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Semiotic Investigations Regarding Image Transfer in the Art of Gandhāra

> At the same time iconography develops its own canon,
> as pictures are copied from pictures: these are clear and
> demonstrable filiations, but totally at the level of *signifiant*,
> with little regard for signification and none at all for reference.[1]

Introduction

The art of Gandhāra had a particular fondness for the reutilization of image forms. It adopted motifs from Greco-Roman culture, among others, and used it to transmit a specific content. Regarding this phenomenon at a purely morphological level, semiotics seems to be an appropriate method for understanding its function and importance in the visual communication of this particular region.

Gandhāra, the area east of the Hindu Kush that is today Afghanistan and Pakistan, has always been a crossroads for cultures and religions. From the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE a series of conquests and acculturations created a fertile climate for the emergence of the unique art of Gandhāra.

Alexander the Great crossed the Hindu Kush in 327 BCE. Then at the same time the Maurya dynasty rose in India, and under the emperor Ashoka established the first empire that included the whole subcontinent. Chandragupta, Ashoka's grandfather and founder of the dynasty, prevented the Seleucids who came to power after Alexander from settling in India's northeast. The so-called Greco-Bactrians then stayed on that side of the Hindu Kush until the beginning of the 2nd century BCE.

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[1] Burkert 2003, 65. Many thanks to Lawrence Desmond for correcting the English version of this paper.

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After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, and pushed by an invading group of Scythian nomads called Shakas, they moved eastwards and settled in Gandhāra. This Indo-Greek empire reached its pinnacle during the reign of King Menander (155–130 BCE). From the end of the Mauryan Empire there were numerous invasions of Gandhāra, and the Parthians finally succeeded in conquering the Indo-Greeks. With the advance of the nomadic Indo-European Kushans, a tribe of Chinese origin, the situation stabilized at end of the 1st century BCE.

From the 2nd century BCE of the Indo-Greeks era, Greek elements are identifiable in the local artistic expressions. There was an application of stylistic and iconographic characteristics applied to local forms of art, especially architecture. However, relatively few objects have been found that date to before the Christian era.

Most of the currently known artifacts were produced during the heyday of Gandhāran art that lasted until the 3rd century CE. They were created under the previously mentioned Kushans whose empire (100–250 CE) included large parts of northern India as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan. As a nomadic tribe without an artistic tradition they adopted and assimilated existing artistic styles incorporating them into their own culture.[2]

As a consequence, there was simultaneous development of two important creative schools. In addition to Gandhāra-style and artworks, there is evidence of the 'Mathura-style' named after the empire's capital located on the Gangetic Plain. This school had its artistic roots in the indigenous tradition of the Mauryan Empire, and therefore expresses an Indian approach and perception. The most important characteristic of the Gandhāra-style however is based on Greco-Roman art. Although these differences are clearly recognizable – for example in the representation of space and time and body shapes – it would be incorrect to conclude they are homogenous, independent styles. Both were the result of fruitful cultural exchanges that influenced each other, and originated during the same epoch.

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[2] It was already the Saka-Parthians, preceding the Kushans, who initiated the stylistic development of Gandhāran art. "In summary, the appearance of the formulated Kushana Gandharan style, at the close of the first century AD, was the fruit of a long process. The principal stylistic traditions present in Gandhāra in the earlier periods were the Hellenistic and the Indian. Hellenistic traditions entered Gandhāra with the Bactrian Greeks, to be later reinforced by the Roman influx into the region and by the philhellene tastes of the Parthians. Indian traditions had a longer ancestry in Gandhāra, probably from as early as the sixth century BC, although it was not before the Mauryan period that Indian norms became entrenched, primarily in association with the infusion of Buddhism into Gandhāra. The appearance of the Kushana Gandhāra style, therefore, is preceded by a period of over three centuries, from the third-second century BC till the end of the first century AD." Nehru 1989, 100–101.

The Kushana-Empire had contacts with Rome, the Parthians, the Sassanids, and pursued a politic of religious tolerance. For example, the religion of the Brahmans was supported in the same manner as Zoroastrianism or the Greek gods. But none of them was promoted as much as Buddhism. Therefore the Gandhāra-style is primarily found in Buddhist art such as the reliefs that were attached to the *stupas* to recount Buddha's life.

Image transfer

The most distinct characteristic of the Gandhāra-style is its adoption of Greco-Roman form language. As mentioned above, it is however not an isolated, hermetic style. Typical Gandhāran art is the result of the joining of two forms of art with pronounced stylistic and structural features. There is an indigenous style that was influenced by the city of Mathura ('drawing style') and a Hellenistic ('natural') style. While the first shows a more volatile and flat elaboration of figures with a concentration on specific details, the other applies the realistic style of Hellenistic art.

The transition from the former to the latter took place at the beginning of the 1st century CE, and is clearly visible in the architectural sculpture of the *stupas* of the time.[3] In addition to these two main ingredients, Gandhāran art is always to be seen as a creative and original transformation of several currents. Essentially, this means that indigenous art takes the impulses of – above all – Greek art, but also Bactrian and Parthian art to create specific content, and an idiosyncratic form language. Sometimes this included the adoption of entire image forms.

Harītī and Pancika

Harītī originally was a vicious *yakshi,* an indigenous nature deity who adored and protected her own 500 children, but ate children of human mothers. She was instructed by Buddha and converted, and then became a Buddhist fertility and mother goddess.

The image of Harītī is easily recognized. It depicts a standing or sitting woman with several children, placed on her shoulders, in her arms (sometimes nurturing them) or at her feet. This standard motif is sometimes altered by dress, jewelry, and the objects in her hands.

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[3] Namely the *stupas* of Saidu Sharif and Butkara I, about 25 CE (Saka-Parthian period), see Filigenzi 2012, 117–120.

