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Anna Filigenzi

3 Non-Buddhist Customs of Buddhist People: Visual and Archaeological Evidence from North-West Pakistan

In the rich repertoire of the Buddhist art of Gandhāra,[1] a special place is occupied by what we usually call "Dionysiac scenes," where different characters are portrayed in the act of drinking, dancing, performing more or less explicit erotic gestures that are a prelude to sexual intercourse, or engaged in social ceremonies of unknown nature.

When considered together and analysed more closely, these scenes reveal a typological variety that no doubt reflects different layers of meaning. Besides not fitting into any unitary picture, such themes cannot be easily reconciled with our idea of ancient Buddhism. Nevertheless, the association of Buddhist

1 The term "Gandharan art" is used here in its historicised meaning, which is purely conventional and traditionally accepted by scholars as the more adaptable to an artistic phenomenon that has been recognised, although with distinct regional characteristics, in wider territories than the Peshawar Valley. In this usage (which, I would like to clarify on behalf of non-specialists, was adopted with full consciousness and not without criticism) "Gandharan art" includes art from neighbouring regions such as Swat, Panjab and Eastern Afghanistan, and is roughly encompassed within the Kushan time frame (1st to 3rd century CE). I refer the reader to the brilliant synthesis in Zwalf (1996, 11–19).

Note: An abridged and slightly different version of this paper was published in French (Filigenzi 2016). The contents were first outlined in the framework of the workshop At the Foothills of the Hindukush: Art and Archaeology of the Swat Valley, Pakistan (Drexel University, Philadelphia, May 7, 2011), and further developed on the occasion of the International Symposium Buddhism and the Dynamics of Transculturality (Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg, 11th–13th June 2012). I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the organisers of these events, Pia Brancaccio and Birgit Kellner respectively, for encouraging this line of research and providing the best opportunity to discuss it with colleagues from different disciplinary fields. My deepest gratitude also goes to Pierfrancesco Callieri and Luca Maria Olivieri for their scientific advice and suggestions, as precious as ever. I am also indebted to Lorenzo Costantini for helping me to address specific palaeo-bothanic issues, and to Laura Giuliano for her kind assistance at the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale "Giuseppe Tucci," Rome. Special thanks go to Max Klimburg, who generously gave me access to the pre-print version of his article (Klimburg 2014). His presentation at the conference Wine Culture in Iran and Neighbouring Countries (Institute of Iranian Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, 16th–17th September 2010), on which that publication is based, was indeed revelatory of the connections between the iconographies discussed here and the Kafir folklore.

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iconographies with imageries manifestly evocative of sensuousness and/or inebriation, so odd to our eyes, must have been significant to the society of the time, although it continues to elude satisfactory explanation. Basically, this is due to the fact that our knowledge of these ancient societies, being mostly dependent on occasional clustering of sources, is like separate mountain peaks that reach above the clouds while the unbroken complexity of the underlying landscape remains hidden from our sight.

An in-depth analysis and interpretation of all the relevant iconographic subjects are beyond the scope of the present article. Here, attention will be focused on some particular reliefs, whose contextual meaning and close connection with real life are more easily discernible, in the hope that this may somehow contribute to establishing the need for a general reassessment of the evidence. The aim of this paper, indeed, is not to solve such intricate problems but rather to tackle them, when possible, from an inner perspective, based on the theoretical assumption that any element which is included in a coherent code of communication has a contextual meaning, in spite of its possible foreign origin or dissonant appearance with relation to the whole.

In particular, the following sensitive issues will be addressed here:

1. Are wine consumption and related symbolism merely a Greek import to the north-west of the Indian subcontinent?
2. Do the "Dionysiac" themes in Gandharan art all have the same meaning?
3. Who are the people depicted in those scenes, and which religious/ideological universe do they represent?

This investigation will focus on modern-day Swat (now part of the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, formerly North-West Frontier Province [NWFP], North-West Pakistan), which archaeologists have long since identified as the ancient Uḍḍiyāna of the literary sources. Indeed, not only the rich archaeological landscape that has been revealed by more than fifty years of systematic research, but also the geographical and climatic features – and in several cases the modern toponymy as well – largely match the ancient topography of Uḍḍiyāna as it is described in Indian, Greek, Chinese, and Tibetan sources.[2]

2 Archaeological investigations have been carried out in Swat since 1956 by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (IAMP) in close collaboration with the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan. A constant and capillary activity of archaeological surveys and excavations is also being carried out by teams from the Department of Archaeology of Pakistan and the University of Peshawar. I refer to *Journal of Asian Civilizations* [Special Issue – *Italian Archaeology and Anthropology in Northern Pakistan*, ed. by Ghani-ur-Rahman and L.M. Olivieri], 34/1 (2011), and to *East and West* 2006 [Special issue – *Fiftieth anniversary of the Italian*

3.1 Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Cultures in Swat: the Archaeological Evidence

It is a fact that in Swat the most astonishing survival of the region's cultural past is represented by the tight network of Buddhist monuments which developed along the tributaries of the left bank of the Swat River since the time of Aśoka and reached its period of greatest splendour in the first centuries of the Common Era. However, while the predominance of Buddhism emerges quite monolithically from the macroscopic archaeological evidence, Buddhist doctrine and also its social interface must have been a more nuanced reality, significantly influenced by the interaction with diverse cultures and ways of life, and moreover, with folk religions. Here we are on difficult ground, the features of the latter being extremely elusive. However, a boost to tackle such a tricky subject is given by recent archaeological discoveries that we can finally connect to the Dardic cultural substratum, which in Swat was (and partly still is) the baffling co-protagonist of the great codified systems.

3.1.1 The Dards and the Cultural History of Swat

Different ancient sources vaguely place the Dards (the Dadikai of Herodotus; the Daradas of the Puranic lists; the Daedalae of Curtius Rufus; the Derbikes of Ctesia [?]; see Tucci [1977, 11–12]; Francfort [1985]) in the north of modern-day Pakistan. Today, the term Dardic survives in linguistic science as an extended geographic reference that embraces all the Indo-Arian languages spoken in this region (Koul 2008). However, the ancient land of the Dards has not yet acquired any defined historical, geographical, and cultural characterisation. We do not know whether the Dards had ever given birth to any unitary political entity or if they were rather organised in different principalities somehow connected with

Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, ed. by L.M. Olivieri] for a summary of the activities and related bibliography, to which at least Faccenna and Spagnesi (2014) and Olivieri (2014) are to be added. For a more inclusive bibliography, see http://www.oeaw.ac.at/uddiyana/. The IAMP was initially administrated by IsMEO (Italian Institute for Middle and Far East), then by IsIAO (Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient), as the result of the merging of IsMEO with the Italo-African Institute (IIA). At present, the IAMP is administrated by ISMEO (International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies). This new Association was founded in Rome in 2012, in order to take over the historical legacy of IsIAO, which was suppressed in November 2011 by legislative decree as part of a drastic spending review process.

each other. Nevertheless, a kind of "Darada system" seems to have existed until at least the fifth century CE (Tucci 1977; Jettmar 1977, 421).

