# THE TECHNOLOGY OF CLASSICAL NATURALISM IN ANCIENT RELIGIOUS IMAGES?*

*Peter Stewart*[**]

***Abstract:*** *The characteristic forms of Graeco-Roman naturalism, first developed in late Archaic and Classical Greece and ultimately inherited by the Roman world, could reasonable be viewed as a sort of artistic 'technology' within religious imagery, facilitating the efficacy of the cult image as a proxy for a god. This is true even for the Roman period when the heritage of Greek styles and conventions had become a highly conventionalized and conservative 'language' for religious representation. Nevertheless, the utility of classical naturalism as a representational strategy in such images had its limits. An interesting sidelight is cast on this issue by considering the ancient Buddhist art of Gandhara in Central/South Asia, which adopted the conventions of classical naturalism afresh, in order to invent the anthropomorphic image of the superhuman yet superlatively humane Buddha. The Gandharan case illustrated the undiminished potential of this visual tradition in the early centuries AD.*

***Keywords:*** *classical art; Gandharan art; Buddha; cult images; naturalism.*

## A TECNOLOGIA DO NATURALISMO CLÁSSICO EM IMAGENS RELIGIOSAS ANTIGAS?

***Resumo:*** *As formas características do naturalismo greco-romano, desenvolvidas na Grécia arcaica e clássica e, em linhas gerais, herdadas pelo mundo romano, podem ser coerentemente vistas como um tipo de "tecnologia" artística na qual a imagética religiosa incrementa a eficácia da imagem de culto como representante de um deus. Isso é válido mesmo para o período romano, no qual a herança dos estilos e padrões gregos tornou-se uma linguagem altamente convencional e conservadora para a representação religiosa. Contudo, a utilidade do naturalismo clássico como uma estratégia representacional compreendida nesses termos tem seus limites. Sobre essa questão, uma interessante comparação é observar*

* Recebido em: 17/07/2021 e aprovado em: 25/10/2021.

** Professor do Classical Art Research Centre da University of Oxford, no Ioannou Centre for Classical and Byzantine Studies. E-mail: peter.stewart@classics.ox.ac.uk. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6460-540X.

*a arte budista de Gândara na Ásia Central e Sul, que também adotou as convenções do naturalismo clássico a fim de inventar a imagem antropomórfica de um Buda sobre-humano, ainda que superlativamente humano. O caso de Gândara ilustra o potencial inalterado dessa tradição visual nos primeiros séculos da era comum.*

***Palavras-chave:*** *arte clássica; arte de Gândara; Buda; imagens de culto; naturalismo.*

The question-mark in the title of this paper is important, for its purpose is both to raise and interrogate a hypothesis, namely that the naturalistic style which is a hallmark of classical art had a particular religious utility in the creation of ancient cult images, even in the Roman imperial period, long after that style was invented. Ultimately, my response to that hypothesis will be mixed and it will take account of a broader than usual – or perhaps rather, 'eccentric' – range of evidence, from the fringes of the Roman world, broadly defined, and even the art of Central Asia.

It is important to emphasize that the term 'classical style' is employed as shorthand. It stands here for the repertoire of styles and representational devices that characterize the Graeco-Roman artistic tradition from around the early fifth century BC onwards: that is to say, the repertoire of conventions for representing subjects naturalistically, in a manner that is selectively true to life. Classical naturalism involves the observation of bodies and movement, of anatomy and space, conjuring up the impression of reality rather than relying predominantly on abstract formulae and schemata. However, in classical Greece and, to a greater or lesser extent, throughout the development of Graeco-Roman art, this sense of reality was balanced by idealization. So, naturalism is a matter of conventionalized *plausibility* more than *realism*.

Classical naturalism took diverse forms. In different periods and circumstances this mode of representation was employed at different 'frequencies', so to speak, for the representation of the gods with more or less realistic mimicry of human anatomy. The demands of religious representation may have been partly responsible for the development of naturalism in the first place. Its origins are a huge and controversial subject which cannot be addressed here. It is important, however, to note that in more recent years some scholars trying to explain the 'Greek revolution' which gave rise to naturalistic representations in the years around 500 BC, have seen

this formal development in functional terms, asking how social and ideological shifts drove artistic change. For example, how did naturalism serve the increasing differentiation of gods and humans?[1] Or how did it animate the athletic victory statues which flourished as elite monuments, in place of funerary display, after the end of the Archaic period (SMITH, 2007).

The word 'style' is, in fact, rather misleading in this context, because its various meanings imply habitual practices on the part of artists or cultures, whereas we *might* better think of naturalistic art as a technology, or a package of techniques – technical know-how applied to a particular practical function – rather than merely learned tendencies passed between generations of craftsmen. However, if that suggestion is plausible for the sixth and fifth centuries BC, it is harder to maintain for a period several hundred years later, when the repertoire of forms developed and elaborated by Greek artists had been inherited *en masse* by the artists of the late Roman republic and empire.

By the Roman imperial period the heritage of naturalistic styles was conservatively embedded in art, and especially in sculptural representations of gods. It is easy to regard this as an ossified classicism, and for generations that assumption contributed to the relative neglect of Roman art in scholarship. More positively, we can see the retrospection of Roman art as the transformation of a diachronic stylistic history of Greek art into a synchronic visual language, as was suggested notably in the pioneering works of Tonio Hölscher and Paul Zanker in the 1980s.[2] In other words the artists of the Roman period had at their disposal the whole range of past Greek styles, which could be deployed as appropriate in different contexts and for different subjects. Hölscher shows, for example, how those styles worked for differing kinds of divine images: archaism lending dignity and a sense of primitivism to mature images of Dionysus (Fig. 1a); or alternatively his epiphanic radiance evoked by the use of the late fourth-century BC body type, accompanied by Hellenistic-style satyr (**Fig. 1b**) (HÖLSCHER, 2004, p. 65-68).

**Figure 1**

Two Roman statues of Bacchus illustrating Tonio Hölscher's 'semantic system' of Roman art: (a) Bacchus and satyr, *c*. AD 180-200, Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (Alinari 20105); (b) archaizing work, *c*. AD 140-60, Rome, Villa Albani (Alinari 27580). (After HÖLSCHER, 2014, p. 66 and 68).

