

# *Narrative Art Between India and the Hellenistic World*

**Maurizio Taddei**

These pages synthesize everything I said—not read—over the course of four lectures given at the IsMEO Seminars in the Palazzo Brancaccio on February 15, 22, 29, and on March 7, 1992.\* There are also some additions, partially prompted by the questions posed to me at the end of each meeting, meant to make the presentation more precise and well-documented.

I had the opportunity to talk about closely related subjects on various occasions: at the Institut für Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde of the University of Vienna in 1989, at the Institut d'Archéologie et d'Histoire Ancienne of the University of Lausanne in 1990, and once more in the same year at the Institute of Archaeology of the Archaeological Survey of India, in New Delhi.

The same subjects—analyzed more from an Indian than a Gandharan viewpoint—were also dealt with during my course “Archaeology and History of the Art of India” at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli during the academic year 1991–92.

A final notice: some of the reflections that follow have been included in an article currently being printed in *Vestnik Drevnej Drevnei Istorii. Journal of Ancient History*.†

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† Taddei, M., G. Verardi “Archeologija i buddizm—vklad Ital'janskogo Instituta Srednego i Dal'nego Vostoka (IsMEO),” *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii*, 2 (1993): 152–162.

Il faut [...] admettre que les bouddhistes indiens, quoique ayant servi de maîtres à tous les autres, n'ont pas plus que les autres pulsé en eux-mêmes la connaissance de la statuaire, et qu'ils ont, eux aussi, appris à martier le ciseau à l'imitation de mains étrangères. Mais alors de qui ont-ils pu tenir l'art de la sculpture? Les collections du Musée de Lahore répondent: Ils l'ont tenu des Grecs.

(One has [...] to admit that the Indian Buddhists, although they played the role of teachers for all others, have not for their part pushed for an understanding of statuary art more than the others, and that they, like the others, have learned to handle the chisel by imitating foreign hands. But then, from whom could they have received the art of sculpture? The collection in the Lahore Museum gives the answer: They received it from the Greeks).

Th. Duret

The Gandharan School is not an example of Hellenistic influence upon Indian art, but the reverse [...]

E. B. Havell

[...] the Gandhāra School was merely a branch of the cosmopolitan Graeco-Roman art of the early empire.

V. A. Smith<sup>1</sup>

For the last century and more, the study of Indian art has been investigating the most formal, or rather morphological aspects of the ancient production, coming to a stylistic classification that is fairly accurate, though not as sophisticated as that of Greek art; at the same time, efforts were made to pursue an analysis of the images that made the most of the literary tradition, in an endeavor to decipher and classify or, in other words, label, the figurative scenes. Confined in this manner to the narrow tracks of a purely descriptive iconography, the history of Indian art has not yet opened itself to the methodological approaches that have borne fruit in other contexts and that also represent prospects which may be provisionally put aside but cannot be fully ignored: I am above all referring to the social history of art, to Warburg-related iconology, and to the different structuralist approaches.

In recent times, I have been happy to assist in the rise of new interests—including the directions just mentioned—that pay particular attention to dealing with the problems related to the concept of “narration.” This has been

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1 Th. Duret, *Voyage en Asie*, Paris 1874, 326; E. B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, London 1908, 41; V. A. Smith, *The Early History of India*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., London 1924, 282–283.

a particular focus of a recent essay by Vidya Dehejia<sup>2</sup> (we will have occasion to come back to this).

It was already quite common to make use of the expression “narrative art” as opposed to others such as “symbolic art,” “iconism,” etc. For example, the English scholar John Irwin, who is particularly interested in symbolic—cosmological and above all cosmogonic—aspects of Indian art, wrote that “Gandhāra artists worked mainly in the service of texts, and what they give us is *literary narrative in stone*—not an art speaking its own aesthetic language.”<sup>3</sup> We will come back to this.

Since it is my intent here to go into some aspects of “narration” within the artistic production in India and Gandhāra, I will first try to explain the term “narration.” It seems to me that it can be connected—in the sense that concerns us here—with myths and stories, when these become artistic creation. I draw a distinction between “myth” and “story” because, although it is true that all myths are stories, not all stories are myths; however, we can say that a story may contain a varying number of mythical elements, and that all myths may be “told” in a more or less articulate manner, depending on their narrators.

When I say “myth”—perhaps the explanation is superfluous—I am talking about the cognitive process that, in our culture, from Plato onwards, is distinguished

2 V. Dehejia, “On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art,” in *Art Bulletin* 72, 1990, 374–392; also “Narrative Modes in Ajanta Cave 17. A Preliminary Study,” in *SAS* 7, 1991, 45–57. In addition to D. Schlingloff’s more general essay (D. Schlingloff, “Erzählung und Bild. Die Darstellungsformen von Handlungsabläufen in der europäischen und indischen Kunst,” in *Beiträge zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Archäologie* 3, Munich 1981, 87–213), we must also remember his numerous and important contributions on Ajanta (collected in *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings*, Delhi 1987) and on other ancient Buddhist monuments of India, such as “The Mahābodhi-jātaka in Bharhut,” in *Ludwik Sternbach Felicitation Volume*, Lucknow 1979, 745–749; “Aśoka or Māra? On the interpretation of some Sāñcī reliefs,” in L. A. Hercus et. al., eds., *Indological and Buddhist Studies. Volume in Honour of Professor J. W. de Jong*, Canberra 1982, 441–455; “Das Śyāma-Jātaka: Schultradition und Bildüberlieferung einer buddhistischen Legende,” in H. Bechert, ed., *Zur Schulzugehörigkeit von Werken der Hīnayāna-Literatur*, I (Abhandl. der Akad. der Wiss., in Göttingen, Phil. Hist. Kl., 3<sup>rd</sup> s., n. 149), Göttingen 1985, 203–218; “Die Meditation unter dem Jambu-Baum,” in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XXXI, 1987, 111–130. An interesting iconological and semiological foray is that by R. Parimoo, “Vidhura Pañḍita Jātaka—from Barhut to Ajanta. A Study of Narrative, Semiological and Stylistic Aspects,” in G. Bhattacharya, ed., in *Akṣayanīvī: Essays presented to Dr. Debala Mitra*, Delhi 1991, 177–189. As to the art of Gandhāra, there are several astute observations in L. Nehru, *Origins of the Gandhāran Style. A Study of Contributory Influences*, Delhi 1989. Worth mentioning, all their severe inadequacies notwithstanding, are also the works by P. E. Karetzky, namely “Hellenistic Influences on Scenes of the Life of the Buddha in Gandhara,” in *Oriental Art* XXXV 3, 1989, 163–168; also her *The Life of the Buddha. Ancient Scriptural and Pictorial Traditions*, Lanham 1992.

3 J. Irwin, “The Mystery of the (Future) Buddha’s First Words,” in *Annali del’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 41, 1981, 633.

from *logos* or logical reasoning, while cultures that are different from ours have considered it, and still do consider it, an entirely appropriate way to express a system of thoughts.<sup>4</sup> It is our culture, following Aristotle above all, that has sharply pitted *mythos* against *logos*, placing the latter on a higher level than the former, to which at most an auxiliary function was attributed. By “story,” on the other hand, I mean a type of narration that is not explicitly mythical, but rather sets out to record and describe events which actually occurred in historical time even if the narrator/artist did not personally experience them.

It is not always possible to draw a definite line between myth and story; on the other hand, it is not even always possible to clearly separate mythical and logical thinking. But this is an issue that would take us too far from our topic.



**Fig. 1:** Descent of Buddha from the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven. Relief found at Butkara I, Swat Valley, Pakistan. Now preserved Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif. [Fig. 3 in the original.]

4 Among recent works on the myth as a cognitive process, one of the most stimulating is that by K. Hübner, *Die Wahrheit des Mythos*, Munich 1985; Italian translation, *La verità del mito*, Milan 1990.

At this point we realize the fact that, under the category “narrative art,” we end up finding works as different from each other as a relief with the Descent of the Buddha from the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven (fig. 1) and one of the scenes from Trajan’s Column in Rome: in the first as well as the second we are confronted with an event that is narrated, but in one case we are dealing with a myth that is being told—albeit with essential simplicity—whereas, in the other, with a story that tends to become a myth but which is firmly rooted in history, or, to be more precise, the annals. The objects here in the second are common objects: weapons, fences, ponds, and bridges. But in the first, the stairs which form the core of the representation are not common stairs to be used at their pleasure by the characters of the narration: they are most definitely *symbols*.

We can agree therefore that, in this manner, the concept of “narrative art” remains rather vague, being only the opposite of representations that are fixed in an iconic rigidity: in icons, to be precise, from which all becoming is excluded. These are the vehicles of a “message” that is made only in space and does not unfold in time, because time belongs to the relative, the human, to things that can be felt: the icon on the other hand aims at reproducing the absolute as it is experienced by the artist—or rather as the artist learned to reproduce it from the instructions by those who had experienced God, thus situating himself as the intermediary between Truth and the faithful.<sup>5</sup>

It is worthwhile to invoke the words of a unique and original thinker, the Russian Orthodox priest Pavel Florenskij:<sup>6</sup>

The witnesses [i.e. the saints], by way of the icon painters, give us the images—*eide, eikónes*—of their vision. Through their artistic form, the icons bear witness directly and graphically to the reality of these forms: they pronounce the Name of God with lines and colors. . . . Icon painters thus bear witness not to their art of making icons, i.e. to themselves, but to the holy witnesses of the Lord and, with them, to the Lord himself.

5 On the function of images in European culture, see D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago 1989. On the attitude toward images in Eastern Christianity, see, among recent contributions, J. Pelikan, *Imago Dei. The Byzantine Apologia for Icons*, New Haven 1990. There is no need to recall the neo-Platonic origins of these European speculations about the image: suffice it to refer to the essays by A. Grabar, now collected in his volume *Les origines de l'esthétique médiévale*, Paris 1992.

6 The work quoted here by P. Florenskij (in Russian) was published under the title “Ikonostas,” in *Bogoslovskye Trudy* IX, 1972, and published in Italian translation by E. Zolla, *Le porte regali: saggio sull'icona* [The royal doors: an essay on the icon], Milano 1977. Italian readers can find other works on art in P. Florenskij, *La prospettiva rovesciata e altri scritti* [The reverse perspective and other writings], edited by N. Misler, Roma 1983. Obviously, Florenskij’s has his precedents in Byzantine thought: for the issue discussed here, see especially Maximus the Confessor (7<sup>th</sup> century; cf. Grabar, *Les origines*, 114–16).

At this level of significance, it is clear that the pictorial representation is not something that can stop halfway: either it reaches its purpose, putting us in touch with the symbolized reality and therefore becoming one with its purpose, or it does not, and is therefore dead and misleading. In this perspective, there is no room for mediocre works: we have masterpieces, or nothing.

Florenskij even declares his conviction through the following upsetting but perfectly consistent formulation:

Among the philosophical demonstrations of God's existence the most convincing seems to be one that you cannot find in manuals: it can be expressed through the syllogism "because Rublev's<sup>7</sup> Trinity exists, God exists!"

