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Jin Dynasty Greco-Buddhist Atlas at the Zhongshan Grottoes

Lucas Christopoulos

Osaka

The Jin dynasty (晉 265–420) succeeded the Wei Kingdom (Cao Wei 曹魏, 220–265), which itself had been responsible for spreading Buddhism and its arts across China. At this time, travelers, monks, and artists came from the Kushana Empire of Central Asia to Jin dynasty China to participate in translating Buddhist texts and building such architectural works as temples and stupas. Greco-Buddhism and its arts flourished during the third and fourth centuries of our era, and Kushana ruled Gandhara as the main center of influence for the Chinese Buddhist communities of Northern China.

The Zhongshan grottoes (*Zhongshan shiku* 鐘山石窟) are situated at the southern part of the Zhongshan Mountains in Shaanxi Province. Five caves, out of a total of eighteen, have been excavated to date, with the main one having an impressive collection of about ten thousand Buddhist sculptures of various sizes situated widely within. On one of these sculptures, figures similar to the Titan Atlas are seen carrying the Buddha on a plate (fig. 1). By elucidating these examples, I explain in this paper how Greek mythology “mutated” through Central Asian Buddhism and then its influence was passed to China during the first centuries of our era.

After the Indo-Greeks adopted Buddhism, mostly during the time of King Menander I “The Savior” (Μένανδρος Α' ὁ Σωτήρ 165/155–130 BC) (fig. 8), Atlas (Greek: Ἀτλας) in Greco-Buddhist Gandhara was assimilated to Yaksha (Sanskrit: यक्ष *Yakṣa*, Chinese: *Yecha* 夜叉) and was often represented alongside Heracles-Vajrapāṇi (Sanskrit: वज्रपाणि Chinese: *Jingang* 金剛), together with the Buddha. Victor Goloubew (1878–1945), a member of the *Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* and an objective observer, expressed very clearly the impact of the Greeks on Buddhist arts in 1923, while he was visiting the museum of Lahore in northern Pakistan (Goloubew, p. 453):

In the silence of this museum, we can understand better than anywhere else what was on Indian history, the impact of Hellenism. The mad and genius epic of Alexander, the Greek colonization of the Indus basin and the reign of Menander....

At the origin of the myth, Atlas had participated in the Titanomachy (War of the Titans) that occurred between the Titans and the Olympians. All the Titans were finally banished to Tartarus, apart from Atlas, who was condemned to hoist the Heavens, to prevent Earth and the Heavens from again uniting in power.

A number of bas-reliefs representing Atlas, sculpted in Gandhara, show him sitting next to the Buddha together with Heracles (figs. 2, 3) and holding wheels — but why? The myth is (Graves, pp. 507–514) that, for his eleventh work, Heracles had been asked to bring back the golden apples of the Hesperides Garden. Gaia had planted the golden apple tree for the goddess Hera in her own divine garden, on the slopes of the Atlas Mountains. Atlas went to help Heracles get the golden apples, and, upon his return, Atlas attempted to trick Heracles into carrying the sky permanently by offering to deliver the apples to Eurystheus himself. Heracles, suspecting Atlas did not intend to return, pretended to agree to Atlas' offer, and he asked only that Atlas take the sky again for a few minutes so that Heracles could rearrange his cloak as padding on his shoulders. So Atlas set down the apples and took the heavens upon his shoulders again — and Heracles took the apples and ran away!

The sculptures of Gandhara show the clear presence of Greek mythology in the minds of the Kushana artists of that time. Their style mixed classical myth with the Buddhist faith, demonstrating that the heritage of the Indo-Greeks was unifying past Greek religions and philosophy with a new concept of salvation that, however, did not go against Buddhist beliefs. Instead it appeared to take the best of both worlds, inscribing in Greco-Buddhism a spiritual continuity with the history of the region. In contrast with the later Christian-Pagan wars in the West, ancient Hellenic philosophy and religion found new accommodation with tolerant Asian Buddhism, and they both looked, in a sense, to “grow together.” The discussions and cultural exchanges between Indians and Greeks in India shows a high level of human intelligence and the desire to attain a superior understanding.

The main new element of Hellenistic civilization that was incorporated into Chinese Buddhism was the muscular aspect of the divinities inherited from “athletic Greece,” as *agon* (Greek ἀγών: athletic

contest) was an imperative part of worship cults and celebrations in Greek–, Hellenistic–, and Kushana–ruled Central Asia as well (Christopoulos 2013b).

