

## TAMED BY RELIGION: CENTAURS IN GANDHARA

A UNIQUE SCULPTED NECKLACE OF A GANDHARAN SCHIST BODHISATTVA MAITREYA  
IN THE ASIAN ART MUSEUM, SAN FRANCISCO

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Scholars of South Asian and Central Asian Buddhist Art and of the Buddhist art of the Kushan period (i. e. Gandharan Art from the northwest of

modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> / 5<sup>th</sup> century CE) have long recognized that the artists of ancient Gandhara created Buddhist images by melding classical Mediterranean Greek and Roman art with Indian art and the Buddhist faith. This artistic development first emerged in the Hellenistic culture of Bactria with the cultural influence of Alexander the Great and his successors in the independent Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms who ruled the region after his death until ca. the late first century BCE. Later on, the Kushan Empire stimulated trade and connection with the Roman Empire by the sea and land routes to the West, known today as the Silk Roads, and brought late Hellenistic and Roman art, and possibly artists from the West, to create the arts of Gandhara.

The art of Gandhara very likely was the first to show the Buddha as a human being. The way this East-West / West-East cultural marriage worked out is still under debate (Luczantis et al. 2008). While intermingling Hellenistic-Roman with Iranian and Indian religious beliefs and arts, many gods, goddesses and fabulous creatures from the Mediterranean West reached Gandhara (Stančo 2012). Many of these prominent Hellenistic-Roman gods, goddesses and heroes and the syncretism with their eastern, i.e. Iranian and Indian, counterparts have often been discussed, but centaurs in particular have not, despite Ladislav Stančo's contribution to this subject in his outstanding study of 2012 (Ibid., pp. 82–83).

While visiting the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, in 2014, this author encountered a standing image of the Bodhisattva Maitreya from the Avery Brundage Collection (Inv. No. B60 S597) wearing a carved necklace with two confronted centaurs holding a bead-like reliquary (Asian Art Museum 1994, p. 24) [Fig. 1]. I found this Bodhisattva statue, carved of schist, and most likely dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, to be of particular interest, since it posed the question about the place of centaurs and their meaning in the art of Gandhara and in the pre-Islamic arts of Central Asia.



Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh

Fig. 1. The Bodhisattva Maitreya, Gandhara, 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, Avery Brundage Collection, B60 S597.



Fig. 2. Details showing the different depictions of Gandharan bodhisattvas' necklaces: a) The Maitreya in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; b) Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, M.83.105.1; c) National Museum of Korea, Seoul, jng7013; d) From the Monastery of Shahbaz-Garhi, Pakistan, Musée Guimet, Paris, AO2907; e) Seattle Asian Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection, 44.63.

This standing Bodhisattva Maitreya, carved of dark-grey schist, is made in a distinctive style, known very well from Gandhara, where it very likely was a cult image originally part of a chapel in a Buddhist monastery. Due to its sophisticated artistry which can be seen in the rendering of the folds of its garment, it is one of the finest of its kind, despite the fact that it now lacks the feet. Usually all such Bodhisattvas wear rich jewellery, but while this figure holds the typical water flask, its necklace is absolutely unique. It shows two confronted centaurs holding a faceted bead-like pearl that probably is to be understood as a reliquary [Fig. 2]. Usually the necklaces of Gandharan Bodhisattvas end in two confronted monster, dragon, or *makara*-heads holding a faceted pearl or reliquary-box (Tissot 1999). Our two centaurs are shown crouching, their legs turned under their elongated bodies. Both wear bracelets on their upper arms, and each of them holds with one hand a rope-like handle of the pearl or reliquary-box. Both centaurs are male with curled hairdos.

One has to wonder about the religious meaning of having centaurs instead of monsters holding a pearl-like bead or reliquary. Before addressing this question, for context it is important first to review images and mythology about centaurs, starting with the Greek and Roman traditions (Schiffler 1976) and then as found in art objects from Greater Gandhara and other pre-Islamic regions (Bethe 1921; Dumézil 1924; Meyer 1883/2011; Padgett 2003).

