# Buddhism in Gandhara and beyond: cultural interaction between ancient East and West

Aerde, M.E.J.J. van

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# Aspects of globalisation

Mobility, exchange and the development of multi-cultural states

# Buddhism in Gandhara and beyond:

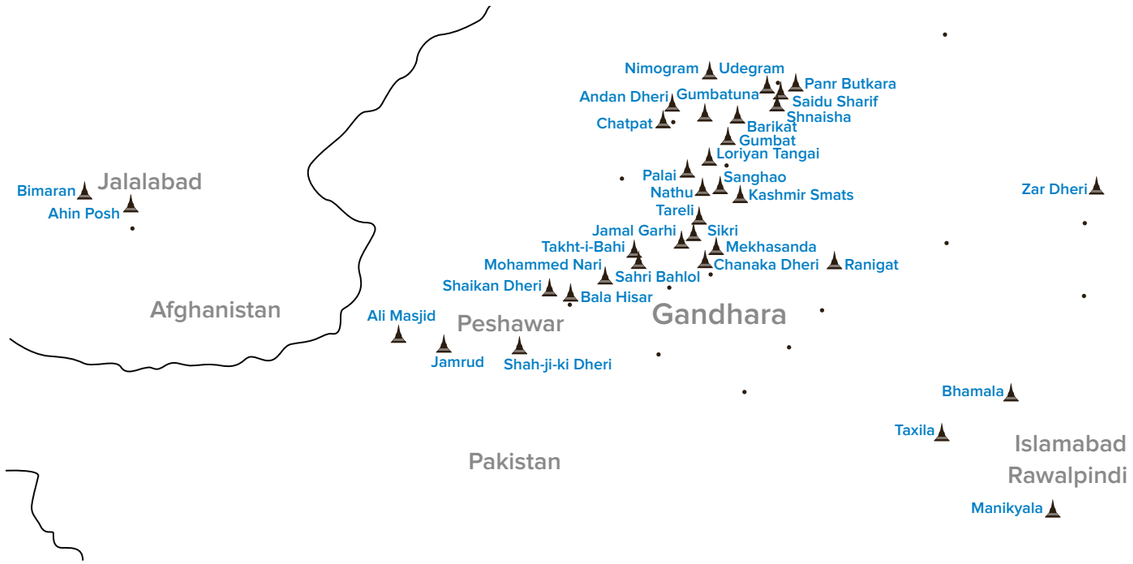
## Cultural interaction between ancient East and West.

**Marike van Aerde**

studied Archaeology and Classics at the Radboud University Nijmegen and University College London (UCL), and completed her PhD (2015) as part of the VIDI project 'Cultural innovation in a globalising society: Egypt in the Roman world' supervised by Miguel John Versluys at Leiden University. She investigated cultural interaction between Rome and Egypt, and takes a similar approach in her Postdoc on Hellenistic and Buddhist culture in the archaeology of Gandhara. So far, she has been supported by the Catherine van Tussenbroek Fund and collaborated with the Leiden Archaeology Faculty, the British Museum, and UCL's Institute of Archaeology in London.

**Buddhism is one of the oldest religions in the world, and deeply connected with East and South Asian culture. The man who was to become the Buddha was born as Siddhartha Gautama, the son of a warrior king, in the foothills of the Himalaya in ca. 563 BCE. Buddhism draws on the life and experiences of the Buddha, whose teachings (known as dharma) present a model for life towards enlightenment and freedom from earthly suffering. Some of the earliest Buddhist texts, in the form of the Jataka tales, date from 300-400 BCE, while the earliest known full account of the life of the Buddha – the Buddha Charita – was written by the Indian poet-monk Ashvaghosha in the 2nd-1st century BCE.**

Buddhism began as a religion of monks and monasteries, founded by the Buddha's original followers. But as the teachings of the dharma spread, the amount of Buddhist monuments and places of worship – usually in the form of stupa burial mounds and Bodhi trees – increased across the area of modern-day North India and Pakistan. So did Buddhist scholarship. Especially the region known as Gandhara, which spread from modern-day East Afghanistan to Northwest Pakistan, saw a remarkable rise in Buddhist learning and philosophy, which reached beyond the monasteries and began to influence both public and political life. At that time, the Gandhara region was part of the Maurya Empire. Emperor Ashoka the Great (who reigned from 268-232 BCE) became the first political patron of Buddhism, which significantly increased the religion's




Map of Gandhara with its major sites.

spread throughout the Maurya Empire and beyond. Nowadays, Buddhists are a minority in India and Pakistan, but the religion became predominant in both Far East Asia (via China, the Korean peninsula, and Japan) and South Asia (via Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Thailand). This spread has significantly influenced the material culture of these regions, as archaeological sources from as early as the 2th-1st century BCE already show. But this increasingly wide variety of Buddhist culture across Asia – possibly the reason for its widespread 'success' – seems originally rooted in the Gandhara region.

