

# The syncretism of cultural influences manifest in the representations of the Buddha in the art of ancient Gandhāra

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## Abstract

More than two thousand years ago, ancient Gandhāra saw the encounter of the Hellenistic civilisation with Buddhism. The representations of the Buddha Śākyamuni from the beginnings of our era produced in the artistic style of Gandhāra are a result of a synthesis of above all the Greek, Roman and Indo-Buddhist culture. As evidenced by research, not only these cultures made an impact on this art because elements of many other influences also entwined themselves with Indian ones in this field. The representations of the Buddha from Gandhāra are silent witnesses of the then intensive contacts between civilisations concentrated on the Silk Road.

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, Hellenism, Gandhāra, sculpture, Śākyamuni*

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## 1 General information

Gandhāra was an ancient land which extended near present-day Peshawar (the former Puruṣapura) and existed for almost fifteen centuries. It was there that Greek-Buddhist art was born and flourished. Today this is the area of north-western Pakistan and Jalalabad – the area of present-day eastern Afghanistan. The Indus River which flows there once divided the Gandhāra region into two parts: the eastern part, with Taxila (Takṣaśilā) as the principal city, and the western part with the city of Puṣkalāvati. Gandhāra was a cultural and trade centre, where eastern and western influences mingled. For a long time it was an important centre of Buddhism<sup>1</sup>, one of the main religions of the Silk Road. An important element of the local prosperity had to do with trade roads linking the Mediterranean Sea, South Asia and China – trade and cultural exchange were conducted owing to those centres.<sup>2</sup>

The style of art which developed in the Gandhāra area was syncretic; it drew inspiration from many cultures. This art may exemplify a synthesis of the influential civilisations of that time. It is also sometimes called the school of Graeco-Buddhist art, due to distinct features of Hellenistic art imported into these areas along with Alexander the Great and his army. India was the cradle of Gandhāra art, and the subjects that it treated were associated with the Buddhist religion, which developed in the Subcontinent around the figure of the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> Buddhism most likely reached the Gandhāra area owing to Emperor Aśoka<sup>4</sup> who lived in the 3rd century BC and who is considered a propagator and protector of this religion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Rosenfield, *Prologue: Some Debating Points on Gandhāran Buddhism and Kusana history*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> M. Mejer, *Zarys historii buddyzmu w Indiach*, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> K. Kosior, *Buddyzm pierwotny*, pp. 181–183.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 101–103.

<sup>5</sup> P. Williams, *Buddyzm mahajana*, pp. 20–21.



## 2 Cultures whose influences are discernible in Gandhāra art

### 2.1 India

At the early stage of the development of Gandhāra three influences are the most distinctive: Indian, Hellenistic and Iranian/Persian. These leading tropes will also be featured in varying degrees at all stages of the development; therefore, they are considered to be fundamental. The influences which are derived from the Indian subcontinent are obvious in Gandhāra, at least due to the very fact of its geographical location. Gandhāra came to be linked with India by the Āryan tribes<sup>6</sup>, whose representatives lived in the areas comprising present-day Afghanistan,<sup>7</sup> before they entered the Indian Subcontinent. There were times when both Gandhāra, India or some of their territories were controlled by one ruler.<sup>8</sup>

The basic property of Indian art is its strong association with religion and philosophy. Therefore, when Buddhism arrived in Gandhāra from India, a repository of iconographical (the most important ones include pan-Indian symbols) and architectural forms came with it. Not only did the cult of the *stūpa* arise but its construction too.<sup>9</sup> The Indian *stūpas* in Bharhut, Sāñcī and Amarāvātī were decorated with age-old emblems, which were supposed to refer, in the new, Buddhist context, to the figure of Śākyamuni.<sup>10</sup> These included, among other things, the lotus<sup>11</sup> and the wheel<sup>12</sup> as well as the impressions of Buddha's feet adorned with a *nandipada* – an age-old symbol, whose history dates back to the beginnings of the Indus Valley civilisation.<sup>13</sup> In the course of time, these signs became the basis of Buddhist iconography and they also appeared in Gandhāra art.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A. Grunwedel, *Buddhist Art in India*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> J. Petrus, *Afganistan. Zarys dziejów*, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> India and Gandhāra jointly belonged to the Maurya Empire, subsequently to the Kuṣāṇa Kingdom. Ibidem, pp. 76–78.

<sup>9</sup> K. Behrendt, *Relic Shrines of Gandhāra: A Reinterpretation of the Archaeological Evidence*, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> V. Dehejia, *On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art*, p. 380.

