

WHEN HERAKLES FOLLOWED THE BUDDHA: POWER, PROTECTION, AND PATRONAGE IN GANDHARAN ART

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Long before the twenty-first century adage that “the world is flat,” ancient empires and trade routes enabled cultural globalization of a kind quite familiar to us today. Modern buzzwords like ‘syncretism’ and ‘alterity/otherness’ apply to these ancient cultures as much as they do to modern ones. The art of Gandhara in the 1st to 5th century Indian subcontinent offers many examples: coins, sculpture, and architecture depicting scenes from Indic mythologies, but sharing an iconographic vocabulary with Graeco-Roman and Iranian Zoroastrian arts and religions. This article examines Herakles’ iconographic journey to India and his transformation into Vajrapani, the bodyguard of the Buddha. In Gandharan sculptural reliefs depicting events from the life of the Buddha, the Heraklean Vajrapani serves as a sacred icon embodying the Buddhist community’s aspirations to royal patronage under the Kushan dynasty.

Royal power and luxury: the image of Herakles in Gandhara

The most striking fact about Gandharan art, both Buddhist and courtly, is its inclusion of Graeco-Roman

and Iranian mythological figures and artistic styles. Gandharan Buddhist art also incorporates Hindu deities such as Shiva (Quagliotti 2011). The fusion of such varied elements makes the study of Gandharan art a vibrant field involving many cultures, but also can make it difficult to determine the provenance of particular iconographic motifs.

Graeco-Roman artistic culture first spread into Gandhara through the conquests of Alexander the Great (335–323 BCE) and the settlers he left behind in Bactria. The Hellenistic successor states declined, to be replaced in Bactria and Gandhara (territories encompassing northeastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan and India) by the Kushan empire [Fig. 1]. In the Kushan period, Classical artistic influence continued (Nehru, pp. 27–28). Beginning in the 1st century BCE under Augustus, elite Romans developed a taste for Eastern luxuries – perfumes, spices and silks. Roman consumption of aromatics and spices became widespread; the volume of Rome’s eastern trade was substantial (McLaughlin 2010, pp. 59–60; Thapar 2002, pp. 242–43; Begley 1991, pp. 3–7; Liu 1994, pp. 7–11). This trade has been documented by abundant archaeological evidence – e.g., Roman coin hoards and amphorae found in India – and from the *Periplus Maris Eurythraei*, a 1st-century trading manual for Greek-speaking merchants traveling the route from the Red Sea to northwestern India along the Indian Ocean littoral. The *Periplus* mentions Gandhara and, fleetingly, the trade connections to China (Casson 1989, p. 47). Legends of Romans who travelled to India, such as the apostle Thomas and Apollonius of Tyana, as well as donative inscriptions in Buddhist monasteries crediting *Yavanas* (Greeks) and *Raumakas* (Romans) indicate that the exchange be-

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Fig. 1. Map of Kushan Empire. Map designed by Dirk Fabian, *ingraphis.de*, Kassel, © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.



Fig. 2. Heads of Herakles (left) and Antiochus I of Commagene (rt.) (r. 70 – 38 BCE) at the west temple on Nemrut Dağı (Turkey), the tomb complex of Antiochus. The detached heads are from statues of the seated ruler and divinities, who also included Fortuna, Zeus and Apollo.

Photos courtesy Daniel C. Waugh.



Fig. 3. Relief sculpture showing Antiochus I and Herakles, at Arsameia, the summer Commagene capital, Turkey.

tween Rome and India may have been cultural as well as mercantile (McLaughlin, 2010, p. 40).

Herakles' most important attribute for the Classical world was his strength, which enabled him to slay many of the monsters who threatened human civilization. Naturally, Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman rulers adopted his imagery as part of their propaganda of power (Vollkommer 1988, pp. 87–93). A striking, if perhaps extreme, example is Antiochus I of Commagene (r. 70 BCE – 38 BCE), who placed himself in a pantheon that included Herakles at his burial site on Nemrut dağı in Anatolia [Fig. 2] and at nearby Arsameia erected a large relief showing him shaking

hands with Herakles [Fig. 3]. The coins of Bactrian and Kushan kings show that this visual lexicon of power spread into the South Asian world.

Heraklean iconography first made its way into Gandhara by way of Alexander the Great's coinage.¹ Alexander styled himself as both the descendent and brother of Herakles. In his campaign through Greece, Egypt, and Persia, he even re-enacted many of the deeds of Herakles (Amitay, 2010). Fittingly, the obverse of his coinage depicts Herakles with lion skin on his head, an image one must assume was to be understood as Alexander himself [Fig. 4]. Coins from Alexander's successors in Bactria also depict Herakles.

