

Wine, Women and Royalty in Gandhāra

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Abstract Curtius Rufus (8.10.34-36) narrates that when Alexander the Great had conquered the city of Massaga, which was the capital of the kingdom of the Assaceniens, queen Cleopis presented herself to the conqueror with a retinue of noblewomen who libated wine from golden cups: in this way she managed to maintain her kingdom. Beyond the fictional episode that is analysed as a 'cultural representation', the paper investigates the plausibility of the ritual act that the text reports, i.e., the libation of wine through peculiar precious vessels (*paterae* or *phialai* – often inscribed), in the historical context of Greater Gandhāra and, more in general, in the 'Indo-Iranian frontier', in connection with royalty and the presence of women of rank. Research shows that the connection between these elements is functional to the ostentation of prestige by elites, and to the recognition of kingship: the possession and use of gold libation cups is a characteristic of sovereignty, a speaking symbol for both Indians and Greeks.

Keywords Curtius Rufus. Alexander the Great. Assaceniens. Queen Cleopis. Swat. Greater Gandhāra. Paterae. Phialai. Wine libation. Indo-Greeks. Indo-Scythians. Scythians.

Summary 1 The Backdrop of the Story. – 2 Curtius Rufus and Queen Cleopis. – 3 Women and Royalty. – 4 Wine Libation and Precious Vessels. – 5 Golden Cups and Kingship: Ideological Connections.

1 The Backdrop of the Story

In the autumn of 327 BC, at the beginning of the Indian campaign, Alexander the Great arrived in the region of the Gureo-Panjhora River and, from there, entered the Swat Valley, at that time inhabited by the Assaceniens, who were preparing to fight him. Thus, he conquered the cities of Bazira (Barikot), Massaga (Mingora), Ora (Udegram) and many other strongholds before taking the fortress of Aornos and heading towards the Indus. The sources are not consistent in presenting the itineraries of this journey and the details,¹ but they are unanimous in attesting the strong local resistance of the inhabitants, thus suggesting the existence of a society politically autonomous from the Achaemenid power.² The opulent region constituted the kingdom of the recently deceased king Assacanos, and the surrender negotiations of its capital, Massaga, were conducted by his mother who was recognised as a legitimate queen. Even about her figure, the historiography is not unanimous. According to Arrian, she was taken prisoner together with Assacanos's daughter,³ while for all the remaining historians (generally considered as forming part of the so-called *Vulgate*)⁴ she played a more active role. According to Diodorus, Assacanos's mother, admiring Alexander's magnanimity, sent him very precious gifts and pledged allegiance.⁵ According to Curtius Rufus, Justin, and the *Metz Epitome* her name was Cleopis, and she had a relationship with Alexander, a fact described in a

1 Cf. Antonetti 2020, 98-100 (also for primary sources). I am generally following Curtius Rufus' itinerary, on which a general scientific consensus has recently been reached, especially thanks to Olivieri 1996; Rapin, Grenet 2018; Coloru, Olivieri 2019. For Alexander's itinerary before his entry into Swat, see now Coloru and Olivieri in Coloru, Iori, Olivieri, in this volume.

2 On the Achaemenid rule in the area, cf. Callieri 2023, 863-76. On the toponymy of the region, cf. De Chiara 2020, 18 ff. On Mengjieli/Massaga as the capital city of Uḍḍiyāna, see Iori 2023.

3 Arr. *Anab.* 4.27.4: τὴν τε πόλιν αἰρεῖ κατὰ κράτος ἐρημωθεῖσαν τῶν προμαχομένων, καὶ τὴν μητέρα τὴν Ἀσσακάνου καὶ τὴν παῖδα ἔλαβεν (Forcibly conquered the city, which was now without defenders, and took Assacanos' mother and daughter prisoner). Cf. Sisti, Zambrini 2004, 445.

4 Today, *Vulgate* appears a questionable definition: this historiographical tradition is now carefully studied by diversifying its components. See Bosworth 1995, 141-2; Baynham 1995; 1998 and, for the region under study, the case studies of Rapin 2017; Rapin, Grenet 2018; Coloru, Olivieri 2019.

5 Diod. Sic. 17.84.1: ἐπὶ δὲ τούτοις γενομένων τῶν ὄρκων ἡ μὲν βασίλισσα τὴν μεγαλοψυχίαν τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου θαυμάσασα δῶρά τε κράτιστα ἐξέπεμψε καὶ πᾶν τὸ προσταττόμενον ποιήσειν ἐπηγγέιλато (A sworn pact was made on these terms: the queen, admiring Alexander's magnanimity, sent him precious gifts and promised to carry out his every command). The *Periocha* suggests that the city was Massaca (= Massaga); Prandi 2013, 141-2.

particularly fictional way by their historical accounts.⁶ It would seem, at first glance, that we are facing another version of the famous literary *topos* of Alexander's erotic encounters with mythological figures, such as Candace or the Queen of the Amazons, but we shall see that the episode is rather part of the Macedonian conqueror's series of encounters with queens endowed with real power, like Ada and Sisygambis,⁷ and whose authority he carefully defines. Though a legendary aspect is certainly present in the account we are dealing with, nevertheless this episode, as well as the previous ones, is the result of a tradition developed in at least four centuries of historiography and should be considered as a 'cultural representation'. As such, it will be analysed, in an attempt to understand the original contexts in which the representations at stake were 'adapted', rather than merely emphasising the *Quellenforschung*.⁸

2 Curtius Rufus and Queen Cleophis

I will mainly deal with Curtius Rufus' version on the basis of the following reasons: Curtius has resulted to be the most reliable and informed historian for this part of Alexander's expedition;⁹ he is more attentive to the characteristics of Indian royalty than Strabo, who

