Gandhāran Deities in the 4th Century BCE - 2nd Century CE

Aman-ur-Rehman

It is a privilege to have been invited to give a talk on my collection of seals, sealings and tokens and to present my views on the iconography of deities in Gandhāra during the 4th century BCE - 2nd century CE period.

A Word about the Collection

This was made over a period of 30 years quite by accident. As a numismatist, I had several 'dealers' come to my house offering coins and all sorts of minor antiquities, including these 'seals'. Often such people were fringe dealers i.e. local villagers who had found or purchased material from fellow villagers with the objective of selling them onwards for a profit. Some managed to get contacts of collectors [such as me] and thought it more profitable to sell directly, cutting off the middlemen and being paid cash as against a promise of payment. These villagers were generally a poor lot who traveled long distances to make a sale and since every now and then they had interesting items, I encouraged them to approach me up the chain in order to make a more profitable sale for them. One form of encouragement was to attempt never to let them return without buying something. Often these were seals, which were acquired and put into storage without further thought. It was only several years after this process had been commenced, and, necessitated by a desire for spring cleaning my study, I found that I actually had accumulated a large number of these seals/sealing in semi-precious gems, clay and metal. Curiosity prompted a closer inspection which made me suddenly realize that this material was as interesting as coins, and perhaps even more so as each individual piece was unique. I felt they had a story to tell about the socio-religious aspects of those earlier times of the people of Gandhāra. It then became an equally important collectible as my coins. All this has led me to believe that there is much that can be gleaned from such material than meets the initial glance and should be published in a catalogue form so that it is available to future scholar who may derive more profound conclusions. Such a catalogue is under preparation and should be out, hopefully, by the end of 2010.

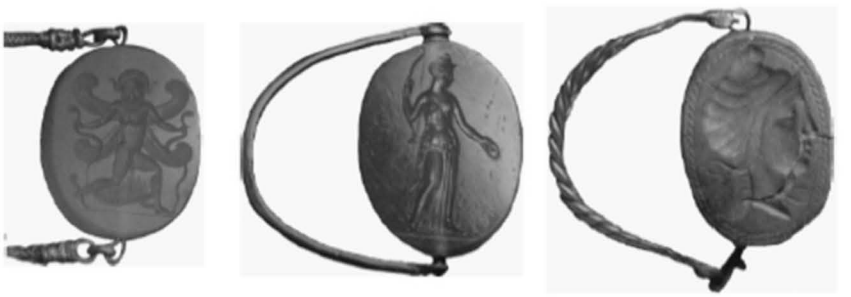
I have been fortunate to get an access to the collection at the Taxila Museum, both those found by Marshall (1951) and those from subsequent archeological excavations done by the Department of Archaeology and Museums. The Taxila collection is important as all individual specimens have a strata reference and hence a rough dating guide. As Behrendt (2004) - quoted by Jensen (2008) pointed out: *Without doubt, the change to an iconic representation of images is a reflex of changing ideologies, but as the chronology of figural depictions is not easily achievable, architecture remains a defining element in getting (chronological) information about sacred and profane practices.* The Taxila collection thus yields a reasonable source for dating typologically identical material in my collection.

Similarly I was more fortunate than Callieri (1997) in not only being able to access the material in the Peshawar Museum, but to have them removed from the adhesive mounted position for examination and photography of the complete specimen. The fuller access to the material permitted me to correct several of Callieri's descriptions, made impossible for him to study because of their mounting.

The exceptionally large size of the collection [1500 specimens], exclusively from Gandhāra, combined with specimens of known Gandhāran provenance [Taxila and Peshawar Museums] confirm Marshall's (1951) observation that while a few of the specimens could be imports from the Hellenistic West, the majority were made in Gandhāra, by Greek engravers, their apprentices or by local artists, initially adopting the Hellenistic idiom, and subsequently hybridizing them with Local, Persian, Buddhist and Central Asian themes. More so than numismatic art, sigliographic and glyptic art in Gandhāra, while extensively using Hellenistic prototypes, essentially used them for depicting local deities and belief. The discussions that follow therefore make use of this material and my personal numismatic collection of the same period from Gandhāra.

Perhaps a few general words on seals, sealings and tokens will be in order: Gem seals, as would be expected, were usually ring mounted, as seen in some specimens in this collection.

They were equally popular as ornaments worn around the wrist or neck, as pierced pendant seals - excellent examples of which can be seen in the Hermitage collection (1976)



What remains a moot point is whether they were primarily employed as seals or part of jewelry, keeping in mind that the seals are intaglio while cameos are notably employed in jewelry. Certainly those intaglio seals that have a legend engraved 'in the negative' were proper seals even though mounted in a ring, while those that did not have a legend could well have been jewelry. It should be borne in mind that cameos are considerably more difficult to engrave and hence more expensive but also there would be a limited number of artisans with the capability and tools for making them. This could possibly be one explanation of the rarity of gem cameos found in Gandhāra.

From purely financial reasons, metal seals, some of extraordinary details, were similarly used but by the less well-off strata of society. Clay tokens were used as 'passports' or identification pieces. Clay sealings were used in sealing documents or packaged goods. For a more extensive coverage of shapes and use, I refer the readers to the excellent works of Bivar (1969), Thaplyal (1972), Callerie (1997) etc.

Commentary on Iconography

The commentary below is limited to Gandhāra and specifically to the time period between the 4th century BCE and the 2nd century CE. It is by no means a very comprehensive analysis but rather a limited attempt to show that up to the time of the early Kushans, there seems to be an absence of Hindu divinities in plastic or glyptic arts in Gandhāra. As a numismatist-cum-collector of sigliographic material, I was intrigued by, what seemed, arbitrary assignment of divinity names to iconographic representations on coins and glyptic art. Very often this name assigning varied significantly amongst scholars, some repeating what others had stated in earlier works and many quoting second millennium texts as source material for late first millennium BCE and early first millennium CE material. Examples that come to mind is the article by the French Scholars Audouin and Bernard (1974) on some silver coins of Agathocles (c 165 BCE), who was amongst the very first Bactro-Greeks to have invaded and conquered India. These coins, of the 'Indian Fabric', were found at Aï Khanum, a Greek city on the border of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, which were discovered by the French Archeological mission. All the coins are identical and are the only ones of the type known. They depict a male figure standing frontally on both the obverse and the reverse, with the king's name written in Greek on one side and Brāhmi on the other:

8 Spoke Wheel

Closeup of trident? Plaugh? Rudder?

The authors have identified the two figures as Vishu [for the figure holding a 'dharmachakra', which the authors see as a 'solar wheel'] and Balarama [for the other, holding what they identify as a 'plough']. They have justified their attribution from Sanskrit treatise dealing with the subject - without pausing to realize that such works are 'modern' in as much as reflecting ancient oral tradition which underwent significant changes by the time they were committed to in writing some 1000 years later. [see below on the objections these later date renditions raise]. Apart from these shortcomings, the authors fail to identify several attributes on the imagery, notably the drawn, raised sword, the 'flask-resting-in-palm' etc. Interestingly across the Hindu Kush at Taxila, Marshall (1957) unearthed a metal seal of a frontally standing male holding a similar 'plough' in one of his raised arm. Both Marshall (1951) and Konow (1929), who studied the seal, considered the object a 'trident' and the figure that of Śiva.

Impression of copper
Seal from Taxila.

Close up of Trident?
Plaugh? Rudder?

Another example is the amazing attribution by Bopearachi (1992) who, carried away with the so called depiction of Viṣṇu and Bala on Agathocles coin, attributes to another one of this rulers coin variety, depicting a female figure, to being that of Subhadrā, Visnu's half sister, thereby alluding to the Taxillians being Vashvaites! Misra (2006) correctly points out that Subhadrā, was the half-sister of Kṛṣṇa and does not possess the necessary attributes to be considered a major deity.

