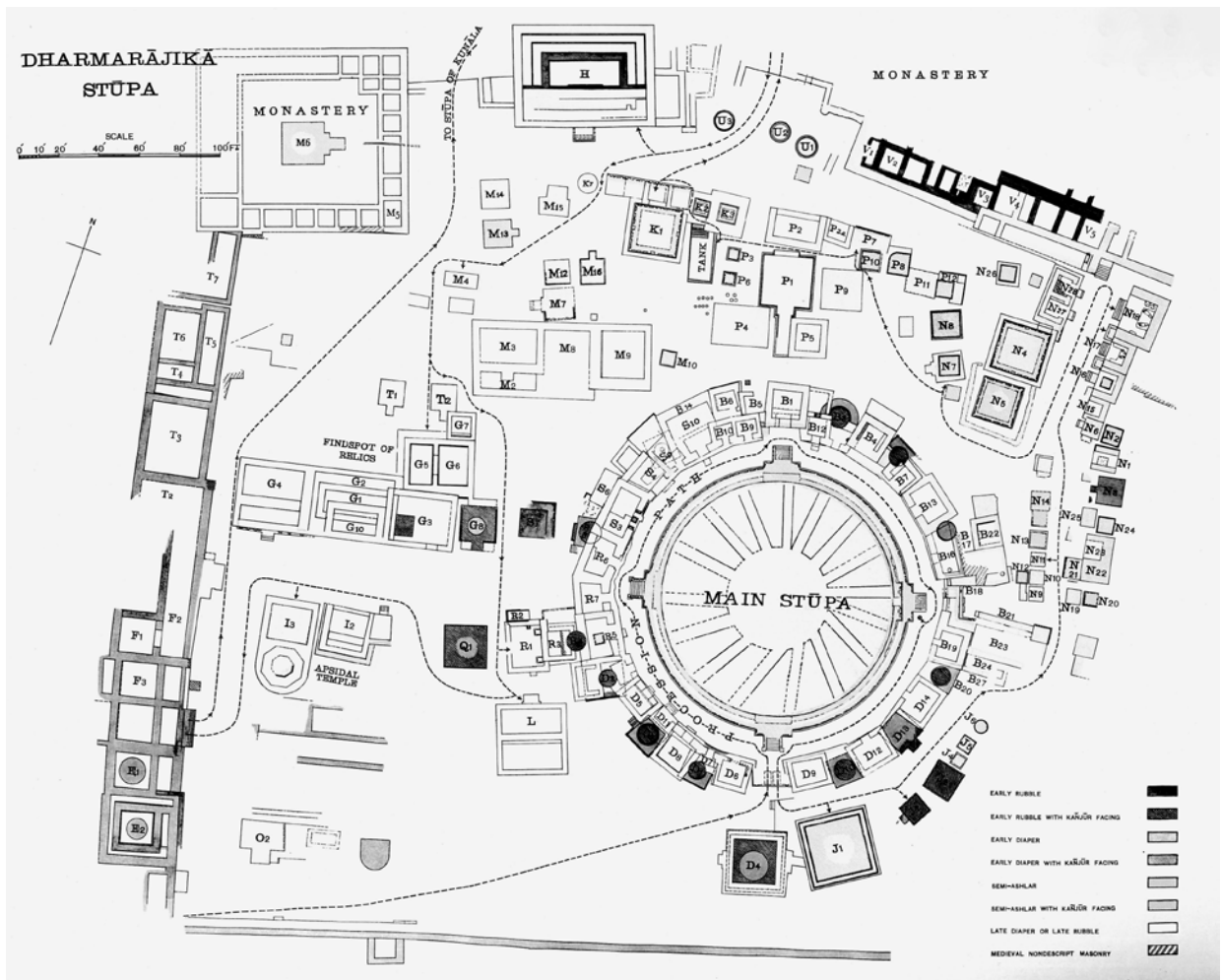


Figure 1. Site plan of the Dharmarājikā Buddhist complex (after Marshall 1951: pl. 45).

Coin groups

Upon analysing coin distribution patterns across *stūpa* deposits at the Dharmarājikā and eastern Afghanistan, it is evident that in general only coins of similar date range were included in each deposit. Only in rare instances were coins of much different date ranges mixed in the same deposit. In addition, there are also chronological correlations between the coins and their associated objects, and in the case of Dharmarājikā, the chronological correlation between coins, associated objects and the structures in which they were found. It is possible therefore to say that coins in general were included when still current, and thus can be used to help date the deposits.

