

Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art

Edited by
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Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project,
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Introduction

Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart

In 2016 the Classical Art Research Centre at the University of Oxford launched a three-year project entitled 'Gandhāra Connections', which has been generously supported by the Bagri Foundation and the Neil Kreitman Foundation.¹ Its aim is to stimulate and support fresh research and discussion on unresolved problems in the study of Gandhāran art, and in particular the long debated question of the links between Gandhāran and Graeco-Roman artistic traditions. During the consultation process that laid the foundation for the project, a variety of scholars with interests in Gandhāra made the same observation: that several fundamental topics needed renewed attention in the light of recent research, as a precondition for understanding classical connections with Gandhāran art and many other matters besides. At the forefront of their minds was the problem of the chronology of Gandhāran art and archaeology. Chronology therefore provided the focus of the first international workshop of the Gandhāra Connections project, hosted in Oxford on 23rd and 24th March 2017, on which this volume is based.

Chronology is far from being a new concern in Gandhāran studies. Indeed it has been one of the most consistent obstacles to the understanding of Gandhāran art since its rediscovery in the nineteenth century. But intense study in recent years has led to important new insights, which deserve to be tested against a continually expanding body of published archaeological evidence. This volume presents and builds upon modern hypotheses in the context of archaeological discoveries in the region.

Two problematic aspects of its chronology are addressed here. The first is the paucity of absolute dates in the history and archaeology of Gandhāra as compared even with other ancient societies that have to be explored through fragmentary evidence. A consequence of this lack of fixed points for art history is that the dating of individual artefacts is usually only provisional. Proposed, or feasible, dates can commonly differ by two centuries or encompass wide spans (for example, 'c. second-third century AD'). It has been hard to win from such temporally mobile material a secure sense of the artistic development of sculptures – to construct the sort of chronological framework that is so fundamental in many other fields of ancient art and archaeology.

The art history of the classical world – to use a closely relevant example – is not without such latitude in dates, and the highly conservative and retrospective character of the Roman artistic tradition – a character which we also encounter in certain categories of Gandhāran art – can undermine attempts at dating on the basis of style. Yet here the apparatus available for trying to place individual works chronologically is much more extensive. It is built on a much greater wealth of material from systematic and well recorded excavations that include datable evidence; many more inscriptions on works of art or relevant to them; abundant literary evidence (including annalistic histories); historical knowledge about the circumstances in which some monuments were made, used, or destroyed; and a comparatively tightly dated numismatic corpus. All of these types of evidence also exist for the Gandhāran region, but they are much sparser. A huge proportion of extant Gandhāran art is without archaeological provenance. It largely comprises sculptures recovered without documentation over generations, whether through crude, earlier excavations, deliberate looting, or as the result of more casual finds which have ended up

¹ The University of Oxford's OUP John Fell Fund provided a proof-of-concept grant for an exploratory workshop in 2013. This laid the ground for Gandhāra Connections and we are deeply grateful to the participants for helping to define the research focus of the present project.

on the market. Textual and literary evidence is comparatively thin, notwithstanding the circumstantial evidence afforded by the study and publication of Gāndhārī manuscripts in recent years (which still promise the potential for new information directly relevant to art). It is indicative of the problem that some of the most valuable written sources for the chronology of Gandhāra are ancient Chinese texts, not those of Central Asia or even India (Falk 2015; Chavannes 1907; Zürcher 1968).

However, a still more fundamental problem lies with the instability of the very framework in which any fixed dates would be placed. Even the handful of explicitly dated Gandhāran sculptures that have survived have been difficult to pin down because of uncertainty and debate about the conventional eras – the ancient dating systems – to which their inscriptions make reference. In particular, for many years there has been disagreement about the date of the Kushan ruler Kaniṣka I, whose accession marked year one in a new era repeatedly used in Gandhāran and other Kushan inscriptions. This doubt has significantly limited the utility of a sculpture like the Mamāne Dherī stela (Figures 1 and 2 in Juhyung Rhi’s chapter of this volume), a votive relief representing the seated Buddha in the Indraśaila cave, whose inscription lucidly dates it to ‘the year 89’ (but when is that?). This sculpture is discussed further below by Juhyung Rhi alongside the complexities of other dated sculptures.

