e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

Pathways to *Nirvāṇa*: Aquatic Imagery and Visual Metaphors in Gandhāra

Alice Casalini
The University of Chicago, USA

Abstract This article offers a new analysis of stupa architecture that takes into consideration the metaphorical value of aquatic imagery on staircases. Using Stupa 10 at the Buddhist monastery of Andan Dheri (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan) as a case study, the piece discusses how the metaphorical value of water-related imagery in a Buddhist context was enriched and supported by the architectural form of the stupa. The article argues that the specific iconographic program centred around metaphors of water-crossing and water-flowing created a space of devotion where devotees could enact and embody spiritual refinement in the physical space through their movements.

Keywords Gandhāran art. Aquatic imagery. Visual metaphors. Buddhist architecture. Nirvāṇa.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-13
Accepted 2025-03-26
Published 2025-11-14

Open access

Citation Casalini, A. (2025). "Pathways to *Nirvāṇa*: Aquatic Imagery and Visual Metaphors in Gandhāra". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 165-204.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/006

1 Introduction

In the religious-philosophical system of Buddhism, no concept is more difficult to define than that of *nirvāṇa*. About this, Collins (1992, 216-19) wrote:

> any concept of salvation must eventually involve an appeal to indescribability [… which] is rarely, however, quite so consistent and uncompromising as in the case of the Buddhist *nirvāṇa*.

To circumvent this aporia, Buddhist textual tradition over the centuries has often employed metaphorical language: *nirvāṇa* is a fire or lamp that goes out because it has no more fuel (*Padīpopamasutta* SN 54.8), or because the flame is quenched (*Therīgathā* 5.10); it is the stillness of a broken cymbal (*Dhammapada* 134); it is a city that the Buddha built (*Nagarasutta* SN 12.65); it is the ocean, unchanging and immutable (*Uposathasutta* Ud. 5.5).

These and other metaphors have been discussed extensively regarding their role and function within the Buddhist textual tradition.[1] Metaphorical acts in the Buddhist visual language, as well as the issue of metaphoricity in Buddhist architecture, however, have seldom been the principal topic of investigation in Gandhāra.[2] This article seeks to fill in part this lacuna. It takes into consideration the use and meaning of aquatic imagery in the art of Gandhāra and shows that its metaphorical value was effected through careful architectural design and direct dialogue with the religious substratum of the time. It does so by examining the architectural relations of aquatic

1 The use of metaphoric language in Buddhism is a vast subject that many have explored over the years, therefore, a comprehensive overview cannot be attempted here. However, it is worth mentioning a few contributions that have informed my approach in this piece. On *nirvāṇa*, seminal work is by Collins (1982; 1998) and, more recently, Hwang (2006). McMahan (2002) has investigated the role of metaphors in Mahāyāna literature, while Schlieter (2013) has offered an account of metaphors of karma. O'Brien-Kop (2017) discussed the role of metaphorical imagery shared between Sarvāstivāda Buddhism and the Yoga of Patañjali. Tzohar (2018) analysed figurative language in early Yogācāra philosophy in the works of thinkers such as Vasubandhu, Asaṅga and Sthiramati. Silvestre-López (2019) and Maes (2022) have both discussed metaphorical language in the context of meditation and liberation. Concerning Gandhāra, the work of Marino (2017; 2020) on the pedagogical value of metaphors comes to mind.

2 Among those who have dealt with the topic more recently, I refer the reader to Filigenzi (2002), Brancaccio (2011), Neelis (2014) and Iori (2018), who all have ventured into discussing in explicit details the complexities of the symbolic cachet of the Gandhāran visual language. The Buddhist meaning of imagery connected to water, marine creatures, and figures of swimmers has been in part investigated in the context of the Buddhist art of Kucha by Zin (2019). It is to this work that I owe the initial inspiration for my approach here. Seminal works on the symbological apparatus of the stupa at large are Irwin 1979; 1980, Snodgrass 1985, Fussman 1986, and Kottkamp 1992.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

imagery within the context of a stupa staircase, on the one hand, and by discussing relevant Buddhist textual sources from the time on the other. By interrogating the rapport between images and their architectural context, the piece shows that aquatic imagery was used to create a virtual space where physical movement became spiritually efficacious and was conceptualised as a tool for spiritual betterment.

Since my case study is a monument in the monastic site of Andan Dheri, Stupa 10, of which I offer a partial reconstruction, I begin with a brief overview of the site and the archaeological findings related to the monument.

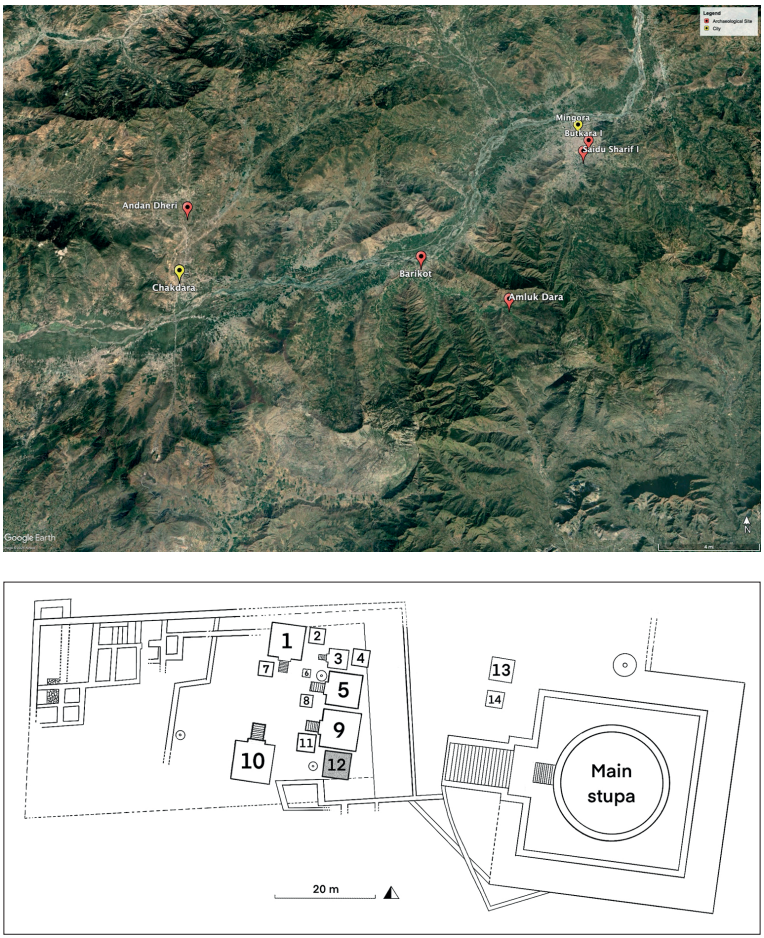

Figure 1 a: Map of Gandhāra showing the location of Andan Dheri and other important sites in the region. Base map from Google Earth.
b: Plan of the monastery of Andan Dheri. Redrawn by the Author after Dani 1968-69, fig. 2

2 Andan Dheri and the Staircase of Stupa 10: De-Fragmenting the Evidence

Andan Dheri is the site of a Buddhist monastery in the district of Lower Dir, lying in the Uchh Valley in Swat **[fig. 1]**. The site, approximately 6.5 km north of the city of Chakdara, is next to the modern Chakdara-Dir Road, which lies on the path of a major ancient route running across the plain. This important location certainly made Andan Dheri a vibrant religious center visited by many pilgrims over the centuries (Dani 1968-69, 34).

The significance of Andan Dheri is interwoven with the historical and mythological geography of the region. The whole valley is connected to a Buddhist legend told by the Chinese monk and pilgrim Xuanzang (602-664 CE) in his travelogue, the *Da Tang Xiyouji* 大唐西遊記 (Journey to the West). The Chinese pilgrim reported that, during one of the Buddha's previous lifetimes when he was a *deva*, the valley suffered from great famine and disease. The *deva*, moved to compassion, transformed his body in that of a giant serpent (Skt. *nāga*) and lied in the valley, calling on all villagers of the land to feast on his flesh. Anyone who ate the serpent miraculously healed and famine was finally eradicated from the region. Xuanzang mentioned two major stupas in the valley, that of *Sapoushadi* 薩裒煞地, more than twenty meters tall and whose name has been reconstructed to the Sanskrit *Sarpauṣadhi* (the serpent's medicine); and the stupa of the serpent Sūma, situated not far off from the previous one. It is impossible to say with certainty whether any of these two was the stupa of Andan Dheri, but these records show that the valley itself was the background of much Buddhist folklore related to the aquatic figures of the *nāga*s, even during Xuanzang's time (Li 1996, 74-5).

Andan Dheri is a relatively well-documented and well-preserved site that was excavated in relatively recent times.[3] The site was divided in two major units, the large monastic dwellings to the west and the main stupa with the stupa court to the east. The main stupa was built on top of a massive square podium (36.5 m per side), with an offset projection and a long staircase. Another set of shorter stairs connected the top of the podium to a circumambulation path around the stupa drum, in a configuration that must have likened this monument to others in the region, such as that of Amluk Dara (cf. Olivieri 2018). Intervening between these two units was a stupa court with twelve minor stupas.

