

**Wine Cultures  
Gandhāra and Beyond**

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# **Beyond the Form** Observations on Wine-Symbolism and Related Figurative Themes in Gandhāran Art

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**Abstract** Wine and related motifs hold a special place in Gandhāran sculptural production as they constitute a common thread among several visual themes, including the so-called 'Dionysiac scenes'. Despite their different nature, these themes bear indirect – yet significant – witness to a coherent pattern of shared semantic values, the core meaning of which can be considered in light of recent discoveries, data reassessment, and contextual interpretative approaches.

**Keywords** Gandhāran revelry scenes. Wine symbolism. Hārītī. Tutelary couples. Erotic couples. New Year festival.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Context. – 3 The Gandhāran Visual Repertoire: A Glimpse into Archetypes and Symbolic Patterns. – 4 The Gandhāran Revelry Scenes: Again on the Saidu Sharif I Reliefs. – 5 Final Remarks.



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## 1 Introduction

There are perhaps few iconographic themes in Gandhāran art that have attracted more scholarly attention than the so-called ‘Dionysiac scenes’, showing characters engaged in winemaking and revelling. Such a fascination is easy to understand, for these scenes not only constitute a puzzling occurrence in the figurative programs of Buddhist monuments (*stūpa*) but they also effectively embody a range of issues crucial to Gandhāran studies, including their long-debated Hellenistic features within the broader – and no less discussed – phenomenon of Hellenism in Asia.

This is a domain hard to seize, where our interpretation efforts may be muddled by potential bias arising from preconceived knowledge and lack of proper tools for contextual analysis. The term ‘Dionysiac’ itself, which strongly associates Gandhāran revelry scenes with the Graeco-Roman visual repertoire, exemplifies conceptual approaches that, although increasingly questioned in recent years, still remain influenced by restrictive paradigms. Already Martha L. Carter, in a paper published in 1968, had rightly observed that “a purely Western interpretation of the origin and significance of such [Dionysiac] motives does not seem adequate to justify their basic *raison d’être*”.<sup>1</sup>

Here, however, we do not seek to either revise or expand upon the general question of the Hellenistic influence on Gandhāran art, which has been extensively addressed in several dedicated contributions.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we would like to offer some observations on the values underlying Gandhāran wine symbolism and associated figurative themes, aligning with recent research on the interactions between Buddhism and the local cultural substratum in the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent in ancient times. It has become apparent that the coexistence of different – and theoretically contrasting – cultural facets calls for re-evaluating the criteria used in current standard practice, as they are proving not to fit the intricacy and nuances of the socio-cultural dynamics at play. While it takes time to establish new paradigms, we can at least start outlining general patterns to define potential, promising lines of research. This essay represents a first modest attempt.

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<sup>1</sup> Carter 1968, 121.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Filigenzi 2012.



**Figure 1** Unknown male deity. From Barikot (Swat Valley, Pakistan), third century AD. Schist, 17.2 × 8.5 × 2.8 cm. Swat Museum, Saïdu Sharif, inv. no. BKG 2304 (SM acc. no. 547). Photo by Cristiano Moscatelli, copyright IAMP-ISMEO

## 2 The Context

Among the research questions that have gained prominence in Gandhāran studies in the last years is the relationship between the distinctive social groups that shaped the cultural landscape of the North-West in the first half of the first millennium AD; that is, the urban centres, Buddhist communities and non-urban groups.<sup>3</sup> The reconstruction of such interactions poses a monumental challenge to our interpretative efforts as it encompasses non-linear aspects of history, including not only religion and art but a much broader social and economic domain. As a matter of fact, our knowledge of ancient Gandhāra is still mainly confined to macroscopic events such as the rise of strong political powers and formalised religious systems. In contrast, the underlying (co)existence of subaltern ideologies, likewise crucial to historical dynamics, largely remains ignored for being cloaked – at least to our eyes – in dominant cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, the data obtained by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (IAMP-ISMEO) over almost seventy years of systematic activities in the Swat Valley has allowed research to move forward on much firmer ground. Especially some of the evidence collected in the last decade hints at a system of beliefs that has been connected to the so-called ‘Dardic’ local substratum, which must have formed a significant sociocultural facet of the region since early times.<sup>4</sup>

Worth mentioning is a third-century small stela [fig. 1] found at the urban centre of Barikot (Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai) in a corridor leading to a courtyard of a residential block, where a Buddhist domestic chapel was also excavated.<sup>5</sup> This piece depicts a local male deity sitting frontally on a throne, his right hand holding a goblet, his left a severed head of a goat and a sacrificial knife. The deity belongs to a group of similar figures – mostly female – already known from specimens obtained from the antique market, who carry the same attributes and are portrayed, in a few cases, with a goat head that emphasises their intimate connection with this animal [fig. 2].<sup>6</sup> While very

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**3** The evidence briefly summarised in this section represents only the tip of the iceberg of a much more intricate picture. Besides the references given in the text, see also Olivieri, Coloru, Iori in this volume.

**4** This ‘Dardic’ cultural substratum was outlined, among others, by Giuseppe Tucci in a seminal work (1977) and connected to the north-western people mentioned in Classical and South Asian textual sources as *Dardae*, *Dadikai*, *Daradas*, etc., as well as the Assakenoi that Alexander the Great fought in *Daedala* during the Indian campaign in 327 BC (Olivieri 1996). It is still not clear whether a true ‘Dardic kingdom’ ever existed or rather we have to think of several political entities somehow connected. Hence, for the sake of simplicity, the term ‘Dardic’ is used here to refer to local substrata of culturally related areas comprising the north-western regions of present-day Pakistan.

