Buddhism in a Cosmopolitan Environment: The Art of Gandhara

Christian Luczanits

Gandharan art, as is well known, is predominantly Buddhist – so much so that the material record of the region of greater Gandhara (centring on present-day Peshawar in north-western Pakistan), which had a common culture from the 1st to the 5th century, is usually in its entirety associated with Buddhism and interpreted accordingly. However, it is almost equally well known that the society that made possible the development of Buddhism and its heritage was extremely varied, and in the true sense of the word, cosmopolitan. The rulers of the Kushan empire (*c.* 1st-3rd century), which enabled and obviously also supported the flourishing of Buddhism in Gandhara (located in the centre of its vast territory), were themselves Zoroastrian or Shaiva, the latter indicating that some forms of Brahmanism or early Hinduism were prominently present there at the time as well. This is not at all surprising since it can be assumed that the main population of Gandhara was culturally Indian, not only because in the 3rd century BCE the region was part of the Mauryan empire (322-185 BCE), which originated in the kingdom of Magadha in the Indo-Gangetic plains (modern Bihar and Bengal), but also because in the 2nd millennium BCE the Aryans (the bearers of Vedic culture), as all other invaders, had entered the Indian subcontinent through this very region. In addition, the art of Gandhara attests to an extensive knowledge of Western, that is Greek and Roman, mythology and visual culture. Parthian and then Sassanian invasions in the early decades of the 1st century and from the 3rd century, respectively, further contributed to the complex cultural environment, and are also credited with having had a considerable impact on the region's art (Nehru, 1989).

To the Western viewer, the Buddhist art of Gandhara seems strangely familiar, its visual language and the depiction of Western motifs making it appear deeply rooted in the classical sculpture of the Mediterranean world (Fig. 1). It was no accident that the French indologist Alfred Foucher (1865-1952), whose work on Gandharan art is still valid in many respects, called its distinctive style 'gréco-bouddhique' (Foucher, 1905-51). In fact, the Gandharan region was connected to the Mediterranean area through the far-flung conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) and the rule of his local successors. Alexander's foray laid the foundation for the trade between the Mediterranean world, in particular the Roman empire, and East and South Asia along the famous Silk Road. This same route was used by later conquerers heading towards the Indian subcontinent, and enabled the spread of Buddhism beyond its native India in the opposite direction. It is these countermovements that are responsible for the merging of Eastern and Western cultural and artistic traditions in the Buddhist art of Gandhara; nevertheless, its influences are much too varied to be summarized in such a simple picture.

(Fig. 1) Garland bearers
From Butkara 3, Swat, Pakistan
Kushan period, 2nd century
Green schist
Height 26 cm, width
33.5 cm, depth 5.5 cm
Peshawar University Museum
(inv. no. BK III 1983-1-153)

(Fig. 2) The birth of the Buddha
From Sikri, Pakistan
Kushan period, 2nd/3rd century
Grey schist
Height 35 cm, width 47 cm
Lahore Central Museum (inv. no. G-17 [old 2125 and 101])

Indeed, some more recent studies have considered the interaction of East and West in Gandharan Buddhist art anew. Be it the highly sophisticated technique of a bronze incense burner in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as researched by Elizabeth Rosen Stone (Stone, 2004), or the composite character of a number of Gandharan scenes of the Buddha's life, as discussed by Martina Stoye (Stoye, 2004 and 2008), the nature of this exchange is highly complex and far from uniform.

In the depiction of the Buddha's birth in Figure 2, the figure of the god Indra approaching the Buddha's mother Queen Maya with a cloth covering his lower arms is traced by Stoye to a series of miraculous birth representations in the Hellenistic world, the protagonists changing in each case (Stoye, 2008). The posture of the queen grasping the branch of a tree, in contrast, derives from a common Indian depiction of *yakshi,* chthonic goddesses that are associated with fertility and well-being. In my understanding, the derivation of the queen's visual characteristics is considerably more immediate, and thus more likely to have been fully understood by contemporary viewers, than that of Indra's posture, and has been clearly recognized since the study of Gandharan art began. However, only the origination of the depiction of Indra, as it has been postulated by Stoye, wholly reveals the highly intellectual nature underlying the creation of imagery in Gandharan art. It may well be that the derivation of the Western motif appears much more obscure today because we lack artworks that would expose the intermediate connection, but significantly, it shows how familiar the cultural elite and certainly also the artists of the time must have been with such Western artistic conventions. This clearly extends to the usage of architectural conventions as well.