The origin of the religious concept of the centaurs in Greek and Roman mythology is old and much deba-

ted. Created by Zeus, the centaurs were a wild tribe of riders, living in the mountainous regions of Thessaly. The centaurs were thought to have the upper body of a human and the lower body of a horse. Being wild, rude and war-loving, as well as extremely fond of wine and women, they often engaged in conflict with humans. One widely known story related how the centaurs got in fight with the Lapiths at a wedding ceremony, an event famously depicted on temple friezes, notably in that epitome of Greek sculpture, Phidias' 5<sup>th</sup> BCE century metopes for the Parthenon that are now in the British Museum (Jenkins 2006, p. 146) [Fig. 3]. The emphasis here is clearly on the wild, beastly

Fig. 3. A centaur battles a Lapith. Marble metope (South XXXI) from the Parthenon. British Museum Acc. No. 1816,0610.15.

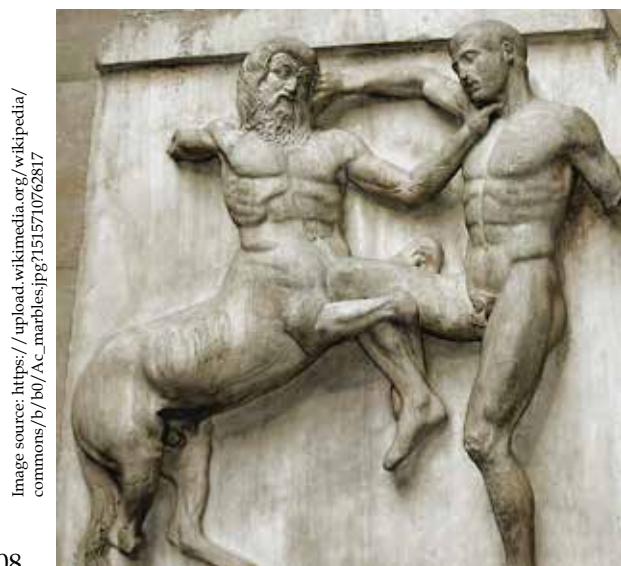


Image source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/Ac\\_marbles.jpg?1515710762817](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/Ac_marbles.jpg?1515710762817)

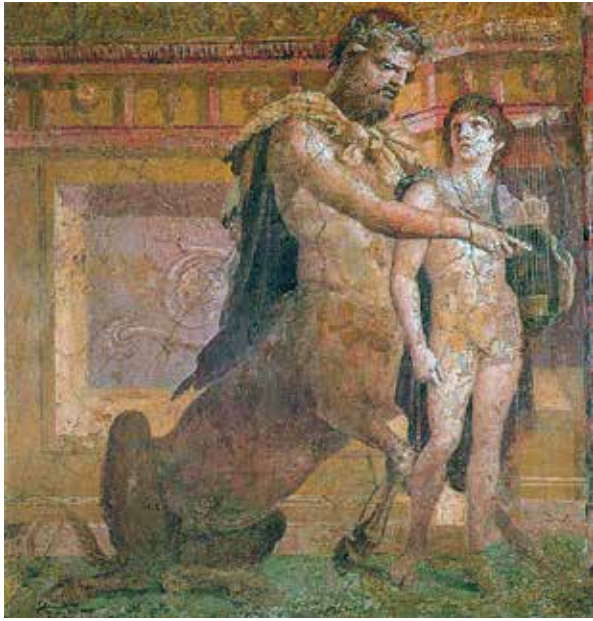


Fig. 4. Chiron instructs the young Achilles, wall painting from Herculaneum, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Naples Archaeological Museum, Inv. no. 9109.