The worship of statues representing muscular demi-gods, gods, and heroes became a major part of Central Asia cults following Alexander’s conquest. Every city built in Asia by the Greco-Macedonians had a gymnasium (with a “*palaestra*,” or wrestling hall, annexed to it), an *agora*, and a theater, following the Greek city models. (I have analyzed this new element of “athletic professionalism” [or “ascetics” of body and mind, from the Greek: *Askesis*, ἄσκησις, *askein*, “to exercise, train,” perhaps originally “to fashion material, embellish or refine material”] in China, showing that it arrived mainly alongside Central Asian Greco-Buddhism, in several earlier articles [Christopoulos 2010, 2013a, 2013b].)

The link between this new visual aspect of Greek athletics and the heroic representation of wrestlers first began in China under Emperor Qin (Qin Shihuang 秦始皇, 259–210 BC) (fig. 7), through his contacts with King Euthydemus of Bactria (Εὐθύδημος Α΄; c. 260 BC – 200/195 BC). Perhaps the idea of direct contact between the ancient Greeks and the ancient Chinese seems psychologically insurmountable — but the archeological findings, the short geographical distance between the two, and the chronology nevertheless support it. There is, for instance, corroborating evidence of Greco-Bactrian and Qin contact (Nickel 2019, 2013; Barnhart 2004; Christopoulos 2012, pp. 8–15). I do not support the theory that a nomadic tribesman from the steppes or the Tarim Basin effected the link between the two and thereafter convinced the king of Qin to employ a Hellenistic-city type of advanced building construction or to insist on realism-focused methods in sculptural artwork. The artists and architects who initiated these styles at the Qin court must have had advanced knowledge of these skills coming from the schools of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. The Han dynasty denomination of the Greco-Romans as “Greater Qin” (*Daqin* 大秦) is most likely derived from that cultural union, if not from a visual connection.

A break in this influence occurred during the Han dynasty, when the Greco-Bactrian kingdom fell, until the Kushana Empire (30–375; Greek: Βασιλεία Κοσσανῶν, Bactrian: Κυβανο, Chinese: *Guishuang* 貴霜) was established and began to worship the Buddha with a new and distinctive Greek-like statuary style named “Gandhara art.” The Wei and Jin dynasties’ “athletic” sculptures, influenced by the Gandhara style joined with the Buddhist faith in Central Asian art and sculpture worship. At the time, Atlas and Heracles were considered to be divinities entirely belonging to the Buddhist world, as

the Wei dynasty Chinese saw it, and they served as a model for practices, both mental and physical, at the Shaolin monastery and with warriors of northern Chinese origin (Christopoulos 2013a),

“Winged” Atlas was shown with the lion skin of Heracles on its head and wings on its back, symbolizing its capability of moving between Heaven and earth. A beautiful sculpture representing Atlas sitting on a floor, with one leg straight up and the other resting on the floor, was found in Gandhara, from the third-century Kushana Empire (fig. 4). This particular statue seems to have been a canonical model that sculptors were reproducing in schools in the Kushana Empire and as far away as China. A sculpture of the Sui dynasty dating from 606 (second year of the *Daye* era 大業) represents the same Atlas figure carrying the Buddha, accompanied by two servants and two lions on either side (fig. 5). The statues of Atlas carrying the Buddha in the Zhongshan grottoes seem to have been inspired by the same model as well, showing Atlas sitting on the floor with one leg bent, the right hand on the knee, and the other leg lying straight.

Atlas carries the three interconnected Celestial Wheels (or Wheel-lotus), in Gandhara instead of Heaven. These Wheels symbolized the past, present, and future Buddhas, each with the necessary tripartite of the *Triratna* (The Three Jewels: Buddha, *Dharma*, *Sangha*) (Vatsyayan p. 284) (figs. 2–3). Heracles’ twelve deeds were perhaps compared to the “twelve deeds” of the Buddha in Greco-Buddhism, and that is why both are often represented together, Heracles presumably being the physical force (and “excellence,” Greek: *Arete*, ἀρετή) representing the achievement of Greek athletics and their moral values, while Buddha was the spiritual force that was the achievement of Indian Buddhism and its ascetic practice. The post-Alexander Bactrian tradition of “religious athletics,” as understood by the Buddhists of Gandhara, also saw, in the representation of these muscular gods, the inner strength required to worship and to fight against evil. Mario Bussagli (1996) noticed as well that in Gandhara artistic representation, Heracles–Vajrapani survives the death of the Buddha and stays on Earth to protect the Buddhist communities and help them to prepare for the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya. According to Fernando (2008) and Varadpande (1981), the myth of Heracles can be found as well in the Mahabharata, demonstrating that, for the Indians, he was simply a figure in the continuity of their own history and myths. Later, especially in Southeast Asia, Atlas was also assimilated with the Yakṣa proper, or as a kind of mythological being traveling in nature or in space, often represented as a flying ogre or a goblin.

