

# Indology's Pulse

# Arts in Context

Essays Presented to Doris Meth Srinivasan in  
Admiration of Her Scholarly Research

Edited by  
Corinna Wessels-Mevissen | Gerd J.R. Mevissen

With the Assistance of Arundhati Banerji and Vinay Kumar Gupta



Aryan Books International

New Delhi

INDOLOGY'S PULSE: ARTS IN CONTEXT

ISBN: 9788173056321

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First Published in 2019 by

**Aryan Books International**

Pooja Apartments, 4B, Ansari Road, New Delhi-110002 (India)

Tel.: 23287589, 23255799; Fax: 91-11-23270385

E-mail: [aryanbooks@gmail.com](mailto:aryanbooks@gmail.com)

[www.aryanbooks.com](http://www.aryanbooks.com)

Designed and Printed in India by  
ABI Prints & Publishing Co., New Delhi





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## Forms, Models and Concepts: Regionalism and ‘Globalism’ in Gandhāran Visual Culture\*

Anna Filigenzi

The aim of this paper is to contribute some reflections on Gandhāran art from the viewpoint of global history, in the hope that a scholar who has devoted much of her work to investigating transcultural phenomena may appreciate, if not the results of this article, at least the questions it tries to tackle.<sup>1</sup>

There is by now a growing recognition in every sector of the humanities and social sciences that interpretive models based on diffusionist views originating from ‘hegemonic’ cultures are inadequate and inappropriate, especially for their not entailing the multi-centric approach the encounter between different cultures would logically require. However, in the field of Indian and Central Asian studies such a theory is difficult to turn into pragmatic applications. This is the case with the ‘Hellenistic’ features of Gandhāran art. After more than one hundred years of studies, the interpretation of Gandhāran art still depends on Western paradigms, which lack the necessary mediation with the context. This is mainly due to a marked imbalance between Western and Oriental disciplines, the former being supported by a highly standardised methodology and terminology based on strong clusters of cross-referenced data, and the latter still suffering from serious gaps in the historical and archaeological records, poor in thesauri and repertoires – in a word, still on its way to working out its own identity. On the other hand, the richness and internal coherence of the classical studies have created a kind of centripetal, and somehow static, reference point for interpreting any context where artistic forms of Western origin are tracked down, thus excessively characterising uncharted territories of cultural diversity. Meanwhile, the most challenging issue, i.e. the dynamics, interaction and outcomes of the encounter between diverse

cultural universes, remains underrated or even missed.

The need for a new approach to history, though perceived as an impelling cultural issue, nonetheless requires a refinement of strategies and methods that nobody can work out in isolation. A 'global history' of the ancient world is still far removed from the present circumstances, but we may at least start reasoning on common goals, obstacles to overcome and projects for the future, thus accepting *a priori* that our perception of human phenomena depends only on the investigation tools we have at our disposal as well as on our cultural standpoints. On the other hand, if we accept reasoning in terms of interculturality, or transculturality, we also have to face the risk of uncontrollable fragmentations or meaningless jumble.

Still, I think we have to try, using our imagination and common sense as well in order to better understand material evidence that is still unevenly distributed. For instance, we have to make the preliminary effort to imagine how South and Central Asian traditions reacted to the impact of Hellenistic culture, despite the fact that we know very little about them. Focal issues of a general nature, such as visual culture and historical backgrounds of visual communications, may represent a good starting point.

#### THE USE OF IMAGES

Although aniconism certainly coexisted in Western ancient cultures with fully figural forms, the human scale of visual arts represents one of the most conspicuous elements of confrontation with the Indo-Iranian/Central Asian world (let's use this vague and inappropriate notion just for the sake of simplicity), where the concept of the divine was mainly aniconic. In the regions directly or indirectly exposed to the Greek cultural influence, this certainly produced a response by the recipient societies, which were pushed to adapt their own cultural resources in order to counter the massive intrusion of figurative and architectural repertoires.

The competition with the anthropocentrism of the Western world might have acted as an additional boost to indigenous cultural innovations. As a matter of fact, the clash between Western and Oriental societies that we generally trace back to the Macedonian invasion is to be considered against the background of complex historical realities. Besides being cushioned by a fringe of geographically and culturally contiguous areas long since impacted by trans-regional contacts and reciprocal reverberations, the confrontation between different ideological universes took place in the framework of important political changes that in a way diminished potential conflicts in terms of views of iconicity and aniconicity. The rise of large and powerful imperial formations, such as the Achaemenian first, and then the Mauryan, had most probably introduced into the Indo-Iranian world strong elements of disruption of the aniconic tradition, in particular with the need – inherent in such processes of territorial, political and social aggregation – for communicative strategies of intuitive grasp which might sustain ideological cohesion. This seems to be the case with Buddhism as well. Impelled to pursue an active policy of consensus building in order to assert itself against inclusive orthodox traditions, Buddhism also transformed permanent architecture and icons into a powerful tool of visual propaganda.

Though this may be a bit of an oversimplification, we have to take into account this background when reasoning about the penetration of Western visual culture into Asia. We cannot think of this phenomenon in terms of a mere colonisation; rather, we should try to apply, even in the absence of sufficient material data, universal models of historical dynamics, according to which passive recipients simply do not exist, and the notions of cultural transmission and acquisition are inseparable from the notion of interaction.

The interaction between indigenous and alien elements can produce a variety of possible reactions: not only adaptation and transformation

of compatible patterns, but also new ideas and behaviours. In any case, such processes are not to be seen as static forms of unilateral dissemination. Based on these presuppositions, I will discuss some iconographic themes that, in my opinion, offer interesting clues to understanding – or at least to considering in a more realistic way – the general question of the circulation of visual forms through different contexts.

#### 'DIONYSIAC' EROTICISM IN GANDHĀRAN ART

The departure point of my enquiry will be the so-called 'Dionysiac' imagery of Western descent. If this constitutes *ab origine* a complex repertoire, covering a wide range of meanings, the same is certainly true for its adaptations within foreign cultural contexts. Here I will limit myself to that part of the 'Dionysiac' repertoire which in Indian territories was transferred into the domain of *yakṣas/yakṣīs* and, in particular, into what the Italian scholar Mario Bussagli (1984) called 'the system of the couples'.<sup>2</sup>

*Yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* occupy an ambivalent place in Indian religious imagery. Their functional connection with the sphere of fecundity and abundance encompasses both physical and metaphysical levels; it also converges on the vast semantic field of inebriation, since their association with water naturally lends itself to include intoxicating liquors, especially intended as *rasa*, that is, the vital principle, or *amṛta* (Carter 1968). However, *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* essentially embody life and, more precisely, the power of life to further perpetuate itself. Though connected with the earth's well-being in general, which includes all life forms, *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* have nonetheless a special link with human life, as emphatically asserted in Buddhist iconography by the episode of Siddhārtha's birth, where the moment of the delivery is patterned on the scheme of the *yakṣī* grasping the branch of a tree (Figs. 10.1 [Col.pl. 7]; 10.2).

