

THE DIONYSIAC IMAGERY FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN TO GANDHĀRA

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ABSTRACT

Amongst the corpus of Gandhāran sculpture, there are relief panels depicting so-called Dionysiac or Bacchanalian scene¹. Dionysus is the famous god of vine, wine, grape-harvesting, wine-making and of ritualistic madness, fertility, theatre and religious ecstasy in ancient Greek religion and myth. His followers are called thiasos: Satyr, Silenus, God Pan, Maenad. The world of Dionysus and thiasos symbolise the paradise in which his devotees and followers will be reborn and can enjoy various pleasures obtainable in Dionysiac after life.

Images pertaining to Dionysos show banquet, male and female fraternizing or amorous couple, playing music, and wine making. Such images were undoubtedly influenced both iconographically and stylistically by Greek art including Hellenistic and Greco-Roman.

In this paper, I will take up such a Gandharan Dionysiac imagery and attempt to clarify how such an imagery was transmitted from Roman Empire to Gandhāra. First, I will show typical Dionysiac images depicted on Gandharan relief panels. Second, I will show typical Dionysiac images depicted in Greek and Roman Art. Third, I will introduce the Dionysiac images in the East including Gandhāra.

Keywords: Dionysiac, Gandhara, Meditarian, Hellenistic, Imagery, Buddhist Art.

I- DIONYSIAC OR BACCHANALIAN IMAGES FROM GANDHĀRA

I will show and investigate six relief panels depicting Dionysus and thiasos.



Fig. 1 Banquet scene. H. 29. 2cm, 2nd-3rd century CE, the Tokyo National Museum; inv. TC-740 (Photo: after Tokyo National Museum et al. 2003: fig. 129)

To the viewer's right of this relief panel representing a banquet scene is probably celebrating the marriage of Dionysus and Ariadne. Dionysus has a cantharus cup (*amṛta-kalaśa*) in his right hand and is seated with his bride Ariadne on his knee. Her right hand is put on the god's shoulder. He is surrounded by two women, probably Maenads, each holding a wine cup or plate. A man is standing behind him. To the viewer's left, a man shoulders a leather wine skin while another man scoops up the wine from him in both hands. Both wear an *exomis*, Greek costume for lower-class men. Behind his back, a woman, probably a maenad is standing. All men depicted on this relief panel are bearded and they all wear Greek or Roman style costume. Unfortunately, the heads of Dionysus, a standing male behind him and standing three women or maenads were all broken away and the present heads are not original but restored.



Fig. 2 Banquet scene. H. 19. 2cm, 2nd-3rd century CE, the Tokyo National Museum; inv. TC-705 (Photo: after Tokyo National Museum et al. 2003: fig. 130)

On this relief panel, all the figures are depicted dancing or playing music at a banquet. To the viewer's left, a drunken Dionysus or Silenus is supported by a man (Satyr?) and a woman, probably a Maenad, from both sides. Dionysus is bearded and ties a branch of grape-vine around his head. To the viewer's right, a woman, probably a Maenad is playing on an oboe, and a man wearing Indian costume is dancing and beating a drum. On both sides of this relief panel is represented a grape-vine, a symbol of Dionysus.



Fig. 3 Dionysiac scene. H. 29. 0cm, 2nd-3rd century CE, Private Collection in Japan (Photo: after Tokyo National Museum et al. 2003: fig. 131)

On this relief, a fraternizing couple is depicted twice under the Indian-style arch. The male has a pair of horns on his head and a pointed ear, which allow us to identify him as the god Pan and the female figure as a Maenad. To the viewer's left of the scene, they are hugging and kissing each other. To the viewer's right of the scene, Pan tries to touch the Maenad's genitalia. This love-making of *thiasos* is depicted twice on the same panel in continuous narrative style.



Fig. 4 Dionysiac scene. H. 24cm, 2nd-3rd century CE, the Lahore Museum
(Photo: after Tokyo National Museum et al. 2002: fig. 17)

Set between a pair of leonine feet is a typical remarkable example of a Dionysiac scene composed of two pairs of couples facing one the other. The shape of this relief panel designated by Wladimir Zwalf as a 'stair panel' and is modified by a narrow inward curve is quite unique and reminds us of the *simhāsana* (lion-throne) of a seated Buddha and Bodhisattva (Zwalf 1996, vol.I: 299). To the viewer's left, a Maenad wearing a shawl and a crossed marriage-belt (*cestus*) is sitting with a bald and bearded man, probably Silenus. He wears a wreath of vine leaves around his head and is offering to his female partner a drink of wine from a shallow bowl. To his left, a beardless and bare-chested young man, probably Dionysus, is also sitting with the other Maenad who touches his shoulder with her right hand.



