Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art

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On the relationship between Gandhāran toilet-trays and the early Buddhist art of northern India

Ciro Lo Muzio

Although there are reasons to suspect that they might have had nothing to do with cosmetics, an alternative and unanimously accepted denomination for Gandhāran 'toilet-trays' is still lacking. For this reason, in this paper I will refer to them using the traditional, though unsatisfactory name.

What we are certain of is that they are a class of artefacts peculiar to Gandhāra, and that their chronology is far from being settled. They are commonly understood as dating from before, perhaps not long before, the inception of Gandhāran Buddhist art, but there are reasons to think that part of this production might have been coeval with Gandhāran sculpture.

Their formal layout and the thematic repertoire of the subjects worked in relief on their inner face has been described and classified in a number of studies.[1] The patently classical inspiration of the themes and motifs depicted in a fairly good number of specimens has made 'toilet-trays' particularly appealing to Western scholars. Along with mythological scenes, sometimes linked with or hinting at Dionysism, there are ritual ceremonies, banquets, and single symbolic figures or motifs, above all the Nereid mounted on a sea-monster. A significant number of trays, however, do not show any straightforward relationship with classical imagery, thus inviting us to search for suitable parallels elsewhere, a stimulus which has so far received a much weaker response. It seems that the search for Alexander's legacy is still a polarizing factor.

Another debated question, as anticipated in the first lines of this paper, is the very function of these artefacts: the assumption that they are to be understood as cosmetic trays goes back to John Marshall (1951, I: 190; II: 493), after whom they have been labelled 'toilet-trays', or equivalent formulas in other languages, by the majority of authors. Marshall's hypothesis gained further support from Henri-Paul Francfort, author of one of the first comprehensive studies on the topic (Francfort 1979), who restated their cosmetic function, dismissing any direct link with religion.

Since then other authors, including myself, have dealt with toilet-trays pointing out iconographic elements, which seem to refer to the eschatological realm or to marriage, or both. More recently, the scope of the discussion has been enriched by Harry Falk, who offers interesting arguments for linking Gandhāran 'libation trays', as he proposes to name them, with the ritual sphere (Falk 2010). Falk's hypothesis is perhaps more in keeping with the general orientation of the subjects, but leaves room for further elaboration with regard to the specific context – funerary rites or marriage or otherwise – in which they might have been used.

In an article of a few years ago (Lo Muzio 2011), I argued that the evaluation of the classical component in the iconography, in the style, and in the workmanship of Gandhāran toilet-trays is perhaps not the best method to reach safe results in chronology, especially when one keeps to the assumption that the classical component basically (or exclusively) stems from the Indo-Greek cultural layer, as seems to be the case with the majority of scholars who have dealt with toilet-trays.

[1] Marshall 1951, II: 493-498; Francfort 1979; Dar 1979; Tanabe 2002; Lo Muzio 2002; 2011; Falk 2010; Pons 2011.

Based on George Erdosy's reassessment of the chronology of Taxila (as formulated by John Marshall) (Erdosy 1990), I made some remarks on the chronology of the toilet-trays unearthed in Sirkap, a significant sample of the whole evidence at our disposal, that I will summarize as follows:

1. No toilet-tray can be dated with certainty before the end of the Indo-Greek period; we are therefore left to wonder if it still makes sense to situate the beginning of this 'minor art' during Greek rule (Lo Muzio 2011: 338).

2. The bulk of Sirkap toilet-trays were found in layers IV to I, a chronological span extending from the reign of Azes I (mid-first century BC) to the epoch of the Great Kushans. A point which is worth being stressed is that the highest concentration of finds (nineteen toilet-trays) was recorded in layer II, which covers the first century AD and the first two or three decades of the second; if our understanding of the chronology of Gandhāran art is correct, then these toilet-trays are coeval with Gandhāran Buddhist sculpture; furthermore, a Roman component in their classical repertoire should not therefore be ruled out (Lo Muzio 2011: 338-339).