One coin of Euthydemus I (230–200 BCE) portrays Herakles reclining on his lion skin, while another issued by Bactrian king Agathocles (190–180 BCE) depicts Herakles standing in *contrapposto* with his club in the air [Figures 5, 6, next page].

In addition to these coins, we also have several small bronze figurines from Bactria depicting Herakles, perhaps used as votives

Source: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00654/AN00654709_001_1.jpg>. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 4. Silver coin of Alexander III the Great. Obverse: Head of young Herakles; reverse: seated Zeus. Minted in Miletus (now Turkey). British Museum, London. Museum No. 1982,0513.11.



Fig. 5. Gold coin of Euthydemus I, ca. 230–200 BCE. Obverse: head of Euthydemus; reverse: seated Herakles with club and lion skin. Minted in Bactria. British Museum, London. Museum No. 1888,1208.72.

Source: (above) <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN01344/AN01344584_001_l.jpg>, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN01344/AN01344585_001_l.jpg>; (below) <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00031/AN00031399_001_l.jpg> © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 6. Silver tetradrachm of Agathocles (190–180 BCE). Obverse: bust of ruler wearing elephant-scalp headdress; reverse: standing Herakles, crowning self with wreath and holding club and lion skin. Minted in Bactria. British Museum, London. Museum No.1923,1107.1.

of Heraklean iconography into the Gandharan region. They convey Herakles' embodiment of power, and his iconography of the club and lion skin. Another image of Herakles in royal iconography is on a Kushan seal depicting him wrestling with one of the human-eating horses of Diomedes (Rosenfield 1967, pp. 78, 102). Herakles killed these horses as part of his labors protecting human civilization from dangerous monsters. So it is not hard to see why a king would choose this iconography to represent his power. This seal suggests that Kushan artisans had a greater

or decorative statues (Allchin et al. 1992, pp. 99-103). As Cribb and Bopearachchi write (Ibid., p. 50):

The gods chosen by the Greek kings of the Crossroads of Asia tended to be those who could also be used as symbols of royal power. So Zeus, king of the gods; Heracles, the mortal hero who achieved divinity; and a martial representation of Athena, daughter of Zeus, were the ones most frequently portrayed on these coins.

These portrayals of powerful Greek gods made their way into Kushan coinage and other royal symbols. While most Kushan coins depicted Iranian deities, some coins of the early Kushan kings Kujula Kadphises (r. 30 – ? CE) and Huvishka (r. ca. 150 – ca. 190 CE) depict Herakles on the reverse [Fig. 7], identifiable by his characteristic club.

These coins represent the earliest and most easily tracked movement

knowledge of Greek myths about Herakles than could be derived from the coinage of Alexander and Bactrian kings alone.

Kushan royal art uses the imagery of Herakles, as well as that of several other Greek gods and goddesses, in art depicting the luxurious activities of the court. Marco Galli argues that the wealth coming into Gandhara from Silk Road trade funded the famous art of Gandhara, creating a visual lexicon of "Hellenistic court imagery." For Galli, the courtly art of Gandhara embodies luxury, leisure, and wealth. He cites Phi-

Source: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN01099/AN01099287_001_l.jpg>. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 7. Copper coin of Kujula Kaphises, ca. 40–90 CE. Obverse: bust of ruler; reverse: standing Herakles. British Museum, London. Museum No. 1922,0424.3003.



Source: <<http://images.metmuseum.org/CRD/images/as/original/DP12342.jpg>>. © The Metropolitan Museum.

lostratus' account of Apollonius' journey to Taxila, which describes the activities of the Indian court: javelin and discus contests, beautiful maidens dancing, and massive quantities of alcohol (Galli, 2011, pp. 290-91). Correspondingly, courtly Gandharan art depicts athletic competitions, drinking parties, and sensual displays of palace dancers. The cosmopolitan imagery of this courtly art enhanced its appeal for the elite.