3 Several doubts remain about relative and absolute chronology, stratigraphic periodization, and even the sculptural stylistic typologies – Taddei (1973) has partly addressed these issues; I am currently reviewing the archaeological record of the site in light of recent archaeological work in the region.

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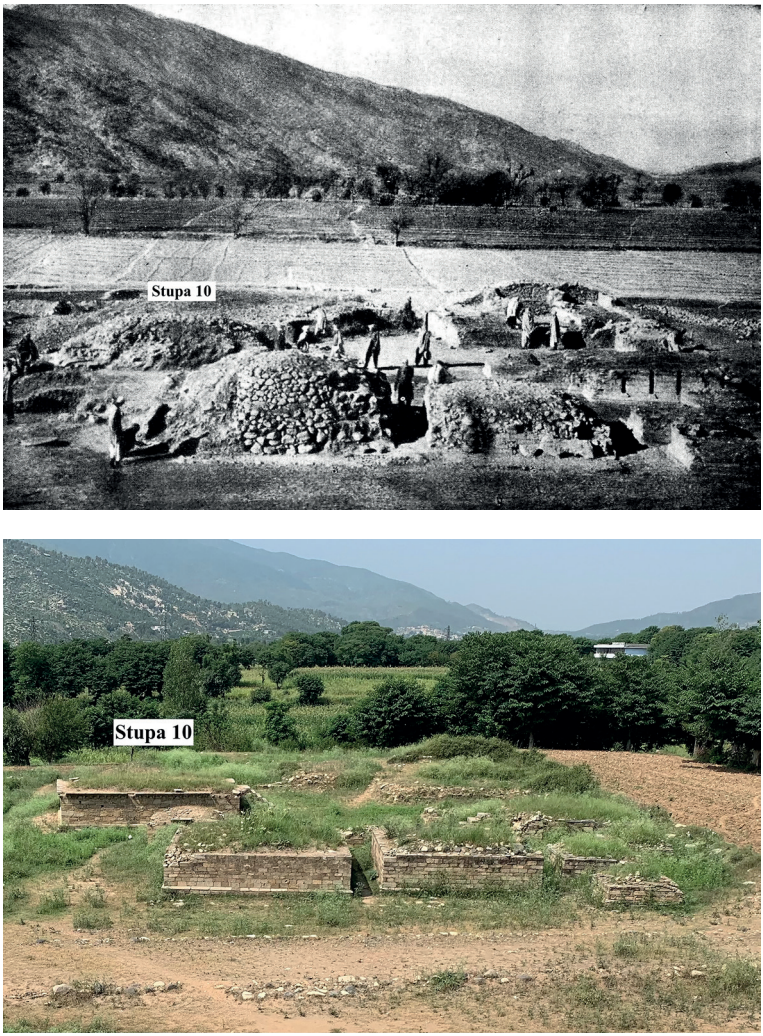

Figure 2 a: The stupa court of Andan Dheri seen from the east in 1966. After Dani 1968-69, pl. 2a.
b: The stupa court in 2019. Photo by the Author

Stupa 10 is one of the medium size stupas in the court. Due to changing patterns of neglect and restoration over time, Stupa 10 has changed significantly since its excavation in the late 1960s. For example, the stupa podium now appears rectangular (5.96 × 8.8 m), whereas the archaeological report makes no mention of such deviation from the norm. There, the stupa is described as measuring approximately 6.6 m per side and in the plan the podium was drawn square, not

dissimilarly from all the other secondary stupas (Dani 1968-69, 33-64). It is likely that an oversight in one of the reconstruction campaigns resulted in the elongation of the podium – after all, the structural profile of the monument was extremely ruinous from the start, as can be seen in some of the excavation photos, to the point that it might have been unrecognisable at a later stage when reconstruction was carried out **[fig. 2]**.

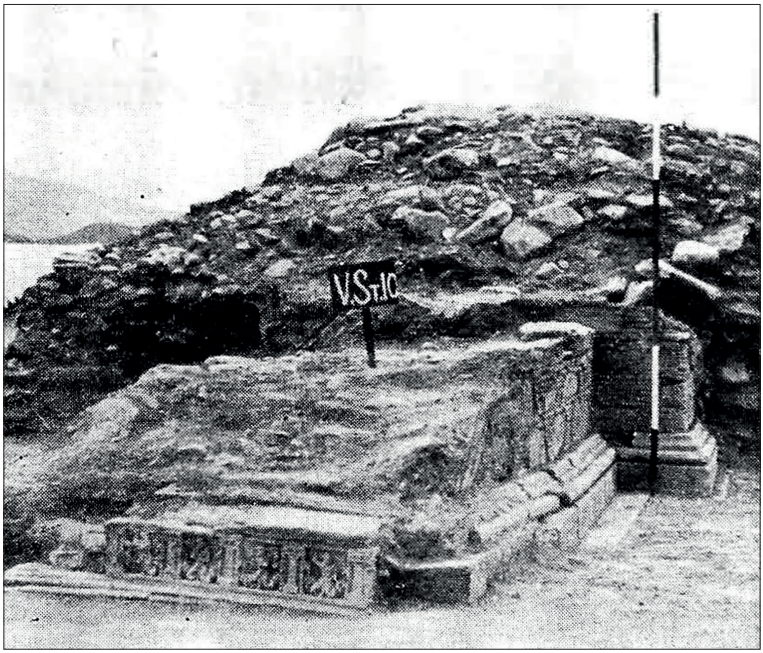

Figure 3 Photo of Stupa 10 during excavation with relief panel *in situ*. After Dani 1968-69, pl. 5c

Most sculptures from the site were either found scattered around the ruinous stupa mounds or had been looted, depriving the monuments of their original décor. The excavators, however, found one *in-situ* panel on the first step of the staircase of Stupa 10, DMC 505 **[fig. 3]**. This panel is a stair-riser depicting a line of four tritons with double fishtails, each in their own field separated by Gandhāran-Corinthian pilasters. The two central tritons are playing musical instruments – a type of *tympanon* and an *aulos* – while the one on the right dances, perhaps holding cymbals; the one on the left is performing the 'Persian snap', a gesture that is often performed by figures appearing on boundary or connecting elements such as stair-risers, cornices, and *nāgadanta*s (Lo Muzio 2019). The panel is now in the Dir Museum of Chakdara **[fig. 4]**.

Figure 4 Unknown artist(s), Relief panel with tritons. Third century CE. Grey schist, 17 × 72.6 cm. Andan Dheri, Stupa 10, Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 505 / ADN 533. © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Figure 5 The restored staircase of Stupa 10 in 2024. Note that the first step is now almost completely buried under the modern ground level. Photo by the Author

Any reconstruction of the original appearance of the staircase of Stupa 10 is necessarily limited, since DMC 505 is the only object found *in situ* and the sculptural pieces retrieved from the vicinity of the stupa are scant. However, we can advance a few hypotheses here by looking at available *comparanda* from the other minor stupas at this same site and others – starting with the built structure. Taking the "Gandhāran step" as the standard measurement (run: 30~32 cm × rise: 16~20 cm) (Faccenna 1995, 168), the original number of steps for the length of the staircase (approximately 2.4 m) was nine (eight plus the landing on top). Indeed, while at the time of excavation only the first step was preserved, nine steps have been restored at the site now **[fig. 5]**.

Figure 6 Unknown artist(s), Relief panels with aquatic imagery (not to scale).
a) Third century CE. Grey schist, 13 × 22.5 × 5 cm. Andan Dheri, Stupa 5 (2), Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 92 / ADN 95. © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum;
b) Second-third century CE. Grey schist, exact dimensions unknown or unrecorded. Shotorak. *in situ*. After Meunié 1942, fig. 70; line drawing of the relief flipped upside down by the Author;
c) Second-third century CE. Grey schist, exact dimensions unknown. Sahri Bahlol, Peshawar Museum, PM 1325. Photo by the Author;
d) Second-third century CE. Serpentinite, 16.8 × 43.2 × 4.8 cm. Buner (?), Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.96.21. Public Domain

Panel DMC 505 is 72.6 cm long and covers approximately half the total length of the first step (157 cm), meaning that another panel of similar length must have been installed next to this one.[4] The adjacent stair

4 Most of the measurements of the monuments reported here are those I took in person at the site in June 2024. These numbers are approximations, as they are based on the reconstructed structures as they appear today; furthermore, the ground level has also

riser has not survived. However, it is likely that other stair-risers, possibly even the adjacent one, showed more marine creatures, as other surviving stair-risers from the larger corpus of Gandhāran art confirm the popularity of this theme in the décor of staircases. From the vicinity of Stupa 5, for example, comes a slightly smaller fragment with the same subject matter **[fig. 6a]**. The panel is broken at both ends, but it clearly shows a winged double-tailed triton framed by two Gandhāran-Corinthian pilasters that are almost identical to those of DMC 505. This triton is holding an object on his shoulder, perhaps a wineskin. Almost identical is the stair riser found *in situ* in court F at the monastery of Shotorak in Kāpiśa, Afghanistan (but clearly reused: it was found installed upside down) **[fig. 6b]** (Meunié 1942, 14).[5] One other example of tritons, together with dragon-like creatures, is a stair-riser from the monastery of Sahri Bahlol, in the Peshawar Valley **[fig. 6c]**. A different typology of marine deities and/or creatures appear in a couple of stair-risers from the set of the so-called 'Buner reliefs' **[fig. 6d]**.

