



The Triumph of Dionysus and Heracles on a Gold Tray from Datong (Pingcheng, Capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty, 398–494 CE)

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*To the memory of Pierre Chuvin,
who brought the late wanderings of Dionysus back to light.*

... ἐν ταύτῃ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τετάχθαι με τῇ μερίδι λέγων, ἐν ᾗ πρότερον Ἡρακλῆς
καὶ Διόνυσος ἐγενέσθην φιλοσοφούντες ὁμοῦ καὶ βασιλεύοντες καὶ πᾶσαν σχεδὸν
τῆς ἐπιτολαζούσης κακίας ἀνακαθαιρόμενοι γῆν τε καὶ θάλατταν.

... saying that God has placed me in the same position in which there
were earlier Heracles and Dionysus, philosophers and kings who
purged almost the whole earth and sea of the evil that infested them.

Julian, Letter to Themistius 1

Between June 19 and August 23, 2020, the exhibition *Mutual Learning on the Silk Roads: Stories of the Silk Road Treasures/Yi hua yi shijie: Sichou zhi lu shang de hu xue hu jian* was held at the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou.² The catalog, published in Chinese,³ included an exceptional object relevant to the ancient history of the Silk Roads: a golden vessel with a diameter of 12 cm, a rim height of 1.7 cm, and a total weight of 70.08 g (fig. 1). The object was found in the Datong (formerly Pingcheng) region, but there is no information about its archaeological context. It is currently preserved in the holdings of the Datong Museum (Shanxi Province; inv. Datong 2015).⁴ As noted in the Chinese description of the 2020 publication, this object is remarkable for its small dimensions and shallowness – which leads us to call it a “tray” rather than a “bowl” or “plate,” even though it may be compared with tiny Chinese bowls from the Tang period and later. Its material is also exceptional

for Pingcheng: it is made from a simple gold sheet with low reliefs in repoussé (formed by hammering the negative design from the reverse side and chasing from the upper side, without any loss of gold).

Below the flat rim and the arc-shaped side, on the almost flat bottom, one sees the embossing of four characters borrowed from Greco-Roman mythology, surrounded by a circular vegetal pattern with fifteen ivy leaves alternating on each side of a rolling stem (fig. 2). Two Centaurs (*ban-maren* 半馬人) pull a two-wheeled chariot synchronously toward the right and rear. The right-side Centaur, in the foreground, has his right hand with his fingers outstretched on his horse's hips and raises a horn with his left hand. Since the spout of the horn is inside his mouth, it does not seem to be a drinking vessel – a rhyton (*lai-tong* 來通) – but rather a musical instrument (Greek κέρας/Latin *cornu*) used in both military and Dionysian gatherings.⁵ The second Centaur



Fig. 1. The Gold Tray of Pingcheng.



Fig. 2. Detail of the Gold Tray of Pingcheng and its drawing, after the China National Silk Museum/*Zhongguo Sichou Bowuguan* (中國絲綢博物館), 2020.

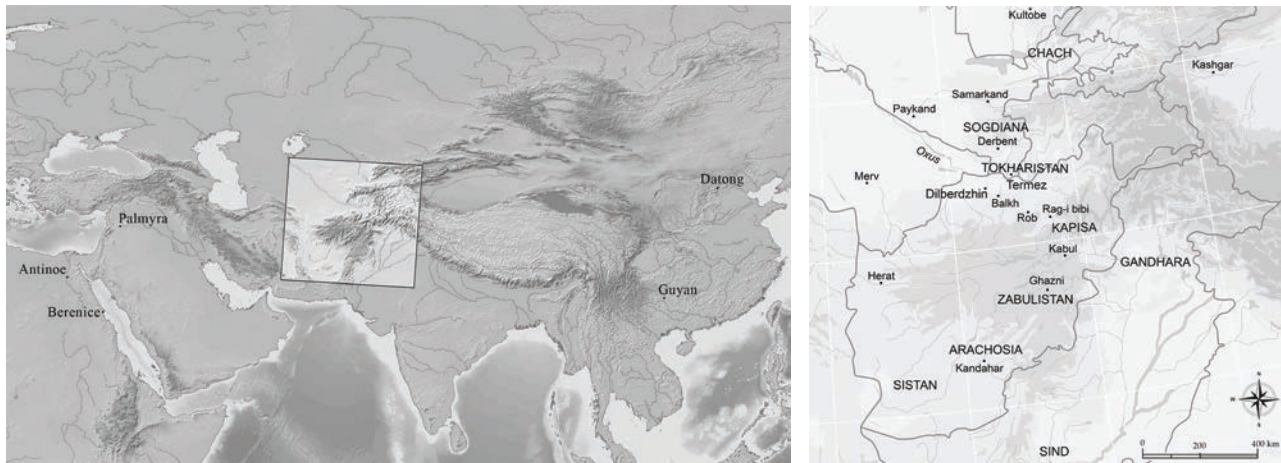


Fig. 3. Map of the toponyms mentioned in the text, with detail on Central Asia (reproduced from F. Ory, A. Dan, and F. Grenet).

makes similar movements with his hooves. His right hand clasps the barely visible front rail of the chariot's box, while his left hand is hidden behind the first Centaur. Both centaurs have their forelimbs raised and hind limbs straight, supporting their bodies. The artist drew each leg attempting to suggest the perspective of their parallel movements as if on both sides of a pole that hangs between them. In the chariot are two men, nude, with Caucasian features, distinct eyes and noses, thick hair, long beards and mustaches, carefully chiseled muscles, and exposed genitals, following the canons of Greco-Roman statuary. They stand in the chariot perpendicular to the direction of travel, facing the viewer. Both hold drinking bowls in their left hands. In their right hands, they carry specific attributes. The central figure, with long wavy hair adorned with a vegetal crown, is slightly swaying, unable to stand firmly on his left foot. He holds a long staff topped above his head with a pine cone: this is the thyrsus, which a staggering Dionysus usually clings to during Dionysian processions.

The second figure, slightly inclined toward Dionysus and the Centaurs, has short curly hair and beard, with prominent pectorals like those of a mature athlete. He carries a heavy mace hanging downward. The woody knots, carefully chiseled into its surface, suggest its identification with the club that Heracles holds when he is not drunk.

The catalog entry describes the scene as a

celebration of a drinking festival. It dates the object between 398 and 493/494 CE, when the Northern Wei (386–534 CE) had their capital at Pingcheng, before relocating it to Luoyang.⁶ The Northern Wei rulers are reputed for facilitating overland connectivity following their conquest of territories between Central China and Inner Asia. Evidence includes their ties to the Sogdian commercial networks, the numerous Persian,⁷ Hephthalite,⁸ and Jibin (Gandhāran)⁹ embassies they received from the 450s onward, as well as the earliest Chinese traces in Central Asia and Pakistan.¹⁰

Largely shared on social media,¹¹ some photos of this object (figs. 1–2) aroused great interest from scholars, who raised questions about its model, fabrication, and transmission to Pingcheng.

In this article, we try to answer these questions. First, we stress the importance of this discovery for the so-called Silk Roads archaeology. We present a critical, up-to-date synthesis of the most important golden vessels of the Late Antique period that can be compared with this tray. We emphasize the meaning of this vessel's weight, shape, and manufacture in the context of North Indian (Gandhāran) and Central Asian ("Bactrian") art. Second, we identify the ultimate roots of its iconography in the Roman Empire of Septimius Severus and of his sons. Finally, we discuss the conditions under which the Roman archetype must have reached northwestern India

(Gandhāra and Kapisa) and Inner Asia (Tokharistan, previously Bactria, fig. 3), where both Heracles and Dionysus had long-standing traditions before the third century CE. We cannot be certain where the tray was produced, whether in Kušāno-Sasanian, Hunnic (Hephthalite), or Northern Wei territories, within one of the hubs along the south-north Silk Roads, through which Buddhism and its “Hellenized” iconography entered China’s western and northern regions. But we can be highly confident that the Roman ultimate model of the tray passed through Gandhāra and Tokharistan, regions reputed not only for their wine, but also for their goldsmithing. Therefore, the importance of this exotic object in a Northern Wei context can hardly be overemphasized.

Description and Parallels of an Exceptional Vessel: Material, Weight, Shape, Manufacture, Transportation, and Function

Unfortunately, nothing is known about the archaeological site in the Datong region where this gold tray was found (fig. 3). Doubts about its authenticity can be addressed only by referencing parallels from Greco-Roman, Indian, and Hunnic repertoires, sources that would have been largely inaccessible to a forger even ten years ago (see below). The scarcity of comparable gold finds, along with the specificity of the weight standard and shape, serves as strong evidence of its authenticity.

A Rare Example of Goldware

Ancient China is reputed for its sober taste in bronze and jade. Between the Han and the Tang dynasties, there were only a few intrusions of gold and silver luxury goods, mainly in the western “Barbarian” regions.¹² This tray is one of the most important finds illustrating the Northern Wei’s cosmopolitan taste for precious metals, fashioned in foreign styles. It confirms Yang Xuanzhi’s account of Prince Yuan Cheng 元澄 (467–519), who “often gathered members of the imperial house [at his residence] by displaying various precious items: more than one hundred pieces of golden vases/pitchers (*píng* 瓶/甁) and silver jars (*wèng* 瓮), with their accessories [including]

cups/bowls (*ōu* 甌), wooden stands/supports (*qíng* 檠), plates/dishes (*pán* 盤) and boxes/cases (*hé* 盒); in addition to them, there were wine-drinking vessels [such as] quartz bowls (*bō* 鉢/鉢),¹³ bowls (*wǎn* 盥/碗) made of agate and glass(?),¹⁴ red jade (*zhī* 卮);¹⁵ [the total number of these drinking vessels] amounted to several tens. Their craft was strange and marvelous, as it did not exist in the middle kingdom (China) – all of them were from the Western Regions” (*A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang/Luoyang Qielan ji*, juan 4).¹⁶

By comparing this text with Yuan Cheng’s biography in the *Weishu*, one can understand that these treasures were accumulated between his residence in Dingzhou (Hebei Province), during the reign of Emperor Shizong (500–515), and his stay in Qinzhou (515–519). Qinzhou (present-day Tianshui, Gansu Province) was an eastern exit of the Hexi Corridor and thus one of the most important gateways to the Silk Road.¹⁷ Although the text refers to the early sixth century CE, a period later than when Pingcheng served as the capital of the Northern Wei, it still attests to the importation of significant amounts of precious ware into northern China, in a sociopolitical context which may be compared to that of the tray.

