

The Gandhāric Roots of the Indian *Symposion* and Sympotic-like Elements in Buddhist Literature

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Abstract Starting with a recent work by Kenneth G. Zysk “From Symposion to Goṣṭhī: The Adaptation of a Greek Social Custom in Ancient India”, this contribution aims to analyse evidence about the three sympotic elements (alcohol, sex, and intellectual pursuits) in the Gandhāra region. Gandhāra is, indeed, the ideal area in which a *métissage* of cultures could occur, and an ideal place in which the Greek symposion could at first be accommodated and then later spread. Then, Buddhist literary sources (with a special reference to those in Pāli) will be considered in order to analyse some relevant sympotic-like elements. Most notably, a feast occurring in the Pāli Vinaya, the regulative monastic code of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, will be examined, highlighting its sympotic characteristics. Furthermore, three groups of deities known as *karotapāṇi* ‘Those with cups in hands’, *mālādhara* ‘Garland-bearers’, and *sadāmatta/sadāmada* ‘Always euphoric/drunk’ will be discussed. These deities are represented in iconography, well attested in Buddhist literary sources in Sanskrit and Chinese, and even mentioned in Pāli literature. Their sympotic function in Buddhist cosmology as hypostatizations of the three sympotic elements of the symposion will be advanced.

Keywords Gandhāra. Buddhism. Pāli. Symposium. Vinaya. Buddhist Cosmology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Gandhāra as a Perfect Grey Area. – 3 An Account from the Pāli Vinaya: Acknowledging Sympotic Ways of Partying in a Regulative Monastic Code. – 4 Sympotic Divinities in Buddhist Cosmology: Assimilating Festive Elements. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction*

The archaeological and inscriptional evidences illuminate the extent of Greek customs, practices, and knowledge that were transmitted from Gandhāra into the central parts of the Indian subcontinent during the early centuries of the Common Era.¹

With these words Kenneth G. Zysk highlights how the abundant material evidence we have points to a transference from the region of Gandhāra to the southern Indian subcontinent of a set of practices and customs of Greek origin. In particular, he analysed evidence for the well-known Greek social institution called *symposion* and characterised, *in nuce*, by three main elements: alcohol, sex and intellectual pursuits.² The very name *sym-posion* indicates the act of ‘drinking together’,³ which in Greece involved the alcoholic substance known as ‘wine’, accompanied by foods of various kinds. As wine is a very good ‘social lubricant’, sexual aspects are not totally unexpected. Differently, the intellectual element is not at all obvious and indicates a refined way of enjoyment that overcomes the basic acts of eating, drinking and having sensual pleasures. Indeed, at least for some activities, it presupposes a certain appreciation for intellectualism, most likely present in the higher and well educated classes of a society. In particular, if we consider the cosmopolitan society of the ancient Gandhāra, a melting pot of people in which Indians and Greeks coexisted,⁴ an interesting association between Buddhism and the symptotic elements can be recovered. Material culture related with wine production and consumption, in addition to iconographies related to symptotic scenes, were found in Buddhist sites. So much so was the Buddhist involvement in such worldly activities that Harry Falk, in the conclusion of his seminal article on the Buddhist wine production in Gandhāra, writes that “[t]he age-old and non-Buddhist wine-cum-merry-making festival was so attractive that its organisation was hijacked by the Buddhist monasteries”.⁵ Falk was referring to

* I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed feedback. All the translations from Pāli, Sanskrit, and Chinese are my own unless otherwise noted.

1 Zysk 2021a, 105.

2 Other of Zysk’s works are concerned with exchanges between the Indian and Western worlds. See, for instance, his contributions on physiognomics (2018; 2019a; 2019b) and medicine (2021b).

3 As reported by Zysk (2021a, 84), there is, notably, the cognate Sanskrit form *sam-āpānaka* ‘drinking together’.

4 Baums 2018.

5 Falk 2009, 75.

a communal and popular festivity. However, we might assume, Buddhism in that region got in touch with an even more elitarian way to party, that is to say with the *symposion*. As it has been suggested elsewhere,⁶ juices (especially that from grapes), without neglecting their primary medicinal function, might have also had a social facet in situations in which monks and laypeople had to eat together. Indeed, it might be possible to infer from the Chinese pilgrim Xuán-zàng 玄奘 that grape juice was the alcohol-free counterpart of the intoxicating grape wine, a typical beverage of the caste of the *kṣatryas* (Sanskrit term for ‘warriors’ = Pāli: *khattiya*). It would seem that the *śramaṇas* (a Sanskrit general term for ‘ascetics’ which also includes Buddhists) and *brāhmaṇas* in Xuánzàng’s account drank as good as the highest caste, posing themselves on the same social level without violating religious norms.⁷

The Buddhists’ self-representation that can be inferred from Pāli literature (but not restricted to it) is that of a religious group particularly eager to be compared with the higher classes of the Indian society. Buddhists define themselves as *ariya* ‘noble’,⁸ an adjective used to also describe many of their practices. They also redefined the meaning of the word *brāhmaṇa* claiming that it is a state that is not achieved by birth but by merit,⁹ thus conceptually allowing Buddhists not to be excluded from being considered *brāhmaṇas* due to congenital limitations. Furthermore, the Buddha himself was a *khattiya/kṣatrya*, a member of the caste of the warriors and ruling class.¹⁰ Not by chance, he is described with a war metaphor through the epithet *jina* ‘Victorious one’, and was also a universal king (Sanskrit: *cakravartin*; Pāli: *cakkavattin*; lit.: ‘Wheel-turning’ king) in previous lives. Another meaningful epithet of the Buddha is ‘caravan leader’ (Sanskrit: *sārvabhauṃsa*; Pāli: *sattavāha*), which connects the Buddha with the wealthy caste of merchants (Sanskrit: *vaiśya*; Pāli: *vessa*).¹¹ In light of the Buddhist interaction with the élites, we might wonder about the necessary adaptations which occurred on both sides to interact with each other, in a game of negotiation of uses, customs and values. It would seem, sometimes, that Buddhists followed the

6 De Notariis 2023a, 96-7.

7 “Thus, there are intoxicants of many different tastes, distinctive liquid substances [for each group]. Grape and sugar cane [intoxicants] are for the *kṣatryas* to drink [...] *Śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* drink grape (葡萄) and sugar cane (甘蔗) juices (漿), [these] are not considered intoxicants” (若其酒體之差滋味流別。*葡萄甘蔗剌帝利飲也 [...] 沙門婆羅門飲葡萄甘蔗漿, 非酒體之謂也; T2087.51.0878b03-06).

8 In the sense of a ‘worthy person’, with a connotation of superiority; cf. Benedetti 2023, 131-2.

9 Sn 142; see also Norman 1992, 196, fn. 17.

10 Ellis 2019, 59-60.

11 Neelis 2011, 24-39.

motto “When in Rome do as Romans do”, showing remarkable societal adapting skills. Furthermore, reevaluations of moral tenets certainly occurred. An example could be the negative Buddhist attitude towards dance and dance performances, as emerges from the Pāli texts, whereas the puritan attitude is not preserved in the Vajrayāna Buddhism, which is conversely well integrated with such practices.¹² Potentially, a Buddhist interaction with the Greek *symposion* would have challenged the Buddhist attitude to the world and might have prompted a negotiation of values. In principle, if we give serious consideration to the widely known ‘five precepts’ (*pañca-sīla*),¹³ also known in early canonical texts as *pañca-dhammas*,¹⁴ the main elements of the Greek *symposion* may seem to contradict the religious tenets adopted even by laymen. Indeed, the ‘five precepts’ are moral and behavioural rules adopted by laymen, which include *inter alia*: the rule of training (*sikkhāpada*) of abstention (*veramaṇī*) from a misconduct regarding sensual/sexual pleasures (*kāmesu micchācārā*) and from states of intoxication (*pamāda-tṭhāna*), derived from *surā*, *meraya* (two macro-categories for alcoholic drinks) and intoxicating substances (*majja*).¹⁵ In light of this, the case of wine production in Gandhāra highlighted by Falk is a good example of how real practices might differ from precepts.¹⁶ Even contemporary empirical evidence would show us that, concerning the abstention from alcoholic substances, there is a good deal of flexibility in modern states in which Buddhism is the dominant religion.¹⁷ A similar ancient flexibility is likely the reason why we can find an attempt to legitimise such praxis in some exegetical Buddhist literature from northern sources.¹⁸ Concerning the misconduct regarding sensual/sexual pleasures, we should be conscious not to superimpose either our modern worldview on the matter or some modern Buddhist approaches derived from the Victorian sexual mores, a legacy of British colonialism.¹⁹ Sexual intercourses were forbidden to ascetics, monks and nuns since they all have to live a chaste life, whereas

¹² On the dance in Pāli texts, see Comba 2019, whereas a discussion on dance in Vajrayāna Buddhism is provided by Shaw 2022.

