

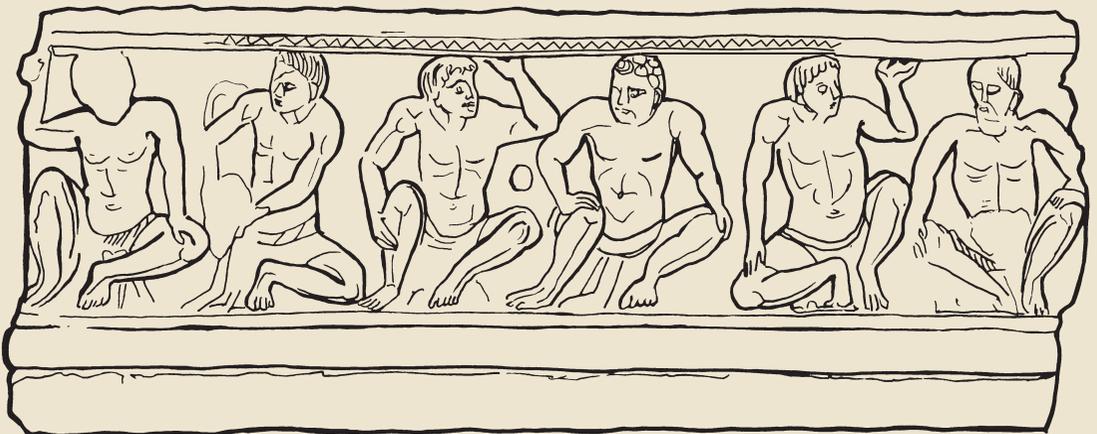


Ladislav Stančo

Greek Gods in the East

Hellenistic Iconographic Schemes
in Central Asia

KAROLINUM



**Greek Gods in the East
Hellenistic Iconographic Schemes in Central Asia**

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1 Introduction

1.1 Definition of the subject

The idea of compiling, and as far as possible also analysing, a catalogue of art and craft works that come from Central and Southern Asia but feature Hellenistic and Roman themes in their decoration first occurred to me when I was writing my M.A. thesis in 1999.¹ At the time I would have found a monograph of that sort very helpful, and since no such study has appeared since then, I tried to fill the gap in my Ph.D. dissertation, which I finished in spring 2005.² This little book is a shortened and slightly reworked version of that dissertation, with an emphasis on incorporating new knowledge and publications that were inaccessible to me earlier. What I am putting forward is a sort of catalogue of everything that was produced in the Gandharan school, as well as in the broader framework of the art of the Kushan empire, above all in Bactria and Paropamisadae, and which at the same time has some allusion to the art of the ancient Mediterranean in the sense of the icon, the image itself, and of its intentionally-created symbolic components, the iconographic symbols. The catalogue and its individual chapters and entries feature imports of a clearly Mediterranean origin, together with items created by Greek artists and craftsmen working in the East, as well as works by local artists who merely took

1 *Stančo* 2000, some parts – catalogues of Gandharan objects in two Czech collections – has been published later on, cf. *Stančo* 2001 and *Stančo* 2003.

2 *Stančo* 2005.

on iconographic elements of Western origin or who allowed them to influence their work. In this work, however, I am deliberately not concerned with issues of style, no matter how much the style of a work owes to an ancient model – even though my original intentions lay in this direction. What I am essentially aiming to do is to ask WHAT was depicted, in terms of content, and much less HOW it was depicted, in terms of style. The way in which I intend to deal with the subject requires that I should not limit myself to the period of the beginnings of Gandharan art itself and Kushan Art in general, the period of the turn of the first and second centuries BC, but that I include works from an earlier period, corresponding to the Hellenistic period in the Mediterranean.

There thus arose a large group of art and craft works of which the value as evidence lies not only in the possibilities for analysing the phenomena it presents, but in the statistical evaluation of the group. To orientate themselves in the relatively rich collection of material, readers may make use of the new drawings of almost all objects, which I find particularly useful in the case of pieces that are not often mentioned in the literature. This will be the first time that such a rich collection of comparative material has been collected in one place. In a few exceptional cases, where I have been unable to gain a sufficiently good-quality reproduction to include a picture of a particular item, I try to at least provide precise references to older or generally more accessible works.