Fig. 5 Dionysiac scene. 2nd-3rd century CE, Private collection in Japan
(Photo: Courtesy of Katsumi Tanabe)

To the viewer's left two male figures wearing *exomis* are tramping grapes to make wine. Beside this group, a naked and pot-bellied male figure, probably bearded and bald Silenus, is drinking wine from a cup in his right hand. Behind him a female figure, probably a maenad, is standing. In the centre of this relief panel a male figure is lying on a lion or panther. This male figure seems to give wine to the animal. Behind them a female figure is standing. To the viewer's right of this scene a naked male and naked female figures are embracing and kissing each other. On the right end of this relief panel, a male and a female figures are also embracing and caressing, suggesting sexual intercourse on seemingly rocky bed.

Five medallions formed by two symmetrical intertwining vines are depicted in the central zone of this vertical relief panel. Tendrils, leaves and grapes grow out from branches of the vine scroll forming these medallions enclosing images. In the top medallion we can see a seated man drinking wine from a rhyton held in his right hand. Pictured in the next medallion below is an amorous couple, whose iconographic importance resides in that the male figure is touching the female's bust. In the third medallion from the top, a man can be observed carrying a basket of grapes on his back. This male figure holds a bunch of grapes, checking whether it is appropriate to harvest the grapes or not. The medallion below this encloses a male figure with a child on his shoulders tramping grapes in order to extract juice from them. In the lowest medallion an archer is shown. This archer aims an arrow at some wild animal that is not depicted.



Fig. 6 Dionysiac scene of the peopled vine scroll. H: 124cm, 2nd-3rd century CE, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
(Photo: Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

According to these six examples of the Gandharan Dionysiac imagery, the *dramatis personae* are Dionysus, Silenus, Pan, maenad, lion or panther, vine, and they are engaged in wine-making, drinking wine, playing music, dancing and love-making or fraternization. Most of figures are more or less, borrowed from or modelled after a Dionysus or *thiasos*, and most of the participants wear a Greek or Roman costume. These motifs seem to be rather secular than religious in appearance, because they lack sacred and divine significance and feeling and rather stress secular and sensual pleasures.

2- DIONYSIAC OR BACCHANALIAN IMAGERY IN GREEK AND ROMAN ART

Dionysiac imagery in Greek and Roman Art is classified based upon themes in the Dictionary LIMC (*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*).² There are many figurative motifs of the Dionysus and Bacchus. Therefore, I selected about thirteen images from the classified motifs of the LIMC. The criteria and bases of the selection are the Dionysiac myth, cult and ritual, in other words, how the relevant images connote the religiosity or religious significance of Dionysus.

1. INDEPENDENT STATUE OR IMAGE OF DIONYSUS AND THIASOS



Fig. 7 Statue of Dionysos. 2nd century CE, Palazzo Altemps Rome (Photo: T. Tanabe)

This naked, youthful Dionysus must have held a staff known as *thyrsus* (now lost) in his left hand and wine jug that still remains held by his right hand. A wreath of ivy and grapes adorn his long hair.



Fig. 8 Dionysos riding a panther. 325-300BCE, the Pella Archaeological Museum
(Photo: after Siganidou and Lilimbaki-Akamati 2008: 64, fig. 45)

The naked Dionysus is riding a panther. He has a *tyrsos* on his left hand and holds the neck of the panther by his right hand. He puts on a wreath on his head.



⇐ Fig.9 Table support with Dionysos and Satyr. 170-180 CE, the National Archaeological Museum in Athen (Photo: T. Tanabe)

⇐ The nude Dionysus holds a rhyton ending in the *protome* of a panther. Next to him, the goat-footed god Pan holds a stick known as lagobolon. A young satyr climbs up vine and cuts grapes in his right hand.

2. MYTHS OF DIONYSUS



Fig. 10 Birth of Dionysos from the thigh of Zeus. Apulian red figure krater, 410 BCE, Il Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Taranto: inv. IG. 8264 (Photo: after Dell’Aglia and Zingariello. 2015: 47)

On the body of the krater Zeus is depicted the infant Dionysus is emerging from his right thigh, whom a nymph is receiving. They are surrounded by the Olympian deities and thiasos, Pan and Silenus.