Coin of Pantaleon depicting city goddess

He again misses out on the realities of the times: the persecution of the Buddhists by the Sungas and the wars between the Indo-Greeks and the rulers of the Gangetic plains had led to an influx of Buddhists from the East into Gandhāra, attendant with its natural back-lash against the few followers of Brahmanism in the region. It would not have been politic on the part of the new conqueror, Agathocles, to patronize Brahmanic deities on his coinage; furthermore local glyptic art and coinage already show an identical figure, representing either a city goddess or a local deity.

City goddess holding lotus
Gandharan coin

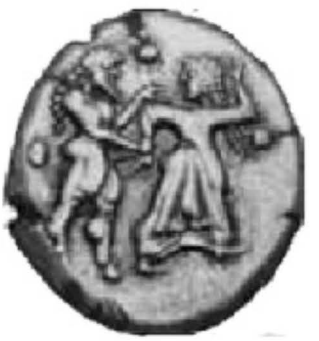
City goddess of Pushkalavati
holding lotus

Impressions of seal of city goddess holding lotus

The literature abounds with several such examples of mis-attribution, most 'cloaked' in references to 2nd millennium written texts. A brief overview of the most common 'attributes' or 'emblems' subject to mis-attribution are:

Ithyphallic Imagery - Art historians and numismatists, drawing from each other, invariably attribute all male deities porting an ithyphallic imagery to automatically represent Śiva, because of this deity's association with the linga in later periods. In the case of Kushana coinage, despite the indication of a name i.e. Oesho, the depicted deity is called Śiva because of the attributes shown on the imagery, especially the trident and his ithyphallic renditions. Knight (1892) wrote that *in Egypt and all over Asia, the mystic and symbolic worship (of the phallus) appears to have been of immemorial antiquity. The women of the former country carried images of Osiris in their sacred processions, with a movable phallus of disproportionate magnitude.* Plutarch (says) that *the Egyptian statues of Osiris had the Phallus to signify his procreative and prolific power.* [In Isis & Osiris] he wrote *"They exhibit the statue in human semblance, holding the sexual part prominent as fecundating and nourishing"]. It was the same, in emblematic writing, as the Orphic epithet, Pan-generator, universal generator, in*

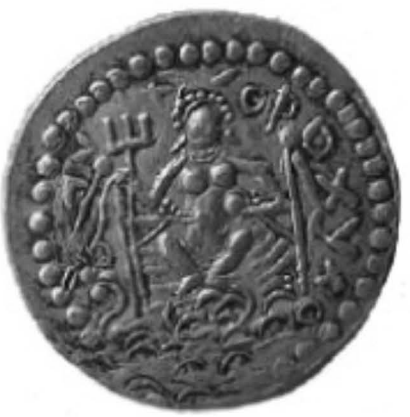
which sense it is still employed by the Hindus. Banerjea wrote that *many European and Indian scholars believe that the pre-Aryan settlers of North Western India were phallus worshipers, and if this view is accepted, we find here an incidental reference to a particular religious practice of a certain section of the Indian population of the remote times.* Ithyphallic imagery is not limited to Kushana coins. It was widely used in the Thaco-Macedonian region as far back as the 6th/5th century BCE. It is also noteworthy that nowhere in the glyptic or numismatic arts in Gandhāra is the Shiva Linga represented as such.



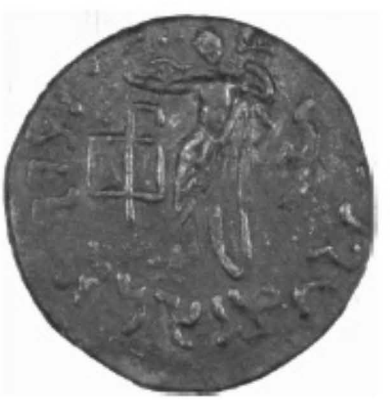
Ithyphallic Satyr

The Trident - Again the presence of this attribute leads to its immediate identification to Śiva. Giuliano (2004) in her article informs us that *the word triśūla makes no appearance in Vedic or Late Vedic literature, either in association with Śiva or in any other context* and that *the trident was unknown in Indian art* [outside Gandhāra] *till the Gupta period.* The trident was off course a symbol par excellence of Poseidon Greek mythology; it was used both by spear-fishermen and military forces. In mythology it was considered as a weapon to shatter rocks, to call forth or subdue storms, to shake the earth and the like. Most authors agree that it is of Hellenistic origin. In Numismatics, the wide spread depiction of divinities, other than Poseidon or the hybrid Zeus- Poseidon, with trident are reproduced here.

Boeta - Greek city state. c 200 BCE



Right Kanishka. c 3rd. c CE



Gandaphores c 1st

Water flask - depicted the king's right to be anointed. This stems from the Buddhist Jatakas where the new born Siddhartha is said to have been anointed with water. It is commonly depicted on Oesho coinage, being held in his pendant left hand.

Sidharta being lustrated. Peshawar Museum

Oesho on Kanishka coins. holding trident and water flask

Thunderbolt - Associated with the iconography of Zeus, it is called a Vajra in Sanskrit. As a material device, the vajra is a short metal weapon that has the symbolic nature of a diamond (it can cut any substance but not be cut itself) and that of the thunderbolt (irresistible force). Thus symbolically it represents firmness of spirit and spiritual power, and is used as such in Buddhism and Hinduism.

Zeus yielding the thunderbolt c early 2nd. c BCE

Heracles and Vajrapani in Gandharan sculpture

Bull - Since antiquity the bull has been represented as an animal of great strength and possessing strong sexual re-generative power. It received widespread recognition in Egypt, Greece, Rome, Babylonia, Assyria, Achaemenid Persia and India. The Egyptian god Apis was a deified bull. The Greek god Poseidon was worshipped with the blood of a bull (Jha 2004). It was at a much later period that it was adopted in Hindu traditions as Śiva's mount and called Nandi. Standing alone it began to be considered his theriomorphic representation. In Gandhāra, the use of a bull image in numismatics dates back to the time of the Taxillian issues, circa 180 BCE and became regularly used by the incoming Indo-Greeks, Indo-Scythians etc, starting from Apollodotus I, circa 160 BCE.

An interesting specimen is that of a gold coin with the image of a bull with a Kharoṣṭhī legend that reads *ushebhe*, and a Greek legend *Taypoc*, both meaning 'bull' - without any illusion to Siva.

Depiction of the bull on coinage

Greek City State gold coin c 450 BCE

Gandharan copper coin c 180 BCE

Indo-Greek Apollodotus silver coin c 160 BCE

Indo-Scythian Azes gold coin c 60 BCE

On gem seals and clay tokens in the collection

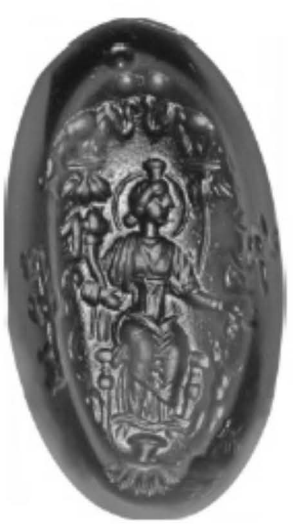
Cakra - A cakra depicted in Gandhāran art is commonly mis-attribution to being Viṣṇu's solar disc, and hence all imagery depicting it is declared to be that of Visnu (see above). Let's look again at Audouin and Bernard interpretation, where the wheel like object is declared a solar disc. In Gandhāran art, the representation of the Cakra connotes the Dharmacakra, and where depicted correctly, is in the form of a wheel with 8 spokes and represents the 8 ashtamangal [the eight auspicious symbols] of Buddhism.