Other themes on stair-risers also recalled liquescence, albeit in a different context. Winemaking and wine-drinking scenes – known as Dionysiac or Bacchanalian scenes (Brancaccio, Liu 2009; Tanabe 2020) – were often depicted in close spatial association with tritons, ichthyocentaurs and other marine creatures. From Stupa 10, two pieces are related to this theme, DMC 142 and DMC 147.[6] In the former, a vintner is depicted with a wineskin strewn over his shoulder. He is wearing a short tunic and is framed by a Gandhāran-Corinthian pilaster to his right. The latter was a longer panel of which only the central scene, flanked by two pilasters, is fully preserved, though much damaged. Three figures are seen gathered around a large basin or krater on the floor: the one on the right appears to be dancing (possibly performing the Persian snap?), while the one in the center holds a wineskin and the one on the left holds a cup or a pan as he is

risen since the excavation. When possible, I have checked and corrected them against Dani's maps and old photographs in the 1968-69 report – with the caveat that Dani's report is not always reliable (Taddei 1973).

5 The evidence from Shotorak also shows that aquatic imagery in staircases was used from an earlier time well into the late Kushan era. Not only the triton panel was reused, but two stair-side bases (a typology of objects described in detail below) depicting tritons were found *in situ*, but were clearly part of an earlier, much larger staircase that gave access to the main stupa at the site (Stupa F1). The staircase was later reduced in width and the stair-risers were re-used for a new first step added in front of the earlier one (Meunié 1942, 14-15). According to the excavator, the monastery of Shotorak flourished under Kushana rule in the second century CE but was occupied for a long period of time (69-70). Of the few coins retrieved from the site, one is identified as a coin of the Greco-Bactrian king Eukratides (172-145 BCE), one as that of an unidentified Kushan ruler, and a Vāsudeva issue (191-232 CE or 275-300 CE).

6 Images of these and following objects are available at *heidICON*: `https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/`.

moving towards the basin.[7] Similar pieces with revelry scenes were retrieved from the stupa court (DMC 459, DMC 506, DMC 4, DMC 126) but, with the exception of DMC 126 coming from the vicinity of Stupa 1, all these pieces have no precise provenance.

The role of wine-related imagery is complex and multivalent not only in the Buddhist context but also within the pre- or non-Buddhist, Kafir-Dardic cultural substratum of the Swat Valley (Tucci 1977; Klimburg 2016; Filigenzi 2019), and is intimately connected to geographic features in the Swat Valley. As the water imagery recalls the fluvial nature of the landscape around the monasteries, wine imagery, too, speaks of the social and ecological networks that Buddhist monasteries inhabited, surrounded by verdant agricultural lands where viniculture took place, often under the direct supervision of the Buddhist monastic communities (Falk 2009; Coloru, Iori, Olivieri 2024). Wine imagery is also clearly related to revelry and merry-making, which seems to be the overarching connecting thread between wine-enjoyers and tritons, who are themselves engaged in dancing and music playing, and sometimes even drinking.

Other likely stair-risers (on the basis of form, framing devices, and dimensions), whose detailed findspot has not been recorded, pertain to two more thematic categories: the first is that of procession of human 'types' – nobles, ascetics, soldiers (e.g. DMC 200, DMC 161, DMC 44, DMC 45, DMC 48); the second is that of phytomorphic and/or geometric designs (e.g. DMC 239, DMC 463, DMC 483, DMC 486).[8] Since it is unclear at this stage which ones of these panels might have belonged to the staircase of Stupa 10, I prefer to leave a discussion of their role and significance to future investigation.[9] In general, however, we can point out that the iconographic apparatus of stair risers is both varied and complex, and ranges from explicit and direct representations of beholders themselves engaged in ritual performances to complex ornamentation that might have merged a decorative impetus with finer symbolic meaning(s). The aquatic imagery on stair risers, therefore, appears embedded within a sophisticated system of symbolic figuration that has been uncovered only in part.

7 A similar scene is seen in a relief from Kafir-Kot now in the British Museum (BM 1899,0609.11).

8 Phytomorphic-geometric design appears on stair-risers found *in situ* in the site of Aziz Dheri in Swabi (Khan 2010).

9 Other scenes that usually appear on stair-risers involve *jātaka* stories, like the sets found in Jamālgaṛhi (Errington 2022) or Sahri Bahlol – most are now in the Peshawar Museum. No *jātaka*s have been identified in the stair-riser corpus from Andan Dheri.

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Figura 7 Unknown artist(s), Strings from Andan Dheri Stupa 10.
a) Third century CE. Grey schist, 10 × 13 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 138 / ADN 144b;
b) Third century CE. Grey schist, 14.5 × 11 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 145 / ADN 151;
c) Third century CE. Grey schist, 19 × 15.5 × 5 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 143 / ADN 149;
d) Third century CE. Grey schist, 10.5 × 12 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 146 / ADN 151.
All photos: © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Other objects from Stupa 10 pertaining to the aquatic category are some triangular panels that served as strings, the lateral element framing each step of a staircase below the banister. Of the original corpus, which must have totalled to sixteen strings, only four were found in relation to Stupa 10: DMC 138 (a winged beast with a chest mane), DMC 145 (a winged beast with a dog or *makara* head),[10] DMC 143 (a young beardless ichthyocentaur), and DMC 146 (only the coiled fish-tail is preserved) **[fig. 7]**. They were all part of the left-side banister structure. Among the ten other strings retrieved from the site whose exact *in situ* location cannot be ascertained, at least two seem to be

10 On the dog head in relation to aquatic creatures, see Minardi 2016.

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related to this specific staircase in terms of dimensions and style: DMC 7 (from the left side once again) and DMC 475 (from the right side) **[fig. 8]**. In general, from the totality of strings retrieved from the site (twenty-two objects), only one depicts a terrestrial animal (a lion). Only the head is preserved, so it is impossible to know whether it had a fish-tail – examples of lion-fish hybrid creatures in the Gandhāran mythological bestiary are rare, but not unseen.[11]

Figure 8 Unknown artist(s), Additional strings, possibly from Andan Dheri Stupa 10. Left: Third century CE. Grey schist, exact dimensions unrecorded. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 7 / ADN 6. Right: Third century CE. Grey schist, 10.5 × 13.5 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 475 / ADN 500. All photos: © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The last relevant object retrieved from Stupa 10 is an 'L-shaped' stone block with curved ends in the shape of a reversed 'S', DMC 149 (approximately height 19 × width 19 × length 37 cm) **[fig. 9a]**. Only one of the longer sides is decorated and shows a winged triton with double fishtails turning to his right; he is either holding something in his right hand or he is dancing, while his left hand rests on his hip. This typology of objects, still generally misunderstood in the literature as generic pedestals or weights, should be securely identified as stair-side elements, one of the parts of the architecture of stupa stairways (Brancaccio 2018). DMC 149 was the base of the left-side banister – it thus makes sense that the triton, being sculpted on the outward-facing side, is looking to his right towards the rise of the staircase and, therefore, towards the stupa. I believe the

11 See for example, the corner animals below in Figure 12b. A small body of strings from Sahri Bahlol, now in the Peshawar Museum, include at least two birds among the more common set of marine beasts (PM Acc. No. 2908 and 2937). It is impossible to say with precision what type of birds they are – they both show a hooked beak typical of eagles (are they *garudas*?) but have long necks and plump chests, not too dissimilar from geese. Perhaps they are intended to be *haṃsa*s, aquatic migratory birds (either the bar-headed goose or the mute swan) often seen in Hindu iconography as vehicles of Brahma, the river goddess Sarasvati or the divine architect Viśvakarma.

corresponding right-side object to this one has been found at the site, despite not being recorded as associated with Stupa 10. This is DMC 150: not only it mirrors the first stair-side base, but the dimensions of the object, the sculptural style and the subject matter – a similar triton engaged in dancing or playing music – all conform to DMC 149 **[fig. 9b]**.[12] The front side of both objects show a weight-bearing squatting figure in a square field.

Figure 9 Unknown artist(s), Stair-side elements from Andan Dheri Stupa 10.
a) Third century CE. Grey schist, 19 × 37 × 19 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 149 / ADN 157;
b) Third century CE. Grey schist, 19 × 22 × 19 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 150 / ADN 158.
All photos: © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

12 Other stair-side elements retrieved from the site are DMC 365/AND 383 (depicting a double-tailed triton); DMC 523 ADN M17 (no décor/too abraded); DMC 494 ADN 519 (depicting a double-tailed triton); DMC 222/ADN 231 (depicting a double-tailed triton); DMC 101/AND 105 is a stair-side element too, but the lower part of the object has not survived. Associated with Stupa 5, it depicts three lotus flowers on the decorated part. It is thinner than other stair-side bases and does not have the characteristic 'L' shape of the other bases in Andan Dheri; however, a similar example of this type of object with a similar thinness was found *in situ* in Pānṛ (Faccenna, Khan, Nadiem 1993, pl. 82a).