Tracing back the Dardic world was an embedded target of the archaeological explorations in Swat since their very inception, despite the fact that field research began with two main and more pragmatic objectives: rediscovering its Hellenistic heritage and gaining insights into the history of Buddhism. These aims reflect the cultural orientations and needs of the period between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At that time, the guidelines for field research were drawn from the available literary sources and also dictated by the political interests of the colonial powers in Asia. Not insignificant were also the anticipated results in terms of monumental discoveries, which were expected to stimulate the interest of the Western world and thus help fund raising activities.

Nevertheless, a holistic approach to cultural history was strongly advocated in the founding charter of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, which since 1956 has carried on a true "territorial archaeology" in Swat. Some seminal studies in particular have laid the groundwork for a diversification of the research areas which marked a kind of modern devolution from the conventional standpoints. Among these, mention must be made of Giuseppe Tucci's work on cultural substrata, which goes far beyond the history of events and dates (Tucci 1963, 1977). It takes time, however, for archaeology to deploy sensitive investigation methods into the sub-layers of the macroscopic evidence. Only now, perhaps, can one say that an accumulation of relevant data allows research on cultural history to move ahead on firmer ground.

3.1.2 Evidence and Existence: Methodological Problems of Field Research

Our reconstruction of the past inevitably suffers from circumstantial disparities between different fields of investigation. This is especially true with regard to a large part of Asian territories, where historical events and cultural aspects often elude our analytical efforts or even escape our surveys because of the lack of detectable elements such as the existence of written documents, the support of strong dynastic propaganda, and the monumentality and durability of artefacts. Thus we might easily overemphasise the originality of phenomena that emerge more prominently in a void of material evidence and acquiesce in applying cultural etiquettes that have been created for better known, neighbouring contexts.

This is the case with wine consumption and its related rhetoric. The copious literary and visual evidence which attests to its existence in well-defined contexts such as the classical Western world or medieval Iran leads to these

better known areas being regarded as culture hearths on which similar patterns in less known contexts are hierarchically dependent. However, the history of wine production, consumption, and social/ritual use is certainly much more complex, as sporadic but significant evidence seems to prove. With regard to Swat, it may be useful to work backwards.

I would like to start with a luxury artefact of the Huṇa period, possibly a box lid in the shape of an irregular hexagon, with elongated longitudinal axis and opposite vertices with stepped profile (Qi Xiaoshan and Wang Bo 2008, 181; here, Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Box lid (?) with drinking scene. Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum. After Qi Xiaoshan and Wang Bo (2008, 181).

Rows of pearls between fillets divide the surface into a central rectangle, which bears two figured scenes, and two opposite triangles, which are fully occupied by vegetal motives. The main figured scene, on the upper register of the rectangular field, depicts a drinking scene with four male characters. The protagonist, characterised by short straight hair with slightly curly tips and pronounced facial features, is sitting in a relaxed posture on a big cushion and wears a densely pleated long sleeved tunic and trousers, large earrings and a short pearl necklace (or neckline?). He holds in his right hand a large lobed bowl, into which a servant, standing to the left, pours a liquid from a jug. To the right, another standing servant fans him with a fly whisk. The servants have short hair and wear button-like earrings, a necklace (or neckline?) and different clothes: the one to the left, only partially visible, wears the same pleated tunic as the master; as

for the other to the right, one cannot rule out a short *dhotī*, and a long necklace and bracelets, although the latter could be also interpreted as the edges of a plain tunic. A fourth character is represented in profile to the left, in the act of bowing down before the master. Apart from a waist there are no elements for the identification of his dress. Besides his posture, a further element of differentiation is represented by his hair, wavy and longer than that of the other characters.

One wonders whether such differences imply any ethno-cultural distinction between the master (and his personal attendants) and this obsequious character.[3] The prominence of the seated character is further enhanced by his slightly bigger proportions, and his overlapping – although only barely – the figures at his sides. The upper corners of the field are occupied by a vegetal element: a cluster of fruit or flowers between two leaves in profile. The same plant is depicted on the triangular fields as well, this time much bigger and with more details, although the schematic rendering makes uncertain the identification of the species. Whatever the specific botanical identification, this plant must have had a symbolic link with the scene. Several plants from Indian flora could match its shape – for instance the *kadamba* and the jackfruit, well known in traditional medicine for their detoxifying, analgesic and invigorating properties. Nevertheless, the three-lobed shape of the leaves points towards the vine or, as a second option, the hop (*Humulus lupulus*) – the latter listed by some authors among the specific plant species from which the *soma* might have been produced.[4] The remaining space below the main scene is further divided into two registers, the upper one composed by a row of three rectangles. The lateral rectangles are occupied by two identical quadrupeds (walking?) in profile to the right and characterised by elongated muzzles, small ears and a heavy body (wild boars? canids?). The central rectangle appears as a shallow empty cavity (to serve some purpose?), with a semi-circular projection that reaches the lower

3 The reference to ethnicity here is intended to be understood in very broad terms (see De La Vaissière [2003] for a reassessment of the question with specific relevance to this topic).

4 See Sharma, Seerwani, and Shastry (1972, 42); Padhy and Kumar Dash (2004, 19). Cf. Falk (1989) and Brancaccio (2010, 333), who maintain instead the identification of *soma* with Ephedra. See also Nyberg (1995) for a review of the different hypotheses with regard to the botanical equivalent of *soma*. However, the botanical identification has to be approached from two different viewpoints: the *soma*/*haoma* of the Avestic and Vedic literature, and the ritual use of "*soma*/*haoma*" derivatives (i.e. culturally recognised as "entheogenic") across time and space. One has to consider that the spread of *soma*/*haoma* rituals over regions characterised by highly diverse ecosystems might have induced local adaptations. It is very likely, indeed, that the preparation of *soma*/*haoma* in different geographical and historical contexts was more dependent on specific psycothropic properties and environmental requirements of the selected plant rather than on specific botanical species or varieties.

edge of the object and interrupts the lower register, the latter decorated by two superimposed motifs separated by a fillet: a rectilinear festoon (below) and a row of opposite triangles filled with parallel lines (above).