Since its very inception, Buddhist visual art attests to a special attention paid to life. Figures of *yakṣas*, *yakṣīs* and tutelary and human couples occupy a prominent place in the iconographic



Fig. 10.1. *Yakṣī* in the form of *śālabhāñjikā*, Sanchi, Stūpa 1, eastern *torāṇa*, early 1st cent. CE, sandstone. After Taddei 1972: fig. 19 [Col.pl. 7].

programmes of Buddhist monuments. This is not, in my opinion, a mere concession to the secular world in order to please the lay community, but rather the expression of a quite common approach to the subject matter in Indian thought. Trying to find a way to become liberated from the world does not imply, in any of the Indian philosophies, a condemnation of the world, as this is the scenario of self-consciousness.

Sexual symbolism is an essential part of the message. The *yakṣī* who can cause a tree to bear



Fig. 10.2. Queen Māyā giving birth to Siddhārtha, from Amluk-dara, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 39 x 48.5 cm, Swat Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. AKD 89. After Olivieri 2014: fig. 58.

fruit just by touching it (Fig. 10.1) is a clear allusion to the generative power of sexual union. The same meaning is implied in the representation of both divine and human couples, as unequivocally illustrated by Indian and Gandhāran specimens. In Sanchi 2, a specific iconographic code can be detected that unambiguously defines the different functions expressed by human couples. The couple can either represent marriage – symbolised by the ceremonial vase (Fig. 10.3a) – or allude, through a simple hand gesture, to sexual union as a core element of the generation of life (Fig. 10.3b); this is the meaning of the woman portrayed in the act of touching the man, which may be assumed to be an equivalent to the *yakṣī* touching the tree (Fig. 10.1). Significantly, the same gesture – with the same allusion – is employed in Gandhāran versions of the tutelary couples (Fig. 10.4). These are visual

‘forms’, i.e. semantic units whose meaning must have been obvious to Indian people.

Thus, we can consider couples – either human or, on a metaphysic level, divine – to be the expression of the *manuṣya-loka*, or human realm; that is, the most auspicious world in which to be

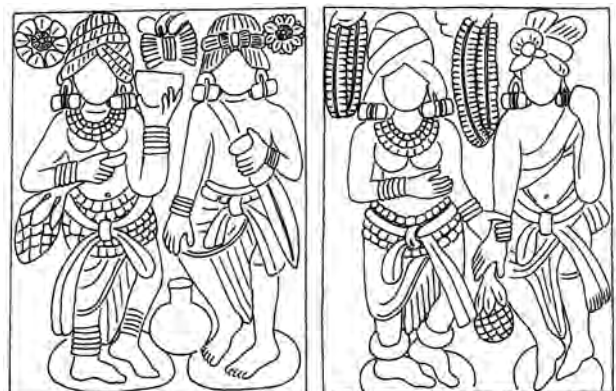


Fig. 10.3. Railing of Stūpa 2, Sanchi, western gateway, c. 100 BCE, sandstone; couples: a. marriage; b. sexual union. Drawing by the author.





Fig. 10.4. Gandhāran tutelary couple, from Takht-i Bahi, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 27 x 24.7 x 10.3 cm, British Museum. After Zwalf 1996: fig. 98.

re-born, since this is the only one where Awakening can be attained. Neither completely burdened with the pain and hassle of life, as is the case with the lower spheres of existence, nor too pleasant to be mistaken for a state of true liberation, as is the case with the world of the *devas*, the human realm allows the necessary freedom for the mind to transform experience into a path to salvation. Being born into *manuṣya-loka* is thus a felicitous event, but one which is extremely difficult to realise. As is stated in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, “suppose a yoke with a single hole is cast into the great ocean where it is tossed about by winds that blow in all directions, and that in the same ocean lives a one-eyed turtle who comes to the surface once every one hundred years to catch a glimpse of the heavens. It is possible that this one-eyed turtle would ever chance to look at the sky through the hole in the yoke? ... it is even more difficult ... to be born a man”.<sup>3</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the presence of *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* or human pairs, allusively or explicitly engaged in sexual intercourse, is not at all conflicting with the Buddhist doctrine.

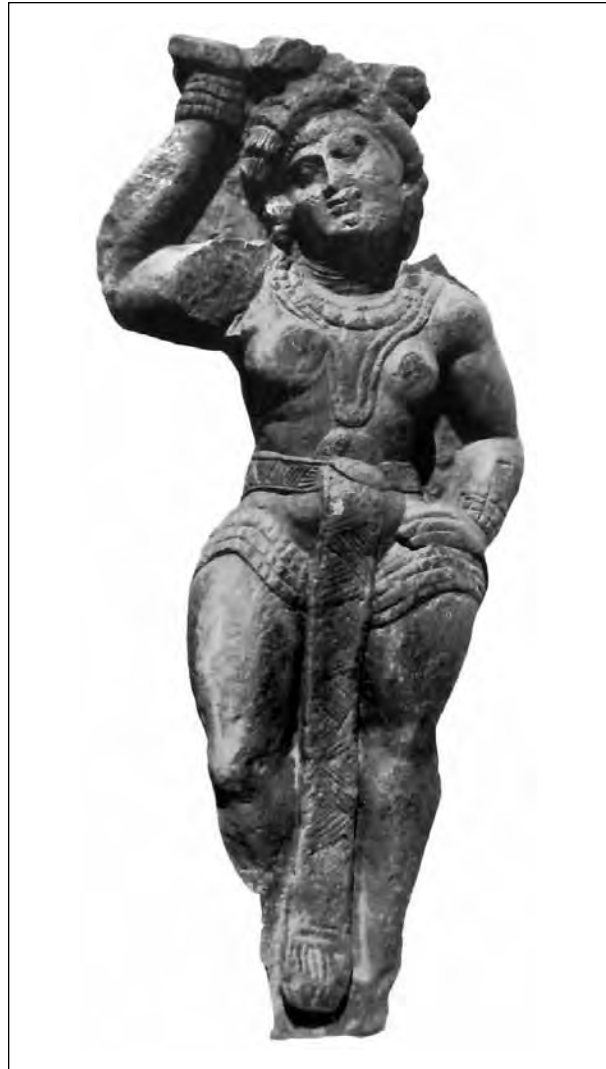


Fig. 10.5. *Yakṣī* of Indian type, Butkara I, early 1st cent. CE, schist, 59.5 x 27 x 7.5 cm, Swat Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. B 3277. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CDXXVIa.

#### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Interesting clues are provided by the corpus of sculptures coming from the Buddhist site of Butkara I in Swat, excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan from 1956 to 1962 under the direction of Domenico Faccenna (1980–81). The careful methods of archaeological investigation and the rich stratigraphy, spanning the whole Buddhist period, from the 3rd century BCE to the 10th century CE, make of this site a landmark in Gandhāran archaeology.

In the relative archaeological sequence of the site, three different styles have been detected;

starting from the earliest one, they are the 'drawing style', the 'naturalistic style' and the 'stereometric style'. Based on the stratigraphic sequence, the earliest one (drawing style) appears to be already attested at the beginning of Period 3 of the site, when the sacred area was completely renovated and acquired unprecedented grandeur. This happened at around the beginning of the Common Era, that is, during the Śaka-Parthian period (Faccenna 2003; 2007). The drawing style, which precedes the naturalistic one of Hellenistic ascendance, is characterised by flat volumes and a dense play of lines. The stylistic and iconographic features of this early production show the dependence on more or less coeval Indian iconographies, evidently held as authoritative models. Nevertheless, a quite rapid process started that produced a conflation of Indian forms with the Hellenised artistic language elaborated during a centuries-long period in the territories of the former Seleucid Empire.