Roman cult images were especially conservative and retrospective. Not only did they employ earlier Greek styles, but they also frequently copied sculptural types which had origins in the fifth and fourth centuries BC (VERMEULE, 1987). We need only think of the most prominent example in Rome: the Jupiter Capitolinus in his temple on the Capitoline Hill, in its late republican and imperial form, which a variety of sources suggest was inspired by Pheidias's Zeus at Olympia (neither statue survives) (PERRY, 2012, p. 190-194).

While acknowledging this stylistic conservatism, we should look again at classical naturalism in this relatively late, Roman setting and ask what – if anything – such a mode of representation might have contributed to the effect of cult images, and to the way in which people experienced them and interacted with them. By 'cult images' I chiefly refer not to religious art in general, but more specifically to the sort of statues which would have stood in a temple or shrine as one of one of the main focuses of veneration, standing as a proxy for the deity. The appropriateness of the 'cult image' as a concept for explaining Graeco-Roman religion could be questioned (DONOHUE, 1997).[3] No good word or phrase exists in English to denote a statue dedicated to worship in a shrine, though the German *Tempelkultbild* captures part of the sense.[4] For the Romans these were *simulacra* or, less precisely in Greek, *agalmata*, but the terminology is slippery. I have argued elsewhere that the concept of the cult statue existed, but that the categorical boundaries were fluid and challenging even for the Romans themselves (STEWART, 2003, p. 20-28 and 189-194.).

This conceptual problem is mirrored in the difficulty of recognizing Roman cult images visually. Perhaps that is why relatively little has been written about them from an archaeological perspective. A Roman statue of a god taken out of context might be a votive, or a garden sculpture, or a religiously themed decoration for baths or some other public building. It is significant that cult images do not necessarily *look* distinctly like cult images. On the other hand, some of them do – some cult statues 'look the part'. It would be hard to imagine the statue of Minerva now in the Museo Nazionale in Rome as anything but a temple cult statue, enthroned in forbidding majesty at one end of her shrine (**Fig. 2**). Coins and representations in other media, as well as abundant literary evidence, help to evoke a wider repertoire of such images in their contexts across the empire (**Fig. 3**) (STEWART, 2003, p. 191 and 194-221 – with further references for various media).

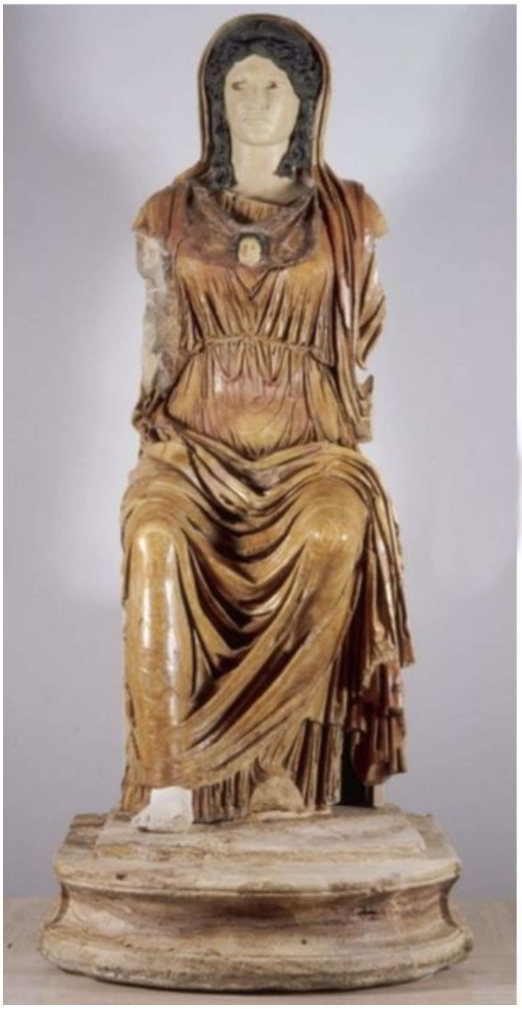

**Figure 2**

Double life-size statue of Minerva found near Via Marmorata, Rome, *c*. late first century BC to early first century AD. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (Palazzo Massimo), inv. 124495. (Photo: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma).

**Figure 3**

Silver Antoninianus of Philip the Arab, showing a statue of Roma in her temple, Antioch, AD 244-9. New York, American Numismatic Society, 1981.43.2 (Photo: ANS, Public Domain).

The goddess from Rome was found headless in 1923 near the River Tiber, about 500 m to the south-west of the Circus Maximus (GIULIANO, 1979, p. 127-128, n. 91). Its head and the gorgoneion which secure its identification were restored with a Minerva face of Carpegna type. But its restoration with extraordinarily lively polychromy, created by white Italian marble, alabaster, and basalt, give an entirely plausible impression of the original form. Its rather alarming livelikeness and its stately seated position are certainly evocative of many Roman cult images of the kind.

We do not know the particular circumstances in which ancient viewers would have encountered such statues, because the conditions of access evidently varied from one temple or sanctuary to another (CORBETT, 1970; BLIDSTEIN, 2015). But they do seem to assume a face to face encounter. Their naturalistic appearance makes them believable – and sometimes intimidating – stand-ins for the god. Of all the aspects of the deity's appearance or character that could have been communicated by the religious image, here the emphasis is on their anthropomorphic *presence*. They very much inhabit the worshipper's human world. So, it would be possible to suggest that the statues' naturalism contributes to their psychological effect.