If I wish to delimit the extent of this work and to ask the questions I would like to answer, it is probably wise to begin with what the goal of this work is not: in no case was it my ambition to collect all the material that could possibly be included in the phenomenon described above. Limits were placed on my possibilities by, for one thing, time, of which there is always less than is needed, but above all by the accessibility of the literature and museums necessary to complete the work.³ The result is more of a sample, a cross-section. My task was to compile, and above all interpret, this sample correctly. I focus primarily on WHICH iconographic models were transferred to the east, and, further, HOW each type was transformed. The complementary questions are then WHY this happened and also precisely WHEN, if we can connect the waves of imports and the transfer of ideas to specific historical events.

I should now define the time and space framework within which I intend to work. The logical starting point is Alexander the Great's campaign, which brought the first direct wave of Hellenisation, the apogee is the period of the

3 Although I tried from the start to compile as large a collection as possible, in reality it did not turn out to be possible to collect everything. In order to proceed to analysis, I had to set a deadline after which I no longer included any further entries in the catalogue, but if I came across an object that I considered it important to mention in connection with the rest of the collection, I included it in the form of a mere citation or note.

first two centuries AD, while the latest works I shall mention come from the period of the late ancient world from the 4th and 5th centuries. In geographical terms I am not confining myself to Gandhara itself, as I probably originally intended to do. The area I am dealing with includes the Greek-ruled lands to the east of Iran, as well as the empire of the Kushans of the later period. In other words, I am dealing with Gandhara, Punjab, Ariana, Paropamisadae and Bactria, and, exceptionally, Sogdiana and Kashmir. This might appear to be a subject too broad, both in geographical and chronological terms, but I believe that for tracing the phenomenon that I have delimited above, this framework is exactly what it ought to be.

1.2 Political continuity

Thanks to intensive developments in the numismatics of this far-flung region over the last few decades, we have largely reliable answers to the question of political continuity. In particular, the work of O. Bopearachchi⁴ allows us to correct the historical interpretations that have been handed down since the times of W. W. Tarn and A. K. Narain.⁵ Bopearachchi was able to provide a satisfactory explanation for some doubtful sequences, as well as the simultaneous rules of individual rulers. He was also able to provide an approximate estimate of the extent of their dominions. The following paragraphs are mostly based on and cite his arguments.

Much has been written about the beginnings of the Greek presence in the east, the campaign of Alexander of Macedon and the secession of Diodotus from the Seleucid Empire. I shall not go into these events in detail here, since they are sufficiently covered by the literature. Subsequent developments, however, are still the subject of discussion, and so at this point I shall summarise the significant events that create the historical framework for my subject.

The initial increase in power and territorial expansion of the Bactrian Greeks was subdued by gradual waves of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes from the northern steppe regions. Greek rulers, namely the last of them – Eucratides I (170–145) had to withdraw from the area of western Bactria relatively quickly. After his death, the eastern part of Bactria continued to be held by Eucratides II, Plato (both 145–130 BC) and Heliocles (145–130 BC) until approximately 130 BC, when they were definitively driven out by the nomads from the north. The first decades of the second century, when by all accounts Demetrius I's campaign to the area to the south of the Hindu Kush took place (apparently to the regions of Paropamisadae and Arachosia) marked the start of a new penetration of north-west India by the Greeks. At that time, at least one hundred years passed since these areas had been ruled, at least formally, by the last Hellenistic ruler – Seleucus I. During his eastern campaign in 305, Seleucus had concluded a mutually-beneficial agreement with Chandragupta, on the basis of which he ceded his possessions between the Indus and the Hindu Kush to the Mauryans, while he himself gained a powerful unit of 500 war elephants. An attempt to regain the rich eastern satrapies was also made by Antiochus III at the very end of the third century (208–206). In confrontation with Euthydemus, he failed to subjugate Bactria, and in India appears to have collected some sort of ransom from Sophagasenus, who may

4 *Bopearachchi* 1991, 1993.

5 *Tarn* 1951; *Narain* 1957.

be considered a satrap or vassal of the Mauryans. However, he did not gain control over any possessions. The very possibility of military expansion from Bactria to the south and south east into India is an extremely interesting factor, and shows how much self-confidence Euthydemus' son, Demetrius I, must have had, if we consider that it was less than ten years since Antiochus' campaign. We are not sure whether his conquests reached the Punjab or even more eastern regions of India, but at any rate it appears that some of his successors controlled these regions. According to coin distribution, this might have been above all Pantaleon (190–185 BC), Apollodotus I (180–160 BC) and Antimachus II (160–155 BC), whose spheres of influence can be documented to have reached at least into the western Punjab, the area centred on Taxila. Under these rulers, the two domains (Indian and Bactrian) began to separate, and gained different rulers. Pantaleon's contemporary in Bactria was Agathocles (190–180), while Apollodotus' was Demetrius II (175–170). There has already been mention of Eucratides I. It was he who was the last to rule over joint dominions in India and the whole of Bactria.

