# Exploring Gandhāran Relic Rituals and Veneration I: Visualising Relics

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**Abstract:** Gandhāran reliefs and pedestal images repeatedly show figures venerating the relics of the Buddha. While efforts have been made to study this group of images, the next logical step of analysis would be to conduct a more systematic and contextual analysis of the visual and religious content in order to understand how images communicated normative rituals. By giving primacy to images and its associated evidence, such as Gāndhārī inscriptions and Chinese travelogues, this paper, the first of a series, is a modest attempt to shed light on how images depicting relic veneration and dating from the second century onwards are part of a visual rhetoric of Gandhāran rituals. By doing so, this paper lays special emphasis on how seeing the relics was an important part of Buddhist rituals not only in Gandhāra, but in the wider Kuṣāṇa visual culture.

**Keywords**: Relics, Rituals, Buddhism, Seeing, Visual Culture, Gandhāra, Pedestal, Xuanzang

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## 1. Introduction

Within Gandhāra, broadly in present-day northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, the centrality of relic veneration is attested by both the epigraphic and visual corpora (**Fig. 1**). The epigraphic corpus, i.e., texts consisting mainly of donative inscriptions, have had a significant impact on Gandhāran studies in particular, and Buddhism in general, in the last few decades.[1] The vast majority of inscriptions in local Gāndhārī (Middle Indo-Aryan language) and written on reliquaries,[2] mention the date of the donations, the names of the donors, the object of donation as well as the location in which the donations were made. Since the reliquaries were largely recovered from antiquities market and private collections, the location mentioned in the inscriptions cannot always be correlated to excavated Buddhist sites in the region. However, the information provided by the inscriptions can more broadly be associated with two local polities, the Apracas and the Oḍis, ruling the Bajaur and Swāt Valleys, respectively, who played a key role in maintaining Buddhist institutions (*saṅgha*) through relic donation and veneration.

A complementary and equally important source, the visual corpus, was well-known and documented as early as the nineteenth century when colonial officers dug up sites and collected images as antiquities. The visual corpus mainly preserves statues and bas-reliefs associated with the biography of the Buddha Śākyamuni, ritual praxis and decorative motifs. In the early period of their discovery by western scholars, the monumental images of the standing Buddha and bodhisattva were considered as the perfect amalgamation between western artistic aesthetics and Indic philosophy. They were mainly studied within Eurocentric and colonial perspectives that were focussed on understanding the origin of motifs in Gandhāran art rather than their socio-religious functions within Buddhist sites. However, in recent decades, the potential of the visual material to shed light on contemporary praxis has slowly begun to be fully exploited.[3] As a result, studies on rituals, portraits, and royal ideology, among other things, have paved the way for studying Gandhāran art within its historical context.[4]

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[1] The other source of texts are birch bark manuscripts with written texts, which are not relevant to the present discussion. For an overview of this evidence, see Salomon (1999).

[2] On some of the reliquaries such as pots, stone slabs and steatite containers, the inscriptions were directly written or inscribed on the surface. However, some relic inscriptions were also written on metal sheets and placed within reliquaries. For a detailed survey of Gandhāran reliquaries, including their form and inscriptions, see Jongeward et al. (2012).

[3] This was further accelerated by excavations in Swāt (Faccenna 1956–1962, 1962–1964; Callieri 1989), which has provided not only a basis for the chronological understanding of Gandhāran art but also shed light on the regional religious and political dynamics in the Oḍi kingdom (Lakshminarayanan 2023a, 2023b).

[4] Amongst them, the images associated with contemporary rituals have received sporadic

Starting from an interdisciplinary perspective using both inscriptions and images in which relics are donated and venerated by devotees, this paper will explore two aspects associated with relic veneration – displaying and seeing. As such, it is part of a series of forthcoming works that disseminate the results of my UK Research and Innovation Horizon Europe Guarantee Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship project titled Gandhāran Relic Rituals and Veneration Explored (GRAVE) at Cardiff University. The main objective of GRAVE is to establish an interdisciplinary methodology that combines art historical, epigraphic and textual sources to shed light on the ritual and veneration activities surrounding Buddhist relics in Gandhāra between the first and the fourth centuries CE.

The first section of the paper illustrates the variety of evidence available to delineate a corpus that is currently being studied within the scope of project GRAVE. Before examining the main object of this paper, displaying and seeing relics as part of ritual acts, it is important to establish what exactly is ritual in the realm of Gandhāran studies. While it has often been used in secondary literature when analysing textual evidence, mainly inscriptions and manuscripts, scholars have yet to systematically study how rituals can be understood based on visual culture.[5] As a modest attempt to bridge this gap, the second and third sections will outline how images, when studied using other sources such as texts, can shed light on the way rituals were visually conceptualised. Thus, in the subsequent section, the paper introduces some aspects related to relic veneration, such as displaying and seeing the relics, with hopes this may trigger further conversations regarding the socio-religious dimensions of Gandhāran visual culture.

Before discussing the images depicting relic veneration, it is important to establish what exactly do we mean by this term.[6] Relics in secondary literature are used to refer to three categories: a) corporeal relics (*dhātu* or *śarīra*) such as the teeth, bones, and the ashes of Buddha and his disciples; b) contact relics (*pāribhogika*) comprising objects that were in contact with the Buddha, such as his alms bowl, turban, footprint; and c) objects of commemoration or representation imbued with special significance such as images (*uddeśika*). We will see how devotees, in art and in turn, reality, venerated Buddhist relics and cultivated religious merit.[7]