The value of this object, quite modest from a merely artistic point of view, lies rather in its significance in relation to the cultural and social history of a still little-known period that can generically be defined as Huṇa. This period is hinted at by the whole of iconographic, stylistic and technical elements. The strong and heavy facial features, the short hair, and the costumes by and large comply with models known from the Huṇa environment (Callieri 1997, 267; Grenet and Riboud 2003, 138; Filigenzi 2010, 169). The iconographic lexicon echoes Gandharan, Sasanian and Gupta traditions, while bearing at the same time a strong formal unity that seems to represent the secular counterpart of post-Gandharan works of religious nature known from the Pakistani-Kashmiri areas (Paul 1986, figs. 47–53, 58–59, 69, 71). More specifically, this object finds its closest comparisons with a small number of box lids, all of them from non-archaeological contexts but reportedly from Pakistan, and more precisely, in some cases, from Swat (Ghose 2003, with references). Besides sharing the same style, technique, and material, they display common iconographic themes, all referring to courtly life. The range of subjects, which include fantastic beings, animals in combat, human heroes killing a beast, royal hunting, and musical entertainment, conveys an image of refined luxury in an intimate atmosphere and captures the taste and habits of the upper classes in a specific time and environment. A further element of formal and conceptual unity is the decorative patterns in the form of schematic vine stocks that, notwithstanding marginal differences, recur quite similarly in some of these box lids (Ghose 2003, figs. 5, 7, 10, 13).

No doubt, these objects constitute a homogeneous group whose production can be safely attributed to a well-defined artistic milieu, if not to a single atelier, as already suggested in the case of some of them (Lerner and Kossak 1991, 92). In particular, the shape is most probably the same as a fragment of plaque preserving a stepped triangular vertex occupied by a hunting scene (Bopearachchi et al. 2003, 355, cat. no. 316), where the horseman wears a costume very similar to that of the main character of our piece, and closely recalls the conventional portrait of the Alkhan Huns as we know it from their coins.[5]

This image of a Huṇa aristocrat, who receives homage from a subordinate while drinking, features a social ritual of inclusion/exclusion based on wine

5 For a reassessment of the relevant evidence, see now Vondrovec (2008); Alram and Pfisterer (2010).

consumption and widely known in post-Sasanian Iran and Central Asia. At first sight, one would say that we are confronted here with themes of Iranian origin. More probably, we are simply observing old local traditions revived by a wave of Iranian culture.

3.1.3 Wine Production and Consumption in the North-West of the Indian Subcontinent: The Archaeological Evidence

The assemblages of the proto-historic graveyards of Swat (c. 1700–300 BCE) include a large number of the so called "brandy-bowls," i.e. drinking vessels characterised by hemispherical, globular or carinated bodies on a high foot. Although no traces of substances were detected, their connection to the ceremonial practice of libation is nonetheless manifest. Some sort of intoxicating liquid was indeed consumed in proto-historic Swat, probably beyond the funerary context as well.

The probability that wine was among the inebriating substances consumed by local people – either in convivial or ritual situations, by large or restricted groups – is quite high. The archaeological grains from the civil settlement of Aligrama and Loebanr 3 (18^{th}–4^{th} century BCE) also include grapevine (Callieri et al. 2006, paragraph 8). On the other hand, a large variety of wild grapevine is still characteristic of a vast area stretching from Anatolia to Pakistan (Olmo 1996). South-western Asia must have been involved quite early in the process of domestication of this plant, which started, according to archaeobotanists, in the Early Neolithic not too far away, in terms of phyto-geography, from modern-day Pakistan. The ample evidence of grape pips yielded by a number of Neolithic sites in Daghestan, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Costantini, Kvavadze, and Rusishvili 2005–2006, 64) adds credit to the hypothesis put forward by N.I. Vavilov that the homeland of wild and cultivated grapes was Transcaucasia, where a very large number of ecotypes of grapes were found (Vavilov 1960, 343). Besides, it is a fact that palaeo-botanical evidence of cultivated grapes is recorded in the Indian subcontinent from the third millennium BCE onwards (Falk 2009, 65).

The consumption of wine – or some other kind(s) of intoxicating drinks – in the Subcontinent is also confirmed by both Sanskrit and western literary sources of early historic times (Falk 2009, 65). Of particular interest with regard to the area of modern-day Pakistan is the story reported by Curtius Rufus about the inhabitants of Nysa (a town placed by both Morgenstierne and Tucci somewhere near the Tirič Mir, in modern-day Chitral) worshipping

Dionysus.[6] This statement is evidently based on the *interpretatio graeca* of the habit of drinking wine or a wine-like product,[7] but also – one may argue – of some sort of festivals or ritual celebrations associated with wine.

Moreover, material evidence of wine production is being copiously collected in Swat thanks to a careful survey of the highlands overlooking urban settlements of early historic periods. A number of stone tanks – both wine-presses and vats – carved out of the rock can be compared with similar devices still in use among the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush (Olivieri and Vidale 2006; Olivieri 2013, 190; cf. Edelberg 1965, fig. 3). Interestingly, these tanks are often located near rock shelters (possibly natural sanctuaries and/or hermitages of still unknown nature) and, in some cases, Buddhist settlements.[8] The rock shelters (spanning a vast chronological horizon from the Bronze Age to approximately the tenth to twelfth century CE) have been connected with communities of transhumant pastoralists that we may venture to call "Dardic."

The paintings and graffiti adorning many of the rock shelters refer to a still little-known ideological universe, which might be generically – and conventionally – termed animistic.[9] The coherent visual syntax of the pictograms attests to the cohesive force of non-literate traditions which for centuries existed vis-à-vis Buddhism. These communities, most likely also practising integrative forms of mountain economy (lumber, orchards, honey harvest, dairy products, leather industry, vineyards), seem to have formed a kind of tribal belt around the urban and monastic settlements of the valleys, with which they must have had constant economic and cultural interaction (Olivieri 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013; Olivieri and Vidale 2004, 2006; Falk 2009). Indeed, the presence of rock shelters, wine-making places and Buddhist monasteries at a short distance from each other is suggestive of an effective contiguity.

6 Morgenstierne (1931, 443); Tucci (1963, 157–158; 1977, 27). As for Curtius' *Historiae Alexandri Magni*, although its reliability has been often questioned, it was certainly based on primary sources, now lost.

