

THE TRAVELS OF TWO MARINE BEASTS from the Mediterranean to Gandhara – A Transfer of Form and Meaning?

Ever since Western scholars first came into contact with the art of South Asia, the focus of their attention quickly turned to the Northern schools, in particular Gandhara, although the Southern art school known as Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh produced as many high-quality pieces during the same time period. At first sight, this obvious imbalance seems unfounded and unjust – perhaps even aggravating.

However, if we take into account the cultural and educational background of those scholars who first took an interest in the art of South Asia during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the unconscious reasoning behind their strong favour for Gandhara becomes more obvious. All of them had received higher education and university education in Europe and North America was still centred around the classics. Across the board, they were fluent in Latin, proficient in Ancient Greek and knew some Hebrew. Their perception of beauty and quality was moulded by their classical training, which elevated Greek art as the ultimate ideal to aspire to. Even Roman art was still considered inferior. At the universities of the time, the most prestigious chairs were in Latin and Greek and those “only” appointed to a chair in Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic or Chinese were already considered something of a disappointment.

Bearing this intellectual environment in mind, the immediate attraction of Gandharan art to the European recipient is unsurprising. The geographical area which is today called “Greater Gandhara”¹⁾ had already been part of the

¹⁾ See Salomon (1999: 3).

Hellenistic world, or at least been in close contact to it, for more than three hundred years before the emergence of what we call “Gandharan Art”. Epigraphic and archaeological evidence proves that at least the higher-educated layers of society were familiar with the Mediterranean culture of their day in terms of literature and the performing arts. A general understanding of the stylistic vocabulary of the visual arts can therefore be assumed. But does this also imply, as suggested by the pioneers of the subject, that there was no creativity in applying or using this stylistic vocabulary? In other words, is Gandharan art merely an unreflective and unquestioning repetition of given forms and motifs?

The aim of the following discussion is to investigate this question by examining the motif of the triton and the triton-related ichthyocentaur. Mythologically, Triton is the name of a son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, but over time the name became a generic term for a merman with the upper body of a human being and the tail of a fish.²⁾ The image of this creature was developed in Greece³⁾ during the so called Archaic period and applied to a number of sea-related entities. Examples can be found on a variety of objects, but ceramics in particular represent an extensive source for depictions of the man-fish form.⁴⁾ Sometimes the triton is used as decorative element and cannot be identified with any particular mythological figure, but in most cases the context permits a clear denomination; in some cases the individual figures are even labelled. Among other names, Nereus, Poseidon and Triton all sometimes appear in the form of a man-fish, fitting the full space allotted to them. Unlike the triton, the ichthyocentaur stays an anonymous member of the retinue of the major sea deities. Yet physically, it is also a composite creature consisting of the upper body of a human being, the forelegs of a horse and the tail of a fish; it can even have wings.

In architectural contexts, these fishtailed creatures are often used in triangular recesses, which are normally awkward to fill, but which they fit into perfectly. The best-known examples can be found on the so-called Lion-pediment of the Hekatompedon from the Acropolis (ca. 570 BCE), now in the Acropolis Museum. However, unspecified tritons were also used for

²⁾ See Shepard (1940: 14).

³⁾ The general idea is Near Eastern, but this particular image type is a Greek development. See Furtwängler (1912: 414).

⁴⁾ See Shepard (1940: 14–16 and figs. 17–26).

decorative purposes in almost every architectural position and format, from acroteria to mosaics.

Nevertheless, from about the fourth to third century BCE onwards they are increasingly found on grave stones and appear frequently in Etruscan graves; in the paintings on the chamber walls and on urns and sarcophagi. By the time of the Imperium Romanum, the tritons are mainly used in funerary contexts: again as decoration on urns and sarcophagi, memorials and memorial sculptures. In Rome itself, the majority of tritons are found on sarcophagi within a maritime thiasos, depicted either on their own or accompanied by nereids, while in the wider regions of the empire, tritons and ichthyocentaurs were used to decorate memorials or memorial sculptures.