This viewpoint may seem strange to the European reader, even more so because it is expressed by a European scholar—albeit an Eastern European and member of the clergy—who was anything but ignorant of the modern speculation that took place until the first decades of our century (he died in a Stalinist prison in 1943); I think it can nevertheless be of some help to us in approaching the field of Indian iconography with greater sensibility.

In India—and the Himalayan countries—the correspondence between the Divine and the image (the icon, which is not only *mūrti*, "form," but *pratimā*, or rather *bimba*, reflection as in a mirror) is guaranteed either by the artist's mystical experience or by the tradition, of which the priests or, in some cases, the whole community, are guardians.<sup>8</sup>

If we were to find a constant feature in different religious contexts that allows us to define an icon, we could say that it is the testimony of divine presence and immobility *par excellence*. It was not without reason that the rulers who wished to state the divine origin of their royalty—if not their own partaking of divine nature—made use of the formal qualities that usually mark an icon: frontality, immobility, rigidity, luminosity, and bi-dimensionality.

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7 Andrej Rublev (~1360–1428), Eastern church icon painter, whose work has become an important model for later painters (editor's note).

8 As reported in the *Mānasāra*. See S. K. Sarasvati, "An Ancient Text on the Casting of Metal Images," in *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* IV, 1936, 140. On the role of the images in Indian art, see also several works by H. Zimmer, especially "Yoga and the Figurative Sacred Image," in his *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India*, Princeton 1984, 21–64. Another work full of very interesting and useful ideas is that of Niharranjan Ray, *Idea and Image in Indian Art*, New Delhi 1973.

I think that, at this point, the fundamental difference between icon and narrative representation should be clear; but it should be equally clear that it would be a mistake to consider these two categories as being quite distinct, without overlapping.



**Fig. 2:** *Stela from Kāpiśa, Afghanistan. Now preserved at National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. [Fig. 12 in the original.]*

It might suffice to give one example: when India and the same Gandhāra, probably under the impulse of mature Mahāyāna thought, started to favor the images of the Buddha or of Bodhisattvas as isolated figures or in mystical groups (e.g. triads) which were, however, not inserted into a narrative context, those who commissioned the images did not altogether neglect the episodes of the Buddha's life or his former lives as told in the *jātakas* to build meaningful compositions. These stories, however, were crystallized in highly simplified forms that seem to act only as reminders. This is true for some stelae from Kāpiśa (fig. 2), as well as some of the reliefs on the façade of Cave 19 at Ajanta depicting the Dīpaṅkara Jātaka and Siddhārtha's meeting with his son,<sup>9</sup> and also in some Pāla stelae such as the one from Nālandā with the story of the conversion of Aṅgulimāla, etc.<sup>10</sup> The distinctive elements of the scene have by now been reduced to mere attributes, such as the piglet in the iconography of St. Anthony the Abbot, or the cogwheel in that of St. Catherine of Alexandria, though perhaps without the ethno-historical substance of the latter.

The predominant feature in these works is the image of the Buddha, whose colossal dimensions reveal him as what he is, regardless of the insertion into a story: we are tempted to define it as a true and proper icon with a juxtaposition of a narrative element, in accordance with a conventional compromise that was not to meet with great success. Yet we must return with this opinion to a more cautious definition as we can see that—in some cases at least—these works act as a “support” to others that are central in both the physical and the ideational sense, and their purpose is to transmit, by means of allegory, a doctrinal and ideological message that is normally foreign to the true icon.<sup>11</sup>

9 For example, a stela from Shotorak: M. Bussagli, “Osservazioni sulla persistenza delle forme ellenistiche nell'arte del Gandhāra” [Observations on the persistence of Hellenistic forms in the art of Gandhāra], in *Rivista dell'Istituto nazionale d'archeologie e storia dell'arte* 7, years V–VI, 1956–1957, 149–247 (now also in M. Bussagli, *Indica et Serindica*, Roma 1992), 200 ff., fig. 39; H. G. Franz, *Buddhistische Kunst Indiens* [Buddhist art of India], Leipzig 1965, 103, pl. 176 (caption with incorrect indication of provenance); on Cave 19 at Ajanta: M. Hallade, *Inde. Un millénaire d'art bouddhique*, Paris 1968, 138, fig. 101.

10 For example, D. and P. G. Paul, “Just the One Finger Yet. A Rare Representation of Aṅgulimāla in Pāla art,” in D. Mitra and G. Bhattacharya, eds, *Nalinikanta Śatavārsikī, Dr. N. K. Bhattasali Centenary Volume. Studies in Art and Archaeology of Bihar and Bengal*, Delhi 1989, 35–39. Another example is the representation of the story of the elephant Nālāgiri: T. Tse Bartholomew, “Taming of the Elephant” and Other Pāla Sculptures in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,” *ibid.*, 61–65.

11 See for example M. Taddei, “Appunti sull'iconografia di alcune manifestazioni luminose dei Buddha” [Notes on the iconography of some luminous manifestations of the Buddha], in *Gururājamañjarikā. Studi in onore di Giuseppe Tucci*, Napoli 1974, vol. II, 435–449; S. Vasant, “Dīpaṅkara Buddha at Ajanta,” in G. Bhattacharya, ed., *Akṣayanīvī, cit.*, 170–176; M. Taddei, “The Dīpaṅkara-jātaka and Siddhārtha's Meeting with Rāhula. How Are They Linked to the Flaming Buddha?” in *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 51, 1992, 103–107.

Therefore, we must admit that, when we speak of “narrative art” in connection with the art of Gandhāra, we are only saying that this art finds its best expression in recounting coherent sequences, or *fabulae*,<sup>12</sup> which is perhaps saying quite a lot but is definitely not everything.

The interesting question is, rather, a different one: in telling these stories—and we all know that they are mainly episodes in the life of the Buddha—in what way does Gandhāra differ from Indian art and in what from Hellenistic-Roman art? We will try to give an answer by looking at this problem from another point of view, the widely debated issue of the so-called classic “component” in the art of Gandhāra.

It is a well-known fact that, when it was discovered (in the second half of the nineteenth century), Gandhāran art was hailed with real enthusiasm by Western scholars, who saw in the Gandharan production a felicitous—if not the most felicitous—moment for the art of the subcontinent and, according to some, the only one that could be called art. The Indian content was not questioned, but it was the Hellenic form that gave it aesthetic dignity.

What was happening in European culture at the time? The first half of the nineteenth century had witnessed a blossoming of studies on the religions of India, which went together with the expansion and consolidation of British rule in the subcontinent. One had passed from a stage of tentative and nebulous knowledge where one was incapable of distinguishing between Buddhism and Brahmanism to one of critical analysis, of verification based on texts. By the mid-nineteenth century, scholars had access to some well-grounded works, some of which are still useful to this day. It is enough to remind ourselves that the first edition of *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien*, by Eugène Burnouf, saw the light in 1844.

Such was the impact, such the fascination that the philosophical and above all the ethical doctrines of Buddhism exerted on the European—and in particular evidently the English—intellectuals that priggish Victorians and the Anglican clergy took the trouble to denounce, at times with the pitch of an ideological crusade, the “dangers” of this Asiatic religion. Its greatest sin was located in its alleged or real atheism, as well as in the theory of reincarnation: in this condemnation, Buddhism was matched with Darwin’s theory of the evolution of species.

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12 “*Fabula*: The set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence.” G. Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 1987.

However, we must say that the crusade against Buddhism was generally a failure: *The Light of Asia*, a narration in blank verse of the life of the Buddha, written by Edwin Arnold and first published in 1879, ran to at least a hundred reprints in England and America and helped to spread knowledge to very broad audiences that had hitherto been the preserve of a few specialists. At the end of the century, the enthusiasm for Buddhism—in spite of the numerous condemnations shared by the fortunate English poet and the ancient Indian sage—was at its highest and would be maintained in one way or another to this day.<sup>13</sup>

In Buddhism, Arnold, and with him scholars in universities and academies, had discovered an acceptable face of Asia and particularly of India. In his preface, in which he avoids any, even veiled, confrontation with Christianity, Arnold defines Buddhist Asia as a “magnificent empire of belief” that unfortunately today does not include India, although “the mark of Gautama’s sublime teaching is stamped ineffaceably upon modern Brahmanism, and the most characteristic habits and convictions of the Hindus are clearly due to the benign influence of Buddha’s precepts.”<sup>14</sup>

Even those who maintained an attitude of rejection towards Buddhism could not help but find in Gautama a wonderfully wise person, on par with and perhaps superior to the sages of Greek and Roman antiquity, though not comparable to Jesus of Nazareth.

We can witness an appropriation of Buddhist thought by European culture. Stripped of its less “digestible” elements, Buddhist thought ended up being likened in a way to Christianity, especially from an ethical point of view. In this process, the new atmosphere naturally had a considerable weight which had been formed with the arrival of comparatism in the study of religions. While, on the one hand, Europeans could approach Buddhism without causing too much scandal and even recognize in it (with the help of scholars of Max Mueller’s caliber) quasi-Christian elements, this Christianity on the other hand was from now on also studied as one among many religions: in

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13 On the attitude of European culture against Buddhism, see: H. de Lubac, *La rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l’Occident*, Paris 1952; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Paris 1985; Italian translation *Buddhismo e Occidente*, Milano 1987, 101 ff.; Ph. C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge 1988; several interesting points can also be found in P. Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters. History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Oxford 1977; R.-P. Droit, *L’oubli de l’Inde. Une amnésie philosophique*, Paris 1989. See also M. Winternitz, *Geschichte der indischen Literatur*, vol. II, Calcutta 1927, 402–423.

14 Matthew Arnold, *The Light of Asia; or, The Great Renunciation (Mahābhiniṣkramana), Being the Life and Teaching of Gautama, Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism (as Told in Verse by an Indian Buddhist)*, New York and Boston 1879, Preface, VII–VIII (editor’s note).

mid-century Germany and France, even more than in England, rationalism and positivism obtained great success in inducing a critical reassessment of the figure of Christ thanks to two works which also did not fail to make their influence felt in England: *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (1835) (*The life of Jesus, critically examined*, English translation by George Eliot, London, 1846), written by the Hegelian David Friedrich Strauss (now known for being the target of a violent attack by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1873), but above all, *Vie de Jésus* (1863) (*The life of Jesus*, English translation London, 1863) by Ernest Renan.