These elements, though extremely fragmentary at a first glance, allow a tentative reconstruction of the original look of at least the initial part of Stupa 10 staircase. I have illustrated two visualizations of Stupa 10 in Figure 10.

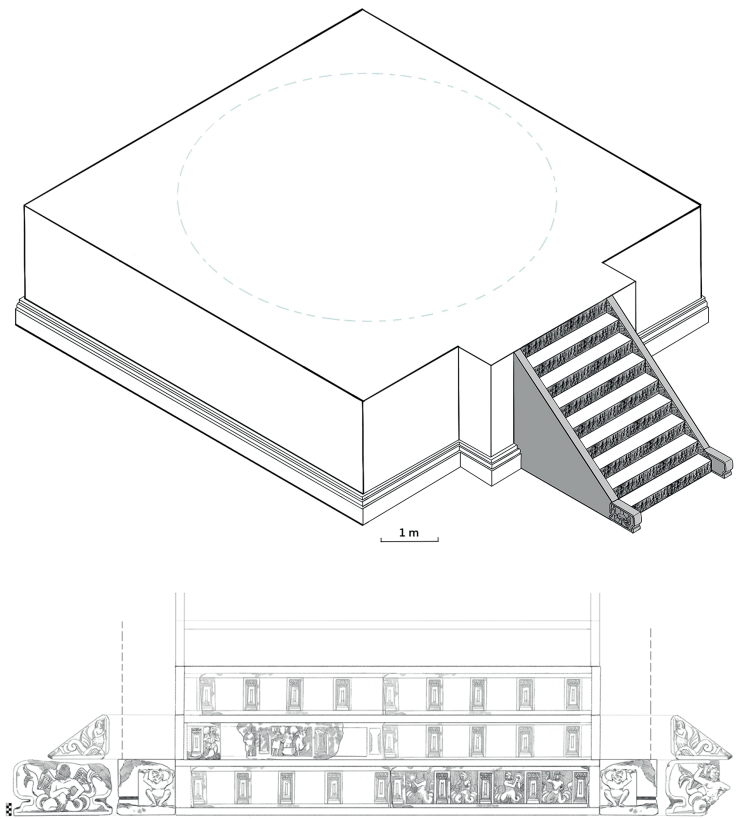

Figure 10 Hypothetical reconstruction of Andan Dheri Stupa 10.
a: Isometric view of staircase and podium volumes;
b: and frontal view of the first steps.
Line drawings by the Author

3 Aquatic Imagery at the Threshold to *Nirvāṇa*

As discussed so far, despite the fragmentary state of the corpus, a sizeable portion of the objects that made up the iconographic program of staircases directly depicted aquatic creatures or was related to marine imagery. The presence of this type of aquatic imagery in a Buddhist context has puzzled many for a long time. Southworth (2016)

has connected Gandhāran marine imagery to the figure of the *ketos* and other Greco-Roman sea monstrosities, arguing that sea imagery was intimately connected to Hellenism not only in form but also in meaning: as tritons and ichthyocentaurs acted as psychopomps in that context, so they did in the funerary context of a stupa. Tanabe (2002; 2003), specifically in relation to similar images on toilet-trays or cosmetic palettes, also argued that *ketos*-like figures symbolized the journey of the soul across the Great Ocean but connected it to the goal of reaching Sukhāvatī (the Pure Land of Buddha Amitābha). Galli (2011) saw the use of aquatic mythological creatures as part of a strategy of appropriation of Hellenistic court imagery by local elites. Olivieri and Iori (2021), too, have argued that marine figures, together with Dyonisiac and Iranian imagery, were part of a strategy by patrons and urban actors to stage their political and social power by employing the Hellenistic and Greco-Iranian imagery as symbolic capital to strengthen their social and political position. Following Boardman's (1986; 1987) analysis of similar motifs in the West, others like Pons (2011), perhaps unsatisfied with the partiality of these interpretations, have rejected any deeper meaning to the images of sea-monsters and have deemed them as basic motifs of purely decorative value.

One cannot agree with the specificity of Tanabe's Sukhāvatī reference in all cases of water imagery, even though the Mahāyāna currents the reference recalls are both chronologically and geographically relevant for Gandhāra (Schopen 1987; Rhi 2003; 2005; 2011a; 2023). The iconographic program of Stupa 10 in Andan Dheri does not show any specific reference to Pure or Buddha-lands – indeed, it is quite in line with the narrative art that was especially popular in the Swat Valley and that centered around the historical Buddha's *res gestae* (Taddei 2015).[13] However, the rising popularity of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Gandhāra around the turn of the first millennium certainly played a part in redefining some aspects of devotion, such as direct approach to devotional icons as well as a renewed emphasis on crossing boundaries in the physical worlds to reach higher realms. The apparent conformity to Classical or Hellenistic iconography tells us about the persistence of certain images, and perhaps of certain mythologies, as it showcases the movement of symbols and their transfer across cultures and across time. However, it does not shed any light on the meaning and role of this type of aquatic imagery in a Buddhist context. On the other hand,

13 The remains from the stupa décor on top of the podium are incredibly scant, but some exist, and hint to the narrative nature of the frieze on the stupa drum. See for example, DMC 153, a stacked relief with people conversing on top and four unidentified figures at the bottom; DMC 144, another stacked relief showing the Great Departure; DMC 152, which only preserves the top register with a mundane scene.

it is also difficult to agree with the dismissal of this imagery as 'just décor', since the assumption that decorative motifs do not bear any meaning would overlook the patent popularity of an entire category of imagery located at important transitional spaces in the stupa. I see no reason to doubt that Hellenistic and Greco-Iranian motifs were used as part of a strategy of social and political self-representation, as Galli, Olivieri and Iori argue. However, these solutions fail to consider the architectural and doctrinal contexts of aquatic imagery. I also want to suggest, then, that rather than being non-Buddhist motifs, all these images do have a Buddhist meaning that finds efficacy in the metaphorical cachet of aquatic imagery.[14]

I present my argument here in two stages which stem from two interrelated, but slightly divergent points – one visual, one textual. The first point is that aquatic imagery is a function of liminality. In this case, I refer to visual *comparanda* from other objects, not necessarily related to staircase décor. The second point is that the necessary association between aquatic imagery and staircases, hinged upon the liminal nature of both, stems from metaphorical acts that deploy physical movement as symbolic matter – here, it is in the Buddhist canonical and para-canonical texts that evidence can be found. Combining these lines of inquiry suggests that, in the Gandhāran context, architecture, sculpture and the devotee's physical movement could embody – even effect – a spiritual transformation: movement in space, passage through a built and sculpted environment, became Buddhistic praxis.

3.1 Functions of Liminality

The stele in Figure 11 is one of the most famous objects from Gandhāra: the excellent quality of the carving and the virtuosity displayed by the sculptor in creating depth makes this stele one of the masterpieces of its time. Known as the Muhammad Nāri stele, this large object depicts with great vivacity a tableau of the Buddha in his realm among many supernatural beings. The Buddha sits on a large lotus at the centre of the scene, surrounded by a heavenly host of bodhisattvas and *deva*s: some of them are engaged in conversation with one another, others are looking at the Buddha in adoration or are blinded by the light he is emanating, others still are offering garlands

14 The significance of aquatic imagery in the early South Asian context is not touched upon in this article, which is concerned with Buddhist specificities as they pertain to staircase architecture. However, one cannot forget the fundamental role of water in South Asian cosmology and cosmogony, as both structural foundation of the universe and life-giver matter (Coomaraswamy 1993; Mitra 2023) – aspects that are certainly relevant for the Buddhist imaginary as well.

and flowers. A large flowering tree towers above the Buddha's head, surrounded by flying spirits. Two additional Buddhas and their emanations hover above on the highest register, set in roundels on top of small lotuses.

Figure 11 Unknown artist(s), *Muhammad Nari stele*. Third-fourth century CE. Grey schist, 119 × 97 × 28 cm. Exact provenance unknown, Lahore Museum. Photo by the Author

The stele has been the subject of many discussions, especially with regard to the identity of the central Buddha, variously identified with Śākyamūni in his cosmic aspect, or in his *saṃbhogakāya* aspect (the 'body of enjoyment' or the 'body of limitless form'), Amitābha in Sukhāvatī (the Western Pure Land), Akṣobhya in Abhirati (the

Eastern Pure Land), or even the Buddha of the past Dīpaṅkara at the moment of enlightenment (Huntington 1980; Rhi 1991; 2023; Harrison, Luczanits 2012; Vendova 2023). This is a debate I do not intend to rehash, as it goes beyond the point of my current discussion and I am content with Rhi's assessment that this and similar steles represent a theophanic vision, that is, "a grand vision of a Buddha […] who has been elevated to the status of supramundane being" (2011, 115). For the sake of my argument, I focus instead on the visual mechanisms that are implemented in the stele to signal boundaries and their crossing as a significant spiritual act; I argue that these boundaries are not only visualized through aquatic imagery, but that they also made the water realm into an explicit symbol of liminality.