<sup>11</sup> Y. Krishnan, K. K. Tadikonda, *The Buddha Image: Its Origin and Development*, pp. 65–67, 78.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 7, 14, 125.

<sup>13</sup> T. G. Aravamuthan, *Some Survivals of the Harappa Culture*, p. 2, 18, 48.

<sup>14</sup> These symbols were particularly important for the iconic period in Buddhist art. For a more comprehensive treatment of this subject see A. Łozowska, *Kontrowersje wokół tzw. fazy*



## 2.2 Greece

Ancient Greece and India conducted trade long before Alexander's reign, although these were contacts intermediated by the Persians and the Phoenicians.<sup>15</sup> Around the year 327 the Macedonians came to Gandhāra along with his army, in order to continue his conquests, having occupied this Persian satrapy.<sup>16</sup> From a modern perspective, one may state that these raids and conquests left few traces in any sense apart from artistic, and they did not make a significant impact.

Perhaps the cult of representations itself came from Greece,<sup>17</sup> although this is a debatable point and it is not known whether this question may ever be settled. However, it is a fact that the early stage of the development of Graeco-Buddhist art did not begin with the representation of the Buddha himself but of the bodhisattvas<sup>18</sup>, who were clearly stylised as Apollo – these representations followed the Hellenistic convention of naturalist realism.<sup>19</sup> The art of Gandhāra came to portray such representatives of the Greek Olympus as Athena, Dionysus, Hermes, Eros, as well as the less popular Atlantes or Tritons.<sup>20</sup> In the field of architecture, Corinthian columns evolved into Indo-Corinthian columns with figures of a miniature meditating Buddha hidden among acanthus leaves. The theme of the Corinthian column was also used in bas reliefs, where it separated one scene from the other.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.3 Rome

Another culture which reached Gandhāra was Roman culture. Because it combined various elements, including a marked dominance of Greek features, one frequently talks about Graeco-Roman influences. The Romans did a great deal of trade; their contacts with Asia intensified when they acquaint-

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*aikonicznej we wczesnej sztuce buddyjskiej w Indiach.*

<sup>15</sup> H. G. Rawlinson, *Intercourse between India and the Western World...*, pp. 155–156.

<sup>16</sup> J. Petrus, op. cit., pp. 73–75.

<sup>17</sup> J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> The purpose of a bodhisattva is to attain the state of a buddha, therefore he invokes in himself endless compassion; he acts toward the benefit of all sentient creatures. P. Williams, op. cit., pp. 68–69.

<sup>19</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Origin of the Buddha Image*, p. 287, 294.

<sup>20</sup> J. H. Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhāra*, p. 37–38, 82–83.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.



ted themselves with silk, probably via the intermediation of the Parthians.<sup>22</sup> The demand for this luxury material resulted in an increased frequency of expeditions to China.<sup>23</sup> Numerous trade routes crossed the Roman Empire, although due to the conflict with the Persians and the Parthians, trade expeditions to Asia took place by an ocean route which was safer.<sup>24</sup> The ability to utilise monsoon winds considerably shortened the time necessary to cover long distances.<sup>25</sup> In the period of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty the court maintained diplomatic relations with the Roman Empire.<sup>26</sup> Ample evidence – including cultural – of the presence of Romans is provided by glassware found in Begram, a former seat of the Kuṣāṇas.<sup>27</sup> Instances of Roman inspiration occurred in the Kuṣāṇa empire since its inception – the ruler Kujula Kadphises<sup>28</sup>, who clearly manifested his inspiration with foreign currency<sup>29</sup> by striking his coins in the fashion of Augustus.<sup>30</sup>

The influence of Roman works on Gandhāra art manifested itself in a number of fields. Three styles of Roman relief were adapted<sup>31</sup>. Decoration themes of Graeco-Roman origin (scrolls of vine leaves, cherubim holding garlands) began to appear, and in certain representations the Buddha's garments resembled the togae worn by Roman deities.<sup>32</sup> A specific example of Roman influence upon Gandhāra art is offered by a bronze figurine of the Buddha made in the 1st or 2nd c. AD, which bears clear traces of inspiration by the portrait art of Nero's reign.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>22</sup> According to some researchers, the first time when the Romans encountered silk was supposed to happen before the battle of Carrhae, when they saw Parthian banners. A. Kajdańska, E. Kajdański, *Jedwab. Szlakami dżonek i karawan*, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> H. G. Rawlinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–106.

