

## Chapter 32

# Towards Identifying *Bhikṣuṇīs* in Gandhāra

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My research on Gandhāran art began with a simple question: where are the nuns in Gandhāra? This has since opened an interesting yet complex research path on gender. However, this question cannot be sufficiently answered at this stage as new data continue to emerge. In recent decades, this new data has been in the form of texts, notably manuscripts and inscriptions, which have greatly contributed to our understanding of social, religious, and political aspects of Gandhāran Buddhism.

While a comprehensive answer to my question is not possible, my modest goal at present is to bring together the available data from the region as an invitation for further research on *bhikṣuṇīs* (nuns) in Gandhāra. By Gandhāra, I refer to the region broadly covering present-day northwest Pakistan and northeast Afghanistan between the first century BCE and the fourth century CE. This

contribution makes the first step towards analysing the representation of *bhikṣuṇīs* in two corpora from this ancient region: texts<sup>2</sup> and images. In doing so, this chapter seeks to complement my previous research on the difficulties in identifying *bhikṣuṇīs* based on the archaeological evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Before studying the two corpora, it is important to outline their nature and the type of information that they present. The epigraphic and visual corpora preserve very different types of information due to their function within Buddhist sites. In general, the epigraphic corpus consists of texts recording the activities of donors in Gāndhārī, a north-western Middle Indo-Aryan language written in Kharoṣṭhī script that was used between the third century BCE and the fifth century CE. These texts or donative inscriptions are records of varying length and wherever fully preserved, they sometimes state the date of the donation, the name of the donor, the donor's familial and kinship links, and their motivations for establishing the donation. Donative inscriptions were recorded on a variety of objects such as reliquaries, stone slabs, statues, reliefs, terracotta and metal objects, amongst others. However, many of these objects were identified in the antiquities market and private collections and so, possess only a general provenance and cannot always be linked to excavated

<sup>1</sup>It was perhaps inevitable that my search led me to an article published by Osmund Bopearachchi on the *bhikṣuṇī* Utpalavarṇā. This initial encounter with a *bhikṣuṇī* has led me down an interesting research path filled with a never-ending array of questions on gender representations and interactions in early Buddhism. For this reason, I am honoured to make my contribution to celebrate Osmund Bopearachchi, an outstanding interdisciplinary scholar whose work has enlarged our knowledge of not only numismatics but also Buddhism in South Asia.

Buddhist sites. As the primary focus is the information presented in the inscriptions rather than a linguistic analysis, I have chosen not to provide the complete texts in this essay, but I mention their Corpus of Kharoṣṭhi Inscriptions or CKI numbers. The texts associated with the CKI numbers are readily available online.<sup>4</sup>

In comparison, portraying the Buddha's biography, ritual practices, and decorative themes, the corpus of Gandhāran art comprise of statues and reliefs that decorated Buddhist monuments such as *stūpas* and *vihāras*. As such, Gandhāran art rendered in local schist provide crucial information regarding well-known Buddhist legends and stories and normative ritual practices that were distinct to the region.

Examining the two corpora side by side, this essay demonstrates that the available evidence paints a favourable image of *bhikṣuṇīs* in Gandhāra. The epigraphic corpus preserves evidence of nuns as active donors who donated to Buddhist sites and shaped the ritual landscape of Gandhāra. This positive representation of nuns in the epigraphic corpus also finds an echo in the visual corpus which comprises reliefs depicting the impressive achievements of nuns.

## Representation of *Bhikṣuṇīs* in Gāndhārī Inscriptions

*Bhikṣuṇīs* appear in six inscriptions within the epigraphic corpus. The Oḍi king Senavarma's donative inscription is the earliest inscription indirectly referring to *bhikṣuṇīs*. The Oḍis in the Swāt Valley, along with the Apracas in the Bajaur Valley, were local dynasties who were active in shaping Buddhist practices in Gandhāra (c.65 BCE–CE 60). The members of the Oḍi royal family appear as donors in at least three donative inscriptions.<sup>5</sup> Amongst the three inscriptions, the most elaborate one

records the actions of the Oḍirāja Senavarma. Dating roughly around the first half of the first century CE, the inscription on a gold scroll details the efforts made by Senavarma towards rebuilding the Ekauda *stūpa* after it was destroyed by a lightning strike. The Oḍi king renovated and improved the destroyed *stūpa* that was previously established by his ancestors (CKI 249). The donative inscription begins with the king paying his respects to important members related to his *stūpa* renovation. It states that the king greeted the assembled groups of *āryas*, ascetics and *brahmacārins*, the two-fold community (*ubhayadosaṅgha*) and Priamitra, protector of the *stūpa*. The inscription goes on to describe the actions taken by the Oḍi king, his dynastic lineage, and the motivations for his donation.