**5** Olivieri 2014, 95-6; Olivieri, Filigenzi 2018, 76; Filigenzi 2019b, 77.

**6** Taddei 1987.



**Figure 2** Unknown female goat-headed deity. Possibly from Dir. Collected by Sir H.A. Deane, given by Lit. Col. H.H.R. Deane. Schist, 24.2 × 13 × 5.2 cm. British Museum, inv. no. OA 1939.1-19.19. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved



**Figure 3** Relief showing Buddha's life episodes (lower register) and a ceremonial scene (upper register). From Saidu Sharif I (Swat Valley, Pakistan), first century AD. Schist. Museo delle Civiltà, Rome, inv. no. S 704 (MNAOr acc. no. 4152). Photo by Jaroslav Poncar copyright IAMP-ISMEO

little, if any, can be said about the identity of these local deities,<sup>7</sup> their attributes manifest a religious environment centred around alcohol consumption and goat sacrifice.

Cognate visual evidence was recently detected by one of the Authors in a group of reliefs excavated at the Buddhist area of Saidu Sharif I by IAMP during the first archaeological campaign at the site in the early 1960s. These reliefs, which can be ascribed to the same monument based on technical, iconographic, and stylistic features,<sup>8</sup> show in the upper register a high-rank male figure sitting on a throne in a vineyard-like setting. Several male attendants are bringing him drinking vessels, grapes and - in two cases - a goat, which is led "in a way that suggests a bloody sacrifice without actually representing it" [figs 3-4].<sup>9</sup>

Intoxicating beverages and goat sacrifice were thus the showiest features of a deep-rooted, socially relevant ritualism to the extent that even in a Buddhist context it was codified as a means to stress the cultural affiliation of the lay groups, and the same groups who supported

<sup>7</sup> One may wonder, for instance, whether the female figures represent the same or different deities. For an iconographic reassessment of these stelae, see Moscatelli, Filigenzi 2023, 704-9.

<sup>8</sup> This is probably the little *stūpa* no. 38, dating to the first century AD, in whose proximity one of these reliefs (no. S 418) was excavated (Filigenzi 2019b, 72 fn. 19).

<sup>9</sup> Filigenzi 2019b, 74.



**Figure 4** Relief showing Buddha's life episodes (lower register) and a ceremonial scene (upper register). From Saidu Sharif I (Swat Valley, Pakistan), first century AD. Schist. Museo delle Civiltà, Rome, inv. no. S 418 (MNAOr acc. no. 4107). Photo by Jaroslav Poncar, copyright IAMP-ISMEO

the monastic community (*saṃgha*).<sup>10</sup> As pointed out by ethnologic studies, this ideological system once dominated a much wider geographic area comprising the Hindukush-Himalaya region where autochthonous populations (traditionally and inadequately referred to as Kafirs, Arabic for 'unbeliever') practised forms of Indo-European polytheism. Notwithstanding local differences, these populations were united by a common, all-encompassing 'pastoral ideology' founded upon goat husbandry, the religious value attached to this animal, and wine consumption especially during (but not limited to) seasonal festivals. In north-western Pakistan, vestiges of this system are found in the valleys of southern Chitral, where the Kalasha communities managed to maintain their traditions.<sup>11</sup>

**10** It is reasonable to assume that the monastic communities initially attempted to restrain such practices, only to tolerate them eventually in the face of their rootedness. In this connection, it is interesting to recall Caroline Humprey and James Laidlaw's ethnographic study (2007) on goat sacrifices performed at the Buddhist monastery of Mergen Süm, Inner Mongolia. They observe that "the crucial organs of the carcass are laid out in the inner sanctum of a temple, right beside the Buddhist altar [...] the ceremony (or at least that part of it taking place inside the temple) is carried out by lamas with cheerful goodwill and without a hint of condemnation" (258).

**11** In Eastern Afghanistan, this cultural system began to collapse in the sixteenth century with the gradual spread of Islam in the area, culminating in 1895 with the conversion of the Nuristani people under the rule of the then Emir, Abdur Rahman Khan. The Kalasha communities were not affected by Islamisation as they were located in an area that, a few years earlier, the Durand Line (1893) had placed under the administration of the British

While, according to some scholars, the linguistic conservatism and the absence of any Buddhist or Brahmanical cultural elements seem to indicate that these communities mostly remained isolated from the major historical events that affected the valleys,<sup>12</sup> the archaeological record from Swat suggests there may have actually been a greater contiguity than previously thought.

