Phiroze Vasunia

A God in Translation? Dionysus from Lucian to Gandhara

Abstract: Dionysus' conquest of India enthralled ancient writers and artists from the Hellenistic period onward. Lucian's *Dionysus* is a fascinating text since it offers us a humorous interpretation of Dionysus's invasion and Indian reactions to the event. The text prompts its readers to reflect on Alexander's Dionysiac self-fashioning, especially in south Asia, and not least to ask after Indian reactions to Dionysus. It so happens that what we might arguably term "Indian" responses to Dionysus also can be perceived in other ways since "Dionysiac" images survive in some quantity from Bactria and Gandhara, regions that Alexander and the Greeks thought of as India. The images date to a period that is roughly contemporaneous with Lucian's lifetime and, in their own terms, also explore the relationship between Dionysus and India. These Gandharan images were recovered during the period of British rule in India, and the colonial context of recovery is important. Reflecting on Lucian and the Gandharan images together gives us a worthwhile opportunity to think comparatively about Dionysus and to inquire into the politics of religious "translation."

Dionysus believed that his greatest conquest was in India. We know as much because the Greeks and Romans tell us that the god celebrated his victory against the Indians by leading a triumphant procession back to Greece complete with satyrs, maenads, drinking, song, and wild animals. The invasion and the triumph were the stuff of legend, the more so because they were duly connected

My thanks to Eustathia Papadodima for the invitation to deliver this paper in a seminar at the Academy of Athens. The Academy is a grand institution, and the occasion was made all the more memorable by her hospitality and by the generosity of the audience. Other versions of this chapter were delivered in Paris, Glasgow, and London (twice in London: once for the conference "Dionysus in Rome" organized by my colleague Fiachra Mac Góraín and on another occasion to the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies). Fiachra suggested I write on this topic and provided me with valuable references. Bob Fowler, at the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies in London, and Sofia Xenofontos, in Glasgow, were friendly and learned hosts. Antoine Pietrobelli was a remarkable host in Paris and received me with a hospitality that was exemplary. Anne Sinha responded to my paper with tact and erudition; Samra Azarnouche provided me with very helpful bibliographical suggestions. My warmest thanks to all these scholars and to the audiences on each occasion for their questions and comments.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110767599-005

to the expedition of Alexander the Great. In the Roman period, emperors attempted to emulate both Alexander and Dionysus, and the precedent of the Dionysiac Alexander was frequently recalled in art and text. In this milieu, Lucian's *Dionysus* is a fascinating text since it offers us a humorous interpretation of Dionysus's invasion of India and Indian reactions to the event. The text prompts its readers to reflect on Alexander's Dionysiac self-fashioning, especially in south Asia, and not least to ask after Indian reactions to Dionysus.

It so happens that what we might arguably term "Indian" responses to Dionysus also can be perceived in other ways since "Dionysiac" images survive in some quantity from Bactria and Gandhara, regions that Alexander and the Greeks thought of as India. The images date to a period that is roughly contemporaneous with Lucian's lifetime and, in their own terms, also explore the relationship between Dionysus and India. I would not like to suggest that these Gandharan representations of Dionysus are somehow more truly or more authentically reflective of how and what Indians thought of the god than Lucian's text. These depictions of the god are no less partial and no less culturally and politically mediated than the many Greek and Roman texts and images of Dionysus, and we should read them no less carefully than the other. But I think reflecting on Lucian and the Gandharan images together gives us a worthwhile opportunity to think comparatively about Dionysus and to inquire into the issue of religious "translation." In this context, the word "translation" has at least three, partly overlapping, connotations: the first is linguistic and refers to translation from one language to another. The second is geographical and refers to the displacement of the god from one part of the world to another. The third is religious and refers to varying conceptions of religion, divinity, and belief across cultures. There are, of course, other issues raised by the translation of Dionysus from the Mediterranean to Gandhara, and I hope that we shall be able to address them in this chapter.

Let us begin with Lucian. "Surely, there is nothing to prevent my telling you a tale of Bacchus," Lucian says in his short *prolalia* on the god Dionysus, and in fact this is how he begins:

> When Dionysus led his host against the men of Ind (surely there is nothing to prevent my telling you a tale of Bacchus!), he was held at first in such contempt, they say, by the people there, that they laughed at his advance; more than that, they pitied him for his hardihood, because he was certain to be trampled under foot in an instant by the elephants if he deployed against them. No doubt they heard curious reports about his army from their scouts: "His rank and file are crack-brained, crazy women, wreathed with ivy, dressed in fawn-skins, carrying little headless spears which are of ivy too, and light targes that boom

> if you do but touch them"—for they supposed, no doubt, that the tambours were shields.[1] (Lucian, *Dionysus* 1)

This "highly original account of the god's invasion of India" offers its audience a colourful description of Dionysus and his followers, of Indian condescension toward the god, and of the god's triumph over the Indians.[2] In a subtle gesture near the beginning, the narrator wonders, what must the Indians have thought of this strange god and his army of "crack-brained, crazy women" and "young clodhoppers … dancing the can-can without any clothes on?" He goes on to describe how the Indians fail to take the god seriously—in part, since Dionysus rides in a chariot drawn by panthers and wears clusters of grapes, a ribbon in his hair, a purple gown, and golden slippers—and how they decline to defend their land against him, much to their own detriment. To the bewilderment of critics, the last section of the work switches focus and consists of a story, set near the banks of the river Indus, about the amazing effects of the water from three springs on men of different ages. There is a great deal of literary complexity in Lucian's short "prologue," as many readers have seen, but what is interesting for our purposes is the depiction of Dionysus in an Indian context.[3]

Lucian is, I think, lampooning Alexander's conquest of India and narratives of that event by offering his readers a witty, knowing version of the conflict. Lucian does not mention Alexander or the Alexander historians by name in his work, but in the story about the three springs he mentions the tribe of "Machlaioi."