Since gold can be easily melted down and reused, very few comparable objects have survived. One of the rare examples is a small gold stem-cup of Western origin, discovered in the richly furnished tomb of the Sui princess Li Jingxun (d. 608 CE), along with another silver cup, a Sasanian coin of Pērōz (457–484 CE), gold jewelry, and glass fragments.¹⁸

The discovery of gold vessels remains exceptional also in Tokharistan and India after the Kušān period.¹⁹ They are rare even in the Roman and Sasanian empires. In Western Europe, there is only one Dionysiac gold plate (called by the Latin term *patera*) discovered in 1774 in Rennes (France), now preserved in the French National Library (BNF, MMA, inv. 56.94; see fig. 4).²⁰ It has a diameter of 25.2 cm (of which the central medallion occupies 14 cm), a height of 3.4 cm, and weighs 1,315 g. Possibly ordered by Septimius Severus himself in an imperial workshop between 208/209 and 211 CE, this *patera* is an exceptional iconographic testimony to the drinking contest between Dionysus and Heracles, represented on its medallion, and surrounded by a circular frieze depicting a Dionysian procession. It also confirms



Fig. 4. Roman gold plate discovered in Rennes, France, showing the contest between Dionysus/Bacchus and Heracles/Hercules, now in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Musée des Monnaies et Médailles, inv. 56.94.

the role the two deities and their mythology played in the expression of political power (some would say “propaganda”), as illustrated by sixteen golden coins (*aurei*) with imperial portraits of men and women from the Antonine and Severan dynasties embedded in golden crowns along the inner edge of the plate. Preserved without any damage, the Rennes plate was probably an official gift from the emperor to a member of the elite in Gallia (Lugdunensis), in recognition of exceptional merits.

In Asia, a Sasanian ewer discovered near Perm (Volga district, Russia) is now preserved in the Moscow State Historical Museum (OK 14083/ГИМ 81326). Decorated with 64 beads around its foot and featuring a fantastic dragon with horns, hooves, feathers, and scales on its handle, the ewer is probably a product of the third century Tokharistan or Sogdiana.²¹ Another ewer, accompanied by an elliptical lobed bowl and some undecorated vessels, was among the 21kg gold discovered in the Pereshchepina Treasure (now in Ukraine). This treasure was most likely the property of Kubrat, the founder of Old

Great Bulgaria, at his death between 646 and 665 CE.²² Despite the rarity of gold in Iran, it was used for objects expressing the Sasanian royal power – such as the “Kosrow Cup”, once called the “Solomon Cup,” but probably made in the time of Kawād I (488–530). This cup is preserved in Paris (BNF MMA Camée 379), where it may have arrived as a present for Charlemagne from the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rašīd in 801.²³ The gold frame could symbolize cosmic light. Three series of eighteen round medallions, alternating garnets and rock crystals on a green glass background, represent the stellar background surrounding the crystal image of the Sasanian king seated on his seven-climes throne.

In fact, all these gold objects, produced and circulated among the elites, are symbols of radiant power. If, in the end, the tray was probably used as tomb furniture, the primary purpose of its model, and up to a certain point maybe of this tray itself, must have been the sociopolitical expression of power. In the Greco-Roman world, Dionysus and Heracles, sons of Zeus and mortal women, are solar conquerors of the world, benefactors of humankind, and mythical models of Alexander the Macedonian and of his imitators. Just like the Roman and the Sasanian gold bowls, the Pingcheng tray may have been a diplomatic gift, a tribute, or at least a copy of such a prestigious item that circulated among Sasanian or Hephthalite rulers and those of the Northern Wei.

The Gandhāran Weight Standard and the Shallow ‘Tray’ Shape

The object is complete: we assume that it has not lost any gold since Antiquity. It is made from a single gold sheet and shows no traces of use. It was partially damaged by a crush which occurred underground or possibly during the excavation, but this caused no loss of metal. The horizontal rim is uneven, with cracks and pinches at irregular intervals (figs. 1–2).

The weight of 70.08 g, is a multiple of 17.52 g (4 x 17.52), a figure corresponding (down to the hundredth!) to 4 staters (of 4 drachms per stater) in Gandhāra. Kharoshthi inscriptions on gold objects from the Dal’verzin Tepe hoard indicate the average weight of the drachm as 4.38 g (the actual range is from 4.28 to 4.51 g). This standard is intermediate between Alexander’s drachm,

which followed the Classical Attic/Euboean standard and continued in Sasanian Iran (ranging from 4.32 to 4.35 g), and the heavier Bactrian/Sogdian drachm, calculated from many inscribed silver objects and Sogdian stone weights as an average of 4.47g (with an actual range from 4.40 to 4.55 g).²⁴ This precise match – the more so as the *tet-rastater* was a recognized monetary unit in the Hellenistic world – suggests a direct connection with northern India.

Although small golden bowls have been discovered in various Achaemenid, Central Asian, and nomadic contexts, the Pingcheng find is more closely comparable to the Gandhāran “cosmetic trays” (mostly made during Indo-Greek, Indo-Parthian, and Kuṣān periods, second century BCE to second century CE),²⁵ as well as to Egyptian libation trays, possibly used in religious festivals, which seem to have served as models for the Gandhāran trays. These were also decorated with reliefs of gods, at least until the fourth century. For instance, a silver and gold shallow cup from Egypt, preserved in Paris (Louvre E 25448),²⁶ which has close parallels in stone,²⁷ proves that such trays of Ptolemaic and Roman imperial times could be made not only in stone but also in precious metals.

The hammering technique used to shape the gold sheet of the Pingcheng tray is attested between India and China by a set of gold bracteates (imitations of Roman and Byzantine coins and medallions) produced in Kapisa, including one copy of a Late Roman/Byzantine image of the Roman she-wolf.²⁸ However, such bracteates are also found in Sogdiana,²⁹ as well as in the Chinese western and northern regions, including Datong.³⁰ Probably hammered in various hubs of the “Silk Roads,” they were appreciated in China as much as throughout the steppe.³¹

Despite the divine banquet represented on the tray (cf. *infra*), its fragility, shallowness, and small dimensions made it impractical for repeated use in banquets. Yet the tray could hold liquids. It was possible – though rather unlikely – to insert it into a wider container, which would have hidden the hammering traces on its back, much like the Hellenistic cups with relief medallions (for example, the silver-gilded bowl with Dionysus, Ariadne, and Silenus in the J. Paul Getty Museum, 83.AM.389; see fig. 5),³² the bronze mirrors with gold or gilded medallions covering their backs, or the golden covers of nomadic wooden



Fig. 5. Silver-gilded bowl with Dionysus, Ariadne, and Silenus, J. Paul Getty Museum, accession no. 83.AM.389.

vases.³³ In any case, the tray was made using similar techniques.

The thinness of the gold sheet and the delicate decoration, embossed from the back and chiseled on the upper surface for very fine details, including the masculine genitals, raises questions about the place where the tray could have been made, and how it could have been transported to Pingcheng, if it was not made there.

The question of the place of fabrication remains open. Due to the great fragility of the object, we initially considered the possibility of a copy made in the region of Pingcheng after an imported model. In the end, we exclude this hypothesis for three reasons:

1. There are no Chinese parallels for such a naturalistic representation of nude masculine bodies. The extreme care shown in the chiseling of the genitals – of both anthropomorphic figures and even the Centaur – has no equivalent beyond the easternmost edges of direct Hellenic influence, between Gandhāra and Tokharistan.

2. There is no precise metrological match with Chinese standards (according to Guo Zhengzhong),³⁴ unless one assumes that the actual weight of a *liǎng* 兩 under the Northern Wei (in the “new system”) was closer to 28 g than to

30 g. In this case, 70.08 g may be counted as 2.5 *liǎng*. However, values calculated from unearthed weights are never lower than 28.63 g and range up to 31 g. Therefore, as an alternative to the execution of the gold copy in Gandhāra, one must imagine that either the exact supply of gold came from Gandhāra (as bar/ingot, coins, or another weighted object),³⁵ or that the artisan or client used the Gandhāran gold standard, perhaps under Buddhist or Hephthalite influence.

3. Very fragile glass vessels, imported from India, the Sasanian Empire, and even from the Roman world found in China (and sometimes even further, in Thailand, Korea, and Japan), prove that breakable objects could travel long distances by sea and land.³⁶ Such vessels were hardly intended for use in banquets, but were appropriate for religious rituals (such as libations), or for display as prestige items in elite households, cultic places, or, most probably, in tombs.

This is why, in our opinion, the tray could be the product of a goldsmith who had access to a Roman model, who understood it, and who reworked it according to Gandhāran standards, under Kušāno-Sasanian, Hunnic (Hephthalite), or, less likely, Northern Wei rulers. It was a prestige vessel, suited for offering and display in an elite household, a temple, and eventually a tomb, evoking through its decoration the triumphal banquet of Dionysus and Heracles: two Greco-Roman conquerors of the edges of the world, heroic vanquishers of death, and divine benefactors of the human civilization.

The Roman Archetype: Septimius Severus' *Dii patrii* and Echoes in Roman Iconography of the Third Century

Dionysus and Heracles are often depicted as drinking partners in Greek and Roman art from the late sixth century BCE to the fifth century CE.³⁷ In Roman imperial times, a drinking contest staging a tired Heracles, seated or reclining below Dionysus, weakened after drinking strong wine, became common. This motif appears on the *patera* of Septimius Severus discovered in Rennes (mentioned above, fig. 4), as well as in mosaics from Antioch (in the House of the Atrium, early second century),³⁸ from Seleucia Pieria (in the House of the Drinking Contest, early third

century),³⁹ in the third-century Dionysian villa at Sepphoris (Israel),⁴⁰ and in fourth-century Apamea.⁴¹ Variations on this theme were particularly well suited for the decoration of banquet halls: the competition between Dionysus and Heracles invited participants not only to recall the mythical exploits of the god and of the hero, who civilized the known world and served as an example for Alexander of Macedon and the Roman emperors who imitated him, but also to engage in debates on vice (gluttony, drunkenness) and virtue, and on the triumph of the spirit (represented by Dionysus) over body (represented by Heracles).

On the Pingcheng tray, however, Dionysus and Heracles are not in competition but riding together in a triumphal chariot. Both the motif of competition and that of triumph spread as a consequence of the religious politics of Septimius Severus and his Syrian wife, Julia Domna. The imperial couple promoted the two main gods of Leptis Magna, the Punic-Roman city on the Mediterranean shore of Tripolitania (in present-day Libya), where the emperor was born in 145 CE.

From Leptis Magna to Rome: The Ancestral Gods of the Severan Dynasty

The two ruling and civilizing gods of Leptis Magna were Greco-Roman interpretations of two Phoenico-Punic gods: Shadrappa, identified with Dionysus/Liber Pater, and Milkashtart-Melqart, identified with Heracles/Hercules. The history of their invention, shaped by interactions between the Near East, North Africa, and the Greek and Roman worlds, is complex. Yet it deserves attention in order to understand the full range of meanings that could have been associated with the model of the Pingcheng tray in the time of Septimius Severus, and later with the tray itself.

Shadrappa/Dionysus/Liber Pater

Shadrappa (Aramaic *šdrpʾ*), called in Greek Σαδρπάπης or Σατράπης, was invented in the Near Eastern middle ground sometime before the fifth century BCE. His earliest known image is an Achaemenid relief reported to come from Amrit (now in the Louvre, AO 22247), which is characterized by a mix of Egyptian and Near Eastern elements.⁴² The etymology of his name is debated: according to current opinion, the name of this



Fig. 6. Limestone relief from Palmyra representing Shad-rap(h) a, now in the British Museum, inv. 125206.



Fig. 7a-b. Gold coins of Septimius Severus, issued in 194 CE (a) RIC IV Caracalla 74B, and in 204 CE (b) RIC IV Septimius Severus 25.



Fig. 8. Bronze coin of Septimius Severus (RIC IV Septimius Severus 761), issued in 204 CE.