Besides the Barikot stela, which is the most eloquent piece of evidence in that regard, historical interactions between 'Dardic' and valleys communities have been inferred from a number of painted rock shelters that were documented in the uplands of the Swat-Malakand area by MAIP in the framework of the Archaeological Map of the Swat Valley project (AMSV).<sup>13</sup> These natural rock formations are located along outcrops of gneiss, generally at the same altitude and in some cases near springs, ancient trails and mountain passes. While their purpose remains unclear, the paintings overall display a consistent semantic system conveying the beliefs and world views of transhumant pastoralist groups who retained their cultural traits over generations (Bronze Age to late first millennium AD). The subjects include hunting and fertility-related scenes, anthropomorphic figures with overdrawn body parts, what appears to be the ritual slaughtering of an ibex,<sup>14</sup> and Buddhist monuments. These latter are not necessarily an indication of religious affiliation (buddhas or bodhisattvas are never represented in the paintings), but may rather be regarded as visual evidence of contact with the Buddhist communities - which we may assume occurring already in the third century BC with the gradual spread of monastic groups in the area.<sup>15</sup> Based on the collected data, it appears that especially during the historical period these pastoral communities formed a sort of 'tribal belt' around the urban and monastic settlements, with which they must have had constant social and economic interactions.<sup>16</sup>

Among the activities was no doubt wine-making, as evidenced by several stone tanks and vats for grape pressing (comparable to those used by the Nuristani/Kalasha people)<sup>17</sup> documented next to the rock shelters, and in one case, inside; similar stone vats were also found near Buddhist areas where they might have been used for fermentation.<sup>18</sup> The overall picture suggests a standardised process in wine

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Raj. On the cultural traditions of the Nuristani people, see Sir George Scott Robertson's renowned account (1896); on the Kalashas, see Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001; Cacopardo 2016a.

**12** Cf. Fussman [1977] 2014.

**13** Olivieri, Vidale 2006; Olivieri 2011.

**14** Olivieri 2012, 45, site no. 4.

**15** Tucci 1977, 57-8.

**16** Olivieri 2011, 180 ff.

**17** Klimburg 2016.

**18** Olivieri 2011, 191.





**Figure 5** Stela depicting Hārītī. From Barikot (Swat Valley, Pakistan), third century AD. Schist with traces of gold leaf, 22.4 × 16.2 × 5.1 cm. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. BKG 3636 (Reserve Collection). Photo by Cristiano Moscatelli, copyright IAMP-ISMEO

production, with initial stages (grapes harvesting and crushing) taking place in the uplands, followed by pasteurisation in the urban settlements. Here, still devices, probably used for either cooking or distilling alcohol, were found in significant numbers by excavations, particularly in Buddhist cultic places.

The presence of winemaking infrastructures and related devices in both extra- and urban Buddhist areas introduces a further layer of cultural transversity, which adds many telling clues to the intertwining of different social, ideological, and economic identities in the area. Besides the evidence from Sirkap/Taxila, distillers were found at Late Kushan Barikot in the courtyards of Sacred Buildings BN and H. Particularly noteworthy is the former, which yielded an almost complete condenser along with an exquisite stela depicting Hārītī [fig. 5], a demi-goddess (*yakṣiṇī*) associated with childbirth and fecundity and usually shown holding a bunch of grapes, as in this specimen.<sup>19</sup> Worthy of mention is also the contemporary archaeological context of the so-called ‘House of Naradakha’ at the urban centre of Shaikhān-ḍherī, present-day Charsadda (north-western Pakistan). The building, which shares a similar layout, architectural features, and material evidence with the Barikot structures, was a Buddhist shrine located within a block where wine and/or other fermented drinks were probably manufactured. This is evidenced by several millstones, distillers, and large jars, mostly found still *in situ* in the rooms surrounding the shrine.<sup>20</sup> Although we do not know whether these sorts of urban Buddhist-*cum*-winemaking buildings were run by groups of monks or nuns, the involvement of the *saṃgha* in the process, while not widely accepted, cannot be dismissed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Iori 2023.

<sup>20</sup> The ‘House’ was excavated by a joint Pakistani-British mission in 1963. According to one of the leading archaeologists, the building was the private dwelling of a first-century AD Buddhist *ācārya*, which was gradually turned into a shrine after the teacher’s death at the time of Kaniṣka I’s reign (Dani 1965-66). For the sake of simplicity, we are not dealing here with the inconsistency of this interpretation, for which we refer the reader to the reassessment of the archaeological record of the site made by one of the Authors (Moscatelli, forthcoming a; Moscatelli, forthcoming b).

<sup>21</sup> *Contra* see, for instance, K. Tanabe 2015. The scholar argues against Harry Falk’s claim that Gandhāran monasteries participated in wine production. Falk’s arguments were based on the analysis of some large stone bowls that, according to the German scholar, were used by the *saṃgha* to ferment and distribute wine during lay festivals (Falk 2009). Although Tanabe raises some compelling points, his critique is mainly confined to textual sources and does not consider the whole corpus of available data. Not to mention that there is at least one reference to nuns taking part in wine production for secular celebrations in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, a monastic code likely redacted in the North-West of the early Common Era (Falk 2010, 101). Regarding the still devices, see Mahdihassan 1972; Allchin 1979; Brancaccio, Liu 2009, 225-7.

### 3 The Gandhāran Visual Repertoire: A Glimpse into Archetypes and Symbolic Patterns

Gandhāra was thus an area rich in wine tradition, encompassing economic and religious spheres. What does the Gandhāran visual repertoire tell us about this ideological system, with its revelry scenes, erotic and tutelary couples, and local deities imbued with wine-related symbolism?<sup>22</sup>

To begin with, there is no doubt that this visual repertoire conveys different layers of meaning. Yet, one cannot help but notice that the visual codes employed in these themes, when taken together, hint at a coherent set of notions rooted in ancestral ideas of both cosmic and social order, with special connotations on fertility and the interplay between different realms of existence. The artistic evidence is self-speaking that Buddhism did not conflict with these conceptual paradigms but fostered instead a cultural integration that stemmed from the recognition of, and interaction with, the social structures, practices, and norms of local communities.