Enlargement of the chakra with 8 spokes terminating in 'umbrellas

Marshall (1951) wrote In these Dharmacakra, which symbolize the third Great Miracle of the Buddha - that of setting in motion the wheel of the Law in the deer park at Banaras - the spokes of the wheel are, in almost all the earlier examples, provided with terminals outside the rim in the shape of diminutive umbrellas (the symbols of the royalty of the Buddha) .....It is true that the wheel had been a familiar symbol in India long before the Buddhists adopted it as one of their most significant emblems... and sort to show, by its presence, the proud title of cakravartin or Universal Monarch.

Gandharan sculptures depicting dharmachakra worship

Lustrated Female - Standing or seated deity, sometimes on a lotus throne, holding a lotus flower in hand, with one elephant on either side standing on a long stem lotus and pouring water on the deity is a popular rendering of a lustrating divinity [commonly referred to as Gaja Laxhmi]. Banerjee pointed out that the lotus in the hand alone would not always justify us in identifying the figure as Laxhmi unless some other distinctive marks are present; the lotus on which a few of these goddesses are made to stand is not also the characteristic of Laxhmi alone, for the lotus pedestal is one of the commonest pedestals on which the cult divinity are placed...The concept of lustrating of a divinity by water is mentioned in the *Nidānakathā Jataka* where immediately after Buddha immerged from his mother's womb, 'two showers of water came down from heaven in honor of them and refreshed the Bodisatva and his mother.' (Rhys Davids 1880). In much of the descriptive passage on Maya and the birth of the Buddha, the sacred nature of the elephant and the presence of the lotus flowers are mentioned. The imagery of the lustrated deity can therefore be seen as a syncretic derivation from the Maya being showered from heaven - iconographically replacing the heaven by the two elephants and encapsulating the whole scene with a profuse depiction of the lotus flowers.

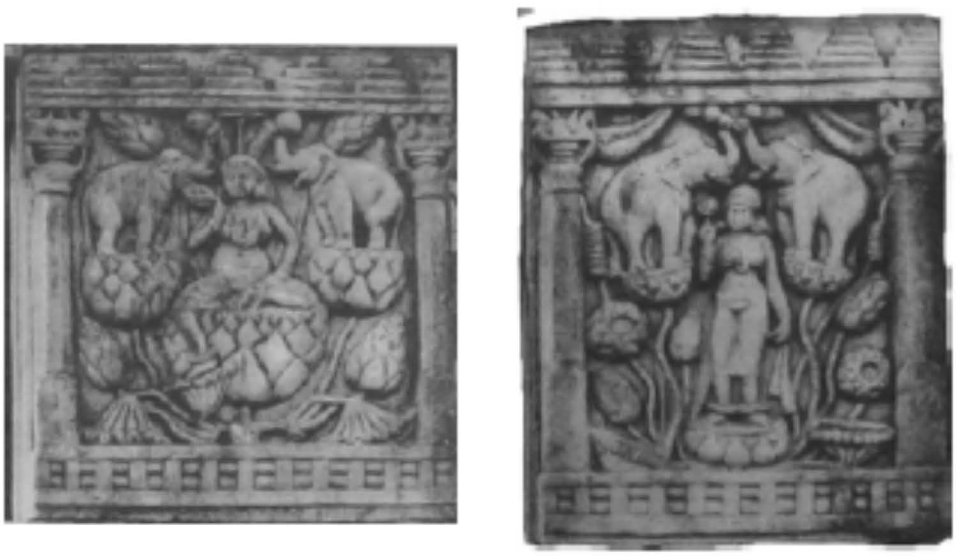


Seated nimbate deity with a polos, wearing a Greek dress being lustrated by two elephants

Frontally facing deity, top half nude, in a dancing' pose being lustrated by two elephants

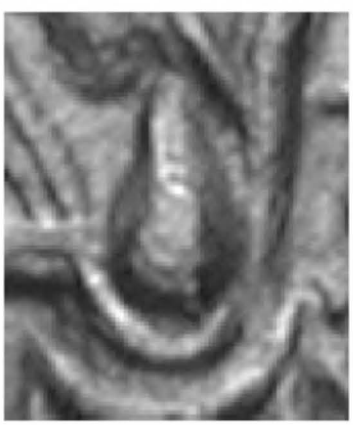
Alternately this may be a local divinity Śri Mata as Rhys Davids proposed. Marshall and Foucher (1918) dating the imagery of a lustrated female on the Northern Gateway at Sanchi to a period perhaps even before the reign of Asoka in the third century BCE, attribute it to Maya, Siddharta's mother.

Sanchi. Front of Northern Gate



(Left: Deity seated on lotus, one leg resting on the flower, the other pendant.
Right: Deity standing on inverted lotus. In both frames deity holds a lotus and is being lustrated by two elephants)

Viṣṇu - non-Vedic; post Gupta. Very commonly mis-attributed by Art Historians and Numismatists, is not represented in anthropomorphic form on coins or glyptic arts till Gupta period. An Indian scholar, Sikri [:2002] admits that there is no iconic representation of Viṣṇu assignable earlier than the beginning of the Christian era. Banerjea (1995) writes ...the Vedic Viṣhṇu, one of the constituent elements of the composite cult god Vāsudeva-Nārāyana-Viṣṇu of the Epic and Purāṇic, is undoubtedly one of the aspects of the sun-god in the Vedic period.....But the concrete representations of these anthropomorphic, theriomorphic and hybrid forms make their appearance in the sectarian art at a much later date, and we do not find any reference whatsoever to such figures in the multifarious descriptions of the early Vedic divinities. Again Audouin and Bernard make a serious error in declaring the object held on the palm of his hands as being a conch shell, thereby confirming to them that the figure represents Vishnu.

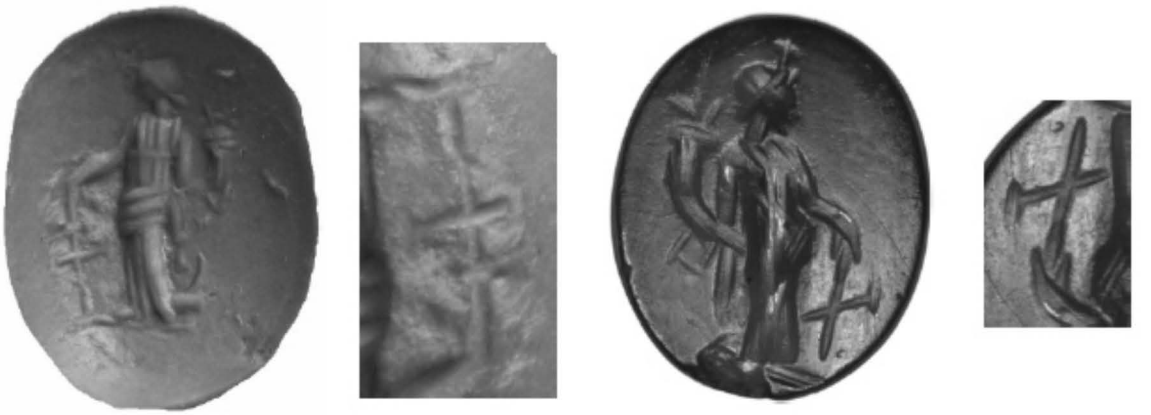


Flask being held in the palm of the hand

The Plough - Frequently mis-attributed as indicative of a Balarama imagery is not so for reasons already pointed out while discussing Viṣṇu above. Let's take another look at Audouin and Bernard interpretation.