Image sources: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Chiron\\_instructs\\_young\\_Achilles\\_-\\_Ancient\\_Roman\\_fresco.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Chiron_instructs_young_Achilles_-_Ancient_Roman_fresco.jpg); [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/96/Apollo\\_Chiron\\_Asklepios\\_MAN\\_Napoli\\_Inv8846.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/96/Apollo_Chiron_Asklepios_MAN_Napoli_Inv8846.jpg)

Fig. 5. A centaur between the god Apollo and Asklepios, 1<sup>st</sup>-century CE mural from the "House of Adonis" (VI.7.18 Pompeii). Naples Archaeological Museum, Inv. no. 8846.

and rude nature of the centaurs, who take special delight in fighting humans (Kahler 1949, p. 87; Bremmer 2012).

A number of paintings from the Roman period, preserved in the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, point to a different perception of centaurs. Perhaps the best known example is that of Chiron, or Cheiron, of different parentage than the other centaurs, who became the teacher of heroes such as Herakles, Achilles, Asklepios and Jason. A painting from Herculaneum depicts him as a wise and fatherly figure instructing the young Achilles (Kelsey 1908) [Fig. 4]. How tame a centaur could be can also be seen a first-century CE mural from the "House of Adonis" in Pompeii showing a centaur between the god Apollo and Asklepios (Dorigo 1971, Fig. 3) [Fig. 5]. According

to myth, Chiron was the father of medicine and surgery, here transmitting that knowledge to the famous physician Asklepios, son of Apollo.

Given their fondness for wine, drunkenness and women, it is no surprise that since Hellenistic times centaurs were also consorts of Dionysos, the god of wine, ecstasy and death. A composite capital for a column, dated between 230 and 280 CE, now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, depicts Dionysos and two centaurs. (Vermeule 1981, p. 235, Fig. 196) [Fig. 6].

Centaurs might be female and could have families. Among the early examples, from the period of the peak of Hellenistic art, late 3<sup>rd</sup>-early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, is a Gnathian krater (drinking cup) depicting the goddess Nike in her chariot being drawn by two centauresses (Webster 1996, Frontispiece and p. 24) [Fig. 7].

Fig. 6. Dionysos with two centaurs on a composite capital from Italy, ca. 230 to 280 CE. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Accession no. S10s6.

Fig. 7. Centaur females pulling the chariot of the goddess Nike, on a Gnathian kantharoid krater (detail). The British Museum, Accession no. 1856.1226.15.



Image source: <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/collection/13228>



Image source: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00707/AN00707480\\_001\\_1.jpg](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00707/AN00707480_001_1.jpg)



Image source: <https://archaeology-travel.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/berthouville-treasure.jpg>

Fig. 8. Detail from silver-cup found in a hoard at Berthouville, France, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des monnaies, médailles et antiques, Paris.

A number of silver-vessels with decorative scenes, so important in Hellenistic and Roman art, show centaurs in what we might imagine are scenes of domestic bliss, for example on a first-century CE cup from the spectacular hoard found at Berthouville, France, where a centaur and a centauress are surrounded by erotes (cupids) (Lapatin 2014, pp. 46–54, Figs. 26, 27) [Fig. 8]. The Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17/18 CE) in his “Metamorphoses” (XII, 210ff) was one of the first to tell of centaureesses and complete families of centaurs with children. The particular connection of the female of the species with women in the Roman period can be seen in a mosaic from El Djem (ancient Thysetrus) in Tunisia, depicting two centaureesses holding a crown over a nude woman (Vilimkova 1963, Fig. 49) [Fig. 9].

To sum up this evidence, it is clear that there was a wide range of beliefs about centaurs from the Hellenic into the Roman period, where on the one hand they were emblematic of the wild and uncivilized, but on

Fig. 9. Centaureesses on a 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century CE mosaic from El Djem, Tunisia. Bardo Museum, Tunis.



