

The Hellenistic Era: Globalisation in the Ancient World

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The Hellenistic era was emblematic of a form of globalisation in the ancient world, not unlike the sort we are experiencing today. Alexander's conquest of the 'world' has left a legacy of Greek heritage that has permeated beyond the Mediterranean. It spread well into Central and South Asia, centuries beyond his invasion of the Indian subcontinent. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru was very much inclined to believe that the very practice of idol worship that is pervasive in India was a practice inherited from the Greeks.¹ The general view circulated in scholarship around Indian art, particularly amongst Western scholars is the notion that the proliferation of Greek art brought something new and alien to local artistic traditions that was nonexistent before. However, while the Greek influence is certainly undeniable in artefacts from the Hellenistic period, particularly in the art of Gandhara, I argue the art that emerged from the so-called globalisation of the Hellenistic period led to a unique and new style of art that incorporated images not just from Greek life, but from the various surrounding kingdoms and their cultures as well - particularly Buddhism.

To understand the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of the Hellenistic period, studying the art of Gandhara serves as a very useful example as the region had a number of different rulers throughout the region's history who had different cultural affiliations. Gandhara, (what is now partially modern day Pakistan and partially Afghanistan) was under the jurisdiction of the Achaemenid dynasty prior to Alexander's conquest.² For centuries, the region was thus under Persian rule. After Alexander's consolidation of the Persian empire under Macedonian-Greek rule, the population of Greek communities in the region increased.³ After Alexander's death in

¹ Stoneman, Richard. "Greeks and the Art of India." Essay. In *The Greek Experience of India: From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*. 2019. 433.

² Mitter, Partha. *Indian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

³ Pons, Jessica. *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, 2016. 154.

320 BC and the subsequent fragmentation of Macedonia, it fell to one of Alexander's five 'heirs': Seleucus Nicator, one of Alexander's *hetairoi*,⁴ who established the Seleucid Kingdom when he declared himself King in 305 BCE.⁵ Seleucus I and his son Antiochus initiated an "extensive and vigorous colonisation program"⁶ to strengthen the Greek presence on the Asian continent. This was no doubt an effort to also consolidate his own position as Alexander's 'rightful' heir, who died at the age of 33 with his succession mired in conflict. Aside from making clear associations with Alexander to reinforce his own legitimacy, it appears that there was a race between the Hellenistic leaders to create a new cultural epicentre for the Greek world, in a bid to recreate Athens at its zenith. This state led propagation of Greek culture led to a hybridization of Greek culture with the indigenous cultures and religions of the region.

While the Persian influence permeated through Zoroastrianism, the Buddhist influence to the region appears to have come from India - specifically from the Maurya dynasty.⁷ Notably the Maurya dynasty was able to consolidate a foothold on the region due to Alexander's invasion into the subcontinent and the subsequent power vacuum he left behind.⁸ The founder of the Maurya dynasty Chandragupta I, overthrew the previous "unpopular"⁹ Nanda dynasty and incorporated much of Western India into his empire. By 305 BCE, Seleucus I attempted to challenge Chandragupta but lost and was forced to cede Greek satrapies - namely that of Kabul, Baluchistan, Herat and Kandahar.¹⁰ Chandragupta also forged diplomatic ties with his Greek neighbours by way of marriage. While Chandragupta was pivotal in

⁴ Craven, Roy C. *A Concise History of Indian Art*. Thames and Hudson, 1985.

⁵ Craven, Roy C. *A Concise History of Indian Art*. Thames and Hudson, 1985.

⁶ Sidky, H. "Alexander the Great, the Graeco-Bactrians, and Hunza: Greek Descents in Central Asia." 1999. 235.

⁷ Mitter, Partha. *Indian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁸ Craven, Roy C. *A Concise History of Indian Art*. Thames and Hudson, 1985.

⁹ Mitter, Partha. *Indian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ Craven, Roy C. *A Concise History of Indian Art*. Thames and Hudson, 1985.

establishing diplomatic and in turn eventual trade relations with the neighbouring Seleucids, it was his grandson Asoka who is credited with the vast proliferation of Buddhism throughout Central and South Asia.¹¹ In any case, it is evident that the Gandhara region was exposed to a myriad of different cultural and in turn artistic influences due to the geopolitical realities of the period.