The beginning of the inscription describes some of the performative aspects that were likely part of *stūpa* inauguration ceremonies in Gandhāra.<sup>6</sup> We can imagine that the king conducted a highly organized official ceremony by inviting important members of the community. He or his representatives may have made a public proclamation on the ritual day regarding his rebuilding activities and his aspirations. Amongst the respected members gathered at the *stūpa* inauguration are the *ubhayadosaṅgha* (Skt. *ubhayasaṅgha*) or the two-fold community comprising *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*. References to the *ubhayasaṅgha* occur several times in Buddhist literature, notably in the Vinayas in relation to the ordination of *bhikṣuṇīs*.<sup>7</sup> Their presence in this event organized by the Oḍirāja demonstrates that during the first century CE, an organised *bhikṣuṇīsasaṅgha* may have existed and took part in the ritual practices of the Oḍi kingdom. Besides their presence within the assembly, the inscription does not provide any further information regarding the nature of their participation. However, the actions

of individual *bhikṣuṇis* are preserved in other donative inscriptions. Within the Gāndhārī epigraphic corpus, four inscriptions refer to *bhikṣuṇis* as the donors and one inscription refers to a *bhikṣuṇī* as a beneficiary of the merit accrued by another female donor.

Inscriptions recording the donations of three *bhikṣuṇis* were found on three different metal objects belonging to a hoard of seven objects.<sup>8</sup> The exact location in which the metal objects were found is unknown, but they are currently preserved together in a private collection. The donative inscriptions written in *pointillé* style can be found on the surface of these objects: two goblets (named B and C by Salomon) and a bowl. It is possible that the objects were donated to the Buddhist site by the donors after they had already been used for some other purpose. The inscriptions record the donations of two *bhikṣuṇis* whose names are preserved and one *bhikṣuṇī* whose name is not clearly preserved in the text. Based on the palaeographic features, the inscriptions, and consequently, the objects, have been dated by scholars to the early part of the first century CE, and contemporary to the aforementioned Oḍirāja Senavarma's inscription.

Two goblets (B and C) from this hoard were made of silver and are presently heavily corroded. Their general form corresponds to other goblets that were found in Sirkap.<sup>9</sup> They consist of two sections: an upper and a lower section. The upper section is cylindrical with an everted lip presenting a concave profile. The inscriptions were written on the surface of this section and close to the lip. Besides the inscription, an image of a lion (?) and an ibex, respectively, was also executed on the surface of the goblets. The lower section is conical in shape and is connected to the upper section by a ridge.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the goblets from Taxila, the lower section of these two goblets does not contain any decorations.

The goblets may have also consisted of feet that were soldered to their bottom. The third inscription was found on a round silver bowl without any decorations. It was written on the upper edge and close to the rim of the bowl.

The three inscriptions preserve limited yet similar details about the *bhikṣuṇis*. The inscription on Goblet B states that it was a pious donation made by *bhikṣuṇī* Avhemitra to the Sarvāstivāda teachers in Uṭaradeva *vihāra* at Koṇaśīli. By establishing the donation, Avhemitra honoured her mother and father (CKI 1183). The second inscription, the inscription on Goblet C states that it was a pious donation of a *bhikṣuṇī* whose name is not clearly preserved. This donation was also made to the Sarvāstivāda teachers in Uṭaradeva *vihāra* at Koṇaśīli (CKI 1184). Finally, the third inscription on a silver bowl states that it was a pious donation of *bhikṣuṇī* Budharakṣida to the universal community in Uṭaradeva *vihāra* at Koṇaśīli in the possession of the Sarvāstivāda teachers. Budharakṣida shared her merit with her mother and father, friends and kinsmen, and all Buddhas (CKI 1186).

The three inscriptions are composed using the same formula found frequently within the Gāndhārī epigraphic corpus. They state the name of the donor, the recipient of the donation and the beneficiaries of the accrued merit. The short inscriptions, likely influenced by the space available on the surface of the metal objects, contain the names of three *bhikṣuṇis*: Avhemitra, unknown name, and Budharakṣida. They were all active within the same Buddhist site, the Uṭaradeva *vihāra* at Koṇaśīli and donated similar types of objects. Neither the location of the Uṭaradeva *vihāra* nor Koṇaśīli can be identified based on the available inscriptions. Due to the few details preserved by the text, we cannot say if this site was important for *bhikṣuṇis*. In the seven available objects from this hoard,

women are overwhelmingly represented. Four of the objects were donated by female donors: three nuns and a lay donor. It would seem that women, if not nuns, were active in donating to the Utarodeva *vihāra*.<sup>11</sup> We can cautiously suggest that women, including nuns, played an active role in supporting the Utarodeva *vihāra*. How that may have manifested in the development of this site and if there were any particular connection between female donors and this site cannot be estimated based on the present state of the data.<sup>12</sup>

Another inscription, outside of the aforementioned hoard, also records the donation of yet another *bhikṣuṇī*. Dating around CE 99/100, the inscription written on a schist miniature *stūpa* states that on the year 157, in the month of Praśṭhapaḍa on the first day, a *bhikṣuṇī* named Utaraya established a relic of the Lord in the Kharavala Mahavana (Great Forest?) to honour her mother and father (CKI 226). It records similar information that is presented by the three aforementioned inscriptions. It states the name of the *bhikṣuṇī* as Utaraya and the location of the relic donation, the Kharavala Mahavana, presumably the name of a Buddhist site. Utaraya also shared the merit of the donation with her mother and father similar to nuns, Avhemitra, unknown name, and Budharaksida.