Some of the first known anthropomorphic depictions of the Buddha emerge from the archaeology of this region specifically, and can be dated roughly from the time of Ashoka's reign onwards. Something quite remarkable seems at work here: these first statues of the Buddha, as a human figure, have so far been widely recognised for their 'Greek' or 'Hellenistic' style, ever since they were excavated in the late 19th to early 20th century. Virtually all archaeological campaigns in the region were undertaken by British and French colonial scholars at that time – and their records and interpretations still make up the majority of the (predominantly Western) understanding of these archaeological sources today. These scholars focused deliberately on the 'Greek' aspects of these Buddhist sculptures and reliefs, in order to demonstrate that the arrival of Hellenistic settlers in Gandhara, in the form of the Indo-Greek kingdoms (2nd-1st century BCE), became a 'superior filter' for the existing local Buddhist culture, which became known as Greco-Buddhist art. In the West, Buddhism was seen as a 'negative' culture, while the superiority of Greek art was considered irrefutable at that time. This led to many misinterpretations and wrong datings of especially Buddhist archaeology from Gandhara, and the prevalence of so-called cultural containers, where 'Greek' and 'Buddhist' elements are regarded as signs of separate ethnic categories. Briefly put, Buddhist material culture from Gandhara was considered superior because it was 'Greco-Buddhist', whereas the spread of Buddhist material culture beyond the region was deemed of lesser quality (and therefore of lesser interest) because it could no longer be regarded as Greek craftsmanship. As a result, Greco-Buddhist art has long been (and often still is) seen as an isolated category that was unique to Gandhara, because of the presence of the Indo-Greek kingdoms. But the actual archaeological data suggest something quite different.

The distinct naturalistic style and certain material techniques of many of the Buddhist sculptures and reliefs from the Gandhara region, can indeed be recognised as part of the wider material culture repertoire of the Hellenistic world from the 2nd-1st century BCE. At the same time, many details (even in the form of distinct facial features), attributes and subject-matters of these objects match descriptions and traditions from Buddhist scholarship and scriptures very closely, and cannot be found anywhere else in the Hellenistic world. Moreover, most examples of so-called Greco-Buddhist art in Gandhara are integral parts of specific Buddhist architecture and monuments, as evident from most surviving excavation reports of Gandharan sites. The evidence clearly shows that these sculptures and reliefs were not isolated objects in a Hellenistic/Indo-Greek environment, even though most 19th century Western scholars did choose to interpret them in that way, as a result of their own predetermined perspectives of both Greek and Buddhist culture. In addition, objects from Gandhara that seemed to lack Buddhist attributes or subject matter were deemed 'fully Greek' (e.g., figures of Herakles or Medusa) and labelled as imports from the Mediterranean, based on style and general appearance only. Even when these objects were originally excavated as part of Buddhist architecture, such as stupa monuments. However, modern-day analyses of material properties have demonstrated that most of these 'imports' were in fact made locally in Gandhara, from local stone or bronze. The sites of Taxila, one of the central cities of Buddhist scholarship under Ashoka the Great, and the great stupa monument at Butkara I provide a variety of interesting examples.

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More than anything, such new analyses point towards a process of interaction on quite a global scale; the opposite of ethnic categorisation and cultural containers. The archaeological sources show different and often highly flexible layers of material choices, technical skill, subject matter, and (local) contexts that emerged in Gandhara during this time. And this, in turn, points towards an ongoing process of interaction and exchange that seems incited by cultural contact and trade networks throughout the ancient East and West; again, the opposite of cultural isolation and categories according

to so-called culture styles. By asking ‘What is Greek about Buddhist material culture from Gandhara?’ from the onset, we already put categories in place before examining the actual data. More relevant (and interesting) is the question ‘How did the flexible interplay work of Buddhist elements and Greek naturalistic techniques that the archaeological data from Gandhara show?’ Contrary to studying Greco-Buddhist art from Gandhara as an isolated (and predominantly Greek) phenomenon, this makes us think about the wider scope of cultural interaction, trade, and exchange networks throughout Eurasia. On a practical level, what routes, connections, and processes enabled

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this kind of interaction in the first place? And why did it become so successful for Buddhism in Gandhara specifically? That subsequently leads to the question how elements from Gandharan Buddhist material culture spread beyond that region, and how they contributed to the large-scale spread of Buddhist culture throughout Asia. Buddhism indeed continued to spread far, towards both East and South, but at its origin it also met and interacted with the West. This process certainly does not appear to have been a clear-cut case of origin and transmission – and certainly not one of specific cultural ‘filtering’. More than anything, the archaeology of Gandhara suggests that Buddhist material culture was inherently layered, flexible, and interactive from its very start. Perhaps that original characteristic enabled, or at least encouraged, its large-scale spread and appropriation throughout the very diverse cultures of South and Far East Asia.

Re-examining Gandharan sites and objects can give us new insights into specific case studies from the archaeological data – but it also reminds us of the potential influence of our own perspectives as scholars. By trying to look beyond the notion of culture containers and ethnic categories, we will be able to look beyond Gandhara, as well. In that way, singular sites and even individual objects can become valuable sources about the widespread interactive networks that seemed to prevail throughout ancient Eurasia and that seem to have convened, possibly in multiple ways, in the Gandhara region from the 2nd-1st century BCE onwards. On a practical level, this requires a substantial re-examination of archaeological data from both Gandhara and beyond. The often scattered locations of artefacts and incomplete records can provide some challenges, but initial results have already shown that the interaction between Hellenistic and Buddhist elements in Gandhara can be seen as part of a much larger material culture process, which was marked by diversity and flexibility. Subject matter, techniques, material choices, and physical contexts were apparently interchangeably available, depending on the specific requirements for the artefacts and/or architecture in question. Based on these findings, the continuing study of cultural interaction between ancient East and West promises to yield yet many more insights. And, in particular, will expand our understanding of the spread of Buddhist culture beyond cultural categorisation, as well as beyond Gandhara. ___