¹³ Given the prominence of Pāli sources in the present work, I will mainly use Pāli terms when mentioning Buddhist concepts, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ E.g. A III 203.

¹⁵ The ‘five precepts’ are also attested in Gandhāra thanks to a Gāndhārī version preserved in a manuscript. In this regard, see Strauch 2014, 29, quoted also in the contribution of Stefan Baums in the present volume.

¹⁶ Falk 2009.

¹⁷ Crosby 2014, 116-17.

¹⁸ Kano, Kramer 2020.

¹⁹ Cf. Gombrich, Obeyesekere 1988, 255-6; Crosby 2014, 244.

laypeople could have a vivacious sexual life, without breaking any Buddhist rules. For example, Pāli texts widely attested polygyny,²⁰ and courtesans and prostitutes were well integrated members of society – their presence in a city could even enhance its prestige.²¹ Although their work is often described in negative terms,²² it would seem that neither the prostitution would fall into the category of a wrong sexual conduct, nor the patrons, as long as they have paid for their own prostitute and did not go with a prostitute already paid for (*alias* engaged) by another person (otherwise the act would be equated with the notion of theft, as in the case of adultery).²³ This state of affairs would be, as rightly stated by Jonathan Silk,²⁴ still in line with the Indian legal literature.²⁵ In light of this, the presence of the courtesans and brothels in the art of Gandhāra – as those detected, for instance, by Tadashi Tanabe –²⁶ is certainly less striking and scandalous than images related to drinking scenes. However, as highlighted by Collins,²⁷ polygyny, adultery and prostitution, although often accepted or justified, are certainly not encouraged and, indeed, we have textual examples that promote moderation in Pāli literature.²⁸ Thus, the Buddhist attitude that mostly emerges from the Pāli texts is certainly strait-laced when compared with the more worldly attitude we find in the archaeological and material culture. Kenneth Zysk believed that this ‘moderated attitude’ modified and mitigated the Indian social male gatherings influenced by the Greek *symposion*:

The evidence thus far presented indicates that central symptotic elements of drinking and sex existed in the regions of Bactria

²⁰ Collins 2007, 263, fn. 2.

²¹ This happened in the case of the courtesan Ambapālikā, “through her, [the city of] Vesālī has been abundantly beautified” (*tāya ca Vesālī bhīyyosomattāya upasobhanti*; Vin I 268).

²² E.g. a prostitute (*gaṇikā*) is ‘one who lives on defiled form of actions’ (*kiliṭṭhakamma-upajīvin*; Pv-a 75; cf. Vv-a 75 and Ja III 436) or one who has an ‘inferior work’ (*nīca-kamma*; Ja III 60), cf. Collins 2007, 278, fn. 35.

²³ Collins 2007, 280-2; Silk 2008; Langenberg 2018, 584.

²⁴ Silk 2007, 376.

²⁵ As discussed, for instance, by Sternbach (1951).

²⁶ Tanabe 2019.

²⁷ Collins 2007.

²⁸ E.g. Ja II 125-7 suggests us that adultery, despite being a wrong action, can be nonetheless forgivable (cf. Collins 2007, 271), whereas in the *Parābhavasutta* (Sn 91-115) going with a prostitute for a married man is a cause of ruining (Sn 108), but the reason, according to the commentary (Pj II 172), is not the sexual act but the fact that a man would waste money (cf. Collins 2007, 272). If the polygyny was accepted and prostitutes were also regarded as ‘temporary wives’ (*muhuttikā*; cf. Collins 2007, 265), it would seem an interaction somehow legalised.

and Gandhāra shortly after Alexander conquered them and set up satraps to govern. The third symptotic element, involving mental activity, has come to us via Sanskrit literature. These three symptotic practices were subsumed into the Indian courtly and urban life during the Kuṣāṇa period and were adapted, imitated, and interwoven in the aristocratic, social, and courtly fabric of the Indians under the Sanskrit names of *sabhā* and *goṣṭhī*. It was probably during this time that Brahmanic and perhaps also Buddhist religious ideology and practice influenced the activities of the men's social gatherings, so that the emphasis moved away from drinking and women to emphasise intellectual and literary activities.²⁹

In the present contribution, I initially want to delve deeper into the centrality of Gandhāra with regard to a possible diffusion of the Greek *symposion* in India. Then, I will adopt a complementary perspective to the conclusion made by Zysk, that is to say, I will analyse the influence that men's social gatherings and *symposion*-like parties had on Buddhism. In particular, how symptotic elements and related activities could be represented in the conservative Theravāda tradition will be explored. As such, it would become a study of how real life practices – so far mostly attested by the material culture – flowed into the Pāli texts, providing us with some new nuances on Buddhist culture and paving the way to new interpretative hypotheses concerning potential foreign influences on Buddhist literature. The elements analysed are widely and significantly attested in Gandhāra even in Buddhist contexts, making a case of a potential influence. If the influence of Gandhāra on the diffusion of Buddhism out of India through to China has been thus far well recognised, the fact that Gandhāra could have also affected the more native Indian versions of Buddhism may, nonetheless, be an intriguing line for future inquires.

²⁹ Zysk 2021a, 107.

2 Gandhāra as a Perfect Grey Area

In the gradual passage from black to white, there should be something in between which is neither one nor the other, but a mixture of the two. This is grey. Its usefulness consists in avoiding a blunt passage from one to the other, allowing a harmonious transition [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Gradient from black to white

Of course, there is not only one grey, but many shades connected together from the most blackish ones up to those most white. Black and white are the two extremes and, perhaps, they do not even exist in their purity, and as such they could only be academic constructs. The reader, at this point, might have already understood that I am speaking metaphorically since I am here referring to the dichotomy between West and East or, in our case, between Greek and Indian cultures. Can we say there is a pure Greek or Indian culture uncontaminated from foreign influxes? I doubt we can, as would also be the case for any unisolated culture. Cultures are dynamic and even the most conservative ones somehow react to new things, either in opening or closing to them. The mere contact between cultures triggers a motion, allowing potential for change or a process of mediation. Thus, when we consider an area such as that of Gandhāra, we should consider and value the melting pot of cultures which existed and their necessity to coexist. As also argued by Stefan Baums,³⁰ the cosmopolitan society of Gandhāra produced a unique piece of literature able to appeal to both Greeks and Indians who lived side by side in that area. The text is extant in its Indian rendition as *Milinda-pañha* and in two Chinese versions as *Nàxiān bǐqiū jīng* 那先比丘經.³¹ In such a text, a Buddhist monk called Nāgasena/*Nàxiān* 那先 held several dialogues with the Indo-Greek king Milinda/*Mílán* 彌蘭 (the latter probably corresponds to Menander)³² in a fabulous encounter in which Buddhism talks to Greece, at least allegorically. Not by change, the text was composed in Gandhāra, in such a grey area in which a *métissage* of cultures occurred.

Mutatis mutandis, Gandhāra might have been crucial in the Indian reception of the Greek *symposion*. Its characteristic of being

³⁰ Baums 2018, 42.

³¹ T 1670 versions A and B.

³² I have recently discussed some not entirely convincing attempts to revisit the identity of Milinda, see De Notariis 2023b, 306-7.

a grey area, arguably, made Gandhāra able to receive foreign customs and readapt them for another culture. In Gandhāra, Indians could be receptive and cosmopolitan enough to receive a new custom, but could also still preserve Indian cultural traits which then may prompt an adaptation of the new custom to suit Indians' sensitivity, if needed. The mitigated foreign custom can, then, reach the subcontinent in an Indianised form. In this regard, for instance, we may note how references to homosexuality in Indian texts, which refer to symptotic scenes, lack explicitness,³³ a fact arguably due to an underlying aversion and proof of an Indian adaptation, at least from a narrative point of view.

Thus, to bolster the assumption that Gandhāra was the epicentre for the diffusion of the Greek custom of the *symposion*, we shall note how the three symptotic elements discussed by Zysk are all well documented in Gandhāra. Since long ago, archaeological research presented us material culture related to wine/alcohol production and consumption in Gandhāra, customs which were corroborated by anthropological data and literary sources and prompted early suggestions concerning a certain Buddhist involvement with such activities.³⁴ Sexual aspects were also often found in material culture related to Buddhist places, a fact that struck scholars and called for explanations.³⁵ Even in literary sources, such as in the Mūlasārvāstivāda *Vinaya* (a regulative monastic code), there is evidence of an articulated sexual life in north-west India, an area that roughly corresponds to Gandhāra.³⁶ Furthermore, we might note how Gandhāra is the birthplace of some outputs which can be well sprung from the symptotic intellectual activities. The most representative example is most likely the Buddhist poet and playwright, Aśvaghōṣa. Born in the North city of Sāketa (Ayodhyā), Aśvaghōṣa has been associated with Gandhāra as a result of his association with the Kushan king Kaniṣka who ruled over the northwest.³⁷ He was, notably, the author of the oldest *mahākāvya*s (great poems) we have.³⁸ As we know, poets (*kavi*)

³³ As noted by Zysk 2021a, 91.