We are also not lacking attempts to locate a common ground in the gospels of Christ and the Buddha in coincidences, “accord,” or interdependence: we may mention, at least from the 1880s to the first decade of the twentieth century, the names of the German Rudolf Seydel, the Dutchman G.A. van den Bergh van Eysinga, and the American Albert J. Edmunds;<sup>15</sup> but for the Italian reader, the translation which Carlo Formichi gave us in 1912 of Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, accompanied by an introductory essay and a commentary, deserves to be briefly brought back to mind. Formichi compared the two religions, implying, in some respects, a preference for Buddhism. He was answered not only—and in a calm way—by [the then Prime Minister] Luigi Luzzatti, who maintained the superiority of Christianity, but also by a curious pamphlet from a priest, one Pier Luigi Veneziani. We are less interested in the arguments against Formichi and Luzzatti than in the argument Veneziani tried to make with regard to the *Buddhacarita* and its author because it shows how dangerous the Catholic Church considered, on the eve of World War I, the rivalry “of a Buddhism that nowadays they want to substitute for Christianity and which finds favor with the upper classes and with women, with fashionable society and theosophists and modernists of recent date:”

Perché Acwaghosa [sic] è per noi un qualche eretico fanatico che ci è restato ignoto nella storia delle eresie, o un qualche strano e solitario pensatore come il noto vecchio di Iasnaja Poljana, Leone Tolstoj, il quale sotto l’influenza di quelle idee che il Giudaismo aveva da lungo tempo sparse in Oriente e che il Cristianesimo aveva esso pure diffuse sulla coltura e sulle idee fondamentali dell’umanità in soli 125 anni di esistenza, ci à regalato una strana e colossale mistificazione del Cristianesimo stesso. E non cerchiamo se inconsciamente o per mala volontà.

(For Acwagosha [sic] is for us a certain heretical fanatic that has remained unknown to the history of heresy, or some strange and singular thinker like the notorious old man from Yasnaya Polyana, Leo Tolstoy, having, under the influence of those ideas which Judaism had for a long time already spread to the Orient and which

15 Winternitz, *Geschichte der indischen Literatur*, 277ff.

Christianity also, within just 125 years had spread into the culture and basic ideas of humanity, given us a strange and monstrous hoax of Christianity itself. And we are not interested in whether this was done unconsciously or with bad intentions.)

So Aśvaghōṣa was nothing but “a fanatical heretic or a pagan who was not sufficiently informed about Christianity!” This attitude was anything but new among writers of the Catholic persuasion: the matter of Christian influences became, for some of them, as noted by H. de Lubac, a fixation; in this case, the lashing condemnation only reveals the embarrassment of the zealous priest when confronted with the by now universally positive assessment of Buddhism.<sup>16</sup>

However, in welcoming the Buddha to the Western pantheon of the sages of all ages, European culture shielded itself against this other religion, Brahmanism, with which it could not manage to find any point of contact and which it continued to often find repulsive, especially on account of the caste system but also because of the extreme “weirdness” of the myths surrounding its incomprehensibly numerous divinities. We are reminded of the statement by Edwin Arnold already quoted according to which whatever is good in Brahmanism seemed to be due to the “benign influence of Buddha’s precepts.”

Buddhism, which had by then almost disappeared from India, became, paradoxically enough, the only part of India European culture was ready to accept. I would go further: after somewhat obtuse and essentially parochial initial opposition, official European culture was able to welcome Buddhism with sincere satisfaction, because insofar as it had disappeared from India, it could never be identified with any of the major ethno-political forces of modern India. Moreover, having been acknowledged as similar to Christianity, it could be presented as a prefiguration of Christianity itself, thus giving a “historical” justification for the European presence in India.

The operation was completed with the extreme emphasis placed by historians such as Vincent Smith on those periods of Indian history that were considered particularly fortunate because they were unified and characterized by “benevolent” dynasties, which were—not coincidentally—Buddhist: moving backwards in time, the Gupta, the Kuṣāṇa, and, above all, the Maurya.

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16 C. Formichi’s book *Aśvaghōṣa poeta del Buddhismo* [Aśvaghōṣa, Buddhism’s poet] came out in the “Biblioteca di cultura moderna” [Library of modern culture], of the Laterza publishing house, Bari 1912; L. Luzzatti’s text is in the *Corriere della Sera*, August 9th, 1912; P. L. Veneziani’s pamphlet had the title *Buddhismo e Cristianesimo. I canti buddistici di Acvaghosa e l’on. Luzzatti. Controversie religiose* [Buddhism and Christianity. The Buddhist songs of Acvaghosa and the Honorable Luzzatti. A religious controversy], Roma 1913 (quoted passages on pp. 4, 10, 84). Cf. de Lubac, *La rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l’Occident*, 185.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the reorganized Archaeological Survey of India, entrusted to the classical archaeologist John Marshall by that great political manipulator of culture, Lord Curzon, concentrated its efforts mainly on surveying and excavating Buddhist sites, leaving a bit on the sidelines the interest in Hindu and Muslim antiquities that had arisen during previous decades. A favorable terrain for this operation had already been prepared for some years with the first attempts to classify the “Graeco-Buddhist” art of Gandhāra.

This is not the place to delve into a history of the studies of Gandhāra, especially because an overview that is admirable in its clarity has been available for some time: the *Contribution à l'étude de l'art du Gandhāra*, (Contribution to the study of the art of Gandhāra) by Henry Deydier;<sup>17</sup> however, some notes on the terms in which the debate was conducted in those early years seem to be called for, because I believe that they framed all later scholarly literature.

In scarcely the space of a year, the Englishman Vincent Smith and the Frenchman Émile Senart offered two substantially similar readings of Gandharan production, although they differed on the chronology.

While Senart, in his essay published in the *Journal Asiatique* in 1890, wanted to limit the period of the flourishing of Gandharan art to the first and second centuries AD, Smith, whose article had been published a year earlier in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, proposed 200 AD as the date for the earliest works of the Romano-Buddhist school of Peshawar and 600 AD as the probable latest date for any work of the Gandhāra school in the lower Kabul valley. However, he also added that all the sculptures of any artistic merit were made between 200 and 350 AD.

Smith returned to the subject of the extinction of art in India in the fourth century, a truly bizarre proposition that can nevertheless be explained by what seemed obvious to him, namely that beauty and Greek (or rather Roman) classicity were one and the same thing. Probably the same motivation is at the root of the narrow chronological terms proposed by Senart.

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17 H. Deydier, *Contribution à l'étude de l'art du Gandhāra. Essai de bibliographie analytique et critique des ouvrages parus de 1922 à 1949* [Contribution to the study of the art of Gandhāra. Essay of analytical and critical bibliography of the works published between 1922 and 1949], Paris 1950. It should be noted that, in those years, alongside the debate on the alleged Greek roots of Indian art, another discussion arose on the origin of classical Indian theatre, a debate that involved scholars of the caliber of Albrecht Weber, who favored recognizing a Greek origin, or at least a Greek influence, and of Richard Pischel, who strongly opposed this theory. The issue is summarized in N. Savarese, *Teatro e spettacolo fra Oriente e Occidente* [Theater and performance between Orient and Occident], Roma 1992, 226–232.

In the beginning of this century which is so rich in initiatives, the first volume of the work that is still the most important on the subject was published in France, *L'Art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra* (Graeco-Buddhist art of Gandhâra) (1905), by Alfred Foucher. The title itself already takes a stance and the interpretive key is extremely precise: It proceeds, in the development of the art of Gandhâra, from a maximum of Greekness (with a minimum of Indianness) to a minimum of Greekness, that is to say, a Greekness which becomes more and more degraded or Indianized. Yet Foucher keeps a balanced approach, dividing the merits between the two components in an admirable attempt at synthesis:<sup>18</sup>

Pour notre part, nous définissons volontiers cet art comme la combinaison d'une forme classique et d'un fond bouddhique, l'adaptation de la technique grecque ou, plus exactement, hellénistique à des sujet strictement indiens. [...] l'originalité et l'intérêt de ces oeuvres singulières consistent justement dans cette intime union du génie antique et de l'âme orientale, dans cette sorte de fusion de la légende bouddhique coulée à même les moules importés d'Occident. [...] C'est bien, selon le mot d'E. Curtius, "une page nouvelle de l'art grec" qui s'ouvre; mais le sens de cette page ne peut être déchiffré qu'en sanskrit.

(As far as we are concerned, we will gladly define this art as a combination of a classical form with a Buddhist background, as the adaptation of Greek or more precisely Hellenistic technique to strictly Indian themes [...] the originality and the interest of these unique works consist exactly in this intimate union of the antique genius and the Oriental soul, in this kind of fusion of the Buddhist legend cast into forms imported from the West [...]) It is indeed, to quote Ernst Curtius, "a new page in Greek art" that opens here; but the meaning of this page can only be deciphered in Sanskrit.)

However, alongside the more "academic" systematizations of the material (Smith, Senart, Foucher, Grünwedel), the first controversies also began to emerge.

It was a somewhat atypical Englishman, E. B. Havell, who in 1908, in his book *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, expressed judgments on Gandharan art along the following lines: "The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of this period are soulless puppets, debased types of the Greek and Roman pantheon, posing uncomfortably in the attitudes of Indian asceticism;" and again, three years later, in his very widely distributed *The Ideals of Indian Art*, he defined "Graeco-Buddhist" art as "the trivial, decadent sculpture of

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18 *L'Art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra*, I, 2.

Gandhara, to which many critics would attribute the source of Indian artistic inspiration.”<sup>19</sup>

Havell was not denouncing Greek and Roman art; his intention was to show that India had produced works of art of equal value, even if reflecting different ideals. He followed in the tracks of Owen Jones, Henry Cole, and George Birdwood in his esteem for Indian decorative art, but the anti-Gandharan polemic gives his approach a very different meaning. He reassessed non-Gandharan Indian art in every respect, and it is significant that Havell identified Gandhāra as the symbol that had to be knocked down, the obstacle that had to be removed in order to overcome the convenient misunderstanding of an India that derived the very “idea” of beauty from Greece.

Havell’s ideas were taken up perceptively by a young Indian intellectual, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who caused quite a stir at the International Conference of Orientalists in Copenhagen in 1908 by claiming that not only Gandharan art was an unfortunate hybrid from an aesthetic point of view but that the Gandharan sculptors had proved to be totally inadequate for the task. This was the way in which Coomaraswamy argued and, with him, Indian culture showed that it knew how to react to the ideological pressure exacted by European scholars.

Havell and Coomaraswamy’s opinions did not go unnoticed. Foucher, in a lecture given at the Musée Guimet in 1912, tried to clarify his position.<sup>20</sup>

C’était récemment encore la coutume de triompher bruyamment de l’infériorité artistique des Indiens, réduits à accepter toute faite de la main d’autrui la réalisation concrète de leur propre idéal religieux. C’est la mode à présent, par engouement d’esthéticien ou rancune de nationaliste, de faire payer à l’école du Gandhāra sa manifeste supériorité par un dénigrement systématique de sa plus noble production. Nous nous refusons pour notre part à partager en cette occasion aussi bien le mépris injustifié de l’ancienne critique pour l’inspiration indigène que le dépit mal déguisé de la nouvelle contre la facture étrangère. Ce n’est pas le père *ou* la mère qui a fait l’enfant, c’est le père *et* la mère. L’âme indienne n’a pas pris une part moins essentielle que le génie grec à l’élaboration de la maquette du Moine-Dieu. C’est un

19 E. B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, London 1908, 42; Id., *The Ideals of Indian Art*, London 1911, 80. For more on the personality of this protagonist in the cultural debate in India at the beginning of the century, see G. Flora, “Arte e nazionalismo in India. La scuola bengalese negli anni del movimento swadeshi” [Art and nationalism in India. The Bengali school during the years of the *swadeshi* movement], in *La modernizzazione in Asia e in Africa. Studi offerti a Giorgio Borsa*, Pavia 1989, 137–152; S. Cross, “E. B. Havell and the Art of India,” in *Temenos* (London) 10, 1989, 224–243; T. Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New “Indian” Art. Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, Cambridge 1992.