However, further information about Utaraya can be understood based on a related inscription recording the donation of a female donor named Khamḍadata. The inscription also dating roughly to CE 99/100 states that in the year 157, in the month Praśṭhapaḍa, after 27 days, a lady named Khamḍadata, daughter of Utara, established a *stūpa* at the Mahavana to honour her mother and father, all beings and Utara (CKI 225).

Khamḍadata established a *stūpa* in a Buddhist site also named Mahavana. More

importantly, she is presented as being *utaradhītā* (daughter of Utara). Along with the consistent language already seen in other inscriptions related to honouring mother and father, she also mentions Utara separately once more at the end of the text and shares the merit with her. If the Utara referred to in the Khamḍadata inscription is the nun Utaraya, then Khamḍadata likely demonstrated her piety where her mother's relic donation was housed.<sup>13</sup> This connection between Utaraya and Utara is further strengthened if we consider that the donations occurred in the same location, on the same year and month (Mahavana, year 157, in the month Praśṭhapaḍa), but on different dates (1 and 27). Since the inscriptions provide similar types of information and can be palaeographically dated to the same year, the two inscriptions were likely related. Reading them together shows that Khamḍadata deliberately associated herself and her donation with her mother, a *bhikṣuṇī* who also established a donation within the Mahavana sanctuary. If this is the case, the Khamḍadata inscription also shows that Utaraya may be a married woman with at least one child, a daughter named Khamḍadata, before becoming a nun. Their independent donations show that they were likely part of an affluent family that possessed sufficient wealth to establish multiple donations within the same site.

When we look at the four aforementioned inscriptions as isolated attestations of *bhikṣuṇīs*, they do not give us more than the names of the *bhikṣuṇīs*, the location in which they established their donation, and the object of their donation. Based on such limited information, partly due to the formulaic nature of the inscriptions, we cannot reconstruct the social life and position of *bhikṣuṇīs* in Gandhāra over four centuries. However, the inscriptions reveal that

*bhikṣuṇīs* gave a range of objects including relics as donations. Based on their role as donors, we can suggest that some *bhikṣuṇīs* in Gandhāra possessed sufficient wealth to independently establish their donations. The inscriptions do not state that the *bhikṣuṇīs* were supported by other lay donors, so we can safely assume that they made their donations using their personal wealth.

How did they acquire their wealth? Based on the different Vinayas (books of discipline), *bhikṣuṇīs* and *bhikṣus* could either hold on to or renounce their personal wealth when they joined the order.<sup>14</sup> In some instances, monks and nuns chose to retain their personal fortune such as their inheritance based on their individual resolve. Once they were admitted into the order, the rule books of different Buddhist sects list out careful details on how the personal wealth of renunciates may be used, including for paying previously incurred debts, taxes, and for buying back stolen property. We do not know the exact circumstances related to the four Gandhāran *bhikṣuṇīs*, but the inscriptions suggest that they had access to some wealth which they deliberately spent on establishing pious donations. A close comparison with other Buddhist epigraphic evidence from the subcontinent leaves no doubt that the Gandhāran practices align with the trend noted elsewhere. Similar to renunciates in India, nuns, along with monks, were actively concerned with making merit through donations and shaped Buddhist ritual practices.<sup>15</sup>

Besides the four donor *bhikṣuṇīs*, one inscription from Haḍḍa mentions a *bhikṣuṇī* in connection with a lay donor. In this inscription, a *bhikṣuṇī* is mentioned by a lay female donor named Hastadata who donated a water pot.<sup>16</sup> Dating roughly around the second century CE, the inscription states that Hastadata, wife of Teyavarṇa, donated a

water pot as a pious gift for her own health and that of her husband. The poorly legible inscription also preserves the names of Hastadata's family members and mentions a *bhikṣuṇī* in the list of beneficiaries (CKI 373).