An example in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (**Fig. 1**) shows the goddess standing in a straight frontal pose wearing just a *dhoti*.[4] Her upper body is nude, and covered only by necklaces. She has a relatively big, round head on which her helmet-like hair and a wreath are placed. Two earrings and bracelets on both arms complete the adornment of this otherwise rather sober figure. Five children[5] surround her, one kneeling on her left shoulder, another sitting in her left bent arm and suckling her breast. Two of the children try to reach the bunch of grapes she holds in her extended right arm, and one is sitting between her legs. This sculpture is a little more than one meter in height, is dated to the second half of the 3rd century CE, and was found in the Swat-valley in Pakistan.

Another figure of Harītī, now in the Lahore Museum in Pakistan, is more or less contemporary with the first example, but is completely different in appearance (**Fig. 2**).[6] Harītī's position is a clear *contrapposto* with the left leg carrying the weight while the right leg is free. The head is slightly turned to the right and appears in a three quarter-view. She has put her left hand on the left hip while the right hand holds a child at the side of her right breast. Two other children are on her shoulders, touching her head. She is almost fully clothed with what appears to be a *chiton*. Besides her usual jewelry she has an elaborate hairstyle, and a crown to adorn her as a goddess. Her posture and her appearance have a strong resemblance to the figure of Tyche or Fortuna.[7] Certain morphological characteristics of the aspect of the Hellenistic goddess have been adopted in order to give a specific aspect to the Gandhāran figure.

In addition, Harītī is also often shown together with a male *yaksha*, usually Pancika, the general of the army of the *yakshas* who personifies the heroic. With her male companion she forms a tutelary couple that also finds parallels in the Indian and Bactrian pantheon: the constellation of Harītī and Pancika corresponds to that of Lakshmi and Kubera or of Pharro and Ardoxsho who all have the same connotation of abundance, wealth and glory.[8]

In an example in the British Museum (**Fig. 3**), the couple are sitting on a throne, and turned towards each other.[9] The goddess wears a *chiton* that has slipped from her right shoulder. Her curled hairstyle is knotted in the center in front of a tiara and a wreath, and behind rises a kind of *polos.* She holds a cornucopia in her left hand, while

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[4] Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) Inv. M.78.105, 110.49 x 35.56 x 15.24 cm. Regarding the rather sturdy aspect of the figure see Ahuja 2016, 250–251.

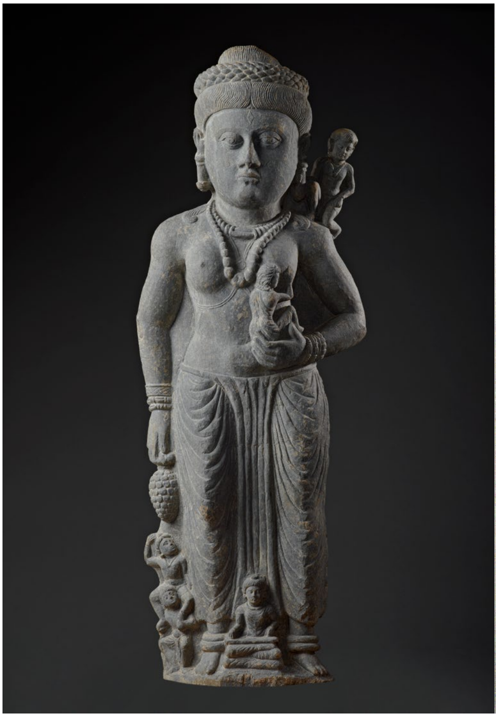
[5] The iconography of the children of Harītī is by no means accidental but shows on the contrary the variety of meanings communicated by her image: Ahuja 2016, 260–261.

[6] Pakistan, Central Museum Lahore Inv. G-102, 92 x 36 x 13 cm; see also Gandhara 2009, 155 Cat. No. 104.

[7] As for example in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul Inv. 4410 (2nd century CE).

[8] Ahuja 2016, 251–253.

[9] London, British Museum Inv. 1950,0726.2, 2nd to 3rd century CE, 27 x 24.7 x 10.3 cm.



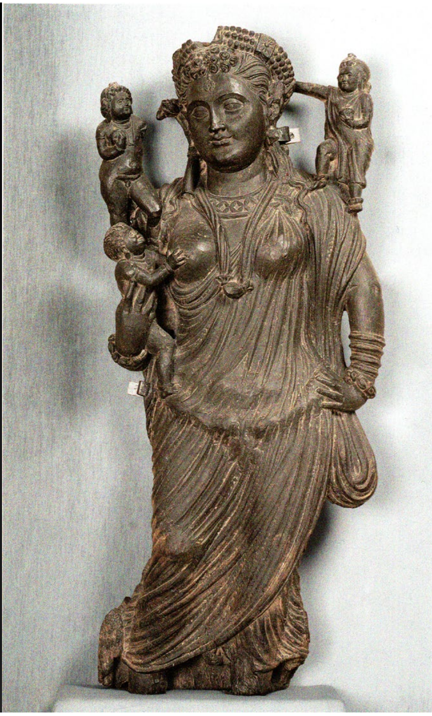


Fig. 1 (left): Harītī with Children (www.lacma.org, Public Domain High Resolution Image); Fig. 2 (right): Harītī with Children (Photo: Peter Oszvald © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland and Government of Pakistan, Department of Archaeology and Museums).

her right is reaching towards her companion's lap. He is wearing a short tunica, cloak, and boots. He also has curled hair held by a fillet, and wears almost the same earrings as Harītī. A part of his right hand is visible holding a *kantharos* before him, originally probably with both hands. Three more figures are part of the group: Between the couple a bearded old man with a cloak leans over the top of the throne offering the god a small bag. Beneath, a child reaches out for the goddess's right leg, and in the left corner emerges a figure behind what seems to be the foot cushion, but represents water that is pouring from two pots (the corresponding figure opposite is lost).

Harītī again evoking Tyche (this time even more explicitly by holding the cornucopia) and her consort, form a couple that resembles Greek representations of Dionysus and Ariadne as found for example on a bronze mirror that dates from the end of the 4th century BCE.[10] Pancika shows some attributes of Kubera, the *yaksha*-king who is the god of wealth, and often depicted with a drinking vessel. He incorporates even more of this personality in a sculpture in the Peshwara Museum in Pakistan

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[10] Athens, National Archaeological Museum Inv. 15268.