7 According to Jettmar (1986, 64), among the Kafirs, wine replaced an earlier use of *soma* in cultic practices connected to Indra (see below). On this topic, see also Tucci (1977, 32–33); Brancaccio (2010, 334).

8 Consistent occurrences can be detected in the relevant topography: vats on their own (for fermentation?) are usually found next to the Buddhist settlements whilst wine-presses are located in the proximity of painted rock shelters. In one case (Gwarejo-patai, Kotah), a wine-press was found *inside* one of them (Olivieri 2013, 191).

9 The term "animism" has been widely criticised and revised by modern anthropology. It is retained here within the frame of such criticism, as indicative of a complex relationship with the environment. For a survey of the relevant debate, see Harvey (2005).

Although monks were not allowed to consume wine or other intoxicating beverages, occasional usage for medical purposes was certainly practised. However, whether and how the monastic communities indulged in the consumption of wine is not the question here. Rather, the question is whether the local people in Swat – the same people who surrounded and supported the monastic communities – were accustomed to wine production and consumption and how they socially patterned this particular habit. From this, a contingent question arises as to whether and how the monastic communities acknowledged it.[10]

The growth of the network of Buddhist and urban settlements during the early historical period was certainly supported by a well-organised and cross-functional economy, which must have entailed a better integration of mountain industries into the system. The wine produced in the wine-making places that have been found in the highlands is likely to have been destined for the urban settlements of the valleys, although archaeological evidence is still lacking about the process of fermentation/distillation and storage. What we know for sure is that wine was consumed (and seemingly distilled as well) in the towns, as attested by distilling vessels found at the archaeological site of Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot, Swat) and dated to the first to third century CE, one of them bearing a Kushan *tamgha* (Callieri 1990, 686; Brancaccio and Xinru Liu 2009, 226).[11] The direct involvement of monastic communities in the economy of wine (production

10 As for the monastic discussions about wine consumption, a collection of relevant passages in the Pāli commentaries is provided by Kieffer-Pülz (2005). It is opportune to recall here that, according to the *Mulasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the Buddha himself would have explained to his retinue of monks, who did not know the grapes, that these were fruits from the northern region, that they could be pressed to extract the juice, and that the juice should be heated in order to preserve it (Przyluski 1914, 506–507). See also Brancaccio and Xinru Liu (2009, 225–227), where this passage is analysed in the framework of wine distillation for preventing its degeneration, and historically contextualised according to the archaeological evidence from modern-day north-western Pakistan.

11 The record from Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai includes two complete distillers (BKG 1411 and BKG 1680); a fragment of a distiller (BKG 1399); a fragment of a receiver (BKG 1430, the one with the impressed *tamgha*); and a miniature distiller (BKG 2539). BKG 1411 and BKG 2539 are characterised by a thick, temperature-resistant base with parallel incisions. It might be useful to recall here that a number of such bases have been found at the Buddhist site of Amluk-dara. My thanks are due to Luca Maria Olivieri for providing me with the complete list of the finds from Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai, and for pointing out to me the relevant data from Amluk-dara, excavated and restored by the Italian Archaeological Mission, under his direction, in the years 2011–2012. The excavation was carried out in the framework of the *Archaeology Community Tourism* (ACT), a three-years project financed by the Italian Government through the Pakistani-Italian Dept Swap Agreement (PIDSA), and managed by the Economic Affairs Division, Government of Pakistan (Olivieri 2014).

and trading) also cannot be ruled out, especially in light of the physical proximity of wine-making places to Buddhist monasteries and, more generally, of the pivotal role that Buddhist monastic communities seem to have played in the management of crucial economic activities.[12]

Thus, if we look at the material evidence, we cannot but conclude that the consumption of wine in Swat was a component of the normal ambit of economic and cultural life, a *status quo* for which the monastic communities certainly had to make accommodations. A witness to this is the category of the so-called "Dionysiac" iconographies in Gandharan art, a cultural term that we should try to avoid in favour of a more neutral definition as "revelry scenes."

3.2 Revelry Scenes in Gandharan Art

As a matter of fact, the designation of Gandharan revelry scenes as "Dionysiac," which suggests a direct and exclusive connection with the Greek tradition of wine consumption and related symbolism, can be critically misleading. The Gandharan libation and erotic scenes, albeit formally derived from the Hellenistic symbolic repertoire, need to be looked at from the Buddhist viewpoint, i.e. from a contextual perspective, as would be normal in any art-historical analytical method. The case of erotic couples placed just above a Buddha image is particularly representative of the irreducibleness of such associative schemes to a mere question of exotic import (Figure 3.2).[13]

It is evident that interpretative efforts must take into account the intrinsic polysemy of these scenes and, moreover, the cultural landscape they were embedded in.

A significant area of concentration of iconographic themes connected with wine appears to be Swat, and particularly sites located in the Jambil valley, such as Panṛ I, Saidu Sharif I, and Butkara I, all excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan under the direction of Domenico Faccenna. This homogeneous archaeological record, characterised by distinct technical, iconographic, and stylistic features, is supplemented by a number of pieces that, based on their close affinity with the former, can be attributed to the same

12 For interesting comments on the relationship between monastic communities and wine economy, see Falk (2009).

13 A rich selection of specimens can be found in Faccenna (1964, pls. DCXII–DCLI). See Carter (1968, 130) for an insightful examination of the Indian character of such themes, though disguised under Western iconographic models. For a tentative interpretation of the "erotic couples" I refer to Filigenzi forthcoming.

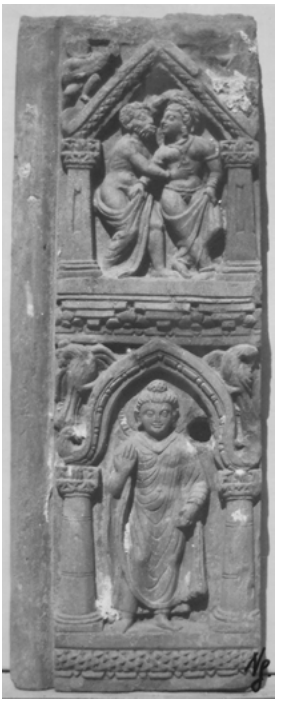


Figure 3.2: Door jamb with Buddha and erotic couple. From Butkara I (B 3215). After Faccenna (1964, pl. CCLXXXIX).

workshops.[14] The formal, physical, and geographic coherence of this corpus of sculptures allows us to reason in concrete terms about the meaning and cultural background of libation scenes in the Buddhist context in general and, in a more perceptual perspective, in the context of the specific cultural history of Swat.