20 A. Foucher, “L’origine grecque de l’image du Bouddha,” in *Conférences faites au Musée Guimet en 1912* (Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque de vulgarisation, 38), Paris 1912, 271–272.

cas où l'Orient et l'Occident ne pouvaient rien l'un sans l'autre. Il serait vain de se complaire de parti-pris et tour à tour dans l'exaltation ou le mépris, soit de l'Europe, soit de l'Asie, alors que l'occasion s'offre si belle de saluer dans le prototype eurasien du Buddha l'une des créations les plus sublimes dont leur collaboration ait enrichi l'humanité.

(Just recently it was a custom to noisily hold forth about the artistic inferiority of the Indians, reduced as they were to accept, ready-made by others, the specific realization of their own religious ideals. It is the fashion at present, either through the fancy of the esthete or the grudge of the nationalist, to make the school of Gandhāra pay for its evident superiority through a systematic denigration of its finest works. As far as we are concerned we refuse on this occasion to either share the unjustified disdain of earlier critical opinion for the indigenous inspiration or the badly concealed spite of the new critical opinion for the foreign workmanship. It is not either father *or* mother who has made the child, it is father *and* mother. The Indian soul has not played a less important role than the Greek genius in the development of the model of the monk/god. This is a case where Orient and Occident could not have achieved anything without each other. It would be in vain to indulge in bias in either exaltation or contempt, be it for Europe or Asia, while there is such a beautiful opportunity to welcome in the Eurasian prototype of the Buddha one of the most sublime creations with which their collaboration has enriched humanity.)

Foucher was not wrong, but in a sense he did not understand, or pretended not to understand. Coomaraswamy replied patiently:<sup>21</sup>

For the benefit of M. Foucher [...] and of other scholars who may suppose, with him, that Mr. Havell, Professor Münsterberg, and I, have cared more for Indian art than for art, I may point out that our estimate of Gandhara sculpture as of small aesthetic significance must not be taken as evidence of any prejudice against the art of Europe; it simply indicates concurrence in the view that "in the long sands and flats of Roman realism the stream of Greek inspiration is lost for ever [sic]." To admire Gandhara art, as art, is not a compliment to the greatness of the Greeks, but only shows how far that greatness has been misunderstood.

We are evidently also dealing with a dialogue of the deaf because, at the time, the most important issue was apparently the origin of the Buddha image, and the dilemma, an odd one indeed, was whether or not India would have succeeded in representing the Buddha in human form without the impregnating inspiration of Greece. The controversy evidently ended up being more ideological than scholarly.

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21 A. Coomaraswamy, "Buddhist Primitives," in his *The Dance of Shiva. Fourteen Indian Essays*, Bombay 1948, 81.

In substance, the debate focused on iconographic models, on formal elements such as the drapery, and on architectural and decorative elements. These aspects have been thoroughly scrutinized since then, and we hope to come soon to a satisfactory chronological arrangement of the art of Gandhāra on the basis of stylistic analyses as well as epigraphic, numismatic, etc. documentation.<sup>22</sup>

What was perhaps not sufficiently taken into consideration, however, is the fact that the narrative reliefs from Gandhāra tell the story of the Buddha's life in a way that has no counterpart in India and perhaps not in the classical world, either. In other words, what was not given due consideration is what we could define as the narrative structure of Gandharan reliefs. I would like to attempt a reading of Gandharan art from this perspective that is more focused on syntax than on morphology, even though I am well aware of the extremely provisional nature of this attempt.

As is well known, *jātakas* and stories of the life of Gautama Buddha are not lacking in the earlier Indian artistic production which precedes the development of the school usually defined as "Greek-Buddhist."

In the essay that I cited above, Vidya Deheja has described various forms of narrative representation, each characterized by particular technical expedients or conventions that permit, amongst other things, a considerable conciseness in narration itself. She distinguishes between monoscenic, synoptic, conflated, continued, and linear representations making use of various examples from Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati, Goli, and Gandhāra. Even though these distinctions are undoubtedly very useful, the way in which the different scenes are combined so as to produce a program, particularly when this program coincides with a "life," is perhaps even more substantial.

The famous reliefs on Stūpa I at Sanchi (first half of the first century AD) or the ones on the Stūpa at Bharhut (early decades of the first century BC), today in the Indian Museum of Calcutta, are splendid examples of a fully-developed narrative art, in which the single story unfolds with an extraordinary richness of detail and of elements in the setting that are not

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22 Amongst the most recent reviews we must mention: G. Fussman, "Chronique des études kouchanes (1975–1977)" [Chronicle of Kushan studies (1975–1977)], in *Journal Asiatique* 1978, 419–436; Id., "Numismatic and Epigraphic Evidence for the Chronology of Early Gandharan Art," in M. Yaldiz and W. Lobo, eds., *Investigating Indian Art*, Berlin 1987, 67–68; id., "Chronique des études kouchanes (1978–1987)" [Chronicle of Kushan studies (1978–1987)], in *Journal Asiatique* 1987, 333–400; M. Taddei, "Gandhāra, Arte del," in *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Antica*, II Supplemento 1971–1994 711–721, Roma 1994. Important (even if not always convincing) contributions to the study of relationships between the Hellenistic-Roman world and Gandhāra will be found in H. Ch. Ackermann, *Narrative Stone Reliefs from Gandhāra in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London*, Rome 1975.

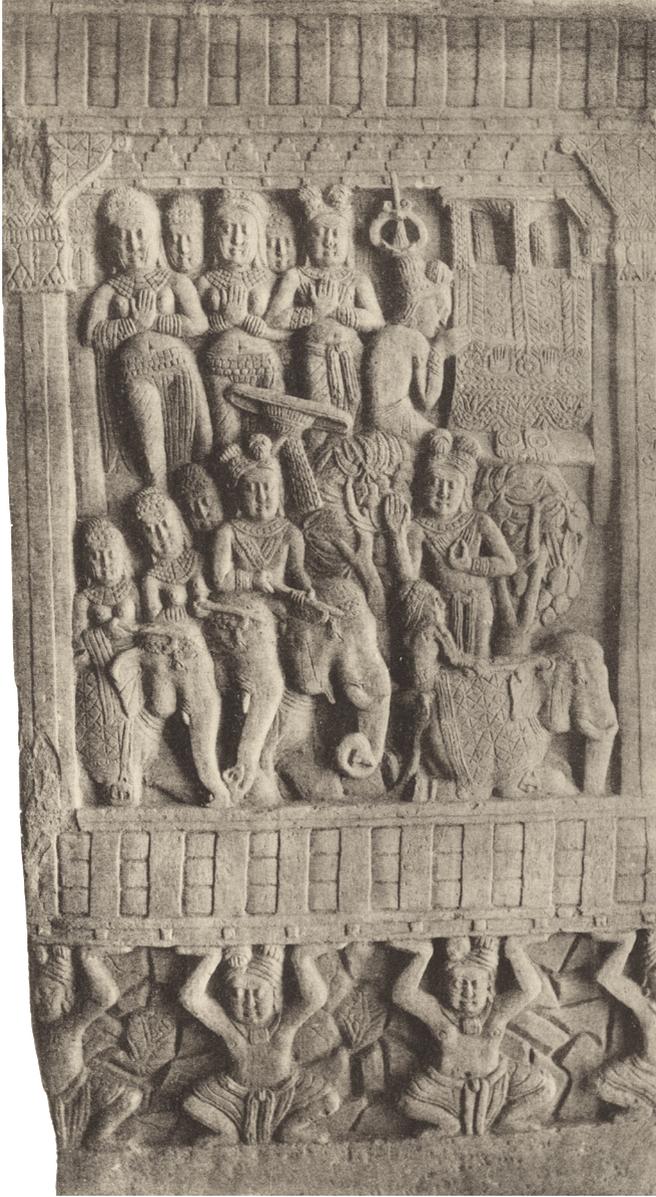
always strictly necessary for understanding the event. The figure of the protagonist—the Buddha or Bodhisattva—is physically absent, a perhaps canonical preclusion that prevents the Buddha from being represented in human form; he is an invisible presence, an immobile “center,” that does not act but gives meaning to the actions of the other characters. By taking the form of a symbol, the Buddha is devoid of all contingency.

The represented scenes obviously have their referents in Buddhist literary texts, but we are dealing with texts that are not important with regard to what the Buddha does but as to what the Buddha says. Reading a work such as the *Dīghanikāya* will make this very clear.

For example, we may take the beginning of the *Sāmañña Phala Sutta* with its splendid description of the court of Ajātasattu gathered during a night of a full moon and the decision to visit the Enlightened One, the arrival of Ajātasattu and his retinue on elephants in the mango grove of the physician Jīvaka, his surprise about the absolute silence, and the vision of the Enlightened One surrounded by 1500 monks in meditation. The description is greatly effective because, in all its essentiality, it has its own literary dignity independent from the philosophical substance of the story: the anamnesis which Ajātasattu is induced to make of his previous religious experiences and of the enlightening words addressed to him by the Buddha.

There is no necessary connection between the narrative frame and the philosophical message. The reader is prepared for the sacredness of the revelation by a story in which the Buddha does not play an active part. He does not perform actions; he is nothing but the word, *lógos*. Once the story is transferred to stone, it is obvious that that word refrains from becoming a narration: to become explicit, it requires either previous knowledge by the observer or the intervention of a “guide,” as Vidya Dehejia duly pointed out when talking about the forerunners of narration in stone. The figures that she calls “picture-showmen” might very well have been none other than members of the *saṃgha* with the specific task to accompany the pilgrims. We can especially see that, in the relief of Bharhut representing the *Sāmañña Phala Sutta* (fig. 3), the word (the teaching Buddha) reveals itself the moment the story ends.<sup>23</sup>

23 A. K. Coomaraswamy, *La Sculpture de Bharhut*, Paris 1956, 52–53. Figs. 30 and 33. A vivid representation of the attempts to explain “aniconism” in Indian primitive Buddhist art can be found in H. de Lubac, *Aspects du Bouddhisme*, Paris 1951; Italian translation, *Aspetti del Buddismo*, Milan 1980, 75 ff. A recent attempt by Susan L. Huntington to prove the non-existence of an “aniconic period” in early Indian Buddhist art (“Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism,” in *Art Journal*, Winter 1990, 401 ff.) contains a number of useful considerations but addresses the issue in inappropriate terms and therefore totally misses its mark: see the prompt reply by R. Linrothe, “Inquiries into the Origin of the Buddha Image: A Review,” in *East and West* 43, 1993 (241–256).