The accumulation of tritons and related creatures like the ichthyocentaurs etc. on funerary monuments, and their rare appearance in other contexts after the Classical period, has raised the question as to whether or not the depiction of these maritime beings reflects the religious beliefs of the deceased or the donors of the monuments.⁵⁾ Nevertheless, the soteriological concept of the soul crossing water to reach the “Other world” was widely accepted in antiquity. Besides being of a purely decorative character, these maritime creatures may hint at death without being connected to a particular belief system. Rather like the gorgon-head, strong apotropaic qualities have been ascribed to them.

Turning now to the appearance of tritons in the art of Gandhara, the best-known example is a so-called “toilet-tray” from the Dharmarājika-Stūpa-Complex (T2) at Taxila.⁶⁾ A remarkable feature of this triton are his two fishtails, which obviously replace his two legs rather than forming a single fishtail from the lower part of his body. This feature recurs in other Gandharan sculptures, except in cases where the triton is used to fill a triangular space.

Another well-known example is a relief from Andan Dheri, showing four tritons playing musical instruments,⁷⁾ The instruments evoke a festive atmosphere, as does the palm leaf⁸⁾ in the hand of a triton on a relief, probably a sculpture base, now in the Musée Guimet.⁹⁾ In fact, two tritons

⁵⁾ See Meuli (1958: 504–505).

⁶⁾ Taxila Museum Acc. No. 8499, see Gandhara (2008: Kat.-No. 22).

⁷⁾ Dir Museum, Chakdara Acc. No. 505 and 533, see Gandhara (2008: Kat. No. 75).

⁸⁾ For the meaning of the palm leaf see Galli (2011: 314).

⁹⁾ See Leiden University Library, Kern Collection Ref. No. P-037020. For a similar object in the Peshawar Museum see Kurita (2003b: Cat. No. 700).

appear on this relief: the one on the right holds a palm leaf in his right hand while his left rests to the shoulder of the other triton, who raises his right hand and holds his left on his hip. These two share a common space and interact directly, whereas the tritons on the relief from Andan Dheri are each granted a particular space and are divided by architectural elements, namely columns. By this architectural division a certain formality is created, that is different from the more intimate feel of the scene from the Musée Guimet. A similar effect can be found in a stair riser from Jamalgarhi, now in the British Museum (Fig. 1). Again, four tritons divided by columns are depicted. Two of them hold drinking cups, while the other two may have held palm leaves. Although the tritons can be conceived as forming two pairs, each pair indicated by the tritons turning to look at each other around the dividing columns, the scene still retains a strong formality. The setting is festive, yet it is obviously an official occasion. A similar sense of formality is also conveyed by a relief from Sahri Bahlol, now in the Peshawar Museum. The scene shows two tritons fighting or dancing with dragon-like creatures. It has a strong dynamic through its fluid movement, but it gives rather the impression of a theatrical performance than that of a wild chase.

As in Greece, the triton is often used in Gandhara to fill awkward triangular spaces. This motif can be found on singular objects of triangular shape at Andan Dheri,¹⁰ Takht-i-Bahi¹¹ and various unknown locations.¹² It has been suggested,¹³ that they may have been panels from a stairway. As a rule, these triangular objects (Fig. 2) show a single triton or a single ichthyocentaur with his hands raised in adoration, poised in a body position equal to that of kneeling for a human. Tritons and ichthyocentaurs reappear in this venerating attitude on many false gables in Gandharan art, filling the triangular corners of the semi-circular arches. A pediment in the National Museum in New Delhi (Fig. 3) illustrates this nicely as it contains three pairs of ichthyocentaurs in the recesses on three different levels. As always on the pediments, the ichthyocentaurs – or in other examples the tritons – mark the beginning and the end of each row of worshippers. The central object of worship can be the Buddha himself, or aniconic emblems such as the almsbowl, turban, etc. It is on the pediments, that the tritons and the ichthyocentaurs are for the first

¹⁰ Dir Museum, Chakdara Acc. No. ADN 143, see Gandhara (2008: Cat. No. 235).

¹¹ See Leiden University Library, Kern Collection Ref. No. P-036973.

¹² For further examples see Foucher (1905: 241; 243; 245).