> Among the Machlaean Indians who feed their flocks on the left banks of the Indus river as you look down stream, and who reach clear to the Ocean—in their country there is a grove in an enclosed place of no great size; it is completely sheltered, however, for rank ivy and grapevines overshadow it quite. In it there are three springs of fair, clear water: one belongs to the Satyrs, another to Pan, the third to Silenus. The Indians visit the place once a year, celebrating the feast of the god, and they drink from the springs: not, however, from all of them, indiscriminately, but according to age. (Lucian, *Dionysus* 6)

The word "Machlaioi" occurs nowhere else in Greek literature, and H.G. Nesselrath has wondered whether that term is a garbled reminiscence of "Malloi," one of the tribes that Alexander is said to have fought against in the Indian

1 Translations of Lucian are based on the version of A.M. Harmon (1913) in the Loeb Classical Library.

2 Bowersock 1994, 159.

3 On Lucian's prologue, see Branham 1985 (with Branham 1989); Jones 1986, 14; Nesselrath 1990; Georgiadou and Larmour 1995; Whitmarsh 2005, 64–65 (with the wider context provided in Whitmarsh 2013); Porod and Porod 2008; and ní Mheallaigh 2014, 33–34.

campaign.[4] The word may also contain an allusion to *machlos*, "lewd" or "lustful," in which case there is a further joke or pun in Lucian's story about the springs that exert a mysterious effect on Indian men. Even without the wordplay, however, we know that stories of Alexander's invasion were in circulation in the author's era, and a writer as versed in letters as Lucian would doubtless have been familiar with the accounts of the expedition to India.

The register of Lucian's work is difficult to gauge, but, to me, at least, the satire extends to post-Alexandrian generals and politicians who, conscious of the achievements of Alexander, launched expeditions against distant lands. Lucian deflates the pretensions of these men by drawing a comparison with maenads, satyrs, and sirens.

> Dionysus had the centre in person; Silenus commanded on the right wing and Pan on the left. The Satyrs were commissioned as colonels and captains, and the general watchword was "Evoe." In a trice the tambours were beat, the cymbals gave the signal for battle, one of the Satyrs took his horn and sounded the charge, Silenus' jackass gave a martial hee-haw, and the Maenads, serpent-girdled, baring the steel of their thyrsus-points, fell on with a shriek. The Hindoos and their elephants gave way at once and fled in utter disorder, not even daring to get within range. The outcome was that they were captured by force of arms and led off prisoners by those whom they had formerly laughed at, taught by experience that strange armies should not have been despised on hearsay. (Lucian, *Dionysus* 4)

Military leaders were ripe for parody since Alexander and Dionysus together had been appropriated by a string of powerful rulers, from the Ptolemies onward, in "the context of universal empire and political power that inspired the first literary treatments of Dionysus in the post-Alexander mode."[5] Trajan and Hadrian were merely two of the many enthusiastic imperial supporters of Dionysus of whom Lucian would have heard, and he is probably puncturing the vanities of all rulers who thought themselves worthy heirs to the Dionysiac Alexander.[6]

The Indians in Lucian's text are not spared the sharp edge of his wit either, and he pokes fun at them by showing them to be complacent and no match even for a ragtag bunch of soldiers. The chief fault of the Indians appears to be that, like Pentheus in the *Bacchae* and many others, they fail to take the power

4 Nesselrath 1990, 138–139.

5 Bowersock 1994, 159. On Alexander and Dionysus, see Nock 1928; Goukowsky 1981; Bosworth 1988a, 1988b, and 1996; Galli 2011; Koulakiotis 2017; and Mac Góraín 2020, 20.

6 On Dionysus and Roman leaders, see Mac Góraín 2020, 20–23, with the further bibliography cited there.

of Dionysus seriously, and they are routed easily by the god and his merry band of soldiers. Bracht Branham has read the work in terms of estrangement, in Shklovsky's sense of the concept, but the estrangement is relatively contained and not as developed, say, as in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (*Persian Letters*) or in Tolstoy's novels.[7] The Indians' views of Dionysus and his followers are drawn largely from long-established Greek or Roman patterns, so the Greek or Roman reader scarcely comes away from the text with a heightened or altered awareness of the god. What we do find in the text are fairly standard descriptions of the beardless god and his attire, of Silenus and Pan, of the maenads, of Bacchic dancing and *omophagia*.

The Greek and Latin writers typically connect Dionysus and Alexander, as I said, and Lucian's text recalls their accounts of Alexander in India. Arrian, Plutarch, Diodorus, and Quintus Curtius comment on the idea that Alexander staged a Bacchic procession through Carmania (Καρμανία), and they each provide various details of Alexander's Dionysiac procession.[8] Arrian is the most sceptical of the writers and he claims that the stories of Alexander's Bacchic revel are invented by his critics and that the conqueror himself would not have participated in such activities. The major Alexander historians, along with Megasthenes, whom they quote, and Strabo, also provide several additional comments about Dionysus, his procession, the largely female entourage, and the god's activities in India.[9] One of the well-known claims is that the town of Nysa, which Alexander passes through, was founded by Dionysus. Another is that a mountain in the area was known as Meros, and Dionysus gave it that name on account of his birth from the thigh of Zeus: according to a variant tradition, however, the story of Dionysus' birth arose because he was associated with a mountain that was already know by the name. Some of the historians tell us that Dionysus founded many cities in India and that these became democracies after his passing. He is also said to have ruled India for 52 years and then died of old age; or perhaps it was not Dionysus who was the ruler but Spatembas who ruled India for 52 years, Spatembas being a mortal whom the god appointed as a king.[10] We could multiply details and citations at length on the subject of Diony-

7 Branham 1985.

8 Arr. *Anab*. 6.28.1–2; Plut. *Alex*. 67.1–3; Curtius *History of Alexander* 9.10.24–29; Diod. Sic. 17.106.1. Philostratus *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, esp. 2.9, is also illustrative in this regard (see Galli 2011).