In a 1998 paper, Richard S. Cohen discussed a trend in the contemporary academic discourse that emphasised a conceptual distinction between what was considered ‘official Buddhism’ – namely, the Buddha’s teachings and the *saṃgha* – and ‘popular Buddhism’, the latter encompassing religious beliefs somewhat contingent on Buddhist practice, such as the worship of local spirits. Such an approach persists in current scholarship, where non-Buddhist cultural aspects are usually regarded as mere phenomena of syncretism or appropriation within the broader context of Buddhist practice.<sup>23</sup>

Cohen suggested that such cults in Buddhist contexts should be considered in light of a network of different exchange relationships between the *saṃgha* and local lay communities. In this dynamic, the monastic groups took on concerns surrounding the laity, whose resolution would ensure mutual benefits for all parties involved and, eventually, social (Dharmic) harmony. For instance, the subjugation of a wicked *nāga* (semi-divine beings connected to water) would assure the local society of living in a stable and orderly environment, no longer fearing the violent floods these subterranean creatures were believed to cause. On the other hand, the monastic community would benefit from such a context, for a wealthy society means, above all, material support. Through these mechanisms, Buddhism found therefore its natural field of action and, most importantly, legitimacy in society.

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<sup>22</sup> This section and the following one provide a revision of the contents outlined in a preliminary form by the Authors within the framework of the Roots of Peristan International Conference held in Rome, 5-7 October 2022 (Moscatelli, Filigenzi 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Cohen 1998.



Figure 6 Tutelary couple. From Takht-i Bahi. Schist, 27 × 24.7 × 10.3 cm. British Museum, inv. no. OA1950,0726.2. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved

Cohen based his assumption on the analysis of the archaeological evidence from the fifth-century Caves 2 and 16 at Ajanta - associated with a local king of *nāgas* (*nāgarāja*) and the *yakṣiṇī* Harīti, respectively. While Gandhāra has not yielded similar programmatic contexts, the cultural process discussed by the scholar was no doubt operating also in the North-West as *nāgas* and *yakṣas*, notwithstanding local developments, belong to a strong transregional belief in the religious Indic universe. The northern Buddhist literary tradition records several stories about the Buddha subjugating these creatures during his mythical journey in the region, and the Gandhāran sculptural production itself witnesses a widespread cult.

It will be sufficient to recall the legends of the *nāga* Apalāla,<sup>24</sup> the guardian of the source of the River Swat, or Hārīti, the anthropophagus *yakṣiṇī* who became a protector of the Doctrine in the Buddhist tradition.<sup>25</sup> Also in Gandhāra, these conversion stories contribute to relocate the worship of local supernatural beings within the Buddhist

<sup>24</sup> Zin 2006, 54-68.

<sup>25</sup> Péri 1917; Zin 2006, 35-53.

cultural environment, with the Doctrine standing as the sole authoritative ordering source of the forces that threaten both the natural and civilised world. In this connection, it is not surprising that such mechanisms had, or at least reflected, purely pragmatic outcomes, with the *saṃgha* acting as an intermediary in the management of natural resources and social affairs.<sup>26</sup> At any rate, it is clear that this process did not deconstruct the inherently ambivalent nature of these figures, or the religious practices associated with them. These latter are more or less apparent in the figurative production, showing *nāgas* and their female counterpart (*nāginīs*) in scenes of revelry or Hārītī holding a bunch of grapes, according to popular conceptions in India that ascribed to them a penchant for offers of intoxicating beverages.

From a semantic point of view, the figure of Hārītī can be connected to other Gandhāran subjects that, when considered together, define a rhetoric of sexuality. The symbolic core of this discourse is not, however, the mere sexual act itself, but its deeper purpose – whether motivated by biological, ideological, or even economic reasons; that is, the generation of offspring and the perpetuation of one’s family line, and therefore, by extension, the civil society. The origin of the *yakṣiṇī* is unknown, but it can undoubtedly be traced back to the broader group of pan-Indian female deities embodying fertility and motherhood. The Gandhāran iconography portrays her as a loving mother standing, or sitting on a low throne, surrounded by her infants.<sup>27</sup>

The values associated with Hārītī find a natural semantic convergence in her depictions with the companion Pañcika, the commander-in-chief of the *yakṣa* army [fig. 6]. This couple arises from a concept of polarity articulating the dual unity of opposing yet complementary powers within an ontological system that is, above all, strongly sexualised. The ‘system of tutelary couples’ is well-documented in the

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**26** We refer, for instance, to the large barrage works documented in the Kandak Valley close to Buddhist monasteries, which were most likely engaged in the management of water supply within the economic activities of the area (Olivieri 2008, 297). As for the involvement of the Buddhist monastic communities in social concerns, see e.g. Schopen ([2012] 2014, 131-56), who stresses Hārītī’s role as a model for the practice of giving children at risk to monks in Buddhist texts.