"savior and protective genius" was composed from the Semitic roots *šd* and *ršp*, which some scholars connect to the names of Egyptian gods Shed (*šd*) and Reshep (*ršpw*), both worshiped in the Near East.⁴³ Related both to the sky and the underworld, this god possessed protective and healing powers, as suggested by the scorpion and the snake that accompany him in most Greco-Roman representations. Later, the god was not only mixed up with other healing gods (mainly the Phoenician Eshmun and the Greek Asclepius) but also identified, in an Anatolian context, with the Semitic god Baal (or one of his avatars, in the fight against the evil Anguiped) and with the Greek god Apollo.

In North Africa, Shadrapha was mixed up with the Roman Liber Pater (himself identified with Bacchus/Dionysus). In Roman times, the god took multiple forms, ranging from a young boy (because in Africa he remained a *genius*, later identified with a Roman Lar and the Greek Corybas⁴⁴) to a mature ruler, bearded, cuirassed, and armed with a spear, like an authoritarian Pater. This multiplicity of representations matched that of the Greek Dionysus, who was at the same time a child who defeated death before being born (and thus was born twice, from his mother and from his father), a young and an old god of fertility, triumphant on the edges of the world, and guarantor of prosperity and well-being for all.

Judging by the Greek evidence, A. D. H. Bivar attempted to identify Shadrap(h)a with a hypothetical Iranian ruling god, who might also have been at the origin of the Greco-Egyptian Sarapis.⁴⁵ In reality, Shadrapha has no original connection with Sarapis but is instead linked to the Egyptian Horus-Shed and Kneph, as well as the North African Baal-Hammon. Any connection with Sarapis would likely be late and mediated through the Egyptian god Kneph or the Greco-Roman Liber Pater/Bacchus/Dionysus. There is no doubt about the Phoenico-Punic origin of Shadrapha, which is well attested in Carthage at least since the third century BCE.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, one cannot exclude a secondary Iranian etymologization of his original Semitic name, either in Old Persian or at least in Greek: the Aramaic form *ḥštrpty*, which designates Apollo in the trilingual inscription from Letoon/Xanthus (358 BCE), seems to transcribe an Old Iranian form *xšaθra-pati-*, "lord of kingship/regal power," – not to be confused with Old Persian *xšaça-pāvan-* "protector of the realm,"

hence "satrap."⁴⁷ Was this a mention of the god Shadrapha, or just an avatar (or epiclisis) of the Iranian Mithra? It is impossible to say. But a confusion between the Semitic and Iranian names certainly occurred in Greek, at least in Roman times, when the Shadrap(h)a, understood as the "Satrap-god," is well attested in Palmyra (from where comes the limestone relief in the British Museum inv. 125206; see fig. 6),⁴⁸ depicted as a bearded warrior and described as "holy master, master of the whole world" (τῷ κυρίῳ ἁγίῳ κε κυρίῳ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου Σατρπάπτι).⁴⁹ This cosmic dimension, developed through contaminations and hybridizations, is essential for understanding the religious functions and political significance of Dionysus/Bacchus/Liber Pater in the Roman imperial context in which the archetype of this vessel was made (cf. *infra*).

Melqart/Heracles/Hercules

The second god of Leptis Magna was Milkashtart or Melqart, the supreme Tyrian god, commonly identified with Heracles/Hercules.⁵⁰ He shares with Shadrapha/Dionysus/Liber Pater the function of master of the world and of a protector able to intervene in the underworld. The two gods are mentioned together in inscriptions from the second–first century BCE onwards in the Roman provinces of Tripolitania, and occasionally in Numidia and Mauritania.⁵¹ Their busts and attributes appear on coins from Leptis Magna between the first century BCE and the first century CE.⁵² Depicted together, the two gods are shown nude, either looking leftward or facing each other, on gold (*aurei*, fig. 7a–b), silver (*denarii*), and bronze (*asses*) coins issued under Septimius Severus, sometimes with the effigies of Severus' sons, Caracalla and Geta. The first monetary series started in 194 CE.⁵³ Some coins, showing the two gods facing each other, commemorate the Secular Games of 204 CE (fig. 7b). In some cases, a veiled figure is shown making a sacrifice before their nude statues, next to Tellus, the personification of the Earth (fig. 8). It has been suggested that these coins commemorate the construction of their temple in Rome (whose architecture and decoration remain mostly unknown),⁵⁴ or Septimius' visit to Leptis Magna in 207 CE. The main reason of this iconography, however, was Severus' desire to link the two *Dii patrii* directly to his dynasty. This is why, on coins dated around



Fig. 9. Marble relief representing Heracles, Dionysus, and a Satyr, from the Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Museums, inv. 1204. Photo and drawing after Amelung 1908: 214, cat. no. 79, pl. 21.

210–212 CE, Hercules is shown crowning Caracalla, while Bacchus crowns Geta.⁵⁵

We do not know much about the statuary group or relief that may have inspired the numismatic representations, whether in Leptis Magna or in Rome. Judging by the imperial coinage, Dionysus is represented as an archaizing kouros, with long twisted wicks (reminiscent of Shadrapha, fig. 6) and vegetal crown. He holds a thyrsus in his left hand and pours wine from a kantharos in his right hand over a panther. He is slightly turned toward Heracles. In some depictions, Heracles appears either to Dionysus' right, facing the same direction, or to his left, turned toward him. Heracles is shown bearded, with short frizzy hair, holding his club pointing downward in the right hand and draping the lion skin over his left forearm.

The Evidence in Rome

The image of the two standing nude gods spread, with slight variations, throughout the Roman Empire, from Rome to the Germanic *limes*.⁵⁶ Two Vatican reliefs reflect this Severan fashion. The first is a high relief of Heracles, holding a club and cornucopia, standing next to a young

Dionysus supported by a Satyr, from the Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Museums (inv. 1204, fig. 9).⁵⁷ The second, closer to the drawing of the Pingcheng tray, is a small funerary relief, dated between 230–240 CE, now preserved in the Galleria Chiaramonti. It represents Heracles, bearded and nude, and the young Dionysus, covered by a panther skin, seated together in a chariot pulled by a Centaur and a Centauride, and accompanied by Erotes, Pan, and a dancing Maenad (inv. 1502, fig. 10).⁵⁸

Dionysus' triumph over India, often mingled with his wedding procession, was already depicted in a chariot pulled by Centaurs as early as the first century BCE.⁵⁹ Before the third century CE, however, only Ariadne and, in some rare cases, Silenus or a Satyr shared his chariot.⁶⁰ Occasionally, Eros served as the charioteer.⁶¹ Only under Septimius Severus, however, do Dionysus and Heracles, the two gods associated in Leptis Magna, appear together in a triumphal parade. Therefore, even if the two are mentioned together in literary sources long before and after Septimius Severus, as models for Alexander the Macedonian,⁶² the iconographic archetype of the tray cannot date earlier than the beginning of the third century CE.

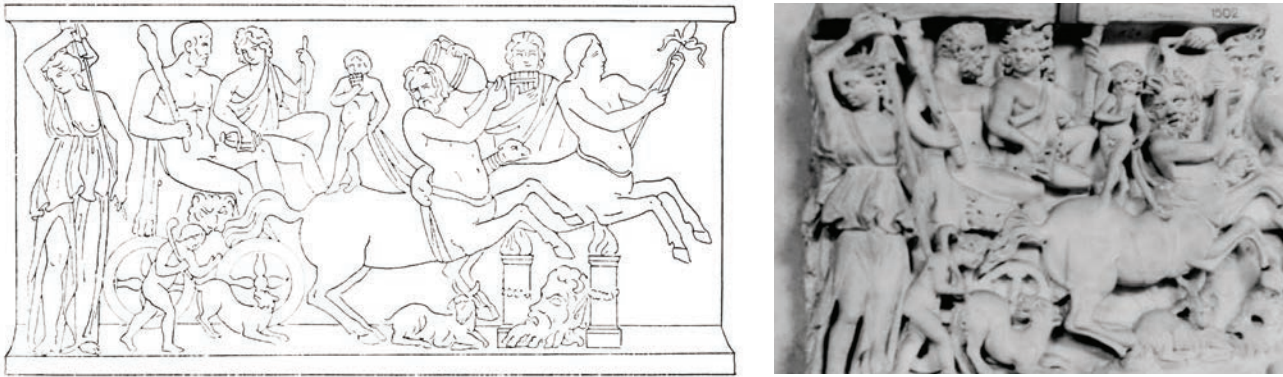


Fig. 10. Marble relief representing Heracles, Dionysus, Erotes, Pan, a Maenad, and Centaurs, early third century CE. Galleria Chiaramonti, Vatican Museums, inv. 1502. Photo and drawing after Amelung 1908: 63, cat. no. 21a, pl. 5.

Parallels from Thrace

Under the impetus of Septimius Severus' promotion of his *dii patria* and of the Alexander myth, Dionysus was represented together with Heracles, especially in provinces where the two gods had earlier affinities and where the Roman army had to face the enemies. This was particularly the case in Thrace, where Dionysus and Heracles were often presented as founders of peoples and cities. They were already depicted together on opposite sides of fourth-century BCE tetradrachms from the island of Thasos, in the northern Aegean.⁶³ In Roman times, they were both considered mythical founders of Nicaea.⁶⁴

Particularly important for the Pingcheng iconography is a series of low marble reliefs from the late second to early third century CE, found in the territory of modern-day Bulgaria, depicting Heracles and Dionysus. These small votive plaques, either square or semi-circular, were usually inscribed with the names of the gods to whom they were dedicated, as well as the name of the believer who made the vow. They were displayed in niches carved in stones and walls in sacred areas. Their sculptors reproduced two main models: the first derives from coins of Septimius Severus, complemented or influenced by the scene on the Roman high relief from the Belvedere. This first type is reproduced in low reliefs discovered around Suhindol (IGBulg: II.696) and Plovdiv (Archaeological Museum II.162),

respectively (fig. 11 and fig. 12).⁶⁵ These show the bearded Heracles with his club, lion skin, and a phial, standing near the young Dionysus, who offers wine to a panther from a kantharos while holding his thyrsus. The Satyr, situated on the "Belvedere" relief between the two gods, appears on the right side of the Plovdiv relief (fig. 12). In a variation of this "Belvedere" type, discovered in the region of Mesambria and preserved in the Varna Museum (fig. 13), Dionysus/Bacchus does not pour wine but instead places his right arm around Heracles' neck, just as on the Pingcheng tray (fig. 1).⁶⁶ Pan and Silenus complete the scene to the right of Dionysus. The metrical inscription on this relief is a dedication to Heracles, the mythical founder of Perinthos-Herakleia (modern Marmara Ereğli in Turkey), the capital of the province of Europa (in Thrace) since 297 CE. Heracles himself is called "Perseides," meaning "descendant of Perseus," the eponym of the Persians, who were masters of this region in Greek Classical times and against whom Roman troops were sent from Thrace.⁶⁷

The second iconographic type of the Thracian reliefs is even closer to the archetype of the Pingcheng tray (fig. 1) and the funerary relief from Galleria Chiaramonti (fig. 10). It is illustrated by a "Thracian" relief found in Panagyurishte (IGBulg: III.1 no.1055; see fig. 14). Its inscription reads: Διονύσῳ καὶ Ἡρακλῇ | Μαρκειανὸς δῶρον.⁶⁸ The young Dionysus and Heracles, both frontally nude, appear in a Roman chariot, under a



Fig. 11. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Suhindol (Bulgaria), early third century CE. After Gočeva 2009: no. 16.