9 See e.g. Megasthenes, *BNJ* 715 Fragments 4 (from Diodorus), 12 (from Arrian), and 33 (from Strabo), with the very full commentary by D.W. Roller and the discussion in Stoneman 2019, ch. 3 (on Alexander, Heracles, and Dionysus) and chs. 5–10 (on Megasthenes' account of India).

10 Diod. Sic. 2.35–42; Arr. *Ind*. 8.1.

sus in India, but I think enough has been said to remind us that Lucian's work is part of a broader discourse about Dionysus and Alexander in an Indian context.[11]

One of the points that Lucian does make subtly in his text is that the invasion of India by Dionysus introduces Indians to the worship of the god in his many facets. The Machlaioi Indians, as we saw, celebrate the feast of the god once a year in a grove sheltered by ivy and grapevine.[12] The ivy and the vine are tokens of Dionysiac worship but also markers of Mediterranean culture, here as elsewhere: just as Alexander is occasionally said to have dispersed Hellenism across the territories that he brought under his control, Dionysus and his entourage introduce memorials of Mediterranean culture and civilisation in the lands of their conquest. In his *Strategemata*, Polyaenus, who is a rough contemporary of Lucian, writes that Dionysus intoxicates "his enemies with wine" and several writers state that wine, especially, is one of the indicators of civilisation that Dionysus takes with him to India.[13] The vine is not the only thing brought to India by Dionysus, and Lucian implies, as do writers such as Diodorus and Arrian (*Indika*), that Dionysus also teaches the land to dance: thanks to Dionysus, men, women, and satyrs revel together, to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals. In the post-Alexandrian narrative of the triumph, Dionysus follows in the tracks of Alexander to India, and together with his army of maenads and satyrs, he brings markers of culture such as wine and wheat and the Bacchic revel.

Some readers have suggested that Lucian's interest in Dionysus and India actually derives from the author's own position as an outsider. On this reading, Lucian sought assimilation in much the way that Dionysus sought recognition and was warning his readers not to mock him for his own exotic novelties. According to one critic, "Lucian would certainly have had distinctive facial characteristics that would differentiate him from the Western population of the Empire and that could constitute a reason for ostracism."[14] I do not believe that we can comment meaningfully on Lucian's facial characteristics or his appearance, nor do I think we can claim, as some have, that he "closely resembles Dionysus, his entourage, and his accoutrements."[15] The ironic tone of the piece also makes it

11 Buccino 2013 provides an extensive collection and discussion of the Greek and Roman texts and images of the Indian triumph of Dionysus.

12 Luc. *Dion.* 6.

13 See Polyaenus *Strategemata* 1.1.1–3 = Megasthenes, fr. 57 (Schwanbeck); with Megasthenes *BNJ* 715 F 4 (from Diodorus), F 12 (Arrian), F 33 (Strabo).

14 Bozia 2015, 56.

15 Bozia 2015, 57.

unclear whether Lucian is inviting his readers to notice an affinity between him and the god on the grounds of shared exclusion. We cannot even assume that the author and narrator have the same proclivities or backgrounds. The story of the three springs, in fact, foregrounds the issue of interpretive difficulty, and the narrator explicitly refuses to draw a moral from it.

That Lucian, who was from Samosata on the banks of Euphrates, was interested in questions of cross-cultural interaction is not in doubt: we need only look at works such as *Anacharsis* and *De Syria Dea* (*On the Syrian Goddess*) in order to recall his engagement with non-Greek and non-Roman figures. In the case of *Dionysus*, we have a text in which a foreigner from Roman Syria writes in Greek for an élite audience in the Empire about the reaction of Indians to a Greek god who, from the classical period, had been famously associated with non-Greek regions in the East including India itself. We might rephrase this to say that a writer who comes from outside the metropolis refers in a highly cultured language to a people (Indians) who are far more marginal to the centre than his own nation (Syria). If the relationship between author and culture seems complicated, the language and tone of the work also make interpretation of the text a challenge. As Simon Goldhill says of Lucian, "He slyly allows his authorial stance—his foreignness, his commitment to Greek culture—further to vein his cultural politics with a destabilizing irony."[16] In short, the cultural, linguistic, and political features of the text are multifaceted, and to say simply that Lucian's text is a Roman or a Greek account of Dionysus in India is to underplay the richness of the work.

The relationship between Dionysus and India is, of course, not a theme that is original to Lucian. As we well know, the triumph of Dionysus becomes especially popular in visual culture during the early Roman Empire, and remains so for several generations—with the result that in the fourth century Pacatus advises artists to avoid the subject for being too clichéd.[17] Despite Pacatus' advice, the Indian triumph continues to be of interest in Lucian's own homeland as late as the mid-500s, a point that is illustrated by an ivory Pyxis which is likely to have been made in Syria (Fig. 1).