<sup>24</sup> A. Kajdańska, E. Kajdański, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–193.

<sup>25</sup> H. G. Rawlinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–113.

<sup>26</sup> W. Ball, *Rome in the East...*, p. 145, 148.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136, 153.

<sup>28</sup> Kujula Kadphises was the first emperor of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty. Testimony to his reign – coins inspired by Roman money – may be found, for example, in the British Museum.

<sup>29</sup> P. Frankopan, *The Silk Roads...*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> S. Sharma, *Gold Coins of Imperial Kushanas and Their Successors...*, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> B. Rowland, *Gandhāra, Rome and Mathura: The Early Relief Style...*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> K. Behrendt, *Gandhāra*, [[www 02](#)] (access: 29.03.2019).



## 2.4 Scythians and Kuṣāṇas

The period of the overlordship of Greek satraps in northeastern provinces came to an end when their lands began to be raided by the Scythians – a nomadic people of Iranian origin.<sup>34</sup> Slightly more permanent authority was introduced in these lands by the Kuṣāṇa dynasty which was derived from tribes of nomads.<sup>35</sup> Their Buddhism-friendly policy enabled two schools of Buddhist art to arise: Mathura in northern India and Gandhāra. Important monuments of Gandhāra art from this period include Kaniṣka I's coins and a large number of Buddhist *stūpas*, the most important among which is the *stūpa* in Peshawar.<sup>36</sup>

The Scythians control of the Eurasian steppe areas had considerable significance for the development of the Central Asian art of that time.<sup>37</sup> Their influence in West and Central Asia proved to be great. Among numerous Scythian monuments from Central Asia there are ornaments (*inter alia* earrings, buckles, clasps) frequently inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones.<sup>38</sup> Various materials were used to make the artefacts – precious metals were predominantly used. The most representative items include valuables made of gold. The artists-craftsmen who made Scythian ornaments were skilled in the field of the repoussé technique<sup>39</sup>. The most famous artefact of Buddhist art which was ornamented in this manner is the Bimaran reliquary.<sup>40</sup>

## 2.5 Persia

Persian presence in Gandhāra lands dates back to the 6th century BC when these lands came under the control of Cyrus the Great. Subsequently Gandhāra, as a satrapy, was incorporated into the empire of one of Cyrus's suc-

<sup>34</sup> J. Auboyer, *Sztuka Indii*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> J. H. Marshall, *The Date of Kanishka*, p. 984.

<sup>37</sup> B. Stawiski, *Sztuka Azji Środkowej*, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 97–101.

<sup>39</sup> Repoussé (a word of French origin) is a technique of processing metal which consists in the punching of cold-formed notches which yield a relief pattern on the other side. The British Museum, *Curator's corner, Under the microscope: the Oxus treasure and Scythian gold*, [www 08] (access: 12.05.2019).

<sup>40</sup> The British Museum, Collection online, *The Bimaran Reliquary*, [www 06] (access: 12.05.2019).



cessors – Darius the Great of the Achaemenid dynasty.<sup>41</sup> The long-standing relations of the Central Asian areas with the Persians left their mark in art, including Gandhāra.<sup>42</sup> Emperor Aśoka<sup>43</sup> was not immune to foreign influence – buildings whose construction he commissioned shared certain properties with the buildings of Persepolis.<sup>44</sup> An example of a slightly later architectural inspiration may be offered by a palace in the Hellenistic city of Ai Khanoum, which is clearly modelled on Darius I's seat, constructed for him in Souza.<sup>45</sup>

Many Iranians were among the officials who were in the service of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty.<sup>46</sup> Sources indicate that their religion, Zoroastrianism, thrived during Kaniṣka I's reign. The obverse of his coin featured as many as two references to fire<sup>47</sup>, which was the object of a particular cult among the Zoroastrians.<sup>48</sup> The Zoroastrian fire-altar represented on the coin became an attribute of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty<sup>49</sup> – one may suppose that this symbol was familiar to the Buddhists of that time.<sup>50</sup>

Selected cultures and their influence upon Gandhāra art were mentioned and described above. Even though only some elements of their legacy were indicated, it is not difficult to imagine how complex, heterogeneous and difficult the Gandhāra school of art is to study. This land was the stage of fairly tumultuous events – many people passed through on their way to India<sup>51</sup>, a result of which was, *inter alia*, variety in art.

<sup>41</sup> J. Petrus, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> B. Stawiski, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> P. Williams, op. cit., p. 20–21.