Image source: <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/9b/1a/3f/9b1a3f6a2476a3b1a72ccc4159b152a2--female-centaur-roman-mosaics.jpg>



Image source: [http://www.persee.fr/rendre/illustration/jds\\_0021-8103\\_2001\\_num\\_2\\_1\\_11\\_0256\\_0000\\_1.png](http://www.persee.fr/rendre/illustration/jds_0021-8103_2001_num_2_1_11_0256_0000_1.png)

Fig. 10. Detail of silver goblet found at Bajaur, Pakistan, depicting a centaur abducting a woman.

the other they might exhibit charm, convey wisdom and be found in peaceful contexts. Whether one can speak of a clear chronological line leading from one to the other is uncertain. Readers can consult the outstanding dissertation by Georg Morawitz (2001) for the best treatment of this transition. With this background in mind, let us now turn to the evidence regarding centaurs in the arts of the eastern Hellenistic realms of Central Asia and the art of Gandhara during the Kushan period.

The transmission of the concept of the centaur must have taken place early in the history of contact between Greeks, Central Asian intermediaries and Indians after Alexander the Great’s march to the East. Unfortunately we are not blessed with many depictions of centaurs from the eastern Hellenistic part of Central Asia predating the Kushan period, that is, prior to the early Common Era. Suggestive about the transmission though are the objects found in a Parthian-era hoard at Bajaur in northwestern Pakistan, i.e., in the ancient region of Gandhara (Baratte 2002). One of the many silver vessels in this hoard is a goblet with raised relief depicting centaurs, which is analogous stylistically to the one found at Berthouville in France and probably dates to some time in the last century BCE. Unlike the Berthouville cup, however, this one depicts the male centaurs abducting the Lapith women [Fig. 10]. Where it was made is uncertain, but undoubtedly it is an import from the West.

Definitely Graeco-Bactrian—i.e., Hellenistic—is a gilded silver buckle from the region of Samarkand in Uzbekistan depicting the centaur Nessos in combat with a hero, convincingly identified as Herakles

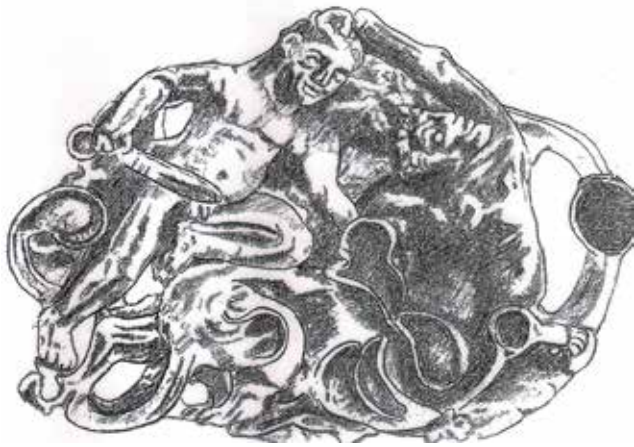


Image source: Boardman 2015, p. 108, Fig. 58, after photograph in Abdullaev 2008, Fig. 1.

Fig. 11. The centaur Nessos fighting Herakles on a gilded silver buckle, said to have been found close to Samarkand, Uzbekistan, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Tashkent Museum of Fine Arts.

by Kazim Abdullaev (2008) [Fig. 11]. The scene is one of the canonical twelve deeds of Herakles, and as such, emphasizes the wild and beastly character of the centaurs. The buckle is not easy to date, as it stems from an unauthorized dig, but it may be assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

More widely known is a remarkable group of ivory rhytons from the Parthian capital Nisa in Turkmenistan. The Nisa rhytons, carved of Indian ivory, very likely were made in the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom in the second century BCE, but this is still under debate. One of them shows a protome in the shape of a centaur, the curled wings possibly later additions (Masson and Pugachenkova 1982). The variety of images decorating rhytons is considerable, and they



Image source: [http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/media/collection/w425/Collections/Single\\_Objects/EA\\_1963/EA\\_1963\\_0000/EA\\_1963\\_28-a-L.jpg](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/media/collection/w425/Collections/Single_Objects/EA_1963/EA_1963_0000/EA_1963_28-a-L.jpg)

Fig. 12. Bronze rhyton in shape of a centaur holding a goat; 3<sup>rd</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, found at Ishkuman, northern areas of modern Pakistan. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford EA1963.28.

are to be found in various cultures all across Eurasia. Another example, also well known, is a bronze rhyton found by Sir Marc Aurel Stein at Ishkuman, west of Hunza in today's northern Pakistan [Fig. 12]. It shows a standing centaur holding a tiny goat in his hands. This hybrid centaur-rhyton might have been made by a Graeco-Bactrian workshop for invading Saka nomads. The Ashmolean Museum dates it to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (cf. Errington et al. 1992, No. 95).