16 Goldhill 2001, 4; see also Andrade 2013, Introduction and ch. 10.

17 Pacatus 2[12].44.5, quoted in Parker 2008, 242. On the triumph of Dionysus, see Buccino 2013 and Catania 2014 and 2015.

Fig. 1: Dionysus rides in his chariot overseeing his conquest of India. Ivory pyxis from the mid-500s CE. Possibly made in Syria. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917. Accession Number 17.190.56. [Creative Commons License]

The triumph of Dionysus is particularly well attested closer to Lucian's era, "on cameos of the later Hellenistic and early Roman period (second century BCE to first AD); and on stone sarcophagi mainly of the second and third centuries AD."[18]

There is no need for us to visit all the images in this chapter again, and it will suffice for us to point to a well-known example such as this cameo (Fig. 2), which arguably dates to the first century, and this marble sarcophagus (Fig. 3), which is dated to the period of Lucian's old age or just after his death.[19] Both objects show motifs such as the vine that are familiar to us as a part of Dionysiac iconography.

18 Boardman 2014, 19.
19 Zanker and Ewald 2012, 329–334.

Fig. 2: Cameo of Dionysus on a chariot pulled by Pysche (onyx and sardonyx). Sardonyx agate cameo attributed to Sostratos. 1st century BCE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Inv. 25840.

Fig. 3: The Triumph of Dionysus. Sarcophagus in marble, ca. 190 CE. Discovered in Rome. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Accession Number 23.31. [Creative Commons License].

These signs of the Dionysiac life, including the vine, maenads, satyrs, scenes of drinking and revelry, all also appear in Kushan art of the first two or three centuries CE, that is, in art from the very regions that Alexander conquered in and around north-west India.[20] This is the area of "Greater Gandhara" (i.e. Bactria and Gandhara), where traces of Greek, Iranian, Chinese, and Indian art are attested in abundance, and the Dionysiac Greek features on these images co-exist alongside themes that scholars have traced to the diverse cultures that shaped the artistic and political life of Bactria and Gandhara in the Kushan period. The multicultural nature of the images is worth stressing. But whatever the artists have to say of their own cultural identity, and however wide the range of traditions on which they draw, they nonetheless make a place for the Dionysiac in their images. One study published in 2005 estimates, with impressive precision, the number of pieces of Gandharan sculpture in museums worldwide at 1,439, of which 481 pieces or 33.4% are said to "show at least one Greco-Roman element," and of these again a small percentage can be deemed Dionysiac.[21]

The Dionysiac, and other Greek, motifs are no less remarkable because ancient Gandhara also appears to be the site of Buddhism from the second century BCE if not earlier. The earliest Buddhist sculpture in Gandhara dates to the first century CE and coincides with the appearance of what we might term Greek features in Gandharan art. By this time, the Kushans, who were nomads from Central Asia, had assumed control of Bactria and Gandhara and much of northern India. There has been heated debate as to where the Hellenic influences come from, but the most plausible view is that the blossoming of Gandharan Buddhist art is connected both to the legacy of Hellenism from the Indo-Greek kingdoms in Bactria and also to trade with the Roman Empire.[22] In a loose sense, therefore, Lucian has in common with the artists of early Gandhara that they are belated inheritors of Hellenism. Just as Lucian expresses his Romano-Syrian identity in classicizing Greek, so the artists of Gandhara express their local identity through the use of Dionysiac and other features.

Greek and Roman representations of Dionysus, especially after the era of Alexander, show him as a god at large, a deity who ranges under the open sky, a general who goes to war and brings wine and civilisation to India, but in the art of Greater Gandhara, Dionysus is not shown at the head of an extended army, and images of his conquests are absent.

20 Stančo 2012, 84ff.

21 Aldrovandi and Hirata 2005, 311.

22 Taddei 1969a, 66 = Taddei 2003, 1.126.

Fig. 4: Garland holder (possibly a figure of Dionysus). 1st century CE, Gandhara. Schist. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts, in honour of Douglas Dillon, 2001. Accession Number 2001.736. [Creative Commons License]

For whatever reason, Dionysus and the Dionysiac appear in the material culture, but the subject of invasion—and, as we shall see, the triumph—did not appeal to the artists in the area, whether they were Greeks, descended from Greeks, or unrelated by blood to Greeks altogether. Perhaps the forms of early Buddhism that flourished in Gandhara were not congenial to depictions of con-

quest, even in a parodic mode, although other representations of the Dionysiac can be found. Or perhaps the martial link between Alexander and Dionysus was reconfigured, attenuated, or absent altogether. Like Lucian, however, the artists of Bactria and Gandhara emphasize the maenads, satyrs, music, intoxication, and revelry (and perhaps also the afterlife), and these are the figures and scenes they choose to portray in their art (Figs. 4 and 5).

Fig. 5: Stair Riser: Dionysian Scene with Musicians and Dancers. 1st century CE. Gandhara. Schist. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1913. Accession Number 13.96.23. [Creative Commons License]

The god had come back home, to the land of his birth. There was nowhere else to go, no lands to conquer, no need for a mission to bring civilisation to anyone. Drinking wine, dancing, revelry, and the theatre: for these activities there was time, and in them Dionysus was willing, as ever, to play his part (Fig. 6).