A first distinction can be made between two types of depictions: symbolic allusions to states of mind induced by eroticism and/or intoxication, and revelry and/or ceremonial scenes containing unequivocal references to actual performances. In formal terms, the first group is clearly derivative of models of Hellenistic origin, although its contextual meaning is still a matter of debate. To this category we can ascribe themes such as drinking males (either *putti* or adults), sometimes shown recumbent or hanging limply as to suggest

14 In particular, the reliefs belonging to the collection of the former Wali of Swat (WS), which formed the first nucleus of the Saidu Sharif Museum, and others occasionally found in the area, inventoried as "Varia" (V). The materials from the sites excavated and surveyed by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan are kept in the Saidu Sharif Museum. A representative collection is also kept in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale "Giuseppe Tucci," Rome, following an official agreement with the Government of Pakistan.

drunkenness; birds, lions, and boars drinking from craters and basins, either alone or in association with humans; banquets of wine with erotic connotations, and satyr-like characters drinking wine with women who are sometimes shown to be reluctant, thus probably depicting inducement of intoxication aimed at seduction (Figures 3.3–3.5).[15]

Figure 3.3: A segment of a cornice with drinking scenes (WS 10). After Faccenna (1964, pl. DCXVIIa).

Such scenes generally appear in peripheral position, on architectural frames of various types (cornices and *harmikā* slabs), among which special mention is deserved by two fragments from a false-niche, namely from the intradox of the projecting arch. They both display in one of the figured squares a young Faunus-like character, visibly drunken, holding a wine vessel (Figures 3.6–3.7).

The second group, instead, evokes real life and manifestly refers to an autochthonous system of social ritualism. This group includes actual wine-making operations or ceremonial scenes where wine plays a central role. The most explicit reference to wine-making is provided by a relief of unknown provenance, now kept in the Peshawar Museum, which portrays different moments of wine-making where male characters in Kushan dress are shown engaged in pressing, filtering and tasting wine.

The operations are presided over by a main character holding a spear, seated on a throne with canopy and flanked by standing attendants (Figure 3.8).[16] Being isolated, this relief cannot be contextualised in any semantic scheme.

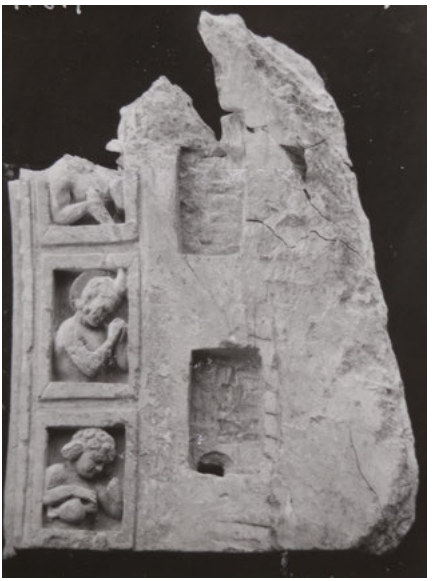
15 A chronological benchmark is offered by relief S 1164, a segment of a frieze showing two male characters (seemingly drunken) seated at either side of a large vessel filled with fruits (grapes?) and found reused in the filling of *vihāra* no. 63. According to the stratigraphic sequence of the site, this monument belongs to the earlier phase (Phase a) of Period II, the latter spanning the end of the first century CE through the middle of the third century CE (Faccenna 1995, 138, 155, 369–374).

16 Not Kubera/Pāñcika (the chief of the *yakṣa*s) as suggested by Ingholt (1957, 104) and accepted by Carter (1968, 131), but rather a true "Kushan" chief. See below.

Figure 3.4: A segment of a *harmikā* slab with drinking scenes (WS 69). After Faccenna (1964, pl. DCXLI).

Figure 3.5: A segment of a cornice with a seduction scene. From Butkara I (B 3073). After Faccenna (1964, pl. DCXLVIII).

More informative in this respect is a series of reliefs from Swat where revelry scenes do not occupy decorative architectural elements, but are explicitly connected with the main decorative apparatus of the *stūpa*. They represent a separate part of the so called "narrative friezes," which depict scenes of the



Figures 3.6 and 3.7: Segments of an arch intradox with devotees, among which is a drunken Faunus. From Panṛ (P 817, P819). Copyright Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan.

Buddha's life. Friezes originally adorning small *stūpa*s provide ample evidence of the narrative being arranged in two superimposed registers. Sometimes the two registers are both devoted to Buddhist themes. In this case, one usually finds scenes from the Buddha's life in one of the registers and generic (?) scenes of adoration in the other. More often, the two registers are markedly distinguished from each other by apparently unconnected content, i.e. "biographic" scenes in the lower register and "lay" scenes in the upper register.

Among these, mention can be made of a relief showing in the upper register naked male characters depicted in the act of dancing around a large wine vessel to music performed by drummers (Figure 3.9).

The scene, though highly conventionalised, brings to mind a male festival centred on wine consumption and most probably connected to the wine-making season.[17] In the scene below, notwithstanding the pronounced abrasion of the relief, is still possible to recognise the episode of the Horoscope: the

17 Inv. n. V 590. Falk (2009, 67) interprets the scene as the opening of a storage bowl and the gestures of the male characters as an attempt to protect themselves from being harmed by the lid, which might be tossed up into the air by the pressure of the gas. This interpretation appears to be quite unlikely in light of recognisable iconographic conventions, such as the

Figure 3.8: A relief with wine-making scenes (After Ingholt 1957, 104, n. 175).

seated couple to the right, the standing female attendant in the middle, the seated old Brahman holding the child followed by a standing young *brahmacarin*, and the framed half-columns – which in Gandharan narrative friezes represent the conventional separation between the scenes of the Buddha's life – leave no doubt that the relief appertains to the Buddhist visual biography. The relationship between the two registers, if any, is not clear. It must be noticed, however, that the segmentation of the two superimposed scenes almost coincides, both in length and in the dividing architectural element, but they differ in scale (smaller in the upper register) and in the absence of the encasing frame in the half-columns of the upper register.

Even more thought-provoking are some curvilinear reliefs from Saidu Sharif I,[18] which in the upper register again depict characters in Kushan dress (all male, with the exception of the couple in the scene to right in relief S 570)

distinct posture of legs and arms of the dancing characters (cf. the "Phrygian" dancer in Goldmann [1978, fig. 5]; the two dancers depicted in a door jamb in Faccenna [1964, pl. CCCL], both from Butkara I) and the additional presence of drummers. Besides, the nudity of the male characters is more congruous with an uninhibited feast.