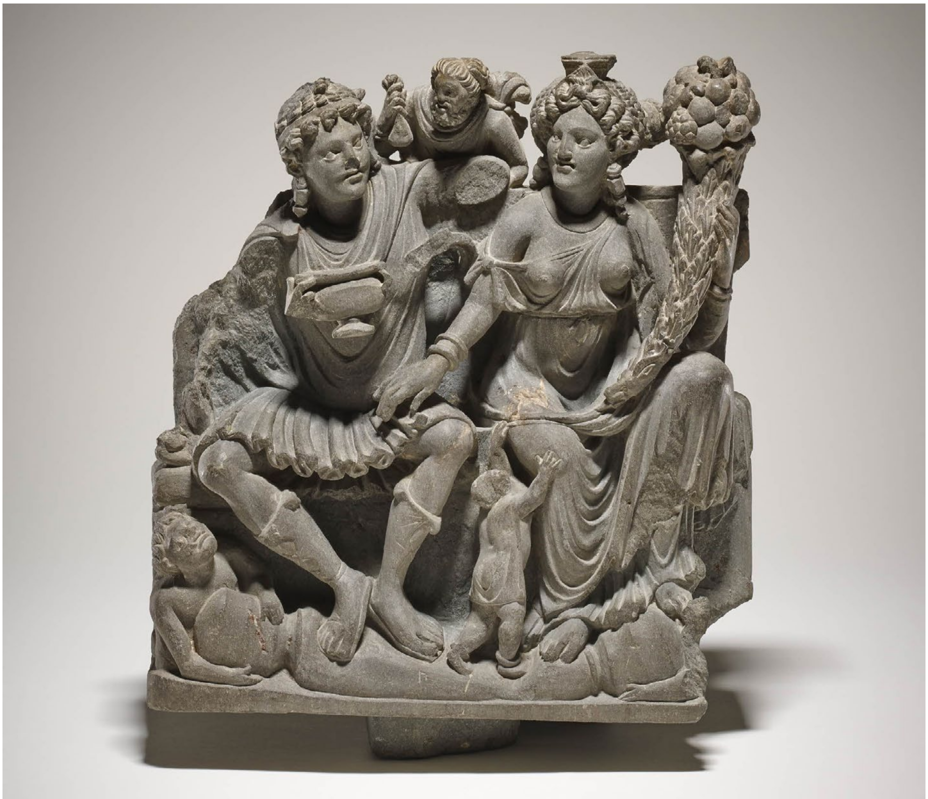

Fig. 3: The tutelary couple Harītī and Pancika (© Trustees of the British Museum).

(Fig. 4).[11] The scheme of the image is very similar to the preceding one. The two gods sit on a throne slightly turned towards each other, and thus presenting their heads in a three quarter-view. The male god has a more Indian aspect in this sculpture shown by his clothes, rich jewelry and hairstyle – all royal attributes – and a potbelly, and is rendered in a Hellenistic style. In this sculpture Harītī does not hold a cornucopia, but is nurturing a child on her left breast while another one sits on her left shoulder. Her dress, hairstyle and jewelry are quite similar to those in the British Museum-group, except her adornments and those of her companion are more abundant and elaborate. The similarities to the first group include the child at the goddess's right leg, and the smaller figure between them who appears to be a child. Because the hands are lost, little can be said about the rest of her attributes. On the base of the sculpture is a frieze of playing cupids.

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[11] Peshawar, Peshawar Museum Inv. PM-3013, 2nd century CE, 104.5 x 89 x 19 cm; see also Gandhara 2009, 17 fig. 1.