Dionysus plays his part in Gandhara with Heracles and a range of Greek and local figures, mortal, divine, and semi-divine. In the early Kushan period, as I said, local artists do not see Graeco-Roman classicism as a barrier but take over some of its most distinctive images and symbols, and Dionysus becomes part of a culture in which "a compelling fusion of foreign styles' gives 'visual form to Buddhist religious ideals."[23] Why this happens is an interesting question. I agree

23 Behrendt 2007, 3; cf. Carter 1968.

largely with Maurizio Taddei's suggestion that "Gandharan sculpture is to be considered as the art of few social groups that needed a foreign model enabling them to distinguish themselves from the majority of the population." Dionysus and Dionysian features served "the interest of some political (and cultural) *élite*," or else they would have not persisted so vibrantly in Gandhara.[24]

Fig. 6: "Phrygians with their trousers, tunics, and conical caps play music, dance, and clap, while Greek figures drink from fluted cups filled with wine decanted from pitchers filled from a wine skin, shown hefted on the shoulders of the figure at the right." Schist relief, 1st century CE. Gandhara, Buner area. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund 1930.328. [Creative Commons License]

24 Taddei 1969b, 382 = Taddei 2003, 1.156. The extraordinary analysis and collection of materials in Taddei 1963 is well worth reading.

Let us turn to a couple of objects that come from Bactria (i.e. from inside the Greater Gandhara area) during the period of Kushan rule. Consider a pair of gold clasps that were found in Tillya Tepe, in northern Afghanistan, and that date to the early Kushan period in about the first century CE (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: One of a pair of clasps ostensibly showing Dionysus and Ariadne. Tillya Tepe, Tomb VI. 1st century CE. Gold, turquoise. National Museum of Afghanistan, 04.40.53. Photograph by the author, based on Fredrik Hiebert and Pierre Cambon, eds., *Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World*, London, 2011.

The clasps, which are mirror images of each other (only one is pictured here), show Dionysus (closer to the front) and Ariadne seated on a beast, a lion perhaps, while Silenus reclines at their feet; behind Dionysus and Ariadne appears the figure of Victory (Nike), who appears to be crowning the two with a wreath. John Boardman writes that the clasps "are a celebration of the god, his wine, and his marriage"[25] and observes that the Ariadne figure "has become naturalised in the east, a new Roxane for Dionysos/Alexander."[26] He considers at length whether the scene is a Dionysiac triumph, but ultimately he seems to

25 Boardman 2012, 105.
26 Boardman 2014, 45.

discern no more than a hint of the triumph in the image. For Boardman, "It looks as though the whole golden group was devised by an artist well aware of Greek Dionysiac and other iconography but ready to make original combinations which would have looked strange but not impossible in a Mediterranean context but which then, or later, were far less unusual in an Indian context."[27]

The scene on the gold clasps poses difficult questions about the legacy of a Dionysiac Alexander in Bactria, where the clasps were excavated. The association with death and the afterlife that we see on sarcophagi in Rome finds here a loose counterpart with the clasps, which were found in graves. The clasps belonged to a woman who was buried in one of the graves with royal paraphernalia and with several other Greek objects, including a coin in her mouth as a kind of payment to Charon. Boardman speculates she was "an Indo-Greek princess in the royal household of the King of Emshi Tepe."[28] That an Indo-Greek royal family was seeking a connection with Greek culture is scarcely surprising, even in a region that was open to influences from the south and the east. Nor is the royal family's desire to forge an association with Dionysus, a god who is so frequently compared to Alexander, in the Hellenistic world and in south Asia. Alexander was a complex forefather to many of the Indo-Greek rulers of an earlier era, as we know from the coinage, but many of them identified with him as a Greek benefactor and conqueror and not as an oppressive colonizer. From that perspective, the representation of Dionysus in the burial site of a royal princess is consistent with the ideology that we might expect to find among the aristocratic descendants of Indo-Greeks in Bactria.

Dionysus also seems to appear on a silver plate, the recovery of which reminds us of the region's entanglement with modern as well as ancient colonialism (Fig. 8).[29]

27 Boardman 2003, 354; see also the valuable survey in Boardman 1994, 109–147, with Boardman 1997.

28 Boardman 2003, 372.

29 For the association between Alexander the Great and the region's colonial history, see Hagerman 2013, Vasunia 2013, and Briant 2017.

Fig. 8: A gilded silver plate showing the triumph of Dionysus. 2nd to 3rd century CE, found in Afghanistan. British Museum, London. Accession number 1900.02-09.2 (BM 124086). Transferred to the British Museum from the India Museum, Calcutta, in 1900. Image: Marie-Lan Nguyen, Wikimedia Commons. [Creative Commons License]

The plate is said to have belonged to the Hazara Mirs of Badakhshan who, like many other rulers in the region, said they were descendants of Alexander.[30] In the nineteenth century, the plate was acquired in Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan (and ancient Bactria), by a British administrator who passed it on to Alexander Burnes. "Bukhara" Burnes, whose adventures and death during the fall of

30 I take this information from the British Museum online catalogue, at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1900-0209-2 [accessed August 2021].

Kabul in 1841 are now celebrated by historians, noted that the bowl "represents the triumphal procession of the Grecian bacchus, and is of exquisite workmanship;" he transmitted it to the Indian Museum, in Calcutta, from where in turn it was handed over to the British Museum by the India Office in 1900.[31] Burnes was one of a number of British soldiers/administrators in the region who entertained fantasies of following in Alexander's footsteps, and the bowl's history thus illustrates the long legacy of Alexander in Afghanistan.