⁶ Just. *Epit.* 12.7.9-11: *Inde montes Daedalos regnaque Cleophidis reginae petit. Quae cum se dedidisset ei, concubitu redemptum regnum ab Alexandro recepit, inlecebris consecuta, quod armis non poterat; filiumque ab eo genitum Alexandrum nominavit, qui postea regno Indorum potitus est. Cleophis regina propter prostratam pudicitiam scortum regium ab Indis exinde appellata est* (He then reached the Daedala Mountains and the kingdom of queen Cleophis. When she had given herself to the king, redeemed her kingdom by her favours and received it from Alexander, having acquired by caresses what she had not been able to have by arms; and she named Alexander the son whom she conceived of the king, and he was afterwards master of the kingdom of India. For this reason, queen Cleophis was called by the Indians the royal courtesan). *Metz Epit.* 45: *deinde ad oppidum reversionem fecerunt. eis obviam venit Cleophis cum populi principibus ac nepote parvo, prae se velatas verbenas ac fruges supplicii signa portantes. tum Alexandro facies mulieris pulchra visa est. erat enim statu ac dignitate ea, uti nobili loco orta atque imperio digna videretur. deinde Alexander cum paucis in oppidum introiit ibique complures dies commoratus est* (They then returned to the town. Cleophis came to meet them with the leading citizens and her little grandson, carrying before them wands wrapped in wool and fruits as signs of supplication. Alexander saw that the woman had comely looks, and her bearing and dignity betrayed her noble birth, suited to rule. Then Alexander entered the town with a few men and dallied there for several days). This account is the only one that attributes a grandson rather than a son to the queen. On the relationship between the *Metz Epitome* and Curtius, see Baynham 1995.

⁷ For the first case, see Baynham 2001; Coppola 2008; for the second one, Howe 2021.

⁸ Cf. Li Causi in Li Causi, Pomelli 2001-02, 233-40, following the symbolism theory of D. Sperber. On the sources of Curtius, see Baynham 1998, 57-100; Atkinson 2000, XIX-XXV.

⁹ See above, fnn. 1; 4. Cf. also Tucci 1977, 48-50.

is, among the classical sources, the reference author,¹⁰ and his story presents an interweaving of elements that are not immediately decipherable and attributable to a specific cultural horizon, as is the case for other versions. The *Metz Epitome*, for instance, represents the episode as a procession of suppliants, which includes the queen and the *principes populi* (the 'leaders of the people'), in a form that recalls a Roman setting.¹¹ Similarly, Diodorus' short version – while historically appreciable – proposes the classic scheme of the submission ceremony, which is typical of the Great Achaemenid King and is attested for Alexander in India, with regard to the *reguli* who reached him as soon as he 'crossed the border of India' and in the case of kings Omphis and Mousicanos.¹²

Curtius narrates that when the inhabitants of Massaga were besieged and without hope, they decided to surrender and sent ambassadors to the Greek king to beg for mercy (*veniam*). When this was granted (*qua impetrata*),

*regina venit cum magno nobilium feminarum grege aureis pateris
vina libantium. Ipsa genibus regis parvo filio admoto non **veniam**
modo, sed etiam **pristinæ fortunæ** impetravit decus: quippe ap-
pellata regina est. Et credidere quidam plus formæ quam misera-
tioni datum: puero quoque postea ex ea utcumque genito Al-
exandro fuit nomen.*

The queen came with a great train of noble ladies, making libations of wine from golden cups. She herself, placing her little son at the king's knees, obtained, not only pardon, but also the splendour of her former fortune; indeed, she was addressed as queen. And some believed that this was granted rather to her beauty than because of compassion; also, it is certain that a son who was born to her, whoever his father was, was called Alexander.¹³

Leaving aside the last part of the story that concerns the union between the characters and the improbable birth of Alexander's son (which is a predictable theme and is also found in Justin),¹⁴ it is worth noting the way in which the queen presents herself to the king to

10 Compare Curt. 8.9.23-30 and Str. 15.55 (obviously, on the basis of Alexander's historians and Megasthenes). On the topic, Antonetti (forthcoming).

11 On the ancient supplication, the Greek *hikesia*, cf. Canciani, Pellizer, Faedo 2006; Naiden 2006. For the attributes of the supplicants depicted here, Canciani, Pellizer, Faedo 2006, 205-6.

12 Curt. 8.10.1, 12.5-11. Arr. *Anab.* 6.15.5. See Briant 2017, 500-2; Coloru 2021, 69-70.

13 Curt. 8.10.34-6 (emphasis added), transl. by Rolfe 1946.

14 See Atkinson 2000, 508-9.

wonder what that means. According to the text, there occurs a procession (Curtius' *grex*, to be understood as the Latin *pompa* and the Greek *pompe*) of noblewomen who follow the queen making wine libations. However, whether this libation will be followed by a sacrifice or a banquet, is not specified. Likewise, we do not know whether the precious vessels (*aureae paterae*) will then be donated to the king, an act that would follow into the category of 'submission ceremony with gift offering' which is Diodorus' preferred version. The little son's position at the knees of the king is, instead, very clear: it represents the *hikesia*, the classic attitude of the suppliant, known to the Greeks from Homer onwards; as we have seen, it is the bare version chosen from the *Metz Epitome* to interpret the whole episode.¹⁵ It is interesting to note how the same narrative elements appear, with different intentions, in the various versions: the fundamental function of the institution of supplication, that of having one's life saved, becomes an accessory element in Curtius' text because the king has already shown his mercy. In his account, the supplication is evidently performed to confirm the power of Cleophis, who does not seem to bow before the king (as the supplication would require) and, in the end, is 'acclaimed queen'.

Curtius' version is composite, somehow hybrid, not only when compared to the other authors but especially in the light of the cultural references he uses, which evoke: the procession, the sacrifice, the banquet (albeit less likely), the supplication, the royal acclamation. Basically, fundamental institutions of the ancient world are invoked. However, considering how they are quickly mentioned and placed side by side in the text, alluded to but not fully described, we cannot outline a reliable historical picture, rather, a 'cultural representation'. Nonetheless, a learned reader of the Roman Empire could find Curtius' story generic but plausible, even in its subtlest, terminological aspects: to Cleophis is destined the *venia* (forgiveness) of the Macedonian king, not the *clementia* (clemency) that is instead reserved for the illustrious mother of the King of Kings, Sisygambis, whose reply to Alexander is "dignified and perceptive. [...] She also knows that Alexander's mercy is politically expedient".¹⁶

To an upper-class Roman from the late republican or early imperial period, *clementia* and *gratia* (gratitude) are two-edged, implying

¹⁵ See also Naiden 2006, 55 for the mother/child pair in scenes of supplication, and *passim*. For another example of a supplication whose setting is 'Romanised', see Curt. 6.7.35, 10.14: Philotas begs Alexander, who gives him his right hand, cf. Atkinson 2000, XVII-XVIII. The ample space given by Curtius to Philotas episode demonstrates his interest in politics, certainly aroused by his contemporary one, and the central role played by the king's *clementia* in relation to the monarchical institution (Curt. 8.8.8). Cf. Baynham 1998, 13, 143, 182-3, 197-8.