³⁴ "Buddhism also seems to have been compelled to allow, in those countries, some exceptions to its prescriptions concerning the prohibition of drinking alcoholic beverages (as was the case also in Tibet, Nepal and China)" (Tucci 1977, 33). Overviews on the main sources can be found in Falk 2009, 65; Klimburg 2016; Filigenzi 2019a, 60-3.

³⁵ Carter 1968; Faccenna, Callieri, Filigenzi 2003, 369-74; Filigenzi 2019a; 2019b.

³⁶ "The one visible female domain outside the home is that of the courtesans or prostitutes, who also densely populate the narratives of the MSV [= Mūlasārvāstivāda *Vinaya*]" (Finnegan 2009, 163; square brackets mine) and also "prostitutes or courtesans are simply part of the social landscape in the MSV [= Mūlasārvāstivāda *Vinaya*], and appear as figures in each of its 13 volumes" (Finnegan 2009, 341; square brackets mine).

³⁷ Brancaccio, Liu 2009, 243; Deeg 2022, 234.

³⁸ Lienhard 1984, 164.

used to frequent the Indian male social gathering known as *goṣṭhī*,³⁹ which is the object of Zysk's study, being one of the main candidates to represent an Indian version of the Greek *symposion*. A further example is the forementioned text known in Pāli as *Milindapañha* and in Chinese as *Nàxiān bǐqiū jīng*, a text that consists of the philosophical dialogues which occurred between a Buddhist monk and a Indo-Greek king. The text is believed to have been composed in Gandhāra and in Gāndhārī language.⁴⁰ Notably, philosophical dialogues can also form part of the intellectual pursuits of the Greek *symposion*, as Plato's *Symposium* itself well exemplifies. All the elements mentioned were in connection with Buddhism, and Buddhists were actually involved in worldly activities in the Mūlasārvāstivāda *Vinaya*, a north-western literary source. This was highlighted by Gregory Schopen in stating that:

the Buddhist monk in Early North India, and in this monastic code [viz. in the Mūlasārvāstivāda *Vinaya*], did not look like the caricature found in modern scholarly sources [...]. The monk that we will see in this code is a construction foreman, an art promoter, a banker, an entrepreneur, sometimes a shyster, and sometimes a saint - he should at least prove to be of some interest.⁴¹

Monks in the Mūlasārvāstivāda *Vinaya*, compared with “the caricature found in modern scholarly sources” (Schopen most likely refers here to the picture derived from the Pāli *Vinaya*), can be described as gentrified monks.⁴² Thus, we have both archaeological and literary evidence which tells us that Buddhism in Gandhāra departed from some of its ascetic tenets to become involved in more worldly activities. Thus, it would seem we are entitled to wonder to what degree these gentrified monks were also directly involved with, or at least supported, activities related to our sympotic elements, if not even the *symposion* itself. Perhaps in these sources the process of gentrification is more evident than in the Pāli sources, although I would argue that Pāli Buddhism similarly testifies to have come into contact with these - or at least similar autochthonous - social activities, but reacted, at least in theory, in a more conservative way. In my view, while reading the Pāli sources we should consider two potential attitudes regarding sympotic elements, namely: acknowledging and assimilation. ‘Acknowledging’ is used in the sense of acknowledging the

³⁹ Lienhard 1984, 16-19.

⁴⁰ De Notariis 2022, 118, fn. 17.

⁴¹ Schopen [2000] 2004, 20; square brackets mine.

⁴² With ‘gentrified monks’ I mean monks who moved away from the rural world and, at the same time, look like they are in search of material well-being, in a *viveur* spirit.

existence of such practices, and by ‘assimilation’ I mean that those practices found their own way to be integrated in the Pāli Buddhist world, at least in the imaginary. The evidence I will discuss below originates from regulative literature, since a legislator forbids what is really or potentially practised, and from mythological accounts involving cosmology, as what is forbidden – or at least discouraged – on earth can be a reward in heavens.

3 An Account from the Pāli *Vinaya*: Acknowledging Symptotic Ways of Partying in a Regulative Monastic Code

In considering the Gandhāric Buddhist attitude towards intoxicants, we should regard it as a later development when compared with a hypothetical early Buddhism. In the same manner, we should consider any openness towards sexuality. Buddhism did not come out of the blue, but was part of the ascetic tradition of ancient India, which testifies quite early on a certain general (albeit perhaps not exclusive) negative attitude towards these activities.⁴³ On this point, we also have evidence from the Greek historian Strabo, who wrote in book XV of his *Geography*⁴⁴ that Indian ascetics do not drink intoxicants and avoid sexual intercourse (Strabo’s account is based on the Historiography of Alexander the Great, and so refers to an early period). In the Pāli canon we find roughly the same statement in the *Upakkilesasutta*,⁴⁵ in which intoxicants and sexual intercourse are among the obstructions (*upakkilesa*) for both *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, that is to say, for all the religious actors of ancient India from the Buddhist perspective. Buddhism posits itself on the side of those ascetics who avoid drinking and sexual intercourse, at least in the earliest times. However, the text, indirectly also tells us that there were some who used to do such activities: “There are, monks, some *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* who drink *surā* and *meraya* and do not abstain from *surā* and *meraya* drinks”.⁴⁶ The same statement is repeated with reference to the act of indulging in sexual intercourse (*methunaṃ dhammaṃ*

⁴³ In this regard, see Bodewitz (2007), McHugh (2021, 213-15). *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, for instance, clearly forbids drinking *surā* and some specific kinds of sexual intercourse (CU 5.10.9).

⁴⁴ Strab. 15.1.60.

⁴⁵ A II 53-4.

⁴⁶ *santi bhikkhave eke samaṇabrāhmaṇā suraṃ pivanti merayaṃ pivanti surāmerayaṃ pānā apāvīratā* (A II 53).

paṭisevanti).⁴⁷ In the Pāli *Vinaya*, on an occasion such kinds of actions were actually performed by some Buddhist monks. The account aims to condemn this behaviour, but nonetheless testifies to the existence of a type of private elitist way of partying which has all the sympotic elements previously described, in addition to other elements which, commonly, characterise the Greek *symposion*:

tena kho pana samayena Assajipunabbasukā nāma Kiṭāgirismiṃ āvāsikā honti alajjino pāpabhikkhū. te evarūpaṃ anācāraṃ ācaranti: mālāvacaṃ ropenti pi ropāpentī pi siñcanti pi siñcāpentī pi ocinanti pi ocināpentī pi ganthenti pi ganthāpentī pi ekatovaṅṅikamālaṃ karonti pi kārāpentī pi [...] te kulitthīnaṃ kuladhītānaṃ kulakumārīnaṃ kulasuṇhānaṃ kuladāsīnaṃ ekatovaṅṅikamālaṃ haranti pi harāpentī pi [...] te kulitthīhi kuladhītāhi kulakumārīhi kulasuṇhāhi kuladāsīhi saddhiṃ ekabhājane pi bhuñjanti ekathālake pi pivanti ekāsane pi nisīdanti ekamañce pi tuvaṅṅenti [...] vikāle pi bhuñjanti majjamaṃ pi pivanti mālāgandhavilepanamaṃ pi dhārenti naccanti pi gāyanti pi vādentī pi lāsenti pi [...] atṭhapade pi kīlanti [...] raṅgamajjīhaṃ pi saṅghāṭiṃ pattharivā naccakīṃ evaṃ vadanti idha bhagīni naccassū ti; nalāṭīkaṃ pi denti vividhaṃ pi anācāraṃ ācaranti.