Figure 1, which currently resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a stone dish made of blue-grey schist, roughly 6 inches in diameter and convex in shape.¹² It depicts a distinctly Greek scene: a winged Eros sat astride what appears to be a sea-monster. The sea-monster's tail is coiled and the decorations around the tail, neck and body of the monster are suggestive of scales. As for Eros himself, interestingly, there appears to be something distinctly Alexander about him, particularly when we take a closer look at his hair - the long-ish curls and middle part are quite similar to sculptural depictions of Alexander. Eros also appears to be depicted as a child, which is rather typical of the Hellenistic period.¹³ Furthermore, he appears to be feeding the sea-monster through what appears to be a drinking vessel. The scene is confined to the upper half of the dish by a lintel, with diagonal incisions made across it as a means of decoration. The lower half of the dish has carvings reminiscent of flower petals- likely lotus petals given the prevalence of Buddhism in the region and its importance to the religion. Similar floral carvings also decorate the rim of the dish. This assumption is further strengthened by the presence of half-lotuses on a number of other Gandharan stone dishes.¹⁴

¹¹ Craven, Roy C. *A Concise History of Indian Art*. Thames and Hudson, 1985.

¹² "Dish with Winged Eros Riding a Lion-Headed Sea Monster: Pakistan (Ancient Region of Gandhara)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹³ Stanco, Ladislav. *Greek Gods in the East*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2012. 114.

¹⁴ Wannaporn Rienjang, and Peter Stewart. *Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art: Proceedings of the First International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project*. 2018. 124.

This particular piece was donated from a private collection held by Samuel Eilenberg and donated to the museum in 1987.¹⁵ Furthermore, this dish is among many others of its kind, from Eilenberg's collection - all of which depict Greek iconography. The same collection boasts another depiction of Eros, but instead of a sea-monster, the dish depicts him astride a swan.¹⁶ We have no clear location of discovery for the piece, as is the case for objects donated to museums through private collections. This, in turn, also makes dating the artefact quite difficult. Our ability to have a clearer grasp on the provenance of the object is further complicated by our inability to conduct any archaeological research in the region currently due its prolonged political instability. We can only achieve a sense of the time period in which this object may have been created by drawing parallels with objects with similar artistic approaches. As such, the MET provides an approximate date of the 1st century BC.¹⁷

However, we are not completely without any frame of reference. According to Falk, similar dishes to the Eros dish above, were found predominantly in Taxila, otherwise also known as Sirkap.¹⁸ Those found outside of Taxila were found largely in urban centres around the region.¹⁹ While it would be easy to say that perhaps such objects were the result of the Greek ruler's attempt to proliferate their own culture throughout the region, it is interesting to note that we do know of at least two similar objects that were found in Buddhist religious sites.²⁰ Their presence here suggests a certain fascination with these objects on a wider level. This is particularly

¹⁵ "Dish with Winged Eros Riding a Lion-Headed Sea Monster: Pakistan (Ancient Region of Gandhara)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹⁶ Lerner, Martin, and Steven Kossak. *The Lotus Transcendent: Indian and Southeast Asian Art from the Samuel Eilenberg Collection*. 1991. 63.

¹⁷ "Dish with Winged Eros Riding a Lion-Headed Sea Monster: Pakistan (Ancient Region of Gandhara)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹⁸ Falk, Harry. "Libation Trays from Gandhara." 2010. 90.

¹⁹ Falk, Harry. "Libation Trays from Gandhara." 2010. 91.

²⁰ Falk, Harry. "Libation Trays from Gandhara." 2010. 105.

interesting because there is no explicit Buddhist iconography on these objects - while there are certainly implements that draw from Buddhist artistic traditions, the scenes themselves are strikingly Greek. Another dish from Samuel Eilenberg's donated collection depicts a Nereid astride a sea-monster.²¹ There are also multiple iterations of other Greek deities on the Gandharan stone dishes, ranging from Apollo, Daphne, Heracles and Dionysus.²² While it would be simple to attribute the prominence of Greek iconography to the Greek stewards of Gandhara, some of these examples imply something different. This becomes especially evident when we look at the depictions of sea-monsters on the dishes.

The sea-monsters appear to be an amalgamation of both Greek and possibly Indian heritage. Jessica Pons provides us with a number of examples that depict sea-monsters, as does Harry Falk. The figures provided to us by both of these scholars can help us make analogies between these objects to understand the hybridised image that we see before us. As Falk notes, contemporary Indian works rarely depicted deities using sea-monsters as mounts, while such imagery was quite common in the Greek tradition.²³ There are a few suggestions as to the nature of the sea-monster in Figure 1. Figures 2, 3 and 4 depict sea-monsters all with similar coiled tails tapered out towards the end. The creature depicted in Figure 1 could be likened to an *ichtyocentaurus*, which usually has a fish-like body covered in scales.²⁴ Such a creature, however, also has a rather human-like face, which does not appear to be the case for Figure 1.²⁵ There is something rather feline about its face, which

²¹ Lerner, Martin, and Steven Kossak. *The Lotus Transcendent: Indian and Southeast Asian Art from the Samuel Eilenberg Collection*. 1991. 62.