Unlike the earlier-mentioned waning of Greek power in Bactria, minor kingdoms existed to the south east of the Hindu Kush until the first decades AD. The foundation for building positions in the Indian regions was the above-mentioned conquests by some of the Bactrian Greeks, for example Demetrius and Pantaleon.

It appears to have been Menander who played the greatest role in gaining new territories, however, as indicated above all by Strabo's comment: "*The Greeks who caused Bactria to revolt grew so powerful on account of the fertility of the country that they became masters not only of Ariana, but also of India, as Apollodotus of Artemita says: and more tribes were subdued by them than by Alexander – by Menander in particular (at least if he actually crossed the Hypanis towards the east and advanced as far as the Imaüs) for some were subdued by him personally and others by Demetrius, the son of Euthydemus the king of the Bactria*".⁶ Imaüs in this text tends to be interpreted as the Ganges. Sources confirming the advance of Greek troops into the Ganges valley and possibly to Pataliputra itself can also be found in Indian literature.

One of these Indian sources is the *Yuga Purana*, one of the works in the Garga Samhita astrological writings. They were written as prophecies and draw on original writings in Prakrit, supposedly a century younger than these events. The *Yuga Purana* describes the Greek advance on Pataliputra as follows: "*After taking Saketa (the town of Kosala), Panchala (Doab) and Mathura, the cruel Yavanas, wicked and valiant, will reach Kusumadhvaja (Pataliputra). Once the strong*

6 Strabo, *Geography* XI, XI, 1.

fortifications in Pataliputra are reached, all the provinces will undoubtedly fall into unrest.”⁷ It is also confirmed by the Mahabhasya by the grammarian Patanjali. Explaining a grammar rule – specifically, the use of the imperfect – he gives this example: “*The Yavanas were besieging Saketa*” and, similarly, “*The Yavanas were besieging Madhyamika*.” This writing is believed to have arisen around the year 150 BC⁸, and the events of Menander’s campaign can be assigned more or less to that period. Furthermore, in the play *Malavikagnimitra* by Kalidasa we learn that the Yavana forces were defeated by Vasumitra, the grandson of King Pushyamitra, who according to the Purana died around 150 BC⁹ The Greeks did not stay long in the Ganges basin, however, as the *Yuga Purana* relates: “*The Yavanas, drunk on fighting, will not stay long in the Madhyadesh (Middle Country): civil war will certainly erupt among them and will spring up in their country; it will be a terrible and fierce war*.”¹⁰ The reason for their departure was thus perhaps a civil war in Bactria.

Most information on Menander comes from the writing “Milinda Pañha” or “The Questions of Milinda”.¹¹ It is a conversation between Milinda (Menander), the Yonaka (Greek) king, and the sage Nagasena about the soul and release from the wheel of transmigration. The work is believed to have arisen in northern India not more than about 100–150 years after Menander’s death. However, all that has been preserved are much later translations, in Ceylon, south-east Asia and in China. The Chinese translation is considered the more authentic. Plutarch writes that “*when a certain man named Menander, the good king of the Bactrians, died in camp, the cities celebrated his funeral as other occasions. Only with regard to his remains were there disputes, and it was with difficulty that an agreement was reached that the remains should be divided and that monuments would stand over them in all the cities*.”¹² This implies that his death was sudden, and the decision on the division of his remains seems to have had its roots in Buddhism and