Based on their distribution pattern, it is possible to divide coins in *stūpa* deposits into nine groups, ranging in date between mid-first century BC and seventh century AD (Table 1).³ The first group (A) belongs to coins of the Indo-Greeks and the Indo-Scythians, whose issue dates range from early to mid first century BC. The second and third coin groups belong to coins of the Indo-Scythians. Their issue dates range from early first century BC to early first century AD. The fourth coin group (D) includes coins of the first Kushan king, Kujūla Kadphises (c. AD 40-90) and a local satrap ruling in Jalalabad, Mujatria, whose dates range between late first and early second century AD (Cribb 2015a). These coins (group D) are the earliest in date found within *stūpa* deposits of eastern Afghanistan.

³ The dates of coin issuers used in this paper follow those published in Errington & Curtis (2007) and Jongeward & Cribb (2015).

Table 1. Coins in stūpa deposits.

Coin group	Date range of coins	Issuers and their ruling dates
A	c. 75 BC-50 BC	-Maues (c. 75-65 BC) -Apollodotus II (c. 65-50 BC) -Vonones with Spalahores (c. 65-50 BC)
B	c. 75 BC-1 BC	-Maues (c. 75-65 BC) -Azēs I (c. 46-1 BC)
C	31 BC to c. AD 30	-Augustus (31 BC-AD 14) -Azilises (c. 1 BC-AD 16) -Azēs II (c. AD 16-30)
D	c. AD 32 to early 2nd century AD	-Gondophares (c. AD 32-60) -Kujūla Kadphises (c. AD 40-90) -Mujatria (c. late first to early second century AD)
E	c. AD 90-113	-Kujūla Kadphises (c. AD 40-90) -Wima Takto (c. AD 90-113) (Soter Megas coins in the Darūnta)
F	c. AD 113-190	-Domitian (AD 81-96) -Trajan (AD 98-117) -Sabina (c. AD 128-36) -Wima Kadphises (c. AD 113-27) -Kaniška (c. AD 127-150) -Huviška (c. AD 150-90)
G	c. AD 190-227	- Vāsudeva I (c. AD 190-227)
H	c. AD 230-350	- 'Late Kushan' (c. AD 230-350) - Vāsudeva II (c. AD 280-320)
I	c. mid-3rd to 7th century	- Shapur I (c. AD 240-272/3) -Imitation of Shapur II (AD 309-379) -Imitation of Shapur III (AD 390-410) -Varhran IV (AD 388-99) -Varhran V (AD 420-438) -Yazdagird II (AD 439-457) -Peroz (AD 457/9-84) -Imitation of Theodosius II (AD 409-450) -Imitation of Marcianus (AD 450-457) -Imitation of Leo (AD 457-474) -Kidara (c. AD 340-345) -Kidara 'Kushanshah' (c. AD 370-400) -Alchon (5 th century AD) -Khingila (5th century AD) -Sri Sailanavirya (King of Kashmir) (5th - early 6th century AD) -Nezak Huns Kabul mint (c. AD 515-650)

The fifth coin group (E) covers a short period, belonging to the so-called Soter Megas coins, whose issue dates could have started towards the end of Kujūla Kadphises (c. AD 40-90) and continued during the reign of his successor, Wima Takto (c. AD 90-113) (Cribb 2014; 2015b). The sixth coin group (F) comprises coins of the third to the fifth Kushan kings, Wima Kadphises (c. AD 113-127), Kaniška (c. AD 127-150) and Huviška (c. AD 150-90).⁴ The seventh group (G) belongs to the coins of the sixth Kushan king, Vāsudeva

⁴ In the stūpa deposit of Ahinposh, eastern Afghanistan, there are also Roman gold coins of Domitian (AD 81-96), Trajan (AD 98-117) and Sabina (c. AD 128-36) found together with the gold coins of the three Kushan kings in coin group F (Simpson 1879; 1880).

I (c. AD 190-227), and the eighth group (H) to the coins of the so-called ‘late Kushans’ (c. AD 230-350). *Stūpa* deposits found with these two coin groups (G and H) are fewer in number and their nature poorer than those found with coins of earlier dates. The last coin group (I) comprises coins of the Sasanians and the Huns, covering a period of approximately three centuries (c. AD 240 to c. AD 650).