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attention, particularly if they are presumed to have a "non-Buddhist" affiliation. For example, see FALK (2010a) and FILIGENZI (2019).
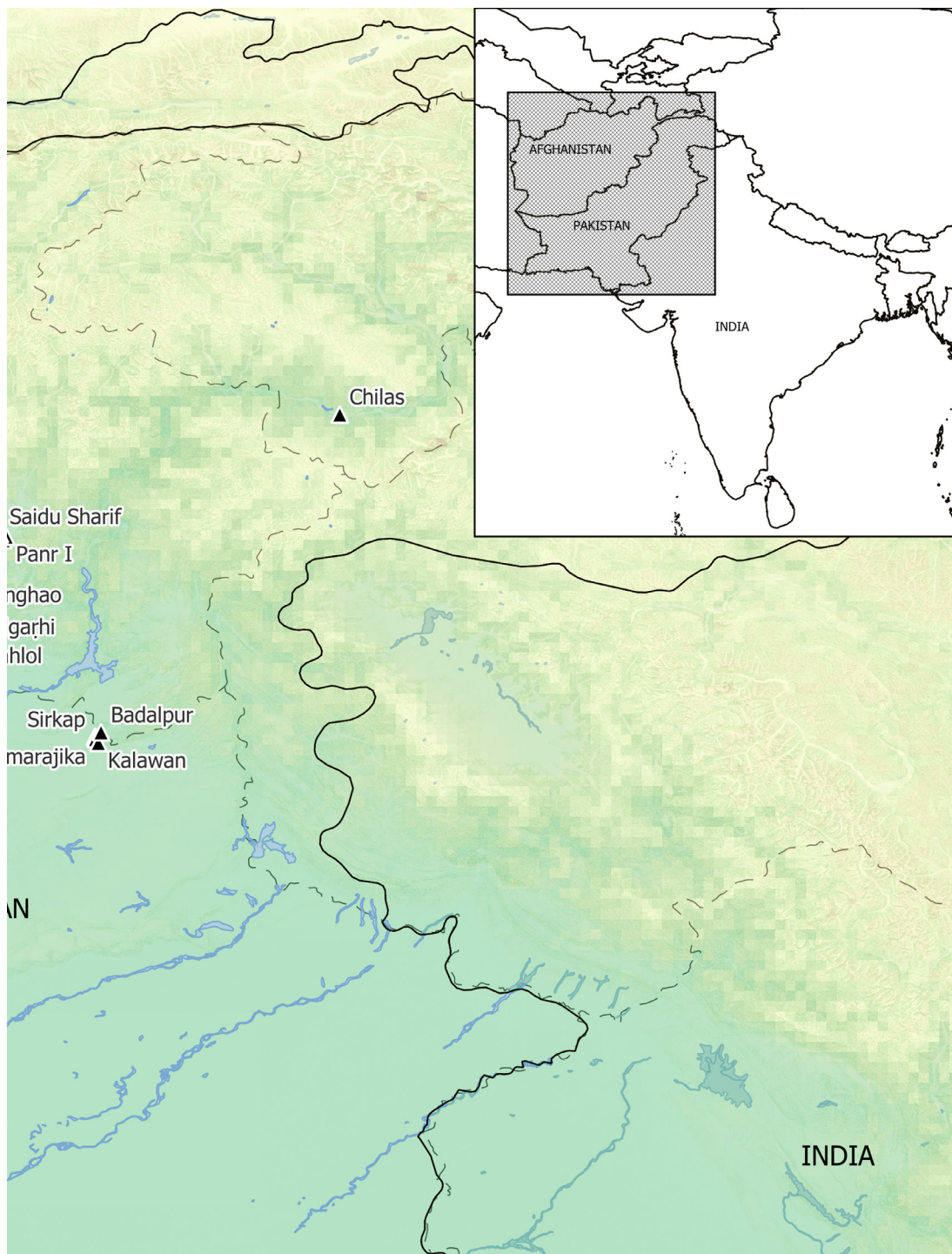
[5]  Publications on relic rituals based on the visual culture have certainly widened our knowledge, and some notable ones are VERARDI (1994), BEHRENDT (2003, 2006) and RHI (2005).

[6]  For the distinction between different relics, see SHARF (1999: 80–81), who makes an argument for not conflating them. Since this paper is a general introduction to the approach to relics on images, I have chosen to combine the groups together.

[7]  Several publications have dealt with the relationship between merit making and relic veneration, for example see STRONG (2004), STARGARDT and WILLIS (2018).

**Fig. 1.** Map of Gandhāra with key Buddhist Sites © Author. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not

Saidu Sharif
Panr I
nghao
garhi
hlol

Sirkap  Badalpur
marajika  Kalawan

Chilas

AFGHANISTAN

PAKISTAN

INDIA

AN

INDIA

apply to this picture.

## 2. Seeing and Displaying Relics in Images

This paper examines the ritual of viewing relics as represented in Gandhāran art. Chronologically and geographically, the term "Gandhāran art" encompasses a vast corpus of material, exhibiting considerable stylistic diversity. Consequently, there are notable differences in how relics are depicted, venerated, and framed in visual representations dating from the first to the fourth centuries CE. In the earliest phase of Gandhāran art, particularly in the Swāt Valley during the first century CE, relics are primarily shown being carried by donor and devotee figures.[8] As Gandhāran visual culture developed, scenes of relic veneration were increasingly incorporated into the decorative frames of large statues and narrative reliefs illustrating the life of the Buddha.

Among the earliest Buddhist representations from the Swāt Valley dating to the early first century CE are a number of images depicting male and female figures, sometimes bearing reliquaries. For instance, a statue from Butkara I (**Fig. 2**) portrays a male donor figure clad in Indic garments, holding a large cylindrical container. This container closely resembles some schist reliquaries also found within the region (**Fig. 3**), and visually evokes the presence of the relics within them.[9]

By the second century CE, new focal points for relic veneration in images emerged, particularly for contact relics – objects directly associated with the Buddha's life. During this period, in addition to reliquaries, representations of cremation mounds containing the Buddha's corporeal relics began to appear on separate registers on narrative reliefs. The mounds strongly resemble the cremation mound that is depicted in the life of the Buddha, between episodes of his *mahāparinirvāṇa* and the division of the relics.[10] One such relief, for example, depicts a mound venerated by devotees who are framed within arches and separated by Gandhāran-Persepolitan columns. The mound, a raised tumulus draped with cloth, is placed on an elevated platform (**Fig. 4**). Although the lower register of this relief, which likely depicted a scene from the Buddha's life, is not preserved, the composition on the upper register emphasises the veneration of the *stūpa* mound, recalling the Buddha's *mahāparinirvāṇa* cycle.

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[8]  Simultaneously, the images from the early phase continued to be reused on *stūpa* monuments as part of the iconographic programme. Taddei convincingly argues, based on the apparent lack of overarching pattern in the way in which the images were reused, that the piety accorded to sacred material was "perhaps an easy way to decorate a votive *stūpa* without being compelled to spend much money on having new images made" (TADDEI 2006: 47–48).

[9]  Reliquaries, whether they were schist, terracotta, metal or another material contained a number of objects that were associated with the relics. The Piprahwa relic caskets comprised objects such as precious and semi-precious beads, lapis lazuli, shell, coral, embossed and granulated gold as well as bones and ashes (FALK 2013). Similarly, the Ajidaseṇa relic container comprised a large number of pearls, precious stones and gold and silver flowers, fabric and an inscribed gold sheet (FUSSMAN 1986).

[10]  For instance, see BEHRENDT (2003: 78, Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2.** Statue of a donor figure carrying a reliquary, from Butkara I, height = 65.5 cm. Swāt Museum, Pakistan © A. Martin. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

**Fig. 3.** Buddhist reliquary in the form of a pyxis with various decorations, height = 4.7 cm, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. CC BY-SA 4.0



**Fig. 4.** Relief fragment depicting the stūpa mound, unknown provenance, height = 13.2 cm, National Museum of Pakistan, Pakistan © A. Martin. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

Relics such as the Buddha's turban and bowl also feature prominently in reliefs as objects of veneration. The turban relic, a symbol of the Buddha's renunciation, represents the moment when Siddhārtha cut his hair crest and, literally, abandoned his princely status.[11] In reliefs depicting its veneration, the turban is typically shown on an elevated podium, often exaggerated in size to highlight its importance (**Fig. 5**). On the same relief, the upper register preserves the bowl relic placed on a pedestal, venerated by a series of figures.



**Fig. 5.** Relief depicting the veneration of the Buddha, turban and the bowl, unspecified provenance, Dir Museum, Pakistan © Digitization of Gandhāran Artefacts. CC0 1.0 Public Domain.

Footprints, or *buddhapāda*, are also framed in a similar manner in reliefs, with devotees often shown flanking them in *añjalimudrā*.[12] In **Fig. 6**, two figures

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[11]   In Saidu Sharif I, a relief depicts the cutting of the hair episode from the Buddha's life in drawing style and likely dates to the early first century CE (AMATO 2019). For the veneration of the turban, see ZIN (2019).