Over decades a range of more or less circumstantial evidence has been enlisted to date the start of the Kaniṣka era, which is pivotal in considerations of Gandhāran chronology, to altogether different years, the principal candidates being AD 78, AD 127/8, and AD 227.² The latest of the three, AD 227, and other dates in contention around AD 230 were propounded by scholars, particularly numismatists, such as Nikolaus Schindel (2009; 2014) and Robert Göbl (1999), who largely base their arguments on iconographical and stylistic comparison between Kushan, Kushano-Sasanian and Roman coins. The year AD 78 as the start of Kaniṣka era was a result of equating this era to the well-known Śaka era known to commence in that year, which was used by the Western Kṣatrapas who were Kaniṣka’s vassals in Ujjain. This equation was made on a variety of grounds, mainly epigraphic, literary (Chinese, Central Asian and Indian) and archaeological. Principal scholars who propounded this date include Johanna van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (1949; 1968), James Fergusson (1880) and Sergei Tolstov (1968).

In the last twenty years, Joe Cribb and Harry Falk in particular have marshalled disparate but complementary evidence, from Central Asian numismatics and Indian and Chinese literature, to consolidate the case for AD 127 as the start of Kaniṣka era. In 2001 Falk published a paper reassessing passages from a Sanskrit astronomical text, the *Yavanajātaka* of Sphujiddhvaja, which mentions the Kushan era in relation to Śaka era (Falk 2001). The passages from this text demonstrate that this Kushan era does not correspond to the Śaka era. It states that by adding 149 to the Śaka era one can obtain the Kushan era (with a one year margin of error depending on the role of elapsed or current years in the calculation) – therefore ostensibly c. AD 227. Falk proposes that Sphujiddhvaja was living in the second century of the Kushan era, which is taken to be identical with the era founded by Kaniṣka. Consequently his formula for converting dates from the Śaka era to his own assumes the dropping of the first century, a practice previously suggested by Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (1949: 235-262; 1986) and attested in other contexts. On that basis the formula actually converts to the second Kushan century, with the real date for the start of the Kushan era, as founded by Kaniṣka, being AD 127.

This proposal corresponds with the implications of other sources for the date of Kaniṣka, including his lineage recorded in the famous Rabatak inscription, which also attests to his creation of an era (Falk 2001: 127; Sims-Williams & Cribb 1995). Van Wijk (1927) had already suggested AD 128/9 for the start of the Kaniṣka era on the basis of calculation of the Indian Nakṣatra years. As Falk emphasizes, the Chinese sources also support the dating of Kaniṣka’s reign to this period, as does a careful consideration of the

² For a critical overview of the main evidence and competing claims see esp. Golzio 2018; Bracey 2017.

numismatic evidence. Two decades ago, Cribb (1997) embarked on an attempt to align the ‘Azes era’ with the Kaniṣka era and suggested that by working out the length of the gap between the two eras one could establish the Gandhāran chronology. Numismatic research has contributed to a growing belief in the AD 127 date. In his magisterial opening chapter for this volume, Cribb builds on his previous research in seeking definitively to put a limit on the beginning and end of the gap between the Azes and Kaniṣka eras and consolidating Gandhāran chronology across several centuries. One of the key factors in Cribb’s adherence to the AD 127 date is his earlier calculation of the start of the Azes era to 46 BC (Cribb 2005). Using this date, Cribb reviews and analyzes coin sequences from the Indo-Parthian to Kushano-Sasanian periods in combination with dated inscriptions associated with these kings.

Falk’s and Cribb’s conclusion of AD127 as the start of Kaniṣka era has not been universally accepted; for example it is still opposed in Fussman (1980 and 2004, maintaining the AD 78 date) and Bracey (2017) has been sceptical while accepting that AD 127 is very plausible. Nevertheless, a consensus has started to develop around this later date. Particularly in the light of the additional evidence and arguments presented here, the AD 127 date must surely now be regarded as settled beyond reasonable doubt. It should be noted that no one who participated in the Gandhāra Connections workshop, either as a speaker or a member of the physical and online audience, dissented from this date.