*Yakṣas*, and especially *yakṣīs*, are a common presence in Butkara (Fig. 10.5) – as well as 'couples' of different types – throughout the site's life, though the highest concentration of isolated figures of *yakṣīs* of Indian type is to be found in the earliest production.<sup>4</sup> As for the couples, of relatively easy identification are those which I would call the 'married couples' (i.e. an early 'Gandhāran' version of the married couples of Sanchi), caught in intimate moments of daily life (Fig. 10.6).<sup>5</sup> Also this typology seems to enjoy greater popularity in the earliest period, while different patterns evolve over the course of time. A quick glimpse of them will be given here, in an attempt to highlight their broader implications and their bearing on the interpretation of the overall archaeological and cultural context.

Among the monumental additions of Period 3, a special place is occupied by the Great Vihāra, of which only the foundations remained, superseded by later buildings. Nevertheless, according to Faccenna's reconstruction, this monument must have been very similar in shape to the exceptionally well preserved *vihāra* of Gumbat, in the Kandak



Fig. 10.6. 'Married couple', Butkara I, early 1st cent. CE, schist, 53 x 34 x 7 cm, Swat Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. B 283. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CLXVI.

valley, which shows a tall platform, a single cell surrounded by a corridor, and a double dome roof, following a typology often represented in Gandhāran reliefs (Fig. 10.7).<sup>6</sup>

Besides the imposing size, the Great Vihāra of Butkara I also stands out for its position, just opposite from the Great Stūpa's stairway. Such a big, central shrine must have housed some remarkable Buddhist image as the main cultic object, certainly surrounded by additional subjects chosen according to some associative logic. We know at least two of these subjects. Given its size, the Great Vihāra is the only monument of that period that might have housed two big sculptures – certainly along with several others sharing analogous features – which



Fig. 10.7. The Vihāra of Gumbat, 2nd/3rd cent. CE. Photo: E. Loliva, courtesy of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan.

represent, respectively, a Great Departure<sup>7</sup> and a profiled stela (B 6795; preserved height: 0.845 m) with back-to-back relief figures: a tutelary couple on one face, a single stout figure of a kneeling *yakṣa*/atlas on the other (Fig. 10.8).<sup>8</sup> Size and correspondence between stylistic features of the sculptures and dating of the building make us sure that the former belong to the original decoration of the latter. This archaeological evidence, though exceptional, is nonetheless particularly significant with relation to a possible reconstruction of other, lost architectures, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, of which – once again – Butkara I offers valuable clues.

The symbolism of the couples is one of those themes which lend themselves to a quite anodyne Hellenistic reshaping. In terms of meaning, there is not much difference between the old 'Indian' couples and the 'Dionysiac' couples that we find in the 'naturalistic' group in Butkara I or anywhere else in Gandhāra. One may say that this is just a coat of Hellenistic paint on old, indigenous concepts. Based on this consideration, we can take a qualitative leap

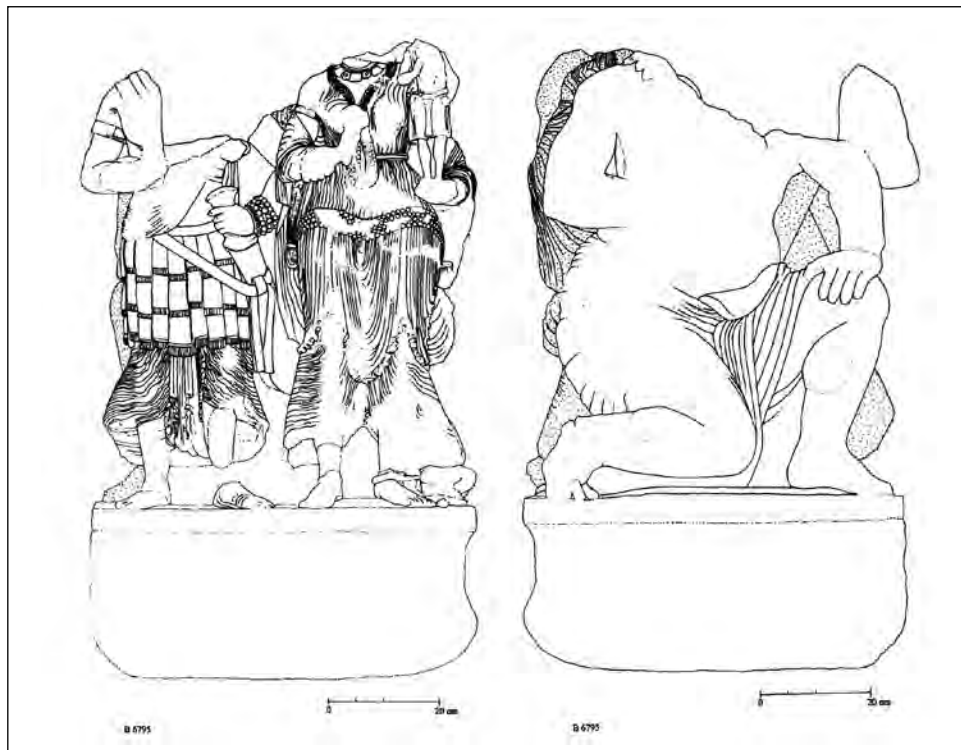


Fig. 10.8. Stela with back-to-back figures, Butkara I, early 1st cent. CE, schist, 84.5 x 69 x 30 cm, Swat Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. B 6795. After Faccenna 2006: figs. 3–4.

forward and start look at similar scenes in a totally different way.

#### REAL ARCHITECTURES AND ARCHITECTURAL SKETCH PLANS

If the Great Vihāra attests that the combination of Buddhist icons with tutelary couples was acknowledged as legitimate in formal cultic spaces, then we can conjecture that this model might have been reproduced in iconography. Actually, associative schemes of this kind can be found in some doorjambs from the same site. The vertical arrangement of figured squares framed by architectural elements can thus be seen in a different light: not mere decorative space fillers, but schematic models of real shrines where the spatial relations take the form of an open box with all sides extended along a vertical axis.<sup>9</sup>

Particularly telling evidence is offered by doorjambs B 3215, B 3217 and B 79 (Figs. 10.9–10.14).<sup>10</sup> Images of Buddha enshrined within an *aedicula* (B 3215) or a *vihāra* (B 3217, B 79) are accompanied by erotic couples, these also represented within *aediculae* of different shapes, with pediment (B 3215, B 79) or carinated arch (B 3217). The erotic connotation of the couples, extremely explicit especially in B 3215 and B 3217, no longer appears odd if we explain it in the light of the arguments developed above. What we see represented in these sculptures is a sketch plan, both physical and conceptual, of a Buddhist temple of the same kind as the Great Vihāra of Butkara: the world-redeemer Buddha is represented in his necessary association with the *manuṣya-loka*, the human sphere, whose double aspect of prelude and obstacle to salvation is efficaciously synthesised by the sexual symbolism expressed by the couples. In the case of the Butkara doorjambs this binary-relationship paradigm appears re-modelled according to the ‘naturalistic’ wave of Western origin, but in its very essence is still Indian. The ‘Dionysiac’ characters re-interpret here the Indian *mithunas*, a pan-Indian motif of ancient origin (cf. Quintanilla 2007: 60) and of fluid



Fig. 10.9. Door-jamb with Buddha and erotic couple, Butkara I, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 50 x 18 x 6.5 cm, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci', Rome, inv. no. B 3215. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCLXXXIX.

and adaptable nature, which over time (or since its very inception in formalised religious art?) was charged with more subtle meanings and related to



Fig. 10.10. Door-jamb B 3215, Butkara I, detail of Fig. 10.9. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCXC.

truth-seeking, as a symbol of total abandonment, transformation, and union (“like a man and a woman in close embrace”; Kramrisch 1976, II: 346–47, quoting *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* IV.3.21).