[12]   Quagliotti has catalogued several isolated footprints in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia (QUAGLIOTTI 1998). Huntington, when arguing against the aniconic theory, which suggested that the representations of trees, *stūpa*s and footprints, amongst others, persuasively demonstrated that the *buddhapāda*s are "distinct from a figurative representation of the Buddha" (HUNTINGTON 2020: 428). She argues that in most cases, they are to be understood as imprints left by the Buddha, similar to the relics, rather than a symbolic substitute for the Buddha himself.

are positioned beside an intricately decorated footprint. It is likely that similar rituals took place around monumental footprints, such as the one shown in **Fig. 7**. These depictions demonstrate the expanding scope of relic veneration beyond corporeal remains to objects and symbols as vestiges not only associated with the Buddha's life but were also vestiges that triggered veneration activities.[13]



**Fig. 6.**  Relief depicting the veneration of the footprint, probably from Dir, height = unknown. National Museum of Pakistan, Pakistan © Z. Zhong. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

In addition to serving as supporting elements, relic veneration scenes also appear on the pedestals of Buddha and bodhisattva statues. These statues, likely intended for placement in shrines and niches within Buddhist sites, typically

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[13]  While they may refer to the Buddha indexically, they were objects that were venerated on pilgrimage or was visualised using prayer. In some traditions, Strong has identified that the footprints did not resemble human feet but were no more than depressions on rocks which pilgrims visited and covered with gold leaf (STRONG 2004: 88–90).

**Fig. 7.** Relief depicting the footprint of the Buddha, from Sikrai, height = 99 cm, Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery, India © Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery, A. Lakshminarayanan. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

range from 80 to 100 centimetres in height, while the pedestals themselves are approximately 20 centimetres. However, most of these pedestals originate from unknown or poorly documented excavations, limiting the potential for a detailed contextual analysis here.[14] Nevertheless, a preliminary analysis of around 326 pedestals revealed that around 253 images depict ritual veneration scenes.[15]



**Fig. 8.** Pedestal relief depicting the veneration of the bowl, unknown provenance, height = 42.8 cm, Musée national des Arts asiatiques – Guimet, France © Musée national des Arts asiatiques, A. Lakshminarayanan. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

[14] Some pedestals bear inscriptions, which allow for dating based on the textual content and palaeographic characteristics. For example, a pedestal of a now lost statue with an inscription is the subject of a detailed study by Fussman (1985). For now, it is important to note that the inscriptions on the pedestal cannot be directly correlated to the image on the pedestal.

[15] A complete presentation of the data is beyond the scope of this article. This data is part of a forthcoming paper in which I also deal with other objects appearing in the pedestals such as lamps and fire altars. Some examples of the latter are TC-80 (Tokyo National Museum); S 113 B, OS-120 (Östasiatiska Museet); 1886,0618.1 (British Museum); I 540, I 514, I 444, I 284, I 4916 (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin); Acc. no. 848, 568, 41 (Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh) G-66-0 (Lahore Museum) amongst others.

**Fig. 9.**  Pedestal relief depicting figures performing rituals, unknown provenance, total height = 126 cm. National Museum, India © National Museum (Delhi), A. Lakshminarayanan. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

Overall, the pedestals preserve compact vignettes that follow the same structure: the relics and ritual paraphernalia, and in a handful of cases reliquaries, are centrally placed on a throne or platform, and flanked by several devotees, who are often symmetrically arranged (**Figs 8** and **9**). The larger proportion of the former further emphasises their importance within the visual structure. The back of the enthroned relic is often covered by a large, pleated cloth that suggests they are being frontally viewed. The devotees who venerate them, comprise both male and female lay and monastic figures, are symmetrically arranged on either side of the central object. In some cases, male and female figures are grouped together regardless of their status. In this manner, monastic figures sometimes stand next to other lay male and female figures. In some cases, no object is depicted on the pedestal, the devotees are oriented toward the statue itself (**Fig**. **10**). These representations can be tentatively interpreted as illustrating devotees venerating an image as an *uddeśika* relic. Moreover, the positioning of the figures toward the relics serves to direct the attention of external viewers to the central object of veneration.

**Fig. 10.** Statue of a standing Buddha image with the pedestal, from Chatpat, total height = 51 cm, Dir Museum, Pakistan © Digitization of Gandhāran Artefacts. CC0 1.0 Public Domain.

## 3. Relics Rituals and Art: Engaging with the "Visual Turn"

What exactly are these rituals? In other words, how can we define the act of devotees visually engaging with relics in our images as a ritual and distinct from simply "seeing"? To answer this question, let us turn to the definition of the term "ritual", usually made based on its external characteristics and its varied contexts.[16] The range of definitions has led some scholars to observe that "few terms in the study of religion have been explained and applied in more confusing ways" (ZUESSE 2005: 7833) and that ritual "means very little because it means so much" (SCHECHNER 1993: 228).[17] Despite the limitations on defining ritual, it remains a key conceptual and analytical tool in the study of ancient religions, and has often been used to describe formal, repetitive, and stereotyped behaviours performed as social acts.[18] In this paper, the following definition applies: ritual is an intensive form of communication, structured by specific personnel, times, places, speech, gestures, costumes, and artefacts, and are based on the familiarity of the participants and some authoritative consensus.[19]

To engage with the visual representations of rituals in Gandhāran art, Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* offers a valuable starting point. BELL (1992: 88–93) shifts focus from defining ritual to exploring "ritualisation" a process which essentially differentiates and privileges some actions from more common, quotidian activities. Ritual agents internalise behaviours in structured environments, creating distinctions from mundane acts. Bell's examples show how the same actions – such as eating or giving gifts – can acquire distinct meanings during the process of ritualisation. Within this process, rituals despite resisting change, are not entirely static and unchangeable.[20] As rituals are

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[16]  The most well-known theories in the debates are VAN GENNEP (1960), BELL (1997), TURNER (1969), RAPPAPORT (1999). Some scholars have actively moved away from this term, instead opting for others such as "public events" which comprise characteristics such as formality, tendency to be replicated, intentionality, function, symbolism and connection to the wider world (HANDELMAN 1998: 10–11).

[17]  See also GOODY (1975).

[18]  KOTTAK ([1974] 2008: 228). Similarly, for the features of formality, fixity and repetition, see BELL (1992: 92).

[19]  BLOCH (1987: 296–297) emphasises the importance of familiarity. This paper does not aim to redefine ritual for Gandhāra, but to demonstrate how ritual theory can be explicitly applied to images. This does not mean that previous studies have ignored the dimension of ritual within Gandhāran art and indeed, the works cited in this article demonstrate that scholars have consistently been implicitly aware of how Gandhāran art is also a major part of social and anthropological phenomena (such as religion and gender amongst others) in the region. While some may find it cumbersome to frame the material within theoretical frameworks, making the relationship between Gandhāran art and its socio-religious contexts explicit in our discussions encourages questions that move beyond iconography and aesthetics, reflecting the current trends within the field.

[20]  BELL (1992: 210) suggests that the "part of the dilemma of ritual change lies in the simple

performed by ritual agents, the latter interprets the elements of the rituals to communicate them. Over time, the ritual agents "know what to do" as their ritual behaviour becomes internalised. At the same time, through the repetitive performances,[21] change can become part of the dynamic process when meanings are either left behind or layered or when actions acquire new nuances.[22]

It is indeed Bell's theory that influences Kevin Trainor's *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism*. TRAINOR (1997: 137) identifies two key characteristics of rituals: they are somatic and formal.[23] Trainor suggests that there is an overemphasis on an assumed early Buddhist scepticism about rituals. However, certain ritual actions, such as venerating the Buddha through gestures, were seen as conducive to achieving Buddhist ideals. Gestures like the *añjalimudrā* (salutation), prostration, kneeling, amongst others became normative for Buddhist practitioners. Trainor's analysis of relic veneration, where physical actions express devotion to the Buddha, is particularly useful for studying Gandhāran visual culture. Archaeological evidence provides only a glimpse of the rituals performed at Buddhist sites, as much of the material is fragmentary and lacks detailed context. While human actions may leave traces, this evidence is often incomplete and difficult to interpret. A more reliable source for inferring rituals is the visual corpus. Early Buddhist visual culture offers valuable insights into how rituals were conceptualised.[24] Although these images are not direct representations of rituals, they provide snapshots of the ritual process, through which meanings were communicated.