The psychological, and indeed emotional effect of an image – its affective aspect – needs to be taken into account in any consideration of religious images. It takes us away from the formalistic view of stylistic traditions in classical art. It is a truism that images can be powerful and that this power can derived from their aesthetic configuration. Through the impact of their appearance images do not just make us feel things, they make us feel things *towards them*: awe, fear, love, affection, or indeed desire, as suggested in the realm of religion by the ancient tales of *agalmatophilia* – love of cult statues. Aside from the mythological Pygmalion, the most famous of these is the (no doubt apocryphal) story recorded by Pliny, pseudo-Lucian, and other authors about the frustrated lover of the Aphrodite of Knidos, who closeted himself with the statue so that he could make love to her. There is an abundance of textual evidence to suggest that in real life Romans interacted with statues or imagined themselves interacting with statues in accordance with the spectrum of feelings.[5]

In recent years there has been a considerable increase of art-historical and archaeological interest in the agency of objects and works of art. Particularly influential is the anthropologist Alfred Gell's posthumously published 1998 masterpiece, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (GELL, 1998).[6] It may be that Gell's model has been rather over-used,

or too lightly invoked, while the word 'agency' is sometimes diluted to the point of losing it explanatory value. Still, Gell's work remains deeply persuasive and illuminating in many respects. Among many other arguments, Gell shows in engaging terms, ranging far beyond his own specialism of Melanesian anthropology, why it *makes sense* for people to deal with images and objects within social relationships as if they are alive, inferring their agency or the agency that works through them. To present this sort of response to images as 'make believe' does not do justice to their active social role, to which the objection 'But they're not *really* alive' is scarcely relevant. I have suggested elsewhere that Gell's approach offers much to help us understand the treatment of cult images in societies that use them, and it also helps us to understand our own, everyday interactions with objects – to understand the sort of personhood and personality that artefacts assume in our lives because they give us the cues that we need to respond to them as efficacious social participants. The power of images to generate affective relationships is not limited to the sphere of religious faith nor excluded from rational modern life. To give one mundane example: when we say that a cuddly toy *looks* cute (**Fig. 4**), the active voice in the English word 'looks' has a real force (no *esse videatur* here). We do not have to evoke theories of extramission – the idea that objects are visible because of their active emission of particles or rays – to realize that it is the cuddly toy that is doing the 'looking' here, by virtue of the emotional appeal designed into its (cute) form.

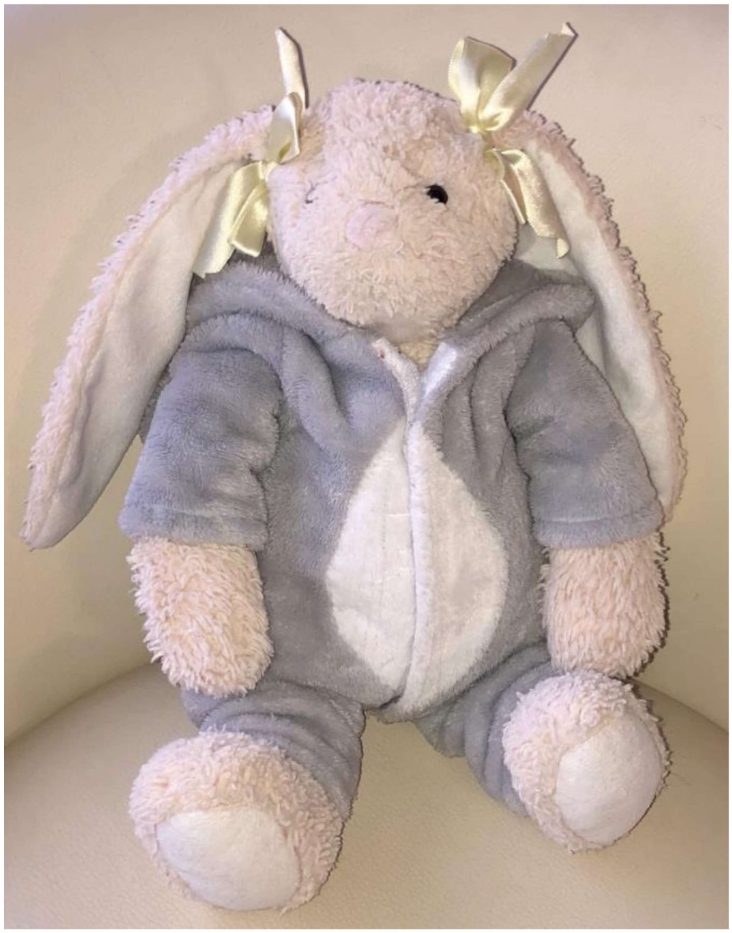

**Figure 4**
Toy rabbit (unbranded, made in China), dressed in a onesie, *c*. AD 2017. (Photo: courtesy of N. Stewart.)

Alfred Gell is explicitly little interested in iconography or style or Saussurean semiotics; he is principally concerned with what images *do* rather than what they look like or how they communicate. But the aesthetic configuration of images is important for some of his theories, and indeed he is particularly concerned in some of his writings with the 'technology of enchantment' which he believes worked through the virtuoso carved prowboards of Trobriand Islanders' canoes (GELL, 1992). In the responses to these works of art, Gell argues not only for the commercially beneficial psychological effect of their complex imagery, but more to the point, the inference of magical power behind that effect. In the utterly different domain of naturalistic, figurative representation we can argue for the same sort of mechanism of response: naturalistic images have an immediate psychological impact, but they also encourage us to infer agency behind them – in our case the agency of the god who is thus represented.

* * *

It must be admitted that classical cult images are generally not as appealing as cuddly toys. Yet in principle their design is no less relevant to their affective attraction to viewers and how that makes them think about the image's power. We might provisionally assume that their artistic strategy considerably enhances the image's capabilities.

That suggestion needs to be qualified, however. For a start, let us be clear that there are no illusionistic props or *tricks* involved in the presentation of these images (which is not to say that accessories like clothing and food were not provided for classical cult images). The statues' sculptural realism is, in fact, decidedly measured. Perhaps we should say that they are realistically represented as detached, emotionless, above real life, in marked contrast to the emotive Christian images of Jesus or the saints in the baroque tradition. Most Graeco-Roman statues of gods wore the stereotypical classical face, with ever youthful, impassive, symmetrical and unindividualized features. The poses of the enthroned gods such as those above are static, but that is not because they are unnaturalistic. Rather, it is as if they have chosen to sit still because that is what is appropriate for deities.