¹⁶ Baynham 1998, 127 on Curt. 3.12.24-5.

the intrinsic superiority of the individual who exercises the former and the obligation of the latter¹⁷ but *venia* is the request of the guilty and the losers.

Yet Cleophis manages to retain the royal *status* she had before Alexander's conquest, that *fortuna* which for Curtius is the 'structural pendant' of the *regnum*.¹⁸ We can therefore take a step forward and try to shed light on this earlier history, attempting what we can call a 'local' reading of the story: in other words, trying to establish whether Curtius' narration can arouse echoes in the very region in which it was set, i.e. 'Greater Gandhāra' (but also, in a broader sense, in the 'Indo-Iranian frontier'),¹⁹ in the time span from the passage of Alexander to the first century AD, period in which Curtius most likely wrote his work.²⁰

The salient element in the Roman historian's account is the affirmation of kingship: to be more specific, the negotiation between a 'vassal' and an 'imperial' kingship, obtained with the deployment of clear indicators of *status*. These are wealth and reciprocity, in conjunction with an active female component. We will therefore analyse these themes which are ideologically interconnected: women's participation in royalty; wine libation through peculiar precious vessels, and the symbolism of royal power conveyed by these elements.

3 Women and Royalty

Kingship is well documented everywhere in this area and occupies a central place in the *imaginaire* of ancient India, but what matters in our context is the female presence, and any historical evidence that documents it. We certainly cannot believe the historicity of the figure of Cleophis as exactly described in our account. However, on the basis of the sources, there is little doubt about the existence of an Assacanian kingdom, allied with Indian principalities, and depending on the choices of the ruling family.²¹ The presence of a procession accompanying the queen is also attested: from another passage of Curtius, we do know that the Indian king was accompanied by two separate

¹⁷ Baynham 1998, 134-5. See Naiden 2006, 242-3.

¹⁸ Baynham 1998, 134-6 and above, fn. 15.

¹⁹ For a definition of 'Greater Gandhāra' cf. Stewart 2024, 1-2; for the concept of 'Indo-Iranian frontier' cf. Callieri 2023, 838.

²⁰ Baynham 1998, "Appendix", in favour of dating the author to the age of Vespasian; Atkinson 2000, XI-XIX, for the Claudian period. Lucarini 2009, VIII: the author was read and possibly followed by Hegesippos and the *Metz Epitome*.

²¹ After Tucci's 1977 seminal contribution, see, for Alexander' time, Coloru 2021.

processions of equal splendour, one led by the queen and one consisting of the royal concubines (*paelicum longum ordo sequitur; separatum a reginae ordine agmen est aequatque luxuriam*, 8.9.29). The latter is also widely attested in Indian literature.²²

In our discourse, particular attention must be paid to some remarkable numismatic sources related to regent queens and wives of rulers. The documentation is scanty, although of great interest, and is concentrated in the final phase of the Indo-Greek kingdoms and the initial phase of the Indo-Scythians.

The first among this group of notable women is Agathocleia (reigning in the third quarter of the second century BC), now considered the wife of Straton I,²³ who managed to keep the eastern part of the paternal kingdom between eastern Gandhāra and Panjab. She appears on a series of tetradrachms together with Straton, also in the Greek numismatic legend of the obverse, probably receiving from him the insignia of power.²⁴ Alone, she is portrayed on the obverse of drachms – a commemorative coinage – with braided hairs in Indian style and Greek legend:²⁵ the queen of Taxila is characterised by a rare epithet that alludes to the Divine and which served as a model for other queens in the area, *Theotropos* ('divine in character', or 'turning towards divinity').²⁶ Hermaios (c. 90-70 BC), who was the last Greek king to rule over Paropamisadae and Arachosia before the invasion of the nomads, had his first two coin series minted also in the name of his wife Calliope, perhaps a signal of a marriage alliance: on the obverse the two busts appear geminated and are accompanied by the names of the two sovereigns in the Greek legend.²⁷ Finally, the Indo-Scythian conqueror of Gandhāra and Panjab, the king Saka Maues, issues a series of tetradrachms in which, on the obverse, stands his wife Machene (or Nachene), who adopts the Agathocleia's epithet *Theotropos*.²⁸

22 On Indian royal concubines, Sternbach's 1951 essay is fundamental.

23 She is not the widow of Menander: Dumke, Grigo 2016. Previous *status quaestionis* with historical commentary in Coloru 2009, 246-7; 2015, 178-80.

24 Dumke, Grigo 2016, 53, 57.

25 Dumke, Grigo 2016, 57, now the fundamental study for the chronology and monetary iconography of Agathocleia.

26 Muccioli 2013, 306-8, with a very fine analysis of the possible meanings of the epithet, which only occurs in this area and in this era.

27 Coloru 2009, 256; 2015, 179.

28 Coloru 2009, 257-8; 2015, 179-80, 186. Coloru 2015, 185 for another example in the same area: "in the first century BC Tanlis Maidates, possibly a tribal chief belonging to the Sakaraucae, struck a series of coins representing himself and his wife Raggodeme [...]. The veiled portrait of Raggodeme, accompanied by the Greek title KYPIA, i.e., 'the Lady', is represented on the reverse [...] denoting the divine status of the queen".