In light of this discussion on rituals, how can we interpret these images of relic veneration that we came across in the first section of this paper? In the case

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fact that rituals tend to present themselves as the unchanging, time-honoured customs of an enduring community".

[21] KAPFERER (1983). SCHECHNER (2003) frames rituals as performances in order to study their aesthetic and dramatic nature.

[22] This provides a possibility that rituals, were not unchanging, but had successive phases during which they acquired new meanings. Such changes in the ancient context are difficult to identify based on material remains and so are not tackled in this paper.

[23] Trainor states that the ritual, as it is performed by one's body and the use of senses and hence it is somatic. They are also not spontaneous acts but are "action performed in accordance with some authoritative or traditional pattern".

[24] Huntington's works dealing with these questions are particularly relevant, such as *Lay Ritual in the Early Buddhist Art of India* which used visual evidence from central Indian *stūpa* sites to suggest that the bas-reliefs decorating monuments can be associated with lay ritual practices. The reliefs, depicting lay practitioners performing various veneration activities, or showing devotion, to use the author's term, "reify the very lay practices associated with the reliquary monuments they adorn" (HUNTINGTON 2012: 8). However, some differences between the corpus analysed by Huntington and this paper, most notably, the representation of monks and nuns alongside lay devotees venerating relics in Gandhāran art suggest that Huntington's conclusions cannot be transposed to the Gandhāran corpus.

of Gandhāran art, the use of ritual theory can enhance our understanding of how Buddhism was practiced in the region. Rituals played a key role in social dynamics, and combined with our Gandhāran textual sources, we can ask nuanced questions about how rituals shaped mutual experiences. Thus, studying images can offer insights into the everyday experiences of Buddhism. The figures in these images, engaged in rites, are depicted with distinctive gestures, postures, and garb, suggesting normative rather than realistic representations. While the repertoire is limited and most images lack narrative content, their focus on veneration suggest a ritualised visual engagement with relics. Needless to say, if we consider them simply as decorations of reliefs and statues, they provide little original information. Their composition is highly repetitive and the actions of the figures, when in contact with the relics, are stereotypical and limited. Their compositions, along with the stereotypical and constrained actions of the figures in contact with the relics, suggest a lack of individuality or intentional variation. However, one can argue that this standardisation indicates a systematic approach to the representation of ritual acts and offers valuable insights into the normative practices surrounding ritual veneration. The predominance of these images, especially on the pedestals of nearly life-sized statues, implies that they functioned as typologies. As visual types, these representations likely aimed to reinforce and amplify the rituals, thereby formalising the practices familiar to Buddhist devotees.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the specific aspects of seeing and displaying the relics that these images illuminate, it is essential to consult other contemporary sources, particularly texts that explicitly document such practices. As previously noted, the most significant textual corpus from Gandhāra comprises primarily donative inscriptions. The trends observed in these inscriptions can be further expanded by studying Buddhist texts from India and China, thus enriching our understanding of the ritual context. The following section will focus on the relevant Gāndhārī inscriptions and their parallels within Chinese textual accounts, providing a nuanced framework for interpreting the ritual acts depicted in Gandhāran art.

## 4. Viewing Relics in Texts

The invisibility of the Buddha's corporeal relics, in the vast majority of cases, is generally accepted. According to the various versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the most important text that deals with relic veneration, the Buddha's cremated remains were divided amongst several polities and interred within *stūpa*s.[25] The text makes no mention of special reliquaries. Rather, the remains

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[25]   For a comparative analysis of the texts in Chinese, Pali and Sanskrit, see WALDSCHMIDT (1948). For an overview of the reliefs depicting the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* cycle, see JONGEWARD et al. (2012: 9–38).

were simply collected and measured in urns and distributed amongst various kings. The kings took their share of the relics and immediately raised mounds or *stūpa*s over them for veneration. The text does not mention any display practices such as parades and processions associated with the relics, and the *stūpa*s themselves seems to represent the relic within them. The relics likely remained invisible until, according to the *Aśokāvadāna*, the Mauryan king Aśoka opened the seven (or eight) original relic *stūpa*s and redistributed the relics within 84000 *stūpa*s across his kingdom.[26]

In so far as Gandhāra is concerned, the relic tradition in the region can be associated with the narrative of Aśoka distributing the relics, as well as localising narratives.[27] We have limited evidence for the intermediary periods, but by the mid-first century BCE inscriptions reveal that relic donations were made by wealthy donors, including the local ruling elite. The relics in these donations were mainly kept within stone and metal reliquaries that were likely interred within a *stūpa* and never to be seen again.[28] The large number of reliquaries, an estimated 500 containers, suggests that relics were widely distributed within the region.[29] Amongst them, stone and terracotta reliquaries greatly outnumber those made in silver and gold. They are devoid of any overarching iconographic programme; only floral and geometric motifs decorate the surface alongside the inscription (**Fig. 11**). Admittedly, the stone reliquaries were likely the outer covering within

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[26] For an examination of the Indian and Chinese versions of the text, see Przyluski (1923). A Gāndhārī *avadāna* associated with King Aśoka and his harem of women was analysed in Lenz (2014: 56–57).

[27] It is also important to note that other narratives for the region's claim to the relics exist. One such claim was made by Utarasena in Uḍḍiyāna in the Swāt Valley. After the Buddha subjugated the *nāga* Apalāla, he visited Utarasena's mother in the palace at Dhānyapura, the capital of Uḍḍiyāna. In the narrative, the Buddha is said to have explicitly stated that the kingdom had a share in the relics as Utarasena was his kin. Thus, when the Buddha attained *nirvana*, Utarasena requested a share but was denied as he was from the border regions. Eventually, the eight rulers dividing the relics are compelled to give him a share. When Utarasena returned to Uḍḍiyāna with the relic on a white elephant, the elephant died and becomes petrified. So, Utarasena decided to establish a relic *stūpa* at this spot (T.2087.884a19–25 translated in Deeg 2011: 194–197). Faccenna also notes that a relief from Saidu Sharif I might be a possible representation of Utarasena recovering his share of the relics and bringing them back to the Swāt Valley (Faccenna 2001: 227–229, Inv. no. S241). Such an event would be ideally placed in Saidu Sharif I, located in the Swāt Valley, and have evoked the regional claim to the Buddha's relics on this *stūpa*.

[28] In some cases, the objects used as reliquaries may have been reused in this context. For example, the silver reliquary of Indravarman were goblets that were reused as relic containers (Salomon 1996).