#### DOORJAMBS AS SYMBOLIC MAPS: CONSISTENT EVIDENCE

The same reasoning about real architectures and conceptual axonometric representations can be extended to several other doorjambs with different figured scenes arranged in superimposed registers, framed by Corinthian-Gandhāran columns and separated from each other by decorated architraves/cornices. They are in most cases fragmentary and do not allow the reconstruction of the complete series; others, though almost entirely preserved, show unambiguous signs of being originally connected with additional segments. A systematic study of this specific category of sculpted elements has not



Fig. 10.11. Door-jamb with Buddha and erotic couple, Butkara I, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 56.5 x 16 x 7.5 cm, Swat Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. B 79. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCXCIIa.



Fig. 10.12. Door-jamb B 79, Butkara I, detail of Fig. 10.11. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCXCIII.

yet been attempted, but the impression is that they might have played, in the overall visual strategy of the Buddhist pedagogy, a greater role than expected on the basis of their apparently subordinate position. Their significance is clearly not univocal, and yet they must have covered a range of purposes sharing some common denominator, the sense of which was probably encrypted in the architectural frame. In general, and with different nuances, the latter is to be interpreted as a concise iconographic sign which defines a structured space, in this case a sacred one. The artists seem to follow a codified convention that we can observe in full display in



Fig. 10.13. Door-jamb with Buddha (broken, below) and erotic couple (above), Butkara I, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE; schist, 41 x 18 x 7 cm, Swat Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. B 3217. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCXCIIa.

the narrative cycles, where the difference between the 'biographical scenes' (i.e. scenes directly connected with the Buddha's life and Buddhist *dharma*, including generic scenes of adoration) and



Fig. 10.14. Door-jamb B 3217, Butkara I, detail of Fig. 10.13.  
After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCXC1b.

the so-called 'non-biographical' scenes (featuring laymen or semi-divine beings engaged in a variety of performances, often unintelligible to us) is marked by a different frame: architectural for the former; 'natural' for the latter (Fig. 10.15).<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, the meaning seems to be unspecific, when for instance the superimposed squares are all occupied by different figures of devotees. In such cases, one cannot exclude a derivation from multi-storeyed shrines, an architectural typology which is occasionally reproduced in reliefs (unfortunately, often of doubtful provenance; Fig. 10.16). However, it is significant that the artists often took pains to show the figures slightly jutting out from the frame (Fig. 10.17),<sup>12</sup> as to underscore the act of moving within a space, thus making the space itself more 'real'. Also, with regard to this sense of 'overstepping' a structure, the vertical sequence of devotees seems, in the domain of reality, to correspond better to the horizontal plan of the *pradakṣinā* around the main cultic space, and to the aim of conveying the notion of a crowded place of worship.



Fig. 10.15. Relief with 'biographic scenes' (below) and non-biographic, ceremonial scenes (above), Saidu Sharif I, second half of the 1st cent. CE/2nd cent. CE, schist, 18 x 25.2 cm, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci', Rome, inv. no. S 704.  
After Faccenna 2001: pl. 127.



Fig. 10.16. Multi-storied shrine, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, private collection, Japan. After Kurita 1988–90, I: fig. 540.

#### HINTS AT NON-BUDDHIST WORSHIP OF OBJECTS AND PLACES

The possibility of reading vertical arrangements of architecturally framed figured scenes as physical/conceptual plans of sacred spaces is not confined to Buddhist subjects but also applies to analogous decorative devices drawing on different religious affiliations. Although the predominance of Buddhism in Gandhāra emerges unequivocally from the archaeological evidence, other religious universes must definitely have existed within and without the Gandhāran cultural regions, not only folk beliefs, but also organised and officialised cultic traditions, as suggested *in primis* by the presence of non-Buddhist deities in the Buddhist iconographic repertoires themselves.

Discussing in detail the meaning of those ‘alien’ presences in the Buddhist imagery is beyond the scope of this paper. I will limit myself to noting that they mainly serve the purpose of underscoring the inclusiveness and, implicitly, the superiority of Buddhism. A well-known passage of

the *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* praises the ability of Avalokiteśvara to reveal himself in practically infinite forms in order to convert all sentient beings: Buddha, Śakra, Maheśvara, Senāpati, *yakṣa*, *gandharva* and so on (de Mallmann 1948: 31–32; Taddei 1987: 353–54). The same concept is also alluded to by many other iconographic themes, whose common semantic framework is the ultimate re-absorption into the Buddha’s world. Most explicit in this sense is the decoration of the famous ‘*stūpa* of the double-headed eagle’ in Block F at Sirkap, Taxila (Marshall 1951, I: 56, 163–64; *ibid.*, III: pl. 28), where the different typologies of doors (an Indian *torāṇa*, an Indian door with volute carinated extrados, a building door of Western type with pediment) represented in relief on the *stūpa*’s



Fig. 10.17. Door-jamb with devotees, Butkara I, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 43 x 30 x 7 cm, Swat Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, inv. no. B 2299. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCCLX.



square body convey a clear message of universal convergence.<sup>13</sup> Though the features of competitive religious systems still remain extremely elusive, we can assume that the number of alien deities portrayed in Buddhist contexts must have had their own worship places (either architecturally structured or in special open-air settings) elsewhere, not too far removed from the Buddhist enclosures.

As to the reciprocal relationship between Buddhism and other religious systems, we can only speculate. However, in the actual practice of religion some boundaries must have been blurred, not dissimilarly from what happens today (Widorn 2015). It is most probable that a Buddhist practitioner of that period deemed it absolutely normal to worship other deities in other temples, especially on specific occasions, either of social or individual relevance; we also cannot rule out the possibility that the Buddhist establishment might have tolerated such a co-existence.<sup>14</sup>

In any event, the conceptual correspondence between the Great Vihāra and the iconographic programme of doorjambs B 3215, B 3217 and B 79 (Figs. 10.9–10.14) encourages to look for other clues to the existence of real architectures disguised under the same appearance, i.e. vertical rows of figured squares that – as in the abovementioned case of the Buddha and the couples – may be interpreted as flattened axonometries. This indeed may provide, as we will see, important keys to understanding some associative schemes in Gandhāran iconographic assemblages that we erroneously perceive as odd, which instead might have represented a conceptual synthesis of common occurrences in coeval non-Buddhist contexts.