The custom of representing in coinage queens – and family members – derives from Egypt through the Seleucids (from the beginning of the second century BC) and is widespread in all the kingdoms of the Indo-Iranian and Mesopotamian areas. Nevertheless, Omar Coloru highlighted an early concentration of these attestations in the north-western Indian area, underlining the special political role of the queens portrayed in the obverse of the coins (usually reserved for the ruling kings), and especially “the high status a woman of the royal family could attain among the Indo-Scythians”.²⁹

To these considerations, derived from numismatic analysis, are added others of an archaeological and epigraphic nature, which help to paint a coherent picture of the active presence of *status* women in the local society of Assacenic origin, which over the centuries took on Persian, Hellenic, Indian and finally Scythian characteristics.³⁰

For the protohistoric phase of the Swat Valley (c. 1200-800 BC), recent excavations of two important groups of graves at Gogdara IV and Udegram, showed, in burial practices, a

careful consideration of a cyclical conception of time and a ‘narrative’ ideological background in which gender, age and kinship roles were actively performed by members of the household.³¹

At Udegram, in some of these megalithic burial chambers, the primary interment of an aged female might

involve a strong link between females and the idea of the household, and perhaps even a matrilinear descent and residential pattern.³²

Further archaeological research sheds light on the social customs of the region’s lay elites of Indo-Scythian times: an early-historic funerary monument at Butkara IV, the largest multiple burial monument ever discovered in Swat, which was in use at least from c. 151 BC to c. 51 AD, clearly speaks of the

29 Coloru 2015, 186.

30 Tucci 1977 carefully examined the Purānic tradition of ancient local dynasties that retained the names of some queens (46), while expressing scepticism about dating them; he defined the local population as a Dardic people and was inclined to see a connection between the Assacenic and the Massagetae (and generally the Scythians): the bellicosity of the latter’s women was legendary in ancient historiography (51). On the topic, cf. Rollinger, Schnegg 2023. Today, it is believed that local elites had deep roots in the region: Olivieri 2019, 252-3. On the genetic pools of the Swat population, see Narasimhan et al. 2019.

31 Vidale, Micheli, Olivieri 2016, 209.

32 Vidale, Micheli, Olivieri 2016, 208.

elitarian role of the family [...] who managed to keep a visible memory of its ancestry not only through the elevation of a monument, but especially through the enduring ritual of the manipulation of the dead, occurred throughout two centuries.³³

For at least four/five generations a defined burial custom was performed in it, where the known ancestor is represented by the mother, and the main deceased by the son.³⁴ L.M. Olivieri emphasises the importance of the cemetery, given its position between two major Buddhist sanctuaries (Butkara and Saidu Sharif) at the outskirts of the most important urban centre of Swat, and the concomitance of these funerary uses with the early development phase of Buddhism and urbanism in Swat, going hand in hand.³⁵

The local ruling family was that of the Oḍi-rajās: *clientes* of the Sakā, they might have been in power in the period from the first century BC to the first century AD, contemporarily to the Apraca royal house in Bajaur.³⁶ The evergetic activity of female exponents of these royal families who dominated the mountain regions north of the Peshawar Valley towards Buddhist monasteries is widely attested in the Gandhāran epigraphy: royal women played the roles of principal donors, co-donors, and beneficiaries of ritual activity, a female protagonist that decreases with the advent of the Kushans.³⁷ As A. Lakshminarayanan wrote,

the chief wives of the *rāja* and the *strategos* seem to have been more active as principal donors establishing multiple donations, but secondary wives, sisters, and aunts of royal men also supported the *saṃgha* further strengthening the Apracarāja's role in the Buddhist corpus. We can tentatively advance that a similar blueprint of patronage was likely practiced by the royal women related to the Oḍirājas, but their donations are yet to be confirmed by the archaeological record.³⁸

33 Olivieri 2019, 247.

34 Olivieri 2019, 252.

35 Olivieri 2019, 248, 253. The (so-called) burial of a young woman associated with the foundation of the Indo-Greek city wall (c. 130-115 BC) of Barikot is interpreted by Iori 2021 as a ritual deposit aiming at legitimising the new idea of city foundation, but, since the female skeleton is in secondary deposition, it does not appear to be significant of a specific female role in the ritual act.

36 Olivieri 2019, 253.

37 Salomon 1988; 1997; 2007. Baums 2012, 202-4; 2018b, 58-9.

38 Lakshminarayanan 2023, 221.

These local elites express a

smanioso desiderio ('eager desire' or 'craze') [...] to appropriate and represent themselves materially through the forms of the 'symbolic capital' of Hellenistic Greece and Hellenised Iran, to which ritual innovations (the creation of mobile geographies of pilgrimage) undoubtedly contributed.³⁹

We can visually appreciate this trend by contemplating Saidu Sharif's frieze celebrating the figure of Utarasena, the founder of the local dynasty, the progenitor of the Oḍi family reigning in Swat,⁴⁰ in the frame of a 'dynastic sanctuary'.

Women at the top of society can, therefore, assume a political role, being it either institutional or belonging to the religious sphere. This picture is increasingly attested, starting from the end of the Indo-Greek kingdoms, and is consistent with the prominent role that contemporary queens, and *status* women held in the Hellenistic, Mediterranean and Eastern worlds, of course also and especially in Rome.

4 Wine Libation and Precious Vessels

The investigation of libations from golden *paterae* is not an easy task: it is difficult to select relevant examples within a rich but heterogeneous archaeological material from a wide area ranging from Afghanistan to northern India, and almost always lacking precise contextual and chronological references.

The first source one would naturally turn to, is the iconographic repertoire of the so-called 'Gandhāran reliefs', but the latter mainly provides us with images of beakers, mugs, pitchers, and *kantharoi*. Evidently, a particular vessel such as the Latin *patera*, clearly identifiable with the Greek *phiale* in form and function,⁴¹ was not so widespread in the local tradition of drinking scenes, unlike the *kantharos* itself and the Graeco-Roman cornucopia, which finds a parallel in the Gandhāran type, a typical attribute of female deities associated with abundance and fortune.⁴² Similarly, the Kalash tradition of Nuristan and Kafir has kept alive the use of precious metal goblets,

³⁹ Olivieri 2022, 175. The application of Bordieu's concept of 'symbolic capital' to the case at hand was made by Galli 2011, 282, 285-7.

⁴⁰ Olivieri 2022, 18 ff.

⁴¹ Hölscher, Schörner 2005, 205, 208-9 (on the *patera*).

⁴² Moscatelli, Filigenzi in this volume. Cf. also Filigenzi 2019 for an updated definition of the entire visual repertoire of the 'Gandhāran reliefs'. For the archaeological evidence of these different vessels in the Barikot excavations, see Iori in Coloru, Iori, Olivieri, in this volume.

a tradition that has its roots in Central Asia, as illustrated by archaeological and ethnographic research,⁴³ but, again, their shape is very different from that of the *phiale*.