<sup>44</sup> J. Nehru, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>45</sup> C. Rapin, *Fouilles d'Aï Khanoum VIII: La trésorerie du palais hellénistique d'Aï Khanoum...*, pp. 272–278.

<sup>46</sup> A. D. H. Bivar, 'Fire-altar' *Subjects in the Art of Gandhāra*, p. 36.

<sup>47</sup> 1) Fire-altar; 2) flames on Kaniṣka I's shoulders. S. Sharma, op. cit., p. 42, 71.

<sup>48</sup> M. Boyce, *Zaratusztrianie...*, pp. 86–87, 89–92, 144–147.

<sup>49</sup> A. D. H. Bivar, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> J. Petrus, op. cit., p. 72.

### 3 The first anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha

#### 3.1 The gold token from Tillya Tepe



Figure 1: Golden token from Tillya Tepe, [www 09] (access: 29.03.2019)

Numerous finds of the Kuṣāṇa period prove that at that time the cult of the bodhisattvas and Buddha, the future Maitreya, was popular at that time.<sup>52</sup> Some researchers associate this cult, as well as the occurrence of anthropomorphic representations, with Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> In the context of the first representations of the Buddha in human form, the gold token from Tillya Tepe (Fig. 1) is a significant find. According to researcher Siglinde Dietz, this token, which is dated to approximately the year 50 BC, features the first anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha.<sup>54</sup> The figure which is represented on the coin does not manifest features typical of the Buddha, who was presented as a slim man with a beard turning a wheel. The scene may be interpreted to represent the Buddha who sets in motion the wheel of the Dharma/Law because it features an inscription in the Kharoṣṭhī script – *dharmacakrapravartako*, the exact meaning of which is “the one who sets in motion the wheel of the Dharma”.<sup>55</sup> The reverse of the coin features a representation of a lion with an inscription – *siho vigatabhayo*, i.e. “the lion who

<sup>52</sup> E. R. Stone, *An Early Image of Maitreya as a Brahman Ascetic?*, p. 68, 73–74.

<sup>53</sup> Mahāyāna is one of the principal branches of Buddhism which separated itself at the beginning of our era. P. Williams, op. cit., pp. 21–34. Y. Krishnan, *Was Gandhāra Art a Product of Mahāyāna Buddhism?*, pp. 104–105.

<sup>54</sup> S. Dietz, *Buddhism in Gandhāra*, p. 58.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem.

drove fear away” which most likely refers to the Buddha as “the lion of the Śākya family”.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.2 Kaniška I’s coin

Money issued by King Kaniška I is particularly interesting in the context of the first representations of the Buddha. The reverses of coins feature a number of religious figures associated with various cults which are even quite remote from each other.<sup>57</sup> The reason which motivated such a selection of religious representations could have been associated with a desire to emphasise the territorial acquisitions of the Kuṣāṇas and the manifestation and legitimisation of authority or the propaganda of assimilation-related policy. One may also conjecture that money was simply supposed to reflect the ethnic variety in the Kuṣāṇa Empire.<sup>58</sup>

Coins which feature a representation of the Buddha are exceptional and do not appear either before or after Kaniška’s reign. One cannot rule out the possibility that they were struck to commemorate the erection of a *stūpa* in Puruṣapura (present-day Peshawar), which was founded by the ruler.<sup>59</sup> However, it is possible that the coin which represented Śākyamuni was struck to commemorate the 4th Buddhist Council, which according to a tradition was supposed to be summoned by Kaniška I in Kashmir.<sup>60</sup>

A gold denarius which features a representation of Śākyamuni (Fig. 2), dated to approximately 127–150 AD, may be viewed at the British Museum.<sup>61</sup> The obverse of the coin presents King Kaniška in a standing posture. His face is presented in profile; he wears a diadem, holds a spear, and there is a fire altar next to him. The ruler wears a long mantle and large boots, i.e. clothes typical of Indo-Scythian peoples.<sup>62</sup> The reverse of the coin features a representation of the Buddha, who holds a part of the garment in his left hand,

<sup>56</sup> G. Fussman, *Numismatic and Epigraphic Evidence for the Chronology of Early Gandhāran Art*, p. 71.

<sup>57</sup> The figures which were honoured with a representation on legal tender included, *inter alios*, Buddha Śākyamuni, Śiva, and Mitra. J. M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Art of the Kushans*, pp. 69–74.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> A. Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art: And Other Essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology*, pp. 128–129.