Fig. 11 Dionysos sails his ship to Greece. Attic black figure cup, 530BCE, Glyptothek, Munich (Photo: after Knauß 2017: 119)

Bearded Dionysos wearing ivy wreath sails his ship or boat from which a vine grows up along the mast. Around his ship are swimming seven dolphins, probably referring to his encounter with Tyrrhenian (Etruscan) pirates whom he transformed into dolphins. He is bringing the gift of the vine and wine-making from Naxos to Athens. The story is included in the Hesiodic Hymn to Dionysos, of uncertain date, but possibly archaic Greek period, 6th century CE³.

3. HARVESTING GRAPES, WINE MAKING AND DIONYSUS
IN A VINEYARD,



Fig. 12 Dionysos and satyrs harvesting grapes. black figure amphora, 540-530 BCE, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; acc. no. 63.952 (Photo: T. Tanabe)

Dionysus is sitting on a crossed legged chair (*sellacurulis*) in a vineyard tended by satyrs -and drinks wine from his distinctive high-handled cup, the kantharos. Satyrs are harvesting grapes. Drinking Dionysus and wine-making satyrs are common themes in Greek vase-paintings but here the painter combines various elements, creating a lively pattern of baskets, twisting vines, and ripe and juicy grapes.



Fig. 13 Dionysos and Satyrs making wine. red figure krater, 450-440 BCE, the National Archaeological Museum, Athen (Photo: T. Tanabe)

At the viewer's right a satyr is carrying a basket filled with grapes to wine press basket. Another satyr stands in this basket set on two wine tubs. Behind them bearded Dionysos is standing and watching their wine-making. The god has a kantharos in his left hand. Behind Dionysos a satyr is shouldering a basket filled with grapes.



Fig. 14 Harvesting grapes. the Farnese Sarcophagus, 225 CE, the Isabella Stewart Gardner's Museum (Photo: Courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner's Museum)

This beautifully curved sarcophagus is known as the Farnese Sarcophagus. On this sarcophagus satyrs and maenads, grace the sides of the sarcophagus. While the maenads harvest grapes, satyrs interrupt their work by flirtatiously pulling at their garments and exchanging amorous glances with them. The sarcophagus housed in the

Capitoline Museum and the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki also adopts a similar Dionysiac vision of the grape harvest as its theme (Nielsen 2018: 34-35, 61). Bacchanalian revelry was a popular theme in ancient Roman sarcophagi reliefs.⁴

4. PROCESSION AND TRIUMPH OF DIONYSUS AND SATYR



Fig. 15 Dionysos and Satyr. Attic red figure kylix, 480 BCE, the Altes Museum, Berlin (Photo: Backe-Dahmen A et al. 2010: fig. 8)

On the inside of this Kylix, bearded Dionysos and a naked satyr are standing and facing each other. Dionysos has a thyrsus. He puts a wreath made of grape ivy and leaves on his head. Satyr is playing aulos. The outside features Maenads dancing ecstatically around the altar and the cult image of Dionysos.



Fig. 16 Dionysos seated on a Panther with his thiasos. 260-270 CE, the Metropolitan Museum of Art; acc.no. 55.11.5 (Photo: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This extremely well-preserved Roman marble sarcophagus depicts Dionysos seated on a panther in the center, but he is somewhat overshadowed by four larger standing figures who represent the Four Seasons (from left to right, Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn). The figures are shown as sturdy youths. Around these five central figures are placed other Bacchic figures and cultic objects, all carved at a smaller scale. On the rounded ends of the sarcophagus are two other groups of large figures, similarly intermingled with lesser ones.

On the left end, Mother Earth is portrayed reclining on the ground; she is accompanied by a satyr and a youth carrying fruit. On the right end, a bearded male figure, probably to be identified with the personification of a river-god, reclines in front of two winged youths, perhaps representing two additional Seasons. One of them are drinking wine.



Fig. 17 Dionysos procession. Vorghese Krater, H: 1. 72cm, 30-40 BCE, Musée du Louvre
(Photo: T. Tanabe)

The frieze depicts Dionysiac procession conducted by naked Dionysus and his thiasos. Dionysus is standing and holds a thyrsus in his right hand. Thiasos plays some musical instruments: aulos, harp, tambourine. Drunk Silenus almost collapses. However, the other accompanying figures are often said to be satyrs having the common characteristics of both feet of goat and equine tails. Female figures are said to be Maenads but they are not clearly depicted.



Fig. 18 Triumph of Dionysos. The Pashly Sarcophagus, the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Photo: T. Tanabe)

The main frieze of this sarcophagus shows Dionysus returning from the East in triumph, with his traditional entourage of Satyrs and Maenads. The god's chariot is drawn by Centaurs. Pan dances ahead and an elephant leads the way. Silenus lurches drunkenly across the centre of the scene. On the small frieze above, Satyrs and Maenads recline on couches, drinking and demanding wine. These Dionysiac scenes are suitable subjects for the decoration of a sarcophagus because elements of the myth and worship of Dionysus focused on re-birth: the god himself was born twice.