At that time, shameless and sinful monks who were followers of Assaji and Punabbasu were residing at Kiṭāgiri. They indulged in such a kind of misbehaviours: they cultivate and cause to cultivate [flowering] plants for garlands, they water and cause to water them, they pick and cause to pick them up, they tie and cause to tie them up, they produce and cause to produce a garland with the stalk on one side [...] These [monks] offer or cause to bring the garland with the stalk on one side to women from a good family, to daughters from a good family, to maidens from a good family, to daughters-in-law from a good family, to female slaves from a good family [...] These [monks] eat together in the same bowl with women of a good family [...] they drink from the same beaker, they sit on the same seat, they were coupled in the same bed [...] they eat at the wrong time, they drink intoxicants (*majja*), they make use of garlands, perfumes, and cosmetic, they dance, sing, play musical instruments, and amuse [...] They play on a chessboard (*atṭhapade*

⁴⁷ A II 53. We should wait till the emergence of Tantrism to see these practices fully and clearly legitimated by religious traditions. The passage can, in principle, testify to early harbingers of practices that will be labelled as ‘Tantric’ in later times or, perhaps more likely, complain of the existence of blameable religious actors who do not follow common behavioural standards. Brahmins and Jains agreed with Buddhists in their approach to intoxicants and sexual intercourses, allowing us to assume that this was the dominant attitude.

pi kīlanti)... [there is a long list of games at which the monks play (*kīlanti*)]. Having spread the robe as it was a stage, they say to a dancer: “Sister, dance here!”, they mark their forehead,⁴⁸ and they indulged in various misbehaviours.⁴⁹

This account begins with monks that cultivate plants suitable to produce garlands. Later, they actually go on to make garlands and send them to a variety of elitist women. As also highlighted by Jonathan Silk, giving a garland can indicate in India a sexual invitation.⁵⁰ The monks and these women eat and drink together, and intoxicants conveyed through the generic term *majja* are also involved. They consume food and drinks in a festive environment, sharing the same space (being it a seat, a bed, etc.), and playing (*kīlanti*) many kinds of games.⁵¹ The ludic activities can be identified with our ‘intellectual pursuits’. Daud Ali highlights that these activities match the activities in the *Kāmasūtra*.⁵² Of course, we cannot exclude the autochthonous nature of such elements even if, we may argue, there was a time interval (albeit short) in which foreign elements could potentially flow into the *Vinaya* literature in Pāli.⁵³ Indeed, there are some remarka-

48 Horner translates *nalāṭikam pi denti* as “they applauded” ([1952] 2001, 15), although it is not clear to me whence she derived such translation (even the recent DOP s.v. “nalāṭika” does not provide anything similar to that interpretation). Since *nalāṭika*, as reported in PED (cf. s.v. “nalāṭika”), has a parallel in the Sanskrit *lalāṭikā*, I based my translation on the SED (s.v. “lalāṭikā”): “A mark made with sandal or ashes on the forehead”.

49 Vin II 9-10.

50 Silk 2007.

51 We might wonder whether the various practices described in this *Vinaya* passage refer to a single ‘it’, a party, as it were, rather than to various behaviours not necessarily taking place on a particular occasion or at a particular gathering. To my mind, the passage depicts the many activities occurring during an elitarian party. Many activities involved are not wrong *per se*, but only if framed within the general picture. Not all the activities listed have to happen at the same time, some are clearly alternatives.

52 Ali 1998, 177. The *Vinaya* passage is discussed also by McHugh (2021, 215-16), who also refers to the article of Daud Ali.

53 The presence of Alexander the Great in India is dated in the second half of the fourth century BC, while a convenient cut-off point for an early redactional closing date for the Pāli *Vinaya* is the first century BC (Kieffer-Pülz 2020-21, 156), when Pāli texts were first committed to writing according to tradition. However, this convenient closing date includes the canonical *Abhidhamma*, a much later composition than many other texts. Therefore, an earlier date for at least the core of the Pāli *Vinaya* sounds reasonable, and this can be the third century BC, the period in which Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Aśoka (von Hinüber 1996, 21). In the same period, viz. the third century BC, we have evidence that Buddhism reached Gandhāra (Olivieri et al. 2022, 72; Iori 2023, 198; Olivieri 2024). Taking these dates into account, we can note that there is a short time interval between the arrival of Alexander and the composition of the *Vinaya* core in which Greek customs could flow into Indian culture. Furthermore, a couple of centuries exist between the redactional closing date of the *Vinaya* and the Buddhist presence in Gandhāra, where Greek culture spread. It is worth noting that our *Vinaya*’s account is not

ble details which are worth noticing. The party is basically elitist, as it is enjoyed by monks (who are *ariyas* ‘nobles’)⁵⁴ and women from a “good family” (*kula*);⁵⁵ it is private and not open (as it can be with a public festival). If we were in Greece, we could probably call it *symposion*, as its core elements are involved. Sexual aspects are not explicit, but are most likely implied by garlands and the intimate situation of consuming food and drinks closely. At least, we can certainly infer a certain degree of intimacy,⁵⁶ since the prescribed monastic behaviour was much stricter. Indeed, it is reported that the Buddha declared that it is better to embrace, sit or lie down with a mass of fire rather than with high-class maidens.⁵⁷

representative of the earliest phase of Buddhism, as it presents us a wealthy and well-developed monastic community living in a lavish monastery and not itinerant and wandering ascetics. Eventually, in discussing some knowledge about Greeks in the *Assalāyanasutta* (M 93), Anālayo (2012, 245-6) makes a point, suggesting there is no need to await the invasion of Alexander to expect references to the Greeks. In sum, even if a Greek influence on Buddhism is certainly more likely in a later period (especially, during the Kushan period), we cannot exclude some early harbingers of mutual influences.

54 The monks of Kiṭṭāgiri, followers of Assaji and Punabbasu, are according to the text ‘shameless and sinful’, but are described as ‘noble’ (*ayya*; variant of *ariya*) by the people of Kiṭṭāgiri (*ayyā Assajipunabbasukā*; Vin II 11).

55 In another version of this story (Vin III 184-5), there occurs a gloss on the term *kula*, explaining that it refers to warriors (*khattiya*), *brāhmaṇas*, merchants (*vessa*), and slaves (*sudda*). As Zysk highlights, in the classical Greek *symposion*, “[a]ristocratic women were strictly forbidden, but slave women and special courtesans, serving as female companions (*hetaira*), were commonly present for the enjoyment of the men” (2021a, 87). However, we should bear in mind that, according to Zysk (2021a, 91-2), some sympotic elements in Indian texts could occur either with Indian nuances or as Indian adaptations.

56 It might be considered significant that in the passage it is not suggested that the monks have infringed the first *pārājika* offence which, according to Theravāda tradition, entails expulsion from the monastic order for monks and nuns who have sex (a less strict penalty is admitted by other Buddhist traditions, in this regard see Clarke 2009 with further notes on the topic in Anālayo 2016). However, we might wonder, in a speculative legal sense, whether there could be a possibility that, even if the monks had sex, this was not considered an infringement of the first *pārājika*. Indeed, as Collins (2014, 211) highlights, a penalty is not applied to a person who is mad (*ummattaka*) in the *Vinaya* (Vin III 33) and the condition of madness can be caused by drinking intoxicants (and these monks were actually drinking intoxicants), a fact attested in the canon (A IV 248; Kv 619) and supported by the existence of the term *surummattaka* (maddened by *surā*) (Ja III 243). Naturally, the latter case can be considered only in a speculative sense as the commentary (Sp I 269) would interpret the term *ummattaka* as *pitummattaka* ‘maddened by bile’, and later mentions *yakkhumattaka* ‘maddened by demi-gods’. In any case, we can assume the presence of sexual-related activities to such a degree that do not violate the *pārājika*. The *Vinaya*, indeed, describes a huge range of sexual behaviours not necessarily entailing expulsion from the monastic order (Langenberg 2018, 574-8). Finally, it might be worth noting that, as highlighted by Schopen (2006, 497), *Vinaya*’s accounts in which monks had sexual interactions with women involved the latter in the act of visiting the monastery.

57 A IV 128; cf. Vism 55. It is worth noting that when the Buddha asked the monks if they would prefer to embrace, sit or lie down with the mass of fire or the maidens, the monks chose the latter.

We can hardly state whether or not the account tells us of a historical event since the literary genre of the *Vinaya* commonly makes use of stories as an etiological expedient to explain the reasons why the Buddha established a certain rule.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, we can infer some information: this kind of way to party was known and monks were believed to have the resources to organise it. Even if the story is not true, it sounds at least plausible. There should be the possibility, even if remote, that this could happen, since there is no reason to forbid an action totally outside the horizon of thought. Therefore, it might seem that the Pāli account acknowledges the existence of a social practice and reacts by condemning it. In so doing, it provides us a description of the condemned practice, thus serving as an evidence for its existence. The behaviour of these monks would constitute an evident violation of many ascetic norms. In the same way, as would the behaviour of six nuns in another *Vinaya*'s account:

tena kho pana samayena chabbaggiyā bhikkhuniyo avaṅgaṃ karonti visesakaṃ karonti olokanakena olokeṇti sāloke tiṭṭhanti sanaccamaṃ kārāpentī vesim vuttāpentī pānāgāraṃ ṭhapenti [...]