Rendition of plough on a token. The image at the right has been turned 90° counter clock wise to imitate object held by the figure on Agathocles coin

Based on what may be a near contemporary clay token in my collection [see the early rendition of the Kharoṣṭhī 'closed' 'Sa'] of a plough, we find no resemblance. A third option that cannot be ruled out is that of a Tyche's rudder held aloft as seen on several seals in the Taxila Museum, turned 180° and also several specimen in this collection:



Impression of a gem seal in the Taxila museum collection and a gem seal in the author's collection, depicting Tyche holding a cornucopia and resting one hand on a rudder.

Similar rendition of Tyche on clay token

All the seals and sealings depict Tyche in her classical Greek pose, wearing Greek garments, and are hence of an earlier period possibly contemporary to the time of Agathocles. Recollect that the rudder attribute of Tyche signified the city goddess's ability to steer the city to prosperity.

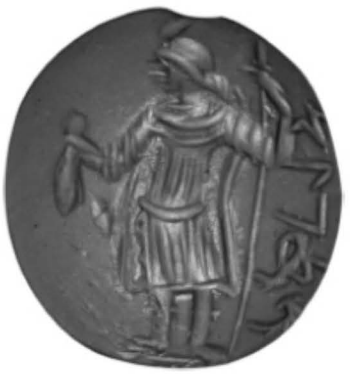
My interpretation of the imagery on this coin type of Agathoclius is that it was an experimental issue for a possible use in the conquered territories of Gandhara, probably designed by a Gandharan engraver but minted at the Royal Court at Aï Khanum for approval of the authority. Since the design on these coins are so very different to Agathoclius's Bactrian coinage, it seems that the engraver wanted to convey an Indian theme and fabric to the king, for greater acceptability amongst the conquered populace and to portrait the him as a defender of the land [the raised sword], the harbinger of good fortune [the rudder] and the propagator of the faith - the dharmachakra and the flask.

Warrior Deity - Rosenfield writes that during the time of Kanishka I and Huvishka, the syncretic fusion is noted clearly at work among Indian war gods: Mahāsena (great general), Skanda (attacker), Viśākhā and Kumāra (princely youth.) He points out that during Huvishka's time these were separate and independent deities, but at a later date their identities were merged into that of a single war god, Kārttikeya, and their names were applied to him as cognomen. In the Rabatak inscription the names of Mahāsena, Viśākhā and perhaps Kumāra were written above those of the Iranian gods Sroshard, Narasa and Mihr.

A wide variety of such male deities are depicted in Gandhāran glyptic arts. They begin with the Buddhist adoption of Kubera - 'the General of the gods' to his merger into the Buddhist deity, Panchika, and later hybridization with the Iranian Pharro, to ultimately emerge as the prototype for the Hindu Kartekya:

Gem seal impression of an Iranian deity holding spear and cornucopia

Gandharan sculpture of Buddhist deity Kubera seated holding a spear and a money bag



Gem seal of Buddhist deity Panchika holding spear and a money bag

Gandharan sculpture of Kartekiya holding

Undoubtedly the subject of iconography, especially of the deities, is complex and not very well understood in the absence of written contemporary records. It seems that art historians and numismatists have thus preferred referencing to either arbitrarily dated sculpture or modern renditions of ancient texts. This has led me to believe that they are reading into the past a mistaken view of such modern renderings. I am intrigued on why supplemental tools such as linguistic evolution, numismatics and historical accounts have not been more exhaustively explored. With the certainty of the provenance of the sigliographic material in the collections and the near definitive dating of numismatics material, I am daring to approach the subject along the lines I think they ought to be studied. However this is a limited attempt both due to the short time and space span considered and my own limited knowledge, aggravated by lack of decent library facilities in Dubai.

Archeological Context

The term Gandhāra is used for designating an area in the North West of Pakistan, including the Peshawar Valley, Swat, Dir, Chitral, Buner, Bajaur and Taxila, and has been known and designated by that name since antiquity. Beginning in the mid 1850s many archeological excavations some in considerable details - some limited to surface sherd finds - were carried out in this region. Today it boasts of over 2000 known sites in a roughly 10,000 square kilometers area, ranking it, arguably, as the most densely occupied historical zones of South Asia. The time span for these sites covers a period from the Stone Age to the Islamic period. Such sites have been excavated more or less exhaustively and have yielded remains of Hellenistic, Scythian, Parthian, Kushan and later civilizations. The excavations have yielded townships, monasteries, temples and Stupas. An important point to note here is that there has not been a single Brahmanic temple or site found so far, dated earlier than the 5th century CE. A priori therefore there seems little to support the existence of Brahmanic deities in their anthropomorphic form in the region. As archeological finds demonstrate, Gandhāra was inhabited by a people of mixed ancestry drawn from Persian, Greek, Scythian, Parthian, and Kushan stock. Despite the mélange, as the material in this work demonstrates, the iconographic idiom shows a strong bias towards pre-existing local beliefs.

Historical Context

According to the Behistun Inscription and later historical accounts by Greek writers, notably Herodotus and Ctesias, the conquest of Gandhāra is attributed to Darius the Great, circa 500 BCE. Prior to that, one is told

by ethnologists (Schaffer 1954) that the population mix was of 'Indo-Aryans' and various local people notably Bhils-Nahāls and a majority of the Druhyus who are said to have founded Gandhāra, and spoke Dardic, which was linguistically between the Indic and Iranic languages. Thus the Vedic language, and as a consequence, socio-cultural practices, co-mingled with the existing local Prākrits and customs. These could well be considered to have been further diluted by the Avestan brought in by the new conquering Persians who ruled over Gandhāra during the next two centuries. As has been pointed out by scholars (Mitchiner 2004), the Persian conquest had a major impact on the Hindus of Pakistan. Those who wished to remain adopted Persian culture and appear to have forgotten much of their Hindu tradition. Those who wished to retain their Hindu traditions and to live by Hindu norms moved eastwards beyond the Persian frontier. This therefore was the state of affairs in Gandhāra during the 6th - 4th century BCE.

Towards the end of the 4th century BCE, the Persians were conquered by Alexander's forces and the Gandhāran demography further changed, introducing strong Hellenistic beliefs of the conquerors into the indigenous population mix of Persians and Indians. The migration of yet new waves of foreigners into Gandhāra slowed down under the Mauryans, circa 3rd century BCE, who nonetheless maintained trade contacts with the Mediterranean and, under Ashoka, could well have exerted influence in reinforcing Buddhist belief and traditions. Subsequent to the Mauryan period, mass migration recommenced: from the West by new waves of Greeks - remnants of Alexander's forces - Scythian, Parthian, Kushan, Sasanian and Huna through the great passes, and from the plains to the East, of Buddhists fleeing from the Sungas persecutions. After the demise of the Mauryan Empire and the advent of the Sungas under Pusyamitra, Buddhism experienced severe persecution at the hands of the Brahman Sungas, forcing many to flee west into Gandhāra. Strong (1983) quoting from the 2nd century Ashokavadana informs us "*...then King Pusyamitra equipped a fourfold army, and intending to destroy the Buddhist religion, he went to the Kukkutarama. (...) Pusyamitra therefore destroyed the sangharama, killed the monks there, and departed...*" Some scholars have disputed the veracity of the Buddhist persecution by the Sungas, however the fact of the lack of chronologically datable Hindu temples and plastic art in Gandhāra lends indirect credence to the accounts narrated in the Ashokavadana.