Types of *stūpa* deposits

The above coin groups were almost invariably found associated with objects inside *stūpas*, and different types of deposits across the Dharmarājikā and eastern Afghanistan can be observed. To facilitate the analysis, deposits of these two areas are categorized into types. Three main elements used in the categorization are corporeal remains, relic containers, and other associated objects including coins.

There are two main types of *stūpa* deposits at the Dharmarājikā and in eastern Afghanistan: deposits that did not contain relic container(s) and those that did. Within each type, three and four variations can be observed, respectively (Table 2).

Deposits that did not contain relic containers, can comprise corporeal remains alone without any accompanying objects (1.1), corporeal remains with accompanying objects (1.2), or simply objects without any corporeal remains (1.3). Corporeal remains that were found alone without accompanying objects generally were larger pieces of bone, recorded as human bones or skeletons, as well as a skull (Masson 1841). These corporeal remains were almost always laid on the ground inside the *stūpa*. It is to be noted that there are no report of larger pieces of bones from *stūpa* deposits at the Dharmarājikā, and when reported from *stūpas* in Afghanistan, none of them were found accompanied with objects. This type of deposit (1.1) therefore is likely to be sepulchral in nature rather than being for the purpose of worship. In this respect, they are not considered as relic deposits. On the contrary, corporeal remains that were accompanied with objects (1.2), are generally smaller pieces of bones or ashes. Sometimes earth and charcoal were reported from *stūpa* deposits and they were probably mixed with ashes. The most consistent kinds of objects in *stūpa* deposits are beads and coins. This type of deposit (1.2) is considered be a relic deposit. While coins were generally placed outside relic containers, beads were almost always placed mixed with corporeal remains inside relic containers, and in most cases, inside caskets.⁵ *Stūpa* deposits that only contained objects (1.3) are also considered relic deposits.

Table 2. Varieties of relic deposit.

Deposit type	Deposit sub-type	Nature of deposit sub-type
1. Without relic container	1.1	Corporeal remains
	1.2	Corporeal remains, objects
	1.3	Objects
2. With relic container	2.1	Relic container, corporeal remains
	2.2	Relic container, corporeal remains, objects
	2.3	Relic container, objects
	2.4	Relic container
Note: ‘Relic container’ refers to the outermost container, while ‘objects’ refer to any items, apart from relic containers and corporeal remains that were found in the <i>stūpa</i> deposits.		

⁵ Caskets are smaller containers, often made of precious metal, placed inside relic containers. One relic container can contain one or more caskets. In case of more than one casket, often they were placed inside one another, making layers of caskets. See a compilation of relic containers and caskets from Pakistan and Afghanistan in Jongeward et al. 2012: appendix.

Stūpa deposits that contained relic containers are by and large richer in nature, in that they often contained objects such as beads of gemstone and occasionally gold ornaments. In addition, the arrangement of the corporeal remains (when present) in relation with the associated objects is more elaborate than in the deposits that did not contain relic containers. The corporeal remains found inside relic containers are almost invariably bone fragments or ashes, or organic substances such as charcoal, earth or moulds, which were probably mixed with ashes. Deposits that contained relic container(s) are considered relic deposits. The relic containers can contain corporeal remains (2.1), corporeal remains with accompanying objects (2.2), objects without corporeal remains (2.3), or nothing inside (2.4). It will be seen below that this richest and most elaborate type of deposit (2.2) was generally found associated with coins early periods, i.e. from the Indo-Greeks to Huviṣka (coin groups A to F).

Five phases of relic practice: changing natures in relic deposits

Upon analysing the above coin groups and their associated deposits, it has become apparent that there are chronological correlations between coin groups and deposit types. It is possible therefore to tentatively establish a chronology for the development of *stūpa* relic practices (Table 3). This chronology is divided into five phases according to the changing natures of the *stūpa* deposits. The first phase covers the period of the Indo-Greeks and the Indo-Scythians (coin groups A-C). Deposits during this phase only belong to the richest and the most elaborate type (2.2). Corporeal remains during this phase were almost invariably recorded as bone fragments and in a few instances, ashes. The objects accompanying the bone relics were mostly beads of various materials including gemstone, pearl and ivory. The elaborate arrangement of the relics is attested by the placement of the bone relics inside one or two caskets⁶ made of precious metals (gold, silver, copper). These caskets were in turn placed inside relic containers, which were mostly made of stone.