The second resource to draw on, would then be the literary tradition: a drinking cup defined by the sources as *caṣaka* could be a reference to a context homologous to the one studied. According to J. McHugh, the Sanskrit word *caṣaka*, which is attested from approximately the early-mid first millennium AD in literary scenes of luxurious drinking with cups and vessels made of gemstones, silver, and gold, may be based on an Iranian word:⁴⁴ the same happens for other Indian words related to the sphere of wine and drinking, thus revealing the imported origin of these goods of social prestige, as, for instance, the excellent *Kāpiśāyana* wine (*madhu*) which was imported from Kapiśa, near Begram in modern Afghanistan.⁴⁵ A Gāndhārī *caṣaga* parallels the Sanskrit *caṣaka*,⁴⁶ a fact that might allow one to speculate about the existence of a traditional local cup in that cultural area. But, as we do not know what shape the cup known as *caṣaka* has, we must set aside this interpretative possibility.

As is often the case, it is not easy to associate ancient lexicons with archaeological finds and, furthermore, with modern taxonomy. For this reason, we should turn again to Curtius' account in which the action of making a libation of wine from golden *paterae* is clearly expressed. Since this action has, in the context, its own functional coherence, the latter will have to be better investigated starting with the value attributed to the Greek *phiale* (corresponding to the Latin *patera*).

Within the Greek world, the word *phiale* referenced the vessel designated by this name in modern scholarship, namely the handleless libation bowl with the mound in the middle.⁴⁷

The *phiale* constantly accompanies one of the most frequent ritual acts in Greek religion, that of libation; indeed, it may be said to constitute its technical object *par excellence*. Its mere presence, in an archaeological context, is an indication of a libation, i.e. of the "most

⁴³ Francfort 2007-08; Klimburg 2014; 2016. See the *caveat* of McHugh 2021b, 128, fn. 75.

⁴⁴ McHugh 2021a, 184; McHugh 2021b, 120-2.

⁴⁵ McHugh 2021a, 53, 131-2; McHugh 2021b, 114-15.

⁴⁶ McHugh 2021b, 121, fn. 32 with full references: in Gāndhārī *caṣaga* is attested as a measure of volume (s.v. "caṣaga" in Baums, Glass 2002a-).

⁴⁷ Gaifman 2018, with the *caveat* that neither current terminology nor ancient language is always consistent. On the *phiale*, after the seminal work of Lushey 1939, see Krauskopf 2005.

refined and purest form of renunciation”,⁴⁸ because it entails the total irretrievability of the offering.⁴⁹ The *phiale*’s success in antiquity was due to the fact that it “evoked the dedicator’s personal participation in the libation and his involvement in the making of the offering”, as it “embodied the dedicator’s physical commitment to an act of piety”.⁵⁰

its unique design allows the performer of the ritual to manipulate it with ease, smoothly controlling the course and extent of the flow [of the poured liquid].⁵¹

Phialai also indicate the divine or heroic nature of those who manipulate them, so they are frequently seen depicted in the hands of deities involved in rituals:⁵²

they constantly await human acts of giving and, if they so choose, they can respond to the bringing of liquids to their vessels with participation in a divine libation.⁵³

By substituting the container for the content, one understands how the *phiale* becomes a favourite offering at shrines, an *agalma* that also has an economic value:⁵⁴ *chremata* which are recorded in sanctuary inventories very often with their weight.⁵⁵ In the Roman imperial era, there is an accentuation of the institutional aspect over the votive one in public representations of sacrificial rites: starting with Augustus, the canonical image of the libating emperor with *patera* is affirmed, aimed at communicating one of the fundamental Roman virtues, *pietas*.⁵⁶

The Gandhāran testimonies of *phialai* are rare. The surviving ones are made of precious metal, especially silver, sometimes fully or partially gilded; unfortunately, we do not know the original archaeological context of most of them, as they usually come from the antiques market, like two famous private collections believed to originate, one

48 Burkert 2003, 173.

49 The beautiful definition is by Parisi 2017, 562.

50 Gaifman 2018, 457 (for both quotations).

51 Gaifman 2018, 449.

52 Lissarague 1995, 132.

53 Gaifman 2018, 460.

54 Lissarague 1995, 133.

55 Parisi 2017, 502; Gaifman 2018, 456-7. According to Kéi 2014, the *phiale* is a multifunctional and versatile object; it serves as a medium for contact and exchange, as well as a symbol of honor between humans and the world of gods and the deceased.

56 Simon 2004, 247: the most famous – and archetypal – representation is the statue of Augustus of Via Labicana.

from an area located between modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the other from the Mohmand Agency north of the Khyber Pass.⁵⁷

The latter contains some specimens of shallow and smooth *phialai*,⁵⁸ but some stand out for their elaborate decoration. One of them, finely chiselled, belongs to the Achaemenid tradition and is, perhaps, an Egyptian production: dating from the second or early first century BC, is very famous for its bilingual inscription in Greek and Gāndhārī, which connotes the artefact as an offering by the meridarch Kalliphon (*Kaliphona* in Kharoṣṭhī) to an Indian deity who in Kharoṣṭhī is *Boa*-interpreted by Falk as *Bhava*, “one of the gods melting into Śiva”,⁵⁹ and in Greek *Chaos*.⁶⁰ The Greek interpretation, not very satisfactory, reveals the evident difficulty in identifying the venerated deity in the complex identity of this border area, which may have witnessed the simultaneous development of layered and parallel forms of worship, still evolving at the time of their ‘fixation’ in the epigraphic document.

The treasure, possibly associated with a Hindu shrine from the late phase of the Indo-Greek period, includes two more offerings (without indication of the recipient deity) by officials whose title is derived from the Seleucid administrative tradition: one, in Gāndhārī, is the offering by a certain Samangaka, described as *epesukupena* (ἐπίσκοπος), of a gilded silver bowl with Eroses;⁶¹ the other, in Greek, is the dedication of the meridarch Phoitokles (or Phantokles) of a silver *mastos* and also bears the weight inscription (in Attic drachmas).⁶²

Writing *en pointillé* coexists for both Greek and Kharoṣṭhī on precious vessels with a similar function, and for the first time in the area, weight notation, also of Hellenic origin, appears. The objects constituting the second treasure, found between Pakistan and Afghanistan,

⁵⁷ The first one was published by Baratte 2001 and Falk 2001 (see also Salomon 1990); the second one by Falk 2009. For both, see the epigraphical updates in CKI, and Baums’ very detailed contribution in this volume. For copies in terracotta of the silver *phialai* samples, see Falk 2010, 99.

