

Notes on Quiz #4: Ancient Asia

1. The Scythians were
 - a. a class of beer-loving harvesters of grain
 - b. a nation of horse-loving nomadic Indo-Europeans of the steppes
 - c. a profession of silence-loving librarians of the great temple at Babylon
 - d. a troupe of sailor-loving sailors from beyond the Indian Sea

“Scythians” is a general term used by the Greeks to describe the Indo-European peoples inhabiting the areas around the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. These peoples were various nations descended from the original Indo-European inhabitants of the area, and retained a lifestyle that was decentralized and nonurban, with a largely pastoral economy making use of horses, oxen, and wagons and a loose clan-based social structure spread out over a broad territory. Because of the wide lands they inhabited they were an early link between Europe and Asia. — Because they were in some ways the antithesis of urban civilization, to the Greeks they represented barbarians in general: strong but uneducated, good with animals, and in possession of great natural abundance.

2. The ancient Greeks’ knowledge of India was limited before
 - a. the conquests of Alexander the Great
 - b. the fall of Rome
 - c. the voyages of Columbus
 - d. the Industrial Revolution

Early on, those in the west (like Herodotus) had only hearsay traders’ reports, and India being on the edge of the world most of what was known was nonsensical legend. — Alexander’s conquests in the east in the fourth century BCE launched a period of intensive study of the Indian peoples by the Macedonians and Greeks, starting with Alexander’s admiral Nearchus, who traveled across India and wrote of its animals and peoples. Another Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, wrote a similar account in the third century. — The other main source of information about early India is Hindu religious literature, including poems and hymns called the Vedas that date back to roughly 3000 BCE. Also important are the discourses known as the Upanishads, which discuss important philosophical ideas like karma; and the Puranas, or epic tales. Though they don’t provide a historical narrative, they contain a great deal of cultural and social information.

3. Asoka, king of the Mauryan empire in northern India, was known for all of the following EXCEPT:
 - a. waging a bloody war that claimed 200,000 dead
 - b. converting from traditional Hinduism to Buddhism
 - c. helping Buddhism become a world religion
 - d. shunning any and all contact with the Hellenistic peoples of the west

Aśoka, one of the most successful emperors of southern Asia, ruled over most of India in the mid-third century. After engaging in a huge war resulting in 100,000 deaths, Aśoka converted to Buddhism. From that point on, his governance and Edicts reflected Buddhist principles. Subsequently, he worked to spread Buddhism throughout Asia, hoping it would be a better unifier of peoples than imperial conquest.

4. The kingdom of Bactria, where Alexander founded many colonies that became outposts of Greek culture, was located in what is now
- a. Afghanistan
 - b. Ethiopia
 - c. Florida
 - d. Ultima Thule

Bactria was located in what is now Afghanistan, between Iran and India. It was the furthest Alexander the Great reached in his conquests and he founded several major colonies there; these Greek-Asian cities became an important extension of Greek culture in Asia.

5. All of the following are true of the Parthians EXCEPT:
- a. Like the Persians they had no standing army, only a small bodyguard for the king
 - b. They helped establish the "Silk Road," creating a trade link between China and the Mediterranean
 - c. Their society was entirely classless, with no nobility and no kings
 - d. They embraced both Greek culture and their own language and traditions

The Parthians were an Indo-European people, related to the Scythians, who migrated from the steppes north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in the mid-Iron Age and established a powerful kingdom between Iran and India. Though the royal succession was frequently disputed, they nonetheless grew in power and influence at the expense of the Seleucid Empire ruling over the former Persian lands. — Their economy was agricultural, but they benefitted from growing trade between east and west Asia and encouraged the passage of caravans bringing expensive goods from China to Parthia and on to Syria. An embassy sent to the Han Emperor in the 2nd century BCE led to the establishment of what's now called the Silk Road, a 4,000-mile trade route linking China with the Mediterranean world.

Optional Extra Credit

EC. What key ideas would you say are most associated with Buddhism as it arose in ancient India?

Siddhartha Gautama was a prince in the 6th century BCE who abandoned his privileged life after discovering the suffering of the masses. He advocated mental training as a means of achieving nirvana (the enlightenment that allows release from endless reincarnation). On attaining enlightenment, he became the Buddha ("the awakened one").