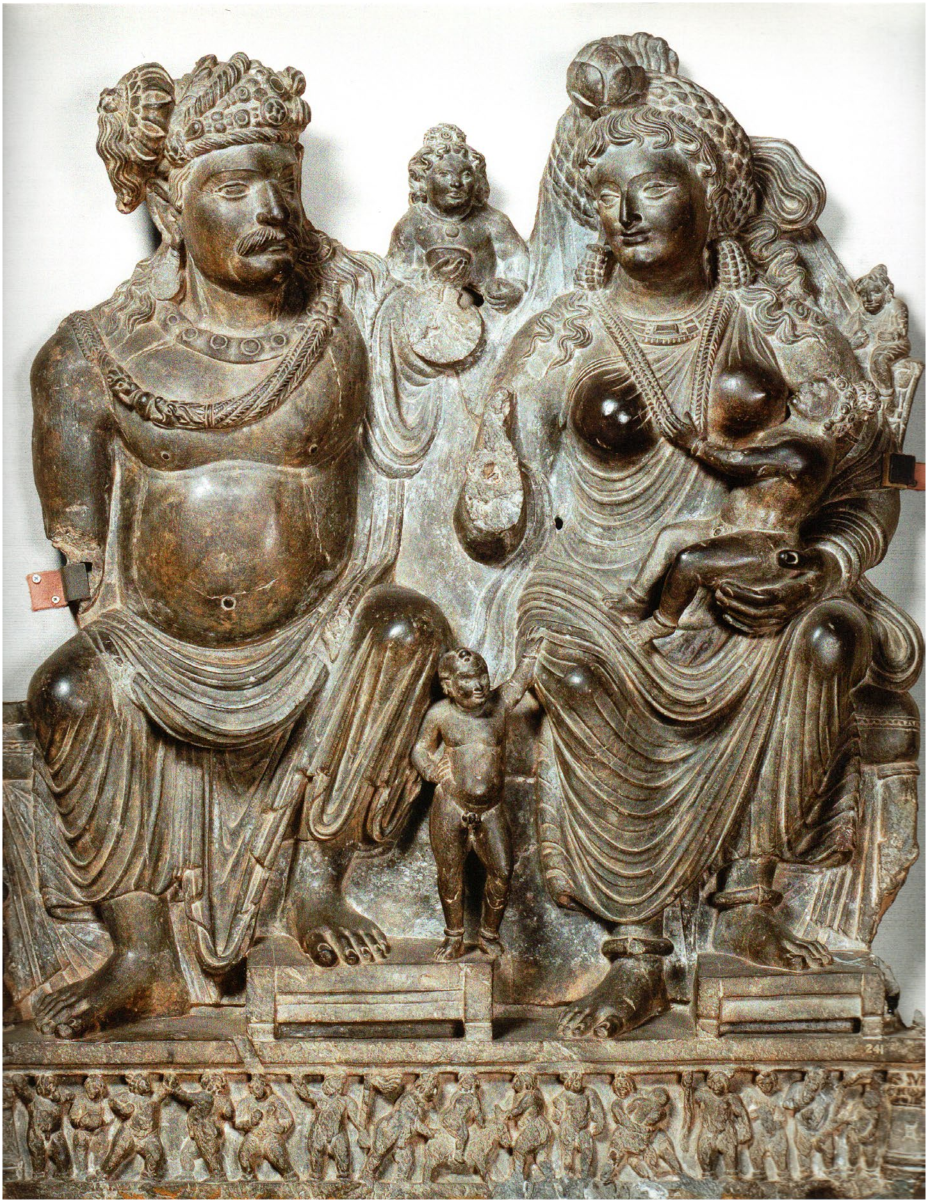

Fig. 4: The tutelary couple Harītī and Pancika/Kubera (© Peshawar Museum).

In the Peshawar sculpture, the gods' form and attributes are slightly shifted: The presentation of the male figure has changed from a more heroic/military stance to that of wealth and power, the goddess goes from cornucopia abundance to motherhood that is shown most clearly by the nurturing of a child. The changing com-

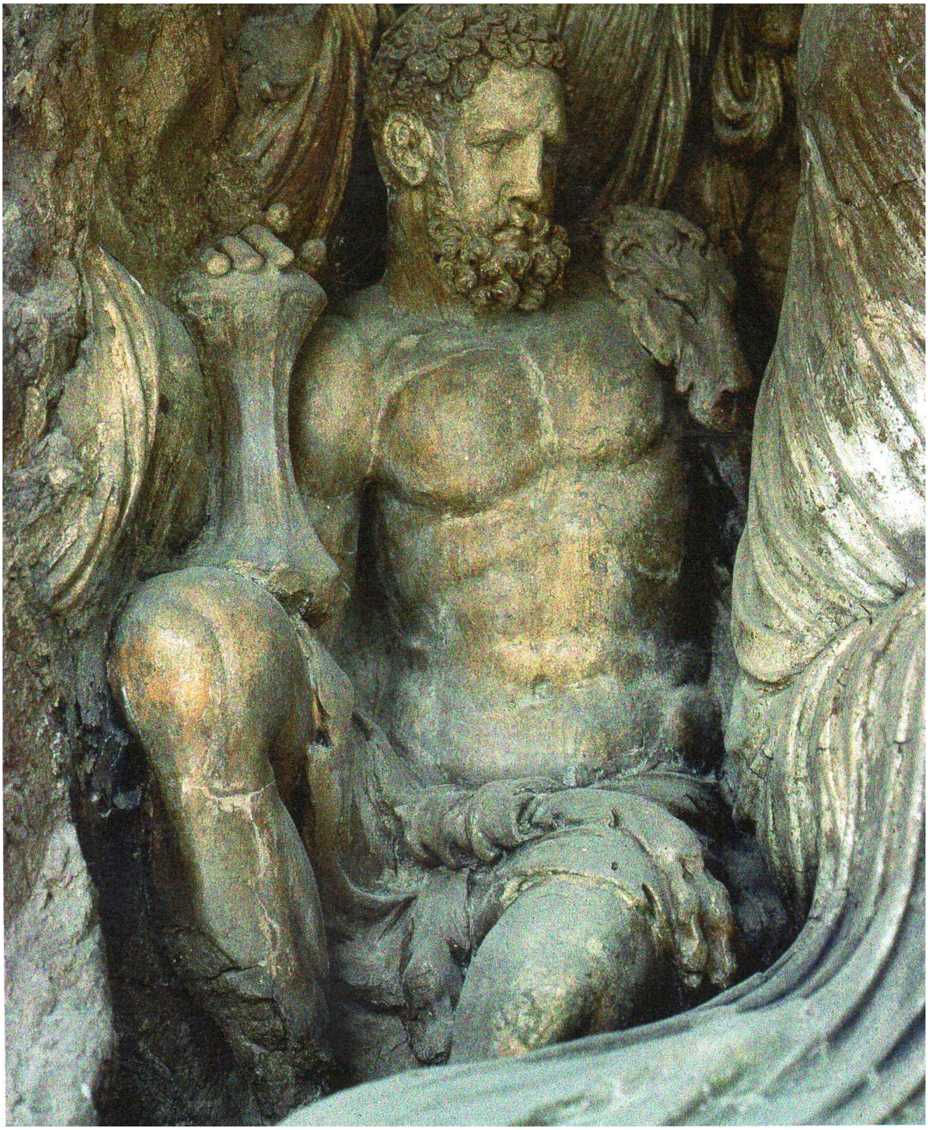

Fig. 5: Vajrapāṇi sitting next to Buddha (after Gandhara 2009, 329 fig. 3).

binations of figures, postures, attributes and style create a multilayered variation of communicated contents that were addressed to different recipients. The Hellenistic form language was one possibility among others to pass on specific information.[12]

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[12] "A variety of other Indian mātṛkās (particularly those seen at Mathura and including Lakṣmī at Sanchi) sit in the pose of the Magna Mater, just as Cybele, Isis, and Tyche do." Ahuja 2016, 247.