⁵⁸ Falk 2009, 25, 37-8. Cf. Baratte 2001, 39-41.

⁵⁹ Falk 2009, 40. Cf. CKI 552 and Baums, in this volume.

⁶⁰ IGIAC 88bis: Καλλιφῶν μεριδάρχης εὐξάμενος ἀνέθηκεν τῷ ΧΑΟΣΕΙ. *Chaos* would thus be the *interpretatio graeca* of *Bhava*, but G. Rougemont and P. Bernard raise doubts about the alleged Greek dative *Chaosei* from the Greek nominative *Chaos*. G.-J. Pinault, believes that the composer of the Greek text was unable to render the Gāndhārī word *Boa* into Greek and resorted to another name (epithet?) of the god *Bhava/Śiva*. Cf. SEG 62, 1571.

⁶¹ Falk 2009, 29-31. Cf. CKI 553 (without weight indication).

⁶² Falk 2009, 34-5 (*Phantokles*). But cf. IGIAC 88ter: Διὰ Φοιτοκλέους (?) τοῦ μεριδάρχου· δρ(αχμαὶ) ν'. SEG 62, 1572. On the Hellenistic administrative titles transposed into Gāndhārī, see P. Bernard in IGIAC, 272; Coloru 2009, 268; Baums 2018a, 39. A comprehensive functional interpretation, very convincing, has been offered by Lakshminarayanan 2023, 215-20.

slightly more recent than the first one (first century BC/first century AD) and containing some extraordinary pieces,⁶³ confirm these acquisitions that seem to have been systematised: the language is only Gāndhārī, and the epigraphic typology is that of ownership inscription accompanied almost always by weight annotation.⁶⁴ Four samples of *phialai* found by J. Marshall at Sirkap (Taxila) confirm this pattern.⁶⁵ In this evolutionary trend, the same epigraphic *habitus* is found on inscriptions engraved on precious vessels that do not belong to the Greek tradition, such as Indo-Parthian cups,⁶⁶ and, consequently, on Buddhistic reliquaries composed from the latter, like the most famous reliquary of Indravarma and wife.⁶⁷ The *pointillé* fashion quickly spreads during the Indo-Parthian period for dedicatory inscriptions on a wide range of utensils.⁶⁸ The typology of writing adopted is not a minor detail: the ‘chased script’ is a precise cultural reference evoking the imperial engravings on precious objects circulating among the ruling classes, primarily at the court of the king or satrap and among their associates.⁶⁹ The weight annotation refers to the same context: as an expression of the widespread social distinctions at the Achaemenid court, it finds numerous comparisons in the Parthian and Sassanian world.⁷⁰

It is interesting to note that most of the metal vessels bearing ownership inscriptions made *en pointillé* are silver *phialai*:⁷¹ the names of the owners are Greek, Iranian, Scythian, and particularly Indian,⁷²

63 Baratte 2001; Falk 2001. See the *phiale* who has an *emblema* with a Dionysian character (Heracles?) holding a lyre while riding a feline which is, according to Baratte 2001, “un objet sorti d’un atelier extérieur aux frontières de l’empire romain (262)”, CKI 722 (only the weight indication is present); or the silver kantharos with Centaurs that perhaps mentions the Scythian king Maues: Baratte 2001, 252-8; Falk 2001, 314-15; CKI 721. About this last text, refer to Baums’ appropriate caution in this volume.

64 CKI 723 (without weight indication), 724, 727, 728, 729. On weight inscriptions and their metrology, based on the system of the Greek drachma, see Bernard 2000, 1422-5; Falk 2001, 309-11.

65 Marshall 1951, 612, no. 7, a, b; 612-13, nos. 10, 11. Cf. CKI 88, 89 (88 and 89 bear the same inscription without weight indication), 91 (this *mesomphalos phiale* bears the same ownership and weight inscription as CKI 90, which is, however, engraved on a silver plate), 190. On all of this, see Baums 2018a, 36-8, 40 and the contribution in this volume.

66 CKI 724, 725, 726 (without weight indication); cf. 173.

67 CKI 241. Cf. Baums 2012, 233-4; 2018b, 65 and the contribution in this volume.

68 Salomon 2022, particularly 272.

69 “Royal inscriptions would have enhanced the symbolic value of the vessel”: Miller 2010, 875.

70 Canepa 2021, 12-16, fn. 23, with a peculiarity for the Chorasmian region. Cf. Minardi 2016, 283. Aelian reported the following tradition: two silver *phialai* weighing one Babylonian talent were a customary Persian royal gift to foreign ambassadors: *VH* 1.22.

71 The frequency of *phialai* has also been noted by Baratte 2001, 302.

72 On the variety of local names, cf. Baums 2018a.

and the weight annotation is almost ubiquitous. It is undeniable that these features were introduced in the Gandhāran region along with the Hellenising habits of the ruling classes, as we have seen for the megarques who made precious offerings to local deities: the Greco-Bactrians are the prime suspects, although we cannot exclude earlier influences, and also later, until the Indo-Scythians, given their receptivity.

If the presence of the *phialai* indicates, as observed, a widespread libation custom, an entirely different question is to establish the ritual context in which this may have taken place in the composite Gandhāran region. For instance, the fragment of ceramic *patera* found in Barikot, inside Building H (a Buddhist cult building from Mauryan era) during the 2021-22 excavation campaign by the Italian Archaeological Mission, is certainly the sign of a ritual act, but only future studies might help to better clarify its context.⁷³

Indeed, the libation is not uniquely Greek; it has precedents and parallels in the Ancient Near East, in various corners of the ancient Mediterranean. Even in ancient India there are examples of libations of water and wine to the ground which can hardly have been influenced by the Greeks and should have been rather an Indian ritual custom.⁷⁴ Most significantly, ritual pouring served different purposes: similar bowls may have been used across cultures and continents for similar rituals, but their significance varied according to context and norms.

In the area under study, there is little evidence that we can relate with certainty to libation contexts. But the studies by A. Filigenzi have shown how some representations of the ‘Gandhāran reliefs’ should be understood as ritual acts in which a libation is presupposed, alluded to, or depicted: for example, those of a ‘ceremonial character’ displaying local aristocracies exercising power, or the arrival of the sacrificer with the goat, or the scenes of libation with the Nāgas.⁷⁵ It is therefore necessary to be very cautious in the analysis: libations may have been performed (and therefore represented) even if they are not immediately apparent or the main focus of the scene.