[29] Such a large number of reliquaries, presumably of the Buddha and his disciples, reflects some evidence of commodification of relics, which needs further investigation. A theoretical model that might be useful in understanding the sudden explosion of relics in the early first centuries is presented in Kopytoff (2013). For a chronological arrangement of inscribed reliquaries see Baums (2018).

which more elaborate containers may have been placed. In this case, the smaller containers made out of precious materials may not have survived because of their value. When these containers were preserved, we can note that their forms and decorations were more developed. For example, the well-known gold Bimaran reliquary casket from a *stūpa* in Jalalabad, Afghanistan in the form of a pyxis is decorated by a series of deities venerating the Buddha under arched niches.[30] It was protected within a steatite container inscribed with the name of the donor as Śivarakṣita and, presumably, this container was interred within a *stūpa*.[31] The decorations on the gold reliquary casket reflect wider patterns of Gandhāran art and are similar to what we find on other objects such as stone reliefs. When compared to **Fig. 12**, the scenes on the casket find a striking echo. Although **Fig. 12** only uses the bust of the figures, the architectural frame with niches supported by pilasters suggests, unsurprisingly, that the same motifs were deployed by artists in different mediums.



**Fig. 11.** Schist reliquary with geometric motifs and its contents, unknown provenance, height = 7 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, USA © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. CC0 1.0 Public Domain.

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[30] The gold reliquary and schist casket are currently housed in the British Museum (Inv. no. 1900,0209.1). The gold reliquary measures around 6.7 cm in height and 6.6 cm in diameter.

[31] CKI 50. The object as well the relics within the steatite container were extensively analysed by CRIBB (2018). CKI refers to the Corpus of Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions based on the Gandhari.org database created by Stefan Baums and Andrew Glass. Translations of some of the inscriptions are available in BAUMS (2012).

**Fig. 12.** Relief depicting a series of figures venerating the Buddha, from Jabagai, height = unknown, Dir Museum, Chakdara © Digitization of Gandhāran Artefacts. CC0 1.0 Public Domain.

Not all the reliquaries were inscribed, but the ones which were inscribed allude to their contents. Amongst them, several inscriptions explicitly mention that the bodily relics belonged to Śākyamuni.[32] For instance, one of the earliest Gāndhārī inscriptions dating to the middle of the first century BCE, the donative inscription of the *meridarch* Theodotus states that the donor established the relics of the Śākyamuni for the benefit of all beings.[33] Another inscription of the Apraca prince Iṃdravarma I dating around 6 CE states that the donor established a relic donation along with his family members.[34] It mentions that the relics belonged to the Śākyamuni and that they were originally part of a Mauryan period *stūpa*.[35] This donative inscription illustrates a specific case during which relics were removed from a *stūpa* and reinterred somewhere safe.[36] While the Iṃdravarma I inscription does not state why the relics were removed from the Mauryan *stūpa*, we will see other inscriptions which allude to the circumstances leading to the removal of the relics.

When the *stūpa* was damaged due to natural causes or human neglect, relics were removed and moved to another monument. Such a case is described in

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[32]   CKI 464 (Relic Inscription of Gomitra); 242 (Relic Inscription of Iṃdravarma); 334 (Relic Inscription of Ajidasena); 46 (Relic Inscription of Patika); 257 (Relic Inscription of Śatruleka); 266 (Relic Inscriptions of Dhaṃmila, Kumuka and Dasadija, and of Kopśakasa); 401 (Relic Inscription of Ayadata); 564 (Relic Inscription of Helaguta); 153 (Relic Inscription of Śveḍavaṃma); 159 (Relic Inscription of Vagamarega); 509 (Relic Inscription of the Daughter of Vagamarega); 457 (Relic Inscription of Teyamitra).

[33]   CKI 32 (Relic Inscription of Theodotos). The office of the *meridarch*, a title coming from the Hellenistic West, was likely related to the administration of the local kingdoms. A complete examination of the Greek office titles in Gāndhārī inscriptions can be found in Falk (2010b).

[34]   CKI 242 (Relic Inscription of Iṃdravarma).

[35]   According to Salomon, the site in which this and another Dharmarājikā *stūpa* was located was Tramana, the capital of the Apracarājas (Salomon 2007: 272–273).

[36]   Removing relics from the *stūpa* may have also been a means by which political entities reinforced their power through rededications. A brief analysis of relic rededications conducted by Albery suggests that kings either renovated destroyed *stūpa*s, which were either neglected or destroyed by calamity, or destroyed them deliberately to make rededications (Albery 2020: 112).

the Oḍirāja Seṇavarma's donative inscription, which states that the Ekauda *stūpa* established by the king's ancestors was enlarged after it was destroyed by lightening (CKI 249). As one of the longest Gāndhārī donative texts, this unique inscription, dating around the first century BCE, provides information on the actions of the king as well as his motivations for establishing the inscription. The inscription reads much like a public proclamation and can be imagined as part of an elaborate *stūpa* inauguration. We will examine this detail later on. But, for now, it is important to note that the damage also exposed the older donative inscription of his ancestor, King Vasuseṇa, according to the text. We may infer that the donative inscription of King Vasuseṇa, likely inscribed on a reliquary, was interred within the *stūpa*. Without the destruction of the *stūpa*, the Vasuseṇa inscription was completely hidden from view and was only revealed during Seṇavarma's rebuilding project.

Similarly, the inscription recording the relic donation of the Apraca king Vijayamitra II includes the previous donative inscription made by Vijayamitra I around 150 BCE.[37] It states that Vijayamitra II, sometime around 8 CE, restored the relics of the Śākyamuni, including the broken reliquary in which it was held as it was destroyed due to neglect. By restoring the relics, he added his donative inscription on the outer surface of the reliquary and included the inscription of Vijayamitra I on the inner surface. While the inscription does not explicitly state a process of exhuming the relics, based on the Seṇavarma inscription, the Vijayamitra I relics were likely reinterred during an elaborate ceremony organised by Vijayamitra II.

The handful of cases from our epigraphic corpus in which the bodily relics of the Buddha were interred within the *stūpa* and later removed under specific circumstances suggest that these relics were not always meant to be seen. When the relics were indeed moved to more secure monuments by building new or renovating damaged ones, we may imagine that an elaborate public ceremony was performed by the kings in front of important members of their polities. In the Seṇavarma inscription, the king directly addressed the assembled groups consisting of ascetics, noble folk, and the two-fold community (monks and nuns). We can imagine that the king conducted a highly organised official ceremony by inviting important members of the community. He or his representatives may have made a public proclamation on the ritual day regarding his rebuilding activities and his aspirations. On such a day, the relics themselves may have been put on display for devotees to venerate them. While the Vijayamitra II inscription does not explicitly contain a proclamation, the royal status of the donor suggests that such a public ceremony may have been instituted.

Such public ceremonies were meant to honour both the donor and the recipient

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[37]  CKI 176 (Relic Inscriptions of Menandros and Vijayamitra).

and render the donated object, in this case a *stūpa*, more accessible to devotees. I have previously argued that Gandhāran kings may have even been approached by representatives of the *saṅgha* to induce them to care for the donations established by their ancestors (LAKSHMINARAYANAN 2023a). According to some *vinaya* rules, monastics were encouraged to appeal to the donors when their donation fell into disuse. When the donors themselves were not alive to maintain the donation, their offsprings could be persuaded to make more donations.[38] When the successors of the donors rebuilt and renovated previously established donations, new opportunities to affirm the inter-relationship between political powers and the Buddhist *saṅgha* were created. During these opportunities, the kings could publicise their efforts through *stūpa* inauguration festivals, processions and ritual ceremonies.