Marshall (1951), with his unrivalled knowledge derived from his extensive excavations at Mohengodaro, Taxila, Shah-ji ki Dheri, Sanchi and other sites, writes that during the 3rd century BCE Buddhism was probably the strongest religious body in the Punjab and North West [i.e. Gandhāra], and numerically, perhaps, not inferior to the Brahmans of Hindustan and Central India. He was also of the opinion that Buddhism, by its very nature, would no doubt have been likely to appeal to the Greek intellect more than Brahmanism and that Greeks and Buddhists happened to have a common enemy in the Sunga king.

Thus, by the beginning of the second century BCE, the religious beliefs of the Gandhāran society can well be assumed to have become one of wide spread syncretism between the Hellenistic, Buddhist and Persian origin impacting on the local beliefs. Whatever remained of pure Vedic beliefs played an insignificant influence. This is also borne out by the sigliographic, glyptic and numismatic evidence. This situation started undergoing changes with the Kushan invasion during the first century CE. As remarked by Rosenfield (2006) the Kushana sovereignty was rooted in a cult of kingship in which the ruler was imbued with divine powers conferred by Gods who protected the realm. The famous Kanishka I Rabatak inscription (Sims-Williams and Cribb 1995/96), attests to this fact in no uncertain words. However due to a lack of their own iconographic traditions, they readily borrowed from existing Hellenistic models and made additional changes into them as they went along.

It is interesting to note that other than numismatics, the iconography of the Kushana divinities is limited, indicative of preferences of the Gandhārans retaining Hellenistic derived imagery for local divinities. While it could be expected that with the opening up of trade and communication with their eastern neighbours some elements of Hindu Shaivites and Vaishnuvaites beliefs might have crept into Gandhāra, there is little conclusive evidence that this happened. One reason perhaps was that there was no iconographical parallel

or prototypes in the Hindu heartland of the Gangetic Plains at that time. In summary then, the historic canvas in Gandhāra during the period 6th century BCE and the 2nd century CE demonstrates: (1) that the population mix in Gandhāra was very different from the rest of Hindustan; the large majority of the Gandhāran population were not-followers of the Brahmanic religion; (2) that the iconic traditions followed in Gandhāra were those familiar to and thus patronized by the population and were often a hybrid of borrowings from Greek, Persian, Buddhist and local beliefs; (c) Hindu divinities, as have come down to us from the much later manuscripts of Hindu religious texts, were unknown and un-patronized by the Gandhārans.

Textural and linguistic Context

While the Aryans brought their own language into the sub-continent, they could not close the northwestern gate behind them, and were followed in due course by a succession of further invaders from Central Asia and the Iranian plateau. Most of them were people of Indo-European language stock, more closely related to the Iranian language. In a nut shell, the spoken and written forms of the language in Gandhāra underwent gradual but significant changes over time, due to continuous invasion by people of different linguistic backgrounds.

As discussed earlier, Gandhāra, presumably of original Druhyus stock, was inundated by waves of Vedic, Avestan, Greek and other Indo-European/Central Asian people, all with developed and completely different linguistic features. The linguistic background in Gandhāra during the first millennium BCE may be summarized thus: the language of the invading Aryans was Vedic, which absorbed elements of the languages of the pre-Aryan stocks in Gandhāra, Dardic, to the point where it evolved into local Prākrits or Pali (Masica 1993). Rhys David (1903) states that *from Takka-silā all the way down to Champā no one spoke Sanskrit. The living language everywhere was a sort of Pali. Many of the old Vedic words were retained in more easily pronounceable forms. Many new words were formed on analogy from the existing stock of roots. Many other new words were adopted from non-Aryan forms of speech.*

Meanwhile, it is accepted that during the 7th/6th century BCE, the earliest form of Sanskrit moved into the Gangetic heartland where it was to flourish into Classical Sanskrit. Due to the 'push' of the Achaemenians, as Mitchner (2004) points out, it was in the Gangetic plains that Sanskrit saw its greatest literary flowering during the first millennium CE onwards; there it created the great Epics and the Purāṇas - a full thousand years after the language saw its origin. The local Prākrits continued to be used in Gandhāra, undergoing creeping changes due to borrowings of words and phrases from the intruding foreign linguistic groups. There is no reason to believe that, as with the language, the culture, religious beliefs and arts did not undergo similar adaptive and evolutionary processes over the period of the first millennium BCE. This is too evident from the coins and seals of this period.

The next important element is to review the history and influence of religious works of the Brahmanic religion. We are told that the earliest works are those of the Veda hymns, the Ṛgveda being the oldest, claimed to have originated sometime during 1550- 1200 BCE. The age of the Ṛgveda was succeeded by that of the Brāhmaṇas or sacrificial treaties which were practical guide books for the correct performance of various types of sacrifices. Next came the Upanisads where the pursuit of higher knowledge - the true knowledge about the Brahman, Atman and the Universe - was the chief desideratum. Banerjea (1995) points out that *in such esoteric literature where the true nature of the Brahman and Atman is being deeply cogitated, it is futile to seek for references to concrete representation of deities. The peculiar mystico-philosophical beliefs which are expressed in this class of literature only confine themselves to undoubtedly a smaller section of the people, obviously the higher intellectuals. Scholars are often prone to generalize and assume that what can be said about these few is applicable to all the Indians of a particular period.*

The Upanisads were followed by the Great Epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa and then the Purāṇas, all reportedly introduced during the period 500 - 100 BCE. Unfortunately all these and earlier works were maintained in oral tradition and their extant written forms are known to us only from the 6th century CE onwards.

A significant difficulty in the study of early iconography based on written records is the corruption that has occurred in manuscript transmission; not only are extant copies of older works removed from the original content by many millennia, but those earliest known versions have been corrupted by many generations of recopying. With the earliest written texts of Brahmanic beliefs dating to around the 5th - 6th century CE, the removal in time and space of these literary compositions from the points of origins of the languages employed in them, cannot, but introduce complications into their use as evidence, not only for stages of linguistic development, but of rites and beliefs. It is widely accepted that contemporary forms had crept into Sanskrit vocabulary, which again lends credence to the historical attribution of the pristine form of the Brahmanic sacred text of the 1st millennium CE religious beliefs represented in the Vedas, Upanisads, Brahmana etc., as not being factual. This is further complicated by the fact that the priestly cast throughout the millennia played an 'editorial' role, incorporating local but popular beliefs, discarding the lesser known ones etc. As Rhys Davids (1903) asserts *It is the accepted belief that it is in the literature of the Brahmins that we find the evidence as to the religious beliefs of the peoples of India in the sixth and seventh century BC. This seems more than doubtful. The priests have preserved for us, not so much the opinions the people actually held, as the opinions the priests wished them to hold. Rapson* (1916) held similar views, pointing out that *the chief difficulty which the historian finds in using these materials lies in the fact that the books in their present form are not original. They are the versions of a later age; and it is not easy to determine to what extent their purport has been changed by subsequent additions or corrections, or by textual corruption, and their evidence, therefore, must be used with caution; it can scarcely be questioned that much of their substance is extremely ancient, although the form it is expressed may have undergone considerable change in the course of ages.* An excellent overview on the subject of the influence of early Brahmanic beliefs is outlined in Banerjea (1995), who writes that the great mass of literature took centuries to attain its present shape and the canons are really the results of the accumulated experience of generations of artists whose business was to construct images. He also reconfirms that the present form of iconographic literature can only be fixed to the 6th century CE and presented in a perfected form, as we now know it, to the 12th to 14th century CE.