The Muhammad Nāri stele represents a form of the Buddha that does not inhabit the current plane of existence, but that lives instead in his own buddha-field or buddha-domains (Skt. *buddhakṣetra*). As Harrison and Luczanits put it, this cosmological Buddha lives in "a different order of reality" (2012, 109). This field, however, becomes visible or accessible to the practitioner only insofar as he or she undergoes a process of spiritual refinement. This point is made explicit, for example, in the Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra* (LSukh), when the Buddha describes the many wondrous details of Sukhāvatī to his disciple Ānanda.[15] He tells him that

> *yaśca* […] *ākāṅkṣeta kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā kimityahaṃ dṛṣṭa eva dharme tamamitābhaṃ tathāgataṃ paśyeyamiti, tenānuttarāyāṃ samyaksaṃbodhau cittamutpādya adhyāśayātiśayatayā saṃtatyā tasmin buddhakṣetre cittaṃ saṃpreṣya upapattaye kuśalamūlāni ca pariṇāmayitavyāni*. (LSukh 27)[16]

> if […] any son or daughter of a good family should wish, "How then may I see that Tathagata Amitabha visibly?" then he must raise his thoughts on to the highest perfect knowledge, he must direct his thought with perseverance and excessive desire towards that Buddha country and direct the stock of his good works towards being born there. (Transl. by Mueller 1894, 45)

Towards the end of the *sūtra*, Ānanda asks Śākyamūni to see Amitābha in Sukhāvatī, but it is Amitābha himself who, upon hearing of this desire, shines his light forth: Ānanda can finally see this magnificent realm "through to the Buddha's power, due to the

15 The LSukh is one of the oft-cited sources for the imagery in this stele: cf. particularly Huntington 1980.

16 The Sanskrit text is from Vaidya 1961, 221-53.

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purity of his light".[17] The vision is reciprocal: Ānanda and the other beings in this world, called Sahāloka, see Amitābha in Sukhāvatī, and all beings in Sukhāvatī see Sahāloka and Śākyamūni (Mueller 1894, 61). The LSukh makes explicit that to gain a direct vision of the buddha-domain, a practitioner must attain a comprehension of higher knowledges and secure a Buddha's intercession.

In the Muhammad Nāri stele, this intercession is depicted in the upper right section. There, Buddha Śākyamūni, accompanied by the loyal Vajrapāṇi, is shown ushering in the vision of the field to one of his disciples. Most recently, Vendova (2023) identifies this specific disciple with Mahāmaudgalyāyana, according to the description of Dīpaṅkara's enlightenment in the *Mahāvastu*, but the generic nature of the image makes it that it could also very well be Ānanda, or any other practitioner intent on this spiritual path. It is worth noting that in these revelation images, the interlocutor-practitioner is always a monk, someone who had explicitly renounced the everyday world and was expected to attain higher knowledges.

Another point of access to the theophanic vision, however, is across the pond at the bottom of the stele. The lower register of the stele depicting the pond is arguably the most direct limit that the beholder traverses, at least metaphorically.[18] As the revelation scene above did by depicting a monk, the bottom register showcases human agents, too: among the characters flanking the lotus stem upon which the Buddha is sitting are a woman and a man. They are two of the very few characters in this stele who do not sport a halo behind their head.[19] These figures are intended to represent the donors of the stele, one of the many wealthy couples of Gandhāra who became benefactors of the monastery which once held this object (Harrison, Luczanits 2012, 107). Even though perhaps very few lay visitors of a monastery could fully identify with the wealthy couple, within the economy of the stele these two figures are the closest to any (very human) beholder who might happen to stand in front of it. Together with the monk, they

17 LSukh 39: *buddhānubhāvena tasyāḥ prabhāyāḥ pariśuddhatvāt*.

18 It is now impossible to recover the original *in situ* location of this object, however, its large dimensions (height 119 × width 97 × depth 28 cm) make it likely that it was positioned within a large chapel or shrine, either around the perimeter of a stupa court or within the monastic dwelling area or, alternatively, against the drum of a large stupa. In both cases, the stele would have been placed on a pedestal of some sort, elevating it from the ground level or from the level of the platform inside a chapel. The beholder would probably have encountered the Buddha's gaze either at eye-level or from a slightly lowered position. Given the dimensions of the stele, the Buddha might have not been too elevated, but in any case, the bottom register with the aquatic scene would have been the closest to the beholder.

19 All other halo-less figures are clearly recognisable as non-human spirits or demigods through other iconographical features.

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are the only two human actors who have managed to cross over into the Buddha's realm.

The boundary the donors have crossed to get access to this cosmic *buddhakṣetra* is one marked by a watery realm. The two, each on top of a lotus flower, stand on each side of the Buddha's lotus throne. Their lotuses rise from the tumultuous waters of a large pond or lake. In the pond, fish and *nāga*s swim among the waves and a couple of ducks fight the whirlpools.[20] Two more *nāga*s with their cobra hoods emerge from the waters, their bodies still halfway submerged.[21] Water plants and flowers float on the moving surface of the pond. In the visual economy of this stele, the boundary between the worlds of the viewer and that of the Buddha is explicitly marked by aquatic imagery and the implication here is that the beholder who wants to attend to the Buddha as part of his divine host must traverse the watery realm that separates them from him.

The reference to bodies of water – ponds, oceans, rivers – is explicit in the description of *buddhakṣetra*s as they appear in the LSukh and in other texts pertaining to similar Mahāyāna traditions. In the LSukh, Śākyamūni describes to Ānanda all the different kinds of sweet-smelling rivers that make the landscape lovely in many details (LSukh 18); the *Avataṃsaka sūtra*, one of the longest Mahāyāna texts composed or collated in Central Asia (Hamar 2007, 163-4), offers numerous descriptions of the million wondrous ponds, pools, and reservoirs across the many buddha-worlds, filled with all kinds of beautiful birds and flowers, made of precious metals,

20 Regarding the ambiguous shape of *nāga*s, Saxena (2021, 225-6) has shown that *nāga*s often appear in three forms: as multi-headed snakes; as humans covered by a snake hood; as hybrids with human upper body and a coiled snake tail. All three *nāga* forms appear in Gandhāran art. On this specific issue cf. also Sharma 2014.

21 There are two more figures, male and female, flanking the stem: the female on the proper right is holding her hands (now damaged) in front of her chest in a gesture of prayer; her exact role and identity are unclear. The male on the proper left is touching the lotus stem, applying jewels to it. He is holding something in his right hand, but it is unclear what this is meant to be: Harrison and Luczanits (2012, 80) talk of a *rython*, but both the zoomorphic head of the object and the crisscross finish of its body appears closer to the cornucopia that Hārītī (or Ardoxšo) is sometimes seen holding (cf. in the Ashmolean Museum EA1962.42 or at the British Museum 1950,0726.2). The object top, however, does not open in a *rython* or a cornucopia mouth, but unusually drapes over and around the man's shoulders. Could it be another marine creature? If it is, it is certainly a hybrid of many forms, donning a dog head with one (or two?) sets of horns and a snake body. On the dog head appearing on marine creatures, I have already cited Minardi (2016), but I'd like to add a comparison with a similar horned beast (a dragon figure?) appearing in a relief from Sahri Bahlol (Stein 1914, pl. XVa), now in the Peshawar Museum. The act of holding a marine creature in one's hand is somewhat significant, albeit unclear: among the boatmen depicted on the stair-risers in the group of the Buner reliefs (see specifically 13.96.21 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and 1889,1016.1 at the British Museum), two are holding a fish in their raised hand in a similar fashion to the figure in the stele, with the head of the fish resting in the palm and the body coiling up vertically and partly draping over the forearm.

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emitting a sweet smell of sandalwood from the fragrant mud that covered their bottom, and so on and so forth (Cleary 1993, *passim*). It is not surprising that depictions of marine environments feature prominently in the making of such cosmic visions of buddha-fields like the Muhammad Nāri stele, which is clearly intended to recall one of these fantastic cosmic realms.