Vajrapāṇi

Vajrapāṇi is a creation of Gandhāra-art, but became so popular that it was incorporated in all Buddhist texts. Vajrapāṇi (meaning "holding the thunderbolt/diamond"), in the iconography of Gandhāra, is a companion of Buddha who stands or sits by his side. His aspect and stature resembles that of Hercules, sometimes including such details as the lion's fur and the club, however the latter is usually replaced by the thunderbolt.[13] An impressive example is a group in polychrome clay made in the 3rd century CE, still *in situ* in Hadda in Afghanistan (**Fig. 5**).[14] To the right of a cross-legged sitting Buddha sits a seminude male figure. His upper body is twisted and turned to his left towards the Buddha, and he slightly bows his bearded head. On his bent right leg he rests the thunderbolt he is holding with his right hand. Over his left shoulder lays the lion's furry head and body of which the lower part reappears bent around his hips. The anatomy of the naked, muscular body is rendered idealistically in a style a little overemphasized and characteristic of Greek Heracles-statues.[15]

There is great variability in the representations of Vajrapāṇi who is depicted standing or sitting with different clothing and physiognomy. But, Vajrapāṇi is always near the Buddha and recognizable by his physical appearance and the *vajra* in his hand.[16] In Indian mythology the thunderbolt is the symbol of Indra who is king of the gods in the Vedic pantheon.

Of course, the question why the thunderbolt-holder in the guise of Heracles has emerged in Buddhist Gandhāran art has been intensely discussed. Some scholars think that the figure represents the magic power of Buddha that is always with him, even if he does not use it.[17] Anna Filigenzi states there is congruence between Vajrapāṇi and Ānanda, "the faithful servant, the inseparable companion and the adept physically closest to the Teacher".[18] Either way, the image of the Greek hero has been reused to symbolize either a quality of the Buddha or a figure very close to him.

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[13] Club and thunderbolt do sometimes have a similar form. For the Kushans the club is a symbol of justice and power, see Bussagli 1996, 251.

[14] The niche in which the group is placed is 1.25 m large and 1.9 m deep, see Tarzi 1976, 392; Gandhara 2009, 329 fig. 3.

[15] This particular type is attested on Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian coins, see Tarzi 1976, 396–397.

[16] See Tarzi 1976, 403–404 on a example of a non-bearded, clothed Vajrapāṇi in Hadda in a niche just beside to first one. On a relief from the 1st century CE in the Asiatisches Museum in Berlin (Inv. I 58) Vajrapāṇi wears an *exomis* and fans air to the Buddha standing before him. There are also examples that completely leave the Heracles-iconography.

[17] Bussagli 1996, 251: "Personnellement, je conserve la vieille idée d'Emile Sénart et je pense que ce curieux personnage est, plus que le protecteur, la personnification de la force magique du Bouddha, à laquelle le maître recourt très rarement, tout en l'ayant toujours à disposition."

Garuda and the nāgas

The third example of a transferred Greek image form presented here is the eagle Garuda who is the vehicle (*vāhana*) of the Hindu god Vishnu. In Vedic mythology he was identified with the sun, and was attributed gigantic dimensions and enormous speed. His natural adversaries are the *nāgas* who as the *yakshas* were indigenous but ambivalent nature deities. They were associated with chthonic aspects; mainly earth and water. Buddhism integrated the *nāgas* into its pantheon by establishing a clear hierarchy: A very popular scene on Gandhāran reliefs shows the submission of the *nāga*-king Erapata by the Buddha. However, the topos of the antagonism of the eagle Garuda and the *nāgas* is much older, and probably shares some roots with Mediterranean mythology.[19] The reason why the motif continues to be pictured in Buddhist Gandhāra-art is that the new religion also integrated the mythic figure of Garuda by transforming it into a *Dharmapala* who were protectors of the Buddhist doctrine.

Many of the representations of the fight between Garuda and feminine *nāgīnis* are morphologically almost identical to the image of the abduction of Ganymede by Zeus that was invented by the Greek sculptor Leochares.[20] On a turban-rosette of a (not preserved) Bodhisattva in the Lahore Museum we can see an eagle in an almost heraldic position with spread wings, and his crowned head turned to the right (**Fig. 6**).[21] In his beak he holds the upper part of a snake that below changes its zoomorphic aspect into that of a young woman, reaching up to the eagles neck with her left arm. The eagle's right talon is pressed on the *nāgīni*'s right hip while she seems to try to push it away with her right hand. She wears Indian clothing and

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[18] Filigenzi 2006, 270. Note also ibid. 274–275: "He is, in my opinion, the iconographical counterpart of the metaphor concealed in Ānanda's life story: a slave to his own inferior nature, like a pariah, but also a servant working toward his own redemption, like Heracles. Yet, like Heracles, the vajra bearer (i.e., Vajrapāṇi/Ānanda) is also a suffering hero who through his labours transfigures himself, taming his own nature and thus elevating and civilizing the entire sphere of human nature." For a short summary of the different interpretations proposed so far see Santoro 1991, 269–270.

[19] See for example Wittkower 1939, 294–299.

[20] Rome, Musei Vaticani Inv. 2445.

[21] Lahore, Central Museum Inv. (old) 1045, 2nd to 3rd century CE, Dm 11 cm; Gandhara 2009 279, Cat. No. 209.