Granoff (2006) writes that art historians familiar with the visual record have drawn our attention to the fact that narrative scenes are strikingly absent from the earliest repertoire of Hindu art, despite their prevalence in Buddhist art of an early date. Indeed it is generally agreed that narrative scenes based on Purāṇic myths and the stories in the Mahābhārata did not appear until the Gupta period, and the full range of scenes, particularly those centering around Śiva, was to appear even later. In a footnote he informs us that Giuseppi Tucci argued from a different perspective that the cult of Śiva with its developed mythology was the result of a complex process that first began in the Kushan period. It was only after this period, during which local cults were synthesized, that the theological speculation and myth-making which we associate with Śiva proceeded. Although he does not state so explicitly, Tucci's argument leads to the conclusion that the Puranic Śiva is in fact a relatively late development.

In summary then, by what linguists and philologists are telling us, idol worship, and thus iconography, seems to be a later addition to the Vedic beliefs, primarily surfacing in the much later Purāṇas, compiled in the Gangetic plains, wherein the vivid and detailed descriptions and attributes of various divinities gradually evolved, perhaps starting in the post Gupta period.

Numismatic Context

A study of the coinage in use in Gandhāra between the 4th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, draws attention to the fact that, before the advent of the Kushans, while depicting deities, the Greeks, Scythians

and Parthian continued to use Hellenistic motifs without the naming the deity. Also noteworthy is that some attempts were made in introducing anthropomorphic forms of local divinities, apparently to acknowledge popular local beliefs.

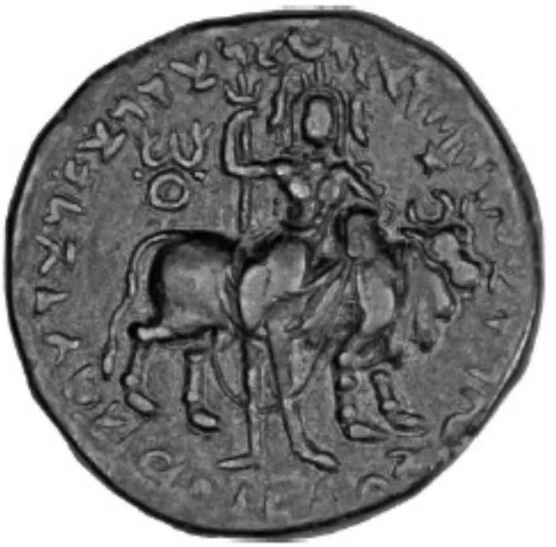
Early Indo-Greek coinage of Gandhara possibly depicting a city goddess

Early Indo-Greek coinage of Gandhara possibly depicting a city goddess

Silver coinage of the Indo-Scythian Azilises depicting the lustrated deity

The Kushans who succeeded these dynasties held strong beliefs in the concept of the divine power of kingship, and became the first of the invaders in introducing a large number of hitherto unknown Iranian divinities and placing their names alongside the image on the coin.

For themselves they assumed epithets much as some of Alexander's successors had done earlier in styling themselves 'theos', 'devaputra' etc. This projection of association with the gods often resulted in the portrayal of the rulers in god-forms embellished with one or more of a deity's attributes. This unfortunately led scholars in attributing many such epithets as being that of the specific deity appearing on the coin. One such example is the title on the reverse of some of Wima Kadphises coins depicting Oesho with trident, where Kadphises styles himself 'sarvalokishvara [lord of the whole world] and 'mahishvara, [mahī = earth, and iśhvara=lord; thus lord of the earth.] Most scholars take this for maheshvara [mahaa (great)] and iishvara, [(a+i=e) = the great lord], a much later epithet of Śiva. Falk points out that 'i' and 'e' are confused by such authors. The titles are Iranian or Roman (personal correspondence) Banerjea (1995) correctly points out that this is a title that Wima assumed for himself, as Antiochus IV [of Syria] had done previously in styling himself Theos Epiphanous - the God manifest.

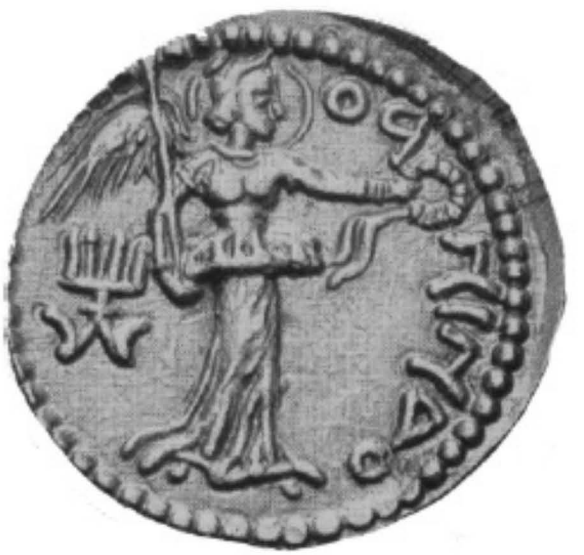


Wima Kadphises copper coin depicting a 3 headed deity holding a trident and a flask with a legend acclaiming himself as lord of the whole world

Reverse of Antiochus IV's copper coin depicting a standing eagle with a legend declaring himself as the god manifest

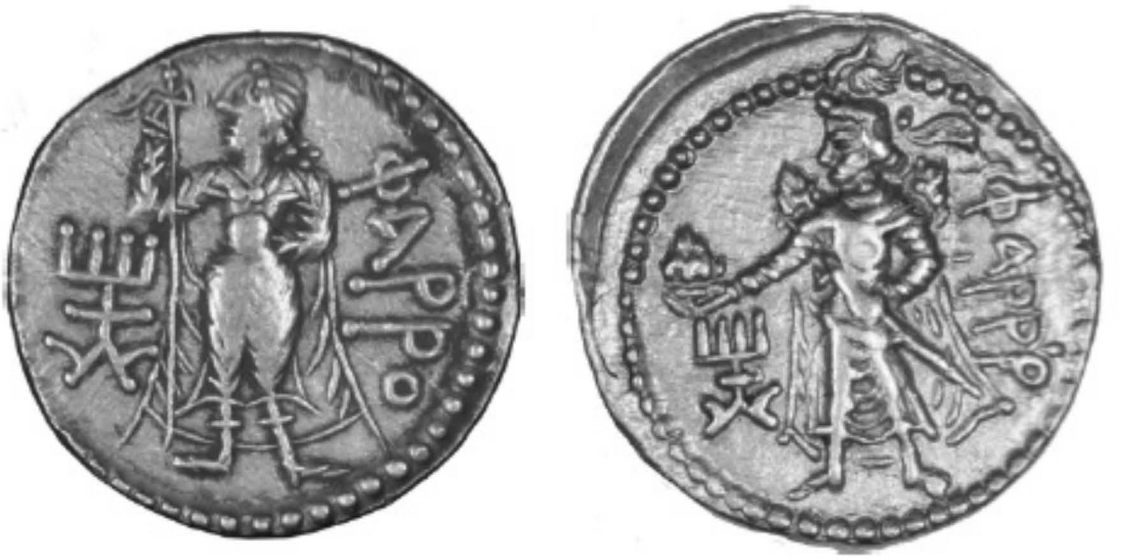
As stated earlier, the Kushans placed the divinity's name alongside its imagery on the reverse, in indication that they derived their right to ruler-ship from the divinity. In the absence of an iconographic Kushana prototype, they used Hellenistic imagery to depict the form of the deity. Judging from their extensive coinage, it seems that there were no rigid rules governing which Hellenistic prototypes were to be used for a particular divinity - often the same iconographic features were used for different divinities or the same divinity assumed different iconographic features.