Figure 12 Unknown artist(s), Relief panels, part of a false niche or false gable. a) Second-third century CE. Grey schist, 61 × 68.62 cm. Landi. Peshawar Museum, PM 02809, donated by P.G.G. Pipon, Esquire, I.C.S; b) Second-third century CE. Grey-blue schist, 56 × 44.47 cm. Exact provenance unknown, Peshawar Museum, PM 02788. Photos by the Author

Marine imagery preserves its liminality even when it is *not* directly tied to a water environment that separates the beholder's reality from that of a Buddha. This is the case, for example, of the objects shown in Figure 12, both top parts of complex relief panels once affixed onto a stupa drum. The two are quite similar, both in terms of dimensions and use of figurative space: the main scene is at the bottom, enclosed in a semi-circle – one depicts the conversion of *nāga* Apalāla **[fig. 12a]**, the other the Buddha's descent from Trāyastriṃśa Heaven **[fig. 12b]**. Above these scenes in each panel, two superimposed lunettes depict scenes of worship developing around a central object or Buddha.[22]

22 The exact identification of the episodes depicted above the descent from Trāyastriṃśa is unclear and one of them is heavily damaged; they are perhaps meant to represent Buddha preaching in heaven right before he comes back down on the tripartite staircase. The scenes above Apalāla's conversions might be related to the story of how the Buddha's bowl came to be guarded and worshiped by the *nāga*s. According to one tradition reported in the *Nidānakathā*, after eating the milk-rice given to him by Sujātā, Śākyamūni put his bowl in the river, where it first floated upstream and then sank to the riverbed, where it was taken by the *nāga* king Kāḷa (Ānandajoti 2020, 174). According to another version, while in *Śrī Laṅkā*, Faxian heard that the Buddha's bowl was in Gandhāra, but that after many peregrinations across the Buddhist world, it would eventually come in the hands of a *nāga* king, who will guard it until Maitreya's advent (Beal [1884] 2013, lxxviii). In the top lunette, the bowl is set upon a draped table

In both panels, the corners of the lunettes are inhabited by marine creatures: ichthyocentaurs in Figure 12a and lion-fish hybrids in Figure 12b. Each beast is nested in the narrow and angular leftover space created by the shape of the arch and closes the rear end of worshipers' processions moving towards the central ritual focus. In way, they are signalling the limits of these acts of worship made by the human actors within the figurative space of the lunettes.

These figures and their inherent visual malleability make them the natural choice for interstices: their coiling tail can be manipulated easily by the artist who must fill the leftover space of corners or frames. But the ease with which this type of imagery is made to fit borders and boundaries is not only a function of their form, it is also attached to their meaning as creatures that exist within movement and transition – from their form, stuck between human and non-human, to the space they inhabit, the ever-changing and ever-flowing watery realms that are close enough to the human world yet just beyond human reach. Indeed, it seems that the marine imagery – were it a *nāga*, a hippocamp, an ichthyocentaur – is so inherently associated with the threshold that it becomes the most natural symbol for it.

When I say that aquatic imagery is a *function* of liminality, then, I mean that this plethora of sea creatures and riverine theriomorphic characters are an index of the marginal by virtue of inhabiting and shaping its space. Their positionality within the visual economy of the Gandhāran visual language signals the boundary and the threshold. The topic has been investigated recently by Stefano Beggiora in the early South Asian context; building on the "Monster Theory", which takes the monstruous and the prodigious as necessary qualities in transformation and transition (Cohen 1996), Beggiora writes that

> [the *nāga*s'] liminal function is emphasised by the fact that they come from the netherworld, but also that through them the individual can make a qualitative leap, transforming himself. On the other hand, the theme of transformation is in some way specular between the parties, in the sense that some myths of the *nāga*s seem almost to re-propose the theme of the siren–or mermaid-like creatures well-known in other cultures–which loses

and is being venerated by many (note, however, that no figure in the lunettes don the cobra hood that is typical of the *nāga*s' depictions; except for the ichthyocentaurs in the corners, no other figure is directly connected to a water environment here). In the bottom lunette, the scene is difficult to identify with certainty: the garb and headgear worn by the figures is difficult to discern and, therefore, their gender (especially that of the figure right next to the Buddha on the proper right) remains ambiguous: could it be the scene of Sujātā offering the milk-rice to Śākyamūni before his enlightenment? In this case, however, the Buddha would still be a bodhisattva. Could it be the Buddha being offered four bowls by the *lokapāla*s? The question remains open.

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> its tail after joining a mortal, in a context, however, of intimate sacrifice and spiritual transformation. (2022, 148)

The liminal significance of the water realm, sublimated in the figure of the *nāga*, is compounded upon by the secondary role it assumes in relation to the primacy of Buddhism: cults related to water, rivers, and the natural world in general were historically tamed and integrated within the Buddhist worldview (Brancaccio 1999; Shaw 2004). A popular *nāga* cult existed in the North-West before the advent of Buddhism, when it was both supplanted by and integrated in it – in some instances, archaeological evidence has been found of Buddhist structures physically superseding earlier cultic spaces dedicated to the chthonic and marine deities at the turn of the first millennium (Saxena 2021, 230-1; Singh 2004). Therefore, it is not surprising to see aquatic creatures that can be deemed as *nāga*s themselves or as part of their aquatic entourages appear in the art of Gandhāra as frequently as they do in subjugated positions of transition, where they are put to mark passage by virtue of being trampled on, surpassed, and crossed over.

Indeed, it is the idea of crossing over and superseding boundaries that is inherent in the transformative nature of the *limen* that makes water imagery particularly apt for spaces of passage. This transformative nature assumes a specific meaning within the spiritual economy of Buddhism. It is to this aspect – the Buddhist specificities of water imagery – that I now turn.

3.2 To Cross Over, to Flow Into: Waterways to Liberation

It is my argument that, in the décor program of a stupa, the necessary association between staircases and aquatic imagery (hinged upon the liminal nature of both) stems from metaphorical acts that make physical movement into a spiritual matter. To prove this claim, I first look at the rich Buddhist literary realm and explore the aquatic metaphors used there to describe the process of spiritual refinement and the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. In a second moment, I explore how these metaphors are woven into the religious architecture of stupas.

A very popular group of metaphors for *nirvāṇa* are those related to bodies of water. As shown by Collins (1982, 249-61), they are of two types, one negative and one positive: in the former, the water is seen as something to combat and overcome, while in the latter it is invested with the positive attributes of the final spiritual goal. Within the positive group, one of the most enduring and successful metaphors of the Buddhist soteriological message is that of *nirvāṇa* as "the other shore" or "the far shore" (Skt. and Pāḷi *pāra*; alternatively,

also "dry land", Skt. *sthala*, Pāli *thala*).[23] The semantic field here refers to a riverine landscape: if the far shore is *nirvāṇa*, then the near shore is the present moment in the practitioner's life when he or she is still imbricated in the many and impure *dharma*s of the world. The fast-flowing waters of the river are an expansion of the near bank, as they stand for the chaos of *saṃsāra* stopping one from reaching the other shore safely.

The real spiritual transformative act in the context of this metaphor lies in the physical movement that brings the practitioner from the near shore to the far one: the act of 'crossing over' itself is repleted with spiritual significance, a fact not lost on early Buddhist commentators. An anonymous Gandhāran monk explained liberation with these words:

> *[*ti]ṇo, muto, śato, vimutida*. (CKM 9)
>
> Crossed over, liberated, calm means 'the state of liberation'. (Transl. by Baums 2009, 329)[24]

The word translated here as 'crossed over' is *tiṇo*, which corresponds in Skt. to *tīrṇa* and in Pāli to *tiṇṇa*. The verbal root √*tṝ*, whence both they come from, has been analyzed as such:

> √*tṝ* in its primary denotation entails the idea that its agent crosses a place by moving from one specific point to another. In the context of a river, these two points are understood to be the hither bank and the opposite shore. The banks do not have to be mentioned explicitly. In other words, it suggests a movement perpendicular to the riverbanks. The crossing expressed by the root √*tṝ* thus implies a spatial tension and appears to demand a certain (physical) effort of its agent. (Maes 2022, 58)

In the metaphorical language of liberation, the movement implied with √*tṝ* lends itself quite aptly to explain the goal of 'going beyond' of one who has fully embraced the process of perfecting with the goal of liberation. The Buddhist canon constantly stresses movement and motion as indicators of a practitioner always journeying, always striving in their process of spiritual refinement: the Buddhist path is for going and growth, not for standing still (Horner 1947, 138).

23 In some cases, the other shore becomes the island of *nirvāṇa* (Skt. *dvīpa*, Pāli *dīpa*): see for example *Dhammapada* 25: "By hard work and diligence, by restraint and by self-control, a smart person would build an island that the floods cannot overflow" (Transl. by Sujato 2023, 6).

24 This text, according to Baums (2009), is a commentary on a miscellaneous collection of verses that have parallels in the *Kṣudraka Āgama* of the Dharmaguptaka school.

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But crossing over is a notoriously difficult, painstaking, and laborious process, and many fail to leave this shore behind. See for example these verses from the Pāḷi *Dhammapada*:

> *Appakā te manussesu*
> *ye janā pāragāmino*
> *Athāyaṁ itarā pajā*
> *Tīramevānudhāvati*. (*Dhammapada* 85)
>
> Among humans few are those
> who cross to the other shore.
> The rest just run around
> along the near bank. (Author's transl.)

Following in this visual cachet that relates the strenuous process needed to cross over to the far shore, another popular image often used in this semantic context is that of the flood (Skt. and Pāḷi *ogha*). In these metaphors, the Buddha (or the accomplished practitioner) is described as someone who has "overcome the flood" (Skt. and Pāḷi *oghātiga*) or "crossed the flood" (Skt. *oghatīrṇa*, Pāḷi *oghatiṇṇa*). In discussing the meaning of *ogha* in relation to the latent defilements carried over into one's life from the previous ones (Skt. *anuśaya*), the Gandhāran Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (fourth-fifth century CE) stressed the inescapable violence of this image in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (The Treasury of the Abhidharma with Its Self-Commentary):

> *adhimātravegatvādoghāḥ tarhi tadvānuhyate tadanuvidhānāt*. (Kośa 308|21)[25]
>
> The *anuśaya*s are called *ogha*s because of their unstoppable force: in fact, just like that, they trample anything that yields [to their impulses]. (Author's transl.)