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- 7 *Tarn* 1951 (1966), pp. 452–456; *Narain* 1956, pp. 174–179; *Bopearachchi* 1993, pp. 15, 16, taken from: Jayaswal, K. P. 1928: Historical Data in the Garga-Samhita and the Brahmin Empire. JBORS, 14, p. 14; in this and several following notes I am using secondary citations. Although aware of the shortcomings of this approach, I unfortunately have no other option with regard to Indian sources.
- 8 *Tarn* 1951 (1966), pp. 145–146; *Narain* 1956, pp. 82–83; *Bopearachchi* 1993, p. 16, taken from: Kielhorn: Mahabhasya, II, pp. 118–119; Filliozat, P. 1975: Le Mahabhasya de Patanjali. Pondicheri.
- 9 *Bopearachchi* 1993, p. 16, which he in turn took from: Malaviagniknimitra of Kalidasa, ed. Pt. Ramchandra Misra, Haridas Granthamala Series, Chowkhamba, Banaras, 1951, pp. 227–8.
- 10 *Bopearachchi* 1993, p. 16, taken from: Jayaswal, K. P. 1928: Historical Data in the Garga-Samhita and the Brahmin Empire. JBORS, 14, p. 411.
- 11 *The Questions of King Milinda*, English translation by T. W. Rhys Davids; Czech translation was used by the present author (by V. Miltner, 1988).
- 12 *Plutarch*, Moralia 821, *Bopearachchi* 1993, pp. 18, who quotes H. N. Fowler’s translation from 1936 (Oxford), p. 278.

the tradition regarding the division of the Buddha's remains. While there is no convincing proof of Menander's conversion to Buddhism, a rare copper stamp with a wheel (of the law)¹³ provides a certain degree of evidence. The stamp may be a symbol of the Chakravartin, the universal monarch according to Indian tradition. A Buddhist reliquary from Bajaur has an inscription stating the date (the 14th day of the month of Kartikka) of a certain year in the reign of Maharaja Minadra.¹⁴ The *Milinda Pañha* gives Sagala (now allegedly Sialkot in Pakistan) as Menander's birthplace, describing it as "*a city that is called Sâgala, situated in a delightful country well watered and hilly, abounding in parks and gardens and groves and lakes and tanks, a paradise of rivers and mountains and woods. Wise architects have laid it out, and its people know of no oppression, since all their enemies and adversaries has been put down. Brave is its defence, with many and various strong towers and ramparts, with superb gates and entrance archways; and with the royal citadel in its midst, white walled and deeply moated...*"¹⁵ Many other references cast doubt on this, however. According to another passage he came from Kalisigrama, not far from Alasanda, which is 500 miles from Sagala. This corresponds to the position of the site of Kapisa (modern Begram)¹⁶ as proposed by Foucher.¹⁷ In addition to Gandhara and the surrounding areas, he ruled over the northern regions of India from Kabul to Mathura. The question that arises in connection with the location of his main seat at Sagala is: why do we find so many of his coins in Gandhara, Swat, Paropamisadae and the surrounding area, and not around Sialkot in the Punjab? It is very difficult to determine the site of the capital of Menander's Empire with the dates we know today with any final validity. The reason I have gone into this ruler in more detail is an effort to show the way in which two worlds could be connected: the Indian with the Greek/Hellenistic. These intermezzos were a preparation for the later blending of artistic traditions in the Buddhist art of Gandhara. If, in the second century BC the ruler had a close relationship with Buddhism, then other Greeks were certain to have had one too. They and their descendants are likely to have contributed to the transfer of the typical depictions of Greek gods and whole mythological scenes into the just-developing figurative tradition of Buddhist art. The first depictions may have actually been designed for the Greek-Macedonian community in India, acquainting it with local teachings, especially Buddhism, in Greek artistic language.

13 *Mitchiner* 2, 241.

14 For translation and references to literature see again *Bopearachchi* 1993, p. 19.

15 *The Questions of King Milinda* I, p. 2.

16 Begram is sometimes identified with Alexandria in the land of Paropamisadae (the area around Kabul), founded by Alexander the Great, q.v. *Crossroads of Asia* 1992, p. 5 (F. R. Allchin and J. Cribb).

17 *Bopearachchi* 1993, pp. 20–21.

After Menander's death the Greek possessions in India were divided up into tiny kingdoms. To start with they were divided into two large parts – Paropamisadae, Arachosia and parts of Sistan on one hand, and Gandhara, the Punjab and probably also Kashmir on the other. Almost all the territory to the south of the Hindu Kush, with the exception of the East Punjab, was probably still held by Philoxenus for a time (100–95). In the valley of Kabul the last ruler was Hermaeus (90–70), who seems to have been overthrown by Yuezhi tribes and probably also Sakas (Scythians). The Yuezhi then struck imitations of Hermaeus' coins in Paropamisadae until the 1st century AD, just as in Bactria, Heliocles was long imitated, as well as Eucratides I in both areas. After that, surprisingly enough, only the eastern areas of the Greek dominions were held on to. Gandhara was lost for a while after the year 80, but there was still one more king, Telephus (75–70), while in the Punjab, according to new knowledge, local Greek rulers hung on until the beginning of the Christian era.