Indo-Greek Menander's coin depicting a winged Nike (victory) holding a diadem in her outstretched arm, while carrying a palm branch on her shoulder



Kushan Huvishka's coin depicting the Iranian deity of victory employing identical iconographic features as the Greek Nike

Identical pose and dress of 2 distinctly different Iranian deities



Distinctly different iconographic representations of the same Iranian deity

This is an important aspect to note as it reinforces the hypothesis that rigidity of iconographic features was not a major concern for the Gandhārans; not only could they understand and relate to the imagery on numismatic and glyptic art, but the same image could be equally acceptable by many communities for differing local deities. From this follows the use of differing attributes given to the same divinity on contemporary imagery as seen in the above example of Pharro on Huvishka's coins.

The entire Gandhāran region was by no means a uniform mass of territory ruled by a single ruler -except during the Mauryan and Kushan periods. Often the region was split into many independent kingdoms ruled by different Kings and over-lords, of differing cultures, linguistic backgrounds and beliefs. Each separate community established a community-specific deity and to assert the superiority of 'their' deity over

those of others, attributed them with additional powers for granting favors or inflicting pain. Kanishka I, the Kushan, exploited this practice by introducing multiple heads and limbs to one of his divinities to signify the omni-presence and omni-potent nature of the divinity from whom he got his patronage. Thus Oesho [Wēšparker or Vāyu, an Iranian wind god] (Tanabe 1991/92), is seen on his coinage as a hybrid deity with attributes of Poseidon, Herakles and Buddhist beliefs, 'enhanced' through addition of multiple heads and arms:

Rendition of the same deity, Oesho, on the coinage of the first five Great Kushan Kings.

Wima Taktu Wima Khadphise Kanishka Huvishka Vasu Deva 1

- Wima Taktu. Poseidon's trident plus Herakles' club

- Wima Khadphises. Three headed, two human and one of a goat, Poseidon's trident plus Bud- dhist water vessel & dharmacakra plus Zeus's thunder bolt and Heracles' lion skin.

- Kanishka I. Four arms. Poseidon's trident plus Zeus's thunder bolt plus Buddhist water vessel plus a ribboned diadem.

- Huvishka. Three human headed, four armed; Poseidon's trident plus Buddhist water vessel plus Zeus's thunderbolt plus Heracles's club.

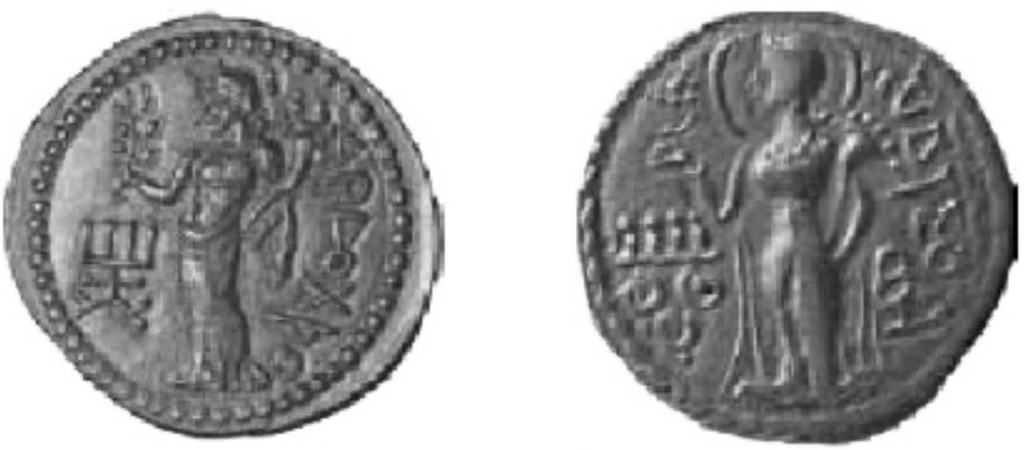
- Vasu Deva I. Three human headed, four arms, ithyphallic, Poseidon's trident, two Buddhist water vessels, ribboned diadem. Bull in the background.

Note: the above Oesho images are random selections intended to demonstrate various attributes adopted in numismatic arts and do not represent a chronological sequence of the display of such attributes on Kushana coinage. Similar examples are to be found on contemporary glyptic art:

As a final point to my hypothesis that Hindu iconography played no part in the arts of Gandhāra during the period of the 4th century BCE and 2nd century CE, I would like to introduce a brief glance to the coinage of the Imperial Guptas, considered the classical or Golden Age of Indian arts, perhaps never again equaled in

subsequent periods. As staunch Hindus, they were in the forefront in the development of anthropomorphic forms of Hindu deities in Plastic and Glyptic art etc. They could therefore be considered the first amongst the great Hindu dynasties to propagate these forms for deities based on whatever came down to them by way of oral traditions of ancient rites, rituals, symbols and forms. However, as various numismatists, including Altekar (1992), Mukherjee (1991), Gupta (1981), Chhabra (1986) and others point out, the Guptas initially adopted the Kushan iconography as prototypes, strongly suggesting that the anthropomorphic forms of Hindu divinities were unknown and unavailable from oral or written texts that may have been available at that time. This has been widely accepted by most specialist scholars listed above. The wide spread use of such Kushana prototypes as Ardoxsho by the Guptas, and its gradual conversion to the Hindu goddess Laxhmi is illustrated:

Note the progressive changes: the disappearance of the 'foreign' high back throne to first an Indian back-less four legged charpoy ['4-legged' chair or bed] and ultimately to a wicker stool; the replacement of the mat on which Ardoxsho rests her feet, first to a fully open lotus and later to a more elaborate form of the flower; the replacement of the cornucopia by a long stem lotus and the disappearance of the Kushan Tamgha.



Another example is that of the standing Ardoxsho with the palm branch, itself adopted from Hellenistic prototypes, where the long stem lotus replaces the branch and the deity now depicted with a halo.

Conclusion

Coinage being the ideal propaganda media because of its wide circulation and practical use, the imagery on them acclaims, not only information on the ruler himself, but his beliefs and perhaps also the popular beliefs existing in his territories. It thus disseminates knowledge on the iconography of a deity through its visual

representations in anthropomorphic form, perhaps as a prototype for others to adopt. A casual survey of the numismatic material during the time-line under consideration amply shows a distinct lack of Hindu divinities on the coins circulating in Gandhāra. That such principal deities as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Laxhmi etc. were not represented on the early Gupta coins, further reinforces the conclusion that Hindu iconography of the anthropomorphic presentation of deities was not a tradition prior to their advent. As demonstrated on Gupta coinage, it also highlights that Hindu iconography derived from the various anthropomorphic forms employed by the Gandhārians, which in turn were of Greek, Persian, Buddhist, Central Asian, Local or their hybrid or syncretic origin.

Summary

The pantheon of deities represented on the sigliographic, numismatic and plastic media is seen to be a hybrid/syncretic mix of Hellenistic, Iranian, and Central Asian deities with a strong bias towards representation of local Gandhāran Deities. Attributing these early Gandhāran renditions to later period iconographic developments in the Gangetic region conveys erroneous messages e.g. to this day most, if not all, scholars accept Audouin and Bernard's attribution of the figures on the Aï Khanum silver coins of Agathocleus as proof positive that in the early second century BCE the existence of a strong Vashnuavite cult existed in the far West of the sub-continent, especially Gandhāra, while my hypothesis is that this was far from the case. This being so, all later scholars, notably Bopearachi, who claims unrivalled knowledge to everything Gandhāran, brings up links for other iconographic representations through dipping into modern day Sanskrit texts and propounding links that do not exist. What remains a mystery to me is the silence of other scholars to such mis-interpretations.

Many examples exist of numismatists and art historians mistakenly casting back into time modern day renditions. Need therefore exists for scholars to study the evolution of iconography in Gandhāra utilizing the vast archeological, historical, linguistic and numismatic data now avail-able to us, in order to close this chapter of the fascinating history of the region.