Nevertheless, this sort of iconography is not universal, or even the norm, for cult statues. In many other cases the naturalistic animation of the statues could be seen as a disadvantage because it forces them to strike an attitude

rather than simply sitting or standing with grandiose receptivity. Naturalistic action and movement in art can positively undermine cult statues' potential to instil reverent one-to-one engagement with the god. We might recall, for example, the many Roman images of Diana hunting; or Apollo playing the lyre; or the Praxitelean Sauroktonos (Lizard-Killer) type, which seems to have been copied for the cult image at Apollonia on the Rhyndacum, and perhaps elsewhere; or even Venus caught off guard while bathing in those countless Roman 'Pudica' figures – presumably, some of them where actual cult statues rather than just *ornamenta* for gardens or baths (**Fig. 5**).[7]

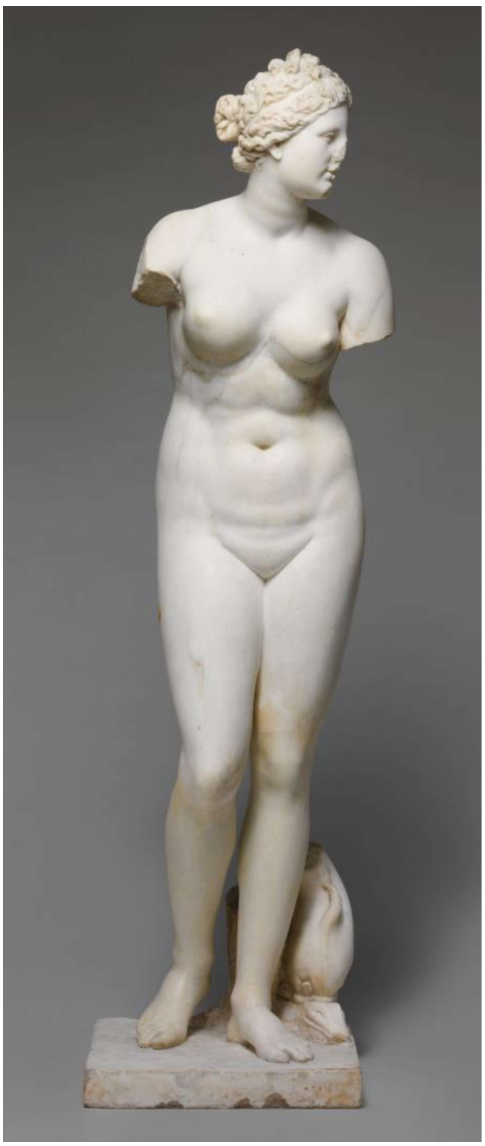

**Figure 5**

Roman statue of Venus, *c*. 1st century AD, possibly found in Italy (published as formerly in collection of Count Chamaré in Silesia). New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 52.11.5 (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, Public Domain).

In all of these cases, the viewer encountering the cult statue would have been presented with a sort of narrative tableau, or at least an opportunity to spy upon the deity in some characteristic activity. So, these sorts of naturalistic representations, while they might inspire reflection *about* the god, do not offer the same sort of direct encounter with the icon-like proxy image. These snapshots of divine action may not have carried the same sort of affective 'punch' as more restrained iconography, whatever other insight they offered into the stories and personalities of the gods.

The corollary is that the techniques of naturalistic representation have their limitations as well as benefits when it comes to conjuring up the presence of the god and facilitating communication or interaction between gods and mortals. In cultic imagery less is sometimes more. Indeed, it is worth remembering that naturalistic representational conventions are only one technology among several that could serve to animate a cult image. The ancient sources tell us sporadically about statues that were able to speak by means of concealed tubes, and of course the 'false prophet' Alexander of Abonoteichus' portable cult image, Glykon, which became famous in the second-century Empire, was animated by trickery using a windpipe of a crane (LUCIAN. *Alexander*, 26; STEWART, 2003, p. 192-193; STEWART, 2007, p. 165-166). In a seminal article of 1945, Frederik Poulsen reviewed the evidence of talking statues and other such miracles, and interpreted a head of Epicurus in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek as just such an image which had – he believed – been adapted so that mysterious pronouncements could be intoned through its mouth from behind (POULSEN, 1945). But the important thing to note is that these sorts of cases are the exceptions that prove the rule. If cult images were expected to be animated in a lively fashion, there might have been much more of this kind of deception. Instead, visual representation of lifelike divinities thrived on *inference* and *implication* – on the mere trigger to a fantasy that the statue could stand up and walk out of the room. It is a technology of evocation rather than a mechanical fraud. Otherwise, the statue really *would* appear magic, like the haunted statue of Pelichus which walks about at night in Lucian's *Philopseudes* (18-20).

So classical naturalism *can* be seen as a sort of animating technology that serves the interests of cult images, but its utility was circumscribed and should not be exaggerated. Moreover, we should not underestimate the 'beholder's share' (as Ernst Gombrich called it) in animating artefacts

(GOMBRICH, 1960). People can develop social relationships with objects that are much less elaborate than naturalistic statues. Ancient *aniconic* cult images were, in fact, especially revered, and by the second and third centuries AD we encounter numerous examples of these non-anthropomorphic cult-images receiving essentially the same kind of veneration as figural sculptures across the Roman Empire (STEWART, 2008; GAIFMAN, 2012). We do not call them 'statues' because that term is almost inseparable from anthropomorphic representation in modern languages of European origin, but in respect to people's religious interactions with them they were just like the classical, naturalistic statues, as we see from the way in which they are framed in coin representations, standing like conventional statues in the cellae of their temples (STEWART, 2008). The most celebrated example is perhaps the aniconic image of Elagabal at Emesa in Syria, whose priest became the Emperor Elagabalus in AD 218 (**Fig. 6**) (STEWART, 2008). It was probably a meteorite, though it does not survive. We may have one substantial survival of such an image in the conical form of the Aphrodite of Paphos in Cyprus, which is also represented on coins, for a worn, dark, conical stone was uncovered at the site in 1913.[8]

**Figure 6**

Bronze coin of Caracalla, showing the cult stone of Elagabal in its temple, Emesa, AD 211-17. New York, American Numismatic Society, 1961.154.68 (Photo: ANS, Public Domain).