All of the issues mentioned so far have been connected with hard chronology – the challenge of arriving at or near absolute dates and of establishing historical eras. These are of obvious importance in locating Gandhāran works in relation to each other and understanding the development of their tradition. They are also centrally important in any effort to interpret the relationship between Gandhāran art at its Graeco-Roman relations. For example, the availability of relatively fixed dates for sculptures found in the Swat Valley has demonstrated that at least some of the earliest Gandhāran sculptures, confidently placed at least as early as the mid first century AD, are the least ‘classical’ in appearance; their linear, somewhat abstract style, which Domenico Faccenna dubbed the ‘drawing style’ (*stile disegnativo*) is more closely related to contemporary narrative sculpture in India than to the Hellenistic Greek or Roman traditions (Filigenzi 2006; 2008; Faccenna 1964).

Besides absolute chronology, however, Gandhāran art is surrounded by other, more subtle problems of chronological interpretation. Firstly, it is surprisingly difficult to construct a relative chronology of Gandhāran art. Certain broad assumptions are generally accepted: that the narrative reliefs which attract so much attention within the study of Gandhāran art are a comparatively early phenomenon (let us say, c. first and second centuries AD), which gradually yields to an emphasis, in the adornment of stupas and other devotional reliefs, on the image of the Buddha himself as a transcendental figure, largely detached from history, in iconic, frontal representations. Kurt Behrendt’s use of architectural history lends weight to the perception of this trend (Behrendt 2003). Similarly, it is widely assumed that the numerous extant stucco and terracotta sculptures, many of which are markedly classical in appearance, are characteristic of the later tradition in the sculpture of the Greater Gandhāran region (the chapter in this volume by Anna Filigenzi and Luca Olivieri casts some light on the emergence of these sculptures). Nevertheless, beyond such generalizations, it is almost impossible to position the surviving sculptures with any confidence in a coherent narrative of stylistic development, a challenge which Juhyung Rhi’s paper seeks to explore using images of the Buddha.

Other chronological questions remain open. Why did the flourishing tradition of figural, architectural decoration that we call ‘Gandhāran sculpture’ emerge when it did? Why not earlier, given that narrative Buddhist art is so strikingly attested at early Indian sites such as Bharhut, Sanchi and whose foundations could be dated to some time between the third and second centuries BC (Cunningham 1854; 1879; Maisey 1892; Hawkes 2008; Willis 2000; Mackenzie 1823; Elliot 1872; Shimada 2013). How should Gandhāran art be calibrated with neighbouring artistic traditions and later developments in the art of Central Asia?

Are our methodological tools, such as the traditional art-historical mainstay of stylistic comparison, fit for purpose in the examination of a tradition like that of Gandhāra? And how should we try to reconcile different methodologies, particularly methodologies derived from the diverse disciplines implicated in the study of Gandhāra – archaeology, art history, numismatics, epigraphy, Buddhology, philology and literary studies – when they converge on the chronology of Gandhāran art? Such questions were in the minds of the contributors to the Gandhāra Connections workshop and inform many of the observations in their chapters presented here.

A notable result of the workshop was that new problems were highlighted even as some of the older ones came closer to resolution. For example, if the date of Kanishka or the character of post-Kushan sculpture came into focus through new analysis and fieldwork, some of the old assumptions were unsettled by scrutiny of the relationship between Gandhāra and India. As a consequence we expect and hope that these proceedings will do as much to stimulate debate and further investigation, as to solidify the existing foundations of the subject. This introduction is intended to sketch the background of what follows and no further summary of the chapters is offered here. They will speak for themselves. It remains only to say that their order broadly reflects the themes outlined above. The initial three chapters look closely at the contributions that different forms of evidence can make to the study of chronology – numismatics (Cribb), the sculptures themselves (Rhi), and inscriptions on other artefacts (Baums). The focus then shifts to relevant archaeological evidence from specific sites, including results of recent fieldwork (Olivieri and Filigenzi, Rienjang), and then to a consideration of chronological problems in relation to material from India which complicates the story (Zin, Lo Muzio, Bracey). Finally, Kurt Behrendt's concluding chapter takes account of a later period of construction and reconstruction at Buddhist sites during the third to fifth centuries AD, challenging us to see the extant evidence through the lens of a flourishing late period of devotional activity, after the time of the Kushans.

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