The second phase covers the period of the first two Kushan kings, Kujūla Kadphises and Wima Takto and a local satrap in Jalalabad, Mujatria (coin groups D and E). By and large, *stūpa* deposits of this phase continued in the same fashion as those in the first phase, with the richest and the most elaborate deposit type 2.2 being most dominant. Relic containers were still made of stone and the corporeal relics⁷ were often placed inside one or more caskets, accompanied with objects such as beads and other types of ornaments.

Table 3. Chronology of *stūpa* relic practices.

Phase	Coin Group	Deposit Type	Corporeal Remains	Relic Container	Casket	Beads
I	A	2.2	All	Stone	None	All
	B	2.2	All	Stone	Gold	All
	C	2.2	All	Stone	Gold / Bronze	All
II	D	2.2/2.3	Some	Stone	Gold / Silver	Some
	E	1.2/2.2	Some	Stone/Metal	Gold / Silver	Some
III	F	1.2/2.1/2.2/2.3	Some	Stone/Metal/Clay/ Bone/ Ivory/Wood	Gold / Silver	Some
IV	G	2.3	None	Clay	None	None
	H	1.3	None	-	None	None
V	I	2.2/2.3	One or two	Metal/Clay	Gold/ Silver / Gilt copper	Some

⁶ When there was more than one casket, the smaller casket(s) were almost always placed inside the larger one(s).

⁷ Corporeal relics at the Dharmarājikā continued to be, by and large, bone fragments. The same is true in eastern Afghanistan, where other types of corporeal relics were also reported. These include ashes, charcoal, earth and moulds, the last three could have been mixed with ashes.

The third phase covers the period of three Kushan kings, Wima Kadphises, Kaniška, Huviška (coin group F). This is the phase that witnessed the most variety of *stūpa* deposits. Coins of these three Kushan rulers occurred in *stūpa* deposits in a large area of Afghanistan, from the Jalalabad plain to the Kabul region, indicating that *stūpa* relic cult was widely practised in Afghanistan during the periods of these three rulers.⁸ Relic containers of this phase were made of a variety of media, including stone, metal, bone, ivory, wood and clay. The richest and the most elaborate type of *stūpa* deposit (2.2) continued into this phase, but a larger number of deposits belong to type 2.3, which share the same elements as type 2.2, except that they do not yield corporeal remains.⁹ Beads continued to appear in *stūpa* deposits of this phase but are much less in quantity compared to the previous two phases.

The fourth phase covers the period of the successor of Huviška, Vasudeva I (c. AD 190-227), and the late Kushan kings (c. AD 230-350) (coin groups G and H). This is the period that witnessed a clear change in the nature of *stūpa* deposits. The number of relic deposits found with coins of this phase decreased,¹⁰ and they are much poorer in nature compared to those found with coins of earlier phases. This poorer nature is manifested in the general absence of corporeal remains, caskets, beads and other ornaments in *stūpa* deposits. Some *stūpa* deposits appear to have only contained coins.¹¹ Stone relic containers appear to have gone almost completely out of fashion, giving ways to the cheaper media such as clay. The fifth phase covers the period of the Sasanians and the Huns (coin group I). Similar to Phase IV, the number of *stūpa* deposits that contained coins of this phase is less than in the previous Phases I to III.¹² Their nature, except for one deposit,¹³ is also poorer than those in Phases I to III.

Implications

There are many possible interpretations for the limited number and the poorer nature of relic assemblages associated with coins of Phases IV and V. One of them could be that after the second century AD, relic deposits of earlier periods may have been re-consecrated, whereby the earlier *stūpa* could have been enlarged or the old relics were re-located to a new *stūpa*.¹⁴ Another possible explanation could be that other kinds of religious activities became more widely practised. Such activities may have included the display of relics and image cult. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian (mid fourth to early fifth century AD) mentions a display of relics in Haḍḍa and Nagarāhāra and the involvement of royal elites (Legge 1991), suggesting that the display of relics was already being practised and received royal patronage by the fourth century AD, the period contemporary with Phases IV and V.

Faxian states that in Haḍḍa, for example, the bone relic of the Buddha, which he describes as a flat bone of a skull, was kept inside a shrine (*vihāra*) and brought out during the day, for public display

⁸ It is to be noted that Darūnta is the only area in Afghanistan whose *stūpa* deposits did not yield coins of these three Kushan kings.