The patterns of association between the different subjects in Butkara's doorjambs remain in most cases undecipherable, due in part to the fragmentary state of preservation and, moreover, to their being found away from the original context. Nevertheless, it is still possible to cluster some of them in homogeneous series on account of their extrinsic features. This is the case, for instance,

with two extremely interesting pieces (Figs. 10.18–10.23),<sup>15</sup> which, despite a slight difference in size and in the shape of the horizontal cornice, show the same festoon of half-opened lotuses and the same arrangement of the internal space. There is no doubt that these pieces belong to the same artistic episode and, most probably, share the same contents and sources of inspiration.

Doorjamb B 1603, broken off at the upper part, shows (starting from the bottom): a kneeling *yakṣa*/atlas; two symmetrical young male figures with spear, holding hands; a six-armed god in martial attire; a tutelary couple holding spears or sceptres with palmette-like ends, on the left a *nagaradevatā* and on the right an unidentified male figure; above, a few elements of a missing scene (Figs. 10.18–10.22).

The identity of the six-armed god (Fig. 10.20) is unclear: he wears a *mukuṭa* with incised net-like decoration and holds in his right raised hands a *vajra* and a sword (the third lowered arm is missing); the two upper left hands hold a lance and a disc (the lower one is missing). The shape of the headdress and the *vajra* suggest a derivation from the iconography of Indra, although the six arms do not correspond to any known form of the god.

This relief was discussed by Gherardo Gnoli (1963) and later by R.C. Agrawala and Maurizio Taddei in a co-authored paper (Agrawala & Taddei 1966). Though tentatively, the three authors put forward different interpretations. According to Gnoli, the six-armed male divinity might have represented Śiva. Agrawala instead sees in this figure the composite aspect of prominent divinities of the Brahmanic pantheon – a phenomenon not uncommon in Gandhāran art – and cautiously suggests a possible identification with Skanda-Kumāra. This identification is endorsed as plausible by Taddei, who nevertheless broadens the discussion by inquiring into the inspirational source of such a composite iconographic form. According to Taddei, the iconographic features of the god may derive from Syrian prototypes – specifically Šadrafa, the healer god, and Ba'al Šamīn, the 'Lord



**Fig. 10.18.** Door-jamb with divine couple, six-armed god, Dioscuri, and *yakṣa*/atlas, Butkara I, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 135 x 38.5 x 14 cm, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci', Rome, inv. no. B 1603. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCCXXXVIa.



**Fig. 10.19.** Butkara I, B 1603, detail of Fig. 10.18. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCCXXXVIb.

of the Skies'.<sup>16</sup> The reference to the Near Eastern world – Syrian or Western Parthian – made by Taddei is not purely accidental, but rather lies in a methodological approach to Gandhāran art which deems its 'Hellenistic' features to be not the result of direct 'Classical' influences but rather an expression of a more complex, dynamic and multi-centric cultural world, which encompasses intermediate regions and historical periods.

The Butkara relief was also dealt with by Doris M. Srinivasan (1997–98: 254–55) in an incidental manner as part of a comprehensive survey of the imagery of Skanda/Kārttikeya in the Northwest, where the author tackles the more general question of the possible existence, in Gandhāran territories, of a true, independent cult of Skanda/Kārttikeya and stresses the martial characteristics of the god, which would well have constituted a reason for his popularity in the Northwest regions.<sup>17</sup>

We will come back to this point later. Let us consider first the two symmetrical figures in the second register: they wear a sort of *limus* (apron) and shoes reaching halfway up the shin, and both rest on their lances (Fig. 10.21). The Western appearance, the spears and the inseparability expressed by the gesture of holding hands all



Fig. 10.20. Butkara I, B 1603, detail of Fig. 10.18. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCCXXXVII.

make the identification with the Dioscuri, already proposed in the catalogue of sculptures by Taddei, quite certain. At the time of publication of the catalogue in the early 1960s (Faccenna 1962–64), archaeology had not yet produced that small but significant critical mass of evidence relating to non-Buddhist religious architecture. Monuments such as the 'Temple à redans' at Ai-Khanum, the Temple of the Oxus at Takht-i Sangin, and the Temple of the Dioscuri at Dilberjin bear witness to the existence, in the Greek and post-Greek period, of local cults of still uncertain nature that nonetheless invite us to break out of the old paradigms.

In particular, of the utmost interest for a direct comparison with the Butkara's artistic production is the so-called Temple of the Dioscuri at Dilberjin, in Southern Bactria. The temple is situated in the north-east corner of an urban complex that, according to the excavators, was founded in the Graeco-Bactrian period, flourished in the Kushan times and was abandoned in the 5th century CE (Kruglikova 1974; 1986). With sound arguments, authors of later studies rejected this chronology,

including Gérard Fussman (1978), Giovanni Verardi (1982), Paul Bernard (Bernard & Francfort 1979: 126, fn. 7 esp.), Guitty Azarpay (1988: 357–58 and fn. 42, although with a proposed new chronology challenged by Lo Muzio 1999: 45 and ff.), Thomas Fitzsimmons (1996), and lastly, Ciro Lo Muzio (1999), whose comprehensive study will be used here as the main reference.

I will consider here only a few aspects of this revision, in particular those related to the temple, which owes its name to the painted representation of the Twins on the outer face of the eastern wall (Fig. 10.24). According to Irina Kruglikova, the painting represents incontrovertible evidence not only for the dating of the temple to the Graeco-Bactrian period and specifically to the reign of Eucratide, but also for the function of the temple itself, which would have been consecrated to the Dioscuri. Besides not being in agreement with the numismatic finds from the site (Fussman 1978: 428) or with the iconographic type of the Dioscuri adopted in Graeco-Bactrian, Seleucid and Arsacid coinage (Lo Muzio 1999: 44–45), the chronological frame proposed by Kruglikova is also not consistent with the Graeco-Roman iconographic repertoire, where the standing Twins with their mounts in the background become a common feature only much



Fig. 10.21. Butkara I, B 1603, detail of Fig. 10.18. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCCXXXVIIIa.



Fig. 10.22. Butkara I, B 1603, detail of Fig. 10.18. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCCXXXVIIIb.

later, i.e. from the 1st century CE onwards, with a major concentration in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (*ibid.*: 46). The attribution of the painting to the Period I of the temple is also questionable, since the painting would have scarcely come out unharmed from the large restoration of Period II. In addition, due to the position of the Dioscuri at the sides of a door, it is more reasonable to think that the Dioscuri rather played the role of door-guardians or assistants of the major deity venerated in the temple. But who was this deity? Unfortunately, no traces are preserved of the main cultic object. However, as hinted at by Boyce and Grenet (1991) and later convincingly argued by Lo Muzio (1999), it must have been the Great Goddess.