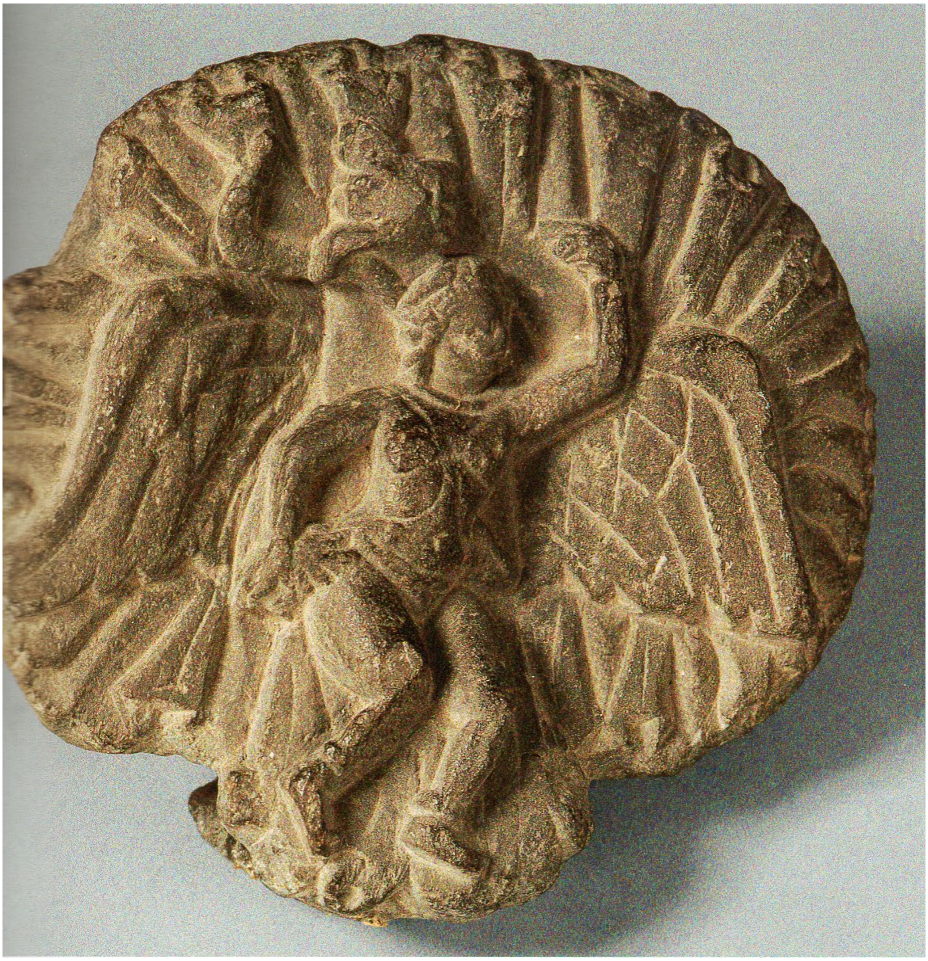

Fig. 6: The eagle Garuda carrying off a *nāgīni* (Photo: Peter Oszvald © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland and Government of Pakistan, Department of Archaeology and Museums).

jewelry and a wreath on her head turned to her left. The whole figure is shown in a twist to the right with the legs almost in profile. Despite the small size of the object – its diameter is 11 cm – there is a noticeable dynamic in the representation of the two adversaries. Similar groups of Garuda and one or several *nāgīnis* are also similar to Greek and Roman images.[22]

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[22] See for example another turban-rosette in the Peshawar-Museum (Inv. PM-3019; Gandhara 2009, 279, Cat. No. 210) and a Etruscan Bronze mirror-case in the British Museum (3rd–2nd century BCE, Inv. 1884,0614.54).

The image as a form of communication

If we review again the images we have seen, they all seem familiar in form or aspect because morphologically they are part of the Greco-Roman iconography. But, within the new context they obviously have another meaning, so the image of a specific figure may refer to Heracles in Greek and Roman culture, but to Vajrapāṇi in the art of Gandhāra.

The differentiation of sign and object or image content and image reference[23] is the basis of semiotics, and is crucial for the understanding of the cultural mechanics of image transfer. While most of the theories in formal aesthetics and cultural anthropology assume the unity of form and content of the image,[24] they are seen as independent entities in semiotics. Therefore, if you understand the image as a sign, you can „refer to arbitrary things through arbitrary images".[25] As a consequence, the faculty to communicate or to transfer content is intrinsic to language as well as to the image as 'visual text'. However, compared to language where the relationship of form and reference is highly conventional, the image can never be completely understood. This is why it is often regarded as ambivalent.[26] Thus, with communication through images it is even more important that message sender and receiver share the same cultural codes and conventions. This is especially evident with symbolic images as presented in this paper.[27]

If we again take the example of Vajrapāṇi who in Gandhāran art is the reference of a sign that in Greek art is referred to as Heracles, it is important to realize that there were images in Gandhāra showing the same *signifier* but actually referring to the Greek Heracles. For example, on a wrestler's weight found in Pakistan we find a wrestling scene on the reverse side, and Heracles with the club, and the lion's fur confronted by a lion on the front side.[28] The same is the case with the motif of Zeus and Ganymed, represented on a glass vessel found in Begram.[29] Thus we might propose that the beholder of the image of Vajrapāṇi or Garuda or Harītī had also an idea of the 'original' image form and meaning. Following Peirce, this would mean that knowledge of the 'original' image influences the *interpretant*, i.e. the mental image that the recipient forms of the object.[30]

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[23] This means signifier – referent/signifiant – signifié etc. in the various semiotic theories.

[24] See Sauer 2016, 145; 151.

[25] Sachs-Hombach 2005, 173.

[26] Cf. Sachs-Hombach 2005, 177. One difficult question is that of the units constituting an image and creating its meaning, i.e. the equivalent to the letter in a written text; see Nöth 2009, 250 and Bal – Bryson 1991, 194: "If no minimal units for images can be found, then a visual semiotics, deriving from Saussure, must be an impossible endeavor: we cannot establish where the 'signifier' actually is."

[27] The distinction of the sign classes *icon*, *index* and *symbol* established by Peirce by its way of denoting the object can also be found with Leach (Leach 1976, 12–13). For Peirce an image is always a mixture of the three classes, see Nöth 2009, 243–245.

[28] New York, Metropolitan Museum Inv. 1994.112, 1st century CE, 26 x 29.4 cm.

[29] Paris, Musée Guimet Inv. MG21228a, 2nd–3rd century CE.

The beholder and receiver of the message from the image leads to the question of historical context of Gandhāran images. An inhabitant of the Gandhāra region during the 1st and 2nd century CE lived in a relatively densely populated urban environment[31] characterized by intense trading activity and cohabitation of many ethnic groups with cultural idiosyncrasies. There are still considerable *lacunae* in the understanding of everyday life of a Gandhāran, but in the last few years some new manuscript findings have augmented the body of source material. The newly found manuscripts prove, beyond a doubt, the existence of social groups outside the monastic communities.[32] When combined with archaeological sources they allow the reconstruction of an aristocracy that formed a profane *antipole* to the sacred world. This local elite was not only the receiver, but they also commissioned and donated many of the votive reliefs presented in this study.