It is hard to imagine the Paphian Aphrodite having the visceral erotic appeal reportedly exercised by the Aphrodite of Knidos, but cult images of this kind *could* be no less 'active' and actively engaged in interaction

with human beings than an anthropomorphic image. The aniconic image of Elagabal offers a good illustration. Herodian describes its chariot processions after its relocation to Rome: 'No person sat in the chariot, nor did anyone hold the reins, but they were actually fastened to the god himself, as if he were driving' (HERODIAN. 5.5.7). He adds that the emperor ran along in front, backwards, holding the six white horses' reins. To our sceptical eyes, or to Herodian's, this looks like an absurd form of play-acting which misattributes to the stone the agency which was actually exercised by the horses and the man leading them. Yet a more sympathetic viewer would regard this a convincing demonstration of the *god's* agency, as it sits in the dignified stillness we would expect of a potent god (or a stone), while at the same time 'evidently' being the cause of the chariot's movement because, after all, who else is driving it?

The major aniconic cult images were exceptional, but they provide a limit-case of how far cult images can depart from naturalistic representation and still remain fully functioning. Their efficacy prompts us to ask what is the real added value provided by naturalistic sculpture? Of course, human form is one of the most important aspects of the gods as the Romans conceived them, but anthropomorphism does not require particularly naturalistic illusionism. Perhaps more importantly, as Richard Gordon has described, participating in an iconographical system allowed gods to be recognized and reproduced universally in the Roman Empire (GORDON, 1979, p. 13).[9] The use of anthropomorphic iconography therefore balances out the aniconic image's unique selling point: that it is a special, irreproducible, numinous object, often literally fallen from the heavens. But again, reproducible iconography does not require successful naturalism. Indeed, the iconographical attributes of the gods are the most consistently transmitted component of classical religious art in the Roman provinces, even when local lack of skill or interest has led to the abandonment of protocols of naturalistic representation (STEWART, 2010, sections 7-10).

Does this mean that the effectiveness of cult images is connected only in very general terms with the mode of representation – that naturalism did not enable them? Up to a point, this is true. The technological advantages of naturalistic illusionism are only one factor in the design of Roman cult images. In this connection we might also consider the gamut of modern Hindu representations of gods which employ naturalistic devices to varying extents. Many use naturalistic conventions, like lifelike staring faces,

to exercise a psychological appeal very similar to that of Roman or modern Christian effigies. But once again semi-iconic and aniconic images, including the Shiva lingam, are tended and venerated as physical proxies for the absent god no less than if they used mimetic tricks to pose as human figures.

* * *

For the rest of this paper, we shall remain in South and Central Asia. For, implausible as it may seem, the representation of the Buddha in the art of Gandhara casts a sidelight on the value of classical naturalism as an artistic technique. 'Gandhara' is an ancient name conventionally used to describe a region around the northern tip of modern Pakistan, including parts of Afghanistan. In the first few centuries AD, Buddhism flourished in Gandhara. For much of this period it was an important part of the Kushan Empire of Central Asia and northern India, and it seems to have flourished in the stable conditions created by the 'Pax Kushanica' (as it has been dubbed). Gandhara has been called the 'crossroads of Asia' and was apparently on trade-routes that connected Rome with China, and India with Central Asia.[10]

In the early centuries AD, there was an explosion of stone monuments across this small region. The Buddhist population of Gandhara sought to convert their wealth into merit, securing a better life or future lives through virtuous donations. In this way many dozens of monasteries were embellished with shrines, most conspicuously the domed reliquary shrines called *stupas*. They were adorned with sculptures, mostly executed in the local slate-like schist to begin with, and later on, mainly from the third century onwards, by stucco and terracotta sculptures.

When Gandharan art was 'rediscovered' by classically-educated western soldiers and administrators in the second half of the nineteenth century (when the region was the North-West Frontier of British India), they were astonished by the sculptures' affinities to classical art. The Gandharan artists had drawn upon the repertoire of Graeco-Roman naturalistic techniques and iconography. Gandharan art also echoes conventions of other traditions, but the classical element is still obvious and puzzling. Time and again the classical archaeologist recognizes traces of Graeco-Roman imagery in the styles, compositions, gestures, clothing types, and even the mythological personnel of the Buddhist art of Gandhara. It has often been believed that the classical appearance of Gandharan art is a Hellenistic phe-

nomenon, because Gandhara had been conquered by Alexander the Great and Bactria (roughly northern Afghanistan) remained a substantial Greek kingdom until the later second century BC. Local rulers of Greek culture and descent persisted in Gandhara for decades later. However, Gandharan Buddhist sculpture emerged considerably after this time, in the first half of the first century AD and its most classical-looking exemplars probably date to the second century or later. Consequently, the once controversial idea that *contemporary* contacts with the Roman Empire were at least partly responsible for Gandharan classicism is now becoming almost the consensus.[11] We do not need to resolve this contentious issue at the moment. Suffice it to say that by means and for reasons still only partly understood, the artists of Gandhara were drawing very skilfully and deftly on a Graeco-Roman artistic tradition rooted several thousand kilometres to the west.

It is in this context that the image of the Buddha himself was invented. The historical wise man known as the Buddha (the "enlightened one"), Siddhartha Gautama, lived probably in the fifth century BC, but there is no proven representation of him before around the first century AD. In early Buddhist art in India, the Buddha is represented by his symbols rather than human form. As with the absence of Christian art in the first two centuries, there has been much debate about whether this gap is the result of a deliberate aniconism and whether it truly represents an absence of imagery.[12]

In any case, the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha seems to have appeared more or less simultaneously by around the start of the second century AD in Gandhara and at Mathura in northern Indian, both within the Kushan Empire at that time (RHI, 2010; DECAROLI, 2015; FALSER, 2015, esp. p. 15-18). Mathuran sculptures are relatively schematic and stylized, with closer affinities to sculptural traditions in other parts of India. In contrast, the Gandharan artists made a choice which was to be extremely influential on later Buddhist art, down to the present. They dipped into the repertoire of Graeco-Roman religious art to choose a very immediate and present human form for the Buddha. His body and the fall of his clothing in sculpture are highly naturalistic. His youthful, unindividualized face and hair recall classical and Hellenistic conventions for idealized representations of gods, and in particular many Gandharan Buddhas closely recall the imagery of Apollo and Diana (**Fig. 7**). The relationship is so striking in certain cases that the ultimately classical origin of the Gandharan Buddha iconography seems beyond question.[13]

**Figure 7**

Detail of a Gandharan schist sculpture of the Buddha, from Amankot near Mardan, *c*. 2nd-3rd century AD. Lahore Museum, inv. 2099. (Photo by Islay Lyons; after H. Ingholt, *Gandhāran art in Pakistan*, New York, 1957, fig. 52).