Fig. 12. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Plovdiv (Bulgaria), early third century CE. After Gočeva 2009: no. 14.



Fig. 13. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from the region of Mesambria, early third century CE, now in the Varna Museum (Bulgaria).



Fig. 14. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Panagyurishte (Bulgaria), early third century CE. After Gočeva 2009: no. 17.



Fig. 15. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Plovdiv (Bulgaria), early third century CE. Now in the Sofia National History Museum.

vine branch. There are, however, also differences from the Pingcheng tray: Dionysus is beardless and holds no vessel, but embraces Heracles with his right arm. There are no Centaurs; the chariot is pulled by panthers, which leap over a *cista mystica*, one of them ridden by a Satyr. On another relief, probably from Philippopolis (modern Plovdiv, preserved in the Sofia National History Museum, fig. 15), Heracles holds a bowl but lacks his club and lion skin; the closeness of Dionysus, who hugs him in the triumphal chariot, leaves no space for these attributes.⁶⁹ These variations show the freedom of artisans in the Roman Empire and beyond, who could adapt the various Severan models according to regional cultural practices.

The relief from Panagyurishte (fig. 14) has sometimes been interpreted as a copy of a monument in Plovdiv, possibly related to the commemoration of a triumph of Alexander the Macedonian or of Septimius Severus.⁷⁰ Both the funerary relief from the Galleria Chiaramonti (fig. 10) and the Pingcheng tray (fig. 1) could be linked to such monuments. The links between the two gods and Alexander the Macedonian, whose heroic cult spread in the Roman Empire, especially from the beginning of the third century CE, have long been established: Heracles was the mythical founder of the Argead dynasty; Alexander was worshipped as the new Dionysus. All three were considered sons of Zeus and mortal women. They traveled to the edges of the inhabited world and beyond, into the Underworld, from where they returned to life, changing the destiny of humanity for the better. In the time of Septimius Severus, they were all seen as masters of the world, credited with contributing to the spread of civilization.

From the Severi to the Northern Wei: The Pingcheng Tray in Eastern Dionysian Art

The nudity of the two gods and the careful depiction of their genitals, as well as those of one of the Centaurs, were exotic to the peoples in Inner Asia. Nevertheless, the figures themselves are attested elsewhere, and their peculiar features – such as the beard of the nude Dionysus or the absence of Heracles' lion skin – are important for understanding the transmission of the model from the Roman Mediterranean to China.



Fig. 16. Woolen wall-hanging tapestry found at Sampul (Hotan-Xinjiang), first century CE, now in the Xinjiang Museum, Urumqi, China.

Dionysus' Procession through Inner Asia

Dionysus' triumph and wedding procession (called in Greek *thiasos*/θῆσος) is one of the most frequent iconographic motifs in the Hellenic art of the Far East. The Centaur playing a kind of trumpet, for instance, was introduced into Central Asia in Hellenistic times and is still visible on a famous woolen wall hanging in the Urumqi Xinjiang Museum (fig. 16).⁷¹ Often, Centaurs, either accompanying or blending with the iconography of the Indian *kinnaras* (protective creatures, half-human, half-animal), frame Buddhist stupas or heroic rulers.⁷²

Since Alexander's arrival in northern India and his recognition of Dionysus' and Heracles' mythical traces, the Greeks interpreted local myths and cults as reflections of Indian reverence for the two sons of Zeus.⁷³ According to later testimonies of Strabo (15.1.58–59) and Arrian (*Indica* 7), Megasthenes, the Seleucid ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya, emphasized the importance of the two figures in the Indian pantheon, even proposing a binary system: the Indians in the mountains were said to venerate Dionysus, while those in the plain preferred Heracles. The compatibility of the local traditions



Fig. 17. Silver "Bactrian" bowl from the Stroganoff Collection, now in the Hermitage Museum (S-75), representing Heracles hunting the Erymanthian boar at a Hephthalite banquet, sixth century CE. Photo courtesy of the Hermitage Museum.



Fig. 18. Sasanian gilded silver plate representing Heracles bringing the Erymanthian boar to King Eurystheus, fifth–seventh century CE. George Ortiz Collection, Geneva.



Fig. 19. "Bactrian" gilded silver bowl from The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 1560 M, representing Hunnic aristocrats at a Dionysiac banquet, fifth century CE. Photo courtesy of The al-Sabah Museum.



Fig. 20a–c. Sasanian gilded silver plates representing the wedding and the triumph of Dionysus, dated between the second/third and sixth century CE. a) British Museum, London, inv. 124086; b) State Historical Museum, Moscow, inv. OK 14318/ ГИМ 84845; c) National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1964.10.



Fig. 21. Gold pendant from Tillya Tepe, representing Dionysus, Ariadne, a Satyr, and Nike; first–second century CE. After Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 286, no. 216.



Fig. 22. Gilded silver “Bactrian” relief, second century BCE. The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 1571 M. Photo courtesy of The al-Sabah Museum.



Fig. 23. “Bactrian” silver plate representing Dionysus and two Maenads, surrounded by Dionysiac scenes; fourth–fifth century CE. The al-Sabah collection, LNS 1372 M. Photo courtesy of The al-Sabah Museum.



Fig. 24. Roman gilded silver plate representing Dionysus and the Twelve Gods, discovered in Beitan-Lanzhou (China); made in the Eastern Mediterranean, second–third century CE. Photo and drawing courtesy of the Chinese Provincial Museum of Gansu.

with the Greek cults of Dionysus and Heracles may also have facilitated the adoption of Septimius Severus' image, joining the *dii patrii*.

In the iconography, Heracles, holding Zeus' thunderbolt (Sanskrit *vajra*-), was identified with the bodhisattva Vajrapani, the protector of the Buddha.⁷⁴ Among Heracles' labors, the Central Asiatic elites (both Iranian and Hunnic) seem to have preferred his hunt of the fearsome boar on Mount Erymanthus – depicted on a sixth-century "Bactrian" silver bowl from the former Stroganoff Collection, now in the Hermitage (S-75; fig. 17).⁷⁵ This bowl – made in Tokharistan or Sogdiana – shows a Hephthalite banquet merged with a theatrical *intermezzo* staging Heracles' feast with the Centaur Pholus, prior to the Erymanthian hunt. The story is preserved in mythological sources (such as Diodorus of Sicily, *Historical Library* 4.12), but its depiction on this vessel suggests it may have been performed in theatrical shows, most probably in the form of mimes, at Hunnic courts. In any case, the confrontation between Heracles, carrying the Erymanthian boar, and the cowardly king Eurystheus, hiding in a cauldron, was a very common image in Greek and Roman art.⁷⁶ It was also known to the Sasanians, as shown on a fifth- to seventh-century gilded silver plate from the George Ortiz Collection in Geneva (fig. 18).

Dionysus, potentially identified with the Indian Siva, appears on various objects imported to or created in Gandhāra and in Bactria-Tokharistan from the Seleucid period until the Islamic conquest. This continuity over a millennium is due not only to Dionysus' mythical conquest of India and Bactria,⁷⁷ but also to the similarity of banqueting practices in the Mediterranean, India, and Tokharistan, which persisted until the Turkish conquest.⁷⁸ One piece of evidence is a fourth- to fifth-century "Bactrian" gilded silver bowl (in The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 1560 M; fig. 19), on which Dionysus, whose facial features recall Alexander the Macedonian, looks into the eyes of Hunnic aristocrats participating in one of Silenus' mystical banquets. The bowl echoes the practices of the Dionysian mysteries in the Roman Empire.⁷⁹ Yet the alternation between young and old warrior symposiasts recalls both the nomadic tradition of gathering all elite members of the community, and probably Greco-Indian or Greco-Bactrian traditions which left no trace in the preserved evidence.

The best-known Dionysian image beyond the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire is Dionysus' marital and triumphal procession, reproduced on at least three Sasanian gilded silver dishes, now in London (British Museum, inv. 124086), Moscow (State Historical Museum, OK 14318/ГИМ 84845), and Washington, DC (Freer Gallery of Art, F1964.10; fig. 20).⁸⁰ All these plates are inspired by late Hellenistic or early Roman representations of Dionysus' wedding, which circulated on (precious) stones, vases, or other perishable media. In burial 6.2 from Tillya Tepe (fig. 21), a gold pendant depicts Dionysus drinking from a kantharos and riding a lion together with Ariadne. In front of them, a Satyr drinks from a horn, while a flying Nike crowns the pair from above.⁸¹ This original representation suggests that although the three Sasanian plates have a late Hellenistic Mediterranean archetype, their immediate model could have originated in Tokharistan, between northern India and Central Asia. This Eastern model could have represented Dionysus as a solar *triumphator* and *kosmokrator*, "master of the universe," with his marital cortege, by the early third century CE at the latest. The Afghan origin of the London plate (acquired in Kunduz, and bearing Middle Persian inscriptions), which is the earliest and most "Hellenic" in the preserved series, as well as the "Bactrian" connections of the Moscow plate, speak in favor of such an eastern model, rather than a western import into the Arsacid Empire.⁸²

The London plate (fig. 20a) shows the half-draped Dionysus, reclining and drinking from a wine bowl in a solar chariot together with Ariadne, smaller in size and almost nude, backing her husband. The vine tree behind them forms a canopy, suggestive of Dionysus' function as god of wine. The banqueting couple is followed by a hopping Heracles, carrying a club on his right shoulder and a lion skin over his left forearm. An Eros (*Amor*), clinging to a whip-like fishing line carried by another flying Eros, pours a liquid from an ewer onto two Maenads-*Bakchai*, the charioteers of the joyful procession advancing to the left. In the lower "exergue," a panther climbs into the open mouth of a krater, between bushes. The plates in Moscow (fig. 20b, probably to be dated between the fifth and the sixth century CE) and in Washington, DC (fig. 20c, probably sixth-seventh century CE) show significant transformations of the model:⁸³ they add celestial musicians on both sides of the drinking panther, to suggest

the paradisiacal location of this banquet. The solar wheel of the wagon is balanced between two *Erotes* (*Amores*). Ariadne is covered with Sasanian draperies. Both Heracles and Dionysus are transformed: Heracles is hybridized with a Satyr, now bearing a tail and a conical hat (Greek *πίλος*, Latin *pileus*), while his club is transformed into a thyrsus. Dionysus appears youthful and wears a seemingly feminine headdress, with what appear to be breasts, a feature not surprising, since on some other Sasanian works, bouncing male pectorals resemble female breasts. Rather than viewing these iconographic peculiarities of the Sasanian plates as “misunderstandings,” we prefer to interpret them as further developments within an iconographic series, which probably started at the court of Cleopatra and Mark Antony in the third quarter of the first century BCE, continued throughout the Roman Empire, and culminated in an Iranian Zoroastrian context.⁸⁴

Another image of the Dionysiac *thiasus*, which started in Hellenistic Bactria and was later supported by the importation of Roman vessels with the same theme, is that of Dionysus supported by two Maenads, either upon discovering Ariadne on Naxos or, more generally, in the middle of the procession. The god and the Maenads appear on a late-second-century BCE “Bactrian” relief, made of silver with gilding (LNS 1571 M, The al-Sabah Collection; fig. 22).⁸⁵ Almost 600 years later, the same figures decorate the central medallion of a “Bactrian” silver plate, also in The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 1372 M; fig. 23). Produced somewhere in northern India, this fourth- to fifth-century plate, bearing a Brahmi inscription, follows a Roman model, which could have originated between the second and the fourth centuries and which continues, with variations, in furniture decorations at least until the sixth century CE.