<sup>60</sup> S. N. Sadasivan, *A Social History of India*, p. 93.

<sup>61</sup> The British Museum, Collection online, Coin [www 04] (access: 09.05.2019).

<sup>62</sup> J. M. Rosenfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–110.



and makes the *abhayamudrā* gesture with his right hand.<sup>63</sup> To the left of the Buddha there is a *tamga* – a symbol which is interpreted as the monogram of the ruler.<sup>64</sup> Even though his face is indistinct, one may discern features which are peculiar to the Buddha, such as the *uṣṇīṣa* and elongated earlobes. Joe Cribb remarked that the representation of the Buddha on the coin is parallel to the representation of the Buddha featured on the Bimaran reliquary.<sup>65</sup> The features which are shared by both representations include, for example, a double halo, an *uṣṇīṣa* with a ribbon, a moustache, vestments and the positioning of the hands.<sup>66</sup>



Figure 2: Kanishka's golden denarius with the representation of Buddha Śākyamuni and a Greek inscription "Boddo", [www 10] (access: 7.03.2019)

### 3.3 The Bimaran reliquary

An analysis of the scenes represented on Gandhāra bas relief artefacts furnishes a wealth of information on the rituals which were common among the ancient inhabitants of this land. One may remark that worshipping relics was particularly important for them.<sup>67</sup> Chinese pilgrims who eagerly visited Gandhāra, especially from the 5th to the 8th century AD, left copious accounts about relics, reliquaries which supposedly contained human remains.<sup>68</sup> These subjects were engaged by both Faxian (5th c. AD)<sup>69</sup>, and Xuanzang (7th c. AD) in their writings<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> D. E. Sanders, *Symbolic Gestures in Buddhism*, p. 49, 53.

<sup>64</sup> K. A. Akishev, *Art and mythology of Sakas*, [www 01] (access: 12.05.2019).

<sup>65</sup> J. Cribb, *Kanishka's Buddha coins...*, p. 83.

<sup>66</sup> G. Fussman, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>67</sup> G. Verardi, *Homa and other fire rituals in Gandhāra*, pp. 25–26, 64.

<sup>68</sup> K. Behrendt, P. Brancaccio, *Gandhāran Buddhism. Archeology, Art, Texts*, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> K. Behrendt, *Relic Shrines of Gandhāra...*, p. 87, 94.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83, 87.

No large fragments of human bones were found in the reliquaries which were discovered in Gandhāra; sometimes ashes were not even present, although there were other objects, e.g. valuables – predominantly coins.<sup>71</sup> In the case of the monument from Bimaran, the finds were located in a steatite vessel, inscribed in the Kharoṣṭhī script by which we may infer that this was a gift of Śivarakṣita offered in exchange for the relics of the Buddha.<sup>72</sup> Robert Brown noticed a link between the round shape of the vessel and the round reliquaries which were common in Gandhāra.<sup>73</sup> The researcher also drew attention to the form and the shape of cosmetic pyxides placed in the royal tombs of the Kuṣāṇas in Tillya Tepe. A similar reliquary from Gandhāra was fitted with each of the eight cosmetic pyxides found in the burial sites. Also the Bimaran reliquary was found in this collection.<sup>74</sup> The hoard of Tillya Tepe, which is also referred to as “Bactrian gold”, similarly to the reliquary under discussion, shares many features with Scythian artefacts.<sup>75</sup>

The Bimaran reliquary (Fig. 3 and 4) is an example of an artefact which belongs to the early stage of the Gandhāra school. The British Museum provides information about the date of production – approximately 1st century AD.<sup>76</sup> The artefact takes the form of a small case, and was probably topped by a lid. It was found by British archaeologist Charles Masson in the first half of the 19th century in one of the *stūpas* in Bimaran.<sup>77</sup> The reliquary was made of gold and featured *repoussé* ornaments, and was additionally inlaid with rubies. The decoration presents eight figures of identical size set in niches: the Buddha accompanied by Brahma and Indra.<sup>78</sup> Each of these figures was presented twice; the remaining figures are two adherents in a worshipful attitude (their hands are clasped together to make the *añjalimudrā* gesture), or the founders or even bodhisattvas. Each of this figures is located in a niche within arcades. According to John Marshall, this is a reference to Indian architecture, because similar arches are featured in the façade of a *stūpa*

<sup>71</sup> R. L. Brown, *The Nature and Use of the Bodily Relics...*, p. 183.