²² Lerner, Martin, and Steven Kossak. *The Lotus Transcendent: Indian and Southeast Asian Art from the Samuel Eilenberg Collection*. 1991. 62.

²³ Falk, Harry. "Libation Trays from Gandhara." 2010. 102.

²⁴ Pons, Jessica. *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, 2016. 156.

²⁵ "Dish with Winged Eros Riding a Lion-Headed Sea Monster: Pakistan (Ancient Region of Gandhara)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

may have led the MET to interpret it as a sea-lion. However, according to Pons, Gandharan sea-lions are typically winged.²⁶ This leads me to believe that the sea monster in Figure 1 is an amalgamation of imagery taken from both Greek and Indian influences, especially given the sea-monster's similarities to that of a *makara* (Figure 5). Ultimately the creature is neither entirely Greek nor Indian, but a unique blend of both. This is further corroborated by Pons who observes varying "degrees of hybridity"²⁷ when it comes to depictions of the sea-monster in Gandharan art, which includes Indian, Hellenistic and even Parthian traces.²⁸

The sea-monster imagery found in these stone dishes as a whole have connotations of seafaring²⁹ and in turn an increased accessibility to the rest of the world. The Hellenistic period was an era of increased interaction between different cultures - particularly between the Mediterranean and Asia. Furthermore, the Gandharan artists' familiarity with Greek iconography and their ability to incorporate it into their work reflects a globalisation in the ancient world reflective of the Hellenistic period. It also belies the balancing act undertaken by the now Greek rulers of those lands, who would have to balance their aspirations for the spread of Greek culture while appealing to local sensibilities. This is further corroborated by their strong presence in Taxila as a centre of their geographical distribution, which was an important trade centre for the region.³⁰ Under the Bactrians, Taxila "formed the nexus of trade routes"³¹ which linked India and China to the West. These facts

²⁶ Pons, Jessica. *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, 2016. 158.

²⁷ Pons, Jessica. *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, 2016. 159.

²⁸ Pons, Jessica. *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, 2016. 159.

²⁹ Falk, Harry. "Libation Trays from Gandhara." 2010. 102..

³⁰ Sidky, H. "Alexander the Great, the Graeco-Bactrians, and Hunza: Greek Descents in Central Asia." 1999. 237.

³¹ Sidky, H. "Alexander the Great, the Graeco-Bactrians, and Hunza: Greek Descents in Central Asia." 1999. 237.

together may also offer us some insight into potential uses of these dishes and their significance.

The initial scholarship on the Gandharan stone dishes refers to them as “toilet trays”,³² which would have been cosmetic palettes intended for women. However, this view feels less compelling when we delve into it further. Falk notes usually objects intended for the cosmetic use of upper-class women would have had residue indicative of lard or grease within the grooves of these dishes.³³ Furthermore, the closest Greek equivalents of such palettes *unguentaria* often depict women adorning themselves which is vastly absent from these dishes.³⁴ Given the increasing visibility of women during the Hellenistic period, it appears incongruous for such an item to not depict scenes referencing said adornment. Falk’s argument that these stone dishes may be libation trays instead appears to be the most compelling argument especially given the imagery of drinking and the iconography of Dionysus being prominent among these dishes. Figure 1 shows Eros feeding his mount from a drinking vessel,³⁵ and Figure 6 depicts a scene of Dionysos and Ariadne, which was found in Taxila.³⁶ The theme of wine and the links to Dionysos carry connotations of celebration and may explain the attribution of this object’s use in “domestic rituals”.³⁷ The domestic ritual in question could be a marriage as “liquor was instrumental”³⁸ for such an occasion, even in Buddhist culture. Falk observes that some nuns even chose to operate “liquor dens”³⁹ nearby nunneries for the sake of convenience.

³² Wannaporn Rienjang, and Peter Stewart. *Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art : Proceedings of the First International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project*. 2018. 123.

³³ Falk, Harry. “Libation Trays from Gandhara.”2010.92.

³⁴ Falk, Harry. “Libation Trays from Gandhara.”2010.92.

³⁵ “Dish with Winged Eros Riding a Lion-Headed Sea Monster: Pakistan (Ancient Region of Gandhara).” The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

³⁶ Pons, Jessica. *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, 2016. 166.

³⁷ “Dish with Winged Eros Riding a Lion-Headed Sea Monster: Pakistan (Ancient Region of Gandhara).” The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed April 6, 2024. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38098>.

³⁸ Falk, Harry. “Libation Trays from Gandhara.”2010.89–101.

³⁹ Falk, Harry. “Libation Trays from Gandhara.”2010.89–101.

These dishes being used as libation trays for marriages specifically are given further credence due to Eros's presence who personified erotic love in the Greek canon.⁴⁰ His presence then seems especially appropriate on such an object.