That it is Bactria from where the silver dish was acquired by British administrators also affirms to us the attraction of Hellenic art to the region's inhabitants in earlier centuries. What seems important is that the dish adapts or reworks important elements of Dionysiac scenes as we know these from other contexts and puts them into circulation in north Indian or central Asian lands. The point for the artist was not to offer a triumph, as with the cameo we considered above (Fig. 2), but rather a cross-cultural prospect with Dionysiac elements in it. The scene is arguably more restful than in the earlier cameo, and the leftward movement has given way to an image of repose. The various figures are somewhat disconnected from the reclining god in the centre, and the idea of a procession, if it is there at all, is subdued: the winged Psychai are not pulling the chariot, and Eros is not guiding them forward here. Yet, the figures and details certainly contribute to the Dionysiac nature of the scene: Eros holding a jug, the other Eros flying above, the cart on which the central figure reclines, the small woman sitting on the corner of the cart, the satyr standing on one leg behind the cart, the vine on the upper right, the panther at the bottom who seems to be peering into a vessel. This is a Dionysiac image but without the elements of triumph that we see in the cameo and in other representations: this man is not travelling back to Greece in a victory procession, with or without an Ariadne by his side. He is already where he wants to be, and that is in India.

These particular cases of Dionysiac art can be set against what may be termed a general receptivity to the Dionysiac, across many generations, in the local, hybrid cultures of Bactria and Gandhara.[32] Scholars have looked for signs

31 Burnes 1842, 204.

32 Carter 1968, 1970, 1982, and 1992; Taddei 2003, vol. 1; Abdullaev 2005; Brancaccio and Liu 2009; Kim 2011; Boardman 2014; Tanabe 2016; and cf. Kouremenos, Chandrasekaran, and Rossi, 2011. On this theme in the wider Sasanian context, see Callieri 2008 and Kouhpar and Taylor 2008. For the Gupta period, see Callieri 2005. For Homeric and Euripidean echoes in Bactria, see Dan, Grenet, and Sims-Williams 2014, a wide-ranging and fascinating study, with implications for the silver plate discussed here. For the related but separate topic of Dionysus and Shiva, see Doniger 1980; and for the Indo-European scholarly background in the nineteenth century, Konaris 2011.

of the Dionysiac in viniculture, viticulture, festivals surrounding the making and drinking of wine, singing, dancing, music, and the theatre, and arguably have located evidence for these activities in the region. There is, indeed, a large body of archaeological material that points to wine-making and wine-drinking in Gandhara from the second century BCE to the second century CE.[33] As for drama, archaeologists have discovered the remains of a theatre at Ai Khanum, in northern Afghanistan, together with a gymnasium, fountain, and funerary monuments, and also many structures that do not conform to older Hellenic patterns.[34] Since Ai Khanum was destroyed in about 150 BCE, whereas the material from Gandhara that we have been discussing comes from a slightly later date, the earlier Hellenism appears to have lingered on, transformed, into the later period.[35] Dionysus also appears on two Indo-Greek coins (Heracles was more popular on Indo-Greek coinage): "… the nickel and bronze coins of Agathocles and Pantaleon depict on the obverse the bust of Dionysos wearing a wreath and holding a thyrsus over his left shoulder, and on the reverse a panther standing with raised paw."[36] The scholars Pia Brancaccio and Xinru Liu have discerned a Dionysian "dramatic ethos" in the Sanskrit writings of Aśvaghoṣa, a dramatist and poet from Gandhara who lived in the first and second centuries CE and who composed a Sanskrit life of the Buddha known as the *Buddhacarita* ("Acts of the Buddha").[37]

In arguing that "[i]n Bactria and Gandhara, traces of Dionysian dramatic performances are ubiquitous," these scholars refer to the remnants of the theatre at Ai Khanum and to a fragment of a vessel, from the first century CE, in which Dionysus is said to be the figure in the centre, flanked by a maenad in an animal skin on the left, and another woman on the right who is embracing him (Fig. 9). The curator of the fragment writes that "[t]his delicately carved scene is set before a type of curtain that in the West would be associated with theater."[38] Brancaccio and Liu marshal many other pieces of evidence in support of their claim that a "long-established presence of Greco-Roman theatrical traditions and Dionysian culture … pervaded the arts of the Kushan period."[39] It may be possible to go through all the evidence and analyse it in its particularity, but let

33 Falk 2009; Brancaccio and Liu 2009, 226.

34 Bernard 2011a, 2011b, and 2012.

35 Bernard 2011b and 2012, 52.

36 Bopearachchi 2017, 267.

37 Brancaccio and Liu 2009, 243. For a text and translation of the *Buddhacarita*, see Johnston 1935–1936; for a more recent and fluent translation, see Olivelle 2008.

38 Behrendt 2007, 30.

39 Brancaccio and Liu 2009, 243.

us postpone the controversial question of Greco-Roman theatrical influence on Sanskrit drama to another occasion.

Fig. 9: Fragment of a Vessel with a Dionysian Scene (?). 1st century CE, Gandhara. Schist. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Bequest of Samuel Eilenberg, 1998. Accession Number 2000.284.15. [Creative Commons License]

For the moment, let us direct our attention to the cultural irony of the persistence of Dionysiac motifs in the art of Bactria and Gandhara since the god Dionysus himself is said to have arisen in the area. Lucian is evidently not an exception in this respect. As early as the fifth century BCE, Euripides already shows Dionysus arriving in Greece from Bactria and Asia. The historians of Alexander such as Arrian, Diodorus, and Strabo connect Dionysus to India, through birth or conquest or both, and they ascribe some of these stories even to