**Fig. 3:** Detail of a pillar from the Bharhut Stupa. Indian Museum, Calcutta. This is the second scene from the bottom in figure 4. Photograph, 1897, 25 x 13 cm. Leiden University Library, Digital Image Library, 87931. [Fig. 2 in the original.]

The sculptor of Bharhut has seized upon the core elements of the story: the king arrives in the mango grove with his women, on elephants, asks where the Buddha and his silent followers are, and then, followed by Jīvaka and the women, kneels in front of the Buddha, in the light of a lamp. The Buddha is, as always in these reliefs, represented by symbols: the sunshade, the empty throne, and the footprints. The structure of the story finds a perfect correspondence in the visual account. To be surprised by the fact that the Buddha is not represented in human form is perfectly nonsensical. What difficulty would a sculptor as experienced in rendering the human figure as the one at Bharhut have in depicting the seated Buddha as he is described in the *Dīghanikāya*? Certainly none at all. Not only is his choice a perfectly conscious one, it is not even necessary to think of some explicit canonical ban: the Buddha is depicted in symbolic form simply because this is the fullest, most satisfying way to illustrate his role in the story. The use of the symbol does not detract from the narrative effect of the representation if we confine ourselves to the single relief.

The function of the relief is to recall to memory the episode of the *Dīghanikāya*; its effect on the devotee is of course also to remind him how even the most powerful people on Earth must become humble before that mystical center, which is the word of the Buddha.

If we then consider the wide figurative context (fig. 4), we realize that the reliefs on the pillar are not arranged in a chronological order. We will probably never be able to fully understand the “program” of the *vedikā* at Bharhut, nor those of other contemporary or slightly later complexes such as the Stūpa 1 at Sanchi, but I would say that we can easily rule out that the chronological sequence of the episodes was a concern for either artists or patrons.<sup>24</sup>

We know, however, that literary texts such as the *Buddhacarita*, the *Lalitavistara*, the *Divyāvadāna*, and numerous other works that have come down to us in the Indian original or in Chinese translation, give us chronologically arranged stories of the Buddha’s life, or at least some elements to outline an ideal story, as has been attempted in times closer to us—and with a variety of narrative devices as well as the use of different sources—in the wake of Arnold, by H. Oldenberg (1881), Édouard Schuré (1885), R. Pischel (1905), André-Ferdinand Herold (1922), A. Hillebrandt (1925), Luigi Sualì (1925), E. H.

24 One might further investigate whether the venue where each of these scenes occurs may have been decisive in their placement. Cf. D. Schlingloff, “Erzählung...,” *cit.*; Id., “Ein Zyklus des Buddhalebens in Ajanta” [A cycle of Buddha’s life in Ajanta], in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XXVI (113–148), 1983, 146–148, which, however, examines unitary contexts very different from those discussed herein.

Brewster (1926), Edward J. Thomas (1927), C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1928), Ernst Waldschmidt (1929), Alfred Foucher (1949), Giuseppe Tucci (1967), and André Bareau (1985), just to name the most well-known.



**Fig. 4:** *Pillar from the Bharhut Stupa. Indian Museum, Calcutta. Repository caption: Sculpture piece excavated from the Stupa at Bharhut: left side of Ajatachattru pillar. Photographic print, 1874. Photographer: Joseph David Beglar. British Library, Photo 1003/(1493). [Fig. 1 in the original.]*

It was on the abovementioned literary texts, in addition to the Speeches of the Buddha, the *Jātaka*, the *Avadāna*, and perhaps other, earlier, lost “stories” that Indian sculptors from all the regional “schools” drew. From Sanchi to Amaravati, and from Bharhut to Gandhāra, we can easily identify a common corpus from which sculptors drew in accordance with the patrons’ intentions.<sup>25</sup>

Let us take by way of example a relief (c. second century AD) from Amaravati (fig. 5).<sup>26</sup> There appear three scenes: the one in the middle is a moment in Buddha’s life—the subjugation of the elephant Nālāgiri—the one on the right

25 I would like to point out two useful recent collections: J. L. Panglung, *Die Erzählstoffe des Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya analysiert auf Grund der tibetischen Übersetzung* [The narrative materials of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya, analyzed on the basis of the Tibetan translation], Tokyo 1981; L. Grey, *A Concordance of Buddhist Birth Stories*, Oxford 1990.

26 D. Barrett, *Sculptures from Amaravati in the British Museum*, London 1954, 73, pl. XIVa; R. Knox, *Amaravati. Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stūpa*, London 1992, 115–116, n.56.

is a *jātaka*, and the one on the left an episode from the *Sarvaṃdadāvadāna*. The scenes are separated from one another by four globular elements (lotus flowers) but these provide a break only if an analytical reading is made: the overall effect is that of a continuous representation, although there is no temporal relation between the three episodes. We are dealing with exemplary scenes, which we could more to the point call *exempla* or *prāxeis*, which could be taken up in any edifying context regardless of the chronological order in which the episodes might have occurred.



**Fig. 5:** Relief from Amaravati. Museum caption: Drum-frieze from Amaravati, 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Palnad marble, 37.5 x 134.75 x 7 cm. London, British Museum, 1880,0709.90. [Fig. 11 in the original.]

Perhaps the time is not yet ripe to attempt an interpretation of this earliest Indian Buddhist production in terms of social history. Vidya Dehejia has, however, appropriately emphasized the highly collective nature of the commissioning of these works within India proper, in Śuṅga, Śātavāhana, Ikṣvāku, and Kuṣāṇa circles, in contrast to what happened later, when almost no other commissioning was imaginable than that by royalty.<sup>27</sup> The individual donor often offered to pay for the execution of a small part of the work, alongside numerous others: one gets the impression of a society where a surplus of the production found itself at the disposal of a large number of producers (mainly artisans) who could directly secure merit for themselves through individual and fundamentally free donations.

In such a socioeconomic situation, the success which the scenes of the Buddha's life or the *jātakas* had on account of their exemplary value is quite understandable, supporting, as they did, an individual ethos.

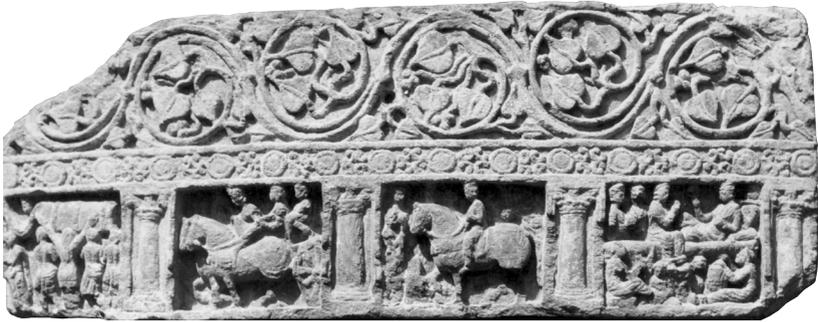
Usages of this type are not lacking in Gandhāra, either (as we will see later on), but here we are more likely to find a marked preference for the succession of

27 V. Dehejia, "The Collective and Popular Basis of Early Buddhist Patronage: Sacred Monuments, 100 BC–AD 250," in B. Stoler Miller, ed., *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, Delhi 1992, 35–45. Vidya Dehejia does not deal here with the case of Gandhāra.

scenes forming a “story” or a “life.” These scenes, arranged along the wall of the *stūpa* so as to be taken in at a glance during the *pradakṣiṇā* (the ritual circumambulation), show a narrative strategy that is particular to them: the succession of episodes alternating with small columns, pilasters, or panels (figs. 6–7) is not the only storytelling method known in Gandhāra, but it is the one normally followed to narrate the life of the Buddha and the *jātakas*. Other *fabulae* and depictions, in which that same characteristic of a coherent narrative is in fact rather dubious, are not divided into panels, but follow each other on the wall of the *stūpa* in an unbroken succession of figures, whose agitated gesticulations (fig. 8) form a curious contrast with their being unfortunately mute to us, although one cannot infrequently see similarities between them and Hellenistic precedents with Dionysiac subjects. However, in those stories, the Buddha almost never appears, and neither do the other personages of the Lives (i.e. the *jātakas*): the choice of the narrative technique is therefore clearly dictated by the nature of the story that is being told. Often the frieze with a continuous narration unfolds on the drum of the *stūpa*, above the frieze with the succession—in separate scenes—of episodes from the life of the Buddha (figs. 8–9); this cannot be attributed to the mere demands of architectural taste, because there are also cases where the life of the Buddha occupies both the upper and the lower frieze, but in these cases the narrative in both unfolds in separate scenes (fig. 10).



**Fig. 6:** Relief found at Saidu Sharif I, Swat Valley. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, Pakistan. [Fig. 6 in the original.]



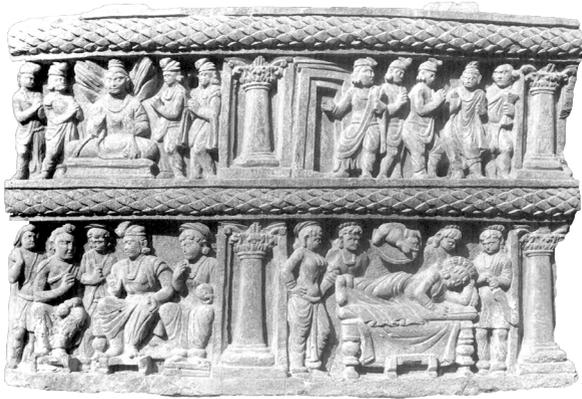
*Fig. 7: Provenance unknown. Private collection. [Fig. 7 in the original.]*



*Fig. 8: Provenance unknown. Private collection. [Fig. 8 in the original.]*



*Fig. 9: Relief found at Saidu Sharif I, Swat Valley. Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale, Rome. [Fig. 9 in the original.]*



**Fig. 10:** Relief found at Saidu Sharif I, Swat Valley. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, Pakistan. [Fig. 10 in the original.]

Unfortunately, there is very little documentation on the decorative “programs” of the Gandharan *stūpas*. We all remember the *stūpa* from Loriyan Tangai in the Indian Museum of Calcutta,<sup>28</sup> whose reliefs narrate Siddhārtha’s life cycle from Birth to Renunciation, and the one from Sikri in the Lahore Museum,<sup>29</sup> whose reliefs illustrate the whole cycle. Johanna E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw wrote

28 N. G. Majumdar, *A Guide to the Sculptures in the Indian Museum*, II. *The Graeco-Buddhist School of Gandhāra*, Delhi 1937, 116, pl. XIV.