**27** In his travelogue, the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang records that in the surroundings of Puṣkalāvati, there was a *stūpa* dedicated to Hārītī on the spot where, according to local tradition, she was converted by the Buddha. People would sacrifice at the monument to obtain children from her (Beal 1884, 1: 110-11). The site was identified by Alfred Foucher (1901, 342-3) with the Sarē-makhe-ḍherī mound (the remains of a *stūpa*) located in the proximity of the Umarzai village, Charsadda. The scholar recorded that pinches of earth collected from the mound were believed by local Muslims to cure children suffering from ‘red face’ (*sarē makhe*), either smallpox or measles, hence recalling the association of Hārītī with diseases. Moreover, it is interesting to note that in a nearby village, a popular shrine is dedicated to a Muslim female saint (variously spelt as Bibi or ‘Lady’ Sahida/Sayeda/Sayda), believed to cure infertility. (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/556515-travelling-to-charsadda>).

Iranian-Central Asian and Indian regions, as well as in the border areas such as Gandhāra. Here, excavations have yielded, besides the said Pañcika-Hāritī pair, another couple that is traditionally identified with Pharro and Ardoksho, the Iranian deities of royal glory (*xvarenah*) and wealth, respectively.<sup>28</sup>

The tutelary couple is the powerful expression of archetypes of gender, each invested with symbols inherent to their respective condition that is embedded in the local cultural ideology. At the same time, this condition appears to be political, social, and familial: the male figure carries attributes and motifs related to the sphere of power and authority, such as the military attire or the spear, while the female figure, depicted holding a cornucopia or a child, embodies fertility, generative power, and motherhood.

An explicit body language manifests the union between the two opposing poles. In the female figure extending her arm to the male's genital, or gently touching his thigh, we perceive the interaction between the feminine and masculine energy, both channelled towards creation.<sup>29</sup> One cannot act or exist without the other.

The *mithuna* (Sanskrit 'pair'), or so-called 'erotic couples', underlies similar notions, but here being communicated through a subtle allusion to the sexual union between a male and a female figure and the fruit it will bear. Actually, the term 'erotic' can be critically questioned as it only stresses the sexual arousing and not the whole semantic content embodied by these figures, including notion of birth and generation - i.e., the realm of life. This is alluded to, for instance, by the *mithuna* carved on the door-jamb B 3215 [fig. 7] from Butkara I, a Buddhist site excavated by IAMP in years 1956-62. A *mithuna* is carved in the upper register. The female, standing with crossed legs, pulls down her lower garment with her left hand to reveal the vulva, which is covered by a leaf-shaped band, while uncovering or probably grabbing her companion's phallus. The male kisses her and touches her belly with the right hand, the latter being a universal gesture for pregnancy.

But the Butkara door-jamb provides significant evidence of how such themes were incorporated within a Buddhist context. In the lower register is depicted what, at first glance, appears to be a Buddha standing in *abhaya mudrā* (gesture of reassurance). A closer look shows that his right hand is turned with the palm facing outwards. This gesture, yet to be fully understood, was documented by Maurizio Taddei in some reliefs, where it is usually performed by the Buddha-to-be Maitreya.<sup>30</sup> This may indicate that not a Buddha, but Maitreya as an accomplished buddha is portrayed in the door-jamb.

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28 Bussagli 1984.

29 Filigenzi 2019a, 172.

30 Taddei [1969] 2003.



**Figure 7**  
Door-jamb showing a *mithuna*  
(detail). From Butkara I, second half  
of the first century/third century AD.  
Schist, 50 × 18 × 6.5 cm. Museo delle  
Civiltà, Rome, inv. no. B 3215. Photo  
after Filigenzi 2019a: fig. 10.10

However, the question is extremely complex and cannot be addressed in detail here.<sup>31</sup> Be as it may, it will be sufficient for the time being to stress how the occurrence of iconographic themes produced by different ideologies converges in expressing one and the same conceptual idea: the intertwined bond that ties the renewal of the Buddhist Doctrine with that of humankind, as the human world (*manuṣya-loka*) constitutes, according to Buddhist soteriology, one of the beneficial samsaric condition of existence where self-liberation can be potentially achieved.<sup>32</sup>

**31** Here, we shall limit ourselves to mentioning a possible comparison with the paintings at the entrance of Cave 17 in Ajanta, particularly on the monastery's entrance door (Ghosh [1967] 1996, pl. LXII). The upper frame shows the Seven Buddhas of the Past and the Buddha-to-be-Maitreya, readily discernible by his attire and rich jewellery. The lintel is painted with eight panels of as many *mithunas*. It is worth noting the exact correspondence between the number of Buddhas (including Maitreya) and that of the couples. A detailed discussion on the Butkara I *mithunas* and connected iconographic themes is under preparation by one of the Authors (Moscatelli, forthcoming c).

**32** Filigenzi 2019a, 176. See also Jenkins 2022 for a recent discussion on rebirth in Heavens within Buddhist soteriology. We are grateful to Dr Bryan De Notariis for bringing the study to our attention.