Another scene with both Hellenistic and Roman parallels shows Dionysus riding a feline. The god appears not only on the “Bactrian” or “Kušan” gold decorations from Tillya Tepe mentioned above (fig. 21), but also on a Roman silver plate discovered in an elite tomb in Beitanzhou (now in the Chinese provincial museum of Gansu, fig. 24).⁸⁶ The central medallion, featuring the god on his panther, is surrounded by portraits of the Twelve Gods, starting with Dionysus himself, and encircled by a dense vegetal crown. Although the central medallion reproduces a Hellenistic model, the plate was molded in silver

and gilded somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean between the second and third centuries CE. The Bactrian inscription mentioning the “weight 178”⁸⁷ clearly indicates that this Roman product from the Eastern Mediterranean passed through Tokharistan before reaching China. This seems to have also been the case with many other silver vessels that circulated from Gandhāra through the Western Regions, eventually reaching Tibet and even Mongolia.⁸⁸ Most probably, this was also the path followed by the Pingcheng tray or, at least, by its model.

The Peculiarities of the Pingcheng Tray and Their Significance for the History of Cultural Transfers

The major difference between the Roman, “Bactrian,” and Sasanian representations of the young Dionysus on the one hand, and the Pingcheng tray on the other, is that on the latter, the triumphant Dionysus is nude and bearded. In Greek and Roman art, nudity was specific to young individuals (Greek *παῖδες*), who were potential passive, receptive partners (*ἐρώμενοι*) in a homosexual relationship with the adult *erastēs*. By contrast, the beard was a sign of maturity and masculinity, usually incompatible with a passive sexual role. Therefore, adult men and gods usually have their genitals covered. Exceptions occur in depictions of powerful ruling gods, symbols of masculine power and fertility, such as Zeus/Jupiter, Poseidon/Neptune, Saturnus, Vertumnus, and other nature deities, as well as Heracles the athlete, and hybrid gods who combine multiple iconographic attributes (like several *epikleseis* attached to a divine name). Furthermore, nudity could also symbolize Hellenicity, a sign that the artist and their work belonged to a culture where the beauty of the body echoed the beauty of the soul. Finally, it could be an echo of the heroic nudity seen in public images of Greco-Roman monarchs – Alexander or the Roman emperors such as Septimius Severus.⁸⁹ The Pingcheng tray reflects Greco-Roman mythical, and maybe also political, iconography, which must have seemed both exotic and exuberant to the Northern Wei.

Here, Dionysus seems to be a blend of the young, naked Dionysus, common in Hellenistic and Roman art due to the assimilation of features from the iconography of Apollo/Helios and



Fig. 25. Terracotta head of Dionysus, from Gandhāra, fourth–fifth century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 1979.507.2.



Fig. 26. Linen and wool textile from Antinoë, representing Dionysus; fourth–sixth century CE. Louvre Museum, inv. X 4792.

Eros, and of an older chthonic god. The bearded, older Dionysus went out of fashion in the Hellenistic world (at least until the first century BCE to first century CE Roman archaizing creations⁹⁰); however, the figure remained popular in the East. This combination of the nude and bearded figure may have originated in Gandhāra, where the mature god, introduced by Alexander's companions and the Seleucids, survived for centuries (as illustrated by the terracotta head in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 1979.507.2; fig. 25).⁹¹ Parallels are difficult to find outside the Gandhāran networks. One exception may be a nude Dionysus depicted in a Nilotic scene on a linen and wool textile from Antinoë, dated between the end of the fourth and the sixth century, which has been interpreted as “bearded” (now in the Louvre, X 4792; fig. 26).⁹² However, the scene is hard to interpret because it is isolated in the broader Dionysian iconography. Dionysus' supposed beard seems more likely an illusion, created by the contrast between the colors used for his shaded skin and the missing parts of the tapestry. Even if he were bearded, it remains difficult to determine whether the combination of a nude, youthful body and a bearded, mature face originated in Egypt (possibly through identification with, or confusion between, Dionysus

and Sarapis/Serapis, or even Osiris), in Gandhāra (as suggested by the most solid evidence), or more generally in the Roman East, across the regions connecting the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asia. Was there any connection with imperial iconography, which represented older, bearded emperors as naked heroes or gods? It is impossible to say, since the evidence is very fragmentary and the history of the reception of the Greco-Roman cults in Central Asia requires further study. In addition to Frantz Grenet's publication of a jade intaglio featuring a bust of Sarapis from Afghanistan,⁹³ further attestations of the Greco-Egyptian god in the Kušān Empire under King Huviška (r. ca. 150–191 CE) have been published by Laurent Bricault (1998) and Rachel Mairs (2007). The bearded face of Sarapis, directly inspired by Roman iconography, is identified as *Sarapo* (CΑΡΑΠΙΟ) on golden dinars, probably issued in the context of the trade connections across the Indian Ocean, through Greco-Egyptian hubs (*emporía*) established along the coast and possibly also in the Indus Valley (fig. 27).⁹⁴ Most interestingly, at Begram, a bronze statuette of Heracles, standing, with his right hand leaning on his club and his left hand holding a (now lost) vessel, shows an original hybridization with Sarapis, indicated by the calathus above his head



Fig. 27. Gold coin of the Kušan King Huviška (150–191 CE), with Sarapo on the reverse.



Fig. 28. Bronze statuette of Heracles-Sarapis, discovered in Begram; second century CE. After Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 204, no. 108.

(fig. 28).⁹⁵ The general pose, comparable to that of Heracles on the Pingcheng tray, and the unique representation of a nude Sarapis could indicate that original iconographies, mingling elements considered incompatible in the Mediterranean world, appear in the cults practiced in the cosmopolitan circles of Hellenized traders and Roman soldiers active at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The mature, nude, bearded Dionysus on the Pingcheng tray may have been influenced either by his companion Heracles (also bearded and naked, as the Heracles-Sarapis mentioned above), or by his old teacher and friend, Silenus, who had a much broader and long-lasting reception in Asia (including on the al-Sabah bowl, LNS 1560 M, fig. 19, mentioned above). Silenus was identified with the Hindu/Mathurān *Kubera*, god of wealth and god-king of *yakshas* (nature spirits), later transformed into the Buddhist/Gandhāran *Pāñcika* and *Vaiśravaṇa*. Thanks to his Hellenic iconography, he remained easily recognizable for more than a millennium, from northern India to China.

Nevertheless, one cannot exclude the possibility that the bearded, naked Dionysus was invented in the Mediterranean. In Roman times, Shadrappa takes on not only the iconography of the mature, bearded Dionysus and of a Pater figure

(like Saturnus and Sarapis), but also the Apollinian, solar features of the young, naked Dionysus. Some busts of the older Shadrappa/Liber Pater suggest that the god could have been represented at least partially nude (as Saturnus was), although no Roman example is currently identified as such. In fact, in the second century CE, Pausanias (6.25.5–6) mentions a statue from the Peloponnese (Elis), representing Neptune/Shadrappa/Corybas nude, but beardless. Since gods could be depicted with imperial features, we cannot exclude the possibility that a nude Dionysus/Shadrappa/Liber Pater might have been given the bearded portrait of an emperor – but we have no evidence linking such a hypothesis to the Pingcheng tray.

In the current state of the archaeological documentation, we cannot identify the precise location where the Pingcheng tray, or its direct model, was created. If the tray itself was produced somewhere between northern India (mainly Gandhāra) and Inner Asia, its Roman model, possibly inspired by a monument of Septimius Severus or a reproduction thereof, could have originated in the Eastern Mediterranean – in particular in Syria. There, the Palmyrene cult of Shadrappa produced a significant amount of reliefs showing a bearded warrior figure, which may have influenced the Roman

image of Shadrapha/Liber Pater/Dionysus (see *supra*, fig. 6). Alternatively, the image could have been produced in Gandhāra or Tokharistan, where a similar mix occurred, sometime during the second–third century CE, between the nude Heracles and Sarapis (as attested by the bronze statuette discovered in Begram, fig. 28).⁹⁶

Other elements of the decoration on the tray could suggest that the ultimate Roman archetype was redrawn in Gandhāra. But one must proceed with caution, as these features may also reflect adaptations made by copyists. In our study of the al-Sabah “Bactrian” bowl (LNS 1560 M, fig. 19), which was probably inspired by objects related to Roman Dionysiac mysteries, we have shown how the busts of the young and old symposiasts facing Dionysus, decorating the exterior walls, and the depiction of Silenus’ cavern in the medallion at the bottom were adapted to “Hunnish” (or more precisely, “Kidarite”) physical types and fashions.⁹⁷ On the Pingcheng tray, the two “Bactrian” bowls held by Heracles and Dionysus replace the kantharos and the libation bowl (φιάλη, *phialē*), which are frequently depicted on Roman reliefs. These vessels have been carefully chiseled from the reverse side, in order to be identified by the viewer who likely had access to similar objects. Heracles holds a “lobed” or “fluted” bowl, commonly attested in metal and glass across the Achaemenid, Hellenistic, and Roman worlds. This shape survived into the Sasanian Empire, as well as in Bactria and Sogdiana, from where it was introduced into China.⁹⁸ Dionysus, by contrast, raises another type of shallow bowl, decorated with vegetal reliefs or bosses: its model, in precious metal or glass, is attested from northern India and Central Asia to the territories of the Northern Wei.⁹⁹ Thus, even if the two bowls differ clearly in shape from that of the shallow tray itself, all are consistent with a banquet service which could have been used between Gandhāra and China, from the third–fourth to the fifth–sixth century CE. This decoration is, in fact, a *mise en abyme* of the precious container: when the tray is empty, the user can see that the bowls held by Heracles and Dionysus are full (by an artistic license, despite the motion of the chariot drawn by centaurs with their front legs raised). It is an invitation to refill the vessels and join the celebration.

Another departure from the Roman models is the ivy garland surrounding the figures. This



Fig. 29. Bronze statuette of Heracles, discovered in Aï-Khanum, second century BCE. After Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 113, no. 14.

vegetal motif is only a sketch of the Hellenistic vineyard canopy that appears on the Getty medallion representing Dionysus and Ariadne, mentioned above (fig. 5). There are no grapes, maybe because the tray was intended for a variety of drinks (such as palm or cereal-based alcohols), not necessarily grape wine. Yet one should not forget that grape wine was introduced to China by the Sogdians, notably in the Shanxi province.¹⁰⁰ Another possible explanation is that the rounded ivy leaves (usually *Hedera helix*) or vine leaves, chiseled into the gold sheet, look similar to the leaves of the Bodhi tree (the tree of enlightenment, *Ficus religiosa*), which would have been more familiar to the Buddhist believers active in the networks connecting Gandhāra with the Northern Wei. Following the Buddhist path by which the tray may have reached Datong, we could argue that the artisan’s subtle iconographic choices correspond to the features of the three groups of deities who participate in Indian feasts, according to Buddhist texts and iconography:¹⁰¹ the *karotapāṇi*, “those with cups in hands”; the *mālādhara*, “garland-bearers”; and the *sadāmatta* or *sadāmada*, “always euphoric” or “drunk.” This would explain why both Dionysus and Heracles hold drinking vessels. Dionysus wears a



Fig. 30. Gilded silver stem-cup with Dionysiac decoration, discovered in Datong; fifth century CE, now in the Datong Museum. After Watt et al. 2004: 149, no. 59.