One of the few monuments remaining in north-western part of India from the period of Greek rule is all the more significant because it is an Indian document. According to the inscription in Brahmi script engraved on the column in Besnagar, it was devoted to the god Vasudeva by Heliodorus, Greek ambassador of King Antialcidas (115–95) and citizen of Taxila.¹⁸

The last Greek rulers held on to relatively small enclaves in the land of five rivers, the Punjab. In the west of the area they were Apollodotus II (80–65 BC) and Hippostratus (65–55 BC). Paradoxically, it was the rulers in the eastern Punjab, one of the easternmost areas where the Greeks penetrated, who held on longest of all: Dionysius (65–55 BC), Zoilos II (55–35 BC), Apollophanes (35–25 BC) and Strato (25 BC – 10 AD). As a result, it looks as if Greek/Macedonian rule in the east died out at the same time as the Hellenistic empires in the west. The successors to the Greeks in the leading civilisational role in the Mediterranean learned much from their predecessors, and the same can be said of the East. The factor that determined or at least influenced further development here was ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. I should reiterate, however, that the Greeks and Macedonians did not act as “teachers of nations.” They simply brought their standards and inhabitants into the new environment, while the gradually-settling nomads also took on some aspects of their level of civilisation.¹⁹ In the 1st century BC, the Sakas had a direct opportunity for this. Their

18 *Hebner – Rosen* (s.d.).

19 Some Western phenomena penetrated these areas before the arrival of Alexander. Among the best-known are the gems of the so-called Greco-Persian group. J. Boardman cites a group of finds from Taxila, specifically from the Bhir Mound, which is supposedly the city from Alexander's times. They are three gems with zoomorphic subjects, which come from a “travelling salesman's suitcase,” *Boardman* 1970, pp. 318, 319.

leaders commanded a small area of north western India formerly subject to the Greeks and in some regions small Greek statelets continued to exist side by side with them. Not only were the Sakas confronted with Greek heritage, but they also gradually came into contact with living Greek culture. It is hard for us to discern, on the basis of the fragmentary historical information that exists, what sort of mutual commercial and political relationships existed. It is likely that their ancestors were in a very similar situation with an alliance of Yuezhi tribes when in the second half of the 2nd century BC they subjugated Bactria and for a while lived side by side with the remnants of the Greek kingdom to the north of the Hindu Kush, at the same time building up their dominion on the ruins of this part of the empire. The long period of mutual jealousy definitely did not prevent mutual trade, which initially might have been a typical relationship between a semi-nomadic and settled society.

In India the situation changed definitively with the arrival of the Parthians. Gondophares (20–50 AD) joined most of the Greek and Scythian dominions under his rule. Some Sakas withdrew to the south, and although they retained a certain amount of political power there, we hear nothing more of them in our area. Soon after Gondophares' death, the Parthians were driven out by the Kushans under the leadership of Kujula Kadphises and his son Vima Takto.

1.3 A note on Kushan chronology

I finished my M.A. thesis, on the beginnings of Gandharan art, in summer 2000. In it I stated that one of the barriers to research was the continuing failure to find a date for the first year of what is called the Kanishka era, as well as general shortcomings in the chronology of the Kushans. Then, the very next year, Harry Falk published an article that was, if I might venture to say, of fundamental importance for the solution of these questions.²⁰ Falk puts forward a new reading and interpretation of the *Yavanajataka*, the text written by Sphujidhwaja in the year 191 of the Saka era, or 269 AD. He concludes that the *Yuga*, the age of which the *Yavanajataka* speaks, begins in the year 22 AD and not in 126 or 136 as was earlier assumed. This allows, according to the formula in the text, the start of the Kushan era, in other words year 1 of King Kanishka, to be set at 127 AD. The reaction of all scholars in this field has been favourable, at least going by their oral expressions, although none have as yet appeared in print.²¹