The case is especially interesting from the perspective of classical art history, because here we have an example of the active, fresh, contemporary adoption of classical religious imagery to serve a particular artistic need. It should be stressed at this point that we do not know why the anthropomorphic Buddha image was invented at this time. But just as naturalistic narrative art in the Roman world appears to have provided a useful model for the stories of the Buddha's life and past lives on Gandharan stupas, so the classical naturalism of Roman divine images seems to have provided a solution for the Buddha images which also adorned these monuments.

Sculptures of the historical Buddha, and to some extent the accompanying representations of Buddhas of other eras like the Bodhisattva Maitreya – the Buddha of the future – were not cult images of the kind that we have seen in the Roman Empire. They did not stand in temples, though some were made for dedicated shrines arranged like chapels in proximity to the stupa.[14] They were not officially a focus of worship, though the stupa and the sculptures were venerated. Circumambulating the stupa and coming into proximity with the Buddha's relics was a

route to the acquisition of merit, while viewing the holy images facilitated both merit-accumulation and self-improvement. The Buddha was regarded as a superhuman figure even though, strictly speaking, by achieving enlightenment and ultimately Parinirvana (upon his death), he attained the goal of self-elimination and release from the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, the Buddha was not a god ruling from heaven (which may help to explain why he was not represented directly for so long). Nevertheless, in the Buddhism of ancient Gandhara, the Buddha, all the Buddhas, were effectively worshipped and maintained a transcendent place in an inclusive pantheon which absorbed some of the characters of early Hinduism.

What did the Graeco-Roman form of naturalistic representation offer to images of the Buddha? Classical idealism had strong ethical associations in the Graeco-Roman context. The classical face is not simply a generic, default face. The youthful, impassive, classical face had connotations of emotional balance and self-control. This classical facial type must have lent itself to representations of the Buddha as a man who had achieved emotional detachment and understanding of a higher register of consciousness through meditation. He is detached from the world and its emotional distractions. The idealism of the classical type also conveys the physical health and strength of the Buddha, who had experimented with and rejected extreme self-denial, seeking a middle way to enlightenment that eschewed the extremes of the ascetics. Nevertheless, the shocking images of the emaciated Buddha such as that in Lahore, represent his role as an ascetic; they exhibit the sort of realism of which the Gandharan artists were capable, but which they avoided (their own form of renunciation) (**Fig. 8**).[15]

**Figure 8**

Gandharan schist sculpture of the fasting Siddhartha/Buddha, from Sikri, *c*. 2nd-3rd century AD. Peshawar Museum, inv. 1430 (Photo by Islay Lyons; after H. Ingholt, *Gandhāran art in Pakistan*, New York, 1957, fig. 198).

That ancient Buddhists thought of the historical Buddha and similar figures as physically ideal is confirmed by the literature. Some of this post-dates Gandharan sculpture, certainly in written form, but a concern with the Buddha's appearance as a sign of his inner qualities is very ancient and consistent. The sculptures always include two of the 32 *lakṣaṇas* – the physical characteristics of a great man – specifically the swelling cranium called an *uṣṇīṣa*, which looks like a topknot, and the lump of hair on his forehead called the *ūrṇā*. But the complete list includes such idealized features as a straight body and perfectly smooth and delicate skin, as well as others less obvious to us (such as webbed fingers and toes). An extended list of minor characteristics includes, for example, smooth eyebrows, tidy hair, a well-shaped nose and so on.

John Powers' book, *A Bull of a Man*, analyses the picture of ideal masculinity that emerges from the corpus of Buddhist literature (POWERS, 2009). The ideal body is rather different from that of the classical Graeco-Roman tradition, because it is less overtly muscular, slenderer and more rounded. After all, it comes from his innate qualities and the refining process of unnumerable rebirths, rather than self-cultivation in the gymnasium. This may explain the relatively feminine appearance of the Buddha in Gandharan art, and the appropriateness of the youthful, Apolline image for his idealized visualization, and the majority of Gandharan Buddhas lack facial hair. Powers quotes the *Discourse with Canki* (*Cankī Sutta*), amongst the canonical Buddhist texts, which describes the Buddha as 'handsome, good-looking, graceful, possessing supreme beauty of complexion, with sublime beauty and sublime presence, remarkable to behold'. Powers concludes: 'The transcendent physical beauty of the Buddha is a core trope of every text I have seen that discusses his life and teaching career.' (*Majjhima-nikaya*, ed. Robert Chalmers (London: Pali Text Society, 1960), v. 2, 166-167; Powers (2009, p. 3).[16]

This is the context for the idealism of the Gandharan images. Yet their specifically naturalistic component is important too, precisely because the Buddha was *not* a distant god, but a human being who had experienced the life lived by his followers. Moreover, he devoted his long career to teaching and attempting to share his wisdom with his followers out of a limitless compassion for the plight of humanity. This is much of the subject-matter of the reliefs on Gandhara stupas, especially in the first century or two of that tradition, and the iconic representations of Buddhas made for the same

setting emphasize his human scale and aspects of his human nature, in contrast perhaps to the scintillating colossal statues that emerged subsequently – at Yungang in China, Bamiyan in Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Classical naturalism offered a method of communicating both aspects of the Buddha's character and accomplishments, as well as those of the other Buddhas and potential Buddhas (bodhisattvas). On the one hand we have the supramundane transcendence. On the other hand, we have the compassionate humanity conveyed by realistic human form and details such as the turn of the head or the soft Venus-rings on his neck.

The borrowed imagery of Gandharan Buddhism therefore seems to me to be a clear-cut case of the motivated use of classical style for a religious purpose: not because of some kind of hidebound formalism or adherence to convention, but because it was technically useful. How much does this usage have in common with the classical cult imagery of the Roman Empire?