Fig. 31. Gilded silver stem-cup with high-relief Dionysiac decoration, discovered in Datong; fifth century CE, now in the Datong Museum. After Watt et al. 2004: 150, no. 60.

crown, and an ivy garland surrounds the whole chariot. They celebrate a euphoric triumph, an invitation extended to the viewer as well.

The absence of Heracles' lion skin (λεοντή) is another peculiarity of the tray. Heracles' left arm, which should have held it, is folded over his chest and holds the drinking cup, in a gesture which recalls *Herakles kallinikos*, the "triumphant Heracles" (potentially identified with the Zoroastrian *Vərəθraγna*), reclining at the banquet in Bisotun, where he protected a Seleucid satrap of the Upper Satrapies.¹⁰² The lion skin is also absent on Heracles' bronze statuette discovered in the Hellenistic layers of Aï-Khanum (fig. 29),¹⁰³ and on the Heracles-Sarapis of Begram (fig. 28), as well as on some rare bronzes found on the shores of the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁴ Could the omission of the lion skin on the tray be the artisan's refusal to represent the remains of a hunted animal? The only certainty is that it enhanced the closeness of the two drinkers, recalling that of the *Yakshi* on the loaded Dionysian sceneries of Gandhāra. Therefore, it may be an adaptation of the artisan who made the small tray or its model, if several adaptations separate the Roman model from the Pingcheng tray, somewhere between India and China.

Conclusion

The "Silk Roads" as "Gold Roads," through which Heracles and Dionysus, Symbols of Macedonian and Roman Power, Reached China

This golden tray attests to the import of Roman goods, techniques, and ideas, including Dionysian myths and iconography, through Gandhāra and "Bactrian" intermediaries, all the way to Northern Wei China. Its ultimate model dates back to the end of the second and the beginning of the third century CE, under Septimius Severus (r. 193–211 CE), and is probably contemporary with the Roman gilded silver plate discovered in Beitan-Lanzhou, which depicts the young Dionysus on a panther, surrounded by the Twelve Gods and vegetal decoration (fig. 24, see *supra*). The tray itself is probably later: its exotic material, exceptional iconography, and fragility suggest that it arrived in Datong when this was the capital of the Northern Wei, that is, in the fifth century CE. Therefore, it may be contemporary with the silver-gilt vessels decorated with Dionysiac imagery, found near the ruins of a Buddhist temple in the southern suburb of Datong, such as the cup covered

in grapevine inhabited by *Erotes* (*putti*) in relief, recalling models from Alexandria and Antioch (fig. 30), or the gilded, footed cup decorated with pastoral figures in high relief (fig. 31).¹⁰⁵

We do not know where these silver-gilt vessels were produced, but they clearly reflect the diffusion of Greco-Roman banquet culture, including wine, metal tableware, and divine imagery, from the second to the seventh century, as it spread from the Mediterranean to northern India and Central Asia under Kušān, Sasanian, and Hephthalite rule. Literary texts refer to rare, direct contacts, both by land and by sea, between the Greco-Roman world and China, from the Han through the period of the Three Kingdoms, and into the Wei.¹⁰⁶ A growing number of archaeological finds indicate that coins, jewelry, and other precious metal objects circulated widely across the Indian Ocean and throughout Asia. Often, the Roman image was imitated or reinterpreted in the Eastern trading hubs – most probably in India.¹⁰⁷ Roman imperial coins and imitations of coins (such as bracteates, medals, medallions, or bezels with one face in relief, molded on an effigy copied from a coin or a medallion¹⁰⁸), which did not preserve their monetary value beyond India, were used as jewelry (especially pendants) in the Thai-Malay peninsula, Myanmar, Thailand, and northern Vietnam (at times under Han control).¹⁰⁹ In some cases, the iconography was changed: an artisan could combine two different Roman coins – as on the gold ring of Dhangupta, son of Dama, decorated with the laureate head of Septimius Severus facing the draped bust of Julia Domna, above the Brahmi inscription of the owner (fig. 32).¹¹⁰ In other cases, an Indian element was added to the Roman iconography (such as on the gold medallion in the British Museum, inv. 1988,0808.11, made after an *aureus* of DIVA FAVSTINA from the time of Antoninus Pius, with a corrupt legend and the addition of an Indian shrine, fig. 33).¹¹¹ Similar iconographic adaptations can be observed on metal bowls: the “Bactrian” silver bowl from The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 1560 M; fig. 19) used a Roman decoration related to the Dionysiac mysteries for a Hunnic banquet in Tokharistan. The Pingcheng tray transformed the Severan iconography of the triumphant Dionysus and Heracles by featuring Dionysus with a beard and Heracles without his club – an image that could align with the principles of a Buddhist elite banquet.

Together with glassware, coins, and jewelry of Roman and Sasanian origins, these fragile, precious goods followed the Buddhist “Silk Roads” from the southwest to the northeast.¹¹² They could have been presented as gifts in Pingcheng, the capital of the Northern Wei, reputed for its cosmopolitan taste for luxurious goods between the fourth and sixth centuries. The delicateness of the tray made it unsuitable to use in an actual banquet. It was rather a symbol of the banquet, a prestige item that could be displayed in a house, a temple, and ultimately deposited in a tomb, as were many other precious goods previously discovered in Datong. The mythology of Dionysus and Heracles, masters of the world, but also savior and psychopomp deities in the Roman Mediterranean, predecessors of Alexander, and *dii patriae* of the Severan Roman emperors, suits any context (domestic, cultic, or funerary) in which the object could be displayed to signify the social prestige of its owner.

It is impossible to say how much information about the Western regions, their peoples, and beliefs was brought by traders or envoys sent from Bosī (Persia/Sasanian Empire), Yeda/Yanwei (Hephthalite region), and Jibin (Gandhāra) to Pingcheng and later on to Luoyang, and how much a rich prince such as Yuan Chen could have known about the Greco-Roman Dionysus and Heracles, as well as about their followers, Alexander of Macedon and the Roman emperors. However, the early seventh-century Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta mentions a legend according to which Alexander of Macedon was the founder of China, having conquered Bactria and Sogdiana and killed 120,000 barbarians (*Histories* I.9.6). This unparalleled testimony is part of a synthesis on northern China, designated by the name of Taugast (Ταυγᾶστ). Derived from the Old Turkic form *Tabγač/Tabgatch*, and corresponding to the Chinese *Tuoba* (拓跋氏), this name belongs to the Xianbei clan which founded the Northern Wei dynasty. Theophylact’s description provides valuable information on the Chinese emperor and the conflicts between dynasties around 580 CE, and the unification under the Sui, the use of gold and the production of silk, the Buddhist religion, and contacts with India.¹¹³ In our opinion, the reference to Alexander’s legend in China is not a confusion, but a trace of the Buddhist transmission of Greco-Roman Indo-Bactrian traditions between northern India, Central Asia, and the



Fig. 32. Golden ring of Dhangupta, Son of Dama, decorated with the laureate head of Septimius Severus facing the draped bust of Julia Domna; third century CE.



Fig. 33. Gold medallion from India; second-third century CE. British Museum, inv. 1988,0808.11.

Northern Wei, predating Nestorian and Islamic influences.¹¹⁴

Dionysus the god and Heracles the hero, two sons of Zeus with mortal women, were reputed to have conquered the whole world and ruled it with divine wisdom long before Alexander (himself claiming to be the son of Zeus-Ammon), according to Neoplatonic scholarship of the third and fifth centuries, that is, the period during which the ultimate Severan model and the tray of Pingcheng were made.¹¹⁵ If the Pingcheng tray was a diplomatic gift manufactured in Gandhāra or in some other Buddhist workshop, then it was probably an exotic way of honoring and flattering the Northern Wei elites by inviting them to a Buddhist symposium in Datong.

Notes

1. We are grateful for the support received in writing this paper. We thank Prof. Rong Xinjiang (Peking University), Prof. Wu Xin (Bryn Mawr/Fudan University), Dr. Jin Xu (Vassar College), Dr. Liu Bin (Luoyang Municipal Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology), and Dr. Ching Chao-Yung (Kyoto University), who translated the Chinese texts for us and generously offered various references. Anca Dan studied the tray in Datong in November 2024 and presented the results at conferences at Peking and Fudan universities (thanks to the invitations of Prof. Ching-Yuan Wu and Prof. Huang Yang). She provided the Greco-Roman interpretation, identified parallels, and wrote the draft. Frantz Grenet contributed the Gandhāran and Hephthalite expertise and revised the manuscript. The websites cited were accessed on July 1, 2023.

2. See China National Silk Museum, http://www.chinasilkmuseum.com/zz/info_17.aspx?itemid=27795.

3. China National Silk Museum/*Zhongguo sichou bowuguan*, ed., *Yi hua yi shijie: Sichou zhi lu shang de hu xue hu jian* (*Mutual Learning on the Silk Roads: Stories of the Silk Road Treasures*) 2020.

4. Information kindly communicated by Prof. Wu Xin.

5. For how rhytons were held in order to pour liquid into a bowl or directly into the mouths of exceptional figures, see, for example, the depiction of drinking men in the Herculaneum fresco, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 9024), available at: Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/Herculaneum_Fresco_001.jpg. See also the figure of Kubera, depicted on a silver plate from the Dera Ismail Khan District in northwestern Pakistan (third–fourth century), now in the British Museum (inv. 1937,0319.1), https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1937-0319-1. In the case of Centaurs, the confusion between a drinking horn and a musical instrument could be explained by their animal and fantastic nature, prone to excess.

6. Cf. Liu 2021: 26–29; Pearce 2023: 269–72.

7. Rong 2023; cf. Church 2024: 245–46.

8. According to the *Weishu*, Yeda/Yanwei embassies were received in the years 456, 502, 507, 509, 511, 512, 513, 517, 518, 519, 524, 530, 532. See Ching and Galambos 2020: 84–87, I.069. Information kindly communicated by Ching Chao-Jung.

9. According to the *Weishu*, embassies from Jibin were received in the years 451 (*Weishu* j. 4:105), 453 (*Weishu* j. 5: 113), 502 (*Weishu* j. 8: 195), 508 (*Weishu* j. 8: 206) and 517 (*Weishu* j. 9: 225–226). However, it is important to keep in mind that the geographical notion of Jibin was not stable: initially referring to Kapisa-Gandhāra, the term appears to have been transferred to Kashmir sometime after the period under consideration here. This information was kindly communicated by Ching Chao-Jung.