⁹ It should be noted that the information on corporeal remains was mostly obtained from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century records, so it is possible that there were corporeal remains inside relic containers that escaped the attention of the excavators. However, it is unlikely that bone or ash relics that were placed inside minute caskets would have escaped their attention, for they were almost always recorded when found in such contexts.

¹⁰ None in Darūnta, three in Jalalabad plain, two in Kabul region, and one at the Dharmarājikā.

¹¹ These are *Stūpas* nos. 6, 8, and 9 in Haḍḍa, Afghanistan, excavated by Charles Masson (Masson 1841).

¹² None in Darūnta, one in Jalalabad plain, one in Kabul region, and two at the Dharmarājikā.

¹³ This is the *stūpa* deposit of Haḍḍa *Stūpa* no. 10 (Masson 1841)

¹⁴ This is evident in two *stūpa* relic deposits in eastern Afghanistan. One is the Tepe Maranjan 2 (Fussman 2008), where there were a mixture of coin groups D and H, whose issue dates are almost two centuries apart (see the re-identification of the coins from this *stūpa* deposit under the above footnote 2). The other is the deposit of a *stūpa*, probably from Wardak based on the inscription on its relic container (Falk 2008; Baums 2012: 245-46). It contained coin groups F and I, whose issue dates are almost five centuries apart. The characters of the two *stūpa* relic deposits are similar to those found with coins of earlier dates (groups D and F), suggesting that the contents of the original relic deposits were not discarded, but coins, and perhaps more items, were added during the re-consecration. It must not be forgotten, however, that the practice of re-dedicating the 'old' relics without adding new coins may have also played a role in the decreased number of relic deposits with coins of later periods.

on a platform (Legge 1991:37-38). Offerings, which included flowers and incense, were made to the relics during the display. He also mentions the daily participation of ‘the king of the country’ and the safeguarding of the relics (that were kept inside an accessible shrine) by ‘great families of the kingdom’ as well as the offerings made to the relics by ‘the kings of various countries’ (Legge 1991: 37-38).

Other forms of worship that may have come into in practice alongside the public display of relics include the cult of image. Kurt Behrendt (2003) has proposed four chronological phases for Buddhist architecture in Gandhāra. In his chronology, Behrendt distinguishes the periods before and after Huviṣka; one difference between pre- and post-Huviṣka periods is the presence and absence of image shrines. Behrendt notes that image shrines started to appear after the second century AD, and the size of the images placed inside the shrines became larger over time. An example of an image shrine with large images can be seen at the Dharmarājikā, which holds two life-size Buddha images and one over-life size image, all made of stucco (Figure 2). The shrines were built with semi-ashlar type of masonry, a masonry type common to structures of post-Huviṣka period.

It is known that the representation of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form already took place on coins towards the end of the reign of Kaniṣka (c. AD 127-150) (Cribb 1982; 1984; 1985; 1999/2000) (Figure 3). It is therefore not impossible that by the time of the late Kushans (c. AD 230-350), image cult may have become popular within Gandhāra and adjoining areas. This form of practice may not have been limited to images placed inside shrines for veneration, but may have also included images attached to *stūpas*. While relics continue to be the central point of rituals, the use of anthropomorphic objects to represent the Buddha could have become more popular. Commissioning sculptures that ‘represent’ the Buddha and bodhisattvas could also be an easier way to make merit than acquiring their relics.



Figure 2. Chapel N18 at the Dharmarājikā (after Marshall 1951: Pl. 59.c).



Figure 3. Gold coin of Kanishka I, with Buddha image on the reverse. (Photo: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/ Alamy Stock Photo.)

Summary

To sum up, *stūpa* relic deposits found with coins whose issue dates are later than the second century AD are much less in number, and generally poorer in nature than those found with coins of earlier dates. One possible explanation for such a transition could be that other forms of worship or merit-making may have become more popular than establishing relics inside *stūpas*. These new forms of worship and merit-making may have included the display of relics and the image cult. That the practice of involving visual representations of the Buddha and bodhisattvas was likely to have become more popular than establishing relics inside *stūpas* may also explain why some of the excavated *stūpas* did not yield any deposits. Some stone and many stucco images, particularly large ones, may in fact have been produced during the period in which these alternatives became popularized, some time after the second century AD.

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