Images of centaurs also appeared on textiles along the Silk Roads in Central Asia. The most famous example is the depiction of a trumpet-playing centaur on a tapestry found in a cemetery at Sampula near Khotan in the southwestern part of the Tarim Basin (today in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region of China) [Fig. 13]. Originally a wall-hanging, the textile was recycled by its later, i.e., last owner and



Photos courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh

Fig. 13. Recycled textile depicting a centaur playing a long trumpet and an armed warrior, from Tomb 1, Graveyard 1, at Sampula, close to Khotan. Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum, Urumqi, Inv. no. 84LSIM01:C162.

changed into a pair of trousers. The Chinese scholars offered only a rather broad date range for the tomb, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (Wieczorek and Lind 2007, pp. 213–14). As the textile fragment also shows a standing spearman, which might be an early Kushan warrior (?), a more realistic date for the original wall hanging is a date in between the late first century BCE to the early first century CE. If this were the case, then the centaur playing a long trumpet might stem from a late Graeco-Bactrian workshop in northern Bactria, i.e. northern Afghanistan or southern Uzbekistan. The genre of musical instrument playing centaurs takes us into the sphere of the cult of the Greek god of wine, ecstasy and death, Dionysos.

This connection helps us to understand the interest Indians showed in the Greek centaur, since they could connect it to their concept of divine beings they called *gandharvas*. These gandharvas play the role of celestial musicians in Hinduism and Buddhism and, like the centaurs, also share a certain interest in wine, women and feasting. Even if for the most part the Indian gandharvas are thought to be half bird and half human,

some also are thought to be half human and half



Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh

Fig. 14. Detail of Bodhisattva sculpture, Gandhara. From the Monastery of Shahbaz-Garhi, Pakistan, 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Musée Guimet, Paris, AO2907.

horse (Canoy 1936; Dumézil 1924; Garrett 1871/1971, pp. 218–19; Krishna Murthy 1985; Meyer 1883/2011; Pattanaik 2003, p. 74; Sansonese 1994). Significantly, the necklace of the Gandharan Bodhisattva in the Musée Guimet illustrated above in Fig. 2d and shown here as Fig. 14 has gandharvas holding the jewel-like reliquary.

There are some additional examples of Gandharan sculpture depicting centaurs. A now fragmentary one, carved from schist in the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, depicts a female centaur, i.e. a centaress, is now in Chandigarh in India (Dar 1999/2000, p. 35; Boardman 2015, p. 123) [Fig. 15]. This fine centaress wears a folded chiton and has a friendly smile, but how she might have been viewed by her creator is impossible to say, since we know nothing about the iconographic program at a stupa in which, presumably, she was placed. The same is true for the male centaur, again a fragment and headless, now in the Lahore museum in Pakistan, which was also once part of the image program of a stupa (Ingholt and Lyons 1957, p. 156, and Fig. 391) [Fig. 16].

Kurita Isao (1998/2000, Vol. 2, pp. 235–36, Nos. 705s, 706) has published two more fragmentary male centaurs, one in a European private collection playing a small drum and wearing a palmette-like loin cloth, and another in a loin cloth holding a small fire altar or incense burner with a sculpted flame on top and with little wings on his upper legs. Both are carved from the typical grey schist of Gandhara and date to the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century. These two Gandharan centaurs are peaceful, one playing a small drum, the other obviously offering incense, and give the impression they are devout Buddhists.