The Zhongshan grottoes, with their representation of Atlas, shows us the continuity of a Chinese “athletic Buddhist divinity” sculpture mainly inspired by Gandharan art during the Wei dynasty and beyond. These muscular Buddhist deities, represented by Atlas–Yaksha and Heracles–Vajrapani were brought together with athletics and martial arts in some *Sangha* (*Sengjia* 僧伽), or monk communities, in Northern China. They gave a new model of the “excellence” of body and mind necessary for protecting the Buddhist faith (Christopoulos 2013a, pp. 244–251). As Hsing (p. 138) states correctly, concerning the figurines of Heracles–Vajrapani, dating from the Tang dynasty, found in tombs in Shaanxi Province:

These figurines were placed on either side of the tomb path or entrance. They held weapons and displayed a martial power, undoubtedly as symbolic protectors of the tomb. Their role is similar to Vajrapani or the *gandhavra* responsible for guarding the law in the wall paintings and in the Buddhist grottoes. Clearly, although Heracles had changed appearance before he entered China, his original function as warrior and guardian was essentially unchanged.

Similarly, Atlas–Yaksha, who was sometimes understood as a *gandhavra* (Chinese: *Gantapo* 乾闥婆), had to carry the Buddhist faith with his strength: it was a physical strength added to a moral and a virtuous one for the Chinese monks. The first Buddhists who brought the Law to China belonged mainly to a warlike aristocracy that had been trained in athletics, including wrestling and boxing, from their early childhood education in Central Asia and Northern India, as all the Buddhist warrior aristocratic caste of mixed ethnical origins, the *Kshatriyas* (Sanskrit: क्षत्रिय), supposedly were. The martial arts or “war gymnastics” education in the local *palaestra* (known mainly as a military elite training ground from the Hellenistic period) consisted in wrestling, boxing, *pankration*, weightlifting, breathing exercises, and weaponry training. Greek-style athletic competitions took part even after the Greco-Bactrians and the Indo-Greeks, with the Kushanas and the Parthians as well. Heracles–Vajrapani was the main protecting god of that particular Buddhist aristocracy of mixed ethnic origins, and he was represented on some votive weights. On a particular training votive weight, he was represented as been honored by a lion on the reverse side, and on the other side, two athletes engaging in a wrestling match,

with one man standing and holding an Hellenistic (or Kushana) type of the Olympic wrestling referees' whipping rod, the *rhabdos* (fig. 9.). The large number of sculptures showing wrestlers and boxers demonstrates that combat sports professionalism inherited from Greek athletics was a common phenomenon having religious meaning for the Buddhist aristocracy of the Kushanas (see Faccenna 2001, pl. 120a; Galli pp. 292–296; Bernard pp. 40–45; Christopoulos 2013a–2013b). In the Indian tradition (most probably emphasized during the Kushana times, where combat sports were mandated), Siddhartha Gautama himself (563/480–483/400 BC. Sanskrit: सिद्धार्थ गौतम), as a member of a Hindu *Kshatriya* family, would traditionally have received wrestling, fencing, swimming, and archery training, before becoming enlightened and then becoming a Buddha. In classical Greece, Eros was the symbol of friendship, love, and camaraderie, and one of the major three gods of the *palaestra* alongside Heracles (symbolizing physical strength, courage, and virtue) and Hermes (symbolizing skills, intelligence, and ruse), but it seems that in Kushana Gandhara, the Buddha had replaced Hermes in Greco-Buddhist representations revolving around wrestling. And as Galli states partly (p. 296), Buddhism in the Kushana Empire was associated with an aristocratic power probably seeing itself as being an offspring of the gods and immersed in the practice of Indo-Greek combat sports and other military arts as an entire inherited tradition coming from its glorious ancestry and royal lineage.

What is really important here is not whether competitions between athletes really took place in these forms within Buddhist sacred spaces, but the conscious desire to introduce a precise reference to the exercise of such cultural practices, which constituted one of the interests that distinguished the aristocratic classes involved in the worship of the Buddha.

I have already detailed the Chinese biographies (Christopoulos 2012, pp. 57–64) of the Parthian aristocrat An Shigao (安世高 148~170), who wrote texts on breathing exercises like the *Da anban shouyi jing* (大安般守意經; translated from Pali and Sanskrit: *anapana*, meaning “breathing,” perhaps from Greek: *anapnein*) and another Parthian, An Xuan (安玄), who became commandant of the cavalry (*Qiduwei* 騎都尉) of Luoyang, as designated in 181 by the Chinese authorities. During their lifetimes, military arts in Parthia, including archery, were exercised in the *palaestra*; the institution of the gymnasium was itself mostly administered by Greek *gymnasiarchs* (Christopoulos 2013b, pp. 433–434). As Parthians belonging to a warlike aristocracy and coming from Bactria, which had strong Hellenistic components, without doubt they would have been trained in the *palaestra* as an imperative part of their

education from their youth onwards (Galli 2011, Christopoulos 2013a, 2013b, pp. 435–437). The Indian element is also interesting here, and we can only guess at what types of exchanges may have happened between the Greek versions and the Indian gymnastic forms like yoga and other psychosomatic exercises associated with Buddhist philosophy. Probably they simply evolved in a new way, taking in all that was known from the past and unifying them in the realm of Greco-Buddhist culture, so that Greek and Indian elements were no longer distinguishable.