¹³ See Marshall (1960: 37).

time shown in a distinctive Buddhist environment and this distinguishes them from the other examples shown. They still fill the difficult spaces, but at the same time are actively involved in the worship of the Buddha. Moreover, they do not present an exception, a one-off example, but are in fact quite common on this type of relief.¹⁴⁾ It has to be noted that precedence is even given here to the winged ichthyocentaur over the simple triton.

However, the question arises: why do the tritons and ichthyocentaurs appear in the art of Gandhara at all? Of course, they have a certain decorative value, but is that enough to explain their frequent appearance in a Buddhist context? To my knowledge, they have absolutely no textual standing in the Buddhist tradition; yet all the examples shown have come out of a Buddhist environment: they either derive from excavations of Buddhist sites or display Buddhist scenes. The only exception here is the piece from the Peshawar Museum, which has no provenance and the carving illustrates no obvious Buddhist subject. Its imagery, however, falls into the category that Marco Galli¹⁵⁾ calls “Hellenistic court imagery” as do the reliefs from Andan Dheri, Sahri Bahlol and Jamalgarhi depicted above. Like the so-called “Dionysiac” scenes from Gandhara, they betray more information about their donors than one might expect at first glance. Through the theatrical setting and the attributes (the palm leaf, instruments, wine cups) shown, a reference is made to the same aulic models and finery listed by Galli¹⁶⁾ in the context of the Greek or Hellenistic paideia. It is this cultural background that is also the source for the use of the triton and ichthyocentaurs in a Buddhist context, albeit on a different level. The Gandharan elite, who was so conscious of this cultural background, made precious donations to Buddhist sites as a statement of both their religious affiliation and social status. Here the images of the triton and the ichthyocentaur, as visual references of Hellenistic culture, are imbued again with a religious meaning by embedding them in a new Buddhist context. They are now worshippers of the Buddha with the prospect of enlightenment and salvation.

An important aspect of the triton and other maritime entities including the ichthyocentaur in the Mediterranean world, as noted above, is their intimate connection to funerary monuments by the time of the Roman Empire –

¹⁴⁾ For a selection of further examples see Kurita (2003a: Cat. Nos. 322, 452, 453, 575, 589, 590, 591).

¹⁵⁾ See Galli (2011: 281–284).

¹⁶⁾ See Galli (2011: 296).

without making any specific reference to religious beliefs. In this way they are rather indicators of a burial ground or memorial area – a sacred space that was not to be violated in antiquity. In Gandhara, this mortuary aspect is transferred to the *stūpa*.

The *stūpa* (or *caitya*) is built to house the physical remains (ashes, bones, teeth, etc.) of a Buddha, or in some cases of an important disciple or a particularly venerated person. In this regard it is a tomb; a sacred space to be respected. As excavations at various sites have shown¹⁷⁾, *stūpas* were built outside the urban areas, often even within older burial sites. The Buddhist sites in Gandhara are evidence of an extremely prosperous society established along the important trade routes, where people of many different origins met and passed through. The tritons and ichthyocentaurs could therefore serve in this context as subtle indicators of death, to anyone who knew this vocabulary of visual forms.

Although situated outside the urban centres, a *stūpa* was never an isolated monument¹⁸⁾. It was always surrounded by other religious facilities like assembly halls and monastic accommodation. This turns the *stūpa* into a public place of veneration. It was not a hidden location for private use only. For the local well-to-do classes of Gandhara this offered a double opportunity: through their gracious donations they could show their religious affiliation as well as demonstrate their cultural and educational accomplishments. The triton and the ichthyocentaur served their needs as a medium, that fulfilled both roles. It is precisely this type of careful and conscious remodelling and adaptation of its Hellenistic inheritance that in the end constitutes Gandharan art.

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¹⁷⁾ See Shimada (2013: 191–193).

¹⁸⁾ See Skilling (2009: 27).

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Fig. 1. Stair Riser, Jamalgarhi, British Museum No. 1880,57, © Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 2. Triangular panel, Gandhara School, British Museum No. 1914,0502.3, © Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 3. Pediment, Gandhara School, National Museum-New Delhi Collection, Acc no: 48.3/40, Photograph courtesy Leiden University Library, shelfmark P-008889, Coll. Lohuizen, Box 128 Nr. 237-4