At that time, the group of six nuns painted the corner of the eyes, painted the cheeks, they look down/out from a window, they stand in a visible [position], they arrange dance[-parties?], they promote courtesans, they establish a drinking house [...]⁵⁹

These nuns, just like the aforementioned monks, behaved in a manner considered wrong by the orthodoxy. Nonetheless, the account provides us a glance into some remarkable working activities women could undertake when not relegated to the mere role of 'housewife'. The establishment of a drinking house (*pānāgāra*) is quite telling as also the Mūlasārvāstivāda *Vinaya* would provide evidence for nuns' expertise in brewing intoxicants,⁶⁰ allowing us a brief insight into some historical truth behind the account. Furthermore, the account interestingly reports that "People get annoyed, bothered, upset [saying]: 'They [viz. the nuns] enjoy sensual pleasures (*kāma*) just like female-householders'".⁶¹ This and similar statements are used very frequently in the *Vinaya* and reveal a certain Buddhists' attention to laypeople's judgement and the need to distinguish themselves

⁵⁸ Clarke 2009, 35-6.

⁵⁹ Vin II 267.

⁶⁰ McHugh 2021, 91-2.

⁶¹ *manussā ujjhāyanti khīyanti vipācentī: seyyathāpi gihikāmahoginiyo 'ti* (Vin II 267).

from the latter.⁶² However, later textual and material sources, mostly datable around the middle of the first millennium AD (with fluctuations of a few centuries), would testify to the existence of ascetics and Buddhist monks who lived like householders,⁶³ pointing to a potential breaking of boundaries and merging of roles.

Assuming, for the sake of the argument, a historic interpretation for the symptotic-like party of the aforementioned monks of Kiṭāgiri, the account can be regarded as an early evidence of monks behaving like householders (in this case elitist householders), taking advantage of the societal and economic sources they have.⁶⁴ But in case we do not want to endorse a historic reading, we can nonetheless read into the account a fear of breaking boundaries expressed by the orthodox tradition, perhaps in a period in which the progressive enrichment of the monastic community, combined with an increase in relations with the laity, began to constitute a danger for the sober lifestyle derived from the Buddhist ascetic background.

Turning to the interpretation of the passage about nuns, we might wonder what is wrong with nuns looking out from a window. Probably, the answer lies in the next sentence in which it is stated that the nuns “stand in a visible [position]”. Following the commentary: “‘They stand in a visible [position]’ means that having opened the door, they stand showing half body”.⁶⁵ As highlighted by Schopen, standing at the door is the classical behaviour of a prostitute, and so it is within reason that we should likewise understand the act of looking down/out from a window, an act that presupposes the existence of a building.⁶⁶ Following Tanabe, some Gandhāric reliefs would represent buildings that were interpreted as brothels, and their representation aimed

to remind vividly lay Buddhist devotees and a certain kind of monks of the pleasures to be obtained in the Realm of Desire (*kāmadhātu*), in particular, in the paradise of the *Trāyastriṃśa* Heaven.⁶⁷

⁶² Notably, monastic celibacy seems it actually was a key element to differentiate monks and nuns from laypeople (Langenberg 2018, 568-9).

⁶³ von Hinüber 2006, 24-6; 2023.

⁶⁴ Similar cases are actually attested in sources external to Buddhism, as in the case of a Kashmiri satirical play which is ironic about the luxurious life of Buddhist monks (McHugh 2021, 237).

⁶⁵ *sāloke tiṭṭhanti ti dvāraṃ vivarivā upaḍḍhakāyaṃ dassentiyo tiṭṭhanti* (Sp VI 1293).

⁶⁶ Schopen 2008, 237-8, fn. 14.

⁶⁷ Tanabe 2019, 35.

If Tanabe is right in his interpretative hypothesis, such lascivious activities were assimilated in the Buddhist imaginary, namely in their representation of heavens, which are notably one of the main soteriological goals of laypeople.⁶⁸ It is apparent that Pāli texts contain descriptions of various kinds of amusement, just as the dancing and drunkenness scenes in the description of the city of Kusāvati,⁶⁹ but we can arguably attribute a particular meaning to pleasure occurring in celestial realms. As epitomes of human pleasures, the pleasures of the heavens dignify worldly activities, and if such activities were prohibited or discouraged on earth, they find their legitimacy in heaven. This is not a mere representation of the culture in which the Buddhist texts were composed, but is a deliberate act to reintegrate earthly entertainments (repressed by the ascetic tenets) into the imaginary. In the same perspective, we can read the presence of what we can call ‘sympotic divinities’ in the Buddhist cosmology, a further sign that worldly and lay customs have flowed into the Buddhist worldview, perhaps mitigating the original ascetic attitude over time.

4 **Sympotic Divinities in Buddhist Cosmology: Assimilating Festive Elements**

Assimilating an element in the cosmology means to allow something to enter the constructed imaginary in a hierarchical localised place. Heavens or paradises (*sagga*)⁷⁰ are rewards for having had a meritorious life. Things located there are not only deserved, but somehow coveted. Heavens, as the name suggests, are often above us in higher planes. Attaining heaven is quite an early element and is the only soteriological goal we find in the Buddhist-inspired Aśoka’s edicts of the third century BC. We can deduce from the Pāli literature that the Buddhist view of cosmology consists of roughly thirty-one realms of existence [tab. 1].⁷¹

The table shows us a panoramic and macroscopic view of the Buddhist world-system called in Pāli *lokadhātu* or *cakkavāḷa* (=

⁶⁸ However, as Stephen Jenkins has highlighted (2022), attainment of heavens does not only concern laypeople, but can similarly be a goal for monks, since even from heavens *nibbāna* can be achieved.

⁶⁹ D II 170.

⁷⁰ Steven Collins (1998, 293) has well highlighted how the definition of the word ‘paradise’ only partially fits the Buddhist ‘heaven’, a literal translation for the Pāli term *sagga* (= Sanskrit: *svarga*), although it is certainly somehow evocative of some luxurious settings that might be found in Buddhist heavens.

⁷¹ The realm of the Anti-gods/Demons (*asura*) is sometimes omitted, see Collins 1998, 300, fn. 4.

Table 1 Buddhist cosmology, according to Pāli sources and based on the reconstructions made by Gethin (1997, 195; 1998, 117-18), Collins (1998, 298-9), and De Notariis (2019, 66-7)

Cosmology		
WORLD-SYSTEM <i>(dhātu)</i>	REALM (<i>bhūmi</i>)	
Formless World-System <i>(arūpadhātu)</i>	<i>nevasaññānāsaññāyatana</i> (Sphere of Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception) <i>akiñcaññāyatana</i> (Sphere of Nothingness) <i>viññāṇañcāyatana</i> (Sphere of Infinite Consciousness) <i>ākāsānañcāyatana</i> (Sphere of Infinite Space)	Formless Brahmā's Worlds <i>(arūpa-brahmaloka)</i>
World-System of Pure Form <i>(rūpadhātu)</i>	<i>akaniṭṭha</i> (Highest Gods) <i>sudassin</i> (Beautiful Ones) <i>sudassa</i> (Good-Looking Ones) <i>atappa</i> (The Serene) <i>aviha</i> (The Durable) <i>asañña-satta</i> (Unconscious Beings) <i>vehapphala</i> (Great Fruit) <i>subha-kiṇha</i> (Full Splendour) <i>appamāṇa-subha</i> (Measureless Splendour) <i>paritta-subha</i> (Limited Splendour) <i>ābhassara</i> (Radiant Ones) <i>appamāṇābha</i> (Measureless Luminosity) <i>parittābha</i> (Limited Luminosity) <i>mahābrahmā</i> (The Great Brahmā) <i>brahma-purohita</i> (Brahmā's Ministers) <i>brahma-pārisajja</i> (Brahmā's Retinue)	Brahmā's Worlds of Form <i>(rūpa-brahmaloka)</i>
World-System of the Five Senses <i>(kāmadhātu)</i>	<i>paranimmita-vasavattin</i> (Those who have authority on others' creation) <i>nimmāṇa-ratin</i> (Those who delight in creation) <i>tusita</i> (Contented Ones) <i>yāma</i> (Yama Gods) <i>tāvatiṃsa</i> (Thirty-Three Gods) <i>cātummahārājika</i> (Realm of the Four Great Kings) Human Being (<i>manussa</i>)	Good Destinations <i>(sugati)</i>
	<i>asura</i> (Anti-Gods/Demons) <i>petti-visaya</i> (Departed Ones/Hungry Ghosts) <i>tiracchānāyoni</i> (Animals) <i>niraya</i> (Hells)	Bad Destinations <i>(duggati)</i>

Table 2 A focus on the borders between Human realm and the first divine realm

A closer look at the Buddhist cosmology	
The first heavenly realm of the gods	<i>Cātummahārājika</i> 'Four Great Kings' <i>karoṭapāṇi</i> 'Those with cups in hands' <i>mālādhara</i> 'Garland-bearers' <i>sadāmatta/sadāmada</i> 'Always drunk'
Human realm	Upper-class (<i>khattiyas</i> and <i>brāhmaṇas</i>) Medium/lower classes (merchants, slaves, outcastes)

Sanskrit: *cakravāla*).⁷² The general features of this scheme are shared by both Sanskrit and Pāli sources, although there might be differences in details.⁷³ From the human condition, an individual can achieve either higher destinations, which are increasingly better, or lower destinations, which represent a degeneration from the human condition. A closer look at this cosmological map would show some details which might, at first and panoramic sight, be bypassed. In doing so, especially thanks to the testimony that has come to us through Sanskrit and Chinese sources (which we will discuss below), we move closer to the border between humans and gods' worlds, where the boundaries seem to conflate [tab. 2].