29 Harald Ingolt, *Gandhāran Art in Pakistan*, New York, 1957, 17, pl. II. It is truly odd that, in the *stūpa* from Sikri, the most remarkable among the very few in Gandhāra to preserve a complete decorative cycle, the panels are arranged in an order that differs from the chronological arrangement which obviously one would have expected. On this subject, see A. Foucher, “Les bas-reliefs du Stūpa de Sikri (Gandhāra),” in *Journal Asiatique*, sept–oct. 1903, (185–330), 186–190; *L’Art gréco-bouddhique de Gandhāra*, I, 266–267, Paris 1905. It is hard to provide an explanation for this, but it is even harder to believe that this order was indeed the one designed at the time of the creation of this work. Foucher himself in fact notes that “A plusieurs reprises, nombre de fragments de frise, par hasard conservés, nous fournissent des suites biographiques fort étendues” (There are several instances where a number of frieze fragments, which have by chance been preserved, provide us with rather extensive biographical subjects) (*ibid.*, 267). This was indeed the rule. It is easy to observe that, when the fragment of a frieze contains more than one episode, the order—barring a few rare exceptions—is always chronological, from right to left. Since there seems to be no reason to doubt the accuracy and the documentary scrupulousness of Col. Deane, who supervised the removal of the *stūpa* and its transfer to Lahore, Foucher assumed that the rule—strict in the case of “petites frises sculptées sur une même dalle de pierre” (small friezes sculpted onto the same stone slab)—of the succession from right to left “ne s’appliquait pas toujours aux frises de dimensions plus considérables et composées d’une série de panneaux détachés” (was not always followed for friezes of more extensive dimensions and made up by a series of separate panels) (“Les bas-reliefs...,” 190, note 1). If this is true, it is hard to understand the reason. Since it is not possible, for the moment, to check the rear and the sides of the panels from Sikri for signs that could give more reliable hints about the original assembly, I will assume an attitude of extreme caution and not rule out the possibility that we are looking at an assemblage error, which possibly occurred during a reconstruction with reclaimed materials.

very perceptively that “the function of these panels could be compared with that of the Stations of the Cross in the Roman Catholic churches, both used as illustrations of the Master’s life and, at the same time, as a meditation-object.”<sup>30</sup>

The comparison might well appear obvious, but it is not: in both cases a close connection is established between the narrative cycle and the worshipper’s course; it is even likely that the ritual practice of the *pradakṣiṇā* influenced certain technical aspects of the Gandharan reliefs.<sup>31</sup> Van Lohuizen’s observation should prompt us to a closer examination.

I think that the most acute analysis is the one conducted by Santo Mazzarino. In his *Il pensiero storico classico* (1966) (Historical Thinking in Classical Antiquity), he wrote:<sup>32</sup>

nell’arte buddhica di Gandhara la precedente tendenza narrativa indiana, per esempio di Bharhut, subisce un’evoluzione: gli artisti s’interessano alla vita del Buddha, considerata in ogni suo momento, con accentuato interesse per ogni episodio [...]. Anche questo aspetto [...] è greco e non. [...] Anche per i Greci non c’è distinzione, nel racconto figurato, tra fatti mitici e fatti storici, tutti visti quasi come contemporanei. Ma buddhica è l’idea di una figurazione dei vari episodi che riguardino la *vita* e la *personalità* del Salvatore. Meglio ancora: l’idea della *continuità* precisa, aderente ai testi, può pur essere greca; ma quella forma classica trova la sua continuazione, in ambito indiano, nella storia figurata della *vita* di Buddha, come anche, in ambito cristiano, nello *istoriare* del tardo impero e del medioevo. In tutta questa evoluzione, estremamente significativa per la storia della cultura universale, [...] l’età ellenistica ha un posto eminente [...]. Tuttavia, solo un classicismo maturo poteva *istoriare* non più battaglie o cacce, ma gli episodi che esprimono la *interiorità* di una vita nel suo *svolgimento* religioso. Il senso della *biografia spirituale*, che è nell’arte del Gandhara, presuppone che il mondo classico abbia trovato forme d’espressione per una biografia che non è più di sole *praxeis*; e ci riconduce, grosso modo, all’età imperiale romana, piuttosto che nel 2° secolo a. C.

30 J. E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, *The “Scythian” Period*, Leiden 1949, 108.

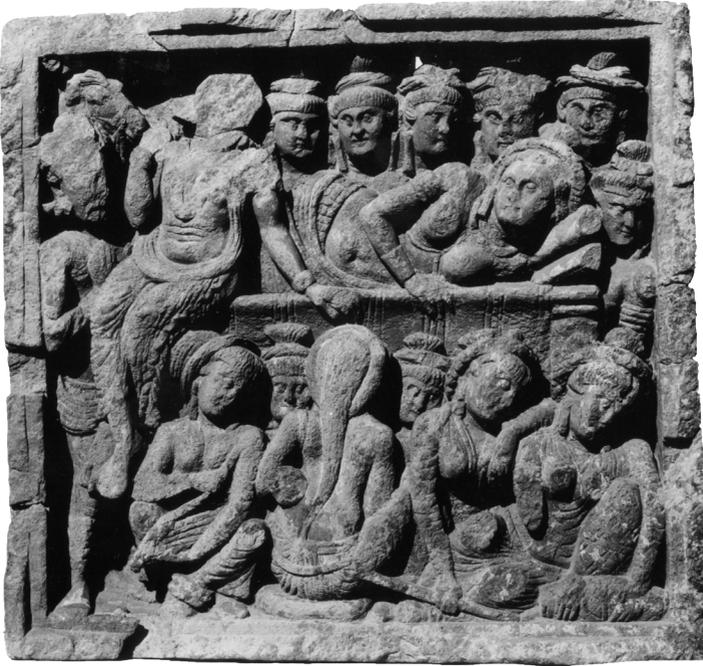
31 M. Taddei, “Della cosiddetta ‘prospettiva rotante’ nell’arte del Gandhāra” [On the so-called “rotating perspective” in the art of Gandhāra], in *Prospettiva* 53–56, 1988–1989 (*Scritti in ricordo di Giovanni Previtali*, vol. I), 71–74. Other interesting remarks in M. Mariottini Spagnoli, “Relationships between the Perspective and Compositional Structure of the Bharhut Sculptures and Gandharan Art,” in *East and West* 20, 1970, 327–347.

32 S. Mazzarino, *Il pensiero storico classico* [Historical Thinking in Classical Antiquity], II 1, Bari 1966, 239–240. Mazzarino was inspired by the work of M. Bussagli, “Note sull’immagine del Buddha” [Notes on the image of Buddha], in *Atti dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei: Rendiconti*, s. VIII, II, 1947, 202–239 (now also in M. Bussagli, *Indica et Serindica*, Roma 1992), especially 223ff.

(In the Buddhist art of Gandhāra, the Indian narrative propensity, for example in Bharhut, undergoes a development: the artists become interested in the life of the Buddha, considered in all of its moments, with a heightened interest in each episode [...]. Even this aspect is both Hellenic and not [...]. For the Greeks there is no distinction between myth and historical facts in a pictorial narrative, both being seen as being about on the same temporal plane. But the idea of a depiction of different episodes that concern the *life* and the *personality* of the Savior is Buddhist. Better yet: the idea of a precise continuity in a close fit with the texts may very well be Greek; but this classical form finds its continuation, in the Indian environment, in the illustrated history of the Buddha's life, as it also does, in the Christian environment, in the *istoriare* (the illustration of historical narratives) of the late Roman Empire and the Middle Ages. In this entire development, which is extremely significant for the history of universal culture, the Hellenistic age occupies an eminent position [...]. However, only in a mature classicism could *istoriare* no longer depict battles and hunts but the episodes that express what goes on *inside* a life in its religious *development*. The sense of a *spiritual biography*, which is there in the art of Gandhāra, presupposes that the classical world has found a form of expression for a biography that is not one of *praxeis* (specific actions) only; and which leads back, roughly, to the age of imperial Rome rather than the second century BC).

The difference between Gandharan art and the art of India proper does not lie, then, in Gandharan art being “narrative” rather than symbolic (“literary narrative in stone,” in the words of John Irwin), but in its use of a type of narrative that we could call historical and linear, which is absolutely original compared to both India and the West. We can indeed easily agree with Mazzarino's opinion that the Gandharan way of narrating the life of Buddha cannot fit into the second century BC. But was it really necessary to wait for an inspiration to come from experience with the imperial Roman environment? I do not think so. This would come with the risk of falling into the same trap as Sac. Dott. P. L. Veneziani, who, to “make sense” of Aśvaghōṣa's existence, found no better way but to make him into a Christian heretic or a plagiarist of Christian ideas.

The excavations at Butkara I in Swat have yielded a fairly substantial group of reliefs with scenes from the life of Buddha (figs. 1, 11) that are now ascribed—together with others that are stylistically similar (figs. 6, 12)—to the end of the first century BC or the first half of the first century AD, both on the basis of archaeological evidence (D. Faccenna) and on stylistic grounds (J. E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, John and Susan Huntington, Chantal Fabrègues). With regard to the last-named authors, I would like to point out that both Huntington and Fabrègues give much weight to an undoubtedly present, though maybe



**Fig. 11:** Relief found at Butkara I, Swat Valley. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, Pakistan. [Fig. 4 in the original.]

overestimated, stylistic element of Parthian origin while overlooking what is actually significant in these reliefs, namely the knowledge of Indian stylistic elaborations, particularly those of Bharhut.<sup>33</sup>

These are scenes in which the Buddha sometimes appears only as a symbol (fig. 1), and unfortunately, we cannot know into what context these were inserted. However, the shape of the panel reminds one of the horizontal linear

33 D. Faccenna, "Excavations of the Italian Archaeological Mission (IsMEO) in Pakistan: Some Problems of Gandharan Art and Architecture," in *Central Asia in the Kushan Period: Proceedings of the International Conference on the History, Archaeology and Culture of Central Asia in the Kushan Period, Dushanbe, Sept. 27–October 6, 1968*, I, Moscow 1974, 126–176; J. E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, "New Evidence with Regard to the Origin of the Buddha Image," in *South Asian Archaeology 1979*, ed. H. Härtel, Berlin 1981, 377–400; S. L. and J. C. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India. Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, New York 1985, 109–124; Ch. Fabrègues, "The Indo-Parthian Beginnings of Gandharan Sculpture," in *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, n.s., I, 1987, 33–43; also Nehru, *cit.* An important contribution to Gandhāran chronology can be found in a doctoral thesis defended by Ch. Fabrègues at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London in 1991, *The Jewellery of the Gandhara Sculpture in Schist and its Chronological Significance*.

succession pattern characteristic of Gandhāra, even if there is nothing to ensure that this succession was rigorously chronological: but tendentially it certainly was.



**Fig. 12:** *From Swat (?). Museum caption: Gandhara School, The Return to Kapilavastu, 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century. Found at Swat Valley. London, British Museum, 1972,0920.1. [Fig. 5 in the original.]*

It was therefore at a very early date (at least during the first century AD) that a sequence of episodes took shape in Gandhāra and consolidated what came to form—albeit with countless variations—a complete “life.” Here the various narrative texts making up this “life” are no longer significant insofar as they frame the different sermons of the Buddha in a fable-like chronology (i.e. the *Sāmañña Phala Sutta*, for example, starts “Once the Exalted One was staying near Rājagaha in the mango grove of the medical doctor Jīvaka...”), thus, in a way, providing the episodes with a reason; the episodes acquire significance in their own right, whereas each of them gets meaning from, and at the same

time confers meaning to, the others due to a mutual concatenation.<sup>34</sup> Narrative fragments of probably different origins that were first entrusted to bards and perhaps actually originated in their environment are grouped together and take on a more definite shape; purely narrative passages alternate with events of highly symbolic import; the zest for narrating gives way to the dazzling vision of the supernatural event—located within time and yet timeless—or to a facile dwelling on the edifying message of an episode.