Closely related to the flood, and just as treacherous, is the image of the ocean. In the *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha), a poem written by the Buddhist monk Aśvaghoṣa in the first century CE, the ocean is qualified as the "ocean of existence" (Skt. *bhavasāgara*; cf. for example verse 13.8) or "ocean of suffering" (Skt. *duḥkhārṇava*, verses 1.70 and 12.9).[26] A stanza from the *Dharmapada* in the Split Collection

25 The reference for the Skt. text is to page and line of the text as edited in Pradhan 1967.

26 The same compound is also used in verse 9.24 to refer to Śuddodhana's grief after Siddhartha has left the palace. The *Buddhacarita* has been translated by Olivelle (2008).

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e-ISSN 2385-3042

describes this chaotic and dangerous ocean of existence in vivid details:

Ekamulo du .. + + +
+ + + + + + + + +
Samudro badaśavaṭo
*Padalo pa[dari munj*i. (CKM 369)[27]

One is the root, two are the whirlpools,
[three are the stains, five the spreads,]
There are twelve whirlpools in the ocean:
This is the abyss that the sage has crossed. (Author's transl.)

The aquatic vision conjured here depicts a sea that is choppy and stormy, where twelve whirlpools (the six internal and the six external sense-bases, Skt. *āyatana*s) await the seafarer practitioner. But that is not the only danger: craving (the one root), pain and pleasure (the two whirlpools), lust, hatred and delusion (the three stains), and sense-pleasures (the five spreads) also lurk in the abyss to prevent the practitioner to cross the deep ocean and reach the other shore safely.

Therefore, to help the practitioner make this treacherous traverse, oftentimes the image of a boat or, alternatively, a raft is conjured in relation to the crossing of the river or flood. The Khotan *Dhammapada* states:

sija bhikhu ima nama
sita di lahu lahu bheṣidi
chetva raka ji doṣa ji
tado nivaṇa eṣidi. (CKM 77)

O monk, bail out this boat.
Bailed out, it will become light.
Having cut off passion and evil,
it will go to *nirvāṇa*. (Transl. by Lenz 2003, 56)

It is unclear what exactly the boat or the raft stand for in this metaphor; perhaps the ambiguity of the significance is part of its semantic multivalence. Sometimes it is intended as the body and mind of the practitioner, which can be refined through practice to deliver them to liberation. It is known that many meditation techniques based on the examination of the body, such as the meditation on

References to the text are from this work.

27 CKM 369. Given the lacunae of the text, my translation is based on the parallel passage in SN 1.44, the *Ekamūla sutta*. The Ghd. text is reconstructed by Falk 2015, 47.

the foul (Skt. *aśubha-bhāvana*) and the mindfulness of breathing (Skt. *ānāpānasmṛti*) were known and practiced in the Buddhist North-West (Dhammajoti 2009, 284-95; Fa 2019; Anālayo 2022, 33-5). Alternatively, the boat can also stand for the teachings of the Buddha, the *Dharma* itself, and the entire system of knowledge derived from it that will aid in delivering the practitioner from *saṃsāra*.[28]

In a story preserved in the Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Anavataptagāthā* (Songs of Lake Anavatapta), the image of crossing the river or flood to the other shore is taken out of the metaphorical space and becomes an actual plot point.[29] The sage Yaśas is recounting his past deeds, both good and bad, that lead to his current existence. Being reborn as the son of a wealthy merchant, Yaśas one day became aware of the repulsive nature of the body and of the impermanence of the world. Frantically running outside the house and outside the city, he came to a stop on the banks of a great river, where he saw an ascetic walking on the other side. The ascetic was none other than the Buddha, who addressed him from the far shore:

> "*Ehi kumara ma bhaya id(*u) te (*ṇiru)vadhrodu^{o}*" (CKM 1)
>
> "Come, young man, do not fear! This is your [place] (*without) affliction". (Salomon 2009, 179)

Yaśas responded to the man's call and thought:

> *imaśpi eva takṣaṇo viadaraghe bhav(*idu)^{o} (*ma)ṇ(*i)padua ujita ṇadiritu taritaṇa ^{o}uaghami karuṇio śastu apradipughalu <* ^{o}> tada karuṇio śaste tiṣidu me viditvaṇa ^{o}deśeṣi masuru dharmu cadusacapraghaśaṇo.^{o}* (CKM 1)
>
> At that very moment, [I] was caused to become free from passion. Throwing off [my] jeweled shoes, *I crossed to the [other] bank of the river*, and I approached the compassionate Teacher, the one without a rival. Then the compassionate Teacher, knowing that I was thirsty, proclaimed the sweet Dharma which reveals the four (noble) truths. (Salomon 2009, 179; italics added)

28 A good overview of the uses of boat imagery in the *jātaka*s is given by Shaw (2012). On the imagery of shipwreck and navigation in the context of southern Buddhism, see Shaw 2014.

29 In the *Anavataptagāthā*, the Buddha's major disciples recount their previous lives to show the various karmic entanglements that brought them to the current state of life. There are several versions of the *Anavataptagāthā*, from the Gilgit manuscript corpus to the Central Asian texts found in Xinjiang, to the Chinese *Tripiṭaka*. Accounts of all versions are given by Salomon (2018, 207-8; 2009 with the review by von Hinüber 2010, 90-4).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Here, the distance between the space of the metaphor and the space of reality – at least within the boundaries of Yaśas' story – are so close as to be virtually null: Yaśas physically moves from the near to the far shore and he also reaches at the same time a higher spiritual level, where he can receive the four noble truths directly from the Buddha – these truths will set him on the right path towards *nirvāṇa*.[30]

As I mentioned above, however, aquatic imagery in relation to *nirvāṇa* also has a positive connotation: *nirvāṇa* here is like the ocean, now seen in a virtuous light, as it shares with it the characteristics of being still and unchanging, immeasurable, and not clinging to anything around it (Collins 1998, 221-2).

In this case, both the near and far shore are intended as just another set of hindrances:

> *yo ecasari na precasari*
> *sar[va iha]* + + + + + + +
> *so bhikhu jaha* + *orapara*
> *urako jiṇa viva tvaya puraṇa*. (CKM 77)[31]
>
> The monk who has not gone too far nor lagged behind
> But has stepped over all the [diversified world]
> Abandons the near and far shore
> Just as a snake leaves behind his old, worn-out skin. (Transl. modified from Lenz 2003, 70)

In this passage both shores are seen as places to keep away from and avoid, to the point that, were the practitioner to be thrown back on one of the shores, their mind would be like a fish, thrashing to escape the rule of Māra.[32] This and similar metaphors that include both shores as hindrances refer to a type of aquatic imagery that not only invoke *nirvāṇa* as the ocean but also – and most poignantly – the practice of spiritual refinement as the stream or river.

30 The role of *karma* in this entire process cannot be understated: Yaśas can cross the river (that is, reach a higher spiritual step) in this life because he has gone through many cycles of rebirth that have matured his *karma* to the point where his mind is now fertile ground for the Buddha's teaching, and liable to receiving them. In the first part of the story, in fact, Yaśas recounts two other previous lives when he was an ascetic living in the wilderness and meditated upon the rotting corpse of a woman and when he was in the Brahma Heaven (Salomon 2018, 223).

31 The text is reconstructed in Brough 1962, 131. Cf. the translation of the parallel verse in the London Dhammapada by Lenz (2003, 70): he translates the relevant term *orapāra* (this side and the other side) as "this life and the next", following the commentarial tradition of the *Niddesa*. However, as Jones has shown (2016, 100-4), there is ambiguity on the exact meaning of the term even among the early commentators.

32 As in *Dhammapada* 34.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

In this context, the practitioner – aptly called a stream-enterer (Skt. *srotāpanna* Pāḷi *sotāpanna*) – has embarked on the dharmic path that leads to final cessation, just like a stream eventually flows on towards and into the ocean. Returning to either shore would mean abandoning the path to liberation. Oftentimes in this metaphor, the practitioner is then compared to a log which must avoid obstacles in the river currents to be able to reach the ocean, just like a devotee must avoid obstacles on the way to reach *nirvāṇa*.

The metaphor of the stream is just as spatial as the one involving the flood: rather than a vertical or perpendicular movement across an obstacle, however, we are now looking at a horizontal or parallel movement of an object between two flanking obstacles. The metaphor of the stream, exemplified above in the passage from the Khotan *Dhammapada*, fits spatially with the refrain "as a snake sheds its old worn-out skin", another popular image used to describe the practitioner who has abandoned the world. The horizontal movement of the snake slithering away in between the boundaries of its old skin replicates in fact the movement of the practitioner moving down the stream between the boundaries of the two riverbanks and towards the ocean of liberation (Jones 2016, 115-16).

Aquatic metaphors are far from unequivocal, in the sense that every image is polysemic and polyvalent, and often every term has two or more complementary and even contradictory referents. The river or stream is both the obstacle of samsaric flow and the path that streamlines the monk towards *nirvāṇa*; the farthest shore is both *nirvāṇa* or another flavor of *saṃsāra*; the ocean is either liberation or the vast and endless cycle of rebirths. Despite the ambiguity, however, all variations of aquatic imagery stress movement – a change of location from one state to the other that is mapped onto spiritual development.

