"The Hephthalites are of the stock of the Huns in fact as well as in name; however... they are not nomads like the other Hunnic peoples, but for a long time have been established in a goodly land....they are ruled by one king, and since they possess a lawful constitution, they observe right and justice in their dealings both with one another and with their neighbours, in no degree less than the Romans and the Persians."

Procopius (6th century CE), 1.3:2–8.
Translated from the Ancient Greek by H. B. Dewing.

It has been said that each of the three geographical milieus that frame the life-concentrating valleys and oases of central Asia – steppes, deserts, mountains – represents the ultimate of its type. This is certainly true for the mountains, which are the highest on earth.

During Alexander the Great's (r. 336–323 BCE) expedition and after, the Greeks considered the Hindu Kush, which branches off to the west of the Himalayas, as part of a continuous mountain chain, the main dividing line of Asia, stretching from the Taurus mountains via the Caucasus and the Kopet Dagh. Its reputation of being almost impassable gave rise to its Persian name *para-upari-saēna*, 'above the eagles', and thence to its Greek name *Paropamisos*. North of the Himalayas one meets first the lower Kunlun range that separates the Tibetan plateau from the Taklamakan desert. To the north of the desert, the Tianshan and Altai ranges enclose the Dzungaria plain. The Tianshan have long western offshoots (the Alatau, Turkestan range and the Hissar) forming a continuous mountain zone that frames the upper valleys of the Amu Darya, Zarafshan and Syr Darya while enclosing the Fergana plain.

Geography played a major role in the history of central Asia. The only passable east–west corridor for an army of horsemen was the Dzungaria plain and the Ili valley, leaving the region vulnerable to recurring invasions of peoples from the steppe. The cluster of mountains around the Pamirs has always created a barrier between the western and eastern parts. Control of the mountain passes was vital both to conquerors and to those empires (the majority) that had a foot on both northern and southern sides of the western ranges. When Alexander arrived in the eastern satrapies of the Achaemenid empire (*c.* 550–330 BCE), he exerted considerable effort securing the passage though the central Hindu Kush. It then took him two years to subdue the 'rocks' in the Hissar range to the northwest; he did not cross the ranges further to the east.

After Alexander, the kingdoms in the north of the mountains on either side of the Amu Darya, the Sogdians and Bactrians to the north and south respectively, took a different approach to the Hissar. For them the range was important as the border with steppe pastoralist confederations not integrated into their kingdoms. Consequently they erected a formidable fortification line. A few centuries later, it was reinforced by the Kushan empire (1st to 3rd centuries CE), and later by the Sasanians (224–651) [*see* box on p. 59].

The mountains were the initial power base of several central Asian empires. The Kushan empire was formed from five clans of the Yuezhi people from the Hexi corridor who, after being pushed westward by Xiongnu incursions from the steppe, had settled in the late 2nd century BCE in the valleys between the Hissar range and the Amu Darya. It was here that the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian (164–113 BCE) encountered them, estimating that they had a force of 90,000 mounted archers. Two centuries later, as the Kushans, they had unified much of the central Asia mountain region and started their expansion towards India.
In the 5th century the Hephthalites (*c.* 450–*c.* 560), also from the steppe, first emerged as an independent state in the foothills of southeast Bactria, where their rulers retained a pastoralist

# Buddhism and Christianity on the Silk Roads

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The Buddhist and Christian monastic tradition was a significant economic, social and religious factor in Eurasian history and international cultural exchange. During the lifetime of the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni (5th century BCE), his disciples in north India were wandering ascetics. However, the monsoon rains forced them to stay in one place, and as early as the 2nd century BCE there is archaeological evidence in India for Buddhist monastic structures.

Before monasticism, the first permanent Buddhist structures were the earthen burial mounds that covered the relics found after the cremation of Śākyamuni. The mounds, called *stūpa*, were encased in bricks and over time had features added such as fencing, gateways and reliefs depicting events in the life of the Buddha. For some years, relic veneration was the major focus of Buddhist followers, both the wandering ascetics and householders [*see* pp. 176–81]. In time, structures were built adjacent to some of the mounds, and were used by the ascetics for times of meditation. Since the bodily relics of the Buddha were thought to have great power that could emanate outwards and change the nature of any site where they were present, it is not surprising to find that ascetics gathered at such places. Cells constructed for meditation in the presence of relics are the first signs in archaeology of the emergence of permanent dwellings that were to develop into monasteries [*see* box on p. 130]. Textual evidence provides us with the storyline for how communities of both men and women set themselves apart from normal society and over time formulated the rules of conduct required for those who chose to lead their lives in this way. Known as *Vinaya*, and first transmitted through oral recitation, these rules were then transcribed into Sanskrit and Pali, and later translated into Chinese and Tibetan.