As clearly shown by Lo Muzio in his extensive survey of the subject, the pattern of association between the Dioscuri and a female deity is a widespread motif in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in the 2nd to 3rd centuries. The Dioscuri of Dilberjin can be assigned to more or less the same date, which, besides matching the iconographic evidence, also appears more

consistent with the archaeological stratigraphy of the site. The geographic distribution of the scheme Dioscuri/goddess (Lo Muzio 1999: 46–50) attests to the Oriental source of this association, which is to be traced back to the Indo-Iranian religious background. The cult of the Twins itself, on the other hand, is not a Greek import. It is instead firmly rooted in the Indo-Iranian world, as it is in many other Indo-European cultures as well. In Indian literary sources, from the *Rgveda* to the *Mahābhārata*, the Twin deities, or *Aśvin*, are assigned with some specific domains, which mainly represent a semantic extension of their healing power. The *Aśvin* twins bring solar energy down to the earth, and happiness and bliss to everyone they touch. They have the power to quickly heal and reach things, to rejuvenate the body, mind and spirit, to dispense the honey which gives life, strength and immortality, to bestow happiness upon the married couple, to protect children, provide happy delivery, and so on (*ibid.*: 52–53).

Of the cult of the *Aśvin* we do not possess any iconographic evidence, until they entered – as did many other Indo-Iranian deities of ancient origin – the mainstream of a religious visual culture. As I mentioned before, the activation of such a process is most probably a response to the impact of Greek culture, which also provided a rich repertoire of exploitable forms. A particularly enlightening example is offered by Kushan coins, where the figures of Iranian gods, unequivocally identified as such by the legends, are modelled after prototypes of Western origin.

I refer to Lo Muzio for a detailed review of the literary and iconographic sources related to the association of the Twins with a goddess. Just as a sample of the wide circulation of this conceptual form across diverse cultural and religious milieus in the Indo-Iranian world, mention can be made of the triad *Ṣaṣṭhī/Skanda* and *Viśākha* in Mathurā reliefs of the Kushan period, which in light of the quite overlapping semantic and iconographic features can be traced to the same ‘goddess/Twins’ scheme

that was interpreted at times by Ásvin and Dioscuri (*ibid.*: 55). Additionally, I would like to stress the fact that this association is not confined to the cultured world of the liturgical hymns but can also be detected in pervasive folk religious traditions, still widespread and of great social relevance, such as the Indian festivals in honour of the Great Goddess, usually celebrated during the month of Ásvin.<sup>18</sup>

As for the temple of Dilberjin, the connection of the Twins with a goddess is corroborated by the general framework, which shows a high degree of consistency with such an associative pattern. As a matter of fact, the notions of health, abundance, fertility, and – ultimately – marriage and family life as essential foundations for realising such aspirations are largely represented in the assemblage of votive materials. This includes 20 small bronze bells – that is, apotropaic musical instruments employed in a wide range of rituals but especially linked to fertility – and several hundred finger-rings, possibly symbolic of marriage (Lo Muzio 1999: 57). A painting representing Umāmaheśvara, found in a vestibule of the temple and assigned by Kruglikova to the 5th century<sup>19</sup> – but according to all evidence dating from the 7th century at the earliest – is further proof of the specific and long-lasting connotation of the temple, since in early medieval Central Asia, for instance at Penjikent, the Umāmaheśvara couple appears to have played the role of assisting a goddess, just as the Twins did in previous times.

In the Butkara doorjamb we find the Dioscuri associated with a couple (Fig. 10.19) whose function partially overlaps that of the pure female power expressed by the single goddess. In Indian contexts as well, and particularly in Buddhism, the city goddess, or *nagaradevatā*, is variously associated with the fortune goddess, either Śrī or Lakṣmī.<sup>20</sup> In such contexts the mural crown worn by the goddess can be interpreted either as the expression of a particularised personification (for instance, in Gandhāran reliefs, the city of Kapilavastu grieving over Siddhārtha's abandonment in the scene of the

Great Departure) or, by semantic extension, as a generic reference to royal fortune, where the mural crown is symbolic of the 'civilised space' ruled by a legitimate sovereign. This seems to be the case with the *nagaradevatā* of the Butkara relief, where the additional combination of the latter with an unknown male deity is to be ascribed to that wide range of 'variability' in the system of the couples we see largely attested in the Indo-Iranian world.

Doorjamb B 2329 (Fig. 10.23) offers no less interesting food for thought. Of the three surviving scenes, the upper one preserves only scanty remains. In the central square two dancers are represented. In the square below, a figure wearing a scaled cuirass and a long *dhotī* is represented in the act of striking a fantastic animal held with his left hand. Undoubtedly we are confronted here with a north-western version of the fight of Skanda against the *asuras*. This Puranic myth, still extremely popular in South India, is especially known for its being integrated into epic literature, in particular



Fig. 10.23. Door-jamb with 'Phrygian' dancers and Skanda killing an *asura*, Butkara I, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 43 x 30 x 7 cm, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci', Rome, inv. no. B 2329. After Faccenna 1962–64: pl. CCCL.