The Hastadata inscription was written on a water pot (named pot E) belonging to a collection of five water pots that may have come from the same site somewhere in Haḍḍa, Afghanistan. Amongst the five pots, three of the pots were donated by lay female donors: Vasavadatta, wife of Susoma (pot A, CKI 369); Viratata, wife of Sravihama (pot C, CKI 371); and Hastadata, wife of Teyavarṇa (pot E, CKI 373). Two of the pots do not mention the name of the donor and only mention the recipients: Sarvāstivādas (pot B, CKI 370) and Dharmaguptakas (pot D, CKI 372). The significant number of female lay donors suggests that Haḍḍa women were actively shaping the donative sphere of this site. Found within this context, the inscription on pot E preserves a particular relationship between Hastadata and a *bhikṣuṇī*. While their exact connection is not clearly stated, its importance can be assumed based on the donor Hastadata sharing the merit of her donations with the *bhikṣuṇī*.<sup>17</sup>

The image that begins to develop regarding *bhikṣuṇīs* based on the handful of inscriptions seems to me a favourable one. At present, the evidence suggests that *bhikṣuṇīs* existed in the region and actively participated in the donative sphere as both donors and as beneficiaries. They created merit through their activities in two ways: four *bhikṣuṇīs* created merit by establishing donations either in the form of relics or metal objects and one *bhikṣuṇī* gained merit through her connection to a lay donor. This favourable image of nuns is also reflected in the corpus of Gandhāran art in which the only *bhikṣuṇī* that can be definitively identified is Uṣpalavarṇā.

## Representation of Bhikṣuṇīs in Gandhāran Art

Before studying the visual representation of the *bhikṣuṇī* Utpalavarṇā in Gandhāran art, it is important to outline some of the methodological issues related to the image corpus. The process of identifying *bhikṣuṇīs* in Gandhāran art is much more complex than in the epigraphic corpus. In general, the schist reliefs from Gandhāra do not possess labels that allow us to identify figures. As a result, only the interpretation of the visual stories and legends allows us to identify the figures that are represented and subsequently, establish the iconographic conventions related to them. However, the existence of different workshops, spatial constraints and stylistic aspects complicate the process. For these reasons, some figures, despite having some standard iconographic elements, can be represented differently based on the choices made by the artist. We will see how this is the case for the *bhikṣuṇī* Utpalavarṇā whose iconographic features vary depending on the relief. However, the interpretation of the story related to her ensures that her figure is indeed a *bhikṣuṇī*, regardless of the different depictions occurring within the corpus of Gandhāran art.

Utpalavarṇā is part of reliefs depicting the well-known story of the Buddha's descent from the *Trāyastriṃśa* Heaven (thirty-three gods heaven).<sup>18</sup> This story has been recounted in several texts and some common elements can be summarized based on them. The Buddha's mother, Māyā, passed away soon after his birth and was reborn in the *Trāyastriṃśa* Heaven. Following the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī, the Buddha went to this heaven in order to teach his mother the dharma, bringing her and the other gods towards the first stage of enlightenment. After preaching in *Trāyastriṃśa*, he returned

to the city Saṃkāśya where he was welcomed by a great crowd, including the *bhikṣuṇī* Utpalavarṇā.<sup>19</sup> As the crowd assembled, Utpalavarṇā transformed herself into a *cakravartin* (universal monarch) through miraculous powers and became the first to pay homage to the Buddha. In some of the textual accounts of this story, the Buddha chastised the nun for performing the miraculous transformation in order to be the first to welcome him.<sup>20</sup> However, we will see that Gandhāran reliefs do not preserve this element of the story. Instead, they highlight the nun's piety by representing her consistently as the first person to venerate the Buddha's descending form.

The story of the Buddha's descent was represented around twelve times in Gandhāran art. The most elaborate relief depicting this story comes from Zar Dheri. The monumental arch measuring 121 cm. on the north face of the main *stūpa* from Zar Dheri only preserves Utpalavarṇā in her *cakravartin* form and not as a *bhikṣuṇī*.<sup>21</sup> The central panel, which is now missing, likely preserved her venerating the Buddha as he descended from heaven.

In early Buddhist art, from Gandhāra and other regions in the Indian subcontinent, this story is often visually represented with the Buddha walking down three monumental ladders that descended from the skies. The Buddha commonly occupied the central ladder and was flanked by Brahmā, Indra and the gods of their realm on either side. This is the case on the earliest relief depicting the story coming from the site of Butkara I from Swāt Valley, Pakistan (Plate 32.1). The relief belonging to Domenico Faccenna's Group I (called drawing style), is the earliest representation of a nun in Gandhāran art and can be dated to the first century CE.<sup>22</sup> On this relief, the central staircase used by the Buddha during his

descent is given prominence. The Buddha is depicted symbolically using the *Buddhapāda* (footprints) located at the bottom of the staircase. His descending form is flanked on either side by Indra and Brahmā in *añjalimudrā* (hands held together in veneration). As the Buddha reaches the end of the staircase, the kneeling Utpalavarṇā venerates him. Rather than her transformed *cakravartin* form, the relief preserves Utpalavarṇā as a *bhikṣuṇī* and allows us to make some remarks on the visual representation of nuns in Butkara I.