This poses an interesting question about the Gandharan affinity for certain Greek deities over others. In the case of Eros, his domain has a degree of universality. Erotic love at its very core is universal regardless of the cultural context in which it is situated. Objects with culturally universal themes located at a major trading post would have had the capacity to reach a wider and more varied population. This would necessitate an incorporation of a range of different artistic styles to create a unique hybrid that could appeal to such a population. Furthermore, Eros could have been a point of conciliation between different cultures, which given the universality of his domain would make him easier to syncretize or be subject to *interpretatio*. Furthermore, Eros is inextricable from his mother, Aphrodite, who was quite closely linked to fertility.⁴¹ This coupled with the notion of wine and drink being a universal practice in marriages regardless of one's religious affiliation points to a fusion in cultural practices that have become manifest through the material objects that we have access to.

Eros can also be viewed as a sort of chaotic force similar to Dionysos, who has very strong multicultural connections. Eros holding what appears to be a drinking cup alludes to Dionysos implicitly. This coupled with Dionysus' own pronounced presence on a number of these dishes,⁴² suggests a Gandharan affinity for this particular Greek god. It is also important to note that Dionysos himself is thought to be an Eastern import to the Greek pantheon. If this notion is accurate then it would

⁴⁰ Stanco, Ladislav. *Greek Gods in the East*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2012. 116.

⁴¹ Stanco, Ladislav. *Greek Gods in the East*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2012. 25.

⁴² Pons, Jessica. *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, 2016. 155.

offer some insight into the numerous references to Dionysos. As his presence in the East existed far before the Hellenistic period, it would have exposed the region to his iconography and associated themes for much longer, making it easier to subject him to *interpretatio* by this period. Additionally, I believe the references to Dionysus can also be allusions to Alexander himself. Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* goes as far as to say that far before Alexander, Dionysus had his own adventure into India. Dionysos' parallels to Alexander and his prolonged presence in the East in general, could have had a widespread appeal in the region.

The parallels to Alexander and in turn the Greeks, feels very intentional. The rulers of the Seleucid Kingdom and later the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom would have wanted to close their own proximity to Alexander for legitimacy and prestige. This feels especially salient for Seleucus Nicator who would have wanted to consolidate his position as one of Alexander's heirs after his death. Those who followed seemed to have maintained this desire to establish a link with Alexander especially when we consider the notion that "...both sides of the Hindu Kush were once teeming with dynasties and chieftains claiming descent from Alexander".⁴³ In turn, the closer one was to Alexander, the closer one's proximity to the Greek world. The sentiment felt by the rulers of this region seems to have permeated down to the societies they governed. It is likely that in the Hellenistic world, the Gandharan stone dishes like Figure 1, were a means of indicating a certain learnedness or worldliness in a more connected world. The objects as a whole have the capacity to be seen as status symbols, especially when we consider that their primary use may have been in domestic celebrations like marriages, where one might be able to publicise such a claim. Yet it is also evident that the appeal in these objects were not purely its

⁴³ Craven, Roy C. *A Concise History of Indian Art*. Thames and Hudson, 1985.

somewhat foreign nature, as the artistic style itself is uniquely a blend of cultural legacies of this region.

Lastly, I would like to mention, while this paper has focused primarily on the Greek influence on Gandharan art, the influence of the Persians or the Indians cannot be completely discounted. This was briefly discussed in my exploration of the imagery associated with the sea-monster but there are references to Buddhist motifs in clearly Greek scenes as a result of the artisans who made them and the region's proximity to Buddhism. It is clear, however, that this subject has been largely approached with a more eurocentric lens. This has led to a tendency to attribute a one-way relationship between the Greeks and their Eastern neighbours. The majority of these views hold that art as a medium was an alien introduction to an otherwise less evolved culture. So the analysis of this object feels skewed in this regard. Additionally, the lack of political stability in the region and extremely limited access to archaeological evidence due to widespread looting makes such an analysis much more difficult.

Figures



Figure 1: Dish with Winged Eros Riding a Sea Lion, 1st Century BC
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession: 1987.142.42



Figure 2: Tray with Nereid riding a Sea-Monster.
Courtesy of Aman ur Rahman.



Figure 3: Dish with Nereid Riding a Sea Monster, 1st Century BC
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession: 1987.142.107



Figure 4: Nereid riding an *ichthyocentaurus*, Private
collection, Pakistan
Book: Pons and Mairs, 2016, 156



Figure 5: *Makara*, Bhārhut stūpa, India museum, Calcutta.
Book: Pons and Mairs, 2016, 156



Figure 6: Wedding of Dionysos and Ariadne
Book: Pons and Mairs, 2016, 166

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