10. See Hauptmann 2024, with bibliography.

11. On X (formerly Twitter), by Xu Jin 徐津 <https://twitter.com/xujinx/status/1174014375373561862?s=20> (on September 17, 2019); on the platform Sina Weibo, <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4518181337508671> (on June 21, 2020); <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4519313061727403> (on June 24, 2020); in the local news *Youth of Zhejiang Province*: <http://m.qnsb.com/index.php?a=show&catid=114&id=109200> (accessed in 2020). An inventory of the “western” objects mentioned in ancient Chinese texts and discovered in the Pingcheng region, including the gold tray, was published by He Kun in 2022. Anca Dan and Frantz Grenet also discussed the vase in their short blog article “Classiques grecs entre l’Iran, l’Inde

et la Chine: L’héritage inespéré des vases en argent ‘bactriens,’” *Actualités des études anciennes*, August 24, 2022, <https://reainfo.hypotheses.org/25838>.

12. See, e.g., Hamada Kōsaku 1933; Bunker 1993; Carter 1995; Han Wei and Deydier 2001; Safran 2022. Cf. Ching and Grenet 2021. For the Tang discoveries, see Kieser 2015.

13. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: *bō 鉢/鉢*: a transcription of Sanskrit *pātra* “(alm-)bowl” or a Prakrit form of it in Chinese Buddhist texts. Here, without any doubt, the “quartz bowls” mean the ones of foreign style being different from *wǎn* 碗/盥/椀, a generic term of bowls in Chinese.

14. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: *liuli* 琉璃: a transcription of Sanskrit *vaiḍūrya* or a Prakrit form of it. It usually refers to lapis lazuli or beryl in Chinese Buddhist texts. But an attestation in the *Weishu* concerning traders from Tokharistan (Ching and Galambos 2020: 26–28; Text I.014) clearly refers to “glass.” Since a number of glass cups from the Northern Wei period have been unearthed in the Datong region, “glassware” is taken as the preferable meaning in this context. Wang Yi-t’ung (1984: 193) translated the term as “agate cups, glass bowls,” adopting a less widely accepted interpretation.

15. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: *chìyù zhī* 赤玉卮 (translated as “ruby goblets” by Wang Yi-t’ung 1984: 193): *zhī* 卮 refers to a type of pre-Han drinking vessel resembling a mug, often with three very short feet. As for *chìyù* “red jade,” it is not necessarily as hard as ruby. In the list of objects excavated by Lü Zuan (son of Lü Guang, who invaded Kucha around 384) from the tomb of Zhang Jun (307–346, founder of the Former Liang Dynasty in Liangzhou), there appear: a “pearl curtain, *liuli* drinking vessel, white jade cup, red jade recorder (*chìyù xiāo* 赤玉簫), purple/brown jade flute, coral horsewhip, agate wine-cup” (*Jinshu*, j. 122: 3067). To make a flute from a single piece of jade had already become a refined art in prehistoric China, so, in this context, “red jade” probably refers to carnelian or similar gemstones.

16. *Luoyang Qielan ji*, juan 4: ... *Chēn cháng huì zōng shì, chén zhū bǎo qì, jīn píng* (or: *Píng*), *yín wèng* (or: *Wèng*) *bǎi yú kǒu, ǒu qíng pán hé chēng shì. Zì yú jiǔ qì, yǒu shuǐ jīng bō* (or: *Bō*), *mǎnǎo liú lí wǎn* (or: *Wǎn, wǎn*), *chìyù zhī shù shí méi. Zuò gōng qímiào, zhōng tǔ suǒ wú, jiē cóng xīyù ér lái.* ... 琛常會宗室，陳諸寶器，金瓶 (or: 餅)、銀瓮 (or: 甕) 百餘口，甌繁盤盒稱是。自餘酒器，有水晶鉢 (or: 鉢)、瑪瑙琉璃碗 (or: 椀、盥)、赤玉卮數十枚。作工奇妙，中土所無，皆從西域而來。 Cited in *Taishō tripitaka*, vol. 51, no. 2092: 1016, b1–25; punctuation by Ching Chao-Jung; English translation

modified by Ching Chao-Jung from Wang Yi-t'ung 1984: 190193. Cf. Harper 2006: 129–30.

17. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: “Biography of Yuan Chen,” *Weishu*, j. 20: 529: “He accumulated wealth unfairly in [Qin]zhou; laymen complained [about him].”

18. See Shih 1983: 64, pl. 14 (height 5.7 cm, mouth diameter 5.7 cm), who draws a parallel with two similar silver cups (height 8 and 9.2 cm; mouth diameters 7.9 and 9.4 cm) discovered in Huhehaote (in the Inner Mongolia Province, China), together with a Byzantine coin of Leo I (457–474 CE); cf. Safran 2022: 296–97, fig. 15.5. The cup is preserved in the National Museum of China in Beijing.

19. For the Achaemenid shallow bowls and Hellenistic jewelry, see Miho Museum 2002: 214–15, nos. 123–210. For the first-century Tillya Tepe golden jewelry and vessels, see the contributions of Viktor I. Sarianidi and Véronique Schiltz in Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 211–93 (especially the gold phial in Tomb IV, cat. no. 204). For the Dal’verzin Tepe treasure, see the article of Djangar Ilyasov and Tigran Mkrtichev in Rante and Lintz 2022: 68–70.

20. See the catalogue entry: <https://medailles-et-antiques.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/c33gbg879>; cf., in particular, Foucher 2000: 207–8; Avisseau-Broustet and Colonna 2017: 122–27, no. 2.

21. See Moscow State Historical Museum, <https://catalog.shm.ru/entity/OBJECT/1692632?exhibition=517>. Cf. the Parthian/Kušān dragon figurine of leaded copper alloy from Afghanistan, now in the British Museum (inv. 1913.1022.1): https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1913-1022-1. Cf. Boardman 1994: 140–41.

22. Hermitage specimens Z-524, Z-525; see also the mug-jug Z-526 and the “boat” cup Z-528. Cf. Harper 2006: 136–37, fig. 83. Images are available online: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209736>; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209737>; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209738>; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209740>.

23. See the images online from the Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550099436/f3>; for bibliography, see the catalogue entry at <https://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/c33gbb62>; see also Azarnouche 2026: 109.

24. Sims-Williams 2016; Sims-Williams in Dan et al. 2014 [2018]: 234.

25. Francfort 1979, 2016, and 2020 (with bibliography); Falk 2010; Lo Muzio 2011; cf. Mairs 2014. The most recent inventory is Nikolaou 2023a, described in

Nikolaou 2023b, whose chronology extends up to the seventh century.

26. The cup is 2.5 cm high, 10.9 cm large with a diameter of 9.5 cm. See online the image from the Louvre: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010003964>. Cf. Endreffy 2014 and 2020.

27. See online the images from the Louvre: AF 6869 <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010026858>; AF 6870 <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010026859>; AF 6871 <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010026860>. Cf. Endreffy 2020.

28. Vondrovec 2003 [2007]: 161–64.

29. For Panjakent finds, see Raspopova 1999.

30. See Thierry and Morrisson 1994; Thierry 2000: 128–29; Wang 2004: 13–14, 33–36; Lin Ying 2005; Safran 2022.

31. Jia Jianwei 2019: 102–11; Dunhuang Academy 2023: 17–20. For the parallels with Mongolia, see Desroches 2000; most recently, with extensive bibliography, Stark forthcoming.

32. See the online catalogue with further images from the J. Paul Getty Museum: <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103VHJ>.

33. Cf. the seventh-century gold facing of a wooden beaker (9.2 cm high) from the Pereshchepina Treasure in the Hermitage Museum, inv. 1930–5: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/1128986>.

34. Guo Zhengzhong 2008: 10–12 (on the unearthed weights) and 94–95 table 2–2 (for the estimation of the weight units). We are grateful to Ching Chao-jung who has brought our attention to this reference.

35. Quite often, the weights of silverware produced in Iran and Central Asia are inscribed in round figures according to the local systems, or can be calculated accordingly. This may be linked to the fact that such objects were regarded as movable capital, independently of the artist’s workmanship. According to Sasanian law, they could be accepted as collateral loans (cf. Harper 2006: 167); that rule was inherited in the taxation practices of the Umayyads, who accepted silver vases as payment.

36. There is no general catalogue of the Roman finds in China, nor any extensive study on the isotopic signature of the Mediterranean glass. Examples of very fragile glass objects that traveled to China have been published by Taniichi 1986; Watt et al. 2004: 57–65 (An Jiayao); and Hoppál 2016.

37. For the earliest iconography, see Boardman et al. 1990: 154–60. At the beginning of the fifth century CE, Nonnus of Panopolis describes a symposium at the end of which Dionysus offers a golden cup to Heracles; see Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 40.577. Also cf. Vian 1994.

38. Now mainly in Worcester (MA) Art Museum, 1933.36. See Gasparri 1986: 524, no. 109 = Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: 549, no. 104.
39. Now in Princeton University Art Museum, 65.216. See Gasparri 1986: 524, no. 105; Foucher 2000.
40. Foucher 2000; Talgam and Weiss 2004. Ovadiah 2013 identified the contest on a fresco fragment from Herod's Theater at the Herodion.
41. Gasparri 1986: 524, no. 106; Foucher 2000.
42. See the online catalogue with images and bibliography from the Louvre: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010120344>.
43. Cf. the numerous hypotheses in the syntheses of Teixidor 1979: 101–6; Augé 1994; Cadotte 2007: 253–81.
44. Cf. Pausanias 6.25.5–6.
45. Bivar 1988; cf. Boyce and Grenet 1991: 476–78. *Contra* Caquot 1952; Lipiński 1993 and 1995. For the ultimate Semitic root, see Wilson-Wright 2019.
46. Cadotte 2007: 257.
47. Vernet 2021 with bibliography.
48. See the entry in the online catalogue from the British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1889-0512-1.
49. Starcky 1949: 67–81.
50. Bonnet 1988; Cadotte 2007: 283–305. For the temple, see Brouquier-Reddé 1992: 88–91; Marmouri 2017.
51. Cadotte 2007: 283–84.
52. Andropoulos 2000: 439–48.
53. For the full references, see American Numismatic Society, “Online Coins of the Roman Empire,” <https://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=fulltext%3Ahercules%20%20bacchus>.
54. Cf. Cassius Dio 76.16.3, with Siwicki 2021; also Krawczyk 2021.
55. See, for example, *RIC* IV Caracalla 508a: American Numismatic Society, “Online Coins of the Roman Empire,” <https://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.crl.508A>; *RIC* IV Geta 155a: American Numismatic Society, “Online Coins of the Roman Empire,” <http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.ge.155A>. For the Roman historical context, see Rantala 2017.
56. See the fragmentary relief from Cologne (Römisch-Germanisches Museum, inv. 28.580), dedicated by M. Vannius Adiutor at the end of the second century, and edited with photo and full bibliography available online: Epigraphic Database Heidelberg, “Inscription Database,” <https://edh.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD024415>.
57. Gasparri (1986: 549, no. 106), following Amelung (1908: 214, cat. no. 79, pl. 21), dates the piece to the Antonine period. However, the parallels presented here, along with the Severan features of Heracles, support a date between the late second and early third century CE.
58. Amelung 1908: 63, cat. no. 21a, pl. 5; Reinach 1912: 376, no. 1; Andrae 1995: 866 sq. Cf. the online database entry: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, “iDAI.objects,” <https://arachne.dainst.org/entity/1080075>.
59. See, for example, the cameo no. 9 (Chabouillet 61) in the Cabinet des Médailles, BNF, Paris, listed in Gasparri 1986: 556, no. 215, and available online with bibliography: <https://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/c33gb1ct01>.
60. For Silenus in Dionysus' chariot, see, for example, the newly discovered terracotta plate in the Cairo Egyptian Museum, inv. 7/8/27/3: Ibrahim 2022. Better known and closer in date to the Datong tray is the mosaic from Nea Paphos (third to early fourth century), in which a Satyr with a large kantharos unsuccessfully tries to jump into the chariot (Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: no. 130). For the general patterns of the Dionysiac triumph, see Dunbabin 1971.
61. Eros also appears as Dionysus' charioteer on Roman cameos (e.g., the blue glass paste cameo in the British Museum, inv. 1923,0401.1106, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1923-0401-1106), on the famous Sasanian dishes representing the chariot of Dionysus and Ariadna (cf. *infra*), and in the fifth-century CE mosaic of Sheikh Zouaide in Sinai; see Ovadiah et al. 1991; Olszewski 2002 (not included in Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986b).
62. For example, Seneca, *On Benefits* 1.13; cf. Djurslev 2021.
63. For example, see the British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1898-0602-121.
64. Robert 1977.
65. Gočeva 2009: nos. 14 and 16 (in the illustrations, no. 16 is incorrectly labeled as no. 12). Gočeva's no. 14 (our fig. 12) may be compared with the relief from Belvedere (fig. 9), as a Satyr appears to the right, beyond Dionysus.
66. Shopova 2011; Rabadjiev 2015: fig. 6; cf. Shopova 2017. We could not consult Martinova 2009. The fragmentary relief MND 804 = Ma 3239 in the Louvre Museum (<https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010276958>) is similar.
67. *IGBulg* V 5128, with SEG 28 602 and SEG 35 842. Cf. Sayar 1998: 171, Epigraphische Zeugnisse (EZ)1. For the findspot, Djulino in the territory of Mesambria (not Marcianopolis), see most recently Ruscu