Notwithstanding different nuances, these themes can be assumed overall as semantic variations of the same principle, that is, life perpetuating itself within a cosmic and social order. This notion finds a corollary in wine-related symbolism that seal the intrinsic value of the images – such as the bunch of grapes attributed to Hārīti; the *kantharos*-like vessel held by the male deity in the tutelary couple; the grape hanging from depictions of city doors, or the vine scroll, in which one can recognise not a mere decorative motif but rather, following Carter, the idea of the all-pervading and all-nourishing *arbor vitae*.<sup>33</sup>

Depictions found in other types of reliefs such as cornices, which are often overlooked in Gandhāran studies, offer much food for thought in this regard. Let us briefly consider a specimen from Kālawān showing naked garland-bearers,<sup>34</sup> regrettably broken on the proper right side. Of particular interest are the other figures carved in the field. In the two surviving lower hollows of the garland, a winged female figure (on the right) and a *mithuna* (on the left) are emerging. In the foreground and in correspondence with these figures are, respectively, a pair of children touching (or probably eating) a bunch of grapes hanging from the garland and a pair of birds pecking at another pendent fruit. We do not know what was sculpted in the lost section – probably the same alternating children/birds, judging from the remaining portion of a third child visible near the fracture. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe how a cross-reading of these figures and the centrality of grapes suggest again an interdependence between different levels of existence that is at the foundation of the Gandhāran imagery: everything is firmly connected, and all participate in the great mystery of life – deities, humankind, and natural sphere.

We have seen that in Gandhāra a local religious thought associating alcohol consumption with the bloody sacrifice of goats is documented, and that this finds a much-telling allusion at the Buddhist site of Saidu Sharif (§ 2). While the grape as a symbol of renewing life emerges quite evidently from the artistic evidence, the possibility that the same motif may convey an implicit atavistic reference to blood is less explicit. For instance, as Hārīti retains her potential malevolence, which only the good practice established by the Buddha can restrain, one can wonder whether iconography conveys the same kind of ambiguity through the grape, or better, its juice, evoking the *yakṣiṇī*'s bloodthirst. The allegory of 'wine as the blood of grapes' is, after all, transversal to cultures, time, and space.

In this respect, the female attribute *par excellence*, the cornucopia, offers much food for thought. What is traditionally defined as a 'cornucopia' in Gandhāran art actually appears to be a hybrid of two different

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<sup>33</sup> Carter 1968, 142.

<sup>34</sup> Marshall 1951, 2: 709, no. 72; 3: pl. 216, no. 72.



containers: on the one hand, the body matches the Graeco-Roman horn of plenty overflowing with produce and fruits; on the other, the termination recalls the rhyton, a horn-shaped vessel featuring a hollow element, usually in the shape of an animal or animal's head, used as wine or alcohol purer in libation. The Graeco-Roman cornucopia and the Gandhāran type were both attributed to female deities associated with abundance and fortune in their respective cultural contexts.<sup>35</sup>

As discussed by Niccolò Manassero, the rhyton holds several symbolic meanings, particularly fertility.<sup>36</sup> While the protome in the shape of an animal's head implies sacrifice, the scholar specifies that this notion would be more precisely manifested by the rhyton itself, not by the animal represented. This subtle emblematic distinction, however, does not fit into our context, as there is no conceptual break between the two semantic levels. The protome in the shape of a goat head – whether domestic or wild – always typifies the Gandhāran 'cornucopia'. Not to mention the recurring instances of goat sacrifices found in the available archaeological record from the region. Besides the previously mentioned evidence (§ 2), reference should be made to a bronze rhyton found at Imit (Gilgit), which is in the shape of a centaur holding an ibex in a manner that suggests a sacrificial offering.<sup>37</sup>

We leave philologists to deal with references to goats in literary sources. Let us briefly remark on the symbolic associations between wine and goats. A fact one can easily observe in nature may explain this connection: these animals are particularly voracious for grapes. For instance, goats eating vineyards are a recurrent literary theme in Dionysian etiological myths. According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, goats began to be sacrificed to Bacchus as a punishment for biting vines. Similarly, Servius tells us that the king of Calydon, Oeneus ('wine-man'), learned winemaking by squeezing a bunch of grapes he received from a shepherd, who had caught a goat eating them.<sup>38</sup> Depictions of goats eating grapes or vine shoots are already attested in Sumerian art<sup>39</sup> and are also found in Gandhāran production: see, for instance, a relief from Jamālgarhī showing two goats eating the leaves and fruits of a vine in an open-air setting.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Di Castro 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Manassero 2010.

<sup>37</sup> The rhyton is kept in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (acc. no. EA1963.28). For bibliographic references, see the entry of the object on the museum's website: [http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/10230/10264/all/per\\_page/25/offset/0/sort\\_by/seqn./object/11133](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/10230/10264/all/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/seqn./object/11133).

<sup>38</sup> For these and similar accounts, see Doria, Giuman 2019, 36 ff.

<sup>39</sup> See reference in Burkert 1966, 100-1 fn. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Zwalf 1996, no. 309.

#### 4 The Gandhāran Revelry Scenes: Again on the Saidu Sharif I Reliefs

In light of our observations, we shall now consider the Gandhāran reliefs depicting winemaking and revelry scenes, showing characters engaged in wine consumption, dancing, and playing music, with strong orgiastic connotations. These scenes were usually part of the main figurative apparatus of the *stūpa*, where they follow the unfolding episodes of the Buddha's life in a separate register. That the Gandhāran revelry scenes may represent local religious practices rooted deep in antiquity can be regarded as more than just a mere hypothesis.<sup>41</sup>

Traces of this cultural complex can be recognised in the Alexandrographers' accounts, variously describing Dionysiac-like cults among the Dardic people of the North-West, particularly in relation to the story of Nysa. According to the Classical sources, the city was founded by Dionysus at the foot of a mountain called Meros (cf. Sanskrit Meru), atop which was an open-air temple dedicated to the deity and visited by the locals in a bacchic fashion. In the sacred space were vats and tools for winemaking and a white stone image of the god created by Dionysus himself.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever deity the Greeks knew as Dionysus,<sup>43</sup> it is clear that they encountered a local worship that shared many structural and ritual aspects with the Dionysian Mysteries, such as the open-air celebration and its orgiastic character induced by wine consumption, wild dancing, and music. In other words, what we observe in the Gandhāran revelry scenes.

In this connection, we shall add some remarks on the Saidu Sharif reliefs (§ 2). We have seen that these scenes manifest a strong ceremonial character both by the drinking vessels and the goat, symbolic of an imminent sacrifice. Worthy of mention is also the 'Kushan' dress worn by the figures, which is not necessarily indicative of 'Kushan people' but instead of members of the local (Dardic) elite affiliated with the central power. Moreover, this type of dress strongly contrasts with

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<sup>41</sup> Recently, Tadashi Tanabe argued that these scenes depict the pleasures awaiting Buddhist devotees in paradise (2016; 2020). However, this hypothesis does not consider the whole set of archaeological, literary, and ethnological evidence available today.

<sup>42</sup> Carter 1968, 140 ff.; Filigenzi 2019b, 75, fn. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Several scholars have highlighted some shared characteristics between (Rudra-) Śiva and Dionysus (e.g. Long 1971). Also, we shall not forget that the North-West was a centre of Shaivism. For instance, Tucci (1963, 159) recalls the god's epithet of *Gāndhāra* 'from Gandhāra', which can also be understood as *Gāndhārasvara* (*svara* 'voice', referring to the songs dedicated to him). This latter may be connected to the *Gandarios* of Hesychius' Lexicon (Carter 1995, 150; *contra* Karttunen 2009, 132). For some Gandhāran Shaivite reliefs, see Taddei 1971; 1985. Also, see Mon/Mandi (i.e., Mandeo = Mahādeva = Śiva) of the Nuristani and Kalasha pantheon (Carter 1995, 152).

the use of Indian costumes in the Buddha's life scenes depicted in the lower register.<sup>44</sup>

Based on the ethnological data collected by Max Klimburg,<sup>45</sup> one of the Authors (§ 3) has already stressed elsewhere the strong affinities between the contents underlined in the Saidu Sharif reliefs and the feast held in the Indrak'un or 'Garden of Indr' (cf. Vedic Indra), a small forest of holly oaks and other fruit trees surrounded by wild vines, once a Nuristani cultic place located near Wama in the Pech Valley (southern Nuristan, Afghanistan). The feast would start around the end of September/October, marking the end of harvesting. The village's inhabitants would gather to attend the procession of the god image from the village temple (Indr-amā) to the Indr-tā, where it would be set on a stone base. Here, people of high rank would sit on rows of stones and enjoy dance, hymns and animal sacrifices performed in honour of the god while drinking wine produced in nearby stone vats.

The strict similarities between the Indrak'un, the 'Dardic' ceremonies recorded by the Greeks, and the Saidu scenes can hardly be overlooked. However, here we would like to take a leap forward and wonder whether the grape motif occurring in Gandhāran revelry scenes could be interpreted as a codified symbol to define the period when the depicted feasts were understood to take place by contemporary society. If so, this period would fall between late autumn, at the end of grape harvesting, and winter. While the Nuristani and Kalasha traditions bear different wine seasonal feasts<sup>46</sup> – and notwithstanding local or regional developments depending on environmental factors such as fruit availability and harvesting quantity – one particular festival, and the only one that appears to align with the meanings of the Gandhāran visual repertoire, is still observed by the Kalasha in the said period: namely, the New Year.

As in many other Indo-European traditions, the New Year stands as the most significant festival in the religious calendar of the Kalashas, which culminates with the winter solstice.<sup>47</sup> It celebrates the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one, hence the regeneration of the world and life. During the multifaceted rituals that formed the festival, the community experiences a period of social communion, which is gradually extended to the surrounding environment. Wine consumption, goat sacrifice, dances and songs with sexual undertones are core practices within the morphology of the celebration. According to some traditions, the coming to the valleys of the god Balimain and his attendant Pushaw, both connected to fertility (cf. Indr/Indra and the Vedic

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<sup>44</sup> Filigenzi 2019b, 72-3.

<sup>45</sup> Klimburg 2014; 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Carter 1992, 54-6

<sup>47</sup> Cacopardo 2016b.

Pūṣan),<sup>48</sup> marks the peak of the festival, corresponding to the renewal of the established order.

The possibility to understand the Gandhāra revelry scenes as a distinct picture of a context similar, or even cognate to, the Kalasha New Year festival offers a new perspective within the broad topic of the relations between Buddhism and local cultural substrata in ancient Gandhāra. Although this interpretation is based on fragmentary and patchy materials (no complete decorative programs have ever been preserved), the overall visual codes and themes consistently match the notions and practices underlying the New Year festival.