The result is a cycle that is complete in itself, from the miraculous conception of Siddhārtha to the *parinirvāṇa* and the division of the relics: it is sufficiently detailed to be perceived as an entire life, but not to the point of losing the essential effect of unity, as happened in the slightly obsessive (but also meaningful, though in a different way) dilution of the episodes one encounters seven or eight centuries later in [the Buddhist temple complex of] Barabudur in Java.

The course of Buddha's life—which is still the course of a human life—acquires here an exemplary value that is utterly unprecedented. It is the earthly temporality that imposes itself on that of the fable and interweaves itself—in sudden flashes—with that of the myth: the foundational moments, such as the Enlightenment under the *pīpal* tree during a particular alignment of the stars, or the “first steps” of the Lord of the world straight after his birth, are set in the unspecified temporality of the *in illo tempore*, if meditated upon individually, but necessarily also in this exact moment of a life that is the model for the life of every devotee. But we failed here to consider, say, from a structural point of view, the fact that every cycle of Gandharan reliefs allows us to take up the subject again directly after the end of the narration, in a manner indicating the possibility to repeat the event. One relief which deserves attention (fig. 8) preserves, from right to left, the adoration of the *stūpa* (a scene that follows the death of the Buddha), the Buddha between two worshippers, and the birth of Siddhārtha: Could it be that the Buddha between the worshippers (a “paradise?”) is the pivotal scene in which the entire cycle finds at one and the same time its beginning and its end?

Let us therefore confine ourselves to the “life” as a linear course. If we bear in mind that a text such as the *Buddhacarita*, almost certainly slightly later or contemporaneous with the first realizations of Gandharan narratives (that is

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34 These aspects briefly illustrated here are perhaps to be studied in connection with the difficult transformation of the methods of time reckoning that was happening at about this time. For this argument, see P. Daffinà, “Senso del tempo e senso della storia: computi cronologici e storicizzazione del tempo” [The meaning of time and the meaning of history: time reckoning and the historicization of time], in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* LXI, 1987, 1–71.

Kuṣāṇa period, second century AD), offer a substantially analogous narrative structure, we cannot help seeing, in both the sculptures and the literary text, the mark of a profound change in mentality with a new and different attitude toward the divine.<sup>35</sup>

Attempts at a chronological arrangement of the narrative material are, of course, to be found in the Ganges region of India as well: there is nothing, however, that is comparable to the systematization offered by Gandhāra, so sophisticated in balancing the mythical and the “historical” components, the moralizing with the mystical exigencies. The monks surely found a truly effective support for their preaching in those scenes, which follow one another as discrete moments of a single *fabula*, and from which they could draw an entire range of admonishments and exhortations.

But if this type of narrating has no real counterpart in India; we would search for its model in the Hellenistic-Roman world in vain. It was right there, in Gandhāra, that the choice was made to commit the religious message to the dimension of human life. Undoubtedly, through interaction with the Hellenistic-Roman culture, India came in contact with such experiences as the mythological representations decorating sarcophagi or friezes in villas—representations largely of a celebratory or metaphorical nature—as well as those on columns with spiral reliefs, born from the need to tell a story that was both linear and cyclical, and not completely different from the one shown in the Gandharan lives of the Buddha. And yet we are dealing with things that are different, if only because the scenes carved into the spiraled columns could not be read by anyone in continuous succession, but must have reckoned—

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35 Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* is now available, in a good and recent Italian translation by A. Passi—in addition to the one made by Formichi—which comes with with an equally good commentary, *Le gesta del Buddha (Buddhacarita Canti I–XIV)* [Acts of the Buddha], Milan 1979 (which also mentions, on p. 230, the question of the relationships with the figurative production). On the more general subject of the Lives in Buddhist literature, see Winternitz, *cit.*, vol. II, Leipzig 1920, 181–277; Engl. transl., *cit.*, 226–401; E. J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London 1951, 278–283; É. Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme indien. Des origines à l'ère Śāka* [History of Buddhism in India. From the origins to the Śāka era], Leuven 1958, 718–756; T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. A Study of the Mādhyamika System*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London 1960, 79–80. Murti sees in the literature of the Lives a process of “polarization” of Buddhism towards the Māhāyāna: “The *Mahāvastu*, *Lalitā Vistara* and the *Avadāna* literature constitute, both in literary form and content, a distinct step towards the Māhāyāna. Deification of the Buddha, legendary tales glorifying the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the approved Purāṇic style with all manner of exaggeration, a trend towards Buddhabhakti and the glorification of the exalted Bodhisattva ideal are the characteristic features of these. The epics and dramas of Aśvaghōṣa (contemporary of Kaniṣka) served the same purpose. We see in these the steps by which Buddhism became a popular religion with attractive legends and a glorious pantheon.” This opinion—shared by many other scholars—certainly contains some truth, but is in need of being deepened and clarified. I personally do not think that the idea of “popular” is of much use in this context: It is actually difficult to reduce the complex Mahayanic ontology to a mere devotional, or, more precisely, “popular” trend.

as Brilliant has shown for Trajan's Column—with a perusal from privileged spots.<sup>36</sup> But neither mythological events, even though they tend to spread over a lifetime, like the lives of Achilles, Odysseus, or Heracles, nor the *res gestae* of the emperors narrated in stone, could have been straightforward “models” for the Gandharan lives of the Buddha.

The Hellenistic, or possibly Alexandrine (ca. 150 BC), models could have played an important role, as in the case with the scenes from the *Odyssey* found in a house on the Esquiline hill. These are divided by equidistant pillars and have been attributed to a date between 50 and 40 BC,<sup>37</sup> but they are representations in which the story is just a pretext for landscape painting, “a kind of contamination,” as M. Borda writes, “of megalographia with naturalistic landscape,” for which there is an exact reference in the work of Vitruvius.

It may also be interesting—for our own purposes—to follow the development that took place in representations of a biographical nature in Roman funerary art, in which, however, it seems that from a preference for the chronological arrangement of the life of the deceased, which had been consolidated since the end of the first century or at the beginning of the second century AD, there is a shift during the first decades of the second century towards an increasing appreciation for the emblematic rather than the sequential aspects of the story.<sup>38</sup> But even in his case, it would be, I believe, neither legitimate to perform meaningful comparisons, nor to expect derivations or parallels in the art of Gandhāra.

It does not seem easy, as I said, to find in the Hellenistic-Roman world any “model” for the Gandharan lives of Siddhārtha. It is true that, around this time, an attempt was made to give a definitive sequence to the “labors” of Heracles while, at the same time, giving greater weight to the “positive,” civilizing effect of these exploits;<sup>39</sup> but it remains equally true that these could be arranged in

36 See R. Brilliant, *Visual Narratives. Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*, Ithaca 1984; it. trans., *Narrare per immagini. Racconti di storie nell'arte etrusca e romana*, Firenze 1987.

37 Almost every retrieved panel is preserved in the Vatican Library. See L. Vlad Borrelli, “Un nuovo frammento dei ‘Paesaggi dell’Odissea’” [A new fragment of the ‘Landscapes of the Odyssee’], in *Boll. d’Arte* XLI, 1956, 289–300; M. Borda, *La pittura romana* [Roman painting], Milan 1958, 184–186; R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Roma. L’arte nel centro del potere* [Rome. Art in the center of power], Milano 1969, 16–17, fig. 119.

38 On this specifically Roman subject, see N. B. Kampen, “Biographical Narration and Roman Funerary Art,” in *American Journal of Archaeology* 85, 1981, 47–58.

39 “Reorganization of the Olympia twelve was perhaps the work of an unknown Hellenistic author, and appears for us first in Diodorus and the Tabula Albana. But the composition of the twelve seems not to have been well observed in art or literature, and there are often omissions and additions” (J. Boardman, in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* V, Zurich 1990, s.v. “Herakles, IV A. Herakles Dodekathlos,” 15–16).

any order one might want without their message losing in depth or clarity; and this—there is actually no need to emphasize it—would not be possible in the case of the lives of the Buddha Gandhāra has handed down to us.

Naturally there are no elements here that would allow us to state positively that these depictions of the lives of the Buddha were earlier compared to similar creations of the Hellenistic-Roman world. We can, however, say with certainty that the products in the Western world which bear the closest resemblance to Gandharan “lives”—the Christian illustrated historical narratives mentioned by Santo Mazzarino or certain cycles of the life of Achilles, such as the one on the silver plate in the Kaiseraugst treasure (fig. 13)<sup>40</sup>—are much later by far.<sup>41</sup>

I believe the time has now come for Gandharan art to be considered not as a phenomenon to be explained by the interplay of “influences” but as the product of a mature Hellenism that found itself in direct contact with Buddhism (and here—as we have seen—Foucher’s insights are of great help). It was Buddhist thought—and thus Indian culture—which at this moment was the victorious subject that also disposed of expansive drive. For that reason, it is only natural that the earliest Gandharan Buddhist reliefs that we mentioned above are the ones that were most heavily inspired by Indian models. In its first years of spreading, Buddhist thought could not have used any other language but an Indian one, even if it immediately proved to have a strong propensity to dress in Hellenistic clothes as it was appropriated and reworked by a local culture that was precisely deeply Hellenistic.

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40 H. A. Cahn and A. Kaufmann-Heinimann, eds., *Der spätrömische Silberschatz von Kaiseraugst* [The late Roman silver treasure from Kaiseraugst], Derendingen 1984; *Il tesoro nascosto. Le argenterie imperiali di Kaiseraugst* (Catalogo della mostra, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Roma 1987–1988) [The hidden treasure. The imperial silverware from Kaiseraugst (Exhibition catalogue, Palazzo dei conservatori, Rome, 1987–1988)], Milan 1987, 154 ff. The Achilles plate dates back to the second third of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. That the interest in such lives of heroes—especially Achilles—in Hellenistic-Roman art is a late trend has already been duly noted by L. Guerrini, “Infanzia di Achille e sua educazione presso Chirone” [The childhood of Achilles and his education by Chiron], in *Seminario di Archeologia e storia dell’arte greca e romana dell’Università di Roma, Studi miscellanei*, 1, Roma 1961, 52.

41 In this respect, it is obvious that comparative stylistic investigation can unveil something about potential contacts or parallels. Interesting contributions to the identification of stylistic correspondences between Gandharan art and Mediterranean late-antique art can be found in D. Ahrens, “Some Remarks on Relations between Coptic and Buddhist Art,” in *Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologie Copte* 26, 1984, 9–14; Id., “Bemerkungen zu den Ost-West-Beziehungen in der Spätantike” [Notes on relations between East and West in late antiquity], in *Schatzkammer Simeonstift. Museumsdidaktische Führungstexte* 8, Trier 1986, 24–30. One might also reread, in this perspective, the important article by D. Faccenna, “Su una raffigurazione in un capitello corinzio di Aquileia” (On a representation in a Corinthian capital in Aquileia), in *Gururājamañjarikā, cit.*, 411–434.