<sup>72</sup> R. Le May, *The Bimaran Casket*, p. 120.

<sup>73</sup> R. L. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 200–201.

<sup>75</sup> H. P. Francfort, *Tillya Tepe and Its Connections with the Eurasian Steppes*, p. 96, 99.

<sup>76</sup> The British Museum, Collection online, *The Bimaran Reliquary*, [www 06] (access: 9.05.2019).

<sup>77</sup> The British Museum, *The Bimaran Reliquary, Curator's Corner*, Season 4, Episode 6 [www 05] (access: 09.05.2019).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*.



discovered in Taxila.<sup>79</sup> Between them, in the top part of the reliquary, there are eagles with outspread wings. Albert Grunwedel remarked that in Gandhāra sculpture, the eagle corresponds to Zeus.<sup>80</sup>



Figure 3: The Bimaran reliquary with representations of Buddha Śākyamuni, British Museum, photography by Małgorzata Sułowska

<sup>79</sup> R. Le May, op. cit., p. 119, after J. Marshall, *A Guide to Taxila*, p. 76.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 119, *secundum*: A. Grunwedel, op. cit., p. 93.



Figure 4: Detail from the Bimaran reliquary – Buddha Śākyamuni, British Museum, photography by Małgorzata Sułowska

It is worth examining the stylistically heterogeneous manner in which the figures are presented on the reliquary. Due to the religious context, the most important figure is the Buddha. His exceptional nature may be perceived from the worshipful poses of the deities who flank the Buddha. The latter may also be identified on the basis of the so-called characteristics of a great man<sup>81</sup>. The features that are manifest here are the *uṣṇīṣa* in the form of

<sup>81</sup> The Characteristics of a Great Man were adapted as the indices of the identity of the Buddha.

a topknot and a halo around the head, also possessed by Brahma and Indra. Moreover, the Buddha performs a typical gesture of calming – *abhayamudrā*. Alfred Foucher describes this scene as the descent of the Buddha from the heaven to the earth, accompanied by Brahma and Indra.<sup>82</sup> Standing to the right of the Buddha, Brahma holds a *kamaṇḍalu* in his left hand, i.e. a water vessel<sup>83</sup>, whereas his right hand is raised to express the *abhayamudrā* gesture. Śakra-Indra wears a turban, his body decorated with jewellery and hands clasped together to express the *añjalimudrā* gesture. Both figures were presented in profile, for each of them turns toward the Buddha.

Le May emphasises that the Hellenistic traits are not the only ones that influenced the final form of the reliquary.<sup>84</sup> It is presumably no coincidence that the period when the Scythians and subsequently the Kuṣāṇas brought Gandhāra under their control concurs with the average of the dating for this monument. The choice of the valuable metal core from which the case was made also indicates links with the nomadic people, the Scythians, who developed a particular fondness for gold. Another work which indicates traces of the presence of Scythian art which in the area which is analysed in this article is the Tillya Tepe hoard (also known as “Bactrian gold”), which dates back to about the 1st c. BC and which was already mentioned in the context of an analogy of reliquaries and cosmetic pyxides.<sup>85</sup> The find contains items which represent a syncretic style, which combines Hellenistic with Indo-Scythian art, as in the case of the Bimaran reliquary. Moreover, the outer part of the lid of the scatola features a lotus rosette<sup>86</sup>. The lotus along with its elaborate symbolism is a common theme in Buddhist art. However, it is interesting that similar floral rosettes were often featured on lids of other

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These characteristics are drawn from various contexts: these are auspicious anomalies, features mentioned in universal Indian canons of beauty, i.e. the characteristics of a hero/ruler. Y. Krishnan, K. K. Tadikonda, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>82</sup> R. Le May, op. cit., p. 119, *secundum*: A. Foucher, *L'art. du greco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, pp. 537–539.

<sup>83</sup> Here the water vessel may symbolise the renunciation of the world and to remind people about the significance of meditation (in Gandhāra art it appears usually as an attribute of Maitreya). Rafi-us-Samad, *The Grandeur of Gandhāra...*, p. 184, 185.

<sup>84</sup> R. Le May, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>85</sup> H. P. Francfort, pp. 86–98.