Herakles was a role model for the athletic competitions in the Gandharan court. This choice was natural, since Herakles in Greek and Roman cultures served as a patron deity for athletics and sporting-games (Volkommer, 1988, p. 86). A 3-meter statue of Herakles served to inspire athletes using the Baths of Caracalla (212-216 CE) (Vermeule, 1975). In Gandhara, we see the athletic associations of Herakles on a wrestling weight [Fig. 8]. On its front, he stands with a lion skin next to a lion in a tame posture. If this was meant to portray Herakles with the Nemean lion, then the scene is puzzling, since such depictions usually show the two in combat. There are several possible explanations for the unusual imagery: a sculptural play with temporality, a fragmentary knowledge of the Nemean lion episode, or a local Gandharan legend. Galli hypothesizes (2011, p. 296) that the docile lion is a symbol of royalty. Herakles wears the diadem of a Hellenistic ruler, further alluding to the theme of kingship. On the reverse, the weight has grips for lifting and a scene of a wrestling competition. If the wrestler was lifting this weight off the ground using the carved grips, he would be staring at Herakles and the lion, an apt motivator for a gym session. Wrestling competitions appear elsewhere in Gandharan art, as part of what Galli terms the "Hellenistic court imagery" taken up by Gandharan art (2011, pp. 292-96). Herakles' heroic strength and athletic prowess, so popular in the Greek world, seem also to have been exported to the Gandharan court along with the courtly games themselves.

In Graeco-Roman literature and art, Herakles was not only a figure of power and strength. There was

Fig. 8. Wrestler's weight with Herakles holding a lion skin and being approached by a lion. Schist. 26 x 34.9 cm. Ca. 1st century CE. Gandhara. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession No. 1994.112

also a comedic Herakles, a libidinous figure whose gluttony, drunkenness and sexual prowess were humorously exaggerated (Stafford 2010, pp. 105-17). In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Dionysus dressed as Herakles is accosted by a landlady who asks for payment for sixteen loaves of bread, twenty portions of meat, and generous portions of garlic, fish, cheese, and sausages – all evidence of Herakles' enormous gluttony (Stafford 2012, p. 108). Herakles' gargantuan appetite extended not only to food, but to sex. Apollodorus records one legend that Herakles slept with all fifty daughters of King Thespios in the course of fifty nights, in the king's hopes that the hero would impregnate all of them (Apollodorus 1997, 2.4.10).

In Gandharan art, Herakles is similarly shown as a libidinous figure, someone often overpowered by his urges for women and drink. He is one of several figures from Greek myth—among them Apollo and Daphne, Aphrodite and Eros, and various other mythical beings such as marine monsters—who appear on shallow dishes used in Gandharan courts. Behrendt (2007, pp. 9-11) argues that these dishes "may have been used for ritual offerings of wine, perhaps to ensure a blissful afterlife for the dead" in Dionysiac rituals adopted by Gandharans. Galli (2011, p. 300) speculates that another possible use was to hold toiletries for wealthy women. One dish portrays Herakles accompanied by both alcohol and women [Fig. 9]. Here Her-

Fig. 9. Dish with the drunken Herakles supported by two women with lion. Schist. Ca. 1st century CE. D. 12.4 cm. Gandhara. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession No. 1987.142.105.



Source: <<http://images.metmuseum.org/CRD/images/as/original/DP160861.jpg>>. © The Metropolitan Museum.

akles leans in close and embraces the two women next to him. A tame lion, as on the wrestling weight, sits to the side. This dish portrays a comedic, light-hearted Herakles, enjoying wine and women – the luxuries of the courtly life – as he does in Greek myth. Whether these dishes belong in the womens' sphere of bathing or the transgressive femininity of Dionysiac cult, they connote the intimacy, privacy, and eroticism of the women's sphere. In a woman's private space of her own bath, she could admire (and perhaps be titillated by) the images of seduction and eroticism on these toilet-trays (Galli 2011, pp. 296–300).

How can we best understand Gandharan depictions of the drunken Herakles? Brancaccio and Liu (2009) argue for a Dionysian strand in Gandharan courtly culture. Not only was viticulture introduced into India at this time, but Dionysian art forms, such as Sanskrit drama and theatrical masks, developed under the Kushans as well. That Greek drama was popular earlier in Bactria can be seen at Ai Khanoum, which had a full Greek theater. Dionysian themes of drink and drama were one aspect of Bactrian cosmopolitan style, but also appear in Buddhist art, such as on a stair risers leading up to the entrance of a stupa. Brancaccio and Liu (2011, p. 230) surmise that the bacchanalian scenes of drunken revelry on these stair risers represent the life before embracing the dharma. Herakles, associated with drink in the Graeco-Roman world, was likely a part of the culture of wine in the Gandharan world. Herakles connects the powerful image of kingship with the drinking and revelry that can take place because of the peace won with Heraklean strength and protection.