5. PEOPLED VINE SCROLL



Fig. 19 Stone pilaster. Basilica. Leptis Magna (Photo: Squarciapino M. 1974: tav. LXV-III1-4)

On the bottom of this pilaster stands a krater ornamented with vine leaves and ivy. From its mouth two vines grow up and intertwine symmetrically to form seven

medallions. In the first medallion above the krater Dionysus rides a panther. In the next medallion a satyr holds a leaf of vine in his left hand. In the third medallion a dancing maenad is rendered. The fourth medallion shows Silenus wearing a tunic covered with wool or animal skin, bearing a stick in the left hand and raising his right. In the fifth medallion a maenad is depicted but her head is broken away. In the sixth medallion God Pan is represented with hindquarter legs and wearing cloth over the upper body. The last or top medallion is decorated with an Eros picking up grapes.

Among the corpus of Dionysiac imagery in Greek and Roman art, there are a great number and variety of motifs. Most of them are cultic objects clearly related to Dionysiac cult or ritual. Some of them are something like emblems to suggest us Dionysiac Mysteries. They tell us the Birth and Life Stories of this God. They convince us that Dionysus is god of vine and wine. In general, Greek and Roman Dionysiac imagery is, as a rule, sacred, divine, showing a profound religious significance. Needless to say, although small in number there are secular and sensual images among the corpus of Greek and Roman Dionysiac imagery, but generally speaking, the Greek and Roman Dionysiac imagery seems to be religious and divine.

6- THE TRANSMISSION OF THE DIONYSIAC IMAGES TO THE EAST

Everybody admits that Dionysiac images depicted on Gandhāran relief panels must have been derived from either Greek (Hellenistic) or Roman Imperial art. This fact has been already elaborately studied in various studies. Especially, Alfred Foucher maintained that the Greeks immigrated from Bactria to Gandhāra played an important role for transmitting Greek artistic ideas and techniques to Gandhāra (Foucher 1917: 111-137). John Marshall mentioned that the Parthians had vast numbers of Asiatic Greeks within the borders of their own Empire, but they were able to enjoy at least in times of peace both commercial and cultural contacts with the Graeco-Roman world. Therefore, he thought that the Parthians carried out the renaissance of Hellenism on Gandhāran art (Marshall 1960: 26-32). More recently, John Boardman, Elizabeth Errington, Joe Cribb and Ladislav Stančo also emphasised the Greek influence on Gandhāran relief panels. Errington and Cribb said that images such as Atlas, Triton, Eros shouldering a garland, Dionysus and his thiasos shown in Gandharan art were influenced by Greek art because the Greek homeland had been embraced by the Roman empire and the arts of the eastern Mediterranean area remained essentially Greek, even during Roman rule, and thus set the standards for the development of Roman art (Errington and Cribb 1992: 37). Stančo placed emphasis on Greek influence from Bactria and agreed with the assumption that Dionysiac images must be the work of Greek artists who fled from Bactria to Gandhara before Bactria was invaded by nomads or their successors (Stančo 2012: 86-87). On the other hand, Hugo Buchthal, Benjamin Rowland, Mortimer Wheeler and others attributed the western elements in Gandharan art to the influence of Rome (Buchthal 1945; Wheeler 1949: 1954: 183-202; Rowland 1958).

There are known a lot of objects that were exported from the Mediterranean area to the East: Mesopotamia, Iran, Central Asia, India, China and Mongolia (Boardman 1994, 2015) . They are mostly luxury pieces such as silver vessels and some of them depict Dionysiac images. As I cannot show you all the relevant pieces due to shortage of time, I will select some examples.

A bronze head of Silenus was found from Begram (**Fig. 20**).