These elaborate ceremonies are not preserved in Gandhāran texts but can be deduced from Buddhist texts developing elsewhere in the subcontinent. Oskar von Hinüber has persuasively argued that the Seṇavarma inscription can be read in parallel with the *Mahāvaṃsa* story of king Duṭṭhagāmaṇī Abhaya (161– 137 BCE) establishing a *stūpa*.[39] The *stūpa* inauguration festival organised by Duṭṭhagāmaṇī begins with a public proclamation, a generous donation of food and clothes at the city gates, a procession of the empty reliquary on elephants and a parade with the king and horses carrying the relics. Following these events, the relics were installed in the relic chamber and devotees worshipped the relics for seven days. After these ceremonies, the relic chamber was closed and the *stūpa*, now imbued with the power of the relics, was venerated. In the *Mahāvaṃsa* account, the reliquary and the relics are festively paraded before they are completely hidden from view. During these events, the devotees not only saw and venerated the relics, but were also provided with generous gifts from the king. If our Gāndhārī inscriptions allude to a similar scenario, the relics or at least reliquaries, must have been viewed by the assembled crowds before they were interred within the *stūpa*s.

Some Gandhāran images provide a foundation for identifying such elaborate events during which the reliquaries may have been put on display. A relief from Butkara I may depict a relic procession (**Fig. 13**).[40] This relief, coming from the Oḍirājas kingdom and dating to the early first century is contemporary to our

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[38]  Schopen has demonstrated based on some *vinaya* texts that when *vihāra*s or other donated properties fell into disrepair, the donors should be encouraged to make repairs. This is justified by stating that when the donated object ceases to be used, the donors also cease to accrue merit resulting from use (SCHOPEN 2004: 238–239).

[39]  *Mahāvaṃsa* XXXI in HINÜBER (2015: 187–188).

[40]  A parallel can be found on the relief adorning the south gate of Stūpa 1 in Sanchi. It depicts an elaborate scene interpreted as the war over the relics alongside a relic procession by a royal figure on an elephant. For the image, which is also widely available on the internet, see also Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Acc. No. 56280. Cf. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Acc. No. IM.83-1939.

**Fig. 13.** Relief depicting a possible parade of relics with an elephant, four horses, soldiers and musicians, from Butkara I, height = 35 cm, Swāt Museum, Pakistan © Swāt Museum. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

Seṇavarma inscription. While it is heavily damaged,[41] some elements can be definitively identified. Motifs such as a decorated elephant led by foot soldiers, cavalry, and musicians playing drums and flutes as flying figures hover over them can be discerned as part of the scene. In light of the description from the *Mahāvaṃsa*, an elaborate procession of a reliquary carried by a royal figure remains a possible interpretation for this relief. Similar fragmented reliefs, awaiting interpretation, could also be hypothetically associated with the same theme (**Figs 14** and **15**). To this group of images, we may also add several statues from Swāt Valley depicting donors and devotees carrying reliquaries in their hands and rendering them visible. These images may refer to donors processing reliquaries prior to their installation within the *stūpa*. Once interred in the *stūpa*, the decorative programme of the buildings with donors carrying the relics may recall to the worshippers not only of the presence of the relic within the *stūpa*, but also the elaborate ritual structure that imbued the *stūpa* with the power of the relics.[42]

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[41]  A better-preserved illustration of the relief can be found in FACCENNA (1962–1964: Pl CDLXXI [Inv. no. 683]).

[42]  This may also explain why, by the second century CE, the images were reused on subsidiary *stūpa*s in Butkara I. Since the donor images did not refer to individual donors, but to the pious activities associated with them, they may have been used as part of a wider communication strategy.

**Fig. 14.** Relief depicting figures on an elaborately decorated elephant, unknown provenance, height = unknown, Musée national des Arts asiatiques – Guimet, France © Musée national des Arts asiatiques, A. Lakshminarayanan. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

**Fig. 15.** Relief depicting figures carrying reliquaries, unknown provenance, height = unknown, Musée national des Arts asiatiques – Guimet, France © Musée national des Arts asiatiques, A. Lakshminarayanan. The CC BY-NC 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

Even though our Gāndhārī epigraphic corpus only preserves mentions of relics that were most likely hidden from view, not all relics were contained within reliquaries.[43] We know of the existence of several contact relics of the Buddha that were widely distributed within the subcontinent and viewed by devotees. The textual descriptions of how and when these relics were viewed highlight

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[43] Within this backdrop, we may also analyse the tooth relic festival and processions described by Faxian in Sri Lanka in the fifth century during which it was exhibited on the main road (STRONG 2004: 52). The relic, preciously celebrated, was not entirely confined to a building but seems to have been publicly paraded in a theatrical manner.

that sight was an important aspect of relic veneration and created contact between the devotee and the relics, the latter sometimes reacting with the viewer due to its magical powers. The aspect of seeing during relic veneration, albeit not explicitly stated in our inscriptions, are nevertheless echoed by Gandhāran images.

The act of seeing the Buddha, his relics and *stūpa* frequently appears in the *Divyāvadāna* or Divine narratives, a Sanskrit anthology belonging to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*. The Mūlasarvāstivādins were a branch of Buddhists who flourished in the first half of the first millennium in Northwest India and so, their texts, including the *Divyāvadāna*, may have circulated within Gandhāra. The anthology offers interesting insight into the practices of *darśana* or seeing using complex narratives. Typically, characters in the *avadāna*s saw the Buddha or objects associated with him (*darśana*), which resulted in the awakening of an intense feeling of faith in their minds (*prasāda*), which in turn motivated them to make offerings (*dāna*) to the *saṅgha*. Such scenarios occur repeatedly in the *Divyāvadāna*, creating a nexus between three ritual acts, the *darśana*, *prasāda* and *dāna*.

Some narratives even go as far as to frame the act of seeing the Buddha as a "sight that one never tires of" (*asecanakadarśana*) which invoked *prasāda* in the minds of the devotees.[44] For example, the text observes that the image of the Buddha in the *Rudrāyaṇāvadāna* as a "sight one never tires of seeing" and captures the way in which Buddhist vision was thought to be an act of active engagement. Through the ritual practice of sight, viewers are affected by the image which creates spiritual merit. In this *avadāna*, a group of painters painted the Buddha at King Bimbisāra's palace, and they stared at the image without satisfaction and were unable to grasp the Buddha's appearance. Here, we are contending with something beyond simply "seeing the image" but seeing it in a manner that invokes a response from the viewer.[45] Besides the Buddha and his image, *stūpa*s also invoked *prasāda* as they too "were sights that one never tires of seeing". In the *Koṭikarṇāvadāna*, a caravan leader is said to have seen a newly renovated but previously depilated *stūpa* dedicated to the Buddha Kāśyapa and was moved by the sight of it to give even more wealth to it as donations.[46] In a previous life, the caravan leader is said to have donated his earring to fix the cracked surface of the same *stūpa*. When the money from the sale of the earring allowed the *stūpa* to be restored to its original glory, it became

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[44]    ROTMAN (2008: 72) glosses it as also "somehow compulsively watchable".

[45]    *Rudrāyaṇāvadāna* (466.06.16): *asecanakadarśanā buddhā bhagavantaḥ.*

[46]    ROTMAN (2008: 73). Similarly, in the *Māndhātāvadāna*, a guild master sees a perfectly awakened Sarvābhibhū as a sight one never tires of seeing and gave flowers made of four kinds of jewels that he received from his daughter-in-law's dowry (ROTMAN 2008: 337–371). In the *Dharmarucyavadāna*, Sumati "saw" the Buddha and was filled with faith (SILK 2008).