One of the most interesting questions arising from Stoye's and other detailed research is the exact process that led to a particular selection of components, and how and why a certain solution, such as that developed for the birth scene, was highly popular while others were less so. Indeed, in Gandhara the birth is always based on the two pictorial elements mentioned above, and variations only emerge in the elaboration of the scene. In contrast, Indra's visit to the Buddha meditating in a cave is depicted with considerable variation in Gandharan art, the example from Giri in Taxila in Figure 3 being probably the most unusual of all. Many aspects of the composition depart from the common artistic conventions used for this event, such as its vertical, borderless format; the superimposition of the two parts of the scene separated by a massive railing; the pigs representing wild animals at the bottom; the Buddha being flanked by Brahma as well as Indra, the former in the more prominent position; and the diving gods in the upper scene scattering huge blossoms on the Buddha's cave. At the same time, those conventions that have been used derive from other

(Fig. 3) Visit of Brahma and Indra to the Buddha meditating in a cave
From Giri, Taxila, Pakistan
Kushan period, 2nd/3rd century
Grey schist
Height 53.8 cm, width 22 cm, depth 8.9 cm
Taxila Museum, Department of Archaeology
and Museums of Pakistan (inv. no. 535-GR 27-109)

contexts. The haloed figures of Brahma and Indra, their hands folded in veneration, flanking a meditating Buddha represent one of the oldest pictorial conventions used in Gandharan art, and signify the superiority of the Buddha in relation to the gods that were most prominent in Brahmanism at the time and place this convention was established. Besides representing the wild animals around the cave, the pigs at the bottom may stand for the lower realms, which are contrasted with the heavens by means of the massive railing and the diving flight of two of the gods. Only the blossoms cross the 'fence', which bears a similarity to the balcony railings used to signify a paradise-like environment (see the discussion relating to Fig. 5 below).

The birth is one of the four main scenes of the Buddha's life that can stand for the life as a whole, and the strict adherence to one pictorial model could be seen as a result of this fact, although this depiction was probably only invented immediately before or during the Kushan period, and possibly, but not necessarily, in Gandhara. Gandhara is well known for the creation of many new scenes of the Buddha's life, as it is credited by some for the invention of the Buddha image itself. While it is far beyond the purpose of this article to dwell on this controversial point, it certainly cannot be denied that the creators of Gandharan art were highly inventive and innovative. A beautiful example is the unique image of a reflective Buddha on a panel discovered at Butkara in Swat (Fig. 4). In this scene the first five disciples are joined by Brahma and Indra to entreat the pensive Buddha to teach on his experience of awakening and the path that leads to it. In the background, a bearded Vajrapani raises a fly whisk (or is it a torch?) as well as holding his usual attribute, the thunderbolt (Skt *vajra*).

(Fig. 4) The first five disciples together with Brahma and Indra entreating the Buddha to teach the Dharma
From Butkara 1, Swat, Pakistan
Kushan period, 2nd/3rd century
Green schist
Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif (inv. no. 7206)

That Gandhara was a place of innovation is even more apparent when one considers its contribution to the development of Buddhism from the 'old schools' to a new strand, whose adherents called their common beliefs a 'Great Vehicle' (Mahayana). It is well known that a cult dedicated to the bodhisattva and future Buddha, Maitreya, can first be discerned during the Kushan period and in particular in the region of Gandhara, and that 'paradise' imagery is first recognizable in Gandharan art (see Figs 5 and 6). Although the relevance of the distinction between the old schools and Mahayana in the early centuries of the first millennium is generally questioned in Buddhist studies today (it suffices here to mention David Seyfort Ruegg's summary of the key issues involved: Ruegg, 2004), there is no doubt that some of the Gandharan imagery is based on ideas that are associated with Mahayana or its development. A very cautious and concise study on this subject has been done by Ju-hyung Rhi (Rhi, 2003).

As both bodhisattva and future Buddha, the imagery of Maitreya, which is extremely common in Gandharan art but absent elsewhere in South Asia until the late 3rd century at the earliest, exemplifies the dilemma in terms of art-historical interpretation when it is unclear to which belief system an image may relate. The fragment from Nimogram in Figure 5, for example, shows Maitreya seated with his legs crossed at the ankles on an elaborate lion-throne. Only the (proper) right half of the scene has survived, but Maitreya would have been flanked on both sides by conversing male figures as seen here on his right; the two females gazing from a balcony in veneration above them would also have been repeated on the other side. A comparison with similar depictions, among them Figure 6, suggests that both the balcony and the turbaned males on their tall, basketry stools are indications of a paradise-like setting. In the case of Maitreya, this 'paradise' can be either the paradisiacal city of Ketumati, where Maitreya will attain Buddhahood in an extremely remote future age, or Tushita heaven, where Maitreya awaits his final rebirth. The wish to be reborn with Maitreya in Ketumati when he attains Buddhahood is found in both the old and new schools, as is the notion that Maitreya takes his final rebirth from Tushita heaven. On the other hand, the idea that Maitreya is currently already residing in Tushita heaven and can be accessed to clarify his form or the teaching in case of need, as is evident from numerous such stories, already signifies a major development towards concepts about the qualities and path of a bodhisattva that are characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism.