I do not wish to deny that the population of the Roman Empire were capable of intimate, personally significant relationships with the Olympian gods, but we have nothing like the Buddhist evidence for a personal investment in the personality of the classical divinity. Perhaps a distant analogy – not a straightforwardly religious one – can be found in Petronius's *Satyricon*, where Encolpius empathizes with the representation of gods' homosexual conquests when he sees the faces of these painted lovers in the fictional sanctuary picture-gallery at Naples (PETRONIUS, *Satyricon*, 83). There are of course many other ekphrastic responses to divine images, and abundant evidence of the rationalistic culture of viewing images of gods. But in the context of the Roman religious picture-gallery, as Jeremy Tanner puts it, 'Style ... does not tacitly shape and mediate the relationship and attitude of the viewer as worshipper towards the god. It is rather available for discursive objectification as the theme of the viewing experience and the evaluation of painterly *techne*' (TANNER, 2006, p. 271). That is not necessarily to say that the style of the cult images themselves did not mediate the viewing experience of the worshipper – just that the body of literature we have largely deals with a different experience. There is, to be sure, extensive Graeco-Roman discussion of the appearance of religious images, including both pagan and Christian critiques and *apologiae*, from Cicero to Julian, but we have little to suggest personal, emotional responses to the physical appearance of the god in the form of its artistic proxy.

* * *

Perhaps we should not be surprised, however. The classical naturalistic tradition foregrounds possibly the most important part of the popular classical conception of the gods – that they are *like* mortals or *look like* mortals in most respects. Yet putting the divine and the mortal together on the same physical level was not intended to communicate a moral imperative or to make the religious viewer a better or happier being. The classical gods remain aloof. They might answer prayers and petitions which worshippers placed by or on their statues (not infrequently in the form of curse requests), but no moral transformation was required in exchange, just honour and sacrifices. We are more likely to encounter Apollo self-absorbed in lyre-playing, or in a narrative scene shooting down the children of Niobe or supervising the flaying of Marsyas.

In fact, it is hard to think of a Roman deity which might be associated with compassion. Not the Caritas of third-century Roman coins, whose generic image stands for political harmony among rulers. Even the maternal deity on the east end of the Ara Pacis (probably Pax, in my view), hardly emanates philanthropy, despite her very human physical form. Kephisodotos' famous Late Classical statue of her (known through the apparent Roman copy in Munich), presents an enclosed allegorical vignette rather than someone with whom the worshipper is likely to engage.

In conclusion, I do not want to labour the uncontroversial point that ancient Buddhist religion and imagery was quite different from that of the Roman world. What is demonstrated here is the religious versatility of the classical naturalistic tradition, deliberately adopted in Gandhara because of some of the capacities it actively displayed in Roman religion, and yet employed for a radically different aim in this new, Asian context. To use the language of industry, this is a new application of an existing technology. In fact, it is an artistic technology whose inherent potential, rather than mere tradition or reverence for the classical past, has ensured its continual survival and revival through the centuries, down to the present day. And so, it is perhaps appropriate to finish by describing the naturalistic tradition in the grandiloquent terms used by Alfred Foucher when he wrote more narrowly of the Buddha's classical iconography: 'Here is a creation which the experience of centuries ... have taught us to regard as one of the most widespread and the most durable successes that the history of art has every chronicled' (FOUCHER, 1913, p. 32; translation from the English edition, FOUCHER, 1917, p. 131).

## Bibliographical references


BEHRENDT, K. *The Buddhist Architecture of Gandhāra*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004.

BLIDSTEIN, M. Entering a Sanctuary the Wrong Way. *Scripta Classica Israelica*, Tel Aviv, v. 34, p. 165-179, 2015.

CORBETT, P. E. Greek Temples and Greek Worshippers: The Literary and Archaeological Evidence. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Oxford, v. 17, p. 149-158, 1970.

DECAROLI, R. D. *Image Problems:* The Origin and Development of the Buddha's Image in Early South Asia. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015.

DONOHUE, A. A. The Greek Images of the Gods. *Hephaistos*, Hamburg, p. 31-45, 1997.

FALSER, M. The *Graeco-Buddhist Style of Gandhara* – a 'Storia Ideologica', or: How a Discourse Makes a Global History of Art. *Journal of Art Historiography*, Birmingham, v. 13, p. 1-52, 2015.

FOUCHER, A. *L'Origine grecque de l'image du Bouddha*. Chalon-sur-Saône: E. Bertrand, 1913.

_____. The Greek Origin of the Image of the Buddha. In: _____ (ed.). *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central Asian Archaeology*. Paris and London: P. Geuthner and H. Milford, 1917, p. 111-137.

GAIFMAN, M. *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity*. Oxford: OUP, 2012.

GELL, A. The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology. In: COOTE, J.; SHELTON, A. (eds.). *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 40-63.

_____. *Art and Agency:* An Anthropological Theory. Oxford: OUP, 1998.

GOMBRICH, E. *Art and Illusion:* A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation. London: Princeton University Press, 1960.

GORDON, R. L. The Real and the Imaginary: Production and Religion in the Graeco-Roman World. *Art History*, Oxford, v. 2, n. 1, p. 5-34, 1979.

GIULIANO, A. *Museo Nazionale Romano:* le sculture. Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 1979. v. 1.1.

HAVELOCK, C. *The Aphrodite of Knidos and her Successors:* A Historical Review of the Female Nude in Greek Art. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

HÖLSCHER, T. *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System*. (Transl. Hölscher 2004). Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987.

_____. *The Language of Images in Roman Art*. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.

HUNTINGTON, J. The Origin of the Buddha Image: Early Image Traditions and the Concept of Buddhadarśanapunyā. In: NARAIN, A. K. (ed.). *Studies in Buddhist Art of South Asia*. New Delhi: Kanak, 1985, p. 23-58.

HUNTINGTON, S. L. Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism. *Art Journal*, Nova York, v. 49, n. 4, p. 401-408, 1990.

INGHOLT, H. *Gandhāran Art in Pakistan*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 1957.

LINROTHE, R. Inquiries into the Origin of the Buddha Image: A Review. *East and West*, Roma, v. 43, n. 1, p. 241-256, 1993.

LUCZANITS, C. (ed.). *Gandhara:* das buddistische Erbe Pakistans. Legenden, Klöster und Paradiese. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2008.