Concerning potential depictions of the ritual act with a *phiale*, the most explicit I know is a ‘toilet tray’ which presents a libation scene performed at a tripod by a heroic character (iconographically very

73 A fine grey pottery dish bottom (a kind of *patera*), BKG 7939: see Olivieri et al. 2022, 96, 134-6, 146, Plate XIXg.

74 The offering to the gods described in *Caraka's Compendium* and the *Heart of Medicine* is linked by H. Falk 2010, 99-101 to Hellenised drinking practices, possibly depicted in the ‘libation trays’ from the Gandhāran region; cf. Zysk 2021, 90. McHugh 2021a, 152 disputes this position, recalling that “the practice of making offerings to various beings by leaving food on the floor (*baliharāṇa*), which sometimes has to be cleaned first, was also well established in ancient Indian rituals”. According to Strabo, the Indians use wine in sacrifices: 15.1.53.

75 Filigenzi 2019, 73-4, 78, cf. 69.

similar to Apollo) with a palm branch in one hand and a *paterna* in the other. This evidence is very important because it demonstrates the knowledge of the Greek libation practice *in situ*: the overall picture of the scene is Hellenistic but, as mentioned earlier, this does not mean that the ritual act took place ‘Greek-style’, as is indeed strongly supported by H. Falk.⁷⁶ The scholar’s assertion is linked to his interpretation of the object bearing the representation as a ‘libation vessel.’ This is actually a particular class of artefacts from the Gandhāran region, whose classification is highly controversial. Generally known as ‘toilet trays’ or ‘palettes’, they present a remarkable variety of iconographic themes inside a disc of soft stone or schist; they “belong to urban life in Gandhāra proper, and according to their distribution do not show any significant link to religious centres”.⁷⁷ H. Falk has argued skilfully regarding their general use in the context of libations, but his proposal remains problematic, albeit fascinating.⁷⁸ While those ‘trays’ that feature explicit ritual representations may indeed relate to libation contexts, this does not seem to be the case for all of them. The main problem is that the functional context of these objects is not archaeologically established: until this is known, the issue cannot be resolved.

The clearest indication of libations associated with a sacrifice comes from the northern ‘Indo-Iranian frontier’, from eastern Bactria: it is the famous Greek dedicatory epigram found in Kuliab (Afghanistan) which attests a rite performed for the celebration of the kingship of the *panton megistos basileon* Euthydemus and his son Demetrios *Kallinikos*. The dedication has been made by a certain Heliodotos (κλυταῖς [...] λοιβαῖς ἐμπύροις, “with splendid libations and sacrifices”) at the altar of Hestia, inside the grove of Zeus, for the salvation of the kings around the end of the third century (206 BC).⁷⁹ Given the historical importance of the inscription expressing the religious celebration of the Greco-Bactrian dynasty that initiated the conquest of India,⁸⁰ the clear mention of libations alongside sacrifices allows us to focus on the central point of the demonstration conducted so far, namely the structural connection with kingship.

⁷⁶ Falk 2010, 97-9.

⁷⁷ Falk 2010, 90.

⁷⁸ After Francfort 1979’s fundamental work, see, with different approaches to the issue, Pons 2011; Galli 2011; Francfort 2016; Lo Muzio 2018.

⁷⁹ IGIAC 151: Τόνδε σοι βωμόν θυώδη, πρέσβα κυδίστη θεῶν / Ἑστία, Διὸς κ(α)τ’ ἄλλος καλλιένδρον ἔκτισεν / καὶ κλυταῖς ἤσκησε λοιβαῖς ἐμπύροις Ἡλιόδοτος, / ὄφρα τὸμ πάντων μέγιστον Εὐθύδημον βασιλέων / τοῦ τε παῖδα καλλίνικον ἐκπρεπῆ Δημήτριον / πρευμαίνης σώιζης ἀκηδεῖς) σὺν Τύχαι θεόφρον[ι]. Cf. SEG 54, 1569; 66, 1883.

⁸⁰ Cf. Coloru 2009, 181-2, 186-93. On the importance of libation for Chinese sovereignty, see Li 2022.

5 Golden Cups and Kingship: Ideological Connections

We can now discern a subtle thread connecting all the topics we have examined. There seems to be a certain coherence between Curtius' account of the recognition and affirmation of local royalty and the ideological values conveyed by the precious metal libation cups found in Gandhāra. The fact that these cups bear weight markings and indicate their owners suggests that they were registered, hoarded, or even offered. However, more significantly, they served as clear indicators of *status*, demonstrating that both the objects and their owners were hierarchically valued. Harbingers of this ideological structure could be found in the gift-giving system of the Achaemenid kingship, where "the king and the imperial elites seem to have particularly favoured metal vessels for dining and drinking",⁸¹ these vessels had a clear hierarchy, from gold to silver, and the periphery of the empire – the satrapies – imitated the central power.⁸²

The presence in Hellenistic Gandhāran region of other objects typical of the donatives of the Persian kings demonstrates that the same ideology was maintained, *mutatis mutandis*, after Alexander's conquest in the kingdoms that followed at the eastern end of his conquest. Some favourite ornaments of the Persians were "the animal terminal bracelets which are associated with Achaemenid Persian luxury arts".⁸³ Called *pselia* by the Greeks, they belong to the sphere of long-distance diplomatic gift-exchange as described by Herodotus (3.20, 22). Two of them, made of gold, were found in the area between modern Pakistan and Afghanistan: one, with a serpent's head, bears a weight inscription (31 drachmas); the other, with the head of a sea monster, the signature of the goldsmith.⁸⁴

The simple fact of owning, using, displaying, or donating a gold or silver cup (or a jewel) is thus associated with the idea of power. But we must not forget the economic aspect of amassing wealth by accumulating precious metals in the form of gold and silver objects. As stated by Strabo (15.3.21) "these metals are considered as the most suitable for gifts and hoarding". Herodotus (3.96) reports that the Persian king hoarded the tributes in precious metal from across the Achaemenid Empire and minted coins "from time to time as he needed".⁸⁵

⁸¹ Balatti 2021, 174.

⁸² Cf. Miller 2010, 876; Wiesehöfer 2016; Balatti 2021, 174-80.