*Fig. 13: Silver plate from Kaiseraugst. Museum caption: Achilles plate, 330–340. Silver, 4643 grams. Produced at Pausilypos, Thessalonica-Thessaloniki, found at Kaiseraugst, Switzerland. Augst, Museum Augusta Raurica, 63. Photograph: Susanne Schenker. [Fig. 15 in the original.]*

On the other hand, Buddhism was certainly not the only Asian religion with which Hellenism had to do, and we may speculate whether, rather than merely “forms” of the Hellenistic tradition being bent to the expressive demands of Buddhist art, we should not also talk about a narrative structure that had been developed in Northwestern Buddhism, for which Hellenism was able to readily provide the most suitable formal repertory, and which it, in turn, appropriated to have it reflect afterwards on other, more Western, religious experiences.

Coming back to Foucher’s words, it is perhaps in this narrative tradition, and not only in the creation of a particular image of the Buddha that we are offered, in the study of the relationships between Asia and Europe, “l’occasion si belle” (a beautiful opportunity) if not of welcoming one of the most sublime creations (let’s leave aside some excessive enthusiasm), then certainly of recognizing a new way of living the religious experience which the collaboration between Asia and Europe has offered to humankind.

Unfortunately, the dedicatory inscriptions in Gandharan sanctuaries are scarce and only concern isolated images, but we will not be far from the truth if we assume that the extremely numerous small *stūpas* that surround the monumental ones—which are probably or certainly royal bequests—in Gandhāra were offered by single private individuals: the huge number of *stūpas* of more or less modest dimensions also makes us confident that large sections of the population had the capacity (both economic and social) to donate. The difference with regard to the commissions in Sanchi, Bharhut, or Amaravati lies in the fact that, in Gandhāra, complete sacred stories were offered according to a repertory that, while controlled by the *samgha*, required a reflection on all or part of a cycle of the life of the Enlightened One and, at the same time, allowed one to express one's own devotion by accomplishing a personal act that is not [like in Sanchi, Bharhut, or Amaravati] an individual contribution towards a collective project, but is complete in itself, different from the larger *stūpas* only in its dimensions. It is perhaps too far-fetched to see in this a more rigid, so to say “concentric,” social structure as compared to the polycentric structure of pre-Kuṣāṇa India; but I would not consider it useless to give this argument a thought.

In Gandharan art, as we have been told many times and as is largely correct, there are ideas and iconographic motifs that we will see fully developed later further east, in India and beyond.<sup>42</sup> But what, then, would be the destiny of the “Gandharan” linear narrative technique outside of Gandhāra?

It had a very modest impact in Mathurā, even in the Kuṣāṇa period, as Mathurā was surprisingly impervious to such narrative forms in spite of the frequent and prolific exchanges between these two areas of artistic production.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it seems that Mathurā had little interest in any form of narrative representation, and the exceptions are often marked by a decidedly “Gandharan” taste.<sup>44</sup>

There is no lack, however, of representations of scenes from Siddhārtha's life which nonetheless respond to the requirements of a different expression, where spatial composition prevails over the linear narration characteristic

42 In this respect, see the Foucher's classic *Art Gréco-bouddhique de Gandhāra*, vol. II, ch. XVII.

43 J. E. van Lohuizen-de Leew, “Gandhāra and Mathura: Their Cultural Relationship,” in *Aspects of Indian Art*, ed. P. Pal, Leiden 1972, 27–43; Ead., “New Evidence with Regard to the Origin of the Buddha Image,” *cit.*

44 See, for example, reliefs such as the one in the Lucknow Museum reported by R. C. Sharma, *Buddhist Art of Mathurā*, Delhi 1984, 201–202, 227, n. 115, or another in the Lucknow Museum analyzed by J. Williams, “Sāmāth Gupta Steles of the Buddha's Life,” in *Ars Orientalis* X, 1975, (171–192), 185, fig. 13.

of the cycles on the walls of the Gandharan *stūpas*. This is so in the case of a relief from the Mathura Museum (fig. 14) that shows, from right to left: the Birth of Siddhārtha/First steps, Māra's attack/Enlightenment, Descent from the Trayastriṃśa Heaven, First Sermon, and Death.<sup>45</sup> Is it clear that the artist wanted—without getting troubled by problems of correct chronological succession—to put the Descent from the Trayastriṃśa Heaven (which should come after the First Sermon and not before it) in the middle, thus making it the key element of the whole composition. In this way, he drew attention to the ontologically axial function of the Buddha while, at the sides, he put, in an intermediate position, two gnosiologically foundational moments (significantly similar in their iconographic arrangement) and, in the outermost positions, the two events that pertain more closely to *māyā*, Birth and Death.

I here take the opportunity to underline the fact that an insufficiently controlled use of terms in this field can often lead to some impairment in understanding: the compositional structure of the Mathurā relief in question would seem in fact to be in conflict with the formula given by H. Zimmer for the concept of time that was most peculiar, to use his words, to India:

the Indian experience of time is cyclical and lives in the eternal recurrence of the one and the same.... It does not lie within the Indian cyclical notion of time to single out any special moment as being all important. Indian art does not immortalize the climax.

According to Zimmer, Indian images “timelessly at ease” contemplate the onlooker without displaying any particular moment of action. This is in contrast with the taste for the fleeting moment, for the climax, crystallized by classical Greek art in order to comprise in it the idea of both “not yet” and “no more.”<sup>46</sup> The explicit reference to Lessing helps us understand the exact meaning that Zimmer wanted to give his words: the highest point is not to be understood as the dramatic climax but that magic moment which is pregnant with both past and future. As Lessing wrote, “to show the eye the extremest point is to bind the wings of Fancy, and to compel her, inasmuch as her power

45 A. K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, New York 1927, 62, 236, fig. 104; S. L. and J. C. Huntington, *cit.*, 155, fig. 8.33; H. Mode, *Altindische Skulpturen aus Mathurā* [Ancient Indian sculptures from Mathurā], Hanau-Main 1986, 23–24, pl. 9; Karetzky, *The Life...., cit.*, fig. 7.

46 H. Zimmer, “Some Aspects of Time in Indian Art,” in *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* I, 1933 (30–51), 35–37. Other keen observations on different behaviors of classical Greek art and Indian art towards time can be found in H. Zimmer, “The Indian Sacred Image and Classical Art,” in his *Artistic Form and Yoga...., cit.*, 3–20. For a recent review on “cyclical time” in Indian thought, see A. N. Balslev, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy*, Wiesbaden 1983, 140–150.



**Fig. 14:** Relief from Mathura. Museum caption: *Life Scenes of Buddha, ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Mathura Museum, Mathura, India. [Fig. 14 in the original.]*

cannot go beyond the impression on the senses, to busy herself with feeble and subordinate images, beyond which is that visible fullness of expression which she shuns as her boundary.”<sup>47</sup>

There will therefore be no contradiction between what Zimmer thought about the concept of time in Indian art and what we came to claim about the Mathurā relief (or, as we shall see, about any other Indian work), provided that we force his words slightly: Indian art does not rule out that particularly significant moments stand out—each cycle of time needs phases, even more than linear time does!—but it refuses to catch the action in its dynamic happening: the significant moment does not flee like the Greek *Kairós*, it just *is*.

47 G. E. Lessing, *Laocoonte* (trans. by E. Sola), Firenze 1954, 19. [Note by translator: The reference is to Lessing’s statement in *Laokoon* III, “dem Auge das Aeusserste zeigen, heisst der Phantasie die Fluegel binden, und sie nöthigen. . . ., sich unter ihm mit schwächern Bildern zu beschäftigen, über die sie die sichtbare Fülle des Ausdrucks als ihre Grenze scheuet” (G. E. Lessing’s *ausgewählte Werke* in sechs Bänden, Stuttgart 1889, vol. 6, 17) The English translation follows Robert Phillimore, tr., *Laocoon Translated from the Text of Lessing*, London 1874, 29.] I find the reference to *Laocoonte* proposed by D. Schlingloff inappropriate, *Akṣayanīvī, cit.*, 163, note 125: “...in Kizil the continuous action of the stories is reduced to the delineation of only one scene, which shows the most significant moment of the story.” Lessing did not refer to the most “significant” moment of a *story*, but of an *action*.

Joanna Williams has put together a typologically homogeneous group of Gupta stelae from Sarnath, depicting stories of the Buddha's life.<sup>48</sup> Here, too, we can see how Indian art—even when it has a *fabula* with a chronological structure at its disposal—tends not to take the succession of events into account (here, it is mainly from the bottom to the top). But what is particularly interesting is the fact, as stressed by Williams, that the latest stela of the group is the one that chooses the freest and, seemingly, quite random order of the various episodes represented on its sculpted surface.

These stelae with a vertical development are evidently quite a different matter from the friezes with a horizontal development. Even if the scenes were the same and their arrangement responded to the same criterion of chronological succession, it still is something different whether one develops a story horizontally or places the different moments with one above the other. This is especially true when seen in terms of the reaction of the devotee to the vision: a vertical arrangement is eminently synoptic, while a horizontal development makes us think about the *doing*, which is precisely the peculiarity of Gandhāra that I tried to underline in the previous pages.

I hope I did not create the false impression that Gandharan horizontal narration may not go together with other forms of representation. Besides the aforementioned stelae from Kāpiśa, the pseudo-niches (fig. 15) that decorated some *stūpas* could be accompanied by horizontal narrative cycles.<sup>49</sup> They also show episodes of the Buddha's life, or *jātakas*, but those are placed one above the other, and not necessarily in chronological order (bottom-up or top-down). Their meaning is not narrative but allegorical or symbolic,<sup>50</sup> and that is how the Gandharan *stūpa* provides the worshipper with the most aptly combined means of meditation.

48 "Sārṇāth Gupta Steles...", *cit.*

49 *Art Gréco-bouddhique de Gandhāra, cit.*, I, fig. 70–72.

50 See for example M. Taddei, "The Dīpaṅkara-jātaka...", *cit.* To get an idea of the semantic potentiality of that original iconographic structure, the reader may simply analyze reliefs 159–169 as reproduced in *Gandhāran Art in Pakistan, cit.*



*Fig. 15: Provenance unknown. Museum caption: Scenes from the Life of Buddha, 1<sup>st</sup> century–320, Kushan Period. Schist, 68.0 x 41.30 cm. Found at Gandhara, Pakistan. Now preserved at Cleveland Museum, 1958.474. [Fig. 13 in the original.]*

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**Fig. 14:** Relief from Mathura. Museum caption: *Life Scenes of Buddha*, ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Mathura Museum, Mathura. Photograph: © Biswarup Ganguly, Wikimedia Commons. [http://bit.ly/Life\\_Scenes\\_of\\_Buddha](http://bit.ly/Life_Scenes_of_Buddha) [Accessed on 11. May 2015]. [Fig. 14 in the original.]

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