<sup>86</sup> R. Le May, op. cit., p. 117, 119. For a more comprehensive treatment of the appearance of the lotus theme in Buddhist art (as well as the lotus rosetta) see: D. Seckel, *Before and beyond the Image: Aniconic Symbolism in Buddhist Art*, p. 41.



vessels unearthed in Scythian burial mounds, thousands of kilometres away from the lands which saw the dominance of Buddhism.<sup>87</sup>

The scatola of Bimaran was found to contain coins featuring the name of an Indo-Scythian ruler, Azes II. According to Masson and Marshall, despite the name of the ruler featured on the obverse, the coins did not belong to him but to his successors.<sup>88</sup> The most recent dating indicates that they were produced in the late 1st century AD.<sup>89</sup> The death of Azes II, which occurred approximately the year 12 BC, and pressure from the masses of the Kuṣāṇa nomads, put an end to the reign of the Indo-Scythians in Gandhāra.

## 4 The figure of the standing Buddha Śākyamuni

Śākyamuni was often represented as a young man with a well-proportioned body, similar to how the ancient Greeks and Romans represented their gods. Apollo's image exerted such a strong influence upon Śākyamuni's representations that the Buddha in the Gandhāra style sometimes is referred to as the Apollonian Buddha.<sup>90</sup> Features which indicate this similarity mainly include the hair – stylised, long, wavy, and bound – which resembles the hairstyle of the Greek god Apollo, and a typically Greek profile, in which the nose is an extension of the forehead. The draping of vestments resembles the style of creasing garments which is peculiar to Roman sculpture<sup>91</sup> (Fig. 5). The garments which were represented in reference to the Buddha were a sort of *saṃghāṭī* – a monk's mantle described in the Vinaya.<sup>92</sup> The Buddha is distinguished by two out of the thirty two characteristics, i.e. the *ūrṇā* and the *uṣṇīṣa*. This particular representation of Śākyamuni is also characterised by elongated earlobes, full lips and half-closed eyes. Statues were usually placed on an elevated platform, which were decorated with Buddhist themes (e.g. lotuses).

<sup>87</sup> An example of a recently discovered Scythian gold vessel with a floral ornament on the lid: Archaeology Magazine, A publication of the Archaeological Institute of America: Curry A., *Rites of the Scythians. Spectacular new discoveries from the Caucasus set the stage for a dramatic hilltop ritual*, [www 03] (access: 26.03.2019).

<sup>88</sup> R. Le May, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>89</sup> The British Museum, *Curator's Corner*, Season 4, Episode 6, [www 05] (access: 09.05.2019).

<sup>90</sup> B. Rowland Jr, *The Pelican History of Art: The Art and Architecture of India Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, p. 126.

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, p. 127.

<sup>92</sup> The Vinaya is a collection of rules which refer to monastic life which ensure moral unity. These rules vary according to the particular school of Buddhism, although the differences are not significant. P. Williams, op. cit., pp. 15–17.