The drawing style of Butkara I, characterized by long thin lines and flat treatment of volumes, captures some iconographic elements related to *bhikṣuṇīs* in art. Her facial features remain generic, and she has round eyes, flat lips, and a short nose that are common to all female figures in this style. A thin line at the top of her head also delineates her hairline. If we compare her figure with the representations of *bhikṣus* in Gandhāran art, we can identify two distinct features in her clothing. On this relief, Utpalavarṇā is depicted wearing a tunic with long sleeves decorated by stripes and squares. Her shoulders are covered by a long scarf that is folded over the back of her shoulder. The two garments cover her body entirely including her shoulders and the form of her breasts. This long-sleeved tunic and scarf covering her shoulders are not part of the robes worn by male monastic figures in Gandhāran art.<sup>23</sup>

A relief from Loriyan Tangai, generally dated to the second century CE, preserves the same iconographic conventions related to the *bhikṣuṇīs* robes (Plate 32.2). It depicts the standard elements of the Buddha's descent story, but depicts Utpalavarṇā facing the staircase rather than in profile. Utpalavarṇā can be seen kneeling in front of the staircase with her arms raised above her head in *añjalimudrā*. The lines of her clothing suggest

that she wore a half-sleeved tunic with a shawl thrown over her shoulder. The two elements bear a striking resemblance to the nun's clothing in the Butkara I relief. Even with her back turned to the viewer, the narrative content and her clothing remove all doubt as to the figure's identity as a *bhikṣuṇī*.

In Gandhāra, schist reliefs depict Utpalavarṇā as an important figure within the descent story. The *bhikṣuṇī* as the first devotee to venerate the Buddha is repeatedly highlighted by the reliefs. In this way, Gandhāran images do not align with some of the textual versions in which she is chastised either for her use of magical powers or her enthusiasm to see the Buddha's physical form instead of his mental form. This suggests that the *bhikṣuṇī*'s presence in this story was viewed favourably within the region.

As an aside here, I would like to further consider the attire of the *bhikṣuṇī* in the aforementioned Gandhāran reliefs. The differences in Utpalavarṇā's attire when compared to images of *bhikṣus* echo the rules set out by the different Vinaya texts regarding the standard robes of both male and female renunciates.<sup>24</sup> All renunciates, according to Vinaya rules, had a standard set of robes that could not be abandoned once they joined the *saṃgha*. The number and name of these robes varied from Vinaya to Vinaya. However, some elements are common to all of the texts. Male renunciates commonly had three garments in their standard set of robes: the *antarvāsaka* (inner robe), the *uttarāsaṅga* (upper garment), and the *saṃghāṭī* (outer garment) in comparison to the female renunciates' five or six garments. Additional garments such as in the case of the Pāli Vinaya's *saṃkacchika* and the *udakasāṭikā*, were given to *bhikṣuṇīs* because of their distinct physical needs. The strategy to adapt existing rules for men in order to include women was noted by Heirman.

She argued that *bhikṣuṇīs* as members of the *saṃgha* adopted the rules that already existed for *bhikṣus*. This was done so that the life and perception of the *bhikṣuṇīs* aligned closely to that of the *bhikṣus*. However, the difference in their gender such as their physique had to be accounted for and additional rules had to be incorporated to create a unified image of the *saṃgha*. When both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* were presented similarly, they could collectively distinguish themselves as members of the *saṃgha* as opposed to the lay people.

Rules such as those related to decorum and clothing were added to present *bhikṣuṇīs* in the same way as *bhikṣus* and prevent censure from the lay community. It is likely on this basis that additional garments, such as the *saṃkacchika* and the *udakasāṭikā*, were added to the standard set of robes for the *bhikṣuṇīs*. In the Pāli Vinaya, the *udakasāṭikā* was used to hide the body when bathing in a public area and the *saṃkacchika* was a band worn over the breasts of female renunciates. The latter was worn inside clothing as an inner garment, and may have not been visible. Besides the *saṃkacchika*, Hinüber also identified another garment worn by *bhikṣuṇīs*, the *gaṇḍapratichhādāna*. Based on a comparative study of textual and art historical data, he demonstrated that it was likely a cloth that covered the rounding of the breast. In the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīvibhaṅga* of the Mahāsāṃghikavinaya, the same garment relates to a cloth that covers the shoulder. Whether it covered either one or both shoulders is not made clear by the text.<sup>25</sup>

In analysing the seventh-century monk Yijing's version of the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*, Heirman astutely remarked that the difficulty in correctly interpreting these garments is not a uniquely modern problem, but also an ancient one. The confusion regarding the exact nature of the different garments

stems from the lack of clear descriptions in the Vinaya texts themselves. When texts were translated into other languages, namely Chinese, the confusion had to be confronted and new interpretations were offered. This is the case in the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* which mentions two garments, the *kusūlaka* and *saṃkakṣikā*, without further descriptions.<sup>26</sup> Both garments may relate to pieces of cloth worn as an undergarment to cover the breasts. However, their exact form is not described by the text. The redactors likely took it for granted that their audience was well aware of the different garments and so, they may not have further elaborated on them. Even though we do not know the nature of these robes, we can cautiously suggest that when the *gaṇḍapratichhādāna* and the *saṃkacchika* were worn together, the combination permitted *bhikṣuṇīs* to cover their breasts and its rounding. This may have prevented unwanted attention and allowed them to closely resemble *bhikṣus*.