2014: 95 n. 37. We are grateful to Mustafa Sayar for discussing this inscription.

68. Gočeva 2009: 180, no. 17 = Boardman et al. 1990: 158, no. 3256.

69. Originally suggested by M. Rostovtsev (1911: 30–34, no. 13) and later accepted by I. Venedikov (1955) and E. Penkova (1998), this interpretation is rejected by K. Rabadjiev (1998), who identifies the figure as Silenus rather than Heracles – an argument that returns to the view of the relief’s first publisher, A. Dumont (1892: 334, no. 36). Indeed, a bearded Silenus is shown supporting a young Dionysus on some Thracian reliefs (Tsontchev 1958), and combinations with other gods are also possible. This paper, however, supports Rabadjiev’s view that there is no direct mythical or religious connection between Thrace and the staging of this mythical triumph. The scene is not necessarily funerary – despite the katabasis traditions of both the hero and the god, and their potential Eleusinian or Orphic connections. Rather, the motif’s diffusion in the northern Aegean must be understood in the political context of the military cults of the Roman Empire, influenced by the imperial political communication.

70. See Rabadjiev 2015: fig. 17.

71. Watt et al. 2004: 194–95, no. 101.

72. See Stančo 2012: 82–83; for ichthyocentaurs as Yaksha variants, see Carter 1968.

73. Stoneman 2019: 80–98.

74. Cf. de Jong 2003; Hsing and Crowell 2005; Stančo 2012: 137–58; Galinsky 2019 with further bibliography.

75. For the term “Bactrian bowls,” introduced by Weitzmann (1943) with direct reference to this bowl, see the inventory in Dan and Grenet 2020–2021.

76. Boardman et al. 1990: 43–48 (W. Felten).

77. See Stančo 2012: 95–110. To the inventory of sculptures, one should now add the sixth–seventh-century CE bone plaque depicting a youthful, naked Dionysus reclining with a thyrsus and watering a peacock, revealed by Bohodir Mamaliev and Aleksandr Naymark (2023).

78. For the similarities between the Greek symposium and Indian (Brahmanic and Buddhist) feasts, see Zysk 2021 and De Notariis 2024, and for the implications regarding the Pingcheng tray, see *infra*.

79. Dan and Grenet 2024.

80. For the British Museum example (inv.124086), see: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1900-0209-2. For the plate in the State Historical Museum, Moscow (OK 14318/ГИМ 84845), see <https://nav.shm.ru/en/exhibits/1403/>; and for the plate in the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

(inv. F1964.10), see <https://asia-archive.si.edu/object/F1964.10/>.

81. Boardman 2009: add.1; Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 286, no. 216. For a more general overview of Tillya Tepe, see Schiltz 2015.

82. Cf. Dalton 1964: 49–61; Marshak 1986: 254, figs. 174–76; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: 526–27, nos. 127–28; Gunter and Jett 1992: 121–27, no. 16; Boardman 1994: 94–97; Harper 2006: 90–92; Schulz 2018.

83. For the chronology, one can examine the fluttering ends of Dionysus’s and the foremost Maenad’s garments. On the Moscow plate, the scarves terminate in a triple-triangular shape, similar to that seen on the late fifth–sixth century CE Lhasa bowl (see Dan and Grenet 2020–2021). The inverted triangles along the edges of the skirts recall the textiles depicted on the fifth–sixth century Guyuan ewer (Ningxia, China), which shows Paris and Helen. Meanwhile, the rounded ends of the scarves on the Washington, DC, plate resemble those worn by dancers on later Sasanian vessels, such as the sixth–seventh century CE bottle in the Freer Gallery (F1966.1): https://asia.si.edu/explore-art-culture/collections/search/edanmdm:fsg_F1966.1/. The faces can be compared with those on the sixth–seventh century CE ewer in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 67.10a, b), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/30004532>, and on the bottle in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (AC1992.152.82), <https://collections.lacma.org/node/172523>.

84. Cf., for example, the cameo 25840 from the National Archaeological Museum in Naples: Gasparri 1986: 557, no. 223.

85. Francfort 2020: 81–84.

86. Watt et al. 2004: 184–85, no. 90 (B. Marshak); Carter 1995; Baratte 1996 and 2016; cf. Jianwei 2019: 112–13.

87. Sims-Williams 2009: 191, no. 1.

88. See, for example, the decorative medallion used as a phalera, representing a Satyr and a Maenad, published by Treister 2016.

89. See, for example, the larger-than-life bronze statue discovered in Kythrea, now preserved at the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia (for image, see C. Raddato, “Larger than Life Bronze Statue of Septimius Severus,” Wikimedia Commons, 2015, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Larger_than_life-size_bronze_statue_of_Septimius_Severus_depicted_in_heroic_nudity,_discovered_by_chance_in_1928_near_the_village_of_Kythrea_in_Cyprus,_Cyprus_Museum,_Nicosia_\(22275301569\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Larger_than_life-size_bronze_statue_of_Septimius_Severus_depicted_in_heroic_nudity,_discovered_by_chance_in_1928_near_the_village_of_Kythrea_in_Cyprus,_Cyprus_Museum,_Nicosia_(22275301569).jpg)), or the bronze statue of Treboianus Gallus in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, no.

05.30: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247117>.

90. See Wyler 2006.

91. See the online entry <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38226>. Contra Brancaccio and Liu 2009: 229, fig. 9, who interpret it as a bust of Silenus.

92. Picard-Schmitter 1961; Weitzmann 1979: 192–93, no. 172 (R. Brilliant); Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: 528, no. 142 (“Scène difficile à interpréter”). See the online catalogue entry from the Louvre: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010045311>.

93. Grenet 1982: 155–57, pl. XVI, fig. 1.

94. Source: VCoins: Online Coin Show, “India, Kushan: Huvishka Gold Dinar, Serapis Reverse,” https://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/coinindia/36/product/india_kushan_huvishka_gold_dinar_serapis_reverse_very_rare_and_choice/2087774/Default.aspx.

95. See Rosenfield 1967: 78, fig. 97b; Hsing and Crowell 2005: 11–15; Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 204, no. 108.

96. Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 204, no. 108.

97. Dan and Grenet 2024.

98. For a “Bactrian” example, see Carter et al. 2015: 194–95, no. 47. The same type of bowl is represented by a sixth-century CE “Bactrian” bowl from Lhasa, depicting Alexander the Great drinking the Water of Life (see Dan and Grenet 2020–2021).

99. See, for example, the “Bactrian” bowls in the al-Sabah Collection: Carter et al. 2015: 70–79, 82–83, Cat. 6–8, 10. Several examples of “Bactrian” drinking silverware decorated with vegetal reliefs can be seen in the Datong Museum and the Shanxi Provincial Museum in Taiyuan, including figs. 30–31.

100. Trombert 2005.

101. See De Notariis 2024, with references and secondary literature.

102. Canepa 2018: *passim*; Strootman 2020: 211–14.

103. Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 113, no. 14.

104. See, for example, Boardman et al. 1988: 751, no. 420; 754, no. 491.

105. See Shih 1983: 64, pls. 3–4; Watt et al. 2004: 149–50, nos. 59–60; Marshak 1986.

106. See the evidence referring to Maes Titianos and Gan Ying, as well as the embassy claiming to be sent by “Antun” (i.e., Marcus Aurelius), in Dan 2013; more generally, McLaughlin 2010; Sartre 2021. The passages in the *Weilüe* (魏略) referring to the western regions and merchants, including the mysterious Da Qin, usually identified with the Romans who are said to have reached Jiaozhi (northern Vietnam) in 226 CE, are now translated by Hill 2004.

107. For the Roman coins and imitations of coins, see Turner 1989; Suresh 2004; cf. the map in Smagur 2018, pl. 2. For the Late Antiquity, see Darley 2014. For Romano-Sasanian examples, see Smagur 2022a.

108. See, for example, the stone medallion published by Brancaccio 2014: 35, fig. 3.

109. See Borell 2014, 2016, and 2021 with bibliography; Hoppál et al. 2024.

110. The discovery context is unknown. The ring was sold in 2008: see Classical Numismatic Group, “Exceptional Kushan Dynastic Ring,” <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=115376>.

111. See Smagur 2022b. Cf. the online catalogue from the British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1988-0808-11.

112. Foltz 2010.

113. Boodberg 1938.

114. It is usually thought that Nestorian and Islamic influences shaped the earliest elements of the *Romance of Alexander* attested in the Old Turkic and Mongolian worlds. See Cleaves 1959; Boyle 1974 and 1980. For analogous cultural transfers between Roman, Sasanian, and Chinese elites, see Canepa 2010.

115. This Neoplatonic influence can be observed in the letter of Emperor Julian to the rhetorician Themistius, quoted as the motto of this article. For Dionysus and Late Antique rulership, see most recently Hernández de la Fuente 2021; for Heracles, see Eppinger 2019.

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Abbreviations

IGBulg: *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae*.

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Jinshu 晉書: *Book of the Jin*, by Fang Xuanling et al. Beijing, 1974.

LIMC: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zürich, 1981–1997, 2009.

RIC: *The Roman Imperial Coinage*. Ed. H. Mattingly et al. London, 1923–1994.

SEG: *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, 1923–. Online: <https://scholarlyeditions.brill.com/sego/>.

Weishu 魏書: *Book of the Wei*, by Wei Shou. Beijing, 1974.

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