In the opinion of some scholars, the Hellenistic form language was used to set themselves apart from non-elite social classes. Taddei wrote:

> In my opinion, Gandharan sculpture is to be considered as the art of few social groups that needed a foreign model enabling them to distinguish themselves from the majority of the population. Bactrian and Indo-Greek tradition (i.e., the heritage of former leading classes) certainly provided a useful ground, but it would have been swept away were it not forcibly retained in the interest of some political (and cultural) élite.[33]

We still know very little about the social organization of the Gandhāran society inside or outside the above-mentioned identifiable groups. However, the inscriptions on donated sculptures allow us to conclude that *all* ethnic groups and social classes had access to the use of Gandhāran art forms.[34] Thus, on the one hand, clearly it is impossible to reconstruct a homogenous group of beholders. On the other it explains the changing aspects of syncretistic images like those of Pancika and Harītī. They were meant to address a diverse, ethnically mixed population and to unite them under Buddhism, the one religion.

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[30] See Bal – Bryson 1991, 188; Nöth 2005, 53.

[31] Jansen 2009, 283; 288.

[32] Galli 2011, 284–285. Most of the surviving archaeological evidence originates from a religious context.

[33] Taddei 1969, 382. As an example for this social environment are also seen the numerous motives form the Dionysian world that were probably used in the context of festive wine-rituals, see Galli 2011, 303.

[34] Filigenzi 2009, 300: "Im speziellen Fall der Gandhāra-Kunst führt die Anwesenheit von Laienanhängern zu einer erstaunlichen ethnokulturellen Vielfalt: Alle, Inder, Griechen, Zentralasiaten und Kushanas, werden als Stifter oder in besonderen Funktionen von ritueller Bedeutung dargestellt [...]."

A new visual language

During this period, the relatively young religion of Buddhism tried to reach as many people as possible. Communication through images has always been an effective way to transmit a religious message, firstly because it can be understood by illiterate people, and secondly because of the images' ambivalent nature that seems to give them a special power.[35]

Greco-Roman image forms were part of the repertoire of signs that the authors of Gandhāran art had on hand and employed consciously and in an original, independent manner.[36] The form language of Hellenistic art apparently was especially suitable to express certain contents in a common and codified language.[37] Within 200 years after the reign of the Indo-Greeks it had become a "neutral" and "international"[38] form of communication that, thanks to its various representational possibilities, was able to give a form to the Buddhist messages and address a large part of the population. Rather than to create a certain identity, the aim was to be understood by as many as possible.

Antonio Invernizzi sees the key of the success of Greek art in Gandhāra in its realism. The 'naturalistic style' allowed for the reproduction of the religious narrative with necessary clarity. Thus Greek art was able to replace the not accessible or not readable texts with imagery that carried the same message. The reliefs on the *stupas* had to speak to the devotee by telling the episodes of the Buddha's life, and therefore had to be immediately comprehensible.[39]

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[35] The fact that images escape from a complete conventionalisation makes them to a high degree manipulable and manipulative at the same time, see Sachs-Hombach 2005, 171; 177.

[36] Boardman 2015, 187: "The classical repertoire of figures, dress and attributes, could, it seems, readily be adjusted to suit the presentation of Indian deities, without always one type being monopolized."

[37] Filigenzi 2009, 300.

[38] Filigenzi 2012, 137.

[39] Invernizzi 2014, 264: "L'accent mis sur les traits naturalistes dans la composition des scènes est, dans un certain sens, une sorte de nécessité qui rend plus claire l'explication des narrations visuelles religieuses, en remplacement des narrations textuelles peu ou pas accessibles aux fidèles. Les scènes sculptées sur les stupas devaient parler au dévot, narrer les épisodes de la vie du Bouddha, ce qui permet de comprendre le soin particulier mis à rendre avec réalisme les relations entre les personnages. Une considération naturaliste des gestes des figures et des actions en perspective rendait plus claire la narration et communiquait immédiatement le sens intime du sujet représenté." See also Taddei 2003, 514.

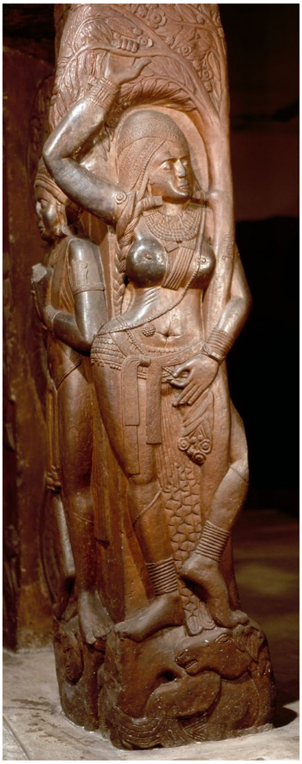

Fig. 7: A *yakshī* as tree goddess (© Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections).

The image transfer that has been discussed here, although not immediately addressing stylistic questions, points in the same direction. The reutilization of existing image forms seems to have been a consciously applied instrument in the art of Gandhāra. The models for this recycling came not only from the Greco-Roman tradition, but were also found in Indian art and even in Gandhāran art itself.

If we take the example of Garuda carrying off a *nāgīni,* we find not only the Hellenistic image form of Zeus and Ganymed transferred but also, in some cases, that of a female *yaksh*ī. In its female form this nature deity is often related to trees and thus shown standing in front of a tree with the right hand raised above her head to grasp a branch (**Fig. 7**), a very popular motif already on the earliest *stupas* of the 2nd century BCE.[40] Her voluptuous body is in an almost dance-like movement with all the weight normally on one leg, and the corresponding hip exposed while the other

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[40] For example on a relief from the *stupa* of Bharhut, now in the Indian Museum of Mumbai, 2nd century BCE.