The starting point for the Kushan era thus gained can be combined with the chronological data that, also recently, was provided by the famous inscription from Rabatak in Afghanistan.²² On the basis of the inscription, Joe Cribb created a new chronological table with two variants of absolute chronology.²³ After correcting to take into account Falk's date for the start of the rule of Kanishka, this table would appear as follows: Kujula Kadphises (30–80), Vima I Takto (80–110), Vima II Kadphises (110–127), Kanishka I (127–153), Huvishka (153–191), Vasudeva I (191–227), Kanishka II (227–249) and Vasishka (249–267). The later period, known as the Kushano-Sasanian period, was also dealt with by Joe Cribb, but here, too, the chronology requires reworking on the basis of the most recent discoveries.²⁴

20 Falk 2001.

21 By the spring of 2005; since then, most scholars use this date as fixed.

22 Sims-Williams – Cribb 1996; Cribb 1999, Göbl 1999.

23 Ibid p. 106.

24 Cribb 1990.

2 An iconographic analysis of the Hellenistic subjects in the art of Gandhara, Bactria and the adjoining areas of the Kushan Empire

2.1 General remarks

A number of researchers have looked at sub-issues connected with this subject. Usually, however, they have been content to give several examples and to state whether Greek or Roman art is a source of “antiquitising” iconography (or style). To date, no one has produced a thorough analysis on the basis of extensive material. I believe that herein lies the key to the solution of a century-old dispute: Greece or Rome, or whether this question should be refused altogether. The basic method used is fairly plain. On the assumption that I can gain a representative group, consisting of fine art objects and craft objects, I can make comparisons of individual iconographic²⁵ aspects not only within the sample but above all with the assumed Mediterranean models.²⁶ First and foremost it is a question of ascertaining whether the depiction of the various mythological figures correspond to types common in the West. If not, then it must be ascertained from whence each particular shift arises. I shall lay aside for now the dispute as to whether artists and craftsmen from the Mediterranean took part directly in the creative process in Gandhara, Bactria and elsewhere (they certainly did), or whether items were produced by local artists that they trained. I would formulate the basic question thus: what is the origin of

25 “Iconographic” in accordance with Panofsky’s definition “*iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form.*”, cf. Panofsky 1939, p. 3.

26 In each sub-chapter a catalogue is included with data on the location, place of origin and publication, with references to photographs where relevant.

the iconographic elements and circles of western provenience in Gandhara, Bactria and surroundings regions in the 1st – 3rd century AD (in other words, the period of the pinnacle of Gandharan art)? My working hypothesis is based on the simple assumption that art was subject to the necessity of supply and demand. I also adhere to the hypothesis²⁷ that the only permanent components of the population to come from the Mediterranean were the Greeks and Macedonians connected with Alexander's campaign, or with the settlement policy of the Seleucids. From this equation it follows that in the area of Afghanistan and northern Pakistan there was a continuing need to create art and craft items that complied with Greek taste, up to the time when the Greeks and Macedonians became totally assimilated with the local population. If this period was long enough, and such items became a normal part of everyday life in the given area, there is no reason why their import and even production of imitation items should not have continued, even after the demise of Greek/Macedonian hegemony. My primary task is thus to show that there was political and artistic continuity from Alexander's campaign until the turn of the millennium, when the great era of Gandharan art was born. The main tool available for this is numismatics. The study of coins allows us not only to follow political changes in the region, especially where there are no historical records at all, but it also provides, as I shall go on to show, a wealth of iconographic material. However, there are also problems associated with coinage in this context. While coins were a tool of communication between the elite, or the ruler, and the population, they were also a one-sided tool – the depictions on the coins do not reflect the demand of the population, but the self-stylisation and promotion of the ruler. The introductory chapter was devoted to political continuity, and I consider this to have been sufficiently demonstrated. I would like to demonstrate the continuity in the use of Greek iconographical schemas below.

In addition to coins I will also look at the depiction of subjects that are well-known from Greek art, in all their possible artistic manifestations and in various materials, including stone and bronze statues, stucco and clay sculpture, metal vessels, appliquéés and jewellery, and gemstones. A special class of iconographic subject is formed by the well-known non-godlike figures from ancient mythology, which would be doubtless understood by Greek viewers only on the basis of their knowledge of these myths. In this case we have to ask how this type of subject was perceived by non-Greeks, the Indo-Iranian population of Gandhara and Bactria. On the basis of an analysis of the material I would like to decide whether the meanings of these depictions could have been known to the creators and consumers of the items, or whether they served merely as filler decoration for well-known scenes (for example scenes from the life of Buddha).

27 The justification of this hypothesis see above, chapter 1.2