Vajrapani's enigmatic iconography

The depictions of Vajrapani analyzed here come from narrative reliefs on the sides of stupas depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha (Brown 1997; Behrendt 2009; Stoye 2011). According to Kurt Behrendt (2007, p. 32), this type of relief dates mainly to the 2nd century CE. The production of these reliefs was part of a broader cultural renaissance of Buddhism in the Gandharan region, which took place under the Kushan dynasty from roughly the 1st to 5th centuries CE (Neelis 2014). Kushan Gandhara prospered and urbanized thanks to the cross-Asian trade, which also provided the means to fund major Buddhist architectural and sculptural monuments. In return for large donations, wealthy lay donors earned positive karma in a sacred economy of money for merit (Schopen 2004; Liu 1994, pp. 103–23). The Buddhist community also benefited from donations by pilgrims, who came to worship at stupas believed to contain relics of the Buddha. The *sangha's* new wealth brought it social respectability and pushed it to expand roles for lay

practitioners (Thapar 2002, p. 271).² The royal coinage and Buddhist art of Gandhara displays a syncretism of iconography from Hindu gods, Iranian deities, and indigenous folk cults centered around chthonic deities (spirits of the underworld) such as *yakshas* and *nagas*.

Vajrapani, the bodyguard of the Buddha, appears in the earliest Pali literature as a manifestation of Sakra/Indra, but in the early Common Era becomes an important and independent figure in post-Pali Buddhist literature, such as the *Mahavastu*, *Lalitavistara*, the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, and the *avadanas* (Lamotte 2003, pp. 7–9). He accompanies the Buddha and acts as an intimidating figure when the Buddha encounters anyone who is opposed to his mission. In Buddhist literature he is described as a yaksha, a chthonic deity tamed by the Buddha and his *dharma* (DeCaroli 2004, pp. 9–54; Lamotte 2003). Vajrapani wields his weapon, the *vajra*, to threaten those who attack the Buddha, or just those who refuse to hear his message. His vajra (Sanskrit: “diamond” or “thunderbolt”), originally an implement of the Vedic storm god Indra/Sakra, is made of the densest matter possible, and is imbued with the power to shoot thunderbolts at enemies (Doniger 1975, pp. 75, 85; Zin 2009, pp. 81–84; Giuliano 2008). In the *Ambattha Sutta*, Vajrapani uses a “huge iron club” to threaten a student of a rival teacher who is trying to refute the Buddha's teachings. Vajrapani's intimidation makes Ambattha take refuge in the Buddha (Walshe 1995, p. 116; Lamotte 2003, p. 5). Vajrapani plays a similar role in opposing the heretics who try to stop Mendhaka from receiving the Buddha's teachings in the first-century CE “Chapter on the Great Fortune of the Householder Mendhaka” (Rotman, 2008, p. 233).

Vajrapani also aids the Buddha in converting harmful chthonic deities. Many of these spirits are yakshas, tree-spirits, like Vajrapani, and others are nagas, spirits associated with rivers. Vajrapani used his strength and his vajra to intimidate and subdue these creatures. For example, the naga Apalala flooded a nearby town, prompting the Buddha to come rescue the townspeople from their distress. Using his vajra, Vajrapani frightened Apalala into converting to the dharma and discontinuing his malevolent flooding (Lamotte 2003, p. 21–22) [Fig. 10, next page]. In the center of this image is a relatively large Buddha; close by him on his right is Vajrapani, always wielding his weapon with a tight fist, ready for attack. Apalala kneels in front of Shakyamuni Buddha in submission. This image typifies the pattern of how the Buddha subdued malevolent spirits not by killing them, but rather by converting them so that they would act virtuously and no longer harm humans. These myths reinforced a social practice whereby the sangha acted as a broker between humans and the spirit world, subduing spir-



Source: A. Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhara*, I (Paris, 1901), p. 551, Fig. 274.

Fig. 10. Submission of the Naga Apalala. Gandhara. From Sanghao. H. 7.12 in. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai.

its to protect humans from their harm (DeCaroli 2004, p. 38-53). In performing this social function, Vajrapani's force complements the persuasive power of the Buddha's dharma.

Vajrapani appears rarely in extant literature from the 1st to 5th centuries CE, but frequently in Gandharan art depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha (Zin

Fig. 11. Devadatta attempts to murder the Buddha. Schist. 28 x 43.5 x 7.2 cm. 2nd-3rd centuries. Gandhara. British Museum, London. Museum No. 1913,1108.22.