We may even venture further and recall John Irwin's interpretation of the *stūpa* as a cosmogram, i.e. an architectural rendition of the cosmic order.<sup>49</sup> In this connection, one cannot help but notice a subtle distinction between the temporal course in which the Buddha's narrative cycles and the revelry scenes respectively take place: the former being in a condition that is no longer in the realm of history; the latter existing in a defined time, "in the present and not *in illo tempore*".<sup>50</sup> However, both partake in the experience of cosmic order and life renewing themselves.

## 5 Final Remarks

The Italian university system embraces a principle, widely reflected in the classifications of disciplinary areas and courses, that combines the history of ancient art with archaeology. This does not imply that an art historian must necessarily practise field archaeology or vice versa, but rather implies an inalienable epistemological perspective that recognises the value of visual arts as historical, social, and cultural testimony. This value can only be recovered through context, from which the image draws its semantic, aesthetic, and stylistic codes.

We would never have arrived at the interpretations presented here (for which, of course, we take responsibility for limitations and inaccuracies) without the possibility of placing our reliefs within a secure network of relations that, by concentric circles, expands from the stratigraphy of a site to its own artistic province and specific territory, and only then to external comparisons. Interpretation thus arises not only from a strictly art historical analysis, but from a wide range of data made available to art history by an inclusive archaeological map, in which, over the course of almost seventy years of research, all traces (certainly, all those recognisable or that we were able to recognise)

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<sup>48</sup> Cacopardo 2016a, 255; Di Carlo 2010, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Irwin 1979.

<sup>50</sup> Filigenzi 2019b, 73.

of the interaction between human societies and territory have converged. An idea may arise, as in this case, from an intuition suggested by a transdisciplinary comparison, but the verification of its plausibility treads on firmer ground if it is then entrusted to the corroboration of material evidence. Without the body of archaeological information that excavations and reconnaissance have produced on civil and religious settlements, as well as on valley and mountain economies and their mutual integration, this study would not have been possible.

We would also like to point out how landscape archaeology, recently established and accepted as a specific discipline, assisted by increasingly refined diagnostic techniques, has in fact been practised in the past without a specific label. Since its beginnings, IAMP has included in its projects a constant focus on the landscape and traces of non-monumental cultures or traditions. This is the case with rock sanctuaries and rock sculptures, graffiti, and winemaking stations, which live in symbiosis with the landscape without modifying it, but rather by reading, or exploiting, its natural forms. Notwithstanding the impressive monumental remains of Swat, the concept of a topography that does not necessarily coincide with the built-up space, or that pre-exists it and justifies it, has also always been present in the IAMP's investigations of the region.

The reliefs discussed here seem to belong, precisely, to that elusive world of substratum that creeps like an apparent otherness into the demarcated space of the Buddhist domain. And yet, it would be reductive to consider them extraneous. Rather, they reveal, under the unifying cloak of hegemonic cultural references (in this case, Buddhism), the complexity of the nexuses of social reality.

The work has just begun. We have tried to identify behaviour that we can trace back to a 'cultural mentality'. We will perhaps be able to recognise actions and characters more precisely in the future, when other series of similar reliefs, of archaeological provenance and linkable to each other by spatial and chronological proximity, are more carefully studied and published. This is the case, for instance, with some stair-riser reliefs from Shnaisha depicting standing figures in Kushan dress interacting in various ways with the main character (referred to by the excavators as government/state functionary), namely a central seated figure, often armed with a spear.<sup>51</sup> Undoubtedly, this is another window on the world that moves around the Buddhist sacred spaces and interacts with them. The actions depicted in the Shnaisha reliefs differ from those we analysed here and yet they too are strongly marked by references to actuality (the evocation of a space that lies outside the sacred area, the focus on a seated aristocrat, the historical topicality of clothing that contrasts with the philologically 'Indian'

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**51** Rahman 1993, 21, 48-9; pls. 41a, 47a-b, 48a-b.

clothing of the characters depicted in the biographical scenes) and by codified attitudes, gestures and behaviours that are part of one and the same 'realised signifying system'.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, we would like to devote a brief reflection on the use of written sources. If we are concerned with Buddhist art, we cannot ignore its literary and epigraphic production. However, the use we can make of written sources depends on what we expect from them. We will never find in the image the exact transposition of a text. Even in cases of the closest correspondence (think, for instance, of the biographical stories of *jātakas* and *avadānas*), the image is constructed in relation to a syntax and within a defined space that are different in nature from those of the text. Hence, if we look at the meaning of an iconography from a strictly logocentric point of view (it does not exist unless it is written), the relationship between text and image will always have a very narrow margin of encounter. Moreover, although all images are derivative (of intellectual or sensible cognitions), it would be unrealistic to assume that their source of derivation is always a written text. On the contrary, it is not infrequent that images represent our primary source of information on processes of historicisation of individual or collective memories.

Likewise, if we limit ourselves to a descriptive analysis based on the model, scenes of the type analysed here will be nothing more than a peripheral and imitative rivulet of Greek Dionysian culture. It is the context, with its complex network of relations and comparisons, that may suggest a different juxtaposition between image (or rather, the visual syntax to which the image belongs) and text or model. The coherence we must seek is not in correspondence, but rather in consonance. Likewise, we can look at the apparent dissonance not as a fanciful intrusion but as the insertion of a different temporal plane, which makes the metahistorical plot of the mythical tale interact with the present, thus implicitly staging a *modus vivendi* between different realities and identities.

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<sup>52</sup> Williams 1981, 207.

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