A number of manuscript collections of Gandharan origin that have recently come to light add to our understanding of the nature of Buddhism in the region. While an initial survey by Richard Salomon of the content of one major collection, in the British Library, did not reveal any Mahayana texts (Salomon, 1999), this lacuna is now filled by a number of texts from two private collections, both studied in Berlin. One of these, worked on by Harry Falk, contains an early form of the *Prajnaparamita* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) *Sutra*, while the 'Bajaur' collection, researched by Ingo Strauch, includes not only a text with parallels to the *Akshobhyavyuha* (or *Splendour of the Immovable*) *Sutra*, but also one with a 'magic' formula (Skt *dharani*) that is similar to that of the Great Peacock goddess Mahamayuri, who prevents and cures snake bites. The Gandharan origin of the so-called Arapacana alphabet, as postulated by Salomon, is supported by a manuscript in the Bajaur collection as well. Arapacana became a common name for the bodhisattva Manjushri, the first imagery of whom is also found in late Gandharan art. (For the preliminary catalogue of the Bajaur collection see Strauch, 2007).

Substantial steles featuring a disproportionately large Buddha image surrounded by smaller Buddhas and different types of bodhisattvas, with or without a common architectural frame, are then certainly an expression of Mahayana ideas, even if their exact identification is contested. The most famous example is undeniably the Lahore museum stele said to have

(Fig. 5) In the presence of the bodhisattva Maitreya
From Nimogram, Swat, Pakistan
Kushan period, 3rd century
Greenish grey schist
Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif (inv. no. NG 337)
(Photography by the author)

(Fig. 6) A vision or display of a paradise-like Buddha field
From Mohammad Nari, Pakistan
Kushano-Sassanian period, 3rd/4th century
Grey schist
Height 119 cm, width 97 cm, depth 28 cm
Lahore Central Museum (inv. no. G-155)

come from the site of Mohammad Nari (Fig. 6). It would be well beyond the scope of this short discussion even to summarize the arguments concerning the identification of this 'paradise' stele. Here, it suffices to point out that the stele itself reveals the exalted nature of the assembly crowding it, through one of the scenes located on the upper right (Fig. 6a). There we see a Buddha, accompanied by Vajrapani and a worshipper, in a secluded mountain retreat. In this window of solitude – and despite the obvious hierarchic difference in size between the Buddha and his company – the Buddha is seen gesturing towards the central Buddha and the large assembly unfolding behind him, just as described in numerous Mahayana scriptures. The stele thus works on two levels, with its main content representing a vision revealed by and/or a display generated by a Buddha in solitude who is himself shown as intimately connected with, and thus part of it. How better can the difference between the true nature of the Buddha (Skt *svabhavikakaya*) and his manifestation, a mere display (Skt

(Fig. 6a) Detail of the stele in Figure 6 showing a Buddha indicating the paradise (Photography by the author)

(Fig. 7) Skanda killing the *asura* Mahisha
From Mohammad Zai, Pakistan
Kushano-Sassanian period, 3rd/4th century
Grey schist
Height 19.5 cm, width 12 cm, depth 3.5 cm
Peshawar, Department of Archaeology and Museums of Pakistan (inv. no. SRO-623)

nirmanakaya), be signified? This most simple differentiation of a Buddha's 'bodies', or *kaya*, as it occurs in early Mahayana literature, is certainly a prerequisite for such a depiction.