References

Altekar, Anant Sadashiv, 1992, Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard, Patna, Reprint.

Audouin, Rémy and Bernard, Paul, 1974, Trésor De Monnaies Indiennes et Indo-Greques D'Aï Khanum (Afghanistan). RN 1974, Series 6.

Banerjea, Jitendra Nath, 1985, The Development of Hindu Iconography, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharial Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Beal, Samuel, 1968, Buddhist Records of The Western World. p. xxiii.

Bivar, A.D.H., 1968. Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Part III, Pahlavi Inscriptions, Vol VI Seals and Coins, Portfolio I; Plates i-xxx, Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian Seals and Kushano-Sasanian Coins: Sasanian Seals in the British Museum, London.

Bivar, A.D.H, 1969, Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Stamp Seals. II Sassanian Dynasty, London: The British Museum.

Blurton, T. Richard, 2007, Hindu Art, London: The British Museum.

Bunce, Fredrick W, 1997, A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography, Illustrated. New Delhi: D.K.Printworld (P) Ltd.

Callieri, Pierfrancesco, 1997, Seals and Sealings from the North-West of the Indian Subcontinent and Afghanistan (4th century BC—11th century AD)—Local, Indian, Sasanian, Graeco-Persian, Sogdian, Roman, with contributions by Elizabeth Errington, Riccardo Garbini, Philippe Gignoux, Nicholas Sims- Williams, Wladimir Zwalf (Istituto universitario orientale, dissertationes, 1). Naples.

Chhabra, Bahadur Chand, 1986, Catalogue of the Gupta Coins of the Bayana Hoard in the National Museum. New Delhi.

Cribb, Joe, 1997, Shiva images on Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian coins, The Institute of Silk Road Studies, Kamakura.

Cribb, Joe, 2008, The Kushan Pantheon, The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Mainz: Verlag Philipp Von Zabern.

Cribb, Joe, 2008, Coins and the Chronology of Gandhara, The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan.

Davids, T.W.Rhys, 1993, Buddhist India, Reprint Delhi.

Davids, T.W.Rhys, 1999, Buddhist Birth Stories, Reprint Delhi.

Doniger, Wendy, 2009, The Hindus, an alternate history. New York.

Filigenzi, Anna, 2008, Buddhist Art In Its Social Context, The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan.

Foucher, A, 1917, The Beginning of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archæology.

Gardner, Percy, 1966, [reprint], The Coins of the Greek and Scythic Kings of Bactria and India in the British Museum, Chicago: Argonaut, Inc.Publishers.

Giuliano, Laura, 2004, Studies in early Saiva iconography: (I) the origin of the triśūla and some related problems.

JISRS, Silk Road Art and Archaeology # 10, Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies.

Granoff, Phillis, 2006, Śiva and his Gaṇas: Techniques of Narrative Distancing in Purāṇic Stories in Voice of the Orient. Ed. Panda, Dr. Raghunath. Mishra, DR. Madhusudan. Delhi.

Gray, Louis Herbert,1917, The Mythology of All Races, Volume VI Indian, Iranian, Massachusettis: Marshall Jones Company.

Gupta, P.L. & Srivastava, 1981, S. Gupta Gold Coins, Bharat Kala Bhavan.

Hinks, Roger, 1939, Myths and Allegory in Ancient Art, Studies of the Warburg Institute.

Ingolt, Harald,1957, Gandhāran Art in Pakistan, New York: Pantheon Books Inc. Jha, Bhogendra 2004 Bull in early Indian art. (Perspectives in Indian art and archaeology, no.5)

Knight, Richard Payne, 1892, Symbolic language of Ancient Art and Mythology. Reprint by Kessinger Publishing.

Kurita, Isao, 2003, Gandhāran Art II—The World of the Buddha (rev. and enlarged ed.). Tokyo.

Masica, Colin P, 1993, The Indo-Aryan languages. Cambridge.

Maheshwari, Madhurika K, 2009, From Ogress to Goddess Hariti A Buddhist Deity.IIRNS Publications Pvt. Ltd.

Marshall, Sir John, 1928-29, Excavation at Taxila. ASIAR 1928-29: 51-66.

Omananda Saraswati, Swami, 1960, The Buddhist Art of Gandhāra. The Story of the Early School: Its Birth, Growth and Decline, Cambridge University press.

Omananda Saraswati, Swami, 1974, [2031 vikrama] bhārat ke prācīn mudrāṃk—Ancient Seals of India. Rohtak.

Omananda Saraswati, Swami, 1975, Taxilla An illustrated account of Archeological Excavations, 3 vols. Indian reprint.

Omananda Saraswati, Swami, 1975, Taxila, 3 Volumes. Indian reprint, Vol. I, p. 34,

Marshall, Sir John & Foucher, Alfred, 1918, The Monuments of Sānchi, 3 vols. footnote 1.

Masson-Oursel, Paul; Willman-Grabowska, Helena de; Stern, Philippe, 1934, Ancient Indian and Indian Civilization, London.

McArthur, Meher, 2002, Reading Buddhist Art, An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols. London.

Mitchiner, Michael, 1978, Oriental Coins and Their Values. The Ancient and Classical World. 600 B.C. - A.D. 650. London: Hawkins Publications.

Mitchiner, Michael, 2004, Ancient Trades and Early Coinage. 3 volumes. London: Hawkins Publications.

Mukherjee, Chhanda, 1991, Gupta Numismatic Art, Delhi.

Muzio, Ciro Lo, 1995/96 OHPO: A Sovereign God, *Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies*, Kamakura,Max, [date???] Chips from German Workshop. Vol. 1

Quagliotti, Anna Maria, 2008, Deities integrated into Buddhist, *The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan*.

Rao, T.A.Gopinatha, 1914, Elements of Hindu Iconography, 2 volumes, Delhi: Reprint by Low Price Publications.

Rapson, E.J, 1901, Notes on Indian coins and seals, Part IV, Indian Seals and Clay Impressions. JRAS: 98- 108.

Rapson, E.J, 1905, Notes on Indian coins and seals, Part VI. JRAS: 783-814.AO: A.

Rapson, E.J, 1916, Ancient India, Cambridge.

Rosenfield, John M, 1967, The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans. U.S.A.

Rosenfield, John M, 2006, Prologue: Some Debating Points on Gandharan Buddhism and Kushana History. Gandharan Buddhism - Archaeology, Art, Texts. Toronto.

Senior, R.C, 2001, Indo-Scythian Coins and History, II. Lancaster/Pennsylvania/London (Classical Numismatic Group).

Shafer, Robert, 1954, Ethnography of Ancient India, Wiesbaden.

Sikri, Richa, 2002, Early Brahmanical Cults and Associated Iconography, (c. 400 B.C. to A.D. 600).New Delhi: Kaveri Books.

Sikri, Richa, 2002, Eary Brahmanical Cults and Associated Iconography, Delhi. P. 35.

Sims-Williams, N. & Cribb, Joe, 1995/6, A new Bactrian Inscription of Kanishka the great, *Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies*, Kamakura. Japan.

Smith, William, 1880, A New Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography, in 2 volumes. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers.

Stoye, Martina, 2008, Ganymede and Garuḍa, *The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan*.

Tanabe, Katsumi, 1991/92 OHΡO: Another Kushan Wind God, *Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies*, Kamakura.

Thaplyal, Kiran Kumar, 1967, Motto seals and sealings—Religious and Ethical. JNSI 29: 26-39.

Thaplyal, Kiran Kumar 1972 Studies in Ancient Indian Seals—A study of North Indian seals and sealings from circa third century B.C. to mid-seventh century A.D. Lucknow: Akhila Bharatiya Sanskrit Parishad.