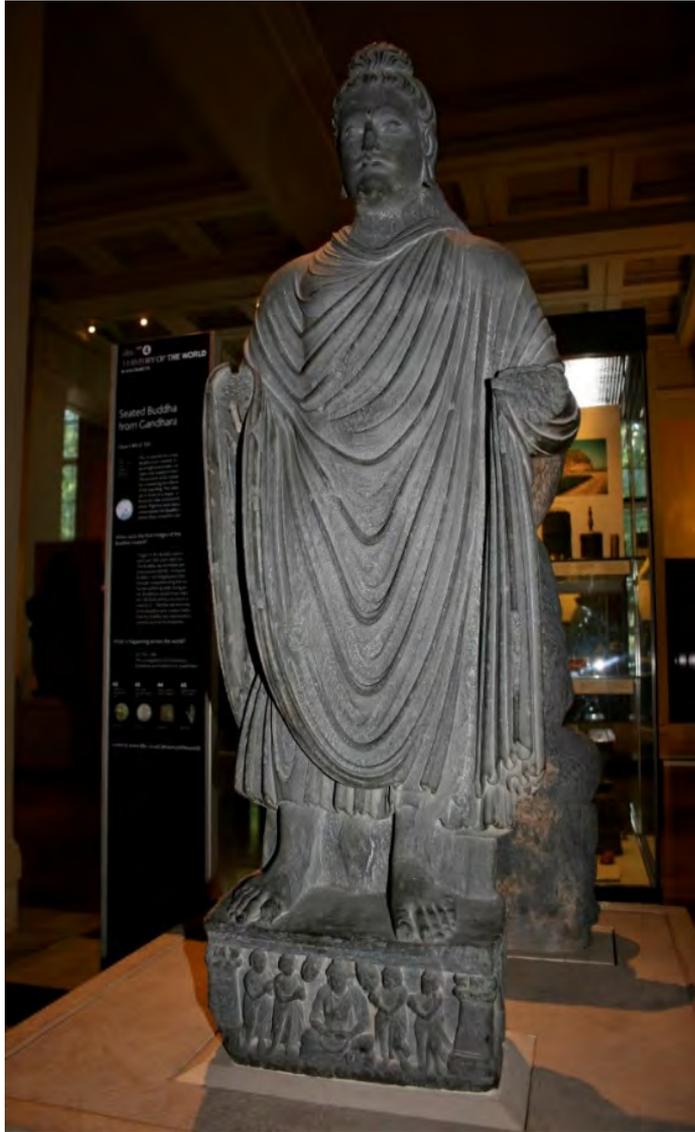


Figure 5: Buddha Śākyamuni in a standing posture, Gandhāra, 2nd/3rd c. AD, British Museum, photography by Mike Peel



Figure 6: A close-up of the Buddha's head, British Museum, photography by Małgorzata Sułowska

The grey schist figures of the Buddha Śākyamuni in a standing posture (Fig. 5 and 6) match this description. Freestanding statues were not popular in Gandhāra art; sculptures were usually positioned adjacent to the walls – they are easily recognisable due to their flattened posterior parts. Artefacts of this kind are represented by the Buddha sculpture in question, which is dated to the 2nd/3rd c. AD<sup>93</sup>, i.e. the peak of the development of the Gandhāra school. Elements of the statue such as the hale and the hands were not preserved,

<sup>93</sup> J. Rhi, *Positioning Gandhāran Buddhas in chronology: significant coordinates and anomalies*, pp. 44–45.

so it is difficult to establish the gesture which was expressed. The plinth on which the figure stands represents a meditating bodhisattva flanked on both sides by figures who worship him. The photograph (Fig. 6) presents the two previously mentioned characteristics that distinguish the Buddha: the *ūrṇā* and the *uṣṇīṣa*.

## 5 Stucco heads

Stucco heads were found above all in places where there was no easy access to rock (Hadda, Taxila). The idea of producing such figurines itself was derived from Greek culture. A small figure which represents a man's head (Fig. 7) is most likely a portrait of a bodhisattva.<sup>94</sup> Two black eyebrows curve above the half-closed eyes to represent a semi-arch, between which there is a red point with an empty centre – an *ūrṇā*. The head is capped by a turban adorned by a precious stone. Such richly ornamented headgear could be afforded only by the representatives of the highest castes.<sup>95</sup> For comparison's sake, let us remark that at the right-hand side there is a picture of the likeness of the Buddha Śākyamuni (Fig. 8), made of the same material, in the same style and period. This representation of the Buddha is much more modest than the representation of the bodhisattva. Apart from the *ūrṇā*, on the head there is an *uṣṇīṣa* in the form of a topknot which is typical of the Buddha. These small pieces of sculpture share the following: style, material, similar dating and traces of polychromies – especially black and red.

## 6 Conclusion

When we compare the statue of the Buddha in a standing posture (Fig. 5 and 6) and the stucco heads (Fig. 7 and 8), one may discern how Hellenistic influences gradually declined over the course of time. The representations of the Buddha produced at the mature stage of Gandhāra art are markedly different from the first representations of Śākyamuni – saturated with Scythian influences – produced in the period of the reign of the Kuṣāṇas. Examples of Gandhāra art which are presented in this article illustrate the various representations of the Buddha Śākyamuni which were developed in it.

<sup>94</sup> The British Museum, Collection online, Figure, [[www 07](#)] (access: 07.05.2019).

<sup>95</sup> S. Dietz, op. cit., p. 20.

The considerations about the heterogeneity of Gandhāra art which are presented here overlap to a great extent with John Marshall's observations, who often emphasises its Hellenistic traits in a book entitled *The Buddhist Art of Gandhāra*. Some of the artefacts reflect an affinity with Greek art clearly enough that it is impossible to overlook these similarities. One may also discern other influences, *inter alia* Persian ones, which indicate that Gandhāra representations of the Buddha constitute exceptional evidence for the co-existence and the interpenetration of ancient civilisations.



Figure 7: Head of a deity or Bodhisattva, Gandhāra, 4th/5th c. AD, British Museum, photography by Małgorzata Sułowska



Figure 8: Head of Buddha Śākyamuni, Gandhāra, 4th/5th c. AD, British Museum, [[www 11](#)] (access: 29.03.2019)

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