In looking closer at the Buddhist cosmology we can see some significant details. As already stated, the upper class in Buddhism is that of the 'warriors' (Pāli: *khattiya*; Sanskrit: *kṣatrya*) which is also the ruling class.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is of some significance that the first heavenly realm is that of the *Cātummahārājika* 'Four Great Kings'. Among them, a king called Kubera rules over the north and is associated with a class of divinities or genii called in Pāli *yakkha* (= Sanskrit: *yakṣa*). The *yakkhas* constitute the retinue of that king.⁷⁵ Often described as *yakṣas* in Sanskrit sources, we find three groups of special relevance for our discussion. These are: *karotapāṇi* 'Those with cups in hands', *mālādhara* 'Garland-bearers' and *sadāmatṭa/sadāmada* 'Always euphoric/drunk'. These deities are represented in iconography,⁷⁶ well attested in Buddhist literary sources in Sanskrit and Chinese, and even mentioned in Pāli literature in such a way that would allow us to suspect either that something went wrong in the Theravāda reception of such deities or that the Theravāda preserved a non-levelled early version.⁷⁷ The core of the story that can be gleaned from many Bud-

⁷² As noted by Gethin (1997, 195-6, fn. 36), the term *cakkavāla* does not occur in the four principal *Nikāyas*, which constitute quite an early stratum of Buddhism.

⁷³ Randolph Kloetzli writes that "[t]he basic outlines of the single world system of the '*cakravāla*-cosmology' are generally agreed upon throughout a broad spectrum of Buddhism and are a prominent feature of the Pāli texts as well as the Buddhist Sanskrit literature" ([1983] 2007, 23). Later, he writes that "[w]hile the basic structure of the *cakravāla* is the same in both traditions, certain discrepancies in detail do occur" (24). For reconstructions of the Buddhist cosmology based on the *Abhidharmakośa*, see Kloetzli [1983] 2007, 33-9; while for a comparison between Pāli canonical accounts and literary sources from other Buddhist traditions on cosmology, see Kirfel 1920, 190-5.

⁷⁴ Although, as noted above, Buddhism was well connected with the caste of merchants, on an ideological level, the two castes that compete for being considered the most important caste are *khattiya/kṣatrya* and *brāhmaṇa*.

⁷⁵ Zin 2015, 128.

⁷⁶ Zin 2015, 129-31.

⁷⁷ Accounts in Sanskrit sources can be found at *Abhidh-k* III 64 (and in its commentary *Abhidh-k-bh*); *Mvu* I 30-1, *Divy* 218-19. A similar account in Pāli can be found at *Ja* I 204 (= *Spk* I 339). Furthermore, there is a mention to the *sadāmatṭa* at *D* II 260.

dhist sources concerns the fact that Mount Meru, from base to top, is defended by various groups of deities. Comparing the Pāli version of this account with Sanskrit and Chinese sources, we can see both similarities and differences, but can certainly identify an underlying consistency in the progressive enumeration of these groups of deities [tab. 3].

From Table 3, we can infer the existence of a common kernel, albeit there are some differences in the details. The Pāli account notes aquatic snakes as the first group of deities, just like the *Divyāvadāna* and the *Āpīdámó dà pípóshā lùn* 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論. Furthermore, the deities are all called *devas* in the *Divyāvadāna* and in the *Āpīdámó dà pípóshā lùn* (*tiān* 天 = *deva*), whereas they are all *yakṣas* in the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Mahāvastu*. The Pāli *Jātaka* designates only the fourth group as *yakkha*, namely the *madanayuta* ‘Intoxicated ones’,⁷⁸ glossed by the commentary with the compounds *visamacārīn* ‘Those who behave immorally’ and *yuddhasoṇḍa* ‘Those who are intoxicated to war’. This group corresponds, in principle, to the *sadāmatṭa/sadāmada* ‘Always euphoric/drunk’ of the other Buddhist sources. In the *Jātaka* we also find the *karoṭis*, perhaps an abbreviation of *karoṭapāṇi*. Notably, the translator(s) of the Chinese version misunderstood the meaning of the original Indian compound, reporting *jiān shǒu tiān* 堅手天 ‘Strong-handed gods’, apparently taking something along **koṭa* in place of *karoṭa*.⁷⁹ The only element in the *Jātaka* account that ostensibly differs from the other sources is *payassa hārin* ‘Those who bear water’, whereas the parallel Buddhist accounts almost unanimously have *mālādhara* ‘garland-bearers’. There is at least one element in common as both *hārin* and *-dhara* indicate the action of ‘bearing, holding’. The formulation of the Pāli passage is certainly odd, as *karoṭi*, *payassa hārin* and *madanayuta* are all *hapax legomena* in Pāli literature⁸⁰ since they only occur in Ja I 204 and in texts that quote this passage. The wording of the groups of deities in Pāli differs from that of the other sources, but virtually the only missing element is the *mālādhara* group, which seems to be replaced by the *payassa hārin*. In order to explain the singularity of the Pāli evidence we can advance two interpretative hypotheses:

The Chinese Buddhist texts also greatly testify to the existence of these groups of deities. A complete analysis of the Chinese texts would exceed the limits of this contribution, but it would certainly be a worthwhile task. For the present contribution, I will only adopt the Chinese translation of the **Mahāvibhāṣā* (*Āpīdámó dà pípóshā lùn* 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論; T 1545) made by Xuánzàng.

⁷⁸ As already noted by Coomaraswamy (1931, 24-5), *yakṣas* were subjected to offerings of food and intoxicants.

⁷⁹ Cf. Morris 1893, 23.

⁸⁰ *Karoṭi* as a term to refer to a ‘cup’ or a ‘skull’ also occurs in other contexts, but as far as I know, there is nowhere else where it occurs to refer to a group of deities.

Table 3 Comparison of Pāli, Sanskrit and Chinese sources

group	group	group	group	group	group	group		
I	<i>uruga</i> (<i>tattha urugasaddena</i> <i>nāgā gahitā, te udake</i> <i>balavantā hoti</i>)	I	<i>karotapāṇi</i> (Abhidh-k III 64): <i>karotapāṇayo nāma</i> <i>yakṣāḥ</i>	[I]	<i>karotapāṇayo nāma</i> <i>yakṣāḥ</i>	I	<i>udakaniśrītā nāgāḥ</i>	Āpādamō dā pīpāsā lūn 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論 (T1545-27,0019a20-22) The text mentions 6 groups by numbering them
II	<i>karoti</i> (<i>karotisaddena supannā</i> <i>gahitā</i>)	II	<i>mālādharma</i>	[II]	<i>mālādharā nāma</i> <i>yakṣāḥ</i>	II	<i>karotapāṇayo devāḥ</i>	堅手天 (= * <i>karotapāni</i> -deva, lit. 'strong-handed', a misunderstanding of <i>karotapāṇi</i> , cf. a similar case in Morris 1893, 23)
III	<i>payassa ca hārī</i> (<i>payassa hārisaddena</i> <i>kumbhāṇḍā gahitā</i>)	III	<i>sadāmadā</i>	[III]	<i>sadāmattā nāma</i> <i>yakṣāḥ</i>	III	<i>mālādharā devāḥ</i>	持曇天 (= <i>mālādharma</i> -deva)
IV	<i>madanayūta</i> (<i>madanayutasaddena</i> <i>yakkhā gahitā</i>)	IV	<i>caturo mahāntā</i>	[IV]	<i>caturmahārājika</i> (omitted in the account of the battle but mentioned later and implied by its cosmology)	IV	<i>sadāmattā devāḥ</i>	恒憍天 (= <i>sadāmatta</i> -deva)
V		V		[V]		V		四大王衆天 (= <i>caturmahārājika</i> - deva)
[VI]	<i>Tāvāṃsa</i> (implied by its cosmology and by the story)	[V]	<i>Trayastrimśā</i> (implied by its cosmology, these gods reside at the top of Mount Meru; Abhidh-k III 65)	[V]	<i>Trayastrimśā</i>	[VI]	<i>Trayastrimśā</i> (mentioned in the account, but not part of the five defences)	三十三天 (= <i>Trayastrimśā</i> -deva)

1. A later interpolation. In light of the diffusion of the story in North Indian Buddhist sources (all of which include the three groups of deities as an inner core), we may consider the Pāli version as an adapted reverberation occurring in literature which mentions some deities that might have had a fairly significant iconographic function.
2. A non-levelled early version. As the evidence of the three groups of deities occurs in the *Jātaka* verses, this means it is part of the Pāli canon,⁸¹ and so it can be a quite early reference to which we could apply the philological principle of the *lectio difficilior potior*, according to which the oddest reading could likely be the original one as the tradition tends to level out the oddities.