Gandharan innovation, however, is not restricted to the different expressions of the Buddhist faith. Although comparatively small in number, there is a considerable body of Brahmanic representations. The most well known are those identified with Shiva, called 'Oesho' on Kushana coinage, and Skanda, at that time an independent martial hero, though later regarded as one of Shiva's sons. A unique representation of Skanda was discovered in the late 1980s at Mohammad Zai, immediately north of Peshawar (Fig. 7; see also Khan and Azeem, 1999). Here, Skanda is shown as he is most commonly represented in Gandharan art, wearing a tunic-like suit of armour, his bow strung across his chest, and holding a spear in his right hand. This time, though, the spear is used successfully against an enemy in combat. At his feet, nailed to the ground by the spear, lies the similarly armoured enemy, his hand still holding his sword and his buffalo head slightly raised. It is the anti-god (Skt *asura*) Mahisha, who has been overcome by Skanda, a feat that is otherwise known to be performed by the 'great goddess' Durga. However, in the epic *Mahabharata* it is the heroic youth Skanda who is to free the world of the danger posed to the gods by the mighty buffalo-headed anti-god (Srinivasan, 1997, pp. 302-03). This 3rd/4th century relief is the only representation of this story known so far, and is roughly contemporary with the earliest depictions of Durga killing the buffalo in the region of Mathura in today's Uttar Pradesh, long before her accomplishment was recorded in any text that has come down to us (Fig. 8).

It is not the place to go into detail here, but the differences between these two stories and their depictions may be taken as exemplary of the dynamics at work in the Kushan realm, of which Mathura was also a part. Skanda is by far the most frequently represented Brahmanic deity in Gandharan art (Srinivasan, 1997/98) even though Oesho or Shiva was the main deity of at least two Kushana rulers, and early imagery of the 'great warrior goddess' (following the designation suggested by Doris Srinivasan [1997] for the first representations of independent goddesses with cosmic character, meaning deities that encompass the whole cosmos) is not found in Gandharan art at all. In Mathura, however, both Skanda and the 'great warrior goddess' occur, and the range of early Hindu imagery is amazingly vast. Nevertheless the depictions of the

(Fig. 8) Durga Mahishasuramardini
From Rajakhera, Agra district, Uttar Pradesh, India
Kushano-Sassanian period, 3rd/4th century
Red sandstone
Height 18.5 cm, width 9 cm
Collection Scherman, Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München (inv. no. Mu 199)
(Photograph © Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München, Photographic Archives)

'great goddess' Durga (so named after the description in a much later textual source, the *Devimahatmya*, or *Glorification of the Goddess*, attributed to the 6th century) killing Mahisha in Mathura have nothing in common with the Gandharan representation of Skanda killing Mahisha or, indeed, the description in the *Devimahatmya*. Instead, in Figure 8, the goddess gently breaks the buffalo's neck or spine. The image is far from conveying a heroic fight of cosmic dimensions against a skilful enemy, as the later descriptions and representations of Durga killing Mahisha, and to some extent also the Gandharan image, do, but rather represents the ritual slaying of a buffalo. Her great feat is that she kills the buffalo simply with her hands. What both the Gandharan and Mathura images in Figures 7 and 8 do have in common, though, is their hieratic pose and small size.

The representation of the buffalo in the Gandharan image adds another dimension. It is well known that later southern Indian depictions, such as the 7th century Pallava depictions of Mahabalipuram, favour the anthropomorphic buffalo-headed Mahisha, just as it appears in the Gandharan image, whereas northern Indian ones, including those of Mathura, always show him in the form of a buffalo, and in the later depictions following the description in the *Devimahatmya* Mahisha is shown in a completely human form, exiting the buffalo body in the course of the fight. This is only one instance where Gandharan imagery is closer to that of chronologically and geographically remote southern India than to that of its northern Indian neighbours. Certain characteristics of Shiva's iconography in Gandhara, such as the accompanying goat or antelope or the flaming hair, may be cited as other, less obvious, examples. Are these independent developments, or is there a chain of exchange to be imagined, of which we are aware only of the extreme ends?

For the time being, such questions cannot be answered decisively without undertaking major research. Given the uncertainties concerning the origin of many pieces, the virtual absence of relatively secure chronological benchmarks and the fragmentary nature of extant examples of Gandharan art, the study of issues pertaining to intercultural exchange, to the borrowing and adaptation of motifs as well as to the roles that art may have played in its religious and social context remains a laborious and at times tedious task. Nevertheless, even if the research cited here is quite specific, the findings do refine our understanding of the subject, and more such studies may well allow for new perspectives on the function of art in Gandhara and the way in which the innovative nature of the region's Buddhist art came into being. The multicultural and cosmopolitan background of Gandharan art cannot be overemphasized, and makes it, be it Buddhist or not, an ideal departure point for a more theoretical reflection on questions of intercultural exchange in a pre-modern society.

Christian Luczanits is co-curator of 'Gandhara – The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan', which will take place at the Art and Exhibition Hall in Bonn from 21 November 2008 to 15 March 2009. The images in Figures 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7 are included in the show.

The perspective summarized here underlies the concept for the exhibition, which was initiated by Luczanits's co-curator Michael Jansen and developed in close cooperation with Martina Stoye.

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