Source: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00521/AN00521576_001.jpg>. © Trustees of the British Museum.

2009, p. 81). Chronologically, he first appears in the Buddha's life in reliefs of the Great Departure from Kapilavastu, and frequently is present in the scene of Shakyamuni's *mahaparinibbana*. In addition to reliefs such as that depicting the conversion of Apalala, he appears in depictions of the Dipankara Jataka, and Devadatta and Srigupta's assassination attempts on Shakyamuni Buddha. Devadatta was a cousin of the Buddha who became his disciple. Jealous of the popularity and fame of his teacher, he tried to kill the Buddha several times in different ways (Zwalf 1996, v. 2, p. 192). Only in the Gandharan-era *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* does Vajrapani appear in the Devadatta stories (Lamotte 2003, pp. 16-18). Fig. 11 depicts the first assassination attempt, in which Devadatta sent assassins to push a wall onto the Buddha. On the left, the assassins push against the wall, and on the right the Buddha pushes back. A bearded and curly-haired Vajrapani stands next to the Buddha, helping keep the wall standing. In the third assassination attempt, Devadatta sends a wild elephant to trample the Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha does not use force to defend himself against the giant attacker, but calms the elephant with his tranquility and power over nature [Fig. 12]. Vajrapani again appears over the Buddha's shoulder. What his action is supposed to be in this

Fig. 12. Buddha subdues the Nalagiri Elephant. Schist. Probably 2nd century. Gandhara. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum No. IS.3302-1883.



Source: <http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/thira/collection_images/2014HG/2014HG4299.jpg>. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

relief is unclear, but his mere presence is a powerful indicator of his protective power.

Scholars of Gandharan art have long known of the connection between Herakles and Vajrapani. The connection is based on a strong similarity between the bearded, muscular images of Vajrapani and similar images of Herakles conveyed into India numismatically, such as the Lysippan Weary Herakles. In the transformation of Herakles into Vajrapani, Herakles' club becomes Vajrapani's vajra. One image clearly

connecting the two is a relief found in the British Museum [Fig. 13]. The figure in the lower left is Vajrapani, holding his diamond-shaped vajra *and* wearing a lion skin. We do not know the original context of this piece, though Zwalf speculates (1996, v. 2, pp. 230-31) that it is part of a larger relief depicting a scene from the life of the Buddha. The lion skin, ubiquitous in Graeco-Roman iconography of Herakles and coins of Alexander, substantiates the connection between Herakles and Vajrapani. The lion skin was also favored in the iconography of rulers who adopted Herakles as ancestor or patron deity, including Antiochus I of Commagene, Commodus, and Caracalla (Hekster 2001; Hekster 2005; Vermeule 1975; Marvin 1983). This unique relief reminds us that where we cannot correlate text with image, it sometimes is difficult to know what Vajrapani is doing in these contexts, or more generally what his importance is in Gandharan Buddhist art.

Several scholars have analyzed the use of Heraklean iconography for Vajrapani in terms of parallels between these two figures. This research on the Herakles-Vajrapani connection has focused mainly on their shared roles as protectors and bodyguards (Zin 2009; Schwab 1998; Flood 1989; Tanabe 2005). Filigenzi (2006, p. 275) has noted that Herakles, like Vajrapani, is a “suffering hero who through his labors transfigures himself, taming his own nature and thus elevating and civilizing the entire sphere of human nature.” Just as Herakles redeems his homicide of his wife and children through his great labors protecting Greek civilization, so Vajrapani reforms his capricious, amoral *yaksha* nature through following the Dharma and redeems himself by serving Shakyamuni Buddha so closely. Tanabe (2005, pp. 372–79) notes a further parallel in the roles of Herakles and Vajrapani: Herakles as a guide for the souls of the dead and guide to and from the underworld for figures like Alcestis, and Vajrapani as mythological guide of the Buddha throughout his travels. However, these scholars overlook one crucial connection: the implications of Vajrapani, and his Heraklean iconography, for the construction of royalty and royal patronage in Gandhara.