"a sight one never tires of seeing. And at the sight of it, his *prasāda* became even greater…Filled with *prasāda*, he gave the wealth the remained [from the sale of his earring] and a little more."[47] Here, the vision of the *stūpa,* seen with utmost sincerity, affects the viewer and moves him to another ritual act, *dāna*.

According to Rotman, the Buddha, *stūpa*s and other objects that compelled the viewer to react in this way can be understood as "agents of *prasāda*".[48] These agents operate in the visual realm, and when they are seen, could induce a certain effect. While the feeling of faith propelled the viewer to make *dāna* to the *saṅgha*, the act of seeing remains the first catalyst in several narratives. The trope of seeing, feeling and donating is repeatedly embedded in the *Divyāvadāna* narratives in which visual engagements are highly effective in motivating devotees. The site of important Buddhist objects affects the individuals immediately, they are captivated by it and feel compelled to react. Such a reaction to a visual prompt is not *automatic*, as ROTMAN (2003: 560) argues, it is "socially and culturally inscribed". We may go as far as to say that the viewer performs an act of viewing, mundane as it may seem, which is ritualised through a process during which the act is distinguished. The process of ritualisation enables the act to carry a deeper meaning within the Buddhist context during which the viewer affects and is affected by their religious merit. One way to inscribe such ritual processes within the community may have been through images. If we consider the power and agency of objects to visually affect their viewer in these textual narratives, Gandhāran images of viewing relics may be associated with normative practices that the *saṅgha* sought to reiterate amongst their devotees.

The long process through which these rites were culturally inscribed within the ritual landscape is also suggested by the travelogues of Chinese monks in Gandhāra. Owing to Gandhāra's growing importance as both a Buddhist and mercantile centre, Chinese travellers observed and recorded Gandhāran ritual practices to be brought back to their land. Their accounts, dating as early as from the fifth century CE onwards are not contemporary to the Kuṣāṇa period (c. the first until the third century CE) during which the majority of Gandhāran

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[47] ROTMAN (2008: 73). Interestingly, the analysis of this narrative has led Becker to suggest that the *stūpa*, in its dilapidated form was not as effective as the *stūpa* that was a "sight one never tires of seeing". Its position as an "agent of faith must be cultivated and maintained" (BECKER 2015: 68).

[48] Rotman compares the response to the agent to a "libidinal response" – similar to the response of looking at pornography – which arises through "enunciative spectacle", emphasising implicitly the visual nature of the objects (ROTMAN 2008: 140). In these narratives, the responsibility of maintaining an object related to the Buddha, such as images and *stūpa* as "a sight that one never tires of seeing", is on the makers of the object and the patrons who continue to maintain them through donations. The caravan leader's reaction to the depilated *stūpa* and the renovated *stūpa* is distinct and further supports this argument (BECKER 2015: 68).

inscriptions and reliefs were produced. Despite the chronological gap between the Gandhāran art and Chinese texts, the lack of first-hand accounts from Gandhāra renders the Chinese perceptions of Gandhāran Buddhism extremely fruitful in locating Buddhist sanctuaries and raising questions regarding the continuity of rituals in the region. The travel accounts are not ethnographic, partly due to the motivations of the authors and partly due to healthy scepticism surrounding whether they had visited the region, but they nevertheless provide observations on practices related to relic veneration that may been broadly embedded within Buddhism.

In the fifth century CE, Faxian reports that the bowl was once in Puruṣapura and a Yeuzhi king summoned his army to attack the kingdom and take away the bowl.[49] However, when the king tried to carry the bowl away, it was impossible to move despite having elephants and chariots pulling them. After realising that his karmic link with the bowl had not been established, the king built a *stūpa* and a monastery to commemorate the bowl relic. Faxian states that seven hundred monks stayed in the monastery and, every day, the *saṅgha* brought out the bowl and the monks made offerings to it. Viewing the relic was an important moment of veneration at this *stūpa* and is similarly taken up several Chinese monks who deliberately came to see the Buddha's bowl during their visit to the Indic subcontinent.

Similar sentiments on seeing relics also find a resonance in the travelogues of the Chinese Xuanzang, who visited parts of India to gather information on Buddhist practices. In his travelogues, Xuanzang mentions several relics such as the shadow, the footprint, and skull of the Buddha which were physically inscribed into the landscape of the Indic Northwest.[50] In his report, seeing the traces of these relics is not regarded as a passive action, but as a means through which the devotee visually engages with the seen object, the relic, and interprets a response. Such a manner of seeing the relics can be understood, for instance when Xuanzang describes the location of the famous shadow image. According

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[49]   T.2085.858b.11ff also provides a description of the bowl and its capacity, adding further dimension to visualising it. Besides the bowl, other relics such as the shadow of the Buddha, the tooth of the Buddha and the *uṣṇīṣa* were also venerated by Chinese travellers in Nagarahāra. Some relics, typically the bowl, tend to move or multiply. After the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, the bowl is said to have moved through different kingdoms and finally, at the time of Faxian's visit, he reports that it was in the kingdom of Persia (879c.5). Moreover, Deeg has noted that the bowl was not solely linked to Gandhāra, and it was also attested by others elsewhere such as Sri Lanka (DEEG 2005: 494). In each instance, the relic was connected to the location to which it belonged through narratives.

[50]   According to T.2087.879a18–23, these relics were in the same area, i.e. around the Shadow Cave in which the footprint, hair, nail clippings and the rock where the Buddha washed his clothes. Such vivid descriptions have led Michel de Certeau to describe the text as a genre in which "the very itinerary of writing leads to the vision of the place: to read is to go and see" (CERTEAU 1984: 281).

to the narrative, the Buddha is said to have left behind the shadow image in a cave after subjugating a powerful *nāga*.[51] After the subjugation, the *nāga* requested the Buddha to stay so that he may continue to be his ardent disciple. The Buddha, knowing his *nirvāṇa* was soon, told the *nāga* that if the *nāga* ever were to become enraged, he should look at the Buddha's shadow, which would placate any evil arising in him. Within this narrative, we already see the emergence of the idea that seeing the relic of the Buddha influences the mind of the viewer. Such a relationship based on seeing is, moreover, directly put in the Buddha's own words. Much later, during Xuanzang's visit, the shadow is said to have been not visible for all, or even in its entirety, but when contemplating the Buddha sincerely, some could see a faint response of the shadow for a short time (T.2087.878c.24).

In the same narrative, the Buddha is also said to have left his footprints on a rock with the marks of the wheel of *dharma*.[52] The quest for seeing the footsteps also seems to be acquisitive in the same way that the shadow was regarded. Despite the footprints being dimly visible but still sometimes emitting a light, we are told that when people of sufficient merit looked upon them, the trace of the relics became long or short in response to their virtue (SELIG BROWN 2000: 44). The relics were so popular that devotees came to these relic sites from near and far to make offerings of flower and incense and to see the relics' response. Similarly, the parietal bone of the Buddha in Kapiśā also interacted with its viewers. When one wanted to know auspicious or evil omens, they applied incense power and mud to it and the resulting shining pattern was used to divine the fate of the devotee (T.2087.0879a26). In the Xuanzang's description of the skull relic, some striking parallels with the visual imagery can be made. The relic is said to have been placed in a bejewelled case and covered by a net. The bejewelled

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[51] The *nāga*s (feminine form *nāginī*) or serpent deities who are often connected to land, water and rainfall (VOGEL 1926: 281, DEEG 2009: 53–54). For the general importance of *nāga*s, see COZAD (2004). The etymology is also synthesised in DEEG (2021: 54). They are creatures of capricious nature, who sometimes have a human form and a snake hood, and it is assumed that were worshipped locally in the Indian subcontinent for their supernatural and terrific powers (DECAROLI 2011). They are commonly understood as part of "local" religious cults across the subcontinent and believed to have played an integral role in the legitimisation of the Buddhist institution, the *saṅgha*'s presence in new areas, and control over water resources (COHEN 1998, cf. SHAW 2004). Faxian similarly refers to the shadow of the Buddha and states that the shadow had all the hallmarks of the Buddha and despite attempts, it could not be captured accurately in paintings (T.2085.859a.3 in DEEG 2005: 258). Nearby the cave in which the shadow image relic was housed, there were other important relics such as the parietal bone, the cranial bone (*uṣṇīṣa*), of an eyeball, the *kāṣāya* and *saṅghāṭī*, and the mendicant staff of the Buddha, which were all meant to be visited by devotees.