Buddhabhadra (Batuluo 跋陀羅, 359–429), who translated sacred books and taught meditative concentration at the Shaolin temple, was also supposedly the teacher of the first Shaolin martial arts monk Seng Chou (僧稠). Boddhidharma (Damo 440?–536/554 達摩) was also known to have written breathing and meditative exercise texts and to have been involved with the early Shaolin boxing tradition at the Shaolin Monastery (*Shaolin Si* 少林寺) as well.

In contrast with the West, where body and mind became separated following the edict of the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 392 and the prohibition of the Olympic Games, in the Chinese world, as it was in the Indian, Hellenistic, and Kushana worlds, body and mind were continuously “exercised” together in quest of excellence, strength, effectiveness in fight, health, and, perhaps, immortality. In Wei–Jin dynasties China, new interpretations and explanations made understandable by pre-existing cultural models instituted the decisive goal of pursuing competitive physical force. It seems certain that Greek athletic professionalism, with the cults that evolved around these early athletic events, was the starting point for the muscular realism characterizing Chinese Buddhist sculptural art as shown by the Atlas-like figure of the Zhongshan grottoes.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Atlas carrying the Buddha; in the Zhongshan grottoes, Shaanxi. (Photo Georges Schmutz 2019)

The Atlas of the Zhongshan grottoes is sculpted with a strong naked torso, a short neck, and clothing in the Gandhara fashion. The figure wears a necklace and a loin cloth (*dhoti*) tied with a girdle at the waist. He is wearing what may be a lion skin on his head, and he has a fierce face and appears to be watchful, as if ready to fight, pointing to his physical strength and his martial skills.



Figure 2. Bas-relief carving from Gandhara, second–third century. Atlas is supporting the three interconnected Celestial Wheels, and Heracles stands next to the Buddha during the Buddha's first sermon. Gray schist 21.5 × 28 cm. Private collection.



Figure 3. A scene similar to Figure 1. Bas-relief of Atlas carrying the three interconnected Celestial Wheels with the Buddha and Heracles; Gray schist from Gandhara, second–third century. Private collection.



Figure 4. Winged Kushana Atlas wearing the lion skin of Heracles; from the third century, Gandhara. Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 5. Sui dynasty sculpture representing Atlas carrying the Buddha (Yamaguchi collection). Osaka Metropolitan Museum of Art.

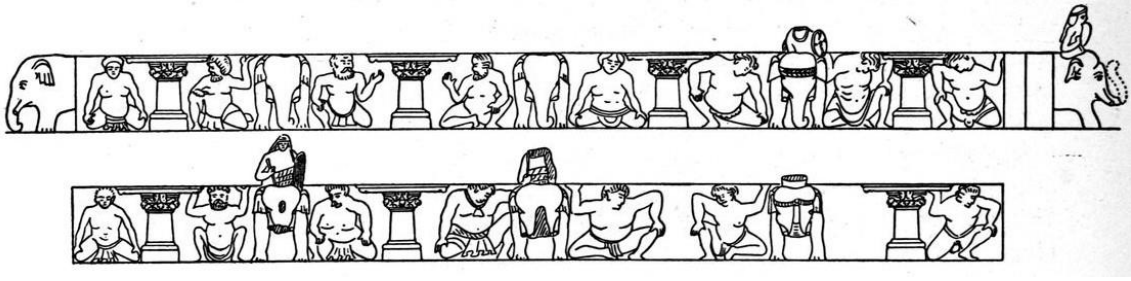


Figure 6. Greco-Buddhist Atlas from Hadda in Afghanistan. The bas-relief carvings face east and south of stupa k 20 (from Barthoux).



Figure 7. 171 cm terracotta wrestler from the Mausoleum of the Emperor Qin (around 221–206 BC), discovered in 1999. Lintong Museum of Terracota Warriors.



Figure 8. Indian coin of King Menander I with the Buddhist wheel.
British Museum.



a.



Figure 9. Votive weight from Kushana Gandhara representing Heracles with a lion honoring him and, on the reverse side, athletes in a wrestling match with two spectators and a referee holding a type of Kushana *rhabdos*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (The *rhabdos* was used to hit the wrestler who was using a forbidden technique, and it seems that the Kushana version of the third century was perhaps used as well to signify victory when raised, rather similar to what is shown on the Roman mosaic from Borghese depicting gladiator fighting in the early fourth century).

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