Even though the Buddha renounces his kingship, depictions of him often emphasize it (Liu 1994, p. 92–102). Kings and other nobles have bodyguards and attendants; for the Buddha, Vajrapani is one of these. The iconography of Vajrapani adds another dimension: the display of wealth. Vajrapani’s implement, the vajra, with the dual meaning in Sanskrit of “diamond” and “thunderbolt,” might be used as a thunderbolt but would also connote wealth and luxury (Zin 2009, p. 83–84). This association with royalty is underscored by the fact that Indra, the Vedic god who



Source: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00521/AN00521554_001.jpg> © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 13. Fragmentary relief: Vajrapani, prince, and monks. Schist. 2nd-3rd century. 54 x 25 x 7.5 cm. Gandhara school. British Museum, London. Museum No. 1970,0718.1.

first carried a vajra, was king of the Vedic gods (Doniger 1975, p. 71).

The legend of the Buddhist Kanishka: propaganda for patronage of the sangha

At first glance, one might think that the artistic interchange between the courtly and religious spheres of Gandharan visual cultures indicates that the Kushan kings were fervent patrons of the sangha. Certainly by the time of Xuanzang, long after the Kushan empire had fallen, Buddhists in Gandhara made this claim. Yet this claim appears to be more an invention of Buddhist legend than documentable fact.

Xuanzang, a 7th-century Chinese Buddhist monk, went on a pilgrimage to India to gather Buddhist texts. His travelogue, composed after his return, contains several anecdotes about Kanishka (r. ca. 127–?149 CE), the Kushan king who conquered the Gandharan region. These stories, told to Xuanzang by the Buddhist communities he encountered, depict Kanishka as another Ashoka (r. ca. 269–232 BCE), the Mauryan ruler renowned for his role in spreading Buddhism. The Buddha himself prophesies Kanishka as a great Buddhist king, who will erect a stupa that contains that

remains of Shakyamuni Buddha himself (Xuanzang 1996, p. 71). A similar story is told in the *Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya*, in which the Buddha also adds that “after my Parinirvana, he will do Buddha deeds” (Lamotte 2003, pp. 26-27). Xuanzang reports that Kanishka sponsored the compilation of Buddhist scriptures and convened the Fourth Buddhist Council (Xuanzang 1996, pp. 102-04; Thapar 2002, pp. 222-73). Like the Buddha, Kanishka used the power of the dharma to win malevolent spirits over to Buddhism, protecting his people from the effects of capricious yakshas and nagas (Xuanzang 1996, pp. 44, 82; DeCaroli 2004, p. 61).

Even though such claims that Kanishka was a Buddhist king were recorded long after the end of the Kushan era, it is plausible that they originated in Kushan times, when Vajrapani was part of the visual lexicon of royalty and wealth. By adopting the royal iconography of Herakles into Buddhist iconography, the sculptors of the sangha asserted that their religion was a religion of royalty. Just as Vajrapani protects the Buddha, so the Kushan kings protect the Buddha’s sangha, and endow it with great wealth for stupas, monasteries, and the art carved into their walls. Indeed, Kushan patronage is attested in inscriptions on reliquaries.

For a religion dependent on patronage, projecting an image of being sponsored by the king would have been advantageous. However, questions remain as to whether Buddhism occupied as important a place for the Kushan rulers as the later narratives suggest. The Buddha seldom appears on Kushan coins, apart from some issued by Kanishka. In contrast, there are numerous images of Iranian deities (Jongeward 2003, pp. 24-26). If they were projecting an image of themselves as a dynasty of Buddhist kings à la Ashoka, would they not have put the Buddha on their coins more frequently? Even if the Kushana kings were donating money to the Buddhist sangha, their coins suggest that they may not have favored the Buddhist community over any other, wanting to ensure support from the several religious communities which they ruled.

Conclusion

We have traced how the image of Herakles traveled east thanks to cultural contact between the Classical world and ancient India. His image conveyed not just strength and protection, but also the wealth and luxury of the royal court. The Kushans, invading nomads, included Herakles in the cosmopolitan imagery they developed as they incorporated urban centers into their empire. The Buddhist sangha responded to this royal usage of Herakles by inserting him into their artistic lexicon, both as a figure of protection for the Buddha and as a subtle claim of royal patronage of

the sangha. The Herakles-Vajrapani connection, then, tells a tale not only of interchange between East and West, but of a dialogue in art between sacred and secular cultural realms. As with many other aspects of Silk Road exchange, the example of Gandharan art demonstrates the human capacity creatively to reinterpret others’ symbols and myths in the process of shaping one’s own identity.

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Notes

1. For examples of Herakles on coins of Alexander, Bactrian and Kushan kings, see Allchin et al. 1992, pp. 79–82.

2. For a more in-depth survey of historical background, see Thapar 2002, pp. 213–79; Liu 1994, pp. 25–41, 78–85.