⁸³ Miller 2010, 868.

⁸⁴ IGIAC 154, 155. For dating (before 150 BC?) and further commentary, see SEG 52, 1517.

⁸⁵ This is the third function that scholars attribute to the widespread circulation of precious vessels within the Achaemenid Empire. Cf. Asheri 2005, commentary ad loc.;

Originally inspired by the Achaemenid model, a universal empire by definition, the pairing of gold with royalty regained vigour and relevance at the end of the Indo-Greek kingdoms, perhaps with a legitimising purpose. This occurred during the rise of nomadic aristocracies, which gradually took control of the Bactrian, Gandhāran, and eventually northern Indian regions.⁸⁶ The luxurious lifestyle and symbols associated with royalty were also shared by contemporary Indian principalities in central and southern India, as evidenced by the importation of the same western luxury goods which are recorded in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.⁸⁷

The picture so far outlined seems to me clearly corroborated by the exceptional discovery of the ‘royal’ burials of Tillia Tepe (northern Afghanistan, c. first century AD), whose attribution, in terms of ethnonymy, is far from being clear.⁸⁸ The cultural references of the different objects connoting the kingship of the ‘warrior prince’ – the only male buried in the Tomb 4 – are in fact manifold (Saka-Parthian, Yuezhi, Kushan, etc.), with a clear tendency towards symbolic accumulation. One of them takes us back to the context we have just mentioned: the head of the warrior rested on a silk pillow (or headdress)⁸⁹ and on a gold *phiale* with 32 grooves: an inscription reports its weight, 41 staters and 4 drachmas.⁹⁰ This element speaks in favour of a Scythian tradition, as was already noted,⁹¹ since the golden cup served an essential function for Scythian royalty, as Herodotus extensively testifies. The Scythians associated the golden cup with the myth of the ethnogenesis of their people and with all the constitutive and celebratory phases of their kingship, including the choice of the sovereign and the prescriptions for his burial: *phialai chryseai* were placed in royal burials.⁹² At Tillia Tepe the heads of the

Miller 2010, 877. On the topic of gold and wine in Herodotus’ depiction of the Persians, see Bichler, Ruffing 2023.

86 For insights into the economic dynamics of the Saka-Parthian period, refer to Coloru, Iori, Olivieri 2022.

87 *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 39, 49, 56 with the commentary of Casson 1989, 21-3, 41: the courts of the rulers required fine ointments, vintage wine, deluxe clothing, handsome slave girls for the harem and slave boys trained in music; among the most expensive goods were silverware and slaves. Cf. De Romanis 2020, 137.

88 Francfort 2011. Cf. Cribb 2023.

89 Shenkar 2017.

90 Cambon, Schiltz 2010, no. 123.

91 Olbrycht 2016, 20.

92 Hdt. 4.5.3; 9-10; 71 with the commentary of Corcella [1994] 2005 (233 for the sacred and honorary value of the *phiale*) and Hartog 1980, 38-46. According to Ivančik 1999, 175 the sacred gold objects from Herodotus’ legend (including the golden cup) represent a form of the Iranian image of royal *hvarnah*.

women in graves 3 and 6, that M. Olbrycht believes must have been the prince's chief wives, rested on silver *phialai*.⁹³

Curtius too leaves us such a cultural reference in a passage with a sententious tone.⁹⁴ He reports that when Alexander was about to cross the Iaxartes, he received a delegation of Scythian ambassadors, and the oldest of them delivered a philosophical-like speech. Among the many arguments used to discourage the Macedonian king's expedition, there is also the following:

Dona nobis data sunt, ne Scytharum gentem ignores, iugum boum et aratrum, sagitta, hasta, patera. His utimur et cum amicis et aduersus inimicos. Fruges amicis damus boum labore quaesitas, patera cum isdem uinum dis libamus; inimicos sagitta eminus, hasta comminus petimus.

So that you do not ignore who the Scythian people are, we have been given as a gift a pair of oxen and a plough, an arrow, a spear, a cup (*patera*). We use them both with friends and against enemies. We give our friends the harvest produced by the work of oxen, and together with them we pour wine from the cup to the gods.⁹⁵

All the elements so far discussed seem to suggest a 'revival' of royal symbology particularly vivid in the Saka-Parthian period. The heterogeneous elements that characterised such a royal symbology were largely understandable by an equally heterogeneous audience: Greek, Roman, Indian, Parthian, Scythian, etc.

The passage we started with, depicting queen Cleophis accompanied by noblewomen pouring wine from golden *paterae*, is not at all in contrast with the prominent role played by some Indo-Greek or Indo-Scythian queens; rather, it is its symbolic celebration. On the other hand, in this same representation, one can also see reflections of high-ranking women in late Republican and early Imperial Rome who are now taking centre stage in the public arena and acting as protagonists. Curtius has crafted a hybrid image, but the individual elements composing it find a precise historical resonance at the 'Indo-Iranian frontier'.

⁹³ Olbrycht 2016, 20. Cf. Shenkar 2017, 157, 161.

⁹⁴ According to Pearson, the passage appears to be inspired by some sentences of Kleitarchos, FGrHist 137 F 40, 43, 48: see Atkinson 2000, commentary to Curtius' passage.

⁹⁵ Curt. 7.8.17-18 (emphasis added), transl. by Rolfe 1946.

Abbreviations

- CKI = *Corpus of Kharosthi Inscriptions* (in Baums, Glass 2002b-).
- IGIAC = Rougemont, G., with contributions by Bernard, P. (2012). *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum. Part 2, Inscriptions of the Seleucid and Parthian Periods and of Eastern Iran and Central Asia. Vol. 1, Inscriptions in Non-Iranian Languages. Part 1, Inscriptions grecques d'Iran et d'Asie centrale*. Edited by N. Sims-Williams. London.
- SEG = Chaniotis, A. et al. (eds) (1996-). *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. Leiden; Boston.
- ThesCRA = Balty, J.C.; Boardman, J. et al. (eds) (2004-06). *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum. Vol. 1, Processions. Sacrifices. Libations. Fumigations. Dedications. Vol. 3, Divination. Prayer. Veneration. Hikesia. Asyilia. Oath. Malediction. Profanation. Magic. Vol. 5, Personnel of Cult. Cult Instruments*. Los Angeles.

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