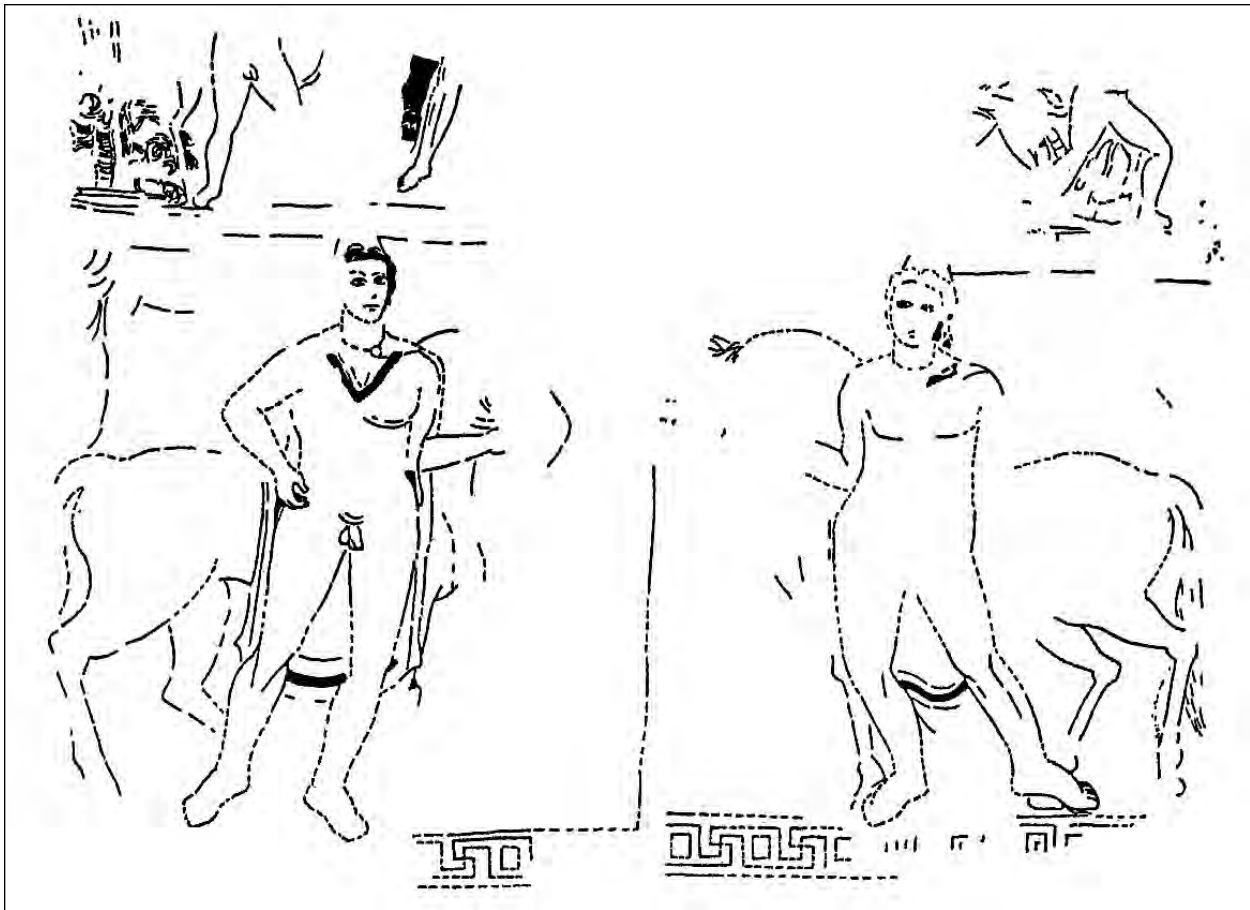


Fig. 10.24. Mural painting representing the Dioscuri, Dilberjin, Temple of the Dioscuri, 2nd/3rd cent. CE. After Lo Muzio 1999: fig. 1.

the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. According to the myth, Skanda, also called Murugan/Murukan or Subrahmaṇya, was born for the specific purpose of saving the world from the tyranny of the *asuras* (L'Hernault 1978: 16–20). The names of the *asuras* killed by Skanda vary over time and space, and the *asuras* can also take on fantastic forms (Zvelebil 1976: 16; Handelman 2014: 33–34), as in the case of our relief, which remains to date an extremely interesting unicum witnessing, in all probability, to a formative stage of iconographies. As L'Hernault (1978: 20) aptly remarks with regard to the variability of Subrahmaṇya in Tamilnadu, “c'est l'*asura* en general plus qu'un *asura* en particulier qui compte”. Following L'Hernault, we may suppose that the fantastic animal was intended as the most suitable form for exemplifying the demonic forces embodied by the *asuras*. However, it is to be noted that, in the specific case of our relief, the killing of a fantastic

animal also appears as a perspicacious iconographic synthesis of the myth. The martial character of Skanda (i.e. his being literally at war with *asuras*) and his replacing Indra coalesce in an image, which brings to mind the slaying of Vṛtra by the latter. The close affinity between Indra and Skanda, also noticed by L'Hernault (*ibid.*: 142–43) in South Indian iconography, is patently illustrated, indeed, by the episode of Skanda splitting apart Mt. Krauñca and the subsequent killing of the *asura* Bāṇa, who had sought refuge in that mountain (*Mahābhārata* IX.46.84); this closely resembles Indra splitting the primordial mountain that had been Vṛtra's abode (Dandekar 1972: 94).

The variability of the myth is well represented in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* (or *Vanaparvan*), the third chapter of the *Mahābhārata* (III.213–21), where the *asura* killed by Skanda is Mahiṣa, the mighty buffalo-demon who, in later literature and

iconography, is more often portrayed as the enemy of Durgā. A small sculpture discovered in the mid-1990s at Mohammad Zai, near Peshawar, depicts indeed this second occurrence (Fig. 10.25).<sup>21</sup> The fluctuation of the legend fully justifies the presence in Gandhāran art of both versions.

As for doorjamb B 2329 (Fig. 10.23), the presence of Skanda as slayer of the *asura* on this panel also makes more plausible the identification of the six-armed god in doorjamb B 1603 (Fig. 10.20) as Skanda in his aspect of commander-in-chief. Although the paraphernalia displayed by this figure are only partially preserved and no perfect match can be proved with those (inconstantly, indeed) listed in the relevant epic, they undoubtedly connote military prowess and might. At the same time, we may interpret the composite aspect of the god as a hint at Skanda's inheriting weapons from other gods (Clothey 1978: 188 ff., esp. 189). It is clear, however, even despite the poor preservation of the relief, that in the Butkara god the artist wanted to feature an eye-catching affinity with Indra, a detail that is certainly of great significance. In the Puranic myth, Skanda can engage the *asuras* only after overcoming the initial opposition by Indra, the chief of the gods and patron of warriors, who fears to lose his power. Thus, Skanda becomes the commander-in-chief of the gods' army after proving his superiority over the greatest of all warriors. If, as we may assume, doorjambs B 1603 and B 2329 share common themes and sources, either literary or not, it is no surprise that the iconography stresses Skanda's martial character by resorting to the emphatic multiplication of arms and weapons (Fig. 10.20). Moreover, the similarity with Indra can be seen as an intentional expedient for underscoring Skanda's replacement of Indra as the divine commander. However, the same mythological background also justifies a different hypothesis; that is, the god represented here might be Indra himself, portrayed as the commander of the heaven's army before surrendering his role to Skanda.

A further element of interest is the auspiciousness of Skanda and its connection to



Fig. 10.25. Skanda killing the *asura* Mahiṣa, from Mohammad Zai, second half of the 1st cent. CE/3rd cent. CE, schist, 19.5 x 12 x 13.5 cm, Peshawar, Department of Archaeology and Museums, inv. no. SRO-623. After Proser 2011: fig. 3.

royal power or kingship. It is most probably with this meaning that he was celebrated in the coinage of dynasties such as Yaudheyas, Śakas, Kuṣāṇas and Guptas, which might have seen in him the prototype of the 'warrior king' (Clothey 1978: 188).<sup>22</sup> This element matches, and at the same time reinforces, the 'royal' connotation of the *nagaradevatā* and her male companion in doorjamb B 1603 (Fig. 10.19). In the *Āranyakaparvan*, indeed, not only is Skanda honoured by Śrī, but his promotion to general of the army of the gods is marked by an *abhiṣeka*, which transforms the fearful appearance of the new-born god, adding to it the shining majesty of status and authority (Mann 2012: 59).

It is useful here to recall that a formalised link between Śrī and the royal fortune is established in

the inscription of Surkh Kotal, which mentions the goddess OANINDO and the Victory (or the 'Bactrian Śrī) of Kaniška, to which the temple might have been consecrated.<sup>23</sup> The links are perhaps tenuous and still speculative, but it is not out of place to imagine that the growing importance, from the Mauryan period onwards, of concepts such as city, state, and king's authority might have led to a conflation of symbols related to the 'civilised space', blessed with opulence and defended by the king.

As a whole, the iconographic programme of the panels appears to be clearly connected with functions vital to societal well-being: fertility, female power, healing, youthful skill in warfare, and kingship. Additionally, auspiciousness, goodness and apotropaism are evoked by music and dance performances, which play a prominent role in both the doorjambs, as well as by the stout *yakṣa*/atlas – of the same kind as in stela B 6795 (Fig. 10.8), allegedly from the Great Vihāra – that often appears at the bottom of the iconographic sequence. He seems to carry on his strong shoulders the temple in the same way as he supports the world, as an auspicious symbol presiding over the entrance, real or imaginary, to the sacred space.