MARTIN, H.-G. *Römische Tempelkultbilder:* eine archäologische Untersuchung zur späten Republik. Rome: Bretschneider, 1987.

MYLONOPOULOS, J. (ed.). *Divine Images and Human Imaginations in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010a.

_____. Divine Images *versus* Cult Images: An Endless Story about Theories, Methods, and Terminologies. In: MYLONOPOULOS, J. (ed.). *Divine Images and Human Imaginations in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010a, p. 1-19.

MYRES, J. L. Excavations in Cyprus, 1913. *Annual of the British School at Athens*, Cambridge, v. 41, p. 53-104, 1940-1945.

NEHRU, L. *Origins of the Gandhāran Style:* A Study of Contributory Influences. Delhi: OUP, 1989.

PERRY, E. The Same but Different: The Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus through Time. In: WESCOAT, B.; OUSTERHOUT, R. G. (eds.). *Architecture of the Sacred:* Space, Ritual and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium. Cambridge: CUP, 2012, p. 175-200.

POULSEN, F. Talking, Weeping and Bleeding Sculptures: A Chapter of the History of Religious Fraud. *Acta Archaeologica*, Leiden, v. 16, p. 178-195, 1945.

POWERS, J. *A Bull of a Man:* Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

RHI, J. Reading Coomaraswamy on the Origin of the Buddha Image. *Artibus Asiae*, Lawrence, v. 70, n. 1, p. 151-172, 2010.

RIENJANG, W; STEWART, P. (eds.). *Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art*. Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology, 2018.

SMITH, R. R. R. Pindar, Athletes, and the Early Greek Statue Habit. In: HORNBLOWER, S.; MORGAN, C. (eds.). *Pindar's Poetry, Patrons, and Festivals:* From Archaic Greece to the Roman Empire. Oxford: OUP, 2007, p. 83-139.

STEWART, P. *Statues in Roman Society:* Representation and Response. Oxford: OUP, 2003.

_____. The Image of the Roman Emperor. In: SHEPHERD, R.; MANIURA, R. (eds.). *Presence:* The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects. Aldershot: Routledge, 2006, p. 243-258.

_____. Gell's Idols and Roman Cult. OSBORNE, R.; TANNER, J. (eds.). *Art's Agency and Art History*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007, p. 158-178.

_____. Baetyls as Statues? Cult Images in the Roman Near East. In: FRIEDLAND, E.; HERBERT, S. (eds.). *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East:* Reflections on Culture, Ideology, and Power. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2008, p. 293-310.

_____. Geographies of Provincialism in Roman Sculpture. *Journal of the International Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art (RIHA Journal)*, Paris, v. 5, n.p., 2010.

_____. Roman Sarcophagi and Gandhāran Sculpture. In: RIENJANG, W.; STEWART, P. *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020, p. 50-85.

STOYE, M. On the Crossroads of Disciplines: Tonio Hölscher's Theory of Understanding Roman Art Images and its Implications for the Study of Western Influence(s) in Gandhāran Art. In: RIENJANG, W.; STEWART, P. *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020, p. 29-49.

TANNER, J. Nature, Culture and the Body in Classical Greek Religious Art. *World Archaeology*, Nova York, v. 33, p. 257-276, 2001.

_____. *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece:* Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation. Cambridge: CUP, 2006.

VERMEULE, C. C. *The Cult Images of Imperial Rome*. Rome: Bretschneider, 1987.

VOUT, C. The End of the 'Greek Revolution'? *Perspective*, Nova York, v. 2, p. 246-252, 2014.

WEDDLE, P. *Touching the Gods:* Physical Interaction with Cult Statues in the Roman World. PhD thesis (Doctor of Philosophy degree) – Department of Classics and Ancient History, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Durham, Durham, 2010.

ZANKER, P. *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*. (Trans. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, Ann Arbor, 1988). Munich: Beck C. H., 1987.

ZWALF, W. *A Catalogue of the Gandhāra Sculpture in the British Museum*. London: Art Media Resources, 1996.

## Notes

[1] See esp. Tanner (2001; 2006, esp. p. 31-96). On the varying directions of recent approaches to the 'Greek revolution' see Vout (2014).

[2] See esp. Hölscher (1987; 2004) and Zanker (1987).

[3] For the problems see also Mylonopoulos (2010b, p. 4-5). The contributions in the volume (MYLONOPOULOS, 2010a) address many facets of the cult images in different periods.

[4] Note e.g. Martin (1987) on the 'temple cult images' of Republican Rome.

[5] See Stewart (2003, p. 261-267, esp. *agalmatophilia*) and Weddle (2010). For the stories of the Knidia: Lucian (*Imagines*, 4), Pseudo-Lucian (*Amores*, 16), Pliny (*Natural History*, 36.21) and Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus*, 4 (51P).

[6] Applied to the veneration of Graeco-Roman images in Stewart (2006; 2007).

[7] For the Apollo type see Stewart (2003, p. 246-247). On the naked Venus tradition: Havelock (1995). On the effect of adding or removing a mythological setting see Mylonopoulos (2010b, p. 11).

[8] Myres (1940-1945, p. 97-98) for first, cautious publication; Stewart (2008), Gaifman (2012, p. 171-180), (sceptically).

[9] See also Stewart (2008, p. 301-302).

10 On Gandharan art in general see e.g., Nehru (1989), Luczanits (2008) and Zwalf (1996).

[11] See e.g., Stewart (2020) and Stoye (2020). For the problems in dating Gandharan art see Rienjang and Stewart (2018).

[12] See e.g., Huntington (1985; 1990) and Linrothe (1993).

[13] The earliest full argument for the connection is Foucher (1913).

[14] For the architectural context of images within monasteries see Behrendt (2004, esp. p. 31-33) and Zwalf (1996, esp. p. 20-24 and 39-49).

[15] The sculpture in the Lahore Museum inv. 2099 (found at Sikri). Cf. Peshawar Museum inv. 799 (from Takht-i-Bahi). Ingholt (1957, 62, n. 52 and 53).

[16] In the *Discourse* a long catalogue of the Buddha's physical and moral virtues and marks of excellence is presented, exceeding those of the Brahmin Cankī.