Fig. 15. Fragment of a schist sculpture of a centaress, Gandhara, 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, Museum Chandigarh, India.

Image source: Dar 1999/2000, p. 35, Fig. 37.



Image source: Ingholt and Lyons 1957, p. 156, Fig. 391.

Fig. 16. Fragment of a schist sculpture of a centaur, Gandhara, 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, Lahore Museum, Pakistan.



Image source: Rahman and Falk 2011

Fig. 17. A seal and its impression from Gandhara showing a centaur, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Aman ur Rahman Collection, Emirates.

In reviewing Gandharan images of centaurs, we should keep in mind that there are a number of seals depicting them, presumed to date to the Kushan period of the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Part of the Aman ur Rahman collection, these six seals show centaurs walking and holding a spear, or a branch (Rahman and Falk 2011, pp. 93-94) [Fig. 17].

The seals presumably point to a secular context for the centaur images, but we have one additional Gandharan image suggesting an analogy in a religious context which may lead us back to our starting point, the necklace on the San Francisco Maitreya. Prior to World War II, in the collections of the Museum of Ethnography, Berlin, was a damaged Gandharan schist slab that possibly did not survive the war, though it may still be located in the collections of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. We know it only from the publication by Albert von Le Coq (1922, Vol. 1, p. 20, Pl. 17b; see also Dreyer et al. 2002). The relief shows two confronted male centaurs and a person in between holding a reliquary [Fig. 18].

Returning then to the necklace of the San Francisco Maitreya, we can only wonder why its artist did not show the usual makara heads as a motif on the necklace, choosing instead two slender centaurs holding a jewel or reliquary. Surely the artist and those who commissioned the work must have had a reason. Might the Gandharan artist have known of the change in character of centaurs from wild and beastly to mild and friendly in the arts of classical Greek and Roman art? Certainly possible. I would be so bold as to ven-



Image source: von Le Coq 1922, Vol. 1, Pl. 17b.

ture that those two centaurs made special sense in that they would demonstrate how such formerly wild, beastly and war-loving centaurs could be tamed by the religion of Mahayana-Buddhism.

In fact none of the Gandharan images of centaurs which we have so far been able to locate are war-like and beastly, suggesting that under the Kushans and the influence of Buddhism, they had uniformly acquired a new role. The transition to this perception began under the Greeks, when centaurs came to be associated with the cult of Dionysos. From there it was but a small step to find them pacified by the Buddha in Gandhara, where they became pious followers of the Blessed One. The transmission of both ideas about centaurs and their images from West to East was part of a process whereby many aspects of Hellenistic culture reached Central Asia and India. One need but think of the objects in the so-called Begram Hoard, discovered back in the 1930s and in more recent times exhibited all over the world (Cambon 2002). The Begram Hoard offered an internal perspective on the wealth and cultural horizons of the Kushan Empire. In addition to the famous gypsum models for Hellenistic silverware (Menninger 1996), it contained Roman bronzes from the eastern provinces of that empire, very likely from Alexandria in Egypt. The hoard found more recently at Bajaur in northwestern Pakistan has now disappeared into a private collection, but we have the excellent study of its contents by François Baratte (2002), an expert on Roman metal wares, which highlighted one of its most interesting objects, the silver goblet depicting centaurs. So it is reasonable to assume that the creators of Gandhara's Buddhist art could draw upon a wide range of media depicting centaurs in their various roles.

So the stimulus of seeing the necklace on the superb statue of Maitreya in the San Francisco museum has led us over a winding path across Asia, inviting a good many hypotheses regarding transmission and transformation of centaur images as they were incorporated into the belief systems of cultures far from where they had come. Only new scholarly excavations and discoveries of centaurs from Afghanistan and Northwestern Pakistan can substantiate my theory that Gandharan Buddhism tamed the centaurs, but perhaps this short article will provide a catalyst for such future exploration.

Fig. 18. Two confronted centaurs with a destroyed human figure in the centre, Gandhara, 2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE (?), formerly Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

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