Indian sources. Gandharan artists are thus creatively assimilating Greco-Roman narratives that cast Dionysus and his adventures in the area on the basis of native information. From this perspective, Indian artists are not importing a foreign god into their own work but representing a deity whom Greek and Roman traditions depicted as Indian from an early date. No Indian text mentions Dionysus or his birth or his triumph, nor does any liken him to Shiva, to whom he is compared in the modern period. This is not to say that the Gandharan artists are simply parroting Greek or Roman ideas about Dionysus and Indian religious beliefs and mechanically reproducing them in metal or stone. To speak in terms of influence is unhelpful in this context. It is more helpful, I believe, to think of these artists as creatively adapting, using, and reformulating older and existing images, ideas, and motifs.[40] They are, after all, crafting their work in a Kushan Buddhist environment and may well be fusing Dionysus with a regional figure or set of figures in the process. That these varied images, ideas, and motifs referred at some level to the god's regional birth and adventures may have added to the appeal of the theme. The notion of the native-born god, of course, would not by itself account for the popularity of the Dionysiac theme, but it may explain the enduring reaffirmation of Dionysiac themes, however acculturated and defined, in Gandhara, and it might also explain why indigenous groups use Dionysus to enhance their own cultural, economic, and political status.

While so-called Hellenistic traditions may have survived into the era of Gandharan art, evolving Buddhist practices in the area also should be incorporated into our analysis. The Buddhism of the region and the period is complex,

40 See Galli 2011, 281–284. Taddei 2015 offers a crucial analysis on this point: "I believe the time has now come for Gandharan art to be considered not as a phenomenon to be explained by the interplay of 'influences' but as the product of a mature Hellenism that found itself in direct contact with Buddhism (and here—as we have seen—Foucher's insights are of great help). It was Buddhist thought—and thus Indian culture—which at this moment was the victorious subject that also disposed of expansive drive. For that reason, it is only natural that the earliest Gandharan Buddhist reliefs that we mentioned above are the ones that were most heavily inspired by Indian models. In its first years of spreading, Buddhist thought could not have used any other language but an Indian one, even if it immediately proved to have a strong propensity to dress in Hellenistic clothes as it was appropriated and reworked by a local culture that was precisely deeply Hellenistic.

On the other hand, Buddhism was certainly not the only Asian religion with which Hellenism had to do, and we may speculate whether, rather than merely 'forms' of the Hellenistic tradition being bent to the expressive demands of Buddhist art, we should not also talk about a narrative structure that had been developed in Northwestern Buddhism, for which Hellenism was able to readily provide the most suitable formal repertory, and which it, in turn, appropriated to have it reflect afterwards on other, more Western, religious experiences" (66–67).

diverse, and open to influence from the outside, and Gandharan art shows a malleable interaction with Yuezhi, Greek, and other cultures. Several scholars have suggested that Gandharan sculptors chose motifs associated with Dionysus because they wanted to explore Buddhist theories of reincarnation, the afterlife, and paradise. Tadashi Tanabe writes that vine scrolls with depictions of people were used in Gandhara since these were associated with Dionysus in the Roman Middle East and since local artists wanted to show "paradisiacal imagery of Dionysus and his *thiasos*."[41] On his view, the Dionysiac figures of Gandharan art are "related to the resurrection and rebirth in paradise" and for this reason would have appealed to the Buddhists of Gandhara.[42] Martha Carter has connected the revellers of the Dionysiac scenes to nature-spirits or *yakshas* and she has written that "[t]he whole panoply of Gandhāran *amorini*, *sileni*, vintagers, inebriates, and lovers appear to have been intended to be seen as Yakshas."[43] Osmund Bopearachchi appears to follow Carter in seeing these *yakshas* "as roistering sensual demigods inhabiting a delightful paradise," complete with grape wine, and he also suggests that the "Dionysian scenes represent the stratified vision of the Indian cosmology as narrated in the Vedic literature."[44] In the opinions of these scholars, the cultures of Gandhara are exploring Buddhist ideas of paradise and the afterlife and Vedic ideas of cosmology through the flexible adoption of Dionysian motifs and themes.

What happens to a god in translation? The subject of Dionysus in Gandhara is clearly fraught, difficult, and complicated. We might even ask ourselves whether it is appropriate to refer to this figure (Fig. 10) as "Dionysus" and to the associated motifs as "Dionysiac."

Over long decades of scholarship, we have learned to think of the ancient gods separately and on their own merits; to insist on their local and regional peculiarities; not to assimilate their rituals, worship, and cult practices. A literary Dionysus may differ from a philosophical Dionysus, who may differ, in turn, from an artistic Dionysus. A fifth-century Athenian Dionysus is not the same as a Hellenistic Dionysus or a Roman Liber. If we need to respect the singularity of the Greek or Roman Dionysus, then we should not be too hasty to assimilate Gandharan images to some putative canon formed further to the west, in lands adjoining the Mediterranean. Even if we could locate a Sanskrit or Pali text that referred to Dionysus, we would need a great deal more than just a name to un-

41 Tanabe 2016, 7.
42 Tanabe 2016, 8.
43 Carter 1968, 130; cf. Carter 1970 and 1982.
44 Bopearachchi 2017, 267.

derstand what lay behind the reference, what the inhabitants of the place thought about it, whether they thought of him as a god, and which particular Greek or Roman Dionysus they were taking over. One might easily imagine a whole series of intractable and challenging questions that such a reference would raise.