18 The Buddhist sacred area of Saidu Sharif I was excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission in the years 1963–1982 with some periods of suspension in between, especially from 1968 to 1977. Notwithstanding extensive publication (excavation reports and exegesis), the paramount importance of this site for the studies on Gandharan art and architecture seems to have passed almost unnoticed. Not only the Main Stūpa of Saidu Sharif I can be safely dated (second quarter of the 1st century CE), but it also represents one of the earliest specimens (if not *the* earliest specimen) of the "*stūpa* with column," which translates in an architectural tridimensional form the concept of *maṇḍala*. Moreover, this *stūpa* was originally conceived for accommodating a continuous narrative frieze composed of sixty-five big panels and a relevant architectural frame (base, cornice and dividing panels). None of the components of the frieze

Figure 3.9: A relief with a "biographic scene" (below) and a wine festival (above) (V 950). Copyright Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan.

sitting on curule-type chairs while minor standing characters serve wine or carry a goat (S 418 and S 704) (Figures 3.10–3.14).

In comparison with the Buddhist narrative in the lower part of the reliefs, the "lay" scenes in the upper section are characterised by a different partition, consisting not of semi-columns but of vine bushes, which suggest an open-air setting and, additionally, a space outside the sacred Buddhist precincts. These reliefs show a distinct formal unity in their technical, stylistic and iconographic features, in the sameness of the architectural frame (plain base, straight festoon with overlapping lanceolate leaves facing left, moulded upper cornice with row of saw-teeth, identical dividing panel in the lower

was found *in situ*, but several fragments of it have been recognised by D. Faccenna thanks to a careful analysis based on technical, material, iconographic and stylistic features. Thus, this represents the *only* datable Gandharan narrative frieze, and probably one of the earliest. The stylistic features assign this frieze to a mature phase of the earliest stylistic group (the so-called "drawing style" first detected at Butkara I), by now at the threshold of the second group (the "naturalistic style," which represents the best known aspect of Gandharan art). These archaeological data provide rare, precious benchmarks for a relative chronology of the entire Gandharan production. See Faccenna (1995, 2001); Filigenzi (2006a, 2012).

Figure 3.10: A relief with "biographic scenes" (below) and ceremonial scenes (above). From Saidu Sharif I (S 418). After Faccenna (2001, pl. 125).

Figure 3.11: A relief with "biographic scenes" (below) and ceremonial scenes (above). From Saidu Sharif I (S 570+749). Copyright Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan.

Figure 3.12: A relief with "biographic scenes" (below) and a ceremonial scene (above). From Saidu Sharif I (S 704). After Faccenna (2001, pl. 127).

Figure 3.13: A relief with "biographic scenes" (below) and ceremonial scenes (above). From Saidu Sharif I (S 729). After Callieri and Filigenzi (2002, 146).

Figure 3.14: A relief with "biographic scenes" (below) and ceremonial scenes (above). From Saidu Sharif I (S 735). After Faccenna (2001, pl. 126a).

register and bushes in the upper register), size (c. 18 x 36/40 cm) and curvature, which make them compatible with the decoration of one and the same small *stūpa* (Faccenna 2001, 151).[19]

The Kushan dress of the characters depicted in all the scenes is a significant detail that deserves some reflection. Actually, what we conventionally call "Kushan" dress is not necessarily indicative of "Kushan people," with the exception perhaps of some specific attributes, such as particular ornaments and headgears that are indicative of royal rank. For the most part, we can assume that people dressed in this way just wear the contemporary costume (of earlier origin than the Kushan period, indeed), which in Gandharan art significantly contrasts with the "philological" use of the Indian dress in scenes related to the Buddha's biography. The same costume, apart from adaptations to the current fashion or to the need of showing a political affiliation to the ruling power, survived over centuries (as attested by the late-antique bronze sculpture of Gilgit and rock

19 They are: S 339; S418 (MNAOR 4107); S 436; S570 (MNAOR 4129); S 572 (MNAOR 4130); S 704 (MNAOR 4152); S729 (MNAOR 4160); S735 (MNAOR 4162). None of them (nor indeed were any of the sculptures from the site) was found *in situ*; nor it is possible – at least in the framework of the present work – to undertake any detailed analysis of their possible provenance based on archaeological data. The Inventory Book indicates the provenance of S 418 from the small *stūpa* 38. This attribution was based on the match of both find spot and size of the relief with the above-mentioned monument.

sculpture of Swat; Filigenzi 2006b, 197–198) and, as we can observe, is substantially the same as that still in use.

The affiliation of all the above-mentioned reliefs with the "naturalistic" group is nonetheless indicative of a mature phase of Gandharan art, which falls within the Kushan period.[20] While it is impossible to determine who exactly are the people represented in these reliefs, one still may assume that they were not axiomatically blood-related members of the Kushan élite. More likely, they were members of the local élite, although certainly affiliated with the Kushan power. If this is the case, one could not expect to distinguish, in the highly typified repertoire of Gandharan reliefs, the native "Dardic" aristocracy of Swat by virtue of any other appearance but the customary outfit of a large part of the Indo-Iranian world at that time.

Be that as it may, the question is what the iconographic schemes of the "drinking men" mean, especially in association with Buddhist narrative cycles. The iconographic details which the scenes have in common (the vine bush, the non-Indian costume of the protagonists, and the consumption of wine apparently restricted to the seated characters) are determinative of space, time, and condition: the event takes place in the open air, i.e. outside the structured and well recognisable Buddhist sacred areas, in the present and not *in illo tempore*, and is celebrated with a libation that demonstrates a significant difference of rank between drinkers and non-drinkers.[21] The ceremonial character of the scenes is

20 The chronological attribution of the reliefs is based not only on stylistic considerations, but also on archaeological data. All the monuments of the Stūpa Terrace have been carefully described by Faccenna and all assigned to a specific typology and building/chronological phase (Faccenna 1995, 179 ff.). According to the reconstructed sequence, *stūpa* 38 – to which the frieze has been assigned – belongs to the last phase (Phase c) of Period I (first century CE), even though in the paragraph devoted to *stūpa* 38 (Faccenna 1995, 280–282) no mention is made of related sculptural decoration. However, I take the occasion here to recall that Faccenna devoted his efforts to the detailed publication of the architectures, with a circumstantial examination of their components and typological variety, in order to create a safe and comprehensive archaeological reference frame for the study of the sculptural materials. In this respect, his publication of the frieze of the Main Stūpa of Saidu Sharif I (Faccenna 2001) can be considered a true masterpiece, and the first part of a work specifically dedicated to the sculptural materials from the main Buddhist sites of Swat and related workshops. Unfortunately, he left unfinished his volume on the sculptures from Butkara I. However, based on the original manuscripts and revision notes, and according to the wishes of Faccenna's family, an ISMEO team has undertaken to complete and publish this groundbreaking work.