Despite the inherent confusion in the Vinaya texts, it is possible to suggest that the two garments worn by Utpalavarṇā in Butkara I and Lorian Tangai reliefs may be related in some way to the additional garments given to *bhikṣuṇīs*. Based on the two Gandhāran reliefs, we can see that Utpalavarṇā's attire covers her shoulder and hides the rounding of her breasts. In comparison to the other representations of Utpalavarṇā in Gandhāran art, we will see how artists did not always depict the robes of the *bhikṣuṇī* in the same manner and as a result, her visual representations closely resemble male monastic figures.

On other reliefs from Gandhāra depicting the story of the Buddha's descent, the individual elements related to the *bhikṣuṇī*'s robes can hardly be discerned. In these cases, without the narrative context, the figures of Utpalavarṇā could easily be mistaken

for a *bhikṣu*. A relief depicting this story from the Peshawar Museum can be used as an example to demonstrate this issue (Plate 32.3). Utpalavarṇā is depicted at the bottom of three staircases. She awaits the Buddha in *añjalimudrā*, with her right knee on the ground and her left leg folded. On this relief, Utpalavarṇā is dressed differently in comparison to the images we have seen from Butkara I and Lorian Tangai. Unlike the aforementioned representations, no lines of her over garments are visible around her arm on Plate 32.3. Instead, she is represented wearing a *saṃghāti* that covers her body and leaves her right-side shoulders bare.<sup>27</sup>

This way of pleating the *saṃghāti* by covering only one of the shoulders is commonly part of the iconography of *bhikṣus*. A relief from the Lower Monastery of Nathu depicts a group of renunciates and lay figures venerating the *triratna* (the three jewels) topped by *dharmacakras* (wheel of dharmas). On this relief, we can see renunciates, often interpreted as monks, venerating the *triratna* in *añjalimudrā* (Plate 32.4). On one side of the *triratna*, the renunciates' garment is wrapped around the left shoulder and the end of the cloth covers the right shoulder. On the other side, the monks standing to the right side of the *triratna*, have their *saṃghāti* covering only their left shoulder and the right shoulder remains bare. When we compare the representation of Utpalavarṇā on the Peshawar Museum relief and the *bhikṣus* on the right side, no difference between their clothing can be identified. However, the identification of the latter as *bhikṣus* is possible as the uncovered portion of their bodies do not have breasts. In the case of Utpalavarṇā, such minute details such as her breasts and shape of her body are not part of the Peshawar relief.

Utpalavarṇā's attire on the Peshawar relief cannot be not distinguished from the robes of

*bhikṣus* in the way that is observable on the reliefs from Butkara I and Lorian Tangai. The identification of her figure as a *bhikṣuṇī* in this case depends entirely on the interpretation of the narrative content of the relief. Studied together, the reliefs of Utpalavarṇā do not uniformly present the robes associated with *bhikṣuṇīs*. While some reliefs depict her wearing additional robes that cover her body more thoroughly, some other reliefs depict her wearing the same attire as the *bhikṣus*. This suggests that there was some confusion in depicting all the garments that comprised the *bhikṣuṇī*'s standard robes. This confusion, we have already seen, is not unique to Gandhāran art, but was also prevalent in the Vinaya literature.

Thus, our visual data presents little clarity on what the *bhikṣuṇī*'s standard robes looked like, and how they were different compared to the *bhikṣus*' garments. Due to this confusion, it is hardly surprising that the representation of Utpalavarṇā sometimes resembles *bhikṣus*. This hypothesis leads us to more interesting possibilities that perhaps some of the monks in our Gandhāran reliefs are not monks at all and maybe were nuns.

## Conclusion

This contribution outlined the epigraphic and art historical evidence related to *bhikṣuṇīs* in Gandhāra. While no direct connection between the two corpora can be established, the available data reveals a favourable image of the *bhikṣuṇīs*. Within the epigraphic corpus, not only are they part of the Oḍirāja Seṇavarma's donative inscription, they also established donations independently within Buddhist sites during the first and second centuries CE. The range of objects donated by them may provide a clue about their varied access to wealth. Aside from being donors, at least one Gāndhārī inscription shows that

*bhikṣuṇīs* also participated as beneficiaries in the donations established by other donors and shared the resulting spiritual merit. Thus, the Gāndhārī epigraphic corpus reveals that *bhikṣuṇīs* were active donors and contributed to the development of Buddhism in the region.