Fig. 10: Head of Dionysus (?). 4th–5th century CE, Gandhara. Terracotta. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Uzi Zucker, 1979. Accession Number 1979.507.2. [Creative Commons License]

A related problem for scholars who write about Dionysus in Gandhara is that the legacies of colonialism affect the discussion. Modern discoveries and excavations in Gandhara date to the nineteenth century and early twentieth century,

during the period of British rule in India.[45] Soldiers, adventurers, and explorers such as Charles Masson sent back reports to Europe about their finds from the 1830s onward. The archaeologists Alexander Cunningham and John Marshall were fascinated by Buddhism and South Asian culture but were also looking eagerly for connections between India and the Greco-Roman world.[46] Alexander the Great and his successors in the north-west frontier regions were an obsession for a number of these men. The scholarly emphasis on Dionysus and the Dionysiac thus seems to repeat the predilections of colonial administrators and explorers who valued Indian culture the more if it could somehow be associated with Greek or Roman antiquity or who found it difficult to accept artistic innovation or accomplishment in South Asia. Gandhara, from such a vantage point, is a sign of the spread of Hellenism and of the remarkable reach of Greek ideas and practices. Gandharan art is valuable in its own right, on this reading, but even more valuable because it reflects the influence of distant Hellas.

The emphasis on the Greek dimensions of Gandharan art can be found not just in British writers but also, and famously, in the work of Alfred Foucher (1865–1952), who was the first head of the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan and who was so influential in the study of Gandharan and Buddhist art in the twentieth century. In one sense, he anticipates my juxtaposition of Lucian and Gandharan art since he points out, in a lecture delivered at the Musée Guimet, "that Gandhara is scarcely further, as the crow flies, from the mouth of the Hellenized Euphrates than from that of the Buddhist Ganges."[47] He writes that the earliest images of the Buddha "must have been created under the industrious fingers of some *Graeculus* of more or less mixed descent—and perhaps, also, who knows? at the command of a Greek or an Eurasian convert to Buddhism."[48] Foucher has been sometimes criticized for making too much of the Greek impact on Buddhist art, and one wonders if he thought that the ancient Indian artists by themselves would not have been capable of realizing the image of the Buddha. In Foucher's own lifetime, E.B. Havell and Ananda Coomaraswamy cautioned scholars against overvaluing the Greek contribution to

45 Errington 1987.

46 In the nineteenth century, G.O. Trevelyan left a memorable account of how he was put in mind of Dionysiac festivals and the road to Eleusis by a Hindu procession he happened to witness (*The Competition Wallah* [1864], 246–247, quoted in Hagerman 2013, 2–3, and Stoneman 2019, 97). For the general context, see further Vasunia 2013, ch. 2.

47 Foucher 1917, 121. Foucher's lecture was published in French as "L'Origine grecque de l'image de Bouddha," *Annales du Musée Guimet. Bibliothèque de vulgarisation*, vol. 38.

48 Foucher 1917, 128.

the development of the Buddha image in India.[49] But Foucher was also an erudite scholar and eager to insist on both the Indian and the Greek nature of Buddhist art. He writes, "It is not the father *or* the mother who has formed the child; is the father *and* the mother. The Indian mind has taken a part no less essential than has Greek genius in the elaboration of the model of the Monk-God."[50] From this perspective, Foucher seems to have espoused a Romantic Orientalism in which East and West worked together in order to enrich humanity as a whole.

Disentangling the study of Gandhara from the question of European colonialism or ethnocentrism is no easy matter since so much of what we know about the place comes from the excavations and writings of scholars who worked in the colonial era. We might also turn the question of colonialism on its head and say that Gandharan artists were no less capable than any other sculptors at understanding and refashioning images of Dionysus to suit their own purposes. What we might want to emphasize is that Gandharan art is its own thing and that it should not be judged for failing to conform to an external canon, whether Greek, Roman, or Parthian. Gandharan art conforms to no canons other than the canons of Gandharan art. The number of Gandharan works that reflect a Dionysiac tradition is very small in comparison to the many "Gandharan sculptures which were produced."[51] It is also true to say that the number of Gandharan sculptures that follow Parthian, Shaka-Kushan conventions, or the traditions of Indian cultures to the south, is very small. As the scholar Lolita Nehru remarks, the majority of Gandharan sculptures are "characterised by a style which belongs to none of the parent traditions. The sculptures are a distinctive Gandharan creation, their style recognisable as an independent language."[52] Dionysus plays, therefore, a seemingly modest role in what appears to be a complex and wide-ranging phenomenon.

We do not yet have theoretically nuanced models for understanding the art and religion of Bactria and Gandhara, in the Kushan period or earlier, and we cannot know now whether these artists and viewers were aware of Dionysus as a god or what they would have made of the connexion between Dionysus and Alexander. Nor do we have an adequate grasp of their conceptions of divinity, representation, history, and translation. But we will, I think, find it useful to place Dionysus in a context where ideas and personnel flow in a "vital and con-

49 See e.g. Havell 1908; Coomaraswamy 1927; for a recent account of the debate between Foucher and Coomaraswamy, see Thompson 2011, 404–409.

50 Foucher 1917, 136.

51 Nehru 1985, 59.

52 Nehru 1985, 68; cf. Nehru 1989.

tinuous"[53] manner between the Mediterranean and Gandhara, where each region made its own use of Dionysus and the Dionysiac. Lucian reminded his readers how Dionysus had been usurped, for ideological and political purposes, by Hellenistic and Roman rulers who sought to follow the example of Alexander. The *soi-disant* Indian triumph of Dionysus was of a piece with their military ambitions. In Greater Gandhara, artists were aiming not to dispatch Dionysus and his procession back to Greece, nor to capture the significance of his triumph. This is not to say that Gandharan art, with its Dionysiac features, served no ideological purpose; among many other objects, the gold clasps remind us that they did. But Dionysus lived and moved in his own environment here, in Gandhara, whether drinking, or dancing, or looking after the dead in the afterlife, and he did not have to bring civilisation to anyone.

53 Taddei 1965, 178 = 2003, 1.96.