21 The commanding role of the seated aristocrats in scenes of wine-making and libation ceremonies might be indicative of the existence of some sort of formalised control of the wine production. Very cautiously, I recall here the Kushan *tamgha* impressed on the above-mentioned

made even more explicit, in two instances, by the presence of the goat, which does not walk freely but is emphatically conducted by a man (a *victimarius*, we would say), in a way that probably suggests a bloody sacrifice without actually representing it.

Clearly, these scenes have no semantic links with the Buddhist sacred space, rituals, and precepts, but at the same time they do not manifest any conflicting interference with the latter. One wonders whether the local aristocrats – likely the donors of the small *stūpa*(s) to which the reliefs belong – made themselves recognisable to the eyes of their contemporaries by resorting to a well-identifiable notion of social identity. The association scheme, which combines in quite a diminished hierarchy Buddhist hagiographic tales and realistic lay narratives, proves that such behaviours were evidently deemed not only acceptable but socially relevant.

The presence of wine and goat sacrifice in these scenes, once again, may evoke "Dionysiac" scenarios. However, we should avoid reductionist interpretations, and try instead to read these visual accounts according to an "inner" perspective with the help of a feasible archaeological anthropology. As a matter of fact, the picture of an ancient social ritualism provided by the Swat reliefs shows surprisingly close affinities with customs still current among the Kafirs of Hindu Kush.

According to the documentation collected and analysed by L. Edelberg (1965), S. Jones (1966), Edelberg and Jones (1979), and more recently by M. Klimburg (1999, 2014), an important cult place in honour of Indr, also used for meetings of important men, was the *Indr-ta* in Wama, in Southern Nuristan. Indr is the Kafir version of the Vedic Indra. Like the latter, he is the ruler of the atmosphere and atmospheric phenomena, and as such is connected in Kafiristan with rainbows and earthquakes (Jettmar 1986, 64).[22] As originally connected to ritual consumption of *soma* (see n. 7), Indr is also the god of wine and owns vineyards (Jettmar 1986; Chandra 1998, 151). In particular, the Indrakun garden, an orchard located high above the Pech River, where fruit trees grow embraced by wild vines, traces its origin back to Indr, who,

distiller from Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai, and the analogous evidence collected by Allchin at Shaikhan Dheṛī (Allchin 1979).

22 The coupling between rainbows and earthquakes is most probably due to the association (rare, indeed) of seismic events with luminous aerial phenomena. Once dismissed as hallucinatory or superstitious, this occurrence is now proved by the unambiguous data provided by recording devices. For a recent review, see Thériault et al. (2014).

according to the local folklore, carved the vats into the boulders himself and visits the garden each summer (Klimburg 2014, 58).[23]

Edelberg (1965, 165) reports that, after the completion of the grape harvest, an important celebration in honour of Indr took place in the *Indr-ta*. On this occasion, a large cult image of Indr was taken from his temple (*Indr-ama*) out into the village and placed in the centre of the *Indr-ta*, on a boulder that served as a base, next to which was a sacred tree (already dead at the time of Edelberg's visit in 1948). Two long rows of stones were used as sitting places for high-ranking men who used to drink much wine stored in the *Indr-ama*. Between the rows of stones there was a flat dancing ground and, in the vicinity, four stone wine vats (*watkuna*). The effigy of Indr was honoured by pouring wine on it and by sacrificing to it several he-goats and one or two oxen, whose blood was thrown on the sacrificial fire while "priests" sung hymns (Edelberg 1965, 165; Klimburg 2014, 59).[24]

Wine, goat sacrifice, dance and songs are thus among modern Kafirs the characterising elements of a festival of great social relevance presided over by men of high rank, exactly in the same way as, nearly two millennia before, it occurred in ancient Uḍḍiyāna at ceremonies performed outside the Buddhist sacred precincts by the same aristocrats who supported the *saṃgha* and embellished the sacred areas.

The interplay and fluidity between the non-official religion of the layfolk and that of the formalised Buddhist system materialises in new archaeological discoveries. Until recently, we did not know the provenance of some peculiar images of "Gandharan" goddesses holding a beaker and the severed head of a goat (Taddei 1987). In one case, the strong connection between the *devī* and the goat is expressed by the theriomorphic aspect of the former, who has a goat head (Figure 3.15).

23 Apollonius of Tyana, who visited India in the first century CE, mentions a temple of Dionysus on the mountain of Nysa, which he describes as a cultic space in the open. His account is remarkably similar to the local tradition about the Indrakun. According to Apollonius, Dionysus founded it "in honour of himself," planting round it a circle of laurel trees and a border of ivy and vine which in time grew together and made themselves "into a kind of roof." Dionysus also set up inside the temple an image of himself "which resembled a youthful Indian, and was carved out of polished white stone" and "there were scythes and baskets and wine-presses." Moreover, "when Dionysus celebrates his orgies and shakes Nysa, the cities underneath the mountain hear the noise and exult in sympathy" (II, 8). Although the reliability of the "*Life of Apollonius of Tyana*" is questionable, the persistence and coherence of the accounts about local "gods of wine," regarded by the Greeks as Dionysus, are certainly meaningful.

24 On the high symbolic value of the goat/ibex in the mountainous regions of the Hindu Kush, see Tucci (1963); as for the connections of these animals with rituals involving intoxication, see Brancaccio (2010, 335).

Figure 3.15: A goat-headed goddess holding a beaker and the severed head of a goat. After Zwalf (1996, n. 105).

Figure 3.16: A god holding a goblet and the severed head of a goat. From Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (BKG 2304). After Olivieri (2015, fig. 8).

However, the hypothesis that they could come from Swat sounds reasonable, given the connection with mountain culture they suggested. The stele representing a Durgā-like goddess killing a caprid instead of a buffalo (Tucci 1963; Filigenzi 2015, 141–143, 204, figs. 72a, b), despite a much later dating (7th–8th century CE), is certainly to be considered another offspring of the same process of acculturation of folk, pre-Buddhist hunter-deities accompanied by goats/ibexes (Tucci 1963) – or hypostasised as the latter – that seemingly appear already in Swat among protohistoric graffiti (Olivieri 1998, 69–70). The recent discovery of a small stele statue representing a male deity holding the same attributes in the urban site of Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai is now substantiating this hypothesis (Figure 3.16).