Following in this semantic ambiguity, the spatial implications are two-fold. There are two similar, but diametrically opposed movements implied in the use of water imagery. On the one hand, we have the image of the river (or flood), whose flux is constantly worried by tumultuous and dangerous currents: this body of water must be traversed by any means necessary to reach the far shore, even by using a boat or raft. The implied movement here is a perpendicular one with respect to the river, as it goes across the stream. On the other hand, in the second image of the beneficial ocean, the stream is to be followed in its current which will eventually flow into the seas. The implied movement here is a parallel one, where the practitioner follows along rather than going across, and is ideally equidistant from both dangerous shores.

The architecture of staircases is made to embody both these metaphors in space by virtue of their very form. In this space of passage, the practitioner enacts both the crossing over (the river) and

the flowing into (the ocean). As they go up the stairs, they cross over the aquatic landscape of *saṃsāra* that is shown in the stair-risers, and they leave behind the near shore one step at a time. However, they not only perform the perpendicular movement against the steps, they also perform the parallel movement following the stream of the steps up to the stupa – each string and the creatures within, flanking the beholder as they go up, face towards the stupa as if to guide them to it **[fig. 13]**. The resonance with both types of aquatic metaphors (that of crossing over the flood of *saṃsāra* to reach the far shore of *nirvāṇa* and that of following of the stream towards the ocean of *nirvāṇa*) is clear, as they are indexically represented in the architectural context.

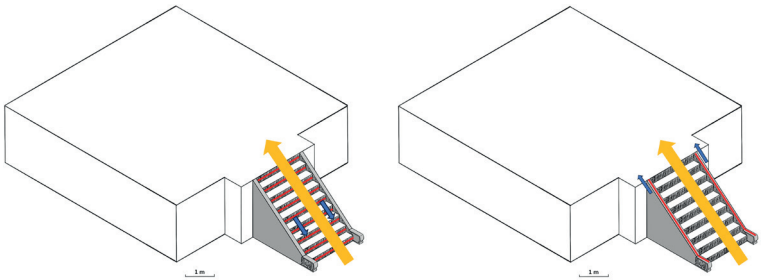

Figure 13 Visualization of the two types of approach on the staircase.
a) cross over: movement against the steps;
b) follow along: movement along the banister.
Line drawings by the Author

The presence of aquatic imagery on the staircase of Stupa 10 in Andan Dheri is not only a nod to its literary counterpart: while it undeniably is in conversation with this religious and literary substratum, it also shows a sophisticated understanding of how the metaphoric language itself can be made to work in a physical setting. Aquatic imagery, located in a specific in the architectural economy of the stupa, makes the physical movement towards it spiritually significant. The metaphor is made architectural as the practitioner embodies the movement of spiritual refinement by literally stepping over the ocean of *saṃsāra* and following along the stream towards *nirvāṇa*. In other words, the staircase deploys space not only as a background for rhetoric, but as a significant metaphorical matter.

4 Conclusions: A Visual Metaphor for Spiritual Refinement

This article makes two direct contributions: one narrower, to the analysis of Buddhist visual language and architecture in Gandhāra, and one broader, to the study of visual metaphors and the discussion of metaphoricity in architecture.

As per the former, I have argued that the aquatic imagery that abounds on stupa staircases is part of a religious and spiritual strategy that centres around the rhetoric of overcoming *saṃsāra* to finally reach the goal of complete cessation, that of *nirvāṇa*. The way in which this salvific strategy is effected is through a careful use of metaphorical visual language in an architectural context. The water imagery invites the beholder to embody the significance of the acts of traversing and journeying by situating them in a virtual space where the physical and the spiritual overlap. One the one hand, images of tritons and other marine creatures make the staircase into a riverine and/or sea landscape. On the other hand, the architectural form of the staircase sustains the vision of an aquatic realm to cross or follow. Within the visual metaphor, the practitioner is compelled to cross the watery realm when going up a staircase in the physical world. At the same time, the movement acquires ritual potency as the aquatic imagery deploys its symbolic significance, so deeply interrelated with the process of progressively approaching *nirvāṇa*.

The staircase, then, is made into a virtual space where the beholder is not merely climbing up towards the stupa, but is embodying the process of spiritual refinement. In this sense, the actual space of the staircase opens into the realm of the virtual on several levels by engaging the metaphoric value of aquatic imagery through language (as preserved to us in the textual tradition), the iconographic apparatus and the architecture:[33] the staircase is a staircase, but it is also a river and a stream; the tritons and ichthyocentaurs are décor on a schist slab, but they are also the creatures swimming about the waves and whirlpools; and this water realm is not mere water, but the endless flux of *saṃsāra*, or the safe flow of the doctrine. The virtual space of the river and the stream is placed upon the space of the staircase, and as the beholder goes through one, she goes through the other too. A larger implication here is that religious art can be (and often is) intended to enhance the physical space they create and inhabit in order to make it into a space of religious efficacy – a space that, despite being hinged on a parallel to the physical, is fundamentally other (Knott 2008). In this sense here,

33 On multimodality in visual metaphors, see the contributions in the volume edited by Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009), as well as Forceville 2008.

the otherness of religious spaces is predicated upon its capacity to open into a virtual dimension where the indescribable can take place and operate despite being, by definition, beyond limits of thought and representation.[34]

Another contribution this article attempts is to the analysis of visual metaphors, specifically to their function, workings, and meanings in a religious context. Starting from the now accepted paradigm that metaphors are not just a matter of language, but that they also structure thought and action (Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Ortony 1993), the article interrogates the role of both seeing and moving as major contributing factors in activating the metaphoric value of objects and architecture. Just like Bal says in the introduction to this volume I, too, "seek to understand the skill of looking we take too easily for granted". In this regard, the power of visual metaphors lies in the images' ambiguity (Feinsten 1982) or incongruity (Schilperoord 2018) with respect to a construed set of visual expectations and assumptions, oftentimes predicated upon varying degrees of formal overlap between diverse objects (Van Weelden, Maes, Schilperoord 2018) – both qualities explode the meaning of seeing, whereby viewers are asked to look more closely and to prod more deeply, in order to see things both as they are and as more than what they are.

A certain 'malleability of looking' is accepted and even encouraged within the Buddhist religious-philosophical system as a response to an ambivalent attitude towards the act of seeing: one the one hand, vision can return images of the world that are pernicious to the path of salvation and murk the perception of how things are; on the other hand, because these suspicions around seeing exist, the act of looking itself can and should be interrogated and manipulated to serve the spiritual goal of the practitioner. The two aspects are sides of the same coin and cannot exist without one another, as it is the capacity of a beholder to interrogate their sensual frameworks – vision as the foremost – and to intervene on them that will bring forward a chance to see beyond the limits of the world presented in front of one's eyes (Kinnard 1999, 176-81). So, for example, the accomplished practitioner is someone who sees the bottom of a lake in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 2), because they have trained their eyes to do so: for those who are not accomplished, the waters are cloudy and murky, and the lakebed impossible to see. Images of these kind describe the "clear sight" or "clear eyes" of one who possesses higher knowledges, which allow them to discern the true nature of things, even when it is hidden.

34 On the virtual as an opening of the real, see Diodato 2021, 86; Harris 2014; Davis 2017, 111-12.

As shown by the case described here, however, visual metaphors in architecture are successful only insofar as we take movement and embodied experience into account (Hale 2013). Building on Schilperoord's argument (2018, 42-3) that metaphoricity is not an inherent quality of images, regardless of their degree of anomalousness with respect to visual expectations, the metaphoric value of the aquatic imagery becomes fully realized as a symbol for *nirvāṇa* when the moving body of the beholder is made active element in the metaphor itself. If ascending through the water realm on the staircase is a metaphor for crossing over, then the moving subject is by necessity implied every time, as there is no crossing over *per se*, without a subject willing to do so. Movement is thus a fundamental component of the conceptual structure that allows viewers to interpret images and objects in space and to insert them within a horizon of meaning where salvation is not only desirable, but most importantly, accessible to all.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Richard Neer and Jaś Elsner for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article, and Claudia Zancan for being a generous and meticulous editor. Jessie Pons kindly helped in managing image credits from DiGA/KPDOAM. My gratitude also goes to Susan Whitfield, John Falconer and Amanullah Afridi who braved the Pakistani summer heat to visit Andan Dheri with me. Special thanks to Shafiq Ahmad, who assisted in taking new measurements of every monument at the site. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who offered comments and helped improve this article. Any remaining faults are mine.

Abbreviations

CKM = Corpus of Gāndhārī Manuscripts, available at `https://gandhari.org/`.

Kośa = *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (The Treasury of the Abhidharma with Its Self-Commentary) by Vasubandhu. Sanskrit text based on the edition by Pradan, P. (1975). *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*. Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Center.

LSukh = Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*. Sanskrit text based on the edition by Vaidya, P.L. (1961). *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṃgrahaḥ*, vol. 1. Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute.

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e-ISSN 2385-3042