This positive image of *bhikṣuṇīs* and their capacity to support Buddhism is reinforced by the art historical data. The presence of the *bhikṣuṇī* Utpalavarṇā during the Buddha's descent from *Trāyastriṃśa* seems to have been an important element in the visual retellings of the event. Her admonition by the Buddha in texts for her glorious physical transformation is not part of Gandhāran reliefs. Instead, the Gandhāran Utpalavarṇā watches the descending Buddha and becomes the first to venerate him in *añjalimudrā*. In a context where *bhikṣuṇīs* were active donors, it is hardly surprising that such favourable visual narratives of *bhikṣuṇīs* may have particularly resonated with the *saṃgha* in the region.

## Notes

1. This contribution is a continuation of my PhD thesis titled 'Gender in Gandhāran Art (1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE)' defended in May 2022 at Sapienza University of Rome and supervised by Professor Marco Galli. Some of the issues discussed in this contribution also form part of Ashwini Lakshminarayanan, *Gender in Gandhāran Art: Representations and Interactions in the Buddhist Context (1st–4th Centuries CE)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024). I subsequently presented this analysis in a conference for students at the École française d'Extrême-Orient. Their comments and observations have further enriched my work. I have also benefitted from the advice of scholars on different aspects of my research on gender, all of whom I have the pleasure to thank now: Professor Marco Galli, Dr Laura Giuliano, Professor Osmund

Bopearachchi, Professor Cinzia Daniela Pieruccini, Professor Ute Huesken, Professor Nikolaus Dietrich, and Professor Charlotte Schmid. All errors are my own.

2. By texts, I only refer to donative Gāndhārī inscriptions in this essay. However, nuns also appear in Gāndhārī manuscripts which have already been analysed. The edition, translation and analysis of a reconstructed Gāndhārī manuscript which is a version of the Pāli *Dhakkṣiṇāvibhaṅgasūtra* (MN 142) dealing with the order of the nuns and the inclusion of nuns as worthy recipients of gifts can be found in Ingo Strauch, 'The Bajaur Collection of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts: Mahāprajāpati Gautamī and the Order of Nuns in a Gandhāran Version of the *Dakṣiṇāvibhaṅgasūtra*', in *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, ed. Alice Collett, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 17–45.
3. The archaeological material, particularly small finds, cannot at this moment provide definitive evidence on the existence of nunneries in the region. A longer discussion on nuns in urban sites in Gandhāra and the problematic association of small finds such as condensers and shell bangles to this group can be found in Lakshminarayanan, *Gender in Gandhāran Art: Representations and Interactions in the Buddhist Context (1st–4th Centuries CE)*.
4. The Corpus of Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions numbers can be used to search for the edited inscriptions on the database <https://gandhari.org/> created by Andrew Glass and Stefan Baums. Translations for some of the inscriptions can also be found in Stefan Baums, 'Catalog and Revised Texts and Translations of Gandharan Reliquary Inscriptions,' in *Gandharan Buddhist Reliquaries*, ed. David Jongeward et al., vol. 1, *Gandharan Studies*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012, pp. 200–251; Richard Salomon, 'A Hoard of Inscribed Gandharan Metalware,' *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 45, 2022, pp. 253–90.

5. CKI 334; 249; 401. Notably, CKI 249 quotes an inscription that has not come down to us.
6. The beginning of the text has already been compared to the description of a *stūpa* inauguration funded by King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi in found in the *Mahāvamsa*. See Otto von Hinüber, 'Reviewed Work(s): Gandharan Buddhist Reliquaries [Gandharan Studies Volume 1] by David Jongeward, Elizabeth Errington, Richard Salomon and Stefan Baums', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2015, pp. 186–93.
7. Ann Heirman, 'Buddhist Nuns: Between Past and Present', *Numen*, vol. 58, 2011, pp. 603–31.
8. This is Salomon's view as he wrote, "although no information is available as to the original provenance of the objects, I feel confident in describing them as a "hoard" in view of their similar inscriptions which show clearly that they constitute a unitary group, and by comparison with other archaeologically attested hoards with partially similar contents" in Salomon, "A Hoard of Inscribed Gandharan Metalware," p. 254.
9. John Marshall, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried out at Taxila under the Orders of the Government of India between the Years 1913–1934*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951, p. 607.
10. The shape of the three cups is noticeably different from the already known silver goblet with an inscription recording the donation of Jivatmevosa and of unknown provenance. See Richard Salomon and Bernard Goldman, 'A Kharoṣṭhi Inscription on a Silver Goblet', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 4, 1990, pp. 149–57; The same type of goblet is depicted in the relief discussed in Bernard Goldman, 'Parthians at Gandhāra', *East and West*, vol. 28, no. 1/4, 1978, pp. 189–202.
11. Similar evidence of the active role played by female donors can also be understood through data from an unknown site in Haḍḍa, Afghanistan. The data, namely donative records and manuscript fragments containing information regarding female figures, is discussed in Timothy Lenz, 'The British Library Kharoṣṭhi Fragments: Behind the Birch Bark Curtain', in *Women in Early Buddhism*, ed. Alice Collett, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 46–61.
12. The representation of female donors within the epigraphic corpus is the focus of Ashwini Lakshminarayanan, 'Towards Investigating the Representation of Gandhāran Female Donors', *Arts Asiatiques*, vol. 78, 2023, pp. 5–26.
13. Stefan Baums, 'A Framework for Gandhāran Chronology Based on Relic Inscriptions,' in *Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art. Proceedings of the First International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 23rd–24th March, 2017*, ed. Peter Stewart and Wannaporn Rienjang, Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2018, p. 59.
14. Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*, Studies in the Buddhist Traditions, Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2004, pp. 170–92.
15. Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997, pp. 238–57.
16. The translation of this inscription can also be found in Richard Salomon, *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhāra: The British Library Kharoṣṭhi Fragments*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999, p. 218.
17. The relationship between women is preserved in some inscriptions from the Indian subcontinent, however similar evidence is lacking from Gandhāra, see Alice Collett, 'Women as Teachers and Disciples in Early Buddhist Communities: The Evidence of Epigraphy', *Religions of South Asia*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 61–76.
18. Osmund Bopearachchi, 'In Search of Utpalavarna in Gandharan Buddhist Art', in *Studi in Onore Di Antonio Invernizzi per*