[52] The pair of footprints in Tirāt with a Kharoṣṭhī inscription along the Swāt river may have echoed such narratives (QUAGLIOTTI 1998: 50–51, & Fig. 24). TUCCI (1958: 302) remarked: "... thus everybody could be satisfied that his merits were not despicable, since the prints were so big as to appear to everyone much larger than the normal footprints of common men".

case likely refers to the reliquary protecting the bone and the net, according to Deeg, is reminiscent of the large, pleated fabric that often covers the back of the enthroned relics on our Gandhāran images.[53]

The interaction between relics and devotees is also framed similarly in Xuanzang's hagiographies, which go as far as to state that the Chinese traveller's full devotion made the relics perform miraculous feats (T.2053.230a.1). In one latter account, when Xuanzang recited the *sūtra*s and praised the Buddha, the shadow image responded and appeared even more brightly than before. In all these accounts dating as early as the fifth century CE, seeing the relics and venerating them plays an important role. Making *darśana* of the relics not only elicited a response from the devotee, but based on their actions, the relic also engaged with the viewer.

If we consider our Gandhāran images, in which relics are displayed to be venerated by a variety of means including that of sight, as not just as a visual representation of what one *does* in the presence of relics but what as one *must do* in their presence, we can say something about the way in which relic veneration was conceptualised. Visual engagement with particular objects, according to texts, allowed devotees to cultivate a certain state of mind that led them to perform right actions. Viewed within the framework of *prasāda*-inducing objects, our Gandhāran images also seem to affirm the ritual efficacy of seeing. Our images, thus underline the practice of visually engaging with the Buddha and his relics side by side with other ritual practices.

Such an interpretation of these images is only possible if we analyse them within the wider context of Buddhist ritual practices. The broad application of ritual theory to ancient Gandhāra can allow us to study visual culture explicitly as a way in which negotiations, strategic actions and social interactions were communicated. The visual depictions of rituals certainly were a backdrop for spaces within which Buddhist ritual activities took place. The images were likely shaped by and informed participants' experiences. Because of their context and content, it is important to study Gandhāran images as not just representations and illustrations of rituals but as reflecting and shaping religious practices (ELSNER 2007: 29–30, 48).

Similar to the textual descriptions of figures showing respect and devotion, Gandhāran images repeatedly depict figures performing a limited set of gestures in front of the Buddha and his relics. If we accept that these images capture

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[53] T.2087.879a27–b20 in DEEG (unpublished manuscript). In this description too, a violent king is said to have tried to remove the relics of the Buddha contained in this site, such as the bone, the staff and his robes (*saṅghāṭi* and *kāṣāya*). However, the relics moved back to their original place on their own will and would not stay in the king's palace. The explanation given was that the relics were so powerful that they could not be forcibly retained against their will.

snapshots of contemporary rituals, we can say that they are visual mediums through which the *saṅgha* and the Buddhist devotees negotiated and mediated communication. Being two-dimensional, images do not record movements of figures and progressive stages of performance. However, sensory elements such as smell and sound can be visually suggested by the presence of incense, flowers and musical instruments which are also depicted on images. The paraphernalia associated with certain rituals, stereotypical gestures and postures, the arrangement of figures, in some cases, even the presence of monastics at the same level as lay devotees, seem to be encoded within the visual frame. By extrapolating different types of information depicted on the reliefs, we can move towards understanding how normative models of certain rituals were visually communicated and reinforced through Buddhist art.[54]

## 5. Summary Conclusions and Future Directions of GRAVE

In the two decades since Trainor's *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism*, attempts to materialise early Buddhist ritual practices are more common than ever before. The early "protestant" approaches to studying Buddhism outside its material context, mainly by dismissing the centrality of images and relics, have almost entirely disappeared. Today, due to the availability of new materials as well as the consolidation of data, it is possible to use the available sources such as texts, archaeological remains, and visual culture to shed light on contemporary socio-religious praxis.

By using images to identify ritual practices, it is interesting to question whether the relics were made visible to the devotees or if some individuals were allowed to look at the reliquaries. Amongst our Gandhāran evidence, metal and stone reliquaries do not allow us to see inside them in the same way that Christian relics from the High Middle Ages were made visible. Many Gandhāran reliquaries were likely hidden away, concealed within the *stūpa* superstructure and were only revealed by the efforts of ancient devotees or modern excavations. Even the reliquaries made of precious metals were presumably not meant to be seen and were likely commissioned to be permanently interred. This does not mean that relics and reliquaries were never seen by the devotees at all. Indeed, images and texts make allusions to how contact relics and reliquaries were either paraded or put on display during specific circumstances.

At the risk of oversimplifying a complex relationship between viewer and religious imagery, the visual discourse based on our evidence suggests that seeing the relics, alongside other practices, was an important aspect of veneration. This

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[54]  The relationship between art and ritual practice is much better established outside the field of Gandhāran Buddhism and some examples are Wessels-Mevissen (2011), Bautze-Picron (2015) and Kim (2016). Moreover, the efficacy of vision based on Bodhgayā imagery is the core of Leoshko (2021).

is reflected in the accounts of Chinese travellers to the Indic Northwest, who not only came to collect important information of how Buddhism was practiced in India but also fulfilled their quest to see relics for their spiritual merit. In light of the textual evidence, if we consider our Gandhāran images as ritual vignette rather than decorative elements, we can ask wider questions on the efficacy of images. Some of them form the objects of project GRAVE and notable ones are: Did the presence of relics evoke the wider narratives regarding them? Did they reinforce regional claims made to relics outside of the Buddha's biographical regions? By repeatedly emphasising *darśana*, did the *saṅgha* seek to remind devotees of *dāna*? When devotees circumambulated *stūpa*s, stopped in front of niches or venerated the buddha in halls, they would have been surrounded by images of relics, some of the latter would have largely remained visually inaccessible. By rendering their presence in images, devotees could not only make visual contact with the Buddha and his relics, but could also be reminded of their own normative reaction to them.

## Author's note

## Abbreviations

CKI     Corpus of Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, see *Catalog of Gāndhārī Texts*, by Stefan Baums and Andrew Glass at https://gandhari.org/catalog (accessed 6 February 2025).

GRAVE   Gandhāran Relic Rituals and Veneration Explored (UK Research and Innovation Horizon Europe Guarantee Project, Cardiff University, Reference: EP/Y031008/1).

T.      *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō.* Ed.: Takakusu and Watanabe (1924–1934).

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