In the light of such evidence, 'Gandhāran Hellenism' appears as a much more complex issue

than the Western origin of forms and concepts. We have rather to think of it as a living culture, which experienced circular phenomena of changes and osmosis over centuries. Far from being a simple question of fashion or 'influence', the Hellenistic models, though maintaining some semantic ties with the original sources, were consciously adopted, transformed and integrated into other, coherent artistic syntaxes, where they acquired new and specific meanings. What is more, Hellenism represents only the indivisible part of a whole, which is still largely unknown.

Before concluding, I would like to stress the fact that the history of this multifarious world should primarily bear the names of Parthians, Śaka-Parthians and Kushans. The disparity of sources between East and West has somehow created a distorted portrait, where paradoxically these peoples, who built up vast empires that were the theatre of tremendous innovations and transformations, appear as mere recipients and administrators rather than active agents of the complex network of political, economic and cultural exchanges they ruled over. Gandhāran art will never be properly understood until we rescue this part of the history from vagueness, possibly with the help of different categories of understanding.

## NOTES

\* This paper was first elaborated on the occasion of the workshop *Gandhara Connections* (Oxford University, 10–12 April 2013). I take the occasion to thank the organiser, Peter Stewart, who provided the most suitable frame for such a topic and a great opportunity for fruitful exchanges.

1. I use here 'Gandhāran art' as a purely conventional definition. This refers to the artistic phenomenon roughly encompassed within the period spanning the late Śaka-Parthian to post-Kushan time frame (end of 1st century CE/beginning of 1st century CE–3rd/4th centuries CE) which involves, with different regional characterisation, an area exceeding the limits of Gandhāra proper and including Swat, Panjab and Eastern Afghanistan (for a synopsis of the question of nomenclature see the passage in Zwalf 1996: 11–19). Notwithstanding the increasing

criticism of this conventional terminology, and for lack of any substantial advancement in the archaeology-based definition of regional workshops, I retain 'Gandhāran art' as expressive of the common patrimony of iconographic and architectural forms to which the contents of this article make reference.

2. For a discussion of the 'Dionysiac' scenes connected with wine consumption and intoxication, with particular reference to the Gandhāran reliefs from Swat, I refer to Filigenzi 2016 and *eadem* forthcoming.

3. *Majjhima Nikāya*, Vol. III: 169; Rahula 1978: 49; cf. Lusthaus 2002: 86.

4. Faccenna 1962–64, II: 176–79, 181–82; pls. CDXXVI–CDXXXV, CDXLVI–CDXLVIII.

5. E.g. B 3216 in Faccenna 1962–64, I: 47, pl. CLXVIII; B 283, *ibid.*, I: 46, pl. CLXVI.



6. Faccenna 2006; Filigenzi 2012; Olivieri 2014: 255–319; Faccenna & Spagnesi 2014: 465 ff.
7. B 6011, of which only the right leg of the rider remains; reconstructed size: 2.78 x 3.03 m, without cornice; Faccenna 1985; Filigenzi 2012: 125–27, fig. 10.
8. Faccenna 2006: figs. 1–4; Filigenzi 2012: 121–25, figs. 6–9.
9. This descriptive way of representing physical space is most common in the ancient world. The idea was first suggested to me by an old map representing the Svayambhūcaitya of Kathmandu, which was shown by Alexander von Rospatt in the course of his presentation at the conference *Buddhism and the Dynamics of Transculturality*, 11–13 June 2012, Heidelberg University, Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg (IWH). I owe to this propitious coincidence and the ensuing discussions the input that encouraged me to develop the topic of this article.
10. Respectively, Faccenna 1962–64, I: 73–74; pls. CCLXXXIX–CCXC, CCXC1a,b, CCXCIIa,b and CCXCIII.
11. As a marginal note, I would add that structured/non-structured space must have been clearly understood at those times and in those places as a means for discriminating between formalised and non-formalised religions, the latter being, in all probability, much stronger and vital than we can perceive from macroscopic literary and archaeological evidence. On this aspect see Filigenzi 2016 and *eadem* forthcoming.
12. E.g. B 2299; B 2493; B 3549; respectively: Faccenna 1962–64, II: 114–16; pls. CCCLX, CCCLXIIIb; CCCLXV.
13. For stimulating reflections on related topics see also Taddei 1990 and Brancaccio 2006, both dealing – though from different viewpoints – with images of devotees under Indian arches.
14. However, important archaeological evidence of a close physical contiguity and – we may infer – pacific coexistence of Buddhist and non-Buddhist cults was collected in the late-Kushan layers of the urban site of Barikot/Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Swat; see Olivieri 2014; Filigenzi 2016: 293, 300). Also, interesting clues about forms of symbiosis between local cults and Buddhist foundations can be detected in literary sources, as in the case of the Nāgarāja temple in Uḍḍiyāna mentioned by Songyun (Beal 1958 [1884]: xcv–xcvi; Filigenzi forthcoming).
15. B 1603 and B 2329; Faccenna 1962–64, II: 107–08, 111; pls. CCCXXXVI–CCCXXXVIII and CCCL, respectively.
16. It is to be noted that Gnoli (1992) returned to the subject in a further article, where he acknowledged the criticism raised by Agrawala and Taddei to his original interpretation and substantially endorsed their view.
17. On the popularity of Skanda in the Gandhāran milieu and the reasons for his presence in Buddhist contexts see Filigenzi 2005. I take the occasion to observe that in my view, differently from what Srinivasan (1997–98: 236) seems to believe, there is no conflict between the opinion expressed by Taddei (1987: 357), according to which isolated images of Skanda found in the Gandhāran areas might have come from Buddhist contexts, as part of a set of 'alien' gods around Buddhist subjects, and Srinivasan's hypothesis of an independent cult of Skanda in the Northwest. Both possibilities are open and simultaneously possible. However, Srinivasan's statement deserves the utmost attention, as it relates to a subject of the highest importance in the field of 'Gandhāran' cultural history.
18. September–October; Vaudeville 1982: 4–5; Kinsley 1986: 111; Mehra 2001: 30.
19. The early date proposed by Kruglikova is not consistent with the stylistic and iconographic scheme of the painting, which instead finds suitable comparisons in the artistic production of the 7th and 8th centuries CE (Lo Muzio 1999: 59–60).
20. According to Gnoli (1963: 33), this happens in the frame of a process of adaptation of the Panhellenic Tyche to "local cults of female divinities connected with fertility, fecundity and abundance, which partly flowed into the cult of the goddess Lakṣmī". On this aspect see also Sinisi (2003: 186–87, and particularly 194–95), who brings into focus the role of the Śaka-Parthians in the construction and adaptation of polysemic iconographic models of goddesses related to the sphere of fortune, victory and kingship. On the *naḡaradevatā* in Gandhāran art see also Fischer 1987, Santoro 2002, and the note to the latter by Quagliotti 2003.
21. The sculpture, a small profiled relief, was published by Ashraf Khan and Azeem (1999), who erroneously interpret it as a representation of Durgā Mahīṣamardinī, notwithstanding the unambiguous male characterisation of the figure.
22. A discussion of the numismatic evidence, besides being beyond the scope of this article, is also much beyond the limits of my competence. For a recent

summary of the relevant debate, especially about the Yaudheya coinage, I refer the reader to Mann 2012: 101 ff.

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