One may question the accuracy of John Marshall's digging method and stratigraphies, as of any other excavation carried out in the early twentieth century, yet the Sirkap specimens are the source of the few objective data – an ascertained place of provenance and a chronological span, however approximate it may be – that we have at our disposal for Gandhāran toilet-trays altogether.

As announced in the title, the aim of this paper is to highlight elements of a so far unnoticed or underrated iconographic relationship, along with their possible chronological implications, between Gandhāran toilet-trays and the art of Bharhut, Bodhgayā, Sanchi (more specifically, Stūpa 2), and Mathurā. All these sites are traditionally held as emblematic examples of Buddhist architecture and art of the second – early first centuries BC, and historically related with the Śunga dynasty. Both assumptions, however, are now disputed: the historical relationship with the Śungas is no longer taken for granted, and, broadly speaking, the chronological framework in which the sites have been distributed is being reconsidered on epigraphic and art-historical grounds (see further below).

I will focus on a selection of toilet-trays unearthed at Sirkap (Taxila), plus a few cognate specimens from other Gandhāran sites, which share style, workmanship, and a rather limited range of thematic choices – drinking couples or animals – most often set on the background of a lotus blossom (or a half-lotus). They form a coherent group, which is probably to be attributed to a single workshop (or to related workshops) and is the expression of a specific social and/or ethnic group, possibly – as I guess – of Śaka origin. An important point to underscore is that the *origin* of the motifs I will deal with is not at issue: most of them (especially the zoomorphic repertoire, except for the elephant) were part of a remote Greek or Western Asian legacy, which, through the Achaemenians, had some impact on South Asian architecture and sculpture well before Alexander the Great's heirs established their power in the Gandhāran area. What matters most to me is to point out the occurrence of certain motifs in Gandhāran toilet-trays and in the art of northern Indian Buddhist sites, to highlight their iconographic and formal similarities as well as the peculiar combinations in which they can appear. The following overview will hopefully bring evidence of a closer relationship between early Gandhāran art and the traditions of the Gangetic plain, also from a chronological viewpoint.

I will start with one of the leading motifs, the full-blown lotus flower, which often appears on the backside of the trays and, in a significant part of the specimens we know, on the inner surface as well. Being meant for containing something, even if we do not know what exactly, toilet-trays never show the lotus in its complete shape, as there are usually one or more lintels splitting the tray into discrete decorated and undecorated portions. There are a number of combinations, one of the most frequent

Figure 1. Toilet-tray: drinking couple, Sirkap. Taxila Museum. (After Francfort 1979: pl. XXXI, no. 62, courtesy of DAFA)

Figure 2. Toilet-tray: drinking couple. Location unknown. (After Francfort 1979: pl. XLI, no. 82, courtesy of DAFA)

Figure 3. Toilet-tray: drinking couple. Taxila Museum. (After Francfort 1979: pl. XXXVIII, no. 77, courtesy of DAFA)

Figure 4. Toilet-tray: drinking couple. Unknown provenance. London, British Museum. (Drawing by Ciro Lo Muzio.)

shows a couple (or one or more animals) represented in the upper half of the tray (Figure 1); a more elaborated layout consists of a grid based on a cruciform pattern, with the couple (or animal) appearing in the central square (Figure 2).[2] An interesting variant is provided by a few specimens in which the lotus takes the shape of a solar symbol with a row of drinking couples, either as full standing figures or as busts, arranged in the spaces between the rays (Figure 3); a more emphatic solar twist is shown by the layout of a specimen of unknown provenance, now in the British Museum, which for iconography and workmanship seems to fit in the Sirkap group (Figure 4).

[2] See also Francfort 1979, XLI: no. 83, from the Taxila area. To the same typology belongs a toilet-tray from Uḍegrām (Swat), showing three human busts (Taddei 1966; Francfort 1979: pl. XL, no. 83).

Figure 5. Two medallions of the Bharhut stūpa railing with a human bust on the background of a lotus flower: a man (left) and a woman holding a mirror (right). Kolkata, Indian Museum. (After Coomaraswamy 1956: pl. 38, 112 and 114.)

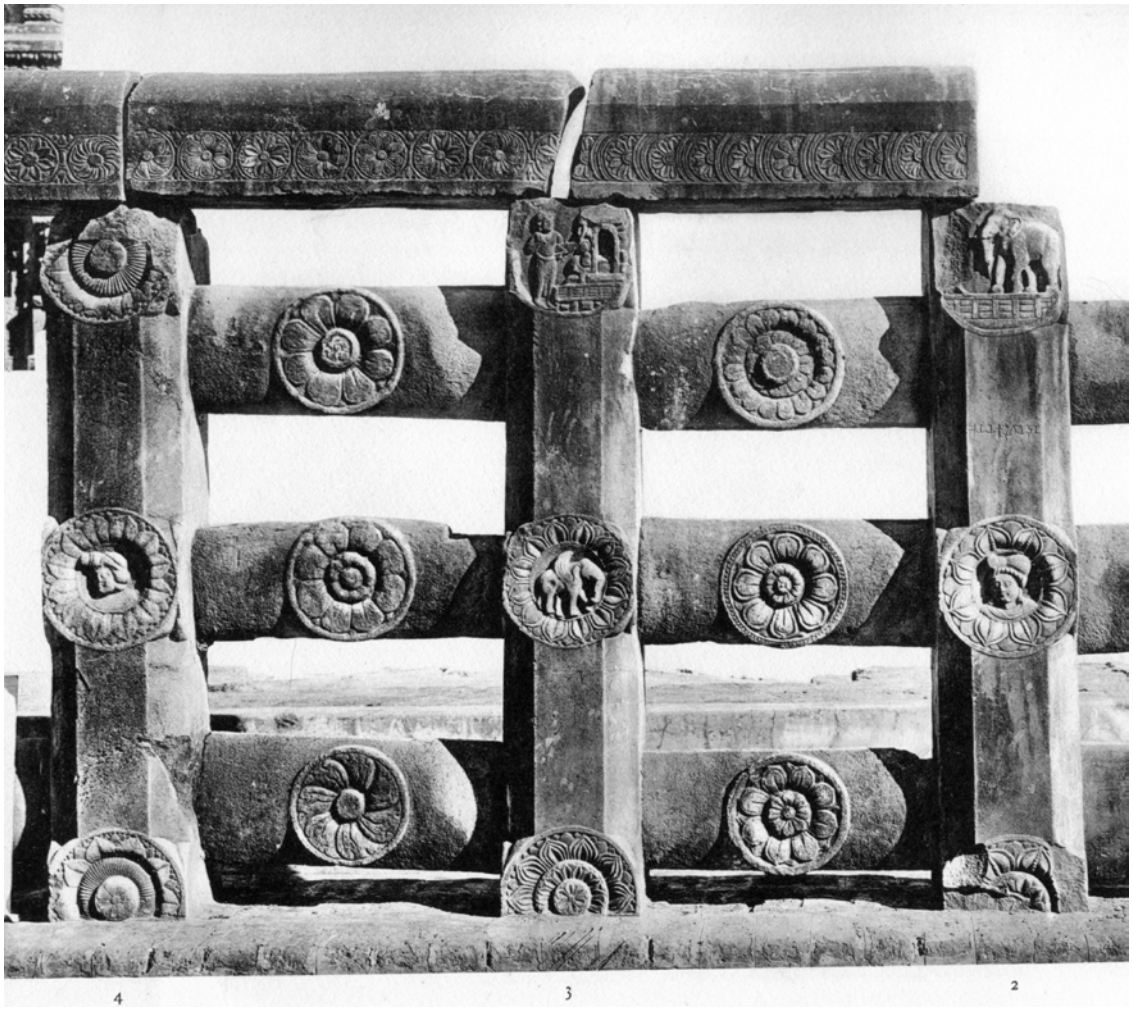

Figure 6. Part of the Bodhgayā railing. After Coomaraswamy 1935: pl. II.)

Figure 7. Sanchi, Stūpa 2, vedikā: medallion showing a male bust on the background of a lotus flower. (Photo: courtesy of Flavia Zaghet.)

Figure 8. Butkara, Indo-Corinthian capital with human bust: a woman holding a mirror. (After Faccenna 1962-64: II/3, pl. DXLIX.)

The lotus is largely employed in the Gandhāran ornamental repertoire too, most often in scrolls or in combination with garlands, whereas, if used as an isolated pattern, it mostly appears in diminutive scale, if compared with the Indian practice. What matters most, however, is that all the subjects we have listed above can be found in Gandhāran sculpture as well, but *not* on the background of an open lotus blossom. On the contrary, this combination was much in favour at Bharhut (Figure 5), Bodhgayā (Figure 6), and, although to a lesser extent, at Sanchi 2 (Figure 7) and Mathurā (Quintanilla 2007: 71, figs. 66, 67). It seems as if, in Gandhāran sculpture, the pattern of the human bust emerging from a lotus flower was transferred into a different setting, i.e. the pseudo-Corinthian capitals, with busts emerging from the acanthus leaves (Figure 8).[3]

Figure 9. Toilet-tray(?) from Bārāma (Swat). (Photo: Courtesy Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan.)

As I anticipated, the toilet-trays belonging to this group regularly show a couple, whereas in northern India we typically find the bust of a single personage, either male or female. Nonetheless, there is at least one artefact of ascertained provenance, a toilet-tray or, more likely, a sort of medallion (diam. 7 cm.), from Domenico Faccenna's excavations at Bārāma, in the Swat valley (Figure 9)[4], showing a single turbaned male bust in a lotus blossom; the rim is damaged, but traces of the petals outline as well as stamens can still be discerned in some spots. The similarity with the Indian model of lotus medallion framing a human figure is, in this case, very close.

The acknowledgment of iconographic parallels between a group of toilet-trays, on one side, and the reliefs on the *vedikā*s of Bharhut and related sites, on the other, is all the more interesting because, apart from very few exceptions[5], toilet-trays are or, at least, seem to be largely unrelated to Buddhism, unless we give credit to Katsumi Tanabe, who claims that the funerary orientation we infer in a large part of toilet-trays is nothing but an allusion to *nirvāṇa* or to the Buddhist paradise (Tanabe 2002). In other words, Tanabe thinks of a Buddhist repertoire disguised in Hellenistic or Western garments, an explanation which is not easy to agree with.

Yet, in the semantic frame of Gandhāran toilet-trays, the lotus, a symbol of transcendence, otherworldliness, might have taken a more specific funerary or eschatological meaning, which is implicit in the Buddhist context as well. After all, the lotus was thought to be a most appropriate pattern to be carved on the lids of Buddhist reliquaries.

We can point out analogies in the animal repertoire as well. Unlike the elephant – a ubiquitous subject in northern Indian sites, but, to my knowledge, still unrecorded in toilet-trays – horses and lions, either winged or not, and sea-monsters are found both in toilet-trays and on the *vedikā*s of Bharhut, Bodhgayā

[3] For more specimens from Butkara (Swat), see Faccenna 1962-64, II/3: pls. DXLVII ff.
[4] The item is unpublished. On the Bārāma excavations, see Faccenna 1964-65.
[5] Cf. Francfort 1979: 70-71 (nos. 96 and 97), pl. XLVII.

Figure 10. Toilet-tray with winged lions. From Sirkap. (After Francfort 1979: pl. XX, no. 40, courtesy of DAFA)

Figure 11. Medallion from the Bharhut vedikā. Kolkata, Indian Museum. (After Coomaraswamy 1956: pl. XXXIX, fig. 118.)

and cognate sites.[6] We are not just dealing with the co-occurrence of similar motifs: there is little doubt that the Sirkap toilet-tray with winged lions running in circle (Figure 10) (as well as the replica found at Charsadda, in the Peshawar Museum, possibly from the same workshop, Francfort 1979: pl. XX, no. 39) is closely related in concept, style, and, we may guess, semantic associations with a medallion of the Bharhut *vedikā* (Figure 11).

Going back to humans, a few more intriguing concomitances can be pointed out. Two toilet-trays from Sirkap are thought to depict a drunken Dionysus supported by two female figures, possibly maenads (Figure 12).[7] Given the classical orientation of so many toilet-trays, this has always been assumed to be the most obvious explanation, although in classical imagery a drunken Dionysus is generally supported by a satyr or Silenus.[8] Curiously enough, the only representations of a drunken Dionysus supported by two Maenads I could find in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* are those listed in the section dedicated to Gandhāran art, namely the two toilet-trays for which such an interpretation has been assumed in Gandhāran studies (Augé 1986: 521, nos. 78-80; cf. respectively, Francfort 1979: nos. 13, 19, 25).

I wonder if we should rather guess a relationship with a very close iconographic scheme – a central male figure (who does not seem to be drunk) flanked by two females, and often with his arms around their shoulders – recorded at Sanchi (railing of Sanchi 2,[9] Figure 13, and southern *toraṇa* at Sanchi 1,[10] where it is thought to illustrate Mara's despair for having being defeated,[11] or Aśoka's grief for the decay of the

[6] As for toilet-trays (from Sirkap or other sites, or of unknown provenance), see Francfort 1979: pls. XIX (no. 38), XX (nos. 39, 40), XXIII (no. 45), XXV (no. 50), XXVI (nos. 51, 52), XXVIII (no. 55), XXXIII (no. 67), XXXIV (nos. 68, 69), XXXV (nos. 70, 71), XXXVI (no. 72), XXXVII (nos. 74, 75), XXXVIII (no. 76), XLII (nos. 84, 85), XLIII (no. 86), XLV (no. 90). At Bharhut: Coomaraswamy 1956: pls. 34 (figs. 95, 97), 39 (118, 119, 121); at Bodhgayā: Coomaraswamy 1935: pls. II-V, VI, IX-XIII, XV, XVI, XIX, XXXVII.

[7] For the second specimen, from Barikot (Swat), in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see Francfort 1979: no. 25, pl. XIII.

[8] Cf. Gasparri 1986: 453 (nos. 320-324), 448-450 (nos. 262-264, 267).

[9] The scene illustrated here belongs to the latest phase of Stūpa 2, which is probably related with the Stūpa 1 *toraṇa*s.

[10] Marshall–Foucher 1940, III: pl. 79.

[11] Schlingloff 1988: 7, figs. 6 and 7.

Figure 12. Toilet-tray from Sirkap.
(After Francfort 1979: pl. VII, no. 13, courtesy of DAFA)

bodhi tree[12]), Bodhgayā (Coomaraswamy 1935: pl. XXXIII, right), Mathurā (on a railing post from Kankālī Ṭīlā, cf. Quintanilla 2007: 71, figs. 66, 67, who assimilates the relief to the category of 'amorous scenes'), as well as, although much later, in a huge number of *virakal*s (or 'hero-stones'), in Medieval Deccan and southern India (Figure 14).[13] The most common layout of such funerary *stelae* consists of three (sometimes four) panels in a vertical row. Each panel shows a scene according to a well-established sequence, which, starting from the bottom, illustrates the circumstances of the hero's death, the dead hero ascending into Heaven accompanied by two (sometimes more) *apsarases*, and, in the uppermost panel, the hero in Heaven (*śivaloka*) worshipping a Śiva *linga*. The 'hero accompanied by the *apsarases*' is an overtly eschatological motif illustrating a most sought-after reward for Indian warriors,[14] and, in its iconographic layout, bears a strong resemblance with the scenes claimed to represent a 'drunken Dionysus', on toilet-trays, and Aśoka's (or Mara's) grief or an amorous trio at Sanchi, Bodhgayā, and Mathurā. A curious detail is worth mentioning: the posture of the male figure in one of the Sirkap trays (Figure 12), with his legs slightly bent and turned aside, as if stepping towards the right, seems to anticipate the standardized manner in which the hero ascending into Heaven (who is not supposed to be drunk) is portrayed in *virakals*.

Whether we are dealing with one and the same iconographic pattern, charged with different meanings depending on the contexts it occurs in, or with an iconographic archetype implying an eschatological association, whatever the cultural, religious and chronological contexts of its depictions, is a question which requires further research. It seems undeniable, however, that we deal with a *longue durée* iconographic pattern, which can be listed among the links between Gandhāran toilet-trays and the South-Asian artistic and symbolic *lexicon*.

I will close this overview with a piece of evidence provided by the Stūpa 2 *vedikā* at Sanchi (Figure 15): a relief showing a male figure of north-western or Central Asian origins, as revealed by his attire: a tight sleeved tunic with folds rendered with parallel lines forming a chevron-like motif along the arms. But for a few details, the figure, possibly depicting a Śaka, strongly recalls the members of a drinking couple in a toilet-tray in the British Museum (Figure 4): same tunic, same chevron pattern on the sleeves (and, in the toilet-tray, also on the 'solar' motif framing the couple), a very similar hair treatment, and eyelids in strong relief, a detail which is not found in other human figures on the same *vedikā*.

Some final remarks on the chronological implications of this sketchy overview. If the bulk of the subjects and motifs discussed in this paper appear in toilet-trays roughly dating from the first century AD, we should infer a rather long chronological distance from their Indian parallels, i.e. 100 to 200 years, depending on the specific site and on the subjective views held by scholars for each of them.

[12] Lahiri 2015: 296, fig. Epilogue 1.

[13] The main reference work on these artefacts is still Settar–Sontheimer 1982. For a recent research on memorial stones in Maharashtra, see Trinco 2015.

[14] For the literary background of this theme, including the *Mahābhārata*, Kālidāsa's plays and other sources, see Hara 2001.

Figure 13. Sanchi, Stūpa 2, vedikā*: a man resting his arms on the shoulders of two women. (Photo: courtesy of Flavia Zaghet.)*

Figure 14. 'Hero-stone', Kumbharvalan (Pune District, Maharashtra, India). (Photo: courtesy Letizia Trinco.)

Figure 15. Sanchi, Stūpa 2, vedikā*: male figure in Central Asian or north-western attire. (Photo: courtesy Flavia Zaghet.)*

As I anticipated, the relationship between the Indian Buddhist sites I have referred to above and the Śunga period is now a debated issue. The assumption of their Śunga association derives almost exclusively by the reading of an inscription on the sole preserved *toraṇa* of the Bharhut *stūpa*. It records the name of one Dhanabhūti, who is reputed to be a Śunga feudatory or a chief coeval with the Śunga rule on account of the words '*Suganam raje*', in which 'Suga', at first identified by A. Cunningham as 'Srughna', in the upper course of the Yamuna (Cunningham 1879: 128-129), has been later assumed to mean 'Śunga' (Barua 1934-37, I: 29-36). Based on this assumption, Bharhut is dated to the Śunga epoch (184-82 BC), preferably to *c*. 150 BC or, at the latest, before the end of the same century. The chronology of the other sites, Sanchi (Stūpa 2), Bodhgayā, and the earliest sculptures from Mathurā, mostly depends on this *terminus post quem*; the periods of their respective flourishing are distributed during a period of fifty to one hundred years (with Bharhut's peculiar style as a starting point) in a linear sequence based upon stylistic analysis (in the case of Bodhgayā and Mathurā also on controversial epigraphic evidence[15]). The analysis is mainly ruled by a criterion that we may summarize in the formula 'the flatter, the earlier'; in other words, the more in the round the figures are worked, the later their date. The flatness of the reliefs is therefore taken as a primary diagnostic tool, and one of the main reasons for asserting that between Bharhut and Sanchi 2 we cannot guess a significant chronological distance; one may wonder why the substantial differences between the two *st*ūpas in the richness and complexity of the repertoire as well as in the narrative modes, iconographic choices, and technical refinement seem, on the contrary, to have no bearing in the chronological analysis. As a matter of fact, a chronological sequence may not be the only possible approach to explain the diverse artistic orientations witnessed in the ancient Buddhist sites of northern India, or, at least, not the most appropriate.

In fact, there are good reasons to suspect that the attribution of Bharhut to the Śunga epoch, with all its consequent effects, rests on shaky grounds. The refreshing overview of the numismatic and epigraphic evidence of the post-Maurya period offered by Shailendra Bhandare (2006) – including a re-assessment of the data concerning the Śunga dynasty – reveals the weakness of the historical reconstruction we have taken for granted for a long time. On the art-historical side, Frederick Asher declares all his scepticism about the evolutionary pattern of the traditional reconstruction we have summarized above (Asher 2006). He rightly argues that what we commonly interpret as differences in style, iconography and narrative mode due to a gradual transformation, occurred during a certain time span, should be rather explained on a regional base, that is as results of local idiosyncrasies of distinct workshops, rather than distinct phases of a linear artistic development (Asher 2006: 61-63).

A further step on this issue has been more recently taken by Ajit Kumar (2014), who reconsiders all evidence, epigraphic and art-historical, and redraws the historical scenario to which Bharhut and cognate sites more plausibly belong. Kumar rejects the current interpretation of the Bharhut Dhanabhūti inscription and revives Cunningham's reading (*Suga-* stands for Srughna/Sug; therefore, no relationships with the Śungas is to be inferred). Kumar argues that the earliest Buddhist sites of the Gangetic plain – which, in spite of the differences, show a significant range of stylistic and iconographic consistencies – belong to a political landscape made of a series of small principalities, ruled by chieftains who referred to themselves as *rāja*, had names ending in *-mitra*, *-datta* and *-bhūti*, as we know from inscriptions and coins, and established a confederacy among themselves and with the Śaka/Kṣatrapa; a scenario which, according to Kumar, corresponds with a period starting no earlier than the beginning of the Common Era, and covering the first two to three decades of the first century AD (Kumar 2014: 237-239).

[15] On the Bodhgayā inscriptions supposedly bearing evidence of a link with the Śunga kingdom, see Asher 2006: 59-59, note 9. On the Dhanabhūti recorded at Mathurā, and on whether he should be considered identical with the Bharhut's donor bearing the same name, see Asher 2006: 58; Bhandare 2006: 58, 76-77: Quintanilla 2007: 10-13; Kumar 2014: 224-226, 237, 238; Milligan 2015: 7.

Finally comes the new evidence provided by Milligan (2015) on the relative chronology of Sanchi Stūpas 2 and 1. The author points out a number of cases in which the name of one and the same donor (identified also by its profession and place of origin) occurs in inscriptions in both *stūpas*. This demonstrates that we should not postulate a chronological distance between the two monuments longer than a reasonable human life span (in ancient India). If we add the epigraphic evidence which seems to link Sanchi Stūpa 2 with the Bharhut *vedikā* (Milligan 2015: 20-21), the periods of architectural and artistic activities of the three *stūpas* 'could have been closer together than previously thought' (Milligan 2015: 21). The chronological span within which we should distribute the *stūpas* of Bharhut, Sanchi 2 and 1 may therefore start around the mid-first century BC and end in the early first century AD (which is the date assumed for the completion of Sanchi 1).

It is evident that a healthy revision of the history of early Buddhist art and architecture in the Gangetic plain has started. The issue clearly asks for further research based on a multidisciplinary approach but, should this historical and chronological reassessment of early Buddhist art in northern Indian sites prove right, the iconographic similarities with Gandhāran toilet-trays I have been highlighting in this preliminary overview would make sense also from a chronological viewpoint.

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