In both cases, the Pāli evidence plays a special role as either a late addition (which was either misunderstood or intentionally adapted) or an early crystallised reading. What is interesting to note is that, regardless of the correct interpretative hypothesis, if we exclude the Pāli testimony (which, if taken alone, has a less clear sympotic connection), the remaining North Indian evidence cannot be regarded as evidence earlier than the iconographic records. According to Martha Carter, these groups of deities were used by Buddhists to rationalise and assimilate local festivities in Gandhāra by depicting them as heavenly delights.⁸² However, although *yakṣas* are certainly pre-Buddhist, a more sympotic characterisation can be connected with a bulk of North Indian Buddhist sources which are closer in time (if not even later) than the so called ‘Gandhāran Art’, which flourished during the Kushan period (first to third century AD).⁸³ All this leaves open the possibility that Buddhist literature reflects elements developed in the iconographic context. Taking this one step further, from the meaning of their names and their representation in iconography, we can further suggest that these groups of deities epitomise our three sympotic elements. The *karotapāṇis* ‘Those with cups in hands’ represent the action of drinking (and perhaps even

⁸¹ While *Jātaka*’s prose sections took the final form in the fifth-sixth century AD, during the Pāli commentarial literature’s final redaction. See von Hinüber 1996, 55, 131; Appleton 2010, 7-8.

⁸² Carter 1992, 57.

⁸³ The compositional date of the *Mahāvastu* covers a wide range of time between the first BC to sixth century AD (Tournier 2017, X), the *Divyāvadāna* can be dated from the early centuries of the common era onwards (Rotman 2008, 6, n. 14 [385-6]), the *Abhidharmakośa* is a work of Vasubandhu who lived between the fourth and the fifth century AD (Kritzer 2019), while, generally speaking, the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist texts are those of Ān shigāo 安世高 from the middle of the second century AD (Zacchetti 2019).

eating).⁸⁴ The *mālādharas* ‘Garland-bearers’ potentially refers to the sexual aspects if we consider the symbolic meaning of garlands as ‘sexual invitation’ in addition to some representations depicting erotic scenes in which *mālādharas* seem to be involved.⁸⁵ Lastly, I argue, the *sadāmattas/sadāmadas* ‘Always euphoric/drunk’ indicate amusement in a state of intoxication. Indeed, it would seem from the medical text known as *Carakasamhitā* that entertainments, along with the company of women, were an expedient to mitigate and to keep under control the effects of the alcohol:

*vanāni ramaṇīyāni sapadmāḥ salilāsayaḥ | viśadānyannapānāni
sahāyās ca prahaṣaṇāḥ || mālyāni gandhayogās ca vāsāmsi
vimalāni ca | gāndharvaśabdāḥ kāntās ca goṣṭhyaś ca hṛdayapriyāḥ
|| saṅkathāhāsyagitānām viśadās caiva yojanāḥ | priyāścānugatā
nāryo nāśayanti madātyayam*

Delightful forest parks, ponds with lotus flowers, outstanding foods and drinks, and enrapturing [male-]companions (*sahāya*),⁸⁶ perfumed garlands, clean clothes, musical sounds, mistresses (*kāntā*), pleasant *goṣṭhīs*, and also splendid arrangements of conversations, laughs and songs, the lovely women in tow remove the effects of intoxication (*madātyaya*).⁸⁷

The rationale behind such kinds of recommended activities seems to be the necessity of cheering up the body and mind both of which were affected by the state of intoxication:

*nākṣobhya hi mano madyam śarīramavihatya ca | kuryānmadātyayam
tasmādeṣṭavyā harṣaṇī kriyā*

Without upsetting the mind and afflicting the body, the intoxicant

⁸⁴ According to the *Jātaka*’s commentary, it would seem that the cups or bowls of these demigods can contain both drinks and food (*tesaṃ kira karoti nāma pānabhojanaṃ*; Ja I 204 = Spk I 339).

⁸⁵ I am especially referring to a depiction found in Ajanta and discussed by Zin (2015, 130, fig. 3). Furthermore, we should consider the presence of males with female companions described in Sastri’s study on dwarf motif in iconography when dwarfs are associated with Garland-bearers: “The sculptures at Sāncī, have these meandering creepers with leaves and emerging from the mouth or naval of a dwarf *yaśa*. The lintels of the *torāṇa* design with jewels issued from the flowers. Slowly, well proportioned men were also introduced in the loops along with dwarfs and animals. Generally males, sometimes associated with female companions were in the loops [...]” (1959, 35). Furthermore, we can also consider the presence of *amorini* in the representations of Garland-bearers discussed by Swāti ([1997] 2008).

⁸⁶ This might be a reference to homosexuality; cf. Zysk 2021a, 91.

⁸⁷ CS 24.191-3.

would not produce intoxication, hence exhilarating treatment should be applied.⁸⁸

From the medical literature we can infer that activities existed which were enjoyed in a state of drunkenness and were believed to help the inebriate to recover. If not involved in amorous activities, drunks were supposed to be involved in playful activities, just as we found above in the symptotic *Vinaya* account.⁸⁹ Thus, it might be argued that these three groups of deities can actually epitomise the three symptotic elements. They are symptotic deities associated with the *Cātumahārājika* (Four Great Kings), and, according to the traditions that describe them as *yakṣas*, more precisely with Kubera, king of north direction (N.B. Gandhāra is located in north-west from an Indian point of view). Therefore, it would seem that at the borders of the human and divine worlds, there is a fusion of customs. From a cosmological geography perspective, the world of the *Cātumahārājikas* is co-present to the world of Humans, but on an invisible level.⁹⁰ This fact can be of some significance when we consider that gods' festive modes are the same as those of noble/royal men in our world. These gods live a life which resembles that of the humans. Their life is not that of an average human being, but rather it is the life of a high class human being, having fun accordingly. If ordinary humans have obligations and duties during their life, "having fun etc., is the aim in the [existential] condition of the gods" (*devānaṃ nāma dhātu-attho kīlādi*).⁹¹ *Vice versa*, it might be argued that the high class individuals behave like gods, in a sort of mutual mirroring, in a ludic place where borders merge. Thus, we face a paradoxical situation. Activities on earth which are forbidden for monks and nuns and whose participation is discouraged for laypeople are a reward in the heavens. However, the heavens nearest to the Human realm are a deified reflection of high Human society, thus possibly betraying an underlying aspiration for social climbing.

⁸⁸ CS 24.194.

⁸⁹ Vin II 9-10.

⁹⁰ "It should be noted that the *Cātumahārājika* heaven is actually on the same level as the human world. It may be regarded as a sub-world which is invisible to human eyes. The reason for its invisibility is that it belongs to a different realm of existence" (Na-Rangsi [1976] 2006, 18). We should similarly note that some inferior spheres of existence can also be co-present to the Human world, such as the animal kingdom (*tiracchānayoṇi*).

⁹¹ Bv-a 25.

