



East Meets West Rome, Greece, and Gandhara

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

The 2007 discovery of the “Shaikhan Dehri Hoard” in Pakistan confirmed that coinage was being struck in this region by the fifth century BCE, but archaeologists were also surprised to find an unexpected coin in the group: a *tetradrachm* (four drachmas) minted in Athens about 490 BCE. That coin is the earliest known example of the type to be found so far east. Its presence in the hoard does not mean a Greek brought it there, but it does confirm interaction between Central Asia and the Mediterranean by the beginning of Greece’s Classical period. When that *tetradrachm* was struck, Persia had launched what became a long series of wars with Greece, thus entangling the destinies of the two regions for many years to follow.

Interaction with Persia exposed Greeks to a kingdom of legendary wealth and sophistication, which Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) would later conquer. But Persia was not enough for the young king’s ambition. He took his campaigns further east than most Greeks had ever been, pushing into current-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and northwest India. That territory formed ancient Gandhara, a name perhaps stemming from the Sanskrit *gandha*, or “perfume,” referring to the region’s reputation for exotic perfumes and spices. Although Alexander peppered the region with Alexandrias and other new cities, scholars continue to debate the character of the resultant “Indo-Greek” culture. Was it more reflective of Greece or Gandhara? The answer to that question is complex, dependent on location, and randomness of preservation. Much of what is preserved, however, clearly illustrates foreign elements in Gandhara’s multiethnic, visual record.

The Greek empire in Asia would be absorbed by the Roman Empire and the Kushan Empire,* but aspects of Greek culture would nonetheless survive. Most of the Gandharan objects in the Museum’s collection date to the period of the Kushan Empire, which controlled Gandhara from the first to the fourth centuries CE. Excluding coins, the Museum has over 100 objects in its holdings from ancient Gandhara. A few selections from this collection reveal strong Graeco-Roman influence.

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Standing Buddha
Buddhist, Kushan period, ca. 200–300 CE
Pakistan (Gandhara)
Probably from the Swat River valley
Schist
Museum purchase (78.82)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

The roots of Buddhism date back to the fifth century BCE, but representations of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha (“Enlightened One”), in human form, are not widely known before the first century CE. Prior to that time, the Buddha was represented symbolically. Some suggest that Asian Greeks conflated Buddha with one of their own gods, such as Apollo, and thus reimagined the two as one syncretic, anthropomorphic god, and representations followed. Proving that a Greek carved the first image may be impossible, but images of the anthropomorphic Buddha proliferated from the first century onward. It has also been noted that the draping of his garments is reminiscent of the Greek *chlamys* (cloak) or Roman toga. Other Graeco-Roman inspired figures also infiltrated the region’s art, including winged figures resembling the Greek Eros or Roman Cupid (aka *amorini* or *putti*) and hybrid creatures reflecting Greek mythology. We had occasion to mention a Gandharan *ichthyocentaur* (“fish centaur”) in an earlier feature on centaurs, but Gandharan creatures also recall *tritons*, the Greek equivalent of a merman. Yet another figure in the Museum’s collection resembles a dancing *maenad*, a female follower of the god Dionysus. The figure plays cymbals, which can also be paralleled in maenad representations, and her dress recalls the Greek *peplos*. She may represent a *yakshi*, a woman associated with fertility who causes a tree to bear fruit by kicking it, but the meaning of ancient Gandharan art is often unclear.

Magnificent Buddhist monuments known as *stupas* dotted the Gandharan landscape as early as the third century BCE. Most commemorated the Buddha or his followers in various ways. Some contained remains or objects used by them, while others memorialized events in their lives. Still others symbolized aspects of Buddhist theology. Stupas were circular, mound-like structures that may have been inspired by circular Greek tombs. Some of the aforementioned relief sculpture probably decorated stupas, and the Kushan stupas were known for their elaborate, sculptural embellishments. Stupa architects also employed the Greek “orders of architecture,” systems of decoration for post-and-beam construction. The Corinthian order was prevalent, often

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Boss or Lid with Winged Figure in Relief
Buddhist, Kushan period, 100–300 CE
From Pakistan (Gandhara)
Possibly Butkara (Swat River valley)
Schist
Gift of Dr. Samuel S. Eilenberg (77.339)



Relief Showing a Winged Triton-like Creature
Buddhist, Kushan period, ca. 100–300 CE
From Pakistan (Gandhara)
Possibly Swat River valley
Schist
Gift of Dr. Samuel Eilenberg (82.300)



Relief Showing a Dancer Playing Cymbals
Buddhist, Kushan period, ca. 1st–4th c. CE
From Pakistan (Gandhara)
Schist
Gift of Eric Neff (83.58)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

represented in the *pilaster*, a non-structural, decorative “column.” Today most of the great Kushan stupas of Gandhara are in ruins, long stripped of their sculptural decoration. The Shingardar Stupa, near the town of Ghalegay (Pakistan), still retains its Corinthian pilasters. In the Greek world, a royal tomb thought to have belonged to Cleopatra Selene (d. 6 BCE) is a relevant comparison to the Kushan stupas. While the Cleopatra tomb is in Algeria today, other circular tombs, less elaborate, still stand at the ancient Greek city of Hierapolis (Turkey). Some may have existed closer to Gandhara. Roman emperors were also buried in large, circular tombs. ■



[Shingardar Stupa, Pakistan](#), 5th century CE
Photo: Muhammad Zahir



Corinthian Pilaster with Two Figures in Relief
Buddhist, Kushan period, 100–200 CE
From Pakistan (Gandhara)
Allegedly from a stupa outside Balikot (Peshawar Valley), but possibly from Nathu Schist
Gift of Eric Neff (78.244)



[Royal Mausoleum of Mauretania, Algeria](#), 1st century BCE
Photo: Faiza Tchoketch-Kebir



[Mausoleum of Augustus, Rome](#), 1st century CE
Photo: ryarwood

*Formed in the first century by the Yuezhi, an Indo-European people who had perhaps migrated from China but lived in Bactria (ancient region straddling today's Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan).