

Gandharan Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, Texts

Pia Brancaccio and Kurt Behrendt, editors

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At a conference some years ago at McMaster University, an attendee exclaimed that anyone who begins to study Gandharan history immediately enters a universe unto itself, from which it is impossible to climb out. This volume offers a glimpse into that universe. “Gandharan Buddhism,” a contentious phrase in its own right, refers to the Buddhisms that arose in parts of Northern Pakistan and Eastern Afghanistan, especially in the Kusana era and directly following. These varieties of Buddhism are important for understanding the development of Buddhism outside of India, its growth in Central Asia, and its transmission into China.

The articles in this volume were first presented at a 1999 conference at McMaster University and the University of Toronto, organized by Phyllis Granoff, Koichi Shinohara, and Neil Kreitman. They are here divided into three sections: Archaeology, Texts, and Art. The volume contains over 100 black and white photographs (both familiar and new); these are clear and found throughout. The Introduction is brief and, unfortunately, does little to synthesize the results of the articles that follow; the editors rightly stress, however, the need for more interdisciplinary work on Gandharan Buddhism. A Prologue by John Rosenfield augments the Introduction with an assessment of some of the major conceptual issues in the study of Gandharan Buddhism and its place in Kusana history. In particular, Rosenfield appeals for caution when applying the term “Mahayana,” which emerged slowly in this region; most Gandharan art, he suggests, represents earlier types of Buddhism (24).

The three articles in Part One consider archaeological evidence from Gandharan Buddhist centres. The article by the late Maurizio Taddei, to whom the volume is dedicated, presents recent archaeological evidence in light of Gandharan sculpture. Taddei stresses context, above all, for the interpretation of art and text; this is important for more accurate dating, for establishing how archaeological layers developed and evolved over time, and for exploring how objects are reused and redeployed as the community grew (48). Pierfrancesco Callieri’s contribution presents an excellent discussion of the Gandharan urban culture where Buddhism was transformed from an elite, peripheral movement to one involved at the popular, cult level, as told by the integration of domestic clay votive objects. Kurt Behrendt investigates relics in situ, complimenting Robert Brown’s article on relics in Part Three.

The two articles in Part Two discuss the most under-worked area of Gandharan Buddhism, namely, the textual evidence. Shoshin Kuwayama presents a masterful

study of biographies of Gandharan translator-monks who travelled to China. This evidence, as he shows, can tell us much about the transmission of Buddhism in its declining years at Gandhara. Richard Salomon offers a solid overview and assessment of past and current projects reconstructing Kharosthi and Brahmi birch-bark manuscripts, the earliest of which date to the first century CE.

Part Three, dedicated to art, constitutes more than half the entire volume. Robert Brown reconsiders the contents and meaning of reliquaries by considering a narrative about Drona, a Brahman who divides the relics of the “historical” Buddha. Doris Srinivasan analyzes the incorporation of regional flora and furniture styles. Her article stands out for its bold assessments of the artisan and indigenous traditions influencing Gandharan Buddhism. While Srinivasan perhaps lacks precision in her results, the editors might have taken her lead in postulating a picture of the indigenous scene that Gandharan Buddhism partially moulded and transformed. Complimenting Srinivasan’s approach, Ellen Raven assesses recent scholarship on Buddhist Kusana coin iconography and points to new regional developments that emerged apart from those derived from India at Mathura. In addition, Pia Brancaccio considers Buddhist arches, and Anna Filigenzi explores possible correlations between Ananda and Vajrapani. Juhyung Rhi presents a somewhat dated analysis of Bodhisattvas, especially Maitreya. Anna Maria Quagliotti analyzes comb motifs in narrative reliefs.

Until recently, art historians have dominated the study of Gandharan Buddhism, and far less attention has been paid to the archaeological find-sites from which the data originates. Textual and epigraphical materials have also suffered neglect. It is unfortunate, therefore, that this volume replicates this dominant trend. The section on texts might have been expanded, for instance, to include the innovative current research being pursued by Salomon’s collaborators in the Early Buddhist Manuscript Project (e.g., Timothy Lentz and Mark Allon). Nevertheless, there are some excellent articles, and the volume provides a useful overview of scholarly trends from the past twenty years. This book will be particularly helpful to scholars of Buddhism and those interested in comparative religion in Central Asia.

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