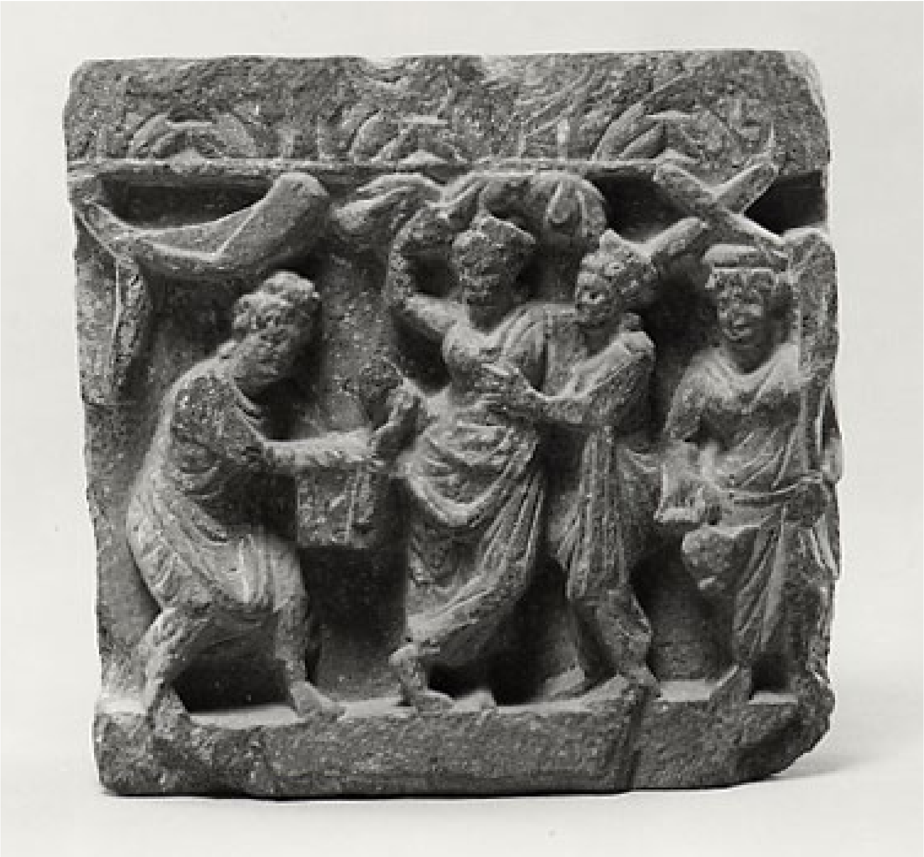

Fig. 8: Māyā giving birth to Siddhārtha (© Trustees of the British Museum).

leg is free. This motif has been re-used in Gandhāra to depict the *nāgīni* in front of Garuda's body.[41] In addition, it has transmitted its form to the mother of Buddha, Māyā, when represented in giving birth to her son Siddhārtha (**Fig. 8**).[42] This scene occurs often on *stupa* reliefs narrating the life of Buddha. Announcing his divine future, the enlightened one does not come into this world as humans do. His mother delivers him standing in front of a tree, grasping a branch above her head with one hand while he slips out of her right side.

There are more examples of image transfers that show the currency of this method in the art of Gandhāra.[43] Arcangela Santoro notes the motif of Siddhārtha on his horse carried by four *yakshas* that originally accorded with the textual sources was used for the "Great Departure", that is the moment when he definitely leaves the palace and his royal life. The same motif was sometimes used to depict other events in the life of Buddha, namely the "Four Encounters". However in the referring textual sources Siddhārtha is not described on a horse carried by *yakshas.*[44] There is no direct contentual justification for the transfer of the motif, but there might have been a formal one since the normal representation of the "Four Encounters" would have required the depiction of Siddhārtha in a chariot, a motif that perhaps needed more space than the horse alone. But even in utilizing the non-canonical image form for the episode in question, the author of the image had to be sure that the beholder was to understand the message. This was assured by choosing a very well known motif of the future Buddha in another situation of his early life.

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[41] See for example Foucher 1918, 33 fig. 318.

[42] London, British Museum Inv. 1880.62, 2nd to 3rd century CE, 14.3 x 14.5 x 5.5 cm.

[43] See Fischer 1958, 240–243.

As mentioned before, the lack of unambiguity in the relationship of sign and reference – especially in symbolic images – is a problem inherent in images. Greek realism provided the highest possible convention and diminished the ambivalence in communication as did the recycling of well-known image forms. They both helped to attain the upmost degree of legibility in a very heterogeneous society where the importance of visual communication was enormous. Also, these two characteristics make the visual text similar to the written: The facile combinability of the sign-forms, and through realism the ability of abstraction.

This brings us back to semiotics. To Mario Bussagli the semiotic quality is intrinsic to the art of Gandhāra since it created a "système d'expression figuratif" in order to transmit an "art sacré".[45] Semiotics, as a methodical approach, has the advantage of being independent and systematic. It can be applied to an image and a text with consistently valid results, and thus facilitates the critical distance.[46] The latter seems particularly important when dealing with an art that has been, and still is susceptible to the monopolization of Western interpretation.

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[44] Santoro 2008, 23: "Quanto alla ragione di questo trasferimento totale […] potremmo dire che esisteva un tipo definito per Siddhārtha a cavallo, quello coniato per la *Grande Partenza*, episodio ben noto e diffuso. Un artista, incaricato di illustrare *I Quattro incontri* – temo non usuale e certo raffigurato raramente – ha fatto ricorso all'iconografia di un'altra uscita di Siddhārtha, quella della *Grande Partenza*, trasferendola integralmente nel nuovo episodio." For more examples of image transfers within Gandhāran art see ibid., 9–14.

[45] Bussagli 1996, 397–399.

[46] Bal – Bryson 1991, 176: "Semiotics, by virtue of its supradisciplinary status, can be brought to bear on objects pertaining to any sign-system."

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