- Il Suo Stantesimo Compleanno*, ed. Carlo Lippolis and Stefano De Martino, Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 2011, pp. 253–367; Ashwini Lakshminarayanan, 'Globalization and Gandhāra Art', in *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Serena Autiero and Mathew Cobb, London: Routledge, 2021, pp. 226–44; Sonya Rhie Mace, 'Localizing Narrative through Image: The Nun Utpalavarṇā in a Stone Relief from Kaushambi', in *Narrative Visions and Visual Narratives in Indian Buddhism*, ed. Naomi Appleton, Edinburgh: Equinox Publishing, 2022, pp. 129–59.
19. The story of Utpalavarṇā's early life and her transformation as a nun is discussed in detail in Alice Collett, *Lives of Early Buddhist Nuns*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 66–88.
  20. The transformation of Utpalavarṇā and its perception is the focus of Serinity Young, 'Female Mutability and Male Anxiety in an Early Buddhist Legend', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2007, pp. 14–39.
  21. Christian Luczantis and Michael Jansen, *Gandhara: The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan, Legends, Monasteries, and Paradise*, Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2008, cat. no. 215.
  22. Anna Filigenzi, Domenico Faccenna, and Pierfrancesco Callieri, 'At the Origin of Gandharan Art. The Contribution of the Isiao Italian Archaeological Mission in the Swat Valley Pakistan,' *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia* 9, no. 3–4, 2003, p. 289. The style of Group I likely depended on Indian models such as those from the Śuṅga period. For Gandhāra's substantial Indian connection despite the presence of multicultural elements, see Gérard Fussman, 'Upaya-Kausalya: L'implantation Du Bouddhisme Au Gandhara,' in *Bouddhisme et Cultures Locales: Quelques Cas de Réciproques Adaptations. Actes Du Colloque Franco-Japonais de Septembre 1991*, ed. K. Fumimasa and Gérard Fussman, Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1994, pp. 17–51.
  23. These features were also astutely identified in Domenico Faccenna and Anna Filigenzi, *Repertorio Terminologico per La Schedatura Delle Sculture Dell'arte Gandharica: Sulla Base Dei Materiali Provenienti Dagli Scavi Della Missione Archeologica Italianna Dell'IsIAO Nello Swat, Pakistan*, Reports and Memoirs. New Series 5, Roma: IsIAO, 2007, Pl. 114.
  24. For the rules and differences, see, Ann Heirman, 'Yijing's View on the Bhikṣuṇīs' Standard Robes', *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal*, vol. 21, 2008, pp. 145–58; Oskar von Hinüber and Anālayo, 'The Robes of a Bhikkhunī', *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 13, 2016, pp. 79–90.
  25. *Mohe sengqi lü* 摩訶僧祇律 [Skt. *Mahāsaṃghikavinaya?*]. tr. Fotuobatuoluo 佛陀跋陀羅 (Buddhabhadra [359–429]) and Faxian 法顯 (338–423). T no.1425, 546b28.
  26. The *Mūlasarvāstivādin* is only partially preserved in Sanskrit and Chinese and fully extant in Tibetan. The Vinaya was likely redacted in the Indic north sometime in the late Kuṣāṇa period and could be relevant to the context of Gandhāran art, see Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*, pp. 2–3.
  27. Another similar depiction of Utpalavarṇā's garments is BM 1917,1009.12.