Fig. 20 Mask of Silens. The National Museum of Afghanistan; inv. No. MK04.1.91,
(Photo: Cambon and Jarrige 2010: fig. 221)



Fig. 21 Plaster cast with Dionysiac Procession. excavated from Begram, ca. 0-20 CE, d. 1.7cm, The National Museum of Afghanistan; inv. KM57-1-80 (von Drachenfels and Luczanits 2008: Cat. no. 19)



Fig. 22a, b Terracotta mould and impression of Dionysus and Ariadne, thiasos. L: 10cm, H: 7cm, Private collection, Tokyo (Photo: Courtesy of Saeko Miyashita)



Fig. 22a, b Terracotta mould and impression of Dionysus and Ariadne, thiasos.
L: 10cm, H: 7cm, Private collection, Tokyo (Photo: Courtesy of Saeko Miyashita)

Moreover, many plaster or gypsum casts of late Hellenistic metalwork (**Fig. 21**) were excavated from Begram. Even several clay or terracotta moulds for plaster cast (**Fig. 22a, b**) were found in Gandhāra and some of them are now kept in the Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum in Japan and one piece is owned by a private collector in Japan (Tanabe 2015: 63-64, figs. 1a, b, 7, 8, 10-14, color plate 4). Even from China and Mongolia, silver artifacts depicting Dionysiac themes are found such as a silver plate with Dionysus riding a panther (**Fig. 23**), two stem cups with Dionysiac figures and grapevine (**Fig. 24, 25**) and a medallion or phalera (**Fig. 26**) with Satyr attacking a maenad or goddess (Watt et al., 2004: 149, 184-185, figs. 59, 90; Polosmak et al., 2011: 110-117, figs. 4.40a, b, 4.42).



Fig. 23 Gilt silver plate with figure of Dionysus riding panther.
D: 31cm, found at Jingyuan, Gansu Province,
China (Photo: Watt at al. 2004: fig. 90)



Fig. 24, Gilt Bronze Cup with Putti and grapevine.
4th century CE, the Datong City Museum
(Photo: Sofukawa and Degawa 2005: fig. 95)



Fig. 25 Gilt bronze stem cup with figures of thiasos and grape vine. H: 11. 5cm, Private Collection (Photo: Courtesy of Tatsuzo Kaku)

These finds were transported from West to East by overland and sea trade. The land route means the so-called Silk Road through the Parthian Royal Road and the sea route is the Erythrean sea and Indian Ocean⁵. As regards a route from the Roman Empire to Gandhara and environs, according to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, ships from the Roman Empire lay at anchor at ancient market port of Barbarik on situated at the mouth of the Indus River, and freights were transported from Barbarikon to a metropolis in the headwaters of the Indus river, i.e. in Gandhāra (Schoff 1974: 37). As the treasures of Begram show, artifacts of the Roman Empire were carried to Greater Gandhāra through such a commerce along the Indus river and her tributaries. Probably, Roman ‘itinerant’ craftsmen and artisans also could follow the same route to Gandhāra (Rowland 1960: 8). The participation of Roman artisans is attested to by an extremely realistic rendering of Heracles/ Vajrapani image (**Fig. 27**) and that of Tyche/ Ardoxsho (**Fig. 28**), both made of clay, excavated from Tape-Shotor in Hadda (Tarji 2000: 167-170; Boardman 2015, pp. 188-189, figs, 122, 123).



Fig. 26 Silver phalera with figures of Maenad and Satyr on lion skin.
D: 15cm, Noin Ula, twentieth Tumulus, Mongolia
(Photo: Polosmak et al. 2011: fig. 162)



⇐ Fig. 27 Heracles / Vajrapani. 2nd century CE,
Tape Shotor (Photo: Courtesy of Katsumi Tanabe)



Fig. 28 Tyche Ardoxsho. 2nd century CE, Tape Shotor
(Photo: Courtesy of Katsumi Tanabe)

CONCLUSION

Based on my investigation of the Gandharan Dionysiac imagery, the ideas and also the repertory of figures of the Dionysiac imagery were undoubtedly transmitted from the West to the East along the Silk Road. The Gandhāran Dionysiac imagery was positively accepted by Gandhāran Buddhists. I think, the most important fact which we can learn from the Gandhāran Dionysiac imagery, is that the Gandhāran Dionysiac imagery is nothing but a limited adaptation of the imagery of Dionysiac paradise, that was intentionally and selectively exploited by Gandhāran Buddhists in order to visualize the pleasures to be obtained in the Gandhāran Buddhist afterlife.

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NOTES

¹This is a revised version of my paper that I read at One Day International Seminar on Gandhāra Civilization and Buddhism Studies held in Punjab University.

²*LIMC* 1986, pp. 420-423, 541-542.

³Bordmann 2014: 8; Zanker/Ewaldt 2012: 143, pl.131.

⁴Cf. Zanker/ Ewaldt 2012: 152, pl.141: Dionysus is watching the harvesting.

⁵Schoff suggested the Parthian stations on a map and Young mentioned the Parthians played important role on the Roman trade (Schoff 1914: 16, Map; Young 2001: 136-148).