Moreover, the presence of this small icon in a domestic context, vis-à-vis both small Buddhist and non-Buddhist cultic spaces *intra muros*, is the best confirmation of a transversal religious culture, which is at the same time formally Buddhist and faithful to a folk religion. Both appear to have been not only intertwined in daily life, but also influenced by each other in their conceptual and visual forms.

3.3 The Powerful *Nāga*s

A further insight into "transversal" religious beliefs is provided by other, non-human participants to Gandharan revelry scenes such as the *nāga*s, i.e. non-human beings of ophidian nature presiding over the subterranean world, from where they regulate at their own whim the telluric forces, the circulation of waters, and the bestowing or denying of the subsoil wealth. Along with *yakṣa*s, *nāga*s must have represented an ineradicable presence in the religious Indic universe, to the extent that even a well-structured religious system such as Buddhism (as well as Hinduism) was compelled to somehow offer them recognition. As a matter of fact, the presence of such beings in ancient Buddhist visual art is not to be regarded as merely symbolic of an accomplished victory of Buddhism over an ancient and primitive folklore, but rather as a window into a different religious culture existing side by side with Buddhism, with its own deities, cultic places and rituals. Archaeology can hardly detect concrete evidence of this world, which probably found its primary expression in natural sanctuaries with no permanent buildings.

Like the *nāga*s, the *yakṣa*s are also associated with water – the latter especially intended as vital principle, seed (Carter 1968) – and with intoxicating liquors. With the exception of some prominent figures such as Kubera/Pāñcika and the *yakṣa* Vajrapāṇi, *yakṣa*s however are not easily distinguishable in the Gandharan iconographic repertoire, where they probably became assimilated

with Satyrs and Sileni (see n. 14). Nevertheless, the existence in Gandhāra of specific divine figures connected to wine (or other kinds of intoxicating drinks) prior to the Greek conquest is more than a likely hypothesis. Falk (2009, 65) recalled the Gandharan god Soroadeios (a high ranking *yakṣa*?) mentioned by Chares of Mitylene, a Greek historiographer who followed Alexander in his military expedition into Asia. Of Chares' *Stories about Alexander* (*Peri Alexandron historiai*), only a few fragments survive in citations and excerpts. From the relevant passage, quoted by Athenaios of Naukratis (*Deipnosophistai* 1.48.64), we know that Chares translated the name Soroadeios (i.e. the Greek phonetic version of an unknown Indian original) as *oinopoios*, "wine maker."[25]

Greater recognisability is instead reserved for *nāga*s, which seem to have held a particularly prominent position in Swat. Apart from the well-known stories of conversion, the world of the *nāga*s emerges vividly in scenes where they are represented drinking, dancing, playing music. Scenes of this kind, combined with other, more generic revelry scenes and with marine monsters, decorate, for instance, the stair risers from Jamalgaṛhī (Zwalf 1996, nos. 310, 330–331; 332–337; Behrendt 2007, fig. 11). But again, it is in Swat that we detect a closer proximity of the *nāga*s to the Buddha's world. At Kafirkoṭ drinking and dancing *nāga*s appeared on *stūpa* drum panels, which means not in a peripheral position, but on the main part of the *stūpa*'s decoration (Figure 3.17).[26]

Figure 3.17: A relief with a libation scene involving *nāga*s. After Zwalf (1996, n. 338).

The force of the *nāga*s and the prominent place they seem to occupy in Swat certainly derive from environmental circumstances. Northern Pakistan is a highly seismic zone, constantly at risk of devastating earthquakes and floods. The Buddha can subjugate and convert the *nāga*s, as the legends emphasise, but

25 For a quick overview of the hypotheses about possible equations to Indian names, I refer to Falk (2009).

26 For the reliefs, see Zwalf (1996, 250–251, nos. 338–339); as for their exact provenance, some doubts remain about the record in the Museum Register (Zwalf 1996, 27).

they are still there, still feared and venerated by the local population. An extremely interesting witness to the co-existence of Buddhism and some form of local cult of *nāga*s is provided by Songyun's account of a lake in Swat inhabited by a *nāga*:

> To the west of the river is a tank occupied by a nāga-rāja. By the side of the tank is a temple served by fifty priests and more. The Nāga-rāja ever and anon assumes supernatural appearances. The king propitiates him with gold and jewels and other precious offerings, which he casts into the middle of the tank; such of these as find their way out through a back exit, the priests are permitted to retain. Because the dragon thus provides for the necessary expenses of this temple (clothes and food), therefore men call it the Nāga-rāja temple… (Beal [1884] 1958, xcv–xcvi).

How important *nāga*s were in the physical and cultural landscape of Swat, and how necessary it was for Buddhism to come to some kind of compromise with them, is further confirmed by a local tradition reported by Xuanzang (Beal 1958, 132), according to which the royal lineage of Uḍḍiyāna actually originated from a mixture of the two elements. As a matter of fact, Uttarasena, the mythical king of Uḍḍiyāna coeval to the historical Buddha, was the son of a Śākya prince and the daughter of the *Nāga-rāja*. Therefore, it is not a surprise to find in Swat a series of Huṇa coins showing the bust of the king protected by a multi-headed snake (Pfisterer 2014, 47–58, 299–300). The precise meaning of this iconographic device is a matter of speculation, but in any case, either it alludes to the king's devotion to the *nāga*s or to a conscious will of connecting somehow the king to a local mythical lineage. Either way, the fact remains that the *nāga*s are still there, in the core of a venerated Buddhist land.

In conclusion, what we can argue from this scattered but consistent evidence is that the "Dionysiac" imagery in Gandharan art cannot be confined within a single category, given the large semantic field it covers. Within this field, Western iconographic models are best viewed not as imported notions but rather in terms of visual borrowing, which gives expression to concepts and behaviours embedded in local cultural realities. Moreover, from these apparently marginal and dissonant components of the Buddhist artistic language, we can catch a glimpse of the world outside the Buddhist sacred areas. They tell us that Buddhism was not ruling Uḍḍiyāna in splendid isolation. All around there were other religious customs, which, better than Buddhism – and since long before Buddhism – engendered the ritual celebration of major life-cycle events, helped people to handle daily-life or environmental problems, and were believed to ward off evil or be imminently conducive to welfare. No wonder, indeed, that even Buddhist people were involved in them. Also, through the witness of visual art we can concretely perceive that the osmosis between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs must have been fecund and constant, as

a part of that silent and intangible flow which eventually merged in the complex system of Vajrayāna and its multitude of gods and demons.

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