5 Conclusion

The three symptotic elements discussed by Kenneth G. Zysk have been found in regulative monastic literature and in mythological accounts involving cosmology. As such, the present contribution would add a piece to the puzzle of the study on the potential influence of the Greek *symposion* on Indian festive modes already started by Zysk. Thus, it would seem that the existence of symptotic-like ways of having fun was acknowledged by the Buddhist Pāli legislation and assimilated into the Buddhist imaginary through representations in iconography, attestations in Sanskrit and Chinese sources and faint echoes in Pāli. The *symposion*-like party in the *Vinaya* account has some striking features which can be of some comparative interest for future studies if confronted with the Greek *symposion*. This can be a valuable task as, *a fortiori*, the chronology of the *Vinaya* does not rule out the possibility that foreign influences flowed into the text. Further, three groups of deities occurring in cosmological accounts were discussed and it has been argued they may epitomise the three symptotic elements. Their symptotic characteristics clearly emerge only in North Buddhist sources in Sanskrit and Chinese, which are mostly chronologically contemporary – if not even later than – the iconographic evidence in which they were represented. Thus, we can make a point in considering the artistic importance that the Gandhāra holds in the Buddhist ecumene. Gandhāra, it has been argued, was the perfect grey area in which early Buddhist ascetic values had to face more worldly attitudes, a fact that prompted adaptations if we consider the Gandhāran Buddhist involvement in the wine production system of the region and the erotic scenes represented in iconographies connected to Buddhist sites. This negotiation of values can be, at least in part, explained in the attempt to make Buddhism more attractive to laypeople (those who have the attainment of heavens as a goal)⁹² and compared with a similar attempt made by Aśoka in the middle of the third century

⁹² Concerning erotic scenes, Anna Filigenzi writes: “Figures of *yakṣas*, *yakṣīs* and tutelary and human couples occupy a prominent place in the iconographic programmes of Buddhist monuments. This is not, in my opinion, a mere concession to the secular world in order to please the lay community, but rather the expression of a quite common approach to the subject matter in Indian thought” (2019b, 171). This opinion can be compared with that of Richard Gombrich, who suggested that “the idea of beauty in the Buddha’s cultural environment was inextricably associated with feminine beauty, and thus with sexual attraction” (2014, 86). However, following Gombrich (84-6), the Buddhist attitude to visual art in the earliest texts (Gombrich discusses those in Pāli) is largely negative. This is not surprising if we consider the ascetic origins of Buddhism. Therefore, in my view, although the choice of the subjects of the iconographic representations may be dictated by a general Indian tendency, the very fact of choosing to promote and produce pieces of visual art is certainly more worldly than ascetic as an attitude, which winks at those who live there in the world, such as laypeople.

BC to universalise a Buddhist-inspired Doctrine (*dhamma*), coming to terms with lay and worldly needs. The emperor Aśoka, indeed, legitimates a morally questionable festivity called *samāja*:

(C) *na cha samājo katavyo* (D) *bahukaṃ hi dosaṃ samājamhi pasati Devānāmpriyo Priyadasi rājā* (E) *asti pi tu ekachā samājā sādhumatā Devānāmpriyasa Priyadasino rāño*.⁹³

(C) And no festival meeting [*samājo*] must be held. (D) For king Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin sees much evil in festival meetings. (E) But there are also some festival meetings which are considered meritorious by king Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin.⁹⁴

The term *samāja*, used in the Aśoka's edicts to indicate a festival or a fair, has a counterpart Pāli term: *samajja*. The initial aversion shown by Aśoka towards the *samājas* is consistent with the Buddhist disposition towards these festivals. In the Pāli canon, we find that monks were forbidden to participate in mountain fair (*giraggasamajja*) because of the presence of music, dancing and singing,⁹⁵ whereas for the laymen, it is stated that there are many disadvantages (*ādīnava*) in visiting fairs (*samajjābhicaraṇa*).⁹⁶ Thus, in stating that some *samājas* would be considered meritorious, Aśoka would show a certain degree of openness regarding some forms of amusement, a fact that certainly meets the laypeople's worldly needs. In a similar way, as discussed by James McHugh, among the moral precepts advocated by Aśoka, sexual misconducts and abstention from intoxicating drinks are missing.⁹⁷ Therefore, we can assume that there were lay Buddhist practices that at a certain point in history departed from the rigid early ascetic tenets to meet more worldly needs. This negotiation of values and the perennial tension between tradition and innovation can be found as reflections and echoes in Buddhist literature, the latter being a product of monastic orthodoxy. The Pāli *Vinaya* account,⁹⁸ with its behavioural condemnation, implicitly acknowledges the existence of symptotic-like ways of partying. Although the practices described in the narrative could be potentially autochthonous, we cannot exclude a foreign influence. While an attempt to assimilate symptotic elements took place within cosmology, revealing what appears to be an actual tension between desire and prohibition. The three groups

⁹³ Hultzsch 1925, 1.

⁹⁴ Hultzsch 1925, 2; square brackets mine.

⁹⁵ Vin II 107-8.

⁹⁶ D III 183.

⁹⁷ McHugh 2021, 241-2.

⁹⁸ Vin II 9-10.

of deities which, it has been argued, can epitomise the three symptotic elements, call for further discussion and contextualisation in the future. If Gandhāra was a grey area that mediated the passage of cultural customs from Greece to India, the *Cātummahārājika* realm was, similarly, a grey area of the Buddhist imaginary, in which a negotiation of values occurred. This Heaven is, at the very least, ambivalent. Even though it is to be considered a superior and desirable rebirth, it can nonetheless act as a springboard for involution within the Buddhist cosmos.⁹⁹ It was a place for revelries and carousals to the point that the anti-gods known as *asuras*, which constitute a bad condition of rebirth, in an exegetical Pāli source,¹⁰⁰ derive their name from the lack (*a-*) of the intoxicant known as *surā*, a fact that betrays a certain appreciation for intoxicating drinks, at least in the imaginary. However, we do also know that in the ascent of the Buddhist cosmos to higher and higher realms, beings change their nutritional habits and so there are beings made of mind (*manomaya*) who are just feeding on joy (*pīti-bhakkha*).¹⁰¹ The Buddhist path of liberation is, indeed, framed in a Buddhist view of a progressive liberation from the bounds of the physical matter and a mastery over it. This process also concerns a change in the nutritional needs.¹⁰² Furthermore, it would seem that symptotic activities are as forbidden on earth as they are desirable as celestial attainments in the post-mortem, but only to be abandoned again in the evolutionary progression of the cosmos since the heavens – *Cātummahārājika*, *Tāvatiṃsa*, and so on – should be progressively left behind in a sort of climb to higher worlds, just to find that even the Brahmā's world is impermanent.¹⁰³

Therefore, we can conclude that the literary sources of Pāli Buddhism deliver us an awareness of symptotic-like ways of partying through the acknowledgement during the practical act of legislating and provide us with some new nuances on the assimilation processes in Buddhist imaginary occurred over time and, perhaps, influenced by iconographic representations. However, it is nonetheless of some significance that, on the one hand, sexual misconduct and drinking intoxicants can be conducive to bad destinies (viz. rebirth in hells, as an animal or among the ghosts)¹⁰⁴ and, on the other hand,

⁹⁹ Mvu I 31.

¹⁰⁰ Spk I 337.

¹⁰¹ D I 17.

¹⁰² As it has been argued (De Notariis 2019, 53-6), the development of a body made of mind (*manomaya-kāya*) in the Buddhist path of liberation is a turning point in the gradual process of liberation from the bonds of matter. Notably, the body made of mind is a higher embodiment than those embodiments that require solid food (61-8).

¹⁰³ S V 410.

¹⁰⁴ A IV 247-8.

we can find in heavens drunks and libertines, without any cause for contradiction. Thus, it would appear that the abstentions from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking intoxicants of the ‘five precepts’ (*pañca-sīla*) were unevenly deemed, and some, let us say, sins were almost a divine temptation.

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All Pāli citations are from Pali Text Society (PTS) editions, unless otherwise noted.

A	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i> (PTS)
Abhidh-k-(bh)	<i>Abhidharmakośa-(bhāṣya)</i> (see Pradhan 1967)
Bv-a	<i>Madhurattavilāsini</i> (<i>Buddhavaṃsa-aṭṭhakathā</i>) (PTS)
CS	<i>Carakasamhitā</i> (see Sharma 1998)
CU	<i>Chāndogyopaniṣad</i> (see Olivelle 1998)
D	<i>Dīghanikāya</i> (PTS)
Divy	<i>Divyāvadāna</i> (see Cowell, Neil 1886)
DOP	Dictionary of Pāli (see Cone 2010)
Ja	<i>Jātaka</i> (PTS)
Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i> (PTS)
M	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i> (PTS)
Mvu	<i>Mahāvastu</i> (see Senart 1882-97)
PED	Pali-English Dictionary (see Rhys Davids, Stede [1921-25] 2015)
Pj II	<i>Paramatthajotikā II</i> (<i>Suttanipāta-aṭṭhakathā</i>) (PTS)
Pv-a	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i> (<i>Petavatthu-aṭṭhakathā</i>) (PTS)
S	<i>Samyuttanikāya</i> (PTS)
SED	Sanskrit-English Dictionary (see Monier-Williams 1899)
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i> (PTS)
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i> (<i>Vinaya-aṭṭhakathā</i>) (PTS)
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i> (<i>Samyuttanikāya-aṭṭhakathā</i>) (PTS)
T	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> (大正新修大藏經). Digital edition: https://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/satdb2015.php?lang=en
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i> (PTS)
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i> (PTS)
Vv-a	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i> (<i>Vimānavatthu-aṭṭhakathā</i>) (PTS)

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